



REPORT on THE RASA & PARFA 2015 CONFERENCE

The Reading Association of South Africa and the Pan-African Reading for All Conference was held at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town from 2nd – 5th September. The theme was Imagination and Literacy. SchoolNet's D G Murray Trust project, Learning Gains through Play project fitted this theme well and, therefore, a project team of six was selected to make a presentation. The team included Noxolo Buyeye (Solomon Qatyana Primary) Nthabiseng Hlela (Nogqaza Primary) Ella Klaasens (Temperance Town Primary) Hlengiwe Mfeka, Janet Thomson from SchoolNet and Tracey Butchart, the LGP, project evaluator.

Opening plenary



Top: David Harrison at Opening plenary.
Bottom: David Harrison answering questions and Bottom right: The Nal'ibali team.

The conference was huge, with simultaneous sessions being held in 9 venues. As part of the opening plenary we were treated to a presentation by our current benefactor, David Harrison

from the D G Murray Trust. His talk was entitled, “Reading between the lines that divide society.”

David held the attention of the audience well. His message was short and sweet and focused on inequalities and the need to address literacy in the early years. He shared two challenges faced, firstly to grow individuals and secondly to create a thriving society. By means of a series of graphs, starting with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, he illustrated the extent of poverty and how literacy and education can lift people out of poverty. Depressingly, the graphs showed how children in poverty fall further and further behind those more privileged. He concluded that the key to creating thriving societies was through empathy, using critical thinking and imagination, imagination being the theme of the RASA conference. In relation to this imagination theme, David stated that ‘Play is a story in action’ which understandably resonated with the objectives of our Learning Gains project.

The keynote for the opening morning was given by the Nal’ ibali Group from PRAESA (Project for the study of alternative education) from UCT and led by Carol Bloch, Ntombizanele Mahobe and Malusi Ntoyapi. They shared insights into their Nal’ ibali campaign that has been running since 2001. www.nalibali.org. The memorable statements from this presentation was that we should ‘find a purpose in being playful’.

The SchoolNet team were presenting at 13:00 and had not yet met to discuss how our session should unfold. Therefore, we converged on our venue and spent some time solving the technical issues with the data projector and the sound with the university technicians.



The presentation team - with the technician



Janet introducing the main aims of the project



Nthabi presenting – Deb and Fiona in the picture



Noxolo Presenting

Our presentation

The programme clash with lunch was unfortunate and while the venue did fill up in the second half of the presentation, it was disappointing that it was not better planned and thus better

attended. The video of Adele Driessen telling the story of a below-average learner using the Xbox in her class was shown early and started the presentation on a strong note. All three teachers showed videos of their classrooms and Noxolo and Nthabi spoke authoritatively about their experiences and their learners. Nthabi's topic was demonstrating how the teaching strategy of learning stations works with tablets in her classroom. Her video is on the SchoolNet YouTube channel here http://youtu.be/8h_SAV9saXk Noxolo's class was using a classic stories app and showed the learners listening intently to Little Red Riding Hood being narrated in a very English accent.



Ella let her video do the talking; it demonstrated a well-organised and effective lesson with her class on the letter 'A' using tablets.

Hlengiwe was suffering from flu but still managed to make a great presentation about the implementation of the project.

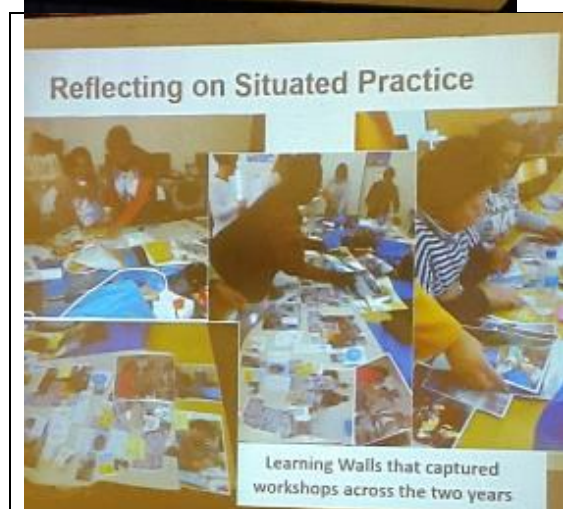
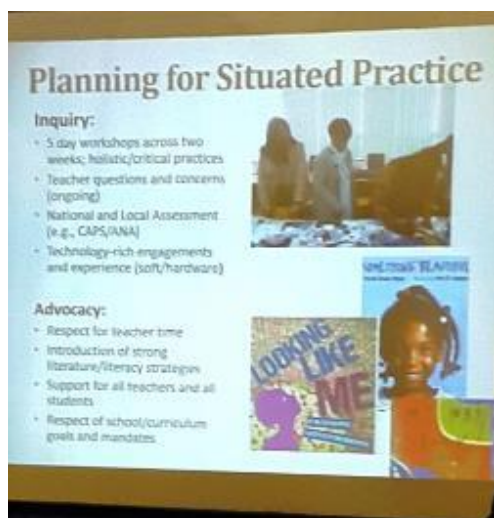
Tracey wrapped up our presentation by summarising her most recent (July) findings. Most of the data was so convincingly positive in favour of the project schools in contrast to the control schools, that the project team as well as Katie from the DGMT felt a sense of achievement.



Other sessions

Imagining the impossible: situated communities of practice in teacher professional development settings

A group of three American researchers, A Flint, M Matthews and P Albers presented on situated learning and the communities of practice they had established in one school in Paarl in the Western Cape. Their intervention comprised professional development held only on Monday and Tuesday afternoons with all 9 teachers at the school. They included lots of singing and always ended with a story. The training sounded very teacher-centred because they based the topics on teachers' expressed needs at exit interviews after each session. They showed a video of a song they use a lot - *'I look in the mirror'* by Ella Jenkins. The focus of the training was to promote readers comprehension, word reading and fluency development.



Their approach to technology was very calm and thorough, expecting it to be used gradually and taking into consideration the fact that the teachers had not been exposed to it previously. They emphasised that technology was a big part of their project with each classroom receiving two laptops and a data projector. They use Facebook a great deal for teacher interaction as well as WhatsApp but were not able to make use of Skype. Their teachers now love Wordle and the digital camera was their best resource. It had taken two years from never having had any experience of technology in the classroom to using it seamlessly and with confidence.

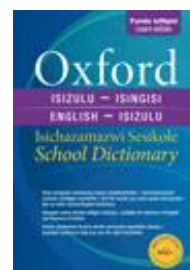


An interesting innovation was what they called, 'a learning wall' where teachers post or pin collages of photos taken during the life of the project. This learning wall effectively plots project progress and documents change. Left is a photo of those teachers who were all presenting at the conference.

African Language Publishing for Children: a story about stories

The evening plenary was given by Prof. Viv Edwards from the University of Reading in the UK. She is a multilingual and applied linguistics expert who mainly researches the use of languages in the classroom. She has worked extensively in Africa and clearly values indigenous languages. Her presentation took the form of a story with a 'Once upon a time' beginning about an evil king in a land where he greedily guarded its many resources. It was a very cleverly constructed interpretation of South Africa's history, of the treatment of language by the various governments, the traumatic events that unfolded around Afrikaans, the apartheid government, the 13 official languages and up to the present day. It was a very long story but she said it was up to us to ensure that it has a happy ending.

Oxford University Press who were sponsoring the conference then hosted the evening function and presented their new living dictionaries in North Sotho and isiZulu. Prof. Khumalo from UKZN spoke well. It was unfortunate, but very common when speeches are made at cocktail parties that nobody listens. The dictionaries looked excellent and it was clear that a great deal of research and funding had been invested in these publications.

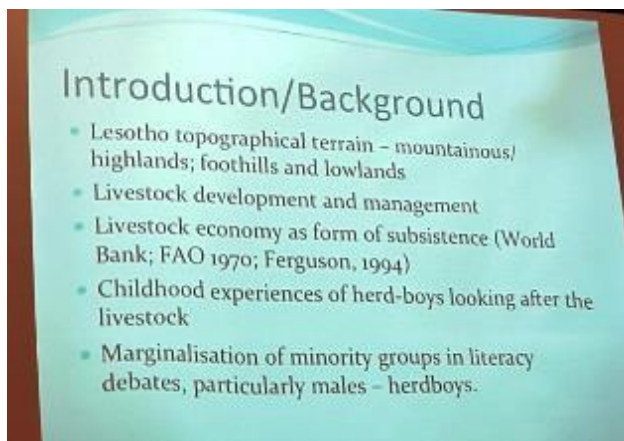


Literacy and the Imagination: working with place and space as resources for children's learning

The Day 2 morning plenary was presented by Prof Barbara Comber from Queensland University of Technology who spoke about Literacy and Imagination and exploring place and space as resources for children's learning.

Cultural and social uses of functional literacy. A narrative approach

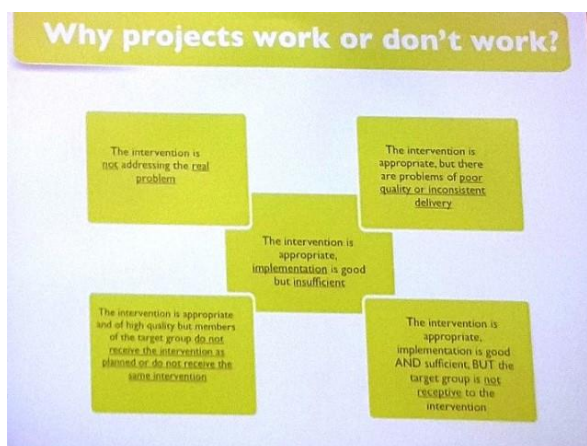
An interesting paper researching literacy among herd boys in Lesotho was presented by Lineo Johnson. It was entitled, 'Cultural and social uses of functional literacy' These slides explain her approach that was based on Paolo Freire's work on cultural influences on literacy.



Lineo Johnson – Cultural and social uses of functional literacy

Literacy Puzzle: What works?

The Zenex Foundation Literacy Project team shared their experiences in the Literacy project they are doing in three Provinces namely; KZN, WC and EC. This was an interesting presentation as it shared certain similarities with our LGP project. It was interesting to learn how they do their TPD including their mentoring programme with the teachers and SMT's in their project schools – photo slides says it all.



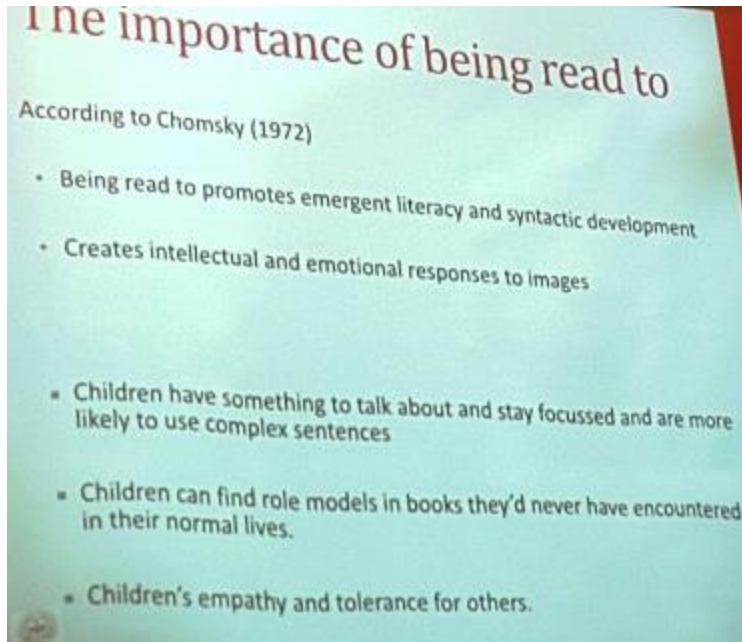
- Being a coach requires.....**
- A close one-on-one relationship with a teacher
 - Modelling behaviour, attitudes and skills
 - Ability to listen deeply
 - Ability to ask powerful questions
 - A belief that the teacher can change
 - That you hold teachers accountable for actions they have decided on
 - A lot of patience

DOSAGE				
Components	Delivery Partner	Target Group	Days	Unpacking & Alignments
1. Leadership, Management & Coaching	New Leaders Foundation	Train 32 HOD's (3 provinces) Train and supervise (onsite + telephonic) 15 Service Providers (& District Officials)	2 days * 3 Prov = 6 days 5+5 days (Jan + April)	Coaching and management content customized and contextualized for SCHOOLS and LITERACY and ALIGNED with project components
2. Literacy teaching	Literacy Experts + Service Providers	Train 225 Teachers (91 in WC/ 71 in EC/ 63 in KZN)	8 days (4 * 2)	PCK content framework and materials. Co facilitated with SP's
3. In classroom teacher coaching and support	Service Providers	Coach and support teachers (215) (96 available days)	4 days (1 per quarter) per teacher per school = 4 * 236	Structured engagement
4. Coaching of HOD's in schools	Service Providers	Coach and support 32 HOD's	4 coaching sessions (Term 2)	Structured engagement
5. Books and classroom resources	Providers deliver to central point	Classrooms and schools	Term 3	

- Structure of in-service training**
- 4 workshops per year – between 1 ½ and 2 days in length – facilitated by university trainers and coaches (isiZulu-English, isiXhosa-English and English-Afrikaans bilinguals)
 - Teachers attend in school groups with their HoDs
 - Followed up with visits to schools by coaches (each teacher receives 6-8 coaching visits per year)
 - Evaluation of workshops by independent evaluators, providing feedback to trainers and informing subsequent workshops

“Reading aloud as a way to develop literacy in very young children.”

Research that studied this phenomenon was presented by Rhulani Nkuna from the READ Foundation. Her slides were engaging because they included so many photos of children using their imaginations. The study was set in deep rural Limpopo outside of Mopani where children have very few learning resources. However if young children are in the habit of being read to then they learn to visualise and therefore are more able to use their imagination when they learn to read and in turn gain far more from the reading experience.



Rhulani Nkuna from the READ Foundation

An interesting consideration that Rhulani emphasised was the need to provide space for children to demonstrate physically what they have heard while listening and thus deepen their understanding and cultivate their imaginations. This is a photo where the children are acting out the visit to the doctors and using a pretend stethoscope and prescribing medication.



The presentation which followed this by Hilary Janks and K Dixon threw up a range of concerns around university administration and particularly highlighted the lack of concern for student teacher experiences in their own environment in the School of Education at Wits.

Improving literacy with a Reading-to-dogs programme: supporting learners who struggle to read

Micheal-Lucien Le Cordeur presented on a Reading-to-dogs project conducted by his master's student from Stellenbosch University. The study was done by the student with a grade 3 class struggling with reading. She visited the learners with her dog once a week for 3 months. Struggling to read learners were each given 10 minutes to read to the dog alone. Her findings were 1. Learners were not scared to read because there was no one to judge their reading abilities. 2. Self-esteem and confidence were built and attained. 3. Learners were given a platform to practice reading. 3. The relaxed environment without pressure encouraged learners to want to try and also provided stimulation. During discussion and answering questions, we all agreed that a toy, a teddy bear or anything that a child loves and trusts can be used. This is one of many strategies that can develop and contribute to improving learners' reading skills.

How curriculum design might influence instructional design (and impact on imaginative literacy practices): the case of English First Additional Language (FET)

This was very interesting research presented by Duma Sithebe and Jean Moore from Umalusi office on challenges and restrictions presented by the CAPS specifically on imaginative literacy practices.



Some of the challenges and restrictions mentioned were:

- CAPS is content driven and teacher centred – it is not flexible nor context sensitive
- Lessons are driven by textbook, based on the suggested lesson plans
- Strong emphasis on tests and examinations which may limit imagination and creative responses
- The CAPS weekly plans have been oversimplified

It was explained that the above restrictions have negative effects both on teachers and learners, so much so that learners are expected to receive, more than to produce. This highlighted the fact that there is little room for the use of the imagination by teachers or by learners in the learning process.

The conclusion made was that CAPS does not support imaginative and appropriate literacy practices. These were very interesting recommendation put forward by the two presenters, captured in the two slides below. Again these recommendations were highly relevant to our work in the Learning Gains project but also in other SchoolNet projects that with curriculum issues.

Recommendations:

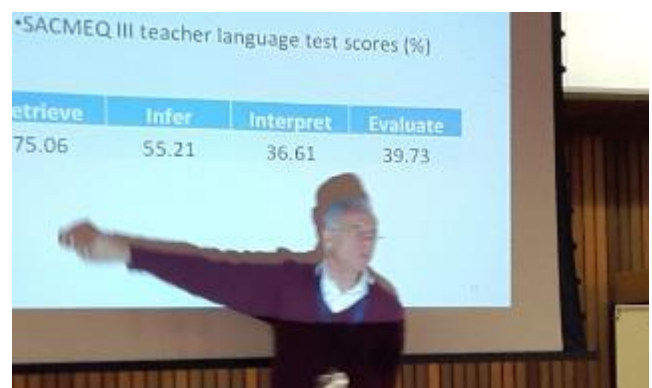
- NGOs and individuals who work in or with schools need to be aware of the pressures that a fast-paced, broad and highly specified curriculum places on teachers. They may not be able to see how an imaginative literacy intervention or programme can be made to 'fit'. Literacy development practitioners should know the curriculum well enough to find imaginative ways of embedding their programme or experience into an apparently unyielding curriculum.

Recommendations:

- The weekly teaching plans are described in the policy document as *suggested* teaching plans (our emphasis.) "Please note that these are only **EXAMPLES** of how to organise the teaching.." (CAPS,57.)
- Although the plans are presented in the textbooks, and are often spoken about by DBE officials as "required", this is a notion that should be resisted and challenged, in order to maintain some degree of responsiveness to learners' and teachers' needs.

Early Literacy: South African teacher educators reading from the same page.

M Metcalfe, C Verbeek, K Dixon and N Taylor presented this session. The full presentation is available here: <https://goo.gl/GKHLLw> Mary Metcalfe explained that a group of academics involved in Foundation Phase teacher education had met at Mont Fleur, Stellenbosch and conceptualised a statement related to initial foundation phase teacher education (later referred to as IP). Two definitions or views around the definition of literacy had emerged among the group who were now seeking broader input into this debate as well as feedback on a proposed Foundation Phase pre-service course content. The overall aim of this process was to improve (and standardise?) pre-service teacher education for foundation phase and to start plotting the crucial components of a possible course structure. This could then be developed, using the most appropriate pedagogy and provide a resource bank of OER materials. The full Mont Fleur document including the two views of literacy as well as the proposed course structure is available on the SchoolNet drive here <https://goo.gl/cZWJ4X>



Following a brief discussion of the two views of literacy espoused in the document, Mary encouraged attendees to write down their own definitions of literacy and pass them to their neighbours for feedback and input and refining. We were then given the opportunity to add wording to aspects of the outlines of literacy that were pasted around the room, Gallery Walk style. Of course because of our Learning Gains focus, we added the broader considerations

of movement literacies and visual literacies and people following us added musical and artistic literacies. So the debate continues but we definitely fell into the 'View 2' camp.

Rethinking teaching and learning in early childhood development

This presentation was given by Karina Strydom from Brain Boosters which she described as a non-profit organisation. <http://www.brainboosters.co.za/about-us/founders/21-founders1>

She explained how she had been a high school teacher but her fascination with early childhood development came about because both of her sons were born with club feet and she felt the need to research more about cognitive development in early childhood because she felt that growing up they would have to compensate for their disabilities. As it turned out they both thrived and went to universities leading normal lives. She outlined the interactive methods that she uses around the process of learning to read and emphasised that neuroscience had a strong influence on their instructional design. She made very interesting examples of "incorrect" strategies that teachers tend to use to teach reading e.g. using an object to teach a concept which creates confusion for a learner. In between she showed interesting videos of schools/learners who were currently using brain boosters and how quickly they learnt to read, make sentences and counting as early as 3yrs old. Brain Boosters is currently operating in 27 schools in South Africa.

Is it really working in Zambia?

The presenter was Ms Ng'oma, obviously from Zambia but presenting data that was already at least 5 years out of date. The topic was related to primary teacher education and included many stats on schools and teachers reached but the presentation was classic death by PowerPoint, cliff faces of text, the presenter reading the text and bullets that kill.

Engaging Imaginations in learning literacy

The next plenary featured Dr. Kieran Egan, a keynote speaker via video from Canada. Kieran is a professor in the Faculty of Education, Co-Director of the Imaginative Education Research Group (IERG) at the Simon Fraser University and Canadian Research Chair in Cognitive Development and the Curriculum. His talk was entitled, "*Engaging Imaginations in learning literacy*" and for me this was one of the best presentations of the conference. The focus was on oral cultures and how they impact on children's literacy and specifically their engagement in reading. He highlighted the fact that teachers tend to ignore many of the most important features of how children learn and acquire literacy. His first topic was jokes and how children love jokes no matter how weak. He pinpointed what appeals to the imagination of children and how much fun teachers could have if they tapped into this instead of the sausage factory or car production conveyor belt mentality that schools tend to have. He provided some excellent examples of misuse of punctuation and certainly used his imagination by thinking up hilarious examples to use in lessons. He touched on metaphor, binary opposites, children's sense of story, sense of humour, rhyme, games, play, what sort of weird heroes children are drawn to (e.g. (the talking) Peter Rabbit, teletubbies and Superman) and how vast their imaginations can be when stimulated, rather than bored.



Somatic: the body's toolkit

- Bodily senses
- Emotional responses & attachments
- Humor & expectations
- Musicality, rhythm, & pattern
- Gesture & communication
- Intentionality

"little factories of understanding"
Fred Rogers

It is hoped that those academics grappling to define literacy were listening to Kieran.

Digital Technologies and Literacy Learning: what do we know about what works – and what doesn't."

A really refreshing presentation came from Bill Teale, who is a professor at the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He teaches courses on early literacy and young adult literature at the master's and doctoral levels. He has authored more than 150 publications on literacy and has served on the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association. He will become president of the International Literacy Association in 2016. His presentation was refreshing in that its starting point was that 'technology has fundamentally changed literacy' and that literacy and technology have a ying-yang relationship.

The full presentation popped up in [Goggles](#) and linked to the university site - as soon as I snapped the first slide – what a professional presenter! <http://goo.gl/dx0AJ0>

As you may see from his presentation, the answer to the question in the title of his presentation was, 'a bit but not much'. He gave information on a broad range of apps for early literacy and warned about the quality and efficacy of some of them, particularly those which merely test and reward without involving any teaching. In a conference atmosphere that at times seemed to shun all learning technologies and be of the view that children should too, it was reassuring that a wise professor was asserting that digital literacy was part of being literate. After his presentation he diplomatically expressed concern about academics who held the view that children prefer books to technology. Deb Avery reaffirmed our position on this by quoting David Crystal, the British linguistics academic who confirmed that children are not reading less – it is just that they are not reading the same things or the same way that the older generation did. David Crystal has also researched texting and written a book entitled, 'Txtng: The Gr8 Db8' where he asserts that texting actually improves people's literacy, as it provides more opportunity for people to engage with the language through reading and writing.

Reggio- inspired practice: new literacies and technologies in various Junior School contexts

Friday morning's keynote was by Des Hugo. She explained how the Italian philosophy called Reggio had inspired teachers to use technologies and new literacies. It had been developed by Loris Malaguzzi, who was a teacher in the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy



after the Second World War. The philosophy includes an emphasis on values education but also promotes a teaching methodology that relies on interaction, physical movement and a self-directed curriculum. The schools in South Africa have been using the Bee-Bot robot app to develop programming as well as problem-solving, sequencing and collaboration.

Friend, foe, accomplice, refining ICT in education practice

This presentation made by Kelly Shiohira, described a project in Limpopo that was funded by USAID. USAID had also funded the development of a digital app for this project by The Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy to be used in Sepedi. Kelly highlighted a number of obstacles in the implementation of this project. Their first mistake was imagining that the Limpopo provincial department of education would communicate with the district in which they were working. So there were a number of logistical breakdowns at the start of the programme. She pinpointed an underestimation of the dosage of teacher professional development that was required for this intervention as the teachers had no previous exposure to technology. Technical and software issues hampered the implementation further. Kelly admitted that their evaluation data did not seem to be reliable because in some cases the control schools made greater gains than the project schools and in some of the instruments there had been 0% gain. No doubt these anomalies would be remedied before the end of the project and the publication of findings.



This photo of our presentation team at the end of the conference does not include our leader, Hlengiwe Mfeka – she took the photo.

Each member of the team felt that they had benefitted from attendance at this conference and that many of the presentations we had seen would continue to inform our practice going forward in the project.

Janet, Nthabi, Hlengiwe, Ella, Noxolo and Tracey: September 9th 2015