

**3ie-IFPRI Joint Seminar: Experimental evidence on the impacts of scripted  
lesson plans on early-grade reading  
01/26/2016**

[Jacobus Cilliers](#), assistant professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, presented his co-authored research on the impacts of scripted lesson plans on early-grade reading in South Africa at the [3ie-IFPRI joint seminar series](#) in Washington D.C. on January 26<sup>th</sup>. The researchers collaborated with South African NGO [Class Act](#) to come up with three interventions, two targeting teachers, and one parents. This paper focuses on the two interventions targeting teachers, the first of which included scripted lesson plans on reading and literacy and a one-off training session for teachers (Training), and the second which also included the same scripted lesson plans but provided teachers with monthly support from teaching coaches instead of the training session (Coaching).

The researchers conducted an RCT with a sample of 230 Setswana-speaking schools in the North-West province and randomly assigned 50 schools to each treatment arm and 80 schools to the control, with 20 pupils per school. The effects of the interventions are estimated using a February 2015 baseline and a November 2015 midline, with a November 2016 endline awaiting analysis. The researchers found that both interventions had comparable, statistically significant, positive impacts on pupils' reading ability and noted that the teaching intervention had similar levels of impact as the coaching intervention at half the price, and thus was more cost effective.

The researchers used disaggregated student data and preliminary qualitative data on classroom observations to suggest the mechanisms behind the pupils' reading gains. They identify greater phonetic awareness, stemming from the teachers' decision to group students according to their reading ability, their increasing of individual attention to each pupil, as well as the reduction of using class time to prepare for future lessons, as the principles changes in the intervention arms. However, they also note that for both interventions the strongest and weakest students benefited the least, rural and poorer schools did not benefit as much, and students with teachers that performed better at baseline test on competency performed better.

[Julian Cristia](#), a lead research economist at the Inter-American Development Bank, served as the discussant for this seminar. He praised the study for including different measures of analysis and for its comprehensive theory of how children learn. He suggested that the researchers consider a more objective measure of assessing progress, for example a task determining ability to read for meaning, and to make explicit the contrast between South Africa and other countries in the region. The audience asked several clarifying questions on the scripted lessons setup, whether these were accompanied by other guides and if coaches were present in the classroom or interacted with the pupils. They also suggested the researchers analyze if teacher attrition was correlated with baseline characteristics, to disaggregate the results by quintiles, and to reconsider holding constant for gender because of the low power resulting from a small sample.