

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239764657>

ENABLING BILITERACY AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: REALITIES, VISIONS, AND STRATEGIES

Article · January 2009

CITATIONS

5

READS

25

1 author:



[Carole Susan Bloch](#)

University of Cape Town

26 PUBLICATIONS 56 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

2

Enabling Biliteracy Among Young Children in Southern Africa Realities, Visions, and Strategies

Carole Bloch

Writing from a multilingual education perspective, in this chapter I focus on the challenges facing early literacy and biliteracy learning and teaching in southern Africa, particularly South Africa. I give information about how the language policies and pedagogical approaches in Africa have tended to hinder literacy learning and the development of reading and writing practices in African communities. I provide examples of research and materials development initiatives from my place of work in Cape Town, the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA). I also discuss ways of addressing the urgent need to stimulate and support reading and writing habits in African societies by deepening the uses of African languages in print, particularly through the development of children's literature.

Kweli phepha, elibhalwe ngombono wemfuno engeelwimi ezininzi, kugqaliselwa ikakhulu kwimingeni ejongene nobugcisa bokufunda nokubhala kubantwana abasebancinci, kwakunye nokufunda nokufundisa ubugcisa bokufunda nokubhala ngeelwimi ezimbini kuMazantsi e-Afrika, ingakumbi eMzantsi Afrika. Ndinika ulwazi malunga nendlela imigaqo-nkqubo yeelwimi neendlela zokufundisa e-Afrika zithi zithintele ngayo ukufundisa ubugcisa bokufunda nokubhala, nokuphuhliswa kokuqeqeshwa kwabantwana ukuba bafunde ukubhala nokufunda ingakumbi kuluntu lwe-Afrika. Ndikwanika nemizekelo yophando neenzame zokuphuhliswa kwezixhobo zokufundisa abantwana ukufunda nokubhala kwindawo endisebenza kuyo eKapa, iProjekti yoPhando ngeMfundo engenye eMzantsi Afrika (iPRAESA). Ndixoxa nangeendlela zokujongana nesidingo esingamisekileyo sokuba zandiswe ngamandla iinzame zokuvuselela nokuxhasa ukuba iindawo zoluntu e-Afrika ziziqhelanise nokufunda nokubhala ngokuthi kuzikiswe ukusetyenziwa

Global Perspectives on Multilingualism, edited by María E. Torres-Guzmán and Joel Gómez. Copyright © 2009 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved. Prior to photocopying items for classroom use, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center, Customer Service, 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA, tel. (978) 750-8400, www.copyright.com.

kweelwimi zesiNtu kwizinto ezibhaliweyo, ikakhulu ekukhuliseni uncwadi lwabantwana.

THE EDUCATION-LINGUISTIC TERRAIN

All African societies are multilingual. Yet most children do not enjoy the normality of attending school where their mother tongue or a familiar language is the language of learning. When they do, it is not for long as the school quickly pushes them into learning in a language that is new to them. This is a major contributing factor to the enormous problems with literacy learning among children before and since the advent of universal primary education.

In the following pages, I focus on some of the ways South Africa is trying to address this disconnect of languages students experience, from my perspective as coordinator of the Early Literacy Unit at the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA). A multilingual education institute based at the University of Cape Town, PRAESA has been in existence since 1992. It is one of the few organizations in South Africa that concentrate entirely on language planning, policy, and implementation.

FROM THE COLONIAL TO POSTCOLONIAL STATUS: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

I now address the statuses of the languages in the South African context and outline what I perceive to be some of the key factors that have shaped early childhood literacy development in southern Africa.

The development of African languages in high-status functions, such as in teaching beyond the first few grades, in publishing scholastic books, in writing legal documents for the courts, and the like, has been held back by the hegemonic status of the postcolonial language, in this case, English, brought about by colonial conquest and postcolonial language policies. African languages have extremely low status, particularly as languages in print. This is evidenced by the kind of print we see used and displayed in both urban and rural settings. For instance, most signs in African languages are those that make sure that negative and prohibitive messages are understood, such as NO JOBS, NO DUMPING, DANGER, TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. Moreover, there is only one African-language daily newspaper in South Africa (in isiZulu), and no food or other commercial packaging uses African-language print.

It is safe to say that the power and status functions of language are marked most clearly in printed form. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1993) makes the fundamental point that while the dislocation of children from their mother tongues in school actually does not destroy the vitality of oral language, it has serious negative impacts on literacy development.

So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school . . . became divorced from his spoken language at home. There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community. (p. 17)

A fundamental principle in education is that appropriate and effective teaching begins with and builds on what children already know and can do. For young children this implies, above all, extending their strong suit, which is their oral language development, in various ways, including moving them toward insights and understandings about literacy itself. Since this happens so rarely for young African children, the "written world" that Ngũgĩ refers to rarely comes into existence.

The following general scenario would strike a familiar chord for many teachers across the African continent. From Grades 1–3, the language in education policy can vary (and change rapidly, depending on which politician is in power) from 3 years in the mother tongue to "straight for English," or something in between. Furthermore, there are situations (usually urban) that are multilingual in the sense that several languages are spoken by the children but frequently are unknown by the teacher. These children require special consideration, such as an "explanation" why mother tongue education is not feasible. Irrespective of the particular policy, most teachers tend to communicate with children and teach in an indigenous language that they and (most or all of) the children share. The impending switch to English, the ex-colonial and market language in early childhood development (ECD)—which includes nonformal preschooling and the "foundation phase" of formal education, Grades 1–3, referred to as the reception years—depends on the confidence of teachers. Teachers often do not know English well and do not have training in second- or foreign-language pedagogy. Thus, the switch to English is experienced by many teachers as profoundly disempowering in relation to their ability to assist students and to the students' abilities to do the schoolwork. Usually, from Grade 4 onward, the official medium of instruction is English and almost all reading materials (textbooks, etc.) are in English. The children have to write in English, and all assessment (which is almost exclusively written) takes place in English.

A strange, almost conspiratorial social arrangement has evolved in which all participants in the system “play the game” by pretending that learning actually is taking place in English. The true situation is that most learning in English is rote learning, and meaning making is expected or achieved only occasionally. Learning in English thus is reduced largely to exercises to get students through tests and exams. Apart from the few exceptions that prove the rule, children’s creative impetus and desire to learn are crushed.

The underlying assumption is that the ex-colonial language is a necessary condition for educational achievement, as knowing such language carries the possibility of entering the world of the markets, which is dominated by the ex-colonial language, that is, English. According to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the fact that people find it so difficult to imagine that African languages can and should be developed and used to perform functions that English, or for that matter French, can, reflects a “colonized” mind. As Ngugi (1993) states:

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people’s wealth . . . [but] economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism, this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised. (p. 16)

Similarly, people also find it hard to accept the observation, so often made by my colleague Neville Alexander, that only a small percentage of citizens actually need to know English well and that society, if it is to achieve real democracy and escape mediocrity, has to give people the choice of performing their everyday business in their mother tongue. Alexander calls what is occurring in many African countries, a “static maintenance syndrome.” By this he means that although African languages are valued and accepted, the uses of the languages are limited to only certain, generally oral, purposes. He points out that

people begin to accept as “natural” the supposed inferiority of their own languages and adopt an approach that is determined by considerations that are related only to the market and social status value of the set of languages in their multilingual societies. (Alexander, 2002, p. 119)

Understood in this light, one of the urgent tasks in African society in general, and in education more specifically, is to find ways to exploit the

creative potential of African languages. To accomplish this, the rift between their oral and written forms must be healed, so that literacy can become widely available and be used as part of people's daily lives. This will give both children and adults the chance to use their language more fully and to experience their worlds as coherent and meaningful.

EARLY LITERACY TEACHING AND LEARNING IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

Various factors have combined to perpetuate the widespread lack of social and cultural practices related to reading and writing in southern Africa, one very powerful one being the pedagogy that is characteristic of early schooling. Views about the nature of literacy that originated in the United States and Europe in the first half of the 20th century continue to have influence today. Reading then was widely understood as a psychological perceptual activity, which led to a focus on the relationships between sounds and symbols. In what South Africans call the North, that is, North America and Europe, this view gave rise to strongly behaviorist skills-based approaches to literacy that included the notion of "reading readiness," which enabled the textbook industry to sell nonprint activities and materials (see [Gillen & Hall, 2003](#), p. 4).

In Africa, where print tends to have little if any significance for social and other exchanges in many communities, educational systems often are staffed by untrained or poorly trained teachers and teacher trainers. All of the developments in African education that were initiated to achieve universal primary education have included as a central tenet the requirement of instilling basic literacy and numeracy. This was, and to a great extent continues to be, executed by these teachers and trainers, most of whom have been educated through the ex-colonial language, which they often have not mastered. Methods based on the view of literacy as autonomous sets of skills that can be broken down, learned, and then later used in learning either a first or a second language have been applied rigidly over many decades, largely without question as to their relevance to meaning making and its role in learning languages.

The significant shifts in understandings about literacy in the United States and Europe that gradually have given rise to new literacy pedagogies during the second half of the 20th century have barely begun to be noticed within the school world in South Africa. I am referring here to (1) the notion that reading and writing are ideological in nature and form part of a society's social and cultural practices and that there are many different literacies that come into existence for various reasons ([Heath, 1983](#); [Street, 1984](#); [Taylor, 1983](#)), and (2) research and theoretical insights about

children's written language development such as emergent literacy and whole language (Goodman, 1986; Holdaway, 1979).

In print-scarce regions, such as in many parts of South Africa, it has continued to be accepted that conditions of poverty in the "third world" produce children who generally are unable to grasp even the basics. The corollary is that teachers have extremely low levels of faith in children's ability to learn. The fact that so many children grow up in communities where they rarely if ever come into contact with meaningful reading and writing in their home languages has not influenced the design or implementation of curricula in any other way. The South African school world is still gripped by the erroneous belief that reading and writing can be taught in social and cultural vacuums as sets of skills that constitute the "tools" for reading and writing (Bloch, 2002).

This has had devastating consequences for learning and creativity. In classrooms across Africa, children are still forced to begin Grade 1 with readiness activities that include coloring in or tracing over shapes, letters, and numbers, and drill in chanting sounds and forming letters—outside of any interesting context of use that might make sense to them. These activities delay even further the time when they actually will start engaging with print and finding out about reading and writing. Ironically, in the African continent, resonant with oral wisdom and stories, textbooks loaded with decontextualized low-level skills and drills are favored. Such teaching methods have given rise to recent assessment results in the Western Cape Province and nationally in South Africa that are appalling. They suggest that most Grade 3 and Grade 6 children are unable to read at grade level and that numeracy performance is even worse (see media statement issued by the Western Cape MEC for Education, on May 25, 2004). The endemic problems are that children learn to decode, but do not understand what they are reading, and that they learn to copy sentences, but cannot compose their own text.

At best, those who can afford them use "readers" with restricted, unnatural language. Storybooks and other meaningful texts are conceptually viewed as irrelevant for school learning and effectively discarded as supplementary material, a luxury that most African children don't have. Youngsters are denied opportunities to experience the richness of print stories in their own languages.

Yet—as we are reminded in an article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Dijan, 2004) about the rediscovery of ancient manuscripts from Timbuktu in Mali—there is a tradition of African literacy going back to the very origins of writing in Pharaonic Egypt and other sites in the Levant. The fact is that Africa has both a rich oral *and* a precolonial written tradition that has not, as yet, been exploited to inspire teachers. Rather, the system produces teachers who act as agents to transmit a mind-numbing and alien literacy

curriculum, often in a poorly understood language. They unwittingly collude with the system to negate the need for real reading materials (such as storybooks). What chances do teachers have to be inspiring role models when they have been unable to engage with print in their own languages (and often even in English) either as children or adults? Given these circumstances, it does not appear too harsh to propose that the perpetuation of a system that holds back the development of a written children's literature in African languages has contributed to crippling the development of effective literacy teachers.

The situation is even more complex: Those active in promoting the use of the mother tongue in education in Africa are often linguists and language scholars who are passionate about dissecting and getting teachers to transmit the "correct" form of the language. Perhaps unintentionally, they tend to strengthen the case for narrow skills-based methods. On the other hand, only a few Africans have been trained as early childhood literacy specialists who have knowledge and understandings about how young children learn. The effect on teachers is that they tend to teach literacy in the mother tongue as if it were actually a foreign language.

All of these factors have mingled conceptually to lead even the best-intentioned development work in African contexts to focus much more on textbook production and distribution than on a fundamental transformation and intensification of teacher education. Teacher guides instruct teachers in minute detail as to what they should do in each lesson. However, apart from the fact that the guides are generally in English rather than a language that teachers are likely to know well, if teachers are not given the chance to understand and reflect on why they do what they do, the use of textbooks will have, at best, limited success. Furthermore, it is not in any case sufficient merely to have textbooks, even good ones, in one's own language. Findings from her research in the United States led Purcell-Gates (1995) to observe that

written language is apparent in the environment only to the extent that it is recognized or noticed. It is recognized or noticed only to the extent that it is used by fellow members of one's sociocultural/sociolinguistic group. (p. 50)

It is important to take note of such cautionary words in print-scarce contexts such as those we find in many parts of rural Africa. It is all too easy to think that once we have printed materials in appropriate languages, our problems will be over. The challenge is far more complex. We need solutions at different levels of society—political and economic as well as social and cultural—so that people have opportunities to tune into the uses of written language and make these personally meaningful, thereby coming to incorporate reading and writing into their lives.

NOT “EITHER/OR,” BUT “BOTH/AND”

At the heart of the work that PRAESA is engaged in lies a simple question to which we feel we have to find the answer: How can we move from the existing situation, in which the languages of the former colonial powers dominate, to one where the indigenous languages of Africa become dominant (Alexander & Bloch, 2004)?

The Early Literacy Unit at PRAESA tries to encourage new ways of thinking and acting in relation to early literacy development and learning. Since 1997, South Africa has had a progressive language in education policy that promotes additive bi/multilingualism. We now refer to what is slowly emerging as its practical manifestation as “mother tongue-based bilingual education” (Western Cape Education Department, 2002), because this term provides a clearer statement of what is required in most African multilingual school systems. However, one of the persistent legacies of apartheid education is a myth that is alive in the minds of many parents across the country—they equate mother tongue-based bilingual education with inferior education. This is one reason why there is still widespread resistance to the use of African languages as languages of teaching in education. English is equated and conflated both with literacy and with “good education.” Our organizational stance is clear: It is not a matter of *either* mother tongue *or* English, but *both* mother tongue *and* English are necessary for a quality education within our context.

This message is gaining ground, albeit slowly, since little has been done by the government to provide parents with the information they need to make informed choices about what is best for their children’s language development and learning. Thus, the gap between policy and practice is substantial, and there is much advocacy and other persuasive work for language activists to undertake. As Alexander (2004) points out, there is a lack of governmental political will to implement policy.

The fundamental issue is the failure of government to answer the simple question: Should we base the education system of the new South Africa on the mother tongues (L1s, home languages) of the learners or should we base it, essentially, on the English language, even though the latter is the home language of under 9% of the population of the country and is “understood” by fewer than 50% of the population? The accumulation of evidence confirming that the prevailing English-mainly default language-medium policy, instead of compelling the decision makers to consider seriously going over to the policy of mother tongue-based bilingual education, elicits denialist and compensatory educational responses along the lines of “simply” improving the competence of the learners in English. (p. 13)

In the absence of a committed position by the government on this issue, PRAESA has concentrated on initiating and exploring the dynamics of small-scale research and materials development projects so that when the time comes for significant implementation, we will have some models to consider.

READING FOR ENJOYMENT—THE FREE READING IN SCHOOLS PROJECT

Arising from insights gained between 1998 and 2003 while developing Xhosa–English bilingualism among a group of children in a multilingual school in Cape Town (see Bloch & Alexander, 2003; Bloch & Nkence, 2000), we realized that changes in language medium and teaching approaches could succeed only if they were accompanied by broader changes in teachers' attitudes toward reading. Apart from our own experience, we were inspired by research on Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) cited by Krashen (1993), which suggests that readers who engage in FVR are superior in reading comprehension, writing fluency, writing complexity, attitude toward school, and self-esteem; that people who say they read more, write better; that reading as a leisure activity is the best predictor of comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed; and that free reading has a dramatic effect on acquiring a second language.

In the following pages, I describe the Free Reading in Schools Project (FRISC) that was conducted in the Western Cape Province to stimulate and support reading for enjoyment.

We ran the FRISC project from 2002 to 2004 to enable teachers and children to experience the enjoyment of reading stories in both their mother tongue and English and to try to deepen our understanding of how story reading can assist with bilingualism development and additional language learning. Krashen (1993) suggests a minimum of 1 year is needed to see results, and it was clear to us that since most African children have had few book-related experiences, they would need more time.

Since none of the schools had sufficient appropriate reading material on site, despite the former Minister of Education Kadel Asmal's 1999 declaration to "break the back of illiteracy," PRAESA donated storybooks. A PRAESA literacy specialist demonstrated reading aloud for teachers (who had already agreed to be in the classroom for the free reading time), with the understanding that the teachers would begin reading aloud to the children so that the literacy specialist could monitor the process and provide support and feedback. Time also was set aside for the children to select their own books to read silently or with a friend, and there was no

expectation that they would do any formal or didactic activities related to their reading. Workshops were held periodically to raise and discuss particular issues, such as strategies for reading aloud, where to get and how to select appropriate reading materials for different age groups, how to meet the reading needs of multilingual groups, and how to ask open-ended questions about stories.

Analyzing and writing up the process proved to be invaluable, mainly because it identified as critical some issues that, on the surface, seemed too obvious to bother about. I use extracts from the notes of Xolisa Guzula, the facilitator of the FRISC project at three different schools, to illustrate some of these.

The first observation is at the beginning of the project when Xolisa was getting to know Blesbok Primary (all school names are pseudonyms), a very large school catering to children living in an ever-growing informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town that is typical of many communities found at the edges of towns and cities in South Africa. Its inhabitants are mainly Xhosa speakers who have come from the rural areas of the Eastern Cape in search of jobs. People live in shacks and are extremely poor.

Later on I went to read to the Grade 4s. . . . I found a “coloured” woman who was teaching them about their rights. She had a pipe [to keep “control”] in her hand and the children were very noisy. Fortunately, her period was over and I started with my reading. I asked the class whether they had been read to before or even now at school and at home. They told me that they have never been read to. They are not read to at school. I told them that I go to their school to make sure that stories are read to them and that they have access to storybooks so that they can choose books out of interest and read them. They were happy and as I read the story they gave me all the attention they could give me. The class was dead silent, you could even hear a coin dropping on the floor. Even though I went there having prepared to read only one story, I ended up reading three stories for them because they kept asking me to read the next one. (August 2001)

Consistently and unsurprisingly, the children, whoever they are, love listening to stories. This fundamental and wonderful fact, which we see as the starting point for many further insights—educational and otherwise—is a surprise to many teachers, who do not readily understand the value of stories. One can surmise that this has to do, at least in part, with teachers seeing themselves as the givers of skills and knowledge, and with a corresponding difficulty in viewing the children as meaning makers and constructors of their own knowledge.

The second observation is from Zimbini Primary, located in an established former township of Cape Town, where the teachers and pupils speak only isiXhosa, but the medium of instruction is English after Grade 3. It is known as one of the old primary schools in the area and also is regarded as the best. The notes capture the ongoing challenge Xolisa has experienced when trying to encourage teachers to take on the role of reading daily to children.

Teachers at Zimbini seem very enthusiastic about reading when one speaks to them. However, in practice, it is a different story. Grade 4 children reported at one stage that their teacher last read to them before June (2002). They read on their own. The teacher has witnessed me on many occasions reading to the class but hasn't taken that initiative. Sometimes when I'm there she asks them to read silently but she does other things, like going to the office or attend to another teacher to discuss their things. (November 2002)

The next observation, back at Blesbok, illustrates the frustration Xolisa sometimes has felt in situations where the best interests of the children were not considered and she had to deal with the problem that arose when teachers under duress took advantage of the extra support she represented to them.

The teacher sees me in the staff room and says, "let's go but I'm going to leave the children with you. I am busy." I told her that this period [lesson time] is very important like her other periods. She said that she's very busy because one of the students has passed away. I told her that I understand that but can't she do what she needs to do afterwards. The teacher says she is not sure whether to give children books to read or read to them but she is going to leave them at 11:00. I tell her to give children books so that they can read on their own. She then asks two boys to go and fetch books with her. Meanwhile children are spending most of their time sweeping the classroom. Books don't stay in the classroom. This is depressing and frustrating. There are only two posters with nouns and verbs on the walls. After the literacy half hour I went to the staff room and found the teacher eating fish and chips with another teacher. And it seemed that this is what kept her busy. I sense that the teachers are not taking the literacy half hour seriously. Later on she came to ask me what I did with the children. I told her that we did folktales. The teacher told me that she is tired from being an MC in the memorial service and her body is sore from practicing drum majorettes with the

children. That was the excuse she could give me. I was angry and frustrated. (no date)

This extract gives a sense both of the daily hardships that often can make people appear “tough” and of the seeming incapacity of many teachers to value reading enough to promote and support it with their children. Our most fundamental challenge is the large number of teachers who themselves need to be nurtured emotionally and to have their own interest in reading stimulated and nurtured if they are to inspire others.

I don’t want to paint a completely gloomy picture—there are some motivated and inspiring teachers as well. The next observation is from Sunshine Primary, a small independent Christian school situated not far from the University of Cape Town. A multilingual (English, Afrikaans, Xhosa) school that is relatively well resourced, it recently had employed a Xhosa teacher specifically to support Xhosa development among first- and additional-language speakers. Most of the teachers are bilingual Afrikaans/English, and most of the children speak an African language (mainly Xhosa) and come from predominantly middle-class backgrounds.

Reports from the Xhosa teacher (Teacher C) were positive ones as she reported that most parents are helping their children to read isiXhosa at home. Children in Teacher C’s classes hadn’t had teaching in mother tongue, especially those who were doing Grade 4 last year. The Grade 1’s at the moment are the lucky ones because they are starting to learn mother tongue from the very beginning. Teacher C also reported that there was only one exception, in a Grade 1 class where a child’s parent threatened to move the child to another school because she hadn’t sent the child to the school to learn isiXhosa. The parent was angry because the child was mainly interested in reading Xhosa books at home and that they do not see where the child is going to go with isiXhosa. (June 2002)

This account gives a sense both of the hope that keeps us going and of the enormous challenges we face in addressing parental attitudes about using African languages in school. The sentiment expressed by this parent is a common one and reflects the belief that the use of one language will hinder the development of another—such parents feel that their child already knows the mother tongue and doesn’t need to “waste time” on it at school.

The final observation, back at Zimbini Primary, points to the importance of establishing authentic and supportive mentoring relationships, as well as the fact that the shortage of reading materials in African languages is a major constraint in developing reading in African languages.

Teacher D is much better now. She seems to understand how the project works. [The fact that she is] making time to chat with me and I am trying to build a good relationship with her has provided her with new insights into the project. She reported using different strategies in the classroom, like getting children to touch books and read on their own. For most of this year, she's only been reading aloud to them. She's worried about the level of the books in Grade 5 because the children say the books are boring. It seems like for next year we'll need novel-like books for them to read. It has only been a year and $\frac{3}{4}$ and we've run out of books in African languages. (November 2002)

TOWARD A CULTURE OF READING

It is difficult for people who have grown up in an English-language environment to imagine a situation in which there is no body of written children's literature and to appreciate the implications of literally running out of books for learning to value one's mother tongue and for literacy learning. Yet for most African-language-speaking children across Africa, getting hold of storybooks in one's language is a rare gift.

I now discuss a materials development process that was initiated to support the development of a culture of reading. PRAESA secured financial support in 2001 from the Royal Netherlands Embassy for what we see as an essential project to break through the economic argument that "there is no market for African languages, therefore no point in publishing in these languages." While the attitude still dominates, it is being systematically challenged, albeit in small ways, and there are now some publishers who are specializing in multilingual and African-language materials. PRAESA's intention has been to help stimulate the market by developing, distributing, and monitoring the use of stories, both original and translated, for children ranging in age from preschool to teenagers. A translation unit has been established at PRAESA to deal with various issues. In addition to developing a feeling for translating children's literature, they have set out to learn about and deal with a range of complex issues that arise when working with languages that have not been widely used in print, such as normalization. In some cases, PRAESA has published materials. In other cases, we have collaborated with publishers willing to publish in African languages by guaranteeing print runs that make the process worthwhile for them. Working in Afrikaans, Xhosa, and English, PRAESA has developed several books for children, including both originals and translations (Bloch, 2005).

An important consideration has been how to facilitate the mentoring of new African writers and illustrators. For historical reasons, this domain

has rested largely in the hands of middle-class English or Afrikaans speakers. Most educational publishers are too busy dancing to the tune of government deadlines for textbook submissions to spend the time necessary to mentor. We recently conducted two workshops for writers and illustrators at PRAESA and collaborated with a local publisher, New Africa Books, to produce six original stories that are now available in 11 languages. Although the stories and illustrations are in some ways “raw,” they demonstrate how such opportunities can give creative expression to voices previously unheard, and certainly these stories resonate powerfully for many South African children. We are convinced that we need to increase substantially both original writing and illustration and translations in order to give birth to a substantive body of children’s literature. The first publication of *Stories Across Africa* was completed in 2007—it is a pan-African set of Little Hands books that are already available in 24 languages (see <http://littlehands.book.co.za>).

TEACHER TRAINING

One way we know that the early literacy situation is so serious across the continent is the anecdotal evidence we have amassed from interacting for over 3 years with teacher trainers, language planners, and African language specialists from several African countries, including Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, and Cameroon. They were all participants in a series of five week-long intensive courses, conducted by PRAESA at the University of Cape Town, designed to train trainers for multilingual education. We included components on early language and literacy learning as well as materials development for multilingual classrooms. Our aim was to empower trainers so that they could share effective pedagogical ideas and strategies with teachers. Many countries have undergone curriculum change or are in the midst of it, and the thrust is usually toward learner-centered education. However, it is extremely difficult to get beyond the level of rhetoric when trainers themselves have not had opportunities to experience what they are expected to impart. In Namibia, for example, where learner-centered education has been “implemented” since independence in 1991, and many staff have undergone many workshops, I know from my experience as an early literacy specialist on the Upgrading of African Languages Project of the National Ministry of Education, supported by the GTZ (1999–2007), that few, if any, teachers know how to actually transform the information they receive into practice. In addition, participants have related anecdotes about associated sociocultural issues such as lack of political will to support mother tongue education, the dearth of learning materials, the

lack of teacher training, and overcrowded classrooms, not to mention the devastation caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other social and economic factors.

To help address teacher preparedness issues, and to help ensure that participants have access to what they need for training, PRAESA has completed a set of training materials for literacy in multilingual settings, Training for Early Literacy Learning (TELL). These free materials can be downloaded from the Internet (www.tell.praesa.org). This endeavor has been a collaborative effort between PRAESA and the National Centre for Language and Literacy (NCLL) at Reading University in the UK. Viv Edwards, a colleague from NCLL, and I discovered that we deal with many similar language-related pedagogical issues, and rather than reinvent the wheel, we decided to adapt a set of training materials she had already developed for early literacy in the UK. We have considered very carefully how these materials can facilitate the conceptual shifts trainers and teachers need to make. For instance, whereas traditional methods view speaking, listening, reading, and writing as separate subjects, the TELL materials emphasize the integrated nature of language learning, providing information and activities that allow trainers and teachers to explore relevant pedagogical points and engage in reflective exercises. The materials provide a generic structural framework to which trainers in different countries will be able to add their individual and local intricacies.

Assuming that demonstrations of good practice facilitate comprehension, we also have made two videos for trainers and teachers—*Feeling at Home with Literacy* and *Building Story Bridges to Literacy*. The first video, set in Cape Town, follows Zia, a Xhosa-speaking child, from home to school and then back home again, highlighting that literacy can be part of home *and* school practices, that it can be enjoyable, that young children are resourceful when they start making meaning using print, that the mother tongue can be used alongside English for teaching and learning, and that play and imagination are important for early literacy development. The second video is a short animated film and was created with rural, print-scarce African settings in mind. Its intention is both to help parents and community members appreciate the value of telling and reading stories for children's literacy learning and to provide suggestions for how to get involved.

CONCLUSION

The work I have described is in progress. There is no doubt that we must struggle against prevailing global economic conditions. The previously mentioned article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* ends with the following words:

The cost of saving the Timbuktu manuscripts is estimated at \$5.6 million—which is 60 times less than the sum that EuroDisney has just demanded from shareholders to save its Paris theme park. Yet the preservation of this gold mine of African history is still at risk. (Dijan, 2004, pp. 10–11)

Despite the ugliness of this reality, there are many points of light that keep us going. A recent language-focused initiative on the whole-continent level is gaining strength and support. We now have an officially constituted language organization of the African Union, the African Academy of Languages. Under its umbrella, several continent-wide projects that are furthering the intellectualization and development of African languages are in various stages of implementation. These include a joint masters program, a translation project, a terminology project, the Year of African Languages in 2006–2007, and the Stories Across Africa project, which is creating common anthologies of stories found or written in different communities and reworking and illustrating them for children to read in their own language wherever they are (Ndzenyuy, 2005). The energy generated by these projects is helping to engender a sense of purpose and a love of reading among future African citizens.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, N. (2002). Linguistic rights, language planning and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa. In S. J. Baker (Ed.), *Language policy: Lessons from global models* (pp. 116–129). Monterey, CA: Monterey Institute of International Studies.
- Alexander, N. (2004). Language policy: The litmus test of democracy in “post-apartheid” South Africa. *Discourse Journal*, 2(32), 7–12.
- Alexander, N., & Bloch, C. (2004, September). *Feeling at home with literacy in the mother tongue*. Keynote presented at the 29th International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), Cape Town, South Africa.
- Bloch, C. (2002). *Enabling effective literacy learning in multilingual South African early childhood classrooms*. Keynote presented at the conference on Teaching Reading Materials Development in the Foundation Phase, St. Mary’s School, Durban, South Africa.
- Bloch, C. (2005). Building bridges between oral and written language: Facilitating reading opportunities for children in Africa. In N. Alexander (Ed.), *Mother tongue based bilingual education in southern Africa: The dynamics of implementation* (pp. 69–80). Frankfurt am Main: Multilingualism Network.
- Bloch, C., & Alexander, N. (2003). A luta continua: The relevance of the continua of biliteracy to South African multilingual schools. In N. Hornberger (Ed.), *Continua of biliteracy: An ecological framework for educational policy, research, and practice in multilingual settings* (pp. 91–121). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

- Bloch, C., & Nkence, N. (2000). Glimmers of hope: Emergent writing and reading in a multilingual foundation phase classroom. *Proceedings from the Teachers Inservice Project's Third Annual Colloquium (TIP)* (pp. 125–133). Cape Town, South Africa: University of the Western Cape.
- Dijan, J. M. (2004, August). Mali: The fabulous past of Africa. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, pp. 10, 11.
- Gillen, J., & Hall, N. (2003). The emergence of early childhood literacy. In N. Hall, J. Larsen, & J. Marsh (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 3–12). London: Sage.
- Goodman, Y. (1986). Children coming to know literacy. In W. H. Teale & E. Sulzby (Eds.), *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading* (pp. 1–14). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holdaway, D. (1979). *The foundations of literacy*. Sydney, Australia: Ashton Scholastic.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Ndzenyuy, F. (2005). Report on the workshop of the Steering Committee of the Project for the Implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa. In N. Alexander (Ed.), *The intellectualisation of African languages* (pp. 27–36). Cape Town, South Africa: PRAESA.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (1993). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. London: James Currey.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (1995). *Other people's words: The cycle of low literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy: Young children learning to read and write*. London: Heinemann.
- Western Cape Education Department. (2002). Language policy in the primary schools of the Western Cape. Retrieved August 14, 2008, from http://wced.wcape.gov.za/documents/lang_policy/index_exsum*