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LITERACY, POWER AND THE EMBODIED SUBJECT:
LITERACY LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE OF A GAUTENG PRIMARY SCHOOL SITUATED IN THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS OF JOHANNESBURG

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between literacy, power and the body in early schooling. It investigates how the ideal literate subject is constructed in policy documents and classroom practice. It also focuses specifically on how the reading subject and writing subject are constructed. The notion of transition underpins the research. Levels of self-regulation, and the continuities and shifts in literacy learning and teaching were tracked as children moved though 'informal' preschooling to more 'formal' schooling in the Foundation Phase. A preschool and a primary school in a working class Johannesburg suburb formed the research sites. A multiple case study design incorporated 5 classrooms from 4 grades: Grade 00, Grade 0, Grade 1 and Grade 3. Over a period of eighteen months the researcher was a participant observer using fieldnotes and videotape to record classroom interactions. This data was supplemented with policy documents, teacher interviews and classroom artefacts.

Foucault's work on power, subjectivity, the body and space forms the theoretical centre of this research. His work on government and governmentality places the research in a political and educational context with a specific focus on the construction of national and individual subjectivities. The ideal literate subject constructed in the Revised National Curriculum (DoE 2002) is a critical and analytic reader and writer who will be a productive and responsible citizen. Findings show this is not taken up in schools. Rather, in school the ideal literate subject has a good vocabulary, writes neatly, spells correctly, and reads fluently with expression and comprehension. The emphasis on skills like decoding and encoding texts rather than meaning-making constructs a limited literate subject. An analysis of spatial and temporal organisation of classrooms reveals a difference between the preschool and primary school subject. The daily preschool routines work to create a communal subject which falls away in the primary school where the focus is on individual competence. There are greater movement flows in the preschool, and space is created for exploratory and pleasurable reading and writing. This shifts in the primary school as children are required to be silent 'on-task' subjects, confined to desks. There are high levels of surveillance and extensive bodily training to

master writing. Levels of self-regulation decreased rather than increased which may point to inefficient use of space and time, and an over-reliance on skills-based tasks.

Finally, the literate subject need not be limited. It appears that greater knowledge of alternative approaches to reading and writing is needed. This would also require reassessing materials and activities. Collaborations need to be developed between preschool and primary teachers to enhance practices. Serious consideration should be given to understanding the impact space and time have on classrooms.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university

_____

(Name of Candidate)

_____ day of _____, 2007

This is for you Hilary,
I could never have done it,
or let it go, without you.

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