# Children's Early Encounters with Literacy in Windhoek Urban Preprimary Schools in Namibia

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## Abstract

*This paper takes a socio-cultural approach as it analyze ways in which reading and writing is taught and learnt to define what counts as literacy in Windhoek urban preprimary schools in Namibia. The study explores data of a larger ethnographic-style research that followed three children in three Windhoek urban pre-and primary schools in Namibia. The writer examines their early encounters with literacy and the implications of these encounters for their later development as readers and writers in schools. As teachers and learners occupy the classroom as a social space, they engage each other in literacy events, during which literacy development is scaffolded and encouraged as a culturally valued activity. This paper presents a 'slice' of that larger study that followed three preschool classrooms literacy encounters over a period of six months. The writer suggests that this "school literacy", defines what counts as literacy, a specific kind of literacy that is planned and offered to learners in a classroom setting. In Windhoek urban preprimary settings, the 'traditional' conception of literacy as a largely psychological ability – something true to do with our intellect, and thus a private possession – remains dominant. Literacy learning is taught as a mechanical activity by focusing on breaking the code rather than as sense-making and engagement. I argue that this approach helps learners to cope with early primary school curriculum while missing to lay the foundation necessary for literacy forms and practices demanded in later years of schooling.*

**Keywords:** classroom literacy, literacy events and practices, ethnographic research, social practice

## Introduction

Through the literature search, it became clear that reading and writing is a socially located and contested activity (Prinsloo & Stein, 2004; Hall, Larson, & Marsh, 2003) as it is based on a wide range of theoretical and methodological positions. I elaborate on this claim while examining research data from preprimary school literacy learning across different social settings in the Windhoek urban area of Namibia. The in-depth study that I take a 'slice' from, which was a small-scale ethnographic-style inquiry, aimed to enhance our understanding of how children begin to learn to read and write by answering the question: *What counts as literacy and how is it supported during pre-and primary school learning?* I was particularly interested in finding out how the literacy practices and events at home, at preschool and at primary school in Windhoek urban settings provide the resources or 'capital' necessary for literacy learning.

## Research methodology and conceptual premises

I specifically reviewed literature on children's early literacy development, focusing on reading and writing to see how literacy studies and education approached them. These studies pointed out the various aspects of early literacy that was being studied and the approaches that guided them. In deciding which approach fitted this study best, the studies that formed the theoretical background played a decisive role. After a careful review of these methodologies and guided by my focus question, this study, in terms of its methodological grammar defined literacy as ideological (Bloome& Katz, 2003, Street, 1993), and has thus in line with the tradition endorsed an ethnographic-style research approach. The SACMEQ II Report for example, argues that "If more than half of the Grade 6 learners in the three regions (Caprivi, Ohangwena, and Oshikoto) cannot read for comprehension, then there could be a serious problem with either their regional or home circumstances, or the way in which they are taught" (Makuwa, 2004, p. 155). This broad unanswered concern shaped the focus of my research, but focusing specifically on Windhoek in the Khomas Region. The study focused on observing and recording literacy practices and events in different contexts to focus on what counts as literacy in those contexts.

As the literacy learning is grounded in either the autonomous or the ideological models of literacy (Street, 1993), it is important to briefly explain these theoretical models.

The *autonomous model* of literacy is conceptualized in technical terms, treating it as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character (Street, 1993, 2005). According to this model, literacy is construed as existing independently of specific contexts of social practice; having autonomy from material enactments of language in such practices; and producing effects independently of contextual social factors. It is seen as a neutral variable, independent of and impartial toward trends and struggles in everyday life (Lankshear, 1999). Being literate under the autonomous model has meant "mastering decoding and encoding skills, entailing cognitive capacities involved in 'cracking the alphabetic code', word formation, phonics, grammar, comprehension etc. Encoding and decoding skills serve as building blocks for doing other things and for accessing meanings … once people are literate they can use 'it' (the skill repertoire, the ability) in all sorts of ways as a means to pursuing diverse benefits (employment, knowledge, recreational pleasure, personal development, economic growth, innovation etc.)" (Lankshear, 1999, p. 208). Clifford (1984) points out that being literate enables the individual to function independently in his society and with a potential for movement in that society to hold a decent job to support self and family and to lead a life of dignity and pride. Survival quality in this functional definition "equate(s) reading, writing, and work" (Clifford, 1984, p. 478).

Searle (1999) argues that literacy as autonomous model is also a tool or technology which is essential to gain access to new knowledge. Education is seen as an assembly line producing human skills and capacities (human capital discourse). As a result, educational outcomes can be stated and individual performance can be assessed in relation to the objectives. The emphasis is on the delivery of key skills and the curriculum spells out what is to be taught, the manner in which it is taught, what gets tested and how such components are to be tested. Sequenced mastery of skills forms the basis of reading/writing and instruction focuses on the formal aspects of reading/writing and generally ignores their functional uses (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). In such a traditional approach, the teacher has to deliver the curriculum as prescribed and drill its content to the learners in preparation for the promotional tests and examinations. Pahl and Rowsell (2006, p. 236) point out that in such classes.

The students remain seated in desks, focused on either a board or on a teacher doing most of the talking and serving a diet of preset tasks which ask them to feedback as individuals information transmitted to them as a group.

The *ideological model* views literacy as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognizes the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts. Street (1993, p. 9) points out that in order to avoid the reification of the autonomous model, the researchers study these social practices rather than literacy-in-itself for their relationship to other aspects of social life. He further points out that,

The ideological model does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power, thus it subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the autonomous model.

The ideological model rejects the notion of an essential literacy lying behind actual social practices involving texts. What literacy is, consists in the forms textual engagement takes within specific material contexts of human practice. These forms, which Street calls 'conceptions and practices of literacy in specific cultural contexts' (Street, 1993, p. 2) evolve and are enacted in contexts involving particular relations and structures of power, values, beliefs, goals and purposes, interests, economic and political conditions, and so on. Hence, Street (1993, p. 7) and Lankshear (1999, p. 205) point out that the consequences of literacy "flow not from literacy-in-itself, but from the conjoint operations of the text-related components and all the other factors integral to the practices in question". The various forms of practices of reading and writing, imaging, computers, visual media and others, play out as components of larger practices, reflecting and promoting particular values, beliefs, social relations, patterns of interests, concentrations of power, and so on. Hence, literacy cannot be seen as 'neutral' or as a producer of effects in 'its own right' (Lankshear, 1999, p. 205).

The autonomous view of literacy in practice simply imposes western conceptions of literacy onto other cultures that have other conceptions of literacy (Prinsloo et al., 1996). Other literacies such as drawings, letter-writing, games, photography, visual format, digital materials, keeping a diary, music, computer, play and drama, folklores, vernacular literacies, cultural resources, workers' literacies, local and social literacies all have their relevance and are significant to those using them. Clifford (1984, p. 481) argues that 'one needs not to stop with words: symbols, circuit diagrams, graphs, pictures, clouds, faces, body language, maps, music are all waiting to be read'. These other forms of literacies are present and young children learn about them as they are used around them, even if schools may not recognize them. It is through recognizing and upholding the western concepts of literacy that other forms of literacies are ill-considered.

Prinsloo et al., (1996) argue that the rich, elaborate and varied meanings and uses of literacy in different cultures across time and space become marginalized and are treated as failed attempts to access the dominant, standard form represented by western-type schooling.

Thus "school literacy" tends to define what counts as literacy, and this constructs the lack of 'school literacy' in deficit terms – those who don't have it are seen as being defective at the cognitive level and suffer from the stigma of illiteracy (Prinsloo et al., 1996, p. 19). This obscures the presence of literacy in other forms, and perpetuates the notion of literacy as individual performance only. Prinsloo et al., caution that such multiple literacies imply that they are seen as equal in their respective cultures, but that different literacies are in use, even if they do not carry the same "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1991). Grabe and Kaplan (1996, p. 14) see the central issue in literacy development not as the development of uniform cognitive skills, but as the recognition that there are many different literacy practices, of which only a few are likely to be valued by a given educational system.

**The research settings**

In this article, I focus on data collected from three preschools situated in Katutura, Khomasdal and Windhoek town. People predominantly from the working class, middle class and upper class respectively inhabit these Windhoek suburbs. Schools in these three areas of Windhoek are differently resourced, in terms of both material and human resources, with Katutura as the poorly resourced, Khomasdal better resourced and Windhoek town section as the best-off in terms of resources.

My interest was to see if preschools situated in these three different locations would be approaching literacy teaching and learning in similar or different ways. I wanted to see if there was a preferred approach to teaching/socializing their learners/children in literacy skills and to document such differences if there were any in these three sites. Such differences in approach, if any, would show similarity and differences in literacy learning in these different sites. Since the context of literacy learning is different in these settings, the content on offer in these classrooms is likely to be different, thus allowing for a description of the nature and diversity of literacy practices as situated social phenomena.

The first child is a girl called*Tuvii*, from a preschool that was part of a primary school in Katutura suburb, which I will call Wanaheda Pre- and Primary School.The Wanaheda Pre- and Primary school is a government public school which enrolls mainly children from low-income groups who reside in Katutura. The school is mainly funded by government. The preschool classroom was big enough to contain the 24 children and their teacher.

The second child is a boy called *Ruben*, who attended a preschool in Khomasdal suburb, which I will call the Ounona preschool. The Ounona Preschool was a private preschool, which was considered one of the good preschools in the suburb. As a private preschool it charged an expensive fee per month and had to plan fund-raising activities in order to sustain itself, pay its staff members, maintain its infrastructure, pay for municipal services and retain its academic reputation. Private preschools mainly enroll middle-class children but because of their good standing, they also attract children from low-income families, including those from the Katutura suburb. The preschool had 22 children and their teacher in the classroom.

The third child is a boy called *Matthias*, who attended preschool in Windhoek central area, which I will call the Happy Faces Preschool. The Happy Faces Preschool was a private preschool which was very well resourced. The classroom where Matthias was placed had two sections; the first room was used for whole group activities and the second room was for formal activities that were done on the tables. The classroom space was big enough to contain the 23 children with their teacher. The second room had three round tables, and an extra desk that was used by two children who could not be accommodated at the tables. The preschool had a library from which teachers borrowed books to use in their classrooms and a store-room containing recycling materials which were often used during creative activities.

**Results**

Upon entering a preschool, on a weekday, one quickly notices that the activities at such institutions are organized and guided by a daily schedule. Among such activities would be literacy learning.

I will here present the schedule or daily routine culture of the Ounona Preschool that *Ruben* attended as an example, in order to put across the argument that literacy learning at school is a situated, organized, controlled and directed activity within the local events of classroom life. Such a typical day at Ruben's school was broken up into chunks consisting of:

Firstly, *warm-up activities*: This included teacher-directed body movement activities such as stretching, bending sideways, backwards and forwards, as well as singing of familiar songs led by the teacher or asking children to suggest some songs they wanted to sing as a way to start the day while waiting for others as they arrived from home.

Secondly, *morning devotion*: The class said a prayer after which the teacher read a short story, mainly religious, from the Bible or another biblical text that was modified with pictorial illustrations.

The children would sit on a rug in front of their teacher who would read the text to them, requesting them to be quiet and to focus on the story. Such a story would start off with – Once upon a time … and end with – … they lived happily ever after! The topic was chosen by the teacher who narrated it to the class, with a pause to ask if the meaning of a given word was known, or to clarify an aspect the teacher deemed necessary. Otherwise she would conclude the whole story before asking a few questions based on the story.

Thirdly, *presentation of the topic*: The topic or theme of the week was presented either by the teacher or the teacher asking children what the week's theme was. Such a theme would usually be displayed on a poster on the wall or the bulletin board. If the topic had been introduced before, the teacher asked a few questions as a way to revise and reinforce the content that had been covered. Such content presentation remained teacher-led direct instruction which was characterized by collective rote and chant learning.

Fourthly, *coloring, writing, and drawing*: This language arts activity took place at their tables in groups, with each child doing his/her own work, at the most sharing material resources such as crayons, color pencils, erasers etc. to complete their task, with each child being encouraged to do their own work. The teacher would move about visiting the various stations and emphasizing silence during the activities, assisting those who needed help and assessing the work of those who called on the teacher when finished. A tick or wrong mark would usually be in red, showing success or lack thereof.

Fifthly, *eating and drinking time*: Children brought their own sandwich along from home. Children were encouraged to share with their friends who may not have brought some food with them for a given day.

Finally, *playtime*: This activity was supervised by teachers who were on duty or adult workers at the centers or prefects who were tasked to monitor that no unauthorized persons would enter their premises and to immediately report such uninvited visitors to the teachers. Play usually becomes something children can engage in to relax following completion of set work, rather than a central learning strategy.

It is within this framework that children learn about literacy at preschool level. In all the classroom literacy events, texts are talked about and as such language facilitates the interactions that take place in the classrooms during literacy learning.

**Literacy learning as a concern of preschool education**

When analyzing literacy learning, especially in the context of school learning, the three significantly interrelated dimensions that need to be considered to understand literacy in its fullest sense: the operational, the cultural and the critical (Green, 1988; see also Lankshear, 1999; Lankshear et al., 2006) and Rogoff's (1990, 1995) cultural apprenticeship model of learning was used. Green (1988) points out that a socially critical stance on subject-specific literacy means providing individuals, at any level of schooling, with the means to reflect critically on what is being learned and taught in the classrooms and to take an active role in the production of knowledge and meaning. The dimensions seek to explain and critique the operation of school literacies as interest-serving selections from a larger culture, which systematically advantage some groups and language communities over others (Lankshear, 1999). Rogoff (1995) advances three planes of analysis for interpreting and evaluating learning. These are apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation. The apprenticeship model of pedagogy in opposition to the traditional view grounds literacy learning within settings with the basic unit of analysis being that of an event. The traditional view separates the person and the social context, by studying the individual's possession or acquisition or lack of skills in a rather decontextualized manner.

I will now move on to present a few examples from my research data to point out what is happening in early literacy development classrooms in Windhoek urban settings. The episodes that I will draw on from the different classrooms literacy contexts are 'telling' cases (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239) that I will use to illuminate the nature of these literacy practices and the kinds of skills that are developed in association with and as a consequence of literacy learning that was shared with them. As an article, only a limited number of cases will be presented to illustrate the patterns that are consistent in the larger body of data in each case.

*Example 1: Ounona Preschool*

*Ruben* and the rest of his classmates were being taught individual letter-sound correspondences as requisite knowledge to read and write in English. The learners were taught the sounds of the different letters of the alphabet and how they

are spelled. The lesson focused on learning the initial sounds in words presented in context of a chart containing the sound and an example of a word starting with the particular sound.

(The school makes literacy learning available through using the alphabet chart to teach the learners to match the corresponding sounds to their individual graphemes as they learn to read and write).

182  **T:** This is a? (Pointing at alphabet chart).
183  **SS:** a b c (sounding letter names).
184  **T:** Is an <u>alphabet</u>, a-b-c [name].
185  **T:** Is a …?
186  **SS:** Alphabet!
187  **T:** a, b, c (letter name) /.. /.  /a/, /b/, /k/, /d/ (sounding while pointing on the chart).  <u>a</u>: <u>a</u>pple; <u>b</u>: <u>b</u>ird; <u>c</u>: <u>c</u>lown and <u>d</u>: <u>d</u>rum (with learners repeating at once, while alerted to initial sound in each of the words).
188  **T:** On this chart is a big <u>A</u>, the mama, and here is a baby <u>a</u>, of the alphabet. I wonder who remembers the *phonic* your name starts with? Come show me, S1, (her name starts with a <u>M</u> sound).
189  **S1:** (Walking to chart and showing it correctly, followed by others).
190  **S2:** Pointing at <u>K</u>.
191  **S3:** Pointing at <u>C</u>.
192  **S4:** Pointing at <u>A</u>.
194  **S5:** (Her name starting with an <u>S</u>) pointing at <u>Z</u>.
196  **T:** Ha/:/a´!
197  **S5:**  Then pointed correctly to **S**.
198   **T:** This alphabet is how we are going to learn to <u>read</u> and <u>write</u>.  You must know your alphabet, and that will come in Grade 1. Right! Now I will call out your name and you will come to the table. (xxx).

The above extract demonstrates how the teacher illustrated to the learners that letters represent speech sounds. The learners were taught to discriminate between the sounds of different letters of the alphabet by knowing the individual grapheme-phoneme correspondences. They were taught to identify the visual patterns of the individual letters. The learners were asked to say and point the initial sounds in words (line 187). During this lesson, the teacher emphasized the initial or beginning sounds in words and in their names (line 189 – 194). The learners were exposed to print tracking skills by being taught the letter and the sound they represented. In addition, the learners were expected to recognize and to match uppercase (referred to as 'mama') and lowercase (referred to as 'baby') letters as they learn to read and write (line 188).

The extract also shows how letters knowledge was incorporated into instruction (line 186, 187). In this literacy classroom, the initial sounds in names were first identified and then learners were asked to go to the chart to show the letter for that sound (line 189). Line 198 clearly shows that such literacy skills that the learners were acquiring were the basis for the development of literacy skills in the later elementary years. The teacher here was giving her learners some understanding about why they are learning, 'the alphabet': '… is how we are going to learn to read and write' (line 198).

The teacher was providing the learners with an opportunity to start taking charge of the reading task. They were afforded an opportunity to engage in literacy activity that taught them how to break down words into their analytic units and to become acquainted with the smallest units by talking about sounds in the context of a word. The letters were written down and the learners were expected to make the sound-symbol relationship. The exercise focused on letter knowledge and early word recognition as essential during beginning reading and writing.

At this school, a small group of learners and their teacher participate in a culturally organized activity with the purpose of developing readers and writers as per the tradition of the school. The extract paints a clear picture that the teacher was the one planning all moves and directing the literacy activities in which the learners were participating, in a kind of expert-novice dyadic relationship. As a class group, the teacher as the expert was not using the learners with their varying literacy experiences as resources to challenge and guide each other as they explored this literacy activity. I argue that if this literacy encounter is evaluated against Rogoff's three planes of focus for sociocultural activity (Rogoff, 1995), the apprenticeship plane falls short at the interpersonal level of participation. On the second plane, which is the guided participation, the face-to-face interaction was predominantly learner-teacher and did not include learner-to-learner engagement. The learners were not given an opportunity to decide or make choices in class as to with whom, where and with what literacy materials and activities they wanted to be involved. Everyone had to do the same lesson.

Thus, this classroom interaction, which was teacher-fronted, did not allow for side-by-side joint participation among the learners. On the third plane, participatory appropriation, the learners were prepared as individuals on a personal level to know how to recognize words as a way to learn to read and write.

I conclude that the teacher was helping individual learners to know the basic word attack skills to build on them in future as certain kinds of readers and writers.

When the extract is analyzed against Green's (1988) dimensions of literacy, the operational dimension reveals that the teacher presented the information orally and the learners had to recite and memorize the information that was shared for learning. The medium of instruction was English, which is different from Ruben's home language, Afrikaans. Hence, to become literate in English as a second language was a challenge for Ruben as he had to learn to communicate in English (oral language), and read and write in it (an unfamiliar language). The classroom as a cultural context of literacy was not meaning-focused but remained decontextualized with the content that was covered reduced to non-meaningful bits. The culture that was being learned was different from the one that the child came with from home, which is Afrikaans; he now had to learn English and become competent in it as it had to become his dominant culture.

The preschool child is learning a new language and a new culture. This classroom literacy learning encounter at preschool phase serves as a means of social control because the child is only socialized to participate in the culture (read and write) without taking a critical role in its formation and transformation.

### *Example 2: Wanaheda Pre-and Primary school*

The following extract was taken from a reading literacy learning lesson. This class, that *Tuvii* was part of, shared a literacy session around a 'story book', which resulted in some exchange between the learners and their teacher.

(The teacher is reading a storybook with her learners):

22  **T:** I want you to listen. I want you to tell me what you can see. What do you think is on the book?
23  **S:** Money.
24  **T:** What is the color of the money?
25  **S:** Brown!
26  **T:** This is brown. (Pointing at the dress of a child).
27  **S:** Yellow!
28  **T**: Yellow. But what do we call this shiny color? Yellow does not shine!
29  **S:** Gold!
30  **T:** Gold! All of you say gold!
31  **SS:** Gold.
32  **T:** What else can you see?
33  **S:** A boy catching.
34  **T:**  A boy carrying money, not catching.
35  **S:** A boy stealing the money!
36  **T:** Ok, there is a tree! These are trees! (Pointing to the picture showing leaves).
37  **S:** No, leaves.
38  **T:** These are leaves, like this one! (Pointing at the leaves in a pot plant close by).

The genre was a story written down in a book. This book combined print with pictures. Before reading the story, the teacher used the pictures on the cover as 'advanced organizers', a metacognitive strategy, to help learners guess or predict what the story was going to be about. The function of the organizer, which is presented to learners before the unfamiliar material is read, is to link what the learner already knows to what the learner needs to know before she/he can successfully learn a task (Groller et al., 1991). The teacher and the learners looked at and talked about a picture on the cover of the book and discussed what the story might be about (lines 22) before reading the actual story, i.e. they talked about this text before reading it. The learners here were reading the picture, providing details based on their teacher's questions and drawing their own conclusions based on the picture on what they thought the story might be about (line 35). The learner response in line 35, '*The boy is stealing the money*', was not commented on by the teacher, she continued with something else. I maintain that in as much as IRE has value as a quick and adaptable framework to use for informal assessments, it may not be ideal as a base for all classroom interaction. Wells and Arauz (2006, p. 380) suggest that there is a need to treat talk as a site for exploration rather than simply for evaluation, arguing that classrooms can indeed be places in which knowledge is dialogically co-constructed.

When this extract is analyzed against the three planes of focus for sociocultural activity proposed by Rogoff (1995), as newcomers into schooled literacy learning, the model that is offered through the apprenticeship exposes them to the expert-novice dyad relationship in developing literacy skills. At an interpersonal plane of sociocultural analysis, the teacher as an expert guided this face-to-face participation activity. In the class dialogue, the teacher instructed and learners responded.

There was no co-construction of understanding as a valuable alternative viewpoint offered by the member of the group in an attempt to make sense of the literacy activity and it was ignored. Thus, the child who was trying to put him/herself in a position to participate was denied an opportunity to do so. This classroom discourse leaned towards being authoritative, insisting on a single truth, imposed by the teacher, dispelling the voice of the other in the group. The process of appropriation may result in some learners understanding literacy as a single truth, imposed hierarchically, with no alternative viewpoints.

This extract exemplifies genres of language used in the preschool. This example shows a common type of classroom talk, the IRE, where the teacher introduces the topic, and asks something, the child responds and the teacher then provides feedback or evaluation. The extract shows how the teacher set up preschool knowledge as capsulated and detached from the children's emergent meaning-making, language and literacy resources; a decontextualized, autonomous model kind of an approach. The questions asked by the teacher remain at the level of literal comprehension and the learners are being 'merely socialized into the dominant meaning system' and constrained from playing active parts in 'transforming and producing it' (Lankshear, 1999, p. 218).

### *Example 3: Happy Faces Preschool*

The following extract describes the reading and writing learning activities that Matthias and his classmates were engaged in. Since the learners could not read by themselves, they were required to follow their teacher's instructions to the letter in order to complete this literacy activity.

130　**T:** Open your book, hands under the table. Count the dots and tell me which page number it is. When you are done, put up your hand and you must count inside your heart …
131　**T:** (Teacher reading instructions: circled the short object with red crayon or color pencil). Cover your work. Between these three, which is short? You circle – quietly. Are you all done?
132　**S:** Yes.
133　**T:** Cover your work! (The teacher was requesting to see the product by uncovering the work, and putting the covering back). Circle <u>not</u> color.
134　**T** (Another task): Take any color you want and cross the long object, any color. The teacher explained the instruction which became complicated, and demonstrated and emphasized 'covering of work'. Learners asked when not understanding. The teacher requested silence and 'Mind own business!' (Most learners seemed not to understand the instruction as they made mistakes). (Teacher moved around, explaining).
135　**T:** Write your name on top, go to page 30…

In performing these writing activities, the learners were required to listen and carry out the teacher's instructions (line 130). The learners could not yet read the instructions on the worksheets. They had to follow their teacher's verbal instructions in order to successfully complete a classroom writing activity (line 131). Literacy learning was governed by the norms and expectations of the participants. Line 130 shows that the teacher was disciplining the learners' bodies in particular kinds of ways. They had to be quiet. The learners had to do tasks with their minds, which she referred to as in their hearts. When answering a question from the teacher, they were supposed to raise their hands and only answer when called upon to do so.

In line 131 the teacher instructed the learners on what to do. They had to do exactly what they were told. Each learner had to 'circle the short object with red crayon or color pencil'. The assumption here was that every learner had or was supposed to have a 'red' color pencil or crayon. Also, the instruction that every learner had to 'circle not color' (line 133) assumed that everyone was supposed to execute this task as per the instruction. If you didn't have a red color pencil or crayon, your answer would be considered wrong and if you didn't circle, you were also wrong because you failed to follow the instructions. Thus all the correct answers were to look alike. Any deviation was considered wrong. This was this preschool's way of evaluating its learners' products to determine if they were correct or wrong. In line 135, the learners had to each write their names on their worksheet and submit it for marking/grading by the teacher. Those who had not yet mastered writing their names had to copy them down from their desk where it was displayed.

When this extract is analyzed against the three planes of focus for sociocultural activity proposed by Rogoff (1995), in this apprenticeship the newcomers to this community of practice advanced their skill and understanding through participation and contribution.

The teacher planned all moves and directed the literacy activities in which the learners were participating, in a kind of expert-novice dyadic relationship. In this class group, the teacher set the rules, as being the more conversant with the school's literacy practices and language for mediating accepted meanings and values.

By doing his/her share in the literacy activity through participation, the learner appropriates how one becomes familiar with reading and writing, its methods, subject matter and how to gain facility in these literacy activities. The nature of guidance and rules of participation that was made available in this activity did not provide for a shared effort or include learner-to-learner engagement.

This extract shows that literacy learning takes place in a regulated classroom environment with minimum disruptions, limited sharing and restricted peer interactions and discussions. In this writing activity, the teacher had an interest in the finished 'product' of writing and had expectations of perfection as she checked and marked her learners' written products. The emphasis on marking the product showed that the learners were expected to learn from their mistakes in order to improve their performance. This approach to teaching literacy leads to producing submissive/docile learners. The teacher was showing that she had power and that things would be done in an orderly manner in her classroom. She showed that there were rules governing how the learners were to participate and behave and how they had to show that they knew. She wanted to earn the respect of her learners as a result. She was teaching them to take an unquestioning approach to school knowledge.

**Reflections on literacy learning in preschools**

A close examination of these extracts reveals that the preschools upheld the autonomous model of skills-based pedagogies. The teachers had a great influence over the flow of literate activities in the classroom through their selection of tasks, time on task and manner of completion, and their use of feedback. I argue that these extracts have skills-based theoretical influence. Skills-based instruction has its roots in behaviorism. Behavioral theories of instruction focus on the curriculum and on the tasks to be learned. Instructional practices linked to behavioral theory are explicit teaching, direct instruction, mastery learning and sequential skills teaching (Lerner, 2000, p. 194). The means by which this skills-based instruction is delivered are teacher-directed and -controlled, teaching academic skills directly rather than leaving it to learner to make inferences from his/her own experiences in order to learn, sequence skills and use carefully sequenced and structured materials. When reviewed closely, the preschool literacy encounters show a process of *acquisition* as opposed to *becoming* (Rogoff, 1995, p. 151). It is based on such connections that the researcher made extrapolations across the three research sites.

Furthermore, the extracts that I presented here show the different ways in which literacy learning is taught and learned at the three preschools in Windhoek urban settings. Such early literacy encounters in preschools showed what is being modelled for the children and explain what the children end up as in terms of being readers and writers at primary education phase. Close examinations of the three extracts reveal that the preschools uphold the autonomous model of skills-based pedagogies. This contested way of literacy instruction, the 'banking' model of education, which treats education as depositing knowledge into the heads of the learners who patiently receive, memorize and repeat the deposits (Freire, 1993, p. 53), helps to explain in part one of Namibia's primary concerns about 'why learners in the upper primary and lower secondary phases can't read with comprehension'.

In my view this is because making meaning and engagement with the text are not taught as part of early literacy instruction. The emphasis of formal literacy instruction in this context fell on breaking the code (i.e. code emphasis) and not on understanding what was read (i.e. meaning emphasis). Morrow and Gambrell (2011, p. 39) point out that those who advocate the code-emphasis view argue that because 'the code (the cipher that maps letters on to sounds) is what students do not know, the sooner they learn it, the better they will be able to read'. In this context, literacy was meant to be used as an empowerment tool for the learners. Hence, at school, children came to encounter literacy in the form of highly directed skill and drill teaching which exclude their out-of-school knowledge and interests (Prinsloo, 2005). Prinsloo further argues that while these children who were taught through the skills emphasis approach 'might adequately cope with the demands of the early primary school curriculum, they were not likely to receive guidance in acquiring and using those literacy forms and practices which are demanded in later years of schooling' (p. 15). Such a 'banking' model of literacy instruction, which focuses on a restricted behaviorist understanding of literacy as consisting of a set of core processing skills, is inappropriate as it produces learners who are not critically empowered to interrogate what is read, but rather learners only capable of breaking the code. As early literacy teaching

overemphasizes the technical acquisition of reading and writing skills, learners' chances of developing successful school careers as readers and writers are limited by their school experiences (see Prinsloo, 2004; 2005).Hence, children do not receive rich language experiences during lower primary years to ensure that they are able to read with comprehension when they reach upper primary years.

The reading problem that the learners therefore experience at upper primary levels and beyond should be viewed as stemming from a school-based, curricularized and teacher-driven process of literacy learning.

This point helps to explain the concern that Namibia faces with regard to 'why learners in the upper primary and lower secondary phases can't read with comprehension'. The limiting school experiences that are shared with the learners, functions to disempower rather than empower them (Bell, 1993).

This way of conceptualizing reading, as an orderly process, proceeding through a hierarchy of skills from small, simple units (letter/sound relationships) to larger, more complex units has been challenged. The debate positioned the teaching of literacy as a set of cognitive skills (i.e. phonics) against the holistic (whole language) approach to reading. The proponents of the whole language approach for example argue that 'there really is no substitute for examining the reading process in action, not taken away from real-life contexts to a laboratory setting or reduced to the fragmentary abstractions of the usual kind of reading test, but the whole process, in its normal functional context, where readers engage with the text to make sense of it. Tests composed of nonsense syllables, single words, unconnected sentences, or literal 'comprehension' questions on longer passages cannot … be counted as tests of reading' (Goodman, 2005, p. 5).

The preschool extracts show that engaging with literacy is always a social act from the outset. The teacher and the learners are in a social practice here; the social rules governing the game of literacy learning are being set and the learners are expected to obey them. It is therefore not valid to suggest that 'literacy' can be 'given' neutrally and then its 'social' effects only experienced afterwards (Street, 2003, p. 78). A set of dispositions which are to constitute the habitus are spelled out and learners are expected to act, react and respond in certain ways during literacy learning in classrooms. Through training and learning, in literacy classroom the learners receive a set of dispositions which literary mold their bodies to behave in a homogenous way despite their differing backgrounds. They are given a 'practical sense', a 'feel for the game', and a sense of what is appropriate in the circumstances and what is not (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 13). As noted by Cook-Gumperz (1986), while trying to promote becoming literate, literacy learning is being controlled, both the forms of expression and the behavior which accompanies the move into literacy. I contend that it is the embodiment through socialization of such dispositions that is not part of one's cultural habitus in some societies that would result in learners taking on an unquestioning and accepting stance to the dominant meaning system without critiquing it. The learners are therefore denied the means to reflect critically on what is being learned and taught in the literacy classrooms and to take an active role in the production of knowledge and meaning (Green, 1988).

**Conclusion**

The examples of literacy learning extracts that I presented shows that the learners participated in literacy learning which I have identified as a social activity of a particular kind that takes place in the preschool classroom. The social interaction around the activity of reading and writing between teachers and the learners in the preschool classroom were all leading to certain behaviors becoming identified as 'literacy learning' and thus roles were offered to the novice children to take up, as certain kinds of readers and writers. It is in situating of the act of reading and writing in its social context that practices involved in teaching reading and writing can be uncovered and praised or critiqued for the kind of readers and writers they produce. I contend that it is what people (the teachers and their learners) engage in, do together, why they do it, and how they do it that will help to explain the types of readers and writers that we have in our school system today. It is this social practice that we need to critique in order to innovate new practices for individual success, should the current practices not deliver the expected results.

This study has revealed that the preschools that participated in the study valued overt instruction and engaged in explicit explanation of formal features of the language (e.g. sound-symbol system) with no emphasis on meaning making. Thus, in Windhoek urban settings the 'traditional' conception of literacy as a largely psychological ability – something to do with our intellect and therefore a private possession – remains dominant.  Consequently, I am of the view that the preschool literacy curriculum, which is packaged with knowledge of the alphabet, nursery rhymes, songs, print knowledge, rapid naming of letters, visual memory and exercises in literal comprehension, needs an overhaul.

The traditional view of literacy learning as a school-aged and school-based phenomenon has been challenged in literature and children came to be considered 'meaning makers' as from infancy within and across spoken and written language domains (Kantor et al., 1992; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Therefore, literacy as such is not and cannot be solely

the outcome of schooling (Cook-Gumperz, 1986), as it happens well before children's entrance into formal schooling. Moving from home to school places children at the crossroads; it is either the excitement with which children come to school and their personal (cultural) versions of literacy that is well-received and shaped at school, or the version of literacy on offer in the school is different and hostile to the children's earlier home literacy practices.

In the case of Namibia, the school experience comes to be the new route to be traversed by the majority of learners with their familiar locally available literacies becoming undervalued and rapidly shaped into schooled literacy versions.

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