

# Exploring Challenges that Contribute towards Poor Annual National Assessments Results in Limpopo Province

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**Abstract** Communication is central to the education process. Language and the functions of language play a very important role in schools. Reading development in the primary schools is central to the success of learners as they progress through school. Evaluations in South Africa have shown that reading achievement in the Foundation Phase is low, especially for learners with African languages as their home language. The purpose of this study was to investigate the way in which reading is taught in Limpopo Primary Schools. The study adopted a qualitative approach and used observation, interviews and document analysis to generate data. Learners come to school from different backgrounds, language groups, cultures and socio-economic status. Learners in South African schools usually experience challenges and perform poorly with respect to literacy and numeracy. To become competitive in the global arena, there is an urgent need to raise the standards of education. Language is required for all learning, including numeracy and mathematics. There is a need for the involvement of all stakeholders in the language acquisition process of learners. The outcomes revealed that the multilingual Foundation Phase classes made it difficult to assist all learners who experienced language problems because teachers could not speak well the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) at the school.

**Keywords:** language, learners, learning, reading, school

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## 1. Introduction

The apartheid history of South Africa deprived a lot of black South Africans from obtaining education. This has contributed to the low skill levels the country is currently experiencing. 350 years of apartheid practices and 50 years of concerted apartheid have created racial differences in socioeconomic position that is larger than any other nation in the world [1]. Reference [2] adds that despite the fact that significant progress has been made in certain spheres, socio-economic development in South Africa is highly unequal, where structural factors have favoured certain sections of the population. At the same time, the socio-economic structure of the country has consigned the majority of the historically marginalised groups to lives that are far removed from the promise of material dignity contained in the constitution. In most rural communities, a large section of the community has no basic education which makes them unable to contribute meaningfully to the education of their children. Illiteracy has serious socio-economic impact on the lives of those affected as it is linked with an array of poor life outcomes such as

poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, crime and long term illness owing to a lack of awareness of contractive methods among others [3]. Involvement of communities is required to address the problem of illiteracy in South Africa [4]. A further aggravating factor within the milieu of the South African education system is the complicated socio-political history of the country that created a large number of disadvantaged schools. Reference [5] emphasises the needs and skills of learners; training, dedication and competencies of teachers; as well as the importance of instructional media in disadvantaged areas. In spite of the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R-9 (Schools) and Grade 10-12 (Schools), illiteracy is still a serious problem in South Africa.

The theory is in line with authors' assumption that the collaborative nature of the education enterprise requires key stakeholders to work together to achieve the desired learning outcomes [6]. The key stakeholders refer to school management teams (SMTs), the teachers, learners, Department of Education and the parents. Illiteracy is rife in the Polokwane Local Municipality specifically in rural areas where Higher Education institutions can team up with the DBE to provide basic numeracy and literacy skills.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy [7] and the human capital theory. Freire is widely acknowledged as one of the theorists who made critical contributions to the field of early literacy and adult education. The purpose of the Freirian theory is to lead students to recognise various tensions and enable them to effectively deal with them [8].

The Freirian approach focuses on empowerment through education. By providing basic education to the illiterate population, those who are afforded the opportunity will develop cognitive and literacy skills that will help them to deal with the socio-economic challenges they face daily instead of always waiting for the government to solve their problems. The human capital theory is equally relevant as it looks at how educated people are able to acquire knowledge and skills that enable them to participate fully in the socio-economic lives of their communities, contribute to economic growth and better earnings from their participation to the economic growth of their countries [9]. No single entity is in the position to deal with the challenges of illiteracy in the country. The DBE and Higher Education Institutions can therefore combine resources in helping to address the problem in the Province in question and elsewhere in the country as the illiteracy of parents contributes to the poor performance of their children at school as well.

Reading attitudes seem to emanate from perceptions acquired from people's reading history and experience [10]. Learners' experience of reading in the first language influences their attitude to reading in the African Language [11]. Furthermore, it seems that cultural beliefs are another cradle for the incubation of negative or positive attitudes towards reading [12]. A culture where reading is viewed in a negative light by people whose approval a learner seeks, may not encourage positive reading attitudes. This argument underscores the role of teachers, parents and communities in the development of positive reading attitudes. These stakeholders play a significant role in the mentoring and modelling of the culture of reading, as each group serves as a vital part in the multilateral context of reading influences [13].

The model of reading attitudes demonstrates that a positive reading attitude does not guarantee actual reading behaviour [14]. There has to be an additional element in the model is the intention to read or continue reading [14]. Measuring whether attitudes are positive or negative is of little consequence. One's attitude may be positive but one may lack the intention to read, resulting in non-reading behaviour being exhibited.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

The study took place in Limpopo Province, and this was informed by the poor ANA results of 2011/2012. There were five focus groups where the research was to generate information from. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from heads of schools as well as the participants. Data was collected through observation and interviews. Participants were also assured of confidentiality in the observation as well as information

given during the interviews. Moreover, participants were briefed about the benefits of the study to teachers, learners and the Limpopo Provincial Education, given that the findings of the study were going to be published locally. With this assurance, participants gave their cooperation and the study was carried out. Each of the classes was observed five times for reading and literacy activities. At the end of the observation in each class, interviews were conducted. Finally, notes taken during observations were discussed during the interviews for participants to crosscheck whether they were true reflections of their teaching.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

In this article, the problem was delineated to focus on the school governing body (SGB). Parents serving in the SGB have become used to hearing of their increased "power" while also realising that the instances by which these powers are exercised are dubious and ineffective. This is the case with sections 16 (1) and (3) of the South African school act of 1996, which provides that: (1) Subject to this act, the governance of every public school is vested in its governing body and (3) Subject to this act and any applicable provincial law, the professional management of a public school must be undertaken by the principal under the authority of the head of department.

It may be that no active management role (as an aspect of accountability) is foreseen for the governing body of a public school, and that the distribution of power to parents serving in the SGB may give rise to conflicts between the governing body and the principal of the school. It may be assumed there will be clashes on views regarding the implementation of policy [15,16]. Therefore, the problem relates to what extent will parents exercise their powers without infringement into the principal domain and with minimum intervention from the principal?

This problem remains perennial because some structures in the school may be very good at taking decisions, yet the decisions are seldom followed through. Why is this happening? It is because there is no accountability system in place to monitor every stakeholder in performing their duties. It seems there is a need for an effective reporting system which allows the school to monitor its work. Whole school evaluation system needs to be effectively in place. However, accountability does a policing system [17].

### 4.1. Implications for Language and Mathematics Education

A decline in motivation to read can have a negative impact on the acquisition of reading achievement and comprehension [18]. This is not only in language in classrooms but also in content area instruction as well, especially mathematics. Most elementary Mathematics teachers would agree that a central purpose of their instruction is to help learners to understand significant mathematical concepts. Even though Mathematics teachers may not be language teachers, reading specialists or librarians, every Mathematics teacher knows that their subject is different from any other and requires particular

kind of literacy skills. Hence, every Mathematics teacher must carefully consider how to use reading in their subject area because understanding subject matter involves more than 'doing' or 'knowing' something. Mastery of content is demonstrated not only through experimentation but also through reading [19].

Research has provided evidence that reading informational Mathematics and science texts can help to support content learning [20,21]. Exposure to informational texts in the early years presents a vital means of expression of thought, especially in this modern world of science and technology which demands that one should be able to take an intelligent and informed interest in happenings within one's environment and the world at large. Every field of specialisation has its own appropriate technical vocabulary.

## 4.2. Challenges Affecting Teaching and Learning

This was based on notes obtained on each of the themes during the observations in conjunction with the interviews. There are challenges faced by the schools which affect teaching and learning:

### 4.2.1. Home Environment

One of the challenges is the home environment. Some learners grow up in homes where cuddles and storybooks are a nightly ritual. Reading for them starts at home as parents or siblings share the joy of reading with them. For those who come from a non-reading home culture, as is the case with many African children, it is the teachers who bear the responsibility of luring them into the wonderful world of the written word. There were interviews conducted to establish the way in which reading is conducted in classes. Lack of adequate reading instruction strategies and the ability to model reading strategies by teachers were identified as major causes for many cases of non-readers and struggling readers in Limpopo Primary Schools.

### 4.2.2. Lack of Parental Support

Lack of parental support in language development at home (emergent literacy) emerged in the study. Equally essential in the poor instruction of reading was the lack of reading teachers and inadequate materials used in reading in those schools. Most of the parents are not literate, therefore they are unable to help children with their school work and others are unable to help their children due to the lack of content knowledge. Some of the learners stay with elderly people who are unable to read and write. Therefore, they are unable to assist learners with school work. When they are invited to parents meetings they do not participate in debating issues related to learners' education because the language used is not user friendly. They don't see themselves as part of the parents' component because in most cases their contributions are not considered. They alleged that during SGB elections only educated parents are considered and their voices are heard because they are able to speak and understand English. This issue leads to poor attendance of meetings and less participation in meeting discussions. The high percentages of slow learners in school as well as the late

delivery of learning material also have a negative impact on the completion of the teaching of the curriculum in time. Another aspect is the involvement of Teachers in union matters which take up valuable teaching time.

### 4.2.3. Absenteeism and Late Coming

The fact that many learners are orphans and do not stay with their parents, impact negatively on some learners. Absenteeism seems to be of grave concern and many learners absent themselves too easily because of so called "ill health". Although some learners are always on time transport issues seem to be a problem in rural areas. This results in learners turning up late for schools. Poor performance by learners stems from children staying alone while parents are working far away. In these situations, we find child headed families. In these situations, parental guidance and supports is limited or non-existing. Some principals were of the opinion that learners are lazy to study on their own, especially in Townships and they are also of the opinion that some parents are not yet committed in their children's education.

### 4.2.4. Lack of Learning Resources

There are inadequate classrooms and overcrowding demotivates learners. The findings from the study confirm that classroom teachers who were involved in the research were finding it difficult to cope with the situation in the classes. As such, they tend to develop negative attitudes to learners experiencing barriers to reading and writing. They regard these learners as a burden, who make it even more difficult to perform their daily routine.

### 4.2.5. Teachers Overloaded with Work

CAPS has introduced extra paper work to teachers and a lot of portfolios to be compiled. Although the CAPS content is clearly spelt out, it comprises of excessive activities that cannot be accomplished by learners within one school calendar year. Lack of support from curriculum advisors also exacerbates the challenges of reading in learners. Curriculum Implementers (CIs) do not deliver or do their work as expected. The most important factor is the high workload of teachers which is due to the high learner-teacher ratio. Classes are so large that teachers are unable to cope with the demands of attending to individual learners. The schools buildings are in a bad condition for effective teaching and learning of reading and writing skills. The workspace in some classrooms hampers effective instruction. Learners are packed together with very limited space available for the teacher to move around to teach as well as monitor the behaviours of learners. In some cases, resources like workbooks arrive at schools in the wrong language and even late into the teaching and learning period.

### 4.2.6. Inadequate Preparation of Teachers to Teach Reading

Teachers are also not confident in teaching Home Languages due to poor training. The study established that there are no qualified teachers for reception year kids. Some of the teachers need to be followed from behind to attend their classes/periods. Therefore, there are no proper basics which are laid down to prepare teachers for

teaching language skills. Teacher unions were shown to play a major role in the process of teaching such skills to learners. These are still expected to assume an even greater role in the instructional activities at schools.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study makes a number of recommendations in order to improve reading literacy in Primary schools as well as other education sectors which share the products of these schools. These include Intermediate and Senior Primary Schools and other Schools in the District.

Reading workshops and in-service training should be held for teachers on the management of reading instruction. In addition to the reading programmes, other books such as storybooks should be used for reading instruction. Some of the in-service training programmes which are used to train teachers in the country should encourage teachers to specialise in teaching effective reading methods and approaches. All primary and secondary school teachers need course work on teaching and assessment of reading.

There is need for school, family and community partnership programmes that take the challenges parents face into consideration. This implies that there should be practical and effective interaction between family, school and community. Non-literate parents may not know how to involve their children in these functional literacy activities and this further jeopardises the reading efficiency of their children. Teachers then need to provide remediation support for such children. There should be mutual trust among the stakeholders for the interest of the learner's education. Parents should play bigger role in learner's schoolwork.

The debate about what development refers to is an old debate. All countries or regions in the world are concerned with development [23]. Family literacy level, grandparents as caregivers and poverty underpins the success or failure of the learning experience because children who are read to and share the reading experience with their primary adult caregivers succeed in their schooling and this generally leads to success in adult life. Parents must be motivated and stimulate learners to read by themselves, by creating a suitable reading atmosphere at home. They should be informed about the importance of reading stories to young children. Emergent literacy must play a major role in the upbringing of the child in the home environment [24]. Admission and language policies should be discussed in parents' meetings so that they are well-informed and aware as to what is expected of them as far as these policies are concerned.

The schools must use languages that are well understood by all parents in order to encourage them to participate in all school matters and meetings. It is recommended that parent support groups be organised at schools, with teachers providing basic workshops to parents on how they can assist their children who experience reading and writing barriers at home. Communities may organise community support groups with retired teachers to assist parents with strategies on how to assist children at home. This will improve their

knowledge and make them more fully involved in their children's studies.

Teachers must serve as the framework for emergent reading instruction [22]. These concepts are: phonological awareness, alphabetic understanding and automaticity with code. Teachers must also be equipped with the modalities and basic steps in reading development and remediation [9]. These steps are: note the problem, teach the basic techniques, practice and verify your success and build on your success. The Curriculum Section must design or develop reading programs for schools.

Because of the diversity of languages, it is difficult for a teacher to know all of them, so schools should strongly emphasise their language policy to the parents when they register learners. The schools and the management of schools should adhere to their own language policies and should encourage teachers to use the language of learning and teaching as set out in the policy in their classrooms. Learners can easily understand the language they use to communicate at home [25]. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers acknowledge each learner's mother tongue when teaching key concepts of major importance in the Foundation Phase. It is recommended that in the classrooms where Sepedi/Tshivenda/Tsonga is used as the LoLT it should be used and spoken correctly. Teaching assistants could be hired to help classroom teachers with learners experiencing barriers to reading and writing development. The teaching assistants should be trained to give learners individual support and attention under the supervision of the classroom teacher. The national policy on teacher-learner ratio be implemented effectively and post establishment be a priority, especially in the Foundation Phase.

Provincial Department of Education should play a significant role and be visible. Constant support from district office and appropriate teacher-pupil ratio be a priority. Teaching and learning resources like reading books are required and should be delivered on time. Peer teaching and clustering of schools should be encouraged as a supporting system. In-service training to encourage lifelong learning and provide incentives for qualifications obtained during service. The ACE leadership programme for principals and up skilling for teachers should be rolled out to all schools. The district office should ensure that each learner has his or her own reader and workbook. Provision should be made for learners who do not have books to do their homework.

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