Teachers' professional development: Awareness of literacy practices

Berit Lundgren, Eileen Scheckle and Denise Zinn
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa
eileen.scheckle@nmmu.ac.za

This article draws upon our experiences of participating in a Literacy Hub in South Africa. The aim is to describe and analyse how dialogue among Grade Eight teachers in a Literacy Hub around literacy teaching practices might lead to professional development and deepen teachers' understanding of literacy practices and teaching. Interviews and observations with eight teachers were conducted to understand their literacy practices. The result indicates that sustainable development is a process that takes time. Furthermore, the study shows that the teachers relate to students' context and own experiences as a means of introducing a topic. While some teachers try to give the students access to cognitively demanding tasks, most tasks and events in the classrooms are cognitively undemanding and context-embedded. The importance of offering teachers examples of varied literacy practices and of making classroom literacy practice visible is noted.

Introduction – Teachers' Power

Research supports the oft-repeated phrase that "it all comes down to the teacher", when describing the quality of the students' school learning experiences (Snow, Griffin & Burns, 2005). Some have suggested that nothing can replace the power of a high-quality teacher (Lindberg, 1995). The aim of this article is to describe and analyse how dialogues around classroom literacy practices reflect teachers' professional development and understanding of their daily practice. The three research questions are: how do teachers comprehend their own literacy practice, what kind of literacy events occur in the classroom, and in what way are they connected to professional development discussions going on in the Hub?

As sites of facilitative engagement, the 'Hubs' were informal meetings held around literacy challenges facing local teachers at 'historically disadvantaged' schools. This latter term is somewhat of a misnomer, as these disadvantages, linked to both material and human resources, have continued, and in fact become exacerbated in the period post-1994, for a number of reasons, which is not the focus of this study.

The Literacy Hub was the initial site of engagement between school-based language teachers and university lecturers. It became a dialogic space of sharing, reflection and ultimately of possibility, as teachers, together with the authors of this paper, considered teaching strategies for literacy development. It is important to note that the initiative to develop the practice came from the teachers themselves in this instance. Initially teachers focused on a deficit understanding of classroom literacies, where learners were described as 'problems' supported by evidence of what they could not do. Through monthly interactions and a series of 'guest lectures', by contributors who shared with the group in a roundtable format, a variety of strategies developed to engage learners in literacy activities and to strengthen teaching and learning, along with a shift to a more affirming understanding of different literacies in line with Street (1984, 2006). These lectures did not form a structured sequenced programme; rather, they were intended to stimulate a different kind of engagement around literacy practices within the schools, and to encourage teachers to reflect on their own and their learners' practices when applying new teaching strategies. Some of these sessions involved strategies for learners to be more attentive and engaged in learning, including various reading strategies, and second language learning approaches, inter alia. Literacy hub discussions ran parallel to the classroom observations and interviews described in the data so that the theory and practice were mutually informative and ongoing.

The improvement and development of literacy practices is neither linear, nor easy, as there are many factors that contribute to this process, for example, the way in which the teachers interpret what is happening in their literacy practice, how they react to the process, and how they actually transform and implement the change they have to consider (Burke, 2002). High school teachers' professional literacy development has traditionally concentrated on in-service training (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). These are often pre-packaged programmes prepared by lecturers or consultants and, according to Liebermann and Wood (2003), have had little success, as the teachers are positioned as passive recipients. Studies with teachers who volunteered to participate in a long-term collaborative study committed to professional development stand in contrast to this (Thibodeau, 2008). These teachers participated in an ongoing programme that included both input on literary strategies, combined with a reflective and supportive space to promote the practice of new strategies. Other studies, which include interventions to help and support teachers, have had a positive influence on teachers' development, which in turn has had an impact on their pedagogical practice (Au, 2013; Fisher, Lapp, Flood & Moore, 2006; Strahan, Geitner & Lodico, 2010; Thibodeau, 2008). Long-term studies indicate a correlation between professional development interventions in which teachers are active and work collaboratively (Strahan et al., 2010; Thibodeau, 2008) in a reflective on-going process (Au, 2013), and sustained improvement in practice. Similarly

the study presented here, which it has to be emphasised, was initiated by teachers' concerns to improve their practice, offered ongoing support and a reflective space within the ambit of the Literacy Hub. Strahan et al. (2010) point out that more case studies in different contexts have to be conducted so as to get more insight into the process of professional development, as there is strong empirical evidence that some teachers fail to sustain a development trajectory, even when said teachers are motivated to improve and develop their practice (Blossing & Ertesvåg, 2011). This latter issue is of particular relevance in the South African context, where, according to Gennrich and Janks (2013), a strong sense of teacher habitus may mitigate against real change in practice.

This study, undertaken in a South African context, contributes to a wider understanding of teachers' literacy teaching and their continued professional development in this area. It adds some positive understandings of teacher development, against a backdrop of a literacy 'crises' and offers various criteria to effect teacher change. These include, amongst others, an ongoing supportive programme, a collaborative team of motivated teachers, committed researchers or trainers, and the knowledge that change takes time. Therefore, this research contributes to further understandings of teachers' habitus, and the effort required to change practice (Gennrich & Janks, 2013). If developing economies consider the development of in-service teachers to be a worthwhile educational goal, then supporting on-going engagement through participation in literacy hubs, or other professional learning communities, is an alternative to be considered. In addition, as a small-scale qualitative study, it provides insight into the challenges of teacher professional development, which is further exacerbated by the multilingual and cross-lingual complexities particular to the South African context.

Portraits of the Schools
Teachers from two local, formerly 'coloured' high schools, who had been active participants in the Literacy Hub, agreed to participate in this study, and all ethical procedures involving permission from the principals and informed consent from the teachers concerned, were adhered to. In addition, anonymity of the teachers and the schools was guaranteed by the use of pseudonyms. South High School has 815 students and about 30 teachers, while North High School[i] has 1,100 students, and 40 teachers. The classes contain between 38 and 42 learners. The classrooms are equipped with single or paired desks, a board, and a desk in front of the room. The students do not have their own books and there are few books in the classrooms. Both schools offer dual medium instruction: that is, learners may choose to be taught in either English or Afrikaans. This is further complicated by Afrikaans learners choosing to be taught in English, as well as the increase in isiXhosa learners, who also choose English as their Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT).

Theoretical Framework – A Critical Socio-Cultural Perspective
This study is framed by a socio-cultural view of teaching and learning (Wertsch, 2002). Research has shown (Barton, 2007; Bourdieu, 1977; Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2008) how people have integrated socially-constructed dispositions informed by earlier experiences. These dispositions, or in Gee's (2008) terms, *Discourses,* contribute to the formation and control of the person's actions and thinking. The dispositions also have an impact on the different social practices in which the person is involved, as the person is part of a social context (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu introduced the concept of *habitus* to indicate circumstances where individuals' norms and values emanate from their historical and collective habits (1977). This provides a useful lens to understand the challenges involved in changing one's habitus.

Furthermore, Fairclough (1989) and Gee (2008) argue that all culture, and schooling in particular, is in some way standardised in order to pursue ideals and values, so as to ensure they can be repeated year after year. Teachers in schools have, thereby, an institutionalised authorisation to support the dominant literacy discourse in schools, which has institutional values and norms. This means the students identify themselves with the system and, at the same time, teachers reject analysing old and new knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Fairclough, 2012; Janks, 2010).

In addition, a critical literacy perspective, which involves different structures like texts, the participants' possibilities to act, and the social interaction between the participants and the mechanisms supporting this (Fairclough, 1989; Janks, 2010), adds another dimension to the socio-cultural approach. Within this approach, *critical literacy* constitutes a form of problem-posing through interaction, where the literacy content is ascertained through engaging with those factors found to be prevalent in the everyday lives of teachers and the learners (Freire, 1970).

Teachers are encouraged to foster a critical language and literacy perspective in their practice, although as Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) point out, the way in which this should be done is not spelt out adequately in Department of Education documents. Critical literacy teaching involves opportunities for the students to detect dominant linguistic expressions, and to recognise how these convey the different values and norms inherent in specific genres (Comber, 2001; Janks, 2010). With critical language and literacy competence, it is

possible to create knowledge of, and reflect on the society people live in with its norms, values and democratic principles (Freire, 1970). Four concepts, namely *access*, *deconstruction*, *reconstruction* and *domination,* have been used by Janks (2010) in order to emphasise the critical perspective of literacy. *Access* focuses on *who* is given access to literacy usage and variation, but also on *how* this takes place. *Deconstruction* refers to an analysis of the type of text and identification of typical linguistic characteristics and structures. This awareness gives students the possibility to reflect, and through *reconstruction,* build their own texts. *Domination* refers to those structures, often underlying ones, which determine who is allowed to write, and what creates and distinguishes a prevailing custom (Janks, 2010).

As this study was conducted in a multilingual South African society, it is important to refer to theories about teaching and learning in additional languages. Cummins (2000) argues that language teaching ought to focus on understandable and meaningful input and critical literacy. Three factors are important, namely the content, the language (the structure of the language and a critical analyses of the same) and the language use. To create learning situations, Cummins (2000) claims that, the topics ought to be cognitively demanding, make an investment in identity, and be negotiated through interactions. Teachers have to activate students' prior knowledge and experience to form the building blocks for new knowledge, as this activates cognitive engagement, which facilitates learning. This teaching process requires practices such as interactive group work, reflective logbooks and other co-operative learning experiences, which draw on prior knowledge (Cummins, 2000; Ramani & Joseph, 2006).

Cummins' (2000) quadrants model for language teaching and learning provides a means to understand different practices of language learning from the cognitively undemanding and context-embedded quadrant of everyday conversations, indicated by quadrant A, to the more cognitively challenging, context-reduced language use of quadrant D (see Figure 1). This latter quadrant is the goal of language teachers.
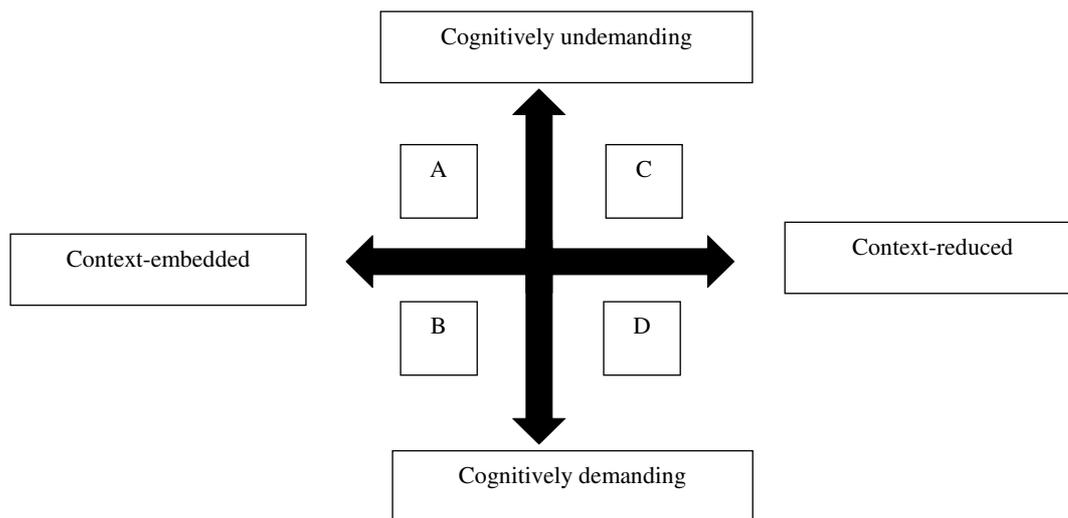

Figure 1 Cummins' (2000) framework of how to conceptualise teaching language from a context and cognitive perspective.

Ramani and Joseph (2006) suggest that quadrant B in Cummins' (2000) model is the arena in which scaffolding might provide students with the possibilities by means of which to achieve quadrant D competence. Therefore, activities in quadrant B can facilitate the learning process to advance into quadrant D. Ramani and Joseph (2006) used the quadrant model to describe additive bilingualism in Higher Education in the South African context, and to demonstrate how an understanding of Cummins' (2000) quadrants provides explanatory possibilities in multilingual contexts. They demonstrate how support for learners in quadrant B can enable them to engage in cognitively demanding concepts encountered in higher education. As language structures are changed, and the contextual support is reduced, students are better able to engage at a quadrant D level of competency. It is at this level that students demonstrate appropriate mastery of cognitively challenging concepts. Cummins' (2000) quadrants can be used to understand the way in which learners, studying through a second language, can develop proficiency in traditionally challenging areas of study like maths and science.

Earlier Studies in a South African Context

Many studies have been conducted on students' lack of literacy competence in South Africa. Bertram (2006) shows that low reading and writing competence in state schools in South Africa has a negative impact on the students' ability to succeed in their academic studies. Bertram (2006) further claims that home language has an important impact on reading competence. As many learners choose English as their LoLT, though it may be their second or third language, reading in an unfamiliar language will be challenging (Alexander, 2001). Furthermore, many students in South Africa come from environments where school literacy and reading habits are not integral to daily life (Bertram, 2006; Janks, 2010).

Papen (2005) found that teaching in schools was textbook-based and teacher-driven. Lessons featured tasks written in advance on the blackboard, learners waiting to get their work assessed, and authoritarian teachers. Other studies found that teachers do not read, label themselves as non-readers as they lack motivation to read, and find reading difficult (Daisey, 2009, 2010; Lundgren & Botha, 2010). Fleisch (2008) and others (Konstantopoulos & Borman, 2011; Rahman & Uddin, 2009), show how learners' low socio-economic backgrounds may result in educational failure, and while this is acknowledged as contributing to different literacy practices, low socio-economic factors are not a focus of the present study.

Instead, this study explores this literacy teaching of a group of teachers' intent on improving their practice through reflection and engagement through the support of interactions with lecturers in the Hub setting. As an informal intervention, it allowed teachers and lecturers to consider classroom teaching together and to consider the linguistic and cognitive demands of the lessons observed. The Hub provided teachers with practical, useful strategies for development, grounded in theory, and reflective space to consider their practice. Through the exploration of new knowledge generated at Hub-meetings, theoretical concepts of teaching were transformed in classroom practice in this South African study. According to Au (2013) and Strahan et al. (2010), amongst others, teachers need to be active to develop their practice in interaction with other teachers. Therefore, this study contributes further to the understanding of how teacher development should be grounded in action, not just in various in-service training programmes provided by governmental initiatives.

Apart from the change over time for literacy and reading achievement, access to literacy is fundamentally different in many aspects among different countries (Perry, 2007, 2008; United Nations, 2010). In South Africa for example, with 11 official languages, English is required for a pass in the matriculation examination in Grade 12 (Hunt, 2007). According to Hunt (2007), it is also difficult to change a practice through workshops, as teachers' schedules are already overcrowded with Educational Department requirements. Therefore, questions about literacy in a globalised world are still a challenge.

A key assumption underlying this study is that teachers' professional development and what best supports their ability to apply literacy knowledge and transform it into literacy practice, has to contain both new content and pedagogical knowledge about the literacy learning process. Another key assumption is that a communicative, reflective and critical perspective is useful for developing language and literacy (Flood, Heath & Lapp, 2005; Janks, 2010).

Language and the Curriculum

As alluded to earlier, learners bring a rich linguistic diversity to the language classroom, but many choose to study through the medium of English, despite it not being their home language. Thus English, which is actually a First Additional Language, in South African parlance, officially becomes the learners' Home Language. This switch to English means that students might not have enough English language knowledge to engage fully in cognitive and conceptual tasks. In the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), which was in place at the time of this study, the instructional time for combined Home Language and First Additional Language teaching at Grade Eight level, was 5.5 hours per week packaged according to the categories "Listening", "Speaking", "Reading and Viewing", "Writing", "Thinking and Reasoning", and "Language Structure and Use" (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011). Teaching literature, which might be included in "Reading and Viewing", could focus on comprehension, interpretations and comments from the students. In order to ensure equivalent standards of comparison, there are directives indicating how many assessments are necessary per term, and the relative weight of each. The teacher had to assess, for example, in term 1: listening comprehension (20 marks); literature and poetry (20 marks), and prepared reading and conversation (10 marks). All tasks are evaluated with students receiving a mark whose weighting had been determined in advance. For example, a prepared speech in Term 4 might be worth 30 marks maximum, and a descriptive essay of 200-250 words worth 40 marks (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011).

Research Methodology

In this section methods used in the study will be described, as well as the participants, data collection and tools for analyses.

In this case study (Merriam, 1998), 37 classroom lessons were observed at the two High schools, South High School and North High School, introduced earlier. Following from the classroom observations, seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with the observed teachers over a period of one month at each respective school. The interviews lasted for 20-40 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. The discussion in the interviews clustered around the following major categories: teachers' thoughts about challenges and success in teaching; language use in the classes; and literacy development. From the interview data and reflections of the classes that were observed, the focus of this research paper emerged. Furthermore, data was collected from eight meetings at the Hub, where sequences of discussions were recorded. In addition, as mentioned earlier, any identifying information in the study has been avoided, with the use of fictitious names. An informed consent was used to ensure the participants fully understood what the study entailed.

All the teachers in this study taught a language, either English or Afrikaans, as a Home or First Additional Language, in Grade Eight. Two of the teachers also taught Social Science. Information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Information about the participants

South High school	Subject	Participated in the Literacy Hub	Observations	Interview	Classes
Ms. Luck	Afrikaans L1	X	X	X	8A
Mr. Smith	Social Science / English and Afrikaans	-	X	X	8A, 8D
Ms. Gallant	Afrikaans L2	X	X	X	8D
Ms. Jewell	English L2	X	X	X	8A
Ms. Mnguni	English L1	X	X	-	8D
Ms. Loggenburg	English L1	X	X	X	8A, 8C
Ms. Bosman	Afrikaans L1	X	X	X	8G
Mr. Fortune	Social Science	-	X	X	8A

Note: In the table /X/ stands for yes and /–/ stands for no.

Table 1 shows the subjects the teachers taught, and whether they were regular participants at the informal Literacy Hub meetings. As indicated, all teachers were observed teaching. One of the teachers, Ms. Mnguni, was not interviewed, and although Mr. Smith and Mr. Fortune did not participate in the Literacy Hub meetings, they had been informed about the Hub discussions and they requested to participate in this study.

The data consists of observation notes on classroom teaching as indicated in the table above, as well as the subsequent teacher interviews. The interviews were opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice, and to draw on any of the discussions or strategies encountered in Hub discussions, which may have informed their teaching or reflections on teaching. The analysis of these teacher interviews and classroom observations draws on theories from Cummins (2000) and Janks (2010), as outlined earlier. Cummins's (2000) continua of cognitive demanding, cognitive undemanding, context-reduced and context-embedded intersections, create a framework for how literacy events can be conceptualised.

Results – Developing a Literacy Practice
This section presents the themes that emerged from studying the interviews and observations as framed by the Hub interactions, which ran in tandem with this study. Teachers' comments on their practice have been foregrounded, while linking them to the observed lessons and Hub discussions. In focusing on understanding the classroom's literacy practice some literacy events are described, which the teachers commented on, or that had been observed in the classrooms. The first of these was a comment on assessment, which was not linked to any Hub discussions, but was driven by departmental imperatives to accumulate marks. Other focus areas, such as drawing on prior learning to connect new material to learners' knowledge and strategies in classroom teaching, could be linked to Hub discussions to some extent. This will be examined further in relation to Cummins' (2000) quadrants.

Teachers' Foregrounding of Assessment
During the classroom observations as well as in the interviews, the impact of the curriculum, syllabus and assessment requirements was noticeable. In both schools, the timetable established a schedule for teaching and learning, where the classroom bell marked when teaching and learning could begin or end. Within this prescribed time period, the teachers were expected to teach, mark and assess the students. Reading, writing and talking were highly structured by teachers, and showed the priority given to the assessment of reading. Proficiency in reading was frequently assessed by the practice of reading aloud. This assessment usually occurred in front of all students, and could be a rather painful experience, for both the reader and the listener. The student stood in front of the class to read one or two unseen pages from a book, and was asked to

explain new words, while the teacher marked the student's reading competence.

In some classes, feedback focused on the need to read louder: *"the only thing I know is that you can't speak loud"* (Ms. Jewell, observation) or *"[put] your arms down"* (Ms. Jewell, observation), to a girl who twisted her hands and arms in front of her face when she was reading. More positive feedback came from teachers who allowed the students to stay in their places when they read aloud. For example, Ms. Bosman encouraged the students to read in pairs to practice and develop their reading competence, with statements like *"go to a person you are comfortable with"*. They could, as Ms. Bosman highlighted, also *"read one-on-one"* together with her. As almost all students were weak readers, this private reading to the teacher served to reduce social embarrassment for the student. Ms. Luck spoke about the students' underdeveloped writing skills. In her interview, she stated that the learners make many spelling errors and, *"when it comes to … when they have to answer say, a setwork question, which is compulsory for a test, an assessment, they must know how to spell as well as the correct answer"* (Ms. Luck, interview).

As Ms. Luck continued, she stated that she had assessment in mind while teaching poetry. Therefore, she avoided creative writing and peer group work. She found it better to set questions on a text that required learners to find and copy spelling and grammar directly from the text.

How Teachers Introduced a Topic

An important phase in any lesson is the introduction of the topic. Interview and observation data showed teachers' awareness of different strategies, as well as the pedagogical importance of drawing on learners' knowledge, which was in line with the Literacy Hub's teaching. One of the most common strategies to introduce the students into a new text or topic, was to connect the content of the text to the students' prior knowledge, their earlier experiences and assumptions. The teachers introduced the topic generally, so that the learners became interested before they focused on the specific text or topic. According to Ms. Bosman, the students wanted to be involved, and she tried to *"get them interested* [...] *to relate to things that is happening in their experiences, in their worlds of experiences. Normally you can do that with anything to any text"* (Ms. Bosman, interview).

The students' own motivation and learning abilities were valued, and the teacher expected the students to use reading strategies available to them and not to wait for the correct answer from the teacher. Students were thereby positioned as contributing to knowledge making. Similarly, Ms. Loggenburg tried to establish connections by asking the students if the topic reminded them of anything.

If it is a story [...] *and if it is about, like the one about puppies – they all know about dogs, so I bring up the topic of a dog without a picture, because it is not necessary, to talk about pets. You know who has a dog, and I try to find something they can connect with first. Because that is, I have also heard in most workshops that I have to start with something they are familiar with. I try to find something they can talk about, and then we go into the text* (Ms. Loggenburg, interview).

Thus, the teacher connected not only to students' experiences, but also to her own experiences of workshops at the Literacy Hub.

Making connections to learners' prior experience was also used as a strategy to introduce grammatical concepts.

To introduce adjectives, you see adjectives describe nouns, they should already know nouns, so I ask them to give a few nouns, and then I ask them to use those nouns in sentences and then describe those nouns. Then I tell them that the words you just used is called an adjective. I give them a text and they can find adjectives from the text (Ms. Mnguni, interview).

Frequently, the teachers asked questions in the introduction phase and the students answered from their experiences. For example, Mr. Fortune introduced the topic *crime,* by asking questions about the students' experiences of crime and violence in their environment. Mr. Fortune pointed out that the articles they were reading in class *"involve crime and learners relate to what is going on around them, people stealing, people shooting each other"* [sic] (Mr. Fortune, interview).

Another often-used strategy to introduce a new topic was to relate it to the society in which the students were living. Mr. Smith introduced the topic of treaties around sustainable development, with a conversation about South Africa as an industrial country, and treaties at home and in schools, before they read a text about international treaties that govern the use of natural resources. Mr. Smith asked questions like: "What is a treaty?" and "When do you have a treaty?"

A common strategy to introduce a topic was to relate it to events described in the media that might be familiar to the learners. In her interview, Ms. Luck mentioned that she *"sometimes introduces with questions, newspaper and television programmes."* The teachers said they also used snippets of television programmes as a means of introducing the topic and piquing the learners' interest.

Also more "traditional" strategies were used in the introduction phase, for example to develop vocabulary knowledge by getting students to use new and unknown words in different contexts through writing them down and using dictionaries. In this way, learners' engagement with the text would not be blocked by too many difficult or unfamiliar words.

Literacy Events and Activities in the Classroom –
Deconstruction or Copying

Here the observations of literacy events are again woven together with teachers' reflections as shared in the interviews in an attempt to answer the question of the literacy events that occurred in the classrooms and the teachers' understanding of these.

After the introduction section, the activities as well as the use of space in different classrooms varied. Most of the teachers stressed individual completion of the given task. For example, Ms. Mnguni said to the students, "this is an individual task, which means that your words are in your minds and keep quiet" (Ms. Mnguni, classroom observation). It was not a test situation, instead the task comprised some questions to be answered so the need for silence was not clear.

Often the task and questions to be answered during a lesson were already written on the board when students entered the classroom. Thus, the same tasks could be used for other classes too. First, the students silently copied the task into their notebooks, and thereafter they completed the task. Some of the students completed the task within the first half of the lesson, and had nothing more to do. Some of them talked to their peers; others just sat and waited for the bell to ring. A little less than half of the observed lessons included "fill in" tasks, where the students were required to read and rewrite the questions from the board.

There were some indications, but very few, of pair and group work. One example occurred in Ms. Luck's class, when the students were going to read three different parts from one text. They were first asked to read the first part of the text aloud in pairs for ten minutes and talk about the content and the concepts. Then the class was divided into three groups, to read and talk about separate parts of the text. After reading, one student from each group explained what they had read to the other students. The only shortcoming was that the teacher repeated what the students had said, thus despite efforts to the contrary, the teacher's voice was dominant.

Another example occurred in Ms. Bosman's home-language Afrikaans lesson. The students were grouped to read articles from the paper *'Hoezit'*. *Hoezit* is a magazine for teenagers, with articles about social science, as well as science, written at a level of language that most of the students were able to understand. After reading, each group had a chance to discuss their article. Thereafter, one from each group informed the whole class about the article the group had read and discussed. Ms. Bosman encouraged, scaffolded and supported the students to talk about these subjects. Students had authentic reasons to speak and ask each other questions in a supportive environment, where language was practiced, rather than assessed.

A third example of communication and a first seed of interaction between the teacher, Ms. Mng-

uni, and the students, occurred when the students were reading *Whitney's Kiss* aloud. After each reading passage, 'book talk' took place. The teacher asked questions about what the students had read and asked the students' opinions of events in the book's plot. Ms. Mnguni also related the plot to the students' own lives by asking how they would have acted in the same situation.

Other activities in the classrooms related to writing essays. Writing is a complex literacy event and many of the students did not like to write. Some of the teachers tried to prepare the students for writing. Normally writing was, *"the final phase of everything. We use to work with the oral first, you know let them use the oral* […] *and out of a topic you can come out with writing"* (Ms. Loggenburg, interview). Furthermore, according to Ms. Bosman, the students needed a lot of guidance, which in practice meant "to take them by the hand and, so to say, lead them" (Ms. Bosman, interview).

Discussion and Analysis - Context and Cognition

The analytic framework employed in this study to understand the development of some teachers' literacy practices, and thus further understand classroom literacy events, is Cummins' (2000) quadrant models for language teaching, adapted to literacy teaching. The data described have been mapped onto the four quadrants, as shown in Figure 2.

In Figure 2, as a result of the study, oral presentations have been placed in quadrant A. This oral event refers to learners' answers when teachers asked them about their own experiences in relation to the new topic, often used in the introduction of a new topic. The Introduction phase in this study mostly falls into the cognitive undemanding category, but context-embedded as the introduction section highlights the students' everyday experiences and language use. The strategy, discussed in the Hub, of using students' experiences and linking them to the topic, created engaged and motivated students. These kinds of events are common, and according to the teachers, are based on a planned pedagogical decision to facilitate understanding of a topic. However, for the most part, the teachers did not take this oral communication and students' vernacular knowledge to a higher, more cognitively demanding level. The students used their vernacular language and were not asked to apply a more academic school language, which is necessary to develop school literacy competence (Barton, 2007).

Assessment of reading aloud, for example, or questions on a text, has been placed in quadrant C. This assessment discourse was about control, regulation and power and had been discussed among the teachers in the Hub, where the assessment discourse was flagged as a problem for development. In terms of Cummins' (2000) frame-

work, this regulated discourse can be described as context-reduced, and cognitively undemanding, with a banking approach to learning (Freire, 1970). Not all students had access to the dominant language used in schools, and they did not have enough literacy skills and competence to pass the assessments. Teaching was about the collection of marks, and learning was about memorising, and the uncritical duplication of what had been taught (Janks, 2010).

Firstly, the assessment of oral presentations with comments, failed to give the students access to a full understanding of a text. Secondly, as a consequence, the time spent on reading aloud assessments reduced the students' possibilities to learn the dominant school language and literacy, its specific genre, structure and values. The banking approach was also observed when students firstly copied tasks from the blackboard, and thereafter tried to find the correct answer in a short text (Cummins, 2000). During the meetings in the Hub, it became obvious to the teachers that they were caught in a teaching discourse which did not encourage students' learning development. This insight and understanding became the point from where the teachers realised they had to develop their own classroom literacy practices.
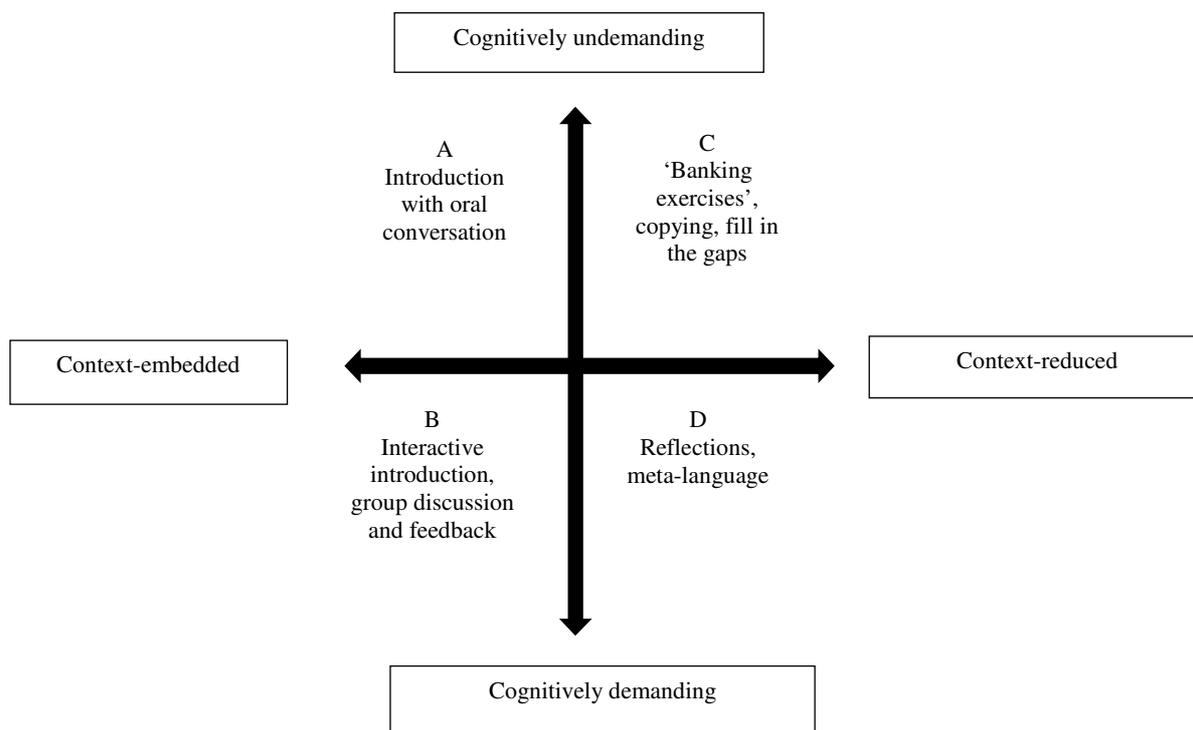

Figure 2 Literacy practices classified within a degree of cognitive activity and contextual support. The results from the study, with teachers' and learners' activities, are placed in the appropriate quadrant.

In quadrant B, teaching involves scaffolding and learning requires interaction, reflection and deconstruction, rather than mere copying. Furthermore, the inference level in quadrant B is high, and the students occupy a subjective position according to Cummins (2000). A striking reflection of teaching practice in this quadrant is that it is cognitively demanding. Borders, differences, access, production and reproduction are challenged. Some literacy events from this study, included students working together in pairs or groups, or negotiating with peers around tasks that had more than one correct answer. These literacy events can be placed in quadrant B. During these lessons, the students had access to the content through the use of their vernacular language. Through the teachers' scaffolding and work with vocabulary, the students working in groups also gained access to the dominant school language. However, group work was only observed in three out of 37 lessons in the two High Schools.

Working with vocabulary was a strategy presented in the Hub, and the teachers had internalised this knowledge into their teaching practices. References to society and earlier experiences created literacy events, which generally had a high activity level. This linking and transition happened in most of the classes, but not all of the teachers were aware of the critical aspect that might have helped the students to purposefully unpack the concepts and the language structure so as to gain access to literacy and language use with which they

were not familiar. As the phenomenon was found in all observed classes, it can be said to be a part of a newly created school discourse, inspired from the discussions in the Literacy Hub meetings. However, most of the teaching was more to do with retelling than with a critical deconstruction, with students encouraged to detect who had written the text, why it was written, and for whom. Quadrant B can be said to be a necessary ground for moving on to quadrant D.

Specific language and literacy events, like reflections and meta-language, for the fourth quadrant D in Figure 2, were hardly visible in the data. In terms of Cummins' (2000) framework, the context-reduced and cognitively demanding quadrant for teaching and learning includes intellectual reconstruction and transformation of the self, in close relation to new knowledge. However, there were some small steps into this area from a few teachers, for example, the task about treaties and sustainable development, meta-language events around adjectives in a grammar lesson, and the reading of articles in *Hoezit*. But, as the teachers did not bring the students' own experiences and knowledge from the context embedded area into a more general discussion with reflections and analyses of the subjects, this field was not reached.

Conclusion and Recommendations
The aim of this article was to describe and analyse how dialogue around classroom literacy practices reflect teachers' professional development and understanding of their daily practice. The first research question explored the ways in which teachers comprehended their own literacy practice. What can be concluded is that the interactions in the Literacy Hub, initiated by teachers, gave the teachers in this study a space and an opening to talk about their worries concerning students' literacy levels. Furthermore the study shows the challenges that the teachers identified, firstly in the Hub discussions, and secondly, in their own literacy practice. The data also showed that the events in the Hub had an impact on the teachers' teaching and development. This was evident in the observations of those teachers, who facilitated and scaffolded students' participation. In so doing, the teachers gave the students access to school language and literacy practices (cf. Janks, 2010). That happened when the students' knowledge, experiences and voices were heard and respected in the classroom (cf. Barton, 2007). The events contained interactive communication and negotiated identities, which created interest among the students. Cummins' (2000) theoretical framework suggested that topics and literacy events ought to be cognitively demanding, should make an investment in identity, and be negotiated through interactions. Teachers activated students' prior knowledge and experience to form the building

blocks for new knowledge, as this activates cognitive engagement, which in turn, facilitates learning. Interaction, therefore, is an important first step and a platform for learning. Through teacher-facilitated interaction, learners acquired possibilities to move from a context-embedded vernacular language to a context-reduced, dominant school language. The observation data indicated that the teachers' professional development had an impact on the teaching practice, where students were empowered to reach a high level of cognitive thinking (cf. Au, 2013; Strahan et al., 2010). The teachers' development of their practice, especially in the introduction phase, was connected to professional discussions and reflections in the Hub (cf. Strahan et al., 2010; Thibodeau, 2008). The teachers were in the process of developing a school literacy discourse, which focused on the learners and their language use when they brought the students' earlier experiences into the classroom (cf. Au, 2013; Barton, 2007; Cummins, 2000; Janks, 2010).

Given the limitation of this study, drawing more generalisations would be difficult. But this case study contributes to a wider understanding of teachers' development in special contexts. Also, what can be recommended for other teachers, as a result of this study, is to turn the physical classroom space into a learning space, where group-work is possible. This would allow classrooms to become spaces that foster mental engagement, where collaboration, even between 42 students, is acceptable. The classroom has to become a place where the teachers can create positive attitudes towards literacy learning. Teaching events and practices, which are situated, embedded and related to students' earlier experiences, could be developed so that learners can engage in context-reduced and cognitively demanding literacy events. Challenging learners' cognitive development begins with teachers' recognition of the importance of this ingredient in their literacy practices. This need is even more pronounced in developing countries with historically differentiated education aspiring to a more equitable system, as is the case in South Africa. However in practice, teaching is often driven by assessment demands, as manifested in the practice of reading aloud, rather than learning and providing tasks for learners to engage in cognitively demanding tasks within the supportive context of the classroom.

In conclusion, this research has investigated how teachers can develop and improve their practice of teaching literacy through professional engagement in the Literacy Hub, and by using some of the intervention activities discussed there. These included practices such as connecting with learners' prior experience, building on existing knowledge, scaffolding language use through the use of mother tongue languages, expecting learners

to negotiate different understandings in groups, allowing learners opportunities to verbalise their own learning with peers, expecting learners to move from copying information and low-level writing tasks, like filling in missing words to generating their tentative, inchoate written responses to a task. For teachers to take up these different practices, they needed to understand their own practice and the need to encourage deeper cognitive engagement. Overall, on the basis of the findings from this study, a conclusion is that teacher change and development takes time. In this study, the process could start as the teachers were supported by others and open to new perspectives and habits. The teachers developed new ideas for teaching, clearly influenced by the literacy events in the Literacy Hub. The teachers created an interactive environment for the learners, an opportunity to learn, develop and internalise new knowledge. Therefore the phrase "it all comes down to the teacher" is relevant, but teachers need on-going support and space to reflect on learning if they are going to take up new practices as part of their teaching repertoire.

Acknowledgements

Notes

i. Both are pseudonyms.

References

Alexander N 2001. Key issues in language policy for southern Africa. In R Trewby & S Fitchat (eds). *Language and development in Southern Africa: Making the right choices.* Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan.

Au KH 2013. Helping High Schools Meet Higher Standards. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 56(7):535-539. doi: 10.1002/JAAL.179

Barton D 2007. *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Bertram C 2006. Exploring teachers' reading competences: a South African case study. *Open Learning,* 21(1):5-18.

Blossing U & Ertesvåg SK 2011. An individual learning belief and its impact on schools' improvement work – An Individual versus a Social Learning Perspective. *Education Inquiry,* 2:153-171.

Bourdieu P 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice.* Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Bourdieu P & Passeron JC 1970. *Reproduction in education, society and culture.* London: Sage Publications.

Burke WW 2002. *Organization change: Theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Burridge E, Ginnis P, Hammond L & Smith A 1993. *Quality development.* Birmingham: Birmingham City Council Education Department.

Comber B 2001. Critical literacies and local action: Teacher knowledge and a "new" research agenda". In B Comber & A Simpson (eds). *Negotiating Critical Literacies in Classrooms.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Cummins J 2000. *Language, power and pedagogy*: *Bilingual Children in the. Crossfire.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Daisey P 2009. The reading experiences and beliefs of secondary pre-service teachers. *Reading Horizons,* 49(2):167-190. Available at http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=reading_horizons. Accessed 12 October 2014.

Daisey P 2010. Secondary preservice teachers remember their favorite reading experiences: Insights and Implications for Content Area Instruction. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 53(8):678-687. doi: 10.1598/JAAL.53.8.6

Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa 2011. *National curriculum statement (NCS). Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Grades 7–9. English First Additional Language.* Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa. Available at http://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=KAWE3ddsuzQ%3D&tabid=672&mid=1886. Accessed 12 October 2014.

Dornbrack J & Dixon K 2014. Towards a more explicit writing pedagogy: The complexity of teaching argumentative writing. *Reading and Writing,* 5(1):8 pages. doi: 10.4102/rw.v5i1.40

Fairclough N 1989. *Language and power.* Essex: Pearson Education.

Fairclough N 2012. Critical discourse analysis. In JP Gee & M Handford (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis.* London and New York: Routledge.

Fisher D, Lapp D, Flood J & Moore K 2006. Linking literacy teaching with assessment: a continuing professional development initiative for secondary schools. *Literacy,* 40(2):115-122. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9345.2006.00439.x

Fleisch B 2008. *Primary education in crisis: Why South African Schoolchildren Underachieve in Reading and Mathematics.* Cape Town: Juta.

Flood J, Heath SB & Lapp D (eds.) 2005. *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Freire P 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Gee JP 2008. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (3rd ed). New York: Routledge.

Gennrich T & Janks H 2013. Teachers' literate identities. In K Hall, T Cremin, B Comber & L Moll (eds). *International handbook of research on children's literacy, learning and culture.* UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hunt G 2007. Failure to thrive? The community literacy strand of the additive bilingual project at an Eastern Cape community school, South Africa. *Journal of Research in Reading,* 30(1):80-96.

Janks H 2010. *Literacy and power.* New York: Routledge.

Konstantopoulos S & Borman G 2011. Family

background and school effects on student achievement: A Multilevel Analysis of the Coleman Data. *Teachers College Record,* 113(1):97-132.

Liebermann A & Wood D 2003. *Inside the national writing project: Connecting network learning and classroom teaching.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Lindberg I 1995. *Second language discourse in and out of classrooms.* Stockholm: Centre for research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University.

Lundgren B & Botha L 2010. Reading events from child to student. *Education Inquiry,* 1(4):289-308.

Merriam S 1998. *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Papen U 2005. Literacy and development: what works for whom? or, how relevant is the social practices view of literacy for literacy education in developing countries? *International Journal of Educational Development,* 25(1):5-17. doi: 10.1016/j.ijedudev.2004.05.001

Perry KH 2007. Sharing stories, linking lives: Literacy practices among Sudanese refugees. In V Purcell-Gates (ed). *Cultural practices of Literacy: Case studies of language, literacy, social practice, and power.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Perry KH 2008. Primary school literacy in Southern Africa: African perspectives. *Comparative Education,* 44:57-73.

Rahman AU & Uddin S 2009. Statistical analysis of the different socioeconomic factors affecting education of N-W.F.P. (Pakistan). *Journal of Applied Quantitative Methods,* 4(1):88-94.

Ramani E & Joseph M 2006. The dual-medium BA degree in English and Sesotho sa Leboa at the University of Limpopo: Successes and challenges. In B Brock-Utne, Z Desai & M Qorro (eds). *Focus on fresh data on the language of instruction debate in Tanzania and South Africa.* Cape Town: African Minds.

Snow C, Griffin P & Burns MS (eds.) 2005. *Knowledge to support the teaching of reading: Preparing Teachers for a Changing World.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Strahan D, Geitner M & Lodico M 2010. Collaborative professional development toward literacy learning in a high school through connected coaching. *Teacher Development,* 14(4):519-532.

Street BV 1984. *Literacy in theory and practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Street BV 2006. *Autonomous and ideological models of literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies.* E-seminar, January 17-24. European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). On Media Anthropology Network. Available at http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/street_newliteracy.pdf. Accessed 12 October 2014.

Thibodeau GM 2008. A Content Literacy Collaborative Study Group: High School Teachers Take Charge of Their Professional Learning. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 52(1):54-64.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2010. *Education literacy.* Available at http://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/. Accessed 22 January 2010.

Wertsch JV 2002. *Voices of collective remembering.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.