Introduction

I learnt the 10 principles of early childhood from Tina Bruce in 1986, early in my teaching career, as a student at Froebel College. These Froebelian principles (Bruce, 1987) incorporated themselves into my pedagogical theory (Landman et al., 1982) – practice trajectory and, having framed my early years teaching in the UK, they travelled with me home to South Africa in 1991. Despite a now vastly differing context, the principles helped to inform the children’s literacy research and development work I became involved in from 1992 with PRAESA (The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) (Bloch, 2002). This trajectory has not only continued until the present time, but has now wound into a circle; Tina Bruce and I recently co-hosted, with other colleagues, a two-day conference in Cape Town on affordable quality education for babies and young children, with her 10 trans global principles underpinning practical workshops (www.praesa.org.za/advocacy-consultancy).

Here I reflect on some of the ways in which Bruce’s principles have helped scaffold the conceptualisation and implementation of key multilingual literacy projects I have initiated and facilitated through PRAESA with my colleagues over several years. Although I mention different principles in relation to particular aspects as I write, really they belong together as the vivid interweaving patterns of a pedagogical cloth which can be cut in various ways for appropriate educative action. When I think of one principle, so another comes to mind. They also attract other complementary theoretical patterns to the weave, ever expanding the potential for adults to offer meaningful educational opportunities to children.

The primary impetus of my work has been to refocus attention to the power of story for young children’s literacy learning in multilingual African settings. And like profound stories meander through the world, enriching our minds with shared understandings of what it means to be human, these early childhood education principles with their various origins and expressions seamlessly traverse the boundaries of space and time to help structure our work.
Considering the entwining of pedagogy with politics

During the 1990s in South Africa we were engaging with a system just starting to emerge from the harsh clutches of Christian National Education which controlled the education system during Apartheid.

Pedagogy, or, more precisely, didactics and politics were intimate bedfellows. Childhood was viewed as an inherently deficient state (Landman and Gonway, 1969) which needed remediation by an education towards adulthood:

The child is a non-adult and is en route to that point where he (sic) will live the life of a proper adult.

(Landman et al., 1982)

So the purpose of preschool education was strongly defined in terms of school readiness training. This idea that children are 'unready' to learn and in need of preparation has not been unique to South Africa; it had been 'passed down' from the North and continues to hold influence today in both settings (Gillen and Hall, 2003: 4, Cooper, 2007: 8, Van den Berg et al, 2013: 9). But the way it was applied to little children from within the divisive racial categories imposed by apartheid was particularly cruel. And while 'pouring what they need to know into their heads' happened to all young children, apartheid racial doctrine determined the quality and substance of the mixture to be poured. Overtly racist rulings enforced the much hated 1953 'Bantu Education' which dictated what the majority of children should learn:

'We didn’t want this bad education for our children. This Bantu Education Act was to make sure that our children only learnt things that would make them good for what the government wanted: to work in the factories and so on; they must not learn properly at school like the white children. Our children were to go to school only three hours a day, two shifts of children every day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, so that more children could get a little bit of learning without government having to spend more money. Hawu! It was a terrible thing that act.'

(Baard and Schreiner, 1986: np)

The ‘superior-inferior’ binary entrenched unconscionable, often insidious damage which persists today. Because African languages were used to transmit Bantu education, a negative association was inadvertently made between language medium and quality (Neville Alexander: personal communication).

Writing about colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981: 16) describes how it caused the:

destruction or deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser.

This happened, he writes, as colonialism took control of the ‘mental universe’ of the people being colonised. Apartheid in South Africa deepened the insult to human dignity. He vividly describes how children under colonial rule could not experience school learning as emotionally profound due to the effects of having an alien body of knowledge imposed on them in a foreign language. So learning about written language was discordant and often incoherent while spoken language at home was centred around authentic communication.
The irrefutability of multilingualism and story for education

The split between home and school led to a loss of status and belief in African languages and in the ‘natural pedagogy’ of storytelling (Sugiyama, 2017). Education was stripped of authenticity and meaning. Years of having to memorise ‘stuff’ devoid of significance leads to systemic low level expectation and performance. Many of us treat young children in preschool and formal education as if they were lacking in imagination, creativity and competence; even when African languages are the medium for communication, inadequate heavily directed worksheet ‘skills and drill’ teaching methods dominate. Yet all children need their potential recognised and nurtured in order to experience learning success. This requires us to know and act on the evidence that . . .

the best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them what they need as children.

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from Bruce, 1987)

This principle has supported our attempts to advocate for and explore alternatives to delivering a diluted version of Grade 1 (Cambourne, 1995), which so often teaches mainly decontextualised skills deemed as necessary forerunners to ‘formal’ learning. We have rather based what and how we teach on the early learning wisdoms which promote and base teaching approaches on observing and conversing with young children to get to know their curiosities, interests and concerns. This implies an attitude of valuing and respecting children for who they are and of considering the role emotions play in intellectual endeavour (Greenspan and Shanker, 2004; Ellis and Solms, 2018). By transforming these early learning foundations, surely we unlock the potential for an entirely transformed system? The following principle supports our view that the fulcrum to transformation is reviving the uses of stories in South Africa, with its great storytelling tradition still etched into so many memories:

Imagination, creativity and all kinds of symbolic behaviour (reading, writing, drawing, dancing, music, mathematical numbers, algebra, role play and talking) develop and emerge when conditions are favourable.

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

To achieve favourable conditions, adults need to prioritise the role of and relationship between stories, play and meaning-making: We know that ‘Children play at story by instinct’ (Jonathan Gottschall, 2012: 23), ‘play is story in action, just as storytelling is play put into narrative form’ (Gussin Paley, 1990: 4) and that children’s imaginations ‘are the most powerful and energetic learning tools’ (Egan, 1986: 2).

We have long been aware of the huge numbers of children in South Africa who do not have what they need to learn to read and write successfully (Alexander, 1990/2013; Bloch, 1994, 1999, 2000) and have done development research to help transform the situation.

Concentrated attention by government and the educational community has been directed at the early childhood phase during the recent past, and what to do about its limited success in early literacy teaching (Taylor et al, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Spaull, 2016). Statements are being made of the importance of the early years for literacy learning progress and that reading for meaning is critical (Spaull, 2016). But little agreement exists yet about how to understand the processes of reading and writing or how significant the emotional climate, imaginary play and storying are for young children and their literacy learning. These still apparently invisible pedagogical ingredients combine with the lack of political will by the post-apartheid government to implement their own mother-tongue based bilingual language policy of 1997 (Alexander, 2002). They too
are supported by a de facto acceptance of the status quo by influential researchers (Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999; Taylor, 2013; Spaull, 2016). Might this not have contributed strongly to hindering generations of children’s literacy and other learning opportunities?

Making home and school connections

The importance of parents taking interest in their children’s education for children’s successful learning is well documented (e.g. see Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Nutbrown et al, 2005; OECD, 2006; Biedinger, 2011; Spaull et al, 2016). It is unsurprising that a significant educational challenge in South Africa continues to be how to encourage such involvement. Coerced away from your known and trusted ways of doing things breaks meaningful affective and intellectual connections. How easy is it then to lose confidence that your knowledge and skills hold any value, particularly when your children are not using your languages at school? If it is true that . . .

what children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point of their education

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

. . . then it is a travesty to systematically teach in languages young children and their families do not understand. How can you learn new knowledge and skills if you don’t understand and cannot express yourself? Put strongly, ‘an education that is packaged in a language which the child does not understand is simply torture to the child’ (Kioko et al, 2014: 2). We should need no advocacy or research proof for mother tongue and multilingual education, although much exists (UNESCO, 1953; OAU, 1986; Baker, 2000; Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Alexander and Bloch, 2010; Kenner and Ruby, 2012).

Mother-tongue based bilingual education has been a pillar of PRAESA’s involvement in education over the years (Alexander, 2002; Bloch, 2009b; Bloch et al, 2010). Bringing the use of African languages and of stories for meaning-making signals an openness to tap into the ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll, 1992) which all children and their families have, and which they consolidate and share through their languages. In an early project, we introduced team teaching with Xhosa and English speaking young children in a former ‘coloured’ school which had, like others across the country, recently opened its doors to young African language speaking children (Bloch and Alexander, 2003). The school’s teaching medium was English, and they asked for literacy support as most children understood Xhosa or Afrikaans. We introduced grade 1 Xhosa speakers to literacy learning in both Xhosa and English simultaneously, using stories and an emergent biliteracy approach (Bissex, 1980; Holdaway, 1979; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1993; Rayes et al, 2012).

One of the challenges was that in 1998, when we began, there were few storybooks in African languages for young children.

Quality education is about three things: the child, the context in which learning takes place, and the knowledge and understanding which the child develops and learns.

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

Putting little children in a context where they are offered little or nothing to read and are not being read to in their languages at school has to be a serious problem for achieving quality education in the twenty-first century. The presence of substantial libraries of fiction and non-fiction has long been taken for granted in affluent English and some Afrikaans school settings. But even now, good collections of storybooks in African languages in all early childhood spaces can certainly not
be taken as given. At that time, we began to facilitate original writing and translations of storybooks (Alexander and Bloch, 2004; Bloch, 2005, 2008). Most relevant for early childhood have been the Little Hands Books, which in 2006 were published in all 11 South African languages and 12 others from other parts of Africa and the later baby board books in all 11 languages (www.praesa.org.za/multilingual-materials/). It is an urgent matter to offer toddlers and little children choice and variety, so that their curiosity and desire to explore print and illustrations is aroused.

In our biliteracy project, we created and displayed print and encouraged children to use Xhosa for writing by introducing ‘interactive writing’ through letters and journals. PRAESA colleague and project teacher, Ntombizanele Mahobe used Xhosa with the children as they communicated with her in journals while I and others, wrote letters in English (Hall, 1989; Bloch, 1999). We hoped in this way to begin to ensure understanding and meaning-making (Wells, 1985).

We interacted with children as reading-writing role models, interested to read what each child had to ‘say’, and to respond. The children’s writing attempts at their various levels of maturity emerged in both Xhosa and English. Because they felt free to make mistakes, their writing showed us the literacy concepts they understood and those they needed support in. We could see how learning to write in this way can unleash ‘the ecstatic power to express and create one’s own world’ (Egan, 1986: 89). Though the weighty ‘charm’ of English was apparent, Ms Mahobe would persist and used Xhosa with several children who would write to her only in English, to try and help them to feel comfortable with the idea and reality of writing in both languages. Connecting authentically meant that adults and children were sharing thoughts and feelings, and this one-to-one personal communication, which happened in print, led to a growing emotional connection between child and adult because they were involved in a relationship where they were really communicating with one another. We were guided by the principle that

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\text{Relationships with other people (both adults and children) are of central importance in a child's life.} \\
\text{(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)}
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Being affirmed motivates children to (try to) write about their own lives and interests; the structures of autobiography begin to grow early in families and ‘persist stubbornly’ (Bruner, 1990). As children apply themselves to explore their concerns through writing, they learn how to write. And they also learn how to read; we had taken ‘the most important step’ by giving them ‘reasons for bothering’ (Egan, 1986: 88).

We also opened a small reading room for families and children in the school. It started, albeit only with a handful for parents, as a space for reading stories purely for personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Unfortunately, our small group of mothers soon came to be used by teachers to give remedial support for struggling learners. At that time, it was difficult to keep the message alive that reading for enjoyment should be a priority in literacy teaching. In hindsight, this had to do with our capacity too – without being able to spend enough quality time with parents, mentoring them in why and how we read with children, we could not keep them appreciating the value of story reading. But we continued by building on this early initiative in several other projects, including initiating and supporting Reading Clubs, a Reading for Enjoyment Campaign, and PRAESA’s present early childhood literacy work, Storyplay.

**Moving into the community**

The Vulindlela Reading Club began in Langa in Cape Town in 2006, bringing community members together with a group of PRAESA staff members, to explore how reading for enjoyment
and personally meaningful reasons could empower an often large mixed-age group of children and adults to expand purposeful story sharing, reading and writing together. Voluntary participation both by children and by adults was central, as was that adults should be interactive role models for children (Alexander et al., 2011).

Every Saturday morning for several years, a stream of children of all ages could be seen making their way to the club at 9 am. Proceedings usually started with group singing, game playing and oral storytelling. This soon brought about a wonderful and intense sense of ownership and belonging. These ritual activities activate embodied memory of the powerful performance thread of story. They energise people for reading aloud and having opportunities to browse and choose books, read, draw and write together and alone. The joy of being apprenticed into something you desired to join into and of feeling welcome to participate (Rogoff, 1990) without negative stress (Willis, 2006) created a sense of unity, belonging and empowerment. Probably one of the most difficult principles to remain true to in education seemed to root itself and begin to grow:

Self-discipline is emphasised. Indeed, this is the only kind of discipline worth having. Reward systems are very short-term and do not work in the long-term. Children need their efforts to be valued.

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

Inspired by the research into Free Voluntary Reading (Krashen, 2004) some years before, we had tried out what we called the Free Reading in Schools Project. As with the reading room, ensuring involvement by adults was difficult. Though the children were overjoyed to have stories shared with them, the teachers would often ‘escape’ when my colleagues appeared. This changed with The Vulindlela Reading Club, as committed PRAESA colleagues collaborated with other volunteers to ensure that they were available and present on a regular basis for the children. Moving into non-formal education spaces, with know-how, commitment and some resources, invisible and neglected conditions which stimulate learning could begin to emerge. Self-discipline links profoundly to motivation (Gambrell, 1996; Clark and Rumbold, 2006) and far too many children get lost educationally as their interest dwindles in the face of dull and senseless exercises. An ongoing challenge in South Africa is how to ensure that the precious motivation babies and young children have as part of their ‘hardwired’ emotional system before birth (Panksepp, 1998) is nurtured rather than stunted by their education. Almost 80 years ago, John Dewey asserted:

The most important attitude that can be formed is that desire to go on learning. If impetus in this direction is weakened instead of being intensified, something much more than lack of preparation takes place. The pupil is actually robbed of native capacities which otherwise would enable him (sic) to cope with the circumstances that he meets in the course of his life.

(Dewey, 1938/97: 48)

So one of the burning questions that seems the hardest to answer for broad transformation is how we kindle and then sustain motivation in adults to involve themselves in storytelling, reading and writing with children. Like children, adults too need their efforts valued. The Vulindlela Reading Club welcomed people to come and observe and participate; through the ‘doing with’ others, enthusiasm and confidence to continue and do, more was passed on. But this was just one club . . . and it included a core team of PRAESA colleagues with substantial knowledge and agreement about the desirable approach to literacy and language and learning. It was about
building relationships and memories around shared activities and the real time that it takes to form these.

**Advocating for and mentoring reading for enjoyment**

We learnt more about this question when I was asked to initiate the design of a national literacy campaign in 2011 by The DG Murray Trust in Cape Town. It proved an amazing opportunity to extend our approach and insights into what became *The Nal’ibali reading for enjoyment campaign* which began in 2012 in six provinces of South Africa. Nal’ibali means ‘here’s the story’ in Xhosa; the campaign’s aim was to grow a love of stories in children, inspiring them to want to read and for adults to get to know and bond with their children through storytelling and reading. We thought deeply about how to position this campaign in a society where so many adults either do not read much or cannot read. The ‘tagline’ on the Nal’ibali logo is ‘it starts with a story’. This deliberately elevated storytelling as a ‘good’ in itself as well as it being a bridge to reading and writing.

One of the main messages I initially wanted to help embed was that wherever someone was, they could stretch out their arms and feel somebody there to interact with who was also involved. I had in mind the image of an interlocking human chain. Another message was that reading aloud to children was a key to awakening in them the desire to read. This is a considerable challenge for novice adult readers because: a) reading is a socio-cultural practice (Street, 1984; Barton, 1994) and we all stock our inner library story by story and in real time (Bloch, 2015) so choosing what you want to read and building up the knowledge of what is available is a process; and b) because reading aloud is about bringing a story to life and has performance elements, which we have to practice to learn. One of the pillars of Nal’ibali at its inception was the design of a regular bilingual newspaper supplement intended for adults to use with children. Nobody should be able to say: ‘I have nothing to read!’ or ‘there is nothing to read in my language’ and children should also have enough choice of material to be able to decide what they wanted to read. It is challenging to produce materials in print-scarce contexts, as it is hard not to want to achieve everything at once. We wanted to cater for an intergenerational readership, while focusing on primary school aged children. The entire supplement is always bilingual in an African language and English. It offers adults advice and information about how to be the kind of interactive role model that motivates children to want to read, and it showcases adults in action in the field. Each edition also has an abridged version of a published picture-book, and a read-aloud story as well as suggestions for use (http://nalibali.org/story-supplies/multilingual-supplement-archive).

Ultimately the stories should add qualitative substance to the flow of daily living stories, stimulating thought and imagination in children (and adults). Hoping to excite curiosity among families and children, we designed a diverse group of story characters living in a story world. Below is one of the first images Nal’ibali offered: Gogo is reading aloud to Neo, Afrika and Bella, with little Mbali exploring her book too. They sit on a bench below signs which say Story Street, Interest Avenue, Future Path and Magic Way.

**Illustration by Rico Scharcherl for PRAESA – Nal’ibali**

We trained and mentored adults to provide such opportunities for children across South Africa in informally structured reading clubs. The consequent ‘face-to-face’ experiences and learnings were used as material for advocacy. The campaign deliberately advocated for and supported
informal literacy learning in ‘3rd spaces’ (Gutierrez, 2008) as this allowed us all to act on the knowledge that,

*Children are whole people who have feelings, ideas and relationships with others, and who need to be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually healthy.*

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

Most spaces have the potential to actually become appropriately nurturing and from the start we did partner with and train teachers for after school activities when we were asked. Time after time we watched teachers shake off the chalk dust, leap up and embrace songs, games and stories with enthusiasm. Adults are also whole people and part of our full, holistic health is to reach back to personal childhood memories. To connect to our own childhood might allow us a better chance to be fully present in the life of each child we encounter. One of the ways we have used with participants in training is to revive early memories of stories, told or read (http://praesa.net/learnToRead/). This has now become a signature activity in Nal’ibali training. In 2017, Nal’ibali has grown to such an extent that in addition to community based clubs, the formal education system increasingly incorporates reading for enjoyment practices in schools (http://storypowerschools.org).

**Nourishing young minds through storyplay**

Preschool practitioners started wanting to form reading clubs for young children in Nal’ibali too and this became an opportunity to explore how to incorporate appropriate, informal early literacy experiences into a range of diverse, often difficult settings. Although we often read and hear that young children learn through play, and stories are part of the curriculum, our definitions of what this means differ widely and children from poor communities are more likely to get a diluted, pale version of the real thing. Many adults working at different points of the education continuum still find it difficult to appreciate the real power of imaginary or symbolic play for literacy learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and this is not surprising when there are no demonstrations...
to absorb and fully appreciate its worth. Even when stories are used, these tend to have didactic intention with restricted vocabulary and specific, pre-set ‘necessary’ outcomes for one or other component of reading or writing. Apart from the low level linguistic and cognitive demand of such work, if we know that . . .

children learn best when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and are respected as autonomous learners . . .  

(Bruce, 2015b: 214 adapted from 1987)

. . . we need to honour the use of story and play because this is where young children feel most comfortable. Exploring storytelling, story acting and philosophical play (Paley, 1990; Lee, 2016; Stanley, 2012), we have grappled with how to transform spaces to include time for daily story input, inviting children to tell stories, scribing these and then acting them out on the ‘magic carpet’. Finding ways to both inspire and legitimise the creation of story-worlds by children, we choose particular storybooks and share possible ways to represent and connect to the stories with children. A diet of interesting stories is crucial for coaxing a Storyplay-friendly atmosphere into life. It often seems as if the children have read the signs of schooling all too well and are surprised that their stories and their play could be condoned, let alone be interesting for adults. We constantly bump into the dearth of magnificent picture books for young children in African languages; far too many times to mention, it is Cinderella or Goldilocks which are names or retold as ‘favourites’ stories. We recently facilitated the translation into five African languages of three Lio Lionni stories, and these are a wonderful resource.

Some challenges are harder to deal with than others. One is when Grade R teachers find it difficult to appreciate the approach. It can be hard to appreciate how the requirements of the literacy curriculum are met with such ‘open ended’ work. We have now explicitly created a document which explains the links and my colleagues support them to reflect on the kind of learning which is happening, and thus see how curricular outcomes are being covered.

Some teachers also struggle to accept or allow ‘flights of fancy’ by the children as the following reflection of my colleague, Nolubabalwa Mbotshwa shows. Extending Lio Lionni’s Frederick, she has brought a little gold box to class with ‘something’ inside and she asks them to guess what she had gathered and put inside it. After several guesses from the children:

I gave them a clue and said I found what’s in the box outside in your playground, some children shouted grass, leaves, sand, I opened the box and showed them what was in the box: there was a small stone, a small piece of wood and some grass. I asked the children if they knew who had put all those stuff in the box and how did it get in my bag, one of the boys said it was him and that he put it in my bag without me know, teacher Sally rudely told the child “don’t lie you didn’t mos put it there” I told teacher Sally that it was ok and that he was just playing part in our little game. I could sort of understand what Sally was trying to do because yes, he didn’t put It in my bag and in her eyes he is lying, I on the other hand thought we are supposed to be encouraging children’s imagination through fantasy play and that’s what our whole approach is about and Sally surely doesn’t understand that yet.

(Extract from reflections 10 May 2017, name changed)

This is not uncommon. Might it be an expression of anxiety by adults who are responsible for young children learning the difference between right and wrong? Do they interpret ‘pretend’ to be lying, because they worry that children might never learn to tell the difference between fantasy and reality if their imaginings are condoned? Is it possible to appreciate Chukovsky’s (1963)
point that as soon as young children appreciate what reality is, they want to turn it upside down, or 'topsy turvy'? Is the challenge to demonstrate how reality lives side by side with fantasy? Will it be easier when teachers see for themselves the way that language and literacy progress emerges and consolidates?

Another challenge is that there are usually many children and not enough adults to interact sensitively with all of them. My colleague, Siwe Mboleka captures what is sadly often the normal atmosphere:

I arrived to a rowdy crowd. (Teacher) Hlumi’s classroom was overcrowded because both (Teacher) Babalwa and (Teacher) Thandeka’s children were put together and Thandeka was alone with both classes. Hlumi was absent.

(Extract from reflections 15 June 2017, names changed)

While it would be arrogant to assume we know better what to do in an all too familiar scenario like this one, we are exploring how best to support teachers to put in place strategies which can give the children more responsibility for their learning, individually and in small groups. Relieved of the pressure to deal constantly with large group dynamics, teachers can observe and notice children’s engagement and think about next steps. My colleague Nadia Lubowski, who co-ordinates Storyplay, often mentions how she notices that when children are deeply involved in playing or exploring stories, their teachers become aware that they have time on their hands.

Success is a relative concept, as Sive notices:

I got in (to the crèche) and found Nomsa sitting on her table while her children were busy with an independent activity. I liked seeing this because Nomsa is always guiding her children, telling them what to write every time I am there. It was beautiful, her children were drawing in groups. Thereafter they presented what they had drawn and to my disappointment they were drawing the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Nonetheless the group I witnessed presenting was happy and Nomsa was very positive in giving them feedback. She praised them and asked for the next group. All the groups said they were still busy.

(ibid)

We aim to support teachers to make the most of small group or one-to-one moments: scribbling a little child’s story can take just a few minutes, but needs to be done regularly and become habitual to be effective. But also it can’t be forced:

Imagination is the free play of the mind or it is nothing. For fantasy to serve any purpose for children they must be motivated to use it and not obliged to switch it on when they have no need for it nor to switch it off when it is their way of building a bridge between the real nature of things and how they would like them to be.

(Harold Rosen in Richmond, 2017: 287)

Too many of our children seem to find it difficult to accept that they are being invited to think imaginatively and have conversations with adults. Some use repetitive vocabulary and language generally to express themselves, in mother or other tongue. But we have faith that with enough input and interaction of the inspiring and nurturing kind, rich language will blossom. To extend what we are doing into homes, we have taken up Sarah Stanley’s suggestion of using a story bear. Bherana (Xhosa for little bear) is a bear with a life story, like all of us, who has to be animated to parents at a meeting, and to children. Once introduced, the children take turns to take Bherana
home in a bag with a notebook. They tell their story to their special adult at home, who writes it down. Then they read the story back to Bherana and the child has the privilege to play with this special little bear for the day.

Bherana gives me hope that the children are starting to show their adults what they need and what they are capable of. The sheer delight and enthusiasm which they display towards Bherana is infectious – and some teachers have begun to smile about it, sharing the stories on WhatsApp groups with each other and with us. While it is true that not all parents or caregivers can write and read, many can, and in families, there are often older siblings who are able to as well. It is highly significant that parents are beginning to join in with this process. Bherana is special because we have all made her (or him) special together. The children are excited to take turns. This little bear goes home and is immersed into their life and infused with their stories. S/he is a sturdy connection between home and school. S/he comes back to school, trusted with the whispered secrets of a class of young children to listen and watch as their stories are shared or played out on the magic carpet.

The end (is the beginning)


Many years ago, there lived a king and queen who did not allow their subjects to learn to read and write. ‘The dumber they are’, they said to themselves, ‘the easier they are to rule’. So they posted signs all over their kingdom:

*Beware of the Big Bad Storyteller.*

You see in those days, storytellers gave people ideas free of charge, and the king and queen knew that ideas lead people to think, and thinking people might have ideas of their own, and soon they might want to learn to read and write, or even put their ideas into action to govern themselves. So the king and queen were quick to spread nasty rumours about storytellers and claim that they twisted people’s minds and shrunk their heads. So fearful did the people become that it was easy to convince their subjects to give them money for protection and to build a huge fortress out of straw, wood and bricks so they would be protected from the ferocious storytellers.

*(ibid)*

There is much that is ferocious in South Africa. But not the storytellers – or readers – or writers! It is unconscionable that another generation of young people might leave school, with their curiosity, motivation to learn, their knowledge and even empathy for others compromised by the very education system that purports to provide them with an education. Our work, grounded in Tina Bruce’s principles, has to intensify to set free and celebrate the voice of the *impassioned* storyteller in each little child in South Africa. This is what will breed new generations of writers, an authentic African children’s literature and people who love reading.