

■ OPINION

A great literacy tapestry

Social media enables pupils to embrace people from diverse backgrounds and cultures

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THE Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant national lockdown have been a stark reminder of the inequity, differences and disparities in our country's education system.

I am sure every teacher tried their utmost to ensure that teaching and learning could continue during lockdown. However, the sad reality is that despite these attempts, learning came to a complete halt for some learners. Reasons for this could be the lack of resources and access to spaces and platforms used for learning to continue.

South Africa's language and literacy classrooms are a wonderful yet complex tapestry. Most are multilingual spaces, filled with learners who speak and use various languages differently. In these classrooms most learners are also not learning in their home language. Even though the language and literacy classroom is a wonderful space to embrace difference, we have to ask whether we create enough space and time for this to happen.

Although people speak one language, the same language is often used differently by different people. The question we have to ask ourselves is: does this difference influence what is happening in the classroom?

In addition, the language and literacy classroom is also clouded by the difference in learners' ability to read.

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report showed that an unfortunate large percentage of our learners struggle to read. They aren't necessarily from a homogeneous group either; learners who struggle to read are quite diverse.

Why is it that too many learners do not learn to read? I believe that the ability to read is dependent on a learner's language proficiency as well as various literacy skills that should be in place.

In celebration of International Literacy Day today, I would like to highlight these skills and also focus on how they can be developed and enhanced.

Language areas that are specifically important to develop as skills for reading are phonemic awareness (the ability to discriminate individual sounds in words), phonics (linking letters and sounds), comprehension



THE language and literacy classroom is a wonderful space to embrace difference, but are we creating enough space and time for this to happen, the writer asks. | Independent Media Archives

(making sense of texts), vocabulary (knowing what words mean), and writing (composition and spelling). In addition, learners' oral language proficiency (developed in listening and speaking) lays the foundation for their use of language to understand others.

Research recognises that interest, motivation, background knowledge, culture and linguistics, socio-economic status and past experiences all play a critical role in learning to read.

So reading should not be considered as an action where words are read correctly.

It is a process that involves identifying words correctly, making sense of what was read while confirming and building knowledge about the world.

The type of texts that are used to teach and develop reading also play a fundamental role in facilitating learners' reading.

Imagine a classroom where learners could read any text they choose? Society has become literacy rich.

During lockdown, some learners were fortunate enough to continue learning using technological devices;

other learners were dependent on physical texts such as books and newspapers. Despite circumstances, learners may have had access to a variety of texts.

Some learners were able to enjoy visual texts (for example pictures, etc), while some might embrace social media. The technological world has really presented an opportunity for teachers and schools to embrace popular culture/texts into schools.

What if we used Facebook platforms in our teaching and learning activities to develop learners' literacy and reading skills?

What if we allowed learners to compose their own variations and translations of Master KG's Jerusalem while doing the Jerusalem challenge?

In doing so, we are using learners' interests to probe their literacy and reading skills. We are also allowing an opportunity to use their experiences and associations for the development of their literacy skills.

Embracing technology and social media for literacy development have many benefits.

Many learners are glued to various technological devices. For example, when they use a platform like Facebook, they have to utilise traditional reading skills such as skimming, language rules and voice, and also embrace digital literacy skills while constructing a story to post.

Using social media also allows learners to interact with people who have different cultural, ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds and perspectives, which often can complement formal teaching and learning as well as introduce marginalised voices into the curriculum.

Perhaps we can, as part of our International Literacy Day celebrations, challenge each other to think of an innovative way to embrace technology and social media, while continuing to develop our learners' literacy and reading skills during this pandemic and beyond.

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