

# RASA Conference 2016

Reading Association of South Africa



David Rose RtL Australia



Prof Leketi Makalela (Wits)



Prof Lori Helman (Uni Minnesota)

The 2016 annual Reading Association of South Africa (RASA) Conference was held at Clarendon Primary School in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal from 30 September to 2 October. SchoolNet South Africa had 3 presentations accepted which had all emanated from the DT Murray Trust-funded project, *Learning Gains through Play in the Primary*.

The opening plenary on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> was a presentation by David Rose of Reading to Learn Australia whose topic was, “Teaching Not Testing: freeing reading from assessment.” David was introduced as a literacy expert who was particularly concerned with Indigenous communities in Australia. He is the founder of Reading to Learn (RtL) There were a number of RtL presentations on the RASA programme as well as a one day conference at the end of the RASA conference devoted solely to RtL. ‘Reading to Learn’ is a methodology and a set of strategies for teaching reading at both school and further education. There is an RtL professional development programme for teachers, about the pedagogy that underpins the RtL methodology and there is an international network of teachers and teacher educators who have been trained in the programme. However David did not present on RtL as such but rather focused on the sort of activities that good teachers should be engaged with. He addressed the issue of “differentiation” and said that he had heard the term used loosely in countries around the world. His main point was that weaker children should not be given lower level activities which would inevitably lead to the gap widening even further between them and the faster learners. Instead he emphasised that teachers should provide all their learners with the same tasks beyond their ZPD but that the weaker learners have to be given more support by the teacher.

David’s presentation culminated with a powerful video of a teenage aboriginal boy who was functionally illiterate and clearly fearful of reading but who, with the mediation, careful preparation and encouragement from a skilful teacher, was able to read a passage from a novel almost flawlessly.



Katie Huston, programme manager for the DG Murray Trust presented on the topic of “How to get South Africa Reading: towards a national strategy.” The DG Murray Trust is a private philanthropic organisation that supports initiatives that aim to bring about dynamic change. Katie mentioned the DGMT campaign, “Let’s Get South Africa Reading” and quoted from a range of research from PIRLS to SACMEQ as well as citing a number of initiatives

that the DG Murray Trust is currently funding. The motivation behind Pratham Books was explained as being a not for profit publishing company that promotes early reading in India by opening access to online libraries of books via creative commons and aims to place a book in the hand of every child. Pratham organises learning camps where volunteers read books to children. Other commendable reading initiatives were mentioned such as the African Story Book, Fundza, Book-dash and Nal ibali. During discussions, serious issues were raised around the teaching of reading in indigenous languages. Experienced Foundation Phase teachers condemned publishing companies that distribute books and early reading materials that are designed and written in English and merely translated directly into other languages. In most cases, the result is language that is not appropriate; in many cases it loses meaning and alienates learners. It was Liseka Melapi, from Nomsa Mapongwana Primary, Khayelitsha in the Western Cape, one of our teachers from the Learning Gains project who raised this issue of the complex difficulties associated with the teaching of home language in South Africa.

On Saturday morning, the opening plenary was hosted by The Zenex Foundation and consisted of a panel discussion chaired by Gail Campbell of Zenex who explained that each of the panel members would be given the opportunity to present findings from their respective research which had been funded by Zenex. First up was Nic Spaull, well-known and respected researcher from ReSEP (Research on Socio-Economic Policy) from Stellenbosch University who outlined seriously sobering data on the teaching of reading in South African schools.

Nic Spaull is an excellent presenter and made it very clear to all that there was a reading crisis in the country. He presented selected data from PIRLS, SACMEQ, NSES and ANAs. He highlighted startlingly unequal educational outcomes, between wealthy and poor areas, between degrees of rural and urban schools and between provinces. There was general consensus that reading is critical to literacy and language development, but is in fact indispensable for attaining better outcomes in mathematics and science. The ‘take home’ points from Nic Spaull’s presentation were:

- 58% of grade 4 children are not learning to read – in ANY language
- because they have not “learned to read” they cannot “read to learn.”
- final message – unless we can ensure that ALL children learn to read in the first 3 years of schooling, the rest is just catch-up - and very unsuccessful catch-up.

One of the findings that had the most impact was when delegates listened to a sentence being read at the normal pace for a Grade 5 learner and then contrasted with the painfully slow pace at which 40% of Grade 5 learners in rural schools read the same sentence. The full presentation from Nic Spaull is available here <https://goo.gl/SxGff0>

Professor Leketi Makalela, Head of the Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures at Wits School of Education was the next speaker and he reported on a study where he investigated reading profiles and practices among grades 1-3 learners in Gauteng townships and Limpopo rural schools. What an amazing coincidence, almost as if he had been prompted by Lizeka and our discussion around the teaching of reading in First Additional Language from the previous day's workshop. Professor Leketi Makalela clearly explained how inappropriate the teaching of reading in English is for African language speakers and that there is a monolingual bias in the teaching of reading in South Africa that limits worldviews and identity affirmation for multilingual early grade readers. He advocated strongly for translanguaging approaches to teaching, with less rigid boundaries between languages and he decried the phonics programmes of 'skilling and drilling' (and killing) that he had encountered in his research. In contrast he had findings on the use of translanguaging approaches leading to promising learning gains in reading. The RASA conference was certainly the most appropriate forum in which to raise these issues. Many of the teachers representing ex-Model C schools readily acknowledged that they were unable to facilitate multilingual classrooms, to support code switching or in fact to support any languages other than the LOLT. This was serious food for thought.



*Nic Spaull*



*Stephen Taylor*



*Lilli Pretorius*

The next speaker was Dr Stephen Taylor, researcher and advisor to the Director-General, Department of Basic Education. Dr Taylor outlined the research agenda of the national department that aimed to address why the majority of South African children have not learned to read with comprehension by grade 4 (Pre-PIRLS 2011), grade 5 (PIRLS 2006) or grade 6 (SACMEQ 2007) – neither in their home language (pre-PIRLS and PIRLS) nor in English (SACMEQ).

Dr Taylor went on to outline three current studies that are targeting reading outcomes in South Africa. An evaluation amongst fourth grade learners confirmed that the English vocabulary of children at the start of the Intermediate Phase was seriously deficient for the purposes of English as the LOLT. He acknowledged that the "Reading Catch-Up Programme" that he was evaluating had not succeeded in substantially reducing these deficits. The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) in the Foundation Phase was however beginning to show some positive impacts. EGRS was targeting home language reading and literacy, as well as English as First Additional Language. Dr Taylor provided details from the intervention in the North West where 230 schools, were included in the study. These schools were from quintiles 1 -3 and the FAL was Setswana. This long term project was expected to provide insights



into the relative benefits of home language and first additional language interventions on reading to learn in the later grades.

Prof. Elizabeth Pretorius, professor of linguistics and modern languages at UNISA was the last presenter in the plenary panel. Her research zoned in on the use of vocabulary and was specifically aimed to support teachers to actively build Home Language and First Additional Language vocabularies in learners throughout the Foundation Phase, to reduce learning barriers and to help learners cope better with the cognitive demands of the Intermediate Phase and beyond.



*Ms Noxolo Buyeye*



*Ms Joyce Ntuli and Ms Tracey Butchart*

“The Impact of Learning Technologies” was the next presentation in the hall, presented by Ms Noxolo Buyeye of Solomon Qatyana primary in Asanda Village in the Western Cape and Ms Joyce Ntuli of Thembelihle Primary in Howick, KZN. Noxolo focused on the teaching of sounds in her Grade 2 class and outlined the value of learning devices for the development of reading skills such as listening to stories from the tablet and answering questions, building words, imitating animal sounds, increasing listening skills and developing fine motor skills. Joyce explained that she used an app called Learn to



Read with her grade 1 class. The app asks the learners to complete tasks and then asks them questions such as, ‘Can you find the cat among the rats and the bats?’ Both Joyce and Noxolo described their journeys towards becoming technically competent from being technophobic at the start of the project. Both teachers outlined the impact that using learning technologies in the classroom had had on their learners and particularly on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills of communication and collaboration but most of all on their reading skills.

Donald Bear is an internationally renowned literacy expert and entertaining presenter. He gave the next plenary keynote of the day but was in fact scheduled on the programme for workshops and colloquia in almost all sessions – a very hard working conference presenter! His session was entitled *Their Way Is Your Way: Developmental Word Study and Reading Instruction*. His presentation was about the synchrony of development across reading, writing and spelling with an emphasis on phonics and vocabulary and word study. In fact the

presentation was very much a lecture on linguistics. Donald is extremely tech-savvy so all of his presentations are available instantly on his website. [www.donaldbear.com](http://www.donaldbear.com)

Our teachers from the Learning Gains project were up next, Mpumelelo Hadebe from Qhamukile Primary in Mpophomeni in KZN and Lizeka Melapi from Nomsa Mapongwana in the Western Cape.



*Lizeka and Mpumelelo presenting on their uses of the Xbox Kinect in their respective Grade R classrooms.*

Both presenters made excellent points about their observations in their classrooms since introducing Games-Based Learning. They listed the various 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills that had been developed through the use of mobile learning technologies and explained how they can even use the Xbox Kinect for assessing learning. Lizeka showed three videos, the first of which showed Grade R learners selecting their favourite dances in an Xbox dance game even though they were unable to read at that stage. The other two videos showed just how much energy was required by Lizeka as well as her learners to



complete the dances and attempt to follow the moves accurately on the screen. Some of Lizeka's presentation is available on the SchoolNet YouTube channel <https://youtu.be/eo5gXPzBlc4> Mpumelelo gave a careful explanation of how valuable the Xbox Kinect can be for learners with barriers to learning and how they are able to demonstrate competence with the Xbox when unable to do so with traditional methods of assessment. A snippet of Mpume's presentation is available on the SchoolNet YouTube channel here <https://youtu.be/MGQcMY158fi>

The keynote plenary session that took place on Saturday night was presented by Prof. Lori Helman. Her presentation was entitled, "Building on Students' Home Language Skills as they Learn to Read and Write". Lori is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota, where she is also Director of the Minnesota Center for Reading Research. She demonstrated her wealth of experience and spoke about her research in the field of literacy development and effective teaching

practices for emergent bilinguals which could not have been more appropriate for our own South African delegates. The recurring theme throughout the conference was the need to respect the diversity of language within our classrooms and Lori was a great proponent of this. Her lists of advice for teachers included the following wisdom:

To support a language learning community:

- create norms for respecting student language
- do not tolerate put-downs
- share multi-lingual skills in group work
- ask students to add words from other languages and talk about them
- use cooperative structures
- maintain multi-lingual word consciousness and

To provide additional support to learners

- combine interactive approaches with explicit instructions - such as instructional conversations, vocabulary instruction, explicit skills instruction
- build on students' bilingual experiences
- involve families and communities
- build on culturally familiar structures



Tracey Butchart, the evaluator of the Learning Gains project was our last presentation on Sunday October 2<sup>nd</sup> and she revealed some amazing findings from her current study. In the assessment of learner performance in the acquisition of English the project schools had far outperformed the control schools. This was attributed to having to understand English in order to play the engaging games on a tablet or Xbox which was linked to

the necessary comprehensible input, making it far easier to absorb and understand English. This is in line with Stephen Krashen's theories of language acquisition who said, "*Language acquisition proceeds best when the input is not just comprehensible, but really interesting, even compelling; so interesting that you forget you are listening to or reading another language.*" In this second year of the study the findings for some of the other literacies were not as remarkable as that of language and not as outstanding as they had been from Grade R to Grade 1. These were being further researched in the final six months of the project.

It was noticeable in the plenary sessions that our project teachers were the only ones using tablets and phones to take photos and videos.





*Lizeka recording a keynote speaker*



*Lizeka, Noxolo, Joyce and Mpume enjoying the conference*

The representative teachers who have participated in the Learning Gains from Play project over the past two years were a real asset to Schoolnet at the RASA conference; they shared ideas and their experiences with delegates they met in workshops and in the networking periods - as well as delivering excellent presentations. Furthermore they felt they had gained a great deal from some of the sessions they attended and were especially impressed by all those who gave affirmation to the encouragement of multi-lingual classrooms. Here below is an extract from the report by Ms Noxolo Buyeye from Solomon Qatyana Primary, which sums up how most of the teachers felt about the conference.

*“(The RASA conference) was very fruitful and I have benefitted a lot and gained good methods of handling different levels of learners in class e.g. the video of the learner who was unable to read – from David Rose - the way he handled the learner was amazing. I also gained a lot about the methods of closing gaps between fast and slow learners. The opportunity to present gave me more confidence and added to my love for technology use in class. It was a great pleasure for me to share with other teachers who had not started to implement using technology - and see that as an extra job. Meeting people from different places with different experiences was an eye-opener for me personally. I can see myself going places involved more in what I am doing in my classroom. I very much appreciate each and every moment. The presentation from Prof Makalela gave me courage to allow my learners who are speaking different languages to speak in class.”*