

Review of: "Is the Reading Crisis in South Africa Sustained on Purpose?"

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This article provides a useful critique of current policy and practice in South Africa for the early stages of language learning in primary schools. Against a background of very poor outcomes for Grade 1 in township communities, the author, Martha Cronje, makes a strong case for different pedagogic approaches, both for the major African languages taught and for English as a second language (ESL).

The 'synthetic phonics' method of teaching reading gained popularity in Western English-speaking countries at the turn of the century, although narrow interpretations of it are now being criticised (Wyse and Bradbury, 2022). As Cronje says, it is not so suitable for the Bantu family of languages. She is probably right to say that the 'syllabic' approach should have been retained as an approved method for home language (HL) teaching in South Africa, though additional research was needed to inform the choice. Simply to impose phonics was poor decision-making by the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

Both the international discourse on children's literacy and the summative measurement of their literacy have tended to focus too narrowly on reading (a box-ticking mentality), to the neglect of other language functions. This may be one of the reasons why the DBE's 'Lesson Plan', as described by Cronje, piles far too much English vocabulary into the Grade 1 work and prematurely requires reading and writing in ESL. As a believer in teacher autonomy, I find it questionable in any case that a national department should impose such a plan, as opposed to providing guidelines.

International factors cannot explain the 'form-focused pedagogy' that the Lesson Plan apparently encourages. Where it comes from is a puzzle. Unfortunately, Cronje had to refer to 1990s research to advocate a focus on communicative competence because her recent plan for field research had been blocked.

I have only two suggestions to make for the improvement of the article. One is that recommendations for the pre-primary level, including Grade R, should be spelt out more clearly. Few preschools would have the resources for a fully bilingual approach, but a little exposure to spoken English could be helpful there and in Grade R where it exists. Secondly, the historical discussion of 'straight for English' is not necessary here, but it could be recognised that an earlier transition to English medium instruction may be desirable in some multilingual areas.

With reference to the final section, I remember that the Free State Department of Education provided good collaboration with Lesotho when I was working there, and I find it extremely disappointing that they refused permission for research on such important issues of curriculum and pedagogy. To the politicians concerned, I have this to say: 'If you prevent useful

research so as to cover up your own mistakes, is that any better than the banning of 'subversive books' by the old minority regime? As an open society, South Africa is a beacon of hope for the continent. But lose that quality, and you risk losing everything.'

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Reference

Wyse, D., & Bradbury, A. (2022). Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading. *Review of Education (Oxford)*, 10(1).