

Xolisa Guzula

Xolisa Guzula is a doctoral student who currently teaches Postgraduate Certificate in Education Foundation Phase (PGCE) students. She is a passionate proponent of multi-lingual education. Xolisa has had wide language and literacy teaching experience at schools and universities. She has also trained trainers and worked with parents in the NGO sector. Her expertise as a board member and consultant has been valued at various early literacy NGOs, including Wordworks.

I left teaching at an ex Model C school after six months in 1998 and became a researcher for the University of Cape Town's Education project called Learner Progress and Achievement Study, in four schools in Khayelitsha. We worked in two high schools and their feeder primary schools. There were many over-age learners in Grade 9, as old as myself at the time. When interviewed, they explained that they were over-age because they had failed many times and dropped out and in again. When we looked for reasons behind their failure, many learners and their parents explained that they had migrated to the Western Cape where they were expected to study everything in English. They did not know English and they struggled to understand question papers and to express themselves in English and in writing. Our observation in Grade 1 classrooms in the primary schools was that there were many under-age children in those grades. When we interviewed the teachers, they explained that parents could not afford preschool for their children therefore they sent them to school where they did not pay a lot of money. When we observed the teaching, the little ones were always in the weak groups and teachers explained that they did not do much with them because they were going to repeat the grade anyway because of their age. So more focus was paid to the older ones. The young ones being referred to as the 'weak ones' did not settle down well with me.

After that project, I worked as a researcher in Children's Early Literacy Learning Project (CELL) in 2000 and 2001. This was the project by early literacy specialists at UCT (Mastin Prinsloo and Carole Bloch) and the ones at WITs (Pippa Stein and Pinky Makoe). I was observing children's early literacy learning at home and at school. I found that professional parents (teachers and social workers and nurses) did not necessarily do things differently from parents who were not working in terms of literacy experiences for their children. They would all come home, watch television and cook dinner and prepare children for bed. I found the same with parents who were from working class backgrounds and those that were not working at all. Their children watched television for most of the afternoon, though they played outside a lot. Creches and schools did very little reading and writing with children. Phonics-based activities and the alphabet were the core activities in the Grade 1 classrooms more than anything else. There were no children's books in the homes except for some school textbooks. But children were learning a lot through play outside, especially when they got home. Children who attended schools in Town, who were learning through English, were playing at home with children who attended schools that taught through the medium of isiXhosa. The children were using both languages to communicate. They played a lot with their bodies; dancing, singing and playing with dolls, as opposed to sitting still in their classrooms.

I always wished that I could intervene at both homes and schools instead of just observing and describing what was happening, and then waiting for someone else to intervene.

What is your approach to early language development in a multi-lingual society?

In 2001 -2012 I was employed at the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, and worked in the Early Literacy Unit, doing action research which helped me to do both research and development at the same time. This way, I worked with teachers in schools, reflecting on challenges they faced, while also working out different alternatives to language and literacy learning, including exploring biliteracy development; unconventional teaching strategies such emergent literacy; reading for enjoyment; interactive writing; and play to get children reading and writing. This is how I got into early literacy. We believed that we could solve high school challenges by laying good language and literacy foundation from the start.

Our approach to early language and literacy development has always involved putting an emphasis on emergent literacy, more especially emergent biliteracy development. Getting bilingual children to learn to read and write in both languages simultaneously, was our alternative approach to teaching language and literacy, and a way to disrupt the monolingual bias in our education system. We believed that young bilingual children can learn to read and write in both of their languages if teachers support and value their bilingual efforts. Our approach also involved transgressing the formal language literacy drills that children are subjected to in class and put a lot of value in informal and implicit learning strategies, to complement teacher's formal and direct teaching approaches. We believed that children need both formal and informal learning experiences.

We also believed in mentoring teachers through team teaching. We found this to be a non-threatening way to help teachers to improve their teaching methods and pedagogies. It was different from evaluating teachers without modelling to them that which they have to do. We emphasized reflective practice and 'kidwatching', to use Yetta Goodman's term, as a way to get teachers to notice individual children's early literacy development. Team teaching, reflective practice and training through workshop became our strategies for mentorship.

Where have you been making your contribution in this field?

I have made my contribution in the Foundation Phase classrooms in which Praesa worked. I also trained Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase and Grade 8 teachers for the WCED at the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute from 20003 to 2009. In 2009, after having learned from senior colleagues, we taught a language and literacy module in the Training of Trainers of Teachers in South African masters' degree offered by Praesa at UCT. I also taught a language and literacy module in the Pan African Masters degree offered by Praesa and the Linguistics department at UCT.

In addition to this teaching experience, I made my contribution by teaching a language and literacy module in isiXhosa in the Advanced Certificate in Bilingual Education at the University of the Western Cape in 2008-2009. Teachers from 16 Pilot schools were selected to implement bilingual education in the Western Cape. In 2006, when we realised that helping children to learn to read and write was not only a teacher's job, and that it takes a village to raise a child, we started our first community reading club called Vulindlela Reading Club in Langa. We worked with people in the community to promote reading, storytelling and writing.

Subsequent to this, we helped to start up other branches of the Vulindlela Reading Club in different communities like Delft, Khayelitsha and Lower Cross Roads. By 2012, we started Nal'ibali National Reading for Enjoyment Initiative to help people nationally to start reading clubs for children and promote a culture of reading multilingually.

At the end of 2012, I left Nal'ibali and Praesa to join The Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development in the Eastern Cape. Here we worked both on community literacy, especially on writing camps, and the mentoring of teachers in schools. I trained trainers of teachers while also focussing on training Intermediate Phase teachers. I left just as we started to work on Principal and school leadership development. In between all this, I trained parents for The Shine Centre in Khayelitsha, as well as the volunteers in their school programme.

I served on the following boards: Wordworks, The Shine Centre, Biblionef, Little Zebra Books and Fundza. Finally, I also served as a PIRLS Steering Committee member from 2006 until 2016. From 2015-2017, I teach PGCE Foundation Phase students and draw on the work that I have done with Wordworks. I have made, and continue to make, my contribution to the Puku Story Festival which takes place in Grahamstown as a curator and translator of Xhosa material.

Work with Wordworks

I am now studying towards my PhD focussing on multiliteracies and translanguaging practices in an afterschool literacy club. At the same time I am doing part time work with Wordworks. This has been twofold. I advise on isiXhosa literacy content in as far as it differs from the English. Secondly, I translated most of the Wordworks teacher professional development materials as well as parent training material. This is a very tricky thing because people's interpretations differ and may lead to different applications of the strategies taught. A lot of important knowledge gets lost in this way. I also use the material for initial teacher training at UCT, meaning that we are empowering teachers by making available material in different languages and preparing them for multilingual classrooms.

The work that went into Xhosa translation was highly valued by staff at Wordworks. It also followed the same publishing processes of editing and proofreading that English goes through, thus making sure we produced quality material for our teachers in all three languages of the Western Cape. The material focused on emergent literacy, balanced literacy approaches and makes reference to bilingualism where appropriate and therefore I felt that I was doing work that was of interest to me.

Though this work was mainly for Grade R, we had started doing similar work for Grades R - 3 at the Nelson Mandela institute. We selected one book per week, and 10 books per term per grade to do this. Working on the Stellar Programme made me realise that using one book over a two week period to teach all early literacy skills while engaging children in multimodal practices for meaning making was useful, for whoever will revise the work we were doing at the NMI. One week is too little to cover everything thoroughly. At the same time, I would advise for use of real books should Wordworks consider developing this work for Grades 1 - 3. This means that we give teachers a taste of what literature is available in their own language. Children get to read real books with beautiful pictures. Many classrooms still do not have books.

In doing all this, I developed and coined terminologies for literacy in Xhosa. By making teacher training material in Xhosa, we not only make it easy for teachers to access material in mother tongue but also contribute to giving power to isiXhosa as a language of teaching and learning, beyond just teaching the children but for teacher professional development