Deep Rural - Eastern Cape Teachers are embracing new teaching approaches

‘Deep Rural’ is a term that is used carelessly these days but it is very appropriate when referring to the schools participating in the CSIR initiative in Cofimvaba. This photo taken from the veranda of a row of classrooms at Zamuxolo Junior Secondary School shows one of the three mud rondavels that are still used for teaching.

One could be forgiven for assuming that teachers at this school might not be familiar with technology and might not readily adapt to an intervention that requires them to use android tablets in their classrooms. How wrong that assumption would be. On the contrary, the achievements of these teachers at Zamuxolo Junior Secondary have surpassed all expectations.

Cofimvaba, a very small town in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, this week saw great gains being made for learning by teachers who expertly demonstrated that they had been making effective use of technology in their teaching. The week marked the stage in this ICT4RED (Information and Communication Technologies for Rural Education Development) project when teachers were assessed on progress they had made in the intervening weeks since the professional development workshops they had first attended.
ICT4RED is the result of a unique partnership between a number of government departments, namely the Department of Science and Technology, The Department of Rural Development and the Department of Basic Education, both National and in the Eastern Cape. The conceptualisation of the project has been undertaken by the CSIR who have cautiously and painstakingly devoted their research resources with the intention of refining best practice for technology in education programmes. The project team has endeavoured not to allow this initiative to become just another instance of technologies being dumped in schools with little guidance on their effective use in the classroom, while learners and teachers are exploited for political or commercial interests. This project team are “getting it right” because the focus of this intervention is firmly on the noblest of educational objectives - to improve learning.

Hlengiwe Mfeka is a former teacher from a similarly disadvantaged area in KZN and she is the project manager for SchoolNet SA who is charged with responsibility for the professional development of teachers for this initiative. SchoolNet South Africa is a non-profit NGO whose mission for the past 16 years has been “Creating communities of teachers and learners using technology to enhance learning”. Mfeka says that although SchoolNet SA has experience of teachers readily embracing new technologies and being able to adopt and adapt them in their classrooms, she has never before experienced this phenomenon among a whole school staff - and in such a short period of time.

The key to this success appears to be the use of targets and rewards as deployed in badges-based learning. The badges concept has been developing world wide over the past three years and involves students (anywhere, anytime and of any age) gaining recognition for their skills achievements through the allocation of badges according to prescribed criteria. In order to “earn” badges, the teachers in ICT4RED have to prove they had have matched the criteria by showing evidence such as a video of a local person describing a story about their local area, digital mind maps of learning topics, photos of...
learners grouped according to jigsaw group methodology, sent email, photos of learners’ work, such as posters about rules for use of technology. (see below)

In turn the accumulation of badges for an individual might lead to the reward of a cover for one’s tablet, an SD card for additional storage, earphones or a car charger. The accumulation of badges for the staff as a whole could lead to many rewards for the school, the first of which in this project was a data projector for the school – seen below being awarded to Zamuxlo JSS by CSIR’s Adele Botha. As this process unfolds it becomes easy to see why staff rooms are suddenly buzzing, why teachers are motivated, focused on learning, even asking to remain at school after hours - and why there is a spring in the step of many school principals in the Cofimvaba district.

The first pilot school in the ICT4RED initiative was Arthur Mfebe Senior Secondary School where tremendous impact on academic achievement has already been recorded over the past year. Grade 12 learners at this school have already become used to using their tablets at school and at home. This week saw the awarding of android tablets to learners in all other grades at the Arthur Mfebe Senior Secondary School, approximately 200 devices.

So, this week the story was about a groups of schools in a “deep rural area” of South Africa where teachers had pledged to make a difference; a story that continues to unfold with unexpectedly high achievements and well-deserved rewards.