

WRITING COUNTS.

A PRACTICE BASED STRATEGY FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION IN RURAL AFRICAN CONTEXTS.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines a writing-based intervention that aims to improve literacy development. It analyses teacher experiences with the use of an innovative learning resource - an erasable note book - for learners in primary education (grade 3-6 learners). Literacy development is hugely important. It frees the mind, opens doors, and for many children in countries such as Malawi and Kenya, it offers a ladder out of poverty and a path to a promising future. In reality however, attained literacy levels through education are insufficient. Literacy skills include skills for both reading and writing. Arguably, both are equally important for personal, cognitive and emotional development. Writing is not only a critical foundational skill, it is also very challenging to teach and to learn. However, development of writing proficiency is underrepresented in international research and literacy programmes. This study covers areas in which empirical evidence is scarce (Graham, 2018).

This is the first of two studies that investigate the potential value of using the erasable notebook for literacy development in primary education. It seeks to find out (1) how the teachers use the tool in their classrooms, (2) what type of in-school support they provide and receive, (3) if the introduction of the erasable notebook helps them to improve their teaching, and if so in what aspects, (4) what challenges they encounter and (5) how they practice and assess writing skills of their learners. A second study is underway to find out if the intervention leads to improved writing proficiency.

PROJECT CONTEXT

Edukans aims to improve education quality for communities, children and youth in rural and marginalised settings. It has offices in the Netherlands, Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Malawi. The intervention central to this study, is part of Edukans' 'Teaching with Impact' (TWI) teacher training. This is a hands-on teaching training which is strongly aligned to the style of teaching that is required in the context



of pedagogical reform programmes such as the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya. With funding by the Dutch zip-code lottery, Edukans partnered up with Correctbook in 2020. Erasable notebooks were made available for all learners in the classrooms of the trainee teachers. The assumption was that this would offer new possibilities for learners to practice. This could for example benefit development of handwriting and creative writing. To stimulate teachers to take advantage of these possibilities, an exercise book was developed 'Learning to write, writing to learn' with 'Correctbook tasks' for teachers to carry out in their daily practice.

These trainings and consequential implementation in classrooms has taken place in since 2020 in approximately 500 schools reaching 7550 teachers in 5 countries (Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Ethiopia, Ghana).

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In order to investigate the key aspects of improved teaching and learning related to writing instruction, the structure of the 'writing framework' proposed by Van Weijen & Janssen (2018) was followed. A distinction is made between (1) *general characteristics of high quality education that are relevant for all subjects*, (2) *teachers' professional qualities* and (3) *specific variables for writing instruction*. In accordance with this framework, the dynamic model of educational effectiveness (Kyrikiades et al. 2009) and the International Comparative Analysis of Learning and Teaching (Van de Grift, 2007) were incorporated. In addition, to contextualise framework for primary education in Kenya and Malawi, dominant elements of quality education reform programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa were integrated. In these reforms discovery-based approaches rooted in a social constructivist learning philosophy are dominant (Westbrook et al., 2013; Altinyelken & Hoeksma, 2021). For category 3, the process-oriented approach for writing was followed (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014; De La Paz & McCutchen, 2011). Graham & Rijlaarsdam (2016) and Purves (1992) provided viewpoints for criteria and standards in the context of writing assessment.

METHODS

The current study takes a qualitative and evaluative approach to gain insights from implementation experiences from Kenya and Malawi. Methods include interviews and classroom observations of five teachers in both countries (the participants), classroom observations of another 35 teachers and a focus group discussion.

In both countries a sampling procedure was followed to create a mix of participants that would be representative for the total group of trained teachers. In addition gender balance was taken into account. The interviews were semi-structured to avoid overlooking important underlying constructs and phenomena. They interviews were carried out in person by local researchers in Malawi (two interviewers) and Kenya (single interviewer). For classroom observation two observation instruments were used: the effective pedagogical behaviour (EPB) assessment tool and the Active Teaching and Learning (ATL) observation tool. Both measure general characteristics of effective teaching and teachers' professional quality.

The aim of the focus group discussion with 4 Kenyan teachers was to gain more in-depth understanding of the development of learners' writing skills and the mechanisms behind this development.



EPB OBSERVATION (5 POINT SCALE)

Skills for:

- ✓ Creating Safe Learning Environment,
- ✓ Classroom Management
- ✓ Effective instruction
- ✓ Intense and Differentiated learning



ATL OBSERVATION (4 POINT SCALE)

Skills for:

- ✓ Variation
- ✓ Real life practice
- ✓ Concept building
- ✓ Assessment
- ✓ Encouraging confidence
- ✓ Time on task
- ✓ Critical and creative thinking
- ✓ Initiative and independence

RESULTS

(1) How do the teachers use the erasable notebook it in their classrooms. Firstly, they use it in all subjects. One teacher even reported how his learners worked with it in physical education lessons. Secondly, they always use it in combination with text books, exercise and paper note books. Thirdly, the majority of the teachers in Kenya make reference to the alignment of this approach to CBC and the need to organise more peer and group work and to introduce exercises that stimulate higher order learning.

Students take notes throughout the lesson (e.g. in dictation or summarising key points) and draft answers to questions or exercises. They are also encouraged to make drawings (e.g. of geometrical shapes in maths lessons); most teachers had not considered drawing before. More than before teachers organise peer learning, for example by instructing their students to compare their notes with each other, and assess and revise their work.

(2) What type of in school support do they provide and receive? While implementing the approach, teachers received support from their peers and head teacher. In Kenya all teachers mention having received useful feedback from their colleagues and in some cases the head teacher. This has increased their confidence to apply the tool in the classroom. In Malawi there is less evidence from support on school level.

(3) Did it help improve teaching and learning; and if so, in what aspects? Many aspects were repeatedly mentioned and confirmed by observation; e.g. increased time on task, more focused practice, more critical or creative thinking activities, more learner initiative. Some remarked that their job of teaching became easier, others found that the workload had shifted from the delivering the lesson itself to lesson preparation.

- ✓ **K3:** So, we engage the learners more, we find that the learners are no longer relying on the teacher.
- ✓ **K1:** I stopped having a passive class. The classes are very active and the teacher spends more time on preparing and using a variety of teaching methods.
- ✓ **K3:** They acquired more vocab by doing exercises. Automation is important and motivation as the realising that they are doing well.



- ✓ “We have a lot what we do with the correctbooks, especially with the new CBC curriculum we really do a lot like drawing, dictation, asking and answering questions, most of them are written. That is why we find the correctbook very important to us. There are so many activities”
- ✓ “In English we have dictation and matching items or sentences or finishing up sentences. Then we use it mostly in dictation where the learners learn how to write new words.”
- ✓ “ When it comes to mathematics, we have our shapes. These learners are able to draw good shapes like the triangles, the rectangles and the cubes, and the correct books actually helped us a lot on that. In mathematics, the correct books are being used in our classes, especially in class six.”

Observations on the EPB instrument confirmed claims by teachers that they improved in offering clear and structured instructions with clear goals, as well as well-structured lessons.

Teachers also regularly carried out classroom assessments and adapted instruction, tasks, and guidance to differences between students. This confirms various statements indicating that teachers perceive the tool to be an important resource for differentiation. Especially in Kenya, participants routinely used the erasable notebook for quick assessments of (pre-) knowledge and systematically monitored the progress and understanding of the learners during the lessons by going around class and checking their erasable notebooks.

- ✓ **K4:** If a learner is good at handwriting they can write, but if a learner is not good at handwriting, they can draw. They feel appreciated in this way.
- ✓ **K2:** I am able to identify the progress of this learner in writing because you realise that maybe in the first exercises, this learner was not able to shape some letters majorly F and maybe I and some even find it difficult in writing the letter A.

Without exception, participants witnessed increased motivation in their classrooms. Their learners looked forward to work with the erasable notebook and were ready to go at the start of the lesson. The teacher-student interactions mentioned had a direct, active and immediate character. A lot of enjoyment was reported and observed.

- ✓ **K1:** In fact they are the ones that motivate me even more. They want homework, they want work, they want to use the correctbook. So I feel motivated also.
- ✓ **K3:** Curiosity of learning has risen. With the use of the CB they want to learn more. This has improved in most of the learners
- ✓ **K2:** The learners are motivated, the moment you walk in the classroom, you see they do not have the textbooks (on the side) and have the correctbook in front. They are always prepared and motivated to use it.

Associated with remarks about motivation, teachers repeatedly reported confidence in implementing the approach.

- ✓ **K1:** I have alot of confidence, I have seen the impact on the learners and I have seen the learners happy. And for me as a teacher it is very very important, very vital.

Some teachers gave examples of teachers planning creative ways to trigger learners' imagination.

- ✓ **FG.T1:** I found a newspaper showing a picture, impact of a drought with cracking soil and no water. Using this exercise I asked them to write a story about what could have happened. This way we are feeding their curiosity.
- ✓ **K3:** Then I engage them and ask the learners to draw something that I saw on my way to school. Provoking the mind of the learners, involves critical thinking.

Most participants witness that students engaged in erasable notebook writing are less afraid to make mistakes. It is different compared to writing in an ordinary notebook. They are not held back and teachers in some cases get the message across that making mistakes is a good thing for learning.

- ✓ **K4:** ... When you keep on practising you become better. I teach math and this requires a lot of practice. because of the CB these learners do not feel ashamed to do all the calculations in the correct book for practice. ... They are not afraid to draw a lot of diagrams and make mistakes, because you can erase the wrong ones and they can practice and learn more.
- ✓ **K2:** One thing I've learned ... is since I told them I'd like to see some good and writing from them they don't hurry. They like writing and writing on one page, repeating the same exercise on another page, and then they try to compare the handwriting and they choose which one is the best.

(4) What challenges did they perceive?

Most of the teachers mentioned that they were very content using the erasable notebook. The only thing mentioned in every interview is that the pens that dry out. This is a point that needs attention.

- ✓ **K1:** The pen dries up. Although it doesn't dry completely, it dries up for some time and then dries again. It writes again and then dries again. ry. So that is the major challenge that we have faced.

At school level some express need for further in-service training on how the erasable notebook can be used to strengthen implementation of the CBC.

- ✓ **K2:** Well, we had the ATL training, but the time located for that time was insufficient. The training never took enough time, to actually empower the teacher to become very efficient. We need more training. [...] The trainer thought we understood but when we went back to the schools, we realised all the teachers had different formats. Those are some of the things why we need more time.

The results on RQ 5 and 6, are based on the focus group discussion with four Kenyan teachers who received a training in applying exercises "Learning to Write" specifically aimed at improving writing proficiency making best use of the erasable notebook.

(5) How do teachers apply and contextualise writing exercises introduced in the training?

The participants repeatedly mentioned having applied 'Wonderful words', 'Name poem', 'Flash words', 'Word chain', 'Many-more-most', 'Extended sentences', 'High five' and 'What happened'. These tasks stimulated practice to improve automation, handwriting, vocabulary, grammar, spelling and creative writing, which was all new for the participants. All gave examples of how they contextualised the tasks.

A recurrent theme in the focus group discussion was the playful practice of many exercises.

Teacher M: Devised a game, make a physical circle ... children standing in a circle ... with creating a a chain of word. Moving around. Angela says "Cut". Tony comes (his name starts with T). ... Some word never made sense and we laughed.

Their reports on how they applied these exercises pointed towards confidence in selecting and shaping tasks in response to what the situation called for. They would for example select exercises that addressed earlier identified challenges in sentence structure or grammar. In other cases they would respond to the perceived motivation and witnessed fun from the learners' part to spend (more) time on certain tasks.

(6) How they assess specific sub-skills in writing of their students

The grading scale was designed in rubrics assessment table allowing teachers to score performance on three criteria: audience awareness, text organisation and handwriting. For the grade 5-6 classes sentence construction was added as forth criterion. Teachers were comfortable with the rubrics assessment method because they had been doing this since the introduction of CBC. They also found that the criteria were well aligned with the curriculum and were positive with the addition of standard performance descriptions which they could use for assessment. Providing standards for grading was helpful and guiding for teachers and through feedback also for their students.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Teachers strongly valued the introduction of the erasable notebook a resource for their learners. In general they applied it as often as they could and in all possible subjects. In Kenya, all teachers stress how it helps to bring the type of teaching that CBC requires into practice in their classrooms. Teachers do not use it as a replacement for notebooks but welcome it as an additional resource to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

The approach benefited the quality of teaching and learning

Teachers' detailed reports are confirmed by observation data. There was increased attention for learning activities that involved critical or creative thinking, teachers improved on differentiated teaching and in skills for structured teaching. These benefits are associated with increased motivation by students and teachers alike. Teachers and learners reinforced each other in working together intensely. It brought out creativity in teachers in preparing customised writing exercises for their lessons.

The results cannot solely be attributed to the introduction of the erasable notebook

The resource was delivered together with the teacher guide “Learning to Write, Writing to Learn” and a two day teacher training. Teachers report that the teacher guide, training and post training peer-support together increased their confidence to use the tool and prepare well for their lessons. Also, the pedagogical approach behind most writing exercises could also be realised with ordinary (non-erasable) notebooks.

It does however offer unique advantages for teaching and learning

In the context of the rural classrooms it stimulates the brain in often poorly resourced and non-stimulating classroom environments. The erasable feature of the tool facilitates teachers to elicit powerful learning activities in the context of writing. Learners joyfully engage in a sequence of writing, assessing, comparing, rewriting, drawing, erasing and revising activities. Moreover, they are far less held back by the fear of making mistakes. This helps develop a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016).

The dry pens are a challenge

The pens dried up and needed to be replaced regularly. Another challenge is the availability of sufficient time for teacher professional development.

Teachers contextualise (playful) writing tasks with confidence

Early findings point out teachers ability to adapt tasks to their own context and carry them out with confidence. Playfulness is a recurring element of writing exercises that teachers design themselves. A grading scale containing standard descriptions to assess the quality of audience awareness, handwriting and text organisation is a promising tool for professional development of language teachers. It is aligned with rubrics assessment that is carried out in CBC and adds important guiding elements for precise (formative) assessment.

With these current results we can reflect on a number of questions:

1. Can we single out the active working ingredients behind the positive user experience and use these to strengthen the intervention?

Underlying the apparent success of the approach studied, we do not know the relative importance of the different elements. These are: 1. Erasable notebook with its unique features (erasability,



multiple use); 2. Exercise book with writing tasks, 3. Grading table to assess writing, 4. Teacher training sessions and 5. Peer guidance in schools. We are inclined to conclude that the first mentioned element (the erasable notebook itself) is central to all positive perceptions and benefits. What would happen if one or more of the other four elements were taken out? This may be relevant for future implementation.

2. Which insights are worth sharing to inspire educational development programmes?

The attention channelled towards international reading programmes, is not matched by attention for writing. In this case we have studied an innovative intervention that is observed to potentially boost the development of writing skills. This is a promising discovery for literacy development with potential large impact for learning and development of individual learners in deprived contexts. Another insight is the potential to help teachers to implement new competency based curricula. Everywhere pedagogical reforms are taking place, mostly with mixed results and large implementation challenges in the field. This practical writing intervention could be a practice to consider.

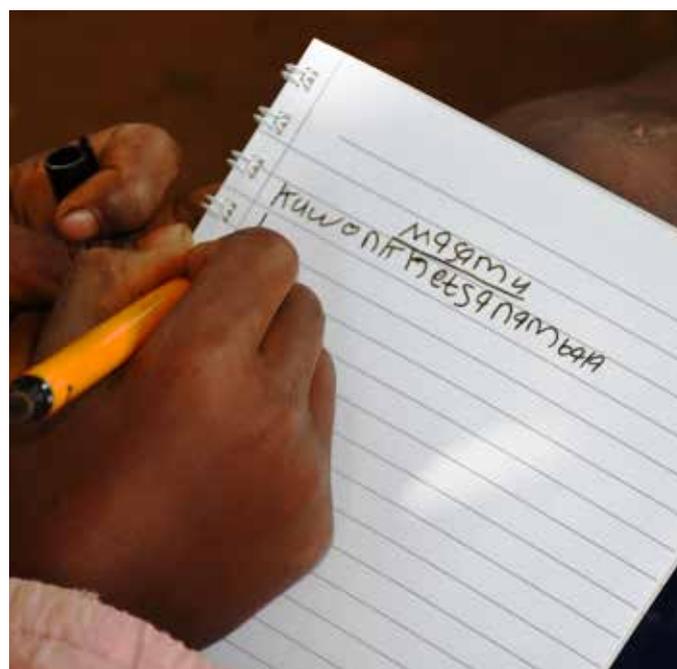
3. What should be the focus of further research?

This design of this intervention was inspired by studies that highlight the importance of writing. If

teachers routinely apply the right focus, writing tasks can have a huge impact in cognitive development. As mentioned above, writing is a key skill for literacy development next to reading. Writing is often regarded as the most challenging skill to teach and learn. Its demands on motoric skills, cognitive and linguistic abilities and awareness of text and social conventions poses problems for teachers and learners alike. This study points out that systematic instruction in fundamental writing can be adapted in large classroom in rural African primary schools. Building on the current findings, further research with a focus on writing instruction in lower income countries could contribute to the design of additional pathways for literacy development.

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