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# Exploring Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Reading Proficiency to IsiZulu Foundation Phase Learners at Rural Schools in KwaZulu-Natal

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite many interventions that have been implemented to address the challenges in teaching reading, few successes have been achieved. This article explores teachers' challenges in teaching reading to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners at rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. A phenomenological research design in the qualitative domain was adopted. Seventeen participants were selected by purposeful sampling from two Foundation Phase schools. Data was generated through two focus-group discussions, of which the transcripts were analysed through interpretive phenomenological analysis. The findings indicated that teachers seemed to have different understandings regarding which initial skills should be

taught to learners to prepare them to be proficient readers. Over-reliance on scripted lesson plans hinders teachers from applying the teaching strategies that can best accommodate all their learners' learning needs and give them time to support those who lag behind. This study recommends that a reading skills analysis be conducted for each learner either weekly or fortnightly to enable teachers to know the learners' shortfalls and be able to offer support before problems escalate.

**Keywords:** Explicit teaching, phonics knowledge, progressive teaching, reading comprehension, reading proficiency, transparent orthography

## 1. Introduction

Reading ability is a foundational skill, a critical requirement for all academic advancement and survival in everyday living (IRT International 2015). The consequences of reading failure may be detrimental to different aspects of a person's life and also for a country as a whole (Cronje 2021). South Africa is currently experiencing a challenge of learners who cannot read according to their grade levels (Spaull 2011; Cronje 2021; Rule & Land 2017; du Plessis & Letshwene 2020). The Department of Education revealed that Systemic Evaluations indicated that 38% of Grade 3 learners performed poorly in the reading comprehension tests they took in their Home Languages (DoE 2007; Spaull 2011; Sibanda 2017). According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2012), the national average for literacy at Grade 4 and Grade 6 in 2012 was 34%. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), which evaluated Grade 6 learners, revealed that 27% of the learners were illiterate and could not read a short and simple text and get meaning (Spaull 2013). Despite many interventions to mitigate the challenge of low reading skills in South African learners, the challenge persists.

This article seeks to critically analyse teachers' challenges in teaching reading proficiency to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners. There are conflicting ideas regarding how reading should be taught. The proponents of phonics instruction and whole-language instruction have been involved in what has been called the "Reading Wars" (Treiman 2018). In a whole-language approach, children are encouraged to use the context or their prior knowledge to make predictions about words rather than using grapho-phonetic cues. O'Carroll (2011:8) stated that whole-language theorists had argued that "letter cues are not reliable, particularly in a language such as English where letters can represent different sounds". Trudell and Schroeder (2007) and Cronje (2021) stated that the reading methodologies used for teaching reading in sub-Saharan Africa are typically borrowed from other linguistic environments and developed with foreign socio-educational goals in mind. The linguistic and socio-educational realities of African language communities are often ignored in the formal school environment where the influence of western pedagogy dominates (Trudell & Schroeder 2007). Languages are different linguistically and need a differentiated approach in teaching (Addington, Wills, Pretorius, Deghaye, Maholwane, Menendez, Mtsatse & Van der Berg 2020). The belief that African Home Languages can be taught using the same approaches as languages like English has therefore probably contributed to the problems we have in the country.

## 2. Problem Statement

The challenges experienced by Foundation Phase learners in reading indicate that there is a serious gap in the teaching of reading. It is evident that some learners are not acquiring basic reading skills in the Foundation Phase. There is an urgent need for research-based evidence on early interventions that will effectively improve early literacy competence. As stated earlier, studies have revealed that the teaching methodologies

used for teaching African languages are inappropriate but that the voices raised in these studies are seemingly not loud enough (du Plessis & Letshwene 2020; Cronje 2021). Elaborating on the same issue, Cronje (2021:2) maintains that “the possible pedagogic cause for the failure to learn to read, is that approaches used to initial reading are not working well for African children learning African languages”. Policy and programme planners in the education department seem not to be doing enough on the issue, although they are aware that the current methodologies used in African schools are failing our learners.

Teachers’ pedagogical knowledge is critical for the teaching of reading, including how to support those learners who struggle with reading (Washburn, Joshi & Cantrell 2011; Westerveld & Barton, 2017). Professional development programmes and teacher education institutions should produce teachers who are highly competent in teaching reading methodologies. There is a need for teachers to be developed to take full control of decisions on the appropriate teaching approaches that suit their learners’ needs. A significant body of research-based evidence demonstrates that reading processes differ by language, with variations in the core skills employed by learners learning to read (Probert & de Vos, 2016; Dowd & Bartlett, 2019).

South Africa has learners from different environments that need to be taken into consideration in schools. Studies reveal that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds begin schooling with fewer early literacy skills than their peers from middle-class backgrounds because of the lack of a literate environment (O’Carroll 2011; Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli 2017; Treiman 2018). Therefore, teachers’ strong and deep knowledge of teaching approaches would empower them to understand the “reading wars” and be able to choose what is best for their learners.

### **3. Theoretical Framing**

The study conducted for the present article was framed within the scope of socio-cultural theory and the concepts of African indigenisation of knowledge production. Lev Vygotsky (1978) provided a viewpoint on reading through the socio-cultural theory of learning (Lantolf 2006; Remi & Lawrence 2012). Socio-cultural theorists view reading as a social skill that requires active participation, interaction and involvement by learners (Reza & Mahmood 2013). Vygotsky (1978) is well known for the two main metaphors in learning namely, scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978:85) described the ZPD as: “The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”. This theory emphasises the importance of the teacher as the mediator of knowledge and for them to be knowledgeable about effective reading instruction, in the context/case of the present article.

Scaffolding refers to supporting students to varying degrees until they have acquired new skills (Larkin 2002; Rosenshine & Meister 1992). Scaffolding ends once students are independently able to do tasks which are beyond their current capabilities. Teachers' comments, modelling and feedback provide learners with the desire to take responsibility for their learning and to gain independence from their teachers' continuous support. Scaffolding strategies represent a bridge that helps learners to move from one place to another one; it is a tool rather than a goal itself (Salem 2017). Although scaffolding has been criticised as adult-driven as the scaffolder constructs the scaffold alone and presents it to the learner, I believe developing reading in the Foundation Phase requires much scaffolding by the teacher as it is a critical technique in reading skills acquisition.

A number of scholars have alluded to the importance of the indigenisation of education. Semali (1999) maintained that indigenous literacies provide an important database for any follow-up learning. According to Semali (1999), indigenous literacies are a complex set of abilities that learners bring to the classrooms – abilities which relate to their stories of everyday life, traditions, poetry, songs, proverbs, dreams, epistemology and skills to communicate complex matters among themselves and with others outside their communities. The concept of indigenous literacies assists in highlighting the urgency of bringing the knowledge and cultural background of African learners to the classroom. It is thus a mistake that the DBE provides a well-planned reading programme that does not consider the diversity of contexts where learners come from. In support of this statement, Semali (1999) maintained that curriculum designers must recognise that there is not one indigenous culture that needs to be incorporated into education. Semali (1999:317) further stated that models of education borrowed from other African cultures can be as oppressive as the Euro-American models.

## **4. Literature Review**

### ***Challenges in Teaching Reading in African Indigenous Languages***

South African's indigenous languages are offered as languages of teaching and learning (LoLT) in most schools with English as a First Additional Language (FAL) but the whole-language approach is widely recommended for both Home Language and FAL. Languages differ in terms of linguistic, culture and socio-economic status. English differs radically from African languages in terms of the structure and orthography (Land 2015). African indigenous languages, such as isiZulu, have consistent and transparent orthography that makes pronunciation of words predictable from their spelling (Land 2015). In contrast, the English language has a deep, opaque, non-agglutinating, disjunctive and inconsistent orthography (Ziegler & Goswami 2005; Ziegler et al. 2010). This means that it is impossible to predict pronunciation of English words without prior knowledge of how a printed word will sound; for example, words like “photo, phone, morpheme”. In isiZulu, the sound “f” always sounds the same as in, for example, “faka,

fihla, isifuba, imfumba”. There are a number of differences that have been revealed by different studies.

### ***Inequalities***

There are learners in African rural communities who do not have resources like books and libraries either at school or at home compared to their peers from affluent communities. Trudell and Schroeder (2007) maintained that the realities of African language communities are often ignored. Most African children come from poor socio-economic backgrounds and start schooling not having the same exposure to a literate environment as English-speaking children who are more advantaged (Ntuli & Pretorius 2005; Trudell & Schroeder 2007; Tlale 2021). Due to the lack of reading materials in poorly- resourced schools, when these learners enter the formal schooling system, they have limited opportunities to extend and enrich the scope of their language and literacy experiences (Ntuli & Pretorius 2005). Tlale (2021) maintains that South African studies of academic achievement have consistently found that there is a strong and positive correlation between socio-economic background and academic performance.

### ***Linguistic Characteristics of IsiZulu Language***

IsiZulu is one of the 11 official South African languages and falls under the Nguni cluster. Like other African languages, isiZulu has agglutination patterns, meaning that it is often modified by very short, conjoined morphemes that cluster around word stems in single words (Land 2015; Spaul, Pretorius & Mohohlwane 2017). According to Hendrikse and Poulos (2006), in agglutinating languages such as the African languages, there are very few free morphemes and linguistic units comprise mainly bound morphemes such as roots and affixes. The implication for learners is that they cannot rely on recognition of fairly fixed word units since even small morphological changes (for example, single letters only) in prefix, infix and suffix position carry significant meaning.

IsiZulu has a conjoined writing system which means that learners must deal with long, complex words whose composition changes with meaning (Land 2015) the most widely spoken indigenous language in Southern Africa, by exploring measurable aspects of eye movement patterns of a group of competent adult readers of isiZulu. In doing so, the study offers an exploration of the particular demands that Zulu orthography makes on readers, and offers a tentative profile of the reading processes currently exhibited by proficient adult readers of isiZulu. The study indicates that with an average reading speed of 815 lines per minute (lpm). IsiZulu has tonal patterns that are crucially important cues for meaning in oral communication and facilitate a listener’s interpretation of its limited range of permitted syllables as they group and regroup in abundant possible permutations (Land 2015). The implication of this for learners is that they must seek cues for meaning in other sources such as context and that there is a high degree of potential for confusion in relation to the many morphemes which are homographic but differ completely in meaning according to their tone.

IsiZulu has words with single, digraphs, trigraphs, and quadgraphs. A learner who is beginning Grade R and Grade 1 needs to learn phonology and letter-sound relationship to prepare them to decode words. Grapho-phonics should be introduced gradually starting from simple letter sounds to complex ones. For learners to be proficient readers, they have to recognise multi-letter units and whole words through extensive practice in decoding words or parts of words (Penner-Wilger 2008; Verhoeven, Reitsma & Siegel 2011). Van Rooy and Pretorius (2013) recommended that consideration should be given to ensuring that early grade readers (those in Grade 1, for example) contain fairly simplified isiZulu language and that a transitional, more disjunctive orthography be used for longer word units in the early phases of isiZulu reading.

### ***Research Question***

What challenges do teachers face in teaching reading proficiency to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners at schools in KwaZulu-Natal?

### ***Objective of the Study***

The objective was to explore the teachers' challenges in teaching reading ability to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners at schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

## **5. Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study adopted a qualitative and phenomenological research design to explore the teachers' challenges when teaching reading in the Foundation Phase. According to Astalin (2013), qualitative research can be considered a systematic scientific inquiry that seeks to build a holistic, largely narrative description to inform the researcher's understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon. The phenomenological design was chosen because it is helpful when conducting long interviews with the participants directed towards understanding their perspectives on their everyday experience with the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase (McMillan & Schumacher 2014). The study sought to find out the teachers' perspectives about the challenges they encounter in teaching reading in isiZulu. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was suitable for this study as it puts emphasis on experiential claims and concerns of the persons taking part in the study (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006).

## Participants and Setting

The population consisted of Foundation Phase teachers from primary schools in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of the Republic of South Africa. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, which allowed the researcher to identify the participants that were directly involved with the teaching of isiZulu and who could provide rich information. Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) stated that purposive sampling is also called judgement sampling as it is the deliberate choice of a participant based on the qualities they possess.

Seventeen teachers (N = 17, Focus Group 1 = 12, and Focus Group 2 = 5) participated in this study. All participants were teachers responsible for the IsiZulu Home Language subject. They had between 3 to 25 years of teaching experience and lived in the rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal. The study took place in two primary schools in the rural area in KwaZulu-Natal.

**Table 1: Demographic profiles of participants**

	School 1 Focus-Group Discussion 1												School 2 Focus-Group Discussion 2				
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P 1	P 2	P 3	P 4	P 5
Age	38	34	55	40	45	44	48	46	42	48	32	58	29	46	33	35	49
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Residential Areas	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN	KZN
Culture	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z	Z
Qualifications	Dip	Dip	ACE & BEd	Dip	ACE & BEd	Dip	ACE & BEd	Dip	Dip	BEd Hons	Dip	ACE & BEd	Gr-12	BEd Hon	ACE & BEd	ACE & BEd	ACE & BEd
Experience	10	8	22	12	16	17	21	19	15	20	7	25	4	19	7	10	20
Grade	R	R	R	1	3	1	3	3	1	2	2	2	R	1	2	3	3

F = Female; KZN = KwaZulu-Natal; Z = Zulu; ACE = Advanced Certificate in Education; BEd = Bachelor of Education; BEd Hons = Bachelor of Education: Honours; Dip = Diploma



## **Research Tools**

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured focus-group discussions. The researcher used field notes and audio-recording during the discussions. Semi-structured interviews were suitable for this study as they allowed the researcher an opportunity to ask probing or follow-up questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019; Sarantakos 2013). The researcher used an interview guide to assist in directing the discussions. The purpose of collecting data from two focus groups from different schools was triangulation, which helped in contrasting and validating the data to determine if it yielded similar findings. Triangulation assisted the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Patton, 1999; Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenco & Nevile 2014).

## **Procedure**

The study emanated from a community engagement project conducted by the Department of Early Childhood at the University of X. Before embarking on the project, the community engagement permission was sought from the DBE. Two schools were purposefully selected because they matched the features that the department was looking for, such as the situatedness in the rural area, having an indigenous African language as a LoLT and specialising in the Foundation Phase. Permission was also sought from the principals of schools. After the project was presented and explained to the teachers, they were requested to sign the consent forms after being assured of confidentiality and the freedom to participate and withdraw at any stage of the project.

Data was generated from two focus groups from the two sampled schools. The researcher conducted a 60-minute focus-group interview with each group. The researcher prepared an interview guide to use during unstructured interviews. The purpose of using focus groups was to explore the participants' rich and detailed set of data about their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and ideas about a topic (Dilshad & Latif 2013; Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee 2017). Focus groups are predominantly beneficial in that the participants are able to learn from one another as they reflect on their practice and create a more natural environment than individual interviews as they influence and are influenced by others – like conversations in real life (Dilshad & Latif 2013). Elaborating on the shortcoming of focus groups, Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick and Mukherjee (2017) highlight that focus group participants may sometimes be reluctant to deal with sensitive topics in a discussion setting compared with an individual interview.

## **Data Analysis**

Data was analysed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is beneficial for examining different research participants' perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences, and producing unanticipated insights (Clarke & Braun 2014).

I focused on consistency, frequency of comments, extensiveness of comments, the specificity of comments, what was not said, and finding the main idea (Morgan & Krueger 1998). The categories assisted in developing and constructing themes for the study. The research questions served as a guide for conducting the analysis. Each question became a major coding category. I followed six phases of thematic analysis: familiarising myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

## **Findings**

This study revealed that teachers encountered several challenges in teaching isiZulu to Foundation Phase learners at schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. From the participants' responses, emergent themes included failure to identify reading difficulties in time, lack of proper support to learners, uncertainty about the expected reading levels and different techniques on supporting learners with problems in letter-sound knowledge.

### **Failure to identify reading difficulties in time**

In addressing the question of what kind of difficulties learners experienced in reading, the participants' responses indicated that the main challenge that emerged is that difficulties in reading were not identified in time. Early identification of reading problems may prevent reading failure and provide skillful literacy instruction in the form of reading recovery. Two participants who teach Grade 3 reported that they have learners in their classrooms who cannot read according to their grade level. Participant 4 from Focus Group Discussion (FGD) 1 stated that:

*"In my Grade 3 class, I have learners who have a challenge in independent reading. They can't read independently. They fail to recognise most letter sounds in a text. I think they did not master the letter sounds in Grade 1 and 2."* (Participant 4, FGD 1)

It is evident from the above verbatim quotation that the reading problems that the learners had were not identified in lower grades. Learners were moved to the next grade without getting proper help. Participant 7, FGD 1, reiterated the same idea as the previous speaker. She stated that she was a Grade 3 teacher and had close to ten learners who could not read letter sounds learned in Grade 1. Despite trying several times to teach Grade 1 work, she had not succeeded. Elaborating on the same issue, Participant 7, FGD 1, clarified that time constraints also hindered her as they are using preplanned lesson plans and monitoring tools through Jik'Imfundo programme. They have to ensure that they follow the given plan in order not to be behind.

Reporting on the same issue of the learners who experience reading difficulties, two other participants reported that their learners experienced challenges with phonics. Participant 5, FGD 1, reported that the biggest challenge was that learners did struggle

with phonics in such a way that most of them could not read the whole sentence without struggling to read a particular word. In the words of Participant 3, FGD 1:

*“My learners struggle with phonics. As a Grade 2 teacher it is difficult to go back and teach previous grades’ work as we have limited time to cover the preplanned lesson plans. Other teachers are not using the phonic (letter/ alphabet sound) approach entirely.”*

Three participants from Focus Group 2 reiterated the challenge of phonic knowledge. They reported that:

*“Most learners have poor phonic knowledge. The challenge is that most of them cannot recognise most words in a text, which makes it difficult to read with understanding and independently.”* (Participant 14, FGD 2).

*“Most learners do not know their phonics. Many children cannot read, even at Grade 7 level. It seems as if some teachers do not know how to help those learners who cannot read.”* (Participant FGP 15, FGD 2).

Participant 17, FGD2, stated that learners struggled with reading comprehension as they could not recognise words in a story. She indicated that she struggled to develop reading fluency skills among learners because most learners struggled to recognise words in the text. It is clear that all the above participants’ learners had problems with letter-sound knowledge. Participant 16, FGD2, clarified that the challenge was that teachers were compelled to promote learners who were incompetent because of the DBE’s promotional requirements on age and maximum years in the Foundation Phase. They had to pass learners even though they did not meet the requirements.

The above transcripts indicate that the challenge that hinders learners from reading is poor knowledge of phonics. Phonics cannot be learned incidentally but need to be explicitly and systematically taught (Rupley, Blair & Nichols 2009). It prepares learners to recognise words and read with meaning. However, it is not only phonics teaching that prepares a learner for conventional comprehension. Preparation for reading with meaning includes different activities and processes, such as exposing a learner to a literate environment (Ntuli & Pretorius 2005). This becomes a challenge to most learners from rural communities who do not have resources like affluent communities do.

Although the participants indicated that their learners struggled with phonics, which made it hard for them to recognise words, it was evident that they failed to identify the difficulties in time for the purpose of giving immediate support. It is crucial that learners’ problems in reading are identified and supported in time. There are slight chances that a learner may perform well in upper grades having failed to master lower grades work.

## ***Lack of proper support to learners who have reading difficulties***

The participants were asked this question: “How do you accommodate all the learners in your class during the reading lessons?” From the transcripts, the participants’ responses suggested that teachers had a limited understanding of differentiation of teaching approaches. Learners are different and they do not learn the same way. Learners cannot be taught reading using a one-size-fits-all approach. It is crucial to understand each learner’s needs so that they may progress according to their pace. Teachers should understand the learner’s frame of reference as every learning should link their prior knowledge with the new knowledge. Participant 9, FGD1, reported that: *“We lack skills to engage in multi-level classroom teaching to give support to learners properly.”* Elaborating on the same issue, Participant 7, FGD1, indicated that they needed support on how to assist learners who had reading problems. Participant 10, FGD1, indicated that some learners could not see (poor sight) and the font in the reading books was too small for them. There was no proper support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST). Participants from FGD 2 also mentioned that they were lacking in offering support to learners who encountered difficulties in reading. Reporting on the same issue, Participant 16, FGD2, stated that they were aware of the policy Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) but that the implementation of it was lacking.

It is evident that teachers need support on how to support learners who experience difficulties in reading. They reiterated that they needed support from the education department’s district-based support office, for instance, if they have learners who need to be referred for further screening. Learners who have problems like poor eye sight and hearing problems (impairment) need professional assessment and placement in the relevant school if the problem is severe. DBST’s work is crucial as schools cannot succeed on their own.

## ***Uncertainty about the expected reading levels***

Participants were asked to respond to this question: “How do you know if learners are reading at the expected level?” The participants’ responses showed that they lacked understanding about the expected reading levels, which could be considered a challenge in the teaching of reading to isiZulu Foundation Phase learners. Each teacher should have clear knowledge of the desired level of reading that a learner should achieve in each grade. This would help to determine whether a learner is ready to move to the next grade, almost ready, or struggling. If the learner is still struggling, the teacher would then provide the required support. Teachers’ knowledge of the required reading levels per grade would help them to collaborate in monitoring the progressive path of the acquisition of the required reading skills. Eight participants reported that they knew the expected reading levels for their grades. Three participants responded as follows:

*“I allow each learner to read individually. I give a learner a story to read, and after reading, I ask questions“. If the learner can answer the questions, I would know. The big challenge we come across is that the policy compels*

*us sometimes to pass learners even if they are incompetent, but they have to pass due to the age cohort. A learner can only fail once in a phase” (Participant 5, FGD1).*

*“I know that learners are reading at the expected level if they read with understanding.” (Participant 2, FGD1).*

*“If learners read with understanding. Unfortunately, most of our learners are unable to read with understanding.” (Participant 4, FGD1).*

The above responses indicate that most teachers in the group believed that reading comprehension was the ultimate goal of reading, which is correct. The researcher observed that most participants could not provide responses on how they know that a Grade R and Grade 1 learner is reading at an expected level or is ready for conventional reading.

The participants from Focus Group 2 provided different responses. Participant 15, FGD2, concurred with most participants in Focus Group 1, that reading comprehension determined that a learner was reading according to the expected level. Two participants reported that they knew that a learner was reading according to the expected level when they read individually. Participant 16, FGP 2, reported that she knew that a learner was reading at the expected level if the learner recognised most of the words in a text at their grade level. Participant 17, FGD1, believed that if a learner read well in a group, in pairs and individually, they were reading at the expected level.

The above responses provided different understandings of reading at the expected level. One participant indicated that if a learner was able to read individually that means that they read at the expected level of the grade. The other participant mentioned that if a learner recognised most words in the text, they were reading at the expected level but this also, like what was said by the previous participant, does not say anything about comprehending what has been read. Reading comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. The third participant also believed that if a learner read well in a group, they were reading at the expected level, which does not mean that they understand what they are reading.

### ***Different techniques on supporting learners with problems in letter-sound knowledge***

The participants were expected to state how they taught letter-sound knowledge, to overcome the challenges of learners who could not read. Focus Group 1 participants’ responses indicated that six participants stated that they used flashcards to assist learners who encountered difficulties in reading. Explicit teaching of phonics in isiZulu is crucial as it equips learners with skills that enhance reading comprehension. IsiZulu language words are made of single, digraphs, trigraphs, and four consonants. Letter sounds need

to be introduced gradually to facilitate the decoding of words. Six participants from FGD 1 reported that they wrote letter sounds on the cards to show learners how to put them together to make words. However, Participant 3, FGD1, provided a different response:

*“I write the letter-sound on the board and ask the learners to give the words with that sound.”*

Similarly, several other participants (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 9, and Participant 10, all from FGD1) indicated that they broke down syllables and drill sounds. Three participants reported that they used flashcards (Participant 14, Participant 15, and Participant 17, FGD2). Two other participants provided different responses; Here are their exact words:

*“I use puzzles to address difficulties in phonics. Learners like puzzles as it feels like they are playing. The challenge that I have is that I do not have enough puzzles in my class due to financial constraints.” (P13, FGD2).*

The researcher asked a follow-up question to all the participants: *How successful have you been after applying the techniques that you have mentioned?*

The participants were hesitant to come out and respond to the question. The first participant who responded stated that it depended on the learner: some learners' performance improved and some did not (Participant 4, FGD1). Five participants supported what Participant 4 stated, indicating that some learners improved and some did not.

## **6. Discussion**

The information collected from two focus groups of teachers who taught IsiZulu Home Language in Kwazulu-Natal reveals that there are inconsistencies and uncertainties around the teaching of reading as a whole. Tandika and Kumburu (2018) reported that teachers faced difficulties in teaching reading to learners because of different factors or challenges, such as over-enrolment, the teacher-learner ratio and lack of teaching and reading materials. From the four broad themes that emerged from the data collected for the current study, the results suggested that the Foundation Phase teachers could experience lack of skills in teaching reading at primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

In the literature review, it transpired that there are different ideologies and debates regarding the appropriate pedagogies that should be applied in the teaching of reading (Castles et al. 2018; Soler 2016). According to Soler (2016), the debates surrounding the teaching of reading approaches have become polarised over phonics versus whole-language approach. The debates and mixed ideas are affecting teachers on the ground as the implementers. The diverse views have contributed to teachers' confusion regarding how they should effectively develop the reading ability of all

African learners irrespective of their background. When teachers had to respond to the interview questions, I could observe the look in their eyes and that some were holding back and did not want to answer some questions. This signaled a lack of confidence in what they did.

I observed that teachers were not empowered to take decisions on the appropriate strategies for teaching reading. They relied on the preplanned lesson plans and the strategies that they were told to use in class, without considering that learners do not learn the same way and that their background knowledge is different. There was a lack of flexibility but relying more on what was prescribed by the DBE. Teachers should work individually and cooperatively with other teachers to better their understanding and classroom performance so that they are able to address some of the challenges, particularly those within their capacity (Tandika & Kumburu 2018). The results showed that Foundation Phase teachers could experience a lack of skills in accommodating diversity in teaching phonics at primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Learners acquire reading skills through explicit systematic instruction, unlike oral language which children learn naturally through interacting with people in their environment. Hornsby and Wilson (2011) contended that the teaching of reading should incorporate evidence-informed practices which include a place for explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

Learners begin schooling with different knowledge and skills. Their socioeconomic status often determines the levels of language acquisition among learners, as some learners from middle-class homes enter school already able to read at a basic level, which is not true for most children from high-poverty, low-text homes (Adams 1990; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). Teachers seemed to have different understandings about which initial skills should be taught to learners to prepare them to be proficient readers. I find it odd that researchers contradict the idea that learners do not learn the same way and should be taught based on their needs (DBE 2008; Phajane 2014). When it comes to teaching African languages, they advocate using the same methodologies as those recommended for teaching English, which is learned as a second language in most African communities.

The results demonstrated that Foundation Phase teachers could experience lack of knowledge regarding which basic reading skills and expected reading levels should be taught in the Foundation Phase. Every teacher should know exactly which reading skills should be mastered by learners in their classes. Two Grade 3 teachers revealed that there were learners in their classrooms who had not mastered single consonant words. I noted that there was a lack of emphasis on which basic phonic skills should be mastered by learners in each grade. Torgerson, Brooks, Gascoine and Higgins (2019:210), in emphasising the role of phonics instruction, stated that it enables learners to make faster progress in reading than no-phonics or meaning-emphasis approaches, especially if applied to meaningful texts. Double, McGrane, Stiff and Hopfenbeck (2019) found that phonics and phonemic awareness played a crucial role in teaching learners how to read, especially in the first three years of schooling.

## 7. Limitations of the study

Data for the article was generated using two focus groups, the researcher posed questions and the participants responded openly. This situation might have led to participants not expressing candid views, for instance, on issues relating to how they supported learners experiencing difficulties in class. The researcher observed that some participants sometimes would hold back and not elaborate when asked to elaborate. The researcher learned that some participants were not comfortable to openly discuss their teaching practice especially in the presence of their Head of Departments or Principals. This means that the information obtained was limited to focus groups, whereas different results might have been obtained from individual interviews.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study recommends an individualised teaching of reading. Teachers need to understand the individual differences among learners. Learners must be supported according to their individual needs. This requires proper assessment or a needs analysis of each learner. The reading skills analysis conducted for each learner either weekly or fortnightly could assist teachers to identify the learners' gaps and be able to offer support before the problems escalate. There is a need for an assessment blueprint that spells out the amount of instructional time and efforts that teachers should devote to each instructional task or strand. Learners' needs analysis could be done in groups if the class was big. In a week, the teacher could assess the reading needs of two groups. In the following week, they could assess other groups and simultaneously provide appropriate support to the groups that were assessed in the previous week. The teacher could devise a variety of support mechanisms tailor-made for each learner.

The ultimate purpose of reading is to derive meaning from the written text (Solikhah 2018). Before learners can read for meaning, they require strong grapho-phonetic knowledge as well as other important elements of reading (de Graaff, Bosman, Hasselman & Verhoeven 2009). This would enable learners to decode words and develop reading fluency. Reading fluency enhances the ability to read with understanding. It is crucial that the first graders be equipped with grapho-phonetic skills which should be done gradually, starting from sounds with single consonants. De Graaff et al. (2009) and Marima (2016) reported that phonics is the preferred method for teaching reading at the early childhood levels.

The study recommends the empowering of teachers in teaching reading so that they can gain confidence and make informed decisions about which strategies are appropriate for their learners. Some teachers who received their qualifications long ago when the teaching of the five components of reading were not yet emphasised need much support.



If we are to be more serious about solving the challenges of teaching reading, perhaps the DBE could think of engaging with the universities to design a short course on teaching reading for serving teachers, which they could study for free and earn some Continuing Professional Teacher Development credits. School management teams could play an important role in ensuring that teachers receive training on how to teach each component of reading and how to support learners who are struggling to read. According to Szelei, Tonica and Pinho (2020:792), school leadership needs to provide an environment that helps teachers in transcending the feeling that they struggle with in terms of perceived structural and societal challenges, to feeling empowered at least in their own classrooms to support learners the best way possible. The point of departure should be a training needs analysis to establish where each teacher needs to be developed to enable them to teach reading effectively. Mudzielwana (2012) recommended that the DBE take bold steps to raise reading standards by ensuring that teachers are conversant with its framework for reading. Teachers should be encouraged to enrol in institutions of higher learning that offer short courses in the teaching of reading.

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