

A reading project to improve literacy in the foundation phase: A case study in the Eastern Cape



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Early literacy teaching and learning in the foundation phase of rural schools in South Africa experience persistent challenges. In order to address some of these challenges, a national reading programme to improve literacy among rural learners was initiated by a non-governmental organisation. The article provides an overview of how teachers in selected Eastern Cape foundation classrooms use the reading programme to enhance literacy of the learners. The objectives of the article are to investigate how the reading project has been incorporated into the teachers' teaching pedagogy and their perceptions as to how the reading programme has contributed to the school and community. Four purposively selected rural schools, each being part of the reading programme, served as research sites. Participants included eight teachers who used the reading supplement in their classroom. Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with the teachers in each school. Through a process of thematic content analysis, the following themes emerged: (1) pedagogical challenges, (2) infrastructure and provisioning for literacy and (3) community engagement. The considerations for future reading programmes in rural areas include cost, availability of resources, training of teachers and practical aspects of the supplement, for example, font size and length of stories. These findings illustrate how the foundation teachers use the reading programme to enhance the literacy curriculum in schools situated in rural settings. The recommendation of the article is that the reading programme is useful and teachers should be encouraged to use the supplement reading activities in the foundation phase.

Introduction

A recent study conducted in the Eastern Cape among Grade 4 learners found that 32% of the learners were considered illiterate, while 60% could not read for meaning at the end of this grade. One of the reasons attributed to these poor results is that the learners were tested in English, which becomes the language of learning and teaching in Grade 4, rather than their mother tongue. However, the study found that this could not be the sole reason for these poor results as the literacy results remained similar whether they were tested in their home language (HL) or English. A second reason often blamed for poor literacy is the overcrowding of rural classrooms with 27% of Grades 1–3 in the Eastern Cape province having more than 55 pupils per class (Charter 2016). In this situation, teachers are not able to observe and facilitate the learning of literacy skills of diverse groups of children. The study further found that many foundation phase teachers in South Africa do not have the content-knowledge base and pedagogical skills to teach children to read (Charter 2016).

In South Africa the basic learning needs of citizens are protected as a human right. Literacy is considered important as it has the potential to reduce poverty, promote productivity and sustain development (Zhang 2006). These advantages are particularly important in the rural areas where literacy and development still lag behind (Mohangi et al. 2016).

The South African government has made progress towards recognising the need for literacy development through the improved access to early childhood development programmes in rural areas (Department of Basic Education, Department of Social Development & UNICEF 2010). The Department of Education has also established the Directorate for Rural Education to support this process as outlined in the National Framework for Quality Education in Rural Areas (Department of Education 2006). Despite these efforts, not much has changed in the rural education environment as research suggests that the rate of educational progress in these areas is limited (Nkambule et al. 2011).

In 2008, 62% of schools in South Africa were situated in rural areas (Surtly 2011). Schools in rural areas are remote and underdeveloped while the community often display poor socio-economic

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circumstances and lack basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity and information and communication technologies (Mohangi et al. 2016). The poverty in rural areas will directly affect educational resources, experiences and opportunity, as it is difficult to attract experienced staff to these schools (Lester 2012). Typical challenges of a rural school include a high number of multigrade classrooms, lack of public transport because of the isolated setting of the school, attendance problems of learners and diverse learner backgrounds (Mohangi et al. 2016).

Literacy in rural schools is further impeded by the lack of reading material. Only 7% of schools in South Africa have a functional library while most classrooms do not have books available that learners can read. More than half of learners do not have access to books at home. There is also an acute shortage of relevant content and appropriate level of books in the African languages (Department of Basic Education 2008; Nel et al. 2016). Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG 2008) reported that there are 30 libraries per million people in South Africa with only 46% of the population able to borrow books from the library.

Literature review

According to De Vos, Van der Merwe and Van der Mescht (2014:147), 'Literacy is one of the most important academic skills'. Literacy can be used as a measure to predict success in both life after school and the educational environment (Pretorius & Mokhwesana 2009). Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) found that Grade 3 literacy results are a good predictor of high school graduation. The annual results from the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) illustrate the poor state of literacy in the schooling system that decreases steadily from Grade 1 (Table 1). The language achievement of learners in the Eastern Cape starts off at the lowest percentage (54.8%) in the country in Grade 1 and decreases to 43% at the end of Grade 4. These scores then are an accurate predictor of the grade 12 results, with the Eastern Cape being the province with the lowest pass rate in South Africa for the past few years.

TABLE 1: Language achievement.

Province	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Difference in percentage between Grade 1 and Grade 4
KZN	61.6	58.6	55.3	46.6	15.0
MP	57.1	54.1	47.0	43.2	13.9
LP	57.9	52.9	46.9	44.3	13.6
NC	56.8	52.8	46.2	43.9	12.9
GP	65.4	60.2	54.5	53.4	12.0
EC	54.8	51.8	47	43.0	11.8
WC	64.5	62	49.9	54.1	10.4
NW	56.6	51.2	46.8	46.9	9.7
FS	61.4	56.8	54.4	55.5	5.9
National average	60.4%	56.5%	50.8%	49.3%	-

Source: De Vos, M., Van der Merwe, K. & Van der Mescht, C., 2014, 'A research programme for reading in African Languages to underpin CAPS', *Journal for Language Teaching* 48(2), 148–177. <https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v48i2.7>

Note: KZN, KwaZulu-Natal; MP, Mpumalanga; LP, Limpopo; NC, Northern Cape; GP, Gauteng; EC, Eastern Cape; WC, Western Cape; NW, North West; FS, Free State.

These dismal results also extend to the international arena where South African learners in Grade 5 were found to be almost three years behind international norms. Learners in the Eastern Cape were an average of four years behind the international benchmark (Howie et al. 2012). The PIRLS report in 2011 also placed South Africa near the bottom of the list for performance in literacy which necessitated a thorough investigation into the subject of literacy.

Research in the literacy field

Primary school curricula state that learners should be able to read and write fluently at a complex level of cognitive skill at the end of Grade 3. From Grade 4, learners then use these literacy skills to investigate a range of disciplinary fields. The results in the previous section show that this is not the current situation in the South African schooling system (Taylor 2016). The results of the ANAs seem to indicate that the development of basic literacy skills, such as reading, writing, numeracy and life skills, has not received enough attention in the foundation phase (Grade R – Grade 3) (Nel et al. 2016).

Schools in South Africa must offer two languages, one that is used as a HL and a second called first additional language. The HL is not always the mother tongue of all the learners, but rather a language that they are proficient in (Department of Basic Education 2011). This means that many learners do not use their strongest language during the initial few years of schooling but rather an additional first language, for example, English (Department of Basic Education 2011). Kerfoot and Van Heerden (2014) found that the policy of teaching in the mother tongue does not ensure proficiency in either the home or additional first language. Instead, reading for pleasure and meaning should be the main goal during the foundation phase (Van Der berg et al. 2016).

Justification

To assist with these problems, the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) document for foundation phase (HLs) was formulated by the Department of Education. The CAPS document emphasises the knowledge, skills and values that teachers in the foundation phase should possess and use to teach literacy. However, the policy has not translated into classroom practice because of insufficient funding and number of teachers, lack of training for teachers and a general indifference where literacy teaching in the foundation phase is concerned (Janks 2014; Nel et al. 2016). Taylor (2016) also reported that pedagogical practice is not appropriate for learners in rural schools. Most rural primary schools make use of chanting in a chorus with very little independent reading by learners. This is similar to the report from Gains and Graham (2011) who found that most early literacy teachers still make use of oral drill sequences to teach reading. This means that learners often do not progress further than technical decoding skills and cannot explain the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. An analysis of an assessment undertaken by National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) found that a large majority

of African Grade 5 children located in rural schools decode simple words at such a slow rate that they cannot understand what it is that they are reading (Draper & Spaull 2015). A further problem is that teachers do not have expressive writing experience themselves and thus do not teach writing during early literacy classes in rural schools. Writing during the year does not reach more than 25% of the CAPS curriculum specifications (NEEDU 2012). The result is that learners have limited understanding of the texts that they read (Hoadly 2012).

Purpose and objective

To date, little research has been conducted into the methodologies that are most efficient to become literature in an African language, specifically in the foundation phase in rural schools (Guthrie, Wigfield & Perencevich 2004). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of how teachers in selected Eastern Cape foundation classrooms use a reading programme to enhance the literacy curriculum. The reading programme was established in 2009 to support literacy in rural schools. The project has been ongoing for the past five years in these four schools. The objectives of the article are to investigate how the reading project has been incorporated into the teaching pedagogy and the teacher's perceptions, as to the contribution that the reading project has made in the school and community. Lastly, the teachers provide suggestions for the improvement of a reading programme in rural schools.

The context of the study

The Project for the Research of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) was the cofounder, together with the DG Murray Trust, of the Nal'ibali campaign in 2012 in South Africa. The project was recognised internationally when it received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2014 and 2015 (Bloch 2015).

The Nal'ibali campaign publishes a bilingual newspaper supplement bimonthly that is distributed to reading clubs and media publications such as newspapers across the country. Since the inception of the project, 21.1 million supplements have been distributed to 45 021 children across the country and 1120 reading clubs were started in seven provinces (Bloch 2015).

'The purpose of Nal'ibali aims to re-ignite a passion for storytelling and reading among adults and children as an urgent strategic intervention to transform children's opportunities for becoming readers and writers' (Bloch 2015:1). The supplement makes use of stories, literacy activities, reading and reading club tips and support to promote literacy and make reading and storytelling meaningful, enjoyable and accessible. PRAESA also maintains a website where teachers can access additional learning material for each story and hosts a radio show on several radio stations where the story featured in the supplement is enacted.

Methodology

This research study employed an interpretivist philosophy where meaning is interpreted from the individual's lens and reality can be socially constructed. This paradigm can be used to provide holistic, rich and in-depth understanding of complex phenomena (Creswell 2016). The objective of the study is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand the behaviour (i.e. the experiences of teachers with regards to the use of Nal'ibali to improve reading literacy in rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape) and not to predict behaviour of the teachers, which is characteristic of the positivist stance. In line with the interpretivist philosophy, the qualitative approach was also adopted and motivated by the need to study, 'real people, real problems and real organisations' (Edmondson & McManus 2007, p. 1155). Such efforts are applauded as they can be forerunners in theory development.

Data collection instrument and procedure

The data collection method for this study made use of semi-structured interviews in order to achieve an understanding around the depth and complexity of the teachers' experiences with regards to the Nal'ibali campaign (Creswell 2016). Semi-structured interviews allow for some flexibility when qualitative data are collected as the interviewee has more 'freedom' to express and ascribe meaning to their experiences (Noaks & Wincup 2004). In order to prompt the interviewee, a trigger question was used, for example, 'please provide a brief description of your experience and understanding of the goal of the Nal'ibali initiatives'. Ethical clearance was obtained for the project from the University Ethical Clearance Committee.

Four rural schools were included in the study and eight teachers were interviewed, two from each school. A purposive, convenience sampling method was used as the sample needed to be 'available and accessible' to the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The schools were selected for the study as they have participated in the Nal'ibali programme for the past five years. The supplements are distributed to the schools bimonthly by a non-profit organisation. The schools were approached by the researcher and asked to identify the foundation teachers that make use of the Nal'ibali supplements in their classroom. Interview dates and times were set up at the school when the teachers were not in class. The duration of each interview on average was 45 min.

Data analysis procedure

The interviews were transcribed and prepared for analyses. Thematic analysis was used to identify appropriate themes from the interviews. Thematic analysis is defined by Crowe, Inder and Porter (2015) as, 'a process of interpretation of qualitative data in order to find patterns of meanings across the data' (p. 617). This process allows the researcher to organise and manage data and further facilitate the

identification of themes, analysis of data, gathering insight and developing conclusions.

Results and discussion

All four schools included in the study were government schools that were classified by the Department of Basic Education as non-fee schools and placed in the first or second quintile. Table 2 provides the demographic information of the schools. All the schools offered classes for learners from Grade R to Grade 7.

School 3 had no computer or Internet access, while the other schools had one computer and a printer that the principal and staff could use for administrative tasks and/or to access email. Schools 1 and 4 had access to the Internet via WiFi, but both complained that the access was irregular and costly. School 1 had also started a programme where international volunteers would visit the schools once a week and provide computer literacy programmes in a small computer laboratory. Because of the geographical location of the school, the laboratory had no Internet access as a satellite dish would be needed to relay the signal.

Schools 1 and 3 made use of the Nal'ibali throughout all the Grades (R–7). The supplements was typically used first with the younger children and then passed on per grade until it reached the Grade 7 class. School 2 used the Nal'ibali supplement in their Grade 1 class where the teacher would initially read the story to the learners and show them the pictures that accompany the story. As the learners progressed throughout the year, they started to read the story themselves. School 4 used the Nal'ibali in the Grade 3 class to supplement the prescribed curriculum. Two of the schools allowed the pupils to take their Nal'ibali home and reported that the supplement is read by the entire family.

Themes

The research makes use of a constructivist lens to analyse the themes of the interviews. Vygotsky (1962) developed the 'zone of proximal development' that suggests that all learning builds on existing foundations (skills and knowledge). New knowledge is built on this foundation, meaning that advanced skills or different learning areas cannot be learned if the links to existing skills have not been established. A learner cannot learn new information if a certain level of language proficiency and understanding of literacy has not been reached (Taylor 2016). In the next section, the various themes that were identified from the interviews are presented.

TABLE 2: Demographics of schools.

School	Total number of pupils	Number of pupils in foundation classes where Nal'ibali was used most often
School 1	170	55 (Grades 1 and 2 in one class)
School 2	415	59 (Grade 1)
School 3	150	36 (Grade R); 33 (Grades 1 and 2 in one class)
School 4	500	98 (Grade 3)

Pedagogical issues

All the teachers interviewed agreed that the Nal'ibali initiative is beneficial to the learners. The Nal'ibalis were seen as incremental in the learning process as younger learners can be taught reading and writing skills while learners in higher grades are asked to use more advanced skills, such as reasoning and thinking, to reflect on the stories. The suggested benefits from Nal'ibali ranged from general outcomes such as developing language skills to specific skills such as reading, listening, comprehension, storytelling and writing skills.

One teacher shared:

'I use the Nal'ibali to encourage writing among the learners. They like the stories and use their imagination for creative writing as they can relate to the characters. Even sentence construction is more fun as they interact with the activities.' (A Female, Grade 1, Teacher)

Nal'ibali was used by the foundation phase teachers to teach a variety of skills. These include reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. All the schools used the Nal'ibali to improve reading, speaking and listening skills, with only two schools incorporating it to improve the learners' writing skills. The class sizes, except for school 3, are above the recommended 35 students per classroom. The classrooms were observed to be small without enough desks for all the students. In many instances, three or four learners would share a desk designed for two learners. In two of the schools, multiclassrooms were also present in one classroom. These arrangements make it difficult for the teacher to manage the classroom and design and implement proper classroom activities.

Reading

Three of the schools used the supplements, or 'Nal'ibalis', as they are known, to improve the learners' reading skills regardless of their grade. The supplements were seen as beneficial, as they provided the story in isiXhosa and English as illustrated by the following quote:

'The Nal'ibalis is useful as the learners can use the small book that is easy to transport. The small book provides the story in English and isiXhosa which allows the learners to improve the reading fluency in both languages. They can also switch stories if they do not understand the English version. This helps them to understand the "gist" of the storyline.' (A, Female, Grade 1, Teacher)

School 2 used the story to discuss phonics with the learners. The teacher made use of Nal'ibali to revise the phonics that was taught during the past week as a re-enforcement to these lessons.

Writing

School 1 incorporated writing skills into the curriculum as they asked the older learners (Grades 4–7) to write an essay about how they related to the story or about a specific

character in the story. The younger learners (Grades 1–3) used the story to improve their vocabulary and spelling skills. The school encouraged all the learners to become involved in the activities by holding a spelling bee competition on Fridays with a small prize for the winner.

School 4 used word puzzles and sentence construction to improve the learners' writing skills. Pictures were also used as starting points for creative work essays.

Speaking

The Grade R teacher at school 2 made use of the supplement to improve the students' speaking skills. The teacher showed the class the pictures during the reading of the story and asked them to discuss what they thought would happen next. This was similar to school 1 that would ask the older learners specific questions about the story or to discuss the moral principle of the story.

School 1 asked the Grade 7 learners to dramatise the story in groups. Once a month these learners then perform the story in front of the other grades. This is similar to school 4, where pictures in the supplement were used to discuss the story line or act out the story. Specific questions were asked to make sure the learners understood and relate to the story. Activities such as group guided reading were used in school 4 to improve the English fluency of the grade 3 learners.

Listening

All the teachers started by reading the story in both languages to the learners. This provided an opportunity for the learners to ask questions, such as if they do not understand a specific word, and become familiar with the story.

A teacher from school 2 said:

'I initially read the Nal'ibali story to the class and ask them questions about the story. Recall of the story is done by asking the learners about the specific sequence of events or characteristics of key characters in the story.' (B, Female, Grade 1, Teacher)

Infrastructure and provisioning for literacy

Reading promotion projects follow a two-step approach: Firstly, the reading material must be available, while the second step entails the teacher helping the learners to find the joy of reading (Snyman 2016).

Only 7% of schools in South Africa have a functional library, which results in the lack of a reading culture in a community as they do not have the adequate resource material (Nel et al. 2016). None of the schools in this case study had a functional library. This meant that the Nal'ibalies often substitute for the shortage of reading material. The teachers suggested that Nal'ibali should be used in schools where there is no library or a small library as the supplements can be recycled for reading purposes. One of the teachers commented proudly that she now had her own library in the classroom and that

the learners read the booklets when they are finished with their school work. She has a valuable resource that she can transfer to the learners in the following year.

The Nal'ibali programme provides a newspaper supplement bimonthly, as well as electronic resources via a website and radio programme. Three of the schools were not aware that Nal'ibali provides additional electronic resources such as social media, the website or radio programme. Only school 4 made use of the radio programme during class time and has become a member of the Facebook page. They said:

'We know about Nal'ibali because John brings us the newspapers every two weeks. We do not have computers or the Internet to look at these things. It is expensive and the Department of Education do[es] not provide us with the resources.' (C, Female, Grade 2, Teacher)

'It is good that the learners make their own booklets as it gives them a proud feeling when they have prepared their own learning material. The learners in the other grades are envious of them as they now have a book to take home to read.' (A, Female, Grade 1, Teacher)

During step 2, the teacher is responsible for the reader development of learners to improve their reading fluency and comprehension (Snyman 2016). Learners must experience the joy of reading before they will develop a reading culture. In order to accomplish this, the teachers felt that awareness about the programme was needed in order to get buy-in from the principal and other teachers at the school. Once a year, two of the schools put on a small concert for the foundation classes when they act out one of the Nal'ibali stories for world read aloud day. This seemed to be the initiative of the individual teachers responsible for these classes. At the third school, the school principal has supported the reading programme, and here the entire school participates in a spelling bee competition or the older learners dramatise the stories for the younger grades. These activities provide younger learners with the opportunities to really engage with the reading material and develop a lasting joy for reading.

Community engagement

Literacy skills are crucial to parenting, employment seeking, consuming and so on. Reading not only impacts everyday life but is also at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning (Cox & Guthrie 2001). It is also needed to take advantage of digital developments. A literate individual can 'develop capacities of reflection, critique and empathy' (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012) that consequently lead to a sense of self-efficacy and identity.

One of the school teachers had started a reading group at her church for adults with the books. There is no library in the community and she felt this was a way for the adults to improve their reading skills as well. This teacher was heavily involved in her community and church and served on many committees to improve the quality of her village. Similarly, PREASA has recognised that many of the reading club

volunteers and staff of Nal'ibali who live in the black communities become role models and are called on to lead discussion on community issues as they are perceived to be more educated and knowledgeable. In this way, they become the critical voices of the community and reassert the value of community and indigenous knowledge. Newman's (2005) ideas about informal learning are useful here: Information and knowledge are used as resources in the fight for better education; interpretive skills are deployed to understand what people are like and to make sense of their actions and behaviour; and critical skills are developed to challenge power relationships.

Implications for reading project in rural school

The availability of the supplement and cost associated with buying the newspaper were seen as prohibitive factors to the sustainability of the project. All the schools are located in rural areas where newspapers are only accessible at the local shop, which is often located far away from the schools. Teachers also felt that parents would not be able to afford the newspaper. All the schools in this study were provided with the supplement free of charge by a non-profit organisation and were delivered to the school.

Teacher training on how to incorporate Nal'ibali was another important point that was raised with some suggesting that a separate teacher guide should be produced that can help teachers to use the supplement effectively in the classroom. Schools 1 and 3 also wanted more activities for teachers to make use of in the booklet, or that additional material could be emailed to the teachers on a database to include in their lesson plans. School 4 suggested that a training guide or workshop would be useful for teachers to learn how to incorporate the Nal'ibali into the curriculum.

The teachers also warned that the amount of time needed to cut and prepare the Nal'ibalies for the classroom was a burden. Some of the teachers overcame this problem by using the older learners to help them prepare the booklets in class.

School 1 suggested that the stories should include other languages as well. In the Eastern Cape, the stories are available in English and/or Xhosa, but school 1 felt that the learners would benefit from Afrikaans as well. School 2 also echoed this sentiment as they felt that the stories should be used to improve the second language of the older learners.

Stories should be Grade appropriate and not longer than 15 min, while schools 2, 3 and 4 complained that the font size was too small for younger learners to follow. One of the schools also suggested that the size of the book must be bigger in order to allow groups to read together. The story content must also relate with the learners that are from rural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This article provided an overview of how teachers in selected Eastern Cape foundation phase classrooms use a reading

programme to enhance literacy among their learners. The literacy rate among Foundation learners in rural schools is dismal, and while the Department of Basic Education has prioritised literacy, there has been very little improvement. The use of a reading programme supplement was found to be beneficial in the four schools that were included in the study. The teachers could use the supplement to enhance the literacy curriculum (reading, writing, speaking and listening) in a variety of ways. None of the teachers were trained to use the supplement or could access the online resources, and the amount of creativity and effort was deemed to be of an individual nature. Where the principal or other teachers became involved in the project, the use of the supplements was expanded to all the grades in the school. The reading programme also provided some reading material in the absence of a functional library for the school and the community in one instance. The considerations that were identified that will impact on a Foundation Phase reading programme in rural areas are cost, availability of resources, training of teachers and practical aspects of the supplement, for example, font size and length of stories. These considerations provide valuable insight into how to improve the sustainability of these projects for the future. The limitations of this study include the small sample size, which could be improved in future research to all the schools that use Nal'ibali to enhance their literacy programmes.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' Contributions

L.C. conceptualised the study, collected the data and performed the literature review. She was also responsible for the analysis of the data and writing the article. C.B. was part of the conceptualising of the study

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