

Departmental Heads as Coaches

Results of the [evaluation of the Early Grade Reading Programme \(EGRP\)](#) were released by the Department of Basic Education early in July 2024. The current iteration is the latest in the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) which is a set of rigorous large-scale studies commissioned by the DBE concerning interventions designed to strengthen foundational literacy outcomes at scale within the public schooling system.

The evaluation findings were a resounding affirmation that, while the model of using Foundation Phase Departmental Heads (FP DHs) as teacher coaches has a lot of potential, there are several limitations that hinder success. Similarly, the evaluation reported that subject advisors (SAs) are not able to conduct instructional coaching effectively due to similar constraints facing DHs.

The DBE's Dr Nyathi-Mohohlwane noted that lessons from the EGRP are about using evidence to continuously adapt and redesign initiatives to make ongoing improvements. As we evaluate, we learn what works and doesn't and what factors impede or support success. The findings provoke important debates on how best to support teaching in schools at scale.

Evaluations conducted previously by Zenex and other organisations point to the centrality of coaching to mediate learning, encourage behaviour change, reinforce good practice and support ongoing professional development of the teacher. Results from the EGRP evaluation confirm and build on this body of evidence that Zenex has gathered over several years through projects such as [ZenLit](#) (implemented during 2015-2017 with a focus on DHs, with the coaching model extended to 2018) and a Grade R Project implemented in the Western Cape (2016-2019) and Gauteng (2020-2024) with a focus on SAs, as well as from national and provincial studies conducted with partners such as EGRS, GPLMS, NECT and PILO.

In both projects, as in the EGRP evaluation findings, the issue of time constraints routinely presents barriers to effective coaching. DHs have full teaching and administrative loads which preclude them from observing and supporting teachers in the classroom. Furthermore, a key aspect of coaching is a safe, trusting relationship between the coach and teacher which requires time to develop. Similar to DHs, SAs have heavy workloads, multiple competing priorities and administrative responsibilities which do not provide sufficient time to carry out meaningful instructional coaching. A study conducted by the NECT showed that the SA to school ratio was too high, which explains the impossible workload SAs face and how challenging providing instructional coaching would be. In the Grade R Project implemented in the Western Cape and Gauteng, SAs conducted coaching in part by convening professional learning communities (PLCs) for teachers. While this was an innovative compromise given the time constraints they face, SAs found it difficult to sustain the practice due to their workload.

In addition, ZenLit revealed that more time is needed to work on the DH's own content knowledge and instructional coaching skills before undertaking the role of coaching, hence the one-year extension to the coaching aspect of that project. Even then, one year was not enough to develop coaches sufficiently. The project pointed to the ongoing need for external coaching support during this process.

Other barriers to effective instructional coaching highlighted in the EGRP evaluation findings, which corroborate findings from ZenLit and the Grade R Project, include the following:

1. **Prohibitive costs of external coaching:** ZenLit showed that the significant costs of external coaching, given the size of our education system, impede implementation at scale.
2. **Undefined coaching role and related competencies:** Collaborative efforts to codify the role of coaches (either as DHs, SAs or external coaches) must be undertaken and, in relation to that, the competencies and skills of coaches must be outlined. Teachers (as with DHs) need instructional coaching with opportunities for feedback, reflection and developing practical strategies for improvement. This can only be achieved by coaches bringing a rich understanding of their content areas to support the development of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and the skills to assist teachers to reflect on their teaching practice and progress. In the case of DHs and SAs, the conflict of interest in the role must be dealt with. DHs and SA's oversight and performance management role to monitor curriculum coverage, disseminate policy guidelines and fulfil district-level administrative requirements clouds the supportive, developmental nature of the coaching relationship.
3. **Insufficient training:** Both DHs and SAs, and in many cases external coaches, are not provided with sufficient training that includes imparting the skill of instructional coaching in addition to in-depth content support. Both forms of training are required to enable coaches to make a meaningful contribution to supporting teacher pedagogy in class.

It is clear that coaching is a key lever for change, but the South African education system cannot afford external support of this kind of intervention. Yet, if the cost-saving DH and SA coaching model has not provided the solution for supporting teachers that we initially hoped, where to from here? It may be time to explore a differentiated approach to support where schools receive different dosages of support on a needs-basis. In addition, SAs can identify key teachers in PLCs to provide ongoing coaching support in schools. This approach does not presuppose that DHs will be coaches, nor that the best teachers will make good coaches.

Regardless, the issue of time must be addressed in the system in order to improve the quality of support that DHs and SAs can offer. In so doing, improved learning outcomes within the system are promoted, in line with the aspirations of all those working in the education sector in South Africa.