

Literacy and Language Instruction in the Foundation Phase Research Study

Call for Proposals

1. Introduction

This is a call for a researcher or a research agency to conduct a study to better understand effective approaches to literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase and how current teaching practice in Foundation Phase classrooms enables or inhibits literacy acquisition in public primary schools in South Africa.

The study combines two linked components: (1) a literature review on approaches to literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase, which will produce evidence for best practice and (2) classroom-based observation studies of literacy teaching practice in Grade 2. Current classroom practice will be examined against the evidence in the literature review.

An amount of **R600,000** is available to undertake this work, which must be completed by **30 November 2027**.

2. Background

The Zenex Foundation has been supporting Language and Mathematics education to improve teaching and learning outcomes in South Africa for 30 years. Early literacy has been a focus from the beginning, particularly through the Zenex Literacy Project and support for the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Early Grade Reading Studies. Zenex also has a long history of supporting work in African languages, including the development of lesson plans and contextually relevant, linguistically sound African language readers such as the Vula Bula series, as well as the publicly available reading materials developed through the Ulwazi Lwethu project. Together with other funders, Zenex supported the DBE in developing the National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase, along with benchmarks for reading in African languages.

The Foundation Phase lays the base for all later learning, yet many South African learners do not learn to read with meaning in their home language, or develop sufficient proficiency in a First Additional Language, by the end of Grade 3. Considerable investment has gone into early grade reading to date. Yet, South Africa is not yet achieving adequate proficiency levels in either home languages or additional languages (such as English and Afrikaans) in the primary school. The next step is to understand in more depth the specific subskills and pedagogical mechanisms that make literacy development effective, and how these are, or are not, reflected in Foundation Phase classrooms.

While the literature provides guidance on effective approaches, far less is known about what is actually

happening in Foundation Phase classrooms. A clearer understanding is needed of the key pedagogical mechanisms that develop literacy competence, along with a review of the policy and contextual factors that affect current approaches. Insight into effective and ineffective current practice will inform future teacher development programmes. In addition, understanding of how big books, graded readers, workbooks and classroom libraries are used in practice allows stakeholders to evaluate the sustainability of these investments and to identify opportunities for future resource development.

In response, Zenex is commissioning a study on literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase, to be carried out in partnership with the DBE. The study aims to provide in-depth descriptions of dynamics and practices playing out in classrooms using a select sample, rather than evaluating teaching practice at scale.

3. Research questions

The central aim of this research project is to gather evidence from literature on best practice in literacy instruction in Home Language and First Additional Language, and to explore current literacy teaching practice in the Foundation Phase.

The study seeks to answer the following research question: **What are teachers' current literacy instructional practices in the Foundation Phase, and how do these compare with effective practice identified in the literature?**

Further sub-questions will guide the study:

- What evidence is available in the literature on best practice in literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase, particularly in African Home Language? What evidence is available regarding key focus areas such as phonics instruction, moving from letter-sound knowledge to word reading, morphological awareness, reading fluency, comprehension and development of sentence and paragraph writing?
- What is the relationship between teacher practice in classrooms, compared to requirements set out in policy documents (CAPS, ATP)? If there are deviations, what factors contribute to these deviations?
- What are teachers' perspectives on what they teach and practices that they use to teach literacy in the Foundation Phase, particularly in African Home Language? What insights do teachers have regarding the gender gap in literacy outcomes?
- What insights can be gained from district officials about pedagogical practices and routines teachers use during literacy instruction? What are common practices and areas of challenge or potential?
- What are the contextual challenges and opportunities teachers face while carrying out literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase?

4. Scope of work

4.1 Research design and sample

The study will be carried out through three approaches: desktop research, classroom-based observations and interviews. The literature review will combine local and international literature with the findings of relevant local studies. Classroom observations will take place in six classrooms over one week during the 2027 academic year. (Fieldwork may include preliminary observations to gather high-level trends and to support an informed instrument development process.) Interviews with teachers and district officials may take place concurrently or prior to observations.

The fieldwork will focus on Grade 2 Languages lessons (Home Language and First Additional Language), since Grade 2 is a pivotal year in which learners develop increasingly nuanced knowledge of literacy subskills.

Observations will take place in Quintile 1–3 schools exclusively, in two provinces selected from the following list: Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and North West. A focus on Nguni languages is preferred.

4.2 Activities and deliverables

The researcher(s) will be expected to conduct research with the following activities and deliverables as a guide:

- A clarification workshop with Zenex and the DBE, setting out the refined research design, literature search strategy, sampling approach, provinces and languages, fieldwork plan and detailed workplan.
- A literature review of local and international scholarship and relevant local studies on approaches to literacy development in the Foundation Phase, including the influence of the curriculum and contextual factors. A draft of the review should be available by the **end of January 2027** so that it can inform instrument refinement and the analysis of fieldwork data.
- Obtaining ethical clearance and DBE and provincial research permissions, and recruiting schools and teachers.
- Development and piloting of research instruments (for example classroom observation schedules, teacher interview protocols and LTSM inventory and usage tools), informed by emerging insights from the literature review.
- Observations of six Grade 2 teachers in 2027, including observation of LTSM use.
- Interviews with key stakeholders in the selected schools and relevant districts (for example, teachers, departmental heads, principals and subject advisors).
- A draft research report bringing together the literature review framework and fieldwork findings, for review by Zenex and the DBE, followed by a final report incorporating feedback received.
- Knowledge products for dissemination, such as a short research summary or policy brief, and a presentation of findings at a Zenex and DBE learning event (for example a seminar or roundtable).

Periodic engagement with the Project Management Team on milestones will be expected, which may be in person or virtual.

5. Application process

5.1 Submissions

Interested service providers should submit a proposal of **not more than three A4 pages** that sets out how they will undertake this work. Applicants can also collaborate with other individuals and organisations where necessary. The proposal must include:

- A brief outline of your understanding of the task
- An outline of the process and methodology that you propose
- A plan with high-level activities, period and budget. (The budget should indicate costs for different activities with travel costs specified separately.)

- Experience and expertise of the organisation and team that will undertake the study
- List of team members (where applicable) - this includes brief CVs of the team leader and researchers
- A sample of previous work conducted that is similar to the planned work - this may include reports or tools.

5.2 Shortlisting Process

Only shortlisted organisations will be notified. Organisations can submit joint submissions or share the call with others.

The shortlisted individuals/organisations will be required to do a virtual interview on **27 October** to a panel selected by the Zenex Foundation.

All proposals and queries should be directed to Ms Catherine Langsford at catherine@zenexfoundation.org.za.

CLOSING DATE: 23 October 2026

CLOSING TIME: 16:00