

**ENABLING BILITERACY AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN IN  
SOUTHERN AFRICA: REALITIES, VISIONS, AND STRATEGIES**

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## **The Education Linguistic Terrain**

All African societies are multilingual. Yet most children do not enjoy the normality of going to school in their mother tongue or a familiar language, or if they do, it is not for long. The development of African languages in high status functions is held back by the hegemonic status of English or another ex-colonial language, <sup>1</sup> brought about by colonial conquest and post-colonial language policies. African languages have extremely low status, *particularly as languages in print*. This is evidenced by the kind of print we see used and displayed even in urban but particularly in rural settings. For instance, most signs in African languages are ones which make sure that negative messages are understood, such as NO JOBS, NO DUMPING, DANGER, TRESSPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED; there is only one African language daily newspaper in the country (in isiZulu); none of the food or other packaging uses African language print, and so on.

Yet the power and status functions of language are most clearly marked in printed form. In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993: 17) makes the fundamental point that while the dislocation of children from their mother tongues in school could not actually destroy the vitality of oral language, it had serious negative impacts on literacy development.

So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school (...) became divorced from his (sic) spoken language at home. There was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community.

First principles, particularly in respect of early childhood, tell us that appropriate and effective teaching begins with and builds on what children already know and can do. Because this does not happen in so many cases, for many children the 'written world' that Ngugi refers to, does not ever come into existence.

The following general language-related scenario would strike a familiar chord for many teachers across the continent: From grade 1 – 3, the language in education policy can vary (and change rapidly depending on which politicians are in power) from 3 years in the mother tongue, to 'straight for English', or something in between. Irrespective of the particular policy, most teachers tend to communicate with the children, and teach in an indigenous language they and (most or all of) the children share.<sup>2</sup> The ongoing effect for Early Childhood Development (ECD)<sup>3</sup> of the impending 'switch' to English on the confidence of teachers, who themselves often do not know English well and have not been trained in second or foreign language pedagogy, is profoundly disempowering. Usually from grade 4 onwards, the official medium of instruction is English and almost all reading materials (textbooks etc)

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are in English, the children have to write in English and all assessment (which is almost exclusively written) takes place in English.

A strange, almost conspiratorial arrangement has evolved where all participants in the system 'play the game' by pretending that learning is actually taking place in English. The true situation is that mostly English is a rote learning instrument, meaning making is only very occasionally expected or achieved, and learning is reduced solely to an exercise to get through tests and exams. Apart from the few exceptions that prove the rule, the creative impetus of everyone is crushed. The underlying assumption of this situation is that an ex-colonial language has to take over as a necessary condition for successful educational achievement and entry into the economy. It is a consequence of the 'colonized mind' (Ngugi Wa Thiong 'o) that people find it so difficult to imagine that African languages can and should be developed and used to perform any function that English or French can. In this respect, Ngugi (1993:16) states

The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth... (but) economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism, this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.

Similarly, people also find it hard to accept the fact so often made by my colleague Neville Alexander, that only a very small percentage of citizens ever actually need to know English well and that society, if it is to achieve real democracy and escape mediocrity, has to give people the choice of performing their everyday business in their mother tongue. What thus exists is what Alexander (2002:119) calls a Static Maintenance Syndrome by which he means that although their languages are valued, accepted and used for certain, generally oral purposes,

the people begin to accept as “natural” the supposed inferiority of their own languages and adopt an approach that is determined by considerations that are related only to the market and social status value of the set of languages in their multilingual societies.

This is the reason for our belief at PRAESA that it is essential to find ways to exploit the creative potential of African languages by healing the rift between their oral and written forms, thereby giving children the chance to experience their world as a coherent, meaningful one.

### **Early Literacy Teaching and Learning in Post-Colonial Africa**

In our work, we have to take note of various factors at different levels of society because these combine to perpetuate and reinforce the widespread lack of reading and writing cultural practices. At the level of early literacy teaching and learning, the effect on African education of views in the North about the nature of literacy in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century is ever-present today. We had brought to us, and adopted methods of teaching initial reading and writing from the North which presented reading as a psychological perceptual activity that focused on

the relationships between sounds and symbols. In Europe this view gave rise for some time to strongly behaviourist skills-based approaches to literacy teaching that included the notion of 'reading readiness' and an industry which sold non-print related activities and materials. A limited definition of reading which promoted the view that learning to read was an associative activity focused on perceptual identification and matching prevailed. (See Gillen and Hall 2003:4)

In many parts of Africa such views and methods took hold as gospel in a system staffed by untrained or poorly trained African language speaking teacher trainers and teachers, many of whom lived their daily transactions almost exclusively in the oral mode. All of the 'developments' in African education initiated in order to achieve Universal Primary Education have included as a central tenet the requirement to instill 'basic' literacy and numeracy. The overwhelming notion regarding literacy has been that literacy is made up of autonomous sets of skills that can be broken down, learned and then later applied.

The significant shifts in emphasis and understandings about literacy in the North, that at least to some extent influence literacy pedagogy, have barely been noticed in the print-scarce regions of the South. I am referring here to a) the notion of viewing reading and writing as ideological in nature and forming part of social and cultural practices in societies and that there are many different literacies which come into existence for various reasons (Heath 1983, Taylor 1983, Street 1994), b) the early literacy research and theoretical insights on

children's written language development, such as emergent literacy, whole language (Holdaway 1979, Goodman 1986).

Somehow it has been accepted that conditions of poverty in the '3<sup>rd</sup> world' produces children who are generally unable to grasp even the 'basics' and a cycle of simplifying skills using a foreign language as medium, extremely low levels of faith in children's ability to learn and consequent impoverished teaching methods and learning results. The fact that so many children grow up in communities where they rarely if ever come into contact with reading and writing being used powerfully and meaningfully in their home languages has not influenced the design or implementation of curricula in any other way. We are still gripped by the erroneous belief that we can teach reading and writing in social and cultural vacuums, as sets of skills which will constitute the 'tools' for reading and writing (Bloch 2002). This has had devastating consequences for learning and creativity. In classrooms across Africa, children are still forced to begin grade 1 with reading and writing 'readiness' activities that prolong even further the time when they will actually start engaging with print and finding out about literacy. On our continent, resonant with oral wisdom and stories, we continue to favour textbooks, loaded with decontextualised low-level skills and drills. At best, those who can afford them, use 'readers' with restricted, unnatural language. Storybooks and other meaningful texts are conceptually and effectively discarded as 'supplementary' material, the luxury that we all know most African children don't get. Our youngsters continue to be denied opportunities to experience the richness of stories in their own languages in print. Yet - as we are reminded in a recent article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* of August 2004, through

the rediscovery of ancient manuscripts from Timbuktu in Mali, there is an ancient tradition of African literacy going right back to the very origins of writing in Pharaonic Egypt and in other sites in the Levant. This fact that Africa has both a rich oral *and* a pre-colonial written tradition has not, as yet, been exploited to re-inspire literacy teachers at all. In fact, the system produces teachers who act as agents to transmit a mind-numbing and alien literacy curriculum, often in a poorly understood language. They unwittingly collude with the system to negate the need for real reading materials (such as story books). What chances do our teachers have to be inspiring role models when they have been unable to engage with print in their own languages or in English, either as children or adults? It is not too harsh to say that the perpetuation of a system which holds back the development of a written children's literature in African languages has contributed to crippling the development of effective literacy teachers.

The situation is more complex still: those active in promoting the use of the mother tongue in education in Africa, are often linguists and language scholars, passionate about dissecting and getting teachers to transmit the 'correct' form of their language to children at school, bit by bit. Because this stance is remote from meaning making and communication and because teachers themselves haven't been educated in their mother tongue, the effect tends to be one where teachers get trained to approach mother tongue teaching as if it were a foreign language. It is probably true to say that there are few, if any Africans who have been trained to be early childhood literacy specialists. All of these factors have mingled conceptually to lead even the best of intentioned development work in African



contexts to focus mainly on how to get text books into the hands of teachers and children, first in mother tongue and then the ex-colonial language. Apart from the fact that sufficient attention does not then get paid to training teachers, it is not enough to have the texts, even good ones, in your own language. One also has to understand that people need to tune into the uses of written language and make these personally meaningful. Purcell-Gates (1997:50)

explains how:

Written language is apparent in the environment only to the extent that it is recognized or noticed. It is recognized or noticed only to the extent that it is used by fellow members of one's sociocultural/ sociolinguistic group.

### **Not 'either-or' but 'both-and'**

At the heart of our work lies a simple question to which we have to find the answer: *how can we make the move from the existing situation where the languages of the former colonial powers dominate to one where the indigenous languages of Africa become dominant?* (Alexander and Bloch 2004)

PRAESA's Early Literacy Unit has the intention, and we think at least in some cases, the effect of acting as a catalyst for shifts in ways of thinking and acting in the direction of finding solutions to this challenge.

Our position is an evolving one, backed in principle by a progressive language in education policy which promotes additive bi/multilingualism or what we now call 'mother tongue based bilingual education' (Western Cape Education Department, 2002) because we believe that this term provides a clear statement

of what is required in most African multilingual school systems. One of the most persistent legacies of Apartheid education is the myth that is alive in the minds of many parents across the country which equates mother tongue education with Bantu Education, and thus inferior education. Our response to this is clear: it is not a matter of **either** mother tongue **or** English, but **both** mother tongue **and** English.

However, the gap between policy and practice is glaring, and there is much advocacy and other persuasive work for language activists to do. The lack of governmental political will to implement policy is challenged in the following recent statement made by Neville Alexander (2004 forthcoming):

The fundamental issue is the failure of government to answer the simple question: should we base the education system of the new South Africa on the mother tongues (L1s, home languages) of the learners or should we base it, essentially, on the English language, even though the latter is the home language of under 9% of the population of the country and is “understood” by fewer than 50% of the population? The accumulation of evidence confirming that the prevailing English-mainly default language-medium policy, instead of compelling the decision makers to consider seriously going over to the policy of mother tongue-based bilingual education, elicits denialist responses... in the direction of “improving the competence of the learners in English.

In the absence of a committed position by government on this issue, we have concentrated on initiating and exploring the dynamics of small-scale development research projects, so that when the time comes for significant implementation, we will have some models to consider using. In the following pages I describe two development research projects we have conducted in the Western Cape Province of South Africa – the Battswood Bilingual Project and the

Free Reading in Schools Project. I then sketch the materials development process and end with a note on teacher training.

### **Battswood Biliteracy Project**

Soon after the government of national unity came into office, the ex 'white' and 'coloured' schools experienced an 'influx' of Xhosa - speaking children as parents who could afford to, tried to give their children a better education. A lack of planning for this eventuality gave rise to enormous difficulties for teachers, used to working with relatively uniform groups of children, sharing a language in common with them, namely one of the then two official languages, English or Afrikaans during the Apartheid years (Pluddemann et al 1998). What we now call the the Battswood biliteracy project began in 1998 under such conditions in a climate where South Africa now had 11 official languages and both the Constitution and Language in Education Policy (1997) made provision for promoting multilingualism and multilingual education. We attempted to bring Xhosa into a grade 1 mixed class of Xhosa and "English" (who were in fact Afrikaans-English bilingual children). Our intention was to use Xhosa as one of the languages of teaching for initial reading and writing, alongside English which was the official teaching medium of the school<sup>4</sup>. We would also introduce Xhosa to the 'English' speaking children. We hoped thereby to raise the status of Xhosa as a language for use in print in the eyes of both the Xhosa speaking and the 'English' speaking children (Bloch and Nkence 1999). Our strategy was to

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support a Xhosa speaking teacher, (Teacher Ntombi)<sup>5</sup>, to work alongside the resident English speaking teacher. This small scale intervention which finally came to an end in 2003, when the children were in Grade 6 ( final project report forthcoming), proved to be significant in various ways.

*We were able to introduce and explore different pedagogies for early literacy that challenged existing notions and classroom practices such as that:*

- having some mother tongue teaching means less English learning – therefore keep the mother tongue out of the classroom.
- children need to be taught through structured phonics based methods- because meaningful reading and writing can only come after the pre-requisite technical skills have been set in place.
- children become confused if they learn to read and write simultaneously in their mother tongue and an additional language – rather start with English literacy from grade 1 and don't burden them with the phonics and syntax of two languages,
- children should be introduced to a second language orally before in writing – therefore do only oral communication until children know some of the language.

*We were able to find out how to use an emergent literacy approach to enable children, most of whom came from 'low literacy' homes, to become motivated to want to read and write for personally meaningful reasons<sup>6</sup>.*

This we began to do in by:

- creating a print-rich environment: hunting for Xhosa and English stories to create a classroom with books in it ( still a rarity in most classrooms across sub-Saharan Africa); making our own reading materials – poster versions of rhymes, songs and stories and smaller A4 sheet versions, with English on 1 side and Xhosa on the other to read, at school in mother tongue and mixed language pairs or groups, and to take home to share with family members
- introducing interactive writing (Hall 1989) as a way to stimulate writing in both languages, risk taking, invented spellings, one-to-one nurturing (Bloch and Alexander 2002 )

*We experienced how the teachers own orientation to literacy and learning shifted as she took on the responsibility of communicating with the children in writing.*

- Gradually Teacher Ntombi worked harder at being a role model by trying to always write thoughtfully back to what each child was saying to her. She came to realize how important it was as she discovered how positively the children responded to her. As they grew to trust her, many shared their
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concerns and opened a window into their lives. They constantly showed her that they loved and appreciated her. She came to see how through meaningful interaction, learning happens.

- She also had to work on technical aspects, like making her handwriting neat, and using correct spelling and punctuation – because of the relatively few close engagements with print that ‘our’ children are exposed to, we felt that every opportunity was significant<sup>7</sup>.
- She had to be assertive about being a Xhosa writing role model with some children who tended to want to use English. Although we never forced the children into using a particular language, Ntombi tried to persuade those who were resistant (and there were a few children who thought English was ‘better’) by consistently answering or initiating in Xhosa.

*We learned how difficult but also important it is to involve parents and caregivers in reading with the children.*

- Although most parents came to be supportive about their children learning to read and write in two languages, our attempts to bring them into the classroom to share stories and read were largely unimpressive. We came to realize however, that starting small *is* significant – and that even if only one adult decides to participate, this relationship should be nurtured<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This understanding has finally led us to a small but growing family literacy project which my colleague, Melanie Zeederberg is facilitating in a bilingual English/Afrikaans school community.

*We realized that if we want children to become readers in their mother tongue, they have to have access to appropriate reading materials.* At that time, there was very little to read for young children in African languages – what existed were mainly storybooks originated in the North that had been translated<sup>9</sup>. We discovered that there were many problems with the quality of translation, and that several of the stories that did exist had mistakes that could confirm in the minds of skeptics that Xhosa cannot be used like English can.

At that time, although we knew how vital story reading can be for (literacy) learning and creativity, we hesitated to ‘push’ the storybook line, partly because the task was daunting and out of our scope, and partly because we were cautioned by the discussion in the North which urged against forcing a middle class mode of literacy learning onto immigrant and working class children, who ‘come to’ literacy in various ways, different but equally important (Heath 1983, Gregory 1996). Though there are clearly various routes to literacy (Goodman 1986), if we want to enable African children to learn to ‘read by reading’ we have to do something about developing storybooks and other reading material. The question that arises constantly in my mind is "Why should children in the South not have literacy learning made easier for them by having the option of enjoying storybooks in their mother tongues?"

At that time though, arising out of our wish to give the children at Battswood opportunities learn to read in authentic ways, the first resource that PRAESA

commissioned was a trilingual year calendar in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa to use in schools.

By the end of grade 6 we noticed:

- that the children were able to read and write equally in two languages (though some prefer using one or the other language).
- that the development of childrens English competence was not hindered despite the fact that they had, unlike most African language speaking children in 'ex white or coloured' schools, a significant proportion of their teaching through isiXhosa.
- The children were proud to be reading and writing in isiXhosa.

### **The Free Reading in Schools Project (FRISC)**

The idea for the FRISC project grew from a combination of insights. Some were gleaned at Battswood, where we saw for ourselves the benefits of allowing children regular opportunities to explore stories by being read to and by choosing books and reading for themselves, together with research evidence, particularly on Free Voluntary Reading (Krashen 1993). The Western Cape Education Department provided us with an ideal opportunity to legitimate this initiative when in 2001 they introduced a 'reading half hour' into the curriculum.



Our idea was to help teachers and children experience enjoying stories, in mother tongue and English, and to undertake a systematic exploration of how story reading assists with biliteracy development and additional language learning both in school beginners (g1), and children already in the intermediate phase (g4). We would run the programme for a minimum of 2 years - the research suggests a minimum of 1 year is needed to 'see results' and it is clear to me that most African children who have had so few book-related experiences need *more* time.

We decided to work only with willing teachers<sup>10</sup>, and although the focus was on particular classrooms, we aimed to encourage the whole school to benefit from this initiative, by sharing books, information and strategies in workshops.

PRAESA donated storybooks to the relevant classrooms as no schools had sufficient appropriate reading material on site<sup>11</sup>. We would role model reading aloud with teachers (who had already agreed to be in the classroom for this free reading time), but the teacher would also take on reading to the children and the facilitator would monitor the process. Time would be made for the children to select their own books to read silently or with a friend and there would be no expectations for the children to do any formal or didactic activities relating to the reading at all.

The project has now run for three years in a small selection of Cape Town schools. We are presently engaged in the analysis and writing up of the process, which has proved to be an invaluable one, mainly I think because it has delved into and identified as critical some issues which, on the surface, seem too obvious to bother about. My colleague, Xolisa Guzula, has been facilitating FRISC from a Xhosa language perspective and I use the following extracts from her observations to illustrate some of these.

The first observation is at the beginning of the project when Xolisa was getting to know one of the schools, Blesbok Primary, a very large school catering for children in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town.

*16.08.01-Thursday Blesbok*

*...Later on I went to read to the Grade 4s ... I found a 'coloured' woman who was teaching them about their rights. She had a pipe (to keep 'control' CB) in her hand and the children were very noisy. Fortunately, her period was over and I started with my reading. I asked the class whether they had been read to before or even now at school and at home. They told me that they have never been read to. They are not read to at school. I told them that I go to their school to make sure that stories are read to them and that they have access to story books so that they can choose books out of interest and read them. They were happy and as I read the story they gave me all the attention they could give me. The class was dead silent you could even hear a coin dropping on the floor. Even though I*

*went there having prepared to read only one story, I ended up reading three stories for them because they kept asking me to read the next one.*

Consistently and unsurprisingly, the children, whoever they are, love listening to stories. This fundamental and wonderful fact, which we see as the starting point for many further insights - educational and otherwise, is a surprise to many teachers, who do not easily identify with the value of stories. One can surmise, that this has to do, in part, at least with teachers seeing themselves as the givers of skills and knowledge, and a corresponding difficulty with viewing the children as meaning makers and constructors of their own knowledge.

What follows captures the ongoing challenge Xolisa has experienced when trying to encourage teachers to take on the role of reading daily to children:

*Teachers at Zimbini seem very enthusiastic about reading when one speaks to them. However, in practice, it is different story. Grade 4 children reported at one stage that their teacher last read to them before June (2002). They read on their own. The teacher has witnessed me on many occasions reading to the class but hasn't taken that initiative. Sometimes when I'm there she asks them to read silently but she does other things, like going to the office or attend to another teacher to discuss their things.*

*Xolisa Guzula notes November 2002*

The next observavtion illustrates the frustration Xolisa has sometimes felt with situations where clearly the best interests of the children is not considered and she has to deal with the problem that arises where teachers under duress 'take advantage' of the extra support she brings:

*...The teacher sees me in the staff room and says "let's go but I'm going to leave the children with you. I am busy". I told her that this period (lesson time CB) is very important like her other periods. She said that she's very busy because one of the students has passed away. I told her that I understand that but can't she do what she needs to do afterwards. The teacher says she is not sure whether to give children books to read or read to them but she is going to leave them at eleven. I tell her to give children books so that they can read on their own. She then asks two boys to go and fetch books with her. Meanwhile children are spending most of their time sweeping the classroom. Books don't stay in the classroom. This is depressing and frustrating. There are only two posters with nouns and verbs on the walls. After the literacy half hour I went to the staff room and found the teacher eating fish and chips with another teacher. And it seemed that this is what kept her busy. I sense that the teachers are not taking the literacy half hour seriously. Later on she came to to ask me what I did with the children. I told her that we did folktales. The teacher told me that she is tired form being an MC in the memorial service and her body is sore from practicing drum marjorettes with the children. That was the excuse she could give me. I was angry and frustrated.*

I don't want to paint a completely gloomy picture - there are some very motivated and inspiring teachers as well. This extract is from Xolisa's report in June 2002 in a church supported small multilingual (English, Afrikaans, Xhosa) school which is relatively well resourced and had recently employed a Xhosa teacher specifically to support Xhosa development in the school.

*Reports from the Xhosa teacher (Teacher C) were positive ones as she reported that most parents are helping their children to read isiXhosa at home. Children in*

*Teacher C's classes hadn't had teaching in mother- tongue, especially those who are were doing Grade 4 last year. The Grade 1's at the moment are the lucky ones because they are starting to learn mother tongue form the very beginning. Teacher C also reported that there was only one exception, in a Grade 1 class where a child's parent threatened to move the child to another school because she hadn't sent the child to the school to learn isiXhosa. The parent was angry because the child was mainly interested in reading Xhosa books at home and that they do not see where the child is going to go with isiXhosa.*

The extract gives a sense of the enormous challenges we face in addressing parental attitudes about using African languages in school. The sentiment expressed by this parent is a common one which reflects the belief that the use of one language will hinder the development of another - such parents feel that their child already knows their mother tongue, and doesn't need to waste time on it at school.

However, we cannot escape the reality that we need to address the challenge of a large majority of teachers who are poorly trained and extremely demotivated<sup>1 2</sup>. This final extract also from November 2002, confirms the importance of establishing authentic and supportive mentoring relationships, as well as the fact that the shortage of reading materials in African languages is a major constraint to developing reading in African languages.

*Teacher D is much better now (NOV 2002). She seems to understand how the project works. (The fact that she is) Making time to chat to me and I trying to build a good relationship with her has provided her with new insights into the project. She reported using different strategies in the classroom, like getting children to touch books and read on their own. For most part of this year, she's only been reading aloud to them. She's worried about the level of the books in grade 5 because the children say the books are boring. It seems like for next year we'll need novel- like books for them to read. It has only been a year and ¾ and we've run out of books in African languages.*

### **Towards a Culture of Reading**

Insights gained in the above two research projects, have contributed towards us initiating what we loosely call the Culture of Reading Project. We secured financial support in 2001 for what we see as an essential project to break through the economic argument that "There is no-market for African languages, therefore

no point in publishing in these languages". Our intention has been to help to stimulate the market by developing, distributing and monitoring the use of stories for children ranging in age from preschool to teenage, both original and through translations<sup>13</sup>. In some cases we have published alone as PRAESA and in others we have collaborated with publishers willing to publish in African languages. We have been able to work to mutual benefit, by entering agreements where we can guarantee print runs which makes the process 'worthwhile' for the publisher. Working in Afrikaans, Xhosa and English, PRAESA's has developed several books for children, both original writing, and translations.

An important consideration has been how to help to facilitate the mentoring and involvement of new African writers and illustrators. For obvious historical reasons this domain has rested largely in the hands of middle class English (or Afrikaans) speakers. But very little has changed since 1994 and the question of who's responsibility it is to nurture this process needs to be asked. Most educational publishers are too busy dancing to the tune of government deadlines for textbook submissions to take the time. We have recently facilitated two such writers and illustrators workshops at PRAESA, and collaborated with a publisher to produce 6 original stories which are now in 11 languages. Although in some ways the stories and the illustrations are 'raw', they demonstrate the way that such opportunities can give creative expression to voices previously unheard, and certainly these are stories that resonate for many South African children. We are

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convinced that we need to increase substantially both original writing and illustration, and translations in order to give birth to a creative and substantive body of children's literature.

### **Teacher Training**

One of the reasons that we know that the early literacy situation is so serious, is that for 3 years now, we have been running a 5 week long intensive training of trainers course for multilingual education. This has been attended by participants who are mainly teacher trainers, language planners, and African language specialists from several African countries<sup>14</sup>. We include components on early language and literacy learning as well as materials development for multilingual classrooms. Our aim is to help trainers empower themselves so that they can share appropriate pedagogical ideas and strategies with teachers. Many countries have undergone curriculum change or are in the midst of it. The thrust is usually towards 'learner centred' education. It is extremely difficult to get beyond the level of rhetoric with this process because trainers themselves have not had opportunities to experience what they are expected to impart. In Namibia, for example, where learner centred education has been 'implemented' since Independence in 1991, and many staff have undergone many workshops, few, if any teachers know *how* to actually transform the received information into practice.



To help address this issue, and to help ensure that participants have access to what they need for training<sup>1 5</sup>, we are presently completing a set of Training for Early Literacy Learning (TELL) materials that we will make widely available. This endeavour has been a collaborative effort between PRAESA and the National Centre for Language and Literacy (NCLL) at Reading University in the UK. Once Viv Edwards and I discovered that we have share many similar language-related pedagogical issues, we realized that rather than re-invent the wheel, we could adapt a set of training materials she had already developed for early literacy in the UK. We have considered very carefully how to make these materials facilitate as far as possible, the desirable conceptual shifts trainers and teachers need to make. We have done this by including information, activities that explore pedagogical points and reflective exercises. The materials will provide, we hope a kind of generic structural framework on which trainers in different countries will be able to add their own intricacies and details to.

Assuming that demonstrations of possible good practice facilitate comprehension, we have also made a video for teacher trainers and teachers – *Feeling at Home with Literacy*. Set in Cape Town<sup>1 6</sup>, the video follows a little Xhosa speaking child, Zia from home to school and then back home again, highlighting aspects including how literacy can be part of home *and* school practices, that it can be enjoyable, the resourcefulness of young children as they start making meaning using print, how mother tongue can be used alongside

English for teaching and learning, and the importance of play and imagination for early literacy development.

## **Conclusion**

This is work in progress. There is no doubt that we struggle against prevailing global economic conditions. Reflect on the following statement to get a sense of what I mean: The recent article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (August 2004) which I have already mentioned, ends with the following words

The cost of saving the Timbuktu manuscripts is estimated at \$5.6 million - which is 60 times less than the sum that EuroDisney has just demanded from shareholders to save its Paris theme park. Yet the preservation of this gold mine of African history is still at risk.

But there are also many points of light that keep us going. A recent language-focussed initiative on the continent is gaining strength and support. We now have an officially constituted language organization of the African Union (AU), the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN). Under its umbrella, several continent-wide projects which will further the intellectualization and development of African languages are being initiated. These include a joint masters programme, a translation project, a terminology project having 2006 declared by the AU as the 'Year of African Languages', and the 'Stories Across Africa' project which will involve us in working towards creating treasuries of the same stories, gathered from different sources in Africa, reworked and illustrated, for children to read wherever they are, in their own language. The energy generated by these we hope

will help to engender a sense of purpose, affinity and a love of reading among the future African citizens.

## **Endnotes**

1. I will refer only to English for the purposes of this paper.
2. There are also situations (usually urban) which are multilingual in the sense that there are several languages spoken by the children and these are not necessarily known to the teacher. Though significant, these are a minority, and obviously have to be considered differently. Such situations tend often to be used as an 'explanation' for why mother tongue education is not feasible.
3. ECD is a term that we use to refer to the phase from 0-9 in South Africa. In formal schooling terms, it now includes non-formal preschooling and the 'Foundation Phase' of formal education (reception year, grades 1 to 3).
4. Our concentration was on Xhosa. With the wisdom of hindsight, we realised that we should have followed exactly the same process with the 'English' children - ie supported biliteracy in English and Afrikaans. At the time, we didn't have the resources to do so.
5. My colleague, Ntombizanele Nkence, who had at the time recently graduated from teacher training took up this post and worked with the children for the entire 6 year period.
6. Recent assessment results are devastating. They suggest that "most" Grade 3 and Grade 6 children in the Western Cape are unable to read at grade level and that numeracy performances are even worse (See media statement issued by the Western Cape MEC for Education, on 25 May 2004); that the catastrophic drop in the number and in the quality of matric passes, in spite of attempts at manipulating the figures; the first-and second-year drop-out rates at universities and technikons, and the repeater rates throughout the system (see Blaine 2004). The problem that is endemic with reading, is that children learn to decode, but don't understand what they are reading, and with writing, they copy sentences but cannot compose their own text.
7. I think that this fact needs to be taken into account in print-scarce education systems. Children should be given enough time to learn to spell, because it takes longer when there is so little reading that happens, and this may well be more than what is appropriate in 'literate' communities.
8. This understanding has finally led us to a small but growing family literacy project which my colleague, Melanie Zeederberg is facilitating in a bilingual English/Afrikaans school community.
9. Various sporadic attempts by publishers with integrity over the years gave rise to poor, if any sales, and a consequent widespread attitude in the industry that 'there is no market for African language children's books' apart from selective textbooks. This attitude still dominates though it is now being systematically challenged, albeit in a small way.

10. We had learned from experience at the inception of the Battswood project, that it is better to work a) with functioning schools, and b) with teachers who want to participate.
11. Despite the expressed intention by the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal to "break the back of illiteracy", provision for school and public libraries has dropped steadily.
12. In fact, last week (16<sup>th</sup> September 2004) saw the largest national day long strike by teachers and other civil servants since the 'new' South Africa came into being in 1994.
13. A translation unit was established to deal with the various translations. Their commitment has been towards developing a feeling for translating children's literature. They have set out to learn about and deal with a range of complex issues that inevitably arise when working with languages that have not been used widely in print.
14. For instance: Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon.
15. Apart from adequate library facilities, all participants relate anecdotes about the lack of political will to support mother tongue education, the dearth of learning materials, the lack of teacher training, the overcrowded classrooms, not to mention the devastation caused by the HIV AIDS pandemic and other social and economic factors.
- 16.** We are presently planning a second video in a rural setting.

## **APPENDIX**

### **CENSUS 2001 STATISTICS**

**Population** 44 819 778

#### **% OF FIRST HOME LANGUAGE SPEAKERS**

<b>%</b>	<b>LANGUAGE</b>
23.8	isiZulu
17.6	isiXhosa
13.3	Afrikaans
9.4	Sepedi
8.2	English
8.2	Setswana
7.9	Sesotho
4.4	Xitsonga
2.7	Siswati
2.3	Tshvenda
1.6	IsiNdebele
0.5	Other

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