



OPPORTUNITY

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Make sure every child is ready to read by the time they go to school

The power of engaging around stories: Evidence from the BiblioneF and Western Cape Education Department Book Project.

South Africa's foundation phase reading is in crisis. As evidenced by studies such as the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 78% of Grade 4 students cannot read for meaning in any language. Several South African NGOs are trying to address this fracture in our education system.

*In 2016, book donation organisation BiblioneF - with the support of the DG Murray Trust (DGMT), the South African Library and Information Trust (SALI) and the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) - initiated a 21-month pilot project with foundation phase teachers at 10 primary schools in the Beaufort West district in the Western Cape.¹ The main aim of the project was to determine the impact book donations would have on teachers and children, **when coupled with training**. This learning brief shares what was learnt through the mixed impact study conducted as part of the project.*

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Childhood literacy specialist, Marlene Rousseau, was appointed to lead the project and conduct a mixed impact study (MIS) on her findings. She conducted six workshops and supported teachers in classrooms. Six days were spent at each of the 10 schools in the project. The MIS model, which allows different types of data to be collected and analysed, was used to provide specific and some in-depth knowledge. The baseline was established in April 2016 and, in August 2017, a second and final round of data was collected and analysed.

According to Rousseau, the effects of poverty and associated socio-economic factors, such as malnutrition and foetal alcohol syndrome, is acute in the school communities included in the study. She also points out that teachers in rural areas receive very little ongoing teacher development. Within this context the baseline study showed that for children participating in the study, reading was not about thinking, talking and interpreting texts. Imaginations were rarely engaged, children's ideas were not sought out or extended and texts were seldom linked to the readers' ideas and life experiences. There was also little attention given to cultivating complex and creative cognitive thinking.

In addition, the study revealed that many foundation phase teachers assume that young children who can read a sentence correctly, understand the text. Yet intermediate phase teachers regularly report that whilst many children **cannot** read, those who **can** tend not to understand what they have read. As Rousseau argues, unless addressed, this flawed belief and associated methods and practices of teaching will have grave political and economic consequences.

Initial visits to the schools revealed:

- › A worrying lack of reading material in most classrooms, such as complete sets of readers, picture books, reference books and bookshelves.
- › Teachers had little understanding of how to teach children to engage with text so that they can learn to read with understanding.
- › Consequently, children spent most of their instructional time learning low-order thinking skills, such as letter-sound relationships and word recognition.
- › Girls outperform boys in classroom and external high-stake tests.
- › Boys tend to be reluctant readers.

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Beaufort West was selected as rural areas tend to receive minimal teacher training.

Thus, the project's four main objectives were:

- › To promote rich classroom dialogue, writing and reading.
- › To promote reading to learn.
- › To increase boys' motivation for reading and writing.
- › To make connections between the lives and socio-cultural practices of the children and those of the books' characters, storyline and values.²

After the study, Rousseau noted the most significant changes in the classrooms to be:

- › A deepening of teachers' pedagogic practices, specifically in learning to use new techniques and approaches related to storytelling, writing and reading.
- › Teachers using stories as a centre point in lesson planning.
- › Children's voices are heard more in classrooms.
- › High order cognition is foregrounded when children and teachers talk and write about books.
- › Teachers focus on what children do before and after reading, so as to deepen and extend children's comprehension.
- › Children have become artists and writers.
- › The project resulted in a significant broadening of teachers' and children's communicative interests and practices.



“Talking well about books is a high-level activity in itself. But talking well about books is also the best rehearsal there is to talking about other things. So, in helping children to talk about their reading, we help them to articulate about the rest of their lives.”

Aidan Chambers, *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*,
Thimble Press, 1993: 9

PROJECT DETAILS: A ONE-OF-A-KIND PROJECT

This project was unique in that no beneficiary of Biblionef had previously received as many books or professional guidance on how to work with the books. The distribution of the books was staggered - every time that training occurred, a new pack was delivered.

Each teacher received:

- › A pack of *Star Story* readers (simple books featuring short sentences, big type and picture clues to help children read on their own);
- › 40 high-quality picture books;
- › A story anthology; and
- › A *Big Book* (an oversized book ideal for group reading).

The majority of the 10 schools that took part in the project were under-resourced, with between 40-48 children in a class. There were three distinct levels of focus and participation:

LEVEL 1: All 10 schools received children's picture books and all Grade 1-3 teachers participated in the quarterly workshops.

LEVEL 2: Rousseau visited 8 of the 10 schools each school term, and each for a day, to support the implementation of workshop content (pedagogic concepts and practices) in classrooms.³

LEVEL 3: A further selection of schools was made, allowing for a more detailed tracking of how teachers and children were using Biblionef books. They were known as the focus schools.

Three focus schools were selected for the study:

- › **SCHOOL A:** a remote rural school where Afrikaans was the children's home language as well as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT).
- › **SCHOOL B:** a large town school with predominantly isiXhosa-speaking children and a small percentage of children (up to 7%) speaking Afrikaans as a home language. The LOLT was isiXhosa.
- › **SCHOOL C:** a large town school that integrates children with disabilities e.g. wheelchair-bound children and those with Down's Syndrome. While Afrikaans is the dominant home language of the children (and also the LOLT), up to 5% speak isiXhosa at home.

At each focus school, a teachers' focus group and one or two children's focus groups were formed.

² Dyson, A. (2003). Welcome to the Jam, Harvard Education Review: ISBN: 0178055 Luke, A.& Freebody, P. (1999), Further Notes on the Four Resources Model, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/a916/0ce3d5e75744de3d0ddacaf6861fe928b9e>

³ Excluded were two ex-model C schools, whose systemic reading test results were well above the no-fee paying schools.

Classroom observations:

The children did not think or speak about the texts they read. When Rousseau asked them to think aloud about why we read books, and why writers write stories for children, the standard response was: "To teach us". She says most children did not think they were entitled to say a story was boring. Doing this was regarded as being 'naughty'.

Children asking questions, as well as making comparisons, inferences, generalisations and probing values implicit in stories was not evident, nor did they think about the social uses of different text types (e.g. adverts, poems, songs, maps, invitations, stories, etc.).

The above findings laid bare an urgent need to expand the reading instructional practices in most schools, so as to meet the project's key goals of reading for pleasure and reading to learn.

Learning Communities

The project followed a social approach to learning, where children collaborate through thinking aloud, reading and generating text.

Interview questions to prompt discussion:

Each child was asked to bring a favourite book to the session.

- › What book did you bring to show me today? Show me a page you like. What's happening here? Who's that? What is s/he doing?
- › Talk to me about this story (pause). Can you tell me what you enjoyed?
- › Does this book make you think of another book you have read? Perhaps a character in this book reminds you of another character, or someone you know?
- › Do you sometimes take a book home to read?
- › Show me the picture you drew. Tell me about your drawing. What did you write about your picture?

Post-reading:

Post-reading activities were at the core of the project.

They included:

- › Exploring children's responses to books.
- › Developing a range of children's higher order cognitive skills.
- › Encouraging children to think and express ideas through:
 - ›› *Focused talk;*
 - ›› *Drawing;*
 - ›› *Emergent, shared and independent writing;*
 - ›› *And shared reading, reading in social groups and independent reading.*

This new family of approaches was used consistently in workshops and in class visits. Ten of the 12 focus group teachers began using some or many of them. The evidence was on classroom walls, on chalkboards, in children's exercise books and teachers' weekly plans.



Grade 1 children doing post-story activities linked to the stories they've engaged with in the classroom.

Results

As in 2016, 36 focus group children each brought a favourite picture book to the 2017 session, and were invited to talk, draw and write about their books. Questions used to prompt children’s discussion are noted above. There was a marked improvement in children’s capacity to talk about books, across all three grades, in comparison with the silences and halting talk of 2016.

These findings provided evidence that these children had some experience of thinking about and discussing the content of books. There was also a marked improvement in their writing, specifically in writing extended texts.

Biblionef’s mission is to make books available for children (ages three to 18) in all official languages, for reading for pleasure and for education. In this way, it aims to lay the foundation for children to make good decisions through critical thinking, and live balanced and productive lives.

Over a 19-year period, Biblionef has donated 1 654 000 books to children.

How access to books brought a new dimension to classroom life:

SCHOOLS IN APRIL 2016



SCHOOLS IN APRIL 2017

STORYTELLING

- › No teacher was aware of CAPS’ endorsement of the role of stories in early childhood literacy, namely: “*Stories are at the heart of a balanced reading programme.*”
- › Only one of the 12 teachers in the two focus group schools regularly told or read stories in class.
- › CAPS requirements were flagged in all workshops, school visits and lessons taught.
- › Whilst CAPS set the minimum teaching and learning requisites, teachers worked with raised expectations, e.g. story complexity and associated talk and writing tasks.
- › Eleven of the 12 teachers in the two focus group schools started reading or telling the stories used in workshops, in class.

READING RESOURCES IN CLASSROOMS

- › No picture storybooks.
- › No non-fiction picture books e.g. dictionaries, first word books, nursery rhymes or information books, etc.
- › Each classroom received a pack of *Star Story* readers, 40 picture books, an anthology and a *Big Book*.

BOYS’ INTERESTS AND READING PREFERENCES

- › No awareness or consideration of boys’ preferred reading interests, e.g. action and non-fiction.
- › Increased attention to boys’ interests and preferences, e.g. book choice and choice of writing tasks.

NON-FICTION (NF)

- › South African reading series seldom introduce non-fiction to children. This absence was evident in the sets of class readers in the focus schools: *Boet en Saartie* and *Doen en Leer* contain no non-fiction. *Storieboom* (Oxford Reading Tree) includes a rare non-fiction text.
- › An entire workshop was dedicated to NF.
- › Here we created NF texts linked to stories. Teachers unanimously rated this workshop the highest of all workshops with regard to teacher learning and the provision of texts that children could read.
- › Teachers received a range of children’s NF texts, which they worked with in the workshop, and then used in classrooms.
- › NF texts introduced: graphs, mindmaps, street maps, story maps, information texts, biographies, recipes, instructions and descriptive texts were visible on walls, on chalk-boards and in children’s written work.

Lessons Learnt

Distilling New Learning



“Too often we underestimate children. My first challenge to teachers is to encourage them to aim high and expect a lot more from the children they teach. We discuss which instructional practices and techniques capture children’s enthusiasm and fire-up their interest and motivation and focus on pedagogies where children and teachers are positioned as capable learners and professionals.”

Marlene Rousseau

Rousseau, who has been a literacy specialist for 16 years, says the key to the success of the project was that it was based on the pedagogies of belonging and possibility, which embrace the following theoretical concepts:

- › The notion of belonging: within physical classroom spaces, as well as in how children and teachers relate to one another - both in and outside of classrooms.
- › An open classroom discourse: diverse ideas, subjectivities and experiences are welcomed.
- › What Comber (2015) calls the recognition factor: teachers who are interested in what children can do and do, and where children see that this counts (They are quick to do so!).⁴
- › Explicit interest in learning, “where there is a sense of well-being and a readiness to participate in the classroom as a collective learning community.” (Comber 2015: 42)
- › An assets model where the cultural and linguistic resources of children, their families and those of teachers are important resources for learning and teaching. Principles of social justice underpin this work, challenging South Africa’s historical and ongoing production of inequality in education.



A responsive curriculum evolved.

When the Grade 3s brought toys to school, the planned reading lesson changed. The class chose four toys, named them, created a rough plan (using a mindmap) and then composed a five-paragraph adventure story about the four characters.

⁴ Comber, B. (2014). Critical Literacy and Social Justice. *Journal of adolescent & adult literacy*, (48) 5: 358-363.

Pedagogic practices to support reading:

- › Tell and read children fabulous stories.
- › Recognise and support emergent literacies.
- › Foreground the key role of talk when learning.
- › Advocate writing into reading: use the ‘mighty twins’, shared writing and shared reading. Cultivate high order cognition in reading lessons, including critical literacy.
- › Integrate thinking, reading, writing and word study so that learning to read and write becomes one flowing, harmonious movement.
- › From Grade 1, consistently focus on higher order cognition.
- › Critically and creatively explore stories children read and listen to e.g. children and teachers can discuss:
 - › **Gender roles:** *Nozibele and the Three Hairs*.
 - › **Race and power:** *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.
 - › **Family dynamics:** *Damien* (seeing issues through a child’s eyes).
 - › **Agency and power:** *Nyangara the Python*, a story where children are positioned as active agents.
 - › **Complex societal concepts:** *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (for example, cultural and language practices, power, discrimination, outcasts (monsters), aggression, abuse, anger, justice and injustice).

Rousseau stresses that books of high quality that capture children’s imaginations and offer beginner readers rousing narratives and illustrations - whether these be about everyday life, e.g. *The Best Meal Ever* or wonderfully humorous stories e.g. *My Sussie is ‘n Alien* - are crucial if teachers, parents and after-school organisations are to engage with books in similar ways to those outlined in the MIS. Often children’s creativity surprises us. And, as we see in the box on the right, teachers’ creativity is also set free.

This learning brief is a condensed version of the MIS written by **Marlene Rousseau**. The brief was edited by **Daniella Horwitz**.

SCAFFOLD LEARNING

From Grade 1, children learn to use paragraphs when writing, and from Grade 2, they learn to plan their writing. Post-reading activities may include creating non-fiction texts, e.g.

Story:
The Girl and the Crocodile

Shared Writing:
A non-fiction text

PLAN for WRITING

Use a draft title:
A crocodile

Paragraph 1:
Describe a croc’s head.

Paragraph 2:
Describe the croc’s body, its skin, texture, colour, etc.

Paragraph 3:
Where do crocs live? What do crocs eat? Anything else you know?

Stay Away from Crocodiles

Today we want to describe a crocodile. Crocs have large eyes on top of their heads so that when they are in the water they see well. Crocs have long, big mouths with very sharp teeth.

Crocs have thick scaly skin covering all their body. They have four short legs and long, strong tails. Crocodiles can grow as long as 5 metres!

Crocs live in rivers during the day and walk on land at night. Crocs eat anything that comes close to their mouths. They enjoy eating meat; they are carnivores.

Written by Grade 2 and 3 teachers in a workshop



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