

Inside the barn of dreams, where digital literacy springs to life for South Africa's rural youth

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JOHANNESBURG, GAUTENG, SOUTH AFRICA, April 11, 2023

/EINPresswire.com/ -- The airy converted banana barn with a symbolic "tree of knowledge" sculpture as its centrepiece is abuzz with the sights and sounds of 10-year-olds playing with robots and Lego, figuring out mathematical problems on computers, reading stories and doing basic coding on tablets.



At Good Work Foundation's Open Learning Academy, primary school children are taught basic coding with the help of robots, tablets and Lego.

Judging by their comfort in getting to grips with technology, you wouldn't guess that these are children from schools in a remote rural corner of South Africa where access to computers is virtually non-existent.

“

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Kate Groch, CEO of this education non-profit

Welcome to [Good Work Foundation's](#) Open Learning Academy (OLA), where learning meets play – and where children with little access to digital tools are given the chance to have the playing fields of life levelled.

Freshly energised from a burst of singing, clapping and dancing with the youthful Good Work Foundation (GWF) facilitators clad in their signature pink T-shirts, these Grade

4s are making the most of their weekly hours of imagination-fuelled fun on GWF's Hazyview Digital Learning Campus. There's much excitement in the air.

"If you know how to use a computer, it doesn't matter where you live – you can access the world," says Kate Groch, the CEO of this education non-profit that has grown to six learning centres after opening its first campus in Mpumalanga 11 years ago.

Most of these sites border the world-famous Kruger National Park, where tourism and hospitality opportunities abound but where formal education is hampered by a lack of resources, and poverty and unemployment are rife.

Complicating matters further is that state education at the foundation phase is conducted in learners' mother tongue, which in Mpumalanga is often Xitsonga and Siswati – but when children reach Grade 4 or the intermediate phase, English takes over as the medium of instruction.

But, thanks to GWF bringing its blended learning approach to almost 30 schools in the Lowveld region of Mpumalanga, outcomes are being noticeably altered for the 8 000 bright-eyed, curious learners who attend classes every week – for the better.

Nomsa Mokoena, a Grade 4 teacher at Ntshuxeko Primary School in Mkhuhlu, Bushbuckridge, not far from the Kruger's Phabeni Gate, sits and observes a class of her charges engrossed in various activities at the Hazyview OLA "barn", guided by GWF facilitators.

She is a dedicated and compassionate teacher but often feels hamstrung by a lack of resources at her quintile one (non-fee-paying) school. Mokoena relates how 40 tablets donated to the school by GWF were stolen. "If we could have computers, our school would be excellent," she declares.



Brain break: there's always time for some stretching, movement and horsing around with Good Work Foundation's lively facilitators!



Nomsa Mokoena, a teacher at Ntshuxeko Primary School, says the Open Learning Academy classes are helping her Grade 4 pupils to navigate the tricky transition from mother-tongue instruction to English-medium education.

She is the type of teacher who will give learners her phone number so they can call her if they need help with homework or assignments. "Some parents don't care," she shrugs, adding that educators often have to find ways to compensate for gaps in the "golden learning triangle" of teacher, learner and parent.

She sees first-hand, she says, how the children struggle with the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 – it's a huge jump to start learning and writing in English when you are not proficient in the language.

But GWF's supplementary Open Learning Academy sessions, held during schooltime and linked to the national education curriculum, weave in Maths, English literacy, reading, creative arts, coding and even conservation – filling a much-needed gap in the learners' transition to senior primary schooling.

Mokoena says she has observed a marked improvement in the children's performance thanks to the OLA classes.

"I can see the difference in their results – it definitely improves their marks. Term one is difficult and the reading level of some is not up to standard. The first week after schools reopened, we checked their reading ability. When they started coming here they were still struggling but already, in the space of two to three weeks, I can see a great change.

"You can see how the learners enjoy learning through play and interaction when they come here," she says, gesturing to the room.

"It helps them understand more, especially when it comes to their English reading skills, and they are thinking quicker when doing Maths. Even those who are lazy at school, when they come here, whoo! I can see they want to learn more. They say a few hours [a week] is not enough at GWF – they want the whole day! They concentrate and behave while they're here."

All have different abilities and are encouraged to learn at their own pace. "You have to love your children the way they are, and have faith in them," she says.

Mokoena has incorporated some of these digital learning principles into her own classroom – often bringing her personal computer to school and continuing with the OLA's exercises.

GWF's Open Learning Academy programme is designed as a partnership that works to schools' advantage as it complements traditional classroom teaching with digitally focused learning methods.

"Here, kids can experience digital gadgets that they don't usually have access to," says Open Learning Academy manager Anorl Mdhluli. "You can tell by their smiles that they are open to this interactive way of learning, and are enjoying being in this space. The main purpose is to give

them the opportunity to have fun and wonder-filled learning experiences.”

He says feedback received from schools has been overwhelmingly positive, “which shows us that we’re doing our job”.

Coding and robotics has been formally introduced as a subject in government schools, but not all are equipped with the digital infrastructure and the know-how to offer both the online and offline components of this essential 21st-century skill.

“Coding and robotics is needed in the workplace in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, but it’s also very important for kids as it improves their thinking, creative, collaborative and analytical skills,” says Mdhuli.

GWF schools liaison manager Crispen Bvumbghe, a teacher by profession, says some rural schools do have smart boards and tablets – but the teachers do not feel confident enough to use them. “I go to schools and invite the teachers to take part in practical training workshops. You need to share information

Ayanda Siswana

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