

Identity, Agency and Imagination in Literacy Acquisition Narratives of Northern Cape Teachers

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Abstract

In South Africa and internationally, studies using post-structuralist frameworks and social theory have thrown light on the roles played by identity and the imagination and by school and the broader society in literacy acquisition. This article contributes to research on these themes, analysing extracts from literacy acquisition narratives written by language teachers in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It explores the development of identity and agency that occurred through teachers' experiential and imaginative engagement in communities of literate practice and concludes that the findings have pedagogical implications. Against the background of themes identified across 25 essays, extracts from four narratives are examined in detail, using concepts such as identity and community of practice. The analysis suggests that strong literate identities are rooted in literacy events and practices of home and neighbourhood communities, and in agency born out of experiences of difference encountered in society and through the imagination. It argues that such findings can be used to move teaching away from sterile and authoritative methods into more critical and participative pedagogies.

Keywords: agency; Communities of Practice; critical experiences of difference; critical and participative pedagogies; identity; imagination; post-structuralism; situated literacy

Introduction

In South Africa and internationally, studies using critical and post-structuralist frameworks have thrown light on the roles played by events at home and in the broader community and by identity and imagination, in literacy acquisition.



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Among theories used in these studies and debates are ethnographic and social practice theories (e.g. Bloome et al. 2000; Rogers 2002), the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Carstens 2014; Kajee 2011), Communities of Practice theory (Ek 2008), critical pedagogies (Ek 2008) and concepts from the theories of Bourdieu (Gennrich 2016). A number of studies highlight deficit views of home and community cultures and literacies (e.g. Kajee 2011; Rogers 2002). They contrast competences demonstrated in home, church and community environments with disempowerment and lack of achievement at school and link this with fragmented subjectivities and low self-image (e.g. Ek 2008; Rogers 2002). Questions are posed about the extent to which home and school literacies and practices are complementary, oppositional, assimilative or adaptive, and how and whether home and community practices can be included in classrooms (e.g. Bloome et al. 2000; Hull and Schultz 2001). They present a strong call for teachers to recognise student competence in out-of-school settings and for classroom practices to reflect those of home, community and work contexts (Bloome et al. 2000; Hull and Schultz 2001).

In South Africa, Carstens (2014), Gennrich (2016) and van der Mescht (2015) are among those who have conducted literacy development studies using teacher language and literacy narratives and journals. Carstens (2014), using New Literacy Studies, identifies relatedness as an important catalyst in literacy acquisition. Van der Mescht (2015), using a similar corpus of literacy narratives to that used in this inquiry and a theory deriving from Systemic Functional Linguistics, studies the effect of the neighbourhood game of “playing school” on literacy development in rural children. She finds that nearly one-third of her subjects learned to read from other children and recommends more play-based learning in schools. Gennrich (2016) uses the theories of Bourdieu (1991) in her exploration of changes in literate habitus through stimulus of the imagination by poetry and drama study.

The current study contributes to this body of literature, analysing literacy acquisition narratives written by language teachers in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. Like Carstens (2014), Ek (2008), Kajee (2011), Rogers (2002) and van der Mescht (2015), it explores the communities and spaces within which the teachers’ identities as literate persons are constructed and the ways in which this construction takes place. The article finds supporting evidence for studies reporting that out-of-school events are often of more significance than school learning in the development of literacy. Its findings support Carstens’ (2014) contention that relatedness is a strong catalyst for literacy development, as well as van der Mescht’s (2015) study on the value of “playing school” in learning to read and write. It resonates most strongly, however, with the work of Gennrich (2016), who discusses the importance of the imagination in enabling shifts in literary habitus.

Using concepts from the New Literacy Studies (Gee 2000; Street 2001), Wenger’s Communities of Practice (1998) and post-structuralist theories of identity and agency (Ahearn 2001; Block 2007; Norton 2000; Weedon 1997) to analyse the teachers’ stories, it finds that events which are of particular significance for identity shift and literacy

development are critical experiences of difference experienced in life events (e.g. a shift to a new environment) or the imagination (e.g. through a story or poem). Such experiences create openings for the exercise of agency and shifts in literate identity.

It argues that such findings can be used to move teaching away from sterile and authoritative methods into more critical and participative pedagogies.

Research Questions

In analysing these teachers' literacy acquisition narratives and arriving at our findings, we explored the following questions:

1. Which literacy and life events were most effective in building the teachers' literate identities?
2. In which communities and spaces did such literacy and life events most typically take place?
3. What are the implications of the findings for literacy pedagogies?

Background

Professionally qualified teachers register for the BEd in English Language Teaching either to update learning acquired in their initial teacher education course to new curriculum requirements, or because of a mismatch between their initial subject specialism and the subject (usually English) that they currently teach (Reeves and Robinson 2010).

The course aims to develop teachers' pedagogical content knowledge of English (Shulman 1987), having a dual focus: English content knowledge, i.e. the core language skills (listening, speaking, reading/viewing, writing, grammar), basic literary studies and related theory, and pedagogical knowledge, i.e. practical and procedural classroom teaching decisions including sequence and pacing of lessons, learning theory and assessment. Course lecturers make an effort to limit monologic lectures, engaging teachers in interactive tasks and activities designed to give them a lived experience of the critical, participatory, learner-centred pedagogies advocated by the school curriculum (DBE 2011).

One of the students' first assignments required them to give a narrative account of their personal literacy history. It is these assignments which comprise the data for this research paper. The assignment brief reads:

Write a narrative essay (min. 3 pages, 1000–1500 words) in which you relate your own experience of learning to read and write, in *at least* two of the languages you know. You need to draw on your childhood and youth experiences of literacy, both in and out of school. Include at least **one** photograph or drawing of a person, place, object or moment

that was significant in your literacy development. The person, place, object or moment could be significant either because it had a positive or negative impact on your experience of reading or writing. You need to explain the reason you include the photograph or drawing, and relate it to your essay.

The 25 literacy narratives were written by 17 women and eight men, all of them teachers of language at the secondary level. Their dates of birth varied between 1961 and 1976, which means that all grew up and attended school during the apartheid years, having somewhat different experiences depending on the specific events of their time.

Eighteen of the 25 teachers were literate in Setswana, their primary language, while 15 were also literate in Afrikaans, which in a number of cases was a first language, as it is for 53.76 per cent of the Northern Cape population, of which only 7.09 per cent are white (Frith n.d.). Five other African languages were mentioned as primary or additional languages by at least one teacher. All 25 teachers were literate in English, overwhelmingly the language of power in South Africa and the medium of instruction for most learners from the fourth year of school.

Initial Analysis, Sampling and Methodology

In an initial analysis of the essays, literacy events,¹ “old-timers” and literacy resources mentioned in the narratives were identified and placed into categories on a spreadsheet with regard to the community / space in which they were found or took place.

Five major communities / spaces emerged within which the teachers had acquired literacy practices: home, school, the wider community (including libraries, movies, peer interaction), church, and the community of political activists. A tally was made of the events, old-timers and resources mentioned per teacher. For 19 of the teachers, home emerged as a dominant area of literacy acquisition,² compared to only 16 for whom school was dominant. For 10, personal literacy within the wider community was dominant, for four church and for three the community of political activists. Adding up the essays in which “non-school” communities or spaces dominated, we arrived at a total of 36, as opposed to 16 in which school dominated. There were clearly teachers for whom more than one community / space was dominant. For example, four combined home with personal literacy in the wider community. For just three teachers, school was their only dominant community of literacy learning.

We selected for detailed analysis four essays which were reasonably representative in terms of primary and additional languages, gender, and communities / spaces that dominated their narratives. We eliminated students who had not completed the

¹ See our conceptual framework for definitions of these terms.

² For home and school, six or more mentions were deemed significant, and for church, politics and the wider community, four or more.

programme and obtained agreement from those selected for their essays to be analysed. We have ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms in the analysis.

The Four Students: Background

The following section introduces the four teachers and their backgrounds and uses some concepts from the framework with which the narratives will later be analysed.

For Mrs Mkwai, an isiXhosa mother-tongue speaker, home was not a community of literate practice:

Learning to read and to write was a challenge to me because I never learned at home. My parents were illiterate but passionate about Education for us their kids. My father was never at home; he was working in the city for us to survive.

She presents a picture of a family who had little to no power, economically, politically or educationally (“illiterate”; “never at home”; “survive”) and constructs her own identity as “the child of illiterate parents.” While Mrs Mkwai’s father had a job that enabled the family to get by, the women and children in the story, with even less power than the father, are stranded at home. Both parents are described as “passionate about Education for us kids,” seeing school literacy as a way out of poverty and powerlessness for the family, and having no sense that any other kind of literacy which they might have is of any value. They participate imaginatively in the community of (school) literate practice, visualising their children as educated adults and investing in that vision.

The community in which Mr Tlou grew up was that of his extended family of cousins and uncles, who lived in a township of Kimberley, but had their origins in a rural village on the banks of the Vaal River. The languages of home were Setswana and Afrikaans. The discourse of his story constructs the rural life and its language practices as valuable: he gives the Vaal River its indigenous Setswana name (*Noka ee tsheltha*), and tells how he enjoyed his mother’s many stories of her work in the “*mielie*-fields.” Just how important books and documents are to him is indicated in the first paragraph of his story, where he deems the night when his family home burned down “tragic,” because the fire took with it important memorabilia in the form of most of his photographs and books. He appears comfortable and confident, then, in his identity as a Motswana and as a literate person.

Ms Lebone spent her early years in two very different places. She was born in Nkowankowa, Tzaneen, where she spent the first three years of her life and learned to speak Xitsonga. At the age of three, her mother (a nurse) took her to Kimberley, over 900 km away, to be raised by her Setswana-speaking grandmother. She recalls that her granny said that she did not initially understand all the words her granddaughter used, but she “insisted that she will respond in Setswana so that we start learning and understand one another.” By the time she was five, Ms Lebone identified herself as a Setswana-speaker: Setswana “was my home language now.” Both mother and

grandmother were literate (“passionate about reading”) and committed to supporting her in learning to read and write.

As a child, Mr Kgabo was strongly influenced by a literate mother and much older brothers and sisters who were already at high school and studying to be teachers. Reading and listening to radio stories were a natural part of his life. Like Ms Lebone, he moved from place to place in his early life (from his home town to Griekwastad and later to Bophuthatswana), something which expanded his language repertoire and impacted powerfully on his identity and his literacy practices.

Conceptual Framework and Analysis

Selections from the narrative discourse of the four teachers’ essays have been analysed using the conceptual framework outlined below. The analysis highlights the construction of literate identity through social engagement in various communities and spaces, real and imagined, and through agency born out of critical experiences of difference in life and through literacy events and artefacts.

Key to this analysis are concepts of identity, agency and imagination. The broader frameworks within which these concepts will be defined in this section are those of situated literacy (the New Literacy Studies), Communities of Practice and post-structuralism.

Situated Literacy and Literacy Acquisition

While for many (e.g. Adams 1993) the study of literacy acquisition is primarily involved with the way reading and writing is taught and learned in schools, for others, such as Goodman (1996, 75), the learning of written language is “no less natural than oral language” and follows the same process. Street and Street (1991, 89) describe the institutionalisation of a particular model of literacy as “pedagogisation,” showing how the spaces and procedures of reading and writing are separated from those of everyday life, higher status being given to written language than to spoken language, “transforming the rich variety of literacy practices evident in community literacies into a single homogenised practice” (1991, 92). The analysis identifies instances of pedagogisation and its characteristics in the teachers’ discourse.

This study supports the view that literacy is acquired in a similar way to oral language. It holds that literacy is a social practice and that literacies are multiple. It draws on the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic 2000; Gee 2000; Street 2001; 2005) which sees all literacies as ideological, each part of a world view which values a particular type of literacy and supports specific ways in which it should be acquired. This means that teaching or passing on literacy skills is not a neutral act, but is ideological work, involving a power dimension. Becoming literate means taking on a particular set of ideas which move one in particular directions. The NLS explores what literacy means to particular people, and from which social context they derive their

meaning. It focuses attention on literacy events, i.e. events where a piece of writing is integral to the nature of interactions, and literacy practices, i.e. social models of literacy brought to bear on literacy events (Street 2005). Literacy events and practices which the four teachers describe are identified through the analysis, as well as the political and ideological forces at work in their lives, which influence the types of literacy they are exposed to.

Norton (2000; 2001), in her work on English acquisition by immigrant women, supports arguments about the importance for language learning of exposure and opportunities to practise (Norton Peirce 1995), and points out that power relations can “enable or constrain” learners’ range of identities and expand or limit such exposure and opportunities (Norton 1997, 412). She elaborates on Bourdieu’s (1991) term “investment,” arguing that second language learners have an “investment” in learning the target language, believing that they will gain cultural and material “capital” through knowing it (Norton 1997).

In the South African context there is a great deal of overlap between the acquisition of language and of literacy. For many of the participants in this research, acquiring literacy was almost synonymous with acquiring English, the language of power, and in some teachers’ narratives the two are at times conflated. The investments which teachers and those in their stories make in various forms of literacy and language are identified in the analysis.

Communities and Spaces of Social Practice

Learning which is situated in social practice (see Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic 2000; Lave and Wenger 1991) takes place through social engagement and interaction, both real and imagined. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe this social engagement as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) in Communities of Practice (CoPs): “modified forms of participation that are structured to give newcomers access” to the practice of the community, where they participate with “old-timers” (experienced members) in a version of the ongoing practice. Legitimate membership of the community enables access to practice, and therefore to learning. The CoP model differentiates between being “peripheral” to a community, which is a position giving access to an inward trajectory, and being “marginal,” a position which leaves one on the borders, never able to participate fully.

The CoP model has been widely applied, debated and criticised. Gee (2000, 184–89) observes that it has been “recruited” by “the new capitalism,” which has led to its being simplistically and manipulatively applied. Critics also highlight the fact that the dimension of power has been largely ignored within Wenger’s (1998) conception of the model. We overcome this shortcoming by using it together with post-structuralist concepts. We have found CoP work useful to this study when applied to well-defined organisations such as families, church organisations and political groups. The CoP

framework is not so well applied in loosely structured social spaces (Barton and Hamilton 2005), where people relate to one another in a myriad of different ways and have multiple membership in different groups, with unclear boundaries. We refer to such environments as “spaces.”

According to Wenger (1998), people participate in communities (and this would apply to certain looser “spaces” as well) primarily through engagement, but can also participate through imagination (1998, 173–87). Wenger (1998, 176) defines imagination as “a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves,” e.g. through reading, writing and other creative activities, or through one’s hopes and dreams. Greene defines imagination more explicitly as “possibility thinking, questioning and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions” (Mendelowitz 2017, 180). In this sense it is a critical activity. For Greene, the poetic imagination (activated when we write or respond to works of art) enables us to empathise and enter other worlds of experience, while the social imagination (or generative imagination) enables visions of what could and should exist in our imperfect society (Greene 1997, 11).

It is within communities and social spaces that subjectivities (sense of self) and identities, dealt with below, are constructed.

The analysis of the four teachers’ stories highlights processes of literacy acquisition by drawing attention to communities and spaces in which they enjoy legitimate participation as well as those they are marginal to and those in which they engage imaginatively. It identifies old-timers who familiarise them with community practices.

Post-Structuralist Approaches to Identity and Agency

Post-structuralist theorists such as Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1991), Norton (2000) and Weedon (1997) see identity as fluid and multiple, constructed through social discourse within contexts which are a site of struggle between power interests that are in a constant state of flux and conflict (Foucault 1976). While we “inhabit” certain identities (Blommaert 2005, 205) by conforming to or resisting norms and practices of the society around us, some identities, particularly those relating to class, gender and race, are firmly ascribed to us, and often position us in ways which we would rather not have chosen.

Individuals often narrate their stories in an attempt “to construct coherence in the midst of the ambivalence created by multiple and fluid subject identities, both ascribed and assumed, pulling them in different directions” (Botha 2015, 39; emphasis added). “[R]ecognizing literacy practices as social has led many theorists to recognize that people’s identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about” (Moje and Luke 2009, 416), as well as by other practices in which they engage. The narrative discourse of the teachers is analysed to identify the ascribed and inhabited

(literate) identities constructed through the social discourse of their lives, and the linguistic discourse they choose to describe the literacy events of their lives.

Certain schools of narrative research (e.g. Bamberg 2006; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012; Wortham 2000) remind us that while a person may attempt to create coherence through narrating their experience, the identity positions that the narrator assumes can change in relation to a different purpose or in response to particular questions. It is clear, then, that the assignment brief and the audience addressed (a lecturer, who is one of the authors of this paper³) influenced the nature and contents of the narratives and the identities constructed within them.

A perplexing question which arises from these views of identity and its construction through social discourse concerns the nature of agency: if identity is structured by society's discourses, to what extent are individuals able to exercise agency? In this study, we define agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act ... the ability to bring about effects and to (re)constitute the world" (Ahearn 2001, 112), and focus on a particular answer to the above impasse.

In most, if not all people's lives, there are moments of dilemma and challenge and striking experiences of difference that create a fissure in the discourse through which one's identity has been constructed (Botha 2015). Such a "critical experience" (Block 2007, 22) of ambivalence can take place through direct experience of a contrasting discourse, context or community, but can also take place in the imagination. In relation to literacy, for instance, a text may call upon us temporarily to inhabit a certain unfamiliar subject position (Moje and Luke 2009, 424). An experience of this kind, jarring or disrupting to a sense of self of which one may until then have been only partially aware, can activate agency and enable a shift into a new, different or more "hybrid" identity. In this sense, one might say that agency exists "in the interstices between people, rather than within individuals themselves" (Ahearn 2001, 129). Gennrich (2016), using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, related to identity and defined by Bourdieu (1991, 12) as "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways," calls such a critical experience of difference "a rupture in field" which makes possible a shift in habitus. If such a rupture does not occur, "an individual is like a 'fish in water' and does not 'feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted'" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127, cited in Gennrich 2016, 2).

The analysis identifies accounts in the teacher narratives of ruptures or experiences of difference in their lives that activate agency and enable shifts in identity, and specifically literate identity.

³ The second author is an independent researcher.

Brokering

Brokering is another concept that has been useful in examining and analysing these stories. Examples of brokering in immigrant communities in Europe and the United States have recently become a subject of interest to researchers (e.g. Hall and Sham 2007; Tse 1996). In these countries, school-age children who are learning the language and skills of their new country interpret for their parents from their position which straddles two communities. Some of the four stories analysed in this study describe situations where the authors fill similar roles in the lives of parents and elders, bridging the worlds of those who have not yet mastered school literacy and the modern “schooled” society. Such situations are pointed out and analysed.

Analysis and Discussion: Literate Identity Constructed through Engagement and Imagination

In this section, the communities and spaces in which the four teachers’ literacies and literate identities developed are described, followed by a study of ruptures in their experience, either through actual life events, or through their imaginations, which activated agency and enabled shifts into more hybrid (literate) identities.

We conclude the discussion with a brief consideration of the implications of the findings for literacy pedagogies.

Learning within Communities of Literate Practice

Here, sections of the teachers’ narratives are examined which describe CoPs and spaces in which the four teachers were exposed to various literacies and able to acquire them through engagement. Although school is one of the CoPs in which literacy is acquired, Lave and Wenger (1991, 97) explain that the classroom curriculum is irrelevant to “situated learning” as defined in the CoP model; the practices acquired in schools are those of “schooled adults.”

Mrs Mkwayi

Mrs Mkwayi acquired literacy practices through the conventional route, at school. Mrs Mene, a teacher and “old-timer” steeped in the practices of Sub A classrooms (now Grade 1) and fully dedicated to teaching, became a key figure in her literacy journey, teaching her reading and writing in isiXhosa. Phrases used by the author construct her positively, as “hard working and dedicated,” committed to “seccrific[ing] [sic] her time for us,” even teaching through the holidays at her home:

That was an unpleasant part, to attend during school holidays, in her yard, under the tree and other kids are at home enjoying holidays. All what we have to learn was written under the tree and in each group there was a group leader pointing the words, reading aloud. At her time she will come out, erase everything, calling out the words that we have to write.

Mrs Mkwayi's identity was that of "a learner," and there was no other identity available, it seems, which could give her access to literacy practices. The process she experienced pedagogised literacy (Street and Street 1991). The form of literacy she learned was "legitimate" literacy (Bourdieu 1991), the literacy of the powerful and "learned" in society. Her class teacher, Mrs Mene, had fully internalised a tough form of literacy practice, according to which learning required "hard work and commitment"; it was "not fun at all" (a phrase appearing twice in the essay). The "unpleasant part" was that they "never enjoyed holidays" like the other kids. Mrs Mene's ideology was that literacy learning is an uphill struggle which goes against the grain of learners' natural urges.

Investment in this uncomfortable CoP did "pay off," however, according to Mrs Mkwayi:

We were able to read the books and to write in our Home Language. I enjoyed reading and writing and everyday after school I'll play school and my mother would ask what we have learned from school. I would write and read for her, by doing that she was learning from me.

Here it can be seen that "playing school" plays an important role in this family's literacy learning, the daughter adopting the role and identity of teacher and "broker."

Van der Mescht (2015, 3–4) shows how "playing school" can promote school readiness as well as building pride, a sense of success and a feeling of agency and power to enter the adult world. Mrs Mkwayi takes pride in acting as broker between her illiterate family community and the community of schooled people, transferring skills to her mother and enabling the dreams of the family to move out of the imagination and into reality. It is likely that "playing school" also sowed the early seeds of teacher identity.

Mr Tlou

Mr Tlou was also one whose success at school built on his participation in the school role-play of his older cousins, who created a "pretend school" to which he was admitted as a learner, with practices similar to those that they had experienced in real school:

Because I was younger than most of my cousins ..., they loved role-playing schooling with us during the weekends. They would read to us, taking on the role of teachers. They would even give us a spanking for not performing well, and give us a reward for doing good ... in the form of black toffees and kool-aid sweet, which was a popular powder drink in those times.

In this description, Mr Tlou describes the role of teachers as one of giving punishments and rewards ("a spanking" and "black toffees and kool-aid sweets"), and seems to construct this as the norm.

Ms Lebone

Ms Lebone's first experience of being read to was with her granny, in Setswana, and she remembers experiencing storytelling from her granny, from the Bible and on Setswana radio. She recalls culturally diverse stories such as "Rooikappie, Tselane and the Giant, and Alibaba and the Forty Thieves": traditional African tales, Western "fairy-stories" and a tale from "The Thousand and One Nights."

She entered Sub A (Grade 1) at the age of five and also engaged with her friends in "playing school" at home, where they "would repeat all the basic words we learnt from school."

She reports that her memories of learning to read were both positive and negative. The negative memories were those of school, whereas home was a benign community of literate practice for her, fostering the development of her own literate identity: she would read "newspapers or books with the help of [her] grandmother." She describes her grandmother's English as "tops!" in spite of the fact that she had never attended school. Her grandmother encouraged her to repeat what she'd read, seemingly in both Setswana and English. Her mother also played a role in enriching the community of literate practice:

When my mother gets to Kimberley [home], she would bring me different books, i.e. colouring books, magazines and picture books, I loved them and I remember that I would cut pictures and paste them in a scrapbook.

Mr Kgabo

Literacy events in Mr Kgabo's early life at home included "listening to Setswana soap operas on the radio":

Everyone had to be quiet during that time and we listened attentively. At the age of four I could already imitate the manner in which the characters spoke and use their vocabulary. The story lines were centred around men who worked hard to maintain their families and women who had to sit at home and take care of the children. I always pretended to be the man who gave instructions to his children and wife, when we played house games.

Adult society required the children to listen carefully to the "soapie" and in their play, the children became part of its imagined community and adopted its male-dominant discourse. The writer instinctively chose and enjoyed playing the powerful role of the husband who could dominate and control his wife and family, moving smoothly, in his play, into the privileged male identity which was his destined role in the Tswana traditional community as well as the South African apartheid society more broadly.

His introduction to literacy took place in school, and in "school at home":

As I was the youngest at home, my brothers were already in high school and my sisters were at teachers' colleges. I was forced to read and write everyday even though we were never given homework at school.

Here, in a no-fun version of “playing school,” his older brothers and sisters are the “old-timers,” inducting him into the practices of the community of literate practice which was his family. The word “forced” suggests that he had no choice in the matter; what his older siblings said had to be done! As a legitimate member of this community he was not going to escape engagement in its literate practices. The image of school presented by his siblings surely reflected the regime they were experiencing in their classrooms, another confirmation of the authoritative norms of the community more generally, according to which elders had to be respected and obeyed. It is likely that such experiences fostered ambitions to become older and have an authoritative identity (e.g. a teacher) himself.

Having learned to read, there were older people whose demands Mr Kgabo had to fulfil, like the illiterate lay minister who was their new neighbour and needed Bible passages read for him, so that he could memorise and base his sermons on them. The writer experienced this as a tiresome chore; he says “I only enjoyed it because I would be rewarded with sweets or a rare ride in his car.” Here again, a child is acting in a “broker” role, mediating between the illiterate lay minister and the community of literate practice in which the man had to operate.

Ruptures in Experience, through Life Events and the Imagination

Mrs Mkwayi

For Mrs Mkwayi, a very simple experience created a rupture in the norms of her experience of literacy and of learning. In higher classes at her school, the recitation and memorisation of poems became a regular literacy practice:

The one that was significant to me was a poem “All things bright and beautiful,” we recited this every morning before we started our lessons. We memorized it, we knew it by heart [sic] without understanding the meaning as long as you can memorize it you are safe from punishment.

All those years I knew it as a poem until late '90's [sic] that I read from another book about it. It's not a poem, is a song. It is the one that encouraged me to read with understanding, if I don't understand some of the lines, I would ask for the meaning of those lines. The more I asked questions or explanations, the more I understood it better.

The surprising experience of finding this poem in another book and seeing that it was really a song seems to have broken through the familiar classroom discourse of meaningless repetition and fear of punishment (“as long as you can memorize it you are safe from punishment”) and spurred Mrs Mkwayi into action. She began asking

“questions or explanations,” and that opened up the poem / song to her and made her realise that she could be an agent in her own learning process.

Although Mrs Mkwai’s school learning made next to no use of the imagination, her drive to become literate appears to have been fuelled by the “generative imagination” (Gennrich 2016) of her family, who aspired to live in a different kind of world.

Mr Tlou

The literacy events which first impacted on Mr Tlou were his mother’s stories about her work in the *mielie*-fields. What intrigued him most was the unusual place names which peppered her stories:

Now in her stories my mother would mention names of the places they used to work at, at those *mielie*-fields of the Transvaal. Some of places were Schweitzer-Reneke, Bloemhof, Christiana and Lichtenburg. The names of those places really fascinated me and I would ask her to repeat the stories just to hear her calling those names over and over. I would then ask her to write those names down, and she would gladly oblige.

The foreign-sounding place names captured his imagination. They were interstices through which he could peer into a wider, different, more powerful world, footholds for his agency in learning language and literacy. His mother, always willing to “oblige,” was his mentor.

Mr Tlou’s first three years of schooling were dominated by rote learning, but in Grade 4 and beyond he was exposed to fables such as “The Jackal and the Wolf,” which created a rupture in everyday discourse, giving him access to imagined worlds. The pleasure he derived from this drove him to read “any book I could lay my hand on, especially books written in English.” While he did not at first understand much of what he read in English, this did not affect his investment in reading them; in contrast with Afrikaans and Setswana, English carried with it an aura of power.

Beyond the walls of the school was another door into imagined worlds: Radio Setswana, a channel on which he enjoyed listening to soccer commentaries, news and stories. As he grew older, more literacy events became accessible to him:

My uncle used to be a body-builder and my cousin a boxer, and they would come with materials of their different sporting codes home. I loved reading those, and then I would ask them questions. It is at this stage that I also started reading magazines like *Tribute* and *Drum* and newspapers like the *DFA* and *City Press*, and I would relate stories I had read to my friends, hence I was given the nickname Samora because I loved relating the story about the death of Samora Machel in 1986.

It is noteworthy that literacy here is part of engagement in social practice. The imagined worlds he enters are so absorbing that he wants to know more, and to share his

experiences, asking questions of his cousin and uncle about their sporting activities and reading materials, and relating stories he reads to his friends. His identity as someone engaged in worlds beyond the here and now is so strong that the people around him ascribe to him an identity in one of the imagined worlds, calling him Samora.

For Mr Tlou, then, the discourse of his everyday life as a rural Motswana boy was irrevocably changed by literacy events involving storytelling and reading, which gave him imaginative access to a multiplicity of other worlds: his mother's work, traditional fables, sport, current events, political protest, comedy, the past, other people's lives. While school introduced him to literature in the form of fables, his engagement in imagined communities, and the social interaction stimulated by his entry into those communities, took place largely beyond the walls of the school.

Ms Lebone

The biggest rupture in Ms Lebone's experience came when, at the age of three, she travelled with her mother by train from Nkowankowa in Limpopo, where she had acquired Xitsonga, to Kimberley in the Northern Cape, to be raised by her granny, who talked and read to her in Setswana. She only became aware of how formative that experience was when, in "bigger classes," she was asked to write about "A journey by train," and she was able to write about her experience of travelling from Limpopo to the Northern Cape, "one of the best journeys I ever took by train, with lots of good memories that will be deep in my heart forever." Reflecting on the exercise, she became aware that she was fortunate: "what would you write if you never took a journey by train?" The fact that she saw the journey so positively suggests that the move to stay with her grandmother had opened a new world up to her, the world of literate practice created by her grandmother and mother, described in the previous section, where she learned to "love" books.

Mr Kgabo

Mr Kgabo's "brokering" experience with the preacher, mentioned earlier, was only the first of his experiences of being "on the boundary" of two communities. His life was to be disrupted by a move into a community with very different language practices:

Due to family problems, I was sent to Griekwastad to start my higher primary education. Afrikaans was the dominant language, my friends and cousins could not understand Setswana. They used to laugh at my Afrikaans accent. Instead of breaking my spirit, it motivated me to learn and practice more.

Here we see that instead of facilitating his incorporation into their community, his playmates marginalised him by "laugh[ing] at [his] Afrikaans accent." This critical experience of difference and stress sparked agency and drove him to work on his Afrikaans until he came to speak it "as his home language." In spite of this achievement,

he still felt “marginal” rather than having “peripheral,” inward-moving participation (Wenger 1998); he clearly still felt somewhat lonely, excluded and homesick:

When you are far away from home and from your loving mother, there is no one to talk to when you are sad, angry, sick, hungry or happy. I used to stay at school and write poems about how I felt. I would normally feel relieved after writing these poems.

The poems he wrote to express his feelings created in his imagination a space where he belonged and where his thoughts and feelings could be heard and understood. He also kept up a lively correspondence with his mother, something which helped him in a similar way:

I used to write letters to my mother mixing Afrikaans and English. She would respond in English. She always concluded the letter reminding me that she is not a product of “Bantu education” and she hoped I will understand her English. She had given me her dictionary that she used when she was still attending school.

Here we see the stigma attached to using Afrikaans, seen as the “language of the oppressor,” even though it is a lingua franca of the black community in this town. English, on the other hand, was regarded as the language of power and enlightenment, and the writer’s mother did not hesitate to show her approval of English and her disapproval of his familiarity with Afrikaans, unknowingly adding to his marginality. He used his mother’s letters to help him with the English friendly letters required in class, and the “very proud teacher” would read out his letters to the class. Such was the cultural capital attached to English that this won him “respect” from his classmates and inclusion in debating and public speaking teams, CoPs in which he excelled.

He was now a person with a hybrid identity, multiple membership of different linguistic and cultural communities and considerable language and literacy skills. Having experienced the tensions, conflicts and ambivalence of being on the margins of the Afrikaans-speaking group, he had exercised agency to learn Afrikaans fluently, and also to craft for himself spaces where he felt more comfortable: an imaginary space created by poetry and writing and a space in the community of learners whose English was good enough for public speaking contests, where his presence was approved and respected. These were both spaces where his literate skills were valued and developed.

Returning home to start his high school education, he found himself marginal once again. His schoolmates laughed at his Setswana accent, which had changed when he learned to communicate in Afrikaans.

Now the power struggles of the broader apartheid society began to affect his education: teachers had been stopped from giving classes by student leaders during what he calls “anti-apartheid riots.” Learners had to study on their own, and later do homework for older learners who were busy “robbing bakery and dairy trucks.” His word choice

(“riots”) and (“robbing”) suggests a negative construction of these practices. He still preferred engagement in the imagined space of poetry, this time the poetry of protest, which “lifted [both his] spirit” and those of the “comrades.” Memorisation, recitation and creation of such poems served another vital purpose, however; it gave him legitimacy within the activist community: the ascribed identity of “comrade.” He achieved fame by writing a “poem” on a cardboard box during protests against the English cricket tour of South Africa. It read: “Mike Getting, how much are you getting when we are getting bullets.” He and his placard were photographed for the front page of the local newspaper. In spite of this appearance of political correctness and involvement, he concludes the account of this triumph with a clear statement of his chosen (rather than ascribed) identity: “I loved poetry; I was not an activist.”

His mother now made a move to extract him from the heat of political conflict, sending him to school in the “independent homeland” of Bophuthatswana.

Mr Kgabo’s fluent command of multiple literacies was born out of critical experiences of tension and difference on the margins (between Setswana- and Afrikaans-speaking communities, between political activism and the world of poetry and ideas) and in the spaces of the imagination (print media and the radio; writing poetry, making speeches). While basic skills were no doubt established at school, most of the dynamic development of his literacy was prompted by events beyond the walls of the school.

Implications of Findings for Pedagogy

In order to consider the implications of the findings for literacy pedagogies, we look briefly at descriptions in the narratives of the kinds of pedagogies these teachers experienced in their childhood and youth. All four narratives suggest that the teachers’ early literacy learning experiences decontextualised words and sounds and focused on repetition, rote learning and memorisation. There was a dearth of storytelling and reading and corporal punishment was used to drive lessons home.

Pedagogies Experienced by Teachers at School

Mrs Mkwai’s description of Mrs Mene’s teaching process reads thus:

Step 1 was to learn vowels if you can be able to write and to read vowels, you go to the next stage, consonants plus vowels ... then step 3, she will write some words, mixing different consonants and vowels and we had to create some words. ... Corporal punishment accompanied those lessons that was not fun at all living in fear all the time.

Mr Tlou’s description of initial literacy learning was similar:

In Setswana we dealt mostly about vowels a, e, i, o and u. It will go like a for *apaya* (cook) e for *ema* (stand) and so forth.

As noted above, Ms Lebone's first experiences of reading at school were negative despite her first teacher's practice being similar to her granny's home reading practice of repeating words read aloud.

I can remember one teacher who was fond of screaming at us, especially when you had to repeat after her and you had to struggle to pronounce certain words that you could not even hear clearly what she said and I would be very scared and cried before it was even my turn.

Mr Kgabo described the following:

I first learned to read and write in grade one ... Emphasis was on phonics and teachers were very strict with regard to pronunciation. We were drilled until we could say the words correctly even in our sleep. We were taught to memorise poems at school, Bible verses in Sunday School and all this was done in Setswana. The stick accelerated the learning process.

While the two women are explicit about the unpleasantness of the school learning process, the men seem to accept it as the norm. Mr Kgabo's description of corporal punishment could even suggest a positive construction of it: "The stick accelerated the learning process." All the descriptions are powerful evidence of the pedagogisation of literacy in the schooling experiences of these teachers, and of their tacit acceptance of these practices as the norm.

In all four essays, however, there are descriptions of literacy events at school that are more positive, most of them in the context of higher classes, and all of them associated with English, the language of power.

For Mrs Mkwai, learning English in later standards was "much more fun ... interesting, fun but hard work."

Mr Tlou's love of reading started in the later grades of primary school, and in his adolescent years he began to reap the rewards which the cultural capital of English literacy gave him, both in the access it gave to the world of past events (History), and in the status that it bestowed in social contexts: "In high school I started enjoying history more, and I started belonging to social clubs and I got elected to the position of secretary in most clubs I belonged to."

For Ms Lebone, reading only became "bliss" when she moved to later grades (Sub B and Standard 1 and 2). She also describes positive writing experiences, particularly at high school, where she was afforded the opportunity of writing about the train trip, mentioned above.

For Mr Kgabo, it was positive to have his English friendly letters read to the class and to be included in public speaking teams. His mastery of English earned him admiration

and respect from teachers and peers, and inclusion in elite groups (debating teams). He describes his high school experience in Mafeking as “real formal high school education.” It included modern literature dealing with themes relevant to their lives (e.g. Bessie Head and Harper Lee) and language rules, which he says “improved his language command.”

Pedagogies Suggested by the Findings

The previous section suggests that much of the pedagogy experienced by the four teachers in their early schooling was sterile, authoritarian, non-participative and decontextualised; it was unrelated to their lives and experiences and required them to sit still, keep quiet and conform, preparing them for the apartheid world outside the classroom in which they were part of a subjugated and suppressed majority. In spite of this, all four students gained the basics of reading and writing skills at school, in most cases supported by out-of-school experiences.

An examination of the kinds of events, relationships and resources (inside and mostly outside school) which played significant roles in energising the process of literacy acquisition points towards more effective pedagogies.

- Events, relationships and resources that caused significant shifts in personal and literate identities and released agency, which involved *exposure to change and difference*, sometimes in life and sometimes in the imagination, through texts, written and spoken, were vital. Those engaging the *imagination* (sometimes of an individual or even lonesome nature) included the following: storytelling by parents; reading fables, poems, sporting magazines, news and reality magazines, political and historical material, and novels; writing letters, poems (personal and political), and personal narratives; and listening to soap operas and sports commentaries on the radio.
- Much effective literacy acquisition was *social and interactive*, taking place within relationships (also see Carstens 2014), often with more experienced others: siblings, grandparents, parents, uncles, cousins and friends, sometimes teachers. It often took place through *engagement and participation* in activities such as playing school, brokering, debating and public speaking.
- Many of the above experiences were *personally empowering*, awakening awareness in the students of their own abilities and bestowing cultural capital. Examples include brokering (helping parents and other adults using literate skills), writing personal poetry, debating, recounting to others things they had read, and being accepted as a “comrade” because of poetry skills.
- Most of the significant events were *relevant* in one way or another to their lives, e.g. a poem that was found to be a song sung outside of school, stories of a mother’s

work, poems of political protest, boxing and body-building magazines, and literature dealing with current themes.

This suggests that effective pedagogies are *participative* and *critical*:

- they involve and engage learners, together with supportive and more experienced “old-timers,” in interactive events and activities which are relevant to their lives;
- they are empowering, making use of learners’ capacities and affirming their context and their experiences;
- they are critical, challenging norms and offering experiences of difference;
- they awaken the imagination, opening doors to other possible worlds.

Conclusions

This article has analysed selected teacher literacy narratives, concluding that social engagement with “old-timers” in home, peer group, neighbourhood and political Communities of Practice in which they have legitimacy (Wenger 1998) has impacted more powerfully on their acquisition of literacy than has school learning.

It has highlighted how the activation of agency (Ahearn 2001) and shifts in literate identities can be sparked by critical experiences of difference (Block 2007) and marginalisation, in life and in the imagination (Greene 1997; Wenger 1998). This represents an extension of understandings of the relationship between identity, agency and imagination in literacy acquisition.

It further finds that, in their own schooling, the four teachers experienced a model of literacy which Street and Street (1991) have called “pedagogisation”: it is decontextualised, few classroom experiences drawing on and affirming the literacy events and practices (Street 2001) of their out-of-school lives. It is also authoritarian, often applied together with punishment, representing the oppressive power structures of the socio-political order.

It argues that the analysis of literacy narratives such as these provides evidence that effective literacy pedagogies are participative and critical. The practice of analysing their own literacy narratives could provide pre-service and in-service teachers with vital insights which could transform their own practice.

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