



Learning with a little help from some friends

If 'learning to read' is ineffective, it will prevent students from later developing the ability of 'reading to learn'. This has devastating consequences for their future literacy, general academic achievement and career prospects. *Jaqueline Harvey* and *Cas Prinsloo* reflect on seeking help from the community in remedying critical components of the current crisis in schools relating to poorly developed reading and writing skills.

Reading is a crucially important building block for future learning. Early intervention when learning is not happening is paramount for the development and future of learners in South Africa.

The authors reflect on some of the lessons derived from a two-year intervention by siyaJabula siyaKhula (sJsK), a non-profit organisation (NPO) that supports processes of education on behalf of learners, schools and departments. sJsK used a unique learner-regeneration approach incorporating various elements, including community participation.

Reading and writing: the first years

Learner literacy in South Africa is in dire need of improvement. Literacy is developed in the first years of formal education in a hierarchical and cumulative process. Therefore, the period from Grades 1 to 7 represents a crucial time during which children should be in a position to master languages.

Developing language proficiency becomes a toolkit that could unlock future academic competence and cognitive development. Currently, ineffective 'learning to read' prevents students from later developing the ability of 'reading to learn'.

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The sJsK intervention aimed to repair critical gaps in learners' English literacy and language foundations, and improve the speed and accuracy in 'decoding' what they read. This can only be attained through repetition and practice.

The first step was to analyse the challenges experienced by a school, as understood from teachers', learners' and curriculum perspectives. The intervention was designed to provide an effective interim learning experience that would elevate learners' abilities to the level where they could effectively engage with the curriculum with minimal impact on the routine curriculum delivery, and with minimal effort on the part of the teacher.

The intervention included teacher training, training community members as classroom intervention facilitators, and administering materials and activities tailored to the needs of the learners. Given sJsK's focus on learner regeneration, the holistic aim of the intervention was to assist schools to align all new learning contents with learners' existing conceptual structures.

What did the evaluation cover?

In partnership with sJsK, the Education and Skills Development (ESD) programme at the HSRC evaluated the impact the intervention had on learners in the Mhinga villages and surrounding areas in Limpopo. A key feature was to explore how such local operations could be refined and expanded to broader regional, provincial and national scales.

The evaluation work covered aspects such as establishing reference points for participating project and control schools in order to compare schools with similar backgrounds and compare the relative achievement gains among learners from the two groups.

Test instruments consisted of self-report background questionnaires completed by school principals, teachers and parents/caregivers, as well as a range of language assessment instruments administered to the learners. The differences in achievement gains over time between learners from project and control schools were used for evaluating the success of the intervention.

Two groups of learners who had either Xitsonga or Tshivenda as their home language, and came from villages with high levels of deprivation, participated in the study. The first cohort was initially assessed during 2013 and consisted of Grade 1, 4 and 7 learners from 11 project and five control schools. The first cohort of learners from Grades 1 and 4 were again assessed over the second and third years during 2014/2015. The second cohort consisted of Grade 1, 4 and 7 learners from an additional 16 project and four control schools, assessed during 2014/2015.

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Gathering the evidence

Following two full years of implementing the intervention activities, the findings confirmed that there were consistent improvements in learner achievement.

The foundational literacy skills, more directly the target of sJsK's interventions, showed greater improvement in intervention schools compared to control schools. Derived proficiencies such as comprehension, which are developed following confirmation of the foundational skills, took a longer time to show improvement and also revealed smaller improvements among learners from intervention schools compared to learners from control schools.

For the two higher grades, Grades 4 and 7, the overall gains were smaller as they had to catch up on several years of illiteracy. Although these learners increased their reading age by more than a year, they remained two or three years behind what should have been their reading age. It seems that once learners fall behind, their reading ages drop as their grade levels increase, as this affects their ability to learn effectively and keep up with all subsequent curriculum requirements.

Once learners fall behind, their reading ages drop as their grade levels increase

The success of scaling up the intervention hinges on recruiting, training and involving community facilitators in a very structured way, and engaging in all necessary communication activities to maintain continuity and control over time.

Threats to success

Another lesson learnt from this process was that political factionalism and insufficient service delivery easily resulted in community upheavals, posing serious threats to effective learning. It was also clear that schools had to adhere to holistic and integrated notions of language acquisition.

Finally, system capacity plays a key role in very disadvantaged and remote school communities because minimum levels of school and classroom functionality are required to ensure intervention quality, continuity and management. As a result, systemic (structural and operational) and conceptual (technical-academic) features compete for attention during intervention roll-out. Put differently, sound linguistic foundations and practices can be derailed and sacrificed by societal unrest and service delivery protests.

Conclusions and recommendations

Both the initial analysis performed by sJsK into the school challenges in South Africa as well as the impact of the intervention raised important points for the public and policymakers. These included the effects of policy and implementation instability, curriculum design, textbook production, teacher training, multiple language resource use, and community unrest and service delivery protests.

The authors recommend that future interventions address system capacity before approaching learners and teachers. The deep-seated nature of foundational and conceptual language teaching and learning backlogs has to be acknowledged and prioritised. This is particularly important when administering interventions at higher grade levels, as the negative effects on academic achievement from poor literacy and language development are accumulative.

The design of the intervention should use and safeguard the resource of experienced community facilitators. Key success factors are associated with successful and efficient teaching and learning: structured process and material at the correct level; human support; and a supportive structured environment. The initiative also conducted a thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the South African classroom dispensation.

From the perspective of learners, the authenticity, freedom and joy of the learning experience should be rediscovered and fostered. Sound intervention and evaluation practices in relation to sampling, data collection and data analysis should be pursued to assure that day-to-day classroom teaching and learning consistently improve. ■

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