

Befriending Education?

Education Partnerships: Initial Reading Instruction and Research at the UJ Institute of Childhood Education



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There is an exciting new vibrancy in varieties of partnerships with public education. In other articles in this issue of *Focus* some of these will be mentioned. In this article I will discuss aspects of an intervention in which practitioners and specialists across sectors come together in an integrated hub of learning, research, service and development. The Gauteng Department of Education’s foundation phase education specialists, a school’s community, a teacher education degree programme, and a university research team have started to collaborate. In this collaboration the participants aim not only to scaffold and to research young children’s entry into formal education, but to develop a new model of partnering with public school education. In this article I will look specifically at the issue of young learners’ first encounter with written language. The site of this research and development programme is the Funda UJabule¹ foundation phase school and the UJ Institute of Childhood Education on the Soweto campus of the University of Johannesburg.

At this university where I have been working since 1989, there have been a number of these educational development interventions, some of which have been successful, such as the Orange Farm INSET project in which more than 400 teachers were educated and trained for the profession on a part-time basis while they were working in community schools.² Nearly 300 of them qualified as teachers in a hybrid programme that was applauded at the time (1992 – 1997) as an innovative higher education endeavour. The other project that has proved to be successful beyond expectation is the Raucall Secondary School, which had its first intake of grade eight pupils in 1992 and which has consistently performed in the ‘high functioning’ category of public schools. In fact, in a survey of 2008 Grade 12 results it was the top school in mathematics, while it ranked fourth in science and seventh overall. The school has some of the characteristics of a US charter school, because it is a public school with its own ‘charter’ and partner. It also has some characteristics of a magnet school, as it draws from high performing youth and works on a contained and specialised curriculum with limited electives. Its predominantly black learner population from low-income families is evidence of how the poverty cycle can be broken through education. In this school a dedicated and well managed teacher corps educates adolescents from low-income families in townships, providing them with an environment that is conducive to learning and where the teachers are trusted.

Building on previous work, the UJ is embarking on another school education partnership in 2010 when the Funda UJabule Foundation Phase School will open its doors to the first cohort of 60 Grade R pupils on the Soweto campus of the University. There, within the Institute of Childhood Education, we will pilot another partnership with the Gauteng Department of Education. In this partnership the aim is not only to establish and nurture a high functioning school, but also to conduct longitudinal research on the young learners' development over four years. The school as a social organism will also be investigated by a team of researchers and by the teacher education students of the new foundation phase education degree programme on this campus. In addition, the school will be the University's practical training site for future teachers of the early grades, while also initiating projects for parents and families about the needs of the young child who is entering formal education. Learning in a formal setting is a group project – families, caregivers and teachers working together to guide young children towards early school success. After all, the best overall indicator of later school achievement and access to higher education is the performance in the third grade³. A strong foundation in literacy is an essential component of this performance.

Building a literacy bridge to formal learning

Until young children enter institutions for formal learning much of their learning is incidental. Few parents design a structured curriculum for their pre-school children. And few parents venture into the systematic teaching of literacy and numeracy in a curricular way. When young children enter school and have to learn that signs, such as letters from the alphabet, signify parts of words, the meaning of which they may know, they enter a different phase of their lives. In the rest of this article I will focus only on one aspect of this phase and how it is dependent on systematic instruction in a structured and secure environment at school and at home – an environment that scaffolds the young child and assists her/him in the drill and practice that is required to learn to read and write.

Literacy is a skill and like most skills it can be viewed as 'procedural knowledge,' a type of knowledge that scholars of learning argue can only be learned by practice, repetition, and by modelling. Skills can be taught, while some complex, abstract knowledge cannot be 'taught' so directly – it has to be accessed/'discovered' and constructed/made by individuals who have, in the words of Lev Vygotsky⁴, the 'higher psychological' skills to set in motion the procedural part of cognition that leads to discovery and personal construction of knowledge. Thus, although learning science concepts in the early grades may be a tactile and visual experience in some instances, young learners also have to talk about it, they have to read and write about it. Language and its literate (and numerate) forms are of great help to further understanding and also to present and articulate understanding.

But literacy, unlike oracy, does not emerge for the young child by just being in the world. It needs systematic instruction in a programme that comprises many different sets and sub-sets of skills. And with practice and repetition most of these skills can be learned. A young learner who has the potential to understand science or mathematics will have little chance to do so if she/he remains non-literate (also non-literate in numeracy) and does not have procedural knowledge skills to build theoretical frameworks for learning. Such frameworks are essentially the 'scaffolds' for building knowledge and the 'pegs on which to secure' this knowledge. Psychologists of learning such as Lev Vygotsky⁵ and Jerome Bruner⁶ respectively, use these metaphors to capture what happens when one learns. One such way of

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'scaffolding' and 'pegging' is the craft of reading.

Apart from reading for enjoyment, this craft comprising a wide array of skills, also mediates much of what a growing child learns in school. Writing in the early 20th century, Vygotsky developed the notion of 'semiotic mediation' to show how dependent a young learner is on engaging with the written word, in addition to using spoken language. He argued that literacy is a 'higher psychological tool.' In this vein Bruner (1990) proposed the idea that we use tools (and signs) as 'prostheses' of the mind. Literacy as a culturally transmitted tool, utilising the signing systems of a language, is such a prosthetic tool. When young children are ready to learn to use this tool they enter school and they enter a system of sign mediation that will come to a close when they are able to continue, incrementally, on their own on a personal reading trajectory. Young readers differ in the rate at which they learn to become independent readers and to increase their reading incrementally. But, to begin with, nearly all children need careful instruction, much repetition and monitoring and also a great deal of care and support.

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Early reading relationships, like other relationships of learning are internalised as part of the phenomenon of learning itself. Another Russian psychologist, Nikolai Veresov⁷ takes this argument further. As a Vygotskian scholar he sees learning as the internalisation of cultural practices and of the relationship with the people who are the mediators of culture. In other words, young children, when learning to read, not only internalise sound-letter relations, but human relations that they associate with reading. A teacher who works systematically, a home environment where the school work is overseen and strengthened, and a school where learning is valued are essential ingredients of a young child's formal education life. When children fail to learn to read it is almost always because school, or home, or both have failed them.

The first few years at school is the crucial time when young children learn how to identify and make meaning of print and thus learn how to access knowledge sources and how to appropriate them. They learn the skills of the psychological craft of reading. They learn the regularities – the rules of how to recognise parts of written language and how to put these parts together, gradually becoming more 'crafty' as they blend micro-skills. In English there are more than 500 rules that constitute blending of parts of word. According to Catherine Snow and Connie Juel⁸ the first rules, about 90 of them in the English language, are learned best systematically with the help of a teacher who follows a programme in a specific chronology⁹. Later on young readers start teaching themselves and learn incrementally by practice. Once they know some rules of connecting a phoneme (a small sound or sound grouping) with its graphemic (written) counterpart, they can put them together and identify words, usually by 'sounding them out' and pointing to them, thereby connecting mind, body and text. If this word has meaning because it is already in the vocabulary of a beginner reader, reading is accomplished. If the word is not yet semantically 'there', the skill of 'sounding out' is still valuable on its own, because the mechanics of early reading are as important as the meaning that is made, or the comprehension that is established. But, obviously, if the meaning of the word is already known, reading progresses more rapidly. Vocabulary in a language and phonological awareness are powerful components of the toolkit of a beginner reader.

Under the supervision of a teacher and with the help of family and caregivers,

children practice the identification of the rules and their use, and expand their emergent craft of reading. They read often boring words and phrases to lay a solid foundation for advanced reading. Print language and oral language connections have to be practised almost laboriously for them to become solid. When they are established, the speed of recognition increases and whole words and phrases are recognised in tandem, in what is known as 'distributed processes'. Thus, it is not as if one recognises a few words together at a glance. Rather, the brain has been trained to recognise the grapheme combinations as they were drilled and practised in initial reading and is able to process them in parallel. It can be compared to learning to drive a car: one learns individual skills incrementally, puts them together by practice and then drives with the brain processing many skills simultaneously in parallel, with mind and body becoming one in a fluid use of skills and cognition. Many of the decisions a skilled driver makes are made in the same type of distributed process as when one has established reading skills as part of firm neurological pathways.

Once young readers have taken off on a trajectory of initial reading and are successful, they become interested in stories and various topics and learn many additional phonics rules and word recognition skills on their own. If they are not successful, the sense of failure tends to inhibit self-directed reading and their motivation often diminishes as a result. This is usually when parents are called in to discuss their child's 'reading problem.' Some of the stepping stones are missing. If these stones have been laid haphazardly and if reading instruction has not been happening systematically, the process of learning to read becomes more challenging. If there is not consistent practice in and out of school, the process also slows down. If teachers have not been trained in the systematic teaching of reading, using a well-organised curriculum, it is unlikely that young children will learn to read effectively.

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The process of learning to read is also slowed down when young children do not know the language in which they learn to read well enough, or when they are exposed to many languages and have to decode different systems of rules of phonics. The sound systems of Setswana and English are different. Groupings of letters and of parts of words are different. Think of adult South Africans who know neither isiXhosa nor Sesotho and who struggle to read the words of the national anthem and to sound them out in (singing) reading, despite the fact that they may sing the words phonetically without written text quite well. Imagine how young children struggle to identify foreign sound systems.

Funda UJabule – A 'learn and be joyful' partnership?

This training and research school on the UJ Soweto campus will give researchers of early school education the opportunity to study reading development, among other components of the curriculum and of general school life. In a newly built school with unobtrusive recording technologies in the classrooms and with a full-time school researcher, the classroom life will be captured and annual cohorts of 60 children from grades R to three will be studied in various projects, most of which are longitudinal. Their language development and their entry into literacy will be captured and analysed. We will also, later on, identify possibilities for interventions in which we will 'experiment' with different ways of teaching and managing the school day of young learners. In terms of literacy education we hope to be able to forward suggestions for reading instruction after completion of research projects. We hope to collaborate with schools in the vicinity to form a cluster of research oriented schools.

Our approach to teaching reading at this school will be largely phonics-based, meaning that we will use small entities such as single sounds and groups of sounds in a systematic programme of building the mechanics of reading, coupled with the semantics. It will include the gradual introduction of English after Sesotho and isiZulu, which will be the two main first languages of the school. This is probably the biggest challenge for the practice we envisage as well as for the research. It is difficult in the best circumstances to move from spoken to written language. One can only imagine how hard it is to compound this early on with the introduction of yet another language and its spoken and written idiosyncracies.

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We should also not forget that young children have to master the signs of reading the knowledge system of mathematics at the same time as well. The written digit '2' is far removed from two blocks or two beads that signify number in the semantic-semiotic links of an individual learner. The written digit is also distant from the word 'two' as they are located in two different signing systems. These systems cross paths and if teaching is not structured and if teachers do not have an understanding of the different signing systems and the semiotic complexities with which young children have to deal they make easy assumptions about children's failure. Young brains have to make many new neural connections at the same time. If teachers are not systematic, organised practitioners, classroom practice becomes a nightmare. My own view of why mathematics in our schools is such a failure is that teachers have not been educated in what the complexities of the different signing systems involved for young children. Grade ones are immersed, all at once, in complex semiotic systems. The skills to survive in these systems and their abstractions need to be firm.

One of the innovations at Funda UJabule is an agreement with our partner, the GDE, to put teachers through a rigorous induction programme for a few weeks before they start teaching. The effectiveness of this induction will be researched with a view to replication in other schools as soon as possible, thereby extending the partnership to teacher development in other schools. The school's name, which can be translated as 'learn and be joyful,' is also its motto. In forging a relationship between teachers, young children and their families and caregivers we hope to see solid learning relationships internalised along with knowledge and skills, and we hope that there will be joy for the children while they build the foundations for their future learning.

A child's right to read and write

I have not yet seen any of the workbooks or the lesson plans that will be made available to all schools in the latest plan to address the 'crisis in education' and have just been informed that the tender for these books has been put on hold. I think this is a wise decision as a hurried compilation of materials may simply be a waste of money. These books have to be put together by experts of literacy and numeracy and a sample of teachers need to be consulted too. I would even like to have seen a small pilot programme to find out how the new tools are used and then refine them before mass distribution.

But, more than anything, I would like to see that teacher unions, while protecting the rights of teachers, do not ignore the rights of the child. Young children have a right to education. It is a nation's privilege to honour this right. It is such a pity that some unions do not agree with giving teachers a 'prescriptive' syllabus. There seems to be an assumption that a set syllabus, with work plans and lesson plans

for a teacher diminishes her/his professionalism and deprives her of the freedom to be a creative and independent teacher. This is fallacious. Teachers can be creative and independent and use syllabi, lesson plans and workbooks as tools to structure their day and their week and to see the logic of their programme of work. A teacher who has to create every single lesson on her own for every class that she teaches needs to be very experienced and needs a lot of time outside school hours to prepare. If a set of lesson plans and workbooks are supplied, she can spend more time on interacting with the pupils and keep a good tab on their progress. She can forge an educational relationship instead of a bureaucratic one, as has been the case of late.

I would hope that non-educational agendas will not obstruct this latest effort to revive good teaching and to increase functionality of schools. But, more importantly, I would hope that labour organisations are not going to obstruct the learning of young children who have only one chance to be an initial reader. If they miss this opportunity the country will have to spend large amounts on remedial work, most of which will not be necessary if grade one and two teachers are supported in the use of structured reading programmes with adjoining lesson plans and workbooks. If teacher development programmes,

such as the one we are implementing in 2010, invite them to work after school hours I would also hope that there will be no labour obstructions.

As well as supporting teachers, I hope time and thought will be devoted to developing programmes for parents, grandparents and community structures such as churches, to enable them to partner child and school in the development of this crucial reading foundation. Especially where there is a deficit in parents' or grandparents' own educational and literacy attainments, they need to be reassured that they have a crucial role to play in their children's learning, and given tools to enable them to play it.

If the children do not learn to read at the appropriate age, neither state nor society can function properly. Both state and society have essential roles to play in making sure this happens. The UJ Institute of Childhood Education could be an institutional partnership that could not only provide education, service and research opportunities, but also yield research findings that could help to systematically structure early literacy (and other) education. Situated on the Soweto campus it may also become both an intellectual and professional hub for educationists whose focus is early school education in this area of the city.

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NOTES

- ¹ The 'UJ' in UJabule refers to the University of Johannesburg
- ² These schools were similar to current conceptions of PEP schools in the ISASA system – see the article by Jane Hofmeyr and Lindsay McCay in this issue.
- ³ Barber and Mourshed 2007; Gravett, Morgan and Henning, 2009
- ⁴ Vygotsky, 1978, 1992
- ⁵ Vygotsky, 1992; Kozulin, 1990
- ⁶ Bruner, 1990
- ⁷ Veresov, 2004.
- ⁸ Catherine Snow and Connie Juel, 2005
- ⁹ There are different methods of initial reading instruction, but Snow, like many others who work in multilingual contexts, advises this ('phonics') approach, coupled with later 'whole language' methods.