



# Early literacy intervention in the Northern Cape: *Lessons learned in the Lesedi area in year one*

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This Learning Brief presents observations and reflections from Wordworks and its partners on implementing the Stellar Home Language Programme around the Lesedi Power Project area in South Africa's Northern Cape province. It highlights the challenges encountered during the intervention and the strategies used to address them, offering insights for best practice models.

This resource-rich programme, which combines theory and practice to enhance teachers' skills and encourage collaboration with parents, has previously also been implemented by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) in schools throughout the two provinces. Over 50 schools in the North West, Limpopo and the Northern Cape provinces are also using Stellar in their Grade R classrooms.



## **Wordworks, the Lesedi Solar Park Trust and DG Murray Trust collaborate in the Northern Cape**

[Wordworks](#) is a South African non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting early language and literacy development during the first eight years of a child's life (Wordworks, n.d.). In 2023, Wordworks partnered with the Lesedi Solar Park Trust to improve literacy outcomes in communities surrounding the Lesedi Solar Park. The Lesedi Solar Park Trust, whose funds are administered by DGMT, was established to reduce barriers to human development and support black communities within a 50km radius of the Lesedi Solar Power Project in the Northern Cape, with the goal of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty (DGMT, 2023). It was created under the Department of Energy's Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement (REIPPP) programme and is funded for 20 years, with a possible extension.

As part of the agreement, Wordworks introduced the [Stellar Home Language Programme](#) in four selected schools within the area (Wordworks, 2024). The Stellar programme supports Grade R teachers in strengthening language and emergent literacy through an interactive, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)-aligned, story-based framework.



In the Lesedi area, the pilot initiative specifically targets schools where Setswana is used as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in the foundation phase. This intervention spans two years, with teacher training and implementation support having taken place in 2024, and continues in 2025 with ongoing support and Community of Practice (CoP) sessions. The project will conclude in 2026 with a review of key learnings and insights.



So far, the collaboration between Wordworks and DGMT's Lesedi Solar Park Trust to implement the Stellar programme has been largely successful over the past year. Positive feedback from teachers and growing interest from the Northern Cape Department of Education (NCDoE) has underscored the programme's impact, leading to discussions about expanding the Stellar programme to all Grade R classrooms in the Northern Cape. Inevitably, there were some challenges in the first year of implementation. These include variations in the pace of adoption and a change in the regulatory framework causing teacher attrition.



Grade R class at Sha-Leje (November 2024)



Grade R class at Refentse (October 2024)



Grade R class at HTT Bidi (November 2024)



Grade R class at Danielskuil (October 2024)

A closer look at the four schools which took part in the Stellar programme in 2024 (pictured left to right): Sha-Leje Primary, Refentse Primary, HTT Bidi Memorial Primary, and Danielskuil Intermediate.

Sha-Leje and Refentse are both rural schools located in small villages. The two schools had significantly fewer learners in 2024 (63 and 220, respectively) compared to Danielskuil and HTT Bidi, peri-urban schools with much larger enrollments of 848 and 1,398 learners in 2024 (von Blottnitz, 2024).

## Challenges during the first year of implementation

### Variations in programme implementation

In an earlier report, *Wordworks' First 100 Days in the Lesedi Region: Early Lessons Learnt* (von Blottnitz, 2024), perceived challenges were identified in the schools, varying from funding and infrastructure to management. While programme implementation varied across schools, most of these challenges were ultimately confirmed.

Throughout the first year of implementation, classroom observations and trainer feedback revealed unequal pace of improvements in teacher practice across the schools. In two of the schools, the Grade R teachers embraced the Stellar programme rapidly, demonstrating adaptability, completing Stellar activities, making consistent weekly progress with Stellar stories, and integrating Stellar materials into daily teaching. By April 2024 (Term 2), the trainer described the teachers at these schools as "very well prepared" and "implementing Stellar nicely and consistently," with learners reportedly "enjoying [the programme] and learning."



In the first half of the year, the third school still showed room for improvement in terms of preparedness and implementation consistency. Targeted interventions, including feedback and coaching, additional support sessions, and engagements with school management, yielded some progress, and teachers showed far more convincing levels of engagement in Terms 3 and 4.

At the fourth school, however, despite repeated interventions, including mentorship from a peer from the neighbouring school, the teacher continued to demonstrate low levels of preparedness and confidence in delivering the programme. Nonetheless, learners responded well to the story-based and letter-sound activities, as well as the small-group learning central to the Stellar programme, gradually increasing their engagement. While the programme proved beneficial for them, its impact was limited by inconsistent implementation. In 2025 that school withdrew from the project (see next section).





## Amendment to the qualification requirements for Grade R teachers in the Northern Cape

The Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (South Africa, 2024) made Grade R compulsory for South African learners—a positive step toward ensuring stronger educational foundations for all. The signing of the act prompted the NCDoe to release a circular introducing new qualification requirements for Grade R teachers. To continue teaching in the Northern Cape, practitioners must now have either a Bachelor of Education in Foundation Phase, a Diploma in Grade R Teaching (which limits them to teaching Grade R only), or a reasonable number of credits with proof of registration toward one of these qualifications (Northern Cape Department of Education, 2024). This has created challenges for several schools, including those in the Lesedi project, where teachers did not meet the required qualifications.

As a result of Circular 35/2024, two project schools lost their Grade R teachers in 2025. In the smallest of them, where implementation challenges were already a concern, replacing the teacher became unnecessary, as enrollment in Grade R for 2025 was too low to form a Grade R class. At the other school, the loss of a highly effective teacher, who excelled in implementing the Stellar programme, posed a different challenge. The need to replace a teacher who had demonstrated strong performance raised concerns about maintaining the programme's success and continuity. Luckily, a Grade R teacher with previous experience in the Stellar programme was hired as a replacement. Ensuring that teachers receive the necessary training and support in 2025 remains key to sustaining progress in participating schools.



### Other notable challenges

An additional challenge in all schools was the limited engagement from Foundation Phase Department Heads (DHs), who were expected to attend Stellar training and support Grade R teachers with curriculum planning and assessments. In most schools, their involvement remained minimal until late in the year. The acting status of DHs may have contributed to this low level of engagement: in very small schools, where the staff complement is insufficient to warrant a formal departmental appointment into this position, a full-time teacher was asked to act as DH, with little recognition. The larger schools, with 3-5 classes per grade, acknowledged that a single appointed DH should not be expected to oversee and coordinate a large team of teachers across four grades in addition to her teaching load, and therefore appointed a second DH, supporting in an acting position, sometimes with confusion in the distribution of responsibilities.

Both scenarios did not play in favour of a full engagement of the DH behind the Grade R teachers.

Possibly as a result of the low engagement levels of school management, infringements on teaching time were observed, with teachers being pulled into non-teaching activities like outings and athletics days. This contributed to incomplete curriculum coverage. Luckily, school principals at most schools were highly supportive of the Stellar programme. Wordworks is exploring avenues to achieve greater accountability and more present leadership to ensure that instructional time is prioritised and that teachers receive the necessary support to deliver the programme effectively.

## Lessons learned during the first year

Despite some implementation challenges and delays in adoption at one of the schools, the Stellar programme in the Lesedi area has been largely successful. Its impact has drawn interest from the NCDoe, which is considering expanding the programme to all Grade R classrooms in the province. In 2024, Grade R teachers across all participating schools reported positive changes in the classroom and particularly enjoyed working with Stellar resources in their home language, with one teacher going as far as to say that the Stellar programme has made her love her job even more.

At the same time, teachers reported that learners showed notable learning progress and are excited for Stellar lessons. Key factors in the program's success thus far include effective and responsive programme management and the appointment of a dedicated local trainer to support schools and teachers. Support from the NCDoe has also been essential in sustaining and expanding the programme's impact.

### Employment of a reliable, local trainer

To provide consistent support and mentorship, in a way that is both readily available and contextually relevant, Wordworks needed a dedicated and dependable local trainer. The trainer was required to facilitate professional development, conduct classroom visits, and provide hands-on guidance to teachers as they integrate Stellar into their daily routines. The trainer also needed to be able and willing to communicate closely with

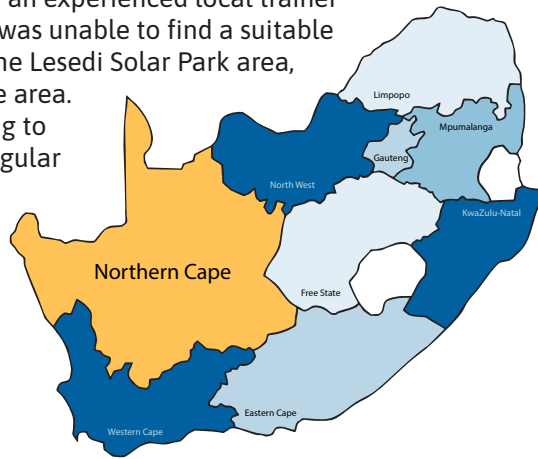




the team at Wordworks office, sharing observations and recommendations in a data-driven manner to allow for ongoing refinement of programme elements where necessary.

After a thorough recruitment process, Wordworks has been fortunate to find a high calibre trainer, who was both passionate for the project and held prior experience, not only in teaching in the low grades but also in training and supporting peers in various capacities. She has also demonstrated great willingness to embrace the project’s comprehensive monitoring tools and communicate closely with the Cape Town based team. In addition to her role towards the teachers, she has been instrumental in managing engagement with local stakeholders, including the Lesedi Trustees.

Nonetheless, the initial recruitment of an experienced local trainer proved to be a challenge. Wordworks was unable to find a suitable candidate within the 50km radius of the Lesedi Solar Park area, requiring recruitment from outside the area. As a result, the trainer had to be willing to commute significant distances on a regular basis. The experience reflects a broader issue of limited availability of qualified education professionals in rural and peri-urban areas in the Northern Cape emphasising the need to continue developing long-term strategies to build and retain local capacity and strengthen the pool of skilled trainers around the province.



### Project Management

The success of the Stellar programme’s implementation in the Lesedi area can also partly be attributed to the thorough work of the project team in Cape Town, especially the project lead and trainer’s supervisor who ensured that the local trainer had a full understanding of the programme and was supported throughout the year.

The Wordworks Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) team also played a supporting role by putting in place robust monitoring and reporting systems, including both quantitative and qualitative tools that allow a close tracking of the progress in each school. In addition to surveys of participating teachers and department officials, the local trainer was requested to share her classroom observations through scaled responses, open-ended questions and photographic evidence. The monitoring systems covered aspects such as teacher and learner engagement and confidence.

The insights gained from this feedback were analysed and used to guide quarterly reflection sessions with the full project team. These sessions focused on identifying challenges in implementation and developing solutions. Regular reflection sessions have been key in refining the programme, and they have also provided valuable insights into the overall effectiveness of Stellar. As an organisation dedicated to continuous improvement, learning, and knowledge sharing, Wordworks is committed to evolving its work to ensure the success of its programmes.

### Working in partnership with the Northern Cape Department of Education (NCDoE)

Wordworks is committed to working in close partnership with provincial education departments (PEDs) wherever we operate. This is especially true for the Stellar Grade R classroom programme, which has proven to be a valuable resource in supporting PEDs with the implementation of a structured Grade R language curriculum. Our successful collaborations with the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) are strong examples of this approach.

As previously reported (von Blottnitz, 2024), education department advisors from the Postmasburg circuit office have been supportive of the project since the start of its implementation in January 2024. They have subsequently played a key role in championing the project at higher levels within the NCDoE. Their consistent support and advocacy opened the door for Wordworks to engage with the Chief Education Specialist (CES) and provincial Grade R coordinators at the provincial head office.

Following this introduction, it was possible for representatives of the Wordworks management team to hold a virtual meeting with NCDoE representatives from Kimberley (provincial head office) and Upington (ZF Mgcawu district office). Following this meeting, the Grade R coordinators were able to attend two cycles of Stellar training sessions, where they had the opportunity to understand firsthand the effectiveness of the programme’s teaching approach. This experience enhanced our partnership with the NCDoE, and they appreciated that Stellar resources are available in Setswana, addressing a critical gap in access to high-quality early literacy programmes in indigenous South African languages. Overall, the strong relationship with the department ensures that Stellar’s implementation is recognized and supported at a strategic level and serves as a significant springboard for expanding this programme to other districts in the province; a case in point in motivating for DGMT’s broader support in the province.





## Looking ahead to year two

In 2025, Wordworks will build on the successes and lessons of the past year. An early childhood development (ECD) centre in Postmasburg that serves as a feeder school for Grade 1 at one of the large participating schools, will be onboarded to replace the school that dropped off due to insufficient enrollment numbers.

All new teachers will receive Stellar training, whereas previously trained teachers will continue receiving support throughout the year. In 2025, Wordworks also plans to establish a Community of Practice (CoP) initiative, bringing teachers together for one session each term to reflect on lessons learned and exchange knowledge on best practices.

Wordworks also aims to continue building its partnership with the NCDoE, which has shown interest in incorporating the Stellar programme into all Grade R classrooms in the province. In collaboration with the Lesedi Solar Park Trust and with support from the local trainer, project management team, and provincial government, Wordworks is committed to addressing challenges effectively while maintaining momentum in its efforts to support early literacy in the Lesedi area. Based on the success of the Lesedi intervention, Wordworks looks forward to the new possibilities that will emerge from this pilot. At a system's level, we are in discussions with DGMT and the NCDoE about a broader roll-out of Stellar throughout the Northern Cape, led by NCDoE. Locally, in the region of the Lesedi Trust, we are excited to continue work with the Lesedi Solar Park Trust to sustain, and hopefully extend, mutual engagement towards early literacy.



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### Keywords:

Early literacy, Early Childhood Development (ECD), Early Childhood Education (ECE), Northern Cape, Lesedi Solar Park Trust, Lesedi, Wordworks, Stellar programme, Foundation Phase, Grade R, Setswana, Home language education, Mother tongue education