



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

School enrolment has shot up across low- and middle-income countries, but for far too many children, access to school has not translated into gains in learning. More than half of children and adolescents worldwide do not meet the minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics.¹

In South Africa, 78 per cent of children in fourth grade cannot read for meaning. Even before the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed this striking statistic,² it was clear that the country's students were struggling to read for meaning in African home languages, as well as in English.

In 2011, a pre-PIRLS assessment showed that less than half the children could read any language at the end of primary school.³ South African students' performance, particularly in home languages, significantly

lagged behind that of their peers in the region, as well as globally. This is worrying because reading proficiency by the end of third grade can be a make-or-break milestone. Whilst most children are learning to read through grade 3, by grade 4, they are using these skills to learn other subjects.⁴

Scholars have attributed the reading crisis to apartheid-era policies of vastly unequal and lower-standard schooling systems for a majority of people.⁵ They have emphasised the vicious cycle of factors that lead to deficient reading that then contribute to poor learning outcomes. These factors include insufficiently trained teaching cadres' focusing on pronunciation and rote memorisation, deficient provincial educational budgets, the lack of reading materials at school and home, and the challenges facing predominantly poor and illiterate parents.

The national government saw developing proficiency in reading in the early grades, especially in African home languages and in schools serving low-income communities, as a promising means of overcoming this history of extreme racial inequality. It prioritised reading in its National Development Plan⁶ and through programmes such as the Read to Lead campaign, citing research that showed that childhood reading could bridge large cognitive score differences rooted in diverse family backgrounds.⁷

However, there was little evidence of which early grade reading interventions worked. In the past, many governmental, non-governmental and academic programmes in various 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 worked about them, for whom, or how or why they worked.⁸ Against this backdrop, demand grew for evidence of the effectiveness of early reading programmes.⁹

International evaluations and the limited evidence available from South African studies consistently indicated that structured teaching programmes with scripted lesson plans and additional reading materials worked in low- and middle-income country contexts.¹⁰ Drawing from this experience, researchers affiliated with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), 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 Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS).¹²

The DBE signalled the importance of this evaluation by listing it in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation's (DPME's) 2014 National Evaluation Plan.¹¹ In doing so, the DBE also accepted oversight from a multi-stakeholder steering committee and committed to the National Evaluation Policy Framework process that called on it to take ownership of the study and its findings, as they became available.

Because the DPME is a 3ie member, rigorous impact evaluations such as the EGRS qualified for funding that 3ie was offering to members. The DPME and the DBE applied for and received this funding to evaluate a pilot the DBE ran starting in 2015.

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 foundation phase^a 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 improve 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.

This brief highlights how evidence from the 3ie-funded EGRS evaluation of the pilot in North West Province is informing the response to the early grade reading crisis in South Africa. The authors explore the range of factors that are contributing to and constraining the study's ongoing impact on policy and programming.



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^a Foundation phase in the South African education system includes grade 0 (reception grade) and grades 1 to 3. The 3ie-funded EGRS evaluation targeted students and teachers in grades 1 and 2. The USAID Reading Support Project extended that evaluation to grade 3.

Highlights

Evidence use from the 3ie-supported evaluation

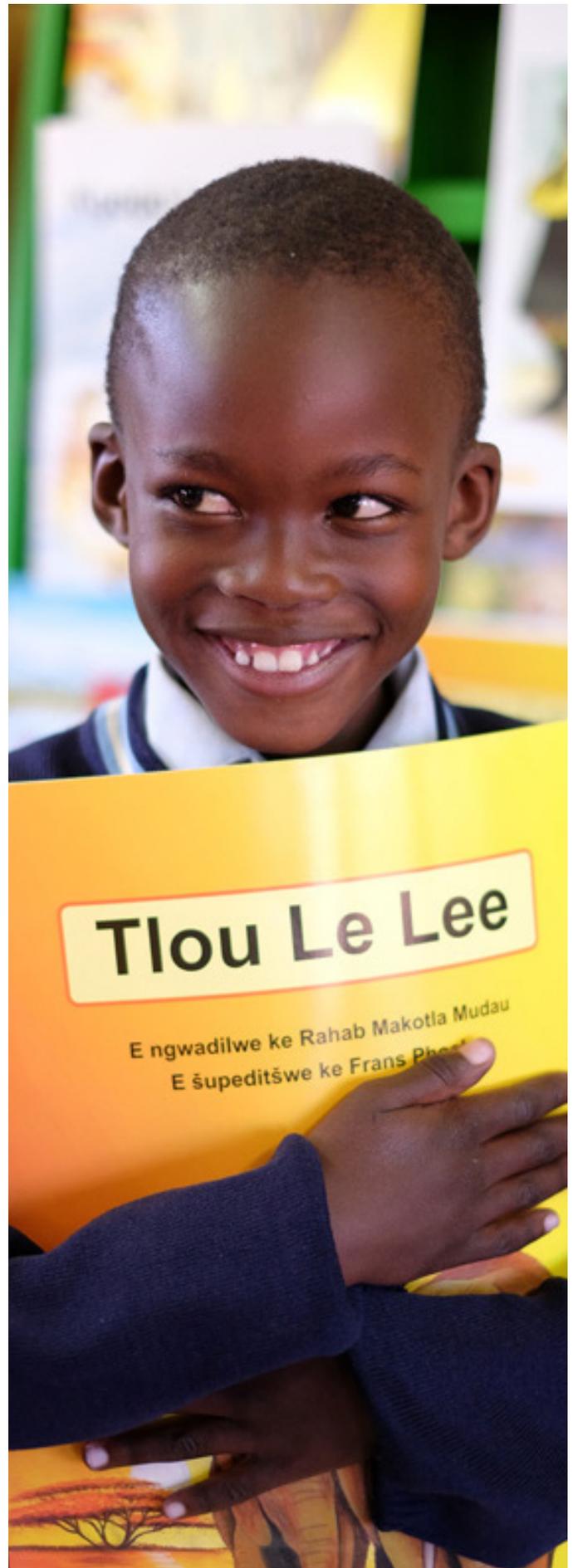
- Following engagement with the researchers on evaluation findings, USAID has reconfigured its [Reading Support Project](#) to extend EGRS implementation and evaluation across all foundation phase classes in two districts of North West Province.
- USAID has funded a follow-up evaluation in Mpumalanga Province, informed by the EGRS, to test virtual modes of instructional coaching for English as First Additional Language.^b
- In two addresses in 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa said the government would implement, across all foundation phase classes, the package of reading resources, expert reading coaches and lesson plans found effective in the EGRS.^{13, 14}

Factors supporting evidence use

- The EGRS responded to the dismal performance of South African students in international and regional assessments and the growing demand for rigorous evidence to improve students' performance in early grades.
- The credibility, existing networks and experience of the research team 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 DPME, helped create ownership of evaluation findings and provided the means for ensuring that evaluation results reached the Cabinet.
- Multiple donors stepped up as evaluation evidence champions to support the evaluation findings, broker relationships and advocate for provincial implementation of the 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 use

- Implementing the EGRS findings will require obtaining 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 large proportions of sector finances committed to personnel costs make it unlikely that provinces could immediately implement the evaluation findings.
- 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.



^b English as First Additional Language refers to the teaching of English as a taught subject in addition to the mother tongue.



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The EGRS impact evaluation

3ie funded the EGRS evaluation in North West Province to improve reading outcomes in students' home language, Setswana. The evaluation compared the effectiveness of the three pilot approaches in grades 1 and 2 in 230 schools, with each approach applied to a separate group of 50 schools and 80 schools serving as a control group, where ordinary schooling continued. Here is a short description of each of the three pilot approaches:

- **A structured learning programme with centralised training:** The first approach provided teachers with lesson plans aligned with the official early grade curriculum, additional high-quality reading materials and semi-annual training on the teaching of reading at centralised workshops.
- **A structured learning programme with on-site coaching:** The second approach provided teachers with the same set of lesson plans and reading

materials and added ongoing support for reading instruction through small cluster-training sessions and on-site coaching from specialist reading coaches.

- **Parental involvement:** The third approach provided weekly meetings with parents to discuss the importance of learning to read in the early grades and empower them with knowledge and tools to become more involved in their children's literacy development.

Impact evaluation findings

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 approach. 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 only small, statistically insignificant effects.

Positive impacts were larger amongst boys, schools in urban townships, larger schools, and communities with higher socio-economic status. Middle-ranked and above-average students in the class and large classes benefited the most. None of the approaches had a negative effect on home-language reading acquisition or on the learning of other subjects.

Although coaching was twice as effective as the training-only approach, it was almost twice as expensive, making both approaches almost equally cost-effective. Implementing coaching also requires operational changes,

such as shifting a greater share of per student government expenses from personnel to non-personnel costs and finding and retaining high-quality coaches.

In making their recommendations, the study team considered that the training-only approach closely followed the existing model for teacher development and training and was less expensive, whilst being effective. They recommended that schools begin with structured lesson plans in the home language and with support materials, such as graded readers. They also recommended more research into the modalities and effects of interventions promoting parents' involvement and those that could work in the most challenging rural, low-income settings.





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Impacts of 3ie-funded evaluation evidence

■ **USAID has funded further evaluations.** Informed by the evidence of the 3ie-supported EGRS, USAID came on board to fund two evaluations of the teacher training and coaching approaches. The first evaluation studies a longer duration of the structured learning programme with centralised training and on-site coaching through the [Reading Support Project](#). The parental involvement approach was discontinued due to the insignificant effects found in the EGRS evaluation. The [second evaluation](#) compares two

mechanisms to provide expert coaching to teachers in Mpumalanga Province. The first mechanism includes tablet-based lesson plans for English as First Additional Language, graded readers and virtual coaching of teachers. The second uses the EGRS model of on-site coaches who visit teachers and compares them with virtual coaches who support teachers through calls and messages.

■ **South Africa's Cabinet has backed implementation of the coaching approach.** On multiple

occasions, the president and the DBE have both announced the government's plan to implement, over the next five years, the EGRS package of reading resources, lesson plans and expert coaches to improve reading comprehension in the foundation phase. The government's implementation plan is informed by the 3ie-funded evaluation's findings and was developed by involving multiple stakeholders, including steering committee members inside and outside the government.¹⁵

Facilitators of and barriers to evidence use

Although there is little question about government ownership of the EGRS evidence, multiple intersecting factors have influenced and continue to affect decision-making. Some of these factors contribute to the link between evidence, evidence-informed policy discussions and action, whilst others complicate this link. Institutionalised national evaluation planning processes, the value attached to rigorous evidence, researcher networks and stakeholder engagement around the evaluation evidence have all contributed to the uptake of the EGRS evidence by the government and donors.

However, evidence-informed action has been constrained by the political economy context – specifically, the presence of multiple urgent priorities in the education sector and budget constraints at national and provincial levels. Evidence use is further complicated by the lack of clarity about coaches as a cadre at scale and the potential for conflict with existing provincial instructional support structures. Going forward, the role of donors' and researchers' continuing engagement with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders at national and provincial levels will be crucial to overcoming these barriers.

Early grade reading is a top priority, but so are other education needs

The DBE research unit designed the EGRS pilot approaches and their rigorous evaluation to address two areas considered critically important across partisan political lines in South Africa: African language literacy and acquisition of reading skills in the early grades by the poorest children. Basic education is an apex priority in South Africa's [Medium-Term Strategic Framework 2014-19](#),¹⁶ and improving reading skills in African languages has been recognised as a critical need since the 2012 report of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit.¹⁷

Whilst reading skills have been a major policy priority in South Africa, multiple other areas in the education sector also compete for policy attention. Chief amongst them are poor school infrastructure and threats to students' safety. The research team, as well as some of the donors, felt that improving building infrastructure and responding to outrage at the deaths of schoolchildren in unsafe school pit latrines was a more urgent priority for government policy.

The government's focus on infrastructure would result in more immediately tangible results, bolstering their campaign claims in the national and provincial elections. In contrast, programmes to improve reading skills would only gradually affect learning outcomes. Even President Ramaphosa, in his February 2019 State of the Nation address, brought up the issue of improving school infrastructure much earlier than the EGRS.

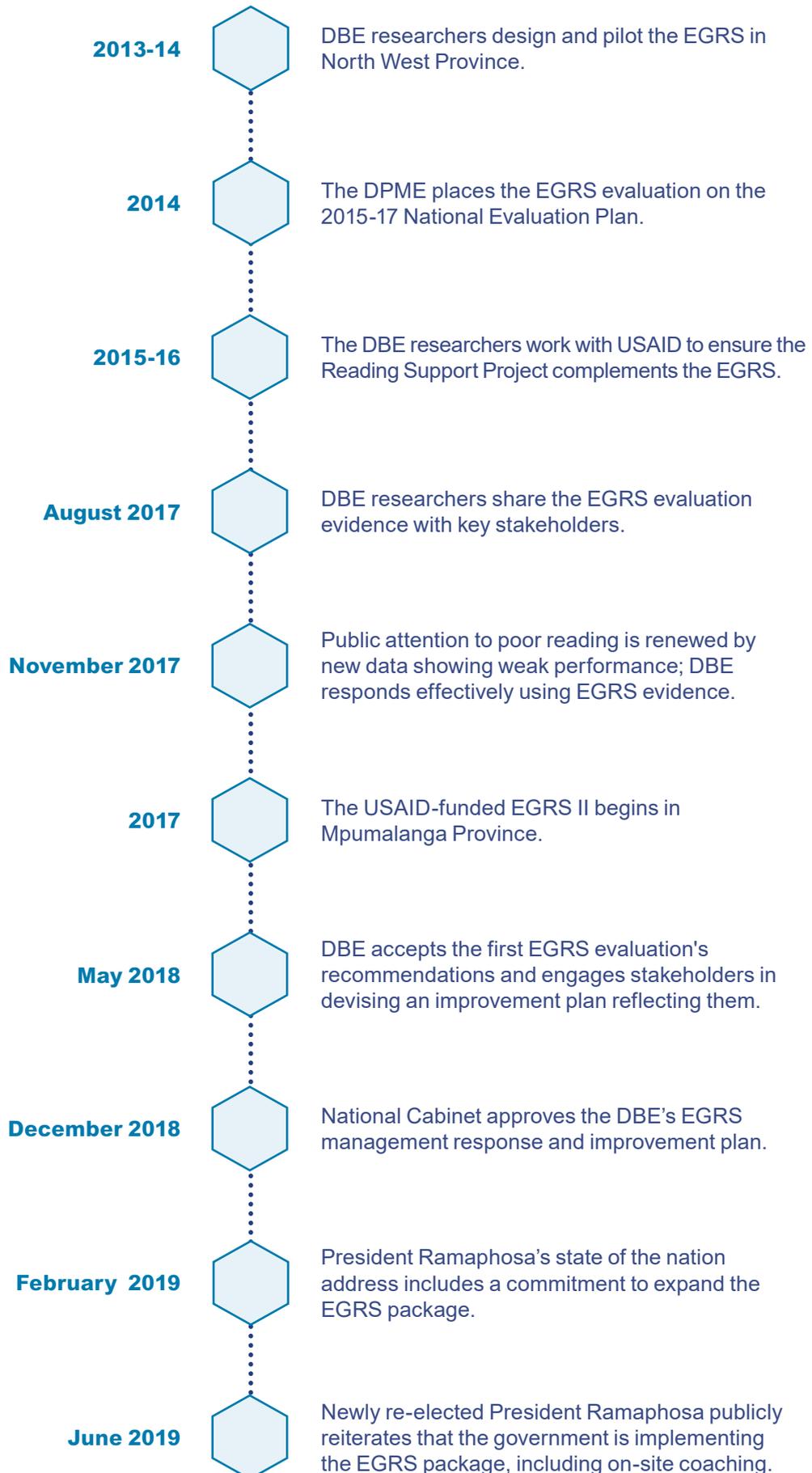
Commentators suggested that with 2019 being an election year and the national economy only just emerging from a recession, the government was not likely to be the only one taking action on 3ie-supported evaluation evidence.¹⁸ In personal interviews, they highlighted the role of non-governmental actors, such as the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), a public-private partnership funded by government and business with representation from the DBE, corporate philanthropists and teachers' unions, that was already working across South Africa to improve the quality of schooling. Most felt the NECT could provide funding at the provincial level and propel the agenda to improve reading skills.¹⁹



The portfolio committee for basic education in parliament... may rather spend it [their energy] on infrastructure because there've been a number of court cases around infrastructure, and several children that have even died because of unsafe facilities like pit latrines, so that's a big [issue].... In response, the president and our minister have launched a massive safe schools initiative to address these infrastructure challenges, so it's a big focus currently.

Nompumelelo Mohohlwane
deputy director of research,
DBE's Research Coordination,
Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate

Tracing the influence of the EGRS evaluation



Researcher experience and networks

The research team's location within the DBE and its strong ties to a small but robust academic research community contributed significantly to the high profile of the EGRS findings. The research team was led by Stephen Taylor, then a research specialist in the DBE Office of the Director-General, and Brahm Fleisch of the University of Witwatersrand's Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

Both researchers are conversant with the national evaluation system and have a record of providing credible, policy-relevant research evidence through prior work on education evaluations such as the Grade 4 Reading Catch-Up Programme.²⁰ Taylor was a researcher in the DBE Office of Director-General at the time of the 3ie study and is now the director of the DBE's Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation unit.

Fleisch led the Gauteng Province's Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy, which inspired the EGRS approaches.

Taylor and Fleisch both have ties to influential university research centres – Research on Socio-Economic Policy at the University of Stellenbosch and the Wits School of Education at the University of Witwatersrand, respectively – that have produced well-qualified education sector specialists working across institutional settings. As a donor representative mentioned in a personal interview, the research team's affiliations and experience lent legitimacy and authority to the study results and recommendations.

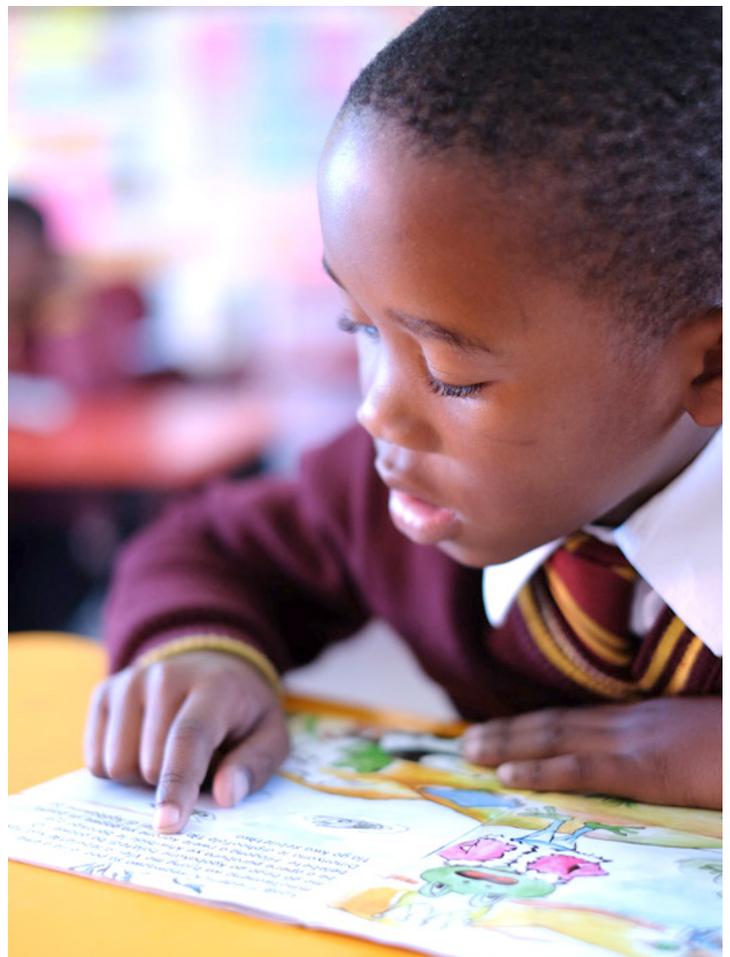
The researchers' affiliations also aided internal engagement at the DBE. The team's location in the DBE building enabled them to present study implications to other relevant DBE units, including the curriculum and teacher training

branches, and to benefit from the DBE's direct relationship with provincial education departments. As one study team member said in an interview, 'Because we're internal [to the DBE], we're repeating the message.... People are seeing it over and over [again]. They're getting progress reports, they're seeing it in different forums and [the penny] drops, I think – and it [can] take a while'.

The researchers' affiliations also facilitated collaboration with USAID when Reading Support Project officials approached the DBE to work in the same regions as the EGRS. The research team's standing in the DBE helped them learn of these plans in time and influence implementation of the Reading Support Project to ensure it did not affect the ongoing EGRS. What started as implementation risk management laid the foundation for closer collaboration, once the team presented the EGRS findings to USAID.

USAID's Reading Support Project team reached out to the DBE for their support in implementation in the North West Province. We were then able to use that project to upscale the effective EGRS interventions for an additional two years across all schools in the two districts where EGRS had taken place, and also to administer another round of data collection. Throughout this process I believe we made progress in our relationship with USAID – they're a big donor in this sector and now they are really working together with the department towards a common objective of improving reading in the country.

Stephen Taylor
principal investigator on the 3ie-supported impact evaluation



Strategic importance of the national evaluation system

The research team and the donor representatives felt listing the EGRS on the DPME's National Evaluation Plan (NEP) was strategic. Under South Africa's National Evaluation Policy Framework, the DPME's unique position – above department level within The Presidency – ensures that departments act on their improvement plans and report progress to the Cabinet.

For the research team, the NEP process also helped them engage with sector stakeholders on the findings, irrespective of their direct association with the EGRS evaluation. Thus, USAID, which was not funding the EGRS pilot or part of its steering committee, was invited to discuss the findings and implications of the evaluation, alongside other partners, when it was time to develop the improvement plan.

What's really neat about the 3ie study is that it was on the national [evaluation] plan...and part of that requirement is that they must do an improvement plan based on the results, so that's where we started getting involved. We were invited to look at the results, to workshop the improvement plan and different components of the improvement plan.... It goes all the way in a report to [the] Cabinet and then there's a mandate to implement this improvement plan that rests on...the DBE.

Carien Vorster
education project
management specialist,
USAID South Africa

South Africa's national evaluation system

The Government-Wide Monitoring and Evaluation System, which the South African Cabinet approved in 2005, identified the following as its focus areas: programme performance information; social, economic and demographic statistics; and evaluation. The National Evaluation Policy Framework, approved by the Cabinet in 2011, sets out the basis for evaluations by government departments.

For each two-year plan cycle, the DPME invites all departments to list high-priority evaluations they wish to include in the NEP. Each included evaluation must form a steering committee, composed of multiple departmental and sector stakeholders and the DPME, that can provide expertise and oversight of the evaluation process. The principal investigator reports regularly to the committee.

The DPME requires a final evaluation report and an improvement plan that covers actions to be taken based on the evaluation findings and other available evidence. Development of the improvement plans often involves stakeholder consultations. At the same time, the commissioning department (for example, the DBE in the case of the EGRS) must provide a formal management response to the evaluation report. The steering committee may comment on the management response and improvement plan. The DPME sends this information to the Cabinet, monitors the improvement plans for two years and reports on its progress to the Cabinet.

According to a recent report on South Africa's national evaluation system, there is evidence of significant follow-up on some of the first NEP evaluations that have been completed.²¹ However, despite encouraging results, some departments have delayed producing and reporting on improvement plans. The report highlights the relevance of the political dynamics in the sector for implementing lessons from certain evaluations.



The value of rigorous evidence

For government representatives and for the donors, it was also important that the EGRS was a randomised evaluation. They pointed out that the methodology was one of the reasons the study was included in the NEP. The DBE director-general mentioned how rigorous evidence could help them lobby for funding the implementation of instructional coaching for teachers.

For the donors, randomised evaluation using control schools enabled strong linking of the

coaching approach with learning gains. According to them, such attribution could convince and build consensus amongst internal and external stakeholders for what worked. One donor representative, speaking in an interview, said, 'In one year we get 1.4 years' worth of learning, right? So, I think the big value of the impact evaluation is we actually can show something, right?[...] Even if we want to get more funding we say look, we've got something that's really good going on here and we need more resources to help expand it'.

The researchers also felt that piloting the early grade reading approaches helped because they were not seen as a judgement or assessment of government schools, teachers or their administrators. However, as the next section discusses, moving from a pilot to a programme would require more research to fit the approaches into existing operational structures and resolve budgetary constraints.



If you give people something that is based on an empirical exercise, they tend to be [more] persuaded than just saying, you know, we have these problems [...] presenting something that says scientifically this is where we are and here are the potential areas of success if we focus on them.

HM Mweli
director-general,
Department of Basic Education

Buy-in at the provincial level

National government departments and donors both highlighted the importance of convincing provinces to incorporate the 3ie-funded evaluation's evidence into their planning, budgeting and implementation. Donors, in particular, highlighted the limits of the national policy agenda for provincial education sector decisions. Provinces effectively control 95 per cent of basic education funding.

The study had local support, and school teachers found the approaches useful. However, provincial involvement and take-up of the evaluation evidence use have been a challenge, because the study focused on new approaches rather than an existing departmental programme.

According to one of the implementing partners, the research team's reliance on only a few provincial officials and the necessity of limiting interventions to treatment areas, rather than applying them to whole districts, prevented full ownership and continuity at the province level.

Just one thin layer at the top is the national policy and now it has to be implemented, and you need people to understand the policy, to buy into it, to have a plan to implement it and to have money to implement it. And so it kind of falls down on all those aspects once it gets to the provinces.

Carien Vorster
education project
management specialist,
USAID South Africa

With the EGRS being marketed as a study and implemented as a pilot, rather than as a programme, the curriculum and teacher development branches were not as closely engaged during the evaluation as the research divisions within the DBE and the provincial education department. During a group interview with the provincial education department, a senior official highlighted that the curriculum and teacher development divisions should have been involved more effectively.

Three other factors constrained provincial buy-in for EGRS evidence. First, the EGRS was one of the multiple external projects running simultaneously in North West Province. The NECT had also provided lesson plans and coaching in the province. A provincial official mentioned in the group interview that multiple programmes that did not align with one another were frustrating for the administration.

Second, the EGRS replaced existing subject advisors within the system with external specialist reading coaches. The research team and EGRS implementing partner Class Act Educational Services both

admitted that evidence-informed implementation would require thinking about where a high-quality coaching cadre would come from and how it would work with the existing provincial subject advisors.

Third, provincial budget commitments were cited as an important challenge for evidence use. An analysis of the provincial budget shows that two thirds of the budget is explicitly allocated towards personnel costs, and provinces could be spending more than 90 per cent of their education budget on salaries.²² With little money available for spending on students, it is unlikely that provinces could afford the EGRS package of readers, lesson plans and reading coaches.

As a provincial official said, '[Whilst] on-site coaching [for] teachers really excelled, we will always be governed by the budget. I think that is something you will always hear even for [reducing] the class sizes: the budget'.

These constraints led the research team to highlight budget-conscious ways of implementing the evaluation findings and to include an analysis of financial options for provinces in the improvement plan.

I understand that a subject advisor could actually be assigned 200 schools, so that's near to impossible to give any level of decent support, but the fact is those people exist in our system. So, what are we now saying? We're saying coaching is the answer. What does it mean about those official structures?

Lorraine Marneweck
executive director,
Class Act Educational
Services

Stakeholder engagement and knowledge translation

Although the policy relevance of the approaches, the credibility of the research team, the rigorous evidence, the NEP process and the associated high-level monitoring were all cited as facilitators, no stakeholder felt this was an automatic process. In light of the various barriers to evidence-informed implementation, ongoing engagement and answering operational questions, especially at the province level, are equally important (if not more important) to move towards evidence-informed implementation of the EGRS findings.

As part of impact evaluation grant-making, 3ie required the research team to develop a stakeholder engagement and evidence uptake plan and report on its progress throughout the evaluation cycle. Using the 3ie planning tool and through the NEP-mandated steering committee and project management team

established in 2014, the research team engaged with a range of stakeholders at crucial milestones during the study, through meetings and workshops; and used a range of communication products, such as baseline and midline reports, pamphlets, and presentations. As a DBE official described it, there was 'continuum of engagement around the results and keeping peoples' interests. Even though the final results were not available, already the research team were creating anticipation for it'.

Once the findings were available, the researchers organised a two-day event in August 2017 to share them widely. Before the event, an external consultant developed a tailored communication plan. The team launched an evidence package of an [animated video](#)²³, an [infographic](#)²⁴, a [policy summary report](#)²⁵ and a [full summary report](#)²⁶ summarising the evaluation findings through the DBE website.

The researchers also enlisted influencers, including the South African singer and United Nations Millennium Development Goals Envoy Yvonne Chaka, DBE Deputy Minister Mohamed Enver Surty and the Nelson Mandela Foundation Chief Executive Officer Sello Hatang, to broadcast social media and video messages about early grade reading and the findings.

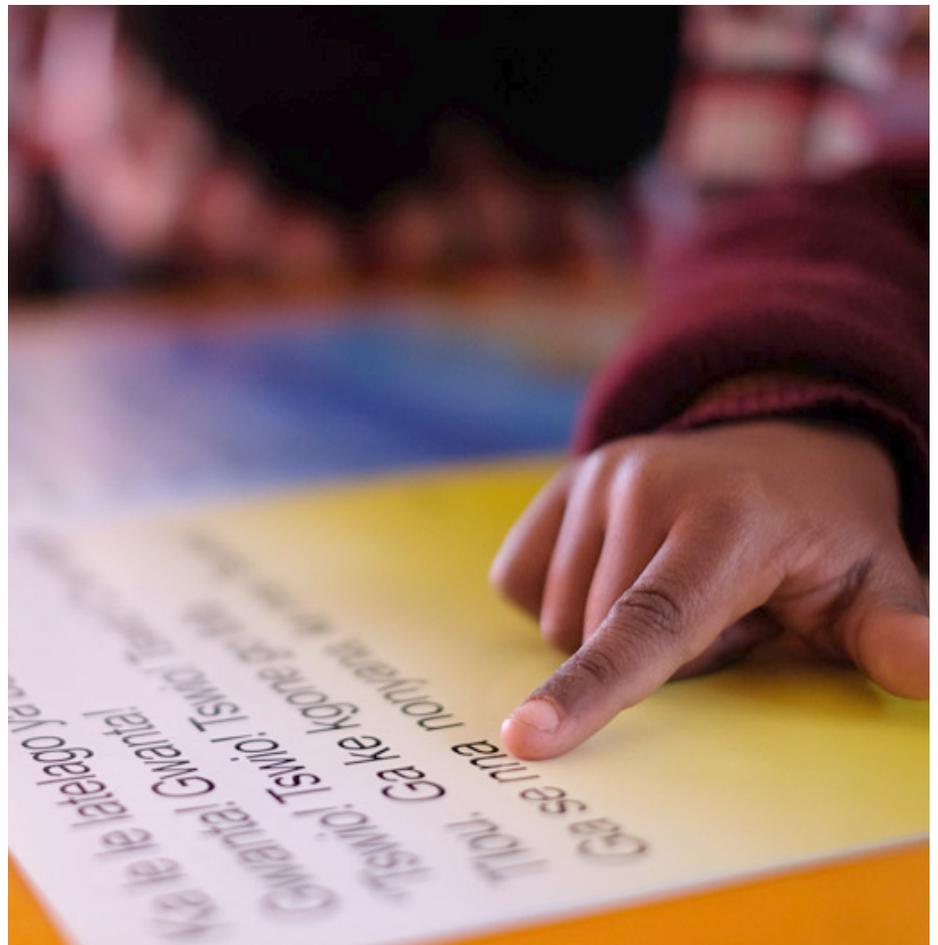
Publicising the EGRS evaluation findings was well timed. Just months after the launch event, the 2016 PIRLS data was released, showing that reading outcomes in South Africa were still particularly weak, bringing the issue back under the public spotlight.²⁷

According to the research team, despite the barriers to evidence use, timely and repeated engagement with stakeholders in the DBE's curriculum and teacher development branches led to conversations that evolved from justifying the need for coaching to discussing coaching standards, cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

We didn't plan it, but fortunately it happened that PIRLS was released in November. South Africa didn't do great, and I think that was quite a trigger to get people more involved. So, as government, we need to respond and say what are we doing in early grade reading, and fortunately each EGRS was perfectly positioned [to say] this is what we're doing.

Janeli Kotze

assistant director of research, DBE's Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate



The role of donors

Even as national and provincial government departments struggled with multiple competing priorities and constraints, donors such as Tshikululu Social Investments, UNICEF, USAID and Zenex Foundation have stepped in as evaluation evidence champions to support further research and advocacy, as recommended in the EGRS improvement plan.

USAID is helping address questions linked with scalability and cost-effectiveness by supporting an extension of the EGRS in North West Province and a follow-up evaluation of different modes of coaching in Mpumalanga Province. USAID has also worked with the research team to produce an [advocacy video](#)²⁸ that cites evidence from the EGRS to support the package of

instructional coaching, high-quality readers and lesson plans. UNICEF and USAID, in partnership with the DBE research unit, both plan to analyse provincial education budgets. The assessment of public finances seeks to enable reprioritisation of provincial education sector spending.

The Zenex Foundation, which is represented on the NECT board, sought to broker relationships and focus efforts informed by the EGRS evidence through the NECT. Through a [literacy symposium in October 2018](#),²⁹ Zenex facilitated connections and exchange amongst researchers, decision makers and NECT. A National Reading Coalition introduced at this symposium and announced in February 2019 appears to be a promising step, given its explicit brokering agenda.

I think the need to be patient is also something that's really important.... I know there are not enough funders who say this but, you know, scaling and embedding these things are – they really do take time, and you've got to walk that journey with people if you believe in the evidence and in the project.

Tess Peacock
former education specialist,
Tshikululu Social Investments



Conclusion

The case of the EGRS strongly reinforces that policymaking is non-linear and complex where the role of evidence depends on the contextual mechanisms promoting evidence use, which may or may not prove effective.

Whilst the EGRS responded to a national crisis in public education with rigorous evidence, an institutionalised process for evidence use has been crucial for the EGRS evidence to gain endorsement from the highest levels of government and donors. Multiple competing priorities in a resource-constrained and politically charged setting have affected the channels and the extent to which evidence has informed decision-making to date.

Clearly, as discussions with the provincial education departments showed, operationalising 'what works' requires more than just evaluation evidence. The national government's intention to expand the cost-effective coaching approach requires professional guidelines for coaches to be developed in consultation with provincial policymakers and their buy-in to allocate the needed funding. These are the discussions that are currently underway.

Those viewed as stakeholders at the beginning might evolve and change over the period of the evaluation. This happened in the case of the EGRS, as the government education departments were saddled with other urgent priorities and as USAID emerged as a key decision maker in the end. Given the constraints to wider impact, the USAID Reading

Support Project partners are implementing the coaching approach in all schools of the two study districts in North West Province, whilst the researchers and donors continue to engage provincial decision makers and other stakeholders around findings, using the NEP process.

To make the evidence-informed investment in reading skills more feasible alongside other education priorities, USAID is funding an evaluation of potentially more cost-effective virtual coaching. Going forward, a crucial mechanism for evidence-informed action is the ongoing collaborative research on provincial budgets and cost-effective ways to implement structured, curriculum-based lesson plans, high-quality reading materials and instructional coaching.







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About evidence use briefs

Since 2017, 3ie has been publishing examples of evidence uptake and use in the 3ie evidence use brief series. Each brief showcases a 3ie-funded evaluation or systematic review and analyses how context, actors and other mechanisms contributed to or limited the use of evidence in policies and programmes.

About the impact evaluation

The 3ie-supported second impact evaluation by [Taylor and colleagues \(2019\)](#) used a mixed-methods, longitudinal, randomised experimental design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative classroom observations to demonstrate the impacts of structured lesson plans based on the national curriculum, high-quality supplementary readers, teacher training and specialist instructional coaching on early grade reading outcomes.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all the informants for their time and the valuable insights they provided through the interviews. The authors are also grateful to the Department of Basic Education's Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation unit colleagues: Stephen Taylor, Nompumelelo Mohohlwane, Janeli Kotze, Tshogofatso Thulare and Bongumusa Khoza, who made the fieldwork possible. The authors thank 3ie colleagues Kanika Jha Kingra for her comments on early drafts of this brief, Radhika Menon for her support during data collection, and Akarsh Gupta for design and layout.

About this brief

This brief examines how the evidence from a 3ie-supported evaluation was taken up and used and what factors or set of factors influenced that evidence use. The authors relied on extensive monitoring data generated from study inception through completion using 3ie's engagement and evidence uptake and use tools and processes. These data included grant documents and regular study reporting using 3ie's stakeholder engagement and evidence uptake and use plan. They were supplemented with interviews with 16 key government, programme, donor and intermediary stakeholders during a field visit to South Africa in September and October 2018.

The authors used the adapted research and policy in development conceptual framework (RAPID+), which specifically considers the role of researchers in evidence-informed decision-making.³⁰ They referred to the Context Matters framework to determine whether and how evidence was likely to be adopted by decision makers and what other factors would contribute to this use.³¹ They coded all relevant data using NVivo to identify and analyse thematic patterns.

Recommended citation: Rao, KV, Ahuja, D and Leach, B, 2019. *How evidence is informing solutions to South Africa's early grade reading crisis*, 3ie Evidence Use Brief Series. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie).



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Endnotes

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December 2019