

RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN BOTSWANA: MAPPING FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Lydia Nyati-Saleshando
University of Botswana
Department of Primary Education
ramaholn@ub.ac.bw

Abstract

Literacy is the foundation of educational attainment and quality of life. Botswana has been experiencing a decline in educational standards in recent years. However, this has been the case in some rural areas since independence. This paper is a review of research on literacy in Botswana with a view to: find out the theoretical frameworks underpinning the studies; if research has diagnosed the issues facing literacy education and provided solutions; whether research has informed action in closing the achievement gap between rural and urban education; and how research can best inform theory and practice to enhance literacy education. Findings indicate lack of theoretical frameworks guiding the research on literacy; problems have been identified with possible solutions. The achievement disparities have been minimally studied. The paper calls for a clear future research agenda on language and literacy, with a focus on policy-practice connections, curriculum, pedagogy, and equity to improve quality of life of citizens.

Keywords: Literacy, language, Botswana, academic achievement, reading, equity

1.0 Introduction

Literacy skills form the basis for all learning (Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (2015; UNESCO, 2005). Since 2011, the examination results have become a national concern as they hit rock bottom achievement at all levels of the education system except tertiary. In 2004 Weeks, Pansiri, & Molefhe launched a newspaper column, analysing PSLE results each year. In 2011, they noted the declining standards in schools, and they observed that 'his has been a thorny issue in Botswana's educational development since 2004' (p.1). In 2012, only 41% of students who sat for junior secondary examinations obtained grade C and better (Mphale & Mhlauli, 2014). In 2014 the situation continued to deteriorate and only 25% of the students who sat for senior secondary school examinations performed at grade C and better (Kayawe, 2015).

The Botswana Examination Council (BEC, 2015), acknowledged the declining standards at all levels since 2007. Government officials and some researchers attributed the poor results to the industrial action by teachers which had taken place in 2011. Factors which had become part of the culture of the education system since independence, especially in rural areas such as lack of resources, untrained teachers, lack of books, curriculum relevance (Malete, 2003; Khan, Mapolole & Nleya, 1989; Keitheile & Mokubung, 2005; National Commission on Education, 1977, 1993), were also mentioned as contributing to the decline. Due to the sensitivity of language issues in Botswana, linguistic skills were not pointed out as part of this problem despite research findings, and common knowledge that language of instruction plays a major role in learning.

Therefore, the problem in Botswana is how to raise the quality of education in general and address the specific disparities in terms of rural-urban dichotomies with regard to academic performance, which have been persistent since independence, and the acknowledgement of the role research on language and literacy can play.

2.0 Definitions of Literacy

The term literacy means different things to different people in various contexts. UNESCO observed that definitions of literacy have broadened over the years (UNESCO, 2005) ‘from basic cognitive skills to using skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change’(p147). UNESCO further observed that, while this change has been understood, it has not been incorporated in policy formulations for programme development.

The Ministry of Education in Botswana (1979) defined a literate person as someone who can ‘comprehend written communication and simple computations which are part of their daily life’ (cited in Hanemann, 2005:5). Hanemann observed that this definition, which was meant to inform the establishment of the Botswana National Literacy Programme, was inadequate in many respects: It excluded literacy in other languages spoken in Botswana; the only competence expected is comprehension; and it ‘does not link the development of reading, writing, speaking and numeracy to the development of skills in other areas to reflect the socio-economic and cultural needs of learners’ (Hanemann, 2005:5).

Children learn to read better when the content is familiar, and culturally relevant (Molosiwa, 2007, 2013; Tshireletso 2000). A democratic classroom allows them to interact in their language and bring their cultural experiences, values, and expressions into the learning process (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997 & 1999). The definition of a literate person above demonstrates the need to conceptualize literacy beyond individual ability to read, write and compute for its sake. Rather, search for a deeper meaning which, in addition to these technical cognitive skills and processes, to include ‘human resource skills for economic growth, to capabilities for socio-cultural and political change, ‘conscientisation,’ literacy practices, lifelong learning, orality, and information and communication technology literacy’ (p.159).

Statistics Botswana (2016) used the definition from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for the 2014 national literacy survey, which states that ‘Literacy is the understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written texts to participate in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential’ (p.12). They further observed that:

The key to literacy is reading development... The process involves a range of complex language underpinnings including awareness of speech sounds (phonology), spelling patterns (orthography), word meaning (semantics), grammar (syntax) and patterns of word formation (morphology), all of which provide a necessary platform for reading fluency and comprehension. Once these skills are acquired, the reader can attain full language literacy, which includes the abilities to apply to printed material critical analysis, inference and synthesis, to write with accuracy and coherence and to use information and insights from text as the basis for informed decisions and creative thought’ (p.12).

IRA (2005) defines literacy as a rich set of strategies that includes reading and writing across a range of texts and media for communication, understanding, problem-solving, and productively participating in society, including academic, home, work, and community contexts (p.17).

The OECD definition focused on the cognitive skills a literate person displays, and the Statistics Botswana's concept focused on the content of literacy and the cognitive processes involved in dealing with this content. On the other hand, the IRA definition focused on what we do with literacy, the purpose. It is in these broad senses that the concept of literacy is used in this paper. The cognitive processes for acquiring literacy, the skills they display as they acquire and the purpose for which one is using literacy are important components which need to be incorporated into our understanding of literacy to inform decision making and practice.

3.0 Theoretical framework

This review is grounded on critical theory for social justice. This theory is a collection of different theories which seek to question the status quo, addressing issues of equity, equality and oppression in society, and seek possible solutions. Examples of this theory include socio-cultural theory which views knowledge as a social construct and is influenced by 'rules of a culture or society' (Hodges, Feng, Kuo, McTigue 2016; Tyson, 2006, p.6). Critical approaches examine traditional ways of doing things, how main stream ideas impact on minority populations, and how politically dominant groups make decisions that impact on those who do not belong to their group and have no voice (Hornberger, 2006). Another example is the Marxist theory. Postone (2015) views 'Marx's critical theory as 'one that uncovers and analyses a unique form of social mediation and domination that structures of modernity itself as a historically specific form of social life'(abstract). This paper therefore employs these two examples of critical theory as relevant to the review.

On language issues, Tollefson (2006) for instance, viewed language policy as a 'state disciplinary power...used to promote inequality by undemocratic structures in which those who make decisions are not accountable to those who are affected by them' (p. 208). Critical approaches search for the non-mainstream as the standard on which to measure social justice. In other words, a democratic society must pride itself by the quality of life as led by the most vulnerable groups. Taking a critical view unravels the unseen, the marginalized, and the voiceless. To satisfy dominant viewpoints at the expense of the voiceless is undemocratic. The rural areas which have been underperforming since independence remain marginalized. These areas include, Ghanzi, Kgalagadi, Northwest, Kweneng, and Southern districts (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999). The 2011 and subsequent school performance results, affected other areas, hence the alarm. But even then, not much has been done to address the poor educational results in general and the rural-urban disparities specifically. This is the relevance of critical theory to this review, to critically examine these issues which create inequality and negatively impact on quality of life. Further, to awaken citizen consciousness and empower them with information to raise their voices.

The role of research is to search for truth, and provide solutions for the improvement of quality of life for all (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1997). In this study, education is regarded as a human right which all must access to participate in national development and improve their quality of life. High failure rates indicate that most citizens do not achieve at levels necessary to advance in the education system and socio-

economically. As a result, the studies were analysed to find answers to the research questions, whose aim is to examine how Botswana education system is achieving social justice in accordance with its democratic principles. Literacy is the foundation of learning in school and the classroom needs to reflect democratic values and emancipate citizens from poverty and other social ills (Freire (1972). More importantly, to raise their consciousness to analyse their conditions and raise their voice.

4.0 Review of Literature

Studies have indicated that students in Setswana speaking urban and peri-urban areas perform better than those in non-Tswana speaking rural areas (Komarek & Keatimilwe, 1988; Monaka, 2009; Nyati-Ramahobo, 1994; Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999). Studies have also found that non-Tswana speaking areas lack resources, they have high numbers of untrained teachers, high drop-out rates, and high repetition rates (Keithheile & Mokubung, 2005; Maletse, 2003, Nyati-Ramahobo, 2002).

The PSLE results indicate that most students perform at C grade and below (BEC, 2015, 2016a; 2017). This suggests that the education system has been failing most students. The worst performance was in Science and Agriculture. Inability to acquire literacy skills at the required grade level implies inability to comprehend other subjects. The best performance was in Setswana and English. This implied that language skills are taught for their own sake. Hence, the good performance in languages has not translated into high performance in other subjects.

Analysing the 2015 report on Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), BEC (2016b) found that out of the ten districts in Botswana, four were performing below average, and all were dominated by unrecognised minority groups. The two minority dominated areas of Chobe and Northeast which were performing above average, have each one dominant language (Subia and Kalanga respectively), and these languages have been unofficially introduced into the classroom (Nyati-Ramahobo, 1994; IRA, 2005, Ketsitile and Commeryas, (2014, Spaul, 2011). Students do better in these areas than those with no one dominant minority language used in the classroom like Northwest, Ghanzi and Kgalagadi (BEC, 2016). While the other three districts (Central, Kweneng and Southern), are minority dominated, these populations have been linguistically and culturally assimilated by the recognised Tswana groups, in addition to their own, and use Setswana for daily communication. It is however, interesting to note that they still under-perform. This is further evidence for the need to use mother tongue in education, especially in rural non-Tswana dominated areas.

Mokibelo's (2016) study on strategies devised at policy level to help the acquisition of reading in primary school observed that, the use of cooks, teacher aids and learners to interpret during lessons has not been successful. She concludes that 'macro-language planning does not adequately produce desired results and therefore teachers and school administrators seek communication strategies at the micro-level to address the needs of learners. Instead of changing the language in education policy and accommodate the learners' languages, policy makers have decided to devise alternative strategies to educate its citizens, and yet such strategies are found inadequate to produce the desired results.

While school results do not address literacy skills directly as a contributing factor to academic performance, they do shed light on the overall performance of students from linguistic minorities who are

the main residents in rural areas. A study by Prophet and Badede (2006) pointed out that students in junior secondary schools had problems learning math and science due to language problems. They concluded that since the language policy has not changed despite a body of research indicating this problem, they found a possible way to minimize the problem, and stated that ‘when the questions were shortened, tense was changed, unnecessary words were removed, and simple words were used, students did better’ (p.248) on the same question they had failed when the language was complex. This study attested to the importance of language in the learning process and consequently in student academic performance.

In a study on English composition writing at junior secondary school, Ayedemi (2008) concluded that students lacked basic skills to write a short paragraph. Masalila (2008) after analysing SACMEQ 11 data, also concluded that children in grade six lacked higher order reading skills, and Molosiwa (2007) pointed out the importance of cultural relevance in teaching literacy and the importance of theory in informing teachers’ classroom practices. Peacock and Morakaladi (1995) evaluated the Breakthrough to Setswana program and noted that, while the method is good, it is not being implemented appropriately by some teachers. Specifically, there was less student-centredness, which is the backbone of the approach. Teachers were giving sentences instead of letting students to generate the sentences from their experiences. The students’ cultural knowledge and language is therefore excluded from the learning process to facilitate achievement. Thus the critical theory has to question the marginalization and social exclusion and seek to change the status quo. They also found that the method is not used beyond grade one. The assumption within the education system is that literacy skills have been achieved at lower levels (IRA, 2005). Studies by Moumakwa (2002) and Ketsitlile & Galegane (2010) found that the textbooks that the students were expected to read were too hard for their grade level. Ketsitlile and Commeryas (2014) concluded that the materials were meant for native speakers of English. In their earlier review, Commeyras and Ketsitlile (2013), found that children were left early in the first grade before they acquire reading skills. In a quantitative study by Tella and Akande (2007), they administered a questionnaire to 200 hundred primary school children to establish their reading habits and the availability of reading materials in schools. They concluded that lack of reading materials was a challenge for the development of literacy skills. These studies paint a bleak picture of the education system in need of serious interventions in the quest to have an educated and informed nation that would improve the quality of life.

5.0 Methodology

This paper is a review of selected studies on in-school literacy in Botswana. The aim was to review research carried out on language and in-school literacy and answer the following questions:

1. What theoretical frameworks have informed research on literacy in Botswana?
2. Has research diagnosed and provided solutions for the major issues facing the education system in the teaching and learning of literacy skills in schools?
3. Has research informed action in closing the achievement gap between rural and urban education?
4. How can research better inform policy and practice to enhance the acquisition of literacy skills for academic achievement across the curriculum?

The review was carried out from June 2016 to June 2018. The following sources were utilized for the search: University of Botswana library (hard and soft sources), ERIC, Google and Google Scholar, and the search produced 91 documents. Using the abstracts, 51 pieces of research work were selected as referenced throughout this paper. These were 15 Journal articles, 2 books, 5 book chapters, 17 reports, 4 dissertation/thesis, and 2 newspaper reports, 2 conference papers, 2 web blogs, and 2 working papers. The search words were those indicated in the abstract.

The document selection process was at two levels. First level was for general literature review of accessible documents since independence. This included studies on a specific aspect of literacy, for instance, just writing, vocabulary, etc. It also included studies which addressed related and relevant issues such as policy, attitudes, perceptions, etc, without making literacy acquisition in school a major focus. All 51 documents selected studies make the literature review section and were referenced accordingly in the text if the ideas were utilized.

For level two analysis, there was a deliberate decision to select four (4) studies from the 51 for further analysis. Selected studies for this level were those that focused on in-school oriented research on literacy between 2005 and 2015, to see if research findings on literacy have changed over time. The study had to address at least one of the research questions above and focus on literacy teaching and learning in schools as a major part of the investigation. It also had to be comprehensive, that is, covering at least one sectorial level of the education system, e.g. primary level, secondary, excluding out of school literacy. The selected studies were published in 2005, 2011, 2014 and 2017, covering primary, junior and senior secondary and tertiary levels.

6.0 Data coding and analysis

Data was categorized according to the research question the article or document was addressing. For instance, if an article addressed research questions 1, 3 and 4 – it will have those numbers labelled on it. Content analysis was the main strategy for analysing the data, by searching for themes related to the research questions above. A brief description of what each of the level two studies investigated and its findings are presented below.

7.0 Studies for further analysis

International Literacy Association (IRA)-2005

The first study was conducted by a team of five researchers, from the University of Botswana and Canada on behalf of the International Literacy Association (IRA) (2005). The study sought to answer three questions: ‘what types of literacy skills and strategies in English do students have upon being admitted into junior secondary education in Botswana? What kind of literacy instruction is provided at the junior secondary level to support learning across content areas in school, and to provide adequate skills for further study, training or work life? How do literacy assessment practices support teaching and learning in the junior secondary schools?’ (IRA, 2005, p.17). The researchers administered questionnaires to teachers in junior secondary schools and conducted interviews with educators in administration, government representatives and staff at colleges of education. They also undertook an extensive literature review on language and literacy in Botswana (IRA, 2005).

Findings of the study relevant to this paper were the following: The responsibility of teaching literacy skills is the sole responsibility of English teachers. The curriculum does not support integration of teaching literacy skills with content areas. Students' lack of ability to communicate in English affected their ability to communicate subject matter. This of course then directly affects their performance in these subjects. Most teachers rated their students' reading, writing and speaking as fairly adequate, somewhat adequate or not adequate as they enter junior secondary school. The study concluded that there was a 'need to support students' language and literacy skills as they embark on more rigorous content curriculum' (IRA, 2005, p. 21).

The researchers also found that other unofficial local languages were used in the classroom to explain concepts, specifically Setswana and Ikalanga, one of the minority languages, contrary to the language policy. The study concluded that while 'teachers see the need for the use of local languages, policy makers have not yet come to terms with this idea' (IRA, 2005, p. 27). The researchers concluded that the language policy should accommodate the use of local languages so that proper planning, methodology, teacher training and material development can take place to enhance the teaching of literacy skills. The study also found that teachers taught for examinations rather than skills development, and this limits what counted as learning. This finding was corroborated by Molosiwa (2007).

Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ)-2011

The second study reviewed was conducted by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ111) on primary school performance (Spaull, 2011). It covered four countries – Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. The study was holistic in terms of coverage on educational issues that impact on performance. It also adopted a comparative approach between countries. One of the issues it focused on was student competency levels in literacy and numeracy skills. The study administered SACMEQ numeracy and literacy tests and from the raw scores they 'calculated competency levels for reading and mathematics' (Spaull, 2011, p. 33). Eight levels of competencies were constructed, with eight being the most complex skill display. The yardstick was the SACMEQ level of competency at 500 points. Botswana performed at 521.1 and the study concluded that this level is 'marginally better than the SACMEQ average in reading and mathematics' (Spaull, 2011, p.28).

SACMEQ further observed that at least 60% of children in Botswana do not have access to pre-school, a factor that impacts on quality education as well as individual student performance. The study observed that 'deficits arising from a lack of mental stimulation early on cannot be made-up for in later schooling' (Spaull, 2011, p.54). Pre-school is normally provided in the home language or mother tongue. When the language policy adopted English for medium of instruction for all grade levels (except for one year of using Setswana), it automatically meant that pre-school could not be provided, hence left to private agencies (Monyeku & Mmereki, 2011). Lack of pre-school education in Botswana is therefore, a quality gap in the education system, affecting the development of literacy skills at higher levels (National Commission on Education, 1993). The study further observed that 'Across all countries there are significantly more functionally illiterate students in rural areas than in urban areas' (p54.) Another important finding was that 'the prevalence of functional innumeracy is egregiously high in all countries'

(Spaull, 2011, p.36). In Botswana the study found that 22% of students in grade 6 lacked functional numeracy.

The Ketsitlile and Commeryras -2014

The third study was conducted by Ketsitlile and Commeryras (2014) to review the literature on literacy education in Botswana and ‘seek ways of providing instruction and assessment that resulted in children becoming proficient readers’ (p.1). The study was comprehensive in that it focused on junior and senior secondary schools. They collected documents over a two-year period and analysed the studies and policy documents. Comparisons between reading in Setswana and in English were done. They also compared American and Botswana students English reading abilities in form 4 and 5.

They found that students in forms 1 to 3 had weak inferential comprehension, slow reading rate, not able to recognise the main idea and supporting details, and were not able to recall enough information to draw valid conclusions. Results from comparing reading in Setswana and English indicated that students read better in Setswana than in English. With the form 4 and 5 group, the American group displayed better reading skills in English than Botswana students. The study observed that overall students had weak reading skills and the textbooks they were reading were above their reading abilities and were meant for native speakers of English.

The researchers observed the mismatch between policy and practice in teaching of reading. ‘Teachers’ lesson plans lacked variety with regard to teaching methods of instruction and were ... mostly lecturing’ (Ketsitlile & Commeyras, 2014, p. 12), instead of the communicative approach the syllabus espoused. There was an isolation of reading from writing, and from subject matter. The study concluded that ‘teachers in Botswana secondary schools lacked preparation for teaching reading... and that there was an urgent need ... to teach reading in ways that meet the needs of all students’ (p.12).

The Ntereke - Ramoroka Study-2017

The last study was conducted by Ntereke and Ramoroka (2017) who were teaching communication and study skills to first year students at the University of Botswana. The study was to assess the reading levels of first year students in the Faculty of Humanities, and the difficulties students were experiencing when they enter university. The researchers also wanted to find out if the study skills course which the students were taking had impact in improving students’ reading abilities. The study used a class of 51 students taking the communication and study skills course. They administered a reading proficiency test at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course.

The results were that 34.5% of the students scored a mark between 49 and below. No students scored above 74%. The majority of the students scored between 64 and 74%. They further observed that students had reading difficulties on questions that required ‘comprehension, deduction of meaning, interpreting and making associations between several parts of a text’ (p.5). Half of the class failed a question which required ‘making connections with the preceding paragraph and deducing the point of view of the writer to answer the question correctly’ (p.6). Finally, more than half the class failed a question requiring them to summarize text and interpret meaning of a given statement. These results indicate a problem in the acquisition of reading skills at secondary school levels, and the impact of that at higher levels.

8.0 Findings

What theoretical frameworks have informed research on literacy in Botswana?

The role of theory in research is well documented (Hodges, Feng, Kuo, McTigue, 2016). These authors further stated that ‘teachers know that they should be providing clear instruction informed by best research-based practices and theoretical understandings. Yet, teachers are not often given specific training on what theories apply to reading, writing, and generalized literacy’ (p. 2). Of the four (4) selected studies for this analysis, only one (1) study articulated its theoretical framework. The study was grounded on the critical education theory, which they elaborated on as follows:

‘Critical education is rooted in Marxist ideology (Apple 1996; Giroux 1983; Maruatona 2002). Marxist ideologists believe in a critique and reformation of education. The Marxist school of thought offers alternative theories and practices for education. It strongly denounces the established bureaucratic and elite ideologies and pedagogies that perpetuate the status quo and further result in people becoming imprisoned in capitalist ideas and ideals. This is denying people the right to social transformation by forcing curricula, ideologies and pedagogies of those in power (p.2).

From level one analysis, studies that articulated their theoretical frameworks were the four (4) theses and a dissertation by Adeyemi (2008), Masalila (2008) Molosiwa (2007), and Moumakwa, (2002). Molosiwa (2007) observed that theory is not informing teacher training curriculum. Therefore, overall there is an indication that research itself is not theoretically grounded in the main. This is a significant finding in that it impacts on quality of teacher training and teaching (Hodges et.al, 2016).

Has research diagnosed and provided solutions for the major issues facing the education system in the teaching and learning of literacy skills in schools?

Studies on literacy in Botswana have indicated serious problems with regards to the conceptualisation of literacy in national policy, teacher training curriculum, teaching methodologies, assessment tools for literacy competency development, and teaching materials. Studies by Ketsitlile, & Commeyras (2014, Moumakwa (2002) also indicate that the curriculum needs grade specific assessment tools to ensure that students at a certain grade level acquire the necessary skills for academic performance and beyond schooling. The development of grade level materials for teaching English as a foreign language is a mandatory task if students are to acquire the necessary skills, attitudes and competencies they need to participate in national and personal development. The lack of integration of literacy across the curriculum, and the isolation observed in teaching language skills could be a result of a narrow official definition of what literacy entails (IRA, 2005; Molosiwa, 2007). The unofficial use of local languages in the classrooms in the Chobe and Northeast district seems to be bearing fruit, pointing to the need for review of the language policy to align it with the realities on the ground for the development of the country, and provide the necessary resources for implementation.

These studies have revealed that students have limited ability in basic literacy skills from primary school to tertiary level. The language policy seems not to be sensitive to the practical realities, resulting in unplanned use of non-official languages to facilitate learning. Inadequate teacher preparation to teach

reading has serious implications on the quality of teacher training programs, and the quality of education in general and student performance in other subjects. Research has therefore diagnosed the issues affecting the acquisition of literacy skills in schools. Possible solutions for teacher training, policy directions and content curriculum review have been provided. However, over the years, no efforts have been made in the direction research has suggested. Issues of equity and inequality in educational attainment need a critical approach to bring about social justice. The dominant structures seem not to be sensitive to these urgent matters, which result in perpetual marginalization.

Has research informed action in closing the achievement gap between rural and urban education?

For level one analysis, seven (7) out of the 51 studies mentioned the urban rural disparities, without providing solutions. At the second level, three studies alluded to the rural-urban divide in performance. These were not in-depth investigations on this aspect of the education system. It is mainly BEC reporting on school results by region. This disparity seems to be taken as a force majeure and therefore, not much can be done about it. This has serious implications because not only is it making a negative statement on the quality of education in the country, but it results in recycled poverty in minority dominated areas. About 42% of Botswana's population remains rural (Statistics Botswana, 2014), translating into poverty for a large portion of the population with low literacy rates.

In the United States, a large body of research seems to conclude that bilingual education, specifically the dual language programme, provides students with language skills for literacy as well as for academic purposes, where it is well implemented and well resourced (Valentino & Reardon, 2015). The programme is used to close the achievement gap between students who come to school from non-English speaking homes and those from English speaking homes. It may provide a solution for our rural communities where other languages than the two official languages of Botswana, are spoken. It may also be beneficial to Tswana speaking children as well, since English is used in grade 2, before they acquire the necessary skills to proceed to English instruction.

How can future research inform policy and practice to enhance the acquisition of literacy skills for academic achievement across the curriculum?

Research has diagnosed the issues in literacy and some studies have suggested solutions. The most commonly identified problem is on policy. Most studies have called for the review of the language in education policy to provide literacy in other languages especially at lower levels. Future research on policy formulation processes could provide answers to why policy makers seem to recognise the need for literacy for academic performance and beyond and yet find it difficult to review the policy. A focus on policy research – seeking answers to who makes what decisions, in what contexts and how do decisions translate into practice, would be ideal. Policy research should not only provide compelling evidence, but find ways to break the barrier between researchers and policy makers. There is need for new ways of thinking about how the two players can communicate more effectively for a common purpose to improving quality of life.

The rural-urban disparity in student performance and resource provision has been regarded as normal since independence. A focus on equity studies can provide compelling evidence on performance in

specific locale over time could unravel these disparities, and seek to find out why education authorities seem not to make this a priority since a significant portion of citizens still live in rural areas as stated above. Not only should the education system focus on raising overall education performance, but pay close attention to specific needs and close the achievement gap between rural and urban areas, as well as other forms of inequalities.

In addition to policy and equity studies, curriculum studies could focus on investigating various aspects of the curriculum at all levels, with a special focus on teacher training, since the quality of education is dependent on the quality of the teacher in the classroom. Other critical areas such as material development, teaching language skills across the curriculum, and assessment tools ought to be part of curriculum research. Such studies could provide data on curriculum content, teaching theories to inform curriculum development and classroom practice at various levels.

Researching the research is another important area to focus on. Research must be guided by clear theoretical foundations, sound research methodologies and analysis tools. Research briefs to policy makers would articulate these theories and demonstrate the importance of theory in guiding decision making and inform practice. Theory assists in helping people to understand the what and why something is to be done in a particular way. For instance, teachers need to understand the theory behind child-centred learning, what it is, how it is done and why it has to be done that way. This would facilitate the smooth transition from policy to practice. It would also assist the Ministry of Education in conceptualizing proper definition of literacy that would drive all teaching and learning activities. Teaching literacy across the curriculum is necessary if students are to do well not only in languages but all subjects.

9.0 Conclusion

This paper has contributed to scholarship on in-school literacy in Botswana. It has provided a summary of critical issues facing the education system in its attempt to produce literate communities. An agenda for future research has been outlined in the areas of policy and practice analysis, curriculum studies, pedagogy, equity issues and research itself, with aim to raise educational standards and attainment.

Research has diagnosed issues on literacy teaching and learning over time. However, not much has changed with regards to the implementation of the recommendations made by researchers.

Issues related to policy- practice alignment, equity, capacity building for teachers and rural-urban disparities in academic achievement have not been adequately paid attention to. Strategies developed at policy level have not helped practice since they are meant to operate within the unchanging policy context (Mokibelo, 2016). Findings from studies carried in 2005 are still echoed by those carried ten years later. In a democratic society, principles and values of democracy are to be reflected in practice within the education system. Democracy cannot be experienced through elections every five years only, rather, it is to be lived by a majority of the citizenry and reflected in the quality of life they lead. A democratic classroom for instance, accommodates students' experiences, culture, language, values as part of the learning process. The knowledge they bring to the classroom based on culture is integrated to define what counts as knowledge. Thus the exclusion of children's language and culture limits their participation and contribution in the learning process. Democracy education fosters tolerance for diversity as a source for

learning ((Nyati-Ramahobo, 1999) and raises the consciousness of learners to issues of marginalization, poverty and discrimination they may be experiencing. The result should be a highly literate society with high standards of living. In their study on World literacy, Miller & McKenna (2016) rank Botswana last to the 61 countries the study covered. Reporting on this study, Ontebetse (2016) stated that Botswana is reflected as the most illiterate society in the world and quoted the report as stating that: ‘what the rankings strongly suggest and world literacy demonstrates is that these kinds of literate behaviours are critical to the success of individuals and nations in the knowledge-based economies that define our global future’ (p.2). In its effort to be a knowledge based economy, Botswana faces a challenge to develop a literate society.

What happens in the classroom is demonstrated in society at large. If a significant number of citizens leave the education system with minimal literacy skills, society has minimal literacy overall. Democracy dictates a response on issues that affect quality of life, such as lack of quality education, leading to poverty and marginalization. Critical theory based research brings these to the conscience of society (Freire, 1972) for liberation. The education system has been bedevilled with equity issues since independence. Therefore, a research focus on these, with the goal to break the policy making code and point to low literacy and language skills is core to the solution.

The poor results in Science and Agriculture, and the high innumeracy rate have serious consequences for the development of the country. The implication is that students are not able to understand these concepts well when English is the medium of instruction at lower levels. Most developed nations such as the United States, use their local languages to deliver curriculum, and this has been found to produce better results (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

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