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Reading problems in the Intermediate Phase: Grade 4 teachers' opinions

Abstract

Reading is currently a matter of great concern in South Africa where most learners including Grade 4 learners are reading below their grade level. The research project discussed in this article investigated Grade 4 teachers' perceptions of teaching learners to read. Teachers' perceptions could influence their attitude to reading and the ways in which they would teach reading. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and qualitative research design were used in the study. Seven Grade 4 teachers, among whom was the teacher used in the pilot study, were interviewed and observed while teaching reading in the classroom to gain first-hand understanding of how reading is taught in English as the home language in Grade 4. For some of the learners English was, however, the first additional language. The findings of the study revealed that

the teachers understood what reading is; and also the importance of teaching reading. It was, however, noted that not all the Grade 4 teachers were trained in how to teach reading. Although the teachers who took part in the study used different approaches to teach reading, not all of them were in a position to use a combined approach. The grade 4 teachers aired their concerns about the increase in the number of learning areas the learners had to study on entering Grade 4. They also raised their concerns about the lack of support they get from district officials. In the opinion of the teachers the parents were also insufficiently involved in the lives of their children.

Keywords: reading in home language, reading problems, Grade 4 learners, training of Grade 4 teachers

1. Introduction

The aim of the Manifesto on Value, Education and Democracy (Department of Education (DoE) 2001:30) is to provide the opportunity for every South African to be able to read, write, count and think. In line with this, the Department of Basic Education and the former Department of Education have pressed for all learners to be taught to read from an early stage. According to Pretorius and Ribbens (2005:140), learners move from learning to read during the Foundation Phase to reading to learn in the Intermediate Phase. It is therefore important for teachers to prioritise learning to read during the Foundation Phase.

It is thus expected that on entering Grade 4, learners would have received adequate training to be able to read in their home language fluently and with understanding. It is also stated in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in Language Learning Outcome 3: Reading and Viewing that, "The learner will be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional, values in texts" (DoE 2004:5).

However, various research reports, among which are the reports of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), show that many Grade 4 learners fail to master reading. This has far reaching implications for their ability to read and study during the years they spend at school and for their eventual success at school and future employment.

In this article some of the reasons for Grade 4 learners' poor performance in reading will be discussed. The information was collected during interviews with Grade 4 teachers and during the observation of reading lessons. Although the study was done on a small scale, the researchers trusted that it could help to understand why there are many learners in Grade 4 with reading problems and to find solutions to deal with the problem.

2. What is reading and the importance of reading

Reading is one of the most complex tasks humans are expected to perform (Rault-Smith 2009:15) and it is complex to learn and to teach. According to Smith and Read (2005:12), it is a process in which information from the text and the reader's background knowledge act together to produce meaning. For Prater (2007:319) reading is the most cognitively demanding language task, which requires attention, perception, memory and retrieval process so that the reader automatically identifies or decodes words. Teaching reading usually revolves around two components: recognising and analysing words (the identification of words); and understanding words and ideas (comprehension) (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel 2005:124).

Learning to read is not a natural process and it requires systematic and well informed instruction (DoE 2007(b):8). It enables learners to gather information throughout their lives and promote their self-image and understanding of the self, and develop an

appreciation of language (Joubert, Bester & Meyer 2008:129). In the Foundation Phase learners are taught the basic skills of reading which are to be able to recognise word and to decode words, with comprehension always being involved. In the higher grades comprehending what one reads is of more importance, although word recognition is still involved (Dednam 2005:124). Teachers predominantly use the phonic approach to teach reading or the look-and-say approach to teach beginning reading. It is, however, advocated, that a combination of the two approaches is the most appropriate (Joubert, 2013:112-116). The phonic approach to reading is an example of the “bottom-up” model. The advocates of this model assume that the process of translating print to meaning begins with the print and the act of reading is triggered by grapho-phonemic information such as letter, syllables and words, in order to construct meaning from print (Vacca, Vacca & Gove 2000:28-29). This model represents the school of thought of behaviourism, which regards reading as a process that moves from parts to the whole (Joubert, Bester & Meyer 2008:84). The emphasis of this approach is to teach learners the letter-sound relations and then to sound and say the word.

On the other hand, the look-and-say approach to reading is an example of the “top-down” model. Supporters of this model assume that the process of translating print to meaning begins with the reader’s prior knowledge, and the act of reading is triggered by his or her prior knowledge and experience in order to construct meaning (Vacca, Vacca & Gove 2000:28-29). The “top-down” model represents psycholinguistics view, which regards reading as a process that moves from the whole to the parts (Joubert, Bester & Meyer 2008:84). The emphasis is to teach learners to identify whole words and read sentences without sounding them. In summary, the bottom-up model is “data- driven,” with data in this case being letters and words on the page whereas the top-down model is “conceptually driven” because the idea or concept in the mind of the reader triggers information processing during reading (Vacca, Vacca & Gove 2000:30)

A combination of the two approaches is often referred to as the eclectic model. Rumelhart (1994) provided another model of reading which he called the interactive model. According to the interactive model readers gain information from both the text and their experiences (Place 2016:51&56). In the Foundation Phase reading is taught in the learners’ home language. From Grade 4 onwards learners are taught in either English or Afrikaans. With regard to the Grade 4 learners whose teachers were interviewed in the research project, English was their second language which was used as the language of learning and teaching.

Reading is also important for learning and studying, because it gives readers access to knowledge in an information-driven society. It is therefore one of the responsibilities of Foundation Phase teachers to instil well-developed reading skills and abilities in learners so that they can read and progress in school from Grade 4 onwards and eventually in their careers.

According to Stanovich,(as cited in Gillet, Temple & Crawford 2004:2)teaching young learners to read is the school’s single most important task because reading can open up an imaginative world to learners, offering them concepts for naming and understanding

experiences, which will help them to learn many subjects and boost their power of reflection. But if learners do not master the art of reading at an early stage, it could have far reaching consequences. According to Jennings, Caldwell and Lerner (2006:3), reading difficulties are not only problematic for learners as individuals when they fail to master the skill of reading with comprehension which could influence their academic progress but also impact on a nation and society as a whole. Low reading levels could result in poor performance, high rates of school dropouts, unemployment and an increase in crime.

3. Reading in Grade 4

Grade 4 is a transitional grade in which the majority of learners in South Africa move from teaching and learning in their home languages to English as the medium of instruction. School work becomes more formal and the Grade 4 learners are expected to write formal tests and examinations. For the first time in their school career learners have different teachers for various subjects they have to study in the Intermediate Phase. Grade 4 is also a challenging grade for most learners since they are expected to have well developed reading abilities to be in a position to learn. According to Pretorius and Ribbens (2005:140) learners move from learning to read during the Foundation Phase to reading to learn in Grade 4; and as a result learners have to be in a position to be able to read fluently, and to be successful in school. Learners should be able to read expository (information) text and critically analyse a variety of texts. They are now expected to read, write and comprehend what they have read in order to cope with the academic demands of the grade in which they are.

The DoE (2007(a):10) stipulates that Grade 4 learners should, amongst others, display the following characteristics as fluent readers. They should

- be able to use different 'cueing' systems
- be in a position to recognise most familiar words on sight
- be able to read 60 words per minute fluently
- begin to understand implied meaning
- read texts with longer, more complex sentence structures
- be able to demonstrate a developing knowledge of story elements
- be familiar with the use of reference materials with guidance

When one considers the above mentioned characteristics as set out by the Department of Education, it is evident that Grade 4 learners and, for this matter, all learners in the Intermediate Phase should have well developed reading skills which will enable them

to use their reading skills when studying. For learners who were trained in reading in a home language other than English this could pose a problem as it might take them a while to transfer their reading skills to English which in Grade 4 becomes their language of learning and teaching. Place (2016:52-53) states in this regard: “The degree of mastery of speaking English and reading in English is unequal in all classes. Some children are fluent speakers in both their first [home] language and in EFAL [English as a first additional language]. Many, though, are not.”

4. Reading performance of Grade 4 learners

According to the Department of Basic Education (2011:34), the percentage of learners who do not perform at adequate levels are unacceptably high in South Africa, but other developing countries, including relatively wealthy ones, face similar problems.

Since 2001 the Department of Education (DoE) has measured performance in literacy and numeracy in Grade 3 and 6, which resulted in an evaluation that revealed poor performance in those areas. The DBE further conducted the Annual National Assessment (ANA) in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 for learners in Grades 2 to 7 in respect of literacy and numeracy. In 2015 learners did not do the ANA tests due to various circumstances. This is the reason why only the results up to the end of 2014 are available. In 2014 there was an increase in the overall scores of language results. The average national percentage for Languages results for Grade 4 from 2012 to 2014 for Home Language (HL) and First Additional Language (FAL) were captured as follows:

	Home language	First additional language
2012	43%	34%
2013	49%	39%
2014	57%	41%

(DBE 2014:8)

For Gauteng the average percentage marks for Grade 4 in Languages were as follows:

	Home language	First additional language
2012	49.7%	40.0%
2013	53.4%	46.4%
2014	59.4%	47.4%

(DBE 2014:52-53)

It is clear that in both the home language and the first additional language assessment the learners were not faring well.

In 2006, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed that Grade 4 learners in South Africa performed under the minimum level determined by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The results were captured and it showed that various countries obtained the following percentages: Indonesia 54%, Iran 60%, Kuwait 28%, Morocco 26%, Qatar 33%, South Africa 22% and United States 96% (DBE 2011:35). This assessment was also conducted in 2011 where learners from a sample of 49 countries participated in PIRLS and pre PIRLS which is a less difficult version of PIRLS (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Drucker 2012:5). South Africa, Botswana and Colombia opted to participate in the prePIRL assessment. The prePIRLS 2011 study results revealed that South African Grade 4 learners obtained 461 (SE = 3.7), the lowest reading achievement score in comparison with the international centre point of 500. As compared to learners from Botswana who achieved 463 (SE = 3.5) and learners from Colombia who achieved 576 (SE = 3.4) (Mullis et al. 2012:39). From the results above, it is evident that Grade 4 learners in South Africa perform poorly in comparison to those from other countries; and that they were also performing below the expected reading level.

The results of various research projects gave rise to many discussions on learners' poor language skills, especially reading skills. The two researchers who wrote this article decided to embark on a research study concerning the reading performance of Grade 4 learners. In an attempt to understand the reasons why Grade 4 fared so poorly in the reading assessment that was conducted, the researchers turned to the language teachers; the people who work with the Grade 4 learners on a daily basis. The researchers opine that often the teachers' opinions are not included in research projects and therefore it was anticipated that listening to the teachers would provide an understanding of the said teachers' views on and their perceptions of teaching reading to their learners.

5. The research design and methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach since the researchers aimed to gain a first-hand holistic understanding of the possible reasons for reading problems experienced by Grade 4 learners. The main aim as discussed in this paper is to understand what the Grade 4 teachers' opinions were about the reasons for the reading problems. An ethnographic design was used in the study, because the researchers were also interested in documenting the attitude of the teachers towards learners who were experiencing reading problems and their practice in terms of supporting them. The researchers had an interactive relationship with the participants who were interviewed and who were observed whilst teaching reading (Fouché & Delport 2006:74). The qualitative method departs from a constructivist point of view.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory formed the underlying structure of the research project, because the researchers saw the reasons for the poor performance in reading as a set of interrelated and interconnected systems. According to Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2006:40), Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory has a significant influence on the understanding of how different levels of a system in the social context interact in the process of child development. For Bronfenbrenner (cited in Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2006: 41-42) child development happens within four nested systems: the micro-system, the meso-system, exo-system and macro-systems that interact with the chrono-system. The study took place in schools; therefore, the micro-level was particularly relevant; albeit that it is acknowledged that what happens on one level directly or indirectly affects functioning on another level. Therefore the findings also relate to the meso-, exo- and macro-systems. This will become evident in the discussion of the data.

6. Population and sampling

In order to structure the study, purposive sampling was used to select the respondents and the researchers selected teachers who had experience in teaching language to Grade 4 learners. Grade 4 English teachers were purposively identified from four different primary schools in the Ekurhuleni South district in Gauteng. Among the selected four schools three were from the suburban areas and one from the township areas. The specific schools were selected because of their geographical setting and accessibility for the researchers to collect data. The school also provided a mixture with regard to the environment where the schools were situated and the socio-economic background of the learners. In total, seven teachers were involved, one of whom was involved in a pilot study. The participants were selected based on their years of experience as language teachers as well as the fact that they were all teaching English as a home language or as the first additional language to Grade 4 learners.

7. Data collection instruments

The researchers also observed the participants in the natural setting of their classrooms. Over a period of four weeks, two days per week were spent at each identified school observing reading lessons and the learners' reading. The researchers also wanted to see how the learners responded to the teaching and learning and the reading methodologies used by the teachers. This was done in order to strengthen the information gathered through interviews. The researchers' comprehensively captured field notes throughout the period, including detailed, non-judgmental, concrete descriptions of their observations. The researchers used Creswell's method (1998) to analyse the collected data. According to Creswell (Leedy & Ormrod 2005:150), data analysis is a spiral, that is, equally applicable to a wide variety of qualitative studies. Taking this view into account, the researchers went over the data several times, following these steps:

- organise the data in the form of smaller units
- peruse the entire data several times to get a sense of what it contains as a whole
- identify general categories or themes, and perhaps sub-categories or sub-themes, classify and categorise accordingly
- integrate and summarise the data for the readers. These steps might include offering presuppositions that describe relationships among categories.

Before the research commenced, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education, the principals of the four schools, and the seven teachers. While conducting classroom observations, the researchers acted in an ethical way in that they did not interfere with any activities at the school, and they did not collect personal information from the learners.

8. Research findings

Certain themes arose from the interviews and during classroom observations. Some of the themes relate to the micro-level and meso-level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory since they deal with factors in the school and factors involving the parents of learners. There were also issues to be found on the exo-level and macro-level which deal with the involvement of the school districts where the schools are situated. This clearly shows that in a system such as a Grade 4 classroom factors can be found on all the levels which could have an influence on the functioning of the system. The following are the main themes that arose from the research.

8.1 Teaching reading in Grade 4

Three issues arose from the discussions on reading and teaching reading in the Grade 4 classroom. These issues form the subsections of this section and include: the teachers' understanding of the concept "reading"; reading problems in Grade 4; and strategies to teach reading in Grade 4.

8.1.1 *Understanding the concept "reading"*

The research that was conducted dealt with the teaching of reading. Thus, the researchers deemed it necessary to start the interviews with the teachers with a question about the concept "reading". Reading is a skilled and strategic process of which learning to decode and read words accurately and rapidly is an essential feature (Vaughn, Bos & Schumm 2007:333). From the data collected, four participants agreed that reading was about gaining knowledge and understanding what one is reading.

Despite her struggle to express herself correctly in English, participant E4 gave a comprehensive explanation in terms of the input and output process: “I think reading is interpretation of what the senses take out there in the environment, processed into the brain and become an output throughout (sic) the mouth and how (sic) and accuracy of the eyes.”

It was evident that some of the participants had been thinking about the concept “reading”. From what they said during the opening phase of the interviews, it was evident that they believed that reading could help develop a person’s knowledge and understanding. Participant E1’s feedback provides an example of a comprehensive personal understanding of the concept “reading” when she commented as follows: “The more you read you extend your vocabulary, the more you extend your knowledge of the word.”

The data collected also revealed that all participants interviewed regarded it as important for Grade 4 learners to read well. This was evident from Participant E3’s comment: “It helps you to acquire knowledge and be able to communicate with other. Reading and writing go hand in hand. If one knows how to read one is expected to be able to express oneself about what was read.” This was affirmed by Participant E6 who commented that without reading the learner cannot write.

8.1.2 Reading problems in Grade 4

The participants acknowledged that there were certain learners who were reading below their grade level and also a group of learners who could not read at all. From the data it was noted that learners were unable to read as a result of a lack of a proper foundation in reading in the lower grades; and they were therefore battling with the demands of Grade 4. Learners were not taught how to read, but were expected to use reading to understand other learning areas in Grade 4. As Participant E5 said: “When you come to the Intermediate Phase you do not have to teach reading.”

According to Rault-Smith (2009:35), learners entering Grade 4 are expected to be fluent and independent readers. They must be able to read on their own. Participant E4 agreed with this statement in her response: “Reading is very important because it creates independency and make a child to be self-reliant.” During classroom observation the researchers noted that when learners were asked to read, most read word for word and still required assistance from the teacher. The researchers got the impression that these learners were taught to read only using the phonic method or the bottom-up approach. They were apparently not trained to see a word or a sentence as whole. Their vocabulary was limited and as a result they were not fluent in reading. It should be remembered that the learners were using English as a first additional language and thus their vocabulary was limited. This could influence reading comprehension. The learners also became easily distracted and frustrated; they read slowly and could not give meaning to what they had read.

8.1.3 Approaches to teach reading in Grade 4

Reading is a skill that needs to be taught, because it increases one's vocabulary and independence. The potential to read is within the learner; therefore it is the teacher's responsibility to develop it. All learners are different; hence, teachers should use a variety of approaches to accommodate each learner according to his/her reading needs.

Participants agreed and differed in their opinions on the approach used to teach reading in Grade 4. It was noted from the interviews that they use different reading approaches to accommodate different learners. This was supported by participants E3 and E4: "In Grade 4 our reading approach is based on comprehension. We do not use a specific approach," and "I would not say I have a prescribed method."

From the data collected the most common approaches preferred by participants were sounding words (phonic method or bottom-up approach), syllabification and the whole word approach. Unfortunately the phonic approach does not emphasise the important issue of comprehension in the reading process. Participants E1 and E5 indicated the importance of combining the different approaches when teaching reading. They were referring to the combined or eclectic approach to the teaching of reading. They commented that they used the eclectic approach.

During the observation, the researchers noted that the participants used different approaches to encourage learners when reading. All of them started by firstly encouraging the learners to sound words whenever they are not sure about these words when reading. If the learners could not read specific words properly, they were encouraged to break up the words into syllables. Participant E1 mentioned concrete objects which related to the story, such as pearls, whereas participant E4 had pictures associated with words used in the story.

It is evident that some of the Grade 4 teachers were not trained like Foundation Phase teachers to be versatile in the use of methods or approaches to teach reading. If learners were not well trained to read in the Foundation Phase or if the learners could not master reading in the Foundation Phase, it could mean that they sit in a Grade 4 class without a teacher to help them to master reading well.

8.2 Curriculum changes in Grade 4

In Grade 4 the academic demands change from more informal learning in the Foundation Phase to formal learning. Grade 4 learners are now expected to read, write and comprehend what they have read to cope with the academic demands, which means that even the learners who were previously taught in an African language are expected to understand English well and to also understand what they are reading and studying in all the learning areas.

From the data collected, participants raised various concerns that the learners have to face once they have reached Grade 4. They were all concerned about the number of learning areas that are taught and which, according to the teachers, might be too much for the learners to cope with. This was evident in the following comments. Participant E4: "Learners move from three learning areas to eight learning areas." Participant E2: "[The] shift in Grade 4 is so much." With regard to the new Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the number of learning areas in Grade 4 will be reduced from eight to six, but during the time of study the learners studied eight learning areas.

Learners in Grade 4 move from being taught by one teacher to being taught by various subject teachers. This issue raised more concern among the participants, because they are unable to follow up on the progress of learners. Participant E1 supported this by making the following comment "[t]here is no time for follow-up."

Another issue noted from the data was the teachers' concerns about the time allocated for different learning areas. They commented that they did not have time assigned for teaching reading in Grade 4. Participant E3 made the following statement: "We don't have a certain period just dedicated to reading; we do reading among all we are doing." This point corresponds with what was observed. During the classroom observation the researchers noted that the timetable for all participants only indicated English as a learning area. The learning area was not subdivided into different lessons to include all the components and skills required for teaching a language. There are, however, suggested time allocations specifically for reading in both the home language and in the additional language in the CAPS document.

Participants were also concerned about the quality of education given to the learners. Participant E4 noted: "What we are interested in now is coverage of the syllabus, it does not matter whether I have children that can read or not in my classroom, as long I can say to the district I have covered so much which to me is of a window dressing, is not quality work."

It was also a challenge for Participant E4 to give intensive individual reading support to the learners since there were far too many learners in the classroom. With reference to the data collected, it was evident that the concept of learner pacing had not been implemented. The teachers were forced to rush while they were teaching in order to complete the curriculum while at the same time the learners were expected to adjust to the changes they are faced with in the new grade.

8.3 Training Intermediate Phase teachers to teach initial reading skills

Although the teachers in this investigation were professionally trained to teach Grade 4 learners not all of them were trained in how to teach reading and certain components of teaching reading. For example, the phonic method, the whole-word method and the combination of the two methods raised a major concern. From the data collected, only two participants were qualified as junior primary teachers and they were thus trained to

teach reading. Three of the participants were qualified as Intermediate phase teachers and one had not been trained as a teacher. This indicates except for the two teachers who were initially trained for the Foundation phase and thus received training on how to teach reading, the other teachers were not trained or retrained to teach reading. The Intermediate Phase teachers needed more training to know how to teach reading and specific reading skills, which includes the main methods and approaches to teaching beginning reading.

Two of the teachers had the following to say about the training in teaching reading that they received. Participant E5 said: "No, I was never being taught how to teach reading, only the Junior Primary students. I'm a Senior Primary teacher. We were never been taught how to teach sound, how to teach a child to learn to read because I think they took it as common knowledge you learn to read in Grade 1,2 and 3." Participant E6 gave her personal opinion about the kind of training that he received from the college: "I do regret the years I spent in a college. I was trained as a primary school teacher, higher primary school teacher but I really do not remember our lecturer teaching us how to teach reading or rather giving us a lesson on reading skills." The response correlates with Taylor's findings in his research on initial teacher education. In his report he states that "none of the five institutions who participated in the project provides a course in literacy instruction" (DHET: 2016:15).

It is evident that there is no link between teaching reading in the Foundation Phase and the Intermediate Phase in the curricula of the respective teacher training institutions. Questions about what should be done when a learner progresses from Grade 3 to Grade 4 and is still unable to read according to the demands of the Grade 4 classroom should be attended to so that these learners could be supported.

8.4 Insufficient district support

The involvement of the various districts in the provincial departments of education relates to the exo-system of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. The Gauteng Department of Education demonstrated its commitment to assist in solving reading problems and re-training teachers. During the re-training of teachers, emphasis was placed on word recognition and how to help learners relate to what was read. From the data collected, all participants acknowledged that training through workshops was organised by the district, however, concerns were raised about the matter. They raised a concern about the kind of workshops offered by the districts. According to them, the most challenging issue was that most workshops offered were general and did not deal with their needs.

Participant E2 said in this regard: "Generally the workshop that we attend is more on English as a learning area to discuss Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards not on how to teach reading and its components such as word recognition." Participant E5 also raised concerns and highlighted that the workshops were the same and repetitive: "If called for reading workshop is usually the same one. We had the phonics and the reading workshop twice in two years in a row."

From the data it was noted that five participants strongly emphasised the insufficient support provided by the district. Participant E6 managed to indicate the number of workshops attended. The following quote supports the statement: “Not so often maybe twice in a year, they will call us for an English workshop.”

Another point that was raised was the lack of regular support in the Intermediate Phase as compared to the support during the Foundation Phase. The Intermediate Phase teachers felt that they were being left out when the district rendered support. This was evident in the following comment from Participant E3: “In the Intermediate Phase we really don’t attend such training”.

It can be deduced from the data that the Grade 4 teachers were not trained in how to teach reading at workshops; hence, it was the responsibility of the English district facilitator to provide adequate support. Interviewed Grade 4 teachers showed that they had the limited knowledge of what reading and word recognition entailed. They, however, needed to know and understand how to teach these skills. If the necessary support was not provided, they ended up not knowing what to do and not teaching reading at all. As a result, continuous class visits by district officials are needed to support the teachers in order to ensure that reading is taught properly in class.

8.5 Parental involvement

The involvement of parents or caregivers in the lives of young learners is another factor at the micro-level which could influence Grade 4 learners’ acquisition of reading. In order for the learners’ reading ability to improve, all parties should be involved. But as a result of parents’ long working hours and lack of sufficient knowledge, they did not render any support. According to Darling and Westberg (2004:774), parent involvement has a great impact on the child’s mastering of reading. Parents need to encourage their children to read and help them recognise words instantly. Contrary to what was indicated, participants felt that parents were not allowing themselves time to read with their children at home. Two participants highlighted the lack of support from home as a challenging issue. This could lead to the learner being unable to develop an interest in reading. The following comments were made: Participant E3: “Not be encouraged at home.” Participant E4: “Secondly no involvement of parents in improving the children’s reading.”

It is evident that there is a lack of the parental involvement in the learning process. Parental involvement could improve Grade 4 learners’ reading abilities. In paired reading programmes which could be done at home, parents could, for instance, read together with their children. This could encourage the children to read at home every day and enhance their self-esteem

9. Conclusion

The teaching of reading and all its components is still a challenge for the Grade 4 teachers who formed part of the research project. As shown by this research, teachers are willing to use their knowledge and experience to deal with the challenges that learners in their classrooms experience but they do not have enough knowledge about the various methods to teach reading and how to address reading problems. There were also factors which affect teachers when supporting learners with reading problems, such as, when to teach reading in the classroom according to the CAPS document and the lack of strategies to support learners to master reading, which is an issue that needs to be discussed at macro-level where policies are being formulated. When dealing with such matters the provincial departments should be given an opportunity to come up with ways to structure their school's timetable in order to ensure that all components of reading and the learners' reading needs are met. The lack of parental involvement also surfaced as a contributing factor to the Grade 4 learners' reading problems.

If Grade 4 teachers can be properly trained on how to teach reading and its components and how to address reading problems that learners may have; and if they receive continuous monitoring and support from the Department of Education, there could be improvement in their support to learners in their classrooms who experience reading problems. It is thus clear that based on the data discussed in this paper that learners' reading problems could be dealt with if addressed at all the levels as set out in Bronfenbrenner's system theory.

It is, however, the Grade 4 teachers who play a pivotal role in addressing the reading problems of some of their learners. Place (2016:52) aptly states about the Grade 4 classroom: "The teachers of learners in these classes need to play their role in providing the challenge and support these children require in order to advance their skills in language learning and their ability to read ..."

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