Factors Contributing to Poor Literacy among Grade 4 Learners in Gauteng Province of South Africa

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Abstract

Much research exists about South African learners' literacy and numeracy challenges as well as their overall declining performance in schools. There are far fewer detailed explanations about the instructional practices and what teachers are actually doing in their classrooms to circumvent this situation. In depth research that attempts to understand literacy and numeracy challenges in Gauteng schools is eminent. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the factors contributing to poor literacy among grade 4 learners in Gauteng Province. Data was collected through semi structured interviews and classroom observation from ten schools and in each school; we sampled three grade four classrooms and four learners from each class. The findings suggest that poor literacy is caused by multiple factors ranging from learners' ability to lack of reading resources and reduced motivation and commitment to learn spelling, punctuations and comprehension. We conclude that poor literacy exists among grade 4 learners as results of learners' inability teachers' lack of skills and inadequate resources.

Keywords
Contextual factors, Reading Literacy, Learner achievement, Parental involvement, Resources availability

1. Introduction
One of the shocking realities in the primary education system in South Africa is that eight out of ten children cannot read properly or read for understanding. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report that these learners cannot create meaning even when they read texts from their home languages. In their comparative reading assessment, they discovered that 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning, and this is significantly worse for children tested in African languages where 3% of Grade 4 learners tested in Sepedi could not read for meaning with similarly large percentages among Setswana (90%), Tshivenda (89%), isiXhosa (88%), Xitsonga (88%), isiZulu (87%) and isiNdebele (87%). At this stage of a learner's development, the ability to locate explicit information and make straightforward inferences about events and reasons for actions is considered crucial for learning other subjects from Grade 4 onwards. Compared to 50 other upper middle-income countries, South Africa is unique in that less than half of its primary school children learn to read for meaning in any official language in lower primary schools.

There is a consensus view that Foundation Phase teachers (grades 1-3) do not know how to systematically teach reading; the poorest schools in the country are extremely text-poor and there is wasted learning time during the school day (Mojapelo, 2023). However, this becomes more complicated when viewed through the language lens. The sobering reality is that because many children are quickly pushed into learning in a new language (English), little time is spent on perfecting their reading skills within their home languages and this is a major factor contributing to their low academic success. The negative effects of early illiteracy cascade to adversely affect the development of cognitive skills and later educational development. According to Cordova et al. (2024) early childhood is the ideal time to develop the basic skills for reading fluency and teachers should keep that hood sacred for learners to learn for reading with understanding. This is because whenever children acquire language skills, they become motivated, habitual readers and increase their chances of become strong in their academic success and continued educational attainment. Generally, it is cost effective to address reading problems in early primary school because learners tend to unconsciously learn even during their play time. Improving literacy outcomes requires resource inputs teaching, learning and leisure reading materials for both

teachers and children to use in class and at home. According to Uccelli (2023) if children learn to read in a familiar language, not only do they stand a better chance of learning to read with meaning, but the transfer to English is easier. And yet, despite all this evidence that reading books are a cost-effective means of improving education outcomes, South Africa is very far from having abundant, accessible and affordable African language reading materials, why?

It is difficult to respond to this because it is nearly hard to separate the global challenge of English's hegemony from national policy issues regarding language use in schools, or to give one language's technical advancement (via editing guidelines or benchmarking standards) priority over another (South Africa has eleven official languages). The marketability of African language books deters traditional publishers, cultural biases in books translated from English, and the lack of information regarding the demand for African language children's books are some of the other issues. Accordingly, there are a lot of other factors that are not limited to the purview of education departments that combine with low in-school early literacy outcome.

2. Literature Review
2.1 The Policy Context
South Africa's legislation gives specific recognition to the right of learners to learn in their home language, illustrating the government's awareness of the value of teaching and learning in indigenous languages. Recent policy developments bringing together issues associated with South Africa's multilingual reality include *The Draft Incremental Introduction of African Languages policy,* which aims to improve proficiency in previously marginalized African languages, and *The Draft Learning and Draft Teaching Support Material (LTSM) policy*, intended to guide the provision and management of LTSM in schools.

The Legal Deposit Act requires producers of any type of publication to deposit one or more copies of the publication at a recognized national institution, most commonly, the National Library of South Africa. But a cursory look at most library catalogues, where English and Afrikaans books reign supreme, drives home just how rare quality children's books in African languages are. Fortunately, there is body driving book development in the country: The South African Book Development Council (SABDC) originated out of an industry-led initiative in 1998 and, despite the absence of statutory recognition and inconsistent funding, continues to operate as an effective non-profit organization, driving a successful national reading campaign, an Indigenous Language Publishing Programme and excellent research reports.

2.2 Access to Literacy Tools
Two of the main causes of the 78 percent of South African children in grade 3 who still struggle with reading for meaning are a lack of access to reading materials and textbooks (Modipane, 2018; Fleisch, 2008). These scholars further state that fixing this national literacy crisis will take time and hard work. Although the National Planning Commission's National Development Plan highlights education as one of the countries nine most pressing challenges and commits to improving the quality of education for all the country's children by 2030, not nearly enough progress has been made. It is even worrisome that the key media houses do not talk enough about this to increase pressure on education and training institutions to devise workable solutions prevent further literacy challenges. A just society must have both improved learning standards and a smaller achievement gap between well-performing and poorly performing learners, which are the two main goals of an education system. It is unrealistic to expect a quick change in education because it is a long, difficult process.

According to Grossen, Grobler and Lacante (2017), in 2008, about 60% of the cohort of students who had begun grade 1 twelve years earlier actually took the matriculation exams; of those, only 37% passed in university. In 2018, R351 billion was spent on education yet only 29% of the poorest primary schools in the country have access to in-school libraries. Numeracy also continues to be a huge problem. A 2015 study conducted by Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMMS) showed that 65% of grade 5 pupils in the country could not add and subtract whole numbers. KwaZulu-Natal has been the hardest hit. In that province only 45.4% of pupils have their own reading textbooks and 50.1% have their own maths textbooks. Similarly, in the Eastern Cape, only 56.2% of pupils have their own reading textbooks and 57.2% have their own maths textbooks. Limpopo is marginally better; 58.9% of pupils have their own reading textbooks while 62.4% have their own maths textbooks (TIMMS, 2019).

Change is achievable through focusing on enhancing literacy and numeracy levels in the initial four years of schooling. This should be done through a well-planned program that is adequately resourced, reaches all teachers in need, and has clear success indicators. The key to improving education, is to establish strong policy ideas and ensure that institutions are capable of implementation (Kolobe & Mihai, 2023). To give these policies a chance to succeed, it is important to convince enough people of their necessity and effectiveness.

Departmental staff at the district level should concentrate on creating support systems for schools, and school management teams must always be well-prepared to assist teachers. Department heads should pay greater attention to the experts who are putting in a lot of effort and using little funding to transform education in challenging circumstances. Children ultimately require textbooks for their education as well as other books for enjoyment (Mahlangu & Mtshali, 2024). Teachers also need to use a language that kids can understand when teaching in order to help students understand the material better and advance in a variety of learning areas (Modipane, 2018). Change requires harnessing the energy of

everyone who has the ability to erect obstacles, remove them, and form a coalition in favour of change (Nkosi, Kola & Mtshali, 2023). Persistent commitment and the conviction that change is required are what keep people pushing for it.

3. Research Strategy

A qualitative design was adopted by using semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to acquire a comprehensive data as it deeply reveals the detailed information (Whiting, 2008). Furthermore, the participants were interrogated through follow-up questions during interviews. Data was collected through semi structured interviews and classroom observation from 09 schools and in each school, we sample 3 grade 4 classrooms and 4 learners from each class.

The researcher's purposefully selected four learners of each of the ten nine Schools were visited with the belief that they are those who contain the most characteristics representation of the population. On the basis of the researchers' knowledge of the teachers' qualifications and experiences on teaching English as a second language in the basic schools, a judgment was made about which classroom teacher was to be selected to provide the best information on the predominant factors contributing to poor literacy amongst grade 4 learners in Gauteng (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006). Furthermore, the reasons for the selection of the classroom teachers as participants of the study were that they are those actively involved in teaching the pupils for the past two years how to read and are also those tasked to ensure the implementation of effective reading strategies in class.

The limitation of the study was the use of only schools in Gauteng region. There is the need for a large-scale research which involves all Basic School Language teachers and their pupils in the Gauteng province to help establish more predominant factors contributing to poor literacy in grade 4 learners' schools. Face-to-face in-depth individual interviews were used to collect data from the teachers through the use of field notes. Semi-structured interview schedule was designed for the twelfth face-to-face in-depth individual interviews session conducted. To validate the content and appropriateness of the interview questions, an English expert was acquired (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006).

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the researchers considered the issue of bias when data was collected, sufficient time was given to the participants to answer the interview questions, and also, participants were used as member checks to corroborate the findings of the study before finalising (Mohammed & Molepo, 2017). Data was analysed thematically. This was where the researchers read and became familiar with the data and then identified the main themes from the data, they then examined the data and provided detailed descriptions of the participants' words and responses and finally categorised and coded the data and then grouped them into themes (Marie, 1997).

4. Findings and Results

As a reminder, this study was concerned with understanding the factors contributing to poor literacy among grade 4 learners in Gauteng Province. This study found that there were constraints and challenges when dealing with reading and writing. The teachers found that in most schools, the contributing factors were:

- Learners arrived late at school.
- Some absconded reading lessons, whereas
- Some showed disrespect towards the teachers.

This collectively highlights the lack of commitment from teachers and learners to reading lessons and they perceive those periods to be of sports only not for reading. Nevertheless, the above themes are elaborated upon below.

Late arrival at school

It may be difficult for most people to think of reasons why Grade 4 learners arrive late at schools. Well, part of those reasons speaks to transportation of learners. They cannot bring learners early for them to start with reading lessons before the actual time-table kicks-in on each day. So, during interviews, teachers indicated that such learners have difficulties with reading and writing. The challenge was even greater as during observation the researcher observed that learners had difficulties with pronunciation, punctuation and spelling.

Absconding reading lessons

Most primary schools have days set aside for extracurricular and extra mural activities. Some of what is expected is that teachers use some of those days to have closer interactions with learners and help them improve their literacy skills. During interviews teachers indicated that learners abscond those days especially when there no filed sports because of weather conditions. Such learners roam around the school. This results in them having challenges to pronounce words, spell words correctly and unable to read and write well when testing comes. The researcher also observed that the learners wrote the wrong tenses as well as the wrong prepositions in the exercise books that they used for class work. Their major difficulties were with punctuation, pronunciation, spelling mistakes and using the wrong tenses.

Disrespecting teachers

In most schools learners tend to mock teachers on how they teach, dress or cars they drive. Most learners use this as attack mechanisms towards their teachers whenever they are reprimanded for their wrongdoing in schools. Similarly in this context, teachers indicated that learners have great disrespect for them, and all punishment techniques does not help to solve this problems. In all the lessons attended by the researcher in Schools 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, the teachers used to

read aloud, use group work, and repetition, engaged in remedial work and also gave learners extra reading and writing activities. Some learners repeated the loudness of the teacher instead of concentrating on the spell-out exercises. The learners attested to the fact that their teachers assigned them more reading and writing assignments, gave them instructions to stand up and read, employed repetition, and required them to repeat what they had read. In addition, both individually and in groups, they had to read aloud and correctly punctuate sentences and spell words. The researcher additionally noted that teachers at School 9 employed repetition, taught learners about tenses, provided additional reading and writing assignments, and promoted group work among students. The instructors in every school also used group work.

5. Discussion

In reference to the findings, South African learner performance remains persistently poor and below internationally set standards, as evidenced by achievement of 461 (SE =3.7) in the pre-PIRLS 2011 study compared to the international centre point of 500. In the light of this underachievement, we aimed to establish statistically significant relationships with reading literacy achievement as measured by the pre-PIRLS 2011 study. Evidence was provided for the effect of aptitude at learner-level, and opportunity and quality of instructional events at classroom-level and their effect on reading literacy achievement scores of South African Grade 4 learners.

The importance of aptitude factors, as measured by parental involvement, learner motivation and learner engagement in reading has been illustrated. The results of the current study are echoed by Geske and Ozola (2008) who state that higher reading literacy achievement can be expected where children come from families where reading is valued, children read for their own enjoyment and where parents spend a lot of time reading to their children. A study conducted by Senechal and Young (2008) also found parental involvement to be of pivotal importance in children's reading literacy development and that larger effects could be expected when parents tutored their children using specific literacy activities.

Lynch (2002) found significant associations between parents' self-efficacy beliefs and children's perceptions of themselves as readers. Children's perception of themselves as readers not only has a positive relationship with reading engagement and motivation but is also linked to later academic success in reading. Edmunds and Bauserman (2010) claim that learners' motivation to read often makes the difference between superficial and temporary learning and sustained, permanent and internalized learning. Reading opportunities in the classroom are best used when there is an emphasis on reading throughout the curriculum, not just during formally designated reading time for the duration of the language class. The significant effect found in teachers' teaching of reading comprehension skills and strategies is evidence that such skills are not acquired through incidental learning but must be taught as a very specific learning outcome.

Evidence based research by Foorman and Torgesen's (2001) illustrate dramatic reductions in instances of reading failure among primary school children when instruction around issues of word recognition, phonemic awareness, and construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling, and text processing are explicitly taught by classroom teachers. For learners at risk of failure, teaching of these reading components should be that much more intensive, comprehensive, and supportive in small-group environments or one-on-one formats. According to Applegate and Applegate (2004), the teacher is ideally situated to create a classroom environment that promotes reading engagement and one that ultimately result in learners who enjoy reading as modelled by teachers who themselves enjoy reading.

Teachers who are enthusiastic readers are more likely to engage their learners in discussion sessions and literature circles, thereby creating stimulating reading engagement opportunities. The timeous introduction of reading comprehension skills and strategies plays an important role, as evidenced by PIRLS 2006 results in South Africa. These results (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Scherman & Archer, 2009) pointed to the relative late introduction of advanced reading skills and strategies (such as making generalisations, predictions and describing text styles and features) to South African learners. Reading comprehension skills and strategies should therefore not only be taught explicitly, but also be introduced at an early age, thereby providing learners with the best opportunity to successfully progress from 'learning to read' in the Foundation Phase to 'reading to learn' in the Intermediate Phase and beyond. Ardington, Wills and Kotze (2021) echo this view by stating that the development of reading interest and aptitude should start as early as possible in attempts to ensure reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3.

In this regard, teachers need to bring about change in not only providing opportunities to learn, but opportunities as early as possible across the curriculum where reading is entrenched in all teaching and learning activities. In placing reading at the centre of all curricular activities, learner motivation with increased engagement from parents at home can strengthen and support greater learner achievement in reading literacy. The current model results can be discussed against transformation as a principal component that characterises educational systems globally in efforts to provide equal, quality education to all. Becker and Luthar (2002) cite evidence of the achievement gap that still pervade patterns of achievement among disadvantaged learners and others, despite concentrated efforts to improve inferior academic outcomes in countries across the globe. While aims for the South African education system's transformation is set out in many policy and curricula documents, no guarantees exist that teachers, parents or learners have implemented the changes needed to successfully implement transformational goals.

If learning is still at best regarded as a rote activity, void of the social and cultural space in which it is constructed, little transformation can be claimed to have taken place at classroom level. Where international assessment results (such as pre-

PIRLS 2011 results) remain only as grim reminders of South African learners' poor performance, assessment as integral to learning has failed, especially when assessment results should provide evidence to inform further support or intervention for learners in need. Assessment should provide indicators of those systemic factors that can be changed, adapted or used as leverage against which to ensure transformation.

Failing to do so, assessment as agent of transformation, may become powerless in providing such indicators of significant factors that are at work in the home, in classrooms and in schools nationwide. In applying Carroll's model of school Van Staden, Bosker learning (1963) as an established theoretical framework against which to test a multi-level model for purposes of this study, factors may be identified to ensure that transformational goals facilitate the move beyond policy status to those being achieved at both learner and school levels.

6. Conclusion

Despite the emphasis on early detection of reading difficulties in learners and the need for language teachers to use strategies to support learners in becoming fluent readers, some students in the Gauteng region struggle to read fluently due to laziness, an inability to make reading enjoyable, and a lack of interest in learning to read. The additional factors that contribute to the learners' low reading ability in the school include lack of reading proficiency, inadequate motivation from teachers and parents to inspire learners to read as well as the lack of pre-reader books and other reading materials in the school. Low phonemic awareness skills of the pupils and teachers' inadequate knowledge on how to teach pupils phonemic awareness skills in class also greatly contributed to the low reading ability of the pupils.

These include lack of commitment and laziness, lack of resources in school 9 (no library and laboratory in good conditions) and also lack of discipline such as bunking classes amid the 2 to 3 days are given in a week. In order for learners to do well at school, there is a need for effective discipline because ill-discipline can destroy the possibility of a safe and orderly environment and thereby hamper the core purpose of the school.

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