

How evidence is informing solutions to South Africa's early grade reading crisis

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Highlights

Evidence impact

- Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) findings prompted USAID to fund a follow-up evaluation in Mpumalanga Province to test virtual modes of instructional coaching for English as first additional language.
- USAID reconfigured its Reading Support Project to extend EGRS implementation and evaluation across all foundation phase classes in two districts of North West province.
- In two addresses in 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa revealed plans to extend the package of reading resources, expert reading coaches and lesson plans found effective in the EGRS to all foundation phase classes.

Factors supporting evidence impact

- The EGRS responded to the growing demand for rigorous evidence to improve students' performance in early grades, which had become an urgent policy priority following South Africa's low ranking in regional and international learning assessments.
- The research team's credibility, existing networks and experience in the sector and the region helped nurture relationships with a donor community already interested in improving early learning.
- Institutionalised processes, such as the National Evaluation Policy Framework, coordinated by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, helped create ownership of evaluation findings and provided the means for ensuring evaluation results reached the Cabinet.
- Multiple donors stepped up to support the evaluation findings, broker relationships and advocate for the provincial implementation of EGRS approaches.

- The researchers were effective in translating evaluation evidence into briefs, summary reports and multimedia products as part of ongoing engagement with key actors.

Factors constraining evidence impact

- Implementing the EGRS findings will require national and provincial buy-in for improving teacher training approaches for home languages and developing a new cadre of reading specialists for instructional coaching.
- Provincial budget constraints, with a large proportion of funds committed to personnel costs, make it unlikely that provinces could immediately implement the evaluation recommendations.
- Given recent elections and a weak economy, decision makers may prioritise responding to other urgent issues in the education sector, such as upgrading toilets and other school infrastructure.

Evidence use brief

www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/publications/evidence-use/how-evidence-informing-solutions-south-africas-early-grade

The authors of this brief analyse facilitators and barriers to the use of the findings from the 3ie-supported Early Grade Reading Study.

Impact evaluation details

Title: [Improving early grade reading in South Africa](#)

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Context

In South Africa, 78 per cent of children in fourth grade cannot read for meaning. Scholars have attributed [the reading crisis](#) to apartheid-era policies of vastly unequal and lower-standard schooling systems for a majority of people. They emphasise the vicious cycle of factors that lead to deficient reading, which then contribute to poor learning outcomes. These factors include insufficiently trained teaching cadres focusing on pronunciation and rote memorisation, deficient provincial educational budgets, lack of reading materials at school and home, and challenges facing predominantly poor and illiterate parents.

Although the government prioritised improving reading, there was little evidence regarding which early grade reading interventions worked. In the past, many governmental, non-governmental and academic programmes in different parts of South Africa had implemented [diverse interventions](#) to improve these skills. Most of these programmes either had short durations or did not include evaluations of what specifically worked about them, including for whom, how or why they worked. Against this backdrop, [demand grew](#) for evidence of the effectiveness of early reading programmes.

Responding to this demand, researchers affiliated with the national Department of Basic Education, the Human Sciences Research Council, the University of Witwatersrand and Georgetown University designed an evaluation to find the best approach to improving reading skills, which they named the EGRS.

The researchers piloted three approaches to improve reading outcomes in a set of early grade classrooms in two districts of North West province. They piloted high-quality Setswana readers and structured lesson plans for teachers of grades 1 and 2, combined with either centralised teacher training or on-site teacher coaching. The third approach they piloted was community-based support to increase parental involvement in children's literacy. The EGRS sought to identify the most cost-effective of the three approaches to improve home-language reading skills

in the early grades.

Evidence

The evaluation found that the on-site coaching approach had larger and statistically significant effects on more dimensions of home-language reading ability than the centralised training or parental involvement approaches. Students of teachers who received on-site coaching were approximately five months of learning ahead of the students in control schools across all measured dimensions of home-language reading proficiency.

Although on-site teacher coaching also had a positive effect on English literacy, the training approach had a significant positive effect on only three dimensions of home-language reading ability: recognition of sounds, recognition of non-words and paragraph reading. The parental involvement approach had to grapple with low parental attendance and had small, statistically insignificant effects.

Larger effect sizes were detected among boys, schools in urban townships, larger schools and communities with higher socio-economic status. Middle-ranked and above-average students in the classes and large classes benefitted the most. However, even initially weak students benefitted as long as they were exposed to two years of the coaching intervention. None of the approaches had a negative effect on the acquisition of home-language reading skills or on the learning of other subjects.

Evidence impacts

USAID has funded follow-up evaluation

Informed by the evidence from the 3ie-supported EGRS, USAID came on board to fund a follow-up evaluation of the teacher training and coaching approaches. The [EGRS II evaluation](#) compared two mechanisms to provide expert coaching to teachers in Mpumalanga province. The first mechanism included tablet-based lesson plans for English as first additional language, graded readers and virtual coaching of teachers. The second used the EGRS model of on-site coaches who visit teachers and compared them with virtual coaches who support teachers through calls and messages.

Findings prompted reconfiguration of USAID project

Findings also led USAID to change its [Reading Support Project](#) to implement and evaluate a longer duration of the structured learning programme, with centralised training and on-site coaching, in North West province. The parental involvement approach was discontinued due to the insignificant effects found in the EGRS evaluation.

“The department’s early grade reading studies have demonstrated the impact that a dedicated package of reading resources, expert reading coaches and lesson plans can have on reading outcomes. We will be substantially expanding

the availability of these early reading resources across the foundation phase of schooling.’

Cyril Ramaphosa

President

Republic of South Africa

South Africa’s Cabinet has backed implementation of the coaching approach

The [president](#) and the [Department of Basic Education](#) both announced, on multiple occasions, the government’s plan to implement the EGRS package of reading resources, lesson plans and expert coaches to improve reading comprehension in the foundation phase over the next five years. The government developed an implementation plan, informed by the 3ie-funded evaluation’s findings, that involves multiple stakeholders, including steering committee members inside and outside the government.

Suggested citation

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