**Literacy must start at infancy**

**Dr Shelley O’Carroll**

Parents and early childhood educators are as vital as foundation phase teachers

We have long known there is a reading crisis in South Africa. The latest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) results have shown how deep it is. Over the years there have been interventions at provincial and national level in response to the crisis but these have not made a substantial difference.

We are not going to solve the reading crisis until we understand that the process of learning to read and write begins well before a child steps into a grade one classroom. When the children entered grade one we could have predicted that many would fail the Pirls test.

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Being able to read and write depends on oral language abilities that begin developing from the earliest days in a child’s life. Through nurturing relationships, critical brain connections are made that will support a child’s language development. Children who grow up in language-rich environments have a better vocabulary at the age of three and four, and this correlates with reading comprehension at the age of nine. Our grade fours are failing not only because of the quality of teaching of reading in grades one to three but also because they missed out on critical early learning experiences from birth to the age of five.

Children who have good comprehension skills in grade four don’t only have good foundation phase teachers but tend to be those who begin school with a wide and deep vocabulary. They start school with a familiarity with letters and print from literacy experiences in their early years. This means they master the skill of decoding new words early on in grade one and quickly move on to longer and more complex texts, which give them exposure to new words and ideas. They bring to the reading task an understanding of what words mean and an ability to use language to make predictions and inferences.

They generally attend better-resourced schools and have access to new books daily, which bring with them an ever-increasing range of new words and concepts. The more they read, the more fluent their reading becomes and the more their language develops and enables them to engage with increasingly difficult texts. They are primed for success by cumulative experiences from their earliest years.

We know this is not the experience of the majority of children in South Africa. So, where have things gone wrong for the 80% of our children who are not able to read for meaning by grade four?

Let’s look at a profile of one of these children at the age of five. We know that two-thirds of her waking hours since birth would have been spent with her parents or caregivers. Her parents were not aware of how important it was to spend time talking to her as a young baby and toddler. In their home, it was accepted that children should be seen and not heard. They wanted the best for their child but believed she would learn to read at school. They didn’t point out print in the environment, or encourage their daughter to draw and write her name. Along with 58% of South African households, there were no books in their home.

She attended a local preschool but the teacher was not qualified and there were very few books and educational resources in her classroom. Although she is now in grade R at the local primary school, it is not a language-rich classroom environment, where she hears stories told and read in her language. The teacher does not give explanations, extend her vocabulary, conceptual and general knowledge, play listening games or encourage her to ask and answer questions. The children sing the alphabet song daily, but this has little meaning to them.

In a test of vocabulary at the age of six, she scores at the level of a four-year-old. She can’t yet write her name, and letters are mysterious marks on a page. She has never played I Spy, so it doesn’t make sense when the teacher talks about sounds in words. What is ssss? She has seldom drawn pictures and talked about what she has drawn or made marks on a page and presented her “writing” to her teacher or parent. She understands and uses very few words beyond those she needs for making herself understood at home and in the playground. She has little experience of the language of books, language that is significantly different to her everyday use of it.

She begins grade one and is faced with a curriculum that is geared towards children who have had a significant investment in their learning from birth to the age of six. There is an expectation that she should know the sounds made by letters and be able to decode words and recognise an increasing number of high-frequency words within eight weeks of being at school. She only reaches these milestones well into her grade one year.

Many of the words she tries to read in books are unfamiliar to her, and there are few opportunities to explore their meanings or relate these to known words. Reading becomes a matter of saying words, with little expectation that this should be a meaningful experience. There are only a few basic reading books in the classroom from which she learns to read. The slow pace of the development of her word reading skills and the lack of variety of texts means she does not get exposure to new words and concepts through books.

These impoverished early learning experiences are devastating regardless of whether she is learning to read in her home language or in English as a first additional language. Learning to read and write in a second language does pose additional challenges but her lack of progress in reading is not only a second language issue. This child, and so many like her in South Africa, has simply had too few early opportunities to develop the skills, understanding and knowledge that will support her growth as a reader.

There is no doubt that we need to invest more in teacher development, but as long as our interventions remain focused on the grade one to four classroom, the next Pirls test results are unlikely to be substantially different.

Last year the first systemic intervention to improve quality of language and literacy teaching in grade R was made. We need more investment in this critical year.

But we must prioritise quality early learning experiences in early childhood development settings in addition to grade R, including opportunities for families and caregivers to become much more actively involved in their children’s learning. It is too late to begin looking for solutions when children begin school.

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