

CONNECTED EDUCATION
EVERY LEADER, EVERY
TEACHER, EVERY LEARNER

BRIDGE
LINKING INNOVATORS IN EDUCATION

25 SEPTEMBER
2018

BRIDGE EARLY GRADE READING COP



01 SETTING THE SCENE

Learning to read is foundational to all subsequent learning; yet the majority of South African children are being left behind in this regard. One of the biggest educational challenges facing the country was presented in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which showed in 2006 that more than 80% of Grade 5 learners in a nationally representative sample could not yet read for meaning. Similar low levels of literacy proficiency were confirmed by pre-PIRLS in 2011. Early-grade performance strongly predicts secondary school completion. If children do not learn to read effectively by grade 4, they will not cope with curriculum demands in the higher grades. This trajectory is generally understood to be the cause of the high rate of dropouts in grades 10, 11 and 12. This in turn affects the likelihood of learners accessing post-school education opportunities.

To address these systemic challenges, BRIDGE has created an Early Grade Reading Community of Practice (EGR CoP), a community which launched on the 25 September 2018.

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02 PURPOSE AND LONG TERM GOALS

The beginning of the convening focused on the purpose of the CoP and its long term goals as connected to BRIDGE's broader theory of change. BRIDGE's CEO, Vuyiswa Ncontsa, described its work in connecting innovators in education through the facilitation of CoPs and knowledge management. Our organisation, she explained, operates across 5 focus areas, namely : Early Childhood Development, Teacher Development, School Leadership, Learner Support, and Cross-cutting themes. Part of BRIDGE's success lies in its strategic partnerships with organisations that share BRIDGE's core value of collaboration. The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) has been one such valued partner. The department is currently working to develop a coherent national literacy strategy which seeks to address the critical literacy problem in the country. At the behest of government, BRIDGE created the EGR CoP as a way to support the department's efforts the best way we know how - by convening a learning community.

BRIDGE's theory of change (TOC) may be described as follows: we contribute to improving education by creating common purpose, peer support and trust; by maximising resources and reducing duplication; by linking policy and practice and by sharing and spreading knowledge and practice. Under this broad umbrella, the CoP was asked to think about creating its own TOC and establishing the community's outcomes as members shape the CoP to suit their needs and those of the literacy community and work towards common goals.

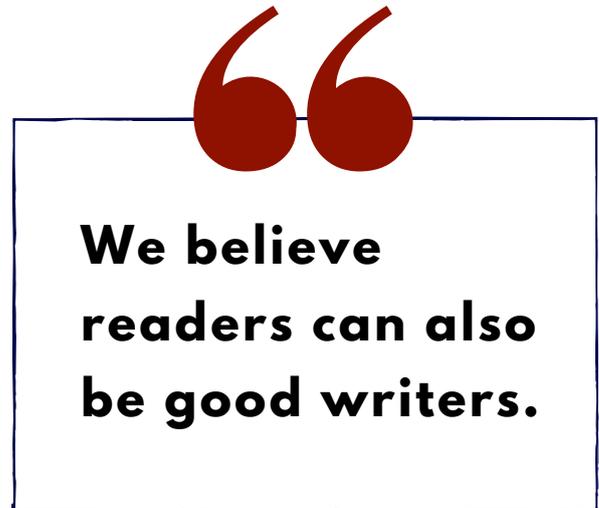
03 PRESENTATION

Ms Pinky Busika, the Provincial Language Coordinator – Foundation Phase at the GDE, presented on the importance of reading and the status of literacy in the country. Ms Busika presented an overview of the issues related to literacy in the Foundation Phase - including a lack of resources in ECD centres and poor instructional practice - and shared some methods by which the problem may be mitigated. She noted that these issues are compounded in Gauteng because of the province's multilingual context which means many learners may speak English in schools but go back to speaking their home languages outside the classroom. Ms Busika went on to outline the language components of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) which includes: promoting reading automaticity (ability to read automatically and smoothly without struggling), phonetic awareness, encouraging teachers to have a broad vocabulary, and promoting group reading exercises among others.

She concluded her presentation by outlining a number of interventions and projects the DBE is running to address the country's dismal literacy rate.

These include:

- A story writing intervention: this initiative encourages learners in the province to write creative stories in any of the official languages spoken in Gauteng. These stories are set to be compiled into a larger book and fed back to schools and education centres thus fostering a culture of reading.
- Reading clubs: there are currently 450 reading clubs in the province. This initiative takes learners to community and mobile libraries, and has them read a story, summarise it and highlight two or three new words they have discovered to develop their vocabulary.
- The Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP): this intervention, which runs in 107 schools, is a fast-paced, high-impact reading development and support programme, endorsed by SACE, which offers structured training support, materials provision and classroom support to help learners improve their literacy skills and help teachers improve the ways in which they teach reading in primary schools.
- The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): a diagnostic tool that comprises a letter sound chart in terms of which learners are required to sound out the letters on the chart. This helps teachers identify which sounds learners struggle with. The tool also includes a word recognition chart that helps teachers identify words learners cannot read and encourages better reading speed.



Ms Busika's presentation contains a wealth of information on literacy and the valuable strategies used in CAPS to improve early grade reading. To access her presentation, click [here](#).

04 GROUP ACTIVITY AND DISCUSSION



The CoP was led through an activity which saw them divided into smaller groups and required each group to think through a set of questions/statements concerned with the issue of literacy in SA and discuss their answers/solutions.

A selection of the questions and responses are noted below:

Q: The single most important goal for the first half of primary school should be the solid acquisition of reading skills such that every child can read fluently and with comprehension in their home language by the end of grade 3

A: Teachers need to implement a daily reading time in the classroom. This must take place first thing in the day when learners are awake and responsive

Q: In interviews in the Eastern Cape, district officials expressed that the Foundation Phase was far less important than the FET phase, and that matric was the most important year.

A: There needs to be a complete mind shift in terms of this, and an understanding of and focus on the importance of the Foundation Phase.

Q: Many of South Africa's children are already at a disadvantage before they even begin school. This is because children from low-income families hear on average 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers by the age of three.

A: We must ensure that our existing ECD structures are capacitated with regards to understanding how to teach literacy and have adequate reading material in local languages. We should also make audio resources available to parents who are illiterate.

Q: Development of reading skills is highly influenced by classroom practices. It is also influenced by a child's familiarity with the language of teaching and learning, which is typically English from grade 4 onwards.

A: We must re-assess and review how teachers are trained to teach early grade reading. There should be a compulsory model in teacher training on how to teach reading . We should also consider learning from the way in which Afrikaans was developed as a language.

05 TOPICS AND THEMES FOR THE NEXT COP

CoP members were given an opportunity to suggest themes and topics for upcoming meetings. These were:

- What neuroscience can tell us about how learners learn to read.
- Strategies for teaching literacy in the home environment
- Lessons learned from those who measure reading skills and literacy rates
- Subject Advisor training
- Mentorship for primary school teachers
- Education and training of primary school teachers
- Reading as integral to the 4th industrial revolution
- The teaching of African languages in the Foundation Phase by teachers who are not suitably qualified
- Bridging the grade 3-4 reading and language gap
- Prioritising resources (both human and material) in the Foundation Phase
- Developing an early learning literacy map (an online tool that would map existing initiatives in early literacy across the country)
- Mainstreaming reading for pleasure
- Strategies for teaching reading in multilingual contexts



The next CoP will be held on the 8th of November 2018 and will focus on what neuroscience can tell us about how learners learn to read.