

Reasons To Build a Reading Movement

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Reading helps expand our world and improve our experiences, being one of the best ways in which we can learn new information and acquire new skills, access the experience of others, and garner advice. For South Africa, the situation is bleak. Indications are that basic education in South Africa needs a holistic intervention.

Recently, South African education has been in the spotlight after a representative team finished in last place in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study in which it became evident that our grade four learners cannot read for meaning.

It is known that the South African public schooling system is fraught with challenges ranging from infrastructure, and socio-economic problems facing the learners, to a teaching crisis, together with low expectations in terms of learning outcomes in an already questionable school syllabus. A fact uncovered by Nelda Mouton, Gabriel Louw, and G. Strydom in *Critical Challenges of the South African School System*.

Educators in South Africa are in short supply or rather, there is a shortage of educators in relation to the number of children in the system. This is especially the case in public primary schools.

A study commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) published in 2022, using data screened from the Human Resource, Personnel & Salary System (PERSAL) showed that almost half (48%) of educators in the public division of education were 50 years of age or older. Among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, South Africa constantly ranked low in the indicators such as “student mobility, participation in education.” South Africa also had one of the largest student-to-teacher ratios, ranking fourth highest in this indicator out of 38 countries. “The number of students per teacher in secondary schools is one of the largest among OECD and partner countries with available data,” said the report.

In the report *Progress In International Reading Literacy Study 2016 South African Children’s Reading Literacy Achievement*, the contributors highlighted the importance of the learning stage of grade four. The study assessment also notes policy problems pertaining to schools that teach African languages stating:

“Grade 4 is a pivotal turning point in the South African school system. In Grade 4, learners must transition from learning how to read, to reading for meaning and learning. An added complication is that in African language schools, learners are taught in the African language from Grade 1 to Grade 3, and then in Grade 4 must switch to English as medium of instruction.”

While South Africa’s education system is known to be terrible, the grade four learners of 2023 are a class that would have begun their schooling in 2020. That year, 2020, was the year the National State of Disaster and the National State of Emergency were declared by President Ramaphosa following the global health crisis

caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus, usually called Covid-19. To note that the impact of the state of disaster on learning time was negative is a valid observation because there was an objective reduction of many hours from the education of the learners.

The reading skills of this class of learners, especially in public schools – which receive little support as was evidenced by the monitoring reports done by Khanya College in schools – were hampered from development even further to the level not possible to apprehend even within the ailing public education system of the country.

Mr Senzo Digala who teaches at Siphamandla Secondary School in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, says that as educators what they “notice is that learners often come from lower grades without the necessary knowledge of either writing or reading the written questions.” He further says, “Most learners lack the [fundamental] basics of natural science and mathematics.”

In the same vein, Digala defended educator output saying, “We then have to spend extra weeks preparing them [the learners] for the actual grade content which further takes away the time that was designated for teaching the grade eight and nine content.”

The Siphamandla teacher went on to complain saying, “There is enough evidence that suggests that comprehensive ability of the learners has been left to task, almost to say they are whoever's coming next problem,” in an unfavourable comment to lower learning.

To fix the education system, the state must consider the problem in a holistic fashion and not only as a classroom problem. That is to say, there are social factors which impact and hamper the ability of the pupil to learn in class. Firstly, many of the learners in the schooling system of South Africa come from working-class poor and rural poor backgrounds living below the poverty line.

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