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The literate Lives of Two Cameroonian Families Living in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the literacy practices of two immigrant Cameroonian families residing in Johannesburg South Africa. The study forms part of a larger project on in-and-out of school literacies. In this case study children and parents were interviewed, and also observed in their homes after school. The research findings reveal that little linguistic congruence exists between the home and school, and that parents and children serve as language brokers at different points. The importance of English as a language of economic and social power is highlighted by parents. The study concludes that teachers need to be versed in the multiple literacy practices of immigrant learners and consider initiatives such as family and community literacy programmes. This is vital not just for the immigrant children, but for the South African education system as well.

Keywords: Immigrant literacies, literacy as social practice; family literacy practices

Introduction

Since its democracy in 1994, the influx of immigrants into South Africa has increased rapidly. The Cameroonian community in the country is a good example of the immigrant story. In 2012 (the most recent figures available), there were approximately, 2 234 documented Cameroonians living in South Africa, comprising a total of 2.9% of the documented immigrant population (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Naturally, the number has since grown dramatically. Upon arrival in a new country there is always pressure on immigrants to adapt to the new society by learning the language, which serves the purpose of creating the foundation for interaction within the immigrants' new environment. For the children, not understanding the language of communication at school impairs learning and results in poor academic performance (Ogbu and Simons, 1989; Sookrajh et al, 2005). The assumption often made is that the homes of minority culture families are less effective literacy and language environments than homes of middle class majority culture families (Blackledge, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). The main argument in this paper is, for continuity and congruence between the home and school, teaching should occur in a context that is compatible with the culture of the learners.

When immigrants enter a country they bring along their culture and language which might not be consistent with the school environment. The Cameroonian children come from a background where their home language is French, to others pidgin or one of the many indigenous languages of Cameroon, and to a few English. Cameroon has two major language communities: the Francophones and Anglophones and some 250 ethnic groups speaking about 270 languages and dialects, which makes it a remarkably diverse country. The challenge occurs when parents speak a language other than English at home or are not proficient in English themselves, their children have less exposure to English and thus tend to be at risk of performing poorly in school.

This paper sets out to explore the literacy practices of two immigrant Cameroonian families living in Johannesburg, South Africa, bearing in mind that the immigrant children

in these families are now entrenched in South African society through their schools. The paper is motivated by the following concerns: How can the literacy practices of Cameroonian families living in Johannesburg be mapped, and what are the implications of these literacy practices for education in South Africa?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

New Literacy Studies and Multiple Definitions of Literacy

Social, historical and linguistic contexts play pivotal roles in determining how individuals understand and experience the world (Gee, 1999), and thus align with Vygotsky's take on the sociocultural context. They hold the view that meaning-making is a social process that is linked to cultural tools and communicative symbols that are grounded in language. James Gee (1996) proposed that in New Literacy Studies (NLS) literacy is not just a skill but a contextualised practice, thus NLS treat language and literacy as a social practice rather than only technical skills to be learnt in formal education. The concept requires that language and literacy be studied as they occur naturally in social life taking into account context and their different cultural groups. Gee (2000) elaborates that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and historical, political and economic) practices of which they are part.

Family Literacy Practices

Family literacy encompasses the ways in which parents, children and extended family members use literacy at home and in their community. Sometimes, family literacy occurs naturally during the routines of daily living and helps adults and children "get things done." These events might include using drawings or writings to share ideas, composing notes or letters to communicate messages, making lists, reading and following directions, or sharing stories and ideas through conversations, reading and writing. Family literacy activities also reflect the ethnic, racial or cultural heritage for the families involved (Morrow, 1995, p. 7). Dwelling on this definition as a starting point, literacy is viewed as an activity that is engraved in our daily lives. This signals a major departure from the views of literacy as strictly school-based, in fact, literacy incorporates our daily lives. The view also resonates with Street's (1984) assumption that literacy is not only autonomous (skills-based) but ideological. The contradiction arises when schools focus only on the autonomous view, which creates little congruence between the home and family, and the school.

According to Morrow (1995), among others, family literacy should be viewed by schools and communities as an important element in literacy development. Given that a typical South African classroom does not only consist of South African citizens but embraces non-traditional students who have different literacies, teaching appears not to cater for them. This is argued by Kajee (2011:1), who says "our education system has to serve not only South African citizens, but immigrants and refugees from the world over who are entering South Africa for a variety of reasons: to escape war-torn countries, to provide a better life for their families, to access better education, for employment and health care opportunities, and to engage in business". Kajee (2011: 1) further observes that "access to the home is minimal, and often hard to come by, and therefore there are few insights into home literacy practices". Consequently, there is need for research in the domain, as teachers often unknowingly exclude or reduce the time minority students participate in literacy activities because features of their discourse do not confirm to teachers' expectations or match their speaking style (McCullom, 1991, pp. 111-112). The home may reveal other varieties of literacy practices than those associated with school, and these may be undervalued or referred to shamefully as 'improper literacy' (Street,

1995, p. 104). To base our understandings of literacy on those practices valued in school alone therefore provides a narrow and problematic theoretical foundation for understanding literacy (Street, 1995). Given that those families most marginalised frequently view literacy and hence schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they did, it is essential to consider ways of valuing the home (Blackledge, 2000, p. 4).

Research Design, Approach And Methodology

The sites

Research was conducted in two family homes. The two families are the Mbong and Fotsou families from Yeoville and Florida in Johannesburg respectively. Pseudonyms are used for all family members for ethical reasons.

Participants and sampling

Purposive sampling, often a feature of qualitative research, was used in this study: here researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought. Purposive sampling was used to select participants because they are French speaking immigrants from Cameroon residing in Johannesburg. One of the researchers is also a Cameroonian immigrant and teacher. The learners were aged between 7 and 14, four were born in Cameroon while two were born in South Africa. Family Mbong moved to South Africa ten years ago and the two children were born here, while Family Fotsou moved to South Africa two years ago with their four children.

Only female parents participated in the interviews. Mr Mbong is deceased, he died in South Africa in 2012 from a stroke. Mr Fotsou was at work in Centurion (a suburb about an hour's drive from Florida where he resided) so he was represented by Mrs Fotsou. Autobiographical details of the mothers appear below.

Research approach and methods

This research is a qualitative case study, utilized to gain in-depth understanding of a situation and meaning for those involved. Yin (1994) says that a case study is a descriptive piece of research that focuses on a single bounded instance. Interest lies in the process rather than outcomes, in its context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. The case study is therefore suitable for this work on two immigrant families.

This research was conducted through observations, interviews, and the collection of artefacts. The literacy practices of the two immigrant families were observed after school hours. The languages they use at home when conversing with one another, as well as the context in which this occurred was noted. According to Henning et al (2004) even though multiple interviews may strengthen an emerging theme, the information gleaned from observation fills the gaps that are inevitably left by interviews.

Second, interviews were conducted with the mothers and children. The main aim of the interview is to bring to our attention to what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say about it in an interview, giving us their subjective reality in a "formatted" discussion, which is guided by the interviewer and later integrated into the research report (Henning, 2004, p. 52). In this light individual interviews were conducted with parents and children that gave participants room to express their views confidently without fear of making mistakes. All the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Audio recordings proved a useful check for what was spoken.

Finally artefacts and documents were studied. For Barton et al (2000) artefacts are the materials, tools and accessories involved in the study for analysis purposes. If documents and artefacts are omitted from a study there will be gaps left unfilled. The artefacts focussed on in this study include photographs of literacy events, books, recipes, art works, recipes and religious literature.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse data. Transcripts were coded into categories and developed around themes, then meaning was ascribed to the data.

Ethical Considerations

Consent letters were given to parents in accordance with University ethics policy. The consent forms were quite explicit of the purpose of the research and participants were informed that participation is voluntary. They were further informed that they could withdraw should they so choose. Participants' true identity is also not published.

Data Description And Analysis

Several themes emerged from the data. What follows below is description and analysis of the following themes: family literacy practices, which include reading and writing at home, and then religious literacy practices. Thereafter the congruence, and lack of congruence between homes and schools are discussed, together with implications of such a study for education in South Africa.

Mapping Family Literacy Practices

The home is the primary domain from which individuals venture into other domains. Different sources of reading and writing, from school and work, are carried out in the home (Barton 2007, p. 39), and some practices might leak from one domain to another or might overlap. Literacy practices that occurred at the Mbong and Fotsou homes included reading magazines, newspapers, internet sites, the bible, watching movies, cooking, drawing and even sporting activities such as martial arts classes. What was evident in both homes was that the languages used between the mothers and children differed from English, which was the medium of instruction at school, as they switched between French, Ghomaala and Bassa.

An insight into observations in the first family home (family Mbong), were as follows:

Extract 1:

Marthe (mom) was the one who opened the door when we went to her house. We got into her apartment and met her with two children who were watching an English cartoon on TV. There weren't many books around the house, and just a few toys available for the children to play with. On her walls she had hung a carved mask from Cameroon. Marthe usually communicated with her children in French, Bassa and a bit of English.

Extract 2:

We met Mrs Fotsou with her sister who was visiting from Midrand, a suburb about half hour's drive away. The sister was introduced to us in French because the primary data gatherer is fluent in French, and also Cameroonian. However, their conversation continued in Ghomaala, their mother tongue, which the data gatherer did not understand at all. Looking around we observed a Cameroonian fabric draped over her sofas, which she said was part of her heritage, and which also kept the sofas

clean. After the sister left, the children returned home from school. They greeted their mother in French and us in English. The tendency was for the mother and children to code-switch between French and Ghomaala.

Extract 3:

Another visit was made to conduct interviews. Mrs Fotsou told her children why we were there and the children asked to have a look at the interview questions before we could proceed. We observed that they did not understand certain words on the interview questions (such as ‘cope’, ‘included’, ‘excluded’ and ‘belong’). This was probably because of the difficulties they experienced speaking and understanding English.

The language practices of the immigrant families can be divided into two, the home/family and the school. Their practices at home include French and Ghomaala for the Fotsou family, and French, Bassa and some English for the Mbong family. The medium of instruction at school includes English and Afrikaans, and a little communicative Zulu which was learnt in South Africa. By establishing these practices in the various domains the issue of congruence becomes more apparent. For some families literacy as demanded by schools involves reading English books and paves the way to academic success, but for others this is intimidating. Minority language families may feel they have to give up their cultural identity and adopt aspects of the dominant culture (Kajee, 2011). This is true for both the two French speaking Cameroonian families.

When interviewed, Mrs Fotsou said about the home language: *“But they (the children) struggle to read Ghomaala, let’s say they are struggling to have a good level in English they cannot focus to have a good understanding in Ghomaala now. I fear they will lose it. (Interview with Mother).”*

One of the very profound consequences faced by minority indigenous languages is the threat of language shift because it is not transmitted to the next generation (Hornberger, 1998), and a language that shifts stands the chance of eventually being lost. Once lost the chances of revival are slim. Ghomaala and French are home languages of the Fotsou’s. The children have communicative competence in Ghomaala but they cannot write it. The reason that the parent gives is, they are now focusing on acquiring competence in English so they cannot at the same time concentrate on Ghomaala which is their mother tongue. It is not enough for these children to only speak their mother tongue and not write it. Code switching and mixing was often observed in the home. Variations between the home and school can lead to problems as learners need to adjust to the needs of formal education.

The Mbongs speak French and Bassa. The transmission of language is the foundation of problems related to the adjustment of immigrants to their new countries, as it is “the instrument par excellence for social intercourse” (Delgado-Gaiten 1991:25) by linguistically different groups. The lack of both linguistic and communicative competence is an obstacle to communication and socialising in the school context.

Some of the children’s views are also relevant: *“People did not talk to me because I could not hear them, so I didn’t have friends” (interview with child).* The child proposed that people could not speak to him because he could not hear (understand) their language. The disaffection and marginalisation they feel is evident.

The teachers provided some of their own solutions to this problem: *“I must write every word that I do not understand in English and translate it into French at home that I know better” (Interview with child).* The effectiveness of their suggestions was not considered by the teachers.

school per se, (usually English), in home and community settings they demonstrate complex language and literacy patterns and behaviours as they weave their way through multifaceted literacy activities. The challenge, as presented by John-Steiner and Mahn (2001) is that children whose mode of discourse is different from that used in school instruction find themselves at a disadvantage and may drop out, or are forced out of school. It must be reiterated that immigrant children in particular bring their own language, literacy and cultural practices to the classroom, leaving teachers and schools wondering how to cope with their specific needs, in conjunction with their already overburdened workloads. The view supports what happens in the classroom when instructed in English. Notice what learner had to say when asked how the teacher assists him when he does not understand some words in class.

Reading and Writing at Home

Based on home observations conducted in this study the learners tend to be less anxious when reading at home as opposed to the tensions that arise with the prescribed teaching of reading that takes place at school. The interactions during times of reading at home appears to be a fun-filled, joyous and a playful experience as opposed to the strictness, ridicule and rigidity that characterises reading at school in front of teachers and peers. In the Fotsou family the learners do a lot of reading at home in English which has facilitated their acquisition of English language. However, their English ability is best described as elementary, given that the learner in grade seven still could not understand the meaning of certain words in the interview questions. Parents and siblings mediated the learning of English to the less competent members during homework time. In each of the families the children read story books and drew pictures.

In the case of the Mbong family, Mrs Mbong was observed sitting on the floor and reading to her son in her apartment at Yeoville, most likely because she was comfortable that way, or because she did not have a dining room table to work at. The moment between mother and child was a touching moment of family love. Parents also serve as language brokers to their children, and vice versa, the learning of English is thus a social practice. Brown et al (1993, p. 191) suggest that the active agents within the zone of proximal development “can include people, with different degrees of expertise, but it can also include artefacts, such as books, videos, wall displays, scientific equipment and computer environment intended to support intentional learning”. The elder son in the Fotsou family for instance took the responsibility of writing the shopping list for his mother who didn’t feel very competent doing so. Writing activities such as poems scribbled on pieces of paper, notes, lists compiled by the children at home are often not acknowledged by schools. Young people are active writers in safe spaces and write with imagination and humor.

The children also were digitally active: they had Facebook sites, and communicated with friends and family members using Whatsapp, sms and sometimes Skype. These will be discussed in a separate section on digital literacy.

Religious Literacy

Religious literacy, as a sub-field of educational linguistics relates the teaching and learning of language to the performance of religious acts, and the use of sacred texts (Watt and Fairfield, 2008p.355), and gives rise to specific ideology. Language used in the sacred texts frames the kind of language used in private religious practices. “The enormous power of language, sacred or secular lies partly in the fact that words originating in one context can be preserved and relayed across vast expanses of geography, time and culture, echoing in a form of natural human language, the very transcendence of the deity from

whom they originated” Religion, by association, becomes intertwined with language, literacy and society, and is a means of language spread, as is the case in this study.

Religious literacy is a central practice in these two homes, and religious texts are integral to their everyday personal lives. Mrs Fotsou attaches a lot of importance not only to her religion but also to her mother tongue. Religion and language are both important symbolic markers of their cultural identities. She brought a prayer book written in Ghomaala from Cameroon to South Africa, most likely because this is how she constructs her identity. Consider the excerpt below from an interview with a parent:

Extract 4:

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

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

Also on Mrs Fotsou’s wall was a photograph inscribed “Jesus I trust in you”. This demonstrates her religious commitment. An excerpt of the Lord’s prayer in Ghomaala was also in a prime spot on a wall. To the Mbong’s weekly church visits are normal practice. The children also go to Sunday school where they recite “The Lord’s Prayer” in English, as well as rhymes in English, and Zulu. Similar practice was noted in the Fotsou family. Mrs Fotsou’s disappointment however, was that she could not find her original church in Johannesburg, so she attended another one. It is also worth noting that the use of South African languages was limited to a smattering of Afrikaans, isiZulu and seSotho. Mrs Mbong said “Just a few words here and there that we pick up..using Zulu or Sotho makes you feel black...but Afrikaans is not right yet”.

Guerra and Farr in Hull and Schultz (2002) who researched literacy practices of Mexican families in Chicago say that charismatic activities such as church going and bible reading are empowering to immigrant communities, and usually seen as a female domain. The stance is analogous in this study, where religion is associated with peace and fulfilment, and enables participants to manage their problems more effectively.

Conclusion

In this study, research points to the fact that the type of literacies practiced in some homes are largely incongruent with those that children encounter in school (Auerbach, 1989; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Conversely the kinds of literacy practiced in classrooms may have little meaning for those children outside school walls (Morrow, 1995, p.7). According to Haneda (2006), “It is vitally important that teachers value and build on students’ existing home and community literacy practices in promoting literacy competence in school.” An important issue to consider regarding the fact that there are different literacies in different domains of life, is what ways schools can connect their student’s literacy practices in different contexts.

Moll and colleagues’ (1992) work on how funds of knowledge can be used to bridge communities and classrooms acknowledges the expertise of parents and community members. However, we need also look at cultural funds of knowledge. Teachers should welcome the way children can bring their outside worlds into the classroom through their speaking and writing. Crossing boundaries of race, class, gender enrich how we look at literacy. By involving parents, family and community members in literacy teaching, and

by building existing literacies of the family and community, schools can act as “catalysts in a process of empowerment for children, families and teachers (and) collaborative literacy teaching and learning can be a positive force in the redefinition of relations of power, and the enhancement of social justice” (Blackledge, 2000, p.1). Those families most marginalised frequently see literacy and schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they did (Blackledge, 2000, p. 4).

After school community programmes such as the 5th Dimension project described by Guitierrez and colleagues (1999) and the STRUGGLE project described by Long et al (2002) are also noteworthy. The latter programme which is based in Pittsburgh, uses the write – present-review format, and gives students the opportunity to use technology to compose narratives. This is reminiscent of Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogues in the mind. Bakhtin (1981) characterizes the dialogic imagination as the chorus of voices that breathe meaning in people’s lives. They may be affirming personal stories that guide the self. Community literacy therefore permits border-crossing, and as such expand horizons, bringing adults and youth together to co-construct texts. Inso doing they have the potential to become urban sanctuaries or contact zones that promote hybrid literacies.

After-school family literacy programs could provide parents with training for home tutoring. Parents could support their children’s literacy development by helping with homework and making special time in the day to focus on reading and writing. Such family literacy programs should encourage parents to value literacy and promote positive attitudes towards it. The most significant way that parents can support their children’s literacy development is by reading to them. It is the responsibility of the educators to value and build on the unique parent-child experiences, by acknowledging what children bring to the classroom, and how we might cultivate a view of learning that focuses on “human lives seen a trajectories through multiple social practices in various social institutions” (Gee et al 1996, p. 4).

Educators could review current programs, reformulate practices and projects in order to develop stronger ties or partnerships between the home and the school. The more educators understand immigrant literacies the more they can help adjust their classrooms instead of trying to reshape children and their families to meet the demands of school. Educational institutions need to deliver instructions which meet the needs of all students especially the linguistically and culturally diverse who historically have been marginalised by traditional models of pedagogy. The benefits too should not be pertinent only to the immigrant children, but to the South African education system as a whole.

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APPENDIX

Kámté wók m Mugo Marya má la'á.
 Kámté m Má la', kámté gú' gwyé
 ye Mú Sí le há bú né tùm dóló tsyé te dhe áá.
 Pyé zhyé fo' mfa' mú: ó bé dwo' tségùn;
 pyé ták nka'te yók bú; pyé kha dúmnyé jím ò;
 Sí lé shwó' ó né ge nkó nté Yésó Krístò.
 Tùm mú bé támshye ye a té jém á pé:
 guḡ grāsya, guḡ pəpúnj awé,
 jye dóló ba jye vək mamā ntém á né.
 O kún bə ó ghə né tú' yá né dú bəḡ
 nkúnnyè, bəḡ cómmtso dēm gwya monəḡ
 sícá' awé. Mála', pyé nuḡ mkwé ò: sésó m
 Mála', yú' mnwə myə á wé ntáknýé wók áá.
 Pyé zhyé gaé pé o le má' wók méjyè;
 nêkélé, ó bé má yók tè byà.
 Ó bé má tùm dóló Yésó. Kwí mcwýé'nyə
 mók bíḡ jú' wók kwa' pəpúnj. Amen

Tá yók ye ó kebəḡ,
 Á Tsó tsú pé dóló, á Nəfo tsú só'ó,
 Á nəkunj o pé demca'á dənḡḡ pá' kebəḡ áá.
 Há bí pyé tyé' o, ywétsé yók né yəḡ tyé'ó;
 Cwýé' mhə mók pá' pyé ge yók né mfə pók áá;
 Kê píḡ pyé kó nê mləḡtə; té', té wók né jye cwəpúnj.
 (Nêkélé, nəfó, tuo ba ghámté bé bú

Figure 1: "The Lord's prayer"
 written in Ghomaala