

# CAUSAL FACTORS OF LOW LEVEL READING STANDARDS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

*Education experts and academics alike agree that the ability to read is necessary for effective communication, solving of practical life problems, and critical for the well being of an individual. The purpose of the current study is to empirically investigate, evaluate and understand the factors responsible for low level of reading standards in the foundation phase among South African primary school learners. The study utilized a combination of theoretical frameworks and qualitative techniques to explore teachers' perception and understanding of causal factors related to low level of reading standards. The findings of the study would identify some of the key factors affecting low level of reading ability among learners and provide possible intervention strategies to address them.*

**Keywords:** *causal factors, reading, ability, performance.*

## INTRODUCTION

The ability to read is necessary for successful communication, to solve practical problems of daily life, as well as being essential for the growth and well-being of an individual, and comprehending road signs, warning labels, telephone books, maps, newspapers, books etcetera (Colberg & Snart, 1992). Reading is a development task that every learner has to master from an early age. Research shows that reading for pleasure or independent reading benefits children in numerous ways. The ability to read and understand content is critical for academic success, yet South Africans routinely performed poorly when compared internationally, and these students are regarded as the "dunces of Africa" (Pretorius, 2002). From Grade 1 to Grade 3 learners are taught how to master reading and to read fluently with understanding (Department of Education (DoE), 2008). In South Africa however research has shown that most learners struggle with their reading. Although the current government is working on addressing the problems of reading, research studies have reported that reading problems have reached alarming proportions (Howie, et al. 2006, DoE, 2002, 2008b, & ELRC, 2009).

In 2006, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006) measured learner performance in literacy in Grade 3. Disturbingly the evaluations showed that learners were performing poorly: their reading levels were below the required levels for their age and their grade (Howie et al. 2006, & DoE, 2008a). The poor reading standards have been

attributed to various causes. DoE (2008) attributes poor reading to poor training of teachers who teach reading at Foundation Phase. The DoE, suggests that teachers must have a thorough knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a thorough knowledge to model good reading behavior and to teach learners strategies that help them to read with understanding and unlock the code of written text.

It is apparent that there is concern as to the factors affecting the teaching of reading and interventions that could be used to raise the reading standards. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to explore the causal factors of low level of reading standards in the foundation phase (2) to suggest the strategies that can be used by the teachers as an intervention to address problems associated with low reading standards in the Foundation phase. Subsequently, a research study will be conducted to empirically determine the causes of low reading and suggest effective reading comprehension strategies that could be used before, during and after reading to deal with reading problems of Grade 1 to Grade 3 learners. The emphasis will be placed or concentrated on Grade 3 learners. The reason for choosing Grade 3 class is that it is an exit grade from the foundation phase into the intermediate phase. Low attainment levels in reading may reduce chances of success in further education (DoE, 2008a).

The South African Department of Education (DoE), (2002) paints a gloomy picture as regards the state of reading competency among South African learners from the Foundation phase to University level. The report suggests that reading competence level is in a crisis. The findings by DoE showed that only 38% of the grade three learners in the nine South African provinces could read. Additionally, a study by the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring standards (SACMEQ, 2004) revealed that children in grade 1 to 6 were reading two grade levels below their own in English and their LC1. Further an assessment by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2006) of learners' performance in literacy among grade 4 and 6 showed that there was a low level of reading literacy in both grades. The main objectives of this study were:

- i To identify the causal factors of low reading standards using the lenses of the teachers.
- ii To attempt to suggest possible interventions that may facilitate reading competence among learners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized a combination of theoretical frameworks and qualitative techniques to explore teachers' perception and understanding of causal factors related to low reading standards. Classroom observation was conducted during student practice teaching session. The observation was used to answer the question, 'what is teachers' classroom practice in developing reading programmes. Teachers' interviews were conducted. This was to answer the question 'what are the teachers' personal experiences of causal factors of

low level of reading standards amongst the learners; and what they think can serve as intervention strategies'. This paper derived its data of the causal factors for low reading levels from various related studies, reports by practicing teachers who are the implementers of the curriculum and my own experiences as lecturer and supervisor of students on Practice Teaching. It is not the intention of this paper to look at all possible causes but only a few viewed by the teachers as critical.

### **CAUSAL FACTORS OF LOW LEVEL READING STANDARDS**

There is abundant evidence from research and reports from DoE that South African learners' reading standards are below the expected standards (DoE, 2002, 2008). It is somewhat disturbing to know that South Africa despite its vast resources fares badly in reading. Quite conceivably, this situation can be addressed if the causal problems are identified and addressed. The study found that there were a number of factors that contributed to the low level of reading standards amongst the learners. These include, among others, the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC), inappropriate use of methodology in the teaching of reading, multigrade teaching approach, multilingualism. The study pointed out some intervention strategies that teachers suggested for the improvement of reading amongst the learners.

***The National Curriculum Statement (NCS):*** Educators attribute poor reading competence among South African learners to the poorly introduced Outcome Based Education (OBE). The OBE curriculum that was announced on 24 March 1997 introduced some radical changes in the education system including reading. Chief among the criticisms raised against new paradigm shift is that it is a borrowed economic package that is difficult to implement in education including reading. According to Dick (2001), the language of the OBE is incomprehensibly rigid and uncompromisingly economic in orientation. Applying this borrowed concept in education implied applying the 'fit all' shoe size approach. Teachers complained that they do not understand the principles of OBE and yet they are the implementers. They also indicated a lack of specificity and examples in the NCS. In addition, teachers were instructed to develop a learning programme based on the NCS.

There was absolute need to make teachers literate about OBE for effective implementation. A survey of 93 foundation phase teachers conducted by De Witt, Lessing and Lenyai (2001) showed that half of the participants were not satisfied with their initial training to teach reading to beginners and indicated a need for further training (Lessing and De Witt, 2001). The foundation phase is critical in the sense that it acts as the bedrock that provides basic reading skills which are important in the acquisition of reading skills in subsequent grades. DoE (2008) attributes poor reading standards largely to poor training of teachers who teach reading at foundation phase.

Are teachers not simply resisting change? It is common knowledge that some teachers always try to resist change when a new curriculum is introduced despite the benefits because change may result in more work in terms of training, reading and preparation of learning materials. Also people prefer the already known route to the well. Fear of the unknown syndrome seems to affect human nature. It is foolhardy however, to introduce a new curriculum package without giving due consideration to the ability of the implementers to handle the new baby. It appears that OBE curriculum had a negative impact on reading, hence the alarming low level reading competence among the learners. The OBE Reading Framework specifies outcomes and all subsequent curriculum activity are directed at achieving those outcomes (Mc Cutchen et al. 2002). Conformity to pre-ordained outcomes stifles creativity. Dick (2001) further argues that OBE is too prescriptive to such an extent that it does not encourage love reading for the sake of reading. The learner should have an intrinsic interest to read and that promotes reading competence.

But is it not the teacher who should extrinsically motivate the learners to read? Indeed teachers are expected to excite learners and broaden their zone of proximal development. Nonetheless only a competent teacher conversant with the curriculum has the capacity and ability to do that. It also seems from various reports by teachers that OBE was not timeously introduced thus contributing to low level of performance in reading. There are legitimate complaints that books that were in use were declared unsuitable and outdated. However, there were no new curriculum reading materials when the new curriculum was introduced. This was tantamount to throwing away the dish water together with the baby.

***Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC):*** Teachers complained that the FFLC came as an overload. Teachers said that they are unable to plan instructions due to many documents and introductions of new terms. Every new change comes with new terminology, and this is confusing to teachers.

***Inappropriate use of methodology in the teaching of reading:*** Teachers do not seem to have been introduced to the major communicative and interactive approach to reading in the pre service teacher programme. The NCS requires these approaches (2005) yet even in the pre-service training for NCS the teacher had little orientation on the teaching and developing of reading. Experiences through interacting with practicing teachers show that when learners read aloud individually, they are not given pause time to use some other strategies. Learners often read parrot like while the meaning of what they read is not established as a reader. They are overcorrected for trivial and insignificant pronunciation errors. Teacher incompetence in implementing the new curriculum is an impediment to effective and efficient reading.

The impact of these gaps in training was evident in the class observation where teachers used predominantly teacher controlled approach and focus on asking questions. These questions were at low order level. This observation

relates to the results of the study by Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE, 2008, DOE, 2008b, PIRLS, 2006), study that South African teachers cannot teach reading. Joubert, Bester and Meye (2008) on reading, suggests that teachers should know a variety of reading methods, for example phonics, language experienced approach and that they should not resort to one method of teaching. The DoE, (2008) further highlights that teachers do not know how to stimulate reading inside, and outside the classroom. Many Foundation Phase teachers have not been explicitly trained to teach reading. That is why they find it difficult to help learners with reading difficulties. Consequently many teachers have resorted to rote teaching as the only option, and tend to be satisfied with the rote learning by their learners (DoE, 2008a).

***Multigrade teaching approach:*** The study noted that during teaching practice there were schools that had very low enrolment. As a result, grades were collapsed into one class despite grade differences. It was very difficult for the teacher to divide his/her teaching equitably. Instead those learners who were not involved were just lying down waiting for their turn. Hence to occupy learners, teachers simply instructed learners to read. There was little evidence in terms of what the teachers did to find out the root causes of learners getting stuck, thereby coming with means to support learners to overcome their problems. The reading activity is not properly organized hence learners find these activities nauseating. This approach does not stimulate the learner's desire to read and improve the reading standards. In a multigrade class, teachers should plan lessons and activities in such a way that learners can be able to share ideas and work together (Sargent, 2002).

***Multilingualism:*** The new South African Constitution Act (No58 of 1995), in brief, is developed in such a way that it prioritizes among other principles, the principle of human rights and equality of human status. It recognizes all 11 official languages and gives them the same status at national level. According to the policy, schools use their discretion to choose two or more learning languages including the one spoken in the area. These languages are introduced as early as grade one. This approach does not promote effective language learning including reading. The argument I present is that the learner is still grappling to understand his /her own language and then is burdened with learning alien languages. This Language overload inevitably overwhelms the learner. Poor language acquisition may impact negatively on reading proficiency. Teachers view this as one of the factors impacting negatively on reading competency. The same teachers suggest the teaching of mother tongue from grade R to grade 3 is in keeping with the South African Language policy.

### **POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS**

The interventions that follow were suggested by practicing teachers during our discussions on how schools could improve learners' proficiency in reading.

- i Teachers need additional tailor made training programmes to enable them understand OBE principles and its reading framework. Long term reading courses could be offered by the Universities to produce highly competent reading specialists that could be used extensively to workshop other teachers. Additionally, university education programmes should develop teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach reading effectively. Only well qualified teachers should teach reading at foundation phase.
- ii Multimethod approach should be considered in the teaching of reading. This allows teachers to use methods they are conversant with.
- iii Meaningful reading requires abundant reading literature to cater for their diverse interests in the class. Introducing a curriculum that has no material back up should be avoided.
- iv Teachers should encourage learners to construct meaning from text other than merely decoding print.
- v Education is a basic right to all children in South Africa. It has to be provided equitably so that all children can learn. It is necessary that even the most disadvantaged populations be given access to it in order to help to reduce social, cultural and economic disparities. Teachers should be equipped with requisite pedagogical skills to teach reading effectively in multigrades classes (Sargent, 2002).
- vi Emphasis should be placed on the need for learners to understand what they read rather than on outcomes.
- vii Universities should conduct researches on the teaching of reading and distribute their findings to schools.
- viii DoE must create scholarships to send teachers to other countries that have success stories in reading for bench marking.
- ix Teachers should be able to apply remedial teaching strategies to assist learners who had reading problems.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discussed teachers' views on causal factors attributable to low level reading standards particularly in the Foundation Phase. The same teachers suggested intervention strategies that could be applied to ameliorate the appalling reading standards. It remains largely the responsibility of DoE to take bold steps to raise reading standards among learners by ensuring that teachers are conversant with the new curriculum especially its framework on reading. Teachers need to be trained to impart them with appropriate pedagogical reading skills. Since this discourse dependent on teachers' reports and lecturers' experiences, there is absolute need to carry out an empirical research to validate these views. This paper therefore precipitates an empirical study on the causal factors attributable to low reading standards among learners in South Africa with particular reference to Foundation Phase (Grade R-3).

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