

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the THRASS Programme in Enhancing Literacy Skills at St Martins Mhomho Primary School, Chivi District, Zimbabwe

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0083>

Received: 17 January 2026; Accepted: 22 January 2026; Published: 18 February 2026

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme in enhancing early literacy at St Martins Mhomho Primary School in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. A mixed-methods, school-based evaluation design was employed, incorporating classroom observations, informal reading assessments, and teachers' perceptions. Informal reading assessments were conducted using grade-appropriate word lists and short passages aligned to the national curriculum, with learner performance scored on decoding accuracy, fluency, and word recognition. Findings indicate that THRASS contributed positively to learners' phonemic awareness, reading accuracy, spelling ability, and learner confidence. Grade One and Two learners recorded an average reading performance of 80%, suggesting notable improvement in foundational literacy skills. However, the absence of pre-intervention baseline data limited the ability to attribute gains exclusively to THRASS. Implementation challenges were also identified, including inadequate teacher training in THRASS pedagogy, limited instructional resources, and inconsistencies in phonics instruction across classes. The study concludes that while THRASS is a promising early-grade literacy intervention, its effectiveness can be strengthened through baseline assessment, sustained teacher professional development, consistent instructional practices, and improved resourcing. The study aligns with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy emphasis on strengthening foundational literacy skills as a basis for improved learning outcomes.

Keywords: THRASS; literacy skills; phonics instruction; primary education

INTRODUCTION

Foundational literacy skills are critical for learners' academic success, effective participation in society, and lifelong learning. Early acquisition of reading, writing, and spelling competencies enables learners to access the broader curriculum and supports cognitive, social, and emotional development. Globally, research consistently shows that learners who fail to master basic literacy skills in the early grades are more likely to experience persistent learning difficulties in later years of schooling (Cayir, 2017; Spaul et al., 2022).

In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education prioritise early-grade reading proficiency as a cornerstone of the competency-based curriculum. This policy emphasis recognises literacy as a foundational competence necessary for the development of higher-order skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Similar policy orientations across sub-Saharan Africa underscore the centrality of early literacy as a driver of improved learning outcomes (Piper et al., 2018; Spaul et al., 2022).

The Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme provides a structured, systematic phonics-based approach to literacy instruction. Evidence from international and regional studies suggests that explicit phonics instruction strengthens phonemic awareness, decoding accuracy, and early reading fluency, particularly when implemented in the early grades (Park & Lombardino, 2013; Siik &

Hawkins, 2013). By explicitly teaching sound–letter relationships through cumulative and multisensory strategies, THRASS aims to improve reading accuracy, spelling competence, and learner confidence. This study therefore evaluates the effectiveness of the THRASS programme in enhancing early-grade literacy skills at St Martins Mhomho Primary School, with specific attention to learner outcomes, instructional practices, and implementation challenges within a rural Zimbabwean context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature consistently highlights the importance of systematic phonics instruction in early literacy development. Explicit and structured phonics teaching has been shown to significantly improve learners' phonemic awareness, decoding abilities, and reading accuracy, particularly in the early grades (Cayir, 2017; Park & Lombardino, 2013). Phonemic awareness is widely recognised as a strong predictor of later reading success, as it underpins learners' ability to decode unfamiliar words and develop reading fluency.

More recent studies within sub-Saharan Africa further reinforce the effectiveness of phonics-based interventions in resource-constrained contexts. Research conducted in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa demonstrates that structured phonics programmes significantly improve early reading outcomes when teachers receive adequate training and instructional support (Piper et al., 2018; Cilliers et al., 2020; Spaul et al., 2022). These studies highlight that systematic phonics approaches are particularly effective in multilingual and rural settings, where learners often have limited exposure to print-rich environments.

In addition, contextualised spelling and vocabulary instruction have been identified as critical components of effective literacy programmes. Arnold et al. (2005) emphasise that learners benefit most when spelling and vocabulary instruction is embedded within meaningful language experiences, especially in rural and low-resource learning environments. Such approaches enable learners to link new words to familiar contexts, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention.

Specific studies on the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme indicate positive impacts on early literacy outcomes. Siik and Hawkins (2013) report that THRASS strengthens sound–letter correspondence, spelling accuracy, and learner confidence through its cumulative and multisensory design. These findings suggest that THRASS is a theoretically sound and contextually relevant intervention for early-grade literacy development in sub-Saharan African education systems.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods, school-based evaluation design to assess the effectiveness of the THRASS programme in improving early-grade literacy outcomes. This design integrated quantitative measures of learner performance with qualitative insights from classroom observations and teacher interviews. A mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it allows for the triangulation of numerical trends and contextual classroom evidence, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of programme effectiveness than reliance on a single method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The school-based evaluation design was justified on the basis that it enables the examination of instructional practices and learner outcomes within their natural setting, which is particularly important when assessing curriculum interventions in real-world educational contexts (Patton, 2015).

Study Site and Participants

The study was conducted at St Martins Mhomho Primary School, a rural primary school in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. Participants included Grade One and Grade Two learners who received THRASS instruction during regular literacy lessons, as well as teachers responsible for programme implementation. Teachers were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in early-grade literacy instruction.

Assessment Tools and Data Collection Methods

Three complementary data collection tools were used: classroom observations, informal reading assessments, and semi-structured teacher interviews. The use of multiple methods was intended to enhance credibility through data triangulation, a widely accepted strategy in educational research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Informal Reading Assessments: Learner reading performance was assessed using grade-appropriate word lists and short reading passages aligned to the Zimbabwean primary school curriculum. Informal reading assessments are commonly used in early-grade literacy research to provide flexible, context-sensitive measures of decoding accuracy, fluency, and word recognition, particularly in low-resource settings where standardised tools may be unavailable (Piper et al., 2018). Learners were assessed individually, and scoring focused on decoding accuracy (percentage of words read correctly), reading fluency, and word recognition. Class averages were calculated for Grade One and Grade Two learners.

Classroom Observations: Classroom observations were conducted during scheduled literacy lessons to document instructional strategies, learner engagement, and fidelity to THRASS principles. Observation as a method was justified because it allows researchers to capture actual teaching and learning practices rather than relying solely on self-reported data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' perceptions of programme effectiveness, implementation challenges, and instructional confidence. This approach was selected because it provides flexibility while ensuring that key areas relevant to programme implementation are systematically explored (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher interviews were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis was employed because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding focused on recurring themes related to learner performance, instructional practices, teacher preparedness, and implementation challenges.

Quantitative data from informal reading assessments were analysed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and averages. Descriptive analysis was considered appropriate given the evaluative nature of the study and the absence of baseline or comparison data, as it allows for clear summarisation of learner performance trends without overstating causal claims (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and detailed documentation of procedures. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant school authorities, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the study derived from informal reading assessments, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. The findings are organised to reflect both learner performance outcomes and teachers' perceptions of the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme. Quantitative results provide an overview of early-grade reading performance, while qualitative insights illuminate instructional practices, learner engagement, and implementation challenges, thereby offering a balanced interpretation of programme effectiveness within the school context.

Learner Reading Performance

Table 1 presents the average reading performance of Grade One and Grade Two learners who were exposed to the THRASS programme.

Table 1: Learner Reading Performance by Grade Level

Grade Level	Average Reading Score (%)	Interpretation
Grade One	78	Above-average reading proficiency
Grade Two	82	Strong reading proficiency
Overall Average	80	Strong foundational reading skills

As shown in Table 1, learners demonstrated strong reading outcomes across both grade levels. Grade One learners achieved an average score of 78%, indicating that most learners had developed adequate decoding skills, basic fluency, and word recognition abilities. Grade Two learners recorded a higher average score of 82%, reflecting improved fluency, accuracy, and confidence in reading age-appropriate texts. The overall average reading performance of 80% suggests that the THRASS programme had a positive influence on early literacy development.

Teachers' Perceptions of THRASS

Teachers expressed a range of perceptions regarding the implementation of the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme, encompassing both positive outcomes and notable challenges. These perceptions are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' Perceptions of the THRASS Programme

Positive Perceptions	Negative Perceptions
Improved learner confidence	Inadequate training in THRASS pedagogy
Structured and systematic phonics approach	Limited availability of instructional resources
Enhanced reading and spelling accuracy	High cost of THRASS materials
Support for diverse learners	Inconsistencies in programme implementation

Teachers reported that THRASS significantly improved learner confidence, particularly among struggling readers, as the structured phonics approach enabled learners to decode words more independently. However, inadequate training and limited access to materials constrained consistent implementation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme contributes positively to early literacy development by strengthening learners' phonemic awareness, decoding skills, spelling accuracy, and reading confidence. The strong reading performance recorded among Grade One and Grade Two learners reinforces existing evidence that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is particularly effective in supporting early reading acquisition (Siik & Hawkins, 2013; Cayir, 2017). The structured, cumulative, and multisensory nature of THRASS appears to have enabled learners to internalise sound-letter correspondences more effectively, resulting in improved fluency and accuracy when engaging with age-appropriate texts.

These findings are consistent with broader international and regional literature which demonstrates that phonics-based interventions yield the greatest benefits when introduced in the early grades and delivered with instructional consistency (Park & Lombardino, 2013; Piper et al., 2018). Within the sub-Saharan African context, where many learners enter school with limited exposure to print-rich environments, structured phonics programmes have been shown to play a critical role in narrowing early literacy gaps (Spaull et al., 2022). The

positive outcomes observed in this study therefore suggest that THRASS is pedagogically appropriate for rural Zimbabwean schools facing similar contextual challenges.

Teachers' perceptions further corroborate the quantitative findings, as they reported increased learner engagement, confidence, and willingness to participate in reading and spelling activities. Such affective gains are particularly important in early literacy development, as learner motivation and confidence are closely linked to sustained reading practice and long-term achievement. The programme's ability to support mixed-ability classes was also viewed as a notable strength, aligning with evidence that systematic phonics approaches are inclusive and adaptable to diverse learner needs.

However, while the findings indicate positive learner outcomes, the absence of pre-intervention baseline data and comparison or control groups limits the extent to which improvements can be attributed solely to the THRASS programme. As such, the results should be interpreted as indicative rather than causal. This methodological limitation is common in school-based evaluations conducted in real-world settings, but it nonetheless highlights the importance of incorporating baseline and follow-up assessments in future programme evaluations to strengthen claims of effectiveness.

In addition, the study revealed that inconsistent implementation and limited teacher preparedness constrained the full potential of the programme. Inadequate training in THRASS pedagogy reduced instructional confidence and contributed to variability in delivery across classes. These findings align with existing research which emphasises that the success of phonics-based interventions is highly dependent on teacher knowledge, ongoing professional development, and instructional fidelity (Cilliers et al., 2020). Without sustained support, even well-designed literacy programmes may fail to achieve optimal impact.

The challenges related to resource availability and the cost of THRASS materials also raise important considerations regarding scalability and sustainability. While THRASS demonstrates effectiveness at school level, its wider adoption within resource-constrained education systems requires strategic planning, including the adaptation of materials, integration into existing curricula, and alignment with national teacher development frameworks. Addressing these systemic factors is essential if phonics-based interventions such as THRASS are to contribute meaningfully to long-term improvements in foundational literacy outcomes at scale.

Overall, the discussion underscores that THRASS is a promising early-grade literacy intervention whose effectiveness is shaped not only by its pedagogical design, but also by contextual and implementation factors. Strengthening teacher capacity, ensuring consistency in delivery, and embedding robust assessment mechanisms are therefore critical for maximising the programme's impact within Zimbabwean primary schools.

Implications for Scalability and Sustainability

For THRASS to be scaled sustainably within Zimbabwean primary schools, several considerations are essential. These include integrating phonics-based training into pre-service and in-service teacher education, reducing reliance on costly proprietary materials through locally produced alternatives, and embedding THRASS within existing curriculum frameworks. Long-term sustainability will depend on institutional support, continuous monitoring, and alignment with national literacy policies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) programme is a valuable and effective early-grade literacy intervention for strengthening foundational reading, spelling, and phonemic awareness skills among Grade One and Grade Two learners. The positive reading outcomes recorded, reflected in improved decoding accuracy, fluency, and learner confidence, demonstrate the potential of structured and systematic phonics instruction to enhance early literacy development in rural and resource-constrained school contexts.

The findings further suggest that THRASS aligns well with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy emphasis on early-grade reading proficiency as a foundation for improved learning outcomes across the curriculum. By promoting explicit sound-letter correspondence and cumulative learning, the programme supports the acquisition of essential literacy competencies required for learners' long-term academic progression.

However, the study also highlights that the effectiveness of THRASS is not determined by programme design alone, but is strongly influenced by implementation conditions. Inadequate teacher training, inconsistencies in instructional practice, and limited access to appropriate teaching and learning resources constrained the full realisation of programme benefits. These challenges underscore the importance of sustained teacher professional development, instructional support, and consistent monitoring to ensure fidelity of implementation.

Overall, the study affirms that with adequate institutional support, targeted resourcing, and alignment with existing curriculum frameworks, THRASS has the potential to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of foundational literacy outcomes in Zimbabwean primary schools. Strengthening implementation systems and planning strategically for scale and sustainability will be essential if phonics-based interventions such as THRASS are to play a lasting role in addressing early-grade literacy challenges and improving educational quality more broadly.

TARGETED RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen implementation without altering programme structure, it is recommended that schools introduce simple baseline reading assessments prior to THRASS implementation, standardise phonics instructional practices across classes, and prioritise low-cost professional development focused on phonics pedagogy. District-level support for resource mobilisation and routine monitoring of early-grade literacy programmes would further enhance effectiveness while maintaining feasibility within existing system constraints.

THRASS is an effective and promising early-grade literacy intervention, but its impact can be strengthened through baseline assessment, sustained professional development, adequate resourcing, and strategic planning for scalability and sustainability.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by the absence of pre-intervention baseline data and a comparison or control group, which constrained the ability to make strong causal claims regarding the effectiveness of the THRASS programme. The reliance on informal reading assessments, while contextually appropriate, also limited the use of standardised measures that could enhance comparability with other studies. In addition, the study was conducted at a single rural school, which restricts the generalisability of the findings to other contexts.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs incorporating baseline and post-intervention assessments, as well as comparison groups, to strengthen causal inferences. Further studies could also examine the implementation of THRASS across multiple schools and districts to assess variability in outcomes and identify best practices for scale-up. Research exploring cost-effectiveness, teacher workload, and learner progression over time would provide valuable insights into the long-term sustainability of phonics-based interventions within Zimbabwe and similar sub-Saharan African contexts.

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