# MOVING TARGETS: A LOCATED PERSPECTIVE ON LITERACY POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

> It is estimated that about 15 million Black adults (over one third of the population) are illiterate... The lack of access to basic education, including literacy and numeracy, has consigned millions of our people to silence and marginalisation from effective and meaningful participation in social and economic development. (ANC Education Department, A Policy Framework for Education and Training, 1994.)

> Facts do not at all speak for themselves but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them. (Edward Said, The Politics of Dispossession, London: Chatto & Windus, 1994: 254)

It is commonplace for illiteracy to get a bad press. Voices around the world continue to warn that illiteracy is a threat to freedom and prosperity, a barrier to social development, a blight on the social body that consigns millions of people to a life in the shadows and that it can and should be redressed rapidly and effectively by responsible policies. These are familiar pieces of an internationally circulating narrative about literacy and its social effects, which identifies literacy, in a generalised and universalised sense, as a basic or core competency in the contemporary world.

One result of this binary way of talking about literacy/illiteracy is that adult education policy makers and adult literacy providers have assumed that their understanding of literacy's utility will correspond to that of an imagined uniform and homogeneous 'target population', who face roughly similar circumstances, suffer from similar lacks or deficiencies and have predictable needs and aspirations, which they can start to address once they are literate. This paper reviews the findings and arguments of a research project on adult literacy which 'tested' these assumptions, through field research and conceptual analysis, and discusses its findings and their implications for interventive strategies in relation to literacy.

Across a dozen distinct case studies, the Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL) research program developed an alternative perspective on literacy and illiteracy in South Africa (Prinsloo and Breier 1996). The research demonstrates that people without extended formal schooling are able to mobilise local forms of knowledge and resources and thereby accomplish the literacy-linked tasks that are part of their lives. They do so through acquiring localised and context-specific capacities themselves, or through making use of the specialist skills of others. The research also supports the argument  that people take hold of literacy in ways consistent with local cultural representations of the social world, rather than being themselves transformed in predictable ways, as some models of modernisation and development would have it.

In the face of assumptions that literacy is acquired in standard ways and has a uniformity about its social uses, the research identifies the complexity of material and cultural circumstances which characterise the presence of multiple literacies and multiple contexts of use. These findings have direct bearing on the debate over what the conditions of success and failure are for education and development programs directed at adults with little formal schooling.

## Large-scale plans and small-scale provision

The circumstances that gave rise to the research program were these: During the early 1990s policy proposals were being formulated for large-scale provision of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) in South Africa, yet literacy agencies were having difficulty in recruiting and retaining adult students.

In pursuing clarity around this largely disregarded conundrum, the founding question for the SoUL research program became an inversion of the familiar policy question - from "What can we (where the 'we' are the planners and providers) do about illiteracy?" to "What are they (unschooled adults) doing in relation to print literacy?". As Morphet (1996: 258) summarised in an afterword to the SoUL book, this inverted question

> posed the 'failure' of literacy programmes as evidence of something other than poor organisation, weak pedagogy or difficult work. It opened a conceptual space by shutting off, at least temporarily, the twin 'literacy' discourses of social failure and curative action, the ways of thinking about the issues of literacy were transformed from a technical to an anthropological framework.

The task was to study the uses and valuations of literacy in social context, so as to provide the data and analysis to address the question of the low achievement rates of adult literacy provision.

## RESEARCH FRAME: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

A review of past research in adult literacy in South Africa showed that it was firmly rooted in assumptions about the unquestionable value of providing literacy skills for adults (Prinsloo 1985). Indeed, previous research had focused almost exclusively on the provision of literacy to adults, and on the providers rather than the recipients. The latter featured mostly in head-counts, collated in statistics demonstrate the relative accomplishments of the competing providers. Where the literacy learners were described it was in uniform, identikit portraits and the gaze of the providers presented their determining characteristic as that of cultural deficit:

That there were other ways of representing such people was made clear in Harries' (1994) study of Mozambican migrant workers in Johannesburg and Kimberley around the turn of the century. Harries demonstrated that the identity that Black immigrants created for themselves was not simply that of a victimised, fractured, racially defined working class. He shows that Black immigrants established their own norms and expectations, in a cultural world that was neither that which they had grown up in, nor was it that of their employers. Their attitudes to work, leisure, clothes, alcohol, religion and learning, among others, marked their dynamic construction of their own world, albeit within the constraints of colonial society.

It was this sense of active appropriation and contestation under conditions of cultural and political pressure and change that the SoUL researchers wished to bring to the study of literacy in social practice in the present.

**THE SoUL RESEARCH: Background and overview**

The case studies were ethnographic in style (they involved close and concentrated interviews and observation over periods of time, and aspired to reflexive theoretical principles in their analysis). The SoUL researchers went into the streets, houses, workplaces, kitchens, churches, drinking halls, taxis, workplaces, civic and social gatherings of people in the Western and Eastern Cape, as well as briefly to Gauteng, in a dozen distinct sites or contexts from factory sites to 'pirate' taxis, from stable residential sites to peripheral 'squatter' and rural sites. The period of fieldwork spanned from between six and eighteen months in a site. The sites and contexts of research were selected because they were seen in a loose sense to typify those social environments from which people are most likely to be recruited onto adult literacy programs, while at the same time, being accessible to the researchers who would do the fieldwork. The subjects in the study were mostly Xhosa-speaking Africans and Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds, but included other people. What the research produces, however, is not 'average' accounts, which stress the generalisable features of the context of study, but rather its distinctiveness and particularity, in relation to the theoretical concerns of the study. The overall impact of the research is to identify the gap which exists, and which might be widening, between projected models of standardised literacy-acquisition-for-development and the literacies of social practice.

**Literacy and social competency**

The assumption that through illiteracy people are excluded or disqualified from participation in political and economic processes, beyond a certain basic level, is one that characterises 'autonomous' perspectives on literacy. That such a perception is widespread is evident in contexts outside South Africa, just one example being a representative of the mayor's office in Philadelphia complaining in the New York Times, "Is it any wonder that, with one of five adults unable to fully read a newspaper, that voter turnout has steadily fallen to record lows?" (quoted in Rockhill 1993: 157).

The assumption that people's 'illiteracy' leads to them being unable or unwilling to vote was a fear that characterised the run-up to the first democratic, national parliamentary elections in South Africa in 1994. A report distributed to the voter education agencies several months before the voter education campaigns started reflected strong anxieties around 'illiteracy' as a characteristic of the voter population, referring to findings in this regard as "frightening", "extremely worrying". (Pinnock and Polacsek 1992, 2).The gloomy conclusion to the analysis in the report was that only a massive literacy campaign could save the situation, but - "The catch is that this is unlikely to happen this side of majority rule if voting is so skewed by misinformation and ignorance that no strong government can emerge."

In the event, only one percent of the votes cast were spoilt ballots, despite the fact that the ballot form was lengthy and complicated, and the turn-out of voters was breathtakingly large and peaceable, as well as competent, despite the fact that most people had never voted in a national political election before. The assumption that 'illiterates' would be both uninformed and cognitively incompetent was convincingly disproved: the anxiety that millions of ' illiterates' would stay outside the process, undermining it, was unfounded. The accompanying assumption, that a mass literacy campaign for adults would have produced the instant, desired turn-around in people's capacities and orientations is remarkably naive in the face of the recorded failure of literacy campaigns internationally to deliver such dramatic changes (Arnove and Graff 1987).

Taking a more complex 'social' view of literacy, rather than simplistically designating large sectors of the population as illiterate, enabled the SoUL researchers to understand better how those people dealt with the demands of modern balloting, and why the outcome was not the organisational disaster that was predicted. Other strands of SoUL research provided information how people without substantial schooling dealt with the other parts of their lives that included literacy.

## ORIENTATIONS TO FORMAL LITERACY ACQUISITION

### Historical perspectives

The SoUL research found multiple orientations to and uses of literacy across different contexts, including varied orientations away from schooling. Such findings impact directly on the question of who does and doesn't present themselves for literacy and further education classes, however constituted. Internationally, field research (Besnier 1989; Bloch 1993; Reder 1985; Reder and Wikelund 1993; Kulick and Stroud 1993) has shown that the cultural and social circumstances under which groups of people encounter specific literacies will impact directly on how they take on those literacies, and incorporate them into or isolate them from their existing cultural repertoire. Schools are the institutions where people in modern societies are expected to acquire standardised uses and conceptions of literacy. Perhaps the most important moves in the new literacy studies is the drawing of a distinction between literacy and schooling as distinct social processes, and the developing of the conceptual resources to study the two as sometimes separate, sometimes linked processes.

### Divergent orientations towards schooling

Cultural and ideological orientations away from schooling were prominent in the narratives of many people, particularly older males, that SoUL researchers spoke to. For many men, who had been initiated into a migrant worker culture when they were young, schools were the preserve of women and children but not men and the real work of their childhoods was the looking after of cattle and sheep (China and Robins 1996; Mpoyiya and Prinsloo 1996). Leaving school was positively associated with the constructions and practices of masculine identity, with the initiation into manhood and manual labour, in particular. Some men, now middle-aged and older, told SoUL researchers of their running away as youths from school and home, in defiance of their mothers and fathers, to go and work on the mines. Their incentives to do so were the sight of their erstwhile colleagues who had left school enjoying the status associated with being men. The narratives of these older men contain details of the complexities and specificities of their literacy uses. Unschooled men who would be classified illiterate under the 'great divide' approach made use of literacy in domain-specific ways, through work, family and church practices. A corollary of their orientation away from schooling, together with their context-specific uses of literacy, was the fact that they did not generally suffer from being stigmatised as illiterate. Their sense of status and dignity was related to other valued cultural attributes (with being men, family heads, church leaders, and so on).

Amongst younger people a diverse range of orientations to literacy and schooling was communicated to SoUL researchers, with the same person sometimes expressing contradictory views. The call by the new government for people to return to school did not appeal to everybody (China and Robins 1996: 168):

> You see, Mandela, what does he say? He says we must all study. I mean I don't criticize him - that we must all study...We can all sing but we can't all talk. You see those who were studying, we were helping them as well in the struggle...killing the Boers at that time, you see if we all went to school who would have worried about the Boers...If we were all at school and not worrying about the struggle would Mandela have been out of prison? Never! The reason Mandela was released was because there were people [like myself] outside causing havoc so the Whites had to release him, you see. Now Mandela is out of prison he says we must go to school.

This speaker, now living on his wits as a petty gangster in Marconi Beam, was once a student activist, one of the generation of militant youths or Young Lions who gave up on schooling to fight the larger battle against apartheid. Like many others he was left stranded by the transition in the country, alienated from the politics of the 1990s, and has found refuge, resources and power within the tsotsi underworld:

Amongst a range of contradictory attitudes towards schooling, strong expressions of desire and yearning for schooling were expressed. Desire to acquire more schooling was often accompanied by details of constraints and, particularly among rural and older women, such desire was manifest mostly in people's ambitions for their children (McEwan and Malan 1996). This woman's ambitions for her favourite grandchild is illustrative (Kell 1996):

> [Woman]: I want he must go to a proper English school. I do not want Xhosa school at [Site 5], I do not want Afrikaans school at Kalk Bay ...I  want he must go to English school. He must be English boy. Welcome [the boy's father] will see to it that he goes to English school at Fish Hoek.
> [Researcher]: But not to forget Xhosa, because in Xhosa are his roots?
> [Woman]: Yes, in Xhosa are his roots, he must have a little bit of Xhosa, but a lot of English. Because you can't get anywhere in life without it.

The assumption that the mass of people will start to take advantage of the new opportunities for learning should they become widely available must be seriously challenged by these differing and complex orientations to schooling. Further, once people have taken that step into formal education, the discursive space of the adult classroom is populated with all of the ambivalences, desires and expectations that arise from these differing orientations to schooling.


## WAYS OF KNOWING AND COMUNICATING WITHOUT SCHOOLING

The various case studies developed in the SoUL project provide multiple examples of the ways unschooled people develop the capacities to accomplish necessary activities in their lives. These may involve learning to read and write outside of schooling, or learning to manage literacy-related demands in their lives without learning how to read and write. These capacities are developed in situ, involving linguistic, textual, analytical and strategic competencies, which precede and supersede any of those strategies adopted within formal literacy classes. A crucial feature of these capacities is their embeddedness in particular discursive contexts, so that the less skilled person is not learning a disembedded cognitive or technical skill but assimilating a particular social identity through the performance of contextualised social practices.

The SoUL research developed a preliminary typology of the major processes whereby such capacities are attained. These are:

- the recognition of the value of 'local knowledge' or 'common-sense';

- the complex role of literacy mediators in mediating the literacy- or discourse-specific aspects of collective social practices; and

- the fact of apprenticeship learning (which involves guided participation and participatory appropriation) as the key mode of informal acquisition of literacy and discourse-linked capabilities;

In addition we examine alternative uses of literacy as a social resource.

## Local knowledge

It became apparent to SoUL researchers, on analysis of the narratives from the sites of research that literacy was a significant part of the activities of many people who saw themselves as being unable to read and write. One farm worker, for example, produced a complicated labelled diagram and showed how he used it to lay, monitor and repair an irrigation system on the farm. The literacy that was part of this task was embedded, and did not call on a school-acquired skill identified as 'literacy'. It was thus not identified as being reading or writing.

Gibson, like the other SoUL researchers at different sites, found a more complex reality than homogenised assumptions around literacy/illiteracy could explain. Farm workers' literacy practices were embedded in power relationships between workers, farmers, men and women, she concluded. Women were excluded and marginalised through 'common sense' constructions of 'farm' knowledge, of women not possessing such 'real' knowledge and not being 'real' breadwinners, despite having had more schooling than the men, on average. Women's literacy was thus not work-linked and most visible through church practices, where they often took the lead.

Comparatively complex findings were reported in a SoUL study of literacy and communication in a factory. In their consideration of worker 'know-how' in a factory, Breier and Sait (1996) argued that 'unskilled' workers employ their own specialised knowledge rather than the 'official' or espoused strategies of the company, with considerable efficiency, in ways similar to the contextually developed, informal strategies of dairy workers in Boston, as described by Scribner (1984). They concluded that management could more effectively address communication and productivity concerns by paying attention to existing worker discourses and practices, rather than hoping that a general literacy program for workers would improve understanding and communication.

## Mediators of literacies

Wagner et al (1986) and Baynham (1995) refer to those social actors who take on literacy tasks on behalf of others, formally and informally, as mediators of literacy. SoUL researchers found that literacy tasks were commonly joint achievements, within family and peer groups, as well as in broader social networks, and they paid attention to the processes of mediation and the roles of mediators of literacy. Like Baynham, they found that mediating literacies involved code-switching (between languages in the multi-lingual contexts that are characteristic) and mode-switching (typically, from activities involving reading and writing to talk about these activities, and back again). The forms of literacy mediation in the SoUL case studies involved not only shifts between languages such as between Xhosa and English but also between varieties of the same language - for example, between Cape Afrikaans, an informal variety associated with Coloureds in the Cape, and standard Afrikaans that is thought fitting for written communication, and similarly with other languages. Such mediation also often required the capacity to cross

from local or informal discourses to formal codes, and back again. Access to and familiarity with local discourses, as well as local legitimacy in one form or other, were seen to be essential attributes of the literacy mediator. Effective mediation was always context and discourse specific and the possession of decontextualised 'literacy skills' was not, by itself, enough.

In Marconi Beam, China and Robins (1996) argue that some local residents have, through experience of 'struggle politics', developed familiarity with oppositional discourses, making it possible for them to occupy positions as local cultural brokers. Their abilities to mediate dominant development and political discourses and the official or standardised literacies of local government and other institutions on behalf of local residents facilitated their access to social power (China and Robins 1966, 162-5).

At a more local, everyday level, examples of family, friends and local officials assisting with specific tasks were numerous, eg, people without schooling who ran their own businesses used trusted associates as mediators of literacy and as translators. Pat Miller, who trains taxi owners in business skills explained the situation to Breier, Taetsane and Sait (1996: 219):

> Often on this course we get requests: 'I am a taxi owner, may I bring my wife or daughter or son with me'. Then you know this is an illiterate, or a barely or semi-literate person. We always say of course, if they are involved in the running of the business. And then we treat them as one unit.

Winnie Tsotso, classified a beginner by the literacy teachers at the Night School in Site 5, an informal settlement near Hout Bay, acts as a literacy mediator for her community as a whole. By drawing on the literacy skills of her daughters and her own informal learning she plays the role of unappointed and unpaid community advice worker (Kell 1996: 235):

> While I am talking to Winnie, a stream of people come in and out of the house, asking for things...Winnie goes to a cupboard and takes out a tin and riffles through some papers in it, while the person watches. I notice that the tin contains numerous documents. "No" she says, "your identity document has not yet arrived"... "Is this your clinic card?"... "Here is your ANC membership card".

Winnie also runs a soup kitchen for the old-age pensioners from her shack in conjunction with Catholic Welfare and Development. Kell (1996: 24) describes 'one day' at Winnie's job:

> One day a delivery man from CWD came around with the vegetables and gas cylinder that she needed. Winnie brought out her invoice book, and the delivery man wrote down what she had bought. Afterwards she told me that she owed R200. She told me exactly how she was going to pay this back and when. She said that her daughter Portia would check what he had written. I showed her a few of the words on the invoice and we sounded them out. She actually read about half of them, and more with a bit of help. As I left Portia came out of another room, picked up the book without a word between her and her mother and ran through the page very quickly.

The mediation processes going on in these examples are complex. Winnie, despite her own 'illiteracy', plays a powerful role as a discursive literacy mediator in the bureaucratic processes on which so many people depend (pensions, clinic cards, ID applications etc). She in turn, depends on her daughter, who plays the role of technical literacy mediator in decoding documents for her when necessary. The delivery man played a role as a literacy mediator when he filled in the invoice for her.

A busy site of literacy mediation is at the interface between institutions and local people, where people such as local government clerks and shop assistants provide the 'facework commitment' (Giddens 1992) of the otherwise impersonal institutions that people engage with on a daily basis: supermarket and furniture stores, banks, the post office, the municipality, the law courts and local government, including the pension offices. The effectiveness of mediators of literacy in these situations is mostly not a function of their possessing decontextualised literacy skills but is dependent on their recognised social or institutional position as well as their acquired skills in reducing the variety and hybridity in local languages and discourses to the formal register of their institutions.

## THE CONTEXTS OF LITERACY ACQUISITION

SoUL researchers paid particular attention to evidence and accounts of unschooled adults acquiring literacy-linked capabilities and found that the learning of (often narrow) task-specific literacies in the course of task completion was the most frequent and sustaining form of literacy acquisition. Because these literacies were usually acquired through a process of transferral from one to another, because they were context-specific, and because their acquisition was analogous to craft-learning, we have described these as 'apprenticeship processes'. In addition to apprenticeship acquisition, some researchers examined sites of formal learning, or adult literacy classes. Examples of people consciously and deliberately teaching themselves were also evident, as in the example cited by Robins of a man who taught himself to read and write by studying a newspaper and getting help from his employer when he was stuck.

### Experiences of formal literacy learning

Adult literacy day classes and night schools were of interest to SoUL researchers as literacy events where people were inducted into standardised literacy. Findings here relate to the wider research which showed the variety, complexity and embeddedness of literacy in other contexts.

Kell, for example, argued that the literacy that was being taught in the Night School at the informal 'squatter' settlement at Site 5 was 'school' or 'essay-text literacy', and this literacy did not articulate with the existing literacy practices in any of the other domains studied within the community, nor with any of the learners' specific reasons for wanting to attend school. It became clear that outside of the Night School classes the learners were only reading their schoolwork and that what they were doing in school was highly encapsulated, and defined by the discursive practices of schooled literacy.

She found that, what she calls, 'Night School literacy' was insulated from the literacy practices within the other domains identified in her study and questions the value of a pedagogy which focuses on the transfer of disembedded cognitive skills. (Kell 1996). In a context where schooled literacy only has relevance to the domain of 'local development' (where exchanges between local community leaders and wider civic and local government personnel are characterised by procedural uses of texts and 'development' discourses) she argues that the acquisition of 'mainstream' literacy practices, through about four hours a week of night school attendance is going to be extremely difficult, to say the least. She argues that the discursive insularity of Night School literacy promotes pedagogical practices which are very new to the learners (since they have not had any opportunities to be socialised into these practices in other domains of their lives). This puts impossible demands on the learner who is rendered inadequate when unable to cope with these demands.

Malan (1996) describes a discontinued literacy class in Bellville South which, while it had attempted to be less school-like and hierarchical, was unable to maintain a discursive space that was distinct from local peer relationships and communicative practices, and nor was it able to develop a pedagogy that could mediate literacy learning through existing neighbourhood discourse.

## POLICY FORMULATIONS AND THE STRUCTURING OF PROVISION IN ADULT LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The SoUL research was primarily conceived as a research-driven intervention in the debate over literacy policy formulation in post-apartheid South Africa (NEPI 1993, CEPD 1994, ANC 1994). The question which the SoUL research raises clearly for those working in adult literacy and basic education - is whether we set about constructing studies, assessments and programs which identify and encourage the diversity of meanings which adults will create from texts and situations, or whether we assemble a series of exercises which we put adults through as part of our programs (O'Connor 1994: 29). The former direction is counter to the leading direction of the policy domain, however.

Within the domain of policy construction for adult literacy work, the discourse of human resources development has become dominant. Shaped by perceived global changes in the organisation of work and the production and distribution of manufactured products, new emphases on skilling and mobility have developed in the international discourses of work and training. These changes have been captured in the aphorisms of 'Post-Fordism' (Kraak 1994) and 'fast capitalism' (Gee 1994).

In South Africa, the two key concerns in the restructuring of education are that it should be about increasing the productive skills of workers, so that national economic competitiveness in the world order is enhanced; secondly, it should provide a route for meaningful advance for members of the working class out of the lowest ranks of skilled labour.

Most strongly influenced by the Australian Lifelong Learning model, the revised education and training system is part of an 'active labour market policy', aimed at 'career pathing', 'multi-skilling' and the reduction of class and gender segmentation in the allocation of jobs and social rewards. This orientation was first pioneered by COSATU [the Congress of South African Trade Unions], and emphasises a corporate and collaborative strategy between government, business and labour, which is enacted through participation in various stakeholder forums.

Intensified education and training efforts are seen as crucial to the success of this strategy. The new National Qualifications Framework emphasises certification, learning outcomes (competencies), and an interlocking grid of supposedly commensurate qualifications, that are to span schooling, vocational training and the adult education system. The framework guarantees a national system of accreditation, allowing portability of qualifications. The procedures for setting up a system of certification and assessment that aims at commensurability across very differently placed systems of education and provision is a vastly complex task which is being pursued, but the task of ensuring effective policy outcomes, it has to be pointed out, is a far more demanding task than the mere revision of an assessment system. The call for 'quality' in educational planning and policy is more an emblem of intention on the part of the state than either a theoretical rationale or a practical plan at this time.

Adult literacy, now described as 'generic skills', is seen as the foundation for entering onto the lowest rungs of the ladder of the NQF, and as part of a program for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) which supposedly has equivalence with the ten years of formal schooling to which children are entitled. In this way, a population of between 7 million and 15 million adults is seen as being in deficit, and as needing remediation before they can contribute to the economy. The claim is made that those who are already making a contribution will be enabled to enter the education and training system through the provision of formal opportunities for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and research and pilot programs are being undertaken to establish procedures for this. In this way the NQF is seen as providing access and redress.

The Department of Education's Guidelines for Adult Basic Education and Training specify a breakdown of subject areas as well as outcomes for various subjects at each level. Learners currently in classes are encouraged to write national exams in accordance with these levels, standards and outcomes. Funding for ABET programs is starting to be linked to outcomes.

Through exploring the social and political relations, ideological practices and symbolic meaning structures in which literacy is embedded, the SoUL researchers have shown that the view of literacy as a single, standardised set of skills which can be transferred within classrooms to those who do not have it, is deeply flawed.

Firstly, as the SoUL research shows, potential learners have differing and divergent orientations towards literacy and schooling and yet they only have the option of entering a discursive space (the classroom) which is filled with the discourses of schooling. Much of the learning they are doing in classrooms is geared simply towards further learning, rather than consolidation and expansion of the positive roles 'illiterate' people already play in their families, homes and communities, as shown in the SoUL research.

Secondly, writers on childhood acquisition of literacy like Heath (1982) and Gee (1990) have shown that schools are good places to practise mainstream literacy once you already have the foundations. But they are not good places to acquire those foundations if you have not already had the chance. The compatibility between home culture and literacy practices and school culture and literacy practices in mainstream families puts mainstream children at an advantage when they enter Sub A (Grade 1). These children have been socialised into schooled literacy practices from their first few months of life.

In most of the areas and sites of the SoUL research it became clear that outside of school there were few opportunities for adults to be socialised into mainstream literacy practices. There were few observations of children being scaffolded into schooled ways of reading and writing in the home (Snow 1983), there were very few texts around which required schooled literacy, and those that were around were usually very specific to particular social practices often with a formulaic quality, like invitations, posters, forms. The research shows that many people with schooling chose to get others to fill in these texts, because of factors unrelated to their literacy competencies. The personal, individualised reading and writing that is traditionally seen as literacy hardly exists. Where it does - as amongst women reading fiction in Bellville South (Malan 1996b), or mothers helping children on the farms (Gibson 1996) - it has by no means led to empowerment. In fact, the way in which it has become gendered has rendered it powerless. Further, the chance to practice the literacy that some people had managed to learn was often not there, or was withheld and denied (Watters 1996; Breier and Sait 1996). We suggest that in contexts like this it may involve setting learners up for failure in expecting them to learn schooled literacy without having acquired or consolidated the foundations in any context other than the school itself.

Thirdly, the most substantial category of findings describes the ways in which unschooled people participate in literacy practices through processes of apprenticeship and mediation. The schooled version of literacy promoted within the NQF in which literacy is taught to those who do not have it cannot take cognisance of these processes. As Morphet (1996: 260) concludes:

> Thus what the research in this book shows is the fact that learning text literacy is for adults analogous to learning the practices of a craft or the dispositions of familial relations...This is an enormously important case to have made...because it redraws the baselines on which literacy provision needs to be considered. The effect of this is to question the long-standing and unexamined homology between schooling practices and literacy learning. The social technology of the school it would appear, is not able to provide an adequate set of procedures within which the apprenticeship and mediation processes can be lodged.

With regard to the claim that locating ABET within the NQF will provide access and redress, the SoUL research has shown that the assumption cannot be made that people will automatically take advantage of the provision of educational opportunities. By deconstructing the uses and valuing of literacy in people's lives it has come to some understandings of what might constitute 'motivation' or the lack of it. Similarly, positive outcomes associated with literacy do not flow automatically from the provision of literacy. The standardisation into stages and levels implicit in NQF discourse is generally based on middle class or mainstream definitions of standard or normative behaviour and fails to acknowledge that people are often denied comparable access to a particular literacy because of differential status within a particular context. The research has shown that literacy acquisition is uneven, varied and may have unintended consequences which contradict the providers' intentions.

So literacy is not a ' given' . What it is and what it does cannot be read from the term itself. Two metaphors help to clarify this. The first is that literacy is two-faced, the potential liberator and the weapon of oppression, the key and the chain. The SoUL research gives plenty of examples of how literacy has been used to control, channel, stunt and colonise. The flip side shows examples of how people take hold of it and use it to open doors, to explore different identities, and to achieve new purposes.

The second and linked metaphor is that of the 'literacy line.' Morphet (1996: 259) comments that the SoUL research shows how literacy emerges as "the marker of the fault line of social power...the socially constructed and managed line of inclusion and exclusion". The literacy line shifts to follow the distribution of power. In apartheid South Africa the Nationalist government tried to draw that line to exclude the vast majority of Black South Africans, but in the national elections of 1994 "the literacy line was temporarily abolished. Major institutions of the state were effectively organised on the basis that text literacy would not operate as an inclusion/exclusion mechanism" (Morphet 1996: 261).

The NQF is a bold attempt to make the line permeable, accessible, three-dimensional, to change it into a grid. But it still constructs a line, and the standardising procedures of certification and accreditation will counteract notions of permeability. Kell (1996) has written about the NQF as a jungle gym placed over South Africa, new assessment practices constituting the bars. It is possible that the conceptualisation of literacy dominant in the structure means that it may have the unintended consequence of closing off the step onto the first rung for those at whom it is actually aimed. Even worse, it might leave the many drop-outs and failures with stunted interpretations of their own identity. The

theorisation of literacy offered by the new literacy studies and research of the type done in the SoUL project offer ways in which such problems may be avoided.

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