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Why do we need reading software?

We're at the Cape Town Book Fair, celebrating books and the printed word.

So what role can be played by computers in helping children to become independent readers who love reading?

Perhaps you feel uneasy about the use of technology in this way, because you love the feel of a book in your hands.

I'd like to explain to you why technology has a very important role to play in the teaching of reading in South African schools today.

According to the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy of the Western Cape Education Department, only 36% of Grade 3 learners are reading at the level expected in Grade 3. The vast majority are performing two to three years below expectation.

If children cannot read, they cannot access the rest of the curriculum.

It is therefore imperative for us to assess the problem and address it in whatever way we can.

Clearly, poverty and language issues provide major barriers to learning. Many of our children arrive in Grade 1 having had no experience of books in the home. They don't understand that print carries meaning, or that pages turn from left to right and text is read from top to bottom.

They may be in a class of 65 children, or they may be expected to learn in a language that they don't understand.

I believe that a most crucial aspect of learning to read is sharing a book one-to-one with an adult.

Nothing can replace this kind of experience of reading support – a computer just does not compare with a loving human being sitting beside you!

But the reality is that many of our children don't experience this. Large classes and overwhelming social problems often make it well-nigh impossible for educators to provide this level of reading support. Also, in underprivileged areas books are not sent home with children because they get damaged, and schools cannot afford to replace them. (If you are 7 years old and you live in a shack with half a dozen other people, in the middle of a Cape winter, it's not easy to keep your book clean and dry.)

So, many children don't get that essential, nurturing, one-to-one reading support – at school or at home. We cannot change this in the short term, but we can provide a good second-best solution using technology.

In partnership with Macmillan Publishers, I have designed the "Macmillan Talking Stories."

We have produced 64 graded stories across a variety of genres, in English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans. These stories reflect real life in South Africa, affirming the sense of identity and dignity of every young reader.

A Talking Story allows you to hear a story read to you while you follow it on the computer screen. You can hear the same page over again if you want to. Instead of an adult pointing their finger to each word, you will see each word highlighted as it is read. If your home language is, say, isiXhosa or Afrikaans, but you're in an English medium school, well you can hear the story in your home language first, to build meaning. Then you can switch to the language of learning and teaching in your school.

Every story comes with three interactive reading activities. These activities are fun and bright, and greatly loved by children. Many have animated rewards for correct answers.

Every story also has a printable worksheet.

The activities cover every single assessment standard of the language curriculum. All instructions and prompts are sound-based. If a child can click and drag, then they should be able to access this software completely on their own.

Independent use of the software is important because of the shortage of teachers in South Africa. Statistics tell us that every school day two teachers in South Africa die of AIDS. When a teacher is absent from school, we usually don't have the luxury of supply cover. Often a parent helper will look after the children for the day.

In this situation the children will still be able to go into the computer lab and use the Talking Stories – progressing at their own pace; covering the entire breadth of the language curriculum over a year.

The Macmillan Talking Stories were initially piloted at Bridgeville Primary School in Bridgetown, Cape Town in early 2007. Using a test group and a control group of Grade 1's, we sought to find out whether using the Talking Stories made any difference to the development of reading skills. We used tests based on the South African lists of high frequency words, and this is what we found:

Over a twelve-week period the control group's reading skills improved by 16%.  
The reading skills of the Talking Stories group improved by 34%!

Our next step is to have independent testing done in twenty test schools and twenty control schools over the period of a full school year, in 2008.

We are very confident that the Talking Stories will provide a big boost to the teaching of reading in the classroom.

