

Exploring the impact of a story-based teacher training programme on language and early literacy in 4- and 5-year-olds

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Little Stars: A language and early literacy programme

This is the first in a series of five research briefs that explore the impact of Little Stars, a story-based teacher training programme on language and early literacy in 4- and 5-year-olds. This brief focuses on key elements of the programme, and on the design of a study to explore how effective it is.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers have a critical role to play in providing language- and print-rich learning experiences for young children. There is a need for evidence-based, contextually relevant teacher development programmes and resources that support quality language teaching.

The Little Stars programme was carefully designed to meet the specific needs, characteristics and circumstances of early childhood education in low-resource contexts in South Africa.

The programme:

- is designed for contexts where children may have had limited language learning opportunities and experiences with books in their early years.
- uses a wide variety of stories by different authors and illustrators to reflect a range of cultures and languages. The stories, published by Book Dash, African Storybook and Nal'ibali, are freely available through Creative Commons licences.
- supports teaching and learning in the mother tongue.
- encourages teachers to embrace the diversity of languages children bring to the class and supports learning in an additional language.
- recognises the importance of connecting home and pre-school environments.
- enables children and teachers to explore the purpose and meaning of print in their lives.

The programme aligns with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), with stories linked to each of the six Early Learning and Development Areas (ELDAs). It has a play-based approach to teaching and learning and follows a similar structure to the widely used Wordworks Grade R story-based home language teaching programme. It was designed around the following key principles of early learning:

- Children learn best when **new learning has meaning** and is connected to something familiar.
- Children learn by **being active, doing things** and **using all their senses**.
- Children make meaning through **stories** and **play**.
- **Nurturing** and **responsive relationships** and **quality adult-child interactions** are crucial for learning and language development.
- Children learn best when we **respond to what interests them** and they can **interact, share** their **ideas** and **ask and answer questions**.
- Learning takes place in an environment where everyone is **welcomed, included, respected** and **encouraged to participate**.
- **Structure, routine, practice** and **repetition** are important for young children's learning.
- Children develop at their **own pace** and may need **many attempts** to develop new skills or knowledge.
- To learn new vocabulary, children need to **hear and use words often**, in **different contexts** and connect them with **stories, pictures, actions** and **real experiences**.
- Children learn best when they are **having fun!**



Little Stars – key features

Oral storytelling provides a bridge to written language for children. Hearing a story and then seeing the same story in written form opens the door to the magic of the printed word – spoken words can be represented on a page!

Each two-week cycle begins with **telling a new story**, and then **retelling** the story, focusing on target vocabulary. Children then engage in **story-based activities**:

- A **song or rhyme** reinforces vocabulary from the story.
- **Role playing** the story gives children a chance to try out new vocabulary and phrases from the story. Children see the purpose of print by using reading and writing in their play.
- **Retelling** the story with sequence picture cards builds understanding of narrative structure (setting, characters, beginning, middle, end). It develops the skills of predicting and sequencing events.
- **Teacher reading a big book** teaches print concepts such as reading from left to right, and shows children how written words represent spoken language.
- **Children telling the story** using their own little books builds children's confidence and identity as a reader. Reading to others forges a connection between reading and enjoyment.
- Children can express themselves through **drawing their favourite part of the story** and see **adults writing down their words** about their drawings.
- Through **reading and writing for a purpose**, children see the value of print and develop the confidence to share an idea and see it written down by their teacher.
- **Creating 3D objects** related to the story develops children's fine motor and visual motor integration skills. It is also a necessary step towards drawing in 2D.
- **Listening and phonological awareness activities** builds the skills of listening and remembering. Children learn to pay attention to the first sound and syllables in words.



The Little Stars programme was designed to be feasible and easy to implement in low-resource contexts.

The training:

- is not intensive.
- involves a 2-day upfront training and monthly workshops for 6–8 months.
- includes one visit by a trainer for support.
- is in participants' home language.

The teaching programme:

- includes one daily teaching activity in a two-week cycle/routine.
- requires only 15–30 minutes per day.
- can be integrated into an existing daily teaching programme.
- is compatible with a variety of programme structures and curricula.
- provides teachers with guidelines and resources to enhance language and literacy learning.
- includes repetition of key activities, which builds familiarity and confidence in teachers and children.

The materials:

- are designed for accessibility and ease of use.
- include scripted teacher guides with steps for each activity.
- include home language teacher guides toggled with English.
- are Creative Commons licensed.
- are affordable.
- include innovative solutions to reduce printing costs (for example, photocopyable fold-up little books).



Research project

To explore the effectiveness of the programme, a study¹ was designed with the following research questions:

- Is the Little Stars classroom programme perceived as being useful and feasible for teachers with limited formal training to implement effectively in under-resourced contexts? (See [Brief 2](#).)
- What is the effect of a resource-based training programme on teachers' teaching practices and on interaction in the classroom? (See [Brief 3](#).)
- What is the effect of the story-based intervention programme on children's early literacy and language skills? (See [Brief 4](#) and [5](#).)

Participants

The baseline sample consisted of 56 teachers (29 isiXhosa, 27 Afrikaans) from ECD centres. Participants were recruited through local ECD forums and NGOs in Paarl, Wellington and Khayelitsha (Inceba Trust, Sikhula Sonke and Ikamva Labantu). These NGOs support and train principals and ECD teachers and conduct regular visits to ECD centres to provide them with support and monitor their progress. The final sample included 51 teachers (25 isiXhosa, 26 Afrikaans).

ECD centre fees: R120–R650/month (an average of R363 per month)

Average teaching experience: 7 years, with 20% of the sample in their first or second year of teaching

Teacher qualifications: 21% had no qualifications, matric, or Level 1; 73% had an NQF Level 4 or 5 qualification and 6% had an ECD diploma or NQF Level 6.

The baseline child sample consisted of 308 children randomly selected from ECD centres (154 Afrikaans and 154 isiXhosa). The final sample included 246 children (135 Afrikaans and 111 isiXhosa) with an average age of 55 months.

¹ Ethical approval for the research was obtained through the University of Stellenbosch [N21/05/047]

Research design

Teachers were randomly assigned to an intervention or the control group. The teachers in the intervention group attended a two-day initial training, followed by monthly workshops from February to August. Workshops were conducted in isiXhosa and Afrikaans, and Teacher's Guides were provided in the practitioners' home language, along with English. The workshops focused on a routine of activities (what to do), steps for each activity (how to do the activities), and why the activities are important.

The control group received the same training from August to December 2022.

Resources

The Little Stars programme includes 18 story packs, each with a daily activity for a two-week period. This provides a total of 36 weeks of teaching, with five activities per week.

Each Little Stars story pack includes:

- a Teacher's Guide with guidelines for daily activities in a two-week cycle.
- a Big Book, 2D puppets, sequence pictures and a photocopiable little book.

Teachers in both groups received a story pack at each training workshop.



Data collection

Classroom observations and assessments of children were done before and after implementation of the training for intervention group teachers, during February/March 2022 and August/September 2022.