

# IMPROVING EARLY GRADE READING IN SOUTH AFRICA:

## A PROPOSAL FOR A RANDOMISED CONTROL TRIAL TO EVALUATE ALTERNATIVE POLICY INTERVENTIONS

### Summary

This document provides a brief summary of a proposed impact evaluation of interventions aimed at improving early grade learning in South Africa. Three alternative strategies to improve early grade reading will be evaluated: (i) a teacher training course focused specifically on teaching reading; (ii) an ongoing support programme to teachers consisting of visits from specialist reading coaches, scripted lesson plans and graded reading booklets; (iii) and an intervention designed to improve parent involvement in – and monitoring of – learning to read. The cost-effectiveness of these three programmes will be evaluated relative to each other and relative to a control group of schools using a rigorous impact evaluation design.

### Motivation

The acquisition of reading is foundational to all subsequent learning; yet South African schools fail miserably in this regard – the PIRLS study of 2006 showed that a striking 80% of South African children were not yet reading with comprehension after five years of schooling. The problem is particularly severe amongst poor children. Consequently, substantial inequalities in educational achievement are established early in primary school and there is no evidence of these inequalities being reduced in later years. Therefore, early interventions, such as improving the acquisition of reading amongst poor children, can be expected to have larger effects than interventions later in the school programme.

Although the DBE and provincial education departments are implementing various strategies to support early grade reading, there is little or no sense of what is working and why. Moreover, there are competing models of support in the system. For example, the teacher union and PED collaboration initiative appears to favour the traditional model of teacher training workshops, the Western Cape LITNUM strategy runs in-service training courses (one focusing on teaching reading) through the Cape Teaching Institute, while Gauteng provides additional graded readers and clearly scripted lesson plans and employs specialist reading coaches who visit teachers on monthly basis to observe lessons and offer assistance. It is important that a national reading strategy be based on scientific evidence regarding what most improves the acquisition of reading.

## Overview of Programme

The project will target Grade 1 children in 230 schools in one of the provinces of South Africa and will be implemented over two years. A lottery will be used to select a control group of 80 schools and three “treatment” groups of 50 schools each to participate in the interventions, thus setting up a type of “horse race” to establish which intervention is most effective. There will be three waves of data collection to facilitate project evaluation: February 2015 (baseline), November 2015 (midline), and November 2016 (endline).

The project will shed light on several pertinent research and policy questions. Firstly, the experiment evaluates the impact of each intervention on reading acquisition relative to the status quo. Is the traditional model of a “one-off” training programme sufficient to impact reading acquisition or, does there need to be ongoing school support from coaches, lesson plans and graded reading material? What is the scope for increasing parent involvement in poor and rural schools, and if this can be achieved does this improve teacher accountability and learning outcomes? If more than one intervention is successful, we can identify the most cost-effective intervention for full-scale implementation.

We also look at long-term effects and spillover benefits of faster reading acquisition. Do the impacts of the intervention persist, dissipate or compound over time? If one succeeds in improving the acquisition of reading in the early grades, are there spillover benefits into other learning areas such as Numeracy and First Additional Language? Over and above our initial data collections, we can measure this using results of the Annual National Assessments (ANA) in subsequent years.

## Implementing Partners

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) in partnership with various NGOs and other stakeholders will be responsible for implementation of the project interventions.

An independent service provider with experience in school-based fieldwork and data capturing will be appointed to conduct the assessments of reading proficiency, administer additional background questionnaires and to conduct occasional spot-checks to monitor project implementation. The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) has committed to funding the project evaluation.

An evaluation team has been nominated to provide academic oversight, conduct the data analysis and write the research reports. The team consists of international experts in education research, from the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Oxford, the University of the Witwatersrand, and Georgetown University.