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Investigating phonics instruction, meaning making, and heteroglossia within Grade 2 foundation phase isiXhosa classrooms

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Background: Early literacy teaching in South Africa has been shaped by policy reforms aimed at improving Foundation Phase reading outcomes. Although the revised national framework for teaching reading in African languages addressed longstanding curricular inconsistencies, concerns remain about its strong emphasis on phonics and the implications for reading for meaning in African language classrooms.

Objectives: This study examined how a phonics-centred orientation shaped Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language literacy practices and its implications for meaning making, learner creativity, and the use of learners' multilingual resources.

Method: A qualitative case study was conducted in two mother tongue-based multilingual primary schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Data were generated through classroom observations, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with three Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language teachers. Data were analysed using a social practices perspective on literacy.

Results: Literacy instruction strongly privileged phonics and code-breaking, with limited opportunities for sustained meaning making, learner creativity, and heteroglossic engagement. Despite teachers' commitment and close adherence to curriculum guidelines, classroom interactions largely prioritised standardised language and teacher-led instruction.

Conclusion: A dominant focus on phonics may unintentionally constrain socially situated literacy practices by positioning reading primarily as a technical rather than a meaningful communicative activity.

Contribution: The study contributes empirical evidence to debates on early literacy teaching in African languages by demonstrating the pedagogical implications of phonics dominance and highlighting the need for more balanced literacy practices that integrate decoding, meaning making, and learners' linguistic resources.

Keywords: reading for meaning; phonics; heteroglossia; creativity; well-rounded literacy practices; isiXhosa Home Language.

Introduction

Early literacy instruction in South Africa has been the subject of sustained concern, particularly in relation to learners' poor reading outcomes in both African languages and English (Pretorius & Spaull 2016; Spaull, Pretorius & Mohohlwane 2020). In response, national policy interventions have increasingly foregrounded systematic phonics instruction as a foundational component of learning to read. The release of the *Framework for Teaching Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase* (Department of Basic Education 2020) represents a significant attempt to strengthen early literacy pedagogy in African languages and to resolve longstanding inconsistencies between curriculum documents, including earlier versions of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for English Home Language and African languages.

While this framework has been widely welcomed as a long-overdue policy intervention, its strong emphasis on phonics raises important pedagogical questions, particularly in relation to how young learners are supported to read for meaning in African language classrooms. Research has consistently shown that phonics instruction is a necessary component of early reading development (Ehri et al. 2001; eds. Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). However, scholars caution against approaches that privilege code-breaking skills at the expense of meaning making, learner agency, and engagement with texts as socially situated practices (Comber 2015; Freebody & Luke 1990; Street 2003).

In South African contexts, these concerns are especially pronounced in African language classrooms, where learners bring rich oral, cultural and linguistic resources to school (Banda 2020; Makalela 2015). When early literacy instruction becomes narrowly focused on phonics drills, scripted lessons, and tightly sequenced decoding activities, opportunities for learners to draw on these resources and for teachers to exercise pedagogical creativity may be constrained. Such practices risk positioning reading as a technical skill rather than as a meaning-making and socially embedded activity (Luke & Freebody 1999; Prinsloo & Baynham 2013).

Furthermore, a phonics-centric orientation may limit the emergence of heteroglossia in the classroom. Drawing on Bakhtinian perspectives, heteroglossia refers to the coexistence and interaction of multiple voices, languages, and meaning systems in social contexts (Bakhtin 1981). In multilingual African language classrooms, heteroglossic practices, such as translanguaging, oral storytelling, performance, and dialogic talk, can support comprehension, identity affirmation, and deeper engagement with texts (García & Wei 2014; Makalela 2015). Within a well-rounded literacy approach, these practices complement rather than replace systematic phonics by integrating code-breaking with comprehension, learner creativity, dialogic engagement, and culturally responsive pedagogies. When classroom literacy practices narrowly prioritise correctness, repetition, and uniformity, opportunities for these richer forms of meaning making may be foreclosed.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that teachers operate within powerful structural and policy constraints. Studies of Foundation Phase literacy teaching in South Africa point to teachers' strong sense of responsibility, care, and commitment to 'doing the right thing' in contexts marked by accountability pressures, scripted programmes, and policy surveillance (Hoadley 2018; Venter & Vandeyar 2021). As a result, phonics-heavy practices are often adopted not out of pedagogical resistance or deficit orientations towards learners, but rather as a response to curriculum demands and systemic expectations.

Against this backdrop, this article examines Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language literacy practices in two mother tongue-based multilingual primary schools. Drawing on a qualitative case study of three Grade 2 educators, the study explores how phonics-centred instruction shapes classroom literacy practices and how this orientation influences opportunities for meaning making, creativity, and heteroglossic engagement. While longstanding literacy scholarship has cautioned against reducing reading to technical skills such as decoding, and more recent work has highlighted the pedagogical constraints associated with skills-driven and scripted approaches, there remains limited empirical research examining how phonics dominance is enacted in African language classrooms in the early grades. While policy and curriculum analyses of early literacy are well established, detailed classroom-based observational studies examining how phonics-centred literacy practices are enacted in African language classrooms remain comparatively limited. Although recent studies have begun to address this gap in specific language contexts and multi-grade settings (Maluleke 2023; Ramrathan & Mzimela 2016), further qualitative research is needed to understand how these practices shape opportunities for meaning making, creativity, and heteroglossic engagement in the early grades.

This article argues that a heavy phonics-centric orientation can inadvertently constrain richer, socially situated literacy practices, even in classrooms characterised by strong pedagogical care, curriculum compliance, and teacher commitment. By foregrounding teachers' everyday practices rather than policy intentions alone, the study offers nuanced empirical insights into current debates on early literacy teaching in African languages and points towards more well-rounded and contextually responsive literacy pedagogies.

Theoretical framing and analytical lens

This study is framed within a social practices perspective on literacy, which views reading and writing not merely as technical skills but as socially situated, meaning-making practices embedded within particular cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts (Prinsloo & Baynham 2013; Street 2003). Viewed from this perspective, literacy learning involves more than mastering the mechanics of decoding print; it entails engaging with texts in ways that enable learners to make meaning, express identity, and participate in social worlds. Such an approach is particularly relevant in African language classrooms, where learners' oral traditions, multilingual repertoires, and community-based literacies form an important foundation for learning to read.

To analyse classroom literacy practices, the study draws on Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model, which conceptualises reading not as a singular cognitive skill, but as a suite of social practices involving four interrelated roles: (1) codebreaker, (2) meaning maker, (3) text user, and (4) text analyst. Rather than viewing these roles as a rigid developmental sequence in which decoding must be fully mastered before comprehension can occur, the model emphasises that proficient reading develops through the dynamic integration of all four resources from the early stages of literacy instruction. Consequently, the framework has been widely used in literacy research to examine how classroom practices privilege particular dimensions of reading while marginalising others (Comber 2015; Luke & Freebody 1999).

In this article, the Four Resources Model provides a primary analytical lens for examining how Grade 2 isiXhosa literacy practices balance, or fail to balance, the four interrelated reader roles. Particular attention is given to the relationship between codebreaking and meaning making, as this emerged as a central tension across the observed classrooms. Codebreaking refers to learners' ability to recognise and use sound-symbol relationships, including phonemic awareness

and phonics knowledge. Meaning making, by contrast, involves comprehending, interpreting, and responding to texts by drawing on their prior knowledge, linguistic repertoires, and contextual understandings. While codebreaking is an essential foundation for early reading development, the Four Resources Model argues that it should develop alongside opportunities for learners to make meaning, use texts for authentic social purposes, and critically engage with texts. By evaluating classroom practices against this framework, the study demonstrates how a disproportionate emphasis on isolated phonics constrained learners predominantly to the codebreaker role, limiting concurrent opportunities to develop as meaning makers, text users, and text analysts. Consequently, texts were frequently approached as vehicles for practising decoding rather than as meaningful, communicative, and socially situated artefacts through which learners could construct, use and critique meaning.

In addition to the Four Resources Model, the study is informed by the concept of heteroglossia, derived from Bakhtin's (1981) theory of language. Heteroglossia foregrounds the coexistence and interaction of multiple voices, languages, and discourses within social spaces. In multilingual educational contexts, heteroglossic practices may include the use of multiple languages, oral storytelling, dialogic talk, and culturally embedded forms of expression. Such practices enable learners to negotiate meaning across linguistic and semiotic resources and to position themselves as active meaning makers (García & Wei 2014; Makalela 2015).

The concept of heteroglossia is particularly salient in isiXhosa Home Language classrooms, where learners' everyday language practices often extend beyond the standardised forms of language privileged in curriculum documents and instructional materials. When literacy instruction is tightly scripted or narrowly focused on phonics accuracy, opportunities for heteroglossic engagement, such as learner-initiated talk, interpretive discussion, and creative responses to texts, may be constrained. In this study, heteroglossia is therefore used as an interpretive lens to examine not only what literacy practices are present in classrooms, but also which voices, languages, and forms of meaning making are enabled or silenced.

Together, the social practices view of literacy, the Four Resources Model, and the concept of heteroglossia provide a coherent analytical framework for examining Grade 2 isiXhosa literacy practices. This framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how phonics-centred instruction shapes classroom literacy events, how teachers negotiate curriculum expectations, and how learners' creativity and linguistic resources are taken up or constrained in everyday teaching and learning.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that underpins this study by illustrating how systematic phonics, the Four Resources Model, and heteroglossic literacy practices interact to support well-rounded literacy practices in multilingual African language classrooms. Systematic phonics provides the essential foundation for developing learners' codebreaking abilities through explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, grapheme–phoneme correspondences, decoding, and encoding. However, these foundational skills alone are insufficient for achieving meaningful literacy development. The Four Resources Model extends literacy learning by recognising that learners must also develop the capacity to construct meaning, use texts for authentic purposes, and engage critically with texts. Heteroglossic practices enrich these literacy processes by positioning learners' full linguistic and cultural repertoires as valuable resources for learning, enabling them to draw on their languages, identities, lived experiences, and dialogic interactions to construct meaning across contexts. Rather than viewing these approaches as competing pedagogies, the framework conceptualises them as complementary dimensions of well-rounded literacy practices in which foundational decoding skills are integrated with comprehension, communication, and critical engagement. This integrated conceptual lens informs the analysis of the literacy practices examined in the sections that follow.

Research methods and design

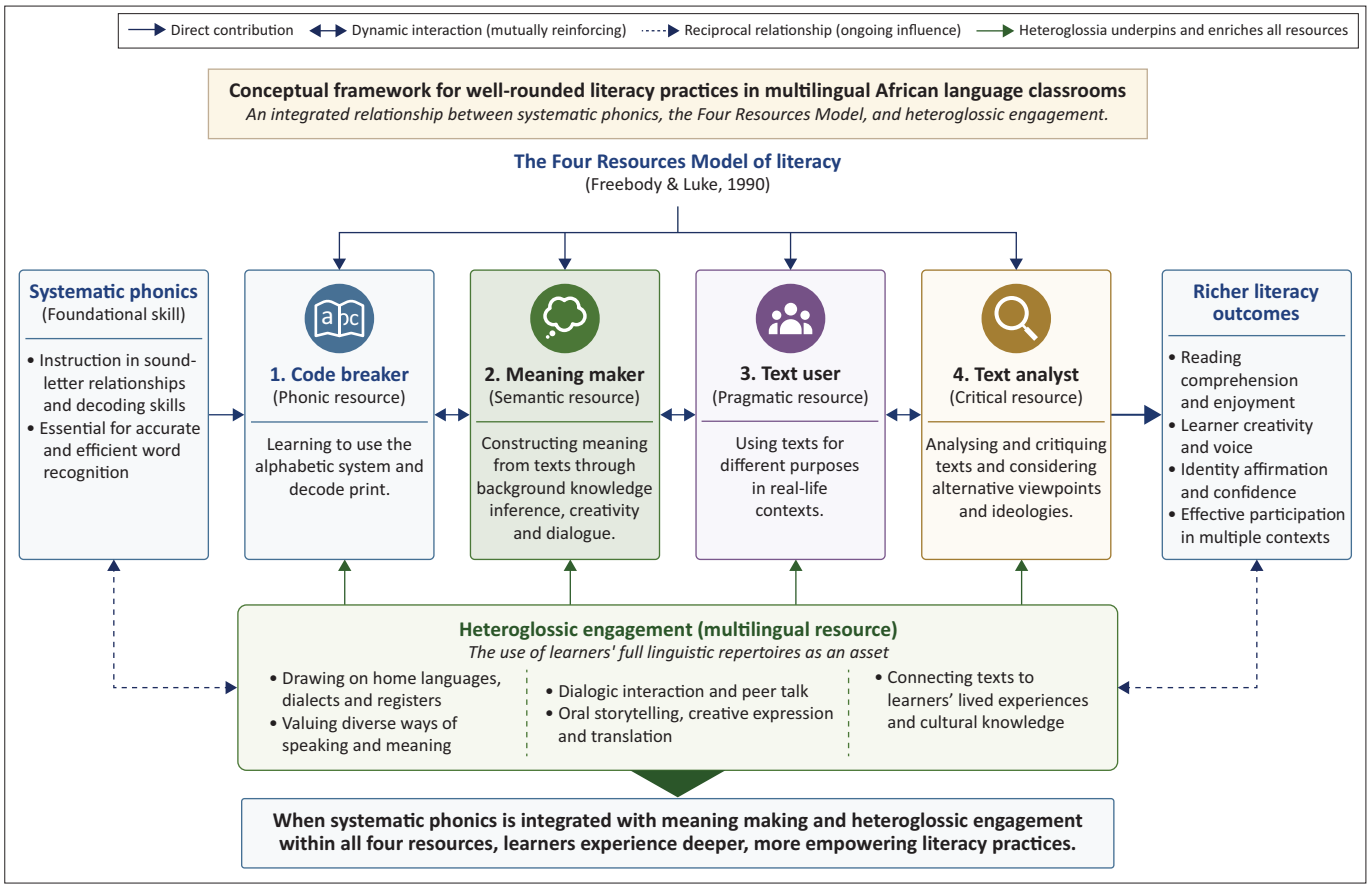
Research design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language literacy practices in context. A case study approach is well suited to examining classroom practices in depth, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how teachers interpret curriculum expectations and enact literacy pedagogy in everyday teaching (Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Yin 2018). The focus was not on generalisation, but on generating rich, contextually grounded insights into phonics-centred instruction and its implications for meaning making, creativity, and heteroglossia.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted in two mother tongue-based multilingual public primary schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. IsiXhosa was the primary language of learning and teaching in the Foundation Phase, although learners were exposed to multilingual practices in their homes and communities. Both schools were Quintile 1 public schools serving working-class, predominantly isiXhosa-speaking communities and were broadly representative of similar Foundation Phase schools across the Eastern Cape in terms of their socioeconomic context, curriculum implementation, and multilingual realities. The schools operated within the policy and accountability frameworks governing Foundation Phase literacy instruction.

Three experienced Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language educators participated in the study. The participating classes



Note: Please see the full reference list of this article, Bussiahn, J.C. & Mbelani M., 2026, 'Investigating phonics instruction, meaning making, and heteroglossia within Grade 2 foundation phase isiXhosa classrooms', *Reading & Writing* 17(1), a646. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v17i1.646 for more information.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework showing the relationship between systematic phonics, the Four Resources Model, and heteroglossic literacy practices in multilingual African language classrooms.

comprised 26, 34, and 36 learners, reflecting class sizes commonly found in comparable public schools in the province. While the small, situated sample prevents statistical generalisation beyond the study context, it enabled an in-depth exploration of classroom literacy practices and generated rich contextual insights. The participants demonstrated a strong commitment to their learners and to curriculum implementation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Rhodes University Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Data generation

Classroom observations

Literacy lessons were observed to capture teachers' instructional practices, classroom interactions, and learners' engagement with reading activities. Detailed field notes focused on lesson structure, teacher talk, learner participation, and opportunities for codebreaking, meaning making and dialogic engagement.

Semi-structured interviews

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher to explore their understandings of reading, phonics instruction, curriculum expectations, and perceived challenges in teaching isiXhosa literacy. The interviews also provided insight into teachers' pedagogical intentions and their reflections on classroom practice (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

Document analysis

Curriculum documents, lesson plans, and learner materials were analysed to examine how phonics and reading were positioned within instructional planning and assessment. These documents provided an important policy and pedagogical backdrop against which classroom practices were interpreted (Bowen 2009).

The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Data analysis

Data analysis was iterative and interpretive. Interview transcripts, observation field notes, and documents were read repeatedly to identify patterns and recurring themes related to literacy practices. The Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke 1990) served as an analytical framework for examining how classroom practices foregrounded codebreaking and meaning making, while the concept of heteroglossia informed attention to language use, voice, and learner participation.

Analytical categories were developed inductively and deductively, allowing the data to speak while remaining theoretically grounded. Particular attention was paid to moments where phonics instruction shaped classroom interactions, as well as to instances where opportunities for creativity, dialogic engagement, or multilingual meaning making emerged or were constrained.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, prolonged engagement in the research context, data triangulation, and reflexive engagement with the data were employed (Lincoln & Guba 1985). This reflexive engagement included critical consideration of the researcher's positionality as an educator experienced in the local context and literate in isiXhosa, which allowed for deeper contextual insights while actively managing potential insider biases. Rich descriptions of classroom practices further support the transparency of the analysis and enable readers to assess the transferability of the findings to similar contexts.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is: 2023-7377-7851.

Results

The findings are organised around three interrelated themes that illuminate how a phonics-centric orientation shaped Grade 2 isiXhosa literacy practices: (1) the dominance of codebreaking practices, (2) constrained opportunities for meaning making and creativity, and (3) the limited emergence of heteroglossia in classroom interactions. Together, these themes demonstrate how reading instruction became narrowly focused on technical decoding, even in classrooms characterised by strong teacher care and curriculum compliance.

Phonics dominance and the privileging of codebreaking

Across all three classrooms, literacy lessons were strongly structured around phonics instruction. Lessons typically followed a predictable sequence: (1) revision of previously taught sounds, (2) explicit teaching of a new sound or phoneme, (3) choral repetition, and (4) word-level decoding activities. Teachers made frequent use of repetition, drilling, and corrective feedback to ensure accurate pronunciation and sound-symbol correspondence.

In one observed lesson, the teacher introduced a consonant blend by writing a list of syllables on the chalkboard and leading the class in choral reading. Learners repeated the syllables multiple times, first as a whole class and then individually. The teacher corrected learners immediately when sounds were mispronounced, emphasising accuracy and speed. The lesson progressed to reading isolated words containing the target sound, again focusing on correct decoding. These practices demonstrate a strong emphasis on codebreaking as the primary goal of reading instruction. While such practices align closely with curriculum expectations and policy guidance, they positioned reading predominantly as a technical skill. Texts were treated as vehicles for practising sounds rather than as meaningful communicative artefacts.

Opportunities for learners to engage with the content, purpose, or broader meaning of what they were reading were limited. The tension between curriculum expectations and actual classroom realities highlights a critical policy–practice gap in Foundation Phase literacy. While South Africa's national curriculum (CAPS) mandates a balanced approach to literacy, classroom implementation often reduces isiXhosa Home Language instruction to isolated, mechanical decoding.

Importantly, teachers' interviews revealed that this focus on phonics was not accidental. Teachers expressed a clear belief that mastery of sounds was essential for later reading success and described phonics as the 'foundation' upon which all other reading skills depended, as related by a participant: 'I always start with vowels and then build onto the consonants. We have those consonant clusters. I find that making a chart with consonant vowel helps'. This suggests that phonics dominance was shaped not only by policy prescriptions but also by teachers' sincere pedagogical intentions.

Constrained meaning-making and limited learner creativity

While phonics instruction was consistently foregrounded, opportunities for sustained meaning making were comparatively rare. In most observed lessons, comprehension was addressed briefly, if at all, and often only after extensive decoding work had been completed. When comprehension questions were asked, they tended to focus on literal recall rather than interpretive or inferential engagement with the texts.

In one lesson involving a short isiXhosa reading passage, learners were required to decode the text line by line. After the reading, the teacher asked a small number of closed questions, such as identifying a character or recalling a specific detail. Learners responded with single-word answers, and the lesson moved on quickly to the next activity. This mechanical approach missed a crucial opportunity for deep-level comprehension and failed to draw on the learners' rich oral repertoires. By contrast, a more meaning-making oriented interaction might have involved open-ended prompts, such as an invitation to discuss why a character acted in a certain way or how they might feel, thereby allowing learners to utilise their expressive language skills and personal insights. Instead, there was no invitation for learners to critically evaluate the text, relate it to their own experiences, or respond creatively.

Across classrooms, learner creativity was similarly constrained. Reading lessons offered limited opportunities for learners to retell stories, dramatise events, create alternative endings, or engage in drawing or writing activities linked to texts. Where creative responses did occur, they were often tightly controlled by the teacher and framed as extensions rather than integral components of reading.

This pattern suggests that creativity was not absent due to teacher disinterest or lack of care, but rather because it was marginalised within a pedagogical structure that prioritised phonics mastery and curriculum pacing. Teachers appeared to view creativity and extended meaning making as desirable but secondary to the 'serious work' of learning sounds and decoding accurately.

Limited heteroglossia and constrained dialogic space

Despite the multilingual realities of learners' lives, classroom literacy practices offered limited space for heteroglossic engagement. IsiXhosa was used almost exclusively in its standardised form, and learners' everyday language practices, oral repertoires, and multilingual resources were seldom drawn into reading lessons.

In one observed lesson, a learner attempted to make a connection between a story and a personal experience, using expressive oral language and gestures. The teacher acknowledged the contribution briefly but redirected the learner back to the decoding task at hand. While this redirection maintained lesson flow and curriculum focus, it also closed down a potential moment for dialogic engagement and deeper meaning making.

Similarly, translanguaging practices were largely absent from reading instruction. Learners were not encouraged to use additional languages to negotiate meaning, clarify understanding, or explore texts collaboratively. Classroom talk was predominantly teacher-led, with learners responding in unison or through short, individual turns. This limited the circulation of multiple voices and perspectives and constrained opportunities for learners to position themselves as active contributors to meaning making.

The absence of heteroglossia should not be interpreted as teacher resistance to multilingualism. Rather, it reflects the tension teachers navigated between creating dialogic space and adhering to tightly structured literacy lessons centred on phonics. In this context, heteroglossic practices appeared to be perceived as peripheral or potentially disruptive to the primary instructional goal of sound mastery.

Summary of findings

Taken together, the findings reveal that Grade 2 isiXhosa literacy practices were shaped by a strong phonics-centric orientation that privileged codebreaking over meaning making, creativity, and heteroglossic engagement. While teachers demonstrated care, commitment, and alignment with curriculum expectations, the structure and pacing of phonics-focused lessons constrained opportunities for richer literacy practices. These findings point to the need to critically examine how phonics instruction is balanced with broader conceptions of reading as a meaningful, creative, and socially situated practice.

Discussion

Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates about early literacy instruction in South Africa by foregrounding how a phonics-centric orientation shapes classroom practice in Grade 2 isiXhosa Home Language classrooms. While phonics is widely recognised as a necessary component of early reading development (Ehri et al. 2001; eds. Snow et al. 1998), the findings suggest that when phonics becomes the dominant organising principle of literacy instruction, it may inadvertently constrain learners' opportunities for meaning making, creativity, and heteroglossic engagement.

Phonics as necessary but insufficient

The strong emphasis on codebreaking observed in the classrooms aligns closely with current policy discourses and curriculum guidance that prioritise systematic phonics instruction in the early grades. From one perspective, this emphasis reflects teachers' pedagogical responsibility and responsiveness to national concerns about low reading achievement. Teachers' commitment to ensuring that learners master sound-symbol relationships should therefore be understood as a rational and caring response to systemic pressures rather than as a pedagogical deficit.

However, the findings resonate with international and local research cautioning against the elevation of phonics to the status of a singular solution to reading difficulties (Comber 2015; Freebody & Luke 1990; Prinsloo & Baynham 2013). In the classrooms studied, phonics instruction frequently functioned as an end in itself, rather than as a means towards engaging with texts as sources of meaning. As a result, reading was positioned primarily as the accurate decoding of print, with limited attention given to why texts are read, what they communicate, and how learners might respond to them.

From a social practices perspective on literacy, such an orientation narrows the definition of reading and risks marginalising learners who may decode accurately but struggle to engage meaningfully with texts. The findings, therefore, support calls for more balanced literacy pedagogies in which phonics is integrated with, rather than prioritised over, other dimensions of reading.

Creativity and meaning making as central literacy practices

The constrained opportunities for learner creativity observed in this study raise important questions about how literacy is

conceptualised in early grade classrooms. Creativity in reading, including retelling stories, imagining alternative endings, dramatising events, or connecting texts to personal experiences, is not merely an enrichment activity, but a core component of meaning making. These practices enable learners to engage deeply with texts, develop narrative understanding, and position themselves as active participants in literacy events.

The marginalisation of creative practices in the observed classrooms appears to be linked to tightly structured phonics lessons and curriculum pacing demands. Creativity was often treated as peripheral, optional, or time-dependent, rather than as integral to learning to read. This finding echoes some concerns raised by literacy scholars that scripted and skills-driven approaches may limit teachers' pedagogical flexibility and learners' opportunities for imaginative engagement (Comber 2015; Hoadley 2018).

Importantly, the study shows that teachers were not resistant to creativity, but rather were constrained by instructional frameworks that foregrounded phonics mastery. This highlights the need to reconceptualise creativity as compatible with, and supportive of, phonics instruction, rather than as competing with it. When integrated thoughtfully, creative practices can reinforce decoding skills while simultaneously deepening comprehension and engagement.

Heteroglossia and African language literacy

The limited emergence of heteroglossia in the classrooms studied is particularly significant in the context of African language literacy. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, literacy classrooms can be understood as spaces where multiple voices, languages, and ways of meaning making intersect. In multilingual South African contexts, heteroglossic practices such as dialogic talk, oral storytelling, and translanguaging offer powerful resources for supporting comprehension and learner identity.

The findings suggest that phonics-centred instruction may unintentionally suppress these resources by privileging uniformity, correctness, and teacher control. Learners' oral contributions, personal narratives, and multilingual repertoires were often acknowledged but not taken up as pedagogical resources. As a result, opportunities for dialogic engagement and deeper meaning making were constrained.

This is not to suggest that heteroglossia should replace systematic phonics instruction. Rather, the findings point to the need for pedagogies that recognise heteroglossia as an asset in learning to read in African languages. Integrating learners' linguistic and cultural resources into reading instruction can support comprehension, affirm identity, and enrich classroom literacy practices (García & Wei 2014; Makalela 2015).

Conclusion

Reframing phonics within well-rounded literacy practices

Taken together, the findings call for a reframing of phonics within broader, well-rounded literacy practices. While phonics remains a necessary foundation for early reading, it should not dominate literacy instruction to the extent that other dimensions of reading are marginalised. To transition from theoretical principles to practical application, this reframing must reshape daily classroom routines. For instance, pedagogical implementation could involve utilising a decodable text not merely for isolated phonetic practice, but also as a catalyst for brief discussions, creative retellings, or opportunities for learners to relate a word to their personal experiences and to words in their wider oral repertoires or other languages.

The Four Resources Model offers a useful heuristic for conceptualising how these practices can be integrated in balanced ways, even in the early grades. Mapping the findings explicitly onto this framework reveals a stark imbalance: the observed classroom practices heavily emphasised the codebreaker resource, leaving the meaning-maker, text-user, and text-analyst resources significantly underdeveloped. By intentionally shifting pedagogical focus toward these neglected dimensions, educators can ensure that decoding mechanics serve as an entry point to, rather than a bottleneck against, holistic, meaning-driven literacy.

In African language classrooms, such integration requires pedagogical approaches that value creativity, dialogic engagement, and heteroglossia alongside systematic phonics instruction. This does not require abandoning curriculum frameworks; rather, it calls for interpreting them in ways that enable teachers to exercise professional judgement and respond to learners' linguistic and cultural contexts. Consequently, teacher education should move beyond equipping practitioners with the technical skills to teach phonics and instead cultivate the professional agency to integrate decoding with meaningful literacy practices. This includes creating opportunities for learners to engage in meaning making while drawing on their diverse linguistic repertoires.

To extend these findings, future research should undertake more extensive classroom-based observational studies across diverse African language contexts, including different language regions and multi-grade settings. A limitation of this study is that it focused primarily on teachers' instructional practices and did not examine learners' interactions beyond teacher-led instruction. Future studies could therefore investigate how learners draw on their multilingual oral repertoires during peer interactions and other informal classroom contexts to deepen understanding of the pedagogical potential of heteroglossic practices.

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Competing interests

The authors, Justine C. Bussiahn and MaDey'Andile Mbelani, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Justine C. Bussiahn: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MaDey'Andile Mbelani: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, MaDey'Andile Mbelani, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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