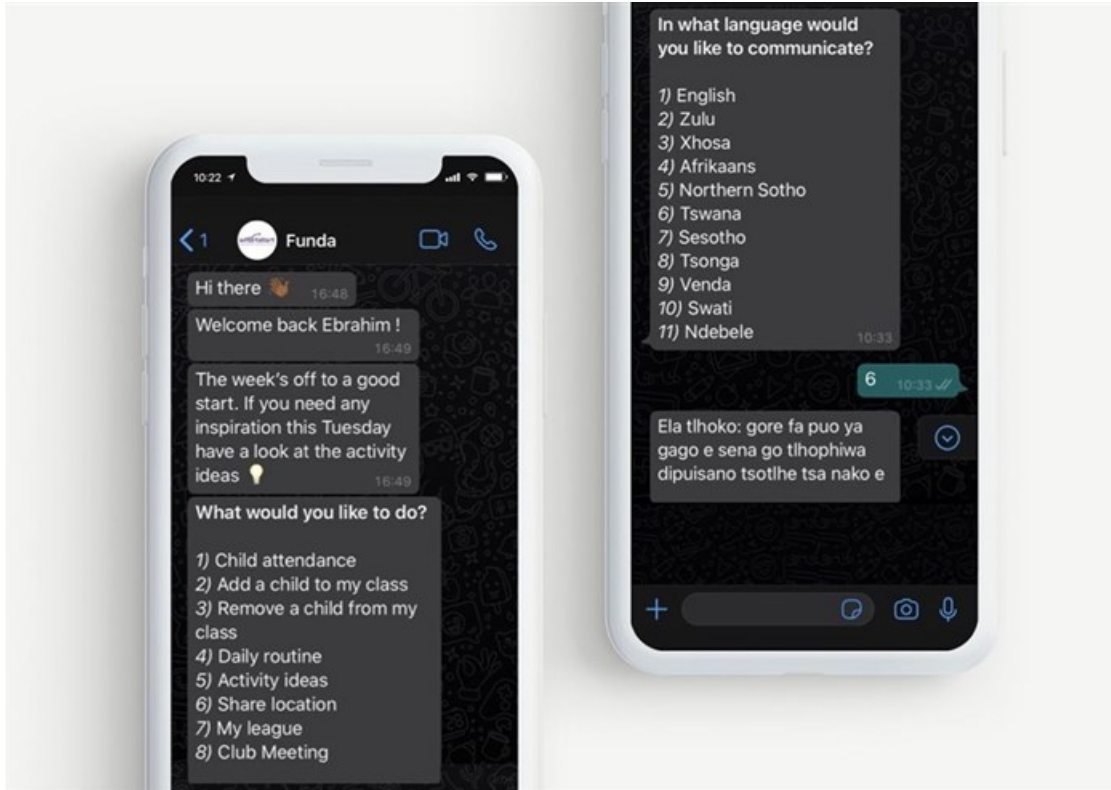


Giving children a SmartStart with chatbots

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A multilingual bot steps up to bridge the gap and secures a Smarties Award in the process.



Early education is so vital, yet it's sadly under-resourced in South Africa. There are one million children aged 3–5 years who don't have access to early learning programmes, which are crucial for mental stimulation and growth. SmartStart, an early learning social franchise in SA, is on a mission to give every child the power to succeed – a mammoth task that saw them reaching out to Helm (previously Praekelt Consulting) to help them make a difference.

Helm is synonymous with turning complex human realities such as this one, into simple experiences. The team of engineers and experience designers assessed the problem and turned to automation to create a smart, simple solution that helps teachers every single day. The solution saw Helm and SmartStart bag a silver Smarties Award in 2021, which was acknowledged at the ceremony in April 2022.

Says Ebrahim Vally, chief product officer at Helm: "We are humbled to be acknowledged by our peers for the work we did with SmartStart, especially because it is work that will make an impact in early learning development – a bot with a feel-good purpose."

The WhatsApp bot has now become an important tool for the early learning practitioners, with education resources being housed in a familiar and comfortable space – their own mobile phones. The chatbot is user-friendly, accessible to all, and affordable without taking up too much space. And when the team at Helm say user-friendly, they mean all 11 official languages user-friendly.

"Too often in South Africa, we think, advertise and write in English, which is a second language for most of our population. With a SmartStarter community that stretches throughout the country, we felt it was an absolute must to build a bot that speaks all 11 official languages," adds Vally.



Ebrahim Vally, chief product officer at Helm

Nomsa Muthaphuli, chief operations officer at SmartStart, says life has become easier for its under-resourced early learning practitioners. “We underestimate how difficult it can be for our early learning practitioners when they’re at full capacity. The technology we have developed here automates a lot of the admin, allowing the SmartStarters to focus on the futures they’re so very passionate about.”

They are now able to check attendance, share pics, look at lessons, and plan activities – all on their very own smartphones. The objective was – and remains – to help as many SmartStarters as possible, and in so doing, as many children as possible.

Did it work? The numbers don’t lie:

- 4,234 unique users/practitioners with a retention rate of 71%
- 1,54m automated interactions to assist practitioners
- 103k children reached by SmartStart
- And don’t forget, 11 official South African languages.

“Ultimately,” concludes Vally, “we want to help SmartStart reach their target of one million children, and this solution is certainly going to help get us there.”

Helm believes that simplicity can change the face of an experience. And there is no experience more important than the education of South Africa’s youth.

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