


Chapter 16

Rekindling the Fire – Vuselela Ilangabi: Revitalizing Indigenous Storytelling for Literacy Development in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter investigates the integration of traditional storytelling into the ‘Learning to Read: Reading to Learn’ approach to literacy teaching for students at tertiary level. Indigenous knowledge systems highlight the concept of relationality, forming and valuing relationships within the community, as well as respecting indigenous knowledge. Therefore, the methodological design consists of community-based projects where the participants take ownership of the research. It makes use of mixed methods, multiple case studies, and participatory action research to explore the potential effects of incorporating traditional storytelling into existing literacy teaching approaches. This design also allows for the collection of quantitative data in the form of literacy assessments. Recommendations are made for future research that can explore the long-term effects of traditional storytelling combined with teacher training and curriculum development to effectively implement storytelling-based interventions

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Historically in South African education, traditional storytelling has been largely neglected. However, in pre-colonial times, especially in African communities, storytelling was common and a means of both educating and entertaining younger family members (Nomlomo & Sosibo, 2016). Not only was storytelling central to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, but it also played a role in shaping moral values and addressing social dilemmas. However, beyond cultural transmission, storytelling also significantly contributes to language and cognitive development (Boya, 2023).

Presenting a theoretical perspective, this chapter will explore the potential of revitalizing indigenous storytelling practices as a means of promoting literacy development among South African tertiary students by drawing on the ‘Learning to Read: Reading to Learn’ (RtL) approach to the teaching of reading,

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which was originally developed for marginalized Aboriginal students in Australia (Rose, 2021). RtL is a practical approach to literacy teaching based upon scaffolded learning, systemic functional grammar (SFG), and socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It is an effective literacy-learning tool that facilitates the continued teaching of reading and writing at any grade level. In addition, it has been successful throughout the past few decades in improving literacy levels in various countries around the world, including Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa (Acevedo, Rose, & Whittaker, 2023). An important principle underlying RtL is the role of storytelling and book reading in the early development of literacy skills in young children (Steinke & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2019). By including traditional storytelling methods into existing RtL literacy pedagogy, it is possible to create a bridge between the indigenous knowledge students bring into the classroom and the formal education system (Acevedo et al., 2023).

Storytelling does not replace book reading. They are both complementary approaches that can cater to particular learning styles (Griffin, Burns, & Snow, 1998). For example, whereas book reading can provide a structured framework for the understanding of genre structures, and promotes self-directed learning, oral storytelling connects learners to their cultural heritage and creates an engaging and interactive learning experience. Both folktales and books can form unique and essential components of literacy acquisition (Brice-Heath, 1983). In addition, where the lack of access to print is exacerbated by the lack of reading culture within poorer South African communities, storytelling can form an accessible and enjoyable home and community-based support system for formal literacy acquisition at school (Makone, 2021).

The chapter outlines the South African literacy crisis and its impact on higher education, justifying urgent interventions. Following this, it discusses the underlying theories, illustrating storytelling's integration into the six-stage RtL cycle (Rose & Martin, 2012). A literature review defines 'indigenous knowledge' and explores storytelling's role in improving literacy. Case studies examining the benefits of traditional storytelling are included. The chapter then details the methodology, considers future research, and provides conclusions and recommendations. An outline of the current literacy situation in South Africa follows.

CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERACY EDUCATION

South Africa faces a significant challenge in developing literacy skills at the foundational levels. The latest PIRLS results reveal that some 80% of South African Grade 6 learners cannot read for meaning (Roux, Van Staden, & Tshele, 2023). Learners who do not learn to read by the end of Grade 3 are not likely to catch up. The reasons for this literacy crisis are varied (Klapwijk, 2015). An underemphasis on reading skills in early grades contributes to high dropout rates in both primary and tertiary institutions, there is insufficient pre-service teacher training (Steinke & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2019) and a disconnect between indigenous home languages and the language of instruction (Henning, 2012). However, a major contributing factor is the lack of access to print in early childhood by many learners from poorer to highlight economic areas, an aspect that will form the focus of this discussion.

Children who have the advantage of being able to read at home before they start formal education tend to be more successful in school. It is estimated that children in literate, middle-class families reportedly spend up to 1000 hours in parent-child reading before they even begin formal schooling (Rose, 2011). Those early, formative years of story reading within the warm and protected environment of a trusted caregiver foster much of the cognitive, emotional and psychological development of a child. Learners who do not receive this generally enter formal schooling at a severe disadvantage (Unsworth & Christie, 2000).

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