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'Playing school.' An argument for peer teaching role play in home language reading practice

ABSTRACT

The Foundation Phase Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (2010) recommends Paired Reading for teaching reading literacy in both Home Language and Additional Language classrooms. This article describes research on the reading histories of teachers enrolled in an in-service Bachelor in Education (B.Ed.) programme. Nearly one third of these teachers learned to read from other children in poor rural villages before going on to become successful readers and students. This finding challenges the notion of literacy learning in which adults are the main role models. In this article I argue firstly that play based learning is neglected in the curriculum. Secondly, I suggest that peer tutoring provides an opportunity to use child led play to encourage children to practise reading and writing at school and home, relying on play structures already known to them. I suggest therefor that play should be recommended more strongly in Foundation Phase classrooms than the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement presently advises.

Keywords: Early literacy, Play, Narrative research, Paired reading, Learning to read.

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1. Introduction to the context of the research

Large scale research into literacy learning in South Africa has revealed grave causes for concern for more than a decade, for example in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Howie S., Venter E., van Staden S., Zimmerman, L., Long, C., Scherman, V. & Archer E., 2007, Howie S., van Staden S., Tshele, M., Dowse, C. & Zimmerman, L., 2012.) and the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) (2013). The Annual National Assessments (ANAs), introduced by the Department of Basic Education in 2011, confirm that South African children are underperforming in the key areas of literacy and mathematical knowledge (Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2011, 2014). These sources also show that little has been gained from changes made in the intervening years, in spite of considerable funding put into literacy teaching by the Department of Basic Education.

In this context of low literacy achievement, the level of teaching and learning in disadvantaged communities gives particular cause for concern. The most rural and undeveloped provinces, i.e.: Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu Natal, return the weakest results in national and international surveys of literacy proficiency (Howie et al., 2007, 2012; Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2011, 2014). This article reports on small scale research into the reading literacy experiences of children in poor rural communities, but its findings and conclusions apply to any community where children cannot easily access reading materials.

In spite of changes, many schools in South Africa continue to be under resourced, with a high ratio of learners to teachers and poor infrastructure (National Education Infrastructure Management System Report, 2011; Mukeredzi, 2013). In an attempt to improve schooling throughout South Africa, infrastructural development has been supported by a workbook programme supplying reading material, as most schools do not have libraries. These workbooks have been provided since 2011 for every child in South Africa for each term of the three years of the Foundation Phase, but ANA results have not improved markedly as a consequence of these materials.

Research has also drawn attention to low levels of learning and problematic teaching practices in Foundation Phase classrooms (Fleisch, 2008; Howie et al., 2007, 2012). This is particularly important as the deficits created in the early years of education follow learners through the system (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin, 1991; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001). All these factors suggest that educators and teacher educators should continue to interrogate how curriculum and policy are implemented, and to research innovative ways in which to strengthen literacy practices, especially in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

Innovations are particularly needed in order to implement two recent policy changes which will both have a profound effect on African Language literacy teaching in the Foundation Phase. The first of these is the Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) policy which notes that: ‘Poor learning outcomes in South Africa are to a great extent a result of poor language proficiency and utility’ (Department: Basic

Education South Africa, 2013:5). The IIAL policy responds to large scale studies such as UNESCO (2005), ADEA (Maruatona, 2006), PIRLS (Howie et al., 2007, 2012) and NEEDU (2012, 2013) which emphasise the desirability of becoming literate in one's home language. The policy suggests that when the language of learning and teaching is not the home language of the child, 'the child mediates his thinking and reasoning in his home language' (ibid.). The policy is intended to support the learning of 70% of South African school children, who currently become literate in an additional language. Its implementation, however, is likely to be problematic because a third language will be added to the Foundation Phase curriculum where many children are already struggling to learn to read and write, and many teachers are inadequate to the task of teaching effectively. The research presented in this article suggests a structure for peer teaching in under-resourced home language environments.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for teaching languages in the Foundation Phase (FP), (Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2010) is another attempt to ensure better teaching by providing more explicit direction to teachers than the Outcomes Based curricula preceding it. It 'aims to provide clearer specification of what is to be taught and learnt on a term-by-term basis' (Department of Basic Education, 2010: Foreword). The CAPS document, and the handbook which accompanies it, Teaching Reading in the Early Grades (Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2008) gives detailed, explicit instruction guidelines. However, a possible criticism of CAPS was suggested by the literacy learning experiences of B.Ed. students, many of whom had initial literacy experiences through peer tutoring in play. In the Home Language CAPS FP, however, suggestions for litearcy learning through play are largely omitted. The document mentions that play is appropriate in Grade R, but makes no specific recommendations for Grades 1 – 3. It asserts briefly that 'The Grade R organization of language learning is based on principles of integration and play-based learning' (Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2010:20) but gives no reasons why play is appropriate, or guidance on play that might support early literacy learning. In addition to this general statement, the CAPS asserts that 'A traditional, formal classroom-based learning programme that is tightly structured and 'basics bound' should be avoided as it does not optimize literacy acquisition for the Grade R child. Grade R should not be a 'watered down' Grade One' (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, without more guidance on play, the reality may be exactly that.

The context of this research is a crisis in primary school education, which new policy documents and large scale provisioning are not able to address. However, this article argues that, rather than being entirely deficit environments for early literacy learning, disadvantaged communities may provide their own opportunities for children to learn to read and write. It presents small scale research in which primary school children promote each other's learning in ways partly suggested by CAPS but also in line with research on play in early childhood learning which CAPS has omitted.

This article began by reporting on research into reading and writing literacy in South Africa and the recommendations of CAPS for reading instruction, designed to strengthen that learning. It goes on to review research into play based learning, and into the role of

peer instruction. With this context, the article presents research which shows that some successful readers and writers were taught to read by peers playing in homesteads and villages. As an illustration of what play based literacy learning may look like, and how it may affect the literacy learning of children who take part in it, this article recounts the experiences of children teaching each other in play structures in local contexts which still exist. From this research I draw the conclusion that play represents an opportunity for children in disadvantaged areas to learn formal literacy practices. I further suggest that teachers could exploit a local game structure and use it to enhance learning in disadvantaged communities. While an application of this recommendation may have only moderate impact, it is important to continue to re-evaluate deficit thinking about literacy learning opportunites for children in disadvantaged communities.

Offering a small data set (van der Mescht, 2014) as an example, this research therefore challenges recent curriculum priorities. The research on play cited below challenges curriculum designers to re-think the importance of play, and to write recommendations for play explicitly into curricula in South Africa, in the ways in which they are commonly recommended internationally (Bodrova & Leong, 2005, 2006; Heroman & Copple, 2006; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In an associated challenge, the research presented in this article also suggests an increased role for peer tutoring in literacy learning.

2. Learning through play

In support of incorporating play more explicitly into the CAPS, there is a body of research (Piaget, 1932; Opie, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Wright, Betteridge & Buckby; 1984, Elkind, 2007) which claims that play is essential to children’s social, cognitive and emotional development. This literature may use the terms ‘play’ and ‘games’ interchangably, but I use ‘play’ to refer to a spontaneous, exploratory, creative and flexible occupation, such as ‘playing house.’ The activity described in this article is a social role play in which children imitate the literacy learning interactions they have observed at school.

Researchers claim a wide range of benefits from play. For example, social skills learned through play include turn taking, leading or following. Children also learn cognitive skills such as fantasy and imagination. They learn and practise language as they negotiate with each other. They learn gross motor skills as they run and jump or fine motor skills as they manipulate materials. Elkind (2007) suggests that self-initiated repetitive practice in play appears as a learning mode at all ages. Vygotsky suggests a more crucial role for play and claims that ‘Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives - all appear in play *and make it the highest level of preschool development’* (My emphasis, 1978:103).

According to Piaget (1932), play teaches the rules of social interaction which makes adult cooperation possible. He suggests that it teaches a sense of democracy, respect, and justice as well as autonomy and self-control. Furthermore, he believes that these

qualities can only be learned from other children in play and not from adult instruction. Participants did not identify these benefits but they are visible in the confidence and agency some of them attributed to playing school.

Play in which children imitate adult social behaviour is classified as socio-dramatic, or role-play games, and Vygotsky (1978) identified this form of interaction as the leading activity of 3-6 year olds. He further suggested that the imagination necessary for socio-dramatic play was the source of abstract thought. Working with Piaget's notions, Elkind (2007) also focused on socio-dramatic play and suggested that children induct themselves and each other into important social events as they mimic adult interactions. Playing school probably gave participants an advantage over their peers when they arrived in unfamiliar classrooms for the first time.

Drawing on these ideas, Smilansky (1968) argued that socio-dramatic play could be a compensatory strategy for educationally disadvantaged children. Smilansky's later (1990) research concluded that children who had engaged in socio-dramatic play in preschool showed an increased ability to organize and communicate their thoughts and to engage in meaningful social interactions. These children demonstrated superior literacy and numeracy skills in Grade Two. Smilansky asserted that 'We saw many similarities between patterns of behaviour bringing about successful socio-dramatic play and patterns of behaviour required for successful integration into the school situation' (1990:25).

These potential benefits of play identify the many ways in which the participants of this research benefited from playing school in rural villages and homesteads, and also explain their emotional association with it. This research confirms that play should not be viewed by teachers as a trivial distraction, but as the important work mode of young children (Tyre, 2008). It also means that its omission from the CAPS is a serious one, as I suggested earlier.

3. Learning from peers

Since 2011, when the CAPS was introduced in the Foundation Phase, children entering Grade One in South Africa encounter four structures designed to teach reading literacy there. These are described in the handbook *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (Department: Basic Education South Africa, 2008) that accompanies CAPS. Three of the structures rely on the teacher to initiate and read, and one is an individual or peer tutored activity. Teacher initiated activities are firstly, Shared Reading of a large print text with the whole class, secondly, Read Alouds, when the teacher reads to a class or a group and thirdly, Group Guided reading, in which ability groups talk, read and think their way through a text with the teacher's guidance. The fourth structure is Independent Reading, in which a learner reads alone in a purposeful, planned way followed by discussion and questions. CAPS suggests that Independent Reading can be alternated Paired Reading, also referred to as partnered or 'Buddy' reading. In this strategy, learners read to each

other alternately before discussing the book. It is recommended to provide additional practice for slower readers. CAPS also links Paired Reading to homework and practice in the following explanation:

> Paired reading can take place at any time, anywhere, as a class reading activity. Children can sit in pairs inside or outside of the classroom to read together or take turns to read or two children who have completed their tasks can read together while other children complete their work.
>
> If children read books on their own they also develop fluency, provided that the books are easy enough for the children to read without help. Short, simple books with predictable text and colourful illustrations are ideal. Some teachers like to give children individual reading to do at home. This home reading should consist of re-reading the group reading book or reading simple, 'fun' books. This extra reading practice, done on a regular basis every day, plays an important role in learning to read (Department: Basic Education 2010:14).

This extract suggests a clear if subsidiary role for peer teaching or peer mentoring in classrooms, and highlights the importance of reading practice, without, however, giving a clear idea of how either of these might be realized in homes or as homework.

While the CAPS recommendations are in line with international recommendations for early literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Snow & Juel, 2004) there is also general agreement that formal school instruction is not sufficient for children to become successful readers (for example, Stright, Neitzel, Sears & Hoke-Sinex, 2001; Haney & Hill, 2004). Before and during their early years at school, children need the stimulation of reading and being read to at home. In an ideal situation, babies and toddlers are inducted by care-givers into reading as a pleasurable bonding experience. In the process the children develop core understandings, for example, that illustrations relate to the text or that pages turn from right to left. They also develop positive associations with books and reading which are essential to later reading success (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006; McKenna, Walpole & Conradi, 2010).

In South Africa, suggestions for improving children's school performance through home literacy practices are problematic. Firstly, very few homes have a plentiful supply of children's books (Howie et al., 2007, 2012). In disadvantaged communities parents have little formal schooling and may not themselves read for pleasure. The Western model of family literacy described above is unfamiliar in African communities (Land, 2008). Parents are eager to help their children, but do not know how they may best support literacy learning, and the literacy practices that do exist in South African homes frequently do not align with school learning. In addition, many parents work away from home, and children may be fostered in the homes of relatives who already have other children, making one-to-one reading difficult. These factors make disadvantaged communities the most problematic learning environments in South Africa today, yet this is where the

largest proportion of children live. Mweru, referring to a Kenyan rural context, makes this applicable observation:

> Nowadays, most parents have to work away from their homes and many leave very early in the morning and return late at night, therefore they may not spend a lot of time with their children. Older children however spend more time with their younger siblings and thus may have a greater influence on these younger children's social and emotional development. With the rising number of child headed households in Africa, older siblings may be playing an even bigger role as they take up roles that are usually performed by adults (2012:251).

Peer tutoring in play based learning can take place in any environment where there are few reading or writing materials and where parents are not able to help with literacy learning. Mweru (2012) recounts thought-provoking findings in rural communities, where children as young as six instruct toddlers in walking, toilet training, politeness, traditional games, song, dance and story telling. She suggests that this is made possible by a 'seniority principle' which automatically gives authority to older individuals. Playing school may represent a similar delegation in South Africa, where there is also an expectation that siblings will care for and to instruct younger family members, but this is not yet confirmed by research. Mweru adds that 'Older children who have already joined school also inform their siblings who have not yet gone to school of school related activiteis such as counting, saying the alphabet, how to scribble, and the daily activities that take place at school' (2012:251). Sibling instruction in other social contexts has also shown benefits, and Brody (2004) asserts that 'older siblings in middle childhood can teach new cognitive concepts and language skills to their younger siblings' (2004:144). He reports that children who take teaching roles earn higher reading and language achievement scores (ibid.). These benefits were certainly experienced by participants who took on the teaching role when they played school.

Mweru (2012) argues, as I do, that teachers can take advantage of these socio-familial structures to encourage children to help younger siblings or friends with school tasks and homework. Referring to children whose parents cannot afford pre-school, she observes that 'In such instances children who are attending school would play a useful role as tutors to those children who cannot attend school' (2012:252). Mweru also proposes a review of curricula to inform teachers of the important role of play in the development of young children.

4. Research methodology and theoretical framework

This research uses a narrative approach, developed by Fisher (1989) within an interpretive paradigm. Narrative theory suggests that individuals experience life as a series of ongoing narratives and that we tell stories both to understand and to shape our worlds. Sandelowski observes that 'narratives are understood as stories that include

a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events: to render, or to signify, the experiences of persons-in-flux in a personally and culturally coherent, plausible manner' (1991:162). The accounts of the participants, the elements they have chosen to highlight and the emotional content of their stories, are therefore a representation of their individually experienced reality. As such, their stories, and the way they feel about them, are a legitimate data source. Within this qualitative paradigm, the research presented in this article is a small-scale case study. The data are the written narratives of sixty-one students, all women between the ages of 35 and 55, Foundation Phase teachers who became students in a B.Ed. in-service programme. They wrote the story of their own literacy learning and reflected on its relationship to their teaching practice. The sampling was therefore purposive and determined by convenience. The gender bias in the study, which coincidentally contained only women, needs to be taken into account. All the participants agreed to have their stories used for this research.

I was primarily interested in how individuals from poor rural backgrounds had learned to read. Specific questions for the research were:

- What early reading experiences did these teachers have which may have contributed to their success as learners and readers?
- How did they feel about these early literacy learning experiences?
- In what ways did these early experiences motivate their later learning?
- What can teachers and teacher educators learn from these individuals' early literacy learning experiences in rural areas?

The initial analysis, which provided themes of common experiences, also revealed the emotional associations in their narratives and suggested a second level of investigation. Herman, Phelan, Rabinowitz, Richardson & Warhol suggest that "The focus on narrative as multileveled communication means that we are interested not simply in the meaning of narrative but also in the experience of it. Thus, we are as concerned with narrative's affective, ethical, and aesthetic effects – and with their interactions – as we are with its thematic meanings' (2012:3). Appraisal Theory, a recent development in textual analysis has roots in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin & White, 2005; Read, Hope & Carroll, 2007). Like Discourse Analysis it allows a researcher to analyse relationships in text, but gives prominence to feeling, affect and emotion. To investigate participants' accounts, I used categories from the 'attitude' subsystem of Appraisal analysis which focuses on affect, judgment or appreciation expressed in text. Read, Hope and Carroll, describe the categories as follows: 'Affect identifies feelings — author's emotions as represented by their text. Judgement deals with authors' attitude towards the behaviour of people; how authors applaud or reproach the actions of others. Appreciation considers the evaluation of things—both man-made and natural phenomena' (2007:94). In addition, a narrative researcher is interested in cause and the explanation of events, as seems appropriate when asking how these particpants' early literacy learning experiences contributed to

their current success as students. Sandelowski observes that 'narrative explanations exhibit rather than demonstrate by clarifying the significance of events (including perceptions, motivations and actual occurrences)' (1991:162).

Following the two cycles of analysis, the findings are presented in two sections: Firstly an overview of participants' common experiences as they learned to read and secondly an account of the way it made them feel about reading. This is followed by an interpretation of key elements and comments on the usefulness of promoting literacy learning through playing school in the South African context.

5. Findings: Playing school

The participants' accounts showed that they grew up and were educated in rural Northern Cape and Eastern Cape, the most undeveloped provinces in South Africa. The experiences they describe took place between 1960 and 1980 when schooling for black learners was systematically impoverished by the descriminatory practices of the appartheid regime. The participants' home languages were Setswana / Afrikaans or isiXhosa. They all describe homes with no or few reading materials

In spite of these conditions, 77% of the participants asserted that they could read before attending school. The average age at which they could read was 5yrs 6 months (Northern Cape) and 6 yrs 4 months (Eastern Cape). To put these figures into context, 'reading' undoubtedly had different meanings for participants. For some, it meant knowing the alphabet or being able to write their names, for others it meant being able to chant sentences or follow simple texts in their siblings' homework. Importantly though, however varied their actual ability may have been, the ease with which they consequently mastered school literacy tasks created the positive emotions that they experienced in literacy learning.

Those who learned to read at home identified four experiences as key to their early literacy learning. Firstly, 13% were related to a teacher who encouraged their reading, usually by supplying materials. Secondly, 18% learned to read by copying adult reading and writing behaviour. For example, an uncle explained his spaza shop accounts to participant NC38 as she sat with him in the evening. Thirdly, 20% were deliberately taught by a sibling or parent. Fourthly, and unexpectedly, nearly a third of the participants (29%) identified a socio-dramatic role-playing game, which they called the "School Game," and which I have called "Playing School" as their main home literacy learning. As early home literacy learning experiences are often assumed to come from the modeling or teaching of literate adults, I investigated the participants' accounts of their play and the kind of experience it provided for them. These accounts are the main data of this research.

It is worth noting that, while the participants in the study were all rural women, colleagues assert that this game is still played by children from all language and socio economic groups and both genders. In 2013 a mixed gender group of forty-one rural matriculants

all responded in a questionnaire that they knew or had played the game as children. Informal enquiry among B.Ed students suggest that both genders play school. I believe that this does not affect the value of these findings.

Playing school was particularly significant for participants' literacy learning trajectory as the schools they attended were overcrowded and under-resourced. They described classrooms with few books and no readers for homework practice. They were taught using chanting, rote learning and drill from a blackboard. One participant captured the experience of many when she wrote:

> I only knew that the main purpose of books was for reading letters, words and sentences. I never thought of reading a story from the book. We were never allowed to take books home. I only thought that reading can take place at school, under the supervision of the teacher on Thursday. It was very hard to read with understanding at that time (Participant NC20).

Schools therefore did not provide the participants with a rich, nurturing literacy learning environment, yet many of them became successful readers because of their home literacy experiences, which included playing school.

Playing school took place with children from the household, farmstead or village. Older children already at school usually took the lead, but children also taught their peers, imitating their class teacher in their home language (Setswana/ isiXhosa). They wrote words with sticks, charcoal or white clay on the sand, on fences constructed from zinc roofing panels or on water barrels, or used brown wrapping paper as 'books.' The 'teacher' led other children in recitation and chanting. Here is an account of a typical experience:

> Every day when [my cousins] came back from school we played school and they took turns to be an educator and I was always a learner. We used to read their school books and sometimes I would take the book and pretend to read by looking at the pictures. They would also teach me to write some words on the soil because they were not allowed to write on their books unless it was homework and in the presence of an adult. When my cousins were at school I would collect other children and teach them what I had been taught (Participant EC19).

Focusing therefore on the narratives of those who had learned to read while playing school, I searched inductively for themes. Significantly, all the participants for whom this role-play game was their primary early literacy learning experience also describe themselves currently as enthusiastic readers and successful students. This was not the case for all those who had learned to read at home. In a second cycle of analysis I applied categories of the Appraisal Theory taxonomy to investigate what had generated participants' emotional connection to reading. The analysis suggests that participants were motivated to read by five affective elements of playing school.

Firstly, the participants emphasised that a sense of success, or of overcoming challenge, was an important factor. This was expressed through detailed descriptions of struggle and effort: the lack of reading materials at home, long distances to walk, unsympathetic family, harsh discipline at school and few resources there. The greater the effort, however, the greater the sense these individuals had of achievement in adversity. Their expression of achievement was accompanied by gratitude to siblings and a memory of pleasure:

> I thanked God for the lovely school experience I gained from home [i.e.: playing school], because it saved me a lot of struggles … I wholeheartedly thanked God for my sister who gave me the basics, and encouraged me to love reading (Participant NC8).

Secondly, participants were motivated by pride in the reading ability they had achieved through playing school. Many described adults' praise as a marker of success and they record the teachers, librarians, principals and inspectors who contributed to their image of themselves as good readers. Other participants ascribed their school readiness to playing school, and wrote of the pride this gave them. For example, a participant whose sister, then in Grade Two, taught her to read at the age of five wrote:

> When I started school I already had a background of books, so I grasped everything easily and became a fast learner. That motivated me to always do my best in reading because it made me feel proud of myself (Participant NC22).

A third motivating factor for participants was that, in their communities, reading was an adult pursuit. Imitating adults by reading gave the children a sense of agency and power, especially if it enabled them to enter the adult life of the family by reading to family members. For example, one participant wrote:

> This pretend play school made me very proud of myself and led me to like reading books. As the time went by I learnt to use other books as well as reading the bible for my grandmother and I was bragging about that to my friends (Participant EC5).

In a further step, playing school enabled some children to take on the role of a powerful adult, their teacher, and to explore the practices of schools through imitation. Some participants as a result developed strong identities as teachers and successful readers. For example, one participant wrote:

> Being able to read made me feel like a teacher. Whenever I used to play school with my friends I was always the teacher. I had one teacher who was really my role model and I loved to imitate her (Participant NC11).

Finally, children played school to mediate their relationships with peers by initiating the game or controlling its direction. One participant played school to escape a local bully who disliked the game!

Appraisal analysis shows that participants had an intensely emotional response to learning to read while playing school. Many described reading as 'exciting,' or 'interesting,' but some added descriptors like 'stunning,' 'a blessing' or 'I felt on top of the world.' Words like 'love' and 'passionate' were commonly applied to reading. Some learned to read texts obsessively, as the following participant relates:

> I never passed a written piece of paper on the street without picking it up and reading it. One day after school I picked up a piece of paper only to realize it was soiled. The other children made it a joke (laughing) saying that it served me right because I liked to pick up paper like a mad person and one day I would pick up a snake wanting to read it. Even after that nasty experience I continued reading every piece of reading material I came across (Participant NC32).

Unfortunately, some of these respondents had less positive experiences at school and as a result do not read with much pleasure today: 'I was a very shy child when I started school and the style of teaching that my educator used made me develop a negative attitude towards reading. It was no longer fun' (Participant EC19). For others, playing school provided an early sense of agency and success that survived the potentially damaging school experiences some individuals described.

6. Implications of playing school for teaching and learning

In addition to the general benefits of play mentioned in Section 2, analysis of participants' accounts suggest that playing school provided four benefits for children which make it potentially valuable in the South African context.

Firstly, playing school provides mother tongue literacy learning. Older peers translated school literacy practices into their home language so that the model was accessible to the whole group. While the PIRLS report (Howie et al., 2007) shows that children in some educational systems become successful readers in an additional language, home language learning has many benefits for young children (Cummins, 1981). This thinking is behind the IIAL policy (2013) and a focus on potential home language literacy learning strategies is particularly current as the policy is rolled out.

Secondly, although models of reading usually suggest an adult tutor, peer teaching has a number of advantages. Because their own level of learning is very close to that of the other children, peers scaffold learning experiences in a zone of proximal development for younger children. Vygotsky observed that 'play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play, a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a

magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development' (1978:103). It is not therefore surprising that the children who learned to read and write through playing school should have had a sense of agency.

Thirdly, while operating in the zone of proximal development, peers induct each other into reading practices. They present reading as a prized social occupation for their age group in a context where adults are not necessarily modeling the value of literacy in the home. Because playing school is based on the practices of local teachers, it prepares children for the teaching style in the local school and gives access to the community of practice there. Whatever the effectiveness of that teaching may be, there is an advantage to being familiar with the expectations of a new environment.

Finally, playing school provides a space in which children can recall and practise formal learning. One participant comments: 'This helped me a lot because in a way I was reinforcing what I was learning at school even though I was not aware [of it]' (Participant NC37). Not only did children memorize their lessons at school and words from books so that they could use them when playing school, they also played using the cognitive skills they needed at school: 'The main learning experience was through memorizing and word recognition, as words were written on the side of the big water tank which was used as a chalkboard' (Participant NC8). Memory training is a powerful tool in the service of literacy learning and probably contributed to the participants' early success at school.

With regard to memory training, however, it is worth noting the concerns raised by Taylor about the 'parrot reading' which prevails in many classrooms (Jansen, 2013). Although the participants of this research learned to read a generation ago, teaching styles have a long lifespan. The NEEDU Summary Report 2012 comments:

> Too much time was spent on repetitive chorusing and discussing peripheral textual features. In other words, there appeared to be an emphasis on reading as collective decoding rather than on reading for individual understanding (2013:7).

Independent reading is the ultimate goal of reading instruction, not 'singing' texts, so a caveat arises. The educational benefit of role-playing will be limited to the models available to the children. When their teacher has a reduced notion of literacy, or uses an ineffective methodology, that methodology will be perpetuated. More encouragingly, a rich engagement with text can also find its way into playing school. One participant was taught by a school-going aunt, and gives this account:

> My aunty used to read in additional language and asked us open-ended questions. She used to read the book and summarized it according to our level because at that time she was in secondary school so she was reading her books and made it simple by translating into our home language. Then she did summary and asked some questions. She used to encourage us to tell others about these stories. Sometimes she also encouraged us to dramatize the story (Participant NC21).

This account suggests not only that the model provided by the local teacher is crucial to the experience but also that children are able to imitate teaching methods which promote higher order cognitive engagement.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The dire needs of schools in disadvantaged communities, the slow provision of infrastructural support and the limited number of skilled Foundation Phase teachers in African Languages create an imperative for teachers and teacher educators to think creatively about practices which can support literacy learning in disadvantaged communities. The participants' accounts of playing school and the successful reading experience it gave them, suggests that community games such as playing school might fit that niche. This does not minimise the need for well trained, commited educators, or suggest that play is a general solution, but rather suggests that teachers could initiate play programmes for homework reading practice. It does not question the benefits of parental mentoring in literacy practices, but asks teachers to recognise that children may successfully mentor each other in poorly resourced environments.

It has become commonplace to blame a range of home and environmental deficits for the low levels of literacy achievement among disadvantaged children, and the difficulties of learning to read in impoverished communities in South Africa today should not be under-estimated. However, this study shows that young children in remote or under-resourced areas can have access to pleasurable experiences with texts that set them on a lifelong quest for learning.

In conclusion, there are three points from this research worth highlighting.

Firstly, the omission of recommendations regarding play in the CAPS FP is a serious one in light of the importance of play activities in early childhood development theory and international trends.

Secondly, this research suggests that peer teaching is potentially a powerful structure for learning, especially in rural areas where provisioning schools is still delayed by logistical difficulties. This research suggests that teachers and teacher educators should not underestimate the opportunities provided by exisiting role play structures to promote extramural literacy practice and positive experiences among learners. It reminds teachers and teacher educators that poor environments may still provide rich, affirming literacy learning experiences for children.

Thirdly, this research suggests that teachers should harness the motivating power of early success. All the participants in this study expressed the importance of a sense of achievement to their reading progress. Playing school accelerated their reading when they were enrolled at school and this, rather than enjoyment, was the main motivating

mechanism of their later success as students. The pride they felt, and the way in which their reading skills empowered them at home and among their peers when they played school, gave them strong identities as readers. To conclude in the words of a participant:

> To add on, it does not mean that the home environment needs to be wealthy or to be in a big city. Rural children can be equally advantaged or even more so, as long as there are adults around to help them learn … and that is exactly what my mother, my sister, adults who were around me and the children in the village did for me (Participant NC7).

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