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What's Inside the Box?: Children's early encounters with literacy in South African classrooms

Abstract
Research on children's early literacy learning has predominantly focused on a 'child attribute improvement methodology' [Bloome & Katz, 2003] in which the child is conceptualized as having a series of attributes which are potentially affected by particular sets of treatments or events. These 'input-output' studies, also described as 'black box' studies, set up one kind of literacy pedagogy against another, where early literacy is seen as a neutral, cognitive, perceptual and individualized activity or set of skills to be acquired centred on sound-symbol relationships. The theoretical orientation in this article draws on work in emergent literacy [Clay 1972; Fereiro & Teberovsky 1987; Goodman 1986], new literacy studies and social semiotics[Heath 1983; Street 1984; Dyson 1993; Barton 1994; Gee 1996; Prinsloo & Breier 1996; Kress 1997] to analyse the ways in which reading and writing and other communicative modalities are taught and learnt as forms of socially situated activities, with boundaries, prohibitions and procedures set by different theories of reading and different sets of institutional practices. Through an exploration of data collected in early literacy classrooms in the Western Cape and Gauteng as part of the ethnographically-based Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) project, the writers examine the nature of young children's early encounters with literacy and the implications of these encounters for their later development as readers and writers in schools. The writers suggest that rather than being viewed as 'black boxes', the sites of early literacy practices should be investigated as complex multi-semiotic communicative environments in which the differences in the environments result from how the teachers in each site invent their activities around literacy differently, despite following the same 'broad' curriculum. It is at the level of 'local culture' within classrooms and institutions that a wide variety of differences around early literacy practices can be detected.

Introduction

The learning of reading and writing is a socially located and contested activity, with boundaries, prohibitions and procedures set by different theories of reading and different sets of institutional practices. We elaborate on this claim through our exploration of the nature of young children's early encounters with literacy in South African schools, and the implications of these early encounters with school literacy for children's careers as readers and writers, in school and after school. We reflect upon these issues while examining research data from three pre-school centres and one Grade 1 class which were studied as part of the Children's Early Literacy Learning (CELL) research project, recently carried out in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo Province. The research presented here is part of a larger ethnographic-style study of the processes and influences

shaping young children's literacy learning in out-of-school and school settings across multiple sites.[1]

Research methodology and conceptual premises

The methodological focus of this paper is shaped by our stance towards the resources and current debates in the field of Early Childhood Literacy studies (Hall, Larson & Marsh, 2003), and our concern is to bring these resources and questions to bear on the study of important concerns in South African education. Research on children's early literacy learning has often followed a 'child attribute improvement methodology' (Bloome & Katz, 2003, 383) where the child is conceived as having a series of attributes (age, gender, intelligence, socio-economic status, language status) which are potentially affected by a particular treatment or set of events. Children are conceptualised as decontextualised individual units, events are experienced, and the change in attribute involves an increase or decrease. The characteristic forms of research from this theoretical perspective have been input-output studies, also described as 'black-box' studies because they are inattentive to the dynamics involved in the take-up of the input. Such studies often pit one literacy programme against another, as a means to determine which is better for children and thus have been described as 'horse-race' studies (Bloome & Katz, 2003, 386). Input-output research methodology can be regarded as consistent with a particular view of childhood literacy, where literacy is seen as primarily a perceptual, associative and individualised activity centred on sound/symbol relationships, and requiring a mental age of around seven before it can start. The influences of behaviourism (Skinner, 1957) as well as versions of Piaget's (1962) modelling of cognitive stages, led researchers and educators to conceive of reading as the acquisition of a series of discrete perceptual skills, particularly that of phonics-recognition, and preceded by a range of perceptual and response skills which could be taught/acquired and mastered by children in sequence. An emphasis on what became known as 'reading

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[1] Examples of published CELL research include Bloch, Stein, and Prinsloo (2001); Stein and Slonimsky (2001); Stein and Mamabolo (in press) ; Prinsloo (in press). The researchers and research assistants who aided the authors in collecting, transcribing and translating data for the study presented here included Jonguxolo Nana, Xolisa Gazula, Pumza Mbembe, Thandiwe Mkhabela and Tshidi Mambolo.

readiness' and phonics-based instruction intermittently dominated early literacy research and educational thinking for much of the 20th century into the 1980s (Chall, 1967; Piaget, 1962; Adams, 1990; Crawford, 1995). Such 'reading readiness' and skills-based models continue to be influential models at teacher education colleges in South Africa and in the working theories of many South African school-teachers (Prinsloo & Bloch, 1999).

Skills-based models of early literacy have been challenged by researchers who have directed their attention on children's pre-school *emergent literacy behaviour*, showing how children bring sense-making strategies to literacy events and actively making sense of their worlds (Clay, 1972, 1975; Fereiro & Teberovsky,1987; Goodman, 1986). These researchers of 'emergent literacy' have conceived of literacy learning as being much more than code-recognition, where written language is a complex, multi-layered and skilled process, involving reflective and strategic meaning-oriented as well as socially pragmatic behaviour, and situated linguistic understanding, in addition to coding competencies. It is an assumption of an emergent literacy approach that literacy learning begins when (very) young children become aware that written language makes sense (as do other communicative modalities such as drawings), and when they start asking how it makes sense. This awareness develops as a result of not only exposure to print in their environment, but also through observing the ways in which print, and other communicative modalities, are useful and provide access to enjoyment.

Following on this emergent literacy perspective, influential ethnographic studies by socio-linguists changed the way that many researchers and educators commonly think about early childhood literacy (Heath, 1983 ;Taylor 1983; Scollon & Scollon 1981; Fishman 1988). In particular, Heath's detailed study showed how local communities in one town socialised their children into very different and distinctive communicative practices and values, with direct consequences for how successfully children encountered literacy in school.

From a socio-cognitive perspective associated with Vygotsky, children's early hands-on experiences with language and literacy in everyday social activities are seen to give rise to the internal mental processes that they use to do the intellectual work of reading and

writing activity (Wertsch, 1993, 13; Vygotsky, 1978). Literacy, then, is seen as a social practice which is mediated by language and other cultural tools and artefacts. It is accomplished in a context in which social actors position, and are positioned by each other in social semiotic interaction that includes verbal, non-verbal, textual and other modes of sign-based exchanges (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton,1998; Gee,1996 ; Street,1984, 2001; Prinsloo & Breier,1996). Thus Rogoff (1990) suggested that from a socio-cultural perspective the basic unit of analysis is no longer the individual, but the socio-cultural activity of participation in socially constituted practices. School literacy is an instance of participation in the social and the symbolic. As Kress (1997) and Dyson (1993) have shown in detailed situated studies of children's symbolic and social work, in play and in school settings, such participation is not simply a uni-directional movement in which children take on board a fully-determined socially world. Within constraints, children at least partly follow their own interests and experiences as they choose what they want to represent and choose the modes, means and materials for their representative work. In sharp contrast to the 'reading readiness' position, then, a socio-cultural, socio-cognitive and social semiotic literacy perspective stretches the process of literacy development back into early childhood, and into a variety of behaviours, including pretend-reading and -writing, parental and teacher modelling, children's play (symbolic play), drawing, 'scribbling' and the handling and use of a range of artefacts. In particular, for our interests here, children enter school with dispositions towards what can be done with speech, writing and other communicative modalities, and are in turn shaped by what they encounter in early school settings. In effect, they develop 'theories' (and experiences) of the values, constraints and possibilities of language, literacy and other communicative modalities (Luke & Kale, 1977). Rather than being black-boxes, then, sites of early literacy practices such as the pre-schools and school we examine below should be investigated as complex communicative spaces: critical sites for up-close, detailed investigations into what is being produced by children and modelled for children with what sorts of consequences for their careers as readers and writers. We treat the theoretical framework that we have outlined above as providing tools for our investigation, rather than as sources of absolute truth or authority.

The research settings

In this article we focus on data collected from three pre-school centres situated in and around Khayelitsha in Cape Town , and a Grade 1 class in a semi-rural school on the borders of Johannesburg. We are concerned to draw out the distinctiveness of each site, as well as the commonalities across these sites from a comparative perspective. The purpose of such comparison in situated methodologies is to reveal otherwise hidden issues and processes that can then be used for theoretical development or as contributions to more insightful future research. Our methodology is what Bloome and Katz described as that of 'comparative situations theory building' (2003, 393). The nature of such comparative study involves the situation as the unit of analysis (as opposed to distinct literacy behaviours). The comparison involves a description of the nature and diversity of literacy practices as situated social phenomena. The methodological grammar that we use could be said to be both phenomenological and empirical, while the methods we use are qualitative or ethnographic, but these categories are only relevant with reference to the theoretical concerns that motivate the study, as we discussed them above. We focus on pre-schools here but are interested in them in the larger study which we described above as comparative sites with schools, with children's play sites and with family settings.

The three pre-schools we study here are examples of low budget 'educare' and pre-school centres that operate with very limited public funding, professional training and support in the urban townships around South Africa. Children at these centres are commonly the children of working class parents, some of them in secure jobs, others without work, living in either township houses or in shacks. The groups of children referred to in this study had very similar backgrounds, so the noticeable variations that we point to across the sites were not a function of the differences that children brought to these institutions. From a distance, in the case of the pre-schools, each centre could be said to be concerned with giving children a pre-school package of knowledge that included the alphabet, nursery rhymes, songs and exercises in 'how to listen'. However, up close, the substance and social interactions that framed these activities varied so dramatically that the children at each site were undoubtedly taking different orientations to literacy and meaning-

making resources away with them into the first years of schooling. The differences, we suggest, were a result of the way the teachers at each site *invented their activity differently*, despite following the same broad curricula.

We focus selectively on examples of teaching from each site and have selected the data to illustrate what we have identified as central features of pedagogical orientation in each case. Our selection was made on the basis of what we regarded as 'telling' data (Mitchell, 1984, 239) where the data makes visible the theoretical relationships we are interested in examining, understanding and elucidating. The selection is limited by the space available here, but is illustrative of patterns that are consistent in the larger body of data, in each case.

Example 1: Thembani Educare Centre

The first site we examine here presents an example of a common form of pre-school pedagogy, where the focus is on recitation-learning. However, the varied and culturally eclectic resources that are drawn on and presented to the children give these practices a particular 'local' dimension that we think is worth examining. This Centre, which we will call Thembani Educare Centre, is linked to the local Ethiopian church (an Africanised, 'Independent' or syncretist Christian church, which refigures Christian worship against African religious and cultural practices, including ancestor veneration). Thembani is presently at a donated site in the township, where two makeshift rooms, '*hokkies*' were built, with planks, one of which is situated next to the gate facing the street, and is used as a kitchen and administration office.

Parents pay R50 per month to leave a child at the Centre, though the Centre's principal says that only a few manage to pay regularly. A number of children are being raised by their grandparents, living on small state pensions. The principal, Mrs Sibhene[2] sees herself as filling a real need for child-carers in the township. She tells a story about a

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[2] The names of children and teachers given here, as well as the names of the pre-school centres have been changed, to protect the confidentiality of our sources.

single mother in Nyanga who left her two children locked inside her house (for their own protection) while she was at work. A fire started inside the house and both children were burned to death. While this story suggests a rationale for the work she does, it is also evident that child-minding is one of only a few money-earning activities available to women in an area where unemployment is rife.

In qualifying herself to do this work Mrs Sibhene did a two-year part-time course in pre-primary teaching, run at St Francis, the local adult night school in Langa township, as well as a short course run by a local development charity (the Community Chest) where she was shown administrative procedures, including basic book-keeping. She employs other staff, including another teacher, a caretaker, and a kitchen worker who prepares food for the children.

While she and the other teacher are absent or busy attending to administrative matters such as purchasing food and equipment, the children are often left in the care of the older caretaker at the centre, Mr Kutumani. He is an enthusiastic and charismatic teacher, who has not been formally trained as a pre-school teacher. He has developed a distinctive teaching style and makes up his own teaching content, which includes a large reservoir of Xhosa-language poems, prayers and narratives that he teaches to the children. The majority of children speak Xhosa as a home language.

For all three teachers the curriculum is broken into three key functions: teacher-led direct instruction which is characterised by collective rote-and chant-learning; supervised play-time where the children are left to play with each other in the small play-ground; and eating and drinking times. Explicit pedagogy is exclusively dedicated to chant learning and recitation. The principal and Mr Kutumani have taught the children to collectively and sometimes individually recite a large and varied body of songs, rhymes, prayers, psalms, poems and chants in the Xhosa and English languages. We discuss some examples briefly below. We are concerned to identify the distinctiveness of the cultural resources acquired by the children, and the energy and enthusiasm that the children bring

to the processes of their acquisition. We are also concerned to identify the limiting effects these processes bring to children's emergent literacy.

Mrs Sibhene taught the children, whose ages ranged from four to seven, to perform the following chant:

Mrs S:	Lelethu, Lelethu
Children:	Akusha, kusha dana
Children and Mrs S:	Akusha, kusha dana
Children and Mrs S:	Hesheshe kakatu ha-ha,
	hupa, aah hupa le bafana, aah hopa
	hesheshe hesheshe tamati ha-ha
	tamati ha-ha, aah hishima fana
	aah hishuma, aa hishima fana, aah hishima,
	Aah Yeeee-eeee

While reciting the made-up sequence of sound-words the children perform an elaborate, 'war dance' which involves limited but precise dance steps and much beating of chests, flexing of muscles and combative gestures towards an imaginary opponent. At the last line they leap into the air and scream in unison. This is Mrs Sibhene's version of the *haka,* the 'All Black's' pre-match war-dance[3] which she has taught the children. As an example of her own version reconstructed off the television screen, it is an imaginative reconstruction of the exotic sounds of the Maori war-chant and includes her own made-up words intermixed with arbitrarily inserted Xhosa words such as *tamati* (tomato) and *bafana* and *fana* (boys). In doing the *haka* the children engage in embodied, performative sign-making and learn and use sound patterns which are nonsense sounds but precise in their sequence, nonetheless. As a pre-reading activity which is likely to enhance children's phonemic awareness (their sense of the sounds in language, how they are distinctive as well as how they merge and combine), this exercise might be said to be a successful example of 'local' pedagogy.

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[3] The All Blacks are New Zealand's national rugby team. The *haka* is their pre-match war-dance, said to be an old Maori war-song-and-dance which they have adopted. Mrs Sibhene and the children will only have seen it on South African television when the All Blacks play the South African national side.

Children learn the chant by doing it, collectively, learning from each other and distributing the knowledge of the sequence amongst each other, so that they collectively sustain one another in their learning. Chant learning makes complete sense when it is about oral performance, such as learning the *haka*, or choral singing, but it is more problematic when it is the dominant mode for learning (and pre-learning) when it comes to reading and writing. The learning task becomes that of successful, collective reproduction of a sequence, not with meaning-making or reflexive deployment of these resources in any other way. There is little space for developing meta-awareness of how sounds and letters combine to make particular signs, or for reflexive deployment of these resources in any other way.

This point is evident when it comes to chant-learning of the alphabet in English, and numbers from one to ten in English and Xhosa. Alphabet and number charts pasted on the walls of the rooms are used to initiate these exchanges, as in the following brief examples:

> (Mr Kutumani, caretaker = Mr K.; Children = C)
>
> Mr K: (pointing to the number chart) Ngubani lo? (*What is this?*)
>
> C: Ngu-one, two, three, .. (They continue counting up to ten.)
>
> Mr K: Masibaleni ngesiXhosa (*Let's count in Xhosa.*)
>
> C: Inye, zimbini, zintathu, zine, zintlanu, zintandathu, sixhenxe, etc.
>   (*One, two, three, four, five, six seven*, etc, up to ten.)
>
> Mr K: Masiphindeni. (*Let's do it again.*)
>
> C: Inye, zimbini, etc. (*One, two, …up to ten.*)
>
> Mr K: (He points to the alphabet chart.)
>   Siya phaya ke ngoku. (*We are going there now.*)
>
> Mr K: (pointing at the letter, and its accompanying word and picture)
>   A for what ?
>
> C: A for apple.
>
> Mr K: B?
>
> C: B for ball.
>
> Mr K: C?

C: C for cake.

Mr K: D?

C: D for doll.

(He continues like this through the rest of the alphabet, finishing off as

follows:)

Mr K: X?

C: X for xylophone.

Mr K: Y?

C: Y for yacht.

Mr K: Z?

C: Z for Zip.

There is notably no attempt to explain the meaning of words or to show the letters of the alphabet at work in any other way than in this list. The children learn and recite these sequences with much enthusiasm and energy, the younger children following the older children in getting the words and sequence right. Mr Kutumani noted, in an aside to the researcher, that the children were doing fine, but were having problems with calling out the words *xylophone* and *yacht*. He had to help them 'to pronounce those words.' Because the task was that of recitation, however, he made no effort to translate or explain these unfamiliar and arguably inappropriate examples. Nor was there any effort to get the children to use these resources in any way besides their recitation as part of a list. Numbers are learnt in a similar fashion.

Individualised pedagogy, when it occurred, was simply about getting the children to recite
the sequence on their own, accompanied by threats of sanctions if they made mistakes. In other words, the concept of the 'individual' which is at stake here is not of an autonomous, creative, personal subject, but rather, the individual as responsible to and controlled by the demands of the larger group or community of which he/she is part. Thus making sure that individual children get the words and sequences 'correct' is in the service of making sure the class as a cohort functions smoothly.

While the only modality was that of chant-learning, the repertoire of songs, poems, prayers and rhymes learnt was impressively large and varied, and absorbing for the children. It included traditional English nursery rhymes, Xhosa rhymes, religious hymns, prayers and psalms, Xhosa traditional praise poems, and several of the teachers' own design, drawing off popular and TV culture, like the *haka* described above, as well as from religious sources.

English nursery rhymes that the children learnt included such standards as *Wee Willie Winky* and *Jack and Jill* (which was taught in both English and Xhosa). The children though were less comfortable with obscure English-language rhymes such as *Wee Willy Winkie* and mumbled and stumbled their way through the recitation.

The children's reciting of their learnt repertoire of Xhosa-language and syncretist religious poems was considerably more confident and joyful than both their English language repertoire and other such awkwardly translated nursery rhymes. When they were left to nominate their own songs and chants to perform, it was clear that their favourites were Xhosa-language rhymes. In the transcript below while Mr Kutumani is attending to a crying child the children carry on with their own selections. This one is called *Unogwaja* (a rabbit) and is full of sound and action in the Xhosa original:

Children:	Nanku unogwaja. (*Here is a rabbit*.)
	Wandophula ! (*It broke me!)*
	Shunqu! *(sound of breaking)*
	Esinqeni (*In the waist line.*)
	Shunqu! *(the sound that is made by a breaking thing)*
	Esikabani? *(Whose waist line?)*
	Shunqu! *(the sound that is made by a breaking thing)*
	Joni kabani? *(Johnny who?)*
	Joni kabani? *(Johnny who?)*
	Shunqu! *(the sound that is made by a breaking thing)*
	Joni maqanda. *(Johnny eggs!)*
	Shunqu! *(the sound that is made by a breaking thing)*
	Gokwe, Gokwe!

Betha lendoda (*Hit this man!*)

Le ndoda (*This man!*)

Hayi bantwana !*(No, children!)*

Bantwana (*Children!*)

Phezu kwelwandle! (*Over the sea!*)

The children were taught to recite a formidable, varied and often linguistically complex body of prayers, most of them in Xhosa. Having drilled the words for some time, the teachers then simply nominated these prayers and the children collectively took up the cue. For example their repertoire included most of David's Psalms from the Bible:

>Mr K: Amelani siza kwenza indumiso twenty-onenke indumiso 21. *(Listen we are going to do Psalm 21. Let's do it all of us.)*

>C: Ndumiso twenty-one zilumko.   *(Psalm 21 : Song of the Wise)*

>Indumiso ka Davide. *(David's psalm.)*

>Wathi masiye endlwini kaYehova. *(Let's go to God's house.)*

>inyawo zethu zafika zema *(Our feet came and stood)*

>emasangweni akho Yerusalem, *(In your gates Jerusalem.)*

>Yerusalem wena wakhiweyo, (*Jerusalem you were built*)

>Ngokomzi ohlangeneyo wamnye. *(Like one house)*

>Apho zinyuka ziye khona izizwe *(Where the nations go)*

>Izizwe zikaYehova. *(God's nations.)*

>Amen.

Besides this repertoire, the caretaker has taught the children a body of more idiosyncratic poems, many of them drawing directly on Africanist Christian poems associated with the Ethiopian church, which mix prophetic Christianity with images and narrative from African culture. For example, the children learnt and recited a long and complex narrative, undoubtedly sourced from prophetic narratives of the Ethiopian church. The opening lines were as follows:

>Vukani kusile magwalandini ! *(Wake up it's the morning you cowards!)*

>Yabinza inkwenkwezi isixelela *(The star told us.)*

>Labetha ixilongo lisibizela *(The trumpet rang calling us.)*

> Ndithe ndinika ubukumkani (*I said I give you the King*.)
>
> Ndithe ndinika imfundo (*I said I give you education*.)
>
> Nayishunqula (*You cut it.*)
>
> Ndithe ndinika umhlaba (*I gave you earth.*)
>
> Nawushunqula (*And you cut it.*)

The children learnt the whole prayer by repeating it line by line after Mr Kutumani, and practicing it over time.

What do children take away from this pre-school when they head off to school? Unlike many schools and pre-schools, the curriculum is eclectic in its blending and mixing knowledge and language resources drawn from diverse cultural and narrative sources and communications media. The teachers have passed on to the children a genuine pleasure in the reproduction of a varied repertoire, and have built a strong sense of community performance and shared activity. But the emphasis on recitation means that the children have not spent a lot of time inventing and creating new meanings around these texts nor gained much experience in simple analysis and synthesis. The repertoires of texts used in these classrooms are always selected by the teacher, leaving little opportunity for the children to draw on their own stories and available resources. However, these songs, and the children's knowledge of them, could well be seen as a resource that later school teachers could draw on. They constitute a potentially rich source of language, image and metaphor, resources for meaning-making that could be creatively deployed. In practice the power of these resources is often under-utilised by school teachers who tend to draw on children's repertoire of songs as filler-exercises, for quietening down talkative children or for getting children's attention before moving on to what they see as the real stuff of school learning. It is also likely that the children's skills in recall and reciting word-for-word, developed at pre-school level, will stand them in good stead, and will be enhanced when they encounter the rote learning and list-learning strategies that characterise most learning in non-elite schools in South Africa.

It seems that at the Thembani Educare Centre, the teachers' imagining of schooling has distinctive features and these are communicated directly and indirectly to the children

through the kinds of texts and communicative practices which are enacted. It is through these processes that the limits and boundaries around what constitutes 'being a reader' and 'being a writer' are actually defined. Firstly, there is an expectation that school knowledge is about collectively learned recitation. While these children have knowledge of the alphabet, nursery rhymes and have learnt 'how to listen', it is apparent that the kinds of social interaction that the teachers have promoted in this classroom have communicated particular attitudes to the social construction of knowledge as well. The children can be seen to be internalising conceptions of what is relevant, and to be developing habits of engaging mentally. Thus they might perform enthusiastically and well in rote-learning exercises, and in choral singing activities, but they have probably not been prepared to make and take meaning in the critically reflexive ways that will enable them to make sense of school reading and writing practices in later years. On the other hand, it might be preparing them very well for very traditional school practices.

Example 2: Sivile Pre-school Centre

We now turn, more briefly, to the second pre- school, 'Sivile' Pre-school Centre which is located elsewhere in Khayelitsha in Cape Town. The learning here is more school-like but undoubtedly more limited in certain ways. We are interested in examining here how reading and writing are encountered by small children in ways that are inseparable from the disciplinary practices of the school. We present here what might be seen as an extreme case, which illustrates that general point in a telling way.

The Centre is sponsored by the Cape Provincial Administration, which pays teacher salaries. The Centre has around 50 children and fees charged are R60 per month. A school-like hierarchy exists, with a principal, a deputy principal and two teachers, with small pay differentials (of about R200 per month between the Principal and the teachers). A cook is also employed to prepare food daily for the children. There are ongoing tensions between the principal and the teachers over decision-making, time-keeping and uses of money.

The principal, Mrs Ngada, recounts details of various plans for school initiatives, such as organising parents' meetings that lead to conflicts and mutual hostility amongst the staff. The children at the Centre are divided into three classes, of 2 to 3 year-olds, 3½ to 4 year-olds, and 4½ to 6 year olds, each with their own class teacher. She says she has two jobs, teaching and managing the educare centre, and wants to employ a new teacher to take her class. The other teachers objected, arguing that any money that was available should be used to increment their salaries, rather than on a new member of staff.

Despite the openly mercenary attitudes displayed by the teachers on these occasions of conflict, they appear to be confident that they are doing good work. As one teacher puts it:

> Do you think the government sees the huge work that we do? We carry these children, teach them to sit, to wee independently, to feed themselves such that we don't teach in January and February. We start in March. For now we are getting them used to our lifestyle here. We take them out, make them happy so that the next day they wake up with interest to come to school. Do you think the government doesn't see this? We prepare these children for Grade One. Grade One teachers take ready-made and prepared children.

Parents also see the Centre as doing good work. One mother, the wife of a policeman, living in Tembani, said, "We decided to take (our child) to the Sivile Educare because it is cheap and ikufuphi and abantwana abaphuma phaya baphuma baclever. *(It's nearer and children who come from them are clever.)*"

It is the processes of producing "ready-made and prepared children" that we focus on here. We are concerned with how procedures of disciplining are interleaved or folded into children's school-based early engagement with modes of information, whether of inscription and print, visual image, spoken language and gesture. We ask the same questions as in the preceding case study: What conceptions of what is relevant are children being encouraged to internalise? What habits of engaging cognitively and

affectively in relation to literacy are being developed? A poem that the children learn early on at the Centre and repeat often goes as follows:

> Umntwana othand'iindaba mbi, mbi (*A child who likes news is bad, bad.*)
> Wofika ngapha, ejonga ngapha (*She always looks from side to side.*)
> Efu'ukuphendula (*Wanting to answer.*)
> Bantwana abancinci yekani abazali (*Young children leave parents alone.*)
> Bancokole, bancokole kamnandi (*Chat, chat nicely.*)

That children take on the ideas, ideology and messages of such rhymes is apparent in the following exchange, where the children are being disciplined to be less noisy. In the following recorded account, at 9.45 a.m, the children have been told to sleep at their tables while the teachers are busy or out of the room:

> (Sindiwe, the teacher, comes out of the kitchen shouting.)
> Sindiwe: Hayi, hayi, hayi! Lala! Lala! (*No, no , no! Sleep! Sleep!*)
> (Some children 'sleep' and some carry on chatting.) Heyi cwaka! (*Hey quiet!*)
> Child: Umntwana othand'indaba… (*A child who likes news…*)

The fact that the child is repeating a line from the poem indicates that she knows exactly what the message is meant to be. It is this concern to produce docile and passive children that makes up much of the teachers' concern with getting the children 'ready'. Passifying the children with threats of punishment for being noisy was a sustained activity.

The children encountered reading and writing at the Centre against the framing background of these discipline procedures. The regulative procedures and the encounters with print, illustration and other communicative modalities are folded into each other inseparably:

> Nosiseko: Khanize apha phandle. Odwa, Thando, khange nindinike umaphepha enu. Aba ndibabizayo khange bandimike amaphepha abo.
> *(Come here outside. Odwa, Thando you did not give me your papers. The children I am calling out are those who did not give me their papers).*
> (She hits Khalapha.) Anuva, uyonqena, yintoni le uyibhale apha?

(You don't listen, you are lazy, what have you written here?) (She hits him again.) Uyalova wena esikolweni. Ndizakubabetha aba bantu batya ipen. Bazakufa eyonanto. *(You are behind at school. I am going to hit those of you who eat pens. The thing is they are going to die.).*

(Later, children start making a noise. Nosiseko comes back with her stick.) Ngubani othethayo? Ngubani othethayo *(Who's talking? Who's talking?)* (She hits Paula on the head thrice with a stick and then goes to another group and hits another child. Yandisa, a child, goes to the researcher to show her a piece of writing.) Hayi sanukumdisturba umisi uyabhala izinto endimthume zona. Nani bhalani ezenu *(No, don't disturb the teacher she's writing things. I have asked her to write. You must also write your things).*

(Again, children are already eating porridge. Sindiwe is serving seconds to the children.) Andifuni mntwana ongxolayo namhlanje. Ndiza kubabetha aba bantwana *(I don't want any child who's going to make a noise today. I'm going to hit these children).* Bantwana, bangaphi abathi abazukungxola. Mabaphakamise isandla. *(Children, how many of you say they are not going to make noise? They must raise their hands).* Mabalale bona ndiyazazi mna ukuba ndizakubapha ntoni. Uzakubonakala ngokungalali umntu ongxolayo. *(They must sleep. I know what I'm going to give them. A noise maker will be seen by not sleeping.)*

(Thuli raises her hand to show that she is not going to make noise. Children 'sleep'.)

The teachers on one occasion showed some concern that they were being recorded during these exchanges, suggesting that they were aware that they were not following the child-centred pedagogy which they had all been exposed to on the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) course they attended. The Early Learning Resource Unit is a local non-governmental organisation that trains teachers in progressive pedagogy.

It would be a distortion to suggest that the above exchanges of threats and insistence on passivity was all that characterised the pedagogy of the Centre. It's not all quiet and discipline, in fact, and the children also get space to sing and dance. Here a teacher

teaches the children how to dance, while the other teachers are away. There are two groups of dancers dancing to different songs, both of them *kwaito* (rap) songs that are familiar from the radio and that mix local languages in their lyrics. At present, the following is a very popular song:

> Oh ho ho ho city Jehova
>
> It's a fiasco
>
> Pap parapapam
>
> Come on every body
>
> It's a fiasco.

However, it is significant that all occasions which included exercises and activities of reading and writing were framed by the coercive disciplinary procedures that have been described above. Thus the encounters with literacy were also encounters with strict and sometimes painful disciplining of attention and bodies. Such examples of physical punishment and enforced passivity are not untypical of many pre-school and schooling contexts in South Africa that we encountered in our research and we heard similar accounts from other researchers and teachers. Corporal punishment is outlawed in schools but undoubtedly still occurs with frequency in many schools, where teachers defend it as being "part of our culture". In such contexts, literacy and violence become linked in distressing ways in children's imaginations: the struggle to write becomes associated with negativity, feelings of failure and pain and this in itself sets limits around what constitutes 'becoming a reader and writer'.

Example 3: Paul Fereira Early Learning Centre

The third pre-school is the Paul Fereira Early Learning Centre, named after a man who left money in his will to be used for pre-schooling in needy areas, and managed by Catholic Welfare Development of the Catholic church. There are about one hundred children attending the pre-school, from seventeen in 1997. There are also six teachers and one caretaker. The Centre, like many others in the area combines daycare and pre-school activities. The fees are R100 a month per child, which includes the cost of the food that the children eat at the Centre. While the pre-school is open to anyone in the area, the

majority of children are Black children of Xhosa-speaking origin. The centre gets its children from Mandalay, Tembani, Bongweni, Luzuko Park and other parts of Khayelitsha. The Centre also gets children from informal settlement areas of New Rest and Lower Crossroads. These children walk to the centre. Jill Daniels has been the principal ever since the centre opened. She belongs to the Mitchells Plain Principals Educare forum. Four other pre-schools in Mandalay belong to the forum, and these five schools work closely with each other, sharing resources when possible.

Of the approximately one hundred children attending the Centre, two children are Afrikaans-speakers at home. The rest speak Xhosa and English, though all the parents are first-language Xhosa-speakers. These children are commonly encouraged to speak English and are spoken to in English by their parents because their parents identify 'good English' as being vital for their children's success at school and thereafter. They ask the teachers at the Centre to teach their children in English because they hope to send them later to multiracial English-language schools whose reputations for success are much higher than local township schools. Knowing English makes it easier for the children to cope at those schools. Jill, who speaks only English and Afrikaans but is learning Xhosa, says that some of the children pick English up very quickly.

We identify the pedagogical orientation of Jill and the other teachers below and go on to show an example of the data to illustrate our point: The teaching involved communicating to the children a largely internal and closed language and reference system. This framework of attaching meaning selectively to a corpus of signs was school-based in the sense that the meanings that were attached were often idiosyncratic but the teacher designated them as correct, whereas other possible meanings and associations were excluded. Thus reading and writing were first encountered at school in a framework of more relaxed discipline than in the previous example, but the children were still encouraged to look only for the meaning or association of meaning with symbol that the teacher had in mind.

This point is illustrated briefly in the description exchange below, around a lesson on rabbits:

(Teacher Jill separates a class of 14 children from the other children.

Jill asks children to clap hands. Children clap.

Jill shows a picture of a rabbit (above the picture is written *my pet*).)

Jill: What is this a picture of ?

Children: A rabbit.

Jill: Repeat.

Children: A rabbit.

Jill: What kind of food does the rabbit eat?

Some children: Pear!

Jill: A rabbit eats carrots.

(Jill shows them a rabbit from a book that hasn't been coloured in.)

Jill: What colour it is?

(The children are silent.)

Jill: A rabbit is white. You are going to make a garden for your rabbit. It is going to live in the garden.

(Jill hands out pieces of blue cardboard with a rabbit drawn in black. She gives them scissors to cut the rabbits from the cardboard. Jill gives them wax crayons including some red crayons, for colouring. She takes two rabbits from the desk and a book. She goes to the children, calls them to sit down and shows them a rabbit.)

Jill: What is this?

Children: Rabbit!

Jill: Why does the rabbit have big eyes?

Loyiso: To see.

Jill : Rabbit can be in what colour?

Children : White.

Jill : Or?

Children : White or red.

Jill: The two small legs of the rabbit are used to scratch out the carrots.Who knows a lion?

Children: Me.

Jill: The lion eats the rabbit and the rabbit eats carrots. A rabbit hops with two small legs, to run away from the lions.

Jill: (reading from the book) Bunny's mommy, Rabbit, wants Jam. She wants what?

Children: Jam.

Jill: The mommy gives Bunny money. What is Bunny going to do at the shop?

Children : To buy jam.

Jill : Who gave Bunny money?

Children : His mom.

(Jill pages through the book (rather fast) and shows them that Bunny goes to the shop and comes back home.)

The above example shows how the teacher is setting up school knowledge as insulated, impermeable, and disconnected from children's emergent meaning-making, language and literacy resources. The teacher is working with mostly Xhosa-language children, but their substantial language and out-of-school knowledge is excluded – for example, the dramatic Xhosa-language song about a rabbit that we discussed in the first case-study could have been used as a resource in this instance. She is telling children what counts as knowledge in school. It is not common-sense at all. Despite experiential evidence to the contrary, it has been established that in this setting, that of the schoolroom, rabbits are white and eat carrots. Unfortunately, this construct of situated meaning is not even internally consistent, so although the children learn to use this particular situated meanings of rabbit - white, eats carrots, this knowledge is not consistently reinforced by the teacher. She asks the children what colour rabbits are, they all say 'white' but she asks for more 'And?' upon which the children throw in the colour red, which they perhaps think is as likely as any colour in this arbitrary social semiotic world. Perhaps the response might be because of the red crayons which were handed out. When the teacher reads from the rabbit book, she subverts her earlier dogma around rabbits' diet. Having

said that they eat carrots, she reads the story where rabbit's mom buys jam, without noticing the contradiction. The story in the book is working with a very different, situated meaning of rabbit to the one that has already been endorsed. In this shift, the teacher has moved from a world of the classroom rabbits to the convention of children's literature where animals are personified as real people, doing people things, wearing clothes, talking, going to the shop and eating jam. The teacher has so absorbed the logic of this device that she doesn't notice the need to explain that rabbit now means something else and is differently articulated in an alternative system of meaning-making.

Example 4: Olifantsvlei Primary School

A key issue arising out of the previous examples concerns the ways in which teachers create differing expectations, values and beliefs about literacy in their classrooms, and the consequences for children's later identities as readers and writers. In this final example, we explore how a Grade 1 teacher, from a semi-rural farm school on the edges of Johannesburg, has created a radically different understanding of literacy pedagogy through her attempts at border-crossings across home, school and community domains.

In 1999, Tshidi Mamabolo joined Olifantsvlei Primary School as an early years literacy teacher. Olifantsvlei Primary School, established in the 1960's, is a state school receiving state subsidy. In terms of resources, the school has electricity, a photocopier, and the Grade 1 and 2 classes have small collections of books in each classroom. The school is situated in farmlands on the borders of the city of Johannesburg and only serves children from the densely populated informal settlements or 'shacks' which are scattered in between the farmlands. These settlements have electricity but no sanitation or running water. Many children come from female -headed households, and some children live in children-headed households as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is affecting entire families. Social security in these families comes from child grants of R140.00 per month per child and pensions for those over 60 years. Children who live in these settlements exist on the margins of the society, in situations of childhood adversity, unemployment and poverty.

When Tshidi Mamabolo started working in this school in 1999, she was surprised and worried at what she calls 'the children's passivity, their lack of motivation and interest in learning'. She decided that it was her fault and that she needed to transform her literacy pedagogy. Shifting from a teacher-fronted pedagogy which focused on rote-learning, phonics and drills, she started to introduce more participatory models in which children's histories, languages and background knowledges were incorporated into literacy activities. In spite of the fact that the children in this school are multilingual speakers of several African languages, the school has chosen a 'straight for English' language policy from Grade 1. This means that English is the language of teaching and learning and children acquire initial literacy in English, not in their home language.

In one example of how Tshidi Mamabolo changed her pedagogy, she developed a multilingual project in local storytelling and performance in which the children produced visual texts, stories and plays in their home languages. In one example of an improvised play, a group of seven year old girls created four women characters, named after four of the official South African languages: Ma English [Mother English] , MamoSotho [Mother Sotho] , Mam'Xhosa [Mother Xhosa] and MamaZulu [Mother Zulu]. They are all neighbours. Ma English is a wealthy, arrogant woman who secretly goes to MamoSotho to ask if she can borrow some sugar. She asks MamoSotho not to tell anyone that she has come to ask her for sugar. MamoSotho promises not to do so but as soon as Ma English has left the house, she runs to MamoZulu to inform her that Ma English has just gone to someone (she does not say it was her house) to borrow some sugar. When MamoZulu asks her 'Where did she go to?'she says she did not know. She also asks MamoZulu not to tell anyone 'the gossip'. But as soon as she leaves, MamoZulu runs to Mam'Xhosa to tell her 'the same gossip'. Mam'Xhosa asks her who gave Ma English the sugar. She replies that she does not know. Mam'Xhosa then runs to MamoSotho to pass on the same gossip! When MamoSotho hears the gossip coming back to her, she goes to assault MamoZulu, shouting, 'What did I say to you about that matter between us?' She hits her repeatedly. Then MamoZulu goes to Mam'Xhosa, shouting at her, 'What did I say to you about that matter between us?' and assaults her repeatedly. The play ends with the children singing this song:

> Let's stop talking about other people!
>
> Let's stop talking about other people!

This play can be interpreted at a number of levels. Certainly the children construct it as a moral tale about the evils of gossiping, exhorting their audience to 'stop talking about other people'. But what do we make of these female characters, all named after national languages? In the performances, each character actually communicated in the language of her name, creating a multilingual polyphonic text in which Ma English spoke English to MamoSotho, who in turn spoke Sotho to MamoZulu, who spoke Zulu to Mam'Xhosa and so on in a predictable chain of oral communication. This play can be read as a powerful symbol of multilingualism at work in South Africa: people living side by side using their language resources to successfully communicate the same message. However, the play is also an interesting socio-cultural commentary on the power and status of different South African languages. Ma 'English' is a snob, unable to openly ask for sugar from her 'poorer' neighbours. The play is remarkable for the expectations it sets up for the possible downfall of arrogant Ma English but nothing like that occurs. Ma English gets away with her behaviour, obliviously enjoying her sugar whilst havoc reigns amongst her neighbours. One moral of the story is that wealth and snobbery get rewarded but gossiping does not!

For three years Tshidi Mamabolo experimented with pedagogies which gave her children more agency in her classroom with very positive results. Children became more assertive and started taking initiatives in relation to the curriculum. In one such example, she informed her class that she would be teaching them about water transport and asked them if they had any ideas about how they might learn about it. Some children suggested that they all bring containers to school the next day, fill them with water and make paper boats. Such was the nature of the relationship between this teacher and her class.

At the beginning of 2003, Tshidi Mamabolo acquired a new class of Grade 1 children. This year, she noticed high levels of absenteeism in her class. Parents never came to enquire about their children's progress, indeed, they stayed away from the school. She noticed children falling asleep in class early on in the school day. Children were

complaining of hunger - the one peanut butter sandwich provided by the school feeding scheme at break made little difference. One day a 7 year old girl from her class crawled into her classroom, desperately ill. Her mother and father were dead. She lay under a blanket at Tshidi's feet, dying of AIDS.

In April, Tshidi decided that some form of action had to taken. She decided that a local, classroom-based pedagogical solution was not enough to address the social crisis which surrounded her. In order to 'be in' the classroom, she had to 'go out' the classroom. She had to cross the border between the school and children's homes. She negotiated access to each child's home through the child, and upon ascertaining that the household was willing to see her, visited each household to hold talks with the family on why their children were frequently absent from school or falling asleep in class. She found some children were being fed by neighbours. Others were being kept at home because there was no money for school fees, uniforms or transport. Parents told her that they were afraid to come to school because, as one parent said, ' No one listens to me there.' The fundamental problem was not lack of awareness of the importance of education, but unemployment and poverty. All that concerned the families was how to get food on the table. Tshidi returned to her school and decided to focus on food first. She approached the principal and the teachers who collectively decided to allocate a section of untilled school land to vegetable gardens which parents or households could use as a form of income generation. They formed an organising committee and applied for a grant from local authorities to buy seeds. Local HIV/AIDS Support Campaigns came on board to support the vegetable garden project because it is a means of providing fresh food to HIV sufferers in the local community. At this point, the first crop of vegetables is ready to be harvested.

The seeds have been sown, though whether they are the seeds of literacy or of something else is what we want to reflect on here. Whilst teachers are obviously not the only agents in this complex construction of what counts as literacy, as presented in the other case studies (or portraits), they are central to its formation in the early years. They are particularly important in contexts where children do not have access to a range of literacy

resources in their homes. Street (2001), referring to the work of Kulick and Stroud (1993), talks about the impact of literacy as a form of 'taking hold' of literacy. He has suggested in his work on literacy and development that *what gives meaning to literacy* may not, on the surface, be *about literacy*. For Tshidi Mamabolo, taking hold of literacy means, to use her own words, 'getting everyone on board'. But what does 'getting everyone on board' mean in the context of poverty, the HIV/AIDS plague and no food on the table? Is planting vegetable gardens in the school grounds a form of taking hold of literacy?

We would want to answer 'yes' to this question and have referred to Tshidi Mamabolo's story as *the seeds of literacy* in order to signal the different kinds of linkages which are possible in relation to what it means to hold literacy in different contexts. On the surface of things, one could well ask what the planting of vegetables has to do with holding literacy. Tshidi Mamabolo answers this question as follows:

> If the parents are regularly in the school grounds, working in the gardens, it will be easier to talk to them about their children's literacy.

We would therefore argue that the garden project holds literacy at a number of levels:

> It provides a site for parents, their children and the community to engage materially and intellectually on a regular basis with the concept of 'school' and its benefits.
>
> It provides food for children and families who have none.
>
> It provides a context in which teachers and parents can meet informally and discussions around children's literacy can begin to take place
>
> It opens up the possibility of Adult Basic Education and Training classes which can commence on the school site. In other words, it begins to build a community which can organise itself around skills development and education.

The steps this teacher has taken to reconfigure home-school-community relations can be seen as a radical re-invention of the idea of literacy in which literacy comes to mean more than a set of discrete, boundaried classroom practices. Taking hold of literacy means working with local cultural practices and community needs as well as school models in a more local/central mix. Tshidi Mamabolo's initial decision to change her pedagogy by

'letting the world in' to her classroom brought the world in, in all its inchoate messiness. In letting the world in, she has not only extended the boundaries of what it means to teach literacy, but she has also extended her own sense of identity as a literacy teacher who through taking certain forms of action, has changed how others see her and how she sees herself. To be 'in the classroom' she understood that she had to 'be in the world' but being in the world in the context of social disintegration brought with it an unbounded set of moral and ethical dilemmas which she had to face. Through a reconceptualisation of the whole literacy programme within her specific context, she has creatively engaged with these dilemmas, bringing new meanings to this situation which move beyond autonomous models to more inclusive ecologically-based literacy pedagogies. In this classroom, children pick up from their teacher, in a kind of Paulo Freire (1970) tradition, that becoming a reader and a writer involves more than 'reading the word' but 'reading the world' as well. Their own literacy development is dependent on a complex set of social and economic relations which involve, amongst others, parents, community and school**.**

Conclusion

In each one of the portraits we have drawn of literacy learning in the early years, the teacher has acted on particular understandings of literacy and literacy teaching. We argue that how these different teachers engage with literacy pedagogy has important consequences for the kinds of readers and writers these children will become, both within school environments, and as independent readers outside of school. All the portraits we have shown demonstrate that the pedagogic environment is producing certain kinds of messages around what constitutes literacy. In the first portrait, literacy learning draws on indigenous forms of knowledge and performance, which appear to be highly enjoyable, providing the children with familiar territory, which can be traversed with ease. The focus here is on recitation and repetition of teacher-led/initiated songs and hymns, with less emphasis on children's production or reflection on meaning-making. In the second portrait, there appears to be a seamless relationship between literacy, discipline and forms of pain and punishment with very little evidence of pleasure. We find this portrait alarming. In the third portrait, the teacher is introducing the children to mainstream

academic literacy through story reading and question and answer on the text, but the world of the text seems remote from the children's lifeworlds, and there is little opportunity offered for children to draw on their available resources for meaning-making. In the final example, the teacher is attempting to bring the children's lifeworlds, home backgrounds and school worlds together in an ambitious project which moves beyond literacy as basic skills into literacy as a form of social action, a way of 'reading the world' in all its messiness.

Whilst the intention of this chapter is not to pass high handed judgements about the literacy pedagogy which we have observed in each one of these sites, given the difficulties in which each teacher is working (large classes, few resources, hungry children) we would want to raise the question of what kind of literacy pedagogies are the most effective in the early years, and most appropriate for the local context. It seems to us that literacy pedagogies which work productively and sensitively with indigenous forms of knowledge, drawing on children's multiple semiotic resources *in combination with* other forms of knowledge which are equally important and powerful (for example, forms of academic and critical literacy), might be an important starting point.

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