

Some Difficulties Encountered By Limpopo Province Foundation Phase Teachers In The Teaching Of Reading And Writing: A Sustainable Approach

K.N. Maswanganyi^{1*}, Prof T.W. Molotja², E.S. Chuene³, S. Ndlovu⁴

¹ Education Studies, University of Limpopo, South Africa
khazamula.maswanganyi@ul.ac.za
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4504-6315>

² Department of Language Education, University of Limpopo, South Africa
Africa
wilfred.molotja@ul.ac.za

³ Education Studies, University of Limpopo, South Africa

⁴ Education Studies, University of Limpopo, South Africa

Abstract

The culture of reading and writing is highly recommended in the educational setting of primary schools in South Africa. Schools are witnessing various challenges in curriculum implementation of teaching literacy in their classroom arrangements. The purpose of this research is to investigate the difficulties encountered by foundation phase teachers in the teaching of reading and writing in the primary schools of Limpopo province. Three primary schools from the Capricorn District formed the population for the study, wherein three educators were interviewed. Convenience sampling was used in the identification and selection of the participants. The study adopted an explorative participatory qualitative method to explore the literacy difficulties faced by teachers through interviews. Teacher opinions were recorded by cell phones and transcribed to identify themes. The content analysis of the interview data transcribed led to the development of themes and patterns for discussion. The findings under discussion highlighted the Foundation Phase teacher incompetency, lack of knowledge in phonics teaching, overcrowded classrooms, SIAS and lack of parental involvement. An intervention strategy is suggested and solutions to the challenges under investigation are outlined.

Keywords: Competency, phonics, foundation phase, sustainable approach.

Background

Reading and Writing are among the five teaching and learning instructional skills that are applied in the Foundation Phase Band, Grade R-3 (Department of Basic Education :2011; Cekiso, Rabelemane, Jadezweni, Madende & Dieperlink, 2022). Reading serves as the important skill that enable learners to communicate their thinking with their teachers. A strong foundation in reading will assist learners in their language development (especially those who will be using English as the LoLT in Grade 4). For these skills to be effective, role players in the classroom setting must implement successive methods and techniques. The greatest factor in their achievement is the teacher (Tinker & McCullough, 1975). Malmquist (1973) indicated that “the teacher is a more important variable in reading instruction than are the teaching methods and instructional materials.” This idea later gained support from various studies (Spache, 1973; King, 1973; Goldbecker, 1975; Tinker & McCullough, 1975). Influenced by it, this study explored some of the challenges faced by educators in their teaching of reading and writing in the rural areas of Limpopo province. Various challenges from different educators were found to be having an impact on the teaching of reading and writing in primary schools, specifically the Foundation Phase. These challenges are influenced by inter-related and inter-dependent factors from different schools. Among them are educational attainment; teacher training; teaching approaches; learners with reading and writing challenges; parental support, economic background, and attitudes; including learners’ behaviour in the classroom. Another objective of the study is to promote the culture of reading and writing in rural primary schools and to raise awareness of the concealed challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers when it comes to literacy teaching (Molotja, et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

The role of educators in improving literacy in schools plays a major role in the implementation of the curriculum (Blease & Condy, 2014; Venketsamy & Sibanda,2021). In South Africa, the Foundation Phase position in the teaching of reading and writing is basically in home language oral development. Literacy is given more attention in grades 2 and 3. In these grades, learners are expected to relate to the sounds the letters represent, and blend letters together to form words (Department of Basic Education, 2011). They are also expected to isolate different sounds of the language. However, literacy development and implementation are still seen as a challenge when learners transit from the foundation phase to the next phase. This challenge ignited researchers to investigate the difficulties encountered by the foundation phase educators when implementing the teaching of reading and writing.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the constructivist's theory (Piaget 1962). Piaget argues that learners learn actively when they engage with their environment. They go through stages, which offers them with opportunities to experiment with learning. Piaget (1962)' stages theories help educators recognize children's accomplishments, anticipate areas of growth, and provide intentional literacy experiences. Piaget's cognitive developmental theory examines a child's developmental stage and how they acquire and categorize information internally (Piaget, 1962). Through the developmental stages, learners' potentials in language learning are being identified and necessary support from teachers scaffolded accordingly. Learners engage each other and with teachers in activities which are aimed at developing their reading skills.

Methodology

Research Approach

An appropriate methodology results in good research (Beam, 2005). This research adopted the interpretive qualitative approach. Johnson and Christensen (2010) and Creswell (2014), who emphasise that qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of people's experiences and perspectives on a certain phenomenon, influenced the choice of this approach.

Research Site and Population

This study was conducted in the four primary schools from the Capricorn District of Limpopo province in South Africa. Participants were conveniently sampled from the 4 identified primary schools based on their experience and perspective on literacy development in the Foundation Phase (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection Procedures

The study used semi-structured interviews to collect the required data. A questionnaire developed by researchers was used to probe questions.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed by the use of thematic analysis. Data from the participants were transcribed, coded, and themed for proficient analysis.

Description of Participants

For this study, the researcher interviewed three educators from three primary school. As informed by Hoyer and van Straaten (2021), it is vital to safeguard the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants. It is under this guidance that participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. In addition, they were named and ranked according to the sequential order of educators such as: Participant 1 School 1 (C1S1) , Participant 2 School 2 (C2S2), Participant 3 School 3

(C3S3), and Participant 4 School 4 (C4S4). The same pseudonyms were used in the presentation of data. The table below presents the biographical details of the participants.

Table 1: Biographical data of research participants

Participant and its school	Participant's gender	Work experience	Participant's Qualification(s)
P1S1	Female	17 years	*B.Ed in Education
P2S2	Female	18 Years	*ACE
P3S3	Female	15 years	*Diploma in Infant Education *BA in Infant Education *MA in Special needs
P4S4	Female	29 years	*Masters *Ph.D candidate (during research)

Findings and Discussion

The common challenges found to be persisting and affecting the primary schools of Capricorn District are discussed below. They include teaching competence, phonemic awareness, SIAS implementation, classroom arrangements, parental involvement, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Competence

Akyol, Temur and Erol (2021) maintain that teacher of reading in primary schools should have the necessary competencies to develop these skills in learners. Reading and writing skills are the basic requirements of the 21st century. The ability to read serves as the foundation for learning in other school subjects such as Social Sciences, History and Life Sciences. The possession of these skills from teachers will bolster the performance of learners in the foundation phase. Primary school have a great role in the acquisition and development of reading and writing skills. Therefore, the primary school is the first to encounter students who have problems with this issue, work with them or direct them to relevant places (Akyol et al., 2021).

This study aimed at finding out of the teachers' competencies in developing and writing skills in the foundation phase. The responses from the participants show that the majority of teachers in the Foundation Phase do not have the competency in to teach in the Foundation Phase and do not have the necessary content knowledge for teaching Literacy. Some of the indicated that they were just requested to as there are qualified teachers to teach in the Foundation Phase.

“ No, Madam. I was not trained to teach the foundation phase. People think you can wake up one day and be able to teach the foundation phase, but it is more difficult than that”

The Teaching of Phonics

The knowledge of word sounds is the pillar of fluent reading with understanding. Phonemic awareness is one of the components of reading and writing. However, the position of teachers in the implementation of reading and writing in the teaching of phonics is slowly despairing. Educators teaching in the foundation phase are familiar with phonics, while some may even define it. They indicate that they attend workshops on phonics. Their common challenge in the teaching of phonics is phonemic awareness, especially when migrating from their home language letter sounds to the second additional language. Respondents have shown that they lack knowledge of what phonics are. This is indicated in the following utterance:

“What is phenomic awareness?”

This reinforces the idea that these teachers are not formally train and as such lack the basic knowledge of teaching phonemics.

The most critical barrier in teaching letter sounds by most educators is language interference (Lekova, 2010). Most teachers indicate a serious challenge when teaching letter sounds to multilingual learners. They said learners whose home language is not English have a serious challenge, and need special attention to their unfamiliar language of instruction, as alluded to by Wilsenach (2015). These learners sound the language of instruction letters in their home language sounds. For example, they will sound out English letters in their locally spoken home language. Wildsmith-Cromarty and Balfour (2019) stressed that in such cases, vocabulary may be insufficiently developed in either HL or LoLT to support the development of literacy. Having had such a challenge, teachers end up spending more time teaching the same sounds. The same is the case in teaching the pronunciation of the written letters b/d, p/q, and s/z. Those who excel in pronouncing the sounds very well are those whose home languages are equivalent to the school languages of instruction, e.g. English. It was also emphasized by participants that the Covid-19 regulations imposed on schools made the teaching of phonics harder to implement because learners could not see what their teachers' lips were doing or saying, hence learning was severely compromised. The wearing of masks by teachers was another barrier to the listening and viewing skills of learners since some of them rely much on seeing when learning phonics.

Screening, Identifying, Assessing, and Supporting Learners

Giving support to learners is a fundamental plan for teachers in the Primary school (Matera & Traver, 2020). When asked to respond on the support given to learners, some educators responded in this way.

'No, because sometimes they will call you to do some finance issues'. This shows that teachers are always busy, and do not have enough time to focus on the development of content. The other educator indicated that she remains behind with learners who to give them support on reading and writing.

However, it is worth noted that this is not done often. The respondent cited issues of the availability of time and the tight classroom schedule.

Classrooms Arrangements

Martin (2006) indicates that the decisions taken by teachers regarding the organisation and management of their learners and lessons may sometimes result in an obstruction of the learners' academic performance. This was directed to the teacher's intention when controlling the group to create a comfortable atmosphere for the learners to work more easily (ibid). A well-arranged classroom enables collaboration and interaction between teachers and learners to take place efficiently. Learners are more luckily to learn by participating enjoyably in a well-organised classroom. Respondents indicated that they try to create environments conducive for learners to work with each other in reading and writing.

Parental Involvement

Most effective teachers and schools are those with strong family engagement programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For schools to be effective, a collaboration or established partnerships between schools and learners' families is recommended. Establishing partnerships may be elusive, but once established, the family's element of trust in their child's teacher may be secured (Grant & Ray, 2013). In order to build trust, educators must create relationships with learners' parents or guardians. When investigating parental involvement in literacy education for learners in our sampled schools, it was found that some parents are involved in assisting learners (P2S2), but not all of them are. Lack of parental involvement may be caused by employment opportunities some parents have in far areas from their homes where their kids are schooling. These parents have no choice, but to leave their kids under the guardianship of their grandparents. P3S3 had this to say:

Some parents are assisting, and some parents cannot assist. Some just do not assist. But some have difficulties because (they) cannot even read or write. Most of our learners stay with their grandmothers. (P3S3).

It is clear from the above excerpt that emphasis on parental involvement has to be accelerated in the form of involving bodies to awaken parents. The concern of parental support at home seems to be jeopardizing literacy development which results in learner's frustrations. On this matter, P2S2 replied that:

One learner copied the word 'Dettol' where the parent was supposed to sign, and when I asked the learner for the signature of the parent, the learner showed me where she wrote 'Dettol' herself. And I could see the handwriting that it was for the learner. I then asked the learner why their parents did not help her? And she (the learner) said that she stayed with the grandmother when the mother is at work in Gauteng.

Parents who leave their children with illiterate grandparents lowers the parental participation standard in learners' literacy development. Manilal (2014) agrees that not all parents can participate in, or assist with school activities. The parents whose children attend underprivileged schools are unable to volunteer at school, take their children to visit places of educational interest, or get them involved in any extramural activities (ibid).

Conclusion

This study concurs with Gündoğmuş (2008) who argues that in order to improve the quality of reading and writing instruction, it is extremely important to identify the difficulties they experience in the process of primary reading and writing instruction, and find out their solution offers for overcoming these difficulties.

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