Literacy is generally considered to be an inevitable aspect of social and economic development at both the individual and society levels. Recent advancements in technology demand that people are able to navigate the world around them independently by invoking their reading and writing skills. Perceptions of what constitute early childhood literacy and literacy practices vary significantly across both cultural and socioeconomical divides. The foci of teaching–learning goals and related objectives are usually defined by the available resources and future prospects. Some dominant Western societies are purely monolingual, implying that literacy practices espoused evolve around a single language used at home, school and play. Literacy practices in multilingual societies vary significantly from one-language societies. They may require more than one medium of transmission because students use more than two languages. The African continent has more than 2000 languages and dialects spoken by more than one billion inhabitants. Until very recently, African literacies were based predominantly on oral traditions passed on from generation to generation. However, the advent of colonialism in the early twentieth century brought about new literacy practices with foreign languages and instructional practices.

This chapter explores early childhood literacy practices that African countries use to transmit literacy skills in schools. Despite the multiplicity of languages within and across national boundaries, educational practices in Africa are in some ways comparable because of the homogeneous nature of socioeconomic challenges facing the continent. The chapter begins with a general overview of language policies particularly vis-à-vis the dichotomy between students’ mother tongue and school language. Variations in orthography are also discussed to determine how they influence literacy policy and its implementation. To provide a clear picture of the early childhood literacy practices in Africa in general and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, Zambia has been used as an illustration because not only does it provide a good example of multilingualism, but multiple language policy shifts over the years are noteworthy and well documented (Matafwali, 2005; Tambulukani and Bus, 2011; Williams, 1998).

The question of school language and ethnicity in Africa

Africans, especially in countries south of the Sahara desert, are generally multilingual. Languages are also very closely defined by both ethnicity and tribal affiliation (Marten and
Kula, 2008). These ethnic groupings are differentiated mainly by subtle variations in the languages spoken. Languages spoken within close proximity are widely intelligible across tribes. However, the capacity to understand other tribes’ languages fades as the geographical distances get wider between languages or dialects. This situation poses significant challenges for school instructions, especially regarding the choice of languages to adopt for literacy instruction. For instance, due to challenges involved in using all languages for literacy instructions, only seven languages of the 70 languages and dialects spoken across the Zambian landscape are used.

**Language policies across the African continent**

Most African educational systems are bilingual as learners are taught initial literacy skills in their first language along with a foreign official language. With the exception of Ghana and Nigeria where the English language is exclusively used, in the rest of the continent students are now taught in their mother tongue or predominant local language at the beginning of literacy instruction. Foreign languages are only used in higher-grade levels. Almost all African countries have adopted their colonizing power’s language as de facto or official languages after attaining political independence (Plonski et al., 2013). Due to a wide linguistic diversity across the continent, first languages vary considerably both within and across national boundaries. The main languages used as official languages in sub-Saharan African countries are English and French, with Portuguese spoken in Angola, Mozambique and Equatorial Guinea. Tanzania, for reasons of political ideology and expediency, is the only sub-Saharan African country that never adopted a foreign language in the sub-Saharan region. Instead Kiswahili is the official language (McGregor, 1971). The strip of African countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea is entirely Arabic speaking.

There has also been a lot of debate regarding the merits and demerits of adopting foreign or second languages for school instruction. One school of thought argues that learning to read in a foreign language is detrimental to students’ cognitive development (Serpell, 1978; Williams, 1998), while Senapati et al. (2012) counter-argue that teaching children – particularly in the English language – fosters their cognitive processing. Johnson (1970) stated that using foreign languages as a medium of school instruction, especially in developing countries, was problematic because it was ‘educationally undesirable specifically in that it limited what content could be taught, the methods by which it could be taught and the whole nature of what might be experienced as part of the educational process’ (p. 203). In relation to the Zambian situation, Chikalanga (1990), Serpell (1978) and Sharma (1973) have noted that the straight-for-English language policy, which the country adopted immediately after political independence, led to gross retardation in literacy development. This is mainly because, apart from students possessing limited second-language oral proficiency, teaching–learning materials used fail to account for students’ everyday experiences (Mhaka-Mutepfà and Seabi, 2011). Moreover, learning one’s own culture, indigenous knowledge systems and local technologies is, in the broader sense, what is considered as literacy.

On the other hand, Sa (2007) argues that for stakeholders such as politicians, educationists, economists and parents in the developing Anglophone countries,

> Competence in English can be regarded as a form of human capital useful to them in seeking employment, where the return on investment in English is a wage premium (or perhaps, access to higher-paying job categories that require knowledge of English).
African countries

For this school of thought, learning the English language is deliberately encouraged to take advantage of opportunities provided by the ability to read, write and communicate. Consequently, reading, writing and speaking in English is a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. Therefore, it does not matter how or how many students learn to read; what matters is that those who become proficient make the transition from poverty to a better life by accessing better paying job opportunities. Serpell (1989), cited in Williams (2014), noted that in some countries, being literate in English is equal to being educated. For instance, education stakeholders in Tanzania have been questioning the country’s Kiswahili language policy because the majority of the high paying job opportunities requiring communication in a widely spoken language are being taken up by English-speaking professionals from neighbouring countries. Mazrui (1997) noted that many wealthier parents send their children to English-teaching private schools or government schools in neighbouring countries to make them more competitive on the job market.

However, due to persistent poor reading outcomes, low progression rates and high school drop-out rates in second language speaking education systems in Africa (Chikalanga, 1990; Nkamba and Kanyika, 1998; Sharma, 1973; Williams, 1998), most countries are re-introducing mother–tongue-based early literacy programmes. Many recent studies have shown strong support for the efficacy of familiar language instruction (Ouane and Glanz, 2010; Sampa, 2005; Tambulukani et al., 1999). Learning basic literacy in familiar languages facilitates smooth transition to unfamiliar language literacy (Durgunoglu, 2000; Pillunat and Adone, 2009). Consequently, some countries have been prompt to adopt mother–tongue literacy in the early stages of instruction.

Fundamental principles of the orthographic and phonological representation of Zambian languages

The development of most African orthographies used in literacy instructions was informed by the official writing systems of the colonizing powers (Chimuka, 1977). All orthographies in sub-Saharan Africa are based on the alphabetic notation of the Latin writing system in which a graphemic symbol represents a single phonological segment (Kemp, 2006). However, unlike relatively opaque English writing systems, African orthographies exhibit highly transparent associations between phonology and orthography (Schroeder, 2010). Therefore, whereas readers of the orthographically opaque English language rely primarily on prior lexical knowledge to aid the decoding process, African orthographies are largely phonetically decoded.

With the exception of Ethiopian Amharic and Arabic orthographies, most African writing systems are based on the orthographic and phonological structure of the Latin alphabet. Consequently, the orthographic transcriptions of orthographies of most former English colonies are modelled on the English writing system. Zambian orthographies exhibit significant similarities (Chimuka, 1977; Kaani and Joshi, 2013). For instance, the five vowels (a, e, i, o and u) map directly on to English vowels as follows: /a/ as in at, /e/ as in head, /i/ in hit, /o/ in hot and /u/ in book in almost all Zambian languages. The same applies to consonants, although some vary depending on whether they are stressed or hit softly. In Chitonga, letters b and k and digraph ch are either stressed or hit softly. For example, the sound k can either be stressed using digraphs kk as in kkala (sit) or hit softly as in kala (finger nail). According to Schroeder (2010: 31), ‘The double consonant in a word is used to indicate a single strong emphasis on the consonant’. In comparison to the English orthography, all seven school languages in Zambia exhibit very low phonetic density – ‘the ratio between the number of
vowels and consonants in a word’ (Alcock, 2005: 416). African orthographies only have open syllables typically exhibiting CV, CVV (for long vowel sounds) or CCV (for digraphs) characteristics, with syllables always ending in vowels. The English orthography, on the other hand, has six different types of syllables (open, closed, r-controlled, the vowel pair, silent e and consonant –le syllables).

African orthographies are generally very transparent – the number of graphemes is almost always equal to the number of its phonemes and consistently pronounced. For instance, the Nyanja orthography has 29 phonemes, which map perfectly into the 29 graphemes (Kaani and Joshi, 2013). In addition to the traditional single letter graphemes, the Nyanja orthography also has the following common digraphs; ts as in tsiku, dz in umodzi and ph in phiri, which are written and pronounced consistently the same way. Therefore, the phonetic density ratio for Nyanja is a perfect one (29/29 = 1) compared to the English orthography with 44 phonemes written in more than 250 different ways (Joshi et al., 2008/9). This high consistency in grapheme–phoneme correspondences among African languages facilitates both reading and spelling because basic knowledge of letter-sound relationships enables novices to read any words (Aro and Wimmer, 2003; Landerl and Wimmer, 2008).

However, there are some noticeable variations in grapheme to phoneme correspondences in African orthographies. The major source of orthographic variations is lack of cross-language harmonization and coordination in the development process. This is mainly because initially the development of orthographies was exclusively done by missionaries, who restricted their exercise to specific dialects, ethnic communities and mission stations (Mwanakatwe, 1974; Snelson, 1974). As a result, their perspectives and scope did not extend beyond dialects or languages in the mission stations’ immediate hinterland. The scopes of the orthographies developed were unique and in language-specific ways. Kashoki (1978) described the process of orthography development in Africa as being sporadic, haphazard, official, semi-official and non-official.

Failure to harmonize orthographies affects efficient cross-linguistic transfer of basic literacy skills between languages. For example, graphemes representing stressed and soft b phonemes in Nyanja and Tonga orthographies are different. In Nyanja, the softly hit b sound is denoted by ṣ as in Malawi, while the stressed b sound is a single b as in bala, whereas in Tonga stressed and soft b are depicted by single and double b’s digraphs respectively. The Bemba orthography does not have a hard /b/ sound, but soft /b/ is analogous to the Tonga single b. Logically, students initially taught literacy in Tonga and later transitioned to Nyanja will be confused by such inconsistences. This lack of orthographic equivalence has significant implications for literacy instruction across the continent, specifically because teacher education programmes are generally unresponsive to these linguistic variations. Additionally, teachers whose native language and educational background is in one orthography are often indiscriminately posted to teach in regions where there is a different school language.

Orthographic depth has a strong influence on early literacy development (Aro and Wimmer, 2003; Kaani and Joshi, 2013; Landerl and Winner, 2008; Seymour et al., 2003). Seymour and colleagues found that novice readers immersed in transparent Finnish and Spanish orthographies had an unassailable advantage over their counterparts taught in orthographically opaque languages such as English. It is, therefore, logical to argue that poor literacy proficiency demonstrated by Zambian students, when taught in English, may in part be explained by the idiosyncrasies of its orthography (Serpell, 1978; Williams, 1998). Williams compared literacy skills of Malawian and Zambian fourth graders and reported substantial variations in favour of the former, who are initially taught in their mother tongue Chewa. It appears Malawians benefited strongly from both orthographic transparency and language familiarity.

Sylvia Chanda Kalindi and Bestern Kaani
The definition of early literacy success according to Zambian literacy policy

The country's national education agenda is to produce 'full and well-rounded . . . pupils, so that each can develop into a complete person, for his or her own personal fulfilment and the good of society' (Ministry of Education, 1996: 29). Hence, in the early stages, literacy education is fundamentally aimed at enabling 'pupils to read and write clearly, correctly and confidently, in a Zambian language and in English, and to acquire basic numeracy and problem-solving skills' (p. 34), to enable them to participate in civil, social and economic programmes to foster development.

Following the persistent failures of the Straight-for-English language policy (Chikalanga, 1990; Sharma, 1973; Williams, 1998) and the subsequent introduction of the mother-tongue-based literacy policy (Sampa, 2005; Tambulukani and Bus, 2011; Tambulukani et al., 1999), the focus has also shifted from meaning-based (whole-word) to code-based approaches. Currently, Zambia's literacy programme was developed to take advantage of not only the orthographic transparency of the local language (Seymour et al., 2003), but also language familiarity (Tambulukani et al., 1999). The early literacy curriculum is mainly designed to foster the development and consolidation of reading and writing skills in Zambian languages before introducing English-based instructions (Ministry of Education, 2012). The Zambian literacy curriculum was developed based on prevailing best practices in reading research. Curriculum developers considered the importance of five building blocks – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension – essential to the reading process. They acknowledge that ‘Effective reading instruction is based on both macro and micro approaches’ (Ministry of Education, 2012: 5). Teachers are, therefore, expected to be explicit and systematic in teaching, as well as to provide opportunities for reading practice.

In preschool, literacy instructions revolve around oral language activities, with a focus predominantly on students’ phonemic awareness development. Success is, therefore, defined by the ability to orally discriminate various sounds. Early instructional activities include reciting nursery rhymes, before introducing students to meaning-focused activities based on everyday play concrete objects. For instance, a teacher may present an apple, that is the actual fruit, with a view to introducing the initial short a sound in the word apple later. When students get to grade school, the focus of literacy activities shifts from phonemic awareness to phonics – letter–sound correspondences – whilst gradually introducing simple words. At this stage, the initial sound in the word apple is also presented in its written words. Due to the local language’s orthographic transparency and students’ good oral/listening comprehension, decoding abilities are relatively easy to develop through self-teaching mechanisms (Share, 2008).

Although many students transition from mother-tongue-based literacy to English with fairly well-developed phonemic awareness and phonics skills, teachers fail to take advantage of this basic knowledge. This is because teaching literacy in the opaque English orthography varies considerably from transparent local languages; knowing the alphabetic principle, although a necessary prerequisite, is not sufficient for mastery reading in English (Seymour et al., 2003; Ziegler and Goswami, 2005). Literacy teachers, unfortunately, tend to rely heavily on meaning-based whole-word approaches. Williams (1996) provided an example of a typical literacy lesson in English-speaking countries in southern African.

**Teacher:** We are going to read the story that is *Chuma and the Rhino*. That is paragraph three and four, which has been written on the board. Who can read the first sentence in paragraph three? Yes?

**Pupil:** Look at that hippo’s mouth father.
Teacher: Read aloud.

Pupil: Look at that hippo’s mouth father.

Teacher: Once more.

Pupil: Look at that hippo’s mouth father.

Teacher: Yes. The sentence is ‘Look at that hippo’s mouth father’.

Class: Look at that hippo’s mouth father.

Teacher: Look at that hippo’s mouth father.

Class: Look at that hippo’s mouth father.

(Williams, 1996: 199–200)

This example illustrates how teachers’ instruction focuses on sentence-level meaning in English literacy lessons, with rote-repetition as the most prominent feature. The teacher fails to engage students at the micro level to emphasis phonological processing. Typically, these reading-like activities may only better qualify as literacy practice rather than literacy instruction or reading comprehension training.

At preschool and first-grade levels, students’ literacy proficiency is typically measured using orally presented phonemic awareness assessments in addition to visual discrimination of alphabet letters and the alphabetical principle skills. By second grade, literacy assessments involve decoding by sounding out initial consonant sounds, word attack and related phonics knowledge. Higher-order skills such as locating and identifying syllables, proficiency in silent reading of short grade-appropriate passages and answering of comprehension questions are also evaluated at this level. Writing proficiency measures focus on copying and completion of sentences on work-cards (Ministry of Education, 2003). Sadly, the Zambian Basic Education Syllabus does not provide specific guidelines regarding how these skills can be assessed; nor does it offer alternative remedial strategies in case of failure to meet expected literacy goals.

**How closely are the major foci of the national early years policy translated into curriculum models?**

In Zambia, as noted earlier, the early literacy curriculum has solid research-based theoretical underpinnings (McCardle et al., 2008). There is, however, a considerable gap between curricular provisions and their implementation. Translating national early literacy policies into actionable objectives has been challenging for most African countries. Both national and international surveys monitoring literacy achievement across education systems show lower than expected literacy achievement in Africa (Chinapah, 2003). Zambia was among the lowest achieving countries on both the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) and Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) surveys (Chinapah, 2003; Nkamba and Kanyika, 1998; Spaull, 2011). Only a small number of students participating in these evaluation studies met expected levels of performance. The main conclusion from these research findings is that generally literacy levels are better in students’ mother tongue than in the second language.

**Factors influencing the variation in reading achievement**

Several factors have been attributed to the existing gap between expected early literacy achievement and actual outcomes. Inadequate teacher preparation and poor literacy policy implementation are the main culprits (Kelly and Kanyika, 2000; Williams, 2014). Moats
(1994) found a strong correlation between teacher preparedness and student achievement. In addition, ‘Poor instruction due to poor teacher knowledge due to poor teacher preparation has been suggested as one of the major causes of reading failure’ (Cantrell et al., 2012: 528). The recent introduction of mother tongue literacy instruction was not accompanied by professional development efforts to improve skills of both pre- and in-service teachers. According to Cantrell et al. (2012), successful teachers have a good understanding of basic language constructs in reading. Therefore, teachers must receive appropriate training accompanied by constant professional development; otherwise, teachers ‘cannot pass on understanding of the basic language constructs considered essential for early reading success when they do not possess that understanding’ (Cantrell et al., 2012: 527).

**Principal methods and content areas of literacy instruction: notable classroom methods of literacy instruction**

As earlier indicated, early literacy instruction in most sub-Saharan countries are in the mother tongue or the familiar language in line with research indicating that literacy is learnt best when the language of instruction is familiar (Williams, 1998). For example, in Kenya, the language policy specifies the use of the mother tongue in the first three primary grades, while English becomes the language of instruction from the fourth grade (Commeyras and Inyega, 2007). Most countries in Southern Africa have adopted the South African Breakthrough-To-Literacy (BTL) programme aimed at teaching initial literacy in native languages. The Zambian version of the BTL, New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL), was translated into seven major local languages and officially launched nationwide in 2003 (Sampa, 2005). Students transition to English at second grade using the Step Into English (SITE) component, and between grades 3 and 7, the Read On course continues with dual language instruction in English and a native language (Ministry of Education, 1996). In addition to employing the language experience approach, the NBTL also incorporates approaches like Phonics, Look and Say and ‘Real Books’ (Ministry of Education, 2002). The New Breakthrough To Literacy (NBTL) course has three stages. The first stage involved introducing learners to the class routine, pre-reading activities and a set of core vocabulary items. In stage two, learners worked on sets of core vocabulary. After acquiring basic literacy, tasks on more challenging work was introduced. It is important to note here that, currently, Zambia is in the process of changing the literacy programme to extend the period of literacy instruction in the mother tongue to three years (Luffman, 2014).

The most common approach across sub-Saharan Africa in native language literacy instruction is the syllabic method – ‘division of words into syllables’. In reading, ‘words are broken down into syllables phonemically, according to their sound’ (Thomas, 2003: 198) – thus, teachers create syllable charts based on vowels a e i o u to form syllables such as sa se si so su, fa fe fi fo fu using consonants. The syllable chart is mainly used for making up different words and also alerts learners to the different sound components in a word (Commeyras and Inyega, 2007; Tambulukani and Bus, 2011). In view of the orthographic transparency of Bantu languages in sub-Saharan Africa, the syllabic ‘consonant–vowel’ approach is suitable. It is, however, important to note here that the effectiveness of any literacy instruction method adopted depends, in part, on the teacher’s content and pedagogical knowledge. In a study aimed at improving the teaching and learning of basic literacy in Africa, Akyeampong and colleagues (2013) observed that training in reading instruction is focused mostly on content rather than teaching methods. For instance, only one single semester or term is allocated to teaching methods in Ghana and Mali. In Senegal and
Tanzania, the study found that ‘teaching reading does not even merit a topic on its own’ (Akyeampong et al., 2013: 275).

Although there is very little information regarding how literacy instruction/related activities is generally done in preschools from the sub-Saharan region in Africa (as will be highlighted later in this chapter), Zimba’s (2011) study highlighted some salient emergent literacy support practices in preschools. Working among various early learning centres in the North-Western province of Zambia, Zimba observed that reading was mainly done using charts or flashcards while reading from books was reserved for first graders. Furthermore it was rare in most schools to find children actively involved in shared book reading or to find students being supported to read, although teachers were seen reading to the children. According to Zimba, preschools in Zambia tend to have a more formal approach to learning as opposed to the play-oriented style of learning typical of early learning centres in developed countries (2011).

### Provision of early literacy for special needs children

Several African countries have made positive strides towards meeting the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of achieving universal primary education. The introduction of free compulsory primary education has tremendously increased enrolment rates, including compulsory education for students with special education needs (SEN). For instance, Zambia has adopted a policy ensuring that children are assessed to determine their specific needs before school placement (Paananen et al., 2011). However, although access is almost guaranteed, the quality of education provided, especially among SEN pupils, has not improved. Most African countries lack qualified personnel to carry out the assessments. In Zambia, for example, there are very few psychologists and the available few are mainly found in the big cities. Inadequate funding to special needs centres and scarcity of spaces in local schools also make it difficult to adequately attend to the literacy needs of children with learning disabilities. Depending on the economic status of the area where a child is located, identification and placement of SEN may be made by the class teacher, parent or even a medical doctor. However, as Paananen, February, Kalima et al. (2011) noted, ideal assessment and intervention involving multidisciplinary teams, as is the case in countries like Finland, is still a pipe dream in many African countries.

Various non-governmental organizations have partnered with African governments to improve identification and remediation skills of primary sector educationists such as classroom teachers, special education teachers and psychologists. For example, the Niilo Maki Institute (MNI), a Finnish non-governmental organization, has had projects in Kenya, Namibia and Zambia for close to two decades (NMI, 2011). Although some countries like Kenya now have special education assessment centres in every district, for most other countries, these centres are only found in national capitals or major cities and have generally not trickled down to schools in the rural regions of the countries. Furthermore, the major problem in most African countries is that the means of diagnosing learning disabilities such as dyslexia is based on Western norms because there are no empirically established norms for locally available assessment tools.

### Interventions for children lagging behind

Although most governments through policy documents and implemented literacy programmes do recognize the need for intervention or remedial work for pupils lagging behind in literacy
African countries
tasks, the situation at the school level is not encouraging. For instance, in Namibia, although
the law requires that students who lag behind receive additional learning support, its
implementation is being hindered by insufficient human and material resources. According
to Paananen, February, Hihambo et al. (2011), where additional remedial services are
available, they may not always be monitored or adequately evaluated to determine their
effectiveness.

Availability of literacy resources to foster reading and
writing skills at various ability levels
Since the introduction of free education, most public schools in sub-Saharan Africa have
had to cope with increasingly large class sizes. This has resulted in various difficulties such
as having inadequate literacy resources to foster reading and writing skills. In countries like
Zimbabwe where Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes enrolment is manda-
tory, Moyo et al. (2012) observed that even at this very early stage, the teacher–pupil ratio
is very high, typically above 20. In Zambia, ECD class sizes ranged from 45 to 80 young
children (Iruka et al., 2012). The unprecedented high demand for education has negatively
impacted the government’s efforts to effectively source and disburse literacy resources to
all schools. Lack of teaching resources including picture books or toys for the ECD pro-
grammes is more acute in rural than urban areas. In cases where the ECD is run by com-
unities, peasant parents fail to financially sustain viable programmes. In an evaluation of
early childhood education programmes in Zambia, Matafwali and Munsaka (2011) high-
lighted the fact that these programmes are still in their infancy. They found that in most
centres, teaching and learning materials were not adequate, and in most cases no efforts
were made by the teachers to employ locally available materials. Although in countries like
Namibia and South Africa, governments are the most actively involved in providing and
monitoring the ECD programmes, for most other countries it is the private sector that is
more actively involved in early childhood education (Kalindi, 2015). The absence of gov-
ernment efforts in monitoring literacy education in early childhood centres frequently
leads to adoption of poorly designed curricula unsuitable for the needs of early learners
(for more details see Matafwali and Munsaka, 2011; Moyo et al., 2012). On a positive note,
however, most governments are slowly incorporating early childhood education into the
formal structures of their education systems. For example, in Zambia, a few identified pilot
schools have now incorporated early childhood centres as well alongside conventional
primary education. Similar ECD efforts in Zimbabwe and Mozambique are, however,
compounded by financial constraints.

An Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessment in Zambia also indicated that
the availability of resources for teachers and pupils in the early grades is low, with only 8 per
cent of schools receiving the appropriate number of textbooks for the population of pupils
at the beginning of the school year. This study further showed that on average 20 per cent
of the pupils had a language textbook, while the majority of classrooms had textbooks for
10 per cent or fewer of their pupils (Collins et al., 2012). Although this scenario only
highlights the Zambian situation, the situation is typical of most countries in sub-Saharan
Africa; they are all faced with challenges of big class sizes and constrained funding. Spaul’s
(2011) review of school performance in Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa
pointed out that the problem of ‘lack of textbook-access is now commonly accepted in the
South African research’ (p. 50). This review further found that sixth graders in Botswana and
Mozambique had the highest proportion of pupils–textbook ratio. However, concerning
a review of classroom based literature in southern Africa, the situation in countries like Namibia, Botswana and South Africa could be completely different.

Since early literacy instruction in most of sub-Saharan Africa now starts with the familiar native language, most of the recent published children’s books are also beginning to reflect original African settings and are mostly based on typical African folklore – oral stories designed to express ‘societal expectations, values and morals’ (Peek and Yankah, 2004: 418) – depicting animal characters such as hares, lions, elephants, hyenas and other common fauna and flora. It is assumed that the familiarity of this literature would encourage students to read and get help from parents, most of whom are semi-literate, to assist in their children’s education.

Three major concerns for current and future literacy provision in Africa

Despite concerted efforts to improve early literacy prospects of children, Africa is still facing and may continue to face three major challenges (Marope, 2005). The first concern relates to students’ school readiness and responsiveness to early literacy acquisition. The majority of new entrants to either preschool or grade school come from poorly educated households lacking in basic understanding of the essence of ECDDE (Zuilkowski et al., 2012). Without an appropriate home background to necessitate the smooth acquisition of literacy skills, students are bound to fail. The second concern, in line with school readiness, is related to language policies adopted by sub-Saharan African countries. Due to linguistic variations across the continent, there are usually mismatches between students’ mother tongue and the official school language, and new learners are not orally competent in school languages. Oral proficiency significantly affects literacy outcomes (Williams, 1998). More research to understand the interplay between languages of instruction and literacy is required as this area is significantly under-researched.

Thirdly, despite low literacy proficiency among novice learners in Africa, especially in the sub-Saharan region, there have been no deliberate efforts on the part of education authorities to ameliorate the problems through early identification, assessment and remediation programmes (Aro and Ahonen, 2013). There is a general lack of assessment, intervention and remediation programmes mainly due to lack of empirical evidence to guide policy development – the little available research on early literacy is based on instruments that are not culturally appropriate because no local interpretation norms are available. Extensive research on these three issues is required to strengthen early literacy programmes in Africa.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we explored early literacy practices across Africa, with particular emphasis on the sub-Saharan region, where literacy skills are acquired in a language other than the learners’ mother tongue. Acquiring oral language competence in one’s mother tongue before the school language raises pertinent issues. With the exception of Tanzania, all sub-Saharan countries have adopted a respective colonizing country’s language as their official languages upon acquiring political independence as local languages were not transcribed into written forms at the time. Examples from countries like Zambia show that reading proficiency in especially English speaking was significantly poor and studies demonstrated that poor instructions – including under-qualified teachers and a dearth of teaching-learning material, in addition to the orthographic depth of the English language – were responsible for the status. Consequently, there is an emerging trend of adopting mother-tongue instruction before
introducing foreign and more challenging orthographies in later grades, and using more effective phonics-based approaches in early literacy teaching in Africa. The good news is that reading outcomes are on the upward swing since the change in policy was implemented, but more research is needed to determine what works and what needs to be changed.

References


African countries


