

Abstract

This study examines literacy experiences of grade 3 learners as they transition into grade 4 in two primary schools in Gauteng. In the first school IsiZulu and Sepedi are the languages of teaching and learning in the foundation phase and learners transitioned to English in grade 4, while English is the language of learning and teaching in the second school. The study poses four questions. The first explores whether reading and writing in the foundation phase adequately prepare learners for the academic and cognitive demands of the intermediate phase. The second and third questions investigate the strategies used by learners and teachers to negotiate the transition and how those strategies could be understood and explained in relation to the increasing academic and cognitive demands of the literacy curriculum. The fourth question examines the role of language as children transition into grade 4.

The study draws on the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (2005) and adopts a socio-cultural orientation to literacy, drawing on scholarship in New Literacy Studies (Street, 2007). The research design was a collective case study in the qualitative paradigm. Classroom observation, interviews and document analyses gathered over 9 months comprise the data. Two grade 3 classes were observed for three months in each school before ten focus learners were identified and these children were followed into grade 4. One grade 4 class was studied in each school for six months.

What emerges from the data is that, at a macrosystemic level, curriculum change is a major factor in what happens to learners as they move across grades. The time of this study coincides with a curriculum transition from the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of 2011 and 2012. When curriculum transition was not clear to teachers, and they did not buy into it, the effect on the mesosystem was confusion, anxiety and frustration on both teachers and learners that resulted in negative attitudes and poor delivery.

The choices of language of learning and teaching schools make for the literacy instruction of their learners an important factor in transition. Language alone is a huge demand and resource factor (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) in learner literacy learning. In both schools the majority of learners accessed literacy through languages that were different from their home languages. This compromised learners' access to and conception of academic texts.

There are complex physical, structural, psychological and academic transitions a learner must deal with at the mesosystemic level on reaching grade 4. Inadequate literacy skills impact negatively on learners' academic and social transition from one phase to another in multiple ways. Psychologically, learners had a sense of fear of the next grade and when their fears were confirmed it made transition challenging when dealing with grade 4 work. Structurally, the organisation of teaching changed from one teacher to many teachers, and hence many subjects with different expectations on learners. Some teachers had inadequate pedagogical knowledge, did not communicate within and across grades, and had generally autonomous conceptions of literacy, resulting in learners' literacy development being compromised.

At the microsystemic (classroom) level learners were confronted by grade 4 academic and literacy demands that the foundation phase did not equip them for. Reading and writing practices changed in grade 4. Vocabulary, fluency and comprehension skills learners brought from grade 3 became inadequate for the demands of grade 4 work. Also absent in grade 4 was the environmental print and other supports learners had in grade 3.

When learners' complex, challenging situations were compounded by poor teaching, inconsistent literacy practices, lack of resources, large classes and timetabling issues some learners lost interest, accepted their fate and developed negative attitudes to schooling. Carelessness surfaced, written work was not prioritised and often not completed, while other learners sought support from the exosystem in the form of parents and siblings to hedge the challenges of transition.

Consequent to this study there was a realisation among teachers in the two schools that they could do something about transition and literacy. An appetite for knowledge and revisiting of pedagogical practices was rekindled among some teachers. Transition and literacy became topical issues in both formal and informal teacher conversations. This raises questions about the coordination and smooth cooperation between systems which further research may tap into.