

Tracing the usage of the term 'culture of reading' in South Africa: A review of national government discourse (2000–2019)

**Author:**Claire Biesman-Simons¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Foundation Studies, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Claire Biesman-Simons,
cbiesman@gmail.com

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Background: South Africa's long-standing reading crisis is well recognised. At various stages since 2000, national government has presented the inculcation of a culture of reading as a solution to this crisis.

Objectives: This article critically interrogated the term 'culture of reading' as used in national government discourse with reference to basic education. By tracing the patterns of use of the term since 2000, it aimed to show the shifts and continuities in the government's understanding of the term 'culture of reading' and how this has shaped the reading landscape.

Method: Drawn from a corpus of 331 texts, a sample of 58 texts produced by national government was analysed. Employing discourse and thematic analysis, key themes were extrapolated and their relation to reading within South Africa was explored.

Results: The government's call for a culture of reading occurs predominantly in response to poor literacy results and at launches of campaigns and strategies focused on addressing these results. This occurs repeatedly without clear delineation of the term or justification for recycling failed initiatives. Instead, the term acts as a rhetorical tool to obfuscate the unsuccessful implementation of reading programmes.

Conclusion: The government's failure to clarify what constitutes a culture of reading prohibits a clear picture of its understanding of the term. The frequency with which 'culture of reading' is promoted indicates a failure to consider alternative approaches to addressing the reading crisis.

Contribution: This article highlights the need for government to re-evaluate its response to the reading crisis, taking cognisance of the South African context.

Keywords: reading; culture of reading; reading practices; reading for pleasure; reading campaigns; Department of Basic Education; materials; literacy myth.

Introduction

It has long been acknowledged at all levels that there is a reading crisis in South Africa. In presenting a solution to this crisis, one particular catchphrase that has cachet is 'culture of reading'. In fact, it has been used at the highest levels of government. The highlights of the 2019 presidential State of the Nation Address emphasise establishing a culture of reading to enable learners to read and, subsequently, enter tertiary education or gain employment (Government Communication and Information System 2019). Such assertions position a culture of reading as both a foundation for improved education within South Africa and critical to economic success. The Minister of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Angie Motshekga (in Department of Basic Education 2017), bluntly asserts, 'our children are not performing at the level they should merely because they lack a reading culture'. Claims such as these disregard the complexity of the deep, entrenched systemic inequalities in the education system (Hoadley 2018). Over a 20-year period, the government has promoted a culture of reading to improve learners' reading results. However, their admission that '[o]ver the years, the [basic education] sector has come to be characterized by unsatisfactory learner/teacher performance in reading and pedagogy of reading' (Motshekga 2019a), combined with consistently poor results in assessments such as the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2006, 2011 and 2016 (Howie et al. 2008, 2012, 2017), provide little evidence that their promotion of a culture of reading has resulted in improved reading results.

The purpose of this article is to trace how the catchphrase 'culture of reading' has functioned in government discourse over the past 20 years, paying specific attention to its use within basic education. To achieve this, I pose three questions:

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1. When and by which national government departments and officials has the term 'culture of reading' been used over a 20-year period?
2. How is the term used and understood?
3. What does this use of the term say about the national government's understanding of and approach to the reading landscape?

This analysis forms part of a larger study which reviews a corpus of 331 texts (written or spoken) that reference 'culture of reading' in the South African context from 1990 to 2019. This article focuses on the 58 texts from the corpus produced at national government level. Because it is not only the content of a text that defines its impact, this article recognises that the author or speaker's position of power, the context in which a text is presented and the author's selection of words and register affect a text's reception and influence (Fairclough & Fairclough 2018; Gee 2018).

I begin with a brief review of global, African and South African research in order to ascertain how 'culture of reading' is defined in the literature. This provides a foundation for analysing the government's articulation of a culture of reading. Thereafter, I detail my methodological approach before presenting the findings. I argue that the government's failure to provide a contextually appropriate definition of 'culture of reading' has resulted in a catchphrase that has no clear function or meaning. The careful historical analysis I undertake of its patterns of usage by government provides insights into policy decisions at key moments over the last two decades, as well as how it is used as a rhetorical tool to obfuscate the unsuccessful implementation of reading programmes across the country.

Literature review

The term 'culture of reading' cannot be defined without first outlining what is meant by 'culture' and 'reading', both complex concepts with numerous definitions. This review begins with a conceptualisation of these terms. Drawing on this conceptualisation of 'culture' and 'reading' combined with an analysis of literature on a culture of reading, I provide a definition of the term 'culture of reading' that provides a framework for analysing government discourse. This review applies a primarily critical African lens but incorporates Global North research because of its influence on literature in all regions (Perry 2008). As much of the emphasis on creating a culture of reading is centred on its contribution to socio-economic advancement, I conclude this section with a critique of this positioning.

Reading

Reading is a contested term. Here, I define reading as a complex cognitive skill and a set of sociocultural practices. Reading has to be explicitly taught and learnt and requires the ability to decode and comprehend texts. Decoding enables the fluent processing of texts but this must be accompanied by simultaneous meaningful comprehension of

texts for reading to occur (Adams 1990). Reading comprehension necessitates drawing on external and internal knowledge sources (Snow & Matthews 2016). The sociocultural contexts in which reading occurs, how it is valued as a practice and the types of available texts affect one's engagement with reading and success as a reader (Freebody & Luke 1990).

Culture

Any discussion of a culture of reading must first define 'culture'. However, this is challenging because the term itself is a multifaceted idea that is universally contested (Eagleton 2016; Inglis 2016). This is because the way culture is conceptualised is influenced by and reflects an individual or group's ideologies and ways of thinking (Grenfell et al. 2012; Spillman 2001). For the purposes of this article, I define culture as one's practices, perceptions, thoughts, behaviour, habits and set of values (Appadurai 2013; Bourdieu 1971; Geertz 1973). For any culture to be sustained, these practices must be embedded within an individual and group's ways of thinking and doing.

In line with this definition, my approach to interrogating the term 'culture of reading' centres on the practices associated with reading. I pay specific attention to the importance of the sociocultural context within which the term 'culture of reading' is referenced and, if an explanation about what constitutes a culture of reading is provided in the texts I analyse, I debate its applicability in the South African context.

What is a culture of reading?

Prior to interrogating the government's usage of the term 'culture of reading', it is necessary to establish how the term has been presented in the literature. Despite both 'culture' and 'reading' being individually contested terms a review of the literature reveals that the term 'culture of reading' is frequently used in both academic and popular literature. The term 'culture of reading' appears to come to prominence in the early and mid-2000s in both literature from the Global North and in South Africa (Behrman 2004; Matjila & Pretorius 2004; Mbeki 2007; Paine 2007; Sisulu 2004), and a few years thereafter elsewhere in Africa (Commeyras & Mazile 2011; Kachala 2007; Töttemeyer 2009).

There is no shared, clear definition of what constitutes a culture of reading. (Within South Africa see for example Mbeki 2007; Government Communication and Information System 2019; Vally 2015). Where there is some explanation, three components appear most frequently: (1) motivating and role modelling children's reading practices, (2) access to materials and (3) reading for pleasure. Although I present these perspectives separately, this does not negate the overlap between them.

Motivating and role modelling children's reading practices

As the dominant adults in children's early lives, parents' and caregivers' practices serve as a model to their children

(Bourdieu 1990). Therefore, reading practices within the home environment play a critical role in developing children's reading practices (Bridges 2014; Kaschula 2014; Ruterana 2012). This is highlighted by the author Mda's (2017) statement that '[a] culture of reading can be cultivated at any age, though like all habits, good and bad, it is best instilled early in childhood'.

The expectation that parents and caregivers will model reading practices is founded in middle-class and Western thinking and cannot be assumed in South Africa (Mda 2017). In reflecting on the uptake of the term within Southern Africa, Perry (2008:66) stressed the importance of identifying "[w]hat might a local reading culture look like?" rather than trying to import western reading culture into the region'. Other researchers have also noted factors that affect the ability to promote reading practices: parents and caregivers may lack confidence in their ability to assist children, be unable to source reading materials, place limited value on reading or be overwhelmed by a focus on economic survival (bua-lit collective 2018; Kachala 2007; Ruterana 2012). Furthermore, many African and South African adults are not readers themselves (TNS Research Surveys 2016). In this context, parents and caregivers cannot be expected to model strong reading practices or fully support their children's reading practices (Willenberg 2018).

The second significant influence on children's reading practices is educators (Commeyras & Mazile 2011; Joubert et al. 2014; Reeves et al. 2008). Matjila and Pretorius (2004:18) stress that educators have 'an important role to play in promoting a culture of reading', particularly if reading does not occur at home. If educators model the enjoyment of reading and promote strong reading practices, this indicates the importance of reading and can improve children's reading practices (Reeves et al. 2008).

Access to materials

Within the Global North, access to materials is highlighted as central in promoting a culture of reading (Clements 2017; Kennedy et al. 2012; National Library of New Zealand n.d.). This literature places little or no emphasis on the necessity of texts being in readers' home languages or on the importance of readers relating to content, factors critical to the development of positive reading practices (Bloch 2008). This absence is taken up in the African context with a particular emphasis on the absence of texts in indigenous South African languages (Kaschula 2014; Mda 2017; Reeves et al. 2008; Sisulu 2004; Vally 2015).

In his comprehensive analysis of a culture of reading in Rwanda, Ruterana (2012) contends:

the question of which language literacy and a reading culture should be in ... is actually the basic and most fundamental factor determining the creation and development of literacy and a reading culture. (p. 54)

As culture is influenced by one's ideologies and values, reading materials should respond to individuals' ways of

being and thinking. Hibbert and Crouss (2011) stress that it is not only access to materials and the language of a text that promote a culture of reading, but that content has to be relevant. Therefore:

[a] culture of reading can only be instilled by adhering to the following criteria, i.e. ensuring affective engagement, maximum meaning-making potential, delight, the engagement of the imagination for the purposes of developing the creative mind, and strong identification with the material for the purposes of developing a sense of agency. (p. 99)

In addition, Hibbert and Crouss (2011) underscore the importance of affective engagement in promoting reading for pleasure, the third component widely identified as essential for a culture of reading.

Reading for pleasure

South African texts frequently position reading for pleasure as critical for a culture of reading (Bloch 2008; Department of Basic Education 2019b; Mda 2017). Pleasure is a cultural construct. If one gains pleasure from a practice, motivation to engage in that practice regularly is increased. In delineating requirements for 'developing a book and reading culture', Reeves et al. (2008) assert that:

children are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards reading in school and classroom environments where they are provided with opportunities to experience the joy and the pleasure of reading. (p. 97)

When reading is positioned as an enjoyable activity, children's likelihood of reading is likely to increase. As Sisulu (2000) rightly states, children who 'do not learn to read for pleasure ... are less likely to read outside the school curriculum'.

Towards a tentative definition of a culture of reading

Much literature, particularly from the Global North, assumes children have the ability to read in order for a culture of reading to be sustainable. South African texts, however, refer to the ability to read as critical for a strong culture of reading (Alexander 2001; Department of Arts and Culture and the National Council for Library and Information Services 2014; Joubert et al. 2014). I do not argue that the ability to read is essential for a culture of reading to exist but, rather, that this ability increases opportunities for habitual reading and children developing their expertise as motivated independent readers, both of which contribute to sustaining a culture of reading.

It seems almost redundant to claim that the term 'culture of reading' needs to be defined in relation to culture. Because there are innumerable individual and group ideologies and ways of thinking and being that constitute a culture, a culture of reading then, by its nature, would be fluid and contextually located. However, an effective analysis of the government's employment of the term 'culture of reading' will be best achieved by using a framework that takes this contextual

fluidity into account. I thus draw on the above three components in presenting my understanding of the term 'culture of reading'. A culture of reading then consists of a specific set of beliefs and practices held by a particular group of people about reading. Influential role players within the group support children's reading practices in and outside of school. The materials available to children (and adults) contain content that interests them and draws on their existing knowledge. A sufficient number of materials, written in the appropriate languages and at a reading level accessible to children, is available. There is an awareness of the value of reading and there is pleasure associated with the practice of reading.

Reading and the literacy myth

In both international and South African literature, two overarching themes emerge as motivators for establishing a culture of reading. Firstly, it is proffered as critical in improving poor reading levels (Government Communication and Information System 2019; Matjila & Pretorius 2004; Paine 2007). Secondly, the contention that a strong culture of reading enables socio-economic development pervades literature on a culture of reading (Bridges 2014; Motshekga 2015b; Ruterana 2012; TNS Research Surveys 2016). The Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa (2018), for example, emphasises the role of a culture of reading in enabling 'the full eradication of unemployment, social inequality, illiteracy and poverty'. Elinor Sisulu (2004) contends that a culture of reading is critical in the country's development, stating that '[t]he absence of a widespread reading culture acts as an effective barrier to our [South Africa's] development, reconstruction, and international competitiveness'.

Such contentions exist despite the long-standing research critiquing what Graff terms the 'literacy myth', that is, that 'literacy alone is enough to end poverty, elevate human dignity, and ensure a just and democratic world' (Graff & Duffy 2008:50). This does not 'discount the importance of reading and writing or ... suggest that these are irrelevant in the contemporary world', as access to further education and formal employment depends heavily on being literate. However, high literacy levels cannot guarantee this because 'the presumed "consequences" of literacy – individual, economic, and democratic – will always be conditioned by the particulars of time, situation, and the historical moment' (Graff & Duffy 2008:51). Consequently, an uncritical perpetuation of this myth within South Africa is problematic because systemic inequalities and current socio-economic conditions do not allow for all literate citizens to enter further education or secure employment.

Methodology

In this section, I explain the data set that constituted the corpus. I then describe my approach to data analysis and explain why this approach was elected.

Data set

In researching the usage of the term 'culture of reading', I sourced texts through searches for 'culture of reading' + 'South Africa', and 'reading culture' + 'South Africa' on Google Scholar and Google (search conducted on 04 November 2019, supplementary search on 30 January 2020). I selected Google Scholar in searching for both popular and academic texts, as I wanted to include South African postgraduate research and Google Scholar enables this to a greater degree than other databases. A total of 331 texts referencing 'culture of reading' within South Africa constituted the data set. The majority of these texts were either academic (138) or produced by the government (91). Thereafter, the most common texts citing 'culture of reading' were produced by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and the media. I classify government texts as texts that were produced by or reference a government official or department directly. Fifty-eight of the 91 governmental texts were from the national government and form the corpus for this article. I focused on these 58 texts because national government holds more power than any other government body. Therefore, its conceptualisation of a culture of reading will influence the field of reading within South Africa significantly (Gee 2018). As the overall corpus forms part of a larger study on reading within basic education, I pay particular attention to texts produced by the DBE. I do not, however, disregard texts presented by other departments from the analysis. This is because individual departments do not operate independently of one another or the presidency and, thus, policies and decision-making that occur at national level outside of the DBE also influence education within South Africa.

Data analysis

For the analysis I began by tracing when and by whom the term 'culture of reading' had been used in these government texts since 2000 and within what contexts. I then used a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2013) to identify what government identified as critical to the development and maintenance of a culture of reading. Thereafter, I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA). The value of CDA is that in critiquing specific actions, the importance of the context in which these actions play out and circumstances that may constrain or promote specific actions and practices are considered (Fairclough & Fairclough 2018). Through this analysis, I interrogate how policies and strategies, and the implementation thereof, reflect the government's understanding of reading in South Africa. Because there has been little significant progress in addressing low reading levels within basic education (see Howie et al. 2008, 2012, 2017), I was interested to see whether there was an evolution in the way the term 'culture of reading' is used over the last 20 years in relation to reading initiatives that have been rolled out.

The individual authors I cite within the analysis have all served as cabinet ministers or presidents. This does not ignore the role of other government officials. However, as one's

level of influence affects the reception and power of a text, a cabinet minister or president's take-up of a culture of reading is likely to affect the positioning of reading within South Africa to a greater degree than other government employees (Gee 2018).

Limitations

I relied on online sources in conducting data collection. I am therefore limited in drawing conclusions about where and how frequently the term 'culture of reading' occurs in texts over the past three decades. This is especially the case with older texts that may not be available online. In particular, content that was posted on the national government website in the early 2000s is no longer accessible online.

The use of the term 'culture of reading' in government discourse

In this section, I trace how the term 'culture of reading' has been employed over the last 20 years within the education sector. I first tabulate when and by whom the term 'culture of reading' has been used. This is followed by specific examples of the use of the term and the contexts within which it is employed. Using these examples as a foundation, the analysis shows how the DBE and individuals within the DBE's use of the term reflects an understanding of the function of a culture of reading and its role within the education sector.

Tracing government usage of the term 'culture of reading'

Table 1 tracks the frequency of the term 'culture of reading' within national government texts. It provides a breakdown according to government departments with presidents' and deputy presidents' use of the term identified separately. For ease of readability, I do not name officials within each department individually.

I have presented the figures in 5-year cycles in order to identify any significant alterations to the frequency of the term's usage. This provides a basis for identifying any peaks in the usage of the term within the context of different departments.

Unsurprisingly it is the DBE that is the government department that has most frequently used the term 'culture

of reading'. The then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, introduced it in 2000, when he launched the *Masifunde Sonke* campaign (Let us read together) – Building a nation of readers, with the aim of 'promot[ing] and build[ing] a culture of reading and writing among all South Africans' (Department of Education, 2001). This campaign recognised that the existence of a culture of reading not only depends on the ability to read but needs to be an ongoing community practice. It focused on strengthening the reading practices of children and adults and aimed to 'engage the whole nation in a dynamic effort to build a sustainable culture of reading and writing that affirms South African languages, history, values and development' (Pandor 2004). Therefore, its objective was described as 'not only about teaching people to read, it's just as much about getting people who can read to read and go on reading' (Asmal in IOL 2000) and creating a nation of 'lifelong readers' (Pandor 2004).

The anticipated benefits of improved literacy results were stressed but there was insufficient articulation as to how the campaign would be implemented. Initiatives such as readathons were held without explanation as to how they would ensure a culture of reading. The government continued to reference the campaign as late as 2007 (Government Communication and Information System 2007). These references were not accompanied by adequate reporting on the impact of the campaign although it is widely considered to be unsuccessful (Chizwina 2011; Sisulu 2004).

Despite the failure of *Masifunde Sonke* to meet its objective of creating a culture of reading, the term re-emerges in 2008 for the launch of the Department of Education's *National Reading Strategy* where a culture of reading is positioned as critical in advancing reading levels:

To meet the crisis of reading, one of the practices promoted by the Department of Education is that all schools (especially primary schools) should arrange an additional half hour per day to 'Drop All and Read'. This campaign creates a culture of reading in the classroom and in the school. Everyone – from learner to teacher, principal and support staff – can be seen reading for enjoyment for half an hour a day. If learners enjoy reading, this will raise literacy levels and improve the ability of learners to learn. (DOE 2008:16)

As with *Masifunde Sonke*, reporting on the *National Reading Strategy* was insufficient and there was no evidence of

TABLE 1: Tracking individual and departmental references to 'culture of reading' (1990–2019).

Date (5-year cycles)	Department of Basic Education	Department of Sports, Arts and Culture	GCIS†	President	Deputy president	Government Gazette	Department of Correctional services	Department of International Relations	Overall total
1995–1999	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2000–2004	6	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	7
2005–2009	4	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	9
2010–2014	3	4	0	1	0	0	1	0	9
2015–2019	16	10	3	1	1	0	0	1	33
Total per department	29	19	4	3	1	1	1	1	59

†, GCIS (Government Communication and Information Systems).

improvements in reading within primary schools. Despite the failure of two significant investments in promoting a culture of reading as a basis for improving literacy levels, the term 'culture of reading' re-emerges again in government rhetoric in 2014 when it is presented a third time as a solution to poor reading levels.

In 2014, Motshekga (2014) contended that '[d]eveloping a culture of reading amongst our learners remains a key driver in improving literacy skills such and [sic] reading and writing proficiency'. In explaining this decision to refocus on a culture of reading, Motshekga (2015b) stated:

After the release of the National Education and Evaluation Unit (NEEDU) report on the State of Literacy Teaching in the Foundation Phase, the Ministerial Reading Audit Report and the 2011 Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), I was convinced that the Sector needed to rejuvenate its reading initiatives.

Subsequently, the *Read to Lead* campaign was launched in 2015 with the aim to 'improve the reading abilities of all South African children'. After 15 years of national campaigns to create a culture of reading, Motshekga noted at a launch of a Drop All and Read Campaign within *Read to Lead* that 'South Africa does not have a reading culture'. In launching the campaign, Motshekga (2015a) stated:

We are gathered here to launch the most important operation in the basic education sector aptly named, Drop All and Read Campaign. ... We hope Drop All and Read Campaign will help children and adults to rediscover the joys of reading while raising awareness for those without access to education.

Motshekga's (2015a) description of Drop All and Read as the 'most important operation in the basic education sector' is unwarranted as there is insufficient evidence of a definitive positive correlation between the voluntary reading that constitutes Drop All and Read and reading achievement (National Reading Panel 2000). I do not suggest Drop All and Read be disbanded, but query the introduction of a practice emanating from the Global North that presupposes (1) learners' ability to read, (2) access to materials within learners' home language and at an appropriate reading level and (3) that providing opportunities for reading will result in enjoyment of reading, unfounded presuppositions in South Africa (National Reading Panel 2000; bua-lit collective 2018; Willenberg 2018).

Although the term 'culture of reading' has circulated within the DBE since 2000, it was only in 2015 that a high-ranking government official explicitly outlined what constitutes a culture of reading (Motshekga 2015b). In introducing *Read to Lead* and the justification for the promotion of a culture of reading as central to the campaign's objective of improving reading levels, Motshekga (2015b) referred to seven studies drawn from the 'huge body of research that concludes that the main thrust of literacy development is the promotion of a school-wide reading culture'. It is concerning that these studies were all conducted within the Global North and Motshekga ignored the vast contextual differences between

the Global North and South Africa. The expectation that findings from these studies could be uncritically applied within South Africa was highlighted when Motshekga (2015b) stated:

To create a reading culture the principal and staff need to:

- understand the impact of reading on learner achievement;
- have a shared vision of the school's reading culture;
- know what an engaged reader looks like;
- fully support the library and its resources, services and programmes; and
- value the impact of reading for pleasure.

This list is drawn verbatim from the National Library of New Zealand's website (n.d.), without acknowledging the source and the significant differences in socio-economic and linguistic contexts. Expecting South African schools to meet these requirements is unrealistic. For example, a functioning library depends on sufficient budget to establish and stock the library, updating of resources and the employment of a library assistant or school librarian (Department of Basic Education 2012; Department of Arts and Culture and the National Council for Library and Information Services 2018), responsibilities that the DBE has failed to meet. By simply stating these expectations, the government abdicates responsibility for creating the conditions necessary for schools to meet such expectations. The presentation of Global North research as a solution to learners' poor reading results indicates a disregard of the realities of the South African reading landscape and of the many complexities that need to be addressed in overcoming the South African reading crisis.

It is deeply problematic that for 15 years, the government claimed that a culture of reading is fundamental to improving education and socio-economic conditions without stipulating how they conceptualise the term. The long-standing absence of a delineation of its meaning suggests either a failure to interrogate the basis for the implementation of time and cost-intensive campaigns and strategies or an assumption that a shared understanding of a complex concept is possible. The latter is a useful discursive strategy in gaining surface-level buy-in as readers and listeners assign their own meaning to the term with an implicit assumption that everyone has a similar understanding of the term. But the reality is that the term 'culture of reading' is denuded of meaning, resulting in an empty signifier that holds limited value in the field of education.

Under the current government, *Masifunde Sonke*, the *National Reading Strategy* and *Read to Lead* have been the three most widely promoted reading campaigns or strategies. All three refer to a culture of reading as critical to addressing the South African reading crisis. It is only within *Masifunde Sonke* that the government referred to the importance of supporting South Africans of all ages to develop a culture of reading which speaks to the intergenerational nature of cultural practices. In contrast, the *National Reading Strategy* and *Read to Lead* focus on a culture of reading at school level. References

to adults' reading practices were framed within their responsibility for supporting children's reading practices, without delineating how adults were being capacitated to fulfil this role or in their development as readers.

Usage and function of a culture of reading

I have identified when the term 'culture of reading' was employed and the context of this usage. I now consider how this reflects government's understanding of reading and how its focus on a culture of reading has affected the reading landscape in South Africa over the last two decades.

The value of family and community support in encouraging reading is a consistent theme in government texts (Asmal 2003; Department of Education 2008; Motshekga 2015b). At the launch of a pilot community programme for the 'promotion of a culture of reading', Mthethwa (2019) stated that '[c]ommunity and parents will have a responsibility to develop their children's reading skills'. Addressing Soweto community members, educators and learners, Motshekga (in Department of Basic Education 2017) raised the importance of encouraging reading within the home. She referred to a poor culture of reading as a 'binding constraint' within society and stated:

We have to stand up and promote reading in our homes to help our children to read books daily. It is critical that our children read for pleasure and for information to improve their literacy skills.

However, as our actions are 'conditioned and constrained by social practices, institutions and structures' (Fairclough & Fairclough 2018:169), such expectations can only be imposed on communities and households who, themselves, value literacy and have been empowered with the necessary education and resources to develop their own reading practices. Because many South Africans have been denied such opportunities, this first requires extensive efforts from government to assist all South Africans in improving their reading practices and abilities.

If children receive little support for reading within their communities and homes, this responsibility falls on schools (Matjila & Pretorius 2004). Although, globally, schools play a critical role in promoting reading, this is often in collaboration with parents and caregivers and schools are better equipped to promote reading practices. If similar expectations are placed on South African schools, the historical inequalities that have existed for many decades and continue to exist within basic and tertiary education have to be acknowledged (Hoadley 2018). These include the negative impact of poor pre-service and in-service teacher education, educators' insufficient opportunities for developing their own reading practices, and having to overcome daily challenges such as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate access to appropriate reading materials (Joubert et al. 2014; Reeves et al. 2008; Willenberg 2018). The DBE's current reliance on international research in its call for schools to create a culture of reading (Motshekga 2015b) is at odds with the South African reading landscape. If the DBE continues to promote a culture of

reading as central to improving reading results, educators and schools need to receive greater support in working towards this goal and effective structures that address the failures of the education system have to be in place.

In advocating for a culture of reading, government stresses the importance of children having access to books, particularly in their home languages (Asmal 2003; Department of Education 2008; Government Communication and Information System 2018). In response to this the DBE introduced learner workbooks and, since 2015, these resources have been published in all 11 home languages and English First Additional Language for Grade R–6 learners' resources (Hoadley & Galant 2016). These provide learners with access to reading materials. However, they function within the confines of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum and cannot address the widespread shortage of materials, particularly with regard to reading for pleasure. In this, there is much to be achieved. The DBE acknowledges the shortage of materials and calls on schools to source donations from NGOs, publishers or individuals and recommends that both schools and homes make use of public libraries (Motshekga 2015b). Many South Africans do not have access to a public library within safe, walking distance. Furthermore, while some schools succeed in sourcing materials from external partners, this is not possible for all schools. No strategy or campaign to improve reading practices can succeed without appropriate materials. It is also the government's responsibility to provide such materials. Their ongoing failure to fulfil this responsibility suggests a lack of political will to meet this fundamental requirement for strong reading practices.

In February 2019, the National Reading Coalition (NRC) was launched by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) in conjunction with the *Read to Lead* campaign. Here, too, a culture of reading was referred to in that the coalition responds to 'the President of the country's call to inculcate a culture of reading in the country' (Department of Basic Education 2019a). The NECT is composed of community members, government, civil society and academics within the education field. The NRC's impact cannot yet be established. However, if the NRC draws on the extensive knowledge held within the NECT, there is potential for conceptualising new and alternative approaches that may assist in improving reading results within South Africa.

Despite linking the promotion of a culture of reading to improved reading results over a 20-year period, the government has failed to produce evidence thereof. Although 'a course of action worthy of being adopted is one that has withstood criticism' (Fairclough & Fairclough 2018:171), the government continues to re-implement failed programmes. The extent of this failure to critique past strategies and implement innovative strategies is reflected in the level of desperation evident in Motshekga (2017) describing *Read to Lead* as part of a 'last ditch effort to achieve the desired outcomes on literacy'. Presenting a campaign that repackages

strategies that have previously failed as ‘last ditch’ portrays a government ill equipped to address poor literacy levels. Such an approach is indicative of the government’s unwillingness ‘to subject its own standpoints to critical questioning, rather than defending a predetermined normative standpoint, even in the face of evidence that it may be unreasonable’ (Fairclough & Fairclough 2018:181). Furthermore, their insufficient articulation about how to maintain a culture of reading is concerning as, without this, promoting a culture of reading holds no value.

Conclusion

Over the previous 20 years, the national government and DBE have stressed the promotion of a culture of reading in improving learners’ reading levels. Any analysis of whether their understanding of a culture of reading has evolved is impeded by their lack of explanation about what constitutes a culture of reading, particularly over the period 2000–2015. Their repetition of past strategies has not been accompanied by sufficient, observable impact or significant improvements in large-scale reading assessments such as PIRLS that justify this repetition. This indicates little alteration to their understanding of a culture of reading or insight into the South African reading landscape and is indicative of the adoption of a catchphrase that dominates education discourse despite holding no clear purpose or function.

It is unclear why the government has continued to rely on the same systems and practices that have, for over two decades, denied many South African learners and adults the necessary opportunities to develop strong reading skills and practices. In light of this, their persistent faith in a culture of reading as essential for socio-economic development within the country and to improve learners’ reading and academic abilities is unjustified. Although catchy, the term ‘culture of reading’ appears to be empty rhetoric.

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Author’s contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

All documents are available in the public domain.

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