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

PAULA GAINS

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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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.

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 _____ 2010

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of the late

Professor Pippa Stein

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Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene

I am sitting at the back of a South African Grade One classroom observing a literacy lesson. There are forty-six bright little beings sitting at their tables, full of life, hope and fragile possibility. In this, their seventh week of the first year in Grade One, they have hardly begun to embark on this new adventure called 'School'. Aspirations are high. And so too are the stakes. Parents have sacrificed to pay for uniforms and school fees, hoping that their precious children will gain a better start in life than they. Captains of industry are banking on this classroom, and others like it in every province of the country, producing the next generation of leaders, technicians, skilled workers, value-driven parents and, implicitly, more teachers. What happens in this classroom, in this and every other literacy lesson, is of resounding national importance. And yet the nation knows so little about what happens in our classrooms across the country – the surprising strengths, the alarming challenges, the detail of the daily processes that enhance or inhibit our children's learning trajectory.

At the heart of this study, then, is a commitment to seeking, gaining and sharing information about the detail of literacy teaching and learning strategies in a range of Grade One classrooms. The more we know about everyday practices in typical South African classrooms, the more informed and focused will be our strategies as educators, as teacher educators and as policy-makers for the enhancement and support of those practices. Implicit in obtaining these insights is the belief that the findings will, in some small way, contribute to the improvement of the literacy teaching and learning experiences of teachers and learners in South African primary schools.

1.2 A personal rationale for the research

All research is about seeking answers to questions. This quest for knowledge is important on a number of levels, not least of which in this study is the personal one, because it is at the level of the personal that motivation is engendered. Barton and Hamilton's (1998) assertion of the importance in literacy research of valorising subjects' literacy histories, bears relevance to this research, not only with regard to my research respondents but also to myself – to my own literacy history:

> A person's practices can also be located in their history of literacy. In order to understand this we need to take a life history approach, observing the history within a person's life. (Barton & Hamilton, 2000: 13-14)

So this is where I will start, because in fact my interest in early literacy in multilingual contexts, which forms the basis of this study, has its roots in my own personal development as a language user, a language teacher and a language researcher. How did I arrive at this place, both physically and mentally, such that burning questions have emerged about early literacy beliefs and practices?

1.2.1 My literacy history

My interest in social and language issues goes back as far as my earliest remembered experiences. I was brought up in the 1950-60s in Britain in a lower middle-class Jewish family. My parents were not highly educated, both having left school early to enter employment, but there was an implicit respect for ideas and learning; it was anticipated that their offspring would proceed to tertiary education. Through experiences and family debate, I became aware at an early age of the existence of social inequalities and of the importance through activism of rectifying these.

I also became aware as a pre-literate person of the power of language. I had a strong reaction against Yiddish, the Home Language of my immigrant and non-literate grandparents, believing it to be a threat to our identification with mainstream society. Although I later came to regret this attitude, it nevertheless offers worrying parallels with the urge in some quarters to relinquish African languages in favour of English-medium education in South Africa. The fact that Yiddish has all but died out as a viable language is perhaps a negative precedent for the future of African languages here, and particularly those seen as minority African languages.

Another important strand in my personal history is my encounter through Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* with the iniquities of apartheid. I was transported by the beauty and poignancy of the narrative, wishing with all my heart for a different ending to the 'story' and overwhelmed by the injustice and the tragedy of the apartheid system, about which I was

learning for the first time through this novel. Although so far away from my middle-class English world, it made me aware of the universality of justice and injustice. From that point forward, I was interested in the news coming out of South Africa, and as I got older became involved in anti-apartheid and anti-racist activities.

Career-wise my choices reflected my political views, my fascination with language in a social context and my commitment to literacy activism as a means of social redress. I became a tutor and then the co-ordinator of an English Second-Language project, which offered free English classes in community settings to people of immigrant and refugee status. Twelve years into this job, I applied for and was offered the post of English Development Officer in eight high schools in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

A motivating factor in taking this post was the desire, born of my awareness of the language challenges facing non-English speaking immigrants in England, to experience for myself the challenges of being part of a language minority population and of attempting to become fluent in isiZulu, the language of the majority population in that province. Although I made significant progress in this regard, a subsequent move for work to Gauteng Province, where English is the de facto lingua franca in most situations, both put paid to my language learning plans and also demonstrated the hegemony of English, which dominates in most spheres of social, commercial and professional life, yet is the mother tongue of only 8.2% of the country's population (South Africa info, retrieved 28 November, 2008).

The posts of National Training Manager and then Research and Development Manager in a leading languages and literacy non-profit organisation, the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy (MILL), which brought me to Gauteng, involved a transition from high school language development to primary school and, in particular, to early literacy and language development. Through fifteen years in this field I have gained rich and varied opportunities to observe literacy teaching and learning in classrooms across a range of contexts in South Africa and many other sub-Saharan countries. I have also been involved in the in-service training of hundreds of teachers in the specific literacy and language methodologies promoted by MILL.

This work has also been my passion. I strongly believe that early literacy teaching and learning is of vital importance to the life trajectories of children – individually, culturally,

socially and economically. So a quest that could lead to improved understanding about, and improved implementation of, early literacy teaching and learning is a vital quest. In the course of my working in MILL with trainers, teachers and children over the past fifteen years, questions have emerged that have not found ready answers. For example, why does literacy teacher training result in changed and more effective practice for some teachers but not others? Why do some teachers readily adapt to learner-centred approaches and some not? How do teachers' pre-existing understandings of literacy relate to their interpretation of the new concepts and methodologies?

Trying to answer these questions from within the framework of the MILL methodology may provide interesting insights into the impact and effectiveness of that particular methodology. However, I see these questions as part of the wider quest globally to deepen understandings about early literacy practices and certainly a wish personally to move away from 'special-interest pleading' (Freebody, 2007) around specific programmes. Hence my burning questions have become a bridge leading me into the wider, often contested, sometimes confusing but always compelling terrain of early literacy pedagogy research.

1.3 The context in which this research takes place

Early literacy has long been a 'high-stakes' issue for researchers, educationalists, policy-makers and parents alike. Flesch's (1955) sensationalist best-seller in the United States brought the issue of literacy pedagogy into the public arena, and Chall's (1967) presentation of the phonics versus whole-language 'Great Debate' drew lines in the ground for what have become known as the 'Reading Wars' (Snyder, 2008; Spiro, 2004; Street & Lefstein, 2007) and which continue to this day in skirmishes between opposing proponents of the 'phonics' and 'whole language' approaches to the teaching of literacy.

Although nowadays there is both tacit and explicit consensus that effective literacy learning requires a balanced approach that combines both decoding with meaning-based approaches (Adams, 1994; Cummins, 2005; Gains & Mfulathela, 2005; Smith, 1971, 1985, 1988), government-sponsored studies internationally continue to provide worrying evidence of falling or unsatisfactory literacy standards (Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, 2005; Bush, 2002; HMI, 2001; Howie et al., 2008). In South Africa, national systemic evaluations of learner performance at Grade 3 and Grade 6 and other

smaller-scale assessment studies (DoE , 2003, 2005, 2008f; Fleisch, 2008; Howie et al., 2008; Kanjee & Prinsloo, 2005; Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Schollar, 2004) have produced some alarming figures with regard to children's ability to read and write. These have been sensationalised in the local media (Soudien, 2007), fuelling urgent debate not only in the public domain but also within research and policy-making circles about what needs to be done to address the problem. Finding a solution is therefore not only an imperative for educators but an issue for society at large.

Large-scale national systemic evaluations of literacy are an important means of identifying a problem but they are not designed, nor are they able, to identify the causes of that problem. Thus, although they are able to provide reliable data about learner performance, for example that 'the mean scores a national level were 36% for Literacy and 35% for Numeracy' (DoE, 2008f: 4), this worrying statistic begs the question – why? To attempt an answer to this question we need to know a lot more about the teaching and learning process than such studies are able to provide. Even reliable and thorough outcomes studies (Howie et al., 2008; Kanjee & Prinsloo, 2005) which seek to provide contextual information from completed questionnaires and observation schedules on teachers' subject competence and learners' home circumstances do not provide the nuanced and finely observed data that can stand as theoretically grounded evidence of classroom practice. For this we need to turn to qualitative studies that aim principally to understand and describe and only then to analyse classroom literacy practices. It is this type of study that 'is able to provide more compelling settings than reports of experiments' (Freebody, 2007: 49) and that has the potential for taking our understanding of literacy education beyond the monochrome, two-dimensional dichotomy of phonics/whole language into a richer albeit more challenging context of seeking to understand and analyse actual classroom interaction.

Qualitative research emanating from early literacy classrooms in the US and UK makes fascinating reading (Dyson, 1989, 2001; Flewitt, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, 2006; Vasquez, 2004), but whilst it does apply in some respects, the South African context is quite different historically, socially and linguistically – all of which points to the need for sound, theoretically based qualitative research into early literacy classroom practices in South Africa. Some recent work within the New Literacy Studies has contributed valuable understandings in this regard (Dixon, 2007; Prinsloo & Stein, 1999, 2003, 2004; Stein, 2003, 2004, 2008; Stein & Mamabolo, 2005), but so far the area of South African early literacy teachers'

conceptualisations and practices has been unexplored. None of these scholars has focused primarily on teachers, nor used as a starting point questions about teachers' beliefs and practices. In my quest to find answers to burning questions about teachers' literacy practices I am, in this study, exploring these issues in depth and hence contributing understandings from this perspective to the small but growing body of New Literacies research in South Africa.

1.4 The rationale for the research

Questions about literacy practices could not be described as 'burning' if finding answers to them were simply a matter of satisfying technical or abstract curiosity. The questions are generated by a desire to contribute meaningful understandings of the reasons behind our children's poor test performance, and the intention is that such understandings will lead to review, to the adaptation of teaching and learning strategies and ultimately to the improvement of children's literacy performance. This research, although ethnographic in style and seeking to 'make the familiar strange' (Spindler & Hammond, 2006), does not ignore the obvious social realities, and takes as a starting point the challenge of inequality, inherited from the apartheid era and still embedded in the education system of South Africa (Fleisch, 2008; Jones, 1993; Kallaway, 2002; Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004; Soudien, 2007; Taylor & Vingevold, 1999). Also the Language in Education Policy, whilst promoting the notion of a richly diverse multilingual South African society, presents implementation challenges with regard to resourcing, support and human capacity (Alexander, 2000; Heugh et al., 1995). These two factors notwithstanding, the data captured in this study does generate interesting and perhaps unique findings about the detail of literacy practices in 'ordinary' Grade One classrooms that can offer insights about quality in the teaching and learning process.

1.5 The research questions

The key questions that the study seeks to answer have evolved as the research process has unfolded. Issues became salient during the process of the research that I had not anticipated and hence I had not generated questions relating to these areas. In order to faithfully document the 'story' of the research process, then, I shall provide the first set of questions, as they were devised in 2004, and then show the additional questions that were generated from the analysis of the first data set in 2005-6.

1.5.1 2004 Questions

What concepts and understandings of literacy do early literacy teachers in a selected sample of South African primary schools hold?

- Do teachers' early experiences of literacy as learners impact on their practices now as teachers?
- How do teachers' experiences of literacy in the home, as parents, impact on their classroom literacy practices?
- What do teachers see as the purpose of literacy?

What literacy practices occur in a range of Grade One classrooms in Gauteng?

- What is the nature of the relationship between teachers' understanding of the purpose of literacy and their enactment in early literacy pedagogical practices?
- What literacy practices take place?

How does the issue of Language of Learning and Teaching affect the literacy learning process?

- How does learning in the Home Language benefit/inhibit the literacy learning process?
- How does learning in an Additional Language benefit/inhibit the literacy learning process?

1.5.2 2007 Questions

The interview process and the analysis of the interview data brought to the surface some interesting findings that I then wished to apply in relation to the second data set, the classroom observations. Hence this question about changed conceptualisations of childhood and children was added.

Have the political and curriculum changes affected teachers' conceptualisations of childhood and children?

- If so, do the changed conceptualisations of children (see above) relate to changed classroom practices?
- What is the role of learner agency in the literacy classroom?

1.6 My argument

On the basis of the teachers interviewed and the classrooms observed, I argue that teachers' prior experiences of literacy impact significantly on their conceptualisations of literacy and that in turn these conceptualisations inform their current practice as literacy teachers. Furthermore, there is evidence of changed views of children and childhood which are impacting on the way teachers relate both to their own children at home and to their learners. Teachers recognise and value the life experiences of their learners and, to varying degrees, draw on these in their teaching. In terms of the teacher–pupil relationship, there are several instances in which children are positioned by the teachers as agentive and where learner-centred ideas are espoused. However, teachers' fundamental understandings of literacy have changed little since their own experience of literacy as learners; with the result that there is a disjuncture between their broad concepts of children as agentive individuals and their narrower concepts of the same children as literacy learners. The important technical skills of literacy are emphasised and enacted in traditional teacher-directed activities at the expense of children's equally important imaginative, creative and expressive capabilities. This is particularly marked in English-medium classrooms with multilingual learners, where much of the teaching focuses on basic oral vocabulary development.

These findings highlight the need for a programme of intensive and sustained literacy teacher training which not only focuses on practical strategies for developing children's creativity and on language teaching strategies for multilingual classrooms but also validates teachers' beliefs and conceptualisations about literacy, using these as a starting point for contextualised literacy teacher training.

1.7 The organisation of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. This first chapter has explained the rationale for the study and contextualised it both in terms of my own history and in relation to the theoretical frameworks on which I have drawn. In Chapter Two I discuss at some length the scholarship that has influenced my thinking, and within which I locate this current study. Chapter Three outlines the methodological attributes of the study, both in terms of the frameworks used and the specifics of the research sites and data-gathering processes. Chapters Four, Five and Six

present and analyse the findings from the fieldwork. Chapter Four is concerned with the findings from the interviews, whilst Chapters Five and Six pay attention to the classroom observation findings. Chapter Five discusses the role of learner agency and Chapter Six focuses on issues of multilingualism as they were seen to affect the four classrooms observed. Throughout the study, interim findings and recommendations are featured and these are drawn together in Chapter Seven, which provides a summary of these findings and recommendations.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In answering questions about the conceptualisations and practices of early literacy teachers in South Africa, this study builds on and contributes to scholarship in a range of distinct but related disciplines. The key areas of interest which are the focus of discussion in this chapter are literacy pedagogy, learner agency, teacher education and multilingual education. Additionally, the literature and documentation regarding the South African educational context and policy framework related to literacy and language teaching and learning are addressed, as these establish the framework within which my study is located. This is the body of work to which I now refer.

2.2 The social conditions of South Africa in which this study is located

My interest in knowing more about early literacy education is based on a concern to ensure that the redistributive and empowering impact of education is as available and as effective as possible for the new generation of children in South Africa. Whilst these sentiments would stand true for children in any context, the negative and damaging effects that were wrought by apartheid on the lives of South African children (Dawes & Donald, 1994; Jones, 1993; Reynolds, 1989) make this concern all the more pressing. The deliberate structuring of inequality under apartheid in the provision and quality of resources was one factor. As Stein (2003) states, 'Apartheid influenced all aspects of children's lives, which in the case of black children, was uniformly destructive and debilitating' (2003: 69).

However, as Barbarin and Richter (2001) and Dawes et al. (2007) have documented, the social transformation of the democratic era has not delivered the anticipated improvement in the lives and life prospects of all children as anticipated. A Birth-to-Ten study carried out over eight years with some 2 500 children born between 23 April and 8 June 1990 reveals that although the 'broad social and political transformations … provide a reasonable, if uncertain, basis for optimism about the long-term prospects for South African children, … the life prospects are not uniformly positive for all whose lives have been touched by these changes' (Barbarin & Richter, 2001: 265). Furthermore, Barbarin and Richter comment that the political violence that prevailed during apartheid has been replaced by economically related crime and community and family violence, all of which result in 'a climate of intimidation,

fear and danger that is inimical to the health and development of young children' (Barbarin & Richter, 2001: 66).

Children under fifteen years comprise 32% [1] of the population of South Africa and their need for quality education is crucial for the future stability and prosperity of the state. Hence the importance of studies devoted to the monitoring, tracking and documenting of children's lives. In this regard, Dawes et al. (2007) have developed indicators for the monitoring of children's well-being across the domains of child survival, health, education and child protection; they are also involved in the collection of data against these indicators, providing evidence that can inform further research and policy development.

Education, 'the platform on which children are prepared for a range of long-term life opportunities and for their ability to participate in social, economic and political life' (Chisholm, 2007), is seen as a key indicator of children's well-being. Citing a range of factors in which 'the quality of teachers and learning and other supports' (2007: 149) feature centrally, Chisholm concurs with others (HRC, 2006; Seleoane, 2004) that the right to basic education has not been fully achieved in South Africa. Her reference to the limitations inherent in studies based only on quantitative indicators to 'accurately capture questions around pedagogy and the use of resources' (Chisholm, 2007: 155) creates space for qualitative studies such as mine which provide nuanced data about a specific element of the curriculum and teacher pedagogy, hence complementing the broader findings of national quantitative studies.

2.3 The Curriculum Context

A historical perspective on the curriculum is relevant to my study; indeed my findings about teachers' conceptualisations of literacy need to be understood in relation to their experiences of the apartheid era curriculum, which have arguably played an important role in shaping their conceptualisations.

Prior to 1994, the education landscape reflected the divisions of the apartheid regime, with seventeen parallel systems organised on an ethnic and racialised basis (Soudien, 2007). Each of these systems followed different curricula. These curricula provided the most direct means

[1] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022008.pdf

of entrenching the inequalities and limited levels of achievement amongst black school children (Hartshorne, 1992), who constitute the main recipients of the country's education provision.

From the few syllabus documents relating to this 'old system' that remain in the archive of the University of the Witwatersrand, it is possible to form a picture of language education as a highly structured and controlling process with an implicit construction of schoolchildren as being in need of correction. The Transvaal Education Department's[2] syllabus for writing from Grade One to Standard Four (TED 1977) reflects an authoritarian stance on writing pedagogy and an emphasis on the technical rather than the expressive aspects of writing,

> … the value of functional writing is to be found in the fact that it can be followed up later with correctional tuition in content and in letter-formation and writing techniques. (TED, 1977: 6.15.3: 67)

The new ANC government had the task of dismantling these structures and re-shaping education as a new entity based on egalitarian and non-racial lines. Significant progress has been made in a relatively short time period to rectify the crude systemic inequalities that were built into the old system. However, the post-apartheid interim syllabus for English as a Second Language still constructed writing as a technical practice, with emphasis on letter formation, spelling and punctuation (DoE, 2005) and little or no recognition of the value of self-expression or creativity.

2.3.1 The new curriculum

Clearly, it was imperative in the process of democratic change to radically review education policy (Bloch, 2007); and the developers of the new curriculum, in seeking to transform learning and teaching in South Africa, needed to engage not simply with content and subject matter but with the transformation of hearts, minds and embedded practices.

The post-1994 curriculum changes were needed both in terms of standardising teaching and learning and also in making it more relevant to the aspirations and requirements of an

[2] The area referred to as the Transvaal has now been renamed as Gauteng and includes the populous cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg as well as mainly industrialised outlying areas.

emerging democracy. In 1998, Curriculum 2005 (C2005), an innovative albeit highly contested (Jansen & Christie, 1999) outcomes-based curriculum, was introduced (DoE, 1998). Its aim was to radically change the content and the process of teaching and learning, moving away from a content-based syllabus to observable, measurable learner performance or Specific Outcomes (DoE, 1998). However, this new curriculum, packaged with 'more than a hundred new words … perhaps the single most important threat to the success of OBE as a curriculum innovation' (Jansen & Christie, 1999: 9) served to disempower and confuse the majority of teachers, even in some cases those who had been teaching effectively using the interim syllabus (Chisholm et al., 2000; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999).

In other words, although C2005 had been a bold and well-intentioned initiative, there were major gaps with regard to the specifics in the documentation and in its dissemination to teachers. For example Malcolm (1999) highlights the 'absence of well-defined levels and with too few on which to base assessment' (Malcolm, 1999: 104); whilst Harley and Wedekind (2004) point to the deep problems with the quality, content and cascading mode of the teacher training that resulted in practices that provided 'strong evidence that C2005 as a pedagogical project is working counter to its transformatory social aims' (Harley & Wedekind, 2004: 211).

Responding to widely expressed concerns about the efficacy of C2005 (Chisholm, et al., 2000), a curriculum review process was instituted in 1999 as the first priority of the newly appointed Minister of Education. The outcome of this review was the introduction in 2002 of a streamlined version that was both simpler and also provided more detailed guidelines for teachers in the form of Assessment Standards. This revised version, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2002c), which provided a set of curriculum statements with Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards for eight Learning Areas,[3] is the version that is currently in place.

The roots of this document lie in the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996a), which forms the cornerstone of the new democracy and 'expresses the nation's social values and its expectations of the roles, rights and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic South Africa' (DoE 2002c: 8). The NCS 'seeks to embody these values in the knowledge and skills it

[3] Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Life Orientation, Economic and Management Sciences, Technology

develops' (DoE, 2002c: 8), evoking the equality and social justice principles of the Constitution through a strong emphasis on the social role of the envisaged learner:

> The kind of learner envisaged is one who will be imbued with the values and act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life and social justice.
>
> The curriculum aims to develop the full potential of each learner as a citizen of a democratic South Africa. It seeks to create a lifelong learner who is confident and independent, literate, numerate and multi-skilled, compassionate, with a respect for the environment and the ability to participate in society as a critical and active citizen. (DoE, 2002c: 8)

Whilst these revised policy documents provide a picture of the intentions of the curriculum and a frame of reference within which to explore and understand classroom practice, it is the disjunctures between policy and practice that yield questions for the researcher. Motala's (2001) review of indicators of quality in the education system traces the history of education policy and research from the late 1980s to the present day. She indicates that dominant approaches to policy had in the past emphasised 'form and structure … rather than pedagogy and the actual processes of teaching and learning' (2001: 63). This, she points out, citing Macdonald (1993), led to 'enormous wastage', because ineffective policy and programmes were devised on the basis of 'poorly-formed assumptions about actual practice and implementation in schools' (Motala, 2001: 65). Although this observation relates to policy pre-1994, the same observation can be made of the implementation of Curriculum 2005 in 1998 (DoE, 1998).

Motala's (2001) work provides eloquent support for the value of qualitative studies which seek to understand classroom processes and highlight the centrality of the teacher within them. A central thrust of her argument is that there is a disjuncture between educational policies and implementation and that this can best be explored using qualitative research because in moving away from 'the distinction between good and bad schools' (Motala, 2001: 74) there emerges the possibility of creating 'a more nuanced understanding of the overall purpose of schools and of the values they are promoting' (2001: 74). This not only provides,

> insider perspectives on teaching and learning processes, but as Chisholm (1997) notes, it is also a validity check on statistical data and the opportunity to examine the unanticipated and contradictory outcomes of policy. (2001: 75)

My study seeks to provide such nuanced understandings, but in so doing also questions the extent to which teachers educated under apartheid are capable of interpreting and implementing an education policy which is so far removed from their own early experiences.

Soudien (2007), concerned also with providing a historical background to an understanding of education issues, argues that the experience and policies of the apartheid years have had, and will continue to have, a profound effect on the structures, people and policies associated with education. His perspective that there is a 'need to understand how the social histories and the social experience of both learners and their teachers are coming into play in the South African school' (2007: 191) provides a useful platform for my research. Also, he makes the point that policy needs to take more heed of these socio-cultural aspects of teacher identity and behaviour if it wants to 'act upon them in more than a re-formative way' (2007: 184).

However, to provide evidence for this argument, he provides a description of dysfunctional schools with 'stubborn practices that have evolved amongst teachers and their learners' (2007: 191) and schools as places where there are 'deep reproductive and anti-authoritarian and anti-regulation dispositions of everybody in the school' (2007: 191). Whilst there are many schools that meet the description, it needs to be understood that not all schools are dysfunctional. For example, the schools in my study did not fit the description of anti-authoritarian. However, even in these schools there were embedded practices that present a challenge to the implementation of policy initiatives. Thus, there is reciprocal value in relating the findings of my small-scale qualitative study with Soudien's (2007) broad argument; my own findings may serve to provide nuanced evidence for his claim.

2.3.2 Troubling evidence from systemic evaluations

Despite the existence of a powerful Constitution and a progressive national curriculum, the record in terms of South African learner performance in literacy has been far from satisfactory. A summary review of the reports of the broad-based systemic evaluations of Grade Three and Grade Six learners that took place between 2002-2007 in language and maths (DoE, 2003, 2005) indicates that children were reading and writing at well below the expected grade level. For the Grade Threes, the average score for reading and writing was 39% (DoE, 2003), and for Grade Sixes it was 35% (DoE, 2005). Results that have recently

been published of the follow-up evaluation of Grade Three learners show a modest improvement of 6%, but an overall result that is still well below a 50% pass rate (DoE, 2008f).

International comparative studies in which South Africa has participated provide even more alarming evidence. The SACMEQ (Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality) evaluation covering fourteen countries including South Africa identified that over half of the 3,163 children randomly selected to participate in the study were unable to read and make sense of a grade level comprehension task (Fleisch, 2008). The PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study) report on a study of literacy levels of Grade Five children in a range of countries (Howie et al., 2008), conveyed the worrying finding that of the forty-six participating educational systems, South African children obtained the lowest mean score (Howie et al., 2008).

Large-scale evaluations of the kind reported above are valuable in that they reflect trends and provide benchmarks for further similar follow-up studies. There is, however, wide-ranging concern in the research community both internationally (Comber, 1996; Freebody, 2007; Gregory, Williams, Baker & Street, 2004) and locally (Adler & Reed, 2002; Fleisch, 2008) that quantitative studies, constructing literacy almost exclusively in terms of learner test scores, lead to alarming discussions of a 'literacy crisis' and do little to advance 'our unsatisfactory understanding of its [literacy education's] nature, development and consequences' (Freebody, 2007: 11). As Fleisch (2008) points out, possible problems related to the culture of test writing may well be at issue as well as other socio-cultural factors.

2.3.3 The DoE's response

Despite the reservations about quantitative evaluations, their impact is undeniable in terms of the amount of concern and focused attention they raise. For example, responding to the findings of the various evaluations, the Department of Education has prioritised literacy in a number of ways. Collections of books and other textual material, which are referred to as Reading Toolkits, are in the process of being distributed to all primary schools (DoE, 2008e), a dedicated reading time has been promoted through the press and through other channels, a Reading Directorate has been established at national level which has mounted the

Foundations for Learning Campaign (2008) and literacy and numeracy milestones for learning and lesson plans are being distributed to all schools in the country. The Department of Education is serious about its commitment to improving reading amongst its 8,400,000 primary school children, as the following extract from the Minister's speech attests:

> Our education system encourages learners to be active learners. Active learning does not happen in a classroom where the teacher and one textbook are the only sources of information! It requires learners to interact with a wide range of learning resources to produce quality work. … Recently, the Department of Education launched the "Drop All and Read" campaign. The campaign encourages all schools to put aside an additional half an hour per day to "Drop All and Read".
>
> The aim of the campaign is to create a culture of reading in the classroom and in the school. Everyone – from learner to teacher to principal to support staff – should read for half an hour every day. If learners enjoy reading, this will raise literacy levels and improve the ability of learners to learn. (DoE, 2008d)

The Minister's speech and the position of the DoE on reading pedagogy as indicated above draw on the literature of the Whole Language proponents (Elley, 1991; Goodman, 1968; Smith, 1985), who argue that children learn to read because they are motivated by the reading material to which they are exposed. Whilst one would not argue against the provision of a rich range of reading texts, one needs to be cautious about assuming an uncomplicated causal link between the provision of books and motivation to read – and, for that matter, between motivation to read and the development of literacy skills. This question is one which leads logically into the debate about literacy pedagogy and it is one which also has central relevance to the positioning of my study.

2.4 The prevailing and contested views about what counts as literacy

Literacy research continues to be contested terrain, dominated by debate that emanates from the Cognitive, Psycholinguistic and the Socio-cultural models. In this section, in providing further analysis of the above models, I wish to argue that their contribution to literacy pedagogy and research is complementary, a view which is sometimes denied or underplayed (Smith, 2004; Snow et al., 1998; Street, 1993). In fact it is important to retain focus, despite the vigour of the debate, on the main purpose of literacy pedagogy research: namely to gain valid and reliable understandings that can inform and enhance the practice to the ultimate benefit of the learners. My view on this matter is succinctly articulated by Cummins (2005),

> The dangers of a fundamentalist approach are not confined only to those who espouse positivist research traditions. New Literacy theorists also need to guard against an either-or approach. Highlighting the social dimensions of cognition does not invalidate a research focus on what may be happening inside the heads of individuals, nor does it suggest that a New Literacies perspective is the best or only way to address all questions of literacy development. (Cummins, 2005: 146)

Although my work draws from and contributes to scholarship in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, 1994a, 1994b; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, 2006; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1983, 1993, 1994a, 1997, 1998, 2005b), it also recognises the value of work within the cognitive and psycholinguistic models. For struggling and earnest South African literacy teachers, there is a need for *both* awareness of the socio-cultural as well as the technical features of early literacy pedagogy.

2.4.1 The Cognitive Model

The Cognitive model has influenced the teaching and learning of literacy for many decades and continues to do so in South Africa and worldwide. Proponents of the Cognitive model (Adams, 1994; Chall, 1967; Clay, 1979; Langenberg et al., 2000; Snow et al., 1998) view reading as a technical process that can be understood in terms of the cognitive and neurological processes of the reader, 'translating graphic symbols [letters] on a printed page into an oral code [sounds corresponding to those letters]' (Pearson & Stevens, 1994: 23). The Cognitive model is often referred to as a 'bottom-up' process in that its attention is on the understanding of text through building up from its smallest component parts to the whole. In other words, the process starts with letter knowledge, moving to consonant blends, then to syllables, words and finally sentences.

Adams (1994) asserts that understanding of text is dependent on the ability to decode:

> The forceful conclusion is that reading proficiency is strictly limited by the speed, accuracy and effortlessness with which readers can respond to print as coherent orthographic, phonological and semantic (meaning-bearing) patterns. (1994: 8)

However, she is equally mindful of the importance of text comprehension,

> Phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relations, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing and with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions, and meanings of texts. (Adams, 1994: 422)

More recent research maintains the primacy of cognitive skills in the acquisition of literacy. Government-funded research in the United States, tasked with identifying, from an overview of available quantitative studies, the necessary elements of effective literacy interventions (Langenberg et al., 2000; Snow et al., 1998) arrived at the finding that 'three major topics … central to learning to read [are] Alphabetics, Fluency, and Comprehension' (Langenberg et al., 2001: 2 of 4).

Locally this view of literacy pedagogy has taken hold and is enshrined in DoE policy documents (DoE, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). The following extract reveals the embedded nature of the cognitive approach as one of the key elements of the National Literacy Strategy (DoE, 2008b):

> What are the five components of teaching reading?
> Most reading experts agree that there are five main components to the teaching of reading. These are:-
> Component 1: Phonemic awareness
> Component 2: Word recognition – sight words and phonics
> Component 3: Comprehension
> Component 4: Vocabulary
> Component 5: Fluency
> Each of these components needs to be taught explicitly and practised in context on a daily basis. (DoE, 2008b: 11)

2.4.2 Insights on reading pedagogy from neuro-cognitive science

Some interesting work related to the cognitive model draws on the discipline of cognitive neuroscience to argue that reading theorists and practitioners need to link literacy pedagogy more closely to an understanding of the workings of the brain (Abadzi, 2006; Wolf, 2007). The work is interesting in that it may provide some answers to the 'devastating story of unequal learning' (Fleisch, 2008: 2) that prevails within South Africa between the advantaged few and the disadvantaged majority. Abadzi (2006) provides an understanding of how the memory receives, processes and stores (or fails to store) new language data,

automatising smaller units of information first in order to use them subsequently for higher-order processing. Wolf (2007) also working in the field of neuro-cognition, emphasises the importance of reading for human cognitive development, showing how reading not only places demands on the brain but also contributes to its evolutionary development.

Abadzi (2006), emphasising the role of practice and feedback in the learning process, claims that children from poor backgrounds require more structured learning than their middle-class peers, who receive it more liberally with parents at home:

> Effective schools, particularly those catering to the poor, must offer students time to learn well the small units that are required before higher functions like analysis and comprehension are achieved. (2006: 23)

She asserts that the kind of learning that is variously referred to as constructivism, active learning or discovery learning may be more suitable for middle-class children and that, 'For the poor, different approaches may be more useful' (2006: 77). The idea of differentiated learning for different socio-economic groups can be construed as deterministic and controversial, particularly in the context of a newly formed South African democracy where the aim to standardise curricula is articulated in the language of social justice and of abolishing the inequities of the past regime. However, insofar as the argument firmly recognises the socio-economic as well as the neuro-cognitive factors affecting learning, Abadzi's (2006) and Wolf's (2007) work strengthens the argument for cognitive approaches more powerfully than de-contextualised studies within the cognitive model have done.

2.4.3 The Psycholinguistic framework

The Psycholinguistic model moves beyond the cognitive. Instead of focusing only on the brain/eye activity involved in isolated instances of the decoding process, it has moved the camera focus backward and, taking in a wider angle, brings attention to bear on the reader engaged in the act of reading, with his/her motivations, responses to the text and unique sense-making of the literacy process. What is now widely referred to as the 'Great Debate' (Chall, 1967) or more forcefully as the 'Literacy Wars' (Snyder, 2008) essentially reflects the difference between the Cognitive and the Psycholinguistic models of reading pedagogy. The

former emphasises the importance of phonics whilst the latter argues for the pre-eminence of meaning-making through exposure to 'whole language' (Smith, 1988).

The psycholinguistic theorists (Smith, 1985; Goodman, 1968; Goodman & Goodman, 1994) criticised what they saw as the narrowness of the perspective of the cognitive theorists, claiming that meaning-making and the interest of the learner are paramount in the literacy learning process and that,

> the cognitive approaches of the past several decades are characterised by either a pre-occupation with letter-sound correspondences, (phonics) or word and the techniques of recognising and naming them. (Goodman, 1968: 15)

According to the Psycholinguistic model, the reader is a unique individual, central to the success or failure of the reading process, and who brings his/her prior knowledge to bear when engaged in reading. As Smith (2004) argues,

> How well a story is understood and remembered depends on how well it conforms to conventional schemes for stories and on how well the reader is familiar with those schemes. (2004: 22)

The debate has been positive in that it has identified and explained some key aspects of reading development that were ignored within the cognitive model. One of these involves the analysis of readers' errors or miscues for signs of semantic and syntactic understanding of text.

2.4.3.1 Miscue Analysis

The Goodmans' work (Goodman, 1968, 2007; Goodman & Goodman, 1994) involved intensive analysis of the miscues generated by children in individual reading of extended texts. Through their research they have asserted that reading is similar to listening and that it involves interpreting and making sense of text, fitting it into the reader's conceptual grasp of semantic, linguistic and grammatical structures.

In developing his theory, Goodman (1968) draws the distinction between 'decoding' and 'recoding'. The former in his terms is a meaning-based activity whilst recoding is the practice

of focusing on letter/sound correspondences to form aural input, which is eventually decoded for meaning. He expresses the concern that over-emphasis on the recoding type of activities can actually interfere with the reading process:

> It is possible that emphasis on recoding can in fact result in learners reaching a high level of proficiency in recoding, with little or no awareness of the need for decoding for meaning. (Goodman, 1968: 20)

This concern certainly resonates with research findings in significant numbers of classrooms in this country (Langhan, 1990; Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999; Fleisch, 2008), which identify low levels of competence with regard to reading – both in reading tests and reading across the curriculum activities.

The construct of the reader as a unique meaning-maker, implicit in Goodman's (1968) work on miscues, achieves congruency with the aims and policy direction of the South African education curriculum. This post-apartheid context emphasises the transition from a traditional, authoritarian, teacher-centred and content-based method of teaching (Hartshorne, 1992) to an outcomes-based approach that focuses on the unique, observable performance of the learner (DoE, 2002b, c; Soudien, 2007). Furthermore, there is an opportunity for teachers of additional language learners, i.e. the majority of teachers in South Africa, to use Goodman's work to recognise and build on children's language miscues as 'the positive effects of linguistic and conceptual processes rather than the failure to communicate or comprehend' (Goodman & Goodman, 1994: 636).

However, in spite of the value of Goodman's (1968) work to the research community and its potential value in the classroom, its broad practical application to pedagogy in South African Grade One classrooms is limited because of the intensive one-to-one interaction that it requires. Teachers often have more than forty children in their classrooms and the amount of time available for one-to-one reading activity, let alone for the analysis of miscues that might inform the teaching, is severely limited; furthermore, this approach would require more expertise in terms of miscue analysis, which in the majority of South African public primary schools is simply unavailable at present (Chisholm, 2004).

2.4.3.2 The Reading Club

At odds with the view of reading pedagogy as a systematic process using artificially constructed graded readers, Smith's work (1971, 1985, 1988, 2004) resonates strongly with Goodman's: both scholars emphasise the pre-eminence of meaning-making. Smith has left an equally deep and lasting psycholinguistic footprint in the terrain of literacy pedagogy. His work strongly positions reading as engagement with real texts, either in books or in environmental print. Smith's approach has become associated with the term Whole Language or Real Books and it would seem that this was highly influential in the design of C2005, the first version of the new South African curriculum (DoE, 1998: 5). Its influence is still discernible in current government policy and documents related to reading pedagogy (DoE, 2002c; 2008b).

Smith takes issue with the notion that reading is a set of skills that can be taught and mastered in a predetermined sequence. He contends that programmatic instruction is the antithesis of meaningful language experience for teachers and children:

> *On the other hand extensive research in many cultures has confirmed that children become readers when engaged in situations where written language is being meaningfully used.* (Smith, 1985: x) (italics in original)

Smith argues that initial literacy learning takes place because children need or want to make sense of text. To highlight the importance of learning to read through reading meaningful texts rather than focusing on phonics, he developed the metaphor of the Literacy Club (Smith, 1988). This concept implies that children do not have to learn reading systematically through a phonics programme but 'join up' for reading out of personal motivation and because they gain benefit from it. His thesis is that the impetus within the child to derive meaning will result in drawing on a range of graphical, syntactic and semantic understandings to do just that (Smith, 1971).

Smith's engaging notion fits more readily with an urban or privileged social context where learners are surrounded by a range of different genres of meaningful print. In rural or semi-urban South Africa, where the majority of the nation's children live and learn, their access to print[4] at home and in the community is rated as poor or limited (DoE, 2005: 100). However,

[4] Electronic media, print media, books at home, and a community library

Smith's contribution to a meaning-making approach is important and holds a significant message for teachers whose learners seem uninterested in chanting lists of words or are unable to laboriously decode print through grapheme/phoneme correspondences. Finally, it is worth mentioning that although he is emphatically critical of a phonics-based approach, Smith does not totally deny its value. He concedes that readers will use their phonic decoding skills to establish if the word they have read is 'correct' (Smith, 1988).

2.4.4 Comparison of phonics and whole language approaches

Cognitive and psycholinguistic theories, with their respective methods of Phonics and Whole Language, are positioned as the two opposing sides in the 'Great Debate' (Wren, 2001). Both have a major influence on the current thinking and practices of policy-makers, literacy practitioners and researchers in primary school education. Although the fervour of debate was at its height towards the end of the previous century, there has been a resurgence of interest at government level not only in South Africa but in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, the three countries which tend to lead the way in terms of policy direction in Anglophone countries. The respective Ministries of Education (Bush, 2002; UK DfCSF, 2008; Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, 2005) have produced policies that emphasise the importance of a phonics-first approach, which in turn has fuelled debate and opposition from scholars who insist on the importance of linking reading pedagogy to deriving and making meaning (Dombey, 2006; Goodman, 2007; Snyder, 2008).

It has for some time been recognised that trying to argue for or against whole language or phonics is a fruitless debate (Adams, 1994; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Smith, 1985; Luke, 2000; Freebody, 2007). Positivist studies can be cited that 'prove' the efficacy of both approaches (e.g. Snow et al., 1998; Goodman, 1968). In this regard, Bond and Dykstra's (1967) findings from as far back as the 1960s underline the inconclusive nature of the debate.

In South Africa, the 'Great Debate' has been addressed by the inclusion in the curriculum of an approach that combines phonics and whole language (DoE, 2002c, 2008c). However, widespread disquiet about the failure of this balanced curriculum to impact positively on learner literacy levels has led to the development of a prescribed system for internal

assessment and to the implementation of systemic monitoring (DoE, 2008a). These strategies rely almost exclusively on quantitative measures, the results of which have repeatedly shown what Fleisch refers to as a 'distinct bimodal distribution' of achievement (2008: 30). The majority of the nation's children who are living and learning in rural areas and urban townships are not benefiting from their educational provision, whilst those from more privileged backgrounds do benefit and continue to do so. This finding indicates the significant bearing of socio-economic and socio-cultural factors on literacy learning and teaching. It also highlights the limitation of both the cognitive and psycholinguistic approaches to provide an understanding of the impact of such factors; for this a socio-cultural understanding of literacy is required.

2.4.5 New Literacy Studies

Recognising that neither the cognitive nor the psycholinguistic frameworks fully explain the entirety of what counts as reading (Heap, 1991), the orientation of this study turns to the body of literature that defines and analyses literacy as a socio-cultural practice. Critical of the Psycholinguistic approach because it was deemed to be too narrow, a number of researchers (Heath, 1983; Street, 1983, 1993, 1995, 1998; 2005; Gee, 1996, 2000; Barton, 1994 a; Barton, 1994b; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000) have become interested in the socio-cultural aspects of literacy learning and teaching and have generated theory within a conceptual framework known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS).

Developing a theory of literacy as a 'social practice', mainly arising out of anthropology, they defined somewhat pejoratively the Cognitive and Psycholinguistic approaches as the 'traditional' view of literacy (Gee, 1996), the implication being that the latter fails to take into account the social and cultural context within which the literacy activity takes place.

Although the writers within this model have contributed ideas related to sub-themes within NLS, and are associated within the model for different key concepts, the central premise of the model is that literacy as a situated practice, embedded in social and cultural contexts, must be studied in relation to the social and cultural context in which the practice is enacted. My work, focusing on educators' concepts of literacy and the relationship between these

perceptions and their enactments of literacy practices, is consistent with this premise and seeks to deepen understanding in relation to the theory.

Brian Street (1983, 1993, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2005) is one of the first scholars to take a socio-cultural perspective on the matter of reading and writing. Based on his observations of different uses of literacy in his research site in Iran in the 1970s, he developed the concept of multiple literacies to argue that reading and writing have different meanings and values depending on the context in which they are enacted. However, a constant feature of these varying meanings is that literacy is always related to an ideological position (1983).

A further related distinction coined by Street that is a useful analytical tool in my study is the distinction between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984, 1993, 2003). He uses the former term to refer to the notion held particularly within the Cognitive perspective that literacy is a neutral, technical skill that can be learnt regardless of context. In contrast, he defines the ideological model as one where,

> … we're not simply talking … about the technical features of the written process or the oral process. We're talking about people's own notions of the writing process itself. We're talking about the fact that people in society not only practise reading and writing but they have models and ideas about it and that there are contests over them. … [which] are always embedded in power relations of some kind. (1993: 115)

Furthermore, he asserts that even the autonomous model is ideological:

> What characterizes it as a particular kind of ideology is the way in which it disguises its ideological status. Its claims of neutrality are what make it precisely an ideological model. (1993: 115)

Street's perspective is relevant to my own path of enquiry. I started out on this research project from a position informed by the autonomous model, assuming that literacy pedagogy was about teaching and learning to read and write – no more and no less. I had wanted to find the cause of strengths and weaknesses in the literacy learning process and, like Beard (2000), arrive at a 'what works' answer. Through developing new insights into the social and cultural contexts within which the literacy practices of my organisation and the schools that we support take place, I reached a deeper understanding and have sought to theorise this understanding further by embarking on research within a socio-cultural framework.

The second point of significance for me in Street's work is his commitment to applying the theories of NLS to teaching and learning contexts so as to inform and improve language in education policies and practices. He is sharply aware of the need to move from theorising to application,

> We have to start where people are at, to understand the cultural meanings and uses of literacy practices and to build programmes and campaigns on these rather than on our own cultural assumptions about literacy. (Street, 1994: 149)

And

> the next stage of work then is to move beyond simply theoretical critiques of the autonomous model of literacy and to develop positive proposals for interventions in curriculum, measured criteria, and teacher education based upon these principles. It will be at this stage that the theoretical perspectives brought together in the 'New Literacy Studies' will face their sternest test: that of their practical applications to mainstream education. (Street, 1997: 29)

The challenge in these times of systemic testing, accountability and massification of programmes, which are all obviously necessary, is to explore how this can be achieved in South African early literacy classrooms.

Literacy Events and Literacy Practices are two key concepts that underpin NLS and are a means of understanding and analysing activities involving literacy. Shirley Brice Heath (2003) in *Ways with Words*, a ten-year ethnographic study of the role of language in three communities in the United States, defines a Literacy Event as 'any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretive processes' (Heath, 1983: 50).

Street (1984), noting that implicit in any literacy event are assumptions or conceptualisations of that event, has used the term 'literacy practices' to capture this notion. As he says,

> Literacy practices I would take as referring not only to the event itself but also to the conceptions of the reading and writing process that people hold when they're engaged in the event. (Street, 1993: 117)

An understanding of these two concepts is important for this study in that the primary research question, which explores the relationship between teachers' conceptualisations and

practices, seeks to understand the enactment of classroom literacy events in terms of their wider social and ideological significance. The exploration works with Barton and Hamilton's (1998) proposition of literacy as a set of practices which 'can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: 7). Literacy events are activities that occur frequently or repeatedly. In early literacy classrooms such events might be group story reading, individual completion of a phonics activity or News-time. Their significance in terms of elucidating practices is that from the repeated nature of the literacy event, from the rituals and relationships involved, the literacy practices currently prevailing in the site or sites of study can be inferred.

A criticism of NLS is that its emphasis on socio-cultural factors has tended to reduce attention to the actual detail of how children become literate. In fact, with the exception of a recent publication on early literacy and numeracy practices (Street, 2005), the majority of the NLS literature is concerned with literacy practices of functionally literate learners rather than addressing how NLS can inform early literacy pedagogy. As Kim (2003) states, a limitation of NLS is its

> evasion, in many cases, of concrete suggestions for literacy practitioners, especially classroom teachers. … Although the resources of insightful ethnographies … are valuable, teachers seeking to encourage hybridity of local practices and school practices still remain without guidelines and administrative support. (2003: 119)

Such guidelines are all the more necessary when applied to a South African context, where teachers have large multilingual classes, where most are under-trained for the complexities of the job and where literacy has become a 'high stakes' subject at the centre of public scrutiny. The documentation emerging from the DoE (2008a, 2008b, 2009) which provides national milestones and lesson plans for teachers for the whole curriculum in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, reflects a trend towards greater prescription and standardisation. This climate of regulation and measurement is often unreceptive to a socio-cultural perspective, yet I would argue that the time is right, more than ever, for NLS perspectives to add nuanced understandings about learner performance and teacher practice and hence to impact on literacy policy and practice in South Africa.

Thus, drawing on NLS theory, my enquiry into how the teachers engage with learners, with literacy materials, with the requirements of the language curriculum and how the children engage with each other and with their teacher, are all related to and expressive of socio-cultural aspects of their lives. Barton et al. (2000) assert that a person's practices are located within his/her own history of literacy and that to understand this we need to take a life history approach. In my study, there are notable and significant changes identified in the interview data between teachers' own experiences of early literacy and their current experiences as parents and early literacy teachers; these factors need to be considered and understood in seeking to analyse the literacy practices in classrooms.

2.4.5.1 Shirley Brice Heath

Heath's seminal research carried out between 1969 and 1977 into the literacy practices of three different communities in Piedmont, USA (1983), was imbued with a commitment to informing and improving education, particularly for marginalised and socially deprived communities. Her main finding, the disjuncture between the home and school literacy experiences of the people of Trackton and Roadville, and the significance of their implicit beliefs about literacy, highlights the cultural embeddedness of literacy; a significant finding that most teacher development interventions in public school literacy programmes seem not to have addressed. In this regard, a succinct and revealing extract from her research is relevant to those engaged in literacy provision in 'non-mainstream' cultures and communities:

> Townspeople carry with them as an unconscious part of their self identity, numerous subtle and covert norms, habits and values about reading, writing and speaking about written materials for which they find continuity of these patterns in school. These ways for them are natural and they expect other to share them. But for Trackton and Roadville people, these ways seem strange indeed. (1983: 262)

The findings in my study about the teachers' early memories of home and school literacy experiences bear testimony to a similar discontinuity.

The other element of Heath's work which is significant for my study, and which is evident in subsequent research within the NLS model, is the commitment to the redress of social injustice. The purpose of Heath's (1983) study was to seek to understand not just as an

esoteric activity but to find solutions for the redress of the social, educational and economic imbalances prevailing at the time. Thus her recommendations that 'approaches to reading and writing should tap into the life experiences that the children have already obtained outside of school' (1983: 289) and that teachers should 'create opportunities for more students to demonstrate accurately their competence with and through language' (1983: 376) challenge curricula and educators to be inclusive of learners' experiences rather than adhering to assimilationist approaches. This challenge implies support for a constructivist theory of learning which argues that the children learn by making meaning from their own experiences, an opportunity that children from Trackton and Roadville were denied in the school setting. Heath's argument is interestingly counterpoised by that of Abadzi (2006), who has suggested that children from poor backgrounds, in other words, from places like Trackton and Roadville, do not respond well to constructivist strategies and need to be provided with opportunities for drilling and repetition in order for them to gain maximum benefit from literacy pedagogy.

A criticism of Heath's work is that she made the assumption that teachers emanate from 'mainstream' social settings. Whilst it may be reasonable to assume that most teachers are middle class, the assumption that they are not originally from similar socio-economic backgrounds as their socially disadvantaged learners is less reasonable. In South Africa particularly, the social situation is different from that identified by Heath. The majority of teachers are Africans, schooled in rural and township public schools under the apartheid regime, which imposed limitations in every area of black people's social development. Consequently, although they may not now be experiencing the same social disadvantage as their learners, they have past experiences of deprivation which enable them to understand and empathise with their learners in ways that are perhaps not the same as teachers in the United States.

One indication of the social deprivation of most primary school teachers in South Africa is that 63% have no higher than a Grade 12 equivalent qualification (DoE, 2005: 179). Under apartheid, most Africans were subject to restrictions on their economic and academic development, which indicates that teachers have direct experiences of socio-economic deprivation. Thus, even if teachers have migrated now to a more middle-class, economically secure milieu, they do have experiences that would enable them to understand their learners' backgrounds and experiences.

The differences between the context of Heath's study and my own serve to reinforce the socially and historically situated nature of literacy and the importance of conducting studies that pay attention to the significance of the local dimension (Prinsloo & Brier, 1996). Heath's (1983) study is nonetheless an important source work for this study: it serves to demonstrate that ethnography provides detailed information about particular sites offering the possibility for cross-case comparison rather than generalisation. It also suggests that there is great scope in South Africa for many more detailed, rigorous ethnographic-style studies of education so that a body of reliable, qualitative findings is available for more cross-case comparison and learning about early literacy practices. Furthermore, despite the co-sanguinity with the learners of most teachers in the study, there is still evidence that schools in this study, as in Heath's study, perpetuate literacy practices that do not relate to home and community literacy events.

More recent ethnographic work carried out in the schools and homes of Bangladeshi children in East London (Gregory & Williams, 2000) builds on Heath's work to argue that 'access to contrasting literacies gives children strength, not weakness' (2000: 203) and that, for example, schools should build on the strengths that children derive from the rote-learning practices of their Koranic School studies rather than seeing this mismatch as a problem to be corrected. Although this study took place in what is referred to as a linguistic and ethnic minority group in England, the findings are applicable to South Africa, where parents and teachers have very different experiences of education to those proposed by the new curriculum.

2.4.5.2 James Paul Gee

The important finding about disjuncture between home and school literacy practices, highlighted by Heath (1983) and others (Ormerod & Ivanic, 2000; Prinsloo, 2004; Prinsloo & Stein, 1999; Dyson, 2001; Stein & Mamabolo, 2005; Wright, 2001) is a central aspect of Gee's theory about Discourses (1996). He deliberately uses the capital 'D' to assign a specific meaning to the term, as distinct from the definition of the word when written in lower case. For Gee, Discourses are,

> ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles by specific groups of people. … They are always and everywhere social. (Gee, 1996: xix)

Gee shifts attention away from the technical elements of reading and focuses on the socio-cultural aspects, stating that,

> The clearest way to see the workings of language and literacy was to displace them from the centre of attention … it leads to a different sort of linguistics as well, one in which language-in-society is the heart of the field. (Gee, 1996: vii)

He asserts that we should focus our gaze on the community within which the reader lives, the context and purpose of the literacy activity, and the different perceptions held by the reader, the educator and the writer in relation to the literacy activity.

Like other NLS theorists, Gee exudes a sense of moral imperative in his work. He is sharply aware of the social, economic and political implications of what he calls 'social linguistics' (Gee, 1996) and hence, locating his work within the framework of teacher education, it is his intention to provide guidelines to educators on strategies that reveal and explain the different Discourses that students need to master. Making reference to meaning, Gee (1996) identifies the key role of the teacher as one who can and must mediate mainstream culture to non-mainstream students. He comments that the teacher's role is to

> … point to the relevant data, focus the student's attention on the relevant aspects of experience that will make the system, the network of cultural models, begin to gel. (Gee, 1996: 91)

As in the case of Heath (1983), the assumptions made about teachers having a native-speaker command of mainstream school-based Discourses (Gee, 1996: 146) do not necessarily apply to the South African context. We cannot confidently assume that the teacher is mainstream and the learner is non-mainstream; the situation is more complex. Teachers in rural and urban public schools may not come from similar language, cultural and social backgrounds as some of their learners, but most of them do. Likewise, some teachers may confidently understand the school-based Discourses in order to mediate them for their learners, whilst others may not.

2.4.5.3 Luke and Freebody – the Four Resources Model

The Four Resources Model (1999) offers a valuable tool for the analysis of the literacy processes observed in this study. The Model emerges from Luke and Freebody's claim that literacy pedagogy is socially constructed, socially and culturally embedded, and that it involves key moral questions about power issues for the learner and the wider society of which he/she is a part. Rather than presenting a single methodology, the Model constructs the learner as an active agent in the process, capable of the following, depending on the type of literacy practice being undertaken:

- break the code of texts: recognising and using the fundamental features and architecture of written texts including: alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, conventions and patterns of sentence structure and text;
- participate in the meanings of text: understanding and composing meaningful written, visual and spoken texts from within the meaning systems of particular cultures, institutions, families, communities, nation-states and so forth;
- use texts functionally: traversing the social relations around texts; knowing about and acting on the different cultural and social functions that various texts perform both inside and outside school and knowing that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality and their sequence of components;
- critically analyse and transform texts: understanding and acting on the knowledge that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views and silence other points of view, influence people's ideas; and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned, in novel and hybrid ways' (Luke & Freebody, 1999: 1).

The value of the Four Resources model to this study is that from a socio-cultural perspective the model incorporates the cognitive and psycholinguistic models but goes beyond them to address questions of power and critical awareness of that power. In the process of this integration, they provide useful practical guidelines for teachers wishing to ensure effective literacy teaching without succumbing to a 'one methodology' approach. I have earlier stated that this study, whilst positioned as a socio-cultural analysis, recognises the value of scholarship within the cognitive and psycholinguistic frameworks. Hence the Four Resources Model, which, in identifying the first three resources, recognises and combines socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of literacy development, is the closest to my own thinking about early literacy pedagogy.

2.4.5.4 New Literacy Studies in South Africa

The importance of applying this theoretical framework to any study in South Africa of literacy and language is self-evident. Here social factors are powerfully present and must be seen as germane to any question of literacy practice or policy (Motala, 2001). Nascent post-apartheid democracy, extremes of poverty and wealth, multilingualism, and deep rural and intensely urban lifestyles are but a few of the social factors that impact on the enactment of literacy practices in this country.

In South Africa, the NLS model has inspired and given rise to a rich vein of mainly ethnographic-style education research (Bloch, 2000; Dixon, 2007; Prinsloo, 2004; Prinsloo & Brier, 1996; Prinsloo & Stein, 2003, 2004; Stein, 2003, 2008; Stein & Mamabolo, 2005; Stein & Prinsloo, 2001; Stein & Slonimsky, 2001, 2006) upon which my work seeks to build.

Prinsloo and Stein's (2004) work, focusing on four different early literacy classrooms, presents segments of teaching and learning to argue that 'teachers create differing expectations, values and beliefs about literacy in their classrooms' (2004: 1979). These become translated into processes that signal to the children 'the limits and boundaries around what constitutes "being a reader" and "being a writer" are actually defined' (2004:14) with significant consequences for the children's trajectories as literate beings. The argument is persuasive, based on interpretation and analysis of classroom transcripts and a case study description.

However, Prinsloo and Stein inferred teachers' 'imaginings of schooling' (2004: 13) from observed practices but their study did not explore with the teachers what these imaginings actually were. Their inferential findings have provided impetus for my study, which seeks to obtain evidence of teachers' stated beliefs and implicit theories (Zeichner et al., 1987) combined with observation data, attempting to hone further the argument for the link between the two. Thus my study seeks to build on the work of Prinsloo and Stein (2004) by providing these perspectives.

The CELL study, 'Home and School Influences on Children's Early Literacy Learning' (Prinsloo & Stein, 2003), aimed to provide highly accessible, thick descriptions of learners' literacy practices in homes, communities and schools. Dixon's work (2007) on early literacy

classrooms in Johannesburg takes the new curriculum documents as a starting point for establishing the kind of learner envisaged and, through close observation of a range of early literacy classrooms, using a Foucauldian framework, compares the 'ideal' literacy learner with observed practice. The primary focus of the studies mentioned above is the learning process from the point of view of the children; hence my study, with its primary focus on teachers, adds valuable new understandings and builds on the growing fund of New Literacy Studies knowledge being developed in South Africa.

2.5 Learner agency

The concept of learner agency had not originally been a focus of this study. Admittedly, in generating the overarching question for this research, I had a hunch that teachers' views, opinions and beliefs are likely to have a significant impact on how they teach literacy. This would relate to how they construct the children as literate subjects, how they understand and interpret the curriculum and materials at their disposal and hence ultimately how and what children learn. This hunch finds corroboration in the work of Elbaz (1983), Freeman and Richards (1996), Halkes and Olsen (1984) and Lortie (1975). Freeman and Richards (1996) argue that:

> Teachers' previous learning, knowledge, and beliefs about teaching serve as a powerful determinant of teachers' perceptions and practices. (1996: 6)

However, in embarking on the process of data collection via the teacher interviews, I had few preconceptions of what those conceptualisations might be. Although the term 'agency' was not used as such, several teachers made explicit reference in the interviews to children having opinions about what and how they wanted to learn, and acting on those opinions. These responses contrasted notably with those relating to their own constrained experiences of early literacy learning, and were sufficiently prevalent to require further exploration as to how such conceptualisations might impact on their literacy practices. This in turn means that the issue of learner agency is important in addressing the research question.

Drawing on Toohey and Norton (2003), I argue that an exploration of the role of agency in literacy learning must acknowledge that 'socio-cultural factors and larger societal processes are involved in the construction of individuals and their learning' (2003: 58). Their argument,

in describing how two successful language learners exercise agency, is that the social and cultural context within which the learning takes place is of central importance. This has significance for the analysis of learner agency in my study. Similarly, the analysis of agency in this thesis is a situated analysis: evidence of learner agency is analysed in relation to the historical, social and cultural context pertinent to early literacy classrooms in post-apartheid South Africa.

2.5.1 Learner agency and the curriculum

Learner agency is, I argue, a concept central to the NCS (DoE, 2002b, c). In presenting a definition of 'The Kind of Learner that is Envisaged' the Learning Area Statement for Languages (DoE, 2002c) lists the attributes of confidence and independence alongside, and, in fact, ahead of, literacy and numeracy skills. The notion of the learner as independent and agentic resonates throughout the NCS in references to participation and active, critical citizenship. The Critical and Developmental Outcomes (DoE, 2002b), derived directly from the Constitution, provide further evidence of the central importance placed on learner agency in the NCS. The emphasis in the design on active verbs, signals that for the effective achievement of these outcomes, children are expected to be agentive learners. The emphasis on learners taking responsibility for their learning marks a distinct change from the content-based curriculum of the previous regime where the teacher is the one who acts, applying 'correctional tuition' (TED, 1977).

> Critical Outcomes
>
> - *Identify*[5] and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking.
> - *Work* effectively with others as members of a team, group, organisation and community.
> - *Organise* and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively.
> - *Collect*, analyse organise and critically evaluate information.
> - *Communicate* effectively, using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes.
> - *Use* Science and Technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others.

[5] I have italicised the initial verb to demonstrate the emphasis placed by the DoE on the development of active, agentive learners

- *Demonstrate* an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

Developmental Outcomes

- *Reflect* on and explore a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.
- *Participate* as responsible citizens in the life of local, national, and global communities.
- *Be* culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts.
- *Explore* education and career opportunities.
- *Develop* entrepreneurial opportunities. (DoE, 2002b: 11)

The construction within the NCS of the learner as confident, independent, multi-skilled, critical and active implies a vastly changed approach in pedagogy from traditional teacher-directed content transmission to a learner-centred pedagogy. In terms of the history of education in South Africa, this change is monumental, placing high expectations on the teacher; who is not only expected to fully understand the implications of this shift but also to have the skills and knowledge to be able to implement the required changes through a learner-centred approach. As is argued in the next section and in chapter five, these expectations are proving difficult to fulfil.

2.5.2 Learner agency and literacy learning

In order to explore the role of learner agency in Grade One classroom literacy practices, it is necessary to show how this enquiry relates to existing scholarship on agency, and on learner agency in particular.

While the concept of agency has interested scholars in a range of different disciplines, there is not an extensive body of research on learner agency and literacy learning. However, important research has been undertaken in this regard by Ahearn (2001), Dyson (2001), McKinney and Norton (2008), Toohey and Norton (2003), Vasquez (2001, 2004) and Varenne and McDermott (1998). Other scholars refer to the concept; Luke and Freebody (1999) acknowledging a desired relationship between literacy and agency, and Prinsloo and Stein (2004) discuss the implications of a literacy pedagogy which denies learner agency.

In seeking to understand how agency might be generated and exercised in early literacy classrooms, the scholarship of various disciplines concerned with agency in human social

interaction is of relevance. These include the Sociology of Education (Davies, 1990; Davies & Harre 1990; Popkewitz, 2001, 2007; Zipin, 1998), Anthropology, (Ahearn, 2001; Ortner, 2001), Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1972, 1974; Freire & Macedo 1987; Giroux, 1987, 1988) and Critical Literacy (Bloome, Power Carter, Morton Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Dyson, 1989, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003; Luke, 2000; Luke & Grieshaber, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Vasquez, 2004). I also reflect on agency in relation specifically to the South African educational context, referring to scholarship dealing with social justice issues (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004; Seohatse, 2005;.

2.5.3 Thomas S. Popkewitz

Popkewitz (2001, 2007) is a leading scholar in the field of education theory and curriculum studies. He uses a historical approach to argue that the role of agency in the modern concept of the school is to render the child as a governable, disciplined subject (2001), pointing to the paradox in which 'the discourses of freedom were ordered through particular rules of childhood that interned and enclosed liberty itself' (2001, 184). He argues that reformist curricula and the concept of the child as a problem-solving, reflective learner, though seemingly emancipatory notions, are in effect the means by which children are disciplined, 'not through brute force but through the inscription of the universal rules of reason, transported to the actor and agency' (2001: 182). This analysis presents an interesting perspective, particularly in relation to the South African curriculum which exemplifies the reformist curricula of which he writes. His intention is to show that education fulfils a dual purpose, 'to create the agent who participates in the forming of the democracy and the actor who is disciplined in order to be capable of acting' (Popkewitz, 2001: 194).

His interpretation of human agency urges one to be sceptical about drawing emancipatory conclusions about learner agency, and emphasises its more hidden role in rendering the learner as a self-governing, regulated subject. However, despite the apparent determinism of his thesis, Popkewitz asserts that to understand the roots of a phenomenon is a 'strategy for making possibilities in the present' (2001: 204). It is worth noting in this regard that the learner constructed in the South African curriculum does indeed have the potential both to be a regulated subject and a critical thinker empowered to take responsibility for her/his learning achievement.

Although his theory of cosmopolitan agency relates to the new republics forged in America and France in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of the revolutions in those states, his theory is of particular relevance to the South African context. South Africa can be said to be in the infancy of its own new republic, born from an almost peaceful revolution. Notions of liberty and discipline are embedded in the South African Constitution and from this has been produced the NCS. Thus Popkewitz's contribution to an exploration of learner agency in South Africa is of particular significance.

2.5.4 Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy

Human agency is at the heart of Freire's model of liberation education (Freire, 1972; 1974; Freire and Macedo, 1987), and the influence of this thought and practice can be seen in much of the work and writings of progressive and critical educationalists who have succeeded him. Freire brings into the frame the idea that the teacher, in addition to the learners, is a participant in the learning process, positioned alongside the learners rather than simply as a representative of the institution.

A possible limitation in using Freire's work in the exploration of learner agency in early literacy learning is that his focus was the empowerment through literacy learning of adult learners. Engaging large classes of seven-year-olds in the kind of critique of the political and social structures of their community that Freire advocated would be challenging, although not impossible, as Vasquez (2001, 2004) has shown. Linking Freire's pedagogy with Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model (1999) might be one way of ensuring that a balance is struck between code-breaking activities and ones involving critical analysis. Vasquez (2001, 2004), for example, has effectively used critical approaches to early literacy, focusing on rights, advocacy and lobbying with four- to six-year-olds in a pre-school class in Canada. This work, which implicitly encourages the development of children's agency, provides an inspiring indication of the potential of critical approaches with young literacy learners.

Giroux's (1987, 1988) contribution to a relevant definition of agency for this study is his positioning of the teacher alongside the learners in a critical pedagogy in which both parties need to be agentive. A further point of reference for my study in Giroux's approach is his

emphasis on the paramount importance of language with regard to agency. He identifies that language,

> as both an object and subject of mastery, understanding and engagement is the site in which people negotiate the most fundamental elements of their identities, the relationship between themselves and others, and their relationship to the wider world. (Guilherme, 2006: 8)

So questions of agency in the language learning classroom go to the very heart of the development of the individual.

2.5.5 Ann Haas Dyson

Ann Haas Dyson's work (1989, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004), also in the field of critical literacy, has afforded an opportunity for reflection on and clarification of the concept of learner agency. Dyson has argued that young children's literacy development flourishes in contexts in which their agency is encouraged. In framing this argument, she draws on Vygotsky's reference to the need for children's 'budding personalities' (1978: 117-18) to grow in the process of authoring. Whilst not engaging in an analysis of the term, Dyson replaces the phrase 'budding personalities' with the term *agency* and then goes on to state that, given space, children can and will generate and build on their own opportunities for literacy learning, albeit of an 'unruly' sort (2001: 11). Dyson's work is of relevance to my own study, although its 'Northern' focus creates space for similar enquiry in other countries. It is also worth noting, from the perspective of NLS scholarship, that in as much as learning is historically and culturally situated, so expression of learner agency will take different forms in different contexts – hence the value of adding, through this study, to the body of learning about agency and literacy learning. The message from Dyson's work is an exciting and motivating one for the potential of agentive literacy learning with young children, but Luke's cautionary comment is also worth bearing in mind:

> Many of us learned a costly lesson from the centre/margin relationships of international educational research: that it is dangerous to generalize any educational approach from one national/regional and cultural context to another. (2000: 1)

The classrooms described in Dyson's research differ greatly from most classrooms in South Africa where, despite the intentions of the new curriculum, authoritarian, teacher-centred practices prevail. Hence the affordance and exercise of learner agency in South African classrooms are likely to take different forms to that witnessed in schools in the United States.

2.5.6 Sherry Ortner

In her analysis of agency from within the discipline of anthropology Sherry Ortner (2001) offers a useful distinction. She identifies two modalities of agency, that of *resistance* and that of *intention* (2001: 78). The former, she argues, relates to the notion that agency is the faculty that people use to 'act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives' (2001: 78). She contends that the 'dominated too have certain capacities' (2001: 78), and their use of these capacities in a continuum of responses from open rebellion to forms of 'foot dragging' (Scott, 1985, in Ortner, 2001) reflects the fact that resistance can be a manifestation of agency.

Ortner's definition of agency of intention involves actions that can be said to issue from the person's social and cultural constructs about how life is, a concept which resonates strongly with Gee's (1996) concept of Discourses. It might seem that this modality of agency (Commaroff & Commaroff, 1991, 1997, in Ortner, 2001) would have little relevance in Grade One classrooms amongst seven-year olds, many of whom were struggling to learn in what is effectively a foreign language. However, the fact that these children *were* so young, and relatively 'uninscribed with the universal rules of reason' (Popkewitz, 2001: 182), indicates that they had the potential to manifest agency and, indeed, with 'the smallest bit of manoeuvring space' (Dyson, 2001: 10) they did on occasion do so.

2.5.7 Bronwyn Davies

Bronwyn Davies's work on learner agency in primary schools in Australia (1990, 2000, 2005) has provided useful guidelines in the process of further defining learner agency. Davies (1990, 2000) uses poststructuralist theory to understand learner agency. Based on her study of the interaction between the teacher and learners, she reached the conclusion that learner

agency occurs within and is constructed by discursive practices in the classroom. Despite the fact that the teacher represents the authority of the school and by association the hegemony of the State, there is still the potential for the affordance of agency,

> It also depends on whether there is *choice amongst discursive practices* and whether amongst these are practices which provide the *possibility* of that individual *positioning themselves as agent* – as one who chooses and carries out the chosen line of action. (1990: 359) (my emphases)

This distinction provides a useful tool for analysis of learner literacy events in this study and her five criteria for the existence of agency have afforded a useful 'agency checklist' in the observation and analysis stage of the classroom observations in this study:

- A definition of the individual as one who actively makes sense of, rather than passively receives, the meanings available within the discourses used by the groups of which they are members.
- Access to recognised/recognisable discursive practices, in which a range of alternative ways of seeing and being are available, such that the positionings one currently finds oneself in are not experienced as inevitable.
- Access to the means by which alternative positionings can be brought about. These include knowledge resources, personal skills and the ability to mobilise the relevant discourse (i.e. to use the discursive practices and to be recognised as legitimately doing so).
- The desire to be agentive, that is, a sense of self as one who both can and should position themselves in that way, make the relevant choices, carry them through and accept the moral responsibility for doing so.
- Access to interactive others, along with appropriate discourse and the appropriate context, who will take up as legitimate the positioning of oneself as agent. (1990: 360)

However, Davies's interest, seeking to develop a post-structuralist theory of agency in regard to personhood and positioning (Davies & Harre, 1990), is different from mine. Her perspective pays attention to the way that the discursive practice positions the child or children as either having or being denied agency in terms of their personhood. As she says,

> … each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognizable identity, who 'speaks for themselves', who accepts responsibility for their actions, that is as one who is recognisably separate from any particular collective, and thus as one who can be said to have agency. (Davies, 1990: 343)

My perspective on agency in relation to literacy classrooms accepts this definition, but asserting that the definition of 'knowable' is situated and contextually based, seeks to analyse it in relation to the context of early literacy pedagogy in South African grade one classrooms.

2.5.8 Agency and Social Justice

Interestingly there has been, in recent years, a high level of interest worldwide amongst various sectors of the research community in the question of agency. Ahearn (2001) suggests that this increased interest is linked to the 'social upheavals in central and eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s' (Ahearn, 2001: 110), positing that 'many academics have begun to investigate how practices can either reproduce or transform the very structures that shape them' (2001: 110). I would argue that the interest in human agency in South Africa is rooted more locally and hence more powerfully in the troubled history of this nation. For example, Steven Bantu Biko's martyrdom for the cause of Black Consciousness, as Seohatse (2005) states, was as much about agency as it was about resistance:

> … defining oneself as a black person … is also about agency, the agency to create rather than be created. It is only through her agency, when a black person has become a subject in history that a true synthesis can be achieved. (2005: 2)

Thus concerns about agency were and remain at the heart of social, emotional and political regeneration in South Africa. Clearly, education has a role to play in this: Pendlebury and Enslin (2004) assert that human agency is at the centre of social justice, indicating the role that education in South Africa must play in securing the latter. Drawing on Nussbaum's (2000) definition of social justice they assert that,

> a socially just system of education is one that … takes human agency seriously and enables the self-development and self-determination of all citizens … [and] provides opportunities and support for all children to exercise the range of functions necessary for developing their mature adult capabilities. (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004: 40)

In accepting Pendlebury and Enslin's understanding of the importance of education in enabling human agency, I am also asserting that my interest in this attribute has a wider purpose than the explication of literacy teaching practices, but also can contribute

understandings that relate to the potential role for literacy education in the realm of social justice and nation-building.

2.6 Teacher education

This review of the literature of teacher education is based on the assumption that there is a link between teacher thinking and classroom practice. As a basis for this assumption, I draw on the work of Beach (1994), Elbaz (1990) and Zeichner et al. (1987). However, their work relates to studies carried out in the North, so there is clearly a need to test the assumption in a South African context. Slonimsky and Brodie (2006) and Stoffels (2005), working with high school teachers, Smit and Fritz (2008) and Vandeyar and Killen (2007), working with higher primary school teachers, have conducted research that explores the links between teacher thinking and practice, but none of these has had early literacy as a focus. Nor do they explore teachers' linked roles as school-based and home-based educators, in other words as parents of children who are also literacy learners. This is a significant difference because it was mainly in relation to the home experiences that the insights about changed views of childhood emerged in this study.

The design of my study constructs the teachers' conceptualisations as central to the literacy development process; so it is therefore essential for validity and coherence to relate my propositions and findings to scholarship in the domain of teacher cognition.

First, however, it is relevant to refer to the policy document which indicates the kind of teacher envisaged by the DoE to fulfill its curricular and constitutional ideals:

> The National Curriculum Statement envisions teachers who are qualified, competent, dedicated and caring and who will be able to fulfill the various roles outlined in the Norms and Standards for Educators of 2000 … These see teachers as mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes and materials, leaders, administrators and managers, scholars, researchers and lifelong learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors and learning area/phase specialists. (DoE, 2002b: 9)

The requirement places great expectations on South African teachers, which is not unreasonable, given the responsibility that rests with them to deliver the new curriculum aimed to produce empowered, analytical, communicatively able learners who will leave the

school system ready to lead and participate in a new democracy. In essence, the expectation is that the schooling system, and the teachers at the centre of it, will rectify the imbalances and inadequacies of the past decades of apartheid education. Popkewitz's analysis of the role of the modern school in the era of the Enlightenment bears relevance to the current South African context:

> Discourses of democracy and participation provide a redemptive theme that links teaching and teacher education to national survival. (2001: 193)

However, the majority of the teachers currently engaged in the system were recipients of the very same imbalanced and inadequate education that we now seek to reform. This produces an inherent systemic challenge, which if not acknowledged, explored and addressed will continue to threaten the success of the very best of policy initiatives.

There is an implicit requirement in the NCS that teachers radically change their approach, their thinking and possibly even their beliefs about education. As noted by Wilmot (2004), to support her proposal for the inclusion of modelling and experiential learning in South African teacher training, 'if policy is to be implemented in a meaningful way, teachers need to acquire a deep understanding of the new theories and then develop the tools to apply them' (2004: 154). Louden et al.'s (2005) study provides confirmation for this proposition. In a classroom observation study to determine indicators of effectiveness in Australian early literacy teaching, they mention that effective teachers are able to

> give clear explanations of the purposes of literacy tasks and their purposes were often of a higher order than those of the less effective teachers whose lower level purposes were often implicit. (2005: 205-6)

I would concur with Wilmot's statement, but argue that it does not go far enough. Exploration of how teachers can acquire the 'deep understanding' and be able to provide 'higher order explanations' needs to take account of the context and the level of challenge. Slonimsky and Brodie's (2006) study reveals the complexity of the 'organisational, epistemic and interactional challenges' (2006: 59) involved in pedagogy change. In tracking and analysing the practice of one teacher over a three-year period, they found that despite his overt intention to change from an authoritarian to a learner-centred pedagogy, the process was 'painstaking and uneven'. The challenges experienced by the teacher in the first two years of this process

were so great that it is probably only through his commitment to change that he did not give up and revert to his embedded authoritarian practice.

Other evidence abounds both locally (Hunt, 2006; Stoffels, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Moyane, 2005) and internationally (Goodad, & Klein, Elbaz, 1983; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999) that initiatives aimed at changing teacher practices are often notably lacking in success. To qualify this point, there is noted success whilst an intervention is supported but major challenges are associated with sustainability of such changes (Reeves et al., 2008). My own experience, grounded in fifteen years of literacy teacher training and support, confirms Reeves et al.'s (2008) finding. It has led me to question the assumed causal relationship between training, however good that training is, and improved performance.

Johnson (2006) refers to the socio-cultural 'turn' in language teacher education. This term is helpful because it captures the notion of a move away from, or changed position on, the traditional concerns of teacher education, namely those of content knowledge and methodological skills. There has been a significant body of scholarship produced in alignment with this 'turn' over the past few decades. Scholars such Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 2000, 2004), Cortazzi (1993), Danielewicz (2001), Elbaz (1983, 1999), Freeman (2002), Freeman and Richards (1996), Johnson (2006), and Mitchell and Weber (1999) have recognised that teachers bring with them a complex package of their own history, their memories about that history, and their beliefs about education and about themselves as teachers. As Freeman and Richards state, 'teachers' previous learning, knowledge, and beliefs about teaching serve as a powerful determinant of teachers' perceptions and practices' (1996: 6).

Whilst all these scholars can be defined as operating within a socio-cultural framework, there are differences in the specifics of their lines of inquiry. Bell (2002), Clandinin and Connelly (1991; 2000, 2004), Cortazzi (1993), and Pavlenko (2002) have applied the concept and practice of narrative analysis to teacher education. Calderhead (1987), Elbaz (1983), Freeman (2002, 2004) and Johnson (2006) are teacher educators who have ensured that the study of teacher cognition attains a central place in the scholarship on teacher education. Although Freeman's (2002, 2004) and Johnson's (2006) work focuses on the field of second-language teaching, their findings are broadly applicable to other areas of the curriculum.

Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, & Cain's (1998) definition of 'history-in-person' is useful in relation to this study, which seeks to explore with teachers how their current identities are forged from past experiences. Mitchell and Weber (1999) have been instrumental to this study in revealing how this concept can be applied through memory work in teacher development. Although their work is largely devoted to encouraging teachers to reflect on their own memories and of how these have influenced their current cognitions and practices, the value of their work to my study is the significance placed on exploring and understanding the past in order to 'reinvent ourselves as teachers' (1999: 4). Their reference to the 'authoritarianism' associated with playing school resonates with the data gathered from my own teacher interviews and which in some measure is reflected in the teachers' conceptualisations about their own present-day identities as teachers.

The socio-cultural turn is not without its critics: concern has been expressed (Yates and Muchisky, 2003) that content knowledge can become marginalised in the process of understanding teachers' beliefs and of teachers themselves coming to understand the source of their beliefs. According to Yates and Muchisky (2003), the socio-cultural turn,

> … marginalises critical issues, such as what it means to be able to use English, how L2s are learned, and how these issues influence what teachers do in the classroom.
> (2003: 136)

I believe that this criticism adopts an unnecessarily adversarial position and agree with Johnson that the 'theory/practice dichotomy … is counterproductive' (Johnson, 2006: 240). Furthermore, I would concur with Hartshorne (1992) and Chisholm (2002) that content knowledge is important and urgently needed in South Africa to address the inadequate standards of apartheid teacher education still prevailing in our schools (Chisholm, 2002). However, as argued earlier in this chapter, literacy pedagogies are situated, socio-cultural practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), and literacy teachers, likewise, are situated and affected by socio-cultural factors (Borg, 2003). Hence insights in this study about teachers' beliefs and motivations related to their practice will provide necessary and important contextual information for teacher training and professional development.

These insights not only provide an opportunity for the voice of teachers to be heard in a wider arena (Bell, 2002; Borg, 2003) but their 'voices' can then have an influence on teacher

education and teacher education policy development. In support of the socio-cultural turn, I would also cite Kettle and Sellars (1996) and Weinstein (1990), whose research confirms that teacher education may be less effective if it does not take cognisance of teachers' prior beliefs and experiences.

2.6.1 Teacher cognition

There is considerable overlap in the work related to narrative inquiry and that of teacher thinking or teacher cognition. Additionally, within the scholarship about teacher cognition, there is some ambiguity, with different terms being used to describe largely similar attributes. Thus, as Borg (2003: 87) shows, Freeman (1993) talks of 'conceptions of practice', Johnson (1992) uses the term 'theoretical beliefs' and Spada and Massey (1992) work with the notion of 'specific pedagogical knowledge'. Elsewhere, Zeichner et al. (1987) refer to teachers' 'implicit theories', Elbaz (1983) uses the term 'practical knowledge' and the most recently cited terminology in use is 'practitioner knowledge' (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002 in Johnson, 2006).

This confusing array of terminology is seen by Borg as 'a necessary process in the conceptualisation of an emerging domain of educational inquiry' (Borg, 2003: 87). It further denotes, perhaps, that focusing as it does on processes internal to the teacher, distinguishing with any confidence between teachers' thoughts and beliefs is problematic (Borg, 2003). In this study, which is not concerned with the philosophical distinctions between these concepts, I use the term 'conceptualisations' to capture the notion of thoughts, beliefs and implicit theories; and indeed at some points use these terms interchangeably.

The value in exploring teacher cognition in this study is related to the growing realisation that teachers' experiences of their own schooling have a major influence on the way they teach (Borg, 2003; Goodson, 1992 in Cortazzi, 1993; Hollingsworth, 1989; Johnson, 2006). Lortie's '15,000 hour apprenticeship of observation' (1975) is also relevant. Borg (2003) conducted a review of sixty-four research studies carried out between 1976 and 2002 in the field of teacher cognition and one of the main findings to emerge was that

> teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualisations of

> L2 teaching during teacher education and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives. (Borg, 2003: 88)

Most of the sites studied, however, are in First World countries and none was in an African country, pointing to the need for further studies exploring this experience/practice connection closer to home. A local study of two teachers in Pretoria East in South Africa (Stoffels, 2005) has identified this same phenomenon and another local study (Hoadley, 2003) likewise finds evidence of a similar relationship.

In contrast to the above findings, and demonstrating the lack of definitive consensus in the body of teacher cognition research, Zeichner et al. (1987) in their review of the research literature on teacher craft knowledge, extract the useful point made by Keddie (1971) that there is not necessarily a direct correspondence between teachers' beliefs about teaching and their actual daily practice. Even Borg's (2003) finding (quoted above) is tempered by a contradictory observation from the same research data that suggests that there is often strong evidence of a mismatch between language teachers' knowledge, beliefs and thoughts about their classroom practice.

These findings and those of Zeichner et al. (1987) serve as useful reference points for my own study, in which I compare stated beliefs and actual practices. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge Freeman's (1996) observation that the field of research into teacher thinking is particularly open to subjective interpretation on the part of the researcher. As he states, 'it deals with a cognitive world that is unseen, unheard and only indirectly knowable' (1996: 365). Thus it was important in the design of this study not only to gather interview data about teachers' beliefs about literacy teaching, but also to observe classroom practice.

Elbaz (1983) advocates the importance of research into teacher cognition by pointing out that 'though not often publicly stated, it is commonly held that teachers are inadequate in their tasks, either by reason of ineffective training or of self-selection' (1983: 10). To counter these negative perceptions, she embarked on an interpretative approach to the study of teacher cognition through the provision of insights about teaching 'from the teacher's own perspective' (1983: 4).

2.6.1.1 Teacher cognition research in South Africa

Elbaz's comments, despite having been made more than twenty years ago, ring regrettably loud bells in relation to the South African context, where the approach to teacher in-service training about the NCS has tended to assume that teachers are starting from a zero base in terms of skills and understandings of teaching. Whilst it may be true that many teachers' content knowledge and skills are lacking, the approach to training nonetheless needs to engage with teachers' beliefs and cognition as a starting point for further professional development. Soudien's (2008) concerns about teacher education in contemporary South Africa support an argument for understanding more about teacher cognition and implicitly provide support for the approach adopted in this study:

> We have to develop strategies for teacher preparation that are grounded in a deep understanding of the context in which we find ourselves. This means developing research capacities we don't have, especially in the field of cognition and its relationship with literacy and numeracy. (Soudien, 2008: 8)

Slonimsky and Brodie's (2006) analysis of the South African education situation serves as a useful lens through which to analyse the challenges facing teacher education currently in South Africa. Teachers who were trained under the apartheid education system received their training according to a philosophy of education known as 'Fundamental Pedagogics' (Landman et al., 1982). This philosophy required of teachers and students an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of the education system and reduced the role of the teacher to being the 'bearer of authority' (1982: 8). There was no place for the teacher to interrogate, analyse or even question the curriculum. In the context of this embedded experience, it is unsurprising that even in a newly democratic system which seeks to construct the teachers as 'mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes and materials' (DoE, 2002b: 9), most teachers in this study evince an incapacity for analysis and a continuing preference for traditional approaches to literacy pedagogy.

As Soudien (2007, 2008) argues, the situation in South Africa is different from the United States. Elbaz, writing from an American perspective, talks about her experiences in 1976 when, on a tide of progressiveness, teacher training was no longer about transmission and was more about 'involving teachers in curriculum development' (1983: 3). Similarly, Freeman (in Freeman & Richards, 1996) argues against the simple transmission approach and for the

support of 'teachers-in-training in developing their own understandings' (1996: 236). Hartshorne (1992) proposed a progressive teacher education curriculum that would better suit the needs of the new South African democracy, whilst the findings of other local scholars (Ja Chisholm, 2002; Jansen & Christie, 2002) caution against the imposition of an imported pedagogy, arguing rather that such approaches be adapted to fit the South African context. Most in-service teacher educators have at some time experienced the mismatch between trained teachers' talk about pedagogy and their actual classroom practice. Freeman refers to this phenomenon thus: 'talking in a new way about teaching and learning is one thing; conducting one's classroom practice in new ways may or may not be a separate matter' (Freeman, 1996: 236).

There is arguably a socio-cultural explanation for this apparent resistance to change in teacher practice. Most primary school teachers in the pre-democratic era in South Africa were not required to matriculate (Hartshorne, 1992) and instead obtained a basic and inadequate teacher training. A pervasive aspect of the teacher education system was that it did not encourage critical or independent thinking (Hartshorne, 1992; Slonimsky & Brodie, 2006): teachers learnt either to accept authority or to resist it passively. Johnson (2006) emphasises the socio-cultural characteristics of teaching and the advisability of accommodating these in policy and practice:

> Studies from around the globe find ... teachers enacting their practices in styles that suit the normative ways of teaching and learning that are historically embedded in their local contexts (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Li, 1998; Probyn, 2001; Simon-Maeda, (2004). More specifically, although questions about the exportability of Western methods have been raised for some time (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Li, 1998; Scovel, 1986; Ting, 1987), ministries of education … continue to set educational policies that import Western methods without taking into account the local constraints that will ultimately affect the extent to which … teachers are willing or able to implement curricular innovations. (2006: 245-6)

Hence, training using teacher cognition as a basis from which to work outwards needs to be very carefully developed and implemented in South Africa; as Soudien (2008) has stated, 'these are research capacities that we currently don't have' (2008: 8). It is hoped that the findings from this research will contribute to the building of such capacities.

In summary, this section has established the policy framework and focused on the areas of teacher education most relevant to my study. By presenting in this study teachers' thoughts,

opinions and ideas as reflected in the interviews and by reflecting with as much 'truth' as possible the realities of four fairly typical classrooms, I aim to contribute not only to the body of research knowledge but also to provide opportunities for teachers to read and reflect on others' practice and in so doing to be able to compare and reflect on their own practice.

However, as stated above, local conditions and context need to be carefully factored into any effort to use teacher thinking, or memory work, as a tool for teacher development. Simply providing opportunities for reflection will not, in itself, lead to changed practice. Johnson (2006) states this point so clearly that I will end this section with her words:

> Moreover, simply legitimizing teachers' ways of knowing will not automatically lead to praxis. This will occur only when teachers have multiple opportunities to connect their ways of knowing to theory, both emic and etic, through modes of engagement that lead to praxis and, more importantly, when they are deeply embedded in communities of practice that seek to ask these more substantive questions. (2006: 242)

2.7 Language issues: Multilingualism and languages of learning and teaching

The issue of language in South African schools and the hegemony of English as Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) continue to be a challenge both systemically for policy-makers and individually for teachers and learners. The following quotation, although emanating from Kenya prior to independence, encapsulates the power that colonial languages have established and continue to hold in Africa, at the expense of indigenous languages:

> A common practice to ensure that students kept pressure on one another was to require those students who were found using a language other than English to wear a button known as a 'monitor'. It was sometimes inscribed with phrases in English such as "I am stupid, I was caught speaking my mother tongue". (Maathai, 2007: 59)

The role of LOLT in schools as an enabling or disabling learning medium in post-apartheid South Africa and, for that matter, in other independent African nations, continues to be an issue at the heart of effective education. Thus, the literature on multilingualism demands a central place in this study.

In this section, I first provide statistical data on the languages and language distribution in South Africa, and then refer to the policy framework represented by the South African Constitution, the DoE language policies and curriculum literature as it relates to language. With this documentation as a backdrop, I investigate the 'Home Language-Straight for English' debate drawing in the work of international scholars (Baker, 1993; Cummins, 1975, 1979, 1981; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, 1995; Spada & Lightbown, 1997) and local researchers (Alexander, 2000, Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Macdonald, 1990) among others who argue that for a range of reasons, initial literacy learning should take place in the Home Language (HL) or the learner's mother tongue. This is a complex and controversial issue on which research findings can be quoted to endorse either 'side' of the debate.

Whilst the debate and research upon which it is based are of vital importance at policy and implementation level, I also believe that in the fervour of the debate, sight of the realities on the ground can sometimes be lost. In many South African urban schools, there are multilingual classrooms of such diversity that it is simply not possible to identify a common HL; hence pragmatic decisions have to be made. However, it also has to be recognised that such urban schools form a minority and that the majority of South African learners are still to be found in rural areas, sharing a common HL. Thus, as a research community concerned with issues of multilingualism and language teaching, our duty is to provide theorised argument, based on practically researched data. Equally, we have a duty to attempt to provide workable solutions with regard to the use of HL and Additional Languages as LOLT for the effective teaching and learning of literacy and of other subjects. Such solutions need to reflect the diversity of learning contexts and, consequently, there will not be one solution that applies to all contexts.

2.7.1 The statistical data on multilingualism in South Africa

In order to understand the multilingual context in which early literacy teaching and learning is taking place, it is helpful to have some factual information about language spread.

According to the 2001 census, isiZulu is the mother tongue of 23.8% of South Africa's population, followed by isiXhosa at 17.6%, Afrikaans at 13.3%, Sepedi at 9.4%, and English and Setswana each at 8.2%. Sesotho is the mother tongue of 7.9% of South Africans, while each of the remaining four official languages are spoken at home by less than 5% of the population.

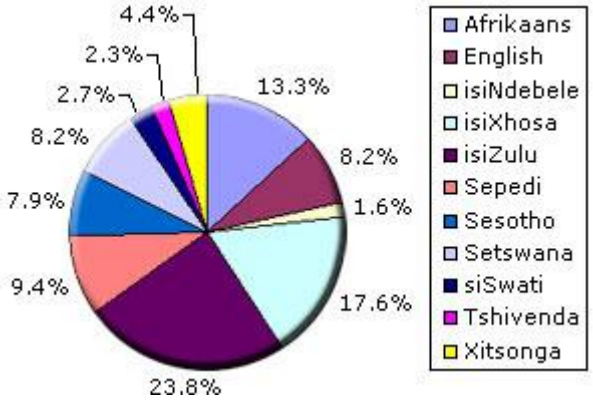


Figure 1: Information from the 2001 census on the languages of South Africa

(http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm)

The above narrative and pie chart reveal that South Africa is a multilingual country. Another feature with regard to this multilingualism is that although English is the lingua franca and 'the primary language of government, business and commerce' (http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm), it is estimated that only 45% of the population has a speaking knowledge of the language. Thus 55% of the population will at some point in their daily lives be at some level of disadvantage because of a lack of functional competence in the main lingua franca of the country. Relating this fact to the issue of chosen LOLT in schools, it may be understandable that parents, who have limited English, opt for an English LOLT school on the assumption that their children will acquire better skills in English and hence not experience the same difficulties in civic life as they do (Kamwangamalu, 2003; Mda, 2004). Equally, it could be argued that the statistics on language spread provide justification for the DoE policy that learners should experience the first four years of formal schooling through the medium of their mother tongue. In summary, the statistic can be used to support either view with regard to the debate about LOLT in South Africa.

The choice of LOLT is always a complex and socially loaded issue, but even more so given the political past of this country (Hartshorne, 1992). The issue of deciding on a language policy and of choosing a LOLT engenders impassioned debate not only at school level, but

also for policy-makers at provincial and national levels. The main question is whether early literacy should take place in the learner's HL with a later transfer to English (the timing of this introduction is also a contested issue) or whether a 'straight for English' policy should be implemented.

2.7.2 Language policy and government documentation

There are four documents that pertain to language policy in South African schools: the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a), the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996b), the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (DoE, 1997) and the Languages Learning Area Statement of the NCS (DoE, 2002c). The SASA (RSA, 1996b) states that the 'governing body of a public school may determine the language policy of the school subject to the Constitution' (1996: 6[2]). The reference in the SASA to the Constitution is important in that it provides direction for the governing body's decision. The three relevant clauses of the Constitution state the following:

> Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages (RSA, 1996a: Chapter 1, section 6 [2]).
>
> Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public education institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account –
> (a) equity;
> (b) practicability; and
> (c)the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices (RSA, 1996a: Chapter 1, section 29[1&2]).
>
> Everyone has the right to use the language and participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (RSA, 1996a: Chapter 1, section 30).

Thus School Governing Bodies are guided to promote and maintain through the school's LOLT, the eleven official languages and clause 29 (2c) can be interpreted as an injunction to pay particular attention to African languages which were marginalised under the previous Apartheid regime.

The LiEP (DoE, 1997) outlines the aims of the National Department of Education with regard to language policy, and lays out in some detail the means by which this will be implemented. This more detailed document holds the potential for a confusing contradiction within the document itself. In stating that the policy of the Ministry is to promote multilingualism, it elaborates:

> the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). Hence the Department's position that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language policy (1997: 4.1.6).

However, the issue of learner (or parent, where the learner is a legal minor) choice is also confusingly inscribed in the document:

> The learner must choose the language of learning and teaching upon application for admission to a particular school (1997: 5.2.2).

The third document that sets out the policy implementation guidelines is the Languages Learning Area Statement of the NCS (DoE 2002c). The content of this document is largely in step with the LiEP, as it states: 'The Languages Learning Area is in line with the Department of Education's language-in-education policy" (2002c: 4). However, there is further ambiguity, as the following three statements reveal:

> **All learners learn** their home language and at least one additional official language (2002c: 4).

> It is **recommended** that the learner's home language **should be** used for learning and teaching wherever possible (2002c: 5).

> Where learners have to make **a transition from their home language to an additional language as the language of learning and teaching**, this should be carefully planned (2002c: 5).

The highlighted areas are those which I believe relate to the ambiguity. In the space of a few paragraphs, the document shifts from making a comprehensive policy statement, to reducing the statement to a recommendation, to providing strategies for learners who will neither follow the policy nor the recommendation. That important policy documents contain very obvious ambiguities is curious and requires further examination. A summary reference to the

history of language policy in South Africa would suggest that this current ambiguity has its roots in a reaction to past conflicts over language.

Language policy had been a key instrument for domination and discrimination since the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 (Hartshorne, 1992; Heugh, 2000a), and language had been a rallying point for students, teachers and parents unwilling to accept the irrationality of the language policy of Bantu Education (Hartshorne, 1992). What became known as the Soweto Uprising was the result of the clash between government intransigence on the one side and impassioned belief in language rights on the other (Kallaway, 2002; Moss, 1982). As is now well known, the youth took to the streets in 1976 in protest against the violation of their language rights. Violence erupted on an unprecedented scale: one hundred and seventy-six lives were tragically lost and from there ensued more than a decade of heightened violence and conflict, which resulted ultimately in the collapse of the hated apartheid regime.

From amongst this same generation of protesting youth have emerged the leaders, teachers, parents and policy-makers of the new democracy. It is small wonder, then, that there are sensitivities in the new democracy about the protection and promotion of language rights, even perhaps to the point of it affecting the clarity of policy guidelines. In summarising the factors inhibiting the effective implementation of language policy, Mda (2004) identifies that parental fear is a key driver,

> Many white (and sometimes Indian and coloured) parents fear the loss of privilege (usually articulated as a fear of lowering standards). Afrikaans parents fear the extinction of their language and culture and black parents fear polarisation and non-access to the perceived economic benefits attached to English and Afrikaans. (Mda, 2004: 184)

I would argue that there is, in addition to these fears, a resistance amongst policy-makers and implementers to endorsing a prescriptive language policy which might signal unwanted associations with the painful past. However, an understanding of the reasons for policy ambiguity does not solve the problem. The purpose of policy is to provide a framework within which to deliver education, and the lack of clarity in this key area can be to the detriment of all stakeholders.

As policy and practice currently stand, the decision about LOLT is a matter for each school to decide. In fact, the issue of choice of LOLT for a school is rarely, if ever, based on pedagogical criteria alone. The power of English as a 'lingua mundi' (Lo Bianco, 2000) and the historical processes by which the languages of the colonial powers in Africa and other parts of the third world have become embraced as linguae francae bring influence to bear on decisions about language policy at both the macro and micro level. Positions are taken up and decisions are made about languages of learning and teaching, which have far-reaching effects on the learning prospects of children, yet these are often based on untested assumptions or on unreliable generalisations from one context to another. The following section attempts to shed light from the available evidence within the academy on the issue of choice of LOLT.

2.7.3 The Home Language–Straight for English Debate

2.7.3.1 Arguments for Home Language LOLT

The multilingualism debate, which focuses largely on the issue of LOLT, is an impassioned one. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues that the reason for the height of the passion is that language goes to the heart of human identity and rights. Hence although the discourse may be academic, powerful emotions underpin the debate. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) writes of colonialism: 'The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation' (1986: 9). From an academic viewpoint, Cummins writes: 'to reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child' (2001: 6). Here in South Africa, whether they are high-profile individuals or not, people have strong emotions about language:

> Language is the highest manifestation of social unity in the history of mankind and it is the inherent right of each group of people to use its language without restriction. (Mandela, 2001: 1)

> I believe in one's identity. The English language contains Western values, attitudes and worldviews, and – most importantly, it carries a Western identity. If I speak English at school and at home, I lose my identity. … Therefore I should also speak Zulu, as it carries my African identity. So, by speaking Zulu I preserve my identity as an African man. (Sibusiso Shezi [learner] in Karlsson & Moodley, 2004: 36)

Key proponents of multilingual education internationally (Cummins, 1975, 1979, 1980, 1981, 2000, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, 1995, 2000; Baker, 1993; Krashen, 1997; Spada & Lightbown, 1997) share common views about its importance. They identify the personal benefits children derive from learning in a language that is consistent with their home and cultural experience (Cummins, 2001). This point is taken further to emphasise that language rights are at issue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and that on a national scale multilingualism is a resource to be nurtured. They also agree that cognitive language skills learnt in the first language transfer to an additional language. Krashen refers to this in terms of his theory of 'comprehensible input':

> When schools provide children with quality education in their primary language they give them two things. Knowledge and literacy. The knowledge that children get through their first language helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. (Krashen, 1997: 1)

2.2.1.1.1 Cummins's Interdependence Theory

Cummins's (1975, 1979, 1980, 1981, 2000, 2001) work has been extremely influential amongst scholars and language implementers in advocating the implementation of late-exit bilingual programmes. Notably he has argued that there is empirical evidence for different types of language involved in the language-learning process. There is BICS, or Basic, Interpersonal Communicative Skills, and CALP, which stands for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. According to Cummins (1980, 2000), BICS can be acquired in an additional language in about two years, whereas CALP requires at least five years for learners to be able to perform with native-speaker proficiency. He further explains these terms by saying that BICS refers to such things as 'oral fluency, accent, and socio-linguistic competence' (1980: 177). The definition of CALP is harder to locate in the literature but one assumes that CALP is everything that is not BICS; however, I would argue that the ambivalence as reflected in this statement, 'the exact composition of a CALP dimension in either L1 or L2 is an empirical question' (1980: 179), suggests a weakening of the theory.

According to the Interdependence theory, skills learnt or acquired in L1 are transferred to L2. Based on this theory, Cummins argues for sustained instruction in L1 to allow for the embedding of CALP in L1 which will be then used in L2 and enable the learner to have a better grasp of the L2. Although the theory makes intuitive sense, there are problems with the application in terms of classroom implementation. Firstly, the relationship between BICS and

CALP is unclear. Is there a linear progression from BICS to CALP and what level of CALP must a learner reach in L1 before she applies the CALP in a second language?

Pang and Kamil (2004) criticise the Interdependence Theory, pointing out that, 'Although there is interdependence between a bilingual's L1 and L2, the nature of that interdependence has not been clearly established' (2004: 12). The concern is valid and, given that the theory is frequently used as a basis to argue for bilingual education, a more explicit articulation of the nature of the interdependence would serve to strengthen the argument.

One of the limitations about the work on multilingualism is associated with the Northern focus of much of it. Influential studies often cited refer to studies of Spanish /English bilingual schools in the United States and French/English schools in Canada. Although Heugh claims that there is a 'huge body of research that has been conducted in South Africa' (2000a: 12), of the three studies that she cites, only two relate to classroom observation data and both of these (Malherbe, 1946; Macdonald, 1990) are concerned with education in the era of apartheid. Setati and Adler (2000) have conducted interesting research on multilingual maths classrooms in South Africa; and Desai (2001) and Brock-Utne et al. (2006) are producing important findings about the value of mother-tongue instruction in South African primary schools. The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) 'does research, training and materials development for early literacy (from birth to around 9 years) in multilingual settings in South Africa and other parts of Africa' (http://www.praesa.org.za). However, considering the language statistics of this country, there is clearly a need for more research, both qualitative and quantitative, in a range of aspects of multilingual education.

2.7.3.2 Challenges to Home Language LOLT

Despite the fact that the findings of the vast majority of research on bilingualism affirm the benefits of learning in HL (Bloch, 2006; Cummins, 1995; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2001; Kotze and Higgins, 1999; Macdonald, 1992; Ramirez et al., 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, 1995, 2000; Stein, 2008), and that, in South Africa, the DoE's recommendation is that 'the learner's home language should be used for learning and teaching wherever possible' (DoE, 2002c: 5), the issue of entrenching HL as LOLT seems to present continuing problems both internationally and locally.

Most of the international literature on these challenges relates to the education of linguistic minorities, in mainly English-speaking countries like the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Schlesinger Jr. (1991, cited in Cummins, 1995) and Walburg (1990, cited in Cummins, 1995) claim that bilingual children need a monolingual (English) education and 'maximum exposure in order to learn' (in Cummins, 1995: 143). Cummins (1995) is highly critical of this viewpoint, claiming that in ignoring 'the massive amount of data refuting the "maximum exposure" hypothesis', it is nothing more than a veiled attempt to sanitise the imposition of 'coercive relations of power' (1995: 144) on linguistic and cultural minorities.

It is both interesting and worrying that this arguably dated debate, taking place in a different country and context, relates to principles that are still relevant and unresolved in South Africa today. As Heugh comments,

> Why, then, given the support of scholars, educational commissions ad reports on the continent, which promote the use of African languages, have there been very few successful attempts to extend the use of African languages in education? (Heugh, 1999: 306)

Mda's (2004) overview of the political and policy environment surrounding bilingual education concludes that problems around policy implementation are caused by a lack of political will to achieve this end. Misinformation about the issues is also rife. For example, the oft-repeated statement that parents want 'straight for English or English only' (Heugh, 2000a: 15) is addressed in detail by Heugh (2000a). She shows how this misconception, which gains credibility through repeated use, overlooks an important finding of the Department of Education and Training. In 1992, parents were asked to choose a language medium and whilst 22% opted for English medium, 54% opted for a gradual transfer from African HL to English (Heugh, 2000a:16). Taylor and Vinjevold's influential study (1999), which seemingly overlooked the 1992 data, has contributed considerably to the public misconception that the majority of parents want their children educated in English. This study (1999), which is a collection of papers, apparently research-based, on the state of education in South Africa claims that,

> There has been no systematic survey of the options chosen by parents in the 1990s but anecdotal evidence suggests that many schools adopted English as the language of learning in Grade 1. (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999: 210)

And

> Many parents want English language instruction from as early as possible. (1999: 220)

It is regrettable and damaging, if, as it would seem, the recommendations in the study with regard to English LOLT are based on anecdotal rather than factual information. De Klerk's study (2000) with a small number of Xhosa parents does indeed find that the parents chose to send their children to English-medium schools. However, their choice is based, not on a rejection of isiXhosa-medium education, but on the justifiable belief that the former white schools are currently better organised and better resourced than the isiXhosa-medium schools and will thus afford their children a better education. Clearly, quality of education is a factor which any parent would prioritise. However, as Heugh shows, referring to a study conducted in 1999, if the issue of quality is taken out of the equation, 'the majority of the people, at least 88% favour the maintenance of home language throughout education or the maintenance of home language alongside a second language/English' (2000a: 19-20).

The argument for home language education as presented by Heugh is persuasive in relation to rural and some provincial urban areas where one African language predominates. The issue of implementation is more complex in typically metropolitan multilingual schools where, as in the case of two of the schools in this study, there are often more than ten different home languages in one classroom. In such a situation, issues of respecting and finding a role for learners' home languages whilst teaching the curriculum through the medium of English will probably remain the response. As indicated in the Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997: section 5), there is a need for the implementation of multilingual education to be guided by the findings of local and international comparative research. One such recent local study (Rodseth, 2005) reached interesting quantitative conclusions that would seem to negate Cummins' interdependence theory. A current action research project (Owen-Smith, 2007) explores the impact on primary school learners of Home Language break-away lessons and bilingual maths lessons in an English-medium school. The findings of an unpublished report (READ, 2005) indicate that a minimal amount of home-language recognition and support, using Owen-Smith's (2008) language developmental mode, had a significantly positive influence on the acquisition of English literacy in three Foundation-Phase research classes.

The matter of quality is sometimes overlooked in the debate about bilingual education. Simply providing education in the children's first language is not of itself a satisfactory

objective. The quality of the teaching is a most significant variable, as Prinsloo and Stein (2004) and Stein (2008) have discovered through close observation of classrooms in Limpopo, Gauteng and the Western Cape. Glenn's (1997) comment is apposite in this regard: 'What cannot be justified … is to continue substituting a preoccupation with the language of instruction for the essential concern that instruction be effective' (Glenn, 1997: 12). Although he is referring to schools in the United States, the same concern is equally relevant to South Africa. The issue of HL as LOLT is important, but quality is also a salient factor. Research in the field of multilingual education needs to advocate that the HL early literacy education is of high quality. It is the intention of this study to make a reliable evidence-based contribution to this advocacy.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that quality factors extend beyond the context of the classroom, relating to the home circumstances of the learner. Heath's (1983, 1990) and Rogoff's (1990, 2003) studies emphasise the significant role played by parents and the wider community in the language socialisation of children, both with regard to spoken and written text. Furthermore, there is a significant body of research both internationally and locally (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini., 1995; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Gest et al., 2004; Howie et al., 2008; Desmond, 2004) supporting the view that parental involvement positively affects children's academic performance.

2.7.4 Concluding statements

Concurring, as I do, with the scholars arguing for the affective and pedagogic benefits of starting to read and write in the HL and maintaining the HL whilst adding an additional language, the concerns of the previous sections of this chapter reverberate also here. Issues of multilingualism do not occur in a vacuum. The situated nature of the literacy learning, the policy issues and issues of teacher development all have relevance to the focus of this study and to each other. As argued by Fitzgerald (2003), there is a need for an over-arching perspective on multilingual literacy learning that addresses the connectedness of the different frameworks. In this way, understandings from one discipline can inform the other with the result that the findings of research into early literacy learning in South Africa will be holistic. The interdisciplinary research community engendered by this approach needs to be less

focused on adversarial debate and more united in addressing the challenge of seeking and providing answers that can practically inform policy and implementation.

Chapter Three - Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This study is essentially a piece of qualitative research. It has little to do with the measurement of inputs and outcomes. As a qualitative study, its reliability inheres in the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis processes. Its validity and hence its value to impact quality in the domain of early literacy rests in my ability to assure and essentially to convince the reader of the rigour with which I have designed, implemented and reported on the whole research process. Thus, in this chapter I will present this process in detail.

First I revert to the research aims to show how the design is consistent with these. Then I address separately the two data sets – the interviews and the classroom observations. For each set, I will explain the design process. In explaining the implementation and analysis processes, I will also show how these draw on and are aligned to current approaches in the discipline of qualitative educational research (Dillon, 2005; Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002; Merriam, 1998, 2002; Patton, 2002). Finally, for each data set, I mention and reflect on the impact of challenges and constraints encountered in the research process.

3.2 The research design

At the outset, I had an intuition, based on years of experience of working with early literacy teachers, that their cultural beliefs about, and experiences of, literacy were closely, possibly causally, linked to their practices. This intuition is corroborated in a significant body of scholarship focusing on teacher cognition, as mentioned in the previous chapter (Calderhead, 1987; Elbaz, 1983; Freeman, 2002, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). Thus, the design of the study was based on the assumption that an exploration of beliefs and practices of a number of teachers would yield insights that might shed light on early literacy practices in South African primary schools. This focus on beliefs and practices led to the choice of an ethnographic-style methodology. Although my study is not a full ethnography, for reasons which will be detailed, it is relevant to explore the definition of ethnography and to show the ways in which my study coheres with the approach and ways that it does not.

Merriam's (2002) reference to the use of ethnography is pertinent: 'One common approach is to view culture as the knowledge people have acquired that in turn structures their worldview and their behaviour' (2002: 236). A succinct definition of ethnography is difficult to find in the literature because, as Hammersley (1994) says,

> The term 'ethnography' is not clearly defined in common usage, and there is some disagreement about what count and do not count as examples of it. Furthermore, the meaning of the term overlaps with that of several others – such as 'qualitative method', life history method', 'discourse analysis', etc; and none of these terms is used in a very precisely defined way either. (1994: 1)

Hence, the difficulty in reaching a discrete definition of the methodology in use in this study. Also, ethnographic research contains an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, the researcher aims to foreground and faithfully reflect the respondents' views and practices as they are, with as little interpretation as possible. The aim is to create for the reader a comprehensive, comprehensible and unbiased picture of the research situation, the relevant participants, their actions and interactions. This calls for detailed and rich description; the term 'thick description' coined by Geertz (1988) has become intrinsically associated with a common understanding of the definition of ethnography. On the other hand, it is impossible in the process of observing and describing to totally exclude bias. As Strauss and Corbin (in Patton, 2002: 488) state,

> … researchers have learned that a state of complete objectivity is impossible and that in every piece of research – quantitative or qualitative – there is an element of subjectivity. What is important is to recognise that subjectivity is an issue and researchers should take appropriate measures to minimise its intrusion into their analyses.

The very process of data collection is selective: the researcher in obtaining the data is the person who sees, and in this seeing is selecting what to see and what not to see. Then, having obtained or generated the data, its analysis involves a further filtering process. It is the researcher ultimately who defines the criteria about which elements of the data to thickly describe and which to leave aside.

However, this contradiction is also, in my view, its strength. Whilst ethnography originates from classical anthropology, which involved an almost voyeuristic interest in the lives and practices of 'exotic' cultures, the evolved version is now credibly associated with postcolonial

and postmodern research studies which problematise the power relations between the researcher and the researched and seek to provide the insider's perspective (Patton, 2002: 84). In the field of literacy research in particular, important work by Barton (1994), Heath (1983), Prinsloo and Breier (1996), Scribner and Cole (1981) and Street (1993) has ensured that ethnography is of central importance with regard to gaining understandings of literacy as a social and cultural phenomenon both in schools and in communities and as a means of 'understanding "what's going on" before pronouncing on how to improve it' (Street, 2001: 2).

The inherent challenge involved in attaining objectivity in ethnographic research is either openly referred to in the data analysis (Correll, 2002; Wright, 2001) or is positively addressed as a reflexive element of the methodology that can benefit both researcher and researched (Barton, 2000). This acknowledgement of the presence of subjectivity serves to accord it greater reliability, in my view, than some types of quantitative research which ignore the inherence of subjectivity and treat the research site as a clinically controlled domain and the researcher's role as that of a neutral clinician applying and monitoring the effects of treatments.

However, certain features of ethnography were not included in my research design. My study did not involve full immersion in any of the school sites and neither was my presence in the classroom fully that of a participant observer (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The duration of the classroom observation in each classroom, although planned to take place over a six-month period consecutively, was interrupted by teachers' industrial action and furthermore by my full-time work, which required me to be out of the country for one month. Thus although there was extensive observation of each class, I was not able to be in any one of the classrooms sufficiently long enough for my presence to warrant the term 'immersion'. Furthermore, I took the decision to keep my participation to an absolute minimum in the classes observed because I wanted to watch and understand the early literacy practices as they were. Extensive intervention in the teaching and learning process on my part would have skewed the practices and detracted from the purpose of the study. Thus, I refer to this as an *ethnographic-style* study rather than as a straight ethnography.

3.3 The methodology chapter as a map of a journey

In terms of the personal, this study represented a journey that was both physical and intellectual. The physical aspect relates to the visiting of teachers and schools that would not otherwise have been 'on my route' as the MILL training manager and this in itself was developmental. Twelve years of training and research work with teachers in schools across Africa utilising MILL methods and materials had afforded me a wealth of early literacy experience. However, embarking on doctoral research within the academy involved the need to navigate differently in otherwise familiar terrain, to become a different kind of traveller and to engage with challenging 'theoretical travel guides' that sometimes posed problems of comprehension, causing momentary doubt about the veracity of the chosen route and at some points, even a fear of the journey itself .

The research questions clearly provided the direction in terms of research techniques. Finding out about teachers' conceptualisations meant that I would need to talk to teachers and provide a non-threatening environment for them to talk to me. Thus a semi-structured interview was the chosen technique for the first data set; the detail of the interview design is explained below. Exploring links between the beliefs shared in the interviews and teachers' early literacy practices required that I observe teachers in their classrooms. Hence classroom observation was the key technique for the second data set.

3.4 Ethical issues

Ethical clearance and a protocol number were obtained through the appropriate channels at the University of the Witwatersrand. Following that, permission was gained from the Provincial Department of Education to carry out the research and to approach the schools directly. Having selected the schools and obtained agreement from the school principals, I also wrote to the district directors responsible for the two districts in which the schools were located to obtain their permission for the research to take place. All the principals and teachers received and signed consent letters agreeing to participate in the study. Parents also received and signed letters of consent for the videoed material and samples of their children's writing to be used in the research and to be shown to other researchers and students for academic purposes (see Appendix A).

Ethical issues emerged as thorny challenges throughout the research, during data gathering, analysis and the writing of this thesis. This is consistent with the nature of qualitative research that deals with real people with whom the researcher becomes involved to varying degrees of intimacy (Bell, 2002). These ethical dilemmas are reported on subsequently in this and later chapters. Whilst experiencing significant ethical challenges in the process of conducting the research I have at all times and to the best of my knowledge operated ethically and with integrity with regard to the data and the people who were involved in the research as participants.

3.5 The timeframe

The intention at the time of writing the proposal was to complete the interviews in one year and then to carry out the classroom observations in the subsequent year, with data analysis being an ongoing process. As it transpired, the data gathering occurred over a three-year period: the first year for the interviews, the second for the analysis of the interview data and the third for the gathering and analysis of the classroom observation data. Combining the research with a full-time job was the main reason for the extended timeframe.

3.6 Development of interview schedule

The information gathered in the interviews needed to be as detailed and rich as possible and to truly reflect not just the thinking of teachers, but as vividly as possible to capture their memories of childhood encounters with literacy. I also wanted the data to reveal teachers' beliefs about the purpose of literacy. Concurring with Barton and Hamilton that a person's practices are located in their own history (Barton & Hamilton, 1998: 7), in order to understand teachers' literacy practices, I therefore first needed to tap into the rich resource of data located within their histories and memories about literacy – in other words, into their literacy histories.

The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule (see Appendix B) allowed for issues to be raised by the interviewees that had not been anticipated or planned for. It was the unanticipated responses that provided the most interesting and persuasive pieces of evidence for the linking of past experiences with current practice. The questions were devised chronologically, starting with their early experiences of literacy at home, then at school as

literacy learners. I had an intuition that it would be easier for the respondents to talk about their memories of early experiences first.

Moving from their own experiences of literacy as learners, questions were then asked about their experiences of literacy at home now, as parents or grandparents of children learning literacy. The intention for this shift was to see if there were similarities or differences between the two and to analyse the reasons for the differences, if there were any.

The second section of questions dealt with teachers' early literacy pedagogy, seeking information about resources and opinions on the new curriculum. The third and final section attempted to explore the teachers' views of the purpose of literacy, its importance and whether literacy will continue be important in the future.

3.7 Selection of respondents

The selection of participants was purposive rather than randomised (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). I wanted to obtain data from a range of teachers from different socio-economic backgrounds and so I selected teachers from rural schools, township schools and urban private schools. The sample comprised fifteen schools, twenty-seven teachers and three literacy trainers. Twenty-six teachers were in South African schools and one was in a private school in Tanzania. Table 1 summarises the sample and Table 2 provides the details of the teachers in the sample[6]; the details of the four observed teachers appear in bold font.

Table 1: Summary of the sample of educators interviewed

	Schools	**Teachers**	**NGO literacy trainers**
Public	12	22	3
Private	3	5	
Totals	15	27	3

[6] The home languages of the teachers appear in Table 5 on page 186.

Table 2: List of teachers interviewed

Teacher	LOLT	Number of years' primary school teaching experience	HLs of the learners	Location of the school
Alison	English	12	various, mainly English)	Tanzania – private school
Amy	Sepedi	17	Sepedi	Gauteng – large school in informal settlement
Betty	English	26	Various, mainly English	Gauteng – public school
Busi	English	9	Nguni languages[7]mainly isiZulu.	Gauteng – semi-rural school
Group interview Joanna Meg Miriam	English	 29 14 16	Various, mainly English	Gauteng – private school
Group interview Lettie Neni Xoli	isiXhosa	not available	isiXhosa	E Cape Township school
Group interview Sakane Bassi	n/a	not applicable (n/a)	n/a	Limpopo Province – literacy trainers
Group interview Lungi Pat Rose	Sepedi	 6 7 20	Sepedi	Gauteng – Township school
Gugu	isiZulu	11	isiZulu	Gauteng – large township school serving informal settlement
Ivy	n/a	n/a	n/a	Gauteng Province literacy trainer
Joan	English	23	Mainly English	Gauteng – private girls' school
Kgabo	English	more than 15	various, mainly Sotho langs	Gauteng – semi-rural school
Minah	Setswana	23 ½	Setwsana	NWP – township school
Mrs Molefe	Setswana	30	Setswana	NWP - rural multigrade school
Ms Jali	**isiZulu**	**17**	**Nguni, mainly isiZulu**	**Gauteng – large school in informal settlement**
Ms Lyons	**English**	**35**	**various, mainly Sotho languages**	**Gauteng suburban public school**
Ms Ndlovu	**English**	**2**	**various, mainly isiZulu**	**Gauteng suburban public school**
Ms Tladi	**English**	**17**	**various**	**Gauteng inner-city publc school**
Nomsa	isiXhosa	7	isiXhosa	W Cape – township school
Olive	Sepedi	14	Sepedi	Gauteng – large township school serving informal settlement

[7] This refers to the family of languages that are similar both in structure and vocabulary, namely, isiNdebele isiZulu, isiXhosa and Siswati.

Sarah	Setswana	24	Setswana	NWP – Township school
Sharon	Afrikaans	28	Combination, Afrikaans & isiXhosa	W Cape – public school in small town
Zodwa	isiXhosa	8	isiXhosa	W Cape – township school

The teachers interviewed are identified by a first-name pseudonym, whereas the four observed teachers are referred to as Ms (surname). When interviewing, the relationship was informal and teachers introduced themselves by the first names.[8] However, during the observation phases of data collection, protocol required that the teachers were addressed by their title and surnames, and hence I chose such pseudonyms for all the four teachers observed. Each teacher had a chance to comment on the selected pseudonym and change it if they so wished. One teacher did change the name.

3.8 Data collection

I held the first interview with Sakane and Bassi, who are colleagues who work in the same organisation as I do, to pilot the interview schedule. There was little need to alter it, although the information shared by Bassi about her memories of playing school as a Grade One child encouraged me to see the importance of this line of discussion and to include it in other interviews.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and, with the exception of Alison's for which notes only were taken, were tape-recorded for later transcription. Alison's interview was not taped because I conducted the interview whilst on a visit to the African country in which she teaches and I did not have a tape recorder with me.

In most cases, the teachers did not know me before the interview. The process of securing the interviews involved an initial approach to the school head teacher by telephone to explain the purpose of my study and to request an interview with Grade One teacher(s). After the head had consulted the teachers as to their willingness to participate, I then arranged to visit the school at an appointed time.

[8] Mrs Molefe is one exception: she was not an observed teacher but had asked to be referred to during the interview with the title Mrs, rather than by her first name.

On arriving at the school, I would meet first with the school head teacher (if present) and obtain written consent for the interviews to take place. I would then be directed to meet the teachers. In addition to the formalities of giving the information and consent letters, I explained the purpose of the study and the reason for the interview. Although the teachers were all very interested in participating in the interviews, there was a diffidence in a few cases which I believe related to the unfamiliarity of this process. Teachers are more familiar with the type of research that evaluates learner performance, so the experience of a conversation about their beliefs and ideas about literacy was a new experience to most of them.

3.8.1 Challenges, inconsistencies, limitations

The interviews took place in English. Twenty-two of the thirty respondents were bilingual or multilingual and they were all sufficiently competent in English to generate valuable interview data. However, some teachers did have difficulty and made reference to the fact during the interview (Lettie, Sharon). The interview with Sharon was particularly difficult and it is likely that she would have said more, had I been able to understand Afrikaans. At some points, she spoke in Afrikaans and these utterances were later translated into English during transcription.

Four of the interviews were carried out as group interviews. With the exception of the initial group, comprising Sakane and Bassi, I had wanted all the interviews to be on an individual basis because I believe that this approach is better suited to the sharing of personal and sometimes poignant memory data. There is a significant body of literature (Frith, 2000; Jarret, 1993; Silverman, 2004) that extols the benefits of focus groups over one-to-one interviews. These scholars claim that focus groups more effectively generate rich data reflecting a range of opinions. Although my group interiews, not being discussion-based, did not fully fit the definition of a focus group, they did afford the possibility of discussion in the process of responding to questions. My experience in this study was confirmed that one-to-one interviews were more appropriate in relation to the type of data sought. However, on each of the three occasions when group interviews were conducted, the teachers had requested this formulation and it would have been inconsistent with my approach and with the ethical principles of the study to oppose or dissuade them.

The problem experienced with the group interviews is that it was difficult to obtain responses from each participant on each item discussed. Also in most cases, one of the teachers tended to speak less than the others. Often a vocal teacher would respond as if for all of them and it is difficult, ex post facto, to truly identify whether all three teachers had the same experiences or opinions. That said, the data from the groups was analysed in the same way as the individual interview data: each response is tagged to the specific speaker although it is noted that more data might have been forthcoming from some of the group participants had they been interviewed on a one-to-one basis.

Teachers' availability for interviews was sometimes a limiting factor. Schools are institutions with non-negotiable timetables and hence teachers are only as available as their timetabled day allows them to be. They were mainly interviewed during the lunch break or free periods and the time factor occasionally caused tension for some teachers who had to return urgently to the classroom.

A final and possibly limiting factor is the Hawthorne effect. This term derives from a series of psychological experiments carried out in the United States in the 1920s (Draper, 2008). It was found that participants' behaviour is changed because of their awareness of their participation. With regard to the majority of the respondents, the interview situation was unfamiliar and some of the questions about pedagogy presented a degree of challenge. Also, despite the guarantee of confidentiality, they may still have been apprehensive about the use of the data, and therefore keen to provide information that they thought I wanted to hear, rather than a true account of their practice. Whilst it was possible with the four observed teachers to mitigate the effect through triangulation, the effect may be present in the data of the teachers interviewed but not observed.

Although the above challenges relate to the internal validity of the data collection process, they do not invalidate the findings. On the contrary, the intention is, through the recognition of these limitations, to strengthen the integrity of the findings and show that this is a piece of 'evidence-careful descriptive research' (Erickson & Gutiérrez, 2002: 21), which has sought at all times to present the data with honesty and hence with recognition that participants' responses may well be conditioned by the parameters and context of the data-gathering process itself.

3.8.2 Data gathering and analysis

Twenty-seven of the teachers were interviewed between March 2005 and January 2006, with the majority of interviews taking place between September and November. The transcription of the audio-taped material and some data analysis also took place during this period. The interviews of Ms Tladi, Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu, who had not been in the initial group of interviewees, took place in 2007 after their classes had been observed. Follow-up interviews were held in 2008 with Ms Jali and Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu; the purpose of which was to gain feedback on my analysis of the classroom observation data and also to seek clarification on some aspects of their first interviews. .

3.8.2.1 Tape transcription

The transcribing of the tapes, whilst in part a laborious process, is also an essential part of the analysis in that the identification of themes starts to be generated even during this initial process of transcription. The quality of the audio-recording is a matter of importance and often difficult to assure before or during the interview. In the case of this study, a small tape-recorder with an internal microphone was used. I decided not to use an external microphone because I did not want to unduly unsettle or intimidate the participants, which I thought a clip-on or external microphone would do. Thus the quality of the recordings was variable, depending on background noise and the closeness of the respondent to the recorder. Most of the interviews were conducted in school during break-time and there was often a great deal of background noise of children playing. Even where background noise was not a problem, the quality of some of the audio recordings made transcription difficult and there were small segments of the interviews which, despite intensive and repeated listening, were inaudible.

I chose to transcribe the interviews verbatim, including the frequent pauses and word repetitions. In the transcription, I used the following conventions: I used a dash for pauses and three dots (an ellipsis) for an unfinished utterance. Where the interviewee and the interviewer talked simultaneously, I noted that in the transcription. Elements that were inaudible were referred to as such in brackets and non-verbal communication (smiles, laughs etc) were described in italics in brackets.

3.8.2.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is a tool used in a range of research fields, and particularly in teacher education, to obtain insights into the thoughts and beliefs of a person or group of people, 'opening a window on the mind, or, if we are analysing narratives of a specific group of tellers, as opening a window on their culture' (Cortazzi, 1993: 2). His categorical statement about the value of narrative analysis has been significant in the choice, for this study, of this approach,

> Any real change in the curriculum is not likely to be carried through unless teachers' perceptions and experiences are taken into account … To improve educational systems, curriculum reforms and classroom practice, therefore, we need to know more about teachers' perspectives. (Cortazzi, 1993: 5)

Seeking to explore teachers' beliefs and conceptualisations about literacy, the interview structure drew heavily on the concept of narrative to encourage teachers to reminisce and tell their stories. In fact although the boundaries between narrative analysis and narrative inquiry are porous, it is actually the latter, the use of narrative as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself (Georgakopoulou, 2006), which more aptly describes the approach adopted for the start of the interview. My intention was to elicit 'life stories' as a means to finding out more about teachers' embedded beliefs about and experiences of literacy. Clandinin and Connolly (2000) refer to the interview data as 'field texts':

> We call them field texts because they are created, neither found nor discovered, by participants and researchers in order to represent aspects of field experience. (2000: 92)

There are three salient points made by Clandinin and Connolly (2000) and also by Bell (2002) and Pavlenko (2002) about narrative inquiry that have import for my research. Firstly, all these scholars are at pains to emphasise that the data emerging from narrative inquiry is not an objective representation of facts. It is, rather, a text collaboratively created by the interviewee and the researcher. Secondly, the interview usually represents an unequal power balance. Even if the interview schedule is open-ended or semi-structured, the fact is that the interviewer has caused the interview to take place and has done some pre-planning about the anticipated direction it will take means that she/he is in a position of greater power (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000: 110). Finally, aspects that can affect the power relationship relate to socio-cultural factors like gender, race, age and language (Pavlenko, 2002). These have specific

bearing on my study where, in relation to the above indicators, I shared gender and age with most, and race with only a few of the participants. Thus it is necessary to acknowledge that,

> narratives … are powerfully shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor. (Pavlenko, 2002: 214)

The method used to analyse the narratives, the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998, Patton, 2002), is an approach to data analysis in which theory is generated in the process of the analysis of the data. The method, which later became known as Grounded Theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a means of gaining insights into the data from the data itself. In the process of utilising this method, themes emerge, are coded and grouped in order to generate understandings about categories of findings, or themes under which the findings can be grouped. From these themes, theories can be developed. Given that the findings are grounded in the data rather than in a preconceived hypothesis, the constant comparative method is a valuable tool in identifying unanticipated or particularly significant themes.

In this study, the analysis of the interview data and identification of themes was concurrent with the data-gathering process. As more interviews were conducted and the volume of evidence for each theme increased, it became possible to identify sub-themes and for the findings to acquire greater validity because of the increased amount of evidence available. I analysed the data in relation to thematic content with vertical and horizontal cuts, coding the themes as they emerged from individual interviews and as they were corroborated across the interviews.

3.9 The journey – second data set: classroom observations

The stance adopted for in the classroom observation was some way between participant and non-participant observer. As noted by Bailey (1978),

> In a natural setting it is difficult for a researcher who wishes to be covert not to act as a participant … most studies in a natural setting are unstructured participant observation studies (1978: 244).

I had sought the advantages of non-participation such that I could observe the teaching and learning in its most natural state and record the literacy learning processes without reference to the impact of my presence. However, as soon as I arrived in each classroom the teacher would instruct the children to greet me and, obviously, I would return the greeting, so from this point onwards I was to some extent viewed by the teacher and the children as a participant in the literacy teaching and learning process. I was also aware that a rigid adherence to a non-participatory identity, for example if a child or the teacher spoke to me directly, would seem strange and hence counterproductive to the natural proceedings of the classroom (King, 1979).

My aim in collecting, analysing and presenting the data from the classrooms was to try to take into account what the classroom interactions meant for the participants and, from this, to create in the reader's mind a vivid and nuanced picture of each of the four research sites. The measure of my success would be 'the extent to which the observation permits the reader to enter the situation under study' (Patton, 2002: 22).

The collection and analysis of the interview data had provided a 'cognitive map' (Werner & Schoepfle, 1987) with regard to a range of themes that would inform the observation and analysis of the classroom observation data. Whilst avoiding the prescriptive notion of a checklist, the themes emerging from the interview data combined with my work-based experience of early literacy classrooms afforded the generation of a number of areas for exploration and enquiry. These were as follows:

- The discourses used by the teachers and learners around the literacy events in the classroom
- The role of story telling
- The role of story reading
- The role of visual literacy (pictures, learners drawings etc)
- The strategies used for learners to practise reading
- How discipline is maintained
- How the teacher corrects learners
- How the teacher relates to the slower and faster learners in the class
- The role of peer collaboration
- How handwriting is taught
- How phonics are taught
- How learners' initiative is encouraged or discouraged
- The role of multilingualism
- How independent learning skills are encouraged or discouraged

- How teachers assess learners' progress
- The role of reading books in the classroom and which reading books are used.

Although this list was long, it helped to have 'along with me' a comprehensive conceptual initial framework for the observation process. It was never intended as a route map in which every point needed to be visited or observed. Indeed, as an ethnographic-style study, my main aim was to submerge myself in the context to absorb and learn rather than to count, measure and prejudge. As Schieffelin and Gilmore (1986) state in justifying an ethnographic approach to the study of literacy in particular,

> Literacy, viewed as a cultural phenomenon that interacts with certain social process, is best studied by adopting an ethnographic perspective … [which] allows the researcher to find out the meaning of events for those who are involved in them. (1986: viii)

3.9.1 Selection of observation sites and teachers

In November 2006, I identified two schools for classroom observation of literacy lessons in one Grade One classroom in each school. These were Valley View and Hilltop Primary Schools.[9] Follow-up meetings were held with the relevant teachers and school management staff in early 2007 and the classroom observation visits began in February 2007. A key consideration in the selection of the schools was the matter of Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT). The class in Valley View School had isiZulu as a LOLT and in Hilltop School the LOLT was English. The choice of these two different LOLTs was based on an assumption that there would be significant differences in the literacy processes, worthy of observation and comparison.

The schools were each visited weekly, Valley View for two hours and Hilltop for one and a half hours. Originally the observations had been proposed to run from late February until June or July. However, there was a public servants' strike in May and considerable disruption of schooling leading up to the strike. So my observation of the schools was halted at the end of May. A return to Hilltop School at the end of the strike was not possible, as the teacher did not want the observation to continue beyond the initially agreed deadline.

[9] The names of all the research sites have been changed

Therefore, I resumed observing in Valley View School from September to November but did not return to Hilltop School. Instead, I was able to organise to observe two Grade One classes in another school, Silver Grove Primary. The LOLT of Silver Grove was English and the learners all had an African language as home language, with English either being their first, second additional or foreign language. I observed in Silver Grove Primary from September to November 2007. Table 3 provides information about the schedule of observation visits in the three schools.

Table 3: Schedule of visits

Valley View Primary Ms Jali			**Hilltop Primary Ms Tladi**			**Silver Grove Primary Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu**		
Dates	Field notes	Video data	Dates	Field notes	Video data	Dates	Field notes	Video data
22 Feb	✓		21 Feb	✓				
1 Mar	✓		28 Feb	✓				
8 Mar	✓		7 Mar	✓				
15 Mar	✓		14 Mar	✓	✓			
12 Apr	✓		18 Apr	✓	✓			
19 Apr	✓	✓	2 May	✓	✓			
3 May	✓		9 May	✓	✓			
10 May	✓	✓	16 May	✓	✓			
6 Sep	✓		23 May	✓	✓	12 Sep	✓	
13 Sep	✓					19 Sep	✓	
20 Sep	✓					3 Oct	✓	
4 Oct	✓					10 Oct	✓	✓
18 Oct	✓	✓				24 Oct	✓	✓
25 Oct	✓	✓				31 Oct	✓ + audio tape Ms Lyons	✓
8 Nov	✓	✓				7 Nov	✓+ audio tape Ms Ndlovu	

Thus, the data collection phase ran from March to November, with Ms Jali's class being observed on fifteen occasions throughout the period, Ms Tladi's class being observed on nine occasions and both Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes on seven occasions.

3.9.2 Description of the schools

The common factor across all three schools was that the learners were all speakers of African languages as home language (HL). In the case of Valley View, they shared a common language to a workable extent, whereas in Hilltop and Silver Grove learners came from a diversity of language backgrounds. The social settings of each school were quite different, as will be clarified below. Valley View is described in greater details than the other two schools because this site was observed consistently over the longest period of time and hence generated more data.

3.9.2.1 Valley View Primary School

Valley View Primary School is a comparatively well-resourced school serving a largely impoverished community beset by the usual socio-economic problems associated with urban poverty and unemployment. Against this backdrop and for this community, it is a prominent symbol of order, empowerment and possibility. The school has strong links with the community and seeks to mitigate the worst effects of poverty through the provision of school meals and school uniforms and it is designated by the Department of Education as a 'no-fee school'.[10].

The school is situated in a township, or what is known in South Africa as a 'location'. At the time of conducting the research, there were 1,272 children on roll. The location is divided into two parts, on either side of an arterial road that runs between two major cities. The housing on one side is mainly self-built temporary housing and shacks, and the area is colloquially referred to as a 'squatter camp'. The housing on the other side is more permanent and formally built, although there are also shacks and temporary housing in this section too.

The population comprises many people who are either domestic workers or unemployed and most of the young children attending the Grade One class in Valley View live either with young unemployed single mothers or with grandmothers. The school becomes involved with many social problems of the children attending the school (conversation with principal,

[10] Schools whose catchment areas and learners are deemed to meet certain criteria of poverty are identified by the DoE as no-fee schools where parents are not required to pay school fees.

08.11.07). Most people in the area are Sepedi-speaking and have either migrated from rural areas or, as the deputy principal stated, from another squatter camp.

There are four classes in each Grade, and in the Foundation Phase (Grades One – Three) these are divided according to the Home Language of the learners. Ms Jali teaches in the isiZulu class, which accommodates not only isiZulu HL learners but also those who speak other Nguni languages, closely linked to isiZulu; in this class, these comprise isiXhosa, isiNdebele, and Siswati. The other three classes, not featured in the observation data, are Sepedi-medium, catering mainly for Sepedi-speaking learners but also for those speaking other languages of the Sotho/Tswana language group.

3.9.2.1.1 Getting started at Valley View Primary

I had interviewed two of the teachers (Ms Jali and Amy) in November 2005 in Valley View School, and at that point had obtained tentative agreement that this would be one of the observation sites. In November 2006 I obtained the Principal's permission to meet with the teachers and discuss the details of the study. This took place in February 2007, and the following extract from my field notes captures the detail:

> Met with Ms Jali, Amy and the deputy principal. I reminded them of the purpose of the research and of the fact that I had interviewed them in 2005. I explained that I really would like to observe in Ms Jali's class because of the language issue. The atmosphere was quite tense, possibly because I was tense, so much was riding on Ms Jali agreeing to me observing her teaching. The deputy seemed very supportive of the idea, Ms Jali was somewhat reticent but obviously interested. I think that we will have more chance to chat when we are on a one-to-one basis. It was agreed that I would visit her classroom every Thursday from 08h10 to 10h00 from next week until June/July. (Field notes, 15 February 2007)

3.9.2.2 Hilltop Primary School

The school is located in an old inner-city suburb of a major city, serving a community consisting mainly of families originating from rural areas in South Africa, refugees and economic migrants from other African countries. The housing in the suburb is a combination of flats and free-standing, mostly rental homes. This densely populated area has been the focus of significant social spending in the form of pedestrian walkways and a park in the

centre of the suburb. The school is a very old two-storey building on the edge of the suburb, offering tuition for learners from Grade One to Grade Three. There were 378 children on roll at the time of conducting the research. There are three Grade One classes, all with about forty-five children on roll. Parents are often seen at the school, waiting to pay fees or to see the principal; however, attendance at parents' open evenings is generally at lower than fifty per cent.

The classes are not divided on the basis of learners' home languages and each class accommodates children from a wide variety of home languages. Most of the children live in the vicinity of the school, although some, from outlying locations, are brought to school on semi-public taxi transport. Children attending the Grade One class observed live mainly with their parents, most of whom are employed in blue-collar work or service industries.

3.9.2.2.1 Getting started at Hilltop Primary

In order to find a school that fitted the desired criteria, I approached the Foundation Phase Reading Specialist in one of the Districts of the Province and was directed to Hilltop Primary. I made an initial visit to see the Foundation Phase Head of Department (HOD) in November 2006 and then another visit in February to see the same HOD, the principal and the teacher identified for the observation, Ms Tladi. The following extract from my field notes captures the event,

> Went as per appointment with Ms King, the principal to meet Ms Tladi, the teacher to whom I have been assigned. Got an instantly positive feeling – Ms King seems very clear, organised and calm. She indicated the process for the day and it went according to plan. I firstly re-met the HOD and then went to the classroom of Ms Tladi. The principal took her learners down and dismissed them (it was the end of the school day) whilst I talked to Ms T in the classroom. She seems to have no reservations at all and is very warm and receptive. The HOD joined us and I explained what I am doing and why and how I envisage the research project rolling out. We agreed that I would come every Wednesday from 10h30-11h30 from next week until June or July. I was struck by the warmth of the suggestion that I come at 10h00 for a cup of tea and to relax before going to the class. We went down to Ms King's office and clarified in her presence what we had agreed. I was impressed that she asked Ms Tladi whether she had any concerns or reservations and also that she referred to this research process as totally transparent for all parties – that there are no agendas. I liked the way she established this positive platform for the research and the relationships to

> commence. I am looking forward to going to the school again next week. (Field notes, Hilltop Primary School: 21 February, 2007)

3.9.2.3 Silver Grove Primary School

Silver Grove School reflects a social pattern peculiar to the urban post-apartheid demographics of South Africa: the school is located in a suburb that was formerly reserved for whites only. The suburb, now formally desegregated, is still largely inhabited by white families but the school population consists almost totally of children transported daily from large established locations. At the time of conducting the study there were 718 children enrolled in the school of which about 90 were reported as living in the locality. The majority of the rest were from the nearest large location, and some are brought in by taxi from two other large locations, and from inner-city residential areas. Of the 109 children in Grade One, fifteen were to remain to repeat the Grade the following year. The school attempts to involve parents in their children's learning and, according to the principal, 'we care about the children beyond what happens in the classroom' (Interview with principal 05.09.07).

3.9.2.3.1 Getting started at Silver Grove Primary

I had come into contact with the deputy principal and the principal during other work that I was doing on behalf of the ministry. A follow-up phone call requesting the possibility of conducting research in this school was positively received so a meeting was held in late August 2007. These notes indicate the content and tone of the meeting.

> I met with Ms Fielding,[11] the principal and Ms Lyons, the deputy principal, who is also a Grade One teacher. Ms Fielding was very much in charge of the meeting. She is warm, calm and has a commanding manner. We agreed that two teachers will be observed, Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu , and that they will allow me to observe and 'just ignore me' (as Ms Fielding put it). I will come on Wednesdays from 08h30 – 10h00. I made it clear that I don't want them to do anything different or special during my visit and that I just want to observe and learn about how they teach literacy. Ms Ndlovu is a young teacher and she seems very enthusiastic and welcoming. (Field notes: 5 September 2007)

[11] All the names of staff at this school have been changed to protect their identity

3.9.3 Data collection

The description of the data-collection process at Hilltop School is presented first, as this was the school visited first. Data collection in Ms Tladi's class at Hilltop Primary took the following form. Having entered the class, I was introduced to the children by Ms Tladi and then I went to sit at her desk at the back of the room. This was to be my 'base' and the position from which I wrote field notes and made video recordings. At times, I moved about the classroom to observe the activities of specific children and to gain a closer view of the whole-class activities conducted by Ms Tladi on the carpet.

The notes taken were a combination of verbatim recording of the teacher's and children's utterances and my own reflections on the activities under observation. It was not possible, because of the speed and volume of the oral interactions, to faithfully write down all the discourse verbatim; hence there is an element of subjectivity in the data recording. The video recording, as discussed below, served as another means of data collection and as a counter-balance to the subjectivity. At the end of the lesson and during sessions when all the children were busy on writing or drawing tasks, I added to my notes, thoughts and questions about the process. Here is an example of the hybridity of the verbatim record and reflections from my field notes in Ms Tladi's class. My reflections are shown in italics, the teacher's words in normal font:

> Copy the U and then copy the four pictures and words from the board. I want to see nice pictures. I don't want to see goggas (*insects)*! Yes, cos goggas will make me want to run away! You can't use white (*a white crayon*) in your book.
> *The children are now quietly busy. The currency about who holds the crayons box and who has access to crayons is a focus of power amongst the learners*. (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 14 March 2007)

I aimed, and succeeded for the most part, to not engage with the children but, of course, my presence in the classroom was not neutral. I was always greeted with happy smiles by the children; yet during the lesson if a child, talking with others, became aware of being observed, he/she would hastily stop and refocus. This suggests that, despite my efforts to appear non-judgemental and friendly, the young children already were aware of power relations in the classroom and associated me with that power.

The intended approach to data collection in the other three classrooms was similar to that described above for Hilltop School. However, the situated nature of literacy learning practices (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) and my interest in observing and gaining an understanding of the cultural elements at play ensured that none of the classes was the same nor was my role in them the same.

Ms Jali's approach to the teaching of literacy was based on a methodology in which the children spent most of the two hours of the lesson on independent activities and only about a third of the time in whole-class activities or in teacher-directed group-work. My base was the teacher's desk, and from there I could also observe the teacher-directed group activity which took place in the Teaching Corner next to the desk. In Ms Jali's class, I spent a great deal of time moving about the classroom, observing the actions and of the children in their groups. I was also drawn into participation more in this classroom. The methodology required that children, having composed a sentence on their sentence maker, would take the sentence holder to the teacher to show and read. Sometimes they came to me, if the queue for Ms Jali was too long, or if they simply chose to read to me. Although I did not encourage this, it would have been inappropriate to ignore children's approaches.

In comparison with both Hilltop and Valley View, my presence in Silver Grove School was the least participatory. I started observing in Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes late in the year, by which time the classroom discourse was well established; in both cases, this involved strong regulation on the part of the teacher. Children were not allowed to move about the classroom without permission, so the only person who moved about was the teacher. I felt that if I moved about the classroom it might be construed by the teacher or the learners as a bid to acquire teacher status, which I did not want to do. I did move about slightly more in Ms Ndlovu's class than in Ms Lyons's, but, for the most part, the data collection occurred from a seat behind the teacher's desk.

The school principals were not primary participants in the research and so I did not conduct formal interviews with them. However, I frequently 'popped in' to speak to the principals if they were there and not too busy. I also requested time with each principal to ask specific questions about the demographics of the school and the surrounding communities and to obtain copies of the school's vision and mission statements.

3.9.3.1 Data collected – field notes, audio tape transcriptions, video recording logs and artefacts

As indicated in Table 3, the main means of data collection was field notes. However, a useful additional source of data obtained in Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes was audio-taped recordings. Audio tape recordings were made once in each of their classes to strengthen the accuracy of the data. It was not possible to make audio recordings in Ms Jali's class because the sound of all the children working, talking and moving about in the classroom during independent activities made this option unfeasible. Nor was audio-tape data obtained in Ms Tladi's classroom because video recording was the preferred strategy, and video data was obtained for most of these observed sessions.

The collection of video data for research purposes was for me a new experience. The use of a camera for gathering research data puts a different emphasis on the act, raising questions that are both practical and ethical in nature. Flewitt (2006) provides insights into the value of video data when she discusses,

> methodological and ethical dilemmas encountered in the collection and transcription, or representation, of dynamic visual data . . . visual data gives insight into aspects of communicative behaviour previously unaccounted for in early years education research. (Flewitt, 2006: 25)

Her paper was particularly helpful in relation to analysing the video data, as will be detailed below.

In terms of methodological issues, as a lone researcher in the classroom with video camera but no tripod, videoing activities automatically meant that I could not write and vice versa. So there was sometimes a dilemma about which mode to use. However, the frequency of the observation visits and the repeated nature of most classroom literacy activities provided a measure of resolution. Having written field notes in the first few weeks detailing the types of literacy practices prevailing in each class, it was then possible to pre-plan to record particular events and also to have the camera available for the unplanned capture of specific moments of interest.

Another consideration was that I did not want the videoing to distract the children or disrupt the process. In fact, because it was a small camera that made no sound, they quickly became acclimatised and most of them stopped noticing that filming was taking place. Regarding the ethical issues, agreement was sought with the teacher on every occasion that the camera was used.

Artefacts, mainly comprising children's work, were also gathered during the observation process in order to provide concrete examples of the texts to which the children were exposed and to provide evidence of what the children were producing in the classroom literacy events.

3.9.4 Challenges, inconsistencies and limitations

3.9.4.1 Language

The LOLT of the classes in Hilltop and Silver Grove was English. Although this was a source of challenge for the learners, in terms of the research methodology and my understanding of the literacy processes it was advantageous. The LOLT of Ms Jali's class in Valley View on the other hand was isiZulu. Whilst I was able to follow the gist of everything that took place in the classroom and much of the detail too, there were some limitations to my comprehension about the actual meaning of some of the interactions. Here the video recordings became an important data source. I was able with the help of a research assistant to transcribe the interactions and obtain a verbatim translation as necessary. I also used the approach, having carefully reviewed all the transcriptions of the classroom observation data, of returning to the classroom with questions that Ms Jali was able to clarify.

3.9.4.2 The public servants' strike

Whilst it is not possible or necessary to anticipate disruptions, it is almost inevitable in a research project of this nature that they will occur. In this case, it was the public servants' strike that took place for three weeks from the end of May to mid-June. Even before the start of the strike, there were some disturbances to school functioning due to union meetings and a general sense of unease amongst staff and the surrounding communities. Access to the research sites had been negotiated from late February to July. However, the strike meant, in

Ms Jali's class, a break in observation from May to August. For observation of Ms Tladi's class, there was no resumption following the early curtailment; a challenge which fortuitously was addressed by the addition in September of a third research site, Silver Grove School. Ultimately, this late involvement of a third site proved invaluable for the affordance of comparison across the three schools.

3.9.4.3 Teachers' perceptions of the research

I realised when embarking on this study that teachers' perceptions, not only about literacy but also about me and my research project, were going to be a key dimension of the research. This awareness had led to decisions about my own behaviour both in the interview phase and even more so as a classroom researcher. I also realised that in order to obtain data about teachers' perceptions about literacy I would also need to be sensitive to their feelings about participating in the research.

There seems to be very little available scholarship on the impact of participant perceptions about the research project and in particular the impact of reluctance or misinterpretation on the part of the participants. Bishop (2005) deals with the matter in relation to the implicit power imbalance in the research relationship between Maori participants and non-Maori researchers; and Patton (2002) draws attention to the way that 'cross-cultural inquiries add layers of complexity to the already-complex interactions of an interview' (2002: 391). The issue of cross-cultural relations is relevant to my study; however, the issue of participant unease or wariness and its possible impact on the data includes and goes beyond the matter of cross-cultural communication. Dillon (2005) raises the important issue of participant perceptions of qualitative educational research and the possibility of resistance to it,

> … in today's world of … increased accountability, research that focuses on the complexities of teaching and learning instead of providing the 'right answers' may not be embraced by practitioners. (Dillon, 2005: 107)

My own experience in this study of participant perceptions coheres in some measure with Dillon's observation. Despite my clear indication in discussion and in writing that the research purpose was to 'understand rather than to change' (Street, 2001), and that the focus of interest was the teachers' literacy pedagogy, three of the four teachers observed sought

from me an appraisal of their teaching. This, for the reasons cited by Dillon, is understandable and not inconsistent with the ultimate aim of this work, which is indeed to contribute understandings about literacy that will improve practice. However, it was noted that the qualitative research processes employed in this study seemed at times more puzzling to the teachers than the learner testing and classroom evaluation visits with which in these times of 'increased accountability' (Dillon, 2005: 107) they are more familiar.

3.9.4.4 Off-record or sensitive issues

This is a difficult subject to broach and, indeed, one way of dealing with the dilemma about off-record or sensitive issues is simply to omit them from the research report. However, in providing an ethical account of methodological issues and dilemmas that arose in this research, it is incumbent upon me to mention and attempt to analyse these difficult matters.

The main area in which participants requested to be off-record concerned inter-racial perceptions and religious orientations. If this had been an action research project or participatory research then these issues could have been more explicitly taken up in the process of the action and/or participation. In this case, however, even though pseudonyms have been used for the schools and participants and every effort made to ensure that they cannot be identified, I am clear that it is my responsibility not to divulge off-record issues. However, it is equally important to record that such dilemmas did emerge in the process of the study.

With regard to sensitive issues, the dilemma is more challenging. By the term 'sensitive issues' I am referring to occasional instances of classroom practice where wrong information on matters of vocabulary or pronunciation was conveyed to the children. These instances have been included in the study, not because I wish to criticise or embarrass the teachers concerned – far from it. In fact, there was much more to commend about the observed teachers' practice than to criticise.

However, I still feel that there is a need to justify their inclusion. Having identified what I believed to be errors in the teaching, I believe it is the responsibility of this study to reveal rather to conceal these features so that we can learn about and from them. The NLS

orientation of this research further provides the rationale for their inclusion; the primary aim of this study being to observe and understand literacy practices rather than to judge or evaluate them. Does this decision lead into contentious and rocky terrain? Yes, it does. Should I have rather omitted mention of these issues and taken the easy route? No, that may have been an option but, I believe, neither an ethical nor a fruitful one.

3.9.5 Checking back with respondents

The use of different sources of data and 'multiple data collection techniques' (Patton, 2002: 555) is one important means of triangulating and hence securing the validity of the findings. Another means of achieving triangulation is to provide feedback and seek further input on this feedback from the participants. This kind of triangulation was of paramount importance for three reasons. Firstly, from an ethical point of view it is important when writing about people to give them the chance to read, agree, disagree or criticise what is being said. Secondly, the feedback process would yield a rich further source of primary data; and, finally, the evidence of having taken the time to get feedback and record the data emerging from it would strengthen enormously the validity of the findings. I still believe that these three features are very important and have therefore ensured that participant feedback was sought with the four observed teachers. For practical reasons, regarding time constraints I made the decision not to seek feedback from the twenty-six other teachers who were interviewed but not observed.

In accordance with the technique of triangulation (Patton, 2002), whilst still gathering and analysing fresh data I gave the field notes to the teachers and held follow-up feedback meetings with them. Although the process did not yield a major source of new data, the fact that the teachers had a chance to comment is significant. The limited nature of the feedback is perhaps another indicator of the chosen research design. In other words, the somewhat inscrutable scribbling or videoing presence in the classroom, which is in fact antithetical to my normal style of engagement with teachers, was beneficial in relation to the production of rich and valuable data about literacy beliefs and pedagogy. However, it seems to have been less useful in terms of generating an interest amongst the participating teachers in the data generated.

Owing to the fact that I took a mainly non-participant stance in the classroom, there remained something of an apprehensive reserve amongst the teachers about this research style. I believe that the stance was justified and that through it interesting findings have been generated. However, there is also scope for further research in similar classrooms that can adopt a more participatory stance, building on shared experiences and enabling the researcher and participant together to 'be with' (Moustakas, 1995) one another in the process.

Finally, having completed the thesis, I offered the four observed teachers the opportunity to read and comment on the three data chapters. I indicated that if they agreed or disagreed with my findings, or wished to make other comments, these would be included in the final study either as appendices or footnotes. Only one teacher accepted the offer to read and comment, and although she did receive the data chapters, she did not wish to comment. The other three indicated that they were too busy with school and or other work to do so. Having done this, I believe that whilst not dispelling the potential discomfort associated with sensitive issues, I have addressed the matter in an ethical way.

3.9.6 Data analysis of classroom observations

The analysis of the classroom observation data commenced straight after the first classroom visit, then continued during and beyond the period of classroom observation. Field notes, audio and video transcripts were typed as soon as possible after the related visit and additional reflections and questions for the teacher were framed in time for the subsequent visit.

As with the interview data, a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for the data analysis, although there was an additional enriching but complicating factor of thematic comparison across data sources. The salient themes identified in the interview data were a starting point for the analysis of the classroom observation data. However, with the wealth of visual, auditory, textual, cultural and semiotic data which the observations yielded, it was necessary to limit the areas of interest and focus on these, albeit perhaps at the expense of other relevant and fascinating data. Two broad themes, which had already emerged as salient in the interviews, were selected. These were the issues of the learner agency, and the role of multilingualism and the language of learning and teaching (LOLT). With regard to the former, the analysis was informed by Davies's (1990) and Popkewitz's (2001, 2007) theories

of agency, Ortner's (2001) different categories of agency, Toohey and Norton's (2003) emphasis on socio-cultural context and Dyson's (1989, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004) analysis of early learners' expressive writing. Analysis of the latter theme was based on policy (DoE, 1997; 2002b) and on international (Baker, 1993; Cummins, 1975, 1979, 1981200a. 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981, 1995; Spada & Lightbown, 1997) and local scholarship (Alexander, 2000, Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2000a, 2000b, 2003; Macdonald, 1990); most of which asserts the importance of mother tongue LOLT. The two broad themes of agency and LOLT are centrally adressed in Chapters Five and Six respectively.

3.9.6.1 Writing audio transcripts

Two lessons at Silver Grove School were audio-recorded and transcribed; one featuring Ms Lyons's class and the other, Ms Ndlovu's. The value of these transcriptions is that unlike the field notes, they afforded intensive and comprehensive pieces of discourse evidence. For these, as for all the interviews, I chose to transcribe the interactions verbatim, including all the repetitions and incomplete words and/or phrases. I used a dash (–) for pauses and an upward pointing arrow (↗) to denote the rising pitch of the teacher's voice when she was expecting the children to respond. I used italics to denote observations about voice register or non-verbal elements of the activity. The following provides an example from the transcription of Ms Lyons' class on 31 October 2007:

> Ms L: Now, I'm going to ask you another question. Why have these two words got a big letter in front? What does it tell us when we have a big letter in front?
> R: to start a sentence
> Ms L: To start the sentence and what is a sentence? A few ↗
> R: words
> Ms L: that tell you a ↗
> Ls: story
> Ms L: short story. A very very short story. OK, here we go
> (*Ls reading in chorus*).
> (Transcript, Ms Lyons, 31 October, 2007)

3.9.6.2 Writing video logs/Writing video transcripts

Although video was used as a data-collection mode selectively, the video recording of the four classrooms produced a total of nine and half hours of video data; a rich resource, and a daunting challenge in terms of analysis. I followed an adapted version of Flewitt's (2006) methodical process of representing video data so that they were 'accessible for systematic analysis' (2006, 36). I watched all the video material to get a general sense of what had been captured. I then watched the material again to search for data that related to salient themes as mentioned above. Selected segments of video data were then transcribed and analysed in more detail, as the following video log for 23 May in Ms Tladi's class in Hilltop School demonstrates,

Table 4: Video log for 23 May

Minutes/seconds	Description of Activity	Researcher observations
10.43	Ms T: – OK is everyone ready now? Lss: Yesss *Ms T takes a book from her table and children(chn) are called to the front*	(tape turned off whilst chn get to the front)
11.02	Ms T standing and all chn on carpet T: xxx you can still come over here. You cannot kneel like that	T organising chn so that they can all see.
11.29	*Silence reigns. T holds their attention before she starts to read (after silence)* Ms T: Are you fine now? Lss: Yesss	Ms T is controlling the group by words and gesture. There is a deliberate pause that lasts 15 seconds during which Ms T gets the chn to be attentive.
11.56	Ms T: OK, who can tell us – what's a rainbow? *Chn put up their hands* Ms T: What does the rainbow look like? What does it look like? L: it's round Ms T: Yes it looks round, but it's not round L: Robot Ms T: (*pause*) Yes it has the colour of a robot but it is not a robot. Ms T: What are the colours of the robot?	Her repetition is a necessary part of her strategy for these learners for whom English is an additional language. Chn come up with various definitions. She doesn't comment or criticise, she asks more chn so that she can generate involvement and participation. She repeats and summarises children's inputs. E.g. on left. She is valuing chn's input – i.e. Kenny (a learner with very limited English) said robot, so she is taking the learning from there.

13.03	*Ms T gets chn to tell the colours of the robot*	She is smiling, genial and giving the signal that she is encouraging input
13.15	*Ms T now asks chn to give other colours of a rainbow*	When maroon is offered, she puts on her 'querying look', though not saying no, signalling to the chn that this may not be correct. When a child says, pink, she does the same thing, repeats the word with a rising fall and looks away – though not dismissing the input directly.

Flewitt (2006) argues that video material is an important source of data in combination with other sources such as field notes and audio transcriptions, and not as supplementary to these data. She points out that the close analysis of video data can reveal important insights that could not be accessed by any other means. Key findings about the potential role for learner agency in two of the classrooms observed in this study would not have been revealed if this resource had not been utilised.

3.10 Conclusion

As the chapter ends, so also ends the explanation of and justification for the chosen research journey. In the course of the explanation I have provided details of my research methodology with regard to the interviews and the classroom observation and then have provided detail about the process of the data collection and analysis in both these domains. I have explained the challenges and dilemmas met along the way and the decisions taken about those challenges. I have provided glimpses of the data not for analysis but as a means of demonstrating methodology. I hope in the process, however, that these have raised interest for what is to come in the next three chapters, the presentation and analysis of data.

Chapter Four - Teachers' Literacy Histories: Looking backward to move forwards

4.1 Introduction

What teachers do in the classroom, how they do it and on what decisions their actions are based combine to form a key indicator of learner performance. Thus teachers' conceptualisations of literacy play a key role in the generation of literacy practices and of the ultimate outcomes with regard to learner achievement. This proposition forms the basis of my argument in this chapter. The relationship between these elements is complex but nonetheless it is a point on which educational research studies from a range of different perspectives concur (Calderhead, 1987; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Adler & Reed, 2002; Fleish, 2008). Evidence for this proposition from my data emerges strongly in this and the two subsequent chapters, where conceptualisations are presented and analysed in relation to observed practice.

However, in anticipation of that, consider this snapshot taken from my data 'album'. Silver Grove School has two Grade One teachers who plan together and use the same materials for teaching literacy. They both have class sizes in the region of 35 multilingual children who come from the same communities and a similar range of social backgrounds. The classrooms are next door to each other. So why do the practices appear to be so different? Why does teacher A admonish the children more loudly than teacher B? Why does teacher B spend more time on choral reading? Why are teacher A's children sitting in separate desks and teacher B's in group seating? The differences are a function of each teacher's unique input; and the input is a function of each teacher's background, history, experiences, ideas and beliefs about teaching (Hoekstra et al., 2009). The 'teacher factor' is a major element in the classroom discourse, and it is the aim of this study to gain a deeper understanding of this factor and its impact on the classroom literacy practices that are influenced by them.

What we define superficially as 'a literacy lesson' is actually a dynamic interaction between human beings who all bring with them their life histories, hopes, beliefs and intentions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991, 2000, 2004). Therefore in order to answer the main question of this thesis and in so doing produce new knowledge, I need first to go backwards. I need to gain understanding of the way that teachers' understandings of literacy have been forged and

influenced by their own experiences and hence serve as a key influential factor in their current practice.

What I am saying thus far is not original. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the study of socio-cultural issues in relation to teacher education is the focus of a significant body of research both internationally and locally (Clandinin & Connolly, 1991, 2000, 2004 ; Danielewicz, 95; Elbaz, 1983; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Freeman, 2004; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Slonimksy & Brodie, 2006; Smit & Fritz, 2008; Stoffels, 2005; Vandeyar & Killen, 2007). However, none of these studies has attempted to understand the relationship between teachers' early literacy concepts and practices, an area that urgently needs to be better understood, if we are to optimise policy, teacher training and classroom practice in this most fundamental of learning areas.

The interviews generated a wealth of data, revealing lots of similarities and only a few exceptions. It is not possible to detail the findings in their entirety against all the themes. Hence the following areas for elaboration in this study represent a degree of researcher selection. These themes have been selected because they emerged strongly across many of the interviews and also because they provide key evidence for findings that can significantly inform policy and practice with regard to early literacy pedagogy in South Africa:

4.1 The role of playing school
4.2 Concepts of the teacher (then and now)
4.3 Teachers' stated early literacy pedagogies
4.4 The issue of LOLT
4.5 The changing identity of the child
4.6 Teachers' views of the purpose of literacy

4.2 The role of playing school

In one sense, the purpose of asking teachers about playing school was about engaging with them in the recall of pleasurable activities and thereby hoping not only to obtain valuable insights, but also to put the respondents at ease. A further rationale, central to the socio-cultural turn in teacher education research (Elbaz, 1983, 1990), was to validate the teachers' experiences and knowledge in order to establish a means of 'working with' rather than 'working on' teachers conceptualisations. Elbaz's (1983) perspective is useful here:

> Thus I set out to explore the consequences of taking up a view of the teacher as an agent, with an active and autonomous role shaped by her classroom experience. My purpose was to illustrate and to conceptualise this role with an emphasis on the knowledge held and used by the teacher in her work. (1983: 4)

In explaining the rationale for their 'memory work' amongst teachers, Mitchell and Weber (1999) place deliberate emphasis on memories of playing school because of the widespread nature of the experience and thus of its being an 'excellent point of entry for self-study' (1999: 14). Their further justification for this type of life history work accords with the objectives of this study; they contend, as I do, that 'remembering is a way of examining teacher identity as integral to professional development' (1999: 218). Whilst these interviews were not carried out directly as a form of teacher development, the understandings gained from them about the role of prior early literacy experience in forming current literacy practices is a key finding of this study and provides data that informs one of the recommendations for teacher development.

What is of interest is the broad intention, as stated by bell hooks (1989) cited in Mitchell and Weber (1999: 17), 'to make the past usable so that remembering serves to illuminate and transform the present'. Whilst the intention for these findings is not exclusively or categorically to transform, I certainly do intend that they illuminate the present and hence contribute to understandings that may be transformative.

4.2.1 Bassi

Bassi's account of playing school alerted me to the significance of the practice; hence her references to it are detailed and analysed first and serve as a reference point for others' inputs (see Appendix C).

Bassi mentions that it was her teacher who helped her to learn to read; yet elaborating on that statement, she focuses on the role of the teacher's daughter during regular playing school sessions, when this child played the role of 'teacher' and 're-taught' the literacy lesson of the day. Bassi recognises that this child knew more than she did, not because she was older but because

> the parents were educated, the father was a principal and the mother was a teacher ... Because she was exposed to many things at home when we were not. Nobody at home was educated, like their parents. (Interview, Bassi: 8 March 2005)

This utterance indicates the value placed by Bassi on being 'educated' and its role in exposing children to 'many things'. Her juxtaposition of the clause 'when we were not' is arguably an implicit devaluing of the non-literacy-based knowledge at home to which she was exposed. Bassi's statement reflects what Barton and Hamilton (1998) have identified as a tendency to focus on the lack of literacy in the home as 'a deficit model which concentrates on what children and families lack rather than examining their strengths' (1998: 207). It is likely that Bassi's home and upbringing have had some influence on her literacy development and on her ultimately becoming a teacher trainer with an Honours degree, yet her lack of reference to this is evidence that lends strength to Barton and Hamilton's (1998) assertion that school-based literacy practices are usually privileged over home or community practices.

Looking at the literacy event itself, it is interesting that the teacher's child was always the 'teacher'; i.e. there was no question about sharing or swapping roles. Bassi states that the child was helping them, so although it was play, it was also an opportunity to revise what had been taught and hence enable them to be prepared and ready for the following day's lesson in school. The props for this 'game' were the cardboard boxes on which they would write with chalk and, importantly, the 'teacher's' stick. The role of the teacher was delineated, according to Bassi's memory of it, by the child-teacher having the stick and saying 'Read!' In Bassi's account, this exclamation is made in a strident voice untypical of her usual soft-spoken tone.

Later in the interview, Bassi returns to explain how the playing of school assisted her in learning to write. Here the stick is put to use by the 'teacher' and Bassi appreciates the value of the admonishment and corporal 'punishment' from the 'teacher' in that it enables them to reach the standard required in school by the real teacher. In other words, the use of the stick by the 'teacher' in this playing school event is seen as part of the necessary preparation for school that this play afforded her.

Other respondents who gave interesting feedback about playing school are Olive, Busi, Zodwa and Gugu. Common features of all the five interviews are that this play was remembered as a pleasurable activity. Both now and then, it is apparent that as children they were aware that it was a means of either revising schoolwork or of preparing other children

for the kind of schoolwork that would encounter on entering school. In other words, the play for those children who had not yet entered school, was a form of 'apprenticeship' to the Discourse of school (Gee, 2000, 2004) and for those who were in school, it was a means of reinforcing the practice and rehearsing the given roles in the teacher–pupil relationship. Additionally, a Vygotskyian perspective on the role of playing school is that, in its replication of the real thing, children are engaging with one another in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978: 102).

Olive's account of the practice reveals an implicit and early acculturation to the notion of progression or graduation. When she was a pre-school child, she played the game as a child but then when she became a learner, and acquired some of the knowledge and direct experience of the Discourse, she graduated to being the teacher 'for the little ones'. Gugu's account corroborates this when she says that, 'we still taught others and it was an ongoing situation' (Gugu 7 November 2005).

This concept of playing school being a source of learning and of value to the community comes through very strongly. Most of the teachers attest to the benefit of this game in their own acquisition of literacy skills, as a means of recapping or revising what they had learnt that day in school:

> Reading, play as a teacher. Outside, then they [children she would teach during playing school activities] enjoyed it. Or repeating what our teacher was teaching us in school. Then the following day you find that everybody's quite all right. (Interview, Ms Molefe: 12 May 2005)

Both Lungi and Olive provide vivid accounts of having assisted young boys achieve excellent results through their 'schools', as Olive's narrative indicates:

> Yes, and it helped a lot. There was this boy; we went to school at a late stage because at that time, you find that if you don't have the money for school fees you (inaudible) won't attend school. So that boy attended Mxx School later than the exact age. So he used to come and be at my class (laughs) and attend school. You know that thing helped that boy a lot. When he get to school he was so brilliant! He was so brilliant up until he went to Standard 10 and then he passed, he never failed in class. And I think that impact of us playing school every day helped him a lot. (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005)

In all the respondents' accounts, there is the indication that playing school was a regular practice. Bassi would go every day after school to the home of the teacher's daughter, whilst Olive implies that it was a daily activity: 'Even in break time we would go and we would play the same things that the teacher had just told us' (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005). Gugu says, 'we played those games even if we, even when we were at school' (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005) and, in Busi's opinion, it was more important than a game,

> We were not taking it as a game. You'll do it at school then when you get home, you'll play a few games and then we start 'Eh, let's play school'. Which shows that it wasn't boring. Because if something bores you just want to leave it there at school; you don't want to bring it home. So basically, we enjoyed it. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)

Ms Ndlovu's account is similar to Busi's:

> Mmmm (loud and dreamy) you know I'm – you're taking me back somewhere.If I go, - the back yard at home – I used to, used to play role, as I'm a teacher. I would be a teacher and I would have my friends being children and I would teach them as I grew up. So, I think, teaching – it started there. I used to, like when I was still at erm, that er kindergarten, I love my teachers, (lots of expression in voice), I love what they're doing eh and it builds inside me. So I grew up like I wanna (inaudible). I go home and said, 'Come come come, let's play, let's play, let's play school. And then I had this, erm, a slate where I would write, I would write and I used to like, ask my teacher, 'May I please have some chalks to use at home?'
>
> Paula: So you wanted to be a teacher from very young ?
> Ms Ndlovu: Yes, yes.
> Paula: How old?
> Ms Ndlovu: 8-9↗ - 8-9. (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007)

It would seem that reasons for not getting to play the 'teacher' relate to perceived levels of education or to degrees of confidence, which suggests an implicit conceptualisation of a certain standard required of a literacy teacher. Olive obtained that 'right', once she had graduated to school student status, and Busi, Ms Tladi and Ms Ndlovu claimed to have always played the 'teacher'. Gugu, like Olive, refers to the ongoing nature of the game and that the learners eventually become the teachers. Zodwa and Bassi claimed that they never played the 'teacher' because of shyness in Zodwa's case and comparative lack of 'educatedness' in Bassi's account. This data seems to provide evidence for the relationship between identity and pedagogy (Danielewicz, 2001), and that even at so young an age, notions of a 'teacher

identity' were framing the self-concept of these respondents who would much later become teachers.

4.2.2 Playing school and discipline

Most of the respondents refer to the 'teacher' during their experiences of playing school using a stick or shouting at the 'pupils'. Gugu points out that it was a replication of their classroom experiences,

> Gugu: Ya we used sit on the floor and someone will be the educator there, telling us what to do, she will act as a teacher and we'll respond to what she's saying
> Paula: And was she strict? Or was it fun?
> Gugu: Yah (*emphatic*) at times they were because they were doing exactly what at school they were doing, you see. (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

And Bassi, who affirms the benefits derived from playing school talks of the 'teacher' with a stick, shouting, "'Write!' when she was hitting us on the hand, say, 'Write it on the air! [*uttered in a harsh tone]*'" (Interview, Bassi and Sakane: 8 March 2005).

This almost caricatured image, typical of several responses, of the harsh teacher with a loud voice, a stick and unassailable authority has its roots in their classroom experiences and is reinforced and perhaps made more acceptable through their hours of pleasurable playing of 'school'. Yet this embedded association of the teacher with the stick can be seen as a factor perpetuating a culture of violence that becomes a normalised practice. Children reconstruct this identity through play and it becomes a means through which they learn. However, the internalisation of these play practices are, I would argue, highly significant in terms of the embodied practices that were internalised as children and which influence teachers' identity even today.

Whilst a detailed study of classroom discipline and the role of corporal punishment is not the main focus of this study it nevertheless is an important insight into some of the participating teachers' understanding of literacy that their appreciation of the linking of reading with authority, discipline and punishment is deep-seated and embedded at an early age. Two

different perspectives on authoritarian, discipline-based education, both from within the New Literacy Studies, have relevance here: Gregory and Williams's (2000) study of literacy across cultures generates similar data to my own, with regard to an acceptance of strong discipline, from interviews with young Bangladeshi women.

Gregory and Williams (2000) conclude that children's home, religious or community experiences of rote learning styles accompanied by a high degree of authoritarianism needs to be validated and harnessed rather than ignored in the literacy learning classroom, particularly for children with a different home language from the language of instruction, and that 'access to *contrasting Literacies* gives children strength, not weakness' (2000: 203). Closer to home, Stein and Slonimsky (2006) reach somewhat different conclusions from their study of instances of shared reading at home. They present a reading event between father and daughter and determine that 'ostensive meanings, inflection and tone, and reading as performance together communicate the message that while texts are meaningful, this meaning is closed' (2006: 127). Based on this analysis, they argue that the child's identity and consciousness 'is unlikely to be radically transformed by texts' (2006: 127) unless she is exposed to a more interpretive and negotiated model of what counts as literacy' (2006: 127).

The orientation and purpose of these two studies are different: Gregory and Williams focus on literacy practices whilst Stein and Slonimsky query types of meaning-making embedded in practices. Nonetheless, both studies have import for our understanding of South African early literacy practices; the fact that teachers frequently recall early experiences of literacy in the context of strong discipline bears relevance for teacher education providers and education policy advisors in South Africa working within liberal, social justice paradigms of classroom interactions (e.g. Giroux, 1987; Pendlebury & Enslin, 2004). As Slonimksy and Brodie (2006) have identified in relation to curriculum change, teacher education that 'ignores teachers' perspectives … does not find points of contact with teachers' realities in order to provide appropriate guidance' (2006: 45). It is therefore important that as teacher educators we validate the extent and depth of this internalisation and provide sufficient and appropriate guidance for teachers to reflect on its impact on their current literacy pedagogy, rather than imposing a liberal perspective on classroom discipline which runs the risk of being adopted in word but not action.

4.2.3 The importance of playing school and conceptualisations of literacy

The main focus of playing school and the activities involved are literacy-related. Thus the significance of playing school from a socio-cultural perspective is that in the enactment of the play, children are learning or being acculturated (Heap, 1991) into an acceptance of what counts as literacy. Heap argues that:

> It is in the experiencing of other persons reading, and in experiencing one's own reading efforts in certain supervised circumstances, that one learns what counts as reading, criterially and therefore culturally. (Heap, 1991: 128)

Heap further elaborates that the observation and participation in repeated literacy events also affords learners an understanding of what counts procedurally as reading and writing, an understanding which, though justified in terms of the context, may amount to incorrect beliefs about effective reading performance. Heap's theory is helpful in relation to an analysis of playing school as a basis for forming teachers' conceptualisations of literacy. Firstly, the teachers, as very young children, were receiving from their peers, or slightly older children, a very distinct concept of what counts procedurally as reading and writing, in some cases, even before they had set foot in a formal school.

Secondly, the literacy practices drawn on in 'playing school' are, I would argue, even stronger instantiations of cultural practice than the school-based literacy practice, because as mimicry and repetition in a different context, they reinforce the learning of what counts as reading and writing both criterially and procedurally. Heap mentions also that,

> ... a pattern emerges from many settings, while versions of the pattern are used to interpret each of the settings. … This may be how more complex knowledge structures can be built up and 'internalised'… . (Heap, 1991: 129)

So the curriculum content, the gestures, commands and paraphernalia of the teacher as well as conceptualisations of the good and bad pupil were internalised through this process of role playing school. Instantiations of reading and writing are embedded in the social relationships of these young children and their emulation of their classroom teacher.

The important and positive function of these playing school activities was to provide safe, non-threatening small group communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), or communities of learners (Rogoff, 1994) for children to mimic, rehearse, play and learn the skills of basic literacy. This experience is invaluable in terms of building confidence and it could well be instrumental in transforming a child's identity; examples of this are present in my data cited above. Thus far, I am in agreement with Gregory and Williams (2000), who seek to move away from the 'best method' debate to a consideration of the range of different ways and settings in which literacy can be effectively learnt. However, embedded in the play-school literacy events are also the reproduction of a specific and narrow view of 'what counts as reading' (Heap, 1991:127). If memories of these activities become associated with teachers' judgements about effective reading strategies and what needs to be done in current Grade One classrooms, then there is a likelihood that an emphasis on form over function will limit the teachers' conceptualisations of literacy and consequently impact negatively, as Stein and Slonimsky (2006) suggest, on the developmental potential of the literacy learners.

The second point to highlight is the importance attached to literacy from a very early age. Although two respondents talk about singing being on the 'play-school' curriculum, for the rest, it was mainly reading, reciting letters, drawing letters in the air or sand and dictation. These activities are remembered as pleasurable. If we add the hours of playing of school to Lortie's (1975) proposition that schooling represents for teachers a '13,000-hour apprenticeship of observation' (1975: 61) we can perhaps understand even more clearly how the rote practices which featured in their own schooling and their imitative play have such a persuasive hold on these teachers and on teaching in South Africa in general.

4.2.4 Playing school and Vocation

The teachers brimmed with delight and enthusiasm when talking about their memories of playing school. In Zodwa's case, my field notes on the interview indicate that the question arose when the interview had been in progress for about eight minutes and it was the first time that she showed any animation or interest. One gets the sense that these games were a formative part of these teachers' life histories – in some cases, setting them on the path to becoming the teachers that they are today.

This connection is categorically articulated by Gugu and two of the teachers subsequently observed in the second phase of this study, Ms Ndlovu and Ms Tladi,

> Gugu: Er I think maybe er I sat down and look and just told myself. And even the games that I joked about earlier, those were the things they, I think I I I I've noticed my potential then. Then I said, no if I could be a teacher, I think I could be a good teacher eheh. (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

> Ms Ndlovu: I would have my friends being children and I would teach them as I grew up. So I think teaching – it started there
> Paula: So you wanted to be a teacher from very young?
> Ms Ndlovu: Yes, yes … I think I was good at it. (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007)

> Ms Tladi: Yah I used to love playing school. I used to love imitating all the teachers who were teaching me. Yes I did love that especially when I was at primary level.
> Paula: And did you think then that you wanted to be a teacher?
> Ms Tladi: That's when, yes, the feeling of wanting to be a teacher started. (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007)

In this section, I have argued for the significance in the respondents' lives of the experience of playing school. The essence of this significance is the strong link between this play and the development of concepts about literacy and literacy pedagogy. The establishment of this link will be further reinforced in the section below that relates to teachers' views of literacy pedagogy and also in the subsequent chapters in which data is presented from observations of classroom literacy practices.

In the next section, teachers' broad memories of schooling and specific memories of particular teachers are presented, and the purpose is to further emphasise the link between memory data and current perceptions and practices.

4.3 Concept of the teacher – then and now

> I think, you know, Foundation Phase teachers, the ones that we had in Grade 1 and Grade 2. They loved us, to be honest and we looked up to them as role models. Now with me, my Grade 1 teacher – I still remember her. Even the things that she taught. I still remember her very well. (Interview, Bassi and Sakane: 8 March 2005)

> So our teacher was so strict and used to beat us when we were not listening in the classroom. So and then I decided, you know, when I grow up I want to be a teacher, I want to punish his children – because he was beating me. (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005)

The above contrasting statements by Sakane and Ms Jali reflect the strength of feeling, both positive and negative, that is evoked by memories of teachers in the early years of schooling. These feelings are often so strong that their power remains in embedded, everlasting memories. Such memories create 'history-in-person' (Holland et al., 1998) by which our current identities can in part be seen as deriving from our histories and past experiences and perceptions. I argue in this section that there is a relationship between teachers' past memories of their own teachers and their current beliefs and thinking about both teacher identity and pedagogy. To support this view, I align my argument to Danielewicz's (2001) claim that 'becoming a teacher means that 7an individual must adopt an identity as such' (2001: 9), and that in fact how teachers construct their identities today is significantly related to their own childhood experiences of teachers. I am also arguing that there is a relationship between these remembered teacher identities and the activities in which their own teacher identities are enacted in the classroom literacy learning discourse.

Whether the teachers have fond or sad memories of their early school experiences, the common theme in the data is the powerful significance of this experience and also the powerful authority figure that the teacher represented. The following extracts reflect the positive images of teachers, remembered from their early days of schooling,

> I'm still remember her, she was a good teacher. (Interview, group interview: Lettie, Neni and Xoli: 11 October 2005)

> I think Foundation Phase teachers … they loved us to be honest and we looked up to them as role models. (Interview, Bassi and Sakane: 8 March 2005)

> … and then I had the most **wonderful** (*said emphatically)* teacher in Standard Four and erm I just came right then. (Interview, Joanna: 12 May 2005)

> … even now I still remember her because she was my Grade One educator and then my Grade Seven educator for needlework; that is why I could remember her. She was very very strict for us … **Maybe that is what makes me to become what I am now**, because of her strictness (Interview, Amy: 28 November 2005) (*My italics)*

> She was … full of life, she was full of life, neh. She wouldn't sit, she used to go round – 1 times 1 (*clicks fingers)* 2, 3 times (*clicks fingers)* ... you thought she's

there then she's there! She's here, she's there, she was everywhere! (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007)

Negative experiences with teachers are remembered with equal clarity. Nomsa recalls the experiences of teachers' cruelty:

Nomsa: I was happy but sometimes we feel scared because we, at that time we were punished very hard. So I sometimes afraid to go to school because of the way the teachers at that time punishes us …
Paula: What would –
Nomsa: (*talking over Paula, very animated*) – if you, you know something, you, you, they label you … and they throw things at you – even a duster. A teacher shouts at you and throw a duster at you …. Sometimes I I I I felt – afraid to go to school. (Interview, Nomsa: 22 November 2005)

Ms Lyons mentions that she limited her writing in primary school because of a fear of corporal punishment for being left-handed,

Ms Lyons: So, I didn't write a lot. I tried not to write a lot because I used to get whacked on the hand often. (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007)

Gugu mentions that her school days were not happy:

The teachers were very very strict and, even the support that they could give … Because ... we were somewhere in the farms, so they, they couldn't care the life situations that we were in, you see. Parents having no money. If they wanted something, they could even expel you from school, you see. So it wasn't nice, it wasn't nice … (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

It would be hard to find a more potent example of past experiences influencing present practice than Sharon's poignant memory:

Sharon: Because it was my turn to read that page and I can't see that, those words and … (*mimes beating*)
Paula: Did it make you feel worried about school?
Sharon: Yes I do, I say, I don't want to go to school and I am hurt it with me. And I told my Mum, I want to go for a teacher but I don't want to punish. (Interview, Sharon: 22 November 2005)

Some, if not all, of these statements probably ring true for many people, raised in an era where harsh physical punishment in school was the norm. The issue for attention is whether these memories affected current perceptions and practices of teachers.

Certainly, all memories of schooling will refer to both good and bad experiences, but the significance is in the impact of these experiences and the resultant predominance of the negative over the positive, or vice versa. Of the thirty interview respondents in this study, seven teachers have negative and painful memories of school or of particular teachers, all associated with receiving, or the fear of receiving, harsh punishment. Nineteen teachers have positive memories of their schooling, seven of which rely on accounts of a particular remembered teacher. Corporal punishment features highly in the memory data, not only amongst those with negative memories but also with three of the interviewees who had positive memories of their teachers. Nomsa's statement is interesting: she states that although the corporal punishment sometimes made her fear going to school it was also good because

> it also make – make us to read more because, you know, if I don't do this, the teacher is going to punish me very hard. So you **have** to know it.
> (Interview, Nomsa: 22 November 2005)

The above extract provides an interesting construction of literacy as something that you 'have to *know*' (my emphasis). Not only does the threat of punishment reinforce the notion of literacy as work that must be done, but the concept of knowing, rather than understanding or enjoying, constructs literacy in a way that is consistent with the authoritarian notions of learning under apartheid (Hartshorne, 1992) and as antithetical to the learner-centred construct of literacy that the NCS (DoE, 2002c) seeks to promote. I would argue that constructs of literacy formed in childhood still hold sway in Nomsa's and other South African early literacy teachers' understandings today.

Regarding the influence of past experiences on current practices, Sharon and Ms Jali, both teachers with negative memories of cruel teachers, cite their experiences as bases for the decision to become teachers. I observed Sharon's teaching only briefly for a few minutes after the interview, but from that and from her explanation of her pedagogy, it would appear that she has adopted a non-violent approach to her teaching and has broken the cycle of violence which she so poignantly feared.

Responses from the four observed teachers, Ms Jali, Ms Tladi, Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu, about the conceptualisation of the teacher afford more possibility of linking these with the observation data and hence are outlined below in greater detail.

4.3.1 Ms Jali

From pre- and post-observation interviews it is clear that Ms Jali has adopted a style that contrasts directly with that of her disliked teacher and is highly consistent with her fondly remembered, patient Grade One teacher, who was 'a kind lady … I don't remember her punishing me' (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005). In the pre-observation interview, she emphasised by stating twice that her approach to literacy teaching 'depends on the ability of the learners' (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005). In her post-observation interview, she is emphatic about the need for children to feel free in order to learn effectively and at their own pace, citing her own experiences of a limited curriculum as negative motivators for this approach. The teacher identity that she manifests in her second interview is in direct contrast to that of her own resented authoritarian teacher; however, when asked if this is a deliberate strategy, her response is equivocal, pointing also to changed curriculum and the socio-cultural factors present in the newly democratic South Africa:

> Sometimes there is – but when we were trained in this OBE, they said we should concentrate on the learners. So learners should learn at their own pace - encourage group teaching, encourage pair work. So I'm trying to include all those things in my teaching … to instil open-mindedness, co-cooperativeness. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

Later in the interview, seeking to encourage Ms Jali to confirm, refute or discuss what I was inferring were her 'implicit theories' (Zeichner et al., 1987: 22), I again asked if she had gone through a thought process that had wrought a change in her approach. Again the response, whilst a personal statement of her intentions, centred on the new curriculum rather than on personal decisions about changed practices:

> Not really, it's just I was being (inaudible) by these Critical Outcomes, that learners should be able to manage themselves. So I just thought: how can they manage themselves in their learning? Then I did what I do, I'm still learning, I'm still learning. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

She acknowledges that discipline is not her strong point:

> Because I like – I allow them too much freedom. So my classroom – you won't find my class (inaudible). My class is free, but I do encourage them to speak softly – not to shout … (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

Yet juxtaposing this with her own childhood experiences of being 'beaten when we were not listening in the classroom' (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005) and being expected to 'just sit in the classroom and be quiet' whilst the teacher left them and went to town (28 November 2005) affords a justifiable inference that Ms Jali's identity as a teacher is marked by an intention not to replicate those experiences for her learners. Ms Jali's approach is related to her negative memories of the slow-paced, teacher-centred methods of her own learning experiences:

> Paula: I think you were teaching in a very different way from the way that you were taught. Would you agree?
> Ms Jali: Yes, I agree because they were teaching us, we didn't do anything. For instance we were reading only one book, for the whole year. And it was twenty pages or fifteen pages. So for the whole year you were supposed to do that fifteen pages and nothing else. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

Ms Jali's frustration with that experience is palpable even today, and her responses about a wish for freedom and open-mindedness in the classroom are redolent of opposite past experiences.

4.3.2 Ms Tladi

In terms of past experiences and present practices, Ms Tladi shares at length her experience of a very fearsome teacher, albeit at high school, who would punish the children who had not correctly memorised the given Shakespearian passage:

> So … you wouldn't love to have an English lesson because you'd be panicking before she comes and think, "I have to learn these lines and she's expecting us to say them when she comes … Then you couldn't say those properly and you know, you had to learn to say them (*said emphatically*) because she was expecting you to say them exactly as they are. So I took it as being unfair because we were second (*chuckles*) language speakers …. So, she was terrifying! (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007)

Ms Tladi's reference to unfairness is significant. It is a theme which is noticeable in her approach to her learners, as will be further discussed in Chapter Five, but even within the context of the interview, reflections about her teaching style indicate that fairness is an important issue for her. As she says, 'You're dealing with Grade Ones, you cannot er pace, er

teach Grade Ones according to your own pace. They develop according to their own pace' (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007). Another converse echo of her remembered panic is present in her statement that 'understanding the text is very important'. Ms Tladi's class is an English-medium class comprising children for whom English is a second, third or even foreign language; it may be possible to conclude that her commitment to them gaining understanding even at the expense of pace and breadth of content covered may be related to her own earlier struggles with English and an inflexible, harsh teacher.

4.3.3 Ms Lyons

Ms Lyons's negative experiences of discipline due to difficulties with left-handedness and writing have been mentioned above. However, there is not much evidence in the interview data to suggest that her current teaching style is related to a desire to counteract this harshness in her own experience. Her response, however, does give credence to Lortie's (1991) 'apprenticeship of observation' in that,

> … even though teaching – teaching methods and pedagogy have changed over the years, erm, people will always say, you go back to what you know – what, how you were taught. (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007)[12]

Her response also strongly illustrates that she has constructed an identity for herself as a responsive teacher: 'you do what best suits you and what best gets through to the children' (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007). When questioned further about how she decides on whether she is 'getting through' to the children, she explains that she bases this judgement on their observed levels of comprehension and enjoyment:

> If they're catching on quickly, and they're enjoying themselves, you can see – they're quick to 'Oh Yay! If you're doing something that they don't like, they – they're not quick to show enthusiasm for it. (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007)

Her choice of words when talking about her relationship with the children conveys a strong personal intention to motivate and empower them to see literacy as a tool for life: 'you gotta say, and you – then you say, "If you can read, you can teach yourself anything!" ' (Interview,

[12] Observation data, which will be presented in Chapter Five, indicates that Ms Lyons utilises a basal reader from the 1960s, confirming that she is 'teaching as she was taught'.

Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007). Whilst this may be a statement of opinion rather than of fact, and whilst prevailing socio-economic factors may limit the learning trajectory of Ms Lyons's learners, her willingness to motivate and inspire the children and to engage with their preferences in the literacy learning context represents a significant shift from her own early literacy experiences, which she refers to as 'a nightmare' (Ms Lyons, 12 November 2007). She clearly states that children in her class can make choices:

> They might even say to you 'Look I don't like this book today' and they'll say, 'Can I read something else?' There's no harm in that … you've got to … cater for that. (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007)

It is possible that her negative experience at the hands of authoritarian teachers has influenced her to be somewhat less so herself. The classroom observations provide interesting corroboration, as will be seen in the following chapter.

4.3.4 Ms Ndlovu

Although a teacher manifestly demonstrating affection and warmth with her learners, her teaching style is strident and sometimes appears to be quite aggressive. Perhaps this is related to her positive recall of the role of discipline, forged from her classroom experiences and honed in the innocent but formative domain of child's play. Her belief in the value of corporal punishment and her linking of that with the notion of background, also signals the extent to which that background, or culture, shapes belief and how belief informs pedagogy (Heath, 1983, Danielewicz, 2001).

Ms Ndlovu's positive memories of her teacher bear a striking resemblance to her own teaching identity. As mentioned above, she loved her teacher and graphically describes how her constant movement and energy in the classroom kept the children, or at least the young Ms Ndlovu, on their toes. This remembered teacher was also a harsh disciplinarian who frequently handed out punishment for inadequate punctuation. With regard to movement around the classroom, Ms Ndlovu resembles the teacher she describes. She is never seated, always moving around the class and often using gesture and mime to convey meaning to her children, all of whom are struggling with English as a second or third language. Similarly, she has a harsh side to her: most of her communication with the children, individually or

collectively, is delivered in a loud, forceful voice; and whilst there is no evidence of physical punishment, the verbal criticism that some children receive shows that Ms Ndlovu believes in firm discipline. Her interview commentary on corporal punishment in her own literacy education reveals her sustained regard for its value,

> Ms Ndlovu: She always came with a stick, checking the writing and at the end of a sentence – no full stop – YOO, you're in for it!
> Paula: Mm
> Ms Ndlovu: We learnt, but we learnt, we learnt, we learnt.
> Paula: You learnt from the corporal punishment?
> Ms Ndlovu: Yes we learnt and we grew up there. I mean, now I mean we're grown-ups we can do things on our own, because there was discipline. Now we know which part, which part – this part or that part. It's either, you can't, you can't have two, you choose one. The right one. Yes.
> Paula: So are you one of the people that thinks that corporal punishment should still be around, or not?
> Ms Ndlovu: It should, it should, it should be around. You know, other children you know, we don't come from the same background …. (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007)

Thus, her current teacher identity would seem to be consistent with her stated views about the importance of discipline and it is possible that the harshness of her approach is evidence of the influence of positive recollections of the practices of her own early literacy teacher.

4.4 Teachers' self-identity

One common and striking feature which emerges from the transcripts of all the thirty teachers interviewed is that they seem to construct and present themselves as caring and responsive to their learners. Both when discussing their approach to their early literacy pedagogy and to the home circumstances of the learners, they evince a commitment to individual achievement and to responding to the differing needs of learners with regard to home circumstances, home language, skill and ability.

Below are examples from the data that reveals this responsiveness with regard to different abilities and skills:

> Olive: …it's just that maybe you have learners who can't read and write, neh, but you still have problems identifying exactly what the problems of those learners, wa bona …. So we try those methods, different kinds of methods

> to help the learners to read … yes, we try this one, then if this one works for this child then this is how we're going to read, reading for this child. If the other method works for this child … yeh we use various methods (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005)

to the interests of the learners,

> Mrs Molefe: The best way of teaching reading and writing is to get the interest of the children and to give them something of interest. And give something that these children are going to have in their lifetime (Interview, Mrs Molefe: 27 May 2005)

and to the social circumstances of the learners,

> Kgabo: So that's the problem we are facing with our children. And that thing of them hurt us because we didn't know that life. We don't know what to can do for them to be like us. They mustn't struggle to learn. They mustn't struggle to come to school. (Interview, Kgabo: 13 June 2005).

Given that the intention of this study is to contribute to improving teacher training in the area of early literacy pedagogy, it is certainly heartening to discover the extent of commitment revealed in these interviews, a commitment which would seem to contradict Soudien's (2006) quite pessimistic view, and to recognise that such dedication amongst our teaching force is a fertile ground for growth and development.

It would seem that the respondents' identities as caring, concerned teachers are related to their conceptions of the identity of the teacher, both from their memory data and as reflected in their statements about their current priorities. For those with negative memories, the motivation to be different is clearly articulated and for the minority who hold positive memories of their teachers, it would seem that they are emulating or re-creating those qualities. As Danielewicz (2001) asserts, although teacher identity development is a dynamic process with many factors involved, what is certain is that 'our identities have social origins. We come to know who we are through social relationships with others' (2001: 38). I would argue that the data presented here provides evidence for a link between most respondents' experiences of particular teachers and their current identities as teachers. I would also, in agreeing with Danielewicz (2001) that pedagogy is strongly linked to identity, argue that the interview data reveals a link between teachers' self concepts, or identities and their early literacy pedagogy. I now move on to present and analyse the data with regard to this.

4.5 Teachers' early literacy pedagogy

I was interested to know how teachers conceptualised their practice, how they described it and whether their concepts of their own early literacy teaching and learning were influential in their current practice. In the interview, I asked teachers to share with me, in as much detail as they could, how they teach reading and writing. Subsequent questions were largely dependent on how each educator, or group of eductors, chose to answer the question.

Strategies for teaching early literacy, the broadest sub-theme under which the data was analysed, captures the responses to the initial question as presented above. Further categories which emerged as common sub-themes are: phonemic awareness and phonics, theorising about pedagogy, multi-modal approaches, pacing of the teaching, initial strategies for teaching writing, views about outcomes-based education (OBE) and the NCS.

With regard to the nature of teachers' responses about pedagogy, there was often a dropping of voice or a degree of repetition or stammering. It is possible that this hesitation or reduced volume, in the case of fourteen of the respondents, was related to language difficulties. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that some teachers were more comfortable than others and responded with more confidence when talking about their teaching strategies and that this discomfort was not always related to language. In other words, making explicit their implicit theories (Zeichner et al., 1987) was a conceptual challenge for most teachers.

4.5.1 Phonemic awareness and phonics

Phonemic awareness emerged strongly as a common starting point for sixteen of the teachers. Of the other fourteen, the starting point was Look and Say followed by phonemic awareness for two. A combination of phonemic awareness and Look and Say was the response from the Joanna/Meg/Miriam group and for the others, a Language Experience approach was the initial starting point. Breakthrough to Literacy (BTL) was mentioned by seven of the teachers, Concentrated Language Encounter (CLE) by Sharon and a combination of real books and language experience approach represents a summary description of Alison's response. It was interesting that Lungi and Pat combined the teaching of reading and writing, starting with the vowel 'o', moving on to the vowel 'i' and so on. Unlike English, which has many spelling and

irregularities, the phoneme/grapheme relationship of the nine official South African indigenous languages is constant; so theoretically the teaching of decoding in African languages is easier and quicker than it is in English. That said, Lungi and Pat claimed that they would spend about five weeks teaching the vowels before adding consonants. In relation to this significantly slow pacing, it was unclear at what point in the year their learners had sufficient phoneme/grapheme knowledge to decode meaningful text.

The responses about pedagogy, combined with other responses previously addressed, provide strong evidence that many teachers do teach as they were taught. Neni's answer is particularly unequivocal on the value she places on her past experience:

> Neni: There is, because our teachers then, they used to write vowels, only vowels. And they, they teach us one by one a-e-i-o-u and then at times they add the letter, the phonic 's' in that 'a' and they make a syllable, 'sa'. From that 'sa' you can build a word, sisa, using the vowels and the letter. And even today, if the child has a problem you go back to your experience and bring it back to the classroom. (Interview, Neni: 11 October 2005)

Her immediate reference to the pedagogy of her teacher, and the fact that she relates her own practice to that of 'our teachers' bear testimony to the significance for current practice of early experience. Her use of the present simple and the first-person plural to describe the practice of the teachers is significant. It denotes that the practice is conceived as widespread and generalised, or 'something that is true in general' (Murphy, 1994). Other responses extracted from the data relating to phonemic awareness and phonics reveal a strong adherence to a traditional vowels-first phonics approach. Despite the different locations and social status of the schools and teachers, the responses are similar:

> Joanna: We start right from the beginning; we'll come in at the beginning of Grade One. And they'll have had phonetic background in Grade Nought. Grade Noughts, it doesn't matter which school they come from, have done Letterland13 or they've done the South African version called Alphaland. So they've got knowledge of the sounds and some of them have picked up blending already. (Interview, Joanna: 12 May 2005)

> Gugu: The best way? I think the best way to teach reading, it's by first giving the learner the sound. Teach the learner the sounds. When the learner have mastered the sound then it's gonna be easy for him or her to understand, to

[13] A commercially produced phonics programme used extensively in South Africa, using pictograms and rhymes to introduce the alphabet.

> understand the words. She could easily read, even other languages, just because of the sounds. (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

Gugu's comment implies corroboration of Cummins' Interdependence Theory, which holds that there is a common underlying principle in all languages and that skills learnt in the first language are transferable to additional languages. However, as Glenn (1997), Prinsloo and Stein (2004) and Stein (2008) have pointed out, the issue of quality of literacy teaching in the first language is salient for such transfer to have the possibility of occurring. Gugu's reference to an easy transfer of skills is perhaps a superficial statement of the complexity of the process.

> Lungi: I usually start with the vowels, and the very first vowel that I start with, it's an o because it's just a circle. They have to give me, they have to look around the class and tell me, what is it that it's round …. So they usually tell me, and they think about the vegetables, fruits, orange, ball – anything that is on air, they write it on their tables, they draw it down there, saying, 'o – it's a circle'. Then they deal with the o, different words, give them words, they have to draw them (inaudible) with the round shape. Then they master the o, maybe after four days. Then I see, 'ah they've got it'. Then the second vowel is an 'i'. (Interview, Lungi, Pat & Rose: 23 November 2005)

> Ms Tladi: ... what I've realised or what I've learnt over the years is that there is no child who can read without knowing all the sounds – that phonic. So to get a child to be able to read – firstly a child should be able to know the sounds and know them very well. And again, a child should be exposed to a lot of print. (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007)

Olive has been trained in the use of the BTL (Molteno Project, 2003) methodology, which commences with the Language Experience Approach, an approach that builds on the speaking and listening skills that the child acquires before coming to school, and moves into phonics tuition only after a few weeks. In spite of this, and whilst paying lip-service to the different methods introduced 'as you go through the different workshops' (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005), she appears at first to be more confident of the traditional phonics-first approach, stating first that this is what she uses. However, later she goes on to highlight her perceived weakness of the phonics-first approach and avers that the Language Experience Approach in BTL addresses this weakness. This ambivalence, which in effect amounts to self-contradiction is, I would argue, a possible indicator of the lack of confidence with theory that occurs in many teachers' responses. I have highlighted the statements in this interview that reveal Olive's equivocality:

Olive: I use different methods of teaching reading as you go through different workshops and all those things of teaching. So there was still a method that I used to use, be using. Like, learners used to know the vowe… the sounds of letters in order for them to make meaning. Even though they come in knowing how to talk and how to use whatever, to talk and communicate. But to me, for them to know how to read, they should know the sounds of letters. Because if a sound is 's' and if something starts with 's' they able to know that this is the sound of whatever and then, maybe if I want to talk about the project that xxxx[14], the methodology that xxxx[15] came up with, using the Molteno Project[16] I think for us it's something that helps us a lot because teaching the vowels, sounds take a lot of time for the learners to know how to read. (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005)

These sample extracts indicate the importance that most of the teachers interviewed place on phonemic awareness and phonics; a comparison with their recalled experiences as literacy learners does provide evidence at least of a strong similarity between these present practices and past experiences:

Olive: Even on our slate we used to write. Maybe we'd repeat a 'g' and repeat a 'g' (inaudible). (Interview, Olive: 7 November 2005)

Gugu: You know when we were at school, then we were those times we were only taught the alphabets. We were never taught about the sounds. And with learning Ay-Bee-Cee (says the letters). Then my uncle taught me that if you know these ABC then ultimately you can read. He told me that you just pronounce the word as it is; then you can read that thing. Then it goes on and on … then ah I'd realised that 'I can read!' (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

Lungi: We were taught how to read and if I can remember then it was that vowels first, a-e-i-o-u. We were matching those vowels at first with words, neh. (Interview, Lungi, Pat & Rose: 23 November 2005)

Ms Tladi: … So we had picture books from which we could identify what's on the picture. … But first we were taught how to sound – the sounds in – in the word. Like the word bona – to see – we could start by saying b- o – na and then from there we learnt how that word was built … (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007)

[14] The name of a trainer employed by the Molteno Project
[15] ditto
[16] She refers to the Breakthrough to Literacy method as the Molteno Method – Molteno Project being the author of this method.

4.5.2 Teachers talking about their literacy pedagogy

When asked about their literacy pedagogy, Amy, Neni, Nomsa, Olive, Thami and Zodwa all refer to the BTL method of teaching reading. Amy, in particular, provided a detailed explanation of the methodology which, transcribed, covered two and a half pages of dense text. She is a keen advocate of the BTL methodology and although not observed in class for this study, her classroom was next-door to Ms Jali's classroom, so it was possible for me to make fleeting observations of her in action and to see that on the whole, she 'practises what she preaches'.

Neni also used BTL but her explanation of the methodology is not clear; one gets the impression that she is following the method as a doctrine that she has accepted without an understanding of the underpinning theory:

> Neni: And even today, if the child has a problem, you go back to your experience and bring it back to the classroom.
> Paula: But that … If the child has a problem, you use the old method?
> Neni: Yes.
> Paula: And if the child doesn't have a problem?
> Neni:We just learn the words. Because Breakthrough taught us we mustn't discriminate or different (inaudible - tina hlulabo?)
> Paula: Divide the words?
> Neni: Divide the word. a-e-i-o-u. Umama and the child must show -a in between, in the word and –u in the word umama. Must know the difference between 'a'and 'u' in the word. But in our olden days we used to learn vowels separately. (Interview, Neni: 11 October 2005)

The BTL methodology is systematic but follows a different and more learner-centred system from that of a traditio0nal phonics approach. It is interesting then that whilst using the BTL method, the familiarity and 'safety' of the phonics drill is still a feature of both Gugu's and Neni's approach to early literacy teaching.

Sharon's response to the question about how she teaches literacy introduces the CLE methodology,

> Sharon: (*struggles to explain in English and seems embarrassed*) *(Laughs*) I start from pictures, they can tell their own story and then I ask them to draw the pictures. Sometimes I ask them to write their own story from the picture. CLE is the only er erm reading that I use in my class.
> Paula: So how do they write the story when they're in Grade One? They don't know yet how to write. How do you do it?
> Sharon: They tell the story and I write.
> Paula: So then you write it for them and then what happens?

Sharon: They erm, they draw the pictures and later on, then they start writing. They write their own story and then they draw their own picture. (Interview, Sharon: 22 November 2005)

Sharon, like Neni, in talking about the method, details all the steps involved rather than theorising the approach. Despite fairly deliberate efforts (see below) to encourage Zodwa to describe her approach in the metalanguage of literacy teaching and learning, she remains committed to description and narration and seems not to have developed an analysis in order to understand the underlying principles of the methodology,

Zodwa: Er, we introduce sentences, not single words, we introduce sentences. Whereby maybe the children will read and view the pictures and then take er take out a sentence. Even now, if you can put the picture in front of my learners, if I can put the picture and tell them to talk about the picture, they can make a lot of sentences out of a picture.
Paula: Mm. And how do they learn to read by themselves?
Zodwa: To read by themselves? (*long pause for thinking*)
Paula: Because they can make sentences verbally.
Zodwa: Yes verbally... They can even write the sentences. Not verbally only. Even writing, they can …
Paula: So how do they know the phonics? Do they just learn it nje, like that?
Zodwa: I did introduce some of, some phonics, but they know even those that I didn't introduce.
Paula: Really that's very interesting. How do you think they know those?
Zodwa: I can't tell, I can't tell. But they do. I don't know. It's the method, I think it's the method. This method. (Interview, Zodwa: 22 November 2005)

Although this extract conveys that Zodwa has some understanding of the BTL methodology, it demonstrates that she has difficulties in speaking about the approach in a theoretical way. The lack of metalanguage per se would not signal a problem; there is a large body of research identifying that teachers may not have the skill or interest in formal theorising but that their beliefs underpin implicit theories which in turn guide their practices (Calderhead, 1987; Elbaz, 1983; Zeichner et al., 1987). However, it is a matter of concern that in this teacher's account there would seem to be a lack of both implicit and explicit theory; it seems that Zodwa, like Neni, is teaching from a script without real understanding of the reasons behind what she is doing. This is an important finding for the Molteno Project, the author and training provider for BTL, as much as it is for other teacher development providers and for policy-makers: responding to the urgent need to provide teachers with effective tools for the literacy teaching may be at the cost of providing deeper and more empowering understandings of underpinning theories.

There are three interesting aspects to the way that the teachers talk about their early literacy strategies. In the first place, very few of them theorise these interventions in formal terms; secondly, it is not clear that they are fully convinced that these 'new' methods are as robust as the traditional syllabic method yet; and, thirdly, the new methods seem to be adopted as a 'new doctrine' in spite of these reservations.

Slonimsky and Brodie's (2006) study serves as a useful lens through which to understand and analyse these limitations. It is unsurprising that teachers trained under the apartheid education system to accept without question the prevailing governmental policies and practices have difficulty in transforming themselves into critical, analytical, enquiring educators-cum-lifelong learners.

Other teachers' responses reveal a greater awareness of the discourse of early literacy theory. Joan, who is the Head of Department of the Foundation Phase and a Grade One teacher with many years' experience, answered the question with no hesitation:

> Joan: Well it's visual, of course, very much to begin with. Erm a lot of visual and auditory. So those visual discriminations and auditory discriminations have to be in place before, we hope, they come to Grade 1 and we do a bit of work on that too. Erm …
> Paula: Visual discrimination as in …?
> Joan: Being able to pattern and see the patterns and shapes.
> Paula: Look and Say?
> Joan: That's how I, well we do Look and Say, yes to begin with; while we're doing the phonics, er at the same time. So we've got 29 books and, well, 29 words for 12 small readers that we use to begin with and we teach those 29 words that are mostly visual. It's words like house, mummy, daddy. You know the usual ones. (Joan, 26 September 2005)

Betty's approach also places more emphasis on Look and Say:

> Betty: They actually think they are going to open a book now and start reading this whole book, you know, and of course it doesn't happen like that, it's a bit slower, they've got to learn the words before they get on to reading and that sort of thing.
> Paula: So that's how you do it, you pre-teach –
> Betty: Yes, well most of them. And basically, the full set. And then we use, we use our, we've got erm, little chalk boards and we've got little cards and then we build them, they write them. (Betty, 17 January 2006)

Additionally, there is an assumption, implicit in Joan's response, that this procedure is combined with the phonemic awareness and letter recognition skills that learners have developed in preschool, and that these skills continue to be honed in Grade One at the same time as the teaching of the twenty-nine high frequency Look and Say words.

The greater confidence and seeming ease with which Joan, Betty and Joanna use the meta-language of literacy teaching to discuss their literacy teaching strategies reflects the better standard of teacher education that was available under apartheid to white students (Hartshorne, 1992; Kallaway, 2002) and reinforces the evidence for a continuing existence in South Africa of a bi-modal system (Fleisch, 2008) that sustains benefits for the advantaged and increases disadvantage amongst the poor. Soudien's (2007) reference to the 'A Factor' is reflected in these differences and there needs to be an acknowledgement that we as South Africans

> are having to come to terms with the reality, as the Americans did in the post-bellum era, that its almost 350-year long history cannot be remade in a mere decade, and much less can its social formations, inscribed as they are in the fracturing language of race and class, be re-composed by 10 years of democracy. (2007: 182)

Soudien argues that the policy strategies with regard to curriculum, infrastructure and resources are necessary and important steps towards the achievement of a democratic education system. However, the realities in the classroom and in the hearts and minds of the teachers will require the investment of more time, patience and, in my view, developmental strategies that take account of and build on teachers' understandings about themselves and their pedagogy.

Teachers' responses to the question about pedagogy generated so rich a composite of data that it is quite difficult to definitively categorise. There is a common recognition amongst the responses of the need to use a combination of approaches, giving learners phonic decoding skills as well as some exposure to text and pictures. This finding harmonises with the findings of the two major research studies (Langenburg et al., 2001; Snow et al., 1998) aimed at identifying from a wealth of secondary data, the key elements of strong literacy programmes in the US. However, teachers' statements about their literacy pedagogy provide few insights into how they actually teach and as Freeman (1996) and Zeichner et al. (1987) emphasise, the

correspondence between teachers' talk about their practice and their daily practice is not necessarily direct. Hence the rationale for the second part of this research: the classroom observations.

4.5.3 Pacing of the teaching

'They are very slow as they are very young' (Interview, Lungi, Pat & Rose: 23 November 2005). This comment by Rose reflects a significant finding in the interview data of several teachers about the slow pace that some of the respondents believe is necessary in their current practice. For example, Lungi (Group interview, 23 November 2005) says that she would spend four days on the letter 'o', and Gugu and Minah state that they would practise one sound for a week:

> Then you do the word, do the word then even the following day maybe I would never have to introduce the new sound. Then maybe for a week I would practice that with them then the following week maybe take another sound. (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

> And maybe it can take the whole week dealing with 'm' because after teaching mother, there will be some other words that have 'm'. (Interview, Minah: 22 May 2005)

The issue of pacing is addressed as a central feature of the Foundations for Learning Campaign (DoE, 2008a, c). Although it was published three years after these interviews took place, the recommendations as to what must be covered in literacy in each term will present a challenge to many of the teachers interviewed and may provide an opportunity for further research along the lines of Hoadley's (2003) study to explore whether and how the Campaign has impacted on the pace of teaching.

Several teachers' reference in this study to slow pacing of the teaching would seem to confirm Hoadley's (2003) findings that the adoption of a slow pace of teaching is associated with large, minimally resourced classes in township schools, whilst in her study, as in mine, the schools that offer differentiated teaching have smaller class sizes and a wealth of resources. However, there is clearly a problem with spending several days on the teaching of one vowel and, as Fleisch (2008) points out in citing Reeves's (2005) study, learner achievement is strongly linked to teachers' effective control of the pacing and sequencing of the learning. It is

important to note, however, that slow pace of teaching is not an inevitable feature of schools serving lower socio-economic communities. Ms Jali was committed to providing differentiated learning at the pace of the children, despite her class having forty-six children on roll.

4.5.4 Initial Strategies for Teaching Writing

The teaching of writing is a critical aspect of early literacy pedagogy. Concerns about children's poor performance on systemic tests, as mentioned previously in this thesis, inevitably centre as much on their ability to write meaningfully as well as their ability to read with comprehension. I was keen to explore with teachers how they tackled the issue of writing and especially so because their own experiences had focused almost exclusively on the technical aspects of letter formation, punctuation and effective transfer to cursive script.

Twenty-five of the teachers claimed to involve children to a greater or lesser extent in writing. Five teachers' accounts went no further than the matter of letter formation and word transcription. The remaining twenty talked about writing beyond this limited level. From these twenty, five were the private school teachers, who do, perhaps predictably, provide more opportunities for children's expression in writing. Of the remainder, nine teachers have been trained in and were implementing their literacy teaching according to a prescribed literacy programme that incorporates a writing component; so this finding, likewise, was unsurprising. Only two of the public school teachers who are not involved in a literacy support programme claimed to focus on expressive writing with their children. Busi claimed that her children were avid and keen writers, even challenging her to give them writing tasks. However, her explanation of the process raises questions about the degree of planning, purpose and follow-up,

> I say 'wait I'm coming!' So I encourage them to take their own papers and whatever to write whatever they want, or something they can tell me about when I come back to class. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)

Betty's reference to expressive writing is preceded by meticulous attention to the mechanics of handwriting, which she considers to be of great importance. Then, when prompted to talk about creative writing, she says:

> That comes obviously a bit later, erm more towards the middle, middle part of the year. And then they start, we basically discuss, talk about things. Some of them will come, er out of their own, erm, where they now have managed to put different words together – have learnt other words because of parents or they ask you and they erm want to write little things and they will start writing little things themselves. That's great for them, because those are usually the ones that are going to manage their news stories and whatever much easier than obviously the others. (Interview, Betty: 17 January 2006)

In relation to seeking to understand the difficulties surrounding writing pedagogy in most South African primary schools, it is salient that Betty, though teaching a multilingual class of children in a working-class inner-city public school, is an older teacher of European origin. The point is significant because she is the only teacher in this study's sample of twelve public schools who is teaching expressive writing; and, even then, her reference suggests that it extends only to the rather standard activity of 'news stories' which are 'managed' rather than to the imaginative, expressive writing described in the work of Dyson (2001) and Vasquez (2004). Nonetheless, Betty's children probably do more expressive writing than the children in the classes of the other eleven public school teachers interviewed. Betty's background and previous teaching experience would account for her greater awareness of the importance of expressive writing. Nonetheless, it is a significant and grave, if tentative, finding that the teaching of expressive, imaginative writing was either inadequately taught or not taught in eleven of the twelve public schools surveyed in this study.

Having mentioned the relative strength of Betty and the private school teachers with regard to writing pedagogy, their inputs still suggest a limited understanding of the scope of text-creation activities with young emergent literates as described by Vasquez (2004) and Dyson (2001). Their research findings hold out possibilities for more literacy work to go beyond the 'news story' and the 'writing about a picture' approach. In fact, it was only Alison (Interview, Alison: 29 December 2005), working in a very different context from all the other teachers and with a range of resources at her disposal, who talks about writing pedagogy as an expressive activity, drawing on children's imagination and linking it also to their reading:

> One of the best things I've done with them is our Author Study. They learn about the author, they find out about her on the internet and then they write to her. It is important that they understand that reading and writing are life skills and forever. (Interview, Alison: 29 December 2005)

Beyond questions of resources, it is clear that teachers' conceptualisations of writing are key determiners of what writing in their classroom takes place. With the exception of Alison, who had 'always wanted to be a travel writer' (Interview, Alison: 29 December 2005) and claimed to have always been interested in writing, none of the teachers mentions examples of imaginative writing or creative writing. Ms Lyons does have a vivid recall of her teacher's instructions about how to write a letter in Grade Two. Quoting the remembered words of her teacher, she intoned,

> you always start Dear So and so and you always ask a polite question – How are you today?" and I think it's one of those things that stick in your mind. (Ms Lyons, 12 November)

Whether through admonishment, encouragement or punishment, it is clear that the teachers acquired the belief that, in the main, writing is about reproducing, not creating, text. It is little surprising therefore, that writing practices in most South African early literacy classrooms today reflect the imprint of those experiences (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999; Taylor and Moyane, 2005) and that findings in later Grades (DoE, 2005; Hendricks, 2009) indicate a compounding of the problem. If we are seeking to develop children as writers, and the NCS performance indicators clearly do reflect this intention (DoE, 2002c), then we need to recognise this disjuncture between curriculum intentions and teachers' experiences. Unless understood and addressed through teacher development programmes, the disjuncture will continue to impact on teachers' take-up of the curriculum and consequently on children's chances of exposure to expressive, imaginative writing.

4.6 Issues of Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT)

Teachers who focused most on the difficulties and challenges of early literacy teaching were those who teach in public schools through the medium of English Additional Language. Whilst 'additional language' is the term used in the curriculum documents, for some learners whose parents are refugees or economic migrants from other countries or who come from remote parts of South Africa, English is actually a foreign language, the teaching of which requires training in skills and knowledge, which most Grade One teachers have not had. The issue of LOLT is addressed more fully in Chapter Six. However, it was in the interview data that teachers' concerns and thoughts about LOLT first emerged.

It became clear that a mismatch between children's HL and the LOLT of the classroom was deemed by the teachers as problematic. Of the fifteen schools featured in these interviews, three are private schools with English as a LOLT where the majority of learners have English as a HL, four are public schools with English LOLT where the majority of learners do not have English as a HL, one is a public school where Afrikaans is the LOLT and the HL of the majority of learners,[17] and the remaining seven public schools have Home Language as a LOLT. The teachers from these seven schools did not raise any issues about difficulties encountered with LOLT, seemingly because they share the HL of the learners and are comfortable with this strategy.

Turning to the three English LOLT private schools, the majority of learners are from affluent families and this economic factor seems to be the one that teachers identify as key to learners' ability to effectively learn through English LOLT. Meg and Joanna, working in two different private schools, have these observations:

> Meg: No, look, you do get the odd one who, but the one that really battles, I suppose because of home circumstances, doesn't have access to books. I've got one whose Mom, I don't know whether she's totally illiterate or whether she just can't read English, but he is such a, he just wants to be able to read …. And yet he won't do his reading homework. (Interview, Meg: 6 September 2005)

> Joanna: We've got one little girl in Grade Two. A little black girl. Sweet little – who came in last year from a nursery that was - looks like a good nursery school but she really really battled. She didn't have the language. Because I don't know what – I don't think they speak English at home. So she had a mother who was right behind her and helped. Whatever we said, the mother did. And she's now almost on reading age. It's taken a year and a half …. to get her there but she's almost there now. I don't think the parents read at h- I don't think Mom reads at home. (Interview, Joanna: 12 May 2005)

The question as to whether children can cope with the demands of school in an additional language is seen by these teachers as one of home and economic background rather than one of language or literacy pedagogy. This perception would appear to be confirmed by the PIRLS study (Howie et al., 2008), which found a correlation, irrespective of home language, between higher learner performance and parental income, education and home reading habits

[17] A few learners have isiXhosa as HL.

(2008: 32). However, the concerns emerging in these interviews would need further corroboration, as they appear to be based on assumptions rather than on evidence about the home circumstances of these particular children.

The issue of parental involvement in children's language learning is key (Bus et al., 1995; Desmond, 2004; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2004; Heath, 1983, 1990; Howie et al., 2008; Rogoff, 1990, 2003) yet Stein and Slonimsky (2006) remind us of the cultural embeddedness of parent-child literacy practices and that some reflect more strongly than others the literacy practices that the child experiences in a middle-class English-medium school. Using this insight to analyse the private school teachers' responses suggests that the issue might be one of mismatch between their expectations and the actual home literacy practices rather than one of deficit in these children's homes. In this context, Heath's (1983) recommendations about enabling 'non-Mainstream' children to relate experiences of school literacy to their home and community language experiences are apposite. In a South African context, one important strategy is to value and draw on learners' multilingual skills as a resource in the classroom.

A similar mismatch may exist between teachers' expectations and actual home literacy practices in the four public schools that have opted for English as the LOLT. However, there is clearly an increased challenge for newly arrived Grade One children, who have to grapple with the skills of reading and writing in an unfamiliar, or for some, a foreign language. Busi and Kgabo teach in the same semi-rural public school and both teachers express concerns about the impact of the school's chosen LOLT,

> Busi: The parents or maybe our feeder zones are comprised mostly of illiterates so that becomes a problem too because they just say, 'Ha, English, ne English is nice is good' you know …. They can't even help their kids with that English that they choose because we are teachers. You can just tell them that 'your kids, it's better if you start them in Zulu in Grade One'. So they come with Zulu or Sotho or Shangaan whatever then they immediately get another language without even mastering their own. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)
>
> Kgabo: It's difficult to them and they cannot understand. Unless you tell them in their mother tongue. Because all these books are written in English; you have to read and read and read. Then after that you can translate what you you've read. So took how long to translate, it's a long time. (Interview, Kgabo: 13 June 2005)

The concerns about quality expressed by Glenn (1997), Prinsloo and Stein (2004) and Stein (2008) regarding mother-tongue teaching are equally relevant to this context. Ironically, English LOLT has been chosen by parents in the belief that it will lead to a better quality education; yet Busi's and Kgabo's concerns suggest that English, the chosen LOLT in their school, is itself the cause of a lowering of quality.

Betty teaches in a government school in an urban area where 'quite a few' of the learners do not have English as a Home Language. In this case, the teacher is an English Home Language speaker so she does not have the recourse to code-switching as do Busi and Kgabo.

Ms Lyons is the only teacher in this category who makes some acknowledgement of the second-language learning needs of her children. When asked which methodology she uses predominantly, she said, 'I think Look and Say, at this – in this – being a second language. Teaching second-language learners, I think Look and Say is – is important because you – you need the basic structure. That's very important' (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2008).

There are two key findings related to the issue of English LOLT and the teachers' conceptualisations. Firstly, English LOLT is a challenge for the children and teacher, exacerbated by social deprivation factors. The four public schools with English LOLT serve working-class communities of differing economic status, differences which result in increased intensity of challenge, according to the teachers' responses. Whilst Betty and Ms Tladi talk of some children struggling to accommodate to an English-medium education, Busi and Kgabo indicate that for children in large classes, who often come to school hungry and with no parental support, the challenge of an English Additional Language education is overwhelming. Interestingly, the socio-economic status of the children in Ms Jali's class is on par with that of Busi and Kgabo and yet Ms Jali is positive and optimistic about the children's literacy learning progress. It seems likely that a key difference is the LOLT in that Ms Jali's class has HL as LOLT and so the children can tackle the challenges of school and literacy through a familiar, instantly comprehensible medium.

The second point which has major implications for teacher education and policy is that teachers have little if any support or training in strategies for TESOL strategies. There seems to be no systemic approach to tackling the problem. Betty mentions that her school has an

enrichment class, Kgabo translates into the children's HL, Ms Lyons utilises Look and Say strategies, but these are all reactive, coping strategies rather than systemic proactive approaches. Since this challenging situation is typical of most urban English LOLT public schools in South Africa, it is not one which can or should be left to teachers to 'get by' as best they can. Heugh (2000a) points to the need for ESOL to be taught by trained experts in the target language if we are to effectively deal with the TESOL challenges in early literacy classrooms. Clearly the National Department of Education's policy of prioritising HL as the LOLT in the Foundation Phase (DoE, 1997, 2002c) is an important element of a systemic strategy but the matter gets complex when there are classrooms where the teacher does not speak that HL or where there is a multiplicity of HLs in the one class. If the solution to this situation is to opt for English as a LOLT, then a concomitant strategy for TESOL training for Foundation Phase teachers is called for.

4.7 The changing identity of the child

The evidence suggesting teachers' changed views about children, leading to a more agentive identity, emerged incidentally in the interview data and as such was not immediately apparent on first analysis. It was only during a more intensive analysis of the data that an interesting pattern was discernible of the children being seen as assertive and powerful in terms of communicating their wishes and preferences to their teachers. This contrasts strongly with most of the teachers' narratives shared about themselves as young learners and in their home situations. In the memory data, with regard to home literacy practices, there is mention of being forced to learn at home by elder siblings (Sakane and Ms Jali), or Granny imposing reading practice at home 'if we have been naughty' (Interview, Mrs Molefe: 27 May 2005). Even where there is an affectionate recollection of the support of family members with literacy learning, there is no indication that this was initiated by themselves as children.

Meanwhile, there was strong indication in the data about current home literacy practices of their own young offspring being assigned power and rights. Busi, talking about her four-year-old daughter, positions the child as exercising power in the relationship:

> She'll write something that you cannot read – Greek or French or whatever she calls it and ask you 'Mammy, can you read?'…. Oh when I look at that, it's horrible, but then I say, 'you tell me, I know you clever than I am'. Then she'll

> start saying, 'it's a cup'. I'll say, 'yeh, I saw it was a cup (*laughs*)'. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)

Likewise, in contrast to her own experiences of literacy at home, where her father was a prolific reader but did not read with or to her, Ms Tladi talks about the regular home reading activities that are instigated by her six-year-old daughter:

> When she looks at a book or even in the newspaper, she'll be saying, (animated voice) 'Tell me – what is this man doing … What is happening here?' ... She's just curious and then she asks questions. (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007).

Data from Ms Jali's interview also reveals the independent decision-making encouraged in her young son. Asked about reading with him, she responds,

> Ms Jali:Eish – he forces me to! He has a Bi- er [sic] (*laughs*) his teacher gave gave [sic] us a very big book, it has Bible stories in it. So he doesn't want any book, he want those Bible stories.
> Paula:This little boy, the younger boy?
> Ms Jali: Mmm he had – he had an interest when the teacher was telling them the stories, so the teacher wrote a letter to us 'May you buy this – this Bible'. Then we bought that Bible, it's R200. Then every day he chooses a story, I don't – I don't choose the story unfortunately. He chooses a story and then says, 'read this for me'. (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005)

The choice of words in this interaction is interesting. Ms Jali's son 'forces' her to read to him and he, not the parent, is also the one who 'chooses the story'. The use of the word 'unfortunately' further contributes to this emerging notion of agency within the child–parent relationship. Furthermore and significantly, this evidence of agency contrasts directly with Ms Jali's own early experiences of literacy in which her elder sister 'forced me to do what she was doing at school' (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005). Ms Jali's own experiences around early literacy are signally lacking in agency, whilst her own child's experiences appear to be contrastive.

This evidence of a changed view of childhood within Ms Jali's reported life history and that of other respondents has provided the impetus to explore this notion further in relation to classroom practice, to see whether and to what extent these changed ideas of childhood have influenced teachers' pedagogy and, in particular, their literacy pedagogy. The strong contrast between Ms Jali's memory data and her current practice at home was of particular

significance with regard to identifying the role and function of learner agency in her classroom; this exploration will form a central part of the next chapter.

Whilst the data about memories of teachers' schooling bears no mention of learners having agency or independence within the confines of the classroom, in the data relating to current experiences in the classroom, eight of the teachers make reference to the learners assertively informing their teachers about what they want to do, as the following two excerpts demonstrate:

> you know, if you give them something to write and say now, 'wait, let me deal with the other ones which are slow' – 'oh man, you are wasting our time, we want to write, we want to …'. Even if today you could say you are not writing, you have maybe whatever function that maybe I am organising, so I'm in and out of the classroom. When you come in they say, 'But we want to write!' I say 'wait, I'm coming (*laughs*)'. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)

> Yes, they like reading because usually some of them come very early in the morning. You find they are asking for a book to read. You find that they read. If they encounter any problem with words, then they'll come, I'll tell them. (Interview, Mrs Molefe: 27 May 2005)

I would argue that these excerpts represent a different kind of teacher–pupil relationship to the one they experienced as children. The children referred to in the interviews were Grade One learners in 2005, so would have been born around 2000 into a new democracy committed to eradicating the iniquities and inequities of the decades of apartheid rule. It is perhaps then not too far-fetched to speculate that the greater freedom being assigned and experienced at home and in the classroom is indeed a function and expression of the new democracy and its effect on children's lives.

4.8 Teachers' views of the purpose of literacy

Drawing on the literature of Teacher Cognition (Beach, 1994; Elbaz, 1990; Zeichner et al., 1987), which provides evidence for the link between ideas and practice, I was interested to gain insights into the teachers' ideas about the purpose of literacy. Also, from a NLS perspective (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005), beliefs about the purpose of literacy infuse and influence literacy practices, so it was of central interest in this part of the study to explore the link between beliefs and pedagogy.

The response that emerged most frequently, from twenty-three teachers, was that literacy is an essential life skill. Comments such as 'Literacy is life. If we drop it then there's no life, for me' (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007) and 'it enables one to live a fulfilling life, a life of completeness' (Interview, Ivy: 22 May 2005) are two of the more poetic responses. Yet, given the high social value placed on literacy by the majority of the teachers, it is interesting that few teachers mentioned classroom literacy practices that went beyond the mechanical details of phoneme-grapheme correspondence and word recognition. Louden et al.'s (2005) contention is that effective teachers are able to provide higher-order explanations of their literacy teaching purposes. In the light of this, these teachers might be categorised as less effective. I would argue that this mismatch between teachers' beliefs and practices is a reflection of the 'apprenticeship of learning' that Lortie (1975) theorised. The socially empowering practices with early literacy learners observed in Vasquez's (2001, 2004) and Dyson's work (2001, 2003) are not evident in their reported practices because they were far from present in the teachers' own experiences of literacy learning. The apparent mismatch between the response of eleven teachers, that literacy is for communication and for functional purposes, and their reported practice, arguably tells the same story.

Three teachers specified the multilingual nature of South Africa as the context for communication and the functional use of language,

> because if you only know your language then it's gonna be difficult to interact with other peoples, to – if you meet other peoples. (Interview, Gugu: 7 November 2005)

Given the multilingual nature of South Africa and of the curriculum, it is somewhat surprising that so few teachers focused on this aspect. The lack of emphasis is possibly a reflection of the hegemony of English (Bloch, 2006; Vandeyar, 2008) and the ambiguity in the language-related policy documents (DoE, 1997, 2002c; RSA, 1996a, b). If policy were clearer and its dissemination more systematic, it is possible that teachers' beliefs about the role of literacy in promoting multilingual education would be more pronounced.

Seven teachers mentioned the importance of literacy learning for access to employment or self-employment and seven mentioned the pleasure of reading. Of these latter responses, four came from teachers working in English-medium private schools. The others who gave this

response were Sharon, who stated that she usually reads to her children four times a day, Ms Jali, and Ms Lyons, who talked about encouraging children to read books with lots of pictures,

> it's for leisure, I mean, more-so – but er I think it's important that children - have a love of reading and build that and it's only – you've got to have also print-rich classrooms. (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007)

Only five of the teachers talked about the importance of literacy for safeguarding legal and welfare rights in situations regarding salaries or health matters. Ms Tladi also extended this concept to refer to the nation's need for literate people:

> our country, we still have large numbers of illiterate people who still need to be literate and with the new developments that are coming in we need people who are literate, so I think – that is why I'm saying that I think er literacy- it is – it is going to be still important in the future. (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007)

This latter understanding of literacy evokes Popkewitz's (2007) thesis of cosmopolitan agency according to which education is a necessary means of producing citizens who have sufficient agency for self-development and more importantly for the stability and progress of the state.

In general, teachers' views of the purpose of literacy are quite comprehensive, reflecting an appreciation of the socio-cultural importance of literacy both to the individual and to the state. A juxtaposition of these beliefs with the explanations of practice, however, reveals a disjuncture between espoused beliefs and enacted practices that is both interesting and concerning. There is scope here for other studies to establish the extent of this mismatch, which, if found to be widely prevailing in South Africa, needs to be recognised and addressed at policy level and in teacher education programmes.

4.9 Conclusion

The interviews yielded both direct and inferential evidence with regard to six central themes. Playing school and early experiences of their own teachers seem to have been central, both in reinforcing their understanding, as young children, of what counts as reading and writing and of establishing identities and practices that still influence notions of their own teacher identity

in some classrooms today. The overtly authoritarian identity of the play-school teacher figure and the teacher-led phonics activities of their early literacy lessons were, and possibly remain, a strong influence on teachers' conceptualisations of literacy as played out in their pedagogy in their classrooms today.

Phonemic awareness and phonics teaching combine as a widespread practice amongst the teachers and this reflects in large part the experiences of their own literacy learning experiences. Additionally, it was apparent that most teachers were reluctant, hesitant or unable to overtly theorise their approach. I believe that this is because discussing and conceptualising practice at a theoretical level is cognitively complex and requires a level of analytical thought that was absent in the curriculum of most of the respondents' apartheid era teacher training. Furthermore, although their teacher training would have been conducted through the medium of English, this is an additional language for most of the teachers, so discussion or explanation of theory would clearly be more difficult in an additional language than in one's home language. Unsurprisingly, it was the white teachers, having undergone a different and better quality teacher training, who were most able to theorise and most confident about doing so.

I would argue that, in whichever language, teachers need to be able to explain their methods more confidently in theoretical terms so that they can understand why certain approaches are, or are not, effective. With this capability, teachers are able to analyse and evaluate their own practice, to diagnose causes of problems and adopt strategies to address them; in other words, an understanding of the theoretical frameworks of early literacy teaching is an essential attribute of an effective teacher.

Another key finding from the interview data about pedagogy is that there is a need for teacher training and development in the area of writing pedagogy. Whilst teaching about letter formation, spacing and punctuation are necessary elements of early writing pedagogy, the encouragement of children's creativity is also beneficial to their literacy development. Only when teachers have a broader understanding of how imaginative, creative and expressive writing can be used in the early grades and are convinced of its potential, will they be in a position, and willing, to implement these strategies with their learners.

Despite the DoE's recommendation that the LOLT for the early years should be the HL, English remains the language of broader communication and in practice is still the LOLT in almost all schools from Grade Four onwards. Hence the majority of teachers in South Africa are required to teach English to young children, whether that be as LOLT or as an Additional Language. Yet there is a critical lack of specialised training in TESOL and multilingual education. Teachers are doing their best in a reactive way but there is a clear and urgent need for a policy and strategy for accredited TESOL and multilingual education training for teachers so that they can operate from an informed basis and so that learners can maximise the benefits of their teachers' increased skills and knowledge.

The interview data has revealed a change in the construction of childhood in little more than two decades – between the teachers' own childhood and the present day. Poignant memories, both pleasant and sad, of strong if not harsh regulation at home and at school are juxtaposed in these interviews with conceptualisations of, and interactions with children, both their own at home and their learners in school, who are opinionated and assertive young individuals. I would argue that the political changes in South Africa have had an immense impact but there is also, implicit in the teachers' narratives, a sense that the personal impetus for change has been as important as the political. I believe that these changed conceptualisations and the potential for greater agency in the classroom is to be welcomed and harnessed. Concepts of independence, reflection and critical thinking are already inscribed in the new curriculum. In-service, pre-service teacher education providers and teachers themselves need to emphasise and encourage these attributes, especially in the early grades where children are less habituated to school practices and more receptive to input than in later grades.

The vast majority of the teachers interviewed hold literacy as an essential life skill. However, a marked disjuncture between their recognition of its social importance and the inclusion of literacy as a life skill in their early literacy pedagogy suggests that embedded practices have pre-eminent power to influence pedagogy.

Teachers' recognition of their role in assisting children to achieve literacy skills was both heartening and humbling. Yet an interesting and possibly worrying subtext remains. Only three teachers working in public schools talked about reading as a pleasurable activity. A key thrust of the DoE's current drive to improve literacy levels in schools is focused on the notion

of instilling in children a love of reading. If, on the whole, teachers do not themselves evince a love of reading, it is hard to see how they will inculcate and nurture this in their learners.

The evidence from the interview data, both explicit and implicit, is that some teachers' current practice is influenced by a desire to do things differently from past experiences, whilst others value and utilise strategies from their early experiences; for a further category, both rationales may have influence, at different moments, on present practices and conceptualisations. Whichever rationale is operative, it emerges as a reliable finding that teachers' understandings of literacy have been forged and influenced by their own experiences.

Chapter Five - The role of Learner Agency in the Early Literacy Classroom

5.1 Introduction – the rationale for this chapter

Mbombela	*Train*
Mbombela wes'timela	*Coal train*
Mbombela	*Train*
Mbombela wes'timela	*Coal train*
Wenzan' utishela	*What does the teacher do?*
Eshay' abantwana	*She hits the children*
Wenzan' utishela	*What does the teacher do?*
Eshay' abantwana	*She hits the children*
Mbombela	*Train*
…	…

(Madlala, 1992:4)

The above excerpt of a popular isiZulu rhyme is widely known and sung by children. It reflects a commonly held sterotype of the teacher and, by association, of the classroom as a place where harsh discipline prevails. The abolition of corporal punishment in schools was written into law in South Africa only in 1996 (RSA, 1996: article 10), and it is common knowledge that some schools in townships and rural areas still continue the practice (IOL New South Africa, 2006) within a context of significant popular support for its re-instatement (wa Kivilu & Wandai, 2009). In addition, education in South Africa, at all levels of the system, is experiencing serious challenges. A key feature of challenge is that teachers, trained under the apartheid era, have embedded understandings and practices that are resistant to change (Stoffels, 2005). The problem has been compounded by the introduction at national and provincial levels of a range of curriculum policy interventions and revisions (DoE, 1998, 2002a, 2008a) that, although aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning, seem to have had the effect of confusing and demotivating many teachers (Jansen & Christie, 1999).

These factors, combined with the impact of teachers' own experiences of authoritarian and often inadequate schooling, most commonly result in classrooms that do not reflect the learner-centred intentions of the NCS and that reproduce, to varying degrees, the traditional teacher-pupil relationships of the past. Thus, in spite of the changing conceptualisations of children identified in the interview data, learner agency is not an attribute commonly encountered in South African early literacy classrooms. Given this background, I am suggesting that the evidence presented in this chapter for the role of learner agency in literacy

learning is all the more significant in terms of contributing to understandings of early literacy pedagogy in South Africa. However, also in relation to the specific contextual features, what is identified in this chapter as agentic learning is quite different from the manifestation of learner agency detailed by Vasquez (2001, 2004), where learners with their teacher take issue with school policies and practices, or by Dyson (2001) where learners develop writing skills whilst navigating imagined worlds. In the South African context, and its need for schools to produce a new generation of responsible, reflective, critical thinkers on whom the future of the new democracy depends, I am proposing that agency is equally, if not more so, an important aspect of early literacy learning. In this chapter, I argue that there is evidence for the role of learner agency, despite the fact that its emergence is often in relation to highly constrained literacy activities or that it flourishes briefly and unexpectedly against the flow of the official classroom discourse.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the findings from the interview data strongly suggest a changed image of childhood and of the learner. These changed images also converge with the representation of the learner as described in the documents of the new curriculum, where agency features strongly in the rhetoric. Thus it is necessary to explore whether and how these new representations are enacted, facilitated or constrained in the classroom. This chapter presents evidence of both the encouragement and constraint of learner agency, arguing for its positive role in the literacy learning process.

Whilst evidence from classroom observation is provided to substantiate the claim that learner agency has a positive impact on literacy learning, it is nonetheless acknowledged that classroom practices are ultimately an expression of the hegemony of the state and the means by which children are moulded as governable and self-governing citizens (Popkewitz, 2001, 2007). Understanding classroom interactions in relation to the expectations of the state is of particular relevance in a newly democratic South Africa. Agency was an attribute not highly valued by the previous apartheid state and hence the new curriculum with its emphasis on the development of 'critical and active citizens' (DoE, 2002b: 8) presents a challenge for teachers, educated within an authoritarian system (Hartshorne, 1992; Slonimsky & Brodie, 2006). Thus it is unsurprising that evidence of learner agency in the classroom discourse is not strong. However, its presence, I argue, is all the more significant, given the past upon which teachers' experience of education is based.

I highlight some examples of classroom interaction where agency served to strengthen the literacy learning process and some where its absence constrained the process. Whilst concurring with Davies (1990) that agency is discursively produced, I further argue that the literacy teaching and learning discourse through which agency is produced is dynamic, such that its production is not always causally related to teachers' intentions. Thus, whilst one teacher sought to encourage learner agency, the limited nature of many of the literacy activities constrained learners' agency. In another classroom, it was during and in spite of the teacher's highly regulated literacy activity that one learner achieved a literacy breakthrough due to the exercise of agency. A persuasive finding, illustrative of McKinney and Norton's poststructuralist argument, is that even in a highly controlled classroom situation agency is exercised as an expression of the learner's investment in 'competing discourses' (2008: 194).

Analysis of the observed literacy events and practices in Ms Jali's classroom form the major part of this chapter because it was there that the issue of agency within the classroom discourse emerged most strongly as a factor in the learning process. I also show by referring to specific parts of the interview data that there is a consistency between Ms Jali's conceptualisations of children, as reflected in her interviews and her observed classroom practice. Data from the other three classrooms is presented as a means of cross-case comparison.

5.2 Ms Jali's class in Valley View Primary School – the school as a backdrop

The vision and mission of the school reveal concern for social justice and an awareness of the socio-economic role that education has to play. The vision statement is as follows:

> Smart service delivery of quality public education, which promotes a dynamic citizenship for socio-economic growth and development in Gauteng and South Africa. (document obtained from deputy principal, 22 May 2008)

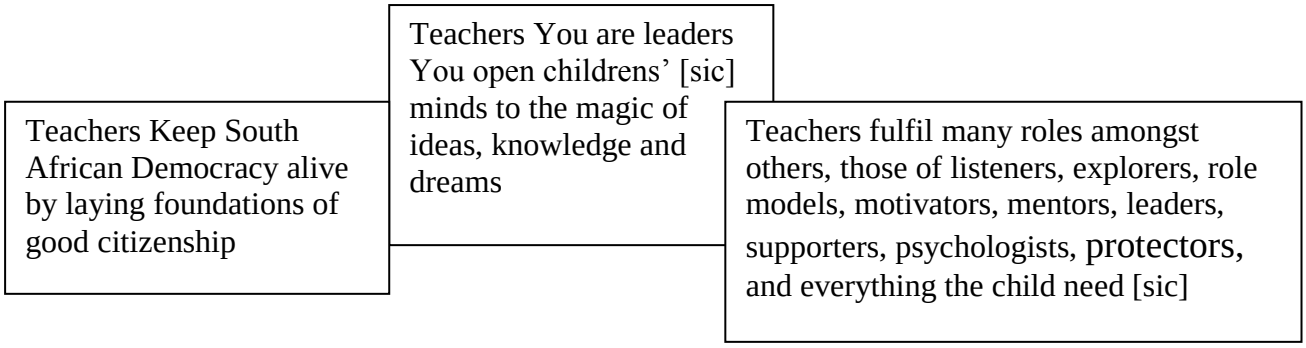
And the mission statement:

> We will be at the cutting edge of curriculum delivery and provide access to quality lifelong learning opportunities. This will be shaped by principles of equity, redress and Ubuntu. (document obtained from the deputy principal, 22 May 2008)

The reference to ‘dynamic citizenship’ echoes the stated intention of the NCS to ‘uphold a democratic vision of the society and the citizens that should emerge from our school system’ (DoE 2002b: 11). Assuming that there is a link between social justice and agency as claimed in Chapter Two, it would seem that this school positively encourages the exercise of learner agency.

The demographics of the surrounding community have already been described in Chapter Three. To provide more textured information about how the school establishes a platform for the encouragement of learner agency, I refer to my field notes:

> The school is a large, single-storey modern yellow-brick building, at once a key part of this community and yet at odds with the shabby DIY of many of the dwellings and temporary kiosks that surround it.
>
> As I walk through the entrance door, I hear the teachers being called over the intercom to the boardroom. Teachers are already arriving and turning right into the large well appointed boardroom that serves as a general meeting room. As I wait, I notice on the board outside the admin block is information about World Teachers’ Day. These are the notices on the board:



> I reflect on the significance of the content of these notices with regard to the school’s conceptualisation of the child, of teaching and learning and of the socio-political emphasis embedded within these messages. It is my observation that Ms Jali’s approach to teaching is very much in keeping with these exhortatory statements. I also note that they are placed prominently for the learners to read also. (Field notes: 4 October 2007)

The ethos of the school, as reflected in the above notices and the school mission and vision, is clearly aligned with the high social ideals and values of the NCS. It was of interest to explore how the school’s ethos impacted on Ms Jali’s classroom literacy practices.

5.3 The literacy learning process

Ms Jali was using the BTL programme, which advocates a pattern of activities and utilises a specific set of teaching and learning materials to provide learners with an understanding of how language is formed (Halliday and Burns, 2006). In each lesson observed there were two short whole-class activities, followed by instructions for independent learning activities. The lessons always started with Ms Jali reading or telling a story, then teaching a phonics item. The independent activities involved completion of Learner Workbook tasks, doing writing or drawing related to the teaching corner (TC) session, or independent reading. Children worked collaboratively or independently on these tasks, as they chose. Teacher-directed learning with groups of about fifteen learners in the TC and independent learning in groups took place simultaneously.

The BTL lessons observed took two hours during which Ms Jali taught all of the children in groups in the TC. When the groups were in the process of moving to and from the TC and changing their activities, Ms Jali would move around the classroom checking progress and offering assistance, encouragement or admonishment.

The above description of the methodology provides the framework for an understanding of the formal process of literacy learning in Ms Jali's classroom. Her interpretation of this methodology, generated by her conceptualisations of childhood and literacy learning, is the focus of attention in this study because finding out more about the role and influence of the teacher in the early literacy learning process is key (Louden et al., 2005; Freebody, 2007). As Louden et al. (2005) state,

> Differences in student learning outcomes may reasonably be attributed more to the ways in which teachers manage the literacy teaching … than to teaching activities such as shared book reading, modelled writing or stand-alone phonics lessons. (2005: 244)

Ms Jali's classroom was a hive of activity, noise, movement, learning, communication, play, concentration, disruption, creativity and negotiation. Learners were at liberty to move around the class, checking on their friends' progress or showing their friends what they had done. If they were not sure of what to do, they were encouraged by Ms Jali to consult another learner

before referring back to her which could result in periods of protracted peer discussion and possibly some off-task activity in the process.

If children needed to sharpen pencils, they went to the waste bin to do so, often participating in some social interaction with other children engaged in the same task. There was freedom to approach the teacher to show her their work and ask for input or for another task if the first task had been completed. Whilst Ms Jali was away from the TC monitoring the work of other groups, children awaiting her return could choose to read the words on the sentence maker or to 'mess about' on the carpet. Throughout the lesson children were able to work in a very individualised and focused way for extended periods of time. This appearance of learner freedom is evidence of consistency between Ms Jali's expressed beliefs and her demonstrated practices,

> As I've said before, I'm trying to address the democracy, equality, human dignity. The freedom enables them to work more and try by all means to please the educator. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

The given rationale, for the freedom to please the teacher, is interesting. It suggests that Ms Jali's view of freedom in the classroom has the same value as that identified by Popkewitz (2001, 2007), namely that of providing children with the freedom to choose to comply with the requirements of the system. It also serves as corroboration of an observed disjuncture (see section 5.4.3) between the freedom that children were afforded in their chosen style of working and very little freedom with regard to the interpretation of what counts as reading and writing; in this regard, Ms Jali was the sole arbiter.

5.4 The role of learner agency in enhancing the literacy learning process

It became apparent from early in the research process that there was an abundance of examples observed with regard to the potential for agency in this classroom. Thirty-six instances were identified where Ms Jali either deliberately encouraged learner agency in the literacy learning process or where learners acted independently without guidance from Ms Jali. What follows are two typical examples where learner agency was evident and, I argue, furthered the children's development as literate subjects.

5.4.1 Agency discursively produced

Ms Jali frequently shared with the children her insights about the learning process and explained the reasons for her chosen course of action. Through this, she established an understanding with the children that classroom discourse provides an opportunity for children to think critically, to reason and question. She quite often shared insights into her approach to the BTL methodology and encouraged children to question the rationale for some of her actions. For example, in this extract (translated from isiZulu) she was explaining to Group 7, one of the weaker groups, that she is pushing them to the next level of competence, which meant that they were to independently compose and then write their own sentences. Lebo, from another group, interjected with his opinion on her actions,

> 09h10 Ms Jali: I'm not going to write the sentence for you today. You've got to find it (*in the Learner Sentence Maker*). Those who find it will get a sweet.
> Lebo: Ah, why aren't you helping them, that's not fair. They need help!
> Ms Jali: (*laughing*) They have to try. It's late in the year now! (*I think her laughter denotes to Lebo that his challenge amuses or pleases her*).
> *(Later in the class proceedings she goes to Group 7 to check on their progress.)*
> 09h18 Ms Jali: You will read one by one. They all wrote the sentence! (*showing great pleasure*). Lebo, you said it was unfair and yet they've all written the sentence! (Field notes: 25 October 2007)

Ms Jali attends to the distinctiveness of the slower learning group and provides a positive environment for independent learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). However it is the exchange with Lebo that particularly reveals the affordance of agency. Ms Jali, in giving an instruction to one group of learners, accepts and even seems to encourage questioning of her decision by Lebo, a child in a different group who chooses to question his teacher's motives, without having been invited to do so. Implicit in the exchange, and particularly in the fact that several minutes later she returns to Lebo to reinforce the validity of her chosen instruction, is the affordance of agency. Ms Jali positions this child and, by association, the others in the class, as agentive in that they have 'access to … discursive practices in which a range of alternative ways of seeing and being are available' (Davies, 1990: 360). Davies (1990) noted a similar strategy in her study, where the teacher shared with the children his motives for certain actions. However, this kind of interaction, which may be common in classrooms in the developed world, is most uncommon in township schools in South Africa.

Clearly the degree of agency is limited, in that the lesson is planned and ultimately under the control of the teacher, with her expectations determining learner performance and outcomes. However, I would argue, from an NLS perspective, that there is a marked shift in the literacy practices (Street, 1993) of this classroom that generate the potential for agentive learning. A comparison of these practices with Ms Jali's own early experiences, or indeed with current teacher-centred literacy lessons, examples of which were observed in Hilltop and Silver Grove schools, indicates the extent of shift towards agentive learning.

5.4.2 Learner choice between alternative possibilities for action

Although always provided with instruction from Ms Jali, the learners generally had a large degree of choice about whether and how they followed the instructions. When not engaged in the TC activity, they were at liberty to carry out given instructions, to revise previous work, page through the Learner Workbook for activities of interest or discuss the learning task, completing it collaboratively or alone. They also, though not within the official discourse of the classroom, had the freedom to fight, play or chat about matters of common interest.

The following incident reflects the potential afforded by the classroom discourse for enhancing and building on literacy skills:

> Sandra has completed her given task and has now created on her sentence maker a nonsense sentence *u malume dlepheka sisibaba ku*. Fully aware of the 'non-sense' that she has created, she shows the 'sentence' amid much giggling and mirth to Bongi who proceeds to successfully decode the non-sense sentence, leading to both breaking out into lots of giggling and laughter (Field notes, Ms Jali's class: 10 May 2007).

Here I argue that Sandra's decision to utilise the BTL equipment to practise and extend her literacy learning skills independently, uninstructed and unauthorised by the teacher indicates agentic learning. By deliberately choosing word cards and putting them together in a non-sense sentence, Sandra shows that she was able to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless sentences and was choosing to be the author of this meaningless sentence. In being able to enjoy the 'joke' and read silently along with Bongi, who read the sentence aloud, she shows that she was able to decode the non-sense sentence and was hence

exercising quite sophisticated decoding skills for a child from a background with little literacy support, who has been in school for only thirteen weeks. Using the BTL equipment for this self-directed activity, the girls are also appropriating the tools of the formal literacy learning discourse to generate their own literacy event, which, in Ortner's (2001) terms, would be a reflection of agency of intent (Ortner, 2001).

In terms of the benefits for Sandra's literacy learning, the literature on non-word or pseudo-word reading (Adams, 1994; Turner, 2003) suggests that 'normal readers' (Adams, 1994: 125) will be fluently able to distinguish words from non-words by Grade Four. Thus the witnessed capacity of a Grade One child to initiate, enjoy and learn from such an activity suggests that the affordance of learner agency has value in the literacy learning process.

With regard to Davies's (1990) proposition about the existence of agency within classroom discourse, there is a consistency with the five conditions that she identifies. Sandra 'actively makes sense of, rather than passively receives, the meanings available within the discourses used by the groups of which [she is a] member' (1990: 360). Similarly, the children have moved beyond the tasks given by the teacher, indicating that they are implicitly aware that these are 'discursive practices, in which a range of alternative ways of seeing and being are available' (1990: 360). The paraphernalia of the BTL methodology is key in that it provides the access to resources 'by which alternative positionings can be brought about' (1990: 360). In other words, agency is more readily afforded in resource-rich classrooms than those in which resources are not available. Ms Jali's class, and the other three classrooms observed, were relatively well resourced. However, schools in impoverished rural areas of South Africa, which still lack the most basic items such as furniture and chalk boards, not to mention textual resources, are unlikely to be affording many resource-based opportunities for learners to assume or manifest agency. The fourth condition proposed by Davies, 'the desire to be agentive', is also present. Sandra has made a decision to adapt the use of the BTL materials for learning in her own way. 'Access to interactive others, along with appropriate discourse and the appropriate context' (1990: 360) – the final condition identified by Davies and present in abundance in Ms Jali's class – is particularly highlighted in this example and also reinforced in Ms's Jali's statement: 'Learners are supposed to manage themselves and their activities and work effectively in a group' (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008).

The example might seem unremarkable when compared to a typical Grade One classroom in the Unites States where differentiated, constructivist learning has been standard practice for more than twenty years (Delpit, 1993). However, in the context of a South African high poverty township school, it represents a significant shift in the teacher-learner relationship and one which reveals the potential that the affordance of agency can contribute to the literacy learning process. Sandra is able to take control of her learning because Ms Jali affords space for her to do so; thus her decisions about the content, process and pace of her learning, are evidence of the exercise of socially oriented agency (Toohey & Norton, 2003). However, whilst teachers' understanding of early literacy pedagogy and its purposes continue to be limited, the evident potential for the enhancement and exploitation of this kind of agentive learning, emerging as it does as spontaneously and on the edges of the official classroom discourse, are likely to be insufficiently developed.

5.4.3 Learning activities engaged purposefully and responsibly

A key example of what I propose as evidence of the potential for learner agency is provided in the following scenario, described in my field notes below and illustrated by the following slide sequence. At this point in the year's work, Ms Jali was in the process of teaching the children about the relationship between capital and small letters and that people's names begin with a capital letter. The learners' task was to write children's names, replacing the lower case first letters with capital letters. The child who is the focus of attention in this slide sequence is Nina. A key player in the process for Nina is the child in the group next to hers, who owns and affords access to an eraser. Only a few children in the class own erasers, which automatically elevates their status amongst their peers and, unofficially, assigns them a particular role in relation to those children seeking access to the item.



1. Nina (front right) works independently on the task.



2. She goes to the eraser owner to get the work erased.



3. Others choose to get involved.



4. She tries again.



5. Going to show Ms. Jali, she gets input from Niel.



6. She decisively rejects the input.



7. Ms. Jali tells her that that she is not looking at the board.



8. She returns to her desk looking at her work.



9. She works independently again.



10. She then goes back for erasures and discussion.



11. There is a group discussion about the work



12. She works independently again.



13. She again goes back for erasures and discussion.



14. She returns looking closely at her work.



15. She works independently again.



16. She stands waiting for Ms. Jali's attention.



17. She waves her book to get attention.



18. Ms Jali tells her that the capital letters are still not right.



19. She returns to her desk looking despondent.



20. She gets her desk mate to do it for her.



21. She is not happy with the work and guides the pencil.



22. Fully dissatisfied, she grabs the pencil.



23. Ms Jali guides her.



24. Ms. Jali partially relinquishes control.



25. Ms. Jali stands aside and watches as she writes.

Figure 2: Nina's independent learning journey

Nina (a weaker learner) starts to complete the writing task but she is not happy with what she has done so she goes to the desk of the 'eraser owner' at a different table to get the 'A' erased so that she can have another try.

The eraser owner and another child get involved in deciding what needs to be erased. Nina goes back to her desk and writes the 'A' but is not happy with it so goes again to the eraser owner to get the work rubbed out. She writes at her desk again and heads towards the TC to show Ms Jali. On her way she has a conversation with Thami and Steve about the work and Thami boastfully shows

her that he has already done that work. At first she is interested in looking at his work and then brushes him off with a dismissive gesture as she proceeds to the TC to show Ms Jali her work.

Ms Jali looks up from her work with the other children and tells Nina that the capital letters are still not big enough. 'The problem is, you are not looking at the example on the board' (Ms Jali). Nina goes back to the eraser owner and negotiates which bits need to be erased; two other children from that group look on with interest as this is done.

She returns to her own desk and works intently on re-writing the words. She then approaches Ms Jali in the TC but is unable to get her attention. Nina stands within sight of Ms Jali, at first waiting patiently and then swaying her body and waving her book to try to get Ms Jali's attention. She then decides to return to her desk. As she does so, Ms Jali looks up to give attention but Nina misses the moment. She soon afterwards returns to the TC, sways and waves her book a little more and this time Ms Jali looks at the book and indicates that the capitals are still not sufficiently large enough compared to the rest of the word that is in lower case.

Nina, dispirited but still focused, returns to her desk and again gets the eraser owner to erase the word.

Now Nina has a different plan. She approaches a girl in her group to get the girl to do the writing for her. However, she is clearly unwilling to relinquish ownership of this piece of work because soon she rethinks that idea and wrenches her pencil out of the girl's hand and returns to her desk to write alone.

After a few minutes, Ms Jali, having finished with the group in the TC comes and, standing behind with arms encircling Nina, she guides her by pointing at the exact place on the page where the capital letters should start and end. Whilst placing her hands very close to Nina's she does not take hold of the pencil. Her next move is to keep one finger pointed on the starting place and move another arm away. Finally she moves away from Nina to the side, to watch her do the writing from a distance. (Field notes and video data, Valley View School: 25 October 2007)

Nina concentrated on her literacy-learning activity for a full seventeen minutes. While others were engaged in different tasks or were choosing to be off-task, Nina took control of her learning through a range of different strategies. She worked independently with persistence, despite the challenge that the task posed to her. This literacy event involved a protracted series of decision-making moments, at each of which was the option to abandon the task or take an easier route. Nina persisted, I argue, because Ms Jali afforded her the opportunity to take control of her own learning and because the classroom discourse facilitated her agency. Through the process of a literacy event about how to form capital letters, Nina was also learning lessons about perseverance, responsibility-taking, decision-making, negotiation and evaluation that are not only necessary elements of literacy learning, but are essential skills,

applicable to other areas of the curriculum and to life experiences beyond the classroom. She had freedom to move about the classroom independently and to seek assistance from whomever she chose, which resulted in her seeking assistance from two different people (slides 2 and 20) for two different reasons. It is also notable that she evaluated the quality of their input and on two occasions confidently rejected it (slides 6 and 22). Despite the fact that she could have been distracted by others (slides 3, 5, 11 and 20), as for example (slide 3) when others in the eraser owner's group chose to get involved, she neither lost focus nor became distracted. Her engagements with Ms Jali are also significant. She chose when to approach Ms Jali, and did so with confidence (slides 7 and 16), despite the fact that Ms Jali was teaching another group in the TC at the time. When not obtaining the required attention, she asserted her presence by waving her book to attract Ms Jali's eye (slide 17). Ms Jali gave corrective input (slides 7, 18, 23, 24, 25) that was neither discouraging nor punitive, conveying to Nina that she was responsible for the effective completion of this task. The last three slides (23, 24 and 25) demonstrate how Ms Jali mediated the learning, progressively reducing the level of direct input.

Nina's perseverance and determination reflect agency of intent (Ortner, 2001) and her actions, for which in the whole process there was a range of other possible actions for her to choose to take, were taken purposefully. She was aware of other strategies for getting the task completed and made choices amongst these; this relates to the second of Davies's (1990) criteria regarding the range of possible positionings within the classroom discourse. In that she was actively making sense of the given task and taking responsibility for its completion, was legitimately using resources and negotiation skills through access to interactive others indicate that four of Davies's criteria (1990) were present in the enactment of this writing activity. Nina's learning style reflects Ms Jali's pedagogy, through which children are advised to seek help from each other. She engaged with a range of other children whom she believed could assist her. She asserted her 'right' to seek assistance from Ms Jali, and persisted until she obtained it.

However, this example, whilst providing evidence for the value of learner agency in literacy learning also confirms Popkewitz's proposition that education is the means by which children are disciplined 'not through brute force but by the universal rules of reason' (Popkewitz, 2001: 182). Nina is constructed in this classroom as an independent, self-directed individual but the learning in which she is engaged holds a prescriptive notion of what constitutes

literacy. The 'universal rules of reason' in this case can be interpreted as the rules of letter formation; and while it is necessary for Nina to learn these rules in order to be able to write meaningfully and to be constructed as a literate subject, an over-emphasis on this aspect of literacy learning at the expense of meaning-making activities can constrain the learner's progress and agency, affording a limited understanding of what it means to be literate.

An analysis of this literacy event, then, reveals evidence to support both Davies's (1990) and Popkewitz's (2001) theories of agency. There is evidence both of the value of affording agency and of how it serves to facilitate compliance with prescribed conventions. The significance of the classroom discourse reflected here, however, is in the extent of shift that it represents compared not only with apartheid era classrooms but also with the majority of literacy classrooms across South Africa today. The intentions of the critical outcomes of the NCS are embodied in Ms Jali's approach, and the resultant classroom discourse offers a viable alternative to the 'brute force' that previously served and in some cases still serves as the principal literacy teaching technique. Whilst the content of the learning activity is consistent with the autonomous model (Street, 1993), the underpinning ideology of the practice as it is enacted in Ms Jali's classroom affords and promotes learner agency. For Nina, this might play a significant role in the building of skills and attitudes that will enhance later study and interactions in the world beyond school.

5.4.4 The impact of agentive learning on literacy development

In terms of evaluating achievement, this study did not generate any test score data. However, it has been possible to identify performance outcomes in terms of the children's literacy development. All children in this class except one, who had joined the school in the middle of the year, have been assessed as competent to progress to Grade Two. Here is an extract from the field notes of my last observation on 8 November 2007:

> Ms J: … they all can read. The weak group is on Book 4 or 5.
> *Ms J asks some learners to show me their reading skills. She patiently reads with all 3 weaker Ls throughout the break. I ask about parental involvement:-*
> Ms J: Parents do come to Open Day and they are happy about the children's progress. Next year I am going to be overworked because there will only be one isiZulu class. (Field notes, Ms Jali: 9 November 2007)

Although not derived from learner test scores, the evidence of learner reading performance provided by the teacher does indicate that she and her learners have exceeded the curriculum requirements and performance expectations of Grade One learners. All the children by the end of the year were able to read the core vocabulary in the BTL methodology, which comprises some 200 words, and have read between four and thirty-four stories. See Figure 3 for an example of the language involved in the Book 5 to which the teacher refers.



Figure 3: An extract from the Breakthrough to Literacy Reader Book 5 of 10 (Molteno Project, 2003c:14-15).

I would argue, furthermore, that this performance is positively related to the freedom and confidence experienced by the children, and to the potential for independence and agency generated by Ms Jali's pedagogy.

The fact that the majority of children in this class had achieved or exceeded the assessment standards required for Grade One suggests a positive connection between these outcomes and

Ms Jali's pedagogy. Additionally, the issue of the teacher's caring attitude and the attention paid to each individual child was, I believe, a positive affective factor in the children's success in becoming literate. Louden et al.'s findings with regard to 'warmth and rapport' (2005: 235) amongst effective teachers provide corroboration for the importance of these aspects of literacy teaching practices.

The literature on early literacy research from within the cognitive and psycholinguistic frameworks is agreed that 'Alphabetics, Fluency and Comprehension' (Langenberg et al., 2000: 2 of 4) are key components of 'effective instructional reading approaches' (2000: 3 of 4). There is scope within the BTL methodology for learners to acquire and practise the skills associated with alphabetics – phonemic awareness, phonics, phoneme/grapheme correspondences and spelling. However, the teacher's belief about the children's need for 'freedom' and 'open-mindedness' appears to be an additional and beneficial component in the interpretation of the methodology.

Any efforts that seek to identify 'what works' in early literacy teaching without acknowledging the importance of the teacher factor will continue to fall short (Freebody, 2005). Literacy is a cultural and social practice and therefore an understanding of the cultural and social context and needs of the learners and a matching of these needs with the methodology is essential. A quality programme is, of course, desirable but understanding quality in the classroom also requires an understanding of the affective factors and social processes at play in the classroom and even beyond, in the lives of the children and their home and community literacy practices (Heath, 1983; Louden et al., 2005; Stein and Slonimsky, 2006; Street, 1994).

There is a close relationship between Ms Jali's conceptualisations of childhood generally and her understanding of the backgrounds and social conditions in which these children were living. For example, she says in the follow-up interview:

> Almost I grew up in the same situation as they are. Most learners come from broken families, most are raised by their mothers – most of them are raised by their grannies because maybe the mother or father has passed away. So I grew in such a place but there were no fatalities in those days, no fatalities. But – the situation, the communities, the – my neighbour is here. I grew up like this. Borrow like this – I stayed with my neighbour when my mother's not here. I grew in such a place. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

Gee's work on Discourses (1996, 2001) provides valuable insights for the understanding of the success of Ms Jali's approach. He theorises that successful literacy activities must involve an understanding of the community within which the learners live, the context and purpose of the literacy activity, and the different perceptions held by the learner and the teacher in the literacy classroom. In Ms Jali's classroom, like many others in South African townships and rural areas, the teacher is not only aware of these socio-cultural factors affecting her learners but actually identifies with them. This is a huge strength in the system that is sometimes overlooked or undervalued when indicators of school effectiveness are sought.

Furthermore, despite the socio-economic challenges of the community within which this school is located, the children can relate to each other through shared community experiences and a shared language. These are important features of commonality from which collaborative learning and support can emerge. As is discussed later in this chapter with regard to Silver Grove school, this factor of strength is not always available in the suburban public schools to which children from more affluent working class township families are sent.

5.4.5 Constraint of agency in Ms Jali's class

The strength and value of the co-sanguinity of teacher and learners, I would argue, also operates as a barrier to progress in terms of Ms Jali's conceptualisations of literacy and hence of her learners' range of engagement with text.

Ms Jali's class provides abundant opportunities for practising the skills associated with alphabetics. Yet, with regard to fluency and comprehension, an interesting disjuncture emerges. Fluency and comprehension do feature as components of Ms Jali's approach but text reading is generally an individual, largely unmediated activity, carried out when the 'main' tasks have been completed. In this study there was no evidence of teacher/learner interaction around the reading of a text, nor indication of how or whether Ms Jali encouraged children to derive meaning or pleasure from their reading of texts. The following interview extract would suggest that decoding is prioritised over comprehension in her approach:

> Individuality… (in pensive tone) it comes when – you ask them to to read for you – because I also encourage them to read – one-by-one. So maybe in a reading

> lesson, we'll read as a group then they'll go to their pairs. Then I'll pick up one to come and read for me. So that maybe you can correctly read the full stop and the pause here, commas. (*inaudible*) (Ms Jali, 20 June 2008)

The teacher's emphasis on syntax and punctuation rather than the message suggests a 'reading as work' conceptualisation (Luke, 1988); and there is no evidence of using text as a basis for written and/or oral work.

Ms Jali acknowledged in her interview the importance of reading both as a life skill and for pleasure, yet the process of reading in Ms Jali's class consisted of children reading individually through the BTL levelled readers. It was almost like the physical act of climbing a ladder, the success being measured not so much by the ideas, information or vocabulary gained, but by how high each individual child had climbed. Indeed Ms Jali referred to the reading process rather as a competition amongst the children to see how quickly they could get through all the books:

> They just love the books … So those who can't read, they admire those who read, so automatically they'll come and borrow the book if maybe they've finished their occupational task, 'Mem, may I borrow that book?' and they borrow that book, then sit down there and try to read. Most of them are reading. (Interview, Ms Jali: 28 November 2005)

Applying Heap's (1991) 'particularist' approach to the understanding of classroom reading, that is, an approach that seeks to understand a reading event as particular to this class rather than 'in terms of (assumed) universal, essential properties' (1991: 121), Ms Jali's approach is acculturating the children into the view that 'what counts as reading' (1991: 121) is individual consumption and completion of a text in order to progress to the next one. Heap goes on to say that,

> The way activities are organised introduces resources and limits which constrain the application of reading theories to reading curricula and pedagogy. (1991: 121)

I have already argued in Chapter Four that what counts as reading in Ms Jali's class is influenced by her own early impoverished experiences of reading in school. So Ms Jali's stated approach to reading, rooted in her own life history and her commitment to 'facilitating that everybody has the ability to become whoever she chooses to be' (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008), is possibly to provide access to more resources than she had been exposed to.

However, because of the limited and constrained nature of her own early literacy experiences, it is probable that she has no for blueprint for the use of reading texts other than for decoding and then moving on to the next one. Otherwise stated, Ms Jali's primary discourse with regard to literacy determines a way of being (Gee, 2001), a habitus (Bourdieu, 1991), that prevents full access both for herself and her learners to a secondary discourse in which literacy is a tool for expression, enlightenment and criticism. Thus, since learner agency is afforded by the classroom discourse in which the teacher ultimately holds more power than the learners (Davies, 1999), her own conceptualisations of what counts as reading serve as constraining factors on learner agency.

Likewise with regard to writing, a similar disjuncture in Ms Jali's conceptualisation and practice was detected. A socio-cultural understanding of writing development argues that 'children's writing emerges coherently but idiosyncratically' (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003: 34) and that writing is embedded in children's everyday practices. This approach validates and encourages children's invented spellings, seeing them as the evidence of children's sense-making of the written form. In contrast, Ms Jali's interpretation of writing is essentially about letter formation and neat writing, showing due attention to correct spacing and writing between the lines. Whilst acknowledging that these skills are important in a Grade One classroom, I would argue that Ms Jali's emphasis of the technical aspects of handwriting and letter formation seems to limit both her own and the children's agency with regard to self-expression and creativity. When asked during the follow-up interview about how children express their individuality through writing, her initial response does not refer to self-expression or creativity,

> Ms Jali So I don't know in writing because (pause) they – it's learning - they, they – these are skills so learners just learn them and –
> Paula: But what about self-expression in writing? When I was observing last year I didn't see much of self-expression in the written form.
> Ms Jali: It's only when they do their own sentences. I teach only one and maybe they'll do five or six. That's their self-expression. But I wouldn't maybe give them a strange picture. So they are using the same picture that I'm using here in the classroom to write more and more sentences. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008)

Children were able to produce independent pieces of writing, as these examples of learner writing show. The translation of the text in Figure 4 is 'The children are in school. The babies

are playing in the school. The children are singing'. The text in Figure 5 reads, 'The girls are jiving and they are happy. The girls are singing'.

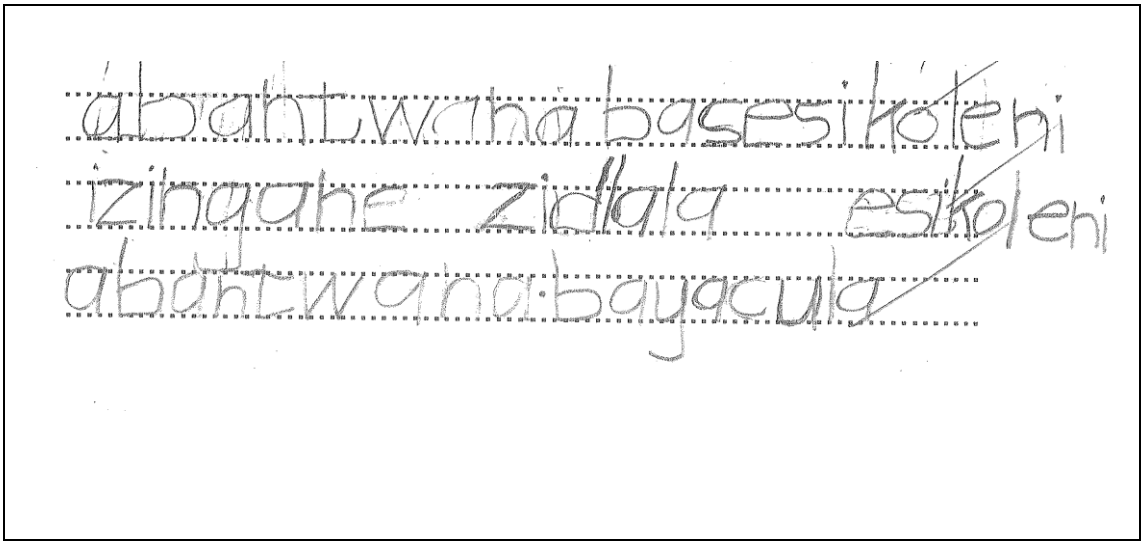


Figure 4: A sample of learner 'free' writing – describing a picture.

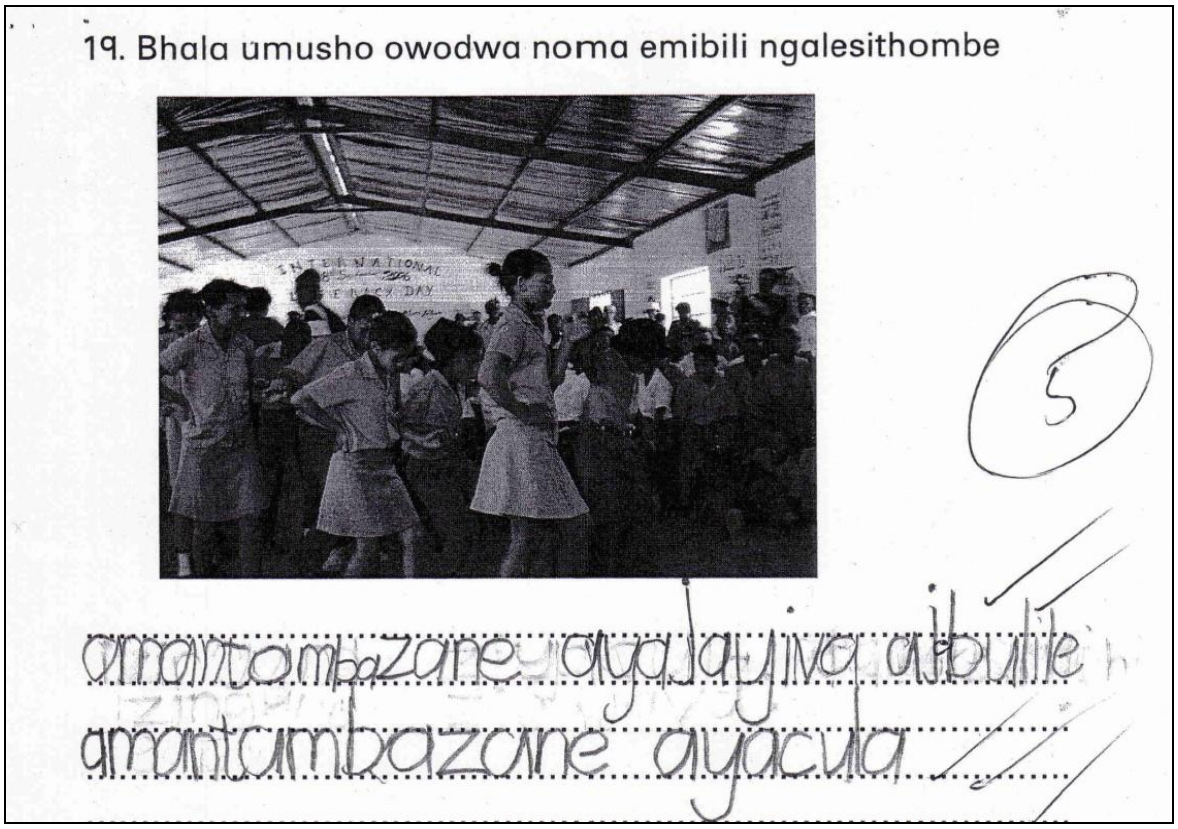


Figure 5: Another sample of the same 'free writing' activity.

However, this writing activity was not part of Ms Jali's normal literacy pedagogy; it was an element of an activity that she had been asked to trial with her learners. The learners' writing is neither extensive nor imaginative but it does show that they have the capacity to create text based on a stimulus. In contrast, Ms Jali's conceptualisation of writing reflects the autonomous construct of literacy, criticised by Dyson (2003), which argues that,

> "all" children are in urgent need … of a tightly scripted, linear, and step-by-step monitored march through proper language awareness, mastery of letters, control of sound/symbol connections, and on up the literacy ladder. (Dyson, 2003: 101)

The evidence that these children can compose sentences individually proves that they are capable of independent writing and strengthens the argument for the further development of these skills, as argued by Dyson (1999, 2001, 2003) and Vasquez (2001, 2004). Its limited nature in these samples reveals the extent to which agency is constrained by the teacher's beliefs and understanding of what constitutes writing.

There is abundant evidence in all the classes observed of children being acculturated into the practice of neat letter formation, into what counts procedurally as writing (Heap, 1991). Ms Jali's liberal approach to the control of learners in a general sense is in contrast to her view of the role of control with regard to their literacy work:

> Ms Jali: I think discipline should be there. Control – maybe control in such a way that I con- you control your learners' work. Not to control them in such a way that if I – like this (gesturing physical constraining of a child) I don't know – about this control (laughs long).
> Ms Jali:Er – I like neat work, so I would love my learners to write neatly – even if counting, count – you can see their er maybe if they've written balls (a counting activity in the children's books). I like those neat balls and with a first Grade class '15 balls makes 20' so it just needs us to encourage neatness. I like to control that. (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June, 2008)

Given that Ms Jali has succeeded in ensuring that these children have mastered the technical skills of reading, letter formation and sentence writing; and that she encourages learner agency in the literacy classroom procedures, it is a significant finding and also a concern that Ms Jali conceives of writing almost wholly in terms of the ability to 'write neatly' and hence limits her learners' potential to express themselves through their acquired literacy skills.

5.4.6 Summary analysis of learner agency and literacy learning in Ms Jali's classroom

Ms Jali's commitment to engendering a sense of agency in her learners is important in terms of developing literacy skills and values applicable to learning in general. On the whole she succeeds in affording agency, and on occasions due to the limitations of her own primary discourse she does not. These instances demonstrate the challenge inherent in mediating an agentive pedagogy, a secondary discourse (Gee, 2001), when this has not been part of the teacher's own experience.

If the children had been prevented from moving about the classroom or required to work in silence, they would have lost the benefit of learning how to work collaboratively. If Nina had been given a line of capital letters to trace, she would neither have had a personal learning journey nor would she have learned about persevering in the face of difficulty. Dyson's (2001) question, albeit about a different classroom in a different hemisphere with fewer learners and different resources at its disposal, remains apposite in this context:

> What are the implications for children's potential for such unruliness? Should teachers tighten the borders and build fortresses around spaces for child agency? … Is such tightening particularly important for the 'at risk' (i.e. for children most apt to be viewed as academically unruly)?' (Dyson, 2001: 11)

5.5 Learner agency in Hilltop and Silver Grove Primary Schools

The evidence of the presence and impact of learner agency in these classrooms is more limited than in Ms Jali's classroom. None of the three teachers placed emphasis in their interviews, as had Ms Jali, on the importance of freedom as a pre-requisite for learning.

A further common factor in Hilltop and Silver Grove schools is that English Additional Language is the LOLT. This was identified as a challenge for the learners, few of whom were able to communicate with confidence in English. Although it does not necessarily follow that children in such contexts will have less possibility of exercising agency in the learning process, it was apparent during observations that their limited command of English was a factor that restricted learners' chances to 'actively make sense of, rather than passively receive, the meanings available within the discourses used by the groups of which they are

members' (Davies, 1990: 360). Also, the lack of validation of their Home Language aural and oral competencies denied them access to the 'knowledge resources, personal skills and the ability to mobilise the relevant discourse' (Davies, 1990: 360).

It needs to be stated that the three teachers in Hilltop and Silver Grove schools were teaching with dedication and commitment. Interacting with more than forty children most of whom had no prior experience of pre-school would be a challenge for any teacher, however well experienced and competent. A further complexity was the multiplicity of languages in each class. In Ms Tladi's class, there were twelve different home languages, in Ms Lyons's class, eight and in Ms Ndlovu's class there were six. Thus it was clear that the teachers, none of whom had been trained in strategies for teaching English Additional language or English as a Foreign language, were faced with a considerable pedagogical challenge.

5.6 Learner agency in Ms Tladi's class in Hilltop Primary School – the school as a backdrop

The vision and mission indicate the school's ethos, which in turn is likely to be the driver of the classroom discourse. These are as follows:

Shared Vision

To be the best and leading school in our community through collaborative partnership and consultative skills through teaching and learning development of life skills.

Mission
We will achieve our vision by:

- Empowering learners to become effective contributing citizens in a democracy/democratic society
- Shows learners the value of adhering to rules and accepting authority
- Provide discipline, respect and self-confidence in our learners
- By striving for effective teaching and learning, teach and adapt for diversity
- Distinguish between right and wrong
- Uphold norms, values, standards diversity

The theme of democracy, which strongly featured in the Valley View School's mission and other public statements, is also a significant part of the mission of Hilltop, underlining once more how important these issues are in the education discourse of post-apartheid South

Africa. However, in Hilltop's mission statement there is an emphasis on authority, discipline and adherence to rules, which, as shown below is reflected in Ms Tladi's literacy pedagogy.

The following extract from my field notes provides a sense of the atmosphere in Ms Tladi's class,

> A row of windows sheds light into the class and provides the chance of a sight into the classroom before you actually get there. It is a colourful sight. The walls are adorned with pictures, charts and children's work. The desks are organised into groups of six children. Ms Tladi seems to have firm control of the learners without needing to get irate or raise her voice. After closing of colouring books from the previous activity, she calls groups to the carpet for the phonics segment, focusing on the sound 'o'. (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 28 February 2007)

5.6.1 The literacy learning process

Ms Tladi's approach to literacy learning is quite different from Ms Jali's. The multilingual nature of the class and the choice of English LOLT require that Ms Tladi devotes a lot of her time to teaching English vocabulary and doing activities like action rhymes that develops the listening and speaking competence of the children.

There is no comprehensive literacy programme or text book in use. The range of activities observed included News Time, 'carpet activities', where all the children come to the front, usually for story reading, story-telling, action rhymes, cutting and pasting words on to pictures, colouring in pictures, copying and tracing letters, sight-reading of words and sentences on the chalkboard, taken from the basal reader. Whilst there was always a variety of activities that took place in every session observed, the emphasis in terms of writing activities revolved around the children's phonics workbooks in which they were required to colour in a picture related to the newly taught single letter phoneme and then trace over multiple copies of the letter relating to that phoneme.

5.6.2 Learner agency and Ms Tladi's conceptualisation of literacy

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Ms Tladi's response about the purpose of literacy is strongly related to social and welfare rights issues. She also powerfully stated her view that, 'if you are unable to read I think you'll be nowhere' (Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007).

Holding literacy in high esteem as she does, it is not surprising to find that Ms Tladi is a dedicated and conscientious literacy teacher. She did not mention communication or enjoyment as the purpose of literacy and yet there were moments of learner enjoyment at some points in all the classes observed. Interestingly, issues relating to the changed conceptualisation of childhood and implicitly of the exercise of agency only surfaced in her interview when she talked about her own six year-old daughter's relationship to reading.

With regard to her literacy pedagogy, Ms Tladi stated that as a second-language speaker herself, she found it difficult to teach children English pronunciation (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 18 April 2007) and also that she had not been trained either for Foundation Phase or for TESOL. Thus, Ms Tladi's strategy for teaching literacy through a second or third language was exploratory, based on the use of a traditional phonics primer and an insufficient and incomplete set of dated basal readers from the Beehive Series (Lawrence & Okonski, 1981).

5.6.3 The role of learner agency in Ms Tladi's class

5.6.3.1 News Time

News Time in Ms Tladi's class was a ritualised session in which each child was required to take a turn at talking about what she or he did the previous day. Makoe's (2007:56) research, focusing on classrooms similar to this one, presents News Time as a discursive practice that implicitly establishes power relationships, socialising learners 'into different identity positions'. Whilst News Time is ostensibly an opportunity for children to talk freely about themselves and their activities, Makoe argues that it is in fact a means of socialising children into an acceptance of the hegemony of English and of the realisation that 'the ability to meet the necessary standard of English is equivalent to all kinds of favourable identity positions' (Makoe, 2007:68). Whilst I agree that News Time in this class privileges those children who have more competence in English, I also noted moments where it affords, at least the potential for, learner agency.

There are three significant points with regard to the potential for agency in this part of the lesson that was very different from more obviously teacher-directed sessions. Firstly, each child was given time to tell the class his/her news and, while they were talking, Ms Tladi stood close by and very deliberately put her head to one side to demonstrate through her body language that she was actively listening. The children's offerings were usually rendered quite tentatively in very low voices because they were neither used to speaking English, nor to speaking alone to the whole class.

Secondly, the teacher did not criticise their utterances or attempt to correct the grammar, but instead followed up by asking other children to give feedback on what they had heard, thus signifying that there was meaning and sense in their utterances.

Finally, there are some children who resolutely choose not to take part in News Time. This may be due to an inadequate command of English or shyness, or both; when their turn comes to speak, they remain silent. As, for example, in this extract from the video transcription:

> Ms Tladi: Kenny, would you like to tell us? Tell us news, my boy.
> *Kenny sits with finger on mouth and also glances at video*
> Ms Tladi:*(trying to help Kenny)* What did Rose say just now? What did Rose tell us?
> *Kenny does not answer. Mandla answers instead – giving a summary of what Rose said.*
> Ms Tladi : OK, thank you **VERY** much . You'll tell us the news tomorrow. Did you want to tell us something Thami?
> (Video log, Ms Tladi: March 14 2007).

The fact that Kenny chose, during the classroom activity discussed below, to communicate despite his limited English, indicates that his silence here is a choice, not a function of lack of oral fluency. Ms Tladi, by accepting Kenny's right to silence, was implicitly acknowledging that children in her class had agency, albeit in this instance, an agency of resistance (Ortner, 2001).

Learner agency in literacy events, I argue, is discursively produced (Davies, 1999) and is also, drawing on New Literacies scholarship (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Street, 1983; 2005) to be analysed in terms of context and history. Thus, given the generally authoritarian nature of Ms Tladi's classroom and her own experiences of non-negotiable regulation, this seemingly insignificant act or non-act, I would argue, represents a notable shift in terms of the

conceptualisation of the learner and is an expression of Ms Tladi's recognition of the child's potential for agency. As Ortner (2001) outlines, agency is also evident in instances of 'foot-dragging'; in this case, a child was making the choice and being respected for that choice, to not participate in a classroom discourse. Kenny, like the young learner in Toohey and Norton's (2003) study, has the freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the regular literacy practices.

5.6.3.2 Learner agency discursively produced - Telling Ms Tladi about games we play

Most of the time the discourse in Ms Tladi's classroom was characterised by teacher instruction or a teacher-directed interaction of question and response, in which the teacher was the 'holder' of the knowledge and the children were required to raise their hands and give answers until such time as the 'correct' answer had been given. An interesting divergence from this approach is detailed below.

The children were all sitting on the carpet at the front of the class and Ms Tladi had read them a story about two children who wanted to go out to play. She had asked them several information retrieval questions based on the story, for example, 'What were the names of the children in the story?' and 'What did they see and what did they want to do?' The children were required to raise their hands and give one or two word answers which Ms Tladi would either endorse as the correct answers, or seek alternatives from others. Then Ms Tladi asked the children 'Do you play with your friends?' and immediately, the interaction and Ms Tladi's approach to the children changed.

Whether it was planned or spontaneous, the segment demonstrates Freire's (1972) notion of the teacher and learners participating dialogically in the learning process. Ms Tladi's communication and body language signalled that she wanted to learn from the children and they in turn, responded to her interest; she smiled more and her tone of voice was soft. There was a different quality to the communication. The children, eager to speak, kneeled or stood up and most had their hands up to speak. They also listened to each other intensively. It was real communication where the children were afforded, and assumed, more power than in the more typical exchanges orchestrated by the teacher.

Smangy gave his explanation of the game and then Ms Tladi summarised her understanding of what he had said. She further sought clarification from Mandla and listened intently, her body language emphasising this:

M:We're playing cars
Ms Tladi: You play cars↗
Several other inputs are made eg touches… tyres…..
M:free jailer
Ms Tladi: Free ??? (*Ms Tladi indicates that she cannot understand what they are saying). The excitement mounts as they endeavour to put across the explanation of the game*
Ms Tladi:Stand Boni, and tell us how you play free jail, or free jam, what is that (*smiling to the children)* .
Boni stands up and explains. Ms Tladi listens carefully. Her facial gesture (face screwed up in concentration) is an almost exaggerated demonstration of a listening person.
M: OK, if the policeman catch us – when they catch us we sit at the jail and when they touch us we get out and then we run and then (*pause*).
Ms Tladi:OK, listen, it is free jailer (*spoken clearly, loudly and slowly*)!
(Video log, Ms Tladi: 23 May 2007)

She then proceeded to ask other children to explain and this gave an opportunity to Kenny, who as mentioned above was unwilling to speak during News Time, to make his input and participate in the classroom discourse:

Kenny: We play guns.
Ms Tladi:You play with guns?
Kenny: Yes.
Ms Tladi:A game – of guns?
Kenny: We don't buy. We get our hands. We go like this *(demonstrating with his hand).*
Ms Tladi:Oh you make your hand a gun!
Another child:Like this.
Ls:laughing
Ms Tladi:Oh, OK. (Video log, Ms Tladi: 23 May 2007)

After a few more seconds of lively interaction and demonstration by the children of how to 'make' a gun, Ms Tladi directed the children to go back to their desks.

This five-minute segment of the lesson afforded the possibility of genuine communication between the teacher and the learners, and between the learners themselves, creating space for the teacher to value the input of the learners and to encourage the development of independent

communication skills (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Although the teacher remained in control of the discourse, in that she initiated and closed the segment and was responsible for the selection of the children to talk, the extent and quality of participation was greater than normal. This increased engagement of the learners reveals the potential that there is, or could be, in basing more of the literacy work on the children's lived experiences. Comparing this segment to the regular News Time slots which generated limited formulaic utterances, it is clear that here the children listened to each other more intensively and spoke with more communicative intention.

5.6.3.3 Learning activities engaged in purposefully and responsibly

Although there was very little deliberate use of group or pair work, several observed instances of children co-operating and mediating provide evidence for the potential role of agency in the literacy learning process, occurring in spite of the official classroom discourse. The following video log extract reveals how one learner takes responsibility for informing others in his group,

> Mandla is now taking responsibility for his group's finding of the right page. He tells Kenny 'not that one, not there' and then points to Rose's, 'even not there'. Then he gets out of his seat to show them the correct page. He is just in the middle of helping the others when Ms Tladi admonishes Keith for not having his book open so Mandla (whose book is also not open), seemingly to avoid similar admonishment quickly goes back to his place and opens his book. (Video log, Ms Tladi: 14 March 2007).

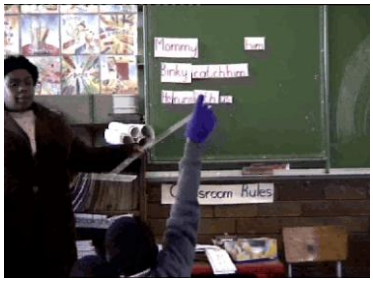
A more explicit example of children choosing to mediate learning and, in the process, making sense of the learning task was observed in the lesson on 23 May, a slide sequency of which appears as Figure 6 below.



1. Keith is pointing at his word list.



2. Ms. Tladi leads the class in choral and individual reading.



3. Ms. Tladi takes volunteers to read aloud.



4. He sees that the words on his list are the same as what is being read.



5. He wants to share his discovery with Kenny.



6. He excitedly shows Kenny.



7. He demonstrates the similarity of the words to the group.



8. He shows that the pot also has a word that he can read.



9. Hearing Ms. Tladi berating another child for inattention, he jumps in his seat, perhaps anticipating reprimand, back to the official discourse.

Figure 6: Keith's breakthrough literacy moment

The activity was a whole-class reading of sight words taken from the basal reader and written in list form on an easel at the front of the class. Ms Tladi was standing by the easel, asking individual children to read the words at random. Meanwhile, Keith had worked out that,

> they [the words on the easel] are the same [words] as in his book and is now reading from his book but he is actually just mouthing the words because Ms Tladi is pointing to different words not going through the list [systematically]. He then works out how to compare the two lists and seems to be able to keep pace.
>
> Now all the children in Keith's group have taken the initiative to be looking at their words in their books and they continue this activity collaboratively whilst Ms Tladi is putting the next sentence on the board. Keith suddenly has a reading breakthrough and excitedly draws Kenny's attention to a word in his list that is the same as one of the words on the chalkboard. He then joyfully shares his insight with the others in the group.
>
> Then, as if suddenly aware that he is now a reader, he picks up the crayon pot (which has words written on it) and animatedly shows Kenny a word on the pot.
>
> Suddenly, hearing Ms Tladi's voice, raised and irate, calling another child's name, Keith, realising that he has not been participating in the official teacher-led discourse of this lesson segment, jumps guiltily to attention. (Video log: 23 May 2007)

As with the video sequence featuring Nina in Ms Jali's class, the significant point about this literacy event is that Keith was engaging in an agentive approach to learning that had significance for his literacy learning. He commenced, in compliance with Ms Tladi's instructions, by pointing at his word list (slide 1). While Ms Tladi, standing at the front of the class with a pointing stick, led the class in a traditional practice of choral and individual reading (slides 2 and 3), Keith deviated from the official discourse to make a breakthrough discovery about the similarity of his word list with those appearing in the sentences that Ms Tladi was composing on the board.

In this regard he was 'actively mak[ing] sense of, rather than passively receiv[ing], the meanings available within the discourses used by the groups of which they are members' (Davies, 190: 360). The active sense-making was characterised by a huge increase in his engagement level as compared to the compliant action of mouthing the (wrong) words in chorus with the rest of the class. His first reaction was to seek to share this insight with others in his group (slides 5, 6 & 7), claiming space for the exercise of 'more student agency and resistance … away from the teacher' (Canagarajah, 2004: 119). Slide 8 indicates that Keith extended this initial insight by reading the words on the crayon pot and again seeking to share this new insight with Kenny.

The marked difference between this and Nina's literacy event is that it takes place outside of the official discourse, and although this off-task activity affords a significant opportunity for agentive literacy learning, it is evident from Keith's almost exaggerated and guilty-seeming jump to attention on hearing Ms Tladi's raised voice, that there is little or no space within this classroom discourse for the validation of this kind of off-site learning.

Analysing this event in relation to Davies's criteria produces a mixed finding. Keith has his own copy of the words, thus the knowledge resources, a key criterion (Davies, 1990) for learner agency, are available to him. The action is taken purposefully and there is a range of alternatives for action, in that Keith finds a different and, for him, more meaningful way of learning to read than that presented by Ms Tladi in this instance. However, his chosen alternative learning strategy is not available to him within the official discourse of the classroom, and thus his action could be defined as agency of resistance (Ortner, 2001). The way that agency is shut down by the classroom discourse in this incident reveals conversely how great is the potential for agency in promoting literacy learning; the key issue being the ability of the teacher to understand, facilitate and encourage learning experiences of this nature.

The fact that children were observed to be learning from and with each other in this way, in spite of the official classroom discourse is, I would argue, a significant finding. Teachers and policy-makers too, seeking ways of optimising teaching and learning practices, should be interested to see how children, within the context of teacher-directed pedagogy, seek, create and enhance their learning experiences in their own chosen ways.

5.6.3.4 Multilingualism and learner agency

An exploration of agency in literacy learning highlights the role of the LOLT and its impact on the exercise of learner agency. It is significant that Dyson (1989, 1999, 2001, 2003) and Vasquez (2001, 2004) focus mostly on English first-language classrooms (even if some children therein speak and write vernacular forms of English). In contrast, Ms Tladi's learners all have English as an additional language and, for most, a limited command of the language constrains independent self-expression. However, as Toohey and Norton (2003) discovered, learners' exercise of agency in a second-language learning context can facilitate learning.

On several observed occasions when Ms Tladi was defining words or attempting to convey meanings, children enthusiastically volunteered their knowledge of that word in isiZulu.

On one occasion, Ms Tladi had been reading from a book about items beginning with the letter 'r'. Some of the words, 'raft, reindeer, razor', were unfamiliar to the children, and although there were pictures for each word, it is still likely that the words have little relevance to the children. Then, the interest levels rose as a familiar item was spotted,

> *Ms Tladi brings the easel to the front of the room and there are different pictures of items starting with 'r' already written on chart paper on the easel,*
> Ms T: Who can point to … *(and gets children to come out and point to all but one of the pictures) This one item is a rake, she does not ask learners to mention that but one child raises her hand and says*
> L: I can see hariki (*isiZulu for rake*).
> Ms Tladi: (*welcoming the input)* What is hariki in English and what is it for? *One learner provides the correct answer. Ms T then proceeds to wipe the board for the next activity and whilst her back is turned, children engage excitedly in mime and conversation in hushed tones about the rake, doing the action of raking. One of the children speaking about the rake is doing so with his hand over his mouth*. (Field notes and video log: 16 May 2007)

This particular feature of a multilingual classroom reveals how language can be both a barrier to and an opening for the expression of learner agency. This incident reveals the potential that a multilingual classroom can offer, if exploited differently, for learners to define, discuss and explain items and concepts in their home language. In this classroom, the learners' home languages had less currency than English, and their continued discussion in isiZulu about the rake, in hushed tones outside of the official classroom discourse, reveals a lack of agency.

5.6.4 Learner agency and literacy learning in Ms Tladi's classroom

There are two findings from the analysis of Ms Tladi's class, which are of interest. Firstly, children seem to want to act agentively in the classroom. This desire is sometimes related to off-task activities but mainly it focuses on ways that children choose to learn. In this regard, for many children, collaboration is a key element. This finding not only produces interesting parallels with the literacy event featuring Nina in Ms Jali's class but both events also provide

concrete evidence for the NLS proposition that 'literacy tasks are often jointly achieved within peer groups or social networks' (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996: 28). Although Prinsloo and Breier's work focuses on literacy in adult and community settings, it is interesting that the proposition seems to apply equally in early literacy learning contexts. The importance of peer learning is particularly significant for learners in an English Additional Language learning context (Toohey & Norton, 2003).7

The second finding is that children interact orally more readily and more meaningfully with each other and with the teacher when there is a communicative purpose. Where Ms Tladi engages in a discussion in which the children have knowledge which she wishes to gain, there is a greater authenticity to the interaction than when the children are required to tell their news. This generates opportunities for the children to listen for meaning, to strive for oral fluency and coherence and to learn new words and structures in the process of a meaningful conversation. Furthermore, in terms of the potential for learner agency, it can afford learners more control of the content and direction of the discourse, and a concomitant reduction of the teacher's dominant role. However, the challenge implicit in this finding for teacher educators and particularly for in-service teacher education is how such insights can be understood in theoretical terms and deliberately used to make oral work in classrooms more meaningful. For example, Ms Tladi clearly enjoyed the activity yet similar instances of meaningful communication featured rarely in other observed lessons, which remained largely teacher-centred.

5.7 Learner agency in Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes in Silver Grove Primary School – the school as a backdrop

The mission statement of the school differs from the previous two schools' statements in its lack of reference to the socio-political dimension, and it also differs in its foregrounding of literacy:

> Through participation, enthusiasm and a positive attitude, with honour and pride, we shall conscientiously work towards literacy in all areas.
> We shall be committed to caring for our environment.
> At all times and by exercising self-control we shall be true to ourselves and to our school. We will reach new horizons through *perseverance*
> (Document provided by principal, November 2007).

Perhaps the lack of reference to the social context reflects the social disconnectedness which inheres in the school, as outlined in Chapter Three. The mission and the teaching subsequently observed would suggest that the school has opted to address this disjuncture by prioritising activities within the school and although there is interest in reaching out to parents,[18] there is little evidence of encompassing the home experiences of the learners within the curriculum. From an analysis of the mission statement alone, it would seem that Silver Grove Primary school's approach would present a challenge to Dyson's view of the importance of agency in literacy learning:

> That is, for the centrality of cultural symbols and practices through which children construct their own varied childhoods. These cultural symbols reveal children's powers of adaptation and improvisation … that are key to literacy learning in contemporary times. (2001: 11)

What remains of interest is whether there is space for learner agency in the literacy learning process where neither is explicitly prioritised.

5.8 The methodology in use at Silver Grove School

Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu planned together and followed the same approach to the teaching of literacy; however, the classroom observation of the two teachers corroborated others' findings (Little, 2002; Slonimsky & Brodie, 2006; Hoekstra et al., 2009) that the teacher's personal style and 'mental activities' impact significantly on the way the approach is mediated and on the way the lesson is accessed by the learners. The literacy approach in use relied mainly on a combination of Look and Say strategies with phonics instruction focused on decoding single consonant words via the recognition of onset and rime. The reading text in both classes was the 'evergreen' Kathy and Mark Series (O'Donnell, 1970) with its dated artwork that presumably had not changed since the books were originally published. There were not enough books to go round so children shared books. As Bloch (1999) points out, these resources 'feature white children and middle-class, eurocentric lifestyles' (1999: 10) and in addition they are aimed at children who speak English as a Home Language. These factors combined to pose both comprehension difficulties and cultural misunderstandings for the children, both of which would be likely to deter the expression of agency in the learners.

[18] Inferred from a discussion with the school principal.

Ms Lyons had developed some worksheets based on the series and these formed the core of the literacy work in both classes. Each teacher added her own interpretation to the use of the worksheets. For example, in Ms Lyons's class there were occasions when children came out to the front of the class to do choral reading and there were also two writing sessions observed where children used the words from the worksheet to form their own sentences individually or as a group. Other literacy activities observed in Ms Lyons's class involved reading to the whole class from a Big Book and whole-class reading of words from the list of high frequency words commonly referred to as the Dolch List (Dolch, 1948).

In Ms Ndlovu's class, children read out lists of words in a group and did whole-class reading following the reading of the teacher. Ms Ndlovu imaginatively used one of the basal reader worksheets to generate her own story which was far more captivating than the base text. Other activities in Ms Ndlovu's class were the completion of a crossword and colouring in parts of worksheets.

5.8.1 Agency in the literacy learning process in Ms Lyons's classroom

There was very little evidence of learner agency in the formal literacy learning discourse in Ms Lyons's classroom. However, this did not mean that learning was not taking place, or that Ms Lyons's pedagogy was failing the children. Ms Lyons, an experienced, competent teacher, had talked in her interview about the importance of generating in the children a love of reading; an early impression of her literacy class was that she was seeking to do this through bringing fun and variety into her teaching approach.

Ms Lyons's interaction with the learners could be described as that of a conductor with her orchestra. Ms Lyons orchestrated the discourse through a range of ritualised strategies that relied on the children interpreting her intonation and having learnt their part in the 'orchestral piece'. For example, Ms Lyons often started off one of these 'pieces' by telling the children to focus:

Ms Lyons: Focus, focus. What are we focusing on ↗?
Ls: Ms Lyons

Ms Lyons: Right focus on ME!. If I have ↗ (*putting flash cards Mo and El on the board)*
Ls: (*reading in chorus*) Mo El
Ms Lyons: What are these words?
Ls: Names.
Ms Lyons: Yes, they are name words. Do I talk about myself as Ms Lyons?
Lss: No!!
Ms Lyons: What do I say?
Ls: I
(Field notes, Ms Lyons: 10 October 2007)

And sometimes, as here, the children, basing their responses on the previously correct ones, did not get it quite right:

Ms Lyons: Are we ready now… don't shuffle, focus!. If you're not sure↗
Ls:Spell
Ms Lyons: to who?
Ls:you!
Ms Lyons: No, to yourself.
(Field notes, Ms Lyons: 19 September 2007)

The literacy lessons observed were structured, varied and entertaining. Ms Lyons used a lot positive reinforcement, with such phrases as, 'good, give yourselves a clap', 'that's a good word! Give her a clap!' and 'Well done, some of you remembered the exclamation mark. Well done!'

There was an energy in the class that was generated by the children's anticipation of what would be coming next, as if they were the audience as well as the performers. However, this dramatic tension relied on the sustained existence of an unequal power relationship between the teacher and the learners (Popkewitz, 2001; Bernstein, 2000) and there were thus very few opportunities for the children to exercise agency.

Nonetheless, some children did indicate signs of the potential for agency within the parameters of this structured literacy class, which Ms Lyons seemed willing to accommodate. On one observed occasion, a child, chosen to read by Ms Lyons, decided independently to come to the front of the class to do so; and her right to choose was thus acknowledged and accommodated:

> Ms Lyons: Anyone like to say the words on their own?
> (A child is chosen and she decides to go to the front to read).
> OK, so you want to come out here and read? Alright, good.
> (Field notes, Ms Lyons: 7 November 2007)

This scenario could be interpreted as yet another example of the 'orchestrated child' misreading the teacher's cues. However, because the class was usually so highly regulated, this seemingly minor instance reflects a changed teacher/learner relationship. That Ms Lyons acquiesced to the child's chosen strategy for reading at the front of the class indicates the potential for a greater role for learner agency. On another occasion (Field notes, Ms Lyons: 31 October 2007), children went beyond an instruction to draw a picture of their understanding of the text and asked Ms Lyons if they could also write their own sentences. Although this would hardly constitute agentive in the context of a less regulated, or in Bernstein's (1990) terms, 'a weakly classified' classroom, what it signifies here is the children's readiness to act independently in the literacy learning process. More importantly it points to the potential that the children themselves have for extending and enriching the literacy learning discourse in this classroom.

5.7.1 Agency in Ms Ndlovu's literacy classroom

Ms Ndlovu was young, energetic and conscientious. Her enthusiasm and commitment were tangible as soon as you entered her classroom. Her classroom walls were adorned with colourful posters and samples of children's work. Having qualified only two years ago, Ms Ndlovu talked of the challenge of operating in an English-only environment:

> I've only been teaching for two years and all this is new to me. When I did my teaching practices in xxx school, I struggled because I did all my schooling up to Matric in Soweto. (Field notes, Ms Ndlovu: 10 October 2007)

The above extract raises the question as to how much agency Ms Ndlovu herself had in this environment. Clearly a dedicated and ambitious young teacher, the school environment and the LOLT represent a distancing from her own learning experiences such that her own identity as a teacher was being newly forged at the same time as that of her learners. It is questionable whether this situation afforded Ms Ndlovu the possibility of either exercising or assigning agency. In this context, it is perhaps understandable that she relied on the Discourse

(Gee, 1996, 2004) of an authoritarian approach and on rote learning strategies, both of which were familiar to her from her own experiences of literacy education.

With regard to learner agency, the formal discourse of Ms Ndlovu's class afforded very few opportunities for children to manifest agency. In the seven observed sessions, the two predominant teaching strategies involved teacher-directed questions and answers with the whole class or group reading out loud. The potential benefit of this type of teaching and learning strategy is that the weaker children can learn from the stronger ones; the likely dangers are that evidence of weaker children's problems will simply be lost in the resounding chorus. In the following shortened extract of a reading activity, it would seem that her aim, justifiably, was to teach children to notice the punctuation marks in text as a means of helping them to understand the text:

> Ms Ndlovu:Right, let's read together. All of us. You read after me. Read after me. Remember I told you there are full stops and question marks and exclamation. You can't just read and read and read. You must stop somewhere. Take a breath, angithi?
> Ls:Yes
> Ms Ndlovu: Yes. You read after me. You read after me. (*reading*) Mark, Mark
> Ls: Mark, Mark
> Ms Ndlovu: It is on!
> Ls: It is on!
> Ms Ndlovu: Come! Come!
> Ls: Come! Come!
> *etc*
> (Video log, Ms Ndlovu: 31 October 2007)

However, this type of activity is incompatible with agentive learning. Whilst it may have been beneficial to some children who respond well to repetitive stress-free learning experiences (Abadzi, 2007), it also lays itself open to the criticism that it encourages 'barking at print' (Smith, 1971, 1975, 1988) that is antithetical to any model of effective literacy learning. As this activity was taking place, my field notes for that lesson record that 'some are reading, others are reciting without looking at the text and one boy is playing with his pencil case' (Field notes, Ms Ndlovu: 31 October 2007).

On the other hand, lesson segments where Ms Ndlovu used the text as a springboard to engage with the children's lived experiences were notably more vibrant, signalling to the children that their experiences, and hence they themselves, were valued. For example, Ms

Ndlovu had handed out a worksheet on which is a crossword with single-syllable words, one of which is *cot.* After the ritualised question and short answer exchange generated by the teacher's question, 'What is a cot?', Ms Ndlovu asked the children, 'Where do you sleep?' and immediately the enthusiasm to communicate increased, with children keen to communicate about their sleeping arrangements.

As with Ms Tladi in Hilltop School, Ms Ndlovu's tone and body language changed and she clearly was interested in their responses. The interaction was only momentary, however, and the lesson reverted to the more controlled activity of worksheet completion, with Ms Ndlovu going round to monitor and mark the work. In this mode, Ms Ndlovu remonstrated with some children for producing pink, red or green dogs,

> Ms Ndlovu: Oh Bernard, have you ever seen a red dog or a green dog?
> *All children laugh then one child at length 'tells on' another child who has used the wrong colours for the various pictures*. (Field notes, Ms Ndlovu: 19 September 2007)

There are many similarities between this class, Ms Tladi's and Ms Jali's in terms of requiring a high and uniform standard with regard to colouring-in. This standardising of practice reminds us that classroom literacy activities are ways of socialising children into particular Discourses or ways of being that replicate the status quo (Gee, 1996). Colouring-in was a common feature of Ms Ndlovu's and Ms Tladi's classes, and was very popular with the children, as was the emphatic prescription against colouring animals in the 'wrong colour'. This emphasis on establishing a standard of correctness for colouring is echoed in Ms Jali's insistence on neatness in the writing tasks. One gets the impression that all the Grade One teachers observed and interviewed place a high priority in their literacy pedagogy on establishing standards of performance with regard to handwriting skills. In this context, not only is children's 'unruliness' (Dyson, 2001) limited but also their potential for self-expression. As they become acculturated into an understanding that 'what counts as literacy' (Heap, 1991:128), they are at the same time being regulated to confine their production of texts, literally and figuratively, between prescribed lines (Dyson, 2003).

The critical question is, do green dogs and sMaLl cApitaL letters need to be prohibited in the early literacy classroom? And, if so, does this contribute to the 'tightening of borders' (Dyson, 2001: 11) that Dyson sees as antithetical to children's 'sense of agency, of

possibility' (2001: 14) that, she argues, is central to literacy development? It is unlikely that a child will progress effectively through the education system without at some point having to succumb to the process of standardisation: if I had not at some point learnt how to write my capital letters the correct size, I might not now be in the privileged position of writing this thesis; and even though Luke and Freebody (1999) argue that literacy pedagogy is more than a matter of 'skills acquisition or knowledge transmission' and that the ultimate goal is for the reader to 'critically analyse and transform texts'(1999: 2), it is nonetheless significant that the Four Resources model (1999) recognises the importance of the technical aspects of literacy. Indeed, the first resource, which is the foundation for the ability to use and analyse texts involves, amongst other things, 'recognising and using the fundamental features and architecture of written texts' (Luke & Freebody, 1999: 1). In other words, there is justification for early literacy teaching at times to provide guidelines and standards for children as they learn, and this does not necessarily rob them of their agency. A salient finding, however, is that too much regulation and not enough recognition of children's ability and desire to be agentive limits their potential as expressive literate subjects.

5.9 Conclusions about literacy and learner agency

This chapter set out to answer some key questions about the presence and role of learner agency in the literacy learning process. In establishing the basis for the enquiry, I presented the case that the new curriculum, developed for a new democratic South Africa committed to redress, equality and social justice, requires that education concerns itself with the encouragement of learner agency. The process of answering the questions has led to an in-depth examination of one teacher's practice and additional comparative studies of three other teachers, their conceptualisations, their literacy practices and the literacy activities of the children in their classes.

In Ms Jali's class, there was evidence that children had been encouraged to learn independently and that certain activities engaged learners' agency. However, this was seen more in the processes that frame literacy learning activities than in the actual literacy practices themselves. In the other three classes, learner agency was not woven into the official classroom discourse but the potential for agency was seen occasionally to emerge in children's independent learning behaviours, in spite of the discourse. Where it did so, as in the case of Keith's breakthrough moment (Video log, Ms Tladi: 23 May 2007), it signified the

possibilities for richer and more meaningful literacy learning activities, should these be harnessed and brought into the official discourse.

For all four teachers in this study, their conceptualisations about literacy have been shown to be key in relation to their practices. The former derive in large part from their own experiences as learners; and their practices are either an effort to emulate admired role models or to compensate for remembered unjust practices. In addition, each teacher, in forming new post-apartheid conceptualisations of South African childhood, is relating to her learners in ways that reflect varying degrees of acknowledgement of learner agency.

Related to this acknowledgment is the recognition that all the teachers in this study to some degree constrain their learners' agency. This raises the question as to whether this constraint had any impact, positive or negative, on the literacy learning capabilities of the children. In terms of what might be seen as a positive impact, the restraint in Hilltop and Silver Grove schools, on oral communication between the children and on free movement about the classroom resulted in learning spaces that were quiet and orderly, recalling Popkewitz's (2001) notions of schooling as 'the inscription of the universal rules of reason, transported to the actor and agency' (2001: 182). This, arguably, provides a more conducive environment for learning than one where chaos sometimes reigned. However, through this form of discipline the possibility was lost of children learning from each other through communicating legitimately about the task at hand. We have seen that children's oral skills were stronger and more confidently produced when seeking to communicate their own thoughts and actions, rather than a conditioned response to the teacher's question.

Identifying the impact of the absence of agency in the reading and writing process is a more complex issue. A comparison with Ms Jali's class, where reading progress was more advanced than in Hilltop or Silver Grove schools, calls for a wider consideration of the key factors of difference, apart from considerations of agency alone. Ms Jali did assign more agency to her children, and this was consistent with her beliefs about the children's need for freedom. However, issues of LOLT, methodology, materials and teachers' beliefs were also key factors of difference in the other three classrooms.

In the three English LOLT classes, the materials used mainly dated back to the 1960s, and whilst such materials can be effectively used for engaging young learners in critical literacy

(O'Brien, 2001), this opportunity was not taken up. The emphasis in the literacy lessons was on training children to work individually to acquire the technical skills of word recognition and phonic decoding. It is possible that this reliance on traditional methods and materials was the teachers' deliberate response to what was deemed to be an overwhelming challenge of teaching large multilingual classes through English, a foreign language for many, with little or no specialised training and insufficient materials. Whatever the reasons, this study has identified that the discourse in Ms Tladi's, Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's early literacy classes afforded less learner agency than that of Ms Jali's class and that, importantly, the progress of the children seemed to be slower than in Ms Jali's class. It is highly likely that the LOLT factor played a significant role in the extent of learner agency witnessed in the four classrooms.

As to the role that agency has played in literacy learning – the ability to persevere, to experiment, to work at one's own pace, to feel able to approach the teacher for help when necessary – these are all agentive actions that seem to have contributed to a positive literacy learning environment.

However, given the role that learner agency plays in Ms Jali's classroom, it is important also to acknowledge the ways in which these capacities were constrained and in which progress was limited. Her progressive conceptualisations of childhood and children's need for freedom were not matched with equally progressive conceptualisations of the power and potential of literacy and particularly of writing as a means for self-expression. For Ms Jali, the technicalities of the 'work' of literacy were seen as an end point, when they actually could have been used in her pedagogy as a starting point. Ms Jali's children, opinionated, confident and functionally literate, were poised and ready to use their newly acquired literacy skills and attributes in order to become critically aware and creatively expressive citizens of South Africa. Likewise, Ms Tladi's, Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's children, with their budding personalities and enthusiasm to communicate and learn, deserve to be assisted along the learning road, maximising on their potential for learner agency as they do so.

Chapter Six - Language Matters

6.1 Introduction – the context in which language policies are implemented

Turning legislation into policy, turning policy into curriculum and particularly turning the curriculum into workable classroom practices are the challenges germane to this chapter. An added challenge in terms of establishing good practice in literacy teaching and learning is the multilingual nature of our society. Multilingualism is not a problem: on the contrary, it is a rich resource woven into the communicative lives of the majority of the population. Neither is multilingualism a unique phenomenon: all African countries on gaining independence have grappled with the complexities of policy development in relation to indigenous and dominant languages and, in most cases to date, the colonial languages have been retained as languages of power (Bamgbose, 1991; Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Heugh, 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

However, the particular history of apartheid language policy in South Africa renders post-apartheid language-in-education policy a particularly thorny issue. The current education and language policy documents aim to promote indigenous African languages by recommending them as the LOLT in the early years of schooling. Yet, as detailed in Chapter Two, there are areas of contradiction in these documents that have served to confuse the implementation of policy (Alexander, 2008). Parents and even school governing bodies are often insufficiently informed of the factors involved in the choice (Heugh, 2000a), the import of their choices and of the complex pedagogical issues involved.

Hence the exploration in depth of the issue of language in both isiZulu Home Language LOLT and English Additional LOLT classes that this study has afforded has been of a key aspect of the research. Whilst findings from a small sample of classrooms will not provide definitive findings on the issue, they nonetheless, because of the intensity of the research, contribute valuable insights on this complex issue. As indicated in Chapter Two, there is a growing body of research literature from both international and South African sources that addresses the issue from both a policy and a pedagogical perspective, and there is a continuing need for more evidence from the field about the actualities of teaching in multilingual classrooms. This chapter seeks to provide some insights in this regard.

The context in terms of the schooling landscape is characterised, partly on account of the complex policy framework and misinformation of parents, by migrations of children from urban township and rural schools to urban, former 'whites-only' English LOLT public schools, and of white children from these public schools into semi-fee-paying or private schools. In consequence, many urban English-medium public schools are populated entirely by black children, for whom English is a first or even a second additional language.

Language is an emotive subject because everybody uses and needs language and consequently everybody has an opinion, often a strong one, about the relative values of different languages. Many researchers in the international arena have provided evidence for the claim that extended learning through the medium of HL is of benefit to the child (Cummins, 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Ramirez et al., 1991; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), as have many in the research community in South Africa (Bloch, 2006; Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2001; Macdonald, 1990, 1993; Setati & Adler, 2000; Stein, 2008). However, I engaged in the interviews and entered the classrooms aiming to be free from narrowing preconceptions. I was simply interested to understand the impact of LOLT and its impact on literacy learning practices.

This chapter analyses the conceptualisations of LOLT from the interview data of all the respondents and comparatively analyses the responses of the four observed teachers in relation to the observation data from their classrooms. In the course of the analysis, evidence-based claims are made about how the LOLT enhances or constrains the process of early literacy learning in each of the classrooms.

6.2 Teachers' conceptualisations about the role of LOLT in literacy learning

The issue of LOLT is overtly mentioned in the interviews by fifteen of the twenty-seven teachers. This figure is surprisingly low, given that most classes in this study are multilingual to varying extents. The majority of the teachers who did not mention the issue were those who shared the same HL as their learners and this HL was also the LOLT. This, arguably, could be the reason for them not seeing language as a salient or contentious matter. Equally, it could be seen as an indication that awareness about multilingualism and its impact on learning needs to be raised to achieve a higher profile at policy and teacher education levels.

Table 5: The LOLT of the classrooms and HLs of the learners

Teacher	LOLT	HL of the teacher	HLs of the children
Sharon	Afrikaans	Afrikaans	Mainly Afrikaans, some isiXhosa
Alison	English	English	Various, mainly English
Betty	English	English	Various, mainly English
Busi	English	isiZulu	Nguni languages, mainly isiZulu
Group interview Joan Meg Miriam	English	English	Various, mainly English
Joanna	English	English	Mainly English
Kgabo	English	Setswana	various, mainly Sotho langs
Ms Tladi	English	Sesotho	various, see Table 6 in 6.3
Ms Lyons	English	English	various, see Table 6 in 6.3
Ms Ndlovu	English	isiZulu	various, see Table 6 in 6.3
Group interview Lettie Neni Xoli	isiXhosa	isiXhosa	isiXhosa
Nomsa	isiXhosa	isiXhosa	isiXhosa
Zodwa	isiXhosa	isiXhosa	isiXhosa
Gugu	isiZulu	isiZulu	isiZulu mainly
Olive	Sepedi	Sepedi	Sepedi
Ms Jali	isiZulu	isiZulu	Nguni, mainly isiZulu
Amy	Sepedi	Sepedi	Sepedi
Group interview Lungi Pat Rose	Setswana	 isiZulu Setswana Setswana	various, mainly Sepedi
Minah	Setswana	Setswana	Setswana
Mrs Molefe	Setswana	Setswana	Setswana
Sarah	Setswana	Setswana	Setswana

As can be seen in Table 5, for nineteen of the classes, the LOLT was the same as the Home Language of the majority of the children. Likewise, the HL of the teachers, with one exception, was the same as the learners' HL. This linguistic congruence is consistent with current policy for the Foundation Phase (DoE, 1997, 2002c), implicit in which is the assumption that the teacher has the same HL as the learners, or is an extremely fluent speaker of that language, in order to be able to effectively use it as the LOLT. Of the remaining eight classes, three were in a Setswana-medium township school which had an intake of mainly Sepedi-speaking children. Five classes had English Additional Language as a LOLT. Two classes were in the same semi-rural school farm that had opted for English as a LOLT despite the fact that the children attending were from homes where English was never or rarely

spoken and where poverty and social problems abounded. As indicated in Chapter Two and elaborated below, the teachers in this school, Kgabo and Busi, were the most vocal about the problems surrounding parental choice of English as the LOLT. The remaining three classes were the three English Additional Language-medium public schools which I observed as part of the second data set. Although somewhat more socially and economically advantaged than Kgabo and Busi's school, strategies for addressing the challenges associated with the choice of LOLT were still paramount in the responses of these teachers.

Despite the perceived challenges associated with English LOLT, Kgabo and Busi shared the same or similar HLs as the learners. This afforded the possibility of interpreting, translating and mediating difficult concepts in the children's HL, which has been shown to impact on the quality of the teaching (Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Setati & Adler, 2000). Ms Tladi's HL was Sesotho which was the same as only a few of the children and she was never seen to utilise that language. Whilst Ms Ndlovu's HL was similar to a large proportion of the children, the school's implicit policy, as explained to me by Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu, was to immerse the children in English and not to use familiar African languages. Ms Lyons, as an English HL speaker, had no option other than to use English at all times with the learners. Of the six classes where English is the LOLT and also the HL of most of the children, five are elite private schools and it is only one of these teachers who mentions the issue of difficulties experienced by English Additional Language speakers, and at that, the example is of only one child.

Regarding the comments that teachers made about the issue of multilingualism and LOLT, the data is categorised according to the five themes which form the basis of the analysis below.

6.2.1 Difficulties associated with the mismatch between LOLT and the children's HL

Significantly, the two teachers who were the most vociferous in criticism of an English Additional Language LOLT policy are Kgabo and Busi, the two teachers working in the semi-rural farm school. Their responses reflect desperation and resignation, with Busi saying:

> It's very difficult. Like I'm saying, it's very difficult. Like, I'm saying the Department gave rights, our rights away. Even the kids' rights, I think, to parents. So at the end of it, they don't master any language because if they go to other grades, then they introduce the second language. When you say ikhekhe (the word for cake in isiZulu) they write something like this eececk. So they are not achieving anything. (Interview, Busi: 13 June 2005)

At the end of her interview, Busi talked about wanting to leave the job and indeed did do so, only a few months afterwards.

Kgabo's concerns about the LOLT issue surfaced from the start of the interview and appeared repeatedly through it like a sad refrain on pages 2, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the ten-page interview transcript. There were sixty children in her class from a range of different language backgrounds and extremes of poverty. The main thrust of her concern was that the children could not understand English and therefore were unable or perhaps unwilling to participate in most of the language activities. Her interview responses also revealed that the diverse range of languages and the social problems were not the only major obstacles to effective literacy learning. Fortunately, Kgabo was able to speak Sesotho and could thus mediate the difficulties of comprehension for some of the children. However, she had had no training in TESOL strategies, no TESOL materials and so, predictably, resorted to strategies that refer back to her own early literacy experiences and that had little impact on the learners' need for communication or meaning-making skills – whole-class recitation and rote learning of passages from the Bible:

> So I even erm, every morning I ask them to follow me, neh. I have a short, short pieces of scripture lessons, neh. I'll read them they they follow me. Since I've started that I just hear their tongues now are coming better … I read, they follow me, I read …. So I've trained their tongues. Then from there we make rhymes, they enjoy rhymes. (Interview, Kgabo: 13 June 2005)

Kgabo's strategy, as illustrated above, for dealing with the challenges of an English LOLT Grade One classroom presents a rather bleak picture about the possibility of her children gaining any meaningful grasp of communicative oral English, let alone an understanding of the writing system of the language.

The other two teachers who voiced concern about the mismatch between children's HL and the English LOLT of the school were Joanna and Betty. Joanna teaches in an elite private

school and Betty in an inner-city public school. In both cases, the children with difficulties, to whom they referred, are in the minority in the class. Joanna refers to only one child:

> A little black girl, sweet little ... . She really battled. She didn't have the language – because I don't know what- I don't think they speak English at home … I don't think Mom reads at home. Mom has definitely not been a reader herself (Interview, Joanna: 12 May 2005).

and Betty made reference to several children:

> I've – I've got a few – couple who are managing beautifully – speak very nicely and are really up and about with everything we do. So far, they've managed very well. And then some that are really battling, really, really. And in actual fact, their *language skills are so terrible* and they don't speak well and they mumble and they can't pronounce the words, their vocab is not helping either. (Interview, Betty: 17 January 2006) [My emphasis indicated in italics]

In these English LOLT classes, with monolingual English HL teachers, the children do not have access to support through code-switching or translation; as Betty stated, they simply had to 'manage'. Also indicative of the challenge facing learners operating in English Additional language is how both Joanna and Betty referred to the problem as a 'lack of language'. This is the 'discourse of disempowerment' to which Cummins refers (Cummins, 1995: 140) and which devalues the language that they do have, their home language, in this supposedly monolingual context. So in this regard, some of the children in Busi's and Kgabo's classes did have an advantage in that their HL was recognised and used, an important feature of multilingual education that those in the more advantaged schools with monolingual English speaking teachers do not have.

These four English LOLT teachers, whilst operating in schools at different places on the social spectrum, made the same point: that home circumstances are a key factor in children's ability to cope in an English LOLT class where English is not their HL (Gee, 1996). The fact that parents of children in Busi and Kgabo's school were limited in their ability to speak English and had few, if any, books for the children to read would ensure that the chances of these children for a strong start with early literacy in English are woefully slim.

Meanwhile, children who 'battle' in Joanna's class have more access to the teacher because there are only fifteen children in the class. In addition they get 'sent off on their own with ...

the floating teacher, and she'll go through the sounds with them just to make sure that they recognise their sounds' (Interview, Joanna: 12 May 2005). Likewise, in Betty's class, where there were twenty-four children, those who struggled were sent to an 'enrichment class' with a speech therapist. None of these options were available to the children in Kgabo's and Busi's classes, most of whom were struggling; this was simply the status quo accepted, albeit regretfully, by the class teachers. It is a concern that Busi's and Kgabo's situation is replicated in other classrooms in schools across the country that have opted for English as LOLT without the resources, professional expertise or social context to support its implementation. It is also a concern that these two teachers felt so disempowered professionally by the decision to opt for English LOLT.

The detail of the evidence presented here and the extent of disparity in the experiences of young children learning to read, write and speak English between advantaged and disadvantaged schools calls for critical reflection on two salient points. The confusing nature of the documentation on language policies was mentioned earlier. Kgabo and Busi's challenges, where parents have made an ill-advised choice of English LOLT, are a reflection of the ill-advised implementation of this language policy and also of insufficient advocacy amongst caregivers about the issue.

The second issue relates to the provision or paucity of professional development for teachers in TESOL strategies. Internationally there is a vast body of research and classroom practice material that over time has focused on the specific needs of children learning an additional language (Crosse, 2007; Cummins, 2000a, 2001; Cummins and Davison, 2007; Haslam, Wilkin, & Kellet, 2005; Scott, 2009; Teachernet, http://www.teachernet.gov.uk). Regionally, Benson (2004) and Kasule (2003) have identified the lack of effective English Language Teaching and Bilingual Teaching provision in Teacher Education in Botswana and Mozambique, a finding which also has relevance to South Africa. Strong corroboration of this finding is provided by Zimmerman, Howie and Long (2009) in their study of the current status in South Africa of pre-service teacher education programmes. One of their key findings is the following:

> The lack of major emphasis on Second Language learning at most of the institutions is problematic. Also the lack of content on language and its impact on literacy development at all of the institutions is a glaring omission for teacher preparation in the South African context. (Zimmerman et al., 2009: 40)

The fact that few pre-service courses and fewer in-service courses include TESOL strategies as a part of the training is a significant gap in provision that needs redress.

6.2.2 The relative importance of the Home Language and English

Although it was not a direct question in the interview, four teachers mentioned the importance of English as the language of wider communication and of the HL as a vehicle for culture and identity. Rose and Kgabo were passionate, using emotive language like *pathetic* and *pitiful*, when talking about the importance of HL in the formation of an individual's identity:

> If we stress to make our children to know their own language, I think in future is 'going to come right'. If we emphasise our children to know their own language. And it's very pathetic, you know, it's very pathetic to see a black child not knowing her or his language, it's very pathetic. (Interview, Rose: 23 November 2005)

> It's important to know our mother tongue first, perfectly… because it's in our culture. You have to know everything…. Right now it's pitiful if you ask a child who's attending these multiracial schools, "what is this on your head?". He don't know that thing is moriri *('hair' in Setswana*) … because you can't express. You don't even know your body part. (Interview, Kgabo: 13 June 2005)

This view provides a healthy counterpoint to Betty and Joanna's deficit discourse, and also reflects one serious aspect of the application of the Languages in Education Policy (DoE, 1997) and the widespread choice of more affluent African-language-speaking parents to send their children to English LOLT former Model-C[19] schools, where often they do not have the possibility to learn their HL as anything other than a second additional language, introduced in the Intermediate Phase with English as the LOLT and Afrikaans as the first additional language.

[19] A commonly used term to describe public schools with a relatively high fee structure that used to be semi-private, many of which provide education in English, with Afrikaans as a First Additional language and usually one African language as a second additional language. The recent court case won by the CEO of PANSALB taken against one such school for offering isiZulu at the level of a second additional language to children for whom it is a home language, is a case in point. (http://wwwthetimes.co.za/printarticle.aspx?ID=678493)

However, the issue is complex, and Lettie and Kgabo showed their understanding of the complexity in their statements about the importance of multilingual skills:

> I prefer them to know both languages because how are they going to communicate outside there, you see? I would prefer learners to know er mother tongue, or home language as well as first additional language. Otherwise, how, how how are they going to – if you send your child to the shopping complex, how is he going to read? (Interview, Lettie: 11 October 2005)

And, as Kgabo saw it,

> English is very good because you are able to communicate with everybody – all the people of all nations. They have to know English because if they don't know your – your – if you don't know my language I'll have to talk to you in English then we can understand each other. (Interview, Kgabo: 13 June 2005)

6.2.3 The importance of resources for effective language teaching

Most of the teachers made reference to the importance of resources for literacy learning. Minah and Sharon acknowledge the value of different non-governmental organisations because of the resources that they have brought to the school. Ms Lyons and Mrs Molefe talked about bringing in magazines as extra resources. In terms of identified problems, Lungi and Rose pointed to the difficulties of teaching in HL when the majority of the materials are in English:

> Lungi: The charts that we have in Grade One, they're in English. You see, they're in English, those children cannot read, you see.
> Rose: I think I was going to say er the resources we have are mostly in English Additional Language. We don't have our mother tongue. (Rose, Pat & Lungi, Group interview: 23 November 2005)

Given the wide recognition by the teachers interviewed that visual materials are a vital means of developing vocabulary and comprehension, it is worth recording that most teachers in public schools stated that they had insufficient visual resources for literacy learning. The walls of all the four classrooms observed did display a wealth of visual materials which were

drawn on during observed lessons. So the wish to obtain more materials would seem to reflect an understanding of the importance for young children of visual stimuli for learning. This understanding about the importance of a print-rich environment for bilingual early literacy learners is well-supported in the literature, both internationally (Krashen, 2000; Langenberg et al., 2000; Snow et al., 1998) and locally (Bloch, 1999; DoE, 2002c, 2008c).

6.2.4 Multilingualism and cross-cultural issues

The role of culture and multilingualism was not included in the interview schedule, so it is interesting that it was mentioned by various teachers. It is not surprising, given the history of South Africa, that only thirteen years into the new democracy, those differences still exist in people's representation and perceptions. Whilst none of the respondents was racist or negative about 'the other', their responses did serve to represent understandings about multilingualism and cross-cultural issues from different perspectives. Teachers play a unique and important role for the children they teach in the development of a social and political consciousness and so the political and social views of the teachers are of importance here.

It appeared that most of the respondents, although willing to understand cross-racial issues, were far from a position of mutual understanding. For example, Betty and Joanna seemed to overlook the multilingual nature of South Africa in that both talked about children's problems with English as a language deficit. Makoe's (2007) study corroborates this finding.

Ms Jali's perspective reflects a greater awareness of the multilingual nature of South African society: 'my class now, they can speak Sepedi, isiXhosa, others who … . So this place is a multilingual area … so they just learn from each other' (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008). She also expressed the opinion that 'there is that innate ability to learn another language' (Interview, Ms Jali: 20 June 2008). This observation, based on her perceptions of her own class, and probably on her own experiences as a multilingual person, provides powerful corroboration for Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition (Krashen, 1988; Shutz, 2007). Krashen's theory hypothesises that acquisition is a different activity from learning. He argues that children can acquire language provided that they are exposed to meaningful 'comprehensible input' and that they are motivated to learn in a non-threatening communicative context. Ms Jali's learners, living as they do in a multilingual community,

have both the motivation and appropriate context. The congruence between Ms Jali's implicit and Krashen's explicit theory provides beneficial corroboration both ways.

Mrs Molefe's reference to multilingualism highlights her sense of the importance of facilitating cross-cultural communication:

> Specially when it comes to South Africa. It's a multilingual place. How are they going to associate or communicate with other people when they don't know a particular person's language? So they do … it it [sic] is really necessary for one to know language.
> *(Paula: You think now that we are erm a multi-racial democracy there is more need?)*
> There's more need because with you people now you have to know some of the African languages. And we are fortunate now because we know English, we know Afrikaans, we know Tsonga, we know Zulu, we know too much. We don't have a problem. (Interview, Ms Molefe: 27 May 2005)

Her observations about the importance of white monolingual people needing to become multilingual are interesting, and she is the only respondent of all the thirty who made this point. Ms Lyons, Meg and Betty, all white teachers of long experience and fairly new to the experience of teaching black children, seemed to pick their words carefully when talking about the issue of language and race; they did not mention a perceived benefit or relevance to the early literacy classroom of children's HLs other than English. Amongst the white teachers, it was only Joan who saw the value of establishing a strong foundation first in the child's HL. And even here, it was seen as the responsibility of the home rather than the school to do that.

On the whole, the teachers' responses on multilingual and cross-cultural issues reflected the differences inherent in the socio-economic status of the schools and the communities they serve. Classrooms in townships and rural areas are so different from suburban middle-class schools in terms of class sizes, the LOLT, the language background and literacy and educational histories of the teachers that the literacy practices cannot but fail to be different. Yet, our curriculum and our education system operate as if all schools are the same. Teachers like Ms Jali and Ms Lyons do not have the opportunity of learning how the 'other' operates and so can only work on assumptions which may or may not be valid. Ms Lyons, for example, assumed that literacy 'is not – a big thing' (Interview, Ms Lyons: 12 November 2007) in the homes of the black children she taught. The comment is not evidence-based and thus, whilst it

may well be the case that there are no or few books in the homes of Silver Grove children, the disconnection between the school and the communities from which the children come serves to reinforce stereotypes that are unhelpful in addressing the literacy challenge. The New Literacy Studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1983, 1994) and particularly the work of Gregory (1996), Gregory and Williams (2000) and Stein and Slonimsky (2006), provides useful conceptual tools with which to analyse this view from a socio-cultural perspective. These scholars have shown, through studies of perceptions and practices in different home and community settings, that each family differs 'in its interpretation of what "counts" as reading' (Gregory, 1996: 27) and that in most cases these practices differ from school literacy and are 'often invisible in school and society' (Gregory & Williams, 2000: xvi).

While this study did not encompass an exploration of the home literacy practices of children whose classes were observed, the interview data reveals a significant gap similar to that identified by these scholars. In the context of Ms Lyons' class, with 'children entering school with a different home language and very different cultural practices from those of the school' (Gregory & Williams, 2000: 203), an attempt to show the importance of 'syncretis[ing] home and school learning, drawing upon one to inform and change the other into a dynamic whole' (2000: 203) is particularly relevant.

This cultural gap between school and home was traversed by few if any of the teachers in this study. Ms Ndlovu was the one exception. She was raised and schooled in Soweto, then went on to study teaching at the University of the Witwatersrand after which she obtained the post in Silver Grove Primary. My field notes relate to a discussion initiated by Ms Ndlovu about the challenges this culture-shift presented to her:

> *At the same time Ms Ndlovu expresses that the culture of the school is not familiar territory to her:*
> Ms Ndlovu: I've only been teaching for two years and all this is new to me. When I did my teaching practice in xxxx school, I struggled because I did all my schooling up to Matric in Soweto. (Field Notes, Ms Ndlovu: 10 October 2007)

What emerges in relation to this theme is a corroboration of Heath's (1983) findings that teachers' perceptions are informed and largely entrenched by their own cultural experience and understandings. Due to the history of South Africa and the hegemony of the English language, black multilingual teachers have a more subtle and experiential understanding of

multilingualism than white monolingual teachers. If teachers' perspectives on the multilingual nature of South African society are different, it is likely that these differences will also influence their attitudes to multilingualism in the classroom. The promotion of multilingualism in schools is an overt objective of the NCS, so the differences emerging from the interview data, in my view, are a significant finding that points to the need for the issue to be addressed carefully, experientially and thoroughly through teacher professional development.

6.3 How do teachers' conceptualisations of language issues relate to their practice?

This section focuses on the data that emerged from the classroom observations of Ms Jali, Ms Tladi, Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu. It compares the teachers' conceptualisations with their practices and highlights observed areas of strength and challenge with regard to LOLT.

Prior to detailing the practices, it is important to establish the multilingual context in which all four teachers were operating and particularly the three who were teaching in English Additional Language as a LOLT. The following table details the range of different HLs as obtained from the school records, representing the languages by class and by learner.

Table 6: The language diversity in the four classrooms observed

	Ms Jali	**Ms Tladi**	**Ms Lyons**	**Ms Ndlovu**
Afrikaans		1		
Chibemba		1		
English		1		
French		6	1	
isiNdebele	8			1
isiXhosa	12	3	2	3
isiZulu	25	11	14	11
Portuguese		1		
Sepedi		1	1	5
Setswana		1	3	5
Siswati	1			
South		1	10	12

Sotho								
Tshivenda					3			
Xitsonga			1		2			
Not available			14					
Totals	**No. of languages**	**No. of children**	**No. of languages**	**No of children**	**No. of languages**	**No of children**	**No. of languages**	**No of children**
	4	46	12	42	8	36	6	37

All eleven official South African languages were represented in addition to French, Portuguese and Chibemba. There was a significant gap in the information obtained from Hilltop Primary about Ms Tladi's class: the principal indicated that the parents had been asked to voluntarily provide this information but that many had declined to do so. It is unclear whether they had not understood the request or were suspicious and apprehensive about being asked such questions. It also perhaps suggests that, in not pursuing this information, the school was not prioritising it. It is nevertheless evident from the available data for Ms Tladi's class that there was a widely diverse range of HLs, as is also the case for Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes.

IsiZulu and South Sotho were the predominant languages in these three classes; the combining of the Nguni group languages and the Sotho group languages could have provided a means for these languages to be more prominent in the curriculum, if the schools had wished to capitalise on the multilingual resources of the children. However, both Hilltop and Silver Grove schools had clear policies of English LOLT, despite the apparent problem that learner outcomes of these schools would be compared with schools in which the children had English as a HL. For example, Baker (2006) suggests that an additional language learner needs seven years to reach native speaker competence and Cummins (1981) suggests five to six years. When I raised this point with Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu during the follow-up interview, Ms Lyons expressed the opinion that it would be inappropriate to follow the English Additional Language curriculum because it was too simple. Whilst this might be the case in later grades, it was noted that in both Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes, the majority of children were challenged by a limited command of BICS (Cummins, 1980, 2000a), which is likely to result in them being poorly prepared for the CALP required in the English HL curriculum from Grade Three.

Ms Jali's class, albeit an isiZulu LOLT class, was also multilingual. Whilst isiZulu was the predominant HL of most learners, there were significant numbers of children who spoke three other Nguni languages as HL. Analysis of the impact of multilingualism in each class follows.

6.3.1 Ms Jali

Ms Jali's pedagogy, as detailed in previous chapters, prioritised collaboration and peer learning. Thus there was ample opportunity during independent learning activity time for children to learn from each other, to converse and consult, using whichever language they chose. My observation of the classroom indicates that this did indeed happen, almost all of the time. Whilst Ms Jali was working with one group in the teaching corner, all the other learners had the freedom to communicate with one another. Peer communication observed was mainly in isiZulu but the video data also captured a group of boys avidly holding a discussion in Setswana about something that they had seen happening in the playground. Their chosen language in this case was not the LOLT of the classroom, indicating that within metropolitan township settings, children usually acquire and speak more than one language. The 'innate ability' which Ms Jali claims children have to learn other languages is also something that she, through her pedagogy, implicitly encourages and nurtures. This unintended benefit of her methodology is something which researchers keen to develop multilingual classrooms might well be interested in exploring further.

6.3.2 Ms Tladi

Ms Tladi's literacy practice was consistent with her conceptualisations about the importance of oral development and vocabulary building, and it also was in contrast to her own negative memories of being required to recite words in English that she did not understand:

> Ms Tladi: Some of them come from deep rural KwaZulu-Natal or are foreigners. They don't speak a word of English. You'll find that at the beginning of the second term they're talking English.
> Paula: What's your strategy?
> Ms Tladi: I make them talk a lot. You see those rhymes - and they pick it up from each other, they learn from each other

Paula: What language do they use to talk to each other?
Ms Tladi: English. I make sure they sit with children who don't speak the same language so they they have to try and speak in English. You see, if a Zulu child is sitting near another Zulu child they will speak Zulu. (Field Notes, Ms Tladi: 16 May 2007)

In terms of the literature on bilingualism, Ms Tladi's class was practising an immersion approach (Baker, 2006) and whilst the thinking behind the segregation of the children to prevent them from speaking their home languages is prescriptive and at odds with much of the literature on multilingualism (Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Ramirez et al., 1991; Cummins, 1995, 2000a), my observations detailed in 6.5.1 identified some surprisingly positive findings.

A significant amount of time was devoted to aural and oral development, the BICS to which Cummins (1980, 2000a, 2001) refers. Out of the eight classroom sessions observed, children practised action rhymes five times; Ms Tladi read to the children on six occasions. In addition there was a session on the carpet where Ms Tladi used household items to teach children the English words for various crockery and cutlery items. On two occasions, Ms Tladi's oral interaction with the children blossomed into real communication, when they were telling her about giving roses on Mother's Day (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 16 May 2007) and about the games they play (Video log, Ms Tladi: 23 May 2007).

Ms Tladi's interaction with the learners reflected her belief about learner-paced instruction and she often implemented strategies to provide children with the opportunity to build their receptive English vocabulary (Coady & Huckin, 1997). The frequent use of action rhymes was a much loved and useful means of children developing productive English at the same time as increasing their vocabulary. However, the strongly regulated nature of the class provided only limited opportunities for children to acquire language (Krashen, 1988) in the course of peer activities and group-work.

6.3.3 Ms Lyons

Ms Lyons's stated emphasis on Look and Say procedures was reflected in her frequent use of this strategy in the classes observed. Of the seven lessons observed, six included reading sight words extracted from the basal reader. The seventh involved reading single-syllable words

which drew on a combination of phonic decoding and Look and Say strategies. Ms Lyons's practice also was consistent with her emphasis on the development of pronunciation and oral reading skills. There were two instances of choral reading of text from the basal readers and a third where children were required to read aloud individually. In the interview, Ms Lyons's referred to the importance of 'diction'. It was notable that she devoted time to teaching the term 'exclamation mark', which was difficult for most learners but nonetheless the term featured in three different lessons observed (12 September, 24 October and 7 November 2007), revealing both the children's enjoyment of such a difficult word and also the importance placed by Ms Lyons on learning it:

> Ms Lyons: (*she writes an exclamation mark on the board)* What's this? *(Children struggle to remember the word)*
> E: Exclamation mark.
> Ms Lyons: Good, go and get a sweet!
> (Field notes, Ms Lyons: 12 September 2007)

Ms Lyons also read the basal reader text to the children as a means of enabling them to listen to and learn native-speaker pronunciation, explaining to them that, 'I like to hear you read and you like to hear me read as well' (Field notes, Ms Lyons: 7 November 2007); the children clapped after she had read the text. Ms Lyons's interaction with the children did not involve any open-ended conversation; instead it followed a pattern of teacher question and individual learner response. Some of the questions required information beyond the level of the text: for example, they had to use the texts displayed on the wall to search for specific words. However, the questions were largely about vocabulary retrieval. The only time when children were observed communicating with one another was when Ms Lyons instructed them in groups to devise sentences from a range of words taken from *Kathy and Mark* (O'Donnell, 1970). Although the sentences produced were in English, the children discussed the activity in their groups in their home languages; and whilst this was a decision independently taken, it appeared to have been condoned by Ms Lyons, in spite of the implicit policy of only using English in the school.

Thus, her stated efforts to provide her children with opportunities for listening, for using Look and Say strategies and for practising pronunciation were reflected in her literacy teaching practices. There was a strong emphasis on reading as performance in this classroom, which might have inhibited the weaker or shyer learners; however, there was an equally strong

emphasis in Ms Lyons's question and answer technique on comprehension. This benefited the stronger learners, who were most frequently called upon to provide the answers, and it may have benefited the weaker children to the extent that the discourse served as comprehensible input (Krashen, 1988).

6.3.4 Ms Ndlovu

A somewhat mystifying aspect of Ms Ndlovu's interview is that she made no direct reference to the issue of LOLT or of multilingualism. This is all the more surprising, given her mention of the difficulties she had experienced on teaching practice and at university, coming from a learning environment in Soweto where English was not the LOLT in primary school and where code-switching was a feature of the teaching and learning in high school. It would seem that Ms Ndlovu, as the least experienced of the four teachers observed, has an investment in providing answers that comply with, rather than question, the status quo. When asked to state her opinion about the best way for teaching reading, she responded in some detail about a limited aspect of the pedagogy, namely the teaching of the sounds of the letters rather than the names:

> I love the way we teach now, the alphabets. The ah, buh, cuh, duh (*sounds not names*).We don't say ay, bee, cee, dee. We say ah, buh, cuh. I don't know if you understand. (Interview, Ms Ndlovu:12 November 2007)

She proceeded for what takes up four more lines of the transcript to further explain this strategy. When asked if it succeeds in ensuring that all the children become literate she conceded that it does not, but did not offer any analysis of the methodology other than to say that:

> Children need time. The others they (clicks fingers), the others they go slowly, so you have to be patient with them, give them time, they're not the same. But it works it does works (Interview, Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2007)

She also indicated a belief that children need to have a lot of repetition of activities, which indeed was often seen to take place in her class. In fact there was strong emphasis on repetition in terms of 'reading after the teacher', which for some children may have had some value but for others was an apparent means of mentally 'signing out' whilst the lips moved in

chorus with those who were reading. Ms Ndlovu's teaching style, though energetic and involving gesture and movement, provided no opportunities for children to practise speaking and listening with each other; which although problematic in terms of their oral language development, is consistent with the interview data in which there is also no mention of this aspect of language development.

Ms Ndlovu made very little use of isiZulu, her HL, in her classroom. It was only on five brief occasions that she used any of the children's HL. In fact her most common use of children's HLs was when she used a range of tag questions in isiZulu (angithi?), Setswana (a kere?) and colloquial Afrikaans (nè?). On other occasions she would ask a question in English and then repeat the question in Setswana:

> Ms N: You're colouring and you've not done this. What's this? Keng ee?
> (Field notes, Ms Ndlovu: 19 September 2007)

In this second example, Ms Ndlovu was helping the children to understand a picture worksheet, prior to them labelling the pictures themselves:

> Ms N: It's a bug. Is he right?
> Ls: Yes
> Ms N: Do you know a bug?
> Ls: Yes
> Ms N: What is a bug?
> Ls: (*shouting excitedly*) magogga
> Ms N: What is it magogga? Magogo! (*children laugh because magogo means grandmothers! Many children shouting out definitions in English)*
> (*The next word to be read is top)*
> Ms N: The next one, the boys, the boys are playing with it
> L: Top! (*another learner and several other learners say – top*)
> Ms N: It's a ↗
> Ls: Top
> T: I think in Zulu you're saying topo, angithi?
> Ls: Yes
> Ms N: Topo (*other learners saying – topo*) Topo, neh? Topo baSesotho, topo isiZulu, mara English top. Not that top, angithi, not that top – you know the the the … of the coffee. (Field notes, Ms Ndlovu: 7 November 2007)

As shown in these extracts, Ms Ndlovu kept her use of the children's HL to a minimum, using no more than one or two words.

I had been interested in Ms Ndlovu's usage of these tag phrases and believed that it might be a way of forming a bridge between her and the learners; a means of demonstrating co-sanguinity. However, when asked, Ms Ndlovu's response did not confirm this assumption. She did however indicate that the children expected her to speak to them in a familiar language:

> Ms N: They know that I know their language and they are looking for my support. They come to me and speak to me in isiZulu if they are looking for my help.
> *Both Ms Ndlovu and Ms Lyons were in agreement that Ms N only uses HL if there is a health risk or a need. For example if a child had fallen down and needs attention or if a child needs to take medication*.
> Ms N: I teach in English and only if there's a reason that the children can't understand, then I will speak in isiZulu. Only if I have to
> Ms L: … and not to do with the school work. (Follow-up interview, Ms Lyons and Ms Ndlovu: 12 November 2008)

It would seem that there is a rigorous school policy against the use of the children's HLs for pedagogic purposes. Whilst this is consistent with the immersion approach, it can also have harsh side-effects with regard to confidence and identity development, as detailed both internationally and in South Africa (Baker, 2006; Makoe, 2007).

The only other concession to the multilingual nature of this class and to the possibility of communicating with the teacher in an African language was that there were two posters on the wall, one with the Setswana word dula (*sit)* and the picture of a child sitting and the other with the isiZulu word hamba (*walk/go)* and a picture of a child walking.

In summary, this comparison of the four teachers' beliefs about multilingualism expressed in their interviews and their attention to multilingual factors in their pedagogy has revealed that there is consistency between what they believe and what they do. Ms Jali's stated belief was that children acquire competence in additional languages naturally, and she makes space in her pedagogy for that to happen. Ms Tladi's concern, based on her remembered experiences, seems to relate to her careful transmission of vocabulary lessons and to the repeated use of stories, comprehension questions and action rhymes to give them ample opportunities to learn and practise newly learnt language.

Ms Lyons's belief in the value of 'diction' and of gaining enjoyment from reading was reflected in her frequently practised reading aloud sessions and in children's access to the book box for independent reading. Ms Ndlovu's belief in the need for repetition was reflected in the choral reading, repeating after the teacher. All of the three teachers in the English LOLT classrooms, in step with the philosophy of immersion, used the children's home language(s) very sparingly if at all within their pedagogy. However, there was little opportunity for the use or practice of English for communicative purposes in context.

6.4 The impact of Home Language LOLT on literacy learning

Home Language as LOLT was observed in Ms Jali's classroom. The freedom with which children were able to communicate with the teacher and with each other in a common familiar language was a key factor in the children's literacy development progress. There was no evidence that learning in the HL had anything but a positive effect both pedagogically and affectively on the learners. By the ninth month of their first year of schooling, all the children except one were able to read the core vocabulary of Breakthrough to Literacy, which comprises some 200 words, and to read story books of between 10 and 400 words. A comparison of this attainment with the main elements of the Assessment Standards for Reading (DoE, 2002c: 34-43) for Grade One, which are the minimum standards required for a learner to have achieved at the end of the first year of schooling, indicates that Ms Jali's learners had achieved the reading standards.

With regard to writing, children were able to generate their own written sentences in isiZulu, samples of which appear below. This child's work shows a drawing and three sentences completed in one lesson and six sentences and drawings in the next lesson. The translated versions mean:
Lesson 1: The baby is sleeping, the mother likes the baby, the baby is crying.
Lesson 2: Father is going home. Mother is cleaning. The child is playing with the ball. The girl has a bicycle. She is making a fire. She is carrying the wood.
These sentences do not cohere as a 'story' nor do they reflect the child's intention to convey a message through his writing. However, as argued in Chapter Five, this is related to Ms Jali's limited conceptualisation of the potential of writing, not to a limitation of language or ability. This child, given the right encouragement and impetus, does have the literacy skills that would enable him to 'launch himself into imagined worlds' (Dyson, 2001).

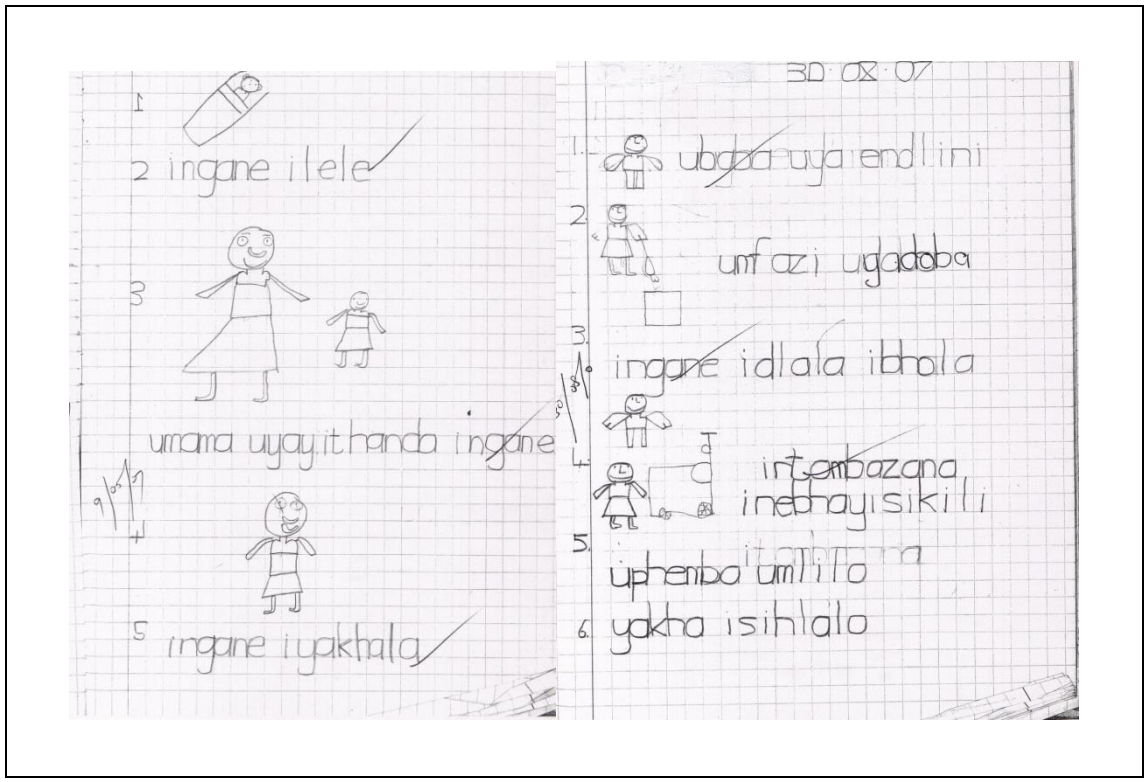


Figure 7: Samples of learner's work

6.4.1 Transfer of L1 skills to L2

A literacy event involving language transfer relates to Sharon's independent decision, in the lesson of 8 November 2007, to transfer her literacy skills in isiZulu to English. The learning of English First Additional Language as a subject was included in the timetable for half an hour per week from the third term. Sharon chose, in independent learning time when the teacher was working with another group, to read through the Grade One Bridge to English Book (Molteno Project, 2002), as the following extracts from my field notes indicate. The interaction between Ms Jali and the children has been translated from isiZulu into English:

> 09h25
> *Sharon has finished her work and is reading her library book (a book in isiZulu) 3rd Group in TC. Sharon and Zama are discussing an English-medium book on Ms Jali's desk.*
> Sharon: (*calling out to Ms Jali*) I've finished.
> Ms Jali: Take a book and read.
> *Sharon does not look keen*
> T: Write those words.
> *Sharon still does not look keen.*

Ms Jali: Well, take an English book and read.
Sharon (visibly pleased) and Zama choose to read Little Hen – *the text and pictures of the rhyme they had recited before at the beginning of the class*

09h43
Ms Jali: Come, I'm waiting for you. (*All the group goes except Sharon, who chooses to stay and read the BTE English Learner Book. Sharon then goes to the Teaching Corner, taking the BTE learner book with her proudly displaying her competence*. (Field notes, Ms Jali: 8 November 2007)

This demonstration of the child's ability to independently transfer the literacy skills learnt in the HL to an additional language, and her keenness to do so, may be problematic for those proponents of multilingualism who argue that a delayed introduction of the second language correlates with better performance ultimately in that language (Macdonald, 1990; Ramirez et al., 1991). A critical take on this scenario might be that the logical consequence of starting English as a subject 'too early', in an unequal context where English is privileged, channels young children into an unquestioning acceptance of this privileging at the expense of the sustainability of HL education.

Whilst there is no intention to use this scenario to argue for an early exit into English, it does indicate that encouraging children's agency in literacy learning can lead in unpredictable directions, including ones with which the above scholars might have problems. However, the cited example reveals that children are able to independently transfer language skills from one language to another and the early introduction of an additional language gives them the scope to be able to do so. In this proposition I find concordance with Cummins (2000), who states that 'There is nothing in either the threshold or interdependence hypotheses that would support neglect of the majority language.' (Cummins, 2000a: 23) and Hornberger (1989), who similarly argues for a non-dogmatic approach to the timing of the introduction of the second language: 'the first language must not be abandoned before it is fully developed, whether the second language is introduced simultaneously or successively, early or late, in that process' (1989: 287).

6.5 The impact on literacy learning of EAL as LOLT

Most of the evidence, predictably, supports the notion that children learning to read and write in an unfamiliar or foreign language are at a disadvantage compared to those learning to read and write in their Home Language (Abadzi, 2006; Alexander, 2008; Brock-Utne et al., 2006;

Cummins, 2000a, 2000b; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2000a, 2000b; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). All the four participating teachers in this study were diligent in the implementation of their chosen curricula. Children observed in this study, who were learning through the medium of English, had made progress. However, children learning to read and write in their HL had made more progress.

By November, when children in Ms Jali's class were independently reading books of between ten and four hundred words, Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's children were doing whole-class reading of texts from the fourth basal reader in the series they were following (O'Donnell, 1970). Children in Ms Jali's class were able to both copy and create their own comprehensible sentences whilst the children in Ms Lyons's class were seen only to be able, as a group, to formulate sentences, some meaningful, others not so, from the core vocabulary of the basal reader. The only writing that was observed in Ms Ndlovu's class was the completion of a crossword puzzle and a sentence completion worksheet. It may be that they also formed sentences as in Ms Lyons's class, but it did not happen whilst I was present in the classroom nor did I see evidence of children's writing of sentences.

Observation in Ms Tladi's class was terminated in May, so the possibility of comparison here is limited. In May, children in Ms Tladi's class were slowly mastering the whole-class activity of reading of words and some sentences from the Beehive Series (Lawrence & Okonski, 1981). As regards writing, the only writing observed in the language class was the tracing of letters in the phonics workbook. On 23 May 2007, a longer text from a Bible Stories book was written on the board and copied by the children as part of a life-skills lesson. However, when asked if the children could read this text, Ms Tladi indicated that they could not but that she had given them the text to copy 'so that they practise writing on the lines' (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 23 May 2007).

The fact that learners made slower progress with writing in the English LOLT classes may be evidence of inexperience or poor strategy on the part of the teachers. However, it is more likely to be related to the disadvantage that children were at in trying to learn basic words and communicative competence in English at the same time as learning how to read and write. Another key difference between the two different LOLT classes was the readiness of children to participate orally. In the isiZulu LOLT class, there was a greater spread of children willing to participate and respond to the teacher's questions, whereas in the English LOLT classes, it

tended to be the children more competent in English raising their hands to participate and also who were called on more often by the teacher to provide answers. These children, who started off with more English, got unequal opportunities to improve than those who started with less competence in the language. A further potential problem associated with this practice, observed to be operative in Ms Tladi's and Ms Lyons's classes, is that competence in English becomes conflated with overall ability: children can become graded at this early stage on their ability in English rather than on general cognitive ability, and this kind of labelling in the first year of school can have lasting and possibly devastating effects for a child's learning trajectory (Makoe, 2007).

It must be stressed that this comparative analysis is intended to draw attention to the different effects of HL or EAL as LOLT. There is no intention to compare, criticise or evaluate the teachers involved, all of whom were making progress with their learners according to the methodologies that they had chosen to use. Clearly a key factor in the relative progress of the children is that in the English LOLT classes, a great deal of teaching and learning time was, of necessity, assigned to oral development and clarification of words, terms and teacher instructions that simply was not necessary in the isiZulu LOLT class. Another possible factor of difference is that Ms Jali's children were encouraged to learn from each other and to collaborate, whereas this element was only minimally developed in Ms Tladi and Ms Lyons's class, and discouraged in Ms Ndlovu's. This latter factor is unrelated to LOLT, and so it would be precipitate to argue that LOLT is the definitive factor in the increased progress of Ms Jali's learners. From the evidence, however, one can say that LOLT is likely to be key. This study has also identified the positive role of learner agency in literacy learning; further research could usefully attempt to understand the different and relative impacts of these two elements on Grade One literacy learning.

6.5.1 Beneficial factors of EAL as LOLT

Children in Ms Tladi's class were seated in groups and were deliberately mixed with regard to language so that they would communicate with each other in English. Recalling Ms Jali's statement about children having an innate ability to learn another language, the communication patterns between Ms Tladi's children did corroborate this assertion. They frequently found sufficient English to communicate with each other, checking on each other's

progress, checking whether others in their group had found the right page, helping each other to find the right page and engaging in as much 'safe house' communication (Canagarajah, 2004) as the constraints of the generally teacher-centred official classroom discourse allowed. The fact that this was an English Additional Language-medium class did not totally shut off the possibility of communication. In fact, unofficial peer interactions through gesture and a little English were a significant means of communicative learning in this class. The example already featured in section 5.6.3.3 of Chapter Five, in which Keith, brimming with excitement about the sudden realisation that he had cracked the 'reading code', was intent on communicating this with his peers and found ways of doing so regardless of the limited English that he and they shared.

All three English LOLT classes were domains where English was the only language that figured in the official classroom discourse. Most of the children, who had arrived in January with very little ability to understand English and without strong parent/school links for reinforcement of the learning at home (Interview, Ms Lyons: 7 November 2007; Interview, Ms Tladi: 20 June 2007), were in November able to participate in the classroom discourse. This is an indication of their success and progress in the learning of English and an achievement in varying degrees of the objective of an immersion programme. However, the freedom of full expression which this approach denied all but the most fluent and confident English learners was evident.

6.5.2 Challenges for teachers who speak English as an Additional Language

Ms Tladi and Ms Ndlovu were in similar positions in that, as second-language speakers of English themselves, they nonetheless had to provide a model of English fluency and competence for learners exposed for the first time to English. Both teachers expressed in different ways the challenge that this posed for them, a challenge which is documented in the literature both locally and internationally (Benson, 2004; Kasule, 2003; Stoffels, 2005). Some scholars in the field of English Language Teaching research reject the 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1996), referring to the strengths of co-sanguinity and a better understanding of the students' cultural and linguistic background (Maum, 2003; Moussu & Llurda, 2008) that teachers who are non-native speakers of English possess. Whilst this may be so, and such

factors were observed to be at play in both Ms Tladi's and Ms Ndlovu's classrooms, there are other factors which limit their effectiveness as English Language Teachers. These relate to the inequalities in the teacher education provision that prevailed both during and in the early years after the apartheid regime (Sayed, 2004) and that, I argue, place Ms Tladi and Ms Ndlovu at a distinct disadvantage.

In terms of literacy pedagogy, Ms Tladi stated her belief that majoring in Sesotho at university helped in 'understanding how a language is formed' (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 11 April 2007). Nevertheless, she also referred to the difficulties of being a second-language speaker and having to teach the children to pronounce the words, 'of which I am not sure of the correct pronunciation' (Field notes, Ms Tladi: 18 April 2007).

Ms Ndlovu also alluded to the challenges of teaching in an exclusively English-medium environment. Both teachers were seen on many occasions to be coping well with the challenge, and particularly so in relation to the lack of preparation and support of teachers in TESOL or strategies or applied theories of language learning (Benson, 2004, Kasule, 2003).

Ms Tladi's frequent use of action rhymes as a non-threatening and fun way for children to learn vocabulary and gain confidence in producing oral English was one example of an effective language development strategy. Another was her carefully prepared vocabulary lesson in which she introduced crockery and cutlery names prior to a reading about a tea party. However, a prescriptive element in the lesson detailed below also points to the possibility of a lack of confidence in English and in TESOL strategies becoming a limiting factor in children's language development:

> *Ms Tladi has children at the front on the carpet to teach the vocab of teacup, saucer, milk jug etc.*
> Ms Tladi: *holds up a sugar bowl* What is this?
> L:sugar dish.
> Ms Tladi: not sugar dish.
> (*Looks to others for an answer.*)
> L: sugar cup.
> Ms Tladi: No, not sugar tea. Who can help us?
> V: sugar bowl.
> Ms Tladi: Yes, sugar pot, clap for V. A sugar pot, neh!
> (*children clap)*
> Ms Tladi: What is this? (*holds up a teaspoon*)
> Ls: Spoon.

Ms Tladi: Spoon! (*Looks shocked and surprised*) No, no, no.
Child comes up with the right word – teaspoon – and gets a clap from the teacher. Then follows a discussion about the use of the teaspoon and Ms T asks what is the word for stir in isiZulu. Lots of children are keen to show their knowledge of the word (godoza)
Ms Tladi: *recaps the vocabulary and says about the sugar bowl:* Some people call it a sugar basin.
(Video log, Ms Tladi: 18 April 2007)

One interpretation of the above interaction is that it is typical of a teacher-centred approach, regardless of language issues, in which the only right answer is the one that the teacher has in mind. However, the rejection of 'sugar dish' or 'spoon' as correct answers, combined with a lack of discussion about the related and specific meanings of these terms are, I would argue, evidence of the challenge of teaching English as a non-native speaker, to which Ms Tladi herself has referred. The confusion at the end of this extract about the sugar bowl/pot/basin is further evidence of the challenge and also of how it can affect the learning progress of the children. Such a literacy event may lead not only to confusion about terminology but also possibly to the children whose suggested words are rejected becoming reluctant to be risk-takers (Krashen, 1988) as learners of English.

Ms Ndlovu likewise had to find her own way of teaching TESOL without any guidelines, training or specific TESOL materials. Sometimes her strategies worked very well, as in the following segment, where she nicely elicited the word 'horse' from the children:

Ms Ndlovu:What are they doing?
Ls: Riding.
Ms Ndlovu: They are riding. What can you ride? There are animals …
L: Bus, car, bike.
Ms Ndlovu: eh-eh (*meaning, no)* What can you ride? Can you ride a cat?
Ls: *(giggling)* NO!
Ms Ndlovu: Can you ride er a snake?
Ls: No.
L: Horsey, horseys (*shouting out*)
Ms Ndlovu: Oh, they're riding horses. (Video log, Ms Ndlovu: 31 October 2007)

However, in her efforts at teaching a pronunciation segment, as indicated in the video log below, she steered the class into choppy waters, as her own lack of ability to hear the distinction between *her* and *hair* was shared with her learners,

Ms Ndlovu: Listen, ***her*** and *hair (writing both on board*). These words

sound the same but they don't mean the same. This is (*points to hair*) how we write the spelling of hair on your head. This one (*points to her)* refers to a person, a girl.

Ms Ndlovu: When I say, did you see her, her hair is beautiful, what do I mean?

L: You say she's hair is nice.

Ms Ndlovu: Who, who?

L: Pamela.

Ms Ndlovu: Pamela's hair. But I didn't say her name. Instead of saying her name, I say her. Her hair is nice. OK. Sit down.

(Video log, Ms Ndlovu: 24 October 2007)

I believe that this difficulty would not have arisen if the appropriate materials had been available to teach this distinction between the two words *her* and *hair*, but they were not – or if Ms Ndlovu had had some grounding in TESOL strategies. For example, she was conflating two complicated lessons into one (firstly the teaching of the pronouns and how they refer to and substitute for nouns, and, secondly, the teaching of pronunciation). If she had undergone effective TESOL training, she would have been guided to separate the teaching of pronouns (her/his), which was actually her objective in this segment, from the teaching of pronunciation (her/hair). Furthermore, there are materials that can provide ideas and assistance with the difficulties of hearing and pronouncing the different vowel sounds in what is referred to as minimal pairs (Baker, 1981). Ms Ndlovu's difficulties with aural discrimination between 'her' and 'hair' are commonly experienced amongst mother-tongue speakers of African languages which are phonically regular and have only the five vowel sounds. The materials Ms Ndlovu was using were for English first-language speakers, based on an implicit assumption that the children already have an oral/aural understanding of the two different words 'her' and 'hair', and do not have any problem hearing the difference between the two sounds.

It is not the intention of this section to causally link progress with the HL of the teacher, because the progress of Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's learners was roughly on par. However, in Ms Ndlovu's class, observed towards the end of the year, I noticed that although most children were able to read word lists in groups, there was little evidence of comprehension of meaningful text. Although the evidence from seven sessions of forty-five minutes is insufficient to confirm this finding categorically, I did not observe any children reading fluently or confidently on their own.

The cultural mismatch between the text and the learners' experiences (Gregory, 1996) may have been a key factor, as the following lesson extract reveals. The children and Ms Ndlovu

were reading a reading sheet without pictures, taken from the text, in which Kathy calls Mark to come and watch Cowboys and Indians on the television:

> Ms Ndlovu:What is Kathy and Mark doing. What do you think they are doing from this story? Kathy and Mark. What are they doing? Yes, Thomas?
> Thomas: They are watching (*pause*) the cowboys.
> Ms Ndlovu: They are watching the cowboys, where? Hands up!
> Sylvie: They are watching television.
> Ms Ndlovu: They are watching television, angithi. Kathy and – What are they watching? They are watching something – they are watching. What are they watching? Yes, Gary?
> Gary: Generation[20]
> Ms Ndlovu: Generation? Do you remember where it says Generations here?

The child's reference to a popular TV soap opera *Generations* showed that he had grasped that the topic was television, but, apparently, did not understand that the answer Ms Ndlovu sought was in the text. The segment became even further complicated, revealing the gulf between this text and the learners' schemata (Anderson, 2004) when Ms Ndlovu asked what the Indians were doing (they were riding their horses). One child offered a definition of Indians that made sense within her own schema,

> Ms Ndlovu: OK. What are they doing? They're doing something. Yes, Jacky?
> Jacky: They are watching a show.
> Ms Ndlovu: A-a (*no).* The cowboys and the Indians. La koTV (*there, on TV*). They're doing something. Yes?
> Louis: They're doing like this. They're dancing (*Another child does a demonstration of an 'Indian dancer' with his palms together)*
> (Video log, Ms Ndlovu: 31 October 2007)

From this earnest but misplaced effort to engage with the text, one wonders how much comprehension this text really afforded the learners. Another incident involved Ms Ndlovu's repeated attempts to get one learner to read the rubric above a word list. *Read these every day*. The child repeatedly proffered the following miscue (Goodman, 1968): 'Read these *words* every day', revealing that she understood the meaning of the rubric, but, understandably, did not grasp the concept of a modifying pronoun in place of the noun. Ms Ndlovu's efforts to drill and re-drill the sentence revealed two likely factors. Firstly, that the child was not actually reading, but was repeating the phrase after the teacher and then adding her own word

[20] A popular South African television soap opera.

to make the sentence make sense. Secondly, that Ms Ndlovu was not analysing the source of the problem and hence was not able to provide the necessary strategy to address it.

In short, the factors of relative inexperience and the lack of specific training in English language teaching combined with Ms Ndlovu's status as a non-native English speaker together presented a significant challenge for both teacher and learners in this class. The fact that it is probably typical of many Grade One English LOLT classes in urban South African schools gives reason for us as educators, teacher educators and policy-makers to critically reflect on what we can do to better assist teachers in similar situations.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the issues of teachers' conceptualisations of the role of multilingualism in early literacy and on the observed impact of the classroom LOLT on children's learning progress. I have found that in the four classrooms observed, there is an alignment between teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and their practices.

I have further found that early literacy in the HL does afford children a more natural and logical means of learning to read and write, and that progress is accelerated when children are learning to read and write in a language that they know and can speak. In the process of conducting this research, I have become convinced by the evidence that, where possible, our children should receive their early literacy education in their HL.

In making this proposition, however, I do not position myself uncompromisingly, and remain aware of the situational complexities of metropolitan multilingual classrooms that sometimes preclude HL LOLT. My findings with regard to English LOLT classes in this context are that children with very limited competence in English will, given a literacy learning environment conducive to communication and supportive of communicative learning activities, communicate and develop skills in the additional language. What has been identified as a key factor in this process is the ability of the teacher to provide this conducive and supportive environment. This is not an innate ability: it requires training, materials and support, all of which those responsible for teacher development and policy need to take into account. Furthermore, in English LOLT early literacy classrooms, a greater awareness of and

utilisation of children's multilingual skills will be beneficial in terms of cognition, language development and learners' positive self-concept.

This chapter ends on a similar note to that of the previous chapter: our most precious resource in the language classroom is the teacher and she/he needs to be valued, her/his existing experience and expertise validated and her/his needs for development in the area of TESOL identified, fulfilled and mediated through a system of ongoing support. The need is vital: the potential for improved quality in the classroom is immense. The threat, if we ignore this, is that more valuable, experienced teachers will, like Busi, vote with their feet – to the ultimate detriment of Grade One children.

Chapter Seven - Summary of findings, recommendations and conclusions

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to gain insights into Grade One literacy teaching and learning strategies that might guide and inform classroom practice and teacher education in South Africa. It also sought to establish whether political and social changes have affected teachers' conceptualisations of childhood and children. In concluding this thesis I reflect on the research questions, considering the extent to which the findings are of significance for furthering understandings of literacy pedagogy and how these understandings can be translated into recommendations for policy and practice.

7.2 Teachers' beliefs about, and practices of, literacy

I sought through the interviews and classroom observations to understand early literacy teachers' conceptualisations about literacy and the links between these and their literacy practices. In the interviews, teachers' early memories of literacy practices and events were strong and significant. Many of the teachers categorically linked their current status as teachers with their early experiences, both positive and negative, of reading and writing, in the home and/or at school. This evidence of a relationship between teachers' past experiences and current practices confirms the importance for teacher education of narrative inquiry, memory work (Bell, 2002; Mitchell & Weber, 1999) and teacher cognition theory (Elbaz, 1990; Hollingsworth, 1989; Zeichner et al., 1987).

Further evidence for the impact of past experiences on current practices emerged in the evidence of a strong relationship between teachers' present practices as literacy teachers and their memories of their reading teachers. Consistent with studies that have identified the importance of prior experiences for current thinking and practice (Bell, 2002; Holland et al., 1998; Mitchell & Weber, 1999), this study has shown that many of the teachers' present self-concept seems to be strongly related to past experiences with their own early literacy teachers. An interesting qualifier of this finding, however, is that there is often a disjuncture between the respondents' expressed approach and the content of their teaching, an observation which is addressed more fully in the section below regarding learner agency.

The teaching of literacy is the central focus of the Foundation Phase curriculum in South Africa, accounting for 40% of the school timetable (with numeracy and life skills taking up 35% and 25% respectively). I had therefore anticipated that theories (implicit or explicit) of literacy pedagogy would feature highly in early grade teachers' thinking about their work and that they would have a great deal to say on the matter. The significant finding here is that, generally, teachers had difficulty in providing explanations of how they teach literacy and that there were very few who were able to provide explicit theoretical explanations of their pedagogy. Whilst I acknowledge that teachers' theories can be implicit (Zeichner et al., 1987), few of the teachers interviewed had an over-arching, clear conceptualisation of the literacy development process. This finding can be explained by the fact that most teachers in the study are recipients of inadequate apartheid-era training, but it nevertheless points to a need for redress through in-service training. It also has significance with regard to the findings about learner agency, as detailed below.

Teachers from the private schools and those implementing methodologies initiated by different non-governmental organisations seemed more confident about their learners becoming literate by the end of Grade One. However, the broad evidence of the interview data, also corroborated by systemic evaluation studies (DoE, 2003, 2005; Howie et al., 2008), would suggest that, if these responses are typical of South African teachers in general, literacy in South African public schools is not systematically well taught. The implications of this finding for these learners and for the nation at large are serious.

With regard to writing pedagogy in the early literacy classroom, in all four of the observed classrooms there was almost no evidence of expressive or imaginative writing. Even in the isiZulu HL class, where most children were able to compose words and sentences independently, there was little opportunity afforded for this practice and no encouragement for children to create their own texts. The fact that none of the teachers' memories of their own early literacy experiences included expressive writing confirms the proposition (Lortie, 1975) that early schoolroom experiences serve as apprenticeship for, and have a lasting impact on, current teaching practices. This finding points to the need for teacher education, seeking to change and improve present literacy teaching provision, and to recognise and work with these potent forces.

One of the research questions sought to establish the relationship between teachers' beliefs about the purpose of literacy and their early literacy pedagogical practices. An inconsistency between espoused belief and practical implementation seems to prevail in this regard. For example, most teachers in this study asserted the centrality of literacy as a life skill for individual personal development. Some also pointed to the vital role that literacy plays in cultural and societal development. Yet there appeared to be a pervasive lack of classroom evidence of literacy practices that would engender the development of life skills, cultural identity or self-expression. This disjuncture is unsurprising, given teachers' lack of confidence with regard to talking about pedagogy, and the identified gaps in an over-arching understanding of literacy theories. Given these limitations, teachers are likely to have difficulty knowing how to plan and implement a literacy program that achieves identified purposes.

Furthermore, very few of the teachers constructed reading as a pleasurable activity or themselves as avid readers. If we wish to develop in this current generation of young learners a love of reading, creative self-expression and a critical awareness of the power of text, then we need to seriously consider how to work with teachers first to generate these understandings and engage in these practices.

7.3 The impact of political and curriculum changes on teachers' conceptualisations of childhood and children

The emergence in the interviews of a pattern of changed conceptualisations of childhood was an unanticipated finding. Many respondents talked about memories of limited learning opportunities, of prescriptive rules in the home, about access to peers' school books or the Bible, or of reading as an imposed activity. In contrast, their interview descriptions of current practices lack any reference to limitation or prescription. These, instead, acknowledged the child's role in determining the mode, content and timing of the learning or reading event. It was this marked changed conceptualisation that gave rise to the research interest in learner agency. Despite the fact that most classroom interactions observed are still strongly regulated by the teacher, the interview data reveals a pervasive shift in conceptualisations of the child, and the classroom observations indicate, to varying degrees, an impact of these changed conceptualisations. There is a likely connection between the history of political and social change in South Africa, and the fact that these 'born-free' children are afforded more space

for their voices to be heard both at home and at school; and more potential for agency in the literacy learning process.

There is evidence in this study both from interview and observation data that these changed conceptualisations of the child have had an impact on the way the teachers conceptualise their children as literacy learners. There is widespread acknowledgement in the interview data of children as decision-makers, with different learning styles that need to be accommodated, enjoying some aspects of the literacy curriculum and not others. All these references imply a potential role for agency in the literacy learning process (Davies, 1990). And yet, as other scholars have found, 'teachers assimilate new notions into their existing belief systems and use new language to describe their teaching without changing their underlying beliefs' (Hoekstra et al., 2009: 4). Similarly in this study, whilst much of the teachers' language bears witness to agentive conceptualisations of learners, their understandings of literacy as an autonomous set of technical skills, combined with a limited grasp of the theoretical frameworks, serve to limit the extent to which these conceptualisations result in changed practices.

This disjuncture between conceptualisation and practice is a function of the limited theoretical understanding of early literacy which most teachers hold; and its impact is significant. Teachers who lack confidence with regard to understandings of literacy pedagogy are more likely to revert to traditional approaches, and in so doing to constrain learners' agency, which in turn can limit learners' potential for literacy development. Furthermore, as identified in the regulated classrooms in this study, without the confidence or ability to analyse literacy events from a theoretical perspective, where learner agency emerges spontaneously within a more formal literacy event, teachers can fail to capitalise on its learning benefits.

In Ms Jali's class, there was evidence that children had been afforded agency and that some children readily manifested this in the course of their literacy learning. In the other three classes, learner agency was not intentionally engendered in the official classroom discourse. However, where oral interaction focused on real communication, there was an obvious increase in the enthusiasm and effort to participate. Furthermore, independent actions in some children's chosen learning behaviours did emerge in spite of the official discourse. I would argue that this signals the importance of agency and the value of encouraging it within the official literacy classroom discourse.

The agentive procedures in Ms Jali's class that frame literacy learning activities and the constraining literacy practices themselves combine to produce a disjuncture, the evidence of which is a finding worthy of further interrogation. For, whilst it does not contradict Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the teacher as the mediator in the ZPD, it reveals the challenge that arises for the developmental potential of education when the teacher herself has not previously been led forth[21] into that particular ZPD.

Ms Jali, striving to empower and liberate her learners through her literacy pedagogy, is herself constrained by her own literacy history, her own way of conceptualising literacy and her own way of being a teacher of literacy – her own Discourse (Gee, 1996) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus her conceptualisations of what counts as reading and writing meant that her children's relatively advanced abilities did not achieve the heights of expression and meaning-making that could have been possible with more agentive discourse about reading and writing activities.

The implicit function of the literacy pedagogy of all the teachers in this study can be understood in terms of Popkewitz's (2001) theory of the disciplinary role of education. With regard to the teachers observed, there was relatively greater constraint on learner agency in Ms Tladi's, Ms Lyons's and Ms Ndlovu's classes, and also a slower rate of literacy learning progress, which may be linked to the reduced affordance of agentive or independent learning. However, issues of LOLT, methodology and materials were also key variables. While a direct causal link between learner agency and literacy progress cannot be categorically proven, there is sufficient evidence of a positive relationship between the two.

7.4 The Language of Learning and Teaching and its impact on the literacy learning process

Another area for exploration in this study has been the observation of the extent to which learning in the different media of instruction (Home and Additional Language) impacts on the literacy learning process; in this regard the findings were both predictable and unexpected. Based on the wealth of research evidence (Bloch, 2006; Brock-Utne et al., 2006; Cummins,

[21] The etymological root of the word educate – to lead out *educare (L)*

1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Desai, 2001; Heugh, 2000a; Macdonald, 1990, 1993; Ramirez et al., 1991; Setati & Adler, 2000; Skutnabb- Kangas, 2000; Stein, 2008), and my own professional experience in the field, I had assumed that children learning to read and write in their HL would be at an advantage compared to those struggling to do so in an additional language. The findings of this study confirmed this assumption. Early literacy teaching in the HL does seem to afford children a more effective medium of learning to read and write. A comparison of learners' reading and writing progress between the HL and the EAL classrooms suggests that learners' progress is accelerated when they are learning to read and write in a language in which they already can think, listen and speak.

However, this study has also identified that even in HL LOLT classrooms, which, like that of Ms Jali, are located in peri-urban areas, the children have access to a range of languages and may come from homes which are multilingual. Equally, there are some schools in metropolitan areas with learners having so great a diversity of HLs that the decision to use English as LOLT is, from a policy and economic perspective, the only option. The challenges and opportunities presented by these varying multilingual contexts call for more research to be undertaken, such that decisions made at school and government level about LOLT are reliable and evidence-based. Such evidence can also inform the development of a sound and comprehensive strategy for community advocacy and public information about education language policy.

Regardless of the choice of LOLT, the majority of learners in South Africa at some point in their educational career need to learn English as an Additional Language. The teaching of English as an Additional Language is a specialised field and yet none of the teachers interviewed had received any training in this field; they were basically doing the best they could in the circumstances. This presents different types of challenge for teachers who are English first-language speakers and for those who are English second-language speakers. Ms Lyons, as the only mother-tongue English-speaking teacher observed, evinced no difficulties with regard to the teaching of vocabulary. However, her orchestrated closed question approach prevented children from using English communicatively. It also privileged and gave more opportunities for practice to the children who were more competent in English and, conversely, limited the chances for development of the children who were less confident in the language. Ms Tladi and Ms Ndlovu experienced the greater challenge of mediating a language which is not their HL. Despite this, they did manage occasionally to generate

opportunities for real communication. However, there was evidence in both classes of a limited understanding of vocabulary or grammar having the potential to cause significant learner confusion.

The issue of co-sanguinity of Ms Jali, Ms Tladi and Ms Ndlovu with their learners is a strength that is often overlooked in the context of the large-scale drift towards urban multilingual schools and away from rural and township schools. Most schools in urban areas, whilst on the surface appearing to be better resourced and more functional, lack co-sanguinity between staff and students; and this may well be associated with implementation challenges ultimately resulting in reduced learner achievement. This situation is not unique to South Africa, and has been documented notably in studies in the United States (Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1983) and Britain (Gregory, 1996; Gregory & Williams, 2000). However, although it is not within the scope of this study, there is a need to further explore the impact of this mismatch on learner outcomes in South African foundation phase classrooms. Linked to this finding is the issue of the differences in socio-economic, linguistic and cultural status of schools in rural areas, townships and suburban sites. These features, without doubt, have impact on the literacy practices of these sites, and on how the curriculum is interpreted and implemented.

7.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on my own interpretation of the data and whilst I believe that the data presented and analysed in this study provides ample evidence to support them, it must be clearly stated that they do only represent the opinion of the author.

7.5.1 Teacher development

Teachers need to be able to explain, discuss and analyse their own early literacy practices in terms of the underpinning theory. This will not only build their confidence as key professionals in a vital learning area, but will also enable them to think critically and work strategically. It is not enough to know that a methodology works (or does not work) well, teachers need to know *why*, and to be able to make strategic adaptations to suit the context and needs of their learners.

At the same time, teacher educators need to recognise the foundational potency and influence of past experiences with regard to teachers' conceptualisations of early literacy. Teachers' remembered experiences of early literacy need to be validated within teacher development as a basis for understanding theory and for developing literacy teaching strategies that are theoretically sound and culturally relevant. Understandings generated from within the NLS framework about literacy as a situated culturally specific practice are of key relevance and need to be incorporated into literacy pedagogy curricula. Current pre-service and in-service teacher education also needs to ensure that students have a grounding in theoretical understandings of early literacy as well as in the skills of reading and writing pedagogy. In this regard, the inclusion of action research would be a valuable means of developing the necessary understanding of the linkages between theory and practice. One suggested focus for such action research is mentioned in 7.5.2 below.

7.5.2 Agency and Literacy Learning

Grade One children are able to make responsible choices about their learning when the classroom discourse allows for agency to flourish. Teachers may need to reflect on the extent to which they do afford and encourage learner agency in their approach to literacy teaching. For teacher educators, this finding provides evidence for the value of exploring the concept of learner agency with teaching students, and of seeing how its facilitation coheres with the principles of the new curriculum. For literacy research in South Africa, there is scope for further exploration into the role played by learner agency in effective early literacy learning. Action research involving Grade One teachers would present an interesting focus, providing the possibility to explore the impact on teachers' conceptualisations and practices as well as on learner outcomes.

7.5.3 Writing in early literacy pedagogy

The observed writing activities suggest that writing pedagogy requires further development. Whilst I recognise the value of the technical training that children received in the observed classes in letter formation, spacing and punctuation, it is important to consider how much

more children can achieve with these technical skills. The finding leads to a recommendation to teacher development provision – within the DoE, the non-governmental sector and higher education institutions (HEIs) alike. Teachers cannot be expected to conduct process writing, or understand the necessity of teaching about genre in writing practice, as detailed in the NCS, if they themselves were not exposed to these practices as learners or as student teachers. Thus, teacher development needs to start where the teachers are currently 'at' and expand teachers' understanding of the role of writing so that they can see its potential for use with their learners. Only when teachers have an experiential understanding of writing pedagogy will they be in a position to effectively implement it with their learners. This suggests a further area in which action research by teachers can play a significant role.

7.5.4 Multilingualism in early literacy pedagogy

In order to understand and value the role of multilingualism in urban classrooms there is need for further qualitative research. This study has identified that, often in spite of the formal classroom discourse, young children are resourceful and willing communicators in HL, English as an additional language and other community linguae francae. Identifying ways in which learners' multilingual skills can be harnessed to enhance literacy development is one area for further research. Another relates to gaining an understanding of the strengths and challenges involved in literacy teaching and learning where the teachers share or do not share the learners' HL. In this regard, there is need for further work to be undertaken to augment the existing research that identifies the impact of socio-economic factors on learner literacy outcomes (Howie et al., 2008). This work, however, needs to explore how co-sanguinity, or the lack of it, and teachers' different understandings of the languages curriculum affects their practices and learner outcomes.

The teaching of early literacy in the child's HL should be encouraged, supported and sustained. To ensure that the cognitive language skills are sufficiently developed in HL in order to most beneficially transfer them to an additional language, HL LOLT should continue for as long as possible and at least until the end of Grade Three. English can meanwhile be introduced early as a subject.

The issue of HL early literacy teaching is also about quality. Most of the early literacy teachers using African HLs as LOLT have been poorly trained or not trained at all in early literacy pedagogy. This alarming paucity in quality early-literacy teacher education in African-languages literacy needs to be addressed both at in-service and pre-service teacher education levels.

That said, the reality of South Africa is that the majority of the school population will need to learn English as an Additional Language, be that in Grade One or later. For those in urban schools with learners from a diversity of language backgrounds, the logical choice of LOLT is likely to be English from Grade One. In relation to both scenarios, the lack of teachers in the system who are qualified or trained in TESOL strategies requires that the DoE consider creating a specialism in this field. This would involve the training of at least one teacher per school who would then become a TESOL lead teacher, responsible for raising the standard of TESOL and for mentoring fellow teachers. At the same time, all teachers should receive some training in TESOL strategies, given the current policy regarding English LOLT subject teaching from Grade Four onwards. The DoE, HEIs and the NGO sector need to work together to provide the TESOL skills which were seen in this study to be lacking.

7.6 Conclusion

In seeking to learn more about teachers' conceptualisations and practices, this study has, for me, strengthened the awareness of the centrality of the role that teachers, and early literacy teachers in particular, play in the vulnerable, promise-filled lives of the children of this nation. I have also been strengthened, by the resilience and commitment of the teachers interviewed and observed, in the belief that Foundation Phase teachers in South Africa are dedicated to and passionate about making a difference in the lives of their learners. In the course of conducting this research, I have learnt a lot more than I knew before about the teaching of early literacy in South African schools. I hope that in the selection, presentation and analysis of the data I have also shed light on these practices for others who, unlike me, have not had the privilege of being in classrooms over an extended period of time to watch and learn how things work.

The key finding of this study concerns the links between early experiences, conceptualisations and practice. Teachers' early experiences of literacy influence their conceptualisations of

literacy pedagogy, and these in turn inform their practice. The relationship between experiences, conceptualisations and practice is complex, but one that is of central importance both for teacher education and policy implementation. This study has shown that there is often a disjuncture between agentive conceptualisations and limiting practice. This disjuncture, unless recognised and addressed, may continue to thwart efforts to address learner achievement levels. Teacher training needs to be grounded in theory which informs teachers' ability to effectively plan, implement, analyse and evaluate their literacy practice. However it also needs to validate teachers' conceptualisations, and to afford the opportunity to reflect on how the disjunctures can impact on learning outcomes. This finding poses a challenge to the relevance of early literacy teacher education. It strongly suggests that, in generating understandings of the impact of conceptualisations and other powerful discourses on early literacy classroom enactments, the curriculum must ensure equal space, alongside the cognitive and psycholinguistic models, for socio-cultural understandings of early literacy.

Implicit in all the above findings is that to seek 'the one' early literacy approach that works better than others is fruitless unless it also takes account of the central role of the teacher, not only in terms of knowledge and skills but also of conceptualisations, past experiences, attitudes and beliefs. Thus the best contribution we can make to early literacy development in South Africa is to invest more in the intensive and sustained training and support of teachers. Teacher professional development needs to address the realities of the classroom with regard to teachers' conceptualisations, and particularly with regard to the interesting and important disjunctures between these and their enacted practices.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Letters and consent forms for district directors, principals, teachers and parents

i Information and Consent form: District Managers

Date

Dear

Re: Research into Early Literacy Teaching and Learning

My name is Paula Gains and I am engaged in doctoral studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am also the National Training Manager of the Molteno Project and it is because of my involvement with early literacy provision in this project that I have embarked on this study. I am investigating teachers' concepts of early literacy and how these perceptions/conceptualisations relate to their classroom practice.

As you may be aware, the Molteno Project has been training teachers in *Breakthrough to Literacy* in your schools and working collaboratively with your two LF's xxxx and xxxxx.

In this first year of my fieldwork, I would like to interview teachers about their own literacy histories, the relationship between their own experiences (as literacy learners and parents of literacy learners) and their own literacy practices as teachers. Next year, I hope to focus intensively on a very small number of teachers and observe their classrooms over a period of time.

I would like to seek your permission to interview a several teachers (between 8 and 10) in the xxxxx schools that we are working with. Teachers' participation will be totally voluntary and I will assure them of confidentiality as a matter of course and anonymity if requested.

The ultimate goal of this study is for the findings to make literacy education more relevant and responsive to context and participants. Through the study I hope to provide insights that will contribute to literacy research and practice both within South African and worldwide.

I will be happy to address any questions or requests for more information which you may have.

Please sign the form below if you are willing to grant permission for me to interview teachers in schools in your District.

Yours sincerely
Paula Gains
PhD Student, University of the Witwatersrand
and
National Training Manager, The Molteno Project

The signatory below grants permission for the abovementioned research to be carried out with Grade One teachers in District xxxxxx

……. ……

District Manager Date

STAMP

ii Information and Consent form: School Principals

Date

Dear Principal

Re: Research into Early Literacy Teaching and Learning

My name is Paula Gains and I am engaged in doctoral studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am also the National Training Manager of the Molteno Project and it is because of my involvement with early literacy provision in this project that I have embarked on this study. I am investigating educators' concepts of early literacy and how these perceptions/conceptualisations relate to their classroom practice.

As you may be aware, the Molteno Project has been training teachers in *Breakthrough to Literacy* in your school since 2004..

In this first year of my fieldwork, I would like to interview teachers about their own literacy histories, the relationship between their own experiences (as literacy learners and parents of literacy learners) and their own literacy practices as teachers. Next year, I hope to focus intensively on a very small number of teachers and observe their classrooms over a period of time.

I would like to seek your permission to interview a several teachers (between 8 and 10) in your school. Teachers' participation will be totally voluntary and I will assure them of confidentiality as a matter of course and anonymity if requested.

The ultimate goal of this study is for the findings to make literacy education more relevant and responsive to context and participants. Through the study I hope to provide insights that will contribute to literacy research and practice both within South African and worldwide.

I will be happy to address any questions or requests for more information which you may have.

Please sign the form below if you are willing to grant permission for me to interview your teachers.

Yours sincerely

Paula Gains
PhD Student, University of the Witwatersrand
and
National Training Manager, The Molteno Project

The signatory below grants permission for the abovementioned research to be carried out with Grade One teachers at this school

……. ……
Principal Date

……. ……
Silver Grove B: Chairperson Date

SCHOOL STAMP

iii Information and Consent form: Educators

Date

Dear Educator

Re: Research into Early Literacy Teaching and Learning

My name is Paula Gains and I am engaged in doctoral studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am also the National Training Manager of the Molteno Project and it is because of my involvement with early literacy provision in this project that I have embarked on this study. I am investigating teachers' concepts of early literacy and how these perceptions/conceptualisations relate to classroom practice.

As you may be aware, the Molteno Project has been training teachers in *Breakthrough to Literacy* in your school since 2004.

In this first year of my fieldwork, I would like to interview teachers about their own literacy histories, the relationship between their own experiences (as literacy learners and parents of literacy learners) and their own literacy practices as teachers. Next year, I hope to focus intensively on a very small number of teachers and observe their classrooms over a period of time.

I would like to seek your agreement to participate in an interview. This participation is totally voluntary and you have every right to decline if you are not interested or able to participate. The interview will last approximately one hour. I will assure you of confidentiality as a matter of course and anonymity if requested. If any part of the interview appears in my research report, I will show you the text and include your comments, if any, in the final draft.

The ultimate goal of this study is for the findings to make literacy education more relevant and responsive to context and participants. Through the study I hope to provide insights that will contribute to literacy research and practice both within South African and worldwide.

I will be happy to address any questions or requests for more information which you may have.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, please sign the form below.

Yours sincerely

Paula Gains
PhD Student, University of the Witwatersrand

The signatory below agrees to take part in an interview.

I _____consent to being interviewed by Paula Gains for her study on Teachers' conceptualisations of early literacy. I understand that:

- participation in the interview is voluntary
- the interview will take approximately 60 minutes
- I may refuse to answer any questions I do not wish to answer
- I may withdraw from the study at any time
- No information that may identify me will be included in the research report and my responses will remain confidential.

……. ……
Signed Date

……. ……
Educator Date

OFFICIAL STAMP

iv

PO Box 30696
Braamfontein
2017

23rd April 2008

Dear Parent

Re: Research into Early Literacy Teaching and Learning

My name is Paula Gains and I am a PhD student at University of Witwatersrand doing research into Literacy teaching and learning.

The Gauteng Department of Education and has given me full permission to carry out this research in three different Gauteng schools. One of these is Summerwood Primary School.

Last year I was observing the teaching and learning of reading and writing in the class that you child was attending.

As part of the research, I have taken some video/DVD recordings of the teaching and learning and have made copies of some of the learners' writing. These recordings are a very useful means of helping us to know more about how teachers teach and how learners learn.

I would like to refer to these recordings and photocopies when I write up my thesis. I would also like to be able to show short clips from the videos to other researchers and students for academic purposes.

Your child **may** appear in some of the video clips and so I need your permission to use the material for my research report and to show some of the video material for academic purposes. Confidentiality will be preserved; your child's name will not be used in any written or spoken reports.

If you agree, please sign **BOTH** parts of the consent form below. One is for the use of the video material and one is about showing the video material.

Yours faithfully

Paula Gains
PhD Student
University of the Witwatersrand

CONSENT FORM

Child's name……

PART 1

I consent to video clips of my child and his/her written work being referred to in the thesis and research papers of Paula Gains. I understand that the material will be used for research purposes only.

I understand that this agreement is voluntary.

Name: ……..

Signature: ……

Date: ……

PART 2

I consent to video clips of my child and his/her written work being shown to students and/or other researchers for the purposes of learning more about how children learn to read and write.

I understand that this agreement is voluntary.

Name: ……..

Signature: ……

Date: ……

Appendix B

YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES - PRE SCHOOL ENTRY

1. I believe that people's understanding of literacy is strongly related to their own experiences of literacy learning. Can you share some insights into how each of you learned to read and or write?

3. As a child, were you aware of reading and or writing before you went to school? E.g. were there any printed materials in your home or community? What was the place of reading in your childhood? (Did reading come into playing games, newspapers, magazines, playing with other children)

4. Can you tell me what you remember about anything in your life before school that involved reading or writing?

5. Was there anyone significant in your life who helped you to learn to read? E.g. parent, a brother/sister. Teacher, friend, grandparent etc etc. What support networks helped you to progress with reading? Did anyone provide you with books? Were there any public libraries?

6. Story telling. Did you have story telling at home?

7. How do you think your early experiences have impacted on your attitudes to and perceptions of literacy now?

YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES – POST-SCHOOL ENTRY

8. Thinking back to when you were a child, what kind of things did you do when you came home from school? How did you relate to school? What were the differences between play and school activity?

9. How did you learn to write? What were your early experiences of writing?

10. Are your experiences of your own process of learning to read happy ones or not? Please explain.

YOUR OWN EARLY LITERACY EXPERIENCES AND THE CURRENT SITUATION

11. Are your own experiences of learning to read the same or different from those of:
    your learners
    your own children/children in your family

12. Do you play any part in your children's (or any other children's) learning to read?

13. Do you do homework with your own children/grandchildren? Do you read to your child? Or does the child read? Or do you read along with them?

IN THE CLASSROOM

14. What do you think is the best way to teach reading? What activities help? Describe them.

15. How do you teach reading? Describe it to me; talk me through it step by step.

16. What is your approach to teaching reading? E.g. whole books/graded readers/phonics/syllabic approach/Look and Say
or a combination of some/all of these.

17. What materials or methods do you use to teach reading?

18. What are the difficulties children have in learning to read and write?

19. What do your learners enjoy about learning to read?

20. What do they dislike about learning to read?

21. Has the NCS helped or hindered you in your teaching of reading? Why do you say that?

22. If you had all the resources and time available would you use different materials or change the way you teach reading? What would you do?

23. Which do you think has more impact on children developing reading skills? School - home - friends – church (or other religious activity), TV, other sources (name them)

THE PURPOSES, USES AND STATUS OF LITERACY

24. Why do we need to learn to read and write? What are the purposes of literacy? What are the most common uses of literacy in our current society?

25. Do you think that what we need reading for is changing? Do we need different skills or the same skills e.g. as when you were a child?

26. Do you think that the children attach a high status to literacy? On what do you base that answer.

27. Do you think the children's parents attach a high status to Literacy? On what do you base that answer?

28. What in your view is the status of someone who reads a lot? Or never reads? Or cannot read?

29. What do you spend most of your reading time, reading? What do you notice about others' reading habits?

30. Do you think that the nature of reading has changed? Do you think there are new kinds of reading needs?

31. Do you think that reading will continue to have the same status or will it have changed by, say, 2018?

Appendix C – Extract of Bassi's interview transcript

B: when I was in Sub A our teacher had a child who was a year older than me and then they were staying at school, they had houses at school. So after school we'd go there and play and normally when we play, we play like, she's a teacher and we are daughter was teaching us. She was pretending to be a teacher. So in most cases, she was the one who's helping us after school when we were playing.

P: Cos she knew more?

B: Cos the mother was a teacher, the father was a principal of a school.

P: What was your thought about a girl the same age as you that know more than you?

B: She was one year older than me and the parents were educated, the father was a principal and the mother was a teacher. And after school we'd go to the house and play school, she'll be a teacher and then we are kids. Because she was exposed to many things at home. When we were not. Nobody at home was educated like, their parents.

P: So did she write stuff on a board or …?

B: Mm, we used this, what d'you call this? We used the card boxes to write on the card boxes with chalk and then she would teach us on the.. She would be a teacher. She would have a stick and say, 'Read!' and then in that way we learned how to read and then we learned how to write.

P: Did you enjoy that play?

B: We did (*emphatic*) ----I learnt to write at schools when I was in Sub A and then after that when the principal's child was teaching us that `Write!'. When she was hitting us on the hand say ` Write it on the air!' Then we start writing on the floor and on the air and fortunately we had a Grade One teacher who was good in hand writing so we learnt from there that our teacher want us to write like this so when she was hitting us on the head/hand (?) and saying say 'Can we write 'b' properly it goes up and ...' Then we learned how to write just when we were playing.