Executive summary

Good reading skills are nonnegotiable for a developing country like South Africa. However, recent national assessments revealed the low literacy levels of Grade 3 learners (see 1.1). The mother tongue plays an important role in reading literacy, but it does not rule out the benefits of multilingualism (see 1.2). Therefore a multilingual reading programme was implemented in three schools in the Kenneth Kaunda District of the North West Province (see 2.1-2.3). As it was a pioneering project it was crucial to keep record of the process and a mixed methods approach was followed (see 2.4). Research done over three years (2010-2012) showed that the multilingualism acquired boosted the children’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and fostered respect and love for other languages and cultures (see 2.5.2). Most importantly, the Grade 3 learners in the programme outperformed the other learners in the Kenneth Kaunda District, the North West Province and South Africa (see 2.5.3). The multilingual reading programme has not only the potential to improve the literacy levels of South Africa but also to build bridges between the languages and cultures. As this is a longitudinal study, research needs to be conducted on a regular basis to ensure the programme remains on track.
1. Introduction

1.1 Low literacy levels in South Africa and the North West Province

In February 2011 the Department of Basic Education administered the first Annual National Assessments\(^1\). The results of the assessments were shocking - the national average performance in literacy among Grade 3 learners was 35% and the numeracy performance was 28%. In the North West Province the performance in literacy was 30% and 21% in numeracy (ANA 2011: 20). This means that 70% of Grade 3 learners in the North West Province could not read properly.

The ANA 2012 results looked better, but there were no clear indications in the report that tests with the same level of difficulty were used. In the words of the ANA 2012 report: “It is important to note that direct comparisons across years can only be done with extreme caution […]” (ANA 2012: 22). Bearing in mind the implicit warning that the figures might not be a true reflection of the current state, the national average performance in literacy among Grade 3 learners was 52% and the numeracy performance was 41%. In the North West Province the performance in literacy was 46.4% (the worst in the country). It looked even bleaker in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District (where Klerksdorp is situated) where the average performance in literacy was 38% (ANA 2012: 22-24). This means that 62% of learners in the district cannot read properly.

70% of Grade 3 learners in the North West Province are functionally illiterate.

1.2 Three factors: Reading, mother tongue and multilingualism

Why should we be so concerned about the low literacy levels? Good reading skills are non-negotiable for today’s learners and our future leaders. There is clear evidence of a strong link between reading difficulties in primary school and subsequent poor employment history in early adult life. The mother tongue plays an important role in

\(^1\) It was the first time that the results were made public.
this process. It is a generally accepted principle that the longer education is received in the home language, the better the chances of sustainable good academic performance. However, the reality is that many learners grow up in multilingual societies and do not receive their education in their mother tongue at all. Some of the parents believe that speaking, reading and writing in English is a necessity to progress in South Africa and the perception is that the best way to learn English is to attend schools where English is the medium of instruction.

1.2.1 Good reading skills – foundation phase

The early stages (in the foundation phase) of literacy acquisition are crucial for later success in reading. If the foundation is not sound, the builders’ efforts are futile as the remediation of reading problems in older children is largely ineffective (Sylva & Hurry, 1995; Hurry and Sylva, 2007). Basic literacy is attained after approximately three years of formal schooling. Learners should by then be able to demonstrate the acquisition of basic skills – given that the schooling took place in the home language.
1.2.2 Role of the mother tongue

"Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language." (Ouane & Glanz, 2010: 4)

It is now generally accepted that the mother tongue plays a cardinal role in the acquiring of new knowledge and skills. The South African Grade 6 Systemic Evaluation National Report of 2005 showed that learners who studied via their home language achieved a national average of 69 percent in language. Those who learned through another language achieved only 32 percent (Ouane & Glanz, 2010: 33).

In 2007, the then MEC for Education in Gauteng, Angie Motshekga, stated in the provincial budget speech that the non-utilisation of the mother-tongue was a contributing factor to the weak performance of learners. She therefore set the goal of promoting the use of the home language in the foundation phase as it was the single largest contributor to poor learner performance throughout entire school sector (Motshekga, 2007).

Moreover, research outcomes (national & international) indicate that home-language instruction and further enhancement of first-language skills are of crucial importance for learners to develop their conceptual abilities optimally while simultaneously being afforded an opportunity to acquire other languages. It is a generally accepted principle that the longer education is received in the medium of the home language, the better are the chances of sustainable good academic performance (cf. Ouane & Glanz, 2010; Heugh et al, 2007; Magga et al, 2005; Ramirez et al, 1991). In the words of Thomas and Collier (2002: 7): "the strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement".

In Carole Benson’s 2004 paper, The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality, for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report of UNESCO the importance of the mother tongue is highlighted in bilingual schooling. She writes that the “[u]se of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence. Learning to read is most efficient
when students know the language and can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies; likewise, students can communicate through writing as soon as they understand the rules of the orthographic (or other written) system of their language” (Benson, 2004: 2).

The problem is that many learners are not educated through their home language. Conceptualisation is hampered by what in many instances is essentially a ‘foreign’ language. Home language instruction not only improves conceptualisation, but it also aids acquisition of other languages by way of the home language following the principle of first the familiar then the unfamiliar.

1.2.3 Importance of multilingualism

One could ask if the importance of the mother tongue rules out the importance of other languages. Susan Coetzee-Van Rooy (2010: 309) wrote the following in her article Complex systems, multilingualism and academic success in South African higher education – that “there are studies that have found a positive relationship between bi- and multilingualism and cognitive development during the past 40 years.” In this article she highlighted the cognitive benefits of being bi- and multilingual: The cognitive process of analysis, the cognitive process of selective attention and inhibition enhanced the ability to learn more languages. Kathleen Heugh refers in her 2002 article The Case Against Bilingual and Multilingual Education in South Africa: Laying Bare the Myths to the ground-breaking work of EG Malherbe (1946) who more than sixty years ago provides evidence of the benefits of bilingual education.

With our knowledge of the importance of reading literacy, the role of the mother tongue and the benefits of multilingualism it made sense to embark on a multilingual reading programme and in the next sections the implementation thereof, research and findings will be discussed.

“Africa’s multilingualism and cultural diversity is an asset that must, at long last, be put to use.”
(Ouane & Glanz, 2010: 6)
2. Multilingual reading programme

When the Rotary Club Orkney approached the NWU Language Directorate a few years ago, there was consensus that something should be done to improve the literacy levels in the foundation phase.

The Language Directorate suggested an alternative solution: a **multilingual reading programme** (via Literacy for All) whereby the home language is used to develop the learners' conceptual abilities optimally while simultaneously acquiring other languages.

### 2.1 Schools in the pilot project

There were three schools in the pilot project (all three of them in the North West Province and in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda District). The three schools were: Strathvaal Primary School in Stilfontein, St Conrad's College in Klerksdorp and Klerksdorp Primary School. Strathvaal Primary School and Klerksdorp Primary School are English-medium former Model C schools. They have, not uncommon for state schools, full classes and limited resources. St Conrad's College in Klerksdorp, also an English-medium school, is more privileged as it is a private school with relatively small classes. The majority of the learners are mother-tongue speakers of Setswana, but the teachers in the schools (English and Afrikaans speaking) had limited knowledge of Setswana.

### 2.2 Reading programme: *Literacy for All*

It was decided to invest in a reading programme built around progressive sets of readers for each grade that was developed by South Africans for South African circumstances and, most importantly, available in all official languages, namely *Literacy for All*. This programme consists of a teachers' guide, a set of readers and a workbook per grade. In this three year roll-out programme the learners had access to these books in all three the official languages (Setswana, English and Afrikaans) of the North West Province.
2.3 Training of the teachers

We were fortunate to have three training sessions with Barbara and Ed Coombe, the “parents” of Literacy for All readers and Johan Zerwick, a Setswana expert and lecturer at the NWU. Over 30 teachers from three different schools were trained how to use the readers and after an introduction to Setswana pronunciation with Johan Zerwick, the teachers were able to read and even sing in Setswana. However, as this was a pioneering project we did not have clear-cut methods on how to use the multilingual readers in class. The training therefore also served as brainstorming session with the teachers on how the other languages could be incorporated in their unique settings. Understandably the first teachers, non-mother-tongue speakers of Setswana, were quite terrified to teach the learners to read in Setswana. So it was wonderful to see how the teachers’ self-confidence grew as the project developed into a programme. Our training was also refined by our research findings (see 2.5)
2.4 Research methodology

As it was a pioneering project it was crucial to keep record of the process. Initially we followed a qualitative research approach as we wanted to determine the teachers’ attitude towards the project, how the readers were used in class and how the learners coped with the multilingual approach. It was very important for both the learner and teacher to benefit from the project - and the research approach served as a good barometer of the needs of teachers and learners. The information gathered through class observations and focus group discussions was also used in the later training of the new teachers.

We used the following set of questions in the focus group discussions (following a longitudinal study approach):

1. How were the readers used in class? (Which language combinations were used?)
2. The reaction of the learners to the readers?
3. How did learners compare to learners of the previous year?
4. Did they have an assistant to help the learner in his/her mother tongue? If yes, how did it work and what were the effects?
5. General impression of the reading project so far?

Our findings in the focus group discussions and observations (six visits in total) were complemented by the analysis of the first Grade 3 group’s performance (see 2.5.3).
2.5 Research findings

Our main aim with the reading programme was to improve the reading skills of the learners and we hoped that the multilingual approach and readers would aid the teachers in their task. We were quite pleasantly surprised to find that the impact of the readers was not limited to reading skills only. The multilingualism acquired boosted the children’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and fostered respect and love for other languages and cultures. Our findings are discussed with reference to the research questions asked in the focus groups.

2.5.1 How were the readers used in class?

Here we were specifically interested in the language combinations manifested in class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language combinations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English, Afrikaans and Setswana separately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English, Afrikaans - Setswana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English - Setswana - Afrikaans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English - Afrikaans - English</td>
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Figure 1 Language combinations

In the beginning of the project the focus was more on English and Setswana with a little bit of Afrikaans. In 2012, when CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement) was introduced, there was a stronger emphasis and shift to Afrikaans, the compulsory first additional language from Grade 1 in these schools. The multilingual project helped the teachers to implement CAPS - a benefit for the overburden teachers in our school system. The schools in the multilingual programme will also be ready for the envisaged introduction of an African language in 2014.
**School A**

In the beginning the focus was more on Setswana. The Setswana was used as a bridge to reading in English. Later on in the project, the focus shifted more to Afrikaans. The readers were initially used for shared reading (group reading), but later the readers became the main reading programme at the school. They purchased extra readers so that every child could have his/her own reader.

**School B**

Interestingly, at School B the story was first read in English, then it was discussed and vocabulary explained. The teachers would then apply it on daily life asking the learners to share their own thoughts and ideas. After reading in English the Setswana for English words would be given. The verbs were taught through action and play. Afterwards these verbs were applied in sentences – e.g. I can (in English and Setswana). Then they read the book in English and Setswana. The same process was repeated with Afrikaans. In the end they read all three languages – with the same comprehension. There was especially one teacher who made a real effort with all three languages and one could observe that the learners enjoyed the multilingual reading classes tremendously.

Later on the school followed a different approach where one teacher would be responsible for the Afrikaans readers, another for the English and another for the Setswana.

**School C**

At School C they also started off in English, followed by the Setswana. The teacher would then ask the learners to give the Setswana for the English. One of the teachers made a video where the English and Setswana readers
were compared. This might be ascribed to the lack of confidence from the teacher’s side to do it live in class, but it had merits and helped insecure teachers to give the learner access to English via his/her mother tongue. In some classes the English was followed by Afrikaans as some children were more familiar with Afrikaans than Setswana.

**Remark**

The reason why School B and School C first used the English and not Setswana is due to the heterogeneity of their classes, whereas School A mainly had Setswana-/Sesotho-speaking learners.

### 2.5.2 The reaction of the learners to the readers?

In general the readers immediately identified with characters and setting in the readers, but they also enjoyed the teacher’s effort to read in Setswana. Teachers love to tell how their shy learners started to blossom when they used the mother tongue in class. In the words of one the teachers: “The shy Setswana-speaking learner who never wanted to take part in the class blossomed when we started to use the Setswana readers.”
School A

“The learners were very excited.” The characters were black children; the story was situated in a township; and the characters travelled with taxis the way they do it. The learners “totally loved” the books and the pictures. The same characters were used throughout the series and the learners got to know the characters, who “grew up” with them from year to year. There was an immediate positive reaction when they saw the pictures.

School B

“Phenomenal”. The learners enjoyed the programme, they have a sense of achievement. Even parents were thrilled with literacy in three languages. The learners were enthusiastic about the books.

School C

“They love it!” They enjoyed the teachers’ efforts to pronounce the Setswana. The readers were used for reading for enjoyment at the end of the day. Parents were surprised that the learners were learning to read in Setswana and Afrikaans, but there were no complaints (against expectations).
2.5.3 How did learners compare to learners of the previous year?

In the beginning it was difficult for some of the teachers to compare the learners to the learners of the previous year, but in general they were positive about the progress of the learners. Unfortunately the 4-point grading scale changed in 2012 to a 7-point grading scale. This change made it almost impossible to compare the Grade 3 learners of 2012 to the Grade 3 learners of 2011, as a 3 (“achieved”) on the 4-point scale is from 50% to 69%; and a 4 (“adequate achievement”) on the 7-point scale is from 50% to 59%. It seemed safer to compare the pass rates. See figure 3 below.

![Figure 3 Average pass rates](image)

There seemed to have been an improvement in the pass rates of the schools in the programme.
However, we were able to compare the Grade 3 learners’ (Grade 1 learners of 2010) reading abilities to those of the Grade 3 learners of the district, province and the country. See Figure 4 below.

![Performance of Grade 3 learners](image)

**Figure 4 Performance of Grade 3 learners**

As can be seen in Figure 4 the learners outperformed the learners in the country, province and district. We believed that the reading programme played a big role in the better grades, but we are aware that there are many other contributing factors, such as possibly better infrastructure, better qualified staff members, etc.

**2.5.4 Language assistance**

We asked the teachers if they had an assistant to help the learner in his/her mother tongue. In all three schools the children played a cardinal role.

**School A**

The learners helped and the teachers recognised the boost it had for the children’s self-esteem.

**School B**

One or two parents helped out, and two learners who are very gifted. However, there was a problem with slang.
3. Conclusions

3.1 Attitude makes a difference

There are so many factors to take into account when implementing a multilingual programme and one of them, as in so many spheres of life, is attitude. It could be seen from the reactions of the teachers of School C, that there was a negative attitude towards the reading programme. In follow-up visits, it became clear that the principal and head of the foundation phase were not convinced of the merits of the reading programme and did not encourage the teachers. This could have had a very negative impact on the multilingual reading programme, as the school principal is a crucial figure and quite authoritarian especially in South Africa (Emerging Voices, 2005:109).

However, despite the negative leadership, one of the teachers privately confessed that she made a mind-shift after she had seen the changes in her learners’ participation in class. Yet another teacher started to blossom – as it came out she had Setswana as university subject and she was at long last able to put it into practice. Of all the classes we visited across the three schools, her incorporation of the readers in the three languages was one of the outstanding examples (given the size of the class and working conditions).

Towards the end of the second year of implementation the principal joined a focus group session to inform us that he wanted to stop the programme, even when one of the teachers offered in that meeting to take responsibility for all the Setswana lessons if she could be exempted from netball coaching. Unfortunately, sport seemed more
important. We did not want to call it off immediately and asked the principal to reconsider the matter.

At a year-end function where the Rotary Club could reflect with the principals and one teacher of each school we had an interesting and pleasant surprise. The head of foundation phase at School C could not attend the meeting and another teacher represented them. Without the presence of the leadership, the teacher was able to share freely how the learners benefited from the multilingual reading programme. The head of the foundation phase later called us to ask if they could get books for the third year.

In our follow-up training sessions we asked the trained teachers to attend the first day of the training to tell the other teachers of the success stories in their classes and to give advice. The fact that it has been done before and that it was not only successful in the privileged schools seemed to inspire some of the new teachers and the general attitude of the groups has been found to be positive.

3.2 Mind your language

The learners do not all speak a standard form of Setswana, the one used in the readers, but a mixture of Setswana and Sesotho and then there is the influence of English on spoken Setswana. In the beginning the teachers did not know how to handle it as they had limited knowledge of Setswana. We incorporated a session on slang in follow-up trainings and how to handle it. The one way is to incorporate it in a lesson about slang and another is to ask the learner to go home and ask his/her parents. One favourite example is di-“tjommie”, the slang form for ditsala (“friends”).

3.3 Spin-offs – how the learners benefited in more than one way

Cultural aspects: Not only familiar language was used, but also familiar settings (illustrations) and it made the learners excited to read. With shared languages, bridges are built between teachers and learners, and between learners from different language and cultural groups. We would like to believe the reading programme fosters respect and love for other languages and cultures.
The learners played an important role in the learning progress. The learners helped the teacher with the Setswana and the teachers recognised the boost it gave to the children’s self-esteem. In the words of one of the teachers: “The shy Setswana-speaking learner who never wanted to take part in class blossomed when we started to use the Setswana readers.”

4. It does not stop here

As this is a longitudinal study (with a qualitative research supported by quantitative data - mixed methods research approach), research needs to be conducted on a regular basis to ensure the programme remains on track, to refine the training and to get a better picture of the effect of multilingual education.
Bibliography


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