

## Editorial



Welcome to the first issue of *Reading and Writing: Journal of the Reading Association of South Africa*. This new journal aims to bring together research, field reports, discussion pieces and critical commentary that will contribute to our knowledge and understandings of reading and writing and that may help us to better grasp the complex, dynamic and changing nature of literacy practices in education and in contemporary social life. The idea for Reading and Writing grew out of the meetings of the Reading Association of South Africa. RASA started on a small scale in Cape Town in 2004 and these origins are still faintly discernable in the roughly Table Mountain shape of the books on RASA's logo on the front cover. RASA quickly outgrew its 'Mother City' origins, however, and is now a larger national body, affiliated to the International Reading Association, with branches in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Western Cape, and with active participation from literacy educators and researchers in neighbouring countries around southern Africa. One of the initial aims of RASA, as set out at the inaugural conference, was to promote research into all fields of literacy in South Africa. This is just one direction in RASA's broader mandate to engage with teachers, educators and academics in developing and promoting literacy work, and in particular, contributing to the development of better teachers of reading and writing, in schools and throughout the system of educational provision. But research is the primary business of this new journal.

The importance of developing a sound and sustained research tradition around reading and writing in southern Africa hardly needs to be stressed, despite and probably also because of the lack of dedicated research outlets in this field. There is no doubt that the educational challenges around reading and writing and the societal issues around literacy and language are at least as big a concern in South Africa as elsewhere in the world and much attention has been drawn in recent times to how poorly large numbers of children in South African schools are doing on standardised literacy tests. There is also an adult literacy campaign underway in the country costing several billions of rands, but there is very little sight of it in research journals, let alone in newspapers

and little evidence at all that it is making a difference. Reading, writing and language concerns challenge universities in South Africa as they confront evidence of widespread failures and drop-outs amongst designated social groups. We are also in a situation where there is not a clear and informed consensus nor an informed debate amongst educators and researchers from varying backgrounds and disciplines as to what counts as literacy and how reading and writing should be taught for particular purposes. The impacts of Information Communication Technologies, with screen-based, multi-media reading and writing, game-playing and Internet activities such as e-mailing, social networking and mobile phone-texting are just some areas where literacy practices are dynamic and changing.

We therefore welcome the participation, both as readers and writers, of a broad range of practitioners and academics who are interested in exploring how literacy is defined, enacted and promoted in a range of institutional, socio-cultural and disciplinary contexts: from early childhood literacy; early school literacy; middle school literacy; high school literacy; academic literacy in tertiary institutions; workplace literacies; family and community literacies; digital literacies associated with the new communication media, technologies and practices; transnational and translocal literacies associated with migrants and mobile people in African settings and with children of migrants and refugees in schools; reading and writing across various kinds of multilingual settings including schools and workplaces; to the reading and writing practices associated with government, local government and formal as well as informal civil society associations. The journal will present contributions from colleagues writing and researching in any of these relevant areas. We welcome papers that provoke debate about literacy interventions of various sorts, whether directed at children, adults or both; in schools, homes, workplaces and elsewhere. We encourage contributions from a range of different disciplines and across disciplinary boundaries. While literacy studies have come more from some disciplines than others in the past, from psychology, linguistics and education, the growing contributions of sociologists, ethnographers, literary, cultural and technology theorists have broadened and enriched the field. In addition, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches can stretch and invigorate our sense of what concepts and approaches are productive in our field.

Besides its primary commitment to publishing original, relevant, peer-reviewed research across all sites of literacy studies, the journal can also provide a forum for information and exchange amongst various sectors in the field, including government and ngos, as well as contribute to the growth of teachers of excellence, in the long run. Individuals will not at all need to be members of the Reading Association of South Africa (RASA) to write for or to subscribe to the journal but we will not mind if the journal encourages growth

in RASA membership. While the journal will be published by RASA, it will be run by an Editor and Editorial Board who will have an identity independent of RASA decision-making structures as regards content and selection. The journal will also need to fill a developmental role where new researchers are given detailed and helpful feedback from review editors that gives them support in their struggles to turn their efforts into publishable research.

We include in this issue a review of some aspects of the international PIRLS testing of primary-schoolchildren that happened South Africa in 2006 and is scheduled to run again next year; we invite discussion on this research. The paper, by Surette van Staden and Sarah Howie is written by key participants in the South African wing of this influential comparative international programme. We also include a study of an intervention at school level, by Sally Currin and Lilli Pretorius, which tries to make a difference in one school. Both of these papers present instances of exemplary practice of particular kinds and we would hope that they stimulate responses and research studies that engage them productively. We start with a paper that is based on Kate Parry's keynote address at RASA's second national conference, outlining her innovative and influential approach to library development in rural Kenya, and the final article is by Daniel Kasule and Violet Lunga on their research from Botswana into the practice of self-editing as a strategy for academic literacy development at tertiary level.

We are pleased to have a report from Snoeks Desmond on the innovative Family Literacy Project from KwaZulu-Natal, and a short opinion piece from James Paul Gee, well-known internationally as a stimulating, accessible and innovative thinker on literacy, language and learning.

As we welcome you to this first issue, we ask you to imagine what could be done in future issues and to participate with us in broadening and sharpening the scope of work presented in these pages. At a more mundane but no less important level, we urge you to get your institutions to subscribe to the journal, using the details available on the back pages. We need these subscriptions if the journal is to prosper.

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