

## CHAPTER 3

# MEDIATION AND LITERACY ACQUISITION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

*"Is it a curse or a witchcraft  
That makes me an illiterate  
A person who cannot read or write  
In these modern times?*

*Is it a curse or a witch-craft  
That makes me deaf and blind  
To these robots and road signs that give warning  
In this fast moving world?*

*Is it a curse or a witch-craft  
That makes me an unknowing parent  
Who cannot help his poor kids  
In this demanding world?*

*Oh! My Ancestors  
Come and unchain me  
From the world of books  
That I may be free again and dance with joy."*

Bertha Noge in Pitse (1988:14)

The individual baby is born with inherited tendencies that fiercely drive the individual on in the growth process (Winnicott, 1986:144). This includes the tendency towards integration of the personality, towards the wholeness of a personality in body and mind, and towards object relating, which gradually becomes a matter of interpersonal relationships as the child begins to grow up and understand the existence of other people. All this comes from within the child. Nevertheless, these processes of growth cannot take place without a facilitating environment, especially at a young age.

A facilitating environment must have a human quality, not a mechanical perfection. Winnicott (1986:144) argues that if the facilitating environment is not good enough, then the line of life is broken and the very powerful inherited tendencies cannot carry the child on to personal fulfilment. According to Winnicott (1986:148), nothing that a person is capable of is due to himself; it was either inherited, or else somebody enabled him to get to the place where he is.

In the past three decades psychologists and educators have shown a growing interest in the cognitive development of infants and pre-schoolers (Wiechers, 1996:175). They have come to realise that the pre-school years are most important for the child's intellectual development. Beck (1986:18) states: *"all later learning is likely to be influenced by the very basic learning which has taken place before the age of five or six..."* It is therefore also likely that retarded performance could be caused by a lack of early learning.

McCandles (1964) contends that the pitiful situation of at least 85% of the mentally retarded is

attributable to stimulus deprivation, while Tarjan (1970) states that mild mental retardation is the most common form of handicap, and he attributes this largely to pedagogical neglect.

Feuerstein (1980) finds that a major inhibiting factor in respect of children with learning problems was poor pedagogical input during the child's first years of life. These children appear unintelligent and dull because they lack high quality 'early mediated learning experiences'. In his introduction to Feuerstein's book, Michael Begab (Feuerstein, 1980:xiv) says: *"In Feuerstein's conceptual framework, children from economically and psychologically impoverished homes perform poorly on intelligence tests and function generally at a low level because they have been denied appropriate mediated learning experience (MLE)"*. This type of deprivation - absence of adults in the child's life who can effectively focus attention and interpret to him the significance of objects, events and ideas in his social surroundings - is the root of most failure.

The most serious impediment to a child's intellectual maturation is therefore the ignorant or uninvolved parent or early caregiver (Wiechers, 1996:177). What one teaches can only be implanted on what capacity is already present in the individual child, based on the early experiences and in terms of the ever-widening circle of family, school and social life. Therefore the important role of mediation should be addressed.

## 3.2 MEDIATION

According to Feuerstein (1980:15), the development of cognitive structure in the organism can be conceived as a product of two modalities of interaction between the organism and its environment: **direct exposure to sources of stimuli and mediated learning.**

The first modality of learning as a function of direct exposure is consistent with the stimulus-response formulations of learning theorists such as Piaget (1966), who conceives of cognitive development as a function of the interaction between the organism and the environment.

The second modality, mediated learning experience, which is far less universal and is characteristic of the human race, refers to the way in which stimuli emitted by the environment are transformed by a 'mediating' agent, usually a parent, sibling or other caregiver. This mediating agent, guided by its intentions, culture and emotional investment, selects and organises the world of stimuli for the child. The mediator selects the stimuli that are the most appropriate and then schedules them. This process of mediation affects the cognitive structure of the child (Feuerstein, 1980:16).

Mediated learning experience, according to Feuerstein, can therefore be considered as the ingredient that determines differential cognitive development. In terms of this theory, the deficiencies responsible for retarded cognitive performance, of which literacy is an example, are conceived as belonging to the syndrome of 'cultural deprivation', which results in the development of 'special educational

needs' as described in chapter two.

In this sense, according to Feuerstein (1980:13), cultural deprivation is the result of a failure on the part of a group to transmit or mediate its culture to the new generation. It has been suggested that, not only are disadvantaged groups culturally deprived, but that the reason for both their disadvantage and their deprivation is the fact that they are also culturally different. This fact has important implications for the acquisition of certain skills for certain cultures. The following sections will therefore address the position of literacy with regard to the cultures it serves.

### **3.3 LITERACY AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ACT**

Gardner (1991:38) argues that we differ from other organisms because we participate in a rich culture, one that has its own evolution over many thousands of years. Indeed we have no choice: we are as much creatures of our culture as we are of our brains, and therefore the environment and culture of origin play significant roles in the development of the child.

Literacy does not have the same value for all. The level of literacy that people achieve, depends to a certain extent on the uses of literacy in any specific cultural group and social setting - the availability of printed matter and other facilities, people's attitudes towards literacy, as well as the resources made available to people to become literate (Ellis, 1988:16). The culture that they grow up in may as such be the primary cause of their disability to achieve their real potential.

### 3.3.1 Cultural and contextual disadvantage - the origin of special needs?

In a population like that of South Africa there is a diversity of cultures with different values and norms amongst the people. These cultures vary to a great extent and this fact impacts on the literacy development of the members of these cultural groups, and on their adaptation to the society that they live in.

Kriegler (1990:72) in her argument about the dynamics of early parent-child literacy events describes some typical scenarios regarding the nature of the early mediation and its relevance for literacy acquisition and future success of the child. Two of these scenarios will be described in order to illustrate the differences:

*Christine, already at the age of six months gave attention to books and book related materials (Heath, 1982). Her room had a bookshelf and was decorated with pictures and posters as well as toys and blankets that referred to the books she was familiar with and the characters in them. As soon as she started verbalising about the pictures in the books her parents expanded on her simple questions about the nature of things, to questions regarding the characteristics thereof.*

*From a very young age she played the role of 'question answerer' who had knowledge of*

*books (Heath, 1982:52). Objects and happenings in real life were compared, by her mother, to the objects in her storybooks. There was a constant reference between real life and the world of print.*

*Christine was often prompted to tell stories, and to relate real life experiences with her stories. Her parents asked her what she liked and did not like; her opinions were important and interesting to them.*

*Before she entered school she was already capable of telling a story or making one up. She was also aware of herself as being storyteller and as object of the telling. They often spoke about the uses of print in everyday life: street names, road signs, advertisements, instructions, menus, recipes, newspapers, magazines et cetera, and her bedtime story was the basis of the literacy activity of which a big part of her life consisted of (Heath, 1982).*

*Books and book-related activities played an important role in Christine's household. She was well-aware that literacy was important for success in life.*

The pattern which is observable in Christine's household is repeated many times in the lives of children who are highly successful in literacy acquisition, school and in later life (Wells, 1986). The pattern of this child's informal education was such that the child entered school with a cognitive style that guaranteed scholastic success. **She was literate before she could read and had mastered**

**certain meanings which are characteristic of a literate culture before she entered school.**

*Elias was born in a hut where nobody could read or write. There were no books, magazines or writing materials. Paper was being used to light the fire - not as a means of establishing meaning. His mother was so caught up in the everyday struggle to survive that she hardly had time to talk to Elias (Thirion, 1989). She did not regard herself as a "teacher" of children (See Feuerstein, 1980; Harkness, 1988; Heath, 1982). All she taught them was to do things which were essential for the functioning of the household. Communication with her children were mainly commands such as "Look after your sister", "Eat your 'pap' (porridge)", "Fetch the water". She was an 'executive mother' - whose task it was to control the activities of her children (Harkness, 1988).*

*She battled to send Elias to school but the tragedy is that what Elias learnt in school fell on deaf ears. He was not able to escape the illiteracy cycle. The reading and writing skills that he learned was hardly more than a layer over the illiterate cultural foundation.*

*And one day when Christine, as a medical practitioner, met the underfed Elias in the emergency unit of the hospital and handed him a prescription which he was unable to read, they were both aware of the gulf that separated them but could not comprehend what the core of the difference between them was: a bedtime story for the one, a bowl of 'pap' and 'biesmelk' for the other.*



### 3.3.2 Literacy in a dual culture

Literacy cannot be neutral (Combrink, 1996:1) as it is always situated within a specific historical, social and cultural context. Reading is a constructive act. A reader does not extract meaning from a page but constructs meaning from information on the page and information already in his mind. Cultural literacy refers to the information already in the reader's mind. The reader who is not culturally literate, cannot really understand what he is reading, cannot be a participant in the discussion and cannot make necessary inferences (Combrink, 1996:1).

Culture, according to Combrink (1996:2), can be described as everything that people construct in social interaction, everything the people have done and are currently still doing. People inherit and construct culture. Culture is both the individual's and the group's whole way of life.

Childhood in literate societies therefore implies encounters with reading to some purpose, even if it is limited to identifying the names of people, towns and villages, streets, shops, foods and so on in the ordinary business of life in the home and neighbourhood. To children reading is what adults make of it for them in contexts where these same adults find it significant in their own lives, and such significance may include deliberate as well as incidental instruction of the young (Francis, 1990:17).

Literacy has now become an essential part of modern industrialised western society (Cleaver,

1988:270). Some people would even regard literacy as a basic human right. Illiterates in a western dominant society are therefore to a large extent victims of a social milieu where literacy is necessary in order to cope effectively with social order.

Industrial societies tend to create economies and social differences between advantaged and disadvantaged people. Lack of education produces poverty. A vicious circle can be set up for the disadvantaged so that they, as well as the children they must educate, remain victims of the social system in which they live.

Ogbu (1987:151) suggests that the identity and cultural frame of reference that the disadvantaged group had developed to cope with their subordinate relationship with the more advantaged group further reinforce the problems. Although the adaptation arose historically in response to the treatment of the disadvantaged by the advantaged group, it still persists. Reasons for this are for example:

- The barriers in opportunity structure and other forms of differential treatment of the disadvantaged continue and are perceived to continue in one form or another,
- Because of the way the schools have continued to treat the disadvantaged, and
- Because of the types of responses that the disadvantaged have developed to cope with their situation

The problem of illiteracy among the disadvantaged is part of the broader problem of low academic

performance and relates to the existence of special needs (Ogbu, 1987:151). Ogbu (1987:152) distinguishes between three different types of cultural and language differences which are at the root of the situation:

- Universal cultural difference: This refers to the transition from home to school, which, for all children involves adjustment to new behavioural requirements, social relations, style of language use or communication and style of thinking.
- Primary cultural/language difference: These are the differences that existed before the advantaged and disadvantaged population groups came into contact. If members of the non-dominant (disadvantaged) population group do not perceive the learning of a standard language (for example English) and the academic aspects of the school curriculum as threatening to their language, culture or identity, they will interpret school behaviour and practices for academic achievement as appropriate means to acquire literacy, as one of the means of future employment and self-advancement. With this attitude they will be able to cross cultural boundaries and do well in school.
- Secondary cultural difference: These problems arose after the two different population groups came into contact - where the one group dominated the other. The disadvantaged population group developed "secondary" cultural ways of coping, perceiving and feeling (Ogbu, 1987:155). The secondary cultural differences are often

differences in style rather than in content. These styles are part of an oppositional cultural frame of reference and the disadvantaged or non-dominant group equates this kind of learning with linear acculturation that is threatening to their culture/language, identity, and sense of security. Secondary cultural differences between blacks and whites arose in America after blacks had been involuntarily brought into the society as slaves, relegated to menial status and denied the chance of true assimilation. In South Africa where the black population was oppressed, they have developed new or 'secondary' cultural ways of coping, perceiving and feeling. They have developed a new cultural frame of reference in opposition to the cultural framework of their 'white oppressors', which means that, because of their oppositional frame of reference, they do not respond to learning standard English or Afrikaans, and this "attitude" tends to be often associated with the persistence of learning difficulties.

### 3.3.3 Mediation in a disadvantaged culture

Among culturally deprived groups, what is transmitted tends to be limited to those aspects to which the child is directly exposed by means of his sensory, perceptual, and motor behaviour (Feuerstein, 1980:37). This exposure is not a transmission in the sense of being mediated or interpreted to the learning organism, but direct exposure to sources of stimuli, which, when not present, adds up to a breakdown in cultural transmission.

Teachers and students from developing countries experience unique and specific problems originating from their socio-economic world. The socio-economic circumstances and lack of learning experiences are brought into the learning situation and therefore place enormous pressure and demands on the teachers to make their lessons successful (Thirion, 1989:386). Although teachers cannot control factors in their learners' life-worlds, they have to consider them in the teaching-learning situation and thereby contribute to the unloading of the field of tension resulting from them. The negative self-perception of the learners, that can also be the result of their lacking learning experiences and their socio-economic circumstances, can also be counteracted.

The task of the school is to educate and guide the learner in order to fulfil his rightful place in society (Thirion, 1989:386). The reaching of this educational goal differs from culture to culture, tribe to tribe and society to society.

If the socio-economic reality of most black or coloured learners is taken into account, it is obvious that it has a definite influence on the learning that takes place in school. A significant influence on the problems experienced by the disadvantaged learner is the occurrence of urbanisation. The vast concentration of people around towns results in inadequate housing and economic demands that force both parents to work, and, this has resulted in child-neglect and the declining of parental authority. The city child has become a mass person, estranged from his tribe and confronted with unfamiliar elements.

Certain groups may experience a transition from one established way of life to another and may attempt to obliterate their past. This occurs for example when a non-dominant culture perceives specific advantages as accompanying the dominant culture and decides that the past must be relinquished - often to the extent of rejecting previous cultural identification. Two characteristics of the cultures that impact on the learning acquisition are the oral tendency of the disadvantaged culture and the mediating reality that they find themselves in:

- Oral versus literate culture

The black population have a historically oral culture. Many educators argue that 'disadvantaged' children do poorly in school because they come from an oral culture. D'Angelo (1983:104) writes: "*Many students come from a 'residually oral' culture, a stratum within mainstream of society where oral modes of expression permeate thinking. They come from homes where speech is more widespread than reading and writing.*" What he suggests is that one possible reason for the decline in literacy might be related to the incipient or undeveloped forms of literate thinking in some of our students. The home situation of the disadvantaged also impacts significantly on their learning acquisition:

- The home situation of the disadvantaged

As some disadvantaged parents had not been exposed to the school reality as children, they lack interest and are unable to provide a stimulating environment that enhances learning. Some of these parents place little importance on education and do not motivate their children, or are unable to do so. Teachers in these settings also receive little appreciation for their inputs. Children are often left to themselves when doing homework and the absence of authoritative figures creates a false sense of independence. These children then find it hard to accept being prescribed to and commanded in the learning situation and some refuse to accept the authority of teachers (Thirion, 1989:388).

Children have a need to identify and associate with their parents. The absence of their parents and the influence of traditional practices and habits are frustrating this need. The child's traditional role as subordinate towards the teacher as authoritative figure causes passivity on the part of the child and can lead to inadequate interaction.

Thirion (1989:389) mentions that in some circumstances the children have already accepted the western practices and habits but are still taught by teachers representing the traditional society. On the other hand the child might not have accepted the western practices and is now being exposed to them in the formal school situation.

The culture-gap between the two groups may be so considerable that they are unable to find each other in the learning situation. Because black education in South Africa is based on western practices, many teachers feel that more attention should be given to the black culture in the learning situation, because: *"It is important that the tradition must not be left to die, it must be enriched. As part of one's culture, the child must be made to be proud of his culture. Culture is a heritage that has to be mentioned"* (Thirion, 1987:159). The lack of the traditional and cultural therefore, results in negative reactions which are related to radicalism and propaganda (Thirion, 1989:389). The children find themselves in two worlds, namely the traditional at home and the western in the school.

Confusion grows, and not only the cultururation but also the acculturation is delayed and the teachers find it hard to get through to the fundamentals (basics). These children lose perspective, and the reliability of the textbook, learning content and knowledge of the teachers is being doubted.

Disadvantaged children are also confronted with home duties like cleaning, cooking and care for the elderly, earlier in their lives, which sometimes results in them coming to school late or not at all. The children's learning time is thus often interrupted for tasks.

Other home affairs that affect the children are the financial position of the family, that may result in a lack of electricity as well as a lack of food and adequate clothing. Learners are sometimes unable to concentrate, have negative self-concepts, and start blaming the school and authorities for the suffering that they must endure to become literate.



The abuse of alcohol and domestic violence also cause an unfavourable learning atmosphere, and together with noise, home responsibilities, radio and T.V, overcrowdedness in the home, lack of lights, insufficient study-area, friends and poor parents leads to inadequate learning behaviour. They are therefore often unprepared, achieve low results and then become unmotivated and disinterested (Thirion, 1989:390).

Although disadvantaged children grow up in environments that are not favourable for excelling academically, they still need to adapt to the westernised culture, where much emphasis is placed on literate adequacy in order to fulfil their rightful place in society.

#### **3.4 'CULTURAL LITERACY' - WHY IT HAS TO CHANGE**

Christenbury (1989:14) refers to the term 'Cultural Literacy', that describes a familiarity with the dominant culture which insists that students - and the populace at large - need a body of general and specific knowledge to serve as a common touchstone among all. Hirsch (1987:xiii), who wrote a book on this topic, defines cultural literacy as that which one needs to "thrive in the world". Hirsch also regards poverty and illiteracy as the direct legacy of the current misguided educational system, and this intensifies what he and his supporters see as the urgency of the issue.

In South Africa literacy is a characteristic of the advantaged culture. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) stresses

the social origins of language and thinking and begins to conceptualise the mechanisms by which culture becomes a part of how each person thinks, learns, and relates to others and the environment.

If we live in a culture where a large proportion of the people are unable to 'thrive in the world' because of illiteracy, as a result of the difference in cultures, isn't it the task of the 'dominant' culture to educate them in order to fulfil their rightful place in society?

If educational psychology is to make any impact in terms of quality of instruction and issues of equity, its focus must be on preventative and development work (Kriegler, 1993:69), and therefore early education and its impact on literacy acquisition need to be addressed urgently.

### **3.5 EARLY EDUCATION AND LITERACY ACQUISITION**

#### **3.5.1 The quest for early intervention**

All over Europe there is a spreading awareness that very young children, below the age of formal schooling, are capable of learning complex literacy lessons (Dombey, 1995:95). Scarcely more than a decade ago, it was widely agreed that children could not and should not learn to read before the age of six. In most of the countries of Europe this is the age fixed for entry into formal school, and the age at which formal literacy teaching begins. However, this last decade has shown us that the acquisition of literacy is not a straightforward rite of passage into the institutional world of school.

Instead it is a long and complex process that begins early, when very young children, who are far more capable than we used to believe, begin, in the world of the family and the environment, to understand and express themselves through the written word. This process continues to develop and to play a significant role throughout the long duration of education.

Becoming literate is not simply a matter of acquiring a value-free technology. Learning to read and write is now most fruitfully seen as the construction of linguistic meaning and the initiation into social practices. In the earliest stages of their entry into the written word children encounter more forms of language and new orders of meaning. As our views of literacy and literacy learning have become more complex, so we have seen the need for more complex and subtle forms of assessment. Although the educational systems in different countries vary, there are fundamental similarities underneath this variety. Many examples exist, that describe, not isolated successes, but fruits of shared strategies that really respond to the needs of all children, whatever their nationalities, their languages or their socio-economic background (see par 4.5 for a detailed description).

### 3.5.2 South Africa: The current situation

A study carried out by Kriegler et al (1993) in Venda revealed that of caregivers in disadvantaged societies, 53% had no formal schooling. 70% indicated that they never talk to their children about schoolwork, and 59% admitted that they never tell a story. These findings were disconcerting because the predictors of children's ability to benefit from formal education are primarily dependent upon the

quality and quantity of informal education at home, which should be able to do much to alleviate factors such as ‘cultural differences’ and ‘socio-economic status’ (Kriegler, 1993; Heath, 1982; Sternberg, 1987; Sulzby, 1988; Wells, 1986).

Kriegler (1993:76) states that children in disadvantaged and illiterate communities need better-than-average literacy instruction; they need an introduction to literacy that is so rich in story, language, print and books that their early disadvantage may be erased.

Kriegler (1993:77) further states that while the rest of the world is focussing on the importance of early literacy programmes (Cambourne, 1989; Clay, 1987; Heath & Branscombe, 1986; Strickland & Morrow, 1989) there is an ominous silence in this regard in the South African pre-school field. There are eight million pre-school children in South Africa who need early childhood educare, most of them poor, and half of them living in rural areas (Grassroots, 1991). As described in par 3.3.1, the disadvantaged are doomed to a life of illiteracy, unless they can be helped to break the cycle of illiteracy by means of mediation.

In order to address the special educational needs of the disadvantaged, it would be purposeful to first address literacy acquisition in its normal state and the mediating practices related thereto.

### 3.6 MEDIATING LITERACY ACQUISITION

Two contrasting theoretical explanations dominate the discussion on where a child's control of his native language, as well as literacy come from. Chomsky (1976) argued that it is the innate structure of the learner operating upon the specific organisation of whichever human language he is exposed to. An input of primary linguistic data is necessary, but, provided it contains a proportion of well-formed sentences appropriate to their situational context, the precise form of input does not significantly affect the course that learning takes.

The second explanation, by contrast, emphasises the role of the environment (also refer Feuerstein 1980). Observation across a wide range of language communities shows that adults, when speaking to young language learners modify their speech in the direction of syntactic simplicity and semantic and pragmatic redundancy in context. These features provide the child with what is, effectively, graded instruction concerning the formal structure of the language and the way in which form is related to intended meaning. Some degree of structural pre-adaptation to the task on the part of the learner is assumed, of course, but in this account the main burden of explanation for the course taken in acquisition falls on the input (Wells, 1986:17).

These theoretical accounts are mutually exclusive alternatives, with acceptance of either one requiring the rejection of the other. It is, however, important to notice that language is both system and resource. Language learning should be seen as a resulting form of interaction between an organism

pre-adapted to the learning task and an environment that to varying degrees facilitates the task by providing evidence that the organism requires. However, learning is also dependent on interaction in another sense, for it is participation in conversation that provides learners with opportunities to construct and test their representation of language, both as a system and as resource.

As educators we are concerned with the characteristics of both learners and their environments. But most particularly we are concerned with the way in which learners and their environments interact, for it is in that interaction that we, as parents and teachers, can best help children to realise their linguistic/literate and intellectual potential by adopting an interactional style that maximises opportunities for learning.

### 3.6.1 Literacy mediation at home

In the simplest, most traditional societies, education takes place largely within a family environment of young children. Often these families are extended, including assorted kin from each of several generations. In such traditional environments, it is assumed that children will follow in their parents' steps. From an early age children witness their elders fulfilling certain roles. Most learning occurs through direct observation, although such learning-by-watching will be punctuated on occasion by overt instructions, the invoking of specific rules, or explicit demonstrations of procedures that may not be readily observable (Gardner, 1991:121).

To children, reading is what adults make it for them, in contexts where these same adults find it significant in their own lives, and such significance may include deliberate as well as incidental instruction of the written words. Whether or not parents teach their children strategies to attack unfamiliar written words, much experience boils down to a straightforward meaningful connection between spoken and written words. This connection can be at the level of anything from a single word to a sentence or two, a short rhyme, or some other fairly simple written display (Francis, 1990:19).

As societies grow more complex, with valued skills attaining high degrees of intricacy, it is no longer possible for youngsters to master the requisite roles simply by 'hanging around'. Traditionally when the mastery of certain skills, such as literacy and numeracy, needed a more formal form of instruction in order to be acquired, the youngster was sent to a 'master' with whom he had no biological relation. This practice used to be called 'apprenticeships' and gave way to what is currently known as schools, where, among other aspects, literacy instruction is provided.

### 3.6.2 Literacy mediation at school

It was the need to instruct young persons, presumably boys, in the skills of literacy that gave rise to the first schools. A school, according to Gardner (1991:127), is an institution in which a group of young persons, rarely related by blood but usually belonging to the same social group, assemble on a regular basis in the company of a competent older individual, for the explicit purpose of acquiring

one or more skills valued by the wider community. The precise nature and extent of early schools remains hidden in prehistory, yet, on the basis of the many schools that have been observed in several cultures around the world, schooling generally began during the second five years of life. The entry to school was often marked by ceremony, for it was an event of significant importance for the community. But while the occasion might be joyous, the actual school regimen was strict, if not fear instilling (Wells,1986; Gardner 1991; Engelman 1992). Learners were expected to be obedient. They copied letters, number, etcetera, until they achieved perfection with them. At the same time they were expected to drill in the sounds of words, either on a letter-by-letter basis or by memorising important letter sequences within. Unger (1998:83) also argues that these learners were often forced to ‘march lockstep’ with other learners, and to learn in ways that were unnatural to them.

The mission of the early years of school is to introduce all students to basic literacy. Thereafter, there may be some form of grouping the students. The more able students will be directed toward disciplines that they can pursue at secondary and higher institutions, while the less able students will either cease school altogether or enter vocational or remedial tracks.

At schools there are clear milestones for progress, marked by recognition, privileges are given to those who excel in mastering the system, while sometimes embarrassment awaits those who, whatever the reason, are not able to master the system (Gardner, 1991:129). Learners can usually instinctively sense the areas in which they are not competent, and they tend to lose interest or avoid those activities (Unger, 1998:133).



Somehow the natural, universal, or intuitive learning, that took place in their homes or immediate surroundings during the first years of life, seems an entirely different order from the school learning that is required throughout the literate world. These practices even cause problems for children who have been exposed to literacy throughout their pre-school years. Disadvantaged children from illiterate families have even more reason to experience literacy teaching practices as alien and respond with anger, fear and resentment.

The 'conventional' view about teaching, therefore, might have contributed to children being alienated from the need to learn. It is useful to look at what these practices entailed:

#### **3.6.2.1 Conventional mediating practices**

The reading activities of decoding, comprehending and interpreting have traditionally been thought of as a series of steps in the reading process. For the most of this century the curriculum for the teaching of literacy skills in Britain, the USA and South Africa has been based on a number of apparently fundamental assumptions. These are that:

- Reading and writing are primarily visual-perceptual processes involving printed unit/sound relationships;
- Children are not ready to learn to read and write until they are five or six years old;

- Children have to be taught how to be literate;
- The teaching of literacy must be systematic and sequential in operation;
- Proficiency in the ‘basic skills’ has to be acquired before one can act in a literate way;
- Teaching the ‘basic skills’ of literacy is a neutral, value-free activity (Hall, 1987:2).

These assumptions control the way most educators deal with literacy. The following quotation of Goddard in Hall (1987:3) embodies them:

*“Reading is first of all and essentially a mechanical skill of decoding, of turning the printed symbols into sounds which are language... We are intensely concerned that our children understand what they read, but the mechanical decoding skill must come first if we are to get them started properly. In the earliest stages of learning to read there is very little need for thinking and reasoning on the part of the child. What he needs is a little practice in mastering a decoding skill and the thinking will come along quite some time later.”*

These kinds of assumptions did not contribute to make the teaching of reading and writing easier, neither did they resolve the problem of how to teach literacy. They only elevated the status of the teacher and indicated that literacy was a task for the specialist - not the parent (Hall, 1987:3). Whether teaching was based on phonic, alphabetic, whole word or sentence methods of reading instruction, certain matters such as the control of the manner and the rate of learning were in the hands of the teacher. Certain features, however, are not reflected in assumptions such as these, for

example:

- Becoming a reader and a writer are closely related events,
- Becoming literate might be a social process and be influenced by a search for meaning
- Pre-school children might actually have some knowledge of literacy
- Becoming literate might be a continuous process that begins very early in life
- In order to become literate a child needs to engage in literate acts
- Language and stories enhance children's understanding of literacy and text
- Knowledge that children have about literacy might be a legitimate element of their literacy development.

### 3.6.2.2 'Modern' mediating practices

Goodman (1980:31) makes the following statement: "My research has shown that literacy develops naturally in all children in our literate society." The following assumptions, which are rather different from the conventional beliefs about literacy, underlay this statement. These are:

- Reading and writing are cognitive and social abilities involving a whole range of meaning-gaining strategies.
- Most children begin to learn to read and write long before they arrive at school and do not wait until they are 'taught'.

- Literacy emerges as a response to the printed language and social environment experienced by the child.
- Children control their literacy learning in much the same way as they control all other aspects of their learning about the world.
- Literacy is a social phenomenon and is therefore influenced by cultural factors. The cultural group in which the child grows up will be a significant influence on the emergence of literacy (Hall, 1987:8).

The way in which children become literate can therefore be described by the word natural. This word may, however, imply some kind of maturational phenomenon or something that occurs as a result of biological programming. The real claim is actually that learning to read and write is learnt in the same way and to some extent at the same time as oral language. Children would not learn to talk if deprived of access to purposeful oral language use. Within such environments all kinds of people - adults, siblings and friends - help in their learning. This seldom takes place as a result of systematic and sequential instructional practices but is rather a consequence of playing and living with children. The same effects can be found in literacy development. Therefore it can be called natural.

Turner (1995:80), however, argues that children do not learn to read by accident, by inspiration, contagion or osmosis, or by being encouraged in attitudes that others deem socially desirable. He states that they learn to read by being taught and that reading is not a natural activity, but a set of gradually acquired component skills initially learned independently, but later integrated and

automated. Comprehension and mastery of syntax can be shown to depend crucially on phonological decoding.

Yule (1992:12) states the following: *“After their beginners had had two years of ‘learning to read without being taught’, the teachers were shocked to find that their grade two classes were full of non-readers, except for the children whose parents had ignored instructions and told their children how to read. So I found the teachers of seven-year-olds were rushing round trying to give their children phonics or ‘Letterland’ or anything, because most of the class had only around twenty common sight words.”*

The widespread argument for Whole Language has been that acquiring literacy skills is analogous to the acquisition - or development - of oral language. Turner (1995:89) further argues that reading is not a skill that spontaneously develops but that specific morphemes, and even language-learning strategies, are the product of teaching interactions and fine-tuning of maternal feedback.

Engelmann (1992:7) comments: *“The step-by-step teasing out of arguments which bear, today, on the teaching of literacy skills is far removed from the cavalier, global statements of yesteryear. The curriculum - the instructional programs and the details of how kids are taught - is the difference between failure and success. The difference is not the ‘global’ aspect such as ‘co-operative learning’ or ‘discovery’. The difference has to do with what the kids are doing, how they are using what they have been taught, and most important, how they*

*receive specific skills, facts and operations that they are to use in applied situations.”*

One can confront directly the primary reasons why school is difficult. It is difficult, first because much of the material presented in schools strikes the learners as alien, and the kinds of supporting context provided for pupils in earlier generations has become weakened. It is secondly difficult because students whose intellectual strengths lie in other areas such as the musical, spatial or personal spheres cannot readily master some of these notational systems. It is further difficult because these scholastic forms of knowing may even collide with the earlier, robust forms of sensory-motor and symbolic knowledge which have already evolved to a high degree even before the child entered school (Gardner, 1991:149).

The problems experienced by learners from the disadvantaged communities are in this regard even greater for they lack the exposure and support generally given by parents in a literate society. Therefore the means of preventing the difficulties and the existence of special needs of disadvantaged children will need to be addressed.

### **3.6.2.3 Differences between home and school mediation**

At home children are active learners, constructing their knowledge of language from their experience of the language in use. As they learn their native language, they also use language to learn other things. There is no curriculum, of course. Most of the learning that occurs, happens spontaneously,

as problems arise in everyday activities and are resolved, often with the help of an adult, who serves as an additional resource of skill and knowledge. Then, at about the age of 6 years, children go to school, making a transition to a social environment which is very different from home. Two factors are particularly responsible for the difference: firstly, the large number of children assigned to the care of a single adult, and secondly, the curriculum aims that provide the framework for most of the activities that take place. Some 'culture shock' is inevitable, but, ideally, one would hope to see every effort made to ease the transition. Opportunities for interaction with an adult will of necessity be reduced but, when they do occur, one would hope that, with the benefit of professional training, teachers will ensure that these opportunities are as enabling as those that occur at home. Indeed, some educational theorists have claimed that, by comparison with many (particularly lower class) homes, schools should provide a much richer language environment, which can provide compensation for earlier linguistic deprivation.

However, Wood (1980) presents a systematic comparison of the language experiences of some six-year olds as they make the transition from home to school. It was established that, compared with homes, schools provide a significantly reduced opportunity for children to learn through talk with an adult. In those conversations that do occur, children also find themselves forced into the respondent role, their contributions for the most part only being valued if they contribute to the teacher's predetermined line of thought. The result is that they make less use of their linguistic resources than they do at home and have less opportunity to extend those they already possess. Compared with their experience at home, children at school play a much less active role in conversations. The same could

also be said for their experience with literacy. These results must make us question some of the claims that schools provide a linguistically richer environment able to provide compensation for children believed to be linguistically deprived at home (Wells, 1986:25).

Chapter 4 will deal with the issues of accelerating the literacy acquisition of the disadvantaged child and in preventing the occurrence of special educational needs.

### 3.7 SUMMARY

“Humans are creatures of the brain, but not solely so”(Gardner, 1991:38). Unlike all other organisms, we participate in a rich culture, one that has had its own evolution over many thousands of years. Indeed we have no choice; we are as much creatures of our culture as we are of our brains. From the moment of birth a child enters into a world that is rich in interpretations of meaning, all introduced by courtesy of the assumptions of the culture in which he happens to be born. The other humans in the world introduce him to physical satisfactions - warmth, food, and to psychological nutrients - love, conversation, humour and surprise. They expose him to language and demonstrate its uses. They present him with the artefacts valued by the culture, be it the technology like pens or computers, toys like rattles or dolls, art works like stories or songs, etc. Therefore much of the story of human development must be written in the light of cultural influences in general and the particular persons, practices, and paraphernalia of one's culture.



The culture in which a child is brought up also has important implications for the development of his cognitive structure and for the development of literacy competency. Childhood in a literate society implies that the child encounters many literacy-related activities, but the child who is brought up in a culture that does not emphasise the importance of literacy acquisition will find the formal school system demanding and alien.

It is therefore our task to equip disadvantaged learners with some literacy knowledge before they enter formal school. It is therefore also important to know how reading and literacy skills are acquired and how they can be presented to pre-schoolers to enhance confidence and promote academic success. These issues will be discussed in chapter 4.