What Works Hub for Global Education

Key findings from a series of studies on structured learning programmes in South Africa

Synthesis report

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ANA	Annual National Assessments
CAPS	National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DH	Department Head
DBE	Department of Basic Education
EA	Education Assistants
EFAL	English as First Additional Language
EGRS	Early Grade Reading Study
EGRS I	First Early Grade Reading Study
EGRS II	Second Early Grade Reading Study
EGRP I	First Early Grade Reading Programme
EGRP II	Second Early Grade Reading Programme
GPLMS	Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy
HL	Home Language
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Material
ORF	Oral Reading Fluency
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PLCs Professional Learning Communities
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
RCUP	Reading Catch-Up Programme
RSP	Reading Support Programme
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
USD	US Dollar
wcpm	words correct per minute
WWHGE	What Works Hub for Global Education
ZAR	South African Rand

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1 Background to the Early Grade Research Programmes

Since the mid-1990s, the quality of primary education in South Africa has received more attention as the Annual National Assessments (ANAs), Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessments all showed that most South African learners perform well below curriculum expectations. Children were in school but not learning critical literacy and numeracy skills by the end of the foundation (Grade 3) and the end of the intermediate phase (Grade 6). Functional literacy and numeracy remain below the levels attained by international peers.

The EGRS series was launched by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2015 in response to the growing awareness of the need to develop contextually relevant evidence on how to improve reading in the country, given the core and strategic role that reading plays in early and later learning.

A variety of programme designs were initially considered and, in some cases, tested. In the first Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) the chosen interventions included a parental-involvement intervention, as well as two different models of a structured learning programme. Only one of the interventions had an impact – the structured learning programme with teacher in-person coaching.

Since then, several variants of large-scale structured learning programmes have been tested under the EGRS series of studies, which included the Early Grade Reading Study I (EGRS I), Early Grade Reading Study II (EGRS II), the Reading Support Programme (RSP), Early Grade Reading Programme I (EGRP I), and the Early Grade Reading Programme II (EGRP II).

The EGRS series has contributed significant local and contextually relevant evidence on effective methods to improve early grade reading.

Evaluations of these programmes used a mixed-methods approach, blending randomised experiments with more detailed classroom observations and case studies. This approach provides quantitative estimates of the impact of each intervention on Home Language and English as First Additional Language (EFAL) as well as nuance on which components of the programme did or did not work. As a result, it has underlined the importance of literacy instruction in early grades, particularly in home language, to facilitate comprehension and decoding, laying a foundation for future language acquisition and learning.

This report synthesises the findings from the implementation research of these interventions and is an update of a 2022 Synthesis Report on EGRS I and II.

1 Spaull, N. (2013). South Africa's education crisis: the quality of education in South Africa 1994–2011. Centre for Development and Enterprise.

2 Angrist, N., Djankov, S., Goldberg, P. K., & Patrinos, H. A. (2019). Measuring human capital (Working Paper 8742; Policy Research Working Paper). World Bank Group.

3 EGRP II is running from 2024 to 2025, so is still in the implementation phase.

4 https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/EGRS/EGRS%20Indaba%202022/Synthesis%20Report%20digital.pdf.

2 Lessons from the Reading Catch-Up Programme

Before EGRS I, an impact evaluation was conducted on another large-scale programme, the Reading Catch-Up Programme (RCUP) which borrowed from the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) 2011-2014. The programme aimed to equip Grade 4 learners, whose home language was not English, with the literacy skills needed to transition to English as the language of instruction. While an initial evaluation showed significant improvement over the 11-week intervention period, a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) conducted in 2014 showed no substantial difference in the improvement between the control and treatment groups.

This programme provided the DBE with two valuable lessons: the need to invest in robust impact evaluation methods to draw accurate conclusions about programme effectiveness (#methodsmatter), and the need for a longer implementation period; 11 weeks proved insufficient for new classroom practices to take root and for learners to truly learn to read for meaning in English. These critical findings, among others, were crucial in shaping the design of the EGRS I in 2015.

A series of Early Grade Reading studies followed, each supported by an RCT and comprehensive impact evaluation. The application of mixed research methods facilitated a deeper understanding of issues and mechanisms, enabling the triangulation and contextualisation of findings and conclusions. Furthermore, this robust approach has served to enhance accountability, and enable the prioritisation of investments, in an effort to therefore improve efficiency in programme implementation.

5 The Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) was a provincial strategic intervention set up in 2011 with an initial focus on foundation phase (FP) literacy targeting 740 underperforming schools. By 2013, the intervention had expanded to serve over 1 063 schools from Grades 1 to 7 in both Mathematics and Language (Home and First Additional Language).

6 Fleisch, B., Taylor, S., Schöer, V., & Mabogoane, T. (2017). The value of large-scale randomised control trials in system-wide improvement: The case of the Reading Catch-Up Programme. South African Journal of Education, 37(1), 1–13.

7 Department of Basic Education. (2022). Synthesis Report of EGRS I and EGRS II. Republic of South Africa.

3 The Early Grade Reading Research Studies

In the initial EGRS I study, a variety of programme designs were considered. Drawing on experiences from previous literacy studies in South Africa and the literature on early literacy, a structured learning programme and a parent programme were selected to be tested. It became evident during EGRS I that structured learning programmes, consisting of an integrated package of curriculum-aligned daily scripted lesson plans, prescribed additional learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) and teacher professional development including coaching, led to significant improvements in learning outcomes. The three core components of this structured learning programme are referred to as the 'education triple cocktail' in South Africa. The initial success of this approach prompted the DBE research team to explore more cost-effective ways to achieve the same impact and better support teachers through a series of EGRS studies testing structured learning programmes.

3.1 Overview of the Research Studies

The table below provides a summary of these research studies, followed by an overview and analysis of the findings from the interventions. More detailed reports from the series can be found on their website.[9]

Table 1. Overview of the studies in the EGRS Series

Name of study	Implementation Timeframe	Research Timeframe	Research Method	Intervention Focus	School coverage
Early Grade Reading Study I (EGRS I)	2015–2017	2015–2021[10]	RCT Qualitative & Case Studies	Grades 1–3 Setswana HL Literacy	230 schools in the North West Province
Early Grade Reading Study II (EGRS II)	2017–2019	2017–2020	RCT Qualitative & Case Studies	Grades 1–3 English (EFAL) Literacy	180 schools in Mpumalanga Province
Reading Support Programme (RSP)	2019–2020	2019–2020	RCT	Grades 1–3 Setswana HL and EFAL Literacy	258 schools in the North West Province
Early Grade Reading Programme I (EGRP I)	2021–2023	2021–2023	RCT Qualitative & Case Studies	Grades 1–3 Setswana HL and EFAL Literacy	140 schools in the North West Province
Early Grade Reading Programme II (EGRP II)	2024–2025 (Ongoing)	2024–2025 (Ongoing)	RCT	Grades 1–3 Setswana HL and EFAL Literacy	131 schools in the Northern Cape Province

Notes: HL – Home language; EFAL – English as a First Additional Language

In this report we focus on three of the studies (EGRS I, EGRS II, EGRP I).

The two studies omitted are the Reading Support Programme (RSP) and the Early Grade Reading Programme II (EGRP II). The RSP was an expansion of the EGRS I programme to include additional schools and extend the programme to control schools from the initial study. This intervention was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact evaluation analysis is still underway. The follow up Early Grade Reading Programme II (EGRP II), also featured in the overview, is currently still in the implementation phase.

8 The term was first used by Prof Brahm Fleisch. It draws from the analogy to the medical field, where all seemed to fail until the introduction of the Antiretroviral therapy (ART), a combination of antiretroviral drugs, commonly known as the HIV cocktail, proved effective to delay the progression to HIV. Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.

9 https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/EarlyGradeReadingStudy.aspx.

10 To further evaluate the sustainability of the EGRS, a fifth wave of data was collected in 2021.

3.2 Descriptions of the Interventions

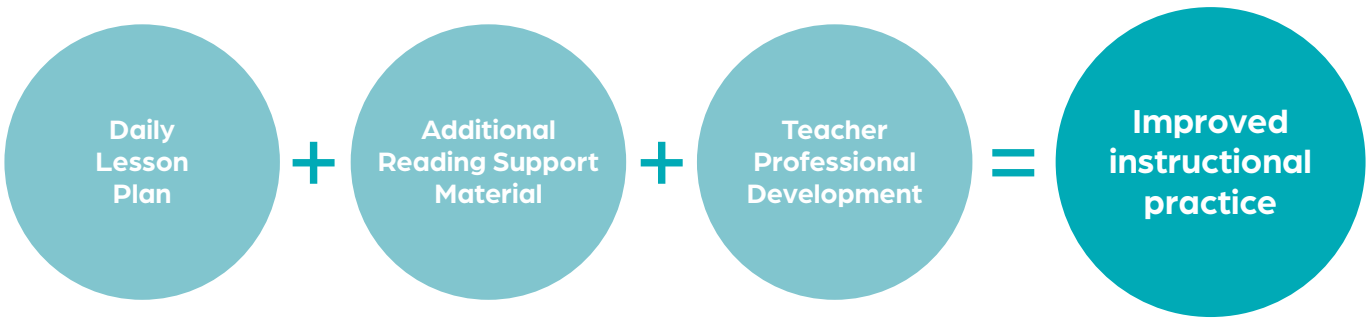
The findings of the study series reinforce that the education system is not a collection of isolated components working independently but a complex interplay of instructional practices involving teachers, learners, content, and materials.[11] The 'education triple cocktail' consists of three core components that are developed and delivered together in an integrated manner. What are these components?

A) **Scripted daily lesson plans provide** structured lessons aligned to curriculum goals that guide teachers on content to cover ("what to do") and instructional methods ("how to do it"). This ultimately builds their pedagogical content knowledge and self-confidence.

B) **Additional[12] learning and teaching support materials** (LTSM) including graded readers, flash cards, posters, big books and alphabet friezes. These high-quality materials were integrated into the lesson plans to ensure that they are used appropriately within a coherent lesson.

C) **Teacher Professional Development** includes "just in time" training on the new materials and approaches delivered at the start of each term, as well as teacher-coaching from an external or internal coach, targeted at implementation of the routines, methods and content in the lesson plans, general classroom management as well as use of the additional LTSM. In the more recent EGRP programmes, this has also included setting up and encouraging the use of teacher professional learning communities (PLCs), where teachers are able to share ideas and reflect on their teaching practice.

Figure 1. **Overview of the components of the Structured Learning Programme**



11 Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.
12 Whilst daily lesson plans are a part of Reading Support Materials, they are mentioned separately because of their centrality to the programme. Additional LTSM, refers to all other LTSM with the majority being physical paper-based LTSM that are used in the classroom with learners.

Table 2 outlines the combination of elements from the Education Triple Cocktail that were tested over the course of the ERGS series to provide support to teachers and schools, and enhance fidelity of implementation (an expanded version of this table showing the full design with control groups and EGRP II is included in the Appendix, Table A1).

Almost all interventions that were tested, with the exception of the Parents Intervention in EGRS I, shown in the last row, were structured learning programmes. These included a combination of scripted daily lesson plans, additional LTSM and Teacher Training (the 'base programme') shown in the first four rows. Whilst the lesson plans were initially distributed as hardcopy, these were later provided digitally on tablets.

Later, studies tested different modes of coaching support, with a focus on virtual coaching in EGRS II and a partially internal model using school-based Departmental Heads in EGRP I. The table outlines the types and frequency of teacher coaching provided in rows 5–8.

Table 2. Components that were included in the interventions tested during EGRS I, EGRS II and EGRP I

	EGRS I			EGRS II		EGRP I		
	T1: Central Training	T2: Coaching	T3: Parent intervention	T1: Coaching	T2 Virtual Coaching	Control: Base Prog.	T1: External coaching	T2: DH Coaching
Daily lesson plans	● Paper	● Paper		● Paper	● Tablet	● Tablet	● Tablet	● Tablet
Additional LTSM	●	●		●	●	●	●	●
Residential Teacher Training	● 2 x 2 days			● 1 x 2 days	● 1 x 3 days	● 4 x 2 days	● 4 x 2 days	● 4 x 2 days
Non-Residential Teacher Training		● 4 x 1 day		● 3 x 1 day	● 3 x 1 day		● Monthly (in yrs 1–3)	● Monthly (in yr 1)
In-person Coaching		● Monthly		● Every 3 wks			● Support	
Virtual Coaching					● Every 2 wks			● Yrs 2 & 3
Coaching of and by DHs							● Yrs 2 & 3	● Yrs 2 & 3
PLC & School based workshops								
Parent workshops			● Weekly					

4 Key Findings of the Research Studies

Throughout the EGRS series of studies, key initial findings have remained unchanged. Over time longer run impacts have been tracked and insights on related questions have expanded and evolved. These findings are summarised below.

4.1 The Education Triple Cocktail

The study series has shown that the Education Triple Cocktail of well-structured and sequenced daily lesson plans, additional LTSM and teacher-training and -coaching in combination, was able to successfully influence teaching practices to improve literacy outcomes in the foundation phase by changing how teacher teach and shaping teacher-learner engagements in classrooms.[13]

4.1.1. Lesson plans

Despite concerns that daily scripted lesson plans might de-skill teachers or infringe on their autonomy, the lesson observations, as well as detailed case studies, demonstrated that the structured learning interventions expanded the repertoire of instructional methods used by teachers and assisted with pacing, helping them to cover more of the curriculum. Lesson plans and LTSM also contributed to teachers feeling supported and ready for the change, and freed up teacher time on lesson planning to focus on instruction and feedback.[14]

The lesson plans were aligned to the official curriculum. To be most effective, the learning outcomes of the lesson plans should take the children's current skill level into account. While efforts to strengthen the curriculum may be needed, this has not yet been tested as a part of the EGRS series.

4.1.2. Additional reading support materials

Lesson observations from the EGRS I revealed a higher usage of the provided LTSM among the teachers who received these materials. There was a notable increase in the uptake of graded readers especially for group-guided reading. Although only three-quarters of EGRS I treatment teachers displayed some of the LTSM in their classrooms,[15] in EGRS II every teacher, who received the intervention and was observed, used some of the LTSM provided in their lessons.[16] Additionally, the frequency of group-guided reading was somewhat higher, and how these materials were used was closer to the programme's intended purpose for teachers that received instructional coaching, in comparison to those who only received centralised training.[17]

13 Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.
14 Botha, D. & Schollar, E. (2018). The Second Early Grade Reading Study: case studies in EGRS II schools 2018. Wits Health Consortium. Johannesburg.
15 Department of Basic Education. (2017). Early Grade Reading Study: classroom observation study. Pretoria. p. 13.
16 Department of Basic Education. (2017). The Second Early Grade Reading Study: classroom observation study Grade 1. Pretoria. p. 44.
17 Department of Basic Education. (2019). The Early Grade Reading Study Sustainability Evaluation: technical report. Pretoria, p. 21

Provision and integration of materials matter. While resources in general are useful, when they are integrated into lesson plans, this informs teachers on what materials to use for each type of activity, ensuring that there is clarity on how to use them and no gaps in materials available.

4.1.3. Teacher Professional Development

Most of the variation across the studies has been as a result of testing different approaches to teacher development:

A. Centralised training:

All teachers were trained directly by the implementers. In EGRS I, schools where teachers received centralised training without coaching showed higher literacy outcomes than the control group, though the difference was not statistically significant. These gains were about half the size of those achieved through coaching.[18] Despite the lack of significant impact of the centralised training intervention,[19] direct in-service training is widely considered more effective than train-the-trainer models, which is even less likely to have been effective.

B. Face-to-Face instructional coaching:

Instructional coaching, involving regular monthly in-person school visits that were supportive rather than evaluative, proved to be the most effective but also the most intensive teacher-support intervention. This approach built trust between teachers and coaches, boosted teachers' confidence to innovate, and improved their teaching. It also allowed for tailored support, enabling coaches to observe lessons, offer advice, and provide just-in-time support.

Across all three studies, the on-site teacher support interventions have consistently resulted in the greatest improvements to literacy outcomes. Teachers who received coaching also implemented the lesson plans with the greatest fidelity. For example, teachers receiving coaching provided more opportunities to learners to read graded readers compared to teachers who had received centralised training.[20]

In EGRS I, the largest impact on Home Language reading was observed in schools that received on-site coaching. Children in this group learned an additional 40% of a normal year's worth of schooling by the end of Grade 2. A smaller impact, around 26% of a normal year of schooling, was observed under EGRS II on reading outcomes in English as a second language by the end of Grade 2. The best results were from the on-site coaching intervention.

In the recent EGRP I study, on-site in-person coaching was again the most successful intervention. After two years on the programme, there was a positive impact on learning outcomes for the Grade 2 on-site in-person coaching group relative to the control group that received the base programme in Home Language and EFAL (0.26 of a standard deviation for HL and 0.32 for EFAL[21]). Unfortunately, the 2023 Grade

18 Department of Basic Education. (2017). EGRS Policy summary report. Republic of South Africa.

19 Another NGO in South Africa, Funda Wande, who implemented a similar structure learning programme, did find significant impact with a more intensive centralised training model (8 days vs. 4 days). Findings are outlined here: SALDRU. (2024). Funda Wande Limpopo Workbooks Evaluation: Endline Report. Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit.

20 Department of Basic Education (2017). EGRS Policy Summary Report. Republic of South Africa.

21 For EGRP, we can't calculate percentages of a normal year of learning using the same approach as for EGRS I & II because data were only collected in 2021 and 2023. This means we can't track the same group of learners across two consecutive years. Although 2023 includes cross-sectional data from multiple grades, differences in how grades were affected by the pandemic mean that these cannot be meaningfully compared.

3 group was COVID-affected early in their schooling. However, the programme also had a positive impact on their EFAL oral and reading outcomes (0.18 of a standard deviation), with positive but insignificant improvements to Home Language.

The EGRS I study provided the first conclusive proof that instructional coaching 'works' to improve early grade reading in the Home Language and that, without the on-site in-person coaching component that encouraged and supported adoption of the programme, intervention models had less impact.[22]

C. Virtual coaching:

EGRS II (Mpumalanga, 2017-2019) tested a virtual coaching model to explore a lower-cost coaching option.[23] This involved remote interactions with teachers through structured phone calls and instant messaging on tablets, as well as competitions as an attempt to see learners' work, or short videos of classroom practice. After brief initial training, teachers quickly adapted to using the tablets. The virtual coaches, who supported more teachers, never visited schools or observed teaching practices in person. In reading subtests, schools with in-person coaching made significant gains in oral reading comprehension—a key measure of reading for meaning—while children in virtual coaching schools performed no better than those in control schools.

At the end of Grade 3, the virtual coaching intervention did not show a statistically significant impact, nor was any statistically significant impact observed one year after the intervention concluded at the end of Grade 4. Analysis of tablet usage data and lesson observations suggest that the technology itself was not a barrier to implementation, but rather that the virtual coach was less able to monitor, model and correct the more difficult teaching practices.

Given that the virtual coaching intervention did not show a significant impact, the on-site in-person coaching remains the only effective intervention.[24]

D. Department Head-led Coaching:

Whereas EGRS I and II used expensive external professional coaches for on-site, in-person coaching, the EGRP I (North West, 2021-2023) tested a less expensive alternative using Department Heads[25] (DHs), who are already part of schools' staff complement.

In this study the control group also received the base programme of lesson plans, LTSM and training, whilst the interventions aimed to differentiate between the impact of external and internal (DH-led) coaching models. This intervention aimed to assess the model's cost-effectiveness and explore the potential for integrating the coaching component into the education system, without having to draw on external expertise and resources. The research programme found that time availability for coaching by DHs was a significant constraint.[26]

22 Fleisch, B., & Alsfrom, K. (2022). Coaching research in the Early Grade Reading Studies in South Africa. In N. Spaull & S. Taylor (Eds.), Early Grade Interventions. Oxford University Press.

23 Note that EGRS II also focussed on instruction in English (EFAL) as opposed to the home language focus in EGRS I

24 Department of Basic Education (2022). EGRS II year 4 report: evidence one year after the end of the implementation, Republic of South Africa

25 DHs have a number of roles in their school. They are teachers with their own class(es), are responsible for leading and managing a subject, learning area or phase. They may also have extra-curricular duties. Their role includes planning a subject-, learning area- or phase-programme; internal moderation; quality assurance; and performance management of their teacher team. Larger schools may have multiple DHs, and DHs are often older and more experienced teachers.

26 One mechanism to achieve this was demonstrated at schools that had Education Assistants recruited through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. They were able to use the EAs to supervise classes, freeing up DHs for coaching.

The intervention identified a huge variation in the coaching delivered by the DHs, and the endline assessments revealed no significant difference in learner outcomes between DH-coaching schools and control schools.

The focus of DHs on compliance over individualised instructional coaching limited teacher innovation and confidence. Self-reported improvements in teaching practices from 2021 to 2023 were also similar between the treatment and control groups, suggesting that increased confidence may have been due to lesson plans and training, rather than the DH coaching. It is also not clear to what extent COVID-19 disruptions affected the results.

DH coaching is still potentially viable, but the barriers to effective implementation are high. It would require that: 1. DH's coaching role is formalised; 2. DHs undergo a careful selection process to reduce the high variability in the quality of coaching; 3. DH time is freed up, for example, by well-trained education assistants; and 4. DHs are provided with ongoing support themselves to enhance their coaching skills.

E. Cluster-based after school training and professional learning communities (PLCs).[27]

In EGRS I and EGRS II, coaches led cluster-based after-school training sessions with small groups of teachers from nearby schools. These needs-based training sessions allowed coaches to address common challenges while fostering a supportive community. The establishment of PLCs was included for the first time in the ERGP I programme, as some of the coaching roles moved from external coaches to schools-based DHs, these replaced the earlier cluster-training. However, even in combination with the DH-led coaching this was insufficient to significantly improve reading outcomes in EGRP I.

27 In the South African context, professional learning communities (PLCs) refer to groups of educators, including teachers, school managers, and subject advisors, who collaborate to improve their teaching practices and learner outcomes. These communities are designed to provide a supportive environment for continuous professional development, allowing educators to share knowledge, strategies, and resources. The Department of Basic Education has established guidelines for setting up and maintaining PLCs. The goal is to enhance teacher-quality and create a culture of collaborative learning and professional growth.

5 | Sustained Impact and Fade-out

5.1 Long-term Impact on Learners

EGRS I showed that the training-and-coaching intervention had lasting effects throughout primary school. In Grade 4, one year after the intervention ended, learners in the coaching group were 0.20 standard deviations ahead of control-group learners. This advantage was similar to, but slightly lower than, what was seen after two years of intervention by the end of Grade 2 in 2016 at 0.25 standard deviations.

Data collected in 2021 on the learners who were now in Grade 7, showed that the coaching intervention had a sustained impact on learners' Setswana (HL) skills, even four years after the initial intervention ended. They reflected an effect size of 0.16 standard deviation for written comprehension and 0.19 standard deviations for oral-reading fluency in Setswana.

EGRS II found that one year after the on-site coaching intervention, learners still had a significant advantage over their peers in oral-reading fluency (ORF), reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and both productive and receptive English vocabulary tasks.[28]

5.2 Long-term Impact on Teachers

Furthermore, in EGRS I schools, it was found that teachers who had participated in the coaching intervention continued to use the improved teaching techniques that they had acquired, after the completion of the programme.

In 2018, in addition to assessing the Grade 4 learners who directly received the intervention, Grade 3 learners were also assessed. They were taught by teachers a year after they had received the coaching and training support. The size of the impact was about half as large as the impact on the directly affected cohort of children, suggesting some decline in implementation by teachers after the intervention period. This also suggests that some "light-touch" follow-up support or monitoring in schools in the years following an intervention could be a cost-effective way to sustain implementation quality.

It is not possible to draw any strong conclusions on teacher sustainability of EGRS II given the complexity (due to COVID-19) of measuring sustained teacher practices during 2020. The evidence on the sustained accessibility and use of the learning and teaching resources provided is, however, encouraging.[29]

28 Department of Basic Education (2022). EGRS II year 4 report: evidence one year after the end of the implementation. Republic of South Africa.
29 Department of Basic Education. (2022). EGRS II year 4 report: evidence one year after the end of implementation. Republic of South Africa.

6 Language and Language Transitions

EGRS I, which targeted Home Language (HL) instruction, showed a positive spill-over effect on English reading proficiency that was evident at the end of Grade 4 and Grade 7. Even though this was not the outcome directly targeted by the intervention, this finding is in line with linguistic theory, which predicts that learning to read effectively in HL helps children transition to a second language.

An important finding from EGRS II is that the children, whose English First Additional Language (EFAL) proficiency improved as a result of the interventions, did not experience any positive spill-over benefits into their HL reading outcomes. This is in contrast to the findings of EGRS I where the HL intervention also impacted positively on English proficiency.

EGRP I tested both HL and EFAL. In this study, the control group received the base programme of lesson plans, LTSM and teacher training. Additionally, the first year of the intervention was disrupted by COVID-19. The results showed significant improvements for the Grade 2 group on both HL and EFAL for the in-person coaching relative to no coaching. For the Grade 3 group, only EFAL improved significantly, whilst the impact on HL was not significant. For Grade 4, neither HL or EFAL results were significantly higher for the in-person coaching group. However, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions because the assessment took place a year after they completed the programme, and much of their time in the programme was disrupted by the pandemic.[30]

The EGRS I intervention also effectively raised learner grade progression, with significantly less repetition observed in the coaching group by Grade 7.[31] Lower levels of repetition have been linked to higher levels of reading performance on Early Grade Reading Assessments.[32]

These findings highlight the strategic importance of prioritising support interventions to HL reading in the foundation phase, since this is the key period during which children learn to read.

30 Department of Basic Education. (2024). EGRP Early Grade Reading Programme: evaluation findings summary report. Republic of South Africa.

31 Stern, J. M. B., Jukes, M. C. H., Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Taylor, S., & Mohohlwane, N. (2024). Persistence and emergence of literacy skills: long-term impacts of an effective early grade reading intervention in South Africa. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 0(0), 1–22.

32 Wills, G. (2023). Early grade repetition in South Africa: implications for reading. Stellenbosch University. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP). https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-14_Wills_early_grade_repetition_final.pdf.

7 | Role of Parents

The parent-involvement intervention, which only featured in EGRS I, had no significant impact on overall reading outcomes. Through this initiative, parents were invited to weekly meetings to learn about the importance of developing reading skills early for future learning. The sessions provided knowledge and resources, including sound games, to help parents support their child's literacy development.[33] Phonological awareness was the only domain that showed a marginal impact compared to the control group. This outcome likely reflects the strong emphasis on this skill in the training and support given to parents as part of the programme.[34]

This certainly does not mean that parent-involvement doesn't affect reading outcomes, but rather that this particular intervention did not succeed in shifting parent-involvement in ways that ultimately led to improved reading.

Simply getting parents to attend the weekly meetings regularly proved a challenge. Only about 30% of parents attended at least three meetings in a year. As with the RCUP evaluation, measuring the causal effects using a robust methodology highlighted the reality that not all well-meaning or plausible-sounding interventions will actually impact learning outcomes. Although parents have an important role to play in supporting education and, perhaps, in fostering the enjoyment of reading amongst children, they are not as well equipped as teachers to teach the systematic process of decoding text which is fundamental to learning to read.

33 Department of Basic Education (2017). EGRS Policy summary report. Republic of South Africa.
34 Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.

8 Areas for further Investigation

One valuable aspect of the EGRS series of studies is that they have been designed by a centralised team of researchers within the national DBE. This team has had control over the research agenda and has implemented the EGRS series, iterating on previous study findings. As a result, some of the limitations and questions raised from the first EGRS study, were subsequently investigated in later evaluations. For example, the team responded to cost concerns by testing key cost effectiveness questions and suggestions. Questions relating to the trade-off between focusing on HL versus the second language, English, have also been explored. However, a number of questions remain:

8.1 Curriculum

The South African Curriculum is a critical basis of the programme and has never been adjusted or tested in the interventions. The EGRS series lesson plans have been deliberately aligned to the curriculum targets and goals. Though untested, it is feasible that greater impact could be achieved by updating and refining the curriculum while systematically evaluating the efficacy of these adaptations by: aligning instructional approaches and lesson plans with learners' proficiency levels; ensuring that the decoding skills progression, sequencing of texts and curriculum specifications are appropriately adapted for African languages; or time allocation to components and activities is refined.[35]

8.2 Parent-involvement interventions

Parental involvement is a hugely deterministic factor in a child's learning outcomes. The improvements in phonetic awareness in EGRS I, despite very low parental engagement, suggest there may be some promise. The biggest challenge from a policy perspective is how to shift parent-involvement at scale. Given the potential cost-effectiveness and complementarity with schools-based interventions, researchers and policy-makers should continue to investigate mechanisms to do so.

Lastly, while these studies have contributed to increasing the contextually relevant body of knowledge on improving early grade reading, implementation has remained limited to evaluation schools, without translating to system-wide programmes.

35 Ardington, C., Wills, G., Pretorius, E., Deghaye, N., Mohohlwane, N., Menendez, A., Mtsatse, N., & van der Berg, S. (2020). Benchmarking early grade reading skills in Nguni languages: Technical Report. Department of Basic Education, Pretoria. 81.

9 | Progress towards Scale

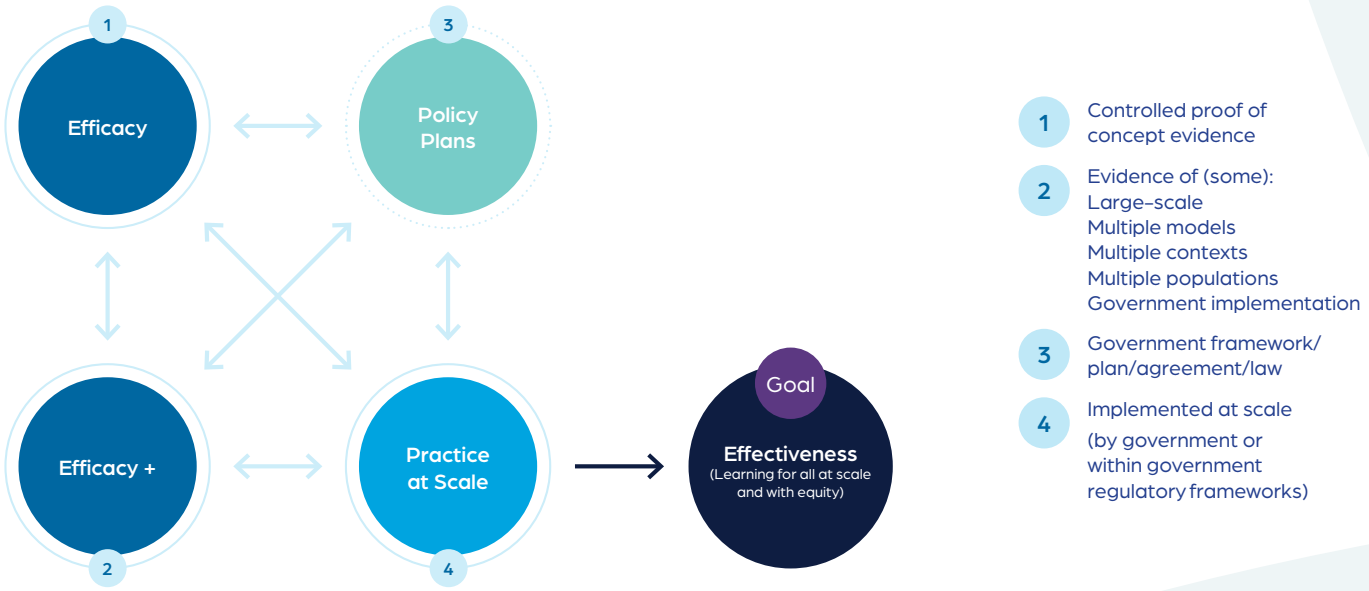
The EGRS research programme has been critical in providing evidence that the education triple cocktail of interventions works to improve nearly all skills associated with effective reading. To date, however, implementation has remained limited to specific geographies and grades, and for a short timeframe, spanning, on average, 3 years. More specifically, they have not resulted in implementation at scale and for a protracted time, which are what is needed to have sustained improvements in early grade reading.[36]

A framework has been developed by the What Works Hub for Global Education (WWHGE)[37] to support governments and implementers to translate evidence into decisions on scaling of successful programmes. It has been employed to strategically analyse the relationship between implementation and the initial generation of evidence—essentially, discovering "what works" and how it scales.

The framework, shown below, outlines various pathways to effectively scale up learning initiatives and apply successful strategies on a broader scale.

The following section positions the research of the EGRS series and its outcomes within the WWHGE framework using a similar approach to that of Kayton and Kaffenberger (2025)[38] to map the DBE's progress toward scale, highlighting the broader influence of the research on education practice and policy in South Africa.

Figure 2. What Works Hub for Global Education Intellectual Framework



36 Taylor, S., & Spaull, N. (2020). What works and what scales?: returning to a tradition of evidence-based systemwide programmes. Oxford University Press.

37 The What Works Hub for Global Education is an international partnership focused on implementing education reforms at scale in low- and middle-income countries. Their goal is to improve literacy, numeracy, and other key skills for millions of children. They generate and translate evidence to support governments and implementers in making informed decisions and achieving transformative educational outcomes. Home - What Works Hub for Global Education.

38 Kayton, H., & Kaffenberger, M. (2025). The path to scale: navigating the scaling of structured pedagogy programmes (Insight Note 2025/001). What Works Hub for Global Education.

10 | Wider Influence of the Research Programme in South Africa

EGRS I, as the first study, provided evidence that the education triple cocktail was effective on a small scale in 230 schools. This established the Efficacy (#1 in Figure 3) of the intervention.

Subsequent studies in the series have tested different modes of interventions, in different contexts, in HL and EFAL, all under the leadership of the government. Across the 5 subsequent studies, a total of 709 schools were reached. This moved the EGRS series from Efficacy to the Efficacy+ (#2 in Figure 3) dimension of the framework.

Additionally, the research programme has contributed to knowledge creation and has influenced the work of various NGOs in South Africa, and enriched the international body of evidence on structured pedagogy as an effective approach to addressing early grade reading gaps.

Furthermore, a significant initiative arising from the implementation of the EGRS series has been the establishment of reading benchmarks in all 11 official South African languages,[39] taking into account their unique and diverse structures. This serves as an example for other countries striving to improve early grade reading in local languages. Work is ongoing to integrate these early grade reading benchmarks into the curriculum and the EGRA assessments, and support teachers in using them to guide children as they learn to read.[40] Consequently the Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) have been adjusted and aligned to the HL benchmarks.

The research programme has also bolstered sector-wide capacity-building, benefitting not only government bodies but also a diverse array of NGOs, donors, and implementing partners invested in early grade reading. The research outcomes have been instrumental in enhancing lesson plans, teaching materials (including graded readers), teacher guides, and language-sensitive learner workbooks. A robust and expanding research agenda has spurred increased investments in assessment instruments and practice, and monitoring and evaluation within educational programme design, thereby deepening the understanding of actual practices and outcomes in schools.[41]

Lastly, the findings of the EGRS series have influenced some of the government strategy and policy around reading in South African primary schools. This mode of impact is represented by a shift towards the Policy Plans (#3 in Figure 3, dotted line indicates partial achievement) dimension of the framework.

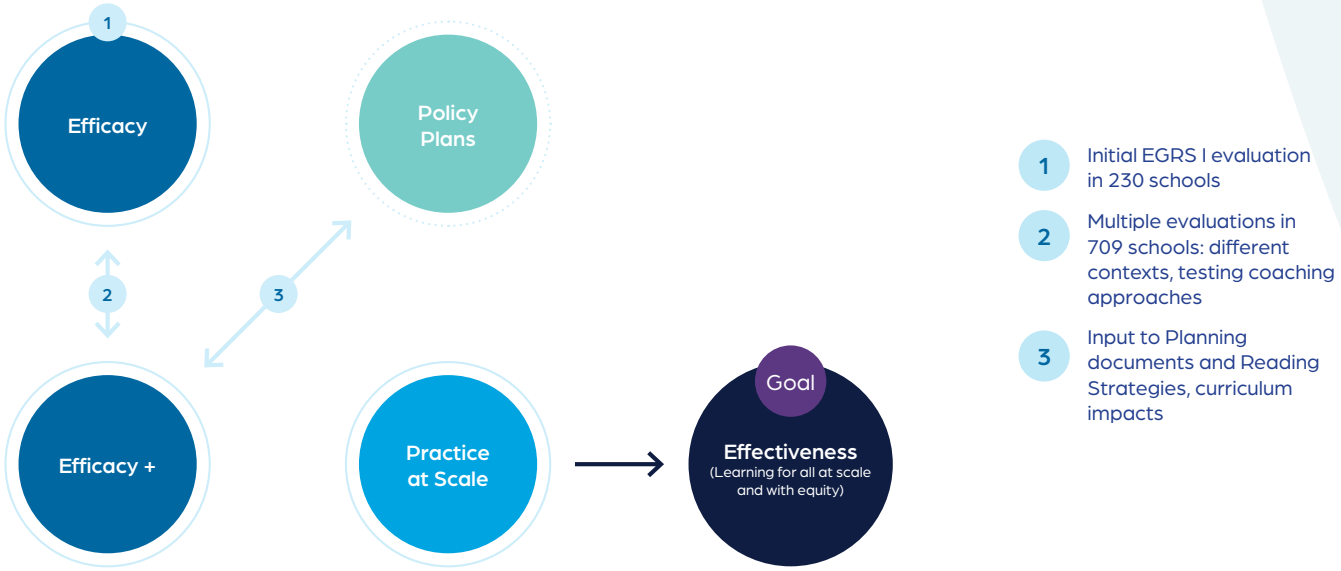
At the highest level, President Cyril Ramaphosa has supported literacy development since the start of his term in 2018. In his State of the Nation address in 2019, his stated ten-year aim was that "our schools will have better educational

39 Department of Basic Education. (2023). Terms of reference. Guidelines for the Grades 1 - 3 submissions: Annexure B. Pretoria. (Unpublished).
40 Mohohlwane, N., Wills, G., & Ardington, C. (2022). A review of recent efforts to benchmark early reading skills in South African languages. In Early grade reading in South Africa, N. Spaull and E. Pretorius, (Eds), Oxford University Press. 83-108.
41 Pretorius, E., & Spaull, N. (2022). Reading research in South Africa. In Early grade reading in South Africa, N. Spaull & E. Pretorius (Eds.). Oxford University Press.

outcomes and every 10-year-old will be able to read for meaning,"[42] a sentiment that has been reiterated numerous times since then. This is also supported by the latest Department of Basic Education Action Plan to 2024, in which Goal 1 is to "[i]ncrease the number of learners in Grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3."[43] Similarly, a number of provinces, notably the Eastern Cape,[44] have released reading strategies that draw on the outcomes of the EGRS series findings to reach their reading goals.

Strides have also been made in developing a standard, centralised recommended set of lesson plans and linked LTSM for all 11 HLs and EFAL.[45] To date, a review of existing lesson plans and materials has been conducted and a National Reading Framework and Teacher Guide for African Languages has been developed. The selection, adaptation and development of lesson plans and LTSM is ongoing—a minimum LTSM package based on EGRS was published in 2023 in the textbook catalogue and this is in the process of being aligned with the reading benchmarks for African languages (process started in 2024).[46] Provinces can select resources from this list as part of the standard provisioning of LTSM. This will promote greater consistency in teaching practices, aligned with those tested in the EGRS series, and enable more uniform training and coaching support across the system.

Figure 3. EGRS Path to Scale in South Africa



42 https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-state-nation-address-2019-20-jun-2019
43 This is mentioned both in the Action Plan: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/Action%20Plan%20to%202024%20Brief.pdf and in the Strategic Plan: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/south_africa_strategic_plan_2020-2024.pdf
44 Eastern Cape Department of Education. (2023). Reading strategy & campaign 2022-2030 Grade 1-9: improve reading to improve learning. Zwelitsha.
45 Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. (2020). Improvement Plan progress report for the impact evaluation of the Early Grade Reading Study. Department of Basic Education. Pretoria. (Unpublished).
46 Department of Education. (2024). Draft invitation and terms of reference to submit materials for Grades 1 – 3 National Catalogue which will list the minimum package of resources for foundation phase as well as for evaluation and adoption in the National Catalogue. Department of Basic Education, South Africa. Pretoria.

In addition, there has been indirect take-up and usage of HL lesson plans and LTSM by provinces[47] and NGOs,[48] whilst some have switched their interventions focus from EFAL to HL.

All this notwithstanding, practice at scale of the interventions tested in the EGRS series has not yet been achieved. Nor has it led to a system-wide policy and reform of early grade education in the country.

47 Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape are making use of lesson plans and LTSM. The Western Cape also developed their own (https://wcedeportal.co.za/lessons/foundation-phase).
48 An example of an organisation with a similar structured learning approach is Funda Wande, whilst the NECT/PSRTIP has moved to using home language from EFAL in their early grade interventions.

11 | System level scale constraints

Scaling the education triple cocktail to a national level presents a multitude of challenges and system-level constraints.

1. Availability of skilled coaches: The intervention would need to expand from hundreds to thousands of schools, across multiple grades and subjects concurrently, significantly increasing complexity. The system is already struggling to find the number of highly skilled coaches for the smaller EGRS interventions, both from external implementing agencies and from within the department's staff complement itself. Additionally, more options for coaching personnel need to be identified within the system to ensure institutionalisation, sustainability and cost effectiveness.

2. Involvement of school leadership and management: School leadership is crucial to drive sustained instructional change over time. School leaders and managers would need to become leaders of practice to induct new teachers. This is especially important for poor rural schools, which require consistent follow-up for programmes to actually be implemented.[49] This has also been increasingly difficult as school management numbers[50] have declined (by 4%[51] from 2013 to 2023) as a result of budget cuts.[52]

3. Costs: As the evidence suggests, a key component and success factor in the education triple cocktail in early grades, is the external expert coaching. This is also the most expensive ingredient. However, failing to invest in it on a large-scale risks perpetuating an inefficient system and squandering the untapped potential of South Africa's young population.

4. Role of provincial and district department officials: These programmes are currently outsourced to external implementing partners. Institutionalisation would mean that some of the monitoring, oversight and coordination roles would need to be implemented by district- or provincial-level education department staff. This would involve adjustments to their roles, with enough time retained for their current responsibilities. They would need to ensure the provisioning of materials and assist in training arrangements. It would also require investments in capacity-building to equip them with the necessary skills to support schools in implementing new practices.

49 Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.
50 Generally, departmental heads, deputy principals and principals.
51 Own calculations using anonymised PERSAL payroll data. This is the decline in the headcount of school management team members (departmental heads, deputy principals and principals) that were publicly employed in South Africa. It is worth noting that learner enrolment at ordinary schools increased by 8% over this same period according to School Realities Reports.
52 Böhmer, B., & Gustafsson, M. (2023). Provincial educator demand projections for South Africa (2021-2030). Teacher Demographic Dividend Working Papers [G]. Stellenbosch University, RESEP.

12 | Sustainability at Scale

South Africa has, over the course of the last two decades, seen the proliferation of programmes and interventions implemented by a multitude of players with different objectives, focuses and geographies. These programmes, primarily led by NGOs, despite having a positive impact, have not led to sustainable results. On the contrary, this vast number of programmes has sometimes distracted the attention of key staff in the department at decentralised levels, as well as the most critical implementers, the teachers themselves.[53]

Both international and local experience have demonstrated that the probability of achieving sustained, enhanced learning outcomes is significantly higher with fewer, evidence-informed, well coordinated, system-wide interventions implemented over a prolonged period of time with broad-based support. This approach, coupled with accountability for learning outcomes, is key. A notable example of effective coordination across provinces, curriculum areas, LTSM, and teacher development within education departments in South Africa, has been the nationwide implementation of the DBE workbooks.[54] Similarly, while the elements of a structured learning programme could be rolled out, successful implementation would require significant coordination. Unlike workbooks, this approach demands that lesson plans, LTSM, and teacher training be integrated and aligned to ensure effectiveness. Additionally, a long-term commitment and sustained implementation would be necessary to establish new instructional norms and achieve improvements at scale.

A well planned, multi-phase approach is essential to lasting impact, starting with early grades to secure permanent learning gains. Furthermore, it is important to adapt strategies according to schools' readiness for change.[55]

In addition to the above conditions, a key ingredient for sustained results is a shared vision on critical components of the education system, such as curriculum design and objectives. The Tusome[56] programme of Kenya is a good example of a successful structured learning programme implemented at scale that came to a sudden halt as a result of the switch to a competence-based curriculum.[57] This underscores the importance of enduring political leadership that transcends political party cycles and diverse political influences and interests, while maintaining and embracing a long-term, evidence-based vision of learning for all children.

53 Taylor, S., & Spaull, N. (2020). What works and what scales?: returning to a tradition of evidence-based systemwide programmes. Oxford University Press.

54 Taylor, S., & Spaull, N. (2020). What works and what scales?: returning to a tradition of evidence-based systemwide programmes. Oxford University Press.

55 Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press.

56 The Kenya Tusome programme was a flagship partnership between the Government of Kenya's Ministry of Education and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The programme aimed to improve early grade reading outcomes for children in Grades 1 to 3. By the end of the programme, Tusome had reached over 10 million primary grade learners and significantly improved literacy rates. The programme was recognised for its impact on foundational literacy and its role in fostering a reading culture among young learners.

57 Similarly, in Gauteng province in South Africa, a change in provincial political leadership and related changes in priorities contributed to the de-prioritisation and phasing out of the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) programme.

13 Programme Costs

The evidence from the EGRS series clearly demonstrates that the education triple cocktail improves literacy outcomes in South Africa. Establishing the cost and affordability of such an intervention is crucial. This is particularly important in the highly constrained fiscal environment in a post-COVID economy, where such a programme competes with other priorities both within education and across provincial departments.

Over the years, various models have been tested, focusing on two key factors: the mode of coaching support and the target language.

From a language perspective, ideally the intervention targets both the home language and the first additional language (English); alternatively, just the home language. However, only on-site, in-person coaching has been shown to significantly improve literacy outcomes.

We present two costing analyses here. The first is a bottom-up view that looks at per-teacher and per-learner costs across both of these dimensions: mode of coaching support and target language. The second takes a national perspective, broken down by province, and models potential costs at scale for different models and roll-out approaches.

13.1 Per-teacher and Per-learner Costs

A costing analysis was conducted to estimate the expenses of selected programme modes and is presented in the table below.

Table 3. Annual cost of four variants of the programme, analysed per Teacher and per Learner (in 2025 ZAR)

		Cost (in ZAR 2025)	
Programme		**HL Only**	**HL + EFAL**
Base Programme	per teacher per learner	R5 274 R151	R14 023 R401
In-person coaching (External) + BP	per teacher per learner	R17 063 R488	R25 568 R731
Virtual coaching (External) + BP	per teacher per learner	R11 522 R329	R20 027 R572
DH coaching (internal, with External support) + BP	per teacher per learner	R11 764 R336	R20 268 R579
(Any programme) + Extra cost for lesson plans on tablet	per teacher per learner	R2 263 R65	R2 089 R60

The base programme presented in the first row, consists of the provision of daily lesson plans, additional LTSM and teacher training.[58] This base programme provides the building blocks for a successful learning intervention. In 2025, it would cost about 5,300 South African Rand (ZAR) or 285 US dollars (USD)[59] per teacher per annum to implement the programme in home language or about 14,000 ZAR (760 USD) per teacher per annum, to intervene in two languages: the HL and the second language, EFAL.

However, there was no significant impact of the base programme without coaching. Adding in the cost of in-person, on-site coaching for both languages comes to a total cost of ZAR 25,600 (1,380 USD) per teacher per annum. In-person teacher coaching, which has consistently been found to be the most effective intervention with lasting benefits to learner outcomes, almost doubles the cost of the programme per teacher.

The costs for the other two coaching models that have been tested have been included for comparison. Both are slightly lower cost options, with virtual coaching costing about 20,000 ZAR (1,080 USD) and DH-led coaching costing about 20,300 ZAR (1,100 USD) per teacher annually in 2025,[60] However, the current evidence suggests that these approaches did not lead to significantly greater improvements compared to the base programme and therefore do not justify the additional cost.

The lesson plans that form the core of the base programme can be delivered in either paper format or on tablets. Tablets are more expensive and add a cost of around 2,100 ZAR (110 USD) per teacher to the base programme for both languages. This additional cost for tablets is currently not included in the costs figure. Whilst tablets are useful as a part of an evaluation as it allows for the tracking of teacher behaviour, there is no good evidence of a positive or negative impact of tablet-use on reading outcomes. Thus, it would not be cost-effective to include them at scale.

There are few studies, which have shown clear impact and even fewer that have also reported on costs. Funda Wande, a South African NGO, trialed a similar structured learning programme in Limpopo, using lesson plans, LTSM and slightly more intensive centralised teacher training than the EGRS base programme. They also found positive results with 0.27 standard deviations improvement in home language reading after three years of intervention.[61] They estimate that, if a district or province were to implement the programme for home language, it would cost 357 ZAR[62] (19 USD) per learner.[63] They also tested a more effective but much more expensive teacher-assistant programme, costing about 2,299 ZAR[64] (124 USD) per learner per year in 2025.

Their results, in combination with the EGRS series evidence, strengthen the case for a structured learning programme in South Africa.

58 Teacher-training costs were calculated using the maximum required expenditure, but some provinces could decrease costs by making better use of existing resources.
59 Used an exchange rate of 18.5 ZAR per USD. This exchange rate was used throughout this section.
60 Additionally, under such a model, schools, district and provincial capacity-building would need to be undertaken. These costs have not been included.
61 SALDRU. (2024). Funda Wande Limpopo workbooks evaluation: endline report. Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit.
62 Cost estimate in the report is 342 ZAR in 2024, this was adjusted for inflation to 2025 ZAR.
63 SALDRU. (2024). Funda Wande Limpopo workbooks evaluation: endline report. Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit.
64 Cost estimate in the report is 2.202 ZAR in 2024. This was adjusted for inflation to 2025 ZAR.

13.2 Modelling a National Roll-out with Cost Estimates

A separate 2020 finance review[65] was conducted as part of the EGRS Improvement Plan. It provided detailed cost estimates for implementing the EGRS combination of lesson plans, up-front teacher training, additional LTSM and different types of coaching (external coaches, internal DH coaching, or a hybrid model of external coaches supporting DHs to coach). This report also reviewed estimates of government spending on foundation phase LTSM and professional development activities and made recommendations on possible sources of funding to cover a scale-up of these EGRS programmatic components.

A costing tool was also developed so that planners in national and provincial departments can adjust the parameters in order to budget for various scenarios. For example, the total national cost to roll out the external model was estimated to be 3.2 billion ZAR[66] (173 million USD) over a five-year period or about 650 million ZAR (35 million USD) per year. This figure is roughly consistent with the per teacher per annum estimate.

Whether this is too expensive is ultimately a matter of prioritisation. It is certainly significant compared to existing interventions focused on reading. However, it is also less than 0.2% of total Basic Education spend and about 0.8% of non-compensation spend in Basic Education.

Over the last two decades the Department of Basic Education has successfully invested in a number of national programmes to support education delivery. Some of these include the provision of the DBE Rainbow workbooks,[70] estimated at 1.3 billion ZAR[71] (70 million USD), and the National School Nutrition Programme with an estimated expenditure of 10.3 billion ZAR (560 million USD) in 2025.[72] Although this was not envisaged as an education, but rather an employment intervention, the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative's Basic Education Employment Intervention (PYEI-BEEI) was another national programme which impacted on education delivery from 2020 to 2023. In its last year, in 2023, the programme cost about 7 billion ZAR[73] (equivalent to 380 million USD[74]).[75]

65 DNA Economics. (2020). Analysis of the financial implication of scaling an early grade reading programme. Available from the DBE on request.

66 Cost estimate reported was 2.4 billion ZAR in 2020 ZAR. This was adjusted for inflation (Treasury reported CPI).

67 Used an exchange rate of 18.5 ZAR per USD. This exchange rate was used throughout this section.

68 The figures get to a total that is in the same ball-park. Assuming a per teacher per annum cost of 25,600 ZAR, spending 650 million ZAR would reach about 25,400 teachers, who would receive the base programme plus coaching. Assuming each teacher received the programme for 2 years, this would allow us to reach about 63,500 teachers in 5 years. In 2020, when the costing tool was developed, there were about 92,000 Grade 1-3 teachers, which means the programme would reach about 69% of Grade 1-3 teachers. Given that Quintiles 1-3 and, perhaps, some Quintile 4 schools would be the main target population, the numbers very roughly align with the expected reach.

69 Own calculations using information from: National Treasury. (2025). Budget Review 2025. National Treasury of the Republic of South Africa. https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2025/review/FullBR.pdf.

70 The DBE Rainbow workbooks form part of the DBE's interventions aimed at improving the performance of South African learners. They consist of four workbooks, two for home language and two for Mathematics, that are provided to each child in Grades 1-9 in public schools every year.

71 Taken from the National Treasury Basic Education Department Excel tables found at https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2025/excelFormat.aspx.

72 Medium Term Budget Policy Statement 2024 and used an exchange rate of 18.5 ZAR per USD.

73 Figure reported was 6.4 bn ZAR for 2023/24, this was adjusted for inflation to get to 2025 ZAR.

74 In 2025 USD.

75 Department of Basic Education. (2024). Presidential Youth Employment Initiative Basic Education Employment Initiative: Implemented in the Basic Education sector Phase I-IV (2020/21-2023/24). Department of Basic Education. Pretoria.

The next critical step to improving schooling quality is to focus on better instruction and learning outcomes, which could be achieved through an EGRS-like programme. Such an early grade reading programme would cost less than some of the national programmes mentioned, but would also cover fewer grades.

Implementing a structured learning programme with in-person coaching is a meaningful step toward improving education. However, it still does not fully bridge socio-economic gaps nor is it able to raise achievement to the desired minimum learning outcomes. Nevertheless, it remains the most cost-effective, evidence-based option available for improving literacy in the foundation phase.

Education is a crucial long-term investment in building the nation's human capital, and well-designed interventions like this can create lasting positive changes in teaching practices and learning outcomes.

14 Conclusion

The EGRS study series has been a long-running and far-reaching programme in South Africa, with interventions that have been tested across different regions and languages. Over time, successive studies have built on earlier findings, refining approaches and exploring cost-effective strategies to enhance implementation. This iterative process has strengthened the evidence base, demonstrating both the feasibility and effectiveness of the programme in improving learning outcomes.

The studies have consistently shown that the base programme consisting of lesson plans and additional LTSM with teacher training has a positive effect on literacy outcomes, especially when paired with on-site in-person coaching. The intervention with on-site coaching implemented in Grades 1-3 has been found to have a lasting impact on children's educational trajectories, with improvements evident up to Grade 7. Furthermore, preliminary administrative data suggest that participating learners are more likely to progress to Grade 9 without delays.[76] This reinforces the broader implications for learner retention, system efficiency, and later academic success of effective early interventions, particularly those in the home language.

Nevertheless, the evidence on what works to improve reading presents an uncomfortable reality that has to be confronted: even those few interventions that have demonstrated a measurable positive impact on reading outcomes have modest effect sizes relative to the size of the learning inequalities across the system; yet the learning and teaching support material (LTSM) and teacher professional development they provide are regarded by many as unaffordable.

Using the findings of the EGRS series to improve learning at scale remains a key goal. While the research has shaped policy directions, the programme has not yet been universally adopted in South African schools.

Without a clear, effective, and more affordable alternative, the approach developed through the ERGS series of studies remains the most viable option for achieving meaningful and lasting improvements in early-grade literacy in South Africa. To maximise its impact and extend its reach, ongoing policy engagement and prioritisation will be essential, along with efforts to explore and implement more cost-effective adaptations.

76 Own calculations using matched learner administrative data in 2024 from the SA-SAMS system from 2024.

15 | Acknowledgements

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16 | Appendix: Table A1

Table A1: Showing the programme design for EGRS I, EGRS II, EGRP I and EGRP II

	EGRS I				EGRS II		
	Control: Status Quo	T1: Centralised Training	T2: Coaching	T3: Parent intervention	Control: Status Quo	T1: Coaching	T2: Virtual Coaching
Lesson plans		● Paper	● Paper			● Paper	● Tablet
LTSM		●	●			●	●
Teacher Training (External)		● Initial: 2 day Term 3: 2 day	● Initial: 1 day Term 2-4: 1 day			● Initial: 2 day Term 2-4: 1 day	● Initial: 3 day Term 2-4: 1 day
In-person Coaching (External)			● Monthly			● Every 3 wks	
Virtual Coaching (External)							● Every 3 wks
Coaching by DHs (Internal)							
Coaching of DHs (External)							
PLC							
School based workshops							
Capacity development (Province, district & school)							
Parent workshops				● Weekly workshops			

16 | Appendix: Table A1

Table A1: Showing the programme design for EGRS I, EGRS II, EGRP I and EGRP II

	EGRP I			EGRP II	
	Control: Status Quo	T1: Coaching	T2: DH Coaching	Control: Base prog. (Incl. Multigrade)	T1: External coaching (Incl. Multigrade)
Lesson plans	● Tablet	● Tablet	● Tablet	● Tablet	● Tablet
LTSM	●	●	●	●	●
Teacher Training (External)	● Initial: 2 day Term 2–4: 2 days	● Initial: 2 day Term 2–4: 2 days	● Initial: 2 day Term 2–4: 2 days	● Initial: 2 day Term 2–4: 2 days	● Initial: 2 day Term 2–4: 2 days
In-person Coaching (External)		● Monthly (In Yr 1–3)	● Monthly (In Yr 1)		● Every 3 wks (In Yr 1–2)
Virtual Coaching (External)		● Support			● Support
Coaching by DHs (Internal)			● Year 2 & 3		
Coaching of DHs (External)			●		
PLC		● Year 2 & 3	● Year 2 & 3		●
School-based workshops		●	●		
Capacity development (Province, district & school)				●	●
Parent workshops					

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