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Advisory Note

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Scaling up the Early Grade Reading Programme

Introduction

At least half of primary school aged children globally cannot read with comprehension however, in South Africa, the percentage is staggering as eight out of ten children cannot read for meaning by the end of grade four. This situation has been worsened by the global pandemic that saw many children remain out of school for prolonged periods leading to learning losses. For countries like South Africa, this perpetuates learning poverty amongst children in marginalised contexts.

Unless countries like South Africa garner enough energy on RAPID¹ recovery that seeks to advance assessing learning levels, prioritizing the teaching of the fundamentals and increasing efficiency through catch-up, learning poverty will worsen. This can be achieved through the scale-up of foundational literacy and numeracy interventions that have evidence to improve learning at scale.

South Africa has lost ten years of improvements in literacy. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 published in 2023, shows that the number of children who cannot read for meaning increased from 78 to 81%. This was attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, South Africa had the most adverse decline in the reading level/score among the countries that participated in the study in both years². This shows a loss after ten years of gains between 2011 and 2021.

1 From Learning Recovery to Education Transformation.pdf (unicef.org)

2 See: <https://pirls2021.org/results/achievement/overall> (Accessed on 21 November, 2023)

What Works in RAPID recovery³ to end learning poverty:

Considerations for Early Grade Reading Programmes

Evidence shows that building on existing interventions that have shown improvements and implementing at scale will improve foundational literacy and numeracy. UNICEF proposes, based on evidence from seventeen countries, the following would support RAPIDrecovery in education

- Scale-up pilots of remedial programmes, Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), Structured Pedagogy formative assessment, and others.
- Play-based early childhood education (ECE), accelerated school readiness programme.
- Integrate remedial programmes into ‘regular’ schooling.
- Engage youth and community volunteers to support programme delivery.
- Use technology to support programme delivery.

This evidence has guided the selection of the Early Grade Reading Programme, a structured learning programme using the materials from the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) EGRP for Home Language, and the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSIRP) for English First Additional Language (EFAL).

Scaling up interventions

Amongst other interventions, structured learning programmes have shown the most promise in improving early grade reading in India, Uganda, Malawi, Kenya and South Africa, to name a few. In South Africa, the Early Grade Reading Programme has long been part of the government’s improvement plan and was first implemented in 2015. Different iterations of the programme have been implemented with the base being provision of quality lesson plans, training of teachers, coaching (external and/or internal) and parental involvement in the case of EGRS 1. In these iterations, evidence has shown that while training has a positive effect, coaching was even more valuable. This evidence supports international evidence on improving early grade reading, as seen for example in Kenya.

The Early Grade Reading Programme aims to mitigate the challenges involved in teaching and learning in Foundation Phase literacy classrooms. It is a collaboration between the DBE, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Zenex Foundation, UNICEF, and the Northern Cape Department of Education (NCDoE). This intervention is one of the latest iterations of the Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS 1, EGRS 2) and the Early Grade Reading Programme which have been implemented in the North West province since 2015.

The intervention will be implemented in the Northern Cape province. The province is dominated by Setswana (34% of learners in the Foundation Phase) and Afrikaans (51% of learners in the Foundation Phase). The remaining languages are English Home Language (11%) and isiXhosa Home Language (3%).

The intervention will involve training and coaching for teachers to deliver a basic structured reading programme. The intervention imparts evidence-based instructional practices to teach the practice of reading in the foundation phase. The main support to teachers will include structured lesson plans, integrated reading materials and coaching (referred to as the triple cocktail).

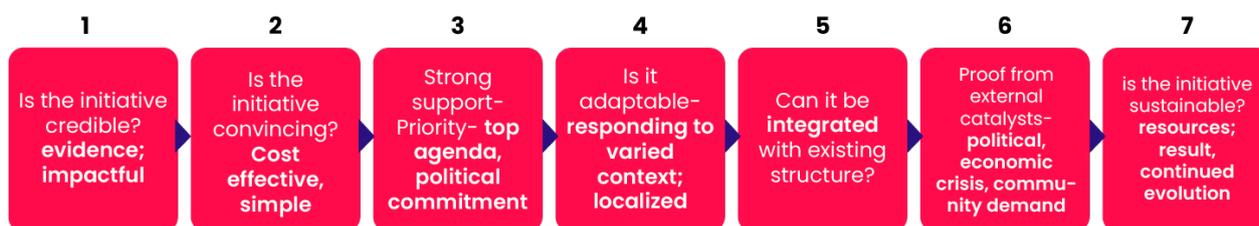
The intervention will be rolled out in two phases. The first will focus on all schools with Setswana as a Home Language (HL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL), as these are the dominant languages used for teaching and learning in the province. The second phase will focus on all remaining ordinary schools in the province. These are schools with Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa as the Home Language; and English and

³ See: <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/32546/file/Where-are-we-in-education-recovery.pdf>; <https://www.unicef.org/media/140796/file/Education-in-post-COVID-19-world-advocacy-brief.pdf>

Afrikaans as a First Additional Language. The first phase will be implemented from 2024-2025 in the Frances Baard and John Taolo Gaetsewe Districts. The second phase will be implemented thereafter. The key components of the intervention include the provision of integrated learning and teaching support material (LTSM), just in-time training, and onsite coaching. Of note is the additional work of developing multigrade resources using existing materials.

Pathways to Scale Up Approaches: Tracking Changes in the Scalability of EGRP as a Structured Learning Programme

The Pathways to Scale of EGRP is a practical tool to support decision-makers in making decisions around whether interventions are ready to scale. ‘Scaling up’ here refers to “expanding, replicating, adapting and sustaining successful policies to promote early grade reading programmes in a geographic area and over time to reach a greater number of children with improved results”. The seven pathways described below are interconnected and together act as a robust tool for the education system in scaling up the interventions; in this case, the EGRP.



- 1. Credibility of the intervention:** Is there sufficiently robust evidence available to suggest that the intervention can work in diverse settings, with significant impact on learning outcomes? In the case of the structured learning programmes in literacy, there is international evidence. In South Africa, structured learning programmes – if implemented ‘well’ – have shown significant improvement in learning outcomes. The evaluations of EGRP have found that the intervention enables learners to acquire foundational reading skills.
- 2. Cost, effectiveness, and efficiency:** Scalable interventions should be cost effective, lower cost than existing or alternative solutions, and affordable for a longer period without much burden on the education system. Initiatives such as EGRP require small amounts of funding to scale up, which can easily be mobilized internally or externally.
- 3. Political Commitment and proof from external catalysts:** Political priority is the key determinant to the successful and sustainable scale up of the initiatives and the political commitment eventually drives the relevant policy change and guidance where appropriate. This political priority and commitment should not alter even when there is an unforeseen emergency hitting the country.
- 4. Adaptability to Context:** Adaptability and the potential replication of the initiative in diverse contexts are core to successful scale up. The nature of adaptability needs to be verified with key critical indicators, such as human resource capacity and skills; the extent to which the intervention departs from current practice; alignment with government policy and guidance; the level of complexity involved; and the various elements involved in implementation and monitoring.
- 5. Using existing structures and government systems:** Scaling up an effective program requires the systematic scaling up of implementation capacity to support, sustain and improve high-quality replications. Strong, collaborative relationships are needed between originating, intermediary and adopting organizations. While adopting organizations should have the operational capacity and financial resources to implement at scale, the adopting and intermediary organizations need to have experience scaling up similar interventions. Additionally, leveraging an organization’s strong network and credibility in relevant contexts add value to the integration of the intervention within the existing structures.

- 6. Sustainability:** Sustainability may be considered in two ways: sustainability of results and the sustainability of initiatives. Sustainability of results ensures that the programme delivers positive impact year on year, while sustainability of the initiative ensures fidelity of programme delivery: it is implemented as intended, has the requisite budgetary allocation and human resource capacity, and is well-integrated with existing government initiatives.