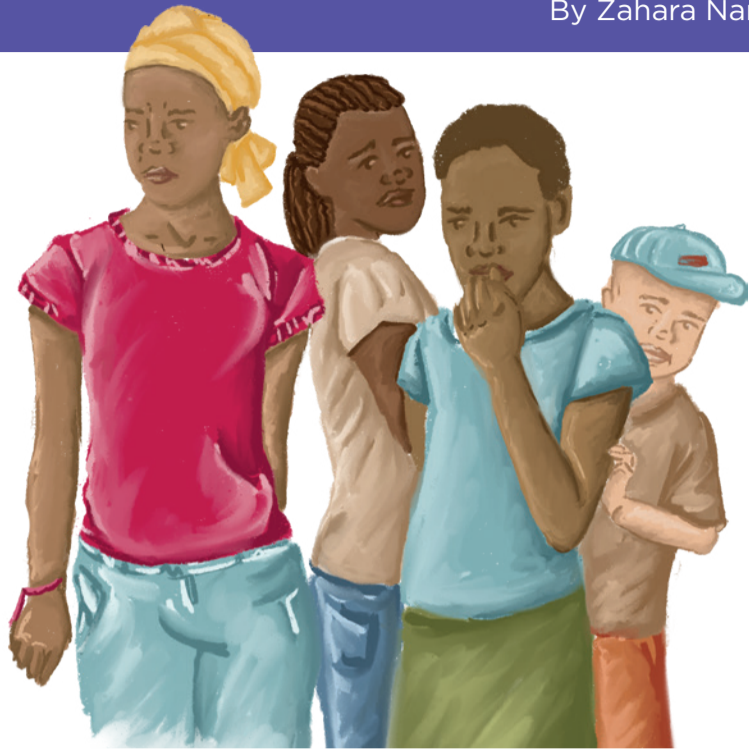


Why Emmanuel Can't Read

By Zahara Namanda & Paul H. Sutherland



“Which age group is the book for?” a Headmaster asked as he looked into my eyes for an answer.

“Age 0 to age 99,” I answered.

He continued looking at me, and clarified, “I mean, is it Foundation? Intermediate? Senior? What classes would use it?”

“Any class,” I replied.

As if I had not heard him, he asked again, “Paul, what classes would we buy this book for?”

I responded, “We create books that tell great stories. Each page is well-illustrated. We use high-quality paper and then think about every word, every illustration, and how each page is put together. We don't consider ‘age.’ We only ask ourselves, ‘Is this book one that kids and even adults will love?’”

My colleague Paul Sutherland and I have had dozens of conversations like this, and we think, more than anything, the conversation illustrates the root of why Emmanuel, Andora, Michael, and Doris can't read.

It seems well-meaning ministries, NGOs, headteachers, librarians, and parents buy books based on budgets, word count, or word list criteria with little thought regarding whether the child will be motivated internally to actually read and enjoy the book. Buying books because of some ancient, outdated system that decreed 7-year-olds can't learn words like INSPIRE, INCREDIBLE, CONFIDENT, HAPPINESS, or UNCOMFORTABLE because they are above the grade level is counterproductive. The goal of education is to create self-reliant learners—learners who are curious and want

to grow, learn, explore, and of course, read because it is fun, fulfilling, and enjoyable.

Books entertain and teach us. We need to learn to read before we can read to learn. But the education industry has not connected that if we want children to really learn to read well, they need MOTIVATION. The best motivation is motivation that is positive and intrinsic. Children need to fall in love with the books.

There are many reasons why Emmanuel can't read. Like the generation before them, many of today's parents grew up in a home with no books, so they too have little connection to the importance of reading and English competency as a key to success. Parents also struggle to afford school fees, let alone find extra money to buy books.

Emmanuel cannot read because he is caught in a cultural trap—he has been systematically taught to hate reading and to avoid books. He looks at books as something to drudge through because Mum, Dad, and teacher say, “Read this and shut up!” Emmanuel grew up hearing from well-meaning adults, “You can't play until you read that book,” as if reading were the punishment and all else was the reward. Depending on his age or school, he was hit, criticized, or made to feel dumb because he read “b” instead of “xd”. It did not take long for Emmanuel to become afraid of books and reading.

Patrick's grandmother who spoke little English, was great at making up stories about the pictures and enjoyed having Patrick find the bugs, and other images on each page. She would point out the letters and make the letter sounds for Patrick and he would delight in pointing to the “P” and say “P - Patrick” or “J” - jambo”.

When Emmanuel was young, if he had a book in the house, his dad would say “Don't touch it! You'll spoil it.” If he was allowed to hold the book, Mum would say, “Careful, don't rip the page! Move your water cup away so you don't spill on it!” Emmanuel learned one thing: Books are going to get you into trouble—stay away!

Why Patrick Loves Books

Patrick's parents realized from their own life experience that if their son was going to be successful, he needed to learn to read, write and speak English very, well. They had struggled, had multiple languages spoken in the house growing up, and had little money, so they carefully planned how they used their money. Instead of giving in to his pleadings to buy whatever plastic junk was sold on the street that day,

they saved their money to buy just one book at a time. When friends would ask what gifts to give Patrick for his birthday, his parents suggested, “Well-illustrated books in the English language.”

His parents also realized that motivation is important, and that love motivates better than fear. So, they allowed Patrick to play with the few books they owned from the time he was born. Patrick would look at the illustrations, chew on the book, play with it, and flap the pages in the air to hear the “wooshing” sound they would make. He learned that books were fun. Often, he would sit on Mom or Dad’s lap and he would simply turn the pages and look at the pictures feeling loved and happy, interacting with his parents. His parents would read the words in English and also in the home language.

As Patrick grew, his Dad would inquire, “Patrick, do you want me to tell you a story?” Patrick would grab a book, climb on Dad’s lap, and open the book. Father and son would look at the pictures together. Patrick would ask, “What does that page say, Daddy?” and Dad would not read the words, but he would respond, “The girl is riding on the boda-boda really fast. She is happy!” Patrick would continue turning the pages, and eventually stop on one as he pointed to the grandfather making a wooden bicycle. Dad would then tell a story, sometimes reading the author’s words, and other times making up his own based on the illustration on the page. Patrick’s mom would point to each word as she read it. She would decode the words and say, “Hap” as she pointed to **Happy** then say “ee” as she pointed to the **Happy**. Eventually Patrick asked, “What does that word say?”

Patrick learned that books were fun. His whole life, he knew that his family loved books and loved to have him on their lap with a book, and that books were a way for them to connect with each other.

People often tell us, “This idea that ‘books are toys too,’ is crazy! Kids won’t respect them and we’ll wind up with torn paper everywhere!” Our answer, “It is ok if they get worn. Tell me something you love that you don’t respect?” The simple truth is, we respect what we love. If kids love books, they will respect them. Sometimes we talk about Patrick’s minister Grandpa Tom. Grandpa would take kids camping and before meals he would pull a small bible out of his pack to read. His bible’s pages were brown and worn. There was ketchup or maybe it was blood on some pages. Grandpa had written little notes to himself on some pages and some pages had phone numbers written on them. He loved his old bible and respected it. It is ok if your child draws in his book, or is creative and colours in the book. Naturally for books owned by the library or school he must be careful.

When children are comfortable around books and realise that stories are fun and entertaining, they will want you to read the book to them—and often on their own terms regarding timing and book choice. Children’s bodies are designed to be in a regular state of motion so they can grow stronger and bigger. For this reason, God never intended for children to have a lengthy attention span, so maybe a young child will only look through a few pages of a book before moving on to another activity. That is okay! Patrick could sit on his parent’s lap for hours as a toddler, looking at books and listening to their stories. His younger brother, however, found sitting still to be fun for only a few minutes at a time, after which he would dance around the room while his mother or father kept reading. His mother never dragged him back and implored him to sit. Both boys enjoyed books on their own terms, and today, both brothers are strong readers who love books.



So, let's get to the psychological reasons ("book maths" as we call it) of why Patrick loves books:

1. Patrick was allowed to play with and enjoy his very small collection of books when he was a baby. He learned that books connect him with caring adults, are fun to look at, make a "wooshing" sound, and can be pushed along the floor like a car.
2. His parents intentionally made a positive association between books and a love-filled experience of connection and joy.
3. Grandma could not read English but helped him learn that her language had letters and sounds too by telling made up stories from the books pictures in her home language. She would point to the pictures and say Mtoto as she pointed at a child, and point to letters and make the sounds of the letters in her mouth and ask Patrick to say the sound too.
4. When Patrick was not even 2 years old, his Grandma had learned from a visiting teacher to draw pictures of letters on the dirt and have Patrick trace the dirt letters as she would say the sounds. She began by having Patrick trace, say and learn words beginning with P, B, G, S, K, and R. Grandma also would sneak in some numbers. Patrick loved having Grandma slowly touch his fingers softly as she counted his fingers in the 3 languages grandma knew.
5. Patrick's parents read books also, and would talk about what they read with him—a biography about Nelson Mandela, an interesting article in the newspaper, or stories they recalled from when they were young. His dad would read his newspaper out loud to Patrick. Even though he did not know some of the words they were saying, he was learning. Children need to hear lots of words when they are young to help them develop. Starting to sing the a, b, c's to your child when still in mommies tummy

is a great way to give your child a head start on language and communication development. Patrick's parents knew that if they could get Patrick to fall in love with books he would WANT TO LEARN TO READ.

6. They also knew he would admire and respect books, because we respect what we love.
7. Patrick's parents believed that for children, there is no right way to read a book. If he read the book from back to front that was fine. Eventually Patrick realised on his own it was more enjoyable to start at the beginning of a book.
8. Patrick's parents did not have a lot of money and they only had a few books. Those few books, however, were fun, well-illustrated, great stories, and designed just for them. His parents and others made up stories from the illustrations and also helped Patrick realise that letters have sounds and make up words. Grandma felt it was important that he know her home language and not just English so she would tell him stories in what she called the mhenga ulimi (ancestors tongue).
9. When Patrick reached school, he did not mind that some of the books were a bit boring, because in his heart he knew reading and books were fun, enjoyable, and good. Patrick realised that if he learned more words, he could read even better stories. He could then read on his own and not have to wait for someone to read to him. In fact, he could make his parents happy by reading stories to them.



10. The sum of this “book math” is simply, once we learn to read, we can read to learn. When we learn to read English well, the world opens to us and we are no longer dependent on teachers, computers, and others to grow. We can teach ourselves. We can learn about accounting, law, medicine, art, food, success, finances, or read fantastic fiction at 3 in the morning or in the back seat of a bus. If we can be self-learners, we can be anything we want to be—because we can teach ourselves.
11. Patrick’s parents understand that our vocabulary and ability to decode complex words will continue throughout our lives. They have Patrick’s older siblings read to them. They help by assisting their older children decode words, sound them out and discuss the meanings of the word. As children learn to read, often they will want to hurry forward to see what is next, or to complete a reading assignment skip words and assume their meaning in the context of the story to just keep moving on through the text. Studies have shown that often High School learners have significant deficits in reading and lack understanding complex words because they have not been taught to slow down and decode words. Reading competence builds over the years. Dictionaries and searches on the web offer spectacular assistance as we grow our vocabulary and reading proficiency throughout our lives.

It is sad that there seems to be more Emmanuel than Patricks: We need great, fun stories that are well-illustrated and feature places, people, images and situations that Africa’s children can relate to. We need motivated parents, teachers, caregivers, siblings, uncles, grandparents and community members to commit to building an education culture built around reading and English competency. A vibrant, positive reading culture in Africa is achievable.



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The STEPi books were proudly crafted, edited, illustrated, designed, and printed mostly in Uganda and South Africa and are available to read online, just visit www.stepiedu.com to find out more!

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Paul H. Sutherland writes on success, values, virtue, finance, and happiness for adults and children. With help from artists, illustrators, contributors, and children STEPi creates fantastic, incredible, beautiful, magnificent children’s stories for children age 0 to 99.

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