

Getting Reading Right in the Foundation Phase

– Nic Spaull

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests and stakeholders. It makes me very happy to be standing here today as we mark the start of this important journey. In my speech today I want to make the case that focussing on reading in the Foundation Phase is the very best use of our time, money and energy. I want to talk to you about four things today:

- (1) why we have to get reading right in the early years of school,
- (2) to talk about access to books in South Africa and in the Eastern Cape specifically,
- (3) the reading results of children in this province
- (4) advice for this project at its birth, and a few closing remarks.

But before I start all that I want to tell you a funny story about a bouncing ball and dinosaurs.

[SLIDE]

A friend of mine works at one of the textbook publishing houses in South Africa and she told me about a time where they were piloting a textbook in Limpopo. They had asked some primary school subject advisors in the province to look over the books and see if they had any comments. So the subject advisors read through the books and in general they were happy. However they wanted 2 changes – one to the early primary textbooks, and one to the higher primary textbook. In the Lower primary textbook the subject advisor paged to the story called “The Crazy Bouncing Ball” which told the story about a bouncing ball that went something like this “Lebo had a red bouncing ball and loved to play with his ball. One day he bounced it so hard that it bounced across the street and over the trees and over the fence and it just kept going. It bounced over the dog and over the mouse, it even bounced over neighbours house!” And then the story goes on about the crazy bouncing ball getting stuck in the river or something. But the Subject

advisor didn't like the story and said " This story is not a good story. Balls don't bounce across streets or over houses!"

The second instance was in the higher primary textbook with a story about dinosaurs and scientists looking for dinosaur fossils in the ground. The subject advisor looked at the publisher and pointed to the dinosaur and said "We want you to take this story out, it's not relevant for our children. We don't get these animals around here!" (***) And then lastly the subject advisor says "And anyway I've never seen one of these animals before." To which my friend replied "Well that makes two of us!"

There are various things that we could draw from this story. Perhaps the most obvious is to ask how this person became a language subject advisor in the first place?! They clearly do not understand the important genres of myth, fable, fiction and fantasy and their importance in the child's cognitive and emotional development. It also highlights the fact that subject advisors are frequently not selected on competence but rather on political allegiance. But I don't want to dwell on that today.

This story also foregrounds the importance of imagination, books and reading. In school children learn many academic skills but learning to read is unlike the others. The magical ability to read for meaning and pleasure is arguably *the* most important skill children learn in primary school. Since almost all future learning will depend on this fundamental understanding of the relation between print and spoken language, it is unsurprising that literacy, built upon a firm foundation of basic reading, is used as one of the primary measures of school effectiveness. Let me read a quote from the research literature:

"Professional educators and the public at large have long known that reading is an **enabling** process that spans academic disciplines and translates into meaningful personal, social, and economic outcomes for individuals. Reading is the fulcrum of academics, the pivotal process that stabilizes and leverages children's opportunities to success and become reflective, independent learners" (Good, Simmons & Smith, 1998: p45).

Apart from the obvious cognitive importance of learning to read, children who become novice readers within the first three years of primary school also have higher levels of socio-emotional well-being stemming from improved self-expression and communication as well as the self-confidence that comes from cracking this difficult code.

[**SLIDE** - monster]

I think sometimes as educators and researchers we forget the pleasure that comes from reading a thrilling novel and not knowing whether Dumbledore will die in this latest battle between muggles and He Who Shall Not Be Named. Or the pleasure we felt as our parents read “Goodnight Moon” before dozing off to sleep.

[SLIDE – Pig]

Or the comfort that comes when you read a story about someone else living in a different country in a different time but who also lost their mother at the same age, or is also being teased for a disability or a stutter. To read an author who can articulate in words something you have only ever felt is a powerful experience. That strong sense of kinship and belonging when we look up and say “Me too! That’s how I feel!” As C.S. Lewis says “We read to know we are not alone.”

But we also read to find out about new worlds and new ways of being. I follow a photographer who blogs at “Humans of New York” and he has recently been documenting the lives of people in Pakistan and he came across this man

[SLIDE] in the Hunza Valley last month on the 5th of August. I’ll read his story as he told it to Brandon:

“Education changed the lives of my entire family. Before education, we knew only how to work. It was always very quiet in our home. My grandfather was a laborer, but he paid to send my father to a tutor so that he could learn to read. He told my father that, if nothing else, he should begin by learning how to read and write his name. When I was born, my father taught me how to read. I

started with local newspapers. I learned that our village was part of a country. Then I moved on to books. And I learned that there was an entire world around this mountain. I learned about human rights. Now I'm studying political science at the local university. I want to be a teacher."

(Hunza Valley, Pakistan)

By not acquiring basic reading skills in the Foundation Phase students are effectively "silently excluded" from learning since they struggle to engage with the curriculum in higher grades and fall further and further behind even as the curriculum and the textbooks steam roll ahead. And apart from the curriculum, these children are condemned to only know about their immediate surroundings, not being able to read and even if they can read, not having any books TO read .

While there are many challenges in the South African education system, the fact that most students do not learn to read fluently and with comprehension by the end of grade 3 - in any language - is arguably *the* binding constraint to improved educational outcomes for the poor. This is the conclusion from a large study we are doing for Presidency and the European Union. Unless these students can crack the code of basic reading and writing they will be forever disadvantaged and in perpetual catch up mode.

So it's prudent to ask "Why focus on reading in the Foundation Phase?"

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And the short answer is that all future learning depends on being able to read quickly and accurately. It is no coincidence that the major goal of the Foundation Phase is for children to learn how to read, and that from grade 4 onwards they use the skill of reading to "read to learn" and acquire new information about their subjects. The problem is that if you haven't learnt to read, you cannot read to learn. This is why the VW Foundation goal of ensuring all children are functionally literate by age 10 is such an important one. This is the age when children simply **MUST** have learnt how to read.

[SLIDE]

In South Africa we have an infantile obsession with the matric exam. We love to focus on matric. The pass rate, the number of bachelor passes, the quality, etc. But this focus

on the end of the system is incorrect. The real problem in South Africa's education system is that children are not acquiring the basic skills of learning to read for meaning in the Foundation Phase and how to use the 4 operations with dexterity and understanding. That is the much bigger part of the ice-berg.

And part of the reason we do not see the problem so much is because so many of our children never reach matric in the first place. If we look at the matric class of 2014 and looked at how many students started school 12 years ago the results are staggering. Of 100 students that started school, 51 did not make it matric. 12 reached matric and failed, 23 reached matric and passed, and 14 reached matric and qualified to go to university.

And I want to stress that this is not just "education" problem. Children who cannot read properly eventually drop out of school and either become unemployed or can only have very menial jobs. Let me show you how the South African education system and the labour-market are connected. We start out with a very unequal society....

[Discussion about cogs and triangle]

Let's now look at reading specifically. I don't want to spend much time speaking about the components of reading, partially because there many reading experts here who would do a better than me and also because I want to move on to books. I include this slide only to show that there is a large body of research evidence – both locally and internationally – documenting how children learn how to read. They need Phonemic awareness – understanding the sounds in words; the alphabetic principle about the relations between letters and sounds – as well as vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. And of course children should also be taught to love reading and see it as an enjoyable activity.

I want to show you some research from a large study conducted by the Department of Basic Education called Verification ANA 2013. It looked at nationally and provincially representative samples of schools with 2021 schools in total.

[SLIDE]

Closing remarks

Firstly I want to commend the VW Foundation for selecting an excellent goal. I cannot think of a more important goal than the one you have chosen

Secondly I want to caution you to be aware of the political context of the Eastern Cape. The educational bureaucracy in this province is totally dysfunctional. The interests of teachers and politicians are regularly put far ahead of the interests of children. Because of post-provisioning problems the budget is totally out of control.

Thirdly I want to say that no education system can move beyond its teachers, at least not in the long run. We need to give our teachers meaningful learning opportunities and teach them how to teach reading. There needs to be higher quality training and more accountability.

Lastly I want to re-affirm the goal that you have set yourselves. You have the buy-in of both the community and the Department. Stick to your goal. Never give up! Whether it takes you 5 years, 10 years or 20 years to achieve it. All children in these communities **will** be functionally literate by the age of 10. We are setting ourselves the essential goal: Every child must read!

Thank you