

Seeding change in South Africa: New literacies, new subjectivities, new futures

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Abstract

In this chapter, by examining the implementation of a school environmental education development (S.E.E.D) project in one township school, I will be able to show literacy as an embedded practice, as word-and-action (Freire, 1972). The vision of this school and its community, articulated as the *Feed the Child Feed the Nation* project, shows how education can contribute to the production of liberated as opposed to subaltern subjects. Here literacy can be seen as 'critical literacy', because it is nested within other projects whose positive social effects play an important part in post-apartheid reconstruction. I will argue further that, within these projects, literacy contributes to the changes that are produced.

Introduction

After South Africa gained independence in 1994, I began to consider the link between critical literacy and reconstruction because it seemed important to move away from deconstruction and critique to theorise how critical literacy might contribute to reinventing our country and ourselves. I chose the word 'reconstruction' to establish a link with new discourses in South Africa focussing on reconstruction and development initiated by the African National Congress' political manifesto, called the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (1994). I also chose it, because it sets up an antonymic opposition with 'deconstruction', a set of practices that has underpinned my own work in critical literacy. Foucault's work helped me to move from a view of power as only negative and repressive to seeing power as producing effects, both positive and negative.

'Critical' as used in post-structuralist, neo-marxist discourses requires that analysis is put to work to reveal the hidden ideologies of texts. Here the aim of critical deconstruction is to reveal how power works, to see the play of interests in the textual instantiations of discourses. Who benefits from these textual constructions, who is disadvantaged? Power is seen as oppressive: social relations invest members of dominant groups with power over others whom they subordinate, constructing a world of 'top dogs' and 'underdogs' (Janks, 1993). According to marxist theorists such as Althusser (1970) and Gramsci (1971), subordinate groups can be persuaded, often below the level of consciousness, to consent to these relations or, where this fails, they can be coerced. Part of the work of critical literacy is to make these workings of power visible, to denaturalise 'common sense' assumptions and to reveal them as constructed representations of the social order, serving the interests of some at the expense of others. Critical literacy within this discourse is seen as an emancipatory project in which subordinated groups are rescued from 'false consciousness' (Engels in Eagleton, 1991: 89-90) in the interests of social justice; it relies on uncovering the ideological meanings in texts and

practices. It assumes an ideologically-free space from which to speak the truth, if not a more 'scientific' truth, then at least, in relation to social equity, a more ethical one.

For Foucault

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. [It] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth. ... The political question ... is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself (1980:133).

He moves away from seeing power as negative, working through the modes of 'censorship, exclusion, blockage, and repression' (1980:59). Instead, he sees power as strong because

it produces effects at the level of desire - and also at the level of knowledge (1980:59).

In studying power,

we should try to discover how it is that [human] subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc.

If we take seriously Foucault's view of power as having a 'capillary form of existence' that 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980: 39), then this necessitates a focus on the effects that our pedagogies produce. What are the changes in corporeal, spatial and material conditions? (Luke 2002). Are these changes positive or negative? What possibilities do they create for agency and for local action, in the face of national and global politics? And what, if anything, is the role of literacy? It is not enough to talk about 'productive pedagogies' (Education Department, Queensland, 2000). All pedagogies, the effective practices that flow from educational discourses, are productive - they are not, however, all positively transformative and reconstructive.

As my context has changed, so has my thinking in relation to critical literacy. I am now more interested in body and place (Janks, 2002) in habitus and habitat (Comber and Thomson, 2002) and the unconscious investments and desires that are invoked in our encounters with texts (Janks, 2002; Kenway and Bullen, 2001) and contexts. My earlier work on critical literacy and reconstruction (Janks, 1999) was useful in identifying the need to move away from a singular focus on deconstruction, but weak in its formulation of what a reconstructive view of critical literacy might look like. It was the closest I could get to imagining it at that time.

With an account of a educational partnership that has produced and is continuing to produce material changes in people's lives, this chapter focuses on the role played by a school development project that provides new and transformative possibilities

for its participants. Appadurai (2002) argues that oppressed human subjects need to learn to aspire. Aspiration which could be considered a Foucauldian 'effect at the level of desire' is important for apartheid subjects whose sense of self was brutalised by classifications of racial inferiority and whose hopes for a better future were nullified by structured exclusion. I will show how the practices, including the literacy practices, embedded in this project develop the capacity of everyone involved to aspire. I will argue that when literacy is situated meaningfully within a project that produces positive effects, its contribution to reconstruction is clear. This argument will support Paulo Freire's contention that

If learning to read and write is to constitute an act of knowing, the learners must assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects (Freire, 1972:29).

And I will build on his view that

the human word is more than mere vocabulary - it is word-and-action. The cognitive dimensions of the literacy process must include the relationships of men [sic] with their world. (1972: 29).

By showing the effects of literacy when it is situated in a project that produces positive effects, I will show what can be achieved by linking reading/writing the word, to reading/writing the world. I will show possibilities for the creation of new subjectivities and new futures.

The global and local context

Both the time of writing, the end of August 2002, and the place of this article, Johannesburg, coincide with the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in South Africa.

The venue of South Africa - and the powerful symbol of affluent Sandton, juxtaposed by impoverished Alexandra - has brought home to the 40 000-odd delegates that Planet Earth is a place of irreconcilable poverty and wealth, employment and unemployment, sick and healthy, educated and uneducated, developed and underdeveloped, worldwide webs and mass starvation.

And South Africa is a microcosm of that wealth and poverty - the one just a 9km march from the other, Alexandra to Sandton (Sunday Times, 1 September 2002).

The World Food Programme, a United Nations agency, has declared a food crisis, affecting six neighbouring countries in southern Africa. The agency needs US\$507 million to feed 10.2 million people at risk of starvation in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swaziland (World Food Programme, 2002). A combination of

drought, flooding, misgovernment and devastated economies lies at the heart of the current crisis. Malnutrition and the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in the world have exacerbated the situation. (World Food Programme, 2002).

Detailed discussions of each of these six countries in the report, however, show severe weather to be the main cause of crop failures. Lesotho has experienced 'heavy rain and frost'; Malawi floods and drought; Mozambique a 'prolonged dry spell' following on catastrophic floods; Swaziland and Zambia have experienced 'erratic weather'; and Zimbabwe 'the longest drought in 20 years'. Only Zimbabwe's land reform programme which has led to the collapse of large scale commercial farming is offered as an example of misgovernment. Unemployment and poverty also mean that poor people cannot afford the raised market prices caused by the scale of the problem in the region. In the world, 16 500 children under the age of five die every day because 'they are undernourished; their bodies too weak to survive' (Madeley 2002:8)¹. From a position of privilege, it is hard to imagine this lived reality.

Klaus Toepfer, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), links climactic disasters in Africa to global warming.

Africa's share of the global population is 14% but it is responsible for only 3.2% of global CO₂ emission. They (Africans) face the most direct consequences of extreme weather conditions, with regard to drought and storms. Last year floods battered Mozambique and prolonged drought in the Horn of Africa pushed millions to the brink of starvation (UNEP, 2001).

Toepfer also says that 'developed countries, which were responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gas omission, had a moral obligation urgently to tackle the scourge of global warming' (UNEP, 2001). Yet the United States of America, with four percent of the world's population and responsible for 25% of the earth's greenhouse gas emissions, has refused to sign the Kyoto protocol (Environment News Service, 2001). 'Under the Protocol, agreed in Kyoto in 1997, 39 industrialized nations must cut emissions of six greenhouse gases to an average of 5.2 percent by the period 2008 to 2012'. (Environment News Service, 2001). After the USA, the highest carbon dioxide emitters are Australia and Norway. Australia, along with Japan, Canada and New Zealand also refused to sign the Kyoto protocol (Environment News Service, 2001)

Faced with the global magnitude of the problem, what is Freire's 'creative subject' supposed to do about food shortages in Africa? What constitutes word-and-action in this context? South Africa is more prosperous than her neighbours, yet 'half of all households experience hunger. ... A 1999 Health Department survey showed that 21.6% of all SA children between the ages of one and nine were stunted because of malnutrition, with acute wasting running at 3.7% in the same age group' (Sunday

¹ Madeley in his book *Food for All*, compares this figure with the number of people who died in the attack on the World Trade Centre, to make the apppoint that starvation kills five times as many people on a daily basis (and this is only the children under five) but there is no talk of 'building a system of agriculture that serves the poor' (2002:9).

Times, 28 Jul 2002). School feeding was introduced on a national scale in South Africa in 1994, following President Nelson Mandela's announcement in his State of the Nation Address on 24 May 1994 that a nutritional feeding scheme would be implemented in every primary school where such a need was established. In 1999/2000, 15 428 schools and 4.8 million learners participated in school feeding (www.schoolfeeding.co.za). According to the Sunday Times, 14 July 2002, 'the [Gauteng] provincial government acknowledges that 750 000 children fall outside its feeding scheme'. For some children, the school meal is the only meal that they receive. While I have no difficulty imagining what critical literacy teachers in Kyoto-refusing countries might do to produce more globally aware and responsible citizens, what is Freire's 'creative subject' in a poor community in Africa supposed to do about food shortages? What constitutes action in this context? What might teachers do if the children they teach are hungry? What might the children do? How might literacy, support what they do, so as to constitute Freire's notion of 'word-and-action'? Graff's work (1978) on 'the literacy myth' has shown that literacy alone cannot rescue people from poverty. The project described in this paper, provides one answer to these questions.

Social responsibility partnerships

Social responsibility partnerships in South Africa first took shape in the 1980s during the economic boycott of South Africa. As more and more foreign companies disinvested in South Africa, many of those that remained established social responsibility programmes for their workers and for disenfranchised communities more broadly. They also supported anti-apartheid non-government organisations (NGOs) working in areas of human rights, education, health and housing and they provided donor funding for a wide range of projects committed to transformation. In the period leading to the negotiated settlement, and then after 1994, much of this money was re-directed to support the democratically elected government's reconstruction and development projects. Not all companies continued their social responsibility programmes after 1994 and some turned to other forms of sponsorship, such as the arts or sport. An unfortunate consequence was the demise of many NGOs working at grassroots level, along with an organised and strong civil society. Other institutions besides big business were also involved in development work. Often, their contribution was to share knowledge and human resources. Universities, for example, established clinics, legal resource centres, training for Union leaders, education projects and the like, while many schools, privileged by virtue of class and race, established co-operative links with poor township and rural schools. All of these varied contributions to sharing and redress, came to be known collectively as 'outreach' programmes.

In 1998, shortly after her appointment as principal of Phepo² school, a poor primary school in an African township, with a population of 92 800 (<http://worldatlas.brinkster.net>), west of Tshwane³, Paulina Sethole decided to establish vegetable gardens in her school. The idea came to her while on a leadership course run by the

² 'Phepo', which means 'feeding' in Twana, is a pseudonym.

³ Pretoria was renamed Tshwane in 2001.

outreach programme of St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls, a private church school in Pretoria⁴. The course was held at Sizanani, a Catholic seminary, where Sethole saw raised vegetable beds, bordered by bricks for the first time. In September 1998, Buzz Bezuidenhout, from BMW, a global motor industry company, offered her a partnership in BMW's School Environmental Education Development (S.E.E.D) programme. The S.E.E.D programme, one of many BMW social responsibility programmes⁵ includes, among other things, the development of sustainable permaculture vegetable gardens.

Thus began the collaboration between Phepo school, big business and an outreach-NGO (non-governmental organisation), that is the focus of this paper. I first visited the school in October 2000. During 2001, I worked with teachers on a literacy project focused on children's representations of place, funded by and in conjunction with the University of South Australia. At the beginning of 2002, I joined the collaborative partnership as a researcher on the *Feed the Child Feed the Nation* project at Phepo school. Many of the children who attend Phepo school come from the informal shack settlement on a hill that rises behind the school. Soon after she established the vegetable gardens she and her staff saw them as a means of supplementing the government's school feeding scheme. The school now grows enough food to provide a hot meal every day to its 670 learners and sixteen members of staff. The main focus of my ongoing research is to understand and document this project as it develops, with a particular focus on the work of the school principal. In this article, by exploring the power of a school/community project to change the material realities of people's lives, I hope to develop an understanding of whole school transformation and to explore the relationship between word-and-act, that is literacies in combination with social action, in the production of 'creative subjects'.

Although Sethole had been on the staff of her school for twenty-two years as a teacher and then head of department, her appointment as principal was marked by particularly bitter power struggles and infighting and she took up office during an ongoing 'chalk down'⁶. With active opposition from rival factions on her staff, she needed to construct a space in which to work and people with whom to work. As a learner on the BMW programme, Sethole from the outset assumed the role of a 'creative subject'. This is evident in the test she set for BMW - expecting Mr Bezuidenhout to attend a parents' meeting in the township on a Sunday morning, and for herself - the preparation of two demonstration garden plots that would make the idea a tangible reality for parents. The parents were so enthusiastic that they all

⁴ The DSG (Diocesan School for Girls) Outreach programme provides leadership training courses in the Tshwane South School District. The role played by these courses in developing the management and leadership skills needed by Sethole will be the subject of another paper.

⁵ For more information on BMW South Africa's social investment policy, see <http://www.bmw.co.za>

⁶ A teachers' strike.

met the next weekend to clear the grounds which at that stage was 'a haven of snakes'⁷.

Sethole tells of how when BMW first arrived at her office

I saw money coming to the school, because BMW is a giant. Then Buzz said, like he was already reading my mind, 'Please don't look at me like I'm having a blank cheque'.

BMW does not provide schools with money. Instead it provides the knowledge and skills that the schools need to run their projects independently as well as basic materials such as seeds and garden tools. The projects are started with minimum investment of capital and the necessary investment in human resource development.

Participating schools are offered a partnership and they are given a handbook which makes BMW's expectations and the criteria for success explicit. Each school is encouraged to deploy the criteria in relation to its own vision for its own community. The handbook is explained and discussed in an induction/training course and it is used as the basis for the annual evaluation of school projects. Projects are evaluated, categorised as A, B or C and 'cash incentives are awarded annually to facilitate school development' (BMW Handbook: 7). Category A schools show 'consistent excellence and growth in the overall project', Category B schools show 'ongoing effort and progress towards achieving the principles of the programme and Category C recognises 'schools who are making an effort'⁸. The categories only measure degrees of success. 'Sustainability and development' are required for continued participation and schools that show neither commitment nor effort are not allowed to continue on the programme. Educational organisations can learn a great deal from the business ethos and the standards that partnership with big business inculcates. This, together with the development of skills, incentives based on regular evaluation, personal support and overall project management, appear to be keys to the success of the S.E.E.D programme.

⁷ All unsourced quotations are all taken from a lengthy transcribed interview with Sethole, 16 - 17 February 2002 or subsequent personal communications recorded in field notes.

⁸ BMW currently works with 47 schools in 3 provinces. Most of these receive an A rating.

Using the BMW handbook involves the staff of Phepo school in a number of literacy practices which assist with project management: establishing the base from which one starts by conducting an audit; finding and articulating a vision; setting measurable goals; locating, making and using resources; introducing new practices; monitoring and evaluating progress. They include

- Reading and understanding the handbook and the obligations it entails;
- Auditing the school's current environmental practices by rating them on an evaluation form;
- Completing a school grounds check-list;
- Drafting a policy statement and action plans for their selected concerns. These plans have to include time lines and measurable targets;
- Re-writing the school calendar so that it includes selected environmental days (e.g. World Day for Water, World Health Day, World Environment Day, Arbor Day etc.);
- Auditing resources: e.g. water, energy, waste, paper used in the school;
- Using field guides;
- Gathering and archiving local and indigenous knowledges and skills;
- Writing reviews, reports and project evaluations;
- Developing curriculum materials;
- Documenting the project.

Feed the Child Feed the Nation

Each school on the S.E.E.D programme defines its own vision. Phepo school embarked on a project to grow food, called *Feed the Child Feed the Nation*. Sethole often repeats what she learnt on her training programme. 'If you give a hungry man fish you feed him for a day; if you teach him how to fish, you feed him forever'. The government school feeding scheme in South Africa offers schools the choice of either a cooked menu or a bread menu. There is, however, a catch. If schools choose the cooked menu, they have to provide their own equipment, in particular a stove and large pots, and their own labour, expenses that are out of reach for most poor schools. Sethole's project worked to get the equipment donated and parents prepare the food - a combination of the starch (corn meal) and protein (usually soya beans) provided by the government feeding scheme and the vegetables and herbs grown by the children in the gardens.

To assist with the analysis of Sethole's project as well as the S.E.E.D programme, I will use the evaluation criteria listed in the BMW handbook. The language of the handbook gives readers a sense of the discourse employed by BMW when envisioning social reconstruction. However, it is not clear to what extent these criteria guide or control the projects in the schools. When asked if she set up her project to meet the BMW criteria, Sethole said that at the start of the project she did not really know what they were.

In the beginning it was just fumbling around, not having any idea of what to do. What helped was the Food Garden Foundation's training. Starting the

vegetable patch using the trench methods, the basics. Now we had direction of what to do ⁹ (Interview, 27 December 2002).

The trench method of gardening involves preparing a vegetable plot by digging a 'knee-deep' trench 6 metres long by 1 metre wide. The trench is then filled with the following layers of recyclable waste: rusted tins to provide calcium and minerals; kitchen garbage: vegetable peelings, chicken bones, egg shells; paper cut into small pieces; leaves, twigs and corn cobs. This forms compost that enriches and feeds the soil. These layers are then watered and stamped down, so as to prevent further subsidence. The layering process is repeated until the addition of the final layers of subsoil and top soil will be sufficient to fill the trench. Vegetable plots prepared in this way sustain the soil for a period of five years.

When asked about how BMW helped in the beginning, Sethole says that 'it was mainly the support' they provided. Yet, one of the S.E.E.D programme requirements is that each school keep records of the development of its project. This was done at Phepo school and she admits during an interview that she got the idea for keeping these records, which she calls the *School Profiles*, from BMW. It seems that at first the learning and labour involved in building the gardens from scratch were demanding enough and that conscious attention to the criteria came later. It is likely that it was the practical and human support from BMW, in the person of Bezuidenhout, that steered her, in part, in the direction that BMW envisaged.

Analysis of the project

The seven S.E.E.D programme criteria are: sustainability, level of pupil participation, level of creativity/initiative, social impact, level of research, project presentation and enthusiasm. The achievements of Phepo school will be discussed in relation to each of these criteria together with an account, where relevant, of the literacy practices they entail.

1 Sustainability

Sustainability is seen by BMW as 'the most important critical element of the programme' (BMW Handbook, 9) and this criterion is divided into economic, political, social and environmental sustainability.

Economic sustainability

According to the BMW Handbook (9) the project needs to be both 'self-funded' and to develop 'more than one funding source'. In a school where not all parents can afford 50 Rands¹⁰ per annum for school fees, alternative sources of funding are

⁹ BMW found and paid for Sethole to attend courses run by the Food Gardens Foundation so that she could develop the skills she needed.

¹⁰ R50 is roughly equivalent to US\$50. In South Africa, the average price of a popular paperback novel is R90. This gives one a sense of the buying power of the Rand. According to 1997 HSRC figures, the average monthly income per family in Attridgeville, based on 47 cases is R2 322 in a range of R1 923 -R2 740, with a

essential. Sethole has raised money from the sale of vegetables, the many awards she has won, and by persuading donors to invest in her school. The *School Profiles*, to be discussed later, which document the progress of the project are central to demonstrating the school's ability to use development money constructively and responsibly.

The children have been involved in writing letters of appreciation to donors and of finding appropriate ways of thanking people for gifts as diverse as buildings and scissors. The Japanese government built three extra classrooms that were needed to alleviate overcrowding¹¹, as well as a media centre. In preparation for the opening ceremony teachers and students will be reading and discussing the story of *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Coerr:1977). They are learning about the history that led to Sadako, a young Japanese girl, dying of radiation sickness after America dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima, during World War II. The children have learnt about the Japanese art of origami and are folding paper cranes to present as a gift of thanks to be sent to Japan to be placed at the foot of Sadako's statue in the Hiroshima Peace Park¹². The literacy and numeracy skills involved in following the complicated visual/verbal directions for paper folding are extensive. This is an immensely pleasurable way for children to learn about mathematical shapes, fine motor co-ordination and reading diagrams.

This year, Phepo school was selected, on application, as an official exhibition site for the World Summit. Sethole viewed this as an opportunity to network. Students worked hard to prepare the gardens. They also rehearsed a performance piece using a poem about seeds, their own rap songs, and a clap-chant, which they devised, about their being ambassadors for their school. There is something quite unusual about seeing a young township boy proudly performing a rap song that he composed on the importance of mulching a garden

Mulch is a covering
like a blanket
on top of the soil
to protect
and improve it.

and a young girl, using rap to explain the medicinal properties of the herbs in the school garden

At our school

standard deviation of R1 429.09. (<http://worldatlas.brinkster.net.asp/terr.asp?terrid=244>). These figures are problematic because they give no indication of family size. Many of the children at the school live in informal shack settlements and their families have no regular income.

¹¹ For example, one small Grade 4 classroom accommodates 88 children and two teachers.

¹² I suggested this project to Sethole, when we were discussing an appropriate gift for the Japanese government. My family supplied the resources and the teachers have taken responsibility for the project.

we have a herb garden
 which is our chemist.
 When children have fever
 we give them the right herb
 for that fever.
 We have different kinds of herbs
 like lavender, marigold and chip-chop [sour fig].

One needs to imagine backing by a choir of students that provides the necessary rap syncopations.

Maintaining a steady flow of income from donors is difficult. As the conditions in the school improve, donors, BMW, the department of education begin to feel that Phepo school has benefited enough and other schools are now more needy. At times Sethole is expected to set the needs of her project, *Feed the Child Feed the Nation* aside in the interests of her partners in the broader S.E.E.D project. When, at times, she is expected to share her potential donors, she has to negotiate a contradictory set of demands, as she is still being evaluated by BMW according to the viability of her independent project and its ability to achieve its separate aims. When this happens, it is as if the extensive effort¹³ she puts in to raising the profile of her school to attract these donors is not adequately recognised.

Political sustainability

According to the BMW Handbook, projects require 'support from local and civic authorities' (9). The ugly political battles surrounding her appointment as principal taught Sethole hard lessons about the importance of political support. That she has won the support of most of the staff who were vehemently opposed to her, gradually, one by one, is testimony to her emotional resilience and her tough-mindedness. She is a fighter. She maintains a close connection with her district director in the Department of Education and more recently her school has gained recognition from both the departments of Agriculture Conservation and Land Affairs (DACEL) and of Health. Sethole is discovering that 'fame is expensive'. Her school is beginning to confront some of the difficulties associated with professional envy, and her own personal success - in 2002 she won the Premier's Woman of the Year Award - runs the risk of reviving old animosities in the school. In addition, she is having to learn to see time as a precious resource and to manage judiciously the demands on her and her school. It is hard, if not impossible, for Sethole to refuse requests to host visitors brought by her partners BMW, DSG Outreach, by researchers in her school, by government and by her many donors. She is also expected to speak on BMW and government platforms and to evaluate BMW project schools in other provinces.

Social sustainability

¹³ For example, during the World Summit for Sustainable development, the staff and students of Phepo school hosted tours of the township and the school twice a day, during a week of school holidays. Each group of visitors was entertained by the school choir and by the student performance created specifically for the Summit. This was exhausting work.

Social sustainability 'involves all groups within the community' and looks at 'issues such as ownership, consultation and communication' (BMW Handbook: 9). The parents of Phepo school, who were her only allies at the time of her appointment, are fully committed to the project. In addition to physically clearing the grounds and preparing a hot meal everyday, parents volunteer to clean classrooms and furniture, to teach and to serve on the School Governing Body.

Sethole also looks after her neighbours. She sees them as the 'eyes that look after the school. I can't be here all the time'. She awarded the contract to build the media centre and classrooms to a man who lives near the school on condition that he employed, as labourers, all the unemployed men in the houses surrounding the school. As a result, unlike many township schools, the school experiences no vandalism and there is no theft from the exposed vegetable gardens.

Environmental sustainability

For BMW, environmental sustainability means that projects do not waste resources, they 'minimise damaging the natural environment', they challenge consumerism and they 'practise the saying *reduce, re-use, recycle*' (BMW Handbook: 9). Sethole has taken the germ of this idea and developed it into a core value that underpins her school and its daily practices. Children 'pay' for their food by bringing recyclable materials. On different days of the week they are expected to bring vegetable peelings for the compost heap - 'the gardens feed us so we must feed the gardens'; two litres of 'grey water' - dirty soapy water which acts as an insecticide in an organic garden; tins sold to collect-a-can; paper for recycling; and half bricks scrounged from the township for bricking both beds and paths. The children take responsibility for collecting and recording these contributions. The project even makes 'insecticide tea' from cigarette butts. She has helped me to understand that what to a middle class household constitutes waste, to her school constitutes resources: empty margarine tubs, polystyrene packaging, paper printed on one side only, empty tins, old magazines, broken toilets, two litre plastic bottles, plastic bags, old tyres, broken desks, cardboard boxes. I have come to understand that reading one's own litter is an important critical literacy activity.

2 Level of pupil participation

The school community formulated the vision for the project, in response to evidence that children were coming to the sick room for medicine because they were hungry. One of the students explained this vision to a delegate to the World Summit as follows: 'We stamp food into the garden to stamp out poverty'. The students work in the garden, learn from the garden and eat from the garden. They put their bodies into the garden and the garden into their bodies. Teachers use the garden to teach mathematics: from counting beds and cabbages, to calculating cubic metres of water. Children measure and record water consumption and rainfall, the amounts of recycling material brought by each grade and the money earned from sales. They keep charts and bar graphs, which form part of the *School Profiles*. They learn about earthworms and how to improve the soil - 'the gardens feed us, so we must feed the gardens'; they live their environmental awareness in their daily practices and they translate these into songs and dramatic performances; they draw and write about the

gardens and learn about the importance of documenting a project through written and visual records. Learning is tied to real needs. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) physiological needs for air, food, water and bodily comforts form the base, without which self-actualisation and education are impossible. Students and staff are invested in what I am naming 'the edible curriculum'.

Figures 1 and 2 are drawings done by two Grade 3 children in response to an invitation to draw important places in the school. This activity was part of the international research project on *Children's Representations of Place*, that I ran at the school together with three of the teachers. It is clear from the data, that in Grades 3 and 4 children were able to communicate more with their drawings and photographs than they could in spoken and written English, which is not their mother tongue. At the school, English is the medium of instruction from Grade 5 and in my work with teachers at the school, we see visual literacy as an important means of supporting print literacy. 11 out of 61 children chose to draw the school taps. Many of the children do not live in homes with indoor running water and in the informal shack settlements most people have to walk to collect water for use in the home from communal taps. Both these drawings show a heightened awareness of both the uses of water and the need to conserve it: taps do not run or drip except to fill buckets or to water the vegetables. They show an old bath, placed strategically under the school taps to collect any water that is spilt. Traditionally collecting water is woman's work and women carry water in containers on their heads. Here, however, both boys and girls are involved in this communal activity. Children are taught that water is a precious resource and they are shown how to recycle used soapy water for the gardens. The only drawing in the data set, that shows water being wasted, is a drawing of rain water gushing out of a downpipe from the roof gutters. Now, the new buildings have four rain water tanks to collect water from the roofs.

'Ideally the pupils themselves should be tasked with running the projects with the guidance and support of their teachers. They should be involved not only in the manual labour, but also in determining direction, management and review of the projects and maintaining the Project File' (BMW Handbook: 10). Where principals and staff have themselves needed to learn how to develop and manage a garden project, these projects have not been initiated or imagined by the children. This remains an ideal.

Figure 1

Figure 2

3 Level of creativity/initiative

Each school on the S.E.E.D programme has articulated its own vision. I have visited a school where the garden has been the springboard for other initiatives such as the development of primary school materials for the national outcomes based education (OBE) curriculum and for raising awareness of the need for sports facilities in the township; I have seen a school where adults in the surrounding community use the

school grounds to grow vegetables which they sell; some schools have adopted other schools to extend their projects outwards. Each school's vision then becomes a source of inspiration and a resource for other school in the S.E.E.D project - they learn from one another. For example, Sethole plans to send her heads of department to 'Mr OBE'¹⁴ to learn from him, and he has brought his parents to her school to see the potential of extending their own school's gardening project.

Both Sethole and Mr OBE inherited dysfunctional schools with low teacher morale. Mr. OBE's school was threatened with closure because of declining student numbers. BMW, by conceiving of their partners as creative agentive subjects, has contributed to their realising their aspirations such that each school in the programme provides the others with new possibilities, new aspirations. Success is a powerful motivator. Once disaffected and demoralised teachers at Phepo school now sign up for courses and are interested in furthering their education. How to ensure that all the teachers in the school have their own platform from which to build their own successes is an ongoing project.

Similarly, the schools need to create possibilities for the learners 'to exercise their creativity and initiative by making choices, setting their own goals, learning to negotiate and define a common purpose'. (BMW Handbook: 10). While students at Phepo school are involved in maintaining and learning from the gardens, they do not as yet direct or manage the project. It is not their vision which drives it. That they show some initiative is clear. It is not unusual to find a group of students bringing brooms from home to sweep the grounds because they have decided that this is what is needed; or to find students on their own in the afternoon weeding or watering. They own the gardens and often decide what it is they can do in them. Sometimes this backfires: students have been known to weed out ornamental grasses that had been deliberately planted as a ground cover.

In discussion, it became apparent to both Sethole and Janks that there was no certainty about the children's ability to develop a vegetable plot from scratch independently. This realisation led to their conceptualising, together with BMW, the *Learner SEED Garden Project*. Using the schools as resources of knowledge and equipment, children in Grades 6 and 7 would be invited to develop a garden either in the backyard of their own home or in the community where they live. Like the school projects, the learners' independent projects would be evaluated, and success would be rewarded. We agreed to use two schools as pilot projects and this work has already begun in Mr OBE's school. BMW is providing the material resources, such as seeds and gardening tools and practical difficulties, such as rocky ground, space and sources of water, will be anticipated and tackled where and when they arise. Literacy will play a decisive part in the evaluation of these backyard projects as students will be expected to keep a journal and to record the progress of their gardens and its produce in tables and diagrams.

4 Social Impact

¹⁴ A pseudonym for the principal.

If the *Learner S.E.E.D Garden Project* is successful, it should improve the overall social impact of the school garden projects, carrying know-how and environmentally sound practices into the communities where the children live. As it is, many of the school's neighbours have begun to grow their own gardens and there is a decrease in littering in the streets around the school.

Although poor, Phepo school has an outreach programme and the children have been involved in establishing S.E.E.D gardens at a local old age home and at a school for children with disabilities. The school constructs its students as social subjects who can 'pay' for what they receive and who have something to give back to society. The achievements of the school have attracted a great deal of media coverage and in 2002 the school was visited by a number of provincial government ministers. Her project has something to contribute to the departments of Education, Agriculture Conservation and Land Affairs, Water Affairs, Health, and Social Welfare. At the end of 2002, the school was chosen as the venue for the National Department of Education's *imbizo* - community consultation - a singular honour.

5 Level of research

Students in the school are involved in keeping records, in tabulating results and producing graphs. Although not involved in planning the project or formulating the research questions, they are acquiring some basic research skills. The BMW Handbook (10) maintains that 'any initiative should be thoroughly researched and planned in order to yield the maximum result', yet learning from experience and error seems to be the method that is used most often. As a researcher on the project, I have had to learn that nothing happens in a systematic, methodical, incremental way that is easy to monitor. Decisions are taken spontaneously in response to immediate situations and often the challenge is to try and make sense of what has already happened. This is as true of the *Learner Seed Garden project* as it is of the school's own project.

Sethole and many of the teachers have learnt a great deal about translating vision into practice and about project management. These activities involve a wide range of literacies, the latest of which include the use of the school's one computer for email, word processing, internet searches and for working with digital photographs. These new digital literacies are currently vested in one teacher and the administrative staff. Now that the school has received eight relatively new computers for the media centre, other teachers and students will begin to gain access to the literacies associated with these new technologies.

6 Project presentation

Documentation provides the schools with a history of their efforts and is a valuable tool for them to measure their growth and to remember where they have come from. It makes their progress visible. BMW requires that 'every project must have a project file' (BMW Handbook:11). The literacy practices involved in producing an ongoing record of the school's S.E.E.D project as well as all other evidence of school development is extensive. These documents, which Sethole calls the *School Profiles*

have been central to the production of positive effects. They show in plans, diagrams, text and photographs the transformation of the school from a 'haven of snakes', both literal and metaphorical, to an energised community that has visibly altered its space.

The once overgrown school property now has eighty vegetable plots, with a total of 3 840 square metres under cultivation. Each 8 by 6 metre plot is bordered with bricks and covered with hail netting. West of the entrance to the school are the cut flower garden, the Mandela garden - used for teaching students about how Mandela, the tall tree at the centre of the garden, brought people separated by apartheid together, and the Thabo Mbeki garden - where Mbeki 'a young tree that needs our support to grow' is surrounded by the nine provinces of the new South Africa. East of the entrance is the indigenous garden where every plant is labelled. 'The vegetable garden is for the body, the indigenous garden is for the mind'. Here Sethole speaks of the importance of aesthetics in addition to food; of feeding the children's spirit not just their stomachs. She knows that the birds that will be attracted to the indigenous garden will enrich the space with both sound and colour and will provide an additional source of curriculum material.

Alongside this garden is the media centre, the floor of which has been tiled in the pattern of the Japanese flag. The architecture of the new buildings and the quality of the building materials, stand in sharp contrast to the surrounding school buildings, offering the children something distinctive and constructing them as worthy subjects. This is a very different construction from that of the subaltern subjects of apartheid school architecture.

The *School Profiles* provide a tangible history of the school's transformation of its space, a history of the achievement of this community. Every time Sethole uses them to talk about the school, she is reminded of where they have come from and what they have achieved in only four years. Every time the children see them being used, they are reminded of what is possible. In the use of these profiles to talk about what has been accomplished, the power of a community project to seed much more than food - to seed pride and dignity and independence is clear. This literacy practice is key to the school's sense of self. Here we have an example of word made action and action made word, such that word-and-action inspires further action and further words.

7 Enthusiasm/Motivation

What BMW expects from its partners is commitment. It requires ownership, hard work, imagination, independence and the recognition that sustainability is only possible if all the participants - community, teachers, students, parents - share this commitment. 'Enthusiasm is a combination of identification, ownership, participation, creativity and initiative' (BMW Handbook: 11) and Sethole's enthusiasm is boundless. She leads by example and by laughter and patience, but this alone does not account for how she was able to turn her school around in the face of open hostility.

Appadurai (2002) talks about developing the capacity of human subjects to aspire (2002). Sethole's capacity to aspire was evident before she began this project. Like so many African teachers in South Africa who began their careers with a Grade 10 certificate and a teaching diploma, Sethole completed her matriculation certificate (Grade 12) and her degree through part time study over many years. Despite opposition which isolated her in the school, she resolutely took up her principalship. In addition, she found and executed a vision that enabled her to transform her school community. DSG Outreach provided her with the leadership training that she needed and the moral support. BMW provided her with the means and the partnership; their award ceremonies, with prizes and incentives, provided her with both the material and symbolic capital needed to bring status to a school in a community that is not used to recognition. It is clear, that this recognition was crucial in the construction of new and positive subjectivities and in teaching others that in the capacity to aspire lies hope.

New literacies, new subjectivities, new futures

When Sethole takes visitors around her school, she show them the sick room, a small room situated between the principal's office and the staff room, in a school where space is a precious commodity. In this room, where the seed of the idea vision to feed the children first germinated, there are two plain iron beds covered with clean linen, blankets and pretty counterpanes. Each bed has cuddly teddy bears. Sethole says

at home our children sleep on the floor. They must know that if they work hard to get an education they can aspire to sleeping in a nice bed.

She understands what Appadurai (2002: 1) means when he says that

In strengthening the capacity to aspire, conceived as a cultural capacity, especially among the poor, the future-oriented logic of development could find a natural ally, and the poor could find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty.

The work of her staff is oriented to the possibilities for new futures for black children created by a new dispensation in South Africa. But nothing is given. The constraints are enormous, the depth of poverty extreme, the risks of violence, abuse, starvation and disease terrifying. The best chance is for the children in her school to 'assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects' (Freire, 1972:29). The garden project teaches children that they have the power to transform the spaces in which they live and work, to refuse handouts, to develop skills and knowledge that will enable them to make a contribution to their communities, to understand the relationships of [human subjects] with their world. (1972: 29). In doing so, it constructs them as agents who can transform the corporeal, spatial and material conditions in which they live.

The positive social effects also have a wider reach. Hope lies in the realisation that South Africa is being reconstructed bit by bit by ordinary people who are doing their jobs, with vision and commitment. Mr OBE, Sethole, the teachers and parents of their schools, other principals, their partners in other schools here and in other countries, members of their communities, big business, foreign donors, researchers

are all changed in the process. Everyone is a learner, everyone is a teacher. Effects are produced in all of us at the level of desire - and also at the level of knowledge' (Foucault: 1980:59). Literacy is not centre stage but it is there, tied to action, embedded in the processes that make the projects succeed, helping to create new subjectivities. It is my hope that the literacy practices involved in academic research and its publication might also make a small contribution to this ongoing project and that in addition such research might help to transform the politics of recognition in South Africa¹⁵.

¹⁵ This article respects Paulina Sethole's wish that she is named in any research that takes place in her school. Although anonymity enables the researcher greater freedom to explore difficult issues, it is my view that naming this work contributes to changing the politics of recognition and shares the ownership of this work with her. I remain deeply grateful to Paulina Sethole and to the staff and students of Phepo school for accepting me into their community. I also wish to acknowledge my appreciation to Buzz Bezuidenhout and Esther Langa of BMW and to DSG Outreach for their trust that I would not hijack their projects.

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