


Editorial



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Traditional tales serve not only to entertain children but also to impart values and convey important life lessons. In the traditional tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, the seemingly fussy little protagonist dismisses things that are either too hot or too cold, too high or too low, too hard or too soft – she wants things to be 'just right'. The metaphysical insight from this fairy tale has been adopted in the scientific world and dubbed the Goldilocks effect; it refers to a situation where a set of 'just right' conditions must be obtained for something to flourish. The theme of this special collection of the *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 'Reducing inequalities in and through literacy in the early years of schooling', represents an ongoing quest in the academic, research and education community to improve the literacy levels of learners in our schools. Like Goldilocks, we also want things to be 'just right' in homes and schools so that our learners can flourish.

Over a decade of findings from both large- and small-scale studies in South Africa – and Southern Africa – consistently reflect low reading abilities of learners, not only at primary school but also at high school and tertiary level. Clearly, our learners are not flourishing, which means that the Goldilocks conditions specific to reading development are not all in place. To reduce inequalities in and through literacy in the early years requires an understanding of the Goldilocks effect in reading.

However, an understanding of the Goldilocks effect in any field of scientific study requires a sound understanding of both the phenomenon under study and the conditions that separately and collectively enable the phenomenon to flourish. Understanding the Goldilocks effect also requires understanding what happens when one, some, or all of these conditions are not obtained and how this affects the different components of the phenomenon, causing it to go into distress.

Reading is a complex phenomenon with different facets or components. Understanding the Goldilocks effect depends heavily on an in-depth understanding of how literacy develops in all our languages, cognitively, linguistically, affectively and socially; how various factors in the environment support or impede literacy development; how learners come to use literacy for different purposes in critical and meaningful ways; and what pedagogical implications can be drawn from all these findings.

We already know much about reading and its Goldilocks conditions. Sixty years of reading research across the world has provided converging evidence from diverse academic disciplines and perspectives for us to know that reading is multifaceted; it is an individual cognitive-linguistic, neurolinguistic and affective accomplishment. It is also a socially constructed phenomenon serving different purposes across diverse communities. We also know that children are launched on successful reading trajectories if they have parents who read storybooks to them at home, have ready access to books in homes and at school, have opportunities to read on a regular basis, are actively motivated to read by role models around them, know the code in which written language is represented and have supportive and knowledgeable teachers.

However, much of this knowledge comes from reading research conducted on reading in English (the language in which most reading research has been conducted) or reading in different European alphabetic languages, or Asian languages with logographic writing systems. English is an isolating language and most European languages are inflectional languages. African languages are agglutinating languages. Much of the reading research also comes from fairly industrialised societies, with higher socio-economic indices, higher adult literacy rates and ample physical and written resources available in homes and schools. In contrast, education systems in Africa and other developing countries have to deal with widespread poverty, lower adult literacy rates, fewer physical resources in schools and fewer written materials in various languages.

Although we already know quite well about reading and its Goldilocks conditions, we need to build on this knowledge, extend it, fine-tune it and continuously critique it to ensure that our

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knowledge base includes understandings of differences across languages, orthographies and contexts. For example, we need to know more about how early reading develops in syllabic agglutinating African languages with transparent orthographies. We also need to know how the conjunctive and disjunctive orthographies of the Sotho and Nguni language families affect early reading trajectories in these languages. This kind of fine-tuning in our reading knowledge has implications for fine-tuning our teaching practices. Early reading instruction in African languages needs to be informed by a carefully researched evidence base of the cognitive-linguistic processes at play when reading in African languages, and how pedagogy can effectively support these processes. We need to move away from instruction that is tangentially informed by reading practices derived mainly from English, or by anecdotal reassurances that 'this really works!' derived from intuitive claims about language and hunches about what is happening in the mind of a young reader while reading.

We also need to expand and fine-tune our knowledge of the written resources available in our various languages, various age groups for which they are targeted, the genres they serve and the ways in which teachers can put such materials to productive and meaningful use in classrooms. Expanding and fine-tuning is also needed regarding our knowledge of the way in which oral language proficiency, especially in dynamic multilingual, multicultural countries such as South Africa, impacts reading in one or more languages, and how reading in turn impacts oral language. Although having knowledgeable teachers in classrooms is desirable, what exactly do teachers need to know and how well do they need to know it to launch their learners on successful reading trajectories?

The aim of this special issue is to move the field of research on early reading instruction in multilingual African contexts forward by examining more closely and rigorously the interplay between resource, learner, language and teacher factors in early literacy development. The six articles in this special edition make a contribution to this expansion and fine-tuning in various ways.

The first article by Yvonne Reed draws attention to one of the fundamental conditions needed for children to become readers – namely, availability of and easy access to reading material. However, as she points out, there is a paucity of authentic texts available in African languages that are suitable for young readers. Reed uses the case of the African Storybook (ASb) initiative as a potential model for cost-effectively generating and publishing literature online in multiple languages for young readers. The ASb website provides free access to stories produced by teachers, librarians and education students across Africa who form the website community, and also to stories created by ASb staff in the central office in Johannesburg. The opportunity exists for community members to translate stories from one language into another. Drawing on reports, evaluations and interviews,

Reed explores the successes of the ASb initiative and some of its challenges. She concludes that its success is largely because of its digital open licence publishing model, its responsive website and mixed delivery methods, its collaborative approach involving formal and informal partnerships, and the creativity and responsiveness of staff involved. Its main challenge is engaging with national and provincial governments where decisions about teacher education, curricula and provisioning are made because these decisions influence teachers' engagement with the website and uptake of the resources.

The next three articles by Carien Wilsenach, Tracy Probert, and Janeli Kotze and Martine Schaeffer focus on the early cognitive-linguistic aspects of reading accomplishment, especially in relation to agglutinating African languages with conjunctive and disjunctive orthographies. Because African languages are syllable timed languages, it is pedagogically intuitive to teach early reading using a syllabic approach. However, African languages use an alphabetic orthography that represents language at the phonemic level in writing. Furthermore, African languages are agglutinating languages with a rich morphology, and morphemes can vary in size, from a single phoneme, to a syllable or a unit larger than a syllable. Wilsenach and Probert look at the role of grain sizes in decoding in Northern Sotho, Xhosa and Setswana, respectively, in relation to phonological (and morphological) awareness amongst Grade 3 (and 4) learners. Both authors used innovative measures that were especially adapted to the phonological and morphological features of the languages in which they tested the children. Both authors also reported that the reading abilities of the learners in both studies were low and that they read very slowly. However, while Wilsenach found phonemic awareness to be a significant predictor of word recognition in Northern Sotho (similar to findings by Malda, Nel and Van de Vijver [2014] for Setswana, and Kotze and Schaeffer for isiZulu and siSwati [this edition]), Probert found syllabic awareness to be a significant predictor of word recognition in isiXhosa and Setswana (similar to Tolchinsky and Jisa [2017] in Spanish – a syllabic language with a transparent orthography like the African languages). Are these different findings artefacts of the tools used to assess the learners? Do these findings reflect learners at different stages of early reading? The fact that the learners performed better in syllable awareness than in phoneme awareness tasks reflects the developmental sequence of larger grain sizes (syllables) developing before smaller ones (phonemes), as documented in other alphabetic languages (e.g. Alcock et al. 2010; Ziegler & Goswami 2006). However, the jury is still out with regard to which grain size predicts successful reading in agglutinating African languages and more research, especially of a longitudinal nature, needs to be conducted in this area. What we learn from both studies is that phoneme awareness does not develop early. Although neither of the studies looked at the way in which decoding was taught in the classrooms, the findings suggest that phoneme awareness does not spontaneously develop in languages with a simple syllable

structure and a transparent orthography; classroom instruction helps develop such awareness. Both these studies contribute to an understanding of how linguistic and orthographic features of African languages need to be taken into consideration for better understanding reading development in these languages and the kind of classroom pedagogy that can best support it.

Another under-researched area in our multilingual country is how reading develops in two languages within the formal schooling system. Kotze and Schaeffer use longitudinal data over a year to look at the interaction between various language- and reading-related skills amongst Grade 1 learners who are becoming biliterate in isiZulu or isiSwati as Home Language (HL) and English as First Additional Language (FAL). They examine which HL and FAL skills at the start of Grade 1 are associated with English FAL literacy at the end of Grade 1. Their data are drawn from a larger intervention study involving 3327 learners who were randomly selected from 180 Quintiles 1–3 isiZulu and SiSwati medium schools in Mpumalanga. To eliminate specific instructional effects, they included *only* the data from 1347 Grade 1 learners from 80 control schools in this study. These learners were assessed on various isiZulu or SiSwati and English skills at the start and end of Grade 1. Various findings are of relevance to a better understanding of Goldilocks conditions in bilingual reading when it is 'business as usual' in schools, without specific interventions. For example, oral proficiency in both languages was positively associated with word reading ability. However, a wide variability was found in HL vocabulary and listening comprehension at the start of Grade 1, pointing to the need of more research in the way that oral language proficiency, especially vocabulary, develops in the African languages and can support reading in both HL and English FAL. In addition, phoneme awareness and knowledge of letter-sound correspondences in HL were predictors of word reading abilities in both languages at the end of Grade 1. Significantly, they found a higher number of learners in the control schools who could not identify a single letter sound correctly after spending a year in Grade 1 and who could not therefore read words accurately, either from a word list or in a passage. Having a better understanding of the kinds of skills that children need for successful early reading in both HL and FAL helps us focus on the classroom and teaching conditions needed to help learners flourish.

While some may regard attention to these kinds of cognitive-linguistic minutiae as too technicist for their liking, it is imperative to undertake this kind of research in the African context to further advance theory building in the early stages of reading across different languages.

The last two articles look at issues related to teacher knowledge and practices and have relevance for the 'just right' teacher and classroom conditions that can help learners flourish in their reading. Lieke Stoffelsma looks at the English vocabulary teaching strategies of eight Grade 3 teachers in two different contexts: four teachers who taught

English HL learners and four Xhosa HL teachers who taught English FAL learners, both in the Eastern Cape province. What the teachers had in common was that they all taught in schools that serve poor communities. Interviews and classroom observations were used for data collection. While the teachers showed a fairly wide range of vocabulary teaching strategies that are commonly identified in the literature, the strategies seemed to serve immediate short-term needs, such as explaining the meaning of a word, but did not seem to serve more enduring needs, such as challenging and engaging the learners in active learning, or using the strategies to help learners take ownership of their own vocabulary learning. The English FAL teachers relied heavily on their L1 for vocabulary instruction. The findings have implications for both pre- and in-service teaching development programmes, where teachers are made aware of the different ways in which vocabulary can be nurtured in bilingual education systems.

Matiekase Kao and Jabulile Mzimela look at a much neglected aspect of reading, especially in the African context, namely, that of teaching early reading to learners with visual impairment. Using a small case study design involving three teachers in a School for the Blind in Maseru, Lesotho, they examine the technological, pedagogical and content knowledge that teachers need for the effective teaching of Braille reading in classrooms with visually impaired learners. Document analysis, interviews and classroom observations were used for data collection. They found that the teachers tended to teach Braille as a 'stand-alone' skill and without linking it to the children's own world and experiences, while the development of oral language proficiency and the teaching of other pre-reading skills to Grade R learners were neglected. The study calls for more quality in-service teacher education programmes that can support Grade R teachers of learners with visual impairment and help them develop a wider range of knowledge and skills to nurture emergent literacy skills in inclusive classrooms.

The Goldilocks effect requires an understanding of 'just right' conditions at all levels of the reading phenomenon. If children do not have easy and regular access to texts in their languages, or if they do not understand the written code well enough to recognise words fast and accurately on their own, they go into distress rather than flourish, resulting in reading comprehension failure, as documented in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016 results (Howie et al. 2017). Similarly, even if teachers are well intentioned and try their best in the classroom, inadequate grasp of content or pedagogic knowledge related to reading can jeopardise the classroom conditions needed for learners to flourish as engaged and critical meaning-making readers. We believe that readers will enjoy reading the articles in this special edition as they all make a contribution to a deeper reflection and understanding of the various 'just right' conditions needed for reading to flourish in African schools.

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