

Breaking the norm: conducting a needs analysis for a literacy intervention strategy, Capricorn district

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Abstract

The ability to read and write is an indispensable skill in fostering a fertile foundation for learning in primary schools. An education system with a weak implementation plan or policy on literacy development is doomed for failure. The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs analysis in terms of the policies, teachers' knowledge, and practices in the teaching of reading and writing in the Foundation Phase. The population for this study is four sampled primary school educators from Molepo, Mothiba, Mogodumo, Westernburg, and Mothapo circuits where educators in grade R, wherein one from each of the schools was purposefully sampled to participate in the study. The total number of participants in the study is four. The study adopted an explorative participatory qualitative method to get an in-depth understanding of the needs in each school, where participants were interviewed. The study is underpinned by the social intervention theory and modelled by the discrepancy model of needs analysis.

Key words: Policy; foundation phase; intervention program; Literacy and needs analysis.

1. Introduction

South African literacy continues to experience persistent challenges (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018) regardless of the policy amendments that are constantly carried out. Since the era of democracy, there have been numerous policy changes and adjustments to bring about equity and quality education, especially in the black marginalised communities (Kanjee & Sayed 2013). While the world has praised the South African government for a good work done on policy drafts in education pertaining the use of a school quintile system (Maistry, & Africa, 2020), the National School Nutrition Programme (Qila, & Tyilo, 2014), Learner Teacher Support Materials (Sedibe, 2011), there seems to be a disjuncture between policy intentions and outcomes (Sayed, 2002). The literacy learning outcomes are poor as documented by international organisations like the PIRLS (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena, & McLeod Palane, 2017) and SAQMEC (Spaull, 2011). This problem stems from a variety of factors namely, lack of parental involvement as required by white paper 6, low economic status of parents and their low literacy levels regardless of the government's efforts to curb this through the utilisation of Adult Basic Education Centres (ABET). This study examined the needs in the four primary schools from Molepo, Mothiba, Mogodumo, Westernburg and Mothapo circuits. A study of this nature is key for promoting literacy skills in rural schools. It is also necessary to raise awareness on the concealed challenges experienced by foundation phase teachers when it comes to literacy teaching. Literacy is a key to the educational development of all learners.

2. Problem statement

The continuing decline of literacy skills in the Foundation Phase of rural areas has been a thorn in stakeholders' thoughts. Most rural foundation phase learners are unable to read and write properly. This problem has been emphatically highlighted by international

organisations like the PIRLS (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena, & McLeod Palane, 2017) and SAQMEC (Spaull, 2011). In light of this problem, several national and international programmes have been initiated to counter, including Early Grade Reading Programme, Eco-Schools programme, Early Childhood Development, Integrated School Health Programme, and Save the Children. However, despite these interventions, the problem persists aggressively as maintained by Palane (2017). Therefore, this study aims to analyse the needs of rural primary schools in relation to the lack of literacy teaching skills by educators in low socio-economic status areas. The teaching of foundation phase learners is on the spotlight.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to comprehend the significance of the needs for rural primary schools in question, a systematic intervention theory was employed. Social intervention in the context of education refers to programs, policies and movements meant to alleviate social, educational and economic challenges faced by learners (López, 2014). When the foundation phase learners in rural areas struggle to reach satisfactory reading and writing capabilities, and teachers have implemented any form of classroom intervention for the learner in question, then the external intervention structure must be invited. The theory suggests that if a learner is struggling to succeed in school, there are things to be looked at, starting from the background of the learner to see if they are not being abused (Eyzaguirre & Foulon, 2009). If this is not the case, social workers, psychologists, community leadership, and churches must be involved in that regard. The current examples of social intervention programs in South Africa include the following (Department of Education, 2001). *Education White Paper*. Pretoria: Copyright Department of Education 2001.

- Early Grade Reading Programme - aims to improve learner's reading proficiency levels in the foundation phase. Interventions in the foundation phase have the most significant impact on learning outcomes in the long term.
- Eco-Schools programme - an international programme of the Foundation for Environmental Education that was developed to support environmental learning in the classroom.
- Early Childhood Development - a comprehensive approach to programmes and policies for children from birth to nine years of age.
- Integrated School Health Programme - school health services to learners in primary and secondary schools.

Considering the state of literacy in rural schools, researchers initiated this study in order to investigate the challenges and literacy needs in the selected rural schools.

4. Conceptualisation of needs analysis

4.1. Needs analysis

Needs analysis is differently viewed by various researchers based on the contexts of their lens. However, the simplest and straight forward explanation is by Witikin & Altschuld (1995) who indicate that a "need" is a discrepancy or gap between "what is" and "what should be". Another key view on this phenomenon is by McKillip & McKillip (1987) stating that needs analysis involves a thorough identification and assessment/analysis of needs as a tool for decision making to benefit the parties involved. These definitions of needs analysis share one element in common, that is "discrepancy between reality and expectation". This enabled researchers to coin a definition of needs analysis to ensemble

the context of the study. Needs analysis is the process of evaluating and assessing the current literacy fundamentals (policies, teaching and learning processes) in order to beam light on the discrepancies and needs, with an intention to make assistive interventions. The process of needs analysis cannot be an abrupt process due to its sensitivity, more especially when dealing with young learners such as those in the foundation phase band (Zandstra, 2021).

4.2. Model

There is a plethora of needs analysis models (discrepancy model; marketing model; decision making model) swarming literature. This study prioritised the “discrepancy model of needs analysis” as the most corresponding to the question in education (McKillip & McKillip, 1987). According McKillip & McKillip (1987) the discrepancy model’s main objective is to match reality to expectation of the situation at hand. In this study, the model was used to review policy expectations on learners’ literacy outcomes in order to match with the current reality. It framed and informed the shape of the study’s phenomenon. This model is backed by three phases:

- Goal setting
- Performance measurement
- Discrepancy (difference between ‘what ought to be’ and ‘what is’)

The below table depicts what literacy says about literacy goals, how performance is measured and what is noted as discrepancies. These are outlined below in column one, two and three, respectively.

Table 1: Goal setting, performance measurement, discrepancy

Goal setting	Performance measurement	Discrepancy (difference between what ought to be and what is)
Quality education for all: the world bank quality education initiative launched in 1990 promised to bring about change in the reality of education globally (The World Bank, 2014). These included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ to provide quality early childhood education more especially for the most vulnerable learners. ➤ Improve all aspects of the quality of education and ensure the excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills” (The World Bank, 2014). 	For the purposes of performance measurement, the study used the analysis of the Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ III) (Spaull, 2010).	Although equal education has been promised, however, the link between quality education and economic status seems to be more relevant in literature (The World Bank, 2014). Apparently, learners in rural areas with socio-economic issues do not receive the same quality education as their suburban counterparts (Spaull, 2010). All these are seen in the performance of the learners. This also

		sounds the alarm on the legacies of apartheid.
<p>Equitable literacy in foundation phase: Goal highlighted in the current curriculum policy (CAPS) and The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The importance of this goal is emphasised by Masinire, (2015) stating "Being able to read is the key to academic and future success,' says Celeste Combrinck, Acting Director at the CEA. 'If you can't read, your opportunities in school or after school will be limited, which is why reading should start at a very young age.'" Learners should be able to read for understanding by the time they reach grade 4</p>	<p>Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Some of the (PIRLS, 2016) findings include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 90% and more of learners writing in Setswana and Sepedi did not reach the lowest benchmark. ➤ Learners writing in one of the nine African languages attained the lowest mean scores, which were significantly lower than those writing in Afrikaans or English. ➤ Children writing in isiXhosa and Sepedi are the most at risk. ➤ Grade 4 learners living in remote rural areas or townships have the lowest reading literacy scores compared to other locations.

5. Rural South African stance in education

The apartheid inherited divided educational system played a huge role in marginalizing learners in rural schools (Hlalele, 2012). This has led to the rural population remaining poor regardless of its people being educated since they acquire low-quality education (Spaull, 2015). Hence, for the poor to be well off, they need to be getting good quality education. This has proven not to be the case for the majority of South African learners. Learner outcomes of foundation phase learners in South Africa are still low, especially in rural areas (Spaull, 2015). Stakeholders in the education sector have been working tirelessly to curb the effect of apartheid in rural schools by a myriad of efforts, thereby using programs that attracts newly qualified teachers in the rural schools such as feeding schemes (Hochfeld, Graham, Patel, Moodley, & Ross, 2016), multigrade teaching workshops (Mulaudzi, 2016), Nalibali reading program (Mubaiwa, 2020), and national reading programme, to improve literacy among rural learners (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018). This has worked to a certain degree, hence there has been a reported parity reached in enrolment of school going children in the foundation phase (Mashau, Mutshaeni, & Kone, 2014). However, the quality of education the majority of learners are getting is still of concern. This was proven by the low learner outcomes in literacy by the progress in

International Reading Literacy Study (Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena, & Palane, 2017).

6. Methodology

According to Creswell (2014), research methodology refers to the approaches, strategies and methods that researchers use to effectively investigate a phenomenon. The research methodology applied enabled the current researchers to contextualise the identify problems and other research claims and findings regarding the phenomenon in conducting a needs analysis. This study employed a qualitative research method to collect and analyse data. The study presented its whole findings and made analysis and interpretation of data in words than in numbers. Therefore, a qualitative methodology is ideal for this study since it dealt with a personal study of the subjects. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) argue that the qualitative methodology enables researchers to present significant reasons and point of views of the participants in relation to any phenomenon in question. Thus, the qualitative methodology was effective to analyse the needs that bind the failure of teaching effective reading and writing skills in the Foundation Phase.

6.1. Research site and population

The study was conducted in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, Capricorn District within Molepo, Mothiba, Mogodumo, Westernburg and Mothapo circuits. Although there are more than five circuits in Capricorn District, the study focused on the specified four because they are reachable to the researchers, and are likely to have a minimum number of participants required to exhibit a total sample of the study. Additionally, these circuits are a convenient and relevant population to respond to the questions and objectives of the study because they cater for schools that are located in rural setting.

6.2. Sampling procedures

A non-probability sampling was applied, under which a purposive sampling was used to select the research participants. Purposive sampling is a random selection of participants within a population, which the researcher deems to be more informative to the concept under enquiry (Guarte & Barrios, 2007). The purposive sampling strategies are typically used when focusing on a limited number of informants, who are selected strategically so that their in-depth information gives optimal insight into an issue about which little is known (Degu & Yigzaw, 2006). The purposive sampling was preferred because the selected circuits have schools that might be affected by poor reading and writing performance. Thus, it allowed researchers to generate authentic and in-depth information, as well as the participant's optimal insight regarding the needs that hold back learners' reading and writing performances. A sample size of four participants was used to respond to the study questions. The sample of four teachers comprised of one teacher from each school. Teachers were sampled as skills facilitators and experts in the knowledge of teaching reading and writing skills in the foundation phase. Their daily interactions with learners and their observations of learners' needs insinuate their suitability as persons to reveal what learners need to improve on regarding reading and writing skills.

6.3. Data Collection Procedures

The study used interviews as a primary method of data collection. It applied the semi-structured interview questions to interact with teacher participants. Semi-structured interviews are intensive, yet open interviews conducted with a small number of respondents. The aim of using semi-structured interviews is to explore the respondents' deeper understanding of the concept in question (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Voice recorders were used for interviews with all four participants. The researchers used generated voice recordings to capture the actual interactions between themselves and the participants. The recording ensures that the collected data is viable, reconcilable and sharable with participants on request (Jewitt, 2012).

7. Data Analysis

A thematic approach to data analysis was applied in this study. The researchers found that a good way to structure the results section of this study will be to group participants' similar responses and use such groups as main categories or themes which will be used for analysis and interpretation. The data analysed provided a constructive information on: (a) educators' challenges; (b) parental involvement; (c) Covid-19 impact and; (d) the anticipated implications.

8. Findings and discussions

8.1. Educators' challenges

Most educators alluded that they were not trained to teach in the foundation phase, however, due to the shortage of foundation phase educators (Green, 2011), the school management requested them to assist in the filling of gaps. Having educators teaching in a phase they are not qualified for, create problems such as poor interpretation of both teaching and learning outcomes; and relevant teaching approaches not well understood, hence not well implemented. The other challenge practically encountered by educators is the educational curriculum interpretation in the foundation phase. They stated that workshops should be conducted yearly for such educators, however, the duration and frequency of the workshops is deemed not enough by the participants. The other issue related to workshops is that, different curriculum advisors have contrary approaches on the interpretation of the foundation phase policies, leaving participants confused on whose induction to follow. Elder educators find it hard to excel in the teaching of literacy by using role-play due to their age and health factors. They are saying they could no longer play like before due to their age.

8.2. Parental involvement

It was indicated by all participants that lack of parental involvement by some parents in the school, especially those whose learners seriously need parental support, cause an academic deterrence on learners. The White Paper 6 gives an allowance for parents to be involved in their children's education, however, some parents' family background and illiteracy (Matshe, 2014) play a role in the lack of parental involvement (Mutodi & Ngirande, 2014). Some parents are still not aware of their educational roles as stipulated in South African School Act (1996), hence they feel as if they are doing educators' work (Sibanda, 2021). In the meantime, some parents are willing to assist, but their mythical background repel. It is noticed that in a case where a single parent is looking after many

children or/and extended family, there seems to be no time for homework assistance. In some cases, some learners are taken care by their grandparents while their mothers are working away (Mugedya, Kang'ethe, & Nomngcoyiya, 2020). This situation isolates effective parental involvement on assisting learners the reading and writing skills when home. At the same time, one indicated that some grandparents are illiterate, their will to assist alone yields no progressive results.

8.3. The Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

Since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot has changed in the education sector in South African schools and consequently in the foundation phase. Rotational learning, social distancing in classrooms, and the wearing of masks had an impact on the teaching of reading and writing. As the world was still coming to terms on how to deal with the pandemic, the South African government introduced the rotational system (Ardington, Wills, & Kotze, 2021) that meant learners would not attend their classes every day as per CAPS. This significantly reduced teaching time (Hoadley, 2020). Educators and learners were equally required to keep a distance away from each other. This meant that the educator had to stay a distance away from all the learners, at the same time, wear a mask while teaching (Axelsson, 2021). It was emphasised by participants that the two measures employed made it extremely difficult for learners to read the teacher's lips as they teach phonemic awareness, hence learning was severely compromised.

8.4. Anticipated implications

CAPS provides for an instructional time of 23 hours in Grades R, 1 and 2; and 25 hours in Grade 3. CAPS suggested the reading and writing hours to Foundation Phase band, which are above five/six hours per week since 2012. COVID-19 has affected those instructional hours. Learners are no longer utilising all the hours directed to reading and writing due to new attendance programmes in their schools. This study investigated the possible effective ability to read and write as an indispensable skill in fostering a fertile foundation for learning in primary schools in the new normal and beyond. Also, correspondent to the findings of systematic evaluations and literacy surveys, the study interrogated the link between the poor indications of reading and writing performance in rural areas and the emerging insights in the investigated schools. Systematic evaluation studies such as SACMEQ, PIRLS, ANA, NEEDU and TIMMS reveal that there are notable gaps between the reading and writing performances of children who attend rural schools and those who attend township or urban schools. This study sought to establish the needs in rural schools to improve the teaching and learning conditions in rural schools and to culminate in improved reading and writing achievements.

9. Conclusion

The teaching of literacy in South Africa continues to be plagued by the lack of foundation phase teachers. The purpose of this study was to conduct a needs analysis in terms of the policies, teachers' knowledge and practices in the teaching of literacy in the Foundation Phase. Most rural foundation phase learners are unable to read and write properly. Learner outcomes of the foundation phase learners in the rural schools of Limpopo are still low. Some primary schools from Molepo, Mothiba, Mogodumo, Westernburg and Mothapo circuits have a shortage of educators who are trained to teach in the foundation phase, however SMTs compromise those available to fulfil the educational outcomes

expected from each school. The lack of parental involvement in schools also has a negative impact on the improvement of the teaching of literacy in the foundation phase band. Lately, measures employed by the government on Covid-19 pandemic policies on educational program made it extremely difficult for learners to learn reading. Learners found it hard to see teacher's lips while teaching phonemic awareness.

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