

# To Make a Book Talk: Print Reading in Botswana before Independence

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**Abstract:** In this paper we provide a historical sketch of the development of reading print in the place now known as Botswana. This history is divided into the time of the missionaries (1831 – 1835) and the establishment of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (1885 – 1965). Missionary journals, histories of Botswana and other scholarly writings were studied to find information about the development of reading Setswana and English among the Tswana. This paper is intended to be of interest to literacy educators in Botswana.

**Keywords:** Print reading before independence, Botswana, Setswana and English reading.

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## “To Make a Book Talk”: Print Reading in Botswana before Independence

The story of learning to read the printed word in Botswana begins before independence in 1966. Moreover, it begins before the establishment of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885. The legendary Dr. David Livingstone who took up residence with his wife Mary in Kolobeng (between present day Molepolole and Gaborone) takes credit for teaching Kgosi (Chief) Sechele of the Bakwena to read (Schapera, 1961). As far as the Tswana were concerned the missionaries

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were merely teaching them “to make a book talk” (Chirenje, 1977 p 160). But, of course there was education before the missionaries. As Mgadla (2003) explains in his *History of Education in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* African education prepared the young for society through learning by observing, imitating and doing - what is now called situated learning experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

There were some specialized forms of constructing meaning (which is the purpose of literacy) before reading printed words. There were praise-poems composed for and by chiefs as well as persons of modest rank and boys during bogwêra, a time of initiation into adulthood (Schapera, 1965). These laudatory and narrative poems were repeated until they could be delivered fluently. And there were the healers who learned how to read the bones. There were men who read the land to identify iron ore and copper. There were (and still are) women who weave designs in baskets made of ribbons of palm leaves. These designs were (and are) readable. There are *ribs of dogs* and *tears of giraffe* in today's baskets (Lambrecht, 1968). Graphic literacy in the form of rock paintings can be seen in Tsodilo Hills (Campbell, Robbins & Murphy, 1994) where the earliest inhabitants of the Kalahari Desert hunted and gathered food.

Learning to read written languages was not part of indigenous informal education for those peoples who lived on the lands that became Botswana. Education at the time occurred around the fire where children listened to riddles (dithamalakane), proverbs (diane) and tales (mainane). These entertaining literary forms developed children's listening comprehension and thinking abilities. Consider, for example, the thinking called for in this riddle (Magdla, 2003 p. 24).

Ke na le motho wame o ema ka dinao fa a kgotshe, fa a na le tlala oa a wa

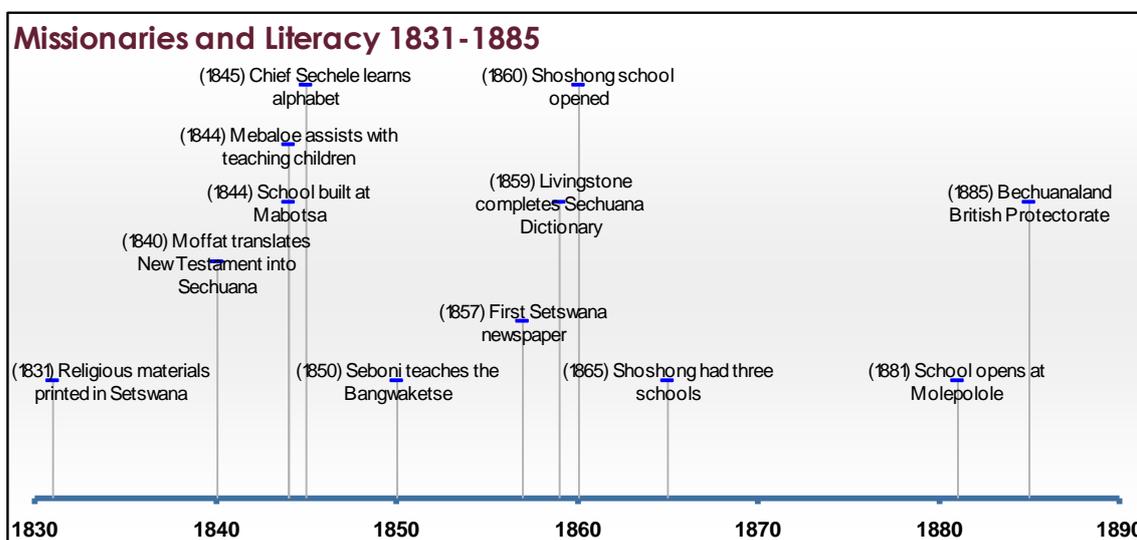
(Who will stand when full and fall when hungry?)

Ke kgetse ya mabele

(A bag of sorghum.)

The riddle calls for metaphorical thinking because words such as *who*, *stand* and *hungry* are associated with a person or animal rather than a thing. It also encourages visualization because one needs to see how a bag full of sorghum does stand and when empty the bag is fallen lying as a heap of cloth. Thinking metaphorically (Spivey, 1997) and engaging in visualization (Wilhelm, 2004) are cognitive processes that contribute to understanding printed texts.

The stories told by elders to the young were not only entertaining they were also intended to teach youth to conform to societies' norms and expectations (Mgadla, 2003; 23). Raseroka (2006) has noted that every tale is adapted as the performer constructs the narrative with her audience in mind. The idea of meaning being constructed at the intersection of the storyteller, audience and situation parallels Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading wherein meaning is shaped at the nexus of reader, text and context. There are important parallels between orality and literacy and yet the development of oral communication occurs naturally whereas the same cannot be said of learning to read print.



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### Missionaries (1831-1885)

Reading the printed word in Setswana (formerly spelled Sechuana) and English began with the Bible. By 1831 missionaries were printing religious works in the vernacular (Schapera, 1961). Christian missionary work was conducted mainly through Setswana. The London Missionary Society more than other missionary groups focused on providing education in Setswana (Hull, 1987). A translation of the New Testament into Setswana was completed in 1840 by Robert Moffat. By 1859 Livingstone's "An Analysis of the Sechuana Language" as well as a *Sechuana Dictionary* (Hull, 1987).

The Bakwena under the leadership of Kgosi Sechele were the first people to learn reading and writing with David and Mary Livingstone of the London Missionary Society (Mgadla, 2003). Livingstone with the Bechuana built a school at Mabotsa (located between Molepolole and Gaborone) where he and his wife Mary taught about the Christian God along with reading and writing from 1847 – 1852. Livingstone wrote in 1845 that Chief Sechele "acquired perfect knowledge of the large & small alphabets in two days, and has since made considerable progress in learning to read" (Schapera, 1961 p. 80). Two years later Livingstone wrote that most of the principal men of the Bakwena attempted to "acquire a knowledge of reading" but that progress was difficult because "they are obliged to go to the fields in search of the roots" (Schapera, 1961 p. 104). Rarely did the missionaries write about how they actually taught people to read. This may be because the methods of instruction did not differ much; in one account it is specified that Moffat, the father of Mary Livingstone taught the ABC's to the tune of Auld Lang Syne (Morrison, 1922). We can surmise that teaching the ABC's as song to sing was a common method of instruction.

Chief Sechele "always seems to relish explanations of what he does read" wrote Livingstone (Schapera, 1961 p. 104). One can infer that Sechele sought meaning beyond literal comprehension. Livingstone writes that Sechele was his best pupil. Of course Livingstone's purpose was not teaching reading but using reading to teach Christianity. One can imagine that Sechele may have asked Livingstone to explain the Christian prohibition against polygamy. Livingstone would not baptize Sechele until he parted with "his superfluous wives" even though all the wives were the "best scholars" in the village (p. 119). When Sechele cast away all but one wife his people interpreted this as diminishing his power which included his ability to bring the much needed rain. Livingstone wrote of it in a letter to Arthur Tidman dated the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1848.

*On the morning after it was known that Sechele had renounced his wives on account of the gospel, a general consternation seemed to have seized both young & old. The town was quiet as if it had been Sunday. Not a single woman was seen going to her garden...having tried in various ways for two months, we proceeded to administer the ordinance of baptism. Many of the spectators were in tears, but these were in general tears of sorrow for the loss of their rainmaker, or of grief at seeing some of the ties of relationship to him completely broken.* (Schapera, 1961, p. 120).

There were other dramatic consequences from Bible reading for Chief Sechele and his daughter, Gagoangwe. Apparently Sechele took the scripture's eye for an eye literally because after hearing that Gagoangwe had poked a woman's eye with a long sewing needle he ordered that her eye be poked or gouged out (Smith, 1957: 192). When Sechele found that he could no longer stay with just one wife he was denied church attendance. This did not lead him to give up reading the Bible. It is also reported that he read John Bunyan's Christian allegory "*Pilgrim's Progress*" (Chirenge, 1977). We can further appreciate Sechele's literate abilities by looking at letters he wrote that were translated into English. In one letter to Livingstone he wrote:

*Friend of my heart's love, and of all the confidence of my heart, I am Sechele, I am undone by the Boers, who attacked me, though I had no guilt with them. They demanded that I should be in their kingdom, and I refused...They came on Saturday, and I besought them not to fight on Sunday, and they assented. They began on Monday morning at twilight, and fired with all their might, and burned the town with fire, and scattered us. ,they killed sixty of my people...(Mallery, 1970 p. 483).*

Literacy acquisition did not always lead to becoming a Christian. Kgosi Gaseitsiwe (1845-1889) ruler of the Bangwaketse participated in literacy lessons as did his wife from missionary MacKenzie. Yet he did not choose to be baptized as Christain. Gulbrandsen (1993) in taking up the question of who used whom in the kgosi-missionary relationship makes the argument that "politico-religious authority was negotiated" (p. 49). The dikgosi (chiefs) valued missionaries for potential access to "firearms, ammunition, strategic information, assistance in diplomatic efforts and the

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value of their presence as a deterrent against outside attack” (p. 52). Learning to read was seen by the dikgosi as an additional strategic advantage.

The European missionaries were engaged in a form of teacher preparation through the assistants they recruited to work among the various tribes. Livingstone in a letter dated 1844 reported that “the native assistant Mebaloe and I commenced the instruction of the children” (Schapera, 1961 p. 60). We assume that this instruction included some reading and writing. Livingstone also wrote of Sebube (of the Tlharo) who taught the BaNgwaketse at Ranaka (near Kanye) until his death in 1891. The Bangwato were introduced to literacy education by Robert Moffat through two itinerant teacher evangelists named Sehunelwe and Kgobati. An unnamed wagon driver was given rudimentary training by Roger Price in order to assist in teaching the seventy pupils attending school. Teacher evangelist Seboni began teaching the Bible in 1850 to the Bangwaketse. By 1871 when the missionary James Good was evangelizing among the Bangwaketse their chief Gaseitsewe had already made significant progress in learning how to read (Mgadla, 2003). The chief encouraged literacy learning while never becoming a Christian. The Barolong were introduced to Methodist Christianity by Reverend J. D. M. Ludorf in 1851. By 1880 many Batawana had learned to read from missionary James Hepburn and his assistants Khukhu, Mogodi, and Diphukwe (Mgadla, 2003).

Chirenje (1977) identifies 1880 as the beginning of a second phase in Tswana education under the direction of the London Missionary Society. The Tswana parents wanted a broader curriculum than learning to read the Bible in Setswana. A trend toward sending Tswana youths to schools in Basutoland and the Cape was occurring. These schools taught English which Tswana Chiefs recognized as a means of enhancing their sons’ social and economic standing. J. S. Moffat a former L.M.S. missionary advocated the training of teachers to take over from evangelists because the quality of education was unsatisfactory. In 1881 there was a day school at Molepolole with 140 pupils whose head teacher was named Miss Wallace. She was assisted by Moshoboro (Chirenje, 1977). By 1894 two new school teachers Alice Young and Miss Ellen Hargreaves came to teach in Palapye. Some parents were able to pay extra to have their children receive lessons in English (Chirenje, 1977; Mgadla, 1997).

Among the missionaries there was interest in the people’s oral literature. Livingston wrote of this in an 1843 letter to Arthur Tidman about visiting four Kalahari villages. “By far the happiest portion of my late journey was when, sitting by their fires & listening to their traditionary [sic] tales, I could intermingle the story of the Cross with their conversation” (Schepera, 1961 p. 37). Roger Price who spoke Sechuana well was a collector of Tswana folklore; some of what he recorded appears in “The Native Races of South Africa” (Stow, 1905).

Women’s access to literacy during the days of Christian missionaries was through instruction to read the Bible. While this was also true for men they were more likely to receive in addition a more secular literacy education. Mgadla’s (2003) history of education before 1965 makes the point that women were more often regular attendants at church services and school. Mgadla offers that this is due to psychological, spiritual, and oppressive aspects of society. The church provided access to education for women. Girls outnumbered boys in the missionary schools because boys were often away tending the cattle. When secondary education was introduced it was at first for the boys. Mgadla’s concludes that this situation resulted in “the highest literacy rates at the elementary level for women in sub-Saharan Africa as compared to men” (p. 71). In studies of women learning English it has been argued that this was a means for getting out from under patriarchy (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Elizabeth Price, the daughter of Reverend Robert Moffat, and wife to Roger, seems to have also thought that educating women might allow them to get out from under the yoke of patriarchy. Her assessment of women was harsh. She pitied them for being in her view vile and coarse. This she blamed on their being ruled and crushed by beastly men from childhood through marriage. In her efforts to teach the women she sought as allies two daughters of Chief Sechele-Opi and Bantshang.

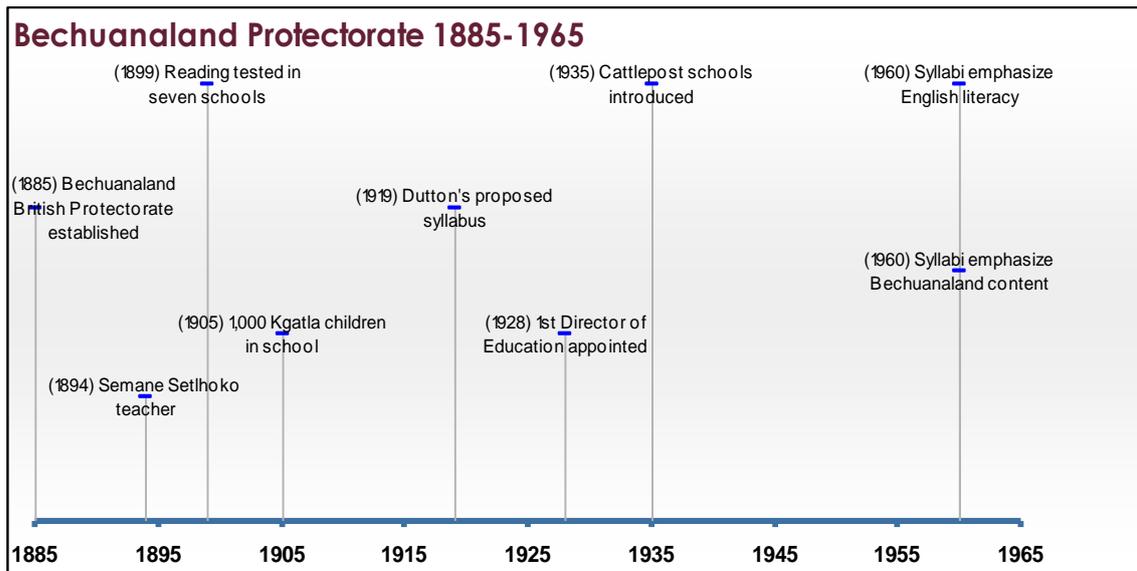
There is evidence that the desire for literacy crossed gender and class boundaries as seen in the writings of missionaries. Roger and Elizabeth Price noticed an eagerness to learn reading and especially in English. Elizabeth, wrote in 1867, “Sometimes I wonder whether it is not all a grasping after greatness and wisdom and power of the white man” (Smith, 1957, p. 195). In the diaries of Roger and Elizabeth Price there are exclamations such as “The people are indeed on fire about being taught” (p. 195). There is a telling anecdote about Mrs. Price coming into her kitchen only to find the workmen grouped around a single spelling book belonging to a maid. When Mrs. Price ordered them to return to their

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work one man reportedly pleaded, ‘Oh! Ma! let me finish this column!’ (p. 195). Spelling books seem to have been a primary text for teaching aside from the Bible.

Another kind of reading material made its debut when the first newspaper in Setswana was printed in 1857. Mgdala and Volz (2006) have published a selection of letters published in the Setswana-language newspaper *Mahoko a Becwana* from 1883 to 1896. The letter writers were from the first generation of Batswana who learned to read and write from the missionaries. Mgdala and Volz’s intention is to provide a window through which we can see the concerns and deliberations that took place among literate Batswana during a period of accelerated development. Keeping in mind that European missionaries, in the role of editor, had the final say about what got published.



**The Bechuanaland Protectorate (1885 - 1965)**

Bechuanaland became a British Protectorate in 1885 and remained so until independence in 1966. Chief Khama III of the Bamangwato, Chief Gaseitsiwe I of the Bangwaketse and Chief Sechele of the Bakwena accepted the 1890 Order of Council that recognized nine chiefs who would rule their people under the ultimate power of a British High Commissioner. This was deemed necessary because of the expansionist designs of the Boers in South Africa (as seen in Sechele’s letter to Livingstone above).

During this period children received a traditional education that was informal, formal and vocational. In 1905 Mr. E. B. Sargent, then education advisor to the High Commissioner, reported that 1,000 children were in school (Schapera, 1940). The Batswana wanted an education that went beyond what the missionaries offered but what they got was an education that met the needs of colonial administrators (Mgadla, 2003). The Bechuanaland colonial administration thought education should serve three primary purposes: (1) to promote European-style education, (2) help maintain law and order; and (3) support commerce and trade.

The London Missionary Schools were now in competition with industrial schools that prepared men to be masons, carpenters and builders. The education advisor, E. B. Sargent, criticized the missionary schools for leaving out education in weaving, pottery, carving and stringing beads. At the time Khama III and other chiefs favored a comprehensive educational program (Watters, 1973). The Tswana elite preferred to send their children to schools such as Lovedale in the Cape and Morija in Basutoland where they would learn to speak, read and write English. The LMS responded by introducing a two tier education wherein one stream of students paid a higher fee to get English lessons. Miss Alice Young, the school mistress at Palapye, used this system beginning in 1894. At the turn of the century there were two inspection reports from colonial administrators (Ellenberger & Sargent) that supported the idea of beginning instruction in the vernacular (Setswana) with English instruction following from three to five years later (Mgadla, 2003).

The earliest report of pupils reading achievement in L. M.S. schools was delivered in 1899 by Reverend James

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Richardson. In his visits to schools he administered a reading test in Setswana (Chirenje, 1977). Results were reported for 822 pupils at seven school locations (Sekao, Boririma, Khurutshe, Talaote, Palapye, Molepolole and Kanye). Less than ten percent of pupils passed the test. Pass rates varied among the schools from a high of 78% at Palapye followed by 30% at Boririma and the remainder being less than ten percent. Ella Sharp, who was the principal of the Phalatswe Central School from 1899 to 1902, wrote that the pupils have “an intensive desire to learn how to read” (Mgadla, 1997, p. 76). Phalatswe Central was the school in Palapye where Richardson found the most students able to pass the reading test.

In 1919 the British inspector of schools named Dutton proposed a syllabus for schools with three general principles. Two of the principles are particularly telling with regard to what Dutton had observed in schools. First Dutton proposed that “No pupil should begin an English Reading Book until he can correctly read and write sentences in Setswana;” Secondly he proposed that “that the use of English primers be discontinued. As pupils in Grade 3 already know the sounds of letters, and how to spell them, it is useless to weary them with such sentences as: The fat cat sat on the mat.” (Watters, 1973 p. 96). Dutton was calling into the question the usefulness of a linguistic approach to teaching reading for students who had learned the correspondences between letters and sounds.

Frances Phiri, a primary school teacher (1929-1958) observed that “Children want to go to school, but as soon as they learned to read and write that was enough schooling for them. The girls could then go home and write to the young men in the mines who, in turn, could read and answer their letters” (Watters, 1973; pp. 105-106). Examples of epistolary reading and writing by the Bakgatla can be found in excerpts Schapera (1940) used from the letters he collected during his ethnographic study of married life among the Bakgatla. Breckenridge (2006) who studies the significance of epistolary literacy in southern Africa writes that I. Schapera, who did his fieldwork in Bechuanaland (1929-1934), is the only one who collected letters from his informants. Excerpts from these letters show that epistolary literacy was not limited to the educated elite but included others who had received some literacy instruction in village schools. Schapera and Breckenridge analyze the content of these letters to better understand the personal and political of the times. An excerpt from a love letter reproduced by Schapera (1940) is helpful in appreciating why epistolary literacy was desirable.

*I still think of how we loved each other; I think of how you behaved to me, my wife; I did not lack anything that belonged to you. All things I did not buy, but I just got them, together with your body; you were too good for me, and you were very, very sweet, more than any sweet things that I have ever had. We fitted each other beautifully. There was nothing wrong; you carried me well; I was not too heavy for you, nor too light, just as you were not too heavy for me nor too light; and our ‘bloods’ liked each other so much in our bodies. (p. 46).*

In colonial southern Africa the writing and reading of letters was a major literate activity that emerged because of the massive and systematic labor migration (Barber, 2006).

In 1935 cattle-post schools were introduced as a way of providing education to those boys who were not able to attend formal schools because of their herding responsibilities. A teacher traveled from cattlepost to cattlepost with a blackboard and books. The idea was that these teachers would focus on what the boys wanted to learn given their day to day herding responsibilities. This effort in extending education beyond the school walls did not last long (Watters, 1973).

For those who attended formal schools the day began with an assembly which included prayers. After assembly children were inspected for cleanliness and health resulting in some being sent home to wash or have their tattered clothes mended. The instruction time focused on learning religious content, arithmetic, English and Setswana. First the teacher read and explained the lessons then students reread the lesson and asked questions to prepare for tests on their mastery of the material. In formal schools there was also a trend toward using more materials that fit the Bechuanaland context. From 1960 onward the school syllabi increasingly called for using English in the classroom and using materials relevant to life in Bechuanaland (Watters, 1973).

An expression of racism affecting literacy learning was expressed in this colonial period by a South African ophthalmologist named Joki. When advising the Bechuanaland government on preventing trachoma infections that led to blindness he recommended against prescribing reading glasses because in his estimation the “[Native] mind is not experienced like the minds of white persons to distinguish rapidly, and assess the differences of small details (in white persons this faculty has been developed since centuries before the art of reading). From this point of view, the efforts of

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traveling opticians who examine Natives, and supply them with spectacles, should not be encouraged. The more educated Native has nearly a morbid desire to wear spectacles, firstly because he imagines they give him an air of importance, and secondly because he very often suffers from eye strain. This eye strain, however, is not due to an uncorrected refractive error, but to the lack of familiarity with the art of reading and writing" (Livingston, 2005 p. 159). If that doctor were alive today he would see that the art of reading and writing is alive and well in Botswana.

### Batswana Make the Book Talk

When independent Botswana was established there were citizens who could "make the books talk" (read) but schooling was predominantly foreign, selective and expensive (Molefe, 2004). In 1966 Botswana was among the 25 poorest and least developed countries in the world whereas today it is ranked among the middle income countries (Hanemann, 2005). Education has been a key development priority since independence. A National Literacy Programme for adults and school leavers was established in 1980 (Youngman, 2002). Botswana has achieved universal access to primary education (Republic of Botswana/United Nations, 2004). In the past forty-three years of nationhood the ability to read in Setswana and/or English has made notable gains. UNICEF statistics project that more than 90% of youth can read ([http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/botswana\\_statistics.html#46](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/botswana_statistics.html#46)). Among adults, 81% were found to be literate on the 2003 national survey (Chilisa, 2008).

The teaching and assessing of reading in primary and secondary schools is an emerging field of study. The first dissertation research specifically on the teaching of reading was completed by Mpotokwane in 1986. More often research on reading can be located in studies using the broader term of literacy (e.g., Chimbanga, 2006; Jankie, 2001; Molowisa, 2007). The studies that specifically focus on reading are few such as Secco's (2001) case study of forty-five children in a standard four classroom whose reading ability was assessed using a psycholinguistic model of reading (Goodman, 1967). More recently Biakolo (2007) has reported on how reading is taught in primary school. Writing a history of making the book talk from 1966 to the present will require an interdisciplinary search that goes beyond the topic of education.

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