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UNICEF EDUCATION

Education Case Study

SOUTH AFRICA

Recovering learning at all levels

March 2022

Since the first case was detected in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused extensive disruptions to schooling systems in South Africa. Despite home-based options during school closures, valuable teaching and learning time was lost. The result was a deepening of pre-existing educational inequities for the most vulnerable children and adolescents and the deterioration of what had been previously improving educational trends.

This case study looks at three key UNICEF-supported education programmes that have been leveraged to recover lost learning in keeping with the Department of Basic Education's School Recovery Plan in Response to COVID-19. The first is a digital learning platform for secondary students studying Math and Science, called [Siyavula](#). UNICEF advocated successfully to ensure that access is free of charge for learners. It contributed further through the development of new digital learning materials. The second are instructional videos on foundational skills shared via TV and via an online platform called [2Enable](#). The third is the pilot Early Grade Reading Programme running from 2021 to 2024 that involves in-service teacher training, ongoing coaching for teachers and structured lessons, the data from which is helping to quantify learning losses and inform learning recovery efforts. Preparing teachers to undertake formative assessment is also a fundamental element of the model.

RESULTS

- Over 1.1 million Grade 8 to 12 learners (approximately 755,000 girls) accessed online textbooks and practice exercises for Math and Science via Siyavula over the period from 1 June 2021 to 23 February 2022. Impact studies found that learners who completed more than 250 practice questions showed an average increase of 7.9 *per cent* in their Math and Science scores relative to the control group, and learners who completed more than 1,000 practice questions showed an average increase of over 10 *per cent* relative to the control group.

- UNICEF’s technical and financial resources contributed to the development of over 600 educational videos for TV and the 2Enable platform that aim to build children’s foundational skills. They have reached almost 1.9 million learners to date.
- Approximately 900 teachers in Grades 1 to 3 participating in the Early Grade Reading Programme benefitted from UNICEF-supported training in 140 primary schools in North West Province. See a teacher testimonial below.

Thank you...for this wonderful training we receive. I feel good to meet other teachers every term in the workshop to encourage one another and to receive materials... We are filling the gaps this year and we learn and revise what we learnt last year. It will make us good teachers. We also learn life skills here to get confidence in ourselves and to have a good growth mindset...

Grade 2 teacher

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Forging partnerships with cell phone carriers for zero-rated learning materials is an important step but not adequate to ensure equitable access to digital learning.** Forging a partnership with a local cell phone company to enable students to access digital textbooks helped to broaden access, but did not offer a full solution to adolescents who lacked devices or a stable internet connection. Likely, a mix of high and low tech materials are required to ensure the poorest learners are not left behind.

- **Preparation for exit exams is a priority but supporting skills development earlier on would be of greatest benefit.** The initial focus for digital textbooks for Math and Science was students in upper secondary, but skills development is an ongoing process over the course of a learner’s schooling. Materials and supports should be more evenly distributed in earlier grades to improve learning outcomes.
- **Learning losses in the critical early grades are devastating.** As teachers participating in the Early Grade Reading Programme pilot hone their assessment skills, a more complete picture of lost learning has emerged. Grade 4 students tested in 2022 were more than one year behind where they otherwise would have been but for the pandemic. Recovery efforts will need to span immediate-, medium- and long-term plans and require overlapping reading initiatives to help learners get back on track.

NEXT STEPS

To overcome the digital divide, [Siyavula](#) is exploring with the one of the provincial Departments of Basic Education the possibility of combining digital textbooks with printed packs. UNICEF is working to broaden the scope of the initiative to include Math and Science online textbooks for Grades 8 and 9.

The larger than expected learning loss among primary students is sounding the alarm for the need for intensified programming in early grade reading. Data from the pilot will continue to feed into the overall efforts of the Government and its partners, including UNICEF, to support teachers and students to recover losses, particularly as regards foundational skills that students need for future success.

Cost effectiveness: The cost per learner for the Siyavula platform is estimated to be a mere US \$1 for access to both Math and Science resources, reaching over 1.1 million students in Grades 8 to 12. With respect to the 600 educational videos, the estimated cost is just under US \$200,000, reaching almost 1.9 million children to date. Regarding the Early Grade Reading Programme (2021-2024), the initial UNICEF commitment was US \$2.8 million, with valuable support from the Hempel Foundation. An additional US \$650,000 committed by the Zenex Foundation went towards the evaluation of the study. This enabled the Ministry of Education to leverage an additional US \$700,000 from other partners and its own funds.

For more information, please contact:

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