

Possibilities of a Community Centred Pedagogy: A Snapshot of a Reading Project in Cape Town

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Introduction

This article traces shifts in radical pedagogy from the post-Apartheid period to the present (1994 to 2014) in the Programme for Research and Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), an organisation that advocates a bilingual language policy in schools and presently runs a ‘reading for enjoyment’ campaign. Radical pedagogy is included in the paradigm of critical education as it challenges oppressive relations and takes the knowledge of the oppressed as its starting point. PRAESA’s starting point is that children learn and progress better if they first learn in their home language and then become literate in a second language.

Education and particularly language policy during Apartheid denied Africans equal opportunity, a livelihood and access to higher education. The key purpose underlying PRAESA’s work is to help to reverse this injustice. Language policy is a contentious issue and the 1976 black student revolt was ignited when the Apartheid state wanted to impose Afrikaans - which was seen as the language of the oppressor - as a compulsory language in black schools. More recently, in September 2015, black students in the established Afrikaner universities protested against language policy, demanding that the primary medium of instruction be changed from Afrikaans to English.

My interest in exploring shifts in radical pedagogy is based on my research with the South African Homeless Peoples Federation in which radical pedagogy changed as the political landscape changed. The federation is a housing movement, mainly led by poor African women when it was formed in the early 1990s. Initially the pedagogy was collective and encouraged consciousness raising through participatory struggle,

mobilisation and advocacy. However, it changed to be more informative and less challenging as it partnered with the state in 2001 in its efforts to ensure quicker delivery of low cost housing (Ismail, 2015). Since then, I was curious to investigate how radical pedagogy has changed in other progressive organisations.

PRAESA's language policy activism

Dr Neville Alexander initiated PRAESA, an independent research and development unit. He was a well known Marxist political and academic activist and brought his experience of alternative education during the Apartheid years into PRAESA. The unit researched language policy in a newly democratic South Africa in 1994. Policy developed from the research, and envisaged teaching in the learner's mother tongue in the foundation/junior phase (first five years) of schooling, and then for learners and teachers to switch in the intermediate phase to English as the medium of instruction (Alexander, 2009). Mother tongue teaching is stigmatised because it was used during the Apartheid period to divide people and to denigrate African languages. However, it is used here, as PRAESA intends, to signify the language that a young child uses at home and is competent in. PRAESA's policy was based on a 'radical critique of the previous racist education that belittled African languages and prepared black people for an oppressive and exploited position in society' (adapted from Trimbur, 2009:86). This challenge to the hegemonic view led to advocacy work at many levels: government, schools, parents and universities.

The state's language policy is that learners are taught in their mother tongue for the first three years of schooling then switch to English as a medium of instruction. Research has indicated that this policy does not ensure proficiency in either language (Kerfoot and Van Heerden, 2014) and this is cited as one of the reasons for black students being poorly prepared for tertiary study (Desai, 2013). Recent empirical studies (Van Der berg, Spaul, Wills, Gustafsson and Kotze, 2016) confirm this view, and show that reading for pleasure and meaning should be the main goal in the first phase of schooling. The empirical evidence shows that 58% of Grade 4 students (after 4 years of schooling) could not read for meaning in any language.

Transition from policy activism to the reading project

PRAESA's attempts to convince the Department of Education (DOE) to have teaching for the first five years in the mother tongue failed. Parents, teachers and principals remained unconvinced, and although in some pilot projects it has been successfully implemented, it has never become mainstream policy in any school. Therefore, PRAESA re-focused their energy and attention away from introducing mother tongue education in schools to work instead within the community. This shift can be traced back to a community-based reading club *Vulindela* ('Open the way') in Langa, an established black township in Cape Town. The club approached Neville Alexander to work with them, and from then onwards reading clubs were established. This development led PRAESA to look at other ways of fostering mother tongue education and this was the start of the *Nal'wali* ('Here is the story') project. This is largely an informal programme, i.e. the learning is not certificated, it is self-directed and intentional. Radical pedagogy is strongly associated with informal learning of this kind and has important links with indigenous knowledge as it seeks to reconnect people with their histories and language.

The new Director of PRAESA explains that another significant reason for the shift was staff frustration with the slow progress of the policy work:

There were very little gains with the policy work and we started to work in schools to model free reading time to demonstrate what the language policy would mean, but this work was slow, sometimes exciting and sometimes successful, leaving the staff exhausted.

PRAESA facilitators described their frustration:

The early work in schools showed that it was difficult to change teacher behaviour, there were many challenges even for those teachers who liked the model and practised it. However, management did not buy into informal learning, teachers were afraid of informal learning, they didn't know how to teach without control, they only felt that they were

teaching if in front and instructing. It was difficult to change the behaviour of teachers and their attitude to informal learning.

Another facilitator who worked with parents said:

Parents were also a category of stakeholders who had to be convinced. Some of the parents who were part of PRAESA's 3 Rs project were convinced. In this project facilitators went to the learners' homes and spoke to parents and demonstrated reading practices. This led to improved results at school but the overall prejudice that English is best prevailed amongst many parents.

A critique levelled at PRAESA was that it did not build grassroots support for its policies. For example, parents and teachers had no confidence in a bilingual policy and, in a context in which English is seen as the dominant language for access to education and employment, a bilingual policy was not popular. However, according to the literacy facilitators, the children were taken up with the literacy model in the school and were excited and loved the free reading time, and thus progressed. Senior phase and junior phase teachers commented on the confidence and freedom of those kids who were exposed to the free reading time.

So in PRAESA's case, the practice of bilingual language learning went slowly into the reading clubs, first at school level, then into homes and the community. The aims of the reading clubs were to compensate for failures in the school system and the lack of a reading culture in the homes as well as a need to encourage the community to participate in education (Pluddemann, 2015). PRAESA built on 'the reality that for most children...they get little or no chance at home to form insights related to reading or writing and first encounters with print tend to be at school' (Bloch, Guzula, Nkence, 2010:92).

The reading project has three different levels of staffing and training. Amongst the staff are graduates who are literacy specialists and who are responsible for materials development, i.e. writing reading materials in multiple African languages and

providing training to the programme officers. The programme officers in turn train and mentor the facilitators who, in turn, mentor and run workshops for the reading club volunteers.

A reading club can be started anywhere, and the person who starts it is the ‘story sparker’ who may register the club with *Nal’ibali*. This organisation then assists them with training and resources (books, posters) and workshops which provide methods on how to make reading fun and enjoyable so that the readers will continue reading outside the workshops. The facilitators also try and advise on how to choose relevant books for particular age groups and publicise stories which they hope will become popular favourites amongst the children.

I had the pleasure of observing two workshops. In one workshop with the reading club volunteers I witnessed their deep interest and motivation as volunteers who were open to learning new teaching methods to stimulate reading in their communities. In another observation of a reading club in a primary school the teacher motivated her reading group by allowing the learners to sing the short stories they were reading and put them into action. The learners displayed sheer joy in performing the stories and the ‘novelty of having fun with literacy’ (Pluddemann, 2015:2) was evident.

Transition from reading project to a campaign

In 2012 the *Na’ibali* project was reconceptualised as a campaign and expanded into most of South Africa’s provinces. Its primary focus is to start a culture of reading for enjoyment in which story books are translated into African languages. The campaign promotes the formation of reading clubs, which are typically facilitated by youth and adult volunteers, and aims to foster a love of reading through songs, games and storytelling as ways of sharing reading and writing. In addition, *Nal’ibali* produces a weekly bulletin which is published in a local newspaper and includes children’s literature and activities. Although not radical in its mission statement, it does bring different sections of the community together in the task of improving the education of their children, fostering a love of reading in both mother tongue and English.

PRAESA is also reformulating its campaign in the language of human rights and has just released a Charter which explains children's rights to education.

PRAESA no longer actively seeks engagement with the state, but they will work with government when requested to do so. Their frustrating experiences when trying to implement language policy in the schools has made them opt to work in the informal context. Here they experience less bureaucratic control and are free to experiment and engage children and adults in a reading campaign which also grows into a love of indigenous languages. Most importantly, its strategy is to work with communities and use learning in an informal context to organise people and to guide communities to knowledge that will contribute towards social change - however gradual and incremental this may be. As one *Nal'ibali* facilitator put it, 'Our benefits are not immediate, it's a process... a journey. So we try and ensure that the reading clubs also understand it in that way'.

Shifts in radical pedagogy

On the surface the *Nal'ibali* campaign appears to be non-political, and some of the reading club members describe their work as less radical than previously. However, I would argue that reading allows one, in Freire's words (1973:7), to 'transform the world'. In my conversations with reading club leaders and staff, this is what I noted.

One leader spoke of her reading club for Rastafarian kids who are so discriminated against in schools and teased about their culture: 'for them the reading club is more than just teaching the love of reading but also teaching the kids self-confidence, identity and a space for learning in a secure environment'.

One critique made by a reading club volunteer from the black township of *Khayelitsha* was that many of the books did not contain African role models or African stories. However, I was told that this issue is being addressed by the materials development section of PRAESA. The lack of African role models and stories can be traced back to a time when the absence of African languages in educational materials

was an issue. This blind spot became evident to Alexander who then promoted bilingualism in the PRAESA project (Trimbur, 2009:103).

A former facilitator reflected on his experience and motivation to join the project:

I was very impressed with the focus on the importance of the mother tongue as well as the rationale behind what was essentially a whole language approach. More specifically, I was impressed at the importance of thinking of literacy acquisition as an apprenticeship into the practice of reading, rather than solely as the mastery of skills in isolation.

One of the literacy specialists expressed the purpose of her work in the following terms:

Well, first of all, if you have been to schools and observed how children are being robbed of good education and if you've watched how teachers use outdated teaching methods in the classroom, then you almost wish that you could do something to show the schools that there are different ways, there are alternative ways of doing things. So, for me, PRAESA offered those alternative ways.

Another facilitator emphasised the importance of advocacy:

For us it was also advocacy when you spoke to people about the reading clubs. I remember we went to Equal Education (an NGO advocating equal education for all) a lot and we spoke about the importance of libraries. We supported Equal Education's call for a one-school-one-librarian commitment, but we were also saying that they must fight for books in different languages in those libraries and that we couldn't wait for all schools to have libraries before we can read with children. These two things can happen concurrently. They seemed to think that children only read when the libraries are there. We said no, we can have reading clubs in different communities while we are also fighting for libraries.

These sentiments confirm what most of PRAESA staff expressed, i.e. that since it is a campaign to create awareness of the enjoyment of reading, the focus is specific but, at the same time, the staff must have a broader view of reading clubs as vehicles for social development by improving education at the grassroots level.

Many of the reading club volunteers and staff of *Nal'ibali* who live in the black communities become role models and are called on to lead discussion on community issues as they are perceived to be more educated and knowledgeable. In this way, they become the critical voices of the community and reassert the value of community and indigenous knowledge. Newman's (2005) ideas about informal learning are useful here: information and knowledge are used as resources in the fight for better education; interpretive skills are deployed to understand what people are like and to make sense of their actions and behaviour; and critical skills are developed to challenge power relationships.

Conclusion

The attempts of PRAESA to influence language policy by piloting mother tongue instruction in schools demonstrates that the state does not privilege African languages. Under the African National Congress (ANC) government, even with its policy of promoting indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), the dominance of English has been sustained and IKS has been shifted to the periphery. In contrast, the renewed focus of pedagogy in PRAESA is intended to contribute to the development of a literate society which may encourage the community to take responsibility for building a reading culture and to empower those who come into contact with it (Pluddemann, 2015). It does so by focusing on building relationships through informal learning and engaging communities in the struggle for their right to a sound education. Reading clubs provide a space for discussion about the significance of indigenous languages and related issues of identity, and they enable people to talk about education as a human right, thus highlighting the possibilities of community-centred pedagogy. On reflection, this research confirmed that pedagogies can help to change things for the better. There may be no clear transformative agenda, but we were inspired and

impressed by the passion and commitment of the *Nal'ibali* educators and it was wonderful to witness their successes.

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