

Exploring how school leaders promote literacy improvements

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The performance of South African learners in reading comprehension is extremely poor. The Progress in International Literacy and Reading Study (2016)

The Leadership for Literacy study highlights the need to refocus the role of school leaders and managers on enhancing the knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers through effective human resource management and support.

highlighted that by the end of grade 4, 78% of learners cannot read for meaning. In this context, what can administrations, school leaders and managers do to promote improvements in literacy?

This policy brief², presents findings from a two-year mixed methods project that aimed to identify leadership and management practices that may be linked to higher literacy outcomes in township and rural schools. The Leadership for Literacy study³ highlights the need to refocus the role of school leaders and managers on enhancing the knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers through effective human resource management and support.



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³ The methodology and research findings are detailed in: Taylor N., Wills G., Hoadley U. (2018) A mixed methods approach to investigating school leadership and management in challenging contexts: Insights and lessons learnt from South Africa. Unpublished.

1. Method

Our study was based on a literature review⁴ identifying four kinds of resources available to school leaders in promoting reading and literacy; namely knowledge resources, human resources, strategic resources and material resources as described in Table 1. Our objective was to measure to what extent these resources are present in schools and how they are utilised by school leaders. We then wanted to see if these measured differences could predict higher or lower literacy results.

TABLE 1: Leadership for literacy framework - Four resources available to school leaders in promoting literacy

Leadership for Literacy framework:			
KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMTs knowledge of reading • School-wide emphasis on reading • Shared understanding of what reading instruction entails 	STRATEGIC RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading programmes: Existence, implementation, duration • Reading assessment: Use of data and monitoring
HUMAN RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist reading role • Placement / distribution of teachers • Recruitment / termination of staff • Use of reading expertise amongst staff • Opportunities for collaboration around reading instruction • Professional development including out-of-field teaching • Remedial assistance 	MATERIAL RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Texts: quantity, quality, use • Use of budget for a text rich school • Library: Existence, stock, use • Time for reading

Our research study took place in 60 schools, which consisted of 30 matched pairs of primary schools serving children from poor homes in three provinces (KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and Gauteng).

In this brief, we report findings from both the larger 60 school study and in-depth case studies conducted in a sub-set of four pairs of schools (i.e. 8 schools). The case studies are important for understanding leadership practices in more detail. Each school pair was matched closely on socio-economic, provincial and locational features, except that one outperforms the other in literacy.

The next part of this brief reports the four main findings from this study.

2. Better practices overall are not consistently present in better performing schools

Where better practices exist, these activities are inconsistent and not linked to an overall strategy for teaching reading.

Despite a rigorous search for higher quality township and rural schools, we could not detect schools in our study sample with consistently better 'Leadership for Literacy' practices.⁵ Generally weak leadership practices predominate in all four resource categories across all case study schools. Where better practices exist, these activities are inconsistent and not linked to an overall strategy for teaching reading. As a result, within each pair, the two schools are not strongly distinguished from each other. The

quantitative analysis across all 60 schools mirrored this result, with the presence of better practices roughly equally distributed across the highest and lowest performing schools in literacy.

⁴ Hoadley, U. (2017) Leading for literacy: A review of the research. Unpublished.

⁵ Wills, G., 2017. What do you mean by 'good'? The search for exceptional primary schools in South Africa's no-fee school system (No. WP16/2017), Stellenbosch Economics Working Paper Series.

Box 1: How we measured the presence and use of 4 'Leadership for Literacy' resources in schools

We created a rubric to describe what characterises lower and higher presence or utilisation of the 4 resources available to school leaders in promoting literacy. Descriptions range from low (1) to high (5) and are written for 114 different measurement areas linked to the 4 resource categories. Close-ended questions were developed to identify whether what happens in a school fits with lower or higher scored descriptions. The questions were asked of educators, principals, deputy principals and HoDs or required a fieldworker to observe different aspects of a school environment.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of rubric measurement areas that were scored 1 (low), 2, 3, 4 and 5 (high) for the 5 best and 5 worst performing schools, ranked by the performance of the middle learner in the grade 6 English literacy test. The best performing schools are as likely to have a larger percentage of high scores as the worst performing schools.

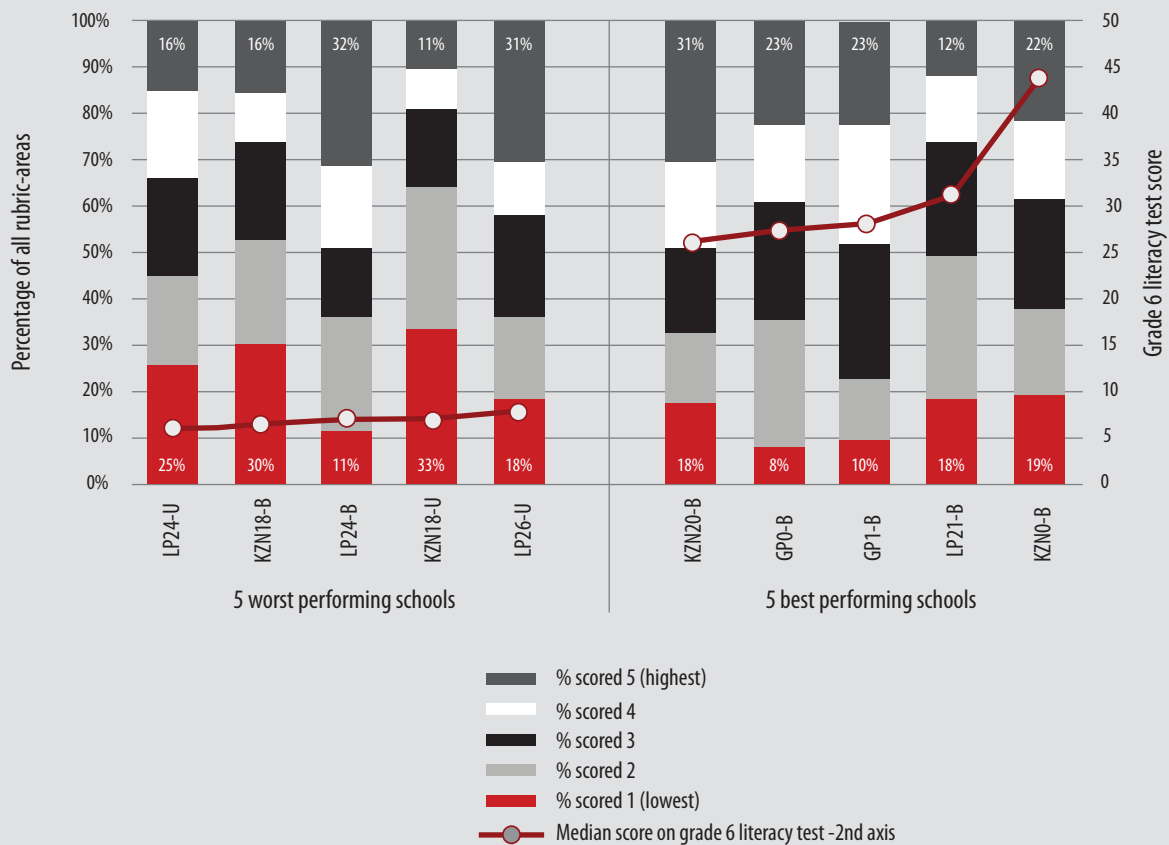


FIGURE 1: Leadership for literacy scores across 114 rubric measurement areas for the 5 best and 5 worst performing schools in our study

Source: Leadership for literacy dataset, 2017. Notes: Percentages add up to 100 in this stacked bar graph. Although 60 schools are considered in the study, these results are only shown for the 5 best and 5 worst performing schools, ranked by the median performance of grade 6 learners in a reading comprehension and vocabulary test.

3. If better literacy results are identified this is usually due to better teachers rather than exceptional leadership or management practices

Where better test scores exist these are usually not the result of leadership activities, but that one teacher is a better teacher of reading or literacy than his/her peers. Too often, this capacity, which exists among individual teachers in many schools, is not utilised for the greater good by school leaders. Where there is no coherent effort directed from school leadership in improving reading instruction across the school, learner scores in any particular class depend largely on the skills and efforts of individual teachers.

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Incoherence is accompanied by inconsistency in how school leadership and management practices are applied by school management team (SMT) members. For example, teachers in the same school experience differences in how regularly their departmental head (i.e. HoD) checks how much of the curriculum they have taught.

4. The importance of knowledge resources

The four kinds of resources identified in the literature review are not of the same order of importance; they occur in a hierarchical relationship to one another as illustrated in Figure 2. Both theory and the case studies highlight the foundational importance of 'Knowledge Resources' on the part of school leaders, that is the extent to which they understand the processes by which children learn to read and how it is best taught.⁶ Without this understanding most leadership activities reduce to compliance: leaders try to follow policy but without a real understanding of the problem (or how to fix it) compliance with a set of rules or expected actions is powerless to produce the intended result, namely literacy improvements.

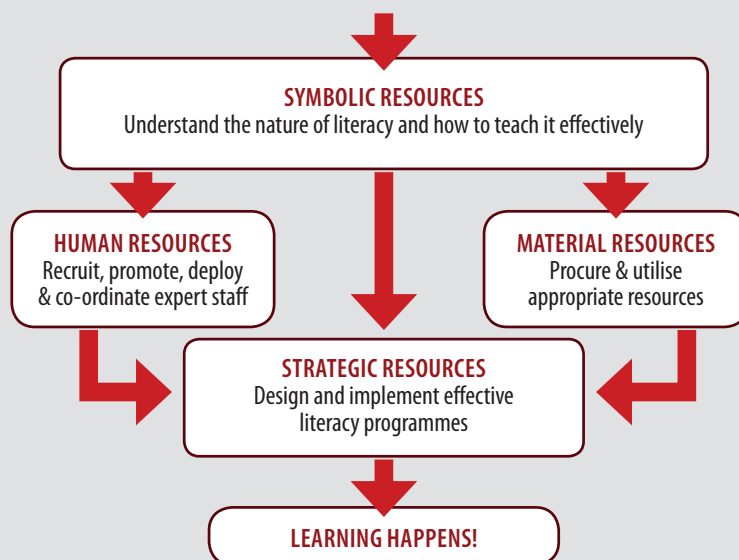


FIGURE 2: Leadership and management practices that promote literacy learning depend on 'Knowledge Resources'

⁶ The quantitative analyses were not able to find strong linkages between knowledge resources and literacy outcomes due to difficulties in quantitatively measuring the presence of content and pedagogical knowledge in schools. For another discussion of this problem see Shepherd, D., 2015. Learn to teach, teach to learn: A within-pupil across subject approach to estimating the impact of teacher subject knowledge on South African grade 6 performance. Stellebosch Working Paper Series

5. More effective human resource practices are linked with English literacy improvements

Analyses across the 60 schools indicate that schools with better human resource practices experienced somewhat higher gains in English literacy test scores and there was evidence of more curriculum coverage in these schools (reflected in the amount of work done in learners' language workbooks or exercise books). Human resourcing factors that were positively associated with literacy improvements included effective teacher selection practices by School Governing Bodies (SGBs), hiring teachers with specialisms in language and teaching reading, teacher professional development, acknowledging teacher excellence through systems of rewards and ensuring that there are enough managers (SMT members) in the school to maintain systems of management. The value of effective human resource management practices which substantively raise knowledge resources is closely linked with theory and the case study findings.

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6. Implications

In response to these study findings, the following set of recommendations are aimed at equipping school leaders to promote the teaching of reading in their schools:

- *Select school leaders on basis of expertise.* Only when leaders are more knowledgeable than their teachers will they generate the professional respect essential for teamwork and be able to systematically support learning.
- *Ensure that schools are sufficiently resourced with school management team (SMT) members.* School leaders cannot be expected to champion learning improvements if schools do not receive their post-provisioning entitlements of middle-managers, deputy principals or support staff. The decline in the presence of SMT members in some provinces is highlighted in another policy brief in this 'Leadership for Literacy' series.⁷
- *Remove all constraints to the selection and promotion of educators according to expertise, motivation, and ethical behaviour.* This will send a strong systemic message that knowledge and skill are important in the promotion of educators, rather than considerations of seniority, nepotism and corruption. In addition, it is likely to incentivise ambitious educators to develop their own knowledge and skills.
- *Build the capacity of school leaders and teachers to understand how reading is best taught.* There is a specific technology required to teach reading well, and the knowledge and skills involved in this pedagogy need to be infused throughout the school system.



⁷ Wills, G. (2018) Structural inequalities in school leadership and management across South African schools. ReSEP Policy Brief. Leadership for Literacy series. Stellenbosch University.