

**Enabling effective literacy learning in
multilingual South African early
childhood classrooms**

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Abstract

This paper addresses the fact that large numbers of schoolchildren in South Africa do not learn to read and write in either the mother tongue or any 'other tongue', let alone in two languages. A narrow skills-based approach to teaching reading and writing is identified as one of the main stumbling blocks. The author discusses a number of interrelated issues that need to be considered in the quest to make literacy and biliteracy learning meaningful and effective. The approach in this paper gives substance to the more integrated view of literacy in the Revised National Curriculum Statement. In particular, the notion of emergent writing, still an alien concept for many educators, is highlighted. Examples of young children's writing make this a teacher-friendly text.

Opsomming

Hierdie referaat spreek die feit aan dat baie Suid-Afrikaanse skoolkinders nie leer om te lees of skryf nie, nóg in hul moedertaal nóg in enige ander taal, om nie eens van geletterdheid in twee tale te praat nie. 'n Nieu vaardigheids-gebaseerde benadering tot lees en skryf word as een van die grootste struikelblokke geïdentifiseer. Die skrywer bespreek 'n aantal verwante vrae in die strewende na 'n betekenisvolle en doeltreffende benadering tot geletterdheid en dubbelgeletterdheid. Die benadering in hierdie referaat gee inhoud aan die meer geïntegreerde siening van geletterdheid in die Hersiene Nasionale Kurrikulumverklaring. Wat spesifiek uitgelig word is die idee van ontwikkelende skryfwerk, wat maar vir baie leerkragte 'n vreemde konsep bly. Voorbeelde van jong kinders se skryfwerk maak van hierdie referaat 'n onderwyser-vriendelike teks.

Isishwankathelo

Eli phepha lithetha ngomba wabantwana besikolo abaninzi abangafundi kakuhle ukufunda nokubhala ngolwimi lwabo okanye 'nangaluphi na olunye ulwimi', ingakumbi ngeelwimi ezimbini. Indlela egqale ekufundiseni izakhono zokwakhiwa kwamagama nokwakhiwa kolwimi njengendlela yokufundisa ukufunda nokubhala iphawulwe njengeyona ndlela engunobangela wokungafundiswa kakuhle kokufunda nokubhala. Umbhali ushukuxa imiba echaphazelanayo ekufuneka ithathelwe ingqalelo kwiphulo lokwenza ubuchule bokufunda nokubhala ngolwimi olunye okanye nangeelwimi ezimbini bufundwe ngendlela esebenzayo nenika intsingiselo ebantwaneni. Indlela yokufundisa ukufunda nokubhala elandelwa leli phepha yenza umbono wokudibanisa iindlela ngeendlela zokufundisa ubuchule bokufunda nokubhala indlela ephathekayo ekwiNkcazelo yeKharithyulamu yeSizwe eHlaziyiweyo

(RNCS). Lixile nangakumbi kumba wokufundisa abantwana abaselula kakhulu ukubhala nokunakana imibhalo yabo ekhangeleka ngathi ngamarhoqololo, nto leyo engekaziwa ngootitshala abaninzi. Imizekelo yemibhalo yabantwana yenza ukuba eli phepha libe nokufundeka lula kootitshala.

Other publications in the Occasional Papers series:

1. Bloch, C. 1998. 'Literacy in the Early Years: Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Early Childhood Classrooms'.
2. Plüddemann, P., Mati, X. and Mahlalela-Thusi, B. 2000. 'Problems and Possibilities in Multilingual Classrooms in the Western Cape'.
3. Alexander, N. 2000. 'English Unassailable but Unattainable: The Dilemma of Language Policy in South African education'.
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5. Vesely, R. 2000. 'Multilingual Environments for Survival: The Impact of English on Xhosa-Speaking Students in Cape Town'.
6. Heugh, K. 2000. 'The Case Against Bilingual and Multilingual education in South Africa'.
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14. Giliomee, H. 2003. 'The Rise and Possible Demise of Afrikaans as a Public Language'.
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19. Obanya, P. 2004. 'Learning In, With, and From the First Language'.
20. Alexander, N. 2004. 'Implications of *Brown v Board of Education*: a Post-apartheid South African Perspective'.
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22. Beckett, T. 2005. 'Language and Dementia in Bilingual Settings: Evidence from two case studies'.

A Paradigm Shift in Literacy Understandings

Large numbers of children in South Africa do not learn to read and write in either the mother tongue or any 'other tongue'¹. Foundation phase, senior primary and high school teachers identify children's 'lack of literacy', especially a reluctance or inability to write, as a major problem. Apart from the many well-known issues that have confounded education under apartheid, the issue of pedagogical approach to teaching literacy in the early years has been identified as an important contributing factor (Bloch 1994). A reading of the Department of Education's Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R–9 (Schools) Policy (DoE 2002) suggests that the DoE is attending to this. However, for change to happen in the classroom, teachers have to engage with and understand a different paradigm around early literacy teaching and learning from the one which they are presently comfortable with.

Teacher educators and classroom teachers need to recognise that the paradigm (or way of seeing) we hold about a phenomenon determines or influences the way we look at it. The paradigm influences the boundaries we fix around what we expect to see, what questions we should ask and what answers we should accept – and these again determine what we see (Edelsky 1986). For the phenomenon of early literacy learning, the paradigm we are *moving away* from involves viewing literacy as being made up of sets of technical skills, separate from any real context. Because it is seen like this, the emphasis is on the teaching and practice of skills. The skills thought to be needed for reading and writing are taught to children, from simple to complex and from part to whole with an emphasis on phonics, letter formation, and neat handwriting. Many teachers believe that children can only use writing and reading for meaningful and real reasons once they know these 'basics'.

The 'new' paradigm suggests that we need to see literacy as being part of people's daily social and cultural practices. What people *do* with reading and writing is significant. Teaching reading and writing involves children in doing meaningful activities with written language from the start. These help them understand what reading and writing is used for as well as how to use it. Technical skills are learnt *at the same time* as they actually learn to read by reading and to write by writing (Smith 1979), with a focus on making meaning.

Many teacher educators and teachers ask, 'WHY do we need to do this?' This is fairly easy to answer: Teaching skills on their own often doesn't work, particularly with learners from poor communities who see very little print displayed and used in their language/s and where families have few reasons to read and write in daily life. Children come to school having had few opportunities to develop important understandings and

insights about print and the power and point of reading and writing. Faced in class with repetitive skills drill like letter sound relationships and letter formation, many children are not able to make the associations necessary to actually start reading and writing. It's a bit like learning to ride a bicycle: being taught what all the parts of a bicycle are, and how to move your legs in pedalling motion etc. will not actually get you riding. Nor will you have any idea what a bicycle is for or what part pedalling plays unless you have seen people riding a bicycle or have been on the back of a bicycle and decide for yourself that riding a bicycle is a useful thing to do.

Another question which has two related parts, follows: 'HOW can children actually learn to read and write when they haven't yet *got* the skills and WHAT is my role as a teacher in this process if it is not to teach the skills first?' To find their solutions, educators need opportunities to examine their own beliefs about learning as well as to explore some of the significant research and pedagogical insights in the literature on early literacy learning. They also need to observe and experience 'good practice' to realise that skills can be taught in meaningful contexts and holistic ways. Today, I will try and provide some information that will help this process. Although what I say applies to literacy learning generally, I will orient my comments and suggestions towards early writing in particular. This is because what is possible with young children's writing development is at present not widely known. I will consider five interrelated areas, which frame the domain of early literacy:

- language medium
- views about literacy
- environments for literacy
- how young children learn
- classroom strategies

Language Medium

In the Revised National Curriculum Statement document it is stated that '[t]he classroom should be a place that celebrates, respects and builds on what learners know' (DoE 2002: 9).

What young children know when they begin school has, in most cases, been learned in their mother tongue(s). This is the actual starting point for all learning but in multilingual settings this fact is often ignored and hindered when the language of teaching is different from the language that a child knows. This is the case here despite the fact that we have had a school language policy that promotes additive bilingualism approaches since 1997. Wherever resources and conditions

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Endnotes

1. This paper is an edited version of a keynote address prepared for the English Language Education Trust (ELET) and Provincial Curriculum Unit (KZN DEC) conference, 'Teaching Reading Materials Development in the Foundation Phase', 30 September – 1 October 2002, St Mary's School, Kloof, Durban.
2. While a language of teaching has to be chosen in multilingual classrooms, where children speak more than two (or three) different languages, there are still valuable ways to support and sustain the various home languages.

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make it possible², it is preferable that learning begins in the mother tongue. English or any other language can be learned as well and can eventually be used as a complementary medium for some teaching. At the same time we know that context, language medium and pedagogy need to be considered together. Under certain circumstances, for instance, it is appropriate to teach literacy simultaneously in both mother tongue and English (see, for example, Bloch with Nkence 2000, Bloch and Alexander 2003).

Views about Literacy

I have already referred above to the following two major theoretical approaches to literacy. The first has systemically gripped school and adult literacy especially in the post-colonial South, while the second has emerged as a contesting multidisciplinary movement:

1. Literacy is made up of sets of autonomous skills, unconnected to any particular context. Use it after you have learned the skills. 'Getting/being given' literacy will change your life. (This view still dominates many teaching methods.)
2. Literacy is social and cultural in nature and forms part of people's daily life practices (Street 1995, Brice Heath 1983, Barton 1994). People have (multiple) literacies rather than a single literacy. Skills are learned as you use them to do something personally meaningful. The focus is on what people do with literacy.

A third complementary theoretical stance exists for early literacy. It arises out of interdisciplinary research into young children's learning and early language/literacy development:

3. Emergent reading and writing /whole language (Holdaway 1979, Goodman 1986). Young children construct their own literacy in personally useful and meaningful ways as part of developmental and social learning processes.

The influence of 2) and 3) are reflected in the Revised National Curriculum Statement document. For instance, teachers are expected to be:

... moving away from the 'reading readiness approach' which held that children were not ready to start learning to read and write until they were able to perform sub-skills such as auditory discrimination and visual discrimination, and had developed their fine and large motor skills to a certain level (DoE 2002: 9).

Most importantly, skills:

... do not have to be in place before a learner can start to read and write and can and should be developed during children's early learning experiences. (ibid)

And language development:

... involves a gradual process of improving. Mistakes are a natural part of this process and with support learners language will become increasingly more accurate as they have more opportunities to use their language, knowledge and skills. (ibid)

In the forthcoming pages I offer some examples of some children's writing to provide practical application for such a curriculum.

How Young Children Learn

Research into the nature of oral language learning of babies and young children has influenced the path of research into early literacy. The (active) way that babies learn language provides us with a model of effective language learning. We recognise that babies learn oral language (speaking and listening) when they are exposed to and interact with significant people using the language (or languages, in case of bilingual situations) as they go about their daily activities. Motivation is high because they use language to get things done as they are learning it and emotional satisfaction (affect) is tied intimately into the experience. Don Holdaway says:

There is no more successful example of language learning than that provided by mastery of native language during infancy. Since time before history, regardless of race, class or educational background, families have succeeded in transmitting their native language to their infants – or their infants have succeeded in learning the language within a natural environment of language use. (Holdaway 1979:19)

Attention to very young children who have learned to read and write before school has led to realisations that under particular conditions, the ways that young children learn oral and written language tends to be more similar than different (Meek 1982, Bissex 1980). The different aspects of language (talking, listening, reading, writing, translating and interpreting in multilingual settings) are interrelated and learned together. Recognition is given to the importance for literacy learning of young children's symbolic play and the way that children learn through play and imagination generally. When children learn oral and written language by playing with language they develop phonological awareness, an important literacy learning skill (Goswami and Bryant 1990). Telling and listening to stories is valued and promoted (Chukovsky 1963, Vygotsky 1978) because it exposes children to a rich and complex form of language (Wells 1985, Gussin Paley 1990). Gordon Wells describes how,

[b]ecause stories are self-contextualising, sustained symbolic representations of possible worlds, they provide the child with the opportunity to

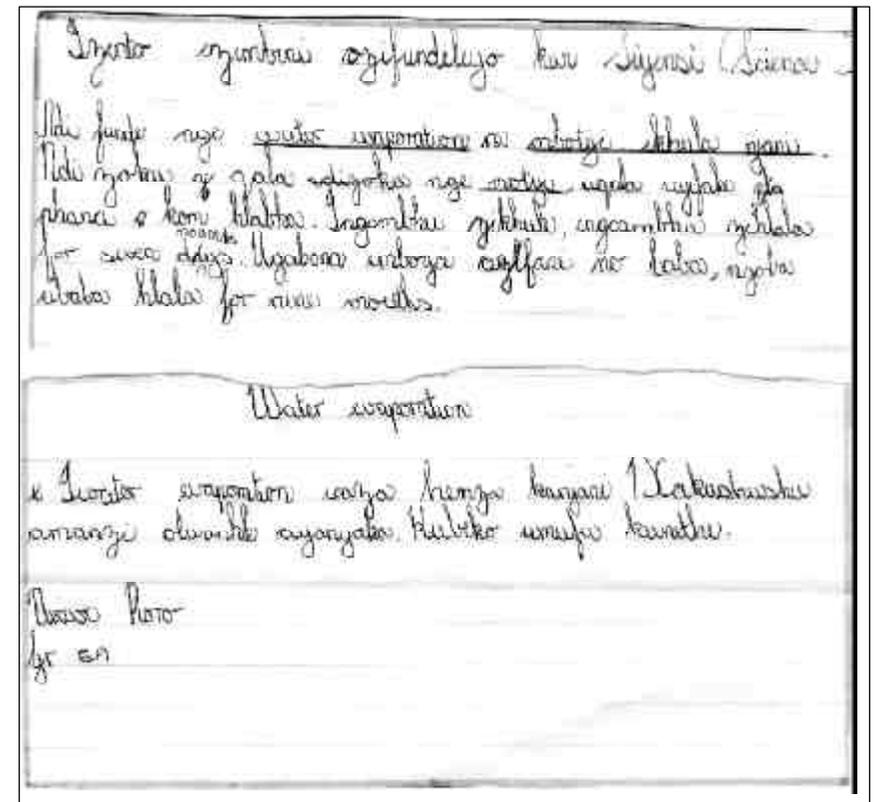


Fig. 12: Reflecting about science in isiXhosa

Translation: Two things I've learned in Science.

I learned about water evaporation and how to grow beans. I will start with beans. First you put them under the ground. The roots grow, they stay for seven months. You see, beans are not like babies, because babies grow for nine months.

Water evaporation.

When it is hot, the sea rises. Then the clouds are formed and it rains.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we join Aviwe in a Grade 5 reflective task where she writes in Xhosa (Fig. 12). In this task, part of a Xhosa literacy lesson, she was asked to reflect on Science. Although she had never been taught Science through the medium of isiXhosa, she had learned how to read and write the language in a highly communicative way. She thus had the confidence to invent the spelling for 'Siyensi' using her pronunciation and phonics knowledge; to switch to English when she needed to e.g. 'for seven months', 'Water Evaporation'); to segment words according to how she spoke e.g. 'Ndi zoku qala' should be 'Ndizo kuqala'. She also had the initiative to include an interesting (if inaccurate!) comparison between the gestation period for beans and babies.

All of these are the strategies of a good literacy learner. Moreover, they are the strategies of a child who is becoming literate in both her mother tongue and her additional language – powerful and highly desirable achievements in a multilingual society like South Africa.

learn some of the essential characteristics of written language. Reading and discussing stories helps the child to cope with the more disembedded uses of spoken language that the school curriculum demands. (Wells 1985: 253)

In summary, for young talkers to become readers and writers, they need to:

- be in an environment where the people around them interact with them positively using written language that they understand
- become aware of the world of print
- be encouraged to behave like readers and writers
- realise that print makes sense and is meaningful, just as talking makes sense and is meaningful
- be involved in creative and rich language play/use (stories, songs, rhymes, wordplay, conversations, critical reasoning)
- understand that what they say and what they think can be written down and read by themselves and others
- want to do it for themselves
- be willing to make mistakes and take risks.

The following spontaneous writing attempt of Georgie aged four, illustrate how, when given opportunities to engage meaningfully with oral and written language, young children apply what they know to construct new knowledge and to learn skills. From having had many regular, enjoyable encounters with print, including comprehensible stories shared with/read to her, Georgie knew about story-print conventions and story language (the stories she has heard have a beginning a middle, and an end, a book has a cover, a title, pages, pictures and words to 'go' with the pictures, punctuation etc.). She knew English grammar and letter-sound correspondences from (among other things) being exposed to, taking notice of and making sense of a rich and varied version of story language and by making connections between the visual and aural clues. She was prepared to risk making mistakes by inventing her own spellings (see Bissex 1980), applying her phonic knowledge. Her small-motor co-ordination (drawing, letter formation) was developing through practice as she drew and wrote. To all of this, she applied her own worldly concerns, emotional resources and imagination (the story content) to construct her own story (see Bloch 1997, Kress 2000 for further examples of purposeful emergent writing).



Fig. 1: Georgie's story. 'Sinde thought of a doll. So Sinde asked for a doll. Her Mom said yes, said Sinde's Mom. She was very happy. Mosa (Marsha) wanted a dress. But she could not. Jan wished for a new pair of shoes. But she could not. None could have their things. Not except for Sinde. The End.'

In summary, as a strategy to encourage literacy and biliteracy development, interactive writing has the potential to:

- stimulate children's (or adults') initiative to write in one or more languages for themselves
- show children (and adults) the power and satisfaction of communicating through writing
- provide children (and adults) with writing role models
- provide authentic samples of and reasons for reading and writing in any language
- provide opportunities for one-to-one interaction between adult and child
- help to counter the dearth of reading materials in African languages
- improve and expand the adult writer's writing and motivation to write (and read)
- provide an opportunity for each child's voice to be heard and responded to
- contribute to the nurturing and emotional well-being of children, and thus help to motivate learning.

All of Aviwe's writing reflects her pre-occupation with communicating and finding out. She is someone who writes because she has things to say. She is able to do this because she has learned under the guidance of adults who expect that what she writes will be meaningful, but that mistakes will be part of this process. She thus has the confidence to make mistakes and invent her own spellings.

In Fig. 11, Ntombizanele and Aviwe (Grade 6) wrote using both languages. Ntombizanele had the ongoing task to keep the children motivated enough to write in Xhosa – the status of English is such that even in a nurturing environment children become easily tempted to opt for English. This extract shows that Aviwe was 'at home' in both languages: she had the multilingual sensitivity to use Xhosa to answer a question which was posed in that language, she code-switched comfortably – using colloquial Xhosa and a borrowed word. She also assumed (sadly, probably wrongly) that it would be fine to enter a writing competition using both languages!

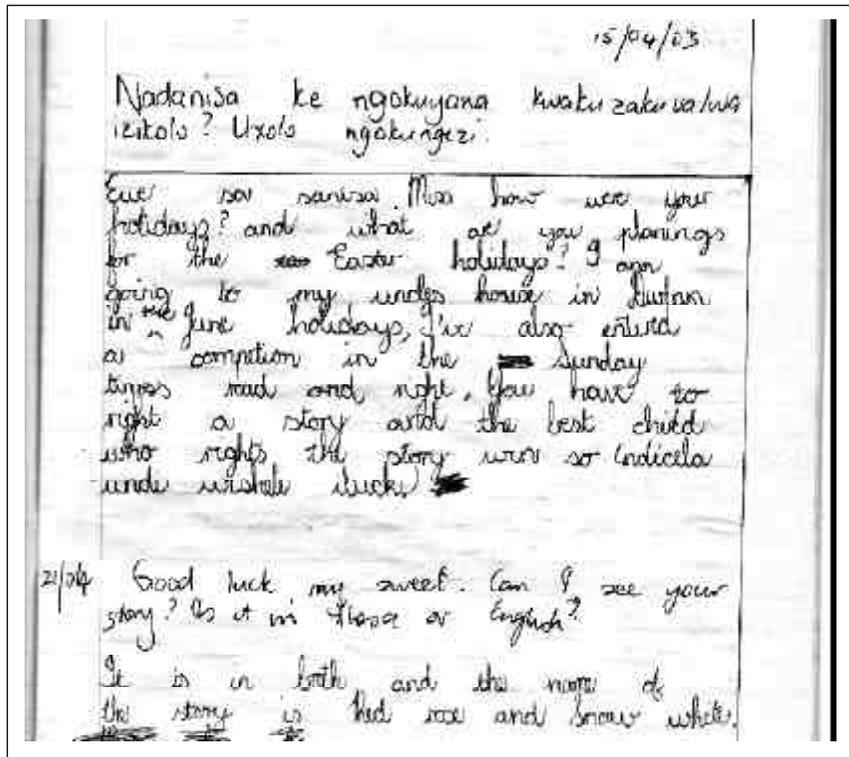


Fig. 11: Did you dance?

Translation: (Teacher) Did you dance the day when school closed? Sorry I didn't come. (Aviwe) Yes we danced. ... (continues in English) ... (please wish me luck).

An example of an older (six years) child's emergent writing provides similar insights. My son, Ivan, already in Grade 1, like many South African children was not given much incentive to write for real reasons at school. Because he understood and accepted the requirement from his teacher for neatness and correct spelling, he usually tended to restrict his writing to copying. School expectations influence home behaviour. Mostly he didn't bother trying to write at all. The example below shows how he became motivated when he had a really good reason to do so: he was very keen to buy something but I would



not listen to verbal persuasion. He then decided to try another way to convince me to allow him to take the money that he had saved out of the bank. He mustered the energy and concentration to invent his own spelling and say what he wanted to say. The 'stars' that he put between words marks the influence of the particular approach to early writing of his primary school.

Fig. 2: Ivan's letter. 'Dear Mommy, why can't I take out as much as I want? Even though I just want a little. About 110 (rand). Why can't I, it is my bank account.'

We can see from both of the above examples that emergent writing can be used to help teachers with assessment and to plan future lessons. When children write spontaneously, they expose and share what they can do with writing – thus providing a clear record of their learning progress.

The following framework suggests that Georgie and Ivan, like many young children growing up in 'literate' communities, would have had various people *modelling* reading and writing behaviour for them. They would have also had plenty of *opportunities to interact* with people around print in ways that encouraged them to behave like readers and writers, with *recognition* being given to the value of what they were trying to do (Hannon 2000). This framework is useful for conceptualising the kind of literacy requirements children need for them to thrive as learners. The implication is that meeting these requirements gives rise to conditions where young children have the kind of input and support that motivates them and makes them feel secure enough to risk trying to work out how to read and write for themselves.

Learners need ...	Literacy experiences		
	Reading	Writing	Oral language
... opportunities			
... recognition			
... interaction			
... model			

Fig. 3: Literacy Framework (Hannon 2000: 56)

Environments for Literacy

The framework in Fig. 3 is designed for relatively affluent settings in the North. It assumes that adequate and appropriate (mother tongue) reading and writing materials and other resources exist. In most parts of South Africa, conditions are very different. As Fig. 4 indicates, very little print exists in most of the African languages, and there is a vast difference in the

Journal Writing

Once the children were enjoying writing, we introduced the idea of writing journals to them. Two teachers wrote to the children – Erica Fellies wrote and responded in English, and Ntombizanele Nkence, in isiXhosa. The two examples of Aviwe's journal writing that follow reflect how interactive writing allows children to express their different concerns and styles of writing when they feel they are able to write to someone they trust and who cares about them.

In the first extract, the exchange between Aviwe, in Grade 3 and her teacher was in English. When asked where she got the idea for her writing, she told her teacher that she liked to read the 'did you knows' on the Chappies bubblegum wrappers.

31 July 2000

Child: Did you know that rain comes from the sea? when the sun is very hot. The sea is sending little drops of water to the sun. And the wind comes and it rains.

Teacher: Wow!

1 August 2000

Child: Did you know that there are seven seas in South Afrika. And in Gauteng there is no beach.

Teacher: I would not like to live where there are no beaches. I love to swim in summer and Cape Town has very beautiful beaches. What else do you know about South Africa?
Love, Mrs Fellies

2 August 2000

Child: Did you know that you tell 2000 lies in one day. Maybe not but some do.

Teacher: That is terrible don't you think. Can you believe it? I wonder what else people do that IS funny? Love, Mrs Fellies

4 August 2000

Child: Did you know that you spick {speak} two times in one day but when you are kwayt {quiet} you don't make a noise.

Teacher: No, I didn't know that.

7 August 2000

Child: Did you know that when you read you read 2000 words. Evene you read a small sentnse {sentence} you {read} 2000 words.

Teacher: Wow!

Fig. 10, is a response to a letter Babazile wrote to the children from the UK. She had no choice but to leave her child behind, and was now asking for advice about what gift she could bring home to him. Aviwe responded in Xhosa. Like the letter in Fig. 9: this letter is written with feeling.

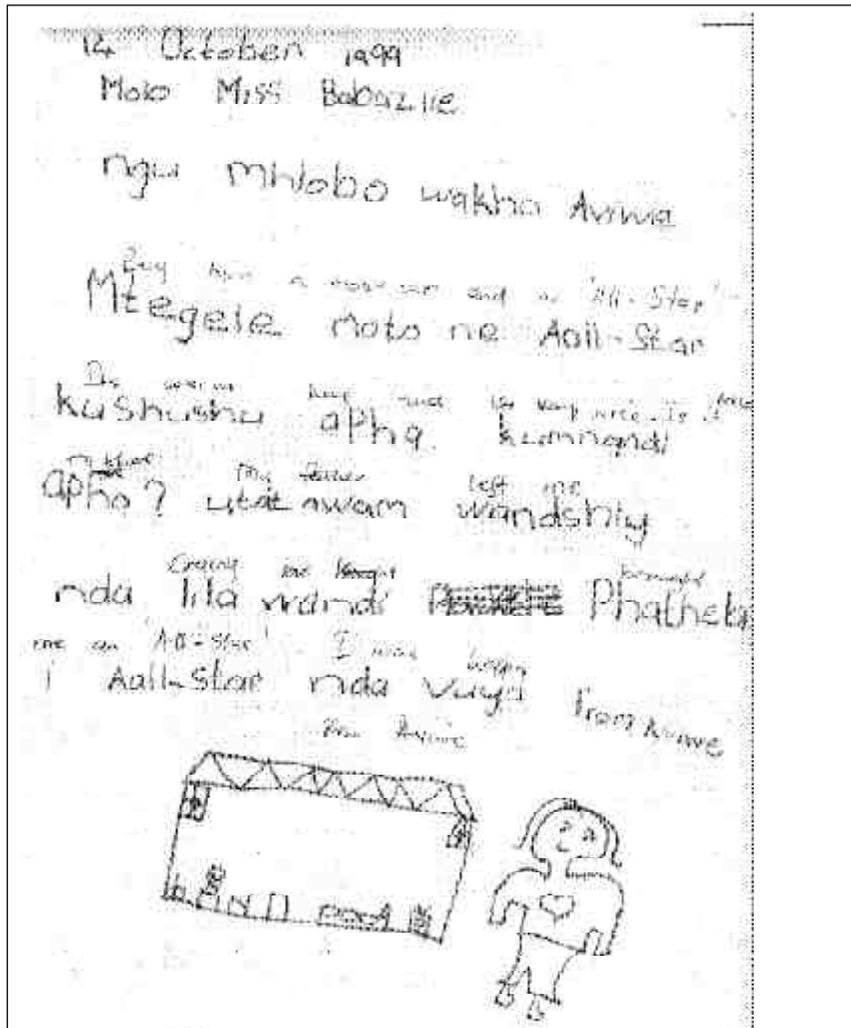


Fig. 10 (left): Buy him a motor car and an 'All-Star'

Translation: '14 October 1999 Hello Miss Babazile, I'm your friend Aviwe. Buy him a motor car and All-Star (tekkies/trainers). It's warm here and very nice. Is it nice there? My father left me crying but brought me an All-Star. I was very happy. From Aviwe'

status of English and Afrikaans on the one hand, and the indigenous African languages, on the other, as written languages.

Adopting emergent literacy and literacy as social practice perspectives in South Africa helps us realise that we have underestimated the significance of the role that environments play in helping or hindering the development of reading and writing habits among young children and their families.

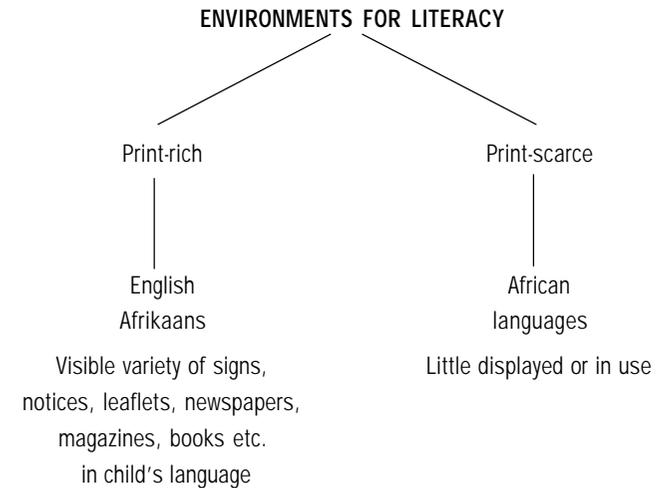


Fig. 4: Environments for literacy

The DoE's Revised National Curriculum Statement says that emergent literacy refers to a child's growing knowledge of the printed word. Children see print in the environment and begin to understand its purpose (DoE 2002: 137).

In order for this to happen, print needs to be in the languages children and their families use. Moreover, they need not only to see, but also to *interact with* people reading and writing in ways that are of interest and make sense to them and motivate them to want to read and write for themselves. Seen from this perspective, it is clear that communities can provide favourable or unfavourable environments for literacy learning depending on the visibility and uses of languages in writing. Changing the low status of African languages as print languages is a priority. Carole Edelsky says:

If children see adults using writing in any language for only a limited number of purposes, they are unlikely to see a wide range of needs for writing or incorporate 'writer' into their identities. As we look at various communities as possible sources for demonstrations of written language, we

must ask questions such as these: Who in the community knows how to write? In what languages do people write? How can schools both use and extend community resources so that children will become writers? (Edelsky 1991: 52)

We all need to think about the messages that are being given to people about the power, status and use value of their language/s as print language/s if they rarely or never see these used in writing. One critical aspect of this is that there are insufficient appropriate stories and other reading material in African languages. It is inescapably significant that the youngest members of 'literate' communities will have shared at least several hundreds of storybooks in their mother tongue before starting school. Children (and adults) who become successful readers and writers are ones who read voluntarily for enjoyment and information (Krashen 1993). One of the tasks for teachers is to take a careful look at their community and ask themselves:

- What print do I see at school (exterior, interior), in classrooms (on the walls, displays, in cupboards and on shelves), at home, in church, at the shops, in the newspaper, in advertisements, etc.? (How) do adults and/or children use this print?
- How can I make use of any of this for teaching my children in the classroom?

This simple sounding task is complicated by the fact that many teachers themselves are not actually readers and writers – a fact that will prove to be one of the major challenges to address in the future if we are to improve literacy development for all in the longer term.

Classroom Strategies for Developing Early Writing

While it remains true that teachers need to know how print is used among the families of the children they teach, many may find little or nothing that appears immediately useful in African languages and especially in rural settings. Even so, they have to know how to provide children with relevant literacy learning experiences. Guidance can be found in the range of interdisciplinary principles that inform and underpin what are now considered to be sound educational practice in early childhood education (Bruce 1987), early literacy (Holdaway 1979, Ferreira and Teberosky 1993, Goodman 1986), literacy as social practice (Street 1995), and bilingual and biliteracy education (Baker 1996, Krashen 1982, Cummins 1996, Gregory 1996, Hornberger 1990, Edelsky 1991):

- Appropriate teaching begins with and builds on what children know, including their languages.

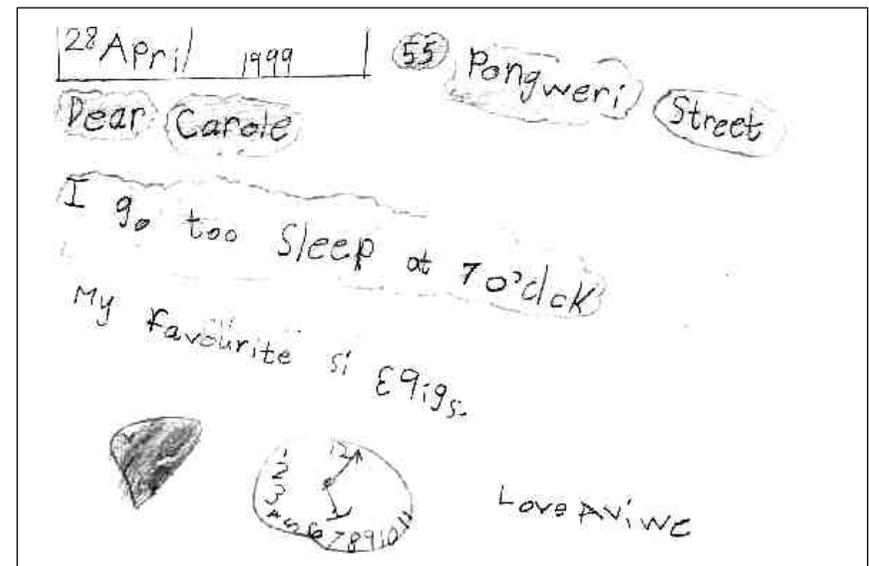


Fig. 8: My favourite is the Three Little Pigs

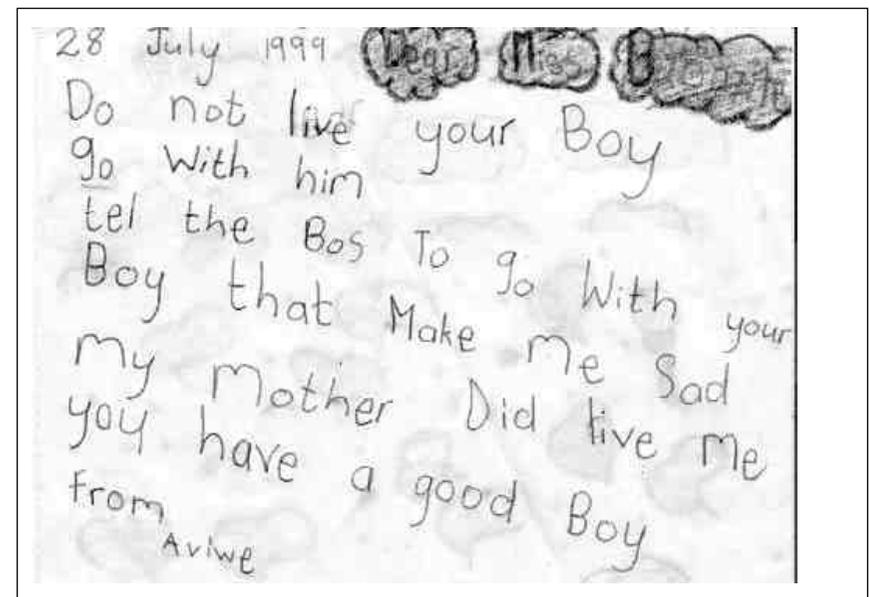


Fig. 9: Do not leave your boy

'28 July 1999. Dear Miss Babazile, Do not leave your boy. Go with him. Tell the boss [you need to - CB] go with your boy. That [would - CB] make me sad [if - CB] my mother did leave me. You have a good boy. From Aviwe'

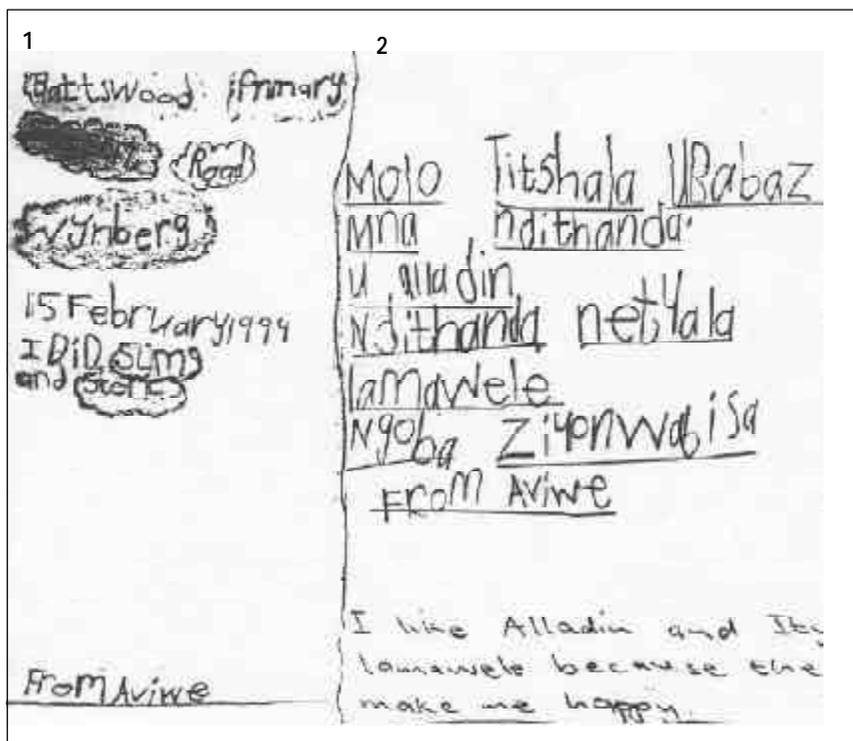


Fig.7: Two early letters

- 1) 'Battswood Primary Gosport Road, Wynberg 15 February 1999. I did sums and stories. From Aviwe'
- 2) Translation 'Hello Teacher Babazile, I like Alladin and I like "Netyala Yamawele" because they make me happy'.

In Fig 8, Aviwe answered a letter from me in English where I asked two particular questions: 'What time do you go to sleep?' and 'What is your favourite story?' We used questions in the beginning to stimulate responses in the children.

After the first few months of letter writing, Aviwe was one of several children who began to write more, and with a good measure of fluency in both languages. Some letters, especially ones with an emotionally charged message, sparked off an intense response. One of these was when Babazile wrote to the children asking their advice about a matter of great personal concern: she was going to study abroad, and had been told that she could not take her little boy with her. What should she do? Aviwe wrote in English this time. Her objective was clearly to persuade.

- Language is a resource rather than a problem.
- All aspects of language are interrelated and understandings in one aspect help to develop and support other aspects (reading, writing, speaking, listening, translating and interpreting).
- Children learn to write in similar ways to how they learn to speak – through an active process of constructing and modifying hypotheses about how language is used.
- To learn a language, written or spoken, the content needs to be made comprehensible.
- Each of us is a learner and a teacher, and teachers and children learn from each other.
- Mistakes offer insights into the learner's understanding and development.
- Children learning literacy benefit from teaching approaches that focus on involving children in using written language for real and personally meaningful reasons.

Following these principles, a useful conceptual step with immediate practical relevance is to move away from organising literacy skills as distinct areas with separate component sub-skills to be taught by teachers and practised by children before they can explore real reading and writing activities with stories and other print (see Fig. 5):

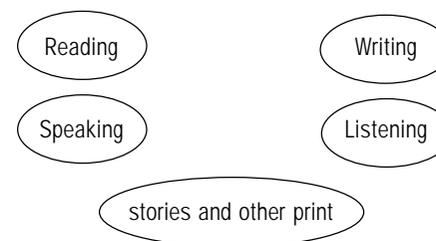


Fig. 5: A 'separate skills' approach to literacy

It is more useful to conceptualise an approach which integrates skills and puts meaningful encounters with print at the centre of overlapping and mutually reinforcing activities that are mediated and scaffolded by the teacher (Fig. 6). This organisation helps teachers to move a classroom environment closer to one which approximates 'natural' language learning, where meaning making, interest and enjoyment are valued, and the divisions between different aspects of language are blurred.

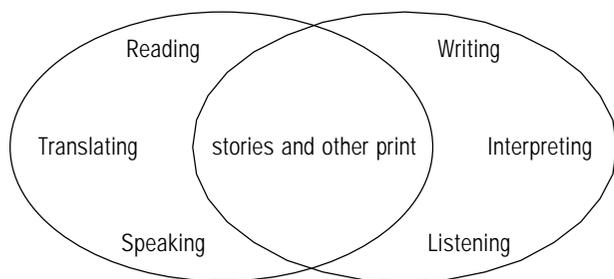


Fig. 6: An integrated approach to literacy

With this in mind teachers can try to include the following regular (preferably daily) literacy activities:

- Teacher and/or other adults, older children tell and read stories to the children (in their mother tongue and additional language where appropriate) and engage in related open-ended dialogue;
- Children to read in pairs and groups;
- Free reading by the children and the teachers;
- Teacher models meaningful writing on the board or on large sheets of paper, e.g. using rhymes, riddles, songs, messages and notes. Read this text together;
- Teacher writes children's own ideas and thoughts (language experience). Read this text together;
- Interactive writing (see below) and other writing by the children for real reasons;
- Focus on alphabetic knowledge, phonic skills, phonemic awareness, spelling etc. arising from such meaningful/enjoyable/useful texts.

Interactive writing

The main challenge with teaching early writing is to create conditions where children are prepared to risk using what they know about written language to try to write for themselves. An essential literacy insight for most young learners (or literacy learners of any age) is that what we say can be written down. Making writing 'talk' helps children build a conceptual bridge from oral language, to writing.

We can use *interactive writing* (Robinson *et al.* 1990, Kreeft Peyton & Stanton 1993) to offer teachers (and others) ways to help children take the risk to begin to write purposefully. Interactive writing is a

simple yet effective strategy that helps to develop writing and reading and raise the status of a low-status language in print. Any language or languages can be used. It simply involves a writing partnership where people commit themselves to writing to each other, for example through letter writing, journal writing, or using a message board.

One or more experienced writer(s) needs to be able and willing to communicate in writing (in one or more languages) with children. They need writing materials and stamina to keep the process going over time. The teacher (or other willing writing partner) does not mark the children's writing, but writes back in a way that demonstrates conventional writing and correct spelling. The most important task s/he has, however, is to enter into, and keep alive, a written dialogue with each child. At first, if children cannot write at all, they can draw what they want to say. At the same time they should be encouraged to try and write by referring to an alphabet chart, word lists and one another for support. Teachers should also spell words they ask for.

Letter Writing

Figs. 7, 8, 9 and 10 illustrate one child's writing in two languages that emerged over time as part of a six year biliteracy programme to teach a class of children to use both their mother tongue (isiXhosa) and an additional language (English) for writing (Bloch & Alexander 2003). Our first interactive writing strategy was letter writing. We wanted to enhance other attempts we had made to get the children in Grade 1 to explore writing freely and creatively (Bloch with Nkence 2000). Even at the beginning of their school careers many children had already internalised the formula that writing = copying and neatly formed letters. During their Grade 2 year, I began writing to the children in English and my colleague, Babazile Mahlalela wrote in isiXhosa. The children were invited to write back, in either language.

Fig. 7 has two letters: 1) Aviwe wrote an English answer to my letter where I asked 'What did you do at school?'²) She responds in Xhosa to Babazile's enquiry 'What do you like to watch on TV?' Right from the start, Aviwe (and most of the other children) were quite happy to explore moving between the two languages for writing. In all of the letters, punctuation and spelling were not a priority. We believed that these conventions would be mastered over time and with a lot of reading in the relevant languages and that this would take a lot of time under our relatively print-scarce conditions.