

Reading Literacy in Primary Schools in South Africa: Educator Perspectives on Factors Affecting Reading Literacy and Strategies for Improvement

Usha Naidoo¹, Karunanidhi Reddy^{2*} and Nirmala Dorasamy³

¹*Department of Operations and Quality Management, ²Department of Applied Law,
³Department of Public Management and Economics, Durban University of Technology,
South Africa*

Telephone (Office): ¹<+2731-5646412>, ³<+2731-3736862>;

Mobile: ¹<0849108438>, ³<0722678704>

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ABSTRACT As a developing country, South Africa is faced with challenges in the sphere of education which have a direct impact on the literacy level of learners. Learners are taught in a language (English) which is not their home language. The socio-economic challenges, particularly of having little or no parental support, as well as the challenges of educators who are not proficient in English as a medium of instruction, and large class sizes, also contribute to the low literacy levels. South Africa's performance in terms of the international reading tests, as well as the national literacy tests, has confirmed the seriousness of the problem and the urgency of finding solutions. This paper seeks to investigate the factors that impact on reading literacy as a preliminary step to finding measures to improve the quality of reading. Through an empirical study using a survey, data has been gathered from the perspective of educators from 40 schools in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The study will be beneficial to educators in the inter-mediate phase of primary schools; curriculum development specialists and national policy makers.

INTRODUCTION

The political history of South Africa has impacted negatively on the quality of literacy and education in general in the country. South Africa has been undergoing many radical changes in education since the introduction of democracy. Since 1994 the government in South Africa has used various means to improve literacy levels using literacy and reading campaigns. However, the literacy level among learners is still low (Bharuthram 2012; Republic of South Africa, Department of Education (DoE) 2008a) and many educators in South Africa believe that learners do not have well developed reading abilities (Hugo et al. 2005; Spaul 2013; Msila 2014). Zuze and Reddy (2014: 100) declare that proficiency in reading lays the foundation for personal development, and that there is a definite link between reading literacy and educational oppor-

tunities and wellbeing. One of the aims of education since the change in government is, therefore, to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In support of this, an equal opportunity for all learners irrespective of race, religion or creed, to develop holistically through education in South Africa, has become the main focus. In this respect, literacy is one of the areas which have come under the spotlight.

South African learners in the intermediate phase of schooling participated in both national and international assessments to evaluate the state of literacy in the country. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2006 (PIRLS) (Howie et al. 2007), which is an assessment of the reading comprehension of learners in the intermediate phase, was administered to South African learners in grades 4 and 5. Of the forty five participating countries, South Africa was placed last with a score of 302 with a benchmark of 400 being the cut-off point for low achievers (Howie et al. 2007; Bharuthram 2012). National averages of 30-35% in tests of numeracy and literacy are the norm for the country as evident from the National School Effectiveness Study (2007-2009 for Grades 3-5) and the Annual National Assessments (ANA) (2011 for Grade 1-6). South Africa has the lowest average score of all

**Address for correspondence:*

Professor K. Reddy
Head, Department of Applied Law
Durban University of Technology
Durban, South Africa
Telephone: +2731 373 5367
Fax: +27313735408
E-mail: reddyk@dut.ac.za

low income countries (as in the case of PIRLS) (Spaull 2013). Bharuthram (2012) contends that drastic measures have to be employed to improve the overall literacy and reading levels of learners. Reading skills are indispensable to the academic achievement of learners in middle or high school (Rajchert et al. 2014).

This paper, firstly, focuses on reading literacy in the intermediate phase of primary schools. Secondly, it explores the factors that impact on reading literacy in the intermediate phase. Thirdly, it examines strategies for improvement of reading literacy. An empirical study was used to gather data from managers and educators from primary schools in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. The study was restricted to intermediate phase educators only.

Reading Literacy in the Intermediate Phase

Literacy

Literacy has been popularly and conventionally defined as the ability to read and write at an adequate level of proficiency that is necessary for communication. However, literacy does in fact go beyond reading and writing and it is indeed a contested term. Hence, the term reading literacy is referred to. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics, about 861 million people (20% of the world's adults) cannot read or write, and therefore, cannot be fully fledged members of their societies. UNESCO is of the opinion that approximately one billion people were illiterate worldwide at the turn of the century, and prospects of a radical improvement seem to be unlikely (University of Pretoria 2006).

In the broader sense, literacy encompasses the basic learning skills of listening, reading and writing. Literacy, specifically reading literacy, forms the foundation of scholastic success at primary, secondary and tertiary level (Pretorius and Machet 2004). Pretorius (2002) confirms that learners who are good readers also tend to excel academically. Bearing in mind the new literacies theory, the meaning of literacy has also become deictic since we are living at a time where there are rapidly changing communication and information technologies, each of which requires new literacies (Leu 2000, cited in Leu et al. 2013). Hence, being previously literate in terms of stat-

ic book technologies, would not necessarily mean that one is literate today in light of new technologies such as Google, Skype, iMovie, Dropbox, Facebook and the many mobile applications. Being literate in the future would be defined by the technologies that emerge in years to come. Thus, the concept of new literacies implies that literacy is not just new today but becomes new everyday (Leu et al. 2013).

Reading Literacy in the Intermediate Phase

In the intermediate phase (grades 4, 5 and 6), learners extend their knowledge over a wider range of texts than in the foundation phase. Learners in the intermediate phase must be able to read a variety of texts for different purposes, use a variety of reading and comprehension strategies; view and comment on visual texts; describe their feelings relating to texts; discuss certain aspects of fiction texts, such as central theme, character and plot; identify and recognize different structures, purpose, language use and audiences of different types of texts; identify and discuss values in texts; comprehend and respond suitably to information texts; interpret simple visual texts; and select information texts for their own information needs (DoE 2002; PIRLS South Africa 2006).

According to the Foundations for Learning (FFL) (2008b), an initiative of the national DoE to enhance literacy and numeracy in South Africa, "read aloud", "shared reading" and "guided reading" by the educator and learner, form the components of a reading programme. In terms of this approach, the "guided reading" constitutes a significant segment of the reading process in the intermediate phase. During "guided reading", learners of similar reading requirements are grouped and instructed under the guidance of an educator (DoE 2008b). According to the Foundations of Learning (DoE 2008b), the educator selects the text that is at the learners' instructional reading level and will reinforce or introduce appropriate reading strategies and concepts.

Government in South Africa, has made significant efforts to make primary school education accessible to learners of school age regardless of their environmental locality, religion, socio-economic status and political associations. However, research conclusions and the personal interpretation of classroom sessions by researchers in the South African context, have also

shown that a significant proportion of learners are deficient in many of the literacy skills they are obliged to have in their formal and informal learning circumstances (Bharuthram 2012; Malda et al. 2014).

In view of the fact that the focus of this study is on South Africa, it is strategic to commence by explaining the National Department of Education's (DoE) perception of literacy. The DoE's National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE 2002) refers to a 'balanced approach' to literacy development. Such an approach commences with learners' emergent literacy, progressing to learners' reading 'real books', for authentic reasons with a focus on phonics.

The 6 learning outcomes described in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DoE 2002) were to be incorporated in teaching and learning. In terms of the National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008) learners had to be taught a variety of learning techniques to facilitate appropriate reading levels with comprehension; to extract information; and also to read for pleasure.

Why Improve Literacy in South Africa?

Bharuthram (2012) highlights the problem of low literacy among learners in South Africa. The 2009 National Benchmark Tests Project discovered that only 47 percent of new university students were proficient in the academic literacy test, while 46 percent had intermediate skills and 7 percent had basic skills (Bharuthram 2012).

The challenge presented by the South African Education system is to provide quality education to the multi-cultural learner in a country where there are 11 official languages (Van der Berg et al. 2011). According to Howie et al. (2008), English as a first language is spoken by less than 10 % of the population. Although English is the most frequently used language in schools, it is not the most frequently spoken home language. Hence, the challenge of learning and mastering a second language is a reality for the majority of learners. Such a language system where learners are not taught in their home language is known as immersion (Howie et al. 2008). According to Admiraal et al. (2006), instructions in a language foreign to them contribute to the poor reading abilities of these learners.

An added challenge is the issue of language policy. In terms of the National DoE's language policy, learners should receive instruction in

their home language from Grades 1 to 3, while from Grades 4 to 12 the medium of instruction is English or Afrikaans. Consequently, White, Coloured and Indian learners are instructed in English or Afrikaans from Grades 1 to 12 while African learners, whose home language is not English or Afrikaans, receive instruction in English or Afrikaans from Grades 4 to 12. This prevails despite the government policy on language, which makes provision for learners to receive instruction in their home language from Grades 1 to 12 (Howie et al. 2008).

Reading literacy is viewed as an important aspect of learners' functionality as developing individuals, both within and outside schools. When one examines the history of schooling in South Africa, including the classroom methods and systems that have developed in western education, it is clear that it benefits the selected upper class and marginalizes the majority (Rose 2006a; Spaul 2013). In a study conducted in 2003 by the DoE to determine literacy levels among Grade 3 learners in South Africa, it was found that 61% of learners could not read and write at their appropriate age levels (University of Pretoria 2006). An investigation of the factors that contribute to poor reading literacy is therefore imperative as a preliminary step in finding solutions to such problem.

Improving the Quality of Reading in the Intermediate Phase

Imperative for Enhanced Reading

South Africa's performance in the PIRLS 2006 and ANA shows that there is an urgent need for reading programmes that will encourage and maintain appropriate literacy levels nationally, as well as internationally. Reading is seen as an integral part of nation-building. There is therefore an urgent need to improve reading in order to encourage and improve the confidence of learners in modern society and the world generally. South Africa has embarked on a National Reading Strategy which is focussed on improving the reading competency of all learners, including those learners who encounter barriers to learning (DoE 2008a).

The Reading Development Curriculum

According to Rose (2006b), since reading is seen as the primary mode of learning in formal

education, it should be the core focus of teaching. It is also apparent that most educators have no previous training on how to teach reading. Further, learners who have home grounding speedily learn to become independent readers in the early years and are well prepared to commence with learning from reading in later primary years. However, those that lack such grounding are less prepared and may be greatly disadvantaged (Rose 2006b).

Barriers to Learning

The term “learners who experience barriers to learning” is an all-encompassing concept. This refers to learners who are possibly experiencing a multiplicity of problems with learning and who subsequently cannot realise their optimal potential (Weeks 2008). These present themselves as physical and/or physiological impairments, developmental problems, learning problems, emotional problems or behavioural problems.

Factors That Contribute to Poor Reading Abilities of Learners

The following factors are barriers that contribute to low literacy achievement.

Language of Instruction

Bilingual education (BE) is a form of instruction used in Netherlands which refers to situations where learners who are in the minority regarding language are taught in the language of the majority (Admiraal et al. 2006). This method is termed “submersion”. It aims to develop skills in a language that may be alien to them, but which governs daily life outside school. It may also refer to “immersion”, in which an alien language, for example a language that is not the language of the larger society, is the medium of instruction. Instructions in a language foreign to them contribute to the poor reading and writing abilities of these learners (Admiraal et al. 2006). Some studies in South Africa (Alexander 2005) have blamed the poor achievements of learners from African language speaking homes on the early transition to English, while others see a negative attitude by African parents towards African languages which makes it difficult to enforce mother-tongue education (De Wet 2002). There are also arguments that ques-

tion the notion that only one of the languages is best for classroom practice in all educational contexts, including multilingual ones (Banda 2014).

South Africa is a developing country and, as such, learners who are not adequately competent in the language of instruction, which is English, will experience barriers to learning a second language. According to Lessing and Mahabeer (2007), learners who are instructed in a language different from their mother tongue, will experience problems in reading. Dixon et al. (2008) maintain that, in Southern Africa, many children’s home and school literacy practices do not afford them access to local and global literacy practices.

Contextual

Socio-economic conditions, parental commitment, parents’ educational achievement and the language and culture of the community, are some of the contextual factors that many second language learners (L2) acquire as barriers to learning. These factors may explain the lack of advancement in reading (Lessing and Mahabeer 2007). In a study conducted by Linnakyla et al. (2004) in Sweden and Finland, there were many factors that contributed to low literacy achievements. Learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds with big families; single-parent families; poor availability of books; a lack of political and social discussions in the home; learners’ personal interest and attitudes indicated low literacy achievements.

Qualifications and Proficiency of Teachers

According to the Reading Strategy (DoE 2008a), numerous educators in South Africa have an inadequate perception of teaching literacy and reading. Many educators simply possess a modest understanding of teaching reading. Educators are not familiar with methods of teaching reading which may be suitable to the learning approach of all learners (Spaull 2013). The Reading Strategy (DoE 2008a) emphasises that educators are not acquainted with how to motivate reading inside and outside the classroom.

The National Teacher Education Audit of 1995 (DoE 2007) revealed that many South African educators are under qualified or unqualified. Teacher training fails to meet the required

standard (Malda et al. 2014). It was further emphasised that educators are not reasonably knowledgeable in the principles that underpin bilingual and multi-lingual education. Unqualified educators have been identified as one of the factors responsible for the poor performance of learners (Uwatt and Egbe 2011).

A study by Uys et al. (2007) found that the inability of English educators of Second Language Medium of Instruction (L2MI), to assist their learners in the acquisition of academic literacy, was due to several factors. The factors identified included the following: the educators were often unaware of their inability to meet language-related needs of their learners; they not only lacked knowledge and skills for teaching language skills, but also could not identify strategies to promote effective L2MI; and they lacked the personal language proficiency that was needed to assist learners with literacy.

Lack of Early Childhood Development

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to an inclusive advancement to policies and programmes for learners from birth to nine years of age with the dynamic involvement of their parents and caregivers (DoE 2001). According to the White Paper 5 on early childhood education (DoE 2001), approximately 40% of young children in South Africa are prone to under-development in poverty stricken areas. These children are neglected in these poor households and are therefore at high risk of infant death, low birth-weight, stunted growth and subsequently do not adjust to school easily. These children are often school dropouts. Such children never reach their full potential. However, with quality early childhood development (ECD), these children can acquire language skills, perception-motor skills that are required for learning to read and write, basic numeracy concepts and skills; problem-solving skills; and a love of learning. The shift to early childhood education (ECE), which refers to processes having the object of developing young children before schooling, is creating a debate on quality provisioning (Ebrahim 2010). Ebrahim (2010) observes that achieving the best outcomes for young children, is closely linked to the training of teachers. It is crucial that ECD plays a crucial function in ensuring the quality of children especially from black communities in terms of development (Msila 2014).

Availability of Resources

Children who have greater access to books and other literacy materials learn to read more easily than children who come with a paucity of literacy experiences (Dixon et al. 2008). The lack of access to quality reading materials is another factor contributing to poor performance (Uwatt and Egbe 2011). The general lack of resources at schools in South Africa includes textbooks for reading and general teaching aids.

The National Reading Strategy (DoE 2008a) states that South Africa faces many challenges in promoting literacy. It is uncommon to find schools with fully fledged libraries. Numerous homes have no books or valuable reading literature. Books in African languages are rare, and learners do not have the opportunity to read in their home language. A number of classrooms have no books, and even those classes which do have sets of readers, often have them at an inadequate level. According to the Reading Strategy in South Africa (DoE 2008a), the language of the resources at school (for example, books, posters) is not equivalent to the home language of the learner.

According to Twist et al. (2006), learners who experience reading difficulties in the Netherlands are assisted by support educators who work with learners away from the usual classroom. Educators in England and New Zealand indicated that this type of support was available all the time (Twist et al. 2006).

In South Africa, learners with special needs and severe reading problems are incorporated into the mainstream and educators do not have the assistance of support educators. This is referred to as inclusive education (DoE 2001).

The Socio-economic Order of the Classroom

Rose (2005) is of the opinion that there is a moral order in the classroom that defines learners as successful, average or unsuccessful. He believes that the education system favours the reproduction of an unequal socio-economic environment by not designing the curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. Spaul (2013) points out that schools which served predominantly white children during apartheid remain functional while those that are situated in areas that are in the townships (predominantly Black African areas), have low literacy and numeracy rates.

Gaps that Exist in Schools

As an incentive for learners to advance themselves in reading, they should be exposed to a proper programme structured to facilitate progression. Research conducted by Condy et al. (2010) investigated final year student-teachers' responses relating to a teaching method bearing the acronym THRASS (Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills). The respondents indicated that the learners are not encouraged to read for enjoyment, neither do they frequent the library. Furthermore, learners rarely witness educators reading.

Class Size

According to the Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) (2011), the educator-learner ratio and class size impacts on teaching and learning. It is deliberated that a smaller class size supports quality education. Lower class sizes allow for more interaction between the educator and learner, resulting in quality teaching and learning. The recommended educator-learner ratio and class size in South African primary schools is forty learners per educator (SACMEQ 2011). Hence, class size may also be a factor that impacts on the level of literacy of learners as well.

Strategies for the Improvement of Reading

It is important to continuously integrate the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension) into the daily reading instruction (Meier and Freck 2005). According to Condy et al. (2010), literacy approaches that use phonics may seem efficient in the short term, but unless they are entrenched within focused texts and reading activities, they may well be analysed as drills for school and not as reading 'for real' authentic purposes. Meier and Freck (2005) believe that educators should be familiar with learners' interests and blend them into teaching methods and texts that are chosen for reading purposes. Many studies have revealed that reading and writing skills sustain and strengthen each other as they are learned (Reading Rockets 2008).

The following strategies assist learners to read more speedily and efficiently (NCLRC 2004):

- ♦ Previewing: reviewing titles, section headings, and photo captions to acquire a sense of the structure and essence of a reading selection;
- ♦ Predicting: applying knowledge of the subject matter to build predictions about content and vocabulary and verify comprehension; applying knowledge of the text type and reason to formulate predictions about discourse structure; applying knowledge about the author to formulate predictions about writing style, vocabulary, and content;
- ♦ Skimming and scanning: by means of a quick investigation of the text to get the main idea, recognizing text structure, confirm or question predictions;
- ♦ Guessing from context: applying prior knowledge of the focus and the ideas in the text as clues to the meanings of unknown words, instead of stopping to look them up; and
- ♦ Paraphrasing: stopping at the conclusion of a section to test comprehension by declaring the information and ideas in the text.

"Learning to Read Reading to Learn" (LRRL) is a literacy instruction course the purpose of which is to aid all learners to read and write at levels commensurate with their age, grade and area of study. This course was developed with educators of primary, secondary and tertiary learners across Australia and internationally, to sustain reading and writing across the syllabus (Rose 2006a).

In South Africa, long-established approaches to teaching literacy in both the mother tongue and as a second language, is primarily viewed as language in terms of many small tactful units which comprised syntax and parsing, phonics, spelling, grammar and punctuation. These skills are taught and often dedicated to recall from small to larger units. Learners used this language structure learnt by drill, but without purpose or meaning (Condy 2008).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design entails a coherent course of activities to obtain research participants, to gather data from them and to draw conclusions about a research problem. In this study a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. Quantitative research deals with

questions of relationship, cause and effect, or current status that researchers answer by collecting and statistically analyzing numerical information (Ary et al. 2010). According to Creswell (2009) qualitative research involves proposing questions and course of action, information characteristically assembled in the participant's surroundings, data analysis inductively building from fine points to general themes and the researcher producing interpretations of the meaning of the information. A survey is a means of gathering information from a large group of people in a relatively short period of time and is always conducted within a specific socio-cultural context (Wagner et al. 2012). The study entailed a survey through questionnaires for the purpose of gathering information on the factors impacting on reading literacy, language and reading instruction, strategies for teaching reading, resources available for reading, systems for improving quality reading and reading as a homework activity. The questionnaires were designed by one of the researchers based on the findings from the literature review. They were administered to school management members and educators. This paper will focus on the findings and conclusions relating to factors impacting on reading literacy.

Study Population

The study was conducted among managers and educators of primary schools in the North Durban region of KwaZulu Natal, in the cluster which geographically extends from Umlazi in the south to Umhlanga in the north and from the Bluff in the east to KwaSanti (Pinetown) in the west. In this cluster there are both public state schools and independent schools. The cluster is divided into 8 wards. In each ward there are approximately 40 schools. The target respondents for this study were educators and management in the Umgeni north region, which represents one of the 8 wards in KwaZulu Natal. 40 schools participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used and 450 educators were selected. The questionnaire was completed by 366 respondents (a response rate of 81%).

Reliability

How consistently a measuring instrument gives similar results for similar inputs has been

referred to as reliability. Cronbach's Alpha is one of the means of measuring such consistency of results. A reliability coefficient of 0.7 or higher is regarded as acceptable. In this study the overall reliability score was 0.906, which indicates a high degree of acceptability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Average Number of Learners per Class

Most of the respondents (58%) have between 21 and 40 learners, while 37% of them have between 41 to 60 learners and 2% have more than 60 learners. Bearing in mind that the recommended educator/learner ratio and class size in South African primary schools is forty learners per educator (SACMEQ 2011), there is a significant proportion (39%) with average class sizes above that number.

Factors Impacting on Reading Literacy

Number of Educators Attending Workshops: The majority (57.7%) of respondents did not attend workshops on reading strategies regularly, while 23.5% indicated that they did attend frequently. According to Rose (2006b), most educators have received no previous training in teaching reading.

Reading Levels of Learners: The respondents were asked if the reading levels of the learners in their class were above average. The majority of the respondents (55.4%) indicated that their learners did not have above average reading abilities, while 24% of the respondents indicated that the reading abilities of learners is above average. The DoE of South Africa undertook a study in 2003, to determine the literacy levels among grade 3 learners. The results of the study showed that 61% of learners cannot read and write at their appropriate age levels (University of Pretoria 2006).

Second Language Learners: The majority (59.5%) of the respondents indicated that most of the learners in their classes were second language learners, while 30.2% indicated that most of their learners were not second language learners. Even though many respondents (55.4%) had indicated that the reading levels of learners were not above average, nearly 69% indicated that most learners were able to comprehend the language of instruction. English as a first language

is spoken by less than 10% of the population (Howie et al. 2008) and is one of the most frequently used language by schools (the other being Afrikaans).

Socio-economic Factors: The respondents were asked to indicate which socio-economic factors impacted on the reading literacy of their learners. Table 1 indicates the results.

Table 1: Socio-economic factors that impact on reading literacy

| <i>The following socio-economic factors impact on reading literacy</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Single parents | 62.6 | 11.7 | 25.7 |
| Early childhood development | 85.4 | 6.9 | 7.7 |
| Health care | 74.3 | 13.0 | 12.7 |
| Unemployment | 72.4 | 10.1 | 17.5 |
| Housing | 71.6 | 12.5 | 15.9 |

Respondents believed that the most dominant of the factors was early childhood development (85.4%), followed by healthcare (74.3%), unemployment (72.4%) and housing (71.6%). This highlights a challenge in education since early childhood development is important for the learners' future literacy progress. It is evident that all the factors identified were rated high in respect of impacting on reading ability.

A significant observation is that single parents (62.6%) as a factor impacting on reading literacy, was ranked lower than the other factors. The findings of the study by Linnakyla et al. (2004), confirmed that learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, big families, and single-parent families, indicated low literacy achievements. A further observation is that the results show that there is a high prevalence of all the indicated socio-economic factors.

Language of Instruction: A significant proportion (68.5%) of the respondents indicated that learners do experience difficulties comprehending the language of instruction and 27.8% indicated that learners did not experience any difficulties. African learners in South Africa, whose home language is not English or Afrikaans, receive instruction from grade 4 onwards in English or Afrikaans despite the current government language policy which advocates that learning should take place in their home language from grades 1 to 12 (Howie et al. 2008).

Common Reading Problems Experienced by Learners

The respondents were asked to indicate the common reading problems experienced by learners. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2: Common reading problems experienced by learners

| <i>Learners experience the following reading problems</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|---|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Poor eyesight | 52.4 | 21.4 | 26.2 |
| Second language learners | 85.7 | 5.6 | 8.7 |
| Lack of exposure to reading resources | 84.9 | 4.0 | 11.1 |
| Lack of facilities for early childhood development (ECD) | 84.0 | 10.1 | 5.9 |

About half (52.4%) of the respondents agreed that poor eyesight was a common reading problem experienced by learners, while 85.7% of the respondents indicated that second language learners experienced reading problems. According to Lessing and Mahabeer (2007), learners who are instructed in a language different from their mother tongue, will experience problems in reading. Further, 84.9% of the respondents agreed that a lack of exposure to reading resources influenced common reading problems and 84% agreed that the lack of facilities for early childhood development had an effect on learners' reading performance. Even though health problems in terms of poor sight (52.4%) ranked as the lowest of factors, it is alarming that more than half of the respondents have identified this as a reason. The other factors had a higher prevalence.

Eighty-five percent of the respondents indicated that second language learners' lack of resources and lack of facilities for ECD are problems relating to reading literacy. According to Weeks (2008), there were discrepancies in the supplies for schools, particularly for black learners. Inequalities in the accessibility of educational support services and the lack of available teaching support and equipment were also apparent. According to the ECD policy (DoE 2001), by 2010 all learners that entered grade 1 should have participated in an accredited Reception year programme. The insufficient financial support of ECD services for Black communities (mostly rural), has impacted on learning.

Corrective Teaching

With respect to corrective teaching and time spent in class, Table 3 illustrates the common trends.

Table 3: Common trends relating to corrective teaching

| <i>The following are the common trends relating to corrective teaching</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Learners require corrective teaching in reading | 92.6 | 6.6 | 0.8 |
| Learners do not receive corrective teaching in reading because of time constraints | 81.8 | 6.6 | 11.6 |
| Most of the reading time in class is spent on teaching the entire class | 84.4 | 6.3 | 9.3 |

Ninety- two percent of respondents indicated that learners required corrective teaching in reading and 81.8% of respondents agreed that learners are unable to receive corrective teaching in reading because of time constraints. According to the South African DoE (2008a), every educator in the intermediate phase is envisaged to devote at least 30 minutes daily on reading for enjoyment. Eighty- four percent of the respondents indicated that the entire class is taught reading at the same time. There was a high percentage of agreement with the statements as indicated in Table 3. In The Netherlands, learners who experience reading difficulties are assisted by support educators (Twist et al. 2006). Learners in England and New Zealand also have such support (Twist et al. 2006). With inclusive education, learners in South Africa with special needs and severe reading problems are incorporated into the mainstream and educators do not have the assistance of support educators (DoE 2001).

Time Allocation for Specific Areas of Instruction

Respondents were asked to indicate whether there was adequate allocation of time for each of the following specific areas of instruction: reading; speaking; literature and language skills.

- ♦ 39.1% of the respondents agreed that adequate time is given for reading instruction, while 51.9% disagreed.

- ♦ 52.9% of the respondents agreed that adequate time was allocated for speaking as an area of instruction, while 33.9% disagreed.
- ♦ 39.3% of the respondents agreed that adequate time was given to literature studies, while 45.6% disagreed.
- ♦ 53.4% of the respondents agreed that sufficient time was allocated to the development of language skills, while 33.3% disagreed.

The time allocated for English is usually 5 hours in schools, which is insufficient to successfully teach the Learning Outcomes that underpin reading (DoE 2011). The majority response (51.9%) that time allocated for reading is inadequate, supports this contention.

Resources for Learners with Reading Difficulty

The findings regarding the various reading resources available to assist learners with reading difficulties are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Resources available to assist learners who have reading difficulties

| <i>The following reading resources are available to assist learners with reading difficulties</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|--|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| A reading specialist is available in my classroom to assist such learners | 7.7 | 3.5 | 88.8 |
| A reading specialist is available to conduct remedial reading with such learners | 14.1 | 3.2 | 82.7 |
| An educator aide is available in my classroom | 7.7 | 3.4 | 88.9 |
| Other professionals (for example, teaching specialists, speech therapists) are available to assist such learners | 10.1 | 4.8 | 85.1 |

Table 4 shows that there are strong levels of disagreement with each of the statements relating to the availability of resources. Educators are presumed to have adequate resources to warrant the effective teaching of reading. On average, 86.4% of respondents indicated that there are no specialist personnel or resources available for learners with reading difficulties. The respondents in the survey indicated that a majority of the learners required corrective teach-

ing in reading and that learners are unable to receive corrective teaching in reading. The lack of assistance from support educators contributes to such situation.

Strategies Used To Improve Reading Literacy

The findings relating to strategies during instruction time that are used to improve reading are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Strategies used during reading instruction

| <i>The following strategies are used during instruction time</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
|---|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Read aloud to the learners | 95.0 | 1.0 | 4.0 |
| Allow learners to read aloud to the class | 97.8 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| Allow learners to read silently | 89.4 | 5.0 | 5.6 |
| Allow learners to read books of their own choice | 81.6 | 6.6 | 11.7 |
| Revise skimming, scanning, self-monitoring methods | 66.8 | 11.9 | 21.2 |
| Teach learning strategies involving decoding sounds and words | 71.6 | 9.0 | 19.4 |
| Teach learners new vocabulary | 93.4 | 2.6 | 4.0 |
| Assist learners to understand new vocabulary in the text they are reading | 97.6 | 1.3 | 1.1 |

The majority (95%) of respondents applied “read aloud” as a reading strategy and 70.5% of the respondents allowed learners to read aloud in small groups. Further, 89.4% of the respondents allowed learners to read silently and 81.6% of the respondents agreed that they allowed learners to read books of their own choice as a reading strategy. Also, 66.8% of the respondents applied skimming, scanning and self-monitoring methods, while 71.6% of the respondents taught learning strategies involving decoding sounds. Most (93.4%) of the respondents taught learners new vocabulary during reading instruction time and 97.6% agreed that they assisted learners with learning new vocabulary from the text they were reading. The overall pattern is one of agreement with the statements. The findings show that there is very strong agreement for four statements (first two and last two), strong agreement for statements 4 and 5, and agreement levels between 66% and 72% for the re-

maining three statements. The strategies used in the teaching of reading are applied by most educators. According to the Foundations for Learning (DoE 2008b), “read aloud”, “shared reading” and “guided reading” by the educator and learner, form the components of a reading programme. “Guided reading” constitutes a significant segment of the reading process.

As far as using “scaffolding” as a strategy is concerned, although 63.2% of the respondents indicated that the method of scaffolding is important to improve reading, 49.7% indicated that scaffolding is not applied during reading. A quarter (24.9%) of the respondents agreed that scaffolding is important and they are employing the technique.

Chronbach’s alpha is a measure of reliability. Reliability is computed by taking several measurements on the same subjects. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as acceptable. The overall reliability score of 0.906 for the study indicates a high degree of acceptability, consistent scoring for the different categories for this study.

CONCLUSION

The National Teacher Education Audit indicated many educators in South Africa were under qualified or unqualified. The findings of the study showed that there were a significant number of educators that received no training in teaching reading and a majority of the respondents indicated that they did not attend workshops in teaching reading regularly. These difficulties impact on the quality of reading. Many of the respondents in the study encounter between 41-60 learners in their classes. Large class sizes are another factor that impacts on reading literacy. Resources for reading are limited. The socio-economic factors that impacted on reading were: lack of early childhood development, health care, unemployment, housing, and to an extent, single parents. Owing to time constraints and the lack of specialised personnel, corrective/remedial teaching is limited. A significant number of respondents agreed that learners experienced difficulties comprehending the language of instruction. The findings also revealed that second language learners experienced reading problems. Since English is not the most frequently spoken language at home, the acquisi-

tion, mastery and learning of a second language is a reality for the majority of learners in South Africa.

As far as strategies to improve the quality of intermediate phase reading is concerned, the majority of respondents prefer teaching reading as a whole class activity, whilst a significant number of the respondents indicated that learners of the same abilities are grouped together for the teaching of reading. "Read aloud" as a reading strategy was very popular and a significant number of the respondents allowed learners to read aloud in small groups. The majority of respondents allowed learners to read silently. Several of the respondents agreed that they allowed learners to read books of their own choice as a reading strategy. A significant number of the respondents applied skimming, scanning and self-monitoring methods, while the majority of the respondents taught learning strategies involving decoding sounds and words. "Guided reading" constituted a significant segment of the reading process. The respondents also agreed that the method of scaffolding is important, but it is not being applied during reading.

The findings of the study also revealed that many learners required corrective/remedial teaching in reading but were unable to receive corrective teaching because of time constraints. Furthermore, professional remedial educators who work with learners away from the classroom and resources for learners with reading difficulties, are not available in South African schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On Factors that Contribute to Poor Reading Abilities

It is necessary to ensure that learners in the entry level of school are taught in the mother tongue and gradually introduced to English. Library books written in isiZulu with English translations are needed at the intermediate phase of schooling to improve learners' ability to read and comprehend. There is a need for the training of more grade R and foundation phase educators. More educators need to be trained to close the gap that exists in the education system. Reading resources and facilities for early childhood development need to be easily accessible.

On Strategies to Improve Reading Literacy in the Primary Schools

Educators should develop learners who are critical thinkers; use the compulsory reading time constructively; teach aspects of language in context; work in close collaboration with foundation phase educators; meet informally weekly to discuss common difficulties; use visual aids, DVD's and CD's; engage learners in meaningful homework exercises, develop learners comprehension ability; and engage in 'read aloud' more often. Further, educators should regularly attend workshops on literacy education, the use of remedial educators should be introduced; and extra time should be allotted for literacy learning. Parents need to play an active role in education by monitoring homework of learners seriously; engaging in adult literacy courses if necessary; liaising with educators to discuss learners' progress and to act as volunteers at schools. School management teams can assist by ensuring that learners are taught at entry level in the mother tongue; make reading resources in isiZulu available; diagnose reading problems of learners; liaise with DoE to find solutions to reading problems; use retired educators for remedial teaching; and monitor educators regularly.

In conclusion, there is a dire need in South Africa for the nation's learners to experience success. There is lack of concern in some schools to reach the most challenged learners and this, coupled with the dissatisfaction over the slow pace of change, creates a sense of urgency. Hence, there is an expectation on researchers and organizations to mediate in various ways to overcome impediments to academic success. Learners believe this ethical order and mould their future experiences around this, thereby creating a small professional elite group and a larger group of unskilled manual workers. As a result of the failure of educational outcomes to keep in line with social and economic changes in South Africa, the centre of attention has been directed to literacy in schools. It is therefore important to teach learners reading skills explicitly at any stage of the curriculum as opposed to leaving learners to acquire these skills tacitly. Skilled readers recognise words by visually processing letter patterns, while learners with reading difficulty frequently struggle to sound out words letter-by-letter. Experienced readers read with meaning whereas learners with read-

ing difficulty cannot read with comprehension. Therefore, in order for all learners to be able to react to the environment they live in, reading and understanding what is read, is fundamental to their progress in life in general.

The most important constituent of high quality education is literacy. Without the ability to read, people are deprived of access to important information that impact on their lives. Illiteracy in South Africa is an ingrained social phenomenon and is threatening the transformation and development of the country. It is crucial that reading literacy in primary schools in the country be improved.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to intermediate phase educators in the North Durban region of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Grade 7 educators that teach reading at a primary school were excluded from the study.

FUTURE STUDIES

Areas for further research include: a study reviewing the time allocation for reading in the intermediate phase; a study to review the teaching methods used by educators from both foundation and intermediate phases; a study of high-performing schools in low-income areas/poor social background areas to provide solutions for schools that perform poorly; and a comparative study with other countries where schools are experiencing similar reading difficulties, with a view to sharing best practice.

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