

Dear Mr President,

We are a group of concerned teacher educators who work in universities and NGOs. We are concerned about the ideological positioning of our education system which privileges the voices of white academics over and above black thinkers and academics. This letter is particularly concerned about the nature of research and resources in literacy and African language development.

Over time the department of education has surrounded itself with researchers who have positioned themselves as experts in literacy and African language development; many of them do not speak, read and write African languages. This kind of arrogance smacks in the face of black researchers who do not get the same opportunities and who would never dare claim to be experts in English and Afrikaans language development even when they have learned to read and write in these languages. We have watched in dismay the ways in which white researchers have centred themselves in the literacy crisis and include black researchers only as props or translators rather than the core team that does the work of setting the research agenda.

This centring of white researchers in the African language space is not new in South Africa. This is the colonial legacy set up by people such as Clement Doke, a professor at Wits University in the 1950s. Doke was a missionary turned publisher, writer, academic in the 1920s-1950s. His publications were the precursor to what is now Wits Press. In an essay written by Professor Ntongela Masilela he writes about the journal Doke began which still exists today as well as the intentions behind some of the work he did in developing isiZulu in particular while working with B. W. Vilakazi. While his archive is important, it is no different to what was being done at Lovedale by other academics and researchers like R. H. W. Shepard who wrote biographies and worked alongside the early Xhosa intellectuals and J. T. Van Der Kemp who is the missionary who is given the credit for translating the English Bible into isiXhosa. Both these men, Shepard and Doke, are an example of the missionary and colonial project of committing the barbaric native languages into the written word in order to advance the colonial and Christian project of civilising the 'barbarians'. While the work of translating and civilising what they perceived to be barbaric languages into print has contributed to some of the developments behind the research that has been done in African languages, their paternalism and colonial intent is very clear in the ways in which they worked with black people.

How does this relate to our current context?

The archive of black thought points us in the direction that white researchers and academics follow in the footsteps of people like Clement Doke: a legacy of white men who became experts of African languages in order to appropriate, control and define the black experience. The latent message in our current context is that when white people become experts on the black experience they do so because they wish to help, but there is also the sense that they do not see beyond their whiteness which says that they can become experts on a language they do not speak, read nor write. If we apply this to literacy in particular, non-African language speaking, white people see the disproportionate disadvantage for black children in our education system and want to lead the response, and while they may be experts in English/Afrikaans acquisition, they assume this makes them experts in African-language acquisition at the expense of others who truly are. The arrogance in assuming expertise and authority in a language one does not speak and then proceed to tell people who speak, read, write, dream, pray in that language how to teach their language is not part of the South Africa we imagined. There is also something arrogant in not collaborating in respectful ways with people who not only speak the language

but have also taught and done research in the language for over a decade. Of course their research is not seen, because they do not have a monolingual orientation in the education of the African Language -English bilingual child. Their research rather takes as a starting point that we are a multilingual country and that we need to approach education from a multilingual perspective rather than from a monolingual one. The focus is on how the children can acquire simultaneous biliteracy, because even the curriculum expects learning of two languages from the beginning. These black researchers are not simply doing research, but also work as teacher trainers, materials developers, translators, activists and many times have to teach the children directly. Yet, the expectation is that they should engage in researching and publishing academic articles only, when there is a mountain of work to be done, often with no funding.

As black researchers we have sat in seminars and conferences and meetings where we hear white researchers tell us that there are no vocabulary lists or terminologies in African languages for young children; implying that there is no vocabulary in African languages which contributes to children's inability to develop African language reading proficiency. This is said in spite of the work and legacy of Prof Neville Alexander and his team at PRAESA (The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) which developed vocabulary lists and glossaries, translated maths and science textbooks; created maths and science dictionaries up to Grade 9 and produced children's literature for years as teachers, teacher-educators and researchers as well as activists for Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education. This is also despite the work done by colleagues at the Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, who have been consistently working in rural areas, trying to understand how to transform education in rural areas as well as how to develop academic terminologies teacher education at universities. A narrative which erases the work done by black researchers and allies is not only an insult to both historical and contemporary thought and work, but it is simply untrue. It cannot be that in a country where there are black people who are educated and are linguists and literacy specialists, the experts are white people who cannot speak, read and write African languages.

There have been many attempts made by black academics, researchers, teacher trainers and activists to address the literacy crisis in the country, including the Vulindlela Reading Clubs in Langa and Lower Crossroads (Cape Town) which led to the birth of Nal'ibali National Reading for Enjoyment Initiative in 2012. One of the most recent attempts at solving the language and literacy challenges we are facing in education was the Language Transformation Plan (2007) in the Western Cape, where Minister Dugmore made it possible for black researchers to do advocacy on bilingual education with school governing bodies and communities; offered teacher training (2008-2009) and mentorship (until 2011) that explored models that work, as well as conducting research in this area. This coincided with the Home Language Based Bilingual Education plan for the Eastern Cape Education Department where black education specialists did advocacy in East London, Cofimvaba and Qumbu for bilingual education. It was however with great sadness that the new administration of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) at the time, had written to the 16 pilot schools who had drafted bilingual language policies and had trained teachers at the University of the Western Cape in bilingual education, telling them to revert back to English only education. After encountering resistance from Khayelitsha Development Forum and members of the Western Cape Language Practitioners Group, the WCED told the schools that it was within their constitutional right to draft their bilingual language policies, but the department would not be able to offer them support for isiXhosa-English bilingual textbooks and assessments, despite the fact that Afrikaans schools are supported with materials and resources in their language of teaching and learning. There is also lack of acknowledgement of the work being done at the University of

Limpopo in offering a Bilingual BA Degree in Sepedi and English and the work done by Nelson Mandela University and University of Fort Hare in offering multilingual BEd degrees. Academics at these institutions are working hard in developing academic terminologies and glossaries for their academic courses. There is no interest among those in strategic positions as part of this deliberate invisibilization of black academics and researchers working on and with African languages. These examples show how attempts by black academics and researchers are halted by white people in power, and then criticised for doing nothing to advance society. It also shows how English and Afrikaans speaking children continue to be privileged by being the only ones allowed to access education in the languages they know best. Thus, the coloniality of the education system continues to ensure white dominance and continued patterns of white privilege despite the work of black people in the field. This can be seen in the long patterns of only hiring white academics as well as their access routes to publication via their existing relationships.

As work done by black people becomes invisible, marginalised and erased, white people take up the space and work and become experts in African languages and the reading crisis in African languages. They become experts not because they know African languages but rather, they are in positions at universities which have elbowed out black researchers and assume that literacy in African languages is a matter of translation from English to these languages. Academia is still very hostile towards black people because they are spaces where white people have been dominant for years (and the legacy of bush universities vs white universities continues in 2019). The increased corporatisation of universities has bred a cutthroat culture of competition and in spaces that continue to be dominated by racial and gender disparities that disadvantage young, black, female (for this is the demographic for the field) researchers, collegiality, fairness and justice are seldom found. In fact, our collective experiences are quite the opposite. It is only in spaces where justice and respect has been abandoned that we can find the absurdity of non-African language speaking people 'leading the way' forward for African language and literacy research and work.

At the core of education research are issues of funding, research methodologies and research expertise: funding means that white people still have access to international and national organisations which reinforce Eurocentric ideologies in the work being done. This is a political issue as the economics of research determines who can set the agenda. It is impossible to write about this issue without writing about the whiteness that pervades the higher education system as well as the NGO sector in South Africa. White people continue to enjoy the status of being the people in authority who make strategic decisions about an education system which affect contexts which are often alien to them and refuse to share this knowledge and these networks. They bring their Eurocentric, monolingual and Anglonormative ideologies in language and literacy learning and assume that these will work in contexts where the children need both their home languages and additional language to make meaning and to learn optimally. They also bring with them research methodologies that favour quantitative research methods which care more about numbers rather than qualitative ethnographic research methodologies that try to understand people's uses of language and literacy in their daily lives and how people make meaning in their daily life. These research methodologies have subjected the children more and more to large scale systemic assessments. These assessments impact negatively on children's confidence and self-esteem as the assessments then construct them with a deficit, through no fault of their own but systemic issues. They also shape what then gets suggested as education solutions to the crisis as we show below.

The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS)

Though the proposed Early Grade Reading Study that has been piloted and will continue to be rolled out by government to communities seems promising, there is nothing glaringly new. The conceptualisation of literacy as only a technical skill for black children with no access to books at home and no access to libraries is detrimental to black children's development. Compare this to white English or Afrikaans speaking children who are taught the same technical skills at school, who still get immersed in literature at home and have easy access to libraries and book related events such as book fairs, theatre and art classes in their schools. Surely there is something unequal about not immersing black children in literature and arts-based programmes even though the PIRLS results attest to the fact that having access to books leads to positive attitudes towards books and the building of a culture of literacy. The quantitative research methods mentioned above also determine the kind of approach to literacy that is taken. It is easy to teach literacy as a skill that can be taught universally and autonomously regardless of contexts for it makes it easy to quantify and compare how well children do on a larger scale than to do so with how they use literacy in their daily life. This kind of assessment encourages unhealthy competitiveness instead of helping children along their developmental trajectory.

Secondly, the programme needs to be critiqued for its prescriptive pre-planned lesson plans for teachers that take away teacher agency in making their own teaching resources. Consultation and curriculum building with teachers who are working in schools is empowering and of paramount importance rather than top-down policies and decisions made for teachers without them. In the same way we must consider the input of children who are the ones to have to consume EGRS and other apparatus that measure their literacy. Packaged education programmes get designed by white English-speaking academics and practitioners and then get merely translated and animated by black teachers to pass the message across in the similar way religion has functioned in this country.

The Early Grade Literacy Programme, and the Primary Teacher Standards as well as the Assessments and other well-funded programmes are led by white academics to the exclusion of black academics who have been working in the field for more than 20 years. This gives the impression that black academics are merely props and are not capable of leading research projects. We must interrogate the historic role of white people in creating the education crisis and maintaining it, but they are not so blatant. They invite black academics to give their opinions and their inputs and put their names on documents as though proper consultation was done, but the real decisions are already made. Though they have always been the ones making decisions about how black African language speaking children learn, training teachers at universities and in NGOs and developing materials, when their efforts fail, they refuse to apply any reflexivity in their work and always point their fingers at teachers for failing to implement their agenda. The education crisis did not occur in the past 25 years alone, it is a historic crisis built on the foundation of a system that did not prioritise the black child. This needs a systematic and ideological positioning that does not exclude black people who have carved a space for themselves in spite of the cabal of white researchers.

Therefore, Mr President we respectfully demand the following:

1. An audit of research about African language research asking the question: where are the black researchers in these projects who are mother tongue speakers of the languages under research?

2. A larger audit across universities of the teacher education sector and who are the teacher educators and what are their ideologies and sources they use in their courses.
3. Consider a long-term strategy for addressing the dearth of support for African language development as promised in the constitution of South Africa.
4. Fast-track the development of existing researchers who work in the African language sector; particularly linked to primary school teaching and teacher education
5. A meeting with the president and the ministers of Basic Education and Higher Education to address creating an unapologetically black agenda to solving the education crisis in South Africa

Signed by: Abram Mashatole, (UL); Akona Gwiliza; Amanda Hawker (concerned Parent); Anthea Adams (Rhodes); Armstrong Mpela (Parent); Asanda Kwakweni (Parent); Asanda Ngoasheng (independent academic); Athambile Masola (UP) Babalwa Mgoqwana (Rhodes); Babalwayashe Molate (UCT); Bizo Bomela (Reading Club Volunteer); Brian Ramadiro (NMI); Bukelwa Kumalo (Teacher); Bukelwa Yuze (teacher); Bulewa Galada (ACORN Foundation); Buyisile Vanqa (Parent); Cindy Amila Mkaza (Emagqabini Education Academy); Esther Ramani (Rhodes); Joanne Peers (Centre for Creative Education); Elinor Sisulu (Puku Children's Foundation); Isaac Ntabankulu (Manuscript Librarian); Jama Wezo (Parent); Khanyiso Jonas (SU); Kholeka Shange (WITS); Leigh-Ann Naidoo (UCT); Linda Rutter (teacher); Linomtha (Parent); Lorato Trok (Puku Foundation); Lwazi Mkula, (Rhodes); Madoda Ndlakuse (Nal'ibali); Malusi Ntoyapi (KwaFaku Vulindlela Reading Club); Makgatla Thepa (Ponelopele Reading Club and Library); Mamelo Shelle (Parent); Michael Joseph (Rhodes); Mathapelo Gxasheka (Teacher & Parent); Mila Moreano (Yes We Can); Nadeema Jogee (NMU); Nangamso Koza (Inqubela Foundation); Niko Mgiba (Parent); Nokhanyo Mdzanga (NMU); Nokuthula Khumoetsile Msimang (Puku Children's Foundation); Nolubabalo Rani (Teacher); Nomakhaya Mashiyi (CPUT); Nomalanga Mkhize (NMU); Nomalungelo Shange (St Stithians Boys College); Nombini Kutta (Parent); Nomthandazo Guzula (Teacher); Ntebo Phakisi (Parent); Nthabiseng Sibanda (Puo); Ntombizanele Mahobe (NMI), Ouma Mpela (Parent); Phakamani Ntentema (PASMA); Pamela Maseko (NWU); Pamla Letsoalo (UL); Portia Ohangbon (Parent); Pretty Magangxa (NMU); Pumeza Ngobozana (ZabeNguni Media); Pumla Mbebe (Teacher); Rethabile Mashale-Sonibare (Thope Foundation); Rose-Anne Reynolds (UCT); Sandiswa Qayi; Sebolelo Mokapela (UWC); Sibongile Xamlashe (CPUT); Sibonile Mpendukana (UCT); Simphiwe Dana (Artist & Parent); Simthembile Xeketwana (SU); Sindiswa Mokoena (Parent); Sindiswa Mondli; Smangele Mathebula (Literacy Professional); Sisanda Nkoala (CPUT); Siphon Dibakwane (Impumelelo Educational Trust); Soraya Abdulatief (UCT); Thando Mqgolozana (Abantu Book Festival); Tebogo Mogobata (Language Teacher); Thokozile Budaza (Mother); Vangiwe Makhubalo (PSP); Votelwa Majola (Parent); Vuyelwa Mbalekwa (Teacher); Xolisa Guzula (UCT); Xolisa Nyhonyha (Teacher); Yamkela Tywakadi (Sifiso Publishing); Yoliswa Jarrett (Teacher and Parent); Zolile Prusente (Lungis'umgangatho Activist); Zamokuhle Mabaso (Afronia Children's Book Club); Zandi Radebe (Activist Scholar BHK/UNISA); Zola Mbebe (Teacher); Zinzi Mtola (Parent); Zukiswa Wanner (Paivapo Publishers).