

# Literacy teaching in disadvantaged South African schools

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## Abstract

This article analyses the experiences of teachers of literacy working in underprivileged communities in the Western Cape, South Africa. The purpose is to provide teachers in poorly resourced schools within economically deprived areas an opportunity to voice their experiences of teaching literacy. The article is based on an empirical study using interviews and classroom observation with a sample of 10 teachers. A descriptive account of the observation data was followed by an interpretive analysis. The content analysis of the interview data led to the development of themes and patterns for the discussion. The study reveals the social complexity of literacy education in a post-apartheid and multilingual society and focuses on teachers in Grade 4 classrooms, which is the grade when learners switch from mother tongue (mainly isiXhosa and Afrikaans) to English as language of instruction. Key factors for literacy underachievement include lack of resources, parental support, lack of teacher knowledge, changes in the curriculum, absence of cognitive activities and the social complexity of poverty. The article recommends that a new model of literacy that challenges inequality and provides strategic and sustained teacher support in disadvantaged schools is crucial in a society emerging from oppression and racism.

**Key words:** literacy, disadvantaged schools, classroom-sited research, English language, language learning, primary education, second language, everyday literacy lives, teachers

## Introduction

South Africa is a world apart, with two education systems created by the still palpable legacy of apartheid. This study was firmly located in the 'other' schools, an excluded system that enrolls the vast majority of poor and working-class Black children whose health, economic and home/community difficulties concomitant with equally deficit schools produce learners who read for the most part at a purely functional level and write without fluency or confidence (Chetty, 2014, p. 97). Equally concerning is that teachers in this system receive little acknowledgement for their work and much of the literature point towards poor teacher quality and poor pedagogic facility exhibited by 'numerous' teachers (Hoadley, 2012) with limited consideration of the context of disadvantaged schools – large classes with limited resources, lack of library

facilities to encourage reading and school management structures that are unsupportive. Taylor (2016, p. 18) emphasises "poor subject competence among teachers" and refers to the low levels of reasoning skills identified in a national sample of Grade 6 primary school teachers that wrote the SACMEQ (The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality) test in English. While teachers achieved relatively well on questions requiring the simple retrieval of information explicitly stated in a passage of text (75.1%), scores dropped dramatically as soon as the higher cognitive functions of inference (55.2%), interpretation (36.6%) and evaluation (39.7%) were invoked (Taylor and Taylor, 2013). Poor teacher competence is attributed to the teacher training received in largely dysfunctional colleges during the apartheid era (Taylor, 2016, p. 18). Teachers have not been adequately trained to teach in disadvantaged schools, as the idealised norm in teacher training is the average suburban school that enrolls middle-class children. The teacher education curriculum rarely takes into consideration needs of poor children, teaching and learning challenges of under-resourced schools or realities of socio-economic inequality and injustice of poverty. Schools in the so-called 'locations' and 'townships' remain 'non-existent', despite the fact that they form the majority of schools in the country.

This study provides teachers in poorly resourced schools an opportunity to voice their experiences of teaching literacy. The failure to problematise the material conditions of poor children's lives is a shortcoming of literacy policy that aims to address inequity in South Africa. There is a lack of reading material, limited support for teachers and low levels of parental engagement with their children's education. These factors reinforce the complexity of the teachers' predicament. The poor quality education that these learners receive reinforces an intergenerational cycle of poverty, irrespective of the children's own abilities or the efforts of their teachers.

The focus was the teachers of Grade 4 learners as it is the grade level at which learners, previously taught in their home languages (isiXhosa and Afrikaans), are required to switch to English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). This article provides a description of the empirical study, interpretation of the data and insights that emerge. The article is consistent

with the key research question: What are the experiences of literacy teachers in poorly resourced schools within economically deprived areas?

## Literacy policy and practice

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment gives an alarming picture of literacy in South Africa. Seventy-eight percent of Grade 4 children were not able to reach the lowest benchmark compared to 4% internationally. The education department in South Africa is cognizant of the literacy crisis in poor schools. The Diagnostic Review prepared by the National Planning Commission (2011) found that the quality of education for poor Black children is substandard and "... efforts to raise the quality of education for poor children have largely failed" (NPC, 2011, p. 13). The Western Cape (the province where this study was conducted) Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2006, p. 12) found that the vast majority of learners in Grade 3 were performing 2 to 3 years below expectation, that children entering Grade 1 are generally not ready for formal learning and that there was a high correlation between the poor results and poverty. Issues contributing to this situation were identified as "poverty, TV, lack of movement/motor development, lack of opportunities to play, poor language use by role-models, substance abuse by pregnant women, malnutrition, single-parent families, illiterate parents, lack of parental involvement in children's lives and lack of engagement with books before school entrance" (Western Cape Department of Education, 2006, p. 6).

Research in Africa reinforces the view that children from low-income families are at risk of learning outcome difficulties, particularly in literacy. The Ngwaru and Oluga (2015, p. 88) study in low-resourced communities in Tanzania noted the extent to which school infrastructure and ecology including buildings, teaching learning materials and teacher characteristics reinforced literacy practices and events at home and school. Similarly, a Kenyan study by Piper et al. (2015) found that poverty, literacy skills and weak instructional methods combined to drastically limit the educational opportunities for poor children.

The deficiency lens used to characterise literacy achievement of poor children include deficit cognitive abilities, deficient language, poor motivation, devaluation of education and poor parenting skills. Internationally, however, there has been a change towards the recognition of the importance of sociocultural factors. This is the result of growing evidence that all communities have appropriate cognitive abilities, albeit different ones to fit varied life situations. Judgements about the abilities and/or disabilities of people from sociocultural groups different from our own is seen by an ever-growing segment of the

research field as invalid, unhelpful and destructive (Purcell-Gates, 1995, p. 3).

Literacy development is 'situated': it occurs in and through children's interactions in their home, community and school settings (Reid et al., 2004, p. 128) and is a complex process that is influenced by culture, language and socio-economic factors. Pedagogy of early literacy suggests that it ought to be play-based, community-oriented, family friendly and responsive to children's interests and experiences (Morgan and Chodkiewicz, 2009, p. 264). Children gradually awaken to the meanings of signs and messages embedded in the social practices of their families and wider community (Marsh and Millard, 2000, p. 68). There is no single road to becoming literate, and the influence of popular culture, media and new technologies in the home and community are important factors in literacy. Teaching children the letters of the alphabet directly prior to their school entry may not be successful because this skill is acquired incidentally and informally in the emergent literacy stage (Riley, 1996, p. 12), and knowledge of letters is of little value unless the child knows and is interested in their use. Abadzi (2008, p. 585) posits working memory and the speed of visual recognition as a misunderstood, but vital component for learning to read.

Street (2013) argues that in the past, the emphasis in research on literacy has been on cognitive consequences of literacy acquisition where literacy is viewed as a neutral skill. He notes that the trend now has been towards a broader consideration of literacy as a social practice and in a cross-cultural perspective. Within this framework is the conceptualisation of literacy as an ideological practice, complicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices. The focus is on the social nature of literacy and the multiple character of literacy practice and incorporates environmental resources (Street, 2013, p. 1). There is the recognition of multiple literacies varying according to time and space but essential to the new focus is the contested relations of power within social practices. Literacy is also a cultural practice, and children begin to learn about reading and writing initially in their homes. Hence, the home environment affects children's literacy and the difference between parents of good readers and those of poorer readers has been noted in the literature as associated with literacy achievement.

English is still dominant in the school system, and African languages are practically excluded as languages of tuition (apart from Grades 1 to 3). Within the post-apartheid neocolonial understanding of literacy, poor children benefit from acquiring enhanced cognitive skills, economic prosperity, successful navigation of the school system and eventual entrance into higher education. Literacy in this sense is viewed as politically neutral, universal and granting benevolent effects to all. The social and economic issues of poverty

and racism, integral factors in the lives of poor and mostly Black children in South Africa, are not considered within any contexts of social or historical justice. The consequence of the history of apartheid that used education as a tool of oppression over Black people is that poorer learners in South Africa continue to perform worse academically.

Although racial oppression ended in 1994 with the advent of democracy, schools that serve the majority of Black children in townships, informal settlements and ghettos remain dysfunctional with extremely low levels of literacy achievement. A low quality of education in disadvantaged classrooms reinforces an inter-generational cycle of poverty where working-class children inherit the socio-economic standing of their parents, irrespective of their own abilities. Neocolonial attitudes conveniently disguise cultural and ideological assumptions and ignore the economic and social conditions that resulted in the 'illiteracy' of the children in the first place. New Literacy Studies does not view literacy as an independent technical skill but as a practice embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. The manner in which citizens conceive of knowledge, their identity and their being is rooted in their particular social contexts. Factors that affect the meanings and practices of literacy include the curriculum (ideologies that underpin literacy), teacher-learner interaction, the nature of the literacy being learned and the learner's position in relation to power (Street and Besnier, 1994).

## Methodology

The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm which assumes that reality is socially constructed. Interpretivism frequently relies on qualitative methods which enable researchers to obtain deep and rich meanings from participants in a world where reality is "socially constructed, complex, and ever changing" (Thomas, 2003, p. 6).

Ten schools were randomly sampled from a list of Quintile 1 (poorest schools) provided by the provincial education department. Schools are categorised into a Quintile system of 1 to 5 with Quintile 5 being the high resourced schools that catered only for White children during apartheid. The higher quintile schools charge high fees and are located in elite suburbs which still remain largely White. African students paid an average of 326 ZAR per year (roughly 32 USD), compared to 5817 ZAR (roughly 581 USD) for Whites (Lam et al., 2011, p. 27). The schools in the sample are located in high-poverty townships for Black and Mixed-race children. Quintile 1 schools do not charge school fees and provide the children with a meal everyday. The infrastructures of these schools are very basic: there are no sporting facilities nor playing fields and the schools are generally overcrowded.

Purposive sampling was used to select one teacher from each of the 10 schools. The criteria for selection included teacher qualification, voluntary participation, willingness to provide rich and relevant information about literacy through a series of interviews and specifically teachers of English in Grade 4.

In nine of the 10 schools, the language of instruction from Grade R to Grade 3 was isiXhosa (the dominant African language in the province). Children and teachers at these schools were first-language isiXhosa speakers. In the 10th school, the language of instruction in the Foundation Phase (Grade 1 to Grade 3) was English although learners' home languages were English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. The language of learning and teaching in Grade 4 in all 10 schools was English.

Data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with Grade 4 literacy teachers. Three lessons (30 minutes each) were observed in the 10 schools. The teachers were interviewed once and they reviewed the transcripts of their interviews to ensure accuracy of the data. The classroom observation checklist was categorised into three key areas: classroom organisation, teacher preparedness and classroom practice. An attempt was made to observe whether teachers were keeping appropriate records and whether teaching plans were prepared for the specific lesson observed. A pilot study was conducted, and the interview schedule was refined.

Observation data were analysed on two levels. First, a descriptive account of the data was elicited. Second, an interpretive analysis, involving assessment of the differences and similarities in each of the schools, was undertaken. The interview data were transcribed, manually analysed, and a system of identifying themes and patterns (content analysis) was developed. An attempt was made to classify and explain verbal and behavioural data. A retired academic and a postdoctoral fellow validated the instruments and served as readers for the data analysis and refinement of themes.

## Discussion

### *Teacher experiences*

Most teachers were confident of their own teaching techniques but sensed that their abilities as teachers were challenged when they frequently encountered learners in Grade 4 who had no reading or writing ability in English.

Teachers recorded emotional experiences in their attempts to improve learner literacy. The word 'frustration' recurred in eight out of 10 responses. The frustration was caused by the following: the school's inability to comprehend the difficulties faced by

learners; the lack of success despite attempts to use different techniques to teach literacy; lack of parental involvement in the school; incomplete homework; non-responsiveness of parents to meetings and notices; and the lack of resources at schools. Teachers commonly experienced and expressed a sense of despair or sadness at knowing that “parents are not in a position to assist learners with their education” (Teacher 8). Some teachers noted a sense of being personally unsettled. Teacher 7 stated that she “felt bad when I cannot help struggling students”. Teacher 5 felt a sense of personal hurt, knowing that she was a good teacher but that her learners continue to struggle. She commented that teachers needed a range of skills to teach literacy; especially to learners for whom English is an additional language.

In contrast, the teacher who was most vociferous about the gaps in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum with regard to accommodating the diversity of learners in her classroom, expressed her joy at the achievements of some of her learners “against all odds”. She indicated her sense of pride when learners made progress in her class. She attributes this to her own intervention techniques, with how she taught her lessons and her emphasis on reading and writing. In spite of the poor context of the school and the lack of support and resources, her approaches were not in vain; there were learners in her class who worked hard to express themselves fluently, to read and to write during the English lesson.

### *Teacher support*

Teachers generally knew that they were required to comply with the curriculum (CAPS) policies when organising their work plans. They were aware of support offered in the form of workshops and teaching and learning resources from the department of education. Their teaching was guided by the CAPS document and since it was so prescriptive, they had no choice but to strictly follow the work plans and timelines as indicated in the curriculum. The CAPS document stipulated the assessment tasks and teachers acknowledged that the systematic description of the class activities and written tasks were completed as prescribed. Teacher 5 noted that she taught in such a manner that she could fulfil the requirements of the assessment tasks. She found CAPS ‘very helpful’ and preferred being told what to assess and how to assess as opposed to making her own decisions on assessment tasks. She praised CAPS for its ease of application, clarity and specificity.

Although the guidelines of CAPS made it easier for teachers to construct effective lesson plans, the pace set for its implementation did not always suit the learners:

*“It is useful because everything is clear and easy to follow; except that its pace is very fast and not accommodating slow learners at all.” (Teacher 7)*

Critique about the CAPS document was most strongly articulated by Teacher 1 who felt that the curriculum was “demanding and leaves very little time for consolidation”. She elaborated that there were too many concepts that had to be taught in a “short space of time”, which made it hard for teachers to attend to weak learners individually. Writing exercises were few due to the lack of teaching time: “what little writing is done consists of exercises composed of isolated sentences and very few creative writing pieces”.

Teachers listed several forms of support that were offered by the education department: visits by subject advisors; workshops on the curriculum; and specialised assistance for learners with special needs. All learners received a workbook, and teachers were provided with a guide to accompany the workbook. While credit was given to the support received from the education department, teachers questioned the usefulness of the initiatives. They noted that the workshops were infrequent and inconsistent, visits from subject advisors were ‘very seldom’ (Teacher 1) and that their needs were not canvassed with the type of workshops that should be facilitated. Teacher 7, a newly qualified teacher with less than 2 years experience in primary school literacy, commented that, “since I started teaching English I have never attended any workshop or seminar”. She elaborated that there was no orientation provided for her as a new teacher and no support yet with regard to teaching literacy in the primary school.

Teacher 9 had difficulty understanding the theoretical nature of presentations at workshops organised by the department of education and questioned the applicability and practicality of much of the material offered by the subject advisors. This finding was also noted in the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (2013) report on rural schooling with a strong call for curriculum advisors to complete a subject-specific test and demonstrate their capacity to help teachers in their subject. The report also raised concerns with regard to the qualifications of curriculum advisors, as some of them had no tertiary training. Teacher 9 sensed a disjuncture between policy and praxis. He emphasised that learning problems do not occur in isolation and that a one-size-fits-all approach is neither helpful nor advisable. While the CAPS document acts as a guide, specific contexts call for specific interventions. Teacher 1 interrogated the issue of balance: the pedagogical problem of assisting weaker learners while stimulating those learners who have a higher capacity. She called into question issues of inclusivity and diversity; how to recognise and address barriers to literacy peculiar to high poverty contexts and how to gain the expertise needed to implement appropriate support strategies.

### *Teacher preparedness*

Attempts at sequential or systematic progress through the lessons were evident. All teachers used the 2011 curriculum iteration (CAPS) as a guiding document for their lesson planning; specifically the time allocation and methods prescribed. Five teachers used a year plan. A variety of teaching tools were used: chalkboard, textbooks, worksheets and activity cards. Teachers generally knew their content well and were enthusiastic in their presentation of the lessons. To ensure that learners were able to follow content and instructions, teachers often switched between English and isiXhosa (code-switching). Six teachers were flexible and allowed learners' questions or comments to be part of the lesson while the other four did not invite learner participation, resorted to transmission pedagogy and their voices dominated the lesson. Venkat and Spaul (2015), in their study of mathematics teaching, noted similarly the lack of pedagogical skill among South African teachers.

Reeves et al. (2008) also concluded in their study that very little reading took place and that few texts were in evidence in classrooms. Teachers' predominant reading activity was to read aloud to the whole class with not much direct or explicit literacy teaching taking place. This resulted in learners mainly reading isolated words rather than continuous text. The dominance of transmission teaching with its concomitant emphasis on teacher-talk and rote learning continues to hold sway, and few questions are consciously posed by teachers regarding what and how they teach, and in whose interests. Discipline was effective in all classrooms during the observation. Learners were committed and engaged actively: they listened to explanations and read or wrote in their task groups. A marked absence in all 10 classrooms were teacher questions that required higher thinking skills and feedback from learners, including their opinions and feelings about the matters discussed in the content (the themes included were "How we feel and what we do"; "Playing and poetry"; and "Fact and fiction"). The low levels of cognitive demand, the dominance of concrete meaning rather than abstract meaning and focus on decoding text together with neglect of reading extended texts has to be addressed in literacy teaching to stem the looming literacy crisis in the country. Further evidence is found in the PIRLS report (2018) where almost 78% of the learners did not comprehend what they read.

### *Classroom organisation*

None of the 10 schools possessed a library that was adequate for the needs of primary school learners. The key reason was overcrowding in the schools and the imperative to use all available space for teaching. Six schools had a rudimentary library: the use of this

'library' as a vital learning/reading strategy was promoted. Four schools did not make any provision for learners to borrow books to take home and lacked a library altogether. Teacher 9 commented that this lack of reading resources militated against progress in literacy among their learners.

All classes have standard chalkboards while two schools had whiteboards/smart-boards (which were not used by the teachers). Eight classes had pupil enrolments of between 40 and 44 learners which is far above the accepted teacher:learner ratio of 1:35. Six classrooms were print rich with relevant posters as well as learners' work on display, a variety of resources as well as a library corner that was thinly stocked with grade appropriate books. In their study on reading in primary schools in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province of South Africa, Pretorius and Machet (2004) also found the lack of reading resources, and libraries in particular, as an additional barrier to effective literacy. The classrooms in this study displayed features of a bilingual (mainly English and isiXhosa) environment in terms of textbooks and learner resources. Four classrooms lacked any materials on display, walls were empty and resources were non-existent. Similar portrayal of dark, colourless classrooms is noted in the Ngwaru and Oluga (2015) study in poor schools in Tanzania.

### *Classroom practice*

Language teaching and learning resources were generally available: language textbooks, teacher guides and support material and a limited number of books in the library corner in six classrooms. The content of the support material was inclusive of gender, race, culture and disability. Most teachers in the sample used a Whole System Language Approach for teaching; employing pictures and words, and teaching learners to recognise the whole word in relation to a graphic image. It was noted that most teachers were not clear about the meaning of the phonics system for teaching English.

The lessons demonstrated an engagement with all four components of literacy: reading, writing, listening and speaking; activities which effectively differentiate ability levels. An important feature common to all the schools was that the teachers were unaware of any strategic plan at the school as a whole for improving literacy. Teacher 3 noted that apart from the time-table requirements of indicating reading as an activity, there was little engagement with the Head of Department or the school management with regard to strategies to improve literacy in the school. The teachers also commented that the annual audit by the education department was a routine activity of testing of learners with limited discussion around the results and no programme had been formulated specifically to address

the literacy needs of the learners like building a school library or providing reading material in the classroom.

### Writing

Teachers provided written work in the form of worksheets: learners were required to write their own sentences and paragraphs according to topics provided. The majority of the learners were not capable of writing proficiently with correct grammar and spelling. All 10 teachers commented that learners struggled with vocabulary and spelling. Although the teachers followed the policy recommendations for giving regular homework, completion of homework among learners was observed to be weak to non-existent at all the schools. In five of the classrooms, it was noted that teachers did not mark homework regularly and some books were never marked. Two teachers commented that many administrative requirements and school activities (extra-curricular and extramural) left little time for addressing issues around homework or assisting weak learners to progress with their classwork. Teachers complained that the evaluation of long written tasks was time-consuming, and the high levels of language errors discouraged them from giving extended written tasks.

### Oral work

Oral work usually consisted of asking learners to respond verbally to questions posed by teachers, or preparing learners to speak on themes set by the teacher. Skills involved listening, comprehension, reading in groups, reading aloud, independent reading and reading for pleasure. Independent reading was often related to the topic presented by the teacher and reading for pleasure referred to the learners' own choice of books. Seven schools were rated as good for group reading and one was adequate. The criteria for good group reading included word recognition, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Independent reading was promoted in eight schools. At the two remaining schools, reading practice was non-existent. The findings note an interesting shift in reading when compared with the Taylor and Moyane (2005) study where in only 3% of literacy classrooms did learners interact individually with books – the most common form of reading consisted of the teacher writing up three or four sentences on the board and the students chorusing these after the teacher. In contrast with oral work, the progress with writing in all 10 schools continues to be slow as the study observed that very little writing was done in the classes, and it generally consisted of writing lists of isolated words rather than sentences.

### Socio-economic contexts of learners

Children lived mostly in informal settlements or low-income flats where many social problems existed. Starvation and hunger were common and teachers commented as follows: "They haven't eaten from the time they left here to the next day"; "Feeding schemes are helping to feed most of our learners"; and "they come to school with empty stomachs and they get food from school".

Teachers attributed hunger to unemployed parents or guardians, systemic child neglect, absent parents and child-headed households. All teachers commented on cases of child abuse and elaborated on social problems that affected their learners and commented that poverty was one of the key factors that influenced their learning, attendance at schools and concentration in the classroom. Drugs, gangsterism and alcohol abuse were rife in all the communities in which the schools were located. Teacher 6 noted:

*"The level of education of parents is poor or non-existent: negatively affecting the education of our learners; they don't help with homework, don't monitor school attendance and don't show an interest in their children's schoolwork."*

Teachers pointed to the following problems: poor families reliant on social grants; low-income homes in informal settlements; unkempt learners with dirty clothes; no uniforms or shoes; and parental indifference to children's schooling. Teacher 1 referred to learners' home situations as frequently dysfunctional and stated that her personal experience suggested that many children do poorly in school due to absent mothers or fathers; a situation that "has affected them in some way" and many live with their grandmothers or foster parents.

The teachers concurred that the high poverty contexts of their learners affected them physically (hunger, stunted growth and problems with sight and hearing), emotionally (learners seldom participated in lessons and remained silent throughout the year) and psychologically (learners did not share their feelings, a few were very disruptive and every class had some boys who were violent and bullied the passive learners). Branson, Hofmeyr and Lam (2014, p. 106) also noted the adverse effects of poverty on progress in schools and the resultant high dropout rates among disadvantaged learners.

### Literacy levels of learners

Teachers acknowledged that literacy levels in their schools were 'inexcusably' low. Almost all the teachers explained that Grade 4's, in particular, were unable to read and write proficiently in English. They attributed

this partial illiteracy to the after effects of historically entrenched racial inequality in society during the apartheid era which relegated countless non-white families to townships, 'homelands' and informal settlements with poor housing. Parents remained unqualified for any employment except low-income, unskilled jobs: "We have blacks and coloureds who are still having high levels of illiteracy based on their past system of education" (Teacher 2) and "... some races were fortunate by getting quality education and blacks were very much unfortunate" (Teacher 7).

Teachers 1 and 2 explained that code-switching took place in an attempt to ensure that learners understood essential concepts behind what was being conveyed in detail in English. King and Chetty (2014) in their study in a Cape Town school also noted that teachers linked code-switching with learner understanding. While code-switching may assist the majority of isiXhosa home language speakers, it does not cater for children who speak other languages; specifically children who belong to immigrant families who were mostly refugees in South Africa. Children from foreign African countries (Congo, Malawi, Zimbabwe and Somalia) were enrolled in the 10 schools (refugee children attend schools that do not charge fees) and their home language include French, Lingala, Shona, Somali, Swahili and Chichewa. The teachers acknowledged that the foreign African learners experienced code-switching as a double disadvantage: they have to understand both English and the language the teachers used for code-switching (Afrikaans and isiXhosa).

Teacher 6 noted that communication is a general problem at her school. She commented that Grade 4 learners in her English class have extremely low reading ability:

*"My difficulties are about learners who can't read or write at Grade 4, their level is that of Grade 1 yet they have progressed to Grade 4."* (Teacher 6)

Teacher 3 concurs that the understanding level of some learners is far below their Grade:

*"They need individual attention and that is not feasible as periods are very short and CAPS pace is very fast to accommodate those learners and also there is no time allowed for revision in CAPS."*

Teacher 3 felt strongly that the fourth curriculum change since 1994, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), would not be helpful to raise literacy achievement among poor children because there is no place in the work schedule to provide individual attention to struggling learners. She remarked that the majority of her learners experienced difficulty in understanding English, but she had a syllabus to complete and the work schedule was rigid with no opportunity to assist learners who do not understand the lesson. As a result of parental indifference, many

learners did not have an interest in or love of reading inculcated in the early years. When probed what remedial programme the teacher implemented to assist the poor readers, the response was that the prescriptive curriculum indicated what should be done in each lesson and themes had to be completed within 3-week cycles: hence, it was impossible for her to deviate from the rigid schedule. The teacher mentioned that the learners in her class were good listeners and eager to learn, but when it came to higher order questions, "they appear confused, appear not to know what is required in the question, suggesting a fundamental lack of comprehension skills" (Teacher 1).

Teacher 4 commented that where learners showed improvement, it was frequently because teachers, guardians or parents built up their self-confidence. She notes that this is the hidden aim in her lesson, to make learners confident about using English and speaking it fluently. Teacher 4 also remarked that some children achieved very well and she attributes it to parental involvement: "Those learners' parents would more frequently come to your class just to see if everything is fine and so on". The teacher's comments resonates with Wallner-Paschon's (2009) notion of 'reading socialisation' – important fields of socialisation for the learner are the school, family and peer group, all of which in turn affect the learner's motivational characteristics, such as reading attitude and reading self-concept, as well as reading achievement.

Teachers mentioned a range of factors that would improve a learner's ability to read: stable and caring homes; educated parents; time spent by caregivers supervising homework; adults encouraging children to read; and parental interaction with the school. A noteworthy comment by teachers was that when children were read to by their parents, they displayed higher literacy levels in class. Teachers felt that the school should not be the only place where the children read, but the home has to contribute to this skill: support in reading and doing homework, whether provided by parents, guardians, caregivers, peers or siblings, was a decisive factor in raising the literacy levels of young learners.

### *Social justice and equity*

The failure to problematise the material conditions of marginalised children's lives is a shortcoming of literacy policy, hence the continuation of unequal schooling. This study reinforces the premise that inequality in the social system based on race and class is central to low literacy levels among disadvantaged learners. Giroux (1992, p. 304) writes that what is missing from 'traditional' views of literacy as cognitive activity that children learn through a transmission model is any notion of how teachers both produce and authorise particular forms of political, ethical and social literacy.

Also missing from this dominant position is any sense of how the ideologies that inform teacher authority, with its particular view of knowledge and curriculum on the one hand and pedagogy on the other, serves to legitimate and introduce learners to particular ways of life, and their corresponding narratives and cultural values. The challenge for South African teachers and teacher education institutions is to construct literacy education in ways that promote social justice. When we speak of marginalised or struggling readers, we generalise about the learners when it is possible that the reading behaviour is directly tied to the school context. In the case of this study, the lack of books in the classroom, the high levels of poverty in the community, the quality of teacher knowledge and teacher support by the education authorities characterise the learners' context.

Examples of profoundly classed experiences in South Africa includes the two education systems based on parents' ability to pay school fees – the schools in this study enrol poor and working-class children whose social context is characterised by high levels of drug abuse, gangsterism, teenage pregnancy and violence. The greatest resource any classroom teacher can utilise is the parents, yet the study shows that absent, unemployed and disinterested parents do little to help their children develop in conjunction with the efforts of the formal education system. Parents do not help children with their homework and are not aware of what learners are doing in class. Parental and community difficulties concomitant with equally deficit schools produce learners that read without comprehension and struggle with literacy and numeracy activities.

The advent of democracy in 1994 has resulted in little change in schools in high poverty communities. The schools in the townships lack resources and the continuity with the apartheid era is ironic (the enrolment at poor schools is still segregated according to race). We need to question the tension between equality as promulgated in the Bill of Rights and our failure to provide epistemological access to marginalised children and how implicit we are in reinforcing mediocrity in public schooling and whether this maintains the power relations of the class-based and racialised society.

## Reflection and conclusion

The voice of the teachers in this study is a catalyst for rethinking literacy teaching and learning in poorly resourced and disadvantaged schools. First, critical literacy has to be foregrounded as an important aspect of education in post-apartheid South Africa. The children should be developed into independent critical thinkers, in contrast to transmission pedagogy, which privileges the teacher as expert. The silence of the children in the majority of the classrooms in the study

and the lack of higher thinking strategies has to be addressed. Pedagogy needs greater consideration; specifically a cognitive, creative and higher thinking perspective to literacy teaching. Teachers are accurate when they articulate so passionately the need for relevant and appropriate skills to teach literacy to poor children, a skill that is largely excluded within the current teacher education landscape.

Second, CAPS forces teachers to confirm to the capitalist ideology and proposes the classroom as a site for memorisation. The curriculum in an emergent democracy should provide a secure space for children to expose and debate the underlying tensions, conflict and discord of an unequal society. The curriculum should build cognitive skills and use literacy as a tool for personal growth and social transformation. CAPS appears to discount creative engagement of the learner as an individual interpreter in a worrying emphasis on teacher-centred pedagogy. The teaching programme and assessment tasks are prescriptive and no consideration is given to diversity of learning skills among the children, especially the needs of slow learners. The over-reliance on text books run counter to the democratic initiatives of critical literacy in the classroom and it erodes teacher creativity.

Third, teacher support is vital for improvement in literacy skills, especially with creative ways to motivate children to learn, reinforce their written work and encourage children to use their voice in the classroom. Teacher support, from a critical pedagogy perspective, should empower teachers to understand, affirm and analyse meanings, interpretations and experiences that children bring to the classroom. Such experiences should form the basis of the teaching programme to ensure that students have an active voice in the content taught instead of the traditional approach of silencing them by ignoring their cultural capital.

Fourth, teacher education must shift the training paradigm towards an emancipatory pedagogy. Both teacher training and teacher professional development have to empower teachers to create the conditions in which agency and voice can emerge. The almost total absence of cognitive activity is the core problem in marginalised classrooms and teacher education has to foreground critical literacy. Currently, the teacher has no choice but to produce and authorise particular forms of political, ethical and social literacy. This is clearly evident in their views on the rigid and prescriptive curriculum that does not take into consideration the context and lives of poor children. The challenge for teacher training, given the imperative for equity and transformation of a colonised society together with low levels of reading comprehension, is to construct literacy education in ways that promote social justice. A new model of literacy that challenges inequality is crucial in a society emerging from oppression and racism.



Lastly, the state must take the provisioning of resources at disadvantaged schools seriously and address the shortage of libraries and books urgently. The provision of a classroom library with age-appropriate books and a school library well stocked with reference material should be the norm. Reading support is needed, not only for the children but also for parents so that they can contribute to their children's literacy achievement. There is much emphasis on Grade 12 (the final year of school) and the first year experience in higher education, but minimal consideration of low-performing primary schools. These schools should be prioritised, teacher support should be monitored and a national register of under-resourced schools should be created to ensure that the main concern and essential responsibility of district officials and curriculum advisors remain with disadvantaged schools.

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