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The socio-educational context of literacy accomplishment in disadvantaged schools: Lessons for reading in the early primary school years[1]

A B S T R A C T Literacy does not develop in a vacuum. Reading is taught and is learnt within a social context, and the school and teachers are a central part of this context. This context will affect the way learners acquire literacy as well as the consequences of their literacy accomplishments within the learning environment. This article presents findings from a study that assessed Grade 1 learners' literacy accomplishments and examined the school literacy context as well as the literacy practices and perceptions of teachers in a primary school. The findings are discussed in relation to the broader school literacy environment and the learners' literacy achievements. The findings indicate that the acquisition of literacy skills is the product of a set of socio-educational circumstances that translate themselves into specific literacy environments for learners. The article concludes by identifying some implications that follow from the findings.

Key words: reading; literacy assessment; assessment standards; socio-educational context of literacy

1. Introduction

Reading is a core competency at school and all academic achievement depends to a lesser or greater extent on reading literacy. The ability to read refers to more than just being able to recognise letters and decode words; it includes the ability to construct meaning from the written word and familiarity with the various forms and functions of written texts. We live in a world that relies to a large extent for its functioning on the written word, and we are part of a global

1 This article is based on a paper delivered by the author at the LSSA/SAALA Conference held at RAU, Johannesburg, 30 June – 2 July 2003.

economy that requires a high level of literacy competence to survive. As long ago as the early eighties, Chall (1983: 3) argued that there were even greater demands on learners to achieve higher literacy levels than had been the case a few decades ago:

> ... we are newly entered on a third literacy revolution brought about by the great increase of knowledge and the efficiency of the media to convey it. This knowledge revolution has brought with it the need for a greater level of literacy among more people than ever before. It contrasts with the two earlier revolutions – the agricultural and the industrial – each requiring much lower levels of literacy.

Learners who fail to become proficient readers are unlikely to do well at school or even after school. Moreover, they are generally less exposed to new ideas and experiences than are those who read with ease. There is a large body of research which shows a robust relationship between reading and academic performance (e.g. Saville-Troike, 1984; Wells, 1986; Pretorius, 2002). Proficient readers are able to access written sources. This enables them to broaden their general knowledge, increase their vocabulary and develop strong language skills (e.g. Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993; Vivas, 1996). In the information society of the 21st century, reading and the ability to find and use information effectively are basic conditions for survival (Bruce, 1995; Sayed & de Jager, 1997). Contrary to expectations that new technology will diminish the dependency on the written word and textual literacy, electronic information requires a sophisticated level of reading ability in order to be able to search for, select, retrieve and use information (Sayed & De Jager, 1997).

In order for sound reading competence to be established in South African schools, it is essential to understand the factors that hinder the development of reading skills and avoid or minimise them where possible, at the same time nurturing those factors that promote skilled reading literacy. A consideration of the reading situation in South African schools calls for the recognition that reading is both an individual cognitive-linguistic achievement and also a socially constructed form of human behaviour. It is therefore important to examine the interrelationship between these two factors. Expectations about what literacy entails depend on the sociocultural context in which specific types of literacy occur, their functions and how they are valued by their communities. Notions of what it means to be literate vary within and across cultures, and these notions affect home, school, work and community literacy practices, the levels of literacy that are attained, the materials that are used for teaching and practising literacy, and the instructional practices that are used for teaching literacy (e.g. Allen & Rubin, 1993).

In this article we examine some socio-educational dimensions of reading literacy within the learning context of five disadvantaged rural primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. We present the results of end-of-the-year reading assessments of a group of Grade 1 learners from the given schools, and examine the broader socio-educational context in which the learners acquired their reading skills. We also explore some of the literacy perceptions and practices of the Foundation Phase teachers at the schools. This study was carried out as part of a larger research project in which an out-of-school literacy enrichment programme for Grades 1 and 4 was evaluated. The article concludes with a discussion of some implications that follow from the findings.

2. Factors affecting literacy

Reading takes place and is learnt within a broader social context. Schools and teachers constitute an important component of this social context. The context within which literacy is taught and acquired will have an effect on the consequent levels of literacy accomplishment. Research indicates that both the home and the school literacy environment influences and affects children's acquisition and development of reading literacy (De Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986; Luke, 1988; Elley, 1994). Literacy instruction at school not only teaches children how to read but also enculturates them into the functions and value of literacy within society (Luke, 1988: 17). This is especially true in areas where there is a high rate of illiteracy and where children are not exposed to many literacy events in the home. Literacy practices at school are thus exceptionally important in contexts where there is little literacy support in the home environment.

There is a range of school-based resources and inputs that can influence literacy outcomes within the formal learning context. It is well documented, for example, that learners in well resourced schools tend to attain higher literacy levels than learners from high poverty schools (Elley, 1994; Allington, 2002). Other factors that can impact on literacy outcomes include the availability of textbooks, availability and accessibility of reading material in general (e.g. via classroom or school libraries), and instructional time set aside for language in general and reading instruction in particular. The little local research that is available indicates that there is a strong reliance on the teaching of the more technical decoding skills of reading (i.e. learning the alphabetic principle and 'translating' written symbols into meaningful language), with far less attention given to reading for comprehension. Although decoding is a necessary reading skill, it is not sufficient, for it is comprehension that makes reading a meaningful activity. Many readers may decode texts quite well but still have difficulty understanding what they have decoded (e.g. Yuill & Oakhill, 1991; Flanagan, 1995). In fact, local research reports that many learners from disadvantaged schools can decode texts quite fluently but have very poor understanding of what they have read (Macdonald, 1990; Strauss, 1995).

Teachers, naturally, are an important part of a school(s resources. Criteria for what makes a good teacher may differ within and between countries and cultures. Teacher-based factors that can influence learner outcomes include teacher education, qualification, training and experience, classroom management and discipline, instructional approaches to reading, and the personality of the teacher and his/her attitude to learners (e.g. Hoffman, 1991; Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole 2000).

In South Africa, very few standardised reading tests are conducted at provincial or national level at primary or high schools so it is difficult to ascertain whether learners attain literacy levels appropriate for their grade levels[2]. There is little research on reading in South Africa, so it is also difficult to determine how and to what extent school-based resources impact on the levels of literacy attained. The research that is available indicates that, in general, South African learners(reading skills are poorly developed, from primary school through to tertiary level (e.g. Macdonald, 1990, 2002; Perkins, 1991; Strauss, 1995; Pretorius & Ribbens). Research further

2 The Western Cape Education Department has conducted standardised literacy and numeracy tests for the past two years. The findings confirm that learners in 'poor' schools still perform badly and the gap has not narrowed since 1994.

indicates that though English is being used as the predominant language of tuition in South African schools, even for second language learners, poor literacy results cannot be attributed to this factor alone. Teachers and learners are struggling with literacy in the African languages as well as English (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999; Macdonald, 2002; Smyth, 2002; Matjila & Pretorius).

The poor academic performance of learners in many of our schools can be attributed to a wide range of factors. The learning environment within the African context in general is framed by poverty and disadvantage, and characterised by inadequate physical resources, overcrowding, and inadequate supplies of learning materials and books. Furthermore, an extremely dysfunctional education system developed under apartheid education, characterised by reliance on rote teaching and learning, low proficiency levels in the medium of tuition, and poor school management. In 2001 the Education Department's national director of teacher development, Sesi Nxesi, stated that a 2001 audit had shown that approximately 58,000 of the 350,000 teachers (i.e. 17%) in South Africa were underqualified (Sukhraj, Mkhize & Govender, 2004: 1). Despite a decade of democratic rule and widespread attempts to level the educational playing fields, gross inequalities still exist within the schooling system in terms of physical resources, underqualified teachers, poor school management and poor delivery of learning materials to schools. These are not circumstances that promote the development of meaningful literacy practices. Yet, despite these factors literacy advocacy cannot afford to wait.

2.1 Reading competence and assessment standards

The value attached to literacy by a community and the functions that literacy serves within that community determine to a large extent what is regarded as 'reading competence'. Formal educational institutions in turn help to promote and maintain 'reading competence'. How is reading literacy being conceptualised in the new outcomes based educational drive? According to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (henceforth RNCS) (2003: 44), the learning outcome for "reading and viewing" is blandly stated as involving the following: "The learner will be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts". The assessment standards for this learning outcome for Grade 1 are further outlined, and include aspects such as:

- Use of visual cues to make meaning (e.g. using pictures to interpret meaning of stories)
- Role-playing reading (e.g. holding book the right way, turning pages correctly, looking at words and pictures, etc.)
- Making meaning of written texts (e.g. discussing main idea of story, identifying details, etc.)
- Recognising letters and words (e.g. reading simple material, using phonic and word recognition skills to decode new or unfamiliar words) (RNCS 2003: 32-34).

In line with current theories of reading, the RNCS gives recognition to the fact that reading comprises both decoding and comprehension or meaning-making skills and recommends wide reading with the use of the phonics approach. It also urges teachers to create a print-rich classroom environment. This means that classrooms should be interesting, stimulating but safe places where a wide variety of books are available to learners to read or page through, where posters, charts, maps and other print materials are displayed and are accessible and meaningful to the learners. However, the above assessment standards do not specify whether all or only some of the criteria must be met for the learning outcome for reading and viewing to be achieved.

They also do not provide teachers with guidance as to 'warning signs' for reading problems so that appropriate action can be taken. What should a teacher do for instance if, by the end of Grade 1, a learner can generally recognise letters and words, but does not use visual cues to construct meaning and has difficulty making meaning of written texts? In standardised reading tests, for example, learners who read with less than 90% decoding accuracy and 60% or less comprehension are regarded as reading at frustration level. These are readers who have major reading problems, especially with regard to comprehending written information, and who are reading well below maturational level. They need intensive reading programmes to increase their reading level (McCormick, 1995). Since there is as yet no standardised literacy assessment at national or provincial level, learners can pass their grades despite low reading literacy levels. Many teachers may be unaware that their learners have reading difficulties (for many teachers this is a little known phenomenon) or they may feel powerless to address these problems as a result of factors such as large classes and inadequate resources.

3. Focus of article

In the study reported below Grade 1 learners' literacy accomplishments are examined within the school literacy context as well as the literacy practices and perceptions of teachers in a primary school.

There were two main sources of data for building up a profile of the *socio-educational context* of literacy in the five primary schools: firstly, observations of the schools in general and the literacy features of the classrooms in particular and, secondly, interviews with the Foundation Phase teachers. This socio-educational context provides a framework for examining the literacy accomplishments of the Grade 1 learners. Before proceeding, some background information to the current study is sketched.

3.1 Background: The Family Literacy Project

The current study formed part of a larger project, namely the Family Literacy Project (FLP). The notion of family literacy refers to programmes that involve children, parents and other family members in literacy enhancing activities and practices within the home environment (e.g. Machet, 2000: 11). The FLP operates in deeply rural and mountainous areas of south-western KwaZulu-Natal[3]. There are several components to the FLP: for example, it encourages family literacy through adult literacy groups, it trains literacy facilitators who live in the communities, it promotes literacy through child-to-child groups, and it sends out a community newsletter (for further details see Labuschagne, 2001; 2002). The communities in which the FLP operates are rural areas with high levels of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment. Many of the households are female dominant because the men work in nearby towns or more distant cities.

One component of the FLP is the promotion of literacy through child-to-child groups of learners at primary schools, who meet informally twice a week in the afternoons. A Zulu-speaking literacy facilitator supervises the classes and organises literacy-based activities such as storybook reading, discussions on topics relevant to the children's daily lives, role playing, completing worksheets provided by the facilitators, using magazines to reinforce reading and writing skills, etc.

3 The Family Literacy Project was started in 2000 under the leadership of Snoeks Desmond, who is also the co-ordinator.

Entry into the programme is voluntary but, once in the programme, the child is expected to attend the weekly sessions on a regular basis. The learners are expected to take a storybook home each week; the younger children have the story read to them by a family member, while the older children are expected to read the book themselves to a caregiver or older sibling. The overall aim of the programme is to encourage discussion, promote self-expression, increase vocabulary, and to provide the learners with opportunities for exposure to literacy-based activities. In all, there are five groups of learners in the literacy programme. Although these afternoon groups each meet on the premises of five local primary schools, the groups operate outside the formal schooling curriculum.

The reading skills of the Grade 1 and 4 learners in these groups were tested twice during the course of 2002, in April and then again in November, to determine whether the extra exposure to literacy was impacting on their reading skills. For comparative purposes, the reading skills of a sample of Grade 1 and 4 learners from the same schools but who were not involved in the child-to-child groups were also tested. Details of the assessment procedures and results are discussed in the research report (Pretorius 2003).

The focus of this current article is not on the child-to-child groups per se; rather, the main focus is on the broader schooling context in which the learners in these communities acquire their literacy. Three research questions inform the study, namely: *What kind of literacy environment do the schools provide? Do learners achieve the reading assessment standards? and What are the teachers' literacy practices and perceptions?* For ease of discussion and in order to define these schooling contexts more clearly, a brief outline of the reading accomplishments of the Grade 1 learners at the given schools will be presented. This includes learners who were in the child-to-child literacy programme as well as those learners who were not part of the programme.

3.2 Grade 1 literacy accomplishments

A discussion of the context in which literacy is acquired becomes a rather meaningless exercise unless one has a clearer sense of what kind of literacy is being referred to. In this paper we relate some aspects of the Grade 1s' literacy accomplishments to the broader socio-educational context.

The Grade 1 learners were given a battery of tests that tapped into their emergent literacy skills and knowledge. They were assessed individually in Zulu by the Zulu-speaking facilitators who supervise the child-to-child programmes and who are familiar to the learners. Readers who are interested in the methodological details of the child-to-child programme and the results of both the Grade 1 and Grade 4 learners are referred to Pretorius (2003). For the purposes of this article, we examine only some aspects of the Grade 1s' literacy accomplishments, namely those related specifically to four assessment standards for reading (RNCS 2003: 32–34) identified earlier in the Introduction.

- *Use of visual cues to make meaning* (e.g. using pictures to interpret meaning of stories). The learners were required to sort four picture frames into their correct sequence and to explain the story that the pictures told. Each learner's explanation of the story was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The order in which the child sequenced the frames was noted on an observation sheet.
- *Role-playing reading* (e.g. holding book the right way, turning pages correctly, looking at words

and pictures, etc.). A storybook was read to all the learners in Zulu. Later they were asked, individually, to retell the story to Thabo, a black doll who was 'sick' and couldn't go to school. To minimise memory effects, the learner was given the book to help retell the story. The learner was handed the relevant storybook upside down and back to front. The facilitator observed the child(s familiarity with storybooks, whether the book was held correctly (the right way up), the pages turned in the appropriate direction, and whether a page number and a word on a page could be identified. These book behaviours were noted on an observation sheet.

- *Making meaning of written texts* (e.g. discussing main idea of story, identifying details, etc.). The retelling of the story that had been read to all the children was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The main events in the story were identified as a template and the main events in each child(s recall compared to this template. The learners' Zulu oral reading fluency and comprehension of extended discourse was also assessed. This involved the reading of a short story in Zulu by each learner, followed by seven comprehension questions, presented orally to the learner.
- *Recognising letters and words* (e.g. reading simple material, using phonic and word recognition skills to decode new or unfamiliar words). A word recognition test was drawn up in Zulu, containing 25 high frequency words of two, three, four and five syllables. The task assesses a reader's sight vocabulary and the extent to which the decoding of familiar words has been automatised.

In all, five Grade 1 learners from each group who attended the afternoon enrichment classes were assessed, as well as three Grade 1 learners from each school who did not attend the enrichment classes.

3.3 Teacher interviews

All the teachers at the five primary schools involved in the teaching of Grade 1 to 4 learners were interviewed about their literacy practices and attitudes. In all, 20 teachers from the five schools were interviewed. The teachers were given a 44-item questionnaire that probed their perceptions about reading and literacy habits in the home as well as in the schooling context. The questions were asked orally in interviews by the project co-ordinator, and responses recorded on the questionnaire. All the data were captured and descriptive results obtained from the computer statistical package SPSS. Some of the outcomes of the questionnaire are presented in the following section.

4. Results

In this section a description of the five schools is given first, in order to contextualise the outcomes of the standard assessments for reading and viewing that follow. Thereafter, some of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire will be presented.

4.1 The school context

The research question that is of relevance in this section is *What kind of literacy environment do the schools provide?* Answers to this question rely on qualitative data; over a two-year period at least three visits were made to each site where a morning was spent at each school. The project co-ordinator also visits each site regularly, every five to six weeks.

The five schools that the learners attend during the mornings and where the enrichment groups

meet in the afternoons are characterised by disadvantage and lack of resources. Two of the schools in particular (Nondi[4] and Tembisa) have old, dilapidated buildings, no administration block, and few resources. School furniture is in a state of disrepair, blackboards are old and chalk writing on them barely visible. The classroom cupboards have broken doors and handles, and some contain stacks of old textbooks and exercise books and papers piled up untidily. There are very few posters or print on the walls, and the few dusty charts that are visible are either very old or else bear little relevance to the current syllabi. The textbooks that are used are scarce; teachers hand them out to be shared amongst learners during class periods, after which they are taken in again and locked in the staffroom-cum-office. Textbooks are thus not taken home nor can they be used for homework activities. Cursory examinations of the learners' exercise books revealed that written tasks in the classroom were irregular and far apart. The principal of one of the schools was often absent from school during the week, and teacher absenteeism was not uncommon.

The third school, Reditso, is a small and modest mission school with sturdy old stone buildings. Although classroom space is not a problem, the class sizes are relatively small. It was the only school with a small library containing children's books, but the library was not integrated into the daily activities of the school. A very relaxed atmosphere seemed to prevail at the school – one day the Grade 1 teacher was found sleeping on the floor of the classroom at nine in the morning and was unabashed on being woken up by the project co-ordinator.

The fourth school, Maliba, is set deep in the mountains and was the most isolated of the schools. The local Anglican church next to the school used to serve as a classroom during the week, but in 2002 three new classrooms and office space were added to the school. Although there is very little environmental print in the classrooms and textbooks tend to be shared amongst learners, teachers on the whole appeared to be in their classrooms most of the time. The principal, appointed to the post two years previously, is said to be present at the school only four days of the week, but he is regarded as being an efficient administrator.

Of the five schools, Siminga is the newest, with modern buildings. The school play ground, though bare, is kept tidy and the classrooms are clean. In comparison to the other schools, this school was more functional, with teachers regularly in their classes and learners moving quickly from class to class between periods. Textbooks, workbooks and exercise books were more visible in the classrooms, and teachers had cupboards and shelves in their classrooms that they obviously made use of. Cursory examinations of the learners' workbooks and exercise books revealed that written tasks were completed on a fairly regular basis.

The schools all serve poor, largely illiterate and isolated communities. The top-down leadership determines to a large extent the pedagogic ethos at each school. The artifacts of school literacy (e.g. textbooks, posters, charts, exercise books, reading books) are not an overt characteristic of these schools. Some of the children at these schools have family members attending adult literacy classes where they are encouraged to engage in literacy activities at home with their children. However, for the majority of the learners, the little exposure they have to literacy tools and practices is likely to come from these schools and not the home environment. Yet the schools themselves, with the exception perhaps of Siminga where textbooks and workbooks

4 To protect the anonymity of schools, the real names are not used here.

were clearly visible in the classrooms, cannot be said to provide stimulating print-rich environments for the learners.

4.2 Outcomes of Grade 1 reading assessment

The research question that is of relevance in this section is *Did the learners achieve the reading assessment standards for Grade 1?* The learners were assessed early in November, towards the end of their Grade 1 year. The performance of the Grade 1 learners who had been in the intervention programme is compared to their peers who had not been in the enrichment programme. These results are reflected in Table 1 below (the "Int" column refers to learners in the intervention programme; the "NI" column refers to the non-intervention group, i.e. learners not in the programme). Unfortunately the data are not complete as the non-intervention subjects in the Tembisa site were not assessed and there was incomplete assessment of non-intervention subjects in the Nondi site (attendance at the school had been erratic on the day of assessment).

Table 1: Literacy accomplishments of Grade 1 learners in intervention and non-intervention groups

	Reditso		***Siminga***		***Maliba***		***Nondi***	
	Int	***NI***	***Int***	***NI***	***Int***	***NI***	***Int***	***NI***
Age	7.4	7.6	7.4	6.6	6.8	7.3	7.2	7
Sorting frames (%)	58	50	68	14	55	7	38	12
Book behaviour (%)	77	28	73	61	77	28	42	*
Story recall (%)	73	17	50	42	72	42	.06	*
Zulu word recognition (%)	70	21	78	47	62	33	85	78
Zulu story compreh. (%)	50	0	40	22	29	11	87	53

* Data not available

As can be seen, although there are variations in performance depending on the site, the Grade 1 learners in the programme on the whole tended to outperform the learners in the control groups on all of the above measures. These measures all involve tasks that reflect learners' direct involvement with the act of reading literacy. In other words, the scores indicate that the learners in the enrichment groups, during the course of the year, developed stronger reading literacy skills compared to their non-intervention peers. In contrast, one notes the relatively low Zulu word recognition scores of the non-intervention groups where, by the end of Grade 1, many of them had problems decoding simple, high frequency words such as *vuka, sana, ikati, ikhaya*. Another task that presented enormous challenges for both groups of learners was the picture sequencing task, where the learners had to rearrange four picture frames into their logical sequence and tell the story that the pictures depicted. The learners failed to make use of the visual clues in the pictures from which sequence could be inferred.

In terms of the RNCS assessment standards, the learners who were not in the intervention programme cannot be said to have met the criteria for reading and viewing appropriate to Grade 1. Although the reading performance of the learners in the intervention programme was

much stronger than their peers, they still displayed rather fragile literacy profiles in some areas. Were they ready to cope adequately with the literacy demands of Grade 2? The assessment standards do not provide clear guidance as to how to interpret the reading profile of a Grade 1 learner after a year of schooling. Will learners who achieve about 70% accuracy in word recognition and have about a 50% level of comprehension be able to cope with the literacy demands of Grade 2? (For critics of standardised tests, it must be noted that general impressions of how well children cope with reading tasks can be determined from continuous classroom assessment and portfolios and not just from one-off reading tests.) According to the guidelines suggested in standardised reading tests, even the better readers in this sample (i.e. the learners in the intervention programmes) would be regarded as readers in need of extra reading attention. Yet all the readers who were assessed went on to Grade 2 the following year.

4.3 Teacher questionnaires

The main research question that is of interest in this section is *What are the teachers' literacy practices and perceptions?* The items from the questionnaire were designed to probe the home and school literacy activities of the teachers, as well as their perceptions of themselves and their learners as readers. Several of the questions probed the amount of books in the home, library membership, exposure to books as a child, newspapers and magazines read at home, preferred genre of reading, etc. Although at best such items provide very rough indicators of the possible role of literacy practices in the home, they do enable one to build up a rough sketch of the home literacy context of the teachers.

Some of the results of the reading questionnaire are set out in Tables 2 and 3. The items singled out in Table 2 pertain more specifically to literacy practices in the home and to the teachers' attitudes. As can be seen, 60% have 10 or fewer books in the home. Newspapers and magazines seem to be the preferred kind of reading (e.g. 60% of the teachers had access to a newspaper at least once a week, and 70% stated that they bought a magazine at least once a month). The favourite magazines were *Bona* and *Drum*. Much of their reading seemed to be more functionally oriented – the notion of reading novels for pleasure, for example, did not feature in their responses. The teachers' reading skills were never assessed, so there is no way of matching their perceptions of themselves as readers with their actual skill in reading. However, it is rather telling that as primary school teachers, the majority saw themselves as average rather than as highly skilled readers.

One way to counteract the tendency of respondents to reply in ways that they think are desirable is to pose different questions that probe the same issue. Thus, although 55% of the teachers said that they enjoyed reading "very much", when asked to name a book that they had read recently, only one teacher listed a book she would not have encountered in the school environment, namely Nelson Mandela's biography: *A long walk to freedom* – the rest all gave the titles of books that have been used in the past as prescribed setwork books (e.g. *Close to the Sun* (anthology of short stories), *Animal farm, I heard the owl call my name, Romans* (sic) *and Juliet*). These were possibly the only books available to them. It seems that not many of the teachers really engage in reading books for pleasure. In fact, although 42% of the teachers stated that they really liked reading and read a lot, 47% felt that reading was "OK – they sometimes read a book or magazine" and 11% didn't like reading and only read when they had to study. One also has to query what is meant by "reading a lot" as there was such a dearth of

Table 2: Home literacy activities and attitudes

		Teachers' responses*
Parents read stories to you as a child	*Never*	*47*
	Seldom	*26*
	Sometimes	*11*
	Often	*16*
Books in home	*More than 50*	*10*
	More than 20	*30*
	About 10	*35*
	None	*25*
Newspaper bought in home	*Every day*	*10*
	Once a week	*50*
	Sometimes	*30*
	Never	*10*
Magazines bought in the home	*Once a week*	*10*
	Once a month	*70*
	Subscriber	*10*
	Never	*10*
How would you classify yourself as a reader?	*A fast, highly skilled reader*	*10*
	An average reader	*60*
	A slow reader, but I understand most of what I read	*30*

* The scores express percentages of respondents (n=20)

reading material available in most homes (only 10% had more than 50 books in the home) and no teacher was a member of a public or community library. The most common genre of books read were romance (30%) and books for study purposes (30%). Only 26% of the primary school teachers said that they read storybooks to their own children. Again, part of the problem may have been the lack of availability of suitable reading material.

Table 3 reflects responses to items concerning the teachers' literacy perceptions and practices within the formal schooling context.

An interesting response was that of the 57% of respondents who stated that they had received "a thorough training" in reading theories and methods during their teaching training; despite this training, only 34% of the teachers seemed to have a realistic pulse on the reading situation and felt that their learners were not really performing up to standard. Given the low word recognition skills of the learners in the non-intervention groups and the generally low Zulu and English comprehension scores, it is somewhat disquieting that 56% of the teachers felt that their learners were "average readers" who "understand most of what they read". In four of the schools the end-of-year Grade 1 learners in the non-intervention groups were scoring less than 50% on Zulu word recognition tasks containing simple, high-frequency Zulu words, yet

Table 3: School literacy activities and attitudes

		Teachers' responses*
Does your school have a library?	*Yes*	*30*
	No	*70*
Is enough attention given to reading in your school?	*Too little*	*50*
	Adequate	*50*
What kinds of reading problems do your learners typically have?	*Words not known*	*44*
	Problems with grammar	*15*
	Slow readers	*25*
	No real problems	*40*
Do learners do sufficient reading?	*Too much*	*5*
	Too little	*55*
	A reasonable amount	*35*
How would you describe the reading situation at your school?	*A strong culture of reading*	*47*
	Not much is done about reading	*53*
What training were you given in reading theories and methods?	*A thorough training*	*57*
	A brief overview	*32*
	Very little	*11*
How would you classify the reading skills of your learners?	*Average readers – they understand most of what they read*	*56*
	Slow but sure readers	*11*
	Slow readers who often have problems with understanding	*28*
	They struggle with their reading	*6*

** The scores express percentages of respondents (n=20)*

half the teachers felt that adequate attention was given to reading in their schools. In other words, many of the teachers did not seem to recognise the severity of the reading problems of their learners.

Responses to one of the open-ended questions asking teachers to explain how they dealt with reading in their classroom situation provide an interesting window onto some of the reading methods adopted in the classroom. For example, 20% mentioned the use of charts[5] and flashcards as a way of practising reading, while more than 30% said they made the children read words and sentences together in chorus in groups. Large classes remain a problem, and many teachers did lots of group reading. Further, 15% of the teachers said they made a point of identifying

5. These are charts of consonant and vowel combinations that are commonly used to teach the various sound sequences in the African languages, e.g. *ma-, me-, mi-, mo-, mu-*. A Grade 1 teacher recently communicated to us her unhappiness when an official told her that such charts were not part of the OBE syllabus and should not be used.

difficult words in a text, writing them on the board and making the children practise reading them from the board. Many of these activities involve attention to print (lists of letters/words) rather than to the reading of more extended discourse, such as short stories. Although a sound phonics basis is important for reading, especially in the early years (e.g. Adams, 1990), attention to decoding at the expense of comprehension is not beneficial in the long run. Learners need to be exposed to extended discourse in the form of short narrative or descriptive texts in order to practise bringing both decoding and comprehension processes to bear on 'making meaning' from the text (e.g. Graves, Juel & Graves, 1998; Oakhill & Cain, 1998).

In sum, it would appear that most of the teachers come from home environments in which literacy activities are not frequent, and they themselves do not engage readily in reading for pleasure. They work in disadvantaged schools that are not well resourced in terms of classrooms, textbooks or exercise/classbooks. The fact that no teachers belonged to a community library could be due not only to the fact that the nearest community library was at least 40 km away, but also to the fact that in the previous political dispensation there were not many libraries in black communities. However, it is disquieting that reading seems to play a fairly peripheral role in the lives of a class of professionals who are deeply engaged on a daily basis with developing literacy in young learners. There also seems to be a mismatch, in general, between the teachers' perceptions of the reading abilities of their learners, and the actual reading levels of their learners as revealed in the formal reading assessments.

5. Discussion of findings

The results from the literacy assessments indicate that by the end of Grade 1 the learners, on the whole, had rather fragile literacy profiles and were underperforming in relation to the task demands of the curriculum. This was especially apparent in the control groups, i.e. the learners who had not attended the afternoon intervention programme. Although the learners in the intervention programmes performed significantly better than their peers on many of the measures, they still tended to have scores that were not always very robust. For example, on standardised word recognition tests, testees who attain less than 90% accuracy in decoding familiar high frequency words are regarded as requiring extra reading attention. None of the learner groups attained 90% accuracy on the Zulu word recognition task, which was the task that tended to yield the best performance. On two of the assessment standards for reading outcomes at Grade 1 level (viz. use of visual cues and making meaning of written texts (RNCS 2003 32–34)), the learners did not perform very well, especially those learners in the non-intervention groups. Yet these were all learners who passed on to Grade 2 the following year.

The research questions, *What kind of literacy environment do the schools provide?* and *What are the teachers' literacy practices and perceptions?* help us situate the literacy accomplishments of the children within a broader sociocultural and educational context. Given the high poverty schools that these learners attend, it is clear that, through no fault of their own, their acquisition of literacy is not a seamless, stimulating and print-rich experience. Literacy cannot be accomplished in a void. The additional exposure to literate activities that some of the learners had via the intervention programme certainly impacted beneficially on their literacy accomplishments. Yet the sustainability of these gains, a question beyond the purview of this paper, might be marginal.

The responses from the questionnaires indicate that many of the teachers at the five schools

do not seem to be actively engaged in reading activities outside their work environments. Furthermore, for many of the teachers there seems to be a mismatch between their perceptions of the literacy achievements of their learners and the learners' actual literacy accomplishments. The teachers' failure to be fully cognizant of the reading problems of their learners could be due to several factors, such as naiveté about what reading entails, the tendency to equate reading skill with decoding, a lack of adequate training, and the need for a broader frame of reference in terms of which to evaluate their learners' literacy achievements. The lack of external assessment and national standards perpetuates the perception that literacy levels are adequate. Furthermore, the problem of having to deal with large classes remains a ubiquitous feature of disadvantaged schools, and many methods adopted in the classroom are in effect coping mechanisms. While not wishing to decry the sincere care and real dedication that many of the teachers put into their teaching, the discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions of what was happening at their schools, on the one hand, and the inadequate literacy development of the learners on the other hand, helps to perpetuate the tendency for underachievement to be regarded as adequate performance at disadvantaged schools.

Although the teachers sincerely believed that their efforts in the classroom were yielding fruitful results, the reading methods that many adopted are not conducive to developing skilled readers. Both Macdonald (1990) and Strauss (1995) report that there is a tendency for children in disadvantaged black schools to become ‘sound-centred readers' where the pedagogic focus is on getting readers to decode printed information with little attention paid to meaning. As a result, the learners end up 'barking at print', often in quite a competent manner, leaving the teacher satisfied that the learners can indeed 'read'. This was clearly reflected in the learners' performance on the Zulu word recognition tasks where the learners could decode high frequency words in isolation, but performance dropped dramatically when they had to read a short story, and their comprehension was poor. From these findings it is clear that the socio-educational context translates into a specific literacy environment for the learners, and this in turn produces a certain set of literacy accomplishments.

The picture that emerges is a paradoxical one. In fact, it characterises what we would term the 'paradox of the primary school professional' in the SA context. Primary school teachers are professionals who are supposedly deeply involved in developing literacy skills in their learners. Yet it is precisely in the domain of literacy that many teachers are themselves unskilled. Many primary school teachers come from communities with a strong oral culture and so they are not inclined to be readers themselves, nor are they familiar with the traditions of storybook reading or books for young people. Furthermore, many of them teach in disadvantaged schools where the non-delivery of books, lack of supplementary reading materials and lack of access to libraries are common features.

The tendency in disadvantaged schools for underachievement to become normalised also results in teachers having lower expectations about learners' literacy accomplishments. In her extensive fieldwork in primary school classrooms, Macdonald also reports on the generally low standard of work that is accepted by teachers (Macdonald 2002). In addition, the fact that no national standardised literacy tests are administered at any stage during primary school means that there is no broader frame of reference in terms of which teachers or schools can evaluate their learners' literacy achievements. There is thus little accountability in the system. The extent to which the

assessment standards for reading and viewing are familiar and meaningful to the teachers is an area that requires further investigation. If the given literacy assessment standards are not really being applied in the classrooms, and if learners are passing on to Grade 2 despite not being able to meet the literacy assessment standards, then of what value is outcomes based education for either teachers or learners?

6. What can we learn from the study?

Several implications follow from the above findings. Firstly, high poverty schools can obviously not change their socio-economic reality in the short term, nor can they change the socio-economic reality of their learners' home environments. However, they can make more committed attempts at creating more stimulating and print-rich literacy environments. The afternoon intervention programme shows that a lot can be achieved with few fiscal demands. Such programmes should not remain afternoon programmes but should actually be incorporated into the daily classroom routines of the Foundation Phase. In fact, this would be entirely in line with the literacy environment envisioned by the new curriculum.

Secondly, the non-delivery of books in schools is a problem that needs urgent attention. The continued absence of books in schools suggests compliance with an implicit assumption that, given the myriad of problems in education, literacy can in the meantime occur in a book void. It cannot. Primary schools need textbooks, workbooks and a range of storybooks in the African languages and English for learners to practise their reading skills in order to become skilled readers. This is the foundation on which later academic success is built. In the IEA study of reading literacy (International Studies in Educational Achievement) in 32 countries, it was found that across and within countries, differences in reading performance were consistently and robustly associated with availability of books, in the community and in the schools: "It would appear that the general message is that books are essential no matter how rich or poor a nation is" (Elley 1992: 147). This is a crucial factor that educational policy makers and planners should heed.

Thirdly, one way of addressing the challenge of low accountability in schools is to change teachers' perceptions of and expectations about their learners. literacy accomplishments.Teachers need to be better informed about what reading entails so that they can assess their learners' reading development more realistically. Given the central status of reading in schooling, it is important for educators and schools to be aware of their learners, reading abilities, to provide appropriate instructional practices and to create opportunities for their learners to have access to books. Teacher training and in-service training can play significant roles in socialising teachers into stronger literacy knowledge and behaviours.

Fourthly, it is important to recognise that changing teachers' attitudes to and perceptions about reading does not come about easily or quickly. Literacy is socio-culturally constructed. A reading campaign will only be successful if new literacy behaviours are role modelled, if a broader frame of reference for literacy practices is made accessible to educators, and if they can perceive the benefits of adopting more meaningful literacy practices. Further research needs to be done as to how familiar teachers really are with assessment standards for reading and how meaningful these criteria are for them. Poorly trained teachers who are themselves not regular readers are unlikely to find much practical support in the present RNCS guidelines.

Because schools cannot change the socio-economic status of learners, it behoves them to develop a range of resources that will provide a rich literacy environment for learners to develop their reading skills, especially if learners do not have easy access to this outside the parameters of formal schooling. This includes books, instructional time and good teachers. This is an educational responsibility that South African schools and Government need to take more seriously.

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