

In this overview paper Carole Bloch reflects on her work in the field of early literacy over the past decade and more. The first part of the paper establishes a theoretical framework that emphasizes meaning-making, the role of emotion, play, stories, and knowledge construction for the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in young children. Subsequent sections focus on the position of early literacy in South Africa before 1994, environments for literacy, and the work of PRAESA's early literacy unit in the officially multilingual post-apartheid dispensation. The cultivation of mother-tongue based literacy learning is presented as the effective way to nurture children's literacy learning, and the sense of the current official pre-occupation with outcomes, assessment, and test scores is questioned. The paper is a slightly edited version of the summary chapter of Carole Bloch's PhD, which was based on published journal articles.



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

## Theory and Strategy of Early Literacy in Contemporary Africa

with special reference to South Africa

Carole Bloch



PRAESA Occasional Papers No. 25

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Carole Bloch is an early childhood literacy specialist and the co-ordinator of PRAESA's Early Literacy Unit which does research, teacher education and materials development for multilingual classrooms. The Unit explores and documents ways of promoting emergent literacy and biliteracy among young children, and how to foster teaching approaches and develop reading materials which emphasise meaning making and enjoyment. She is currently the central co-ordinator of Stories Across Africa, a pan-African project which is developing common anthologies of children's stories to read in their own languages.

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with special reference to South Africa



**Carole Bloch**

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## Abstract

In this overview paper Carole Bloch reflects on her work in the field of early literacy over the past decade and more. The first part of the paper establishes a theoretical framework that emphasizes meaning-making, the role of emotion, play, stories, and knowledge construction for the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in young children. Subsequent sections focus on the position of early literacy in South Africa before 1994, environments for literacy, and the work of PRAESA’s early literacy unit in the officially multilingual post-apartheid dispensation. The cultivation of mother-tongue based literacy learning is presented as the effective way to nurture children’s literacy learning, and the sense of the current official pre-occupation with outcomes, assessment, and test scores is questioned. The paper is a slightly edited version of the summary chapter of Carole Bloch’s PhD, which was based on published journal articles.

## Opsomming

In dié referaat reflekteer Carole Bloch oor haar werk op die gebied van vroeë geletterdheid oor die afgelope aantal jare. Die eerste gedeelte bou ’n teoretiese raamwerk waarbinne die rol van betekenis, emosie, speel, storieverhale, en die gekonstrueerde aard van taal in die koestering van tweetaligheid en dubbele geletterdheid beklemtoon word. Die daaropvolgende gedeeltes kyk terug op die situasie van vroeë geletterdheid in die “ou” Suid-Afrika, beskryf die milieu of tipe omgewing wat vir geletterdheid bevorderlik is, en verskaf ’n oorsig oor die werksaamhede van PRAESA se eenheid vir vroeë geletterdheid in die post-apartheid bedeling. Die kultivering van ’n moedertaalgebaseerde geletterdheid word daargestel as ’n doeltreffende manier om die kind se geletterdheid te koester, en die onderwys se huidige behepthed met uitkomst, assessering, en toetspunte word bevraagteken. Die referaat is ’n ietwat geredigeerde weergawe van die opsommingshoofstuk van Carole Bloch se PhD, wat op gepubliseerde tydskrifartikels gebaseer is.

## Isishwankathelo

Kweli phepha lophononongo-zimvo, uCarole Bloch ubonakalisa iingcinga zakhe ngomsebenzi wakhe kwicandelo lokuphuhliso lobuchule bokufunda nokubhala kubantwana abancinci kwiminyaka engaphezulu kweshumi egqithileyo. Icandelo lokuqala leli phepha lakha isikefele sethoyori egxininisa ukufunda nokubhala okunika intsingiselo, indima edlalwa yimvakalelo ngento eyenziwayo, edlalwa ngumdlalo namabali kunye nendlela abantwana abazenzela ngayo intsingiselo xa kukhuthazwa ukufundwa kweelwimi

ezimbini kunye nobuchule bokufunda nokubhalala ngazo zombini ezi lwimi. Amacandelo alandelayo agxile kwindawo ebibekwe kuyo imfundo yobuchule bokufunda nokubhala yabantwana abancinci eMzantsi Afrika phambi konyaka ka1994. Likwagxile kwiindawo apho ubuchule bokufunda nokubhala buphuhliseka khona kunye nakumsebenzi wecandelo lophuhliso lobuchule bokufunda nokubhala babantwana abancinci lasePraesa, emva kokupheliswa kocalucalulo apho ukufundwa kweelwimi ezininzi kumiselwe ngokusemthethweni. Ukumiliselwa kwendlela yokufundisa ubuchule bokufunda nokubhala okusekelwe kulwimi lweenkobe kuboniswa njengelona hlobo lwemfundo esebenzayo ukuphuhlisa ubuchule bokufunda nokubhala babantwana kwaye oku kuzikhathaza ngeziphumo, ngovavanyo kunye neziphumo zohlolo kuyathandabuzwa ukuba kuyasebenza. Eli phepha licatshulwe kwisahluko esishwankathela iphepha lePhD kaCarole Bloch elisekelwe kumanqaku amaphepha-ngxelo apapashiweyo.

*First words must mean something to a child.  
First words must have intense meaning for a child.  
They must be part of his [sic] being.*

(Sylvia Ashton Warner 1963/1971:30)

## Introduction

This paper summarises work I have undertaken between 1994 and 2005 on the theoretical issues and practical approaches that have contributed to the changes taking place in the early literacy field in South Africa, and, by extension, in some extent, other parts of Africa. It reflects the range of influences and issues I, and others working in the early literacy domain, have grappled with and helped to inform. I also discuss pertinent research and approaches to classroom teaching and materials development I have engaged in for more than a decade of academic, professional and activist work on early childhood literacy. This has been done mainly at the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town<sup>1</sup> in many collaborative projects with various colleagues.

Literacy is described as a problem for Africa, like for the rest of the world (Triebel 2001:19). It is common to hear complaints that “low literacy” in the North is obstructing economic development in similar ways to claims for the “lack of literacy” in the South. Although there are some common features in the manifestation of the problem, the differences tend to be complex and often stark. It is widely acknowledged that, despite decades of literacy campaigns by UNESCO and others and efforts like Education for All (EFA) (Triebel 2001:21), attempts to ensure that what is often referred to as the “spread of literacy” in Africa have failed.

Jung & Ouane (2001:320–321) point to the fact that “writing as a psychological and sociohistorical practice has been invented in only a few societies” but “borrowed and adapted” in many others and that for development policy, it is critical that we understand “the mechanisms of literacy transfer from one culture to another”. The popular belief that Africa is an “oral” continent and that literacy, though necessary, is somehow alien to the continent is captured thus: “Africa needs oracy more than any other community in the world” (Zirimu & Bukenya 1986:99 cited in Bamgbose 2000:3). However, the rediscovery of the Timbuktu manuscripts in Mali presents unfolding documentation of the rich and varied African literacy practices that formed part of social, political and economic life in the Sahel region from the 12th Century to the 16th Century and again provides evidence “... that it never was true that African civilizations relied on

oral traditions ...” (Dijan 2004:10). But colonial and apartheid policies ensured a deep rupture of “transfer” to other parts of Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, which in some ways, despite “modernisation”, has continued to deepen through the post-colonial language policies of many countries. This understanding is my point of departure for deliberating on early literacy development in Africa.

In addition to poverty, two fundamental and intrinsically related issues have affected and continue to affect movements to make literacy an integral part of daily life in many parts of Africa. One, as I have indicated, is the issue of language. Several years ago, Michael Halliday wrote:

There is no doubt that many of our problems in literacy education are of our own making; not just ourselves as individuals, or even educators as a profession, but ourselves as a whole – society, if you like. In part the problems stem from our cultural attitudes to language. We take language all too solemnly and yet not seriously enough. If we (and this includes teachers) can learn to be a lot more serious about language, and at the same time a great deal less solemn about it ... then we might be more ready to recognize linguistic success for what it is when we see it, and so do more to bring it about where it would otherwise fail to appear. (Halliday 1973:viii, cited in Goodman 1979/2003:355)

But language is a deeply complex and political issue (Bamgbose 2000:2) and the insidious consequences of the fact that literacy under colonialism, and after independence in many cases, has been taught to the majority of people in unfamiliar, ex-colonial languages is often not faced head on, and literacy is dealt with as if it were unconnected to language. For instance in the UNESCO thematic study on Literacy and Adult Education, Dan Wagner (2000:16) refers to the common problem of participants dropping out of adult literacy programmes, and gives several possible reasons, omitting language as an issue:

Many varied and valid reasons have been cited as causes of this problem, such as inadequate programme quality; lack of time and resources of learners; poor quality of textbooks and pedagogy; lack of social marketing, and so forth. There is little doubt, however, that the general factor behind all these technical issues is that learners, for whatever sets of reasons, do not feel motivated to participate and remain in such voluntary programmes.

When he does refer to language, he does not actually state the case for mother tongue learning:

In numerous developing countries, a significant proportion of students in primary schools are either illiterate in their first language or receive only a few years of first language instruction before a second language is introduced as a medium of instruction. Poor second language proficiency is a principal cause of high repetition and wastage rates, and of low achievement in academic

subjects in primary and secondary schools, with profound consequences for employment and other externalities of schooling. (Wagner 2000:16)

The other issue relates to people’s everyday beliefs about literacy, and the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches that arise from particular views. One of the quandaries faced by those of us trying to transform various aspects of education like literacy teaching, is that we have to grapple with how responsible adults – teacher trainers, teachers and, in some cases, parents, come to change their ideas and practice. It is not enough to be told *what* to do when you teach reading and writing, without understanding *why* this should be the case and be motivated to do so emotionally as well as intellectually. Nor is being told *why* you should teach in a particular way sufficient if one is not able to engage with the ideas at a practical level. For shifts in practice to take place that reflect new understandings, people also need to know *how* to make changes concrete. My research experiences, informed by my role as a parent, a teacher and a teacher educator, suggest that this is a slow, cyclical process involving opportunities to observe reading and writing practice, reflect and discuss, read related contesting views and theories, reflect on these, try out adjusted practice based on fresh insights, with guidance from and interaction with a more experienced “other”.

But first there needs to be an understanding that some kind of change is required and an emotional engagement with this idea. To this end, Carole Edelsky (1989:92) suggests that we need to see that the beliefs we hold, belong to

... prevailing paradigms pertaining to literacy and biliteracy. I use paradigm to emphasise that the beliefs comprise a worldview, not just a set of discreet items. Paradigms wield their power by determining how to look at phenomena – where to draw the boundaries, what questions to ask, what to count as answers – which in turn, determines what one sees.

In South Africa, and across Africa, the need for change is enormous. In the South African National Department of Education’s *National Strategy for Reading in the Foundation Phase* (2004) the situation is summed up thus:

There are various reasons for South Africa’s loss of reading. Traditional societies and orders of authority have been undermined by relentless “progress”. Most children grow up without the intimate interaction of story-telling because of a breakdown of family and communal structures and the hegemony of radio and television. Apartheid education reduced the fullness of learning drastically, with its emphasis on a thin gruel of basic skills. The mission schools’ intense engagement with a small, limiting, yet still valuable set of texts, produced people strong in conceptual and moral confidence, qualities that have been sadly eroded since the introduction of Bantu Education.

In this text, and more generally, I am not concerned with addressing the matter of compensatory education among adults and children who are

already subject to prevailing orthodox paradigms of literacy learning although I hold that relevant literacy practices might do well by gradually (or suddenly even) changing their understandings of and approach towards the teaching of reading and writing. I am concerned rather with the longer term strategic issue of recognising and using the potential of the early childhood years to address language and literacy issues in ways that will contribute towards providing opportunities and incentives for people to develop and embed literacy in their own and other languages, in their daily lives in South Africa, and across the rest of Africa. To do this, I have sought ways to make the need for change in pedagogy in the early literacy domain apparent, and to help demonstrate what change might look like in practice. I use the term pedagogy as described by Street & Street (1991:144),

... not in the narrow sense of specific skills and tricks of the trade used by teachers but in the broader sense of institutionalised processes of teaching and learning, usually associated with the school but increasingly identified in home practices associated with reading and writing ... pedagogy in this sense has taken on the character of an ideological force controlling social relations in general and conceptions of reading and writing in particular.

My own theoretical understandings of the question of literacy learning are based on a set of insights derived from many different authors and practitioners that has assumed the force of a paradigm which is referred to as “whole language” and “emergent literacy”.

## Views about Literacy

*... we would do very well to understand that what we have mistakenly come to think of as “bodies of knowledge” or “fields of learning” or “academic disciplines” or “school subjects” are not nouns but verbs, not things that exist independently somewhere out there, but things that people do.*

(John Holt 1976/2004:16)

Two major theoretical positions occupy the paradigmatic space that determines how literacy is viewed (Edelsky 1986:92). Brian Street (1984) terms these “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy. The more widely entrenched “autonomous” model views literacy as being unconnected to any specific context. People can only use literacy once they have been taught the component technical skills. The assumption is that literacy by itself has transformative powers over people’s lives – such as enhancing the cognitive skills of poor people and improving their chances of getting work irrespective of the social and economic conditions that gave rise to their particular situation (Street 2003:1).

In terms of early literacy learning, the various methods that tend to be broadly called behaviourist, skills-based or phonics methods fall under this autonomous model. This is the hegemonic model in Africa today – it involves us in talk about “spreading literacy” like a force of good, or “eradicating illiteracy” as if it was a disease (Wagner 2000:4) or even “breaking the back of illiteracy” as if it were an evil (Asmal 2001:3).

The “ideological” model, in contrast, sees literacy as social and cultural in nature and forming part of people’s daily life practices (Street 1984, Heath 1983, Barton 1994). People have multiple literacies rather than any one single literacy, and these are always “... varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power” (Street 2003:1). Skills are learned as you use them to do something personally meaningful and/or economically useful. The focus is on what people *do with* literacy from particular political and ideological and economic positions (Barton & Hamilton 2000:7), rather than on what literacy can do for people. Jenny Cook Gumperz (1986:17) provides a definition:

Literacy thus refers to the ability to create and understand printed messages as well as to the changes that this ability brings about. Yet, at the same time, it connotes an assessment of the usefulness of this ability. We see that literacy cannot be judged apart from some understanding of the social circumstances and specific historical traditions which affect the way this ability takes root in society.

More recently, the ideological model, within which perspectives of “emergent” literacy that deal specifically with literacy in early childhood have come to be situated, has influenced discussion and practice in African development programmes and education for adults and children, in both formal and non-formal situations (Wagner 2000, Jung and Ouane 2001:320–335, Bloch 2002b).

The emergent literacy or whole language perspective which, as I have stated, guides my thinking sees young children constructing their own literacy in personally useful and meaningful ways as part of developmental, personal, social and cultural learning processes (Bloch 1997:4). In the second half of the 20th Century, international research into early language and literacy learning undertaken in a range of disciplines led to revised and powerful understandings about how young children who grow up in literate settings come to be literate. This relatively new but fast growing body of research into early childhood literacy has begun to “close the gap” between the previously very separate areas of adult and child literacy, bringing together influences and perspectives from anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and education (Holdaway 1979, Taylor 1983, Goodman, K 1986, Hall 1987). It is to these that I now turn my attention.

## Elements of a paradigm: “Learning how to mean”<sup>2</sup>

*Child mind asks questions, seeks order, and monitors and corrects its own learning. These are natural functions of human mind. However, these are also functions that teachers have regarded as their own special domain, functions that teachers have so pre-empted that children often abandon them when in classrooms. Such distrust of child mind in the classroom is but one manifestation of the school system's distrust of the learning ability inherent in human mind.*

(Glenda Bissex 1984:99)

The way I have come to understand the challenges we face with literacy in African settings has been influenced during two phases, one of these in Britain, where I learned about mother tongue pedagogy<sup>3</sup> from the perspectives both of a teacher and a mother. The other was in South Africa where as an early literacy specialist and researcher, I have learned about the competencies and resourcefulness of multilingual children, and the complex ways that language is integral to learning, power, identity and democracy. Here, working in collaboration with my PRAESA colleagues, I have adapted, developed and applied some of the theoretical and practical insights I gained in Britain for use in multilingual African contexts.

Below, I raise and outline some of the main underpinning theoretical issues related to early language and literacy learning which inform my practical efforts to facilitate an enabling literacy learning situation for multilingual education in South Africa. These came into prominence for me through my investigations of the behaviour of very young children who learned to read and write before school, based on reading among others Clark 1976, Clay 1975 and Bissex 1980. This led to realisations that written language, though not the same as oral language, can be learned in similar ways to the way that oral language is learned, i.e. *by using it in personally meaningful ways in social contexts* (Goodman & Goodman 1979/2003:353). This insight is at the heart of the emergent literacy and whole language perspectives (Ken Goodman 1986) which contest the widely used notion of “school readiness” that values the mastering of mechanical skills above all other aspects of literacy in particular motivational aspects. The difference between perspectives of emergent literacy and school readiness is that

... in sharp contrast to the readiness position, an emergent perspective stretches the process of literacy development to include budding literacy-like behaviours (e.g. pretend reading) as legitimate and contributory and treats social contexts (e.g. bedtime reading) as important venues for

exposing children to literacy knowledge and practices. Through this lens, children's early “hands on” experiences with language and literacy in everyday social activities give rise to the internal mental processes that are needed to do the intellectual work of reading and writing activity. (Roskos & Christie 2004:96)

Learning literacy, like learning to speak, is learning language

Language is “a personal-social invention” and thus we learn oral and written language in the same way (Goodman & Goodman 1979/2003:354). In fact “... the same dynamics that promote oral language development promote writing development, for they are the dynamics that promote learning” (Kreeft Peyton & Staton 1993:3). Babies learn oral language (speaking and listening) “naturally” in social situations because they are exposed to and interact with significant people who role-model the use of the language (or languages, in case of bilingual situations) as they go about their daily activities (Holdaway 1979:20). Motivation is high because they use language to get things done at the same time as they are learning it and emotional satisfaction is tied intimately into the experience.

This active way that babies learn oral language provides us with a model of effective language learning:

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)

As parents, we do not feel that babies need to be made “ready” before they learn to talk (Holt 1976/2004:13–17). We trust that they will learn because as humans we use language to communicate with and be understood by others. We try and work out what they are trying to say, and then give them the kind of support, feedback and affirmation that we think will help them achieve this. Similarly, when they are in situations where the important people around them read and write regularly, they come to realise that “what I say can be written down”, and read. Ken Goodman (1979/2003:352) summarises the process thus:

For some children, their awareness of written language and its uses leads so naturally to participation that they are reading and writing, even inventing their own spelling rules, before they and their parents are aware that they are becoming literate. For such children the process of developing written language parallels that of developing oral language.

As children experience various regular, personally meaningful ways of reading and writing, they come to discover for themselves the differences

between oral and written language. In *Chloe's Story*, where I examine and interpret my daughter's emergent writing process, I document how one of the first distinctions she made between oral and written language was that of the visibility and permanence of print in contrast with the transient nature of talk. I observed her growing sense of satisfaction and power as she realised that a text such as a favourite rhyme, will always look the same and be in the same place. Time after time it was there for her close scrutiny (Bloch 1997:10).

### At the heart of things

Crucial for considerations about language and literacy learning, is the research evidence which points to the *central role that the emotions play in learning and development*<sup>4</sup>. Stanley Greenspan and Stuart Shanker's (2004:210) observations of babies' development and their ability to create symbols and think lead them to claim that "... emotions are at the very heart of language development" so that "A child's first words, her [sic] early word combinations, and her first steps towards mastering grammar are not just guided by emotional content, but, indeed, are imbued with it". Thus language, which comes from "*lived experience*", carries the prominence of relationships and shared meaningful experiences, implying that: "In general, the more constricted a child's emotional development the more delayed and problematic her language development" (Greenspan & Shanker 2004:10). Studies into emotion-related disorders at an early age often point to the influence of negative care-giving relationships, providing further evidence that early positive relationships with caregivers are critical for healthy psychosocial development (Thompson 2004:23).

The seemingly endless early interactive language play between caregivers and babies, with its core of rhythmical rhymes and songs contains all the elements of emotional satisfaction. These are in fact "storehouses or machines for programming the brain for language, art, music, math, science, kinaesthetic, and interpersonal abilities and intelligence" (Frost *et al.* 2005:63). The close, one-to-one conditions created when a baby or young child enjoys sharing a book with a caregiver establishes deeply emotionally satisfying bonds between them which envelop the notion and reality of early reading encounters with positive feelings, creating firm foundations for reading and writing development (Butterfield *et al.* 2004:157). Toddlers and young children then carry the positive feeling into further interactive and solo encounters with literacy.

### The special language of stories

As human beings, we organise our thoughts and make sense of our lives through the stories we tell ourselves and others (Bruner 1994:28). Using

stories starts as soon as young children begin to be able to communicate their thoughts and experiences in relationships with their significant loved ones (Stern 1985 cited in Haas Dyson & Genishi 1994:2). In the USA, Vivian Gussin Paley, has written about her close observations and work with young children, where she helps them use their personal stories as vehicles for learning. Paley (1990:4) writes, "Amazingly, children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form". Her work has focussed on the primacy of stories as ways of expressing ideas, something which she describes as "the most profoundly human act of all" (Paley 2002:9). As the children tell their stories to her, she writes them down, showing deep respect for the centrality of the youngest child's story (from the age of three), saying that "... storytelling is contagious, and listening to the children's stories will rekindle the teacher's" (Paley 1990:5). She encourages children to act in one another's stories – creating a process of "story in action" (Paley 1990:4) that helps them to explore their concerns as part of a co-operating community of language users – and as they play, they develop and demonstrate increasingly skilful literate behaviour.

Story telling and reading expose children to a special form of language which is holistic, rich and complex. This allows them to tune into the rhythms and structures of language and broadens their conceptual worlds and their vocabulary to express themselves. As well as providing information in ways that are easy to remember, stories orient and shape our emotions like no other form of language can do (Meek 1985:44, Egan 2005:10), helping us move out from our own egocentric feelings and interests to a position of being able to empathise with others. Kornei Chukovsky, a Russian author and poet who was a champion of the young children and their literary needs during the time of "social realism", suggests that the goal of storytellers

... consists of fostering in the child, at whatever cost, compassion and humaneness – the miraculous ability of man [sic] to be disturbed by another being's misfortunes, to feel joy about another being's happiness, to experience another's fate as one's own. (Chukovsky 1963:138)

Depending on experience and cultural background, stories mean different things to different people. Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) study of contrasting literacy practices in three different communities in the USA shows vividly how the purpose for a story and the way in which it is told often varies in different communities, and Sarah Michaels' (1991) research with children from different backgrounds who told stories in different ways both point to the importance of teachers understanding children's cultural contexts so that they can support their learning in appropriate ways.

## Child's play

Play, a universal feature of early childhood, appears early as a critical aspect of language development. Scientists studying young babies have observed how, just as they play with their arms and legs, babies

... also seem to play with their mouths and listen to the sounds they can produce. Babies will lie in their cribs all by themselves and play with sounds, squealing with delight and producing *ee's* and *aa's* and *ba's* and *ga's* and even just raspberries for long stretches. By playing in this way, they learn how to make the sounds they hear us produce. (Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl 1999:124)

Jean Piaget (1962) identified many different forms of play, but *it is symbolic (or imaginative) play that has particular relevance for early literacy learning*. Symbolic play is at its greatest between the ages of two and five, but continues until at least seven, and sometimes further, depending on the cultural influences (such as formal school) that are brought to bear on children. Symbolic play often involves pretending that one object stands for something else than what it is generally used for and though it is one of the most remarkable aspects of early childhood, it is sometimes misinterpreted by parents and teachers, who in my experience, nervously brush it aside as “lies” in favour of “real” and “serious” learning. Research into symbolic play suggests that it underpins and precedes the understanding of written language. For Vygotsky (1978:101), play is important not because it is a “predominant feature of childhood but it is a leading factor in development”. When children play, they are bound by the rules that they have encountered in real life, and so play creates a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978:102) and provide a time when children have to learn to exert self-control. Vygotsky also makes the connection between children's symbolic play and written language as “second order symbolism which gradually becomes direct symbolism” (Vygotsky 1978:106). He suggests that the preschool years are the ideal time for a “natural” and meaningful introduction to learning written language. His view is that “symbolic representation in play is essentially a particular form of speech at an earlier stage, one which leads directly to written language” (Vygotsky 1978:111).

Several other studies of young children's emergent writing development show that when children are given the tools, opportunities and space to play with language in literate ways, they explore and practise their meaning-making, communication and self expression at the same time as they are gaining control over and knowledge of the phonics and mechanical skills (Bloch 1997, Bissex 1980, Hall 1989). It has long been known that nurturing imagination is essential, not only for whimsical or artistic endeavour (Egan 2005:xii), but for science too. Chukovsky explains:

Without imaginative fantasy there would be complete stagnation in both physics and chemistry, because the formulation of new hypotheses, the invention of new implements, the discovery of new methods of experimental research, the conjecturing of new chemical fusions – all these are products of imagination and fantasy. (1963:124)

Perhaps this is because in the story-telling-play of young children we might well have “... the original model for the active unrestricted examination of an idea” (Paley 1990:5).

Chukovsky notes how the “linguistic genius” of young children constantly causes them to play, not only with things and toys, but with language and ideas as well, hence their love of nonsense rhymes, riddles and stories. He points out that as soon as young children gain clarity about the ordered “sensible” nature of reality, they play with it, and turn things into “topsy turvies”. The point though, is not to create chaos, but in a way to accentuate (with joy and laughter) the safety and comfort of what they know to be real (Chukovsky 1963:102). You cannot understand the right way without understanding the wrong ways also. Phonological awareness, recently emphasised as a critical literacy skill, develops through such repetitive and rhyming play with language (Goswami & Bryant 1990). As Meek (1992:227) says, they do it “... not because it's important, but because it's fun”.

## Language is Construction and Invention

No knowledge can simply be transmitted. “It has to be constructed afresh” using previous experiences and strategies gleaned outside and inside school (Wells 1987:218), and gaining knowledge about reading and writing is no different. When young children realise that written language is useful and makes sense to the important people around them, they begin to try to make it work for them. With writing, they do this by observing, generating hypotheses about how to do things, trying these out, and then evaluating their efforts against the examples of conventional writing they encounter. In so doing, young children are engaged over time with many purposeful experiences in “processes of appropriation of the socially constituted writing system” (Ferreiro 1984:154). In fact, they reinvent the writing system, but they have the conventional system against which to measure their progress. They solve several problems along the way to becoming conventional writers: establishing the difference between drawing and writing; realising that a letter is different from other objects and is not just a letter, but part of a symbolic system that “says” something (Ferreiro 1984:161); thinking that you need a certain number of symbols for a word to “say something” and developing an awareness of the relationship between the oral production and the length of the print it relates to (Goodman, Y. 1984:106); inventing

punctuation (Bloch 1997:18) and spellings (Bissex 1984:89) as a “... process of active learning, hypothesis-making and testing, and incorporation of new information ...”.

Young children are profoundly in control of their own learning as they apply the insights and conventions of writing that they have grasped for self-expression and communication. Their examples of writing provide clues to their zones of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978:86), from which adults (or more experienced others) can help them to develop further. *Initially, the children focus on meaning making*, and behaving like authors (Robinson *et al.* 1990:11) rather than on producing good quality conventional letter like symbols. Denny Taylor describes how use precedes form in young children’s emergent writing (1983:42). Many children do so much writing that they produce an acceptable handwriting long before they enter primary school.

Language is socio-cultural: “the very fabric of family life”<sup>5</sup>

Ethnographic studies into the nature of literacy development in families from different socio-cultural and class backgrounds have led to realisations that it is through the patterns of use, the intertwining of reading and writing in daily relationships of different intensities that children come to internalise their being literate (Taylor, 1983, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988, Heath 1983, Gregory 1996, Kenner 2000). The different ways of giving and taking meaning to and from print varies among families from different cultural and class backgrounds allowing reading and writing to develop naturally as “complex cultural activities” (Taylor 1983:90). Powerful white, middle class home literacy practices are most synchronous with the school variety of literacy which it defines and sets the standards for. In doing so, it marginalises other literacies (Street & Street 1991:143).

Many family literacy programmes have tended to try to “impose” this school definition of literacy onto families, implying that parents ought to help schools remediate the “problems” from home.

Elsa Auerbach (1989) has critiqued such deficit family literacy models which are supposed to improve children’s skills but run counter to their cultural ways. In the same vein, Denny Taylor (1983:88) cautions that by making programmes that are “too literally literate”,

it is entirely possible that the undue emphasis on specific didactic encounters might unwittingly undermine the opportunities for reading and writing to become socially significant in the lives of both adults and children, and therefore an integral facet of family life.

Evidence is available for the importance of developing programmes that respect and value diverse literacies (Kenner 2004, Gregory 1996) and makes

space for the “funds of knowledge” (Moll 1992) from home in the classroom. In the British context, Charmian Kenner discusses the significant insights many bilingual children gain when they learn to read and write their home languages which are Chinese, Arabic or Spanish as well as English. However, this home language learning achievement is “learning at the margins” and she thus argues for support and funding for community language schools (Kenner 2004:67).

Becoming bilingual ...

It is often assumed that children arrive at school at six or seven years of age, having completed learning their mother tongue. According to current research, twelve years are needed to learn a first language or mother tongue (Collier 1989, cited in Dutcher 1998:2). Research also suggests that learning a second or third language at a younger age does not imply more or less successful or efficient learning than when it happens at an older age – it appears that with the additional language learning process, a similar developmental sequence occurs with younger and older children and that many factors contribute to language learning. The one exception to this seems to be that pronunciation and accent are learnt more easily and authentically at a younger age (McLaughlin 1992, cited in Dutcher 1998:3). Also the speed of learning an additional language “... is not necessarily related to the amount of exposure to that language, especially when that exposure to the second language comes at the expense of the development of the first language” (Dutcher 1998:3). Jim Cummins says that

... there may be a threshold level of linguistic competence which a bilingual child must attain both in order to avoid cognitive deficits and allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence his [sic] cognitive growth (Cummins 1977:10 cited in Baker 1996:130).

Following this “thresholds theory” about the relationship between cognition and degree of bilingualism, Cummins proposes what is known as the “Developmental Interdependence hypothesis” (Cummins 1978 cited in Baker 1996:151) whereby language learners develop a “common underlying proficiency” for two or more languages, and transference takes place from the academic skills learned in one language to another. Similarly literacy skills acquired in the mother tongue transfer across languages (Baker 1996:151–161).

When the additional language is a high status language, and replaces the mother tongue, a lower status local language, as the medium of instruction, this early use of the additional language can lead to detrimental educational and linguistic effects (Singleton 1989 cited in Baker 1996:84).

Therefore reasons given for early teaching through an additional language in school need to be ones based on factors other than additional language research, such as “providing general intellectual stimulation”, or the benefits of learning a country’s lingua franca (Baker 1996:85). Colin Baker suggests: “There are no critical periods in a child’s development in childhood or adolescence when a second language should or should not be introduced in the school.” Furthermore he says:

Second language instruction in the elementary school rests on the suitable provision of language teachers, suitable materials and resources, favourable attitudes of the teachers and parents, and the need to make the learning experience enjoyable for the children. (Baker 1996:85)

... and biliterate

Biliteracy involves “any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in or around writing” (Hornberger 1990:213). Eve Gregory (1996:65), working with young bilingual children in Britain learning to read in an additional language, says that young emergent bilingual children use cues differently from those used by children learning only in their mother tongue:

They have an advanced metalinguistic and analytic awareness in that they are able to see the arbitrary nature of words as labels and can detect and compare the boundaries of words in their different languages, and usually they have excellent memories. At the same time they cannot call upon experiences or schemata to call up a network of words in the new language nor can they depend upon the redundancy of words to assist prediction.

Charmian Kenner (2004:107) working under similar circumstances describes vividly the enormous competence of young emerging biliterate children, living in “simultaneous worlds”. They discover and are able to sort out not only that writing represents language but also that writing represents language in different ways in different scripts (2004:34). For instance children are able to understand that different writing systems like English and Chinese, create meaning in different ways, and that different written languages can have different rules for directionality (Kenner 2004:76). Moreover, they are also able to adapt to learning through different teaching methods for each language (Kenner 2004:103).

The above summaries hint at the vast body of inspiring theoretical and research information that informs early literacy teaching and learning. They provide a set of first principles that can guide us, and offer essential insights about the way young children learn, as capable, creative and constructive meaning makers. Below I describe the way that early literacy was viewed and positioned in South Africa at the point in time when Apartheid was about to end.

## The position of early literacy in South Africa before 1994

*There is no place for the African in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. It is of no avail for him [sic] to receive a training which has as its aim, absorption in the European community.*

(HF Verwoerd 1953)

Before the Government of National Unity came into office in 1994, although it was widely known that large numbers of children did not learn to read and write in either the mother tongue or any “other tongue”<sup>6</sup>, little or no research had been done in South Africa (Bloch 1994a:3), or indeed in Africa (Wagner 1992:18) about how young children become literate. As yet, the popular paradigmatic boundaries fixed around the notion of early literacy excluded it from the domain of early learning before primary school in South Africa. Learning to read and write was perceived as a formal learning activity (Flanagan 1995:14), only to be taught on entry to primary school by trained primary school teachers because this was the place for formal learning. Preschool, on the other hand was the place for informal learning, so the notion of literacy learning was excluded (Bloch 1996).

The only significant preschool provision under Apartheid was for white children. Most children under six years of age had no access to preschool provision at all<sup>7</sup>. In 1991, only about 7% of black children had access to some form of non-governmental organisation (NGO) “educare”, with largely untrained care givers (NEPI 1992:20). Considerable attention was given to the unacceptably high drop out and repeat rate across the grades, the causes of which were explained by factors including overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, poverty and deprivation and the lack of early childhood education (NEPI 1992:3). During the 1980s, in line with their deficit model of education, the South African government had instituted “bridging programmes” as a condensed and cheaper option than full preschool provision to prepare “disadvantaged” children for formal school (De Lange 1981).

Increasingly though, set against the backdrop of an imminent change of government, holistic preschool education for all children under the age of five (Padayachie *et al.* 1994) was proposed as a key to solving the drop out and repeat rate. At the time, although getting children to learn “basic literacy skills” was considered important (Taylor 1989:7), the nature of these “basic literacy skills” was not scrutinised and the tendency was to focus on solving problems at high school level, how to improve adult literacy rates and also how to provide access to preschool education.

In 1992, the preschool curriculum became a focus of attention in the NEPI Early Childhood Education Report. A curriculum approach that

originated in Europe and had been adapted locally by educare (ECE) NGOs in the absence of adequate government provision was promoted. It was referred to as follows:

... early childhood education has always had its Western roots in a child-centred, process-oriented, play-based, participatory learning approach, which is much more progressive and democratic in its general ethos (NEPI 1992:37).

Such an approach, inspired by thinkers such as Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky, Steiner and Montessori, was promoted and valued by the several dedicated NGOs<sup>8</sup> which developed the “Educare” field during the 1980s in an attempt to provide early care and education for the vast numbers of poor children who were being ignored by the apartheid government.

Their curricula had been set up in contrast to the apartheid government’s Christian National Education (CNE). Childhood, from a CNE perspective was a deficient state of being. The deficiency would be remedied by an education oriented towards adulthood, with adulthood being the aim of education. The task of teachers was to provide children with the experiences they were deemed to lack before primary school (Grove & Hauptfleisch 1989). Following this perception, the role of preschool, was understood as one of ensuring general “school readiness” and specifically for instilling “pre-reading and pre-writing skills”. This remedial and didactic conceptualisation and the accompanying sets of nonsensical activities, contradicted the child-centred pedagogy that was envisioned for the NGO sector.

This notion of school readiness, inherited from the North (western Europe and the USA) during colonialism had grown from and formed part of a strongly behaviourist skills-based interpretation of literacy teaching (Gillen & Hall 2003:4). The understanding was that biological development precedes learning, and that children had to follow their biological clock and thus become ready to learn how to read and write at school (Razfar & Gutierrez 2003:36). In countries like the USA and Britain (and later in South Africa, too) this resulted in a lucrative “school readiness” industry. Strange as it now sounds, this consisted almost entirely of a range of non-print based activities that were sold to pre and primary schools aimed at preparing and fine-tuning the child to be able to deal with the eventual complex challenges of print.

The widespread perception was that on school entry at age six or seven, it would be the right time for children to be taught how to read and write by teachers who had been trained to impart the “basics”, sets of mechanical and phonics skills which had to be delivered in a particular order from simple to complex and from part to whole. Essentially, this amounted in the first few years of school to large doses of “instructional nonsense” (Edelsky

1991:69) – consisting of phonics instruction, letter formation and handwriting practice. In this rigid framework, which fetishised “formal learning” as the real work of school, the importance of imagination, play and stories for young children was sorely neglected. This arid situation was intensified because of the language medium issue – where although mother tongue education was a cornerstone of apartheid education in the first three or four years, the impending switch to English meant, like in many other African countries, that the sooner the concentration was on teaching English, the better (Bamgbose 2000:24, Bloch & Edwards 1999:614)<sup>9</sup>.

There was no space to recognise that orality, rather than being inferior to literacy, has its own “rich store” of orature – rhymes, riddles and stories (Ngugi 1994:23) and at an individual level, provides “powerful and effective mental strategies” (Egan 1997:181). Slavish interpretation of restricted pedagogy, taught to teachers in a language they themselves do not know well, and one which the children often don’t hear beyond the school grounds has blinded us to the greatest strength of African education – the wisdoms of the oral tradition and its potentials both at personal and systemic levels for building bridges to literacy (Bloch 2005:69–70). A particularly detrimental part of this situation has been the ongoing but somehow silent collusion by the educational establishment with publishers away from developing a written African children’s literature, and towards accepting the primacy of textbooks, often full of “nothing to read” for beginning literacy.

Decontextualised methods can be more or less successful for children from literate, print-rich (Hudelson 1994 cited in Baker 1996) home backgrounds<sup>10</sup> who experience reading and writing, usually in mother tongue as part of “normal” everyday life. These children “naturally” imbibe knowledge about the various cultural uses and values literacy has for families and friends (Taylor 1983). They “somehow just get to know conventions of print” (Clay 1991:141–154) as well as an understanding of its importance, and all of this knowledge forms the sturdy scaffold – often invisible to the teacher – for the formal exercises in class. However, as I will discuss in more detail below, the many African language speaking children who have orally oriented socio-cultural realities are in very different positions: often their first introduction to the peculiarities and particularities of written language is only possible at school. Faced with repetitive exercises that are not even meant to make any sense at all and with little if any chance of catching a glimpse of a storybook or any other sensible text (Bloch:2000), many children are not able to make the necessary associations to actually start reading and writing.

At this time of impending change in South Africa, failure to be “ready” was largely attributed to a lack of parental and family support and input. No significance was placed on the “the assimilative charm of English” (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2000:101), the inadequate teaching

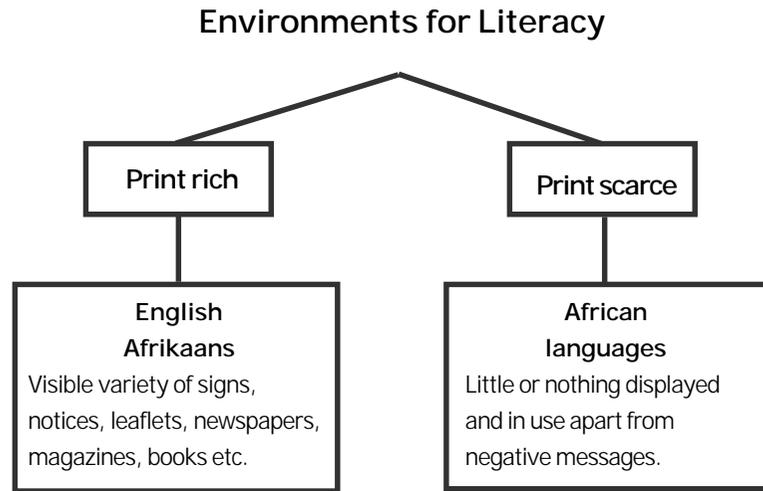
approaches, or the lack of authentic and appropriate mother tongue reading materials and a culture of reading and writing.

## Environments for literacy

*Mother tongue education and an environment of literacy in the mother tongue are reciprocal conditions, indissolubly bound to each other, and only making sense together.*

(Kurt Komarek 1997:29)

I refer to the kinds of environments that the majority of African children grow up in as “print scarce”, in contrast to “print rich” to emphasise the issue of environments for literacy as a major contributing factor to literate behaviours (Bloch 2005b:13). Particularly in rural areas, but even in peri-urban and urban settings, any print that might be abundant is in English or another ex-colonial language.



Yet it is in print that the power and status functions of language are clearest (Bloch 2006:2). This is simply but profoundly illustrated by an analysis of the genres of public signage where African languages are *always* used. In the Western Cape, Xhosa is always on signs with negative messages such as “no dumping”, “no jobs”, or “danger”.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, packaging of goods, “junk mail”, advertisements (apart from HIV/Aids), newspapers and magazines are mainly in English and Afrikaans, the languages of high status. Learning to read and write is greatly facilitated in situations where the language in

print form is valued, used and displayed (Ngugi 1994:17). Insight into why this is so at an individual psychological level comes from work by Vygotsky (1978) into the social and cultural nature of the development of higher psychological functions and related research by Istomina (1948:15 cited in Taylor 1983:91). Istomina suggests that for young children to commit and hold something in their memory, *whatever it is they do needs to have some kind of intrinsic relationship to their present situation*, because their memory processes are integrated into other activities and are not yet voluntary. If this is the case, Denny Taylor (1983:90–91) says,

... the question emerges of whether we can seriously expect children who have never experienced or have limited experience of reading and writing as complex cultural activities to successfully learn to read and write from the narrowly defined pedagogical practices of our schools. Can we teach children on an individual level of intrapersonal processes what they have never experienced on a social level as interpersonal processes of functional unity in their everyday lives?

For us, in Africa, this is a sobering question. With globalisation, and present economic policies which force African societies to “compete” for limited resources in a shrinking world, it is correct and necessary that we argue and struggle for the growth and rooting of literacy practices across Africa (Bamgbose 2000:3). Yet we have to ensure that this “growth” is not in its present stunted form. As we continue with the scramble to “spread” Universal Primary Education (UPE)<sup>12</sup> it is illuminating to remind ourselves how relatively recent compulsory state education is globally.<sup>13</sup> From the eighteenth century, there was a shift in Britain from literacy being learned as part of daily life in various ways for different purposes as part of a “multiplicity of literacies” that then existed to the notion of “a single, standardised, schooled literacy” in the twentieth century. Cook Gumperz also notes that the movement from “a limited home-based learning” to school literacy involved great changes in terms of what was expected from literacy in this time of “the great transformation” from a mainly agrarian society to the development of the modern industrial state in Britain (and the USA). The industrial revolution took the whole 19th Century to complete. But it was not the Industrial Revolution that led to literacy and schooling, although this is a popular misconception. Many people could read and write a little, they were “minimally literate”. Over time the expectation grew for more reading and for reading unfamiliar texts, but the fact was that “the literacy of a substantial proportion of the population can be seen as preceding industrial development, rather than the reverse” (Cook Gumperz 1986:23).

Referring to settings for literacy learning, Glenda Bissex (1984:98) says very simply:

A first grade classroom is by no means the only place for a child to begin reading – and maybe it is not even the best place to begin. Throughout the five thousand years or so that people have been reading, many children have been taught to read at home. Their teachers have been parents, siblings, relatives, servants, masters, governesses, tutors or playmates. In some societies, this sort of teaching has even been commonplace. Perhaps reading is, as Margaret Mead suggests, an apprenticeship skill.

The new literacy studies (Street 1995, Barton 1994) have given rise to several studies that document the variety of ways that literacy is part of people's cultural practice in different social situations and not necessarily forming part of schooling (Scribner & Cole 1981, Scollon & Scollon 1981).

At the dawn of the twenty first century, we can see how the rapid imposition of UPE in Africa, carried out through anti-pedagogical language policies, has been in many ways at best a misguided, generally ignorant and often a brutal extension of "schooling literacy" across vastly diverse social and cultural terrains. The effects of such "modern education", as Margaret Mead (1943:627 in Taylor 1983:79) already warned in 1943, is to deepen the "discontinuities" in the lives of many people (see also *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee). In Africa, societal intellectual output suffers the scars left by the dulling of the creative impetus of many teachers and children.

This is extraordinarily difficult to address, in no small part because of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1994) has called the "colonised mind" and Neville Alexander (2002:119) has termed a "static maintenance syndrome" where people keep their languages alive for home and community functions but do not see the point of trying to develop and modernise them for high status functions in economic, political and cultural domains because they view them as somehow "inferior" to English (or another colonial language). Symptomatic of the paralysing effect of the hegemony of English, it is at the same time,

... no more than the continuing neo-colonial malaise of most African states, the economic and to some extent also the cultural dependency of the continent on the largesse of their former colonial masters and on other countries of the North. (Alexander & Bloch 2004:3)

Although these phenomena become manifest at different levels – social, cultural and political – they originate and settle in as affective responses to something gone wrong in the hearts and minds of individuals, and thus become deeply rooted psychological patterns of thinking and feeling.

But history shows that time will force change. The pilot projects which I discuss below have come into existence precisely because we recognise that there are always alternatives<sup>14</sup>, which involve different possibilities and more humane ways of doing things.

## Making changes – opportunities and frustrations

*What is basic to the development of literacy, I would argue, is the same as what is basic to its full exercise: the empowerment of individuals to speak freely in such voices as they have about matters that concern them, matters of importance, so that conversations may be nourished. The most debilitating suggestion in our dominant metaphors for literacy is this one: that a language must be learned, a voice acquired, before conversation can begin.*

(Robinson 1990:264)

In 1992, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) began its work – first in alternative education but soon concentration focused on multilingual education.<sup>15</sup> In 1994, as the new government took office, we entered a phase characterised by the opening up of a "window of opportunity" (Bloch & Alexander 2003:117) for change. A period of policy and curriculum reform was underway in South Africa, providing on paper, and to a certain extent in practice, the conceptual and actual space for intensified research, debate and action (for an analysis and description of educational struggle work prior to 1994, see Christie 1991). During this time, PRAESA's work has consistently informed and shaped government policy formulations for multilingual education at national and regional levels<sup>16</sup> and early literacy.

In order that the indigenous African languages be afforded equal status to English and Afrikaans, eleven official languages were proclaimed<sup>17</sup> and a Language in Education Policy (LiEP) promulgated in 1997 which follows the constitutional obligation to recognize our cultural diversity as a valuable asset and to promote multilingualism, the development of African languages and respect for all languages used in the country. In terms of a language in education approach, the LiEP supports and promotes "additive approaches to bilingualism"<sup>18</sup>. Official government policy in early childhood is thus mother tongue education up to (at least) grade 3, with the learning of at least one additional language as a subject from the Reception Year, and the possibility of using the mother tongue as a co-teaching medium indefinitely.

Among several others, the following curriculum related policy recommendations came into being with implications for literacy:

- The LANGTAG (Language Plan Task Group) process (1996) established the need for additive approaches to multilingualism in education and referred to the need to research and consider approaches to early literacy (see LANGTAG Recommendation 8 Ch 4, Bloch 1996:10).

- The needs of young children from birth to nine years fell under the umbrella of Early Childhood Development (ECD), i.e. up to the end of grade 3 (DOE White Paper 5 2001a:8). This measure was introduced to “bridge the gap”, between the non-formal pre-school years and formal schooling.
- Provision was made in policy for one preschool year, the Reception year for all 5 and 6 year old children (DOE 2001a:13).
- Curriculum 2005 (and later the Revised National Curriculum Statement) was introduced for General Education as a “... move away from a racist, apartheid rote-learning model of learning and teaching to a liberating, nation-building and learner-centred outcomes-based one” (DOE 2001b:5). It involved several statements about literacy teaching and learning.

Essentially teachers were expected to move away from the “reading readiness approach” and realise that 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” (DoE 2002:9). The actualisation of these language and curriculum policy recommendations would allow for the implementation of a “mother tongue based” system (Alexander 2005:3) of education and the development and promotion of appropriate child-centred approaches to literacy teaching and learning.

However the ambivalence of the government towards embracing the challenge of using African languages in education had already begun to manifest itself in the policy development processes of language and curriculum. Rather than being mutually reinforcing by being thought through in reference to each other, they were conceived of and kept in effect, separate (Bloch 2000:63–64).

As time passed, there was silence regarding the relationship between the National Language Policy and the curriculum implementation process. This is vividly illustrated in the July 1999 “Call to Action” of the Minister of Education, Professor Asmal, who outlined nine priorities of “Tirisano”<sup>19</sup>. Although his second point was “We must break the back of illiteracy among adults and youth in five years” (DOE 2001b:7), the word “language” does not appear in any of the nine points<sup>20</sup>.

An ongoing situation emerged which consisted of opportunities and frustrations in schools and among language specialists and activists. The emphasis of the government on OBE (Outcomes Based Education) to the neglect of developing implementation strategies for the language policy meant that suggestions made by us at PRAESA (and others) for addressing the language issue effectively fell on deaf ears for several years. The obfuscating (English) OBE rhetoric that framed the new curriculum (Curriculum

2005) and its “assessment driven” focus has definitely detracted from what were clearly in some cases sound and useful pedagogical strategies for improvement. Some of us at the time argued that this was going against the fundamental learning principle of building on the learners existing knowledge (in this case the learners were teachers). Another way of describing the loss of balance that came about through the rapid adoption of an alien set of ideas leading to a great sense of frustration among many is the following:

There are two principles inherent in the very nature of things, recurring in some particular embodiments whatever field we explore – the spirit of change, and the spirit of conservation. There can be nothing real without both. Mere change without conservation is a passage from nothing to nothing. Its final integration yields mere transient non-entity. Mere conservation without change cannot conserve. For after all there is a flux of circumstances and the freshness of being evaporates under mere repetition. (Whitehead 1925:201 cited in Taylor 1983)

Much energy and time has been wasted, with educators at all levels becoming despondent and disempowered in the face of “mere change without conservation”. At the same time frustrations of one kind or another are inevitable aspects of change. It is also in some respects difficult to write with real analytic insight about the nature of “influence” within such a relatively short time period. But our struggles to intellectualise African languages (Alexander 2003) and the larger goal to systematise and normalise societal multilingualism in South African life must be seen against the often farcical backdrop of post-colonial language policy development in other parts of Africa, with the many glaring examples of implementation failure due to lack of political will by governments (Mazrui & Mazrui 1998:64–65, Alexander 2000:6–11). It is thus understandable that at times we have felt extreme impatience, as it has often proved to be the case that our ideas, insights and suggested strategies were “ahead of their time” – certainly in terms of policy implementation. Nevertheless, the enabling policy frameworks were in place and the influence of the projects that we have undertaken has slowly but surely gained influence. The overlapping and mutually reinforcing literacy programmes that I now discuss fall under the ambit of PRAESA’s larger Multilingual Demonstration Schools Project.

Language is as Language does<sup>21</sup>–

the Multilingual Demonstration Schools Project

In the climate described above, we initiated the Multilingual Demonstration Schools Project (MLDS) in 1995 to prepare ourselves to assist government to implement multilingual education which as we understood it was hovering brightly on the educational horizon.

Research was conducted in a selection of Reception Year and Grade 1 multilingual Cape Town schools during 1995 and 1996 in response to the frustration that was expressed by principals and teachers as pleas for assistance in the “mixed language”, previously “white” and “coloured” schools. They were to varying extents, experiencing problems with the “influx” of African language speaking children, seeking a better education than that which the townships could provide. Teachers who had been accustomed to “homogeneous” groups of children were totally unprepared for the linguistic and cultural mix that they found themselves facing in the classroom each morning. Information gathered from classroom observations and interviews with teachers confirmed our suspicion that many teachers were in desperate need of support and training – to learn about the significance of the mother tongue for learning, to learn second language teaching methods, to gain understandings and strategies for teaching emergent literacy<sup>22</sup> in multilingual classrooms and to know how to “handle” diversity in appropriate and sensitive ways.

The research also identified the urgent need for providing information for parents and teachers about the new Language in Education Policy, i.e. the benefits of mother tongue and bilingual education. Apartheid education had left many parents and teachers with the sense that mother tongue education was the same thing as Bantu Education. Given the deeply oblique complexities of language, their response to blame mother tongue education, was understandable, but nonetheless wrong. For this reason, we wrote and produced our first trilingual publication, *Languages in Our Schools: A Family Guide to Multilingual Education* (Bloch & Mahlalela 1998) which was distributed widely to schools in the greater Cape Town area and adopted for this purpose by the Western Cape Education Department.

The challenge we were, and still are dealing with is one of working out how to move from the existing situation where the ex-colonial languages dominate to one where the indigenous languages of Africa become dominant (Alexander and Bloch 2004:5). At the same time, in terms of educational reality the situation was not then, and is not now, one of using *either* the African languages (mother tongues) *or* English, but rather the use of *both* in an additive bilingualism approach. In the classroom context, this involves finding and trying out ways to raise the status of Xhosa (in the Western Cape Province) as a language equal in use and value to English through the promotion and development of biliteracy, so that power is shifted away from English and towards African language use. To do this involves not only developing the conditions under which biliteracy can flourish, but convincing families and schools that this is desirable and necessary.

Our initial proposal aimed at addressing the problems identified in the 1995–1996 research outlined above, was to establish multilingual

demonstration schools in all of the nine provinces of South Africa, where we could try out different models of mother tongue and bilingual education, and develop related teacher training courses in partnership with the National Department of Education. Despite much positive verbal support for the importance and relevance of our proposal, no direct support was forthcoming and we thus went ahead with smaller initiatives to gather the requisite experience, insights and expertise for eventual implementation<sup>23</sup>.

My involvement was in the initiation of three intersecting kinds of activity to support and elaborate this intention – in a sense these gave rise to and unfolded from one another over time. They were all what we at PRAESA call “development research” projects – the Battswood Biliteracy project (1998–2003), the Free Reading in Schools Project (2001–2004) and the Culture of Reading Project (2002–2005). We use the term “development research” to suggest the necessarily practical and problem solving nature of our research efforts. Our intention is to respond in informed ways to a challenge by proposing, agreeing upon and then making changes over time, which include ongoing development – increasing human capacity and developing the necessary resources to improve conditions on the ground. At the same time we document carefully the processes we are going through, and reflect on these on an ongoing basis. With all of these projects we have a flexible approach, in the sense that we continuously evaluate and respond to the shifting challenges in what we believe are open ways, taking into account, but not allowing ourselves to be stymied by the deep societal difficulties that permeate all of our contexts.

### The Battswood Biliteracy Project (1998–2003)

*To write ... is to be forced to march through enemy territory.*

(Michael de Certeau 1984 cited in Rosen 1992:119)

*A classroom for new entrants must be an environment in which the child becomes aware of the need for reading and writing in everyday life.*

(Marie Clay 1991:97)

Many mother tongue experimental studies have been carried out in several African countries (Bamgbose 2000:48–96, Akinnaso 1993). Most have concentrated on teaching through the mother tongue only for the first three years of primary school<sup>24</sup>. From a pedagogical perspective this is not ideal, as among other things, research indicates that the skills required in an additional language for academic learning take (on average), five or more years to develop (Ramirez 1992). However, often these represented signifi-

cant steps in difficult political conditions. Thus, although most of these experimental situations have been subtractive<sup>25</sup> in nature, at the very least they show that the learning of other languages is not hindered by the use of mother tongue (Wolff 2000) and they “prove” that the use of mother tongue brings benefits for literacy and other learning.

Through the six years of work in what came over time to be called the Battswood Bilingual Project, we followed a mixed class of Xhosa and “English” (these children were in fact bilingual in Afrikaans-English) from their grade 1 year. We used Xhosa as one of the languages of teaching for initial reading and writing, alongside English which was the official teaching medium of the school and also introduced Xhosa to the “English” speaking children<sup>26</sup>. We hoped that by bringing about an additive bilingualism situation we would be able to raise the status of Xhosa as a language for use in print in the eyes of both the Xhosa-speaking and the “English”-speaking children (Bloch & Nkence 2000). A critical aspect of my role was to nurture and support a Xhosa speaking teacher (Teacher Ntombi)<sup>27</sup>, to work alongside the resident English speaking teacher. A personal goal of mine was to find out how children from relatively print-scarce homes would respond to regular opportunities to take risks to express themselves and communicate through using emergent writing. At the time, and even now, most children in orthodox classes are still only able to copy words and sentences by the end of Grade 3<sup>28</sup>.

The project gave rise to several insights which I summarise below.

We were able to find out how to use an emergent literacy approach to enable children, most of who came from “low literacy” homes, to become motivated to want to read and write for personally meaningful reasons. We did this by:

- creating a print-rich environment;
- hunting for Xhosa and English stories to create a classroom library (still a rarity in most classrooms across sub-Saharan Africa) and making our own reading materials;
- creating daily time for the teachers (a) to read stories to the children in both Xhosa and English and (b) for the children to explore books alone and with friends;
- introducing interactive writing (Robinson *et al.* 1990:11) as a way to stimulate writing in both languages, risk taking, invented spellings and one-to-one nurturing (Bloch 2002a:75).

In these ways we challenged existing notions and classroom practices such as that:

- having some mother tongue teaching means less English learning – therefore keep the mother tongue out of the classroom;

- children need to be taught through structured phonics-based methods because meaningful reading and writing can only come after the pre-requisite technical skills have been set in place;
- children become confused if they learn to read and write simultaneously in their mother tongue and an additional language, rather start with English literacy from Grade 1 and don’t burden them with the phonics and syntax of two languages;
- children should be introduced to a second language orally followed by writing, therefore do only oral communication until children know some of the language.

We experienced how the teacher’s own orientation to literacy and learning shifted as she took on the responsibility of communicating with the children in writing:

- Over time Teacher Ntombi worked harder at being a role model by trying to always write thoughtfully back to what each child was saying to her. She came to realize how important it was as she experienced positive reinforcement from the children’s initiatives and responses to her (Bloch & Alexander 2003:113). As they grew to trust her, many shared their concerns and asked for advice about their lives. They constantly showed her that they loved and appreciated her. She came to see how through nurturing and meaningful interaction, learning happens.
- She also had to work on technical aspects of her own writing, like making her handwriting neat, and using correct spelling and punctuation. Because of the relatively few close engagements with print that “our” children are exposed to, we felt that every opportunity was significant<sup>29</sup>.
- She had to be assertive about being a Xhosa-writing role model with some children who tended to want to use English. Although we never forced the children into using a particular language, Ntombi tried to persuade those who were resistant (and there were a few children who thought English was “better”) by consistently answering or initiating in Xhosa (Nkence 2006).

We learned how difficult but also important it is to involve parents and caregivers in reading with the children:

- Although most parents came to be supportive about their children learning to read and write in two languages, our attempts to bring them into the classroom to share stories and read were largely unimpressive. We knew that we were expecting a lot, as most Xhosa speaking families lived very far from the school and would have had to struggle to find the

taxi or train fare (apart from the fact that those of them who worked, had little, if any spare time). However, we came to realize that starting small *is* significant – and that even if only one adult decides to participate, this relationship should be nurtured<sup>30</sup>.

We experienced at first hand that if we want children to become readers in their mother tongue, they have to have access to appropriate reading materials. This first principle was demonstrated on a weekly and even daily basis. Because we needed storybooks in Xhosa, we felt for ourselves the frustration of not having enough to read. The books that did exist then were mainly translations from Europe, Britain and the USA (Bloch 1999:45). We discovered many problems with the quality of translation into Xhosa. Several stories had mistakes that could “confirm” in the minds of skeptics that Xhosa cannot be used in the same way as English. At that time, arising out of our wish to give the children at Battswood opportunities to learn to read in authentic ways, and help counter the fact that only particular types of texts were available in English (Bloch & Alexander 2003:104), I facilitated a PRAESA trilingual year calendar in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa to use in schools<sup>31</sup>. In 1999, to do the same for teachers, I co-ordinated the production of a PRAESA Year 2000 trilingual diary for teachers.

By the time the children reached the end of Grade 6, we had amassed documentation to illustrate how they were becoming confident and enthusiastic readers and writers of both Xhosa and English. Most were able to read and write equally in two languages, though some preferred using one or the other language (Bloch 2005b:22), and their work showed that the development of their English competence was not harmed despite the fact that they had, unlike most African language-speaking children in “ex white or coloured” schools, experienced a significant proportion of their teaching through Xhosa.

### The Free Reading in Schools Project (2001–2004)

*We come to every situation with stories; patterns and sequences of childhood experiences which are built into us. Our learning happens within the experience of what important others did.*

(Bateson 1979:13 cited in Gregory 1996:26)

Although we knew from our own experience and from research how vital story reading can be for learning and creativity, for some time I hesitated to “push” the storybook line. Partly this was because the task was daunting and seemed outside of our scope of work, but also because I was cautioned by discussions in the North, which urged against forcing a middle class mode of literacy learning onto immigrant and working class children, and pro-

moted valuing and supporting the diversity of literacy practices in the homes of children from different cultural backgrounds (Heath 1983, Gregory 1996). At Battswood, however, the children’s enthusiasm for stories and reading in both languages was palpable. Jerome Bruner’s statement about young children and stories sums up what we observed on a daily basis:

... while young children are notoriously wondering in their attention, they can be kept in a state of rapt and prolonged attentiveness by being told (or read – CB) compelling stories. There may be something to be learned from this observation. (Bruner 1966:116)

Thus it was our Battswood experience, together with reading Krashen’s research into Free Voluntary Reading (1993) and Elley’s work on the significance of free reading on first and second language learning (Elley 1991) that convinced us of the need to examine the notion and reality of reading for enjoyment in South African contexts more closely. We decided that though there are clearly various roots of literacy to be built upon (Goodman 1984:103), if we want to enable African children to learn to “read by reading” (Smith 1978) and make learning to read easy, they needed to be able to experience and choose from various genres. Moreover, children need what Tolstoy (1943:143 cited in Vygotsky 1962/1978:84) called the “general linguistic context” for vocabulary and concept formation:

When he [sic] has heard or read an unknown word in an otherwise comprehensible sentence, and another time in another sentence, he begins to have a hazy idea of the new concept; sooner or later he will ... feel the need to use that word – and once he has used it, the word and the concept are his ... But to give the pupils new concepts deliberately ... is, I am convinced, as impossible and futile as teaching a child to walk by the laws of equilibrium”.

We thus conceptualised the Free Reading in Schools project (FRISC). Its actualisation coincided with the Western Cape Education Department’s literacy strategy for 2002–2008, launched in 2003. It included the compulsory introduction of a “literacy half hour” in all schools and the supplying of “100 books” over time into every Grade R to Grade 7 classroom. Thus the FRISC became an opportunity for PRAESA to influence the nature of the literacy half hour<sup>32</sup>, and to make suggestions to teachers about using their “100 books”. The intention of the FRISC was simple: to introduce and demonstrate regular reading for enjoyment in appropriate ways, mainly but not only in the mother tongue, to describe its impact, and to support teachers in an ongoing manner. Our main findings were simple too. The children we observed and interacted with, loved being read to and reading for themselves in their mother tongues and in English, not least because of the sense engendered by the nurturing, non-threatening relationships that developed from regular sessions with the story reader-researcher<sup>33</sup>. We confirmed that there is not nearly enough appropriate reading material in

Xhosa for regular free reading. Moreover many teachers are unable to commit themselves to being regular reading role models; although they expressed themselves otherwise, their *actions* showed they seem not to believe in the significance of reading for meaning and enjoyment as part of the literacy learning process.

My understanding is that the teachers' own conceptions of literacy are embedded deeply within their personal language and literacy biographies (Busch 2006) and if this does not include the experience of how it feels to "get lost in a book", it is extremely difficult or even unlikely that one can pass on a passion for reading to others. Jerome Bruner (1966:124) brings us close to the crux of the matter as he discusses what it means to be an effective role model:

I would like to suggest that what the teacher must be, to be an effective competence model, is a day-to-day working model with whom to interact. It is not so much that the teacher provides a model to *imitate*. Rather it is that the teacher can become a part of the student's internal dialogue – somebody whose respect he [sic] wants, someone whose standards he wishes to make his own.

Our challenge is how to provide the kinds of interactive "effective competence" models for our own teachers and family members in large enough numbers. With hindsight, I note that I performed this role with my colleague, Ntombizanele Nkence at Battswood Primary School. But this is one-to-one nurturing, and is it not too slow a process for supporting a nation of teachers? There are no quick or easy solutions. At the macro-level we argue together with many others that the answer lies with effective teacher training supported by appropriate resources, which is the issue I now address.

### The Culture of Reading Project (2002–2005)

*We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way. When we first do something, we will probably not do it well. But if we keep on doing it, have good models to follow and helpful advice if and when we feel we need it, and always do it as well as we can, we will do it better. In time, we may do it very well.*

(John Holt 1976/2004:14)

Accepting and promoting approaches to early literacy learning that support the repositioning of stories from the periphery to the centre implies that if there is not enough to read, something has to be done. This is a classic "chicken and egg" situation where publishers claim there is no market for children's reading materials in African languages. *Yet there can be no demand unless the benefits and joy of reading are demonstrated.* The cross-disciplinary cycle of collusion<sup>34</sup> (unwillingly or willingly) over time to keep children's

literature "supplementary" to basic textbook production for literacy development has to be broken.

Referring to Senegal, Fagerberg-Diallo (2001:155) discusses the significance of the "convergence of contexts" for helping to root literacy as a regular community practice among a group of "new literates" and others in Pulaar, a Senegalese local language with a recent written tradition. One context was "imposed by the outside" where a national or international development project created conditions in which people needed to read to be part of the economic process. A second was "internal", created by the new readers themselves who became activists for getting others to learn to read and write the local language so as to use it in important community functions. The third context was "promoted" in the sense that during the process, good books were developed and effective teacher training was undertaken: "Very simply, the more books there are, the more that people read; and the more that they read, the more they want to continue to learn" (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001:156).

Fagerberg Diallo also makes the point that it was in fact humour that inspired people to read the books that have been published in Pulaar since the 1990s. She quotes the following statement by an editor who read one of the most popular novels when it was still a manuscript, called *Ndikkiri Joom Moolo*:

I would sit on the sidewalk reading from Ndikkiri. With each page I could barely keep from laughing out loud as I sat alone in the street. Each time this would happen to me, I would get up and look around to make sure no-one had noticed me, fearing that someone would think I was crazy. The next day I would entertain my friends with stories from Ndikkiri while we drank tea together. In the end, all of my friends who were literate in Pulaar could hardly wait for this book to be published. (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001:164)

We have been mindful of the fact that though such demonstrations are inspiring, getting good books into the hands of people is not enough<sup>35</sup>. Equally important challenges are those of ensuring effective book distribution (Wagner 2001:8) and training or orienting teachers and others towards reading and writing (Bloch 2005a:77).

Ours is one of a number of pioneering projects that are taking place in the interests of culture of reading development. The development of a "culture of reading" has become widely accepted as desirable and necessary in South African society, although it is often assumed that this is mainly to happen in English. Essentially our aim has been to contribute to establishing and consolidating a culture of reading using the three languages of the Western Cape – English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, so that we would begin to have a body of high quality and inspiring mother tongue texts at all levels. Collaborative ventures with publishers, would encourage them to undertake the task of

taking further African language publishing risks in the interests of promoting a multilingual culture of reading and writing. Several insights and related challenges have revealed themselves through the PRAESA book production process, and I discuss those which I consider to be most important below.

### Supporting African literary artists

Given that reading for enjoyment is not part of many people's past or present reality, it is unsurprising that there is a dearth of African literary artists with the necessary relevant experience to write and illustrate children's stories – the domain, small as it is, is dominated by “white”, middle class people like myself. The relevance of children's literature for laying the intellectual foundations of African language development has to be made increasingly apparent to potential and existing African literary artists if reading and writing once again is to be rooted in modern African society. Hence the importance of providing opportunities for developing these talents through, for instance, writers and illustrators workshops.

### Creating a common store of literature

Another crucial related aspect is that through the collective efforts of our and other “culture of reading” projects, space has been created for discussion about the nature of South African, or more widely, African, children's literature. This is both in terms of cultural (including visual) content and language. PRAESA has begun to explore in some detail the ways that the “... ‘disruptive’ and reconstructive potential of translation as a social practice ...” (Alexander 2005a:6) can be harnessed, not only to increase the stock of books available in different languages<sup>36</sup>, but also to build a sense of common identity among children from differing language and cultural backgrounds<sup>37</sup>. It is for this reason that we have concentrated on creating a common store of literature at this point in time (Alexander 1990:137–138). The kinds of cultural interpretations and negotiations that arise when translation decisions are made collectively mean that

... translation and interpretation are the archetypal forms of what we now call inter-cultural communication. Translation is the graphical counterpart of the oral process by which peoples have since time immemorial through interaction in countless different modalities mutually influenced and, thus, “developed” one another. (Alexander 2005a:7)

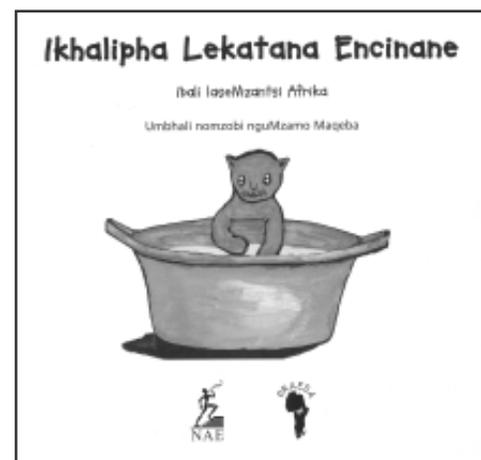
Multilingual reading materials production thus becomes part of an authentic process to address the intricate work of bridging the “apparently unbridgeable rupture” between tradition and modernity in sub-Saharan Africa (Alexander 2005a:7). It involves, among other things, the reinterpretation and realignment of indigenous ideas and visual forms with those from

a long tradition of European and British children's print literature that already occupies a patch (albeit a tiny one) of South African and African cultural life. It will also create an opportunity for all the main cultural tributaries that make up the river of South African culture (African, European, Asian and modern popular American currents) to flow together into an ever-changing mainstream experience that is accessible to all our children, who are tomorrow's decision makers<sup>38</sup> (Alexander 1996).

One of the challenges we face in situations of scarcity is that every effort seems to be only a “drop in the ocean”, but at the same time a precious drop, and there is thus a tendency to try and achieve all things with each bit of material produced. We have to achieve a balance between allowing for free creative expression and making appropriate decisions that reflect considered values, positive role models and balanced perspectives for gender, age, rural-urban setting, disability, health, religion and so on. This is not to be politically correct, but a recognition that if we are to offer ways for all children to discover the joy of reading and come to experience it as personally meaningful and satisfying, they have to be able to find something of themselves in the text. It is when stories, including both their written and visual texts, are able to reach children at an affective level, “in a warm emotional context” (Frost *et al.* 2005:63) that they wield their magic and power. Sometimes rough, but authentic examples of the beginnings of this process exist in stories for young children. *Brave Little Cat* (Maqeba 2003), which arose from the first writers and illustrators workshop that I initiated and facilitated on behalf of PRAESA, tells a story about little Ra-cat, who had a lot to cope with:

*Ra-cat felt sick – as if there was a big storm going on in his stomach. He didn't know what to feel first. Anger, sadness or loneliness. And it was all his mom's fault.* (Maqeba 2003:2)

His mom was drunk and didn't care for him and he had to bear the derision of his teacher and classmates when he came to school dirty. But he finally found friendship and a home with Chicky, whose mother took him under her wing, saying “A young cat like you shouldn't be alone with all



The cover of *Ikhilipha Lekatana Encinane* (*Brave Little Cat*)

his sorrow” (Mqheba 2003:22). It is a compelling story *because* it is written and illustrated from the heart of the author, Mzamo Mqheba and it speaks to the themes of innumerable childhoods, which can be dealt with in a story in powerful but subtle ways.

I wrote *Let's Go* (Bloch 2002c) one of the first Little Hands series modelled on the European *Pixi* books, as an attempt to provide an example of a way to make economically viable, full colour, high quality, text-light little books for young children (Bloch 2005a:79). I invited Thembinkosi Kohli, a young artist to illustrate it. He had participated in our first writers and illustrators workshops where he produced *The Shadow* (Kohli 2003), a “scary” book with quite mature, unsettling images, which was suitable for older children, and had expressed an interest in exploring illustration work further. Because he had no experience of picture books for very young children at all, we worked together, examining and discussing a wide selection of picture books,



The cover of *The Shadow*



Pages from *Let's Go*

deliberating on aspects such as the kind of emotive atmosphere I wanted to create in this little “concept” story. In particular, we explored how preschool age children look and how to get a sense of the “little child” qualities that needed to be portrayed. He then went through several stages to create the final appropriate, gentle enough little characters and scenes that give life to the story.

One of the interesting factors to emerge through our materials production and distribution process is that the materials we make are often used by older siblings reading with younger ones. Many parents and grandparents do not read themselves and because there is so little to read in African languages, the books *are* the reading material for older children as well. Although we have not consciously planned making the materials attractive to a wider age range of children, in a sense, this is happening anyway in because of the socio-cultural experiences that writers and illustrators bring.

### Support for developing a culture of reading and writing

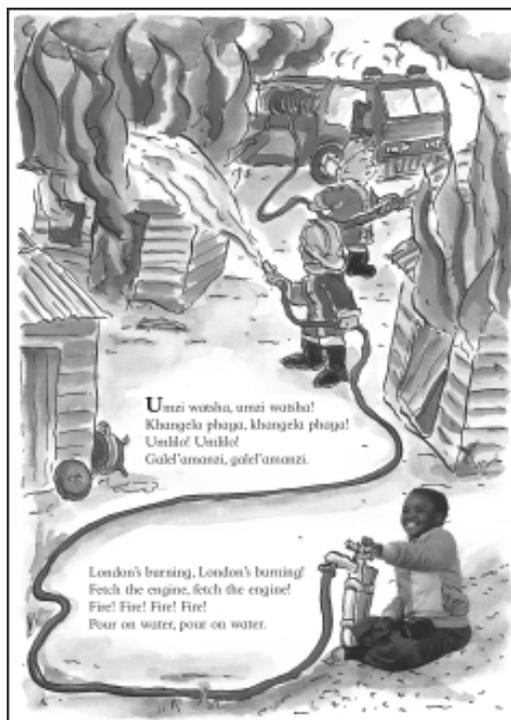
A big question for teacher education in Africa is “Who is there to train the trainers?” The Early Literacy Unit contributes to various training courses for multilingual education that cover the need and the ways to change teaching environments and approaches to early reading and writing, facilitate reading for enjoyment and develop multilingual materials. My discussions in this paper have indicated that we have overlapping early childhood education histories, both with Britain and with other African countries<sup>39</sup>. There are similar overlaps for multilingual education (Bloch & Edwards 1999:611). We have shared insights about the production of reading materials for training and use in multilingual situations. In particular, we’ve learned about and explored



Example of alphabet side of Ah Bekutheni (see overleaf)

language and design and issues for producing bilingual and multilingual publications (Multilingual Resources for Children 1995).

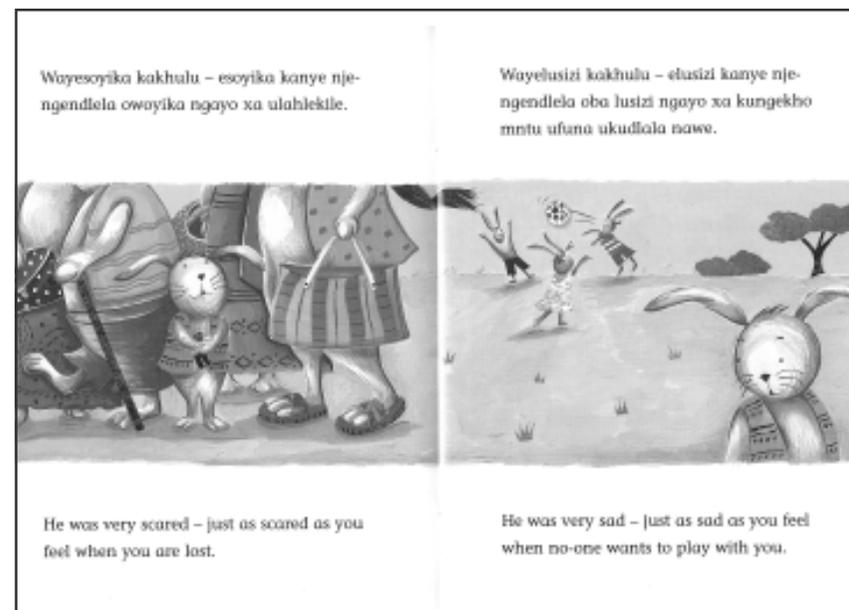
Although we have concentrated on producing mother tongue versions of books to promote mother tongue reading, we have also produced bilingual and multilingual materials for particular purposes. *Ah Bekutheni? An ABC of multilingual rhymes* (2001) is a set of Xhosa, Afrikaans and English Alphabet and Rhyme cards which Reviva Schermbrucker and I conceptualised on behalf of PRAESA and the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU)<sup>40</sup>. We wanted to



Rhyme side of A4 card

make an imaginative and flexible material to use for literacy teaching and learning. The use of a combination of photographs of real children with illustrations was intended to situate children in their everyday world, but take them beyond that in playful ways. The cards can be displayed as an alphabet or rhyme frieze or they allow all children in a Xhosa, Afrikaans and English multilingual classroom to have something to read. Each child or groups of children can get “close up” to print and pictures (at the same time). Teacher can be trained to use the materials to support and promote language awareness, intercultural communication as well as mother tongue and additional language learning.

*Umvundlana/The Little Hare* (2005), which grew from a collaboration with UNICEF to produce books for caregivers and children from 0–5 years of age on the theme of dealing appropriately with sickness and death, is bilingual in Xhosa and English. The decision to make it bilingual was (a) to reach caregivers who would read to young children in Xhosa, (b) to be available more widely for others to read in a lingua franca and (c) to be available for initial biliteracy teaching and learning. In terms of distinguishing between languages, the book was designed so that the illustration is in



A double page spread from *Umvundlana/The Little Hare*

between the two languages. Xhosa is on top, to avoid any interpretation that English might be valued more because of the relative positioning of the languages on the page. We chose to use the identical font and font-size for both languages, to have to book look clear and simple and the languages appear equal<sup>41</sup>.

We have also used opportunities as they have arisen to produce training materials that aim to help teacher trainers and teachers explore and recognise what good practice for multilingual education is, and suggesting ways to achieve it. The TELL (Training for Early Literacy Learning) materials involved a collaborative process between the PRAESA Early Literacy Unit and the National Centre for Language and Literacy at the University of Reading (United Kingdom). We adapted a set of early literacy materials for multilingual education originally developed for use in British primary school in-service training. These were reconceptualised and designed flexibly so that they could be of use in South Africa as well as in other African contexts (see: [tell@praesa.org.za](mailto:tell@praesa.org.za)).

We have found that there is immense value in training videos because they are visual and in the absence of real examples of appropriate practice, can be designed to demonstrate examples of good practice to trainers and teachers. Thus *Feeling at Home with Literacy* was produced to

show how learning to read and write can take place in contexts of use. The script is careful to indicate that this “story” of the day in the life of one little girl<sup>42</sup> was constructed to show the *kinds* of activities that children need to engage with, and the *kinds* of interactions they need with people so that they begin to develop the necessary insights, understandings and skills that will get them reading and writing. It does this by using one set of possible activities and interactions in an urban setting while making it clear that there are many others. The intention was to give the viewers a situation against which to consider and evaluate other practices and possibilities<sup>43</sup>.

## Concluding remarks

*How much hangs on the love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book! Instinctive. That's what it must be. The reaching out for a book needs to become an organic action, which can happen at this yet formative age. Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself.*

(Sylvia Ashton-Warner 1963:30)

I am conscious that the initiatives we promote can become no more than pockets of innovation, unless the current mode of mass education undergoes major changes, not least because it functions – in the name of progress and equity, as a mechanism for uniformity and standardisation. The obsessive use of standardised tests (supposed to ensure high standards of “basic literacy” across educational systems in many parts of the world, including South Africa) contradicts all of the information I, and many others, have gathered over the last decade. Referring to what she titles “The backwash of high stakes assessment”, in the North, Tessa Granger (2004:3) says:

Classroom practice has arguably become visibly shaped by assessment criteria leading to an instrumental approach to literacy teaching, and impacting upon teachers’ understandings of the nature of literacy development. A surface approach to literacy is likely to profile forms and features of text at the expense of meaning and purpose, so that from a child’s perspective, naming and knowing may appear to be given precedence over using and understanding language in meaningful contexts.

Apart from anything else, in South African and other African settings with the enormous economic and cultural extremes that exist between urban and rural contexts, I am unconvinced of the wisdom of emphasising “performance indicators” that base themselves on “international standards” in a climate where we are trying to inspire and motivate teachers and

children. The vast majority live under appalling conditions characterised by poverty, ill health and brutality, schools are *still* horribly overcrowded and ill resourced and teachers are *still* poorly or under trained. It would take the concerted intervention of many magicians to meet these standards now. The emphasis on systemic evaluation before teachers have had opportunities to explore the “new approach”, in any case creates a situation where “knowledge becomes reified and teachers feel pressured to concentrate on achieving set targets, not on developing children’s learning” (Granger 2004:3). Moreover, when results are not satisfactory, it sets individuals up to feel like failures, and the system becomes one where everyone is desperately looking for somewhere to pass the blame. We would do better to focus on a five-year phase of on-going teacher training and support where we (a) normalise the idea and practice of creating bilingual print rich classroom environments that welcome children and families, their knowledge and concerns and (b) nurture the creativity and imagination of teachers and children alike. Sensitive and constructive evaluation through methods like continuous assessment clearly can and has to be integral to this process.

The struggle thus remains one of continuing to push for appropriate pedagogical understandings and strategies for mother tongue-based bilingual education in a climate where there is a body of “more or less” mutual rhetoric and discourse. South Africa’s National Department of Education (DOE) has identified the following as priorities for attention:

Poor output of foundation phase learners in reading and writing; underqualified and unqualified reading and writing educators; dire shortage of suitable quality and quantity of learning and teaching support materials per classroom and school library; effects of large classrooms and overcrowding on teaching and learning; parents’ level of education and resources at home do not support the education system (DOE 2004)

As I reflect on the myriad of intricacies influencing the “literacy worlds” (Kenner 2000:1–10) of children, their families and teachers, I am reminded of looking through a kaleidoscope as a child and feeling amazed as I noticed the seemingly endless possible patterns shift into place and then changing before my eyes. It seemed remarkable that such variety could be contained in one tube. Amidst all this real life complexity, people are often tempted to grasp at one or another “pattern” as the solution to problems<sup>44</sup>. In their enthusiasm, they tend to lose sight of the greater whole.

It is more useful to try and identify the consistent patterns that run through the lives of successful learners. Carole Edelsky (1989:170) refers to “literacy event universals”, and she says the main one is “... the use of a

graphic display as a graphic display (rather than as material for wrapping fish or insulating walls) so that it functions in social life”.

Hannon’s Literacy Framework (Hannon 2000:56) provides a reminder of the kind of universal literacy learning requirements children have.

#### LITERACY EXPERIENCES

<i>Learners need:</i>	Reading	Writing	Oral Language
Opportunities			
Recognition			
Interaction			
Models			

As the framework was developed in Britain, it assumes an abundance of literacy practices and resources. Of course, in Africa we can make no such assumption. Instead of a conclusion, I end with a brief description of the vision and work that is underway, which is going to help make readers and writers out of future generations of children in Africa, if not in a situation of abundance, at least one approaching sufficiency (Alexander & Bloch 2004:16). The Stories across Africa Project<sup>45</sup> is a logical progression of PRAESA’s work to further attempts to create, by cross-fertilisation on a pan-African scale, a common core of literature for children, which will be used in all of the regions of Africa. The regional teams that we have set up in each of North, East, West, Central and Southern Africa are collecting and translating stories which will be illustrated and published in three anthologies for children of all ages. Initially the publications will be in the five working languages of the African Union and five cross-border languages<sup>46</sup>, but eventually in as many languages as possible. We are using the spirit of the African Renaissance which is now inspiring work in South Africa and across the continent to intensify efforts to intellectualise the African languages. For this to be sustainable over time, the foundations can and must be laid in early childhood.

#### Endnotes

- 1 PRAESA is an independently funded research institute, which has as its focus all aspects of language policy and planning, and implementation of multilingual education in South Africa, and elsewhere in Africa.
- 2 I borrow this phrase from Halliday, 1975, as cited by Yetta Goodman (1984:102).
- 3 At the time, the fact that this was indeed, “mother tongue” pedagogy largely eluded me. It was only when I returned to multilingual situations that I realised the implications of this and shifted out of my own ‘monolingual habitus’.
- 4 Increasing support comes from brain research. See for example <http://www.readingonline.org/critical/coles.html> and Ellis and Toronchuk (2005).
- 5 Denny Taylor (1983:87) shows how channels of written communication are “part of the very fabric of family life” in her careful documentation of literacy use in middle-class US families.
- 6 Although a minority of children grow up in monolingual English homes, for the vast majority it is usual to speak one or more indigenous African languages at home and to learn to understand and communicate in other languages at some point during childhood in more or less formal ways. One or more of these languages, although they may be variously termed “2nd”, “3rd” or the more generic “additional” languages, are often in effect, foreign for many children.
- 7 In South Africa in 1990, the estimate was that 6.4 million children were aged six or younger, and half of these were under three. 5.3 million were African. At least 3.5 million were extremely poor as they lived below the Minimum Living Level (NEPI 1992:15).
- 8 These included compensatory programmes, such as MATAL, Hippy, Highscope (Tree and Grassroots), Waldorf Education (Baobab) and the Montessori approach (Woza Bona), all examples of various adaptations of progressive early childhood pedagogy. None of them had yet developed approaches to incorporate early literacy pedagogies into their programmes (Bloch 1994b:2).
- 9 Apart from any other reasons, the unconscionable distress and intellectual paralysis caused by the fact that generally from grade 4 all textbooks and learning materials and all testing and exams were and continue to be in English accounts for this.
- 10 Among other research, work by Stanovich (1986) suggests that children who start school with little experience and knowledge about literacy soon start to feel a sense of failure as they find themselves not coping, and as the texts get more difficult, they try to read less, and thus have fewer literacy experiences than children who are coping well (cited in Raban 1997:23).
- 11 This is changing, slowly but surely, particularly in the Western Cape, where the Western Cape Language Committee, one of the structures set up by government to ensure the systematic promotion of multilingualism, has instituted a process of usage of the three regional languages in high status functions.
- 12 This began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 establishing the right to education for all, and free and compulsory elementary education (EFA:27-28), with the accompanying ‘natural’ assumption that one of the primary tasks of UPE is to teach literacy.
- 13 As Jenny Cook Gumperz (1986:26) reminds us, in Britain it was in 1870.

- 14 I owe this simple but profound insight to many conversations with Neville Alexander.
- 15 In fact it continued to deepen work begun by Neville Alexander and colleagues at the National Language Project, a previous NGO which concentrated on language issues in the 1980s.
- 16 This was led by the Director of PRAESA, Neville Alexander, who has in this period chaired several government policy processes related to language and continues to be consulted at every level, both regional and national, on issues of language planning and policy.
- 17 Under Apartheid, English and Afrikaans were enforced as the two official languages. African languages were only used as languages of instruction for the first few years of primary schooling and were the medium through which “Bantu Education” (an inferior system of education aimed at keeping black people in lowly positions in society) was conducted.
- 18 Based on research evidence about the benefits of mother tongue learning (Cummins 1996) and bilingualism (Ramirez 1992), this implies that learning is most effective when strong foundations in the mother tongue are established to which one or more languages are then added (rather than replacing it).
- 19 A Sotho word meaning “working together”.
- 20 It is both fascinating and thought provoking to note that in the DOE 2001 publication, *Education in South Africa. Achievements since 1994*, the only reference to language is in the section “nurturing multilingualism” as a “Value in Education”, where it is stated: “We are committed to providing an initial grounding in mother tongue education. We are considering ways to increase second language learning” (DOE 2001:20–21). The Language in Education Policy of 1997 is omitted completely. It is neither a point of reference or referred to in discussion.
- 21 I have adapted this phrase from Halliday: “The child knows what language is because he [sic] knows what language does” (1969:27 in Goodman 2003:358).
- 22 For instance, many teachers have told me that they could not see how children actually learn to read and write when they had not yet got the skills, nor could they see what their role as a teacher could be if it was not to teach the skills first.
- 23 In 2005, exactly a decade from when we proposed a partnership with government for the development of the MLDS process, the Western Cape Education Department is poised to implement a mother tongue based bilingual education system.
- 24 An important exception is the six-year Ife project in Nigeria (Akinraso 1993).
- 25 This means that the mother tongue is replaced, rather than added to after three or four years, by another language.
- 26 However, our concentration was on Xhosa. With the wisdom of hindsight, we realised that we should have followed exactly the same process with the “English” children – i.e. supported biliteracy in English and Afrikaans. At the time, we did not have the insight or resources to do so, and our priority was Xhosa.
- 27 My colleague in the Early Literacy Unit at PRAESA, Ntombizanele Nkence, who had at the time recently graduated from teacher training, took up this post and worked tirelessly with the children for the entire six year period.
- 28 In case one needs “official” evidence, national and local government literacy assessment results continue to highlight the importance of addressing the issue of children’s literacy, and I believe particularly their writing. Most Grade 3 and Grade 6 children in the Western Cape are unable to read at grade level (See: media statement issued by the Western Cape MEC for Education, on 25 May 2004). The problem that is endemic with reading, is that children learn to decode, but don’t understand what they are reading, and with writing, they copy sentences but cannot compose their own text. In the recent grade 3 learner assessment study in numeracy and literacy on 963 children in 28 WCED schools, using the JET Mahlaha literacy and numeracy tests, the following pertained for the three components for literacy: word recognition: 69.8% average correct, sentence completion: 52.8% average correct, comprehension of passages: 26.2% average correct.
- 29 I think that this fact needs to be taken into account in print-scarce education systems. All children require enough time to learn to spell, and it takes longer when there is so little reading going on. Thus I feel that we need more time than what is appropriate in “literate” communities. This is an important consideration for assessment.
- 30 This understanding has finally led us to a small but growing family literacy project which my colleague in the Early Literacy Unit, Melanie Zeederberg is facilitating in a bilingual English/Afrikaans school community.
- 31 This gave rise to insights and debates around language status and terminology: the children and teachers realised that Xhosa could be used as an equally functional print language as English, and showed an interest in comparing how we “say” things in different languages; there were contested words in Xhosa for the months of the year, etc.
- 32 The WCED did not stipulate how the literacy half hour was to be used. The concept was borrowed from the UK’s “literacy hour”, which has several formal components, and I was keen to provide an alternative to this model.
- 33 While I guided the FRISC project’s conceptualisation and facilitation, most practical work was undertaken successfully and completed with much dedication and enthusiasm by my colleague in the Early Literacy Unit, Xolisa Guzula.
- 34 This has included a range of people who could influence and persuade funders and government about the need to develop a children’s literature in African languages – publishers, writers, illustrators, teacher educators, teachers, researchers, and even to a certain extent, parents.
- 35 Those of us working in literacy education have all heard anecdotal evidence from many sources about books that gather dust “in the principal’s office”, “the storeroom” or “in the teacher’s cupboard”. I recently experienced this myself in a Namibian school, when I went with a group of education officials to visit and we offered a set of new mother tongue storybooks to a principal who was introducing us to a class of children whose teacher was absent. The children were sitting at bare desks, with nothing to do. We suggested giving the books to them to read. The principal refused this offer, telling us that they needed to first be catalogued. We were then shown to the “library”, a storeroom, where the books were laid to rest, on a dusty shelf, next to other piles of dusty textbooks.
- 36 PRAESA’s Translation Unit has worked closely with the Early Literacy Unit on all of our publications.
- 37 The power of translation becomes apparent when we consider how the missionaries had the “presence of mind” to translate the Christian bible “in unlimited quantities in even the tiniest African language” (Ngugi 1994:26). When we note further, as Dlodlo has (1999:321 cited in Alexander 2005a) how success-

ful the indigenisation of Christianity has been in Africa, as opposed to education, we do not need the brains of a rocket scientist to infer that educational achievements in all disciplines would improve greatly if texts were made available in indigenous languages.

- 38 As I will indicate below, we have embarked on a continent-wide project with the same fundamental intention.
- 39 This has been reinforced for me in the many discussions that I have had with participating colleagues both from the North and from other African countries on our training course, the Training of Trainers for Multilingual Education (2002–5).
- 40 Reviva Schermbrucker is a talented writer and book designer who at the time was working for ELRU, a Cape Town-based preschool training and resource centre.
- 41 The book, and several other PRAESA publications, were designed by Reviva Schermbrucker.
- 42 This could not have been made without the do-operation of a former PRAESA colleague Zanele Mbude, her family and friends, who all were all experts at “acting naturally”.
- 43 The video has been translated into Afrikaans, Xhosa, Sotho and French (for use in Cameroon and other French oriented African countries). Another “rural” video, *Building story bridges to literacy*, made for PRAESA by Margie Orford, Alan Munro and Carole Bloch, has a focus on teacher training for early literacy development in rural, print-scarce settings.
- 44 There are many examples of this. A very recent one is an impending national pilot programme that will be carried out as a partnership between the National DOE and a university from the USA to train Grades 1–3 children to write stories which will then be published to help deal with the shortage of appropriate reading materials. While I do not want to sound cynical, and have no problem in principle with publishing children’s stories, often such initiatives are driven more by the funding that is offered to run them, than considerations of the best ways to solve the problem at hand.
- 45 This is one of the five core projects of the African Academy of Languages, an official bureau of the African Union. (AU) (Alexander 2005b).
- 46 The AU languages are French, Arabic, English, Kiswahili, Portuguese. The five cross-border languages still need to be determined.

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