



Home as a primary space: Exploring out-of-school literacy practices in early childhood education in a township in South Africa

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Background: Early childhood education is essential in bridging home and school literacy practices; however, recognising the home as a literacy space remains a challenge to educators in South African schools.

Aim: The aim of this article was to explore children's literacy practices, often through play, and the potential implications this might hold for their future careers as readers and writers. The article conceptualises home as the primary domain where literacy develops.

Setting: The study was conducted in a multilingual township in South Africa.

Methods: We engage with key theories in sociocultural studies and new literacy studies, as well as key ideas from young children's learning experiences with family members and peers during play. Methodologically, we undertook a case study in which we conducted interviews with parents, guardians and educators, as well as conducting home observations of the children's literacy practices.

Results: We confirmed that children's out-of-school practices have the potential to support literacy development in school, and we concluded that children interact with multiple discourses during their everyday practices and play.

Conclusion: Although there is a general lack of knowledge and understanding of these discourses by educators, these interactions have the potential to enhance schooled literacies.

Keywords: new literacy studies; literacy practices; children's play; township; school; South Africa.

Introduction

Children, when provided with support to develop their literacy skills through play and other activities in the home, develop positive views of expression (Saracho & Spodek 2006; Tsao 2008). Early childhood educators as well as parents and guardians play an important role in developing these skills. In South Africa, some 24.35% (StatsSA 2011) of the population live in townships – the often underdeveloped segregated urban areas that were reserved for non-white people, namely Indians, Africans and people of mixed race, during the apartheid era (Huchzermeyer 2011). Among key issues challenging township dwellers are education, healthcare, employability and housing. Township schools include those supported by government as non-fee-paying schools, as well as those subscribing to the National School Nutrition Programme, which feeds millions of schoolchildren every day. Government is targeting improvements in the infrastructure of poorer schools such as libraries, laboratories and sports fields, in addition to literacy and numeracy initiatives. However, even with positive transformations, these improvements have not necessarily been accompanied by a better distribution of education. Former white Model C schools still uniformly produce better results and their governing bodies are able to raise substantial private funds used to access resources that are unreachable by rural and township schools.

Post-1994, the democratic South African Government was not only concerned with the desegregation of the education system, but also with addressing poor literacy levels, specifically in primary schools (Bloch 2009). Of concern, South Africa still produces learners with very low literacy and numeracy levels (Fleisch 2008; Howie et al. 2012; Spaul 2013). Reports on educational achievement in South Africa demonstrate that far too many children in primary schools are performing poorly, often failing to acquire functional numeracy and literacy skills. They are classified as not only

among the worst in the Southern African region and in Africa as a whole, but also among the worst in the world (Lancaster & Kirk lady 2010). Over the past decade, there has been growing concern that a substantial number of South African schoolchildren are one or more years below acceptable achievement levels, particularly in key subjects such as English First Additional Language and Mathematics (NEEDU 2013; Spaull & Kotze 2015). Spaull and Kotze (2015) argue that schoolchildren who lag behind the academically acceptable levels of performance in the Foundation Phase are likely to fall further behind their counterparts.

It is certainly time for a review of literacy efforts countrywide, given reported shortcomings in schools. Debates persist about the value of the contribution of the home and out-of-school settings with regard to literacy. According to Rowsell and Pahl (2015:1), literacy exists in homes in the varied ways that people live, speak and practise every day. For Haneda (2006:337), too, in order to help children develop the literacy competences required for success at school, it is important to recognise and draw on the repertoires of literacy practices that learners develop outside school. However, several studies on literacy have shown incongruity between home and school literacy practices. This article is derived from a larger study of township children's literacy practices. In this article, the focus is not only on the home as a powerful primary literacy space, but also as a distinct means of bridging the worlds of home and school (Hull & Schultz 2002). We argue that literacy learning is fundamentally associated with the social practices of people in their everyday activities. Drawing on the early works of Barton and Hamilton (2000), we argue that experiences outside formal classrooms are equally important for literacy learning. The focus of this article is to examine ways in which out-of-school literacy practices can be viewed as significant (or not) to the practices of formal schooling. The article sets out to also illustrate the distinct ways, such as play, in which young children negotiate their home landscapes. The study is prompted by the following questions: How can the out-of-school literacy practices of young children be mapped at home? What are the implications of children's encounters with literacy at home for their school literacies, or their careers as readers and writers?

Theoretical framework and literature review

New literacy studies

This article is located within new literacy studies (NLS), exemplified in the work of Street (1994), and Barton and Hamilton (1998), which addresses literacy from a sociocultural perspective and as a social practice (Street 1985). The framework conceptualises literacy in terms of what people do with reading, writing and texts in real-world contexts, and why they do it (Perry 2012:54). However, practices involve more than actions with texts; practices connect to, and are shaped by, values, attitudes, feelings and social relations (Barton & Hamilton 2000). In this regard, social relationships are crucial, as 'literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relationships between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set

of properties residing in individuals' (Barton & Hamilton 2000:8). New Literacy Studies theorists have illustrated that as children are socialised into particular literacy practices, they are simultaneously socialised into discourses that position them ideologically within the larger social milieu (Gee 2001). Sociocultural theorists have further illustrated how the social organisation of learning in out-of-school settings can promote language and literacy development (Hull & Schultz 2002; Vasquez 2003). The contexts of interest for NLS extend beyond formal teaching environments and include the practices that typify children and adults' everyday literacy lives (Sefton-Green et al. 2016). In her studies, Dyson (2003) shows how children from a variety of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds can draw deeply upon their out-of-school knowledge of non-academic social worlds to negotiate their entry into school literacy. Dyson (2003) advocates a curriculum where educators can draw children into understanding and using symbols and resources from their experiences, in school-like ways. Purcell-Gates (2007) presents a similar observation based on her research of literacy in community settings. She argues that if the curriculum does not relate to learners' lives outside of school, their education will be meaningless. For children more likely to learn better, she advises educators to make literacy instruction more relevant to learners' lives, by tapping into their out-of-school literacy practices.

Out-of-school literacy practices

Out-of-school literacy practices are not always restricted to the physical spaces outside school but can occur within the physical school boundaries outside the formal classroom context. In her study on in-school and out-of-school literacy practices, Maybin (2007) illustrates the heterogeneous configuration of a classroom space where formal (linked with school setting) and informal (linked with home or vernacular setting) literacy practices swap roles, interact with one another and even run parallel to each other. Lenters (2007) also shows how literacy practices extend from the family at home to peers at school, such as discussing novels read at home with other learners. A growing body of research aimed at bridging the gap between out-of-school literacies and classroom practices (Hull & Schultz 2002; Street 2005) and recent research from New Zealand suggest that some children may be placed at a disadvantage when they go to school, if their early literacy experiences are not closely matched to the pedagogy and practice of school (McLachlan 2006:33). When home literacy practices differ substantially from primary school literacy practices, children could experience difficulties in learning. Often emergent or early literacy develops in social contexts rather than through formal instruction. Other research advises educators to tap into 'funds of knowledge' from children's communities, in order to enrich and transform these learners' classroom experience (González, Moll & Amanti 2005). Literacy that occurs outside a school context can become a community resource and in such instances 'families, local communities and organisations regulate and are regulated by literacy practices' (Barton & Hamilton 1998:13). A key social practice that most children engage in is play. As we unpack

the concept of play and creativity, we gain insight into how children navigate their social space in different play activities.

Play as a literacy activity

Vygotsky's (1978) work is highly influential in early childhood research, as a factor in child development. Vygotsky (1978) views play as crucial to cognitive development and a leading activity that leads children towards the acquisition of new skills and/or knowledge and understanding. His belief is that play facilitates the development of cognitive processes linked to creativity, such as problem-solving, and is fundamental to some of the child's greatest achievements. Play has also been reported to enhance creative practice in a range of areas such as numeracy, literacy and the arts (Holmes & Geiger 2002; Wood & Attfield 2005). Play is a practice that enables children to learn, innovate and reflect on resources available to them from multiple social domains. From the emergent literacy perspective, play is considered an integral aspect of literacy development as it occurs in both in-school and out-of-school activities. In this study, we present play as a central rhetoric in childhood literacies (Banaji, Burn & Buckingham 2010). Play in this context can be viewed as a phenomenon that, drawing from play theorists such as Wood and Attfield (2005), can be defined in numerous ways but must be seen as an activity that is complex, multifaceted and context-dependent.

Creativity is children's everyday productive acts across a diverse range of domains (Marsh 2010). Children use and adapt media scripts in their play, such as characters from television programmes; they parody advertisements and programmes and draw on language taken from media in rhymes and songs (Griffiths & Machin 2003; Grugeon 2005). Children's play frequently draws on media sources in imaginative and fantasy play, in which they take on the role of media characters such as superheroes, acting out scenarios observed in everyday life. This type of play is frequently criticised as being imitative rather than creative (Linn 2008), as it is assumed to be replicative and mimicked. Numerous studies outline the originality that underlines this type of play, however, with children adapting characters, storylines and settings in imaginative and creative ways (Wohlwend 2009). As Gee (2006) points out, the games children play have a greater potential to build new learning systems than learning in the school setting.

Research approach and methodology

Site

This study is part of a larger study of township children's literacy practices. The research site was a township in the western part of Gauteng province in South Africa. The children participating in the study attended Kutlwano (pseudonym for ethical reasons), a local primary school. All learners and teachers at this school are African. Although the school population reflects the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of isiXhosa, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, isiZulu, Sesotho and Setswana, only Setswana and isiZulu are the languages of teaching and learning (LoLT) in the

Foundation Phase (Grades R-3). In the Intersen Phase (Grades 4-7) Setswana and isiZulu are offered as first languages, although the LoLT is English. Literacy instruction has been an area of emphasis at Kutlwano Primary School because of a strategic move made by the school to meet the Annual National Assessment standardised assessment benchmark. Kutlwano is also a 'no-fee' primary school, which means that learners are not compelled to pay any tuition fees.

Research design and methods of inquiry

This study aims to understand the home as the primary space for literacy development through utilising a qualitative case study approach to explore children's literacy practices. The case study is one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies (Yin 2011). Case studies are designed to gain deep understanding of situations and meaning for those involved. They are in-depth, descriptive pieces of research that focus on bounded instances (Yin 2011). The interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. We also draw on Candappa's (2017) justification for the case study, which lies in its potential for learning and its explanatory power.

Sampling of the research site and participants in this study was by way of purposive sampling (Merriam 2009). Three of the children from the larger case study were learners selected to participate in the study. They were in Grade 3 at Kutlwano Primary School. Their ages ranged from 8 to 9 years old. They were chosen as participants in the study because they had spent 2 years in the Foundation Phase and were likely to be a viable source of data for this study. Sampling of all children was based on their parents' or guardians' consent and willingness to also participate in this study. The three educators who participated in the study were selected because they were teaching Grade 3, which is the Foundation Phase on which this study is based. They were also teaching the learners who participated in this study. All participants involved in the study and the school have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The data were collected from non-participant observations in the homes in Kagiso township. The children were closely observed with the aim of uncovering the literacy practices that they engaged in at home. The second data collection was through interviews with educators and parents or guardians of the learners. Interviewing is regarded as one of the most powerful ways to understand human behaviour. It is the most commonly used method of collecting data in educational research, essential in picking up non-verbal cues, including facial expressions as interviewees 'speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings' (Berg 2007: 96).

Data presentation, analysis and interpretation

We present pen portraits of three of the children and vignettes as illustrative of their literacy practices. Key themes emerging

from the data are as follows: home as the primary space for literacy mediation and play as a literacy activity.

Pen portrait 1: Thandi the designer

A three-room Rural Development Programme house is home to Thandi, one of the learners participating in this study. Note that all names used are pseudonyms, for ethical reasons. Thandi is an orphan who lives with her aunt and grandmother. There is a television set in Thandi's home and the family only watches programmes of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) because her guardians cannot afford Digital Satellite Television (DSTV). Thandi likes watching cartoons and educational programmes, which she says teach her a lot of things. She finds the children's drama *Dora the Explorer* entertaining and educational, which she says teaches her to solve life problems. When playing, Thandi and her friends mimic lines from any TV drama they find interesting. Thandi is also an ardent follower of the local TV talk show *Three Talk with Noleen*, hosted by Noleen Maholwana-Sangu. When the researcher asked her what she learns from the show, she indicated that 'many people such as celebrities come to talk to Noleen's show so we learn a lot from them'. She says she learns how the guests on Noleen's show achieved their success and the subjects that they did at school. What is interesting is that the programmes that Thandi likes are in English. She is able to understand the content without an interpreter. Thandi's literacy practices are interesting because they seem to bridge the gap between reality and school knowledge. They also suggest incongruence between home and school learning as she identifies a gap in school knowledge, which seemingly does not prepare children for life after school at the level she is at. This suggests that Thandi acquires knowledge on possible career paths from the media. She is even made aware of the subjects that are prerequisite to pursuing different careers. Thandi is passionate about drawing and aspires to be a fashion designer. Thandi's passion to become a fashion designer stems from her exposure to the works of famous South African designers such as Nkhensani Nkosi and David Tlale, whose works are profiled on local television and in magazines. Thandi also reveals that she likes *Takalani Sesame*, an award-winning South African children's programme. According to Thandi, *Takalani Sesame*:

'teaches us through storytelling. This storytelling teaches us about child abuse, crime and rural life that we town kids don't know. *Takalani Sesame* is story reading time ... they call people to come and play with them.' (Thandi, female, 9 years old)

Thandi's comment highlights social problems such as child abuse that are prevalent in Thandi's community, which *Takalani Sesame* mirrors. From this programme, urban children like Thandi learn about rural life. Above all, the programme is in storytelling form, which helps child viewers to identify themes and messages in the story and also learn how to narrate their own stories. Although Thandi does not have a mobile phone of her own, she has access to her uncle's phone. The researcher observes Thandi playing games on the mobile phone with her cousin Mpho. Thandi informs me that her favourite game is *Teenage Girls*.

She complains that Mpho likes cheating as she chooses games that are complicated. When I ask how the games are complicated, Thandi says the instructions are in 'difficult English', which Mpho understands better because she is in Grade 6. Thandi is in Grade 3, in a Setswana-medium class although her home language is isiZulu. When Thandi encounters problems with Setswana homework she is assisted by her uncle's girlfriend, who is Setswana-speaking. Literacy seems to be valued in Thandi's home: her aunt has completed an auxiliary nursing course, and her grandmother has also attended an Adult Basic Education and Training course on literacy. Thandi reads books that she obtains from her school library. During weekends she does her homework in the 'outside room'.¹ When she is done with reading books she turns to magazines and cuts out pictures that she pastes in her book. If she is not at school she spends most of her time playing with her friends.

Pen portrait 2: Lindi, the 'Zulu girl'

Lindi is affectionately called the 'Zulu girl' by the other children in her class. She is originally from KwaZulu-Natal, which is a predominantly isiZulu-speaking province. Lindi and her twin sister, Linda, live with their grandmother in a 'back room' that they share with two young cousins and one older cousin who is a learner at a Further Education and Training college. After the death of their parents, Lindi and her sister moved from KwaZulu-Natal to come and live in Gauteng with their isiXhosa-speaking maternal grandmother, who is originally from the Eastern Cape. A devoted member of the Twelve Apostles Church, Lindi reads the Bible aloud to the congregation in her church during service. This makes her the focus of admiration of her grandmother who remarked, '*Lengane inesiphiso sokufunda ibhayibheli*' [This child has a gift in Bible reading]. Lindi is one of the few young people in her church who help the 'uneducated' adults with Bible reading. Besides reading the Bible, Lindi always reads an isiZulu newspaper, *Isolezwe*. She indicates that she likes reading the isiZulu newspaper because she finds the way stories are written very interesting. In school, she is in an isiZulu first-language class. As an isiZulu first-language speaker, her isiZulu accent and pronunciation of isiZulu is considered 'standard' by her educator. From earlier observations of her classroom, it is evident that Lindi is very outspoken and usually dominates most isiZulu class discussions. Lindi and her sister, Linda, seem to be admired by their classmates for their eloquent isiZulu. Their educator always asks them to read most of the isiZulu texts during lessons. The educator emphasises that the class should pay attention to the way Lindi and Linda pronounce isiZulu words. Lindi's encounter with everyday literacy practices is exemplified in the following interaction with her grandmother, recorded at Lindi's home on a Friday morning. It is a busy day and Lindi's grandmother has to submit her pension forms to the Social Development office. Lindi's 2-year-old cousin also has to go to the clinic for immunisations.

1. A cottage-like corrugated iron structure built at the back of the yard.

Vignette 1:

- Gogo: *Molo tisha.* [Greetings, teacher.]
- Researcher: *Ewe gogo, ninjani?*
[Greetings, Granny, how are you?]
- Gogo: *Ndisaphilile ngane yam, ndingazi kuwe.*
[I'm fine, thank you, my son, and how are you?]
- Researcher: *Nami ndisaphilile makhulu. Akukho nto. Iphi'ntombi yami?*
[I am also well, Gran. Where is my girl?]
- Gogo: *Ikhona apha endlini. We ngane! Nangu utisha wenu usefikile.*
[She's here in the house. Hey, child! (calling). Your teacher is here (referring to the researcher).]
- Lindi: *Ndivasa uNono. Andithi uyahamba naye eklinika.*
[I'm bathing, Nono. Isn't she also going to the clinic?]
- Gogo: *Tixo wami. Besendikhohliwe. Khawulezani nami ndiyakuhambisa izi-formu zami zepentsheni.*
[Oh my God, I'd forgotten. Hurry up, I will also submit my pension forms].
- Lindi: *Kanti ezethu izifomu zegrant uzihambisa nini?*
[In fact, when are you submitting our grant forms?] (She emphatically reminds her gran.)
- Gogo: *Zizawumela umalume wakho azigcwalise.*
[We will wait for your uncle to complete them.]
- Lindi: *Kodwa makhulu ama-birth ethu akhona nje. Uzakubhala i-ID zethu qha!*
[But Gran, our birth certificates are there. You will only write our ID numbers.]
- Gogo: *Nawe Lindi musukundenza isibhanxa mna. Zininzi into abazifunayo. Andinayo imali yokwehla ndenyuka mna. Uyazi leza ntombazana zasemawovisi ukuthi zichwensa kanjani uma ndingazigcwalisanga kakuhle. Bazovese bandiphonsele zona.*
[You, Lindi, don't make me a fool. There's a lot of information that they need. I've no money to be travelling up and down. You know how arrogant those girls who work in the offices are. They will just throw the forms at me if they are not filled out properly.]
- Lindi: *Manje makhulu uzosithengela ngani impahla ze-Christmas? Mina ndifuna i-skinny jean noNono ufuna i-tight.*
[So, Gran, how are you going to buy us Christmas clothes? I want a skinny jean and Nono wants tights.]
- Gogo: *Ndiyakuyifumanaphi mna imali. Phela lezinto ziyabiza.*
[Where will I get such kind of money? These things are expensive, as you know.]
- Lindi: *Azibizi gogo. Khumbila leziya catalogue zase Checkers ne Pick n Pay ebisizifunda bezinazo i-tight ne-skinny jean ezi-cheap. Futhi ndibone i-advert zakhona u TV.*
[They're not expensive, Gran. Remember those Checkers and Pick n Pay catalogues had cheap tights and skinny jeans. And I saw their advert on TV.]

This extract highlights how Lindi helps her grandmother with household chores such as bathing her little cousin. Lindi is also aware of the everyday literacy practices with which her grandmother has to engage. She asks her grandmother when she is going to submit their 'grant' forms (the state child support grant for destitute children). She also displays knowledge of the literacy practices involved in completing the forms. Mentioning the writing of identity numbers in the forms suggests that Lindi is exposed to everyday literacy practices in the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) (grant) forms. Lindi's grandmother reveals that Lindi's uncle will complete the forms as the knowledgeable other. Lindi uses multimedia sources of information, the catalogues and television advertisements.

Pen portrait 3: Tumelo, the girl from the North West Province

Tumelo is a Setswana-speaking girl from Rustenburg. It is her first year at Kutlwano Primary School. She lives in a two-room shack with her parents, two young brothers aged 7 and 2 years old and her 22-year-old aunt, who has recently moved from Mafikeng, North West Province, to look for a job in Gauteng. Tumelo is the eldest of the three children in her family. Her mother, who is employed as a call centre agent, works long hours and is barely at home. Tumelo and her sibling who is in Grade 2 are looked after by their aunt while the 2-year-old is taken to an informal crèche nearby. Whenever she is at home, the aunt devotes much of her time to household chores. She uses whatever remaining time to do her studies for her distance-learning course in Education. Tumelo's father is a general worker in a factory at the local industrial area. He is seldom home as he has to leave for work very early to get to work on time. Although Tumelo's father works long hours, he actively participates in the affairs of Tumelo's school as the School Governing Body chairperson. He is also doing distance-learning studies in Theology at the University of South Africa. Tumelo's mother is pursuing her studies in Teaching at the same institution. Tumelo is a reserved but intelligent girl. Her peers always chuckle when she speaks Setswana, which sounds different from the township Setswana 'lingua franca' spoken by most of her classmates. Whenever the class is given Setswana vocabulary work, her peers seek her assistance with difficult words.

Children's world: Play as a literacy activity

Vignette 2 – Thandi and her friends' play event: The observation of Thandi at play with her friends Lebo and Mandy took place on a Sunday afternoon in their yard. Thandi had just returned from church with her aunt. Usually on Sunday her aunt does not like having Thandi and her friends play in the house as she says they make the house dirty.

- Thandi: *Wena Tshidi uya-cheater. Uhlala uba-first.*
[Tshidi, you're cheating. You're always the first.]
- Lebo: *I started first. Mina ngingu Noluntu. Indoda yami nguPhenyo.*
[I'm Noluntu and my husband is Phenyo.]
- Mandy: *Mina nginguMawande umama kaNoluntu.*
[I'm Mawande, Noluntu's mother].

- Thandi: *But uPhenyo uyabora. U-cheater u-Dineo ngo Noluntu.*
[But Phenyo is boring. He cheats Dineo with Noluntu.]
- Lebo: *Umama wami akafuni siyibheke i-Generations. Uthi eyabantu abadala!*
[My mother doesn't want us to watch *Generations*. She says it's for adults.]
- Mandy: *Mina ngiyibuka uma umama wami engekho. Ugogo aka-mayindi!*
[I watch it if my mother is not around. My grandmother doesn't mind!]
- Thandi: *Asidlaleni iskolo. Mina ngingu-Principal!*
[Let's play school. I'm the principal.]
- Mandy: I'm teacher and *wena* (you), Tumi, you're a parent!
- Thandi: *Yah ungumama kaThemba lowo o-naughty!*
[You're the naughty Themba's mother!]
- Thandi: Your child doesn't do homework, why?
- Mandy: He play a lot, principal, with his friend. They play Play Station whole day.
- Lebo: He does not do his homework. Does not write spelling!
- Thandi: He must get detention!
- Mandy: He does not read aloud in class.
- Thandi: Teacher, you must give him a book every day to read home. Mother must help him.

In the above extract, Thandi and her friends' play initially focuses on their recollection of some scenes from a local television soapie, *Generations*.² They illustrate how they design their literacy event along the storyline of the soapie as they identify with its characters. They reveal that they follow the storyline as they claim that one of the main characters, Phenyo, is cheating on his wife, Dineo, with Noluntu. An interesting aspect of this play activity is the children's critical engagement with social issues, such as infidelity, as they reveal that Phenyo is cheating on his wife. This suggests that they are critical of the contents of the soapie. Although the soapie has an age restriction of 13 years, these children indicate that they 'sneak' to watch it without their parents' knowledge. During the same play activity, the children's focus shifts to school-like dramatisation. In this part, they emulate school literacy practices as they dramatise a school disciplinary proceeding. They portray how a troublesome learner is disciplined by the educator and the principal. They play different roles such as those of parent, educator and principal. It is apparent that they are probably aware of what happens in disciplinary events when a child does not do their homework. They even suggest that a parent should mediate their child's reading process at home. In this regard, Thandi and her friends emulate the roles of their educators, parents and school principal. In this play activity there is evidence of bilingualism and code switching. The children switch comfortably between isiZulu and English.

Vignette – Tumelo and friends 'play hospital': The following excerpt describes a play event at Tumelo's home on a Saturday afternoon. Tumelo is playing with her friends

2.A local soap opera aired on SABC.

Mashudu and Lindi. Because it is a very hot day, the girls are playing in the shade.

- Lindi: Yah, we are going to play hospital!
- Mashudu: No, Leratong Hospital is so boring ... when my grandmother goes there for her sugar she spends the whole day ...
- Tumelo: The nurses are rude. My dad reported them to Health Department last year.
- Mashudu: My mum takes me to the doctor at Randfontein.
- Tumelo: Eish ... *akere* (isn't it) your mother has money.
- Mashudu: We just give the doctor mum's medical aid and they treat me free. OK, Lindi. I am doctor.
- Tumelo: Doctor, I have BP.
- Mashudu: I cough, doctor!
- Lindi: I give you injection, all of you!
- Mashudu: My doctor give me a letter I will buy at chemist.
- Lindi: And you, Tumelo, I book you for operation ... come for operation at theatre on Monday.
- Mashudu: I am afraid of operation. My mother have operation when she give birth for my baby brother ...
- Lindi: Ah Mashu ... my grandmother say you must not speak strong language.

The above extract describes Lindi and her friends at play. This event reveals the different discourses that the children are exposed to in their environment. The children bring a variety of sociocultural perspectives to this literacy event. This play setting becomes a meeting place for these children's experiences, such as the visit to a doctor. The play event draws from the discourse of medicine as illustrated in the children's use of medical terms such as 'book for operation' and 'injection'. Although Mashudu might not know or could have forgotten the word 'prescription' she knows that some medication can be purchased from a pharmacy if one has a doctor's prescription note. Mashudu has experience of using medical aid as she indicates that her mother produces her medical aid card when they visit a doctor. Mashudu, however, is not aware that her mother actually pays for the medical aid and brags about the doctor treating her without charge. Lindi also knows hospital discourse, as she is aware that one has to book an operation. She even mentions that the operation is done in 'theatre', meaning the operation theatre. Tumelo refers to hypertension as 'BP', which is common South African township lingua when people refer to 'high blood pressure' as 'BP'. Mashudu also demonstrates a knowledge of the Caesarean operation performed to deliver babies. In this play event, the children describe the unsatisfactory state of the South African health system. The children move from describing the appalling situation in state hospitals, a long waiting period before one gets treatment (she spends the whole day) and the staff being rude to patients. Mashudu in particular makes meaning of the medical context and transforms it into dramatic play.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study, according to ethical standards stipulated by the Faculty of

Education, University of Johannesburg Ethics Committee. Ethics clearance number: 2013-038.

Discussion

Parents and guardians mediating schooled literacy

The discussion centres on the data on the home as a primary space and role of play. The extracts suggest extensive out-of-school literacy practices in which the children engage, dominated by play. Drawing on the three pen portraits reveals that the children's families engage in different out-of-school literacy practices. At Thandi's home, the adults facilitate the learning process by assisting her with school-related activities. Her uncle's girlfriend is a 'literacy broker' (Papen 2012), who helps Thandi with her Setswana homework. As Papen (2012:79) explains, we are living in 'highly textually mediated social worlds' where asking someone else to act as literacy mediator with particular genres and texts is a common practice. On the other hand, Thandi's interaction with different materials in her home portray her own literacy world. She reads magazines, plays games on a tablet and watches television. In Tumelo's family, they engage in shared reading of Setswana school texts and her mother asks her to read on her own. She later asks Tumelo to explain what she has read. Tumelo's family literacy account demonstrates that the process of learning to read involves children sharing in the reading process. Tumelo's mother also reveals that she also benefits from assisting her daughter with her homework. Research on parents and children has also reflected their interaction as a mutual exchange of knowledge, for instance Duran's (2001) work that reveals how United States (US) Hispanic parents learn from their children when helping them with English homework.

Interacting with everyday literacy

Ever since Denny Taylor coined the term 'family literacy' in 1986, to refer to the ways young children and their parents interact around texts, the term 'family literacy' has generally been applied to the practices that occur in homes to support young children as they become readers and writers. In this study, family literacy practices feature as literacy events that promote the development of children's literacy. In Lindi's home, they engage in everyday literacies that have to do with official documents such as social grant application forms. Lindi is conversant with the contents of the social grant forms for which her grandmother has to seek her son's assistance. From the conversation between Lindi and her grandmother, it can be deduced that the officials at the SASSA offices are not very helpful towards their clients. Lindi and her family also refer to brochures from local retail outlets such as Shoprite, Checkers and Pick n Pay, where they not only study prices but compare them, demonstrating their economic literacy.

The vignettes illustrate children constructing meaning of their world through play. In Thandi's and Lindi's

environments, play holds an important role in their literacy development. When these children engage in play, they draw on activities from different discourses. Their play activity displays knowledge of the medical field, for instance, around which their play is modelled. Through exposure to social problems in their environment, the children are able to enact sociodramatic play, depicting their interpretation of those social issues.

Implications for teaching and learning

Children's encounters with literacy at home: Family and siblings as literacy mediators

Children's encounters with literacy at home hold multiple implications for their careers as readers and writers. What is crucial in all the children's encounters with literacy are the mediators of literacy (Williams 2004). Analysis of the child participants' experience with literacy is framed by the theory of language learning as socially constructed knowledge and understanding that develops through interactions with more experienced members of the community (Rogoff 2003). These more experienced members of the community are significantly important, given that practices such as mediation and scaffolding are regarded as critical to effective learning (Rogoff 2003). Kelly (2004) argues that as children come to school, they bring different experiences of how to act and interact during literacy events and may hold different values and beliefs about the nature of literacy. For some children, these experiences and understandings will match those sanctioned by the school; for others, there will be significant differences. In the following extract, Ms Dube, an educator in Thandi's school, reveals how parents in her community prepared children for school:

'Isn't it at home we were taught how to count in our language? We were taught colours in our language ... they would just prepare you for the language which they knew was used at school. According to me, the environment also prepares the child for school.' (Ms Dube, female, educator)

Ms Dube reiterates that children's formal literacy encounters are not confined to school. Learners are exposed to discourses when parents and guardians expose them to counting and colours in the home language. According to Ms Dube, older siblings also play a valuable role:

'In the past there were no Grade R schools. You would leave home school-ready. Children older than us they would read the stories and poems to us and we would cram them. I think it means when a child is able to comprehend a story and narrate it in his own way or illustrate by drawing a picture, she shows that she understands the concept. She can write a paragraph to show that she understands the story.' (Ms Dube, female, educator)

Older children socialised the younger ones into school literacies so that they would start school 'school-ready'. They read stories and poems to the younger ones, which the younger ones would 'cram'. Older children would then ask the younger children to demonstrate their comprehension of the story by narrating it in their own way or through

drawing pictures. In their ethnographic study, Gregory (2001), too, highlighted the importance of siblings in bilingual learning. In addition, children who have been exposed to reading before entering school are more likely to succeed in learning to read (Mol & Bus 2011). Providing children with books and writing materials and talking to them about letters and writing encourages their development in print awareness and the importance of written language (Roberts 2008; Sénéchal 2006). It has also become increasingly evident that children whose families are involved in their education are more successful in school (Dearing et al. 2006). It is within their communities that children interact with peers and siblings in developing and acquiring different literacies. Children's social worlds change as they move beyond their families and interact with peers in organised play groups and preschools. In our study, Ms Dube also highlights the importance of home-language teaching. She reveals that in her community, children learnt from their parents and siblings before they even started formal schooling. She supports the perception that the home environment should play a key role in the child's performance in school.

Family plays a vital role in children's literacy development (Kelly 2004). In a nuclear family context, the mediation role is often taken on by older siblings. In a family context, children can practise their emerging skills freely and rehearse, display and experiment with language capacities and cognitive skills with their siblings well before they do so with older people (Weisner 2002). These language interactions positively impact the child's language and literacy development. Mrs Miya, a parent interviewed in this study, described how her reserved daughter, Tumelo, becomes talkative when interacting with her friends. The observations made on the visits to the homes of the three focal learners and the interviews that were conducted with their parents and educators reinforce the important role played by the family. We found that in most cases parents are not able to spend much time with their children. From our work, it emerged that mothers or female guardians and siblings participate more in children's literacy practices. In the townships of Johannesburg there is an acute shortage of accommodation, as a result of massive rural-urban migration and migrants from other provinces hoping to earn a living in Johannesburg, which is considered South Africa's economic hub. All the educators interviewed in the study expressed the need for the parents or guardians to play an active role in the education of their children. As Ms Dube says:

'Parents are supposed to extend what has been done at school. They are supposed to help their children ... to supervise their children with their homework and to encourage them too because here ... OK ... we help them with all that but there is a limitation for each things that are supposed to be done, *akere* (isn't it). The day is not long enough. We do sometimes give ourselves extra time to help the children but sometimes other learners need more than that.' (Ms Dube, female, educator)

Ms Dube's argument is that although educators mediate the learning process, the school day is not long enough to enable

educators to adequately reach out to all the learners. She appeals to parents to enhance what the children would have learnt in school and mediate learning by helping their children with their homework. Interestingly, a counterargument is presented by Tumelo's parents, Mr and Mrs Miya. Mrs Miya complains that, like most working-class families in South Africa, she does not have time to assist her child with homework:

'Honestly, we don't have time for homework. We come home tired and don't have time to assist our child with homework. Most of the work they do is too difficult for me as a parent – what more a small kid.' (Mrs Miya, female, parent)

The same concern of time constraints is reiterated by Mr Miya:

'When I come home, *sifika ngo 6* [we arrive at 6]. We only have 2 hours before the kids go to sleep. When we leave, we leave here at 5, when they are asleep. When they wake up, we are not here. We're gone ... long gone. Probably when they leave for school we are already at work.' (Mr Miya, male, parent)

The comments highlight the fact that Tumelo's parents do not have as much time as they would like to assist her with homework. Mrs Miya complains that she finds the work given to her child beyond her ability. Tumelo's father, Mr Miya, vocalised his opinion that teachers' expectations are unrealistic: 'How can I help in the teaching of the children? I'm not a teacher and don't know any methods of teaching.'

Children's play

The implications of play in learning and development are proposed by Vygotsky (1978), who says that such processes occur in the children's social interactions in which more competent members of the culture engage with less competent members who are unable to engage in such activities alone. According to Vygotsky (1978), such encounters permit learning to take place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD).³ The children in this study exploited the ZPD during collaborative dramatic play with their friends and siblings. Vygotsky sees symbolic or dramatic play as central to a child's emotional and cognitive development (Williams & Rask 2003). In the play event of Mashudu and her friends, we see how their capabilities were extended as they shared knowledge of different discourses. In addition, play can be a self-help tool, permitting children to 'create their own scaffold, stretching themselves in such areas as self-control, cooperation with others, memory, language use and literacy' (Roskos & Carroll 2001:4). During the activities of play discussed in this study, the children were able to participate in imaginary events. In the present study, media and school formed the basis of the play activities. There is widespread evidence that children's daily encounters with media culture inform their play (Marsh 2010). Play is not confined to adapting to media but also engaging with media. In this study, the children developed their own play rules on how the 'play-event' should be conducted and the role each participant was to play. The sociodramatic play events cited in this article were

3. The ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do with help and what they can do without help.

complex socioemotional scripts incorporating insights into relationships and emotions such as the imaginary disciplinary proceeding in which a parent is called to the principal's office to discuss the progress of their child (Marsh 2010). In play, children move easily between the real and imaginative worlds as they reproduce the cultural knowledge they have acquired in the formal and informal contexts of the home, school and community (Wood & Attfield 2005). Thus, during play, children interweave elements of real life and fantasy as they attempt to make sense of the world and construct meaning outside the boundaries of reality.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore children's literacy practices in a multilingual township in South Africa through researchers' observations of children's interactions at home during informal play, as well as through interviews with teachers and parents or caregivers. The findings indicate that children's home interactions and play activities are potentially beneficial for learning. The findings suggest that children encounter a myriad of literacy experiences at home through family mediation and during play. In the study it was found that children engaged in different literacy practices at home, despite parents having little time to support their practices. In their play activities, children related to television programmes and soap operas. Further, the study established the fact that parental involvement in literacy activities such as homework mediation can yield positive results when learners are extensively assisted by a knowledgeable other – siblings or other family members. Schools would benefit from recognising everyday knowledge that learners bring to the learning process. Because emergent or early literacy is a social practice that develops in social contexts, not only through formal instruction, early childhood educators would benefit from drawing on home and community literacy practices in their teaching.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

R.S. has completed his PhD under the supervision of L.K. R.S. designed the initial draft and collected and analysed the data. Both authors worked together in completing the article. L.K. helped in compiling the article to meet the requirements of SAJCE. L.K. was the project leader.

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