

A CASE STUDY OF XHOSA AND ENGLISH BILITERACY IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE VERSUS ENGLISH AS A 'MEDIUM OF DESTRUCTION'¹

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Introduction

In the following pages I describe an Early Childhood Development² (ECD) development research initiative carried out by the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) in a mixed language class of young Xhosa, English and Afrikaans mother tongue speaking children. The initiative has involved an attempt to demonstrate strategies that address how teaching and learning can be effective in multilingual classrooms³. In 1995 PRAESA put forward the concept of a Multilingual Demonstration School (MLDS)⁴ programme as a necessary step towards developing workable models for multilingual education in South Africa. Our idea was that one or more demonstration schools should be set up in state schools to develop mother tongue and bilingual education models for teaching and learning in the various multilingual contexts of South Africa. These would become centres for both research and teacher education and would provide much needed inspiration and guidance for parents, teacher educators and teachers. We had evidence of the need for such an initiative from research conducted by PRAESA in 1995 to find out how teachers in a selection of Cape Town schools were coping with the growth of mixed language classrooms in the Western Cape. Our findings suggested that neither teachers nor pupils were benefiting from the situation (Bloch, De Klerk, Pluddemann, 1996). Teachers had not been trained to educate children from diverse linguistic, class and cultural backgrounds, and generally an assimilatory ethos prevailed which promoted and valued English as

¹ I have borrowed this phrase that was used by Keith Chick at the English Language Education Trust conference in Durban in 1999.

² Since 1994, Early Childhood Development (ECD) describes the educational phase from birth to 9 years of age.

³ In doing so, I hope to show my respect for and thanks to the two teachers who I have worked with from 1999-2000, Erica Fellies and Ntombi Nkence. It is their hard work and commitment to the process that has achieved the progress I describe.

⁴ This idea arose out of a series of meetings PRAESA had with David Ramirez in Cape Town in 1994.

'normal' for educational purposes at the expense of any other language.

Although the Education Department has not been able to support the MLDS initiative by meeting PRAESA's request to provide a school and pay the regular salaries of the teachers, they have given verbal and moral support to the programme. Rather than waiting for such a school, in 1998 we initiated a revised version of the MLDS which took the form of a multilingual stream at one ex 'coloured' primary school.

It is an English medium school, where both teaching staff and parents believe that Xhosa speaking (and in lesser numbers Afrikaans speaking) families send their children to school to learn English. Guided by socio-cultural and political considerations about identity, anti-racism and democracy and substantial international research on bilingual education (for example, Cummins 1986), our basic pedagogical tenet in relation to which language/s to use for teaching has been that any additional language has the best chance of being learned well if it is added to a sound mother tongue foundation. This principle of additive bilingualism lies at the heart of the requirements of the Department of National Education's Language in Education Policy for Schools (July 1997).

We agreed with the principal of the school and the staff that we would explore, as far as was possible through the primary years, beginning with Grade 1, how to bring Xhosa into the class as a language of learning and as an additional language. The teachers here as with most of the 'coloured' and 'white' schools have always been and remain bilingual in English and Afrikaans⁵. The linguistic make-up of the children has changed over time - during apartheid the children were Afrikaans and English speaking, but by the mid 1990s, the majority were Xhosa speakers as the following table indicates.

March 2000 language breakdown of children Grades 1 to 4.

⁵ During the course of our work at the school, the principal has made several attempts to bring on board one or more Xhosa speaking teachers, and at the time of writing, the school has one such staff member.

Grade	Boys	Girls	Total*	Xhosa	Afrikaans	English
1a**	15	13	28	24	2	1
1b**	12	14	26	19	4	3
2a	23	19	43	35	0	7
2b	23	17	40	26	8	4
3a***	25	21	46	30	10	6
3b	25	22	47	38	3	5
4a	22	22	44	40	3	1
4b	18	31	49	30	7	6

Data collected by Thabile Mbatha March 2000

*Where this figure is inaccurate, a Sotho or Zulu speaking child makes up the total.

** Relatively low intake is due to the new age 7 entry limit to Grade 1.

***The multilingual stream

PRAESA employed a newly trained Xhosa speaking primary teacher, Ntombizanele Nkence (Ntombi), to teach at the school alongside Erica Fellies (Erica), an existing Grade 1 teacher. Ntombi's tasks were to raise the status of Xhosa in the classroom as an oral and written language, and as far as possible in the general school environment, to support and maintain Xhosa for the Xhosa speaking children, and to introduce Xhosa to the English speakers. In fact many of the so-called English speakers are actually Afrikaans speaking or English/Afrikaans bilingual at home. A desire for English instruction similar to that which exists in Xhosa speaking communities has developed among many Afrikaans speaking 'coloured' parents. Because the status of Xhosa is so much lower than that of Afrikaans, and because Afrikaans is a better resourced language in the Western Cape, we decided to concentrate our energies on Xhosa and English, though not to the exclusion of Afrikaans. Because we were all embarking on a new initiative, we felt that it would have been too difficult to begin such a programme using three languages for teaching and learning.

Reading and Writing in Africa

Ayo Bamgbose says of literacy in Africa that

Much as one can extol the virtues of oracy, particularly in a non-literate society, the fact is that Africans, in the context of rapid development and modernisation have been thrown into a world in which literacy has become an inevitable prerequisite (Bamgbose, 2000:3).

It is useful to remember that historically, reading and writing was not learned in schools. Today, in many parts of the world, it is actually still not only learned in schools. Studies into the literacy development of young children in various social, class and cultural situations suggest that before school and out of school, many children in 'literate environments' construct understandings and knowledge about the different ways that people use and produce writing in their lives. These are *in themselves* highly significant aspects of learning how to read and write (Brice Heath 1983, Goodman 1984). As these children assisted sometimes by siblings and adults, start to use written language, they explore how it functions and incorporate it into their daily play and other activities. Necessary phonic knowledge for sound-letter relationships, spelling of words and the physical skills for letter formation and conventional handwriting are learned as part and parcel of this process that organically initiates them into their community's particular socio-cultural practices of reading and writing. In so doing, already sophisticated oral language capabilities are extended to include print. School teaching then adds to, refines, clarifies, modifies or in some cases, hinders these emerging capabilities.

However, the above situation does not pertain widely in South Africa. Factors like poverty, great rural and urban differences, as well as contrasting cultural and linguistic practices allow most children few if any opportunities to begin to use or understand the uses of print in any language during their pre-school years. Most young children in South Africa live in rural conditions⁶, and they do not hear or use English regularly, nor is written language part of the daily activities of their families. Many children thus only begin to have experiences with written language when they begin primary school. (Bloch 2000).

⁶ The 1997 government statistics state that 35,2% of 0-14 year old African children live in urban areas. For 'coloured' children, the figure is 84% and for whites, it is 95,4%. In total, for this age group, 45% live in urban areas. In terms of a total for the whole population, 53,6% of South Africans live in urban areas.

This in itself need not be a problem, as we don't know of a cut-off point in childhood after which literacy learning cannot take place. However because of the way that literacy teaching takes place at many schools, it becomes a fundamental element of a combination of historical, political and educational factors inherited in Africa that combine to present most young children with a highly decontextualised and often meaningless introduction to literacy.

While the inception of the new curriculum, C2005 has meant that fresh ideas are beginning to find a place in some teachers' repertoires, heavily skills based methods continue to dominate in many situations (Bloch *ibid*). With the teaching of writing, doses of essentially mindless exercises are generously dished up to unsuspecting eager children to such an extent that by the time they can actually form letters, copy words and sentences (after two or three years), many have not yet ever written for any real purpose, nor do they have any desire or see any need to. It is not an exaggeration to say, that for many children at the end of the Foundation phase (Grades R- 3), writing is still a matter of copying shapes off a board. For most children, these teaching methods together with the chronic lack of reading materials in African languages make encounters with books rare, and reading is often taught without reference to books at all. Worse still, English soon begins to replace children's home languages as the language for literacy learning, and they are expected to swap a concentration on learning the relationship between what are at least familiar oral sounds and words with their printed form, for new and strange ones.

For these reasons, in addition to normalising the use of the home languages of children for learning, particular pedagogical concerns about the way that young South African children are introduced to reading and writing at school lie at the heart of the programme. It is these that I will mainly concentrate on in the following pages.

Strategies and Challenges

Since 1998, all of the children in the multilingual stream have had mother tongue support and maintenance for their learning.

Ntombi and Erica have worked in the classroom, sometimes together and sometimes separately to provide input and support and to act as role models for Xhosa and English. During the first two years, we emphasised a team teaching approach where the teachers worked at finding ways to make sure that what was being taught was comprehensible to all the children. Both teachers planned lessons together and worked together with the whole class, so that all of the children were exposed to content in both languages. An important challenge relating in some ways (but not only) to the structural realities of a team teaching situation, was to get both teachers to treat each other as equals, so that Ntombi came to be seen as a Xhosa speaking role model and a teacher of equal status in the eyes of the children and staff alike. Another was to get the Xhosa speaking children to feel comfortable enough to use Xhosa for educational purposes in the classroom, and not to be tempted to use English to the neglect of Xhosa. The following extract from Erica's diary in 1998 captures both the sense of initiative the two teachers began to develop as they explored working together and the self-confidence they saw growing in the Xhosa speaking children through this process:

Ntombi and I also tried team teaching at the same time. She would have a group of Xhosa speakers and I would have the English speakers. We would use a chart with a sequence of pictures relating to a story. A discussion (in each group, CB) about the pictures would follow, encouraging the children to speak out more freely e.g. "Nadeemah what do you think is happening in the picture numbered 4?" They would then listen to me telling the story. After this the groups would then formulate their own story, using the pictures as a guideline. The two groups then get together and a few children from each group would read their story. I would normally ask a Xhosa speaking child to translate their story to the English speakers. This I always find interesting because the majority of Xhosa speakers' hands would dart up, to volunteer to translate. This just shows that their confidence is boosted by them getting the concepts and ideas in their mother tongue. I am proud to mention that we used a particular story: 'Zanele and Tammy' that children came up with (Erica Fellies diary 1998).

In addition to team teaching, there have always been regular periods of mother tongue group teaching as the table below indicates.

Strategies developed in 1998 and built upon in 1999 and 2000

Team teaching

Both teachers (T1 and T2) work together with whole class:

T1 introduces lesson in English (E) or Xhosa (X); T2 summarises in the other language. Reverse next time. All children are exposed to content in both languages.

Mother tongue group teaching

T1 with X first language (L1), T2 with E L1 for L1 support, maintenance and development

T1 with EL1, T2 with XL1 for intensive modelling/ enrichment.

Especially in the first year, children were encouraged to discuss and to write in the language of their choice. At particular times, and for particular purposes, teachers made it clear that either Xhosa or English (and sometimes Afrikaans) was being used, or was to be used. From Grade 3, the children have also had regular teaching of the additional language as a subject in mother tongue groups.

At the time of writing, the children are in Grade 4. Logistical staffing changes in the school has meant that Erica, who had been with the class for Grades 1-3, could not take them into Grade 4. They therefor have a new class teacher, and decisions have consequently been taken about the nature of Ntombi's involvement with the class. It was agreed that she should reduce her engagement with the class to two days a week. She would continue to maintain and support Xhosa (subject teaching and medium for literacy learning) with all of the children, expanding and refining the strategies developed already, apart from team teaching, which has now ceased.

Nurturing Meaningful Literacy

The low status of Xhosa as a language for literacy in society, makes the early years of childhood critical ones for fostering the development of early positive attitudes to Xhosa writing in as meaningful and accessible ways as possible, with both English and Xhosa speaking children.

I have worked closely with the teachers to help them to consider ways of adapting their literacy teaching in a movement away from

"the sterile exercises of workbooks" (Robinson et al 1990:12)
towards an approach that includes:

- Showing the children that we have faith in them and how they tackle their learning
- Simultaneous exposure to Xhosa and English
- Providing many and varied encounters with print in both languages
- Promoting an ethos that values reading and writing as powerful, useful and enjoyable practices
- Encouraging meaning making and risk taking, especially with writing
- Making use of and developing understandings about the possibilities and potentials of translating and interpreting.

We thus read stories in both languages in the classroom, convinced that all children are entitled to come to know what Margaret Meek has called the 'tune on the page' (Meek, 1982). While we are clear that there are many ways to become literate that need to be respected and nurtured (Goodman, 1997), we fool ourselves if we believe that the majority of African children are receiving equal educational opportunities, and that they can somehow become literate when they do not actually ever experience the real power of reading that comes through many varied and meaningful engagements with books. We thus give children many and regular opportunities to 'wallow in books', allowing them to develop concepts about print in their own time, and in their own way, in Xhosa and in English. They have times to choose their own books and read alone or with friends and the children help each other to read in each others language. They are also encouraged to join a library, and to bring books to school to share and the teachers read daily stories with the children in one or both languages.⁷ As Ntombi explains

I suggested that they join the library. Most have been bringing books to school for me to read to them. They are even sharing the books. Even the English children are bringing Xhosa books to school for me to read to them. They said they wanted to bring the books, but can't read (them) so I suggested to them to bring (the books) to school for me to read to all of them. They are even bringing Afrikaans books, which I also try to read.

⁷ A serious problem exists with finding appropriate reading materials in Xhosa (as with other African languages). There are some translations from English or Afrikaans, but not enough and often these are badly translated. Virtually no original story writing for young children has taken place as yet.

(Ntombi Nkence, diary 2000)

Especially in Grades 1 and 2, but also in higher grades, the teachers have used rhymes, songs and the children's own writing to increase their store of reading material. They have got into the practice of writing up the rhymes and songs in 'big' on flipchart size paper, and using these to read and display on the walls. There is also formal reading in mother tongue groups, both English and Xhosa at regular times.

Families Reading

Recognising the significant role that parents and other family members can have for young children's motivation and learning, we have tried to engender family involvement in reading, both at home and at school. This is not easy to achieve. Many parents do not read and write, many often work long hours, use public transport which is unreliable, do not have access to libraries close to home, do not read much as part of their daily activities and feel that it is the schools responsibility to teach their children. We have tried two different ways to support reading with family and community members. One is to send something home something to read by typing rhymes, songs and short stories onto A4 paper. These are put these in plastic folders (sometimes bilingual, sometimes mother tongue) and sent home with the children. At first we concentrated on giving rhymes and songs that the children knew orally, so that they could read these easily, even in the other language. Reports from families have been to the effect that they enjoy sharing their child's sense of achievement engaging with both languages in print, and at first they were surprised and impressed that the children were able to do so.

The other way is for family members to share books at school. In 2000 we set up a 'reading room'⁸, and invited family and or local community members to come and read with individual children or small groups. Verbal response was positive, but physically only two women have participated. This kind of initiative needs ongoing effort on behalf of the school staff to help it grow and keep it alive. It is about the development of a new way of relating to parents or other

willing adults in the school. We have felt that the participation of even one or two adults is worthwhile; a seed has been sown, and slowly over time, such an initiative has the potential to grow. At present though, there is a general (but usually unstated) scepticism about the notion of free reading as having deep educational significance (Krashen 1993). It is demonstrated by the lack of emphasis on story reading at schools and because of this, those involved and committed to the process have the task of preventing what is intended as a 'reading for pleasure' process being replaced by remedial teaching, where skills get practiced.

Children Writing

A lot of work has gone into thinking about how the teachers approach the teaching of writing. During the first year we encouraged the children to try to write for themselves, in whichever language they felt most comfortable. The teachers worked at creating a 'print rich environment' and an atmosphere where writing for real reasons was happening often and regularly. In this way they shared with the children some of the authentic reasons that people have for writing and introduced the idea that even when you are learning to write, and can't yet do it 'properly', you may still want to write - you may want to 'say something' on paper and that it is acceptable to make mistakes as you learn. At first this was an arduous process for many of the children, who felt comfortable only with the safety of copying words of the board⁸.

It took the most part of the year to arrive at a point where we could see that the children were actually beginning to write for themselves. When I entered the classroom one day the teachers showed me some children's own writing about frogs after they had sung "Five Little speckled Frogs". The fact that Erica said, "We were astounded" indicates the importance of this moment for the teachers when it was proved to them that these young children can and will take initiative when given the opportunity. Their previous training had taught them to have little faith in young children's capacity for learning (Bloch and Nkence 2000). Although a very small and

⁸ The school identified a room that was essentially used as a junk room, and the caretaker helped to clear it and clean it up. The intention was to make it a pleasant and comfortable environment for quiet reading.

⁹ It was very interesting to notice how even in their first year of schooling, many children have already picked up attitudes about what they can and cannot, should and should not, do and what constitutes 'schoolwork'. Regarding language medium we found that during this first year, many of them were reluctant to try and write in Xhosa.

unconventional step had been taken, as the example of child's writing below shows, it offered us a real 'glimmer of hope' for future writing developments:

my Frog is green. I luv The frogs, frogs luyk to sot in the rod

Interactive writing

Because we wanted to get children to understand and act on the fact that like talking, writing can be used to communicate and express what they feel, think, imagine and know, we used Nigel Hall's ideas and suggestions about ways to get children to "write with their own voices" (Robinson et al 1990:11). These provided us with some of the tools we needed to allow the children to develop a sense of themselves as authors, i.e. people who write - and to become writers. We agreed that "Children, from the start bring to the authoring process their experience, ability and a commitment to imparting meaning" and that authorship is not "something which happened after children had learned to write neatly and spell correctly" (ibid). In 1999 we began an interactive letter-writing programme. Principles underlying this approach are that:

- writers have to take responsibility for what they write
- writers are motivated to write when a real audience exists which understands and cares about the meaning of what is written
- when the reader responds by using the same medium (writing back), the writer knows that the interest is real.

(Adapted from Robinson et al 1990:12.)

Letters

Over the course of the year a Xhosa speaking colleague, Babazile Mahlasela and I wrote letters in Xhosa and English to the children. Although we both visited the class regularly, we were both very busy, and told the children that we would love them to write to us when we couldn't visit. The teachers read our letters out loud, and then displayed them on the wall, for re-reading and the children wrote back in either language, but they were encouraged to use their mother tongue. In fact what tended to happen was that the Xhosa speakers responded in the language of the adult writer (indicating that they understood themselves as users of both languages), while most of the English speakers wrote in English. Many children found

their way into authentic writing through this process, which was somehow liberating, affirming and motivating while at the same time totally unthreatening. They confirmed for us that indeed it was "the experience of authorship which led to the refinement of writing" (ibid). The process then also broadened to include writing to others, like children in other schools who were to be pen friends, thank you letters, etc.

The following examples provide a glimpse of the letter writing process, which the children have engaged in¹⁰. Hopefully they will assist the reader to get a sense of the willingness, motivation and energy that we saw being generated in all of the children, irrespective of ability level, through this activity as well as the childrens emerging biliteracy competency. Spellings and punctuation have been left as they were originally composed. At a technical level, writing examples like these provide teachers with opportunities to assess each child's actual strengths weaknesses in writing (phonemic awareness, spelling, punctuation, composition etc), that can be used later for teaching specific skills.

Examples 1 and 2: The same child wrote both letters in 1999, one towards the beginning of the year and one later on. The first is a response to my 'introduction' letter, telling the children what I was doing and asking them about school. The second is one of a series of letters that several children wrote to Babazile, when she asked for their advice about whether she should take her little son with her to study in the UK, or whether she should leave him at home. Many children wrote with deep feeling about whether she should leave him behind or not(see example 3). She did have to leave him, and wrote for advice about Christmas gifts to bring back to him, and this particular letter is a response to this question.

1. Battswood Primary 15 February 1999 Gosport road
Wynberg
Dear miss Carole
We did sums
And
we couloured in awa coularing
books
I love you miss Carole
from O

¹⁰ The children have given their permission that we use (with sensitivity) some of their writings. Systematic and detailed case studies of the bilingual Xhosa-English writing development of a selection of children are underway and will be reported on in due course.

2. 14 October 1999
Molo miss Babaziolo
Imozulu yalapeKapa
Ishushu.
Nge cristmasi umtengele.
I moto I jini ne shethi
Bye-bye miss Babazile
From O

Translation:

Hello Miss Babazile,
The weather in Cape Town
is warm.
For Christmas buy him
a motor car, jeans and a shirt.
From O

Examples 3 and 4: Both are written by the same child. In example 3, C reassures Babazile that her child will cope without her, while example 4 is a letter to a class of children at another school, who were potential penfriends.

3. 8.07.99
Molo Miss Babazile
Miss Babazile there is nothig to waree are bawthe. plees dont waree
youre chilb is not goig to get lost
no that yuore child is fife-yar
from C

4. June 2000
Molweni bantwana bakwa Grad 3. Mna ndingathanda Ukubangumhlobo wanu. Ndizoku xelesa zonke izinto ngam. Ndiyazithana izinto ezihlekhisayo. Ndine nwele ezinkulu. Ndine ndlebe ezinkulu.
C

Translation:

Hello Grade 3 children,
I would like to be your friend. I will tell you everything about me. I love jokes. I have long hair. I have big ears.
C

Journals

Another form of interactive writing introduced in Grade 3 was that of journal writing. The idea of the journal is simply that it is a book in which two people write to each other. The assumption is that the teacher and child enter into an equal relationship. The child can trust her and exchange personal information safely, and the teacher is encouraged to write about herself as well. It gives teachers a unique chance to get to know their children, and to show empathy. The teacher generally doesn't mark the writing but it is

vital that she becomes an informal role model, who writes and communicates well and legibly, using correct spelling¹¹.

Each child was given a notebook, and Erica and Ntombi explained to them that there would be time for daily writing, the children could write anything they liked, that they would write back, and that they would respect the children's privacy, and not share what had been written with others without permission.

Both letter writing and journal writing have proved to be deeply satisfying practices for the children and for the adults. In an extract in her diary, Erica, described the whole class as "journal-crazy" and explained:

The children are so enthusiastic about their journals, and they don't see it as schoolwork; they get frantic when we leave their journals at home or if they can't find their journals. I remember one time when Ntombi was late and she had some journals with her, they basically attacked her when she came in because they had some things to write in their journals. They would also nag in the mornings to write in their journals. I absolutely love this idea...(Erica Fellies, diary 2000.)

The children write about their concerns, which range from everyday things like going to play in the park with friends or buying a new pair of shoes, to their feelings about personal matters. This entry in English shows how a child, who is not at all a conventional speller, does not let this stop her from expressing what she has to say in her second language.

28 October 2000

wan I go to Evettes haws I fil hapi w I play tha I fil sow mach hapi and w I cum hom I cray
wen I go to skool I fil hapi
Ann wen I weirk I fil sow mash hapi
Ann wun I came hom I fil sad

The issue of spelling is important. A lot of weight tends to be put by teachers on correct spelling. A good speller can appear like solid positive evidence of successful teaching and learning. At one point Ntombi expressed how she felt

... a bit worried about their spelling. Sometimes they have a good idea of what they want to say and some will even write

¹¹ Moreover, the teacher's understandings about how to do this well are also emerging through an ongoing process of expanding her individual ways of writing.

it down and make sense, but a few of them are battling with spelling. After every writing they do, I take all their words that they have spelled wrong and go over them (Ntombi Nkence diary 2000).

A significant body of research has dealt with the issue of emergent writing (Holdaway 1979, Ferreiro and Teberosky 1981) and invented spellings (Bissex 1981). Unfortunately, partly because of the limited investment into preschooling in South Africa (which is (developmentally) seen as the 'natural' arena for emergent writing to begin), and partly because of our relative isolation from innovative educational thought and practice prior to 1994, few teachers as yet have had the opportunities to realise the practical application steps that need to happen in the classrooms that arise from this research into early literacy learning. The spelling mistakes that young writers (or older inexperienced writers) make, are evidence of their resourcefulness and creativity as well as what they already know about the structures and sounds of written language. These early attempts need to be celebrated and nurtured into conventional spelling. Addressing the issue of early invented spellings, and referring to some examples of childrens writing, Gunther Kress explains how

...although the sense here is clear, the knowledge of words and their component elements is shaky. These spellings are based on having heard these words, not on having seen them: they are informed guesses in terms of the framings of the words and in terms of their grammatical function. (Again), if we take this insight seriously, we see that spelling rests on a prior knowledge of language as a visual phenomenon, knowledge of the look of words. What is clear from these, is that spelling from sound alone is not enough. Spelling is deeply embedded in the shape, the look of words and their grammar. And all of these depend on a prior sense about their meaning (Kress 2000:219).

Further, Stephen Krashen provides research evidence to substantiate his unequivocal conviction that improved spelling comes about most effectively through reading, as opposed to direct instruction (Krashen 1993:19). He explains how

The hypothesis that spelling comes from reading is confirmed by an experience familiar to all teachers: our spelling gets worse when we read misspelled words.(ibid: 11)

We believe that both of these insights point directly to the need to address the environment for literacy in African languages in print scarce contexts.

The investment of time and energy in real communication is highly valued by both parties, but particularly by the children, who literally glow when such individual positive attention is invested in them. Moreover, this kind of writing provides a natural way for home life concerns and practices to become part of the school curriculum. Nancy Hornberger suggests that such activity, which draws on as many of the strengths of a learner as possible, like a child's vernacular or local experience/ knowledge and use of mother tongue for writing, challenges existing linguistic power relations, and contributes to biliteracy development (Hornberger 1990). The following journal interaction between the teacher (T) and grade 4 child (C) provides an example of how many of the children have begun to feel empowered through this kind of trusting relationship:

C: 2 May 2001

A song, Things that you can see in the world that flash you at the night. God took air since and plow it away. Remember it's a song. I made it up.

T: Clever girl. Do you think you can make up a Xhosa song as well?

C: 7 May 2001

Kuyanet phandl sonke silele. Sivuka ekuseni inkosi ihambe nati. Amaphephe abeta ezofesitile. Sifikaesikolwen sitandazela uyesu Amen.

Translation: It is raining outside. We wake up in the morning and the Lord Jesus goes with us. Papers hit the windows. We arrive at school and pray to Jesus. Amen

T: Ayisemnandi. Uyifundiswe ngubani? Okanye nayo uyiqambile?

Translation: This is very nice. Who taught you, or did you make it up?

C: May 9 2001

Ewe ndiyi qwebile. Ndiykwaz ukuqwebha.

Translation: Yes, I made it up. I can make up things.

T: Ndiqwebele ke ibali. Ndizokupha iphepha.

Translation: Make up a story then. I will give you paper.

C: 06/06/01

Ndizakuyiyenza isiXhosa neEnglish.

Translation: I'm going to write it in Xhosa and English.

T: Intle lonto.

Translation: That's nice.

C: Akhuko nto endiyi ngokhontle 11/06/01

Translation: There isn't anything I'm not good at.

Teacher N: Ufuna ukuba yintoni xa umdala?

Translation: What do you want to be?

The extract below shows how important the journals have become for the children - it is one of several written at a time when the teachers were very busy, and didn't respond as quickly as the children would have liked them to:

10 October 2000

T: Nibangaphi? Bahlala phi abanye abantwana okhwela nabo?

Translation: How many are you? Where do the other children that you travel with live?

11 October 2000

C: Sibayi 7 sisonke sibaninji andinoku cazela amagam ethu.

Translation: We are 7 and I can't tell you all the names.

T: Bahlala phi?

Translation: Where do they live?

12 October 2000

C: Bahlala eHoutbay.M.A. road emaheyisini. I love you so much.

Translation: They live in Houtbay M.A. road where my mother works as a domestic.

13 October

C: Ndifuna ubhala nge english ngoku kodwa wena awufuni.

Translation: I want you to write in English now, but you don't want to.

T: Ndibhale ntoni?

Translation: What must I write?

No date

C: Andiyazi ukuba mawubhale ntoni.

Translation: I don't know what you must write.

No date

C: Khange undiphendule.

Translation: You didn't answer me.

No date

C: And today.

24 October 2000

C: Why do you say you are going to answer us but you not.

T. I'm going to.

25 October 2000

C: Once a pona a time there was a teacher called miss ntombi that teacher didn't want to answer back the children followed the teacher and the children shout and shout the end.

T. This Miss Ntombi is naughty. How can she not answer when children want answers. Do you want me to talk to her? Where can I find her?

Miss N

26 October 2000

C: I don't understand please will you answer me.

Taking Stock

We have been assessing the children's writing development in an ongoing way, among other things by collecting and analyzing examples of their work over time. In particular, we are collecting information on the same fifteen children. This gives us a good sense of different individuals process and progress.

Both teachers have kept a record of their work in progress. Some of the time, they have written a diary or notes. At other times, they have talked their thoughts onto tape, and we have also videoed them discussing their ideas and the thoughts about the progress the children are making. Sometimes this has been an onerous task - it has often felt that they have enough to do without having to revisit it all again. But the recording and corresponding reflection proves to be worthwhile - it throws light onto what has happened and provides new ideas for future directions.

As with most classes, some children have become fluent and some are struggling and give us cause for concern. As I have already indicated, the paucity of print materials and the relatively limited range of socio-cultural writing and reading practices among many communities in South African society contribute generally towards making the development of a culture of reading and writing slow and difficult. At Battswood (and arguably at most other schools)

relatively few close encounters with print means that for many children, spelling and general writing fluency takes time to develop. What is clear to us, is that the Xhosa speaking children, who are developing fluency in Xhosa reading and writing, are equally fluent in English. Using less English has not meant a loss for development in English. On the contrary, using Xhosa has brought gains for both Xhosa and English. The effect is different for the English speakers. Mother tongue maintenance and support for Xhosa, in an English hegemonic situation (at societal and at school medium levels) implies and provides a very different experience to that of mother tongue tuition in English with the introduction of Xhosa. We realised increasingly over time, that the situation makes it very difficult for the non-Xhosa speakers to actually come to learn to use Xhosa. We have noticed the extent to which the high visibility, dominant use in print and generally elevated status of English provides a strong incentive to learn English for Xhosa speaking children, as well as how the reverse holds true with Xhosa for non-Xhosa speakers. Although the English speakers have had Xhosa lessons, know some basic phrases, have some receptive knowledge, they see it as 'hard'. None are fluent like their bilingual and biliterate Xhosa first language peers. It is important to remember though, that most of these English children are in fact bilingual in English and Afrikaans and for them Xhosa is a third language. Their greatest gain at this stage is their open and positive attitude towards Xhosa speakers, the language itself and their willingness to try.

Visitors to the class have commented on the general sense of confidence and positive attitude children have towards learning and towards each other - within the walls of their room, the languages have equal status in their eyes, and they are curious and respectful of one another's ways of saying and writing things.

Most have certainly developed an enthusiasm for writing:

Our children have become very confident with communicating by writing because Mrs R gave us some jars the other day when we were doing art, and the children suggested that we write thank you letters to her. And then Aviwe also, out of her own free will, decided to write a letter of thanks to Mr and Mrs T for staying with her when she missed her lift on Friday. So I think overall they're pretty eager about their writing skills (Fellies, diary 2000).

Conclusion

At a parent meeting in March 2000, I was struck by the contrast of this relaxed and animated group of parents to the many mixed gatherings at different schools I have attended when Xhosa speaking adults sit in silence as the English speaking teacher awkwardly tried to get her message across. Here, because of the presence of a Xhosa speaking teacher, there was a normality of communication - people were communicating as equals. I asked for comment on the fact that it is often said that Xhosa speaking parents send their children to 'ex - coloured' schools because they want them to learn English, and they do not actually mind if Xhosa only happens at home. Two fathers began speaking at once. One explained

That would not be true at all. We do want English, if our children go to a township school, they come out and can't get a job because they don't know English well enough. But we're happy if they know English and Xhosa, because that's their culture, and they shouldn't lose it.

The other's words were "I am very happy to see what Teacher Ntombi has done for my child. It's the way things should be".

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