

**Literacy in the Early Years:**  
Teaching and Learning in  
Multilingual Early  
Childhood Classrooms

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## Introduction

This paper offers observations and reflection arising out of research done in 1995 and 1996 as part of PRAESA's multilingual education project. This project aims to help to facilitate effective multilingual teaching and learning in South African classrooms. Among other things, this has involved gathering information about teachers' approaches towards language issues in their classrooms.

The classrooms which we became familiar with through our research are some of the former House of Assembly and House of Representatives schools. These schools were selected because they have all, to varying extents in the recent past, begun to experience changes in the linguistic make-up of the pupils and their families. The teaching population, however, has remained the same, speaking as before either English or Afrikaans, but mainly English, while numbers of English and Afrikaans pupils dwindle and the numbers of African-language speaking children increase.

In these former 'white' and 'coloured' schools, the dismantling of apartheid has brought about a situation where many teachers and children who do not share common languages or cultural backgrounds find themselves together in a teaching/learning situation. This move to multilingual, multicultural Early Childhood Development classrooms, from a background of training and experience in a system designed and developed to handle situations leaning towards uniformity and conformity rather than diversity, is causing many teachers to 'pull their hair out' as they battle to find ways to communicate with their pupils and workable strategies to regain control over their classrooms.

## Research Design

While I was responsible for the literacy aspect of the research, I was one of three researchers who visited schools. Our intention was to explore strategies teachers in linguistically diverse contexts are using to facilitate learning, and which assumptions about oral and written language development underpin their practice. I gathered information about the kinds of early experiences with reading and writing that teachers provide for multilingual groups of children in reception class and Grade 1 classrooms, and what reasons they give for doing so.

## Learning to be Literate

A central concern of the initial years of education is to ensure that children become competent readers and writers. Peter Hannon (Hannon, 1995, p. 5–6) explains this:

Educationally, literacy is the key to the rest of the curriculum. Virtually all schooling, after the first year or two, assumes pupil literacy. This is particularly so to the extent that children are expected to work independently of teachers, for that requires them to read worksheets, written directions, reference materials, and so on. Many schools are anxious to establish this pattern of pupil learning from the earliest possible stage – which means establishing literacy as soon as possible after school entry. The corollary is that children who find reading and writing difficult are disadvantaged in all areas of the curriculum.

Consequently, language research at the beginning stages of education necessarily involves an analysis of literacy learning and teaching. Goodman, (1973, p. 64 in Wallace, 1988) explains that

The learner of reading has a highly developed language, which is his [sic] greatest resource in learning to read.

In multilingual educational situations, decisions have to be taken not only about how to teach literacy, but also about which languages children should learn in. Educators need to know how African L1 children who bring a different 'highly developed language' from that of the teacher to school, one that is often as good as invisible, fare with literacy learning in a language they do not know well.

At the moment, many teachers are not confident that they can provide appropriately – the kind of education they have themselves experienced to teach children who do not speak the same language as they do leaves them feeling ill-equipped. One teacher expressed this feeling:

I didn't know where to begin. I got the Sub B's and I didn't know what they knew, what they would understand, what topics to choose. Where do you start learning? Which method do you use? My greatest problem was not knowing what to teach the children, and what method to use.

Furthermore, teachers' comments often reflect a resigned attitude towards what is actually possible in their teaching. Class size, the pressure of getting through the syllabus and the pressure from the teacher in the next highest level impacts on what kind of teaching is possible.

In the words of one Grade 1 teacher:

Because the classes are so big, (that's why) I often have to teach maths as a class because it takes me nearly all day and all I have time for is writing a lesson. And after I've done writing, the whole class does maths and then after that I'll take each group for reading. And then my day is over.

In order to find solutions to these and many other problems facing teachers, educators need to clarify their beliefs about learning and the role of language in education. Gordon Wells puts meaning at the centre of all language learning:

We are the meaning makers – every one of us: children, parents and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature – parents and teachers – the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich *their* meaning making (Wells, 1987, p. 222).

Given that South African education is beginning to emerge out of a situation where only the advancement of a small minority was considered important, this is a useful starting point. For educators to build on present practices to ensure the kind of meaning-making that provide learning opportunities which 'reach' all children irrespective of linguistic differences, information is needed about the kind of meaning-making presently being facilitated in multilingual classrooms.

#### Researcher's Position

My position implicit throughout this paper, is that literacy development is a social, political and cultural process which begins with meaningful interactions with written language. The way then, that children progressively understand languages and interpret the value

of literacy in their lives depends on their developing home, community and school encounters with activities which involve reading and writing.

My view is that written language learning, like learning spoken language should have at its heart the construction of meaning and the expression of creativity and communication (Bloch, 1997). Principles underpinning a 'whole language' perspective<sup>1</sup> correspond closely to principles of early childhood education and together these provide a useful framework from which to work (see Appendix A for these two sets of principles).

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1. In the 'second language' field, the incapacity of traditional methods to address high failure and dropout rates of minority students in America led educators to try a whole language perspective (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). The importance ascribed by this approach to building upon all the linguistic strengths of a learner supports the sense of applying additive multilingual principles to learning and teaching. In other words, the languages/literacy presented by a pupil are what need to be acknowledged and developed and supported wherever possible.

## Reading and Writing in School

My observations both at pre-school and junior primary level are discussed in the following sections:

- The Language of Learning and Teaching for Literacy
- The Print Environment
- How Children Become Readers and Writers – Teacher Assumptions and Classroom Activities

### The Language of Learning and Teaching for Literacy

At present, all of the children in the schools I visited have their first experience of formal tuition in reading and writing in English and Afrikaans.

The teachers were asked:

*Do you think it would be helpful to use the home languages of the children to teach them how to read and write?*

Here are some of the responses:

- Definitely, they all need that. In the teaching manual for reading it says that a child should be taught in the mother-tongue for the first three years.
- I feel it's unfair to expect [this of] a child – this happens often to a child that goes to a school to learn English. That will never be his [sic] first language. Xhosa will help the children to cope better because it's their language.
- [Yes because] ... they are learning how to read but they don't have the vocabulary, they don't understand what they are reading.
- There is a tendency among Afrikaans speaking parents to put their children in English medium schools. This is a pity because first language medium of instruction is the most successful.

For a variety of reasons then, many teachers think it would be best to include use of a child's home language for initial literacy learning. However they give the following reasons for being unable to do anything but to adopt an English-only approach.

- *the desire of parents to have their children learn English* – Past and present definitions of schools as English or Afrikaans medium or

dual English/Afrikaans medium determine and are used to justify reasoning behind the language of learning for literacy. Hence we were repeatedly told that children are taught to read in English (or Afrikaans) because the school is an English or Afrikaans medium school. Many teachers say that parents believe English medium instruction provides a better education (Crawford, 1996).

- *being unable to speak the language themselves* – Because most teachers could not understand an African language:
  - a) they would not be able to judge whether reading books are appropriate;
  - b) if they allowed children to read/write in Xhosa, they would not be able to evaluate what the children had read/written or assist them further.

Thus they were unable to see their way through to supporting young readers and writers in Xhosa without themselves having direct control over what is to be read and what gets written:

I can't (allow Xhosa) because I can't understand them, so I wouldn't know if it was good or bad.

- *the scarcity of reading materials in African languages*. While several teachers expressed the desire to get more 'culturally appropriate' books, they accepted that the text should be predominantly English:

Now we're on the lookout for stories in which the characters are black, so that children will identify with them. Gert and Pietie and Jannie are not known to them, but Siphos is. We're still looking for such stories. School libraries are only now beginning to stock books with black characters in them.

Another teacher was more specific in identifying the need for appropriate materials:

We've got a little library that we use. It's got story books, and it's got the English words and the Xhosa words underneath. And when we buy books, we try and get books ... we haven't got any Xhosa books, but we do try and get books with far more of the African idea to it.

## The Print Environment

Powerful messages are sent out to children and adults alike about the relative status of different languages via the print in the environment. The 'writing on the wall' can also provide information about teachers attitudes towards language issues and towards the literacy acquisition process.

### *In the Classrooms*

Some of the different forms and functions of written language displayed on the walls and other reading materials of the preschool and junior primary classrooms visited are described below to provide some sense of what could be described as 'the general trend':

*Children's Artwork.* Children's drawings, paintings etc. are often displayed with their names written by the teacher, and/or the children themselves.

*Labels and Educational Charts.* As part of the formal introduction to literacy learning in schools, many preschool and Grade 1 classrooms tend to be 'labelled' environments. This is because labelling is widely regarded as a useful initial way to get young children recognising words. For instance there may be labels on some or all of the following: doors, windows, taps, washbasins, lightswitches, dustbins. There are also usually charts showing the alphabet, numbers, weather, colours, birthdays, days of the week, map of the world etc. These are either commercially produced or made by the teachers themselves, and were in English or Afrikaans.

*Literacy materials.* The following examples, mainly of English, sometimes Afrikaans written language materials are typically used in the classrooms were visited.

- Graded reader materials such as 'Kathy and Mark' illustrations with phrases underneath them are sometimes displayed at child eye level:  
Come here Mark  
Come and jump  
Here I come
- Didactic patterns with the corresponding letters of the alphabet which are taught via the patterns are often displayed:

vvvvvvvvvv w x y z k  
ccccccccc c d p b  
mmmmmm m n r  
uuuuuuuuu u

- Phonics posters: aa/haas, ei/meisie.
- Afrikaans alphabet poster linking letters to a corresponding visual image e.g. f vir fiets.
- English nursery rhyme posters with pictures.
- Pictures of white, nuclear families with sentence strips at the bottom of each picture, such as 'boys are naughty' and 'girls have dolls' [!].
- Bilingual English/Afrikaans poster of 'white' girls in swimming costume, with caption 'My Body, My Liggaam' and bilingual labelling of bodyparts.
- Language/Concept posters. For example: 'front, back', 'above, below', 'together' and 'next to'.
- In a class which had predominantly Afrikaans speaking children, only one sign, placed high up above the chalkboard, was in Afrikaans: 'Hou ons klas skoon'.

### *Reading Materials*

- All teachers use reading schemes with graded readers as a basis for teaching reading. Often these are many years old (Kathy and Mark [Nisbet, 1966], Janet and John [Horizonbooks, 1966]). More recent series include Die Lente Reeks (Juta, 1970) the Beehive Series (Juta, 1981) and Playways. All feature white children and middle-class, eurocentric lifestyles.
- 'School Readiness' manuals such as Stepping Stones are used in preschool and some Grade 1 classes.
- Flashcards are used as a matter of course to teach 'sightwords' to reception year and Grade 1 pupils.
- Sometimes there are bookcomers. There are occasionally Afrikaans stories, but mostly, books are English. No Xhosa story books were seen in classrooms. Most stories have a eurocentric, monocultural focus.

### *The General School Environment – Signs and Notices*

In the schools I visited, the signs which provide information and help people find their way around school buildings are in English or Afrikaans and not (as yet) in Xhosa (or any other African language). The same applies for letters or notices that are sent to the children's home.

Brian Street (1995, p. 121) describes how

The organisation of the visual environment itself helps to construct and provide a model of the child's relationship to language and to the written word. The walls of the classroom become the walls of the world.

The clear message in these schools is that English is the language that counts. With very few exceptions, the images displayed, typified by the above examples, are ones which reflect white, usually middle-class, eurocentric lifestyles and values. These are generally represented through and explicitly value English. Giving due consideration to the strong and complex links between linguistic and cultural practices, these visual environments, the reading and other learning materials all suggest that the onus is on the families to make all the linguistic and cultural adjustments to assimilate into the school. Furthermore, the nature of the written language displayed is overtly didactic. Apart from story books, children's names on artwork and the register of children's names, there is almost no evidence of written language being used for any genuine reason.

### Children Becoming Readers and Writers: Teacher Assumptions and Teacher-Centred Classroom Activities

The way that teachers understand the process of becoming literate has consequences for what they understand to be appropriate teaching strategies in the classroom.

Wendy Flanagan (1995, p.14) describes the widely accepted skills-based approach to teaching and learning literacy which is popular in many schools. She says that teachers

believe that there are major skills in reading and that each of these major skills can be broken down into sub-skills. Some of

these skills are more difficult than others and so children are taught the skills in a particular order.

My observations in schools gave me no reason to challenge this description. As yet in South Africa, although it is widely accepted early childhood wisdom, backed up by substantial studies that children are 'knowers and doers', the extracts which follow in this paper show that teaching approaches for literacy acquisition seldom reflect this. There is a contradiction between what ECD teachers see as appropriate general educational activity for young children, and what they believe is appropriate early literacy activity. This is largely due to a misconception that literacy learning must be formal learning (see Bloch, 1997). The role of pre-school is widely understood to be a preparation for schooling generally, and for learning how to read and write particularly. In the reception year, there is an emphasis on 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' exercises.<sup>2</sup> These, it is believed, develop the skills thought to be the necessary precursors to formal reading and writing instruction which commences in Grade 1. The following extract from a reception classroom activity involves the use of Stepping Stones, a school readiness programme. It provides an example of a typical 'readiness' exercise.

The activity involves the children looking at a worksheet which has five animals down one side, and five products down the other. The task for the children is to draw a line linking the animals with their relevant product. The teacher explains to the children that they must first use their finger (to draw) and then their crayons. She demonstrates this with the first animal and then does the rest 'with' the children:

**Teacher:** Which animal next?

**Children:** The cow.

**Teacher:** Now watch, who's not watching? From the cow to the milk with your finger, with your finger ... slowly. Eyes on the board. Which animal is next?

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2. These include visual and auditory discrimination, visual and auditory memory, rhyming, letter recognition, visual matching, developing listening skills and recognising sound letter correspondence. Writing readiness involves pre-writing skills such as tracing over existing shapes, copying, doing pattern, colouring-in, etc.

**Child 1:** Teacher, what about the ...

**Teacher:** I'm busy with the board, you see you're not listening. Sit up. Pull your chair in.

**Child 2:** Teacher, he's stealing crayons (points to child seated opposite her)

**Teacher:** Not stealing, taking that's right. Now you many colour your animals different colours. What colour can a cow be? Brown or?

**Children:** Black.

**Teacher:** Yes.

The children begin to work

**Teacher:** Now now, somebody's crayons are talking and it looks like Faried's. Vukile, what must Loyiso and Siphso talk? (The two children are chatting quietly together in Xhosa.)

Vukile makes no reply.

**Teacher** (putting her head down to Loyiso): English, talk English to each other.

This extract above provides an example of what is often valued as learning, in terms of preparation for formal school. It shows the tight control many teachers feel is appropriate for such 'readiness' activities. The focus is on a very particular form of collaboration between teacher and pupils with little or no opportunities for conversational type interchanges or initiative from the children. The emphasis is rather one of giving instructions and on eliciting correct answers. The situation is exacerbated for African language speakers because the small amount of talk that is permitted must be in English. The example below follows the pattern of the one above as well as illustrating the kind of typical oral interaction between teacher and pupils which I observed many times in both reception and junior primary classrooms. Interaction is limited to chanting together the response which the teacher wants to elicit:

Children are seated at their tables. The teacher stands before the blackboard in front of the class:

**Teacher:** What day is it today?

**Children:** Thursday.

**Teacher:** (slightly raising her voice): What day is it today?

**Children:** Today is Thursday.

**Teacher:** What was yesterday?

**Children:** Wednesday.

**Teacher:** Say it everybody.

**Children:** Yesterday was Wednesday.

**Teacher:** What will it be tomorrow?

**Children:** Friday.

**Teacher:** Say it everybody.

**Children:** Tomorrow will be Friday.

Even when it is 'news' time, the teacher closely directs the conversation, using it for a very specific didactic purpose. The children are seated on the floor in front of the teacher who asks who has some news to tell:

**Child:** I went to the Spur.

**Teacher:** You went to the Spur and ... what is a Spur? – A ... restaurant. Everybody?

**Children:** Restaurant.

Concerning writing, many pre-school teachers express the view that: '... in pre-school they're (children are) not supposed to write, but they should get familiar with the letters and experience them.'

This is interpreted to mean the need for handwriting patterns, and copying or tracing letters. Internationally, research into young children's spontaneous engagements with written language before school-going age has led to many fresh insights about the literacy acquisition process. The term 'emergent literacy' is often used to describe becoming literate as a process, whereby children's grasp of literacy develops with purposeful encounters with reading and writing. Reading and writing are interrelated – they develop together when they form part of everyday play and other activities as children come to realise that written language makes sense. From this perspective, young children

*actively construct* or build the written language system for themselves in very similar ways to how they develop their speech (Holdaway, 1979; Goodman, 1984). In a longitudinal study of 4 to 7 year old children from widely differing backgrounds conducted in Argentina, it was found that children in literate communities in Argentina develop their own concepts about print. This they do 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, 1993).

This perspective leads to teachers having very different expectations of young children, in that they understand children to be extremely capable, and in need of the freedom to develop their own understandings of the writing system in partnership with other more experienced users of literacy by trying out things for themselves. Teachers thus see their role as developing a curriculum which provides opportunities for using writing for real reasons. They extend the children's immature writing attempts by giving positive feedback and further opportunities for exploration by young children who act as apprentices as they begin to incorporate written language into their lives (Bissex, 1980; Taylor, 1983).

Moreover, as far as curriculum matters are concerned, research by Gordon Wells in Britain about young children's literacy learning provides support for considering alternatives to the kind of 'school readiness' activities which are understood to be appropriate in South Africa. In the study, which stretched over many years, the researchers looked for occurrences of four activities: looking at a picture book and talking about it; listening to stories; drawing and colouring; writing or pretending to write.

They discovered that one of these activities – listening to stories, was extremely significant for literacy development:

- Children tune in to the rhythms and structures of language through listening to stories long before they can read aloud. When they come to read themselves, they bring a wealth of language to the text.
- Through stories, children's experiences stretch further than the limits of their immediate environment. They are able thus to develop a broader picture of the world and have the vocabulary to talk about it.

- Stories have the potential to be a starting point for collaborative talk between children and parents. Parents and children can explore their world in the light of what happens in the story and to use children's own experiences to understand the significance of story happenings.

Language is a major vehicle which we all use to consolidate and clarify our lives through our own stories as we construct and reconstruct memories of the past and visions for the future. In this way too, young children use stories to explore and make sense of their lives.

*Write Sounds Right*

In our Grade 1 classes, which are intended to provide the beginnings of formal tuition in writing, emphasis is still overwhelmingly on imparting physical skills, sometimes to the total exclusion of meaning. The following extract from an hour-long writing lesson in Grade 1, imparts how concentration is focused on correct letter formation.

**Teacher** looking at Sandi's work, moves the board and writes an **i** saying: Never make a big thing like (referring to a bigger than usual dot on top of the **i**) that when you make an **i**. I see Sandi's got one like that. It looks very ugly. Now lastly what has a **t** got?

**Children** (chorus): Half a neck.

**Teacher**: OK, now you can pick up your next colour. Go to where your next dot is and we make the next pattern. Say it with me – Curly C.

**Children** (chorus): Curly C.

**Child** puts up hand (the first child to do this in the lesson).

**Teacher**: What's wrong Thembi?

**Child** (pointing to the child setting next to him): He started before you.

**Teacher**: Hmm, never mind, when I mark it I'll see he's made a mess.

The analysis below provides a sense of what might be the underlying assumptions about learning which guided this teacher (o = observation, a = assumption).

- ***o:*** *The teacher writes an i on the board –*  
***a:*** learning proceeds from part to whole. Thus each letter must be learned from the teacher, one at a time to reach the eventual goal of being able to put them all together as writing
- ***o:*** *The teacher shows the children how to form letters correctly –*  
***a:*** learning how to write needs to be teacher-centred and directed because learning involves transferring knowledge from the teacher to the learner, correct letter formation is a priority because writing is about mastering a set of physical skills
- ***o:*** *The children are practising individual letters and chorusing the names of letters –*  
***a:*** learning takes place with skills practice and habit formation
- ***o:*** *The teacher says the child who started early will make a mess –*  
***a:*** mistakes are not part of learning, children should not take the initiative, because they are not able.

In an interview with this particular teacher, she said that she finds writing lessons very tedious and boring, and that she always feels a sense of incredible relief when they are over. There were several such indications from teachers to this effect, i.e. that while they understand their approach to be necessary because they believe it to be the way that children will learn, they are not necessarily satisfied with what they are doing. Gordon Wells points out that

Knowledge cannot be transmitted. It has to be constructed afresh by each individual knower on the basis of what is already known and by means of strategies developed over the whole of that individual's life, both outside and inside the classroom (Wells 1987, p. 218).

Because many teachers seem to implicitly accept that knowledge is acquired by transmitting information, they do not place educational value on what children bring to the classroom from their homes and communities, nor do they see children as being capable of taking initiative in the reading and writing process. When Thembi in the

above extract 'tells it on' the pupil who started before the teacher, rather than seeing this as a display of initiative, she foretells that this child will make a mess. Making mistakes is discredited as not listening properly, rather than being part of learning and discovery. Because learning how to read and write is assumed to involve moving from knowledge of the parts to the whole by learning a set of skills, these skills must be broken up into small chunks to be learned, bit by bit. Often the resultant activities amount to the chorusing of strange unconnected phrases (for many children in a foreign language) in order to learn, for instance how to form a number:

1 finger space 5 down to halfway, up, up and put the hat on 5 makes a 5.

This provides a pertinent example of what Carole Edelsky (1991, p. 69) refers to as developing 'skill in instructional nonsense' [or SIN!].

The following extract from a writing lesson, where the teacher deals scathingly with a child's initiative, provides further indication of the level of control teachers often hold over writing in classrooms:

The children are copying letters from the board and the teacher walks around the classroom looking at what they are doing:

**Teacher:** Zuki is doing it her own way.

The teacher goes to the board, and demonstrate what Zuki has done with the letter 'p' and how she wants it done.

**Teacher:** Down, up and around, not around first. Did I say we do it like this (she writes the 'incorrect' movement on board)?

**Children:** (chorus): No!

Teachers sometimes demonstrate an inflexible and punitive attitude towards small children:

**Teacher** (to Grade 1 class): This is new work and if you don't listen, you'll make a mess. Now I want you to put your new pencils in the air. Stand up if you haven't got your pencil.

Three children stand up, two are Xhosa speakers.

**Teacher:** Now you won't be able to write and you will get a bad mark in the exam. You'll just have to watch today, because you know you must remember your pencils. Give me your books.

Throughout the lesson, the three children fiddle with their pencil crayons, and are not allowed to write with them.

Having forgotten their pencils, the children were not allowed to improvise and use pencil crayons, and so lost out totally in that lesson.

With emphasis at all times on mechanical skills like neatness and correct letter formation, many teachers cautioned the children as they started in their books,

When we do writing we go slow. Then we don't need rubbers.

Even when children are writing 'news' – a rare example of writing I observed children doing which could be described as having some purpose – the teacher placed limits on the children, both in terms of what to write about, and how much to write (as well as the implicit fact that writing was to be for all children in English):

Not more than two sentences for your news. The theme is transport or animals. You can choose. Not more than two sentences.

#### *For Simplicity's Sake*

The following extract from an interview with a Grade 1 teacher provides some indication of how the teacher's beliefs about early reading as needing to start off with recognition of small components of written language, forces her to use material which she actually would prefer not to use. While she recognises the particular reading material as in appropriate, she understands the approach to be the best for her pupils from a language learning point of view.

**Teacher:** The Kathy and Mark stuff is so white ...

**Interviewer:** Why do you use it? Is it school policy?

**Teacher:** No, it is the easiest way for a second language learner to learn.

**Interviewer:** Why do you say that?

**Teacher:** Because it teaches those first initial words super quickly.

The teacher went on to explain how she had tried a kind of Language Experience Approach<sup>3</sup> but that she found that the children struggled to read the big words because 'their phonics is so bad'. She feels that using the very simple language of readers such as *Kathy and Mark* helps the children with their phonics because of the repetition, the 'visual' learning, whereas

with the Language Experience Approach you're having different words every time and it takes that much longer to notice repetition.

The view expressed by this teacher is echoed by many others. They believe that even more than a first language speaker, a child learning to read in an additional language needs to have what is learned simplified to make it 'easier'. Again, this appears to be linked to the de-emphasis on the significance of meaning in literacy learning, as well as the perception that teachers can (and must) actually control both the input and the outcomes of learning. Allowing children to make mistakes, to take longer to master the 'basics' as they involve themselves in real tasks, implies having faith in their ability to learn, and in what Glenda Bissex (1984, p. 101) calls 'each child's inner teacher'. She discusses how

Child mind asks questions, seeks order, and monitors and corrects its own learning. These are all natural functions of human mind. However, these are also functions that teachers have regarded as their own special domain, functions that teachers have so pre-empted that children often abandon them when in classrooms. (1984, p. 99)

The debate which has raged for many years about approaches towards literacy have included arguments over whether children benefit from learning to read using simplified, graded readers, or real story books. This touches the surface of the issue at the heart of the matter – the understandings which underpin the *process* of becoming literate. Central to this is recognising and acting on the fact that prospective readers and writers must grasp that literacy is something

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3. In a Language Experience Approach, the pupils generate sentences, which are then used as reading material.

useful and enjoyable for their lives. It allows them to use language to express themselves in different and powerful ways, providing them access to stories, extending their play as they explore their worlds, and enabling them to participate in the variety of communicative activities which we use in society. While this debate initially centred around the needs of monolingual children, it has more recently broadened to include consideration of the needs of bilingual children. Maura Blackburn (1992) says simply that as a guide, if a book or method is unsuitable for a monolingual child, then it will be even more unsuitable for a bilingual child.

In the South African situation, as the teacher's comments about appropriate reading material above suggests, many teachers have not had access to the kind of information that would help them to recognise the significance of meaning and of purposeful social and cultural practice in literacy learning. They thus tend to prioritise texts which repeat the same phonically regular words and short sentences in the belief that this is what will provide the necessary tools for reading.

#### *Phonics Focus*

As I have just explained, both classroom teachers and language support teachers<sup>4</sup> place heavy emphasis on phonics instruction, teaching how letters 'blend' together to form sounds. One teacher explains:

When you look at your phonics in Sub A and B it's all geared around short vowels in the main. All the reading material will be around short vowels and the simple words, so that we set up the way to learn that first, and get that right. Then slowly towards the end of Sub A I would teach things like digraphs, the 'ch' and 'sh' and other double letter sounds.

Sometimes exercises involve letters combined on a sheet of paper with oo, oe, uu, ui, ei, aa etc. Teachers then get the children to chorus out the sounds while she points at them with a ruler.

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4. Originating in the area of 'special needs' out of a tradition of remedial education, teachers known as 'speech correctionists' or 'speech therapists' have been enlisted by some schools to provide 'enrichment' in English for the African Language speaking children. These teachers had previously worked to remediate learning problems with English and Afrikaans L1 children, and now apply their skills to children learning English as a second or maybe third language.

Many teachers expressed the view that it is the African language speaking children who have major problems with phonics in English. Teachers feel that when children do not come to grips with their vowel sounds, they have difficulties elsewhere in their learning. One teacher elaborates this as she explains her reason for using basal readers. She describes how African language speakers have problems with

the vowels, because they don't say 'a', they say 'e'. They don't say 'apple' they say 'epple'. So they have a real problem just saying the sounds. And the thing about the basal reader approach is there's a lot of repetition, and there's a lot of visual learning.

The following extract from an interview with a teacher who believes that for accurate spelling children must pronounce their vowels 'correctly' shows the extent to which phonics learning is emphasised and seen as fundamental to learning:

**Teacher:** Did you hear how they pronounced the word **sandwich** today? The **a**, it was **s-u-n-d-w-i-c-h** and then you saw how I tried to highlight the spelling of the **curly c**. The last group picked it up and took it as a diagraph – the **ch**, which it actually is. These two letters (ch) – this comes up in Sub A, and it's reiterated in Sub B, now they were able to give me that sound as a whole, whereas when the others were spelling, they were doing single sounds. They didn't have an explanation of how you say the sound. They were trying to say **s**, and it's not an **s**. And then to teach them how to spell the curly c, I had to improvise with my hair. But with this **a** that was **u**, that is essentially a very big weakness, and a very bad one that will need work. That we can bring up in our listening skills.

This focus on phonics makes teaching difficult as it draws the learner into the complexities of language outside of any meaningful context. In the words of one teacher:

That's the problem or fight teachers have in presenting this myriad of spelling rules to the children, but in bite-size pieces.

Teachers think of it as 'normal' to teach language as decontextualised bits (even though there is no meaning to a phonics exercise beyond it being an exercise). Because of this, they tend to explain the difficul-

ties children experience as (phonics) weaknesses rather than asking questions about whether what is expected of the children makes any sense to them:

They're very weak with rhyming words, and they always have been, and I think they always will be until the end of the year, because of the phonics. They can't work out what it is about a rhyming word, and they can't work out that the first sound should be different every time, no matter how often you say this it doesn't sink in. Whereas in the first language at this stage they know exactly what a rhyming word is, and why it's different and how to pick them out.

One of the reasons why rhymes, like songs and stories are such powerful learning tools, is because as they begin to speak, young children firstly are using their developing language to construct meaning in their world. One of the strongest ways that they do this is through imagination and play. Through imagination and play children explore and gain control over their environment. All children love to play with language and they appreciate humour, which is why they love rhymes. A characteristic of fluent early readers is that often they have a strong phonological awareness, meaning that they have a well-developed understanding of how sounds fit together. This understanding has usually come about through *playful and incidental* interactions with a wide variety of texts, among which are nursery rhymes. Teaching phonological awareness through exercises in a first, second or third language is a much harder and less efficient way of assisting young children to make sense of the language.

*See Sounds Say*

The use of flashcards is yet another example of 'part to whole' decontextualised activity which is widely used at preschool and Grade 1 level to develop 'sight words' and to promote 'word recognition'.

Similar, but slightly different in that there is a context which emerges in due course 'Look and Say' activities are. Here the teacher shows the children pictures from the story to be read such as 'The Three Little Pigs', and gives them 'key' words, which they practice with her, e.g. 'stene', 'strooi', 'man'. She then reads the story while showing the children the pictures.

Lists of words sometimes on their own and sometimes with corresponding pictures are regularly exercised with groups of children. The decontextualised nature of the exercise is often further exacerbated by the questionable cultural and social appropriateness of the chosen images/ vocabulary.

In the following extract, the teacher uses a small poster which she has made with pictures from a magazine stuck onto it. On the back of the poster, she has written a list of the corresponding words which end in 'ck' (black, back, wreck, candlestick, gluestick, etc.). The children are seated in front of the teacher on the floor in rows. She asks the children to say what the words are, and to give a sentence after each word to illustrate its meaning.

There is a picture of a tablecloth, with a 'check pattern'. The teacher launches into a conversation about cloths as she tries to prompt the desired response:

**Teacher:** Some cloths have flowers on them, some are with tartan, some are with ...

**Child:** blocks!

**Teacher:** What's another word for block?

**Child:** check.

**Teacher:** good.

The teacher then points to a photograph of a deck chair:

**Teacher:** deh ...

**Children:** dig, dik (Afrikaans pronunciation).

**Teacher:** We call it a deckchair. It's the kind of chair you sit on when you relax, sit back and get a suntan, and you find them on yachts and boats.

One of the pictures is of an ostrich.

**Child** (calls out): 'ostrick'

**Teacher** (ignoring the ingenious pronunciation of the word to make it fit the exercise at hand): Yes, but we're doing 'ck' sounds. So what has a 'ck' sound?

There are no suggestions.

**Teacher:** neck

This kind of activity reinforces the image (for children) that engagements with written language are engagements with language which comes out of this air and are going nowhere, and are unconnected to anything purposeful. While I am in no way wishing to make too much out of a couple of images, or to deny children access to new information and knowledge, these examples demonstrate, as do many others, how teachers often create an environment which does little to reflect or engage with the lives of the pupils outside of school.

*A Hard Task For All*

The focus on phonics is supposed to enable the reader to break new words down into their sound elements. An over concentration on phonics has been identified as problematic for children learning to read in their first language in that they become 'stuck' with very laborious work, and do not get around to developing other, arguably more effective strategies for exploring the text such as predicting what happens next (Wallace 1988, p. 90).

In South Africa and in other countries many teachers refer to the phenomenon of children becoming able to read (decode) without understanding what it is they are reading. This is related directly to an overemphasis on phonics instruction for children learning in a first but usually for additional language learners. Added to this, learning individual sounds in a systematic way, together with then having to build them up into simple phonetically regular words can take so much time and energy that learners become frustrated and never get to the point of reading authentic texts. Often, even if they do, they tend not to become fluent, because they get stuck with decoding. For African language speaking children, this is phonics without having the literacy background to draw meaning from<sup>5</sup>, and they are also having to cope with the indignity of being told that their pronunciation is faulty, as teachers persist in conflating correct spelling with standard English pronunciation.

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5. Some young children, such as middle-class English speaking children, grow up in homes and communities where both the language/s of and practices with written language are 'in tune' with and form the often hidden foundations for the educational task of the school. I call these hidden because most teachers have been trained to view their work as

Teachers are aware of the difficult task they present to African language speaking children who must learn to read and write in English. They are also conscious of their own difficulties. Referring to reading in Sub B, one teacher expressed this succinctly:

There's quite a heavy phonics programme in Sub B. And that's why all these teachers must be having a really hard time trying to get them (the African language speakers) (to cope), because it's even difficult for first language children.

#### *Where Are The Stories?*

There is recognition of the importance of stories, but little time for them in many early childhood classrooms. Even when teachers think that stories would help children to develop their language, they cannot afford to fit in such 'extras' because:

We're already so far behind. X and I pull our hair out about how far behind we are. Sub B teachers almost think we're not doing our job ...

Teachers who have been trained recently, tend to find themselves frustrated by the weight of the syllabus, and the pressure from above to 'get through the work'. Thus even though they may have been taught at college to focus stories, there is just not the time because the exercises continue to be seen as the 'real work' to be assessed. For instance, when asked whether she reads stories with her class of Grade 1 children, the answer from one teacher was

Hardly ever. That book has been lying on my desk for two weeks.

As this particular teacher described her teaching practice as a new teacher fresh out of college, she implied that she was naïve, and almost irresponsible at that stage, before *real* teaching demands took over:

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starting to teach reading and writing 'from scratch', where in fact children entering school have often developed a variety of complex understandings relating to written language themselves as part of their own meaning making process. The schools, because of their view of teaching literacy as imparting a set of skills, concentrate intensely and separately on the mechanical forms of literacy, which are obviously important aspects of written language. However, by teaching them in isolation from the other aspects of written language, the interactive, communicative, creative functions are neglected.

In the beginning I was really slack and thought, let's just read stories to them and have a bit of role play and acting. I started like that in my first year because we did the second language teaching method that says always do fun things. And I started doing that but it takes time, and you don't get through all the other things you need to get through. The worst thing is that now the pressure's on, because the Sub B teacher starts saying to the Sub A teacher: 'So how far are you ...?' This work load and the fact that classes are so big, makes the teachers' task so onerous.

There are sometimes book corners in classrooms, and generally they are seen as places to go to when the children have completed their work. This makes the place of paging through storybooks, alone or with friends, low on the list of priorities in most classrooms, so that ironically

those kiddies who are slow and take their time, they never ever get a chance to play with the games and read the storybooks.

However, the few teachers who do seem to make space for stories in the curriculum, openly sing their praises. 'Enrichment' (language support) teachers are coming to value stories in their teaching. There are different reasons cited for why stories are good. For some teachers, they provide opportunities for practising aspects of grammar. So

The Three Little Pigs was quite useful for the prepositions, Goldilocks and the Three Bears for degrees of comparison and the family structure and personal pronouns.

For others, stories are coming to have greater significance. In the following extract, a teacher explains how stories came to be used in a Sub A classroom where they began with colours, shapes and animals:

Before we started off with stories it was very difficult to get them to say a little sentence about the shape such as 'this is a circle'. But where you had a story and it was ongoing, we got to the stage where they were telling the story – even if it was just the repetition of a sentence – but it was something that meant more to them. In the end you could ask them to reason about the story, e.g. 'why do you think she cried?' Now it made sense to them. Things like circles are too abstract. They enjoyed the stories more than anything else.

In one school 'enrichment' teachers began the year with the theme of 'My Body'. This is how one teacher described the process:

It was boring. We basically told the children what to say, and still we didn't know what they knew. They had to say what we knew, and what we told them to say. If we hadn't changed (our approach), we still wouldn't know today. Then we decided on stories. We decided against fairy stories in favour of animal stories.

The teachers made the decision because they felt that all children could relate to animal stories.

Teachers have realised that material needs to be relevant to the children for effective learning. They have begun to look for culturally appropriate materials. Via this route, the teachers came to realise the power of stories. They described how they sought out appropriate stories for the children to act out, ones with enough characters, as well as ones with repetition, such as 'Run, run as fast as you can' in *The Gingerbread Man*, and 'Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin' in *The Three Little Pigs*. Stories like these provide reinforcement and:

the (English) language becomes friendly, not unfriendly, and falls easily on the tongue. Rhythm is a lekker way of doing this, where children half sing and dance the rhythm of the sentence, they simply remember it so much better.

Recognition by teachers of the immense value of stories for young children's learning is an important aspect of breaking the skills transmission mould. As I've already outlined, research in Britain (Wells, 1987) into young children's language and literacy development argues strongly that of all the activities which contribute towards becoming literate, *hearing stories* is the most crucial to later educational success. In addition, the single most important factor accounting for differences between children's later educational development was the degree of understanding children had about the importance of literacy on entry into school.

One of the important steps to becoming a reader is discovering what Margaret Meek (1985, p. 44) describes as 'the tune on the page'. Emotions have a crucial role to play in the development of this kind of knowledge, and Meek describes 'first time' encounters

with words as unique and powerful moments for young children because of the feelings that are an integral part of these encounters. When young children have stories read to them, these act as what she calls 'first time feelings', which when read over and over again can be experienced many times. Children become familiar with this special language of books. The more stories children hear, the more their knowledge of the structures and forms of written language and of various discourses and genres grows. When we read and write, what we have in our heads to bring to bear on the printed page is of equal if not more importance to developing our decoding skills. I observed only traces of these crucial aspects of literacy development at play in the classrooms I visited, in either English, or in African languages.

## Multilingual Classrooms, Multiliterate Children, Drawing Implications for South Africa

The pattern which emerges through the above descriptions is not unique to a small number of South African classrooms, (indeed they are common in many classrooms in many countries in Africa and elsewhere). For some years now, as approaches to literacy in the early years have been explored, it has been acknowledged that there is often urgent need for change. 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, p. 105). The essentially meaningless way that children are expected to learn literacy, Kumar believes, while not negating the negative effects of poverty on learning, may contribute substantially towards the problem.

In reference to the situation in Latin America, Emelia Ferreiro (1992, p. 42) says:

During the past fifteen years, a series of research studies has begun to show that the socio-economic factors are not the only ones to contribute to the failure of initial literacy acquisition. It is also necessary to look at what goes on within schools to unveil the institutional mechanisms and conceptual framework which prevent children's access to the written word.

She describes how

traditional school practices reduce the child to someone who is not able to think and who can only receive, associate, and repeat. It also reduces the object of the learning process – the writing system – to a school object, divorced from its social purposes and functions (p. 149).

In South Africa, many assumptions have been largely unquestioned about how to teach reading and writing, which languages to use and what counts as high quality practices in classrooms. Looked at in the light of the above research evidence, these assumptions are neither adequate nor appropriate.

Moving on to the wider debates on bilingual and multilingual education, it appears to me that the issues understandings and

approaches to literacy have been sidelined with the focus tending to be on which language children should learn in. Goodman, Goodman and Flores (1979, p. 19) say that

From a theoretical perspective, learning to read in one's home language will be easier than learning to read a second language, particularly an unfamiliar one. The learner brings to the task of learning to read his or her native language a syntactic and semantic knowledge of the language which makes it possible to predict the meaning of the written form.

Obviously, social and political factors influence and complicate decisions in schools, as well as community/parents attitudes towards languages and literacy, whether and how literacy is used in the particular home languages, resources and teacher availability in different languages. Some of the assumptions which have guided teaching in the USA influence teaching in South Africa. One of the most popular views widely held here about beginning literacy is that children should speak a language before they explore its written forms. Goodman (1979, p. 21) argues against the need to consider this a rule:

But language learning is motivated by functional need. Many people in non-English speaking countries have more need to read English than to speak and understand spoken English. Even children who are already literate to some extent in their native language seem to be able to learn oral and written English simultaneously, using the two forms to support each other in developing control of English. Reading as a receptive language process seems to develop more rapidly than speaking, a productive process. It is not uncommon for non-native speakers of English to understand what they have read but not be able to retell it orally in English. Reading need not then follow oral development but may be parallel to it and contribute to general language control.

This provides an indication that the chronological relationship between oral language learning and learning literacy is not an automatic one, particularly in the case of learning an additional language. Additional evidence for this comes from the fact that

children with hearing disabilities can learn to read (and to spell) without learning how to speak or without hearing sounds. In South Africa, as we move forwards with strategies for developing the written forms of African languages, we need to ensure that there are opportunities for children to begin and continue reading and writing in African languages as well as English.

## Conclusion

All of these issues need to be considered within the framework of the National Department of Education's new Outcomes Based Education (Curriculum 2005) and the recently released Language in Education Policy (Department of Education, 14 July 1997). The policy promotes multilingualism, and specifically stresses the need to explore additive forms of multilingualism. The language and literacy practices in schools should now begin to be shaped in the light of this policy.

Whole language principles and principles of early childhood education are in complete accord with Curriculum 2005 and the new language policy (see Appendix). They provide assistance for thinking of ways to generate relevant activities in classrooms for all children. These include: beginning with and building on what children know and bring to school – which includes their knowledge of one or more languages; and recognising that we integrate our learning – using both written and oral forms of language to ensure that children's school life involves literacy activities that are important to them.

These points provide guidance for educators, making decisions about multilingualism, as they review their approaches to reading and writing. Teachers need to be aware how they are responding to the existing linguistic diversity, whether it is in a negative way, which involves disallowing language use, or by responding negatively to mistakes in reading and writing by not taking into account the influence of other languages. One way of doing this is for educational institutions and schools to develop language policies which are clear about the need to explore literacy issues, and evaluate resources for literacy teaching and learning.

Some innovative strategies to affirm learning in languages other than English already in use by teachers are described below. These, and others like them serve as launching pads for ongoing exploration into effective multilingual teaching practice.

One teacher, who works as a language support teacher, has experimented with a Xhosa speaking child and has allowed her to write in Xhosa. The child in question could already write in Xhosa, and the

teacher described her as being very angry about being put into a white school:

She couldn't speak much English at all yet she was very literate in Xhosa. So I asked her teacher when she (the child) wrote her diary, could she write in Xhosa. She wrote her diary furiously. Sometimes we couldn't understand actually – we could correct, but that wasn't the point. She was just writing and she was doing what she needed to do ... And then gradually as she became more proficient in English, she started to write her diary in English.

The point of departure for this teacher was that the child was already fluent in Xhosa – she said that this (writing in Xhosa) should be allowed for Xhosa literate children who join schools where Xhosa is not the language of teaching.

The guiding point could shift to recognising that for meaningful learning and for reading and writing to develop in the low-status languages, there must be commitment to find ways of enabling learners to use their home languages for expression and communication through writing.

While the English-only or Afrikaans-only environment is clearly regarded as the school norm, a handful of teachers stress the importance of sustaining home languages and cultural practices at home:

When we have parent-teacher meetings, then we always encourage them to continue with their mother-tongue at home. That's very important that they give the kids some kind of cultural awareness of where they come from. Otherwise they get very disorientated. Tell them, don't only read them English stories, but tell them all the cultural stories, the folklore. Let them know where their roots are.

Once teachers go a step further and gain the confidence to see themselves as also being responsible for nurturing all the children's social and cultural practices, the presently dominant assimilation model which many schools accept will begin to change. This will then open paths for joint teacher and parent explorations of appropriate activities with children to develop fresh conceptions about the nature of home and school life. Small hopeful signs in such activities

are provided when teachers occasionally affirm the language which children respond in.

In response to a picture of a jack, a child says 'i jecki' and the teacher says: 'Yes, Sandi knows in Xhosa you say jacki, in English we say jack.'

'Common sense' wisdom says that children get confused when they mix languages. This is one of the reasons that some teachers feel nervous about letting children use home languages for learning among themselves. Once they have evidence that both use of primary language and code-switching are safe and normal multilingual practice, they will be able to extend the use of the various classroom languages.

An important step in promoting multilingualism in schools will be the work done with parents to engender good and trusting relations with them. One of the ways is to include their linguistic and cultural practices in the life of the school. Substantial spin-offs for literacy can follow. Children with home languages which are not widely promoted will be provided with examples of different literacy practices as they see the languages they speak being used in different ways by the important adults in their lives.

The new language policy promotes additive approaches to multilingualism in the interests of facilitating access to meaningful education for all children. As schools and families think about these approaches, they will hopefully realise the need to commit themselves to sustaining and nurturing children's home languages in both their spoken and their written forms. In addition to this, beginning to ensure meaningful education for all children requires that teacher educators and teachers must consider not only the languages of learning and teaching, but also the *ways* that children are being introduced to language, written and spoken.

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## Appendix

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

### *Common-sense Assumptions*

1. Learning proceeds from part to whole
2. Learning is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the pupil so lessons should be teacher centred
3. Lessons should prepare students to function in society after schooling
4. Learning takes place as skills are practised and habits are formed
5. Oral language acquisition precedes the development of literacy in learning a second language
6. Learning should take place in the target language to facilitate its learning
7. The learning potential of bilingual pupils is limited

### *Principles of Whole Language*

1. Learning moves from the whole to part
2. Children actively construct knowledge, so lessons should be pupil centred
3. Lessons should have meaning for pupils now
4. Meaningful social interaction promotes learning
5. In a second language, oral and written language are acquired simultaneously
6. Emphasis should be on first language learning to build concepts and facilitate learning another language
7. Teachers need to trust in the learner's potential

(Freeman & Freeman, 1992, p. 7)

*Principles of Early Childhood Education*

- Childhood is not only preparation for the future life of children, it has importance in itself in the present.
- The whole child is important and there are different ways to develop and rates of development. All the different aspects of development are interwoven – emotional, spiritual, intellectual, moral, physical and social.
- Every child has abilities which need to be identified and encouraged.
- Young children do not separate out different aspects of their learning into different subjects, but integrate the various experiences in their daily lives.
- Young children learn best through doing; they need to be actively involved in their learning.
- Children learn best when they are motivated and this happens when they are involved in exploring their interests and concerns.
- Learning is enhanced when children have confidence in their abilities.
- What children can do, rather than what they cannot is the starting point for learning.
- It is mainly through play, imagination and conversation that children learn about their own lives, about others, and about the world.
- Independence is developed in children who are encouraged to think for themselves.
- Relationships with other children and with adults are centrally important to development.

(Adapted from Ball, 1994, p. 51)