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## Reading revolution

SHARON DELL Apr 03 2011 16:13

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There are many ways to learn, but in schools and universities the main means are through texts, in other words, reading. But what happens if you reach your penultimate year at high school and you still can't read at required levels, or understand what you read?

For Phindi (not her real name), a grade 11 learner at a former model C school in Pietermaritzburg, who was pushed through the school system courtesy of the department of education's policy of not allowing a learner to fail more than once in every phase, it meant high marks for group work, orals and practicals, but consistently poor examination marks owing to her inability to write intelligibly or to make proper sense of written text.

Phindi's problem is by no means unique. According to KwaZulu-Natal educationist Mike Hart, the literacy levels of the majority of learners in all grades are dangerously low, with most learners, even those at university, being four to six years below their age-appropriate reading level. Furthermore, the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which looked at 40 countries around the world, found that 75% of South African learners were unable to reach the lowest international benchmarks for reading and only 2% could reach the highest.

Working in KwaZulu-Natal, Hart co-ordinates Reading to Learn, a literacy programme developed in Australia by Dr David Rose, an honorary associate of the University of Sydney. Originally targeted at aboriginal children, the programme claims to accelerate learning at twice to more than four times expected rates among learners of all levels, abilities and backgrounds. It is being widely applied in Australia, but has also been introduced in Indonesia, Kenya, Uganda, Afghanistan, Sweden and parts of Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The Reading to Learn methodology works at any level of the school system, from foundation to tertiary level and across the curriculum. It builds a thorough understanding of the reading process and the structure and language patterns of different languages. According to Rose, the programme recognises that language is complex and stratified, with the lowest-level components, letters and sounds, only being intelligible in the context of higher-level components -- words, sentences and, finally, the text. This is in contrast to prevailing practices in most schools, which focus on the word level and decoding skills without focusing on language patterns in the context of whole texts -- a major reason why South African students have such poor comprehension levels, Hart says.

The challenges facing Phindi and many other high school pupils have their origins in a widespread lack of parent-child reading, he says. They are compounded by the school environment, which assumes existing "orientations to meaning" through text.

According to research, children of literate, middle-class families receive about 1 000 hours of parent-child reading before they even start school, says Hart. The orientation to meaning that this produces is simply assumed by the school system, to the detriment of children from homes where books are not available and communication is largely oral.

This disadvantage persists through all levels of the school system. "Most school systems only provide explicit teaching of reading in the first three years of primary school, by the end of which period learners are expected to be independent readers who are capable on their own of learning from reading and engaging with the curriculum content," Hart says. "After that, there is no provision in the curriculum for the explicit teaching of reading.

"The problem is that a lot of children never become independent readers and, as they move through the system, the gap widens between the best and poorest learners."

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For Rose, the results of the Reading to Learn programme prove that narrowing this gap is possible at any level of the school system.

After implementing the programme in 90 schools in New South Wales over a period of two to three terms, the gap between the bottom and top groups of students was almost halved. Rose's argument, as reflected in a 2010 paper, "Beating educational inequality with an integrated teaching pedagogy", is that "there is no need to accept the grossly unequal outcomes that have plagued education systems for so long and disadvantaged so many children, particularly from indigenous backgrounds."

But the system also works for successful learners. Pietermaritzburg teacher Debbie Avery said: "I presumed in the beginning that it was largely remedial, but even the top learners loved it and benefited from it."

She introduced the programme to her grade eight English classes in 2010. Now retired, but still working part-time to implement the programme, Avery describes her final year of teaching according to Reading to Learn as the "happiest" of her career.

Avery said schools and textbooks tended to presume too much regarding the competence of both first- and second-language learners. "Children today speak SMS language, they don't have the foundation of grammar that we were given, yet we expect more from them because of the current emphasis on content," she said. "I believe that every teacher is a language teacher and should be able to teach language in the context of their subject."

Among the benefits of the programme she lists higher levels of engagement, confidence and enthusiasm, as well as improved ability from all learners. "I also found it built a strong rapport between me and the children in the classroom, and between the children themselves." For Avery, the programme's emphasis on reading and writing as part of the same process made immediate sense.

"Teachers tend to squeeze half an hour of writing into their classes if they can. Most teachers argue that writing helps children to express themselves. But that's only one kind of writing and learners need to be able to produce a range of types of writing across the curriculum."

At foundation level, the results are also positive. Nana Mthlale, a grade one teacher at Panorama Primary School, said the programme enabled her to stay one step ahead of the state curriculum, built confidence among her learners and fostered an intense engagement from them in the process. Most importantly, she said, Reading to Learn cultivated a love of reading from an early age.

"For show and tell, one of my girl learners brought her favourite book to school ... That was a proud moment for me. With this programme, everyone becomes a reader."

The programme also helped struggling high school learner Phindi. A research paper co-authored by Hart and Phindi's teacher, Jean Matier Moore, showed that, after six months of twice-weekly half-hour sessions with Moore, who implemented some of the fundamental strategies of Reading to Learn on a one-to-one basis, Phindi's grade position for exams rose from 203 out of 213 learners to 126 out of 199. Improvements were also noted across the curriculum in her ability to decode words and understand the phonetic system in her writing and general comprehension levels.

In South African schools, the Reading to Learn programme is slowly gaining a foothold. In KwaZulu-Natal, the organisation is introducing the methodology to the foundation-phase subject advisers and intermediate-phase English subject advisers it trains on behalf of the provincial department of education. The organisation is now seeking funding to train subject advisers and teachers across the curriculum and across selected pilot schools.

**For more information, contact Mike Hart at hartm@lantic.net**

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