

bu-a-lit

language and
literacy collective

How are we failing our children?
Reconceptualising language
and literacy education

October 2018

www.bua-lit.org.za

bu-a-lit collective

Soraya Abdulatief, Xolisa Guzula,
Catherine Kell, Glynis Lloyd, Pinky Makoe,
Carolyn McKinney & Robyn Tyler

Preamble

South Africa has a long and rich tradition of research in language and literacy studies and strong connections with scholars and practitioners in these fields all over the world. In literacy studies in particular, several South African scholars are internationally recognised for their leading contributions in the fields of early literacy; critical literacy; academic literacies; digital literacy and adult literacy. ¹In some cases their involvement has spanned over three to four decades of intensive work with adult literacy projects and popular and radical education initiatives. These scholars have taken a broad view of literacy and literacy learning, seeing it as a set of social practices involving engagement with written texts. Literacy practices are viewed as intricately woven into family, community and institutional contexts (in particular schooling and higher education). They are deeply shaped by the historical legacies of apartheid and stitched into the searing inequalities that continue to characterise South African society.

In the context of the failures in the South African education system to build equality and the urgency to address these failures, a number of debates about literacy are circulating, research projects are underway, policy changes are mooted and some large-scale interventions are being put in place. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we engage with the complexities of providing successful language and literacy education, draw on our existing research and consider alternative strategies for change.

We have established the bua-lit language and literacy collective as a group of researchers, teacher educators, teachers and literacy activists who have spent the best part of our working lives in the field of literacy and language education. Our work puts forward dynamic and cutting-edge ideas about how literacy and language can be viewed, practised and taught. We challenge a narrow skills-based view of literacy and offer 'rich literacies' as an alternative.

Drawing on a wide range of scholarship from South Africa and internationally, the collective aims to:

- explain what it means to be literate, beyond skills, and the many pathways to becoming successfully literate in schooling and higher education;
- show the implications of a complex approach to literacy for standardised assessments;
- explore approaches to curriculum and language in education policy that build on the resources South African children bring with them to schooling;
- put forward strategies for change.

Towards this aim we have produced a paper which can be read online or downloaded here. The paper aims to take readers through the multiple complex contemporary ideas and debates in literacy education. In the paper we address the following:

Section 1 Understanding literacy


Section 2 Defining the resources required for school and university literacy

Section 3 Reviewing standardised testing and what counts as evidence

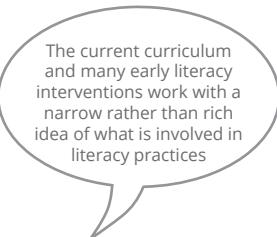
Section 4 Identifying the role of language in education policy in sustaining inequality

Section 5 Re-imagining textbooks and other learning resources

Section 6 Strategies for effecting change.



We need a rich understanding of literacy to interrupt the reproduction of inequality in South African education



The current curriculum and many early literacy interventions work with a narrow rather than rich idea of what is involved in literacy practices

The current focus in South Africa is around early literacy intervention. Generally, those advising government and leading funders are informed by the discourse of evidence-based approaches, and are basing their proposals on the results of standardised assessments such as the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). These assessments are underpinned by a view of literacy as a measurable and quantifiable set of skills and an essential competency, developed in stages along a clearly defined trajectory which corresponds with age bands as set out in schooling. We will show that there is another way of looking at literacy and will argue that a broader understanding of literacy is needed to interrupt the reproduction of inequality in South African education.

The latest proposals for interventions and literacy strategies require many more millions of rands to be spent. However, a closer look at these proposals shows that there is little that is new in the long line of government interventions since 1994, designed to address the vast inequalities in educational provision and achievements. These interventions tend to conceive of literacy in a narrow way and accept official language and curriculum policies uncritically. In a world where literacy is rapidly changing as a result of the impact of digital technologies, and where other modes of communication like the visual are gaining prominence, it is becoming ever more essential that proposals and interventions do not prioritise narrow, skills-based, 'back to basics' versions of literacy.

In our paper below, we present a view of literacy as a valued and rich resource for expression, communication and meaning-making for all children. We set out our critique of current policies and practices in language and literacy education and present different ways of understanding and talking about these critical areas in education. We hope that government, NGOs and the private sector engage with these critiques and understandings so that together we can more successfully meet the challenges we face in reducing inequality in our education system.

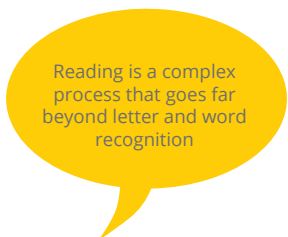
Section 1: Understanding Literacy

There are many views on and understandings of what literacy is, how it should be defined and the role it plays in society. But, as we will show, literacy is a complex social practice that varies extensively from context to context. Take this sentence, provided by leading literacy theorist James Gee for example:

“The guard dribbled down court, held up two fingers, and passed to the open man.”²

Many of us can 'read' (or decode) the words in that sentence but how many of us can understand what it means? Most of us can recognise the letter-sound combinations and recognise individual words, yet can make little sense of the sentence. To understand it we need background knowledge of basketball. We also need experience or practice in reading and talking about basketball. No amount of 'reading' instruction will prepare you for a sentence like that. This shows that making meaning through reading is a highly complex process that goes far beyond decoding, or letter and word recognition. We need to be participants in the appropriate activities and practices that are relevant to a text.

In this section we set out three main approaches to literacy and the debates



Reading is a complex process that goes far beyond letter and word recognition

among them. We argue that a social practices approach is needed to fully account for the processes and practices involved in schooled literacy. We will call this a 'rich literacies' approach.

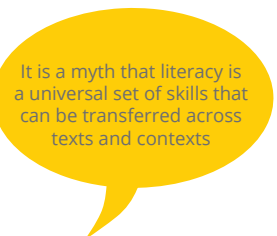
1.1 Literacy as a skill

The view of literacy as a skill predominates in the South African and global media. In this view, literacy is understood as the ability to use combinations of letters of the alphabet in a language to create units of meaning like words and sentences, in that language. Knowledge of the sound-symbol correspondence (also known as the phoneme-grapheme relationship) is viewed as a central skill. It is believed that once this correspondence is achieved, anyone learning to become literate proceeds through stages of development along a fairly linear trajectory, from 'decoding' to 'reading words' to 'comprehension' and from there to what is known as 'automaticity'.

Decoding refers to the ability to correctly link letters to sounds. For example, the word 'ship' can be decoded as 'sh-i-p' where the initial consonant cluster 'sh' is blended with the vowel 'i' and the final consonant 'p' to produce the word 'ship'. Comprehension here would be signalled by the knowledge that the word 'ship' refers to a large craft or form of transportation that travels on water. Automaticity is achieved by being able to read 'ship' quickly and without needing to break it down into the smaller units of sh-i-p which enables the reader to move quickly on to the next word to retain the meaning over the phrase or sentence. In this view, becoming literate is about letter recognition, letter-sound relationships, reading words and sentences. With growing automaticity, competent readers are expected to apply this uniform set of literacy skills to a wider range of text types like short stories, novels, recipes, dictionary definitions and laboratory reports amongst innumerable others. However, as the basketball sentence above shows us, decoding, while important, is insufficient to make meaning from written text.

The understanding of literacy as a universal and decontextualised set of skills that can be transferred from one context and one text type to another, forms the foundation for much of the early literacy work in schooling in South Africa. It is sometimes known as the bottom-up processing approach, or the building blocks approach, where the beginner reader builds up from letters to syllables, to words, to sentences, to paragraphs and to a stretch of written language. The concept of phonics (letter-sound relationships) is central to the bottom-up view of literacy learning. Many argue that without a full understanding of systematic phonics, achieving fluency in reading is not possible.

Underpinning this approach is the idea that writing is closely related to speech and that alphabetic letters and combinations of letters capture the sounds in a language and therefore deliver a pre-existing message that shifts from the mind of the author into language and from there to the mind of the reader, leading to the interpretation or uptake of the message. Advocates of this approach draw on a concept of the 'Big 5' to describe the processes which need to be taught in reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. The approach is dominated by understandings of how the building blocks are formed in the English language. For example, teaching short consonant-vowel-consonant words (c-a-t/cat) and 'word families' (train, rain, pain; screw, grew, chew). Critically for our context, many of these early reading concepts developed for English literacy teaching are not transferable to African languages.



1.2 The whole language approach

In the 1980s the bottom-up view described above was challenged by theorists and practitioners who insisted that literacy learning was not a context-free skill and that learners needed to work from the meaning of what they were trying to read, down to the 'building blocks' – the phonemes and the letter-sound correspondences. 'Top-down' processing proponents showed how learners would only achieve comprehension, or understanding of what they decoded, if they could rely on contextual clues which would enable them to connect aspects of the text to their existing knowledge. Contextual clues such as the title of a text, pictures or diagrams accompanying texts, the layout and formatting of a text, as well as knowledge the reader brings to the text are central to comprehension. If you struggled to make sense of the sentence about basketball above, a key factor is likely to be that you do not have the necessary background knowledge of basketball playing to make sense of it. Making it even more difficult for readers is that there is no contextual information, e.g. no title, no source, and no indication of the intended audience which may enable you to make more sense of the content.

In the whole language approach, learning to read was not equated with the reading of words but rather with making meaning from whole texts. Immersion in print-rich environments where children have extensive opportunities to engage with reading and writing texts, as well as shared book reading, are central to this approach. The whole language approach inspired literature-based pedagogies to literacy learning and encouraged book floods (the provision of a wide range of books and reading materials) and reading corners or classroom libraries in many classrooms.

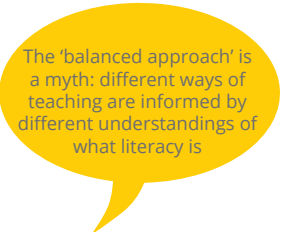
1.3 The 'so-called' literacy wars

The challenge posed to the skills-based approach to literacy by the whole language approach led to serious contestations about which approach to teaching literacy (and most often teaching reading) – bottom up (from parts to whole texts) or top down (from texts to parts) – was more effective. These contestations have been described as the literacy wars. However, what we endeavour to show in this paper is that these fierce disagreements are actually about how literacy itself is understood and defined. How we understand literacy shapes the teaching approaches we will support in enabling children to become literate.

As a way of reconciling the tensions between the two approaches, claims have been made that a 'balanced approach' which brings together phonics-based and meaning-focused approaches is possible. This 'balanced approach' is widely promoted and appealing. However, it is a myth that a balanced approach can give equal weight to the different methods as each methodology proceeds from a different understanding of what literacy is. Those who argue that learning to read is about learning to read words will offer very different approaches from those who argue that learning to read is about making meaning from and in text. While many middle-class children are exposed informally to a meaning-focused approach in their early literacy due to extensive book reading and other kinds of text sharing at home, many poorer children's main exposure to texts is in formal schooling where far from a rich, meaning-making process, literacy is reduced to the decoding and encoding of symbols and isolated words.

1.4 The social practices approach

A rich understanding of literacy acknowledges that decoding skills, such



The 'balanced approach' is a myth: different ways of teaching are informed by different understandings of what literacy is

as letter and word recognition, associations between sounds and letters, blending of sounds and the ways of writing these, are undoubtedly of central importance in the development of literacy. But these skills are not themselves literacy. The idea of literacy as an abstract system and as a set of universal skills has been challenged by what is called a social practices approach to literacy which emerged in the late 1970s. A social practices approach also enables us to understand why immersion in print-rich environments (as encouraged by whole language) is necessary but not sufficient in educating successfully literate children. This approach drew on anthropological, sociolinguistic, sociological and historical research³ studies to demonstrate that becoming literate involved far more than the skill sets outlined above and the access to written texts that it implied. These studies showed that becoming literate is inextricably linked to the specific practices and activities that people are engaged in and that different activities demand different kinds of literacy practices. These activities and resources are deeply shaped by varied histories across communities, depending on the access to literacy and other communicative resources that communities have had.

Becoming literate is rooted in specific practices that demand different kinds of literacy

Both print-based skills and practices will differ, depending on the kind and purpose of the literacy activity. Consider the different skills and practices involved in reading a graph to infer weather patterns in the context of playing a sport, looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary while reading a novel for leisure, reading a poem to conduct literary analysis, writing a poem as a birthday gift for a parent, decoding Arabic script to recite the Quran, or writing in a local language to produce a record of a community meeting. It is the purpose of the reader and writer and how they participate in the activity that gives meaning to the engagement with written texts. The knowledge required to understand the basketball sentence is most likely to be developed through repeated participation in the activities of watching and talking about basketball. And this text is produced in relation to the practice of watching, as well as talking and reading about basketball. Understanding the role that written texts play in the social practice is critical. Meaning-making is therefore something much more profound than simple comprehension.

Literacy (reading and writing) is multiple

James Gee, a key theorist in the social practices approach, thus argues that:

We never just read or write 'in general', rather, we always read or write something in some way. We don't read or write newspapers, legal tracts, essays in literary criticism, poetry, or rap songs, and so on and so forth through a nearly endless list, in the same way. Each of these domains has its own rules and requirements. Each is a culturally and historically separate way of reading and writing, and, in that sense, a different literacy.⁴

Literacy demands will change as children move through schooling and beyond

He adds: "There are thus different ways to read different types of texts. Literacy (reading and writing) is multiple, then." The sports literacy needed for reading sport articles is not the same as the legal literacy needed for reading law books. The literacy engagement in negotiating an insurance contract is not the same as that involved in Super Hero comic books.

What does the social practice approach mean in the context of schooling?

In this paper our focus is on the kinds of practices and skills involved in schooled literacy, i.e. the range of literacy practices needed to navigate successfully through schooling and higher education. Literacy involves engagement in a range of specialised meaning-making practices and activity types. Thus literacy demands will change as children move through schooling and beyond.

Literacy learning is not a task that is accomplished by the end of Grade 3


A commonly stated myth is that children learn to read in years 1–3 and then read to learn in years 4 and beyond. However in the explicit teaching of literacy in Grades 1–3, the focus tends to be on decoding and reading fluency. Like language learning which doesn't end around age 4 or 5 when most children are highly competent communicators using language, literacy learning is not a task that begins and is accomplished by the end of the first 3 years of schooling. Despite the assumption that they have learned 'to read' by the end of Grade 3, children will not yet know, for example, how to read a Science text without being taught how language is used in Science texts and how Science texts work. Their existing knowledge of how stories (narratives) work with setting, characters, conflict and resolution will not help them to understand how texts work in other subjects across the curriculum.

This myth may be responsible for aspects of the failure in early literacy in South Africa. While much research in this area bemoans the 'chanting' and drilling that takes place in many classrooms, the concept that Grades 1–3 children are only 'learning to read' reduces what they are engaging with at school to 'practise' for their later grades and strips meaning-making from the activities they are engaging in.

Engagement with literacy begins long before formal schooling. Young children begin to notice the text around them which, depending on their environments, could include text on billboards and posters, on cell phone, computer and television screens, everyday packaging, and through books and newspapers. Literacy engagement also happens as children hear literate language e.g. in church or other religious services, through oral storytelling, rhymes, games and songs. The period during which young children develop print awareness and start to notice texts and how language works differently across contexts is referred to as emergent literacy. Children 'playing school', attempting to draw their names and producing 'scribbles' as approximations of written text are also all forms of emergent literacy. Schooling needs to build on these emergent literacy experiences that children bring with them and to continue expanding on literacy practices throughout school and beyond into higher education.



Engagement with literacy begins long before formal schooling



We must build on children's early literacy and expand these practices throughout schooling

Section 2: Defining The Resources Required For School And University Literacy

2.1 The four roles of readers and writers at school

If we understand that there is no generic or universal literacy, but rather different kinds or practices of reading and writing, it is crucial that we identify what kinds of literacy practices children need to engage in to learn and be successful at school and university. Almost thirty years ago, Australian researchers Peter Freebody and Allan Luke developed a model to describe the kinds of resources (i.e. knowledge, practices and skills) that are required in schooled literacy in the twentieth century and beyond.⁵ Focusing on reading, Freebody and Luke outlined four different roles of the reader. In the table below, we have expanded this to include four different roles of the writer as well. We do this, since we take issue with the current emphasis in South Africa on reading as something separable from writing. This separation, we believe, is also a contributing factor to the failures in early literacy development.

Four roles of readers and writers at school

<p>1. Code-breaker Reading: Decoding letter/sound relationships, understanding basic layout, recognising words [knowledge of phonics; phonemic awareness; reading sight words]</p> <p>Writing: Writing as encoding: letter formation and handwriting; producing single letters; conventional spelling and use of punctuation</p> <p>In this role the 'code-breaker' draws on decoding resources.</p>	<p>2. Text participant and meaning-maker Reading: Participating in the meanings of texts – [developing understanding by relating the text to what s/he already knows; comprehension as assessed by PIRLS fits largely into this category].</p> <p>Writing: Writing as communicating meanings and messages e.g. writing a story; a laboratory report; a shopping list; writing an sms; facebook post</p> <p>In this role 'the text participant' draws on what are called semantic (meaning-making) resources.</p>
<p>3. Text user and producer/designer Reading: Using texts for particular purposes and developing knowledge of different conventions used for different purposes; understanding how genres (text types) differ from each other [e.g. finding relevant information for a school history project; identifying key points from an internet source and using them in a debate].</p> <p>Writing: Writing as the production of particular text types according to specific purpose and following accepted conventions e.g. diary writing which is personal, and uses first person versus a lab report which follows a specific layout, includes images/figures, use of third person; recipe including ingredients and methods, with incomplete sentences, lists and specific instructions, e.g. folding, whipping, creaming.</p> <p>In this role 'the text user' draws on what are called pragmatic (knowing what's accepted as appropriate) resources.</p>	<p>4. Text analyst and critical producer Reading: Discerning what version of reality is (re)presented and identifying whose interests the text serves and the specific role of linguistic features in this [e.g. critical literacy: evaluating truth claims in the text; identifying and challenging the point of view; identifying what might be excluded]. Compare the meanings of the two news headlines: 'Farmworker shot' and 'Worker dies in farm strike'. What can we learn about black women's experiences during apartheid from reading Ellen Kuzwayo's Call me woman?</p> <p>Writing: Being conscious of the choices you make and the effects thereof; writing to make voice heard; writing for social justice e.g. argumentative essay; providing elaboration and evidence for opinions; challenging powerful assumptions.</p> <p>In this role 'the text analyst' draws on critical resources.</p>

(adapted from Freebody and Luke, 1990)

In order for children to navigate successfully through school and higher education, they need to be able to play all of these four roles and draw on all four sets of resources. Freebody and Luke pose two critically important questions in relation to these roles and resources:


- Is there a natural or inevitable developmental progression to the four roles, such that they can be left to instruction in later years?
- Can learning in any of these roles be left to incidental, indirect or implicit processes?

They answer a resounding “no” to each question.

A powerful example of their answer to this can be seen in a video clip where literacy expert and co-author of the work on the four resources, Allan Luke, talks about the way in which a lower income school failed to engage learners in literacy classes with a disaster faced by the city of Brisbane when their river flooded. Luke asked the staff: “Who’s teaching about flooding?” He described how the teachers looked at each other uncomfortably and said “Well, Dick and Dora ... Three Blind Mice ... the Unit on Roald Dahl.” He says “Come on, the city’s being washed away, who’s doing climate change? Who’s doing hydrology, salt water sharks being driven up the estuary? The effects of run-off from flooding on the Great Barrier Reef? No-one.” It was like a burger with no patty! I realised they were not teaching any substantial field knowledge and content. It was the Commonwealth Games and I said maybe they could do that task where each kid takes a country to report on. They said, um, we’ve got struggling readers, threshold levels, and the task became colouring in national flags. Pirates became Johnny Depp. And I said to them “What about Somalia”? There was no substantive content, no reading of the world. Luke then explains that years’ worth of school reform literature has shown that there are three key lessons: First – intellectual demand. Here he refers to “... real ideas, substantial ideas. The learners may be working class and may be struggling with ‘real stuff’ but it’s not about skills. Skills acquisition and behaviour management are means not ends. And this narrowing of the curriculum from the testing agenda is something we have to address. The second is sustained classroom conversations, quality dialogue, rich classroom talk. The third is connection to the world ... Floods go down a lot better than Roald Dahl.”⁶

This clip shows us that when ‘learning to read’ is limited to following a structured and sequenced programme, the opportunity to connect literacy to the broader world and to substantive content is missed. This diminishes opportunities for poorer learners to engage with the world beyond the classroom and to extend their knowledge.

There is much evidence that shows that children learning to read and write do not necessarily move through the roles of code-breaker, meaning-maker/text participant, text user and text analyst, in that order, and as developmental stages. An early literacy activity for many children is learning to ‘write’ their name. Initially many children will draw this word as an image copied from an example of their name written down. They will be able to produce a recognisable visual representation of their name without needing to know the individual letters of the alphabet or the sounds of each letter as they draw their way into writing. They will also recognise the image and read it accurately as their name, just as they might recognise the KFC image and know that it means KFC Chicken. These children will then go on to learn the individual names of the letters in their own names and this is one route into understanding the alphabetic principle.



To become successfully literate at school requires access to four sets of resources

The movement here is from text user and producer (knowing how to represent authorship of a picture you have drawn by assigning the picture of your name or 'writing' your name on the page) to text participant and eventually code-breaker when the child learns to recognise and produce each individual letter in their name. At a later stage the child might try to develop their unique signature and learns that with certain texts they can use the signature and with others they cannot. This is learning about the pragmatics of texts. We might argue that the starting point here is from text analyst or critical text producer in a case where a child is writing their name to show authorship of a text they have produced.

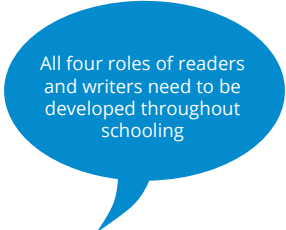
A crucial message that children need to learn about literacy is that written text represents different kinds of meanings for different kinds of purposes. These can be used to represent their own meanings so that they become producers of text, and this is where the boundary between reading and writing starts to fade away. Too much emphasis on decoding of letters and letter blends (e.g. in English 'c + h = ch', 's + h = sh') and reading of isolated words, as well as the decoding of so-called non-words, undermine the learning of this crucial message. It also limits children's prospects to recipients or consumers of texts, which is a passive role inadequate for rapidly changing societies in need of critical citizens.

All four roles of readers and writers need to be developed from the beginning and right through schooling. Very young children show how they can take up a critical stance to texts, thus fulfilling the roles of text analyst and critical text producer, long before they are fluent readers. The critical resources they develop in such activities provide key resources for any later engagements with decoding, meaning-making, using, and playing with texts. In this way, their agency can be fostered and their involvement and interest in the literacy practices of the classroom can be sustained. For example Xolisa Guzula describes how the Grades 3–6 children in her literacy club engaged as text users and text analysts, critiquing and re-designing the main character in the story 'Stephanie's ponytail' as a black child with whom they could identify and using hairstyles that were familiar to them.


2.2 Drawing on existing resources for literacy

Becoming an accomplished reader and writer across multiple contexts requires a massive amount of exposure to meaningful experiences with texts and language in purposeful activities. Extensive research shows us how children from middle-class homes are often immersed in print and playing with text types in different roles before they come to school. This gives them an advantage in mastering the four resources. However, what is often forgotten or ignored is that all young children come to school with particular knowledge and experiences. In South Africa these are often multilingual resources and engagement with practices like games, story-telling, singing, and remixing of media texts. These practices are not 'schooled' in a conventional sense, but are nevertheless rich resources for learning and engagement. Schools and some educational research often assume that the only valuable pre-literacy experience children can bring to school is of shared book reading. This view on the part of educators contributes to the way in which schools are good at recognising the resources that middle-class children bring with them (which are already more closely aligned with school practices) but often position children coming from poor or working class and non-English speaking homes in a position of deficit.

It is an indictment of the field of early literacy that very little research has attempted to uncover what resources, knowledge and experience typical



All four roles of readers and writers need to be developed throughout schooling



Developing rich literacies requires a massive amount of exposure to meaningful experiences with texts and language

South African children bring to school. These resources may include: oral storytelling and performance; children's embodied games such as hand-clapping routines with their accompanying songs and rhymes; and imaginative play. These resources are built up through experiences of pleasure and affect that involve the child as a full human being. Rather than continually lamenting that South African children don't come to school with particular resources, we need to identify and work with the rich resources that they do bring.

In addressing the ways in which our current education system is consistently failing the majority of our learners, we need to examine the (lack of) opportunities which children are getting to acquire all four of the literacy roles explained above. Teaching children to decode and read words, even to develop oral reading fluency, will not enable them to develop the rich literacy resources they need to succeed at school and in higher education. It will not enable them to become powerfully literate. This means that we need to review our curriculum and language teaching practices to ensure that schools are teaching all our children to acquire all of the resources outlined above.

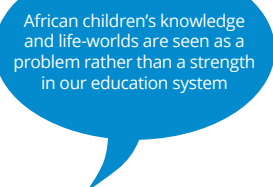
Of course, we also have to take into account the access to print material and technological as well as infrastructural resources – in other words, the wider literacy environment. This is often presented as a key reason for the failure in early literacy education. Undoubtedly, it is a critical factor. Infrastructural resources in the wider environment include access to books and libraries, means of delivery of textbooks and access to lighting, cabling and electricity. Technological resources include the means to write and read (pens, paper, notebooks, reading books, computers/electronic devices and so on). The inadequacies and uneven provision of these resources, and the hugely divergent access to these resources across communities is part of the devastating legacy of apartheid, as well as the failures of government since 1994. However, we believe that there are even more significant reasons for the failure in early literacy which lie in the narrow skills-based approach to literacy which dominates the field and is growing in influence.

Section 3: Reviewing testing and what counts as evidence

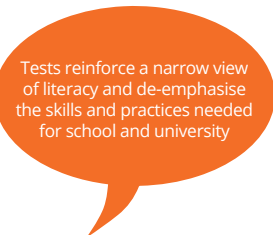
How we teach 'literacy' depends on what we understand by literacy. The same applies for how we test literacy. A skills-based approach to literacy may be suitably assessed through standardised testing, but the same is not true for the rich literacies approach supported in this paper. At best, standardised tests give feedback about a selection of decoding skills, but they typically do not reflect the combination of resources that make up literacy: decoding, meaning-making, using text appropriately, and being able to analyse texts in critical ways. One of the potential dangers of this approach to testing is that 'teaching to the test' misses out on teaching some of the most important aspects of what literacy entails.

Typically, literacy tests – particularly large-scale tests – measure what can be quantitatively analysed. This leads to an emphasis on words and small segments of language that are taken out of context. And as we have argued, decoding words is not the same thing as literacy as a social practice. Tests reinforce a narrow view of what literacy means, and this inevitably de-emphasises the very skills and practices that are necessary for success in school and university literacy.

On this point, it is interesting to note that, in an afterword to Marilyn Adams' well-known book *Beginning to read*, written for the Centre for the Study of



African children's knowledge and life-worlds are seen as a problem rather than a strength in our education system



Tests reinforce a narrow view of literacy and de-emphasise the skills and practices needed for school and university

Reading in the USA, two members of the expert advisory panel, Dorothy Strickland and Bernice Cullinan,⁷ explain why they could not endorse Adams' method of phonics first and isolated words position. They explain that almost all of the studies reviewed by Adams "... examined children's performance in decontextualised situations with minute segments of language".⁸ As the explanation of the four roles and resources model of reading and writing in Section Two shows, this means that only research focused on the decoding aspect of reading (one of the four roles) met the criteria for review.

3.1 Assessing early literacy and longer-term effects

Currently, randomised control trials (RCTs) are being presented in South Africa as not only desirable but as 'the gold standard'⁹ in producing evidence from educational interventions. This is without any acknowledgment of the many critiques of their application to complex open social systems, such as education.¹⁰ If an evidence-based approach is advocated, then it is crucial to be clear about what would count as 'evidence' and what it is evidence of.

The Department of Basic Education is currently running the 'Early Grade Reading Study' (EGRS), a major component of which is an RCT on the effectiveness of early grade Setswana literacy interventions in North West Province. This research draws directly on the widely critiqued USA-based Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). The EGRA is criticised because the assessment is focused only on a very narrow set of decoding skills.¹¹

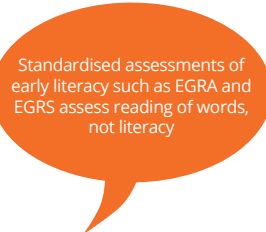
The components of the South African EGRS assessment are set out as follows:

- letter-sound recognition (60 seconds);
- word recognition (60 seconds);
- non-word recognition (60 seconds);
- paragraph reading (60 seconds);
- reading comprehension (4 items based on paragraph);
- phonological awareness (4 items);
- writing (letter dictation, word dictation, re-writing a short sentence);
- Maths (2 items);
- English (8 items receptive and expressive vocabulary).¹²

As the list shows, only one aspect of the EGRS assessment, the 4 questions asked of the paragraph they have read labelled 'Reading comprehension', focuses on children's understanding of what they have decoded – the second resource set in the four resources model. Writing is similarly reduced to encoding (e.g. letter and word dictation).

A further critique of EGRA-based early literacy interventions is that the effects that are claimed are generally based on assessments that take place immediately post-intervention. But follow-up research on children who have participated in such interventions 3 to 4 years later has shown that those initial effects are often not sustained.¹³ This is not surprising as the decoding skills assessed in the interventions are mainly assessing the ability to recognise letters and to read isolated words and 'non-words'. In other words, the evidence may be showing short-term gains that are not sustained, or evidence of performance on only one aspect of literacy that is insufficient to meet the more complex demands of school and university literacy.

Such assessments also create the problem of the 'Grade 4 slump' or the drop in literacy scores of children reaching higher primary grades. This is not so much a slump as an indication that in the early grades, decoding is tested while in the upper grades, children's understanding of and ability to apply



Standardised assessments of early literacy such as EGRA and EGRS assess reading of words, not literacy

content from texts (in other words largely text participant and to some extent text user resources) are assessed.

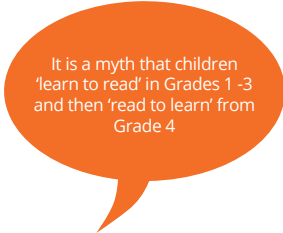
As discussed above, the often-repeated statement that children learn to read in Grades 1–3 and then read to learn in Grades 4 upwards is a myth. It is not possible that in the first three years, children could be exposed to and enabled to understand the wide range of texts that they will encounter during the rest of their education (schooling and beyond). As we have explained above, making meaning from and with different texts is a complex, detailed practice that makes different demands of us in different contexts. For example, the practice of reading a Science text to follow instructions and conduct an experiment in Grade 5 is very different from the practice of reading a narrative text in Grade 3.

3.2 Challenges to evidence-based policy and the validity of PIRLS in South Africa

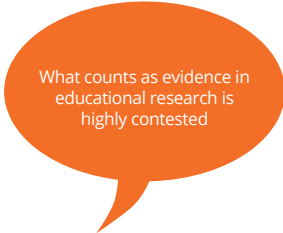
Globally and in South Africa, strong calls have been made for evidence-based policy (EBP) and decision-making in education and other areas of social development. South Africa took a bold step in participating in the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and making the results public which shows a deep commitment to improving the education system. However, while the dominant analysis of the test results¹⁴ (as it has appeared in the media recently) and calls for EBP sound perfectly reasonable, the problem comes when we look at what counts as evidence in educational research.¹⁵ This is a question fiercely contested in educational research¹⁶ and one that has a particularly troubled history in relation to research on teaching literacy.¹⁷ Just as how we teach literacy will depend on what we understand by literacy, so how literacy is tested is shaped by different understandings of what literacy is. Such debates are not being brought to the attention of the general public by scholars advancing an ‘evidence-based’ perspective.

In the infamous international assessment of reading, ‘PIRLS’, administered here in 2016, South African students performed poorly, a fact widely lamented and commented on in the media. While it is clear that our children are not reading as they need to be, it is not clear that PIRLS performance provides useful insights on how the situation might be improved. It is very important to question the validity of a test that is designed for monolingual children who have received their education and learned their early reading skills in a language continuous with that of their homes.

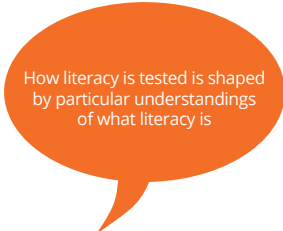
In contrast to the child for whom PIRLS is designed, many if not most South African children will encounter their first non-fiction text written in an African language in the context of the PIRLS test. This is because there are very few non-fiction texts available in African languages in SA, and not unrelatedly, because all African language speaking children have to study through the medium of English (or Afrikaans) from Grade 4 with exclusive provision of monolingual English learning support materials. Beyond Grade 3, African language speaking children have almost no exposure to reading and writing non-fiction texts in African languages. For example, the chances of a child knowing what the word for dinosaur is in isiXhosa without ever having read a text about dinosaurs in isiXhosa are slim. The centrality of a reader’s existing knowledge in making sense of text and the ways in which this knowledge is different for every person is completely ignored by standardised assessments such as PIRLS. If you struggled to make sense of our sentence about basketball, could we make the claim based on this that most South African adults are not able to ‘read for meaning’, even when reading in their home language? Surely this claim would be invalid?



It is a myth that children ‘learn to read’ in Grades 1–3 and then ‘read to learn’ from Grade 4



What counts as evidence in educational research is highly contested



How literacy is tested is shaped by particular understandings of what literacy is

An additional concern is with the varieties of African languages used in the translation of PIRLS. African language speaking children are also described as writing the PIRLS test in their 'home language' without any consideration given to possible differences between the standard variety of a language used by the translators of the test and the children's actual home language varieties.

Nevertheless, the bigger challenge for the South African education system is to reflect on PIRLS and other test results with a view to developing strategies for system improvement. We strongly advocate that this reflection involves deeper consideration of language and literacy learning in relation to the conditions of South African classrooms. Our view is that it is important for policy-makers to engage with the scholarship presented in this paper on local and international knowledge and debates within the field of literacy research. This is a point we address further in Section 6 of this paper.

3.3 The effects of tests on teaching

Standardised literacy assessments such as EGRA and PIRLS promote and prioritise a very narrow notion of language and of literacy. Not only is the public misled about what these tests can in fact assess but they also have detrimental wash-back effects on classroom practice. These effects work to widen the gap in success between children from print-rich middle-class homes and poorer children. The valuable resources and the ones that make reading and writing more engaging activities for learners – text participant, text user and text analyst are absent from these assessments. Also ignored are the range of multi-modal resources which children bring with them into school and engage with on a daily basis (such as oral storytelling and performance, creativity and language play, digital text production).

Currently standardised assessments play a powerful role in determining classroom practices. From our research experience this has taken the form of extremely negative effects on teachers' decision-making and the diminishing of the agency of teachers. In one example we conducted research in a Khayelitsha primary school on the transition from isiXhosa medium of instruction in Grade 3 to English medium in Grade 4. In the third term of Grade 3, we were not able to observe a single English First Additional Language (EFAL) lesson in the two Grade 3 classes over a period of four weeks. When questioned about this, Grade 3 teachers explained that the systemic assessments were only testing in isiXhosa at Grade 3 level and thus it was not a priority to teach EFAL.¹⁸ In a different research project involving Grades 4–6 children in a Saturday morning literacy club where children come to read and write for enjoyment, children were frequently prevented from attending Saturday sessions in the run up to provincial standardised assessments. Teachers explained that they had to prepare learners for these assessments. The preparation involved children and teachers in chorus 'reading' aloud.¹⁹

3.4 The value of in-depth case studies

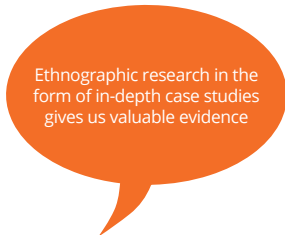
It is significant that it is in single site case study research that the damaging effects of testing have been observed. This kind of research relies on the researcher's presence over extended periods of time, rather than on short school visits or researcher requests to observe particular lessons. In fact ethnographic observational studies have produced much of the scholarship that has become foundational to our understanding of literacy as a range of practices and of how children develop literacy resources which are more or less valued within schooling, as well as how these differ across social contexts.²⁰ However this ground-breaking work is generally not included in



We advocate a deeper consideration of language and literacy learning



The current testing regime has negative consequences for children's opportunities to learn



Ethnographic research in the form of in-depth case studies gives us valuable evidence

'systematic' reviews of existing research on literacy, as these studies work with relatively small numbers of participants and do not fit requirements for replicability. Yet without these studies our understanding of literacy and of how to teach the range of practices involved in different kinds of writing and reading needed to succeed in schooling is extremely impoverished.

Section 4: Identifying the role of language in education policy in sustaining inequality

4.1 Language policy and the language of learning and teaching

Understanding the language of classroom talk, textbooks, and assessment instructions is crucial to successful learning. Yet the issue of language is continually ignored in educational change. While there have been extensive curriculum reform initiatives post-apartheid, the Language in Education Policy (LIEP) released in 1997, the same year as Curriculum 2005, has not been reviewed since then. The LIEP explicitly promotes multilingual education and refers to two different examples of this: "teaching through one medium (home language) and learning additional language/s as subject" and "structured bilingual education found in dual-medium (also known as two-way immersion) programmes".²¹


In contrast to this, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which is the current official curriculum, supports neither teaching through the home language beyond Grade 3 nor dual-medium bilingual education. The language requirements of the CAPS have effectively changed language policy through the back door by introducing an additional language from Grade 1, and by implicitly enforcing a change in the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) for African language children in Grade 4. This change is enforced by providing teaching and learning resources as well as assessments exclusively through English.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) upholds the right of all children "to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice" and the 1997 LIEP emphasises the cognitive benefits of bilingual education and the goal of multilingualism.

However, the national and provincial departments of education enforce monolingual education through the medium of either English or Afrikaans. An early exit model of bilingual education, also called sudden transition, where children exit the language of instruction in their familiar language after only 3 years is widespread policy in primary schools.²²

That the DBE and the provincial departments support this sudden transition to monolingual English is evidenced in the complete lack of support for bilingual or African language medium of instruction beyond Grade 3. The question must be asked whether middle-class English and Afrikaans speaking parents would allow a system where their children learned, for example, isiXhosa for 2–4 hrs a week in Grades 1–3 and then switched to isiXhosa only for all their instruction, learning materials and assessments from the beginning of Grade 4? Yet this is what the average child in the South African schooling system is forced to do.

With the best intentions and the most dedicated teachers, it is simply not possible for children learning English as First Additional Language in Grades 1–3 to develop the English language proficiency required to access the range of texts and the curriculum, more generally, through English only from Grade 4. While Social Science textbooks may be easily accessible for English home language learners in suburban schools, they present a sea of unknown print



Neither the language curriculum nor language policy as implemented is appropriate for most South African children

language and are thus unreadable for African language speaking learners.

More than 30 years ago, Carol MacDonald completed a research project in the former Bantustan, Bophuthatswana, on learners 'crossing the threshold' from four years of home language instruction to Grade 5, where instruction continued in English. Based on an analysis of the curriculum and textbook materials available for Grades 1–4 English as a subject and Grade 5 subjects across the curriculum, MacDonald showed that if the English teacher had done her job well, the average child leaving Grade 4 would have a vocabulary in English of around 800 words. On entering Grade 5 the child would need a vocabulary of at least 5000 English words (never mind all the aspects of language proficiency beyond vocabulary). She concluded that this "...supposes an increase [in vocabulary] of 600% which would be unreasonable even for first language speakers of English".²³


A deeply entrenched colonial matrix of power allows this expectation that children should take on a relatively unknown language as the LOLT after only three years at school, to go unchallenged. It means that in practice the same children who were racially and linguistically privileged during apartheid schooling, i.e. home language speakers of mainstream varieties of English and Afrikaans, continue to be privileged. A Grade 4 child born into an African language speaking home is expected to use the same textbooks and write the same assessments as a child born into an English speaking home who reaches Grade 4 with 9–10 years of full immersion in English. This is a gross inequality that continues the legacy of apartheid educational outcomes. Given that this practice discriminates against Black children, while continuing to advantage White children, we can describe current language policy implementation as racist.

Colonial constructions of language also position multilingual teachers, who use innovative bilingual strategies to support their learners, as linguistically deficient, berated for using 'code-switching', and for modelling 'impure' and urbanised registers of English and African languages. This unequal situation will be further exacerbated by a policy of one (English) textbook per subject and grade for all South African children, regardless of their language resources and life worlds.


4.2 What concept of language underpins language and curriculum policy?

As with our discussion above of what literacy is, we need to engage with the paradigm of language that underpins language and curriculum policy. We need to ask how we have come to be in this untenable situation where African language speaking children are so severely disadvantaged through a monolingual English LOLT. This can be explained by powerful beliefs about what language is and what is perceived as normal language practice – in other words, language ideologies. One such belief is the understanding of named languages as pure, autonomous and clearly bounded entities. In reality, language, like race, is a social construct. People have named the sets of resources we recognise as 'one language', such as English or isiXhosa. But there is huge variation (in vocabulary, accents or phonological features, sentence structure etc) in what is recognisably 'English' across the world and even within small geographical regions. In some cases there are several names for what outsiders might consider 'one' language.

Linked to the belief that named languages exist as bounded objects is the myth of monolingualism. The idea of monolingualism developed in the process of European constructions of nation states, based on the principle that a nation has one geographical territory and one language. Following



A deeply entrenched colonial matrix of power allows discriminatory language policies to go unchallenged



Monolingualism is not normal yet our system operates on every level as if it is

this myth:

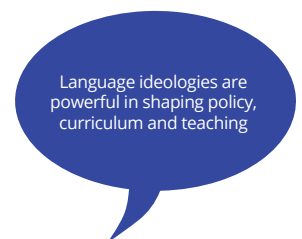
- monolingualism, or a high level of proficiency in a single named language, is seen as the norm;
- linguistic purity, or the separation of 'named' languages is seen as inherently superior, while 'mixed' language use is seen as deficient;
- bi/multilingualism is understood as multiple monolingualisms, or as equivalent proficiency in two or more named languages, so-called 'balanced bilingualism'²⁴ with each so-called language stored separately in the brain;
- bi/multilingualism is seen as undesirable/a problem.²⁵

In stark contrast to these myths, the majority of people globally and in South Africa are multilingual, making use of a range of language resources on a daily basis. At the same time, it is not uncommon for English first language speakers to be monolingual and thus to operate from a monolingual mindset and their power in informing curriculum and policy decisions is disproportionate. 'Who' informs curriculum decisions, especially in terms of their own language resources, histories and social class, as well as racial positionings, matters. Monolingual English (or at best bilingual English and Afrikaans) curriculum writers, policy-makers and textbook writers are often unable to see beyond their own limited language experiences. The lack of recognition of African language speaking children's resources can be seen as a form of racism and one of the most pernicious ways in which Coloniality continues to shape the South African schooling system and its deeply unequal outcomes.

The disproportionate exercise of power by English speakers accounts for the normalised expectation that one can change LOLT in a classroom entirely from one day to the next (that is from the final day of Grade 3 to the first day in the new year of Grade 4). This is a bizarre and discriminatory expectation which in any case is likely never to occur in this way in practice, except in cases where the Grade 4 teacher has only monolingual competence in English (very unusual in the schools where an African language is home language and the LOLT in years 1–3). This notion of a sudden switch in the LOLT thus only makes sense if one is working with a monolingual view of languages as discrete and clearly bounded entities.

Additionally, the idea that one can learn a language sufficiently through only a few hours a week of language learning as a subject (English as First Additional Language) over 3 school years in order to be able to then learn exclusively through that language, depends on a view of language as a stable, and context free system. This relies on the incorrect assumption that language is an object, or a static body of knowledge to be mastered. It denies the reality that language use, like literacy, is deeply related to context of use, purpose and audience. Thus language can only be understood and learned in contexts of use. The curriculum in the subject English as a First Additional Language works from this incorrect assumption of what language is. It thus teaches children about language (e.g. how to name objects in the home, parts of the body, and colours, as well as how to identify parts of speech such as nouns, verbs and adjectives). This is not the kind of language they will need to use in other areas of the curriculum such as Mathematics or Social Science.

Beliefs about language (or language ideologies) are extremely powerful in shaping policy, curriculum and the kind of teaching and learning that happens in classrooms.²⁶ There is an urgent need to challenge the dominant monolingual approach, and for both language policy and the curriculum to take account of our current knowledge and understanding of language



and multilingualism.²⁷

When it comes to issues of language in schooling, the debate is unhelpfully stuck in arguments for or against the use of mother-tongue LOLT versus English LOLT. In our view, parents cannot be expected to choose either home language or English instruction. It is essential to develop and implement bi- and multilingual approaches where children are able to learn using their most familiar language resources as well as develop proficiency in English. Much more attention needs to be focused on how language and other meaning-making resources can be used for learning rather than focusing on what language teachers and children are using.

Section 5: Reimagining textbooks and other learning resources

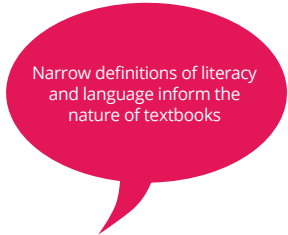
In the previous sections, we have made numerous references to the impact of historic and current policies and practices on the provision, content, range and accessibility of textbooks and other resources such as reading materials, on the learning opportunities for the majority of our children. As with policies and practices for literacy teaching, so too do dominant and narrow definitions of literacy and language overwhelmingly inform the nature of textbooks in South Africa, both for learning languages, and for learning across the curriculum.

5.1 Current models of textbook development, selection and access

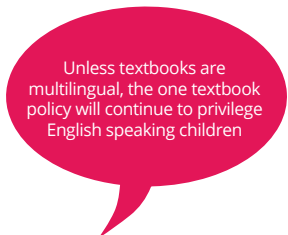
Post 1994, there have been three opportunities for the development of textbooks and other learning materials like readers, each happening after the introduction of the respective post-apartheid curricula: Outcomes Based Education, the Revised National Curriculum Statement and now, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In each case, once the curriculum documents were published, the DBE set out criteria for new textbooks in all the subjects and called on commercial publishers to make submissions for selection onto government-approved lists. In each case, unrealistically tight time frames have resulted in the hasty production of books (in some cases the submission of first drafts) which has had implications for their quality and ruled out any chance of piloting, to assess their suitability in our complex, diverse classrooms.

Further compromising the suitability of textbooks for diverse classroom contexts, is the fact that textbooks are largely developed by publishers, writers, designers, illustrators and editors who have very little experience outside of mainly White, English speaking urban contexts. Yet it is these developers who make the decisions about the suitability, relevance and meaningfulness of stories and other texts for all children and who control which views and experiences of the world are normalised in those texts.

Until now, textbooks that met the criteria set out by the department, were curriculum compliant, and were of a reasonable quality, made it onto officially approved lists. However, the DBE has indicated their intention to reduce the lists of approved textbooks – and therefore the books that all government schools are obliged to purchase – to just one approved textbook per subject, per grade. This means that regardless of the context, regardless of the language resources of the children in a particular school, textbook writers have to prepare materials pitched at some unknown norm and teachers will lose the opportunity to choose books that may support learning better in their classrooms than in others. Giving children with different language resources the same textbook will continue to privilege English speaking



Narrow definitions of literacy and language inform the nature of textbooks



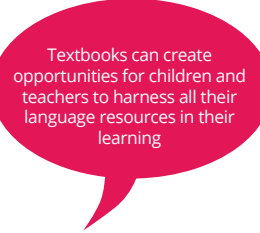
Unless textbooks are multilingual, the one textbook policy will continue to privilege English speaking children

children and disadvantage bilingual learners.

5.2 Current language policy and curriculum in textbooks and other learning materials

How is current policy realised in textbook production and provision?

- Textbooks in content subjects, Maths and Science, from Grade 4 assume that all children have high levels of English resources and have experience of reading a range of non-fiction texts.
- Graded reading programmes in the foundation phase, especially in African languages, are often translated from English, and contain few examples of non-fiction genres that African learners will encounter in English in all subjects from Grade 4.
- Very little development of textbooks in African languages has occurred.
- Textbooks for learning English have relied on prevailing language ideologies that see languages as pure and bounded and have neglected to provide scaffolding, in the form of translanguaging for example, to support children having to make the switch to English.
- In line with the CAPS curriculum, textbooks for English language learning pay little attention to building the language resources that children need for learning in English across the curriculum.
- Children's literature in African languages is dominated by translations of English children's literature written by mostly White English speaking authors. Publishers and NGOs working on bilingual materials curate which books need to be translated rather than create opportunities for original writing in African languages. Though translation has its value in exposing readers to other worlds and cultures, translation is being used to prevent original writing in African languages. Attempts at asking original writers to translate their works into English for the benefit of monolingual publishers and editors often lead to judgements about people's Englishes and rejection of their manuscripts.
- Language textbooks have largely failed to address the need for the development of, in particular, the resources of critical literacy (text analyst and critical producer), an academic orientation vitally needed particularly, but not only for, success in higher education.



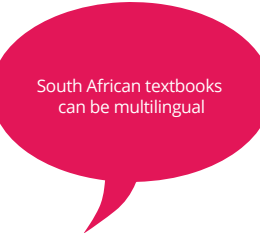
Textbooks can create opportunities for children and teachers to harness all their language resources in their learning

5.3 Re-imagining textbooks

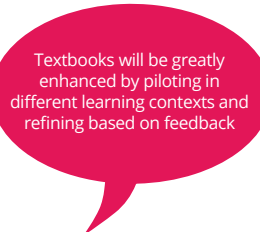
The DBE is currently preparing a call for a new round of textbook submissions for all grades (to be CAPS compliant). This is an opportunity for a new way of developing textbooks and other learning materials that can more successfully meet the needs of children in linguistically diverse classrooms. Such textbooks could create opportunities for children and teachers to harness all their language resources in their learning and affirm and foster literacy practices that provide solid and dynamic foundations for school and higher academic literacy acquisition.

Below are some suggestions for how this process could be revised:

- The timelines in the submissions process could be extended to give textbook publishers time to develop materials that can be extensively trialled in many, varied learning contexts, so that the final official materials recognise and affirm the lives and language resources of all children.
- The people working on textbooks, be they writers, designers, artists, editors or publishers, need to reflect access to a diverse array of life-worlds and linguistic repertoires.
- At all levels of primary and high school, textbooks developers could devise



South African textbooks can be multilingual



Textbooks will be greatly enhanced by piloting in different learning contexts and refining based on feedback

ways to acknowledge the multiple language resources that children bring to their learning by, for example, structuring the use of multiple languages into activities; providing scaffolding as children move between the languages they know and school discourses and experiment with languages in their speaking and writing activities; providing multilingual glossaries for technical terms and other key subject vocabulary and so on.²⁸ This approach will affirm teachers in their work and validate and celebrate the linguistically resourceful nature of our children.

- Attention needs to be paid to the nature, content and structure of reading programmes in the foundation phase. The submission criteria determined by the DBE for reading material in all the language programmes could include the requirement of the publishing of a range of original and indigenous fiction and non-fiction texts in multiple languages so that children can on the one hand develop reading strategies for many of the text types they will need to engage with later on, in their early years, and on the other hand enjoy rich reading experiences that are culturally familiar.
- Extensive consultation with practitioners and theorists in the fields of multiliteracies and multilingualism, in the development of new textbooks and new reading programmes, could enrich the final products in ways that better represent the lived experiences of the children who will be using them.

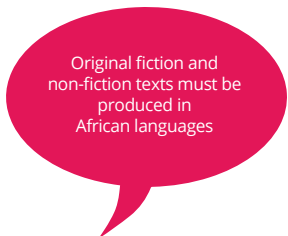
Section 6: Establishing principles for effecting change

What we are experiencing in South Africa are the bitter fruits of the legacy of deprivation and inequality in the provision of education and the lasting effects of conquest, colonialism and apartheid. While some powerful voices in the field are calling for magic bullets, the history of literacy campaigns and strategies worldwide has taught us that there are very few short-cuts and often where they are attempted, money is simply wasted.

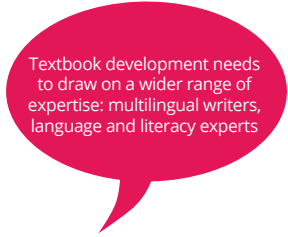
The approaches outlined above require deep levels of expertise among teachers and broad repertoires of teaching and modelling engagement with texts. They require humility and recognition of the alienation that African languages speakers have often experienced with regard to the use of their languages in literacy practices. They require deep listening to the experiences of those who have worked at the coal face for decades.

The current period, twenty-four years after the end of apartheid, is characterised by fierce contestations about where the locus of authority in our education system lies and by a continuance of a colonial matrix of power. In early planning for the post-apartheid education system, as set out in the ANC's 'yellow book' and White Paper 1 on Education and Training, proposals were put forward for a National Institute of Curriculum Development (NICD). White Paper 1 proposed a study of alternative forms an NICD could take, involving stakeholders and role players, to consider "... the relationship of curriculum, assessment and teacher education processes in all fields and phases of education and training, including early childhood learning, education support services and special educational needs". Unfortunately, these proposals were never realised.


However, it is not too late to develop more open and transparent consultative processes where a range of expertise can be drawn on in matters of curriculum development and testing. If we wish to build an education system that will achieve social justice, end inequality and produce critical citizens, we need the courage to take a different path.



Original fiction and non-fiction texts must be produced in African languages



Textbook development needs to draw on a wider range of expertise: multilingual writers, language and literacy experts



There are no magic bullets for addressing the lasting effects of conquest, colonialism and apartheid

As we have argued, because of the deeply contextual and practice-related nature of literacy, as well as the very different conditions that prevail in public schools, it is not possible to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach, or a single script that can be followed in all schools. We propose the following strategies to enable all children to develop rich literacies and thus to shape successful language and literacy education:

- Build on and extend children’s language, communication and other knowledge resources in literacy activities, so that children can use their full language and meaning-making repertoires for learning.
- Legitimise and model different kinds of bi- and multilingual language use.
- Ensure literacy teaching is always embedded in meaningful contexts and activities.
- Develop and support all four roles of de-coder/encoder; text participant and meaning-maker; text user and producer as well as text analyst and critical text producer from the beginning of schooling.
- Enable children to develop a pleasurable and positive affective relationship with literacy through imagination, play and capitalising on their interests and what excites them.
- Explicitly support literacy development across the curriculum within and beyond the foundation phase.
- Implement and support bi/multilingual education through language policy; curriculum; assessments; and crucially, appropriate learning support materials.
- Ensure access to stimulating reading and writing materials, and harness digital technologies for meaningful literacy.
- Support literacy teachers to engage in literacy practices themselves that draw on all the four roles and restore their agency.
- Work with teachers and children to develop critical awareness about language.


We call on all stakeholders in education to embrace these important ways of working to effect change:

- Engage respectfully and consult widely with teachers, students, parents and education experts in the process of change.
- Establish a national curriculum development institute.
- Acknowledge the limitations of the knowledge and experience of English monolinguals or English/Afrikaans bilingual researchers, policy-makers, and materials developers in a context of African multilingualism.
- Acknowledge the resources that teachers are currently using as they attempt to carry out what is in many ways an impossible task of teaching children with an inappropriate language policy and a complete lack of language support in textbooks and assessment.
- Support out-of-school literacy initiatives such as reading clubs and holiday literacy clubs which expand children’s opportunities for pleasurable and stimulating engagement with texts (print, digital and oral) – as listeners, as readers, as writers, as performers.
- Confront and erase the deficit positioning of African language speaking children from poor and working-class homes.


It is time for the knowledge and experiences of the African language speaking child to be taken as the starting point in education and for all children to be given the opportunities to access rich literacies. This is not something that can be achieved by schooling alone. It requires a massive effort on the part of government, schools, higher education institutions, civil society, NGOs, families, communities and funders.

As one of our collective, Xolisa, put it

“We need to move from Bantu education to education for Abantu.”



We require deep levels of expertise and broad repertoires of engagement with texts



It is not too late to develop processes to achieve social justice and end inequality in education

Endnotes

¹Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and Power*. New York and London: Routledge. Kapp, R. (2004). 'Reading on the line': An analysis of literacy practices in ESL classes in a South African township school. *Language and Education*, 18(3) 246-263. Kell, C. (2016). Literacy, mobile texts and translocal literacies. In Canagarajah, S. (ed) *The Routledge Handbook of Migration and Language*. Routledge: London and New York. Kell, C. (2011). Inequalities and crossings: Literacy and the spaces-in-between. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(6) 606-613. Prinsloo, M. (2004). Literacy is child's play: Making sense in Khwezi Park. *Language and Education*, 18(4) 291-304. Lemphane, P. and Prinsloo, M. (2014). Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35(7) 738-753. Prinsloo, M. and Rowsell, J. (2012). Digital literacies as placed resources in the globalised periphery. *Language and Education*, 26(4) 271-277. Prinsloo, M. & Breier, M. (eds) (1996). *The Social Uses of Literacy: Theory and practice in contemporary South Africa*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Prinsloo, M. and Stein, P. (2004). What's inside the box? Children's early encounters with literacy in South African classrooms. *Perspectives in Education*, 22(2) 67-84. Stein, P. and Slonimsky, L. (2006). An eye on the text and an eye on the future: Multimodal literacy in three Johannesburg families. In Pahl, K. and Rowsell, J. (eds) *Travel Notes from the New Literacy Studies*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. Thesen, L. and Van Pletzen, E. (2006). *Academic Literacy and the Languages of Change*. London/New York: Continuum.

²Gee, J.P. (2003). Opportunity to learn: A language-based perspective on assessment. *Assessment in Education*, 10(1) 27-46.

³Graff, H. (1979). *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and social structure in the nineteenth-century city*. New York: Academic Press. Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Prinsloo, M. and Baynham, M. (eds) (2013). *Literacy Studies Volume 1: Great divides and situated literacies*. Los Angeles: Sage.

⁴Gee (2003).

⁵Freebody, P. and Luke, A. (1990). Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect: An Australian Journal of TESOL*, 5(3) 7-16. See also Luke, A., Dooley, K. and Woods, A. (2011). Comprehension and content: Planning literacy in low socioeconomic and culturally diverse schools. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 38(2) 149-166 for an extended discussion of comprehension as a cultural, social and cognitive activity and for the application of the four resources model to whole school literacy development.

⁶Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnWdARykdcw> (note Allan is mis-spelled as Allen).

⁷Dorothy Strickland holds the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Chair in Education at Rutgers University. She was formerly the Arthur I. Gates Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University and is a past president of the International Reading Association (IRA). Her career began as an early years' teacher. Bernice Cullinan is professor emeritus of reading and children's literature at New York University. Like Strickland, she is a past president of the International Reading Association (IRA) and began her career as an early years' teacher.

⁸Strickland, D. and Cullinan, B. (1990:430). Afterword in Adam, M. (1990). *Beginning to Read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

⁹Fleisch, B. and Schoer, V. (2014). Large-scale instructional reform in the Global South: Insights from the mid-point evaluation of the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy. *South African Journal of Education*, 34(3) 1-12.

¹⁰Cartwright, N. (2010). What are randomised control trials good for? *Philosophical Studies*, 147(1) 59-70. Cowen et al (2017); Tikly (2015). See further references in footnote 16.

¹¹e.g. Bartlett, L., Dowd, A.J. and Jonason, C. (2015). Problematizing early grade reading: Should the post-2015 agenda treasure what is measured? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40: 308-314.

¹²(DBE EGRS Summary Report Results of Year 2 Impact Evaluation, p11). <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/EGRS%20Summary%20Report.pdf?ver=2017-08-17-090215-583> last accessed 8 August 2018.

¹³Hurry, J. and Sylva, K. (2007). Long-term outcomes of early reading intervention. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 30(3) 227-248. McQuillan, J. (2018). Is synthetic phonics working in England? A comment on the 'teaching to teach literacy' report. In Clark, M. (ed) *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence, and ideology*. Birmingham: Glendale Education. See also <http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/is-synthetic-phonics-instruction-working-in-england-updated/>

¹⁴For an analysis of SA learners' achievements in an earlier PIRLS assessment informed by a social

practice view see Janks, H. (2011). Making sense of the PIRLS 2006 results for South Africa. *Reading and Writing*, 2(1) 27-39. For a recent critique of the validity of PIRLS in South Africa, see Prinsloo, M. Op-Ed: The PIRLS debacle – Literacy, language and standards in schools in South Africa. 23 March 2018. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-03-23-op-ed-the-pirls-debacle-literacy-language-and-standards-in-schools-in-south-africa/>

¹⁵This is not a problem unique to educational research. Du Toit (2012) argues in relation to pro-poor policy-making that what counts as evidence in the call for EBP is driven by technocratic and narrow empiricist notions of research and evidence. Du Toit, A. (2012). 'Making sense of "evidence": Notes on the discursive politics of

research and pro-poor policy making', Working Paper 21. PLAAS, UWC: Bellville.

¹⁶Biesta, G. (2007). Why 'what works' won't work: Evidence based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1) 1-22. Cartwright, N. (2010). What are randomised control trials good for? *Philosophical Studies* 147(1) 59-70. Ball, Stephen J. (2015). Education, governance and the tyranny of numbers. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3) 299-301, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2015.1013271. Cowen, N., Virk, B., Mascarenhas-Keyes, S. and Cartwright, N. (2017). Randomized controlled trials: How can we know 'what works'? *Critical Review*, 29(3) 265-292, DOI:10.1080/08913811.2017.1395223. Tikly, L. (2015). What works, for whom, and in what circumstances? Towards a critical realist understanding of learning in international and comparative education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40: 237-249. Hammersley, M. (2013). *The Myth of Research-based Policy and Practice*. Los Angeles: Sage.

¹⁷Bartlett, L., Dowd, A.J. and Jonason, C. (2015). Problematizing early grade reading: Should the post-2015 agenda treasure what is measured? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40: 308-314.

¹⁸NRF funded project 'Heteroglossia in Primary Schooling' Principal Investigator Carolyn McKinney.

¹⁹Xolisa Guzula's PhD project on the #Stars of Today Literacy Club in Khayelitsha. See also Prinsloo and Krause (in press, 2019). Translanguaging place and complexity. *Language and Education*.

²⁰Dyson, A.H. (1993). *Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write in an Urban Primary School*. New York: Teachers College Press. Gregory, E. and Williams, A. (2000). *City Literacies: Learning to read across generations and cultures*. London: Routledge. Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Prinsloo, M. (2004). Literacy is child's play: Making sense in Khwezi Park. *Language and Education*, 18(4) 291-304. Lemphane, P. and Prinsloo, M. (2014). Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 35(7) 738-753. Stein, P. (2008). *Multimodal Pedagogies in Diverse Classrooms*. London and New York: Routledge. Street, B.V. (1983). *Literacy in Theory and in Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Taylor, D. (1983). *Family Literacy: Young children learning to read and write*. Exeter, N.H: Heinemann Educational Books.

²¹Language in Education Policy, 1997. Preamble. Point 6. Available at https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/LanguageEducationPolicy1997_1.pdf

²²Probyn, M. (2005). Language and the struggle to learn: The intersection of classroom realities, language policy, and neo-colonial and globalisation discourses in South African Schools. In Lin, A. and Martin, P. (eds) *Decolonisation, Globalisation, Language-in-Education Policy and Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 153-172. Department of Basic Education (2010) *The Status of the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT): A quantitative overview*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

²³MacDonald, C., with Burroughs, E. (1990). *Eager to Talk and Learn and Think Bilingual Primary Education in South Africa*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, p. 15.

²⁴Grosjean, F. (1982). *Life with Two Languages: An introduction to bilingualism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

²⁵Ruiz, R. (1984). Orientations in language planning. *National Association for Bilingual Education Journal* 8(2) 15-34.

²⁶Makoe, P. (2014). Constructing identities in a linguistically diverse learning context. *International Journal of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism*, 17(6). Makoe, P. and McKinney, C. (2014). Linguistic ideologies in multilingual South African suburban schools. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 35 (7): 658-673. Makalela, L. (2015). Translanguaging as a vehicle for epistemic access: Cases for reading comprehension and multilingual interactions. *Per Linguam* 31(1) 15-29. McKinney, C. (2017). *Language and Power in Postcolonial Schooling: Ideologies in practice*. New York: Routledge.

²⁷Heugh, K. (2013). Multilingual education policy in South Africa constrained by theoretical and historical disconnections. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33: 215-237. McKinney (2017); Pluddeman, P. (2015). Unlocking the grid: Language in education policy realisation in post-apartheid South Africa. *Language and Education* 29(3) 186-199. For early examples of innovative approaches to

multilingual education in South Africa see Heugh, K., Siegruhn, A. and Pluddeman, P. (eds) (1995). *Multilingual Education for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

²⁸Inspiring examples of multilingual materials that have been piloted to look at here are the Language supportive teaching and textbooks (LSTT) projects in Tanzania (using Kiswahili and English) and Rwanda (using Kinyarwanda and English). Milligan, L.O., Clegg, J. and Tikly, L. (2016). Exploring the potential for language supportive learning in English medium instruction: A Rwandan case study. *Comparative Education*. 52(3) 328-342. See also <https://lstttanzania.wordpress.com/> and https://www.educationinnovations.org/sites/default/files/LSTT%20baseline%20report_PSIPSE_0.pdf