

## COMMENT



DR ZELDA BARENDIS

Towards an understanding of the foundations of literacy

LITERACY, a basic human right, is defined as the quality or state of being literate. Put simply, it refers to the ability to read and write. Unfortunately, only some people in our country are able to enjoy the pleasure of being able to read and write adequately.

Understanding the intricacies and science behind what it entails to learn to read and write should be our point of departure when attempting to address the persistent literacy crisis.

Answering fundamental questions like whether we really understand what it means to learn to read, and what foundations are needed for anyone to acquire this skill, could be a good place to start.

This process is dependent on what happens in early childhood. Our journey towards literacy development begins very early.

The more children know about language and literacy before entering the formal schooling system, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading. Research reiterates that we should capacitate young children with a solid foundation by developing their competency in spoken language.

In doing so, they will be made aware of the sound structure of the language they speak and learn in, and be able to find meaning in symbols around them. Additionally, it will teach them the value of writing. Activities that advance young children's literacy skills should include storybook reading and carefully planned activities that enable the development of pupils' phonological processing skills. This could range from singing and rhyming to sound manipulation games.

If so much effort and funding are put towards developing literacy and enhancing children's ability to read, why are literacy levels not improving? According to reading expert Louisa Moats, our children will not master this craft as long as ineffective teaching methods are used and evidence-based instructional strategies are ignored.

Science tells us that our brains are not as fully evolved to process written language as they are to process spoken language. This means that systematic and explicit instruction is necessary to help our brains master the craft of reading. But what should be systematically and explicitly instructed?

And, what scientific processes are happening so that a reader can be regarded as proficient? Reading is an intricate process dependent on many other intricate processes to make meaning. In their book *An Introduction To Language And Literacy*, Deborah Glaser and Louisa Moats describe good reading as the accurate deciphering of printed words, sufficient reading speed and understanding the meaning of words.

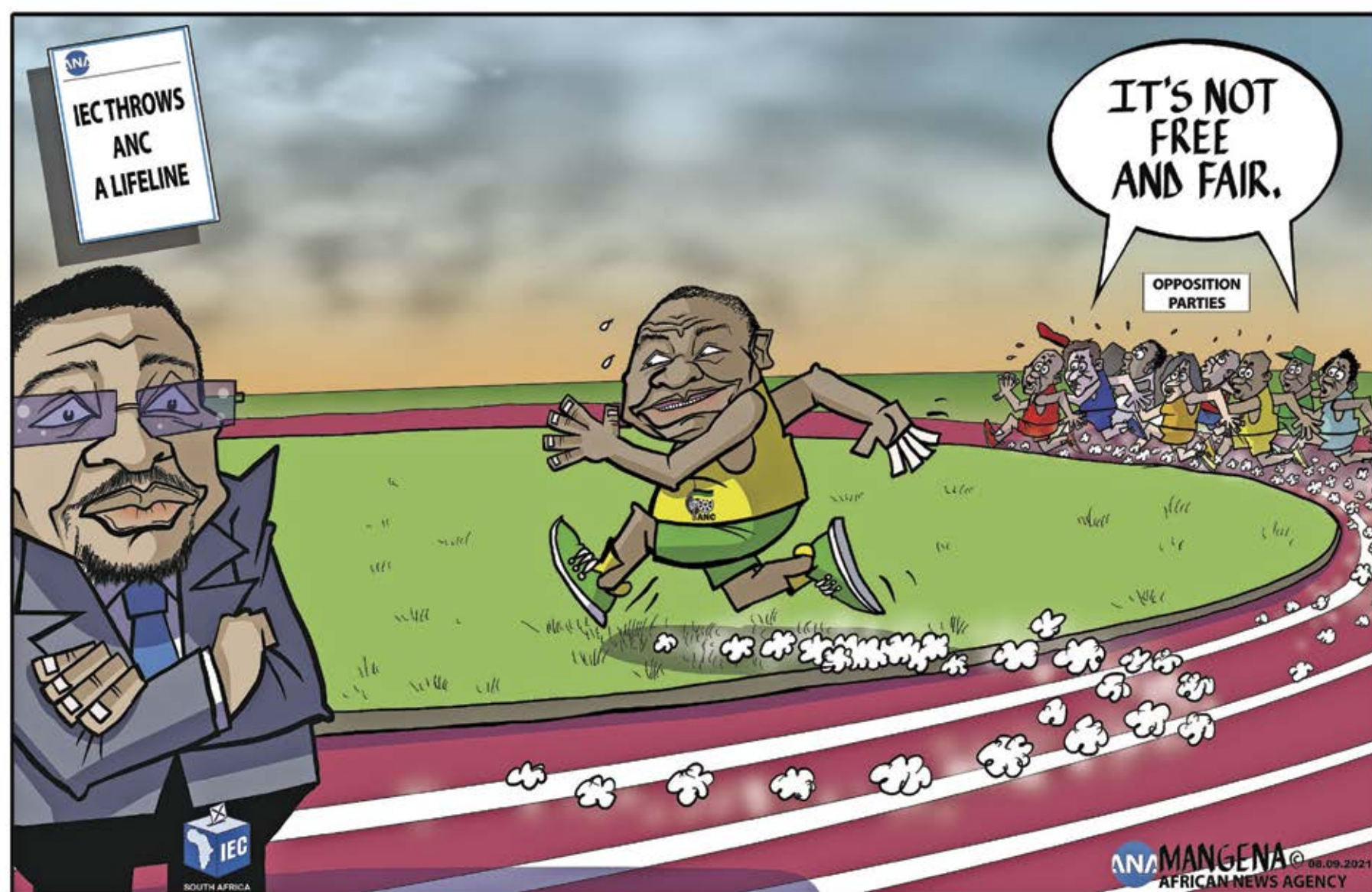
That said, how will we develop good readers? We can only develop good readers if we instruct decoding systematically and explicitly. If pupils develop the knowledge and skills to effectively decode unfamiliar words, they would be able to recognise words more fluently. A skill such as decoding is related to pupils' knowledge of phonics and their phonemic awareness (the ability to identify the separate sounds in a language).

This is often a conundrum in South Africa as most pupils are not taught in their home language. Not all South African languages have the same language system, which means that phonics and phonemic awareness instruction will be very different across the various languages of the classroom.

For this reason, the development of a crucial literacy skill may be impeded. Fluent readers should be able to understand what they are reading, because instead of deciphering words, they will simply integrate the newly acquired information with what they already know. To develop competent readers, we need to understand what it means to learn to read, and what foundations are needed for anyone to succeed in learning to read.

Let us use International Literacy Day, September 8, to meet this challenge head-on as we continue to raise awareness of literacy problems that exist nationally and internationally.

Dr Barends is a lecturer and leader of the Foundation Phase Programme in the Department of Curriculum Studies at Stellenbosch University



## How a truly magnificent city rose from the ashes

*St Petersburg never lost its historical and cultural heritage*

## COMMENT



ALEKSEI V MALENKO

NOWADAYS, the Russian city of St Petersburg – one of Cape Town's sister cities – is a modern metropolis that nevertheless has not lost its historical and cultural heritage.

In 2019, about 10 million guests, half of whom were foreigners, visited the city inhabited by 5 million people and located on the banks of the Neva river.

But even now, during the crisis of international tourism and closed borders, the city hosts major international events: at the beginning of June, the city hosted an annual economic forum visited by many foreign delegations; in June-July this year, six football matches of the Euro 2020 tournament (postponed until 2021 due to Covid-19) were held at Gazprom Arena, the city's main stadium.

However, the northern capital of Russia is really nice just as it is. Born in this beautiful city, I declare with full responsibility that St Petersburg will never leave anyone indifferent. It is not by chance that the city takes a special place in the works of writers and poets – in particular, in that one of Alexander Pushkin called *The Sun of Russian Poetry*, who wrote:

*"City of Peter, just you shine  
And stand unshakable as Russia!  
May make a peace with beauty, thine,  
The conquered nature's casual  
rushes ..."*

But all of that may not have happened. Exactly 80 years ago, the German fascist invaders started the siege of Leningrad – which is what the city was called then – and one of the most tragic and at the same time heroic pages in the history of the Great Patriotic War began. The Blockade, which lasted for 872 days, according to various estimates, claimed the lives of between 600 000 and 1.5 million inhabitants.

The siege of Leningrad started on September 8, 1941, when the German army closed the ring around the city after capturing the town of Shlisselburg. The northern part of the city was besieged by Finnish troops. Not everyone was able to leave the city before the Blockade began. From the first days of the Blockade, German artillery began to conduct constant barbaric shelling, and it became almost impossible to leave the city.

On September 8, 1941, the Germans bombed the large food warehouses of Badayevsk, and the 3 million population of the city were doomed to starvation.

A system of food ration cards was introduced immediately – during the



THE Isaac's Cathedral during the siege and at present.

first days it was not possible to buy any foodstuffs.

Food supply standards were calculated on the basis of the minimum quantity that would allow a person not to die – although the city lacked food even for that. Schools remained open, but fewer and fewer children attended their classes. They studied by candlelight, constant bombing interfered in the educational process.

On September 2, 1941, on the eve of the beginning of the Blockade, the workers of the hot shops received 800 grams of bread, engineers and technicians and other workers – 600. Employees, dependents and children – 300-400 grams. Since October 1, the ration had been halved. During the siege, only 3% of the deaths were the result of shelling. The reason for the remaining 97% was hunger and hardship.

The only artery that was not

be at least 20cm. Such thick ice in the Shlisselburg Bay of Ladoga Lake is formed in 11 days at an average air temperature of -5°C, or in six days at a temperature of -10°C.

With the onset of cold weather, the intensity of traffic along the "Road of Life" increased. If, on November 21, the first delivered batch of food consisted of 63 tons of flour, then by the end of December, about 1 000 tons of supplies were delivered to the city every day. From December 25, food rations began to rise, but hundreds of thousands of people had already died of hunger. During the operation of the ice road from November 1941 to April 1942, more than 550 000 people were evacuated from the besieged city, and 361 thousand tons of cargo were delivered to Leningrad.

On January 18, 1943, as a result of the Iskra Offensive military operation, the blockade of the city of Leningrad was broken, but the siege of Leningrad continued until January 1944. In January-February 1944, Soviet troops carried out the Leningrad-Novgorod operation. The enemy was thrown back 220-280km from the southern borders of the city.

January 27 is celebrated as the Day of Ultimate Lifting the Blockade of the city of Leningrad.

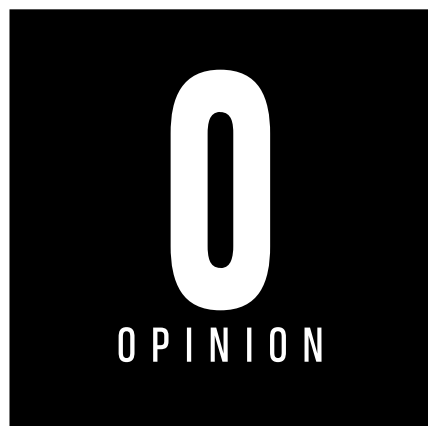
In April 1944, the rehabilitation process of the city had already begun, although the war was far from over. The pace of recovery was astonishing. Shelling and bombing destroyed a third of the housing stock, more than 800 enterprises, two-thirds of medical institutions, and half of the schools. In 1944, more than 400 000 previously evacuated people came back to Leningrad. In 1945, more than half a million. It was the will of the people to return.

During 1944-1945, 1.6 million square metres of housing, 205 schools, and dozens of kindergartens were restored. In April 1946, about 7 000 apartments were connected to a gas supply.

By order of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief dated May 1, 1945, the city of Leningrad received the title of a Hero City due to the courage shown by its residents during the Blockade. The incomparable courage of Soviet citizens – soldiers, home front workers, ordinary people – made it possible to defend the city 80 years ago, turn it into a modern metropolis, the second largest city of Russia (after Moscow), successfully develop sister city relations with other cities of the world, including the Mother City.

I invite you, dear readers, to visit St Petersburg one day. Take a boat ride along its canals, have a nice walk along its main street of Nevsky Prospekt, see the world-famous Hermitage Museum. I invite you to enjoy its endless charm and pay tribute to the unprecedented courage of the defenders of Leningrad who never surrendered, and ensured that the city still exists.

Malenko is the Consul-General of Russia in Cape Town



## EDITORIAL

### IEC'S CREDIBILITY, INDEPENDENCE PLACED IN DOUBT

THE Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) has been rightly accused of reopening the candidate registration process to favour the ANC, an allegation which does not bode well for its independence.

IEC chairperson Glen Mashinini has rejected claims it gave a lifeline to the ANC, which missed the previous deadline, saying it was "reasonably necessary" to amend the timetable.

He announced September 18 and 19 as the new voter registration weekend after the Constitutional Court dismissed its application to postpone the local government elections.

Echoing Mashinini's sentiments, vice-chairperson Janet Love said the IEC could only act on the basis of the court order and within its mandate.

What she says may well be true. But given the circumstances in which the IEC's decision was taken, it raises suspicions of being in the ANC's pocket.

The fact that the governing party withdrew its Electoral Court case to force the reopening of candidate registration days before the Constitutional Court ruling, does not help matters.

However, the interpretation of the Concourt ruling by the IEC that it means they have to reopen candidate registrations, seems debatable. Is the IEC suggesting that it was legally impossible to reopen voter registrations for first-time voters who missed the deadline, as well as candidate registrations only for first-time voters who wish to stand as candidates?

This reasoning by the IEC raises eyebrows just as its decision to appoint Justice Dikgang Moseneke to make a case for election postponement did.

As we previously said, the IEC appears to have sought Justice Moseneke's endorsement of its pre-determined decision to postpone the polls, instead of taking and standing by such a decision.

DA federal council chairperson Helen Zille's disclosure that she received a call from the IEC, before the Moseneke report could be released, asking whether her party would oppose the postponement of the polls, is telling. It also raises questions about whether the IEC is really prepared for the elections.

The Justice Moseneke route, the interpretation of the Concourt ruling and claims the IEC gave the ANC a lifeline cast a dark cloud on the commission's credibility and independence. Such things should not be happening.

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