

● **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 (Youspa) 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 Kraal, Masisebenze, Quagga and Vukani 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



DIVING IN: Grade 5 pupils, from left, Devon Moos, Angel Mandeka and Rozanne Mandeka from De Mist Kraal Primary School in Gamtoos Valley dig into a book. Youth Potential South Africa launched its Book Buddies Programme, during National Book Week (September 3-9), at four rural schools in the area

our imagination, develops our thinking processes, deepens empathy, helps us to learn problem-solving and to practise self-reflection.

“The more young people read for pleasure, the faster they gain the language and thinking skills they need for academic success and for their own personal development.”

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

“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 bench-

marks and do not have the basic reading skills required by the end of grade 4,” she said.

Youspa 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, Youspa offer Mobile Village Libraries [books in a bag, managed by youth librarians] and nurture youth reading clubs,” she said.

From October onwards, Youspa 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 Kraal school principal Martha de Beer said since Youspa 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 too.

“So when Youspa 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 Youspa by donating new or good quality books for children and youth by contacting Salaman on 076-123-3832, website: www.youspa.org; facebook: www.facebook.com/youthpotentialsa*