

# Seeing like a state: literacy and language standards in schools

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## Introduction

Conversations about literacy/illiteracy from South Africa that I followed on social media in November 2017 featured a thread where people argued about whether South Africa, Zimbabwe, Lesotho or Ethiopia were the most literate countries, the first three scoring in the 90s as their percentage of literates (based on self-reported Household Survey data from the previous Census exercise, in the case of South Africa) and recorded in United Nations literacy tables (UNESCO Inst. for Statistics, 2017). Then, in December 2017 the focus of conversation dramatically changed as disaster appeared to strike in the form of the release of the latest Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which tested a selection of Grade 4 children across the country and compared their results to 50 other countries where the test was also run (Howie et al, 2017). The one glaring claim that kept getting repeated and endorsed in the conversations online was, as PEN South Africa tweeted, “78% of Grade 4s in SA cannot read for meaning”. Journalists, business-people, politicians and academics joined in the widespread lament: “78% of Grade 4 pupils in South Africa can’t make sense of what they read. This is heartbreaking. A culture of literacy is essential for our children to succeed” was tweeted and retweeted by journalists and business people who followed each other. Investigative radio journalist and influential author Mandy Wiener tweeted: “South Africa has scored the lowest in a world literacy study. 78% of Grade 4 pupils in South Africa can’t make sense of what they’re reading. This makes me want to weep. A culture of literacy is essential for our children to succeed.” The *Mail and Guardian*’s (December 2017) end of year Cabinet Report Card gave the national Minister of Basic Education a D rating, largely because: “The PIRLS report told us that 78% of pupils in Grade 4 cannot read for meaning. South Africa scored last in reading out of 50 countries. This is shocking...”. These same numbers were distressfully repeated in the *Sunday Times* (5 December 2017), eNCA radio news (5 December, 2017) and in the *Daily Maverick* (6 December 2017) under the heading ‘Educational Shocker’, which added, “the students in question failed to meet the lowest literacy benchmark of the study: retrieving basic information from texts to answer simple questions. To put this into global perspective, only 4% of students internationally were unable to reach this benchmark, as opposed to South Africa’s 78%.”

The dismay shown by academics was exemplified by Nic Spaull, Educational Economics researcher from Stellenbosch and education activist who wrote on his website:

Today the PIRLS 2016 results were released by the Minister of Basic Education Ms Angie Motshekga. To say that they are anything but **devastating** would be a lie... I received an embargoed copy of the final report from the IEA last week late in the evening and battled to fall asleep after reading it. (nicspaull.com 5 December 2017)

Spaull had just recently co-published a paper (Spaull and Hoadley, 2017) where he ran the figures from the previous PIRLS round (2011) and showed in a vivid graph that 59% of South African Grade 4 students could not read for meaning. Of the 2016 results he said: “The results were worse than thought.”

Such distress was thus both widespread and consistent. Nothing that I read paused to comment on the reliability or otherwise of these claims and percentages, not even by academics or investigative journalists whom one would expect to be more careful, or to have filled out some background to what these tests are about or at least to have read more widely. Indeed, such poorly informed crisis rhetoric and moral panics around literacy/illiteracy are not new phenomena, in South Africa or elsewhere, emerging periodically both in dominant and peripheral countries over at least the last 100 years, often as a way of drawing attention to and attempting to restructure the provision of schooling in those societies (Graff, 1979; Prinsloo and Kell, 1996; Freebody, 1998; Williams, 2007). In South Africa, the ANC’s education desk reported in 1994 (ANC, 1994: 87) that “15 million Black adults (over one third of the population)” were illiterate (and therefore somehow beyond the reach of the state) based on National Education Policy Investigation data that drew on doubtful school exit data across the fourteen Education Departments in operation at the time across the country, when many of these Departments were in a state of collapse (Prinsloo and Kell, 1998; Aitcheson and Harley, 2006). Then in 1999, Kader Asmal then Minister of Education made the bold promise to “break the back of illiteracy within five years”, and set up the misconceived Tirisano campaign which went nowhere at all (Aitcheson and Harley, 2006). The more recent and barely noticed Kha Ri Gude adult literacy programme was awarded the 2016 UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy at an awards ceremony in Paris on the basis of its dubious claims that 4.7 million adults had passed from a state of being illiterate to a state of being literate after a few months of part-time classes on basic written language coding and decoding and then the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) found that R44.3 million for the 2015/16 financial year paid to literacy teachers had been fruitless and wasteful expenditure, because they were claiming for classes that didn’t

exist or had long ceased, or consisted of already-schooled family members (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 23 November 2016; Politics Web 04 October 2016).

### **Literacy myths**

Literacy as a compacted construct, streamlined for administration and for measurement, is given a spurious precision in popular as well as academic discourse and interventive projects through reports and claims such as those above, with their frequent references to literacy ‘levels’ and rates and through assumptions and implicit assertions about all the good things that flow from individual attainment of a state of ‘being literate’ and the woeful negatives that result from ‘being illiterate’ (Freebody and Freiberg, 2008), while various kinds of interventions that get targeted at ‘the problem’ commonly disappoint. Clearly, how literacy is construed and understood determines what is taught and measured and how this is done, and a number of influences and assumptions shape the answers to any questions about the general literacy levels among South Africans, adults and children, including what definition of literacy is used and what is valued in literacy activity, otherwise we would not have such largely diverging claims about literacy levels (as I have shown above, well above 90% for the general population in UN data, then 58% of children being unable to ‘read for meaning’ in 2011 and then 78% in 2016). Tests such as the PIRLS tests work with greatly limited constructs of both literacy and language and are not sensitive enough nor grounded enough in actual classroom literacy practices to be of any value beyond pointing to what we all already know in broad outline – schooling is a problem in South Africa, characterized by massive inequalities, widespread inefficiencies and corruption and by centralized curricula that get implemented, rejected and revised every few years within a policy bubble disconnected from the realities of classroom practice, from workplace realities, from other social activities and from attention to the great diversity that characterizes schooling in South Africa. It is not as if we all did not know about the serious, pervasive and deeply rooted problems within educational provision in South Africa, along with their links to the pervasive social inequalities in the country. So why the shock about Grade 4 tests? And why does the idea of literacy continue to work as such an emotional red flag when waved in public and academic discourse?

### **Seeing like a state**

The assumption in PIRLS tests and in wider language policy in South African schools that all children have equal access to a standard language that reflects their ethnolinguistic identity is what Silverstein (2014) refers to as ‘seeing like a state’ because of the assumption that everyone

speaks such a standard language which reflects their place of origin or of current location. It is assumed that arriving immigrants, from elsewhere in South Africa or from across the borders, will be oriented to a standard language from their place of exit and will gradually orient to the standard of their new place of residence. As Silverstein (2014, 5) elaborates, when children are asked, by teachers or testers, ‘What language do you speak?’, the enquirer means ‘what denotational code(s) – centrally, grammatically conforming words and expressions – for representing things and states-of-affairs in the world do you control?’. Such a standard language is a “voice from nowhere” as he describes it, occupying ‘top-and-centre’ as a register for denotation in formal contexts. In the case of isiXhosa in the Western Cape, it is not what people speak nor how they speak (Dowling and Krause, 2017). Davila (2016) points out that standard language ideologies advance beliefs about one, stable, correct denotative code that is a superior and, therefore, common-sense resource for school, business, and public settings. It becomes an unmarked and unnamed resource that is seen to be functioning in the service of ideas and meaning, in contrast with other language, dialects and resources which become marked as deviant or deficient. The view of literacy as a basic skill or set of skills best taught by trained experts as a sequence of skills learnt in early schooling similarly reflects a statist view, bearing only a loose resemblance to the actual, diversified practices of reading, writing and learning in widely diverse communicative contexts in school and out-of-school.

The construct of standard languages and of language discourse as well as the construction of literacy as a unitary, portable and readily testable property of individuals are examples of state administrative strategies, where officials and academics take what are often “exceptionally complex, illegible and local social processes” and create a standard grid which allows centralised recording and monitoring, to make these diverging practices “more legible – and hence manipulable – from above and from the centre” (Scott, 1998, 2). Scott points out that such designed constructs that purport to correspond to actual practice are necessarily schematic and always ignore essential features of any real functioning social order, an excellent illustration of which is a work-to-rule strike, where production processes can be severely disrupted by workers simply refusing to carry out all the informal improvisations and practices that aren’t codified but which make things work. The formal scheme is parasitic on informal processes that, alone, it could not create or maintain. “To the degree that the formal scheme makes no allowances for these processes or actually suppresses them, it fails both its intended beneficiaries and ultimately its designers as well.” (Scott, 1998, 3) Scott’s examples of projects that failed because of their inadequate schematics compared to the actual features of located

complexity include the Ujamaa village campaign in Tanzania from 1973 to 1976 and Stalin's first five-year plan for a collective economy in 1920s Soviet Russia as well as such disparate sites as designs of scientific forestry and agriculture, as well as standardisations of language and legal discourse. In each case, the formal scheme is parasitic on informal processes and often fails and always distorts if it suppresses processes outside of its frame. Such simplifications are like abridged maps in that they represent only the slice of social activity that interests the official observer but unlike maps they can sometimes cause much of the reality they depict to be remade or distorted through the effects of state power.

### **Literacy and language – stasis and fluidity**

Scott's descriptions of such partial and interested strategies resonate with Heller's (2007) analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century modernist projects of national-states in Europe and North America to create standard registers of previously vernacular languages and to marginalise others. Harries (2007), Errington (2008) and Mamdani (1996; 2012) have analysed similar dynamics in Africa where colonial linguists are said to have ignored the variability and complexity of the language resources they encountered when they chose to name distinct languages that identified groups of people. Mamdani (1996; 2012) described the colonial production of tribes in India and Africa – ethnic groups distinguished on language difference, for administrative purposes– as a key strategy of colonial rule, with lasting consequences. Errington (2008, 9), in an analysis of colonial linguistics, presents a view that linguists 'read back' into speech "a stability of meaning" which actually existed "only in their descriptions" and Harries (2010; 2007; 1981) provides ethnographic details of the linguistic variability and fluidity that Swiss Missionaries based at Elim in the north east of South Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century struggled to identify and codify. Harries (1981) examined how missionary linguists glossed over their own evidence of considerable linguistic and cultural differences amongst people they were coding as homogenous groups. Harries elsewhere recalled how the Swiss missionary Henri-Alexandre Junod, believed that "immersing Africans in a written language structured by a disciplined grammar and a regular orthodoxy . . . would raise (them) to think in the manner that had led to the development of Europe" (Harries, 2001: 410) But Harries points out that however much they tried, the missionaries could not control the literate productions of their converts:

No common, universal message was inherent in the words scratched or printed across a page; and reading was put to uses very different from those envisaged by the

missionaries. Far from literacy domesticating the savage mind, in many cases it was appropriated, harnessed and yoked by indigenous people (Harries, 2001, 417).

### **The total linguistic fact**

‘Seeing like a state’ with regard to language rests on an unexamined assumption that a language is a relatively static denotational code for shared meaning-making. In contrast, Silverstein (1985, 220) draws attention to the array of potential connotative features of any instance of language use, to all the other things that are at play at such a moment regarding who is communicating with whom about what. Any such instance presents “an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualized to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” and he describes these as core features of what he identifies as the “total linguistic fact” regarding any moment of language use, to distinguish this view from that of language as carrying meanings directly through its forms, independent of context. He offers, along with Hymes, Bhaktin, Blommaert and many other linguists, a view of language as comprising linguistic resources that do not carry inherently stable and context-free meanings from one setting to the next, but rather as resources invested with social and cultural interests and that includes all of the improvisations and practices that make things work – language habits and dispositions which are acquired in practice and not explicitly learnt or taught but taken as given, and which are typically characteristic of people’s interactions with things and with other people. To speak and to write (to use language—or indeed to use other media) is to position oneself in the social world and to engage in identity practices. Similarly, since the 1980s at least, strong criticism in Literacy Studies has been given to the bureaucratized view of literacy as something which individuals acquire through instruction, as a unified ‘autonomous’ set of neutral skills that can be applied across all contexts. The socially variable and ideologically shaped dimensions of literacy in social practice have been well established in a wide and varied literature (see Prinsloo and Baynham, 2013).

Policy, curriculum and teaching methods in schooling in the 20th century that impacted South African schooling were developed primarily in ideologically monolingual contexts such as the USA and the UK, over many decades, and then exported to South Africa and elsewhere. They present an administratively tailored view of literacy and ignore the situated and variable nature of language and literacy practices, effectively turning away from what it is that children, youths and adults bring with them to the literacy-learning in educational settings and to the use of language in those settings.

Coincidentally, in the light of Scott's focus on the first five-year plan in Soviet Russia as a failed state project, an influential but contested study of literacy and its consequences was carried out by Alexander Luria (1979, English translation) in the late 1920s in Ukraine, during the social and economic restructuring around the plan to transition to a collectivist economy, along with the expansion of schooling and skills training. Luria tested his research participants on a variety of experimental tasks dealing with perception, conceptualization, classification and reasoning to see what the effects were of literacy and of new socio-economic activity on individual thinking. He concluded that illiterate subjects were limited to concrete, situational thinking and incapable of abstract thought. On the other hand, subjects with "well-established forms of theoretical thinking", those with even a short (1- 2 years) time in school education, "tend to grasp the over-all logical structure" (pp. 103/4). For Luria, these findings provided evidence of the deep and dramatic impact of literacy on forms of thinking. Scribner and Cole (1981, republished 2013), who had been central to translating Luria's and his mentor Lev Vygotsky's work, noted that Luria's research design did not allow him to distinguish between 'school effects' and 'literacy effects' and did not distinguish between kinds of work experiences and the kinds of cognitive strategies they followed. They set up a comparable set of tests but designed to distinguish between literacy and schooling. Over four years their research team studied in detail the cognitive consequences of literacy in a setting (in Liberia) where three different scripts and literacy traditions were present, including school literacy in English, a religious literacy in Arabic script and an indigenously developed syllable-based script used by individuals for letter writing and record keeping.

Scribner and Cole's team gathered ethnographic and survey-based descriptions of language and literacy use and also ran a battery of tests of participants' cognitive, perceptual and conceptual processes, including tests for abstraction, memorization, categorization and verbal explanation skills, so as to study the uses and consequences of literacy in these three different scripts, languages and contexts. They were able to distinguish in their analysis between 'literacy effects' and 'school effects', and to show that the cognitive attributes previously associated with literacy, by Luria and many others, were not products of literacy itself but were the variable outcomes of particular social practices such as schooling, urban living and factory work. Taking and making meaning from texts was a variable activity and was contextual, depending on what domain of social activity people were oriented towards in their literacy activity. The failure of literacy to yield consistent cognitive effects across all three scripts and literacies (and also the inconsistency of schooling effects on measured cognitive outcomes) led Scribner and

Cole to conclude that “schooling and literacy are not synonymous” and that “literacies are in fact highly differentiated” (1981: 132). This made them question the tendency by many writers to “discuss literacy and its social and psychological implications as though literacy entails the same knowledge and skills whenever [and wherever] people read and write” (1981: 132). Applying Scribner and Cole's (1981) analysis, one sees that what Luria had taken to be the consequences of literacy were rather a result of the communicative and cognitive strategies taught and acquired by way of specific schooling practices. Subsequent early work in Literacy Studies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Prinsloo and Baynham, 2013) showed that the micro-practices of talking and writing depend on an assimilated background knowledge that makes up a situated competence within practices, including a feel for occasion, style, register, tone, strategies of turn-taking, affirming, politeness and silence that are involved in bringing off particular kinds of conversation or exchange in speech, writing or in online written or multimodal communication and that these practices vary across settings and are sometimes invisible to outsiders or are seen through the lens of cultural deficit assumptions about non-mainstream groups of people. Such repertoires, habits and expectations are both the effects of and also contribute to the shaping of power and social inequalities (Blommaert, 2007).

We can contrast two short examples of classroom exchanges from South African classrooms as illustration of what is meant by variable practices in the discussion here:

#### **‘English’ and literacy: situated local activity**

The passage below is from a formerly Whites-only, middle class fee-paying state school in the Cape Town southern suburbs (first discussed in Prinsloo, 2012 and drawing on the research assistance of Nikki Pietersen). It had shifted since the 1990s to become a fee-charging state school that attracts working class Black and Coloured students who are dropped off/bused in by their parents from the townships and from the Cape Flats. There was also a small number of immigrant/refugee students from the Congo, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa at the school, so that the students’ ‘home language’ facilities and backgrounds are quite divergent. The language of learning and teaching was monolingual English (meaning that there was no use of local language resources that were ‘non-English’ or not Standard), with mostly teachers who didn’t share ‘home language’ resources with their students at all. While languages (e.g. English) are popularly thought of as unified and homogeneous (or monoglossic), they are always fractured and stratified. Most of the teaching happened at this school on the assumption that the children brought very little with them to the school by way of linguistic resources and

background knowledge and it was the teachers' task to induce them into ways with words and print in a version of Standard English to which they did not already have access. The lesson extract presented here is from a Grade 6 class. The teacher focused on language and literacy coding and decoding and on features of language meaning. She carefully took students through a reading aloud exercise and then made students look up the meanings of words.

1. TEACHER: Right. Ehm, we going to read this story. What can be so interesting about it? OK, I'm gonna, eh – Siphon starts, eh, then Marita, then Mishali, then Lorato. OK? Just three lines. Ok I'll tell you when to stop.
2. STUDENT: [Starts reading] A turtle is a member of the reptile family. It is covered by scales and flakes. It is cold-blooded and breathes air. The outstanding feature of the turtle is its hard shell. This shell can be up to a metre long and is made from ribbed bones, covered with flakes or scales.
3. TEACHER: Thank you. Who was the next one that I... Marita.
4. STUDENT: [Reads] A turtle cannot pull its head into the shell like the tortoise, which is a close relative. There are seven types of marine turtle in the world, but most live in the warm tropical islands.
5. TEACHER: OK. Thank you. No – finish that sentence.
6. STUDENT: where they feed on algae and sea grasses.
7. TEACHER: OK. Right. Go on.
8. STUDENT: Turtles will spend nearly all their time in the water, but the female will crawl onto a beach to lay the rubbery shell eggs in a hole in the sand and lays the eggs and covers -
9. TEACHER: Shuh! You know what is wrong here? You know what is wrong here? Same thing that happened when we read that first that was so badly done. OK? The sentence is written and on the other side in the middle is a picture, and the sentence goes on, on the other side. OK? So, we will start there again.
10. STUDENT: Turtles will spend nearly all their time in the shell – shell –

Students took turns reading aloud in this class and the teacher managed the exercise. The teacher's intervention in Turn 9 is about a reading error where the student misread because the sentence jumped across a picture on the page. The student was apparently simply reading the words rather than the sense of the writing and so did not notice that "and lays the eggs and covers" (Turn 8) does not follow grammatically or semantically from the earlier sentence fragment. The attention to reading as print-based produced a focus which rendered the image of the turtle laying her eggs as redundant and also produced a misreading. Language and literacy activity under these circumstances are mostly cut off from the requisite that meanings get made in contexts of relevance and exchange, if they are to link up to or provide bridges for related activities in other contexts.

In contrast, we can look at the following extract taken from a nearby school in the same suburb where the students were predominantly middle-class and mostly but not exclusively White.

The teacher tries to construct this literacy reading event at school as compatible with students' home and out-of-school ways of knowing and relating. In the following extract, the teacher has enriched the 'SURE' (Silent Uninterrupted Reading Exercise), where students engage in quiet novel reading everyday for 15 minutes, by bringing in a hot drink, in response to the cold weather, in an echo of private home reading as a warm and comforting activity.

1. TEACHER: .. I've decided today is Hot Chocolate day while we have...um... SURE reading ...but the deal is that this is a privilege. I went to the shop and took my own money and bought this for you because I love you so much, so don't abuse them. (...) alright?
2. STUDENT: (noise and all talking simultaneously) Thank you miss!
3. TEACHER: (...) And thank you to Jean and Claire who helped in the background.
4. TEACHER: O.K. guys, please don't burn yourselves and please don't mess.
5. STUDENT: Is there sugar in?
6. STUDENT: I'm not supposed to drink hot chocolate and sugar...
7. STUDENT: It makes you hyper (...)
8. STUDENT: (Various talking simultaneously) Is this is an experiment miss?
9. TEACHER: The experiment is to see how brave you children are when there's teachers present (...). (A reference to the researcher at the back of the classroom)
10. STUDENT: (Various talking simultaneously)
11. STUDENT: What is this?
12. TEACHER: This is LO.
13. STUDENT: LO?
14. TEACHER: Developing the skill of being grateful
15. STUDENT: How about we do an experiment to see how hyper I can (be) with 3 cups of coffee... (Recording: P school, Grade 7. 05 AUGUST 2009)

The chatty and interactive nature of the pre-reading exchanges here suggests a relative ease with the setting and form of communication on the part of the participants. There is a sense that things are at least partially being negotiated and there is room for students to talk amongst themselves and play with ideas and attitudes while the teacher maintains a loose but watchful control during the exchanges. The student question in line 8 ("Is this an experiment miss?") started a joking dialogue where teacher and students playfully invoked their local or school-specific meanings as well as meanings from home and other domains. In response to a question (line 11, What is this?) the teacher makes a joke about it being LO, which it clearly isn't but the suggestion invites the students to reflect on what the teacher thinks about LO through her invoking the concept here. (Life Orientation or LO is a relatively recent school subject on the national school curriculum and holds an ambiguous status for some teachers who think it's focus on 'advice for young people about good and healthy living' gives it a dubious status as a school subject.) The last exchange (line 15) is an example of an intertextual moment where a

student playfully ventriloquizes (or double-voices, in the Bhaktinian sense) parental/medicalised conversations about youthful activity as sugar-induced hyperactivity and the students show ease in doing such identity-work in the classroom setting, reflecting a relative comfort with and acceptance in this setting. This extract shows, particularly in the last utterance how literacy is framed with reference to real-life literacy activity (in contrast to the say-aloud activity which constructs reading in a school-like and insulated way). It also shows that talking and writing as situated practices depend on the assimilated background knowledge that makes up competence within practices, in a particular network of people and practices. In the preceding extract, the children reading the Turtle passage are embedded in different rules and expectations of what can be said and done in school. While they might well develop competent coding and decoding skills of a certain kind over time which will enable them to succeed at certain school tasks, they are less likely to flourish when other kinds of activity are required. The centralized curriculum and standardized testing practices take it as a given that the two groups of children are engaged in the same activity, with (strongly) contrasting degrees of success but this is clearly not the case. Heath (1982/2013, 112) described the struggles of a group of children in the Southern USA whose conservative Christian fundamentalist parents encouraged their home reading but directed their engagements not to fiction and play but towards lessons of a moral nature from texts, to be taken at face-value rather than questioned. One consequence of the particular kinds of textual habits that they started with was that in school they did not have certain kinds of frame-shifting resources that school favoured: they did not know how to move events or items out of a given frame or imagine themselves as characters in a narrative. In one example, to a question such as ‘What habits of the Hopi Indians might they be able to take with them when they move to a city?’, they provided lists of features of life of the Hopi on the reservation, without considering their appropriateness in an urban setting. The point here is not that they could not read nor that they could not “read for meaning”, it is that they could not read and respond to texts in ways that were favoured at school and they struggled at school despite handling the initial work of coding and decoding and recounting what they had read. ‘Meaning-making’ is not a transparent process where a text offers up its message independent of the context of its engagement or the background orientation of its readers. The assumption of universality and neutrality in literacy curricula and testing practices disguise the inequalities between groups of children that such practices produce.

If we turn back again to the PIRLS tests we can ask what indeed they are testing.

## **The PIRLS tests**

The PIRLS data is based on a test where children read two passages and then answer questions on them. The administration of the South African testing was managed by the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment at the Faculty of Education in Pretoria (Howie et al. 2017), as was the case in 2006 and 2011 as well. The South African implementers translated the passages from US into UK Standard English and into ten South African standard Languages. The tests are exercises designed to focus on the so-called comprehension skills of retrieval, inference, interpretation and evaluation (Mullis et al, 2015, ch 1), on the assumption that these are context-free, individually-based but uniform and universal mental processing activities which can be reliably tested and compared across widely diverging socio-economic, -cultural and -linguistic contexts, and which can provide a reliable basis for drawing conclusions about students' ability to 'read for meaning'. Implicit in its design is a construct of language as a neutral and transparent conduit in a mentalist coding, decoding or translational model of language-based communication and of the reader as a simple social subject who is either competent or incompetent at coding and decoding skills and at meaning-taking and -making. But meaning is not contained and coded simply into the graphic marks which can be coded one by one to produce meaning. It is also coded into the genre of writing, the materials used, the various other representational resources that have particular social meaning, and the wider social context that shapes particular kinds of textual production. While purporting to test children's individual literacy skills, they are more tests of whether the children's experiences of schooling match the unexamined assumptions of the tester as to how schooling is done, or should be done. In contrast, we need to understand the ways in which schools in specific social spaces organise themselves through particular ways of relating, where literacy teaching and learning happen as instances of the workings of these settings (Freebody and Freiberg, 2008). For example, what is the nature of teacher-pupil dialogue in the classroom in relation to literacy? As Scribner and Cole pointed out long ago (1981, 255), what gets tested as literacy sometimes is that of the general skill of verbal explanation but it is not literacy that fosters this skill but rather other aspects of schooling where teachers ask questions such as: What made you give that answer? How do you know? As Scribner and Cole argued, schools are assumed to develop students' abilities and habits of answering questions of a general sort, often in relation to the world outside of school that has mostly not been encountered by students except as subject matter in classroom discourse. These strategies are learnt within particular systems of activity. What counts as literacy and 'meaning-making' is not a generalized competence (e.g., being able to 'speak English or 'code and decode letters' or 'make meaning') but a situated, communicative

competence embedded in acquired cultural knowledge and learnt models of using situated language in specific ways, drawing on varying histories and different rules for socially interacting, for sharing knowledge and opinions, and for reading and writing.

As part of the earlier 2011 PIRLS study, the Pretoria-based implementers asked a series of questions in questionnaires from school principals and teachers as to what was being taught in their schools in the early Grades. As Janks (2011, 36) summarised it, based on the principals' self-reporting, 20% of schools did not invite students to relate what they were reading to their personal experience; 30% of schools did not require children to compare texts or to predict what would happen; 40% did not require students to make generalisations and inferences; and 60% of schools paid no attention to describing the structure and style of texts. Whether these principals actually knew in such detail what was going on in their classrooms is another matter altogether, as I show below, but on the basis of these replies, we can conclude that the PIRLS tests were testing children to see if they were at home in language and literacy-linked activities and practices to which they had probably not been exposed. More importantly, we can see again that the skills that purport to be about literacy are actually about strategies that are learnt mostly in some kinds of schools through certain kinds of interactive, mostly spoken communication between students and teachers (McLean et al, 2018). The emphasis on coding and decoding of letters, words and sentences which is thought to count as literacy by many educators, policy-makers and testers is a reification that perpetuates unequal outcomes. To the extent that the formal scheme of literacy instruction and testing makes no allowance for the complex local practices upon which it is parasitic, it fails both the intended beneficiaries and its designers.

### **The language of PIRLS**

The PIRLS passages used in South African tests are drafted or culled in the USA and adapted to regional English varieties elsewhere or translated into other standard national languages. The assumption that is made is that South Africa children will have most ease in reading and responding to these passages in one standard South African language amongst the 11 so-called national languages which is identified as being the 'mother tongue' of each child and that the translated passages in that other standard South African language version are equivalent to, or carry a commensurate comparability with the English original. Amongst other problems with this procedure is the notion that students are at ease reading in the standard language identified as their 'mother tongue' and that such 'mother tongues' are unified and homogenous resources that are carried by individuals. In Khayelitsha, in Cape Town, where isiXhosa has dominance

as the denotational code recognisably closest to how most people are speaking) a teacher noted the variability of the actual ‘home language’ of both students and teachers, as “mixed with iLanguage yamaColoured, amaXhosa and the White” (Krause, unpublished interview transcript). The dynamic local languaging of people in Khayelitsha spills over, bypassing the Standard to absorb diversity and unpredictability, in a frame of language as socially practiced rather than as a systemic resource with autonomous structures that consists of a core and of lesser-status dialect offshoots. Languaging practices here are shaped by people and things that are carried in and out of these spaces and are assembled *in situ* to form languaging resources that are both diverse and unpredictable and opaque to outsiders.

The administrators of the South African PIRLS tests will not let researchers examine the translated test passages used across the designated 11 South African languages, claiming that the tests and the text pieces that they used have to be kept confidential in case there is a reason to use them again for testing purposes. As a result, the widely publicised claim that 78% of South African students can’t “read for meaning” is a research claim that cannot be tested, despite strong reservations that the translated passages might be problematic as instruments for testing in South African multilingual contexts. (That alone should be a problem for the validity of the claims.) The two examples of text passages that the PIRLS centre in Boston gives for the 2016 tests (Mullis et al, 2017, Appendix B) are a narrative passage about a father who bakes an ‘enemy pie’ to teach his son how to make friends with another boy he regards as an enemy; and an ‘informative text’ about the study of fossils that first led to the concept of dinosaurs and their presence on earth long ago. How does a story about a father baking a pie to teach his son about making friends and a discussion of dinosaurs and fossils get translated to South African contexts and language? How many Grade 4 students would follow a discussion in an African language which uses Standard isiXhosa, isiZulu or one of the other ‘official’ languages to discuss fossils and dinosaurs? What words would be used for these and how many children would recognise them? Just how far or close are these passages to children’s actual language use? What alternatives did the testers in Pretoria devise and how were they applicable to multiple, diverse settings around the country?

How do standard tests encounter localised realities? We can look at a short example of an actual teacher working in Khayelitsha as an example of how apparently generic and uniform activities are in fact localized as situated practices of a kind that are not visible or taken account of in policy and curriculum interventions. (This transcription of a classroom lesson was first reported and discussed in Prinsloo and Krause, 2018, and was recorded by Lara Krause as part of her

extended research on language and teaching at this school – see also Dowling and Krause, 2017; Krause and Prinsloo, 2016). This teacher, along with others at her school, routinely transgresses her principal’s explicit instruction that “they mustn’t code-switch” in class, (i.e., teachers should not make use of familiar Xhosa language resources to clarify unfamiliar English language and content for students). She also transgresses the Department of Education’s expectation that students will encounter specific test material as previously unseen content. She tells the researchers that during the week before the test day she explicitly coaches the learners about the content of the upcoming exam. The exam is in Standard English and students have to write in English. Most of them don’t understand that denotational code sufficiently well to have any clear idea of what the passage is about. She says that left to themselves they would be completely lost. It is not uncommon for students here and elsewhere to simply copy out the question off the paper as their answer. Her strategy is to teach the students the language and content of the test and to do this repeatedly in the days leading up to the formal test. She explains her tactics in terms of pressure upon her from the Education Department: “.. they need the learners to pass. You must make sure that you don't get the high number of failures.”

### **Oliver Twist passage**

Teacher (reading): Oliver was even less happy in the workhouse than he had been with Mrs Mann. He now had to work, which made him even hungrier.

Teacher (explaining): It means that before Oliver went to stay at the workhouse, he first stayed with Mrs Mann. And in Mrs Mann's house he didn't have to work, but now, since he is staying at the workhouse, in the workhouse Oliver has to work now. It makes him even more hungrier. *Imlambisa ngakumbi into yokusebenza* (translation: it makes him more hungry, this thing of working)

Teacher (reading): Explain what the effect was of Oliver's request for more food.

T (explaining): Kwaye kwabangela ntoni ukucela kokunye ukutya kukaOliver? Laa nto wayenzayo uOliver yokuhamba aye kwi-servant, aye ukucela more food, kwaye In kwabangela ntoni?

*(Translation: And it resulted in what, the requesting of Oliver for more food? That thing that Oliver did, of going to the servant to ask for more food, what did it result in?)*

In the written task, unfamiliar terms and complex phrasing carry subtle signals that are not grasped by students who don’t have fluid access to the denotational codes or the semantic context of 19<sup>th</sup> century London workhouses and orphanages. For example, the terms ‘effect’ and ‘request’ are embedded in the complex prepositional phrase ‘of Oliver’s request for more food’ and without a clear grasp of context and content, students are at a loss to make sense of

the question. The teacher's switch involves more than a simple translation in that the particular syntactical resources of standard isiXhosa are used to make sense of the textual action. Standard English of the kind written here relies on context and subtle syntactical signals to make meaning, whereas Standard as well as local urban Xhosa languaging operates with a detailed system of agreement markers (identified as multiple noun classes and verb-noun agreement rules by grammarians) which allow listeners to track referents unambiguously. This agreement morphology makes it clear that what is in focus here is 'the request for more food' and along with the possessive construction 'kukaOliver', the learners are able to grasp the construct of 'Oliver's request for more food'. Such grounded languaging particularities and pedagogic strategies are generally not visible or taken account of when principals provide researchers information as to what goes on in their classrooms.

The arrival of the physical exam paper at the school induced a series of located re-shaping processes aimed at making it (barely) manageable for most learners to pass and to not get their teachers into trouble, with the completed scripts being sent off to the examining authorities, for them to find what has become a given: township learners perform extremely poorly in centralized tests. However, what we see here briefly in the teacher's translanguaging activity is a skilled activity, where the affordances of available linguistic knowledge on the part of both teacher and students are deployed in ways that strive to make the best of an almost impossibly challenging situation. We can see the teacher's transgressive strategies as evidence of a kind of resistance (Rampton, 2014) which brings to light the power relations and forms of governmentality which are attempting to define her context but which only serve to undermine both local productivity as well as the governing agenda.

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