IMPLEMENTATION OF MOTHER TONGUE LEARNER-CENTRED EARLY LITERACY EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA

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> Children's learning is constrained by our schemes and our scheming, by our
> allegiances and our theories.
> Clay 1991:16

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

My purpose today is to assist with the process of finding workable models and strategies for early childhood literacy teaching for mother tongue education in line with the conceptual framework adopted in Namibia on learner-centred education. Theoretically, this is simple because when one interweaves thinking about issues of learner-centredness with issues of early childhood learning and of language, both oral and written, it becomes impossible not to speak of the centrality of the mother tongue. Principles of early childhood learning (see Appendix 1) correspond closely with notions of learner-centredness, as outlined in the BETD Broad Curriculum. In the development brief *Toward Education for All* (cited in Avenstrup 2002) the four major goals of education from a learner-centred education policy level in Namibia are access, equity, quality and democracy. None of these goals can make any real sense in a multilingual society if they exclude the languages of the people, because language lies at the heart of the values embodied by these goals: understanding and knowledge, identity and power, meaningfulness and relevance, action and creativity. Yet in practice we know that precisely such exclusion through indigenous languages has caused massive educational and economic disadvantage to people in societies in Africa with colonial language policies excluding (among other means) through the use of official languages known well enough by only the elite few and through people not having the chance to become literate in the languages they use and know well (Bamgbose 2000:1).

It is because Namibia (together with other countries in Africa) is engaged in a process to rehabilitate the mother tongues of people (Alexander 2000) that we need to remind ourselves that mother tongue education is normal. It is quite normal to expect that learning and the development of knowledge, skills and creativity involves understanding, and understanding can only take place in a familiar language, one in which the learner, young or old is comfortable to think in and use.
Mother tongue education is taken for granted in countries that have not been oppressed by colonialism, in their distant or more recent histories. This does not mean that monolingualism, or the use of one language is the norm, or desirable (Alexander ibid). On the contrary, most countries are

multilingual, and increasingly linguistic diversity is being recognised as central to human survival (ibid). Moreover, multilingualism is increasingly being viewed as a resource, rather than a problem and there are many examples of language planning and policy formulations for use and development of mother tongues and 'other tongues'.

Concerning the position of the ex-colonial languages Ayo Bamgbose reminds us:

> The emphasis on the need for African languages must not be taken to mean that imported languages such as English and French do not have an important role to play in post-colonial African countries.
> (2000:45).

He suggests that the point is

> …that the role of the imported languages should be redefined in such a way as to make them complimentary to the indigenous languages
> (ibid).

Discussing this in educational terms, I recently wrote that:

> There is thus, movement towards finding solutions to a fundamental educational question in multilingual countries like Namibia, where ex-colonial languages still dominate in the economy: how best do we enable our children to achieve academic success in both in their own languages and in the language(s) of wider communication, in this case, English?
> (Bloch 2002)

It is useful to remind ourselves as educators there are clear limits to what the education system can achieve alone. The wider society that we belong to has a massive task to develop indigenous languages as part of the democratic process – and I will refer below to the environment for literacy which is one example of this, but there are many others. As we all know, decision making about language planning and language policy implementation ultimately resides in the hands of governments and this means that pedagogical decisions about what is best for children are often not first considerations. The subtractive model[1] suggested by so many postcolonial language policies is a difficult one to make a success of. It is clear from research that three years of mother tongue medium is 'better than nothing' but not enough, particularly in poorly resourced settings. One of our challenges will continue to be to persuade those in power to accept that the longer mother tongue learning is supported and sustained, the better children's potential will be tapped in all areas of learning, including that of English.

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[1] This means that the mother tongue is replaced, rather than added to after three or four years, by another language.

Establishing that teaching takes place in the children's mother tongue is a bit like making sure that a vehicle has the correct fuel in it. Knowing how to provide the optimum conditions for learning to take place is like knowing how to drive the vehicle. Both are equally important in terms of getting going. And both seem equally difficult to achieve.

The challenge of *how to* implement learner-centred teaching approaches is raised by Rowell:

> The message that classroom instruction in Namibia should be learner-centred has been transmitted and received in school districts across the country. And that is a problem. It has been received uncritically in the sense that *assumptions underlying the notion of learning and teaching in such approaches have not been exposed and examined.* Yes, teachers acknowledge that learners bring ideas to the classroom. But how are those ideas to be used in the learning-teaching interactions? How does a teacher find out what those ideas are? Yes teachers acknowledge that learners learn from each other. But why and how are children likely to learn from each other?
> (Rowell, P, no date. Italics added).

In the early years of primary schooling, these questions direct us to teaching approaches for reading and writing, at the centre of the Lower Primary curriculum.

In various '3rd world' countries, it has been recognised that there are problems in this domain, ones that reflect the fact that notions of learner centredness are not being applied to initial literacy instruction (Ferreiro 1993, Bloch 1999). In India, for instance, Krishna Kumar argues that one of the reasons that elimination rates in India remain so high, is that *the school pedagogy fails to enable children to become literate* (1993:105). He argues that often the ways that are used to teach literacy are essentially meaningless and may contribute substantially towards the problem.

In order to address this, a range of criss-crossing and interconnecting factors need to be considered so that teacher educators and teachers are in an informed position on how to teach reading and writing through appropriate approaches, irrespective of the language used. A large body of information and knowledge about initial literacy exists that can be accessed and engaged with by educators to help them with strategies to interpret words of change on paper (learner centred policy, curriculum framework documents) into daily classroom practice. In the rest of the paper I will deal with some of the more significant ones under the headings of:

1. Environments for literacy
2. Languages for learning/ mediums of instruction
3. Teachers underlying beliefs about how children learn
4. Theories of literacy learning
5. Teaching approaches, the curriculum and classroom practices
6. Resources
7. Assessment

1. ENVIRONMENTS FOR LITERACY

While literacy teaching is seen to be the domain of primary schooling, one of the reasons that learner-centred learning is valued, is that it proposes that learning be holistic, with interconnections being made between community and school. The classroom forms part of the school, which in turn fits into the wider environment of the community. All aspects of literacy learning and teaching, and the possibilities in communities for people to develop their uses of reading and writing from birth onwards, are tied intimately into (and ultimately restricted by) the nature of the environments they find themselves in. Powerful messages about the status and use of languages are transmitted by the print in the environment. Many children do not see their mother tongue being used often in print, and when it is used, the message may be a negative one, such as a warning or danger sign or a 'no jobs' sign. When your language rarely or never appears on the packaging of foodstuffs, on sign and notices, or elsewhere as you go about your daily business, you have little incentive to use it in print form. Young children in 'print rich'[2] mother tongue environments gain incidental foundational understandings about the alphabetic principle and about the status and uses of their language. Conversely, the situation for literacy learners (and their teachers) in 'print-scarce'[3] environments is more challenging.

2. LANGUAGES FOR LEARNING/ MEDIUMS OF INSTRUCTION

While there is widespread in-principle agreement about the pedagogical importance of using the mother tongue (L1) in the early primary years, the term 'mother tongue' can mean different things for different contexts. I find the following broad definition useful:

> A mother tongue is the language the child can speak fluently before going to school. It may or may not be the language spoken by both parents, but it is one in which the child can operate confidently in all domains relevant to the child's life. In this sense the bilingual child has two mother tongues.
> (Dyken 1990: 40 cited in Akinnaso 1993:273)

We do not need to prove the validity of mother tongue education, but to contextualise work for a learner-centred approaches to early literacy teaching and learning, the following summary of international research findings is useful:

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[2] A print-rich environment is one in which a range of print materials of various kinds (often visual as well) are displayed and available for use in one or more languages. These vary from community to community, but could include signs, notices, labels and leaflets, advertisements, newspapers, books, magazines, posters.

- Substantial recent international research and experimental studies suggest that 'additive bilingualism approaches' are optimal ones for children's learning (Cummins 1986). By this it is meant that the L1 of the child is used as a medium from the beginning of education, and is supported and maintained for as long as possible throughout schooling. Other languages (additional languages) are added depending on the peculiarities of the situation[4].

- It is often assumed that children arrive at school at six or seven years of age, having completed learning their L1. According to current research, 12 years are needed to learn a L1 (Collier 1989, cited in Dutcher 1998).

- Research suggests that learning a L2 or L3 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 L2/ L3 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).

- 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 L2 comes at the expense of the development of the first language"* (italics added) (Dutcher 1998:3). An explanation for this is offered by Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins. Cummins proposes 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 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' (Cummins1978 cited in Baker 1996:151).

Of significance is that 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.

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[3] I use the term 'print scarce' to describe settings where there is little evidence of various forms of print being available, used or displayed in one or more languages.
[4] For an example of a language policy that promotes additive bilingualism approaches, see the South African Language in Education Policy of 1997.

Similarly literacy skills acquired in L1 transfer across languages, particularly when the orthographies are the same (See Baker 1996:151 - 161 for details).

- When the L2 or L3 is a 'high status' language, and replaces the L1, the 'lower status' local language, as the medium of instruction, this early use of the L2 or L3 can lead to detrimental educational and linguistic effects (Singleton 1989 cited in Baker 1996:84)

- Reasons given for early L2 instruction in school need to be ones based on factors other than L2 research, such as 'providing general intellectual stimulation', or the benefits of learning a country's lingua franca (Baker 1996).

Colin Baker infers from these points that:

> 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,

> 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)

In Africa

Many mother tongue experimental studies have been carried out in several African countries (Bamgbose 1976, Akinnaso 1993). Most have concentrated on teaching through the mother tongue only for the first three years of primary school[5]. As I have already indicated, 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 1991). Nonetheless, although most of these experimental situations have been subtractive in nature, they show that the learning of other languages is not hindered by the use of mother tongue (Wolff 2000).

3. TEACHERS UNDERLYING BELIEFS ABOUT HOW CHILDREN LEARN

In Namibia, the low status of indigenous African languages (when compared with that of English) for powerful societal functions contributes to a mindset which reflects a general lack of confidence that African languages are capable of being used as teaching mediums. Concerns expressed relating to mother tongue education include that because some teachers do not know their own languages

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[5] An important exception is the six-year Ife project in Nigeria (Akinnaso, 1993).

well in written form, they are not able to use it effectively as a teaching medium, and that it is hard to teach through a language which one hasn't been trained to teach in. These concerns reflect issues that are tied into the ongoing development of African languages in print form and teacher training, the details of which are critical. Halliday says that

> A child doesn't need to know any linguistics in order to use language to learn; but a teacher needs to know some linguistics if he (sic) wants to understand how the process takes place - or what is going wrong when it doesn't.
> (Halliday 1980:11, cited in Harste et al, 1984)

In a recent publication, Fillmore and Snow express the view that in order to teach well, both generally, and particularly for literacy teaching, teachers need to understand how language affects teaching and learning. They identify five aspects of teachers' work in which language plays a central role. Teachers are required to be:

1. *communicators* , having to communicate well and understand the children they work with;
2. *educators*, responsible for knowing their subjects, and selecting appropriate materials, providing learning opportunities for learning both mother tongue and additional languages. They need to know which language is developmentally appropriate and which is not, and how to intervene;
3. *evaluators,* and their decisions have serious consequences for the lives of their learners;
4. *educated people*, with the knowledge and uses of language to be role models as literate members of society;
5. *agents of socialisation*, helping to socialise children into the norms, values, beliefs and communication patterns of the school. They need knowledge about linguistic and cultural practices of the variety of people in multilingual societies.
   (Fillmore & Snow 2000)

While this provides an ideal to strive towards, it is equally important to recognise and act immediately upon the facts that:

1. All languages have the potential to be used for any purpose
2. There is better communication and understanding (and thus learning) if teachers and children are using a mutually intelligible language;
3. Proficiency and competency in reading and writing for teachers as well as children grows and expands through *using* the language (we are all learners).

If this is accepted, educators then need opportunities to reflect upon and examine their own beliefs and theories about learning:

> What teachers actually do when engaged in the act of teaching, is motivated by what they believe about learners and what they believe about the processes which underlie learning
> (Cambourne 1988: 17).

Many of us are aware that a mechanistic view of learning, made popular in the United States during the 1940's and 1950's, still in fact often dominates classroom situations across the world:

> Learning is essentially habit formation. Effective learning is the establishment of 'good' or 'desirable' habits and the prevention of and/or elimination of 'bad' or 'undesirable' habits. Habits are formed through association between stimuli and responses. The degree to which something is learned is a function of the strength of the association between stimulus and response. Repetition strengthens the associative bond between stimulus and response.
> (ibid: 18)

We are all too familiar with the implications of this notion for classrooms: teachers know what must be learned, and children know nothing relevant. These principles are widely applied to language learning, especially its written forms, and learning to read, write, spell and punctuate appear equal to identifying habits by breaking content into subsets, and ensuring memorising (learning) through repetitive rote learning. Mistakes are seen as incorrect patterns, which, if not eliminated, are the start of bad habits.

Writing lessons generally concentrate on getting children to write out mistake - free, single draft texts or topics chosen by the teacher. Mistakes are corrected and pointed out. The correct response (habit) is learned through repeated rewritings. Phonics, grammar, spelling, punctuation and literature are all taught in similar ways.

The above scenario is a familiar one in Namibian classrooms. Imene and Van Graan describe approaches taught to and used by BETD teachers for literacy lessons in the majority of classrooms as being "Whole Word, Phonics, or a combination of the two, coined the Combined Method" (no date:11).

They say that
> …what was found missing is a holistic approach with the emphasis on understanding rather than mere decoding. Often the reading and writing was observed to be mechanical reading aloud and copying from a chalkboard or from other texts. Little evidence was seen of meaningful writing in which learners communicate the meaning that they make of texts or the world around them.

(ibid:12)

Ideas and beliefs about young children's learning influence approaches to literacy teaching. These in turn, are not separable from broader debates about the nature of literacy generally. It is easier for teachers to reflect upon and change their practice towards a more holistic approach if they understand how what they believe and do fits into the 'big picture'.

4.   THEORIES OF LITERACY LEARNING

In the adult education field, mechanistic skills based approaches to literacy teaching have increasingly shown themselves to be inadequate for meeting the needs of the growing number of diverse multicultural and multilingual societies. Recognition of this fact has led to studies being conducted from anthropological and socio-cultural perspectives on how literacy is used across different cultural settings, including those in 'other' parts of the world such as in parts of Africa and Asia (Street 1995, Barton 1994).

Two models of literacy, the 'autonomous' and the 'ideological' models (Street 1984) have been proposed by what has come to be known as the 'New Literacy Studies'. They imply two conceptions of literacy: a) literacy as sets of skills and b) literacy as social practice.

a) The Autonomous Model
Literacy is seen as a set of technical skills that exists independently of any social context. It has consequences for society because of its intrinsic character. People are taught to read and write in ways that divide the component skills, from simple to complex, with an emphasis on physical skills mastery and decoding of sounds.

b) The Ideological Model
Literacy is understood to be socio-cultural in nature, as reading and writing are practices that are part of people's daily lives, woven into the power structures in society . Reading and writing always happens in meaningful contexts and get learned with reference to and apprenticeship into the actual literacy events and practices of communities. Technical skills and cognitive aspects are understood to be subsumed within this model.

Rather than the emphasis being mainly on how to ensure that literacy gets taught to those who lack 'it', a case is thus made for the importance of gathering information about how reading and writing are used in various homes and communities, and how to build on this information.

Approaching children's literacy from this perspective, and referring to the Navajo community in the United States, Carole Edelsky makes two critical points:

> If children see adults using writing in any language for only a limited number of purposes, they are unlikely to see a wide range of needs for writing or to incorporate 'writer' into their identities. As we look at various communities as possible sources for demonstrations of written language, we must ask questions such as these: Who in the community knows how to write? In what languages do people write? How can schools both use and extend community resources so that children will become writers?
> (Edelsky 1991: 52)

And at the same time as children's literacy is woven into their family and community socio-cultural practices,

> … it is also a phenomenon that includes within-the-child activity such as hypothesizing, predicting, planning, and so on.
> (ibid1991 :30)

This inclusive and overarching conception of literacy as being part of people's social practices provides an illuminating frame within which to consider more closely issues of young children's literacy learning and teaching. Recognising the interrelationship between political, socio-cultural factors and those 'within-the-child' allows teachers to develop holistic approaches towards teaching.

Young Children Learning

Developments in the 1960's and 1970's in linguistics and psychology gave rise to important parallel insights about the nature of learning. Piaget (1959) and Chomsky's (1964) work suggested that children do not learn by simply copying adults but that they actively construct their own view of the world and use language to both represent and extend their experiences. Work by George Kelly (1955) in the United States likened the way that people learn to the behaviour of scientists. We first hypothesise, to predict about what it is that awaits us. If we are proved correct, we store what we have learned, as 'personal constructs' within our 'construction of reality' and use it to guide future action (cited in Gregory 1996).

In a longitudinal study of four to seven year old children from widely differing backgrounds conducted in Argentina, it was found that children in literate settings develop concepts about print as they test their own self-generated hypotheses against the socially transmitted information they receive

about the nature and conventions of written language (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982)[6]. Young children's writing develops gradually from early scribbles to conventional form, as they try out, and test what they have done against the evidence of more mature writing done by others (Bloch 1997).

Don Holdaway tells us:

> 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.
> (1979:19)

Profound and useful principles about successful oral language learning come from understandings about how babies interact with the people around them as they become talkers. Normally, spoken language is purposeful, integrated, and whole. Children are intent on making sense of the world. They do not learn language in separate bits, because meaning making is at the heart of all they do. This 'natural' learning, is valued and accepted by caregivers who interact with them, and support their endeavours to communicate and make sense of their environment (Holdaway 1979). This kind of support is given, irrespective of cultural or linguistic background, and is often referred to as 'scaffolding', implying that the assistance can be gradually removed as children become more competent at what they are trying to do. At the same time,

> The type of scaffolding given will be different across cultures according to how 'learning' and 'interaction' are perceived.
> (Gregory 1996: 21)

Research into young children's spontaneous engagements with written language before school-going age shows that although written and oral language are different aspects of language, under favourable conditions, children approach their learning in similar ways.

The model provided by initial oral language learning, is now recognised and used widely as an appropriate one for initial literacy learning. Holdaway describes it as 'developmental' learning, with conditions being similar to those when babies learn to crawl, to walk, or even to ride a bicycle - while the tasks are different, the type of learning is the same (Holdaway 1979:22). (See Appendix 2)

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[6] This ability of young children to generate hypotheses is illustrated by this example of a 5 year old child in Cape Town who I overheard asking his mother what the words 'Win and Spin' which he noticed in a magazine, said. When he was told, he disagreed, pointing to the 'W ' saying, "It can't say win, because that's a 'w' (doubleyou) and 'w' begins with a 'd' (duh), so then it must be 'Din' and Spin!".

Another central aspect of young children's learning, is their ability and drive to use their imagination and play symbolically. Through making one thing stand for another (for instance a child pretends that a stick is a goat), they learn to operate symbolically. This is a significant predecessor of reading and writing, because writing is a symbolic system (Vygotsky 1978**).** Play can be sophisticated and important rule bound behaviour, where children stretch themselves cognitively, by putting themselves in 'the shoes' of the other. By pretending to be the mother, the father or the teacher, children have to organise and discern what it is that characterises being that 'other' and rearrange their behaviour and talk to reflect this (ibid). They also have to collaborate and co-operate with other children in agreeing on what the rules for the particular episode will be. Gussin Paley describes play as the "universal learning medium" and discusses how when children have to co-operate with one another in play, they

> ...insist upon rules, demanding of one another intense concentration, contemplation, comparison, interpretation and self-evaluation. Characterizations must ring true, and scenes are required to look and sound authentic if they are to reach the magical proportions that inform and protect the players.
> (Gussin Paley 1990:10)

Equally significant is the fact that this kind of play involves children in representing their life issues and concerns through stories. We all have a storying instinct, and young children make sense of their lives and experiences through the stories they play and the ones they communicate through talk. Further, young children have a natural tendency play with language. As soon as they develop a sense of what 'is', they explore its rules and certainties through turning things 'upside down' or 'topsy turvey' (Chukovsky 1963). This kind of creative activity lays the foundations for profound and deep thinking. Caregivers in many societies have been observed to engage in early versions of such play with language with their infants[7].

This kind of activity contributes to laying the foundations for literacy learning. Recent research into aspects of written language that are important for successful progress in reading point to the significance of the development of phonemic awareness (Bradley & Bryant 1985). It is through observing how young children whose days include much spontaneous play with language (both oral and written) in the form of nursery rhymes and wordplays that these insights emerged.

None of this learning happens in an affective vacuum. Babies and young children do everything with feeling and emotional intensity, to bring themselves closer to a sense of security and certainty in their world. The role of the emotions in learning is often neglected or ignored. Yet it is when children feel

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[7] For instance, in South Africa, Xhosa speakers refer to this as "u Teketisa"(Zanele Mbude, personal communication 1999)

that they belong and that they are loved that they develop a strong sense of self-esteem, and motivation. Positive relationships and interactions with others is central to learning, and certainly central to early literacy learning. An important first step in learning how to read is the discovery of "the tune on the page" (Meek 1985:44) Even before children can actually decode what is written, they take up this 'tune' - and make the book 'talk'. Meek emphasises the significance of the emotions for the development of this kind of knowledge. These 'first time' encounters with words are unique and powerful moments for young children because of the feelings that are integral to the events. When young children have stories told and read to them, these act as what she calls 'first time feelings'. When the stories are repeated, children are able to re-experience the same sense of emotional well-being.

5. TEACHING APPROACHES, THE CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Various approaches, strategies and activities have been tried in different contexts over the last forty years. As with adult literacy, many have been developed in response to the failure of narrowly defined 'traditional' methods to meet the needs of diverse groups of children. In different ways, and to varying extents, all have grown from the perspectives that literacy learning is socio-cultural, constructive and developmental in nature and that active meaning making is at the heart of learning.

The 'organic method' of Ashton Warner (1963), working with young Maori children in New Zealand during the 1960's, although beginning at the word level, focussed intensely on the relationship between emotions, inspiration and personal meaning. Her intention was to motivate children into reading by understanding that the printed word could be a powerful carrier of personal meaning. She did this by getting each child to tell her a personally important word every morning. She wrote these on cards, which she gave to each child, turning their oral words into their 'first words' in print.

At roughly the same time, the 'Language Experience' approach was developed in Britain. It was intended as a way of developing English teaching materials. However, an approach for teaching initial literacy also emerged, 'Breakthrough to Literacy', which involved children in creating their own sentences, which were then written down as first reading material. A teaching package was subsequently created for the execution of the approach. This has at times caused problems for teachers and children, who do not remain in control of the learning process, due to narrow interpretations of the materials that lead quickly away from meaning making and into an analysis of phonics and grammar.

In the 1970's attempts to arrange the beginnings of literacy learning in 'natural' ways to allow children from widely differing backgrounds to learn together led to 'emergent literacy' or 'whole language' perspectives. These involve teachers in creating 'print rich' learning environments at school for all young children, irrespective of their different home experiences. Teachers encourage and facilitate competencies and skills to emerge as each child experiences reading and writing in socially and culturally significant and personally meaningful ways. Learning takes place through purposeful interaction between the child, the environment and people. Reading and writing develop together in daily play and other activities as children come to realise that written language makes sense and is of value to them in their lives. A signal that children are controlling their own writing process are the 'invented spellings' they use when they feel safe enough to take risks and not only copy conventional forms (Bissex 1981).

Rather than emphasising differences, and thinking of written language as completely separate from oral language, their similarities are recognised as is how easy , 'natural' and 'whole' learning is out of school, and how fragmented and how disempowering school learning is (Smith 1978, Goodman 1986) (see Appendix 3).

In the 'second language' learning field the failure of traditional methods to address high failure and dropout rates of minority students in America led educators to try whole language perspectives (Freeman & Freeman 1992).

Teachers have the challenge of creating such appropriate learning environments. How is this feasible in print-scarce settings with few resources and large numbers of children? Many of the factors that have been identified as constituting obstacles to optimal language development persist in southern African contexts:

- very large groups of children

- high adult-child ratios

- the repeated failure of adults to respond to children's communicative attempts perhaps due to disinterest, or commitment to more adult-centred activity, or not sharing a common language

- a failure to value child's home language as useful and valid for communication

- a strong emphasis on teaching academic skills, like letters, colours, numbers etc which detracts from real communicative activities and language enriching conversations

- an absence of appropriate books and materials.

(Cazden et al 1990:48).

I would add to these the related issues of limited reading and writing habits among those who are the potential role models for young children, slow development of African languages in print form and inadequate school and public library facilities.

So How?

No magic wand can be waved, and no single textbook or 'package' is sufficient in itself. However, much can be done to enhance all classroom environments, the curriculum, and teacher education to improve matters.

Underlying teaching activities that contribute towards an appropriate mother tongue literacy programme include:

- Oral language activities to stimulate receptive and expressive language and verbal reasoning
- Reading aloud to develop children's appreciation and understanding of texts and literary language
- Providing time for children to explore texts and stories to develop concepts about print and other basic knowledge about reading and books
- Writing activities to develop childrens personal understandings about the communicative functions of print and to practice writing and spelling
- Thematic activities (such as dramatic play) to give children opportunities to represent and extend their knowledge of stories in other ways
- Direct activities with print to establish letter recognition and writing of the alphabet
- Phonemic analysis activities to develop phonological and phonemic awareness
- Activities focussed on words, to help develop basic sight vocabulary and understanding and appreciation of the alphabetic principle.
  (adapted from Snow et al 1998: 189)

All of these kinds of activities can involve children in tasks involving meaningful uses of written language, rather than ones which are merely exercises in decontextualised skills. Schools can create mother tongue (or bilingual or multilingual) print rich environments for reading and writing and make use of every opportunity to use and display print. Apart from making their own signs, notices etc to display in the school, a variety of real written language materials from the homes and communities of the children and teachers can be collected. These materials, which reflect community reasons for reading and writing, provide ongoing possibilities for exploration and use in the classroom. Often such material, particularly packaging of consumable items, will not be in indigenous

languages. When it is so, teachers can draw childrens attention to this fact, and use it as an opportunity to encourage creating home language (or bilingual) versions.

Certain types of activities need to become routine early literacy learning features of classrooms. These are:

- Telling and reading stories and encouraging reading for enjoyment
- Interactive writing
- Including home and community resources
- Allowing different ways to represent knowledge

- **Telling and reading stories and encouraging reading for enjoyment**

We know that people learn to read by reading (Smith 1982), and that habits of reading get established over time in environments where there is 'stuff' to read. The continuation of the cycle of textbook production for skills based methods of teaching early literacy *at the expense* of 'supplementary' materials[8] perpetuates a deeply disabling ethos for the establishment of meaningful literacy practices in people's lives. It makes learning to read and write very difficult. The wealth of the oral tradition is the natural bridge to literacy (see Appendix 4).

First oral stories, songs, rhymes and play with language generally become the first words in print in 'literate' settings. This makes literacy learning easy. Teachers write big versions of known rhymes, songs and riddles on poster size sheets of newsprint, which are displayed and read with children. Childrens own stories and other writings are valued. Teachers encourage them to make up and tell or write down their own stories. If the children cannot yet write for themselves, teachers act as scribes, writing down individual children's stories. Children can take turns to act them out, making the characters come alive for each other (for an inspiring description of this process, see Gussin Paley 1991). Such activity, brings together and develops many of the essential ingredients of (literacy) learning, and helps teachers deepen their understanding of their learners.

Abundant research in the United States indicates the importance of 'free voluntary reading' for vocabulary, spelling and grammar learning (Krashen, 1991). Essentially the process involves the stimulation of story reading in schools by getting teachers to commit themselves to providing daily reading time with children. Part of the time they read aloud to the children, and part of the time, there is silent reading or sharing of books. The ultimate objective is that everyone begins to behave

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[8] I use the term 'supplementary reading material' here to mean reading materials other than textbooks, such as stories, plays and anthologies, non-fiction, magazines, posters.

like readers and reading comes to be desirable and enjoyable. Programmes such as this will provide what Krashen calls 'the missing ingredient' of many first and additional language programmes. The task with regards to indigenous languages is to a) overcome the shortage of literature b) help teachers to understand that this is vitally important for the children's literacy (and other) learning, and not a peripheral issue.

- **Interactive writing**

Reading and writing feed each other. Competency grows slowly over time and requires an enormous amount of practice with a variety of texts and activities. To advance in spelling and knowledge about punctuation, grammatical structures etc, children have to engage closely with print, both in reading and writing (as well as dialogue/talk about reading and writing). There are no short cuts. Strategies using interactive forms of writing can help to get learners, old and young, to make the connection between speech and writing. They discover meaning through writing, become motivated to want to write, come to quickly see themselves as writers and to develop energy and skill in communicating through writing (Robinson et al 1990, Bloch & Nkence 2000). And while they write, they read. The central features of writing interactively are that it involves:

- one to one nurturing and dialogue
- an authentic/ real and purposeful literacy based situation
- a focus on the lives and concerns of the children
- the use of any language
- mutual commitment and collaboration
- writing and reading practice
- peer teaching

An important rule that has to be established is that of confidentiality. If teachers allow it, children often begin to share sensitive concerns, and ask for advice. Sometimes the children help one another with spelling. The whole group needs to decide who helps who, and who reads what.

An advantage is that of the developing and expanding literacy of the adult writers in this process. Dialogue through writing can thus be a holistic and interconnecting cycle for learning - from the learning of developmental researchers and teacher educators to their support for teachers to become reflective about their own writing, their responsibility in turn with their responses to the children, to the children's writing development.

Another is that texts are constantly being created, as are ideas that can be used for curriculum expansion. Clearly problems lie with finding sufficient experienced writers to write with children, because one teacher cannot do it all, and sustain the process over time. There are strategies that still need to be initiated and researched, such as pairing older and younger children to write together and using willing adults.

- **Including Home and Community Resources**

A useful approach for thinking through ways of including indigenous knowledge both for the curriculum and for textbook design and writing, is Louis Moll's 'funds of knowledge' perspective. Rather than putting the focus on what the children do not know, both in terms of language and other learning, and trying to remedy things, the concentration is on identifying what resources can be tapped in families and communities, including their linguistic strengths. Homes in bilingual communities make up social networks with important educational and transformational resources. The funds of knowledge are the

> essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive.
> (Moll,1992)

The way they get used is flexible, and dependent on specific contexts. Moll reports on a research programme where teachers visited family members and came up with a range of useful topics that people knew about through their work lives etc. From these, they worked out curriculum links, including literacy innovations. Parents and other community members were invited to come and speak with children, and further activities around writing grew out of these exchanges. The language/s used were those arising 'naturally' in the community.

Moll explains how the teacher concerned in developing a social network for teaching,

> …convinced herself that valuable knowledge existed beyond the classroom and that it could be mobilized for academic purposes. She also understood that teaching through the community...could become part of the classroom routine, that is, part of the "core" curriculum. The teacher's roles in these activities became one of a facilitator, mediating the students' interactions with text and with the social resources made available to develop their analysis, and monitoring their progress in reading and writing in two languages.
> (ibid)

- **Allowing different ways to represent knowledge**

Children find different ways to represent their growing skills, ideas and constructs that they are exploring. Depending on home experiences, they will bring knowledge of, and skill in different social and cultural forms of expression with them to school, but these may not normally be seen to be useful for school learning. Marie Clay has argued for the importance of allowing the expression of

children's cultural practices from home in classroom learning, and that they should express what they learn through art, dramatisation, music, dance etc. She says that

> ...if our instruction requires each child to shift into a constructive mode of thinking, to link the current task with personal knowledge, then any competency that the child has is allowed to contribute to the output.
> (Clay 1986:786)

In different ways, the message that is continuously being stated is one of viewing learning in a holistic way, continuously implying an intricate web-like interrelationship and overlapping of the strengths that learners bring to any situation.

6.   RESOURCES

Published texts

Because of the nature of existing literacy practices and environments for literacy, a range of materials need to be produced that include stimulating attitudes, knowledge and conceptual developments for reading and writing in young children that have tended to be overlooked[9]. Emphasis should be put on hastening the development of appropriate well illustrated 'supplementary' reading materials for young children (culturally relevant, interesting, inspiring, funny, enjoyable, informative etc) in African languages. The store of materials could include single language texts and bilingual texts, stories for all Namibia's children translated across the various languages and books that are selected and translated from other countries in Africa and elsewhere as well. A guide for teachers should accompany such materials explaining how young children learn literacy, and providing suggestions for enhancing teaching reading and writing using stories.

A core textbook for mother tongue literacy (for grades 1 to 3) should be developed for each language, reflecting a learner - centred stance to early literacy. The programme should allow reading, oral language, phonemic awareness, letter recognition and phonics, writing and print awareness to be taught and learned in meaningful ways. The content of the book should include examples of authentic material collected from the relevant Namibian linguistic and cultural communities. The book should be illustrated so that it is visually attractive for young learners, reflects a range of Namibian themes, values, dreams and realities and the relationship between visual aspects and print should enhance understanding and meaning making in the reading process. For each language

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[9] I mean here that in southern African contexts we have not recognized sufficiently the literacy education implications arising from the fact that our conditions are different from 'literate' settings where such developments tend to occur informally in home environments during the pre-school years.

version, aspects of the text could be common to all languages, while other aspects would focus on material unique to the particular language. An explanatory teachers guide should accompany the textbook.

Other resources

Apart from commercially made resources, as I have indicated, there are other ways to getting and making resources that are not only useful, but central to any classroom that is promoting reading and writing. A flexible understanding of what constitutes resources for learning implies that all of the following can be appropriate, depending on the context:

- People who speak, read and write a language we need help with (siblings, peers, older children, parents, other teachers, and other adults).
- Music with words in one or more languages or music with no words (music speaks to all of us, irrespective of language).
- Blank paper, and writing materials for children to draw and write, including blank 'books'.
- Puppets and other appropriate props like rag dolls, mirrors, beanbags and balls.
- Visual images like pictures, photographs and illustrations.
- Any things we can bring from our daily lives in our communities that inspire children to play, think, talk and write together.
- Reading materials created and illustrated by children, older siblings, teachers or caretakers.

7. ASSESSMENT

The area of assessment is a vast and complex one, and I only suggest here a direction for assessing early literacy in learner-centred ways. It is useful to note that the verb *to assess* originates in the Latin word, *assidere* which means literally 'to sit beside' (Stefanakis 1998). Traditional standardised assessment for literacy involving tests of isolated skills may tell teachers something about how well children can perform such skills (and what is 'missing' in particular children) but they don't tell anything about their progress in reading and writing, and what they know and can do, and which concepts or conventions they haven't yet grasped or understood (Edelsky 1991).

Standardised testing is even less useful in multilingual situations because it

> ...presupposes that the child must meet an expected norm of educational performance, and if he or she does not, then remediation is needed. The process is taken as a "given", as a socially and politically neutral process, when in reality, it is not.

(Stefanakis 1998)

Genuine assessment involves teachers and children in continued learning. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' helps one to think of the nature of this procedure, as it implies that teachers have knowledge of what children are trying to do, to know how to help them take their learning forward in meaningful ways.

The products of 'whole language' learning, such as pieces of writing in which children have used invented spellings, allow teachers to assess individual progress. Because the children have been 'taking risks' in their writing, teachers can see clearly what is known and used correctly, and what has yet to be applied. Informal assessment approaches include watching children, and talking with them, i.e. observations and interviews. Examples of children's writing, observed and collected systematically by teachers over time provide useful insights, as can those chosen by the children themselves.

Establishing the habit of daily observation writing in class allows teachers to build up a picture over time of individual learners. It also improves teachers writing fluency, and provides another example of purposeful writing for the children.

Involving family members in assessment enlarges the picture further, in particular providing valuable information about children's home language practices.

APPENDIXES

Appendix 1:Principles of Early Childhood Learning

The principles below (adapted from Bruce 1987) provide a basis for deciding how best to work *with* rather than against children's learning and to solve problems and confusions in trying to work with other educators, and to make decisions about teaching methods and educational innovations (Bloch 2001).

1. Childhood is a valid phase of life in itself and not only a preparation for adulthood. Thus education is for the present and not just preparation and training for later.
2. The whole child is important – health, mind and body, feeling, thinking and spirituality.
3. Self motivation, which gives rise to child-initiated, self directed activity is valued
4. Self-discipline is important.
5. Special receptive periods of learning exist at different stages of development.
6. Learning is not divided up into separate parts, because everything links.
7. The starting point for education is what children can do, rather than what they cannot.
8. An inner life of children emerges under favourable circumstances.
9. The people who interact with children are very important.
10. Education for children is seen as interaction between children and their environment which includes other people and knowledge.
11. Motivation and confidence lies at the heart of successful learning, which begins at birth.
12. Young children are active learners, intent on making sense of the world around them, and of constructing meaning for themselves as they gain increasing control over their environment.
13. Making mistakes and taking risks are essential to the learning process.

Appendix 2: Summary of the Main Characteristics of Developmental Learning

- Learning begins with immersion in an environment in which the skill is being used in purposeful ways. Readiness is timed by the internal 'clock' of the learner.
- The environment is emulative, rather than instructive, provides examples of the skill in action, and induces targeting activity, which gets shaped persistently by modelling and reinforcement.

- Reinforcement, both intrinsically and extrinsically, is usually achieved as immediate rewarding for almost every approximation, even if the initial response is far from the perfect 'correct' one.
- Bad approximations (moving away from the desired response) are not reinforced.
- It is the learner who mainly determines what aspect of the task to practice, at what pace and for how long. Practice happens, even without adults present, and usually continues until the child feels in control of essential aspects of the task.
- A secure, non-threatening and supportive environment provides help on call.
- Development tends to move continuously in an orderly sequence marked by considerable differences from individual to individual.

(Adapted from Holdaway 1979: 23)

Appendix 3: Assumptions about learning

The following two sets of assumptions about learning highlight the differences in teaching approach between proponents of Whole Language and the beliefs of other teachers who are guided by 'commonsense'.

Commonsense Assumptions
- Learning proceeds from part to whole
- Learning is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil so lessons should be teacher centred
- Lessons should prepare students to function in society after schooling
- Learning takes place as skills are practiced and habits are formed
- Oral language acquisition preceeds the development of literacy in learning a second language
- Learning should take place in the target language to facilitate it's learning
- The learning potential of bilingual pupils is limited

Principles of Whole Language
- Learning moves from the whole to part
- Children actively construct knowledge, so lessons should be learner centred
- Lessons should have meaning for children in the present
- Meaningful social interaction promotes learning
- In a second language, oral and written language are acquired simultaneously
- Emphasis should be on first language learning to build concepts and facilitate learning another language
- Teachers need to trust in the learners potential
(Freeman & Freeman 1992:7)

Appendix 4: Oral strengths to use and extend into print:
- The power of melody and chanting to implant important language.
- Reinforcement (intrinsic rewarding) through the enjoyment of language in rhyme, rhythm and repetition.
- Aesthetically satisfying and polished language.
- The power and support to learning and motivation of other art form – dance, drama, music.
- Sustaining and motivating force of co-operating with others and becoming 'one voice' (acceptance and security) when using chorus.

- Playfulness and fun with language, using nonsense rhymes, riddles and wordplays.
(adapted from Holdaway 1979)

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