

# **Early Literacy Learning and Poverty and Social Inequality in Post-apartheid South Africa<sup>1</sup>**

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The focus of my talk is on the connections between early literacy learning and poverty and social inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. It is about how our education system inadvertently contributes to the reproduction of poverty and social inequality rather than to its reduction at the very least or its eradication at best. How we teach, resource and assess literacy ensures that the vast majority of our children in poor urban and rural schools do not and will not - without a fundamental shift in how we go about things - catch up with their counterparts in middle class schools. Because of their very different starting point, children in poor schools are caught in a poverty trap (van der Berg, Burger, Burger, de Vos, et al, 2011). Often they develop only weak literacy skills that do not translate into good matric grades, grades they need to get into prestigious higher education institutions, and eventually into sought after trades and professions. Many of them wind up unemployed or indeed unemployable; or in dead-end, low-paying jobs; or in the bottom rungs of precarious small businesses.

This is no cheap populism. It is not about pandering to indolent teachers or reluctant parents. It is about facing facts. While many teachers in poor urban and rural schools may not be terribly effective, judging by results on provincial and national tests, my experience of working in some of these schools is that many teachers are hard-working and well-meaning. Supposing this is true how come then, two decades after democracy do we see such little improvement? This question is the subject of my talk.

## **Colonialism, apartheid, and the struggle**

One form in which poverty and social inequality expresses itself in South Africa is inequality of educational opportunity. Inequality is rooted in our colonial and apartheid past. Failure to keep this in mind and therefore to trace our problems to their roots has often led to well-intentioned but ill-judged interventions aimed to improve the quality education. There are

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many ways in which colonialism and apartheid and the struggle against apartheid have shaped the present educational landscape. Two have had a lasting impact on our educational system.

The first has to do with how we deal with the question of language in our country. We have not learned as a society that it is not possible to devalue a language without also devaluing those who speak it. The ambivalence and lacklustre support for African languages by post-apartheid governments can be explained in terms of what both the British colonial and apartheid government did. In the case of the British, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they restricted use of African languages to the first three years of primary education in mission schools (Alexander, 1989). We have mindlessly followed this practice in spite of the fact that study after study shows that the vast majority of African language speaking children in poor schools and in communities where little English is used outside of school, have not developed good enough English to learn through this language at the beginning of grade four. In 1955 the apartheid government went in the opposite direction and extended use of African languages in all content subjects from three to seven years, that is, to the end of primary education. An *unintended* effect of this was to clearly demonstrate that use of African languages for an extended period made it easier rather than harder to teach and learn English and English-medium content subjects. This fact was reflected in pass rates in the junior and senior certificate examinations taken in English (Heugh, 2002).

However, because the real intention behind the extension of the use of African languages to the end of primary education was an attempt to prevent Black children from accessing English and therefore from English-medium higher education, African languages in education became associated with apartheid and both were to be rejected by students in 1976. It is true that moedertaal/ mother tongue education was part of the apartheid's government policy of divide and rule. By promoting mother tongue education, along with so-called homelands corresponding to these language groups, the government hoped to keep Black people weak and divided into hostile and competing 'tribes' and therefore unable to challenge and defeat grand apartheid. Like many people today, students of the time instinctively but quite mistakenly, associated English with progress and national unity and African languages (including Afrikaans) with backwardness and division. Because of this, as the late Neville Alexander said once, the universally pedagogically sound principle of using

the 'mother' tongue or most familiar language in primary education (the baby) was thrown out with the bath water (Bantu education) (Alexander, 2014). So that from 1977 use of African languages as languages of learning and teaching was cut back from seven to three years, turning the clock back to the old British colonial period. The students could not foresee the devastation that would follow in the wake of trying to pursue a policy of teaching, from the third or fourth year of school, in a language that many primary schoolteachers struggle with, that children do not know well, and which their parents or caregivers are unable to support.

The cumulative effect of colonialism and apartheid and the failure of post-apartheid governments to deal with the language issue is that many educated African language speaking people today have what can be gently described as 'mixed feelings' for African languages. They at once regard them with suspicion as a potential threat to Black solidarity and unity, at other times with disdain as inherently incapable of speaking the language of science or philosophy, and yet at other times as carriers of 'true' African values, culture and identity.

Public and governmental attitudes to African languages are changing. Some initiatives are underway to improve their status in various social domains and to use them as languages of teaching and learning beyond primary education (see Hibbert and van der Walt, 2014 for some examples). However, the effects of the long period of their devaluing and neglect continues to be felt. Still too few people are involved in teaching and researching African languages in our universities, in particular in teaching and researching literacy development in these languages. The result is that we know remarkably very little about how children learn African languages from birth, and how they learn to read and write in these languages. We know little about how speech, phonics and spelling develops in these languages. All our work in teacher training and development, literacy curriculum planning and development, learner materials, and pedagogy in relation to these languages is based on no more than analogy with English, on intuition, and educated guess work.

If the situation is as dire as I claim, would it not be better to concentrate our resources and energies on improving teaching and learning through the medium of English? In other words, why don't we begin teaching through English right from grade R or earlier. After all, isn't this what an isiXhosa speaking children in an English-medium, middle class preschool and school has?

A short answer to this question is an emphatic NO. This is not what an isiXhosa speaking child in an English-medium, middle class preschool and schools has. The situation of a middle class African language speaking child is quite different from that of their poor urban and rural cousins. A longer answer to this question involves first recognising that we already have English-medium education for African language speaking children. We've had it since 1977. As you know, for the first three or four years of schooling, African language speaking children, at least officially, are taught in English. Thus since 1977 considerable sums of money and effort has gone into propping up English-medium education in South Africa. This has involved research into the development and testing of English as an Additional/Second Language teaching and learning materials, teacher training programmes, and pedagogy. All this work has had little effect on children's learning outcomes.

This is not to say that children in poor urban or rural schools cannot learn through English. Of course they can. In fact these children can learn in ANY language provided the following minimum CONDITIONS are met. Provided the children and in particular, their teachers, have a good command of the language of teaching and learning. Provided their teachers are well trained and supported to teach through this language. Provided that the learners have access to and use the language of teaching and learning inside and outside of the classroom (in particular in the playground). This is crucial because in the early stages of Additional/Second acquisition, say, grades 1-4, much of young children's language input is via aural and oral communication with peers, siblings and caregivers rather than through reading. This is because at this stage children's reading skills are not that developed and therefore the amount of language input they can obtain through reading is limited. Finally, children can learn in any language provided they and their teachers have access to appropriate and adequate resources and teaching and learning materials to support the learning of and through a designated language.

On the question of English, a decisive difference between ex-model C schools on the one hand, and poor rural and township schools on the other hand, is that in the ex-model C schools children have access to teachers who are proficient speakers and users of English. Also they have access to appropriate and adequate teaching and learning resources to learn English and to learn through the medium of English. They are taught in significantly smaller classrooms which means children are better supported to learn. Caregivers can pay for

language and learning remediation services when required. And, crucially, African language speaking children enrolled in these schools tend to be bilingual, even if unequally, in English and an African language. That is, these children have access to and use a considerable amount of English inside and outside the classroom. In contrast, in poor rural or urban schools teachers often do not have a strong command of English, and even when they do, they often find that it is unnatural and cumbersome to conduct classroom communication in a language that children do not understand and therefore in these classrooms communication is conducted largely in (an) African language(s) codeswitched with English (Probyn, 2009). In these schools classroom size is generally large, children have little or no access to language and learning remediation services, teaching and learning materials are often inadequate, and the children hear and use very little English outside of the classroom.

Language learning, including learning the mother tongue, is life-long process-which does not begin and stop with the classroom (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Much of the informal or incidental learning of language (in this case, English) in the normal course of daily life (such as during play and informal talk with peers, siblings or caregivers available to English speaking children in ex-Model C schools and middle class homes) is shut off for poor and non-English speaking children. The overall effect of this is that, over time, these children will learn a great deal of English but the central problem is that their rate and depth of language learning will be too slow and too shallow to keep up with increasing cognitive and language demands of the curriculum from year to year. In general what tends to occur with these children is that the longer they stay in school, the wider the gap between their knowledge of English and that of their counterparts in ex-Model C schools and English speaking communities. This partially accounts for the high dropout or pushout rate for children in poor schools with little access to English.

The second way in which colonialism and apartheid and the struggle against apartheid have shaped the present educational landscape has to do with what has been referred to as a breakdown in a “culture of learning and teaching” in many poor urban and rural schools. The phrase is all-encompassing but in this talk it refers only to school organisation and management aspects of a school culture. This aspect of culture is of course grounded in and organised around school physical infrastructure, materials and other physical resources. The material forms of school culture are essential to sustain a healthy and productive school

culture. What I want to draw your attention to is two aspects of human or interpersonal aspects of culture that have broken down in our schools, making our work of turning around schools that much harder.

One aspect of this culture has to do with school based teacher training or on-the-job learning training. To become a proficient teacher takes about five years after receiving a formal teaching qualification. What a good initial teacher education programme can do is provide a candidate teacher with ways of listening, seeing and thinking about the classroom and with some initial practice on how to teach. My view is that it matters much more where teachers teach in the first five years of their careers than where they are trained or where they do their teaching practice. This is because on the job new teachers learn in a concrete way what it means to keep expectations high for every child, how to collaborate with other teachers in their phase, how to do classroom and school level administration, how to partner with parents around their children, and how to teach day in and day out a class of children with diverse needs, interests and strengths without going mad. University education makes broad suggestions about what to do in these situations but there isn't enough time in a teacher training programme to teach him/her precisely what to do. The kind of knowledge needed to run successful classrooms is context dependent and context-sensitive and is best role modelled by other teachers working in a similar setting. On-the-job training can be described as a form of enculturation. That is, it is about helping a novice become a member of a culture by having him/her observe, assimilate and talk things through with established and successful members of a culture. Much of the 'training', if this is indeed the right word for it, occurs informally in the course of doing work rather than in specially organised workshops. Not that there is anything wrong with workshops as such. Enculturation into a high performance culture has collapsed in many poor urban and rural schools in which I work. New teachers there sink or swim on their own.

The breakdown can be traced to apartheid and the struggles against it. Apartheid era education officials often treated Black teachers with disrespect, suspicion and in an authoritarian manner. For instance, some of the so-called White people employed to oversee Black education were not education professions at all but ex-military people, some did not have any form of higher education, and many of those who were formally qualified were often authoritarian and arbitrary in their treatment of principals, PTAs and the Black community in

general. A well-known example of the arbitrariness of the Bantu Education system is the act of one newly appointed school inspector who announced in 1976, without consultation, that all students in year nine would be required to take their mathematics examination in Afrikaans the following year. This act triggered the student uprising. A culture of disrespect, fear, and suspicion permeated the entire Bantu education system. Principals, deputy principals, and Heads of Departments (HoDs) treated those below them with disrespect. Ordinary teachers treated learners in an authoritarian manner and their parents with disdain. Whatever semblance of school functionality this culture informed, it could not be sustained because it was fundamentally unjust. Indeed in the 1980s teacher unions denounced, resisted and overthrew it. Whatever the reasons, teacher unions, government, universities and civil society more generally, have failed to replace this school culture with a high performance, democratic and humane culture. Instead a kind of a vacuum developed in many of our schools which was filled by school dysfunction exemplified by teacher absenteeism and foot-dragging and a lack of respect for experience and seniority. In these schools the mechanisms for older or more experienced teachers to pass on their wisdom, experiences and practices to younger or novice teachers are broken. As a result, despite years of education reform and intervention work, many of these look like and feel like they are always starting from scratch. The schools have little ability to learn from themselves, to absorb new knowledge and strategies, and to adapt and pass on progressively refined educational expertise to a new generation of their colleagues. Even when these schools are functional at one point in time, they struggle to create and recreate themselves as high performance school cultures. I want to stress that unless we can figure out, as an education community, how to support these schools, much of our innovative educational intervention work will not be absorbed and when it is, it will be short-lived.

The other aspect of school culture that has broken down is the inability of many poor urban and rural schools to hold teachers accountable. I will talk about this aspect very briefly because it is aired often in the media by people like Jonathan Jansen. The basic point I want to make is that principals, sometimes even district officials, often feel that they do not have the backing of senior officials and politicians to hold to account indolent or truant teachers. In some schools this has gotten so bad that I can only imagine that dismissible offences must be limited only to extreme cases such as a teacher being caught red-handed molesting or

killing a learner. Anything else is vigorously challenged and defended by teacher unions. In passing, I want to state that I of course support the need for and the right of teachers to organise themselves into fiercely independent teacher unions. In fact the role of teacher unions will become increasingly more important in this century as persistent moves are made to de-professionalize the teaching profession. The fact though is that you have ceased to have a school if a School Governing Body (SGB), principal or HoD is unable to take disciplinary steps or where necessary, to recommend a teacher to be dismissed. Yet most of our schools lack this basic ability. To be sure, the lack of local accountability is not the invention of the new government but a legacy of apartheid. In that era Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), Black principals and HoDs had no power to hire or fire teachers. Such powers were held in some far away centre by apartheid state apparatchiks. To conclude this point, I want to emphasize to hold teachers to account in itself will not solve all our many educational problems, but without doing so whatever else we do has little chance of succeeding.

A combined effect of a breakdown in the ability to create and recreate themselves as high performance cultures and in holding teacher to account is that poor children in many poor schools have access to impoverished educational opportunities.

### **Concrete ways in which poverty and social inequality impacts literacy**

Now I turn to some of the concrete ways in which poverty and social inequality impoverishes early literacy experiences of children from working class and poor communities. Early literacy depends on the simultaneous development and mutual reinforcement of speaking and listening, reading and writing skills. To summarise: good listening and speaking skills depend on a large aural and oral vocabulary and a command of grammar. In turn a large vocabulary and good grammar partly rely on extensive reading either by reading oneself or by listening to many texts read aloud by a competent adult. To understand what one reads or what is read to one, a child requires extensive knowledge of spoken language which is acquired through listening to and participating in conversations with more proficient speakers. Finally, it is well-known that good writing skills depend on extensive reading. In other words, development of high levels of literacy result from strong interconnections between all these aspects of literacy.

Let us look at each one from the point of view of an isiXhosa speaking child in a poor urban or rural school in contrast to an English speaking, middle class child.

### *Speaking and listening*

Regarding basic listening and speaking skills, isiXhosa speaking poor urban and rural parents and communities do just as well as their English speaking, middle class counterparts in helping their children to learn the basic vocabulary and grammar of their languages and to communicate with a variety of people in a range of situations by the age of six. That is, there is no difference between poor isiXhosa and middle class English speaking children in terms of their ability to conduct everyday communication in their respective languages. However, an important difference emerges when we distinguish between listening and speaking skills necessary to conduct everyday communication from those required to those necessary to understand literate spoken language. This has to do with differing exposure to and immersion in literacy between these groups of children. In general, by the time middle class children begin school - even before they begin to read and write in a conventional sense - they tend to have larger oral vocabularies, sophisticated sentences associated with the language of books, and longer attention spans for listening to written materials read aloud and, therefore, to have a large store of background knowledge which is necessary to understand what is read to them. In other words, middle class children have an enormous and you might say, unfair head start over poorer children.

Therefore even before children begin their first day of school, middle class children as a group, are well ahead of their working class or poor counterparts. This is made possible by a combination of an accident of birth of being born into literate homes, into homes that can afford to purchase a lot of print or can gain access to it easily, and into homes that can afford high quality preschool programmes. In contrast, many poor children do not have access to quality preschool programmes, tend to live in homes with little access to print and weak traditions of literacy (Neuman and Celano, 2001).

### *Reading and writing*

In terms of reading and writing, learning an alphabetic script is time-consuming because to young children the squiggles we call the alphabet look remarkably similar. To learn an alphabetic script requires a huge amount of practice in the early stages of literacy acquisition.

There is no substitute for immersion and meaningful repeated practice. In order for children to learn to use the alphabet independently and with confidence by the end of, say, grade 1, they need to master (NICHD, 2000):

- Sound-letter correspondence (phonics);
- Combining and taking apart syllables and words, and in the case of African languages, also short phrases;
- (fluent) word identification; and

they must do all of the above while self-monitoring for understanding/ meaning/ comprehension as they read. As you can imagine, this is much more difficult for children to do this in an unfamiliar Additional/Second Language.

Although learning an alphabetic writing system is time-consuming, it is not in itself complicated. Appropriate resources, classroom size, good pedagogy and poverty and social inequality play in the rate and depth of learning alphabetic writing system. ALL children, regardless of social class, school type or literacy approach followed by a classroom teacher, need the support of another adult over and above that offered by a teacher in a regular classroom in order to be able to learn to read independently, at the highest level of their grade, and as early as possible. This is true even in the smallest and well-resourced of classrooms, staffed by a motivated and well-trained teacher. This is because there is not enough time in a school day for a teacher to become aware of and to resolve all the inevitable partial understandings, misunderstandings and misconceptions that each child picks up in the course of learning to use an alphabetic writing system. In general because poor rural and urban children either come from poor resourced preschool from no schools at all, they need the most help to get started with reading but in fact the least. Typically they are stuffed in large, under-resourced classrooms and with the least skilled literacy teachers.

Classroom size influences the rate and depth of literacy acquisition. Different children get stuck on different aspects of learning to use the alphabetic system to read and write. In order to be of help to each child you need to know where each one is stuck and to have the time to get them unstuck. This can happen only in a relatively small classroom or in a classroom where additional adult help is available in the form of a teaching assistant, for instance. Thus the issue is not that children in large and poor rural classrooms learn nothing

about how to read and write, nor is it about whether or not they will eventually learn to do so, but that the rate and depth of their learning is much too slow and shallow for the grades in which they are in (Ramadiro, 2012).

In conclusion, a central message of this talk is not that all education intervention work is doomed to failure because of poverty and social inequality and therefore we should throw up our hands in defeat. My message is that our efforts to improve the quality of education for all is doubly made difficult by the stubborn fact that is poverty and social inequality. I'm calling on us to strengthen our resolve and to be even more imaginative in our proposed solutions. Also, I hope that I haven't given you the impression that I diminish the hard work of Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioners and teachers working in middle class settings. All I argue is that because of the privileged settings in which they work, they are essentially running with the wind on their back and therefore can get much further and a lot easier. In poor schools, teachers and children swim up a waterfall. It is for this reason that so few of our intervention programmes succeed or become sustainable.

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