





Evaluating the Challenges Experienced by Grade Three Teachers when Teaching Reading Proficiency in Xitsonga Home Language Classrooms in Limpopo province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the challenges experienced by grade three teachers when teaching reading proficiency to Xitsonga Home Language learners. A qualitative approach was used with an interpretive research paradigm. A case study was employed as a research design. Vygotsky's social constructivism theory was used as a theoretical framework. Fifteen grade three Foundation Phase teachers formed part of the sample for the study. The findings from the study revealed learners' deficiency of willingness to learn to read, which distresses their intellectual capacity to pay attention, as they are not receiving the support they were supposed to get due to being raised by grandparents, and the unavailability of both internal and external teacher workshops. The supplementary data from classroom observations revealed that there was no consistency and emphasis on meaning during the teaching of the big five due to teaching these components implicitly out of context. The study concluded that a reconfiguration of collaborator roles should be reviewed owing to its crucial part in the improvement of the reading proficiency of learners. The study recommended that stakeholders such as teachers, learners, parents and the Department of Basic Education should work together for maximum learner performance. This study will contribute to the urgent call for stakeholders to rethink pedagogies, conceptualize the pedagogies and resuscitate the collaborations between stakeholders concerned with the delivery and teaching of reading that will promote proficiency in the Xitsonga Home language.

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Basic Education introduced the National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African languages in early grades, but it failed to address the challenge of methodologies that are suitable for teaching reading proficiency in the Xitsonga Home language. Surprisingly, the Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African languages in the Foundation Phase boldly declares and acknowledges that presently, the influence of reading methodologies used in English is so strong that it overrides the opportunity to develop reading methodologies that are appropriate for African languages. This study

focused on the challenges experienced by grade three teachers when teaching reading proficiency in Xitsonga Home language classrooms. It has been almost two decades since early grade reading assessments have been administered in developing countries to identify the level of learners' acquisition of decoding skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.¹ Despite these measures taken, there is a gap in knowledge in the South African curriculum for appropriate methodologies to teach reading, as well as phonological awareness, in order for learners to become literate in African languages. Notwithstanding that, during the early stages of reading development, word reading fluency and text reading fluency are highly related.²

The purpose of establishing benchmarks for reading was to track the progress of learners' reading and to understand whether countries are meeting the learning targets aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.³ There has always been a debate that too many learners are unable to master the expected basic decoding skills in the early grades in their home languages.⁴ Manten, et al., and Boyette et. al., argue that there is a noticeable correlation between language proficiency, knowing a larger bank of vocabulary, and reading comprehension in learners learning to read.⁵ It has been noted that factors such as home, community and cultural influence, as well as learners' exposure to print-rich contexts outside the classroom, have an advantage in acquiring early literacy competence and are able to develop language, as well as early literacy skills.⁶ However, Bergbauer and Staden argue that where there is non-interaction with the learner, either by the parent who lacks time or literacy skills to engage in the learners' school work or a teacher who is incompetent in implementing the curriculum, this will result in significantly poor reading literacy performance scores.⁷ In addition, Mokobe, Badenhorst and Schlebusch contend that learners should master the basic reading and writing skills in the Home Language or else they are likely to remain disadvantaged and continually play catch-up programmes.⁸ On this background, the study seeks to answer the following question:

- What are the challenges that foundation phase teachers experienced in teaching reading proficiency of Xitsonga Home Language learners in grade three classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a shortage of methodologies for teaching reading for learners to read with proficiency in the Foundation Phase, especially in African languages. Teachers in South Africa have been found to lack in terms of the knowledge and skills that they should employ in teaching reading to promote proficiency. This has been attested by a study conducted by Ngema in KwaZulu Natal that Isizulu Foundation Phase teachers projected different understandings regarding which primary skills need to be taught to learners to prepare them to be proficient.⁹ The challenge of reading methodologies and proficiency is not only a Foundation Phase problem; high schools are also affected. Reading skills are essential in today's

¹ Margaret M Dubeck and Amber Gove, "The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): Its Theoretical Foundation, Purpose, and Limitations," *International Journal of Educational Development* 40 (2015): 315–22.

² Cally Ardington, Gabrielle Wills, and Janeli Kotze, "COVID-19 Learning Losses: Early Grade Reading in South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Development* 86 (2021): 102480.

³ Samer Al-Samarrai, Pedro Cerdan-Infantes, and Jonathan Lehe, *Mobilizing Resources for Education and Improving Spending Effectiveness: Establishing Realistic Benchmarks Based on Past Trends* (World Bank, Washington, DC, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-8773>.

⁴ Nic Spaull and Elizabeth Pretorius, "Still Falling at the First Hurdle: Examining Early Grade Reading in South Africa," *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality: A Study of the Present Situation and Future Possibilities*, 2019, 147–68.

⁵ Aileen Manten et al., "An Investigation into the Early Literacy Skills of English Second Language Learners in South Africa," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 45, no. 2 (2020): 142–54. Adam Boyette, Senay Cebioglu, and Tanya Broesch, "Teaching Strategies Are Shaped by Experience with Formal Education: Experimental Evidence from Caregiver-Child Dyads in Two Tannese Communities," *Memory & Cognition* 51, no. 3 (April 1, 2023): 792–806, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-022-01340-z>.

⁶ Marike De Witt and Ansie Lessing, "The Influence of a School Readiness Program on the Language and Phonological Awareness Skills of Preschool Children in Rural Areas of South Africa," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 41, no. 1 (2016): 106–14; Hannele Ahvenniemi et al., "What Are the Differences between Sustainable and Smart Cities?," *Cities* 60 (2017): 234–45.

⁷ Annika Bergbauer and Surette van Staden, "Social Interaction Determinants of South African Reading Literacy Achievement: Evidence from PrePIRLS 2011.," *International Journal of Instruction* 11, no. 2 (2018): 555–68.

⁸ Joyce Mokobe, Jo Badenhorst, and Luzaan Schlebusch, "Teachers' Voices on the Poor Reading Skills of Setswana-Speaking Foundation Phase Learners," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Literacy Association of South Africa* 16, no. 1 (2025): 520.

⁹ Millicent Ngema, "Exploring Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Reading Proficiency to IsiZulu Foundation Phase Learners at Rural Schools in KwaZulu-Natal," *Journal for Language Teaching* 55, no. 2 (2021): 195–217.

information-driven society.¹⁰ According to Zimmerman, learners who do not achieve reading proficiency are faced with the challenges of not being successful at school and even in post-schooling.¹¹ In addition, education systems in several African countries are inundated with low learning outcomes, which are mirrored in their performance in international assessments. According to Howie, the 2016 PIRLS Literacy results revealed that 78 percent of Grade 4 learners in South Africa could not read for meaning in any language.¹² South Africa lags far behind its upper-middle-income country counterparts, with most South African learners not able to read for comprehension by the age of 10.¹³

Thage, Mokgosi and Mthembu found that secondary township schools in Gauteng Province performed far below the expected level of secondary learners due to poor reading skills.¹⁴ Another reason cited by Spaul is that learners in the Foundation Phase in the South African context are not exposed to opportunities to read with fluency, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension.¹⁵ Currently, instruction of reading is imposed by the prescribed curriculum, whose methodologies for teaching reading are derived from.¹⁶ Cronje's findings showed that the approaches to initial reading that are currently in use are not suitable for African learners and African languages.¹⁷ According to Currie and De Waal, reading literacy can also be achieved within a specific socio-cultural context wherein values are allocated to particular behaviours and practices.¹⁸

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In an attempt to explore the pedagogies used in the instruction of reading in the Foundation Phase, the study employed social constructivism theory and sociocultural theory by Vygotsky as a theoretical lens.¹⁹ This theoretical framework was employed to provide a specific orientation for the study. According to Creswell, a framework becomes an advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data is collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change.²⁰ The framework guided the study to examine what issues are important to examine. In the context of this study, the important issues that were explored were the pedagogies used by teachers to teach reading in Foundation Phase grade three classrooms and the people who were studied were the teachers. Constructivism is a theory of knowledge. It purports to explain how knowledge is acquired. Its essential tenet is that learning is an exercise that involves the construction of knowledge; it denies that learning is a mere inactive transmission of facts. The social constructivism of Vygotsky is predominantly a psychological theory of teaching and learning.

Brief explanation of Vygotsky's Theory of Social Constructivism

The concept of constructivism is believed to have originated from the time of Socrates, who found that there are mutual benefits when teachers and learners interact by means of verbal communication in the process of learning and teaching. This interaction is believed to help learners interpret and construct the

¹⁰ Young-Suk Grace Kim and Benjamin Piper, "Component Skills of Reading and Their Structural Relations: Evidence from Three Sub-Saharan African Languages with Transparent Orthographies," *Journal of Research in Reading* 42, no. 2 (2019): 326–48.

¹¹ Lisa Zimmerman, "Building Learners' Reading Literacy for Academic Resilience in Challenging Reading Literacy Development Contexts," in *African Schools as Enabling Spaces* (Routledge, 2023), 96–109.

¹² Sarah J Howie et al., "PIRLS 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2016 Grade 5 Benchmark Participation: South African Children's Reading Literacy Achievement" (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA), 2018).

¹³ Jesal Chandrakant Kika et al., "Early Grade Reading in South Africa" (The World Bank, 2022).

¹⁴ Esther Molebogeng Thage, Patricia Namayammu Mokgosi, and Jane Tozama Mthembu, "Exploring the Effects of Implementing Guided Reading Approach to Enhance the Reading Proficiency of English Second Language Learners in South Africa," *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* 79, no. 6 (2021): 971.

¹⁵ Nicholas Spaul, "South Africa's Education Crisis: The Quality of Education in South Africa 1994-2011," *Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–65.

¹⁶ Department of Basic Education (DBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement Grades 7-9: Natural Sciences* (Cape Town: South Africa, 2011).

¹⁷ R. Bezuidenhout and F. Cronje, "Qualitative and Data Analysis and Interpretation," in *Research Matters*, ed. F. Du Plooy-Cilliers, C. Davis, and R. Bezuidenhout (Juta and Company Ltd., 2021), 262–86.

¹⁸ Iain Currie and Johan De Waal, *The Bill of Rights Handbook* (Juta and Company Ltd, 2013); Zimmerman, "Building Learners' Reading Literacy for Academic Resilience in Challenging Reading Literacy Development Contexts."

¹⁹ L S Vygotsky, "The Role of Play in Development," *Mind in Society/Harvard University Press*, 1978.

²⁰ K. Maree and V.L. Pieterse, "First Steps in Research," in *First Steps in Research Sampling*, ed. J.W. Creswell et al. (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2007), 214–23.

hidden knowledge, whereby they ask questions.²¹ Gruber and Voneche advance that the term constructivism is derived from Piaget's constructivist view and from Bruner's constructivist description of discovery learning.²² Since there is no universal definition of constructivism, there are different views expressed. Some regard constructivism as a theory of knowledge, while some "scholars and theorists consider it as a theory of pedagogy."²³ According to Amineh and Asl, constructivism is a strategy where the learner can make sense of the resources and how to utilize these resources effectively.²⁴

Application of the Theory to the Study

Vygotsky is well known for his theory on the social origins of higher mental functions and semiotics.²⁵ He argues that learning is mediated between the individual and the socially competent person in the environment of artefacts, in which the individual's appropriation of learning follows from the construction of meaning and therefore knowledge. This is the Zone of Proximal Development, a recognized concept in Vygotskian theory of teaching and learning. The study locates the teacher as a socially competent, more knowledgeable, more skilled, and more experienced mentor.²⁶ In this context, the teacher is a skilled adult with whom teaching and learning are socially constructed through meaningful engagement. The teacher mediates learning to read in Xitsonga through the use of appropriate methodologies. It is therefore important for the study to find out whether teachers who are expected to be competent and knowledgeable in other areas are indeed competent and knowledgeable in terms of teaching learners to learn to read in Xitsonga. The theory is appropriate to guide the study to explore the methodologies of teaching reading and how Foundation Phase learners are taught to read, as they help learners move through the Zone of Proximal Development and the use of scaffolding in grade three classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach as research approach. The qualitative approach, according to Creswell and Poth, is a purposeful activity that identifies and positions the researcher to observe the intended context.²⁷ This study adopted the qualitative approach due to its suitability in what the study sought in terms of observing teachers' practices and interpreting these observed practices. In this study, a case study was used as a research design. Case studies are known to be strategic inquiries where the researcher seeks to explore in-depth a program, event, activity, and process with one or more individual participants.²⁸ This study thus explored a case that involved Foundation Phase teachers' use of reading strategies in order to promote proficiency in the Xitsonga Home language. The study engaged primary schools in the local rural communities of Collins Chabane Municipality, Vhembe District, where Xitsonga is a dominant spoken language and a language of teaching and learning in schools. The population consisted of 103 Foundation Phase teachers under the Collins Chabane municipality. Fifteen grade three Foundation Phase teachers formed part of the sample for the study, where a purposive sampling method was employed. According to Patton, purposeful sampling is founded on the basis that it searches out the best cases for the particular study in order to produce the best data.²⁹

Data collection instruments included semi-structured individual interviews for selected grade three Foundation Phase teachers and classroom lesson observations for Xitsonga Home Language. Individual semi-structured interviews were utilized specifically for grade three Foundation Phase teachers to collect data based on their knowledge, values and opinions regarding the methodologies that

²¹ Roya Jafari Amineh and Hanieh Davatgari Asl, "Review of Constructivism and Social Constructivism," *Journal of Social Sciences, Literature and Languages* 1, no. 1 (2015): 9–16.

²² Jean Piaget, "The First Year of Life of the Child," *The Essential Piaget*, 1977, 198–214.

²³ Amineh and Asl, "Review of Constructivism and Social Constructivism."

²⁴ Amineh and Asl, "Review of Constructivism and Social Constructivism."

²⁵ Vygotsky, "The Role of Play in Development."

²⁶ Vygotsky, "The Role of Play in Development."

²⁷ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

²⁸ Creswell Jw, "Research Design- Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches," *SAGE, Ca; Offprnia*, 2009.

²⁹ Carl Patton, David Sawicki, and Jennifer Clark, *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning -- Pearson EText* (New York: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315664736>.

they used in teaching reading for Xitsonga literacy.³⁰ Data was analysed through a thematic approach. In this study, data analysis involved generating open-ended data based on the research questions asked and later developing an analysis of the information given by the participants. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to collect data, analyse and group it into themes where shared responses and patterns are identified and outlined in order to compare participants' issues that each has raised.³¹

Ethical considerations

According to McMillan and Schumacher, credible research does not necessarily involve the selection of participants and research strategies but also requires a researcher to adhere to research ethics.³² Before the study was carried out, ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Ethics Committee to conduct semi-structured individual interviews. Permission was also sought from the Department of Basic Education.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study analysed opportunities and challenges in teaching learners to read proficiently. The main issues that were raised by participants included learners' preparedness in learning to read, background, socio-economic status and parents' contributions, availability of teacher workshops and learners' reading proficiency. These themes are discussed below.

Challenges in teaching Learners to read Proficiently

Under this theme, the following questions were asked during the interviews: *What is your thinking with regard to learners' preparedness in learning to read?* The intention of asking this question was to establish teachers' views on the level of learners' preparedness when it comes to reading and how this finding helps them in teaching reading. The second question asked under this theme was, *What form of support do you get from parents in teaching learners to read?* This question was asked to understand the extent to which parents support their learners and how this support influences learners' reading skills. This was followed by the question; *What types of workshops do you attend as a grade three teacher that help you with skills to teach reading?* This question was asked to help the researcher with the knowledge on how and who supports teachers with gaining reading skills, and what this support contributes to the performance of learners. The last question under this theme was: *What can you say about learners' reading proficiency skills coming from grade two who are now in grade three?* The intention of asking this question was to find out the level of learners' proficiency in grade three and how teachers interpret the reading levels of learners.

Learners' preparedness in learning to read Xitsonga

Sometimes learners' preparedness to learn to read has an impact on whether they will gain skills or not during reading lessons. As indicated by the theme, teachers were asked: *What is your thinking with regard to learners' preparedness in learning to read?* Participant FPTC stated:

FPTC: *"Ee! My learners seem to be prepared and willing to read; they like it because when I start the lesson, it depends on what type of lesson I have prepared. Sometimes I start with songs and rhymes, and I can see that they are prepared to learn. Those who were sleeping wake up."*

Reflecting on participant FPTC views, one would argue that reading is an intellectual task that demands learners' contributions too, by paying attention. Therefore, it is advisable that before they start reading, the teacher must check their emotional, physical and mental readiness.

FPTA also shares similar sentiments with FPTC as she articulated that:

FPTA: *"Hey! They want to read but not all because there are those whom you will find doing their own things, they lose concentration unless you walk around line by line checking, but it is the same even if you walk line by line checking when you move to the next child they go back to playing, but it does help when you walk around."*

³⁰ L Cohen, L Manion, and K Morrison, "Research Methods in Education London: Rout Ledge," Brighton: Falmer Press.[Google Scholar], 2007.

³¹ Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, "Research Methods in Education London: Rout Ledge."

³² J. H. McMillan and S. Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*, 7th ed. (New Jersey, USA: Pearson, 2010).

The following participant expressed this:

FPTB: *“As a grade 3 teacher, I find my learners not being prepared enough, and it is because of the foundation that they received from their previous grades. Learners are not prepared. You find that out of 45 learners, I have only 5 who are sometimes fluent, so you have to fight to ensure they become fluent; learners are not prepared. It requires a teacher to work very hard so that they become good readers.”*

Reflecting on the statement of participant FPTB, one would argue that engaging learners in reading is not enough on its own. However, learners should be prepared first by the teacher and commit their willingness to stimulating learners' interests.

Family Background, Socio-economic Status, and Parents' Contributions

From the sub-theme, the following expressions from participants guide us to the knowledge of learners' family background, socio-economic status and parents' contributions towards their learners' education. The main issue emerged after participants were asked the question: *What form of support do you get from parents in teaching learners to read?*

This is what participants' FPTA and FPTB expressed, showing disappointment.

FPTA: *“Aa! Some parents are able, when you tell them the child has a problem, they say I can help him/her to read. Only one or two are able to make follow-ups, but the rest do not do that, especially in our environment, because most of them stay with their grandparents, so how will grandparents make follow-ups? Most of their parents work in ZZ2 farms, so they leave them with grandparents, so it is not easy.”*

FPTB: *“mmm! Eish! Some parents are hard, some understand, as I have said, they take videos of them and say, Here is your child, teacher, he is reading and they send them to me... Some parents I hear them shouting at the children while reading, some tell the learner when they are not reading correctly, and some also read while the child follows. So parents support me, even though it is not all of them.”*

Reflecting on the statements from participants FPTA and FPTB, one might argue that as much as parents are supporting their children in grasping skills to read Xitsonga, one would say that parents put unnecessary pressure upon their children during the process of assisting and supporting them to read at home. This form of support has the potential to increase the fear and anxiety that learners face.

Participant FPTJ has a different experience of parents' contributions as she articulated that:

FPTJ: *“Parents, they don't want their children to be troubled. Sometimes when you call them and tell them that the learner is struggling, they don't believe you until you sit down with them and show them, and they see the learner struggling before they can accept it. Another problem is that because children are just left with their grannies, they are not staying with their parents per se. It is only a quarter of the class that stays with their parents.”*

Reflecting on FPTJ's point, one would argue that parents are literate enough that they want to see evidence of how their children are facing challenges. The challenge of some learners being raised by grandparents has negative outcomes, and it is a serious hurdle for learners to acquire reading skills. In addition, one would argue that sometimes children's background has a role in how learners will make progress in acquiring reading skills because reading is not a once-off activity, but it is a continuous process that should be nurtured even at home.

Participant FPTM confirmed the same challenge of kids being raised by grandparents, as she said:

FPTM: *“Some parents do support us, but some learners are staying with their grandparents, so they are not supported at home.”*

Participant FPTM had this to say:

FPTM: *“Most of my learners are willing to learn, and one of the reasons is their background. I have observed that when I give them homework to do at home, those who can read get support from parents, while those who can't read do not get any support at home. Some kids stay with their grandparents.”*

Below is participant FPTF's version of parental contributions. She expressed the following remarks:

FPTF: *“Ee! Some parents call and ask what you are doing in phonics, so I explain to them that I am teaching this sound, and some at home they teach it at home. They train them, e.g. ‘nt’, I tell them to help them read ba be bi bo bu, and I show them how to read the consonant with the vowel. We get support from parents. Some will call and say: I can see that my child cannot read. So I explain to them that they must first start with the sounds. You tell them that they must help them at least 10 to 15 minutes before they go and play, and revise the sounds the following day.”*

Reflecting on the views of FPTF, one would argue that some parents are literate and show interest in what is being taught to their children. This means that parents are familiar with the curriculum that schools are implementing.

Availability of Teacher Workshops

In every organization, in-service training is one of the measures that are put in place in order to increase the knowledge capacity of employees on current trends and debates related to their sectors. Teachers also require these services in order to keep abreast with what is happening and also improve their teaching skills. Thus, the department and schools must organize internal and external workshops or meetings to capacitate their teachers. The following participants, FPTA and FPTE, had this to say on this issue:

FPTA: *“The workshops are those that we get at school, I don’t remember attending the government ones. Those from cluster workshops try to help each other, for example, when you have gone for competitions, it helps to say: My child can’t interpret a picture. You gain because you can see where your learners are lacking.”*

FPTE: *“Yes, we do get workshops and the kind of workshops, like towards November, we went to attend a workshop where we were taught to teach phonics and phonemic awareness.”*

Reflecting on FPTA and FPTE’s statements above, one would argue that as much as teachers make efforts to organize internal workshops, more external workshops are needed for teachers to have a platform where they are capacitated, share knowledge experiences and reflect on their challenges and successes.

To confirm what participants FPTA and FPTE articulated, participant FPTC has this to express:

FPTC: *“Not all workshops are meant for all teachers, sometimes these workshops are for only one person, so it is not easy for me to attend workshops. So this person will go and come back and cascade the information.”*

Reflecting on this expression by FPTC, one would argue that an effective workshop is one that is aimed at focusing and reaching all teachers directly for the maximum benefit of the knowledge shared, instead of cascading it.

However, the following participants share similar sentiments on the unavailability of in-service teacher workshops. On this theme, this is what they said:

FPTB: *“mmm! Do I recall? I don’t remember attending, because when they invite you to a workshop, they tell you teaching reading is the same in English and Xitsonga. I don’t recall. Those that I remember are for English.”*

Reflecting on the two quotes from participants FPTB, one would argue that workshops should be organized for a specific language to avoid confusion of generalizing reading strategies, even in languages where some are not applicable.

FPTK sides with participant FPTB as she vented her frustrations and disappointment with the organisation of teacher workshops.

FPTK: *“It is a reading workshop that they call, but I have not attended any workshop since COVID-19 for a reading workshop. It does not mean they are not there. Sometimes when the circular comes to school, it will say only one grade 1 teacher or one grade 3 teacher must attend, as you can see, we are three here in this grade. So the one who will be selected to go and attend will come back and cascade the information. Sometimes those workshops are not for reading; they invite you to explain the new lesson plans or to show you how to use the ATP, not reading. And most of the time, those workshops are only for English, I have not seen or heard of Xitsonga workshops.”*

The lack of workshops is further articulated by participants’ FPTF, FPTH, and FPTG below:

FPTF: *“I do not remember having attended a workshop. Here at school, we do grade workshops and talk about, but for circuits and district, I have not attended.”*

FPTH: *“As I have said, workshops are scarce; the school must also organise internal workshops.”*

FPTG: *“I cannot recall when was the last time I attended the workshop to teach reading. There was one which was teaching reading. The workshop was not clear because they did not do reading in a practical way, they were not demonstrating, and they were reading the ATP. The workshops were done virtually. What I wanted to see was how to teach reading in Xitsonga.”*

Reflecting on FPTF, FPTH, and FPTG, one would argue that, as much as there were intervention measures to respond to the COVID-19 era, teachers have not benefited from the virtual workshops. Therefore, the department should organize physical workshops to recover the time, knowledge, and skills missed.

The following participant voiced the following:

FPTD: *“Aa! The type of workshop I attended as a grade three teacher is the PSREP workshop which deals with reading and writing in the foundation phase. In the workshop for Xitsonga, they are saying that the lesson plan that the department has provided is not enough to teach, so we have to download the populated lesson plans from the internet. That’s what they told us to do.”*

Reflecting on FPTD’s statement, one would say that workshops are organized, but it seems they are not addressing the needs of teachers, especially the knowledge of teaching reading in the Xitsonga Home language. One would also argue that teachers are left confused as to what exactly should be done and how.

Learners’ Level of Reading Proficiency

In this main issue, the following question was asked: What can you say about learners’ reading proficiency skills coming from grade two who are now in grade three? The intention of asking this question was to find out the level of learners’ proficiency in grade three and how teachers interpret the reading levels of learners. The following responses were generated during interviews regarding the level of learners’ proficiency in reading. Participant FPTD expressed this:

FPTD: *“The reading proficiency of learners coming from grade two to grade three, those learners they are very much difficult to handle, let me take you back to last year, I had 123 learners, and out of that 123, seventy-something learners were not able to write so it was difficult to teach reading while the learners cannot write their names.”*

Reflecting on FPTD’s statement above, one would say that overcrowding in some schools is a big challenge that is robbing learners. This is due to teachers’ delay in introducing and engaging learners in reading lessons that are meant to equip learners to be proficient.

Participant FPTA has this to say:

FPTA: *“They have difficulties because they are not taught many words, unlike here in grade three, when they are taught words, they must also answer questions. e.g. words with four sounds (quadraps), here you must make sentences for them, they don’t have the full knowledge, for example, you start by teaching them that we start a sentence with a capital letter, and place a full stop at the end of the sentence, so it is another strategy of teaching reading, so it is difficult for them because I am starting new things that they were not exposed in grade two.”*

Reflecting on FPTA, one would argue that learners have insufficient vocabulary, which hinders their proficiency in reading Xitsonga. As indicated by FPTA, grade three learners are expected to be taught words with four sounds (quadraps), but it seems they read this grade without the knowledge of using punctuation. One would argue that the teacher is faced with teaching two grades in one class, and this has a negative effect on learners’ reading proficiency as expected in grade three.

Participant FPTC also concurred with FPTD and FPTA as she articulated that:

FPTC: *“When they have just arrived in grade three, they struggle with sounds because COVID-19 has disturbed them.”*

Reflecting on FPTC’s statement, one would argue that there is insufficient time to teach all the language skills for learners to read proficiently. COVID-19 has had a hand in learners exiting grade three without being competent in reading fluency. Teachers should implement intervention reading programmes to catch up with the skills that learners miss.

DISCUSSION

Learners' Preparedness in Learning to Read Xitsonga

On the theme of learners' preparedness in learning to read Xitsonga, teachers revealed that reading is an intellectual task that demands learners' contributions too, by paying attention. Therefore, it is advisable that before they start reading, the teacher must check their emotional, physical and mental readiness. This finding is in line with Phajane and Mokhele, who confirm that teachers can hardly manage learners without a school readiness programme.³³ Despite these challenges, the social constructivist theory can allow Foundation Phase learners to learn to read, which can lead to abstract thinking skills.³⁴

Family Background, Socio-economic Status and Parents' Contributions

On this issue, it was found that most of the learners are not receiving the support they were supposed to get due to being raised by grandparents. The finding is not in line with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which believes that the learners' cultural development starts at the social level and then at the individual level, which is between others (interpsychological) and then inside each learner (intrapsychological).³⁵ According to Ndebele, the reading level of learners cannot be separated from how their parents are involved in their education; thus, socioeconomic status is another factor attributed to their reading skills.³⁶ Language development as a result of interactions between children and their parents, caregivers, guardians, and other stakeholders can be understood in terms of the interactions that exist between various microsystems that can impact the language development of the child.³⁷

Availability of Teacher Workshops

Teachers also raised an issue of the unavailability of teacher workshops, where they indicated that they need both internal and external workshops so that they can share their challenges. In the absence of teacher workshops, teachers also encountered challenges while implementing collaborative learning and some reading strategies. According to Janssen and Wubbels, the main challenges faced by teachers for effective collaborative learning are a lack of collaborative skills, free-riding, competence status, and friendship.³⁸ Moreover, it has been emphasized that learners must be prepared more effectively for collaborative learning and that teachers should be trained to implement collaborative learning.³⁹ This finding is not in line with the theoretical framework in the sense that Social Constructivism locates the teacher as a socially competent, more knowledgeable, more skilled, and more experienced mentor.⁴⁰

Learners' Level of Reading Proficiency

On the learner's level of reading proficiency, teachers are concerned that most learners are unable to read proficiently because they lack the basic knowledge of sounds and letters. Reading proficiency is a predictor of successful reading and it is an important skill in the Foundation Phase. According to this finding, reading proficiency is linked to the knowledge of orthographic patterns of Xitsonga, which learners do not possess. According to Pretorius and Spaul, too much time is allocated to decoding and less time is allocated to meaning and comprehension.⁴¹ At the end of grade three, readers are expected to read with accuracy at a steady speed, comprehension, and enjoyment.⁴² In South Africa, early reading

³³ Masello Hellen Phajane, "Methods Used for Reading Instruction at Primary Schools in the Bojanala Districts of North West Province." (2012).

³⁴ Nic Spaul and Ursula Hoadley, "Getting Reading Right: Building Firm Foundations," *ChildGauge*, 2018, 201777.

³⁵ Olivia N Saracho and Roy Evans, "Theorists and Their Developmental Theories," *Early Child Development and Care* 191, no. 7-8 (2021): 993-1001.

³⁶ Clever Ndebele, "Gender and School Leadership: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in South Africa," *Géneros* 7, no. 2 (2018): 1582-1605.

³⁷ Stephanie Moody et al., "Vocabulary Instruction: A Critical Analysis of Theories, Research, and Practice," *Education Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2018): 180.

³⁸ Ineke Haakma, Marleen J Janssen, and Alexander E M G Minnaert, "Need Support in Students with Visual Impairments: Comparing Teacher and Student Perspectives," in *Frontiers in Education*, vol. 2 (Frontiers Media SA, 2018), 71.

³⁹ Haakma, Janssen, and Minnaert, "Need Support in Students with Visual Impairments: Comparing Teacher and Student Perspectives."

⁴⁰ Vygotsky, "The Role of Play in Development."

⁴¹ Elizabeth J Pretorius and Nic Spaul, "Exploring Relationships between Oral Reading Fluency and Reading Comprehension amongst English Second Language Readers in South Africa," *Reading and Writing* 29 (2016): 1449-71.

⁴² N. Spaul and J. Kotze, "Tracking Educational Progress and the Impact of Policy on Access in South Africa," *Education Review Journal* 32, no. 1 (2020): 45-60.

itself is not a national policy, though numerous policies and presidential State of the Nation Addresses have raised the profile for the need to strengthen the reading skills of young learners.⁴³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The study recommends that the grade R curriculum should put more emphasis on the big five of teaching reading in preparation for their transition into grade one, where formal schooling begins.
- It is also recommended that schools should use assistant teachers to assist learners who are raised by grandparents to do reading and writing homework.
- Schools should reconfigure the relationship between them and parents by involving the parents in reading programs that learners are engaged in.
- The department should constantly organise external workshops to bring teachers on board with the new trends regarding teaching reading, especially for African languages, to mitigate confusion about employing methodologies for English that might not be applicable in some African languages.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the challenges that foundation phase teachers experienced in teaching reading proficiency of Xitsonga Home Language learners in grade three classrooms. Teachers were asked their views with regard to learners' preparedness to read Xitsonga. Under this theme, teachers voiced their frustrations that some learners seemed unprepared and showed less willingness to read, which is a challenge. When teachers were asked about the support they receive from parents and the community, teachers showed some dissatisfaction that most of the learners are not given the support they deserve due to being raised by illiterate grandparents. Notwithstanding, teachers raised their concerns about the unavailability of internal and external workshops, which leaves them with feelings of uncertainty in teaching reading for Xitsonga Home Language. Lastly, on learners' level of reading proficiency, teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with grade three learners' level of reading, which they feel is far below the minimum requirements of the grade. This study calls for a reconfiguration of collaborator roles, which should be reviewed owing to their crucial part in the improvement of the reading proficiency of learners. Various recommendations have been provided. School Management Boards and other stakeholders must endeavour to implement these strategies. They must work together for maximum learner performance. The findings of this study urgently call for stakeholders to rethink pedagogies, conceptualize the pedagogies and resuscitate the collaborations between stakeholders concerned with the delivery and teaching of reading that will promote proficiency in the Xitsonga Home language.

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⁴³ Ardington, Wills, and Kotze, "COVID-19 Learning Losses: Early Grade Reading in South Africa."

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