

EDUCATION TO
READ AND WRITE

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Wordworks community interventions for early literacy learning

Early intervention: Over the past eight years, provincial and national assessments have shown that a high percentage of South African children do not acquire basic literacy skills in their first three years at school (DOE 2003; W.Cape DOE 2009). To tackle this problem, we need to consider not only what happens in schools, but also what contributes to literacy learning prior to formal schooling. The focus needs to shift from tackling low literacy levels once children have already fallen behind, to early intervention that supports acquisition of reading and writing skills. For the foreseeable future, many children will continue to be disadvantaged by their circumstances but high quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes have the potential to play a critical role in levelling the playing field. There is a need to strengthen literacy and language teaching in Grade R in order to ensure that children in circumstances of poverty have a good foundation for learning to read and write successfully.

Strengthening the role of parents and families: Parents and caregivers do not always realise that they have a key role to play in supporting their children's learning in their own homes. In contexts of poverty, this is compounded by the fact that their own poor educational experiences and resulting lack of confidence deter them from providing support even where they wish to do so. So a key ingredient of successful learning interventions for children from disadvantaged backgrounds must be programmes that provide

parents and care-givers with the knowledge and resources to play a role in their children's education. Such programmes must not only develop capacity and skills, but build self-esteem and a sense of purpose and community among the beneficiaries.

Engaging communities and building centres of support for children: In South Africa, there is a growing awareness that networks of collaboration must be built across communities to educate our children (e.g. campaigns such as 'School @ the Centre of Community'). Volunteer programmes that bring together teachers, parents/care-givers, community members and volunteers both empower those involved and enable a transfer of skills and knowledge back into the home and community contexts. These programmes provide cost-effective ways of supporting learning and giving children a sense of belonging and hope.

Access to resources: Solutions to the literacy crisis in our schools need to include measures to mitigate the effects of poverty. In an extensive review of US studies of programmes that have successfully closed the poverty gap, Susan Neuman (2009) proposes that poverty takes such a high toll partly because poor families 'lack access to educational resources ... that may help them extend their worlds and increase their children's verbal skills'. She argues that poverty exerts influence by depriving children of opportunities to develop core language skills that provide the foundation for further learning. In the South

African context, there is a need for affordable, high quality resources for teachers and parents to use to support language and literacy learning.

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Wordworks

Wordworks is a non-profit organisation that aims to support the early literacy and language development of children from disadvantaged communities. We provide resources, training and mentoring for parents/caregivers, volunteers, community workers and Grade R teachers to support young children’s language and literacy learning. Our vision is that young children from disadvantaged communities will have a solid language foundation that enables the development of good reading and writing skills, and that parents and community members will be empowered to play a meaningful role in children’s learning.

At the heart of our work is the understanding that learning does not only happen in the classroom – families, libraries, faith-based and community organisations can play an important role if they have access to knowledge and resources.

The Home-School Partnership Programme

In the Home-School Partnership Programme our main objective is to empower parents to support informal learning at home, with a focus on literacy and language learning. At the same time we aim to build partnerships between pre-schools/ schools and the families they serve, foster a culture of learning among families and provide a positive and nurturing space for parents to share ideas and ask questions. Parents are invited to attend a 2 hour workshop once a week over seven weeks.

About 25 parents usually attend each session. Parents are given ‘learning kits’ during the course, which include crayons, a little book for drawing, small handmade books, handouts and games. The programme is appropriate for parents and care-givers of children between the ages of 4 and 7 years. The programmes are enabled and sustained by building the capacity of facilitators, key parents, teachers and members of community organisations.

The Community-School Partnership Programme (Early Literacy Support)

The Community-School Partnership Programme trains volunteers and community workers to support young children as they learn to read and write. The techniques and resources are targeted at children between the ages of 5 and 8 who are learning to read in English as a second language and also benefit older children who have not acquired basic literacy skills. Children work in pairs with the same volunteer for a minimum of six months. They thrive on the level of attention they receive in small learning groups, and their learning and social skills benefit as they grow in confidence and self-esteem from week to week. Training and mentoring is provided to volunteers as well as volunteer co-ordinators who recruit and manage volunteer teams at pre-schools, schools and libraries. Volunteers receive a ‘resource kit’ which includes all the materials they need to work with young children.

Wordworks intervention strategy

- Challenge ideas about when learning starts and the role of community and home in early learning.
- Provide resources + build skills and knowledge + support and mentorship for community ownership

TRAINING

- For facilitators who run programmes for parents; coordinators who support local volunteers; volunteers and Grade R teachers
- Based on best-practice and expertise
- Build skills and knowledge



RESOURCES

- For parents and volunteers, Grade R teachers (2011)
- Local, culturally- relevant, accessible, affordable
- Easy to use or make
- Resources also used by other organisations to integrate with their existing programmes



ONGOING SUPPORT

- Support and mentorship for local groups so that they can become self-sufficient
- Flexible and demand-driven
- For clusters, communities and sites
- Direct contact but not running programmes



The Grade R teacher training programme

We are in the process of developing a Grade R teacher training programme which includes a set of guidelines and resources for literacy and language teaching. In 2011 we are working in partnership with the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) to train and mentor Grade R teachers to strengthen their teaching of language and literacy.

Impact: Since 2005 we have trained over 200 volunteers, 30% of whom are from local communities. In 2010, through our Community-School Partnership Programme, these volunteers provided over 750 children from Grades R to 3 with weekly, small-group language and literacy lessons for a period of six months or more. Through the delivery of our Home-School Partnership Programme in 28 schools and three libraries, 720 parents have been empowered to become more involved in their children’s learning. In a number of communities where we work, programmes are driven by community facilitators and volunteers. We are achieving our aim of empowering communities to play a role in changing statistics of low literacy levels.

Where Wordworks works: We work primarily in the Cape Town area, with 28 sites delivering the Community-School Partnership Programme, and

20 sites delivering the Home-School Partnership Programme. We have clusters of schools and libraries using our programmes in the following areas: Kalk Bay to Masiphumelele/Oceanview; Grassy Park; Hout Bay; Mitchell’s Plain; Stellenbosch; Vrygrond/Lavender Hill. Our partners include preschools, schools, libraries and non-profit organisations involved in school and after-school programmes for children from disadvantaged communities. In addition to our sites in the vicinity of Cape Town, Wordworks materials are being used in Dysseisdorp (near Oudtshoorn), Malmesbury and in Grahamstown.

What we have done well

- From 2005 to 2008, our work focused on a few sites, where we delivered our programmes and offered training and mentoring to parents and volunteers, at the same time developing our own expertise, refining our approach and building an evidence base.
- In 2009 we developed high-quality, user-friendly guidelines and resources for our core programmes and published these as open source materials on our website (www.wordworks.org.za). This was a turning point for our work, and has allowed us to expand our reach considerably and increase our impact.
- Our work is characterised by sharing good practice, inclusiveness and collaboration, and

Feedback from parents who have participated in the Home-School Partnership Programme

- ‘It was good to hear about how we could help our children instead of receiving criticism for not doing enough.’
- ‘I’m a different person in my house, I feel proud to be a mother.’
- ‘I learnt how to create at home a fun place to learn.’
- ‘After this course for the first time I enjoyed holiday with my son. We had something new to do.’

Feedback from parents of children who have participated in the Community-School Partnership Programme

- ‘I want to say thank you very much for spending your time with our children. As you are with them we noticed improvements because my child can read and write now because of you.’
- ‘I really appreciate the lessons that you bring for us, for our children in this poor place.’
- ‘There is an improvement, even at his school his teacher thanks me for the reading at home especially in the world cup holiday. Thanks to Wordworks.’

Feedback about resources

- ‘Thanks to Wordworks for this wonderful, well planned, structured programme. Being part of it helps to know that we are bringing positive change in our community and children’s lives.’
- ‘Easy to interpret, and very admirable that pedagogically sound educational theories can be made accessible and comprehensible to those without a background in education. Thank-you!’



sustained commitment to individuals and communities.

- Wordworks offers resources, training and mentorship while encouraging communities to take ownership of their programmes.

Where we are still developing

- We are a small organisation, and in order to extend our reach, ensure sustainability and raise awareness of the importance of early learning interventions, we would like to further develop our partnerships with key organisations and funders.
- We are working to find the right balance between providing mentoring and support, and enabling programmes to become self-reliant and sustainable.
- We would like to strengthen ways of documenting and sharing our work in order that our learning, evidence-base and approach can be understood and impact more widely.

Our plans for the next two years

We aim to have set up over 40 sustainable programmes empowering parents to become more involved in their children's early learning. 40 teams of Wordworks volunteers will have the skills and resources to support young children as they learn to read and write, and our resources and programmes will be used by partner organisations working with young children. We aim to have developed a guidebook and resource pack for Grade R teachers, and produced training DVD's for volunteers and teachers. Our work from 2009 to 2012 will provide evidence for a sustainable model for early intervention in disadvantaged

communities. We will have developed a mentoring model and begun a process of partnering with scale up partners to extend our reach and ensure sustainability. Through conference presentations, research and publication we aim to raise awareness of the importance of early intervention.

Selected references

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