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A Story-Powered Nation

A framework for a National Reading Strategy for South Africa



This document offers a broad framework for a national reading strategy that:

- examines the power of reading;
- paints a vision of a reading nation; and
- offers a road map of how we can get there: by nurturing and investing in story-powered homes, schools and communities across South Africa.

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This framework was developed drawing on the work and experience of leading South African literacy organisations like Wordworks, Nal'ibali, PRAESA and others.

Front-page artwork: Maria Lebedeva

Title: Reading makes your world big

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“If he wasn’t reading a newspaper, he was reading a book. I would see this and it was hugely encouraging.”

- Ahmed Kathrada talking about Nelson Mandela

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The vision

Reading gives children the power to **think critically** and to **imagine**. It builds **empathy** for others. It is key to a child's future because it is the **foundation for learning**.

Children who love reading can help change the path of our country – reading will help us to build **powerful people, a strong economy and a connected society**, allowing us to **reduce poverty and inequality**.

Reading opens up new worlds.

It gives us power – to learn new things, tell our own stories, and shape our futures.

When children can read, they can understand. When they can understand, they can learn. And when they can learn, they can do well in school, pass Matric and get a decent job – which grows our economy and lifts families out of poverty. A fully literate nation could boost the size of our GDP by 25%.¹

When children can read, they can think for themselves. They can be informed and active citizens – people who make connections, ask questions, and imagine new answers to our most pressing problems.² They can understand and connect with each other, creating a society that talks, listens, and empathise with one another – a nation that is more united and less divided.

The positive effects of words, books and stories are so strong that they have a bigger effect on success than parents' education level or income. Reading can change the life chances of a child born into poverty – and her entire family.

We can achieve this vision if we have a **nation of readers**: a South Africa where every child – and every adult – experiences the power and magic of reading.



The opportunity

Too many of our children are **not reading well, or not reading at all.**

27% of Grade 6 learners are illiterate³ – unable to read and understand a simple text. Only 15% of South African adults with children at home read aloud to them more than once a week, and two-thirds do not read to their children at all.⁴

It doesn't have to be this way.

Even before birth, all children are wired to learn, and hungry for the simple things – reading, talking, singing, playing and listening to stories – that help their brains grow and get them ready to read.

Stories are one of the best tools we have to feed this hunger. Before they can even speak, children are fascinated by stories⁵ – read or told aloud, true or imaginary, exciting or everyday.

Hearing stories develops the neural connections and brain architecture to enable children to read, write, count and learn. It exposes children to more words and grows their vocabulary. At school, they are able to read better because they understand more.

Stories have power!

They shape what we believe, how we act, and how we relate to others.⁶

To take advantage of this ‘story-power’, the things we need to do are surprisingly simple – and **we know what they are**.

These proven strategies give us a road map:
how to build a Story-powered Nation.

The Road map to a Story-powered Nation

Talk to children early and often, with nurturing and encouraging words.

Children who hear more words, and more encouraging words, in the first 4 years of life have a larger vocabulary at age 3 and better language skills in Grade 3.⁷ This enables successful learning in all subjects.⁸

Read to children early and often, from books that they love.

Reading books to children builds many skills, including vocabulary, grammar, focus and attention span, and communication.⁹

Surround children with books – in homes, libraries and classrooms.

Poor children with access to books develop better reading skills,¹⁰ and children with at least 20 books at home are more likely to complete school and reach higher education.¹¹ Books help the most in homes where parents are not highly educated.¹²

Give children the chance to read and write what they like, purely for fun.

Reading for pleasure has more effect on educational achievement than parents’ income or education level¹³ – and children who enjoy reading most do better in all subjects, including Maths.¹⁴

Show children that reading matters.

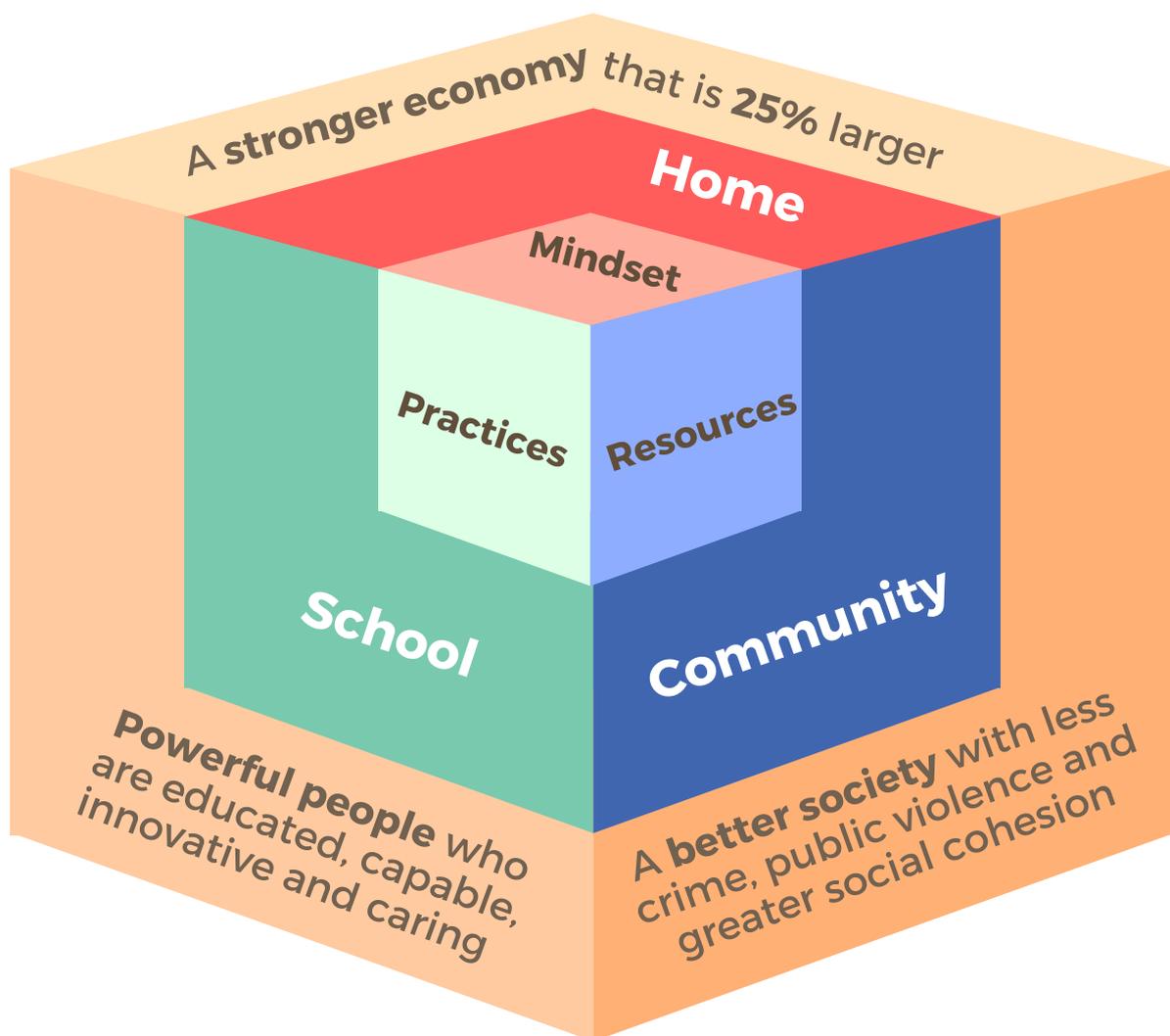
Children are more motivated to read when they have reading role models, when adults respond to and encourage their efforts,¹⁵ and when they get to talk to others about what they’re reading.¹⁶

To put these strategies into action, we need to look beyond the classroom, which is traditionally the focus when we talk about reading, and to all of the places where children spend their time, namely: **homes, schools and communities**.

We need to identify, cultivate and invest in:

- The right **mindsets**: the knowledge and motivation to act.
- The right **resources**: books and stories, in all of our languages, everywhere and for everyone.
- The right **practices**: daily habits, effective and inspiring campaigns and programmes, and new ideas that disrupt the status quo.

What we can achieve through 'story-power'



Many people think children only learn to read at school. But this couldn't be further from the truth. **The seeds of a child's future success are planted in the home, starting at birth.**

Story-powered homes



What do these homes look like?

Children and adults snuggle up together every night or morning, to read or tell stories and enjoy time to bond.

Adults talk, sing, tell stories and read to children from a very young age, and surround them with loving, encouraging words.

Books are always around – whether they belong to a family or come from the library. Newspapers and magazines are there, too.

Paper and pens or crayons are readily available, so children can write, draw and make their own books.

Adults use reading and writing in everyday life – like making a shopping list or writing a letter – and involve children in what they're doing.



What will it take?

Story-powered homes

The right mindset	Important practices	Accessible resources
<p>Parents and caregivers know that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading, talking, singing and telling stories to babies from birth stimulates brain development.• Talking with children is key to language development in the early years.• Reading and telling stories together strengthens bonds and grows a love of reading.• Stories help children to understand their feelings; they pass down history and traditional beliefs and share knowledge about faraway places and things.• Stories and reading aloud help children learn to listen and concentrate and build their imagination.• Even if they can't read well or books are not available, they can still share stories and grow a love for stories.• If children learn to read in their home language, it makes it easier for them to learn to read in other languages later on.	<p>Parents and caregivers are encouraged to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Read, talk, sing and tell stories to babies and children, every day, from birth.• Take children to the public library. Have conversations with children by asking questions and waiting for answers.• Point out print in a child's environment (like road signs or shop signage).• Make children aware of sounds in words (e.g. ssss for snake).• Introduce new words and explain them to children. Provide opportunities for children to draw, paint and 'pretend' write.• Encourage children to play (pretend play is particularly important for language development).	<p>Parents and caregivers have access to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Efficient, well-stocked and child-friendly public and mobile libraries.• Stories, story cards and story supplements, given out in public places – like clinics, post offices, SASSA pay points and supermarkets - and/or distributed through magazines and newspapers.• More affordable and accessible children's books, especially in African languages, so that there are books and stories in homes.• Book clubs and home library networks in communities.• Free story and rhyme libraries on mobile phones.• Audio stories on public and community radio stations.• Read-aloud demonstrations on television and social media.

Some teachers see reading for pleasure as an ‘add-on’ or ‘nice to have’ – **but it’s actually the backbone of learning to read.** To make use of this 'story-power', classrooms need more books – engaging, exciting books in African languages and English – and **children need more time to read, write and get creative with stories.**

Story-powered schools



What do these schools look like?

Educators teach children to care about the story of every person they meet.

Educators use stories to make learning come alive; they know that children are not passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants in the process of learning to read and write.

Educators use every opportunity to cultivate a love of reading among children.

Children have access to books – both in their home language and English – and are encouraged to handle them. They are given time to read the books they want to read, and to simply enjoy reading without being tested.



What will it take?

Story-powered schools

The right mindset

Educators know that:

- Reading for enjoyment and stories are the **foundation of learning to read** – the fertile soil in which reading instruction can take root.¹⁷
- Sharing, making-up, telling and reading stories together has many benefits:
 - It provides opportunities to hear and use language and therefore develops language skills.¹⁸
 - **It helps children to make meaning of and connect to the world around them.** This allows them to see things from another person's point of view, and imagine themselves in a world different to their own – cultivating problem solving, innovation, empathy and hope.
 - It is enjoyable to children and therefore motivates them to be interested in books and reading.
 - It is an effective way to develop listening skills and concentration in children.¹⁹

Important practices

The Department of Education ensures that:

- Educators receive high-quality training (pre-service and in-service) that develops a story-powered mindset and provides the skills for implementing these practices in the classroom.
- This mindset and these practices are encouraged throughout the department.

In the Foundation Phase classroom:²¹

- Teachers use dedicated class time for interactive storybook reading, encouraging extended conversations and creating opportunities for learning new vocabulary and syntax.
- Children are encouraged to experiment with writing - without emphasis on correct spelling or neat writing in the beginning.
- Activities for developing phonological awareness are built into the daily curriculum.

Accessible resources

Schools have:

- Well-stocked libraries that hum with activity during the school day, and allow children to borrow books to take home.
- Classroom libraries with storybooks in children's mother tongues as well as in English that are used, shared, discussed, and debated on a **daily basis**.
- A book and story replenishment strategy.
- Time to read books and tell stories.
- Lists of appropriate storybooks in English and other mother tongue languages.

The right mindset

- Parental involvement is key to early language learning.
- 'Reading for enjoyment' **can be integrated with CAPS** and help to achieve CAPS outcomes.²⁰
- It's important to ensure all children have the building blocks they need in order to learn to read, rather than relentlessly progressing through the curriculum in the Foundation Phase.
- Learning to read is a social activity that should be fun.

Important practices

- Children are given the opportunity for oral storytelling which encourages them to use more complex narratives.
- Educators encourage children to handle books and take them home – even if they get worn.
- Children have opportunities to have fun with books and stories, such as making up alternative endings, acting out parts of the plot, or having discussions with each other about the story.

Because reading is valued and an important part of school culture:

- There are reading clubs at schools.
- Parents are equipped with the information and skills they need to support their child's language development and reading ability.
- There are special events and competitions aimed at motivating children to read.
- Schools participate in national literacy flagship events, such as World Read Aloud Day and World Book Day, and create special occasions to recognise and celebrate their literacy champions.

Story-powered schools

"Reading underpins every other subject. I discovered as a teacher that children don't do well because they don't read. If the parents are readers you can actually see the difference in the child's school work."



Brenda Rhode, former teacher and founder of the Young Authors Club.

It's said that "it takes a village to raise a child" - that "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person because of other people). **Children are more likely to become readers if they grow up in communities where they see from the people around them that reading is important and fun.**

Story-powered communities



What do these communities look like?

People know that the stories of their lives matter.

Children know they are valued because adults in their community pay attention to them, listen to them and make them feel safe and loved.

Adults value reading and they have access to information, resources and support that allows them to play an important role in the language and literacy development of children in their community.

Books and stories are available wherever children are, such as in clinics, on public transport, and across a host of digital platforms.

There are many fun opportunities where children are read to and have the chance to explore stories and books.

The message to children is clear: 'the people in our community think reading is important and they enjoy it'.



What will it take?

Story-powered
communities

The right mindset

Adults in the community know that:

- Early childhood development is important because it enables a child to one day reach his/her full potential.
- Early literacy and language development are an essential part of addressing young children's developmental needs.
- Ensuring that children have opportunities to develop a love of reading is **a simple, but powerful way to give children an advantage in life.**
- Anyone can get involved in story and reading activities with children - and everyone should!
- Reading helps to develop a better, more empathetic and innovative society. By aspiring to be a nation that values reading, we aspire to be the best we can be.
- **Adults are reading role models for children:** when children see adults reading and enjoying it, they are much more motivated to read themselves.

Important practices

In communities:

- Local book and reading clubs are driven and supported by churches, community centres, service organisations (e.g. Rotary), non-profit organisations, schools, and individuals.
- Reading, stories and strategies to help children develop a love of reading are promoted in local community media (print and radio) in all official languages.
- There are strong community-wide social media networks, linking the local library, book clubs, schools and others. These draw attention to reading activities, and sharing skills and ideas to support language and literacy development of children.
- World Read Aloud Day is an important literacy promotion day, with towns and communities competing against each other and focusing on beating their own read-aloud record.

Accessible resources

Communities have:

- Well-stocked public libraries with library personnel who:
 - Understand the importance of community-wide access to books, and who are able to develop local networks and strategies to facilitate this (for example, systems to allow rural communities on farms to take out books).
 - Are able to drive local campaigns to enhance awareness of the importance of reading (which includes supporting the work of local book or reading clubs).
 - Mobilise volunteers to help them with literacy development activities, thereby growing a network of adult reading role models.
- Early childhood development centres and playgroups that emphasise language development and schools that are story-powered.

"Parents, grandparents, guardians, whoever, just encourage them! There is a big need for our children to read and write. **It is a present that you can give to anyone! You cannot buy it, but you can give.**"



Khuthala Bulana, a mother of four children who also hosts a reading club for children in her community.

Important Practices

- There are various fun events (such as community festivals, concerts and competitions) that inspire, enhance awareness and boost participation and support for local story and reading initiatives.
- There are community drives to expose parents and children to the local library with easy registration and library cards for every child.
- The reach of schools and libraries are enhanced by government-driven community programmes that have paired with initiatives that support literacy development (for example, the Community Work Programme and Nal'ibali).

Accessible resources

- Free multilingual libraries and literacy resources on mobile phones.
- Retail distribution of stories (for example by offering free story supplements or story cards in stores or by integrating stories into client incentive products/in-store magazines).
- Stories in newspapers, magazines, Nal'ibali newspaper supplements, etc.
- Mobile libraries that reach out to rural populations (and these can come in all shapes and sizes: cars, buses, tuk-tuks, donkey carts, bicycles, etc.)
- Community-wide book donation drives that focus on equipping reading clubs and ensuring children have books in their homes.

We can do this.

Working together, we can transform ourselves into a Story-powered Nation.



We can create a society where all children hear stories from birth; are motivated to read and enjoy reading; have access to large amounts of exciting and relevant reading material, in all of their home languages; are supported by caring adults; and talk about books and stories with the people around them.

We can nurture a generation of children who experience reading not as a difficult chore, but as a joyful, rewarding exploration of the world. A generation who are motivated, inspired, enabled and supported to reach their full potential – and who use that potential to help build a better society and a stronger economy.

It will take commitment, political will and large-scale co-operation across sectors, departments, organisations and people. There is a role for each and every one of us to play.

And the rewards will be big.

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