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LEARNING ABOUT LITERACY: TEACHERS' CONCEPTUALISATIONS AND ENACTMENTS OF EARLY LITERACY PEDAGOGY IN SOUTH AFRICAN GRADE ONE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This research examines the relationship between early literacy teachers' conceptualisations of literacy and their classroom practices. It explores ways in which the political and educational changes in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy have impacted on the literacy learning process and on teachers' conceptualizations of children as learners. The study further considers the role of the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in the literacy learning process. The aim of the study is to contribute understandings that will inform and improve early literacy teaching and teacher education in the field of early literacy pedagogy.

The orientation of the study is socio-cultural, drawing on scholarship within the New Literacy Studies framework. However, it takes into account the value of research within the Cognitive and Psycholinguist frameworks, asserting the complementary nature of these frameworks. Other work this study draws on is scholarship within the fields of teacher cognition, multilingual education, and theories of agency. The research design is qualitative in nature. It presents findings from two data sets. The first is based on semi-structured interviews with thirty educators, and the second uses ethnographic-style methods to analyse the classroom literacy practices and conceptualisations of four Grade One teachers.

Findings from the interview data indicate that teachers' prior experiences of literacy impact significantly on their conceptualisations of literacy, which inform their current practice as literacy teachers. Furthermore, there is evidence of changed views of children and childhood which impact on the way teachers relate both to their own children at home and to their learners. The classroom data yields evidence of the potential for agentive literacy learning. However teachers' fundamental understandings of literacy have changed little since their own experience of literacy as learners; such that there is a disjuncture between their broad concepts of children as

agentive individuals and their narrower practices of literacy pedagogy. The limited affordance of agentive learning is particularly noted in the English LOLT classrooms in this study, where teachers face the added challenge of large multilingual classes with no specific TESOL training or materials.

The study argues that language issues have implications for literacy research, teacher education, and government policy. There is a need for more research to pinpoint the key areas of strength and challenge of multilingual classrooms, and for sustained, specialised TESOL training and support strategies, particularly for teachers for whom English is an additional language. Finally, the study calls for a greater emphasis in teacher education curricula on validating and working with teachers' conceptualisations and prior experiences of early literacy. Based on an awareness of these factors, teachers should be encouraged to strengthen their theoretical understanding of early literacy pedagogy and to explore ways in which learner agency can be fostered to enhance the learning process.