



Implementing our intentions to improve early grade reading

Mary Metcalfe (Executive Director: PILO; Professor of Practice University of Johannesburg School of Public Management, Governance & Public Policy; and National Planning Commissioner)

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1. Introduction

I was asked to write wearing any one of my 'hats'. I have written on the understanding that this short paper does not represent any of the above hats. At the same time, the views are deeply informed by the work of PILO in working at scale in five provinces, and in the DBE, and some of my current preoccupations in the work of the NPC.

We know that early reading and numeracy must be a national priority if we are to improve educational outcomes: There is adequate evidence of the persistently poor performance of learners in early reading (and in numeracy⁵⁶). Without these tools of navigating text, the trajectory of subsequent learner falters and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities⁵⁷.

What we know about what works: There is an established literature in South Africa on the development and assessment of methodologies for early grade reading that could be taken to scale in a national campaign. This includes Fleisch's, *The Education Triple Cocktail: System-wide Instructional Reform in South Africa* (2018)⁵⁸ and the collaborative research led by the DBE in the 'Early Grade Reading Study' (EGRS) project⁵⁹. There is sufficient evidence that the key elements of adequate reading material for learners, and support to teachers (both professional support and development, and structured pedagogical guidelines) contribute to reading improvement.

A campaign to improve early reading and numeracy can build on what works – but must address implementation challenges.

This short paper will :

- propose key strategies that are fundamental to success of an early grade reading and numeracy (EGL/N) campaign,
- identify weaknesses in government 'implementation'.

⁵⁶ I will flag early numeracy throughout as a reminder of the urgency of work in this area. It is noted that The DBE is now working with partners to accelerate work on early numeracy

⁵⁷ The corpus of work of Nic Spaull provides ample evidence of this. See for example Spaull, N. (2013). "Poverty & privilege: Primary school inequality in South Africa". *International Journal of Educational Development* 33; 436–447

⁵⁸ <https://openuctpress.uct.ac.za/uctpress/catalog/book/50>

⁵⁹ <https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/EarlyGradeReadingStudy.aspx>

Understanding of these should scaffold the execution of any intentions to build on what we know works in early reading and numeracy (EGR/N) at a larger scale within government.

The campaign must be premised on leadership by government, and support for building the necessary capabilities where these are acknowledged to be weak at different levels.

2. Why a campaign?

Change management: Those who must implement the changes at school, district and provincial changes are often weary of changes (from 'above'), often poorly resourced, implemented with a compliance mentality, with little fidelity to the intentions, and with minimal effect. They must be persuaded that the investment in the institutional and personal changes is worth their effort. Elmore⁶⁰ has suggested that "... Schools are accustomed to changing without producing any improvement." Kotter's work on understanding why change fails⁶¹ is instructive and could be the starting point for building understanding of what change is required, why it is necessary, and how it will help with the pressing concerns of all concerned within the multiple competing priorities demanding energy.

Speaking the language of educators: Materials and training that does not engage preconceived ideas is often politely 'listened to' without resulting in any disruption of established and trusted practice⁶². Edicts do not change practice.

Stakeholder 'buy-in': An EGL/N strategy must harness and align the energies of all key stakeholders: officials at national, provincial, and district levels and educators and managers at school level. Teacher unions are essential allies in building and sustaining the conditions for success, and in learning about what is working, and what is not. The reservations currently unions have about overly prescriptive structured pedagogy that limits – rather than builds – teacher professionalism must be respectfully engaged, and a common understanding developed.

Funding partners: A nationally coherent strategy that inspires the active contribution of funding partners (in different localities and with varying programmatic contributions in addition to material resources) will strengthen the resource base of the campaign. We must anticipate funding challenges⁶³, and a campaign that mobilises resources will be key. Funding partners may need to themselves invest in better understanding government processes and challenges in order to be effective partners.

Education NGOs: South Africa is fortunate to have many NGOs working in reading (but unevenly distributed across the country). The coordination of all of these efforts would be unrealistically ambitious, but I believe that these partners would value part of a broader national effort, and could simply be asked, through NASCEE, to reinforce the approach and the pedagogies of the campaign in their work.

Broader society: Improving EFL/N can be accelerated by the active involvement of the many places children live their lives outside of school at home, and in community structures (such as, for example, faith communities) both of which would see the value of the campaign and be committed to its outcomes. There are already a range of existing programmes of support to caregivers from which strategies can be learned, replicated, and extended.

A commitment to a relentless focus on the campaign despite changes in context, new priorities, and setbacks so that momentum, and confidence that the goals can be achieved is sustained

60 See, for example, Elmore (2006) Leadership as the Practice of Improvement <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/37133264.pdf>

61 <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/10/>

62 Teacher unions often quote Earl (in Timperley et al, 2007, viii): "People come to learning with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught or may learn them superficially and revert to their preconceptions in real situations."

63 The Public Economy Project (PEP) at the Wits Centre for Inequality Studies has published an independent appraisal of expenditure choices evident in of budget data. The paper argues that basic education 'will see significant declines in real resource allocation and will be reduced as a share of the budget' (p. 8) and will face 'deep cuts to real spending' (p.9), and that this decline will be evident in 'reduced investment in employee compensation and goods and services.' Reduced expenditure on employee compensation implies larger class-sizes – and unrealistic class sizes will undermine success, and reduced expenditure on goods and services will have consequences for the availability of reading material.

3. Identifying and responding to implementation challenges

These lessons are drawn from the work of PILO and from the work of van der Berg, Gustafsson, and Malindi⁶⁴. Many of these challenges are not unique to education but are common to the challenges of state capacity across many departments.

A capable and developmental state able to intervene to correct historical inequities: The NDP 25 Year Review published in 2019⁶⁵ identified the need to strengthen strategic capacity across government, “The real issue is whether there is a well-articulated and robust strategic intent and planning that effectively directs the public service, and if there are equally robust mechanisms for translating this intent into policies, plans and programmes ...”

Intentional practices of learning from what works, and what does not work: We would benefit from greater courage in assessing implementation failures (rather than defensive compliance reporting as both government and the NGO sector), and frank introspection – with contributions from key stakeholders – on why programmes or initiatives have not succeeded. Rigorous reflection on systemic (or smaller) initiatives that have succeeded, and why, and how, can inform systemic improvement. An example in Basic Education where the failure to analyse key factors driving success were inadequately analysed meant that when the progress subsequently faltered without explanation, and the regression was not conclusively analysed to guide future action is provided by van der Berg et al,

“ The DBE has attributed improvements [in international systemic evaluations] to: better access to books among learners; a strong focus on assessing learners, specifically through the Annual National Assessments (ANA) programme; and clearer pedagogical instructions to teachers in the form of CAPS documentation... Insofar as this explanation of causes is correct, it points to the need to preserve the drivers of positive change at all costs...The absence of a rigorous systemic analysis of drivers of this quality improvement was a missed opportunity for learning as this progress was not sustained in subsequent performance in international benchmarking initiatives”

He concludes that we do not have a rigorous evidence-based analysis of why the system was improving, or declining – what we know is that we are a system capable of improving, to sustain improvement- we need to invest more effort in understanding what drove past improvements.

Translating learning from research into actionable plans: The use of evidence in planning, the coherence of plans and their indicators, and the meaningful monitoring of implementation is weak. An EGR/N intervention should be constructed to strengthen the architecture of planning and implementation and model best practice within the partnerships established to address EGR/N.

Indicators for monitoring progress and using this throughout the system: The use of data and evidence in planning, programme implementation, and monitoring must be a key focus in the development of an EGR/N intervention. The campaign must agree on definitions of success and failure, on mechanisms for regular monitoring of progress, on agreements on both lead and lag indicators, and on mechanisms for adjusting targets and implementation strategies in the light of learning and changing contexts. These mechanisms must be understood, built, and used from school level as part of institutional reflection so that principals and officials appreciate the value of data and want to use it better rather than feeling that they are wasting time in data collection that does not translate into useful insight or meaningful action in their work.⁶⁶

64 For a more comprehensive examination of some implementation challenges in learning, planning, establishing evidence-based measurable indicators, and aligning components of the system – see: Education and Skills for the Economy and Links to Labour Markets in South Africa (van der Berg, S, Gustafsson, M, and Malindi, K. <https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/Education%20and%20skills%20for%20the%20economy%20and%20links%20to%20labour%20markets%20in%20South%20Africa.pdf>

65 Towards a 25 Year Review, 1994–2019

66 See Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, Success by Numbers: How using Data can Unlock the Potential of the South African R-12 Public Education System (2013)

Plans that are aligned across levels and budget: A national campaign would be implemented across provinces. Planning and budgeting must align across these levels. Van der Berg reports that 'A 2017 study commissioned by National Treasury found that silo effects within education departments tend to be replicated in departmental planning documents, the result being that interlinkages and contributions of budgets and activities to overall outcomes are often not clear.' (p.20)

Paying attention to human and material resource constraints: We need to understand and plan for systemic weaknesses in supporting the professional work of teachers. In particular the time and resource limitations on curriculum delivery and support Specialists at district level, and department heads at school level.

A Systemic Approach: Improvements in classroom practice must be integrated into the work of SMT and Districts. If these role players are not integral to implementation and monitoring, the campaign cannot succeed.