



Learning Brief - Popularising Reading -

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Popularising Reading 2015

How schools and libraries use donated books

Reading changes people's lives. Reading provides access to a world of knowledge and allows for lifelong independent learning. The ability to read well while at school means that learners are better able to study, grasp concepts, synthesize information and communicate their thoughts and ideas with clarity. Research shows that reading for pleasure learners read more, which improves their reading ability, comprehension and ability to learn.

However, the vast majority of young South Africans attending low income schools have little access to reading resources, particularly books and stories that encourage reading for pleasure. Many schools lack libraries altogether^{1,2,3}. Moreover, those that do have libraries often rely on book donations, resulting in collections that are old, out-dated, and unappealing to those that they are intended for⁴. Unfortunately, many of these learners also come from homes that lack reading resources, and live with parents or caregivers that are illiterate⁵.

In order to help close this literary gap, a number of organisations donate books to schools or libraries to provide low cost, easy access to valuable reading resources.

The FunDza Literacy Trust has a dedicated programme doing just this. Through its Popularising Reading programme FunDza is growing a network of more than 250 beneficiary groups (under-resourced schools, community libraries, nonprofit organisations and reading clubs) around the country that promote reading for pleasure. As part of the programme, FunDza donates high-interest, exciting teen and young adult (YA) books and anthologies to these groups.

One of the great challenges, however, is to understand how the books are used and whether they are having an impact on reading and literacy. Books are costly – as is the distribution – so ensuring that the programme has the desired impacts: connecting young people with appropriate texts, encouraging more meaningful engagement with text and showing that reading can be fun, is important.

FunDza's books are carefully selected to be interesting and relevant to a teen/young adult South African readership. Beneficiaries receive books in the *Harmony High* series, about a group of teens who attend Harmony High, (a fictional township school), *Big Ups* anthologies, a collection of FunDza's most popular short stories, as well as other material. In addition the 'Reading Champion' – the organiser of the reading group/library lending system in each group – is also sent activity guides that encourage engagement with the reading materials.

A requirement of this programme involves the completion of annual surveys by the programme implementers in order to monitor the service that FunDza provides and to garner feedback as to its impact.

A monitoring and evaluation specialist analysed the results of the annual surveys received by December 2015. These were completed by the Reading Champions and represented beneficiary groups that were spread across the country, from: the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Free State. The majority of these beneficiary groups were nonprofit organisations

and high schools, while the rest were middle schools, primary schools, combined schools, libraries, and other forms of groups (ranging from special education to correctional services). The surveys represented the aggregate responses of close on 9,000 young South Africans who engaged with FunDza's donated materials.

Here follows some of the findings from the analysis:

Methods of using the books

Beneficiaries were asked to specify how the books were used. Through prior research FunDza has determined that beneficiaries typically use the books in one of four ways: as part of a library/lending system (either in a library or a classroom library); for classroom lessons; in small reading groups; or reading out aloud. Typically groups report using the books in more than one way – i.e. books are lent out and they are used in classroom lessons.

The most frequently cited form of use of both the *Harmony High* books and *Big Ups* anthology was a library or lending system, followed by reading groups, and lastly classroom lessons.

Observed benefits

Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which learners' attitudes towards reading, reading behaviour and comprehension and language skills were positively affected by the programme. On average the beneficiaries noted that the change observed was moderately high.

The study noted that beneficiaries that reported having the most positive change, most frequently used the books in two combinations: reading groups and as part of a library system, and reading groups and classroom lessons.

With those who didn't report such positive change, the groups most frequently used the books in two ways: a library system with classroom lesson, or a library system alone.

While the analysis could not find conclusive evidence about a causal relationship between the ways the books were used and the impacts, we believe that this is worthy of further investigation.

One champion, who reported highly positive change for all learners who had access to the books, used the books both in reading groups and classroom lessons. The activity guides were also used. Although it is impossible to say *how* such change occurred, the champion simply commented: "The FunDza books are very relatable and students read them with ease and enjoyment. We look forward to receiving more of these books in the next academic year."

Types of readers

The survey asked the programme champions to specify the level of change observed in different types of readers. Readers could be either *reluctant* – those who do not enjoy or are not interested in reading; or *keen* – those who love books and reading. And, they could also be *weak* – those who struggle with reading; or *strong* – those who are capable and fluent readers.

Unsurprisingly, keen and strong readers showed the highest average outcome scores. The lowest score among this group was 1.45 (for the outcome "improvement in comprehension/language skills"), while the highest score among the reluctant readers was 1.2 ("shift in attitudes toward reading") and 1.05 among the weak readers ("shift in attitudes toward reading").

Thus, there was a clear discrepancy in reading outcomes among those who enjoy reading and read well, and those who do not enjoy reading or struggle with it.

The obvious, and well-established, challenge for FunDza is thus how to get those who struggle with and are not interested in reading, to engage with books and improve their reading skills.

Usage of activity guides with the books

For some of its books FunDza provides activity guides to help reading champions encourage readers to engage more deeply with the reading content. These guides include: contextual and discussion questions, debate, writing exercises, drama/role-play, and literature work.

The reading champions were asked whether they used the guides, and if they did, which parts of the guides they used most frequently. More than 70% of groups reported using the activity books. The most frequently used activity was the discussion questions, followed by the contextual questions. Debate, writing exercises, and drama/role-play activities were used moderately, and literature work was used the most infrequently out of all of the activities.

There was a strong correlation between those groups that reported the most positive learner outcomes and their usage of the activity books, and the reverse – those that reported low learner outcomes made little use of the activity guides.

Statistical analysis of the results seems to indicate that utilisation of the activity guides is an important component of developing positive change in programme outcomes.

Use of pocket booklets

In addition to the novels and anthologies, FunDza provided some of the beneficiary groups with small pocket booklets (an A6-sized 36 page booklet). These booklets contain a story, information, and discussion surrounding the constitutional rights of South Africans. The booklets are typically sent to large beneficiary groups of high school age. Almost half the groups surveyed received the booklets.

FunDza was interested to find out how these pocket booklets were used – they can be used in a variety of ways: in classroom lessons, as part of a library scheme, as a free giveaway, or for ‘other’ uses. Champions reported most frequently using the booklets as part of a library system or as a free giveaway.

The survey also asked the champions to report on the beneficiaries’ general response to the booklets. Results were overwhelmingly positive; the pocket booklets were enjoyed by the beneficiaries, as they are relevant to their lives, well-written, easy to understand, interesting, useful and informative. The booklets were commended for creating awareness about human rights issues and promoting discussions and debates. Many champions reported that the learners were excited about and liked the fact that they could take them home to read. This rather simple deed is helpful in popularising reading among those who are unable to afford to buy books to own and keep at home. It would thus be useful for FunDza to remind champions to encourage the beneficiaries to consult FunDza’s mobi site; beneficiaries may indeed read and ‘own’ their own free stories.

Only one champion reported an initially negative response from the beneficiaries: “they were a little reluctant to read them, as they thought it would be another sermon on behaviour”. One other commented that the language used in the booklets was a little challenging for the beneficiaries, who were middle school learners.

Lastly, the survey asked champions to rate (*not great, OK, great*) the various components of the pocket booklets: general information on the constitution and human rights, the short story, information about the right, discussion questions, and resource information. On the whole, the components were rated as *great* more so than any other rating. The short story was the most popular part of the pocket booklets, followed by the discussion questions.

General Feedback

The Reading Champions provided general feedback on the programme. The ability of beneficiaries to relate to the stories was cited over and over again by champions as a major contributing factor to the programme's success. (e.g. "For the first time they can connect to a book and they're astounded! "). The stories were commended for being well-written, funny, easy to understand, and educational. They kept beneficiaries engaged and complemented lessons in life skills. They helped to stimulate interest and an enjoyment of reading among the beneficiaries, as well as promote positive attitudes toward reading. Confidence in reading was said to improve by some champions, as well as reading skills and strategies, vocabulary, and comprehension. Many noted that the books stimulated discussions and writing endeavours among the beneficiaries, and helped to improve writing skills.

However, two champions noted that the beneficiaries from rural areas could not identify or relate to the stories about teens living urban lifestyles. Considering the large emphasis placed on the beneficiaries' interest and ability to relate to the stories, this may be something for FunDza to consider for future titles. Additionally, four champions requested age-appropriate stories for foundation phase beneficiaries, as they struggled to relate to the teen-centred stories.

The books were reported as being helpful to teachers as well as the beneficiaries. They helped teachers to plan their lessons by using the books and activities as resources. One champion requested that the stories are accompanied by comprehension tests and writing tasks to facilitate learning.

Many champions were very grateful to the programme as it provided books to those in low-resource circumstances and in remote areas, as one champion wrote: "it is such a blessing to have such rich resources, as sadly each year sees fewer and fewer adequately literate learners progress up into our school". Moreover, due to the lack of resources faced by many of the beneficiary groups, a number of champions requested more books. This was in order to replace damaged or lost copies, and, more frequently mentioned, to be able to allow the beneficiaries to take copies home (a frequent request of the beneficiaries).

Some champions reported that the language of the stories is too complicated for some beneficiaries. One champion requested more titles in isiXhosa, as "it is easier to assist and develop the learners' reading when beginning from their mother tongue". Another suggested shorter stories so that those who are not fluent in English do not lose interest.

Lastly, it was noted that boys are more reluctant to read recreationally than girls. In terms of the numbers of girl versus boy readers analysed through the survey, almost two-thirds of the total readership represents girls. While this survey didn't require the champions to comment on the gender bias previous surveys have shown that girls tend to read more FunDza books for pleasure or participate in reading groups and activities. Some reading champions have noted that while girls are happy to read stories that have boys as the main protagonist, boys are more reluctant to read stories with a girl as the main protagonist. Given that FunDza's books have boys and girls as protagonists, it means that boys who are reluctant to read 'girl' stories tend to have less choice about the books that they read. In the general feedback, one champion mentioned that the Big Ups stories had been labelled as "girl stories" by male

beneficiaries and they will therefore not read them. This champion suggested graphic novels or stories relating to soccer to capture the boys' interest.

Conclusion

The feedback provided by the groups using the books is invaluable in helping FunDza to shape its programme and the type of resources it provides to groups. From this survey some of the key messages are:

1. The current books are in general encouraging young people to read for pleasure and to enjoy reading, in particular because learners can relate to the stories and feel that these reflect their lives.
2. While the above is true, there is a need for simpler, shorter content – particularly for weaker readers.
3. Similarly, there is a need for content aimed more at boys.
4. Results indicate that those groups that use the activity books tend to report greater impacts in terms of literacy development, thus encouraging champions to use the resources may be helpful.

FunDza is already responding to these needs. It will be delivering sets of a new series – Soccer Season – to beneficiary groups this year. The series is written at a slightly easier level than the Harmony High series, while retaining the pace of the latter series to keep readers hooked. We're hoping that the soccer theme will help to get boys hooked on reading. In addition, FunDza is compiling activity books to accompany each of the different series and sets of books that it produces so that the reading champions do have easy access to resources to further literacy development and deepen the reading practice of their students.

More information

To find out more about this study or about FunDza's programmes, please contact:

Mignon Hardie

Email: mignon@fundza.co.za

Telephone: 021 709 0688

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