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Nombuso Dlamini

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## Literacy, Womanism and Struggle: Reflections on the Practices of an African Woman

Nombuso Dlamini<sup>1</sup>

The possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term, just as we can live and act in feminist resistance without ever using the word feminism (bell hooks, 1994, pp. 61-62).

As I begin writing about the importance of, and interconnections among *literacy*, *womanism* and *struggle*, I feel myself drawn enthusiastically to treasured memories of my mother's life and the influence she has had in shaping my theoretical and professional undertakings. Going back into my childhood, I can surely categorize my mother then as having been a literacy worker as she taught at an elementary school, a womanist because of her concern for and actions about issues of women equity, and a political activist because of her struggles against apartheid. My interest here is in tracing a few incidents in my life that demonstrate how I use the terms literacy, womanism and struggle to refer to my mother, and ultimately, what they mean and how I have experienced them.

Issues raised in this paper demonstrate that lack of possession of academic terminology such as theory, feminism, critical pedagogy, etc. does not necessarily equate to lack of theorizing about or practicing the issues that the terms embrace. Hooks (1994) argues that women who have access to legitimized modes of communication are able to define, describe and interpret their actions in ways that are not always accurate. Citing examples described in King (1992), hooks further argues that those who possess these modes of communication are able to draw from the actions and works of feminists who have less status and are invisible in academia without properly acknowledging them as sources. Additionally, the possession of a particular mode of communication has resulted in the creation of hierarchies in feminist theory and of the privileging of written feminist thought over oral narratives. While works by people of color and marginalized groups are beginning to permeate the academic world, traditionally, such works were often not legitimized in academia and the tendency was to view works by white women and men as the most legitimate. By documenting my mother's practices I hope to add on to these emerging voices, to give voice to and legitimize mother's oral struggles, and to demonstrate that the contemporary production of feminist theory and of feminism, described mainly as western phenomena, are limited in their description of women's struggles all over the world. The incidences narrated here are proof that experience and theory are dialectical since the practitioner's habits of being and living most embody the actions associated with feminism and literacy.

In documenting my mother's experiences, I am also attempting to answer a question I usually confront as a Black woman educator in an institution of higher learning: how did you make it? The first few times I was asked this question I was upset by it. I interpreted it to mean that those who asked had low expectations of people of my calibre, that is, they did not expect Black women to succeed in meaningful ways. However, since the

question kept being posed by different individuals I decided to take a closer look at it and to not offer dismissive responses as I originally did. First, I realised with disappointment that even though the numbers have increased, there are not a lot of Black women out there who occupy the same position as I do, that is, a university professor. I also realised that the category Black that is, to belong to the Black community is perceived as a category of disadvantage, that this perception does not necessarily derive from bigotry as it is also part and parcel of the Canadian Government discourse. To respond to this question meaningfully, I realised that part of the answer lies in my early literacy discourse, in the possession of valued cultural capital and in having, to use western terminology, a feminist as my mother.

In beginning seriously to respond to the question: How did you make it? I found myself theorising about my childhood and other experiences, and theorising about my mother's practices. Within traditional western feminist scholarship, my mother might not neatly fit into the category of feminist. Even though she has lived a life of struggle against various forms of inequities, the language she uses does not symbolise that used by many feminist scholars. She cannot, for example, use nor know terms and phrases such as *sex as prediscursive anatomical fact*, *gender dichotomy*, *performing gender normatively*, *gender as bipolar identities etc.* My mother would not be able to talk about concepts such as poststructuralism and the poststructuralist project that in part aims to show that thinking in terms of dualisms such as man/woman, theory/practice, etc perpetuate essentiality thinking. In fact, I am afraid my mother might be labelled by some of these concepts as essentialist. Yet to me, her practices and teachings have laid the foundation of the proud Black womanist that I am today, and the educator that I continue to be. In fact, whenever I think of my mother's practices I see her as tightly fitting into the description of the quote that begins this article.

My mother's political life is an open book. Her involvement in party politics during and after apartheid, her role as a leader in the different communities in which she lived can be heard from all those whose lives she touched. In this article, I have chosen to only write about those aspects of her life, those practices that directly nurtured my academic, and later, professional life. As already stated, I am hesitant to refer to my mother as a feminist for two reasons. First, the term itself seems to be used in limited ways, usually signifying western ways of fighting for women's rights and the emergence of the women's movement of the late 60s and 70s, that marginalise similar historical efforts both in the west and in developing countries. The term feminism also seems to be gender specific, thus failing to name those men within the same struggle.

I have translated the Zulu concept of *ubufazi* to womanist/womanism in order to capture some of the nuances demonstrated by my mother's life in general, and in particular by the incidences narrated in this paper. This translation springs from my knowledge of Zulu language and culture, and from knowledge of the circumstances under which this concept is used within the South African context. Literally speaking, the concept itself derives part of its meaning from its opposite, *ubudoda* manist/manism. *Ubudoda* and *ubufazi* are concepts used to indicate acts carried out by anyone regardless of gender. In Zulu actions have gender associations and these actions can be practised by anyone, male or

female, thus, indirectly articulating the social construction of gender. *Ubufazi* and *ubudoda* are also used in a manner that signifies the interconnection between theory and practice. That is, these terms are used in a manner that suggests that one cannot just believe in, or theorise about something and not practise it; there is nothing like pro-*ubudoda*, or pro-*uufazi*. If, for example, a man believes in a womanist act, he is expected to practise it. When he carries out this action it is generally understood that at that particular moment, he has assumed the gender associated with that action- *umfazi*, a woman. For this reason, I use the term womanist/womanism because I find it inclusive, in terms of belief (being pro-feminist), and practice (being feminist). Additionally, the use of the term womanist derives from its ability to capture formal gender politics, as in the women's movement of the late 60s and 70s, as well as capture interpersonal politics, that is, the negotiation of relations of power in women's everyday interactions and practices. Indeed, many of the practices I value in my mother occurred outside the parameters of party politics and nurtured the lives of many girls concerned with just simply surviving.

In what follows, I begin by relating some of my mother's actions that I see as having shaped the way I understand literacy. The term literacy is used to refer to so many different acts to the extent that it is now difficult to clearly define what literacy is. The literacy section of this paper brings forth a number of mother's practices that illuminate this multiplicity of meanings and uses of the term literacy. It offers examples on the importance of literacy as the ability to read and write. This section further offers narratives that point to literacy as skills, that is, literacy as being able to perform a particular skill - usually measured through the use of a standardized tool (e.g. test scores); literacy as culture specific; and literacy as discourse, that is, ones ability to engage in different discursive practices. Following the literacy section is womanism; a section that brings forth mother's actions that forces me to see literacy as an integral part of the struggle for womanism. I conclude by reflecting on how experiences with my mother shape my understanding of literacy and womanism and how these experiences have forced me to begin to think about teaching in ways that reflect *uufazi*.

All episodes narrated in this paper demonstrate mother's belief in literacy as power, the power that enables women to enter zones previously not intended for them. These episodes also demonstrate how it is possible for one to engage in certain practices without being formally educated in highbrow theoretical terms. My mother is testimony to this assertion. This personal narrative is one designed to contribute to the many threads that constitute feminist theory and perhaps, to help rethink the ways in which academia thinks about who ? possesses? knowledge, what constitute ? scholarly? feminist theory, and how feminist theory in general is produced and valued.

### Literacy

My first encounter with the written word was as a child living in a classroom that acted as our family house in an elementary school where both my parents taught. The school was located on the northern border of Swaziland and South Africa, in a small town called Mashobeni North. My father had taken a position as school principal and arrived at the school with my elder sister and me about one term prior to mother. When mother finally

joined us, half way into the school year, we were supposed to, at the very least, have learnt the alphabet, and at the most should have been able to string or code the alphabet together to form simple words.

The first day mother came to the school and was introduced to the other teachers and to their classrooms, turned to be my first introduction to the alphabet. I was five years old and in a grade one class with my sister Skhumbuzo who was six years old. Our teacher Mrs. Mavimbela had divided the class into two groups: those whom she was teaching and would move on to the second grade the following year, and those who observed and imitated others being taught and were expected to repeat the first grade. The criterion for this division was that the latter group was not serious enough, that is, it was too playful. I was in the playful group and my sister was in the studious group.

Personally, I enjoyed our group very much for we were not charged with the responsibilities of reading and writing. When time for reading came, we were expected to follow in our books by imitating students from the studious group. We used to spend virtually the entire school day at the end of the room, next to the coal stove, playing various games. I remember being an expert in a game we called ? frog?. The gist of the game was to try to jump like frogs from one end of the room to another and whoever reached the other side first was the winner. There must have been about ten of us between the ages of five and eight in this group. The shorter you were, the easier it was to manoeuvre and crimp your body in a small space, and, in addition to my love for playing, I think I usually won this game because I was shorter and smaller than most. When mother first came to Mashobeni North, this is the situation she found me in. Even though I was still a young child then, I remember Mrs. Mavimbela explaining to mother the logistics behind putting my group where it was and assuring her that we were happy. To demonstrate our happiness, Mrs. Mavimbela asked us to show mother how we played ? frog?, and, as in other occasions, I won. We were very happy indeed!

That afternoon mother had a talk with father expressing her disbelief at the situation. All along, I had been able to fool father into believing I, like my sister, could read. Mother gave me a grade one book and asked me to read for them, and I did so without any problems. I had memorised the book from the first to the last page. I was smart! However, when mother wrote those very same words onto a plain piece of paper, I could not pronounce even one of them. So it came to be that mother began to teach me the alphabet, and later, reading and writing.

Learning the basic alphabet followed the usual method still found in many classrooms where students are introduced to linguistic symbols and to their corresponding sounds in the context of reading and writing the world around them. However, the alphabet was not taught to me in its chronological order, instead, vowels were introduced first, and later, other symbols. Learning to combine the letters to form short words was the height of my learning experiences. What made it interesting and fun was that the combined symbols often produced the sounds and actions of animals in my surroundings and of the actions of the people around me. For example, I quickly learnt that combining the symbol “m” with “o” gave me the sound that cows made and that combining with

“u” gave me the sound derived from slapping one on the cheek. Today I know that, according to literacy theories, my mother was engaged in whole language methods of teaching. One of the beliefs associated with whole language is that the student has to be the centre of the language learning process, that is, her identity and social surroundings are central to learning. Another belief is that meaning is contextual and socially constructed. In fact, Freire (1987) addresses this concept directly when he examines his early literacy experiences stating the importance of having been able to connect texts, words, and letters to his environment. In this light, I see my mother as a whole language practitioner.

I first learnt the alphabet in the Zulu language, and, indeed, my first reading lessons were also in Zulu. I must have been very happy with my newly discovered reading ability because from that year onwards, I read everything I could lay my hands on. Teachers at Mashobeni North kept schoolbooks in the classes in order to avoid their loss and since our family room was also a classroom, often, my sister and I got to read the books that stayed in the classroom. Some of these books were written in English.

I remember with joy and pride my first English reading lesson. We were still in the second grade then, and English learning was not started until the third grade. On one school evening my mother overheard my sister Skhumbuzo and I reading an English book to each other. With the exception of at we were mispronouncing the words in the book in a Zulu-English fashion. Ours was not a bad job at all. I still remember the book and the words we mouthed out: ? look at mother; look at father; look at mother and father; look at them. Hearing us trying so hard, my mother there and then started teaching us English. I can honestly say that when the evening ended, we knew all the words in that book.

As I grew older, I learnt to see my mother as a valuable source of my language development. One of the problems I had and still have today is spelling. When I was in grade four I remember coming home with what to me appeared an insurmountable problem: a failure to correctly spell the word ? because? no matter how hard I tried. Worse still, I could not understand why my teachers thought my spelling wrong because I spelled it exactly the way it sounded, *becose*. Mother said that she too had had a problem with spelling until she devised a way for herself to think of the problematic word in Zulu. For example, with the word because, I could break it down into two parts which would give me two meaning-related Zulu words: beca (literally, to cut); use? (literally, to give). I began to think of because ?as a word that in Zulu meant cutting and giving, and needless to say, I have never misspelled it since then. That day I learnt two important spelling strategies: that breaking words into smaller units makes it easier to remember them, and that these units can be played around with for purposes of meaning that facilitates memory. Of course not all English words can be broken down to produce meaningful Zulu words, but with a few exceptions this strategy usually works for me.

Theories of second language learning and of the role of the mother language in this process have evolved over the years. In the 1970s the method that mother used to assist me with spelling would have been greatly discouraged because of fear from what is

termed first language interference. Indeed, there is documentation to the fact that in former British colonies second language learners of English who were caught using their mother tongues in schools underwent severe punishment (see, for example, Ngugi, 1986).

The mother tongue was believed to negatively shape and hinder the learning of a second language. Yet, drawing on her practices with me, mother believed that the learning of a second language cannot happen independent of the first language, and that, in fact, strategies of first language acquisition can positively influence the processes of second language learning. In addition, I am sure it was mother's belief that children have the right to their own language that made it possible for her to investigate ways in which my first language could assist me in learning a new one. In this light, I view her as a second language specialist.

Being students in the same school where our parents taught meant that they could use us to figure out some of the teaching strategies they were introduced to. For example, I remember the advent of what was called Scientific Reading Association (SRA) reading cards<sup>2</sup>. The cards were in three big boxes. Each box had colourful cards each colour representing a certain level of difficulty. I now suspect that the boxes also represented something. Beginning from grade five onwards teachers used these cards to teach and test mainly for English comprehension. Each card contained a story with corresponding multiple-choice questions to be read and answered in no more than three minutes. Usually, ability to read and respond to all questions correctly meant that your comprehension skills were at the right/expected level. After doing ten cards correctly, one would be allowed to move on to the next card colour.

When this card system was first introduced, teachers received in-service training. My mother and two other teachers from Mashobeni North School attended this training. Upon returning from the workshop mother introduced my sister and me to the cards and used our responses to figure out strategies for classroom implementation. I also remember discussions between my parents about these cards, mainly cantering on what to do with those students who would not be as fast as required by the set standards. Mother argued that with more practice and familiarity with the cards, such students would catch up. Father believed however that such would be an indication that the students needed more English teacher instruction. In the end, they agreed that some students would need direct teacher instruction, others may need more than three minutes per card at the beginning and improve with time, while others may just do well from the very onset. I remember mother rejoicing over the fact that finally there was a resource that would guide her (and other teachers) with regards to the students' development process, that is, a resource that was to help her see how much progress a student was making and also indicate where assistance was needed.

There are a few pedagogical lessons from my parents' practices with us and with each other. First, my parents' actions speak to the changing nature of classroom pedagogy, that is, the importance of continued professional update, and openness to new information. Second, by using my sister and me to figure out some of the new resources and teaching strategies they were being introduced to, my parents were involved in teaching as a trial and error. By this I mean that as a teacher, when you are introduced to

a new resource or strategy it is important to recognize that in the first few times you will really be trying out this resource, and that in the process, you will be willing to make, admit to, and change mistakes. During this trial period, dialogue with other teachers is crucial and for this dialogue to be meaningful, the teacher should be willing to entertain and accept critical remarks about some of her practices. In my parents' case they used my sister and me for a trial and error and they discussed with each other on a daily basis what was happening in their classrooms. One can only hope that even though most teachers do not have children at home that they could use for trials? they would still recognise the trial period in their own classrooms. Third, my parents' actions also speak to students' different learning styles and levels and, therefore, to the need to incorporate strategies appropriate for all children in the classroom. In this light, I see my mother (and father) as involved in critical pedagogy.

Having mother as my language teacher and mentor was not always very easy for her standards were sometimes too high for my liking. For instance, I received high school education outside apartheid South Africa, in one prestigious private boarding schools of the times, Mankayane High School. For this reason, correspondence with my parents who had by then returned to South Africa was usually through letters. I was in form two when I returned home one day to find mother very unhappy with what she called my writing regression. As proof, mother had with her the last letter I had sent to her. Using a red pen, she had underlined my letter from top to bottom marking all the misspellings, incorrectly structured sentences and poorly constructed paragraphs. I was outraged by her behaviour and, in a fit of teenage rebellion, I promised myself never to write to her again (a promise I later withdrew as it affected my financial livelihood at school). Her argument was that as much as she acknowledged my efforts to update her of my being at school, how this knowledge was presented was equally important. I did not see things that way then. However, today, I see mother as critical of the commonly held belief in some whole language circles which argue that since learning is developmental, there is no need for overt teacher instruction, a belief that things will just happen naturally? (Vibert, 1995). Put differently, mother today would be critical of teachers who emphasise students' efforts to write at the expense of teaching and correcting the skills involved in the process of writing. In this light, I view mother as not buying into what Portelli (1995) terms, soft liberalism? the belief that any choice that a student makes is acceptable and that intervention and correction on the part of the teacher should be minimized no matter the price.

### Womanism and Struggle

My mother was not just concerned with literacy; she was also concerned with the possibilities that literacy made available for women. My father's mother was one of the few converts and priests of KwaMondi, Eshowe, and a Lutheran missionary settlement in the then Natal province. In addition to conducting God's work the missionaries also embarked on educating the natives. Education was then considered the route to civilisation, western ways of living, and to white collar jobs. As a result of grandfather's status, my mother was born into missionary education<sup>3</sup>. Although for mother going to school and eventually to a teacher training college was a given, many African fathers at



that time viewed educating a girl as a waste of resources for the girl would grow up and get married and thus end up enriching another man. While my mother grew up in a household where education was highly valued, she was consciously aware of her uncommon and somehow privileged position and continued to act in ways that promoted women's rights to education.

As far back as I can remember my mother encouraged my sisters and me to excel in our schoolwork. Mashobeni North was, at that time a fairly traditional place and even though there had been contact with Europeans, African norms and customs had hardly been touched. That the place was still under the leadership of a traditional chief, Magungwane Shongwe, valued tribal marriages over western marriages and still participated in things like *incwala* and *umhlanga*, speaks to the integrity of the traditional practices at that time<sup>4</sup>.

At Mashobeni North School it was common to hear teachers talk openly about the genius of boys over girls. For instance, at the end of the school term, exams were conducted and the results were announced on the last day of school. The entire school would assemble in a hall and teachers would take turns announcing the names of the students who had passed their classes. As each name was announced the students would go on stage with the student who got the highest marks getting the first position, followed by the student who got the next highest, and so on and so forth. It was very common for my sister and me to occupy the first positions in our class. It was also common to hear teachers, including my father, commenting that those classes where girls got the first positions were not real classes and that those boys being led by girls were not men enough. Fortunately such comments never had much of an impact on my sisters and me because mother openly challenged such comments and continued to encourage all girls to study hard and outsmart the boys. In the end, it became a gender game with my mother on the one hand determined to show that girls were equally smart and the male teachers unsuccessfully trying to prove her wrong.

Mother's love for education and her belief in it as the journey towards women's liberation and self-progress was demonstrated to me as a child in a relationship she had with Thandiwe Khanyile. By observing this relationship, it became clear to me that mother viewed education as one of the journeys, if not *the* journey a woman could take towards self-independence. To illustrate my point I must beg the indulgence of the reader to describe in detail the nature of this relationship.

Thandiwe was the adopted daughter of Mr Khanyile a local businessman who, among other things, owned and operated a number of buses. She had gone to a girls' boarding school, Mbuluzi High School, and successfully completed her matriculation with flying colours. Mother celebrated Thandiwe's high school success as if she were her own daughter. Now and then she would discuss Thandiwe's future plans with father and express hope that we, her children would take example from Thandiwe's character, for unlike many girls in the area, Thandiwe had taken little interest in boys and more interest in her studies.

Thandiwe had applied to the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland to do dentistry. At that time the three countries, all former British colonies, operated a university together, each country hosting different programmes that the other did not offer. For instance, students interested in studying law would go to Swaziland since this was the only country that offered this. However, Swaziland could offer only a Bachelor's degree in law and not an LLB. So, it was the responsibility of the Swaziland campus to make arrangements for the students to further their studies in law at other universities, usually in Edinburgh, Scotland. It didn't matter that the students who applied were not Swazi; as long as they came from one of the three countries they were Swaziland's responsibility.

When sis Thandiwe (for that is what we called her), applied to do dentistry none of the three countries offered the programme. Therefore, arranging for her and other students to study at another university became a complex process, and I am not sure which country/campus was responsible for this particular arrangement. Talk about Thandiwe's university arrangements became part of daily conversations between my parents, and we children were subjected to long lectures about the virtues of good character and the evils of sexual relationships which would result in nothing but pregnancy. Frankly, I was fed up with the whole thing and the discussions about Thandiwe that were tolerable before were becoming more and more annoying. Thandiwe was finally admitted to Nairobi University in Kenya. And thus began another vein of conversation between my education-loving parents, especially mother, whose open admiration for Thandiwe was surely getting out of hand.

The day Thandiwe left for Nairobi is surely unforgettable. My parents did not see her off at the airport and the only reason I can imagine is that they did not have transport to take them there. However, later that week mother visited Thandiwe's mother to hear about the send off and then returned home to narrate it to father and to us children. I even remember the glow in her voice as she told the story. The part I remember most vividly is that Thandiwe's father had been late arriving at the airport, but begged the officials to enter the plane to say his farewells. Swaziland is a small country and in the 70s, and perhaps even now, mainly depended on South Africa to fly its international passengers. Thus, Thandiwe had boarded one of the small planes, which would take her to Johannesburg and from there she would take another plane to Nairobi. For this reason, her father was allowed inside the plane and, according to my mother, said his goodbyes and gave her a hundred dollars as pocket money, a substantial amount at that time. Three months down the road, Thandiwe returned to Swaziland. Officials had discovered that she was pregnant and according to then sexist scholarship terms, she was to be returned to her country of origin to have the baby.

I should be ashamed of saying this, but to me Thandiwe's return was like a Shakespearean tragedy, one that I would read and enjoy. Had I been asked to write a story then I would have written about the rise and fall of Thandiwe Khanyile, a fall I would depict as inevitable given the triumph of her rise.<sup>5</sup> Yet at the same time I was saddened by her circumstances. I was also saddened by the sadness in mother's voice as she told this tragedy, only, this time, to father. She was sad for her and openly hoped that

she would not see this as the end of her life. But more importantly, she was outraged by the unfair practices that tended to 'punish' women and somehow ignore men's responsibilities in the event. Later, as years went by, mother would follow Thandiwe's progress to teacher training and later to marriage, an inevitable route given her situation. What is more important for me with this story was its ending: My mother began another vain of struggle in which she motivated women to petition the government to change its policy. This resulted in a change of policy five years later and even though Thandiwe did not benefit from the changes I know that this petition saved the lives of many students who later underwent similar experiences.

Thandiwe was one of many in the area who would have such an unhappy turnover. The policy required that pregnant teenagers be sent to their homes and they were not allowed to continue with their education even after delivery of the baby. The result was that because of boredom and lack of direction among other things, these teenagers would end up pregnant again and again. I remember my mother talking my father into privately changing such practices at Mashobeni North School. And I remember her being involved in negotiating with angry grandmothers for childcare arrangements so that their grandchildren would go to school. In the last school in which she taught and was also principal, she started a feeding program that assisted with the nourishment of new mothers who otherwise would have severely suffered from malnutrition. Such a programme was met with resistance from the school committee and some community members. Nevertheless, it survived the pressure and those who benefited from it continue to support it.

Currently, as I work in the area of language education, I discuss language and gender issues with my mother and I am always amazed at her insightfulness and at the lessons I continue to learn from her. In 1994 I was home, South Africa, for a visit when mother returned from a principals' meeting focussed on strategies for implementing language arts workshops for teachers. She told me that she was very upset about the way in which Zulu speakers were blindly adopting western suggestions for linguistic change. While in theory, the meetings are to be conducted in the language of education, English, in practice, this just does not happen. I must preface this discussion by saying that in Zulu there are no human gender prefixes. It is only upon being questioned that the speaker would give out the gender of the person referred to. So, for example, the words policemen and headmasters have no Zulu equivalents<sup>6</sup>. Instead, literally translated in Zulu one talks about police people and big/head teachers respectively. With the rise of western feminism and among other things, a meaningful change in language use and in particular in naming, many English words were revisited. Thus, we now talk of a chairperson instead of chairman, police officer instead of policemen and head teacher instead of headmaster. It is also not uncommon to hear others talk of a policewoman or even a chairwoman. Certainly, within the South African context, and in my mother's region in particular, it is this latter change that became dominant. As a result of women's movements in the country, partly influenced by western feminism, there was talk that women now wanted to be linguistically acknowledged and to have titles that were gender specific. For example, female head teachers wanted their gender acknowledged since this, in the light of apartheid practices, was a rare achievement. Therefore, instead of

talking about *uthishomkhulu*, big/head teacher, one would talk of *uthishomkhulukazi*, female head teacher (-*kazi* is the Zulu female signifier). Mother noted that while male head teachers were not in support of this linguistic change, they surely used female signifiers in crucial moments where ideas were being evaluated and where crucial suggestions were made. In the meeting that she had attended that afternoon, they were all encouraged to write down their suggestions and to put their names at the end (for use by the chairman in case the handwriting was ineligible). What happened was that while reading the suggestion, the chairman would begin by saying *uthishomkhulu*, or *uthishomkhulukazi* suggests this and that. Mother then noticed that whenever the suggestion came from *uthishomkhulukazi*, it was hardly listened to, let alone be discussed. Having made this observation, halfway through the meeting she suggested that the author's title be eliminated since the meeting was made of all head teachers anyway, or that the chairman refer to everyone in the room as *uthishomkhulu*, head teacher.

Her suggestion sparked a debate in which male teachers spoke about the confusing demands women make on them, saying something like, "Women, you never know what they want; yesterday they wanted us to call them this and today they was us to call them that". The women, on the other hand, agreed with my mother arguing that if the use of female prefixes were to help devalue their suggestions, then they would rather hold on to *uthishomkhulu*, which is what they had always been called anyway. They argued that recognition and acknowledgement is a source of empowerment, however, the way that they were being recognised was not to empower but devalue them and their suggestions.

This conversation confirmed my suspicions that, in addition to being a whole language practitioner, a critical pedagogist, and a womanist, my mother is also a sociolinguist, a person involved in daily examination of practices of language choice and language use in society. Bourdieu reminds us of the reproductive role of language: "everyday linguistic exchanges should be viewed as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competences... everyday linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps reproduce (1982, p. 2). Further, Bourdieu argues that since authority comes to language from the outside, its use, the manner as well as the substance of discourse, depends on the social position of the speaker. In the head teachers' meeting it appears that my mother was critical of the way language was being used to reproduce male hegemony, to undermine women's contribution by putting emphasis on linguistic gender signifiers. It is also clear that from the male perspective women head teachers were not legitimate speakers, that is, they were not entitled to speak in these circumstances and therefore, they were not worthy of attention.

My mother is also aware of the interconnection between language and culture in quite interesting ways. My first Christmas in Canada looked as if it was going to be extremely solitary and depressing. For this reason, I decided to look for a package, an organised trip that would allow me not to spend Christmas on my own. I had no relatives in Canada and the few friends I had appeared to have had no clue of my plight. I found a ten-day package for the "international Christmas at Mount Alison University. This trip brought together over a hundred international students and organised different activities between

the Christmas and New Year's holidays. This trip was exactly what I wanted and I returned from it eager to share my experiences. Since mother had been worried about the possibility that I might spend Christmas alone, I decided to write and put her at ease. The letter narrated the many different activities that I engaged in, activities that I definitely would not have tried had I not had company in similar unknowing positions. After receiving my letter, mother wrote back expressing concern about the many references to myself in my letter. She quoted a few sentences: "On the first day of our stay *I* woke up and went for breakfast. At about ten o'clock, *I* went tobogganing, a snow game that involves seating on a slid and sliding down a hill. The second day was hay riding which *I* also enjoyed a lot." She went on to add that from my letter, one would vow that I had gone on this trip on my own, and that there were no people with whom I shared some of these activities. She stated that from my letter, she sensed a change from a communal to an individualistic approach to things. And she cautioned that I should beware of what I was embracing from the society I was in since, every society has its strengths and weaknesses<sup>7</sup>.

Mother's observations above point to what many sociologists have noted as the integral nature of language and culture (see, for example, Ngugi 1986, Kress 1988a, Gee 1997). Kress, states a very close fit of ideas and language; indeed, some ideas/forms of language seem to exist in one culture and not in another. Language and culture are very closely interwoven; social structures and linguistic form are intimately intermeshed. This is so across larger cultures, as much as it is the case in the social and cultural diversity within one society (1988a, p. ii). In this vein, I view my mother as a cultural critic/ analyst.

### Reflections

As I continue to work in the area of language, culture and education, I have looked at a number of theories to help understand my early literacy experiences, and I continue to examine the ways these experiences shape me as an educator. One of the theorists that I draw from is Bourdieu (1977, 1982) and his argument about the unequal distribution and valuing of resources, and in particular, cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, the discourse and knowledge promoted in schools is that of the ruling/ dominant group. That is, dominant groups have established their language and their knowledge priorities (curriculum, pedagogical practices, etc.) as the official culture of the school. Since students come from different groups (subordinate and dominant) those who come from the dominant group arrive in school already ingrained with the culture of the school, that is, valued ? cultural capital. This means that students do not start on the same footing, as some students already have the knowledge that is promoted by schools and knowledge of how schools function, some students are more likely to be successful than others.

Similarly, Gee (1991) talks of primary and secondary discourses. Primary discourses are about ways of doing things, of meaning making found in the homes while secondary discourses are found in social institutions such as schools. Primary discourses are not formally learned but they are acquired through observation and participation in the space in which they are found, while secondary discourses entail a lot of formal learning. The development of secondary discourses (such as the language of school) builds on the

language acquired at home. Gee also argues that not all primary discourses are valued by social institutions. Citing Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gumperz, 1982; Heath 1983) Gee states, "Research also shows that many school-based secondary discourses conflict with the values and viewpoints in some non-mainstream children's primary discourses and in other community based secondary discourses (e.g., stemming from religious institutions)" (1991, p. 9). Gee seems to be in agreement with Bourdieu in his argument that the unequal valuing of primary discourses by schools privileges those students who arrive with the school-valued primary discourse.

Yet Delpit (1995) warns of the deterministic nature of Gee's (and, by association, Bourdieu's) arguments. Her major bone of contention is that Gee seems to suggest that since knowledge of primary discourses is acquired as opposed to being formally learnt, those born outside the dominant discourse have little or no access to the social institutions that make this acquisition possible, learning the dominant discourse is impossible. This deterministic argument, according to Delpit, suggests, in the light of the difficulties he outlines, that those who are outside the dominant discourse should not make efforts to "get in." Such an argument, does not encourage educators for instance to teach both the school curriculum and the hidden curriculum (made up of primary-discourse oriented practices). Delpit states, Gee's argument suggests a dangerous kind of determinism as flagrant as that espoused by the geneticists: instead of being locked into your place by your genes, you are now locked hopelessly into a lower-class status by your discourse. Clearly, such a stance can leave a teacher feeling powerless to effect change, and a student feeling hopeless that change can occur (Delpit, 1995, p. 154).

Gee and Bourdieu's argument resonates in many ways with what I believe to be true for I see my own upbringing as a classic case of benefits accrued from the possession of valued cultural capital. I cannot for instance ignore the fact that coming out of a home that valued education and having been brought up by two parents who were teachers and who used us children to experiment some of the teaching practices they were being introduced to, greatly contributed to my general view of education and, more importantly, to my school success.

On the other hand, Delpit's argument resonates with me in some ways. As a Black woman educator, I realise that not all students come to school from privileged backgrounds like the one I had. I believe that it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that all students develop a shared sense of belonging to, connection and identification with the school. Thus, I understand Delpit's concern about the potential implications of such arguments for a kind of determinism in practice. I also agree that Bourdieu in particular fail to take into account the existence of counter hegemonic discourses especially around language. For instance, the debate over bilingual education and Ebonics in the United States suggests that a counter hegemonic discourse about language and power exists. Such discourses are understated by Gee and ignored by Bourdieu in their discussion of cultural capital and discourses respectively. Yet, I do not read either Bourdieu or Gee as actually implying the determinism mentioned by Delpit. It seems to me that pointing out how discourses of power work to maintain themselves within concrete institutional practices is not the same thing as saying this is how they

must work or that these practices are fixed. Certainly, once one is aware of how discourses work, she is in a better position to change them in the ways that Delpit suggests and as my mother did with Thandiwe, pregnant teenagers, the male head teachers, and myself.

Experiences with my mother have led me to value and understand literacy in multiple ways. First, from my mother, I learnt that with and in literacy I could become anything regardless of gender. I learnt that as a woman, literacy is struggled for and that once acquired, it becomes a tool with which to fight other struggles. I also learnt that these struggles relate to what *ubufazi* is all about: struggling with and for others, facing challenges, and never losing focus. As I entered the journey of teaching in North America I felt equipped to face the challenges that come with being an African Canadian woman in a predominantly white society. I felt equipped not because of the many certificates I have acquired (although of course they play a significant role in determining ones entry into the academic world) but because of lessons learnt from my mother's life. For instance, when I hear how people address students, professors, or me, I usually use my mother's strategies to understand the discourse at work. I have learnt to see those discourses designed to value or devalue who I am and to face them with dignity.

Education for women has always been a central part of my mother's struggle. I can understand this given the era of her prime years, an era that saw the formalisation of women's struggles all over the world, and an era that saw the implementation of apartheid (from the 1950s onwards) that sent many Black South Africans to ghettos, death, exile, and struggle. She devoted part of her life ensuring that girls received the necessary tools needed to face life. Even though I live in a society that differs significantly from that in which I grew up and in which my mother lives, I carry with me the quest to follow in my mother's footsteps, to devote my life working to redress social inequities. This, I see as my professional challenge: how do I teach in ways that reflect *ubufazi*? That is a question yet to be answered. It is in attempting to answer this question that I have started building a theory of struggle, womanism and literacy that might benefit others whose lives I touch.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Education Department, Mount St. Vincent University.

2. A special thank you goes to Ann Vibert for the encouragement, feedback, and information provided during the production of this paper. Vibert argues that SRA was an American production formed in the decade when the new God was Science, based on the notion that speed counted and formed at a time when ? the Russians had beaten us into space?.

3. Elsewhere (Dlamini, 1996), I have documented both my parents' differing backgrounds and how this significantly influenced the way in which I view the interconnection between western missionary education and African ways of being. This, however is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. Incwala refers to the practice of celebrating the eating of the first fruit. In Swaziland this is celebrated nationally and usually, the king, assisted by regional chiefs reside over it. Umhlanga is a time in which girls grouped according to age participate in the cutting of a traditional weed. It is also during this festival that the king chooses some of the young girls to be his wives.



5. Looking back at my feelings then, I can honestly say I was jealous of the relationship that my mother had with someone I considered closer to my age than mother's age. I was wrong. This incident has also led me to ask questions about the way women support and celebrate each other's successes. I have come to the conclusion that the celebration of one woman's success by other women is situational and is dependent on material and social conditions.

6. The lack of gender specific terms in Zulu should not, however, be interpreted to mean that Zulu society is gender free or that it is matriarchal. In fact, one could argue that 'neutral' as the terms appear to be, as is in western societies, since such positions were traditionally occupied by men, these terms were seen to refer to men in particular rather than to human beings in general.

7. I am aware that the contrast between individually based vs. communally based society is, in this context, oversimplified as the use of 'I' does not always necessarily reflect norms and values the society in which it is used. Simplistic as this statement may be, I am, however, using it in this context to bring forth one of the ways mother sees language as directly connected to culture.