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Creating Literate School Communities: Vulindlela Reading Clubs

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Introduction

The Vulindlela Reading Clubs were started to create conditions in community settings which inspire, promote and support reading for enjoyment and the development of reading habits in mother tongue and additional languages among children and adults. The aim is to create nurturing spaces which motivate children to want to read and write and gives them a sense of identity and belonging. Over time, the children realize that 'we' are adults who care enough to be there every week to play, read and write and above all, listen to them. In this way children will become empowered to become literate in ways that help to realise each individual's potential to the fullest extent and that ultimately allows them full and equitable social participation in all aspects of life.

Conditions of learning

As literacy and schooling are inexorably linked in modern society, (Olsen and Torrance, 2001: 10) the definitions of literacy and the principles and methods of literacy teaching are characterised by, among other things, what occurs in school. For early literacy learning, most school curricula work within a skills based, part to whole model, focusing intently on teaching technical skills like recognising letters and sounds, and putting them together to make words and sentences. There are other hugely significant aspects to learning, which have to do with becoming motivated to want to read (and write) through experiencing, appreciating and exploring the power and value of stories and other texts. These aspects are often learned informally, and seemingly 'naturally' in homes where books and writing (usually in English) are part and parcel of everyday life, and where there is a huge body of (English language) story and other books that are shared with children from when they are very young. Because of the way teachers are trained to teach the beginnings of reading and writing, these essential, but informal aspects of literacy are often totally absent at school.

Often these conditions do not prevail in working class families, especially in the poorest urban and rural situations. Today, because of the devastation caused by unemployment as well as social pathologies such as drug abuse and HIV/AIDS, the situation is worse than ever before. Semi-literate parents, even if they are inclined to take a deeper interest in their children and their education, have to ensure the physical survival of themselves and their children as their main priority. In Bertolt Brecht's famous phrase: "first you must eat, then you can philosophise".

Moreover, In South Africa, and across the African continent, children learn under an 'early exit' model of mother tongue education where English becomes the language of teaching after (at best) only three years of schooling. This, together with inadequate teaching of English, a lack of appropriate texts and other resources and the other pedagogical and socio-economic factors already mentioned have disastrous effects on literacy development. Working class children are at an enormous disadvantage for learning to read and write. Even when children are able to read and write, the curriculum tends to continue, mostly in the ex colonial language, to deliver decontextualised skills and information that make little sense to learners.

By creating, supporting and sustaining 'print-rich' literate communities, we are beginning to change the conditions for learning ([Cambourne 1995](#)) and reclaim education as a public good.

The development of the first Vulindlela Reading Club

In the case of the first Vulindlela Reading Club, PRAESA was approached by a community organization, the Zisukhanyo Youth Empowerment, based in Langa, Cape Town, to assist them in addressing the issue of low literacy scores, which had become increasingly evident through the National Systemic Evaluations of 2004-2006 as well as international studies on literacy and numeracy skills – see TIMMS 1998, SACMEQ 2005 and PIRLS 2006. After some discussion at PRAESA, it was decided to suggest the formation of a community based reading club. This move was itself the result of years of research and development work by the PRAESA Early Literacy Unit. The technical, pedagogical side of the work of the volunteers (facilitators) in all the Vulindlela Reading Clubs derives from the work of this unit which works from theoretical principles which include:

- In the multilingual settings of Africa, and given the history of the continent, mother tongue based bilingual education allows children the best opportunities for learning: not either mother tongue or the ex-colonial language, but both (Neville Alexander 2004) ;
- Literacy is part of people's regular social and cultural practices (Street 1984, [Barton, 1994](#)).
- Oral language and written language are learned in similar ways, for use in '*personally meaningful ways in social contexts*' (Goodman and Goodman, 2003: 353);
- Free, voluntary reading, i.e., reading for enjoyment (Krashen, 1993) is the '*missing ingredient*' in language learning;
- 'Emotions are at the very heart of language development' (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004) so the environment needs to be a nurturing one;
- The way to a child's heart and mind is through a story (Bloch 2006).
- Children learn the cultural ways of their communities through guided participation (Barbara Rogoff 1990) with interactive role models.

The central role of adults as interactive role models

When children see others around them using literacy in daily life (i.e. modelling meaningful uses of reading and writing) they begin learning about the functional value of print. But it is more than just modelling. Mediation is at the centre of human existence (Vygotsky 1978, [Wells, 1986](#)). One of the factors inherent to learning is that meaning is created between a child and another, more capable person (Wertsch 1985). When children are apprenticed to more experienced others and become involved in and communicate around a shared activity - something that the children are keen to be involved in, the children join in an activity

... in such a way that they handle manageable but comfortably challenging subgoals of the activity that increase in complexity with children's developing skill and understanding (Rogoff 1990:18).

This concept can help us see that children come to behave like readers and to make sense of reading as they experience and explore real texts. Moreover it allows not only the transfer of literacy skills, but of attitudes, values, motives and emotions.

The example of the Langa Vulindlela Reading Club

The Langa Reading Club was launched in December 2006. It has, since then, grown and evolved and many of the 80-120 children that attend weekly have been coming from its inception.

A 2 hour session takes place every Saturday morning in the grounds of St Louis Primary School in Langa. Up to 100 children aged between 3 and 15 are met there by a group of progressive educators, who have volunteered to play games, sing songs, tell, read and write stories with the children.

The aim is to create an atmosphere which encourages experimentation and exploration with books and other texts, as well as writing activities. The emphasis is on simply enjoying reading and writing in interaction with good adult role models. This stimulates interest and skill in reading and creates a demand for appropriate reading material in the languages they choose.

The volunteers are made up from parents and others in the community, or further afield, as well as PRAESA staff who have the relevant theoretical knowledge and practical experience to mentor volunteers. Volunteers can include high school or tertiary education students, teachers, lecturers, parents – in fact anyone with an interest in children and young people. Sessions alternate between isiXhosa and English.

Following an initial training session for volunteers, regular workshops are held around issues relating to how to choose appropriate books, which languages to read and write in, how to read a story to a group as well as planning and organisational matters.

In fact, experience has shown that the reading club has done more than 'just' enhance literacy. It has become a kind of "home from home", a comfort zone with which all the participants – children, parents, teachers and facilitators – can identify. In a way it can be likened to the boy scouts or the girl guides of the community. This notion has developed organically; not all elements that constitute it were planned or foreseen but, today, there is no doubt at all that this is what has happened: Vulindlela reading club members are extremely proud to be identified as such.

The entire programme is informed by the spirit of volunteerism. Nobody is paid for any service provided. Where volunteers cannot afford the travel costs on a weekly basis, taxi fares are refunded. None of the children is compelled to participate; all of them come because they like to be there. It is a *community*, not a school based, reading club. The children come from all the schools in Langa and a few even come from outside the township. This was a deliberate decision, for fear that a school based project would quickly be seen by the children as a mere extension of the school programme, something that might have some negative consequences.

Older boys and girls from the secondary schools are encouraged to participate. Some are siblings of the little ones, who are regular readers, others come from ex-'white' schools because they want to learn to read isiXhosa while themselves helping the children with their English. This is in truth a case of a whole "village" raising its children.

Some refreshments are provided, usually fruit or juice or a cup of soup, depending on the season and the circumstances. This is usually paid for from private donations. Children are disciplined by means of persuasion. The venue is kept clean and tidy in spite of much jollity, play and vigorous action associated with children.

Using Stories

Stories, in all their guises, are a powerful, yet gentle way of dispensing knowledge at all levels; from moral and social knowledge embedded in the characters and unfolding plot, to the exploration of pictures and the words on the page associated with them that can be explored for their meaning, or their form, or both, in interaction with others. In the words of one of South Africa's great storytellers:

So I say, stories are there to be shared, to mould us, to teach us values, sometimes to tickle us and make us laugh uncontrollably, to take our minds to the worlds of Make Believe, of Never Never Land, of Bhakubha...the list is endless, and so is the capacity of our imaginations.

Gcina Mhlope (1996:1)

The worlds of possibilities and imagination offered by fables, folktales, myths, legends, short and tall stories, just-so and never-ending stories etc, are fundamental aspects of human nature. Our ceaseless and automatic transformation of our realities into story defines us as human beings. Given their centrality in our lives, they are an extremely powerful medium through which reading and writing habits can be shaped and developed.

The Vulindlela Reading Club tries to use stories in powerful ways so that children consistently experience literacy in ways not available to them in schools. Activities are developed around stories, both read and told, that bring them to life and deepen their meaning for the children. Storytelling, craft, drama and song are all used. An exchange of ideas and values is encouraged and the adults accept the children's input and steer away from demanding particular responses or responses in any one language. Children are encouraged to choose their own books, to read/share books as they wish, to write on any topic and in any manner they wish. By means of storytelling, rhymes, songs, book selection and discussions, a climate is created in which values and cultural peculiarities are juxtaposed and children are guided towards adopting those approaches that are most likely to be constructive in their lives.

Activities at the Reading Club

The specific strategies employed within the reading club space have developed in response to the children that attend, and the club's specific context. The Langa Reading Club follows roughly the following order of activities:

- 1. Games, songs:** Children learn easily and comfortably when they play. This is very important especially for learning a second language. It is also important for children to discover that all languages can be fun to learn. This is why music is also used.
- 2. Reading aloud and storytelling:** Sessions start with reading aloud and storytelling because children learn from demonstration of adult reading, storytelling and writing role models.
- 3. Group reading and paired reading and writing:** Children learn from other children. In groups and in pairs, they read together and help each other. It is also very important at this stage for adult reading and writing role models to tag along and confer with readers and writers. They help them to notice things as they read. With young children this means demonstrating things like how to open a book, showing that we read from left to right and from top to bottom.
- 4. Silent/independent reading and writing:** The children read alone sometimes. This is very important for independent readers.
- 5. Writing:** Children are encouraged to write for real reasons and to get them to realise that what they say can be written down. Interactive writing through letter and journal writing as well as greeting cards have proven to be good at encouraging children to write. Writers' workshops are set up, where children can compose poems, and make books of various genres, (e.g narrative stories, autobiographies

etc.) This has to start with interactive modelling of shared writing where the adult composes first with the children, then allows them to work in groups or individually.

Challenges

Challenges include obtaining enough appropriate, enjoyable books, especially books in African languages, getting enough committed people to volunteer regularly, particularly people who speak, read and write in isiXhosa and fundraising , to buy books, to offer the children a snack and a drink and to take them on outings and to help pay for travel costs of the volunteers.

In order to support the proliferation of reading clubs, there is a great need for support to:

a) Create a 'bookflood' ([Elley 1991](#)) ethos by:

1) accessing existing books that are appropriate in African and other relevant languages;

2) developing appropriate storybooks and other reading materials in African languages as well as English, French and Portuguese through the publishing of original writing and translations.

b) Conceptualise and carry out a series of workshops to mentor adults in all relevant aspects of reading clubs, including how to attract volunteers, book sharing/reading with children.

A last word

To date, there is no formal assessment to ascertain the 'success' of the reading clubs. However, the fact that the children return week in and week out is testimony itself. Moreover, many anecdotal reports from parents and teachers are made about the increased confidence levels of children, and improved reading and writing desires and abilities at home and in class. Thus, success can be 'measured' by changes in behaviour. At the same time, written and visual documentation of the Vulindlela Reading Club in Langa takes place to ensure that the story is told, and so that others can learn from and adapt the experience to other contexts. There is a constant trickle – often a stream – of visitors from all corners of the world who, having heard of the programme, want to experience it and are invariably captivated. Many of them make donations in money or books, all of them become ad hoc facilitators, tell their stories, listen to ours and our children's in an unplanned but effective zone of mutual enrichment and learning.

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