

## MAPPING THE LITERATE LIVES OF TWO CAMEROONIAN FAMILIES LIVING IN JOHANNESBURG: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION

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*The language and literacy practices of two French-speaking Cameroonian families living in South Africa are the focus of this paper. Since its democracy, there has been an influx of immigrants from all over the world into South Africa. This influx has inevitable consequences for education. The aim of this research was to map the language and literacy practices of two immigrant Cameroonian families residing in Johannesburg, South Africa. The case study utilised interviews with the parents and children, as well as home observations. The research findings reveal that little linguistic congruence exists between the home and school, and that the parents and children serve as language brokers at different points. The study concludes that, if South Africa wants to live up to its democratic status, inclusive to all who live in it, teachers need to be versed in the multiple layers of literacy practices of learners from diverse backgrounds and consider initiatives such as family and community literacy programmes. This is vital not only for immigrant children, but for the South African education system as well.*

### KEYWORDS

Immigrant literacies; literacy as social practice; family literacy practices

### INTRODUCTION

*‘School was the most important consideration in leaving our country’ (Cameroonian parent living in South Africa).*

These and similar words have been heard throughout the study on immigrant literacies, which is part of a larger project on in- and out-of-school language and literacy practices, based in Johannesburg, South Africa. During the past decades, researchers have documented the intellectual accomplishments of children in out-of-school settings, which contrast with their school-based academic performance, the latter suggesting that they are not capable ‘learners and doers in the world’ (Hull & Schultz, 2002: 1). Smythe and Toohey (2009: 39) note the importance of ‘knowledge of the pre- and out-of-school experiences that students have in using, creating and transforming cultural tools (which) helps observers understand the differential school “success” of particular groups of children, and is also helpful in designing appropriate learning activities.’ This raises questions around why literacy appears to flourish out of school rather than in school. In raising the issue, however, it must be noted that this observation is not intended to discredit the school, or romanticise out-of-school contexts, but rather to view ways in which these contexts can in fact contribute significantly to literacy.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

Since its democracy in 1994, the influx of immigrants into South Africa has increased rapidly. African immigrants in South Africa ‘are increasingly positioned as the new “other”, often occupying the lowest rungs of the new order and subject to widespread but not universal prejudice and exclusion’ (Kerfoot & Tatah, 2017: 38). The Cameroonian community in the country is an illustration of the immigrant story, but does not serve as a generalisation for all immigrant communities. When people migrate to a new country, there is always pressure to adapt to the new society by learning the language, which serves the purpose of creating the foundation for interaction within the immigrants’ new environment. However, Stroud and Prinsloo (2015: 73) assert that language and literacies travel, carried by people on the move, borne by artifacts and embedded in assemblages and networks of contact. They continue to state that ‘power geometries of language are at work when linguistic forms travel – some travel well and others not so well’ (Stroud & Prinsloo, 2015: 73).

For Osadan and Reid (2015: 208), giving immigrant children opportunities to fully develop their potential is important for their well-being and social cohesion in the receiving countries. The researchers add that competence in the national language is necessary for educational achievement and for students to have a sense of belonging (Osadan & Reid, 2015: 214). For the children, not understanding the language of communication at school impairs learning and results in poor academic performance, as demonstrated in the study by Sookrajh, Gopal and Maharaj (2005) in KwaZulu-Natal. The assumption most likely made is that the homes of minority culture families are less effective literacy and language environments than homes of middle-class majority culture families (Creese, Blackledge & Takhi, 2014; Delgado-Gaitan, 2005, 2012). Home, however, is a primary domain in people’s literate lives and central to people developing a sense of identity (Gee, 2008). French-speaking Cameroonians based in Johannesburg with little command of English abound, giving rise to questions around how children are supported with their schoolwork, as well as how they cope in schools where English dominates as the language of instruction. Sometimes, the practices of the home can be exported to other domains and vice versa, and possessing the cultural repertoires upon which school depends is considered constructive for learning (Creese et al., 2014: 8). However, when cultures provide dissimilar sets of social and psychological routines, schools and learners can become mutually frustrated. The Cameroonian children come from a background where their home language is French, or one of the many indigenous languages of Cameroon, and, to a minority, English. Cameroon has two major language communities, the Francophones and Anglophones, and some 250 ethnic groups speaking about 270 languages and dialects, which makes the country remarkably linguistically diverse.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIM AND RATIONALE**

This paper sets out to map the language and literacy practices of two immigrant Cameroonian families living in Johannesburg, bearing in mind that the children are now entrenched in South African society through the school system. The paper is motivated by the following concerns: what is the relationship between the family and school literacy practices, and what are the implications of these literacy practices for education in South Africa? Since its democracy, South Africa has been viewed as a land of opportunity. However, despite the influx of many immigrant children in South African schools, the implementation of even educational policies

that cater for the language challenges encountered by local multilingual children is minimal. Finding solutions appears to be relegated to already over-burdened teachers. The first premise in this paper is that, for continuity and congruence between the home and school, teaching should occur in a context that is compatible with the culture of the learners. Second, the responsibility for change should lie firmly with the school, not the home, or else we will be adopting a deficit mode. Finally, immigrant learners constantly face pressure to adapt to school culture at the risk of negating their minority culture (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### **New Literacy Studies and multiple definitions of literacy**

Social, historical and linguistic contexts play pivotal roles in determining how individuals understand and experience the world (Gee, 2008), and thus align with Vygotsky's take on the sociocultural context. The authors hold the view that meaning-making is a social process that is linked to cultural tools and communicative symbols that are grounded in language. James Gee (2008) proposed that in New Literacy Studies (NLS), literacy is not just a skill, but a contextualised practice. The concept requires that we study language and literacy as they occur naturally in social life, taking into account context and their different cultural groups. Cultural and linguistic diversity allude to diverse literacies at various stages in people's lives (Blackledge, 2000). Creese et al. (2014) further propose that we do not only learn literacy in schools but in homes, families and communities as well. For Rowsell and Pahl (2015: 1), literacy exists in homes with the varied ways that people live, speak and practice the everyday. Literacy takes place in communities to support people and to bridge different practices and perspectives. Literacy can act as an agent of change and can encourage new forms of activism, resistance and revolution. Literacy is both local and global, evident in rural as well as in urban settings. This leads to important considerations around how schools should respond. Literacy research, then, works two ways: school-based, with a focus on reading and writing, and the goal of improving academic performance; and out-of-school, which documents a myriad literacy practices that occur in a range of institutional and social spaces (Hull and Schultz, 2002). But there is indisputably little room in the curriculum for practices that are responsive to learners' individual needs and inclinations.

#### *Family literacy practices*

Family literacy encompasses the ways in which parents, children and extended family members use language and literacy at home and in their communities. Sometimes, family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children 'get things done'. These events might include using drawings, gestures or writing to share ideas, composing notes or letters to communicate messages, making lists, reading and following directions, or sharing stories. Family literacy activities also reflect the ethnic, racial or cultural heritage of the families involved. Drawing on this explanation as a point of departure, we view literacy as an activity that is engraved in our daily lives. The contradiction arises when schools are predisposed to focus only on the autonomous view, which creates little congruence between the home and family, and the school. Family literacy provides the opportunity of new educational practices which need not be constrained by traditions of formal schooling (Barton, 2012; Barton & Hamilton, 2012; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2007). Scholars such as Barton et al. critique this

as a very narrow view of the concept because literacy is what people do, it is an activity, and like all human activity, literacy is essentially social and is located in the interaction between people (Barton & Hamilton, 2012).

Family literacy should be viewed by schools and communities as an important element in literacy development. Although a typical South African classroom does not only consist of South African citizens but embraces non-traditional students who have different literacies, teaching appears not to cater for them. However, access to the home is minimal and often hard to come by, and therefore there are few insights into home literacy practices. The home may reveal other varieties of literacy practices than those associated with school, and these may be undervalued or considered inappropriate literacy (Street, 2015a, 2015b). To base our understandings of literacy on those practices valued in school alone is therefore problematic (Street, 2015a, 2015b). Given that those families most marginalised frequently view literacy and hence schooling as the key to mobility, changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they did, it is essential to consider ways of valuing the home (Creese *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, there is need for research in this domain, as teachers often unknowingly exclude or reduce the time minority students spend on literacy activities because features of their discourse may not confirm to teachers' expectations or match their speaking style.

### *Immigrant literacies*

'Migrant families bring with them children who are generally invisible in educational research or official statistics yet often bear the brunt of integration pressures as they enter the turbulent environments of post-apartheid schools' (Kerfoot & Tatah, 2017: 37). It is usually challenging for immigrant children who speak a language different from the language of instruction at school to integrate in the school context. However, it is the responsibility of the school to make sure that the academic needs of all learners, irrespective of their nationalities, are met. It is therefore important for the school to consider incorporating the literacy practices of immigrant children in classroom activities and in the curriculum.

Studies attesting to the importance of incorporating home literacy practices in the school context include, among others, Gregory and Williams (2000: 158), who state that 'different home literacy practices have been seen as a primary factor in a child's success or failure in school.' Hence, it is important to consider incorporating the home literacy practices of immigrant learners in the classroom to enhance their academic achievement. In the American context, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2015: 7) note that 'many immigrant students struggle academically, leaving school without having acquired the tools they need to function effectively in a highly competitive, knowledge-intensive US economy, in which limited education severely impedes social mobility over time.' The same may be true of immigrant children who are going to school in South Africa whose home literacy practices differ from those of the school. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school to provide each child the opportunity to gain the skills necessary to function properly in the world of today.

According to Delgado-Gaitan (2012: 308):

Teachers' knowledge of the students' home culture is imperative, not as a relic to hang on the bulletin board, but as a means to provide a rich curriculum that allows students to

express themselves and participate fully in their learning. This knowledge of other cultures and the understanding of the ways in which children learn outside school enrich educators' ability to incorporate culturally different approaches in the instructional setting.

Campano's (2007) work on the literacy practices of immigrant children further reveals that the students' lived experiences include multifaceted identities, vibrant youth culture, and rich literary and activist traditions, but in the school system they remain 'objects of remediation or clients as described by educational companies' (Campano, 2007: 2). Campano concludes that our educational system is fragile and we need to provide students with a web of support in order for them to be successful. Support can be provided by teachers recognising and giving value to what immigrant children bring to the classroom, and perhaps using it as a building block to facilitate learning.

According to Smythe and Toohey (2009: 38), in their study of Punjabi-Sikh communities living in Canada:

Ignorance of the sociohistorical contexts and practices of school communities is particularly problematic because learning is seen as so closely tied to participation in cultural and historical situated social activities that involve the user creation and transformation of cultural tools.

Smythe and Toohey (2009: 38) also state that 'understanding the socio-historic literacy practices of the Punjabi Sikh communities is important as it will enable teachers to tailor their teaching strategies to the lifeworld's of children and to avoid re-inscribing structures of privilege and deprivation.'

However, incorporating immigrant literacy practices in the school has also been seen as somewhat contentious by researchers such as Dixon and Wu (2014: 415), who say:

It is unclear whether home practices within immigrant families promote their children's literacy development in the new societal language; they may instead do so in their first language, which may or may not be useful in helping them develop literacy in their second language.

Therefore, studies on the role of home language and literacy practices in immigrant children's literacy development have shown mixed results (Reese & Goldenberg, 2008). Immigrant parents with limited second-language proficiency might try to engage in second language and literacy practices with their children, but these efforts might be undermined by their own low second-language proficiency.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN, APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

### **The sites**

This research was conducted in two family homes: the Mbong and Fotsou families from Yeoville and Florida in Johannesburg respectively. We use pseudonyms for all family members for ethical reasons. The first participant family, the Mbongs (mother and two children), live in

a one-bedroom apartment. The second family is the Fotsou family, who live in a two-bedroom apartment: husband, wife and four children (two boys and two girls).

### **Participants and sampling**

Purposive sampling, often a feature of qualitative research, was used: here, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. We used purposive sampling to select participants as French-speaking immigrants from Cameroon residing in Johannesburg. We decided to work with French-speaking Cameroonians because they have very little command of English, so questions arise around what their home literacy practices are, who assists their children with homework, and how their children cope with being instructed at school through the medium of English. The learners were aged between 7 and 14. Four were born in Cameroon while two were born in South Africa. Family Mbong moved to South Africa 10 years ago and the two children were born here, while Family Fotsou moved to South Africa two years ago with their four children. Only female parents participated in the interviews.

### *Research approach and methods*

This research is a qualitative ethnographic case study. Case studies engage in field research which involves observation of real life events, and where the focus is on ‘the kind of evidence “what people tell you, what they do” that will enable you to understand the meaning of what is going on’ (Gillham, 2000: 10). Likewise, the approach was suitable for this study because we could observe participants in their setting to get a depiction of the way of life of that particular group of people. To undertake ethnographic work is also to enter into a ‘messy set of tasks that will continue over a considerable period of time among strangers’ (Brice Heath & Street, 2008: 29). The desire for fieldwork is located in a particular space and time, where the researcher becomes the instrument. ‘Ethnography forces us to think consciously about ways to enter into the life of the individual, group, or institutional life of the “other”’ (Brice Heath & Street, 2008: 30).

We used interviews and observations, as well as collected a range of artefacts in the process of data collection. The main purpose of an interview is ‘to bring to our attention what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say’ (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004: 52) about their experiences and opinions. In this instance, we interviewed families and children to ‘promote the participants’ expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2011: 114). We conducted interviews with the mothers and children in their homes. Audio recordings proved a useful check for what had been spoken. We complemented the recordings with extensive written notes, ‘for interview data are more than verbal records’ (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000: 661). After collecting the data, we transcribed the recordings. The co-author of this paper is Cameroonian, and French speaking, so she could conduct interviews or translate them into French where the mothers felt more comfortable. Thereafter, she translated the responses into English.

Even though interviews are an important means of collecting large amounts of data, observations help fill the gaps that are inevitably left by interviews (Henning et al., 2004: 52). Therefore, the next component in data collection was observations, which involved us

observing participants' actions, listening to their conversations and asking them clarifying questions when necessary (Gillham, 2000: 45). We conducted at least three home observations per family. This helped to glean a deeper understanding of participants' use of language, and their ways of socialisation and interaction.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis is 'making sense of relevant data gathered from sources such as interviews, on-site observations and documents, and then responsibly presenting what the data reveals' (Caudle, 2004). The method of this analysis, according to Maxwell (2008), should influence and be influenced by the rest of the research design, and should therefore be chosen to explore the data in such a way as to get the most useful information from them. In this study, we used content analysis to analyse the written documents in order to 'convert raw data to final patterns of meaning' (Henning et al., 2004: 100). We did this by indexing the written documents and looking for key words to help us identify the experiences of immigrants in a deeper sense. First, after transcribing and translating the interviews, and writing up the field notes from the observations, we divided the data into units of meaning and gave codes to these different units. Then, categorising related codes gave us themes that emanated from the data and that were used in the discussion of the research.

### **Validity and reliability**

Ethnographers struggle with questions of validity, reliability and replicability. Replicability for instance seems difficult because every study is unique, with an ongoing cycle of events. Ethnographic research is inherently interpretative, subjective and partial (Brice Heath & Street, 2008). Hence, we make decisions about the people with whom we work and the places in which we work, and we acknowledge circumstantial changes that take place between studies. Ethnographers acknowledge empirical and theoretical validity. For Brice Heath and Street (2008), empirical validity ensures that we answer the questions we set out to answer, while theoretical validity ensures our theories stand up to scrutiny.

### **Ethics**

We wrote letters seeking consent from parents for the research, in accordance with university ethics policy. The consent forms were explicit about the purpose of the research and participants were informed of voluntary participation. They were further informed that they could withdraw from the study should they so choose. We used pseudonyms for all participants.

## **DATA DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

Several themes emerged from the data. What follows is a mapping of family literacy practices: their language use, reading and writing at home, and religious and digital practices. Thereafter, possible implications of such a mapping for education in South Africa are considered.

## Mapping family literacy practices

### *Language use*

The home is the primary domain from which individuals venture into other domains. Different types of reading and writing, from school and work, are carried out in the home (Barton & Hamilton, 2012), and practices might leak from one domain to another or might overlap. Literacy practices that occurred at the Mbong and Fotsou homes included reading multiple texts: magazines, newspapers, internet sites and the Bible, as well as watching movies, cooking, drawing and even sporting activities, such as martial arts classes. Initially, what was evident in both homes was that English, which was the medium of instruction at school, was not the primary language used between the mothers and children, as they switched between French, Ghomaala and Bassa. Some insights into observations in the family homes are illustrative:

#### Extract 1

*We met Mrs Fotsou with her sister who was visiting from Midrand, a suburb about half an hour's drive away. The sister was introduced to us in French because the primary data gatherer is fluent in French, and also some Cameroonian dialects. However, their conversation continued in Ghomaala, their mother tongue, which the data gatherer did not understand at all. Looking around we observed a Cameroonian fabric draped over her sofas, which she said was part of her heritage, and which also kept the sofas clean. After the sister left, the children returned home from school. They greeted their mother in French and us in English. The tendency was for the mother and children to code-switch between French and Ghomaala.*

#### Extract 2

*Another visit was made to conduct interviews. Mrs Fotsou told her children why we were there. The children were excited at the prospect of 'visitors', and at the notion of interviews. They asked to have a look at the interview questions before we could proceed. They did not understand several words in the interview questions (such as 'cope', 'included', 'excluded' and 'belong').*

Evidence of code-switching and use of the home language also abounds in the households, as Extracts 3 and 4 reveal:

#### Extract 3: French and English

*Mrs Mbong: Maintenant arrete ton bruit et e'coute/ I told you that cette dame d'UJ est la pour vous interviewer, pourquoi fais-tu du bruit? Silence.*

#### Translated version

*Now, stop your noise and listen. I told you that this lady from UJ is here to interview you, why are you making noise. Silence.*

*In this extract Mrs Mbong code switches from French to English as she urges her children to be quiet for the interview.*

Extract 4: Daren communicating with his mother in Bassa

*Maman á mál l nguen yañen?* Me sobol pam ike ituk. Ndisbe I  
*Mrs Mbong: Sobo bem ike ndek ám ál ndek ngueta nyu bonle ù pam l ke tuk*

Translated version

*Daren: Mom when will this interview be finished I would like to go and play?*  
*Mrs Mbong: Please wait a little bit she will soon finish then you can go outside and play.*

The language practices of the immigrant families are divided into two sections: the home/family and the school. Their practices at home include French and Ghomaala for the Fotsou family, and French, Bassa and some English for the Mbong family. The language practices at school includes English and Afrikaans, and a little communicative Sesotho, which was learnt in South Africa. By establishing these language practices in the various domains, the issue of congruence becomes more apparent. For some families, literacy as prescribed by schools involves English: reading English books, speaking English, and getting involved in activities where the language is used, which is considered to pave the way to academic success (Kajee, 2011). For others, this is an intimidating and costly endeavour, especially if purchasing reading material is involved. As Mrs Mbong said, *'We need money for everything, school must provide books.'*

Minority language families may also feel they have to give up their cultural identity and adopt aspects of the dominant culture (Kajee, 2011). This was true for both the French-speaking Cameroonian families. When interviewed, Mrs Fotsou said about the home language: *'But they (the children) struggle to read Ghomaala, let's say they are struggling to have a good level in English they cannot focus to have a good understanding in Ghomaala now. I fear they will lose it.'* Although the Fotsous had been in the country for only two years, their English proficiency was slightly better than the Mbongs', because they had been exposed to the language a little in Cameroon. One of the profound consequences faced by minority indigenous languages is the threat of home language shift and loss because it is not transmitted to the next generation. Ghomaala and French are the Fotsous' home languages. The children have communicative competence in Ghomaala, but they cannot write it. The reason that the parent gave for this is that they are now focusing on acquiring competence in English so they cannot at the same time concentrate on Ghomaala, which is their mother tongue. In Mrs Fotsou's view, it is not enough for these children to only speak their mother tongue and not write it. We also observed code switching and mixing in both homes on occasion.

The Mbongs speak French and Bassa. Language transmission is the foundation of challenges related to the adjustment of immigrants to their new countries, as it is an instrument for social intercourse by linguistically different groups (Delgado-Gaitan, 2005, 2012). The lack of both linguistic and communicative competence is an obstacle to communication and socialising in the school context. Mrs Mbong was also adamant that *'Bassa must not be lost, I will always use it with them [the children].'* The children's views are also relevant: *'People did not talk to me because I could not hear them, so I didn't have friends'* (Fotu). The child proposed that people could not speak to him because he could not understand their language. The disaffection and marginalisation felt was evident and had a negative impact on social interaction. For many of

the children, English was important because it was how they ‘got ahead’ (Dory), ‘It is important to do well in school’ (Christiane), ‘English is for school and university’ (Daren), and ‘With English teachers say you can go far. It is more important in this country than our [home] language’ (Daren). While children may not show schooled literacy in the dominant language of the school (usually English) per se, in home and community settings they demonstrate complex language and literacy patterns and behaviours as they weave their way through multifaceted literacy activities. The challenge is that children whose mode of discourse is different from that used in school instruction find themselves at a disadvantage, which has the potential to contribute to dropping out of school.

### *Reading and writing at home*

Based on home observations, the learners tended to be less anxious when reading at home as opposed to the reported tensions that arise from reading aloud at school. From observations, the interactions during times of reading at home appeared to be fun-filled, playful experiences as opposed to the rigidity that reportedly appeared to characterise reading at school in front of teachers and peers (interview data). In the Fotsou family, the learners read at home in English, although their English ability is best described as elementary, given that the learner in Grade 7 still could not understand the meaning of certain words in the interview questions. Parents and siblings mediated the learning of English to the less competent members during homework time. Christiane (older sibling) and Carin (younger sibling) were observed doing homework at the kitchen table on one occasion. Carin was busy with school worksheets. Carin interrupted Christiane on several occasions, asking for the meaning or spelling of particular words. Christiane assisted her patiently, and corrected her on occasion.

We observed Mrs Mbong on one occasion sitting on the floor and reading to her young son in her apartment in Yeoville, most likely because she was comfortable that way, because she had a couch that she preferred not to sit on. She pointed out words and pictures to the child in the elementary children’s text, but more often than not, the child would point and pronounce them for her. The moment between mother and child was not just one of ‘getting homework done’, but of family bonding. Parents and siblings serve as language brokers to the children, and vice versa (for instance, Christiane and Carin in the previous paragraph). This is indicative of Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD represents the difference between what a person can do with help, versus what he/she can do without help. Active agents within the ZPD can include people, with different degrees of expertise, but can also include artefacts, such as books, videos, wall displays, scientific equipment and computer environments intended to support intentional learning. The elder son in the Fotsou family, for instance, took responsibility for writing the shopping list for his mother. Writing activities such as poems scribbled on pieces of paper, notes and lists compiled by the children at home are often not acknowledged by schools. Young people are active writers in safe spaces and write with imagination and humour (Delgado-Gaitan, 2005, 2012).

### *Religion and religious literacy*

Immigrants gravitate to what is familiar, taking residence in ethnic neighbourhoods, and engaging in social pursuits in the company of family and friends with similar backgrounds (Hirshman, 2004). The creation of an immigrant church or temple often provides ethnic

communities with refuge from the broader society, as well as opportunities for economic mobility and social recognition. However, many immigrants also join or found religious organisations as an expression of their historical identity as well as their commitment to building a local community in their new country. The idea of community – of shared values and enduring association – is often sufficient to motivate persons to trust and help one another, even in the absence of long personal relationships. However, in his work on African immigrants in the USA, Kwiyani (2012: 2) argues that African immigrant congregations are not just an outcome of the need to create a home away from home. Often, they arise as result of a need to negotiate the discrimination that African immigrants face in Western congregations.

Religious literacy as a sub-field of educational linguistics relates the teaching and learning of language to the performance of religious acts, and the use of sacred texts (Watt & Fairfield, 2008), and gives rise to specific ideology. Language used in the sacred texts frames the kind of language used in private religious practices.

The enormous power of language, sacred or secular lies partly in the fact that words originating in one context can be preserved and relayed across vast expanses of geography, time and culture, echoing in a form of natural human language, the very transcendence of the deity from whom they originated (Watt & Fairfield, 2008: 356).

Religion, by association, intertwines with language, literacy and society, and is a means of language spread, as is the case in this study. Religion and religious literacy are a central practice in these two homes, and religious texts are integral to their everyday personal lives. Both families are Christian and attend church. Mrs Fotsou attaches importance not only to her religion but also to her mother tongue. She brought a prayer book written in Ghomaala from Cameroon to South Africa, because this is how she constructs her identity and Cameroonian heritage. Consider Extract 5 that follows:

Extract 5:

Researcher: *What did you have in your mind when you carried that prayer book in Ghomaala all the way from Cameroon to South Africa?*

Interviewee: *I don't want to lose the Ghomaala language, I don't want to lose it. I am an heir to my mother I have to keep the language. If I call my grand sister I will speak Ghomaala, I do not speak French, I don't speak English then I need to keep the Ghomaala even for my kids to never forget where they come from. It's about respect.*

This text is very precious to Mrs Fotsou. Also on Mrs Fotsou's wall is a print inscribed 'Jesus I trust in you'. The prayer book and religious framed prints are a demonstration of her religious commitment. An excerpt of the Lord's Prayer in Ghomaala is also in a prime spot on a wall. To the Mbongs, weekly church visits are normal practice. The children also go to Sunday school where they recite the Lord's Prayer in English, as well as rhymes in English and Zulu. Similar practice was noted in the Fotsou family. Mrs Fotsou's disappointment, however, was that she could not find her original church in Johannesburg, so she attends another one. Of interest is that the use of South African languages is limited to a smattering of Afrikaans, isiZulu and

Sesotho. Mrs Mbong said: *'Just a few words here and there that we pick up ... using Zulu or Sotho makes you feel black ... but Afrikaans is not right yet.'* Her reference to feeling 'black' is an indication that, even though they use South African languages, it is important for them to claim their cultural heritage as well. Charismatic activities such as church-going and Bible-reading are empowering to immigrant communities (Guerra & Farr, 2002). The stance is analogous in this study, where religion is associated with peace and fulfilment, and enables participants to manage their problems more effectively.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION**

In this study, a mapping of the families' language and literacy practices indicates that the type of literacies practiced in some homes are evidently incongruent with those that children encounter in school (Barton, 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 2012). According to Haneda (2006: 343), 'it is vitally important that teachers value and build on students' existing home and community literacy practices in promoting literacy competence in school.' An important issue to consider regarding the fact that there are different literacies in different domains of life, is what ways schools can use to connect their students' literacy practices in different contexts.

Work on how cultural funds of knowledge can be used to bridge communities and classrooms acknowledges the expertise of parents. Teachers should welcome the way children can bring their outside worlds into the classroom through their speaking and writing. Crossing boundaries of race, class and gender enrich how we look at literacy. By involving parents, family and community members in literacy teaching, and by building existing literacies of the family and community, schools can act as 'catalysts in a process of empowerment for children, families and teachers (and) collaborative literacy teaching and learning can be a positive force in the redefinition of relations of power, and the enhancement of social justice' (Creese et al., 2014: 159).

After-school community programmes, such as the STRUGGLE project described by Long et al. (2002) and Anderson and Anderson's (in Kajee, in print) PAL programme, are noteworthy. The former, which is based in Pittsburgh, gave students the opportunity to use technology to compose personal narratives. This is reminiscent of Bakhtin's (1981) dialogues in the mind. Bakhtin (1981: 301-330) characterises the dialogic imagination, which may be affirming personal stories that guide the self, as the chorus of voices that breathe meaning in people's lives. Community literacy therefore permits border-crossing, and as such expands horizons, bringing adults and youth together to co-construct texts. In so doing, they have the potential to become urban sanctuaries or contact zones that promote hybrid literacies.

After-school family literacy programmes, such as that of Anderson and Anderson, could also provide parents with training for home tutoring. Parents could support their children's literacy development by helping with homework and making special time in the day to focus on reading and writing. A significant way in which parents can support their children's literacy development is by reading to them. It is the responsibility of educators to value and build on the unique parent-child experiences, by acknowledging what children bring to the classroom, and how we might cultivate a view of learning that focuses on 'human lives seen a trajectories through multiple social practices in various social institutions' (Gee, 2008: 146).

For Dixon and Wu (2014:442), ‘family literacy programmes might be seen as reflecting a view that something is wrong with immigrant families’ home practices that need to be fixed.’ However, Hirst, Hannon and Nutbrown (2010) addressed this concern directly by asking parent participants in a literacy programme what they thought of the programme. These parents were overwhelmingly positive, seeing the programme as helping them to learn how to support their children’s school learning better, feel validated in their role in promoting first language literacy, and understand school literacy practices, which differed substantially from the school practices of their countries of origin. Although school programmes may need to change to accommodate immigrant students’ home language and literacy practices, parent programmes can also be established to empower immigrant families to expand their repertoire of literacy practices and therefore support their children’s literacy development further (Dixon & Wu, 2014: 442). As Dixon and Wu (2014: 442) aptly state:

It seems important that educators should recognise their students’ current literacy practices, but these practices may not be sufficient to help students achieve their goals in terms of school and life success. Schools should, therefore, devise programmes that recognise students’ current practices as strengths and build upon them, but also scaffold students’ development of additional school- and work-based literacy practices.

For example, researchers such as Ek (2008) note that the immigrant students in that study were able to read and discuss religious texts at a high level of comprehension. Teachers can help students to transfer these skills to the secular texts assigned in school. However, reading in a religious context may not encourage the development of the type of critical thinking skills that schools seek to develop in students, so teachers must use students’ ability to read, comprehend and interpret, adding the ability to question and even disagree outright with a secular text.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to Dixon and Wu (2014:442-443):

Much more research is needed to fill out the picture of immigrant home literacy practices and how they relate to school and life achievement. It is only with further research on a variety of immigrant populations in a diversity of contexts that researchers and educators may be able to more clearly disentangle which issues are common to experience of immigration, which is common to second language acquisition, which is as a result of specific policies or school contexts and which are culture-specific.

The more educators understand immigrant and family literacies, the more they can help adjust their classrooms instead of trying to reshape children and their families to meet the demands of school. Educational institutions need to deliver instructions which meet the needs of all students, especially the linguistically and culturally diverse who have historically been marginalised by traditional models of pedagogy. Additionally, the benefits should not be pertinent only to the immigrant children, but to the South African education system as a whole.

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