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Investigating literacy narratives among ethno-linguistically diverse South African students

Abstract: This article reports on a study of pre-service teachers' literacy narratives in a South African institution of higher learning. Literacy self-narratives of 57 students were collected and analysed for categories and themes under narrator and sponsor identities through the use of AtlasTi software. The results of the study show the role of historical, cultural and political contexts in shaping literacy identities of student teachers. The results also show huge disparities of literacy experiences among different racial and gender groupings, which highlight social and educational opportunities. Using New literacies and Multiliteracies frameworks, I consider how these literacy challenges may be transformed to facilitate a just and equitable society. Particular implications of the students' constructions of literacy identities are considered at the end of the article.

Keywords: academic literacies, literacy self-narrative, literacy narrative pedagogy, multilingualism, New Literacies, South Africa

1 Introduction

In the last twenty years, the reading and writing of literacy narratives in the university classroom has received renewed attention. Scholarly publications on literacy self-narratives have increasingly focused on their potential to facilitate curriculum change by utilising the space that this pedagogy creates for the voices of students to be heard, especially those of the historically marginalised (Ball 2000; Busch et al. 2009; Clark and Medina 2000; Coffey 2011; Corkery 2004 and Corkery 2005; Kouritzin 2000; Mendelowitz 2005; Terenzini et al. 1994; Williams 2003; Wroots 2002). The studies by Wroots and Mendelowitz have in

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common that they analyse socio-cultural issues in the identity construction of Bachelor of Education students in South Africa through literacy self-narratives, and are underpinned by critical social constructivist approaches to literacy and learning. The study by Mendelowitz (2005), in particular, emphasises the possibilities generated by the genre of students' memoir writing to "craft" and "reconfigure" their life stories, which implies identity shifts, as well as a reflection on the broader social implications of their stories. However, similar to Wroots's study, it does not provide insight into how social stratification in South Africa may influence literacy acquisition, and how we may utilise our students' multilingual and multiliterate repertoires as resources to promote scaffolded, situated and critical teaching practices in school classrooms. The research on which this article reports attempted to address the gap by analysing literacy narratives of first-year teacher trainees in a South African university to make inferences about the prevalence of structural inequality in the post-Apartheid era in South Africa, and adapt literacy strategies to promote social justice. At the end of the paper, I use the Multiliteracies framework to highlight implications for transforming literacy pedagogy through an in-depth understanding of literacy narratives and identities typified in the narratives.

2 Theoretical framework

Before discussing the theoretical framework for this article my understanding of the terms "literacy" and "literacy narratives" needs to be made clear. Drawing on definitions by Scott (1997: 109) and Williams (2009: 18), which are in line with socio-constructivist thinking in a multimodal world, I prefer to define literacy as social meaning making by using conventional sign systems in a variety of media to compose and interpret texts. Literacy self-narratives are autobiographical stories about how a person or persons became literate, traditionally with an emphasis on language acquisition and formal education (Eldred and Mortensen 1992; Coffey 2011: 10), but more recently also including multimodal compositions that engage students in understanding and applying the rhetorical possibilities of different technologies and semiotic resources (Frost et al. 2009: 181–182).

   In canonical published literacy self-narratives the narrator is typically a person from a poor, minority background who overcomes adversity, for example by successfully crossing language worlds, obtains a university education, becomes a successful professional (the hero archetype), and then writes from a position of privilege. Examples from the US are Richard Rodrigues's *Hunger of memory* (1982) and Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic*

of Color (1993), while local examples include Emmanuel Mgqwashu's "On becoming literate in English: a during- and post-apartheid personal story" (2009: 293–303); Aziza Jardine's "Ampe Proudly Kaaps – a language biography from the Western Cape"; and Angelika Tjoutuku's "Treating the colonial language fever. A Namibian language biography" (Busch et al. 2009: 71–99).

These published narratives, as well as narratives composed by students, are often used as part of language and academic literacy curricula to assist students in grappling with diversity, understanding the role that experiences of literacy acquisition have played in shaping personal identities, and building confidence by witnessing that it is indeed possible to become literate in the "standard" literacies, dominant discourses and technologies required for successful university study (Carstens and Alston 2014). However, an adequate model for analysing and teaching literacy self-narratives in higher education has not yet been fully developed (Coffey 2011: 95). A useful starting point is Barton and Hamilton's (2000) framework, grounded in the New literacies, which comprises four main components: literacy practices, literacy domains, literacy events and sponsors. Literacy practices are regular activities patterned by social institutions and power relationships (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 8), and involve literacies that are manifested across a range of semiotic systems (Barton and Hamilton 2000: 9). These practices are found in literacy domains, such as home, school and the workplace, and are enacted by sponsors – "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy" (Brandt 2004: 19). Hamilton (2000) uses the more generic term "participants" to include both sponsors and the narrator. The notion of participant, in turn, is related to Williams' (2003) identities – the archetypal images that students portray of themselves and other role-players in their literacy narratives.

Another useful framework is the New London Group's (2000) pedagogy of Multiliteracies. The New London Group assume that knowledge is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts, and is developed collaboratively by a community of learners. Their pedagogy of Multiliteracies integrates four factors: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. Situated practice involves the experiences of the learners in a particular group or community; overt instruction involves the teacher's scaffolding interventions, critical framing involves reflection of the teacher and learners on the learning, as it is situated in particular historical, cultural, political and ideological contexts; and transformed practice is the implementation and transfer of the new meaning in other contexts.

Collectively, these frameworks emphasise institutional relationships of discourse and power; non-dominant cultures and identities of students; the role of communities of practice in situating learning; critical reflection on pedagogy taking these factors into account; and transformed pedagogical practices.

Furthermore, they provide a basis for studying "little" narratives in the new socio-political dispensation to better understand the "big" social narratives.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data-gathering procedure

As part of the standard curriculum for an academic literacies module that integrates content from a core module in the Bachelor of Education programme, students were required to compose two versions of their autobiographical narrative during the first four weeks of the first semester in 2012: a multimodal narrative, using at least two modes of expression, followed by a monomodal written essay using the same content. Scaffolding included a class discussion of Barton and Hamilton's (2000) framework, reading published literacy narratives, creating forums for peer collaboration, interviewing significant others, designing literacy timelines, and sharing literacy artefacts, such as poems, journals, photographs, etc. The class lecturers made clear that the narratives were not only about expressing personal truths, but also challenging students to reflect on their significance, their effects on literacy development, and how the sharing of literacy narratives could facilitate better understanding among students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

In this article I report only on my analysis of the written self-narratives, elicited by the following essay prompt: "Write an essay of 700 to 1,000 words telling the story of how you acquired one or more types of literacy that has/have special meaning for you."

From the total population of 554 students (10 class groups) registered for the module, 153 students (three class groups) were conveniently sampled, as they were taught by the two lecturers who assisted in gathering the data for the project. From these three groups 19 exercised their right not to sign the letter of consent to analyse their essays. Only those who gave consent were requested to send an anonymous electronic version of the essay to the course coordinator. Eventually, only half ($n = 57$) of the students who signed the consent letters submitted their essays electronically. As a result, the electronically submitted essays did not mirror the demographics of the sampled groups. While 62% of the sample were "Black" (including Black African, Coloured and Asian) and 38% White, 58% of those who submitted their essays electronically indicated "White" as their racial identity. Table 1 summarises the personal profiles of the students who submitted their essays electronically.

Table 1: Profile of participants.

Profile characteristic	Summary of data
Race	34 White; 19 Black; 3 Coloured; 1 Asian
Gender	46 Female; 11 Male
Home language	28 English; 7 Sepedi; 6 Afrikaans; 3 IsiNdebele; 3 Setswana; 2 German; 2 IsiZulu; 1 each of IsiXhosa, Sesotho, SiSwati, Xitsonga, Urdu and Greek
Literacy practice	31 verbal literacy; 2 musical literacy; 5 kinesthetic literacy (drama); 3 visual literacy; 4 computer literacy; 1 subject literacy; 1 religious literacy; 10 combinations of technological, musical, verbal, kinesthetic and visual literacies

3.2 Data analysis procedure

The 57 essays were initially analysed using the qualitative data analysis program AtlasTi, version 6.1. All essays were coded by at least two of the research participants, which included the author, the course coordinator and a class lecturer. The coders used as input the small set of a priori codes that occurred in the data analysed by Williams (2003). The narrator identities included *hero*, *child prodigy*, *victim* and *rebel*, while the sponsor identities included *hero*, *martinet*, *nurturer* and *buffoon*. The codes were recorded and defined in a qualitative codebook. Emergent codes, with definitions, were added when at least two coders agreed that their inclusion was merited by frequency of occurrence. The a priori codes that did not fit the data in the corpus were eventually discarded.

The coding and interpretation were initially done in two phases: first the narrator identities, and thereafter the sponsor identities. After the analysis of the sponsor identities it was realised that the intial coding of the narrator identities, and the thematic categories derived from these, was unilaterally focussed on individual psychological traits. Another interpretive phase followed, during which the narrator data was reinterpreted in terms of social factors.

4 Discussion of findings

This section first discusses the identities students construed for themselves, and thereafter the identities construed for "sponsors" of literacy from the different literacy domains.

4.1 Narrator identities

During the initial analysis of the narrator identities eighteen codes, labelling the various identities the narrator assumed during the literacy events described in the self-narrative, emerged from the data: *achiever*, *confident user*, *coper*, *enthusiast*, *experimenter*, *failure/fool*, *insecure learner*, *developer*, *multiliterate*, *nerd/ geek*, *perseverer*, *prodigy*, *reluctant learner*, *struggler*, *sufferer*, *survivor*, *teacher* and *victim*.

Based on narrative structures and the clustering of the micro-identity traits, eight macro-identities were distilled (as discussed by Carstens and Alston [2014]). Only after the analysis of the sponsor identities it was realised that the description of the macro-identities was rather static, almost deterministic, and that they did not adequately reflect the "fluidity, ambivalence and change" (Bangeni and Kapp 2005: 3) inherent in the students' narratives. In socio-constructivist approaches, such as the New Literacies and Multiliteracies approaches, literacy is seen as "a practice that is socially constructed and locally negotiated", and thus analyses conducted within such a framework should reflect the "*literacy ecology* of communities, in which there is frequently inequitable access to social, economic and political power" (Norton 2010: 2). It was subsequently decided to reinterpret the "macro-identities" in terms of social discourses. Based on the literacy development construed in the narratives, seven meta-narratives were identified in the essay corpus: *Multiliteracy as a vehicle*; *Climbing the ladder to success*; *Rising from the ashes*; *I do it my way*; *From early learner to nerd*; *From child prodigy to celebrity*; and *Against the odds*. Below, a brief characterisation of each of the seven meta-narratives is given.

4.1.1 Multiliteracy as a vehicle

The essay corpus included eleven narratives describing social mobility. All the narrators of essays displaying this structure are either multilingual or multiliterate, and have struggled to survive in educational contexts that foster monolingualism (proficiency in English) and monoliteracy (academic reading and writing). As a result of psychological, behavioural and social enablers these learners have been able to adapt, survive and even excel despite frequent displacement during their pre-university lives. Essay 1 is a good example of this meta-narrative. The author describes her linguistic identity as Afrikaans, while her racial identity is Coloured. She is fluent in Sesotho because her nannies spoke their mother tongue to her as a toddler, and at school she befriended many Black children who spoke Sesotho. She prefers to write

academically in English, although at the university where she studies, she may use English or Afrikaans. Her next challenge is to learn to write in Sesotho, and to speak isiZulu fluently, because some of her friends are speakers of isiZulu. She describes the benefits she has derived from her multilingualism as follows:

(1)   My knowledge of speaking these languages has influence [sic] my life in a very positive way. I have made a multitude of friends throughout my life and when I started varsity this year I made so many friends just by honouring them by being able to speak their languages... I believe that it is going to take me very far in life and in my university career and also as a teacher in practice.

The authors of essays 35 and 53 also tell stories of multilingualism and mobility between vastly different languages, such as Greek, English and German (essay 35); and Urdu and English (essay 53). The following excerpt gives a snapshot of narrator 11's story of multiliterate mobility:

(2)   I started pre-school when I was two, in the rural village of Moeiletswane, in North West.... I was taught in my home language which is Setswana.... Everything changed and I started to attend an English medium pre-school in Chantelle. I really struggled there because I did not understand any English at all.... I started grade 1 in Haakdoorn Primary School and there my teacher was Ms Z. She was Afrikaans, but the school's medium of instruction was English.... Grade 9, I attended Elandspoort High School and I had a teacher, Mr D, who I found extremely difficult to understand. I then started to attend Saturday classes at Akasia High School and I really caught up.... When I got to grade 12... I had another teacher.... His name was Mr K and he really struggled to teach us English poetry. Then from second term on, I had a really brilliant teacher, Ms P.... she really motivated me to work hard at the subject.

All the students who wrote narratives about their multiliterate identities, and/or migrant histories, mention difficulties in the acquisition of a particular literacy at a certain stage of their lives, such as understanding the English of non-mother tongue teachers, and acquiring literacy in a language other than their mother tongue. Primarily owing to support by dedicated teachers, all these learners overcame their problems and succeeded in obtaining university exemption, and are now using their multilingual and multiliterate abilities as tools to succeed at university – both socially and academically.

4.1.2 Climbing the ladder to success

These narratives testify of hard work and dedication, the ability to observe, remember detail, and critically evaluate the influences of events on their literacy development. However, individual efforts were not enough for success. All these learners have been enabled to gradually improve a particular literacy, making maximal use of available resources (artefacts and sponsors). The author of essay 6 traces the steps of his success in becoming a proficient reader and writer, and although he construes himself as a self-driven learner, it is clear that his advancement was facilitated by an enabling environment: a supportive mother and the necessary resources (books).

(3)   At the age of six I was reading on my own and would sometimes read along to cd's that came with the story books…. In no time I was reading books on my own and without the help of my mom…. Reading so much helped me expand my vocabulary and taught me so many new words…. It even improved my writing skills drastically, as reading and writing are linked to one another…. I eventually started writing my own short stories and poems…. In high school I used to love writing essays and would do quite well, especially with the creative essays.

Climbing the ladder to success narratives proved to be encouraging to peers who read them, since these stories show a clear relationship between effort and success, and between seizing opportunities and eventual success.

4.1.3 Rising from the ashes

The learners whose stories fit this meta-narrative describe how they have been subjected to intense physical or emotional suffering, but have been enabled to overcome the problem and to adapt to a normal schooling routine. Three narrators tell how they have suffered from dyslexia (narrators 3, 15 and 20) and how difficult reading and writing in English have been for them. For instance, narrator 3 starts her narrative as follows: "'I can't, I don't know' was my answer for many questions…. Being dyslexic seemed like it was the end of the world"; and concludes with "By the time I was in matric I was one of the top students in some subjects". Narrator 15 writes about hearing loss as a result of recurring ear infections; narrator 21 tells how her dancing career was cut short as a result of a knee injury; and narrator 33 relates the story of pregnancy in high school, and how the freedom to read what she found interesting improved her

reading development. Narrator 48 gives the reader a look into the literate life of a learner whose brain hemispheres "did not synchronise". Notwithstanding their debilitating conditions, these learners' narratives tell stories of perseverance, and support by teachers, doctors, friends, family members and therapists.

One possible explanation for the absence (from this narrative category) of learners from impoverished rural backgrounds is that learners suffering from such conditions in underprivileged schools and communities might not have been (accurately) diagnosed, and might not have received the same intensive educational and medical help as children from privileged backgrounds.

4.1.4 I do it my way

Four essays testify of a literacy journey during which the narrator appreciated space for practising a particular literacy in the preferred way. Two of the four essays that fall into this category deal with visual literacy (essays 12 and 28); one reflects on visual and kinaesthetic (drama) literacy (essay 55), and another deals with a type of religious literacy (essay 31). The narrators of essays 12 and 28 emphasise the need for a quiet space to develop their literacies.

(4)   When I was a young girl, I often spent a lot of time alone, because for some reason I enjoyed my own company more than that of a group of people. (Essay 12)

(5)   When I draw, I feel like I go into my own world where nothing else really matters. (Essay 28)

Learners who wrote *I do it my way* narratives emphasise the role of enablers who provided them with sufficient autonomy to unleash their creativity. The narrator of essay 12 writes about her appreciation for the art teacher who motivated her to "think out of the box"; while the author of essay 55 contrasts the influence of two different art teachers. The O-levels teacher bombarded her with rules, while in A-levels she was allowed to practise what was "exciting and different", and this art teacher understood her style of art "instead of trying to hold me back with rules".

Because of their need for creativity, narrators who wrote *I do it my way* narratives delight in experimentation. The author of essay 12 reflects on her experimentation as follows:

(6)   [If] you wish to create something that will be thought provoking, one needs to use materials that no one has ever used before.... So I began to

step out of my comfort zone, and cross boundaries for the sake of creating an original piece of work.

Interestingly, all the writers using this meta-narrative are White females. Possible explanations for the absence of Black (African, Coloured and Indian) students may be a general lack of resources outside the domain of formal schooling, which denied them opportunities to experiment with artistic literacies, such as art, drama and music. Also, students from cultural backgrounds that carry little social capital may have experienced marginalisation of their indigenous knowledge and skills. Ocholla (2007: 239) relates the marginalisation of IK, among others, to the fact that it is "mostly rural, commonly practised among poor communities, and is therefore not suitable in multicultural, urban and economically provided communities". Thus, learners from such backgrounds may not have developed a strong sense of self, and confidence in engaging in IK practices. The absence of males across the racial spectrum may perhaps be attributed to a general reluctance among boys to admit to an artistic or literary nature, for fear of being labelled "sissies" or "gays". Kathleen Cleaveland says in this regard:

> Boys who possess a natural affinity for literacy-based tasks are often rejected, labeled, and isolated if they demonstrate interest or ability in using these "feminine" skills, because it means they are acting like a girl and, by association, might be "gay." (Cleaveland 2011: 40)

4.1.5 From early learner to nerd

The authors of this meta-narrative, the majority of whom are girls, became immersed in the literacy practice at a young age, as stated by the following narrators.

(7)   At a very young age I got taught how to read. (Essay 16)

(8)   My parents introduced me to reading from a very young age. (Essay 24)

Later in life they spend a great deal of time practising their literacy, often as a hobby, which almost becomes an addiction. In essay 43, the narrator says:

(9)   The library literally became school for me because I'd go there instead of class at times because I read books like they were running away from me. Books at the time were like food to me and I couldn't go without reading.

As a result of their preference for quiet immersion the narrators of this narrative category are often characterised as nerds or geeks, as demonstrated by narrator 16:

(10)   I was no longer seen as a popular. I had become a book worm and got labelled a geek. The glasses I was forced to wear didn't exactly help either.

In recent years, reinforced by popular television sit coms, such as *Big Bang Theory*, male geeks have become a prominent stereotype. However, from these essays, and particularly the last quote, it seems that their female counterparts may be experiencing "geekdom" more intensely. The fact that girls are typically more interested in books and reading, may be due to early exposure, mothers as role models, and gendered socialisation patterns. Awareness of the stereotyping of girls as readers, dancers, musicians, etc., has recently led to the publication of popular softcovers, such as *Geek girls unite: why fangirls, bookworms, indie chicks, and other misfits are taking over the world* (2011). In this book the author attempts to invert the stereotype by merging the notions of expertise, obsession and passion; and celebrating "geekdom" by offering an overview of the "geek elite" through covering celebrity women along with her top picks for playlists, books, movies, and websites.

4.1.6 From child prodigy to celebrity

Writers of this narrative type construe themselves as learners with a love of excitement and limelight. They delight in portraying themselves as child prodigies. The narrator of essay 13 relates how she "started to sing from a very young age and played the flute from the age of 8"; while the narrator of essay 38 boasts that she was the first of her cousins to know the alphabet.

Students using this meta-narrative thrive on the recognition and accolades they receive for their achievements. The three narrators in this category were recipients of numerous distinctions and awards. They clearly delight in public display of their abilities and achievements. Narrator 38 writes, "I couldn't wait for my grade 3 teacher, Mrs T, to call me to the front of the classroom every Friday to read my story".

Although they do not flaunt material abundance, it is clear that these narrators typically hail from privileged backgrounds and have grown up in families that are highly literate in the practice about which they write. They draw inspiration and motivation from the support given by significant others. The author of essay 13 gives a vivid account of the musical accomplishments of close family members, such as her grandfather and her mother. She fondly

remembers how her mother accompanied her when playing musical instruments, while "always watching and believing that I could be the best". A similar account of the role her mother played in her literacy career is given by the author of essay 38, while also naming the various teachers who recognised her passion for reading and creative writing, formed a caring relationship with her, and went out of their way to create learning opportunities for her.

Although a frequency of 3 out of 57 hardly allows generalisation, it is worthy of mention that all three of the narrators are White females – two Afrikaans and one English mother-tongue speaker. If students with this demographic profile are representative of the category, it would not be surprising. The majority of Black first-year Education students are first-generation university students whose parents often have not had the resources to engage their children in literacy practices that carry social and cultural capital in Western societies. The absence of male narrators, in general, can be ascribed to gendered shyness about admitting to artistic or literary endeavours. Because many girls are successful at tasks requiring literacy skills – for instance, reading, writing, art and music – boys often purposely shun such tasks, thereby stunting their ability to master the kind of skills necessary for success both in and outside school (Cleaveland 2011: 40).

4.1.7 Against the odds

Learners who mold their stories on this meta-narrative portray themselves as tough and resilient, despite destitution. The majority of narrators of this narrative type construe themselves as reluctant and unsuccessful at first, but owing to their hardiness, combined with enthusiasm and optimism, they persevered through difficult times, developed coping strategies, and finally reached their ultimate literacy goal: to gain entrance into university.

The struggling and suffering related in these narratives seem different from the types of struggling and suffering verbalised by students who used other narrative frames. In *against the odds* narratives the authors report a lack of support, both in the home and the school domain: whereas authors of other meta-narratives reminisce on how stories were read to them as small children, and how they made music and art together with parents and other family members, these authors report deprivation of such stimuli. The narrator of essay 23 reflects this sad reality that is perpetuated in my communities within post-Apartheid South Africa:

(11) I was from a family where they were all illiterate in reading, so there was no person to help me, and that made me to hate reading because I thought it was a family curse.

Where students from privileged backgrounds take laptops, PCs, music centres and smart phones for granted, the narrators in this category find it worth mentioning that they had a radio and a television in the home (essays 7, 40 and 41); and where libraries, computers, therapists' consulting rooms, music and art studios feature prominently in the other meta-narratives, *against the odds* essays unveil a reality of under resourced and dysfunctional schools. The narrator of essay 60 writes:

(12)   Teachers at X High would normally spend their working hours in the staff room eating, gossiping or chating [sic] amougst [sic] themselves about their personal affairs. Whilst learners caused corruption in the school by vandalising school property by breaking windows, tables, chairs and break fence to bunk classes, learners smoking publicly outside toilets and others gambling.

Some of the authors of this type of meta-narrative have found meaning in their hardships and literacy struggles through the writing process:

(13)   ... and in a strange way I am very great full of how and where I grew up. I would have possibly not worked so hard to get to university. Even though I obtained code 1 for my academic literacy test I wrote when I got to university. (Essay 7)

(14)   [It] also made me to realize that I am from a bad background of reading, so I should not underestimate reading but I must read more and more to improve my reading. (Essay 23)

It is not surprising that eight of the ten authors whose essays have been categorised as *against the odds* narratives are Black students. In the Faculty of Education at the university where the research was conducted, 64% of all first-year students studying on full bursaries in 2012 were Black (excluding Coloured and Indian), which may signify a lack of means within this group to pay tuition fees. It could be inferred that many Black students grew up in dire circumstances, without support to acquire the literacies that carry social capital.

In the next section the spotlight moves to those significant adults who played important roles in either marginalising learners through withholding literacy, or supporting learners through facilitating and promoting literacy acquisition. The focus will be on uncovering relationships between significant others and the roles they assume in relation to narrators.

4.2 Sponsor identities

The coding process yielded 14 sponsor codes, including *hero*, *role model*, *enhancer*, *liberator*, *effective facilitator*, *motivator*, *pastor*, *advisor*, *trigger*, *witness*, *bully*, *suppressor*, *bureaucrat* and *absent authority*. In order to link these roles to categories of sponsors all the essays were re-coded during a subsequent round, from which 15 codes emerged: *mother*, *father*, *both parents*, *brother*, *sister*, *grandmother*, *grandfather*, *aunt*, *uncle*, *(entire) family*, *caregiver*, *friends*, *peers*, *teacher* and *therapist*.

After the coding process had been completed a query was conducted in AtlasTi, and the output codes and quotes for the categories *sponsor ID* and *significant other* were tabulated. Codes were replaced with numerals to allow statistical analysis. These numerical codes were transferred to Excel spread sheets, and with the assistance of a statistician from the Internal Consultation Service of the University's Statistics Department, Lizelle Fletcher, and a data-analyst, Jaqui Sommerville, the Excel sheets were converted to cross tables, showing the correspondence between sponsor types and the identities they assume in the narratives.

Three themes proved to be prominent in the analysis of sponsor identities, *viz.*
– Opening up spaces for literacy acquisition.
– Scaffolding spaces for literacy acquisition.
– Creating a nurturing atmosphere in spaces for literacy acquisition.

4.2.1 Opening up spaces for literacy acquisition

Within the scope of this theme teachers feature in the roles of *liberator* and *advisor*. *Liberator* dominates, with 13 occurrences, and may be illustrated by the following quotes:

(15)   My art teacher motivated me to think out of the box…. This lead me to trying complete different mediums and using different materials such as painting, charcoal, sculpture with clay and plaster of Paris. (Essay 12)

(16)   … as my teacher Mr N used to say and I quote "life is all about choices," "there are many ways to kill a cat" and "I can teach how to go to Marabastad but not how to come back" those were his usual three quotes meaning the same thing. I sticked on to them and made the right choices, life is full of options choose whatever choice works for you. (Essay 32)

Fourteen instances of teachers and therapists were found who closed up literacy spaces. These significant others featured in three different sponsor roles: *bully*,

suppressor and *bureaucrat*. *Bureaucrat* elicited the highest frequency of codes (12 instances). It is interesting to note that almost all instances of negative autonomy originate in high school, as exemplified by the following excerpts:

(17) Unfortunately, during high school I became extremely discouraged to read as we were forced to read reading materials which I had no interest in whatsoever. (Essay 9)

(18) Going on to high school, reading became a pain, when Shakespeare was first introduced. I till this very day do not understand why it is necessary for the 21st century pupils to read something so very boring and old fashioned. (Essay 33).

(19) Over the years my feelings toward the subject escalated. The introduction to comprehension articles and reading was miserable because I could not understand the importance of them. (Essay 52)

4.2.2 Scaffolding spaces for literacy acquisition

As might have been expected, teachers play a major role in scaffolding learning spaces. According to the data corpus they regularly assume the role of *effective facilitator* (22 codes) as well as *enhancer* (10 codes). In particular, the teacher is construed as an effective facilitator, provided that a realistic challenge is involved and that the learner succeeded in his/her learning goals, as illustrated by essay 58:

(20) And that is why my high school English teacher insisted that I join the AP (Advanced Program) English class, in this class he encouraged me to read more challenging books than the books I was currently reading – which was mainly teen fiction novels such as Meg Cabot's Princess Diaries. These "challenging" books included Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights as well as Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Because of his encouragement to join his AP English class, I was able to enjoy these classics and move away from the teen novels.

Although the essay corpus does not feature many examples of teachers who subtracted or withheld literacy, six such instances were found. These teachers acted in negative identity roles, such as *suppressors* (4) and *bullies* (2). Essay 23 presents an example of how teachers' behaviour may cause negative learning experiences. The narrator, who hails from a literacy deprived home environment, writes about his primary school teachers:

(21) [T]he teachers used to tell me that I will never make it in life because this whole world is about reading.

and about his high school English teacher:

(22) After time passed I went to secondary level that is where I thought I will know how to read but guess what, when my teacher perceived that I cannot read he said to me it is not in his pursuit to teach learners how to read I should have learnt that at primary.

These prophecies left him devastated and unmotivated to improve his literacy skills, until his next door neighbour took him under her wing and assisted him to become a more proficient reader. As a teacher, she owned novels of varying difficulty levels, and gradually introduced him to them.

4.2.3 Creating a nurturing atmosphere in spaces for literacy acquisition

The third theme that emerged from the sponsor data was that of fostering relationships of care within the spaces created for literacy acquisition. Family members, especially mothers and fathers, feature prominently, and thereafter teachers.

Codes for *family* members were assigned 51 times, of which *mother/mother's/mom/mom's/mommy's* top the list with 30 occurrences. The most important intersections between significant others and sponsor roles are: *family* (especially *mothers*, *grandparents* and other primary *caregivers*) who act as *literacy triggers* (19), and *motivators* (13). The following three quotes are examples of parents being portrayed as *triggers*:

(23) My father read to me every single night, until one day I started to read the book to him. It was the first time as a child that I saw my father tear up, until this day I remember that moment like it was yesterday. (Essay 24)

(24) [M]ost of my childhood I spent with my grandparents, they taught me how to read and write the Punjabi language. My grandmother used to read stories to me in her language. (Essay 53)

(25) I would snuggle next to my mother on her bed and she would drift between each sentence pausing for me to stare and marvel at the bright colours of the pictures. In these story time sessions I would be able to escape to another world through my imagination where anything was

possible and it was in my control whether negative aspects existed or not. This is where my exciting and marvelous [sic] journey began. (Essay 54)

In the following excerpts family members act as *motivators*:

(26) My mother played a huge role in my reading career. She encouraged me to read. She would spend hours on end listening to me read anything that I could find, be it school books or magazines. (Essay 38)

(27) She [her grandmother] talked to me and explained why I could not go. Although I was young I still remember the way she emphasised the importance of education in my life. "Our current situation will not determine your future my child, in life you must learn to rise above the challenges you face and you will succeed" she would say. (Essay 40)

The word *teacher* occurs 29 times in excerpts that instantiate a caring attitude on the part of the teacher. Teachers act primarily in the roles of *motivator* (24 times) and *pastor* (15 times). Examples of teachers construed as *motivators* occur in essays 7 and 29:

(28) One thing that made [me] enjoy reading and communicating was my English teacher, who encouraged me to believe in myself. (Essay 7)

(29) I am ever great full for Mr. V who taught with great passion, enthusiasm and kept motivating and believing in me. (Essay 29)

In the following quotations teachers are portrayed as *pastors*:

(30) K [her dance teacher] always made me feel good about myself, even when I felt useless. (Essay 26)

(31) My grade one teacher, Mrs N, impacted my life in a huge way. We instantly clicked the moment we first saw each other and throughout the year formed a deep relationship. (Essay 38)

(32) Mr N noticed her [the narrator's] problem and did his best to help her. He offered to lend her one of the schools old computers. (Essay41)

Although it might be expected that caregivers would contribute towards learning during activities such as homework supervision, it was surprising that as many as 15 instances of *effective facilitator* were coded. Thus, some students construe their parents and other primary caregivers as extensions of school, in the sense

that they facilitate learning effectively by setting realistic goals and recognising achievement where merited. In essay 60 the narrator relocated from a multi-racial Model C school to a rural school where all the learners spoke Sepedi. There she was ridiculed as a "coconut" for not being able to read and write in Sepedi. She construes her aunt as an *effective facilitator* in teaching her to read and write in Sepedi, and to overcome this literacy hurdle:

(33)   I made progress with the help of my Aunt who is a foundation school teacher at a primary school adjacent to my high school in the village. My Aunt taught me vowels in Sepedi to reading Sepedi literature.

5 Summary of findings

Within a socio-cultural perspective of literacy individuals are studied systematically within their social environments, with literacy defined as a social and historical construction that evolves dynamically. Literacy means more than superficial contacts with print. A literate learner knows how to understand and manipulate words and concepts through regular complex social interactions.

Students' configurations of the role players in their literacy histories have been approached from two vantage points: that of themselves as narrators, and that of significant others acting as sponsors. By bringing these two perspectives together, the researcher has been able to (re)construct the landscape of literacy in post-Apartheid South Africa, and to magnify some of the structural impediments to access (to higher education) as well as possible catalysts of social justice, and to show that interweaving the concepts of social justice, literacy and pedagogy from a constructivist perspective may hold promise for creating a more equal and just society.

First, the findings of the narrator analysis will be summarised, and thereafter the outcomes of the sponsor analysis.

5.1 Narrator analysis

An important finding of the analysis of narrator identities is that the set of literacy identity characteristics (codes) manifest across language and cultural groups and across literacy practices. Contrary to what was anticipated – a set of identity traits that would form discrete themes that could be related to innate characteristics – it was found that literacy develops from social interactions. For

example, the learners who chose to use *multiliteracy as a vehicle* meta-narratives owe their survival to teachers who invested in them by providing scaffolding to bridge gaps caused by frequent displacement and crossing language worlds. In *climbing the ladder to success* narratives the writers portray themselves as self-driven, but also as learners who were given a good head start by parents or other caregivers. *I do it my way* narrators are sensitive to environmental influences, but thrive on opportunities to explore. Teachers who gave them freedom to experiment played major roles in the lives of these learners. *Rising from the ashes* narratives portray learners who suffered physical or emotional trauma, but thanks to a caring home environment and interventions by significant others, such as therapists, doctors and teachers, they could be mainstreamed after temporary educational setbacks. *From early learner to nerd* narratives depict diligent and focused learners who have thrived as a result of input from significant adults during crucial stages of their development. *From child prodigy to celebrity* narratives resemble *multiliteracy as a vehicle* narratives in that the authors portray themselves as extroverted. However, the authors of *from child prodigy to celebrity* narratives more consistently hail from privileged backgrounds than their *multiliteracy as a vehicle* peers, and have benefited immensely from support by parents and other family members. This support includes material assistance, a nurturing home environment as well as competence support. Teachers boosted their development further by acknowledging their achievements in a tangible way. The narrators of *against the odds* narratives seem to have survived adverse circumstances in the absence of resources. Their essays reflect a conspicuous lack of infrastructural support and opportunities to develop, and in some cases absence of caring relationships.

According to Bangeni and Kapp (2005: 2) identity is often articulated in terms of "a singular, consistent ethnicity which is asserted in defense against possible contamination and loss". Thus, although this analysis serves as a lens through which lecturers may become sensitized to differences in learners' personality types and learning style preferences, caution should be exercised not to use the meta-narratives as a categorisation mechanism to label them, and thereby emphasise differences rather than highlight similarities.

5.2 Sponsor analysis

The sponsor analysis showed that *parents* and *teachers* play the most important roles in creating spaces for literacy development. *Parents* and other primary caregivers are construed as sponsors who demonstrate a nurturing attitude. Their involvement is especially important early in life, when they engage with

their small children in pre-literacy activities. In such contexts the primary care-giver assumes the role of a literacy *trigger*. Providing a nurturing environment in pre-literacy contexts may be seen as connected to autonomy, in that children are usually offered choices in terms of the books they read and the literacy activities they prefer to engage in, which motivate them to learn. These findings resonate with Pomeranz et al.'s (2005) description of "parent involvement". Pomeranz *et al.* (2005) state that parent involvement manifests in activities such as reading with children, but also showing interest in their lives by attending school events, help with schoolwork at home or talk about children's school days with them, and showing excitement about children's successes. By providing choices primary caregivers act as *liberators*. However, for children in high-poverty, print-poor environments the material conditions deny them early reading experiences. Often, parents work far from home, and children are left in the care of illiterate or low-literate grandparents. Although these learners are immersed in rich oral traditions, which afford them cultural literacy and indigenous knowledge, they are denied opportunities to develop schemata for different styles and genres.

Teachers are the primary sponsors of feelings of mastery by expressing confidence in learners' abilities (*motivators*), helping to promote learning by setting realistic goals, providing opportunities for learning, rewarding achieve-ment in an appropriate way (*effective facilitators*), and assisting learners to exceed expectations (*enhancers*). *Teachers* also feature prominently in terms of creating spaces for independent learning. They are construed as providing choices (*liberators*), and giving judicious advice (*advisors*). However, in a num-ber of instances teachers are construed to inhibit literacy acquisition through actions of control (*bureaucrats*), restraint and prevention (*suppressors*), and even coercion and intimidation (*bullies*). Although *parents* are construed as primarily responsible for establishing caring relationships, *teachers* are important exten-sions of *parents* through encouraging learners to take part in activities and to improve their performance (*motivators*) as well as taking care of their personal needs (*pastors*). These findings confirm findings by Wentzel (1996), that a "caring" teacher is associated with democratic interaction styles and positive encouragement. Unfortunately, children from dysfunctional schools and under-qualified teachers do not enjoy the same "caring" environment.

6 Implications for transformed literacy practices

Transformed practices are proof of the success of the pedagogy of Multiliteracies. In the context of teacher education the success would be mea-sured by the extent to which the academic literacy lecturer is able to celebrate

and utilise indigenous knowledge and non-mainstream literacies in building confidence, and creating safe spaces for the acquisition of the literacies that carry academic capital. This may be largely true for school contexts as well. However, from the analysis of the narratives three other spaces for transformed practices have been identified, to which teacher trainees should be sensitised: the recognition of multilingualism and multiliteracies as assets, rather than deficits, and creating spaces for demonstrating the value of multiple literacies; changing discourses about gender appropriate literacies; and early identification and referral of children with disabilities. In sum, teachers should realise the importance of thinking about literacy identities as socially constructed, and of their roles as advocates and facilitators of a more equitable society.

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