



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 30, 2022

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



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An investigation into the Challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy: A case of five primary schools, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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Abstract. The teaching of reading appears to be a global concern, especially in South Africa. Various reading programmes have been implemented as attempts to address the above challenge. The National Reading Strategy is one of those programmes that have been implemented in the Foundation Phase. The problem of learners not able to read still exists, despite the implementation of the above strategy. Approximately 50% of the learners experiences reading difficulty when they transit from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate phase. This may be attributed to various factors of which this study see to address.. The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of Dikgale area, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study followed a qualitative research approach where a cross-sectional design was adopted. Ten (10) teachers from five mainstream primary schools were requested to take part in the study. Data was collected through interviews, observations and document analysis. Data was analysed with a thematic content analysis, which involved identifying common themes that emerge from the data collected. The preliminary findings were as follows: (a) Lack of teacher training in the form of workshops on National Reading Strategy (b) The problem encountered in the interpretation of the National Reading Guidelines(c) The attitude towards the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The study recommends that fully developed workshops be implemented.

Keywords. Reading, National Reading Strategy, Literacy, Curriculum and Attitudes

Introduction

The problem of learners in primary schools not being able to read in English as a First Additional language is of a global concern and of South Africa in Particular.(Ralenala, 2005; Boakye, 2016; Molotja, 2017,PIRLS,2017). Teachers in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases in South African Primary schools are faced with the challenge of addressing the illiteracy level. In an attempt to address the problem as stated, the government has implemented a variety of programmes in workshopping and empowering educators. The National Reading Strategy is one of them. Teachers found themselves overwhelmed with the responsibility of implementing

the National Reading Strategy in the beginners' classes (Maswangaye, 2010). Singh (2011) duly expresses these challenges, when he states that the teachers' level of confidence in teaching reading and implementing the National Reading Strategy in the Foundation Phase is very low.. Singh' study revealed that in the absence of workshops and professional development programmes, there was a conflict between teachers' existing knowledge and the requirements of the National Reading Strategy. In addition, Mensah (2017) conducted a study in the UMkhanyakude District of South Africa and found that experience in years and qualifications had an impact on the teachers' experiences with the National Reading Strategy. On the same breath, teachers' age was found to have no relationship with their experiences with the National Reading Strategy. The implementation of the National Reading Strategy had some challenges as educators lacked proper skills to interpret the National Reading Guidelines. This is despite numerous efforts to offer workshops and other strategies to alleviate the problem. Therefore, the question that we wanted to answer was: why do teachers continue to feel inadequately prepared to implement the National Reading Strategy in the Foundation Phase classrooms, despite the National Reading Guidelines, which were distributed to all primary schools.

The question was considered important because the findings may add value to the limited knowledge that exists on the challenges that are faced by the Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. More specifically, our study focussed on Foundation Phase teachers who held the responsibility of implementing the National Reading Strategy in the first years of the learners in the primary school. The Foundation Phase teachers are regarded as the most important role players and conveyor-belt of learning in the education of the young children as they lay proper foundation in the primary schools. So far, no study has been conducted on the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in South African primary schools. A study by Singh (2011) focused on the Foundation Phase educators' knowledge and attitudes towards the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

This article focused on the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy since the introduction of the policy in 2008. The National Department of Education (2011) attempted to address the reading problem by instituting changes through the National Reading Strategy, since a considerable large number of Foundation Phase learners in primary schools were found to be struggling to read in their Home Language and in English as their First Additional Language (EFAL) (Magona, 2012). According to Brown (2007:119), the National Reading Strategy is defined as the specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information.

Theoretical Framework

The Cultural-Historical Psychology or the Socio-Cultural Theory

To understand the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy, the researchers used the the Socio-Cultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978). The theory focused on the development of people and how the society contributes towards their social being. Therefore, Vygotsky's theory can best be demonstrated where major tenets of his work can be found.

According to this theory, every function in the child's cultural development appears more than once, on the social level and later on the individual level. Firstly, between the people, and secondly between the inside of the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and the formulation of concepts. This implies that all the higher functions

originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978) In addition, theory came up with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Vygotsky referred to as the distance between the actual development of the child as determined by the problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under the guidance or in collaboration with more peers. According to this theory the ZPD is found to be one factor which determines the learner's level of understanding in the classroom and inputs which the teachers have to bring for the meaningful reading to take place.

The success of the implementation of the National Reading Strategy therefore, is highly dependent on effective integration between the teachers, parents, community and all the relevant stakeholders that are involved in the education of their learners. The researchers found the theory to be useful, since the process of reading begins at home, and proceeds further to the primary schools where learners are taught how to read and write in different languages. Given this background, the researchers thought that sound implementation strategies on the National Reading should involve different stakeholders at different levels as the child grows.

Methodology

The study applied the qualitative research method, where a cross-sectional case study design was adopted to understand the views of the Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The approach was considered appropriate because it allowed the researchers to obtain teachers' own perspectives and experiences with the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The approach was also found to be relevant and appropriate, since it affords the teachers an opportunity to express experiences regarding the implementation of the National Reading Strategy than it can be with other approaches. In addition, teachers may provide an in-depth understanding, challenges and attitudes towards the National Reading Strategy (Henning, 2004)

Selection of the participants

Ten teachers (5 males and 5 females) were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The teachers were selected on the basis of their experience in the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase classes in the Primary schools of Dikgale area, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Data Collection

Data collection served as a way to collect information to answer the researchers' questions in order to defend conclusions and recommendations, which are based on our findings. In-depth interviews, observations and document analysis were used to collect data. The first instrument of data collection were interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to provide us with the opportunity to ask individual questions, and to refrain from limiting the field of enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The researchers deemed it fit to use interviews because they provided with the opportunity to obtain first-hand information from the participants. The interview sessions were made up of introductory, follow-up and probing questions.

The second method of data collection we used was observation. Observations were made and field notes were taken. Observations sessions provided the researchers with opportunities to obtain data from the natural setting, that is, the classroom situation. Observation, therefore, entails a systematic noting and recording of events, behaviour, and objects in a natural classroom situation as selected for this study.

The third method of data collection used was document analysis. This method of data collection entails looking deeply into the relevant documents, which, according to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith (2004), can serve as valuable sources of information. The researchers obtained the ideas and different experiences regarding the constraints and possibilities of the implementation of the National Reading Strategy, from teachers in South African schools. WeIt was found that this method is relevant and it gave us access to valuable sources to support the findings obtained through the other two methods of data collection, namely, the interviews and observations.

Data analysis

Data was analysed through content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique for systematically describing written, spoken or visual communication. Many content analyses involve media - print (newspapers, magazines), television, video, movies and the Internet, which is a method for summarizing any form of content by counting different aspects of the content.. For the purpose of this study, data was analysed throughout the data collection process, and we constantly reflected on impressions, relationships and connections of teachers in the Foundation Phase. The process of data analysis has been described as an “intellectual struggle” with the raw data collected (Bassey, 2002).The verbatim accounts of the interviews were transcribed, different categories relating to research topics formed, and information from interviews, observations and document analysis analysed and arranged according to themes.

Findings

Findings from Interviews

Five findings emerged from our data analysis. The *first* finding revolved around the understanding of what the National Reading Strategy is. Foundation Phase teachers showed a narrow understanding of the National Reading Strategy. This was discovered when the majority of the teachers gave different definitions on the National Reading Strategy. This suggests that nothing has been done in terms of explaining exactly the meaning of National Reading Strategy to the Foundation Phase teachers in South African Primary schools. One participant had the following to say that “*The National Reading Strategy is all about to encourage teachers to study with the University of Limpopo and he further indicated that the National Reading Strategy helps us to know the role we play must end up in the classroom*”. Another participant added by indicating “*the National Reading Strategy gives learners more exposure to their additional language. There are different types of reading that learners should learn, for example shared reading strategy, which focuses on language and literacy development*”. The participant further continued by saying that “*Group guided reading may be organised and teachers may work with each group once or twice per week*”. Another participant had the following to say: “*that the National Reading Strategy can be defined as a plan of action that can be used nationally in the teaching of reading. That is, Different methods are applied to see which one can become the best in teaching reading. He continued further by indicating that methods are searched which can be the best for all kinds of learners in South African Primary schools, so that they may become independent readers for the future. Lastly, the participant indicated that it is there to make learners achieve better in their learning*”.

From the different definitions given on what the National Reading Strategy is, it implies that much has not been done in terms of teaching the teachers exactly what the National Reading Strategy means. This was not amazing since the exact and correct definition was not given; this implies that teachers do not read since the definition is provided in the National

Reading Strategy guidelines. One of the participants added by saying that; *“the National Reading Strategy promote reading among learners but inform and support teachers who are responsible for teaching learners to read”*. He continued by showing that the *National Reading Strategy ensure that teachers learn reading in the classroom, assess, diagnose and measure the extent to which learners understand reading and monitor their progress to provide remedial action to those with reading difficulties*. Despite these different challenges in terms of how to define the National Reading Strategy, we found that these teachers were not ready for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

The **second** finding was that Foundation Phase teachers were not satisfied that they were doing the right things and therefore not confident that they were rightfully implementing the National Reading Strategy. For example, one participant said the following about the type of training or support administered by the Department of Education in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy they attended:

“we attended EGRA workshop where they were teaching us about reading strategies. They explained to us that the National Reading Strategy is a tool that is used to assess reading, and we were given letters, words and paragraphs. In return, we implemented it in our schools”.

The other participants had the following to say that:

“The Department of Education sent people to come and have workshops within one-day period once per quarter on Reading and literacy.” He continued to say that the facilitators focused on different reading strategies and the training was fruitful.

Contrary to the positive comments above, one participants from the same area had the following to say that: *“we never attended any form of workshop on National Reading Strategy, this is the first time we hear about that (laughing)”*.

This finding is not a surprise because the lack of training on the implementation of the National Reading Strategy remains a nightmare (Singh, 2011; Phajane, 2012; Mzimane & Mantlana, 2016). As a result, Foundation Phase teachers find themselves in a predicament concerning the rightful manner of implementing the policy without proper training. In addition to that another participant had the following to say that:

“I don’t think of any training done by the Department of Education, in actual fact I don’t know what is meant by the National Reading Strategy and I don’t remember being trained for this policy”.

The third finding was on the experiences that teachers observed after the introduction of the National Reading Strategy in the Primary schools, in terms of learners’ achievements. One of the participants had the following to say: *“In South Africa, there is a great challenge of learners who are unable to read, He continued further by saying that: “according to me, as teachers the introduction of this policy will be beneficial to both teachers and learners if enough support is given to us. It becomes a serious challenge to us because we struggle a lot in making the teaching of reading effective as we don’t know what to do.”* In addition had the following to say that: *“ No, these learners memorise the words and cannot write them on their own, that is, learners can speak the words but finds it difficult to construct a meaningful sentence. Even though the DoE has introduced different strategies on Reading and finally as teachers, we are confused. Again, The issue of learning barriers are sometimes impacting negatively on children’s learning, for example; child headed families, abuse etc. The participant continued further to indicate that Age cohort has a negative impact on reading because learners are promoted to the next grade even if they lack reading skills, knowledge and understanding of the content. Parents do not play an important role because some of them are illiterate”*. This appears to have severe contributions on the performance of the learners largely. In addition,

another participant said: *“Yes, there is a great improvement in schools because of the introduction of the Reading Strategy. Now learners are trying to sound the letters correctly. She continued to say that we are trying on these five main components of teaching reading, that is, **phonics, word recognition, spelling, reading comprehension and skills**. Even though it becomes difficult for the learners to read with understanding, they are able to identify the beginning, the middle and the end of the sentence”*. The other participant agreed by stating the following:

“the introduction of the National Reading Strategy really brought changes in the performance of the learners because learners in South Africa have a huge reading problem and some are able to read on their own”.

The fourth finding was on the kind of challenges teachers’ experience, and what helped them in the process? One participant had the following to say:

“Learners with barriers of learning just keep quite during reading lessons. Their behaviour presents difficulties on the side of the teachers, because we do not know how to help such learners. In addition, she said that the strategy will help the shy learners to improve. Another participant had the following to say:

“the challenges that we have are overcrowding classes, and this becomes difficult to group learners in classes of 50-60 learners and we do not have enough space. We are trying to implement the strategy, but it takes us 5-10 minutes to arrange the learners in groups for the teaching of reading. We are learning the hard way and time allocated for reading is insufficient, with the type of learners in the 21st century who are not willing to learn”.

The other observation we have made is that overcrowding in South African primary schools is a common factor. One of the participants who had the following to say that confirmed this: *“Reading challenges, overcrowding in the classrooms, Ohhhhhh it makes me sick, that is the main reason why I fail to do shared reading”*. Another participant had the following to say: *“Learners can speak the words, but cannot write full sentences, and this is a serious challenge. She further continued to say that learners do read without understanding and they cannot spell the words correctly, as they use dialects from ethnic groups, for example, Batlokwa, Balobedu, etc. As a result of the already mentioned challenges, reading assessment will determine which learners are at risk in terms of reading difficulties and definitely requires additional support. The most important thing that I have learned is that as teachers we observed that as learners grow mentally, intellectually and socially, parental interaction becomes significant for the improvement of children’s learning”*.

The **fifth** finding was on the strategies for effective reading for the Foundation Phase learners. *One of the participants had to say that: “the learners should be encouraged to read on daily basis at school, and at home parental involvement be encouraged to a great extent”*. In addition, another participant had the following to say: *“more time should be given regarding reading, and teachers should be trained from time to time in order to put them on par in terms of the international benchmarks”*. On the other hand one of the participants had the following to say that: *“leaners should be grouped in their levels of ability, those with reading difficulty should be given phonic to start with, and the use of pictures could help in teaching learners with learning barriers. On the same breath, one of the participants had the following to say that: “many books should be made available to the learners so that they can read on their own at home and at school during intervals. She continued to say that reading competitions may serve as the other strategies that are relevant for the improvement of reading, and this may encourage learners to develop a habit of reading once they know that they may be rewarded”*.

Findings from observations

In this article, large volume of data was collected through the use of observations. This data collection tool helped us to clearly read and understand the behaviour and attitudes of Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers, by observing their daily activities and practices on Reading. The main aim of conducting observations was to gain knowledge insight into the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. In so doing, we had the opportunity to collect in-depth and authentic data in order to understand the culture and the practices of the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of South Africa.

Data was also collected through classroom observation (the duration of classroom observation was 40 minutes) during which lessons were recorded focusing on instructional methods, teacher's attitude, experiences, behaviour and the use of language when presenting their lessons and the availability of resources such as teaching media that are relevant and necessary for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. Field notes were taken, using an observation guide which was specifically designed for this study. We observed that teachers only make use of two medium of instruction when presenting their lessons that is in Home Language and English as First Additional Language (EFAL). This was the case in all five participating schools, and the principles of **shared reading, phonemic awareness word awareness, syllable awareness, and alliteration** were not practiced in full.

Generally, the situation in the Foundation and Intermediate phase in the primary schools was found to be difficult concerning the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The researchers observed that teachers are working hard to improve the results on reading levels, but there exists a serious lack of support from the Department of Education in terms of the supply of resources. It was also observed that the performance in terms of reading has shown no improvements. Learners were packed in an overcrowded classroom of 70, and this impacted negatively on the teaching and learning processes, since teachers found it hard to control infants in terms of the teaching of reading, for example, noise making. The environment under-which the process of reading took place was found to be unbearable at all.

The reading practices normally lasted for 15 minutes, and the time allocated for reading could not accommodate all learners in one day. The researchers also observed the types of books the learners in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phase use for reading purpose were story books, poems, rhymes, plays and graphical texts which were found to be scarce. The researchers tried to establish whether learners did understand what they were reading about, it was observed that few learners would remember what they just read, but a considerable large number could not due to the lack of books. It was observed that it becomes difficult for learners to read for enrichment because in some of the primary schools, there are no libraries were extra books that are not used can be stored for future use.

Findings emerged from the document analysis

Document analysis plays a key role in any qualitative study. It helps to provide researchers with the data on what other people have written about the phenomenon under study throughout the world. In this article, the researchers analysed the availability of documents related to the National Reading Strategy, such as the National Reading Guidelines, CAPS documents, and the records of work to ensure provision of remedial actions to be undertaken. In addition, photographs of different amenities and activities in the schools were taken and the researchers further reviewed documents, such as referral notes, the curriculum, individualised educational plan (IEP), and assessment reports in order to obtain information about the

challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

This finding clearly shows that there is poor coordination for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools because of limited support and resources that are needed for this important programme

Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges experienced by the Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of Limpopo Province, South Africa. In this study, it was revealed that a considerably large number of teachers had no exposure in terms of teaching reading in the Foundation and Intermediate phase. This implies that no form of professional training programme was instituted since the introduction of the National Reading Strategy in 2009, and the Department of Education fails to make a follow-up regarding the progress of the strategy. The results of the study are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Theron & Nel, 2005) Maswann, 2010; Singh, 2010; Ngubane, 2011 Mhlongo 2012 ;; Mather, 2012;; revealed that the process of training was ineffective and therefore resulted in the teachers feeling a sense of inadequacy to implement the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Singh(2011) in Kwa Zulu Natal Province . Over a period of ten (10) years since the introduction of the National Reading Strategy, still not enough has been done in terms of training all teachers for reading practices.

From our observations, the findings revealed that improper distribution of resources is a challenge for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in South African primary schools, especially those situated in the typical rural areas. Nor has enough been done in terms of preparing the Foundation and intermediate phase teachers for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

From our document analysis section, it became evident that the entire Department of Education has failed to supply all schools with the necessary documents, which are required for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of South Africa. If supplied, no interpretation regarding the document was made, since it was indicative by the teachers that they were made to interpret the National Reading guidelines on their own.

Given the fact that there is a shortage in terms of workshops for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should develop ways and means through-which Foundation and Intermediate phase teachers could be professionally developed for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the country.

Implications for the Education System

The study established that teachers were experiencing serious challenges in respect of being professionally prepared for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The study indicated that not enough time was allocated for training the teachers for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy, as most teachers in the Foundation Phase and Intermediate phases in the primary schools in Limpopo Province did not receive any form of formal training for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in their pre-service education. They felt that justice had not been done in terms of preparing them for this new programme. The study may sensitise policy-makers to consider the prerequisite time factor when approving any policy in the legislature or in the portfolio committees. It is understood

that the DoE in Limpopo Province, South Africa has failed to provide the necessary support for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The study recommends that more programmes be implemented in the development of educators in trying to address the problem of reading and writing in the primary schools. Programmes should not only be implemented, but there must be thorough monitoring of such.

Conclusion

The study has pointed out the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools, Limpopo Province, South Africa. It would appear that the on-going professional development programmes are ignored and disregarded as outlined in the study. We therefore recommend that on-going professional development programmes be introduced for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy in South African primary schools,

We therefore recommend that the Department of Education should take full responsibility in preparing their spade-workers for the effective implementation of any policy.

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