

IMPROVING READING STRATEGIES AND ASSESSMENTS USED BY EDUCATORS TO ENHANCE LEARNER ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Veena Loopoo* and Robert J. Balfour
Faculty of Education, North-West University
* corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Learning to read is a crucial component of early education. Theorists have found a strong connection between reading skills and the level of academic and professional success enjoyed by an individual. The way an individual learns to read is crucial to achieving academic success; therefore, the methods used to teach reading need to be effective for optimal success.

A substantial body of research demonstrates that literacy is fundamental to success in the formal education system and in most cases, the principal site for learning to read and write is assumed to be the primary school, usually in the early years. While there are many perspectives and methods used at school level, teachers will only succeed when they teach explicit strategies to decode words and their meanings and comprehension instruction.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this article aimed to identify and explore teaching and assessment strategies employed by educators in Grade R at primary school level pertaining to the teaching of literacy. It emerged that although certain strategies do seem to promote greater acquisition of literacy, there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to using literacy to promote the likelihood of achieving academic success.

Keywords: literacy, foundation phase, reading assessment, reading strategies

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a basic skill for all academic subjects. Academic failure at school can sometimes be traced to inadequate reading skills (Levy, 2011). In formal schooling, much of the learning takes place in the form of reading from a chalkboard, textbook or media. Nel et al. (2005:89) and Gunning (2007:3) state that reading is ‘magical’ as it provides an opening to a vast world of information, fulfilment and enjoyment and that after having learnt to read a person is not the same. In light of this, identifying and exploring strategies for teaching reading to enhance academic success is something that ought not to be ignored in contemporary literature.

This article will focus on the current state of reading in South Africa with particular reference to the reading abilities of children in the Foundation phase of education. It will entail the problematic reading scenario in South Africa, which is a critical educational crisis.

Every year in South Africa, there is a public outcry over the low Grade 12 marks and poor pass rates of secondary school learners (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). The high failure rate suggests problems with their reading. Many of the learners apply at tertiary institutions after

passing matric, yet, due to their poor reading and English proficiency levels, they are poorly equipped to cope with academic demands at a tertiary level.

This article will apply both quantitative and qualitative research methods, combining the strengths of both methods, resulting in a good understanding of the research problem. The instruments to be used include diagnostic reading assessments of the learners, questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers.

The quantitative approach will comprise diagnostic reading assessments and questionnaires. The data obtained from the reading assessments and questionnaires will be analysed using statistical analysis to answer the main questions of the research. An important aspect of research methodology is the sampling method (Stratified Sampling method).

In essence, this article will discuss and recommend how learners with reading problems should be assisted because those who get off to a poor start rarely catch up. The above discussion shows that the inability to read is a critical challenge that can be addressed by focusing on the quality of the teaching of reading at Grade R level. The next section will discuss the current state of reading in South Africa.

THE CURRENT STATE OF READING IN SOUTH AFRICA

The problematic reading situation in Africa (South Africa included), constitutes a serious educational crisis (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016). These researchers tested the thresholds of ESL learners (8–12-year-olds) in South Africa and found that, instead of being able to read 90 words per minute correctly, they could only read 70 words per minute correctly.

There are several possible reasons for this: Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) is based on first language (L1) reading (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016) and the norms in English are based upon the capacity of students whose first language is English. Problems with reading at the most basic level are commonplace in South Africa (Goodman, & Goodman, 2012); consequently, the high failure rate suggests problems in learners' reading.

In 2001 and 2004, the Department of Education (DoE) conducted two national systemic evaluations to establish the literacy and numeracy levels in primary schools which revealed that 54% of Grade 3 learners were not on par regarding reading competency. These surveys showed low levels of reading ability across the country. The average score for reading and writing of 52,000 Grade 3 learners from 1,400, mainly urban schools, was 39% (Howie et al. 2008).

These statistics are possibly far worse in rural areas because of inadequate teaching and learning practices. Cultural obstacles also play an important role, with many communities not believing in education for women (DoE, 2008:4; Hugo et al., 2005:210-211).

In September 2012, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) conducted an Annual National Assessment (ANA) in Language and Mathematics for learners in Grades 1–6 and Grade 9. According to their diagnostic report, learners could not read with comprehension, wrote incoherent words and sentences, and could not make inferences from the given information in a text or spell frequently used words correctly (DoE, 2008:5). The North-West Province was the worst performing province in the country for literacy and numeracy levels in Grades 3, 6

and 9 despite being consistently among the top three provinces nationally in terms of the annual Grade 12 results.

Despite Grade 12 results appearing to improve in South Africa from 1994 to 2011, there has been widespread speculation as regards the credibility of the results and adequacy of teaching standards especially when learner performance is compared to international benchmarking assessments such as PIRLS. The current teaching system failed to meet the proper development of South African learners. Therefore, learner achievements in the lower grades assessment have been misleading for the South African students. More recently, the matric results of that region seem to indicate a more favourable set of circumstances as far as basic literacy is concerned (SABC News, 2016).

However, it must be acknowledged that the Matric results do not reflect the many students who drop out between Grades 1 and 12. It has been estimated that out of 100 pupils, 50 will progress to Grade 12 and 40 will get a South African university certified Grade 12 pass (Africa Check, 2014). The matric pass rate that meets the minimum eligibility requirements for a South African university is a big challenge compelling the KwaZulu-Natal provincial Department of Education to incorporate intervention activities in an attempt to address the challenges and help learners improve their performance (DoE, 2006). These included programmes such as LAIP (Learner Attainment Improvement programme) and QIDS-UP (Quality Improvement Development Support and Upliftment Programme).

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the foundation phase in the KwaZulu-Natal province and used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. In this way, the strengths of both approaches were combined, leading to a better understanding of the research problem (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003; Creswell, 2008). The research instruments were Cronbach's alpha to check the internal consistency reliability and *concurrent validity* was performed to measure the readings of children at Grade 1 to Grade 12 levels.

Validity can be understood as the method of data collection that measures what it is supposed to (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2005). To attain the assessments of the validity, several procedures have to be performed in the research (Knight & Trowler, 2002). Following the recommendations by Knight, the researcher conducted a substantive literature review that involved investigating and reviewing various sources of information to discuss and identify many aspects related to the research.

The researcher used three methods of data collection: reading assessments, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Furthermore, clear instructions on 'how to carry out the questionnaire' were provided, which enhanced the study's validity.

'Observer-caused effects' refer to effects that result from the presence of researchers or observers in a phenomenon or environment under study and which can influence the data, conversations and the behaviour of a respondent. The risk of the observer-caused effect increases when the responsibility attributed by the respondents to the research is such that it elicits them to alter their normal behaviour (McKinnon, 1998). To address this challenge, the questionnaire commenced with the clarification and statement of the role of the research in order to build trust and confidence between the respondents and researcher (Saunders et al.,

2012). Respondents were given enough time to complete the questionnaire without the presence of the researcher.

Reliability Analysis

The fundamental element in the evaluation of the instrument of measurement is reliability. Instruments can be surveys, questionnaires, attitude or skills tests, or conventional knowledge (Tavakol & Dennic, 2011). The instrument used in this study is related closely to its validity (Tavakol & Dennic, 2011). An instrument cannot be valid until it is reliable; instrument reliability does not rely on its validity. Techniques used for measurements of reliability include psychometric techniques such as item-response theory or generalisability like *inter-observer* or *inter-rater*, Cronbach's alpha, *parallel forms* and *test-retest statistic estimate*.

The most widely used technique is the Cronbach's alpha estimate. Cronbach's alpha test is simpler to use compared to other statistic estimates like retest-retest estimate since it needs only one test administration (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2010). Therefore, it is used to measure data reliability in this study.

The core factors identified were incorporated strategies, carrying out a reading lesson, availability of resources at school and techniques used to improve learner comprehension. The test statistic of Cronbach's alpha is employed to ascertain the internal data consistency among the factor items. On the statistic value basic, it can be said that the factor has the best ($\alpha > 0.9$) / good ($0.9 > \alpha > 0.8$) / acceptable ($0.8 > \alpha > 0.7$) / questionable ($0.7 > \alpha > 0.6$) / very poor ($0.6 > \alpha > 0.5$) / not acceptable ($0.5 < \alpha$) internal consistency within the items.

Factors such as reading strategies incorporated conducting a reading lesson, available resources at school have four items, and factor strategies/strategy employed to develop the reading comprehension skills of learners have three items. The values of Cronbach's for all the factors that are above 0.9 indicate that the internal data consistencies among the items are the best in all the factors.

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis refers to the statistical technique employed to describe variability among correlated, observed variables in terms of an unobserved lower number of variables known as factors (Child, 2010). It is possible, for instance, that the variation that exists in eight observed variables indicates the variations in two unobserved variables. Normally, factor analysis looks for joint variations and latent variables (unobserved) (Child, 2010). It enables researchers to look for concepts that are not measured easily by collapsing a huge number of variables into underlying factors. In statistical analysis, there are two kinds of factor analysis namely confirmatory factor analysis and exploratory factor analysis.

Research Instruments' Limitations

The questionnaire format makes it hard for a researcher to analyse difficult issues and opinions. Even though open-ended questions are employed, the depth of the answers that respondents provide can be more limited than any other technique used in research. This makes the collection of adequate information that is rich in detail and depth daunting; the questionnaire design format makes it difficult for the researcher to examine complicated

opinions and issues. Researchers have to hope that the questions asked mean the same to every respondent as it does to them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Clough and Nutbrown (2002:84) comment as follows about ethics in research: ' ... to understand, researchers must be more than technically competent. They must enter into chattered intimacies, open themselves to their subjects' feeling worlds, whether these worlds are congenial to them or repulsive. They must confront the duality of represented and experienced selves simultaneously, both conflicted, both real ... '. With respect to Nutbrown and Clough's view above, this researcher had to observe certain considerations, protections, rights and the welfare and feelings of the participants in planning the study.

The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed questions. The larger part of the questionnaire contained closed items that were easily quantified to indicate the educators' views on the teaching of reading at Grade R level. The open-ended questions elicited the educators' views on the benefits or limitations of such a process. This new information had important implications and might have been missed with completely closed-ended items (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003: 304).

Hence, data collection involved quantitative and qualitative data gathered both concurrently and sequentially. The integration of the quantitative and qualitative data in this article occurred between data analysis from one phase and data collection from a subsequent phase while analysing the data as well as when reporting the results.

Informed Autonomy and Consent

To obtain informed consent suggests that there need to be adequate protection of both the participant and the information disclosed by the participant as part of the study. It is for this reason that informed consent is part of an ethical clearance application as well as implementation process during the process of investigation. The possible disadvantages, advantages as well as the possible dangers to which certain respondents can be exposed, together with the researcher's credibility, must be disclosed to the potential subjects, or to their legal representatives, if under age (Strydom, 2005). In accordance with Strydom (2005), voluntary participation in this study was stressed and participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any time. Rosnow and Rosenthal (1999) describe such autonomy as independence. In the context of the ethics of research, autonomy denotes the rights of prospective subjects as well as subjects' ability to decide whether to get involved in the study, to opt out of the process of research or to continue participating in the study at any time.

Ethics deal with values and beliefs about what is wrong and right, improper or proper, bad or good (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006). These refer to the sets of principles that are suggested by a group or individual, are widely accepted subsequently, and provide behavioural expectations and rules about the correct conduct towards experimental respondents and subjects, learners, assistants, researchers, sponsors and employers (Strydom, 2005). The required permission was obtained from the educators and principals of the sample schools. The respective universities granted ethic clearance for the questionnaire.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Confidentiality implies that disclosures by the subjects are protected against unpermitted access. It refers to how to ensure the privacy of subjects as well as improving the data they offer (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1999). Schmacher and McMillan (2006) state that researchers have a responsibility to protect the confidences of individuals as well as to safeguard the participants' privacy.

In this study, the protection of the identities and privacy of the respondents and research sites was ensured. The participants and authorities at the research settings were assured that they could not be identified in print. Therefore, participants' names were eliminated to safeguard their identity and pseudonyms were employed in the study's report.

To maintain anonymity and confidentiality in the study, methods were put in place for safeguarding the data. A coding system that replaced the names of subjects with a sequence of numbers and letters was established, making it difficult for anyone to identify them. Only the researcher and their promotor were aware of and privy to the information provided.

The statistical methods and tools of data analysis utilised in this research study were Cronbach' alpha, percentage analysis and descriptive statistics which improved the reliability of the study. Questionnaires were administered to the Grade R educators, Grade R learners completed the diagnostic reading assessment and semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of the educators.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the North-West University and KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to conduct the research. Nutbrown and Clough (2002) argue that 'Researchers ought to be more than technically competent'; they have to enter into chattered intimacies, whether these worlds are repulsive or congenial to them and be freely open to the 'feeling' worlds of the subjects.

It therefore follows that in strategising this research, the researcher had to take into consideration and safeguard the rights, welfare and feelings of the participants, in agreement with the university's regulations and rules regarding research using humans as subjects. The ethical considerations that were taken into account during the research course are as follows: informed autonomy and consent, ethics, and confidentiality and anonymity.

Qualitative data was obtained by the use of open-ended questions in the educators' questionnaires and from the semi-structured interviews to discover how educators feel and think about the teaching of reading at Grade R level. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators where some responses to the questionnaire were incomplete, unanswered, or required substantiation. The educators' responses to the questionnaire were vital since they would permit the researcher to resolve whatever is imperative and significant to the respondents in this article.

The researcher carefully read through the questionnaires to choose common themes and views expressed by the respondents. As suggested by Walliman (2001:259), the researcher analysed themes that emanated from the data and established the importance of these themes, keeping in mind the interconnections between themes and their theoretical implications.

For this article, the quantitative approach was applied through the use of questionnaires and the diagnostic reading assessment. Data obtained from the questionnaires and reading assessments were analysed using statistical analysis to answer the research questions. The educators' responses to the questionnaires were analysed and correlated with the Grade R learners' reading assessment scores.

An essential aspect of research methodology is the sampling approach; stratified random sampling was used. The population size was too large for the research and a sample size was selected to represent the whole population. The sample was selected using a stratified random sampling method. Random samples were chosen from every stratum. The samples were utilised in analysing, categorising, evaluating and examining the data. Once samples had been collected and as a result, challenges in reading development had been identified, strategies for improving literacy were focused on. These are discussed in the next section.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT AS A STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING LITERACY

As seen in Figure 1, 61.54% of the educators, who were sampled from schools in South Africa in 2018 occasionally read the readers designed for children while 50% of the educators always read books on teaching reading and 66.7% of the educators read articles on reading strategies. All the educators always prefer to read current journals or research theses on teaching/reading. All of the educators use some form of reading material to strengthen their professional or personal development.

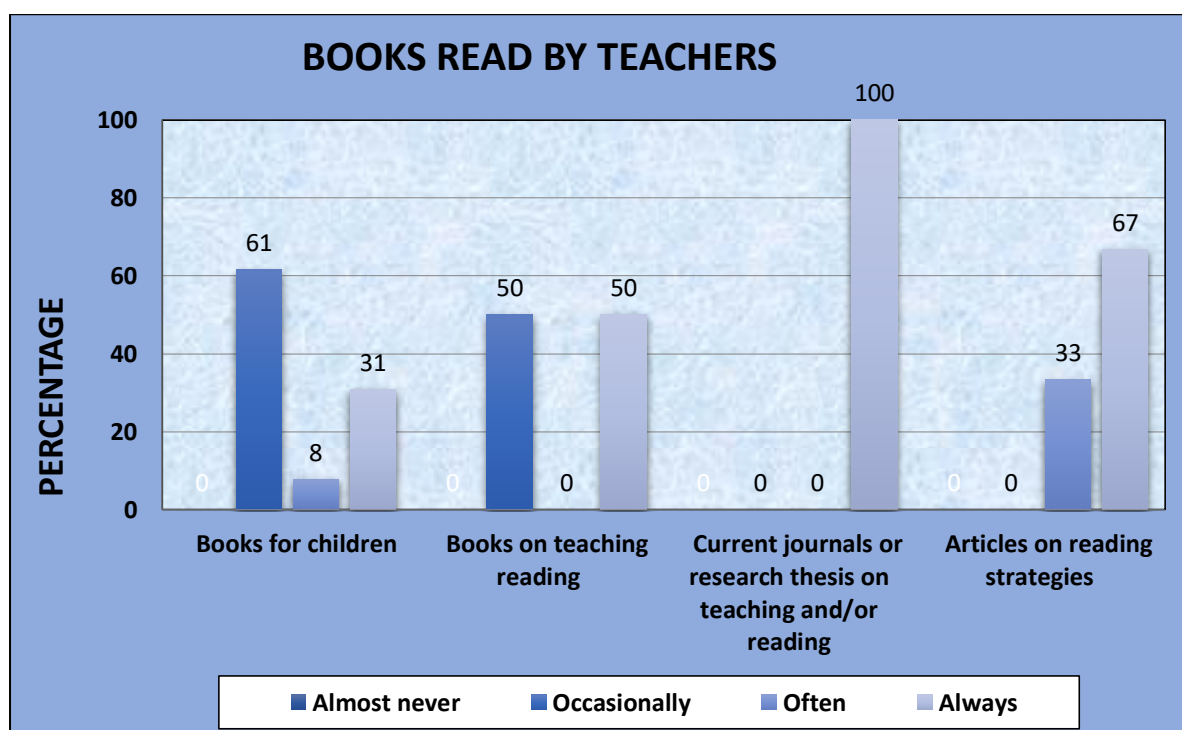


Figure 1: Books read by educators for personal or professional development

Education is a dynamic field that is constantly changing as new ideas about learning, and the latest expertise make their way into the classroom. As such, educators need to keep abreast of new developments in reading and learning research if they are to remain not only committed to quality education but also informed about teaching and learning within their fields. Carlisle

et al. (2011) mention that wide reading increases educators' knowledge and learners taught by these educators are more likely to have higher reading achievement.

Research articles and journals on teaching reading can be a rich source of this knowledge for Grade R educators (Kent, 2004). If more educators engage in developing themselves, the likelihood of learners' literacy levels increasing will be enhanced. Accordingly, such learners would be in a better position to achieve academic success. In this regard, reading problems and strategies to address these were developed.

Reading Problems and Strategies to Address These

From the Grade R educators' responses in the questionnaire, it was found that a large number of learners in their classes are experiencing reading problems. The researcher analysed the information to draw valid conclusions about the reading problems faced within Grade R. In this theme, a combination of questions is analysed. These questions focus on the percentages of learners in one's form class who experience reading problems as well as the percentages of such learners who are receiving, in the opinion of the educators, adequate assistance.

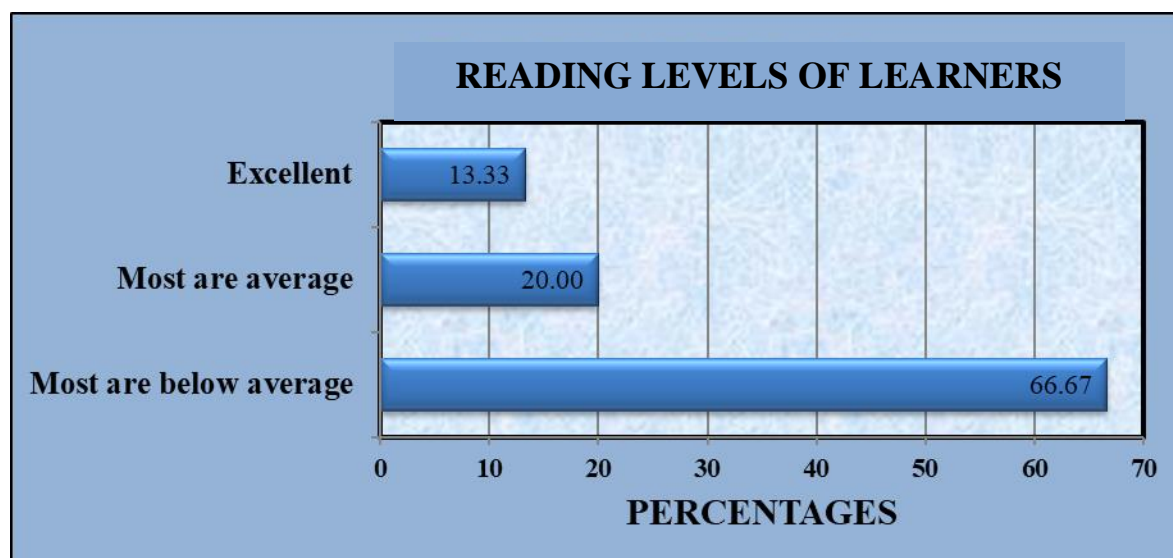


Figure 2: The overall reading level of learners in the form class

From the above Figure it is observed that 66.7% of the learners' reading levels were below average while 20% of the educators stated that learners' reading levels were average. Only 13% of educators specified that learners' reading levels were excellent. It is evident that even though the educators used different strategies during the teaching of reading in their Grade R classes, the overall reading levels of most of the learners are still below average. As a result it is necessary to discuss reading strategies that may improve reading levels.

Reading strategies

The findings from this study showed that learners had difficulties in developing reading skills and several restraining factors like insufficient time spent on reading were identified. The article also sought to collect data on the teaching strategies for teaching reading in the schools selected for this article, when time was allocated to reading. The article found that the majority of the educators (80%) regularly teach the whole class as a group compared to 20%

who did not. Furthermore, 60% of the educators always taught learners with the same ability in one group.

This strategy was deemed ineffective as empirical evidence casts doubt on it. Poole (2008), for instance, found that grouping learners with the same abilities together could be detrimental to learners with regard to learning. The grouping of learners with the same level of reading ability together also flies in the face of Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the more knowledgeable being in a position to assist others, while practising and often improving their abilities. The article thus argue that educators need to move away from this approach and implement reading strategies that can cater to all learners' diverse reading needs.

The article promotes the use of reading techniques to implement the teaching of reading effectively. Teaching reading to a group with mixed abilities can be supported by the studies conducted by Erlbaum, Schumm and Vaughn (1997) as well as Poole (2008) that found when teaching reading to mixed ability group of learners, weak readers will benefit from being with more capable readers and will receive assistance from the better readers. In other words, they learn from their 'more capable peers' in an attempt to develop their zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Good readers are not disadvantaged by this practice since they assume leadership roles and weaker readers are not reluctant to seek assistance and clarification from their peers when they do not know a word. As stated by Vygotsky (1978), when a learner is at the ZPD for a particular task, providing suitable support (scaffolding) will give the learner enough of a 'boost' to accomplish the task. Once a learner, with the assistance of scaffolding, masters the task, scaffolding can be removed and the learner will be able to complete the task on their own (McLeod, 2010). Thus, this finding seems to remain in support of the theoretical framing of this article.

The research for this article found that the educators who did not teach learners with mixed abilities in one group reported that they teach learners individually. Empirical evidence suggested that this approach had some merit. For instance, McIntyre et al. (2005) found that individual teaching improved learners' reading aptitude which may be attributed to additional feedback and coaching provided by the teacher during this time. Likewise, the amount of resources available for teaching reading forms an essential part of a good teaching strategy. Additionally, there is a beneficial aspect associated with the educator taking on the role of Vygotsky's (1978) *more knowledgeable other* in these instances.

This study also found that 53% of the educators occasionally allow learners to read aloud while 13% always allow learners to read aloud. However, 38.46% of the educators do not help learners with identifying new vocabulary, strategies for decoding sounds and words, and understanding the use of vocabulary in the context of what they are reading.

In contrast, 30.77% of the educators always show learners strategies for decoding sounds and words, 15.38% of the educators always help learners to identify new vocabulary and 27.27% of the educators help learners to understand the use of vocabulary in the context of what they are reading. Most educators (53.33%) used reading aloud methods when conducting reading lessons. As indicated earlier, public reading tends to fall in line with the notion of social interactionism and its promotion of one's learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, holding a differing view to that of Vygotsky regarding the empirical standings on reading aloud for improved reading proficiencies, Allington and McGill-Franzen (2010: 53) found that it was not the most effective method to use since it disadvantages weak readers who feel embarrassed to read aloud and as a result do not make good progress from this technique. Nevertheless, the idea of reading aloud as a means by which to improve reading proficiency found much support in this research as this article remains reluctant to deviate from its theoretical framing given the historical significance and great support base for the work of Vygotsky (1978).

The research for this article also found that 71.43% of the educators occasionally explain the main idea of what they have read in their own words while only 21.43 % of the educators always explain the main idea. Most educators do not guide learners in their understanding of what they have read and answer comprehension questions based on the text they have read, which becomes a challenge for developing quality reading skills among learners.

Further, around 71.43 % of educators do not have sufficient contact time to develop comprehension skills. It was interesting that 36.7% of the respondents indicated that the amount of contact time in class was 14.29% sufficient to develop their learners' comprehension skills. Thus, once again, it was evident that where time was not allocated such that social interaction was promoted in the learning process, the impact on learning to read was adverse.

Accordingly, this researcher suggests that prompting and guiding learners in their understanding of what they have read is an excellent strategy that educators could use to develop learners' comprehension skills. However, only 42.86 % of the educators used this method despite such methods correlating with Vygotsky's (1978) call for more social interaction in learning.

The study also found that a teaching method that involves question–answer is also an outstanding method to ascertain whether learners comprehend what is being read – only 43.3% of educators utilise this technique. The majority (70%) of the respondents indicated that they achieved their objectives by getting learners to express what they have read in their own words. Having groups of learners express their understandings in their own words supports Vygotsky's (1978) claim that learners, through social interaction, engage in constructivism which ultimately boosts learning (in this case learning to read) exponentially.

Empirical evidence found in the work of Santoro et al. (2008) also found that for many learners who experience difficulty with decoding skills or who are just learning to read fluently, it seems logical to teach comprehension strategies through oral language opportunities such as reading aloud exercises and explaining in their own words. To capture the effectiveness of reading strategies, assessments must be used (Allison & Rehm, 2007). For this reason, the next section focusses on reading assessments.

Reading assessments

The study found that 16.67% of the educators always think that oral questioning of learners is the effective method for assessing the learners' progress in reading, 14.29% of the educator's favour listening to learners read aloud and 33.33% of the educators say that they use written questions on the materials read. All of the educators reported that the use of a diagnostic reading test is an effective method for assessing learners' progress in reading.

Over half (57.15%) of the educators believed that reading aloud was another measure to gauge the reading proficiencies of learners. This, however, is inconsistent with the guidelines from the National Capital Language Resource Centre (NCLRC, 2004) that argues that learners' performance when reading aloud is not a reliable indicator of that learner's reading ability.

Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that reading aloud increases the likelihood of constructivism through social interaction taking place. Reading aloud, therefore, remains favoured in this article and in line with Vygotsky's (1978) postulation that children, being social beings, learn better through social interactions whereby knowledge is constructed.

This particular article, however, argues that at times, a learner who is proficient in understanding a given text, may stumble when asked to combine comprehension with word recognition and speaking ability when reading it silently, in the way that reading aloud requires. This could be due to the added pressure associated with public speaking and perhaps too, the fear of humiliation. The study, therefore, concluded that reading aloud is a task that learners will seldom, if ever, need to do outside of the classroom.

The conclusion therefore is that this method of assessment is not that reliable because it does not test a learner's ability to use reading in achieving a purpose or goal. It is important, however, to mention that reading aloud can help a teacher assess whether a student is 'seeing' word endings and other grammatical features when reading (NCLRC, 2004). Additionally, as argued earlier, reading aloud may help improve reading, despite being unreliable as a means by which to assess learners' reading abilities.

Using a standardised diagnostic reading assessment provides a better indication of a learner's reading ability than merely reading aloud (Roswell et al., 2005). The research found that (20%) of responses were received for both written and oral assessments. Empirical evidence suggests that educators should use multiple reading assessments since the mandated tests tend to give an unclear reflection of a child's ability whereas the use of a variety of assessments gives educators a more all-inclusive picture (Rubin, 2011).

Empirical findings show that a variety of assessments provides more detailed information about the skills that learners have attained on the content they have been taught since learners have diverse learning abilities (Pretorius et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2003). On reviewing this information, the educator can determine what assessments are needed to supplement the measures that have already been administered. Most importantly, the assessment must be instructionally relevant and focused on essential skills. Therefore, assessments should always be culturally and linguistically appropriate (Skiba et al., 2003). In addition, the information gained from assessments allows educators to improve their teaching strategies and to set up appropriate interventions for learners with reading problems.

CONCLUSION

Learners with reading problems must be identified as early as possible and given support. This is important since those who get off to a poor start seldom catch up. Empirical findings have shown that the gap between good and poor readers widens as children move through the grades (Whitehurst & Lonigan). This is particularly the case if preventative measures are not put in place early (Pretorius et al., 2016). Studies alluded to in this article have shown that most learners in South Africa, especially those from socioeconomically disadvantaged

backgrounds, fail to achieve grade appropriate reading levels (Pretorius et al., 2016; Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016).

Findings from this article showed that children have trouble decoding and read extremely slowly with little comprehension. This is in large part because educators have low expectations of learners and have little understanding of the reading levels children should be achieving by the end of each term (Pretorius et al., 2016). Accordingly, if assessment strategies are adapted to detect problems with reading at the earliest possible point, certain interventions can get underway before problems with literacy affect learners' chances of academic success later in life.

Once problems are detected, using dynamic teaching strategies as suggested in this article will certainly reduce the adverse effect literacy problems may have on a child's academic success. In essence, adopting new strategies for assessment and teaching of reading in a child's early years will undoubtedly result in a greater chance of such a child achieving academic success later in life (Takanishi & Kauerz, 2008).

REFERENCES

- AFRICA CHECK, 2014. South Africa's matric pass rate obscures dropout rate. Available from <http://www.africacheck.org> [Accessed: 15 March 2017].
- ALLINGTON, RL & A MCGILL-FRANZEN. 2010. *Handbook of reading disability research*. New York: Routledge.
- ALLISON, BN & ML REHM 2007. Effective teaching strategies for middle school learners in multicultural, multilingual classrooms. *Middle School Journal*, 39(2): 12-18.
- BLUMBERG, B, COOPER, DR & PS SCHINDLER. 2005. *Business Research Methods*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education.
- CHILD, D. 2006. *The Essentials of Factor Analysis*, (3rd Ed.). Bloomsbury Academic Press.
- CLOUGH, P & C NUTBROWN. 2002. *A student's guide to methodology: Justifying enquiry*. London: Sage Publications.
- COHEN, L, L MANION & K MORRISON. 2007. *Research Methods in Education* (6th Ed.). London and New York: Routledge- Falmer.
- COHEN, R & M SWERDLIK. 2010. *Psychological testing and assessment*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- CRESWELL, JW. 2008. *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (3rd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DoE), 2006. *Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme*. Government Gazette, Pretoria: Government Printers.
- ERLBAUM, BE, JS SCHUMM & S VAUGHN. 1997. Urban middle-elementary students' perceptions of grouping formats for reading instruction. *The Elementary School Journal*, 97(5): 475-500.
- GOODMAN, KS & YM GOODMAN. 2012. *Learning to Read. Reclaiming Reading: Teachers, Students, and Researchers Regaining Spaces for Thinking and Action*. New York: Routledge.
- GUNNING, J & S HOLM. 2007. *Ethics, Law and Society*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.
- HOWIE S, VENTER E, VAN STADEN S, ZIMMERMAN L, LONG C, DU TOIT C, SCHERMAN V & ARCHER E 2008. *PIRLS 2006 Summary report: South African children's reading literacy achievement*. Pretoria: Centre for Evaluation and

- Assessment. Available at <https://web.up.ac.za/sitefiles/file/43/314/SA%20PIRLS%202006%20SUMMARY%20REPORT.pdf> [Accessed 26 June 2014]
- HUGO, AJ, LE ROUX, SG, MULLER, H & NM NEL. 2005. Phonological awareness and the minimising of reading problems: a South African perspective. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 39 (2): 210-225.
- KENT, AM. 2004. Improving teacher quality through professional development. *Education. Journal of English Educators Society*, 124(3): 427-435.
- KNIGHT, TPT & PR TROWLER. 2000. Departmental-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25: 69–83.
- LEVY, R. 2011. *Young Children Reading*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- MCKINNON, J. 1988. Reliability and validity in field research: some strategies and tactics. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability*, 1(1): 34–54.
- MCLEOD, S. 2010. *Zone of Proximal Development*. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved July 28, 2013 from <http://www.simplypsychology.org/Zone-of-Proximal-Development.html>
- MCINTYRE, E, RIGHTMYER, E, POWELL, R, POWERS, S & J PETROSKO. 2005. How much should young children read? A study of the relationship between development and instruction. *Teaching and Learning*, 11(1): 51-72.
- NATIONAL CAPITAL LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTRE (NCLRC). The Arabic K-12 Teachers' Newsletter. 2004.
- NEL, K. 2005. *Villa At 90*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.
- POOLE, D. 2008. Interactional differentiation in the mixed-ability group: A situated view of two struggling readers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43 (3): 228-250.
- PRETORIUS, EJ & N SPAULL. 2016. Exploring relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension amongst English second language readers in South Africa. *Reading and Writing*, 1-23.
- PRETORIUS, E, JACKSON, MJ, MCKAY, V, MURRAY, S & N SPAULL. 2016. *Teaching reading (and writing) in the Foundation Phase: A concept note*. Available from: http://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/RESEPP_ZenexTeaching-ReadingWriting_Email.pdf [Accessed: 21 May 2017].
- RAMRATHAN, L & J MZIMELA. 2016. Teaching reading in a multi-grade class: Teachers' adaptive skills and teacher agency in teaching across Grade R and Grade 1. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, (2): 1-8. Available from <https://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v6i2.448> [Accessed: 15 May 2018].
- ROSNOW, RL & R ROSENTHAL. 1999. *Beginning behavioural research. A conceptual primer*. (3rd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- ROSWELL, FG, CHALL, JS, CURTIS, ME & G KEARNS. 2005. *Diagnostic assessment of reading (DAR)*. (2nd Ed.). Rolling Meadows, IL: Riverside Publishing.
- RUBIN, J. 2011. Organizing and evaluating results from multiple reading assessments. *The Reading Teacher*, 64 (8): 606-611.
- SANTORO, LE, CHARD, DC, HOWARD, L & SK BAKER. 2008. Making the VERY most of read alouds to promote comprehension and vocabulary. *The Reading Teacher*, 61 (5): 396- 408.
- SAUNDERS, MNK, LEWIS P & A THORNHILL. 2012 *Research Methods for Business Students* (6th Ed.). Harlow: Pearson Education.
- MCMILLAN, JH & S SCHUMACHER. 2006. *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry* (6th Ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

- SKIBA, RJ, MICHAEL, RS, NARDO, AC & RL PETERSON. 2003. The colour of discipline: sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*, 34:317–342.
- STRYDOM, H. 2005. Ethical aspects of research in the social sciences and human service professions. In De Vos AS, Strydom, H, Fouché CB & CSL. Delpont (Eds), *Research at the grass roots for the social sciences and human service professions*. (3rd Ed.). RSA, Pretoria: JL Van Schaik Publishers.
- TAKANISHI, R & K KAUERZ. 2008. PK inclusion: Getting serious about a P-16 education system. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 89(7): 480-487.
- TASHAKKORI, A & C TEDDLIE. 2003. *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- TAVAKOL, M & R DENNICK. 2011. Making sense of Cronbach's alpha. *International Journal of Medical Education*, 2:53-55.
- VVYGOTSKY, LS. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Howard University Press.
- WALLIMAN, N. 2001. *Your Research Project: A step to step guide for the first time Researcher*. Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- WHITEHURST, GJ & CJ LONIGAN. 2008. *Child development and emergent literacy*. 69(3). Available from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06247.x/pdf> [Accessed: 12 March 2011].

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Veena Loopoo is a teacher in the Foundation Phase at a school in KwaZulu-Natal. Her research foci include the teaching of reading and pedagogic approaches to language acquisition in the early years of childhood. Her fields of interest lie in the intersections of reading, pedagogy and language acquisition.

Robert J. Balfour is Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Teaching and Learning at North-West University. His research focuses on language policy, planning and education in South Africa. He also publishes in postcolonial literary studies, applied linguistics and poetry.