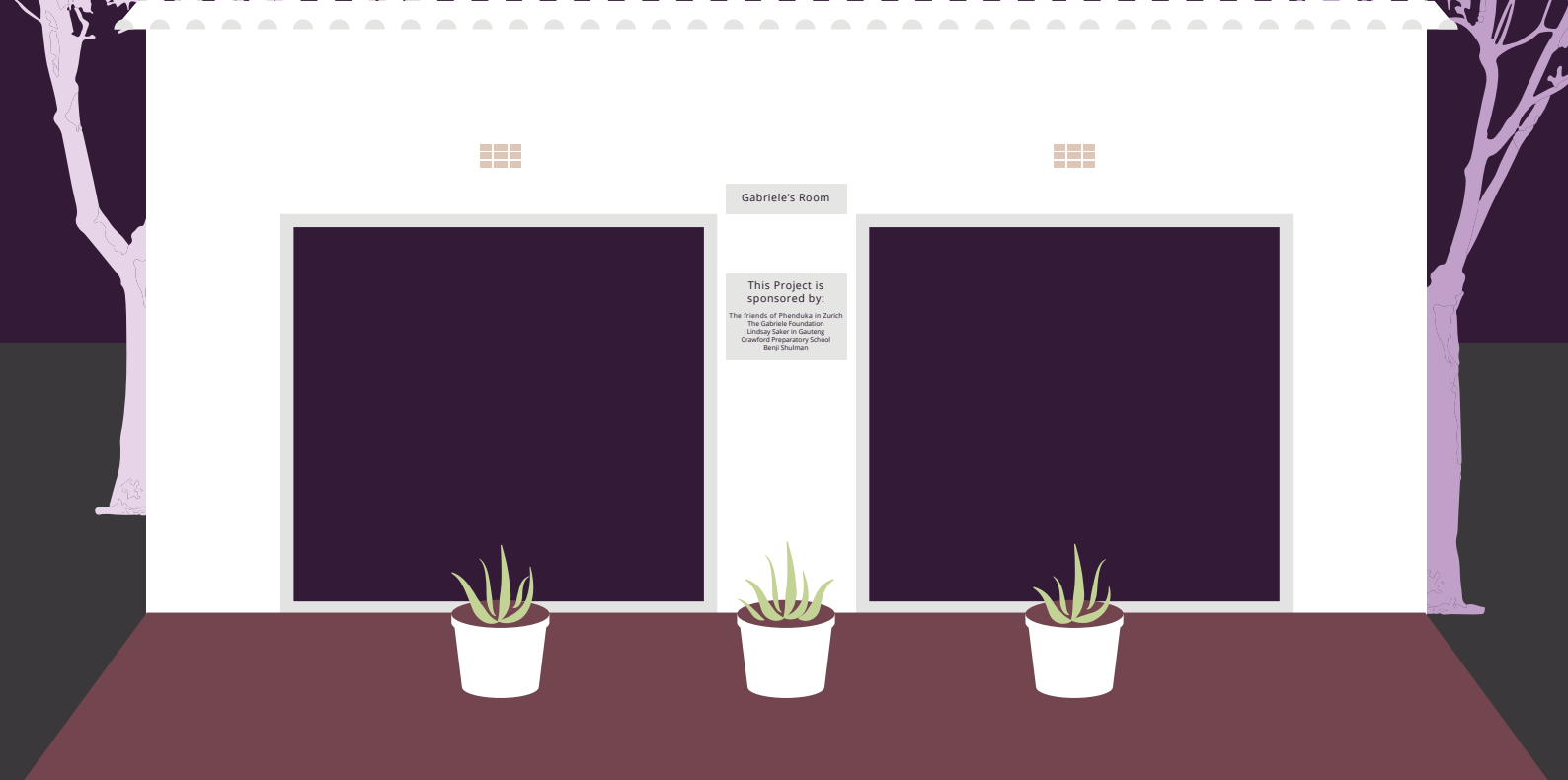




PHENDUKA LITERACY SPECIAL REPORT:

On the trail of 15 years of Education
in Alexandra Township, South Africa



Gabriele's Room

This Project is
sponsored by:
The Friends of Phenduka in Zurich
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Linda's Sister in Gauteng
Crawford Preparatory School
Berip Shulman

*«Education is the most powerful weapon
which you can use
to change the world».*

Nelson Mandela, 1990



This Report is based on own observation, information and data collected at Phenduka Literacy Project premises in Lombardy East, greater Johannesburg area, South Africa and in the township of Alexandra, at Dr. Knak, Ekukhanyisweni, Iphuteng and Ithute Primary Schools, during the month of November 2014. A list of References is provided at the end of this Report for all cases where information came from different sources. The structured qualitative interviews this Report references were conducted on an individual basis and figures in graphs have been rounded up. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity of Phenduka pupils and their primary schools' staff, although never explicitly raised up, have also been considered. The Cover shows the project venue and Jacaranda trees, which are in full bloom in the whole Province of Gauteng in October and November. Contact details for donations can be found at the end of this Report.



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Foreword by the author

In Zulu the word Phenduka means “turnaround.” It stands for a change in direction and, precisely for this reason, this name was deemed to be the most appropriate for the Literacy Project started by Alison Beynon alongside Carla and Alberto Ferrari in 2000. What has been left behind during all these years, though, has been tracking, on qualitative and quantitative terms, of how much of a change has been instilled in the community - hence to what extent Phenduka has complied with its own educational credo.

Indeed, Phenduka’s Annual Reports have presented the stunning progress that children in sample groups have achieved, but data and success stories do not link up to show overall trends on a longitudinal timescale. It is very important to acknowledge that such analyses have never been within the aim nor within the reach of Phenduka Literacy, it being a small project that is run with limited staff and resources. However, questions like “What difference has Phenduka made to the lives of children attending the programmes?”, “How is the project perceived by pupils and teachers?” or even “What happened to previous Phenduka pupils?” have been in the air for long.

Shedding light on such questions is not an easy task in a township context and requires resources that Phenduka doesn’t currently have at its disposal. This is why this Report has to be seen as a first attempt at getting a wider picture. It has been realized with available data of past years, with more extensive data of 2014 and thanks to the help of Phenduka staff, current children and their primary schools. This reading serves both as an external and internal tool. In fact, it is a guide to whomever wants to become familiar with Phenduka Literacy and who may hopefully want to contribute to this beautiful and much needed project. It also aims at being a thought-provoking mirror for this small yet powerful NGO, so that more questions will be both raised and addressed in a distinctive, Phenduka way. Petals of Jacaranda flowers, which are very common in the Province of Gauteng, will take readers across sections.

On a final note I would like to thank for the collaboration the Phenduka Literacy Project specialists, the four groups of Phenduka children I met during my three-weeks stay in Jo’burg, the staff of the four primary schools participating in the Literacy Project: Dr. Knak, Ekukhanyisweni, Ithuthe and Iphuteng, and last but not least you, reading this Report just now, thank you for taking the time.

Gioia Ambrosi, MA
Short-term Researcher
for Phenduka Literacy Project

Part One: Why invest in education?

1.1 Some facts and figures on a worldwide common issue

«Everyone has a right to education». This is no statement to debate, as this is article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2014 a). Even though this was acknowledged long ago, little has been achieved to eradicate the world's inequalities in education. Quite on the opposite - these seem to be growing under the current education crisis, and have possibly become even more exacerbated since 2008.



Child coming back from school in Johannesburg

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Following high unemployment rates, the current state of education is being highly questioned and more innovation is demanded to tackle societal challenges. In both developed and developing countries ICT literacy is seen as a key to unleash further potential, as younger generations are asked to develop so called 21st century skills of divergent thinking and collaboration, entailing among others improved communication, research and enquiry, problem solving and flexibility (The Education Reform, 2014). These are believed to increase productivity and to help open new markets. E-learning practices have increased, massive online open courses (MOOCs) are flourishing and well-known giants are investing with specific projects all over the world. Private companies' efforts in the spheres of education are the results of their philanthropy, corporate social responsibility or social innovation policies, and although the payback might be considered minimal, it is actually significant. Advantages are manifold: companies get more license to operate, they ensure better risk management, experience positive returns on reputation, invest in future human capital while attracting current talent, and ultimately they might even create new markets. The problem is that the way in which a quality education, however it be defined, can benefit society at large is not fully recognized yet. At the same time, while thinking about the benefits technology in education can bring, even if requiring massive investments in infrastructure and know-how, we

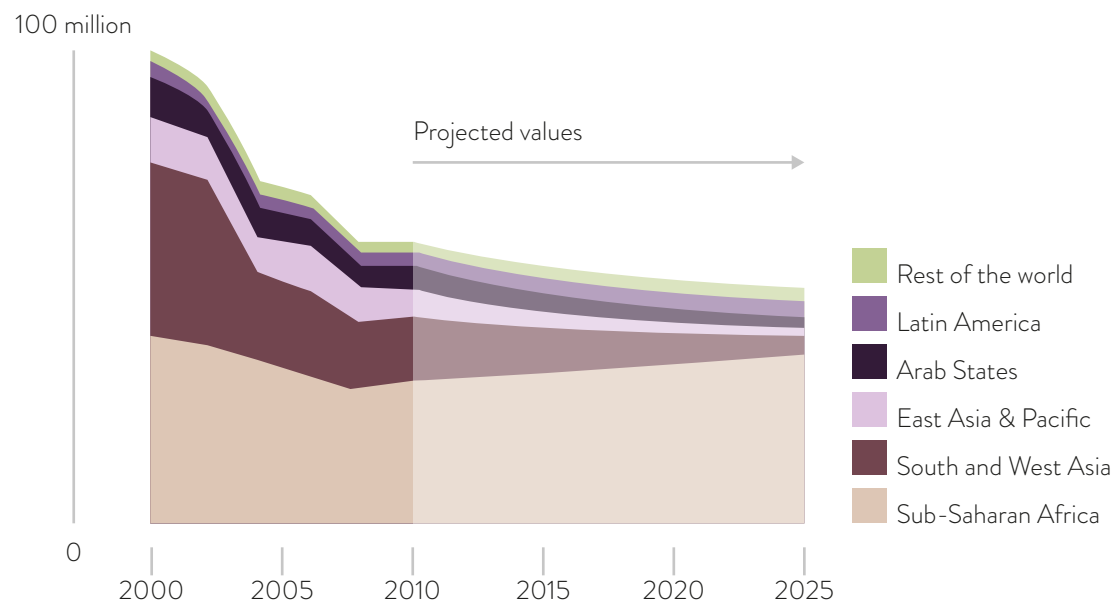
often miss seeing how many people in the world are still left behind without the most basic reading and mathematical skills. If their educational needs will not be met, we risk opening up a much wider gap in the years to come, one that might be difficult to fill.

The United Nations had made a list of eight Millennium Development Goals to achieve by 2015. Among these there was a goal for Universal Access to Primary Education. It aimed to ensure primary schooling completion for every child in our planet but the goal has not been attained (United Nations, 2014 b).

Investments in early childhood education lag far behind those in science or in health (The Guardian, 2013). Why does this happen if more education would actually benefit these fields, too? Some may say this is due to high costs that policy-makers can hardly justify and reap benefits from within their short political timeline (World Economic Forum, 2012). The picture is often made more intricate by a mix of ignorance and misallocation of funds (Ibidem).

UNICEF says that our challenge is growing along with the increasing world population and that by 2030, 619 more million children will need to get basic schooling (UNICEF, 2015).¹ Projections show that the majority of these will be in Sub-Saharan Africa (Brookings Education, 2012 c).

Out-of-school children of primary school age, 2000-2025 (projected)



Source: Brookings Education, 2012 c: Predicted rise of out-of-school population in Sub-Saharan Africa

How can we cover such educational need if today 121 million children and adolescents are out of school? If only more learned to read, 171 million fewer people would be living in absolute poverty (UNICEF, 2015). In fact the Global Partnership for Education calculates that for each extra school year an individual's earnings will go up by 10%, with figures rising to 20% for women (The Global Partnership for Education, 2013). They also estimate that 50% more children could live past age 5 if their mothers could read, that a country's annual GDP would grow by 0.37% for every

¹ Currently the world population's yearly growth rate is of 1.14% (Worldometers Population, 2015).



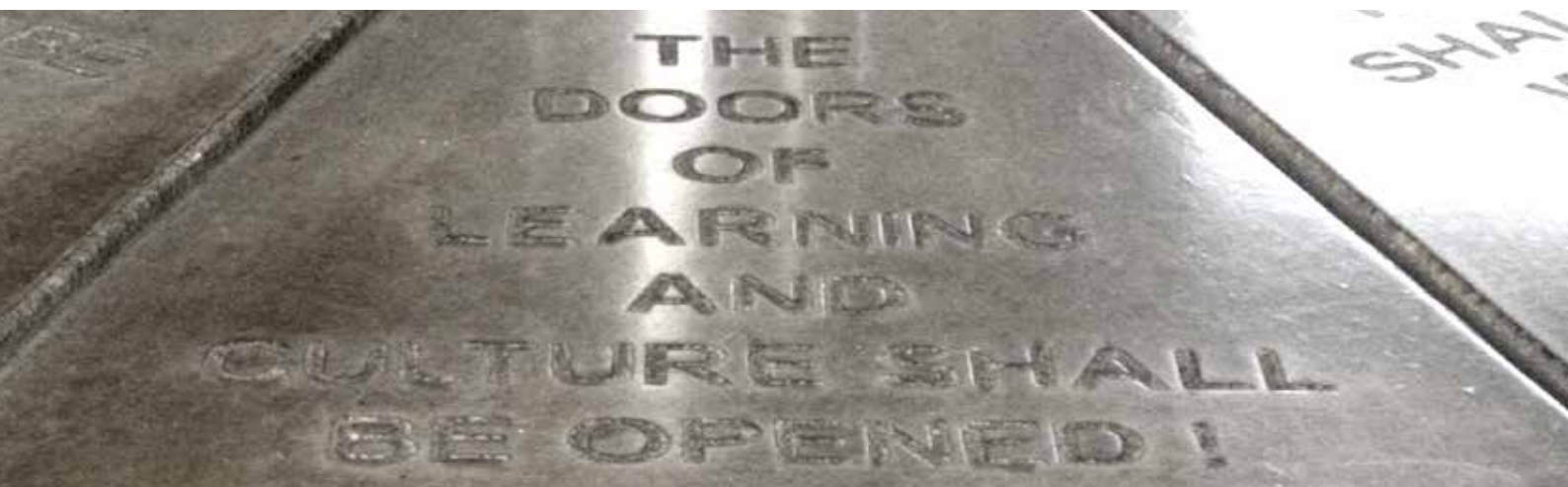
extra schooling year, and that more secondary school enrollment would reduce risks of conflicts by 3% (Ibidem). However, if we consider Sub-Saharan Africa, which faces the most evident learning challenges, numbers of those attending education cycles fall dramatically from an initial enrollment of 76% in primary school to a 53% enrollment at the time of completion. These numbers worsen later on in life, with rates of only 28% enrollment in secondary school and 6% enrollment in tertiary education in the region (Brookings Education, 2012 a).

Because of the aforementioned reasons in addition to countless others, it is of utmost importance that everyone gets access to schooling. Moreover, this education needs to be effective, and this is another serious issue to address. The Africa Learning Barometer, which covers 28 Sub-Saharan countries, estimates that half of 61 million children of primary school age will reach adolescence without being able to read or perform basic numerical tasks (Brookings Education, 2012 c). Those living in rural or disadvantaged areas suffer even more from learning constraints, because too little funds go to poor regions, and this situation allows for the cycle of poverty to endlessly continue without change.

Education is universally recognized as the most efficient change factor and although it is primarily a responsibility of governments, companies and individuals can also make a big difference by investing in projects that have a strong and more accountable impact and that allow for individual and community empowerment (UNICEF, 2015).

1.2 About the learning crisis in South Africa

On a tour of Soweto, the biggest township of South Africa, people visiting Johannesburg get to see Walter Sisulu Square, a place commemorating the struggle of South Africans for democracy and equality during the Apartheid era. The square hosts the Freedom Charter Monument and one of its engraved freedoms refers explicitly to education, stating: «The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened! (...) Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan». But as a young local tourist guide warned, «Not quite all of these are happening!».



*Section of Freedom Charter
photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014*

A South African government factsheet explaining UN Millennium Goals results applied to South Africa proudly states that access to primary schooling has been reached in the country, and well ahead of the 2015 target timeline. It also explains that the country believes in education and that 20% of its budget went into education in 2013 (Republic of South Africa, 2013 a, p. 37). The Report compares primary school completion rates in the years 2002- 2011 and concludes that these have improved by at least 5%, accounting for almost 95% completing primary education in 2011 (Ibidem, p. 42). However, due to unavailability of data, plenty of indicators in the education cycles are left with blank spaces. The Report also recognizes that completion of secondary school education is well behind targets, due to drop out occurring around grade 10, but it doesn't mention the size of this phenomenon nor its causes (Ibidem, p. 49). So how many pupils drop out in secondary schools in South Africa and why does that happen?

A news website reports a 47% drop out rate in secondary school in 2014, happening at grade 10, and the reasons behind this rate are numerous (News 24 South Africa, 2014). First of all, if we take a step back and look at primary school, the Africa Learning Barometer finds that 33.7% of primary schoolchildren in South Africa are actually not learning generally: 27.2% are not learning reading and 40.2% are not learning math (Brookings Education, 2012 b). According to these figures, girls are doing slightly better than boys, but all seem to have very few chances to learn if they come from a poor, black or mixed race rural background (Brookings Education, 2013). Out of the 28 Sub-Saharan countries measuring learning levels, South Africa ranks on the 19th place, shortly before Congo, Chad and Ivory Coast, and poor results at this early stage of education are believed to be due to a mix of preschool malnutrition, parental illiteracy and unaddressed severe structural and teaching weaknesses in the schooling system (Ibidem). Very importantly, one needs to remember that South Africa is a multilingual country with eleven official spoken languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sepedi, Tswana, Sesotho, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, Ndebele. Most South African children are taught in their respective mother tongue (also called home language) during the foundation phase starting from grade 0 when they are aged four until grade 3, but then English becomes both the language of learning and teaching in all subjects. Failures to address literacy skills in English adequately and in time risk bringing down the entire education cycle, in turn causing enormous learning gaps and hindering the education development of primary school students.

In 2013 standardized Annual National Assessments (ANAs) measured learning performance of students in grades 1 to 9, excluding 7, across the whole country (Republic of South Africa, 2013 b). Looking at figures for grade 6, which means those from students closer to primary school completion, the assessments report improvements in mathematics, home language and first additional language, which tends to be English (Ibidem). Nevertheless, levels are very poor as on a national basis, grade 6 students' scores on a rating code level ranging from 1 to 7 are only 2 in mathematics, 3 in first additional language and 4 in their home language (Ibidem, p. 3).

After completing grade 7 students are either promoted because they achieve a pass rate or because of age, and a majority of weak students who make it into secondary education are also believed to be discouraged from writing final examinations so that their schools – especially underperforming ones – can improve their statistics (The Conversation, 2014).

Despite the fact that the current government has celebrated recent improvements in the

matriculation pass rate at the end of secondary school, researchers believe that this is not a reliable benchmark of education quality as it is not designed to be comparable because chosen subjects can change over time (Africa Check, 2014). Sources highlight that even students with top pass results can be refused admission at universities when they do not meet entry requirements (The Conversation, 2014).

Certainly there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve a more equitable education in South Africa, one that truly meets the aspiration of the Congress of the People in Soweto when they composed the Freedom Charter.

1.3 A place to invest and operate: Alexandra Township, Gauteng

Driving through Alexandra can be quite a depressing experience. The car needs to slow down once it leaves London Road to get into the heart of its broken streets. Many young men, children and babies hang around. The traffic is congested and chaotic, and one needs to drive very slowly and be ready to jump in fast to get past a crossing. Shanty roofs shine under intense sunlight and bulks of rubbish can be seen here and there while goats chew its cellophane.

Alexandra Township is just 15 kilometers away from downtown Johannesburg and borders with Sandton, the financial centre of South Africa, one of the richest places of the whole continent. It was founded in 1912 by a farmer who named it after his wife and due to being formed before South African 1913 Land Act, it became one of the few places where black people could buy land. As a result the township grew rapidly with protests and riots being the norm under the Apartheid regime. Forced demolitions, political conflicts, detentions and deaths have left their mark in history during the twentieth century.

In the years preceding the World Cup renovation plans led to construction of government funded houses, yet shacks are still estimated to number over 20,000 (Gauteng Tourism, 2015). 2011 official census figures report a resident black African population of almost 180,000, mostly speaking Zulu, Sepedi, Tsonga and Xhosa and a density of 26,000 per km² over an area of 6.91 km² (Census Alexandra, 2011).

Another official source, though, estimates over 500,000 people living in Alexandra in infrastructure designed for only 70,000 inhabitants (Gauteng Tourism, 2015).

Alexandra, or Alex for locals, hosts 13 primary schools but only 5 secondary schools.² The township belongs to Johannesburg East schooling district and the Annual National Assessments of its grade 6 students in 2013 report them scoring at level 3 in both mathematics and first additional language and level 5 in home language (Republic of South Africa, 2013 b, p. 75). This is in line with the overall results of the whole Province of Gauteng (comprising thirteen more districts), apart from the first additional language being on a level 4 in Gauteng (Ibidem).

Remarkably Alexandra was also home to anti-apartheid activist and progressive former South

² The information about the number of schools is taken by a list of schools in clusters 1 to 10, made by the Gauteng Department of Education, Johannesburg East Institutional Development and Support.

African President Nelson Mandela in the early 1940s.

The following excerpts from his autobiographical book “Long Walk to Freedom” describe his experience at the time he lived here. Although this happened a long time ago, the images recalled throughout the lines are still fairly relevant today.

«Life in Alexandra was exhilarating and precarious. Its atmosphere was alive, its spirit adventurous, its people resourceful. Although the township did boast some handsome buildings, it could fairly be described as a slum, living testimony to the neglect of the authorities. The roads were unpaved and dirty, and filled with hungry, undernourished children scampering around half-naked».

«The township was desperately overcrowded, every square foot was occupied either by a ramshackle house or a tin-roofed shack. As so often happens in desperately poor places, the worst elements came to the fore. Life was cheap; the gun and the knife ruled at night».



View over Alexandra from the second floor of a primary school

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

«In spite of the hellish aspects of life in Alexandra, the township was also a kind of heaven. As one of the few areas of the country where Africans could acquire freehold property and run their own affairs, where people did not have to kowtow to the tyranny of white municipal authorities, Alexandra was an urban Promised Land, evidence that a section of our people had broken their ties with the rural areas and become permanent city dwellers».



Alexandra's Pursuit of Happiness

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

«Urban life tended to abrade tribal and ethnical distinctions, and instead of being Xhosas, or Sothos, or Zulus, or Shangaans, we were Alexandrians. This created a sense of solidarity, which caused great concern among the white authorities».

«Alexandra occupies a treasured place in my heart. It was the first place I ever lived away from home. Even though I was later to live in Orlando, a small section of Soweto, for a longer period than I did in Alexandra, I always regarded Alexandra Township as a home where I had no specific house, and Orlando as a place where I had a house but no home».



Woman washes clothes, behind her is a pile of rubbish and more clothes hung to dry

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014



Part Two: Why do we need Phenduka?

2.1 Mission and History of the Literacy Project

Following the clear learning crisis in South Africa, Phenduka Literacy Project was founded in 2000 with the mission of improving English literacy learning and teaching in primary schools of the disadvantaged township community of Alexandra, close to Johannesburg. The Project owes its name to a Zulu word meaning turnaround, and concentrates on middle school level at the primary schools, as it intends to reach as many young students as possible and uplift their skills before they enter high school. By law all South Africans are expected to stay in education until the age of 15, but considering the poor literacy level too many have, there are far lower chances for township pupils to remain in education.

Phenduka envisage its Project as an “all is not lost” chance, as it aims at helping students boost their skills and self-confidence. As part of its mission Phenduka Literacy also runs workshops to develop and train the teachers and help them become more effective with their classes. Throughout time, there have been lots of changes to the Project, the partner schools have been reduced to four, the number of pupils it works with have diminished, the school grade Phenduka currently operates with is grade 7, and mathematics has been added as of 2013-2014. Mathematics are considered to be complimentary to literacy and therefore they are needed to enable young students consolidate their foundation education. Improvements becoming reality at this young age can be a very powerful change agent in the local community of Alexandra, Phenduka is well aware of this and welcomes and supports such change.

At present the official Mission of Phenduka Literacy Project is:

«improving the learning and teaching of literacy and mathematics at Middle School level in four of the primary schools in Alexandra. It does this through the diagnostic testing and remedial teaching of grade 7 students at the schools served, and through the running of workshops to improve the proficiency and effectiveness of teachers in developing literacy skills. The choice of Middle School level for intervention is to ensure that learners do not enter High School with literacy and mathematics levels inadequate for learning. In the light of the current crisis in South Africa, with very poor literacy and maths skills at all levels, and high drop out rates in High School, we feel that the contribution we make is worthwhile».

In 15 years of existence Phenduka estimates to have reached approximately 7,400 children and over 200 teachers with 8 coaches who taught workshops in more than 50 schools across Gauteng Province. The latter was made possible thanks to the key involvement of Phenduka in the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy aiming to improve teaching quality in the Province (2010-2013).

Currently Phenduka Literacy Project continues to operate with 4 partner educational institutions: Dr. Knak, Ekukhanyisweni, Iphuteng and Ithute Primary Schools and is managed by a part time manager and director, Ms. Alison Beynon, three experienced teachers, Mr. Jan Venter, Ms. Nomi Jula, Ms. Precious Khumalo and a new hire, who just started in January 2015, Mr. David Ngwana. In 2014 the project was also aided by two occasional volunteers and Ms. Yvonne Silubane, a paid volunteer who worked with the project for over ten months.

The pupils at Phenduka Literacy are expected to take part in a 200 hours programme run during school time in two separate phases of the year.³ Unfortunately, the literacy programme conflicts with the school timetable, but it is something Phenduka's staff cannot avoid, because it is believed that students would be unlikely to attend if the programme were to be held in the afternoon.⁴ After several years' search for an appropriate venue, a suitable location just four kilometers outside of Alexandra has finally been found and a minibus taxis children from the schools to Phenduka premises and back.



Pupils leaving Phenduka premises

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

³ More details follow in the next Chapter.

⁴ In the Annual Report 2008/2009 it is reported that 'clinics interventions' run by Phenduka during afternoon hours at the partner schools to follow-up on the progress achieved during the programmes proved only partly effective, as pupils were too tired to concentrate, the noise levels rose because others were playing outside and many children could not stay as they had to take care of younger siblings or were involved with sports.

Key Milestones Timeline

2000: South African Teacher Alison Beynon along with Swiss donors Carla and Alberto Ferrari establish Phenduka Literacy Project. Phenduka is soon provided with its own Board and helped with funds coming from an on-purpose set Swiss-based Foundation and by Swiss and South African Friends of Phenduka, who are individual donors who strongly believe in the cause.

2001: Phenduka becomes fully operative and employs three literacy specialist staff members, including specialist movement teacher Jan Venter. The Project is run at the Ububele Psychotherapies Resource Centre, Alexandra and is given permission to operate in schools by the Gauteng Department of Education. The overall programme lasts about 5 hours per day or approximately 1,000 hours per year and is made available to grade 7s classes of all partner schools.

2003: Six schools are now on Phenduka's roster, namely Iphuteng, Dr. Knak, Pholoso, Gordon, Bovet and Ithuthe. About 2,000 learners are reached by Phenduka Literacy each year.

2004: Difficulties in sustaining steady funding force Phenduka to give up one teacher and the rooms rented at Ububele. Phenduka starts working at the school venues during morning hours with classroom teachers observing the activities.

2005: Relationship with partner schools is tightened up due to closer collaboration. Teaching workshops are also organised.

2006: After exploring the learning environment in Alexandra and nurturing partnerships, Phenduka stops expanding and gets into a consolidation phase. Partner primary schools are reduced to four to achieve more sustainable and effective management and engagement: Dr. Knak, Gordon, Iphuteng and Ithuthe Primary Schools.

2006: A national audit highlights poor literacy and numeracy skills of South African grade 6 classes, which prompts Phenduka to take grade 6 learners as well within its literacy rescue programmes. However this puts a strain on Phenduka's limited capacity.

2006: Apart from receiving large contributions from Switzerland, Phenduka is also aided by another European country, the United Kingdom. In fact George Heriot Primary in Edinburgh raises about R 9,000 for Phenduka.

2007: Phenduka engages further in raising awareness of its work and participates in conferences (Reading Association of South Africa Conference in Cape Town and International Learn Conference in Johannesburg). An interview on Phenduka is broadcasted through local radio and appears on community newspapers. Thanks to the new visibility some occasional funds are attracted.

2007: The Staub Keiser Foundation in Winterthur, Switzerland joins the Board of Phenduka Literacy.

2008: The Department of Education launches the Foundation for Learning Campaign to improve literacy and numeracy skills of South African children.

2009: Ekukhanyisweni replaces Gordon Primary School as project partner school. Retired ex vice-principal of Iphuteng Primary School, Marishon Modiba, engages with Phenduka as part-time fundraiser and then takes a position the next year as a coach in the GPLMS.

2010: The Gauteng Department of Education starts the GPLMS intervention (Gauteng Primary Literacy and Maths Strategy) in nearly 800 schools that are identified as dysfunctional. Experienced teachers are recruited and trained as coaches to upgrade the weakest teachers. Phenduka is invited to join in the programme and is asked to supervise and train 3 coaches. Phenduka itself moves to a quieter learning environment in Riverlea Library, Alexandra.

2010: Due to a compelling need to have their own dedicated remedial space as a learning resource, Phenduka moves to a new venue, in a commercial building in Rembrandt Park that is close enough to Alexandra for the children to be taxied to the venue. To Phenduka's great pride a new South African donor starts supporting the Project on a yearly basis: the Lindsay Saker Gauteng Car Dealer. Phenduka gives its 10th anniversary party and the Ferraris are able to attend, as are Board members and donors.

2011: The GPLMS is expanded to include midschool classes and Phenduka now employs 8 coaches to work with teachers in these classes. This work is very demanding in terms of administration so Phenduka outsources some of this admin to another project involved in the GPLMS, Class Act. The coordination works very well. More than 50 schools are reached by Phenduka's 8 coaches, affecting teaching of more than 200 teachers. These schools are spread across the province requiring coaches to do a lot of travelling. Improvements in literacy start to become evident in these schools.

2011: Phenduka moves to a new venue, a house, in Lombardy East, close to Rembrandt Park. This venue enables to create a truly "literacy-rich environment" providing the ideal atmosphere for Phenduka's learners. A private South African School, Crawford Primary, starts supporting Phenduka with donations.

2011/2012: Two new young teachers join Phenduka: Nomi Jula and Precious Khumalo, and soon learn the particular dynamic of working in the Phenduka mode.

2012: Phenduka's landlord is no longer able to accommodate the Project, so the staff find a new venue nearby in Rembrandt Park, also a house, with an extensive garden. The house is rambling enough to provide accommodation for the two youngest teachers.

2013: Phenduka decides to concentrate on grade 7s learners. The GPLMS Programme is unexpectedly brought to an end, due to lack of government funds to sustain it. This is in spite of the fact that the national assessments indicated a substantial improvement in literacy in those schools served by the GPLMS. Bassey Metswamere, a teacher who was with Phenduka from the beginning, and had become a coach, now moves on to work in the school system where he can build a career to support his growing family.

2014: Mathematics is introduced as a pilot for 2014. The renovation of the double garage on the rented property enables Phenduka to get a new more spacious and brighter classroom. This

renovation is made possible by The Gabriele Foundation. Small yet highly appreciated contributions arrive from South African private donors, the most constant being Benji Shulman and Siba Mhlungwana.

2015: Phenduka celebrates 15 years of existence. A new teacher, David Ngwana, joins the project and his interest in Mathematics will be an asset in Phenduka's Maths remedial programme. The director Alison Beynon will be semi-retiring, keeping close ties with Phenduka and supporting the cause by dedicating her free time to literacy advocacy and fundraising activities.

2.2 The Phenduka Methodology

Phenduka has developed its literacy project following a method called DETOUR, which offers a powerful framework to remediate reading with groups. DETOUR is an acronym standing for Diagnose, Engage, Tools of Reading, Open up a range of learning channels, Use maximum practice and Repetition of texts. It's a step-by-step approach that Phenduka has worked hard to develop as in the words of part time manager and director Alison Beynon it «compresses the usually gradual process of emergent reading into a short and very concentrated process».⁵

The process starts with Diagnose. In fact, what Phenduka does prior to starting its programmes is diagnosing or testing what literacy levels are there in the partner schools' grade 7 classes. Knowing where everyone stand and who are the pupils that need the most support is essential. Phenduka selects pupils for the programme on the basis of the diagnostic tests, where every pupil's literacy skills are rated on a scale ranging from one to six.

“One” means children have no literacy skills, “two” signifies that the pupil can only read a few common words, “three” means that very basic reading is in place. Level “four” stands for reading in phrases, level “five” is near reading fluency and level “six” means that fluency has been achieved. The pupils standing at the bottom of this scale will very likely be taken on board.



Pupils try to read

photo credit: S. Aeschbacher, November 2014

⁵An interview with Alison Beynon and to the whole staff will follow next.

Once the classes have been made the next step is to Engage them. According to Phenduka these pupils have probably developed negative feelings and a sense of inadequacy that undermines their self-esteem and abilities to succeed with their learning. This is due to their incapacity of reading over school years and to being continuously addressed as “slow-learners”, which make them feel unintelligent. Phenduka explains to all the pupils embarking on their programmes that they shall focus on the present and that this is their chance to learn to read, an opportunity not to be wasted, because Phenduka can get them to read. No one is allowed to tease or distract others, this is a safe learning environment built on trust and collaboration. As stated in the factsheets explaining Detour in the Annual Reports what is needed for a successful engagement is:

To «build a classroom ethos of care for fellow learners and co-operation rather than competition. By sniggering at slow readers, or criticizing, we take each other down. We want to take everyone up. Good readers can share their good fortune and become ‘coaches’, rather than ‘gloaters’».

Engagement has to translate into excitement for the class activities and this is not so easy to achieve in a conventional way, because the act of reading is tough and painful for late readers, so good feelings need to be awakened first. Oracy can help literacy, as stories can be experienced before being read. A language approach using lots of story-telling to encourage motivation will be combined with an explicit technical approach that breaks down words components and provide appropriate tools to take on the challenge. This is called a balanced approach and Phenduka believes it is ideal in this teaching context.

The Tools that will be taught will deal with helping pupils recognize the difference between the names of letters and the sounds, blends will be taught and shown with the help of posters, common words and high frequency words will be introduced to ease the reading and word webs will increase vocabulary. Actions, movements and pictures will facilitate meanings and imprint them in memory.

Phenduka has embraced the Multiliteracies movement and applies it in its project design. The Multiliteracies approach considers that there are many channels for learning, not only the verbal one, but also the tactile, gestural, pictorial, sonic or performative. Opening up Channels and linking them up help pupils getting to their objective more easily, because not all learners are the same and using different styles is felt to be a more inclusive and comprehensive way to reach everyone.

Lots of exercise and use of practice are needed when all tools are in place. Phenduka will engage everyone with paired reading, group reading and choral reading. No one will be left behind and in case someone struggles more than others this person will be taken away from the group to check what works best before being re-integrated with the class.

Readings will be repeated several times to build word recognition and confidence. Repetition is essential to this process, but Phenduka will make sure this will not bore its pupils as stories will be read with different tones and accompanied with captivating new actions. Children sort of warm-up on new texts before they try reading, as they are shown flashcards with new or known words so they can identify them more easily. Children draw the stories they read about and when a text has been read several times, short comprehension tests and info scanning exercises are posed to the groups. After that, speed reading can start.



On the left: Movements help memorize high frequency words such as “he”

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014



On the right: A student of Phenduka takes note on words written with playdough

photo credit: S. Aeschbacher, November 2014

When Phenduka started adding math to literacy in late 2013, the staff recognized that many pupils had very low levels, too, and struggled with basic sums, subtraction, multiplications and divisions. With math inasmuch as with literacy, Phenduka’s pupils are not where they should be for a grade 7 class. Phenduka’s literacy approach lays on several years’ of experience and the math approach might face adjustments before it gets to the same level of expertise. However, for the time being, Phenduka has made sure math is also approached in a multimodal way, so that aiding material like solid shapes and abacus among others, can be used to help pupils achieving results.

Apart from remediating reading and math skills, special classes are also organised sometimes, thanks to the presence of volunteer guest lecturers wanting to provide a different contribution. Phenduka is happy to engage with specialists capable of bringing interesting new food for thought into the classes. This has been the case with Karin Stierlin, a Swiss activist working in HIV prevention, who visited Phenduka in 2013. For the occasion she had prepared a sex education session for a group of students and organised a game for the pupils to raise awareness on sexual transmitted diseases.⁶

Another interesting case happened in 2012 when movements specialist teacher Jan Venter invited young cadets of Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra to play a violin, a cello and a clarinet, an event which was highly treasured by the group who was there at that time. Last but not least in 2014 two more special sessions took place and saw Swiss volunteers Patrizia Grossmann engaging with Karate and auto defense techniques and Sara Aeschbacher teaching geography.

As the programmes proceed to an end, the staff at Phenduka retest the students a last time to

⁶South Africa ranks as the country with the world’s highest rate of new HIV infections, survey says (Mail & Guardian, 2014)

check if they have made any progress. A comprehensive feedback on each pupil along with their notebooks is given to their primary schools so that their teachers can check and follow-up from where they have got to.

2.3 Phenduka explained by its staff: the joys and the challenges of being in the front line and visions for the future

On a quiet sunny morning a light blue car approaches the automated gate of a modest one-floor building in Lombardy East, about eight kilometers away from Sandton, Johannesburg's financial heart. The gate opens, the car comes in and stops by the building. A white-haired energetic lady gets out of the car. She walks fast toward the entrance holding two bags. She has spent the evening before browsing through natural science magazines looking for animal pictures to cut and use for brand new word webs and today one of her bags is full of dangerous insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians to show in the classroom. The other bag has far less intimidating content: milk, bread, teas and cheese for the teachers' half-day break. "Good morning!" she quietly says, the pupils look up at her, they haven't spent a long time in the classroom but are already fully engaged in group activities. "Morning Ali!" is the reply she gets by one of the teachers.

It's Alison Beynon who entered the classroom. She's 70 and is the director and part time manager of Phenduka Literacy. She is also one of the founders and has been teaching for her whole life. Born in the Cape area, she moved to Johannesburg with her young sons and has managed the NGO in all its pedagogic aspects, being highly committed to fight the shadows of inequality through the soft power of education.



*Alison Beynon near the main entrance of Phenduka
photo credit: J. Venter, January 2015*

Alison Beynon, along with the other permanent staff, accepted to be interviewed for this Report, so that they could explain with their own words and sensitivity their personal understanding and experience of Phenduka, the educational barriers Alexandra pupils face and their wishes for the years to come.

Alison, what does Phenduka mean to you?

«Phenduka has many meanings for me. Phenduka is a programme that deepens the democratic initiative in the community of Alexandra. I say this because at its heart, democracy is not just a system of voting, it's a belief that all citizens equally deserve to fulfill their potential. The children we serve are those who have got left behind in the educational process, those who are barely literate or not at all literate. But literacy is the base on which all further educational growth will happen. Helping them to catch up with their peers before it's too late means they now have the chance to fulfill their potential.

Phenduka is also an opportunity to show that all children are educable. In South African schools, there is a tendency to 'blame the child' if he or she doesn't learn to read. The oft-used phrase is "He is a slow learner". Blame is also cast on lack of resources, size of classes, illiterate parents etc. These sorts of excuses tend to perpetuate a negative attitude to what can be done to get all children reading. By working with struggling readers in a more positive and dynamic way, we show that most of them can in fact be fast learners, and catch up with their peers in a matter of months. By taking them on as a challenge rather than a burden, we change the expectation of what's possible.



A word-building activity

photo credit: S. Aeschbacher, November 2014

(...) Lastly, it means a great deal to me to see children move forward and take their rightful space. They come to us with very low self-esteem, and no confidence in their abilities. Some cover up their disappointment in themselves with disruptive behaviour. Others are clearly unhappy and anxious. Our method is designed to bring results quite quickly and as they begin to see their skills improve, they change in their attitude to themselves and to learning. I love seeing that change in their facial expressions and it's so gratifying to see them become excited and turned on by reading. Some children are so motivated by the programme that they rise to the top in their class when they return to school. It gives me pleasure to think that we helped to put them on a new path».



Alison Beynon with a group of students

photo credit: S. Aeschbacher, November 2014

How is Phenduka distinct and unique?

«Several things make Phenduka distinctive. Phenduka uses a wide range of varied channels for learning. Our methodology is very different from that used in mainstream schools. We use a range of modalities or channels for teaching, each of these modalities having appeal for at least some of the children. For instance, some children never stop moving (quite often ADHD children struggle with reading and writing). These children find it very difficult to sit still and concentrate on text and bookwork. They need to learn through physical activity. We do a lot of bodywork, with actions for learning new verbs, gestures and acting out of stories. Another example is the use of tactile activities which are pleasurable for children. We use brightly-coloured playdough to make letters and words; and children whose writing is sloppy and ill-formed start to notice the correct formation of letters because it is such a creative activity. They transfer this care and precision to their handwriting. Some children learn best when given lots of visual support, our approach uses lots of pictures and graphics to supplement language.

Phenduka strives to make the experience of learning joyful and liberating. We want the children on our programme to relax and leave their anxieties about reading behind. We work at making the venue a happy place to be, by starting the day with music and movement. We use classical music that arouses feelings of power or experiences of delight. A favourite they respond to very forcefully is the Halleluiah Chorus. We also explain the importance of their never laughing at or mocking errors or poor reading and we encourage mutual pleasure and praise when individuals show achievement.

We also create lots of contrast during the day, so that intense bouts of decoding text are followed by fun word games, or the performance of stories with music and props is followed by quiet writing lessons. Creative activities such as drawing and modeling are a part of the programme. Day by day,

we create a space that is liberating and supports growth».

Why was Alexandra chosen for this intervention?

«When we first started the project 14 years ago, we were concerned to work in a disadvantaged community. Alexandra is one of the poorest townships in the Johannesburg area, with very high unemployment rate and sprawling areas of shacks. It does, however, have many fairly well-built schools in close proximity to each other, and the township lies within the urban area of Johannesburg. So serving the township was logistically not too daunting for us as a project».

What needs to be changed for education to be more effective?

«This is a very complex question and cannot easily be answered in a brief response. A great deal of money (a very high proportion of our GDP) is spent on education yet our education system seems to be less effective than countries which spend far less. Clearly, the main issue is not a financial one. My feeling is that we have gone astray with curriculum and also with teacher training. The following points are some possible ingredients for a 'turnaround' in education in South Africa:

- A sharper focus on literacy and maths skills and less concern with 'knowledge' in the lower grades. No matter how much knowledge children have accumulated in primary school, if they are not fully literate, they will be arrested in their academic growth.
- More explicit guidance to teachers on how to teach literacy, and better training of teachers in how to do this.
- Less emphasis on subject teaching in primary school, as currently children drift from class to class and teacher to teacher for different teachers so that no one teacher is responsible for a child's achievement. Children under the age of 12 need at most one or two teachers who get to know them and then take responsibility for them. When a child has 5 different teachers, no-one takes responsibility for that child and the 'buck is passed or shared' as it were.
- A greater emphasis on active learning so that children are engaged, not passive learning that does not awaken the mind».

What were some of the challenges along the way?

«An ongoing challenge has been the lack of a venue. When we started in 2001, we were briefly able to rent rooms from a project called Ububele, and this was such a boon. But this was not sustainable and for a long time, we were forced to work in the schools, which was a huge challenge. Schools could not offer us suitable space and we were mostly forced to use staffrooms, so our sessions were often interrupted. Schools were also noisy and did not offer the quiet, relaxed space that we need for remedial work. We also had no facilities for storing materials.

Another prevailing challenge has been funding, and it seems sad that for so long almost all our funds were raised in Switzerland by our wonderful couple, the Ferraris, who run the donor foundation in Zurich. It would have been very helpful if we had had more recognition and financial

support from South Africa. This lack of capacity has also meant that it has taken us a long time to be able to afford a venue. However, as funding has improved, and particularly since the advent of support from Lindsay Saker, we have been able to rent a venue which has made a huge difference to our effectiveness.

Another challenge has been less than optimal communication with some teachers and a lack of interest from them in our methodology. Gradually over the years, certain teachers have taken on the role of liaison and we have developed good relations with these focal teachers, so that has improved. The lack of interest in more effective methods for teaching reading continues to disappoint, and is probably part of the general lack of professionalism amongst many teachers that so bedevils education in this country».

What are your wishes for Phenduka?

«I would love to see the wonderful team now responsible for Phenduka's success go from strength to strength. They are such a committed and dynamic team and my wish is for funding to improve so that these teachers can be given the rewards they deserve, such as a substantial yearly bonus, and access to a pension fund and health benefits. We currently cannot afford such benefits. My hope is that funding can be raised enough for us to increase our capacity and serve more of the primary schools, particularly those that have asked to be included but are not currently on the programme. I would like to see a more fruitful relationship with universities, particularly Wits Educational Faculty, as I feel our methodology should be of interest to lecturers and students, who will have to deal with non-readers when they start their teaching careers in disadvantaged communities. Hopefully, the film we are currently making on our methodology will facilitate this».



Coffee break of the staff, the little girl is the daughter of Nomi, one of the teachers

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Along with Alison there are also three literacy specialist teachers: Jan Venter, Nomi Julia and

Precious Khumalo. Jan started with Phenduka Literacy from the very beginning in 2000. He temporarily left the project for about a year (June 2004 – August 2005) but came back to teaching straight after. He is in charge of liaising with the primary schools in Alexandra and has specialized with natural studies vocabulary, verbs and high frequency words and in acting out and telling stories using movement. This comes naturally to him as he has trained for his whole life as a professional ballet dancer. More recent hires of Phenduka Literacy are Nomi Jula and Precious Khumalo. Nomi has been working for Phenduka since May 2011 and her specialties are phonics (blends and sounds), word webs and remedial teaching. She has a background in mechanical engineering and is enthusiastic about helping children reading, especially those needing extra care. Precious started with Phenduka in January 2012 and over the past two years has been dealing with reading, spelling, office organisation and has also been looking after the new maths programme. Before joining Phenduka, she was teaching in another school and she has just completed a National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE). The three of them unveil their personal understandings, opinions and memories about Phenduka.

Could you tell how is Phenduka working to make an impact on the education of children?

Jan: «I've been with Phenduka for 14 years and I have seen a change in the schools since we first started the programme. They would fight with me as they were trying to be first [to start on each January], as they were so keen to come; they know the children need what we do. So I had to devise a rotating system to see who comes first and who comes second and so on. They feel very excited when they know they are going to start as first in a year. The impact is strong. When we worked in the schools until 2007, which was also difficult because of the noise that was very distracting, children used to be left in a corner. Since we have been taking them out and bringing them to our venues, it's been much better for them. Every time we go back the teachers say they are participating more in the class now, which I think it's a big impact».



Jan Venter during the interviews

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Nomi: «I would say Phenduka does wonders for the children and my first experience here was amazing, because the way I was taught at school was very different from the way we teach here, the children are taught with sounds and not with 'abcd' and Phenduka is doing an amazing job to change Alexandra's children's' lives. I saw things changing because when we test them they can't

read and by the time they leave they can, it's amazing!»

Precious: «Phenduka has done a great job towards improving learners' education, especially as it is specialised mostly with literacy which is the main key to all subjects».

How do you ensure that the programme reaches the children in the classroom?

Jan: «I become very aware and watch if each group is paying attention and if they don't understand they call me to help and that is how you draw them into being part of the impact - by being there for them when they need me, by being observant of the needs of specific children».

Nomi: «First I try to understand the problem of the child and how to go about that, like if the problem lies in sounds... and regarding sounds I look in groups and from looking at their lips I see if something is wrong and after the class I take them separately to work together on what they are lacking, which could be blends, sounds, could be high frequency words... and when they can't speak English, there I use my home language [Zulu] to help».



Nomi Julia during the interviews

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Precious: «I do that first by making sure that we are organised, that the class lists are there. At the beginning I did a lot of observation to decide how they shall be sitting in the classroom, with whom and where, I don't want them to get an influence from others, so that they don't perform and I want to ensure that cooperative learning is enhanced. So after we get them in place, I do a lot of observation to add value to our initial diagnostics done in school, because when they come here you see why they were diagnosed level one and see what the problem could be, and as soon as we can, we take children out for special remedial exercises. Sometimes you see children are very isolated and then we speak with them aside to check what the problem is and that is often due to the fact they take Phenduka as their school and they come with the fear, because they are not top learners at school and are scared that here it's the same, so when we explain to them that we don't hit them, don't shout at them and that the environment is different, they feel better. One of the things that I learned when I joined Phenduka is that a child will not learn if something is bothering them. If they are broken-hearted they can't think, so when heads and hearts are not feeling right, they won't perform».



Precious Khumalo

photo credit: P. Khumalo, January 2015

Do you ever get disappointed or discouraged by people or situations?

Jan: «I get disappointed with the children when they don't realise they are getting a gift from us, the gift of learning with care, when they don't understand that, that's where I get disappointed. I also get disappointed when they don't come; because some of them think they don't need it because they don't like the discipline of being watched and prefer to stay at school and to stay in the corner and not being watched because that's the easy way out. There was a child who had come to us for the programme, but he played all the time, everything was a joke to him, we tried everything to make him feel part of the programme... I was even suspecting that he was smoking marijuana and I think he left after school and that he never got to high school. I saw him once in Alexandra, he was carrying bricks around, working for builders I believe, I was very disappointed that he didn't move on to high school. But he wasn't keen to be here and he distracted everybody else. He's one of the two or three out of all children we've had that has been disappointing. He couldn't be changed».

Nomi: «I would say yeah, I do get disappointed at times (...) Like when I see a child that is struggling with something, like with sounds and blends I make sure they all follow and that no child is left out and it's challenging to get them all going at the same time and there are always children that can be left behind because some are slower in terms of grasping and grabbing and others are very fast. If a child is still struggling with sounds and blends, it's hard for this child to manage the reading and also high frequency words at some times. (...) I don't like to feel that I am not doing enough. These children need also maths and we have so little time for all!»

Precious: «I don't remember any significant negative incident about the children, because even with those who would misbehave you find that they are the victims of circumstances and it's a bit late for us to help. Instead of keeping them at Phenduka and affecting the other 17 or 18 children in the classroom, you'd better get that one out than having the whole group not performing, but it's not discouraging, it's something you admit to yourself that you can't help it.»

What or who makes you feel proud? And what makes you keep going?

Jan: «The positive energy that comes out of what we do is what keeps me going, when you hear a

child that in three or four weeks is actually able to read, how wonderfully a child has moved from column one to three, that is just fantastic! I think even one child can make you want to stay if that child is a star».

Nomi: «It makes me feel proud to see those children starting to read, especially the ones at the bottom of the class, the ones that are struggling, they really put a smile on my face».

Precious: «It is the feedback that you get from the children, maybe especially towards the end of the programme, when you see the child changing, from the child that entered Phenduka and got diagnosed a level and was so scared... and then you see that child coming out of a shell and it's priceless».

In your opinion what are the strengths and the weaknesses of Phenduka?

Jan: «I think the strength that we have is having more than one teacher working with children on individual needs, which is a huge strength. They get undivided attention. Some of them may find it difficult to concentrate at first, because they haven't got the tools to focus yet, but when they get the tools, they change, that's the key to unlock the doors that had been locked. Then there are lots of little logistical weaknesses, like now we have a maths classroom and before that was a weakness. It will be nice if we had our own transport and that's a weakness, it'll be nice if we had a space where we could do the movements. And another weakness is given by time constraints, because I'd like to have the children for more hours but that doesn't understandably fit with the school schedules, and it's a catch 22 really. The children need to have the work that they are given in the year by the teachers, if they don't, teachers get uncomfortable because we keep them here too much and already this term one teacher got upset with me because she was doing revision with a class. I just said to her that we wanted to keep the children for an extra week to give them a boost so that they could understand the syllabus better and eventually she was fine with that. Something I am going to work out next term is having a written letter telling them the dates so that they can refer on it, concerning the school schedules for the term. Before I used to check personally with each school and give them the dates personally, then a couple of days before we had to do diagnostics I was phoning in again and by the time we had to be there, they might have forgotten about it. Some communication can be lost and may not reach the teachers. Let's use this as an example, 1st of March I wanted a class to come here, I phoned the school and then they said they got tests and they didn't come back to us to coordinate it properly and that they don't phone you back, makes me very angry actually!»

Nomi: «The strength is getting the children to read, that's like magic! I would also say it's important to separate our feelings from the work that has to be done for the children. That can be a weakness sometimes».

Precious: «The strengths are the methodology and the environment, that was created by Alison because it makes children feel free to be themselves and I have highly appreciated it because it offered me a chance to work with those children that needed remediation, which is something I've learned to enjoy, because I didn't think I had the potential and it made me discover a part of me I didn't know it was there, and I feel great because I know I can help a lot of children in my profession in the future. It has developed me both as a person and as a teacher. Another strength of Phenduka

is the ratio of teachers to learners, it helps us monitor, observe and facilitate. The methodology applied with our general ratio enables us to get results that are difficult to achieve in the schools where there is one teacher for forty children. Devising the daily activities can be difficult, because we may have so many ideas on what to do next, but considering the limited time frame it's hard to fit all the content we'd like to cover!»



Nomi and Jan in the classroom

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Is there any child's story or event, related to Phenduka, which struck you and that you feel like commenting about?

Jan: «I met again one child who was with us in 2006, his name was Siphon. In 2011 I walked into an interior decorating store and I heard my name, I turned around to see this boy with his hair neatly plaited back with extensions, wearing a tie and he said "I was in Phenduka and I now manage 3 of these stores" and I was so excited about that! That was still in the times we were in the schools. When I went back to the store again, he wasn't there anymore and I thought that he might have moved elsewhere in one of the other stores in the chain. Another boy of Ithute, he had taken the key we had given him, it opened up his reading and he became fluent in three weeks, quite sad that we lost touch with him. And then, in another shopping centre I heard "Hello baba Jani" and there were people waving at me, they were in the school like 5 years ago or so and they must have finished school by now, and that made me feel wonderful that they got to grade 12, that is fantastic!»

Nomi: «I think it was in 2012 one boy, his name was Olwethu, he couldn't read but then he came to us and started off shy and when he got to know us, he started opening up and what he was at Phenduka is what he really is, but he was hiding inside a shell and couldn't show his true self, but at the end he said "Thank you, Phenduka! Now I can read!" and the way he said it, it really touched me, it's just a pity we are not following up and that we don't know where he is now.»

Precious: «There a lot of them! A recent one is the presentation by Dr. Knak's children last Friday, and I was also very much touched by Hlengiwe from Ithute in 2012 who made us a thank you card with all our names thanking us for being so kind to her. Then there was another boy, Olwethu, that

on his last day of school at Phenduka, when he was at the door, he said out loud “Thank you Phenduka! Now I can read!” in a very confident way. And then recently some Iphuteng children said they were so happy about the maths, that it made a huge difference to them, they said that I had made their maths very easy».



Students in front of the main entrance of Phenduka

photo credit: S. Aeschbacher, November 2014

How would you like you see Phenduka in the future?

Jan: «I would like to have Phenduka with a school that has an art and dance teacher, proper venue plus all the things that we do and with music appreciation. When we had more time before maths was introduced we used to have 10 more minutes of classical music, now it's merged with art work, so while they are drawing, I explain the music and lots of the children love the rhythm of the music!»

Nomi: «I would love to see Phenduka growing bigger, for instance now we are just a charity helping children from Alex but I would like to see Phenduka growing, implementing fresh ideas. For example we had a child from Thokoza [a township south of Johannesburg] and that boy couldn't read, we were helping him to read and someone was even willing to pay for him! It's clear that there are many children in Jo'burg that need this programme but Phenduka is only functioning in

Alexandra. We get requests from parents to help their children with after school classes but we can't manage that! If Phenduka grew bigger, we could help many more children in need, and if someone believes in this project Phenduka can go far. Now it's going slower and being a charity that may shut down at any moment doesn't give you much of a choice to have new ideas about Phenduka and it's very depressing, it doesn't make you feel secure with your job. It would be great if Phenduka had its own money to run more projects».

Precious: «I would like to see Phenduka growing from this, maybe having two schools at once taking maths and literacy at the same time in a parallel, to give full literacy and full maths, this will make a huge difference in children's education and will also give us that satisfaction that we will be doing enough, because now it's like it's half of both, we need to do more, we're always battling with time, we feel like time is against us».



Part Three: Areas of impact and beneficiaries

3.1 Pupils of Phenduka and their schools in Alexandra: An account of project statistics on available data

Since Phenduka was established about 7,400 young learners are estimated to have benefited from its literacy programmes and about 200 teachers have been coached either directly or indirectly by Phenduka's staff within the framework of the GPLMS strategy (2010-2013). Therefore the areas of impact in Gauteng have been twofold: on one side Phenduka has addressed the needs of some of the underperforming schools in the Province through coaching teachers in the GPLMS programme, on the other side Phenduka has worked with primary schools students in Alexandra. The GPLMS has been operated in cooperation with other Gauteng's NGOs for a limited time frame and unfortunately no official impact assessments or figures related to Alexandra's community have been made available.⁷ Nevertheless Phenduka's coaches reported improvements in the schools they served and ANA National Assessments results showed school ratings rising from 40-50% to 70-80%.⁸ The staff have also collected data on their own literacy programmes with the children and precisely at these we shall be looking further in order to explore context and trends involving Phenduka's pupils and their primary schools in Alexandra.⁹

The schools where Phenduka's students have come from every year are Dr. Knak, Ekukhanyisweni, Iphuteng and Ithute. Even if Phenduka had initially embarked on broader programmes to reach many more children, from 2013 the project has become more focused on remedial teaching, so that only the most needy pupils in grade 7s, i.e. those about to leave primary school with the poorest reading skills, are accepted on the programmes.¹⁰ In order to decide on Phenduka's groups a meticulous diagnostic test is conducted each January, at the beginning of the school year. Phenduka's literacy specialists go into the classes of the four partner schools and sit with the children. Each and every one is asked to read a short text and based on their performance, they are rated from a minimum of one to a maximum of six.¹¹

At this preliminary stage of diagnostic tests, primary school teachers may provide their feedback if

⁷ An institutional website of Gauteng's education reported in December 2012 a clear improvement in Gauteng's literacy and numeracy levels in township schools contexts. The ANA results (Annual National Assessment Results) were used to assess the efficiency of GPLMS (Gauteng Province Education, 2012).

⁸ These results are reported in the Annual Report for the year July 2013 to June 2014.

⁹ Although 2014 may not be the best exemplary year ever, it is the one with greatest availability of data, therefore in-depth analysis on Phenduka's pupils will be mostly based on 2014 figures.

¹⁰ Provided there is place availability in the groups, a few exceptions can be made. This happens in case teachers or parents insist on having a child in the programme.

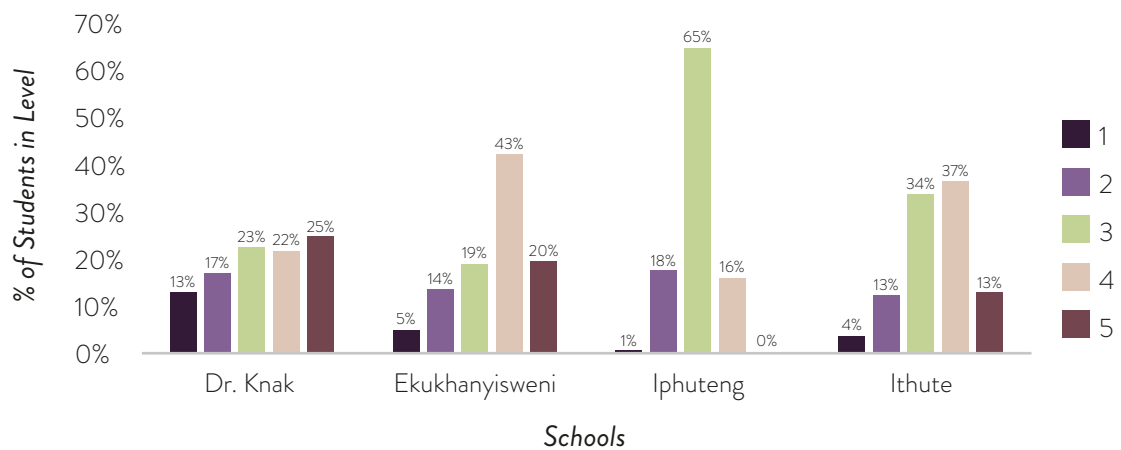
¹¹ Please see previous chapter for a description of diagnostic levels.

they like, for instance they can tell if they think one student should attend the programme. They may even inform Phenduka if they believe that a pupil is deliberately influencing the test to be chosen for the programme. In fact according to the school teachers many children are attracted by the idea of participating in Phenduka’s programmes, also because these take place outside Alexandra and pupils are very eager “to take taxi rides”.¹² Phenduka’s staff take notes on all students and arrange two groups for each school, with groups usually being made of 10 - 20 students each. This variance in numbers is due to the fact that group-making is subject to changes, very often occurring at the last minute. In fact some selected pupils may end up not attending because of parental denial or because by the time the programme starts they have left their primary schools. Unfortunately no further information is available on these points.

The diagnostic or entry tests run in the last two years involved fifteen classes of grade 7s in 2013 and fourteen in 2014. On average each class of the four primary schools, had at least 44 children. The least crowded class had 34 children and was at Ekukhanyisweni in 2013 while the biggest class had 51 children and was at Ithute in 2014. Overall the tests involved more than 1,200 pupils, at least 600 per year.

Out of all classes tested in 2013, 5% of pupils were on level one, 15% on level two and 36% on level three. The same levels accounted for 6%, 10% and 24% in 2014, respectively, and the two graphs below show all data related to diagnostic tests for each primary school in the two mentioned years.

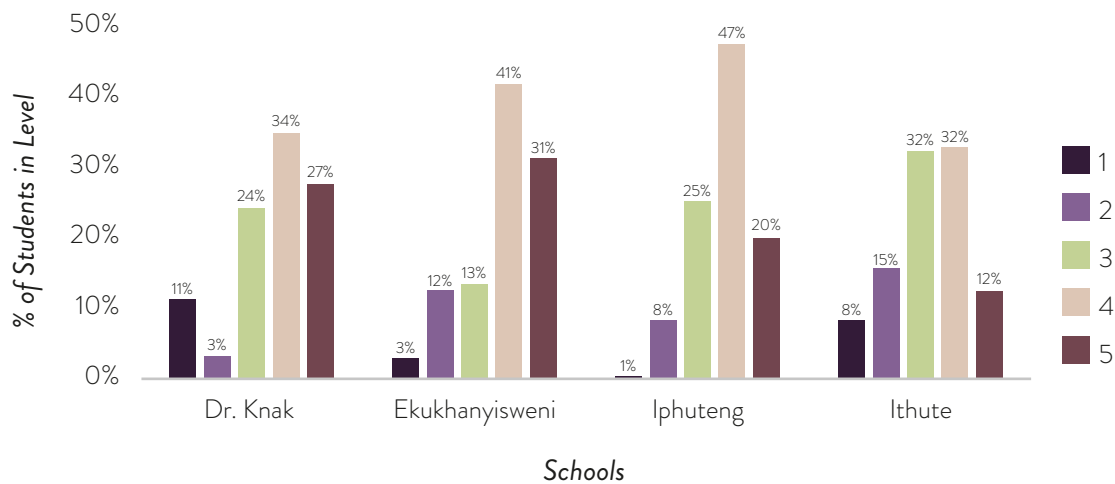
Distribution of Students by Diagnostics Test Levels at 4 Schools in 2013



Source: Own calculations of 2013 entry tests based on paper marked class lists

¹² This topic will be further explored in the next section dealing with interviews with the partner schools’ staff.

Distribution of Students by Diagnostics Test Levels at 4 Schools in 2014



Source: Own calculations of 2014 entry tests based on paper marked class lists

On average about 20% of grade 7s of each school are represented in Phenduka's literacy programmes each year. All schools get their chosen students divided in two groups (A and B) and dates and time slots are negotiated at the beginning and throughout the year. The pupils are not mixed with other schools, but may be mixed with different classes of their same school and that is primarily due to logistical reasons as the children are taxied to Phenduka premises and the arrangement of this service makes it easier for Phenduka to have one school at a time. Group A and Group B of the same school come in two separate sessions: the first starts at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 11:00 a.m. while the next begins at 11:45 a.m. and finishes shortly after 2:00 p.m. At these times the pupils are collected and brought back at their primary school.



Students sometimes work in subgroups

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

A typical Phenduka school year runs in parallel to the primary schools', meaning from January to December and each group gets four or five weeks teaching at the earliest available year slot.¹³ When the first round is completed, each group goes back to Phenduka for a booster three-week programme, which takes place towards the end of the school year and after which exit tests are taken. Overall, each group is expected to spend 200 hours on the programme.

In 2014 the primary school that got more pupils onboard Phenduka's programmes was Ithute (30%) followed by Dr. Knak (29%), Iphuteng (22%) and Ekukhanyisweni (19%). Available data suggest that the majority of Phenduka's students were males (68%). The high number of male students might be due to them having lower reading skills compared to their female classmates when they were first tested. Phenduka does not make distinctions of gender when choosing their students and looks only at reading skills as entry criteria. Unfortunately, gender information is not available for previous years so the eventuality of gender imbalance will have to be closely examined in the next programmes.

That South Africa is a plurilinguistic country is reflected in the variety of native languages spoken by Phenduka's children. Sepedi is the most spoken language by 2014 pupils onboard Phenduka's programmes (51%), next comes Zulu (18%), then Xhosa (12%) and Tswana (11%) and last but not least Sesotho (8%).

The majority of students at Phenduka in 2014 were born in 2001 (42%), so they were 13 years old when they attended, and 18% were 2002-born, meaning they were 12 years old. This is in line with the classes they were attending at primary schools. However 27% of the overall 2014 group were 14 years old, 12% were 15 years old and one student was 16 years old. This is clearly not in line with the class they were attending and it's a bitter consolation to know that they were reached by a literacy rescue programme in the middle of their teenage years, after so many years of primary school.

Although numbers are not fully comparable for each year, since there were far more children born in 2001 than in 2002, a little trend can still be inferred. In fact by crossing results of entry tests of students born in different years, it results that children born in 2002 scored higher levels than their mates born in 2001 and 2000, which may suggest that the youngest may have benefited more from the GPLMS strategy. The same analysis repeated with exit tests reveals that the youngest achieved level five and six more easily than the pupils born in 2001, who did better than those born in 2000. More data across different years of programmes would definitely be needed to ascertain if this is a truly trustworthy trend, but the saying "the sooner the better" seems to be quite appropriate to explain some of Phenduka's success stories.¹⁴

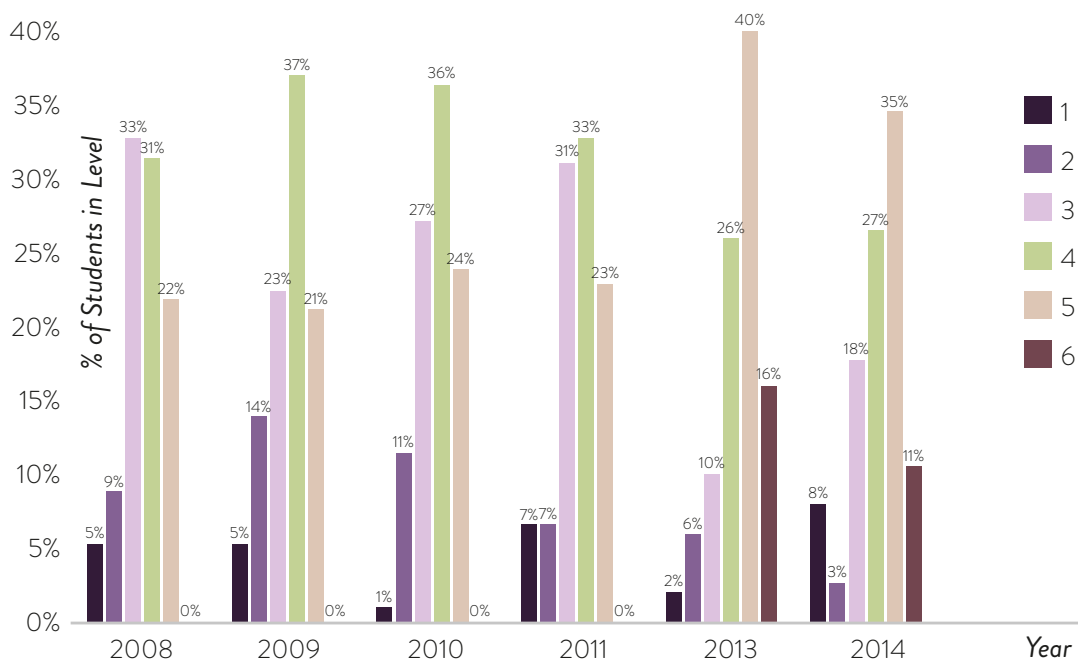
¹³ It is at school's discretion how much time the pupils will spend on Phenduka's programmes. Differences may occur in different years due to holidays and other circumstances, in fact in 2014 pupils had a shorter booster programme.

¹⁴ Pupils born in 2002 were 20, those born in 2001 were 48 and those in 2000 were 31. About 30% of the 2002-born pupils got level six and 45% got level five. Level six accounted for 6% of 2001-born pupils, while 40% of them got to level five. About 3% of the 2000-born students achieved level six and 29% level five.

Another aspect that is worth exploring, and which has not received attention so far, regards the possibility of an influence of native languages into reading abilities in English. Samples of each language are not fully comparable due to a difference in numbers, but the 2014 data suggests that Sepedi and Zulu mother tongue speakers did very well in exit tests, with 42% of Sepedi-speaking pupils achieving level five and 10% level six and 40% Zulu-speakers getting to a five and 5% to a six. Both language groups had 30%+ level three-starters though, which accounts for more than what Sesotho, Tswana and Xhosa-speakers had. To check whether home languages have any influence in their speakers' learning abilities to read in English, further availability of data would be needed.

Regarding exit tests no such thing as a longitudinal time study comparing Phenduka's exit results has ever been carried out, yet available data on Annual Reports on either all schools or some of them, help shedding light on the progress achieved. The below graph is an elaboration of available data on Phenduka classes from 2008 until 2014 – excluding 2012 - and shows how the majority of young students managed to get to higher levels at the end of the programmes. In the last two years a few young learners have even achieved the top level, which is quite remarkable considering that all pupils had either level one or two and in a few cases level three in 2013 and 2014.¹⁵

Distribution of Students by Exit Level, 2008-2014



Source: own elaboration of graphs in Annual Reports 2008 to 2013 with added data of 2014¹⁶

¹⁵ 3 pupils out of 125 in 2013 and 31 out of 113 in 2014 started the programme with a level three.

¹⁶ This table groups all available data on the exit levels reached by the four primary schools students. Please note that the table does not intend to compare one year with the following one as some exit data are unfortunately unavailable for the years 2010 to 2013, including insufficient information to insert 2012 due to a computer crash. Therefore the mentioned years are to be considered as only partly accountable for the levels of progress shown.

The level students get to has partly to do with their start level, and those reaching level three are likely to have started with levels two or one for two reasons: a) that they start with the lowest levels is an entry requirement and b) learners show a tendency to move up the grid. The only cases where improvement does not occur is with pupils with learning difficulties, i.e. they do not respond to new inputs received in class and do not manage to move higher, which is the case with some level one children. Nevertheless, the 2014 data show that pupils starting on this level can also achieve impressive results. Talking in numbers, in 2014 29 children started at level one. Out of them 9 pupils did not move any further (which explains the 8% figure on level one in 2014 in the previous graph), 3 students made a slight improvement into level two, 10 reached level three, 7 made it to level four, and 1 got to a level five. This group of level one is very heterogeneous, since there are at least as many top performers as many lagging behind and a significant number of children improved at an average pace, which suggests that with more time and extra challenge, also these children can easily get to the top. On the other hand that more children got to level six in the last years can be only partly explained with a few children starting off with a level three.¹⁷ In fact the majority of those who went all the way up had a level two when they began the programme, meaning that level two children too, like the pupil who got to a five out of level one, moved on by four levels. Such good results indicate that Phenduka can indeed unleash big potential of young students and that the work being done can be very successful.

Having explored the numbers of Phenduka, interesting questions now are “Are improvements acknowledged by pupils themselves and by their teachers in primary schools?” and “What do they think of Phenduka?” “Will these young students manage to keep up the pace and make the most out of their new reading skills?” The next section presents intriguing answers and the points of views of a few interviewed beneficiaries.

3.2 Perceptions of beneficiaries: Highlights from interviews to current pupils, their teachers and previous pupils

Math has been introduced as a pilot add-on for the 2014 programmes. It has been added because Phenduka’s staff and founders felt that the pupils onboard the programmes, needed more support also in mathematics as it goes along with literacy to strengthen the foundations of their education. As soon as Phenduka’s staff got working with the children, they realized how much their mathematical ability needed to be uplifted, which was highly appreciated by the pupils as shown by the below statements in response to the question “What is the most important learning at Phenduka?”

«[My] reading and math changed and I became very well at school because I passed math and English. I enjoy writing and playing activities in English. [At Phenduka] they helped with my reading, math, high frequency words, to read more and know many more subjects.» This child’s name means “Education” in Zulu, he looks very gentle and is 13 years old.

¹⁷ One child in 2013 and three in 2014 started the programme with a level three and got to a six at the end.

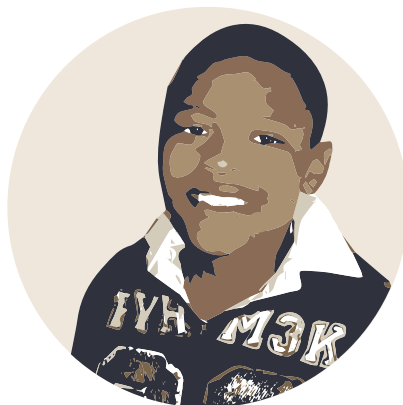


«English and math. I want to learn to talk English. I need them! If I am selling, I want to know the change to the people!», said a pretty and clever-looking 12 years old girl picturing herself as a future sales assistant in this case. Her name means “Mother of crying” in Sepedi.



All of the interviewed pupils gave great importance to their literacy skills improvements of which they talked with lots of enthusiasm. To the same question about their most important learning some replied:

«Reading! Anything! I try to read anything I see, sometimes I can read and that makes me feel happy. When I read in the past, they were laughing at me and now they don't laugh at me. Sometimes it makes me feel bad when I try and I can't read, but when they [other classmates at his primary school] get angry, because I can read, I'm happy!» This was said with pride by a lively and determined 13-year-old boy. He looks younger than his age and his name means “Receive and Accept” in Sepedi.



«English is special... if you want some job, they want people that know English and my English is better now. My English is better than before, reading and writing and talking much better. The teachers tell me to respect, I must buy books and read and answer questions and I do it. In my family they say that I am perfect now and I must go to Phenduka, so they can teach me more and my future becomes brighter. (...) Thank you [Phenduka] for your help, life becomes brighter thanks to teaching!».

This was said heartily by a cheerful 12-year-old Sepedi-speaking girl, whose name means “Holy”. She was sent to Phenduka as her parents wanted her to make more progress. Her parents wish for her a better and «brighter» future and consider Phenduka a treasured ally.



It has been noted in chapter two that Phenduka’s staff aims at creating a safe learning environment that is fully inclusive and trustworthy, where all can feel respected, supported and cheered for every step forward. At least three teachers usually act as facilitators for each group session and the rules are clearly outlined from the beginning. There is no space for teasing and making fun of each other’s mistakes, no chance of distracting classmates from learning, and the teachers’ behaviour is fully consistent with these principles. Struggle for attention gives way to cooperation and Phenduka’s classroom environment certainly feels different also for objective reasons: it is not overcrowded with only one teacher for a class of 40+, and it is not inside a closed up big building with security metal window bars and iron doors everywhere. It is in a quiet place, with no traffic and a park nearby. You can hear birds singing during a lesson and occasionally a bell ringing in a former Model C Primary School located on the opposite side of the road, which unintentionally somehow reminds that this special environment is still bound to mainstream schooling.¹⁸

The interviewed children have been asked to describe the learning environment at their own primary schools and at Phenduka Literacy. They show to be appreciative of their primary schools and raise also some very interesting points, which play in Phenduka’s hands, acknowledging the good results made possible thanks to the creation of a positive and effective learning environment.

¹⁸ Model C Schools used to be reserved for white pupils during the Apartheid era. This is of course no longer the case, but their legacy is still strong, in fact they keep on being addressed as “ex Model Cs” by locals even if this legal form has been abolished. They are state-controlled now, but they set higher fees and achieve higher results compared with other public schools.

«I was very cross [before], because I don't know how to read and I cried, all of them [classmates at primary school] were reading. (...) I don't like to be cross, in class they were laughing at me, because I couldn't read. At Phenduka they give a chance to read.» the "Education" boy stressed.

That Phenduka makes students feel valued, praised and no longer bullied or teased is clear also in the next interview extract. It is a quiet 13 years old boy speaking, whose name means "Mercy" in Sepedi:



«Q: How is school at your primary school?

A: It's good because you have to learn.

Q: And how is school at Phenduka?

A: It's good because it's teaching us many things, so you can understand the words and if you answer correctly, they give you sweets or biscuits.¹⁹

Q: And have you eaten many biscuits? Were they good?

A: Yes! [laughs]

Q: So do you feel you have made progress?

A: I know many more things, like math and English, and sometimes natural science and I'm going better, my friends like me better. Some of my friends are also in the class, we help each other.

Q: What is your most important learning at Phenduka?

A: I'll remember that they teach me the words. At school if you don't know the words they will beat you».

There was also another girl sitting in the group, her figure stood out because it resembled more that of a young lady, but her eye-look was still that of a child and was very disappointed. It was the end of the booster programme and she was soon going to leave Phenduka. In class she was mostly quiet and had smiled at times. When asked the first of the above questions, she broke into tears, and no English was coming out of her mouth. Yvonne Silubane, a volunteer who could speak Zulu and Tsonga was there to help and gave the following account:

«She felt the only one to feel stupid, because she couldn't read, she couldn't read

¹⁹ Occasionally during class activities Phenduka's teachers may give little sweets as a prize to praise pupils for their progress. This is usually cheered with words of incitement and encouragement for the whole class.

and was scared that children would laugh at her. She enjoys being here, because other children are on the same level and she feels like we do understand her. When it's time to read, she enjoys it and there's nothing that she doesn't like. Her most important learning at Phenduka is math and now that she's back at school, when she tries to read, the others stop laughing, because she can read and she tries. She would like to learn more of maths and Zulu. She's struggling with Zulu at school, because she was brought up by parents that speak Tsonga but [at primary school] she's taught in Zulu and English. She doesn't know Zulu, but her surname is Zulu, so she is expected to know it». She's 14 years old, her name means "Gift" in Zulu.



Definitely language barriers are a relevant factor, especially in such a multilingual context. Her case might not be the norm, but with many children raised up in families that tend to be problematic, she is most likely not the only one facing such painful obstacles, even if she feels so.

On a happier note, the next interviewee explains in her own words how the new learning achieved can also inspire a very optimistic outlook, stirring a sense of great self-confidence and gratitude that can beat all obstacles along the way, including barriers due to a lack of knowledge in the own home language:



«Q: How was school at your primary school and how is it at Phenduka?

A: I was scared because I didn't know how to read, but since I came here, I feel better, because I can read long sentences and maybe a story and my mum is proud of me. Also my teachers are proud of me that I can read any sentences in books they give me and if they say I have to write a sentence at the chalkboard, I can do it, I can

do anything, presenting in front of the class and talk English. (...) I would like to thank mama Precious, and all teachers (at Phenduka), because they helped me so much! Maybe I could buy a gift for them!

Q: What else would you like to learn?

A: My home language [Tswana], everything with my language, to know what is this and that in my language.

Q: And what would you like to do when you're grown up?

A: A journalist... in television, in many places and see what's happening and I can think myself and remember what happened and then if my mum and dad are still alive [talking of Precious and Jan, the teachers], I would like to do something at Phenduka and bring them somewhere and thank them». Her name means "Give Thanks" in Tswana, she's an attentive and good-hearted 13 years old girl.

Speaking about their future, the interviewed pupils have fantastic dreams, which could well be within their reach, providing Phenduka has managed to unlock doors of further learning for them and that they keep on receiving a good-quality education. Like many of their peers living in other parts of the world they want to change it for the better and the experience of how it feels like to have little choice and to be marginalized is a great catalyst. Apart from an independent journalist and an inevitable soccer player (because yes, the boys of Phenduka are indeed fond of soccer!), there are also two lawyers and two teachers in this small group and possibly a local government civil servant too:

«I want to be a lawyer, because I like helping people that are innocent and get arrested for things that didn't do!» (Mother of Crying)

«A lawyer, to help other people, that are struggling with stolen things, I want to stand for these people». (Gift)

«I want to be a teacher, to teach how to read just like they taught me here at Phenduka». (Receive and Accept)

«I want to teach like them [Phenduka]! To help children get more education... I like learners to be proud of their education and respect books, teacher and education. I thank so much Phenduka, I say thank you for myself and my family and I am now so proud of myself!» (Holy)

«I want to help people, to give them food, if they don't have homes I want to give them homes». (Mercy)

Whether they succeed at doing what they said or not, they will hopefully look at written language with different eyes and will remember to keep in touch with Phenduka to let them know what they will be up to.

Current pupils are not the only ones happy with Phenduka. Their primary schools are also happy. In the attempt to investigate what is the perception of the programmes in the partner institutions, four teachers, five deputies, two heads of department and one principal of the four primary schools

have been reached and interviewed.²⁰ The staff has collaborated with Phenduka since the beginning or has started only more recently, however they all know the NGO and what it is doing.²¹

In terms of meeting the objective of creating a positive and respectful learning environment, Phenduka seems to be successful also after programmes come to an end, because young students are observed to go back to schools with a behavioural change. Most schools representatives spontaneously linked an increased sense of self-confidence to Phenduka's attendance.²² Self-assertion prompts pupils to speak up and participate in class and makes them more constructive. Many pupils stop behaving disruptively or keeping silent all the times, at least that's what the majority think and the two following comments represent this view very well. The third interviewee shows great disillusion instead, the feelings expressed are not shared by others, who take a more positive stance in their responses:

«Learners are improving in terms of reading and they are able to spell words well, yet they are not able to use basics in math (sums, subtractions, division, multiplication), but they do try. I can see that they are raising up their hands, trying to answer, once more they are developing confidence, they are not shy in the classroom, they are able to communicate with other learners... They were not able to mix up before but now they share their ideas, talk to the teachers, sometimes we give them projects and then they are able to stand up and explain in front of others and their marks are improving!» (Interviewee F)

«There've been improvements also in terms of attitude, they come back as different people and they talk with confidence and make an attempt on the activities without negative feelings that come from not knowing how to approach a task».
(Interviewee C)

«Some of them do change, they show interest after Phenduka. Others don't change and the group of this year is different. This year we are facing behavioural problems, lack of discipline and we are trying to call on parents but they do not respond. There is a lack of parental involvement. Our department is trying so much to organise workshops for parents to teach discipline to their children... this is the worst group ever of grade 7s, I would not blame Phenduka here. These children do not show any interest in the work». (Interviewee D)

The staff at the schools recognize that programmes organised by Phenduka are very much loved by their pupils and some showed some healthy envy of these:

²⁰ Please note that deputies are or have been also teaching.

²¹ To respect the anonymity of responses, the twelve interviewees have been randomly named from A to L. A list of real names can be found at the end of the Report, this does not resemble the same 'A to L' order.

²² Towards the end of their interviews, the four teachers were asked to provide ratings to a list of possible changes in their students and "Confidence" got an average of 5 out of 6. Another noteworthy one is "Speaking and Vocabulary" which got a 4.5.

«All the learners want to go, even when they don't have problems, they get so excited, maybe it's because of their taxis...» (Interviewee J)

«... Children are naughty, they want to get to Phenduka. Last year they were lying during the tests, because they wanted to go to Pheduka and take taxi rides. Some children are disruptive; they disturb other children, and we don't want them to go to the programme, but as of this year we get involved with the selection of children». (Interviewee B)

«Children are happy to go to Phenduka! They will quickly jump to go! They don't even wait for the lesson to be finished once we mention Phenduka's transport is waiting outside; they just go! You need to share with us what is the strategy they are using with them! [laughs] They've got their secrets there, some strategy! [keeps laughing]» (Interviewee L)



Two interviewees at Dr. Knak Primary School

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

As part of an inclusive and constructive learning environment Phenduka uses a distinctive methodology to reach and teach the pupils, and this is noticed by the teachers, because of the way the children respond after the programme. Teachers who know well Phenduka recalled having had workshops with them before, so they have an idea of the process the pupils had gone through, others wish they could have workshops and be explained the methodology:

«What I like is that when we got invited there, they were showing us how they were getting there: they used pictures, actions, interpreting stories with pictures... Not all learners are the same and their individually designed programmes are reaching the learners better. Phenduka helps learners where they got stuck». (Interviewee A)

«I'm happy, because there were learners who couldn't read and now they can, they

can write letters in the air, in counting it is also important, I was asking learners how they were taught maths and I can see they gave them skills through practice. When they were [at Phenduka] reading a text they were dramatizing it, reading a giraffe with a long neck, they would show it and learners would understand». (Interviewee E)

«I would like workshops on methodology that will help teachers understand how are they capable of bringing a child that totally doesn't understand anything to understanding». (Interviewee F)

Apart from methodology, Phenduka is seen as very important because it can more easily reach pupils with learning difficulties and this is both because Phenduka has a higher ratio of teachers per pupils than in the schools and also because they can help with remedial teaching:

«Phenduka helps us very much, because we have kids that need special attention and Phenduka helps them on a one-on-one basis, Phenduka has the time we don't have, we have 175 kids in grade 7 here, I'm unable to give them special attention, because they are too many, but kids cannot understand other subjects if they don't know how to read!» (Interviewee G)

«Alison usually gives us a feedback on the learners, (...) about their improvements. (...) One year there was a learner who was not coping at all, but that [feedback] made us view the learner differently! Sometimes we can't identify the shortcomings about a learner, but since I've started a relationship with Phenduka, I've seen how they are able to give us information about learners and I think we need Phenduka in our lives, because they do something we are not trained to do, our training was not comprehensive, we are not remedial schools, but they supplement us!» (Interviewee J)



Interviewee at Iphuteng Primary School holds lesson plan book

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Children that are referred to as needing special support because of learning issues are pointed to attend specific institutions like Gresswold School or Nokuthula, but apparently parents resist the idea of sending their children to these schools and the account of the following interview fully explains why this happens:

«The main challenge is poverty, they cannot cope... They are supposed to go to special schools, but we don't have them, those which exist are expensive, they can't afford transport and school fees. Then there's a cultural thing, that these are schools for the stupid and it's not true. I know a case of someone who has made something out of himself, has a job and is independent. It's in the best interest of a learner to put him in the right educational institution... Then there is some negligence, of not wanting to take responsibility, they [talking of parents] expect anything to come for free, school uniforms for free, they don't accept a sense of responsibility... I respect NGOs that act for the kids, I am going to support them, even when I'm in my old age. These kinds of programmes are very useful to learners, I fully support it and I wish the relationship continues and I hope that they will become something, even if you reach three or five out of ten, you've made a difference». (Interviewee K)



Interviewee poses in front of Ekukhanyisweni Primary School

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Teachers think that pupils that have gone to Phenduka, will more likely continue in high schools. There are five high schools around Alexandra, teaching in English and in the home languages, but what happens there primary school teachers don't know. Some said a few pupils had come back to the schools to thank them for their good teaching, but this does not seem to occur on a regular basis. That there is a high dropout ratio in high schools, it's a well-known issue, but interviewees cannot help create a comprehensive picture of the reasons behind the phenomenon and what it

means for the youth affected:²³

«The drop out can be explained by high schools, we don't know what happens there». (Interviewee J)

«Most of them go to high school, maybe they drop out of high school, the girls get pregnant, maybe the boys go and look for jobs, selling in the street...» (Interviewee D)

«The majority goes to high school, they drop out at grade 9, until 15 years they have to study and can go also to technical schools to learn skills. If they drop out I think they will not be able to be employed, they will be standing in the streets...» (Interviewee E)

«100% go to high school and the few of them who can't, those we encourage to go to technical schools. We use our efforts to encourage them and tell the parents they shouldn't let them out of school so that they get something for their life. (...) We communicate with the district which searches for special schools and places learners. Parents can also do that themselves, but it takes long, up to 2 years. We do not allow them [children] to roam around the streets!» (Interviewee F)

«I can just say that the drop out of schools is because of parents. They don't give support. They work, they can't see what is happening. Some kids become involved with bad groups and start smoking [marijuana, nyaope], and as teachers our hands are tied, you can't discipline them, (...) no one is doing anything to protect these learners, our laws are not protecting the youth, the environment is not good to raise kids, but those who are committed, they make it». (Interviewee H)

At least pupils that go to Phenduka are reported to have good chances of not falling behind and thanks to their new literacy skills, they stop being bullied and can become even better than others in their classrooms:

«When they speak in the classrooms and they can't read, the others laugh at them, (...) they are bullying each other, it's a whole group against one, we're trying to do our best in the school but they do it in the streets and along their way home. When they improve, the others no longer tease. They have such a change, they become better learners than others and I do have some examples of these kids! » (Interviewee H)

«When these kids get to high school, they perform better, because Phenduka has empowered them to read, others are promoted because of age and get frustrated because they don't pass, most of the girls become pregnant and the boys just leave...

²³The current high school dropout rate is 47% and occurs at grade 10. The Director of Communications and Research at the Department of Basic Education, Elijah Mhanga has been reported to have explained this with following main causes: the youth leave for further training, start working to support their households, or may become criminals (News 24 South Africa, 2014).

but these kids that go to Phenduka are able to debate are more independent».
(Interviewee G)

Some respondents have also criticized Phenduka for taking pupils only at grade 7, which is considered too late. Phenduka aims at getting them reading before they start high school, so as to help avoid dropout later. It doesn't have the capacity to assist the schools with more classes, yet the primary schools can't reap the benefits of their new skills and ask for earlier help. Interviewee D and J complained about the timetable and suggested that pupils should attend the programmes in the afternoon, so that they (not clear whether talking about pupils or teachers, probably both) don't need to catch up with the missed classes.

«Grade 6 should be taken in, they should start earlier and include 6 in one term and 7 in the other. I'd prefer grade 6 to 7 if I had to vote for it, because we're not involved with grade 8 to see the results. The two critical grades are 3 and 6, because at grade 3 you are at the exit point from the foundation phase and at grade 6 you are at the exit point of the intermediate phase». (Interviewee B)

«For grade 7 they are not doing the appropriate work, they should start earlier, it must be a bigger group, helping in both English and maths and progress with them, that will make a big, big difference». (Interviewee E)

«I'm 100% happy! These guys are making a huge difference to our school, I asked last year: why don't you help kids in other grades? Because right now there is not enough follow up with them but they said there is no sufficient funding to do it and this really broke my heart. If there were more synergies, these kids would not drop out of high school, but the impact they're having on the community these kids live in is hugely felt». (Interviewee G)

«It's not about me and about my salary, it's about them, it's all about their future, because these learners are dependent from us and we are from them, if we have no learners, whom are we teaching to? Other teachers that are worried about the timetable when the learners go to Phenduka, they shouldn't forget it!»
(Interviewee H)

As little as the impact may still be, the schools are very eager for the Project to continue, because after all it is a powerful aid to their work and can improve results of their schools' Annual National Assessment tests:

«We are one of the top performing schools in Alexandra Township thanks to the good performance in maths and English and that is achieved through Phenduka Project». (Interviewee I)

«For me, I'm happy, I can see the difference and improvements in some of the learners and boost the school's image». (Interviewee A)

«It is very important [that Phenduka added maths to the literacy programme], when

we have ANA test once a year, maths and languages are tested, so it's good that they introduced it as it will help us with ANA». (Interviewee D)

Multilinguism is not seen as influencing the learning pace of students. It is just a matter of fact for the staff that asserted their pupils experience multilinguism at all times, at home and during the school breaks, but they are educated within the same language group, they said. What is critical is the transition from grade 3 when children are taught only in their home language to grade 4 when all subjects are taught in English. Nevertheless, the staff of the schools feel pretty sure about the improvements of Phenduka's pupils and they said they do follow up by celebrating their progress.

Speaking of students achieving excellence out of Phenduka's programmes: «We make a party! We take their results around the class, we invite parents, announce it at the assembly... we give a small task to learners to check, to see if this is true. (...) I don't think these people [Phenduka's teachers] can make a mistake, they have tested them, I believe the learners who have been taken, they all come back with a change, maybe one or two out of twenty don't have any change». (Interviewee F)

«We normally give awards for certain categories, in learning areas, including for those who behave well, we do that to strengthen their confidence». (Interviewee J)



Two interviewees stand outside Ithute Primary School

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

Regarding the importance of literacy as the basis of education and the extent to which maths and literacy are complementary to one another, they all unquestionably agree on their vital roles:

«Literacy is the key, whether you want to pursue academics or be an entrepreneur you need it, literacy is the key. Math is key, they practice it in their everyday life, they may not realize in the classroom but to build a house, they need to take measures, it

is the basis to be able to survive». (Interviewee C)

«It's important! They use word sentences in maths and maths and literacy are together and we need to talk, write and read so literacy is everything, it's for all subjects. With maths, teachers tell them to look for keywords in the exercise, like if you see the word "difference" that stands for "minus" if you see "the product of" it means "multiply"». (Interviewee B)

«A reading nation is a success nation, let Phenduka get more funding to focus on earlier grades and continue up. The little impact that is now having we reap the fruits out both as a school and also as a community, but I'd like it bigger, to make even more impact». (Interviewee G)

It is not known what happens to the pupils after they leave primary school but teachers hope for the best and feel very proud when they see previous pupils who achieved something out of education, like a good job:

«I met a child, he was working in a bank! I feel great [thinking about it], it feels very wonderful! Another time I was in a CTM store, in a ceramic shop, and there was another, he was the supervisor, I knew him very well, because he was very naughty and I could see he is a gentleman! A supervisor!» (Interviewee K)

Some calls had been made to the schools, to interviewed pupils and through Alex News, to spread the word around and ask previous Phenduka pupils to come and tell about their experience in high school and how they remembered Phenduka.²⁴ Ekukhanyisweni managed to draft a list of previous pupils who had been at Phenduka and that are now in high school, but unfortunately they could not be reached for interviews.²⁵ The word of mouth gave good results though and four pupils came back to share their experiences and feelings. One came alone and three of them came together at a later stage and talked directly with the staff at Phenduka.²⁶

The first of these alumni is still in grade 7, still at primary school because he failed a few subjects. He said he had no ability to read and write before attending the programme, that Phenduka showed him how to communicate with people and that now that he can read, he is reading, currently two stories: one about a girl named Lizzy who gets pregnant and flees from home and another about a group of people who climb up a mountain to put a flag at the top.

The other three who came as a group are now in grade 8 at Relogile High School, in the new part of Alexandra. So far they enjoy their new school, they like to borrow books from the library, they like the sports. They say they find math, science and geography as the most difficult subjects but

²⁴ A call on previous pupils can still be read on Alex News website (Alex News, 2014).

²⁵ Out of a list of thirty Ekukhanyisweni pupils taking part to Phenduka's programmes in 2013, fifteen are now in high school and five in a special needs school, where they will learn a job.

²⁶ Because the group came after I had left South Africa, they were interviewed for me by the staff of Phenduka.

they all agree that they are going well with English and are very happy about that. They are positive about their future; they say they would like to be a lawyer, a pilot and a doctor, respectively. They are also positive about their experience at Phenduka. Here is what they said:

«It really helped me with my English, because the teachers' English was good. At our own school, the teachers' English is not "deep". I think the pictures and the actions helped me to understand. It gave me confidence to kind of speak».

«I loved Phenduka! I never, ever got bored! And ... because you [talking to the staff of Phenduka], give everyone a chance to speak and to try. And because you used lots of things to help us understand, like pictures and acting. So that gave me confidence, especially with reading. And you believed that I can make it so I also believed it. The teachers are always there [at Phenduka], and they are nice. They help you if you don't understand. At school the teachers come and go and they don't really help you. You only have them for a short time each day and they are always going onto something new so you don't really learn properly».

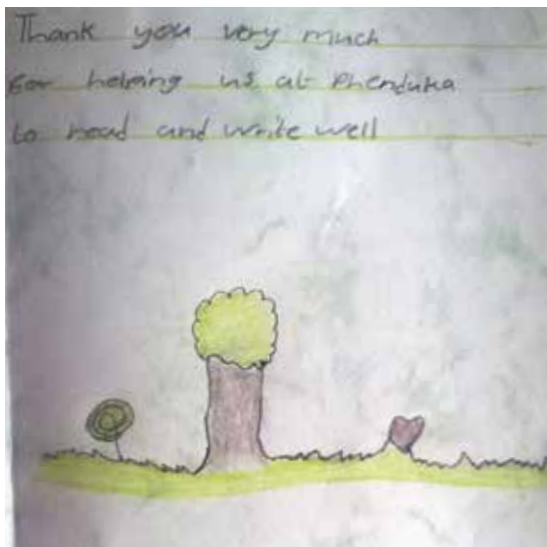
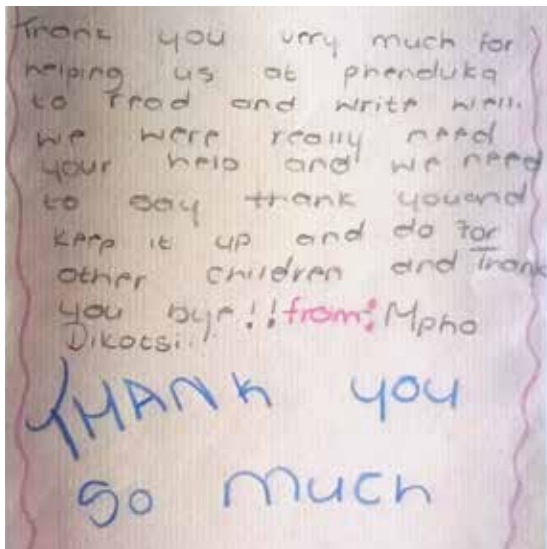
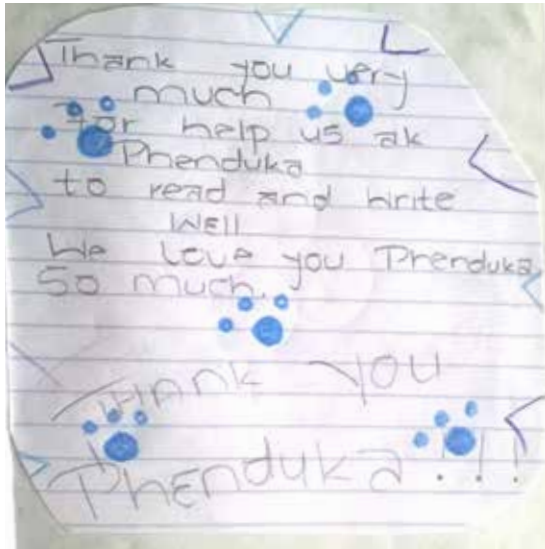


Nomi checking exercises

photo credit: G. Ambrosi, November 2014

«Phenduka helped me with spelling and reading a lot. So now I am not shy to read. It also helped me concentrate. I liked that we weren't allowed to laugh at each other. So I wasn't scared of being laughed at».

As to whether young students at Phenduka will manage to keep up the pace and make the most out of their new reading skills, there is currently no certain answer. There are no numbers at this point in time, only a few fragmented stories. What is clear is that for once, thanks to Phenduka, its friends and supporters, these disadvantaged young girls and boys are having a chance for a change and they are very happy to hang on it to draw their own future. Phenduka Literacy Project will be happy to continue the work in the years to come and assess further impact by keeping closer ties with partner schools and past children. Any type of support to keep up the great work and do more will be highly appreciated.



Thank you cards written by Phenduka children

In addition to all interviewed pupils and Phenduka's staff, special thanks go to the following interviewees at the four partner Primary Schools in Alexandra:

Dr. Knak: Ms. Kuki Matlala, Deputy and Teacher of Home Language; Ms. Zihle Shandu, Head of Department and Teacher of Economic Management Services, Ms. Theresia Pheza, Teacher of Maths and Science

Ekukhanyisweni: Ms. Yolisa Mvunyiswa, Deputy; Ms. Hilary Tshakane, Head of Department; Ms. Gloria Moabelo, Teacher of English as first additional language

Iphtuteng: Mr. Peter Makgato, Deputy and Teacher of Technology and Life Orientation; Ms. Eunice Mohali, Teacher of English as first additional language and Life Orientation

Ithute: Mr. Gabriel Gwala, Principal of Ithute Primary; Mr. Kenneth Moerane, Vice Principal; Mr. Johannes Sebata, Deputy; Ms. Thokozile Mohale, Teacher of English as first additional language

Do you remember the joy of reading for the first time?

What was the first word you read?

Mine was... globe-trotter!

Keep Phenduka going and help it growing!

Phenduka Literacy Project thanks its current and new Friends for their invaluable support.

Donations can be made in either South Africa or Switzerland:

In South Africa:

Phenduka Literacy, Account nr. 1469 03 93 89; Nedbank, Branch nr. 146905,
Johannesburg, South Africa

In Switzerland:

Stiftung Phenduka Literacy, Migros Bank, Postfach 6640, 8023 Zürich,
Switzerland

Konto: 16 727.442.1/09; IBAN: CH78 0840 1016 7274 42109



Are you a previous Phenduka student?

Would you like to know more about the methodology of Phenduka?

Keep (or get) in touch with Phenduka!

Phenduka looks forward to knowing more about stories and personal schooling experiences of previous pupils and is happy to share best practice methods with interested teachers:

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Erica De Marzi is a freelance web and graphic designer, who has built extensive work expertise starting her career with a communications agency and following key clients from the Italian fashion, cosmetics and food industries. She has graduated from the Palladio Design Institute in Verona, Italy and is responsible for the execution of the graphic layout of this Report. Her name refers to a pretty purple flower, also commonly known as Heather. You may check her website @ www.horizonstyle.it



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