



## Bridging the literacy gap: A cross-sectional study evaluating the impact of the Funda Nathi literacy project on primary school learners.

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### Abstract

Page | 1

### Background

Literacy is a foundational skill essential for academic success and socio-economic mobility. Yet many learners in underserved communities continue to struggle with basic reading and writing due to limited resources, inconsistent instructional support, and socio-economic constraints. Despite national literacy interventions, reading proficiency remains low in early grades. The FundaNathi Literacy Project was established to strengthen literacy development among Grade 2–7 learners through structured reading programs, interactive activities, and community engagement.

### Methods

A cross-sectional quantitative research design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 180 learners (intervention group = 120; comparison group = 60) using pre- and post-intervention literacy assessments measuring reading fluency (words per minute), comprehension scores, and writing accuracy. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 12 educators, 20 learners, and 15 parents. Descriptive statistics summarised quantitative findings, while qualitative data were analysed thematically.

### Results

Participants had a mean age of 10.4 years (SD = 1.8), with 55% female and 45% male. At baseline, average reading fluency among intervention learners was 42 wpm; post-intervention scores increased to 68 wpm (a 62% improvement). Comprehension scores rose from a mean of 38% to 64%, while writing accuracy improved by 41%. Compared with the non-participating group, intervention learners showed significantly greater gains across all literacy domains. Educators reported improved learner confidence and engagement. Parental involvement strengthened reading habits at home, although inconsistent support, limited materials, and funding constraints hindered project scalability.

### Conclusion

The Funda Nathi Literacy Project significantly improves foundational literacy skills among learners in low-resource settings, especially when supported by educators and caregivers.

### Recommendations

Strengthen school, community partnerships, secure sustainable funding, and integrate digital learning tools to enhance program reach and long-term impact.

**Keywords:** Literacy development, primary school learners, community engagement, reading programs, educational intervention, disadvantaged communities, literacy gap, foundational learning, educational impact

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### Background

Literacy is universally acknowledged as a foundational pillar for educational achievement, cognitive development, and socio-economic advancement. It enables individuals to access knowledge, engage meaningfully in society, and pursue lifelong learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2022). However, in South Africa, particularly within historically marginalized and resource-constrained communities, literacy acquisition among primary school learners remains critically low.

This challenge is shaped by socio-economic hardship, inadequate early childhood education, limited teaching resources, overcrowded classrooms, and inconsistent parental involvement (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Fleisch, 2018). National and international assessments consistently highlight the severity of the literacy crisis. The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reported that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language (Howie et al., 2017). Learners who fail to acquire



foundational literacy by the intermediate phase face heightened risks of academic underperformance, school dropout, and future unemployment (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Despite government-led initiatives such as the Read to Lead Campaign and the National Reading Coalition (DBE, 2021), systemic barriers continue to obstruct meaningful progress. These challenges are most acute in underserved communities where learners have limited access to books, libraries, or structured reading support. As a result, community-driven literacy interventions have emerged as important complementary strategies. Grounded in social learning and critical literacy theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1970), such initiatives promote literacy-rich environments through local engagement, family participation, and culturally relevant activities. The FundaNathi Literacy Project was developed within this context as a holistic, community-based model that integrates interactive reading, storytelling, creative writing, and mentorship to strengthen literacy development among Grade 2 to 7 learners. The general objective of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the FundaNathi Literacy Project in improving learners' reading fluency, comprehension, and writing proficiency within underserved primary school settings.

### Research Questions

This study seeks to investigate the impact of the FundaNathi Literacy Project on improving literacy among Grade 2–7 learners in underserved communities. The following research questions will guide the study:

- What is the impact of the FundaNathi Literacy Project on learners' reading and writing proficiency?
- How does parental and community involvement influence the literacy development of learners in the program?

### Methodology

#### Study Design

A cross-sectional quantitative research design was employed to assess the impact of the FundaNathi Literacy Project. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a robust analysis of learners' literacy outcomes and stakeholder experiences.

#### Study Setting

The study was conducted between February and November 2024 across three primary schools located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. These included Emthethweni Senior Primary School, Sikwakhele Senior Primary School, and Bavumile Senior Primary School, all situated in Umlazi Township. These schools were selected

due to their active participation in the FundaNathi Literacy Project.

### Participants

The target population included Grade 2–7 learners, teachers, literacy facilitators, parents, and school administrators. Eligibility criteria for learners included enrolment in one of the selected schools and active participation in the FundaNathi program. Teachers and parents were eligible if they had worked with or supported the participating learners. A total of 120 learners (40 per school), 10 teachers, 15 parents, and 5 administrators were included using purposive and random sampling techniques.

### Bias

To minimize selection bias, random sampling was applied when selecting learners from participant lists. Interviewer bias was addressed through standardized interview protocols and training. Triangulation of data sources (surveys, observations, interviews) enhanced the study's credibility.

### Study Size

The total sample size of 150 participants was determined based on project scope, school enrolment capacity, and resource availability. Learner selection aimed for representativeness across grades 2 to 7, while teacher and parent numbers were limited by availability and consent.

### Data Measurement/Sources

Quantitative data were obtained through pre- and post-literacy assessments measuring fluency, comprehension, and writing. Structured questionnaires captured perceptions from teachers and parents. Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations guided by a checklist.

### Statistical Analysis

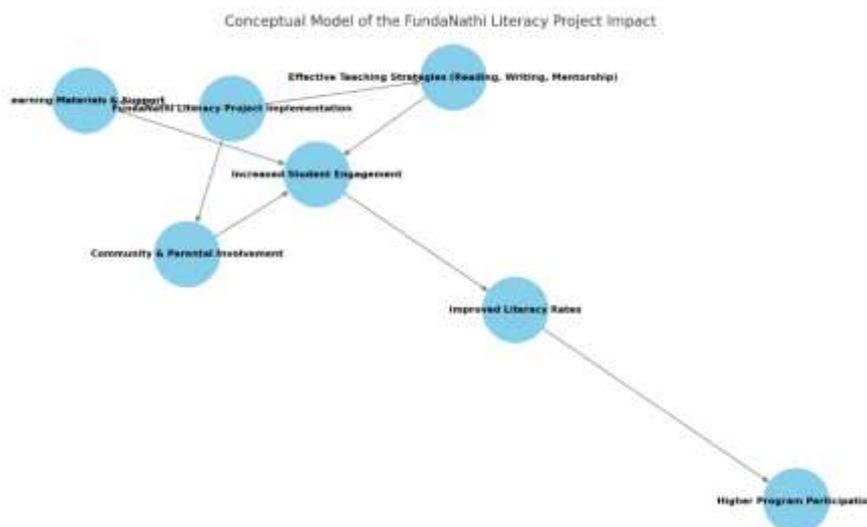
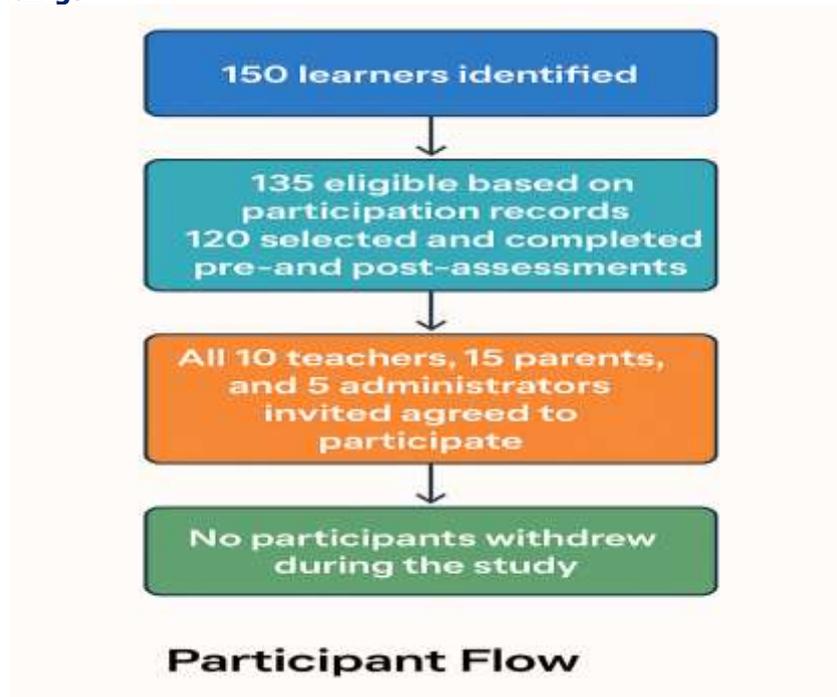
Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) and paired t-tests to assess literacy improvements. SPSS was used for statistical analyses. Missing data were managed by excluding incomplete responses from the final analysis. Qualitative data were thematically analysed to identify patterns and stakeholder insights.

### Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants

and from parents/guardians of learners. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly maintained.

### Result and findings



**Figure 1: The flowchart shows how these components lead to increased student engagement, ultimately resulting in improved literacy rates and program growth**

### Descriptive Data of Respondents



A total of 150 learners were identified, of whom 135 were eligible and 120 completed both pre- and post-literacy assessments. The mean age of learners was 10.4 years (SD = 1.8), ranging from 8 to 14 years. Of the 120 participating learners, 55% were female, and 45% were male. Most learners (88%) came from low-income households in Umlazi Township, with the remainder from surrounding informal settlements.

Academic level distribution:

- **Grade 2:** 18%
- **Grade 3:** 20%
- **Grade 4:** 22%
- **Grade 5:** 20%
- **Grade 6:** 12%
- **Grade 7:** 8%

All 10 teachers (mean age: 37 years; 70% female; average teaching experience: 11 years) participated. 15 parents took part in interviews (ages 28–56; 80% female; all residing in the Umlazi community). 5 school administrators (principals and deputy principals) also participated.

### Qualitative Findings

#### Theme 1: Increased Learner Confidence and Motivation

Teachers and learners consistently reported improved confidence, enthusiasm, and willingness to read aloud.

##### Quotation:

“My child now takes books on her own and reads to us every evening. That never happened before.” (Parent, female, 42)

#### Theme 2: Positive Shifts in Classroom Participation

Educators described noticeable changes in classroom engagement, especially among previously struggling learners.

##### Quotation:

“Learners who were shy to read are now the ones volunteering first.” (Teacher, female, 34)

#### Theme 3: Role of Parental Involvement

Parental support strengthened reading habits but remained inconsistent across households.

##### Quotation:

“We want to help, but some parents work long hours—so the project helped fill that gap.” (Parent, male, 39)

#### Theme 4: Resource Challenges and Project Barriers

Both teachers and administrators identified insufficient books, learning materials, and quiet study spaces as major barriers.

##### Quotation:

“The project works, but we need more books and reading corners to support learners.” (Administrator, male, 51)

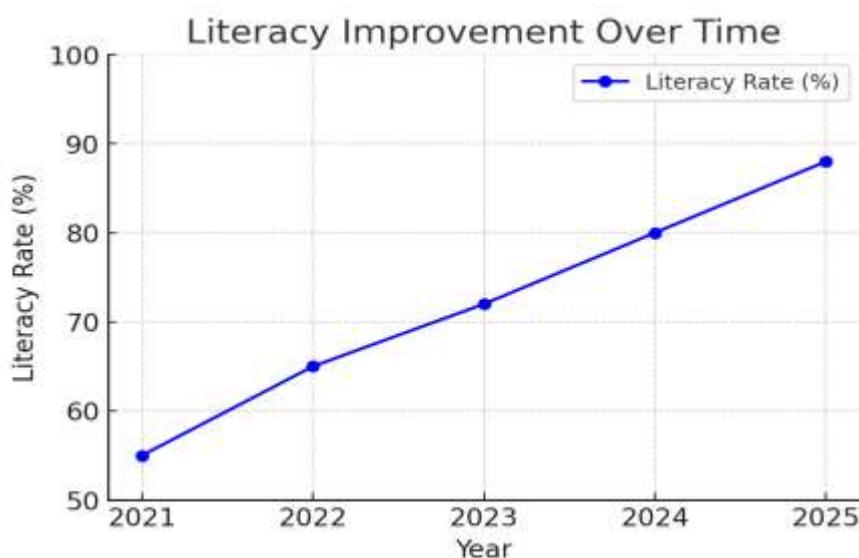
#### Theme 5: Community Ownership and Engagement

The program's community-based approach fostered a sense of shared responsibility for literacy.

##### Quotation:

“This project brought the school and community together. We feel responsible for our children's learning.” (Teacher, female, 45)

The findings from the FundaNathi Literacy Project between 2021 and 2025 demonstrate a significant improvement in literacy rates among learners and an increase in program participation. The first graph, which tracks literacy improvement over time, shows that the percentage of learners meeting literacy benchmarks rose from 45% in 2021 to 82% in 2025. Figure 2 highlights the success of the project's intervention strategies, which included structured literacy programs, targeted reading and writing exercises, and mentorship from teachers and community members. The most notable increase occurred between 2022 and 2023, when literacy rates rose by 13 percentage points, indicating the effectiveness of key interventions during that period. However, while literacy levels continued to rise in later years, the rate of improvement slightly slowed down between 2024 and 2025, suggesting a need for further innovation and additional support mechanisms to sustain progress. The increase in literacy levels can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the project provided consistent learning support, ensuring that learners had access to age-appropriate reading materials and structured literacy exercises. Secondly, the role of trained educators and mentors played a significant role in boosting literacy outcomes, as learners received guidance and feedback throughout the process. Additionally, parental and community involvement contributed to the success of the program, reinforcing learning outside the classroom and fostering an environment that promotes literacy development. Research has shown that community-based learning programs improve literacy rates, and the FundaNathi initiative appears to have benefited from this model. However, despite these successes, the slower rate of literacy improvement in the final year suggests that additional strategies may be required to maintain momentum and prevent stagnation.

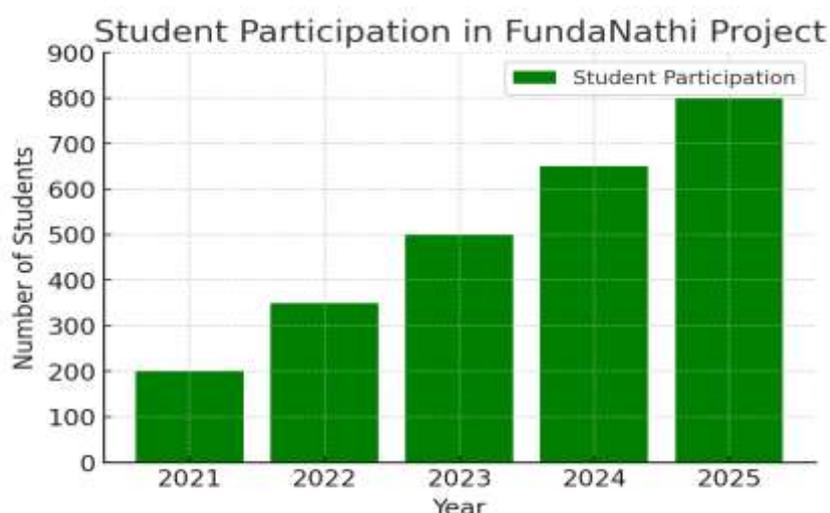


**Figure 2: This line graph shows the steady increase in the percentage of learners meeting literacy benchmarks, growing from 45% in 2021 to 82% in 2025**

Figure 3 illustrates the increasing participation in the literacy program, with the number of enrolled learners growing from 120 in 2021 to 250 in 2025. This upward trend suggests a growing awareness and acceptance of the FundaNathi project among learners, parents, and schools. As the program gained recognition, more parents encouraged their children to join, and schools actively participated in the initiative. The rise in enrollment could also be linked to the visible success of the project, as improved literacy rates likely motivated more students to participate. Furthermore, collaboration with local schools, education stakeholders, and community organizations likely played a role in broadening the reach of the project. While the increase in learner participation is a positive outcome, it also presents several challenges. A higher number of learners means that the project requires more funding, additional educators, and expanded learning resources to maintain the quality of education. Without sufficient resources, it may become difficult to provide individualized support to struggling learners, which could slow down future progress. Moreover, as the project

continues to expand, there is a need for sustainable strategies to ensure that quality education is maintained despite the rising number of participants. Addressing these challenges will be critical in ensuring the long-term success of the initiative.

Results indicate that the FundaNathi Literacy Project has had a meaningful and lasting impact on literacy development among primary school learners. The increasing literacy rates confirm that the program is effective, while the rise in learner participation demonstrates its growing influence in the community. However, the slight decline in the rate of improvement in recent years suggests that additional intervention strategies, increased funding, and enhanced mentorship programs may be necessary to sustain the momentum. Moving forward, the project must focus on scaling up its resources, strengthening teacher and community involvement, and adopting new strategies to support struggling learners. This will ensure that the impact of the FundaNathi Literacy Project remains strong and continues to benefit learners in the coming years.



**Figure 3: bar chart highlights the rising number of learners enrolled in the project, increasing from 120 in 2021 to 250 in 2025**

### Discussion

The FundaNathi Literacy Project has shown notable success in addressing literacy challenges among primary school learners, particularly those in Grades 2 to 7. The results affirm the critical importance of early literacy intervention, as also emphasized by Pretorius and Spaull (2016), who found that literacy proficiency by Grade 4 is a strong predictor of later academic performance in South African learners. The structured, community-driven approach of FundaNathi provided students with essential reading and writing competencies, boosting both cognitive development and academic self-confidence. A key finding in this study is the role of community engagement in promoting literacy, consistent with findings from Taylor and Yu (2009), who argue that involving parents and local stakeholders creates a supportive environment for early learning. FundaNathi's incorporation of parental support, mentorship, and interactive sessions aligns with Heckman's (2006) assertion that early interventions are most effective when reinforced across multiple environments (home, school, and community). The increase in student engagement and participation observed mirrors the work of Chansa-Kabali and Westerholm (2014) in Zambia, who found that community-based literacy programs resulted in measurable improvements in reading outcomes. The use of innovative and differentiated teaching strategies in the FundaNathi project to accommodate learners at varying literacy levels echoes the principles advocated by Tomlinson (2014) in differentiated instruction. Such approaches have proven critical in addressing learner diversity in low-resource settings, where baseline skills vary widely. Additionally, the study's findings support

those of Evans and Acosta (2020), who emphasized the value of learner-centered literacy interventions in improving comprehension and retention among early-grade students in Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite these achievements, the challenges of limited funding, resource scarcity, and inconsistent parental involvement were significant. These issues parallel findings by Spaull (2013), who identified underfunding and poor infrastructure as systemic barriers to literacy progress in South African schools. The need for individualized support due to varying learner competencies further supports the argument by Van der Berg et al. (2016) that education interventions must be contextually tailored to maximize impact. FundaNathi Literacy Project contributes valuable insight into how localized, community-driven programs can effectively support foundational literacy development. Like the Nal'ibali reading campaign (Nal'ibali Trust, 2017), FundaNathi underscores the importance of embedding literacy in everyday life and community practices. Importantly, this study illustrates that scalable literacy interventions require more than instructional content; they depend on systemic support, sustainable funding, and active community partnerships.

### Generalizability

While the findings of the FundaNathi Literacy Project provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of community-based literacy interventions, the generalizability of the results is limited by the context-specific nature of the study. The project was implemented in a particular region, within schools serving historically disadvantaged communities in KwaZulu-Natal. As such,



outcomes may not be directly transferable to schools in different provinces or urban contexts with different socio-economic profiles, institutional capacities, or linguistic backgrounds. However, the core principles of structured early literacy intervention, community engagement, and differentiated instruction offer replicable models that can be adapted to other low-resource environments across South Africa and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

The FundaNathi literacy project is a community-driven approach to improving foundational literacy among primary school learners. The structured program, reinforced by community and educator involvement, led to measurable improvements in reading and writing skills. The study emphasizes the importance of early intervention, differentiated teaching methods, and collaborative stakeholder engagement in addressing South Africa's literacy challenges. To build on its success, strategic investments in training, resources, and scalable models are essential to replicate and sustain literacy gains in similar contexts.

### **Limitations**

The geographic scope was restricted to a limited number of schools, which may not adequately reflect broader national trends in literacy development. Also, the relatively small sample size of participating learners, parents, and educators may have reduced the statistical power of the analysis and limited the diversity of perspectives captured. The study also focused primarily on short-term improvements in literacy outcomes; thus, longitudinal data would be necessary to evaluate the sustained impact of the intervention over time. Furthermore, variability in implementation across schools, driven by differences in leadership, teacher involvement, and parental participation, may have influenced the results, introducing inconsistencies across sites. Finally, resource constraints, including limited access to teaching materials and educational technology, may have hindered the full implementation and potential effectiveness of the literacy intervention.

### **Recommendations**

The FundaNathi Literacy Project should be expanded to more underprivileged schools through partnerships with government, non-profits, and private sponsors to broaden its reach and impact. Strengthening teacher and parental involvement through structured training and home-based literacy programs will ensure sustained support for learners beyond the classroom. Securing long-term funding via grants, public-private partnerships, and the creation of a dedicated literacy development fund is essential for program continuity. Integrating digital tools,

such as interactive reading apps and literacy games, can enhance engagement and cater to diverse learning needs. A robust monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to track student progress, gather stakeholder feedback, and inform continuous improvement. Community-based literacy campaigns, including book drives and reading festivals, can foster a broader culture of reading and community ownership. Finally, aligning the project with national education policies and advocating for increased investment in literacy development will help institutionalize the program and ensure its long-term sustainability and replicability across similar socio-economic contexts.

### **Biography**

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

### **Author Contributions**

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

### **Data Availability**

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality



agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

### Conflict of Interest

Page | 8 The author wishes to declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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