GROWING TREE:
An integrated approach to early years learning

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Higherlife Foundation

1.   Introduction and Background

This study examined the effectiveness of the Growing Tree Program in improving learning outcomes of foundational phase learners. The study was critical in understanding how to build a resilient foundational phase education program that will help children make up time they lost out of school and be able to guide the learning process in the event of future pandemics.

Over 4.6 million children in Zimbabwe were left without access to education as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the country into lockdown and schools to subsequently shut. Each day schools were closed children lost an average of six hours of learning with those in the foundational phase affected the most (UNICEF, 2020). Loss of learning exacerbated challenges early learners faced prior to the pandemic which included shortage of educators, shortage of schools and the prohibitive cost of delivering education. Moshiri, Gasasira and Gijzen (2020) posit that students in the foundational learning phase affected by the closure of schools could experience 3% lower income over their entire lifetimes.

Working through Simba Education, Higherlife Foundation (HLF) designed specific foundational phase learning programs. The Growing Tree Program provides early years learners with literacy and numeracy content that can be used by children of all ages to develop these skills. Instrumental to this initiative was the development of a guided early learners' exercise book known as the Growing Tree Book (GTB). The book offers a practical way of learning through different themes that incorporate learning outcomes intended for early learners. Through the pilot project conducted during the January to March 2021 lockdown, the book was distributed to 1,375 early years' learners across the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe. Students who received the book were expected to attend the Growing Tree lessons held live on Zoom or pre-recorded on the Growing Tree portal.

This study examines the effectiveness of the Growing Tree Program in improving the learning outcomes of foundational phase learners with the view of providing sustainable solutions in addressing teaching and learning challenges in a crisis period. The study was experimentally designed with two groups; early learners who attended the Growing Tree foundational phase learning lessons (the treatment group), and learners who did not attend the lessons (control group). The learning outcomes of the two groups were compared leading to the generation of results presented in this white paper.

2. The Growing Tree Program

The Growing Tree Program (GTP) is anchored on HLF's programming philosophy which recognises the need to design and implement transformational, catalytic, and sustainable community programs. The model takes a holistic approach integrating educator, learning material, caregiver, and community, with the learner at the heart of the program. The approach encourages continuous learning at home, accelerates learning and assists in alleviating learning losses. The robustness of the GTP enables it to address challenges of access to quality education, poor literacy and numeracy skills, underqualified early caregivers, and communities distanced from education of its children. The GTB was distributed for use as a supplementary aid for parents, teachers, and caregivers.

The program put Simba teachers at the centre of conducting online lessons using the online video conferencing platform Zoom. Online classes were structured into three age groups: Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3. Additionally, the program offered an offline capability to cater for students in remotes parts of the country where access to the internet is a challenge. Community champions were trained to facilitate and support offline connectivity in institutions and communities.

3. Results

Evidence from the evaluation revealed that the Growing Tree Program can significantly increase learners' literacy and numeracy skills. The results also showed transfer of digital skills for both the learner and the caregiver during the learning process. More than 80% of the learners and caregivers, were participating in digital interactive learning for the first time. Due to the availability of classes on demand, the GTP proved effective for students in need of remedial learning. 60% of learners who used the GTB identified drawing exercises and colouring as some of the outstanding features of the program. These features are critical in developing writing and other skills including fine motor coordination and accurate finger grip in children. Important to note is the holistic form of learning supported during the implementation phase. Caregivers who live with learners in institutions were instrumental as they assisted the learners to complete their daily exercises. More than 90% of the learners received help from either caregivers or older siblings in their institutions. The 10% who indicated to have not received any assistance from anyone were learners who believed they were capable to navigate on their own.

Numeracy

Results from the assessment indicate that in all the institutions across the 10 provinces participants were able to recognise numbers 1 to 10. This was a critical aspect of the project since number recognition and associated skills are critical in early education. Learners who participated in the Growing Tree Program were able to recognise numbers more than those who did not. 75% of the treatment group were able to identify numbers as compared to 11% of control group. This statistically significant difference in numeracy skills between the two groups demonstrates the effectiveness of The Growing Tree Program in improving numeracy skills for early learners.

Literacy

Learning to read is challenging for children who are unable to recognise letters and name them using their sounds. Early years leaners who exit the foundational learning phase with low literacy skills fall behind and stay behind. The results of the assessment indicated that 77% of the treatment group and 14% of the control group were able to identify letters demonstrating a statically significance difference between the two groups. The Growing Tree Program was therefore effective at improving literacy skills for early learners.

Writing

The evaluation assessed the ability of learners to write their names and the alphabet. The standard practice states that by the age of 6, one should be able to copy or write their names. Learners must also be able to write the alphabet without missing any letters in both uppercase and lowercase letters without changing forms. As the learners proceed to the age of 7, they should no longer reverse the letters of the alphabet (for example, 'b' and 'd'). Results from the assessment indicate that 73% of the treatment group and 13% of the control group were able to write their names demonstrating the effectiveness of the GTP as more participants could write their names than those who did not participate.
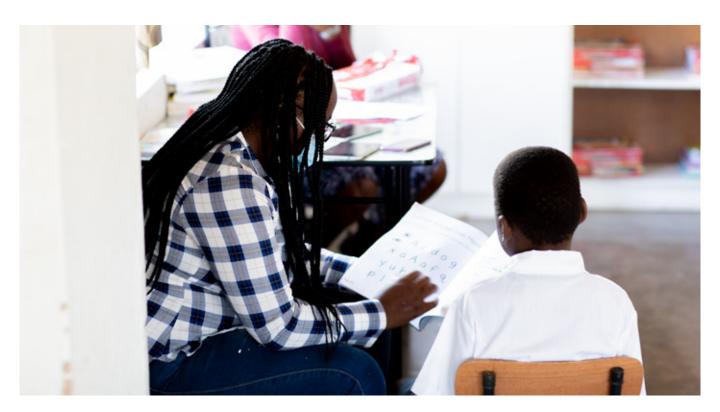
4. Recommendations

Preventing a generation to fall behind academically due to a gap in early years learning must be a top priority. It is imperative for early learners to receive quality foundational education. Harnessing lessons from the Growing Tree Program can aid in ensuring early learners are effectively supported. Taking such an approach ensures inclusiveness in providing quality early years learning. Below are some recommendations based on the assessment and evaluation of the Growing Tree Program.

Remedial learning initiatives targeted at early years learners

As different initiatives were put in place to accelerate the learning process in response to the prolonged closure of schools, strategies implemented by development partners largely focused on higher grades resulting in early year's learners without direct interventions that addressed their learning needs. Caregivers interviewed in the study acknowledged the important role that the Growing Tree Program has played in providing the platform for early years students to learn and cover the lost time out of school. As governments and development partners initiate strategies aimed at providing quality education, a deliberate effort must be made to ensure that learning opportunities are provided for early years learners. Initiatives supporting early years learners should be prioritised as losses at the foundational phase of learning have a huge impact in the economic development of nations.

Equipping guardians and community champions in supporting early years education

The study noted the important role of parents, guardians and community champions play in providing quality education to early years learners. To effectively implement strategies aimed at assisting early years learners to study at home, those taking care of the children need to be empowered with the requisite skills. Against this background, as development strategies are put in place to ensure quality education is provided at home and in the community, capacity building initiatives should be implemented for those taking care of the children. The duty to educate learners is no longer the sole responsibility for educators but involves the whole community. The community champions model is a testimony to the redefined role of the home and the community in providing quality education for foundational phase learners.

4. Recommendations

Leverage on technology for early years learners

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us agility and the need to harness technology to support learning. The pandemic proved the importance of technology as a tool to educate foundational phase learners. Caregivers in the study revealed that the online lessons provided through the Growing Tree Program and the offline Growing Tree portal have been key in enabling children to learn. Leveraging on technology requires one to appreciate that children come from different backgrounds which include those with access to devices and strong internet connectivity as well as those that come from remote areas with no internet connectivity and devices to connect online. Leveraging on technology, therefore, while a game changer in providing of quality education for early years learners, requires a holistic approach in its implementation.

Strengthen the resilience of the education system

Early years learning is an undeniable human right that serves as the foundation for just, egalitarian, and inclusive societies as well as a crucial engine of long-term growth. Strengthening early years learning education systems will allow developing countries to leapfrog themselves towards becoming upper middle-income countries. Measures to "rebuild resilience" and reach all learners must recognise and address the needs of marginalised populations, ensuring that they receive high-quality, long-term education.

Conclusion

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that education systems will be unable to return to the world as they were before. Foundational learning losses are the most difficult to recover from and can have a substantial impact on a child's cumulative learning and future chances. Societies must ensure that education systems are resilient, integrated and leverage technology to provide quality early years education.

References

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