

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 08/06/2007</p> <p>Paired reading: encouraging reading for pleasure at farm schools through peer tutoring in the Greater Tzaneen area</p> <p>C.J. Nel Greater Tzaneen Library Services South Africa.</p>
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Abstract

In the Greater Tzaneen area, the Tzaneen Library and some local high schools are reaching out to farm schools with Paired Reading, which aims to improve reading skills and to encourage reading for pleasure.

Paired Reading enable children to read texts of greater difficulty than they would be able to read independently. A high school learner (the tutor), reads a picture book together with a primary school learner (the reader). They read out loud together, until the reader has the confidence to read by himself.

Paired Reading between the Inzana Farm School and Merensky High School is described.

The project is successful beyond expectation, and continues to be popular with learners from both schools more than a year after it was initiated. Apart from improved reading skills and love of reading, it has had a positive social impact on all participants.

The majority of South African children rarely come into contact with picture books, and associate books with learning, not pleasure. This is especially true of children at farm schools, tucked away on farms in rural areas, with few if any books to read for pleasure and no means to travel to the nearest community library. In the Greater Tzaneen area, the Tzaneen Library and some local high schools are reaching out to farm schools with paired reading, which aims to improve reading skills and to encourage reading for pleasure.

Paired reading is a concept originally devised by Dr. Keith Topping of Dundee University for use by parents with their children at home. Dr. Topping's work showed that normal reading skills and comprehension could be dramatically improved by the technique. (1)

Paired reading enable children to read texts of greater difficulty than they would be able to read independently. In the Greater Tzaneen paired reading project, the high school learner (the tutor), reads a picture book together with the primary school learner (the reader). They read out loud together, until the reader has the confidence to read by himself. As soon as the reader struggles with a word, the tutor reads with him, until the reader gives a sign that he wants to carry on independently.

Of the three high schools and five farm schools involved so far, paired reading between the Inzana Farm School and Merensky High School will be described.

To begin with, both schools' principals were invited to let their schools take part in paired reading. Both were willing, but a little skeptical, as there had been little contact between the two schools. Inzana is a small one-roomed school with only 36 learners. Grades 1 – 3 are taught in the single classroom and grades 4 - 7 are taught on the verandah. The learners are the children of farm labourers, many of whom are illiterate. The school is situated on the Inzana farm adjacent to Merensky. Merensky, with about 1000 learners from various cultural groups, is situated on a farm outside the town of Tzaneen. The school has fairly good infrastructure and a reputation for academic excellence.

The Tzaneen Library organized donations of books from Biblionef, Exclusive Books and Rotary Tzaneen to establish a good collection of books at Inzana. It is crucial that the books donated to farm schools are suitable for the learners as the books are often the first picture books or storybooks they come into contact with. Books in the four languages spoken in the area are collected: English, Afrikaans, Tsonga and Sepedi.

Learners at Merensky were invited to attend a talk on paired reading during break. A surprisingly large number of learners from all grades and culture groups attended. Paired reading was arranged for break on Thursdays. Merensky learners would walk down to Inzana and paired reading would take place on the grounds around Inzana.

The following Thursday Inzana's learners were ready, each armed with two books of their choice and well informed on what was expected from them. They were excited and couldn't wait to begin, but Tzaneen library staff members were worried. What if there were too few Merensky learners willing to give up their break for the project? It was a relief to see over a 100 volunteers arriving. Each Inzana learner bravely read out loud, surrounded by a group of enthusiastic Merensky tutors.

Following a discussion with the teachers involved, a more manageable schedule was arranged. Only the grade 12 Merensky learners were allowed to take part in paired reading up to the half-year holidays. Thereafter they would prepare for their final exams, and the next grade would take over. The Inzana readers would meet the Merensky tutors halfway, at a large open storeroom between the two schools, to allow more time for reading.

Every Thursday morning just before ten, the learners from Inzana each choose a few books from their collection and walk to the paired reading meeting place, accompanied by their two teachers. Learners from grades 1 – 3 read books in Sepedi, their mother tongue, and the language in which they are taught up to grade 3. The rest of the learners choose books in English, Afrikaans, Sepedi or Tsonga. At ten the Merensky tutors come running, anxious to find a learner to do paired reading with in the language in which they are most comfortable. Unfortunately, Tsonga and Sepedi speaking tutors from Merensky are often shy about reading out aloud in their mother tongue, as they have never had books to read in their own language. Then the youngest Inzana learners are delighted to become tutors to the Merensky learners.

There are always more Merensky tutors than the 36 needed, and paired reading is the highlight of the week for the Inzana learners. The project is successful beyond expectation, and continues to be popular with learners from both schools, more than a year after it began. Grade 12 tutors from Merensky drive the project, and work out a strict time-table to allow all interested learners an opportunity to tutor Inzana learners.

The project is successful because the method is simple, tutor and reader enjoy the experience and there is no criticism involved, only encouragement and good example. Inzana's principal, Mrs. Emily Lekgodi, reports that the reading skills of the learners in her school have improved, and that the learners have developed a love of reading. Many of the tutors from Merensky are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the books used in paired reading have been their first meeting with illustrated storybooks too, and opened the door to reading for pleasure for them as well.

The paired reading project between Inzana and Merensky has had an impact beyond improved reading skills and a love of reading. Both tutors and readers have improved self-confidence: the Inzana readers because they have improved their reading, and the Merensky tutors because they are able to help young readers, no matter their own level of competence.

The close social contact between primary and high school, different cultural and language groups, and learners from varied economic backgrounds have broken down pre-conceptions and has improved social relationships. Afrikaans and English learners from Merensky are increasingly requesting to be tutored in Tsonga and Sepedi by Inzana learners, promoting multi-lingualism. Merensky tutors have spontaneously collected blankets and clothes to assist the poorest of the Inzana learners. According to a Merensky teacher: "The number of Merensky learners willing to give up their break to do paired reading is wonderful. Unexpectedly, boys are just as keen to get involved with the project as girls. No Merensky outreach project has generated this much interest across all cultures."

At Inzana, learners play "paired reading" during break - older learners read with younger learners. This led Mrs. Lekgodi to include paired reading between Inzana learners in the school time-table. She reports that learners take books home to tutor young siblings and illiterate parents and grandparents.

Through paired reading the small collection of picture books at Inzana Farm School is spreading the joy of reading to an ever-widening circle of readers.

(1) Topping, K. J. (2001). *Thinking, reading, writing: a practical guide to paired learning with peers, parents and volunteers*. New York and London: Continuum International, p.47.