

Cracking the literacy puzzle in South Africa

SLTs are in a key position to help improve pupils' literacy skills. Jacqui Wright describes her experience in South Africa

Literacy was barely mentioned 20 years ago during my BSc speech and language therapy training at the logopaedics department, University of Cape Town's medical school. Later on, while living in the US for five-and-a-half years, I home-schooled my five children for four years and during that time developed my literacy awareness.

As SLTs we know the importance of the normal development of phonological awareness, speech sounds, language structures and auditory processing skills as the foundation or pre-literacy skills for the normal development of reading, spelling and writing skills. Children who are delayed or deviate from the norm in the former are at-risk for the latter.

For example, children with weak sound structure and segmenting ability have difficulty learning the correct interactions between letters and speech sounds for reading. If they have speech sound errors in their own spontaneous speech, this adversely affects reading correctly even further. And so this snowballs on into spelling and expressive writing.

Sadly, from general clinical experience, we also know that children who are at-risk for reading, spelling and writing difficulties also tend towards school failure and leaving school early, loss of self-esteem, behavioural problems, eventual low socio-economic status and possibly even crime.

On returning to South Africa, I combined this knowledge with my speech and language therapy work in the South African education system. In 1999, I took up the challenge of independent speech and language therapy work in South African schools and developed a clinical reading and spelling programme.

Most therapists in South Africa work privately in specific schools by arrangement with school principals (head teachers). There

are few government posts and parents usually pay fees directly to the therapist.

Based on the many American speech pathologists' recommendations, they assess reading and spelling using South African standardised tests and do remediation for these skills as well as expressive writing.

As I am also trained as an audiologist, I did speech and hearing screenings in pre-schools (ages one to five years) and primary schools (ages six to 13 years), as well as full diagnostic speech and language assessments that included assessing auditory perceptual skills, reading, spelling and writing, followed by therapy as needed.

I worked in private pre-schools and primary schools as well as government primary schools in Pretoria and Johannesburg. The needs of at-risk children in private and government schools were the same, but the children in the government schools had more obstacles to overcome.

In the government schools, teachers faced particular challenges. These were:

- Large numbers of children in a class (40 plus)
- Pupils speaking one of the 11 African languages, English and/or Afrikaans. Many children, therefore, were being taught in a second or third language, eg their 'mother tongue' might be an African language, their second language Afrikaans and they attended an English school, when they barely spoke English. English-speaking teachers were trying to teach literacy skills in English to children who did not have adequate pre-literacy skills in that language. In a parallel medium school, where classes are taught separately in Afrikaans and English, some Afrikaans-speaking teachers were required to teach English literacy skills to English-speaking children without the

knowledge to do this

- There were no learning support assistants, or time to help the children who were failing, and limited literacy resources. These children soon developed behavioural problems and disrupted the classroom

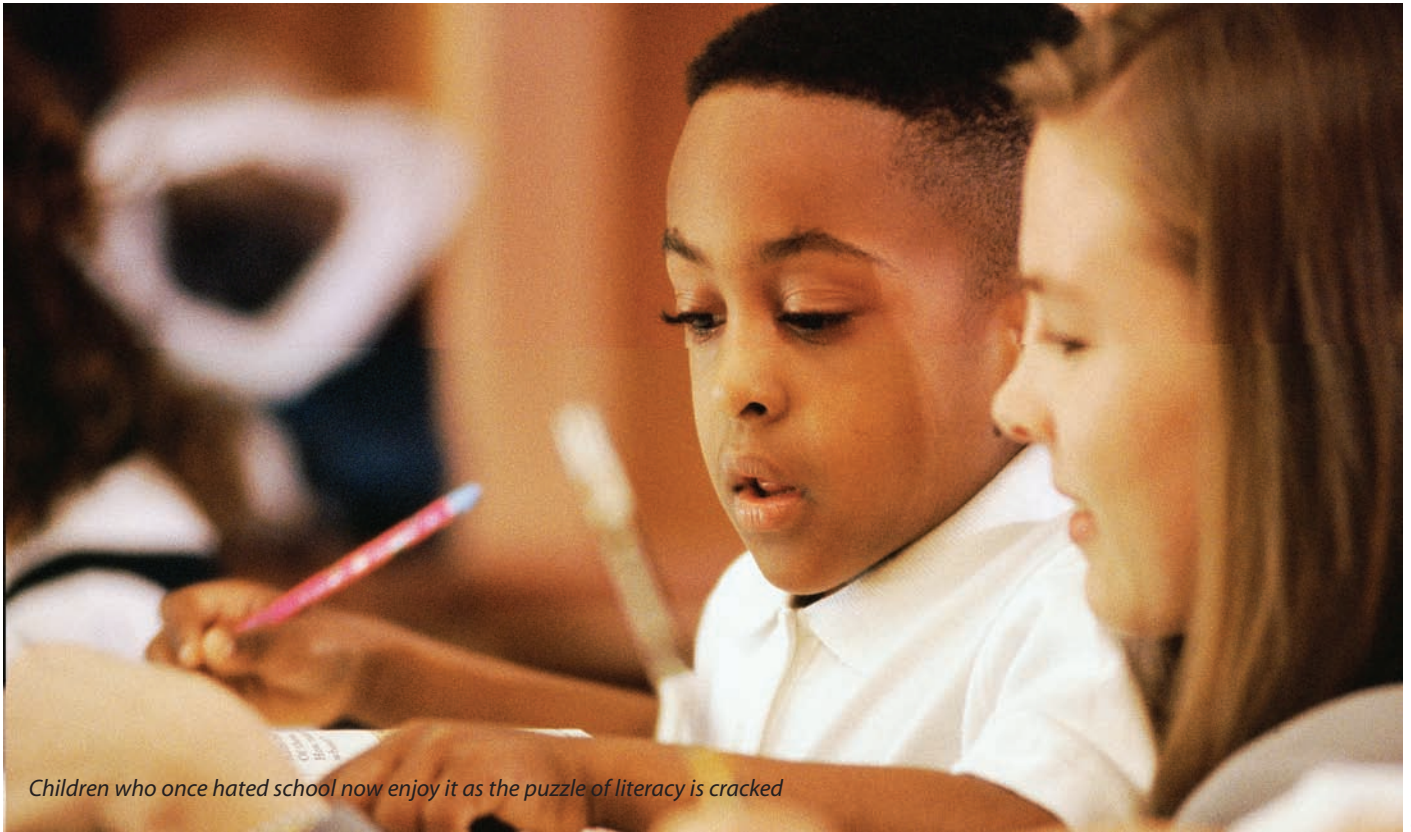
Many of the children had problems because they were learning in English when this was their second or even third language. Others were not progressing because of the poor teaching of basic literacy. I worked closely with the teachers on developing literacy strategies for the school.

In one primary English-speaking school (age six to 12), I met voluntarily with the teachers, occupational therapist and psychologist on a regular basis, as part of government strategy to try to help the failing children whose parents could not afford therapy.

From 1999 to 2002, all the children I saw for regular weekly speech and language therapy, including pre-literacy and literacy skills, made progress in all areas and many caught up their reading and spelling ages.

I usually saw children either individually or in groups of three. The type of work I did initially in the area of literacy was to use memory techniques for recall and contrast of short vowel sounds and then long vowel sounds.

This was carried over into reading books designed for the specific vowel sound eg, 'e' and phonic worksheets for spelling, grammar and writing involving that vowel sound. The children enjoyed being able to master simple reading books and the fun activity worksheets. Although I used a positive reward system for achievement in the sessions and for homework, the children were motivated by their own success with the programme. I also incorporated other aspects



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of speech and language therapy so that the children received remediation holistically in all areas of difficulties.

The best part for me was the newfound confidence of the children and the smiles on their faces. Those who once hated school now enjoyed it as the puzzle of literacy was cracked and this opened up the world of learning. Teachers and parents were also thrilled. One parent commented, “You have saved my child’s life.”

The most crucial stages of literacy learning are in the early school years (ages five to nine). After that learning is more about the content of subjects using established literacy skills. I have learned from experience that the role of the SLT goes hand-in-hand with that of the teachers, and that we both have knowledge and skills to bring to the learning of literacy, especially in those early years.

For the children’s sake, we need to work together with those who are at risk. I have good experience of this, and having returned to the UK, I refined my knowledge by taking part in a Teaching Handwriting Reading and Spelling Skills (THRASS) course with other teachers and SLTs in 2004.

THRASS is a whole-school phonics programme for teaching learners, of any age, about the building blocks of reading and spelling – the 44 phonemes (speech sounds)

of spoken English and the graphemes (spelling choices) of written English. The programme teaches learners that, basically, when spelling we change phonemes to graphemes and when reading we change graphemes to phonemes.

THRASS is an explicit phoneme-grapheme awareness teaching method. It helps learners to understand the building blocks of the English language. It is a logical, linguistically sound, way to teach phonological awareness. THRASS is a code-breaker, described by many teachers as “the key that unlocks the door to our language”. It is also a practical, multisensory approach, addressing both prevention and correction. It teaches metacognitive strategies (thinking skills) to empower learners with lifelong word-solving skills.

Over the years THRASS (UK) has built a reputation for providing high quality professional development courses in many countries. Testimony to this are the thousands of very positive course evaluations, from hundreds of courses, on the main website – www.thrass.co.uk/courses.htm

As a consequence, teachers, assistants, parents, educational psychologists and SLTs in pre-schools, schools, colleges and universities in many countries use the resources.

Alan Davies, co-author of THRASS, is

currently delivering his programme in southern African countries, including Botswana and South Africa. Course evaluations indicate that his training is being well received and with integration into the education system will make a great difference there.

I am hoping for a better future for the children of South Africa, in particular, and also for the children here in the UK, as we take up the challenge of integrating literacy development into our role as SLTs. ■

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Reading:

Hilton, E. Review: THRASS whole-picture keyword phonics in *Communion Magazine*. South African Speech Hearing and Language Association, November 2003.

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THRASS information given with permission from Alan Davies, co-author of THRASS.