Four Gamtoos Valley primary schools benefiting from initiative

Book project shows results

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The only education charity operating in the Gamtoos River Valley is ensuring that hundreds of pupils in the remote area do not miss out on the excitement of National Book Week through their Book Buddies Programme.

Youth Potential South Africa (Youpsa) director Alexis Salaman said the charity launched the programme this week at four Gamtoos Valley schools, with the hope of the model spreading throughout the Gamtoos Valley area.

The Book Buddies Programme involves pairing pupils of different ability and age to read together for pleasure, two to three times a week for 15 minutes per session.

Salaman said none of the four primary schools – De Mist Kral, Massiebenze, Kragga and Vulani Combined – had a school library and many teachers felt “insecure” about teaching reading.

Salaman said over time, pupils’ interest in books developed, and their literacy skills and their relationships with each other naturally improved as they were able to articulate their thoughts and ideas.

“Reading helps people to understand themselves, and to navigate the world around them,” she said.

“The main benefits of reading are that it actually activates our imagination, develops our thinking processes, deepens empathy, helps us to learn problem-solving and to practise self-reflection.

“The more you read, the more you get the language and thinking skills they need for academic success and for their own personal development.”

Salaman said Youpsa had found that multiple approaches were required to bring about a positive change to the literacy crisis, especially in rural areas.

“ar the results of the 2016 Pirls [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study] show that a massive 78% of South African grade 4 pupils do not reach the international benchmarks and do not have the basic reading skills required by the end of grade 4,” she said.

Youpsa has actively tried to address the alarming statistics through a variety of programmes including training teachers and school management in literacy, popularising reading for pleasure in homes and communities and availing reading material to impoverished communities.

“Among a range of literacy boosting programmes, Youpsa offer Mobile Village Libraries [books in a bag, managed by youth librarians] and nurture youth reading clubs,” she said.

From October onwards, Youpsa is offering a Literacy Volunteer Training Programme in the valley, to enable more people to bring the joy of reading to their communities.

De Mist Kral school principal Martha de Beer said since Youpsa had started working with the school at the start of 2018, they had seen a shift in pupils’ attitudes and aptitudes.

“Initially the pupils were very shy and hardly spoke English – in an Afrikaans rural area they haven’t needed to.

“So when Youpsa came they really had to start at the beginning with the kids,” she said.

“But they have such a fantastic way of relating to the pupils and all of them have improved in fluency in English and are a lot more confident.

“The book buddy programme is something I highly recommend. Every day for 15 minutes we stop class to read and make pupils realise the importance of picking up a book.”

You can help Youpsa by donating new or good quality books for children and youth by contacting Salaman on 076-123-3832, website: www.youpsa.org, facebook: www.facebook.com/youthpotentialsa