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Supporting the teaching of early reading: An evaluation of the *TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook* Badged Online Course (BOC)

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May 2020



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Supporting the teaching of early reading: An evaluation of the *TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook* Badged Online Course (BOC)

Executive summary

TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook is a free, online course designed to support practitioners in developing their knowledge and skills as teachers of Early Reading. It was developed jointly by The Open University, UK and Saide in South Africa, funded by a grant from the David and Elaine Potter Foundation. The course is available online. It can be downloaded on to local devices and studied off-line. A certificate is available for those who complete the course successfully but can only be achieved by logging on to complete the assessments. The course is very flexible, involving around 24 hours of study which can be completed over 3 or 4 days of full-time study, over 1 term with 2 hours study a week, and everything in between. The course can be studied by individuals, but the intention is that groups of professionals will study together in their setting and gain the benefits of collaborative learning and discussion as they study.

The course has been adopted by Ntataise – an NGO which supports Early Childhood Education in South Africa – as part of their training programme for practitioners. At the time of writing (April 2020), a total of 366 participants have completed the course, 217 of whom were supported by Ntataise, funded by a grant from the Zoe Carss Education Trust.

The purpose of this evaluation is:

- to test the assumptions on which the design of the course were based;
- to understand how the course is being studied and experienced by participants;
- to evaluate the impact on practice and on learners; and
- on the professional lives of the participants.

It draws on data from the website (pre-and post-course questions) and data collected during a visit to South Africa in November 2019, in which researchers visited 13 Early Childhood Development settings, observed 11 story-telling sessions and interviewed 26 practitioners who had completed the course.

The team found evidence to support the two underlying assumptions – that participating in the course supports professional collaboration, and the resultant small changes in practice can potentially have significant impact on children’s learning – and this evaluation makes a number of recommendations.

Participants were found to have studied the course largely on mobile phones, something most participants had previously not experienced. An unexpected benefit of the course was improved digital literacy skills and a desire for further study. 64% of the end of course comments highlighted aspects of early reading pedagogy which participants had taken into their practice. Ntataise provided a team of facilitators, whose support was greatly appreciated and the experience of studying and learning together has increased professional dialogue and collaboration.

The recommendations are:

- Whilst the technology was demanding for some, it was also apparent that participants were resourceful in asking for help and solving their problems. The lack of technical skills should not be a barrier to developing technical solutions, because if the proposed solution is appealing, people find ways to engage.
- There is scope to develop the support offered to course facilitators. This is both powerful and potentially disruptive. In conventional cascade models of CPD, the 'master trainers' themselves rarely interact with the ideas they are trying to promote at a classroom level. For example, they tell teachers what they should be doing, without having actually experienced the learning themselves. In this model that was not the case – the Ntataise facilitators all completed the course themselves, which meant engaging with and therefore understanding the activities practitioners were experiencing.
- Combining an online course with face-to-face facilitation enabled learners to capitalise on the affordances of both elements. However, developing practitioners' independent use of technology and autonomy should be included in the aims of the facilitator's role.
- The impact on early reading teaching pedagogy suggests that there could be scope in developing an equivalent course to support the teaching of early numeracy, or an additional 'Level 2' course in early reading. This is something the team are seeking funding to support.
- There are many NGOs working in the ECD sector. An aspiration, as a result of this initial badged online course, is to connect with this wider network and to promote the use of the Early Reading course in the way that Ntataise has modelled.

Supporting the teaching of early reading: An evaluation of the *TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook* Badged Online Course (BOC)

Introduction

TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook is a free, online course, developed by The Open University and Saide (South African Institute for Distance Education). It was developed as part of the Teacher Education in sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) strategy for 2016-2019, with funding from the David and Elaine Potter Foundation and facilitated for 267 early years practitioners in South Africa through a partnership with Saide and Ntataise with funding from the Zoe Carss Education Trust. This report is an evaluation of the course, almost one year after it was launched. It draws on data from the 'pre-course survey', 'end-of-course' assessment from 171 course participants across four countries, and on data collected during a visit to South Africa, involving interviews with 26 practitioners from 13 Early Childhood Development settings and observations of storytelling/read-aloud sessions.

Background

TESSA is a network of teacher educators across sub-Saharan Africa, dedicated to improving the quality of teaching by supporting teachers and teacher educators in developing more participatory approaches actively engaging learners. At the heart of the network is a bank of open educational resources (OER) that support the primary curriculum through the provision of examples of classroom activities for teachers to use or adapt to strengthen their teaching. The OER have been available since 2008 and have been versioned for ten African countries. Where they are embedded in teacher education programmes, and schools, they make a difference, with teachers reporting more collaboration with each other; better attendance from their pupils; greater awareness of individual needs; and higher levels of achievement. TESSA OER have also been shown to create a demand for CPD as teachers become more aware of the possibilities available to them in their classrooms (Harley & Simiyu Barasa, 2012; Stutchbury, 2016; Stutchbury et al., 2018; Stutchbury, Gallastegi, et al., 2019; Wambugu et al., 2019). The course was authored by three education practitioners from the OU's TESSA project and three early years specialists from Saide in South Africa, bringing together expertise in teaching early reading, the African context and in writing for online learning. Saide hosts the web-based initiative African Storybook, so one of the purposes of the course is to support practitioners in accessing and using the website resource. When planning for dissemination, Saide introduced colleagues from another NGO, Ntataise, to the course, 'who found it a good fit for their 2019 development strategy, which focused on early reading and digital literacy.'

A key global educational priority is to improve children's literacy outcomes, and one response to this call is to capacitate practitioners' early reading pedagogy. It is widely

accepted that being proficient in reading is the basis on which later progress in learning is based (Akyeampong et.al, 2013). In addition, supporting practitioners' understanding of early reading was identified as a priority for TESSA in 2015 and draft OER units had been produced. Drawing on the experience of running two successful Massive Open Online Courses for teacher educators (Stutchbury et al., 2019; Wolfenden et al., 2017), it was decided to develop these draft units into a free, open, online course TESSA: Teaching Early Reading with African Storybook.

The free course has six sections, each representing about four hours of study (24 hours of study time in total). It can be studied by an individual working on their own, or by groups of professionals working together, and it can be studied intensively in a week or spread over a number of weeks. Participants are able to download the course in order to study offline; thus, supporting those in low resource contexts where connectivity, access to electricity or the cost of data can be problematic. To be successful, participants need to visit each section of the course and complete two specific tasks and four online quizzes. A facilitation guide has been provided to support people who wish to work with a group of colleagues in their setting. The course is 'task-based' and is highly focused on practice (Wolfenden et al.,2017). Participants are introduced to principles that underpin the teaching of early reading: they read and analyse examples of teaching, plan teaching activities and reflect on their own practice.

The course aims to support practitioners, teachers, trainers and teacher educators in four specific areas:

- develop current understanding of literacy practices, with an emphasis on active approaches to the teaching and learning of reading;
- integrate active approaches into practice in their own settings;
- apply and use resources; and
- examine specific approaches to teaching reading.

The course is designed for participants to explore, engage and interact with the African Storybook website (<https://africanstorybook.org/>), there is also an opportunity to access other open educational resources (OER), in the form of free resource libraries like the TESSA OER (<http://www.tessafrica.net/>).

By developing an online course rather than separate, free-standing units of work, it was hoped to introduce new learners to the opportunities afforded by online learning (Wolfenden et.al, 2017). The course also provides a mechanism to support practice-based continuing professional development (CPD) in which groups of professionals learn together in their own setting. By the end of February 2020, 295 participants had successfully completed the course, and at the time of writing (April 2020) this had increased to 366.

This evaluation sets out to report on the experiences of the participants who have completed this course and assess the impact on their practice. It draws on both the

end-of-course comments by course participants, and observations of storytelling/read aloud sessions and interviews with practitioners in the Ntataise network, an NGO who support the professional development of ECD practitioners, which has adopted the Early Reading Course as part of their training programme.

Collaborative course design

Children who fall behind in reading are more likely to drop out of school (EFA GMR team, 2013) and 78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language (Ntataise, 2020). Therefore, strengthening practitioners' early reading pedagogy is essential if progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all) is to be made. To be an effective teacher of reading, practitioners need detailed knowledge of children's reading acquisition in terms of both word recognition and comprehension (Akeyampong et.al, 2013:281). The balanced approach to reading which draws on both bottom-up skills (knowledge of letters and sounds) and top-down skills (prior personal and cultural knowledge, prediction and understanding of text) has proven to be most effective in supporting early reading development (Dombey, 2010; NICHHD, 2000), and is the approach embedded in the free online course.

Furthermore, a DFID review team (Pearson et al. 2017a, p1) gathered evidence from a panel of experts in the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in order to identify:

- **essential knowledge and skills** required of ECD practitioners working in different contexts
- **appropriate methods for delivery of training, and post-training follow-up**, for ECD practitioners, and
- the **necessary conditions for effective scale-up** of ECD practitioners training.

They identified the importance of contextualisation of programmes; the significance of relationship-based approaches as part of all training programmes highlighting that these should be also be modelled as part of the delivery of training; and the role of mentoring and supporting in achieving sustainability.

All of these key principles are evident in the early reading course. The material is adaptable and many of the activities require participants to reflect on their own practice, with the result that contextualisation is built into the course. Relationship-based approaches are highlighted in the text for practitioners working with children and in the Facilitation guide. The course models learner-centred attitudes and values, meeting Schweisfurth's 'minimum criteria' for learner-centeredness (Schweisfurth, 2015). The course provides a short intensive training – or an opportunity for sustained engagement over a number of weeks. Many of the activities ask participants to work with a colleague to analyse or plan teaching. The facilitation model is based on the expectation that facilitators will be able to support participants in their workplace. Previous experience by the team in presenting Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to support professional development in India and Africa (Stutchbury, Amos,

et al., 2019; Wolfenden et al., 2017) highlighted the importance of online learning being locally facilitated through the creation of informal communities of practice around an online resource base (Stacey & Gerbic, 2008:965). In addition, if the course is studied intensively over a few days, the material is always available, and participants can return to specific activities or sections if they feel consolidation is required.

Ntataise is an independent, not-for-profit organisation which aims to provide training, capacity building and information on sector developments to ECD practitioners through its Network of 18 independent member organisations across seven of South Africa's nine provinces. They also run a mentoring scheme to support the on-going professional development of practitioners. Ntataise chose to support, as part of their 2018/19 early reading and digital skills implementation strategy, their trainers in completing the course (August 2018). Based on their feedback changes were made to the content and the course is now embedded in their training programme. As of February 2020, a total of 119 ECD practitioners from the Ntataise Network have completed the course, out of a total 295 participants (website figures, February 2020) and the majority (98%) are from South Africa.

Purpose of this research

The aim of the research, in the form of an evaluation, is to learn more about the impact of a free online course on the practice of ECD practitioners, and to better understand how, as a result, they develop their early reading pedagogical practice.

At the OU, the TESSA team have conceptualised the evaluation of open educational resources in terms of 'reach', 'access', 'use' and 'impact' (Stutchbury, 2020). We are able to estimate reach and access using web-site analytics and project data. However, what happens in order to convert 'access' (when someone browses a resource) to 'use' (when they engage with the content); and 'use' to 'impact' (what they take from that engagement into practice), is more elusive. Therefore, in writing the early reading course, the team had a number of 'programme theories' about what would work and why it could be effective (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005).

- The two main programme theories or assumptions, driving the project were:
- The Early Reading course will provide an opportunity for practitioners to work together, to undertake collaborative planning and to reflect together on practice. Participation will lead to increased collaboration and professional dialogue (access to use).
- By providing engaging activities directly relevant to their practice, ECD practitioners will be motivated to complete the course and will make small changes to their practice, which over time will become embedded and lead to improvements in practice (use to impact).

This research is an opportunity to test these theories and to learn more about the **what**, practitioners take from online learning experiences and the **how** they translate these experiences into their pedagogical practices for early reading. The programme

theories in turn, informed the development of the research questions, as outlined in the following section. The outcomes of this research will inform the future development of the course, the thinking and design around the development of new online courses, and the use of online courses and resources to support professional development for teachers across Africa.

Methodology

Research methods

The evaluation study adopted a qualitative design, exploring the perspectives and practices of ECD practitioners who had completed the online course. The study generated two distinct data sets. Firstly, the team had access to the 'end-of-course comments' written by 171 participants, which provided initial insights into the aspects of the course most appreciated by participants, and 144 responses to the pre-course survey. Whilst data collated from the end of course-comments is useful at a meta-level, a key aim of this design was to better understand the experience of practitioners. Therefore secondly, data gathered from a follow-up group of participants, elicited detailed first-hand accounts of participants' experiences and close observations of storytelling sessions involving 'read-aloud' practices, which was a key element of the course. These data were gathered in three townships near Johannesburg over three days in November 2019. Follow up group participants were identified and approached by Ntataise facilitators at the ECD centres, who had detailed local knowledge and information about practitioners who had completed the Early Reading course. The 26 participants included both experienced and recently qualified practitioners. All were female, and held, or were studying for, ECD qualifications ranging from level 1 to level 4. They ranged in age from their 20's to their 50's. The study addressed three main research questions;

- Who studied the course and why? How did they access and engage with content? What was their experience of the course?
- To what extent did the course support practitioners' early reading pedagogy, confidence and self-esteem, and what was the impact on children's learning?
- What is the impact of the course on practitioners' professional development including ways of working and collaborating with others?

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Open University and the project team were guided by the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethics guidelines. The research is also underpinned by the moral imperative to find out about the impact of the resources devoted to this project. The team were mindful of the potential positive effects of this work for the participants through the opportunity to talk reflectively about their practice (Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). However, it was also imperative to avoid any potential harm to participants. Prior to data gathering, informed consent was sought and obtained from all participants and setting managers by the ECD facilitators. In addition, prior to each observation and interview, the researchers verbally asked permission to audio record

interviews and observe practice. Researchers were attentive to signs of participant discomfort and on one occasion sensitively brought the interview to a close when a participant appeared anxious. All the data was subsequently anonymised before being stored on a secure server at the OU.

Limitations of this study

It should be acknowledged that the three researchers have all been involved in teaching and in training teachers in the Early Years, Primary and Secondary sectors. They were all 'outsiders' to the situation, being based in the UK, but to some extent are 'inside' by virtue of being authors and contributors to the content of the course. As experienced educators themselves, they brought a particular perspectives to the analysis, which might be different to that of someone who had never been a teacher themselves. This 'inbetween-ness' requires a reflexive approach to the analysis and discussion, which acknowledges the basis for any conclusions and recommendations (McNess et al., 2015; Savvides et al., 2014). It should also be acknowledged that the team made the decision to visit a wide range of settings across districts, rather than spending a whole day in one setting. The latter would have provided access to a greater range of activities which could have enriched the data; however, visiting multiple settings across two districts with two different facilitators enabled the team to form a more complete view of how the course was accessed, used and the potential impact made.

Data gathering methods

End of course comments

At the end of the course, participants are asked to write a brief blog post (200-400 words) about their learning on the course. Most write considerably less than that, with the majority of posts being one or two sentences. The brevity is helpful in some respects as it reflects the most memorable aspect of the course, or the aspect that has made the greatest impression. The data set comprised 171 anonymised comments posted by participants on completion of the course between April 2019 and February 2020. Some of the comments will have been written by the follow up group participants, but their specific responses were not extrapolated and therefore the data does not seek to match what specific participants wrote with what was observed or said in the follow up interviews.

Follow-up group data

Data were gathered from the follow-up group at 13 Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres that offered provision for children aged 2 to 6 years old. The settings comprised a state funded primary school, private day-care settings and a church run playgroup. In addition, data were gathered from practitioners and Early Childhood students at two ECD centres connected to the Ntataise network. To address the research questions, four data gathering methods were employed;

Observations

In 11 of the 13 settings, the researchers observed a routine practitioner-led class read-aloud. No direction was given regarding book choice, resources, media and the story-telling approach; practitioners were asked to continue with their usual everyday

practice. A flexible observation schedule was constructed to guide attention to the pedagogic approach, the nature of adult – child interaction and children’s level of engagement; in addition, it ensured a degree of consistency across the data set. All observations were hand-written as fieldnotes in situ.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were guided by a flexible interview schedule. This firstly steered the conversation to technical and practical aspects of completing the course, and secondly, elicited practitioners’ perspectives on how the course had influenced their knowledge, pedagogy and competence with online learning, and how it had impacted on children’s early reading.

Photographic data

With permission, the researchers photographed each classroom environment and resources (avoiding children and practitioners) to document the nature, organisation and use of early reading resources and environmental print.

Focus group discussion

A group interview was conducted with practitioners attending the final facilitated session at one of the ECD centres. In addition to the support of the facilitator, the centre provided free access to wi-fi and laptops. The discussion was guided by the interview schedule and during the 40-minute conversation, eleven course participants contributed to the discussion.

Data analysis

End of course data

On the website, 144 people responded to the pre-course survey and 295 comments were made on the end of course blog. There was no attempt to correlate the two sets of comments.

In order to understand what it is that participants have taken from the course, the following steps were taken.

- All the 295 comments between April 2019 and the end of February 2020 were copied into a word document
- These were imported into an Excel spreadsheet
- Comments in other languages, repetitions, or that were book reviews were deleted
- Comments that were not specifically about what had been learnt, were deleted.

This left 171 separate comments. Each comment was coded against a set of criteria, each of which referred directly to something that had been learnt. 18 initial criteria emerged but were reduced to 11. The findings are presented in the next section.

Follow up group data

Interviews were independently transcribed, and observations typed up. All data were subsequently uploaded into Dedoose, a data analysis software package. The project team employed a thematic approach to analysis, broadly structured on Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Data were inductively coded to identify 'points of interest' and the three members of the team reviewed the codes to ensure inter-coder reliability. Codes were clustered and salient themes were drawn out in team meetings to respond to the research questions; subsequently, interpretations were collaboratively constructed, reviewed, critiqued, and refined.

In total there were nine main codes, with 58 sub-codes creating 397 coded data references (Table 2). The main codes were clustered to each of the three research questions, with the highest referenced question, Research Question 2 - *To what extent did the course support practitioners' early reading pedagogy and what was the impact on children's learning?* This is unsurprising considering the scope of the question, in that it attempts to capture not only the impact of studying the course at an individual practitioner level, but also the ways in which changes in practice were reported and how these changes ultimately impacted on children's learning. Nine main codes, linked to the three research questions were then clustered into new themes. These themes and related Research Questions form the basis of the Key Findings section of this evaluation. However, due to the scope of this report, data is specifically drawn from the practitioner interviews. The main headlines are discussed in order to share the main learning and provide key recommendations for future dissemination and course development.

Research Question	Main code	Sub-codes	References	Theme
Research Question 1 <i>Who studied the course and why? How did they access and engage with content? What was their experience of the course?</i>	Access	Device type used, Cost, Access to Wifi/ Internet/ data, Location for study	33	Who studied the course and why?
	Technology	Perceptions of online learning, Confidence with technology, Broader Internet/ technology use, Previous experience of online course, Seeking further online resources	39	Accessing the course and engaging with content?
	Facilitation		22	How did participants experience the course?
	Challenges	Tech problems, Lack of experience with tech, Access to material resources, Understanding language	8	
TOTAL			102	
Research Question 2 <i>To what extent did the course support practitioners' early reading pedagogy, confidence and self-esteem, and what was the impact on children's learning?</i>	Affective response	Impact of seeing self in text, Enthusiasm, Enjoyment, Sense of pride	36	Impact on confidence and self-esteem of participants
	Reference to course content	New practices, Animated storytelling and using actions, Assessments, Child-centered pedagogy. Children's access to books, Children's agency/ involvement, Creating stories and resources, Drawing attention to title/ front cover, Dual/ multi language, Letters and sounds, Amalgamating existing practices, Open questions, Print referencing, Print rich environment, Read-aloud/ storytelling, Songs and rhymes, Using pictures, Word recognition	89	Changes into practice
	Impact on children	Children's enjoyment, Developing a love of books, Impact on children's personal, social and emotional development, Impact on learning, Language and vocabulary, Level of engagement, Observing learning/ progress, Parents	46	Impact on children's learning
TOTAL			171	
Research Question 3 <i>What is the impact of the course on practitioners' professional development including ways of working and collaborating with others?</i>	Professional development	BOC alongside ECD course, Course completion, Developing knowledge, Developing professional networks, Improved tech skills, Personal interest, Plans for future online learning, Practice/ pedagogy development	64	Broadening knowledge base
	Colleagues	Becoming a facilitator for colleagues, Disseminating course content, Encouraging colleagues to do BOC, Team approach to practice	21	Collegiality and professional networking
	Technology	Perceptions of online learning, Confidence with technology, Broader Internet/ technology use, Previous experience of online course, Seeking further online resources	39	Recognising the potential of online learning and development
TOTAL			124	

Table 2: Follow up group dataset

Key findings

The findings are considered with reference to each of the research questions in turn. Each research question references both the end-of-course comments and follow up data in the form of practitioner interviews, who were observed and interviewed within their specific ECD setting.

Research Question 1

Who studied the course and why? How did they access and engage with content? What was their experience of the course?

Who studied the course and why?

At the end of March 2020, 144 participants had completed the pre-course survey (and 350 had completed the end-of-course blog). We cannot be sure that all who completed the pre-course survey reached the end of the course, but if they did, it represents a return rate of 41% (the reality is probably less than that).

The survey provided some insights into who studied the course and why:

- 90% of participants were female
- 95% were from South Africa with Rwanda, Nigeria, UK also mentioned.
- 60% fell in the age range, 25-45
- Participants were split evenly across rural, semi-rural, semi-urban, urban and city settings
- 64% were in elementary schools or private settings
- 80% identified as ECD co-ordinators, teachers or practitioners, with only 2% being from universities or colleges
- 62% had never taken an online course before and 18% had only taken one.

The main reasons for studying the course were 'To improve the quality of my teaching' and 'To improve my professional knowledge and expertise'. 21% responded that 'It was required of me' and 45% were motivated by the desire 'to gain a certificate of participation'.

The data is consistent and suggests that the sample who took part in the follow-up study were typical of the majority of the participants. They were 100% female and were all ECD practitioners. Most had never studied online.

Of the participants in the follow up group, some undertook the course as part of the ECD qualification training organised by Ntataise, other qualified practitioners took it as a CPD opportunity. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that the participants undertaking the ECD qualification might be part of the 21% who responded that, 'it was required of me'.

Some of the end-of-course comments indicate an initial reluctance and apprehension but also enjoyment and pride in what they ultimately achieved. For example,

At first I found the course very difficult to complete I even lost interest in it, at the later stage I got an encouragement from my colleagues to complete it. we did it in pairs that's where I became aware of how interesting this course is it only requires reading and once you read it with understanding it becomes more easy to complete. (End-of-course comment)

Accessing the course and engaging with content

The end-of-course comments provided some general observations, with the interviews with the follow up group participants providing more depth and insights.

Most of the end-of-course comments were very brief, but they highlighted the aspect of the experience that had made a significant impression. The analysis of the comments is presented in Table 1 which sets out the criteria alongside the number of references to each one expressed as a number and as a percentage of the total number of responses.

Criteria		No. of references	No. of references as a percentage of the whole
1	How to find/write/translate a story on African Storybook	35	12.5
2	Developed mine/my children's confidence and self-esteem/importance of play/relationships	14	5.0
3	How to select stories of the right level and cater for the needs of different children, including the importance of picture books	32	11.5
4	Using stories to teach other things	4	1.4
5	Building a print rich environment	13	4.7
6	Increased professional conversations and collaboration, (including facilitation)	31	11.1
7	ICT skill development	33	11.8
8	The pedagogy of early reading including how to read stories, use puppets and pictures and different approaches	73	26.2
9	How to recognise and assess the different stages of reading development	16	5.7
10	The use of different classroom approaches – pair work, group work, questioning, role play, talk for learning (including involving parents)	16	5.7
11	The importance of home language	12	4.3

Table 1: The nature of the end-of course comments and the frequency at which they occurred.

Criteria 2,3,4,5,8,9,10 and 11 involve aspects of 'Early Reading pedagogy', so grouping these together we find that the comments fall into four main categories. These are illustrated in figure 1.

What did you learn from the Early Reading course?

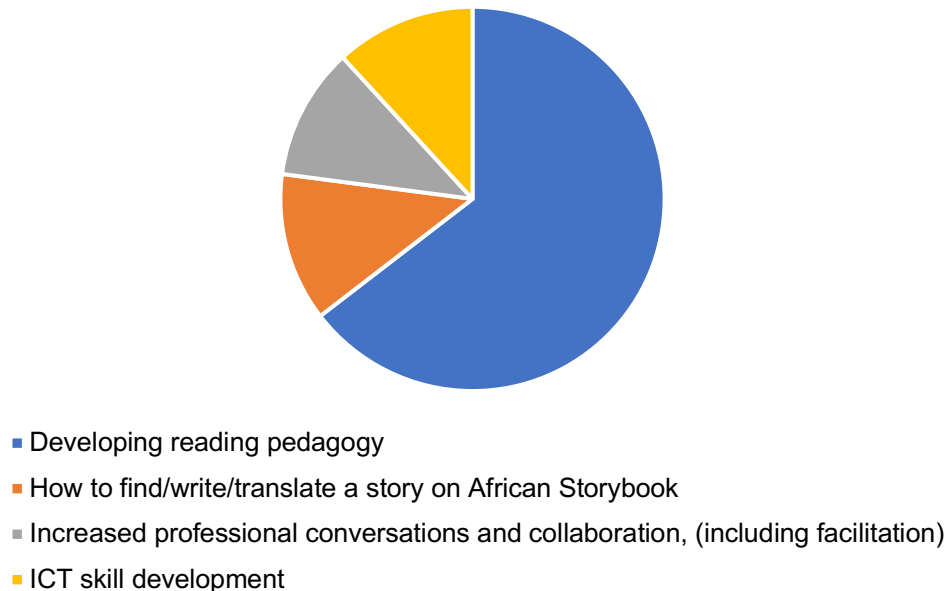


Figure 1: What did you learn from the Early Reading course

Apart from 'early reading pedagogy' which will be discussed in more detail under 'research question 2', the second largest category was 'ICT development'. Many expressed pleasure in the realisation that they could use their phone to use google and access other resources.

This is corroborated by the interviews with the follow up group participants suggesting that the technology was demanding, but that they learnt new skills, which included setting up and using email and internet searches. Many accessed the course on their phones, often in the learning centre rather than at home. Data creates an issue, as it is expensive, although some people commented on the fact that it was worth the expense because of what they got out of the course.

Facilitators were greatly appreciated. Many gave examples of specific ways in which the facilitators had helped them including both technical issues and specific pedagogical issues. The patience, enthusiasm and kindness of the facilitators is mentioned a great deal, and many kept in touch by text and messaging if participants encountered difficulties. Facilitators were also helpful in explaining some of the concepts. They had all completed the course themselves. The interviews showed that working with facilitators

inspired some practitioners to tell others about the course and to encourage them to take part. This data is explored in more detail under 'Research question 3'.

How participants experienced the course

The interviews with the follow up group highlighted a number of challenges experienced by the participants. These included: understanding the text on the screen and what to do in the activities; technical aspects such as registering and creating an email address; and connectivity issues such as downloading items from the internet, audio and video.

I first find it difficult and confusing to me to face this course but as I go though it I enjoyed learning the different methods of teaching of words and strategies so many things I have learned in this course and types of method. (End-of-course comment)

However, despite these challenges many said that they had enjoyed the course and were enthusiastic about what they had learnt and how they had learnt it. Many expressed enthusiasm for: learning online; having new access to storybooks via the African Storybook website; the way the African culture is represented in the stories they found, and particular aspects of the content, including making more use of pictures and the emphasis on story telling.

I thought it was amazing, especially cooking [a story theme] you know we are African people! They are African stories. (Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LCh)

In many cases, engaging with their facilitators inspired participants to encourage other colleagues to engage with the course and it was evident that taking part in the course as a group had inspired more professional conversations in their setting. The work of the facilitators is of crucial importance and many people made reference to the support that they had received. However, pleasingly, the course has also highlighted the opportunities afforded by professional collaboration and a number of people expressed the intention to work more closely with colleagues or to pass on their learning. The support of others was particularly important in helping people to overcome the challenges they faced.

Research Question 2

To what extent did the course support practitioners' early reading pedagogy and what was the impact on children's learning?

Early reading pedagogy

The research highlights three connected aspects of course completion on participants. There were clear links between the positive impacts studying the course had on participants (interviewees), how these impacts translated into pedagogical changes and the ways in which this impacted on children's observed learning. Each is discussed in turn, but are best captured in this reflection by an experienced practitioner:

I did read [to the children], but it was not interesting because I can see when you don't have a clue what must I do, what must I need to do for children to love the story? You can see when you say... 'Once upon a time...', they really want to see what I am going to say you see, they are interested. [Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 3, LCh]

Impact on self-esteem and confidence of participants

All 26 follow-up group participants talked of the ways in which studying the course had impacted on them personally (reflections on professional development are discussed in research question 3). Participants talked of enthusiasm and enjoyment for the course content.

If we could get the whole country to do the course we would. [Focus Group, Day 0]

However, beyond personal achievement and satisfaction, there were also specific examples of how enthusiasm for the course had resulted in positive changes to how they taught early reading.

It was so interesting.... and it taught me a lot of things. I learnt the importance of teaching children in a way that they see things, so using pictures and board ways, so they recognise words. [Practitioner, Day 1, Centre 3, LRL]

One consistent thread was the sense of pride felt in completing the course and the importance of acknowledging the achievement through receipt of the course completion certificate. The focus group was observed receiving their certificates from Ntataise. For those yet to receive theirs, there was anticipation.

Researcher: *Who would you show the certificate to?*

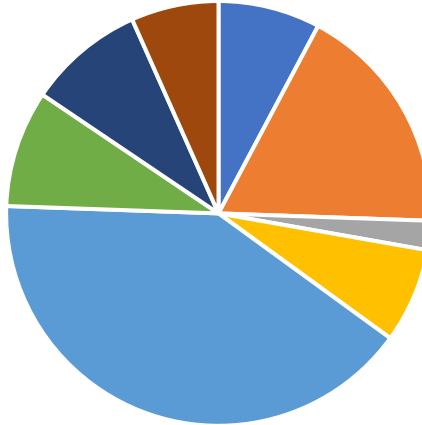
Participant: *To everyone. Yes, to everyone - I wouldn't mind if it was in the office just there!*

[Day 2, Centre 1, LCh]

Changes in practice

The greatest numbers of references (64.5%) in the end-of-course comments were made to early reading pedagogy (criteria 2,3,4,5,8,9,10,11 on page 7-8). The ways in which these comments were distributed is summarised in Figure 2.

Online participants' comments about what they had learnt about how to teach early reading



- Developed mine/my children's confidence and self-esteem/importance of play/relationships
- How to select stories of the right level and cater for the needs of different children, including the importance of picture books
- Using stories to teach other things
- Building a print rich environment
- The pedagogy of early reading including how to read stories, use puppets and pictures and different approaches
- How to recognise and assess the different stages of reading development
- The use of different classroom approaches – pair work, group work, questioning, role play, talk for learning (including involving parents)
- The importance of home language

In many cases these comments highlighted the importance of building learning relationships as well as understanding the technical skill of reading. For example:

It teaches me how to teach the children, how must I behave around them, how to make them understand the story, how must I respond to the questions which they going to ask and make them understand the story (End-of-course comment).

The most repeated references to course content by the follow-up group were: Dual/multi-language, storytelling/read-alouds, the importance of a print-rich environment, the role of learner-centered pedagogy and children's involvement, and increased access to books and stories. It should be noted that local facilitators were supporting practitioners with storytelling/read-alouds, so this may be one reason this aspect was frequently mentioned.

The participants' reflection on the importance of multilingualism reflects the diversity of languages spoken in many of the ECD centres visited. It also supports the underlying

principles of the course, that home language is first teacher, and through the course's practical assessment requirement to locate texts on the African Storybook website.

[I enjoyed] the African stories, yes because most of us we come from location townships like most of the children they are English you have to teach them their mother tongue so yes, it is quite nice because we have to translate to your own language.

[Practitioner, Day 1, Centre 2, LCh]

In one setting the practitioner's home language was not that of many of the children but she had overcome this obstacle through her storytelling skills. She made use of puppets, drama and pictures, so even though some children did not fully understand specific vocabulary they were able to make sense of and enjoy the story [Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 2, LCh].

The most notable change in practice for all the interviewees, and reflected in both the interviews and observations, was their detailed description of how they now read to children. A number of key strategies were repeatedly mentioned including: sitting on the floor, children choosing books, showing text in the book, using drama strategies, asking questions, looking at pictures, changing characters' voices, using actions, reading every day, making up stories, and extending reading through flashcards. The following quote best captures what many practitioners reported:

I would just take a book and just read and just sit in my chair and they will sit in their chairs, but with this course I learnt that you put the children, they must sit down and sit down, so they can communicate with you. You can look at them in the eyes, you can be their height you see, so they learn to understand you and to respond to others. This is what the course did. [Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LRL]

The majority of settings could be described as 'print-rich environments' (discussed in section 2 of the course), with walls covered with age appropriate posters and charts, either home-made or shop-bought. The poster themes included: the days of the week, numbers, and popular animals; and, in some case the daily programme. In one setting a practitioner had told the principal that all the learning rooms (in addition to her own) needed posters, '*because like days of the week they must know, they must*' [Day 1, Centre 1, LCh]. The principal had taken the list and purchased the posters during a trip to a main city shopping centre (several 100 KMs away). However, as another practitioner mentioned, it was not always necessary to purchase posters, as she had sourced her ideas from the course content and made her own posters. Other new strategies for print-rich learning rooms included using more inviting colours and encouraging children to read from the wall resources. In one setting, two practitioners had begun to label items in the classroom, *table, chair, window* – the words were written both in English and home language. The practitioner reflected that each time she brought a new item into the learning setting, the children would tell her it needed a label.

All the interviewees mentioned the course had greatly increased their ability to access books. In particular, they appreciated locating, downloading and printing stories from the African Storybook website, and seeing stories in home language was also mentioned as a positive. One practitioner described that due to a shortage of printed material, and the library being too far away, she was not able to send books home with children; however, since accessing the African Storybook website, she was now able to print books and had recommended the site to parents. Another practitioner mentioned that prior to the course she had never used storybooks but was now able to access and download books and stories, making reading more interesting for the children.

Impact on children's learning

An assumed outcome of the previous finding is that changes in practice would inevitably lead to changes in the learning experience for children. However, this is not always the case, but in this research, the interviewees were able to describe specific ways the course had impacted on children's learning. The focus group, in particular, mentioned they were more effective in observing children and, therefore, recognising next steps for learning.

I have found that the classes has helped me, especially in observing the child and the levels or the stages that he or she is at when they start to read. [Focus Group, Day 0, LRL]

Related to this is the impact of the learner-centred focus of the course:

I realise that maybe when a child is not sure, you can hold their hand with a partner... that I like. Together they can do more than they could have, I love that. [Focus Group, Day 0, LRL]

Specific examples of how new practices are now embedded in daily practice include, asking questions to check understanding, using read-alouds to monitor attention and observing children's interactions with reading for pleasure.

Sometimes I let them choose the stories by themselves, so that I can see which one is more fun to them. [Practitioner, Day 1, Centre 3, LRL]

Of greatest impact appears to be the shift towards reading aloud to children on a regular basis, and an understanding of how this strategy supports children in the early stages of reading development. As the practitioners become more confident, the children themselves provide further encouragement through their reactions, 'Now you see, when I talk and they imitate me and automatically speak in English' [Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LRL]. Another practitioner noted that now children look forward to story-time, and as they get excited and more involved, it encourages her to continue with the new practices.

[Before} we didn't even know it was important to read to children and having this story telling sessions it is even more fun for the kids and they learn the language. [Practitioner, Day 1, Centre 3, LRL]

Research Question 3

What is the impact of the course on practitioners' professional development including ways of working and collaborating with others?

The evaluation also investigated the impact of the course on practitioners' professional development and their ways of working and collaborating with others. There were a number of references from the end-of-course comments that suggest that the course extended horizons and opened up new possibilities for these practitioners, for example;

What I have learn in this course is to think out of the box. I have learned different ways of teaching children a story and how to get everyone involved during story telling by improving the children's reading skills by using all the strategies of introducing early reading to children (End-of-course comment).

Analysis of interview data suggested that most practitioners perceived an increase in their competence and confidence in teaching early reading, and this was evident in the following ways.

Broadening the knowledge base

11 of the interviewees stated that the course had enhanced their knowledge and teaching practices in teaching early reading. Some practitioners commented that some of the ideas and information in the course were entirely new to them; for example, one stated that they had not previously considered the significance of illustrations in the process of learning to read (Day 1, Centre 3, LRL). Other teaching strategies promoted in the course were already established in the daily routine of settings, however course participation had offered a different perspective and prompted reflection and review of longstanding everyday practices. Furthermore, one practitioner noted how this impacted on her capacity to articulate her practice knowledge, she said;

I noticed that we did have some of the things [teaching practices], but we didn't know how to name them, we didn't know why we were using these things, we just did, but now I have the right way to say. (Focus group, Day 1, Centre 2, LRL).

Thus, engagement with the course prompted critical reflection on taken-for-granted practices and expanded understanding of pedagogy, leading to some subtle changes in practices and facilitating professional conversations with colleagues.

Collegiality and professional working

Seven interviewees discussed the ways in which they shared and disseminated the course content amongst colleagues in their own settings or helped and encouraged others to do the course.

Six others commented that either through more formal channels, such as direct instructions, or through informal conversations and modelling of practice, colleagues had begun to implement some of the teaching strategies promoted in the course. For instance, a principal who had completed the course commented that each of the teachers in her setting now incorporated interactive storytelling approaches into their daily routines (Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LRL). Another commented that after doing the course, she intended to run a workshop with staff to ensure there was a consistent approach across the setting (Focus group; Day 1, Centre 2, LRL).

In addition, one interviewee, who evidently placed a high value on the opportunity to develop professional networks with other practitioners whilst taking the course, acknowledged the social nature of the course facilitation. She commented,

....to meet and share ideas as well with other practitioners and get to know other practitioners, because we are in the same field. [] When you come to learning centre and you find something that is common for the sake of the children, so that is an impact of the course. (Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 2, LRL)

This is further reflected in analysis of end-of-course comments, in which 11% respondents noted the course had provided opportunities for increased professional conversations and collaboration. Hence, whilst engagement with an online course may be thought of as a solitary and individual endeavour, these findings illustrate the social nature of both the process of engagement and of the subsequent practice development.

Recognising the potential of online learning and development

Only one of the practitioners interviewed had previously engaged in online learning prior to completing the course. When prompted by the interviewer, eleven practitioners expressed an interest in further online learning opportunities and four specifically asked when and whether there would be a follow up course or asked for recommendations for other courses. For example, when asked whether she would consider another course, one interviewee responded, *'Yes, I do, if there is one, I could. [] Yes, yes, even now I can start'* (Practitioner, Day 2 Centre 3, LRL). Another commented that the technical aspects of online learning would become easier with further practice (Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LCH).

As discussed previously, the support provided by facilitators at the Ntataise network was instrumental to practitioners' successfully and fully accessing the course. However, although there is evidence of increased confidence in using technology, the data tentatively suggests that there was a level of reliance on the facilitators; whilst there was enthusiasm for further learning, there was no evidence that interviewees had independently sought out further opportunities, either by exploring the other courses freely available on the host platform, Openlearncreate, or through the use of search engines.

Thus, the interview data suggests that, notwithstanding some technical and practical challenges, the course, and the notion of online learning were well received by practitioners. The potential of online learning as a medium for continued professional

development was recognised, yet the practitioners interviewed were not yet fully taking advantage of the affordances of mobile devices for professional development.

Conclusion

As a result of this evaluation, a number of aspects of the course emerge as having been successful, four of which are highlighted because they provide evidence to support future development of the programme.

Firstly, the support of Ntataise has been vital. In the first instance they provided pertinent feedback on the course content and presentation, which enabled audience-focused changes to be made. In addition, their integration of the course into their training programme has provided the opportunity for this detailed evaluation.

Secondly, the facilitators played an essential role in helping participants to overcome technical and intellectual challenges; and, the fact that facilitators completed the course themselves impacted positively on participants. The experience of interacting with a facilitator seems to have given some participants the confidence to encourage others to undertake the course, effectively modelling the sort of professional conversations the course design sought to promote.

Thirdly, evidence from both data sets has demonstrated the impact the course has had on early reading pedagogy in practice. Even relatively small changes in practice, such as using a puppet when reading a story, labelling items in the room and sitting at the children's level to read appear to have had a significant impact on practitioners' confidence and produced gains in terms of children's enjoyment.

Finally, the unexpected benefit of developing confidence in and ability to use technology to support learning is significant. Whilst the findings indicate some over reliance on the facilitators, with access to the African Storybook website and numerous other free online resources, practitioners can potentially continue their personal and professional development.

The two programme theories underpinning this evaluation were as follows:

- The Early Reading course will provide an opportunity for practitioners to work together, to undertake collaborative planning and to reflect together on practice. Participation will lead to increased collaboration and professional dialogue (access to use).
- By providing engaging activities directly relevant to their practice, ECD practitioners will be motivated to complete the course and will make small changes to their practice, which over time will become embedded and lead to improvements in practice (use to impact).

This research suggests that the course is achieving what it set out to do. Practitioners reported increased levels of professional dialogue with colleagues and expressed the benefits of working on the course alongside others. This is consistent with evidence from

elsewhere in the TESSA network – building classroom teaching skills is a process of evolution rather than revolution.

The evidence presented suggests that this course has opened-up possibilities for practitioners which could lead to further development over time. Indeed, a few comments suggested that having completed the course, the practitioners would be re-visiting it and making use of the downloadable resources. Others reported that they would be seeking additional online learning opportunities. Through engagement with the course, practitioners developed new and highly valued skills and confidence in the teaching of early reading, and many expressed their pride that they now consider themselves to be much more proficient in this, highlighted by one practitioner:

For me it was wonderful I don't have, I don't see anything changing [about the course] I don't see you changing anything for me it was wonderful maybe it was because it was the first time I saw this for me it was that good I don't think you must change anything.

(Practitioner, Day 2, Centre 1, LRL)

Recommendations

This evaluation proposes five recommendations and lessons for future development:

- Whilst the technology was demanding for some, it was also apparent that participants were resourceful in asking for help and solving their problems. The lack of technical skills should not be a barrier to developing technical solutions, because if the proposed solution is appealing, people find ways to engage. This was also evident in the TESSA MOOC (Stutchbury et al., 2019).
- There is scope to develop the support offered to course facilitators. This is both powerful and potentially disruptive. In conventional cascade models of CPD, the 'master trainers' themselves rarely interact with the ideas they are trying to promote at a classroom level. For example, they tell teachers what they should be doing, without having actually experienced the learning themselves. In this model that was not the case – the Ntataise facilitators all completed the course themselves, which meant engaging with and therefore understanding the activities practitioners were experiencing.
- This approach of combining an online course with face-to-face facilitation enabled learners to capitalise on the affordances of both elements. However, developing practitioners' independent use of technology and autonomy should be included in the aims of the facilitator's role.
- The impact on early reading teaching pedagogy suggests that they could be scope in developing an equivalent course to support the teaching of early numeracy, or an additional 'Level 2' course in early reading. This is something the team are seeking funding to support.
- There are many NGOs working in the ECD sector. An aspiration, as a result of this initial badged online course, is to connect with this wider network and to promote the use of the Early Reading course in the way that Ntataise has modelled.

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