

South Africa's reading crisis is a cognitive catastrophe

February 26 2018, by John Aitchison

When the late Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko published his seminal book, "I write what I like", in 1978 it wasn't about individual self-expression or even self-indulgence. It was a political statement with its origins in [the work](#) of Brazilian adult literacy activist [Paulo Freire](#).

Freire identified the profound connection between reading, understanding the world and so being able to change it. Half a century after Biko was [murdered](#) by South Africa's apartheid state, his country is no nearer being able to do this.

Instead, many of the country's children are struggling to read at all. That's according to the results of the international [PIRLS 2016 literacy tests](#) on nearly 13 000 South African school children. These showed that 78% of grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language. South Africa scored last of the 50 countries tested. Also worrying was that there were no signs of improvement over the last five years. In fact, in the case of the boys who were tested, the situation may have worsened.

A few weeks before these results were released, another study [had found](#) that 27% of children under five in the country suffer from stunting and that their brains are not developing as they should. Damage like this is largely irreversible. It leads to low school achievement and work productivity – and so to ongoing poverty.

These truly disadvantaged children are those of the poor; the 25% of South Africa's population who live in extreme poverty. Given their

dreadful circumstances, it might be understandable that 25% of children might not succeed in learning to read. But 78%? There has to be another explanation for that.

There are indeed reasons. They range from the absence of a reading culture among adult South Africans to the dearth of school libraries allied to the high cost of books and lastly to the low quality of training for teachers of reading.

No reading culture and bad teaching

Part of South Africa's reading catastrophe is cultural. Most parents don't read to their children many because [they themselves are not literate](#) and because there are very few cheap children's books in African languages (and it must be remembered that English is a minority home language in South Africa).

But reading at home also doesn't happen at the highest levels of middle class society and the new elite either. It's treated as a lower order activity that's uncool, nerdy and unpopular. And it's not a spending priority. South Africans spend twice as much on chocolate each year [than they do on books](#).

The situation doesn't improve at school. Until provincial education departments ensure that every school has a simple library and that children have access to cheap suitable books in their own mother tongues, South Africa cannot be seen as serious about the teaching of reading.

Another problem lies with the fact that reading is taught badly. South Africa closed down its teacher training colleges between 1994 and 2000. This was done ostensibly to improve the quality of teacher education by making it the sole responsibility of universities. It backfired.

Previously, universities used to teach mainly [high school teachers](#). Now they were expected to train foundation level teachers of the first three school grades. It was an area university's education departments knew little about. They also inevitably incorporated only those training college educators who had postgraduate degrees. Sadly, these people generally had no great interest in the grunt work of teaching little children to read. So foundation level teacher training at universities is often a disaster.

There's been some attempt to address this bungle. The latest of them is the Department of Higher Education and Training's [Primary Teacher Education project](#).

The teacher training curriculum is also problematic. Most teaching about reading instruction in South Africa's universities is outdated. Faculties of education appear to have largely ignored modern scientific advances in understanding how reading happens.

What the science says

Over the last three decades cognitive neuroscience has clarified and resolved a number of debates about reading. It has been proven beyond doubt that reading – becoming literate – alters the brain.

Learning the visual representation of language and the rules for matching sounds and letters develops new language processing possibilities. It reinforces and modifies certain fundamental abilities, such as verbal and visual memory and other crucial skills. It influences the pathways used by the brain for problem-solving.

Failing to learn to read is bad for the cognition necessary to function effectively in a modern society. The inability of South Africa to teach [children](#) to read, then, leads to another type of stunting: one that is as drastic as its physical counterpart.

The country now has generations who have been cognitively stunted because of a massive failure in its culture and educational provision. All South Africans are implicated if they don't do their utmost to help people learn to read.

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