

5 Apprenticeships in meaning

Transforming opportunities for oral and written language learning in the early years

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Introduction

Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten

(Chinua Achebe)

When children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one kind of learning among many; rather, they are learning the foundation of learning itself

(Michael Halliday, 1993, p. 93)

In this chapter we focus on the early childhood years and consider the significance of stimulating children's hunger for words in leading them to establish powerful foundations for oral and written language development and use. The ongoing, systemic failure to get young children reading and writing in multilingual South Africa (SA) makes this an urgent and complex task. Attention by prominent researchers has turned most recently to the crucial role that reading for meaning has in the reading process, in addition to word recognition or 'decoding' (Spaull et al., 2020). Further attention is also being paid to the differences between teaching reading in African languages and English, or other European languages. In this chapter, our intention is to problematise the way these literacy issues are being addressed and to share our view of some viable alternative theoretical perspectives and practices in early childhood. In doing so, we hope to widen thinking and discussion about the reading process. This will be useful because the views we hold substantially influence the relative weight of different teaching components in designing and implementing early literacy programmes. Our experience is that the choice of pedagogical approach can either open up or close down the teaching opportunities which motivate and inspire teachers and in turn, children.

Irrespective of languages used, in SA and in wider Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), a transmission style of teaching with rote learning of decontextualised skills continues to characterise early childhood teaching practice for most children (Biersteker et al., 2008, p. 228), despite policies and curriculum frameworks

which propose otherwise (e.g. Department of Education, 2011). In addition, education systems in SSA are still influenced by the colonial past where local knowledges and languages were not valued. Among many others, McKinney (2017, p. 3) makes the point that SA “ignores the resources that Black and non-middle-class children bring with them to formal schooling”. She quotes Makoe (2007, p. 60), who reports the view of a deputy principal in an urban English-medium primary school in Johannesburg that African-speaking children ‘have basically no language’. Against this background, teaching and learning in SA needs to take place within a broad framework of the decolonisation and transformation of education, which implies that all cultures, languages and ways of being human are the bedrock on which schooling is constructed. In this chapter, we explore how this aim can begin to be realised in early childhood by ensuring holistic, participatory pedagogical approaches for teaching literacy. Many children in multilingual settings of the Global South and North who use languages to communicate successfully at home and in their communities struggle at school to learn new languages and to read and write:

A growing number of children and youth live in multilingual environments and develop complex language repertoires – although often not exactly the ones that are expected by the respective education systems. In many of the systems, monolingual language development is considered as the ‘normal’ prerequisite for learning and can thus be the general basis for teaching. Research shows, however, that multilingualism is not only influential on language acquisition and development, but also on learning in general and should thus be taken into consideration in the organization, contents and methods of teaching.

(Gogolin, 2018, p. 34)

Our chapter is informed by the view that schooling should ascertain, value and develop children’s multilingual repertoires and make them the basis on which learning is constructed. This encourages opening up and supporting indigenous African approaches to learning, as outlined here by Nsamenang (2006, p. 296):

In principle, children are rarely instructed or prodded into what they learn, but discover it during participation. This depicts cognitive development as the unfolding of the abilities to generate the knowledge and skills with which to responsibly and increasingly engage with the world. Accordingly, the onus to understand the social cognition and intelligent behaviour of Africans lies in capturing shared routines and participatory learning, rather than in completing school-based instruments.

We highlight the role of social and experiential learning and propose a holistic early literacy teaching approach which deliberately entwines languages and pedagogy through story and symbolic play (Vygotsky, 1978), discovery (Nsamenang, 2006) and children’s first-hand experiences (Louis, 2009; Bruce, 2015; Bloch,

2019). This, we will explain, gives rise to the kind of meaningful emotional and intellectual connections which can stimulate literacy and other learning.

PRAESA's Storyplay approach

The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) is an NGO with a history of involvement across various aspects of multilingual education. PRAESA's current work includes training trainers and practitioners to offer holistic language and literacy opportunities for children from birth onwards, and particularly for three to six year olds before formal education begins.¹ We began developing Storyplay for young children in 2015 when we led the Nal'ibali National Reading for Enjoyment Campaign (Bloch, 2015). Our aim with Nal'ibali was to enhance personally meaningful reading and writing cultural practices by growing a love of reading between adults and children, thereby enhancing story-focused literate practices (Bloch, 2018).²

In 2016, Nal'ibali became a separate campaign and PRAESA turned its attention to the nuts and bolts of early literacy pedagogy to help influence emerging interpretations of and solutions to the 'literacy crisis' from a teaching perspective. Fleisch (2008, p. 139) summarises this crisis as "a comprehensive and consistent story of educational failure in literacy and mathematics achievement in South Africa". One of the programmes PRAESA currently offers is a nine-week Storyplay programme to practitioners in early childhood settings which involves an apprenticeship process between a mentor and practitioners. The apprenticeship has a range of elements, all of which hinge on building relationships of mutual trust. We draw on the notion of *apprenticeship*, as developed by Rogoff (1990, 2016), which provides a model of activity, involving individuals who are experienced in a practice ('mentors'), participating with 'newcomers' to the practice in an organised, deliberate process. Part of its purpose is to demonstrate and role model the desirable practice to the newcomers who, are motivated to join in – at first on the periphery, but gradually taking ownership and in so doing, exerting influence on how things are done. Also using Rogoff's concept of 'Learning by Observing and Pitching In' (Rogoff, 2016), we aim to develop communities of Storyplay practice.

One morning a week for nine weeks, in the teachers' classroom and working with the children, the mentors ensure cycles of demonstrating and guiding, planning activities, implementing with children, reflecting and revising. The intention is for mentors to shift between initiating and supportive roles, with practitioners (the newcomers) gradually taking over planning and facilitating as they find their own way into the approach. In the materials for the programme, we prioritise the use of suitable stories available in African languages in SA.³ The chapter is illustrated with examples of classroom work which were recorded in three schools in the areas of Vrygrond, Khayelitsha and Philippi in Cape Town as part of a Storyplay in Action project carried out by PRAESA from 2017 (Bloch 2018, 2019). In two of the settings, where most children and teachers share isiXhosa, this is the language of teaching. In the other, English is mainly used

in a setting where most teachers know English or Afrikaans, but do not know isiXhosa, while the children speak a mixture of isiXhosa, Afrikaans, other African languages, French and English. The project aimed to explore ways of ensuring affordable, high quality early literacy provision and practices in under-served communities.

In what follows, we first raise key issues which in our view challenge the development and transformation of literacy learning in SA. We then discuss how we have tried to address these issues and share practical examples of this from the Storyplay in Action project.⁴ We end the chapter with an analysis of and suggestions for progress and implementation in other Sub-Saharan contexts.

Key issues challenging literacy learning in SA

The young bird does not crow until it hears the old ones

(Tswana proverb)

Below, we describe four key issues which challenge successful literacy learning opportunities for children in SA as well as the theories and practices that we have embraced in the Storyplay approach to help us address these challenges. We developed Storyplay during a time in SA of much research, policy and training around what teachers need to have, know and do to ensure that children learn to read (Taylor et al., 2017). A good deal of debate has been aroused, at the heart of which are four main interrelated issues: firstly, the importance of addressing the factors which hinder meaning-based, culturally responsive learning; secondly, making space for holistic views of teaching early literacy and the role of multilingualism therein; thirdly, taking into account children's multilingual repertoires; and fourthly focusing on how babies and young children learn. These four aspects will be discussed in more detail below.

Understanding meaning-based, culturally responsive learning

With regard to meaning-based learning, we note the ongoing tendency in pre-school, for classroom practice to favour rote-learning, repetition and transmission teaching and to side-line meaning and children's need to communicate and understand to learn. In so doing, children and their family funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) are largely undervalued and often viewed as irrelevant to literacy learning. Recognition of the significance of the very early years (Young & Mustard, 2008) has most recently led in SA to movements towards teaching birth to four year olds (Ebrahim, 2014).⁵ Curriculum frameworks for these youngest of learners promoting 'learner centred' informal, play-based teaching using transforming, culturally responsive pedagogies (DOE, 2015; PIECCE, 2019). However, there is much work to be done to change practice as teachers feel under pressure to 'prepare' children for Grade R and Grade 1 using decontextualised skills teaching procedures. Classroom practice often reduces the importance of personal meaning-making and limits learner responses to recall and repetition.

This tends to be the case in English-medium classrooms where the emergent ability of many children to use English makes it hard for them to produce much more than single word items. Themes, which inevitably include shapes, colours, numbers, weather, months and days of the week, are taught, often through oral drill, worksheets and workbooks.

An example of this practice can be seen in the excerpt below, observed in Vrygrond, Cape Town, at the beginning of the Storyplay in Action project. Teacher C is teaching ‘triangles’ to 25 three- and four-year-old children, who speak a range of languages at home and learn through English at preschool.⁶ She holds a small triangle in one hand and a big triangle in the other and asks the children:

“What shape are these?”

“Tri ... angle ...” chorus the children.

“And how many sides have they got?”

“Three!” chorus the children.

“Give yourselves a clap”, says the teacher, smiling.

She holds up the small triangle, *“Remember, a triangle can be small”*, then holds up the big triangle, *“Or ...?”*

A few children call out *“Big”*.

“Well done!” says the teacher.

The children’s reward is to please their teacher; they have done this before and know the expected answers. All they have to do is recognise, recall and repeat. Such initial decontextualised transmission of discrete skills defines for many teachers what counts as significant learning, its indicators and outcomes.

Turning to literacy teaching in indigenous African languages, we find that the same decontextualised drilling tends to dominate classroom practice. Applying the logic that Grade R prepares children for Grade 1, according to Nel et al. (2016, p. 50), the curriculum requires that:

When they enter Grade R, these children are expected, amongst other things, to already be able to identify words, recognise words made up of sounds, segment oral sentences into individual words, recognise initial sounds, read high frequency words, answer question based on a story read, form letters using finger painting and copy words and letters.

(DoE, 2011)

Teachers often find the children cannot do these tasks (ibid.). One reason is that practitioners use the same low-meaning, high repetition drilling with learners working in indigenous languages as that used for our English-medium triangles example above. Many teachers have little, if any, training; moreover, trained teachers and teacher educators from higher grades can ‘descend’ to work with young children without necessarily having relevant training or experience

with this age group (Atmore, 2013). Storyplay has been designed with these challenges in mind.

Views of teaching early literacy

Deciding what is appropriate teaching for effective early literacy learning is informed by understandings and models of reading and writing processes. The focus in SA has been largely on a formal process of ‘early grade reading’ in primary schooling, starting with preparing five and six-year-old children in Grade R for Grade 1 (Richter & Samuels, 2017; Spaul, 2019).⁷ We contrast this with a well-established view which we hold, which sees early literacy learning as an integral part of a complex continuum which begins well before school (Bua-lit, 2018; Whitmore et al., 2004).

While there are many variations and versions of learning to read across the world, a fairly simplistic hierarchical, skills-based view underpins most literacy teaching, particularly its beginning stages. Comprehending and ‘reading to learn’ are described as the outcome of a ‘learning to read’ process (Pearson et al., 2020; Spaul, 2016). This view, also held widely in SA, is based on the claim that it is an evolutionary fact that oral language learning, i.e. listening and speaking, represents the only ‘natural language’, acquired in social contexts without teaching (Shaywitz, 2003). Written language, i.e. writing and reading, is understood to be a cultural and artificial invention needing specifically ordered teaching with components initially simplified and taught separately (Spaul & Pretorius 2019: p. 5; Wolf, 2008).

Cognitive neuroscience, in what we see as a reductionist view, offers supporting evidence (Dehaene, 2009; Seidenberg, 2017). They propose that graphophonic language ‘cues’ (decoding) must be taught through a systematic process whereby ‘natural’ language is articulated as sounds, when a voice speaks. For reading, these sounds are then mapped onto the particular symbols on the page which combine to become words. They also claim to provide evidence for the need to stress automatic and fluent decoding. The view is that short-term memory will be overloaded without this initial drill for automaticity and fluency. Comprehension is understood to arise from this, although it is not guaranteed (Abadzi, 2006, 2017; Spaul & Pretorius, 2019). The emphasis for teachers is on ensuring that children are taught and learn specific skills so that they can ultimately come to read and write meaningfully. The implication for multilingual teaching with this model is that for each additional language a child learns to read, its sound system should be taught deliberately and separately (Spaul et al., 2020). The diagram in Figure 5.1 depicts an interpretation of this reductionist model by one of us (CB).

This model has been the subject of much critique by scholars who view language and literacy development more holistically (e.g. Altwerger et al, 2007; Edelsky, 1991; Hruby & Goswami, 2011; Strauss, 2004; Strauss et al., 2009). Like them, we view literacy development as multi-directional, integrating complex

Skills-based model of learning to read

Learning to read happens first, reading to learn follows

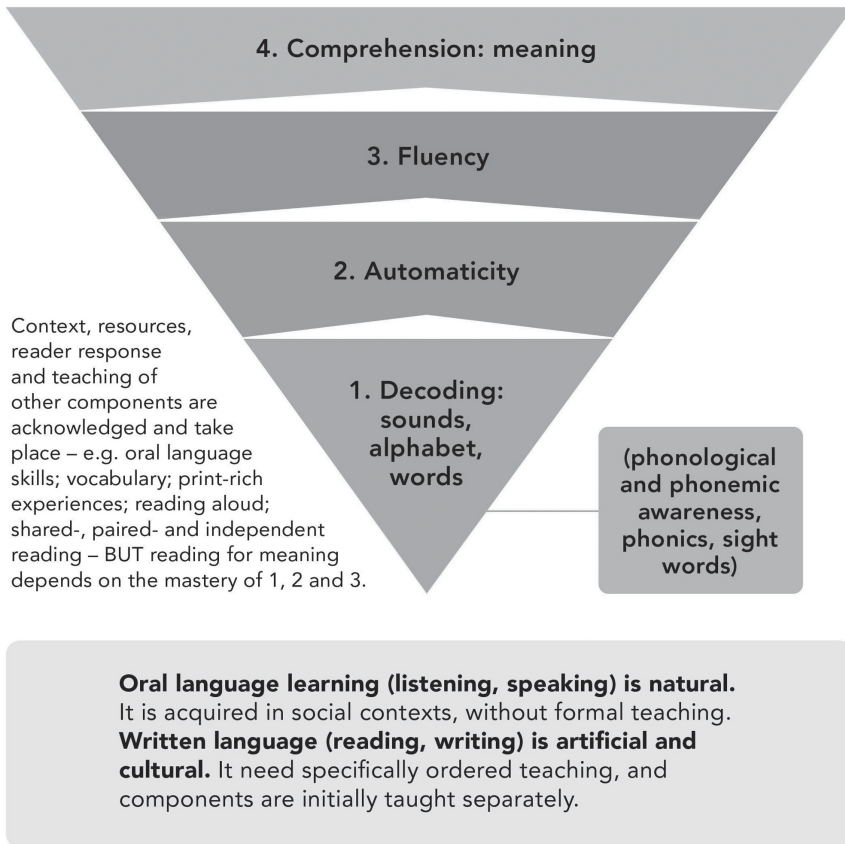


Figure 5.1 Skills-based model of learning to read.

systems and processes. A growing body of more holistically oriented, integrative neuroscience research reveals evolutionary endowed functions which all human brains share. These operate at great speed without our conscious awareness (Damasio, 2006; Ellis & Solms, 2018; Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2007; Panksepp, 1998). In this view, meaning-making and comprehending *drive* learning. Young children learn to simultaneously use a suite of semantic (meaning), syntactic (grammatical) and graphophonic cues for making meaning in one or more languages (Goodman et al., 2016). The brain naturally ‘chunks’ experience, including reading and writing, into meaningful units, and these are what is stored

in short- and long-term memory, rather than just their components (Bermudez, 2014; Miller, 1956). Such a holistic model views both oral and written language as social practice learned in socio-cultural contexts, through both informal and formal teaching. Although oral language is much older, they both evolved as symbolic systems to communicate meaning (Tomasello, 2003).

Neuroscientific evidence (discussed further below) supports our view of literacy and language development, essentially relating to prediction (Hawkins, 2004; Clark, 2013), pattern recognition (Gray, 2011) and a set of evolutionarily ‘hardwired’ primary emotional systems (Panksepp, 1998). Children apply their prior knowledge and knowledge of oral and written language to communicate purposefully and express themselves from the start, learning to write and read together, as with speech, in an apprenticeship relationship, with knowledgeable and interactive role models. These role models teach skills and draw children’s attention to the purposes and features of print as part of an ongoing process of reading and writing interesting and useful texts. Figure 5.2 shows an interpretation of the holistic, meaning-based model of early literacy by one of us (CB).

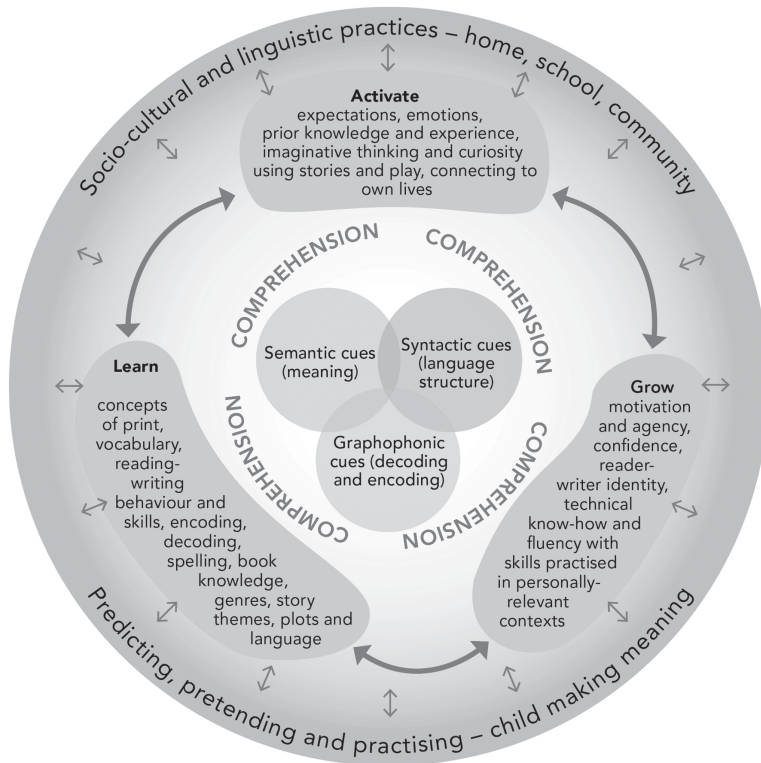
Taking into account children’s multilingual repertoires

This model also integrates the multilingual repertoires of most children into considerations for literacy teaching. A language-in-education policy has been in effect in SA since 1997 which promotes multilingual education (DBE, 1997), but it has not been systemically implemented. So although ‘mother tongue’ is understood widely as preferable for the preschool years and the first years of primary education, a magnetic pull to the early use of English persists: many schools use English as language of instruction in the preschool and early years (Du Plessis & Louw, 2008). Inadequate conditions for teaching and learning English often contribute to low school achievement (Fleisch, 2008; Heugh et al., 2007, Ramadiro 2016; Smith, 2011; Smits et al., 2008) and to the widespread culture of low expectations of young children.

When exposed multilingually, children also translanguage (Bua-Lit, 2018; García, 2009; Makalela, 2019) by drawing on their emerging language capacities, both oral and written, to comprehend and compose. Ubuntu⁸ translanguageing, which gives South African expression to translanguageing (García, 2009), promotes a “... focus is on what speakers do with the languages rather than what the languages look like” (Makalela, 2019, p. 246) and enriches translanguageing with the ubuntu-related concepts of compassion and community. Referring to García’s metaphor of translanguageing as being an all-terrain vehicle (García, 2009, p. 45), Makalela writes:

It is instructive in showing that while it may seem bumpy and non-linear in its movement, there is a logic that enables it to accomplish its task. Like the logic of a moving all-terrain vehicle, multilingual speakers who use more

Learning how to write+read happens while print is used for personally meaningful reasons



Oral and written language are learned in social contexts with both informal and formal teaching. Although oral language is much older, they both evolved as symbolic systems to communicate meaning.

Children apply their knowledge of oral and written language to communicate purposefully from the start. They learn to write+read from knowledgeable and interactive role models who teach skills as these are needed to carry out desirable print related activities.

Figure 5.2 Meaning-based model of learning to read + write.

than one language in the same utterance or in their input/output are able to make sense of the world and of who they are. From the speaker's point of view, the languages are not differentiated as boundaries are overcome by the desire to make meaning.

(2019, p. 240)

This view of language enables us to move beyond arguments for either African languages or English medium which have seemed to paralyse educational progress. It implies a need to better take into account children's multilingual communicative repertoires (Gumperz, 1971; Hymes, 1980) and use them concurrently as resources for literacy learning. Encouraging children to use their repertoires in full and authentic ways intersects seamlessly with holistic early childhood principles and literacy approaches. This can release teachers and children from the burden of overly technical first steps to literacy as we will discuss in the final section of the chapter.

How babies and young children learn

Finally, literacy teaching methods often follow models from formal school without attending to established holistic understandings of the nature of learning in early childhood, as well as the limiting effect on early years education of frequently appalling physical and educational conditions for practitioners, babies and young children (Biersteker et al., 2008; Van der Berg et al., 2013). Storyplay, however, arises from the premise that early literacy learning ought to continue the meaning-making process begun autonomously at birth. By the time they reach preschool, all young children are deep into an apprenticeship of understanding how to join into the particular range of social and cultural ways of being and doing, experienced as 'natural' in their families and communities. Our work builds from the following empirically grounded neuroscientific premises which apply to all human babies at birth.

First, our brains are highly plastic and easily shaped by environmental factors and experience (Ellis & Solms, 2018). The neuronal links which form connections in our brains change all the time in response to the physical, ecological and social environment; this allows learning. Baby brains start off with vast numbers of connections. As they have experiences, some connections are repeatedly used. These thicken and strengthen and create new connections. Connections which are not used get pruned, gradually thinning out (Shore, 1997). This process continues through life, but is most pronounced up to age ten, as our brains shape our development. New learning is always possible, but it happens easily in early childhood.

Thus (culturally and linguistically appropriate) enriched environments and opportunities are key for all children, irrespective of background – including learning how to use written language.

Second, brains use experience to compare things and situations (Ellis & Solms, 2018). Everything new is examined in the light of previous experience and previously learned rules of behaviour. These experiences create expectations which are then either met or not. Learning which builds on what children know already is easier (Bruce, 2012). Thus children who love stories but realise their language is not in picture books can internalise a sense that their language is limited, and experience little desire to learn to read. Children who only experience reading as trying to sound out a text with an inauthentic story line will not expect reading to

interest them, while children who have enjoyed treasuries of stories in languages they understand bring both this story language and the anticipation of pleasure to learning how to use written language.

Third, our brains seek and recognise patterns and make predictions (Gray, 2011; Clark, 2013). Our brains continuously filter information, selecting what they need and throwing away masses of data that is irrelevant in the moment. We fill in the information with only partial knowledge because so much happens all the time that it is not possible to use all of the information. Thus, brains have evolved to efficiently predict what is likely to happen, searching for, recognising and classifying patterns. Patterns bring smaller parts together to make meaningful wholes.

Thus, the word ‘multilingualism’ is easier to recognise and remember than a string of letters, such as ‘msiltpbordiluft’. A song or rhyme is easy to memorise and so is a story. We use the pattern of story to organise and make meaning of our lives. All perception proceeds in the same contextual ‘holistic’ way (seeing, hearing, reading), being based in the same cognitive mechanism, applied in different domains (Ellis and Bloch 2021). Moreover, when we read in any language our brains use prediction:

Regardless of the orthography, readers, like listeners, are preoccupied with comprehension. They predict meaning, syntactic structures and the written language forms which expresses the language. These aspects of reading are universal and create the parameters in which the features of each writing system and language are used.

(Goodman et al., 1984, p. 24)

Readers, including beginners, make predictions using information from a text (including titles, headings, pictures and diagrams) and their prior knowledge and experiences.

Fourth, we are born with a set of several primary emotional systems developed over time through evolutionary activity (Ellis & Solms, 2018; Damasio, 1994, 1999; Panksepp, 1998), which strongly influence how we behave. They change activity in our brains, are remembered in our bodies and guide neurological development. Thinking cannot happen without this emotional guidance; an emotional tag attaches to every memory, influencing and shaping our reactions. We have an “emotional predisposition that motivates us to learn a language in order to communicate our needs and desires ...” (Ellis & Solms, 2018, p. 156).

Three of the emotional systems appear to be fundamental for learning. First, there is a need to belong, secondly, the need to seek and make meaning, and thirdly, the need to play. Considering the need to belong, babies bond with their mothers or primary caregivers, and then with others seeking security and social connection; confidence arises from and connects into this. This bonding initiates communication and language learning with emotional intention and personal use at the centre (Greenspan & Shanker, 2009). By implication, rejection or a sense of alienation hinders or damages confidence and the will to learn. Second,

babies need to seek and make meaning; they are motivated from birth to find out about their world. The reward is intrinsically rooted in the ‘doing’. Learning continues in this way if the activities children are involved in are authentic and not exercises stripped of context. Third, babies need to play; they play with sounds, imitating significant adults, soothing and comforting themselves (Weir, 1962). They move to pretend play, as story in action (Paley, 1991) with real and imagined scenarios, rehearsing and consolidating experiences and solving problems. Symbolic play is a precursor to theory of mind and to written language (Vygotsky, 1978). Pretending to be the doctor or patient nudges young minds towards others. Pretending that a box represents a car is only a few steps from appreciating how the letters ‘Mama’ represent a precious mother. Human emotional contexts are thus integral to effective learning, including learning how to use written language.

Having explored the key issues that the Storyplay approach aims to address, in the following section we offer reasons for, and descriptions of, the approach in practice and consider how it can lead to powerful literacy teaching and learning.

Transformation in and through Storyplay

Story is the taproot of African education. It is also central to human experience, as the shared vehicle for communicating and making meaning (Gottschall, 2012). Story involving reciprocal relationships and experiences, holism, apprenticeships and communal interdependence gave meaning and substance to educational practice in Africa before it was side-lined by colonialism and apartheid (Makalela, 2014; Mbiti, 1989; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Drawing on oral literature traditions exposes children to the value and use of creative performance, rhythm, musicality, metaphor and improvisation (Finnegan, 2012). Simultaneously teachers can guide children in the authentic process of bringing written language into their expanding communicative repertoires. The substance of curriculum delivery can thus develop organically from history, existing social realities and from the current knowledge, practices and language strengths of teachers and children and their families. This beautifully complements what we consider relevant: meaning-based perspectives on early literacy learning embedded in a holistic interdisciplinary early childhood pedagogy framed by Froebelian theories that humans are essentially productive and creative (Bruce et al., 2018). Crucially this involves play (Bruce, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978) storytelling and story-acting (Cremin et al., 2017; Paley, 1991) and imaginative thinking (Stanley, 2012). Young children are apprenticed into the “ways with words” (Brice Heath, 1983) of their families by ‘Learning by Observing and Pitching In’ (Rogoff, 2016). Technical aspects like letters, their sound combinations and spellings should be taught as part of and in the service of communication, while learners transfer the shared concepts they know about print between languages (Saiegh-Haddad & Geva, 2010). We now describe the principles guiding Storyplay, captured in Figure 5.3, and share practical examples from the project in action.

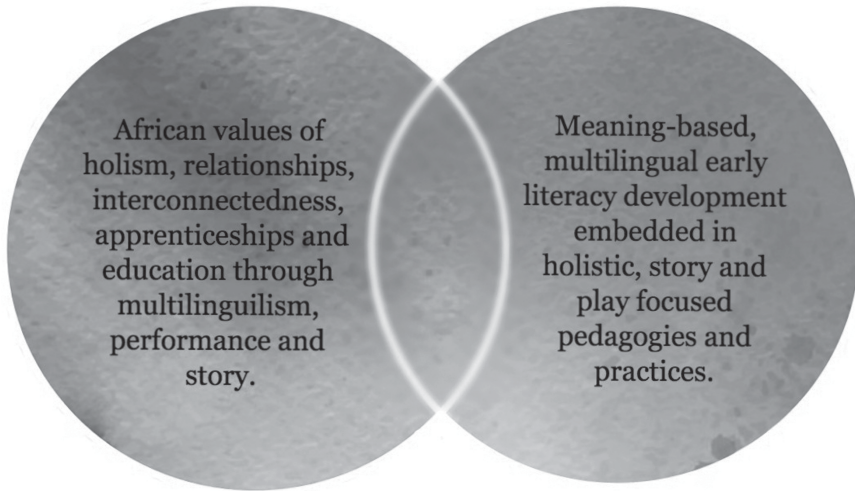


Figure 5.3 Meeting points for power: transformation through holistic African and early childhood wisdoms.

A story fuelled literacy learning cycle

A story-fuelled cycle is a term coined by one of the co-authors of this chapter, Carole Bloch (CB), to make the point that literacy learning in early childhood gathers momentum and power when driven by stories and the narrative form. It implies that stories are living forms of language which grow and flourish with ongoing and regular use. In our work, we have noticed how children hold back their potential for creative expression in classrooms where adults neglect to value meaningful and imaginative uses of language. We have also been relieved to witness the way imagination and motivation spark into life when adults pay central attention to nurturing story and symbolic play among children (Bloch, 2018).⁹

For us, language learning progress is fuelled by children and adults with agency who generate as well as ‘consume’ personally meaningful print in ongoing culturally and socially relevant ways.¹⁰ Children appropriate and hybridize the stories we share with them (real life and fictional) for their own emotional and intellectual ends. In Storyplay, children also dictate their own stories, which adults write down for them (see Figure 5.4). These stories are later enacted on the ‘magic carpet’, our version of the storytelling and acting process encapsulated by the work of Vivian Gussin Paley.

Story and its opportunities for symbolic play are ideally integrated in settings which support young children exploring through first-hand experiences. This makes for affordable, high quality and context-relevant learning with regular opportunities for the following: pretend play, block play, drawing, writing,

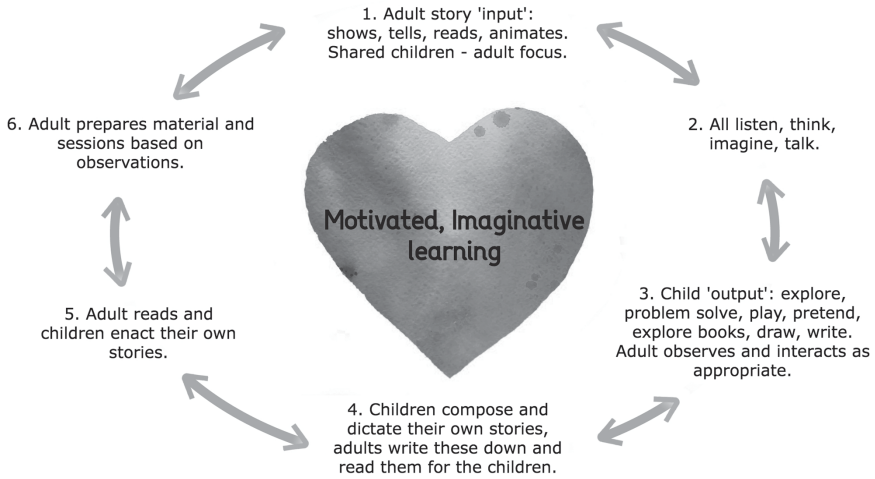


Figure 5.4 The story-fuelled cycle: igniting powerful language use.

book- and/or story-sharing, exploring sand, water and clay or mud, and the use of collected natural and recycled materials and other inexpensive or free topical and interesting materials.

Storyplay needs a good selection of stories; the process encourages teachers to build collections and memory banks of storybooks, personal stories, rhymes and songs to stimulate children's desire to listen, think imaginatively problem-solve, discuss and play. We prioritise suitable stories available in African languages in SA so that teachers get to know which stories 'speak to' them and their emerging readers and writers. The following examples give insight into how this approach works in action.

Stories in action

In the example below, Teacher L begins the story-fuelled cycle (point 1 in Figure 5.4) by reading *Ummangaliso kaHanda* (Xhosa translation of *Handa's Surprise*, Browne, 2016), to 16 three and four-year-old isiXhosa-speaking children. The class is working in isiXhosa. In the book, Handa carries a basket on her head with seven fruits, which she is taking to her friend. As she walks along, she does not notice that one by one, animals are plucking the fruit from her basket. A discussion, which is translated into English by Storyplay mentor Nolubabalo Mbotshwa (NM), ensues (point 2 in Figure 5.4). One child points and says, *'The animals are taking Handa's fruit!'* Another says, *'No, they not taking the fruit, they are stealing because they didn't ask Handa'*. NM asks, *'If you take something from your friend without asking her is that stealing?'*

Several comments follow:

“Yes, because you must first ask!” “No, because that’s your friend ... “My brother always takes my things and doesn’t ask, so I tell him that he is going to go to jail, because he is stealing “I will take my stick and smack the animals, because animals mustn’t steal ...” “You won’t go to jail, but you will get a hiding from your mom, then you must go sleep”.

Facilitating such dialogues by inviting the children to express their views, and thus moving to talking and away from transmission-orientated procedures, is one of the ways in which teachers begin to notice children’s language repertoires and learning potential. They see how motivated, animated and focused children become when they connect to, express and discuss their own experiences. It also addresses supporting children’s growing vocabularies, because “[t]alk may be cheap, but it is priceless for young developing minds” (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009, p. 384).

The teacher prepares activities to go with the story. Once the teacher has read and talked about it, the children choose an activity which allows them to weave whatever resonates with them from the story into their own play. Children find characters and themes from stories which interest them and make them their own. We illustrate this process (point 3 of Figure 5.4) in extracts from a reflection by one of the co-authors of this chapter, Sive Mbolekwa (SM), after he and a teacher used a story to generate writing by the children.¹¹ *UMnumzana Mvundla udibana noMnumzana Mandela* (Xhosa version of *Mr Hare Meets Mr Mandela*) (Van Wyk, 2016) is a story which many children enjoy. Mr Hare finds a R200 note with a picture of Mr Mandela on one side. On the other side is Mr Leopard. Mr Hare decides to take it back to the great man himself. The other animals tell him he shouldn’t go to the city because he cannot read. But intrepid Mr Hare sets off and has an adventure which involves the note changing hands several times, and it changes colour too! Not noticing how the R200 note is swapped for R100 and then R50, Mr Hare is amazed how this note keeps changing colour and has a new animal on it each time. Luckily, the picture of Mr Mandela remains, and so his journey is not in vain.

SM first describes one of the challenges to enable adults and children becoming generators of meaningful print in African languages. This hinges around teachers observing and recognising young children’s learning intentions and agency so that they create opportunities for children to explore and grow as composers at their own pace without enforcing a ‘correct’ blueprint on them. SM explains how he and the teacher planned together, having discussed the need to offer a series of motivating and meaningful activities for the children to choose from (point 6 of Figure 5.4),

The teacher and I planned together to put recycled material in the fantasy area for the children to set up shop and sell goods, paper to cut and to make pretend money to buy with at the shop, clay for them to bake the edibles Mr

Hare saw at the bakery, scrap fabric to cut and sell as clothes, chart paper to draw a map to help Mr Hare find Mr Mandela's house, a recycled cardboard letterbox to post a letter to Mr Hare. We also put out paper for drawing or writing whatever they wanted to and picture books to browse through in the reading area.

How adults shape the learning environment and the nature of the activities they offer to children reflects their teaching views and priorities. This is highly significant: not only does it affect the kind and quality of possible engagements, but also young children's understanding of what their teachers value and what is expected of them. On this occasion, when SM arrived, he noticed that the teacher had interpreted two of the activities differently to what he had envisaged. She had already cut out paper in the shape of money and provided a map of Africa for the children to colour in. SM had wanted the children to be free to make money, and draw maps, in their own way, from scratch. This indicated to SM that further discussion was needed about what qualitatively rich learning involves and how to achieve a balance between providing activities and allowing learners to generate their own:

Teachers often feel the need to do too much for the learners; they are reluctant to allow the children the agency to do things for themselves at their level of skill, wondering whether the children will learn enough if they are left to their own devices.

The teacher had read the story the day before with the children (point 1 of Figure 5.4). In Figure 5.5, we see a letter from Mr Hare which she 'found' and read out loud to the children as a way to begin the session.

Notes and letters can expand the boundaries of stories to include the children. They can happen at any part in the story-fuelling cycle to create the kind of atmosphere of 'pretend' young children are readily drawn to. In Figure 5.6, we see an example of point 3 of Figure 5.4 as the children reply to Mr Hare's letter. This was done in a shared writing activity where the teacher facilitated a dialogue and then wrote down what the children dictated to her.

In their response, the children shift from addressing Mr Hare to addressing the teacher about what Mr Hare must do. In the moment, this is far less important than the fact that they are expressing their views and seeing this expression manifested as a social, collaboration in print. When children have the desire and confidence to express themselves – and – when they see their words written down, and hear them read aloud, they begin to incorporate in their identity a sense of being a composer-writer *and* belonging to a literate community. This is highly motivating: as often happens when teachers scribe regularly for children, independent writing attempts emerge, like the following one by P. SM explains:

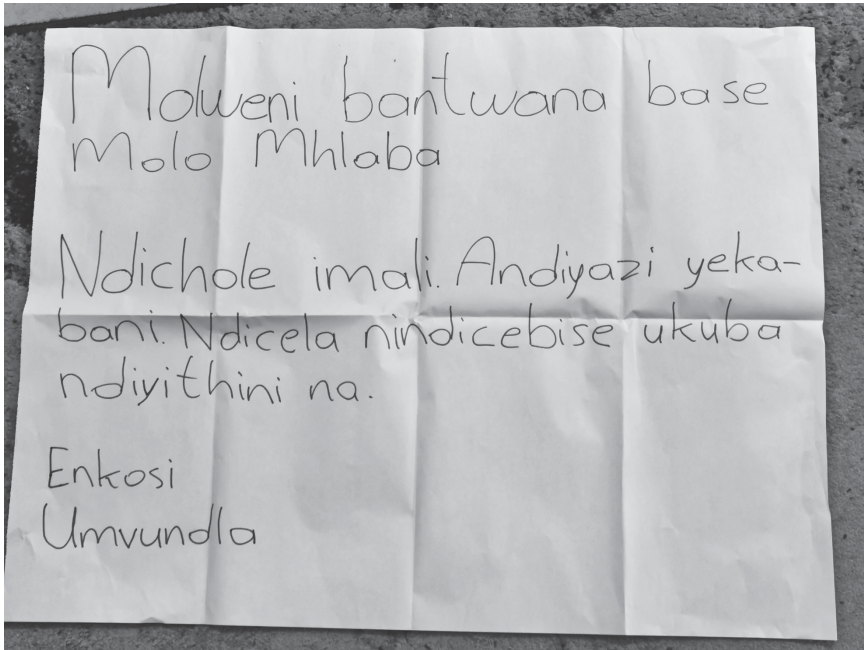


Figure 5.5 Mr Hare's letter to the children.

Translation:

Dear Molo Mhlaba Children, I found money. I do not know to whom it belongs. Please advise me, what do you think I should do with it? Thank you, Hare.

We noticed how focused [P] was on her writing – she was writing a letter to Mr Hare. We wondered what she was writing. As we did not want to disturb her, we waited until she was finished and was about to put her letter in the post box. We then asked if she could read it for us. Translated from isiXhosa, it reads, “Mr Hare, Mr Mandela died. From P” (Figure 5.7). We then asked her if we could write it for her in such a way that other people could read it.

Without teachers having access to information and knowledge about invented spelling (Ouellette & Sénéchal, 2017) and the processes which move young children's writing from emergent to conventional forms, such a writing attempt can seem unconnected to literacy teaching and progress in learning. Part of the role Storyplay mentors undertake is to support teachers in noticing such progress. SM adds:

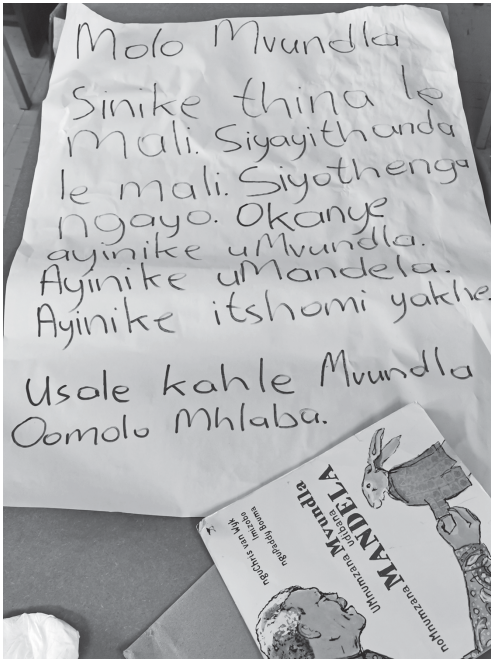


Figure 5.6 The children respond to Mr Hare.

Translation:

Dear Mr Hare,

Give us this money. We love this money. We will buy stuff with it. Or he can give it to Hare.

He must give it to Mandela. He must give it to his friend.

Kind Regards.

Children of Molo Mhlaba.

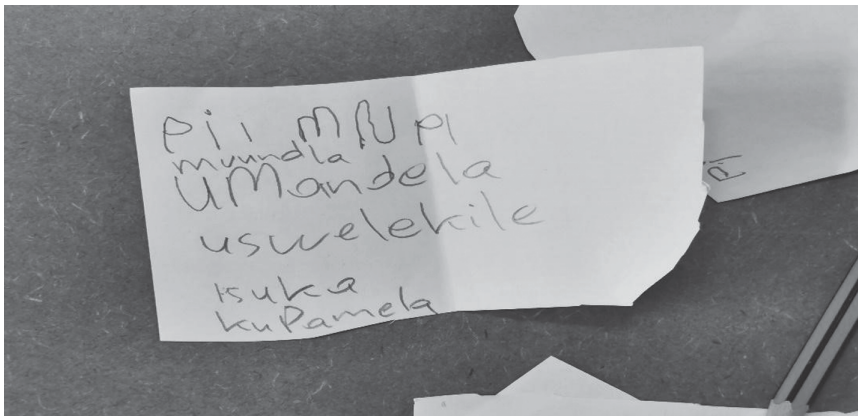


Figure 5.7 A Child Feels Compelled to Write to Mr Hare.

Translation: "Mr Hare, Mr Mandela died. From Pamela"

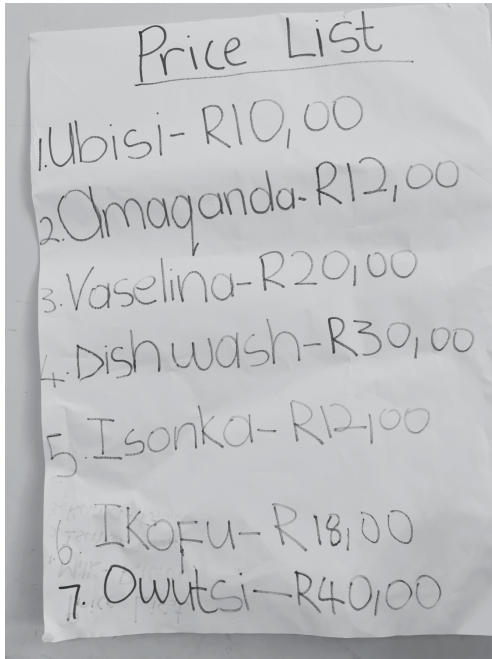


Figure 5.8 The children translanguage, adapting the money theme to their life experiences.

Translation:

1. Milk – R10,00
2. Eggs – R12,00
3. Vaseline – R20,00
4. Dishwashing liquid – R30,00
5. Bread – R12,00
6. Coffee – R18,00
7. Oats – R40,00.

I talked with the teacher about how P has come to know the genre and format of letter writing and shows an understanding that we write from left to right. It appears that this is what she has seen numerous times in the various, regular writing that adults are doing with the children. She is at the stage where she knows she needs to put together letters to send a message (alphabetic principle) and she has learned to form some. She is still developing phonemic awareness and phonic knowledge required to spell the words she uses as she makes an attempt at writing in an imaginative endeavour in the context of story and play.

During the same session, more writing happens. In Figure 5.8, still linking to money and its power to buy, some children help the teacher write a shopping list. They translanguage in English and isiXhosa as they apply their minds to decide on and price their desired ‘essentials’. The teacher is an informal writing role model for the children as she writes the list and they make their contributions in a seamless integration of numeracy, literacy and everyday life, inspired by a story and realised through play.

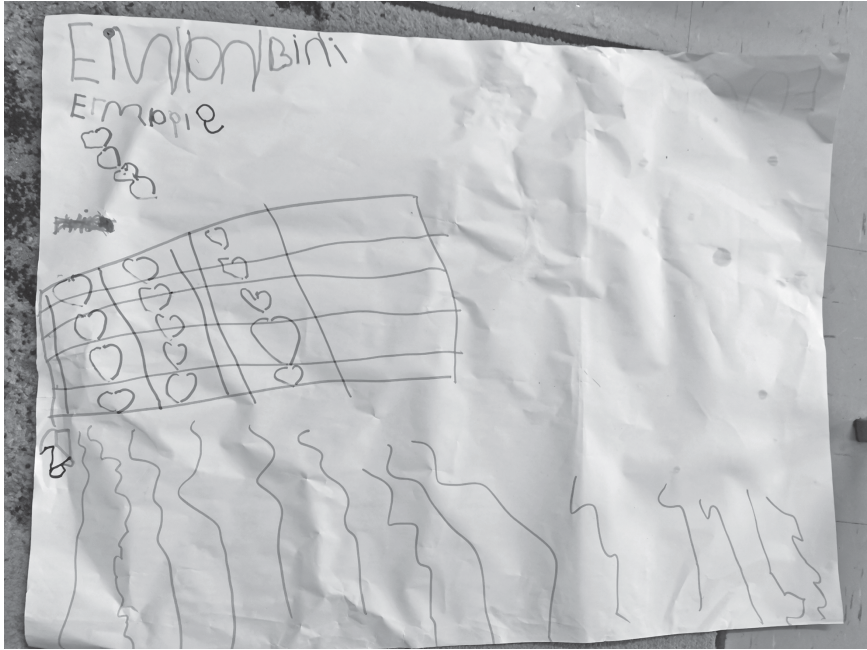


Figure 5.9 An attempt at writing personally significant words, ‘emanzini’ (in water) ‘elwandle’ (in the sea).

The final example of writing from this session illustrates how earlier collaborative and imaginative efforts, like the one SM describes below, stimulates independent endeavour:

One child was copying from a large sheet of paper which was used earlier on in the session, when the teacher and children were thinking of themselves and their travels in relation to Mr Hare, who had travelled to town. The teacher had written down the places as the children told her where they had travelled. This child has attempted to write ‘emanzini’ which means ‘in water’ and ‘elwandle’ which means ‘in the sea’.

Self-driven practice in how to write particular words imbued with imagery and meaning for this young girl arose from a prior event which had encouraged enthusiasm and interest among the classroom community.

It should be apparent that in order to normalise writing in African languages, we need to be providing constant, meaning-embedded writing demonstrations. The children use these to inform their emerging physical and mental command of the writing process. In turn, teachers begin to recognise indicators of technical and conceptual understanding. The examples we have shared demonstrate that

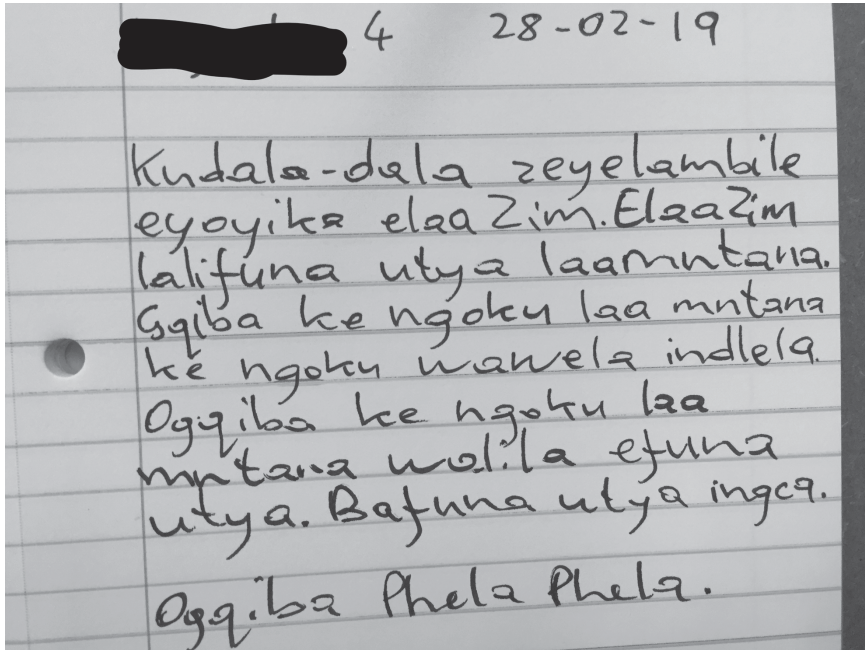


Figure 5.10a Dictating and scribing a child's story in an intimate moment of trust and shared attention.

Translation:

Long time ago, the child was hungry and scared of the monster because it wanted to eat him. He (the child) then crossed the road, crying because he wanted some food. They wanted to eat grass.

The end.

while stories give rise to talk, listening, viewing, reading and writing, children are simultaneously absorbing how written language works and how to make it work for them.

The magic of stories

We now move to describing the magic carpet process which we use to structure and enrich children's language use and learning (points 4 and 5 of Figure 5.4 above). Based on storytelling and story-acting (Bloch, 2018; Cooper, 2005; Lee, 2016; Paley, 1992), it involves dictating, scribing and enacting stories in an interplay which reveals the intimate and immediate relationship between play and story and between writing and reading. The examples which follow occurred in two preschools in Philippi and Kayelitsha, Cape Town, as part of PRAESA's nine-week training and mentoring programme which we offer to practitioners.



Figure 5.10b This young child's composing voice emerges as she dictates her story.

These two children's stories dictated and scribed in isiXhosa were part of a Storyplay session using *OoBhokhwana Abathathu BakwaGruff*, the isiXhosa version of the South African retelling of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Bloch, 2011). They show how children incorporate aspects of stories they hear and think about with their own life motifs, often featuring significant emotional and physical themes. The story is dictated by a four-year-old child in isiXhosa (see the story in Figure 5.10a and the dictating in 5.10b). She creates a human character and focuses on the tragically common themes of fear and hunger; the story serves to make visible and legitimate what she wants to express.

Often children gather round to watch and listen as they wait for their turn. They follow how the teacher writes from left to right and top to bottom; they see that the adult writes slower than the storytelling child can speak; they hear the teacher sound out words and watch her form letters as she transforms the child's own ideas into conventional writing using the alphabet of the particular language. In any context, this is a powerful practice which illuminates how writing can link directly to children's concerns and interests and what purposes writing can be put to; in under-resourced, multilingual settings it has particular value: all we need is pen and paper and children and adults decide which language or language combinations they want to use, crucial in settings where African languages are undermined and neglected in print form.

With sufficient, regular application, this practice can contribute to important attitudinal and relational shifts between teachers and children. Teachers internalise the educational legitimacy of being curious and interested in the child's world and of engaging in authentic writing. They see how to facilitate the children's agency, guiding their composing to give it meaning and they begin to free themselves from

the often burdensome position (and though perhaps unintentional, also disrespectful stance) where the teacher is expected to know, simplify, order and transmit everything worth learning to children.

Magic carpet can be done by most adults once they have appreciated and learned the fundamentals of the process. However, a skilled early childhood literacy teacher, trained in a holistic approach, will also recognise the profound teaching moments and learning opportunities which are nested in this ‘close-up with print’ exercise and how to extend and assess these. They will work deliberately to interest each child in noticing how letters are formed and combined to spell the words which they are verbalising. Teachers learn to do this while keeping overall attention on what the child is saying they want to have written down. They read back what has been written and ask questions to clarify meaning. The story is the child’s creation but as a novice writer and reader, she relies on the teacher to illuminate the ‘how to’ aspect. The teacher draws the child in, sometimes spelling, sometimes sounding out, sometimes noting what letter a word begins or ends in, what an exclamation mark does for expression, etc. This leads to a process of increasing attention to print features and spelling and over time, story structure and style.

Stories are later played out on the ‘magic carpet’, an area drawn on the floor by tape or chalk (point 5 of Figure 5.4). In Figure 5.11, we see a story in action with a group of isiXhosa speaking four- and five-year-old children. They sit around the magic carpet and listen as the teacher reads out the story. The teacher guides the children to take turns to ‘be’ in the story, one after another, whoever the character may be. She does not choose who plays particular story roles, thereby promoting fairness (Paley, 1992), and challenging stereotypes. Nor does she



Figure 5.11 Life enacted as a story on the magic carpet.



Figure 5.12a Four-year-old dictates her story to her teacher.

instruct children to perform in a theatrical manner. Occupying the story is more important than the accuracy of performance.

The issue of language pops up frequently; observation allows adults to notice how fluent the children are at dealing with it. In this session, after the teacher had read the children a Pondo fable in isiXhosa, *UmBali Nengonyama* (Mbali and Lion) (Nevin, 1996), a four-year-old girl dictates the following story, adding some English words, to capture first-hand experiences, like ‘ibutternut’ and the hand sanitiser (which is seen in photograph in Figure 5.12a) they were using instead of water during the drought (see Figure 5.12b).

The aim is not to produce a coherent story the adult would like; it is to encourage this initial creative act, as an essential early step. Developing more conventionally formed stories comes gradually as part of a process which motivates children to identify themselves as writers. As they gain confidence, they act on the knowledge that we all have stories to share and that stories can be composed, written down and then read.

Magic Carpet can also arise from oral storytelling, as in the example below with SM’s own story *Inyosi Yobomi* (*The Bee of Life*) about a forest which was full of animals and beautiful plant life living harmoniously (see Figure 5.13). A monster arrived and destroyed everything till it was ‘dead flat on the ground’. Then a little bee came along, looking for Mama and Papa Bee, and wept to discover what

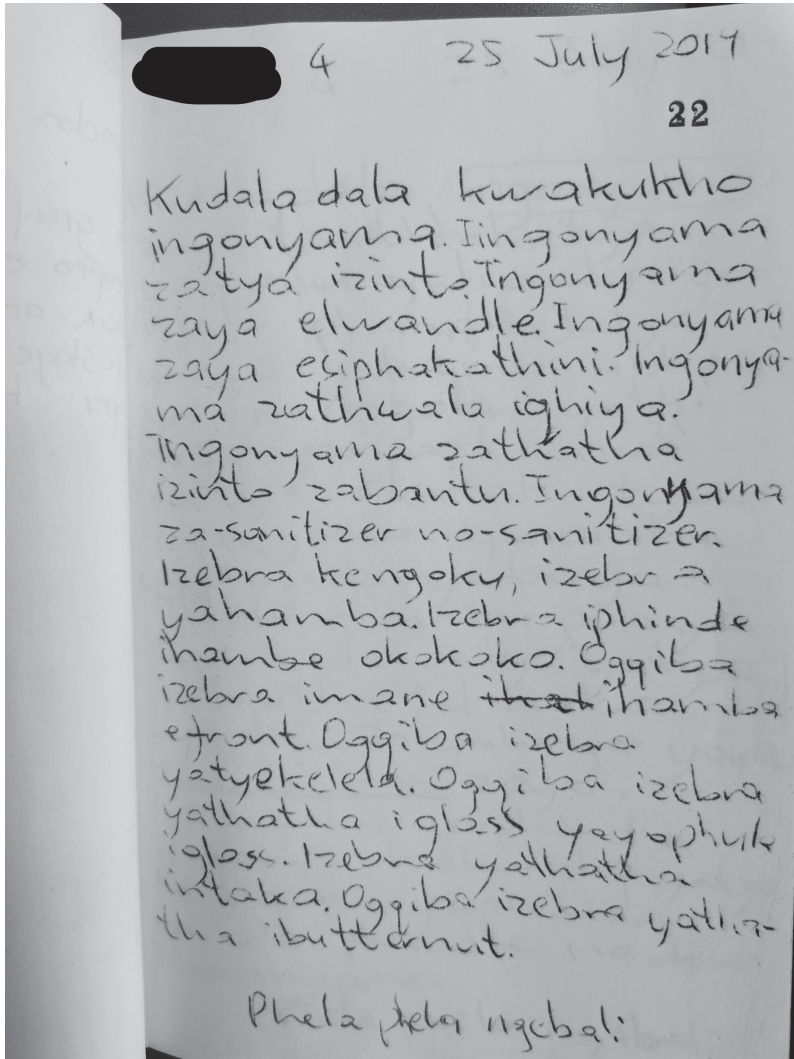


Figure 5.12b The dictated story.

Translation:

Long, long ago there was Lion. Lions ate things. Lions went to the sea. Lions went to the middle. Lions put on a headscarf. Lions took people's things. Lions even used the sanitiser. The zebra then, the zebra went away. The zebra again went and went. And then it sometimes went in front. And then zebra went in front of others. And then zebra took a glass and broke the glass. Zebra took a bird. And then zebra took the butternut. The end.



Figure 5.13 Sive reading his story with the children.

the terrible monster had done. We join the isiXhosa story (in English translation) as it draws to an immensely satisfying close:

“Hey! I remember you! You stepped on the trees and squashed them to the ground! You stepped on the animals and laid them flat on the ground! And squashed all the insects! Squashed the bees too, flat on the ground!”, she said, anger building up inside her.

“Hahaha!”, laughed the monster. *“What can you do about it? You little bee? Hahaha!”*

“Hey you! Don’t make me angry! You hear...?” warned the little bee. *“... What can you do about it? Nothing! Hahaha!”* said the monster, laughing off the little bee’s warning. *The monster walked off lazily, still laughing. ... The little bee got up, flew up high and went straight for the monster. She stung him right on the bum. “Ouch! Ouch!”* cried the monster. *The little bee stung again. “Ouch! Ouch!”* The monster cried. *He ran and jumped into the sea. He drowned and was never seen again”*.

The children join enthusiastically, laughing and empathising in utter satisfaction with the little bee as it gets the better of the monster. They then play the story on the magic carpet. SM notes,

...We had T leading as the monster, while others chose to be snakes, tigers, lions and a giraffe ... showing that they were listening to my voice, as the storyteller. They were loud when they pretended to fear the monster and were snoring while playing the sleeping animals. But they were quiet when they wanted to hear what was coming next and when the animals were in the meeting to vote for the bee to be their president.

SM is reflecting on voice modulation partly because it is a common challenge to listen and hear due to noise. Even in settings which do not have large numbers of children (e.g. as many as 30), we have observed that many teachers use a very loud voice, and children follow suit. This makes it difficult to listen and be heard in precisely the phase of life where children are intuitively committed language learners. Working on the magic carpet, everyone begins to exert self-discipline in a collective commitment to imagine and pretend – and this helps bring about concentration and turn-taking.

It is clear that rich as the process we describe above is, we have only shared a very partial and indeed early part of the literacy learning trajectory. One of our intentions is to carry out research work with cohorts of children using a holistic approach from age three through eight to provide evidence of their entire journey to becoming conventional readers and writers (Bloch, 1997). This needs to be supported as a priority to properly address the extreme and extremely unjust differences in literacy teaching and expectations of children from affluent, middle class English-oriented homes, and those educated in the (still) systemically often print scarce African language-oriented settings we refer to in this chapter.

Ways forward: the zigzag path of progress in literacy education in SA

Language is not a domain of human knowledge (except in the special context of linguistics, where it becomes an object of scientific study); language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge.

(Halliday, 1993, p. 94)

Because of current interpretations of how to meet curriculum requirements, there is not yet an easy way to demonstrate the continuum of holistic, culturally relevant literacy learning by children. Skills-based methods are now (globally) being situated within a ‘balanced’ approach to literacy teaching (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Castles et al., 2018), by which is meant that a balance is supposed to be reached between teaching children all of the relevant components. Increasing awareness and acknowledgement that reading is part of people’s social and cultural practices has led to growing appreciation that the print-related experiences within which learning to read takes place do matter, and are likely to be different for African language speakers and speakers of English. At the same time, as the Bua-lit collective point out, “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” (Bua-lit, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, despite the talk of balance, the message which still reaches many teachers is that reading comprehension is “... the end point of the learning-to-read journey” (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019, p. 11). Teachers exposed consistently to this view (which may also repeat their own experience of learning to read in school) tend to see their priority as being to entrench the ‘steps to’ decoding before worrying about comprehension. Yet this message holds no certainty, even for those who promote this view, i.e. “Without decoding, there can be no text comprehension; but skill in

decoding does not automatically guarantee text comprehension” (ibid., p. 12). Generations of young children have experienced literacy first as predominantly phonics exercises and tests, yet South African children fared the worst out of 50 countries in comprehension testing (Howie et al., 2017) and 60% of children in Grade 6 cannot read with comprehension in any language (Van der Berg et al., 2016).

Unless we are careful, this tendency could unfortunately be reinforced by the increased support for recent research studies “at the interface of linguistic, orthographic, and cognitive processes involved in learning to read in African languages” (Ramadiro, 2019). These studies correctly counter the use of English phonics as a basis for phonics in African languages, paying attention to the different linguistic and structural features between African languages and English. They rightly note the differences between agglutinating languages with transparent spelling systems like African languages and English with its opaque orthography and deeply irregular spelling. However, it is problematic that, due to the consistent spelling of words in African languages and because words can be very long, it is now being claimed that, to benefit young children’s literacy learning, ‘correctly’ and systematically taught phonics (as opposed to phonics being derived from English) is necessary for literacy teaching in African languages. A related point is also made that teaching African languages differs from teaching English because of structural differences, thus ‘Western’ methods are being claimed as inappropriate for African languages. These points lead to two arguments against the value of a holistic approach such as the one set out in this chapter, both of which we refute. One is that “this method does not readily work for agglutinating languages, especially those with a conjunctive orthography resulting in long words” (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019, p. 5). This statement is a non-sequitur: there are universal principles of learning and reading that apply across all languages, because they are based on the nature of the brain (Ellis & Solms, 2018). Another argument is that “it is unlikely to work outside of an extremely print-rich environment and intensive individual attention both of which are in scarce supply in high poverty contexts with large classes and limited resources, as in South Africa” (ibid.). This argument has its roots in Abadzi (2006, 2017), who argues for mother tongue education and at the same time for a single-track, decoding pedagogy, because she says that

Though appealing and inherently sensible, the whole language approach puts low-income children at risk for failure. Poor children may well be able to recognize complex visual patterns of script ..., but limitations in vocabulary, phonological awareness, and working memory may prevent them from creating the necessary analogies between language and reading.

(Abadzi, 2006, p. 46)

She claims that “Only when reading becomes fluent can the child concentrate on the meaning of the message”. Abadzi also states, “To teach the poor efficiently, we must make learning easiest on their brains” (Abadzi, 2017, p. 11).

This approach to literacy is a restatement of the skills-based teaching method proposed and outlined in Figure 5.1 above, applied particularly and patronisingly to learners from poor backgrounds. We counter it by asking: Do we not make learning easy on the brains of children from affluent families? The brains of children from under-served communities are not essentially any different from the brains of children who have more or all of their education needs met; the issue is that they should have the intellectual and emotional rights to ‘the same benefits’, interpreted in culturally desirable ways, so they will be in a position to develop the same reading abilities. This kind of argument also of course points to a real problem to do with the supply of resources which will challenge literacy teaching, irrespective of the method or approach used. And with resources there are still unconscionable disparities between African languages and English. Leaving aside considerations about what attention has been given to ensuring written literature exists to tempt children to read in African languages as well as in English,¹² 7% of South African schools (mostly affluent ones) have a functioning school library, few schools have any budget for library materials, library periods or teacher librarians (Mojapelo, 2018, p. 415). The situation is one of severely restricted encouragement and support for elements facilitating authentic role modelling and engagement while abundant attention is given to teaching language structure and components.

We do not think that the opposition which we have described in this chapter between holistic and skills-based views of literacy learning ought to exist; both views acknowledge the ultimate significance of all aspects. The skills-based view, though, supports the cumulative learning of small units of written language separate from meaning; comprehension of texts comes at the end of the process. In doing so, it interrupts young children’s orientation to discover and explore. The holistic view, by contrast, claims that paying attention to comprehension is not a separate or delayed activity: we have referred to evidence from neuroscience that supports the process as we show it in Figure 5.2 and the idea that comprehension is at the core of the process all along. To make it separate is to put great hurdles in the way of children reading meaningfully, whichever the language, because it goes against human biology and the way children learn. Remembering is in fact made difficult when small units (without apparent meaning) fill up short-term memory slots and is easier when they are filled with larger meaningful chunks. For any language, “things are easy to remember when we have meaningful frames to put them in. Isolated words are hard to remember but the same words are easy to remember when they are in a meaningful context” (Goodman et al., 2016, p. 125). This evidence also supports the wisdom of indigenous African strategies for memorising important oral texts and underlines the validity of appreciating how learning oral and written language constitute ‘learning to mean’ (Halliday, 1975).

We want to emphasise here that we are *not* arguing against the relevance of understanding the orthographic and other differences in languages, or between oral and written forms. Nor are we suggesting that conducting research on all aspects of African languages should not be done or that children should not learn

to decode. But as Figure 5.2 shows, decoding should be *one* of the suite of cueing strategies which young children are taught simultaneously and encouraged to use. Moreover, teachers need the chance to appreciate how these cueing strategies are all as important for learning to read in African languages as in English.

Regrettably in SA and in SSA as a whole, we experience the same tsunami of systematic and synthetic phonics in education as the one which has hit education systems across the globe to shape teaching reading in English, based on the same skills-based model. The problem we are ultimately highlighting is that the drive to search for meaning can be minimised, deflected or even hidden from view when the teaching of automaticity and fluency takes precedence over comprehension, not only in Africa, but in the UK and USA (Clark, 2017, 2018). A consequence is demotivated learners and ‘reading’ that fails to concentrate on understanding (Altwerger et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Broad agreement exists that reading concerns meaning-making, and that the outcome of teaching should be “learners who are independent readers, that is, they can read fluently, with comprehension, on their own” (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019, p. 6). We will assume that the same agreement will soon apply to writing. Our position is that people learn through apprenticeships into meaning, and that the living heart of this is observing and joining in to what is considered desirable, valued social and cultural practice, often in an informal teaching process. With a hierarchical model of teaching reading, which places unambiguous prior value on the technical sub-components, apprenticeships are initially into ‘instructional nonsense’ (Edelsky, 1991), which do not transform magically into apprenticeships into meaning-making.

Continuing to describe comprehension as the hoped for outcome of teaching reading with initial emphasis on decoding, automaticity and fluency leads far too many children (and their teachers) into a culturally, intellectually and above all emotionally demoralising *cul-de sac*; whereas following a holistic model supports a focus on teaching and using skills in the service of meaning, enjoyment, cultural enrichment, real communication and personal emotional involvement. This enables children to learn to write and read with much more motivation and, crucially, much more effectiveness. Such a model is appropriate for literacy teaching in all societies; and utterly essential in countries still dealing with the inequalities wrought by colonialism and apartheid. Systemic delegitimisation of African philosophies, cultural practices and languages finds expression today in the ongoing challenges to radically increase African language book creation and provision, libraries, and writing and reading cultural role models. For this reason, above all else, we prioritise trying to ensure the most satisfying, joyful and motivating experiences with print imaginable, for adults and children alike – expressed through languages dear to them.

A Chinese proverb goes, “Hearing about something a hundred times is not as good as seeing it once”. Our urgent task across SSA is to create the kind of

opportunities which we have illustrated for pre-service and in-service teachers to see in action so that they can engage directly with the substance of a curriculum interpreted and taught as a continuum through the early childhood years. This will reveal the immense learning potential of young children and will assist us in ridding ourselves of the deficit view which has bedevilled so much education since the imposition of colonialism. As SA begins educating its youngest and most creative citizens, the birth to four year olds, it is more crucial than ever before for this happen.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 see PRAESA www.praesa.org.za/papers-articles/.
- 2 Nal'ibali grew from and was underpinned by PRAESA's years of experience in multi-lingual education and early childhood literacy (Bloch, 1999; Bloch & Alexander, 2003; Alexander & Bloch, 2010; Bloch et al., 2011). Nal'ibali means 'Here's the story' in isiXhosa and the tagline we chose, 'It starts with a story', reflected the focus of PRAESA's Early Literacy Unit on story, meaning-making and Free Voluntary Reading (Bloch, 2015; Krashen, 1993) as crucial for successful literacy learning. Offering regular bilingual combinations of stories in African languages and English was one pillar; another was supporting adults to set up and run community-based reading clubs.
- 3 We are using 'story' broadly to include personal, historical, factual or fictional oral and written texts.
- 4 Permission has been granted from project participants to include the examples and photos featured throughout.
- 5 The term Early Childhood Development (ECD) refers to the age birth to nine in South Africa. However, up to very recently, early childhood education before school was largely left by government in the hands of the non-formal sector. One preschool year, Grade R was introduced in 2001. Negotiations have recently taken place to move the locus of responsibility for educating young children from birth onwards, from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. Grade R is now officially the first year of the Foundation Phase of Primary Schooling. A compulsory Grade 'RR' year is being planned, and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) university level training programmes for teachers of birth to four year olds are underway.
- 6 We use 'preschool' to include both community and school-based provision up to and including Grade R.
- 7 When apartheid ended, an unfortunate consequence of putting early childhood development (prior to school) towards the end of the government's attention queue has

been that pre-existing deficit perspectives of the learning needs of young children from under-served communities have been further entrenched. Despite dedicated interventions by many early childhood NGOs, without enough systemic attention to developing alternative, affordable, enriching practices across the sector, a culture of low-level expectations has become normal.

- 8 Ubuntu is an African cultural and epistemological conception of being, which propagates a communal orientation and continuum of social, linguistic and cultural resources and denotes the interconnectedness of all human existence (Makalela, 2019).
- 9 The concept arose from and merged CB's training and early childhood literacy teaching experiences (Bloch, 1997, 2000, 2019) with PRAESA's work to promote societal equity and transformation by supporting multilingualism, and raising the status of African languages for writing.
- 10 There is room for flexibility in the cycle, in the sense that the 'steps' do not have to be followed rigidly. As teachers become more used to the approach, they are able to 'allow' the children more autonomy in order and choice of activities.
- 11 Observing, thinking about and writing reflections about our work with teachers have helped us develop in knowledge and understanding about how best to mentor.
- 12 We distinguish literature from 'readers' as follows: the point of writing literature is to create a worthwhile story to read whereas the point of writing a reader is to teach and practice reading. Though some readers have stories worth reading, the focus is different, with different consequences, and we have far more readers than literature; African language literature for children, either original or in translation is still a tiny fraction of that available in English.

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