Case study 3

Previously a Limpopo school, this Quintile 2 Mpumalanga School is in the remote north-western corner of Mpumalanga. It is in the Bohlebela District, which has been among the worst performing Districts in the country for some years.

The remote, deep rural Bushbuckridge landscape

Widespread poverty and illiteracy
About an hour and a half from Hazyview, this school serves a community where families support themselves through small-scale subsistence farming and vendor trading. This is supplemented by state pensions and child grants. There is widespread poverty and illiteracy, and the school's feeding scheme feeds all of the learners. It is not unusual for teachers to contribute their own money towards buying shoes and uniforms for learners from the poorest families.

Poor nutrition
After each holiday, many children exhibit signs of malnutrition, and each term, it takes about three weeks on the feeding scheme before some of the learners are able to concentrate properly during lessons. Also, many male and female learners do not return to school on time due to their involvement in some form of subsistence labour or initiation schooling. A mobile clinic visits the school occasionally to check on the learners' health.

Limited resources
The school has electricity, but it has pit toilets and a single borehole water tap.

The old feeding scheme kitchen

The 'roundabout' borehole water pump, empty water tank, and only tap

Tidy school grounds with communal hand-washing bowls

The medium of instruction challenge

- English is more like a foreign language than an additional language in this remote area

- Officials, teachers and learners are all uncomfortable, even visibly anxious, about using English; and show frustration when trying to express themselves through the medium of English

- In the Foundation Phase, Sepedi speaking teachers teach Sepedi speaking learners through their home language

- From Grade 4 onwards, Sepedi speaking teachers (who do not speak much English) try to teach learners (who are not exposed to much English), through the medium of English. It is probably realistic to estimate that about 70% of English medium teaching is done in Sepedi.

In 2008

This school was battling to meaningfully fulfil the leadership, management and administrative requirements related to curriculum policies. In addition, it's Literacy and Numeracy results were poor to average, ranging between:

- 30 and 50% in Grade 3
- 30 and 40% in Grade 6

To improve on these results, the school needed support with:

- Leadership and management
- Curriculum planning and administration
- Teaching and learning resources
- Curriculum implementation

By the end of 2010

A) There were clear signs of improved leadership and management

Improved leadership and management and cooperation with the Department of Education, the local community and non-government organisations, led to the school initiating a number of improvement projects:

- Securing the support of the SEEDS of LIFE non-profit organization to build a new kitchen for the school's feeding scheme, and to provide access to running water for the school

The newly built feeding scheme kitchen

- Purchased supplementary resources for the Foundation Phase and begun the development of a school library

- Installed ceiling fans in all classrooms to deal with the extreme heat during summer

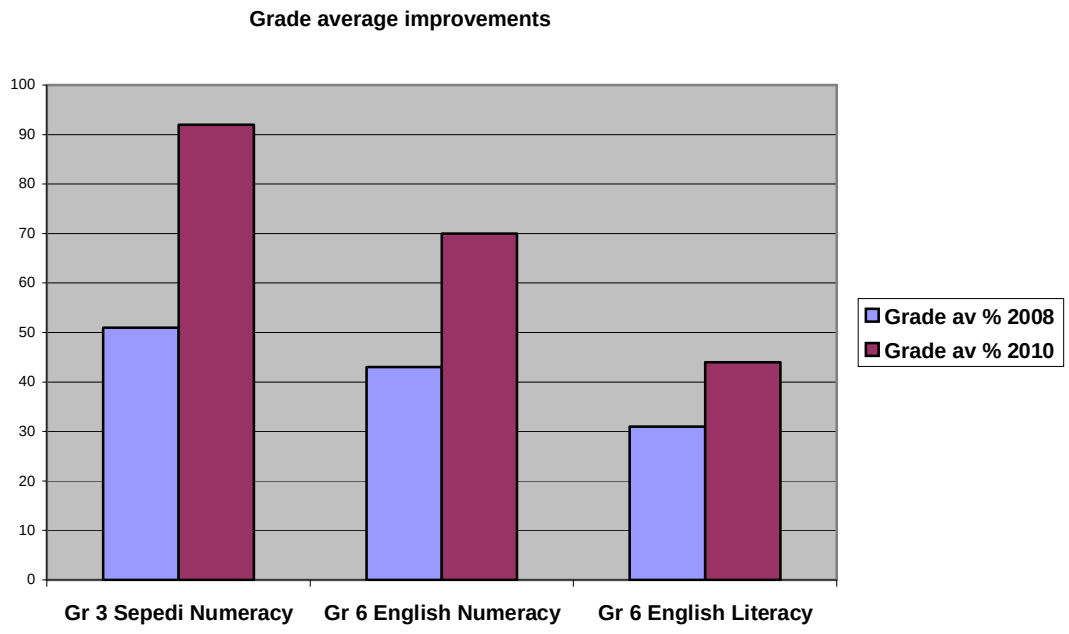
- Developed a general workers' area to facilitate better maintenance of the school; beautified the school entrance; and installed a secure gate

- Installed an alarm system

B) There were also clear signs of improved curriculum implementation and learner results

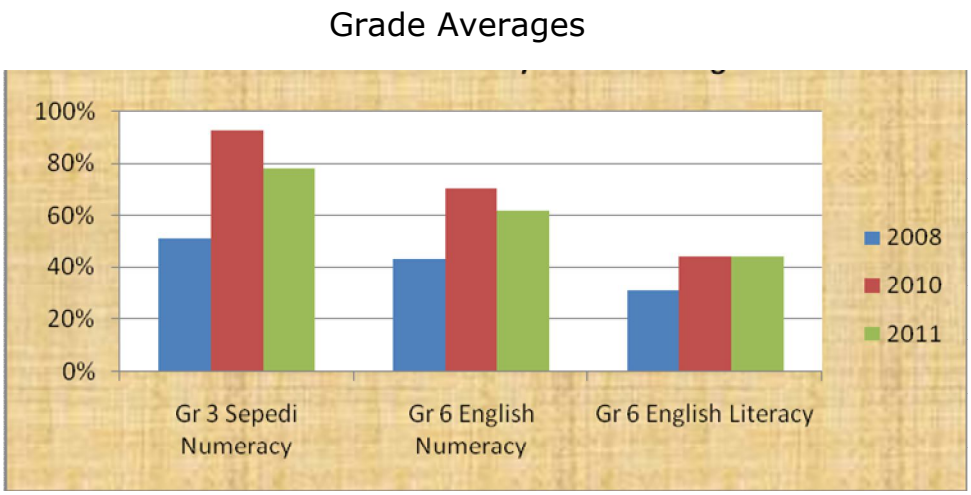
Improved classroom practices led to significantly improved learner results:

- The Grade 3 Sepedi Numeracy average improved from 51% to 92%
- The Grade 6 English Numeracy average improved from 43% to 70%
- Grade 6 English Literacy average improved from 31% - 44%



By the end of 2011

Although the results had dropped slightly or remained stable, as illustrated below, they were all being maintained at between 10% and 20% higher than the averages in 2008.



Conclusion
Maintaining these improved results is all the more meaningful given that the contextual and socio-economic conditions of the District, the school and its community remain unchanged.

It would appear that the factors that contributed most towards the significant improvement in learner results at this school were:

- A strong emphasis on strengthening leadership and management by setting up, coaching and mentoring the school management team to fulfil the Department's requirements of it.

- The provision of teaching and learning materials for every learner and every teacher, in every learning area in every grade.

- Ongoing, but occasional classroom observation and practical support with how to use the teacher and learner materials meaningfully to fulfil curriculum requirements.