

More than just a reading group

By Kendra Dykman

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Women gather outside the concrete classrooms of John Masiza Primary School, in the Walmer Township, each with a group of six to eight children, grade ones and twos. The children are very excited to have the opportunity to read, and they eagerly call out the words on the pages that they see. They each have their own book that has been laminated on the outside. The books are part of the Fantastic Phonics series, a series which Hannah Bayley, a previous primary school teacher and the co-ordinator of this reading group, says is one of the most educationally sound series of its kind.

At the start of the project, there was a large focus on the production of the books themselves. “We printed and made 9 500 books at R5 each with a laminated front and back.” The books were a product of the Fantastic Phonics series, a recommendation by a member of the church, who worked as a linguist and in childhood education.

Bayley described the first call for volunteers: “When we started the program we said, ‘do you have an hour free and can you speak English?’” Bayley said that the volunteers are “just moms who want to make a difference. They put a lot more effort in than just an hour a week.”

“Now they’re reading the books that we made, but we can’t have them reading for the whole hour because you know what children’s concentration – they do games and songs, and some of the children have never even seen a puzzle before in their lives. The one volunteer is actually a little girl who’s being home-schooled, she’s in grade six, so she comes with her mom and she actually plays a game, so she has to do the game. And then we have one male volunteer and he does the book with them, and then one of them does a drawing.” The project spends half of the time reading with the children, and the other half doing activities.

Bayley quit her job as a primary school teacher to become involved in a reading group outreach program, an initiative of Walmer Methodist Church. She explained that she was initially a volunteer with the reading groups, but with the growth of the project over the last 17 months, her role has changed to a more mediating role between

herself and the teachers of the school. “My job has been defined as being the bridge between the teachers and the volunteers.”

Bayley explained that the main purpose of the initiative has expanded from teaching the scholars how to read English, to introducing them to the English language slowly (rather than with complicated books, as had initially been the case). “Now it’s more of getting them to learn the alphabet and the alphabet sounds,” Bayley explained.

The program is also geared towards encouraging the school to uplift itself by enabling rather than giving charity handouts. “We’re not here to do things for them that they can’t do for themselves. If they really wanted to paint their classrooms, they could raise money,” Bayley explained.

Bayley’s other role is in the church outreach team, which gets involved once a month. They recently cut the grass on the fields, and they were looking to paint some of the classrooms. It has been a long process gathering funds, and there are still only two classrooms that will benefit from the beautifying of the classrooms. “We’re going to paint the two end classrooms. It’s good that it’s taken three months. It’s been good for me to be patient because we needed the teachers to see the benefit of it and the buy-in because it’s not just a matter of us coming to make your classroom look beautiful for it to look dirty again in a week’s time. You’ll find that a lot of these classrooms are not great inside, besides that structurally they are falling apart.”

“The head teacher said to me, ‘Oh, actually, I wish I had my own classroom because I want to be a role model because my classroom would be neat and then their classrooms would be neat.’”

While the work of the Walmer Methodist church initially started out as introducing a reading program to a local underprivileged school, the project has grown into much more than that, with the volunteers putting in more than just reading groups. The project aims to enable the school so that future growth and improvement is sustainable.

“Say we step out of here in two years time; they need to be able to carry on what we have started,” said Bayley. “For now, the more volunteers that we have, the more kids we can impact.”

“God was in the process the whole time and we have just been blessed abundantly.”