

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE 2016 PIRLS RESULTS: SUGGESTIONS ON WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

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## Introduction

Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, released the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Results on 05 December 2017. PIRLS is an international study of reading achievement, particularly on Grade 4 learners. Here in South Africa, the study tested 12 810 Grade 4 learners from 293 schools across the country (Mullis et al, 2017). The sample is fairly representative nationally and can be generalized to the entire country. The results reveal that there is a reading crisis in South Africa. However, this also means that all the affected stakeholders like teachers, lecturers, government officials, etc. should make some contributions as to how we can solve some of these problems. In this article, I have decided to look at some of the findings of the PIRLS 2016 and made some suggestions for possible solutions.

## Some of the findings of PIRLS (2016) and the suggestions

- **8 of 10 South African children cannot read for meaning** - 78% of SA Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning and cannot locate and retrieve explicitly stated information.

**Suggestion-** The first few years of school should be focused on developing learners' ability to understand and speak the language. However, the reality is that most learners enter the Intermediate Phase not having the ability to listen, speak, read and write. I think teachers should help learners to get more exposure to the languages. My view is that teachers should start extensive reading programmes and the reading material should be both in English and their home language. Krashen (1993) has this to say about reading, "Reading is good for you. Reading is the only way we become good readers, develop good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers". This means that reading extensively can be a solution to this problem.

- **SA scores last in reading of 50 countries** - SA Grade 4 children have scored the lowest mark in the latest PIRLS Study.

**Suggestion -** Rule and Land (2017) in their article, "Finding the plot in South African reading education", argue that we have lost the plot in South African reading education. To find it, they argue that we need to move beyond the predominant mode of reading as oral performance, where the emphasis is on accuracy and pronunciation, to reading as comprehension of meaning in text. It is also my view that language teachers should use the reading lessons as an opportunity for learners to comprehend what is in the text. This will

also require more time because this is something that requires a lot of time. Teachers can use afternoons after the normal tuition.

- **SA lags behind other countries** - 78% of SA Grade 4 learners cannot read when compared with other learners from developed countries and those from underdeveloped countries like Kenya.

**Suggestion** - One of the challenges in South Africa is that the student teachers who are training to be teachers are not taught how to start their reading programmes and consequently, when they become teachers, they fail to encourage reading beyond the normal tuition in their classrooms. Boakye (2017) in her article, “Extensive reading in a tertiary reading programme: Students’ accounts of effective and cognitive benefits”, recommends that reading programmes at tertiary level should include extensive reading. It is also my view that tertiary institutions should teach prospective teachers how to start reading programmes because this can help them to start their own ER Programmes when they practise as teachers.

- **Reading crisis much deeper than previously thought** - The ANA Results also show poor results caused by poverty, under-resourced schools and under-qualified teachers.

**Suggestion** - Van der Mescht (2015), in her article, “ One day I will pick up a snake, wanting to read it”, explores a role-playing game amongst pre-school and school-going children of rural villages that enabled some children to become successful learners. It also my view that language teachers, irrespective of where they come from, should make learning fun. They should be innovative, creative, self-driven and motivated. They can use resources at their disposal (even if they are in rural schools) to promote language learning.

## **Conclusion**

The main aim of this article was to critically reflect on the weaknesses of our education system that have failed our learners and what could be done to remedy the situation. The article has looked at some of the findings that were revealed by PIRLS (2016) and made suggestions for possible solutions. The few suggestions provided can contribute to the teaching of language in our schools.

## **References**

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