

CAUSAL FACTORS OF LOW READING STANDARDS OF THE FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS IN VHEMBE DISTRICT, LIMPOPO PROVINCE OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out while observing teaching practice where the matter of reading was addressed, and subsequent focus group discussions with teachers to explore the possible reasons for low reading standards among learners, a concern of the Limpopo Department of Education (LDE) as well. Teachers were also asked what improvements they could suggest to address the problem of low reading levels amongst the learners. Teachers themselves attribute low reading standards to the combined effects of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), the Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC), the inappropriate use of methodology in the teaching of reading, the multi-grade teaching approach, and multilingualism. Various recommendations are made for interventions, such as tailor-made training programs to enable teachers to understand OBE principles and the reading framework, university training for reading specialists to train other teachers, the use of a multi-method approach to allow teachers to use methods they are already familiar with, ensuring adequate backup reading materials, encouraging the construction of meaning from texts rather than just the decoding of print-all without neglecting learner diversity which may need to take into account multi-level abilities and multilingualism in schools short of resources.

Keywords: *Causal factors, reading, low reading standards, Foundation Phase, learners*

INTRODUCTION

A number of national and international studies paints a gloomy picture of the state of reading competency among South African learners from Foundation Phase to University level (SACMEQ, 2004) and the progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS, 2006). In addition, a study by SACMEQ (2004) reveals that children in Grades One to Six were reading two grade levels below their own, both in English and their First Language. The report suggests that the reading competence level is in crisis. The South African Department of Education Systemic Evaluation (DoE, 2007, 2010) findings show that in the nine South African provinces only 38% of Grade Three learners could read in 2002. Since there are causal factors of low reading standards in the Foundation Phase in South Africa, especially in the Limpopo Province, four schools with two Grade 3 classes were chosen in this area to conduct the study. Given the controversy surrounding definitions by scholars, it seems that 'reading' is an elusive concept. Scholars tend to define 'reading' according to the purpose of their particular research studies. Nicholson (2000) defines reading as a

multi-component process which involves decoding printed words into their linguistic forms, accessing the meanings of those words, parsing of groups of words in phrases and sentences, semantically analysing those sentences and finally putting together the overall meaning of those sentences and paragraphs to make up a text. Sloat, Beswick and Willms (2007) state that failure to learn reading during primary level may cause a learner to be lacking in the ability to read well. They further point out that learners with limited literacy skills may develop poor self-esteem and lack of motivation, and display behavioural and academic problems, thus leading them from the regular curriculum (Sloat, Beswick and Willms (2007).). It is important to note that it is the role of the teachers to educate learners to read well and with confidence (National Reading Strategy, DoE(c), 2008). Weaver (1994) has identified three aspects in the definitions of learning to read. According to him, learning to read means learning to pronounce words, identify words and their meaning, as well as bring meaning to the text in order to get meaning from it. For Weaver (1994), reading is much more than an act of encoding print, but involves the way the learner pronounces the print and his/her ability to attach meaning to the words.

Smith (2006) perceives reading as a process in which information from the text and the reader's background knowledge act together to produce meaning. This perspective suggests that meaning is a result of information acquired from the text and the reader's background knowledge. According to Inglis, Thompson and Macdonald, (2000), reading is an interactive process where there is dynamic relationship with a text, as the reader struggles to make sense of it. It is referred to as a 'kind of dialogue between the reader and the author that makes the reader develop further the general world knowledge and socio-cultural ethics, norms and values' (Inglis et al., 2000). Thus, the more learners are exposed to printed language, the more they are able to work with collected information and create new knowledge. Reading is therefore the construction of meaning.

Literature indicate several learning theories applicable for this case study such as maturationist theory promoted by Gesell citing Hunt (1969). For the purpose of this study, the behaviourist and the constructivist theory are identified as most relevant learning theories (Schunk, 2012; Hurlock, 1981). Each theory is elaborated on its possible application. According to behaviourists, learning is a reasonably enduring change in observable behaviour that occurs as a result of experience (Slavin, 2000; Eggen and Kauchak, 2001). The emphasis is thus on the acquisition of new behaviours via the imitation of actions modeled by others who are teachers in the context of this study. The same applies to reading. It comes about when the individual controls another to behave in a certain way. Usually, in the classroom, it is the teacher who have contact with the learner, that will have this kind of control on the learner's reading competence. Learning occurs as a result of reinforcement of particular behaviours by the learners social and physical environment. Reading is a conditioned behaviour composed of learnt, isolated skills. The implication of this theory is that if teachers read to the learners on regular basis, they act as positive role models. The

second theory is the social constructivist learning theory as advanced by theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky (Bergin and Bergin, 2012; Slavin, 1994; Glover and Burning, 1990). Although their work varies greatly, these theorists are consistent in their belief that learning and development occur when young children interact with the environment and people around them (Campbell, 1997; Schunk, 1991). In addition, researches endorse that the early years are the focus for the prevention of reading difficulties (Iaquinta, 2006). The essence of constructivist learning theory is that children construct, discover and transform complex information when making the information their own. This view has profound implications for teaching reading, as it suggests a far more active role for learners in their own learning than is typical in the majority of classrooms (Slavin, 1994).

The purpose of this study is to examine the causal factors for low reading standards amongst Foundation Phase learners from the teachers' point of view and to suggest possible intervention strategies. These strategies can be used to help teachers to create a more conducive environment in which learners and teachers can feel more comfortable as they progress toward the goal of reading.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive research design. Four schools were selected for this study. They are situated in the rural setting of the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province. In South Africa, schools have been categorized into Quintile 1, 2, 3 and 4. The schools studied are referred to as Quintile 1- high-poverty schools. Parents in these communities cannot pay school fees or any payment at all. In terms of funding from the South African Department of education, quintile 1 schools get more funding because they are in a rural environment and parents cannot pay the school fees or buy books for the children. The Schools were selected from one circuit coordination districts in the Vhembe district in Limpopo. The schools were selected on the Achievement criterion. They have low reading standards of reading amongst their learners for 2011. They were sampled schools that university uses for student teachers during teaching practice sessions. The population of the study comprises all teachers imparting reading skills to learners at the Foundation Phase in Grade 3.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select 8 qualified teachers who served as the study's respondents as they are qualified to teach in the Foundation Phase. Students at the University come from this community and as such they use these schools for teaching practice. In each of this schools, there were two students teachers. There thus in the Limpopo Province is abundant evidence from research and reports from the DoE that South African learners' reading standards are below the expected standards. It is somewhat disturbing to know that South Africa, despite its vast resources, fares badly in reading. In these schools student teachers from university conduct their teaching practice sessions. This opportunity was maximized to collect data through teachers' focus group discussions.

A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this article. The data presented is derived from four Case study schools in the Foundation Phase. These schools catered for children six to nine years. The schools were selected purposively based on the reason that they catered students' teachers from the university during teaching practice. Focus group interviews with the eight teachers were used to produce data. The voices of teachers in an attempt to understand about the phenomenon of low reading standards amongst the learners were recorded. The ethical clearance for this study was obtained via university procedures before the study commenced. Consent for the study was obtained from the teachers. The letters outlined the nature and aims of the study, confidentiality and voluntary participation, data collection and dissemination of information. Teachers were given opportunities to clarify their understanding, ask questions related to procedures and research activities.

This study utilized a combination of theoretical and quantitative techniques to explore teachers' perception and understanding of the causal factors leading to low reading standards of learners. It is not the intention of this study to look at all possible causes, but only a few viewed by the respondents as critical. The research questions were as follows:

- i What are the causal factors of low reading standards amongst Foundation Phase learners in South Africa?
- ii What are the possible intervention strategies that may facilitate reading competence among the learners?

Focus group discussion was employed to obtain rich data in an attempt to answer the research question according to May (1997). A focus group discussion was useful as insights, perceptions and explanations were more important than actual numbers (Mertens, 1998). This instrument was used because people are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by comments of others and often make decisions after listening to the advice and opinions of others. As the interest was to investigate the causal factors to low level of reading standard, focus group discussions assisted to underline important facts while at the same time enhance the authenticity of the information received.

The focus group discussions focused on teachers' opinion about the low level of reading amongst Foundation Phase learners, and were thus conducted with the aim to gather qualitative information concerning the causal factors of low reading standards amongst Foundation Phase learners and to get information on teachers' views on the intervention strategies. The data was collected during teaching practice sessions. Since it was during teaching practice, it was convenient for the researcher to observe the teachers. This paper furthermore derived its data on the causal factors of low reading levels from various related studies, reports by practising teachers who are the implementers of the curriculum, and the author's own experiences as lecturer and supervisor of students on Teaching Practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resulting from the data analysis of this study, the findings are presented in relation to seven distinctive themes: Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS, DoE(a), Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC DoE (b), inappropriate use of methodology in the teaching of reading; multi-grade teaching approach in schools, lack of parental involvement in the education of their children, lack of variety of readers for the learners in school and multilingualism teaching were developed. The quotations offered are the verbatim expressions of the teachers. The focus group discussions were guided by the following main question: What are the causal factors of low reading standards in the Foundation Phase in South Africa? The questions posed to the respondents allowed for flexibility in responding to concerns raised by the group. The first question was what teachers regard as the causal factors of low reading level amongst learners in the Foundation Phase. Teachers responded differently and their actual words were analyzed and interpreted.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS- DoE,a): Educators attribute poor reading competence among South African learners to the poorly introduced Outcomes Based Education (OBE) (Mudzielwana, 2011). The OBE curriculum that was announced on 24th March, 1997 introduced some radical changes in the education system of the country, including the way reading was to be taught. Chief among the criticisms of the new paradigm is that it is a borrowed economic package that is difficult to implement in education, including reading. According to Dick (2001), the language of the OBE is incomprehensibly rigid and uncompromisingly economic in orientation. Applying this borrowed concept in education implies applying a “one shoe fits all” approach.

Teachers complained that they do not understand the principles of OBE, and yet they are expected to implement. They also complain of a lack of specificity and examples in the RNCS. Teachers were instructed to develop a learning program based on the RNCS. Thus, there was urgent need to make teachers comprehend OBE for its effective implementation. A survey of 93 Foundation Phase teachers showed that half of the participants were not satisfied with their initial training to teach reading to beginners, and indicated a need for further training (Lessing and De Witt, 2000). The Foundation Phase is critical in the sense that it acts as the bedrock that provides basic reading skills which are important in the acquisition of reading skills in subsequent grades (Mudzielwana, 2011).

The DoE (2008) attributes poor reading standards to the poor training of teachers who teach reading at the foundation phase. However, some teachers always try to resist change when a new curriculum is introduced, despite the benefits, because change may result in more work in terms of training teachers, reading texts for the learners and the preparation of learning materials (Mudzielwana, 2011). Also, people prefer the familiar route to the new. Fear of the unknown seems to affect human responses. It would be foolhardy to introduce a new curriculum package without

giving due consideration to the ability of the implementers to handle such a new approach. It appears that the introduction of the OBE curriculum had a negative impact on reading, accounting for the alarming low level of reading competence among the learners (Faktier and Wagid, 2004). At the same time it is acknowledged that conformity to pre-ordained outcomes stifles creativity, therefore, the OBE is too prescriptive, to the extent that it does not encourage the love of reading for the sake of reading (Dick, 2001). The learner should have an intrinsic interest in reading, and that promotes reading competence. This was highlighted in the following way by the respondents:

There are so many workshops that we attended in particular now that there is RNCS, but all of them focus mainly on the strategies that need to be used in classroom in order to assist learners to speak, read and write. In language workshops you will find that much attention is given to the "how" of going about planning using the three levels of planning according to RNCS policy. I only remember one workshop I attended that focused on the development of reading and its strategies.

The question now is: Is it not the teacher who extrinsically motivates the learners to read? Though teachers are expected to excite learners and broaden their zone of proximal development, yet only a competent teacher who is conversant with the curriculum would have the capacity and ability to do that. It also seems, from the various reports by teachers, that the OBE was not timely introduced, thus further contributing to the low performance level in reading. There are well-founded complaints that books that were in use were declared unsuitable and outdated. At the same time, there were no new curriculum reading materials when the new curriculum was introduced. This was tantamount to producing a major problem to teachers in the classroom. This was highlighted in the following manner by the respondents:

The causes of low reading amongst the learners are the changing curriculum in South Africa. We started with the new curriculum of OBE, NCS, RNCS and now we are implementing Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS). Nothing can work. While doing this you change to that it confuses learners and teachers. In the old curriculum, learners were able to read and write.

Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC -DoEb): Teachers complained that the FFLC came as an overload. They say that they are unable to plan instructions due to the many documents required by the new curriculum. Each curriculum has new concepts. For example in the RNCS they were using terms such as Learning programmes, Learning outcomes, Assessment Standards, whereas in the CAPS they now have terms such as Subjects, content area and topic. Every new change comes with new terminology, and this is confusing to teachers (Mudzielwana, 2011).

Methodology Used in the Teaching of Reading: Teachers do not seem to have been introduced to the major communicative and interactive approaches to reading in the pre-service teacher programs. Though the RNCS (2002) requires these approaches,

yet in the pre-service training for NCS, the teacher is provided with little orientation on the teaching and developing of reading. Experience through interacting with practising teachers shows that when learners read aloud individually, they are not given pause time to use other strategies. Learners often read parrot-like, while the meaning of what they read is not established by them (Mudzielwana, 2011). They are also over-corrected for trivial and insignificant pronunciation errors. From this, it may be concluded that teacher incompetence in implementing the new curriculum is an impediment to effective and efficient reading.

The impact of these gaps in training was evident in the class observation, in which teachers used predominantly teacher-controlled approaches and focused on asking questions. This observation relates to the results of the Progress of International Reading Literacy (PIRLS, 2006) study which concluded that South African learners cannot read the text nor comprehend it. In addition, the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE), under the auspices of the Human Science Research Council (HSRC, 2008), had similar results. This was confirmed by the NRS (DoE-c 2008) which states the following:

Many teachers in South Africa have an under-developed understanding of teaching literacy reading and writing. Many teachers simply do not know how to teach reading. Too often, teachers know only one method of teaching reading which may not suit the learning style of all learners.

In the context of literature, Joubert, Bester and Meyer (2008) suggest that teachers should know a variety of reading methods, for example, phonics approach or a language-experienced approach, and that they should not resort to one method of teaching. The NRS (DoE-c, 2008) further emphasizes the following:

South African teachers do not know how to stimulate reading inside, and outside the classroom. It further states that many Foundation Phase teachers have not been explicitly trained to teach reading. That is why they find it difficult to help learners with reading difficulties. Consequently many teachers have resorted to rote teaching as the only option, and tend to be satisfied with the rote learning by their learners.

Multi-Grade Teaching Approach: During the teaching practice visits, it was noted that there were schools that had very low enrolment numbers. As a result, several grades were collapsed into one class despite grade differences, and was very difficult for the teacher to divide his/her teaching equitably (Mudzielwana, 2011). Those learners who were not involved were just lying down awaiting their turn. Teachers simply instruct learners to read. This is meant to occupy them. There was little evidence of what the teachers did to find out the root causes of struggling learners, and thus the teachers' means of arriving at ways to support learners in overcoming their problems. The reading activity was not properly organized, and so learners found such activities repulsive. Such an approach does not stimulate a learner's desire to read nor improve their reading standards (Mudzielwana, 2011). In a multi-grade class, teachers should plan lessons and activities in such a way that learners are able

to share ideas and work together (Sargent, 2002). This was highlighted in the following manner by the respondents:

Because of redeployment , there is nothing I can do, because some teachers have been deployed to other schools and now I have to teach all the grades, I do not know how and it is bad.

Lack of Parental Involvement: Teachers complained that parents are not involved in their children's education. According to the teachers, parents remain uninvolved even if they are called by the teachers to come and see them. The parents do not show up.

Reading is a challenge: Learners' socio-economic context affects the development of reading (Pardo,2004). In this study's case, the learners' context is affected by a high level of poverty. The majority of the population lives in rural areas where there are high levels of unemployment. Reading becomes one of the activities that are not always prioritized by the community members, because the most prioritized activities are those that would bring food home. This can serve as one possible reason why parents remain uninvolved in their children's education.

Lack of Variety of Reading Materials and Books: The availability of reading material was regarded as a major challenge by the teachers. There are no books for learners to read at the schools and in some schools there are no one to read to the learners, i.e., no readers. Teachers can therefore not assist nor motivate learners to read. This was highlighted in the following way by the respondents:

I believe that if reading could be made part of learners' lives, things could turn around. If children could be provided with reading material even before they go to school, that would mean that they grow up having a positive attitude towards books and other related reading material. By the time they go to school, they will be used to books, libraries, pictures and cartoons. They will be able to cut and paste to create their own stories.

Multilingualism: In schools, teachers are compelled to introduce two languages as early as Grade One. This approach, however, does not promote effective language learning, including reading (Mudzielwana, 2011). The argument presented here is that the learner is still grappling to understand his/her own language at the same time as being burdened with learning alien languages. The new South African Constitution (Act No. 58 of 1995) was developed in such a way that it prioritizes, among other principles, the principle of human rights and equality of human status. It recognizes all 11 languages of the country as official and gives them the same status at national level. This language overload inevitably overwhelms the learner. Teachers view this as one of the factors impacting negatively on reading competency. The same teachers suggested, however, that teaching with the mother tongue language from Grade R to Grade Three is in keeping with the South African Language policy.

Table1: Summary from the Focus Group Discussions with the Teachers on the Causal Factors of Low Reading Standards in the Foundation Phase in South Africa.

CFs= Causal factors	Ts= Teachers							
CF	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
NCS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
FFLC	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CAPS	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Inappropriate Methodology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Multi-Grade Teaching	x	x	x	x		x	x	
Multilingualism	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of Parental Involvement	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of Readers	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lack of Training and Workshops	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Redeployment	x	x		x	x	x	x	

Intervention strategies: This study’s findings signify that teachers' voices indicate that they are concerned about the low reading standards amongst the learners. In order to rectify this situation, the participating teachers indicated several intervention strategies they think could address the low level of reading amongst the learners to be implemented. The interventions are suggested by practicing teachers during the discussions about how schools could improve learners' proficiency in reading are as follows:

Teachers need additional tailor-made training programs to enable them to understand OBE principles and the reading framework. Long-term reading courses could be offered by universities to produce highly competent reading specialists that could be used extensively to workshop other teachers. In addition, university education programs should enable prospective teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach reading effectively. Only well-qualified teachers should teach reading at the foundation phase.

A multi-method approach should be considered in the teaching of reading. This would allow teachers to use methods they are conversant with. Meaningful reading requires abundant reading literature to cater to the diverse interests of learners.

Introducing a curriculum that has no material backup should be avoided: Teachers should encourage learners to construct meaning from texts, rather than merely decoding print. Education is a basic right to all children in South Africa. It has to be provided equitably so that all children can learn. It is necessary that even the most disadvantaged population should be given access to education in order to help reduce social, cultural and economic disparities, even if this involves putting learners of different levels and abilities in the same class. Therefore, teachers should be equipped with the requisite pedagogical skills to enable they teach reading effectively in the foundation phase classes. Emphasis should be placed on the need for learners to understand what they read, rather than on quantitative outcomes. Universities should conduct research on the teaching of reading, and distribute their findings to schools. The DoE must create scholarships to send teachers to other countries that can demonstrate success in the teaching of reading, for the purposes of bench-marking. Teachers should be able to apply remedial teaching strategies to assist learners who have reading problems.

Table 2: Summary from the Focus Group Discussions with the Teachers on what the Intervention Strategies should entail that should be Put in Place

INTs= Intervention strategies	Ts= Teachers							
Intervention Strategies	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
Training	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Multi-Method Approach	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pedagogical skills	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Reading literature	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Workshops	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Scholarships	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Conduct Research on Reading	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Remedial Strategies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Reading is a skill that many foundation phase learners regrettably seem to lack. This inability can leave them feeling frustrated, even fearful of the act of reading. From the teachers' focus group discussion on causal factors attributable to low level reading standards, intervention strategies emerged that could be applied to ameliorate the appalling reading standards in South Africa. It largely remains the responsibility of the DoE to take bold steps to raise reading standards among learners by ensuring that teachers are conversant with the new curriculum, especially its framework for reading (Mudzielwana, 2011). Teachers need to be trained to impart appropriate pedagogical reading skills. With these intervention strategies, teachers can create a more conducive learning environment in which learners can both enjoy learning to read and make substantial gains in their attempts to become competent readers.

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