

## The Foundations for Learning Campaign: helping hand or hurdle?

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*The education system in South Africa has failed to produce competent learners. The effect thereof is intensely felt by higher education institutions. Many of the country's first-year students cannot read, write and comprehend satisfactorily. Public outcry has forced the Department of Basic Education to go back to the drawing-board. One initiative taken by the Department was to launch the Foundations for Learning Campaign, a four-year national literacy and numeracy programme, in 2008. The Campaign entails amongst other things providing teachers with lesson plans and the resources needed for effective teaching and assessment. In view of the immense importance of this initiative for South African education, the aim of this research was to investigate teacher perceptions about the Campaign, and the provisional impact of the Campaign on the literacy levels of the Grade 3s of three urban schools, located in different socio-economic circumstances. A combined quantitative and qualitative approach was used, the former through an analysis of the results of the 2008 and 2009 literacy assessments, and the latter by the incorporation of observation and interviews at participant sites. The findings suggest that the Campaign is a necessary and welcome initiative but that attention should be paid to simplifying particular aspects of the Campaign. The impact of the Campaign, although slight, did indicate an improvement in literacy levels.*

**Keywords:** change management theory; Foundations for Learning Campaign, literacy, resources for effective teaching, teacher perceptions

### Introduction

The South African education system has failed to produce competent learners (Mail & Guardian, 2010). Learners are not able to read, write and count at expected levels, and they are unable to execute tasks that demonstrate key skills associated with literacy and numeracy (Department of Education, 2008). This incompetence was demonstrated in South African Grade 8 learners' performance in Mathematics and Science in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1995 — it was significantly lower than that of learners in all the other participating countries in the study. The study also highlighted the relation between the inability to read and write and poor performance in Mathematics and Science. Learners showed not only a lack of understanding of mathematical and science questions but also an inability to communicate their answers verbally and in writing (Howie, 2004:150). Thirteen years later, in 2008, it was reported in the Annual National Assessment of Grades 3 and 6 (Department of Education, 2009) that on average, out of 10 learners, eight are functioning at levels lower than 50%. These statistics formed part of the argument that led to the abolition of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in South Africa. It needs to be mentioned that, since its inception, the OBE system had been criticised by many as a system that did not

suit the South African context, but politicians steadfastly refused to heed the warnings. In this process education in South Africa has suffered from ideological and bureaucratic control (Mail & Guardian, 2010).

The effect of a failed system is now felt seriously by higher education institutions. Many of the country's first-year students cannot read, write and comprehend to a satisfactory extent. Public outcry has forced the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to go back to the drawing-board. Government's response to the 'quality problem' in education was to launch a number of ambitious intervention initiatives and assessment programmes (the Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (2008); the Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme (2005); Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) Project (1999); Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II) Project (2000-2002) and Annual National Assessments (ANA) (DoE, 2011). All of these interventions focused on what learners should be learning in order to improve achievement levels.

This article focuses on one particular initiative taken by the DBE, namely, the Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC) which was launched in 2008 to improve, over a four-year period, the literacy and numeracy performance of learners in South Africa. In view of the crucial importance of the FFLC for South African education, the aim of the research reported in this article was, firstly, to investigate teachers' first impressions of the campaign and, secondly, to determine the provisional impact of the campaign on the literacy levels of Grade 3s on the basis of data obtained from three urban schools, located in different socio-economic areas through questionnaires and focus group interviews. An analysis of the results of the 2008 and 2009 literacy ANA was made. It is argued that teachers' first impressions need to be noted in an effort to avoid the same mistakes made by the OBE implementers, and furthermore that the implementation of the FFLC, amidst an array of other interventions, could be a helping hand to some, but a hurdle or obstacle to others, because of a lack of training and resources.

### **The Foundations for Learning Campaign**

The FFLC was announced in the Government Gazette on 14 March 2008 (Republic of South Africa, 2008). It is a four-year campaign which sets out the goal that by 2011 all learners would be able to demonstrate age-appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy in all South African schools. The initial focus will be on primary schooling — starting with the Foundation and Intermediate Phases — with the intention of ensuring that ultimately learners and students will acquire and maintain a solid foundation for learning. All primary schools will be expected to increase average learner performance in literacy and numeracy to not less than 50%, indicating a foreseen improvement of between 15% and 20% in the four years of the campaign. The FFLC will culminate in a national evaluation at the end of 2011 to assess the literacy and numeracy levels of Grades 3 and 6 learners in South Africa in order to determine the overall impact of the campaign (Republic of South Africa, 2008).

### **Expectations of the FFLC**

The FFLC was launched in Cape Town on 18 March 2008. During her address, the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, spelled out the following non-negotiable issues and minimum expectations regarding the campaign (Pandor, 2008; Republic of South Africa, 2008):

- *Appropriate resources for effective teaching need to be provided.* A list of basic resources (for the teacher, each learner and the classroom) is contained in the Government Gazette and each school must ensure that every teacher has at least the basic minimum resources

in the classroom. These should include wall charts, number and phonic friezes, writing materials, suitable apparatus for teaching concepts, textbooks, reading series and workbooks.

- *Teachers should plan and teach effectively.* All teachers are expected to be in their classrooms, teaching planned lessons, during contact teaching time. Every learner in the primary school must read at school for 30 minutes per day and do at least one hour of extended writing per week. Daily teacher activities must be provided in detail in a teacher's file (Republic of South Africa, 2008).
- *District teacher forums should be established in all districts.* Teachers are expected to be members of the district forum, or of a school forum, so that ideas, experience and best practice is shared and teachers can enhance their teaching strategies.
- *Teachers should assess learner performance regularly.* All primary school learners will undergo Annual National Assessments (ANA) in literacy and numeracy. The ANA will present benchmark assessment at school level, thus providing baseline information to assist educators and districts in monitoring the pace of improving literacy levels. The ANA will consist of standardised tests which will be provided by the DBE on CD and/or hard copy to schools, whereupon schools have to print and photocopy these tests for the learners. A time-table must be drawn up by the school for administering of the tests in November of each year. The results of these assessments must be reported to the district office from where the results for each school will be sent, via the provincial office, to the office of the Minister (Tloubatla, 2008).

To assist teachers in managing the assessment tasks within a continuous assessment framework, the DBE has provided supposed 'milestones' for expected attainment in mathematics and languages per term per grade. Milestones are grouped into manageable units of work aligned to a required number of assessment tasks per term. Criteria are provided for the last assessment task in each term (Tloubatla, 2008).

Monitoring and teacher support will be conducted at district, departmental and provincial level. The DBE and the nine provinces will monitor the overall implementation of the campaign. District involvement is seen as critical to the success of the campaign. District officials must always be available to assist principals and teachers, visit all schools at least once per term, ensure that all schools procure and receive the necessary resources in time, assist all schools in improving their performance, and ensure that the framework for quarterly tests is provided to schools and that regular tests are conducted (Republic of South Africa, 2008).

### FFLC training provided by the DBE and the district offices

A strict management plan (training, communication and support) was set out by the DBE. From 10 October 2008 provincial memoranda invited teachers to attend meetings where the FFLC was unpacked and the ANA process for 2008 was explained to schools (Gauteng Provincial Government, 2008). Meetings of Heads of Department (HoDs) (Foundation Phase), HoDs (Languages) and HoDs (Mathematics), as well as the submission of management plans to district offices, were also managed in October 2008. In November 2008 suggested dates for writing tests, capturing of marks and the submission of mark sheets were put forward. In 2009 many meetings and workshops were held, including Foundations for Learning Numeracy workshops, Literacy cluster meetings and meetings to report on the provincial systemic evaluation of Grade 3 and 6 learners.

### Teacher support by the DBE

The FFLC Gazette, which contains the expectations in respect of basic resources, daily activities and assessment, was sent to schools. The FFLC Assessment Frameworks which spelled out the milestones that guided teachers to pace learning and teaching and monitor learner performance were provided to teachers. Quarterly assessment activities, to assist teachers in assessing learners and monitoring their progress on a quarterly basis, were included in the documentation teachers received. Lesson plans for each quarter provided teachers with guidance on how to approach literacy and numeracy teaching and learning. 'Read Right', a FFLC supplement, provided useful tips and support for teachers and parents.

### Challenges posed by the implementation of the FFLC

Accommodating the FFLC in the timetable of a school poses a huge challenge (Besseling, 2009: pers. comm.). School management needed to decide whether the school day should be longer, or whether time should be taken from other learning areas, or whether spontaneous reading should be incorporated in other learning areas. The integration of the FFLC milestones in weekly lesson plans and work schedules required teachers to rethink how the FFLC could be incorporated in the work schedules and lesson plans based on the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (SAOU Curriculum Services, 2008).

The implementation of the FFLC is arguably an extra burden on teachers who are already struggling to implement the work schedules based on the NCS. Some of the extra tasks teachers and especially the HoD of the Foundation Phase are required to do are: receiving and reading memoranda from the DoE or district offices; receiving, printing and distributing tests; determining the length of the tests according to the learners' ability; reading each question to learners during a test; marking all tests and recording these on a prescribed template before they are sent to the relevant district offices (SAOU Curriculum Services, 2008).

### Problems reported with the FFLC

It was reported to the parliamentary monitoring committee that the standardised literacy grammar and comprehension tests were not meeting their objectives since some of the subtest items appeared repetitive. Many schools, furthermore, did not take the FFLC seriously in terms of the way the tests were administered. Submissions were also made to the committee that many teachers were 'unprepared'/'underprepared' to implement the FFLC. The teachers referred to here are those who, historically, lack adequate professional training (Minutes Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009a). The lesson plans that were provided to teachers were intended to address the skills shortage amongst black teachers, but they did not appear to have the desired effect. The DBE has however found that a key determinant of good performance in the tests was teaching practice, and not always the lack of resources or training (Minutes Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009b).

Furthermore teachers felt that the FFLC increased their administrative duties at the expense of teaching time and that this initiative added unnecessarily to their workload. Poor support to teaching staff by district officers in implementing the lesson plans were also reported (Minutes Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009a). At grassroots level it was reported that schools did receive documents but did not open or read them or some documents came back marked 'Address unknown', indicating that the DBE's address database was inadequate (Minutes Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009b). The mere fact that documentation such as the tests was sent to schools electronically (because the DBE did not have the funds to perform

this task nationally or as a single hard copy) suggests problems, because many schools do not have electronic equipment and photocopy facilities to produce large numbers of tests. The DBE admitted that the teacher-learner ratio could also be a factor impeding on the successful implementation of the FFLC (Minutes Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009b).

Problems such as the above led to poor performance of learners in the 2008 ANA, which was regarded as a baseline assessment for the FFLC. This poor performance was labelled by parents and educationists as ‘a scandal’ (Mail & Guardian, 2009).

It is against this background that empirical research was undertaken to investigate teachers’ impressions of the FFLC, and to gain much-needed information about its provisional impact. In view of the crucial national importance of this initiative, *we regarded the identification of problem areas at the earliest possible stages as a high research priority.*

Before elucidating the empirical section of the research in detail, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the theoretical foundation on which the research was based.

### Theoretical foundation

In considering the need for the FFLC and the implementation thereof, I opted for change management theory as an appropriate framework for facilitating interpretation and understanding of the driving forces and key factors in this campaign. This choice was motivated by the consideration that education policy-makers and planners primarily deal with change (inspired by factual, perceived, or ideological areas for improvement) in the course of their work. In the case of the FFLC, the need for change, i.e. the area for improvement, was factual and non-deniable due to the resounding and hugely disturbing empirical evidence regarding the lack of literacy and numeracy proficiency of South Africa’s basic education learners. In the rest of this section some established key elements of change management are discussed first, and then they are linked to the FFLC with a view to theoretically interpreting the status and future of this campaign.

In considering the essence of change and its effects, an appropriate point of departure is the realisation that change is first and foremost an emotional issue (Harris, 2004:392; Malandro, 2009:222-223; Manns & Rising, 2005:54-55). Change can hurt (Hargreaves, 2004:288; Marris, 1993:220) because it involves leaving a zone of security in terms of proven best practice, and valuable experience. A study of change (also educational change) is thus a study of feelings that accompany such change. These feelings range on a continuum from positive emotions (e.g. excitement) on the one end, to negative emotions (e.g. fear) on the other. Central in the realm of a teacher’s positive emotions about educational change is the notion of trust (Harris, 2004:401; Bishop & Mulford, 1999:184), i.e. trust in oneself, the learners, the colleagues, the principal, the curriculum, the school, the parent community and the education system. In a dysfunctional school all of the above-mentioned avenues of trust are endangered or non-existent. Negative emotions regarding change manifest most often in fear, i.e. of having to leave a comfort zone of experience, or losing valuable time in a perceived over-burdened work schedule.

In accordance with the above-mentioned importance of trust, the emotion of fear could be equated with mistrust of whatever kind. Simply put, the change implementation process should thus follow a course of transforming mistrust into trust. This involves a process of ‘emotion management’. Harris (2004:402-403) identifies three stages in this regard:

- *Emotional fitness:* An initial mindset of fear, mistrust, disgust and blame about the intended change is openly expressed, and dealt with in workshops or forums in which

views, observations and perceptions are discussed and critiqued up to a level where colleagues have trust in one another's honesty of opinions.

- *Emotional literacy*: The implications of the intended change are objectively reflected on. The level of trust has now advanced to the belief that the intended change makes sense to whatever degree, that it can be effected, and that it will benefit the learners.
- *Emotional alchemy*: Positive feelings of mutual involvement lead to creative measures for improvement.

These stages are recognisable in corresponding suggestions and recommendations regarding steps in the change process, such as in a strategy towards "alignment" (Malandro, 2009:236) or the application of a "commitment curve" (Ward, 1995:211), and they apply to both types of educational change with which schools normally deal, i.e. mandated change and self-initiated change. Evidently, the golden thread that runs through the stages is the restoration of trust, the key factor in positive educational change (Harris, 2004:401; Hargreaves, 2004:301).

Most new measures for educational change are mandatory, and therefore the education authorities have the main responsibility of putting structures in place to ensure the feasibility of effective change, i.e. in ensuring trust. Education authorities commonly and generally jeopardise the latter through a) series of often conflicting changes, b) non-involvement of key stakeholders, c) paternalistic attitudes, d) poor resource planning, e) poor field testing, f) over-reliance on initial training, neglecting continuing support, g) political motives which override educational common sense, h) over-regulation of assessment practices, i) disregard for teacher emotions and feelings, with sole emphasis on educational engineering, and j) disregard of research results on similar, earlier measures in other countries (*cf.* Hargreaves, 2004:288-289, 292; Bishop & Mulford, 1999:185). Hargreaves (2004:294) observes with good reason: "Educational change for today's teacher, it seems, is largely conceived of as external change that is unwanted, imposed, repetitious and sometimes repellent, compared with more professionally positive, self-directed change realities in the past."

What then, comes to the fore when the above exposition on educational change is linked to the FFLC? Arguing from the pivotal role of trust, a close look at the FFLC as conceptualised in the relevant Government Gazette (Republic of South Africa, 2008) reveals some disconcerting features. First of all, the tone of the document conveys a strong sense of an almost military approach, setting out the parameters and targets for an offensive, in which every stakeholder will toe the line up until the target of 2011. For example:

The campaign will provide teachers and schools with clear directives on the Department of Basic Education's expectations of schools and teachers to achieve the expected levels of performance. All primary schools will be expected to increase average learning performance in Literacy/Language and Numeracy/Mathematics to no less than 50% (Republic of South Africa, 2008:4).

This tone of voice gives no indication of professional trust, i.e. in regarding teachers and schools as trusted partners in the enterprise. Again in military style, the door is firmly closed on transparency regarding interim achievements in the course of the campaign by dictating: "For the duration of the campaign South Africa will not participate in any regional or international studies assessing learner competency levels in Literacy and Numeracy in the General Education and Training Band (GET)" (Republic of South Africa, 2008:4-5).

In terms of standards and quality assurance, the FFLC is not convincing — there can be hardly any possibility of professional and societal trust in a campaign that is geared to achieving an average mark of only 50%, and with assessment scales that are simply too broad

to make any meaningful deductions (Level 1 = 0% – 34%; Level 2 = 35% – 49%; Level 3 = 50% – 69%; Level 4 = 70% – 100%). Apart from the standards issue, the implementation time frame is without doubt a major factor in mistrust about the FFLC. Although information is provided regarding the learning content, schedules and the needed resources, there is no way in which any of these could have been field tested in view of the tight time frame for implementation. Furthermore, it could not have been possible to ensure that the multitude of resources (for the classrooms, teachers and learners) could indeed have reached all the schools, and if they could, whether they were being used correctly and optimally. Evidently, the most disconcerting aspect of the tight time frame is that it effectively cancelled any possibility for ‘emotion management’ in creating a positive and constructive realm for change.

As overall comment: The most disconcerting aspect of the FFLC is that it is rich in control measures, but poor in conveying strategic measures for ensuring the success of the campaign. Indeed, it seems that from its inception, the FFLC has fallen prey to some of the pitfalls (alluded to earlier) that education authorities should avoid (e.g. non-involvement of key stakeholders, paternalistic attitude, poor field testing, and disregard for teacher emotions and feelings).

According to this brief desktop analysis and interpretation it seems the conceptualisation of the FFLC is lacking in inspiring the much-needed trust as key element in effective education change. This finding begged the questions: What do interim results show about the success of the FFLC? How do practising Foundation Phase teachers experience its implementation? I subsequently undertook some fieldwork in an attempt to find answers. I regarded these answers as crucial in view of the previously mentioned literacy and numeracy crisis in South African education.

## Research design

A combined quantitative (De Vos; Strydom; Fouché & Delport 2005:132) and qualitative (De Vos *et al.*, 2005:268) descriptive approach was used, involving an analysis of the results of the first (2008) and second (2009) Grade 3 literacy ANAs, backed by questionnaires, interviews and observation at participant sites. The research design and methodology intended to make the research replicable.

## Data collection and sample

Information was gathered by analysis of the results of the 2008 and 2009 ANA for Grade 3 — literacy skills (Department of Education 2009), at a national, provincial and school level. For the purpose of identifying possible logistical problem areas and in the interest of keeping the data analysis strictly focused, it was decided to pay attention to only the literacy skills of Grade 3 learners.

Two Gauteng urban schools from varying socio-economic circumstances were purposively selected in an effort to obtain a more in-depth assessment of the campaign as ‘helping hand or hurdle’ (Wiesma & Jurs, 2005:295). School A is an ex-Model C school and School B is a so-called township school of good repute for its academic achievement. Nineteen teachers of School A and six teachers of School B participated in filling in a questionnaire (with partly open-ended questions), and as a follow-up, semi-structured questions during focus group interviews were put to the grade heads of Grades 1, 2 and 3, as well as the HoD of the Foundation Phase of Schools A and B. For verification purposes, a focus group interview was held with three Foundation Phase teachers in a second township school (School C) — a typical,

overcrowded primary school with only a moderate achievement rate. It was assumed that the biggest FFLC hurdles would be in high poverty, resource-challenged schools. Observation of the school settings and proceedings contributed to the triangulation (Fraenkel & Wallen 2010: 559) of results.

## Findings

In order to set the scene for the interpretation of the findings, the 2008 ANA base-line data for literacy, together with the corresponding 2009 ANA results for schools A, B and C, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Grade 3 Literacy ANA results (2008 & 2009)

| Level                | Literacy skills Grade 3 |           |           |           |                        |                        |                        |                        |                        |                        |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|                      | National %              |           | Gauteng % |           | School A %             |                        | School B %             |                        | School C %             |                        |
|                      | 2008                    | 2009      | 2008      | 2009      | 2008<br><i>n</i> = 148 | 2009<br><i>n</i> = 187 | 2008<br><i>n</i> = 283 | 2009<br><i>n</i> = 298 | 2008<br><i>n</i> = 320 | 2009<br><i>n</i> = 354 |
| 1<br>(0 – 34%)       | 27                      | 26        | 32        | 33        | 3                      | 3                      | 39                     | 37                     | 56                     | 45                     |
| 2<br>(35 – 49%)      | 20                      | 18        | 22        | 20        | 7                      | 5                      | 32                     | 30                     | 28                     | 28                     |
| 3<br>(50 – 69%)      | 29                      | 28        | 28        | 30        | 31                     | 29                     | 22                     | 20                     | 13                     | 24                     |
| 4<br>(70 – 100%)     | 22                      | 27        | 18        | 17        | 59                     | 63                     | 7                      | 13                     | 3                      | 3                      |
| Pass rate<br>(3 + 4) | <b>51</b>               | <b>55</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>37</b> | <b>90</b>              | <b>92</b>              | <b>29</b>              | <b>33</b>              | <b>16</b>              | <b>27</b>              |

Noticeably, the 2008 and 2009 results show a correspondence in generally poor results between the national and the Gauteng data — with good reason referred to as “scandalous” in the press, as already indicated.

After one year of exposure to the FFLC, schools A, B and C showed improvement in literacy competency. School A (a resource-rich, ex-Model C school) however is performing exceptionally well compared to the other data sets in the table. These data suggest two concerns. Firstly, it appears that the dichotomy of achievement in rich as opposed to poor schools will be continued in the FFLC. Secondly, the huge disparity between the School A data and the data of Schools B and C raises questions about the general FFLC standards, much the same as in the case of the standard of the matriculation examination.

## Findings from the questionnaires

The teaching experience of the teachers who participated ranges between one and 28 years at School A and between two and nine years at School B. Most of the teachers at School A and School B said that they had been informed about the FFLC by district memoranda and that very few of them attended training sessions on the implementation of the FFLC. The HoDs of the Foundation Phase of both schools did attend a workshop on implementation issues and they

were expected to train the staff members at their schools.

The majority of teachers said that, initially, they were not excited about the new programme. Amongst the main reasons why teachers at School A were not excited were (answers reported verbatim): “*More paper work in our already full programme in the 4th semester*” and “[*O*ur school is on standard.” At School B teachers mentioned that they were always having to implement new programmes and just when they were beginning to master a new programme they needed to change again. Some teachers were, however, more enthusiastic about the new programme because they had been provided with thorough guidelines and valuable resources for the implementation of the FFLC, and they believed that the literacy and numeracy standard in schools would improve.

The majority of teachers reported that they had the necessary resources at their disposal to implement the FFLC and that they had integrated the ‘milestones’ with the already set outcomes of the NCS in their classroom lessons. Nearly half of the respondents found it a tedious task to record individual learner performance and to keep class records. Teachers themselves need to administer the tests in their classrooms and their responses varied from being negative to positive. The negative responses included the following: “*Very time-consuming because the questions must be read to the learners*”; “*It takes a lot of classroom time and children don’t understand the questions, it is formulated different*”; “*It is so challenging to the learners, but those who are slowly, it is a problem to them.*” Amongst the positive responses were the following: “*Good, I like to see what is externally expected of my class ...*”; “*It is good because we get to see where learners lack or need assistance.*” Only one teacher at School A belonged to a curriculum cluster. School A rated the support of the cluster from average to good whereas School B rated the support as “*... no support at all ...*” and “*... the problem is they expect people to implement without taking them to workshop.*”

The overall impression teachers had of the FFLC differed from School A to School B. School A mainly reported that it was “[*g*ood to see if learners are on standard”, and “*A good thing. It is important to lift every one to world standards and to keep them there.*” Some teachers at School A, however, felt that “[*i*t is not a true reflection of the child’s knowledge”, implying that the standard of the tests was too low. Another teacher also pointed to a very important aspect about standards when she asked, “*If all teachers administer the tests in the same manner and also being honest about the results, can it be of value to set standards?*” The opinions of School B’s teachers ranged from “*It is not difficult because it has clear guidelines and lesson plan CD, and it makes learning and teaching so effective*” to “*Is good. Teachers but need more workshop on it*” to “*Some of the things are so challenging, others not difficult because it has a clear guidelines.*”

From a managerial point of view teachers at School A reported that there was “*lots of duplication — lots of paper!*” and “*Grade 3s take a long time to insert marks into the programme.*” Teachers at School B reported, “*There is resistance for new things*” and said that “*completing activities in the right time frame*” was a problem.

### Findings from the focus group interviews

The data collected were consolidated into three broad categories, namely ‘Strengths of the FFLC’, ‘Weaknesses of the FFLC’, and ‘Challenges of the FFLC’.

School A reported the following regarding the *strengths* of the FFLC: the uniform standard across the country, the knowledge that learners were up to standard in School A, the clear indication of guidelines and the use thereof and that the formulation of the test items had

been improved from 2008 to 2009. School B felt that the FFLC material was very user-friendly with clear implementation guidelines which were very helpful in scheduling teaching and doing assessment. Initial training and orientation had been provided. The level of performance was realistic but slow learners struggled. Teachers were generally positive, after initial apprehension (resistance to change). Resources had been provided by the DBE, but the school experienced problems with photocopying. Learners were positive and teachers reported that literacy levels had already increased as learners had to do one hour of reading on Fridays. The views expressed at School B were largely echoed in School C. In the latter school the main strength of the FFLC was that it involved going “back to basics”. They said, “*We feel we are getting somewhere.*”

The *weaknesses* of the programme, according to teachers at School A, were that teachers questioned the acceptability of the standard of the programme. They mentioned that some of the test items had been worded incorrectly and that, according to them, the work was overall “*too easy*”. The marks allocated to test items were sometimes too much. They also said that the way in which the Grade 3 results had to be captured was very complex. They furthermore mentioned that an enormous amount of paper was used to duplicate the tests. They also experienced a problem with the short notice that was given to prepare and administer the annual national tests. Little or no co-operation was experienced in the clusters.

The teachers at School B also complained about the amount of photocopying and the shortage of paper. Test items of Grades 1 and 2 were read to the learners but Grade 3 learners were expected to read their tests themselves. Since there was not enough paper the tests were written on the blackboard. This took a lot of time. Huge classes (1:59) in School B contributed to many problems with the implementation of the FFLC. All the learners did not get enough time to engage optimally, according to the programme, in reading. The teachers also mentioned that they experienced no cooperation with other schools. The managerial task to oversee the implementation of the FFLC was also reported to have a huge influence on the classroom tasks of the HoD. These views were echoed in School C, with the additional concerns expressed being that their resource pack did not include guidelines for the second term, and these were never received. The teachers were also not sure that they were on the right track, because no follow-up, in-class guidance had ever been provided. It was emphasised that, compared to affluent, well-resourced schools, there really was “*no balance*” — the learners were from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds, without any prior experience of preparation for schooling. In most cases they did not even know how to hold a pencil or a crayon.

With regard to the *challenges* of the FFLC, the teachers of School A felt that, based on the results of the tests, their school was on standard but they were also concerned that the standard may be too low. In contrast, the concern of School B was whether they were “*doing it right*”. School C emphasised the dire need for consultation. They felt that teachers must be brought together in conferences and workshops, so that problems and ideas can be shared. Officials must “*get a clue what is happening*”. In their view, working together with other schools will ensure consistency in tuition. They also emphasised that teachers must be involved in planning new initiatives like the FFLC, and there must be sufficient time for pilot testing. And importantly, standards must be more vigorously applied — there must be a distinct “*pass or fail*”.

### Interpretation of the findings

Overall, the schools felt that the FFLC is a good initiative with good intentions to lift the

standard of numeracy and literacy in the country in an effort for South Africa to be compared favourably to international standards. The teachers were also more appreciatively impressed with the initial resources provided to them. In their view, teachers' guides are user-friendly, planned in detail, and teachers can take the 'milestones' as they are printed in the teachers' guide and incorporate them in their normal planning. This cultivated a sense of trust (Harris, 2004:401; Hargreaves, 2004:301) in the campaign, which made the participants willing to engage in and with the programme.

It is, however, in the next step, the practical implementation of the FFLC, that certain factors came to the fore that distinguished the implementation of the programme at School A from Schools B and C. School A, a well-resourced school with relatively small classes and trained and experienced teachers, was in the fortunate situation to have successfully implemented the programme and, after the results of the ANA were known, were in a position to challenge the standard of the ANA. Schools B and C, which were under-resourced, with large classes and less experienced teachers, seemed to have many learners that were struggling, as is evident from the results of the 2009 ANA (see Table 1): School A had a 92% pass rate, whereas Schools B and C had pass rates of 33% and 27%, respectively, although the schools received the same initial, user-friendly resources.

## **Conclusion**

The above findings revealed that the teachers regarded the FFLC as a necessary and welcome initiative to establish uniform literacy and numeracy standards in South Africa. There were, however, factors which undermined the much-needed trust imbedded in change management (Harris, 2004:401; Bishop & Mulford, 1999:184). Although the FFLC did not have a great impact, it did bring about some improvement in literacy levels. However, for well-resourced schools the FFLC may at some stages seem to be a hurdle because according to them they are doing all that is expected of them in the programme in any case. It is time-consuming to implement the 'milestones' and to record the results. To under-resourced schools the FFLC may definitely be a helping hand, helping them to lift the standard of literacy and numeracy in their schools and ultimately in the country, provided that these schools receive all the programme materials on time, and that the teachers are guided to use these with confidence.

The critical factor in the success of the FFLC is thus to create the necessary balance in ensuring that challenged, very poor schools benefit substantially from the campaign. Attention could also be paid to simplifying particular aspects of the campaign, e.g. in the capturing of data. It thus is necessary that the education authorities conduct an in-depth needs analysis in high-poverty primary schools, and devise a formidable action plan in providing what is critically needed to make the FFLC work, such as photo-copying facilities and professional in-class guidance. This should have been done before the implementation of the FFLC. This matter is one of extreme national urgency, and if tackled with vigour, can still have a positive effect. It is clear from the findings that the campaign is inherently accepted by the teachers — they just want to be fully involved and equipped to make it work. If this does not happen, the FFLC runs the very real risk of becoming yet another ideological, bureaucratic case of failed change management.

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