

MAKHANDA EDUCATION MATTERS

ISSUE 7 NOV 2025



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EDITOR'S NOTE

By Phemelo Hellemann

Flying the Education Flag High in Makhanda!



As we reflect on another successful year of transformative and locally responsive education, we can't help but feel a sense of pride and achievement. This year brought many opportunities for engaged collaborations and special celebrations.

Our hearts are still filled with joy and pride as Namibia's Minister of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts & Culture, the Honourable Sanet Steenkamp, walked across the stage at Rhodes University's Spring Graduation on 10 October 2025, to receive her PhD. A momentous occasion that demonstrated the global relevance of Rhodes University's Education Faculty.

This edition highlights the success of engaged education initiatives, triumphs and partnerships that not only keep this town alive but also transform lives. It is a privilege to be part of this community and to have our students and staff involved in projects that enhance teaching and learning and advance educational research. Our talented staff and students continue to chart new research territories, employing problem-solving and creative approaches.

Once again, we congratulate our teachers, staff, students and community partners on the wonderful education work that keeps the town alive!•

MAKHANDA'S EDUCATIONAL *Turnaround*

A Triumph of Access, Quality, and Equity

In January 2024, the education community of Makhanda resolved to work together to take the city to the top of the education summit in South Africa. In order to monitor our progress towards becoming the leading education centre in the country, we adopted various targets to be achieved by 2028. The data suggests that we are well on track toward realising our collective vision—and the evidence is compelling.

BREAKING BARRIERS: A STORY OF INCLUSION AND RETENTION

One of the clearest signs of transformation is the steady rise in learner retention. Makhanda's retention rate has grown from 65% in 2022 to 74% in 2024, already surpassing our original 2028 goal of 70%, which has now been revised upwards. This improvement reflects a growing ability of the education system to retain learners, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, all the way to matric.



This success is built on a foundation of early literacy gains. In 2023, 41% of Grade 4 learners were reading for meaning—more than double the national average of 19% reported by the PIRLS study. Although there was a slight dip to 38% in 2024, the trajectory remains upward, with a 50% target in sight by 2028.

These achievements stem from targeted literacy interventions in the foundation phase, including programmes such as QondaRead, classroom libraries, and reading clubs. For learners in no-fee schools, these gains are especially significant, improving their ability to thrive in later grades.

A SURGE IN QUALITY: BACHELOR PASSES TELL THE TALE

Increased retention is only part of the story. More importantly, the quality of academic outcomes is rising dramatically. City-wide matric pass rates remain strong, improving from 80% in 2023 to 82% in 2024, with a target of 90% by 2028. The total number of passes climbed from 656 to 720 in the same period, demonstrating both scale and success.

Bachelor passes—those that qualify students for university—have shown even more remarkable growth. In 2024, 43% of matriculants achieved Bachelor-level passes, up from 38% in 2023. That equates to 377 learners in 2024, with a target of 504 by 2028. Perhaps most inspiring is the increase in the share of these passes coming from no-fee schools: now at 65%, it reflects the deepening equity in Makhanda’s education system. These schools are no longer peripheral—they are central to the city’s academic achievements.

FEE-EXEMPT SCHOOLS: NOW THE MAIN PIPELINE TO UNIVERSITY

As the number of high-performing learners grows, so too does access to tertiary education. Rhodes University has seen a consistent increase in local, disadvantaged first-year registrations: from 123 in 2023 to 188 in 2024, edging closer to the 2028 target of 200. Graduation numbers are also climbing, with 108 local disadvantaged students graduating in 2024, on track toward the target of 150.

These statistics reflect not just progress, but transformation. In 2014, only 26% of Bachelor passes came from no-fee schools. A decade later, that figure is approaching 70%. This shift signifies a new norm: fee-exempt schools are now the leading contributors to university-ready graduates in Makhanda.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

None of these gains would be possible without the ecosystem of support driving Makhanda’s educational revival. Collaboration between schools, NGOs, Rhodes University, donors, and civic organisations underpins every success. Programmes like the 9/10ths mentoring initiative, Nal’ibali literacy work, Whistle Stop School, and infrastructure support from Rotary all form part of a holistic, community-led movement.

Makhanda’s education story is one of purpose, partnership, and possibility. The data shows that the city is not only closing the gap in educational access and achievement—it is setting a new benchmark for what public education in South Africa can accomplish. With clear targets, committed stakeholders, and an unwavering belief in every learner’s potential, Makhanda is indeed on a path to becoming a national leader in education by 2028.



Participants of the Makhanda Education Summit held as part of Rhodes University’s 120 year anniversary celebrations in 2024.



Matrics at the Nine Tenths Culmination Event in 2025 (left and right)



BRIDGING LANGUAGES, EMPOWERING FUTURES



English FAL Service-Learning Programme Expands in 2025

By Kelly Long & Wellington Hokonya

In an exciting development for language learning and teacher preparation in Makhanda, the English First Additional Language (FAL) service-learning programme has been formally integrated into the annual curriculum for pre-service teachers in their second year of study.

Following a successful pilot in 2024, the initiative now offers greater reach and deeper educational impact for both pre-service teachers and primary school learners.



A RESPONSE TO URGENT NEED

The English FAL programme was initiated in response to the findings of the 2023 Citywide Grade 4 Reading Comprehension study, which identified schools most in need of external support, particularly those traditionally under-resourced and underserved. From this evidence base, three local, fee-exempt schools were selected to host the pilot.

In 2024, student teachers made a total of nine visits to these schools, working in pairs with small groups of Grade 3 learners. Each session, lasting an hour, focused on strengthening learners' English oral and phonics foundations in preparation for the critical language transition that occurs in Grade 4, when the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) shifts to English.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive - from students, school staff, and learners alike. The desire to see the programme become a permanent feature of the educational calendar was universal, leading to its full adoption in 2025 with an expanded format.



GROWING THE PROGRAMME, DEEPENING THE IMPACT

In 2025, the programme has scaled up significantly. Ninety pre-service teachers are now participating, reaching over 200 Grade 3 learners across the same three schools. The number of contact sessions has increased to 15 - ensuring more consistent engagement and deeper learning gains.

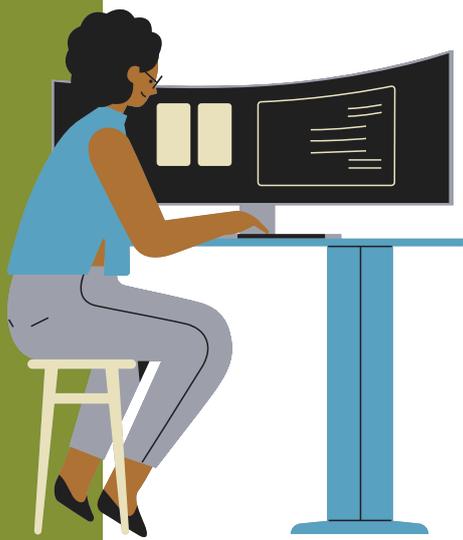
The programme's structure is carefully designed to blend service and pedagogy. Each pre-service teacher commits 15 hours to in-class sessions and an additional 20 hours to training, reflection, and assessment work. This includes administering one-on-one baseline and summative assessments for each learner - a powerful process that informs targeted support strategies.

The programme uses content developed by GADRA Education's QondaRead initiative, a literacy support framework. These open-source resources support both learner development and pre-service teacher growth, as they can be reused during Teaching Practice and even after qualification.

TECH-SAVVY, LEARNER-CENTRED INSTRUCTION

In each session, pre-service teachers use their mobile phones to deliver interactive, child-friendly presentations. These are intentionally designed to help learners distinguish between English and isiXhosa phonics while simultaneously expanding vocabulary, life-world exposure, and confidence in English.

Importantly, this approach addresses the longstanding challenge in South African classrooms of how to make language learning both accessible and engaging for learners navigating two languages with very different phonetic structures.



The use of mobile technology not only supports differentiation but equips pre-service teachers with practical digital tools they can carry into their future careers.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHER GROWTH AS FUTURE EDUCATORS

The benefits of this programme extend beyond learner outcomes. Reflective essays submitted by pre-service teachers as part of the broader programme indicate that participating in this initiative has shifted many of their assumptions and deepened their understanding of learner needs.

Pre-service teachers noted a greater appreciation for the role of socio-economic factors in academic performance, and many expressed a desire to become more context-aware and equity-focused educators. One pre-service teacher wrote,

"This experience made me want to become the kind of teacher who makes a difference - starting from the very first lesson."

With its evidence-based design, community-centred approach, and dual-impact model, the English FAL service-learning programme stands as a beacon of what meaningful educational partnerships can achieve. As it continues to evolve, it offers a powerful example of how pre-service teachers can drive literacy development and educational equity - one learner, one lesson, and one reflection at a time. •

INTRODUCING Tammy Booysen

Lecturer in the Department of Primary and Childhood Education

Tammy Booysen began her career as a passionate Grade 1 teacher in Cape Town, where she laid the foundation for her deep interest in Foundation phase teaching specifically mathematics education. Her academic journey has since taken her from the classroom to the lecture hall—she is currently pursuing a PhD in Mathematics Education, with a research focus on visual representation in teaching and learning of mathematics.

Tammy was recently appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Primary and Childhood Education (DPECE), where she contributes to shaping future educators. Alongside her academic commitments, she is leading the exciting Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Place Value (PV) project together with GADRA Education in Grade 3 and 4 classrooms in Makhanda.

The OMT PV project aims to use a place value digital application (app) to Investigate the place value understanding of Grade 3 & 4 learners in Makhanda, assist in developing the pre-service teachers and teacher educators' understanding of place value and develop their competence to teach place value. With the above we are able to better understand where the Grade 3 & 4 learners are at in terms of their conceptual understanding of PV and in turn prepare PST to develop their own understanding of PV and their competence to teach PV.



Driven by both research and practice, Tammy is committed to transforming mathematics education through innovative, inclusive, and contextually relevant approaches.

By Bridgitte Le Du

DICTIONARY UNIT FOR SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH UNVEILS TRANSFORMED DIGITAL RESOURCE

The Dictionary Unit for South African English (DSAE) has announced the recent launch of a revised edition of its acclaimed online Dictionary of South African English (www.dsae.co.za).



This comprehensive update, two years in the making, introduces new content and features designed to enhance user experience and deepen linguistic understanding. The release of the revised edition on 31 March 2025 solidifies the dictionary's relevance in the digital age, both locally and internationally in contexts of education, research and scholarship.

Housed in the historic St Peter's Building on the Rhodes University campus in Makhanda, the DSAE, funded by the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), has worked to collect, document, and describe the unique variety of English that has evolved through time and is used within the diverse social and cultural landscape of South African society today. Established in 1969, the DSAE began under the leadership of Professor William Branford, Rhodes University's first Professor of English Language and Linguistics. Its initial and enduring mission was

"The continuous and comprehensive collecting, arranging and storing in a lexicographically workable form of the vocabulary of the English language as used in southern Africa and the editing and publication of the collected materials in the form of A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles."

Professor Branford, assisted by his wife and fellow lexicographer, Dr Jean Branford, and a growing editorial team, laid the groundwork for what would become an invaluable national resource and vital custodian of English as it is written and spoken within South Africa.

In its pre-digital stages, the DSAE relied on painstaking manual processes, meticulously accumulating a vast print database of South African English words and their contextual usages totalling 300 000 index cards. This unique archive, drawing on sources ranging from early explorers' journals and historical documents to contemporary newspapers and oral utterances, formed the bedrock of the DSAE's research. A significant milestone was reached in 1996 with the publication of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* by Oxford University Press, of which 100 copies of a special edition were signed by President Nelson Mandela. This monumental work, the culmination of nearly three decades of dedicated research with input from the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, provided a comprehensive historical record of South African English from the late 16th century up to 1995. Its editorial team was subsequently awarded a gold medal by the English Academy of South Africa.

The dictionary tracked the development of new words or new meanings of existing words as they emerged over time and illuminated the fascinating interplay of languages – including Dutch, Afrikaans, and nine Indigenous African languages – that has shaped this distinctive variety of English.

The advent of the internet in South Africa – incidentally coinciding with the publication of the first edition of the dictionary – presented new opportunities for the DSAE. Since 2004, material has been collected electronically, streamlining the lexicographical process. A major technological leap occurred in 2014 when the Unit launched a pilot online edition of *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*. The pilot edition, which largely retained the look and feel of a print dictionary adapted for digital use, was an important first step in making this invaluable linguistic resource freely accessible to a wider audience.

In 2019 the DSAE published the redesigned Desktop Edition of the online Dictionary of South African English and a fully responsive Mobile Edition the following year. This marked an important step forward by incorporating modern web and mobile design and usability requirements, ensuring seamless navigation through powerful features such as filtering content by language of origin as well as numerous other subject or usage categories.



Dynamic layering of the presentation of dictionary entry content was also implemented to improve readability of entries that are sometimes thousands of words long due to their extensive evidential quotations.

The commitment to accessibility and innovation continues, with the release of the 2025 Revised Edition in March this year.

An immediately striking aspect of the new edition is the redesigned user interface. The DSAE invested in a complete visual overhaul for both Desktop and Mobile platforms, making the vast repository of South African English accessible and intuitive. This commitment to usability is crucial for engaging a wider audience, from academic scholars to everyday language enthusiasts.

A standout new feature that truly sets this Revised Edition apart is the inclusion of audio pronunciations. Moving beyond traditional phonetic transcriptions, which have been retained, users can now click to play over 3900 studio recordings of South African English words. Crucially, these recordings often provide multiple variant pronunciations for each headword, reflecting the rich tapestry of cultural and regional variations within South African English. This is an unparalleled phonetic dataset that makes use of South African voices from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, offering an authentic audio record that is particularly valuable for language learners and those seeking to study the nuances of South African speech and phonological structure.

Beyond aesthetic and functional enhancements, the new edition also includes over 100 new words from a wide range of subject domains, such as:

SPORT	shibobo, disk
LAW:	Aquilian liability, cession
MUSIC	amahubo, boereqanga
POLITICS AND HISTORY	the struggle, struggle credentials
FOOD AND DRINK	chakalaka, walkie talkies, papsak
CULTURAL TERMS	ekasi, boerewors curtain, after tears
Everyday life and colloquialisms	load shedding, fong kong, makoya, eish, tsek

These additions at once reflect contemporary usage and highlight the dictionary's role in documenting the sociolinguistic shifts and cultural expressions unique to South Africa. Updates have also been made to existing entries, adding more recent citation evidence from the DSAE's vast corpus of online citations, and reviewing the status of words previously classified as unassimilated into English, confirming that they now reflect current usage. Furthermore, as part of the preparation for the release of the 2025 Revised Edition, language names as used in the dictionary were updated to reflect post-democracy officialisation (e.g., IsiZulu instead of Zulu). Likewise, place names now align with official designations from the South African Geographical Names Council.

The launch of the revised online Dictionary of South African English underscores the profound relevance of a dedicated dictionary of the South African variety of English in the context of education and research. South Africa is an unusually multilingual nation, and while English serves as a language of instruction and communication, its lexicon is shaped by unique historical, cultural and social contexts and influences from the country's other official languages. In this regard, the online Dictionary of South African English supports and facilitates:

Cultural and Linguistic Identity: It validates and formalises the unique vocabulary, expressions, and pronunciations that are integral to South African identity. For learners, seeing their everyday language (ekasi, magwinya, eish) in a scholarly dictionary fosters a sense of belonging and cultural pride, encouraging engagement with language learning and the recognition of South African English as a formalised variety far richer than slang and colloquialism alone.

Contextual Understanding: General English dictionaries typically follow a concise, less descriptive model, often lacking the specific cultural, historical, and social context necessary to fully understand many South African English terms. The online Dictionary of South African English provides this vital context, offering insights into the origins and evolution of words like ubuntu, voetstoots, or imbongi, which have significance within the South African landscape.

Enhanced Comprehension: Students frequently encounter South Africanisms in their textbooks, prescribed literature and media resources. A dedicated dictionary ensures they can accurately interpret and utilise these terms, improving their reading comprehension, writing skills, and overall communication effectiveness.

Support for Bilingual Education: Many South African schools promote bilingual education, and the online Dictionary of South African English, especially with its marked representation of loanwords and culturally specific terms, serves as an invaluable tool for navigating the overlap between English and Indigenous Languages within South African English today.

Development of Critical Language Skills: The historical dictionary model encourages students to reflect on their own developing linguistic environment, to develop a deeper understanding of lexicography, etymology, and a greater awareness of the dynamic nature of language itself. This cultivates critical thinking skills about language use and variation.

In a multicultural and multilingual landscape striving for inclusivity and relevance, the online Dictionary of South African English is more than just a collection of words; it is a cultural and pedagogical resource, equipping South African students and scholars with the tools to confidently navigate and interpret their unique linguistic world. The DSAE's commitment to continuous innovation ensures that this essential resource remains at the forefront of language documentation and education in the country.

The DSAE continues to serve as a vital source of information on South African English for researchers and the public, participating in conferences and contributing to academic journals, reinforcing its role as a cornerstone of linguistic scholarship in South Africa. Today, the DSAE remains a vibrant centre of research, ensuring that the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of South African English is meticulously documented and celebrated for generations to come. The dictionary is open access and available at dsae.co.za.

WELCOME BACK,

*Tarryn
Lovemore*



It gives me great pleasure to be working in the Faculty of Education at Rhodes University, where I carried out my Master's of Education and PhD studies.

I taught both Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase, before embarking on my higher education journey, lecturing at The IIE Varsity College and Nelson Mandela University, before taking up the position at Rhodes. My passion is in Mathematics and STEAM education, with a specific interest in integrating music and mathematics at the primary school level.

Other research areas include mental mathematics and number sense in early grades. I enjoy participating in the SAARMSTE community, a supportive space for both early and established academics in STEM education. My hobbies include playing violin, and walking or horse riding in nature. I look forward to being part of the Rhodes community!

A group of young people, likely students, are smiling and looking towards the camera. They are wearing dark clothing, possibly school uniforms. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting a large gathering or event.

A SHARED SONG

**Reflections on the
Masicule Concert**

By Ntsikohlana Kitsili



The Masicule concert has grown into one of the most anticipated events in our community. Each year, families gather in excitement to witness a celebration of music that not only showcases remarkable talent but also brings people together.

This year, my family was especially eager – my niece, Sinalo Sati, a learner at Victoria Primary (VP), was singing in her school choir.

In the weeks leading up to the concert, I frequently fetched her from rehearsals. On our way home, I would ask how the preparations were going. With a mischievous smile, she would always respond,

"There's something interesting coming," but she refused to reveal any details about the songs. No matter how many times I asked, she held firm. Her secrecy only added to our anticipation.

On the day of the concert, we joined the queue outside, surrounded by families just like ours – chatting, smiling, and buzzing with excitement. People were eager not only to see Buhlebendalo perform, but also to witness their daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, and, in the case of my mother, her granddaughter, share the stage with one of South Africa's most renowned artists.

As we entered the auditorium and took our seats, the atmosphere was electric. Then, the lights dimmed, and two girls walked onto the stage, accompanied by their conductor and the choir behind them. They began to sing. The first few notes were familiar – "*Yele Yele Masicule...*" – and slowly, the entire auditorium began to join in.

That moment was deeply significant. As the song gained momentum, more students filled the stage, and the audience, united by the rhythm and spirit of the music, sang along. It was a beautiful reminder of how music transcends language, culture, and background. Even if the words weren't in our mother tongue, we all understood. We all felt it. Music became our common language.

One of the most powerful moments for me was hearing Buhlebendalo's soulful voice blending seamlessly with the voices of our learners. Equally unforgettable was the performance by the choir from Nathaniel Nyaluza. Their songs celebrated what it means to be umXhosa – I don't recall the exact lyrics, but the emotion and pride they conveyed stayed with me long after the music ended.

The Masicule concert is more than just an event – it is an experience of unity, heritage, and hope. I would love to see it held more than once a year, even if it doesn't feature a guest artist. The true beauty lies in our learners taking the stage and in our community coming together to sing – as one. Masicule!



By Kelly Ann Long

BUILDING A LITERATE FUTURE

Makhanda's Grade 4 Reading Comprehension Study and Service-Learning Innovation



In recent years, Makhanda has become a hub of educational innovation. One standout initiative is the annual city-wide Grade 4 Reading Comprehension (RC) Study, a unique partnership between Rhodes University's Primary and Early Childhood Education Department (RUPECE) and local NGO GADRA Education.

This city-wide, service-learning programme makes a tangible contribution to addressing early grade reading challenges, while equipping future teachers with essential classroom skills.

The Grade 4 Reading Comprehension (RC) Study, now in its third year, has become a cornerstone of Makhanda's city-wide literacy efforts. Embedded within the Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase) programme at Rhodes, the study exemplifies a powerful model of service-learning – an educational approach that combines academic instruction with meaningful community service.

2025: ENCOURAGING GAINS, PERSISTENT GAPS

Conducted from 24 to 28 February 2025, the latest iteration of the study assessed 1,097 Grade 4 learners across 23 primary schools, including public, low-fee independent, and private institutions.

The results reflect notable progress: 45% of learners achieved the comprehension benchmark – an 8% improvement from 2024 and well above the national average.

Yet the data also reveals sharp disparities by school category and language of learning and teaching (LoLT):

- English-medium schools outperformed others, with 68% of learners reaching the benchmark.
- In contrast, learners in isiXhosa and Afrikaans LoLT schools scored 25% and 26% respectively.
- Independent and Quintile 5 schools recorded a remarkable 92% proficiency, while Quintile 1–4 schools showed only 33%.
- A deeper look at Quintile 1–4 schools—a group serving learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds—showed further divergence. While 51% of learners in English-medium Quintile 1–4 schools met the benchmark, just 25% in isiXhosa-medium schools did so.

These findings underscore the need for targeted support in African-language contexts and demonstrate the value of data-informed interventions.

SERVICE-LEARNING IN ACTION

At the heart of this study lies an innovative service-learning model. The data was collected and processed by final-year Bachelor of Education students, who were trained in literacy assessment protocols and deployed across the city's schools in supervised teams. Their tasks included:

- Administering standardised comprehension tests to full classes;
- Conducting one-on-one Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) assessments;
- Moderating and capturing the results under expert guidance.

This hands-on involvement offered future teachers an unparalleled opportunity to engage with real-world educational issues in diverse contexts. It also deepened their understanding of assessment literacy, linguistic diversity, and instructional challenges, especially in under-resourced environments.

Through structured pre-fieldwork training and post-assessment reflection, students gained insight into how reading comprehension is shaped by language, pedagogy, and classroom conditions. One student shared:

“This experience allowed me to see myself as a professional capable of making a meaningful impact.”

LINKING DATA TO IMPACT

In response to the 2023 findings, GADRA’s QondaRead programme was significantly expanded and now reaches all Foundation Phase classrooms in the four English-medium Quintile 1–4 schools in Makhanda.

A new service-learning initiative, introduced in 2024, places Rhodes University Year 2 BEd students in three isiXhosa-medium schools, where they work closely with Grade 3 learners to build English language competence in preparation for the Grade 4 language transition.

Detailed school reports and follow-up consultations have enabled teachers to better align classroom instruction with actual learner reading levels, strengthening the link between assessment and pedagogy.

In 2026, GADRA will launch QondaConnect, an Intermediate Phase literacy support programme designed to address ongoing challenges in reading comprehension by integrating literacy development into content subject teaching.

By embedding the study within the BEd curriculum, Rhodes has ensured continuity, institutional commitment, and sustainable impact. This year’s study also included scaffolded practice sessions, helping student teachers build confidence before entering the classroom.

LOOKING AHEAD

The RC Study has proven that service-learning can deliver mutual benefits: it equips student teachers with essential skills while delivering actionable data to schools. Its success also demonstrates the power of sustained, collaborative partnerships between universities, NGOs, and schools.

However, challenges remain. The persistent underperformance in isiXhosa-medium schools points to the need for language-specific instructional strategies and deeper qualitative research. Ensuring equitable literacy outcomes in Makhanda will require continued investment in teacher development, multilingual pedagogy, and community-led interventions.

Still, the trajectory is hopeful. Makhanda is not only bucking national trends but also offering a replicable model of how university-community collaboration can address systemic educational challenges—while shaping a new generation of responsive, reflective educators.



Jabulani Sibanda

Associate Professor of English Education and Academic Literacies

Jabulani Sibanda is an Associate Professor in Language Education with a teaching and research focus on English Language Teaching (ELT) and Academic Literacies in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. His work explores how language and literacy practices can be leveraged to promote equity, inclusion, and critical engagement in education.

In the field of academic literacies, he investigates how students, particularly multilingual and first-generation learners, develop academic writing skills and navigate the often-unspoken conventions of academic discourse. His research is grounded in sociocultural and critical literacy theories, with a strong emphasis on fostering student agency and voice through writing. His work in English Language Teaching is closely connected, with a narrower specialization in vocabulary development. He examines how vocabulary instruction can be made more effective and responsive, particularly in contexts where learners face linguistic and educational marginalization.

His work in English Language Teaching is closely connected, with a narrower specialization in vocabulary development. He examines how vocabulary instruction can be made more effective and responsive, particularly in contexts where learners face linguistic and educational marginalization. His scholarship bridges theory and practice, with a particular interest in culturally sustaining pedagogy and inclusive curriculum design, and reimagining language education in ways that affirm learners' identities while supporting academic success.

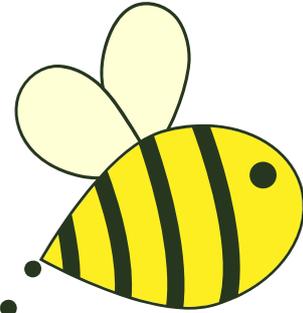
He is actively involved in teacher training initiatives. He serves as a British Council Trainer for Intermediate Phase English teachers, and trains Trainers in the Funda Wande training programme for Foundation Phase literacy educators. He is also an advisor within the DHET run Teaching Advancement at Universities Fellowship programme.



DAILY RHODES

SPELL LIKE A BEE

Interschool Spelling Masters!



By Kungawo Kheka

It was an exciting morning at the Drill Hall in Makanda. This morning was the IsiXhosa Spelling Bee's finals, and it was a sight. A bit of background information

This was the fifth year that Rhodes University held the spelling bee, and it is under the Vice-Chancellor's initiative to improve education in Makanda by 2030. The spelling bee focuses on the grade 3 learners in the schools in Makanda, whose home language is IsiXhosa. The spelling bee has three rounds. Round 1 is the stage where the learners are chosen for the first time, round 2 is the semi-finals, which has two turns, and then the finals.

To explain a little further, round 1 starts with training the first-year students of Rhodes University in the Foundation Phase. They are taught how to conduct themselves when they get to the schools and how everything will happen: from the mother tongue students conducting the spelling, and the non-mother tongue students keeping the learners occupied with ice breakers and games. At the same time, they await their turn to spell.

Nevertheless, even though the students lacked experience working with children, they excelled in the first round, as did the learners. Two learners were chosen in each school participating in the spelling bee, which was mainly Fikizolo Primary School, Samuel Ntsiko Primary School, Archie Mbolekwa Primary School, Grahamstown Seventh Day Adventist Primary School, DD Siwisa Primary School, NV Cewu Primary School, Makana Primary School, CM Vellem Primary School, Samuel Ntlebi Primary School, Tanty Lower Primary School, and Holy Cross Christian School.



This year, the competition had 22 semi-finalists and 10 finalists. The learners were all around the ages of 8,9, and 10. After the first round, the students receive extra training for the semi-finals and the finals. This is when the MCs, Judges, and Scribes are chosen.

This year's MCs were Miss Kungawo Kheka and Mr Chuma Zibula. Ma'am Linda Nelani, Mr Ntsika Kitsili, and Miss Qiqqa Mehlo were judges.

The scribes were Ma'am Samu Chikiwa, Miss Palesa Giyama, and Miss Sibonisiwe Kona. The event was well planned, having been sponsored by Oppenheimer Memorial Trust and partnered with Gadra Education.



As stated above, the spelling bee finals were held this morning, and it was exciting, fun, thrilling, and overwhelming. When the children arrived, you could tell from the look on their faces that they were nervous. Even the lively music playing in the background could not loosen their tension.

However, the busy bees for the event, Miss Emihle Bikitsha and Miss Swazi Hadebe, started the event with some dancing to liven up the hall, and it worked. The audience was less stressed when the first MC, Miss Kungawo Kheka, graced the stage. Miss Kheka welcomed everyone to the event, telling them why they were there and what the spelling was created for.

The most touching moment was when she congratulated the learners for making it to the finals, and the hall went up in applause.

She then introduced this year's finalists, judges, and scribes, and told everyone to kindly switch off their cell phones because "they could be a great distraction to the learners and judges". She also requested that the audience refrain from miming or spelling out the words because that

is considered cheating, and the learner found to be assisted will be disqualified. She quickly moved from the tense subject, told the audience to enjoy the event, and finally called on the second MC of the day, Mr Chuma Zibula. Mr Zibula proceeded to inform the audience about the spelling bee's rules.

Each learner is to be given two words to spell. If they get the words right, they proceed to the next round, but if they get the words wrong, they are eliminated from the competition. He also mentioned the schools participating in the contest when wrapping up the rules. Mr Zibula handed over to the judges, and the spelling bee commenced.

Although a pattern was established with each round getting harder and more learners being eliminated, some moments stood out.

Firstly, the learners struggled to spell out the letters K and G. The judges reported on this and asked the teachers to distinguish between K and G for them when they teach them. This brought on a debate in the hall about a word a learner might and might not have spelled correctly because it wasn't clear if they said K

or G. After all, the letters sound so similar. The judges gave the learner a chance to spell again. This was one of the tensest moments in the spelling bee. Secondly, an audience favourite was Othandwayo Jilana from Fikizolo Primary school because of the way he walks. The audience found it amusing, so much so that Kagiso Marime, a Rhodes University Student, called him "The Man". Lastly, I was sad watching the learners cry when they were eliminated, as much as there could only be one winner, it's painful watching the rest lose. However, that does not overshadow the excitement of the event.

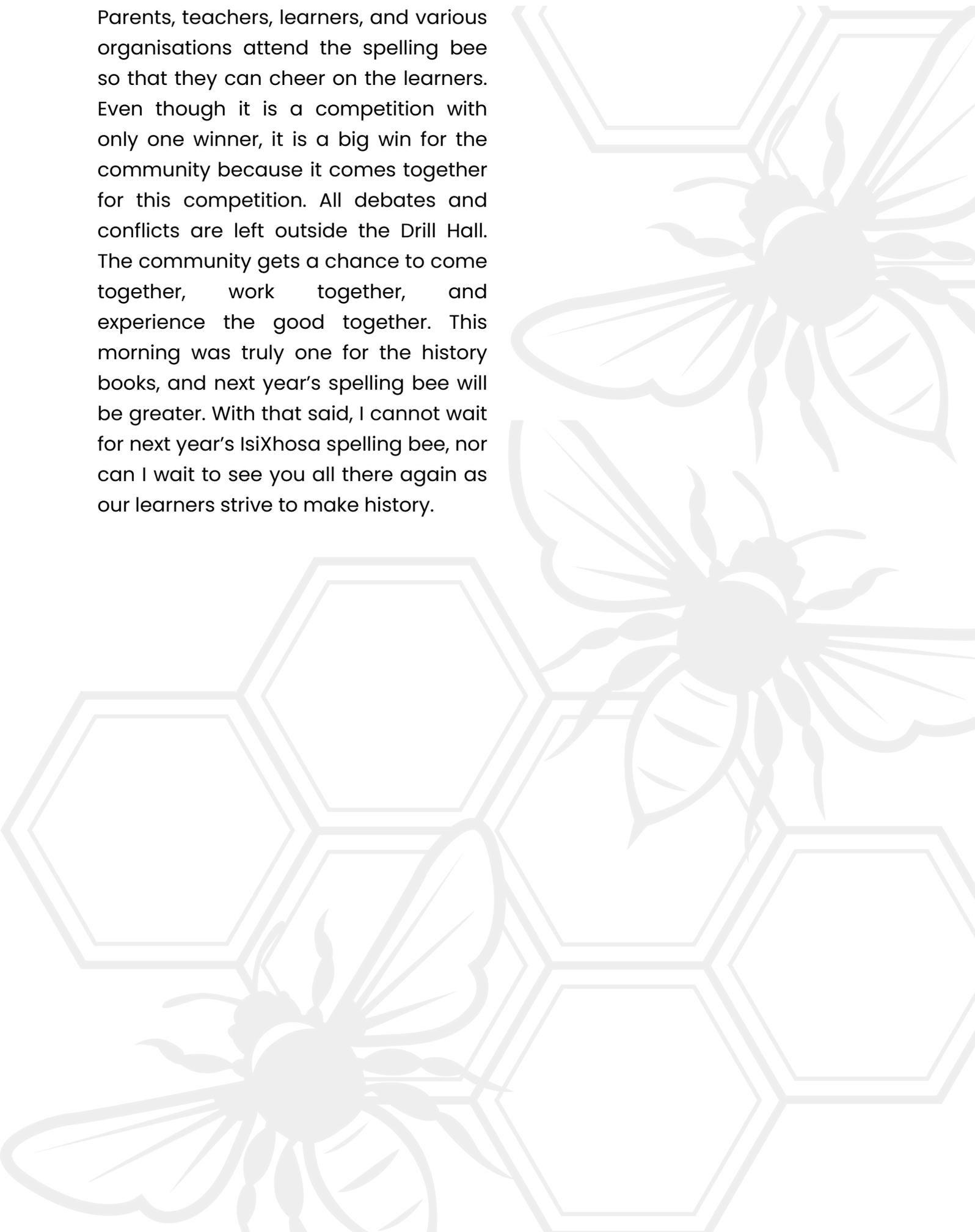
With that said, the event continued smoothly, and a winner was crowned when Lunje Tom misspelled "Umnzwabo," putting him in 3rd place, and Othandwayo Jilana misspelled "Isangxwe," putting him in 2nd place, and making Isthandile Booï the victor.

With the excitement of the spelling bee, people sometimes forget how vital it is. Spelling bees are important because they improve the literacy levels of learners and help them work on and improve their vocabulary. It pushes them to broaden their knowledge.

Moreover, the spelling bee promotes academic excellence because the learners must study words in preparation for the spelling bee. This encourages them to take academics seriously; it also introduces them to the concept of studying. However, the most remarkable thing they can learn from this competition is discipline. It takes discipline to work, study, and prepare for the competition. To focus on one thing and one thing only, which is the win, I imagine the self-accomplishment these learners feel when they get to spell that last word and are proclaimed the winner. All the hard work they put in is finally paying off.

The hard work paid off for the learners, specifically, Isthandile Booï from Holy Cross Primary School, because she won the 2025 IsiXhosa Spelling Bee. The champion received a certificate, a medal, a gift bag, and a trophy. The runners-up, Lunje Tom from Archie Mbolekwa Primary School, and Othandwayo Jilana from Fikizolo Primary School, received certificates, medals, and gift bags. Although the competition is centred on the learners, it plays a vital role in bringing the community together.

Parents, teachers, learners, and various organisations attend the spelling bee so that they can cheer on the learners. Even though it is a competition with only one winner, it is a big win for the community because it comes together for this competition. All debates and conflicts are left outside the Drill Hall. The community gets a chance to come together, work together, and experience the good together. This morning was truly one for the history books, and next year's spelling bee will be greater. With that said, I cannot wait for next year's IsiXhosa spelling bee, nor can I wait to see you all there again as our learners strive to make history.



SERVICE LEARNING

Another perspective on the Spelling Bee

By Angi Jones

At Rhodes University, learning doesn't just happen in lecture spaces.

Our Bachelor of Education students are getting their hands dirty—sometimes literally—through exciting service-learning projects that take them to local schools and preschools. These initiatives are not only helping young learners in Makhanda, but they're also shaping the next generation of teachers.

Here's a look at how our students are putting theory into practice in meaningful ways.

YEAR 1 : SPELLING BEE FUN

Imagine the excitement of a Grade 3 classroom buzzing with energy as learners compete in an isiXhosa Spelling Bee! That's the scene our first-year students help create, thanks to the guidance of Tammy Booysen and Pretty Magangxa. It's more than a fun competition—it's a way to support mother tongue learning and build phonics skills in a language that matters to these learners. Research reminds us that children learn best in their home language (Nag et al., 2019) and this initiative brings that theory to life.



YEAR 2: LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AT GOOD SHEPHERD

Second-year students, led by Ntsika Kitsili and Kelly Long, from GADRA, spend time at Good Shepherd Primary, working with Grade 2 learners on their English skills. Many children in South Africa learn English as a First Additional Language, and they need support to build vocabulary and confidence. Our students jump in with fun, structured language activities that really make a difference.

YEAR 2: TINY TOTS TENNIS

Who says you can't teach a four-year-old to hold a tennis racket? Dr. PJ Hellemann's Year 2 students show that you absolutely can! As part of their Performance and Multimodalities course, in partnership with Human Kinetics and Ergonomics, the Rhodes preschoolers develop gross motor skills using tennis. It's all about balance, coordination, and movement—and it turns out it's a great way to build focus and confidence too (Pienaar et al., 2022).

YEAR 3: LEAPING INTO LITERACY

In partnership with the Lebone Center, every Tuesday and Wednesday morning, our third-year students visit Grade R classrooms at George Dickerson Primary to help learners build the foundational skills they'll need for reading. They run activities focused on early literacy skills, including gross and fine motor skills, listening for sounds, playing with rhymes, and identifying syllables. These early literacy skills are essential and having consistent support in the classroom makes a real impact.



YEAR 4: ORAL READING FLUENCY MAKHANDA STUDY

By the time students reach their final year, they're ready for a bit more responsibility. In a GADRA initiative, with Kelly Long and Angi Jones, year 4 students visit local schools to assess Grade 4 learners' oral reading fluency and comprehension. The purpose of the research is to guide local, contextualised attempts to address the well-documented literacy crisis by providing:

- i) local standardised testing information for comparison with national and international norms;*
- ii) formative information to schools and teachers;*
- iii) data to inform proposed 'learning to read' interventions;*
- iv) a means to identify future research needs—and give our students real-world experience with using data to inform their teaching.*

Established as a service-learning programme in the Bachelor of Education Foundation Phase course offered by PECE, this annual citywide Grade 4 Reading Comprehension Study was initiated in 2023. Annual replication enables analysis of general trends and the impact of educational interventions while acknowledging differences in assessment timing.

WHY IT MATTERS?

Service-learning doesn't just support learners—it transforms student teachers. Working in real classrooms helps them build empathy, confidence, and practical teaching skills. For service-learning to be truly impactful, it must be meaningful, addressing genuine community needs through collaboration. Reflection is key, helping students link their experiences to academic content and social realities. Reciprocity ensures that both students and community partners benefit, while academic integration deepens learning and critical thinking.

Ultimately, service-learning should foster civic engagement, inspiring active citizenship and a commitment to justice. Ongoing assessment ensures these programmes remain relevant, sustainable, and effective for everyone involved.



Kemp, C., Pienaar, A. E., & Du Toit, D. (2022). School-based movement development programmes and motor performance of Grade 1 learners: The NW-CHILD Study. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 62(4), 791-811.

Nag, S., Vagh, S. B., Dulay, K. M., & Snowling, M. J. (2019). Home language, school language and children's literacy attainments: A systematic review of evidence from low-and middle-income countries. *Review of Education*, 7(1), 91-150.



INTRODUCING *Zintle Bangiso*

Lecturer and Teaching Practice Coordinator in the Department of Secondary and Post-School Education

Zintle Bangiso is a Lecturer and Teaching Practice Coordinator in the Department of Secondary and Post-School Education, in the Faculty of Education at Rhodes University.

Her teaching and research focus on initial teacher education, mathematics education, isiXhosa language teaching, multilingual education, inclusive education, and teacher professional development. She holds a Master's degree in Education and is pursuing her PhD, which examines ways to strengthen teacher preparation for Foundation Phase multilingual mathematics classrooms.

With experience spanning lecturing, work-integrated learning coordination, and community-engaged scholarship, she has

contributed to initiatives such as the National Education Collaboration Trust pilot projects and the Nal'ibali reading-for-enjoyment campaign.

Her scholarship seeks to bridge research, policy, and practice to promote equitable, high-quality education in multilingual and under-resourced contexts.



NTSIKA FEST

A Sporting Day that Took Makhanda
by Surprise

By Vuyolwethu Kepe

Photos by Chris Thobela at
Grocott's Mail



On a crisp Saturday morning, something was in the air in the dusty streets of Extension 7. Makhanda witnessed the dawn of something new, something electric – the Ntsika Fest. Hosted by Ntsika Secondary School, the event turned heads.

With limited resources but boundless passion, the Ntsika Fest took Makhanda by surprise, showcasing not only the raw athletic talent of the youth but also the immense potential of community-driven events.

The Ntsika Fest, although in its early stage, aims to rival established sporting events like the Graeme Rugby Day and Kingswood and St Andrews College/DSG K-Day. This not for competition but for the holistic development of learners who attend township schools. The prestigious events mentioned are held annually by schools with significantly more resources, and have long been the crown jewels of Makhanda's sporting calendar.

But on this day, Ntsika Secondary School – often overlooked in the city's sport scene – proved that even without a vast budget or state-of-the-art facilities; the spirit of competition, sportsmanship, camaraderie, and community could bring a sporting event of a high standard to life as long as there are dedicated stakeholders to bring the dream to life.

As the day unfolded, the energy was palpable. Spectators packed the stands, and were buzzing the fields, eagerly cheering on their children, siblings, and friends. The crowd, a vibrant mix of parents, teachers, and learners, embodied the strength of a tight-knit community. From thrilling soccer matches to netball matches, every moment of the Ntsika Fest was a celebration of talent and determination.

The benefits of the Ntsika Fest extend far beyond the games played on the field. For the learners of Ntsika Secondary School, and other learners alike, this festival is a platform for self-expression, empowerment, and development. For many, it is an opportunity to showcase their athletic abilities on a larger stage, which can open doors to further opportunities in the world of sports.

But the event is not just about winning; it's about fostering values of teamwork, resilience, discipline, and building community through teamwork – qualities that serve learners both on and off the field. The Ntsika Fest has also become a powerful tool for strengthening the relationship between the school and the local community. It brings people together, creating a shared sense of pride and unity.

Parents and locals, many of whom may not have the resources to support their children's sporting ambitions, now have a chance to participate in their children's journeys in a meaningful way.

Despite the challenges faced by Ntsika Secondary School, including limited funding, the school's leadership, and sports and organising committee have big dreams for the future.

They envision the Ntsika Fest growing into an event that rivals the well-known Graeme Rugby Day or K-Day reflecting the cultural diversity of Makhanda. With a continued focus on developing our learners' athletic abilities, building community support, and improving facilities, the dream of establishing the Ntsika Fest as a landmark event in Makhanda's sporting calendar will become more attainable every year.



While the Graeme Rugby Day and the K-Day events have long been synonymous with excellence, the Ntsika Fest's arrival is a reminder that talent is not always defined by financial resources. It is a reminder that opportunity, when coupled with dedication, can transcend any obstacle.

The Ntsika Fest is more than just a sporting day; it is a celebration of what can be achieved when communities come together in the spirit of collective growth and achievement. It is a festival that promises to leave an indelible mark on the future of Makhanda's youth and the city itself. If this year's festival is anything to go by, we can only expect the Ntsika Fest to grow – in size, in scope, and in impact – for years to come.



NTSIKA
FESTIVAL
2025

SCA
CHALLENGE

WWD

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I AM Pretty Neliswa Magangxa

I am Pretty Neliswa Magangxa, a lecturer specialising in Early Childhood Literacies. I am based in the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Rhodes University.

I believe in dialogic engagements where Foundation Phase learners utilise their funds of knowledge whilst engaging in meaningful learning. Many years of school classroom teaching inspired my passion for exploring various ways to equip pre-service teachers to teach diverse learners and in diverse environments.

My niche area is determining how culturally responsive teaching can be incorporated in literacy teaching and across disciplines, in order for pre-service teachers to be able to accommodate diverse learners, and so that learners can make meaning of their learning.



Being part of professional bodies like CALT and PrimTed has capacitated me as a teacher educator in multifaceted ways. The opportunity to be an nGap Scholar and Thuthuka Grant Holder developed me as an early-career researcher to supervise students to completion and write and publish articles. Engaging with schools as communities remains one of my strong beliefs for the betterment of education, specifically in the previously disadvantaged communities.

By Rhodes University
Community Engagement



ANNUAL MAKHANDA TEACHER AWARDS

The Annual Makhanda Teacher Awards has become a highlight in the social calendars of the city's many educators and education stakeholders, after only its second year.

The 2025 Awards took place on 26 August 2025 at Kingswood College and provided a much needed opportunity for the community to share their appreciation and show recognition for the work done by school teachers, from Early Childhood Development through primary school and high school.

Dr Ashley Westaway, General Manager at GADRA Education, reflected,

"Education in Makhanda is not just a job, but a calling. The profession that will take us to our vision of becoming South Africa's leading academic city by 2028 is teaching."

The Awards is a special event for all who attended as it provided an opportunity to celebrate excellence in Education, but also get together to reflect over a long year in deeply transforming local schools.



EXCELLENT EMERGING ECD CENTRE: ALL FOR CHRIST PRE-SCHOOL

All for Christ was established in 2016. Today, the centre has survived post-Covid challenges and has 45 children cared for.

EXCELLENT NOVICE TEACHER: HOPE PRINCE (GOOD SHEPHERD PRIMARY)

Hope Prince has been advocating for inclusive, creative pedagogy in classrooms since 2022. To manage 45 learners, Hope creates a calm, musical environment.

EXCELLENCE IN FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHING: ZIMKHITHA MDINGI (HOLY CROSS SCHOOL)

Zimkitha Mdingi's impact can be seen in measurable progress, from perfect attendance to successful community reading camps.

EXCELLENCE IN INTERMEDIATE PHASE TEACHING: JAYNE BERRIMAN (ST MARY'S RC PRIMARY)

Jayne Berriman creates empowering spaces through programs like her "superhero" values initiative. Her flexible planning boosts literacy and critical thinking, evidenced by strong learner outcomes.



EXCELLENCE IN SENIOR PHASE TEACHING: **SETYENZWA NYANDA (NTSIKA SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL)**

Over 30 years, Setyenzwa Nyanda has maintained a 100% pass rate in Grade 12 isiXhosa, encouraging learners to earn distinctions and attend university. She uses innovative methods, like WhatsApp tutoring, to extend mentorship and community support.

EXCELLENCE IN FET PHASE TEACHING: **NADIA CZEREDRECKI-SCHMIDT (VICTORIA GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL)**

Nadia Czeredrecki-Schmidt is a passionate science educator, using real-world excursions and expo guidance.

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP: PRIMARY SCHOOL (JOINT AWARD):

ELZAAN VAN WYK (PJ OLIVIER COMBINED SCHOOL) AND GERARD JACOBS (ST MARY'S RC PRIMARY)

Elzaan van Wyk uses relational leadership and technology to address challenges. Gerard Jacobs, a community stalwart, prioritises basics and partnerships, turning St Mary's into a haven for potential realisation.

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP: HIGH SCHOOL: **THOBILE NCUA (NTSIKA SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL)**

Thobile Ncula played a pivotal role in Ntsika achieving record bachelor's passes in 2024 by focussing on collective growth and holistic development.



By Rhodes University Community Engagement

VICE CHANCELLOR'S DISTINGUISHED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AWARD

Prof Samantha Naidu

2024 RECIPIENT

Every year, Rhodes University celebrates an academic who has excelled in engaged scholarship by presenting the Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Award for Community Engagement. The Award recognises academics who have leveraged deep and meaningful relationship-building in the teaching, research and community engagement activities. 2024 Recipient of the 2024 Award, Professor Samantha Naidu presented her work in the Foundation Phase literacy space in August.

Prof Sam Naidu, a Lecturer in the Department of Language and Literary Studies, coordinates CERCO - Community Engagement Reading Clubs Orientation. CERCO is a short course that prepares student volunteers to set up and manage reading clubs with various organisations across Makhanda. These students spend an hour a week engaging with learners and contributing to addressing literacy in Makhanda.

CERCO was launched in 2014 and continues to support early literacy development in foundation-phase learners.



As part of the VCs Award event, Prof Sam invited a panel comprising a local teacher involved in the project, student volunteer, a former participant of the reading clubs who is now a University student, as well as other stakeholders in the clubs.

Nompumelelo 'Mpumi' Frans is a passionate primary school teacher who has gone above and beyond for her young learners for decades. Mpumi is a teacher at C.M. Vellem started reading clubs with Prof Naidu in 2014, as a response to an ongoing crisis in her classroom - her Grade 3 class was largely unable to read.

"Some of them cried when I asked them to read," she said. "So I said, let's not read-let's talk about the pictures."

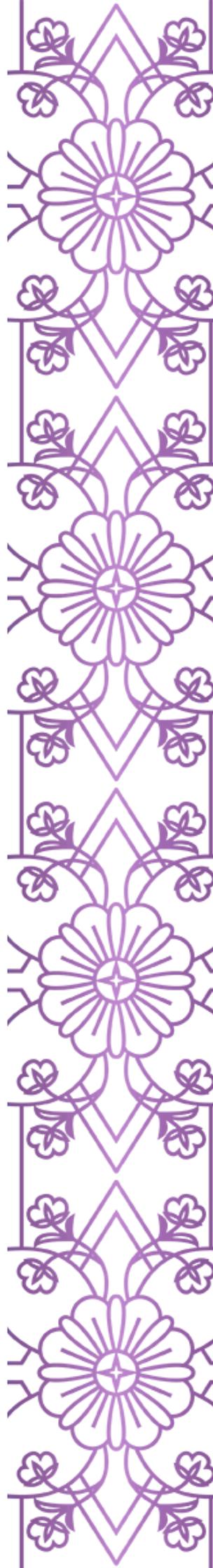
With training from retired professors also invested in the reading space, and with the support of volunteers, Mpumi's school introduced interactive, low-pressure reading sessions.

"The volunteers were like angels," she said. "They were warm, encouraging, and made the children feel safe enough to try, make mistakes, and grow."

Lindani Sifanele, a student leader and student volunteer in several RUCES programmes shared his journey in the programme. "Children remember visuals more than text," he explained, "but beyond that, what they truly remember is how you make them feel. When they see you show up, every week, they begin to trust you."

His work with children not only improved their reading abilities, but also shaped his own growth. "I became more patient, empathetic, and better at communicating. More importantly, I realised that creating safe, welcoming spaces makes all the difference."

The project extended its reach by involving parents. A community session was held to show families how they could support reading at home—even if they couldn't read themselves.



Through Lindani, CERCO's reach went beyond communities in Makhanda. He recalled how, after learning the value of reading aloud to children, he encouraged his sister—who was raising a vulnerable child—to start reading at home.

"Change doesn't always begin in big programmes," he added. "Sometimes it starts with one conversation."

Today, the legacy of that intervention persists. Mpumi proudly shared that her Grade 4 learners now voluntarily read to younger classes every morning—without being asked or rewarded.

"Because they know what reading did for them, they want to pass it on," she said.
"Reading has become the culture of our school."

Prof Naidu reflects on the decade-long process of developing CERCO. "What began as a small intervention has grown into a model of sustainable community engagement," he said. "We are seeing generational change—children helping children, parents helping parents."

Makhanda has higher literacy rates among Foundation Phase learners than other areas in the province. As literacy rates among foundation-phase learners continue to be a national concern, the CERCO model offers simplicity and impact.



By Ephreeda Banda

CELEBRATING ENGAGED CITIZENRY

The Annual Rhodes University Community Engagement Awards

"Community engagement is not a once-off act, not charity, but a way of life."

With these closing words, Vice-Chancellor Professor Sizwe Mabizela captured the spirit of Rhodes University's 14th Annual Community Engagement (RUCE) Awards.

The ceremony was not simply an evening of recognition but a powerful reminder that Rhodes University belongs to Makhanda and that its strength comes from walking alongside communities to bring lasting change.

The awards, guided by partnership, leadership, and love, honoured students, staff, and community partners who have given their time, energy, and creativity to projects that continue transforming lives.



ANCHORED IN THE COMMUNITY

Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Professor Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela, reminded those gathered that community is not an add-on to the university's mission, but a core function of what Rhodes University stands for.

She reflected on the progress since RUCE was established in 2007, pointing to service-learning in the curriculum, faculty-level community

engagement committees, social innovation hubs, and the African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement launched in 2023. More recently, Rhodes University became the first South African university to offer a SAQA accredited Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Community Engagement.

"These achievements are not only institutional milestones," she said. "They represent our vision of developing socially aware graduates who can walk with communities and co-create solutions for a just society."

For RUC Director, Di Hornby, the evening carried historic weight, marking the first time in 14 years that the Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellors attended the awards together. Their presence, she noted, underscored how deeply community engagement is embedded in the University's vision.

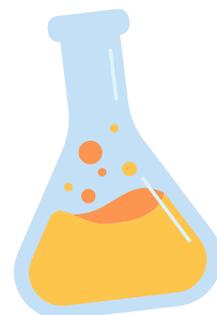
"Things don't happen in isolation," Hornby reminded the audience. "We can go far when we walk together."

The scale of impact in 2025 was remarkable. 970 Rhodes student volunteers participated in community engagement projects, supported by 110 student leaders and 47 community partners. Ninety staff participated in Faculty led Service Learning Programmes reaching 2,500 students. Meanwhile, the Masakhe Economic Development Programme and the Social Innovation Hub injected R4.4 million into the local economy by training small businesses, providing equipment for enterprises, strengthening them and then ultimately registering them as suppliers on the Rhodes data base.



By Lisakhanya Tali

30 Years OF SCIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN MAKHANDA SCHOOLS



Joyce Sewry finds fulfilment in witnessing growth within her science students as they achieve degrees they once thought were unattainable, and by seeing learners from underserved schools discover new opportunities.

Sewry is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Chemistry at Rhodes University, with over 30 years of dedicated service to science education and community engagement. Sewry is a stalwart in CE at Rhodes and was among the first recipients of the Vice Chancellor's Distinguished Award for Community Engagement for her transformative impact on STEM education in local schools. Sewry describes her Community Engagement award as:

"A recognition within the institution rather than recognition for myself."

Passionate about science education, Sewry has led initiatives to bring chemistry to underresourced schools and founded the Khanya Maths and Science Club to support learners. Her expertise spans chemical education and chemometrics. And she plays a key role in academic support at Rhodes. Sewry teaches both remedial and Honours-level courses, guiding first-year students in Chemistry 1 and mentoring Honours students in Chemometrics and Service-learning modules.



In the latter, her students facilitate educational content such as 'A Pollutant's Tale' and conduct hands-on experiments with Grade 7 learners, sparking early interest in science.

Since 1998, Sewry has led impact community engagement initiatives. Most notably, the Khanya Maths and Science Club, which she coordinates in partnership with the Albany Museum, engages over 150 Grade 8 and 9 learners annually.



A school principal and Rhodes alumnus, once told his learners: "The university has come to you, and now you can go to the university."

Sewry's engagement also includes teacher workshops, school visits, and the Science Expo. Her collaborations with institutions like Bristol University and Somerset Educational in Somerset East have expanded STEM access to farm schools in the Eastern Cape.

She continues to nurture longstanding partnerships, for instance with Prof Ken Ngcoza and Somerset Educational, distributing chemical kits and training teachers nationwide. After Covid-19 disrupted face-to-face engagement in 2022, Sewry adapted the Khanya program to reach 180 learners and involve 25 volunteers.

Her one hope is to inspire future science and maths educators to continue this legacy, ensuring a sustainable impact on chemical education and community engagement.



BY VERONA DAVIS

SHOULD THE DISCOURSE OF AFRIKAANS FAL CHANGE?

Language holds power. It has the ability to open doors, academically, professionally, and socially. It is not just a subject, but a critical skill that commands respect.

When I can communicate in your language and understand you, you regard me differently, yet many learners fail to recognise or understand the privilege of learning an additional language. Afrikaans First Additional Language (FAL) is no exception. Currently, the way it is taught often disengages learners, making the subject feel like a chore rather than a valuable skill. As an Afrikaans teacher, I firmly believe the curriculum needs a fundamental shift from rigid, assessment driven instruction to a more dialogue-based, communicative approach.

Afrikaans FAL is often taught with an overemphasis on grammar rules, written assessments, and rote memorisation. While these elements are important, they should not dominate the learning experience. Many learners are already "switched off" by the time they enter the classroom. No matter how interactive or fun I make my lessons, trust me, I have tried, they still struggle to comprehend the language when faced with formal assessments. The reality is that language is not just a subject to be studied; it is a living, breathing tool for communication.

If learners never get the chance to use Afrikaans in meaningful conversations, they will never truly grasp it. My own experience with language attrition proves this: I speak four languages, but my Sesotho has declined because I no longer use it daily. Similarly, my Afrikaans fluency suffers because I only speak it in the classroom or with my mother.



I yearn for more opportunities to engage in uninterrupted Afrikaans conversations yet if I, a language teacher, struggle with this, how can we expect learners to thrive under the current system?

A recent interaction with a former learner reinforced my belief in this needed change. After I posted about marking Afrikaans exams versus helping my daughter with her Afrikaans homework, the student commented:

"Her answers are probably better than the ones you're marking 😭😭"

"Excuse me, your Afrikaans has improved a lot!" I replied.

"Nah, it's from living with Afrikaans girls, yoh 😂😂😂" she responded.

"I still remember when you said in class that we should have more dialogue work rather than written, 'cause I know more from the past year than I did after matric like speaking and understanding."



This exchange speaks volumes. Her improvement came not from endless worksheets or grammar drills, but from using the language in real life interactions. Yet, the current curriculum does not prioritise this. How Should Afrikaans FAL Change, you might ask? Well, the focus must shift toward conversational practice where lessons center on dialogue, debates, and storytelling rather than passive learning. Teachers should facilitate discussions where learners engage with the language naturally, not just for marks.

Language and culture are intertwined. By exploring Afrikaans music, films, and current events, learners develop a deeper connection to the language. This cultural integration makes learning more meaningful and memorable. Assessments should include oral presentations, interviews, and role-playing scenarios; tasks that mirror how language is used outside the classroom.

Real-world application ensures that learners don't just study Afrikaans but actually use it. Today's learners are digital natives (TikTok crazy); incorporating podcasts, social media debates, and interactive apps could make Afrikaans more relevant. A flexible curriculum that adapts to modern learners' needs would make the subject feel less archaic and more engaging.

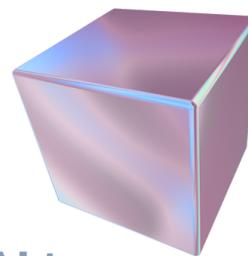
The way Afrikaans FAL is taught, must evolve. If we continue to prioritise written assessments over actual communication, we risk producing learners who can conjugate verbs but cannot hold a basic conversation. My learner's testimony proves that real fluency comes from engagement, not memorisation.

It is time for the curriculum to reflect that language is a bridge: let us teach learners how to walk across it, not just study its blueprint.



By Simphiwe Xaxo

CURIOSITY MEETS COMMUNITY



Family Open Day Brings the Wonders of AI to Makhanda

Energy, laughter and wonder filled the Rhodes University campus as hundreds of learners, parents, and educators from across Makhanda and its neighbouring townships attended the Curiosity Cube Family Open Day on Saturday, after a week of learner-oriented activities.

For one afternoon, science was not confined to textbooks – it came alive, inside a gleaming glass cube.

A CUBE OF POSSIBILITIES

The day's centrepiece was the Curiosity Cube – a seven-metre, solar-powered mobile science lab created by the German-based global science and technology company Merck. Making its first-ever appearance in South Africa, the Cube shimmered under the Eastern Cape sun like something out of a futuristic dream.

Inside, bright-eyed children and curious adults tested how AI distinguishes between real and generated images, experimented with pattern recognition through colourful Lite-Brite boards, and programmed miniature Ozobots that traced lines like self-driving cars on paper. For many participants, it was their first hands-on encounter with the technology shaping tomorrow's world.

Diana Hornby, RUCED Director said that exposure to such experiences could have a profound impact on learners from under-resourced schools.



“AI is here, it’s real, and it’s shaping the world that young people are already part of. Our goal is to spark curiosity – to show learners that science belongs to everyone.”

FROM GERMANY TO THE EASTERN CAPE

Launched in 2017, the Curiosity Cube is part of Merck’s SPARK™ Global Volunteer Program, which empowers employees to advance science education through hands-on outreach. It evolved from Merck’s Curiosity Labs™, where scientists visit schools to conduct experiments – but the Cube takes this concept on the road, bringing the lab directly to communities.

Now, for the first time, the Cube has rolled onto African soil. Its 2025 Southern African Tour spans over 100 events across Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa, with Makhanda’s Family Open Day among its most anticipated stops.

“Africa is full of brilliant young minds waiting for opportunity,” said Rachel Hormeku, Merck Project Director. “Through the Curiosity Cube, we want to ignite imagination and encourage the next generation to see themselves as future scientists, engineers, and innovators.”

BRIDGING THE STEM DIVIDE

According to the World Economic Forum, Africa will require 23 million additional STEM graduates by 2030 to meet its demand for skills in technology, healthcare, and engineering. Yet for many learners – especially those in townships and rural schools – exposure to science remains limited, not by a lack of interest, but by a lack of access.

That's where partnerships like these play a vital role. By connecting academia with community learning, the initiative makes science both accessible and aspirational.

"Community engagement is about breaking down barriers," said Hornby. "When a learner from Tentyi, Fingo or Joza Township steps into that Cube and interacts with real scientists, it changes how they see themselves – and what they believe they can become."

For Mr. Andile Njovane, Principal of Nathaniel Nyaluza High School, the day's impact was profound.

"Today we witness the creation of a new generation of AI and technological experts," he said proudly. "This initiative will go a long way in empowering young people and building a workforce ready for the future."

As the sun began to set, families lingered outside the Cube, reluctant to let the moment end. Children clutched pamphlets and experiment sheets, their faces glowing with excitement. Volunteers packed away equipment, their laughter mingling with the evening breeze.

"The spark of curiosity we light today," she said, "might become the brilliance of tomorrow's scientists." Ms Hornby reflected.

By Phemelo Hellemann

A Childhood in Chalk: Drama meets history education

DEPARTMENT OF PRIMARY AND
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
AND RHODES DRAMA DEPARTMENT

A CHILDHOOD IN CHALK

WHAT THE
YEARS FORGOT

Directed by Thumolwa Madlali
Produced by Phemelo Hellemann

18:00 THURS 16 JUNE

20:00 FRI 27 JUNE

19:00 SAT 23 JUNE

VENUE: Rehearsal Room
The Monument

PRICE: R30 (concession R21)

CAST: *Thabo, Leleka, Leleka
Anthoni, Nyangwe
Mina, Sabela
Siso, Boniso
Kamoune, Bawa*

STAGE MANAGER:
Siphosiso Bolekisi

This year, the Drama Department and the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education collaborated on a drama-in-education project pioneered by me, Dr Phemelo Hellemann, a lecturer in the PECE.

The project, 'Robbed of a Childhood,' is an NRF-Thuthuka-funded project that aimed to bring the stories of Bantu Education and the youth uprising in Makhandla to the forefront. The research forms part of the History of Education in South Africa module, which I teach to the 4th year cohort as part of their Education Studies course.

Through the project collaboration, Thembela Madliki and I wrote the script for the theatre production "A Childhood in Chalk: What the Years Forgot," a 40-minute play that debuted at the 2025 National Arts Festival in Makhandla. I was the producer, and Thembela directed the play. Together with the incredible cast and crew, we presented a multi-lingual and multimodal play that moved audiences through imagery, play, and storytelling, drawing on archival court records from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing in 1996.

The show was well-received and went on to win a Silver Ovation award at the National Arts Festival. Since then, the Grade 9 learners from Andrew Moyake School have also had the opportunity to watch the play in preparation for learning about the 1976 period as a pivotal point in South African history. Subsequently, Thembela and I presented a paper and a workshop at the 6th AHE-Afrika History Education International Conference at the University of Buea in Cameroon in August 2025.

RHODES UNIVERSITY–NAMIBIA PARTNERSHIP BEARS FRUIT AS EDUCATION MINISTER EARNS PHD



The Hon Sanet Steenkamp (left centre, seated) with her fellow Namibian graduands under the programme and several Rhodes University stakeholders, including her supervisor, Dr Callie Grant, Dean of Education Prof Eureka Rosenberg and Director of Global Engagement, Orla Quinlan

When Namibia's Minister of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts & Culture, the Honourable Sanet Steenkamp, walks across the stage at Rhodes University's Spring Graduation today, 10 October 2025, to receive her PhD, she will embody the enduring success of a partnership that has transformed education in Namibia for more than two decades.

The partnership between Rhodes University and Namibia, established in 1999, was designed to strengthen Namibia's education system by providing high-quality postgraduate opportunities for teachers, educational leaders, and officials. Steenkamp was part of the very first cohort, commencing her Masters in 2000 when she was a senior school counsellor in the Oshana Region of Namibia.

In 2015, she was appointed Executive Director in Namibia's Ministry of Education, Arts & Culture, and earlier this year, she assumed the role of Minister of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts & Culture.

During her tenure as Executive Director, Steenkamp began her PhD journey, focusing on Expanding the Leadership of Learning Support Teachers in Resource Schools: A Formative Intervention Study in Namibia. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and her demanding role in leading the education sector through crisis made progress difficult at times, but she persevered. She describes her PhD journey in three words – turbulence, transformation, and triumph.

"I can't think of a better person to be in charge of Education for a country than someone who is willing to dedicate so much time learning and researching how best to serve the sector," says Professor Eureka Rosenberg, Dean of Education at Rhodes University.

Steenkamp's research, which she says "connected the Namibian Ministry and education sector more than ever before," strengthened her capacity as both an Executive Director and, now, as a Minister. "Sustainable change happens when we honour the agency of every teacher and every learner," she reflects – a principle that continues to guide her leadership philosophy.

The Rhodes University–Namibia partnership continues to produce leaders who shape the country's education system. This year's graduates include Steenkamp and fellow PhD recipients Rauha Tufilonghenda Mika and Victoria Nepembe, alongside Masters graduates Absalom Ndamutala Kambindji, Petrina Kamene Mafuro, and Katrina Shivute Ngenosheko.

The renewed Memorandum of Agreement (2025–2030) between Rhodes University and Namibia’s Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts & Culture will ensure this impactful collaboration continues – expanding opportunities for postgraduate study and professional development for educators and policymakers alike.

The long-standing partnership is more than an academic programme; it is a bridge between two nations committed to excellence in education. For Steenkamp, it has been a journey from turbulence to triumph – and a testament to the transformative power of learning, leadership, and international collaboration.



INTRODUCING *Otilia Chiramba*

Lecturer in the Division of Secondary and Post-School Education

I'm Otilia Chiramba, a lecturer in the Division of Secondary and Post-School Education at Rhodes University, where I'm working in the Educational Leadership and Management area. My journey in academia has been deeply shaped by a passion for understanding and challenging the ways in which higher education systems include, exclude, and transform.



I obtained my PhD in Educational Leadership, Management, and Policy Studies from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where I also served as a researcher and tutor. Those years were formative, not only academically but personally sparking a lifelong commitment to equity in education. After Wits, I continued my research journey as a researcher at the University of Johannesburg, where I further explored the intersections of leadership, resilience, and social justice in higher education.

My research centres on higher education, particularly teacher education, and the experiences of underprivileged and international students navigating South African universities and similar contexts globally. I'm especially drawn to the ways in which theories of organisational and student resilience, decolonisation, and social justice can reframe how we understand success and transformation in these spaces.

I've had the opportunity to publish my work in peer-reviewed and DHET-accredited journals, as well as co-edited three books and three special issues.

For me, research isn't just about producing knowledge, it's about making visible the voices and struggles that often go unheard in our institutions and using that knowledge to drive meaningful change.

Currently, I lead a Council on Higher Education national project on Postdoctoral Research Fellows, to explore how we can promote institutional practices to leverage Postdoctoral Research Fellows to enhance academic and research staff capacity in public universities in South Africa.





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Corner of Grey and Somerset Street

Published By: Rhodes University Faculty of Education

Funded By: Rhodes University Vice Chancellors Office

