

## The Writing Skills in Second Language of Learners from a Rural Primary School in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** The school type in the South African context can act as an agent of cultural reproduction that influences learner outcomes. Well resourced schools are richer in social capital than others, depending, among other things, on the prevailing school culture and the strength of networks formed among teachers and between teachers and other stakeholders. High levels of social capital in the school will strengthen its intellectual capital and this, in turn, will benefit learners and they will excel academically. This paper examines the English writing performance of Grade 7 English Second Language (ESL) learners in a former Model C rural primary school that uses English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and explores how good scores can be partly explained by the social context of both learners and school. Although South African education policy seeks to distribute and maintain the linguistic capital of the official languages through its support of multilingualism, the predominant preference for English as LoLT in schooling is one of the major factors which disadvantages most ESL learners and perpetuates inequality in learner outcomes. This situation is exacerbated in certain school contexts (for example, rural settings). The concept of social capital, including linguistic capital, is used as an explanatory framework. In this regard a critical comparison is made between the contributions of Coleman and Bourdieu. The findings indicate excellent learner performance in the writing performance test. This suggests that the current use of English as LoLT means that linguistic capital might be equally distributed throughout this school. Learners' academic performance can thus be influenced by the type of school that they attend.

### INTRODUCTION

Like most countries today, South Africa is multicultural. In all multicultural countries, a decision has to be made regarding the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). This decision will be to the advantage of native speakers of that language and will present a challenge to all second language speakers Cummins (2008). The use of English as a medium of instruction is problematic, because the English proficiency of many teachers, parents and learners is very limited and this exacerbates the problem in South Africa Heugh and Skutnubb (2013). The English language barrier makes it difficult for learners to acquire the necessary proficiency skills to use English as a LoLT. Research indicates that learners will benefit more if they are taught in their first language (L1) and simultaneously taught English as a second language (L2) (Department of Education 1997; Alexander 2006; Heugh 2010; Ayliff 2012). However, despite the benefits of bilingual education in schools, this advice is ignored. This could be due – to a lack of political will on the part of both the government and the stakeholders in various schools. The implemen-

tation of L1 medium of instruction is also hampered by many languages that are spoken in classrooms especially in township (previously reserved for blacks only) and Former Model C (previously reserved for whites only) schools (Department of Education 2010).

There are many arguments in support of the view that mother-tongue education should not be pursued in South Africa. Some researchers believe that, since elite black middle-class children speak English even outside the school's environment (including, for example, in their homes) it is only reasonable that English be used as the medium of instruction (Howie 2010). The argument that most South African black parents prefer their children to be educated through the medium of English is based on De Klerk's (2000: 204-205) survey of colored parents (people of mixed races) in Graham's town. De Klerk's findings suggest that black parents send their children to English medium schools in order to give them a better education; there is also the recognition that English is an international language and the hope that English language proficiency will open the doors for more job opportunities Dekker (2004). A similar finding was made by

Slabbert and Finlayson (2004), who documented the high status of English among black people in Gauteng townships. Slabbert and Finlayson (2004) claim that among this group of people the use of English marks the speaker as educated, affluent and authoritative. Slabbert and Finlayson (2004) also noted that home languages were being maintained by these people.

In related work, these researchers note an on-going threat to multilingual education posed by English dominance. However, most of the researchers who cite a lack of interest in mother tongue education on the part of black parents are wrong in their conclusions Alexander (2008). What most educated black parents want is quality education for their children (Alexander 2008; Heugh 2008). Unfortunately for them, this quality education is only accessible in most former Model C and private schools; these schools have good resources, including academically prepared teachers (Alexander 2004) and, as such, are able to produce better results. According to Alexander (2008), in cases where schools can offer a multilingual program taught by adequately prepared teachers, black parents are ready to choose such schools. The school investigated in this study is an English medium school which has chosen to have bilingual programs to help learners who come from minority language backgrounds. Because of its explicit provision of education via the medium of mother-tongue instruction, South Africa's multilingual policy appears to be implemented in this school.

In the light of the above, this paper reports on selected findings of on-going research on the literacy proficiency skills of grade 7 ESL learners from rural schools Lemmer and Manyike (2012). In this regard the main research question that this study seeks to answer was formulated thus: *What is the English writing performance of Grade 7 ESL learners using English as LoLT and attending a former Model C primary school situated in a rural setting, and how can performance be explained by the type of school learners attend?*

This study therefore reports on the writing performance of Grade 7 rural school learners in a well-resourced school which has English as the medium of instruction; this study seeks to explain how the good performance of these learners can be partly explained by the school context in which they are taught.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the social capital theories of Coleman and Bourdieu. Coleman defines social capital by its function and describes it as follows (Coleman 1988: 98):

*"It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within a structure"*.

Coleman further argues that, like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible (1998: 98). However, Coleman (1998) warns that social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions for some may be useless or even harmful for others (for example, a person using their social capital to gain a promotion at work to the detriment of a co-worker who may be better qualified).

Although Coleman linked social capital with economics, he sought to combine the insights of sociology and economic theory, and regarded social capital as a way of making sense of the overly rational and individualistic models of traditional economics Portes (1998). Gauntlett (2011) argues that Coleman's work seemed to offer a grand predictive model of how things work but, unfortunately, also regarded people as ants in an ant farm rather than as citizens of a civilization (2011: 139). Coleman (1987) makes a distinction between two types of social capital provided by the home and the school in children's socialization and learning. The first category of inputs, opportunities, demands and rewards come from the school. The second category of inputs comes from the child's home environments. In terms of schooling some schools are richer in social capital depending on the prevailing school culture and the strength of networks formed among teachers and other stakeholders. High levels of school social capital will strengthen its intellectual capital and in turn benefits the learners (Lin 2012). Schools with less social capital perpetuates mediocrity and as such its learners are doomed to fail.

The same theory is also applied by Coleman to the home environment. Learners from affluent communities benefit more from their parent especially with regard to language development. Such families are more likely to engage in robust

debates and the rich literacy environment of the home assist these learners in their language development. Although learners in this study come from poor literacy home environments the school appears to be able to complement the home environment with its strong social capital.

Coleman's theory of social capital can be used to begin to explain why students from poor rural communities can sometimes perform at the same level or even better than their counterparts in middle-class urban communities. Coleman identified human capital as a by-product of social capital which enables children to have a secure sense of self-identity, confidence in expressing their own opinions, and growing in their emotional intelligence (Jenkin 2002). Human capital therefore enables young people to become better learners, and consequently to become more successful in school and in society.

Bourdieu defines social capital as follows:

*The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrues to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119).*

For Bourdieu, social capital can be seen as a resource produced by the association as a collective and shared by its members; it is a collective phenomenon, even though it is viewed from the perspective of actors who are engaged in the process of exploiting its potentialities (Bourdieu 1991). It can be argued that Bourdieu's social capital is based on mutual cognition and recognition (Field 2008).

Bourdieu was interested in the way in which society is reproduced, and how the dominant classes retain their positions Gauntlett (2011: 131). Bourdieu discovered that economic theories could not adequately explain this, and could especially not explain his concept of cultural capital. Cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, is the way in which people use cultural knowledge to protect their place in the social hierarchy Halpern (2005). This is most clearly expressed in the cliché: "It's not what you know, but who you know."

Siisiäinen (2005: 1) argues that Bourdieu's concept of social capital is connected with his theoretical ideas of class, which emphasize conflicts and power functions (social relations that increase the ability of an actor to advance his/her interests). According to Bourdieu, therefore,

social capital becomes a resource in the social struggles that are carried out in different social arenas or fields Bourdieu et al. (1994).

Although Bourdieu's theory was limited to monoglossic societies such as France where social membership gave rise to variation in dialect his theory can still be applied to multilingual context where one language dominates other languages. English for example, is regarded as high status language in South Africa and as such is the most used medium of instruction in schools. The minority languages are therefore relegated to lower status (Pennycook 2010). Following Bourdieu's analysis, proficiency in English particularly in key context of schooling represents greater linguistic capital than learners' first languages which are not used as medium of instruction.

Like Bourdieu, Coleman (1987) also linked social capital with economics, but in a different way. Coleman attempted to provide rational choice theory with a more human element. One of the more famous applications of Coleman's work was his demonstration of how social pressure can help struggling students at school. He derived his findings on the basis of an experiment of Catholic school children and public school children, and observed that the students from the Catholic school performed better at school. He attributed this to the fact that the teachers in the Catholic school expected more from the children, thus motivating the children to work harder.

The social capital theory has relevance to this study as it shows that second language learners from low socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from the school social capital. Learners in this study are located in rural areas with low social capital for example, most parents are either migrant workers or unemployed. They live in homes with very few books to read and rural communities tend to lack facilities such as libraries where they can borrow books (Chisholm 2005; Christie 2008). The school in which these learners attend has rich social capital in terms of well qualified teachers, close social ties with the community in which it is located and a library with enough books which learners are able to borrow. The school's rich social capital is able to assist these learners to excel academically.

The above discussion examined the concept of social capital as described (separately) by

James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu and concluded with the relevance of the theory to this study.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

In the light of the above discussion, the following research question was formulated: *What is the English writing performance of Grade 7 ESL learners using English as LoLT and attending a former Model C primary school situated in a rural setting, and how can performance be explained by the type of school learners attend?* The research question was investigated by an inquiry into the English writing performance of all Grade 7 ESL learners in a former Model C primary school in a rural setting. (Standardized testing was used to test learners' performance.)

#### The Sample

The sample consisted of all Grade 7 learners who are Xitsonga L1 speakers in one selected rural primary school (n = 31) in Limpopo Province. Permission for fieldwork was granted by the principal and the Limpopo Department of Education. A brief description of the school is as follows. The sample consisted of 31 learners. The school, situated in the Letsitele area, Limpopo Province, was chosen as a research site by maximum variation sampling. McMillan and Schumacher (2012:459) define maximum variation sampling as a strategy to illuminate different aspects of the research problem, in this case one school type: a former Model C school. This school was chosen by virtue of its distance from the English-using urban areas of the country. In this school, learners used L1 – in this case, Xitsonga (one of South African indigenous languages) – as the LoLT from Grade 1 to Grade 3, during which time English was introduced as an additional language. In Grade 4, these learners transferred to English as LoLT (language of teaching and learning) and Xitsonga is then taught as an additional language. All these ESL learners have had little or no contact with English outside the school setting and outside formal English lessons in school.

The selected school is a well-resourced former Model C school situated in the Letsitele area about 25 km from Tzaneen, the nearest town. Prior to 1994, it served white learners from the surrounding farming community, but has since

become increasingly multicultural. Most black learners hail from the neighboring black settlements. All teachers at this school are professionally qualified. The teacher responsible for Xitsonga instruction is a Xitsonga L1 speaker and the teacher responsible for English is an English L1 speaker. The remaining staff members are Afrikaans L1 speakers who can be regarded as competent bilinguals, that is, equally proficient in English and Afrikaans. As a school established before 1994, the school enjoys strong links with the surrounding community and is able to access additional resources as a result. A wide range of extra-mural activities are available and an after-care center offers the opportunity of homework and play under supervision. Classrooms are print-enriched with adequate textbooks and displays of learners' work. The school has its own library. School fees are approximately R 530 per month which is equivalent to five US dollars. .

#### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected by means of the Writing Performance Test in English (Intermediate Level) as developed by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (Chamberlain and Reinecke 1992). This is a standardized test aimed at determining the testee's English writing performance in the Intermediate Phase. This test, which is the only standardized language test available for this purpose at present, is applicable to L1 and L2 speakers, although different norms apply to these groups. To write the Writing Performance Test, a candidate is supplied with a test booklet, an answer sheet, a pencil and an eraser. The Writing Performance Test in English has two components: (i) spelling and syntax; and (ii) sentence and creative writing. The spelling and syntax component has a maximum possible score of 29 and the sentence and creative writing component has a maximum possible score of 21. The test manual does not give any indication of what is considered to be a pass mark, because performance depends on the context in which the test is written. However, 40% (a raw score of 20 out of the possible score of 50) is given as a guideline for the overall writing performance test, 11.5 out of 29 is given as a guideline pass mark for the spelling and syntax component of the test, and 8.5 out of 21 is given as a guideline pass mark for the sentence and creative writing and

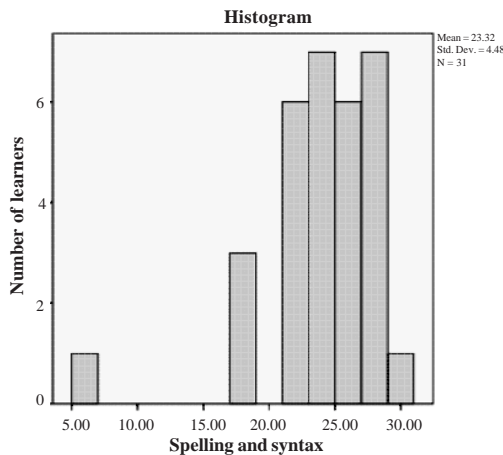
component of the test. This guideline was used in this study and allowed for comparison purposes (that is, to compare results). Furthermore, the Writing Performance Test has a reliability coefficient of 0.89 (Chamberlain and Reinecke 1992:18). For this kind of test, a reliability coefficient of 0.8 or higher can be regarded as satisfactory. As far as test validity is concerned, the items of the test were accepted by a committee of subject experts after a specification table had been drawn up and a thorough study had been made of the suitability of the items for test writing performance (Bernard and Reinecke 1992:21). With regard to the issue of possible cultural bias, the test deals with topics of everyday occurrences at home and at school. Finally, the tests were scored by the researcher and, finally, an expert statistician used an SSPS statistical package to analyze the raw data.

**FINDINGS**

A total of 31 learners from one school wrote the Writing Performance Test in English. The results are presented according to the scores in (i) spelling and syntax (Q1-4; 7-9; 11-16); and (ii) sentence writing and creative writing (Q5, 6, 10 and 17). The spelling and syntax had a maximum possible score of 29 and the sentence writing and creative writing had a maximum possible score of 21.

The histogram in Figure 1 gives the tabulated results of the spelling and syntax in English.

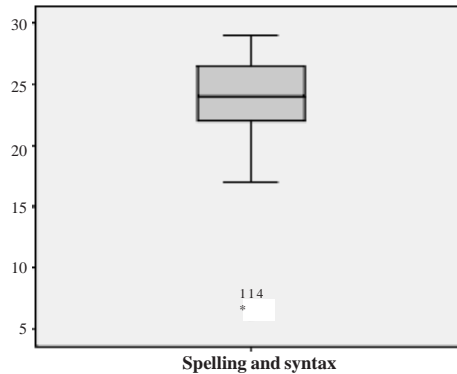
The spelling and syntax subtest had a maximum possible score that ranged from 0 to 29.



**Fig. 1. Spelling and Syntax**

The minimum score obtained was 6 out of 29 (one learner), whilst the maximum score obtained was 29 out of 29 (one learner). The average score for the spelling and syntax component was 23.32, with a median of 24. Since the mean is slightly lower than the median, the data are slightly negatively skewed. The average is well above the 40% pass mark of 11.6 out of 29. This indicates that 96.8% of the learners had scores above the pass mark. One can therefore conclude that the learners performed well in spelling and syntax. The standard deviation was 4.460, with a coefficient of variation of 19.1%. Most scores ranged from 23 to 27. A small proportion of 3.2% (1 learner) got a score below 11.

The box plot in Figure 2 gives the tabulated results of the spelling and syntax in English. The box plot in Figure 2 shows that there is an extreme outlier (learner 114, who got a score of 5). The data are thus negatively skewed. The 25th percentile was 22 and the 75th percentile was 27. Thus, at least 75% of the learners got a mark of 22 and above. One can therefore conclude that the learners performed very well in spelling and syntax.



**Fig. 2. Box plot of spelling and Syntax subtest**

The histogram in Figure 3 gives the tabulated results of the sentence writing and creative writing subtest. The sentence writing and creative writing subtest had a possible score that ranged from 0 to 21. The minimum score was 6 out of 21 (1 learner), while the maximum score was 20 out of 21 (1 learner). The average for sentence writing and creative writing component was 14 with a median of 15. Since the mean is less than the median, the data are negatively skewed. Thus few people are to the left. This was supported by the fact that only 1 learner

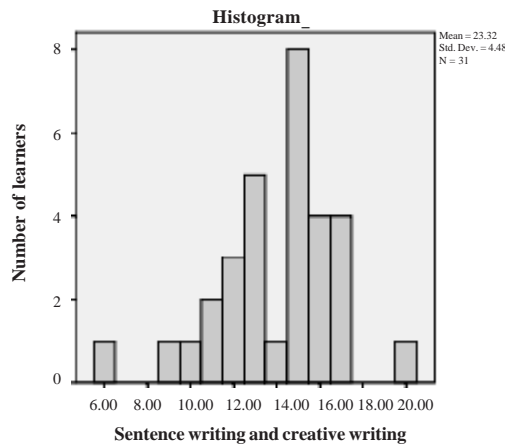


Fig. 3. Sentence writing and creative writing subtest

(3.2%) performed below the 40% pass mark (8.4 out of 21). The standard deviation was 2.805, with a variation coefficient of 20%. The modal score is 15, as can be seen by the highest peak on the histogram Figure 3. Most of the learners obtained scores that ranged from 15 to 17. Looking at the histogram, one can observe that data are negatively skewed. This is also supported by the box plot in Figure 4, which shows an outlier to the left.

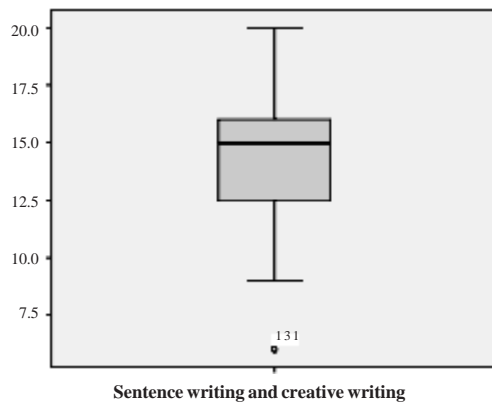


Fig. 4. Box plot of sentence writing and creative writing

The box plot in Figure 4 gives the tabulated results of the sentence writing and creative writing subtest. The learner with identification number 131 who got a mark of 6 is an outlier. The 25th percentile was 12 and the 75th percentile

was 16. Thus, 75% of the learners obtained scores of 12 or more, which are scores considerably above the 40% pass mark. In other words, learners performed well in the sentence writing and creative writing subtest than they did in the spelling and syntax subtest.

A comparative analysis of the spelling and syntax, sentence writing and creative writing is given below:

**Comparative Analysis of Subtests: Spelling and Syntax Subtest and Sentence Writing and Creative Writing Subtest**

Note that proportions and t-tests were used to compare the performance in the two subtests.

*Comparison Using Descriptive Statistics*

A total of 96.8% of learners had scores above the 40% pass mark in both subtests. Learners' performance was therefore the same in the two subtests. The shape of both histograms and box plots showed data to be negatively skewed. Both box plots had outliers to the left, and the spelling and syntax box plot had an extreme outlier. In terms of variability, spelling and syntax has a slightly lower variability of 19.1%, whereas sentence writing and creative writing has a variation coefficient of 20%. The variability in the two subtests is therefore almost the same.

*Comparison Using T-tests*

The results of both subtests were converted to percentages. The results of the spelling and syntax subtest gave an average of 80.42%, while the results of the sentence writing and creative writing subtest gave an average of 66.67%. A T-test was done to determine whether learners' performances in these subtests differed significantly. The results obtained are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Paired t-test of subtests (spelling and syntax and sentence writing and creative writing)**

Pair	Paired mean	Confidence interval	T-value	p-value
Spelling and syntax subtest versus sentence writing and creative writing subtest	13.76	7.97 to 19.54	4.888	0.000

The null hypothesis of equal means was rejected at the 5% level of significance (even the 1%), since the p-value of 0 is less than both 1% and 5%. This is also supported by the confidence interval of 7.97% to 19.54%, which does not include zero. This means that the learners performed better in the sentence writing and creative writing. Figure 5 provides a histogram of the overall reading performance test results.

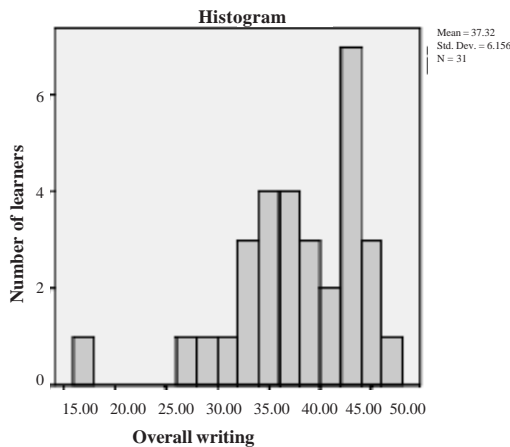


Fig. 5. Writing performance test

**Overall Writing Performance Test**

The results of the spelling and syntax sub-test and the sentence writing and creative writing subtest were combined to obtain the overall results for the Writing Performance Test in English. The overall writing test had possible scores that ranged from 0 to 50. The minimum score obtained was 17 out of 50 (1 learner), while the maximum score obtained was 46 out of 50 (1 learner). The average for the overall Writing Performance Test was 37.32 with a median of 38. Since mean is less than the median, data were slightly negatively skewed. The 40% pass mark was 20 and only 1 learner (3.2%) performed below the 40% pass mark. In other words, learners performed very well. The standard deviation was 6.156 with a coefficient of variation of 16.5%. The modal score was 42, as evidenced by the highest peak in the histogram (see Fig. 5).

Looking at the histogram one can conclude that the data are negatively skewed since more learners are concentrated to the right, with the bulk in the range 35 to 44.

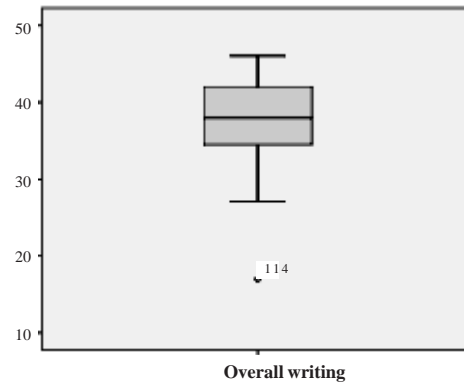


Fig. 6. Box plot of Writing Performance Test

The box plot above supports the view that the data are negatively skewed, with an outlier of 16 to the left (learner 114) (Fig. 6). The 25th percentile was 34 and the 75th percentile was 42. One can conclude that at least 75% of the learners got a mark of 34 out of 50 or more. In short, learners performed well in the overall writing performance test.

**DISCUSSION**

This study shows that learners in the former Model C School performed well in the Writing Performance Test: the average score was 47.5. However, although this average is above the 40% pass mark, this score does not indicate an excellent performance. That said, it can be argued that the relatively good performance of these learners can be attributed to their school type which, as I have said, is a former Model C school. The implementation of a bilingual program at this school may also partly explain why these learners performed relatively well. Initially, these learners received instruction in their L1 and continued to learn their L1 as a subject in Grade 7. Education researchers believe that a good foundation in L1 will facilitate the acquisition of L2. The school's social capital also explains its learners' good performance in the test, because this school was established before 1994 and as such has a strong bond with its surrounding communities. Through its strong ties the school is able to solicit financial help within this farming community. Teachers in this school are well qualified for example teachers responsible for teaching learners in their L1 are L1 speakers who are qualified to teach the language. The

same applies to teachers who are responsible for the teaching of English as a subject. They are mostly English L1 speakers with qualifications to teach the language and years of experience in teaching the subject. Teachers qualifications, and years of experience in teaching assist in producing better results.

Coleman's theory of social capital can be used to begin to explain why learners from poor rural communities can sometimes perform at the same level or even better than their counterparts in middle-class urban communities. Coleman identified human capital as a by-product of social capital which enable children to have a secure sense of self-identity, confidence in expressing their own opinions, and growing in their emotional intelligence (Gauntlett 2011:134). Human capital therefore enables young people to become better learners, and consequently to become more successful in school and in society. Human capital is intergenerational and can be experienced by anyone, regardless of current socio-economic level.

Coleman also notes that human capital depends on relationships, particularly those within the family and other support networks. Coleman argued that, if the human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, then it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth regardless of the amount of human capital the parents may possess (1988:110). For example, when a parent is explaining to a child what he or she (the parent) is reading in a newspaper or book. In this case, the parent needs to engage with the child and explore the concepts, which then helps mold the child's cognitive process. If the parent were to just tell the child the facts, then the information would not be as relevant to the child nor would it help the child to develop and express his or her own opinions.

It can be therefore concluded that children from disadvantaged backgrounds (rural communities) who excel in standardized tests have had significant exposure to Coleman's human capital. Their contact with human capital may not have come from their close family networks, but from other significant networks in this case the school community which has enabled these students to reach their full potential. Given that human capital is intergenerational, these learners are therefore more likely to pass on their hu-

man capital to their own children, who will then also excel at school.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study shows excellent English writing proficiency skills of rural school second language learners from low socio economic backgrounds. Their good results can be attributed to the school's bilingual language policy. Learners in this study received in instruction in their home language for the first three years of school and continue to study the home language as a subject. Given that most second language learners fail to achieve academic English language proficiency skills to cope with the academic context the results of this study shows how the school context, can be used to ensure academic success of second language learners.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Coleman' and Bourdieu's social capital theory can be used to help improve the education system for both former Model C schools and for township/rural schools. If the Department of Education were to encourage a more enclosed system based on shared beliefs or practices, such as the system found in Catholic schools, then it is possible that learners will be encouraged to perform better in schools. However, given South Africa's divided past, this will need to be done carefully to avoid creating further divisions in the country.

Language could be seen as a way of creating these types of enclosed systems. Given that mother-tongue education is vital for a child's educational development, this can be used as a starting point for creating an enclosed system. Furthermore, enclosed groups could be created within existing schools and the schools could encourage the students, parents and educators of these groups to work more closely together.

However, care needs to be taken to integrate these language groups with the other children in the school. This will expose the learners to different cultures and avoid some of the problems associated with enclosed groups. This system will work better in former Model C schools than in township/rural schools simply because the former Model C schools contain a more diverse range of students and because they tend



to have more resources. In other words, they are better equipped to implement such programs.

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