

## Building school-based reading practices

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Traditionally, teachers try to promote reading by bringing texts on topics they feel are interesting to learners into the classroom, such as stories about young people, biographies of pop-stars, or books about sports or sporting personalities. We argue that such attempts by teachers to simulate middle class home based reading practices in working class schools are not effective in building a reading culture among young learners. The mismatch between learners' home and school cultures inhibits this. Our study of working class children's literate actions and interactions in a school context indicated that reading practices are more likely to be supported through school-based activities. This involves a re-conceptualisation of a reading culture developing out of academic subjects and their related activities, rather than as developing out of home-based activities. Our research indicated that, for working class children, reading occurs more "naturally" in the context of the academic subjects which they study at school, rather than in areas traditionally associated with learners' out-of-school interests. As reading is associated with academic success more generally, we propose that integrating supplementary reading activities into mainstream academic subjects, particularly where mainstream subjects are interesting to learners, is effective in the promotion of reading at school.

### Background

This study was concerned with finding ways to support and develop the reading practices of pre-teenage learners in a community-based primary school which serves several townships on the periphery of Cape Town: Gugulethu, Heinz Park, Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain, Portlands, Tafelsig, and Westridge. The learners in the Grade 6 class, who were the focus of this study, speak a variety of languages: 48% speak Afrikaans at home, 23% speak English at home, 20% speak Xhosa at home, and 9% consider themselves to be Afrikaans-English bilingual.

In a study sample of 60 learners (whose school registration records we were able to access), only 25 (40%) of the learners' parents had had a basic schooling, and some form of additional work-related training. None of the learners' parents had obtained post-school qualifications. Thirty-three (55%) children had a single parent (almost always a mother, there was only one single-parent father in the study group), however, 20 (33%) of these 'single-parent' learners lived with extended families. Twenty-two (37%) children lived in a nuclear family, consisting of both parents and siblings. Five (8%) learners lived with grandparents. Only 32 (54%) of the parents were formally employed and the others, although not formally employed, were nevertheless active in the informal economy, or did piecemeal work. All parents, whether formally employed or not, tended to work long hours, do shift-work, and have little time for leisure activities. Of the 20 families who were selected for interviews, none spent what little time they had for leisure in reading activities. Leisure time was usually spent playing or watching sport, attending church, participating in church-related activities, socialising with friends and relatives, and watching television. None of the families whom we interviewed could afford to buy books, magazines, or even newspapers.

Although access to general reading matter is available in public libraries, and the areas from which learners were drawn are reasonably well served with libraries, the libraries tend to close at 16:00 or 17:00, as these areas are perceived to be unsafe after dark. This means that it is difficult for parents to take children to the library after work. There was no book-shop, or second-hand book exchange, in any of the learners' home environments. The closest shopping centre, which most parents and learners frequent, does not have a bookshop. In fact, the learners in this study had never been to a bookshop on their own or with their parents. Most families receive *The Plainsman*, the local free community newspaper, on a weekly basis, and local news items and events are discussed by parents, but not usually with children.

In interviews with parents, it was revealed that many had had an unhappy relationship with books and reading. One parent remembered being asked to read aloud in the class: "Ek het so veel foute gemaak ... hulle het my uitgelag" [I made so many mistakes ... they laughed at me]. Five of the parents interviewed were in their 20s, and identified with others of their age group, preferring "to go out with friends to clubs and dances", than to read. Three of the interviewees' children were in the care of a grandmother (or older family member) who was not able to read or write herself. The older caregivers understood that they were expected to attend to homework and other school-related activities, but were not able to assist, due to their own low literacy levels. For all of the parents and caregivers (of all ages) whom we interviewed, the idea of reading to their children was something strange.

In interviews with the children, they claimed to have little time for leisure activities, as they had to do homework, participate in organised sports, do household chores, and help with the care of younger siblings. When they had free time, they preferred to relax in front of the television. Most learners told us that their parents did not engage in reading activities with them, such as reading bedtime stories, and the majority of the learners had not seen their parents reading a book or magazine for enjoyment or relaxation purposes.

### Research design

The main source of data in the study was a series of classroom-based observations, which were done over a six-month period with 60 Grade 6 learners. During the period January to June 2003, 28 observations were done by the researchers. The Grade 6 class was targeted for the study, as it was felt that there was a "window of opportunity" for the 11–12 year old group to develop a positive attitude towards reading, before the onset of the teenage years and their associated pressures. The school had three Grade 6 classes, with each class consisting of approximately 40 learners. Of the total group of 120 Grade 6 learners, 18 learners were identified by their Afrikaans, English and Xhosa teachers as "good" readers, 42 as "average" readers, and 60 as "slow" readers in their home languages. This assessment was based on reading comprehension and reading speed diagnostic tests administered by the language teachers in the first week of term. The "good" and "average" readers were excluded from this study, which focused on the 60 "slow" readers, identified as such by the three language teachers.

The researchers developed an observation schedule which focused on the learners' reading or reading related activities. The observation schedule identified: a) the texts that learners selected or requested

(when a learner requested reading matter from the teacher, or purposively selected a book from a reading display the researchers noted its title and wrote up a brief description of its contents or subject area); b) the amount of time spent on a reading text (here the researchers tried to identify levels of learner engagement, for example, by indicating how much time a learner was able to concentrate and focus on the reading task, before being distracted by friends or other activities); and c) the learner's enjoyment of the reading task (for example, when the learner asked to take the book home or to continue the reading activity in class, we noted this as an indicator of "enjoyment"). After some of the observations, learners were interviewed by the researchers in order to find out why a particular book or other reading item had been selected, and why the reading activity appeared to be successful or unsuccessful. Five teachers participated in the study: the three language teachers (Afrikaans, English, and Xhosa) and two subject teachers (Geography and Physical Science). School records of the learners in the study were used to access contextual, background information on the learners. In addition, 20 families (who responded to letters from the researchers requesting interviews) were interviewed in their homes about their histories of, and current relationships with, reading.

### The traditional practices of reading teachers

Like many teachers who try to promote learners' reading competence, as well as their enjoyment of reading, the language teachers in this study had, prior to the research based intervention, arranged reading corners in their classrooms, and had selected reading materials from the school's resource centre and the public library, as well as from their own books. The English and Afrikaans teachers' reading corner contained a wide selection of books, including fiction and non-fiction, and children's magazines. The English teacher also supplied her own audio tapes of children's classics, such as *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, *Just so stories* by Rudyard Kipling, *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. There is an acknowledged shortage of Xhosa reading material generally, and a dearth of reading material for the pre-teen group, which meant that the Xhosa teacher's reading corner was generally not well supplied with reading books, although Xhosa magazines and newspapers (such as *Bona* and *Imvo*) were available for browsing. The teachers arranged for all the children to acquire library cards, and a mobile library served the school with weekly visits, enabling learners to choose their own books from the selection supplied by the library. Learners did occasionally go to the library, accompanied by one or more of the teachers. However, the walk from the school to the library was considered by most teachers to be unsafe, and so these visits were not frequent.

On most days, in all three language classes, learners were allocated a 35-minute reading period. On some days the 35-minute period was allocated to reading aloud and story telling. In these periods, a segment of a book was usually read aloud by the teacher, and this was followed with a general class discussion on the book. On other days this period was allocated to individual silent reading. Typically, learners would select books or magazines to read from the "reading corner" displays. It was the 35-minute silent reading periods that were observed for this study.

### Why the traditional practices of reading teachers are not effective

A "reading-for-leisure" culture is difficult to create in a classroom context, because such a culture is more appropriately constructed in the social and cultural environment of the home and community. The problem with reading corners containing extra-academic reading texts, or decontextualized visits to the public library, is that these activities tend to be imposed upon children — and choices about their leisure reading matter are usually made by the teacher or librarian. Most of the children in this study did not use the library corner on their own initiative, and only used the corner when required to do so for silent reading

times. During these periods, many children "pretended" to read, while others played games or carried on whispered conversations with their friends in preference to actual silent reading. During oral reading periods, many of the children were restless, fidgeted, talked or played games with each other. Reading researchers have found a similar reluctance among young school children of working class backgrounds to read books that are chosen for them or imposed upon them by teachers of middle class backgrounds (Purcell-Gates, 1995).

If traditional reading corners are not effective, how can teachers create a "reading friendly" classroom environment that will play at least some part in promoting learners' reading practices? The answer seems to lie in the creation of both a culturally responsive classroom environment and pedagogy, although the practical achievement of these aims is complex and difficult.

Working within a "social practices" model, theorists and practitioners have begun to offer some insights, as well as practical suggestions, for how to build and sustain a reading culture among children (and adults) who do not practice reading as part of their everyday social or cultural activities. Fingret & Drennon (1997), for example, suggest family literacy activities that can involve the whole family in meaningful events such as family histories, family reading projects, community book exchanges, mobile library facilities and other culturally meaningful activities.

Parental involvement in children's literacy education has long been accepted as a central element in effective schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Schneider & Coleman, 1993). Scribner & Cole (1981) describe literacy as a social practice in which learners are apprenticed into group membership. Can such apprenticeship be successfully initiated in schools for children whose parents' literacy practices and experiences are different from those that the schools advocate? Or does this kind of initiation cut children off from their parents and home culture? Wong-Fillmore (1985), in a report on emergent literacy through the medium of English, has convincingly argued for the latter. Wagner (1993) expands: "If literacy is culture, then intervening with or 'tampering' with literacy ... is to change, sometimes forcibly, the way people live". Many researchers have similarly argued that the imposition of an "autonomous" model of literacy (Street, 1984), in which literacy is seen as separate from culture, may be a significant part of the reason why so many attempts at increasing literacy levels fail.

The literature on inter-generational literacy programmes includes a surprising number of negative programme evaluations: researchers describe programmes that "train" or "coerce" parents in how to read to their children (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988); programmes that "blame the victim", that imply that homes have "no literacy", and that perpetuate the "we know, you don't know" dichotomy (Shockley, 1995). White, Taylor and Moss's (1992) review of parental involvement in programmes is devastatingly negative: the authors conclude that programmes aimed at immigrant school going children and their parents, when encouraging parental involvement in, for example, supplementary reading, must be careful to value parents' and children's selection of materials, and diversity in ways of telling stories, teaching, speaking and thinking.

A meta-analysis comparing 29 studies on reading initiatives (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995), does not support literacy enhancement through leisure book reading unconditionally; the authors suggest that if the reading situation is stressful and the interaction ineffective, insistence on reading for what teachers assume to be "pleasure", without attention to family literacy habits, is likely to be counterproductive.

### The research initiative

The researchers were unwilling to suggest literacy interventions which might harm learners' self esteem, or make them experience negative feelings towards their home cultures. Instead, it was decided to integrate reading with other academic activities. The intention was to see if it was possible to support the children's reading in the learning areas,

rather than attempt to promote reading in a decontextualised way, or in a way that seemed to be at odds with learners' home cultures. At the start of the project, the learners responded to a questionnaire which asked them to identify their favourite school subjects. Fifty-two (86%) of the "slow" reading group identified Geography (officially Human and Social Sciences) and 45 (75%) identified Science (officially Natural Sciences and Technology) as their favourite subjects. Due to the high level of interest in the Geography and Science classes, the researchers decided to support the "slow" readers' interest in these subjects with supplementary reading texts on the topics covered over the six month research period, as a way of both building strengths in the subject areas, and as a way of promoting reading.

With this in mind, the researchers collected books and magazines on a variety of the topics identified by the Geography and Science teachers. Well-illustrated and "child-friendly" materials were readily available in Afrikaans and English. No books or magazines on geography or science were available in Xhosa. Books were supplied to the Xhosa teacher in English, and our research assistant undertook to write Xhosa translations for some of the key topics. Several of the books that we selected were intended for older readers and had fairly complex diagrams, which explained various natural phenomena. Scollon and Scollon (1981) point to the importance of affective factors, such as interest in a topic, in the achievement of literacy outcomes generally regarded to be in advance of one's normal level. For example, children that are interested in computers can read and comprehend texts which are more complex than the texts they usually read. Furthermore, reading with engagement and expectation of enjoyment leads to more time spent reading — the reader gains more practice, and thus greater fluency, which is a major predictor of long-term reading outcomes. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) points out that many middle class children have sufficient extrinsic motivation to keep them involved in literacy acquisition, since they believe parents' and teachers' precepts that literacy is a prerequisite to school success and achievement in later life. But for children who have less reason to believe in literacy as a route to success — for example, children with parents or other adult acquaintances who are unemployed despite their education — reading "enjoyment" (provided that what is enjoyable in reading is defined by the readers themselves) may be crucial to keeping children focused on literacy long enough to make serious gains.

The researchers hoped that the learners themselves would request reading materials that engaged their interest. Initially, it was ensured that there was a good choice of reading matter which consisted of both teacher-selected "traditional" reading matter for the 11–12 year old age group (fiction and non-fiction), and non-fiction, subject-based reading materials to support and develop topics in the Grade 6 Geography and Science curricula. Each week, the reading teachers would display books on the topics in Geography and Science that were being taught that week. These books, magazines, and encyclopaedias were opened at the relevant pages. This was because most of the science and geography books that we purchased for the project contained a variety of topics, and the relevant items were difficult to find, without advanced literacy skills, such as using the table of contents, subject index or skimming and scanning techniques. These reading strategies were in advance of the "slow" readers' development.

### Research findings: supplementary literacy practices

Our observations of 28 "slow" readers in the 35-minute period of silent reading identified a) the texts chosen by learners themselves, b) the length of time that learners were engaged with the text, and c) indications of their levels of enjoyment, such as learners wanting to continue reading, requesting to continue reading during the break, or wanting to take the text home. There were 28 observations, with a different child (previously identified as a "slow" reader) as the focus of each observation. During one observation period (the 35-minute period of silent reading), a child was likely to select more than one book. During a reading period a child might select, for example, two Science texts, one Geography text, and one general interest text from the

reading corner. These choices were noted by the researchers. A child might also, for example, request a science text from the teacher if no science books were available (because other learners were reading them). These requests were similarly noted. The researchers used a stop watch to time how long each of the "slow" readers was able to sustain their silent reading. The researchers also noted whether or not the child requested to continue reading beyond the silent reading period, to read during break time (in cases where the break followed immediately after the silent reading period), or requested to take the text home. Table 1 gives the research findings. Under the heading "General" we include fiction and non-fiction appropriate to the 11–12 year old age group.

**Table 1** Research findings

Reading texts	Science	Geography	General
Number of learner selections/ requests	36	28	26
Focused time on reading activity	12 min.	7 min.	2 min.
"Enjoyment" indicators	13	11	0

Among the 28 "slow" readers observed, there were 36 learner initiated selections, or requests, for books on Science. An average concentrated reading time of 12 minutes was spent on the science texts. We noted 13 requests to take home, or to continue reading a science text. There were 28 selections or requests for books on Geography. Learners spent approximately 7 minutes of focused reading time on the geography texts, and there were 11 requests to take geography books home. Learners selected general interest books 26 times (no requests were noted), and spent a few minutes browsing through these books.

Science texts comprised 40% of all selections/requests, Geography texts 31% of all selections/requests, and general interest books 29% of all selections. In the course of a 35-minute period, the learners in the study devoted, on average, 12 minutes to reading science texts, 7 minutes to geography texts, and 2 minutes to reading general interest texts. The remaining 14 minutes were spent browsing through the books prior to making a selection, waiting for other learners to complete their selections, moving between the display and their desk, whispering to fellow learners, or engaging in other non-reading behaviours). Science texts comprised 54% whilst Geography texts comprised 46% of texts which learners wanted to carry on reading, read during break times, or take home. There were no similar requests for the general interest books. Our findings indicated that there was a preference among the study group of "slow" readers for reading texts on topics in Science and Geography.

When we interviewed learners and teachers, we established that the learners' choices had frequently been motivated by the specific topics in Geography and Science that were currently being studied. While learners would pick up and glance through children's literature texts or general interest books (such as the biography of a pop-singer or sports personality), they were attracted to the displays of geography and science books, chose these more often, and were more engaged when they studied the photographs of experiments similar to those which they had done, animals or insects they had studied, and read the captions and explanations. The full text of the book, chapter or section of the book was not usually read by the "slow" readers, but they nevertheless spent concentrated and focused time studying photographs, reading captions, text boxes, labelled diagrams, as well as some sections of continuous text. This interest in academic topics grew particularly strong when the academic subjects included exciting activities, such as field trips.

### Field Trip: Table Mountain

In April 2002 the geography teacher, accompanied by the three language teachers, took the Grade 6 learners on a guided tour of Table

Mountain. Whilst the outing was not planned as a "reading lesson", the language teachers took advantage of the geography site visit to encourage reading around the topic by arranging classroom displays of reading materials on Table Mountain. The excitement that the children experienced on the cable car, and touring the top of the mountain stimulated their interest, not only in the actual environment and geography of Cape Town, but in reading about it.

The language teachers reported that this was one of the few times that most of the class responded enthusiastically to a reading task. The Table Mountain event promoted more reading activity than any of the other reading corner activities, including the science and geography texts on recent class work. The learners were keen to read brochures and books and study maps on Table Mountain, the cable car and the flora and fauna. Most of the learners therefore responded positively to the texts and materials they were provided with, and asked their language and geography teachers for additional reading matter about aspects of the outing which were not part of the display: the "dassies" and the machinery of the cable car were of particular interest.

The outing was a particularly memorable and meaningful event, which the children seemed to enjoy "re-living" through texts and images of the mountain — and the outing inspired the children to seek out more information on Table Mountain. The reading matter provided by the teachers was enthusiastically read. For several weeks after the outing, the children requested more information on the mountain. Adult tourist interest books on Cape Town and Table Mountain became the most popular reading texts during the weeks following the field trip.

The use of activity settings for stimulating emergent literacy has been documented by researchers as a strategy for promoting reading. For example, research by Gallimore and Goldenberg (1993) and by Clay (1979) emphasise the importance of activities — particularly interesting and stimulating activities — as a way into literacy. Whilst it is not possible, given the constraints of the school and parents' limited resources, to engage in similar stimulating activities on a frequent basis, the idea of the stimulating event, such as the Table Mountain field trip, is now more fully understood by the subject and language teachers as an opportunity — not only for stimulating subject interest — but for stimulating reading.

### The MTN Science Centre

The next stimulating event in the Grade 6 curriculum occurred two months later. In June 2002 the learners visited a "hands-on" science centre at Canal Walk, a shopping mall in a suburb of Cape Town. The centre instructors gave the children a short, informative talk on the centre and the exhibits, and thereafter they were free to experiment with the displays. They played with the various computer simulations, they read maps and charts, and did technological experiments with the equipment provided by the centre.

Preparing to "capitalise" on the learners' interest in the science and technology exhibition, the language teachers made a pre-visit to the centre and purchased books on the technologies on display, as well as some of the science-based games on sale in the centre. Integrated displays were then arranged in the reading corners. For example, a book on lenses and how they worked was displayed together with a real magnifying glass and a collection of small items, which could be studied with the magnifying glass. A book on magnets was accompanied by a drawing game consisting of iron filings on a magnetic base, which could be manipulated with a magnetic pen, and then wiped clean. These displays were prepared in advance, and were ready for the children when they returned from the visit to the science centre.

Gallimore and Goldenberg's (1993) thesis on the promotion of literacy through activity setting was supported by the learners' behaviour after the visit to the science centre. The children in the study showed a similar interest in reading about technologies, while simultaneously experimenting with them. The various technological devices at the centre had fascinated the learners, and the classroom displays (while not as dramatic) elicited similar interest, while at the same time,

learners could examine books on the science and technologies which they had seen and experienced. The following is one of the researchers' field notes, made during an observation:

[Learner A] playing with [magnet] drawing game ... now reading text on magnet game ... now studying magnet game ... now studying [diagrams in the text] to see how the thing works (Observation, 12-06-2002).

Learner A's fascination with the magnet game, and his desire to find out how it worked, led him to study the explanatory text and diagrams. The learner was clearly engaged in a process of realisation that there were texts that contained the sort of information that he wanted to access. Snow and Kurland (2000), in a short research paper, show how children's fascination with activities involving magnets stimulated their reading on this topic. These events, which were not intended to stimulate reading, were nevertheless powerful reading stimuli and, when followed up with learner initiated reading activities, were found to be effective ways in which schools can play a role in building a culture of reading amongst learners.

### Conclusions

What has emerged from this research is that children's reading is very complex and if it is to be adequately supported, it is likely to need a "multi-pronged" approach. By this we mean, it is not sufficient to offer supplementary reading texts and activities at school when these are not consistent with practices in the home. Often it is the teachers or the librarians who choose texts that they think are suitable, but as several research projects have shown, the children's own reading choices (for example, comics or magazines about computers, video games, or popular music) is a powerful route into other texts (Whitehurst *et al.*, 1988). It is counter-productive for teachers, parents or librarians to make judgments about children's leisure reading for this is an area which the children should "own" and be empowered to make their own choices and decisions (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

The role that schools play in promoting supplementary reading should be a supportive one, rather than a directive one. Traditionally, the reading teacher lays out a selection of what he/she considers to be "interesting" texts. We are not suggesting that this practice be stopped, for throughout the study period there continued to be a good selection of general interest books available and these tended to be well used by the children who fell outside of this study, that is the "good" and "average" readers. General interest books were sometimes read, or browsed through, by the "slow" readers as well. However, this approach to supporting supplementary reading was not particularly effective in developing the reading of "slow" readers.

A school's primary role is to support learners' academic development. The field trip and site visit described in this article exposed the learners to new horizons and learning experiences, which tended to motivate them to read about these experiences. Therefore where there are school outings or other memorable events planned, the school can play a supportive role by ensuring that the learners have access to a range of reading texts on academic topics.

We have found it effective to build a supplementary reading culture around school-based interests. Exciting events and outings are opportunities for initiating such reading practices. We were fortunate in this project to have a budget from the National Research Foundation, which allowed us to purchase a wide variety of reading texts. There are other sponsors, such as Biblionef South Africa ([www.biblionefsa.org.za](http://www.biblionefsa.org.za)) who help can schools to build similar reading libraries. The acquisition of reading resources and reading support are not only the responsibility of schools and funders, reading also needs to be seen as a community responsibility. Local government provides libraries and librarians, but they also need to ensure safe access to the library, and they need to ensure that they are well supplied with reading resources that are both of general interest and that supplement and enrich the academic curriculum. The study highlighted the need for exciting science and geography texts for intermediate learners in Xhosa. Finally, the children themselves need to be proactive in expres-

sing their reading interests and needs to educators, parents and librarians. They will only be enabled to do this if they are supplied with wide choices of reading texts and topics.

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