

EXPERIENCES OF FOUNDATION PHASE TEACHERS QUALIFIED IN A DUAL MEDIUM PROGRAMME

Thabile Mbatha
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Research shows that literacy is the foundation to successful education and a key to social, economic and political freedom. In South Africa literacy education is in a crisis as depicted in several systemic evaluation test results. A qualitative study was conducted to follow up 33 IsiZulu mother tongue teachers in eight districts in KwaZulu-Natal who were qualified to teach literacy in the mother tongue through a dual medium foundation phase programme. The teachers' experiences and viewpoints captured in information-sharing focus group sessions were analysed based on a conceptual framework of utilising children's emergent literacy and the mother tongue for teaching early literacy acquisition. Findings reflected that although the newly qualified teachers were keen to implement mother tongue teaching in foundation phase classes, some schools did not support mother tongue instruction. Conclusions were drawn, emphasising the importance of literacy acquisition in the mother tongue, in order to establish strong foundations for learning.

KEYWORDS

Dual medium, emergent literacy, foundation phase, literacy acquisition, mother tongue

INTRODUCTION

The early level of schooling, referred to as the foundation phase (FP) is presented through a metaphor of building solid foundations of learning. The ages between 18 months to 9 years are the formative years of childhood development where many concepts and skills such as the ability to read, count and write are developed. Systemic evaluation test results in primary education in South Africa currently show dismal levels of literacy and numeracy. Mullis et al. (2007) as well as Moloi & Strauss (2005) argue that in the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and the Project of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ II 2005) studies, there is a big gap in the performance of South African learners when compared with learners from other countries. In response to the literacy *crisis* six years ago, the South African Department of Education introduced interventions such as the Foundations for Learning Campaign, the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008a and 2008b) and most recently the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to improve the situation of the readers' skills and abilities (DBE 2011). At the same time, the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN)

School of Education began to offer instruction in the Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) FP programme using IsiZulu and English. This was to enhance the foundation phase teachers' knowledge of effective methods for teaching literacy in the mother tongue and in English First Additional Language. The main aim of this incentive of the dual medium programme was to train teachers to teach literacy and other foundation phase subjects in the mother tongue based on the Language in Education Policy (DoE 1997) and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DoE 2002). It was also an attempt to address the role of IsiZulu as a mother tongue for the majority of learners in KwaZulu-Natal, but was not limited to the use of one mother tongue in teacher education. Since 1997, it has not been easy to translate the language policy into practice due to challenges such as the paucity of resources in indigenous languages and lack of well-trained teachers in various indigenous African mother tongues.

In this article, the experiences and viewpoints of teachers in teaching literacy through IsiZulu, the learners' mother tongue, are analysed. This study traces the practices of foundation phase teachers who had undergone training to teach literacy acquisition in the learners' mother tongue in a dual medium programme for foundation phase teachers. A dual medium curriculum combines teaching in a learner's home language and teaching in an additional language. It contains the pedagogical advantages of home language teaching and learning with maximal opportunity in gaining proficiency in English (Plüddemann, 2002:4). The dual medium programme, which is the focus of the research discussed in this article, was a pre-service programme for PGCE FP student teachers. It began in 2008 and is currently offered in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Mbatha (2010) gives an account of the dual medium programme, during its first time implementation, which provides a basis for this study. The main aim of the dual medium programme is to educate teachers to teach literacy and other foundation phase subjects in the mother tongue.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on theory and concepts of mother tongue education and teaching of literacy in a home language as well as the emergent literacy model. A large body of research exists on these concepts in New Literacy Studies, for instance, Gee (1996) and Street (1996; 2003). There is not only a large body of literature on literacy, but this concept is also defined in a myriad of ways. For the purpose of the research reported in this article the definitions provided by (Gee 1996; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Nel & Snelgar 2012) will be taken into account. According to Gee (1996: 49) 'Literacy is the mastery over the ways of being, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, reading, writing and arguing that are accepted by particular groups of people.' This definition implies that communication is about saying and doing things that are deemed correct in certain contexts and decided by the people that use them. This approach is attuned to the ideological model of literacy (Street, 1996; 2003).

Cook-Gumperz (1986: 17) is of the opinion that,

'Literacy refers to the ability to create and understand printed messages as well as to the changes that this ability brings about. Yet, at the same time, it connotes an assessment of the usefulness of this ability. Literacy cannot be judged apart from some understanding of

the social circumstances and specific historical traditions which affect the way this ability takes root in society.’

Furthermore, Bloch (2005:7) states,

‘... the emergent literacy or whole language perspective sees young children constructing their own literacy in personally useful and meaningful ways as part of developmental, personal, social and cultural learning processes. In the second half of the 20th Century, international research into early language and literacy learning undertaken in a range of disciplines led to revised and powerful understandings about how young children who grow up in literate settings come to be literate.’

In similar vein, Nel & Snelgar (2012: 3) add that,

‘Emergent literacy skills are greatly influenced through social and cultural interaction, where young learners acquire literacy from everyday experiences with more literate adults. Different aspects of the home literacy environment affect the emergent literacy exposure, classroom compatibility and development of each learner.’

The above definitions imply that the social uses of literacy should be embedded in learning, which means that learners’ linguistic and social experiences should form part of learning literacy. A dual medium approach allows teachers to use several perspectives of literacy development embedded in conceptions of literacy acquisition in the mother tongue and in an additional language. The multiple perspectives of literacy provide meaningful bases of teaching literacy in the early stages of learning. One definition might present literacy as access or as information-processing skills yet another definition may project literacy as social practice and as a critical thinking strategy (Klaas & Trudell, 2011). The definitions also show that the understanding of printed messages is not just everything that literacy is concerned about. Rather, that being literate takes into account the learning context and that when teaching literacy, learners should not be regarded as empty slates waiting to be taught literacy that does not value who they are and what their social circumstances may be. Meaningful learning of literacy occurs when learners can relate to ways of becoming literate beings. Emergent Literacy development approaches are pertinent to the view of literacy acquisition that implicates a range of pedagogical, linguistic and cultural components and information processing (Klaas & Trudell, 2011).

Proponents of mother tongue education, such as Cummins (1996), Alexander (2000), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), Heugh (2002) and Ball (2010), argue that using the home language as a resource for teaching literacy is advantageous, because children who learn to read in their home language are able to transfer these reading skills to another language. Bialystock (2006) argues that learners who become literate in a language they understand, find that they can transfer the reading skills they have developed in the first language to other languages as well. Klaas & Trudell (2011: 27) concur that ‘... a mismatch between the language of instruction and the language spoken by the learner inhibits learner participation, prevents content learning and makes critical thinking impossible.’ Drawing on the developmental interdependence theory, Cummins (1996: 55) argues that high levels of proficiency in the home language enable similar

levels to be attained in the second language. In contrast, when skills in the home language are not well developed, and education in the early years is exclusively in the second language, further development in the home language becomes stunted. The 'dual iceberg' theory, also proposed by Cummins (1984), argues that 'there is a common underlying proficiency' irrespective of the language in which a person is operating. This theory suggests that the ability to perform language tasks such as talking, reading, writing and listening come from the same central system. Baker (1996), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and Ball (2010) maintain that many of the skills acquired in the first language could be transferred to the second language. Developing the home language is easier and thus can lay a solid foundation for learning the second language. Besides these benefits, the home language also brings its speakers together, because it is the language that embodies their culture. However, many scholars such as Dyers (1998), Turner (2012), Dalvit & de Klerk (2005) indicate that negative attitudes towards local languages exist wherein participants argue that other languages offer better opportunities than IsiZulu and other African languages. According to Turner (2012: 32-34) learners in KwaZulu-Natal stated that they opted for Afrikaans over IsiZulu because 'not only is it easier but also because it offers wider opportunities in the global scenario than IsiZulu does, as Afrikaans has a closer relationship with Germanic languages.'

It is against this background that this study wanted to investigate foundation phase teachers' experiences with mother tongue education, particularly in view of their training in a dual medium programme.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology of information-sharing utilising focus group interviews with 33 foundation phase teachers was used in the study to follow up teachers who had qualified to teach through a dual medium programme. Information-sharing was chosen because the academics and participants involved in the dual medium programme believed that there should be an increased opportunity to share knowledge and activities in a network of scholars such as the foundation phase teachers and lecturers in order to increase teacher professional development. Pilerot & Limberg (2011: 313-315) allude that 'information-sharing is used to describe and explain numerous actions comprising the seeking, using and sharing of information, known as information practice.' The authors indicate that 'information sharing is a situated and collective practice that needs to be approached from a social as well as a technical angle'. They argue that what is shared in the act of information-sharing would include sharing of information in academic communities. During information-sharing sessions, participants interact and co-produce meanings of the work that they do. Hence, information-sharing is a discursive approach and a foundation on which this work rests theoretically. The notion of information-sharing supports Hargreaves' (1999) view that within professional relationships teachers discuss issues related to their work in order to develop themselves and in order to learn from each other. This takes place through various forms of interaction with the middle management such as heads of departments, cluster leaders, mentors and mentees, which help to take information-sharing and collaboration to a higher level. Lieberman & Wood (2003) echo Hargreaves' view by stating that through networking teachers establish learning communities such as study groups and research collaboration. They engage in researching similar problems or questions, plan lessons

together and hold informative discussions that help to strengthen their knowledge bases. The main aim of this research was sharing information with the foundation phase teachers and their experiences and viewpoints of teaching literacy in the mother tongue.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants from eight districts in KwaZulu-Natal were purposively selected, because they had done the dual medium programme in the previous five years. Lecturers who taught in the programme organised an information-sharing meeting with 33 former students of the dual medium programme who were teaching in foundation phase classes in different schools in KwaZulu-Natal. All due ethical procedures were followed in obtaining permission from participants and they were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. They were assured that their identity would be protected. The information-sharing meeting took place in April 2011. The aim of this meeting was to share information regarding experiences and viewpoints of teaching literacy in the mother tongue. In this way information and support were given to the teachers. The participants who took part in this research came from various districts in the province of KwaZulu-Natal as indicated in Table 1 down below:

Table 1: Number of participants in schools per district in KwaZulu-Natal

Names of Districts	Number of participants
ILembe	9
UMgungundlovu	8
Pinetown	5
Umlazi	5
Ugu	2
Empangeni	1
Vryheid	2
Amajuba * bordering the Free State	1
N =	33

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data participants were selected from eight districts in KZN. These participants had studied the dual medium FP programme at various periods between 2008 and 2010. Data was representative of the teachers from rural and urban schooling contexts. Consistency checks and stakeholder checks were conducted in order to determine the accuracy of the findings.

To realise the aim of this research, the following guiding questions were asked and these were later broken down to conduct focus group interviews in the data collection phase:

- What are foundation phase teachers' experiences of using the mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching in teaching literacy acquisition?
- How did the dual medium foundation phase programme shape foundation phase teachers' understanding of teaching literacy in the mother tongue?

Before the data collection participants were informed about the importance of the information-sharing session for their professional growth, including the value of their contribution in generating data for the study. Consent was obtained prior to interviews and participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of the right to continue or withdraw from the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to them.

Data collection

Data collection took place through information-sharing sessions that happened in focus group discussions at the Edgewood campus at UKZN. The researcher utilised open-ended questions and allowed participants the liberty to express themselves freely in IsiZulu if they so wished. Probing questions were posed to expand and clarify points made during the focus group discussions. Both English and IsiZulu were used to discuss topics indicated below:

- The use of the mother tongue for teaching literacy;
- Experiences and viewpoints on the role of mother tongue instruction in teaching learners in the foundation phase;
- Lessons learnt from the dual medium programme about the role of the mother tongue in teaching;
- Implications of using the mother tongue in teaching in the foundation phase and reasons for these;
- Challenges or tensions about using the mother tongue in schools and reasons for that.

Participants were requested to add other information that they felt would be valuable for sharing among the lecturers and colleagues.

Data analysis

After transcribing the focus group interviews, a qualitative data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis whereby patterns in the data were identified and compared. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000: 147) argue that qualitative analysis involves organising of, accounting for, and explaining of the data. It also includes making sense of the data in terms of participants' definitions of the situation. Further, the analysis also involved identifying recurring themes and patterns emerging from the data and synthesising the main ideas. Eventually, a comparison with the body of literature on literacy acquisition and mother tongue instruction was conducted so as to identify possible similarities and differences in findings made in similar studies.

Some of the informants who lived in districts close to the university were asked to evaluate the interpretations pulled from the data and to comment on whether these interpretations represented their experiences. The participants approached endorsed that the interpretations confirmed their views. The findings consisting of experiences and viewpoints shared by the teachers about their teaching practices are presented in the following sections.

LEARNERS' HOME LANGUAGES AND THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING (LoLT) USED IN SCHOOL

The majority of participants indicated that their learners' home language was IsiZulu except one participant from the Amajuba district who indicated that his learners' home language was

Sesotho. Amajuba shares a border with the Free State province but it is in KwaZulu-Natal. IsiZulu was the language of teaching in all the schools in the district with the exception of Afrikaans and English medium schools. Some participants indicated that in their schools English was used as language of teaching from the third and fourth school terms in Grade 2. Participants also indicated that although IsiZulu was the official language of learning and teaching by default they were expected by the schools, colleagues and parents to use English sooner as a language of learning and teaching. The teachers indicated that communicating with learners was not a barrier and served well to teach literacy in IsiZulu. Teachers could engage in the aspects of literacy carried through Gee's notion of literacy that portrays literacy as '... the mastery over the ways of being, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, reading, writing and arguing that are accepted by particular groups of people' (Gee, 1996:49). A second finding of the study concerns lessons learnt from the dual medium programme.

THE MOTHER TONGUE AS THE STARTING POINT

Participants revealed that they were convinced that IsiZulu or the mother tongue was the best medium of teaching literacy because they understood that it was pedagogically sound for children to be taught in their mother tongue. They further expressed that using a dual medium approach at university helped them to understand how to teach using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. They attested that they were enjoying teaching in IsiZulu. They indicated that using the mother tongue was good and they were extremely positive about the benefits of teaching literacy in IsiZulu. One of the participants aptly said:

'I understand that the mother tongue is the starting point. By using the mother tongue children have a better understanding and comprehension of concepts. Children also easily learn the grammar because they already speak the language. In using an additional language, children memorise vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. I have learnt that the mother tongue is the starting point.'

Another participant indicated that the mother tongue is a bridge for learning and that literacy should first be taught in a language that learners speak well, rather than beginning to teach it in an additional language because learners need to understand and relate what they learn to what they know. Participants added that when taught in IsiZulu learners could better understand new concepts when presented in a language that they know. They added that in the mother tongue children have a nuanced understanding of their language unlike learning literacy concepts in an additional language where they 'bark at print' instead of reading with understanding because they do not yet possess a deeper understanding of the additional language and the meaning of the words.

One focus group member mentioned that:

'It is nice to teach in IsiZulu and learners are pleased to be taught in IsiZulu because it is a language they speak at home unlike when they learn in English where they are drilled with rhymes in order to learn English. The teacher has to read out for them and they repeat after him/her. They over-depend on the teacher and they just need to memorise some English lessons'.

In learning early literacy in the English First Additional Language, children become fully reliant on the teacher where they use learning and coping strategies, such as memorisation, repetition and drilling as stated by Nel & Snelgar (2012) and Lemmer & Manyike (2012). A respondent stated that when she attended primary school, it was difficult to understand her teacher because English was used as LoLT in the foundation phase, yet the learners did not speak the language. She said she only started to understand a few words of English in Grade 4. She concurred that learners taught in their mother tongue can better understand what they are taught since it is in a language they understand and actively participate in learning when using their mother tongue, as opposed to using English, because it is a foreign language and also because they do not have the necessary English vocabulary. She acknowledged that it was a problem to use English as a LoLT in the foundation phase if the children use IsiZulu in their homes and in the schooling context. The role of the mother tongue in teaching literacy is further highlighted in the subsequent finding:

THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE IN TEACHING LITERACY IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE

Participants attested that in addition to better understanding what is taught, learners show that they know quite a lot of information when the mother tongue is used, unlike when English is used in which they are less proficient. They corroborated with research, which reiterates that it is a problem to use a foreign language as language of learning and teaching where exposure to that language is non-existent because it inhibits learner participation (Klaas & Trudell, 2011). The role of the mother tongue in teaching literacy in the foundation phase was articulated in a focus group discussion when it was mentioned that:

‘During IsiZulu lessons, the little ones talk and tell you what they think. They talk a lot about what they see and tell you more about things that they can’t tell you about in English. During speaking and reading lessons they discuss a lot about what they know and can tell you stories during news time. All this helps them to learn the language skills of speaking, listening and reading’.

Bloch (2005: 7) argues that ‘the emergent literacy theoretical perspective sees young children constructing their own literacy in personally useful and meaningful ways as part of developmental, personal, social and cultural learning processes’. For this reason, it is critical to make literacy acquisition more meaningful by using words and a sound system that is familiar to learners. For IsiZulu learners trying to learn to read, they need to have phonological awareness in a familiar language, because it is much more difficult to learn the sound system of another language if the sounds are pronounced differently from IsiZulu, as is the case with English. The sound system of the other language may not mirror words familiar to learners. This makes it important to teach literacy in the mother tongue before introducing an additional language. To underscore the above points Nel & Snelgar (2012: 3) argue that ‘language development is the quintessential ingredient for the acquisition of literacy and that the building blocks for learning literacy are acquired very early through emergent literacy’. Nevertheless, some participants

alluded that using the mother tongue faced some challenges that seemed to frustrate their efforts of teaching literacy in English as a first additional language.

CHALLENGES OF USING THE MOTHER TONGUE AS A LoLT IN SOME SCHOOLS

Some school authorities resisted the use of the mother tongue for teaching literacy because they did not believe that teaching literacy in the mother tongue prior to the development of literacy in an additional language was useful. The participants identified two tensions encountered by teachers teaching through the mother tongue in some schools. Focus group discussions revealed that some of the longer serving teachers who did not go through a dual medium programme did not see things in the same way as the recently graduated dual language literacy teachers who insisted on literacy development in the mother tongue. The response below indicates the tension:

‘I don’t know really, but teachers in the schools don’t feel at ease with UKZN graduates. Many of the parents do not involve themselves in the work of their children. Some parents don’t even come to the schools when invited. This inhibits their children’s learning because parents do not read with their children in IsiZulu. They don’t know that we are encouraging reading with children in IsiZulu.’

Furthermore, participants argued that using the mother tongue was a teaching approach that was unfamiliar to the longer serving teachers which was why those teachers did not value literacy development in the mother tongue. These teachers mirrored parents’ demands for children to learn English and tended to ignore that literacy in the mother tongue was also valuable pedagogically and for their children’s personal and social identity. Secondly, negative language attitudes are another source of tension. They are often the main obstacle towards using the mother tongue as a language of learning and teaching. Dyers (1998) and Dalvit & de Klerk (2005) observed the negative attitudes of university students towards IsiXhosa usage at university. Mashiya (2010) identified negative attitudes reported by some students at tertiary level that isiZulu is a difficult language to learn through since it is the language of communication only. Negative attitudes were exhibited by students who attended multiracial schools (ex-model ‘C’ schools), and who were good in English (Mashiya, 2010: 102). The unfavourable attitudes towards the use of IsiZulu and IsiXhosa were aggravated by the hegemony of English presented as the need for English and the lack of the knowledge of the benefits of mother tongue education.

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION DILEMMA

Some participants were concerned that the mother tongue as a LoLT delays the teaching of English as a first additional language. Some participants stated that there was a big difference between teaching IsiZulu and teaching English as a First Additional language and they demanded to have more time to teach English. They said:

‘Time allocated to the mother tongue was too much in the new Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) because it takes away time from teaching English First Additional language.’

IsiZulu Literacy is taught every day, which does not give us enough time for the realities of teaching English. Parents want English. Maybe we should increase the time for teaching English because there is already a lot of IsiZulu.’

The participants indicated that although using IsiZulu to teach Literacy was valuable, there were undertones that English was much more important since CAPS requires English First Additional Language to be taught in Grade 1 (DoE, 2011). Teachers reacted to the new curriculum policy by suggesting that if it required English First Additional language to be introduced in Grade 1, it was in some way implying that they had to teach English literacy soon if they were to give learners a good start in English. That is why the participants argued that, if IsiZulu Literacy was taught every day, it would not give them enough time for teaching English Literacy. However, if seen differently, children have their whole lives to learn English. Because of this argument, participants suggested that more time should be allocated to teaching English than teaching literacy in the mother tongue because the education system values English more and even the parents wanted their children to learn literacy in English. Although a lot of research in South Africa argues that parents want their children to be taught in English very early in the foundation phase, there seems to be no consensus about the appropriate time to begin teaching literacy in an additional language. Research clearly indicates that the mother tongue does not interfere with the learning of English but rather enhances it (Heugh, 2002 and Cummins, 1996).

RURAL VERSUS URBAN TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES IN THE TEACHING OF LITERACY IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

Following the language of instruction dilemma discussed above, teachers’ experiences showed different practices between rural and urban teachers. Although teachers in rural schools followed the suggested guidelines in the CAPS documents on time spent on teaching literacy in IsiZulu and English First Additional Language (EFAL), urban school teachers were under pressure for English. They were the ones that pointed out that there were too many varieties of IsiZulu and thus they would rather focus on English. For them both IsiZulu and English were used regularly in their environment but they believed in teaching literacy more in English than in IsiZulu by considering the rapid changing language used for educational, social and economic reasons. Teachers in rural schools seemed to have a greater opportunity to teach literacy in the mother tongue than teachers in urban schools as the policy gives room for the language used in the environment to be used as a LoLT. Teachers in urban schools, therefore, capitalised on English as a language that was used in some children’s home environments. Gardiner (2008: 20) explains that many people, including those in rural areas, want to learn and become fluent in English, but this goal is often unattainable in rural areas due to the high levels of illiteracy among adults and infrequent exposure to languages like English. Rural children have little opportunity to live, think and work in English. However, it is important for rural and urban children to acquire so-called deep language skills in their home language before they start learning an additional language. The research findings highlighted various aspects of teaching literacy especially the importance of teaching literacy in the mother tongue. These findings will now be discussed.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to ascertain experiences, challenges and viewpoints of foundation phase teachers who had qualified to teach literacy in the mother tongue through a dual medium programme. Teachers' views were drawn from focus group discussions held during information-sharing sessions between graduates of the dual medium programme and their former lecturers. Sharing information on the teachers' experiences was valuable in giving lecturers feedback and opening opportunities of engagement with other teachers and together finding ways of addressing the literacy crisis.

Findings of the study highlighted some degree of success in using the mother tongue in teaching literacy in the foundation phase in KwaZulu-Natal. However, the problems raised by the participants seemed very serious and should be resolved in order to give mother tongue instruction the necessary status. Most importantly, the problems and uncertainties should not only be addressed, but should be systematically researched to ensure well-founded mother tongue literacy teaching.

Although the newly qualified teachers were keen to implement mother tongue teaching in schools, English was the preferred LoLT and some schools did not welcome mother tongue instruction. This situation posed certain challenges to teaching literacy in the mother tongue teaching that the dual medium programme had already started to address. Some of the challenges were the lack of cooperation from older staff members and principals who were opposed to teaching in the mother tongue and preferred teaching literacy in English. Educators who tried to teach literacy English prematurely, without appropriate resources and methods, were unsuccessful because children in rural schools were not exposed to English. Their desired teaching of literacy English was unsuccessful due to constraints that the teachers faced in schools and in the learners' home environments.

Furthermore, findings show that the successful implementation of a mother tongue policy is complex. Some of the most important aspects are adequate teacher education programmes and further professional development in order to equip the teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills. Another important point is about challenging the hegemonic status of English because it casts doubt on well-founded and successful mother tongue education initiatives. A further important point to remember in these language debates is that multilingual education is part of the South African linguistic landscape that is recognised by the Language in Education policy. Therefore, in multilingual classrooms a systematic usage of the mother tongue is part of the educational scene. The example of Sesotho as the dominant language in a district of KwaZulu-Natal underlines the important fact that the speakers and learners of various mother tongues have the same rights to education in their mother tongue as English mother tongue speakers. Hence, the Provincial Education Department must ensure that all learners are taught in equally inclusive circumstances in their schools. Findings also highlight the need for strong dual medium programmes in schools and teacher education institutions.

This research also showed that unless policies that promote the mother tongue in formal education are implemented, supported and monitored the mother tongue would continue to be

undervalued as an educational medium. Safeguarding learners' language rights at school and their mother tongues should not be ignored, whether it is IsiZulu or Sesotho. Snow's (2006) assertion that literacy is a complex and multifaceted skill which changes enormously as it is acquired indicates that using the mother tongue in education deserves careful planning and thinking due to factors such as the unavailability of teaching resources, selection of a suitable literacy programme and preparation of competent literacy teachers.

CONCLUSION

Through information-sharing the participants agreed that instruction that is irrelevant to learner' experiences or language is inappropriate for teaching literacy acquisition since it promotes ritualistic and stressful learning experiences such as memorisation and drilling. However, it seemed that the educational and societal needs for English were more important than the realities of the child. Such an argument represents the hegemonic status of English that is often used by some educators and parents to show the fuzziness highlighted by some older teachers and participants in the study who, despite having undergone training through a dual medium programme showed some vague understandings of the value of literacy acquisition in the mother tongue.

Viewpoints of the newly qualified educators revealed a lack of support in the schools where they were teaching because of a perceived lack of understanding by older colleagues and principals of the value of teaching literacy in a home language. The study recommends that steps should be taken by the Department of Basic Education to equip all teachers and school principals with an understanding of the role of the mother tongue in early literacy acquisition. Attempts should also be made to assist them to understand the theoretical basis of building solid foundations for literacy acquisition, as it was found in the literature and in the study that the mother tongue is the starting point if literacy acquisition and the enhancement of critical thinking are to be achieved

The study contributes to an ongoing debate about the use of the mother tongue as a LoLT in the early years of schooling. Furthermore, it shapes policy and praxis in the implementation of the Language in Education Policy. It also adds to ongoing research that is continually trying to find ways of turning around the literacy debacle in the South African education system. Findings may be used to equip educators with appropriate approaches that develop learners' emergent literacy skills in any mother tongue, which are relevant to teaching English as a first additional language. Findings also highlight the need to strengthen initiatives that give support to mother tongue education as a basis for building the teaching of literacy in an additional language.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr Thabile Mbatha is a Senior Lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the School of Education. She has a PhD in Education. Her research interests are in Teacher Development Studies and teaching Literacy in the Foundation Phase. She publishes in Language Education and Foundation Phase Literacy Studies in the mother tongue and in English as a first additional language. She serves on the South African Research Association of Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) as a committee member. Email address: mbathath@ukzn.ac.za