

Critical literacy across continents

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Two universities, two schools, two continents

The northern suburbs of Johannesburg, South Africa, are home to middle class, predominantly white, families¹. Their large tree-filled gardens give

Johannesburg the distinction of being the largest man-made urban forest, with six million trees in public parks, private gardens, and on pavements. On satellite pictures, the suburbs are a green splotch of colour, closely resembling a rain forest.

http://www.joburg.org.za/2003/aug/aug25_trees.stm

It is no wonder that many of these suburbs are called *Parktown*, *Parkwood*, *Parkview*, *Parkhurst*, *Craighall Park*, *Greenside*. A similar web-site for Adelaide, South Australia, states that:

Light's vision for Adelaide was a fully planned place with wide roads, squares and gardens. He designed a grid layout of wide streets and surrounding parklands, which gives the City an easy to understand and relaxed feel.

<http://www.capcity.adelaide.sa.gov.au/html/adelaide.html>

The understanding that the number of trees and parks in a neighbourhood is a significant

marker of social class is not an astonishing discovery, except perhaps when it is made by children in grades 2/3 (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001). In 1996, Marg Wells' seven and eight year-old students, walking through Ferryden Park, South Australia, 10 082 kilometres from Johannesburg as the crow flies (6265 miles, 5 444 nautical miles)

(<http://www.indo.com/cgibin/dist?place>), were counting trees in their neighbourhood, assessing their condition and plotting them on maps. Their tree research project started as part of a 'literacy and social power' curriculum unit, in which the children were asked to identify aspects of their 'school, neighbourhood and world' that they were concerned about and imagine how they might be changed for the better. The focus on neighbourhood grew out of Wells' realisation that the urban renewal project was likely to directly impact on the children and their families, both by improving the physical conditions in the local neighbourhood, but also, by demolishing many of the old housing trust dwellings in which they lived, ultimately forcing relocations for a significant proportion of that neighbourhood. Wells made the neighbourhood the object of study to demonstrate to children how they might positively engage in aspects of the change process and benefit from it, whilst always being aware that there were some aspects well beyond the control of the local community. These seven and eight year old children had numerous concerns about their local area as they currently experienced it – such as robberies, noise, rubbish, and the lack of healthy trees. Wells encouraged the children to select a concern they would like to research further where perhaps they could make a positive difference. Their priority was trees. They wanted to know why some streets, houses and suburbs had more trees than others. With Wells' help, they collected data to make a case to the local council and the redevelopment authority, Westwood, for the greening of their neighbourhood. The economically depressed area where Wells teaches is known as *The Parks*. The suburbs are called *Angle Park*, *Mansfield Park*, *Ferryden Park* as well as *Ridley Grove* and *Challa Gardens* – a 'grim joke' because 'The

Parks is a bleak grid of bleached fibro and brick bungalows' where public housing came to be seen as 'housing for the poor' (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2002:1).

Paulina Sethole, is the principal of Phepo Primary School ⁱⁱ in Atteridgeville, a African townshipⁱⁱⁱ, fifty kilometres from Johannesburg and 10 082 kilometres from Adelaide as the crow flies (6265 miles, 5 444 nautical miles). Her school, like Wells', is also situated in a neighbourhood where there are few trees and fewer gardens. As part of her *Feed the Child Feed the Nation Project*, Sethole developed an extensive organic vegetable garden on the school grounds that provides children with a hot meal every day (Janks, 2003).

Environmental awareness, together with practices that teach children how to conserve natural resources, are fundamental to the school's ethos. To extend its green consciousness in a township characterised by red dust, the school planted an indigenous garden and donated a tree to each of its neighbours. In sharing its knowledge and its limited resources with the community, the school is modelling *ubuntu*, the African philosophy based on the belief that 'a person is a person through other people'. In teaching its students the importance of reaching out to one's neighbours, Phepo school has also contributed to upgrading its surrounding locale. Educators in both schools independently identified trees and gardens as a social issue; both schools worked in different ways towards engaging children in material change that might improve their everyday living conditions and at the same time used the research as a catalyst to introduce them to new representational resources that would give them the opportunity to communicate with young people beyond the local.

The research project

The research project on which we report here, is based on an ongoing collaboration between two universities and two schools on two continents. It began as a small scale literacy study

funded by the University of South Australia (UniSA) in 2001: *Critical literacy, social action and children's representations of 'place'*. Barbara Comber and Pat Thomson, in researching literacy teaching and learning in disadvantaged schools in South Australia, had become increasingly intrigued by Wells' ongoing innovative work with children investigating neighbourhoods undergoing urban renewal. They were particularly interested in the ways in which the literacy work crossed over into local social and material action (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001). By this time Wells had moved to a school one suburb away, also within the perimeter of *The Parks*, also high poverty and also listed for urban renewal as part of the Westwood Redevelopment Project. Wells was now teaching a grade 3/4 class and working closely with her school principal, Frank Cairns, to incorporate neighbourhood studies into the curriculum across the school. The neighbourhood is one of the poorest areas of metropolitan Adelaide and indeed in the nation, and includes a highly culturally diverse community, including many Indigenous, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian families. 80 % of students at Ridley Grove Primary School are on school card. School cards are given to families whose socio-economic circumstances means that they are allocated health cards. It is a recognised indicator of poverty in South Australian schools.

. Thomson and Comber worked with Wells and Cairns to theorise how children engage with their 'place' in the world and how 'critical literacy' might make new resources available for neighbourhood as a social practice (de Certeau, Giard & Mayol, 1998). They invited Hilary Janks from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg to join them, in the belief that a comparative study across different contexts of poverty would produce a better understanding of the relationship between 'habitus' and 'habitat' (Bourdieu, 1999) that might open the way for thinking about the local in relation to the global.

Janks elected to work with Sethole and teachers at Phepo school. Many of the children in this school live in informal shack settlements^{iv} and come from families living below the breadline; for some the hot meal at school is their only meal. In addition, prior to Sethole's appointment, the school lacked basic necessities such as paper, crayons and books; classes of up to 116 children were squashed into small classrooms with children sharing chairs. Janks deliberately chose a school that countered the discourses of deficit often associated with African education in South Africa. Phepo is a place of both vision and heart; in touch with the needs of the community it serves, with an environmental programme that helps students think positively about who they are and where they come from.

In earlier papers (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2002; Janks, 2002), we examined the different articulations of the project in the two different contexts by a consideration of how the children's lived realities led to the production of substantially different artefacts^v. The children's texts, produced in different modalities, using different materials and different media, drawing on different funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) and confronting different social issues, demonstrated the inseparability of text and context (Halliday, 1985; Fairclough, 1989) and confirmed our sense of the value of the local in children's textual production. In neighbourhoods where children are witness to change that is sometimes frightening – in *The Parks* some children's homes are being bulldozed to make way for upmarket housing, partly demolished houses are targets for fires and the neighbourhood endures escalating crime rates; in Atteridgeville people are dying of AIDS and neighbours are living in shacks, without electricity, running water or sewerage – the local is never parochial. In South Africa, school children's protests about the imposition of Afrikaans in their classrooms was the spark that ignited the 1976 Soweto uprising. Local action is political and it teaches children about agency, and the power they have to change 'their world' as they understand it. We agree with

Haraway that 'the only way to find a vision is to be somewhere in particular' (Haraway, 1991:196).

Mobilising educators

In the early stage of the project we were not sure how to bring the two schools together. We could compare and contrast their histories, their material realities, their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1992), their pedagogies and classroom processes, and the children's textual representations, in order to make sense of the different conditions of possibility in these two research sites. But this inclined to mere juxtaposition; we had no way of making these schools 'talk' to each other. Furthermore, it worried us that we were piggybacking on the work of Wells and Sethole. We were conscious that our own social locations as University researchers gave us privileged access to both local schools and global communities of practice. The artefacts produced by the students and their teachers were mobile and so were we, but the teachers and the students were left in the local. Often those who live and work in poverty are least able to move beyond the local (except of course as refugees or as cheap labour somewhere else).

Analyses of globalisation take for granted the ways in which digital communication technologies and twenty-first century modes of transportation have shrunk the world, enabling flows of information and people. What is generally omitted is the question of access to mobility. For teachers and students living and working in poor communities, the rest of the world is as far away as ever. The 10 082 kilometres as the crow flies separating Johannesburg and Atteridgeville from Adelaide makes these destinations infinitely unreachable for people with no money. Even cyber space is out of bounds, unless both schools are wired and the children and teachers are computer and internet literate. We needed to find ways of moving

people, not just ideas and texts.

How researchers turn their intellectual and cultural capital into resources for communities that they work with is both a political and an ethical issue for research. It would be simple to say that Thomson, Comber and Janks found the funding that would enable Wells and her school principal to visit Atteridgeville in 2002, and Sethole and two teachers to visit Adelaide in 2003. However enabling the school principal and two teachers from Phepo and the school principal and a teacher from Ridley Grove to visit each other involved extensive lobbying and networking with professional associations and the state educational bureaucracy in South Australia. In short, the researchers' cultural capital, networks and time were critical in making the travel happen for the school-based educators. And these visits proved to be crucial. It was these visits that connected the schools across the 10 082 kilometres as the crow flies that separated them. In our work overall, when we discuss the ideas which have been taken up across the schools, why they were taken up and how they translate in different sites, we consider the importance of the 'going to be there', the 'being there' and the 'having been there'. In this chapter the emphasis is on the 'going to be there'. In other words, we consider what difference the fact that their teachers and principal were visiting each other in South Africa and South Australia made to the students' production of texts in each site. What did they need to take into account to write and draw for young people in different locales from their own?

'Going to be there'

In 2001, Pat Thomson suggested *A is for Aunty*, a picture alphabet book authored and illustrated by Elaine Russell an Australian Aboriginal woman, as a resource for the project. In

A is for Aunty, Elaine Russell, re-imagines her childhood memories and importantly the places where these occurred, through her art and storytelling. Interestingly, her choice of the alphabet book genre – an old western technology for teaching reading – in a sense, allows her to tell a different story of childhood – a counter-story of ‘the stolen generation’^{vi} – in a way that is accessible to many readers, including children (Russell 2000). Her bold paintings of the Mission at Murrin Bridge, near Lake Cargelligo, on the Lachlan River where she grew up, and her engaging vignettes capture the quality of life in her community. This children’s book is written in simple English and the drawings are bright with a clarity and simplicity of style that children could emulate. In addition, Russell’s aboriginality provided a possible point of connection for African children in South Africa and Aboriginal children at Ridley Grove Primary School.

Teachers at Phepo had been attracted to the alphabet book from the beginning, but felt it to be quite a challenging task. Seeing the professionalism of Wells’ books they were filled with admiration, and despite feeling quite daunted, thought that, with the support of Janks, they should attempt such work with their students. There was general agreement that because Phepo children spoke African languages, writing a book in English was a task for students in Grade 7. Only once they knew that the teachers and the books were going to Australia, did Janks, the Grade 7 teachers and the students push themselves to produce *A is for Atteridgeville*.

Alphabet books and place: Telling the here to others who are there

The alphabet book project, *A is for Arndale* and *A is for Atteridgeville*, produced on two different continents is the cross continental project that we want to explore in this chapter. In both places this project was energised by the physical reality of the teachers carrying the

books across the world to an audience of children somewhere far away: energised by the ‘going to be there’. ‘Reading and writing have always been tools that take us across borders [and] build bridges across cultures and communities (Luke 2003:20).

A is for Arndale

With her class, Wells spent time discussing what each letter of the alphabet would stand for. They needed to decide what they wanted to say about their place and how they lived their lives to the young people in Atteridgeville. They chose a range of places to describe, from malls, to delicatessens, video hire shops, fast food outlets and restaurants, to outdoor places (beach, catchment, parks) to places of activity at home (playing Game Boys, watching TV) and away from home (bike-tracks, judo, football, netball, ice-cream vans) and institutions (hospital, school, kindy, library). Two pages were devoted to more abstract concepts (Q is for Quiet, Z is for Busy Roads, with the z as a sound effect for speeding cars). The cover and title page *A is for Arndale* represent the local shopping centre, Arndale, in some ways the hub of the community in that it provides a large collection of retail, eating places, services and entertainment in a covered mall. In planning the book it became clear that several children wanted to write about a letter (eg. B is for beach, B is for bike track, K is for kindy and K is for Karate), hence the simple solution to include multiple entries for selected letters. The children, like Elaine Russell the author who they were emulating, wrote simple but interesting accounts to accompany their vibrantly coloured paintings depicting their chosen place. Ultimately Wells’ class produced a 30page A3 colour illustrated alphabet book (with the 30 pages allowing each member of the class to make at least one contribution and necessitating two entries for several letters). It was a class-negotiated and collectively produced text with individuals taking responsibility for producing at least one page each to a

standard ready for publication. We turn now to several examples of the children's texts to illustrate the kinds of knowledges and experiences children brought to this task. These examples give a sense of the children's relationships with the neighbourhood, both as problematic and pleasurable, and their engagement with popular culture.

Most of the children's entries focus on pleasurable associations with places, perhaps no coincidence given the similar stance of the Elaine Russell book. However there are also texts which allude to the complexities of everyday life. There are brief references to deliberate vandalism:

One day someone ruined the track on the mound. They dug a shallow trench with their tyre. This is hard to ride over and has caused accidents. I hope it will get fixed soon.

(excerpt from B is for Biketrack)

There are also references to some of the more demanding aspects of life in this busy inner suburb:

Z is for Busy Roads

Hanson Road is a busy road with lots of traffic.

When I was trying to ride my bike across Hanson Road in the traffic, it was very difficult.

When no cars were coming I went riding across the road fast, but then a red car came around the corner. I rode back quickly and waited until the red car went past. Then I rode into the middle of the road.

Lots of cars drove past and I waited a long time. When the cars were gone, I finally crossed the road and went to the petrol station. I had to fill up a can with petrol for my dad's car.

Crossing the road this time was worse. I rode up and down, and up and down, waiting for a break in the traffic. I got to the middle and then went very fast and made it across.

Then I went home.

Another student also starts with Hanson Road (see Figure 1) before going on to suggest that it is not only cars that make life noisy.

Q is for Quiet

Around our neighbourhood it is usually noisy.

Hanson Road is a very busy and noisy road. Lots of traffic goes up and down every day.

There are lots of workers who work on the lights and snapped pipes.

Some houses in our area are being knocked down and new ones being built. There are big bulldozers and cranes working all day.

Some houses are very noisy and some are quiet. Neighbours sometimes have parties and they are very noisy. Sometimes it is hard to do your homework and get to sleep. It is best when it is really quiet.

The accompanying painting for this text includes a car that appears as though might be going off the road and into a house from which a white-faced figure looks out. The picture is

constructed in bold colours – a bright red house with small green windows, a dark blue sky, a huge yellow sun, a black road with clearly marked yellow lines and the offending purple car with blue windows. The overall effect of the painting is to produce a clash of over-crowded images. It definitely does not look quiet. Indeed the image manages to capture the anxiety expressed by the young writer.

Insert Figure 1 here – Q is for quiet

The texts in *A is for Arndale* go beyond the typical recounts often produced by children of this age, because they are writing not only to tell about a specific event, but to explain how their life usually is to someone else who may live differently. The children needed to become aware of what they could not take for granted about their readers.

In other curriculum work Wells' class had focussed on where it was safe to go in their neighbourhood at different times of the day and night and where and whether they were allowed to move through the neighbourhood alone. In that work many children had written about dangers and perceived threats on particular streets and places in the neighbourhood (including crime, dangerous driving, 'scary people'). Their book, written for students in Atteridgeville, however, is less revealing about these aspects of their lives. Indeed these young people mostly take this opportunity to present the pleasure and order in their everyday lives, whether it is regular sport, aspects of school and neighbourhood life, or particular treats and personal preferences. One child writes enthusiastically about the school crossing, obviously deciding that this might be of interest to her Atteridgeville peers and clearly proud of her older sibling.

X is for school crossing

Outside our school is a school crossing. We have school crossing monitors who watch the crossing before and after school.

My sister is in year 7 and she is a monitor. One of the monitors uses a whistle and the other monitors have broomsticks with hexagons with the word “stop” painted on it.

When the sticks are held up the cars and trucks stop and the signs are down the cars and trucks go. This makes it safe for us to cross the road.

The illustration which accompanies this text depicts an ordered world and the older school building which is actually set back from the road and only partially visible from the crossing is brought into the foreground where a monitor with outstretched hands maintains control along with the traffic lights. Birds fly overhead. In sharp contrast to the accounts of busy roads and noisy neighbours, and the implied sense of threat these children sometimes experience, the letter x portrays a safe world, a world where older sisters, stop signs and school crossings are in control.

The original impetus for Wells’ designing the curriculum about the neighbourhood was, as we explained earlier, the changes being wrought by the urban renewal project. As a result of Wells’ intervention and ongoing communication with the council and the developers, the students in Wells’ class became involved in designing and advising on a local reserve. One student gives an account of the ‘catchment’ as they understand it.

C is for Catchment

Near our school, the Westwood people are making a park but it is not made yet. The park will have an Aboriginal theme with native plants and animals.

We have been making tiles for the new park. These are going to be stuck on the seats.

It will be very deep for the rain water to be caught in the catchment area. There will be a small creek. The creek runs through the middle of the park.

On the sides are lots of small stones and rocks. Some will have animals carved into them. Over the creek there will be a bridge made of wood for people to cross. The water will stay for a little while in the creek. When the rain comes the water stays there until it dries up.

The catchment project has clearly captured this student's imagination. Wells' class had become involved in researching the native flora and fauna of the region and also by making suggestions to the developers for the design of the park and artefacts that would become part of it. While this student writes about what the 'Westwood people' are doing, s/he also writes with agency on behalf of the class and knowledgeably about what's going to happen there^{vii}. The accompanying illustration shows a bridge crossing a creek with clusters of trees and two smiling children on opposite sides of the bridge with their outstretched arms suggesting that they are inviting readers/visitors into the park.

Mostly though, these nine and ten year old children wrote about their pleasures (eating at McDonalds, the Vietnam Palace Restaurant or the Ice Cream Van), going shopping (at Westfield Shopping Mall or the local deli), going to the beach, playing netball, soccer,

football, watching movies and TV, playing computer games.

U is for Greater Union

Sometimes when I am really, really bored, I go to Greater Union and watch a movie with my cousin, Minh and my little brother Kim.

My favourite movies are Monsters Inc. and Scooby-Doo. My favourite characters in Scooby-Doo are Daphne and Scooby-Doo and my favourite characters in Monsters Inc. are Boo and Mike.

My cousin always has to sit in the middle because me and my brother always fight over the popcorn.

Greater Union is near Arndale.

The alphabet entries capture a sense of everyday life and the ordinary places that are meaningful to them in the context of their lived experiences. Many similar entries give snapshots of what children regularly enjoy in their lives and many give a sense of special and contingent treats that happen when parents can afford them. Some give a sense of their investments in routine events, particular activities and places (I is for Icecream Van, N is for Netball, B is for Beach). In writing for and to the young people at Atteridgeville, these children convey a sense of optimism, enthusiasm and realism in the ways they represent their lives at this time in this place.

Insert Figure 2 I is for Icecream Van

Interestingly, shared pleasures in Atteridgeville and Ridley Grove include ice-cream, netball, football, parks and gardens and food. Shared fears included violence, ill-health, robberies and poverty.

A is for Atteridgeville

Teachers and students at Phepo had never before written and illustrated a book. Teachers Shikwambane and Matolong were willing to ‘have a go’ at it, with help from Janks. What is crucial about the collaboration is that neither the teachers nor Janks could have produced *A is for Atteridgeville* with the children on their own. They needed to pool their linguistic, pedagogical, local and global expertise. Work began in earnest in April 2003 and was completed three months later just in time for the trip to Australia.

At Phepo we worked with the following constraints

- The teachers had no experience or previous training for this kind of work.
- Janks could not visit the school more than once a week, she has very little primary school experience, and she does not speak any of the African languages.
- Shikwambane’s grade 7 class had 44 students.
- Material resources were limited.
- Neither the teachers nor the students were computer literate and the school did not have computers that students or staff could use.
- Children had to produce a book in English, with limited skills in the language. While we were able to use multilingual classroom practices^{viii} during the production process, the move from the local to the global necessitated the use of English, the only language that could be understood in both schools, for the final product.

Crucially important was the motivation and excitement created by the students' knowledge that *their* teacher would take *their* book to Australia. Writing for a peer audience, who had no knowledge of Atteridgeville became an important pedagogic tool. The students had to think about what this audience needed to know and which of their own taken-for-granted 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1992) would need to be spelt out for this audience 10 082 kilometres away.

In most cases the drawings were done after the writing. As the writing was a communal activity undertaken by students in groups, the drawings were not necessarily done by the writer, as was the case with *A is for Arndale*. The students who were interested in producing the visual texts for *A is for Atteridgeville* worked together around a large table, sharing the limited supply of pens and crayons. At times children would collaborate, with one drawing and another colouring. Children worked on topics that interested them. Some of the visuals support or enhance the verbal text, providing a coherent representation across the different modalities; others work against the verbal, providing a counter discourse. The use of the different modalities provided opportunities for different students to contribute and to excel, and the combination is crucial to engaging the reader.

Shikwambane and Matolong relied on Janks to model aspects of the writing pedagogy, which she did by actually taking them through some of the classroom processes themselves. For example, Janks and Matolong worked out their preferred topics for the letters of the alphabet together, learning to choose topics in relation to other topic choices. In other instances, Janks did some of the work. She typed out the students' drafts and replied with questions designed to elicit more detail relating to the students' extensive knowledge of their community. The teachers worked with the feedback in class and learnt the technique in the process, adding

additional questions of their own. Janks' use of reply, rather than evaluation, (Barnes, 1976) proved to be extremely generative. It established the writing as an interactive communication with a less knowledgeable audience, rather than as a school writing task to be judged by a teacher. When students know a lot, they often are not sure what to include and exclude and the questions provided them with some guidance, as the drafts before and after Janks' questions illustrate.

First draft: H is for HIV/AIDS

HIV is a virus that kills. HIV/AIDS is cause by sleeping around without protection. HIV is spread by someone who is HIV positive who sleeps with others without using a condom.

People think that you can get AIDS by using the same toilets or by shaking hands with people who are HIV positive. When a person is HIV positive that person can lose weight, lose appetite. A person with HIV can look after their bodies by eating food that builds their body and give energy and by doing exercise. People with HIV can live a normal life. They don't have to think that they are going to die because they don't have AIDS yet.

Janks asked the following questions:

Is what people think about toilets and shaking hands true?

Can women and men spread HIV/AIDS?

Are lots of people in Atteridgeville dying from AIDS?

Are people worried?

Do people like to talk about it? Do you only talk about it at school?

Second draft: H is for HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a disease that cannot be cured. Many people in Atteridgeville, specially the young ones, are dying of AIDS. People who are suffering from this disease don't want people to know that they are infected and they don't want to talk about it. Some of those who are HIV positive are spreading this disease by infecting others. HIV/AIDS is caused by sleeping around without protection. HIV is spread by someone who is HIV positive who sleeps with others without using a condom. Many people don't have information about AIDS. They still believe in myths. They don't want to shake hands with people who are HIV positive or even touch them. Another myth is that if you (sleep with) rape a child you will be cured of AIDS. This is one of the reasons why child abuse and rape is high in Atteridgeville. When a person is HIV positive that person can lose weight, lose appetite. A person with HIV can look after their body by eating food that builds their body and gives energy, and by doing exercise.

The drawing that accompanies this text is a neutral image of the AIDS ribbon, worn as a sign of solidarity with AIDS patients. This image is surrounded by positive verbal messages of support: 'I care for people with HIV/AIDS', 'I care for you care for me' and 'My friend with AIDS is still my friend'. The latter is a large sign painted on the outside of the classroom walls at Phepo school. It is as if the abstract symbolisation of the disease, offered by the

AIDS ribbon, provides a distancing from the material realities of the disease that children know and have written about.

In facilitating the choice of topics for each of the letters in the alphabet Janks and the teachers were perhaps too directive. In the end though, the students took control. Shikwambane tried to steer the students away from their preoccupation with crime and violence. In brainstorming the letters of the alphabet this had been a recurrent theme. The brainstorm included 'blood', 'crime', 'gangster', 'gun', 'improve crime', 'police'. It was agreed by a process of negotiation with the whole class that 'P is for Police' would be the place to talk about crime. When the students wrote the book they elected to use 'P' for poverty instead, thus displacing crime. Crime had no place to go so it erupted at the end of the book in X is for Xenophobia, Y is for Youth, Z is for Zaka^{ix}.

The verbal and visual representations of foreigners in X is for Xenophobia are interesting because of the way in which they work against each other. The verbal text attempts to counter negative discourses about foreigners and to deny xenophobia.

X is for Xenophobia

In Atteridgeville we don't have problems with foreigners. Many foreigners have business in Mshengu informal settlement. In some areas, like Soweto, Thembisa and Mamelodi they don't want foreigners because they accuse them of taking their jobs and being involved in crime. In some areas foreigners are involved in selling drugs. Some foreigners married South African wives and some of their children attend school at Phepo Primary school. We play

with them and see them as children, not foreigners. We in Atteridgeville don't hate foreigners. We don't suffer from xenophobia.

The visual image (see Figure 3) offers a contradictory perspective. Here foreigners are depicted with strangely shaped heads, yellow faces, threatened by storm clouds and furtively covered. They are surrounded by African figures with sticks in their hands saying 'you scare me' and 'your frighten me'. Here the visual and verbal texts undercut one another.

Insert Figure 3 (X is for Xenophobia)

The violence is most explicit in their representations of youth (see Figure 4.).

Y is for Youth

Many youths in Atteridgeville after passing matric (Grade 12) can't find employment. Some youths cannot afford to pay school fees because their parents are unemployed. There are many youths on the street. Most of them are involved in crime. Some do drugs and commit crime. Many youths are in prison for car-hijacking, robbery and burglary. The Atteridgeville police station is full of youths who have been arrested. Many youths are dying of HIV/Aids. Some youths are involved with youth choirs and organisations that help others.

The only positive representation of youth appears in the last sentence, 'Some youths are involved with youth choirs and organisations that help others', was proffered only in

response to one of Janks' questions.

The picture of 'Y is for Youth' depicts a drive-by shooting, a man lying on the ground with blood spurting out of his chest, another man running with blood pouring from his eye, an oversized gangster holding a man up with a knife to take his money, and a police vehicle with its siren blaring and a policeman firing a gun. It is an unrelenting portrayal of uncontrolled violent crime.

Insert Figure 4 Y is for Youth

To provide students with an alternative view of youth, Janks produced a handout with information about Hector Pieterse, the primary school child who died in the Soweto 1976 student protests, when the police opened fire on unarmed children. Pieterse has become a symbol of the contribution made by the black youth in South Africa to the freedom struggle. Shikwambane, himself one of the youths involved in the 1976 uprising, spent time with his students re-imagining possibilities for them as youths about to leave primary school in 2003, nine years after independence. Each student then wrote a new version of 'Y is for Youth'. These paragraphs show very little change, suggesting that the daily realities of these children's lives are experienced by them as brutal. This suggests to us that it is not enough to help students reconstruct their texts, if what the texts are representing remains unchanged. Social action that changes the material conditions of these children's lives is crucial.

The garden project discussed fully in Janks (2003), like Wells' project to involve her students in shaping the urban renewal project in their neighbourhood, provided students with opportunities to contribute to changing their material world. The positive effects of the

garden project, developed by the principal with the support of BMW, a global motor industry company, inform several pages of *A is for Atteridgeville*, in which students see themselves as agentive subjects (see Figure 5.).

BMW^x made us famous. It helped our school start food gardens. We sell vegetables to the community. Visitors donate money to the school so that we can buy seeds. There are 734 learners at Phepo. Last year there were 630 and in 2001 there were 520 learners. More and more learners want to come to Phepo because the school fees are cheap and the school is beautiful. (B is for Phepo^{xi})

At our school we have the Nelson Mandela garden. In the middle is a tall tree, the Mandela tree. The tree is surrounded by four flower gardens - the blacks, the whites, the Indians, the coloureds. After the rain the flowers make the rainbow nation. They are in a circle to make one rainbow nation - *simunye* - we are one. (D is for Democracy)

Our school has an environmental project called *Feed the Child, Feed the Nation*. This project consists of the vegetable garden, the herb garden and the indigenous garden. Feed the child feed the nation provides food for learners. They eat. They eat vegetables with bogobe - porridge. The other vegetables are sold to the community. (Extract from F is for Feed the Child, Feed the Nation)

At our school we recycle waste. Learners bring old wheelbarrows, kitchen units, old tyres to school for re-use. We repaint them and plant flowers in them and decorate them. We also recycle paper. The learners bring newspapers on Wednesdays. ...Grey water is the water that is used by learners when they wash themselves. This water is used in our gardens to kill insects and for watering the plants. (Extract from R is for Recycle, Reduce, Re-use)

The images associated with these texts show children running with paper to the Mondi recycling bin, food being prepared for lunch with vegetables from the garden, a vegetable plot, water from a tap being carried in the traditional way in a bucket balanced on the head, and an image of Mandela looking at the new South African flag. The most amusing of these is the picture representing a BMW motor car with the words, 'Be My Wife', township slang for the car. All these drawings are representations that highlight an aspect of the verbal texts they accompany.

Insert Figure 5 Mondi recycling

While many of the texts deal with socially loaded topics, some positive and some negative, like the texts in *A is for Arndale*, many of the letters are devoted to things that children love to do. The children write about the annual fun day at Maroe Park under 'A is for Atteridgeville'; 'I' is for the icecream centre; 'L' is for the languages the students speak. Here they say 'Hello. We hope you like our book' in all the African languages that they 'are proud of'; 'N' is for netball and 'S' is for soccer; 'O' is for Olesang, Atteridgeville's famous, local gospel singer who has many fans in the class; 'T' is for transport and provides plenty of scope for the boys to draw lots and lots of vehicles which they clearly enjoy doing. The

children's pleasure is echoed in the visuals. And under 'P' for poverty the children remind us that:

Poverty does not stop people from enjoying life. The boys are playing with wire cars and the girls are playing with skipping ropes.

Having been there

Here we have focused on the alphabet books that crossed continents and the impetus that the teachers' traveling with the books gave to this work. How the project is developing, as a result of the principals and teachers having been embodied in each other's place, is a further chapter in this ongoing international research project on place. Allan Luke has recently questioned whether curriculum that works with students' local interests and knowledge "intellectually or textually or critically ... goes anywhere" (Luke, 2003: 21). We believe that the local is a good training ground for the kind of political action that teaches students that they can assume agency.

While we have been actively committed to working with teachers and young people to develop critical literacy pedagogies for some time, this shared cross-continent project took us in new directions. Here our focus shifted from deconstructive critical analysis of texts produced elsewhere for consumption anywhere (that is, food packaging, advertising, media reports etc) to the very specific production of texts for very specific readers elsewhere. With the teachers we exploited the energy that comes from 'going to be there' to generate with young people forms of writing and visual representation that would travel. In the process young people in both places collectively thought about what was significant about the ways in which they live their lives. Such an approach emphasises the reconstructive elements of

critical literacy, the need for students to learn to design texts that represent their interests in powerful ways (Janks, 2000). Importantly this project simultaneously expanded the teachers' worlds along with their students.

Our project is far from over. As researchers we have come into the lives of particular schools and specific communities at different points and connected in various ways with the potentials and the problems faced there. We have tried to make available the cultural capital, resources and privileges that come with university positioning. At the same time we have learnt from the inventive and committed practices of the principals and teachers. While small discreet parts of the project are complete – the production of the artefacts for the children in the other place, the reciprocal visits of the school-based educators to each other's schools – in many ways we are just beginning^{xii}. We face some real challenges as we try to increase the communication and learning between these school communities so that the project is more than a one-off exotic experience for all. We still need to 'connect' these schools electronically and to invite others in. We need to ensure that such schools and learning communities are not shut out of the 'network society' (Castells, 1996) by building an infrastructure that makes such practices part of the normal, as indeed they are in privileged schools. This is important because the learning that is accomplished by seeing someone else's poverty, school, pedagogies, has the power to disrupt the taken-for-granted knowledges that might otherwise fence us in. Developing transnational communities of networked critical educators (school, community and university-based) investigating and analysing the effects of their practices and learning from and with each other and their students is where we want to go next.

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ⁱ Prior to 1994, these suburbs were designated as a whites only area, in terms of the Group Areas Act, a cornerstone of apartheid legislation.

ⁱⁱ 'Phepo', which means 'feeding' in Setswana, is a pseudonym.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ten years after independence in South Africa, townships that were set up as ghettos for Africans

as part of the apartheid policy of separate development, continue to exist. While Africans are no longer restricted to living in these townships, many cannot afford to move to more affluent areas and many choose to remain with their communities.

^{iv} The politically correct term is 'informal settlement'. The teachers and the children who live in them call these settlements 'squatter camps'. Janks uses the word 'shack settlement' to convey a sense of the material conditions of poverty in which the children live. It is however, important to note that these informal settlements do represent new freedom for people to live where they choose, without the restrictions imposed by pass laws and the Group Areas Act, and people are now able to move to the cities where they stand a slightly better chance of finding work.

^v In Wells' class these included digitized photographs of local houses which the children 'redecorated' using *Kidpix™*, large maps of local streets depicting their residences on sheets of brown paper, individual coloured maps of children's routes to school and many surveys about how they saw their lives and homes now and how and where they imagined themselves in the future. At Phepo the children produced cardboard models of their houses, drawings in crayon on paper, and a photographic map of the school, writing, and simple role play 'dramas'.

^{vi} "The stolen generation' refers to large numbers of Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families and taken 'into care' by the authority of the Australian Government. See *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Australia)* (1997).

^{vii} At the time of writing this chapter the Mikawomma Reserve is complete. The children who had been involved continued to be proud of their role in its design and see it as their park as the principal found out when he showed it to visitors after school hours to be asked by the children who appeared, what he was doing in *their* park.

^{viii} We used codeswitching wherever it was needed to ensure understanding and to enable students to contribute to discussions.

^{ix} *Zaka* is township slang for money and the visual representation of zaka depicts a bank robbery.

^x Janks has written of BMW's association with the school elsewhere. (Janks, 2003).

^{xi} We have substituted Phepo for the name of the school.

^{xii} The Phepo teachers returned from their visit to Australia aspiring to emulate the pedagogies that they had seen at Ridley Grove, the organisation of the media centre and the development of children's facility with new technologies. The Ridley Grove principal and teacher were inspired to initiate a garden project that would draw its community into the school. Each took from the other ideas that met their current needs.