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Foundation Phase teachers' challenges in teaching reading in South Africa

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The reading ability of learners in the Foundation Phase through the development of reading proficiency at an early age could determine learning. With the study reported on here I intended to explore the challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers in teaching reading. I used a qualitative approach and employed an explanatory case study design. The study was guided by the social constructivist theory of German psychologist, Max Wertheimer. Twelve participants ($n = 12$) were purposively selected from 4 schools in the Vhembe district in the Limpopo province, South Africa. These were learners who performed poorly in reading. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. I recorded that the Foundation Phase teachers experienced various challenges, namely overcrowded classrooms, a lack of resources and support from the school management team and parents, and poor knowledge of reading instruction. I further recorded that teachers' inability to administer assessment tasks, as prescribed by the Department of Education, might be addressed through workshops, which might also alert teachers to the value of pre-reading and setting learning outcomes before reading lessons.

Keywords: challenges; Foundation Phase teachers; social constructivism; teaching reading proficiency

Introduction

Solid reading ability in the Foundation Phase could determine typical learning by developing proficiency in reading texts from an early age. Thus, in the South African context, the Foundation Phase refers to the first 4 years of schooling (Grades R–3), where the medium of instruction is the learners' home language (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014). In the Foundation Phase, typical learning is essential because learners work in a way suggested to them by their teachers, use the materials provided to them, and rely on the knowledge that their teacher possess to develop their reading proficiency. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) defines reading as the ability to comprehend and be able to use the written form required, interpreted, and valued by the individual to construct meaning (Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse & Zimmerman, 2011). Literacy also assists people to participate fully in the socio-economic world (Barakat, 2016). Similar to other emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, Mexico, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other African countries, South Africa is trying to reduce learner drop-out rates by improving access to schooling. However, all emerging economies face the same challenges associated with improving the quality of schooling, namely slow economic growth, unemployment, low literacy levels, poor infrastructure, and a lack of books and reading materials that learners require to achieve in education (Barakat, 2016; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Based on this, South Africa's education ministry has made many efforts to reform the education system. For example, the introduction of the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) has ensured that teachers are well informed in terms of the areas that need urgent attention and that they should be attended to by the school management team with the help of the DBE. Implementation of the National Reading Strategy and the Teaching Reading in the Early Grades interventions has ensured development in learners' reading levels. However, in 2010, the reading performance of Foundation Phase learners in rural areas was not satisfactory, as it remained at the very bottom of the reading scale (DBE, 2010). Some of the reasons why reading in rural areas is not satisfactory is that there is a high level of teacher error in the methods and approaches presented in reading instruction for beginners, a lack of reading materials, and overcrowding (Blevins, 2020, DBE, Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2008; De Witt & Lessing, 2016; Rule & Land, 2017). Furthermore, rural areas are plagued by poverty and illiteracy.

According to the DBE (2010), learners in rural areas have serious challenges in the form of poor reading proficiency, which hampers their performance when they reach higher grades. In principle, ANAs have aimed to explore learners' performance in different languages – the main aim being to improve learners' reading proficiency. Researchers contend that despite the results of these assessments, learners in the Foundation Phase still cannot read. Reading proficiency is an essential skill that embodies individual learners' growth and performance in school. It enables learners to develop or enhance their abilities from a lower level to a higher level at a reasonable speed (National Accessible Reading Assessment Projects, 2006). Scholars suggest that access to knowledge acquired from different subjects may develop individuals' comprehension and communication skills, thus enhancing mastery of various other skills (Shippen, Houchins, Crites, Derzis & Patterson, 2010). Interestingly, Yaghoobi and Razmjoo (2016) revealed that learners who navigate technology perform much better in terms of reading. Such learners are exposed to different reading materials. Unfortunately, in rural areas access to technology is still a challenge. In Pakistan, computers play a significant role in enhancing reading proficiencies such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and comprehension in different contexts (Bhatti, 2013; Yaghoobi & Razmjoo, 2016).

Reading proficiency can also be defined as a knowledge of phonetic symbols or a comprehension of speech sounds, and fluency skills needed in reading, as well as decoding unfamiliar words (National Accessible Reading Assessment Projects, 2006). It is considered sufficient knowledge that fosters reading comprehension and develops and maintains reading motivation, including other aspects of reading that are relatively consistent with word recognition (Cabardo, 2015). The aim of the study was to explore the Foundation Phase teachers' challenges in teaching reading in South Africa.

Literature Review

I used DBE documents, both international and national articles, case-study journal articles, research journal articles, and meta-analyses to explore the challenges faced by teachers. In recent years there has been an increasing interest in reading in the Foundation Phase (Blevins, 2020; DBE, 2020; De Witt & Lessing, 2016; Küçükler & Kodal, 2019; National Accessible Reading Assessment Projects, 2006). The teaching of reading is overshadowed by multiple challenges that hinder the smooth acquisition of reading abilities by learners. Therefore, supporting teachers in teaching reading is pertinent in resolving Foundation Phase learners' reading deficiency, which has existed for decades. Teachers encounter many challenges when teaching reading and developing reading proficiency of learners in South African schools. Most rural schools are still performing poorly in the literacy learning area in the Foundation Phase. That is why I explored the challenges faced by rural-based Foundation Phase teachers when teaching reading. A Gestaltist approach, or social constructivism, forms the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The literature suggests that unresolved challenges negatively influencing the teaching of reading can result in readers experiencing poor literacy development (De Witt & Lessing, 2016; Izquierdo Castillo & Jiménez Bonilla, 2014; Jansen, 2013; Klapwijk, 2015) and learners experiencing reading deficiencies (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). It has been proven that poor support from parents, teachers, and the DBE can negatively affect the teaching of reading (Bao, Qu, Zhang & Hogan, 2020; DBE, 2008; De Witt & Lessing, 2016). The value of reading permeates the curriculum and is not restricted to formal reading lessons (Van Staden & Bosker, 2014). During the interviews it was found that teachers faced numerous challenges regarding the teaching of reading. These included a lack of resources and support from the school management team (SMT), overcrowded classrooms, and teachers' poor knowledge of reading instruction. Developing reading proficiency assists learners to

demonstrate comprehension because it facilitates understanding when reading (DBE, 2020).

Overcrowded classrooms

Küçükler and Kodal (2019) indicate that overcrowded classrooms can affect the teaching of reading or comprehension at school, as most classrooms accommodate between 40 and 50 learners per Foundation Phase class. When classrooms are overcrowded, learners tend to become unruly, and no effective disciplinary measures are taken. Hence, learners are not motivated to read, neither are they interested in listening, largely because of disruptive elements in the class (Matsepe, Maluleke & Cross, 2019; West & Meier, 2020). Stakeholders' negative attitudes towards education in classroom provision can adversely affect the teaching of reading at schools (Kalitanyi & Visser, 2010). The undesirable impacts of overcrowding in classrooms include ineffectual teaching by teachers who cannot accurately assess learners to determine whether their reading abilities are developing, and a general lack of engagement and poor performance among learners (Marais, 2016).

Reading resources

A lack of resources hinders the teaching of reading and development of reading proficiency at schools. Limited reading materials, and a lack of access to libraries in rural areas might lead to teachers having poor reading competencies which will impinge on the learners' reading abilities (Mojapelo & Dube, 2014). This is because books serve as guides to learners on how to learn to read (Mohammed & Amponsah, 2018; Mojapelo & Dube, 2014). The provision of libraries in rural schools are pivotal in aiding teachers to develop learners' reading proficiencies during reading lessons. It is interesting to note that the Bill and Melinda Gates project has donated millions of rands to build libraries in some South African provinces (Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture, RSA, 2020) however, in the rural Vhembe district, the absence, or lack, of a library or reading materials impeded the development of reading. Libraries are useful as promotional displays in libraries can entice learners, drawing them into the reading experience. The presence of reading materials for both learners and teachers in the Foundation Phase plays a significant role in enriching reading lessons and learners' reading proficiency. Scholars believe that a text-rich environment can strengthen the teaching of reading by Foundation Phase teachers in the classroom; a print-rich environment is regarded as the second teacher, and learners' skills can be improved through such an environment (Clement, Kent & Duursma, 2021; DBE, 2008; Reutzel & Cooter, 2012; Singh, 2009). A print-rich environment supports the teaching of reading for

learners, as it improves learners' reading ability through enriching their vocabulary and understanding of particular texts, as well as explaining what they would have read.

The school management team (SMT)

The lack of support from the SMT can adversely affect the teaching of reading and the development of comprehension or reading proficiency at school. Developing learners' reading proficiency does not rely solely on teachers, but on the parents and the SMT as well. The principal or the SMT is held accountable for the reading programmes in their school, and they should take the necessary steps to ensure effective implementation of such programmes (DBE, 2008). Such programmes include reading campaigns, which embrace Drop Everything And Read, and Reading to Learn, which can benefit Foundation Phase learners. This can be done when classes are divided, and at different times to mitigate the lack of reading material and overcrowding of classes. The reading programme, for example, introduces a readiness programme for learners who cannot read. When a Foundation Phase teacher is satisfied that learners are ready to read, the teacher will introduce them to the breakthrough programme, which is the next phase in moulding a learner. The SMT should also clarify what it is that they want to achieve in implementing such a programme, especially in advancing the reading proficiencies of Foundation Phase learners. Consequently, the SMT should promote reading across the curriculum by involving each teacher in reading programmes. The SMT should also promote reading for enjoyment by encouraging learners to borrow books from the library every week. The SMT cannot do this without the help of stakeholders who are passionate about the development of reading abilities. It is the SMT's responsibility to organise staff training, award prizes to successful readers, and support the teaching of reading, among other things. The question is whether it is possible to implement these measures in rural schools.

Teachers' poor knowledge of reading instruction

Teachers' lack of knowledge of reading instruction can negatively affect the teaching of reading at schools. Researchers (DBE, 2008; De Witt & Lessing, 2016; Rule & Land, 2017) acknowledge that many South African teachers display poor knowledge regarding the teaching of reading. Foundation Phase teachers probably use only one teaching method at a time, which may not suit the learning styles of all learners (DBE, 2008). Rule and Land (2017) found that teachers used limited reading strategies to teach reading. Besides this shortcoming, teachers often do not know how to influence learners to read, whether inside or outside the classroom. In fact, very little should be expected from teachers who are already grappling

with the challenges inhibiting the teaching of reading skills. Marais and Wessels, (2020) report that foundation phase teachers do not always understand the stipulations of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) English Home Language document 2011 and as a result utilise the guidelines partially because they do not know how to interpret them when teaching reading. Many South African teachers teach reading using limited strategies, such as the alphabet, and bottom-up reading strategies, for example, using phonics. While teachers may have been implementing the strategies stipulated in the CAPS document, they were only employing those strategies that they understood or were familiar with. At the same time, teachers were failing to teach reading with understanding, and they did not understand the detail of how to develop learners' reading abilities (Adamu, Tsiga & Zuilkowski, 2022; DBE, 2008; Rule & Land, 2017). With this study I intended to present different ways of solving teachers' challenges when teaching reading.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the work of the German psychologist, Max Wertheimer, and adopted a Gestaltist approach. Eysenck and Keane (2015) explain that a Gestaltist approach emphasises the importance of productive thinking as the highest level of problem-solving, which seeks to restructure problems to solve them. Researchers and authors have found that teachers face many problems, for instance, poor pronunciation and a lack of proficiency and reading comprehension, when teaching learners to read (Marais, 2016; OECD, 2019; Otache, 2020). Every Foundation Phase teacher should be equipped with problem-solving skills. Through productive thinking, the Foundation Phase teacher can restructure the problems of overcrowded classrooms, poor knowledge of reading instruction, and how resources can be utilised effectively to develop learners' reading proficiencies. The main aim of using the Gestaltist approach is to understand how problems can be solved in developing rural Foundation Phase learners (Eysenck & Keane, 2015). One of the key tenets of the Gestaltist approach that helps explain how teachers teach reading against all odds in the Foundation Phase is that teachers teach better when they exercise insightful problem-solving, followed by shouts of "wow" or "hooray." Such excitement is displayed because the teacher would have come up with a new way of solving problems. Gestaltists also believe that insight involves a specific process. The challenges affecting teaching can be ameliorated when certain steps are followed by the teacher who intends to work in a space free of challenges. Therefore, this lens emphasises the role of problem-solving in assisting teachers in teaching

in an environment where they can aid the learner to develop reading abilities (Wessels, 2010). This study was also guided by a perspective of the Gestaltist theory which is related to the teacher's involvement in productive thinking and reproductive thinking, thus creating a conducive teaching and learning environment. The Gestaltist approach is about solving the challenges that Foundation Phase teachers face in the development of learners' reading abilities (Seng, Parsons, Hinson & Sardo-Brown, 2003; Wessels, 2010). When teachers fail to resolve the challenges they face when teaching reading, they often have limited ability to inculcate reading skills in learners during genuine reading.

Research Methodology and Research Design

In this study I adopted a qualitative approach, as qualitative studies are essentially descriptive, allowing participants to present reality from their perspective (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I applied for ethical clearance to be able to gather the information. I used an explanatory case study research design, because my study dealt in depth and comprehensively with the problem under investigation, rather than explaining it (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2011). I was of the opinion that a case study design was useful as it is conducive to capturing teachers' challenges in teaching reading. The philosophical assumptions of this design help produce the desired data for an investigation of the challenges faced by teachers when teaching reading in the Foundation Phase in rural schools. An interpretive paradigm was used because the main purpose of the study was to understand the undiluted multiple realities that Foundation Phase teachers experience when teaching reading (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Some of the challenges experienced by the teachers are presented hereafter. Most schools in rural areas had poor network connectivity and most communities did not have libraries. In some of the schools there were learners from different ethnic groups, however the majority of learners spoke Tshivenda as home language. Most people living in the area were unemployed, and they lived below the poverty line. The parents were still young and some were still attending school themselves. They depended mostly on government grants for survival. In spite of these challenges, most of the teachers were well educated with Bachelor of Education (BEd) degrees and teaching experiences ranging from 10 to 30 years. Most of the schools in the district were quartile three school that were financially supported by the DBE.

Sampling

The participants were purposively and conveniently selected from schools in the Vhembe district, specifically the Luvuvhu circuit, in the Limpopo

province, South Africa. These schools were located in rural areas where there was a mix of foreign learners who came from neighbouring countries and those who spoke one of the South African languages, for example Sepedi and Xitsonga. The participants were selected from these schools based on proximity and accessibility (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). Twelve qualified Foundation Phase teachers ($n = 12$) who spoke Tshivenda as vernacular were selected from four schools (School 1: $n = 3$; School 2: $n = 3$; School 3: $n = 3$; School 4: $n = 3$) from the Vhembe district in Limpopo. All 12 participants were female teachers. Two of the participants were heads of department (HoDs), whose numerous duties included monitoring teachers' work.

Data Collection

I employed semi-structured interviews as the instrument for data collection from Tshivenda-speaking Foundation Phase teachers. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on how the participants approached the questions. I chose semi-structured interviews for their flexibility. This instrument was advantageous, as I was able to follow up on participants' narratives (Bryman, 2012). This was done in order to better understand the responses from the 12 participants by asking open-ended questions. It allowed me to probe for more information (De Vos et al., 2011). Participants in this study, therefore, engaged effectively during the interviews. Open-ended questions were used during the interviews with participants being required to answer in their own words, expressing their personal views. The participants were interviewed in their natural environment, namely the school where they were teaching. I used the interview question to enquire about the challenges that the teachers experienced when teaching reading.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis, which involved making sense of what the participants had said, and identifying patterns and comprehending their meanings (Whittaker, 2012). Data gathered from the interviews were transcribed verbatim in separate transcripts. It was paramount to ensure that the data collected addressed the topic and gathered the most important information. All irrelevant data were kept aside from the important data. This was done to manage and control the data relevant to the topic. To manage the relevant data, I followed a certain protocol. Firstly, I identified keywords and coded them (they were prevalent in all the schools), namely "overcrowding", "poor knowledge", "lack of support", and "lack of resources." I then categorised the responses according to the codes mentioned above, after which the following

subthemes were developed: overcrowded classrooms, lack of reading resources, poor knowledge of teaching and assessing reading, insufficient assistance by the SMT, and a lack of assistance from parents. Finally, the data and codes were transcribed, and the following themes were identified: the influence of overcrowding on teaching reading and the influence of the lack of reading resources, the poor knowledge of teaching and assessing reading, the lack of support from the SMT, and the lack of parental support on teaching reading. The significance of the study is to advocate different ways of solving teachers' challenges when teaching reading.

Ethical Considerations

I ensured that all ethical obligations were fulfilled. This included applying for ethical clearance and guaranteeing participants' confidentiality, privacy, and protection. Complete information about all aspects of the proposed study that concerned potential participants was provided in a consent form. I used the participants' responses and detailed descriptions of the study's context verbatim to certify transferability. To ensure the credibility of the results, I engaged with the data collected from the interviews. Reliability refers to the consistency of the information. Therefore, the data collected from the semi-structured interviews were revealed to the Foundation Phase educators, so that they could confirm the reliability of the transcripts, and thereafter, if need be, modifications could be made to the transcripts.

Results

Overcrowded Classrooms

The result from this study indicate that an overcrowded classroom can adversely affect the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase. All 12 teachers reported that it was not always feasible to effectively teach reading to enhance the reading proficiencies of learners in an environment where the classrooms were crowded. According to the participants, the actual class sizes ranged from 45 to 50 learners. By contrast, the standard class size is 35 learners. In some classes, the learners shared chairs, and the teachers were rendered immobile. Participant 3 from School A confirmed the above:

I can confirm that here in Grade 3, the issue of overcrowding is affecting the way we teach our learners. Some learners are ill-disciplined. It is hard to teach them in such an overcrowded environment. It is also difficult to move around the classroom. I'm confused and do not know exactly what to do.

Based on what Participant 3 contributed, a poor teacher-learner ratio negatively impacts the teaching of reading. The Foundation Phase teachers could only manage to give individual attention to a few learners, yet individual attention is imperative in this phase. Reading strategies can only be

implemented in a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Furthermore, based on what is mentioned above, it is clear that the overcrowded classrooms negatively impacted the implementation of the dedicated reading lessons, as Foundation Phase learners need individual attention to master reading. This might have led to a lack of discipline and poor reading ability, as it became difficult to implement the different reading strategies in an overcrowded classroom.

Lack of Reading Resources

All participants indicated a lack of reading materials as they solely depended on readers. The results indicate that a lack of reading resources can be considered a challenge for teachers in teaching reading to Foundation Phase learners. This deficiency included the lack of a library, the lack of teaching and reading materials, and the lack of printed materials. Related to the lack of reading resources was a lack of library facilities, which was of great concern. The participants' responses showed that many schools in the Luvuvhu circuit lacked library facilities. It is known that the presence of a library motivates learners to read. When conducting the interviews with the respondents, it was clear that the lack of a school library in all four schools hampered Foundation Phase learners' development of reading skills. Participant 1 from School A commented as follows:

I think lack of a library significantly impedes the teaching of reading in schools. I am grappling with problems such as lack of learning materials and poor reading infrastructures, like libraries, computers, and the internet, leading to re. A shortage of reading material and supportive reading material is a challenge that must be addressed.

The results indicate that libraries are tools that can be used by Foundation Phase teachers to assist them to motivate learners to read. Participant 1 from School A was of the opinion that reading instruction in rural schools was hampered by a lack of libraries. Teachers may continue to fail in the teaching of reading if nothing is done in this regard

Shortage of resources

During the interviews all the teachers asserted that the shortage of resources negatively impacted reading instruction in rural schools. The Foundation Phase teachers were concerned about the scarcity of up-to-date materials. Participant 2 from School D confirmed the above. She cited a lack of reading materials, and she indicated that some materials were damaged. She also mentioned that they could not use posters as learners had to move from one class to another in which process the posters were damaged. Some learners could hardly identify the letters of the alphabet in alphabet tables because they had not been exposed

to such materials. She further mentioned that the classroom environment negatively impacted reading strategies, owing to the absence of television, library, newspapers, and magazines. A lack of reading materials, such as reading books and media (television), caused problems as reading materials enliven reading lessons. Furthermore, when there are no reading materials, learners tend to lose concentration.

Lack of printed materials

The study revealed that a lack of printed materials hampers the teaching of reading at schools. The teachers lamented their unattractive classrooms, which did not appeal to their learners due to the lack of supportive pictures in the classroom. When printed materials are available, and Foundation Phase learners are exposed to them in class, this will contribute to their development of reading skills. Participant 1 from School A said the following:

Sir, let's be honest and stop this blaming game. This classroom environment, on its own, does not appeal to learners. There are no attractive pictures, believe me, sir, nothing, nothing, and nothing. Precisely, there are no good reading materials. The fact that we are so isolated here in the rural area renders us forgotten.

The above shows that many rural school classrooms lack printed materials, and this can negatively impact learners' reading proficiencies. Printed materials are teachers in their own right. This means that from printed materials, learners can learn reading anywhere, or in the absence of a teacher.

Poor Knowledge of Reading Instruction

When the teachers were asked about their knowledge of teaching instruction, nine of the participants were not very confident in their responses. They were even reluctant to answer the questions. Three of the participants indicated that they tried to improvise while teaching reading by using buddy reading. They finally indicated that their knowledge of teaching instruction was poor. Participant 2 said: *"I think the DBE does not do much to capacitate us. The only strategies that we are using are those which we generally know, which are called traditional reading strategies."*

The main issues that emerged during the interview sessions were that the teachers had poor knowledge of teaching instruction in the Foundation Phase and that the way they conducted assessment was a serious cause for concern. It was discouraging to note that most of the teachers hardly knew how to teach reading. Finally, during the interviews, some of the Foundation Phase teachers reported that they were not being capacitated by more conversant officials.

Poor Knowledge of Assessing Reading

It was very difficult for all the participants to answer questions on how they assessed learners' reading. I found that poor knowledge of assessing reading and reading proficiency among the Foundation Phase teachers posed a challenge in the teaching of reading. Assessment is essential in the teaching of reading. Such ability will help teachers implement teaching of reading at schools. Participant 11 from School D said: *"I think the DBE does not do much to capacitate us. We know only a few strategies of teaching reading. Hence, our knowledge is limited."*

Participant 10 from School D said: *"We are still struggling to assess our learners. We do not even know better strategies of assessing reading in our school."* Based on the above statements, the teachers lacked knowledge of teaching reading, as well as the knowledge required to assess their learners' reading. Participant 10 from School D asserted that ineffective assessment contributed to the learners' poor reading.

Lack of Support from the SMT

During the interviews, six participants mentioned that they did not receive support from the school management teams (SMTs) and that this challenge hampered their delivery of reading lessons. When the teachers were asked about the support rendered by the SMT, six participants were very reluctant to discuss the matter. One of the comments was that schools did not have money to buy reading materials, and most parents did not respond when their assistance was needed. Participant 3 from School A said: *"When you approach the office asking them to provide some teaching materials like TV [television] or call parents to discuss the challenges we are facing when teaching reading, it takes years for them to act."*

This statement reveals that the teachers were not supported by their SMTs, which is very discouraging.

Lack of Parental Support

The teachers asserted that all stakeholders should collaborate in the education of the learners. However, all participants indicated that there was no support from the parents since most of them were teenagers and still attended secondary education. They claimed that most of the learners were neglected and deprived of the necessary assistance regarding reading. The teachers raised concerns about parents failing to take responsibility for their children and did not read with them at home. Participant 4 from School A said: *"Some learners cannot read, and one of the contributing factors is that parents are not available to assist their children in reading. When we try inviting parents to school, they don't show up."*

Parents' contribution to the education of their children is vital. Education begins at home, and teachers need parents' support to help learners improve their educational outcomes.

Discussion

The results from the study show many challenges encountered by teachers in their attempts to teach reading and develop Foundation Phase learners' reading proficiencies. Social constructivism plays a decisive part in solving the problems hampering the teaching of reading in schools. Firstly, overcrowded classrooms posed a challenge for the Foundation Phase teachers, as they perceived it as the greatest obstacle hindering the teaching of reading. All the participants agreed that overcrowding made it virtually impossible to implement disciplinary measures, move among the learners, and develop reading proficiencies. This is consistent with the view of many researchers (Kalitanyi & Visser, 2010; Marais, 2016) who maintain that even in European and African countries, poor classroom provision leads to poor performance by Foundation Phase teachers. To solve the problem of overcrowding, teachers can use the highest level of problem-solving suggested by the Gestaltist approach theory (Pill & Hyndman, 2018). The participants mentioned the poor teacher-learner ratio as a factor contributing to overcrowding and ballooning class sizes (Küçükler & Kodak, 2019). It is the responsibility of the DBE to fast-track the provision of classrooms.

The second challenge was the lack of reading materials. I found that a lack of reading materials inhibited the teaching and learning of reading in the Foundation Phase. Many classrooms had a shortage of posters, which made the classrooms unattractive to the learners. The Foundation Phase teachers felt that they had been forgotten because they were in rural areas. I found that the factors contributing to a lack of reading materials in most schools were a lack of libraries and computers, which could help learners to download interesting reading material. The above result strongly confirms the findings of a study by Mojapelo and Dube (2014) who found that a lack of reading materials lead to learners' poor reading abilities. Using different reading materials relevant to the learners' level of cognitive development can increase their reading proficiency (Wessels, 2010).

Thirdly, teachers' struggles to teach and assess reading posed a great challenge. Gestalt Theory allows teachers to consider new or transformational approaches to teaching and assessing reading. Many of the participants indicated that it was challenging to implement assessments of reading strategies that they did not understand. Teaching reading was also reported to be a challenge. The teachers only knew the traditional strategies of teaching reading and did

not possess a deep knowledge of reading instruction. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by the DBE (2008), Desta (2020) and Rule and Land (2017), who maintain that most primary school teachers, in South Africa and other countries, do not have sufficient knowledge of reading instruction, which leads to learners' poor reading proficiencies. Poor knowledge of reading instruction leads to high levels of illiteracy and drop-out from school in many countries.

The fourth result was a lack of support from the parents. All the Foundation Phase teachers lamented the lack of parental support. Araújo and Costa (2015) and the DBE (2008) found that even in European countries, parents were unable to support their children in reading, because of their low socio-economic status. Parents' participation is essential because it has a definite impact on learners' ability to read. The lack of support from principals and parents hampered the advancement of learners' reading proficiencies. This finding confirms the findings of previous studies, which have reported that children who were assisted with reading at home performed better in school (Pandith, John, Bellon-Harn & Manchaiah, 2021).

Conclusion

I conclude that the challenges confronting Foundation Phase teachers in teaching reading exacerbate Foundation Phase learners' poor reading abilities. The disappointing reality is that most of the challenges reported here are not new, but the DBE does nothing to address them. The study was limited to one education circuit in a rural area of the Vhembe district in the Limpopo province. A similar study might be conducted in informal settlements in other provinces. It is believed that learners in rural areas cannot read because of teachers' inadequate knowledge of reading instruction. Compounding these challenges are problems including the lack of reading resources, poor support from parents and the SMT, and overcrowded classrooms. These problems cannot be resolved overnight, hence researchers need to develop new ways of resolving the problems that Foundation Phase teachers are facing. The DBE, as the driving force, should be responsible for supporting and enhancing learners' development of reading proficiencies. Therefore, it is essential for parents, teachers, and community members to work collaboratively to improve learners' reading proficiency. It is recommended that the DBE should foster the building of infrastructure and the distribution of reading resources to disadvantaged schools. I further recommend that workshops for teachers are conducted. Although the study was limited to the Vhembe district, the findings can be useful for other emerging economies facing similar challenges of teaching reading in the Foundation Phase.

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