

The potential of early childhood for developing and sustaining literacy in Africa

(Published in Social Dynamics Vol 25. No.1 Winter 1999 Language and Development in Africa, Centre for African Studies, UCT)

If English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for you.
-School superintendent, on refusing request that foreign languages be taught in high school
(cited in Bialystok & Hakuta 1994:1)

Introduction

We end 1999 nowhere near to achieving the goal pledged to by the ‘international community’ at the Jomtien Conference in 1990 ‘to give every child in the world a good education by the year 2000’ (Oxfam 1999).

At the heart of this education, it is widely agreed, is the need to be literate. In Africa, discussions about literacy research and development necessarily form part of the ‘mother’ debate about language planning and language policies in multilingual societies. It is within this debate that I highlight both the neglect and the potential of the early years of childhood¹ for increasing the development of daily living practices, which include reading and writing in African languages. The paucity of research in this area is but one indicator that those who hold decision-making positions have not yet acknowledged and acted upon the significance of early childhood for literacy development.

All children need sturdy foundations with language to become empowered members of literate societies. These foundations should and can be sound ones if the first encounters they have using both oral and written language are varied, plentiful and meaningful ones for them, and when these are well understood and properly nurtured by relevant adults they have dealings with. This does not contradict the fact that any time a person encounters print is a valid one for literacy learning. It has to do with using, and not abusing, the existing potential of childhood, a position that is captured succinctly by these words of Tolstoy:

Was it not then that I acquired all that now sustains me? And I gained so much and so quickly that during the rest of my life I did not acquire a hundredth part of it. From myself as a five-year-old to myself as I now am there is only one step. The distance between myself as an infant and myself at five years is tremendous
(cited in Chukovsky 1963:15).

It is apt to use the words of a literary person because one of the things I hope to argue is that a great (though hopefully temporary) loss in Africa for the literacy education of young children is the nurturing of our continent’s oral tradition, with its stories, rhymes and wordplays. To all intents and purposes, the rich and varied use of African languages as cultural-linguistic tools in early childhood seems to have been swept aside by colonial and post-colonial educational impositions and the accompanying hegemonic force of the colonial languages. It is this tradition which, among other things, needs to be vigorously reasserted.

Although I will concentrate on the South African situation, I am very conscious of the fact that many of the issues I raise are pertinent to other African contexts. I hope that this article will lead to communication between educators and researchers who work with the language and literacy development of young children so that we may begin to share understandings and implementation strategies for reviving and sustaining the earliest steps into mother tongue literacies across Africa.

Facing immense problems

Agreement about what is meant by literacy², what becoming literate means and how to achieve literacy for all remains a perplexing challenge for the entire world – both for economically less developed and industrialised countries. Despite extremely high rates of access to primary and secondary schooling in industrialised countries, it is increasingly recognised that access does not guarantee literacy for all people. This has become ever more apparent, as political and economic imperatives bring linguistically and culturally diverse children together in the countries of the economic North, whose educationalists are forced to reconsider and restructure their ‘advanced’ education systems in the light of changing educational needs.

That said, a problem shared is not necessarily a problem halved as the following small scenario suggests:

Imagine all the 6-14 year old children in North America and Europe. That is the number of children in the world who never see the inside of a school. (Oxfam 1999:4)

Although we benefit from and can adapt for our purposes the research insights and educational initiatives conducted in the North, in the post-colonial areas of the world the legacies of conquest continue to generate problems of brutal consequence for educational justice:

- The number of children who never attend school is 125 million
- 150 million children start primary school but drop out before they can read and write
- Sub-Saharan Africa has one - third of the total out -of -school population and this is a growing trend.
- 2 out of 3 men and 1 out of 3 women are literate in sub-Saharan Africa. In the same region, less than half of the girls from age 6-11 are in school at all (Delors1996:75).

And if we agree that in order to read, there is a need for reading materials, then this point comes across vividly with the following comparative estimates for expenditure on instructional materials: industrialised countries spend fifty - five times more each year per pupil than do low-income countries, and fifteen times more than middle-income countries (Ahmed & Carron 1994:286).

Moreover, it is women and girls who continue to be

Locked into a circle (...) with illiterate mothers bringing up illiterate daughters who are married off too early into yet another cycle of poverty, illiteracy, high fertility and early mortality. (Delors1996:76)

It is highly unlikely that many of these women and children have access to appropriate child-care despite the ever-present global statements about the benefits of pre-school provision (Delors 1996:121, Patel 1993:59). This cold fact makes it evident to anyone with a working knowledge of ECD that gender exploitation contributes hugely to the pitiful pre-school and after-school child-care provision and choices available for most working class women and their children. And, with few exceptions, it is women who are the carers and educators of very young children and they receive virtually no pay for the highly responsible and stressful work they do. Given the immense problems, and the seemingly endless barriers to solutions, one might wonder what the point is of speaking about literacy in early childhood at all.

About Little Children

Perhaps it is the potential that exists within each young child that keeps hope for the transformation of educational delivery in early childhood (and future society) alive. Given the chance, young children cannot help but show their immense propensities for using language – and the way they do it best in countries across the world is through play and stories. Kornei Chukovsky³ described young children as linguistic geniuses⁴, and observed that poetry and nonsense verses are natural ways of using language for young children. What they do goes way beyond self-expression, and has far-reaching implications for learning throughout life. Gussin Paley says that

Play and its necessary core of storytelling are the primary realities in the pre-school and kindergarten, and they may well be the prototypes for imaginative endeavors throughout our lives. For younger students, however, it is not too much to claim that play contains the only set of circumstances understandable from beginning to end.

(Gussin Paley 1990:6)

To be able to play, children must comprehend symbolic activity – something must stand for something else. Such symbolic development in young children holds the beginnings of enquiry into written language. Gestures are also linked with written language through children's symbolic play involving representational gestures. Symbolic play is a major contributor to the development of written language, as it is also a system of second order symbolism (Vygotsky 1978).

There is much more evidence than this (some of which I return to below) to back up the simple point I want to make here about most young children and their literacy learning or lack of it – *they are not the cause of the problems.*

Talk about literacy in childhood

One problem lies in the conception of the relationship between literacy and ECD. In Africa, the domain of literacy learning in early schooling appears up to now to have been conceived of as an attrition or “educational wastage” problem, manifest in the calculations of the notoriously unsatisfactory drop-out and repeat rates (Taylor 1989, World Bank 1994, NEPI 1992, Edusource 1999, Oxfam 1999). It has been usual to argue that such children were not ‘ready’ for school⁵ and that there is ample international

evidence to show that one of the main paths towards solving this 'school readiness' problem⁶ is to provide all young children with access to good quality pre-school education, a solution which many governments might call 'financially impracticable'. (Unicef 1993:59, Delors J 1996:121).

The problem of wastage in South Africa in 1999 is as serious now, as it was ten years ago, when according to Nick Taylor

... almost one - quarter of African children who enter the first grade do not reach the second grade the following year. Many of these children disappear from the formal schooling system altogether at this stage.
(Taylor 1989:1)

Current estimates give details of gross over-enrollment in the early grades with a nationwide average of 60% excess enrollment in Grade 1, but in some provinces it is as high as 135%. Grades 2 and 3 are also oversubscribed. The reason given for this is "repetition" (Edusource 1999).

Such findings are backed up by the Primary Open Learning Pathways (POLP), an educational non government organisation in Cape Town, who have developed a pilot 'accelerated learning' programme for over-age children. While one of their assumptions is that some of their students will never have attended school at all, they state with reference to the 1998 intake that

...it is not obvious from the biographical data that there are, in fact, any learners (older than 9) who have never been to school before; some learners have been at school before the OLC's (open learning classrooms) for as many as five years. This clearly indicates a problem as far as promotion and referral to OLC's and other grades are concerned.
(POLP 1999:8)

Ten years ago, Nick Taylor indicated that there was little understanding of the causes of the phenomenon

But repeating and dropping out are themselves symptoms of deeper causes *and knowledge concerning these causes is almost non-existent.* (emphasis added) (Taylor 1989:7)

Today, only the wording appears to have changed:

However, important as this phenomenon is, no nationwide research on this issue has ever been done, and few accept the notion that this has to be due to some sort of repetition problem, rather than 'mere' inappropriate age at enrolment. *And much less do we understand the causes of the problem.* (emphasis added) (Edusource:1999).

There can be no doubt that the effect of poverty is highly significant. Zaghoul Morsy describes the daunting conditions which children from many African countries who are in schools encounter daily. He says that they

spend all or part of their time in overcrowded schools, in improvised or badly maintained school buildings, with teachers who are overworked and whose qualifications are doubtful, and with few or no textbooks or teaching materials. They are in school, yes; but how can they be expected to learn anything properly and succeed at school to begin with and later in their working lives?

(Morsey 1994:xvi)

But there are other issues to be taken into account relating to policy, theory and the pedagogy of language and literacy. And these need attention - while we address structural issues and issues of access - wherever young children go about their daily lives, be it in homes, community centres, preschools or primary schools.

Languages, literacies and curriculum - policies, practices and problems

South Africa now has a language in education policy which promotes multilingualism as a nation-building instrument, the development of all the official languages⁷ and respect for all languages used in South Africa. While the policy is flexible about implementation strategies,

the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). Hence the Department of Education's position is that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language in education policy.

(DE 1997).

The pedagogical reason for adopting an additive bilingual approach is that research shows that it will lead to more effective learning - both in mother tongue *and* in other languages (in South Africa, usually English). Yet the economic, social and educational climate is still one, which clearly favours and continues to promote English *at the expense* of indigenous languages. Nowhere is this more true than in schooling circles, where bitter memories of Bantu education's abuse of African languages as tools for *underdevelopment* hinder positive acceptance of sustaining and extending the use of mother tongue as well as English in education.

The views of many parents are reflected in the following resigned comment:

I would prefer rather English being the first language and Xhosa to be the second, Because I mean, I'm proud of my language. But the thing is now: what am I going to do with Xhosa much? Where everything, to be able to understand, you to understand me, we have to speak English.

(cited in Knudsen1999:44)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o expresses the fundamental importance of language for identity and learning:

The choice to which language is put, is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.
(Ngugi 1981:4)

He explains how because of having to drop the mother tongue, learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience. (Ngugi 1981:17). Chukovsky, writing about young Russian children forced to learn in a foreign language makes a related point:

These unfortunate children, estranged from the elements of their native speech, mastered neither their own nor the foreign language. Their speech in both instances, was equally colorless, bloodless and pallid, because during the age "from two to five" they were deprived of familiarizing themselves creatively with their spoken language.
(Chukovsky 1963:9)

Most South African parents are yet to be convinced that this is the case. Although I know of no formal statistical evidence of this, trainers of early childhood educators from ELRU (Early Learning Resource Unit) referring to the desire of parents across the country in both rural and urban situations to have their preschool-aged children learn English as soon as possible say "We hear it all the time, it always comes up" (Bev Birkett, ELRU 6 May 1999, personal communication).

This 'language issue', with its prevailing problematic 'only English = good education' equation in ECD in South Africa must be considered together with the introduction of the new education curriculum, thus far implemented at Grade 1 and 2 levels⁸. Couched in the extremely offputting terminology of South Africa's new curriculum, are some sound and progressive early learning principles which have yet to be interpreted coherently for language and literacy to become a relevant part of an integrated curriculum.

There are for instance shifts towards emphasising communication and meaning in the Department of Education's 'learning programme statement' for literacy:

Initially "literacy" was seen as a cognitive process that enables reading, writing and numeracy. In this document, the use of the term "literacy" has expanded to include several kinds of literacies across all learning areas. "Literacies" stress the issue of access to the world and to knowledge through development of multiple capacities within all of us to make sense of our worlds through whatever means we have, not only texts and books (Department of Education. Foundation Phase Learning programmes 1997: iv).

However, there is a concern that while there is a willingness to shift emphasis, there is at the same time a lack of clarity in the new curriculum programmes about early literacy as part of an integrated learning programme (Bloch&Prinsloo 1999). The Department's 'Illustrative Learning Programmes', have active and challenging suggestions for literacy based activities, using words such as *identify, compare and discuss, listen, answer, make a judgement, discuss, predict, list, role play, record, compile, create*. Most teachers, however, have not had sufficient opportunities to get to grips with the theoretical ideas, which underpin this approach, and still understand literacy learning as learning sets of skills before they can be used.

Thus

if teachers do not *understand* that children learn the technical aspects of written language as they engage with meaningful social activities, and *how* this happens, how can they make use of the opportunities provided ?
(Bloch & Prinsloo 1999)

It appears in some cases that this lack of clarity has resulted in the development of a belief among a sizeable number of teachers that questions the necessity for teaching reading and writing to young children at all. The concern has been taken up by the Gauteng Education Department, where, a large-scale reading initiative is taking place in the Foundation Phase to 'boost' reading

...the initiative is aimed at reversing what appears to be a perception amongst teachers trained in outcomes based education that teaching reading is not important.
(Chisholm & Petersen 1999:9)

Because of an unfortunate disjunction between the processes of curriculum policy and language policy development, there is no smooth conceptual integration of the two crucial domains of curriculum and language. This means that the complex and critical issue of choice of language/s for initial and future literacy learning is often sidelined and reactionary decisions detrimental to learning are made.⁹ This is, of course, particularly critical in the early years, where children's grasp of reading and writing in their home language or in any other language (and their entire initiative for learning) continues to be debilitated. An urgent responsibility now rests with national and provincial education departments to prioritise the provision to families and schools of the information, discussion forums and in-service training required for the taking of enlightened language-related initiatives for young children's education.

International trends in early literacy

Dan Wagner has stated that there is very little research in the 'Third World' on literacy learning in early childhood (Wagner 1992:18)

The same situation pertains to South Africa:

Although it is well known that in South Africa many primary age school children do not learn how to read and write, and indeed that this has been the

case since before the inception of Bantu Education, *the issue of how young children acquire literacy has largely been ignored.*
(Bloch 1994)

The issue was indeed taken up during the post-apartheid language planning and policy development process as is illustrated in The Language Plan Task Group's report

In the light of the fact that there are very few or no guidelines as far as language policy for ECD at the preschool level is concerned, it is recommended that urgent attention be given to research on language - in - education policy for the early years and on the new approaches to early or emergent literacy. This should include research into biliteracy, eg what are the best ways in which to introduce literacy in an additional language or in two languages simultaneously in various contexts?
(Langtag 1996:130)

Internationally over the past three decades, there have been significant shifts in understandings about literacy learning generally¹⁰ and in early childhood which have relevance for (South) African contexts. From a range of disciplines, insights have moved thinking away from seeing literacy primarily as a formal and autonomous set of skills to be taught separately in a particular order, with a heavy focus on phonics. The move to understanding very young children as competent constructors of meaning in a social world (Vygotsky 1978, Ferreiro & Teberosky 1979,) included acknowledgement that the learning strategies used by young children to become literate in literate environments have great similarities to the ways that they are equipped to actively acquire speech, in a community of speakers.(Smith 1979, Holdaway 1979). Studies showed how over-concentration on the mechanical aspects of writing at the expense of meaningful expression and communication was unnecessary because the physical aspects of writing can be taught efficiently as young children engage purposefully in authentic activities which include the use of writing. Teacher training and classroom practice have been deeply affected by the related heated debates, which have often tended to polarise into arguments about “phonics” versus “whole language”¹¹.

As educators and researchers have grappled with issues of multilingualism and multiculturalism, further insights have emerged around the issue of class and cultural variations in approaching written language (Brice-Heath 1983, Michaels 1991) The crux of these insights is that it is the discontinuity between home and schools that contributes significantly to many working class children's failure at school. ‘Mainstream’ adults and children have fewer problems because their expectations of print often closely match those of the school, so that from their earliest days young middle-class children are socialised comfortably into a certain type of literate environment in which the uses of literacy form an integral part of their lives. This is an important issue for education in South Africa, where a gulf often exists between different tributary cultures (Alexander 1995:214) and teachers often represent a different cultural orientation to that of their pupils.

Another important issue for our contexts is understanding literacy uses within multilingual and multicultural families. Attention to this area in America (Taylor 1983, Auerbach 1991) gave rise to family literacy programmes which take into account the interconnectedness of literacy practices among family members. In the United Kingdom, research into biliteracy among bilingual communities has developed insights about the impact of differences in home and school practices on young children's literacy learning in more than one language, and the importance for teachers to take into account and make connections between children's home and school lives (Gregory 1996). Such work has also helped to problematise the once widely held view that literacy learning in more than one language should take place in one language at a time. A thread that runs through all of this work I refer to above is the recognition that the role of family members in young children's learning is significant.

The South African situation

As South Africans consider where we fit into the international literacy picture, it is significant to realise that the ways that young children have been introduced to literacy learning in school here, have followed almost verbatim, approaches developed in Britain and the USA some three to four decades ago. Consider this paragraph from a British book on reading pedagogy, whose ideas have largely now been superseded in that country by a more holistic view of literacy:

A good reading programme consists of four parts: the development of readiness, the acquisition of a sight vocabulary of words which occur frequently in children's reading and spoken vocabulary; the development of independent reading by the use of phonic analysis and synthesis and other word recognition techniques; the development of speedy, relaxed silent reading for content, ideas and pleasure.

(Tansley cited in Minns 1967:28)

Although there are teacher educators and teachers who practice more up to date teaching approaches, particularly in the ex 'white' schools, this kind of thinking still continues in South Africa (and elsewhere in Africa) to dominate many teachers' classroom strategies (Pluddemann et al. 1998, Bloch 1999). While many factors contribute to the effectiveness of any approach to teaching, under conditions as unfavorable as ours, it is not too harsh to say that this approach has been highly detrimental to most young children's literacy learning.

In particular, the interpretation of the concept of 'readiness' has had an unproductive impact on helping young children begin to make sense of written language. Readiness programmes have contributed to ripping teachers and young children further from their intuitive knowledge about language - both oral and written, by accentuating isolated skills development. It has only ever been a vaguely reasonable notion for (usually white, middle class) families whose home and community lives provided children, as if by osmosis, with the love of reading and concepts about print which were the actual necessary precursors to the methods of teaching provided in schools (Bloch 1994, 1997). In fact, it is not the 'school readiness' programmes with their array of decontextualised skills exercises that get children reading and writing, but rather the total of experiences

with the written word which are integral to the home lives of 'literate' families, so that to varying extents, these children have developed a strong disposition towards literacy by the time they start school. They see themselves as potential readers and writers. A major contributing factor to this confidence is the abundance of mother tongue stories which children have continuously had read to them¹².

The fact that most children in Africa come from predominantly oral and multilingual backgrounds should have implications for the way that literacy gets approached in schools. Yet colonialism and apartheid have led to an in-practice rejection of the power of the oral tradition for early childhood literacy learning situations (as well as others) in South Africa¹³.

Kieran Egan discusses the importance of orality for helping to solve problems in the North. He suggests that there is a need to learn from the techniques arising out of orality, when people do not use literacy in their lives

Orality entails a set of powerful and effective mental strategies, some of which, to our cost, have become attenuated and undervalued in many aspects of our Western culture and educational systems.
(Egan 1997:181)

He describes how the task of oral poets was to draw the audience into an alternative reality. The techniques were used to 'enchant' the hearers, "drawing them into the world of the story". (Egan 1997:184)

The usefulness of this for today lies in thinking of how to enable children to live in a 'literate-and-oral culture'. (Egan 1997:181)

Ngugi and others raised the primacy of the oral tradition for Africa, describing it as alive and 'rich and many-sided', and how it would be the case that

by discovering and proclaiming loyalty to indigenous values, the new literature would on the one hand be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots
(Ngugi 1981:95)

At the same time, Pierre Alexandre warns that knowledge of oral literature in Africa is in rapid decline, citing one of the causes as being the competition to traditional education of 'modern' schools:

Some oral literature, even certain works dating from only one generation ago, are no longer well understood by the young, because the language used is obsolete.
(Alexandre 1972:117)

Yet it is this oral tradition still essentially part of African societies, that can and should provide one of the most powerful levers into literacy for all our children.

Firming up the foundations

There are various ‘roots’ of literacy (Goodman 1986:2), and depending on the practices which involve using written language that are demonstrated to and shared with children, they begin, in an apprenticeship-like way, to make meanings from these for their own purposes. I have suggested that a fundamentally powerful root not only for literacy, but for all learning, is that of story or narrative. In South Africa, the potential of literature (story, rhymes and wordplay) for enhancing language learning was eroded by apartheid curricula. Teachers were trained to transmit no more than the most mechanical and basic of skills in the early years - and the continuous pull towards English somehow negated the need for anything but the most cursory creative exploration of mother tongue literature. The discussion about literacy in early childhood in Africa needs to revive, very consciously, the foundations of orality, and see literacy in many languages as growing out of it, rather than displacing it.

The richness and power of orality for early childhood comes across very strongly in Ngugi’s description of his experiences of stories in Gikuyu which taught him and other youngsters

to value words for their meanings and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through non-sensical but musically arranged words

(Ngugi wa Thiongo 1981:11)

It is true that rhymes, chants and wordplays *are* used in South African ECD classrooms. Often though, very limited mainly English or ‘translated from English’ selections are taught (Zanele Mbude April 1999, work in progress, personal communication). Moreover, many Foundation Phase teachers use rhymes and chants as time fillers or as mechanisms to calm children down and to regain control over their overcrowded classrooms. (Bloch 1999, Pluddeman et al.1998)

Yet, rhymes and wordplays have the potential to shift young children’s understandings about language to include its written form *and* to help them to develop phonological awareness. This is not harnessed and used -we see evidence of it in the paucity of the genre in South African publishing for children in any language, even English.

We neglect stories to our cost:

The story form has been one of the most powerful and effective sustainers of cultures across the world. It’s great power lies in its ability to fix affective responses to the messages it contains and to bind what is to be remembered with emotional associations. Our emotions, to put it simply, are most effective at sustaining, and helping in the recall of memories of events (Egan 1987:188).

A propensity for engaging in these fundamental ways is inherent in every child. Memory is in narrative form - we record our lives in stories to ourselves and to others. Children learn to do this, without help, at a very early age. The "speech for oneself" referred to by James Britton is in narrative form:

It may well be that the stage at which narrative speech becomes possible to a child is the point at which memory in this sense begins.
(Britton1970:71)

Engaging with written language appropriately, too, for young children involves nurturing the emotions. Margaret Meek describes an important step in reading as the discovery of "the tune on the page". Even before children can read what is written, they take up this 'tune' - and make the book 'talk'. Meek considers the part played by the emotions to be crucial to the development of this kind of knowledge, and says that 'first time' encounters with words are unique and powerful moments for young children because of the feelings that are an integral part of these encounters. When young children have stories read to them, these act as what she calls first time feelings, which when read over and over again can be experienced many times (Meek 1985 :44). There is an issue which lurks persistently in the shadows of every educational discussion, one which I have not yet raised directly, but which becomes dominating when the role of the emotions is highlighted – i.e., the fact of overcrowded classrooms. Under these all too prevalent circumstances, teachers are not able to give children the kind of attention that meets their emotional (let alone any other) needs, and unless this form of child (and adult) abuse is addressed, all talk about equity in education is empty.

In South African school situations, when stories are read to young children, apart from the fact that the books themselves are often not appropriate, they are frequently used in a narrow way to transmit and check on factual information¹⁴.

Ngugi's statement about the importance of literature in the Kenyan context is poignantly relevant for all of us who have watched the bright and hopeful eyes of young children dull as they dutifully perform their daily reading and writing exercises:

The aim is to instill in the student a critical love of literature, which will both encourage its pursuit in later years and ensure that such a pursuit is engaged in fruitfully...
(Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 1981:99)

Initiatives in progress

While the big picture remains bleak and communication channels are not good, there is no doubt that there are many initiatives underway which are inching towards more positive outcomes for early learning. These should and do occur in home, community, and school settings. I now outline just a few such initiatives taking up the challenge to stimulate this 'critical love of literature' which Ngugi refers to. The first two concentrate on reading, the latter ones on writing. In Soweto, there is in existence one of the few family literacy initiatives which connect the

mutual literacy learning among family members in a home-school partnership, the Parents/Schools Learning Clubs (PASLC) where the development of a culture of reading in African homes is a priority. Mashishi explains that

Parents assume that the reading habit is an activity that should be inculcated by teachers at school. In order to change this perception, PASLC engages parents in activities that will help them to introduce the habit of reading to the children in such a manner that the children see reading as a worthwhile activity in its own right. In short, we want parents to reflect their high regard for reading by incorporating it into the rules and routines of the home. (Mashishi 1996:122)

In the Western Cape, Biblionef is a branch of an international mother tongue book donation agency that is providing mainly story but also reference books to schools in the home languages of the children. Their mission is simple – to promote a love of reading in the home languages of children. There are few conditions for receiving books, one is that the school must not be close to a library with appropriate books, and the other is that the teachers and children read the books regularly. In our meagerly resourced schools and communities, such a clearly defined initiative has potential not only to provide resources, but also to nudge our own South African writers into gathering momentum with the essential project of creating literature for our little children in African languages, as well as in English¹⁵. There is vast potential for the development of a vibrant mother tongue and bilingual literature industry. Translations would ensure young children access to the stories from various contributing tributary cultures, and would also help to define a common South African identity, giving substance to a suggestion made many years ago by Neville Alexander :

It is completely possible that all children in South Africa, regardless of language group, learn a common core of stories, songs, myths, fables, nursery rhymes etc., drawn from the three main cultural traditions that constitute our country, i.e. the traditions of Africa, Europe and Asia. The basic material of this core treasury will be internalised by all our children through different language media... (Alexander 1990: 137,138).

Bilingual texts would assist with the effective learning of both African languages and English for all:

In multilingual contexts, it can be argued that bilingual stories are an essential component of any curriculum which aims to counter prejudice such as linguisticism or racism. Apart from the value of growing familiar with the tunes and rhythms of stories in more than one language, the realisation that any language can be used to convey the same content provides children with hard-to-refute evidence for the equality of languages. (Bloch & Edwards 1999)

To expect children to become writers without allowing them to write for any real reason is futile. Young children will battle against and overcome as yet weak physical competency to express what they will when they understand that writing is useful for *their* purposes. In the Western Cape Province of South Africa, a literacy pilot project called the Concentrated Language Encounter (CLE) attempts to shift from a teacher centred to a child centred approach. Briefly, a process is followed which begins with the teacher reading a story, the children retelling the story in their own words, the teacher copying their words onto a chart, the children copying these down, then writing their own story based on these words, and finally reading the story for themselves (Singh, P. "Harnessing passion to teach literacy" Cape Times Monday March 15, 1999) . The 'package' follows 'whole language' principles, and is significant, because it helps teachers to understand that children have great initiative and are highly capable and that previous methods have restricted rather than nurtured these qualities. In another small biliteracy project in one multilingual Cape Town school, Grade 2 children are in their second year of learning to read and write in both Xhosa and English simultaneously. The emphasis is on their mother tongue, and the intention with writing is that the children be enabled to rediscover their creativity and initiative to write for real reasons, with communication and self-expression at the heart of the process (Bloch 1998).

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that 'literate' nations produce, promote and use constantly vast quantities of mother tongue literature for young children. There are no magic formulae – children learn to read by reading, and most successful readers read voraciously, and are exposed to many books.

I have argued that in South Africa, we have added to the problems of material poverty the complexity of using ways of teaching reading which shun the use of literature. For most children, a storybook is the last thing they expect to encounter in their daily activities. And many teachers do not connect close encounters with stories and books as being part of the process of becoming literate.

Another critical area to consider is the nature of the environments that young children explore. If these continue to be ones, which have little or no print in use in their home languages, it will remain a hard task to convince them that writing (and reading) is of value to their lives. Why should young African language speakers not have the explanatory and related print on the products which they consume in their mother tongue? Should the business community pay such a courtesy to them, one of the consequences will be an eye-opening awareness in adults about the (literacy learning) capabilities of young children, not to mention the collaborative gains in literacy for adults and children. Moreover, such moves will naturally, also help English and Afrikaans speakers to become bi- and tri-literate.

Almost 10 years ago, in his concluding remarks made in an address on the future of literacy in South Africa, Neville Alexander warned of the

.... ever-present threat of the growing monster of child-illiteracy because of the ravages of "Bantu" and "Coloured" education.

(Alexander 1990:151)

He suggested that

This is clearly an important area. After all, if illiteracy can be confronted in childhood, there will be less, or even no need for adult literacy programmes.
(Alexander 1990:151)

The literacy education process in South Africa is struggling to break free from a debilitating and disheartening remedial trap. One of the ways out is to stimulate a desire to read and write in the foundational years. No measure, however correct, can succeed alone. The examples of the South African publishers who have published literature intended for young children in African languages which does not sell shows this. So too does the point made by Kurt Komarek that achieving the ability to read in mother tongue is futile if there is little or nothing to read in that language:

Mother tongue education and an environment of literacy in the mother tongue are reciprocal conditions, indissolubly bound to each other, and only make sense together. They are two sides of one and the same coin
Komarek 1997:29.

There is a need for persistent coherent plans of action from many sides. – ECD provisioning, language policy and curriculum implementation, pre-service and inservice teacher education, African language literature development as well as massive translation projects. And the success of such measures requires a government which is committed to nurturing, in practice, both the lives of young children and the languages they use.

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NOTES

¹ What is meant by the early years of childhood is variously defined and described in different situations. In South Africa, since 1994, Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a term used to describe the phase from birth to 9 years of age, implying that this phase is a continuous process. ECD spans non - formal (before school) and formal provision, and in effect reaches only about 11 % of the total under-six population of children (World Bank 1994:6). For economic reasons, in the African context, mixed age and particularly 'underage' children are often in early primary school 'formal' classes, making it necessary to discuss what is meant by appropriate provision, irrespective of the Grade.

² I find Olsen's considerations useful to think about literacy "as the ability to understand and use the intellectual resources provided by some three thousand years of diverse literate traditions...", and that it involves "a diverse set of procedures for acting on and thinking about language, the world and ourselves" (Olsen 1994:17,18)

³ Chukovsky was a children's writer and poet in the Soviet Union, who, just after the turn of the century argued against the 'realists' of the time who feared that fantasy would harm the minds of the future citizens.

⁴ Parents and teachers who have time to listen, will have examples of this – I have a child who, at the age of 4, was 'oppositing' me at the table each morning, and who still 'comps' (on my computer) whenever he can.

⁵ 'School readiness' is a term which describes the basically deficit notion that certain skills and concepts, (including 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' skills) need to be put in place, before the job of teaching reading and writing can begin. It was seized upon and developed in South Africa into "Bridging programmes" as a way of compensating for the 'environmental deprivation' of young black children on school entry (DET 1987, Taylor 1989, Bloch 1994)

⁶ While the value of appropriate pre-schooling is indisputable, lying behind this 'school readiness' idea is the perception of literacy-learning as a set of 'formal' skills, to be taught in primary schools only once the prerequisite 'informal' skills have been set in place through play and other appropriate pre-school activities. In the little pre-school provision that exists, interpretation of this notion often had the unfortunate effect of keeping knowledge of and encounters with literacy *away* from young children, as in practice a contradictory compromise has existed between child-centred play-based,

active learning ideals and the need to deliver on the readiness requirements of primary schools.

⁷ Under Apartheid, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages, and the African languages were deliberately underdeveloped and language varieties which belong to the same language clusters were kept separate from each other.

⁸ The language policy applies to the government's new Reception year (Grade R) for all 5 and 6 year olds, although in effect 'financial constraints' mean that no more than a small national pilot has been introduced thus far.

As the first year of the Foundation phase (Grades R, 1, 2, 3) of the new curricular structure, the Reception year now falls within the ambit of the new curriculum, (Curriculum 2005) and this provides some opportunities for fresh thoughts about the nature of learning.

⁹ Many children with African home languages in multilingual classrooms are learning in English, a 2nd or 3rd language. Often this means that no attention whatsoever is paid to their mother tongues, and the resultant learning problems emerge in Departmental reports and in the theoretical literature as deficiencies in the children, rather than as systemic issues.

¹⁰ The 'New Literacy Studies' which brings together the work of many scholars working across disciplines, challenges the 'autonomous' model of literacy (Street 1993), by concentrating on literacy as social practice.

¹¹ In the USA, the 'whole language' movement focussed on the interrelationship of the different aspects of language, emphasising the similarities between oral and written language and the centrality of meaning-making and communication in the literacy learning process. In Britain, New Zealand and Australia, 'emergent literacy' came to describe becoming literate as a process which emerges as reading and writing are experienced by the individual in socially significant and personally meaningful ways. Reading and writing were seen as interrelated, developing together in everyday play and other activities as children come to comprehend the power of written language for their lives.

¹² Much research documents the place of story reading as a 'way into' literacy. This includes attention being paid to the value of the ritual of bedtime stories in some communities (Brice Heath). In Britain, Gordon Wells' (1987) research into young children's language and literacy development concludes without doubt that of all the activities which contribute to becoming literate, listening to stories is the most crucial to later competence. It was also found in his study, that the single most important factor accounting for differences between children's later educational development, was how much they understood about literacy on entry into school.

¹³ I am not here denying the fact that 'story time' takes place in early childhood programmes, when there are reading resources or adults who love to tell stories and that this practice is seen to varying degrees to be important. I am making a more fundamental point about 1) the kinds of cognitive skills/knowledge exercises which dominate views about what counts as real learning; 2) the dearth of original oral material from African language communities which is used, valued and developed in early childhood curricula - be they rhymes, riddles, wordplay, songs or stories and the fact that such material does not become the base for young children's first reading experiences.

¹⁴ Consider this extract from an observation (Bloch 1994) in a Cape Town creche, where the teacher has finished reading Cinderella to a large group of 4 and 5 year old children.

T : Can I ask you some questions about the story now?

(She asks one question for each page of the book, starting at the beginning)

What was the name of the story?

Children (Ch) chant: Cinderella.

T : Good. Was Cinderella happy or sad she wasn't going to the party? She was....

Ch: sad.

T : Good.

The questions and answers continue, for example, other questions by T L are:

What colour was the horse, how many stepsisters were there in this story?, what happened at 12 o' clock?

Each child has a turn to answer, and if s/he gets it wrong, T says: "No, who wants to try and answer again?"

The last question is "What is married?"

Child 1: When a lady and man put on a ring.

T : Yes, they give each other a ring, that's right.

Child 2: "And they become a mommy and a daddy.

T : Yes later they become a mommy and daddy, that's a bit complicated, you can go outside to play now children.

Child 3: "My mommy isn't married.

But the session has already ended.

¹⁵ With only a few exceptions, the books which Biblionef have managed to obtain, are translations from English.