



# CREATING A NATION OF **READERS**

**Supporting South Africa's children to become skilled and enthusiastic readers in the Foundation Phase:**

**A survey of the evidence, with particular reference to Shine Literacy's programmes**

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**Shine**  
LITERACY





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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy skills equip children to reach their fullest academic and personal potential. Learning to read unlocks all kinds of new learning and helps children to make sense of life, to develop a sense of identity and to relate better to others.<sup>1</sup> In terms of personal rewards, young readers are building a life-long habit that will enable them to relax, discover and be entertained. In short, reading is at once enjoyment and empowerment.

**'Literacy empowers children, excites their imaginations and widens their worlds.'**

*Hofkins and Northen  
2009*

Early literacy skills are directly linked to academic success.<sup>2</sup> When children become good readers and writers, their confidence and self-esteem grow, along with their appetite for reading and learning, creating a virtuous circle. On the other hand, children who do not have sound literacy skills are more likely to experience frustration both as readers and learners, and to struggle to fulfil their potential in school.<sup>3</sup> As learning deficits accumulate, the gap between what a child should know and what they do know, widens,<sup>4</sup> and the resources required to close the gap multiply.<sup>5</sup>

***'For an education system to deliver academic results and produce learners who can maintain a livelihood in the knowledge economy of the 21st century, it needs to produce learners who are fully literate. Academic performance depends on literacy development.'***<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, children who read more learn more,<sup>7</sup> and children who learn more will earn more. In their survey of adult skills, the OECD found that people with poor literacy were more than twice as likely to be unemployed. The average wage of those who 'can make complex inferences and evaluate subtle truth claims or arguments in written texts is more than 60 per cent higher than for workers who can, at best, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information.'<sup>8</sup> Literacy can therefore act as a powerful lever of social justice,<sup>9</sup> upsetting entrenched patterns of under-achievement and disadvantage and helping children to overcome risk and adversity.

***'Economics research has established that schooling is an investment that forms human capital - that is, knowledge, skill, and problem-solving ability that have enduring value. While a country receives a good return on investment in education at all levels from nursery school and kindergarten through college, the research reveals that the returns are highest from the early years of schooling when children are first learning to read.'***<sup>10</sup>

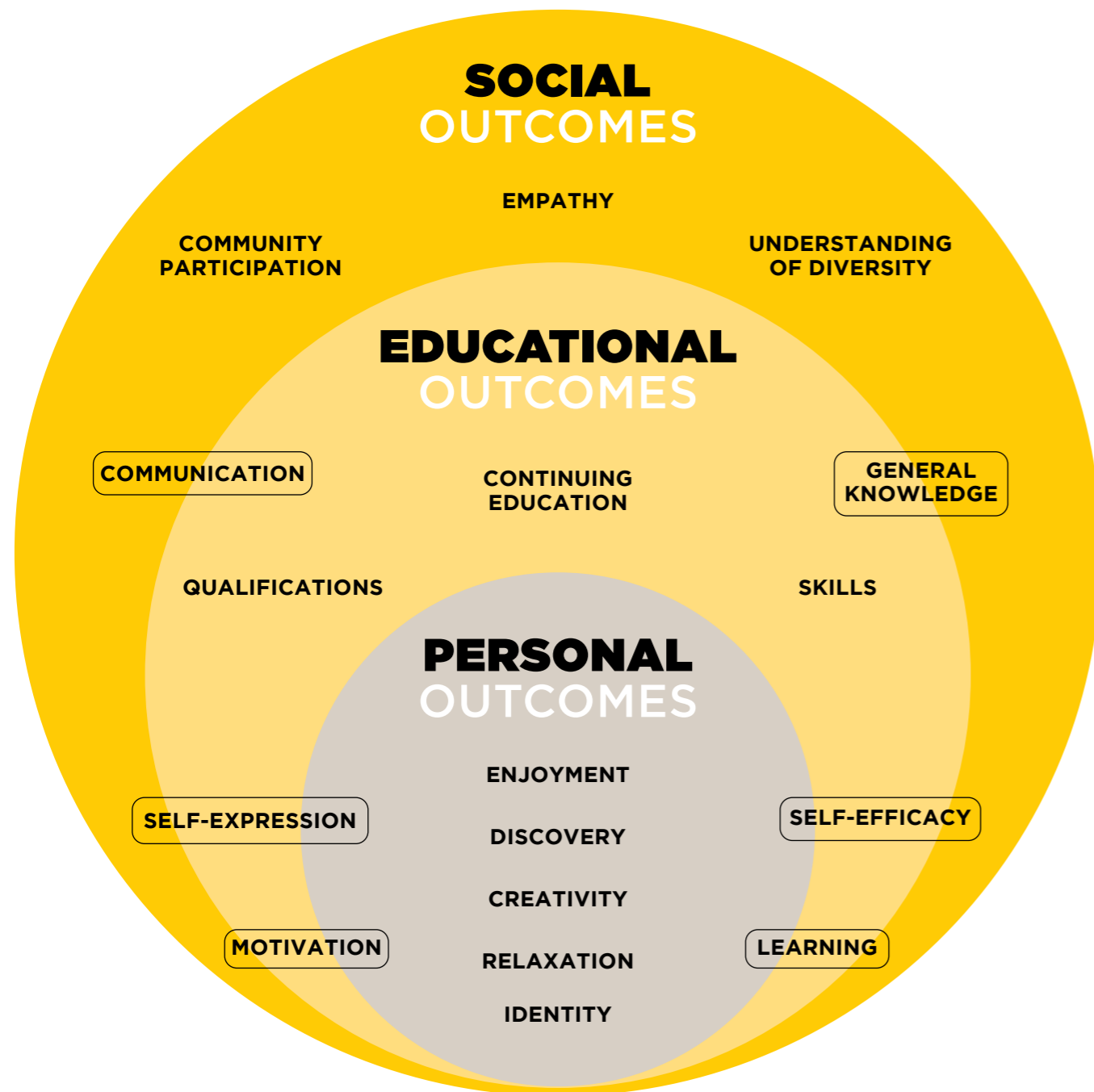
**Literacy is 'the ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts to participate in society, achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential.'**

*Organisation for Economic  
Development (OECD 2013)*

The benefits for the individual and society go well beyond income, and include health and social participation:

*'In all countries, individuals with lower proficiency in literacy are more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and not to participate in associative or volunteer activities. In most countries, they are also less likely to trust others.'*<sup>11</sup>

**READING: Key outcomes for children**<sup>12</sup>



**'The horizons that functional literacy opens is testament to the importance of this first foundation in the school career.'**

*Spaull 2016*

**South Africa's literacy crisis**

In South Africa, less than half of all children learn to read for meaning in any language by the end of Grade Four.<sup>13</sup> The picture is equally bleak at secondary level. A recent study found that 29 per cent of 13 year-olds in South Africa are functionally illiterate, rising to 58 per cent of 13 year-olds in rural areas.<sup>14</sup> Not only do South Africa's literacy levels remain disturbingly low, but the evidence also suggests that virtually no progress has been made over the past ten years.<sup>15</sup>

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international evaluation of trends in reading literacy for children in Grade Four. The most recent PIRLS study was conducted in 2016 and found that South Africa was the lowest performing of 50 countries. The results indicate that South African children may be as much as six years behind children in the top performing countries in terms of reading literacy levels.<sup>16</sup>

PIRLS 2016 also found that 78 per cent of South African children in Grade Four do not have the most basic level of reading skills, compared to 4 per cent internationally. These children did not reach the lowest benchmark and 'cannot read for meaning or retrieve basic information from the text to answer simplistic questions'.<sup>17</sup>

There were also substantial differences between provinces, with Eastern Cape and Limpopo scoring lowest. Children in remote areas, villages and townships performed worse than children in towns and cities.<sup>18</sup>

**Understanding the challenge**

The causes of low literacy levels are complex and vary between countries, communities and individuals. However, some important themes emerge from South African studies.

Many children start school without the foundations for literacy learning, including basic language skills, in place. These children effectively need remedial support from day one as teachers struggle to compensate for early learning deficits.<sup>19</sup> Early childhood development is still seriously under-resourced in South Africa. Most children do not attend any ECD programme in the years between birth and school,<sup>20</sup> and where they do, there is often only limited content relating to language and emergent literacy.



Poverty is known to be a strong determinant of educational outcomes, including in South Africa. Children from low-income homes performed significantly worse than children from more affluent backgrounds in PIRLS 2016.<sup>21</sup> However, comparisons with other developing countries suggest that poverty cannot be used to explain away low literacy levels.

*'For every level of socioeconomic status apart from the very top levels, primary school children in South Africa fare worse in reading and numeracy than equally poor children in SACMEQ countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Swaziland.'*<sup>22</sup>

While poverty is likely to impact on a child's capacity to develop and learn in many different ways, its effects are not inevitable. There is evidence that high quality schooling can redress at least some of the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage.<sup>23</sup>

## DOMINANT FEATURES OF PRIMARY CLASSROOMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

(from Hoadley 2012)

- Lack of opportunities to handle books.
- Limited teaching of reading and writing.
- Children mainly read isolated words rather than extended texts.
- Focus on decoding rather than comprehension.
- Little or no elaboration on learner responses.
- Learning largely communalised rather than individualised.
- Little formal teaching of vocabulary, spelling and phonics.
- Lack of (good) print material in classrooms.
- Language challenges where the majority of learners learn in a language which is not their home language.

The fact that many South African children are taught in a second language is sometimes identified as a contributor to poor literacy results. However, analysis of PIRLS results from 2006 and 2011 shows that children who did the tests in their African home language (which was also their language of learning and teaching) performed worst of all.<sup>24</sup>

Formal schooling has the potential to act as an equaliser, compensating for the uneven opportunities that result from children's backgrounds and experiences in the early years; but in South Africa, schools are often struggling to fulfil this role. Many children from disadvantaged backgrounds experience 'schooling without learning', progressing through the grades without gaining age-appropriate knowledge and skills.<sup>25</sup>

Under-resourcing in the education system remains a serious issue. Children cannot learn to read without books and other appropriate texts, but South African classrooms often do not have enough storybooks and readers of an appropriate level to enable teachers to teach literacy effectively. PIRLS 2016 found that nearly two-thirds of schools reported no school library.<sup>26</sup> Large class sizes also undermine teachers' efforts to provide targeted learning and support.

Despite extensive evidence that early intervention is the most cost-effective way of improving educational outcomes,<sup>27</sup> the Department of Basic Education continues to focus on interventions in the later school years and to allocate inadequate resources to Foundation Phase classrooms.<sup>28</sup>

However, the challenge is not only, or even mainly, one of resources. It is also about understanding the mechanisms for literacy learning and implementing effective teaching and learning strategies, both inside and outside the classroom.

Common classroom practices in South African primary schools indicate that teachers often lack the basic knowledge and skills required to teach reading and writing successfully.<sup>29</sup> Many teachers default to teaching by rote, relying on communalised and oral methods (such as chorsing) for literacy learning.<sup>30</sup> This means that teaching is undifferentiated, with lessons targeted at the lowest ability level and limited individualisation of pace and level. Importantly, it also means that there are not nearly enough opportunities for children to engage in actual reading in Foundation Phase classrooms.<sup>31</sup>

Surveys of literacy lessons in the Foundation Phase indicate that too often the focus is on isolated skill development (such as letter-sound knowledge and decoding) rather than meaning-making.<sup>32</sup> Children are forced to engage with letters and words in isolation, rather than as part of extended texts that communicate a story or idea. Where children do read books, inadequate attention is paid to developing reading comprehension skills and strategies.<sup>33</sup> These teaching methods not only work against children's ability to construct meaning from what they read, they are also likely to drain much of the enjoyment from early literacy activities, diminishing children's motivation and engagement.

**'Based on what we now know, it is incorrect to suppose that there is a simple or single step which, if taken correctly, will immediately allow a child to read. Becoming a skilled reader is a journey that involves many steps.'**

*Commission on Reading  
1985*



Part of the issue is the lack of attention paid to literacy in the curricula of most teacher training courses. Another problem is that many teachers come from communities with strong oral traditions and are often not readers themselves.<sup>34</sup> Where teachers' experience of reading for enjoyment is limited they are less likely to recognise and model this important dimension of early literacy for children.

The causes of South Africa's literacy crisis signpost the solutions. Insofar as these causes are complex, the solutions are likely to be multi-pronged and require the collaborative efforts of government, schools, families and other agencies, including non-profit organisations.

## A note on multi-lingualism

South Africa has eleven official languages. While about two-thirds of South African children are taught in their home language for their first three years of schooling, with English taught as an additional language, from Grade Four about 90 per cent of children learn in English.<sup>35</sup>

It is well established that for socio-cultural as well as educational reasons it is important to have a strong home language foundation before learning a second language.<sup>36</sup> Some research suggests that first language skills are a good predictor of reading achievement in a second language.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, there is evidence that in South Africa, children taught in their home language in early grades perform better in English in later grades.<sup>38</sup> Studies have also shown that knowledge and skills gained in a first language, including phonological awareness and reading comprehension skills, can transfer to a second and subsequent languages.<sup>39</sup>

It should also be noted that much of the international research around English language learning has been conducted among children for whom English is the home language. Some caution is needed in extrapolating from this evidence-base, particularly in terms of levels and pace of learning. The lens of English monolingualism is not always helpful for understanding the literacy learning challenges of South African children whose home language is an African language, or for devising suitable teaching strategies. Nor is it appropriate to use language of deficit for these children's attainment in either their home or second language, using English first language learner norms.<sup>40</sup>

## Shine Literacy

Shine Literacy is a non-profit organisation that seeks to improve literacy outcomes for young children from disadvantaged communities in South Africa. Since its establishment in 2000, Shine Literacy has worked in partnership with teachers, volunteers and parents, to deliver evidence-based programmes that provide effective and sustained support to children as they learn to read and write.

**The Shine Literacy Hour** is a targeted literacy teaching programme, delivered in Shine Literacy's Centres and Chapters which are based in primary schools. Trained volunteers provide children in Grades Two and Three with extra support with their reading, writing and speaking. Each session is divided into four parts – shared reading, paired reading, have-a-go writing and games.



More recently, Shine Literacy have set up the Khanyisa programme, which aims to provide children in Grade Two with more opportunities to read and enjoy books. The programme is delivered by unemployed matriculants who are trained in the shared reading and paired reading methodologies, and work alongside Grade Two teachers.

Shine Literacy's methods and materials are based on their on-the-ground experience as well as the significant evidence-base around what works in supporting early language and literacy learning. This report discusses key themes from that evidence-base and makes links with Shine Literacy's methodologies. It starts by considering the fundamental importance of reading for enjoyment. It then looks at four types of literacy opportunities that all children need – shared reading, time to read, interaction and access to books. In Chapter 4, the evidence relating to four key skill areas is examined – language skills, reading comprehension, word recognition and writing. Finally, features of effective learning environments are discussed.





## 2. READING FOR ENJOYMENT

When children read for pleasure they benefit personally and academically. Enjoyment and motivation are closely linked. Children who enjoy reading, read more; children who read more become better readers; and better readers who can engage with more varied texts are more motivated to read for pleasure.<sup>41</sup>

This 'mastery motivation system'<sup>42</sup> is likely to be one of the keys to learning to read.<sup>43</sup> Intrinsic motivation makes sustained effort over time more probable,<sup>44</sup> and as becoming an accomplished reader takes many years, such perseverance is critical.<sup>45</sup>

*'Highly motivated students who see reading as a desirable activity will initiate and sustain their engagement in reading and thus become better readers.'*<sup>46</sup>

Reading for enjoyment can be understood as, 'Non goal-oriented transactions with texts as a way to spend time and for entertainment'.<sup>47</sup> These types of reading experiences are often absent in South African classrooms,<sup>48</sup> yet there is considerable evidence to support placing reading for enjoyment at the heart of teaching and learning strategies.<sup>49</sup>

PIRLS 2016 found that the reading literacy scores of South African children who reported enjoying reading were significantly higher than those of children who said they did not like reading.<sup>50</sup> This finding is repeated in earlier PIRLS studies and for other countries.<sup>51</sup> Studies warn that this gap must be addressed early on as the 'rich get richer effect' contributes to a widening disparity.

*'...a vicious cycle seemed evident. Children who did not develop good word-recognition skill in first grade began to dislike reading and read considerably less than good readers, both in and out of school. They thus lost the avenue to develop vocabulary, concepts, ideas, and so on that is fostered by wide reading. This in turn may have contributed to the steadily widening gulf between the good and poor readers in reading comprehension and written stories.'*<sup>52</sup>

The positive impacts of reading for enjoyment go beyond literacy. One study of 6000 children found that reading for pleasure had a positive impact not only on literacy skills such as spelling and vocabulary but also on maths attainment, and suggested that the mechanism for this was likely to be improved cognitive function.<sup>53</sup> The findings 'support other work suggesting that children's leisure reading is important for educational attainment and social mobility.'<sup>54</sup>

As reading for enjoyment is not about achieving a particular outcome, it is likely to be less stressful for children. During recreational reading children have greater individual agency and can experience reading not as something to learn or a 'school subject' but as an enjoyable self-initiated activity.

One review of the research on reading for pleasure identified a range of positive impacts beyond the classroom, including life-long pleasure in reading, general knowledge, community participation, a better understanding of other cultures and 'a greater insight into human nature and decision-making'.<sup>55</sup>

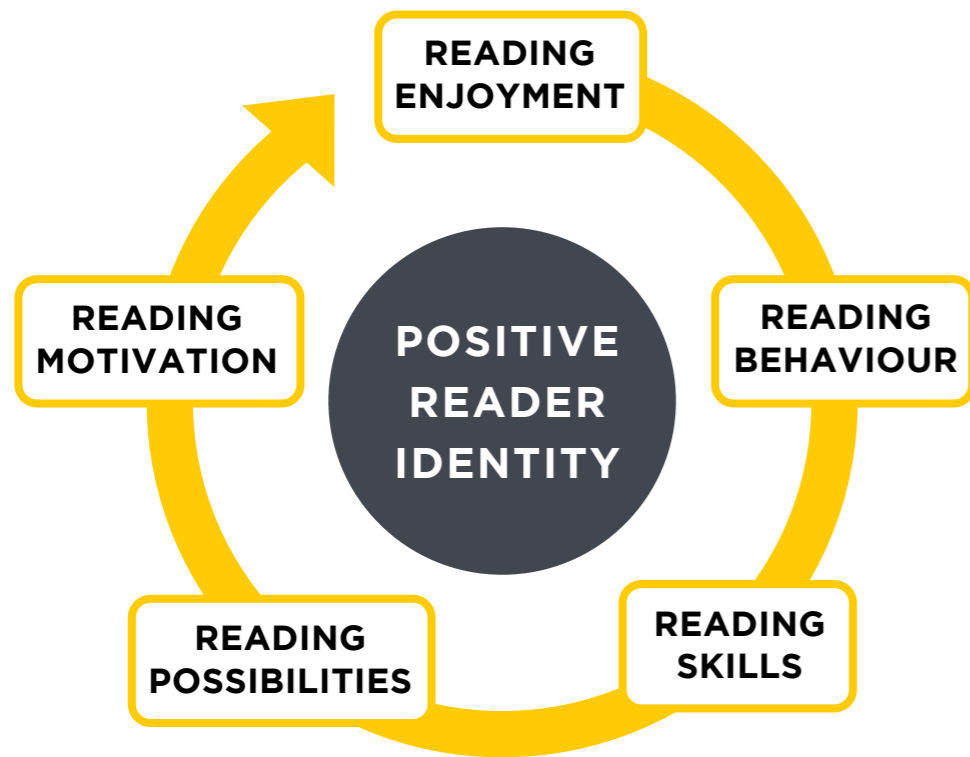
**'Increasing the proportion of children who read widely and with evident satisfaction ought to be as much a goal of reading instruction as increasing the number who are competent readers.'**

*Commission on Reading  
1985*



The principle that 'the will influences the skill'<sup>56</sup> is starkly illustrated by the OECD's finding that reading habits are more important for educational success than socio-economic background.<sup>57</sup> This is an optimistic finding, as while it is difficult to change a child's social circumstances, it is possible to influence their enjoyment of reading.

### The relationship between reading enjoyment, skill and motivation



A range of factors plays a part in reading for enjoyment, including relevant texts, choice, self-concept and a conducive environment. It is important that children have access to reading material that is of interest to them. Choice (around what to read and where to read) empowers children to shape their learning-to-read journey.<sup>58</sup> Choice and self-direction also contribute to a 'positive reader identity',<sup>59</sup> and to an emerging self-concept as a reader, which in turn help to build children's intrinsic motivation.

*'It appears that students who are allowed to choose their own reading materials are more motivated to read, expend more effort, and gain better understanding of the text.'*<sup>60</sup>

For some teachers, promoting reading for pleasure requires them to re-evaluate their own conceptualisation of reading, and to see it as more than just a conduit for curriculum content.<sup>61</sup> In particular, by modelling the different purposes of print (such as enjoyment, discovery, escapism and information-retrieval), teachers can inspire and motivate children.<sup>62</sup>

**'Clearly, instruction that provides students with decoding and comprehension skills and strategies is not sufficient. If students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential.'**

*Gambrell 2011*

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Reading for pleasure is at the heart of all Shine Literacy programmes. In training, volunteers learn about the importance of fostering a love of reading among children. They are encouraged to help children to see reading as an exciting process of making meaning, more than a process of mastering specific skills. In practice, this is achieved by volunteers facilitating lots of discussion and interaction around books and creating an informal and fun learning environment in which all children can experience success.

Khanyisa classrooms have a special reading corner, equipped by Shine Literacy with a mat and cushions and a supply of carefully chosen books. Children have the chance to use the corner with the volunteer, creating a more relaxed reading environment to their usual desk and chair.

Teachers at schools participating in the Khanyisa programme also attend a workshop on creating a culture of reading. The workshop offers practical ideas and strategies that teachers can use to increase children's enjoyment of the learning-to-read process and to encourage reading for pleasure.







### 3. CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

Reading aloud to children stimulates their interests in books and stories and supports important early literacy skills. When they listen to stories, children are introduced to new vocabulary and grammar, which builds their oral language skills. They also learn about the structure and elements of good narratives.

#### Shared reading

Reading aloud to children stimulates their interest in books and stories and supports important early literacy skills. When they listen to stories, children are introduced to new vocabulary and grammar<sup>63</sup>, which builds their oral language skills, and to the structure and elements of good narratives.<sup>64</sup>

*'These studies indicate that shared-reading interventions can have a significant, substantial, and positive impact both on young children's oral language skills and on young children's print knowledge.'*<sup>65</sup>

During shared reading, children can find out about things that are not part of their everyday world, see different perspectives and practise empathy. At the same time, they are able to engage with books above their own reading level, and to engage with language, concepts and information that would not otherwise be accessible.

*'Books have a tremendous influence on many areas of learning. They can introduce themes of friendship, diversity, and overcoming challenge, thus helping to develop character. They can expand children's knowledge of the world, other people, cultures and traditions, or they can introduce imaginary themes.'*<sup>66</sup>

Shared reading exposes children to a certain kind of abstract, decontextualised language that is not typically a part of oral conversations.<sup>67</sup> Children also encounter written language customs, narrative patterns and linguistic devices, such as the use of figurative language, which are important for reading comprehension and wider learning.<sup>68</sup> Some evidence suggests that the ability to understand written language may precede the mechanical skills of decoding print.<sup>69</sup>

*'Storytelling and reading expose children to a special form of language which is holistic, rich and complex. This allows them to tune into the rhythms and structures of language and broadens their conceptual worlds and their vocabulary to express themselves.'*<sup>70</sup>

Modelling is an important dimension of teaching, and when adults read storybooks to children, they can model how print works, skilful oral reading<sup>71</sup> and the simple enjoyment of books. They can also capitalise on learning moments, when new words and concepts arise.

**'The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.'**

*Commission on Reading 1985*



Discussion around the book is understood to facilitate some of the key outcomes of shared reading by creating a time of rich language immersion and helping to mediate meaning. In one meta-study of shared reading interventions only dialogic reading, involving conversation and questions, produced positive effects on children's oral language skills (compared to teachers simply reading books with children).<sup>72</sup> The active mediation of a shared and enjoyable reading activity is also likely to increase children's engagement and motivation.<sup>73</sup>

Some research suggests that shared reading might be particularly important for children who are struggling with certain literacy skills.

*'Where children are delayed in terms of decoding skills and therefore less able to engage in independent reading, listening comprehension through reading aloud helps to ensure that children do not fall behind in their development of vocabulary, concepts and decontextualized language.'*<sup>74</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Shared reading is part of the Shine Literacy Hour and also delivered on a daily basis in Khanyisa classrooms. The main aim is for the children to be able to listen to and participate in a well-read story. In training, volunteers learn how to facilitate discussion before, during and after story-telling, using comments and open-ended questions to help children make links with their lives, build vocabulary and explore meaning.



## Time to read

In order to learn to read, children need to spend plenty of time engaging directly with texts.<sup>75</sup> As one South African researcher says, 'only reading develops reading'.<sup>76</sup> Children cannot practise word recognition and develop their comprehension skills, unless they read and read regularly. Research suggests a direct link between print exposure and reading ability, with one meta-study finding 'an upward spiral of causality'.<sup>77</sup>

*'Children who are more proficient in comprehension and technical reading and spelling skills read more; because of more print exposure, their comprehension and technical reading and spelling skills improved more with each year of education. [...] Moderate associations of print exposure with academic achievement indicate that frequent readers are more successful students. Interestingly, poor readers also appear to benefit from independent leisure time reading.'*<sup>78</sup>

In South Africa, children from poorer backgrounds often have no books at home and therefore few opportunities to read. This means that the school setting is particularly important for helping children to nurture an independent reading habit.<sup>79</sup> Silent reading has been found to be positively linked to reading achievement.<sup>80</sup> Yet frequently Foundation Phase classrooms set aside limited time for children to read, either alone or supported by an adult.

*'Teaching reading and writing involves children in doing meaningful activities with written language from the start. These help them understand what reading and writing is used for as well as how to use it. Technical skills are learnt at the same time as they actually learn to read by reading and to write by writing, with a focus on making meaning.'*<sup>81</sup>

The reading needs to be 'sustained', in other words go beyond individual words and single sentences.<sup>82</sup> Sustained reading contributes to fluency, which is an important factor in reading comprehension. Some research indicates a clear relationship between fluency and the amount of reading that children do.<sup>83</sup> Children who cannot read fluently are more likely to read less and to fall further behind.

## Paired reading

One type of supported reading for which there is considerable evidence is paired reading. Studies of the efficacy of paired reading have found gains in reading comprehension as well as reading accuracy and fluency.<sup>84</sup>

Paired reading can take various forms, but typically involves an adult or stronger reader, reading a book or text aloud with the child. When the child feels confident enough to read alone, they give an agreed signal and the adult withdraws.

*'[Paired reading] is a form of supported oral reading which enables students to access and comprehend texts somewhat above their independent readability level, within a framework of predictable and non-intrusive error correction. This structured support used with high motivation texts offers dysfluent readers a flow experience, which is likely to impact on their reading style and socio-emotional aspects of the reading process.'*<sup>85</sup>



Paired reading uses a scaffolding approach, in which someone with more expertise supports the skill acquisition of a developing reader. This enables the support to be targeted at the level and pace of the learner. As support decreases and the child reads alone, they experience a sense of competence and responsibility.<sup>86</sup> There is no failure because when the child is stuck, the adult supports them as a natural part of the process, which in turn enables continuity and helps to build fluency.<sup>87</sup>

Paired reading also enables children to successfully take on reading tasks just above their current reading level, which increases confidence and motivation. The scaffolded approach engages the 'mastery motivation system', referred to earlier, whereby 'competence begets competence' in a new area of learning.<sup>88</sup>

*'Teachers, as well as parents and coaches, often motivate children for learning by engaging this system. They create opportunities for successful mastery experiences, building a sense of mastery in graduated steps. In this way, they scaffold the development of competence over time, as the child gains confidence and a stronger motivation to learn, solve problems, and engage successfully in the world.'*<sup>89</sup>

## ADVANTAGES OF PAIRED READING

(adapted from Topping 2014)

- Children have choice and agency.
- There is no failure.
- The method can be used flexibly to suit the child.
- There is considerable emphasis on understanding.
- The method enables fluent reading.
- The adult can model pronunciation of words and skilful oral reading.
- Children receive individual attention.
- Children read more books and are therefore exposed to more vocabulary.
- It offers a straightforward structure for guided reading, understood by adult and child.

Paired reading differs from other types of reading instruction insofar as it is collaborative and less task-oriented. During paired reading children can also practise wider skills critical to all learning, including concentration, perseverance and self-control.

There are some important factors in the effectiveness of the paired reading approach. Children should be able to make choices about what they read and have access to reading material that engages their interest and is relevant to their lives.<sup>90</sup>

*'Children are more in control of what's going on - instead of having reading crammed into them, they make decisions themselves in the light of their own purposes.'*<sup>91</sup>

As with shared reading, questions and conversation around the text should be used to help children build language and comprehension skills, and to increase their enjoyment.<sup>92</sup> Adults should also offer plenty of encouragement and recognition of progress to help children to maintain their concentration and motivation.

**'Struggling readers do not necessarily fail in reading because they lack motivation; they often fail because they do not experience progress and competence.'**

Gambrell 2011

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Paired reading is part of both the Shine Literacy Hour and the Khanyisa programmes. This ensures that children who are struggling with learning to read are given regular opportunities to actually read, that are frequently not available to them in the classroom. The focus of paired reading is on supporting children to practise the skills they are learning and helping them to grow in confidence. Volunteers are trained to give lots of encouragement and to be sensitive to children's changing levels of anxiety. Children are given a choice around what to read and are supported to co-direct the process as active and responsible participants. Conversations around the text help children to experience the activity of reading as something that goes beyond applying decoding skills and is enjoyable and relevant.





## Interaction

Many of the benefits of shared reading and paired reading are understood to result from the extended conversations that take place around the book or text.<sup>93</sup> Through observations, expansions and open-ended questions, adults can make reading activities a time of rich conversation which supports oral language development and reading comprehension.<sup>94</sup> This kind of dialogic reading also creates opportunities for children to practise higher order thinking skills, such as abstraction, reasoning and making inferences<sup>95</sup> and to receive validation of their efforts.

***“Dialogic book-sharing” is now recognised as a potent means for stimulating the development of a range of important early cognitive and language skills in children; including receptive and expressive vocabulary, abstract language, the syntactic quality and complexity of sentence construction, emergent literacy skills, literal and inferential language, and oral Narrative skills.’<sup>96</sup>***

It is likely that dialogic reading is more effective in small groups, where adults can pitch the conversation at an appropriate level and children have more opportunities to be involved.<sup>97</sup>

***‘The frequency of the behaviours that are central to the dialogic ideology; active responding, questions and expansions, sensitivity to the child’s evolving interests and abilities, must surely diminish as the ratio of adults to children becomes larger, as would be the case in the overcrowded classrooms so common in South Africa.’<sup>98</sup>***

Discussion and interactions around the text make children an active participant in the learning-to-read process. They also make reading a social and more meaningful experience, increasing enjoyment and motivation.<sup>99</sup>

When adults interact with children around reading, they have the opportunity to be reading role models. Reading teachers – ‘teachers who read and readers who teach’<sup>100</sup> – model both the purposes and pleasure of reading. This is particularly important for children from poorer communities who might not have seen reading modelled as an enjoyable leisure activity in the home.

Effective reading role models impart their own enthusiasm for books and reading to children and by doing so promote reading for enjoyment as well as positive reader identities.<sup>101</sup> They are able to share their reading knowledge, practices and perspectives, creating reciprocal reading relationships with children and blurring the boundaries between learning and recreation.<sup>102</sup>

Attitudes to reading are embedded in individual experiences and social norms and values.<sup>103</sup> This is a particular challenge in South Africa where ‘Teachers in lower performing schools (quintiles 1-3) seem to do less reading and own fewer books than teachers in the higher performing and more affluent schools.’<sup>104</sup> Where reading role models are less likely to be provided by classroom teachers, the role of other adults, including community volunteers, becomes more significant.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Shine Literacy programmes are a time of rich interaction. Children are not expected to sit quietly and listen, but to feel empowered to ask questions and share their ideas and responses. Volunteers understand the importance of valuing children’s voices, not only in terms of supporting language development but also as a way of increasing engagement and enjoyment. Because volunteers work with only one or two children at a time, children do not have to struggle to make their voice heard and a high quality of dialogue is possible. The small groups also strengthen the adult-child connection, amplifying the volunteer’s role as a reading role model.



## Access to books

It is difficult to create a culture of reading without books. In South Africa, more than half the households have no books and only 15 per cent of the population live within easy reach of a library.<sup>105</sup> The onus is therefore on schools to play a compensatory role for homes that are often print-scarce. However, the vast majority of primary schools in poor communities do not have a school library and where they do exist, they often contain unsuitable books or are routinely under-utilised.<sup>106</sup>

A survey by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) found that, 'Many schools are grossly under-resourced with respect to reading materials.'<sup>107</sup> While the Foundation Phase curriculum requires teachers to deliver shared reading, group guided reading and paired or independent reading, many classrooms do not have the storybooks and readers that make these activities possible. When the same storybooks have to be repeatedly re-used they cease to facilitate the introduction of new vocabulary or the practise of comprehension skills such as prediction.<sup>108</sup> Where there are insufficient readers at the right level, children cannot engage in regular independent reading.

The range and quality of reading materials available to a child is likely to particularly influence the development of their reading comprehension skills. It is also important that children have access to reading material that is meaningful to them. Books and texts that relate to children's own experiences and interests are more likely to provoke purposeful engagement.<sup>109</sup> Access to relevant and engaging books is also understood to influence how often and for how long children read.<sup>110</sup>

**'The lack of access to books is similar to learning to play football without a ball, a "preposterous" idea but relevant to hundreds of thousands of learners in developing countries who are expected to acquire literacy skills without books.'**

*Spaull and Hoadley  
(2017)*

***'Providing a rich variety of reading materials communicates to students that reading is a worthwhile and valuable activity and sets the stage for students to develop the reading habit.'***<sup>111</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

★ Shine Literacy's Centres and Chapters are equipped with a variety of storybooks as well as a set of graded readers. They also provide 'Take-home books' which children can borrow between sessions. Schools participating in the Khanyisa programme are each given a set of carefully selected storybooks and readers, which are kept available for children in the classroom's reading corner. ★







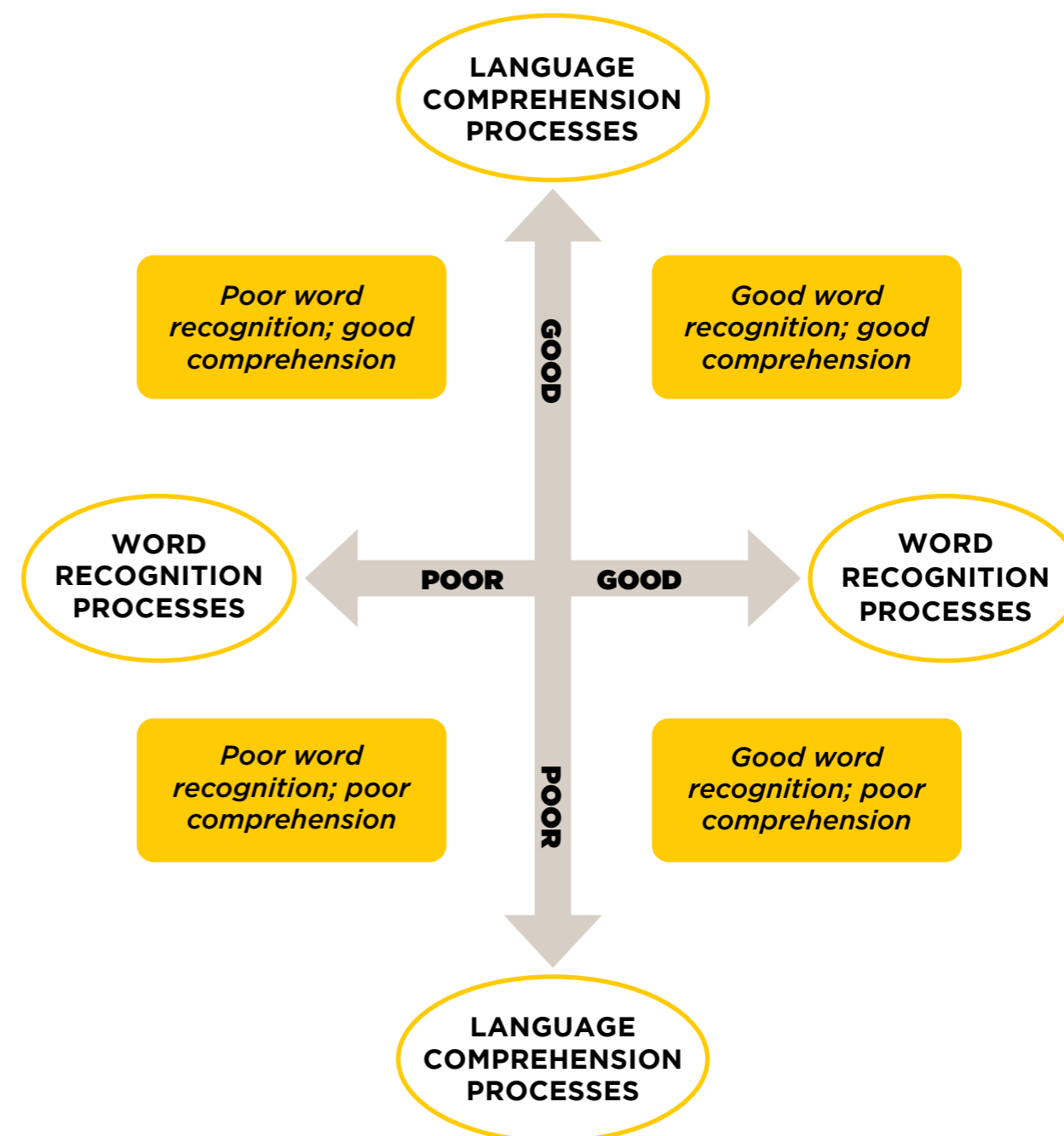
## 4. LITERACY SKILLS

There are many skills and behaviours involved in becoming a good reader. These can be loosely grouped into two domains, word recognition and comprehension,<sup>112</sup> which have been described as ‘inside-out skills’ and ‘outside-in skills’.<sup>113</sup> Vocabulary, language skills, background knowledge and verbal reasoning are all part of meaning-making (‘outside-in skills’). Word recognition (‘inside-out skills’) requires decoding, phonological awareness and sight recognition of familiar words.<sup>114</sup>

*‘Both decoding (the ability to translate written words into the sounds of spoken language) and comprehension (the ability to understand the meaning of the language being read) skills are necessary for confident and competent reading, but neither is sufficient on its own.’<sup>115</sup>*

The evidence indicates the need for a balanced approach, where the two sets of skills are taught together rather than sequentially. This is sometimes described as the simple view of reading. In this theoretical framework ‘both letter-sound cues and meaning cues are essential to the reading process’.<sup>116</sup>

### The simple view of reading<sup>117</sup>





Meaning-making contributes to, and therefore often precedes, word recognition. In other words, the relationship between reading comprehension and word recognition is reciprocal, and technical skills are acquired and consolidated when they are practised through meaningful reading.<sup>118</sup>

*'Those who receive only intensive instruction in decoding do not do well on tests of reading comprehension, but those who learn to read by reading, by understanding what is on page, do well on tests of both decoding and reading comprehension. [...] our ability to decode complex words is the result of reading, not the cause.'*<sup>119</sup>

*'It must be remembered that, without wrestling with text at the level of meaning, readers often are unable to work out which word is associated with the results of their attempts to blend letters. [...] Decisions about how to say a piece of text sometimes may follow success in reading for meaning, rather than amount to a step on the way to reading for meaning.'*<sup>120</sup>

There is some concern that in South African classrooms, too much emphasis has been placed on isolated skill development at the cost of meaning-making.<sup>121</sup>

*'Decoding and blending is currently the dominant literacy practice in South African schools, and the results speak for themselves. [...] In a profound sense phonics does not teach learners to read real words – as carriers of meaning – at all.'*<sup>122</sup>

*'Reading is a matter of grasping meaning conveyed by text. While sustained attention to letter-sound correspondences can be helpful to some novice readers, we should neither assume that it is helpful to all nor confuse mastery of such correspondences with the ability to read.'*<sup>123</sup>

The balanced approach emphasises that reading is the construction of meaning from text, rather than the ability to decode individual words. In other words, while reading for meaning is both means and end, decoding is just one of the means. In this sense, learning to read and reading to learn are not sequential but inseparable from the outset.<sup>124</sup>

*'Teaching skills on their own often doesn't work, particularly with learners from poor communities who see very little print displayed and used in their language/s and where families have few reasons to read and write in daily life. Children come to school having had few opportunities to develop important understandings and insights about print and the power and point of reading and writing. Faced in class with repetitive skills drill like letter sound relationships and letter formation, many children are not able to make the associations necessary to actually start reading and writing.'*<sup>125</sup>

**'By emphasizing all of the processes that contribute to growth in reading, teachers will have the best chance of making every child a reader.'**

*National Reading Panel (2015)*

However, fast and accurate word recognition is essential for reading comprehension.<sup>126</sup> The reciprocal relationship between word recognition and comprehension is highlighted in the key area of fluency. Slow decoding and poor sight recognition of words makes it more difficult to hold in mind preceding words and to extract the overall sense of the text.<sup>127</sup>

*'We argue here that we need to move beyond a repetitive focus on low comprehension outcomes; this is simply the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface there is widespread evidence that most children have not acquired the basic 'tools' for reading success – the ability to accurately and fluently decode letters and words and move from an effortful activity to an automated skill.'*<sup>128</sup>

Fluency also frees up cognitive resources for simultaneous higher order thinking and processing.<sup>129</sup>

*'A learner who pays conscious attention to individual words in a text and tries to work out how to read them will not have attention resources for comprehension. Oral reading fluency, measured in terms of words read correctly per minute is seen as the bridge between decoding and comprehension.'*<sup>130</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

The Shine Literacy Hour uses a balanced approach which combines the importance of developing spoken language and comprehension, with specific skills such as letter knowledge, phonological awareness and writing. Both reading comprehension and word recognition are treated as equally important elements of the learning-to-read process and time is set apart for teaching and practising both sets of skills.

## Language skills

Reading is closely linked to children's wider language skills, including listening comprehension and the expressive language required for speaking.<sup>131</sup> There is evidence that oral language is an important predictor of later literacy achievement.<sup>132</sup> The relationship works in both directions: The more children engage in conversation, the more they are exposed to varied language which will support reading; and the more children read, the more they will develop the vocabulary and grammar that will help them to think, speak and listen.<sup>133</sup>

Oral language is likely to be particularly important for children from poorer homes who often start school with significant vocabulary deficits and may have fewer opportunities to develop language skills at home.<sup>134</sup> This means that children need to have plenty of opportunities to speak and listen in settings that provide a rich language environment.<sup>135</sup>

*'Developing the oral language and vocabulary skills of children, particularly those who are learning English as a second language or those who spent their preschool years in language-restricted environments, is one of the greatest challenges facing educators.'*<sup>136</sup>

When children are familiar with words in their oral form they are more likely to be able to read them and to read fluently.<sup>137</sup> Some studies suggest therefore that children's reading comprehension improves with teaching interventions that focus on speaking and listening skills.<sup>138</sup>

*'Reading instruction builds especially on oral language. If this foundation is weak, progress in reading will be slow and uncertain. Children must have at least a basic vocabulary, a reasonable range of knowledge about the world around them, and the ability to talk about their knowledge. These abilities form the basis for comprehending text.'*<sup>139</sup>

However, it is also argued that as books are important teachers of a second language to children, oral language learning should happen concurrently with learning to read and does not need to precede it.<sup>140</sup>

*'Although it is often believed that young children should first acquire oral proficiency in a language before they begin to read or write in it, this approach in the Foundation Phase did not serve the children well in this study. In fact, it brought about an adverse delay in their English literacy development. There is a large body of research that consistently shows that early exposure to reading and writing in the [second language] helps children acquire literacy in the [second language] and enhances their language development.'*<sup>141</sup>

Vocabulary is the bedrock of language skills. One study found that both struggling readers who speak English as a first language and struggling readers who speak English as a second language exhibit the same trend of 'well-developed word reading skills and underdeveloped vocabulary'.<sup>142</sup> This becomes particularly problematic as children move through the school grades and require wider vocabulary for learning.

*'Many children who successfully learn to read in Grade 1 or 2 are unable to understand books they need to read by Grade 3 or 4. The main reason for this is a lack of adequate vocabulary.'*<sup>143</sup>

A study of children learning English as a second language found that the depth and breadth of vocabulary was the main cause of poor reading comprehension among children with normal decoding abilities (who were described as 'unexpected poor comprehenders').<sup>144</sup> Conversely, poor decoders can use superior language comprehension skills to assist them with reading comprehension.

These findings suggest that strategies that focus on the explicit teaching of vocabulary are likely to benefit the language and literacy skills of all children. However, children require a deep as well as a broad understanding of vocabulary. In other words, they need to understand how the same word can mean different things in different contexts, which goes beyond simple picture-word matching.<sup>145</sup> For children to develop a deep grasp of the meaning of new words, they need 'multiple exposures in authentic contexts'.<sup>146</sup>

*'Our results that unexpected poor comprehenders have difficulties in both vocabulary breadth and depth suggest that teachers should target both the size (breadth) and the depth of vocabulary by introducing multiple meanings of new words and strategies for learning words independently.'*<sup>147</sup>

Conversations around books and about wider learning help children to develop a deeper vocabulary and to become familiar with the type of decontextualised language that appears in many books.

*'Engaging children in conversation facilitates learning different forms of language, expands vocabulary and can help children learn to read. In conversation, children develop the language needed to make sense of print, specifically decontextualized language - or the language of the "not here and not now".'*<sup>148</sup>

*'Yet talk - at home, in school, among peers - is education at its most elemental and potent. It is the aspect of teaching which has arguably the greatest influence on learning. Hence the Review has nominated classroom interaction as the aspect of pedagogy which most repays investment by teachers and those who support them.'*<sup>149</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

All of Shine Literacy's programmes are times of rich conversation. In training, volunteers are taught about the importance of creating and taking opportunities to foster children's speaking and listening skills. Children are engaged in conversation and interaction from the moment they arrive at a Shine Literacy session. By creating a space where children know that their voice will be heard and valued, children are supported to see themselves as capable language users. Talk and discussion are also explicit features of all four parts of the Shine Literacy Hour.



## Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to apply existing knowledge (of words, concepts and topics) to a text in order to produce meaning.<sup>150</sup> Good comprehenders do not only understand what they are reading at a literal level, they are also able to interact with texts in ways that are personally useful or interesting by making links with what they already know.<sup>151</sup>

***'Meaningful comprehension of all but the simplest of writing depends on knowledge which cannot be found in the word or sentence itself.'***<sup>152</sup>

Reading comprehension is an active process which is affected by context and the purpose of the reading activity.<sup>153</sup> It goes well beyond simple factual recall and reflecting back the assumed meaning of text, and allows that the same text may provoke different, equally valid interpretations.

***'Central is the connections children themselves make between their own lives and identities, and the texts they explore. Personal, subjective responses and anecdotes are encouraged and celebrated, but not critically compared or evaluated.'***<sup>154</sup>

Reading for meaning unlocks the drama, lessons and personal relevance of texts in a way that simple word recognition does not. Children who are able to read for meaning are therefore likely to be more motivated to read than children for whom reading is only a mechanical decoding exercise.<sup>155</sup>

There are various inter-locking skills deployed in reading comprehension. These include language skills and vocabulary, background knowledge, working memory, attention, knowledge of narrative forms and devices, and higher order thinking skills (such as inferring and predicting).<sup>156</sup> Reading comprehension also makes use of metacognition – thinking about your thinking.

Reading comprehension difficulties can therefore be rooted in different causes.<sup>157</sup> Some children who struggle to comprehend a text may lack the relevant background knowledge. Other children might struggle with the same text because they are unfamiliar with certain narrative devices or are unpractised in using inference. Correctly diagnosing the source of a child's difficulty ensures that interventions are targeted and relevant.

A number of studies have found that the teaching of reading comprehension is a neglected area in South African schools.<sup>158</sup> As a result, children in the early grades can often recognise words but do not understand what they are reading at even the most literal level.<sup>159</sup>

***'It is remarkable how little attention is paid in South Africa to what it means to read for meaning, the thinking skills involved in making sense of complex texts and how this should be taught in the foundation phase. [...] Deep reading requires comprehension skills that do not develop naturally, but need to be taught explicitly even before formal schooling starts.'***<sup>160</sup>

This is significant because other research has suggested that children who are learning English as a second language are more likely to fall behind their English first-language peers in reading comprehension skills than in decoding skills.<sup>161</sup> Therefore the explicit teaching and practise of the component skills of reading comprehension is likely to pay particular dividends for children learning English as a second language as well as for children from poorer homes.

Teachers can both mediate meaning and help children to develop their own reading comprehension skills by facilitating plenty of conversation before, during and after reading. Open-ended questions, offering observations and insights and highlighting textual clues can all stimulate productive discussions.<sup>162</sup> Children should be supported to integrate what they are reading with their existing knowledge, to pose their own questions and to share their thought processes in a non-judgmental environment.<sup>163</sup> Teachers can also model skills such as inference-making and predicting by 'thinking aloud'.<sup>164</sup> There is evidence that these types of strategies can have a significant impact on children's learning progress.<sup>165</sup> Importantly, reading comprehension strategies should be made explicit to children so that they can use and benefit from them during independent reading.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Shine Literacy's programmes actively support children to build their comprehension skills. Volunteers are trained in how to use open-ended (rather than right and wrong) questions, prompts and comments to deepen children's understanding and foster thinking skills. Particular attention is paid to reading comprehension strategies – such as prediction, inference and making links with existing knowledge – during shared and paired reading. Underpinning these methods is the Shine Ethos, which expects children to be treated as capable thinkers who are active agents, rather than passive recipients, in the learning process.



## Word recognition

Decoding skills, such as being able to segment spoken words into their constituent phonemes and knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, are generally recognised as an essential plank in the learning-to-read process. Poor decoding skills and lack of familiarity with high frequency words can act as a barrier to progress for struggling readers. On the other hand, efficient word recognition frees up attention for reading comprehension and therefore also helps to increase reading enjoyment and motivation.<sup>166</sup>

*'While language skills are critical for later reading comprehension, code-related skills are also vital for learning to read and write. Having letter-sound knowledge and phonological awareness are two of the best indicators that children will learn to read successfully.'*<sup>167</sup>

Phonics 'involves the skills of hearing, identifying and using phonemes or sound patterns,'<sup>168</sup> and helps children to read and spell words by sounding them out. Phonics is to some extent a self-teaching system, providing skills that children can practise during independent reading. There is considerable research evidence for the teaching of phonics, and some studies suggest that it might be particularly beneficial for younger readers.<sup>169</sup>

*'Teaching phonics is more effective on average than other approaches to early reading (such as whole language or alphabetic approaches), though it should be emphasised that effective phonics techniques are usually embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.'*<sup>170</sup>

## PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (2008)

- Understanding that words break down into parts.
- Ability to recognise and manipulate the individual sounds in speech.
- Ability to rhyme words.
- Ability to break syllables into their beginning and ending segments.

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to hear and manipulate the sound patterns in words. It is likely to be a particularly potent learning tool in the South African context because there is evidence that it is a skill that can be transferred between languages.<sup>171</sup> However, many of the studies on transferability of literacy skills relate to languages with the same orthographies (spelling systems). There is less evidence around how language-specific dimensions of decoding (such as letter-sound correspondence and phonics) transfer between languages with different orthographies,<sup>172</sup> such as English and Xhosa.

As has already been discussed, the importance of teaching decoding skills in the context of meaningful reading activities rather than as isolated skills is a recurrent theme in the literature.

*'Programs that focus too much on the teaching of letter-sounds relations and not enough on putting them to use are unlikely to be very effective.'*<sup>173</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SHINE LITERACY

The Shine Literacy Hour uses specially designed games, which cover all the technical skills that children need to learn to read and write successfully. Children progress through the carefully graded games over the course of the year, practising decoding, phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and high frequency words. ★





## Writing

Learning to write is an important strand of early literacy. When they write, children practise code-related skills such as segmenting which will assist them with reading. Writing also provides opportunities for children to express their ideas, to experiment with narrative structures, to use new words and to become familiar with the different uses of writing (such as lists, instructions, letters and stories).<sup>174</sup>

Crucially, writing is an essential skill for learning across the curriculum and helps children to internalise learning.

*'Writing is a very challenging skill to learn and there is less evidence about the most effective ways to teach writing than there is about reading. Nevertheless, access to effective writing instruction is especially important in an era when high-stakes tests depend greatly on writing skill.'*<sup>175</sup>

*'Writing is central in shaping the way we think, reason and learn... Research studies have found that the degree to which information is reformulated or manipulated through writing has an impact on how well the information is integrated, learned and retained.'*<sup>176</sup>

At least three key skills are involved in writing – spelling, letter formation (handwriting) and ideation or composition. Supporting children to work out what they want to say, to organise their ideas and to extend the language they use in writing tasks are therefore a central part of teaching writing. Children from poorer homes with little exposure to books or stories have often experienced language primarily as instrumental communication and are less familiar with the decontextualized language of story-telling.<sup>177</sup> They are likely therefore to need particular support with composition.

South African research suggests that children from poorer homes might miss out on the invented spelling stage, which is a predictor of later reading ability.<sup>178</sup> During invented spelling, children's first attempts are valued and the correct representation of any letter-sounds is acknowledged.

When it is purposeful, writing can tap into children's intrinsic motivation to communicate. It is therefore likely to be beneficial to give children reasons to communicate with real audiences<sup>179</sup> – for instance, through letters and journaling. The focus should be on what the child wants to say,<sup>180</sup> rather than on spelling and neat handwriting.

*'Children learning literacy benefit from teaching approaches that focus on involving children in using written language for real and personally meaningful reasons.'*<sup>181</sup>

Above all, children need to have abundant opportunities to practise writing and to consolidate the skills they are learning. NEEDU found that such opportunities are often lacking in South African classrooms and that writing is one of the most neglected early literacy skills.<sup>182</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

Shine Literacy recognises that many young children do not have sufficient opportunities to practise writing and has included 'have-a-go writing' as one of the four parts of the Shine Literacy Hour. Children are supported to generate ideas and then to extend the language that they use to express themselves, using a 'Talk, prepare, write' approach. Volunteers focus on the overall sense of the writing rather than on correct spelling and grammar, giving acknowledgment wherever letter-sounds have been correctly represented. As children can find writing stressful, the emphasis is on communication and fun.





## 5. TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Research gives useful insights into the types of teaching and learning approaches that are most effective for early literacy. These relate to both the learning environment and the teaching method.

A central theme is that children require a safe and supportive learning environment, where they are not afraid of making mistakes and where effort and progress are recognised.<sup>183</sup> Comfortable spaces (in time and place) where children do not feel under pressure positively affect both learning and motivation.

*'Motivation levels can also be affected by emotions. If a student feels stressed, nervous or anxious whilst reading, they are less likely to engage with reading in order to avoid these emotions.'*<sup>184</sup>

### FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

The Shine Ethos is a statement of five principles which underpin all Shine Literacy programmes. It emphasises the uniqueness of each child and encourages warmth, support and respect in relationships between volunteers and children. It also highlights the importance of creating a learning environment where children are not under pressure and have the space to learn at their own level and pace.

Playful learning activities and games can help to create a teaching context that is free from anxiety and conducive to thinking and learning.

*'While learning is a serious endeavour, much effective learning occurs through play. Games, storytelling and simulations motivate students, offer instant feedback on performance, and help students develop higher-order skills.'*<sup>185</sup>

A conducive learning environment also depends on secure and trusting relationships with adults. Healthy relationships affect brain architecture and have been shown to be linked to children's cognitive and language development, as well as to later academic achievement.<sup>186</sup>

*'Given the pervasive significance of attachment relationships, it is not surprising to find that positive school-based relationships - with teachers, friends, coaches, and mentors - are implicated in many studies of resilience. [...] These relationships can work in many ways to facilitate resilience in children. Most fundamentally, they provide the sense of security and belonging that frees a child to explore and learn.'*<sup>187</sup>



Productive learning relationships can be fostered when children receive greater individual attention. There is evidence that children benefit from small group work and one-to-one work<sup>188</sup> in early literacy interventions. This approach facilitates tailored learning, which responds to the particular needs of the child. However, many children in South Africa, particularly from poorer homes, are taught in over-crowded classrooms<sup>189</sup> where there is an over-reliance on whole class teaching methods such as chorusing.<sup>190</sup>

*'There is a strong and consistent body of evidence demonstrating the benefit of one-to-one or small-group tutoring using structured interventions for children who are struggling with literacy.'*<sup>191</sup>

★ ★

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SHINE LITERACY

Shine Literacy's volunteers support the same children over time, enabling a trusting relationship to be built. This relationship provides a stable framework for children's effort and progress, giving children the confidence to make mistakes without fear of criticism. Because they work with no more than two children at a time, volunteers provide a quality of attention and interaction that is not usually possible in a classroom environment. Volunteers are also supported to tailor the support they give to meet the particular needs of each child.

In order to stay motivated, children need to receive plenty of encouragement and feedback, which is specific and helps children to identify their progress and successes. Some studies have shown that this type of praise is more effective than external incentives such as prizes.<sup>192</sup>

★ ★

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SHINE LITERACY

At the end of every Shine Literacy Hour session, volunteers give a praise note to each child. The note is one or two sentences of positive, meaningful praise. Volunteers are encouraged to make the feedback as specific as possible so that it positively reinforces an area of progress or a good learning habit.

★ ★

Studies also suggest that with appropriate training, a range of adults can support children to learn to read.<sup>193</sup> An evaluation of an intervention in Ghana which recruited teacher community assistants from High Schools to deliver remedial interventions for children in Grades One to Three, found that the greatest impacts were for literacy and the effects were still evident one year later.<sup>194</sup>

The finding that effective literacy teaching does not have to be delivered by qualified teachers is particularly important in South Africa's resource-scarce education system and supports the case for programmes that harness the capacity and skills of community volunteers.

*'What these findings imply is that schools might use a mix of certified, paraprofessional, and volunteer tutors, using the certified teachers as leaders and to work with the most difficult children. One-to-one tutoring is clearly very effective, and when resources are limited, well-structured programs making use of paraprofessionals and volunteers may reach more struggling readers for the same cost as serving many fewer children with certified teachers.'*<sup>195</sup>

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SHINE LITERACY

Shine Literacy's programmes harness the teaching resources that lie beyond schools by recruiting and training community volunteers. This has enabled the steady expansion of its programmes into new communities and provinces. Volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds, and the Khanyisa programme is run solely by unemployed matriculants.

Shine Literacy Hour volunteers not only receive thorough initial training but are also encouraged to attend ongoing 'In Depth' training sessions on specific areas of knowledge or skill. They are overseen by Centre or Chapter Managers who provide support and coaching as needed.

**'The effects seen for paraprofessional tutors and for volunteer tutors using structured and intensive programs pose a real challenge to the idea that only certified teachers can be effective tutors.'**

*Slavin et al (2011)*

Finally, there is evidence that effective early literacy teaching should involve a range of methods structured within well-organised, properly focused lessons.<sup>196</sup> This is often not the case in South African classrooms where teachers frequently fall back on a limited teaching repertoire, such as reading aloud to the whole class, and isolated letter and word reading.<sup>197</sup> As a result, key skills areas are neglected and opportunities to scaffold children's understanding are missed.

Effective lessons do not need to be formal, but they do need to be planned. They should provide targeted support at an appropriate level, offer suitable and engaging reading materials, and above all, make learning to read a fun and self-motivated process.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: **SHINE LITERACY**

The Shine Literacy Hour and the Khanyisa programme are carefully designed and structured, ensuring that all children are able to benefit from the same evidence-based methods and resources in every session. Standardised teaching and learning materials are used to help ensure consistent implementation of the methodology, and a quality assurance system promotes model fidelity.





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