

Basic Concepts Programme®: The Educators' Perspectives

The implementation, findings, and
recommendations from Focus Schools

Willow Herz & Samiya Rana | 4 June 2024



Abstract

The "Basic Concepts Programme®: The Educators' Perspectives" Report documents the experiences and insights of seven teachers across four primary schools in Cape Town, participating in a project facilitated by Stanford University students. This study evaluates the implementation and effects of the Basic Concepts Programme (BCP) on language proficiency, student engagement, literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, and classroom dynamics. Teachers observed significant improvements in students' vocabulary, particularly in colour recognition, and noted enhanced engagement and motivation. The Programme was found to positively impact numeracy more than literacy, with noticeable advancements in mathematical skills and conceptual understanding. While the influence on problem-solving and critical thinking was less pronounced, the Programme fostered better classroom dynamics, collaboration, and student confidence. The report also includes adaptations made by educators to fit their unique contexts and offers recommendations for optimizing the Programme's implementation. Despite some challenges, such as the cost of materials and the limited duration of the project, the overall feedback from educators was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the Programme's effectiveness in enriching educational outcomes.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Context.....	4
--------------	---

Section I: Impacts of Basic Concepts

I. Vocabulary and Language Proficiency.....	6
II. Student Engagement and Motivation.....	7
III. Literacy and Numeracy.....	7
IV. Problem Solving and Critical Thinking.....	10
V. Classroom Dynamics: Engagement, Collaboration, and Confidence.....	10

Section II: Learnings and Recommendations

I. Context Adaptations	13
II. Recommendations	14
III. Advice for New Teachers	14
IV. Other Comments.....	15

Conclusion

Researcher Reflections.....	17
-----------------------------	----

Introduction

Context:

As part of the Stanford University in Cape Town programme, we as American students were given the opportunity to participate in Organizational Projects, which involves partnering with a local organization to provide volunteer work. Luckily for us, we were paired with Basic Concepts! Understanding that our time in Cape Town would be very short (our university operates on 10-week terms), we designed a project that would be feasible yet impactful. For our first five weeks of the programme, we conducted school visits and interviews with seven teachers at four primary schools. In the latter five weeks, we consolidated our data and created this report. As foreign students with such a limited look into the South African educational system, our role was restricted to observers; while we acknowledge the beneficial angle that comes with fresh perspective, it is also important to note that we ourselves are not formally trained in education and this report should be examined as such.

At the time of this report's internal publication – meaning that it is for the use and reading of the Basic Concepts Foundation and its affiliates only – the Basic Concepts Programme was being implemented in a handful of Focus Schools, including the three we visited ourselves. Unfortunately, due to safety concerns, Stanford University did not allow us to visit schools in township-designated areas; therefore, we conducted interviews at our fourth school through Zoom. The teachers we interviewed have an experience range of: trainees in the first domain this year to working with BCP since 2002. The quotes in this report may have been edited for clarity. This batch of educators are part of many in the Western Cape who are still actively being trained in the Programme and bringing it to their classrooms.

It is our hope that this context provides an overview of our short-term role in the Basic Concepts Foundation. We are immensely grateful for our experience with not just the organization, but the people within it. Conducting this research was powerful, informative, and above all, it was a pleasure. The following report details our findings from each interviewed educator, who must remain anonymous, but to whom we are deeply appreciative.

Section I:

Impacts of Basic Concepts

I. Vocabulary & Language Proficiency

When discussing the impact of the Basic Concepts Programme in their students' vocabulary and language proficiency, there is one stark trend: improvement, in various forms. As one Grade R educator puts it, "they don't just answer in one word. In full sentences, they develop vocabulary." Other teachers supported this notion, one of whom claimed that their learners' vocabulary after BCP intervention "almost doubled." Across the board, there were clear parallels between the content of expanded vocabulary and the BCP target areas; teachers noted linguistic growth in concepts such as shape, size, mathematics, position and colour vocabulary. The latter seems to be the most protrusive development – every single one of the seven interviewed educators shared that their students became more skillful in recognizing colours (either visually or phonetically). One example highlighting this progression was described by a Grade R teacher, who said:

“ They're thinking out of the box. Not just normally; if you'd ask them a question, like 'Can you find the same colour around the classroom?' they would just find things inside the classroom. Now, I tell them to internalize, which means they have to close their eyes and think about things outside – and they come up with all these beautiful things. ”

While it is true from our research that the largest maturation of students' language proficiency is in colour, it is relevant to note that colour is taught first in the BCP curriculum; however, given its realized success among students, one could gingerly assume that other language areas would garner similar results.

Another important aspect of BCP's vocabulary improvement is for a specific demographic: students whose home language is not English. According to the teachers working with such students, even if their English proficiency was not directly improved, their understanding of concepts was. It was noted in one school that in the focus group of learners, some parents had command of English; however, the teachers did not believe that the language was being

transferred to the students on a conceptual level. One educator working with non-native English speaking students, while not certain, was under the assumption that the students had confidence in their home languages. However, in English, “they were struggling with speaking in full sentences.” This is where BCP intervention comes in. The same teacher shared that “I think that was the most... I saw how they developed, they started speaking in sentences, and also became more confident to speak out loud in English.” Similarly to the general pattern of all schools – an improvement in colour vocabulary – this was seen here. One Grade 1 educator commented:

“ Colours they all knew, because we’d done a lot on colour, but their whole outlook had widened, they had a much bigger view on the world, they’d been exposed to vocab which we had not exposed them to in class. Or, I think they’d possibly heard it without actually ever getting that chance to put it into practice, whereas with [BCP interventionist] they got that chance to put it into practice.”

Therefore, in all classrooms, teachers report that using BCP has instilled a greater understanding of conceptual language and increased vocabulary, especially in colour.

II. Student Engagement & Motivation

While student engagement and motivation did not see drastic impacts, teachers did notice slight changes in the way students felt about answering questions. Because Basic Concepts covers its namesake – elementary conceptual understanding – students who are typically behind their class now felt that they were “on par” with their peers. Feelings such as “I’m not good enough. I’m stupid,” as one teacher says may become baggage that accompanies a student throughout their life, can be mitigated by thoughtful and connected intervention. Rather than being overwhelmed by external expectations, by gaining confidence in certain concepts (such as colours, one educator spoke), a student consequently gains confidence in themselves.

With that, it is noted by a Grade 1 interventionist that there was a correlation between improved behaviour and enhanced ability to communicate thoughts and feelings.

Another tie to confidence is the way in which BCP is structured to be more interpersonal and hyper focused. As a teacher in a special-needs classroom described it:

“ There is definitely a lot of engagement, I don’t need to prompt them or try and pull out info, they’re very happy to engage and be part of the lesson – which is a big thing for these kids because a lot of the time they’re unsure of themselves and don’t want to get the answer wrong, so they can be hesitant in other classes. But during these lessons, they definitely feel a lot more comfortable, and it’s more of a conversation than a teacher standing in front of the classroom and asking questions. ”

This format seems to work for students in the public school system as well, with a Grade R teacher saying: “Once they see me approaching them with the Basic Concepts box, they already know what we are going to do... so I can tell you, they are so excited because now they know teachers can do magic here again.” The teacher also noted the ways in which BCP filtered into other areas of life. After learning colours each week, one learner associated the colour red with the sun, and said that “the sun is so hot when I go outside – my cheeks turn red immediately.” The teacher noted that in examples like this, students are not solely learning inside the classroom, but bringing it outside as well. Knowing that students in many classrooms love learning the Programme – “I can tell you that they honestly enjoy it. They learn so much from it.” – there are also upshoots in confidence, leading them to participate more.

III. Literacy & Numeracy

In regard to the Basic Concepts Programme’s impact on literacy and numeracy, the data gathered indicates that the curriculum has great efficacy with numeracy and less so with literacy. One school that supports students

with special needs reported that counting the sides of shapes and the number of corners helped participants solidify foundational numerical skills. Another teacher working with Grade R students highlighted that BCP helps students to learn the proper position and form of numbers. By understanding higher order concepts, they less frequently write numbers upside down or letters the wrong way around. In a remedial class for Grade 1 students struggling to move to the next grade, profound changes were noted in their numeracy and mathematical skills. Teachers found that with all eight learners their numeracy improved, with one asserting “There was no doubt about it, it did work.” The learners showed a stronger grasp of the mathematical world, the concepts of sums, patterns, shapes, sizes, and measurements. They had also struggled with practical mathematics such as data handling and those abilities had also improved dramatically.

While the results of the Programme on literacy were less clear, one teacher highlighted BCP’s role in teaching children to describe and compare various things. Another shared that learners were better developed in their language and vocabulary and more equipped to relate to various stories explored in class. A remedial teacher found that the Programme helps develop a particular strategy, or train of thinking, that helps students improve their language capabilities. Other teachers working with those remedial students reported that after BCP “There was a big impact on literacy because we were able to get their marks up sufficiently that we could push them through. We wouldn’t have been able to without serious crookery give them the marks that they got.” The educator working with special needs students said that Basic Concepts helped learners to speak in fuller sentences and better describe the world around them. She said, “They are able to describe things better, so if I give them a hair clip they’ll say it’s a ‘big, black, hair clip’ whereas before they would just say ‘it’s a hair clip,’ so now they can actually add some more adjectives to their descriptions.”

One of the schools provided exam scores from students before and after participating in the Basic Concepts Programme starting in their third term of Grade 1 for a total of 16 weeks, meeting twice weekly.

Below is a chart indicating the results with all identifying features removed:

Student #	Grade 1 English	Grade 2 English	Grade 1 Math	Grade 2 Math	Comments on the Student
Student 1	55	60	45	77	Shows dedication despite some challenge with verbal instructions
Student 2	45	50	45	55	Shy, but determination shines through. Still does struggle with comprehension of English.
Student 3	45	48	45	62	Some reading and writing challenges - may be showing Dyslexic tendencies. Has the determination to do well.
Student 4	45	66	65	48	Writing is a challenge, being addressed by OT. Happy and tries his best.
Student 5	45	43	45	61	Auditory skills need consolidation and visual stimulus very beneficial. Making progress - not yet reflective in his marks. Had speech assessment, but no therapy.
Student 6	45	61	45	67	Interacts in all class discussions, making steady progress, always does his best.
Student 7	45	58	55	60	Quietly confident, does her best, making pleasing progress.

IV. Problem Solving & Critical Thinking

Problem solving and critical thinking was one area where BCP did not have as much of an impact when compared to others. At the special needs school problem solving was seen to have increased in terms of students' ability to listen closely to a direct question and answer it, but if given more complex instructions they would struggle. For example, if given a set of shapes and asked to make a house without step by step instructions they would find it difficult. In a classroom where BCP is in its early stages a teacher shared struggles and successes with problem solving. When she flipped a coloured block to reveal another colour students weren't sure if it was the same block and lost interest quickly. In another instance, they were asked to find various colours around the classroom. Some thought creatively and unexpectedly went outside to gather leaves in different shades. One Grade R teacher shared a similar story where she gave them a series of shapes and asked them to make a picture with them, specifically including a rectangle. Some drew a TV and a coach with someone watching it while others just drew a TV. However, she noted that problem solving is a common theme in their classroom and it's difficult to pinpoint BCP as the cause of creative thinking. One remedial teacher noted that the students' began to employ the structure of thinking through an individual concept to problem solve. "Because we constantly ask the same questions over and over they start thinking in that way because we start with asking 'What do you see? Can you describe? Can you compare? Can you tell me where else do we find it?...We're doing it over and over...They also start asking those questions if they don't know something...There's like an engagement which they don't do normally if you don't teach them to do that.'"

V. Classroom Dynamics: Engagement, Collaboration, & Confidence

All of the educators interviewed in this study reported that the Basic Concepts Programme had a positive impact on their classroom dynamics. One

All of the educators interviewed in this study reported that the Basic Concepts Programme had a positive impact on their classroom dynamics. One teacher shared that its small group format allowed students to get to know each other well and understand that the group had the ability to discuss and talk about various things together. In one case a pair of twins entered BCP with the brother being far more confident in his abilities. After the Programme, the sister became the leader of the two and now consistently helps her brother with his classwork. Other teachers who worked with her observed the change, noting that she really came out of her shell and was far more participatory and willing to answer questions. In the words of one of the teachers interviewed, remedial students changed in that “They were all a lot more able to follow instructions and understand instructions. They had a better grasp of what we were doing...They all improved and the biggest improver was the girl twin who caught up to her brother quite quickly...They all [the remedial students] caught up to him.” Furthermore, where students would confidently give the wrong answer before they now confidently gave the right ones.

In a school where BCP is in its earlier stages, another teacher shared that students are much more open to answering questions whereas before they had been very shy. A second newer mediator found that two learners had not spoken at the start of the year but the first BCP lesson encouraged one to speak louder and this student is now encouraging the second to do the same. Students have on the whole become more comfortable, and especially with the two she had struggled with, “this term [she] can see they just blossomed. Just suddenly blossomed like that.” The school for special needs students found that the Programme helped students better collaborate, take turns, and learn from each other's answers. BCP has also given students the opportunity to articulate thoughts in fuller sentences. At the beginning of the year they would grow frustrated when they had to wait their turn to speak but are now more cognizant that each will get a chance to share.

Section II:

Learnings & Recommendations

I. Context Adaptations

For the particular question of: “How have you adapted the Programme to your particular context?” there was not much variation in response. Teachers have minorly adjusted specific lessons to fit their groups. The largest differences in context are unequivocally the group age, size, and time spent on BCP each week. Below is that data categorized in a table:

Age Level	Size of Group	Time Spent / Week	Additional Notes
Grade 1	8	2 Afternoons/Week	16 Weeks Total
Grade R	18	30 minutes/session 1 Session/Every Other Week	Entire Class
Grade R	25 (in four groups)	25-30 minutes/session Various amounts/week	1 group/day (not every group is every day)
Grade R	27 (in groups of 6-7)	20 minutes/session 2 sessions/week	Sometimes gets parental permission to keep students after school for BCP
6-18 years old	7	45 minutes/session 3 sessions/week	Special Needs Students (hence larger age range)

II. Recommendations

Recommendations are best listed from the sources themselves, the educators:

- Could potentially work as an afterschool programme if teachers do not have the proper time to dedicate to BCP during the school day.
- A bigger kit to accommodate larger groups would be helpful to such circumstances.
- Writing down of students' responses as they verbalize them, so that the learners can see how it is written. Since students at the end Grade 1 are expected to be able to read and write simple sentences, later in the programme, they are able to copy their own sentences from the teachers' writing and read it aloud. The programme doesn't train for this, but it is found to be beneficial to students.
- It should be rolled out in Grade R classes with subject advisors to facilitate that process. The curriculum is so full, but it should still be implemented when possible.

III. Advice for New Teachers

In terms of advice for new teachers, many of those interviewed were relatively new to BCP but shared valuable insights on what has helped them to best implement it. One highlighted that it gets better with practice and the more you mediate the easier it is. In other words, the more you use the Programme the more you will be able to use it and it will become an increasingly better tool. Another shared that asking the questions can be a long process, but having a deeper knowledge of the nature of the questions and how to adapt them helped her greatly. The same educator also emphasized that lessons should be between 25 to 30 minutes in order to retain children's attention. A third teacher encouraged new mediators to be themselves, be confident in

who they are, and be humorous to better engage the children. One of the most senior teachers in BCP advised teachers to start implementing the Programme as soon as they start without waiting to complete their training, as the quicker they start the more comfortable they'll be with it. She shared that sometimes we think children will obviously know things, such as the difference between a square and a triangle, but a lot of the time they don't. New teachers should also start testing out BCP in small groups even if they don't finish all the steps in one less as most lessons, at least at her school, take two 45 minute blocks to complete in their entirety. It's helpful to start with Steps 1 and 2 just to develop greater comfortability with the content as a teacher undergoing training. On a more specific note, the senior educator shared that teachers can make up their own transfer activities rather than doing the worksheets provided in the manual. For example, by cutting out things from magazines rather than drawing 100 squares and choosing tasks more suited to their own children.

IV. Other Comments

At the tail-end of each interview, educators shared major takeaways and reflections on the Basic Concepts Programme. One shared that BCP has impacted her students a lot more than other Programmes in its hands-on and mediative process that emphasizes a deepened understanding of concepts rather than a teacher giving the class directives. Kids no longer feel like they're going to be wrong when they offer answers, but are more willing to participate and try, impacts that she feels have been fostered by BCP. Educators who didn't work within BCP, but evaluated its impact on remedial students, claimed that the Programme was hugely beneficial and weren't sure they had even seen all of the benefits it provided. All of their students involved in BCP had improved, with greater growth in mathematics than language. These teachers noted that BCP is more of a conceptual curriculum than a literacy one in their view. Two of the teachers noted that the Programme, and specifically the kits required to implement it, can be quite costly. Overall, teachers were very enthusiastic about BCP and the benefits it has provided to their classrooms.

Conclusion

Researcher Reflections:

Willow Herz

As an American Studies major with a minor in Education, my goal in my initial pairing with Basic Concepts was to expand my Americentric view of education and learn more about classroom dynamics in South Africa. Through my research, I am truly grateful to have opportunities to speak interpersonally with primary school educators and have very intimate insight into how BCP is implemented with their students. I myself aspire to be a kindergarten (Grade R here!) teacher, so I was in awe during every interview about the work these teachers do to overcome systemic legacies in the country and help their students. Working through BCF specifically allowed me to see how helpful and encouraging the programme is for children.

I would like to extend special thank-yous to Aimee Chiat and Michele Lothian, who invited us graciously into their spaces and allowed us to observe their work. To Julie-Anne Lothian, thank you for being our guide and overseeing each step of the research. And last (but ABSOLUTELY not least), I am especially grateful to Dr. Louis Benjamin for being a force of unwavering support throughout the project. Without his dedication to BCF, BCP, and our research, this report would not be what it is. I had a downright lekker time!

Samiya Rana

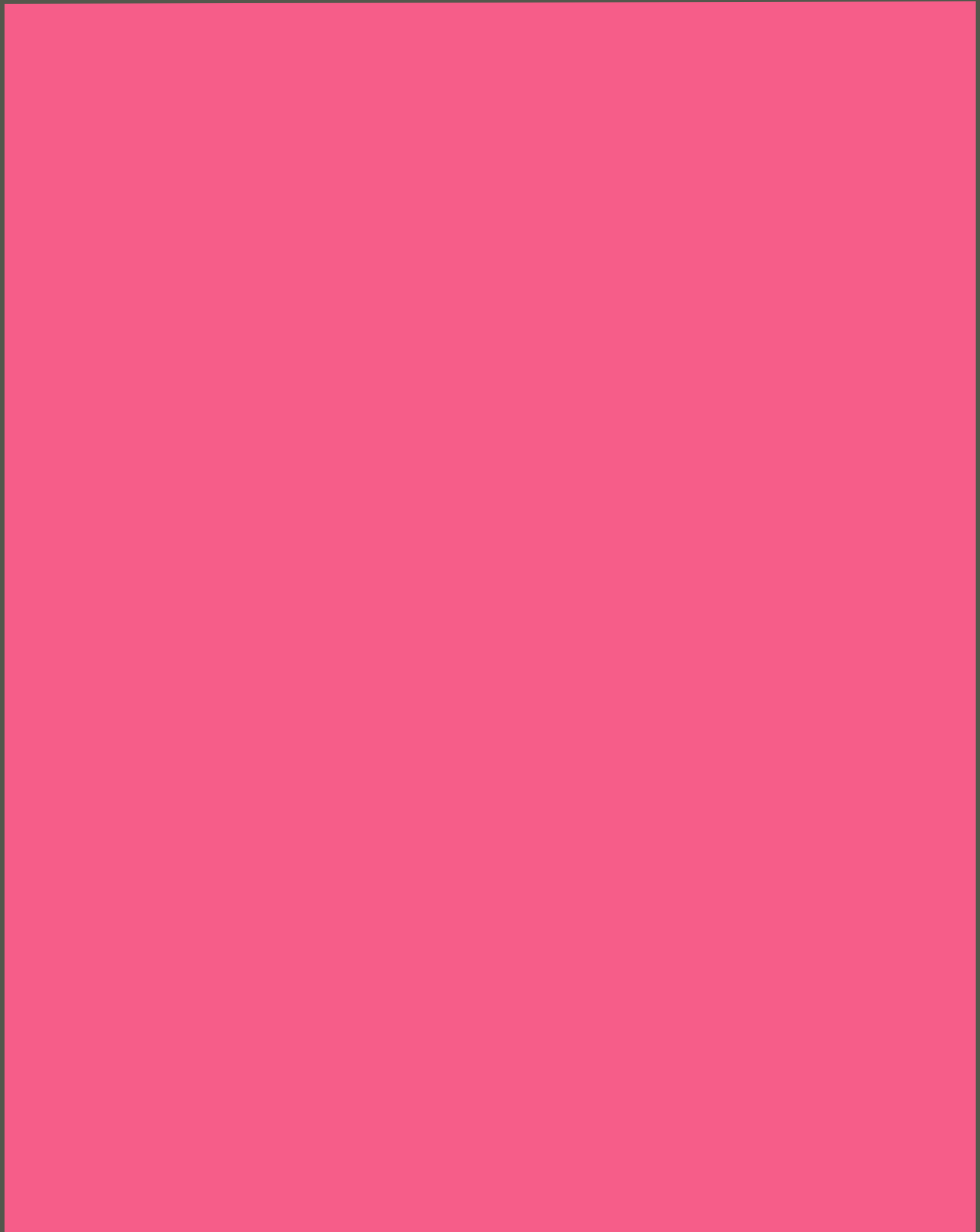
Working with Basic Concepts was an incredibly meaningful experience that broadened my understanding of child development, racial injustice, and educational barriers as they operate across different districts. I am a History major primarily studying race and colonial history with a minor in African studies and a focus on South Africa. I hope to one day work on efforts towards juvenile justice, decriminalization, and youth empowerment, and BCP provided me with the perfect opportunity to observe and learn from educators in South Africa. I was thrilled to find that BCP fosters not only structured thinking and active questioning but also the development of self-confidence and advocacy skills in students.

Researcher Reflections:

Samiya Rana Cont.

I feel inspired by the approach at the core of the Programme: One that doesn't demand children to sit and listen to ideas from adults but instead to explore and understand the world around them using their own creative minds. What would our education system look like if we saw children not as empty vessels for knowledge but as active participants in a mutual creation of understanding? How might classrooms change if we centered the voices of children themselves rather than only their educators, guiding them to develop internal tools of discovery? BCP models child empowerment through a thorough, comprehensive approach grounded in child psychology. I am truly grateful to have interacted not only with the Programme, but the passionate, loving educators who bring it to life.

I would like to thank Dr. Louis Benjamin for introducing us to this incredible work, inviting us to his training sessions, and providing continued guidance and encouragement. I am very grateful to Aimee Chiat for welcoming us into her classroom - her patience, compassion, and love for teaching has deeply inspired my own approach to children. Michele Lothian was also an incredible support and loving guide, helping us to not only conduct many interviews but also sharing her vast knowledge of BCP. All of the teachers interviewed were most gracious with their time and honest and thorough in their answers. Finally, to Julie-Anne, thank you for working to provide us with this opportunity and consistently giving your time and energy to help us see it through. You play such an important role in helping students develop their capabilities and confidence in the realm of public service, and I know I'll take the skills I learned from this project into the future.



Created through partnership between Basic Concepts
Foundation & Stanford in Cape Town