COP MEETING
15 MAY 2019
PHILIPPI VILLAGE

LEARNING BRIEF:
WHY LEARNERS ATTEND AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

This learning brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Game Changer, a priority project of the Western Cape Government.

The After School sector is a critical component in increasing opportunities for learners in low and no fee schools and being a support to teachers to deliver quality academic outcomes. We need to continue to build evidence and share stories of how After School programmes offer learners that critical next step towards becoming active citizens and fulfilling their own potential.

This learning brief is based on the second Western Cape After School Community of Practice held in May 2019. It examines some of the reasons why learners attend extended learning programmes, looks at how we can design After School programmes to incentivise attendance, explores the importance of tracking attendance, and suggests how we can work together to achieve mass After School participation of learners from low or no fee schools.

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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

1 UNDERSTANDING WHY LEARNERS ATTEND AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES

The ASGC and much international literature on the subject posits 'regular and consistent' attendance as twice per week for 1 hour, as the minimum to produce meaningful outcomes such as behaviour change and/or academic outcomes. The dosage may need to be more if the activity has an objective of mastery, or may require fewer touchpoints to monitor learning, such as in the case of Earthchild's gardening clubs.

WHY DO LEARNERS ATTEND?

Very often, the activity is enough of an incentive to get learners to attend regularly. For example, an individual desire to improve in maths coupled with an emphasis on academic outcomes, motivates grade 9 learners to attend OLICO's programmes that achieve this end. OLICO had initially assumed that learners would be attracted to their programmes because of their online learning platform. When they didn't see good attendance rates, they realised that the learners desired and required a more structured and sequenced approach to learning. OLICO made changes to their programme design, and this led to improved attendance.

Evidence from Instant Grass's focus groups and survey research with Grade 4, 8 and 9 learners, found that primary school learners particularly, are motivated by the prospect of mastering a new skill and the satisfaction of learning and achievement. High school learners, on the other hand, want more competition and recognition built into their programmes.

WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE THEY MOST ENGAGED IN?

Instant Grass found that on the whole, activities that learners want and express a need for already exist. The Educollaborate online portal was created to connect education non-profits and encourage collaboration and co-ordination in the sector. Ultimately, it is envisioned that this would reduce duplication and support the sharing of resources. We can use the tool to assist learners to identify programmes in their home communities, and to find the activities that closely meet their needs and interests.

Interestingly, Instant Grass reported that young people at primary and high school level who have experienced trauma as a result of living in poverty, tend to gravitate towards more exciting, high-risk activities such as surfing, due to their propensity for risky behaviour. This idea of providing an alternative to habits like substance abuse, by offering a positive alternative such as sport, is a methodology that has received acclaim in Iceland. Based on research into adolescent addiction, Young people have the ability to be addicted to anything as long as it changes their brain chemistry. By implementing a nationwide After School sports programme, Iceland's teenage substance abuse rates dropped dramatically over a 20-year period.
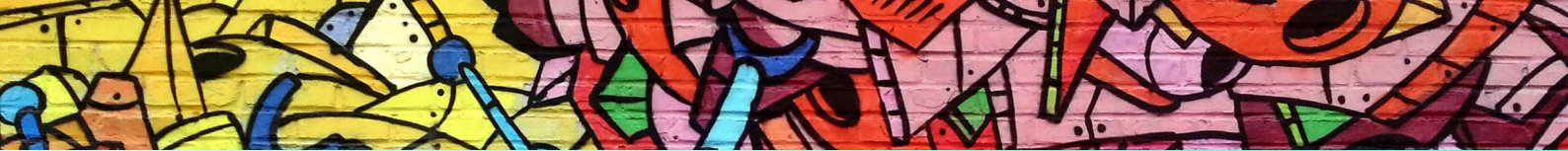
WHAT ELSE MATTERS?

The activity itself isn't always enough to encourage learners to attend regularly and consistently. It is reported that generally 1 out of 3 learners who start with a programme, drop-out. Peer pressure has an enormous impact. Among peers, learners who are able to attend After School programmes because they don't have household responsibilities, can be perceived as 'privileged' by their peers, and are misunderstood by teachers and practitioners who label them as 'disinterested'. This can cause a double-burden for these learners and decrease their desire to attend an ASP.

This is just one of the myriad obstacles that prevent a learner from attending. Other factors include: the low availability and high cost of transport, responsibilities at home, lack of buy-in from parents, and safety issues such as community protests and travelling home late – a particularly threat for young girls. Generally, it is important for After School programmes to communicate consistently and continuously so that they reach all stakeholders including learners, parents, principals, teachers, school caretakers, and community leaders. In this way, ASPs become an expected and supported norm rather than an exceptional add-on.

2 DESIGNING AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES TO MAXIMISE ATTENDANCE

The quality of a programme correlates directly to learner attendance. The activity matters, but the quality of that activity matters most. One step towards quality is implementing best practices, and contextualising tried and tested methodologies. For instance, OLICO, who initiatlly used a globally recognised platform as an entry point to online maths academic support, eventually adapted their programming in response to reported patterns of attendance and academic achievement.

Another way to ensure programme quality is by establishing a committed and trained workforce. Along with other players, the After School Programme Office have been working to capacitate NGO staff and volunteers with the skills to run their programmes. This aims to professionalise the sector, develop a pipeline of staff for ASPs, and equip people with transferable skills to progress on their own career paths.

Instant Grass also found that a learner's relationship with a practitioner plays a huge role in determine their attendance rate, particularly at high school level. Recruiting and retaining quality staff is therefore essential. Wher possible, practitioners could be recruited from within the community whose dynamics and learner needs they are familiar with. Beyond specific skills, staff and volunteers may require therapy and other interventions to deal with trauma and setbacks in their own lives, as well as to to enable them to hold a safe and stable space for their learners.

High school learners are more inclined to form a close connection with a particular practitioner. On the one hand, a strong personal relationship (the cornerstone of children's social and emotional development) can increase loyalty and therefore improve attendance rates. On the other, the absence or departure of a practitioner may result in reduced interest and therefore poor attendance.

MITIGATING THE RELIANCE ON AN INDIVIDUAL

- **Implement an induction process that provides clarity on the type of environment to create for learners, and ensure that staff and volunteers are aligned with and honouring the objectives and culture of the organisation.**
- **Communicate volunteer time commitment and expectations to staff and learners upfront to avoid unexpected departures.**
- **Recruit various volunteers that rotate around different groups so that learners are aware of all the volunteers in the programme not just their 'favourite'.**
- **Strengthen peer relationships among practitioners at different sites/on different days to facilitate skills exchanges so that there are multiple people who can do the job well.**
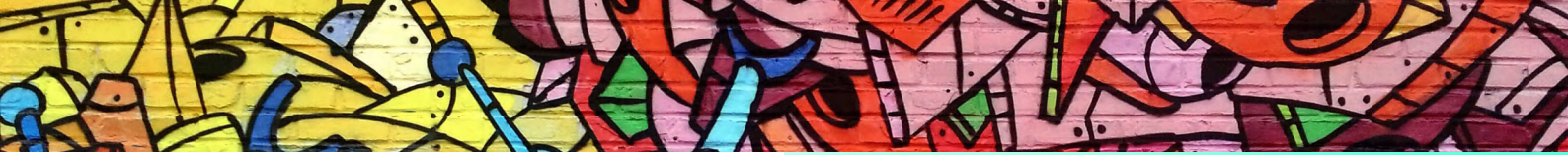
PARENT/GUARDIAN INVOLVEMENT

Instant Grass's research shows that learners don't make the decision to join a programme themselves, but rather the family does, particularly at primary school level. It is therefore critical to engage parents/guardians from the start in order to encourage a child's regular attendance. Communication to parents must highlight the benefits and outcomes of After School programmes, and inform them of the multiple After School options for their children at various stages of their school life. Parents need to see ASPs as a support to themselves as well as their children, in order to encourage their child's attendance.

Communication with parents/guardians is notoriously difficult due to their long working hours, lack of funds to travel to meetings, and general burden of responsibility. Large meetings don't have the desired effect and a more personal approach may be required.

CULTIVATING PARENT INVOLVEMENT

- **Regular home visits to keep families informed of learners' attendance, behaviour and progress.**
- **Compulsory adult represent- ation upon registration onto the programme.**
- **Smaller grade-specific and well-timed meetings that open up discussion and interaction amongst parents.**
- **Use of accessible communication mediums such as SMS, WhatsApp and Facebook**
- **Showcase individual, programme, organisation, and sector successes equally.**

BUILDING INCENTIVES INTO YOUR PROGRAMME STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

Although we must expect drop-outs and plan accordingly, we can also put in place incentives to increase and maintain attendance rates. Primary school learners tend to respond best to incentives that create attachment and belonging, whereas high school learners are motivated most by material incentives.

SOME IDEAS OF INCENTIVE STRATEGIES

- Explicitly and loudly reward regularly attending learners with outings and excursions at regular intervals (termly or annually).
- Reward long-standing learners with products that create a sense of belonging and ownership, such as branded T-shirts and stickers.
- Put in place opportunities for recognition and leadership e.g. best dancers become facilitators on Fridays; high attending learners are invited to be part of a 'young leaders club', etc.
- Establish a selection process and a waiting list that improves the perceived value of the programme.
- Award weekly prizes for best performance, e.g. treats, stationery, airtime/ data etc.
- Structure your programme with opportunities for progression to the next level of participation. For instance, access to Waves for Change's surf club is reserved for learners achieving a 70% attendance at their 'life skills' clubs.

3 TRACKING LEARNER ATTENDANCE TO UNDERSTAND OUR VALUE-ADD

Recording and understanding attendance patterns helps to test assumptions and inform our programme design. ASP practitioners and managers make constant assumptions based on prior-knowledge, associations and conditioning. ASPs need to regularly test and interrogate these assumptions in order to be truly responsive to the needs of our learners and communities.

Monitoring participation rates is one of the best indicators of whether our programmes will achieve what we set out to do. It is the first step to knowing whether our programmes are meeting the learners' needs. If it is, they will attend. Collecting attendance data against a list of learners with their unique identifiers e.g. CEMIS or ID numbers, also positions us to be able to make inferences about the impact of our programmes. For instance, using a CEMIS number, we can track a learner's school attendance and their academic performance over time.

If After School programmes begin to collect and monitor the same indicators and data, we can begin to conduct sector-wide analysis, which will inform the development of best practice, improve programme design, and ultimately drive further investment into the sector.

4 SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

COMMUNICATION

- Focus groups with a range of parents to understand their views and develop a supportive sector-wide communication strategy
- Develop a collective communication strategy that emphasises the value of After School
- Continue with CoP networks and share other existing spaces for organisations to share lessons, experiences, and impact stories.

SERVICES

- Coordinate shared transport solutions e.g. bus companies and taxi associations
- Lobby certain providers to fund/ discount transport and share leads among the network
- Lobby for free access to attractions and educational excursions
- Create a loyalty programme

5 CONCLUSION

After School programmes wouldn't exist without learners attending them, and their presence and participation is a precursor to other impacts and outcomes, like school engagement, behavior change, shifts in self-perception and academic performance. It is therefore important to know why learners do or do not attend our programmes, and how we can adjust our activities and programme structure accordingly to meet the needs of the learners and maximise participation.

Learner attendance is the most basic and easiest metric to monitor whether we are meeting learner needs, and know to what degree our shifts in programming can influence attendance. If we can commit to tracking, understanding, and sharing patterns of learner attendance in our various programmes, we can ultimately draw long-term impact conclusions and build the case for investment into the After School sector.

RESOURCES AND LINKS

- Icelandic Model of After School Programmes:
  Teen Substance Abuse Mosaic - Digg.com

- Instant Grass presentation:
  Youth Audience Engagement Study - pdf

- M&E Presentation:
  M&E Presentation - PowerPoint presentation

- After School Alliance research report on impact of After School Programmes in USA:
  Deeper Dive Into Afterschool - pdf