

# **Education to be able to read and write**

## **Portfolio Strategy**

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# EDUCATION TO BE ABLE TO READ AND WRITE: DGMT's literacy strategy for 0 – 15 year olds

## 1. Objectives of the literacy strategy

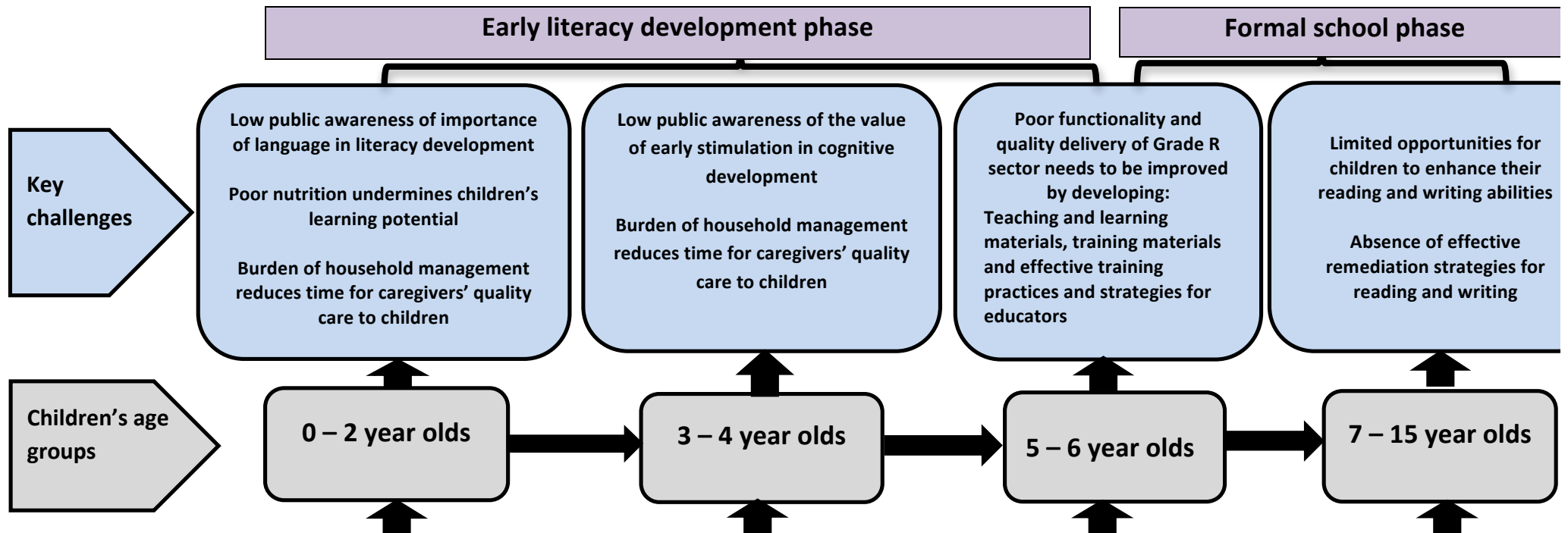
DGMT's literacy strategy for the 0 – 15 year olds is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Design and demonstrate a birth-to-fifteen strategy for literacy that can serve as the basis for advocacy and for implementation;
2. Facilitate the development of systemic support structures at school and district levels in order to create an environment for sustainable delivery of literacy interventions and programmes for learners;
3. Help facilitate the development of policies and practices supportive of literacy development in the education system;
4. Use the media to create public demand for quality literacy development programmes for children in the country.

## 2. Key challenges the DGMT's literacy strategy is trying to address

DGMT's literacy strategy is informed by the recognition that there are two main factors that work against the country's efforts of realising the goal of high literacy performance amongst the children in the SA education system. On the one hand, there is clearly a problem of insufficient resources to support effective literacy development interventions in the country. It is for this reason that one element of DGMT's literacy support strategy will focus on ensuring that community and public literacy development initiatives have the necessary resources to enable them to deliver literacy development programmes for young children. On the other hand, there is also the widespread problem of low public demand for literacy development

programmes in the country. This is the reason why the other strand of the DGMT's literacy strategy focuses on creating public demand for literacy development programmes. DGMT plans to achieve this goal by demonstrating in practice through the implementation of its literacy strategy how effective programmes that can be designed and delivered for the different age groups of children; what role the different stakeholders can play in the implementation process and how the different literacy development programmes for the different age groups of children can be integrated in a logically coherent manner to support the longitudinal progression of young learners from early literacy through to their formal schooling phase.



### 3. DGMT approach to addressing the challenge of poor literacy

## The longitudinal profile of the literacy strategy for 0 – 15 year olds

### 3.1 Focus on early literacy development for young children

of learning to read and write behind with very little

DGMT fully recognises that effective learning and quality education in the school system is a critical necessity for the development of human potential of the citizens of this country. It is for this reason that DGMT has determined to build a high quality literacy strategy that starts at birth and continues through childhood, laying the basis for formal education. The current learner performance scorecard on literacy and numeracy in the country, however, clearly demonstrates fossilised trends of underperformance of learners across all levels of the school system. DGMT strongly believes that the root cause of learner poor performance in the education system is due to the absence of a comprehensive national focus on promoting early literacy and cognitive development for all young children in the country. The majority of learners who enter the formal schooling sector in Grade 1 do so without the basic linguistic and cognitive skills necessary to enable them to cope with the cognitive rigours of the formal schooling regime.

The structure of the Grade 1 curriculum is framed in a manner that assumes that young learners entering the formal school system are bringing with them certain basic skills acquired from pre-school programmes but this is hardly the case for most learners who start school without the advantage of having accessed early childhood development programmes. The absence of these basic cognitive skills from the majority of young learners entering the education system often means a very few of them

prospects of learning to read and write to standards in consort with their grades or levels. At this very stage of their schooling careers, the seeds of the failure of these children in their future school life are sown. It always proves to take extraordinary effort and resources to reverse this trend if not attended to at the outset.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of focusing on early literacy development in a structured and systematic way starting from birth is not a common practice in the country nor is it overtly backed up by any government department through policies or resource allocation. The need to focus attention on early years of children's development was recognised by the Department of Basic Education as early as 2001 in White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development. In the 2005 White Paper 5 on ECD, the Department of Basic Education noted made this undertaking: "In response to the challenge of ECD for children younger than 4 years, the Department of Education will, within the ECD priority group of Government's National Programme of Action for Children, prioritise the development of a strategic plan for inter-sectoral

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Shelley O'Carroll of Wordworks (November 2010) Draft document on 'Suggestions for an early literacy strategy'.

collaboration.”<sup>2</sup> The strategic plan was subsequently developed but the provision of development services to the children within birth – 4 year old cohort still remains a challenge both at the level of access and the quality of services provided.

It is an established fact that children start learning very early on in their lives – actually as early as from birth – and as a country we have not taken full advantage of this reality to facilitate the language development and the cognitive growth of young children to enhance their prospects of success when they enter the formal schooling life. There is a great deal of empirical evidence showing the educational dividends of early learning and cognitive development in young learners in environments and communities where early learning is encouraged as a routine practice. One of the central reasons why early learning through language learning and the stimulation of cognitive development is an educationally sound practice is due to an empirically proven fact that children have the highest potential to learn and tend to learn most between birth and 5 years of age than at any other time of their lives.<sup>3</sup> And what is even more important to note is that at this stage young children are capable of learning language – which is the one of the central vehicles for future learning and development. Secondly, cognition or the ability to know in young children also starts during the 3 – 4 age band and this where the early stimulation of their minds can be initiated to pave the way for the development of literacy, numeracy, logical and critical thinking skills that form a solid foundation for the formal education process later in their lives. Below is a brief description of what the critical areas are in early learning that the DGMT literacy strategy should focus on.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education (2001) White Paper on Early Childhood Development

<sup>3</sup> Tiffany Burrows (June 2010) Article on ‘Early Childhood Development Facts’

### **Language development (0 – 5 year olds)**

Language development is the cornerstone of early learning and development. Children start becoming aware of sounds as early as from birth and this is generally considered to be the child’s beginnings of learning language. This process of language learning and development continues until the child acquires full mastery of the language. With appropriate guidance and support, mothers, parents and care givers of young babies can be assisted to engage in specific activities with young children to enhance the growth of their language development particularly the young children’s mother tongue. This period in the lives of young children is regarded as the most appropriate time for introducing an additional or second language as the minds of young children at this stage of their lives are ‘hard wired’ to learn any language with great ease. Children who learn more than one language at this stage are said to derive a great deal of cognitive benefits from learning an additional language because it enhances their memory, increases problem solving skills, flexible thinking and heightened creativity.<sup>4</sup>

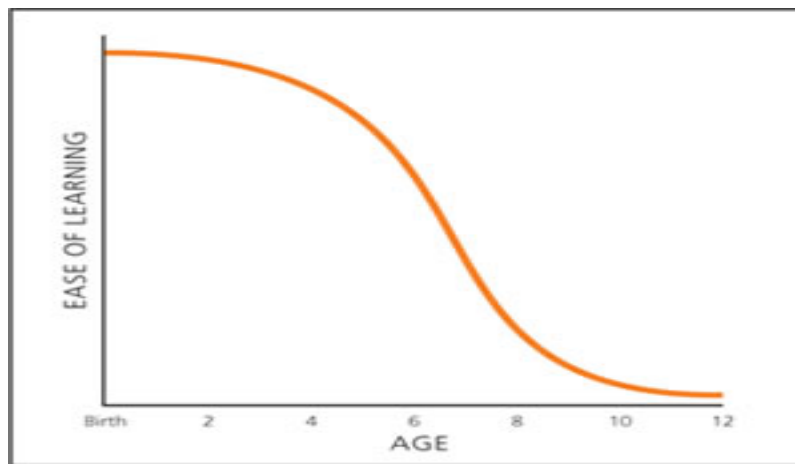
Learning a second language at that age for South African young children, particularly if it is likely to be the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) later in their school life, could prove to be particularly significant in improving their chances of succeeding in their school work. In terms of the current policy and practice in the country, most children particularly from African families only get exposed to English at Grade 1 level for the first time in their

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta Michnick (2009) *How Babies Talk*

lives. The challenge at this stage is that teachers do not have sound methodological approaches to teach the language effectively and children do not make any significant progress in learning English as an additional language. In most cases English becomes their Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) at Grade 4 level<sup>5</sup> and very often most learners struggle to negotiate the transition from mother tongue to English due to poor background in the latter. This is compounded by the fact that children at this stage, i.e. from about 7 – 8 years, are at an age with the lowest potential to learn a new language. The figure below illustrates how children's potential to learn a new language decreases with the advancement of their age.

**Window of opportunity<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> Department of Education (2002) *National Curriculum Statement Grade R – 12*

<sup>6</sup> Karen Gould (2010) In an article entitled 'Children learn a second language naturally'

### **Cognitive development (3 – 4 year olds)**

Another critical development milestone for young children during this period is when their minds reach a stage at which they are capable of learning to think and this is known as cognitive development. This is a phase in the child's development at which learning can be facilitated through activities that stimulate early learning, growth and development. It is generally estimated that children who fall within the band of 3 – 4 years are at a stage in which early stimulation activities can be introduced to facilitate their cognitive development. The 3 – 4 age band is merely an indication of the commencement of cognitive development in children but this process continues way into their formal school life right through to adulthood. The facilitation of cognitive development needs to be a conscious effort facilitated through a carefully planned set of activities that will allow for the maximum development of young children's cognitive development.

### **Emergent reading and writing (5 – 6 year olds)**

Whilst children can be exposed to minimal levels of formal reading and writing opportunities during the early learning stimulation phases, it is when they reach the ages of 5 – 6 years that they are involved in very rudimentary activities to get them to start learning to read and write. This is a transitional phase between the pre-school and the formal schooling periods. The 5 – 6 year olds fall within the Grade R or Reception Year category. In terms of the curriculum guidelines from the Department of Basic Education, this is the period during which these young children are expected to be taught to be able to do some basic reading and writing skills. In White Paper 5 on ECD (2001), the

Department of Basic Education projected that, by 2010, all young learners in the Reception Year fold would be in early childhood development programmes in Primary School-based Reception Year programmes, community programmes or private ECD institutions.<sup>7</sup> And yet to date the provision of Grade R services is still dogged by a number of systemic problems suggesting that there is still an enormous need to provide support resources to develop this sector to a level where it can provide comprehensive and quality access to Grade R learners.

Some of the key elements still missing in the provision of quality Grade R services are the absence of effective materials for educators and learners, quality training for educators and limited infrastructure to accommodate the young learners in school-based ECD programmes. What this essentially means is that there are huge numbers of children who still start formal schooling in Grade 1 without any basic skills on reading and writing. This again is another critical barrier that needs to be addressed to change the fortunes of the young children's potential to progress smoothly through their formal schooling journey.

### **3.2 Enhancing the reading and writing skills of young children in schools and helping them overcome reading and writing barriers**

#### **The formal school system (7 – 15 year olds)**

In line with its philosophy of supporting its beneficiaries are assisted to negotiate the key transitional phases in their lives,

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Education (2001) White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development

DGMT will also provide support to learners in the formal school system in the GET band. The idea is to help learners to continuously improve their reading and writing abilities and thereby improve their chances of succeeding in their schooling careers. The support to learners to read and write to required standards is provided in view of the underperformance of learners in the school system. Substantial evidence of learner performance in literacy gathered by the Department of Basic Education indicates categorically that learners in the education system perform way below the required levels and standards in literacy. One critical instrument that the Department of Basic Education has used over the years to measure learner performance in literacy is the Annual National Assessments previously known as Systemic Evaluation. It is a performance measurement instrument administered to learners at critical exit points in the primary education phases of Grade 3 and 6. This evaluation system measures the performance of learners at Grade 3 and 6 levels and covers the learning areas of Literacy, Numeracy and Natural Sciences. According to figures from the last Annual National Assessment (ANA) report results of 2009, only 41% and 35% of Grade 3 and 6 learners tested respectively were reading at the required levels as defined by the National Curriculum Statement.<sup>8</sup> This is no different from the 2005 Systemic Evaluation results for Grade 6 learners in which the percentage of learners who performed at the required level in the area of language was 38%. Grade 3 learners were unfortunately not tested during that year.

Further evidence of poor performance of learners in literacy in the South African education system has also been obtained from

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Basic Education (2009) Draft report on Annual National Assessment

cross national studies including the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Quality (SACMEQ). This is a comparative study of learner performance in numeracy and literacy across 15 countries in Southern Africa. A 2007 learner performance survey conducted by SACMEQ on language performance of Grade 6 learners has put South African learners at 10<sup>th</sup> position out of the 15 Southern African countries surveyed. The Grade 6 learners surveyed achieved a reading score of 494.9 and these results have also shown South African learners as performing below the SACMEQ average performance reading score of 500 in the survey.<sup>9</sup>

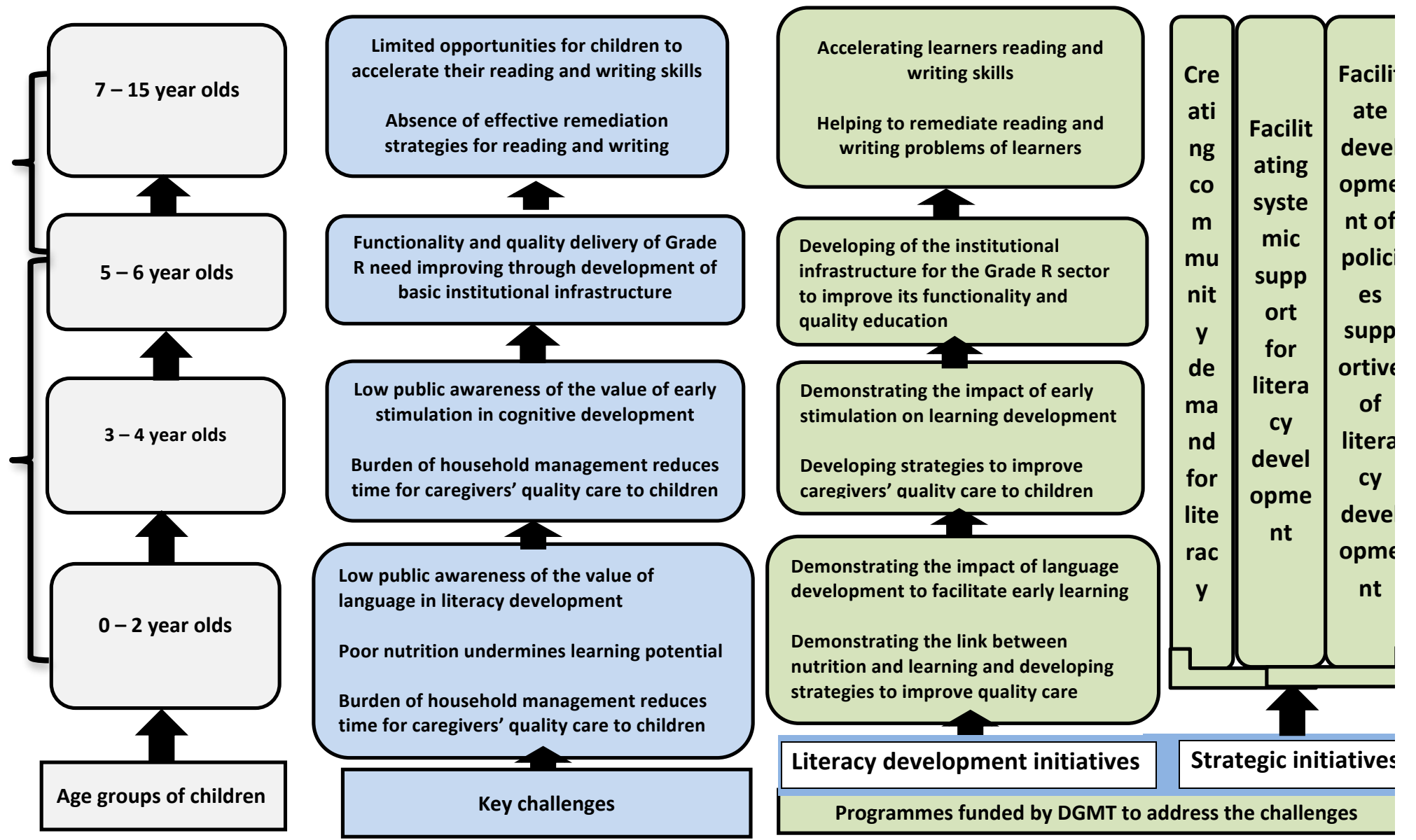
The consequences of the low literacy performance of learners in the South African education system are dire. Current estimates suggest that only 50% of learners who enter the school system reach Grade 12.<sup>10</sup> This represents a massive learner drop out and the corresponding loss of the financial investment in schooling. Poor literacy performance in the education system is also blamed as one of the sources of the poor pass rate at Grade 12 level and this further compromises the potential and prospects of learners to have access to further education and training or employment opportunities. This is a critical challenge that must be addressed as it lies at the heart of the country's inability to develop the skills of its people and thereby contribute to growth and development of the country and its individuals.

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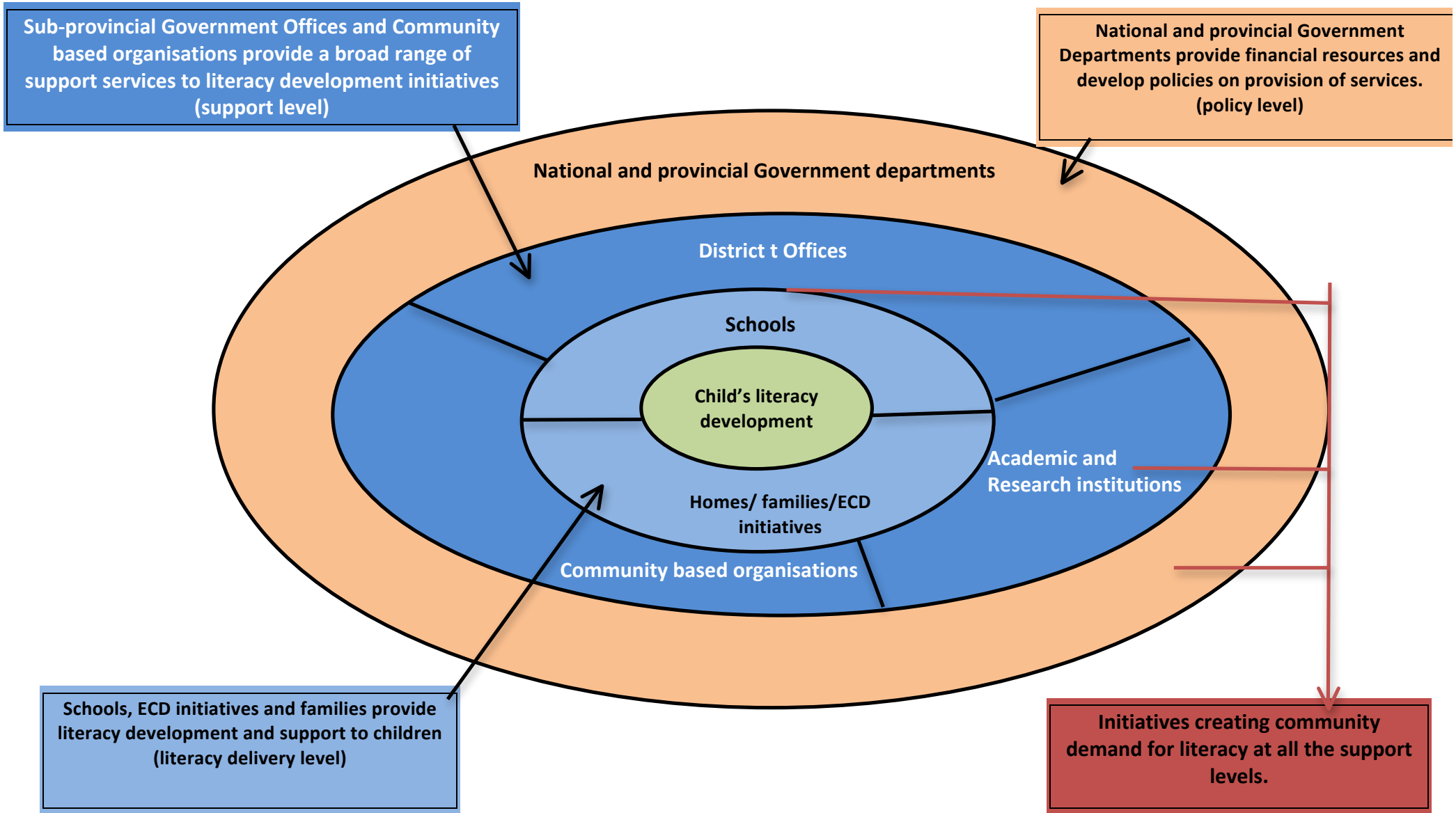
<sup>9</sup> Demus Makua (2010) SACMEQ Policy Issues Series, Number 2 September 2010)

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education (2008) School realities EMIS report 2008

## 4. DGMT's broad programme to support literacy development in South Africa



## 5. Key players and support levels involved in the delivery of the DGMT's literacy strategy



## Key partners that DGMT works with in the delivery of its literacy strategy

In its support for literacy development initiatives, DGMT has identified a number of critical partners that it will be working with at different levels in its drive to support literacy development in the country. At the local community level, DGMT supports organisations that are working with families, parents and caregivers in homes and in community institutions to stimulate the early learning and cognitive development of learners from 0 – 6 years of age. As pre-school early learning development is not an area that is not treated as a priority by the Government, it is a relatively under developed, underfunded, not driven by a coherent set of policies and unevenly implemented by the few players operating in this arena. It is for this reason that DGMT works with organisations supporting early learning development to enable it to refine its early literacy strategy from the experiences gained on the ground. This will in turn help DGMT to contribute to the overall development of a national literacy strategy for early learning development. Another crucial constituency that the DGMT works with are children who are already in the formal school system mainly between 7 – 15 years of age. These are children who either require additional assistance to help them overcome cognitive barriers that stand in their way to be able to read and write or need to be provided with opportunities to accelerate their reading and writing skills, abilities and flair. While some of the literacy development programmes targeting this age group of school going children are delivered through school programmes, others are driven through community literacy development initiatives.

DGMT is fully conscious that its ambitious goal of changing the attitude and outlook of the public to early literacy development and the need to

support literacy development of young children is a daunting task. This is the main reason why DGMT has decided to make use of a number of strategies to create a tailwind behind its literacy development efforts. One of such critical strategies involves DGMT's plan to leverage the power of the media to keep at the forefront of public awareness the importance of literacy development for children, their caregivers and parents. There is a general understanding of the crucial role that the media plays in influencing the course of public opinion through the number of people that can be reached.

Influencing the course of literacy development policies is another critical instrument that DGMT wants to use to shape the course of its literacy development and promotion agenda. This will be achieved through the strategic use of researchers to influence of policies that create conditions conducive to the flourishing of positive literacy development practices in the country. Needless to say, influencing the course of policy development cannot be achieved without establishing close working relations with Government Departments and institutions. DGMT's resources and efforts will also be devoted to facilitating the development of systemic support for education interventions at District level. Apart from creating space and potential for the local level education development initiatives to be integrated into the strategies and practices of local District structures and thereby ensure sustainability, the creation of systemic support also helps to create a coordinated and systematic approach to the delivery and support of education programmes at District level.

The idea behind the DGMT's approach to literacy development is to foster linkages between programmes initiated at local, community level with broad systemic initiatives and processes at a macro level. This helps to align and bring together the bottom up community initiatives with the top down government processes.