



Recent international studies have shown that 78% of grade 4 children in South Africa are not able to read with understanding, even when they read in their own language. (Madelene Cronje/M&G)

OPINION

How you can be part of the solution to our literacy crisis

[Shelley O'Carroll](#) 27 Nov 2018 00:00

I lead a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that supports early literacy in under-resourced communities. I've been doing this work for 13 years, and, while many people living, working and volunteering in our beneficiary communities have approached us to partner on programmes and use our materials, I often wonder why this work doesn't have more support from South Africans who have the means to contribute.

I am also a mother of a child in grade 4 — a 10-year-old who has grown up with bookshelves of books and who we have talked and read with since he was weeks old. He attended a well-resourced preschool, has had the benefit of quality teaching in primary school and there was never a doubt that he would learn to read and write.

And yet for so many mothers in South Africa, their child learning to read is not a given. Recent international studies have shown that 78% of grade 4 children in South Africa are not able to read with understanding, even when they read in their own language. How would it be if eight of my son's 10 friends weren't able to read? Wouldn't we feel compelled to do something? And so why aren't we?

It feels as if we've been told about Day Zero but either are not sure what to do in response or because we still have water in our taps, because we can afford boreholes and rain tanks; because our children can read, we are not mobilised to act.

Why doesn't our literacy crisis assume the same level of urgency and mobilise the same level of sustained resourcing as the drought in Cape Town? I've thought quite a bit about why there isn't more individual giving in response to the literacy crisis we face. Here are my thoughts on why more people aren't doing more, and some suggestions for making a contribution.

I pay my taxes; education is government's responsibility

It is easy to blame the government, and there is no question that the government has failed our children. However, there are also many people in government who are working tirelessly to improve things. No matter how much tax you pay and how well it gets used, the truth is the government can't solve this crisis. Not this year, nor next year, nor in my lifetime.

This is not government's problem alone — it is every South African's problem. Government spend hasn't been able to shift literacy results significantly in 24 years of democracy. There are many reasons for this, but it is partly because investment in children's literacy development in this country only begins when they start formal schooling, while learning to read and write is a process that begins long before children arrive in grade 1. The literacy crisis cannot be solved in schools alone.

South Africa spends only 1% of its public education budget on early learning. While the department of social development provides a small per head subsidy for children in early childhood development centres, early learning is held by tens of thousands of women working tirelessly under difficult working conditions and with limited resources.

There is no state delivery system for early education and almost no provision for parents who want to learn more about how to support their children's learning at home. To date, state interventions to improve literacy have largely focused on grades 1 upwards, while the time children spend at school in grades 1 and 2 accounts for less than 10% of their waking hours from birth to eight years.

We haven't even started to see what difference we could make if we really invested in quality early learning opportunities for younger children in the time they spend at home, in community settings, and early learning centres. This is where civil society can and must step in and this is where we can make our contribution to a better future for our children.

Isn't this the work of philanthropists and CSI departments?

Yes, there many NGOs leading donor-funded projects to improve literacy. However, almost every NGO I know could be doing more if there was more funding. Many international foundations have moved elsewhere and in the current economic climate, corporate donors have less to give. There are fewer and fewer open calls for funding and NGOs who are making a valuable contribution to our country are having to scale back at a time when the need is as great as ever.

Civil society has always extended beyond NGOs — it includes everyone invested in making this country better. The struggle for democracy was won by ordinary people taking a stand against an injustice that could not be tolerated. A generation of young children not able to read is another injustice that we must not accept.

There isn't a lot of spare cash these days

There is enough. We're not looking for a major investment by an individual, just for those that have the means to contribute a small amount of what they spend monthly on nonessentials. 1 000 people x R200 a month x 12 months = R2.4-million; 5 000 people x R200 a month x 12 months = R12-million. A relatively small individual contribution can become part of sustaining and growing the reach of organisations that are making a meaningful difference to children's literacy.

Why is this my problem?

As a parent of children who easily learnt to read by virtue of a well-resourced home and quality schooling, it seems important that I step forward and make the literacy crisis my problem too. With the majority of children not able to read for meaning by grade 4, what hope do we have of things changing in this country?

If I want a better future for my child in South Africa, I must be prepared to give of my time and resources to raise awareness and contribute to initiatives to improve literacy for every child in this country. This is a crisis that demands an urgent and sustained response from all South Africans.

Why giving is important to those that give

Last week I visited a school where volunteer tutors from the community work with grade 1 children who are struggling with reading and writing. Watching the children who'd made progress in the tutoring programme, I realised how this small contribution was going to be life changing for them. I am lucky enough to work in a sector where I have daily reminders of what is possible through our work and the work of our partners. I am often reminded of how good it is for my wellbeing for me to see this, and how it helps me to make sense of my life of privilege amidst so much need in our country. I need to be part of making a contribution for my own good as much as for the good of those who benefit from what I contribute.

With all this corruption how will I know my money will be well used?

Most NGOs have a website and Facebook page that will give you a good sense of the range of the work and the extent of their reach. A few quick questions to an NGO, such as those below, will also help to reassure you that your investment will be carefully managed.

- Do you share evidence of your effectiveness and your learning?;
- Who do you partner with? Are you part of a network with other NGOs?;
- Are your finances audited and do you publish your financial statements on your website?;
- Are there donors who have supported you over a number of years? Can you provide a recent reference?; and
- Are you listed on platforms for giving (for example, givengain.com and forgood.co.za)?

Convincing answers to these questions should give an individual donor a sense of confidence.

So what can South Africans do?

- Make a contribution to one of the many NGOs working in the literacy space. Consider giving a monthly contribution, but do more. Read newsletters, follow Facebook pages, be inspired by young children who are eager to learn, and by the commitment of those who are working in this space.

We have a number of different options on our website for making a contribution to our work ([//www.wordworks.org.za/category/support-us/](http://www.wordworks.org.za/category/support-us/)) as well as a list of NGO's who we partner with to support early literacy: wordworks.org.za/category/our-network/.

Literacy is being supported in so many ways by these partners: through support for teachers; home-visitors encouraging parents to talk to and read to their babies and young children; volunteer-led tutoring programmes for children at risk of not making progress in reading; NGOs working with early childhood development forums or supporting a group of early childhood

development centres; NGOs translating, publishing and distributing books for young children.

- Contact an early childhood development centre and ask what resources they need to do their job better and reach more children. Every centre could do with more age-appropriate, multilingual children's books. Contact us at info@wordworks.org.za for a list of great locally published books for young children.
- Make it your goal to support the children of those families connected to your home and working spaces. Buy books, crayons, paper and educational games; demonstrate how to download free resources or apps for supporting language and literacy (for example, africanstorybook.org, bookdash.org, nalibali.org and wordworks.org.za).
- Arrange an event, run a race, have a dinner party and mobilise those in your circle to contribute more. Talk about the need — and ways of contributing. Become part of a network of South Africans who are building hope. Share news of local NGOs with friends and family overseas.
- If you have a MySchool card, and you support your children's school, consider adding a cause and contributing some of your spend to an NGO or a less well-resourced school.

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