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GRADE 3

IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME SHOWS RESULTS

An intensive education improvement programme has started bearing fruit after its second year of operation, according to the results of numeracy and literacy tests administered last year to about 14 000 Grade 3 learners from 461 participating schools.

The District Development Support Programme (DDSP) is an education improvement initiative of the South African Government funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The programme is conducted in collaboration with the Department of Education and the provincial departments of education in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape and Northern Province.

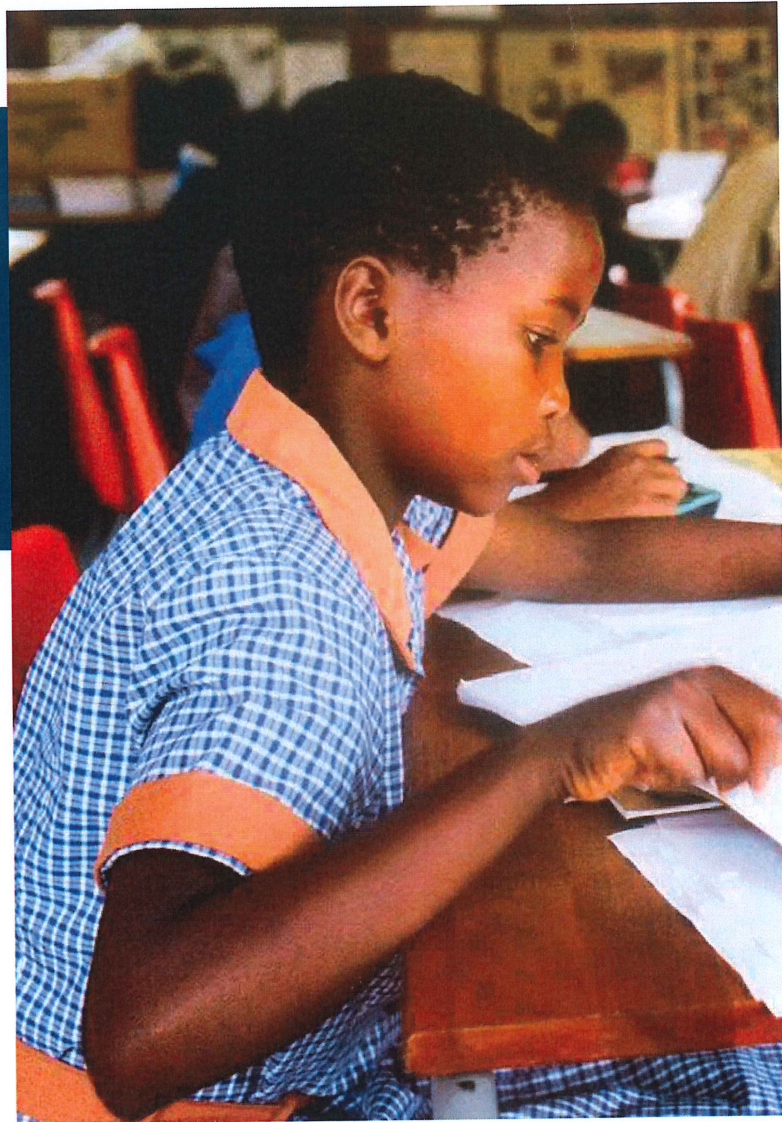
The DDSP focuses on the quality of teaching and learning, school management and governance, and the support services provided to schools. One particular focus of intervention is the Foundation Phase, which ends in Grade 3.

The first test was administered in October 2000, before the DDSP was introduced to the target schools in 2001. Grade 3 learners in those schools were then tested in October 2001 and 2002. The goal was to test the effect of the programme on learner performance in numeracy and literacy. Appropriate testing instruments were developed to measure the learners' grasp of certain skills as they are stated in curriculum documents for Grade 3.

The instruments were administered to random samples of learners from the 461 schools. About 14 000 learners were tested each year.

There was very little, if any, change in Grade 3 performance from 2000 to 2001, but in 2002 the numeracy score increased by 12 percentage points and the literacy score increased by 5 percentage points.

In 2000, learners obtained an average success rate of 26 percentage points in numeracy and 53 percentage points in literacy. The literacy tasks may perhaps more aptly be referred to as reading tasks. The significantly higher scores in the reading tasks may partly be attributed to the fact that all the tasks were of a multiple-choice type, resulting



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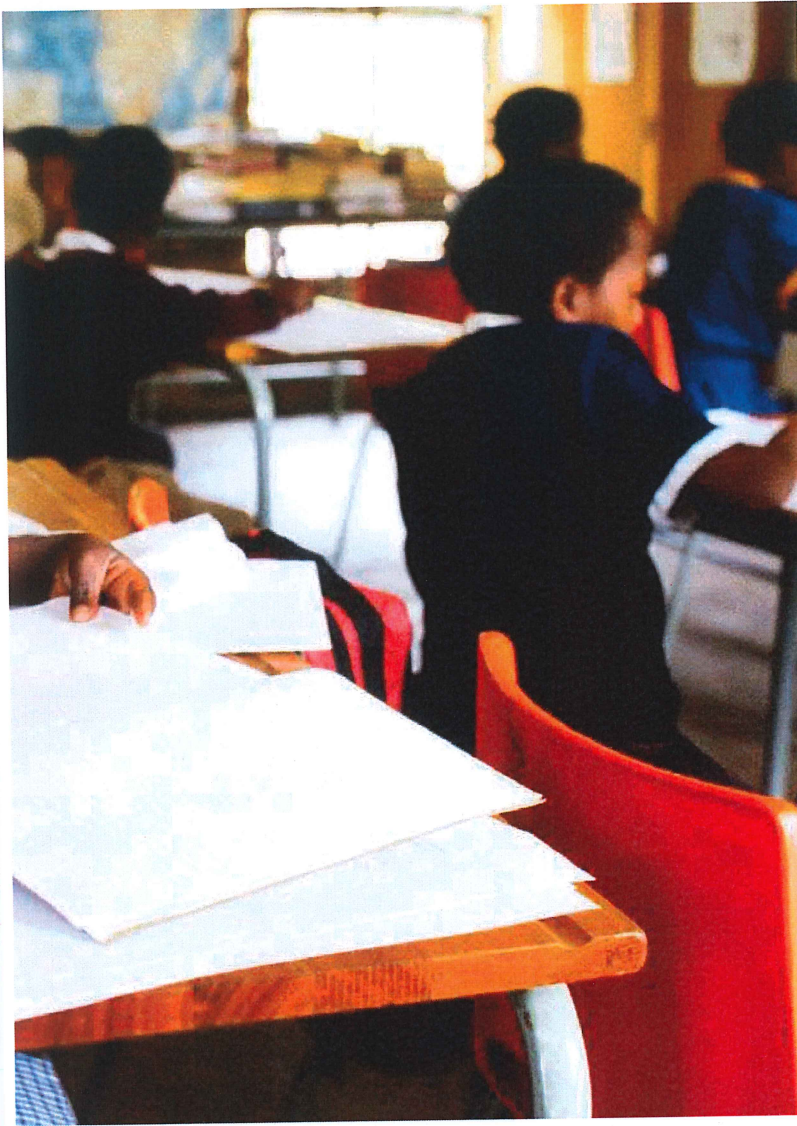
in learners probably getting a number of answers correct by chance.

In the case of numeracy, there was a significant improvement (of about 1 percentage point) in 2001 and again (of about 10 percentage points) in 2002. For literacy, there was a significant decrease (of about 2.3 percentage points) in 2001 and a significant increase (of about 7 percentage points) in 2002.

Girls outperformed boys each year in both numeracy and literacy. In numeracy, girls outperformed boys by 2 percentage points in 2000 and 2001, and by 4 percentage points in 2002. In literacy, they outperformed boys by 6 percentage points in each of the three years. This is a large difference and there is no indication that it may be shrinking.

It is generally found that girls mature faster than boys (emotionally and socially) during the Foundation Phase and it may be that they also naturally progress faster in schoolwork. On the other hand, it is possible that learning conditions at schools favour girls over boys.

As for the general scores, based on comparisons of the test results of 2000, 2001 and 2002, it is clear that small changes occurred



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between 2000 and 2001, and large improvements in performance occurred in 2002. These improvements may have resulted from any one or more of a number of factors:

- ▶ The support from the districts could have improved educational practice.
- ▶ School support officers could have focused their efforts more directly on Grade 3.
- ▶ Service providers were probably better established in 2002 and would consequently be more effective than before.
- ▶ It could have taken a year or more for the training of educators and new teaching materials to take effect in the schools.
- ▶ Some additional programmes that were introduced only in 2002 could have had an exceptional effect on learner attainment.
- ▶ The feedback session in January 2002 could have helped to motivate service providers and educators to make a difference.
- ▶ The nature of the questions in the tests may have become known, resulting in some 'teaching to the test'. However, this need not be a bad thing if the desired outcomes are achieved. It is unlikely that this kind of teaching had an adverse effect in the form of rote learning, as performance increases were observed on all questions.
- ▶ The material provided by some of the service providers could have clarified the curriculum objectives in a meaningful way for educators, empowering them to teach more effectively.
- ▶ Educators could have become more comfortable with teaching in the new curriculum framework and could have translated

- curriculum goals into effective classroom practice on their own.
- ▶ Educators could have motivated learners much better to do well in the tests in 2002 because the educators realised that much was at stake regarding continued support of the kind provided by the DDSP.
- ▶ The implementation of the minimum school admission age of seven years could have reduced the number of educationally less mature students in 2002.

The influence of these and other factors on achievement needs to be clarified before firm conclusions regarding the efficacy of the programme can be reached. Nevertheless, at a minimum it may be said that a number of outcomes improved in 2002.

One of the ways the DDSP aims to improve educational delivery is through the national Assessment Modelling Initiative (AMI). The fundamental purpose of the AMI is to develop and pilot an assessment model that can be used nationally.

The AMI involves the development of Assessment Resource Banks, which translate curriculum goals into a series of tasks to be tackled by learners in the Foundation Phase. Performance in these tasks provides feedback to both educator and learner. Repeated testing of proficiency in numeracy and literacy at the end of the Foundation Phase helps to identify the nature and extent of changes in learner performance.

The tests themselves were developed with the help of the Joint Education Trust. The numeracy test is a paper-and-pencil test with free response questions (not multiple choice) about counting and ordering, addition, subtraction and multiplication. The literacy/reading test was adapted from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Survey conducted in 27 countries. It is also a paper-and-pencil test but all the items are multiple choice. The learners were assessed on core reading competencies such as recognition of frequently used words, sentence completion and comprehension of short fiction and non-fiction texts.

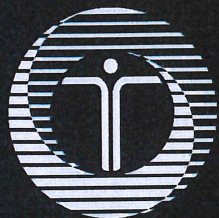
These tests were named the Mahlahle Instruments and were translated from English into eight other languages in which the DDSP schools offered instruction. The skills required for performing well in the Mahlahle Instruments form an important part of the skills required by the curriculum, and scores obtained in the Mahlahle Instruments do indicate how well those parts of the curriculum have been mastered.

As the support given to districts by the DDSP did make a difference to learners, this kind of support should be continued. •

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IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 1 – 2 NEWS ROUNDUP

PAGE 3 FOOD NOT THE ONLY CRISIS

PAGE 4 – 5 GRADE 3s STEP UP RESULTS

PAGE 6 – 7 ELECTION FORECASTS

PAGE 8 – 9 MEETING ELECTION PROMISES

PAGE 10 – 11 CHILD RAPE

PAGE 12 – 13 PROFILE:
DR OLIVE SHISANA

ELECTION FORECASTS VS THE REALITY

