Using WhatsApp and Home Resources to Bridge the Gap Between School and Home

Covid-19 has accelerated the widespread use of technology, it has been a solution to modern problems faced by the entire world, and as a result many countries have moved to online learning. An easy transition for many developed nations proved less feasible in developing nations like South Africa. In South Africa's lower income homes, only 9.3% of homes have access to the internet *(Stats SA, General Household Survey 2016)* which leaves many children unable to take advantage of online learning at home. The national state of disaster and subsequent lockdown meant that those children who were already vulnerable were even worse off.

With schools closed, parents needed to quickly adapt and become their children's surrogate teachers. It was during this time that we noticed a need to support parents as they were now on the frontlines of their children's education. It became apparent that parents needed support, however lack of data, smartphones, computers or school records being out of date proved insurmountable obstacles.

Why is creating a culture of reading at home more important than ever?

Associate Professor Hoadley of the University of Cape Town's School of Education highlighted the need to get readers and workbooks in the home to keep our young and most vulnerable learners engaged and stimulated as an urgent response to the Lockdown and closing of schools *(Daily Maverick, 20 May 2020).* This is even more crucial given the uncertainties we are yet to face as a result of the pandemic. While we are still in the throes of the pandemic, we can only guess what schooling will look like in 2021 and just how the entire schooling model will be affected indefinitely. It is critical for children to have their learning augmented and supported with sound home resources for the days when they face disruptions or are schooling from home, if they opt to participate in the rotation model. (The rotation model means children attend school on certain days of the week, to allow for split classes and social distancing).

"Books in the home are the single biggest indicator of academic success – surpassing income, parents' education, family composition and all other factors" *(Jeff Mcquillan, The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions, 1998).* Children from lower income households often lack these basic resources and can be as far as three years behind children who are raised with regular exposure to books in the home. Our Quintile 1-3 schools form part of the demographic of schools where children's families are dependent on the basic income grant and other social grants offered by the government, as a means for survival.

How has Shine Literacy responded in support of our Shine school children?

Shine Literacy has seen rousing success in the Shine Literacy Hour programme, which is an evidence based programme that seeks to ensure that every child receives two hours of individualised attention through volunteer intervention. The programme reaches children at an early age, through a combination of reading with children and playing games that support the theory behind reading. Children who participated in the programme went on to become confident young readers, equipping them with tools they will use for the rest of their lives.

The lockdown also gave us a unique opportunity to expand our already generous offering and reach even more children and parents. By the end of 2020 Shine Literacy will have distributed reading material to 10 000 children across 46 schools. When schools were re-opened in the lower levels of lockdown, Shine Literacy's Centre Managers were able to re-establish contact with schools and communicate with teachers and principals, opening up access to the children who benefit from these interventions. Of the 1019 grade 2 and 3 children in schools that had active Shine Literacy Hour sessions pre-lockdown, 697 parents were able to respond to WhatsApp messages either with their children's teachers or our Centre Managers. This was possible as WhatsApp is a wildly popular app in South Africa, with 58% of South African mobile users having access to and using WhatsApp *(Stats SA, 2020).* Being in contact with parents allowed us to deliver Shine resource packs containing reading resources for children to work on at home.

A zero rated (data-free) website during lockdown

To further assist children and parents with home-based learning during the lockdown, Shine Literacy in partnership with South African mobile operators now has a zero-rated (data-free)

website. This means that more families now have access to world-class open sourced resources and supplements, without bearing the costs related to data and internet access. Also accessible on our website, are training resources that will cost very little if anything at all to the end users. Given the high price of cell phone data and the low rate of widespread internet access, a data free website is very helpful in ensuring no children are left behind in these uncertain times.

Shine Literacy's Theory of Change:

If we deliver programmes that support literacy learning at home and school, we will help to increase children's access to quality literacy learning opportunities and resources, and to equip parents and communities to play an active role in promoting early literacy. This will result in more children reading and writing at an age-appropriate level and ultimately in improved educational outcomes.

WhatsApp! The answer to supporting parents support their children's to become confident readers

David Harrison, executive director of the DG Murray Trust, stated "*Of course, parents are their children's first educators, a fact reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis, especially in the development of language and basic numerical concepts. Imagine if, at the start of the lockdown, South Africa had prioritized access to stories and other reading material for children and helped parents access them on mobile phones. Inevitably wealthier children just clicked on their web browsers, while the poorest children sat at home for four months without a single book.*"

With the use of WhatsApp API/Chatbots, we will be able to reach the parents of an estimated 9390 children, without the need to increase internal human capacity. The technological solution will allow us to direct the conversations we have with parents to guided reading exercises and gain feedback from them relating to child engagement. The WhatsApp Chatbot will serve as an initial point of contact and will ultimately lead to our website, where a wealth of resources will be available.

WhatsApp is a fantastic tool to use to engage with people as it is wildly popular in South Africa, meaning our target audience will most likely already be using the app. The ease of

adoption makes it means that people will be more welcoming to trying this service on an app they are already comfortable with. Unlike asking users to download a new application (especially at their own cost), which needs to be learned and users need to familiarise themselves with, using WhatsApp means that little to no training is required, leaving more time to reap the benefits of the app.

However, no solution is without its pitfalls and WhatsApp is no exception. The most notable being that they need mobile data in order to access the service; however, this can be kept to a minimum. Given the high cost of mobile data in South Africa, this is a barrier to consider but not likely to deter users from accessing the service altogether. WhatsApp also restricts the use of push notifications, which can make prompting engagement a little harder, but overall the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.

WhatsApp channels generally have a high response rate with many messages being exchanged between users. This feedback loop will provide valuable insights for our future literacy distribution packs and the content made available on our data- free website. Ultimately, this will allow us to increase our reach and impact, helping us to further the goals and mission of Shine Literacy.

Goals for 2021

The ultimate goal of including technology in our programme is to increase children's reading and writing skills by using multiple platforms.

Short Term Goal: For parents/caregivers to engage with their children's reading homework on a weekly basis and for teachers and parents/caregivers to use these technologies to bridge the gap between the classrooms and home. To assist parents/caregivers in their homes as they work with children, through linking our WhatsApp Chatbot to our resource packs which enables us to reinforce and encourage engagement with the material.

Medium Term Goal: To monitor and track changes in children's reading behaviour as they take more books home and set aside time at home to read and write.

Long Term Goal: To have developed a culture of reading at home, leading to confident, fluent readers. To ensure that our website is able to offer material that can be downloaded

and that this information is easily accessible by all and reinforced through our Chatbot and weekly push notifications.

In conclusion, South Africa lacks a culture of reading to children. We need to change that!

The Covid-19 global pandemic has reiterated what we have known for years. That is, how the most important passport, literacy, prevents our children crossing the borders towards success. The lack of access to quality reading material and resources is a problem that needs our urgent attention.

Children need daily reading practise if they are going to successfully improve their reading skill, as is the case with any other physical skill. Many studies have shown the positive effect that increased reading time has had on the academic skills needed for mastery. These are namely reading fluency, comprehension, word recognition and writing *(Johnson, A: 2016)*

The two pronged approach, consisting of our WhatsApp Chatbot and data-free website will allow us to play a critical role in the advancement of child literacy in South Africa. The data

free website will ensure that high quality content, relevant training and links to downloadable material will be accessible to people who do not have physical resources at their disposal. The WhatsApp Chatbot will serve as a source of consolidated information and directory that will increase our impact, not only in schools, but to communities at large.

In these uncertain times, delivering well-resourced reading support at homes and at schools provides parents and children with indispensable tools that help to reduce the literacy gap between high and low achieving learners. This manifesto also echoes our very own organisation goals, here at Shine Literacy.