

Information and communications

Girl learners transformed into Fab Kids

It took only two hours for 15 Girl Learners in Mathematics and Science (a project of the Platinum Development Trust initiative), sponsored by Absa, to fall hook, line and sinker for the magic of the FabLab. The girls are the final 2007 group (of 60 learners) from the North West who have participated in the Meraka Institute's Fab Kids initiative.

The Department of Science and Technology-sponsored Fab Kids project is part of the Meraka Institute's Young Engineers of South Africa (YESA) programme, which promotes learning in mathematics, science, engineering and technology through specific interventions geared at different age groups. The Meraka Institute is a national research centre managed by the CSIR.

Manager of the Girl Learners project David Semela has been responsible for arranging visits to the FabLab by several groups for Fab Kids sessions. As an incentive to learning, participation in Fab Kids is proving to be a winner. He notes, "Learners are selected on merit for participation in this programme. With each visit, enthusiasm has been growing and I am swamped with requests from learners to become Fab Kids." FabLab activities appear to be virtuously addictive, as learners are not easily persuaded to take a break from their tasks!

The Meraka Institute's Ron Beyers is responsible for running the Fab Kids project. During a session, learners are required to form groups of four to tackle a given challenge, in this case, the design and manufacturing of a desk tidy. Each team member has a distinct but complementary role in the process, from design to construction, electronics, team management and media elements.

Sue Vermaak, programme manager of the Platinum Development Trust, is enthusiastic about the synergies between the two projects, Girls Learners and Fab Kids. Grade 11 girls from North West who are achievers in maths and science are selected to participate in the Girl Learners project. Vermaak is adamant that girls should be encouraged in this way to become confident of their ability to tackle careers historically dominated by men, such as engineering and architecture.

This emboldening effect is borne out by comments from Bakwena High School learners Selina Rampou and Kgomotso Rammebe, who now see the world as their oyster, "We have lots of career options to consider when we leave school."

Rebaona Tlhapi and Refilwe Matjabe of Lerothodi High School found their first experience of the FabLab to be both educational and fun, "We have a challenging and exciting task to finish, but we don't mind doing it!"

Beatrice Mushazhirwa of Absa, that is sponsoring the Girl Learners project through its corporate social investment programme, also paid a visit to the FabLab to meet the learners. She was delighted with the evidence at hand of girls enjoying themselves. "Girls must realise that they can do maths and science," she stresses. "Gone are the days when they had only a limited number of career options to consider."



Kgomotso Rammebe and Selina Rampou of Bakwena High School hard at work

Beyers is confident that Fab Kids provides a unique experience, which will play a significant role in the lives of these girls as they start making important career decisions.

The FabLabs project is an initiative of the Department of Science and Technology's Advanced Manufacturing Technology Strategy (AMTS), which is managed by the CSIR. FabLab, an abbreviation for Fabrication Laboratory, is a hands-on laboratory that provides science, engineering and technology platforms for social development, while enhancing competitiveness and growth in the private sector.