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When fathers read, children thrive

Rolland Simpi Motaung

When literacy activist and author Madoda Ndlakuse started working for Na'ibali in June 2016, he facilitated various literacy activities that required the involvement of mothers and fathers.

Over the years he noticed something peculiar: the absence of fathers in parent meetings, literacy workshops and other educational activities involving their children.

Many fathers, Ndlakuse noted, would become visible only when their children achieved something remarkable, such as becoming published young writers.

"While that support was encouraging, I felt that children needed their fathers' involvement much earlier and more consistently," Ndlakuse says.

He also observed that the few fathers who took part in their children's literacy journeys helped build their children's confidence, improved their attitudes towards learning and contributed to fewer behavioural challenges at school.

"Children valued and treasured their fathers' support. The positive impact was clear."

Inspired by the experiences, the Eastern Cape-born father of two daughters sought to mobilise more fathers through the initiative Men's Literacy Imbizo. Founded in 2022, the initiative aims to encourage men to reflect on their own literacy journeys and how reading and education shaped their lives.

"We remind them that they have an important role to play not only in their children's education but also as reading role models," Ndlakuse says.

Reading is not for mothers only

The tasks of a child's learning experience involving reading, writing and homework usually falls on mothers, aunts and grandmothers. Fathers seldom take up the roles, justifying this by prioritising societal expectations to provide and protect.

Some men also believe that reading is a feminine activity, contrary to notions of masculinity.

Another reason for starting the initiative was to challenge the stereotype that early childhood development and literacy are solely the responsibility of mothers.

"Raising readers is a shared responsibility and fathers have a powerful role to play in nurturing a love of reading and learning," Ndlakuse says.

Like many boys growing up, we didn't have consistent male figures who saw reading as a gateway to bonding and emotional development. In most households, particularly in disadvantaged communities, reading was an afterthought; bread-and-butter issues took priority.

Reading is, however, food for the mind and soul. It sustained young Ndlakuse as he relocated to various places across the Eastern Cape while living with various relatives.

To escape the stress and loneliness as a child who was not raised by his biological parents, books became his companions. In Standard 5 he and

Fathers who read with their children build confidence, strengthen family bonds and improve learning, says literacy advocate Madoda Ndlakuse



Food for mind and soul: Madoda Ndlakuse founded the initiative Men's Literacy Imbizo to encourage men to reflect on their own literacy journeys and how reading and education shaped their lives. Photos: Na'ibali

peers would ransack old school cupboards to indulge in dusty books.

Ndlakuse's reading was also inspired by his childhood friends who were passionate soccer fans. Publications such as *Kick-O*, *Soccer News*, *Pace* and *Drum* were his daily bread.

"Looking back, books gave me comfort, knowledge and hope. They opened doors to places I had never seen and helped shape the man that I am today. Reading truly saved my life."

It is no surprise that Ndlakuse founded Men's Literacy Imbizo with his decade-long experience working at Na'ibali.

Calling all men to a literacy imbizo

The Men's Literacy Imbizo is a Na'ibali-led literacy advocacy initiative that forms part of the broader strategy to promote reading for enjoyment and strengthen literacy-supportive environments for children.

Meaning "here's the story" in

isiXhosa, Na'ibali seeks to spark and embed a national culture of reading in children from birth to 12 years of age by developing enticing reading content in all South African languages.

The Men's Literacy Imbizo began as a small community effort with a group of male caregivers in Kariega, Eastern Cape.

After recognising the initiative's positive impact and the broader opportunity to increase male involvement in children's literacy development, Na'ibali expanded the concept into a national platform.

"Today, the imbizo creates opportunities for dialogue, awareness raising and community mobilisation around the role of fathers, caregivers, educators, coaches, faith leaders and other male role models in nurturing a culture of reading," Ndlakuse said.

Reading in mother and father tongue

As an author in his own right, Ndlakuse's early learning was influenced by the *Book of Bible Stories*

language books also strengthens cultural identity and gives children a sense of belonging. Through stories, they learn about their heritage, values, traditions and the experiences of their communities."

Aligned with his fatherhood and community activism, Ndlakuse says children developed empathy by connecting with characters and situations that reflect their own realities.

"They become more aware of the world around them and better equipped to communicate with others."

Beside one of his titles, *Umtshato Wentlanzi Nenkukhu*, Ndlakuse says some of the books that children consistently enjoy include *Ulonwabo* by Mhlahli Khumalo, *Ivula Lembovane* by Cebo Solomela and *Mother of Books* by Dr Geina Mhlophe's *Nozincwadi*.

"These books capture children's imagination, encourage discussion and make reading enjoyable. They also provide meaningful lessons while celebrating the beauty of isiXhosa language and culture."

Ndlakuse says a strong foundation in a home language makes it easier for children to learn additional languages, thus contributing to academic success, multilingualism and lifelong learning.

'Ndoda' must read to his children

Essentially, *ndoda* (a man) must not only provide and protect but read, play and laugh with his children, even if only for a few minutes every day. Despite the socio-economic struggles, an environment for our little ones to sit at their father's feet learning through reading driven by animated gestures and goofy voices is vital.

"As *amadoda* (men) we should start where we are; do not leave the responsibility of your child's education entirely to the mother. Your involvement matters more than you realise. It is very important to create a literacy-rich home where books, stories and conversations are part of everyday life."

"Children enjoy hearing their fathers' voices and often connect deeply with the stories and life lessons shared by the men in their lives. Spend time playing, laughing and learning with your children. These moments build strong relationships and create lasting memories."

A child's development is not a gender bias issue; when both the mother and father – or at least a father figure – read to their young ones, it promotes more family bonding, balanced cognitive development and an overall good learning experience.

In a country with high levels of fatherless households and a lack of access to quality education – including about 81% of Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning – in any language – the role of fathers is needed.

It's no longer a weight carried only by mothers, participation from fathers is essential in the early stages of a child's life.

Through Men's Literacy Imbizo, Ndlakuse encourages fathers, step-fathers, uncles and grandfathers to read with and to their children regularly, to tell stories, ask questions and inspire them to share their ideas learned from reading.

"When fathers become active participants in their children's literacy journey, they help improve reading skills, build confidence, strengthen family bonds and create a foundation for lifelong learning."

Men, fathers and caregivers can join the monthly Men's Literacy Imbizo webinars by visiting the Na'ibali website www.nalibali.org