

Communities of practice for social systems strengthening to improve child wellbeing



Routine eye and hearing screenings could boost academic performance of early grade learners

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South African children and their families face a multitude of challenges as a result of intersecting social problems. These include poverty, inequality, poor nutrition, health and mental health challenges, exposure to violence, safety concerns and a lack of parenting knowledge and skills. All these factors impact on a child's ability to learn, thrive and grow.

In 2020 the Community of Practice (CoP) for Child Wellbeing set out to test an innovative model of school-based support services. Integrated longitudinal assessments were conducted by the CoP research team between 2020 and 2023. These included assessments of children's health, education performance and progression and their material and psychosocial wellbeing. The participating children were all in no fee-paying schools, in Grades R through to Grades 3 and most were beneficiaries of the Child Support Grant. In total, 162 children were assessed in five urban public schools in Johannesburg, Gauteng.

The health screening and intervention occurred in 2020/2021. Caregivers and/or teachers identified children with hearing or vision issues and these children were referred for screenings to the UJ Optometry and Wits Audiology's mobile units. Children requiring further care were referred to St John's Eye Hospital at Baragwanath Hospital for glasses, with some subsequently referred to Specsavers (a private owned optometry company). Those needing treatment for hearing issues were referred to local clinics for further assessment.

We found that:

- 29% of all CoP children screened by the CoP nurses required formal eye and ear tests.

Of this number:

- 21% of children tested received eyeglasses, sponsored by Spec Savers, a CoP partner.
- 31% of children tested received an ear treatment (for example removal of cerumen, referral for diagnostic language assessment, referral to a speech and hearing clinic).

How does this match with national trends?

A large number of children with vision or hearing problems are never screened, tested or receive treatment. This compromises their general well-being, impacts on their school readiness and is a significant barrier to learning to read and write.

Mweli and Gustafsson's (2018) analysis of the 2011 Census finds that White and Indian children are three to four times as likely to use eyeglasses as Black African and Coloured learners.¹ Although the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP) of 2012 makes provision for a basic package of health services for children in public schools, none of the children at the schools where the study was conducted had eye or hearing screening

¹ Mweli, H.M. & Gustafsson, M. (2018). *Basic education's role in tackling poverty*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. [Unpublished article.]

and referrals for services. A lack of eye glasses may explain why some children from poor households have a slow acquisition of reading skills (Mweli and Gustaffsson 2018).

A study conducted by Maluleke, Khosa-Shangase and Kanji (2021) found that school readiness and academic achievement of children with hearing impairments is improved if they have early access to Early Hearing Detection and Interventions (EHD).² Early detection of eye and hearing difficulties, along with timely interventions, can help mitigate the risk of school failure and dropout, and support long-term success in educational outcomes. It is therefore crucial that these services be provided for early grade learners especially when they enter school in Grade R.

Policy Recommendations

The introduction of the Bela Act Republic of South Africa (2024)³ offers an opportunity to support learners as they enter the school system in Grade R, which is now compulsory. Routine eye and ear screening and related interventions are critical in improving schooling outcomes for this group of children. It is also an important pillar in realising the government's commitment to inclusive education.

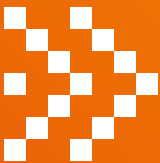
Without early detection and intervention, a large proportion of disadvantaged Black African and Coloured children in public schools with vision and hearing difficulties are at risk of being permanently excluded from meaningful learning opportunities, with profound longterm social and economic consequences for both the state and society. These are vital services, mandated by Section 28C of the South African Constitution and the ISHP, yet they are not being implemented.

Urgent attention must therefore be given to ensuring the early detection and timely intervention for children with sight and hearing challenges. Implementing these measures would not only support children in realising their full potential but would also play a significant role in reducing the education gap between privileged and under privileged learners.

Visit our website for more information <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/> or contact Prof Sadiyya Haffejee sadiyyah@uj.ac.za

² Maluleke, N.P., Khoza-Shangase, K. & Kanji, A., 2021, 'School readiness and academic achievement of children with hearing impairment: A South African exploratory study', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 11(1), a898. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v11i1.898>

³ Basic Education Laws Amendment Act 32 of 2024. Government Gazette. <https://www.gov.za/documents/acts/basic-education-laws-amendment-act-32-2024-english-afrikaans-16-sep-2024>



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