

## 2.14

# CRITICAL LITERACIES IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

*Hilary Janks and Carolyn McKinney*

### History

The Hector Pietersen Museum located in the heart of Soweto, Johannesburg records for posterity the role played by youth in the struggle against apartheid. It is named for Pietersen, the first child who was shot during the 1976 civil uprising. Sparked by children marching to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in primary schools, the protest led to nation-wide riots and prolonged school boycotts. The student rebellion focused on Bantu Education which under apartheid had been deliberately designed to confine black people to “certain forms of labour” and to exclude them “from the green pastures of European society where they were still not allowed to graze” (Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, 1954). When, towards the end of 1985, students were calling for 1986 to be the year of no schooling, Soweto parents called for a national consultative conference within the resistance movement. At this conference the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) was formed and People’s Education for People’s Power was conceived. People’s Education aimed to encourage students not to withdraw from the system but rather to identify and fight for their educational priorities. Three commissions were established at the outset: People’s Maths, People’s History and People’s English. Janks was invited to join the commission on People’s English because of her research on language and power under apartheid (Janks, 1988) and its application to education. This commission produced the *Draft proposals for People’s English* (Butler, 1993) which described language competence as the ability to:

- hear what is said and what is hidden;
- explore relationships: personal, structural, political;
- make one’s voice heard;
- read print and to resist it where necessary;
- understand the relationship between language and power;

amongst other things. When the NECC became a banned organisation, Janks was advised to spend her time working on critical language awareness materials. *The Critical Language Awareness Series* (Janks, 1993) gave birth to critical literacies in the South African context. This was developed further by the work of her early graduate students Clarence (1994), Granville (1996), Shariff (1998), Prinsloo (2002) and that of McKinney and van Pletzen (2004) in the Western Cape.

Education has been an ongoing site of struggle in South Africa which continues to this day, with language as a flashpoint. As a consequence of how language in education policy is currently implemented, the languages spoken by black South Africans stop being used as language/s of instruction after Grade 3. Furthermore, translanguaging is not seen as a valued pedagogy. These languages are also not a requirement as a subject for matriculation despite being spoken by most South Africans. Curriculum policy is prescriptive and mandates standardised testing. The move to decolonising education which is the focus of current struggles in Higher Education has not yet resulted in a challenge to the knowledge that is privileged in the national Curriculum and Assessment Standards (CAPS) for Grades 1–12. Currently, *bua-lit* (<http://bua-lit.org.za>), a national collective, is leading the fight against the narrow, technicist, skills-based orientation to language and literacy education in early literacy education policies. These effectively sideline sociocultural approaches to literacy, including critical literacies.

### **South Africa's Educational System**

South Africa has compulsory schooling for children aged 7–15 years (Grades 1–9) with the official school leaving or matriculation examination taking place at the end of Grade 12. While there is near universal access to primary schooling, the reality is that 40% of children who begin Grade 1 drop out of the system before completing Grade 12 and achieving the school leaving certificate. Of the 60% who matriculate, less than half of these students meet minimum entrance requirements for higher education institutions (Van Broekhuizen, Van der Berg, & Hofmeyr, 2016).

Of even more concern is the racialised, classed and gendered nature of access to quality schooling. In the annual matriculation results as well as standardised assessments, there is a clear bi-modal distribution where a small minority of students (mostly white and black middle class) perform well, while the vast majority of black students underachieve. There are two schooling systems, one highly resourced, fee paying and catering to a minority of elite students, white and black and one catering for the majority of students in no-fee schools (Fleisch, 2008). For the most part though, all schools follow the same national curriculum. The low throughput and poor quality of South Africa's education system is widely recognised as a national priority. Most recently, the statistic regularly reproduced is that 78% of children in Grade 4 “cannot read for meaning in any language” according to the results of the latest international standardised test Progress in Reading Literacy or PIRLS 2016. The conclusions drawn are that teachers do not know how to teach literacy and that teacher education programmes are not doing their job. Systemic inequalities such as infrastructure, class size and access to literacy resources are seen as contributing factors, but the failure of education to build on existing community literacy and language practices is ignored.

In response to results on standardised literacy tests, policy makers and the national Department of Basic Education double-down on implementing a skills-focused, “back to basics” approach where the goal of becoming literate is decoding and the comprehension of texts. Teachers are encouraged to follow a sequential process beginning with the “building blocks” of sounds and words moving on to sentences. Success is measured by an adapted form of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Oral reading fluency (ORF). The government is currently supporting initiatives to develop normative standards for different levels of ORF in the nine indigenous languages through which most children learn for the first three years of schooling before they transition to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4. In the recently produced drafts of Primary Teacher Education Standards, critical literacy and sociocultural approaches were completely absent and it took deliberate intervention by black academics at national consultative workshops to force limited inclusion. The current approach to standardised testing using imported tests such as the EGRA and PIRLS is aligned with psycholinguistic and cognitive approaches to literacy pedagogy and deficit constructions of childhood (Compton-Lily, Dixon, Janks, & Woods, 2020) that negate opportunities

for sociocultural and critical approaches to literacy interventions to improve literacy outcomes for children.

Critical literacy approaches were embedded in the high school language curriculum in the first post-apartheid outcomes-based curriculum, Curriculum 2005, which made a radical break from the apartheid ideologies that informed education. Outcomes-based education which relied on teacher autonomy that had been eroded under apartheid (Jansen & Christie, 1999; Chisholm, 2005) led to Curriculum 2005 and its revised version being replaced by a highly prescriptive, “knowledge focused” curriculum, in 2012, CAPS (the national *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement*). In this current policy response and intervention, the notion that teachers and students might be alienated from the schooling system itself and from exclusively Western and monolingual approaches to knowledge and pedagogy continues to be ignored. In this regard, the need for critical literacies is ongoing and could contribute to decolonising the curriculum.

### **Survey of Critical Literacies Work in South Africa**

This survey is based on critical literacies research since 2005 published as books and electronic dissertations and theses (ETD) ([www.netd.ac.za](http://www.netd.ac.za)). Owing to constraints of space, we have limited our survey of journal articles to four key South African journals, *Reading and Writing*, *South African Journal of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, *Perspectives in Education* and the *Journal of Education* as these are less well known than international journals. Ferreira’s (2019) survey of critical literacies work in South Africa is worth reading, in addition.

### **Critical Literacies: Book Reviews**

Because there are so few books on critical literacies published in South Africa, it has been possible to give a sense of each. *Language and Power* (Janks, 2010) and *Doing Critical Literacy* (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2014) explain Janks’s interdependent model of critical literacy and provide related classroom activities that can be used or adapted by teachers. Janks argues that issues of power, access, diversity (identity and difference) and design and redesign need to work together in critical literacies education and that any one without the others creates a problematic imbalance. This is important in the South African context where access to education often ignores diversity and expects assimilation to white middle-class norms and colonising practices. Othering on the basis of race, gender, sexuality and nationality continue in South Africa and are manifest in violence against women, xenophobic and homophobic attacks, and in systemic barriers—institutional, spatial and economic—that continue to privilege whiteness (Steyn, 2001). These barriers reproduce conditions of exclusion and poverty for the black majority in South Africa. What the post-apartheid period has shown is how difficult it is to change systemically entrenched inequality and the stark horror of failing to do so.

*Literacy Power and the Schooled Body* (Dixon, 2011) is a critical analysis of early childhood literacy education from Grade 0 to Grade 3 at the intersection of time–space and children’s bodies. This ethnographic study shows that the literate subject of schooling is one who has a good vocabulary, writes neatly, spells correctly and reads fluently with expression and comprehension. The emphasis on skills such as decoding and encoding texts, rather than meaning-making, constructs limited literate subjects who are increasingly individualised, surveilled and confined to their desks. A more agentive vision of childhood is evident in the work of Murriss (2016), who uses picture books to engage both children and teachers in Philosophy for Children enquiries, underpinned by a post-humanist onto-epistemology.

McKinney’s (2017) work refocuses attention on language. Her study of language ideologies in practice in *Language and Power in Post-Colonial Schooling* shows the effects of anglonormativity

and the persistence of the ideological construction of languages as bounded entities. Given that multilingualism is the norm in South Africa, she argues for the importance of the use of multiple languages in education, including translanguaging pedagogies and for teaching about language ideologies. She concludes her book with examples of transformative educational initiatives that promote the use of students' full linguistic repertoires and critique the normativity of monolingual English. These include a multiliteracies poetry project in Soweto (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006; Newfield, 2011) and the Phemba Mfundi (fire learners) writing project (McKinney, 2017) with 10–12-year-old children taking part in 2–3 days' multilingual writing camps in rural Eastern Cape. To this could be added the work of Sibanda (2007), a high school English teacher, who engaged his students in researching the stickers found in taxis which are the main source of transport for black South Africans. The stickers, written in many of South Africa's 11 official languages, were then analysed to uncover prevailing discourses and their underlying power relations.

Work in the area of multimodality is not always critical as is discussed by Newfield (2011). Stein's book *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms* does attend to "representation, rights and resources" and is founded on a respect for the languages, funds of knowledge, voice and agency of children living in poverty. She pays attention to the ways in which different modes offer differing perspectives and different uses of rhetoric. *Multimodal Approaches to Research and Pedagogy: Recognition, Resources and Access*, an edited collection, (Archer & Newfield, 2014) looks at the ideological nature of discourses with a view to understanding transformative multimodal pedagogies in South Africa that contribute to greater equity and social justice.

### ***Critical Literacies Review Beyond Books***

The remainder of this overview provides a synthesis of the findings from the review of dissertations, theses and articles. Chetty (2015) argues that CAPS is too prescriptive, provides too little space for critical literacies and runs counter to the emancipatory aims of post 1994 educational policy. This is supported by Cahl's (2016) analysis of the textbooks approved for CAPS and Govender's (2011) research evaluating whether SA textbooks demonstrate critical literacy activities. He found that these often perpetuate conservative ideologies and the exercises preclude critical engagement. In a similar vein, Silverthorne's (2011) research finds that set literary texts remain predominantly anglocentric with the inclusion of some South African and African poets as a form of tokenism in a curriculum that is at its core Eurocentric. Research that focuses on current practice in education has found little evidence of critical literacies practices in state schools and classrooms at all levels (Dixon, 2007; Petersen, 2014; Lloyd, 2016) as well as the difficulties experienced by teachers in the context of CAPS (Enslin, 2017).

**Teacher-Taught Interventions.** Research on teacher-taught interventions show these have had mixed success. Nonkwelo (2012) found that teachers were ill-prepared to teach critical literacies even with materials that invited them to do so. However, in research where teachers were selected because they had some knowledge of critical literacies, they were able to work productively with the materials designed by the researcher (Ferreira, 2013). Working with teachers to transform practices in relation to reconciliation (Ferreira & Janks, 2009) or diversity in schools (Dornbrack, 2008) heightened teachers' understanding of power relations both within and outside of their classrooms and effected some change.

**Practitioner-researchers.** Researchers with an understanding of critical literacies who examine their own interventions have had some measure of success. The research in early childhood education (Grades 0–3) are cases in point, but most of it has been conducted in privileged schools (Hearn, 2018; Anastassopoulos, 2015; Dixon & Janks, 2019). Treffrey-Goatly's (2017) analysis of folk tales in the African Storybook corpus shows affordances in relation to critical literacies and transformative

design in the representation of girls. Our literature search found no evidence of research undertaken in Grades 4–9.

**From Secondary to Tertiary Education.** Ndlangamandla's (2006) research shows that many high school students were able to engage critically with the subject positions on offer in advertisements for denim jeans, and Kur (2009) was able to disrupt adolescent girls' acceptance of racialised notions of beauty. Perhaps, the most important finding by Enslin (2017) is that the teacher in her study who had an overall critical orientation was more able to sustain ongoing critical literacies pedagogy in relation to the content and texts prescribed by CAPS than the other two teachers she investigated. These teachers saw critical literacy as outside of, separated from, and in opposition to, the curriculum rather than a part of ongoing ways of doing and being (Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019).

At the tertiary level, researchers have also been able to construct meaningful critical literacies interventions. Researching his undergraduate course on gender, Govender (2016) shows positive changes in students' understanding of and attitude to heteronormativity and gender diversity; Walton (2016) undertook a critical analysis of the language and practices of inclusive education, and Reed (2010) analysed the ways in which distance teacher education materials construct teacher–students' subjectivities.

**Multilingualism and Translanguaging.** The return to the focus on language as central to critical literacies is evident in more recent research on multilingualism and translanguaging pedagogies that recognise the importance of students' African languages and that challenge the dominance of colonial languages in South African education (Makalela, 2018; McKinney, 2017). Nal'ibali (<https://nalibali.org>), African Storybook ([www.africanstorybook.org](http://www.africanstorybook.org)) and Molteno ([www.molteno.co.za](http://www.molteno.co.za)) have been developing stories in African languages for primary school children and researching their use. Maduna (2010) investigated South African rap music to understand the representations of language creoles and hybrid identities with a view to their inclusion in English poetry lessons at the secondary level.

Petersen's (2014) research on critical literacies with Afrikaans teachers found that teacher's age and consequent apartheid histories affected their selection of texts and their approach to meaning in these texts, which differed from that of their younger students consequently affecting their critical engagement. Mendelowitz and Davies (2011) show how the sharing of language narratives in classrooms produced more positive attitudes to linguistic diversity and an appreciation of multilingualism. By way of contrast (Wentzel, 2013) research with immigrant girls in an inner city secondary school found that the inclusion of language and literacy practices is tied to the ways in which the different school communities are valued or marginalised. Given wa Thiongo's (1986) work on the centrality of language in colonising minds, work in this area is likely to assume greater importance as the demand for the decolonisation of education in South Africa grows.

### **Visions for Moving Into More Transnational and Critical Work From the Perspective of South Africa**

According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo (1986)

The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. . . . It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own.

(p. 3)

A focus on the stratification and the exclusion of languages, rooted in racialised colonial ideologies has always been a central concern of critical literacies in South Africa (Janks, 1990; Orlek, 1993). This connects with more recent work on raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Baker-Bell, 2020) and provides many opportunities for transnational collaboration in challenging the normativity of monolingualism and the hegemony of standard varieties of the dominant language. (See McKinney's, 2017 work on anglonormativity). The alignment of linguistic hegemony with whiteness in post-colonial anglophone countries (e.g., Uganda, Kenya, the USA) also manifests in education as the language of teaching and learning, exclusionary curricula and national/international standardised assessments of literacy, providing further opportunities for transnational research and advocacy. Challenges to this hegemony can be seen in Alim's (2010) examples of critical literacies pedagogy working with African American English and Baker-Bell's (2020) work on linguistic justice. Alim and Smitherman's (2012) writing that meshes African American Language with Mainstream United States English (MUSE) is inspirational in challenging norms and expanding the repertoire of "academic" English.

What counts as powerful literacies and language use is deeply shaped by coloniality, defined by Maldonado Torres (2007) as that which "survives colonialism" (243). Mignolo explains how the colonial matrix of power (Grosfoguel, 2007) includes control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality and subjectivity and knowledge (Mignolo, 2009, p. 19). Critical applied linguistics scholars have challenged the construction of knowledge with the demonstration of the colonial "invention" (Makoni, 1999) of bounded, standard African languages through missionary intervention (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Makalela, 2015, 2018); the construction of the myth of monolingualism as the norm (Phillipson, 1994; Garcia & Lin, 2018) and multilingualism in languages other than European languages as a deficient "linguistic jumble" (Garcia & Lin, 2018, p. 81). De/colonial theory produced by Latin American (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2009; Maldonado Torres, 2007) and African scholars (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) thus provides a significant further point of transnational connection for critical literacies activists and educators in South Africa.

Tools of decolonial theory such as "delinking" and "pluriversality" as well as knowledge construction from the perspective and position of the excluded are crucial to an expanded critical literacy. This requires collaboration between scholars in countries that share histories of colonial oppression. Such collaboration will move South African scholars beyond their existing history of transnational critical literacies network with scholars in Australia, the UK, Sweden, Canada, and the United States.

## **Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research and Practice**

To the extent to which critical literacies work itself is entangled with Western epistemologies and the consequences thereof, it is implicated in universalist ideas, which Mignolo (2013) argues are a fiction of Western modernity. Further work in critical literacies needs to open itself to pluriversal epistemologies, cosmologies and imaginaries. This includes, amongst others, new materialist perspectives that focus on the entanglement of all living and non-living entities and our culpability with regard to the destruction of the planet and the extinction of other species. In this regard, countries in the Global South are more vulnerable to climate change as a result of the historical legacy and continuing profligacy of capitalism in the Global North.

Human beings' inability to value other human beings whom they construct as Other can be seen in the growing power of right-wing nationalist and white supremacist groups across the globe and a surge in the number of populist leaders. Black lives are constantly devalued and under the threat of attack, while a global pandemic has posed a greater threat to people living in precarity without access to employment, healthcare and food security. Lack of access to the internet and online platforms has also affected the schooling of millions of children. Countries close their borders to

desperate migrants, separate children from parents and confine migrants to crowded inhumane refugee camps.

South Africa faces many of these challenges along with other parts of the world. Here, in addition, rampant corruption has led to money being stolen that could have been used to provide basic social services such as running water, sanitation, healthcare, safe transport and food. Gender-based violence, homophobic and xenophobic attacks and police killings are regular occurrences. Systemic inequality introduced by colonialism and exacerbated by apartheid remains, and unequal access to quality education along lines of race and class continues to perpetuate structural divides that perpetuate white privilege. The economic, social, linguistic, spatial and racial justice that the transition to democracy promised has yet to be realised across all institutions that make up the social fabric. There is still an urgent need for education committed to critique and social action based on an ethics of care for all living and non-living entities.

### ***Implications for Our Social Responsibility as Academics***

Since the pioneering work of Paulo Freire, critical literacy has been aligned with social action. Currently, young people around the world are taking the lead and mounting social action campaigns to address issues that threaten their futures. Students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High organised a nationwide demonstration, *March for our Lives*, for greater gun control in the United States. Greta Thunberg, a Swedish student, generated a youth climate movement involving over a million students in school strikes across 125 countries. In South Africa, tertiary students mounted the #Rhodes Must Fall and #FeesMustFall campaigns. Our responsibility as academics is fourfold: First, we have to educate critically literate teachers with a sense of ethical responsibility to strive for equity and social justice. Teachers, and we include ourselves, need to *prepare* students to care about injustice and develop the skills needed to meet the challenges of their time. Second, as teachers we need to *support* students in their struggles to achieve justice as was the case in the teacher education programme at McKinney's university, where lecturers and students created banners and marched together in recent #FeesMustFall and Gender Based Violence activism. Third, we have a responsibility to conduct *research* that contributes to better educational outcomes for all young people. Finally, we have a significant role to play in *advocacy* work that puts the typical African language-speaking child at the centre. The launch of the bua-lit collective in South Africa is an example of the use of social media to raise awareness about the current limitations in literacy education and to advocate for change.

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