

Socio-cultural Background Factors Affecting the Grade 3 Learners' Acquisition of English Literacy (Reading) Skills in Mthatha Education District of South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on the socio-cultural factors affecting the learners' acquisition of English Literacy (reading) skills in the Foundation Phase in selected schools in the Mthatha Education District. There is continuous intervention by educators, Government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and other concerned people in education to improve reading. Despite these interventions, the Foundation Phase is still accused of non-performance and that learners are struggling with reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase. Qualitative approach informed the investigation. Purposive sampling was used to select four Foundation Phase Grade 3 teachers from four rural and semi-urban schools. Semi-structured interviews that were voice recorded with participant's permission were used. The findings reveal that parents' low level of education; lack of parental involvement in the education of their children, the low-economic status of parents are some of the socio-cultural factors that affect the reading acquisition of learners. The paper concludes by suggesting that parents should play a vital role by helping their children in reading and read stories to them. They should, in turn, be encouraged to attend Adult Basic Education Centres (ABET) so as to improve their level of education. Finally, the Department of Basic Education should conduct workshops for parents to equip them with skills to assist learners read at home.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is the key to the prosperity of any country and is generally acknowledged that reading and literacy assessments indicate the success or failure of a country's education. Anderson (2005) argues that the 21st century requires a literate society constituting of people with the ability to effectively use different forms of literacy and not mere interpretation of lines of text. This means that there should be understanding and grasp. In 2004, the South African Department of Education (DoE) recognized reading literacy as one of the most important priorities in education. In line with this, reading is viewed by Anderson (1999), Granville (2000), Grabe and Stoller (2002) and Pretorius (2002) as cited by Cekiso (2007) as a skill essential to success in all academic areas. This means that reading is fundamental to the whole process of learning. Hence in 2008, the National Reading Strategy, whose

desired outcome was that all learners must be able to read basic text by the end of Grade 3 was introduced. It recognised reading as a foundational skill for all learning (Department of Education 2008: 11). The Department of Education (2011) postulates that reading also contributes to learners' language development in English and it gives learners more exposure to their additional language as their vocabulary development is heavily dependent on the amount of reading they do.

Learners are expected to develop reading and comprehension skills according to the requirements of each grade level. The Department of Education (2005) and Howie et al. (2007) state that South African learners perform below standard in reading and numeracy, and it is alarming that there seems to be little improvement in these areas despite various efforts by the government. These efforts include the launch of Masifunde Sonke Project in December 2000. The project was aimed at fulfilling the Department of Education's second major strategic priority, namely, "Breaking the back of illiteracy among adults and youth". Its main objective was to mobilise and promote the importance and value of reading and writing in schools, libraries and homes. It was also mandated to participate and support

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other reading promotion initiatives facilitated by Non-Governmental Organisations, Corporate Business Organizations and Non-Profit Organisations. The extent to which the project and these other initiatives achieved their intended outcomes is questionable as learners still lack comprehension of what they read.

In South Africa, studies conducted by the Department of Education as well as international bodies show that the culture of reading is declining (Department of Education 2008: 5) and that learners in South African schools perform poorly when tested for their ability to read at age-appropriate levels. The national report on the results of 1000 Grade 3 learners in 2008 indicates that 35 percent of Grade 3s country-wide obtained between 0 percent and 34 percent for literacy which included reading. This shows that there is no improvement in literacy levels of grade 3 learners in the country.

The problem that reading skill has deteriorated confirms the findings of the NGO Khanyisa project (2005) which conducted a baseline learner assessment in reading for Grade 3 in Limpopo Province in 2005. Their results have shown that more than half of the learners who wrote the literacy test were struggling to read at the expected levels of this Grade. This is confirmed by Bharuthram (2012) quoting Le Cordeur (2010a) that learners are not reading at the level expected of them in a specific grade. Also, a report released by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit in 2013 suggests that school children are not learning how to solve problems, or read independently (Department of Education 2013). They are expected to read fluently and with understanding and yet this is not the case because learners in Grade 3 generally struggle with phonic knowledge, word reading and reading fluency (National Education Psychological Services 2012). As a result they lack the understanding of what they read whereas the Department of Education (2008) states that learners should not be barking at print but read with understanding. That grade 3 learners do not read with understanding shows that they have a problem with the acquisition of reading skills.

The reality is that the learners who are taught via the medium of English experience difficulties in the areas of reading especially reading comprehension. This may be attributed to a number of barriers as Landsberg (2005) postulates that

there are various barriers to learners' acquisition of reading skills in the Foundation Phase. This is supported by Zimmerman et al. (2009) who also state that poor literacy in South Africa is usually associated with various contributory factors which hamper the success and development of South African learner's literacy education especially in the disadvantaged areas. These barriers are highly interdependent and are seldom responsible for reading difficulties. Once Foundation Phase learners experience difficulties in reading, this manifests in poor performance in other learning areas in the grade (Department of Education 2002: 20-21). This means that both Numeracy and Life Skills are affected.

Bradley and Corwyn (2002: 17) state that the parents who are uneducated and earn small wages have stress or depression because they cannot meet their children's needs in terms of buying reading books, magazines and other school needs. As a result their children may lack behind others in the acquisition of reading skills. It is also argued that parents who are more educated appear better able to provide their children with the academic and social support important for educational success when compared to parents who are less educated. Although parent's education may be advantageous to the learners it is doubted if they contribute to developing their children's reading skills.

According to Maharaj (2007) there are numerous challenges that surround reading, for instance, modern technological systems, illiteracy, poor environment and ignorance in reading. They all pose problems to learner's ability and commit miscues like omission, insertion, substitution and lack self-correction. Learners in the Foundation Phase have difficulty in reading a simple sentence with understanding. This stimulated researchers' interest in investigating the topic to unearth the socio-cultural factors affecting the learners' acquisition of reading skills in Grade 3. This problem affects the teachers as well because they spend a lot of time attending to reading difficulties and correcting the learners as they read.

Objectives of the Paper

The aim of the paper was to investigate socio-cultural factors affecting the learners' acquisition of English Literacy (reading) skills in the

Foundation Phase (Grade 3). This resulted from an observation that Grade 3 learners struggle with phonics and do not understand what they read. They are unable to read their books independently and are reluctant to read. They cannot read the notes on the chalkboard. In order to achieve the objective of the paper, questions asked looked into the parental involvement in their children's reading, how their level of education affects the children's acquisition of the reading skills and the community role in promoting reading. The research was carried out in one district of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. It was part of a larger study which investigated factors that contribute to poor literacy of Grade 3 learners in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This a qualitative research in which the case study was used. An in-depth investigation of small number of cases was employed. The data are preserved in descriptive narrates like field notes and recording. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 8), qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied. Qualitative researchers aim to acquire an in-depth understanding of human behaviour.

Population and Sample

A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria to which the researcher intends to sample/select the target population McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 34). Bell (1999: 34) defines target population as a specific pool of cases from which the researcher draws the sample. The target population for this paper consisted of Grade 3 teachers teaching in the Foundation Phase primary schools in the Mthatha Education District, Circuit 3 from rural and semi-urban areas.

The purposive sampling was used to select information-rich individuals and increase the utility of information from such a small sample as suggested by both Cresswell (2007) and Hen-

ning (2004). According to Cohen et al. (2007), in purposive sampling, the researcher identifies subjects to participate in the research. The purposive sampling is less to generalize to a larger population than it is to gain deeper understanding of specific type. The sample was comprised of four Grade 3 teachers drawn from the four selected schools in the Mthatha Education District, Circuit 3. They were all females because in the sampled schools, all foundation phase teachers are females.

Instrumentation

Qualitative data through semi-structured interviews was generated from the Foundation Phase Grade 3 teachers of the four rural and semi-urban schools. Using interviews may have some advantages; they are good method for producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions and ideas (Maree 2008: 87). When using interviews, informants have the opportunity to expand their ideas, explain their views and identify what they regard as crucial factors. Interviews were recorded and field notes were taken. The aim of the qualitative interviews used in the paper was to see the world through the eyes of the participants, teachers teaching in the Foundation Phase who are a valuable source of information. The interview questions were asked in such a way that the participants were able to give a detailed description of their experiences, feelings and views concerning the socio-cultural factors affecting the acquisition of reading skills. Participants were interviewed at their respective schools as this was where they felt comfortable and relaxed. This allowed participants to feel at ease and promoted honest and open responses. Responses were transcribed after the interviews were completed (Gay and Airasian 2000: 291-292). The researchers retained all transcribed recordings for safekeeping so that the written responses could be used to verify the data, if needed.

Data Analysis and Procedure

As a starting point in data analysis, all information collected was studied to determine if any themes have crystallised (Henning 2004: 117). After data was collected from the sample, they were grouped according to the responses, and then analysed manually to determine the effect

of the responses. The researchers listened to the voice recorder and organized the data by breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important to be learnt. The goal of the researchers was to create descriptive, multidimensional categories, which form a preliminary framework for analysis. Words or phrases or events that appeared to be similar were grouped into the same category. Data were coded, units and categories were formed and patterns were identified. The data were grouped into themes and sub-themes and coded for easy referencing (Gay and Airasian 2000: 242). Data were analysed thematically (themes that emerged from the respondents responses were used to analyse data).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out the study was received from the Provincial Department of Education, the Mthatha education district and the principals of the sampled schools. Participants consented to participating in the study by completing an informed consent form. They were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study if they so wished. Fortunately, no one withdrew from the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings pertaining to the socio-cultural background as they affects the learners' acquisition of reading skills in the Foundation Phase are presented here. In the thematic analysis, the following categories emerged:

- ♦ Involvement of parents in their children's reading
- ♦ Level of education of parents
- ♦ Community role in promoting English reading

Involvements of parents in their Children's Reading

When the participants were responding to the question of how they involve parents in promoting English reading skill, they argued that they give learners homework and reading books to be done at home with the assistance of parents.

I used to give learners some work to do at home, for example, I write down words on the

chalkboard and give learners to read at home so that their parents should help them at home (Interviewee 1).

It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improving reading performances of the learners. There is lack of parental involvement in children's education and that contribute to their inability to develop good reading skills. This has a negative impact on the learners' ability to learn in other subjects.

This paper also reveals that most parents are unemployed and they live below poverty line. Due to financial constraints and lack of jobs, parents do not afford to buy books for their children and this adversely affects reading performances of learners. It also emerged that learners do not read at home because there is lack of books and this promotes reading failure.

This finding is in line with Calteaux (1996) who asserted that home background of pupils is very important in promoting reading. Also, Zimmerman et al. (2009) argument that poor literacy in South Africa is usually associated with various contributory factors which hamper the success and development of South African learner's literacy education especially in the disadvantaged areas is confirmed by this finding.

The Level of Education of Parents

Most Foundation Phase learners live with parents who are generally not educated; hence parents cannot help learners in reading. Thus the data reveal that parental involvement is very low. This was reiterated by one teacher who said:

In my community, most parents are illiterate [and] not every learner [is] assisted at home. So their reading ability is affected (Interviewee 4).

The level of education of parents was found to be very low and the majority of the parents are illiterate. It is difficult for them to assist their children in reading and that could have a bearing on the learners' performance in reading English. This paper reveals that most parents were not educated and that could have an impact on the learners reading in the First Additional Language (FAL). The participants in the paper pointed out that some parents never went to school and consequently they could not read and write and their learners lack reading ability. In support of this:

Some parents are illiterate; they can't read; can't help learners to read; so those learners find it difficult to read. It affects their reading ability (Interviewee 2).

The finding confirms Beard (1994) argument that "parental involvement in reading had a highly significant effect on children's attainment of reading across the whole ability range". Beard continues to say parents are teachers at home whereas teachers are educators at school.

Teachers who participated in the study further blamed the parents' low level of education. All stated that parents who are less educated cannot assist their children in reading and this affects the learners' level of reading who may as a result perform low in reading. This finding supports the view by Bharuthram (2012) that learners are not reading at the level expected of them in a specific grade. This also has an effect on solving problems in reading as stipulated by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit in 2013 that school children are not learning how to solve problems, or read independently (Department of Education 2013).

Community Role in Promoting English Reading

This section presents findings on the role played by community in promoting English reading. It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improving reading performance of learners. The majority of participants disclosed that communities do not take part in promoting reading skill in that there are no libraries in the communities, no debates conducted, and no drama performed to improve the children's reading skill. This was evident from the following comment:

There is nothing that the community does to help learners in promoting reading because there is a lot of poverty and it affects learners (Interview 3).

The same participants agreed that there is no role played by communities in promoting reading ability but it's only the school that prepares everything for reading.

There is no role at all and there are no activities [done in the community to promote reading] (Interviewee 2).

Du Plessis (2001: 43) states that the commitment of working together will give the learner or a child a better choice to strike a balance be-

tween reading and leisure time. It is very important that the school community, parents, and other stakeholders work co-operatively on this problem of reading. The goal is to uplift the status of reading skill of the community. For effective learning to take place, teachers should take a leading role in creating and maintaining a supportive learning community (Taylor 2002: 179).

CONCLUSION

Irrespective of continuous intervention by the Department of Education and teachers, learners still struggle with reading. It was discovered that home environment is not conducive to improve reading performance of learners for there is lack of resources like reading books. Due to financial constraints, parents do not afford to buy books for their children and this adversely affects the reading performances of learners. This paper reveals that most parents are unemployed and they live below poverty line. It also emerged that learners do not read at home because there is lack of books, lighting or places to do their homework and this hampers the reading performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents or guardians should frequently visit school so as to find out about what is expected of them on how to help their children in reading activities. The parents should take initiatives of helping their children with reading activities. Parents and teachers often live in different socio-economic milieus, therefore; achieving a constructive parent-teacher relationship is of paramount importance. Also, parental cooperation can assist teachers in learning more about the needs of learners and thus, creating purposeful and effective collaboration between home and school. Finally, the Department of Basic Education should conduct workshops for parents to equip them with skills to assist learners read at home.

LIMITATIONS

The study was limited to the four foundation phase teachers in selected schools of the Mthatha education district. Not all grade 3 teachers were used and as a result findings presented in this paper cannot be generalised.

FUTURE STUDIES

Future studies that could investigate other aspects of reading within the same grade are suggested. These would be comparative studies that might expose other problematic areas. It would also be of benefit to have studies conducted in grade 2 as it is the one in which learners are prepared for grade 3. A study focusing on parents and their role in assisting their children would be beneficial. Finally, similar studies could be carried in other districts of the Eastern Cape as well as other provinces of South Africa.

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