

# Indigenous language learning and a reading culture are the keys to solving SA's literacy challenges

**The recent release of the findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) understandably sent shockwaves through South Africa's education sector with its revelation that as many as 78% of our country's Grade Four learners are, essentially, illiterate**

**O**f course, much finger-pointing ensued, with many people placing the blame for South Africa's poor showing on many international education indices squarely on the shoulders of the education ministry, teachers and even parents. However, while some of the fault undoubtedly lies with all these education stakeholders, in order to fully understand the troubling study results, you really need to dig a little deeper into them.

If one looks beyond the overall findings at the testing results for the individual languages, it becomes clear that the learners performed much better at reading in English and Afrikaans than in any of the other official South African languages. This was the case even for the learners for whom English and Afrikaans aren't first languages. While the overall scores in these

languages were still not fully of an acceptable standard, they were much closer to the standard than the results for any other languages, such as Venda, Sotho, isiZulu, and isiXhosa.

This discrepancy in the results across languages highlights one of the most significant problems that is hindering South Africa's progress in education, and that is that the vast majority of our learners are not being taught to read and write in the indigenous languages they speak at home. There are two aspects to this challenge. The first is that learning materials in indigenous languages are still very difficult to come by in South Africa. The second is that most indigenous languages that are spoken by learners are not pure versions of those languages.

Many are a combination, or hybrid, of different languages and dialects, which means that when these learners are faced with the pure

version of the language that they supposedly speak—as was the case with these tests—there is a lot that they simply fail to understand.

Adding to the challenges facing these children is the fact that there are still very few aspirant teachers who are including indigenous language learning as part of their pedagogic qualifications. Even for first language speakers of these indigenous languages, there still seems to be a stigma attached to including them as a component of the typical education degree or diploma. This is just one of the many negative legacies of Apartheid, given that indigenous languages were looked down on during that period in South Africa's history and these negative perceptions still have not fully been reversed.

Another Apartheid legacy issue that continues to negatively influence education outcomes is undoubtedly a significant disparity

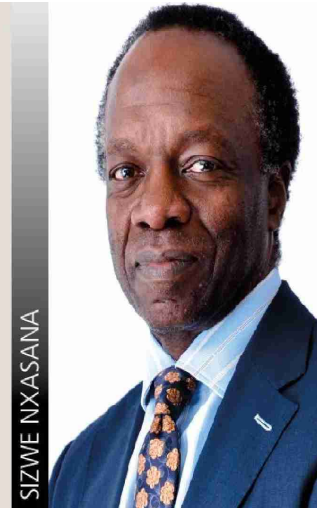
that still exists in terms of the resourcing of schools. The impact of this under-resourcing, particularly of schools in rural and informal residential areas, is abundantly clear from the study results, as learners from these schools performed significantly worse than their peers from well-resourced education institutions that have sufficient textbooks and offer access to computers and reading material.

Exacerbating the impact of this general under-resourcing of schools in poorer areas is the lack of reading culture that exists in lower-income households. It's not unrealistic to say that parents who are struggling financially tend to read less, if only because the conditions in which they live, coupled with a lack of access to reading materials, make it difficult to do so. Young family members see this behaviour modelled and tend to also read significantly less than their peers from more affluent households where reading is more likely to be modelled.

A very concerning adjunct to this is the large difference in reading abilities between boys and girls evidenced by the research. On average, the reading comprehension abilities of boys in Grade Four are more than 50 points

lower than that of girls in the same age group. This significant lag amongst boys highlights a disturbing societal issue in South Africa. Across almost all cultures in our country, it seems that reading is not deemed to be as important, or even acceptable, for boys as it is for girls. This cultural abnormality isn't unique to young learners; we still find evidence of it amongst people of all ages. One simply has to look at how many male book clubs exist for proof of this fact.

Ultimately, this combination of the under-resourcing of schools, very little focus on indigenous language teaching and learning materials, and a lingering lack of reading culture lies at the heart of South Africa's dishearteningly high illiteracy levels. The good news, of course, is now that this study has afforded us these insights into the causes of poor reading levels at our schools, we are able to formulate an effective strategy to address the challenges. However, in order for such a strategy to be effective, it will require the support of all our country's education stakeholders and a willingness by both the public and private sectors to invest significantly into improving our nation's education outcomes. ▲



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