

Creating a Reading Culture in South African Schools

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Abstract

Although South African Schools and the Education Department have invested a significant amount of time and resources into literacy improvement programmes, most South African learners are still struggling with literacy. This paper discusses creating a reading culture in South African Schools, which sees reading for pleasure at the heart of school literacy programmes. This does not mean that traditional reading instruction is abandoned. Instead reading instruction is complemented with carefully considered initiatives which help to foster a love for reading and books.

There are many initiatives described in this report which can be implemented to create a reading culture in schools. They have been categorized into classroom initiatives and school-wide initiatives for ease of reference. School management must lead the school in the vision and strategies implemented to reach the vision.

Schools that have financial or other constraints can start by instituting some of the more impactful initiatives such as daily read aloud sessions for younger learners, or DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) for older learners. Over time the goal should be to motivate the entire school community to support the implementation of most, or all, of the initiatives to achieve maximum benefits.

Creating a Reading Culture in South African Schools

The reading crisis affecting South Africa's education system has been described as a 'cognitive catastrophe' (Aitchison 2018). The Progress International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2016 indicated that 78% of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language and South Africa had the lowest rating (50th out of 50 countries) (Aitchison 2018).

The Department of Basic Education has initiated several projects to address the literacy crisis including The Read to Lead Campaign (Department of Basic Education 2015), the National Reading Remedial Plan, and the Primary Teacher Education Project (Department of Basic Education 2013, pp. 9-12). Sadly, none of these initiatives have been successful on a large scale and the question of how to implement wide-scale improvements remains.

Research shows that reading for pleasure or enjoyment is more important for educational success than socio-economic background (Department of Education [UK] 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, "studies show that when poor children are exposed to books they start to read better" (DGMT 2015). The evidence points to the fact that it is time for South African schools to shift from reading-improvement projects to creating cultures of reading that support reading for pleasure and provide access to quality reading materials.

The excerpt below is from a 2015 report of the United Kingdom Department of Education entitled 'Reading: The next steps':

"A reading culture provides children and young people the support, encouragement, role models, resources and opportunity to read for pleasure. School leaders prioritise the development of the will to read, not just the skill, among students of all ages. They foster collaboration among staff, helping to weave reading for pleasure into every class, across the curriculum and into the daily life of the students". (Department of Education (UK) 2015, p. 17).

What follows is a synopsis of research on how to create a reading culture in schools with a focus on the two main areas of implementation — classroom initiatives and school-wide initiatives.

Classroom Initiatives

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

(Anderson et al. 1985)

Reading to children for pleasure is imperative if a reading culture is to be created. (Guillie-Marrett 2020). This means reading aloud to children forms part of the daily routine and needs to be “planned and developed alongside formal literacy classes”. It cannot be an optional extra; it is fundamental. Teachers need to make stories come alive and choose a variety of appropriate literature that will provide pleasure and, where possible, “make curriculum links and expand understanding” (Guillie-Marrett 2020).

A second, but no less significant classroom initiative that contributes to a culture of reading, is classroom libraries. While there is no argument that school libraries are important, having classroom libraries in every class, means that quality, age appropriate reading materials are easily accessible. South African literacy champions, Biblionef, advocate classroom libraries as the “most effective model to get kids reading in schools” (Huston 2015).

The sad truth is that functioning school libraries are rare, particularly in government schools. The most recent statistics come from the 2011 School Monitoring Survey which showed that 79% of schools had no library at all (Paton-Ash, Wilmot 2015, p. 1). A report from the Douglas Murray Trust (DGMT) illustrates the power of classroom libraries. Schools in Akshara, India replaced traditional ‘hub-and-spoke’ libraries with classroom libraries (Huston 2015). School libraries in Akshara shared some of the same issues faced by South African schools — a lack of age-appropriate materials and no dedicated library staff.

The Akshara project uses ‘foldable book kits’ that hold about 100 books. Teachers receive a half-day of training, including how to use the histogram which tracks book borrowing data (it hangs on a wall near the library).



Monitoring & Evaluation (M & E) is easy. Teachers submit a monthly photograph of the histogram which enables large-scale comparison and analysis of the data. Initial data from the project showed that “the average number of books checked out per learner per month rose from 2.5 at the start of the school year to 5.5 at the end of the year, and difficulty typically increased” (Huston 2015).

The ‘Primary School Reading Culture Review’ from the National Library of New Zealand makes important points relating to (classroom) libraries. The first and most significant point is that learners must be free to choose the books they want to borrow. Secondly, classroom libraries must have “generous and forgiving borrowing policies” (National Library of New Zealand n.d., p. 7). Finally, libraries should include a variety of books appealing to a diverse student body.

Freya O’Dell shares more tips to boost classroom reading culture (O’Dell 2017). The first one is DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), which sees designated individual reading incorporated into the curriculum. DEAR can also be encouraged when learners have completed assigned work and have time on hand. O’Dell also suggests that teachers share extracts from books to get children hooked, but this can only work if there are copies of the shared book available for learners to borrow.

Another imperative highlighted by several sources is ‘teachers as readers’ (O’Dell 2017; Guillie-Marrett 2020; National Library of New Zealand n.d.). Teachers should read children’s literature and other appropriate reading materials which will peak learner interest and serve as book chat topics. Guillie-Marrett also suggests that teachers have a ‘special box’ where they keep their favourite childhood books which children can borrow.

School-Wide Initiatives

Creating a reading culture is impossible unless everyone in the school shares the vision. The school management team should lead, educate, motivate, advocate, provide resources and monitor progress (National Library of New Zealand n.d.). The team leaders should be seen reading and actively participating in conversations about reading and books with educators and learners.

School-wide events can create interest and motivate the school community. Invite learners to dress up as their favourite book character, invite authors to address learners, start book clubs, participate in reading challenges and find fun ways to celebrate World Book Day or

famous authors. Another idea is to choose a book which will be the focus for the entire school for a set period. Guillie-Marrett states, “This may seem tricky, but picture books which have underlying themes or messages will work well...Class teachers devise schemes of work around the storybook and then each class presents how they’ve explored the book in a whole-school celebration” (Guillie-Marrett 2020).



Schools need to be intentional about creating inviting reading spaces in the library and throughout the school. Even if there isn’t a formal library, schools can create reading corners or book nooks. Books should be displayed in ways that entice young readers, with covers visible, and there should be comfortable seating. Below are some photographs of book nooks and reading corners found on the internet. Some require more planning and funding while others are simple and would be a great starting place for schools constrained by resources (Natural Beach Living website (n.d.)).

School libraries should be at the heart of any school’s reading culture. Referring again to ‘The Primary School Reading Culture Review’ from the National Library of New Zealand, school libraries should be inviting spaces and should be well resourced to meet the reading needs of all learners. If the library has dedicated staff, they should be involved in educator planning meetings that focus on literacy. Library policies and procedures should be designed to “enable and encourage students to read for pleasure” (National Library of New Zealand, n.d., p. 4).



The atmosphere in the library should be welcoming and inclusive in terms of “resources, cultural responsiveness, accessibility, signs, displays, opening hours and user-friendly policies” (National Library of New Zealand n.d., p. 7). These are lofty goals for schools that do not have librarians or staff dedicated to the library.

But what of schools that do not have a library? Equal Education, a member-based advocacy group for quality and equitable education in South Africa, argues for libraries in this statement from their website:

For over two decades international research has proven that school libraries are beneficial to the progress and academic development of learners. In a major international study, for instance, researchers concluded that a stocked, staffed and fully-funded library in operation within a school alone improves students’ reading performance by as much as 8%. Beyond direct academic benefits, libraries offer social advantages too (Equal Education 2011).

Schools that do not have libraries can get help from non-profit organizations such as The Bookery and Biblionef in South Africa. The Bookery sets up school libraries and provides books for them. They have set up 85 school libraries and trained and employed 50 library assistants since their inception in 2010 (The Bookery n.d.). Biblionef provides new books in all official languages for 3 to 18-year-old children for reading pleasure and for education. They donated a total of 1 826 883 books in 2019 (Biblionef n.d.). Schools without libraries should be sure classroom libraries are well stocked and fully operational in all classrooms.

Parents/guardians also contribute to a successful reading culture but need to be invited to participate. Communication between the home and school is crucial and needs to be planned and well-designed. Consider using non-traditional methods of communication such as weekly text messages. Where possible, personalized messages are more effective and can be “linked to learning to promote positive interactions, e.g. celebrate success” (Axford 2019). Communication should also be two-way. One idea to encourage two-way communication is to ask parents to share photos of their children (or other family members) caught in the act of reading and then use the photos on a bulletin board or newsletter promoting the reading culture of the community (Guillie-Marrett 2020).

The Education Endowment Foundation suggests that “promoting shared book reading should be a central component of any parental engagement approach” (Axford 2019). Promotion alone may not be enough as some parents don’t know how to share books with their children. Parent workshops that are welcoming, informal and convenient for parents can help. O’Dell reported that the introduction of a weekly parent-pupil reading session at one school made a big difference. The staff worked with parents on “reading strategies and provided them with a space to read regularly with their child” and all the pupils on the programme “improved their reading ages significantly” (O’Dell 2017).

Finally, it is not uncommon for schools to receive books from well-meaning organizations or individuals so that children have appropriate reading material at home. While this is an amazing and necessary initiative, schools should remember that “book-gifting alone is unlikely to be effective, but carefully selected books plus advice and support can be beneficial for supporting reading” (Axford 2019). Thus, schools should be sure that book donations are accompanied by the appropriate parental support.

Conclusion

Creating a culture of reading in South African schools is possible but requires the co-operation of the entire school community. While it is true that many South African schools face resource challenges (both human and financial resources), it is not an excuse to do nothing. The reading crisis facing South Africa indicates that ‘doing nothing’ is part of the problem.

The information in this report provides practical ideas that can be instituted in individual classrooms and as whole-school initiatives. Many of the most important initiatives, such as daily story sharing and read aloud sessions, require little more than commitment. Other initiatives, such as classroom libraries, require resources and management but have immense potential to get children reading. Reading for pleasure is the foundation of all initiatives.

In instances where schools need to make changes gradually due to various constraints, it would be wise to start with daily read aloud sessions for younger learners and Drop Everything and Read sessions for older learners. Classroom libraries can also be

transformational but require funding and management. However, the introduction of any of the initiatives listed in this report is a step in the right direction and may help South Africa move toward a more literate and educated society.

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Note: n.d. means 'date of publication unknown'

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