

Hands-on

Experience Learning

Volunteer-driven literacy programmes in schools: why parents and teachers join, and why they stay.

In order to ensure that more children learn to read and write successfully, there is a need for both early literacy interventions that directly support young children and for programmes that equip parents and caregivers to become more involved in their children's learning. Wordworks' experience sheds light on factors that draw volunteers into programmes and help sustain their involvement over time.

In 2005, Wordworks began the development and delivery of two programmes that support young children's language and early literacy -the "Ready, steady...read and write" Programme (previously known as the Early Literacy Programme) and the Home-School Partnership Programme (HSPP).

The 'Ready, steady...read and write' Programme provides volunteer tutors with training and resources to work with pairs of young children on a weekly basis for at least six months. Through the *Home-School Partnership Programme*, teachers are trained to facilitate a series of eight weekly workshops with parents to provide them with the understanding, skills and practical ideas they need to support their children's learning at home. Teacher-facilitators run the workshops in a voluntary capacity, over and above their commitments as teachers. Both programmes rely on adults giving of their time to ensure that young children have the knowledge and skills to learn to read and write successfully. In 2015, these two Wordworks programmes were active in 54 schools, run by 112 active volunteer teacher-facilitators and 270 active community volunteers.

Given this central role of volunteers to ensure our programmes run year after year, we have sought

to understand why people join our programmes to begin with – and what factors contribute to their commitment to this work over time (sustained involvement).

To identify and unpack these factors, we looked at three key questions:

1. What does Wordworks offer in terms of programmes, training and resources?
2. How do these programmes tap into personal motivations?
3. What other factors can play a role in helping to sustain commitment to supplementary literacy programmes?

1. Wordworks' programmes, training and resources

At Wordworks, we keep developing and refining our programmes and resources alongside the delivery of these programmes across a wide range of contexts. This ensures that our programmes are structured to enable take up by volunteer tutors who are not trained teachers, and teachers who have never previously facilitated workshops for parents.

Practical guides and resources are provided to teachers and other volunteers to reduce time spent on planning and managing the programmes, and to ensure that implementation is as straightforward as possible.

Over the past ten years, we have learnt that the following factors are key to getting and *keeping* people motivated to participate:

- Training must be accompanied by high quality resources. These resources show participants that we value their role, foster a sense of pride, and reinforce one of our key messages: that learning should be fun!
- Trainers must build on what participants bring to the process of learning. As much as training should be about building knowledge and skills, it must also build confidence.
- There must be high expectations of voluntary participants, but within a supportive context.
- Although the initial intensive training helps to build new knowledge, change takes time and comes from seeing the value of the content when it is being applied in everyday situations.
- Mentoring, or some level of ongoing support, is critical to keeping people motivated. Successful mentoring means finding a balance between being supportive, but allowing participants to take ownership of programmes and being responsible for their own development and growth.
- Follow-up or refresher workshops offer an opportunity to share successes, reflect on challenges, receive new ideas and resources, and build a sense of belonging to a wider community.

We are constantly building our relationships with volunteers, parents and facilitators - responding to their needs, interests, strengths and potential. This has resulted in significant commitment from these partners.

2. Tapping into personal motivation : feedback from our volunteers

Through written feedback and focus groups we have identified other factors that explain this commitment to our programmes. What are some of the intangible rewards that make people join and ensure that their experience is worthwhile?

Teachers and volunteers who give of their time to participate in our programmes say they do so because they are responding to a need they have identified in their communities and in their own families, and want to contribute to improvements in literacy in their own or a nearby community. They stay committed because they enjoy the work and it gives them a sense of satisfaction – particularly when they see change in the children and parents they work with. The programmes

also speak to the interests and goals of volunteers – and their desire to access new knowledge and skills. Through the programmes, many volunteers also build meaningful relationships, which helps to sustain their involvement and interest in the work.

Responding to a need:

'The first thing I noticed was that parents were STARVING ... starving to gain knowledge to be better equipped to help their kids. This hunger drove them to come every week and participate in the activities. We had a young mom whose father was very sick but she would still come. There was one week when her baby was sick but she still came with her child as she had nobody to look after him.'

'To help my Grade R son. I was finding it difficult to assist him at home. With the programme, it helped us both.'

Interests and goals of participants:

'For more than 28 years I've been working with young children and therefore with young mothers; most of them single parents. One of my dreams was to reach out to childbearing-aged women as I feel they needed the most support but get the least support from partners and communities.'

'I have a passion for reading and writing so I would love to pass that on as most children tend to shy away from books.'

Personal development and access to new knowledge and skills:

'I feel so empowered, so positive from attending this course.'

'Through this programme I was accepted at Cape College to study further as a teacher at an ECD centre.'

'I would like in the future to become a teacher. I love working with children. I am interested in their development and plan to study further.'

A sense of satisfaction and being appreciated:

'I love working with children and am inspired when you watch them learn and appreciate your help.'

'I feel satisfaction at giving attention to children in need of it. It feels like I'm doing something positive.'

'Being able to assist parents and learners (even if the child is not in my class) makes me feel appreciated and loved.'

Enjoyment:

'I treated this workshop as an escape from my daily life, as 'me time', but I must say I never really enjoyed my 'me time' this much!'

'I absolutely LOVED facilitating the Wordworks programme. There wasn't a week that I sighed – I truly looked forward to each and every session. And now that it is all over, we have a support group meeting twice a month, just to keep connected.'

'I was not at all excited when I heard about the workshop. All I could think of was that there goes another Saturday, and not only one but two! I was pleasantly surprised ... what inspired me most was the enthusiasm of our parents. We laughed together and had lots of fun during our sessions. Every Wednesday I went home with a smile in my heart and feeling on a high.'

Seeing change:

'It's great to work with children, and seeing how they advance week after week gives me great pleasure.'

'Great sense of achievement and satisfaction watching the children progress and grow, not only with reading confidence but emotionally too.'

'I communicate differently, interact and enjoy every moment that I spend with my child. He actually grew intelligent, he grew more free, he communicates with friends which he never did.'

Relationship-building and sense of community:

'I gained a new family with other volunteers.'

'At the end of term we all come together in our little room here and each of us brings something and we sit and we chat and talk

about, not just Wordworks; everything comes out and we laugh and we talk and before we know it time has gone by.'

'The time we spent with the parents also improved the relationship we have with them. We got to know them better and they also learned more about us.'

'Raising kids you are always busy and I was always busy; there is always something to do, being a housewife, being a mother but volunteering actually gets me out of the house. It gets my mind on something else other than kids, other than housework. So for me, it's given me freedom, somewhere to go, different people to meet.'

3. Way forward: sustaining momentum & commitment

After considering the range of factors that influence the people who are involved in our programmes, we have identified an important role for Wordworks in building a NETWORK of committed and engaged facilitators, parents and volunteers. We have also identified a number of systemic factors that can contribute to sustained involvement over time.

Further training and knowledge development opportunities

We did not anticipate that new knowledge about language and literacy would be so keenly taken up, and that adults would be so motivated by this opportunity to learn. Participants who have gone on to explore further training opportunities have led us to see this as an integral part of what we can offer in return for their commitment.

A number of volunteers and parents have indicated their interest in studying further. In response, we have provided information about early childhood development (ECD) courses at FET colleges, and letters of recommendation in support of their applications. In some communities where we work, we have been able to sponsor computer lessons for volunteers through a local library. We have also endeavoured to connect teachers, volunteers and parents with other programmes and resources such as those offered by the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign.

Our newsletter also serves as a valuable source of information for our network of parents, volunteers and teachers, with links to online resources, tips for working with young children, and research bytes in the form of a 'did you know' column.

Recognition for participation:

We have also realised the importance of offering certificates to participants – not just for attending training, but for demonstrating their commitment to programmes over time. We have developed clear guidelines for certification that require parents to attend five out of seven training sessions; volunteers to teach for six months; co-ordinators to manage a volunteer programme for at least six months; and facilitators to run a seven-week programme for parents and submit a portfolio.

Moreover, we have registered the Home-School Partnership Programme as a UCT-short course, which has added status to the training for teacher-facilitators, helping to sustain commitment to programmes in the first year of delivery.

In addition to certification, recognising the commitment of parents, volunteers and teachers in the local press, as well as at school assemblies and prizegivings, has also helped to keep volunteers motivated and involved. We have introduced a dedicated space in our newsletter highlighting the work of a volunteer, parent or teacher in each edition and plan to create a section on our website for a collection of these stories.

We are now considering arranging a mini-conference to showcase programmes and celebrate the commitment of women working to improve literacy in their communities.

Building communities and sense of belonging:

Based on the value that participants place on connecting with others and being part of a team, we have begun exploring new ways of connecting participants. These include refresher sessions for teacher-facilitators, and quarterly meetings with volunteer co-ordinators to help to foster a shared sense of purpose. Furthermore, we are experimenting with ways to connect participants virtually – through our newsletter but also through social media and Whatsapp groups.

We have recently made a decision to introduce Wordworks t-shirts for volunteers who have been

part of the programme for six months or more. This has helped to create a sense of belonging to a team, and contributes towards the work of volunteers being recognised and valued by the wider community.

Financial rewards, incentives and sustained funding:

While we have seen commitment despite the absence of financial rewards, there is no doubt that some volunteers are forced by circumstance to choose between volunteering and seeking paid work. While we are conscious of the potential for financial rewards undermining a volunteer ethos driven by intrinsic reward, volunteers are making a contribution to an improved society for all, and this contribution needs to be recognised. We also believe that teachers should be remunerated for after-hours work that improves literacy in their community. Creative ways of offering financial rewards include reduced school fees or school fundraisers to raise money for a stipend for volunteers. Teachers could also be remunerated in a similar way to those who run high school tutoring programmes after school or in the holidays.

We are currently piloting a project whereby schools raise funds through the sale of Wordworks resources in communities. Funds raised could be used for transport costs of volunteers, refreshments or other resources needed to help sustain programmes. We have also encouraged schools to identify local businesses and smaller donors who can contribute towards gift vouchers for participants. The option of Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) funding for volunteers needs to be explored too.

Supportive schools:

Principals play an important role in creating a welcoming atmosphere for volunteers and ensuring that staff acknowledge their contribution. They can make parents feel valued and encourage their participation in the life of the school; they can make teacher-facilitators aware that the extra time they are committing to programmes for parents has not gone unnoticed.

Support and buy-in from the education system:

Over the past three years, we have been working in partnership with a local education district. Its endorsement of, and support for, the programme has helped elevate the status of the work and

increase buy-in from principals and schools where our work was initially not seen as a priority.

We have identified the following roles that district personnel can play to help sustain commitment to programme delivery:

- aligning programmes with the district strategy/plans;
- assisting with planning and ensuring programmes are part of whole school development;
- attendance at prizegiving and graduation ceremonies, and acknowledgement of programme participants during visits to schools;
- formal recognition of schools and organisations that show initiative by running programmes to support parents and young children (e.g. a certificate of commendation for a school foyer).

Conclusion: mainstreaming volunteerism

Schools in communities that face the additional challenge of learning to read in a second language can derive great benefit from committed, well trained volunteers. We need policies and programmes that enable schools to draw on parents and other community volunteers, and we need to recognise the value of this remarkable resource.

We also need interventions that promote, support and celebrate the role of parents as first teachers, as well as equip them practically with the resources, information, skills and confidence to support their children's language acquisition. Schools and teachers that reach out to parents should be celebrated, and work with parents should be seen as part of the core responsibility of schools to ensure long-term sustainability.



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The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from <http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/>
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