

## **The Story of a Successful School**

SchoolNet South Africa has been conducting a fascinating research project over the past four years, called Learning Gains through Play (LGP) which is funded by the D G Murray Trust. Ten schools received technology in the form of a bank of tablets with carefully selected apps and Xbox Kinect console, large-screen TV and games. Teachers received personal tablets and intensive professional development training in mastering and embedding technology in classroom teaching and learning and learner-driven activities focusing on learning through play. A change-leadership course for school leaders and a peer-mentoring programme for participating teachers strengthened the project design by creating a supportive environment for these teachers to explore new pedagogies. The peer coaching programme ensure that the learnings from the training would be sustained after the project end.

Learning Gains through Play Project learners were tracked over a four year period to assess their progress in foundational skills. Data was compared with control school learners who were assessed and tracked in the same manner (but did not enjoy the benefits of any of the Learning Gains through Play project inputs). While results showed improved achievement in all five foundational literacies of gross-motor skills, fine-motor skills, numeracy, visual literacy and oral English communication skills, it was the last of these that yielded extraordinarily substantial gains in learning. While all Project school learners showed improved achievement when compared to the Control school learners, one Project school stood out and above the others.

This school was situated on the edge of the informal settlement of Asanda Village between Somerset West and the Strand. This school has almost 1300 learners and 36 teachers. The school is made up entirely of pre-fabricated classrooms and these are often plagued by flooding right up to their entrances and freezing cold or boiling hot inside temperatures depending on the season of the year. Despite the obvious challenges, there is a special kind of magic at play here at this school.



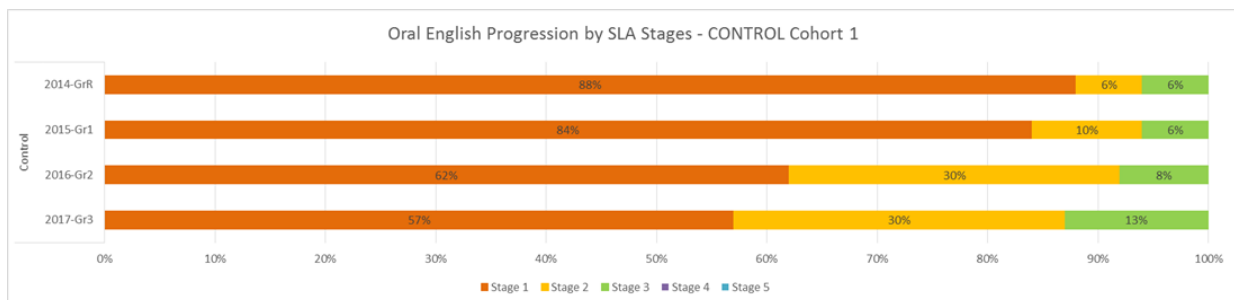
Learners are in class and visibly learning during the day. Teachers are in class, motivated and proud of their activities. The principal is resolute, and together with her deputy and HODs, they are a formidable team pursuing their goals and enacting their plans. There is a great sense of purpose and ambition at this school.

When the LGP project began in 2014, the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) were still being written in South African schools. Grade 1 learners in all ten LGP Project schools and the two Control schools wrote ANAs for Language and Mathematics. These results provided a standardized comparison between all of the schools involved in the project at the start. When ranked according to their Grade 1 2014 ANA results, our Asanda Village school was ninth among the 12 schools involved. This poor ranking was confirmed in the LGP baseline assessments where this school was ranked 10<sup>th</sup> out of the 12 schools. These included the two project schools who occupied positions 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> rankings on ANA results and 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> rankings on LGP baseline results.

Three years later, by the end of the Learning Gains through Play project, this school had risen significantly above all of the other schools to occupy 1<sup>st</sup> position on the ranking scale! This underprivileged school had made the greatest learning gains and achieved the highest overall final assessment results amongst the 12 schools.

When considering the oral English skills assessed over the course of the project, the achievements in this school are extraordinary. All learners were assessed by means of a

scripted interview, face-to-face and one at a time. Learner responses were analysed to place each learner on one of five stages identified by Professor Stephen Krashen<sup>1</sup>, a world leader in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). According to Krashen, students learning a second language move through five predictable stages: Preproduction, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency, and Advanced Fluency. This Stage 1 of “Preproduction” is also known as the “Silent Stage” and the vast majority of learners (both Project and Control) in the Learning Gains through Play project were assessed on this level at the start of the project. Learners were tested each year at the same time of the year through Grade R, Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3 and their progress through the SLA stages recorded. All learners were isiZulu or isiXhosa speakers at home and were taught at school in these same languages.



This graph shows the progress of the Control learners. Even though formal English Additional Language learning was introduced from Grade 1, the bulk of the learners (57%) were still stuck on the Silent Stage 1 after the four Foundation Phase years.

Learners at the school in Asanda Village started behind the Control learners and learners at the other Project schools as 100% of their learners were on the SLA Silent Stage 1 at the beginning. Initial progress was small, but by Grade 2 there was a considerable difference between the oral English skills of this school’s learners compared to the Control learners. By Grade 3 the majority of Control learners (57%) were still on Stage 1 while 100% of this school’s learners had progressed beyond Stage 1 with half of these already at Stage 3 (almost four times the number of Control learners at this stage).

All Learning Gains through Play Project schools received the same project inputs and benefited from change management training for school leaders, teacher professional development workshops, (not just to use the technology but focusing on new pedagogies to integrate the technology and encourage learning through play) and regular visits from Western Cape Education Department e-Learning officials and the SchoolNet team. Yet this need school outperformed all of the other schools, so what is their secret of success?

The Principal, and her Deputy, were personally involved in the LGP project right from the start. When the project was first initiated, the principal consulted with the teachers to prime them and to reassure them of her support. She approached the School Governing Board (SGB) to secure their buy-in and their backing. They agreed to fund the cost of transporting the teachers to the professional development workshops over the three years ahead. The Deputy Head took responsibility for the security and maintenance of the technology and both leaders

kept the teachers encouraged and supported especially at the start through the challenges of mastering the technology. This visionary lady principal could appreciate the value of using technology in all classrooms at her school. By the end of the LGP project, she had secured additional tablets and had devised a plan to use the LGP project teachers to share their newly-acquired expertise with the teachers of other grades at the school on how to effectively use digital tools and resources for learning.

The teachers of all the grades throughout the school were made aware of the LGP project and the feedback from workshops was shared so that other phase teachers could also support the LGP project. The Foundation Phase HOD and the Grade 1 HOD, was an enthusiastic “early adopter” of the technology and actively assisted the straggler teachers to keep up. When one scratches a bit below the surface, it is clear that this school is made up of many teachers who share admiring and supportive relationships, not only at work but in their personal lives too. School leaders and teachers share car lifts home after afternoon workshops; teachers are long-serving and friendships between teachers from their first appointments together exist and grow as they further their studies together. There is an optimistic, dynamic and purposeful air around this prefab school contrasting sharply with the hopelessness of the sprawling impoverished informal settlement right next door. At this successful school, teachers meet opportunities for change with enthusiasm and this contagious energy among a staff with existing positive relationships creates and builds a team for success.

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<sup>1</sup> Krashen, S.D. (1981) Bilingual Education and Second Language Acquisition. *Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework*, 51-79.

