

Heideveld early grades reading project

Report to Children's Helpers Worldwide

Heideveld is a sub-economic township in the greater Cape Town metropole. Gang violence, drug trading, substance abuse and an amalgam of related social ills are part of everyday life. The modern well-secured building of Heideveld Primary School stands out as a refuge of normalcy amidst the poverty and wretched circumstances in the area. The school's mission is to offer children a good basic education which could be their only escape from a generations-old poverty cycle they are otherwise destined to re-live.

During April and May this year, 13 teachers from Heideveld Primary School and 13 teachers from neighbouring Willows Primary School attended the short course *Teaching reading in the early grades*, which was offered by ORT SA CAPE. Before and after the course, ORT trainers visited the 13 Heideveld teachers who participated in the training, to provide classroom support.

All the teachers who participated in the course are qualified and over the years most have participated in in-service training on the Balanced Language Approach (BLA) and other aspects of teaching language. Nonetheless, many teachers reported that the course and follow-up support refreshed their memories and/or clarified important aspects of subject knowledge and teaching methods with which they were not familiar. The following stood out from teachers' feedback and from our two rounds of lesson observations at Heideveld PS:

- Teachers now understand the difference between shared reading and group guided reading, whereas many did not distinguish clearly between these two BLA methodologies previously.
- Most teachers are now making good use of flash cards and word walls to teach vocabulary, which was not the case before.
- During group guided reading sessions, teachers now spend more time on teaching comprehension and reading practice, whereas before they spent most small-group instruction time on word and sentence level work (grammar).
- There is a new awareness of group guided reading amongst the Grade 4 teachers.

A number of challenges remain.

- The pace and flow of the group guided reading lesson is sometimes negatively affected by following:
 - Text selection is not always appropriate.
 - Some teachers do not teach vocabulary systematically during the pre-reading stage of the lesson.
 - In some classes, the groups are not appropriately leveled or are too big, especially the weaker groups.
 - Independent 'desk-work' is seldom differentiated and often results in poor discipline and interruptions of the group guided reading.
- Although teachers are trying to teach comprehension more frequently and better, the cognitive level of questioning remains low – too many lower-order and closed questions.

- The Grade 4 teachers are still not comfortable with the group guided reading methodology and would benefit greatly from more training and support.

One of a number of 'novice' teachers at Heideveld, Ms Sonn¹, qualified from university at the end of 2017 and she teaches a Grade 2 class. Curriculum management is largely organised by grade at the school, so teachers share their lesson planning and preparation with their colleagues working in the same grade. According to Ms Sonn, the ORT reading course, made her realise the importance of teaching vocabulary to support learners' reading development. In a grade meeting at the time of the course, she asked the group whether they could change existing practice and prepare and teach vocabulary in advance, before learners read any new text. In the last few weeks, the Grade 2 teachers have also been working on rationalising and sorting all reading books to allow for systematic teaching of reading according to learners' reading levels.

The ORT course affirmed some teaching practices that Ms Sonn had learned at university, but of which she wasn't sure. For example, while attending the course, she already started to move individual learners to more advanced reading groups more regularly than before, as soon as they demonstrate in informal assessments that they had mastered the required skills at the current level.

Since attending the course, Ms Sonn has introduced a few 'significant changes' into the way she teaches group guided reading:

- Within the guidelines suggested in the curriculum, she adjusts time allocations for group guided reading to suit learners' different reading levels. Typically, the weaker groups' sessions on the mat are somewhat longer than the time allocated for the more advanced groups.
- As the trainers had advised, she has been investing time in creating laminated flash cards to teach vocabulary in the pre-reading segment of the group guided reading lesson. She is confident that she will reap rewards from this hard work in future years, and she can already see positive impact of this strategy. For example, learners no longer confuse sight words like with and went as before. Displaying the flash cards on the word wall also helps learners to remember new words much better.
- Like several of her colleagues, Ms Sonn places much more emphasis on teaching comprehension during the small group sessions on the mat. She makes an effort to include many more higher order questions when discussing the meaning of reading texts with her learners.

The course, as well as discussions with the ORT trainers, has convinced Ms Sonn of the need to take differentiation in her lessons a step further by preparing separate reading and writing desk work activities for the different ability groups to complete while she works with small groups on the mat. She recognises that this will involve considerable additional preparation work, but it is another investment she is willing to make. During the mid-year holidays, she plans to spend time to do this preparation of different activities for the third term. She believes differentiated lessons would create many more opportunities for learners to be

¹ Names and other personal details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

engaged in meaningful literacy work at the appropriate level, while allowing her to attend fully to support learners' reading on the mat.

Ms Sonn complemented the ORT trainers on a relevant and worthwhile teacher development programme:

"I generally don't trust trainers because they often say contradictory things. But the information and advice given by the ORT trainers have been consistent and valid. Your team really understood our challenges with large classes and the problems our learners bring to school."



Theresa Soci, one of our Education specialists, co-teaching and supporting during a Group Guided reading lesson at Heideveld Primary. These visits are imperative after training to ensure that teachers feel supported and acknowledged for their hard work and efforts.