

Futures of literacy in African languages¹

Litasa 2019 keynote address by Dr Brian Ramadiro, Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, University of Fort Hare

It is difficult to speak at the tail end of a conference after so many capable speakers have made their contributions. In the following remarks, I highlight some of the issues that have preoccupied me over the past 12 or so months, about literacy in African languages in primary education. I work in the Eastern Cape and I am going to speak from that perspective. This is not to say I speak *for* the Eastern Cape but only that I speak *from* experiences in that location.

On the word 'futures' in the title of my address: No, I have not discovered the crystal ball! There are many possible futures. What I want to talk about are probable and desirable futures for literacy in African languages and what we can do to bring about desirable futures.

1. As pointed out by Carolyn McKinney², for example, the view that language is not something out in the world waiting to be discovered, but a set of ideas and practices we have about it, has had very little effect on thinking and/or practice about language outside the immediate community of sociolinguists and applied linguists. In the field of education, it has made little difference on curriculum, language education policy, and classroom teaching and assessment practices. This is not an argument to abandon this view of language but is an acknowledgement of the current state of affairs. It is an important perspective to bring to thinking about language and literacy in African languages.

There are several reasons why this perspective on language is *having* (note the mildly optimistic present participle) little effect. I discuss two main ones. The first is that we, as sociolinguists and applied linguists, have been unsuccessful in persuading African language specialists based in African language departments to collaborate with us in working through theoretical and practical implications of the social constructivist stance on language -- including notions such as heteroglossia, translanguaging, third spaces, and linguistic repertoire -- for African language curriculum, teaching and assessment

¹ This keynote address was delivered at the Literacy Association of South Africa (LIITASA) conference entitled, *Masifunde Ditale: Literacy and Language in a Multilingual World*, 12-14 July 2019, University of Cape Town

² Carolyn McKinney (2017:xvi) makes this point very early on in her book, *Language and Power in Post-Colonial Schooling: Ideologies in Practice*. NY: Routledge

practices, and language education policy. As a result, our own work has not developed as deeply and profoundly as it may have as reflected in, for example, the excruciatingly slow development of pedagogies for teaching reading in African languages³. You could say, *they*, have failed to work with us. You would be right, of course, but that is hardly the point. If we do not find a way around or through this, the next 25 years will be more or less like the last. There is plenty of imagination, talent, wisdom, energy and organizational muscle in LITASA, prestige in Prof Makalela's chair⁴, and other networks, that can help us to reconfigure relations with colleagues in African languages departments so that we can together to unravel implications of the social constructivist view of language on literacy in African languages.

Easier said than done, you may say. True. You may point out that African language departments are small, very small relative to education departments, and, therefore, often they cannot spare people to engage in work outside of their particular foci such as work on aspects of African literature, language structure, and pragmatics. True. You may say that in many cases, the manner in which these aspects of language are dealt with have no immediate relevance to questions of education and in particular to formal schooling. True. You may point out that few specialists in African languages have expertise to work on questions of (school) curriculum, teaching and assessment, and language education policy. This may be so. You may also point out that some of the most skeptical people about translanguaging, within or across varieties, are located in these departments. This too may be so. Nevertheless, because I believe the future of literacy in African languages lies in this collaboration, the urgent task is to consolidate relations with whom we work and to expand rapidly our network.

The other reason the social constructivist perspective on language has had little effect on formal schooling has to do with the international and national prestige and dominance of standard English and its role-modelling function in promoting and reinforcing monoglossic views about what language is, how it should be taught and used, especially in formal educational settings. People like Sifre Makoni and Alastair Pennycook⁵ have argued powerfully about the many problems in the manner in which

³ Trudell, B. Schroeder, L. 2007. Reading Methodologies in African Languages: Avoiding Linguistic and Pedagogical Imperialism. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 20:3, 165-180

⁴ Prof Leketi Makalela holds a SARCHI Chair in Multilingual Education for Social Inclusion and Access. The chair can be a game-changer in facilitating conversations to reimagine relations between education departments/faculties and African language departments.

⁵ Makoni, S. Pennycook, A. 2004. Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages, 1-43. In S. Makoni and S. Pennycook (eds). *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters; Makoni, S. 1998. In the Beginning was the

missionaries selected and promoted certain varieties of African languages over others and the need, therefore, to 'disinvent' or re-standardize (my own word) these languages. However, because of a deeply internalized anglonormativity by linguists, educators and the general public, even at a time when we are talking decoloniality, some people still believe that minority and urban varieties of African languages should be kept out of the classroom, written school language and formal assessment, chiefly on the basis that standard English sticks to 'pure' White, middle class English and makes no room for Black English, for instance.

2. In recent years, we've witnessed the rise and rise of phonics-focused work in early reading in African languages. In particular, the rise of studies at the interface of linguistic, orthographic, and cognitive processes involved in learning to read in African languages, to a point where we can say studies of this kind are becoming the most common type of research into reading in African languages in South Africa. While I am a participant in this kind of work, we must not overestimate its value in deepening our understanding how to help children become readers in African languages. While we need more and better studies at this interface, this kind of work does not, by any means, address all that we need to know about learning to read and teaching beginning reading in African languages.

Whatever contributions this work may make to our understanding of the reading process in African languages in the future, we must remember that reading in a classroom setting is a pedagogical rather than a linguistic question. No amount of linguistic minutiae and analysis will in and of itself lead to effective teaching and learning processes. Pedagogical rigor, synthesis, and imagination is required to distill what is most useful from disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, and sociology to generate, experiment with, refine pedagogical principles that can eventually be developed into robust theoretical frameworks to research and teach reading in African languages. This is integrative pedagogical work. Closer collaboration between African language specialists (as suggested above) can serve as a necessary corrective to work by some general linguists that treats African languages as an epiphenomenon and not as real, living languages, whereby African languages are eviscerated into smaller and smaller linguistic categories. While this makes it easier to conduct studies of phonological and morphosyntactic processing of texts in African languages, much of this work is unable to

Missionary's Word: The European Invention of an African Language. The Case of Shona in Zimbabwe, 157-164. In K. Prah. (ed.) *Between Distinction and Extinction: The Harmonisation and Standardisation of African Languages*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

reconstitute this work into viable hypotheses for classroom practice and when it tries to do so, it often betrays its naivety about processes of teaching and learning. While some of this must continue, greater support is needed for integrative pedagogical work.

3. I am among those who believe that graded readers in African languages have a role to play in supporting young readers to apply and consolidate their beginning knowledge about how reading works in their language. At present, I am working with colleagues from Molteno and Room to Read to develop a set of graded readers in African languages. I am aware that some of you regard graded readers with (some) justified skepticism. Under ideal conditions, teachers have access to well-stocked school- or classroom-libraries with books in many genres and at various levels of difficulty; are knowledgeable about children's literature; and are skilled at assessing learners' reading abilities to match books with learners' interests at an appropriate level of reading challenge. As we work to create these conditions, I do not see how we can avoid making available to teachers and learners graded readers that control for sentence complexity and length, familiarity of phonic patterns, vocabulary, and so on, as one of the tools to support and consolidate early reading development in large classrooms with limited access to print and with teachers who struggle to teach reading effectively⁶.

There are of course a number of potential problems with graded readers. Firstly, it can be argued that work on graded readers is a little premature given that we know so little about children's language and literacy developmental trajectories in African languages. Secondly, it can be argued that inserting and placing graded readers at the centre of classroom reading programmes can have the unintended consequence of privileging, and, therefore, misrepresenting the reading process as mainly about decoding and fluency. It can mislead us into thinking that when children can read graded readers they have developed the ability and the will to read other text types. Thirdly, this kind of work can crowd out investments into research and development to produce and test other genres for young readers in African languages -- such as poetry, information texts, and plays -- that make children enact themselves as real readers. I raise the issues here because I want to invite you to help us to stay honest and modest about the claims that we make on behalf of graded readers, through your research and scholarship.

4. Narrative fiction, in particular stories, is becoming more and more available in African languages. The work of the African Storybook Project, Nalibali and Book Dash, among others, have been very important in rapidly increasing the number and variety of formats

⁶ Ramadiro, B. Porteus, K. 2017. *Foundation Phase Matters: Language and Learning in South African Rural Classrooms*. East London: Magic Classroom Collective

in which narrative fiction for beginning readers in African languages is available. Still, there is very little literature, in some of the smaller African languages such as SiSwati and isiNdebele.

There are almost no information books for beginning readers across African languages⁷. The implications are far reaching. First, a large part of the foundation phase curriculum is inaccessible to children. As a result, aspects of beginning knowledge in the life skills curriculum are completely unavailable to children speaking African languages. For example, discussion of basic scientific processes like photosynthesis is inconceivable in such classrooms. Second, as we all know not all children are interested in reading narrative fiction and when this is the only kind of literature on the menu, some children will not develop the will and habit of reading. In work that we are doing with children in the intermediate phase in the Eastern Cape, we have found that many 10 to 13-year-old boys read a lot more in isiXhosa when their reading menu includes nonfiction on high-interest topical issues such as news reports about sports⁸. Third, international comparative tests of reading like PIRLS [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study], test children's reading of information texts in African languages, despite the fact that these children have had very little experience with these kinds of text. This point is hardly ever made in reports and discussions of results of large scale, testing. I will return to this point presently.

A focus on literature in African languages for the foundation phase is still necessary but we need to move on to the intermediate and senior phases. There is little literature (fiction or nonfiction) in African languages for this age group. It seem to me that the thinking underneath this phenomenon is the Anglonormative expectation that – despite what language education policy says - most children should have transitioned to English-only instruction by the end of the foundation phase, and, therefore, there is less need to invest in literatures in African languages. In other words, investment into African languages is worthwhile insofar as it helps acquisition and mastery of English, rather than as an end in itself. Diabolically, just when many children in this age group have begun to read proficiently enough to enjoy reading extended texts in African languages for enjoyment, it is precisely at this time that choice in materials is constricted.

⁷ Recently, some of the implications this particular fact are explored in relation to Xitsonga in Maluleke, N. 2017. An Inventory of Text Types for Xitsonga and English Early-grade Readers: Implications for Translanguaging and Transtextual Practices, 67-82. In L. Makalela (ed.). *Shifting Lenses: Multilanguaging, Decolonisation and Education in the Global South*. Cape Town: CASAS

⁸ We are grateful to the editor of the isiXhosa edition of *Isolezwe*, Mr XX, who has generously allowed us to use original and adapted articles from this newspaper in literacy activities.

5. In order to make more rapid progress around some of the issues referred to above, it is essential that we become much more purposeful about creating long-term collaborative teams made up of teachers, teacher educators, researchers, African language specialists, and district officials, working together to create, test, and refine materials and pedagogies that can work in poor, African-language dominant schools. This ensure that our knowledge project, materials and tools are held accountable to the linguistic, social and pedagogical conditions of the majority of our schools. Our school-based work in the Eastern Cape suggests the current ecosystem of educational research in South Africa is not embedded within African language dominant schools. For this to happen requires us to persuade a lot more African language specialists to collaborate with literacy specialists to build educational design hubs to focus on questions at the interface of language, literacy, and pedagogy⁹.
6. Following years of criticism, the CAPS document for African languages in the foundation phase is under review. This may lead to better guidance for the teaching of reading in African languages, maximizing the linguistic logic and orthography of the various African languages. As far as I can tell, the content and process of the review repeats some of the strategic errors made during the first time around when our curriculum and language in education policy was formulated in the early 1990s to mid-1990s. As Gerda de Klerk and Kathleen Heugh¹⁰ have correctly pointed out some years ago, the core of the problem is that language education policy and curriculum documents were created by two sets of stakeholders, in relative isolation from each other, and who held different views about the role of language and language use in education. With the recent process to review CAPS too, there was no attempt to reconcile curriculum with language education policy. It is as if language education policy did not exist. The language policy envisages an additive multilingual education system, but the latest iteration of CAPS makes no provision for African languages as languages of teaching, learning, and assessment beyond the foundation phase (shamelessly perpetuating the false idea that this is what language education policy prescribes!)
7. The penultimate remark I want to make is about initial teacher education. There are a number of important initiatives underway to improve the quality of teacher education programmes in primary education. The revised MRTEQ [Minimum Requirements for

⁹ We discuss this point in some detail in Ramadiro, B. Porteus, K. 2019. *Policy Brief: Early Grade Literacy and Mathematics: Placing the African Language Speaking Child at the Centre*. East London: MCC, p.38

¹⁰ de Klerk, G. 2002. Mother-tongue Education in South Africa: The Weight of History. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 154:29-46. Heugh, K. 2013. Multilingual Education Policy in South Africa Constrained by Theoretical and Historical Disconnections. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33: 2015-237

Teacher Education Qualifications] and the frameworks for the educating teachers of literacy and mathematics produced by PrimTEd [The Primary Teacher Education project] are recent examples. I am hopeful that these initiatives will contribute to improving the quality of teacher education. Like other universities, my institution [the University of Fort Hare], is under pressure to enroll more and more students to meet the needs of the system, and, fortunately, like other institutions we have seen a surge in interest in education programmes by academically better-prepared students. Incidentally, this includes a considerable number of qualified male students wanting to work in the foundation phase. I am afraid, however, that we may not be able to take the best advantage of the energies of these young people in the service of education, if the current higher education funding matrices are not changed. The FTE [Fulltime Equivalent], that is, the state subsidy allocated to each university student, is significantly lower for education faculties compared to science faculties. So that even though we enroll many more students than the science faculties, this does not translate into greater income, and, therefore, more teaching staff and better facilities and equipment. Teacher education is an intensive undertaking. It is best done in small groups, with close support and supervision, and using the most up-to-date resources and methods. Upon reflection on the conditions under which historically Black and poor education faculties have to operate, such as the University of Fort Hare, it saddens me to say that the quality of teachers to come out of the system in the next 5-10 years, is likely to be no better than that we already have in the system. Under such circumstances, with the best will in the world, we can expect to make very modest improvements in the depth of content and pedagogical knowledge of our student teachers. In the short- to medium-term, it is only education pressure groups, like Bua Lit and teachers unions, that can bring pressure to bear on DHET to consider either revising FTE weightings for initial teacher education and/ or dedicated special grants.

8. In conclusion, a couple of thoughts about testing of young children. Yesterday, the need for large scale testing in public education was linked to the need for accountability, social justice, and funding of education.

I have a 14-year-old daughter who is going through a period of what they call in hip-hop, being black on both sides.

She asked me the other day. Why are black schools failing? With the emphasis on the word black. Her question was honest but not innocent. She was saying, you are black, you work in education, you train teachers. Account. I was enraged. I realized that this is a similar kind of emotion I experience when PIRLS, ANAs [Annual National

Assessments], or OECD [Organization Economic Cooperation and Development] reports are announced. These reports ask, what is wrong with South African education? We all know that the full question is: what is wrong with black education? With black teachers? Black children? Black parents? Black communities? Particularly, given the large sums of money poured into South African education. I feel indicted; as I should.

I should have been able to answer my daughter's question in a couple of sentences but I could not. I had to point out a few things to her.

- On the question of accountability. This is about who takes responsibility for failure of Black education? The state, teachers, and parents, variously and unequally, assume some accountability for the failure. However, much more powerful and influential groups who have shaped in decisive ways what is learned, under what conditions and in what languages, such as teacher educator and trainers, curriculum developers, policy wonks, have taken almost no accountability for ill-founded educational advice that the state and teachers have acted on in good faith. A case in point is a series of curriculum reform initiatives, viz., OBE, NCS, RNCs, C2000, CAPS, led by English-speaking White middle class people are widely acknowledged to have been largely unsuccessful and at least partially a reflection of lack of appreciation of the implications of teaching and learning through African languages.
- On the question of funding of public education. While South Africa spend more per capita on public education compared to other African countries, for instance, 90% of the education budget goes into paying salaries. Because the number of teachers allocated to each school is determined by the number of learners enrolled in that school, a rich ex-model C, like my daughter's own school, is allocated just as many teachers as poor rural and urban school from the public purse, and the ex-model C school is able to charge high fees and therefore to hire in more teacher and acquire additional infrastructure, equipment and materials. It is not surprising therefore that these schools do much better than poor urban and rural schools. This is not to say that poor urban and rural schools (largely Black schools) cannot and should not do better. The point though is that much educational thinking in South Africa is based on the idea that we already know how to do education in South Africa. All we need to do is to study ex-model C schools and do what they do. This simple of view of the matter is deeply offensive and glosses over the fact that the success of ex-Model C is partly, but crucially, reflects the fact that they are able to establish conditions conducive to teaching and learning providing teachers and

learners with a greater chance of success. The fact is that caregivers in these schools can afford to purchase success: by buying in extra teachers, support staff, materials and equipment, and extra tutoring.

Having decided to spend 90% of the education budget on teachers, by and large we misuse the teachers. Despite protestations to the contrary, much teacher education and development in primary education continues to be conducted in English-only while teachers are required to teach in African languages in the foundation phase. People have built careers and made a lot of money on ineffective teacher education and development. Yet, you rarely hear a public outcry about the relevance and quality of teacher development and education.

- On the question of materials. Take the example of DBE literacy workbooks in the foundation phase. Hundreds of millions of rand have been spent on the production and distribution of DBE workbooks. They were written in English by a couple of English-speaking White people and versioned in African languages. They do not follow the logic of African languages. Teachers have tried to use them in good faith, but the things simply don't work in classrooms. Public outcry? Are the authors of these workbooks taking "accountability" for this gross waste of public money? No.

In the kind of situation I have described above where foundations of education are so shaky, large scale testing will tell very little you did not know before testing. Those to whom testing is visited in this kind of situation experience it as a form of symbolic violence. If testing is to be done at all, even if it drew on a data bank of pre-selected items, it should be the sort that helps classroom teachers and district officials to improve teaching and learning processes.

I want to conclude on an optimistic note. While I am vexed by all these issues, I continue to be inspired by my B. Ed students at the University of Fort Hare. Who despite many difficulties they face at university – late payment of their NSFAS funds, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate equipment and classroom furniture, they are open-minded, hardworking and committed to doing their very best.

Thank you very much.

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