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Advisory Note

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Zazi iZandi: Leveraging the public employment stimulus to lay literacy foundations in Grades R and 1

1. Background and Overview

The problem: By the end of two years in school only half of grade 1 learners can identify all the letters of the alphabet

81% of Grade 4 children can't read for meaning in any language, and while the extent of this travesty is shocking, it's also unsurprising given that by the end of two years in school only 50% of children can sound out all 26 letters of the alphabet (Mohohlwane et al. 2022, p.102). South African data shows that if children achieve the national letter-sound benchmark of 40 letter sounds correct per minute, they are much more likely to be on track to read for meaning in Grade 4².



¹ Binding Constraints Lab

² Wills, G., Ardington, C. & Sebaeng, L. 2022. Foundational skills in home language reading in South Africa: Evidence from 2015-2021 (Chapter 3). In Early Grade Reading in South Africa. N. Spaul & E. Pretorius, Eds. Cape Town: Oxford University Press

The solution: Leveraging Teaching Assistants to build phonological awareness and letter-sound recognition, with a targeted and fun intervention focusing on struggling learners.

Zazi iZandi aimed to utilise the learnings from the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) to date, as well as from other interventions³, to design and test an intervention leveraging existing, nationally funded teaching assistants (TAs) to build phonemic awareness and letter-sound recognition; something that is far easier to achieve and measure than – and a prerequisite for – reading for meaning. The intervention sought to employ the following approaches in order to increase the likelihood that the BEEI moves the needle on learning outcomes:

- A coalition approach to public-private partnerships
- Aiming to deliver achievable and easily measurable outcomes
- Focusing on catch-up: Working in-class with small groups and a focus on struggling learners
- Weaving in drivers of quality (strong training, ongoing support and M&E)
- Designing for scale
- Providing a meaningful work experience to TAs

2. Design Pilot

The Zazi iZandi design pilot aimed to test the feasibility and efficacy of an intervention that trains and mentors TAs to improve early grade phonemic awareness, particularly knowledge of letter sounds, in Grades R and 1. The intervention was conceptualised following a workshop with stakeholders from DBE, civil society and philanthropy about leveraging teaching assistants to deliver foundation phase learning outcomes.

The Zazi iZandi design pilot aimed to test the viability of the approach (materials, training and ongoing support). The intervention was designed and implemented by BCL, The Learning Trust (TLT), Funda Wandé and Masinyusane, and funded by DGMT and AGGP, with support from the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) and the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE). Teaching Assistant stipends were covered by the BEEI in September and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) in October and November, with top-ups from DGMT. Brahm Fleisch and Volker Schoer from the University of the Witwatersrand conducted independent research and data was collected by ikapadata.

The design pilot was implemented in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, in classrooms with Grade R and 1 learners. TAs were trained over two days in early September and the pre-pilot ran from 18 September to 17 November. Each TA was provided with a guide, a learner progress and attendance tracker, a Vula Bula alphabet frieze, small letter cards for card games and a board game.

Table 1: Zazi iZandi design pilot

	Peri-Urban Eastern Cape	Rural Limpopo
Implementing partner	Masinyusane	Funda Wandé
Language	isiXhosa	Sepedi
Number of schools	12	13
Number of TAs / Classes	51	26
Number of mentors	5 (part time)	1 (full time)
Number of learners	1,901	739
Median class size	38	22
Median dosage: sessions per learner	11	23

³ Including Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), Funda Wandé (Ardington, 2023), Year Beyond, The Learning Trust's (TLT's) Catch-Up Coalition, Masinyusane, Room 2 Read and WordWorks

At the onset of the intervention, TAs conducted the EGRA letter recognition sub-task. The results were used to organise learners with similar levels of letter sound knowledge into groups of seven. Over six to eight weeks, twenty-minute sessions were held with each group at the back of the classroom, where learners were engaged in fun games and activities including card and board games. TAs were required to track individual learner attendance per session, as well as each child's progress in learning their letters. This internal data informed programme responsiveness, and young people engaged as mentors provided high-touch support to the TAs through in-person visits and via WhatsApp.

Cost



TA stipends comprise the main cost, covered by the BEEI. Additional expenditure includes mentor stipends (R6,500 per month, with 1 mentor for every 30 TAs), training, materials and project management.

In the design pilot, TAs were trained over two days. In the event that additional skills were to be added to the programme (e.g. blends and sight words), an additional two days of high quality training would be required.

The size of a printing run has significant ramifications on unit costs. In a district with around 100 schools, the price per pack of materials is just under R100 per TA. This could foreseeably drop to around R70 per TA for a print run of 50,000 units. In the event that 50,000 TAs were to be allocated to foundation phase literacy, the cost for materials would total R3,5m.

3. Independent research methodology and findings⁴

3.1 Methodology

The researchers approached the pilot review as an exploratory pilot trial, to assess programme feasibility and measure initial gains. The pre- and post-testing provides an indication of the possible impact of the intervention, but given the nature of the sample, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population.

The intervention sample for Zazi iZandi was drawn from two circuits of primary schools, one in the Eastern Cape and the other in Limpopo. In a subsample of the intervention group, the external learner assessment was conducted by an agency independent of the management of the project and the intervention agencies. iKapadata assessed both Grade R and Grade 1 children using the Letter Recognition Subtask in the Grade 1 EGRA. The task involved learners being timed on their ability to recognise 60 letter sounds in 60 seconds. The subsample of schools contains 10 schools from the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. A total of 289 Grade R and Grade 1 learners were tested for the baseline. 266 learners were re-tested in the endline with attrition spread across the schools.



⁴ This section is drawn from: Brahm Fleisch and Volker Schöer University of the Witwatersrand. DRAFT Zazi iZandi Teaching Assistant Pilot Study Report Dec 2023

3.2 Results

According to the DBE benchmarks, all learners should be able to identify 40 correct letter sounds per minute for both Sepedi and isiXhosa by the end of Grade 1.

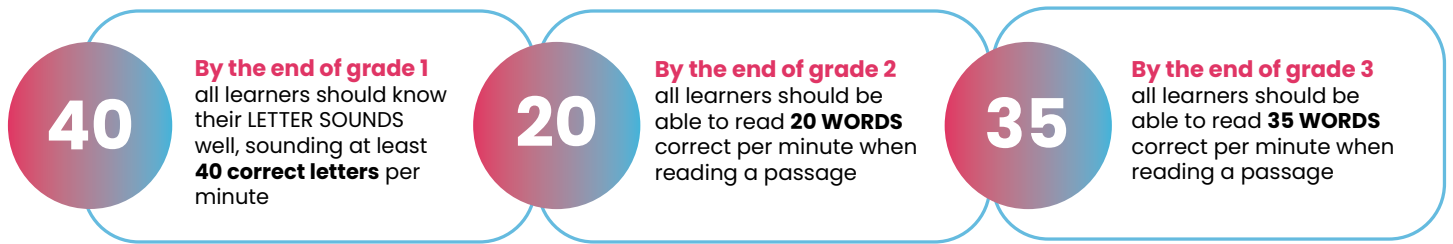



Table 2 shows the performance of grade 1 learners in the intervention relative to the benchmark. The researchers find the intervention is associated with “positive effects both for learners that had no prior knowledge of letters, and dramatically increased the proportion of learners that meet the Department of Basic Education benchmark letter knowledge of 40 letters per minute.



The increase of the proportion of learners that meet the benchmark for the end of Grade 1 from 29% to 42% is educationally meaningful. Equally important is the reduction of learners that could not identify a single letter at baseline. However, the rather low % change seems to indicate that non-identification of letters is potentially not a pedagogic problem but could rather result from severe learning challenges.”

Table 2: Percentage of learners with zero or at or above 40 on baseline and endline for Grade 1, independent data⁵

	Baseline			Endline		
	#	Total	%	#	Total	%
Zero Score	11	122	8.9%	8	122	6.6%
Below 40	87	122	71%	71	122	58%
40 and above	35	122	29%	51	122	42%

Table 3 shows average gains in letter sounds correctly identified that learners made in Grades R and 1.

“In the Eastern Cape, Grade 1 learners improved by seven letters or about a 27-percentage improvement. The percentage gains are of the same magnitude in Limpopo, save that the learners were slightly lower on baseline. For the Grade Rs, the percentage gains are much larger, not surprising given that they come off a much lower baseline for both Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Irrespective, learners in both grades managed to correctly identify around 6-7 more letters after the intervention compared to their baseline performances.”

⁵ Source: Brahm Fleisch and Volker Sch er University of the Witwatersrand. DRAFT Zazi iZandi Teaching Assistant Pilot Study Report Dec 2023 * Learners from one school in the Eastern Cape excluded due to surveying issues

Table 3: Main Findings: Average Number of Letters Correct Baseline and Endline for Grades R and 1⁶

Baseline			Endline			Difference
	Ave letters correct	# children		Ave. letters correct	# children	
E Cape		96	E Cape		96	
Grade 1	26,1	44	Grade 1	33,2	44	7,1
Grade R	5,2	52	Grade R	11,7	52	6,5
Limpopo		146	Limpopo		146	
Grade 1	24,8	78	Grade 1	30,9	78	6,0
Grade R	2,7	68	Grade R	6,3	68	3,7

In summary, the researchers conclude that the results provide a strong basis for moving to the next evaluation phase. They suggest a Phase 3 trial to test two versions of the programme model, one with the current six-nine week intervention and a second version with twice the duration, i.e., 12-18 weeks or two school terms.

4. Looking ahead

To date, the only other homegrown evaluation data we have on the potential of TAs in the classroom is the Funda Wande intervention. This intervention entails rigorous recruitment, intensive training and the provision of LTSM per teacher and learner. Whilst these kinds of interventions are the gold standard for the use of TAs in Foundation phase classrooms, the short Zazi Zandi provides the following additional insights:

1. With focused training and support, youth are able to improve reading outcomes with a relatively small dosage of training (2 days).
2. There is potential for the use of high potential young people as cost effective mentors where trained effectively.
3. The impact of placing youth in the classroom with a structured programme, can be experienced relatively quickly (6 weeks) by learners, however whether the learning gains are sustained needs further investigation.
4. Internal data collection can be a powerful tool to visualise and track individual learner progress and aid programme efficacy, with simplicity, training and ongoing support key to any scalable model.
5. There is great potential in providing a set of low cost LTSM at the level of the youth to work with learners in small groups.
6. The intimate nature of small group work in Zazi iZandi allowed for one-on-one connection with learners, something very difficult for a teacher to achieve in large classes and seemed to enable the teaching at the right level element of the programme to be well delivered.

With the BEEI being extended into 2024, the team is working to expand the programme offering from letters to include blends and high-frequency sight words, and plans to work with the national and Provincial government education departments to bring Zazi iZandi to many more learners.

⁶ Source: Brahm Fleisch and Volker Schöer University of the Witwatersrand. DRAFT Zazi iZandi Teaching Assistant Pilot Study Report Dec 2023

* Learners from one school in the Eastern Cape excluded due to surveying issues