

Executive summary

To assist the basic education sector in preparing young people to thrive in a fast-changing world, the NECT Edhub began a multi-year research project in 2018 to explore how “21st century education” could be realised in South African public schools. The research project, referred to as the Sandbox Schools project, had a planned duration of 3 years. The Sandbox Schools Project included designing and researching a number of interventions intended to deliberately develop social, emotional, and cognitive “competencies for a changing world” alongside content knowledge in specific grades and subjects. The Competency-based Learning Programme (CLP) is one such intervention in the Sandbox Schools Project.

The CLP, as well as other interventions in the Sandbox Project, was designed using an Educational Design-based Research (EDBR) approach. The EDBR approach involves designing an intervention, informed by theoretical insights and contextual knowledge, and iteratively implementing, researching, and adapting it in a learning environment, with the dual aim of strengthening the intervention itself and garnering further theoretical insights. The design of the research for the CLP was conducted in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg (UJ) Faculty of Education. The intervention design process was conducted in collaboration with Class Act Education Services and UJ, building on an existing structured pedagogy programme being implemented by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). The overarching approach to intervention design was to acknowledge the intertwined relationship between content knowledge and skills, by developing competencies with and through the teaching of existing CAPS-aligned content, through relevant pedagogies and content choices. The CLP takes this approach to the Grade 1 Home Language curriculum, building on the existing literacy development routines and methodologies in the structured pedagogy programme.

The CLP was implemented in 11 ‘Sandbox Schools’ from 2020 to 2022. An iterative mixed methods approach was used to explore teachers’ experiences and perspectives regarding the CLP intervention. Through analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, the following insights emerged, each of which is discussed further in the research findings section of this report.

Summary of key research insights

- The majority (97%) of teachers considered the CLP training and materials to be relevant to their teaching in the classroom.
- Over 90% of teachers reported that the training content was detailed enough, and that the course structure was learner-friendly.
- Confidence to implement the CLP increases with more exposure to training. After three years of implementation, 92% of teachers reported that they were highly confident in implementing the CLP.
- Teachers need time and practice to grasp the competencies. The time taken is generally longer than the time taken to grasp the literacy methodologies in the programme.
- Teachers believe that infusion of competencies in teaching is beneficial for learners, and can articulate why they believe this.
- Teachers' understanding of specific competencies influenced their enactment in literacy lessons. Those competencies that were more familiar to teachers were more likely to be infused in the lessons.
- Previously entrenched teaching methods sometimes served as barriers to exploring new pedagogies.
- Overall, teachers reported positive teaching and learning experiences as a result of the programme.

Based on the insights gained through research with teachers, as well as critical reviews by experts and practitioners, and an understanding of broader dynamics in the education sector, the following recommendations are proposed to take the work of the CLP forward:

- Continue to strengthen the CLP:
 - » Incorporate teacher reflection in the training and coaching programme, to promote deeper learning.
 - » Deliberately encourage and incorporate teacher autonomy into the programme.
 - » Incorporate competency assessments.
- Scale up the CLP:
 - » Pilot the CLP formally in a broader sample of schools, and/or mainstream elements of it into existing programmes.
- Use CLP insights to inform broader curriculum strengthening efforts:
 - » Inform updates to teacher development and LTSM development for the strengthened curriculum.
 - » Inform updated approaches to teacher-led lesson planning and development.
 - » Assist in developing terminology in local languages.
 - » Assist in the development of the South African Competency framework.