



What are we doing right and what needs to change?

– Prof Vuyokazi Nomlomo (*University of Zululand*)

1. What are we doing right?

The dismantling of the numerous racially categorised schooling systems was one of the main achievements of South Africa after 1994. This was no mean feat.

South Africa has to be commended for her vision, and democratic educational policy frameworks that aim at enhancing inclusive and quality education post-apartheid. The National Development Plan 2030, for example, is a long-term vision to reduce inequalities and poverty in South Africa. This demonstrates the government's awareness of the value of education in alleviating poverty and advancing socio-economic growth and good health. However, when it comes to implementation, we are still far behind our vision.

Efforts have been made to support literacy teaching and learning over the past two decades of democracy. Collaboration with strategic partners to conduct large and small-scale projects to enhance early literacy and mathematics teaching and learning in basic education is commendable. Reading with meaning is prioritized as a key element of South Africa's vision to have literate citizens who are able to participate actively and meaningfully in socio-economic developments of this country.

2. What needs to change?

While good progress has been made in certain areas of education that include curriculum renewal, there are still glaring inequalities along racial and socio-economic status lines. Our schools are not diverse enough. Rural and township schools remain largely Black, accommodating essentially only home language speakers of African languages. And urban and suburban schools continue to have very few teachers who are home language speakers of African languages. Despite numerous attempts at curriculum renewal, equal access to educational opportunities remains a dream for many. This was starkly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many children in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases cannot read with meaning, and some read below the accepted grade level, even in their own home languages (Howie, et al., 2008; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). The Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) and Annual National Assessment (ANA) results attest to this problem which is attributed to inadequate teacher training, inappropriate teaching pedagogies, and lack of parental involvement (Howie, et al., 2008; Meiklejohn, et al., 2021).

Coordination and targeting of intervention programs: A number of literacy intervention programmes have been conducted in the various provinces, but they are ad hoc and not well coordinated with regard to their impact on learners' reading abilities (Meiklejohn, et al., 2021). In addition, many literacy intervention programmes often target urban and semi-urban or township schools, and this exacerbates the disadvantage of rural children who are already marginalized with regard to access to adequate infrastructure and teaching and learning resources.

The Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) remains a barrier in children's learning, especially when they transition to English LOLT in Grade 4 (Milligan, et al., 2020; Nomlomo, 2014). Why must they transition to English at Grade 4 level? Research by educationists such as Bamgbose (2005), Cummins (2007) and others indicates that it is far better for learners to continue with the home language as medium, at least till the end of Grade 6. The Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) initiative is an attempt to make African languages accessible to all learners, but it seems that it has not been sufficiently implemented and has yet to flourish. It would help if all teachers were sufficiently proficient in an African language so that they could assist all the learners in their classes.

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Recommendations:

The following are recommendations that could enhance children's reading for meaning by 2030:

1. **Investing in school and community reading programmes** that should be well-coordinated, monitored and evaluated for their impact. This exercise should be done both at provincial and national levels, and adequate financial and human resources have to be provided.
2. **Strengthening teacher professional development** with regard to the teaching of early reading in all South African languages. The teaching of reading in African languages should be targeted as there is still reliance on Western pedagogies in the teaching of reading.
3. **The current initiatives of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)** with regard to the establishment of Centres for African Language Teaching (CALTs) at different universities should be supported and sustained. These centres should be developed into research hubs for the teaching and learning of early literacy in African languages.
4. **As far as researching reading instruction in African languages is concerned**, it will be crucial to have reading intervention programmes and large-scale longitudinal projects to enhance the development of early literacy in these languages and how they can be used as valuable tools in the transition to English LOLT – whenever it happens.
5. **The possibility of prolonging the use of learners' home languages as LOLT up to at least the end of the Intermediate Phase**, with extra support for the teaching and learning of English as an additional language should be seriously considered. I refer you here to the successful longitudinal study done by the LOITASA Project in the Western Cape over a period of 10 years – 2002–2012 (Brock-Utne, Desai, Qorro & Pitman 2010).
6. **Partnering with universities to ensure that the teacher education curricula prioritize the teaching of early reading in different languages**, and foster multilingual pedagogies and biliteracy.
7. **Developing African languages for academic purposes and social inclusion.** Making African languages compulsory at school level for all learners who are English and Afrikaans speaking has long been debated in conferences without any resolution. This debate has to be resurrected.
8. **Effective implementation of IIAL should be prioritized** to ensure that all South African learners have access to African languages. As the DBE is promoting it so actively, it makes sense to look at this policy afresh.
9. **Strengthening strategic collaboration with different stakeholders** such as parents, community leaders and activists, government officials, academics, and NGOs on how to respond to the literacy crisis in a collective and effective manner.

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