



Home-School Partnership Programme Evaluation report: 2015

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Sharing our learning



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Sharing our learning

Prologue

What does it take to motivate, equip and up-skill parents living in under resourced or previously disadvantaged communities to become effective partners in early literacy development?

This was the question guiding Wordworks' Home School Partnership Programme 2015 evaluation. Instead of asking the organisation to meet pro-forma reporting requirements, one of the primary donors, The D.G. Murray Trust, invited Wordworks to use the opportunity to reflect on the programme in a way that was meaningful and useful to the HSPP team. Wordworks decided to shape the evaluation to serve an audience larger than just the team, and focused on a question they had not only been exploring over the last three years, but had often heard asked by others wanting to make an impact in the field of early literacy development.

Believing that literacy development is an emerging process that begins before school, and that parents have an important role in teaching and supporting language and literacy, this evaluation aims to distil ways of supporting informal learning at home, drawing from the Home School Partnership Programme. In order to do this, HSPP collected and reflected on extensive feedback from key partners and beneficiaries, teacher-facilitators, classroom teachers and parents, collected during 2015. Their comments and assessments informed this evaluation and helped the HSPP team expand their understanding of their work and to reach insightful answers to their guiding question.

This evaluation report on HSPP 2015, is divided into three sections:

Section One introduces Wordworks and the Home School Partnership Programme, and provides an overview of the evaluation and its methodology. Section Two presents a synthesis of feedback collected from programme beneficiaries and stakeholders during 2015. Section Three outlines five essential components of a home-school partnership programme, provides a list of success indicators drawn up as part of the review of findings, and outlines recommendations for the way forward. Together these sections detail what it takes to motivate, equip and up-skill parents living in under resourced or previously disadvantaged communities to become effective partners in early literacy development.



I. Introduction, Methodology and Evaluation Questions

I.1 Introduction

Wordworks, founder and home of the HSPP, is a non-profit organisation in South Africa whose primary aim is to support the literacy and language development of young children. It has worked with parents, volunteers, teachers and children in libraries and schools within and around Cape Town, since 2004. Their work has consistently shown that parents and schools need help in order to give young children a better foundation for learning to read and write.

The HSPP is based on the belief that literacy development is an emerging process that begins before school, that language is important for literacy and most importantly, that language and literacy learning can happen in homes and other informal settings. This approach challenges the traditional view that holds such learning happens within formal schooling only, and it requires families and caregivers to play their role in early literary development.

The programme's primary aim is to give children a better chance of success at school by helping to provide them with a good foundation for learning to read and write. Working with parents, caregivers and teachers, it aims to do this in a way that also leads to a range of other positive outcomes such as enhanced parent/child relationships, deepened understanding of how children learn, improved parenting skills, enriched teaching skills, strengthened self-confidence, and a heightened experience of community among parents and caregivers.

Accordingly, the HSPP is intended for teacher-facilitators working with parents and caregivers

on how to support learning at home. It is aimed at parents and caregivers of children between the ages of four and seven years and promotes informal learning applicable across languages and cultures.

During the period 2013 – 2015, Wordworks partnered with schools in six Circuits in Metro South Education District (MSED) to implement the Home-School Partnership Programme.

Teacher-facilitators received mentoring for the first two years of running their programme, after which they were invited to annual planning meetings and refresher sessions. They were also supported through telephonic contact and attendance of parent graduation ceremonies. Schools were offered the opportunity to send new facilitators for training to build their capacity to run the programme.

I.1.1 Context

It is well known that South African children are significantly under-performing in literacy. Many children still fail to reach the minimum expected level, and our results lag behind other African countries. The reasons for this are complex, but a central problem is that many young children do not have access to essential learning opportunities that support early language and literacy development. These children are starting school already behind and the achievement gap becomes entrenched from the earliest years. Furthermore, there is evidence that, without intervention, the deep inequalities that already exist as children enter school are amplified throughout their school careers, with severe consequences for the fabric of our society.

For years the prevailing view of many parents and policy makers has been that children learn to read at school, in a classroom, under the expert guidance of a trained teacher. However, research from around the world has challenged this view, and shown that children who have rich language experiences and exposure to stories, books and print in their early years are more likely to learn to read and write successfully. Early language and literacy development is rooted in everyday activities and interactions and simple activities that can be integrated into daily routines in homes and community settings. Talking, sharing stories and books, pointing out print, talking about letters and sounds, supporting drawing and early writing, and facilitating pretend play, all have a powerful bearing on whether or not a child learns to read and write successfully.

Parents and caregivers need knowledge about why these things are important and how they can support their children's early learning in informal ways. They need to be convinced to prioritise the kinds of experiences that promote early language and literacy, and they need resourcing and, perhaps most essentially, support. Parents and caregivers of young children are often under-resourced, and although many want to be involved they haven't had opportunities to access knowledge and therefore don't feel that they can contribute. Parents themselves have had punitive experiences at school and this informs their view of how children learn. Schools differ in their perception of the role of parents, and many lament the fact that they struggle to get parents on board to play a role in supporting their children's education. One-off parent meetings tend to be led by a teacher or principal at a school, and are often characterised by hierarchical relationships that make it difficult for parents and teachers to partner/work together in support of children's education.

I.1.2 Step by step overview of HSPP

- HSPP team recruits schools to participate in the programme.
- Schools identify teachers to be trained as facilitators.
- Teacher-facilitators attend a two day training and receive a comprehensive Resource File and Facilitator's Guide with information, workshop activities and resources.
- Teacher-facilitators recruit parents of children aged five to eight years.
- Parents attend an eight week programme (2.5 hours per week) run by the facilitators.
- Parents receive resource packs and are encouraged to make their own materials.
- HSPP team provides in-course mentoring for three out of eight sessions for every new school that runs the HSPP.

I.2 Evaluation methodology

This evaluation focuses on 2015. It is the culmination of several pieces of evaluative work undertaken by the HSPP team at different points during the year. The programme has a number of in-built monitoring processes through which parent, teacher-facilitator, and classroom teacher feedback was gathered.

Feedback was sourced in the following ways:

- Post programme refresher day report back attended by 70 teachers, librarians and volunteers who trained as facilitators and implemented the eight week programme at their school, library or centre.
- Review of 36 teacher-facilitator portfolios at the end of the programme from 21 schools. (28 portfolios were submitted as part of the requirements of a UCT short course certificate and 8 were submitted to meet the requirements of a Wordworks certificate. 32 of the 36 teachers who compiled portfolios, were first time facilitators.

- 318 feedback forms and/or letters from participating parents at 21 schools (these were completed at session three and session eight of the programme).
- 36 teacher-facilitator reports (written at the end of the course).
- 21 teacher-facilitators' self evaluation forms (completed at the end of the course).
- 109 progress reports on children of parents who attended the course (written by their class teachers).

Note: *Five of the portfolios that were analysed for the purposes of this report were from teacher-facilitators from schools in Metro Central Education District. These teacher-facilitators attended the HSPP facilitator training, planning sessions and refresher in 2015 and their portfolios were submitted alongside those of teachers from Metro South Education District.*

In the interest of expanding and challenging their own observations, thinking and assumptions, Wordworks invited an external consultant to review and analyse feedback gathered. Sandra Hill attended the refresher day report back, reviewed 36 teacher-facilitator portfolios (including forms and letters from parents, teacher-facilitator self evaluation form, report and questionnaire, photos, samples of work, attendance registers, planning outlines) and 109 progress reports, and presented her findings to the team, facilitating discussion and further sense making of the data. This ensured that she was able to develop a robust picture of the programme, while the team had opportunity for further learning about their work and to feed observations and ideas into the evaluation.

1.3 Evaluation questions

The HSPP team agreed to focus the evaluation on a primary guiding question:

What does it take to motivate, equip and up-skill parents living in under resourced or previously disadvantaged communities to become effective partners in early literacy development?

In order to answer this question, the evaluation focused on the following supporting questions:

1. What has been achieved through the Home-School Partnership Programme?
2. What were the challenges faced by teacher-facilitators and parents?
3. What changes did teacher-facilitators make to the programme in response to challenges faced?
4. What are the key elements that contribute to the success of the programme?
 - What aspects of the programme content and delivery model contribute to the success of the programme?
 - What are some of the key school factors that enable successful Home-School Partnership Programmes for parents?
 - How have schools managed challenges that have arisen?
5. What are the learnings that can inform our future work and that of others interested in making an impact in early literacy development?



2. Findings

This section presents a synthesis of feedback collected from programme beneficiaries and stakeholders during the course of 2015. Quantitative data is difficult to distil from discursive reports, forms, letters, and oral feedback – but is offered here to help the reader appreciate the weight of each finding. Direct quotes taken from reports, feedback forms, letters and oral feedback were translated into English (where given in Afrikaans or isiXhosa) and used to animate key points.

Findings are organised around three primary questions:

1. What has been achieved through the Home-School Partnership Programme?
2. What are the challenges facing role-players?
3. What changes did teacher-facilitators make to the programme in response to challenges faced?

2.1 Question one: What has been achieved through the Home-School Partnership Programme?

This section of the report presents a range of achievements distilled from feedback on the programme's impact on children, parents and teacher-facilitators. These stories of success were gathered from teacher-facilitators, participating parents and classroom teachers who were approached for comment on each child's progress. Achievements are thus presented here in these three voices.

2.1.1 Teacher-facilitators' voices on what has been achieved through HSPP

The success stories captured in the teacher-facilitators' portfolios provide an interesting perspective on what the programme has achieved. Again and again teacher-facilitators gave examples of improved relationships among the triangle of key players, personal development of parents and of teachers, and of improvement in children's attitude, behaviour and school work. Together these comprise the programme's biggest achievements. The last achievement noted here is teacher-facilitators' success in securing parent participation in the programme, which ironically was also one of their biggest challenges!

Improved Relationships

Improved relationships, including relationships between parents and children, between teacher-facilitators and parents, between teacher-facilitators themselves, and between parents, was recorded 75 times within the 36 teacher-facilitator reports reviewed.

Thirteen out of 36 (36%) teacher-facilitator highlighted an improvement in relationship between parents and their children, with parents described as being more patient, understanding their child better, listening better, speaking more politely and affirmatively. A further 10 out of 36 (28%) reported that parents were making more time to spend with their children.

Examples given of ways in which parents spent more time with their children demonstrates how parents have implemented what they had learnt.

These include:

- joining the library and visiting it together
- introducing routine
- reading books and telling stories
- helping with home work
- playing games
- singing together
- drawing together
- talking together more and listening better
- using proper words and improving pronunciation
- practising greater patience and expressing less criticism



Teacher-facilitators observed that parents felt better equipped to help their children after participating in the programme – and this undoubtedly went a long way in improving relationship by reducing parents' feelings of inadequacy and by giving practical tools and ideas.

"It warms your heart when a child tells you about all the fun things they did with their parents."

"Parents said they enjoyed spending time with their children instead of just shoving them aside, that way building a close bond with their children."

"Before they'd fight every night and the child would cry when he has to do homework. After starting the Wordworks course, she started relaxing and having fun with him."

Fourteen out of 36 (39%) teacher-facilitators shared how engaging with parents in the HSPP resulted in a deeper understanding of parents' circumstances and limitations and led to a positive shift in their attitude towards parents. 18 out of 36 (50%) Teacher-facilitators commented on an improved relationship with parents. Stereotypes and prejudices were challenged and teachers' status as an authority figure was softened as teacher-facilitators and parents got to know each other on a personal level. In this way the hierarchy between parents and teachers became more level.

"[The programme] made me rethink the challenges parents face in everyday life and the difficulty they encounter to improving the education of their children."

"[The programme] helped me build good relationship with parents. I discovered parents need our support to help them help their children."

The general shift in attitude towards parents was also influenced by teacher-facilitators' growing awareness and respect for parents' vital role in their children's education. For some this insight was a major mental-shift, while others who had previously paid lip service to the idea, really embraced it. That parents are teachers too and therefore their partners in children's education, ranked as a top learning for facilitators. 14 out of 36 (39%) Teacher-facilitators remarked on parents' role as teachers, and on the importance of team work between parents and teachers.

"I learnt that all parents are teachers no matter what their circumstances and quality of their education."

Although not frequently specifically reported, teacher-facilitator feedback showed that working together on the programme helped build relationships between teachers. Planning and presenting sessions together provided opportunity for getting to know each other's strengths, weaknesses and fears – and for supporting one another.

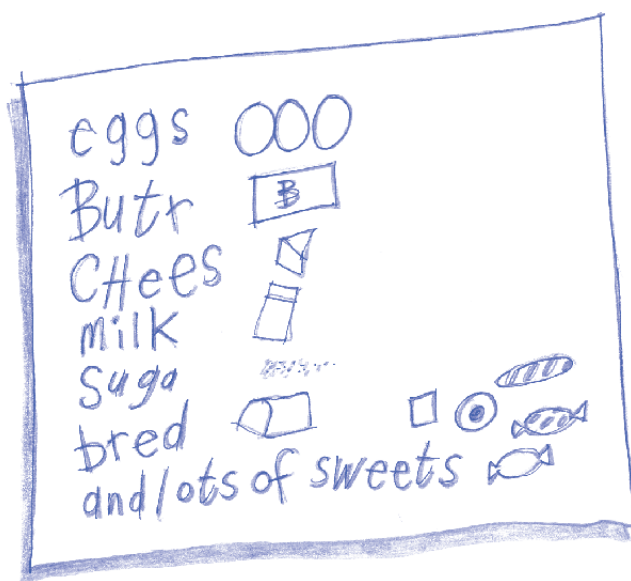
"I grew closer to my colleagues because presenting these sessions together was on a different level."

Parents who participated in the programme typically became more involved in the life of the school overall, attending parent meetings, supporting functions and events, greeting teachers and principal – or assisting with learning support during school hours.

Teacher-facilitator reports detailed the growth of warm and supportive relationships among participating parents. These relationships extended beyond sessions, with one group even setting up their own WhatsApp group to facilitate communication and sharing of ideas and information. Support for one another was demonstrated in the sharing of ideas, materials, and showing interest in and concern for one another.

"Parents stand together and support one another in the community."

While the development of positive relationships between teachers and learners is not stated as a potential outcome of the HSPP, it was anticipated that teachers would apply the messaging in the course to their own teaching. 22 out of 36 (61%) Teacher-facilitators reported that the HSPP showed them how to make learning more fun, introduced them to ways of working with their 'weaker' children, encouraged them to be more patient and understanding, and re-inspired them as teachers. It would be safe to infer that this helped build teacher/learner relationships.



Personal development and empowerment of parents

Twenty-five out of 36 (69%) teacher-facilitators reported an increase in parents' self confidence, knowledge and skill. Their increased participation in sessions, the willingness to answer and ask questions and to share stories from their own lives were cited as examples demonstrating enhanced self-esteem. The realisation of their role as first-teacher, or recognising the importance of reading to a child, or the understanding of ways children learn, were given as examples of knowledge gained or deepened. Skills developed included new ways of speaking, listening, and of disciplining children, as well as practical skills such as making educational books and toys.

Recognising and appreciating what parents already know and using it as the foundation for new knowledge is an empowering approach to adult education. This approach is fundamental to the HSPP and no doubt contributed to the personal development and empowerment of parents reported by teacher-facilitators. Parents' confidence increased as they better understood themselves, and their children, and as they acquired new knowledge that helped overcome things they were struggling with or felt ill-equipped to handle – such as school work or their child's development. New practical skills contributed to parents' growing sense of being able to play a role in their child's educational development.

"Knowing that they could be part of their kids educational development gave them a feeling of empowerment (and) they feel less threatened by the homework their children bring home."

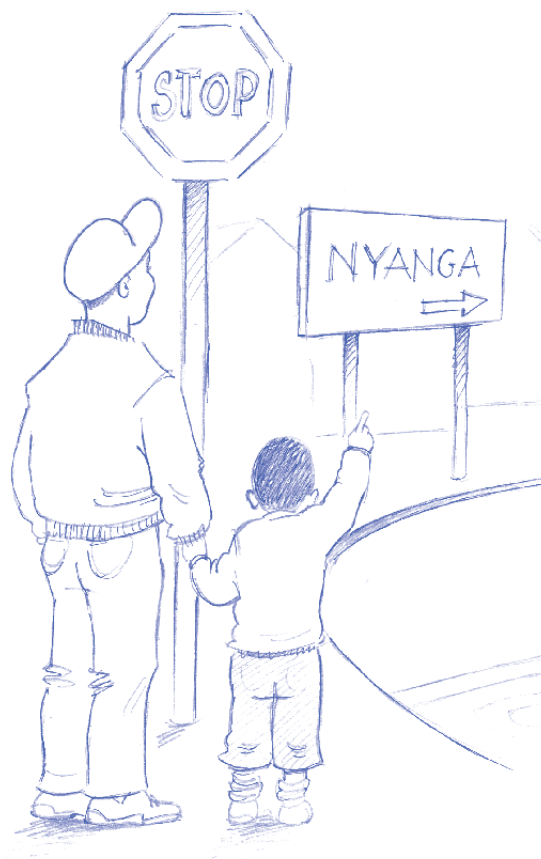
"I could see how their confidence grew as we went along."

Improvement in child outcomes

Twelve out of 36 (33%) teacher-facilitators reported an improvement in the school work, academic codes, attitude and behaviour of children whose parents had participated in the HSPP. It must be remembered that teacher-facilitators do not teach all the children whose parents attend the programme and are thus not in a position to comment on each child's progress. For a more detailed assessment of improvement in child outcomes, please see feedback from classroom teachers below.

Teacher-facilitator reports included their own observations as well as those reported by parents.

Teacher-facilitators' observations of improvement were more specific and referred to incidences of learners learning to recognise letters, knowing single sounds, blending sounds, moving up in codes, giving more descriptive and insightful contributions to lessons – and becoming more relaxed and



confident in the classroom. Improvements reported by parents included attitude to homework, ability to do homework, attitude to attending school, telling stories, enjoying reading more, asking and answering questions, following routine.

"The parents could see the difference it (programme) made to their children's progress and learning."

"It was obvious for us when we did assessments how the children's confidence and academic codes grew."

"Staff can immediately see the improvement in children whose parents are attending the course, especially in the children's drawings and in their communication."

Personal development and empowerment of teacher-facilitators

Teacher-facilitators were required to reflect on personal growth as part of their report. Looking inward at the impact of the programme on teacher-facilitators themselves provides another lens on what has been achieved through the programme.

Apart from changed attitude towards parents and improved parent/teacher relationships already discussed above, the two most significant areas of personal growth for facilitators were improved confidence and development of new skills; and the implementation of course content and methodology in their own homes and classrooms.

Twenty-five out of 36 (69%) teacher-facilitators recounted an increase in confidence, specifically with regards to working with parents, addressing groups of adults, and speaking in public. Taking on new challenges, receiving support (from Wordworks, colleagues, principal, and parents) and overcoming obstacles contributed to this growth spurt. It was also evident from facilitators' self evaluation forms that their facilitation skills improved tremendously over the eight week programme.

"Wordworks helped me to communicate better with parents and to become more confident when speaking to a group."

"I believe in myself much more than I did before starting the course."

All the programme facilitators are teachers, and most are also parents, or grandparents of young children. 20 Out of 36 (55%) reported using what they taught other parents, themselves – either as parents with their own children, or as teachers in the classroom, thus helping to enrich both parenting and teaching skills. Despite being qualified teachers, facilitators reported gaining deeper understanding and learning new strategies for teaching literacy and supporting struggling learners more effectively. Many also reported a renewed passion for teaching.

"The course has improved the way I raise my children. I make more time for them and I talk to them a lot."

"I am applying the skills to my own class when working with the very weak ones."

Recruitment and attendance

While group sizes at each of the participating schools were small (average of 12 and a range of 5-24 parent graduates), securing commitment from any parents to attend an eight week course was a major achievement in itself. 10 out of 36 (28%) Teacher-facilitators noted getting parents to attend the programme as one of their key successes. It must be remembered that this profile of parents typically had compromised and often negative experience of schooling themselves, believe that education is the exclusive role of teachers, face multiple stresses such as unemployment, conflicting demands on their time, limited resources, and live in violent, crime-riddled neighbourhoods which makes attendance risky. Parents commitment to attend sessions contributed to the improved parent/teacher relationship and demonstrates how needed and how 'fertile the ground' for parent education and empowerment programmes.

"The willingness of parents to attend these weekly sessions was a huge success."

"Our parents came every Saturday. Through rain as well. We had two long weekends – our parents still came."

2.1.2 Parents' voices on what has been achieved through the HSPP

One of the programme's in-built monitoring mechanisms is a parent questionnaire completed at the end of the programme. Unlike teacher-facilitators who were specifically tasked with recording achievements (success stories), parents were asked to describe what they enjoyed about the course, what they didn't like, the four most important things they had learnt – and a few were asked what they had done differently since the programme. Over 300 parents across 21 schools completed these qualitative feedback forms. Sifting through their answers added another perspective and helped grow HSPP's list of achievements.

Parents developed a better understanding of how children learn

Parents realised that they are their child's first teacher and developed not only a better understanding of this role, but of how children learn. 122 Parents reported that understanding how children learn and thus how to teach and support children's learning by making it interesting and fun was their most important learning. 18 Parents said this is what they enjoyed most about the programme.

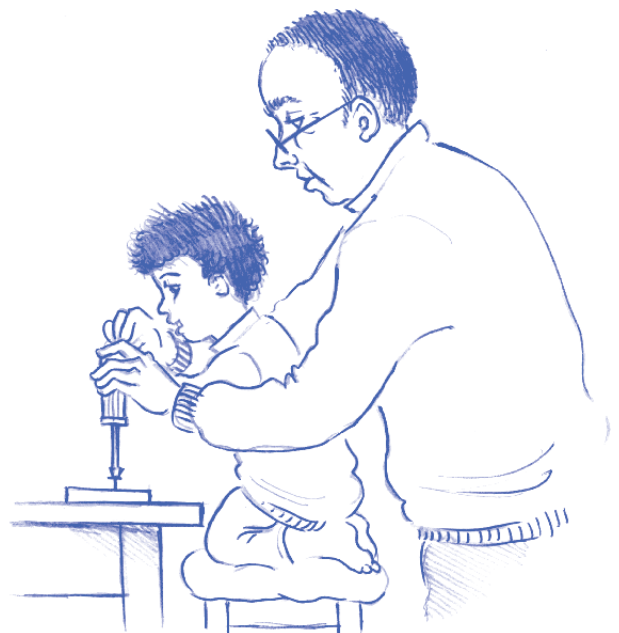
"I am my child's first teacher."

"You can learn through anything you do."

"Play time is learning time."

Increased parental/caregiver involvement in child's day-to-day life and in their learning

Parents recognised the importance of being more engaged with their child and developed a better idea of how to do so. 43 Parents said that understanding how important it



was for them to be involved with their child and learning how to engage better and more often, were the most important things they had learnt. Parents reported making more time for their children, spending it reading, drawing, playing, doing homework, talking and listening, observing or doing everyday household things together.

"Instead of listening to music, I now sing with him and read stories."

"Learning together is not only a task – it is called family bonding time."

New educational skills

Parents learnt new skills for and practical ways of implementing their role as first-teacher. 60 Parents said learning new skills to support their child's learning was what they enjoyed most. 26 Parents listed how to make educational materials such as books, puzzles and games from everyday things like egg boxes and magazines as an important learning. 33 Parents said learning how to tell or read a story so that it came alive was their most important learning, while another five said it was what they enjoyed most. Playing games and learning how to draw were also listed as important skills learnt.

"You don't have to buy expensive things."

"I can make things like puzzles and games."

Improved parenting skills

Ninety-seven parents reported improved parenting skills such as communication, patience, and empathy for children as their most important learning. Parents recognised the importance of respecting children and learnt ways of building their children's self esteem. Parents also reported being less critical and more patient.

"To be less judgemental. To always encourage."

"Conversation is an important way to build trust."

Personal development and enhanced social cohesion

Parents came to experience the course as being about them as much as it was about the child. 15 Parents specifically mentioned enjoying the personal development opportunities, while another 20 said they enjoyed being part of a learning group.

"The sessions were actually also about me as a parent."

"But most of all I adventured myself and discovered a different part of me I never knew existed."

"To chat to others and to learn from them."

Parents' self confidence in themselves as first-teacher was also boosted when they saw an improvement in their child's school work and attitude towards learning for themselves.

"My child is now making progress!"

"Now I see that she started to love to go to school and do her work."

2.1.3 Classroom teachers' voices on what has been achieved through the HSPP

Classroom teachers (who were not HSPP teacher-facilitators) were asked three questions about changes they had noticed in parents and their children since the parents/caregivers had participated in the programme. Improved parental involvement, children's improved behaviour, confidence and participation, and improved scholastics were identified as key indicators of success. HSPP received reports on 109 children and their parents.

Since the programme, are children's parents/caregivers more involved in their learning?

Parental involvement in a child's learning can take many shapes. In this evaluation 'involvement' included communicating more with the teacher, attending parent meetings, asking for extra worksheets, ensuring the child has the materials s/he needs for lessons and activities, helping the child with homework, playing educational games, reading stories together and going to the library.

Teachers reported that 101 out of 109 (93%) parents/caregivers were more involved in their child's learning after completing the HSPP the course.

"Simbongile's mom and dad are now both involved in his learning. I constantly get updates about how homework is going and what educational games and tools they have used in the week."

"The mother is very willing and sits with Jesse daily. She understands the requirements of the homework and uses Wordworks ideas to make it interesting."

According to the children's teachers, six out of 109 (5.5%) parents/caregivers were not more involved in their child's learning since the course. Teachers' comments include:

"No (parental) involvement that I am aware of."

"His parents only come to collect his report. This is the only time that she has discussed Calvin's progress."

Two out of 109 (1.8%) parents were reportedly very involved in their child's learning before the programme and remained as committed post programme.

Are there noticeable changes in the child's behaviour, confidence and participation (since his/her parents'/caregivers' participation in the programme)?

The second question posed to teachers was about changes in each child's behaviour, confidence and participation in class.

The behaviour and/or confidence and/or participation of 95 out of 109 (87%) children changed for the better after their parent's/caregivers' participation in the programme.

"She is more confident in her work and participates in group activities."

"More settled. [Now she] understands classroom behaviour – waiting your turn, sharing."

According to the children's teachers, the behaviour and/or confidence and/or participation of 14 out of 109 (13%) children did not change after their parents'/caregivers' participation in the programme. Two of these children reportedly always behaved and performed well, but the remaining 12 (11%) continue to struggle, despite their parents participation.

"Shane still lacks enthusiasm to do work. Tasks incomplete and homework not done."

"She is still withdrawn. She does not want to participate at times."

"He remains very easily distracted both in the classroom and in the learning support class."

Was there noticeable improvement in language, drawing, reading, writing or number work?

The third question posed to teachers was about changes in each child's language, literacy or maths.

One hundred and five out of 109 (96%) children improved noticeably in their language, and/or drawing, and/or reading, and/or writing, and/or number work. The changes were more significant for some than for others.

"Caleb's maths has improved. His phonics is also good now. Although not a good reader, I can see how the programme has helped to stabilise him and help with other aspects of work."

"There is an all round improvement in his language, reading, writing and number work."

Only four out of 109 (3.6%) children failed to flourish despite parents attending the programme. It is possible that these are the same children whose parent's involvement in their learning did not increase after completing the HSPP but it was not possible to correlate data.

"No. No improvement. He will need to repeat the grade."

2.1.4 A summary of HSPP achievements

Thanks to the HSPP:

- Children are doing better at school, feeling more confident and participating more in class.
- Parents are better equipped to assist their children's informal learning at home, have improved in general parenting and communication skills and have closer relationships with their children.
- Parents report that they are doing some things differently, building new routines and choosing to spend more time with their children. They realise that children learn through play, and that learning should be fun.
- Parents have increased in self confidence, recognise that they are their children's first teacher, have a significant role to play in their children's education and have acquired knowledge and skills to assist them in doing so.
- Parents are forming relationships between themselves which in turn helps build the broader school parent body and wider community support network.
- Parents and teachers are working more closely together in the interest of children's education and well being.



2.2 Question two: What were the challenges faced by teacher-facilitators and parents?

In order to build a robust understanding of the challenges of the HSPP, the evaluation needed to consider the different perspectives of two key role-player groups – that of teacher-facilitators and that of parents. It was also important to consider both internal and external or contextual challenges that affect the programme.

Teacher-facilitators were asked to write about challenges they faced in running the programme – to describe issues, difficulties and what didn't work. Teacher-facilitator reports provided an interesting perspective on what it takes to be a programme facilitator, while parental responses referred to the demands and constraints they faced as working or unemployed parents struggling to make ends meet. Both referred to the environment in which schools are located, and the communities in which parents live.

2.2.1 Teacher-facilitators' voices on challenges faced

As with achievements, there was a wide range of challenges recorded in the 36 teacher-facilitators' portfolios. The four primary challenges were:

- Recruitment and attendance.
- Finding a suitable time to hold the programme: time of year, time of week, and time of day.
- Accommodating children who accompanied their parents to sessions.
- Finding time to plan for the course, both as a team as well as individual preparation.

Recruitment and attendance

Thirty-six (100%) teacher-facilitators reported that securing parental attendance – getting parents involved, and keeping them involved in the program – was their biggest challenge. Despite vigorous recruitment drives, which in many instances led to high numbers of parents signing up, many teacher-facilitators reported a poorer turn out than they expected, and on-going attrition of numbers. Reasons garnered from teacher-facilitator reports include:

- Parents not interested in playing a part in their child's education and see it solely as the school's responsibility.
- Parents interested but lack the confidence to attend a course.
- Parents interested but given their circumstances (long working hours, long commute, double burden of labour, large families to care for), and living environment (crime ridden), are not able to attend a course.

"When we started only 3 parents pitched. Finally we had 17 but only 12 graduated. Getting enough parents involved in the program (was a challenge). Parents are either too busy, working long hours or shifts, too tired when home or just plain disinterested."

"Tafelsig is violent – if they just hear about shooting, they (parents) stay at home."

Teacher-facilitators' high (possibly unrealistic) expectations regarding parent participation must also be taken into account (especially given that 32 of the 36 portfolios reviewed were written by novice facilitators).

Most groups experienced attrition of numbers during the course. Some parents would "just disappear" while others would apologise and give reasons for not being able to return, the most common being "getting a job". In addition, absenteeism put pressure on facilitators to think up ways of keeping participants interested, made it difficult for them to know how much to recap on missed information before proceeding with the content of the next session, and impacted on group dynamics.

"Some parents only attended two or three sessions before opting out by staying away."

"We had to constantly find innovative ways of getting them back and keeping them back."

Finding a suitable time to hold the programme – time of year, time of week, and time of day.

Twenty-three out of 36 (64%) teacher-facilitators reported how difficult it was to find the right time to offer their programme. Competing school events, parents working hours, seasonal employment, inclement weather, dangerous environment (where it was not safe to hold evening meetings), vandalism, term dates, public holidays, high death rates, load shedding, and parents and teachers other commitments all added up to make it extremely difficult to find a suitable time to run the programme.

"We originally planned to hold course on a Saturday, but due to other school events had to shift to a Tuesday evening."

"They decided on a Saturday two o' clock because in the morning they attend funerals and others are working."

"We only started in 2nd term due to violence (in the area). Programme on a Thursday – not at night because not safe."

Accommodating children who accompanied their parents to sessions

Twelve out of 36 (33%) teacher-facilitators' found the unexpected number of children attending the programme with their parents, and the lack of alternative child-care, a big challenge.

"We did not anticipate such a big group of children."

"The children were noisy & disruptive."

"I asked parents to organise a sitter: In retrospect that was the wrong thing to do as many did not come back."

Finding time to plan for the programme, both as a team as well as individual preparation

Seven out of 36 (19%) teacher-facilitators experienced difficulty in finding time to plan for the course. Clearly teachers already had an enormous workload, apart from the additional responsibilities involved in the HSPP. Facilitating the HSPP not only meant presenting sessions but also familiarising themselves with all the content and activities, and finding time to prepare together with their co-facilitators. While having a team (or team mate) was seen as an asset, the more facilitators involved, the harder it was to find a mutually convenient time to prepare.

"As a team we struggled to find the time between sport, meetings and school activities to sit together and plan."

"At times it seemed like a burden planning for Wordworks and the load of my classroom duties."

Not one facilitator mentioned being relieved of other duties because of their role in the HSPP. Perhaps this needs to be negotiated with the school principal and could be added to the list of success indicators? Other challenges facilitators experience, include:

Parent participation in sessions

Four out of 36 (11%) teacher-facilitators found soliciting parent participation a challenge.

"At first parents were so tense and afraid – they didn't know what they were going to do. We told them to relax and be free. They were very curious, they wanted to know, there were things they didn't know that they weren't doing it with their children."

"Parents were not too keen on answering questions."

(Using multi-purpose) Venues

Three out 36 (8%) teacher-facilitators complained of having to use a multi-purpose venue for their programme. This added to their workload, meant a less welcoming environment, less time to chat to parents or answer their questions and led to the loss or damage of resources.

"The venue was a shared facility so we had to set up before parents arrived and remove resources after parents left. Many of our resources were damaged."

"I tend to run around after, trying to clear (venue) up, so I don't really talk to them (have time for parents to ask more personal questions)."

Language barriers

Three out of 36 (8%) teacher-facilitators reported having to deal with language barriers. These included having a French member of the group, and having to translate activities into isiXhosa.

"We had to translate activities to our home language since they were written in English. We are teaching in isiXhosa."

Parents' own poor or lack of education

Three out of 36 (8%) teacher-facilitators mentioned parents own lack of education as a challenge.

"Parents feel ill equipped to assist their children & feel stupid when they don't have the answers."

"Biggest challenge we had that many parents did not finish school. One parent said: I can't read but I want to help my child."

While not reported as challenges per se, it is clear from an assessment of all sections of all the reports, that teacher-facilitators also faced the following internal or intra-personal challenges:

Lack of experience and knowledge of HSPP material

Looking inward, as primarily first time facilitators, many found that they were not yet sufficiently familiar or experienced with the material itself. This kind of familiarity clearly comes not just with training – but from working with the material in implementing the course. There is no short cut. In addition, some facilitators said they were not clear about the purpose of some the activities.

"Sometimes I struggle to understand it (purpose of different activities) during planning."

"I need more experience (to have a good understanding of the material)"



Lack of confidence as facilitator

Closely linked with confidence in their knowledge of the material was confidence in their role as facilitator. Lack of confidence and inexperience increases a novice's dependence on the material/manual. (See parent feedback on parrot style presentation and too much reading)

"Educating adults is by far different to that of educating children."

"(I had to learn to) treat them (parents) as a facilitator (would), not as a teacher (would)."

Anxiety and lack of confidence was a common theme in the self evaluation reports. Facilitators were often anxious they would forget aspects of the session or face questions they wouldn't be able to answer.

"I get nervous when I present so I forget to praise the parents."

"Because I'm nervous I rush through activities."

Particular aspects of facilitation noted as challenging include:

- Getting parents to participate, open up and share.
- Stopping talkative parents from dominating.
- Not talking too much or telling too many stories from own experience.
- Listening to parents (attentively and with understanding).
- Keeping focus on the topic at hand.
- Completing session within time frame.
- Recognising and dealing with own prejudices and stereotypes.

"Not talking too much/telling too many stories about own life. This was a challenge because parents struggle to share."

"(If parents go off track) I was struggling to control."

The self evaluation reports confirm that facilitators were pressed for time, and while they might have appreciated the benefits of journalling, for example, it was difficult to practise, and in some cases added to the stress of facilitating the HSPP.

2.2.2 Parents' voices on challenges faced

'What didn't you like about the course?' was one of the questions in the parent feedback form aimed at soliciting challenges parents' faced. Over 300 parents completed these forms. Of these, 29 said that there was absolutely nothing they didn't like.

So what didn't other parents like? What were the common complaints and what do they reveal about HSPP and challenges parents face?

Participation

The participatory methods employed by HSPP do not appeal to everyone and can be intimidating for some. 14 Parents reported finding it challenging to have to talk, role play, play games or draw etc in front of others. These parents found it difficult to participate in a group, to know what was expected of them and to feel like they belonged.

"Getting the hang of what is expected of me, of what I must do and remembering everyone's name (was a challenge)."

"Having to talk in front of others (was a challenge)."

It must also be noted here however, that 20 parents said that belonging to a group and having fun together was one of the things they enjoyed most about the programme.

Duration of sessions and of course

Thirteen parents complained that the course was too short and that sessions often felt rushed.

"We had to work fast because time was limited."

"Eight weeks went by too quick."

Homework

Eight parents said they did not like getting homework and/or complained that they did not have time to do their homework. As already noted, parents face many demands, at home, and/or at work, making it difficult to not only attend the course but also to implement what they have learnt and to complete their homework.

"Too little time at home to do the programme with your child – one doesn't always have the time if working."

Facilitation

Five parents complained that the facilitator talked too much, repeated things too often or read parrot style from their manuals.

“Too much talking about the same thing.”

Children

Those parents who commented on having children in the session were evenly divided among those who liked having them there, and those who found it disruptive. It was not possible to ascertain from the available data if this difference reflected a divide between those with access to safe, alternative child care and those without.

“I don’t like that my son could not come with me.”

“(I don’t like) the children accompanying parents and disrupting sessions.”

2.2.3 A summary of challenges

Securing parent attendance on the course and in each sessions was a primary challenge for teacher-facilitators and added considerable work to running the HSPP. Teacher-facilitators were hard pressed to find time for planning and preparation – and were not relieved of other extra mural responsibilities nor ‘given school time’ to prepare, both of which would have alleviated the time burden of HSPP facilitation.

Parents lack of availability, low levels of education, lack of understanding of when/how children learn, lack of awareness of their role as their children’s first teacher and commitment to helping their children learn pose considerable challenge and was a real limitation on the programme’s ability to extend its reach.

The community contexts in which many of the schools are located mitigate against higher levels of community (parental) participation because of high levels of crime, violence and poverty.



2.3 Question three: What changes did teacher-facilitators make to the programme in response to challenges faced?

A number of exciting innovations were introduced by teacher-facilitators in response to the challenges discussed above. Such innovations show initiative and a sense of ownership or agency.

2.3.1 Innovations introduced

Finding strategies for keeping parents interested

"Tips, words of inspiration, spot prizes and incentives."

"A sneak peak of the next week at the end of each session."

"We had a lending system where parents could choose a book to read to their children (so that they had to return the following week)

"Our workshops included free lunch."

"(We offered) incentives for parents who attended all sessions. Goody bags and back packs to show that the parents attended all the sessions."

"We offered a bus service for parents (to and from the course)."

Offering attendance as well as graduation certificates

"We gave attendance and graduation certificates."

"We changed the colour of the certificates so if they didn't attend five sessions, they got a different colour certificate to those who did."

Timing and time management – including combining sessions

"We have a back to back programme, afternoon for unemployed parents and then evening for employed parents."

"We put juice and biscuits on the table instead of stopping for a tea break because we felt rushed for time. Parents preferred it."

"We gave parents much longer for feedback time in session seven. Orientation and session one were done together."

Adding material / using different material

"[I added a] Why drawing is important mind map to session four."

"I had a video clip from TedTalks entitled 'Every kids needs a champion'."

Providing child care

"The solution was to get a teacher in to assist with the supervision of children during the session."

"Next year we are going to use extra teachers to assist with keeping the children busy."

Success stories

"We began each session by letting parents tell at least one success story from the week."

Changing home work to 'Quality Time Ideas'

"There is such a stigma connected to home work and quality time is what we are trying to help parents with."

Opening with prayer

"Parents and ourselves need guidance."

2.3.2 A summary of changes made

While a number of small innovations were introduced in response to challenges faced, no major changes were made to the programme. This could be because 32 of the 36 portfolios reviewed were compiled by first time facilitators who may only be emboldened to introduce changes once they have grown in confidence. Lack of changes to the programme may however also indicate that the resource file is complete in terms of content and method.

"Starting out I am just finding my feet and when I am more familiar with the programme I will be able to be more flexible."

"The guide is very user friendly so it is easy to understand."

3. Discussion, Learning and Recommendations

What does it take to motivate, equip and up-skill parents living in under resourced or previously disadvantaged communities to become effective partners in early literacy development?

What answers do the evaluation findings suggest? What does all the feedback tell us about the guiding question?

This section outlines five essential components of a home-school partnership programme, provides a list of success indicators drawn up as part of the review of findings, and outlines recommendations for the way forward.

3.1 Five essential components of a home-school partnership programme

A guiding theory of change.

4. Coherence between content and method.

5. Competent and compassionate teacher-facilitators.

6. Supportive environment: host-school and other supporters.

7. Willing parents.

3.1.1 A guiding theory of change

Any programme seeking to bring about change needs to have a solid understanding of what it is trying to achieve, why and how. A clear theory of change articulates the organisations values, principles and approach.

The change HSPP seeks to make, is rooted in the need for parents and teachers to become partners in children's education. While not articulated as such, this need is often identified by parents who ask for assistance in helping their child with his/her home-work, or by teachers who despair at a child's failure to thrive and his/her parent's apparent lack of interest. 'Help with home-work' is HSPP's entry point – a practical need identified within the community. To this the organisation added the more strategic needs of improved parenting skills and teacher-parent partnering in

early language and literacy development, needs which underpin and extends beyond helping with home-work.

The Wordworks 'way' does not aim to impose a set of ideals or an educational framework on communities, but rather seeks to inspire parents and caregivers to support children in fulfilling their true learning potential.

This way is based on a belief in the insight, knowledge and agency of ordinary people who, once motivated and equipped, can overcome internal obstacles (such as a lack of confidence and apathy) and contextual challenges (such as poverty) to act on issues they feel strongly about.

The HSPP is committed to building on what people already know and what they already do

to support language and literacy. The approach seeks to find a balance between surfacing, celebrating and respecting existing practices and sharing new information and ideas and improving or building new practices. The HSPP team aims at as much coherence between the type of change they want to see and the way they work with others towards achieving it.

3.1.2 Coherence between content and methods

How something is presented is as powerful as the something itself. The HSPP theory of change informs the way they work with teacher-facilitators during the intensive two day training session and all follow-up interventions. The sessions are facilitated in a way that demonstrates the values, approach and skills they want teachers to develop in their new role as facilitators.

Specific training methods used in the course:

- Scaffolding learning – working from the group’s understanding and experience.
- Integrating local knowledge and traditional games with learning.
- Presentation of new material by facilitators.
- Clarifying educational purpose of different activities.
- Consolidating and summing up after each activity.
- Practical activities where participants continuously do the activities discussed.
- Small and big group discussions.
- Question and answer sessions.
- Reporting and feedback on tasks, including those practised at home.

An important component of the teacher-facilitator training is the Guide for Facilitators, which sets out guidelines for supporting informal learning at home

and serves as a resource for teacher-facilitators to run courses for parents in their own school communities. The focus is early language and literacy, how young children learn and how they can be supported them at home, but there is also information on maths concepts, and fine and gross motor development.

The material is presented in easily accessible, straight forward language and animated by informative illustrations. Theory is offered in bite-sizes in the form of *Did you know?* boxes. Content is presented in an accessible way, always starting with what parents already know and building on that.

“The Guide is very user friendly so it is easy to understand.”

The Facilitator’s Guide consists of the course outline and detailed workshop plans for every session. The HSPP file contains handouts, charts and booklets to be used during the programme, as well as glossary and a bibliography. The Guide is available in English, while many of the handouts, charts and booklets have been translated into Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Not all handouts and activities have yet been translated – clearly a task that needs prioritisation.

As reported above, very few teacher-facilitators made changes to the programme: this may reflect their inexperience and lack of confidence (which increases dependence on material), or it may indicate that the resource file is comprehensive in terms of method and content.

3.1.3 Competent and compassionate teacher-facilitators

An enormous responsibility for success hangs on the teacher-facilitators. They need to have a

host of personal qualities, facilitation skills and knowledge of the field.

Facilitators need not only become familiar with the HSPP material and knowledgeable of the subject – they also need to up-skill themselves as facilitators, which for many is a whole new skill set and approach to education, as teaching adults is not the same as teaching children.

“Educating adults is by far different to that of educating children.”

Personal qualities and ‘soft skills’ such as commitment, hard work, resilience, compassion, bravery, risk taking, empathy, affirming, non-judgemental, and humour are essential for a facilitator. Facilitators require the capacity for personal change, the willingness and ability to absorb, process and adapt new ideas and information, and develop new areas of competence including both hard and soft skills. When working with adults, it is important to be willing and able to recognise and challenge one’s own assumptions and stereotypes about others and to have an openness to work with people different to oneself.



As the HSPP is not a “chalk and talk” programme where the facilitator is the expert. Instead, as the evaluation shows, it is vital for teacher-facilitators to be willing to drop the professional barriers (and hierarchy) and come alongside parents and caregivers. Teacher-facilitators need to be able to set aside their position of authority as a teacher, and put themselves on the same level as parents, showing a genuine interest in learning together. One practical and successful way of introducing this was to use first names in workshops – no Missus or Mister.

“Using first names helped us see each other as individuals who want to work together to help our children grow.”

The evaluation also shows that teacher-facilitators need to be responsive to their particular context, with the understanding, experience and compassion to plan and then adapt the course and its materials to best meet the group’s needs, abilities and constraints, and to cope with the unexpected.

3.1.4 Support mechanisms: school and other supporters

The school environment in which the HSPP is run is critical to its success. This includes a supportive principal who not only endorses the programme, but actively supports it by visiting sessions, promoting it at parent events and at teacher meetings, approving budget for refreshments and/or transport, acknowledging participating parents, monitoring children’s progress and so on.

“Support from the principal plays a big role. (He) always made an appearance at the programme, parents felt pleased that the principal made an effort to attend. Always mentioning our names in the staffroom, making sure there was something for parents to eat.”

Support from colleagues is also vital. This ranges from colleagues as co-facilitators, jointly responsible for the preparation and facilitation of sessions, to colleagues who step in as child-minders to help cope with unanticipated number of children who attended sessions with their parents, to colleagues who just show an interest and enthusiasm for the course and acknowledge its contribution to the children's progress and to the school community as a whole. Foundation phase teachers' assessments that showed children's progress in attitude, behaviour and academic codes, was also a huge validator.

The school is responsible for providing a venue, preferably safe and inviting. Having a dedicated venue is best as it means facilitators do not have the extra work of setting up and taking down resources at every session.

Tea, lunches, treats, prizes, and goody bags act as important incentives to keep parents interested in the course. The provision of transport sees to a practical need. Finance made available by the school makes these things possible.

Access to the internet, library and other educational resources for ideas, information and activities enhances facilitators' further development and enables them to add to their understanding of a concept or topic, adapt the course, and/or find additional materials.

Childcare provided by the school has been shown to be important to the success of the programme. Without other options available to them, many parents brought their children to sessions with them which caused disruption. While it is possible to involve children in some activities to demonstrate their fun and effectiveness (e.g.: story telling or games), it is preferable for

parents to be free to concentrate on the session. No facilitator reported being relieved of other extra mural duties, or given school time to prepare. However all facilitators referred to the time pressure and overwhelming demands they face as teachers. It would be a huge advantage for the programme if facilitators' contribution to the school was recognised and counted as an extra mural duty.

Ongoing support in the form of refresher days, mentoring visits, on-going communication and encouragement from Wordworks' staff has been important in keeping facilitators motivated despite the odds they face. The Wordworks team provides a safety net for wavering confidence and a source of information when facilitators are unsure of what to say or do.

Parents' participation and appreciation, as well as the thrill of witnessing children's improvement are also important contributors to success.

Support from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) is important for the status of the programme and thus for implementing teacher-facilitators.

3.1.5 Willing parents

HSPP, as the name suggests, is all about forging partnership between parents and teachers. Partnerships flourish best when all parties are willing participants. To engage the will of an individual, is to tap into their motivation, intention, and energy. Working with the will promotes agency.

3.2 Indicators of success

Looking at all the feedback and evaluation findings, the HSPP team distilled the following list of success indicators and categorised them according to stakeholders and beneficiaries – parents, teacher-facilitators and children.

Parents

- Increased parental/caregiver involvement in child's day-to-day life and in their learning.
- Self development including but not limited to increased confidence in role as a child's first teacher.
- Parents develop a better understanding of how children learn.
- Parents learn new educational skills (how to do or make something practical such as a book or puzzle).
- Improved parenting skills such as communication, patience, empathy, respecting children.
- Enhanced social cohesion within the parent body and school community.

Teacher-facilitators

- Increased understanding of language and early literacy and how to teach it.
- Improved relationship with parents.
- Self development and enhanced self confidence.
- Development of facilitation skills – both soft and hard.
- Recognition from and support of school principal and colleagues.
- Improvement in own parenting skills.
- Renewed passion and inspiration as an educator.

Children

- Positive changes in the child's behaviour, confidence and participation.
- Improvement in the child's language, drawing, reading, writing or number work.
- Improvement in children's relationships with parents and teacher.

3.3 Learnings and recommendations

- Careful planning of programme timing and of session times is needed to attract as many parents as possible and to secure their participation.
- Enthusiastic past-participants could be asked to join the recruitment drive for subsequent programmes. Past participants could address parents at, for example, a parent meeting near the beginning of the year. Personal feedback and encouragement may motivated their peers to attend.
- Principals and foundation phase teachers need to join the HSPP teacher facilitators in recruiting parents for the programme, introducing and endorsing the programme at open-days, orientation-days, parent-teacher meetings, AGMs and so on.
- Positive local exposure for the programme is vital to popularise and promote the programme. Reports with photos in local newspapers are very motivating for parents, teachers and schools, so facilitators should continue to be encouraged to arrange this.
- Child care can contribute significantly to the recruitment, participation and retention of

parents – and ultimately to the success of the programme. A teacher, or volunteer parent or senior school child must be available to look after children who accompany parents to the sessions.

- A suitable room must be available for child-care.
- Children may be invited into particular sessions to take part in activities such as story-telling and playing games. Their participation could enhance learning as the teacher-facilitator demonstrates the activity with a 'real' audience.
- Mentoring should be planned so that mentors have time to give substantial constructive feedback and encouragement to teacher-facilitators after each visit. Mentoring is both time and staff intensive, but crucial, even for experienced teacher-facilitators.
- Putting more resources into fewer, keen schools might be more effective than spreading resources with a 'light touch' across more schools. This approach could help to develop advocates for the programme in some areas.
- A streamlined version of the programme could be offered where appropriate. Designing and implementing a streamlined version would however be challenging as the programme has been extended from seven to eight sessions, the content is quite dense, and teacher-facilitators are not always able to cover it all in enough depth, or give enough time for parents to practise the new skills and approaches and discuss these within current time constraints.
- Ensuring that teacher-facilitators understand the 'why' of each new approach and technique, as well as the 'what' and 'how', during the facilitator training is essential. Teacher-facilitators seem to focus on the

latter – possibly because of time constraints, but possibly because they are not quite sure themselves. If they, and parents, don't understand why they are asked to change from old ways, they are unlikely to accept or implement the changes.

- Offer as much training in facilitation skills as possible. The content of the programme is strong, but is easily compromised by weak facilitation and understanding of adult learning principles. This could perhaps be a bigger focus in the refresher day sessions for teacher-facilitators.