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Learning to Provide a Service: A South African Case Study of Service-Learning for Preservice Teachers

Kelly Long and Ashley Westaway

Abstract
This article presents a case study of a large-scale, city-wide service-learning initiative developed by Rhodes University in partnership with GADRA Education. The program embeds final-year Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase [FP]) students in a reading comprehension (RC) and oral reading fluency (ORF) assessment of all Grade 4 learners in Makhanda, South Africa. Designed to address South Africa's early literacy crisis and the lack of reliable assessment data in primary schools, the initiative simultaneously builds preservice teachers' (PSTs') assessment literacy, pedagogical skills, and critical understanding of local educational contexts. Guided by Chambers and Lavery's (2012) framework for effective service-learning, the program exemplifies reciprocity, responsiveness, and structured implementation. Quantitative data from over 2,000 learners collected in 2023 and 2024 reveal consistent disparities in RC across school quintiles and languages of instruction, highlighting deep systemic inequalities. Our contribution to the literature lies in demonstrating how PSTs can be mobilized not only as learners but also as a currently underutilized human resource in responding to educational crises. When grounded in authentic, reciprocal partnerships, service-learning enables PSTs to act as immediate contributors to system improvement while cultivating critical competencies and professional identities as socially responsive educators.

Keywords: *early grade reading, early literacy assessment, preservice teacher education, reading comprehension, service-learning*

Aprender a prestar un servicio: Un estudio de caso sudafricano de aprendizaje y servicio para futuros docents

Kelly Long y Ashley Westaway

Resumen
Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso a gran escala y a nivel de ciudad de una iniciativa de aprendizaje y servicio, desarrollado por la Universidad de Rhodes en colaboración con GADRA Education. El programa integra a estudiantes de último año de la Licenciatura en Educación (Fase Básica [FP]) (por sus siglas en inglés), en una evaluación de comprensión lectora (RC) (por sus siglas en inglés), y fluidez lectora oral (ORF) (por sus siglas en inglés), de todos los estudiantes de cuarto grado en Makhanda, Sudáfrica. Diseñado para abordar la crisis de alfabetización temprana de Sudáfrica y por la falta de datos confiables de evaluación en las escuelas primarias, la iniciativa desarrolla simultáneamente evaluación de la alfabetización, habilidades pedagógicas y la comprensión crítica de los contextos educativos locales de los maestros en formación (PST) (por sus siglas en inglés). En base al marco de Chambers y Lavery (2012) para un aprendizaje y servicio efectivo, el programa ejemplifica la reciprocidad, la capacidad de respuesta y una implementación estructurada. Los datos cuantitativos de más de 2000 estudiantes recopilados entre 2023 y 2024 revelan disparidades consistentes en (RC) (por sus siglas en inglés) en todos los quintiles escolares e idiomas de instrucción, lo que destaca profundas desigualdades sistémicas. Nuestra contribución a la literatura radica en demostrar cómo los PST (por sus siglas en inglés) pueden movilizarse no solo como estudiantes, sino también como un recurso humano actualmente subutilizado para responder a crisis educativas. Cuando existen colaboraciones auténticas y recíprocas, el aprendizaje y servicio permite a los PST (por sus siglas en inglés) contribuir de forma inmediata a la mejora del sistema, a la vez que se cultivan sus competencias críticas e identidades profesionales como educadores con capacidad de respuesta social.

Palabras clave: *Lectura temprana, evaluación de alfabetización temprana, formación para futuros docentes, comprensión lectora, aprendizaje y servicio*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by ***Karla Díaz Freire, Ph.D.***.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the city of Makhanda, in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, has experienced a variety of civil society innovations in the basic education sector (K-12), many spearheaded by Rhodes University (RU). The service-learning program described here is one such initiative designed to respond directly to an urgent national education challenge: the deep crisis in early grade reading comprehension (RC).

According to the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), just 19% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are able to read for meaning in any language. This figure represents a regression from the 22% reported in PIRLS 2016 (Roux et al., 2023). These results are especially concerning given the pivotal role reading for meaning plays in all future academic achievement and economic opportunity. Without the ability to comprehend text, learners fall behind across all subjects, and their long-term prospects are compromised.

The problem is acute in under-resourced contexts such as the Eastern Cape, where language policy adds complexity. Most learners are taught in their home language during the FP (Grade R–3) but switch to English in Grade 4, often without sufficient fluency to support the transition. This challenge is compounded by the lack of government-led standardized testing programs in South African primary schools, leaving education stakeholders without reliable assessment data to guide reading interventions.

The service-learning program examined in this study was developed by the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (PECE) at RU, in partnership with the local nongovernmental organization (NGO), GADRA Education. Its primary objective is to address the pressing need for standardized assessment data in primary education. As part of this initiative, preservice teachers (PSTs) conduct an annual, city-wide RC study as a service-learning activity. This study evaluates the RC and oral fluency of all Grade 4 learners in Makhanda and systematically returns the collected data to participating schools to inform teaching practices. Concurrently, it offers final-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students practical experience in educational assessment, opportunities for structured reflection, and critical engagement with the socio-educational dynamics of local classrooms.

This article presents the RC study as a case of service-learning in action, using the framework suggested by Chambers and Lavery (2012), which outlines four essential service-learning elements: "the service addresses real life needs, the service and learning goals are of equal importance, there is reciprocity between those serving and those being served, and the program is clearly structured for participants" (p. 128). It argues that this program provides an instructive example of how student agency and university–community partnerships can contribute to systemic community transformation, while also preparing a new generation of teachers to respond to the country's most pressing educational challenges.

In this article, we attempt to demonstrate that PSTs represent an underutilized yet potent human resource for addressing systemic educational challenges. Our contribution to the literature lies in demonstrating how, through intentionally structured service-learning that is grounded in authentic community partnerships, PSTs can be mobilized not only as students but also as active agents of educational transformation.

Literature Review

Service-Learning in South African Higher Education

Service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing reciprocal educational process where both students and community partners benefit through collaboration, reflection, and engagement (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Jacoby, 2015). Integrating meaningful community service with academic learning offers students opportunities to apply their classroom knowledge to real-world challenges while contributing to the well-being of the community (Daniels et al., 2010; Hammersley, 2012).

Service-learning in South African higher education has evolved significantly over the past few decades, gaining prominence as a pedagogical strategy aligned with the social justice ethos of the postapartheid era. Its uptake was driven by national imperatives for transformation, particularly the imperative that

universities contribute more meaningfully to addressing societal challenges. According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2020), community engagement, of which service-learning is a key expression, has emerged as a critical third pillar alongside teaching and research. Bowles and de Vos (2022) assert that, in the South African context, service-learning embodies the ideal of "social responsiveness" (p. 65), aligning academic programs with the socioeconomic realities of the communities in which institutions are embedded. Within this framework, service-learning is not merely an add-on to academic learning but is conceived as a transformative practice that fosters reciprocal partnerships and social responsiveness (Akhurst et al., 2023; Bowles & de Vos, 2022).

Early adopters of service-learning in South Africa, such as the University of the Western Cape and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, positioned it as a means of fostering democratic citizenship, critical engagement, and contextually relevant professional education (McMillan & Stanton, 2014). In the field of teacher education, service-learning has particular resonance. Given South Africa's stark educational inequalities and the varied linguistic, social, and infrastructural conditions of schools, service-learning can play a pivotal role in exposing PSTs to the realities of under-resourced educational contexts. When intentionally designed, service-learning can enable future educators to bridge theoretical knowledge and lived experience, fostering the development of reflexive, socially engaged practitioners (Anderson, 2000; Petker & Petersen, 2014).

Despite the clear rationale for the implementation of service-learning in South Africa, its adoption in the higher education context has been uneven. Scholars have highlighted challenges in this regard, such as limited institutional support (Daniels et al., 2010), difficulties in integrating service-learning meaningfully into teacher education curricula (Petker & Petersen, 2014), and the complexity of sustaining ethical, reciprocal partnerships with communities (Akhurst et al., 2023).

Early Grade Literacy in South Africa

The focus of early grade (K-3) literacy instruction is children's acquisition of essential reading skills and achieving reading proficiency. The SA DBE National Curriculum Statement (NCS) is organized in the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) (SA DBE, 2020). CAPS outlines the foundational skills, and concepts learners are expected to master at each grade level with the ultimate goal that "by the end of Grade 3, readers . . . read accurately – on their own – at a steady rate, with comprehension and with enjoyment" (Pretorius et al., 2020, p. 2).

Broad consensus is that the ultimate educational goal of teaching children how to read is for them to develop skills of understanding, interacting with, and learning from what they are reading, that is, comprehension. "...Comprehension is generally considered to be an essential skill required in all learning areas" (Byers et al., 2012, p. 18). Learning to read for meaning is a fundamental skill, enabling active participation in curriculum, and forming the basis for lifelong success and opportunity (Hulme & Snowling, 2011). The South African basic education system is failing with respect to this goal.

Language of learning and teaching (LOLT) policy in South Africa adds complexity to the learning to read process. Driven by the necessity to redress historical inequities, the South African language in education policy (LiEP) was signed into law in 1997 (RSA, 1997). Policy changes permitted public schools to change their official LOLT from English or Afrikaans (previously the only two options) to one of the newly recognized official indigenous languages (RSA, 1997). Many schools changed the LOLT to the indigenous language of the geographical area (SA DBE, 2010).

Implementation of LiEP (RSA, 1997) marked the first time that the majority of learners were afforded the opportunity to learn to read in the language of their homes and communities, reflecting a positive move toward a more inclusive and equitable education system. However, education policy still dictates that LOLT must switch to English or Afrikaans from Grade 4 onward (RSA, 1997). PIRLS assessments are conducted in the LOLT used during learners' Grades 1–3 years. Consistent with this, the RC study was conducted in three official languages offered as LOLT in the area: isiXhosa, Afrikaans, and English.

Early Grade Literacy and Its Assessment

The ultimate goal of early grade literacy teaching and learning is for children to master how to read, allowing them to make the switch from learning to read to developing the skills necessary to learn from what they are reading, or to comprehend.

There is general agreement around basic foundational reading skills enabling the development of RC (National Reading Panel, 2000; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). A wide variety of methods for teaching key basic literacy skills exist internationally. The SA DBE curriculum for literacy instruction is componential. Componential models assert that decoding skills are strong predictors of early reading ability, and fluency is a strong predictor of RC (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Joshi, 2019). The SA DBE describes the "five components of teaching reading as Phonemic awareness; Word recognition (sight words and phonics); Comprehension; Vocabulary; and Fluency." Fluency is the ability to read text smoothly, accurately, and with expression (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Fluency plays a critical role in facilitating comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). As fluency improves, learners spend less time on the basic decoding of letters and words, freeing up working memory to focus on understanding what the text means (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Fluency development may not immediately translate to measurable improvements in comprehension (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; Torgesen & Hudson, 2006), but, as readers become familiar with text structures and develop strategies for extracting meaning, fluency develops and comprehension improves over time (Hudson et al., 2000; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016).

Fluency is often measured through one-on-one oral reading fluency (ORF) assessments. These assessments note the number of words read correctly within a time frame, typically 1 minute. A word correct per minute (WCPM) score is calculated by subtracting errors made from the total number of words attempted. If more than one text is used, the final WCPM score is based on the mean across the two or three texts.

Written RC tasks assess a learner's ability to understand, interpret, and engage with written materials. A text appropriate for the learner's grade level is provided, with a series of questions designed to evaluate different levels of RC, from basic literal understanding to more complex inferential and evaluative comprehension. Literal comprehension requires simply locating the answer to the question in the text. Inferential and evaluative levels require the learner to read beyond the text, applying their own experience and knowledge to deduce meaning. Inferential comprehension refers to a learner's ability to infer knowledge or their ability to understand meaning that is not explicitly in the text. Evaluative comprehension refers to the ability to critically assess or form opinions about the information in the text (Jang & Kim, 2022).

Understanding and assessing these skills in a structured literacy program is critical for identifying and remediating early reading problems, and therefore important for PSTs.

The Service-Learning Program

The service-learning program is embedded within the final-year Bachelor of Education (FP) curriculum at RU and is designed to meet the dual objectives of developing professional teaching competencies while addressing a real and urgent educational need in the city of Makhanda.

Each year, PSTs participate in a city-wide research study aimed at assessing the RC and ORF of all Grade 4 learners in the city's 25 primary schools. The program unfolds across three key phases: preparation, data generation, and reflection and feedback.

Preparation and Training

Before visiting schools, PSTs undergo a focused preparatory module delivered by Rhodes University Primary and Early Childhood Education (RUPECE). This includes

- lectures on early grade reading benchmarks and the South African literacy context;
- training on how to administer and score standardized RC and ORF assessments;

- orientation on ethical considerations, respectful engagement, and sensitivity to school environments; and
- simulated practice sessions with instruments to ensure inter-rater reliability.

In-School Data Collection and Community Interaction

PSTs are deployed in supervised teams to every Grade 4 classroom in Makhanda, covering schools across all sectors. They work in close coordination with

- school leadership (principals and HODs) to plan logistics and understand the instructional context;
- teachers, from whom they receive practical insights about class dynamics and existing reading interventions; and
- learners, with whom they interact directly during the administration of comprehension and ORF tests.

In the classroom, PSTs initially administer the written comprehension assessment to the full Grade 4 cohort. PSTs then mark the assessments on-site, under the supervision of the team leader, ensuring accuracy and consistency. Following this, they conduct one-on-one ORF testing with a stratified sample of learners across performance quartiles. These interactions require clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and real-time instructional judgment skills fundamental to their development as teachers.

Feedback from schools has indicated that PSTs bring a sense of professionalism and energy into the classroom. Teachers often use the opportunity to compare results with their own assessments, and many request follow-up meetings to discuss findings. These discussions form a valuable platform for peer-to-peer professional development, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of the engagement.

Reflection and Applied Learning

After the fieldwork, PSTs return for structured debrief and reflection sessions. They

- analyze the data they helped generate;
- discuss patterns in learner performance;
- reflect on their positionality, professional development, and the realities of local education; and
- present written reflections that often reveal transformative shifts in perspective.

In reflection sessions, several students noted that the experience gave them "a more in-depth understanding of the complexities of teaching, the realities of learner diversity" (S4, male) and the confidence to see themselves "as professionals capable of making a meaningful impact" (S23, female).

The service-learning program is now integrated into the Year 4 BEd structure and forms a core part of the teaching practice preparation. Through this carefully structured and evolving design, the program exemplifies the integration of community-based research, real-world PST development, reciprocal engagement, and core tenets of best-practice service-learning.

Structuring Ethical and Reciprocal Service-Learning

The RC study illustrates how the four elements of the conceptual framework developed by Chambers and Lavery (2012) can be implemented in a teacher education context to address a deeply entrenched and urgent educational issue, South Africa's early literacy crisis. With only 19% of Grade 4 learners nationally able to read for meaning (Mullis et al., 2023), the need for interventions that both build capacity and generate data in the early grades is clear. Service-learning programs such as this one play a unique role in filling systemic gaps while simultaneously preparing PSTs to become reflective, responsive educators. PSTs, through their involvement in large-scale literacy assessment, engage meaningfully with communities, deepen their pedagogical understanding, and contribute to solutions for long-standing inequalities.

Best-practice service-learning calls for "reciprocity between those serving and those being served" (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Hammersley (2012) asserts that reciprocity is fundamental to decolonizing service-learning. Reciprocity is given effect and practical substance through collaborative interaction and partnerships (Akhurst et al., 2023; Hammersley, 2012). Hammersley asserts that collaboration equalizes

power relations, amplifying "historically unheard voices of community partners" (2012, p. 180). Commitment to reciprocity in service-learning teacher education programs provides PSTs with essential embedded learning opportunities, developing both pedagogical skills and a deeper understanding of the communities they will serve (Daniels et al., 2010; Pinto & Costa-Ramalho, 2023). Collaboration with RU, GADRA Education, and local schools illustrates how reciprocal partnerships can elevate local voices and build trust. In doing so, the program resists neocolonial service-learning tendencies instead positioning community members and local institutions as equal partners in a shared learning process.

Neocolonial service-learning designs interventions for student gains, without taking cognizance of the community context. If there is a commitment to decolonizing practice, reciprocity of relations, and formation of collaborative partnerships, a starting point in service-learning design is understanding the community context. Best practice entails correctly identifying real-life community needs and designing interventions to address these (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). Commitment to reciprocity and prioritization of community needs requires careful structuring to ensure the intervention is "fit for purpose."

The RC study is designed around collaborative planning, guided preparation, field-based practice, and reflective learning. The integration of this program into the BEd curriculum ensures that learning outcomes for PSTs are met while also delivering valuable, actionable data to schools. The design and implementation mirror what Petker and Petersen (2014) and Hildenbrand and Schultz (2015) describe as embedded learning opportunities, where service and learning are not parallel activities but fundamentally interconnected.

In this article, the service dimension is deliberately foregrounded to reflect our conviction that PSTs, during their course of study, can be mobilized as valuable assets to local educational communities. This case is presented to demonstrate that through intentionally designed service-learning programs, PSTs can serve as immediate and impactful contributors to educational transformation. As Anderson notes, "pre-service teachers and young people are a current resource, not problems to be managed or resources only for the future" (2000, p. 2).

The Program in Relation to the Core Elements of Service-Learning

This section presents the RC study as a case study of service-learning in practice, structured according to the four core elements of best practice identified by Chambers and Lavery (2012): reciprocity, responsiveness to real-life needs, careful structuring, and alignment of service and learning goal. These four elements serve as a conceptual framework through which the design and impact of the RC study are analyzed.

We begin by exploring the principle of reciprocity, considering how the program responds to the articulated needs of the local education community, while also aligning with the University's broader commitment to community engagement and social responsiveness. Next, we examine how this study addresses real-world needs, in terms of both the systemic challenges facing foundational literacy in Makhanda and the pedagogical and professional development goals of PSTs.

The third element, structured implementation, is used to frame our discussion of the program's design and methodology, including the planning, training, and fieldwork components. Finally, we draw on data collected from both learners (via literacy assessments) and PSTs (via reflective practice) to analyze the program's outcomes through the lens of alignment between service and learning goals.

Reciprocity

The first core element of effective service-learning is reciprocity. Chambers and Lavery (2012) elaborate reciprocity as mutuality or shared benefit between those who serve and those who are served. In this case study, those serving can be identified as all stakeholders involved in conducting the research (GADRA Education, RU lecturers, Year 4 BEd students), while those being served can be regarded as the primary schooling sector, including primary schools, their leadership, teachers, and learners. In other words, there are networks of organizations involved in the service-learning program under consideration.

The two key organizations at the heart of this service-learning initiative are GADRA Education and RU. GADRA Education has developed a credible and widely respected community engagement division

over the past decade, while RU has prioritized the basic education sector (Ntlabezo & Westaway, 2024). Its engagement processes in the sector have been characterized by reciprocity and mutuality (Ntlabezo & Westaway, 2024). This expression of community engagement is in line with the 1996 South African governmental policy framework, which stipulates partnership, responsiveness, and participation as core principles (CHE, 2020).

GADRA Education is an NGO in Makhanda, seeking to transform public education in the city so that every young person benefits from high-quality primary, secondary, and tertiary education. It roots its "modes of support" in principles of participation, people-centeredness, and empowerment, among others (Msomi, 2024, p. 214). Msomi (2024) argues that GADRA's methods and practices are aligned with African-centered community psychology, reflected in the organization's prioritization of enabling inclusive access to quality education and strengthening bonds of solidarity to enable and foster collective action. GADRA prioritizes partnerships and other collaborative undertakings as key strategies (Ntlabezo & Westaway, 2024).

This overview of Community Engagement (CE) at RU and GADRA Education's priorities and dispositions establishes considerable overlap and synergy between them. At an institutional level, this came together most vividly in what has been referred to as the Vice-Chancellor's Initiative (VCI) to revitalize public schooling in Makhanda, birthed in 2015 from the Inauguration speech of Professor Sizwe Mabizela as the sixth vice-chancellor of the university. During that speech, he said:

> As an institution of higher learning, indeed, as a greater community that cares, we cannot sit and watch when young people amongst us are condemned to a life without hope; a life of despair because of the failure to provide them with the education they need and deserve. . .I look forward to meeting all important role-players in the education sector to discuss how we might work together to make Makhanda a true centre of academic excellence – from Early Childhood education to University, and a model for consideration more widely. (Mabizela, 2015, p. 17)

Since launching, the VCI has pursued a dual strategy of building effective communities of practice across the sector and supporting the emergence of sites of educational excellence at early childhood, primary, and high school levels. A number of collaborative projects fell under this initiative (Ntlabezo & Westaway, 2024). Such projects have built an education stakeholder network based on trust, collaboration, and solidarity.

This contextual information helps explain why all local state and fee-paying independent primary schools responded receptively to the RC study. Rather than seeing this study as a threat or an imposition, the school principals and teachers recognized it as an opportunity to collect reliable, objective data about literacy competence at their respective schools and in the city at large.

Real-Life Needs

A critical component of successful service-learning programs lies in ensuring they are meaningful and relevant to the community or communities they seek to serve (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). In the context of Makhanda, accurate learner assessment information is a pressing real-life need. To appreciate the importance of this need, it is necessary to describe the current state of learner assessment processes in South African state schools.

Unfortunately, the state education system in South Africa lacks standardized assessment data for primary school learners (K-7). School-based assessment (SBA) is notoriously unreliable (Van der Berg et al., 2016), and the consequences are well documented (Van der Berg & Shepherd, 2015). These include teachers not accurately understanding learner competencies and challenges, which prevents them from adjusting their teaching strategies for enhanced learning outcomes (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Hattie, 2009). Reliable assessment information is particularly needed in contexts such as the Eastern Cape Province, in which Makhanda is situated, where there are weak hierarchical institutional arrangements and thus an imperative for horizontal accountability, at community level (Levy & Shumane, 2018).

Reliable data on early literacy are crucial, as progress in the first years of schooling shapes long-term learning outcomes. Spaull (2023) argues that South African children who do not master early literacy remain "perpetually behind and in 'catch-up' mode"—and "they never actually catch up" (p. 2). Without accurate assessment data to guide early intervention, learners face compounding disadvantages, contributing to high dropout rates.

While the South African Department of Basic Education does not directly publish retention rates, the data to calculate those are available in official reports. Calculations based on this data indicate that only 60.2% of learners who started Grade 1 in 2013 sat for matric exams in 2024. This suggests that nearly 40% of the original cohort did not complete school within the expected 12 years, though this estimate may be affected by demographic shifts, migration, or re-enrollment patterns (Parliament of South Africa, 2023).

The specific trigger for this project was the release of the PIRLS 2021 report in May 2023. The response to the PIRLS data at GADRA was keen interest in what RC outcomes might be for Makhanda. The organization approached RU to explore the possibility of a city-wide RC study as a service-learning program. RU recognized the learning benefits for PSTs, and the two institutions moved swiftly to establish a research team to oversee conceptualization and implementation.

The RC study provides a clear example of reciprocity. Its service-learning component provided relevant and essential embedded learning opportunities for PSTs (Pinto & Costa-Ramalho, 2023). Students provided vital test administration capacity, and the project as a whole provided much-needed standardized assessment data at a learner, school, and city-wide level, benefiting the broader education community of Makhanda. Careful examination of course content allowed the team to determine that the service-learning program goals aligned with course outcomes for the final-year student group, achieving "reciprocity between those serving and those being served" (Chambers & Lavery, 2012, p. 129).

Structured Implementation

The research team took on the task of considering the third core element of successful service-learning to "ensure that the program is clearly structured for participants" (Chambers & Lavery, 2012, p. 128). This element underscores the importance of intentional design in guiding participants through a coherent learning journey. Structured implementation ensures that service-learning is scaffolded in ways that support both community responsiveness and educational integrity. In this section, we demonstrate how the RC study exemplifies this principle through the careful design and execution of a large-scale, community-based literacy study.

Given the contextual relevance of research in the Makhanda education landscape, many participant groupings required consideration. The research project required careful tailoring to ensure the structure of the service-learning program would be relevant and result in meaningful learning for PST participants. Beyond PSTs at RU, the team ensured the project structure was clear for all participant groupings, including school leadership, teachers, Grade 4 learners, and the SA DBE and the broader education community.

A quantitative research design was employed to assess the RC and ORF skills of all Grade 4 learners in Makhanda. This study utilized two core instruments: a standardized RC assessment based on grade-appropriate fiction and nonfiction passages, each followed by a set of questions targeting literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension. Learners were given a total of 30 minutes to complete the written assessment. The second instrument was an ORF assessment, administered one-on-one, in which learners read two separate grade-level passages aloud for 1 minute each, to determine an average WCPM score.

All comprehension assessments were written under standardized conditions. Learners completed the assessment in the LOLT used in their FP, namely, English, isiXhosa, or Afrikaans.

Following marking of the written comprehension assessments, a stratified sample of approximately 33% of learners (based on interquartile performance bands) was selected to complete the ORF component. This ensured a representative distribution of fluency data across performance levels.

All assessment and scoring procedures followed a rigorously moderated protocol. This study adhered to ethical guidelines regarding anonymity and data protection. Data were entered, verified, and moderated by the lead researcher and assistant under supervision, ensuring the reliability and integrity of the dataset.

Student feedback reveals the profound impact of the data collection process on their developing teacher identities. One student reflected, "in 2025, I had the opportunity to participate as a student teacher and collect data on Grade 4 learners to assess their reading comprehension. . .we attended lectures that equipped us with the necessary skills to collect data effectively in different schools" (S17, male).

This hands-on participation not only enhanced technical assessment skills but also highlighted the realities of educational inequality. As another student noted, "reflecting on this research experience, I believe it has been a crucial part of my journey as a pre-service teacher. It has provided me with a more in-depth understanding of the complexities of teaching, the realities of learner diversity" (S32, female).

These encounters with learners across diverse schools allowed PSTs to experience firsthand the varying conditions of learning and teaching in South Africa, deepening both empathy and awareness.

Aligned Service and Learning Goals

The final core element of successful service-learning programs is to ensure that service and learning goals are aligned, balanced, and met (Chambers & Lavery, 2012). This subsection initially considers the attainment of the service goal; thereafter, the article analyzes the learning goals for PSTs.

Service Goals

The overriding service goal of the project was to provide city-wide standardized assessment data on all Grade 4 learners. The data presented here reflect the program's reach and rigor over two implementation cycles (2023 and 2024). Taking into account the differences in testing schedules, the consistency of trends across both years enhances the reliability of the dataset and supports the claim that the RC study provides credible evidence of learner performance. The tables demonstrate the scale of the project, its inclusive sampling across diverse school types and languages, the consistency of findings across years (a marker of methodological robustness), and how performance data are disaggregated by factors such as school quintile, LOLT, and ORF, offering actionable insights to schools and education stakeholders.

Providing City-Wide Standardized Data on Primary School Learners

All Grade 4 learners present on the day of testing participated in this study. Comprehension data were collected from a total of 965 Grade 4 learners from 19 schools in 2023 and 1186 Grade 4 learners from 25 schools in 2024. ORF data were collected from 330 learners in 2023 and 372 in 2024.

Breakdown by School Category

Makhanda has a range of school types, with 18 state primary schools. State schools in South Africa are divided into five quintiles, a system aiming to address historical inequalities in education by allocating more government funding to lower quintile schools (Dieltiens & Motala, 2014; White & Van Dyk, 2019). The National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF) outlines the quintile system, with resources and funding provided to schools based on unemployment and literacy rates of communities served by the school. Quintile 1–3 schools serve communities with high unemployment rates and low literacy levels and are exempt from fees (Dieltiens & Motala, 2014; Longueira, 2016). Quintile 4 and 5 schools can raise funds by charging school fees. These schools receive less government funding and serve learners from slightly more socioeconomically affluent backgrounds. The South African schooling system also includes private or independent schooling options—low-fee options serving learners of low socioeconomic status and those charging significant fees generally serving learners from affluent backgrounds. According to White and Van Dyk (2019), 71% of schools in South Africa and 72% of schools in Makhanda are Quintile 1–3 schools. A breakdown of this study population by school category is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Study Population by School Category

	2023		2024	
	# schools	**# learners**	**# schools**	**# learners**
Quintile 1–3	12	691	13	823
Quintile 4	2	112	2	120
Quintile 5	3	134	3	141
Low-fee private	2	28	3	44
Private			3	48
Total	**19**	**965**	**25**	**1186**

Breakdown by Language of Learning and Teaching

Nine of the 13 Quintile 1–3 schools in Makhanda are isiXhosa LOLT, three are English LOLT, the remaining one is Afrikaans LOLT. Of the two Quintile 4 schools, one uses Afrikaans as LOLT and the other English. All Quintile 5 and private schools in Makhanda are English LOLT. English is the LOLT for 22% of FP learners in South Africa (SA DBE, 2010), while English is the LOLT for 47% of FP learners in this study. Table 2 below presents the population study disaggregated by LOLT.

Table 2.

Study Population by Language of Teaching and Learning

	# learners in 2023	**# learners in 2024**
English	450	546
IsiXhosa	454	577
Afrikaans	63	63
Total	**967**	**1186**

Data on Comprehension Competence

According to the SA DBE document on setting benchmarks in South Africa, "although a score of 60 per cent for comprehension in standardised reading comprehension assessment signals that a child requires additional support, for many teachers in South Africa, a score of 60 per cent would probably be regarded as a good achievement" (SA DBE, 2020, p. 27). In line with the guideline provided by the SA DBE, and to ensure consistency with a published study using the same research instruments (Long & Bowles, 2024), this study applied a 62.5% benchmark for comprehension. Data were analyzed quantitatively using raw comprehension scores (out of 24); therefore, a score of 15 or higher out of 24 was classified as "able to read for meaning."

RC outcomes for all Grade 4 learners are summarized in Table 3. In both 2023 and 2024, the majority of learners in Makhanda scored below the established comprehension benchmark (15 out of 24), indicating that they are not yet able to read for meaning. In 2023, 41% of learners met the benchmark, while in 2024, 37% did so. While in 2023, learners were assessed later in the school year, the consistency of outcomes provides support for the reliability of the data collection process.

Table 3.

Reading Comprehension Outcomes

2023 967 learners in total		2024 1186 learners in total	
Able to read for meaning	Unable to read for meaning	Able to read for meaning	Unable to read for meaning
404 (41%)	563	444 (37%)	742

Table 3 serves two critical functions in relation to service goals. First, it illustrates the scale of this study, which encompassed nearly every Grade 4 learner in the city across 19 schools in 2023 and 25 schools in 2024. Second, it provides education stakeholders with a valid, standardized snapshot of comprehension levels. By systematically collecting and reporting this data year-on-year, the RC study supports schools, NGOs, and government officials in targeting early interventions and tracking trends over time, thereby directly fulfilling its service mandate.

Performance by School Type

Comprehension performance by school type is disaggregated in Table 4, revealing persistent and significant inequalities in literacy outcomes across Makhanda's educational landscape. Learners attending Quintile 1–3 schools consistently underperformed in both years. Only 30% (2023) and 26% (2024) of learners in this category met the comprehension benchmark. These results are in stark contrast to those from Quintile 5 schools, where over 90% of learners were found to be able to read for meaning in both years.

Table 4.

RC Outcomes by School Type

	2023		2024	
School type	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**
Quintile 1–3	205 (30%)	487	213 (26%)	622
Quintile 4	55 (49%)	58	32 (27%)	88
Quintile 5	125 (93%)	10	128 (91%)	12
Low-fee independent	19 (70%)	8	27 (63%)	16
Independent	n/a	n/a	45 (94%)	3

The steep drop in performance at Quintile 4 schools, from 49% in 2023 to 27% in 2024, is noteworthy and warrants further investigation, possibly pointing to localized contextual changes, implementation differences, or intraschool variation in instructional quality. Learners at low-fee and independent schools performed better than their Quintile 1–3 counterparts, with achievement rates of 63%–70% and 94%, respectively, in 2024, although these categories represent a smaller share of the population.

Data shown in Table 4 reinforce the service value of the RC study by illustrating how standardized, city-wide assessments can unearth inequities that might otherwise remain obscured in aggregated or provincial-level data. It also provides local schools and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) with critical, disaggregated evidence to inform targeted resource allocation, early intervention strategies, and differentiated instructional support.

Performance by LOLT

Table 5 presents comprehension performance by the LOLT used in the FP of schooling. The data reveal a clear and consistent trend, learners whose FP instruction was in English significantly outperformed those taught in isiXhosa or Afrikaans. In both years, more than half of the English LOLT learners were able to read for meaning, 61% in 2023 and 57% in 2024. In contrast, only 24% (2023) and 22% (2024) of isiXhosa

LOLT learners reached the benchmark, while Afrikaans LOLT learners achieved 25% and 30%, respectively.

Table 5.

RC Outcomes by LOLT

	2023			2024		
LOLT	**Total**	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**	**Total**	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**
isiXhosa	454	111 (24%)	343	577	126 (22%)	451
English	450	277 (61%)	173	546	300 (57%)	246
Afrikaans	63	16 (25%)	47	63	19 (30%)	44

Note. LOLT = Language of learning and teaching; RC = reading comprehension

These results mirror national trends and highlight a persistent gap in early reading outcomes linked to the language of instruction (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; SA DBE, 2010). They suggest that learners acquiring literacy in African home languages, particularly in historically marginalized contexts, face structural disadvantages, which may include a lack of materials, teacher proficiency, and language-specific pedagogical support. This raises urgent questions about language equity, the effectiveness of current LOLT policies, and the extent to which the system adequately supports learners' linguistic development in mother-tongue settings.

From a service-learning perspective, these findings affirm the value of the RC study in providing actionable, disaggregated literacy data that can inform localized language and instructional planning. The ability to report performance by LOLT gives schools, NGOs, and policymakers the information needed to prioritize support in contexts where language intersects most acutely with educational inequality.

Performance by LOLT for Quintile 1–4 Schools

Table 6 narrows the lens to compare comprehension outcomes by LOLT specifically within Quintile 1–4 schools, the no-fee and low-fee sectors of the South African school system. This disaggregation allows for a clearer view of how language-related inequities play out in under-resourced contexts. The difference in performance at English LOLT and isiXhosa LOLT schools echoes the broader trend observed in Table 5, but within a more comparable socioeconomic band. The data suggest that language differences in literacy outcomes are not merely proxies for school wealth or quintile status but reflect deeper pedagogical and systemic challenges.

Table 6.

RC Outcomes for Quintiles 3 and 4, Disaggregated by LOLT

	2023			2024		
	Total	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**	**Total**	**Able to read for meaning**	**Unable to read for meaning**
isiXhosa	454	111 (24%)	343	577	126 (22%)	451
English	287	132 (46%)	155	315	100 (32%)	215
Afrikaans	89	16 (19%)	73	63	19 (30%)	44

The data presented in Table 6 reinforce existing findings in South African literacy research that highlight lagging RC among learners instructed in African languages, despite curriculum intentions to promote mother-tongue-based education in the early grades (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; SA DBE, 2010). This is

particularly noteworthy given the similar school-level contextual factors observed across Makhanda's Quintile 3 and 4 schools, such as socioeconomic status, infrastructure, resourcing, and management.

For the RC study, Table 6 further underscores the value of language-disaggregated, city-level data in identifying patterns that might be obscured at the national scale. From a service-learning standpoint, it illustrates how the assessment not only contributed robust empirical data but also created opportunities for PSTs to observe and reflect on the impact of language and structural inequality in real classroom settings.

Performance in Oral Reading Fluency

A subset of 33% of learners was selected to participate in ORF assessments using performance at interquartile ranges (25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles).

SA DBE benchmark thresholds for early grade reading are used. According to the SA DBE, learners at the end of Grade 3 should reach the threshold of 35 WCPM for isiXhosa. The WCMP threshold for English is 51 WCPM or more (Khulisa Management Services & Department of Basic Education, 2022, p. viii).

Table 7 presents ORF data for learners assessed in isiXhosa. In both 2023 and 2024, approximately 42% of learners achieved fluency levels above the national benchmark of 35 WCPM, set by the Department of Basic Education (Khulisa Management Services & Department of Basic Education, 2022). This contrasts with the lower proportion of isiXhosa LOLT learners identified as able to read for meaning (24% in 2023, 22% in 2024), as shown in Table 5.

Table 7.

WCPM for isiXhosa

2023 (158 learners)				**2024 (166 learners)**			
0	1–19	20–34	35+	0	1–19	20–34	35+
14 (9%)	29 (18%)	50 (31%)	65 (41%)	17 (10%)	39 (24%)	38 (23%)	72 (43%)

The fact that a higher proportion of isiXhosa learners demonstrate fluency than comprehension underscores the need for targeted interventions that support the transition from decoding to meaning-making. For the RC study, these data reinforce the program's utility in capturing nuanced indicators of literacy progress that can inform differentiated instructional support and resource planning at the school and district levels.

As shown in Table 8, in both 2023 and 2024, the majority of learners who took the ORF test in English read at a rate above the grade-level fluency threshold. Specifically, 79% of learners in 2023 and 74% in 2024 achieved more than 51 WCPM. However, a smaller proportion demonstrated the ability to read for meaning, with 61% in 2023 and 57% in 2024 meeting this criterion.

Table 8.

WCPM for English

2023 (145 learners)				**2024 (184 learners)**			
0	1–30	31–50	51+	0	1–30	31–50	51+
2 (1%)	16 (11%)	13 (9%)	114 (79%)	14 (8%)	20 (11%)	13 (7%)	137 (74%)

These results further validate the reliability of the assessment instruments used in the RC study, as well as the consistency of PST-administered testing procedures across school types and settings. The English ORF data also highlight systemic disparities when juxtaposed with the isiXhosa ORF results in Table 7, underscoring the ongoing challenge of language equity in South African education. From a service-learning perspective, these results reinforce the dual benefit of the RC study: Schools gain access to usable performance data, while PSTs acquire hands-on experience with key indicators of literacy development across diverse linguistic and socioeconomic contexts.

Learning Goals

The RC study was carefully designed to achieve a set of integrated learning outcomes for PSTs, grounded in the core principles of service-learning: reciprocal community engagement, practical application of academic knowledge, and personal and professional growth (Anderson, 2000; Butin, 2003; Chambers & Lavery, 2012).

A central aim of the program was to deepen PSTs' understanding of service-learning itself, its philosophy, value, and application within the field of teacher education. By participating in a large-scale community-based research project, PSTs were introduced to the realities of educational inequality, and the critical role teachers can play in addressing these challenges through informed, compassionate practice.

Equally important was the goal of developing assessment literacy, a critical component of effective teaching. PSTs gained hands-on experience administering and scoring both comprehension and ORF assessments. Through this, they learned to collect and interpret learner performance data, identify skill gaps in areas such as vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, and reflect on the implications for instructional planning. This cycle of assessment, interpretation, and response was reinforced through post-fieldwork lectures and reflection sessions, where students developed strategies for targeted literacy support.

The program also provided opportunities for PSTs to receive formative feedback on their assessment practices from team leaders and peers. This not only enhanced technical competence but also encouraged reflective engagement with the complexities of literacy instruction in diverse and under-resourced classrooms (Petker & Petersen, 2014; Wilson et al., 2015).

By engaging directly with learners, teachers, and school contexts, PSTs were challenged to move beyond theoretical knowledge and confront the lived realities of teaching literacy in multilingual, high-need environments. This practical immersion supports the overarching service-learning goal of developing educators who are both skilled and socially responsive. Post-program reflections revealed that PSTs felt more confident in their ability to analyze and respond to learners' needs, particularly in terms of literacy development. Their experiences in the program directly contributed to their professional growth by providing practical experience in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Reflections from students underscored how participation in the program strengthened their confidence and sense of agency as future educators. "This experience allowed me to see myself as a professional capable of making a meaningful impact" (S23, female), one student wrote. Another stated, "This program helped me realise the importance of bringing change through understanding and collaboration" (S47, male). These comments affirm that the service-learning experience developed practical pedagogical skills while shaping professional identity and commitment to educational justice, core intentions of the program.

Response

One of the goals of the program was to utilize data to guide and support local interventions. Here, we discuss actions taken to ensure that the findings led to meaningful change.

A community meeting was held to present and discuss the implications of the results with school-based participants. During this session, the data were analyzed in broad terms, fostering a shared understanding of its implications for teaching and learning. Schools received a detailed breakdown of results. The research team made themselves available to bring original scripts to schools, working directly with educators to discuss individual learner performance and implications for instructional practices.

As a direct result of the needs highlighted in the 2023 data, a new service-learning program was launched with BEd Year 2 students in 2024, targeting three schools where results indicated the greatest need for intervention. These schools have historically received limited support and now benefit from direct engagement with teacher candidates, while Year 2 PSTs benefit from a valuable learning opportunity.

Leveraging this study's results to highlight the need, GADRA Education successfully obtained funding to significantly expand the reach of their early literacy support program. Rolled out in 2023 in seven classrooms at two schools, it expanded to include a further 18 FP classrooms across four schools. This includes the provision of full sets of graded readers with related learner support materials for Grades 1–3,

as well as a single-sound English phonics program for Grade 1 with essential teaching tools, such as data projectors, presentations, and support materials.

As mentioned earlier, the 2023 RC study was replicated in February 2024 and, in response to the feedback from students and school-based participants, has now been integrated into the Year 4 program for the next 4 years, ensuring that this study continues to provide valuable learning opportunities for PSTs' and that this study's insights will continue to inform teaching practices.

Reflections and Lessons Learned

While the RC study has yielded valuable data and enhanced PST learning, the implementation process revealed several important challenges and areas for growth.

One of the most consistent logistical challenges was the tight time frames for data collection. Coordinating assessments across 25 schools within five days placed considerable pressure on both PSTs and school schedules. Additionally, the linguistic diversity of the city meant that matching PST language proficiency to school LOLT requirements was not always seamless. In some cases, this limited the depth of engagement during ORF testing and learner interactions.

Differences in school readiness also became apparent. Some schools were highly familiar with structured assessment procedures and had readily available space and staff support, while others struggled to integrate the assessments into their daily routine. These variations required the team leaders to exercise flexibility and real-time problem-solving.

Feedback from 2023 participants and school-based stakeholders led to several improvements in the 2024 iteration of the program. Notably, testing was moved to February (the start of the school year), which allowed the results to feed directly into early-year planning and helped align the program with the university's teaching practice calendar. This change also opened space for richer post-assessment engagement between PSTs and teachers. Furthermore, all schools in the city (state, low-fee, and private) were invited to participate, ensuring city-wide coverage.

Another lesson emerged in the area of PST training. While the lecture-based preparation was well received, reflection sessions indicated that PSTs would benefit from more scaffolded practice in administering and interpreting assessments. As a result, the 2025 implementation plan includes a simulated assessment component during training, as well as structured debriefing sessions post-fieldwork.

Instrument reliability also prompted an internal review. While the comprehension and ORF tools are robust, some PSTs found it difficult to apply the marking memos consistently under time pressure. Team leaders noted the importance of moderation and real-time feedback during the marking process, and future rounds of the project will include tighter calibration training.

Finally, this experience has highlighted the potential for vertical integration within the BEd program. Based on promising pilot efforts in 2024, Year 2 students will be introduced to early intervention support at select schools identified through the RC study, while Year 4 students will continue with testing and analysis. This scaffolding ensures continuity and deeper developmental learning across years of study.

Together, these lessons reinforce the dual commitment of the program to strengthen educational practice in local schools and to shape responsive, capable novice teachers.

Conclusion

This case study has illustrated how an intentionally structured service-learning program, rooted in authentic community partnership, can mobilize PSTs as active agents of educational transformation. The RC study simultaneously addresses an urgent educational need, large-scale literacy assessment, while offering deep professional development for PSTs.

Our contribution to the literature lies in demonstrating that PSTs, far from being passive recipients of knowledge, can be deployed as a powerful, currently underutilized resource within public education systems. The RC study provides a compelling model for universities seeking to integrate research, teaching, and community engagement in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways.

For readers considering replicating this model in other contexts, three key features stand out:

- a clearly defined, context-specific need (in this case, the absence of reliable literacy assessment data in under-resourced schools),
- a well-scaffolded integration into the teacher education curriculum, and
- sustained, reciprocal partnerships with schools and education-focused NGOs.

The success of the RC study also highlights the value of engaging PSTs not merely as passive learners, but as active contributors to knowledge generation and educational improvement. By positioning student teachers as both assessors and analysts, the program cultivates reflective practice, data literacy, and professional confidence.

Looking forward, the addition of a second-year BEd component marks an important evolution in the program's design. Based on school-identified needs arising from RC data, Year 2 students are now embedded in three underperforming schools for ongoing support work. This intervention layer not only deepens the university's service footprint but also creates an organic learning pathway: Year 2 students begin with support and remediation; Year 4 students carry out diagnostic assessment; and research staff integrate findings to shape responsive programming.

This vertical integration offers a unique opportunity for longitudinal research. Future studies could track the reading trajectories of learners over multiple years, evaluate the long-term impact of embedded university–school partnerships, or investigate the comparative efficacy of different types of service-learning interventions in teacher education.

In summary, the RC study illustrates how localized, data-driven, and pedagogically aligned service-learning can contribute meaningfully to both student development and systemic improvement. It offers a blueprint for replicable, sustainable engagement between universities and schools, an approach with the potential to reshape both teacher preparation and educational outcomes in high-need contexts.

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