

## Factors within the School That Affect the Teaching of English Reading in the Foundation Phase (FP) Grade 3

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**ABSTRACT** The paper aims to unearth the factors within the school that affect the teaching of English literacy (reading) in the Foundation Phase Grade 3 from the teachers' voices and as observed in the classroom. The study employed a qualitative approach in which semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from four purposively selected Foundation Phase teachers. Teachers were also observed teaching English reading in class. The findings show lack of/and non-availability of teaching and learning resources, relevance of teacher training to the teaching of English, lack of the most essential reading skills and the knowledge relevant for teaching reading. It was observed that classrooms were overcrowded and as such teachers could not pay individual attention. The paper concludes by suggesting that teachers should be provided with the necessary resources and be equipped with skills necessary to teach reading.

### INTRODUCTION

According to the South African Constitution (1996), basic literacy is the right of every citizen. It is the ability to read and write in at least one language. The skills of reading and writing are taught simultaneously to children when they begin formal education which is referred to as the Foundation Phase (Grade R – 3) in South Africa. It is the researchers' belief that in order to write, one should master reading, hence this paper focuses only on reading, with specific reference to English.

Reading is a very complex and multifaceted process, which in many instances is not easily mastered by the majority of learners worldwide (Riley 2006:79). The ability to read is a foundation that paves the way for further learning. Therefore, it is a fact that the reading skill plays an enormous role in the life of each and every individual hence it is viewed by Anderson (1999), Granville (2000), Grabe and Stoller (2002), Pretorius (2002 cited by Cekiso 2007) as a skill essential to success in all academic areas. The acquisition of the reading skill can truly be traced in the Foundation Phase because that is where a

strong foundation for reading is laid. If teachers in that level fail to impart the skill, the learner may never be in a position to master the skill.

Studies conducted by the department of education and international bodies reveal poor performance of learners in reading at their grade levels (Department of Education 2001). In addition, the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEC) (2005) confirmed that reading ability among South African school learners is low with South Africa having the lowest average score in English reading comprehension in the Southern African Development Community. This is confirmed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) done in 2006 which revealed that South Africa's score was the lowest of the participating countries (TEACH South Africa 2010: 2). Again, the national report on the results of 1000 Grade 3 learners in 2008 confirmed the same. This is the case, despite, argue Tebekana and Cishe (2015), numerous attempts made by the South African department of education to improve reading and thus reading failure continues to exist irrespective of various strategies used in the classroom by teachers. This has been the case also in other parts of the world. For instance, in Iran, Akbari (2015) argues that although teaching English starts at the age of 11, students still have problems to communicate in English in the real contexts. In Ethiopia as well, Harris (2015) stated that English has also been taught as a subject from Grade 1 since 1994.

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The reading research that is available in South Africa indicates that in general learner's reading skills are poorly developed. According to the SACMEQ report, one major source of concern in South African Education is in those learners of the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) who have difficulty in language literacy, especially reading. Mawasha (1976: 58) elaborates further as he states that more than half of the learners who wrote the literacy test struggled to read at the expected levels of this Grade. He adds that, historically, English, as a medium of instruction was important in black education and that 'English forms a link between Africa and the rest of the world and contains the complex heritage of European civilization'. One wonders if the same can be said about English in the current South African context.

The Khanyisa programme (2005:2) reported that 'reading is a major tool for enabling all other learning areas'. As a result, learners who cannot read have little hope in later grades, unless urgent and effective intervention takes place. Cekiso (2007: 107) supported these views by stating that there is no skill more essential to succeed in school than reading and when this skill is not acquired, the blame is often directed to the lower primary teachers for not preparing learners well enough in the Foundation Phase (Grade 3), where these learners have to learn to read in both their mother tongue and English. TEACH South Africa (2010) added that the reading problem is one of the main problems faced by many schools in South Africa. From the research report it is clear that the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase is not effective, with the result that many young learners attending South African schools find it difficult to read.

Two key resources needed to teach reading in the Foundation phase are good teachers and appropriate reading materials. To support this, De Witt (2008) argues that other resources like charts, newspapers and books are almost always absent in the classrooms, making the physical classroom environment not conducive to maintaining a well-resourced class. Pretorius and Matchet (2004) argue that teaching reading in this type of environment becomes challenging. In the South African context, rural schools often lack one or both of these resources. In disadvantaged and poor schools, lack of additional financial support is virtually impossible for teachers to make the classroom conducive to reading

and as a result teachers rely on textbook readers to teach reading. This problem of the shortage of resources is evident in other parts like Nigeria, where, according to Fatiloro (2015) there is lack of basic facilities and equipment which hinders effective teaching and learning of English language. Most schools in Nigeria do not have a language laboratory and well equipped libraries.

According to Singh, Foundation Phase teachers should be trained in the skills required to teach children how to read. Training would also assist teachers understand how to create a stimulating classroom environment that will make learners have more interest in reading.

Since the rural environment is not a rich source of reading and visual stimuli, the teacher has a great role to play in nurturing young readers. Akbari (2015) opines that there is no environment conducive for learning English in Iran which implies that English has no role outside the classroom. In addition to the non-conducive environment, modern technology as well is not well established in rural and poor areas. There are inadequate resources such as textbooks, audio-visual aids, electricity, furniture, magazines and newspapers, educational radios, well-equipped libraries and other magazines from the home and surrounding environment. This calls for Foundation Phase teachers to play a crucial role in the lives of rural poor children. Their skills and abilities to empower their learners in reading, argues Prinsloo and Stein (2005: 82) forms the foundation of the future learning of these learners. Every teacher at school should ensure that he/she has sufficient resources to ensure the effective teaching and learning of reading. This could include wall charts, textbook, workbooks and any other resources that may be collected at school to promote reading. Another contributing factor in the teaching and learning declares Akbari (2015), is overcrowding in classes which is seen as a challenge since students cannot practice English in order to become proficient and communicate in the language. Practising the language increases the listening and speaking skills. In an overcrowded class there can be no group work which is essential in reading. Group work encourages activity in a classroom. Donald et al. (2002) added that the shortage of classrooms compels many schools to overstretch their classroom capacity and resources, thereby over burdening teachers with too many learners beyond the acceptable teach-

er-learner ratio. Chisholm (2000) also added that in large classes there is high teacher-learner ratio which results in teachers being unable to attend to learner's individual learning needs and cannot practice reading successfully.

### Statement of the Problem

Researchers as teachers have observed with great concern that teachers have problems in teaching reading and that learners have difficulty in reading. This affects their academic performance. Learners are unable to read their books independently and as a result they are reluctant to read. Teachers have to explain reading instructions several times because learners cannot understand. This has motivated the researchers to undertake a study looking into factors within the school that affect the teaching of English reading.

### Objectives

Based on the above problem statement the objective was to investigate factors within the school that affect the teaching of English reading in Grade 3 and sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the school factors that affect the teaching of English reading and learning in Grade 3?
2. How does the school environment affect the teaching of English reading in Grade 3?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A case study was deemed the most appropriate for this investigation. Barbie (2001:281) define a case study as an intensive or in-depth investigation of a single unit and Leedy (2005: 135) argue that a case study may be specially suitable for learning more about little-known or poorly understood situation. It enables one to have an in-depth investigation of small number of cases and may focus on one instance (or a few instances) of a particular phenomenon with a view of providing an in-depth account of events, relationships and experiences occurring in that particular instance (Denscombe 2003). This was a case study of Grade 3 learners in one district of the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

Qualitative approach informed the investigation. Thompson (1994: 14) defines qualitative research as a collection of approaches to inquiry, all of which rely on verbal, visual, tactile and auditory data. The characteristics of qualitative research are that it describes and analyses people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions. The researchers used the qualitative approach as it is an inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings (McMillan and Schumacher 2006: 395).

Both semi-structured interviews and observations were used to generate the qualitative data. The interview was used to understand the participants' views and enter into their perspective to find out things like feelings, memories and interpretations that could not be observed or discovered in other ways (Patton 1997: 80). Face to face interviews with teachers in their natural settings were recorded with their permission. Also, teachers were observed teaching reading in class in order to supplement data generated through interviews.

### Participants

This study was restricted to a population of Grade 3 teachers in the Foundation Phase of selected schools in Circuit 3 in the Mthatha Education District. Mthatha District is in the King Sabata Dalindyebo Municipality (KSD) which is the part of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. There are ten (10) primary schools from which the four schools were selected in Circuit 3. Four Grade 3 teachers drawn from the four purposefully selected schools were used. In purposive sampling, subjects to participate are identified (Cohen et al. 2007). When a purposive sample has been used, findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. Its purpose is to gain deeper understanding of specific type. Thus, the findings presented in this paper cannot be generalised.

### Data Analysis

The data were grouped into themes and sub-themes and coded for easy referencing (Gay and Airasian 2000: 242). In coding the data, units and categories were formed and patterns were identified. The researchers listened to the voice

recorder and organized the data by breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what was important to be learnt. The goal was to create descriptive, multidimensional categories, which formed a preliminary framework for analysis. Words or phrases or events that appeared to be similar were grouped into the same category. Findings presented in the following section are presented according to the two research questions which were:

3. What are the school factors that affect the teaching of English reading in Grade 3?
4. How does the school environment affect the teaching of English reading in Grade 3?

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Provincial Department of Education in the Eastern Cape, the Mthatha education district and the principals of the sampled schools were approached for permission to undertake the study. Participants consented to participating and completed the informed consent forms. All information received from them remained confidential and anonymous. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished. Fortunately, no one withdrew from the study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

As indicated above, findings were presented under the two research questions. Findings pertaining to school factors affecting the teaching of English reading and learning revealed lack of and/or non-availability of resources, relevance of teacher training to the Foundation Phase and lack of essential reading skill and knowledge relevant for teaching reading. Observation showed that classrooms were overcrowded and as a result there could be no effective teaching of reading.

### **School Factors that Affect the Teaching of English Reading and Learning in Grade 3**

Factors that affect the teaching of English reading are presented and discussed below.

### ***Lack of and/or Non-availability of Resources***

Blame for poor reading skill was laid on non-availability and insufficient resources. Many participating teachers blamed insufficient learning material as a contributing factor to English reading failure. Another startling revelation from the participants was that there is absolutely a huge lack of resources like reading books and libraries in the schools where learners attend and communities from which they live. Most of them stated that in most rural schools there were no libraries and this affected the learners' reading ability. According to the participants the problem is compounded by the fact that most of the children do not have reading materials at home. This was evident from the comments like the following:

*In our school there is no library it is in town and learners struggle with [transport] monies to visit library. They also struggle to buy school needs e.g. story books, magazines, etc." (Interviewee 1).*

It also came out that the lack of resources hinders the academic development of learners and as a result learners suffer from reading inability. One participant argued that to develop a reading habit in learners, they must be given access to a wide range of attractive and relevant reading material. This is in support of Fatiloro (2015) opines that the shortage of resources in Nigeria hinders effective teaching and learning of English language as most schools in Nigeria do not have a language laboratory and well equipped libraries. The implication is that those learners who do not have libraries in their schools are deprived of the opportunity to spend their time in libraries after school.

It also became clear that the non-availability of reading material also meant that learners suffered from reading inability as they had no story books and old magazines to read to other learners in class. Such learners do not know how to handle books because they have not been exposed to reading. This finding concurs with De Witt's (2008) view that other resource like charts, newspapers, books are not available in the classrooms thus making the physical environment not conducive to maintaining a well-resourced class and as such teaching reading in this type of environment becomes challenging.

### ***Relevance of Teacher Training to Foundation Phase***

It also transpired that teachers had not been trained to teach in the Foundation Phase as two of them stated:

*I was trained for Senior Teachers Diploma (STD) to teach at Senior Phase, I never had training for Foundation Phase (FP) but due to lack of teachers I was given this class[to teach] (Interviewee 1).*

*I did Senior Teachers Diploma (STD) but now I find myself in Foundation Phase (FP). I have no training and I am confused in teaching this class because I am displaced (Interviewee 3).*

Only few teachers were trained for Primary Teachers Diploma (PTD) or any other relevant qualification to teach in the Foundation Phase. Most of them had not been trained to teach in the Foundation Phase so they were not well equipped to teach English reading in Grade 3. They acknowledged that they lacked profound knowledge and skills in teaching English reading in the FP. Teachers also claimed that they were generally not sufficiently trained to teach in the Foundation Phase, let alone English reading. They also stated that workshops were not organised to train them on how to teach English reading. As learners demonstrated poor reading skills, teachers were confronted with lack of knowledge of how to solve this problem. Therefore, in addition to lack of educational in-service programmes, a teacher struggling to teach reading skills had to see what to do. It also transpired that training offered to teachers was insufficient for teachers teaching reading in the Foundation Phase. This is confirmed by Singh (2009) who argues that FP teachers should be trained in the required skills to teach learners how to read. Therefore, a well-trained teacher is a necessity that would enable schools to function effectively.

### ***Lack of Essential Reading Skill and Knowledge Relevant for Teaching Reading***

Findings revealed that the common scholastic factors which influence the acquisition of reading are teachers who lack essential reading skill and knowledge relevant for teaching reading. This is coupled with the insufficient knowledge of English as a medium of instruction. Teachers still needed to be acquainted with skills

to teach English reading in the FP and that could not be achieved in few days of training.

As the learners demonstrate poor reading skills, teachers claimed to be confronted with lack of knowledge to help with this problem. They claimed that they lacked in-service programmes and workshops to improve reading skills. The teachers' responses showed that they did not take part nor attend workshops on reading skills advancements. Also, attendance of workshop with no link to teaching reading skills provides no solution to the English reading problem. Teachers on the other side believe that pre-service training would equip them to deal with most learning difficulties. Therefore, in all, teachers showed that they lacked knowledge for teaching English reading in the Foundation Phase.

### ***School Environment Affects the Teaching of English Reading in Grade 3***

***When the researchers visited the classrooms in all the four schools the classrooms were overcrowded***

#### *Overcrowded Classrooms*

The problem of overcrowding in the Foundation Phase is rife as teachers find it difficult to pay attention to individual learners. Participants in the study commented on how difficult it was to teach English reading in overcrowded classrooms, this being the result of the high teacher-learner ratios that are not in line with the ratio prescribed by the government. Due to the shortage of classrooms, teachers had no choice but to teach learners that were more than the expected teacher-learner ratio. This confirms the view by Donald et al. (2002) who argued that the shortage of classrooms compels many schools to overstretch their classroom capacity and resources, thereby over burdening teachers with too many learners beyond the acceptable teacher-learner ratio. There were high numbers (ranging between 55 and 70) of learners gathered in one class. Chisholm (2000) opines that large classes and high teacher-learner ratio in the Foundation Phase result in teachers being unable to attend to learner's individual learning needs in order to practice reading successful. In addition, teachers may be unable to cope with such numbers and this may result to poor performance of learners. It was also observed that

classroom arrangement was not conducive as teachers could not even form groups in their classrooms due to the shortage of space and that could affect their learning. Their sitting arrangement was not proper; learners were five in a desk.

The overcrowding discussed here was also evident in Iran as Akbari (2015) opines that there is no environment conducive for learning English in Iran which implies that English has no role outside the classroom

### CONCLUSION

The study explored factors within the school that affect the teaching of English literacy (reading) in the Foundation Phase. It can be concluded that the existence of the factors as presented here adversely affect the teaching of reading in school.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Appropriate intervention and support programmes should be put in place by the Department of Basic Education as this would provide the support that has been seen lacking. As the findings reveal that teachers lack basic skills to teach reading they should be empowered on reading strategies that could be imparted to the learners. This was also recommended by all teachers during the interviews. In addition, teachers could also be assisted in developing improved and more appropriate reading materials for their learners. By so doing the lack of/and non-availability of resources will be addressed. Finally, the Department of Basic Education should supply schools with well-equipped Resource Centres and Libraries and where not feasible mobile libraries should be supplied.

### LIMITATIONS

The study was not conducted in all the schools of the Mthatha education district but in only four schools. In these schools four foundation phase teachers were used. These were not all the teachers teaching in the foundation phase but only those teaching English literacy in Grade 3. As a result, findings presented in this paper cannot be generalised.

### FUTURE STUDIES

Future studies that could investigate other aspects of literacy within the same grade could be worthwhile and such studies could be comparative and be conducted in other districts as well. It would also be of benefit to have studies conducted in Grade 2 as it is the one that prepares learners for Grade 3. Likewise, a study in Grade 4 would be beneficial to investigate the extent to which learners from Grade 3 have been prepared for the intermediate phase.

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