




# Literacy support in practice: Grade 3 teachers' experiences with government reading interventions



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**Background:** South Africa faces a critical challenge with reading literacy, particularly in the Foundation Phase of schooling, prompting government intervention. To address this, the government has introduced various skills development programmes and focused teaching materials aimed at improving reading literacy outcomes.

**Objectives:** This study explored the experiences of Grade 3 teachers in Gauteng with the reading support programmes and materials provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

**Method:** A generic qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 Grade 3 teachers, complemented by focus group interviews involving the same participants. The data were analysed using the constant comparative method.

**Results:** The data analysis revealed that teachers have diverse levels of familiarity with, and use of the reading support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. This highlighted the need for more tailored and targeted support. Additionally, teachers' use of these resources varied significantly, with differing impacts on learners' reading literacy skills as perceived by the teachers.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that teachers' differing perspectives and experiences with the DBE reading support programmes and materials influence both how these resources are used and their perceived effectiveness in improving literacy outcomes.

**Contribution:** This study adds to the body of knowledge on teachers' experiences with DBE reading support programmes and materials. It underscores the importance of incorporating teachers' insights into the design of effective interventions, as they provide valuable perspectives on classroom realities and the practical impact of these initiatives.

**Keywords:** reading; literacy; support programmes; support materials; Grade 3; reading comprehension; Department of Basic Education.

## Introduction

In the Foundation Phase of schooling (Grade R - Grade 3 in South Africa), children learn how to read. From Grade 4 onwards, the emphasis shifts to reading as a tool for learning across all subjects. As a result, reading proficiency, or reading literacy, directly impacts learners' ability to acquire new knowledge and engage with academic texts in different school subjects (Zimmerman 2023). In this article, the authors define 'reading literacy' as the ability to decode a text and construct meaning from it through comprehension. Scholars like Rapetsoa and Singh (2017) highlight that much of the knowledge gained in the later years of schooling and beyond heavily depends on strong reading literacy skills that need to be mastered in the Foundation Phase. Thus, reading literacy skills not only support basic comprehension but also function as a gateway to acquiring new knowledge, which is crucial for academic success. This underscores the importance of reading literacy development in the early years.

Given the critical role of reading literacy skills in knowledge acquisition and academic success, South Africa's alarmingly poor literacy rates are a major cause for concern (Biesman-Simons 2021; Spaul & Taylor 2022). Research consistently shows that many South African learners have not yet acquired basic reading skills by the end of Grade 3 (Carter et al. 2024; Cronje 2024; Howie et al. 2017; Swanepoel, Van Heerden & Hartell 2019). In fact, learners are typically found to be, on average, 2.8 years behind their international peers (Howie & Van Staden 2012). The decline in

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reading proficiency is evident in the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which revealed no significant improvement in South African learners' performance between 2011 and 2016. In 2016, 78% of learners could not meet the lowest benchmark (Nel 2018). Disconcertingly, this figure worsened in PIRLS 2021, with 81% of learners failing to reach the minimum benchmark of reading competency, irrespective of whether this was in English or in the learner's home language (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2023). These findings underscore the urgent need for effective interventions to address poor reading literacy skills in the early years of schooling.

To improve reading literacy rates in South Africa, the DBE has developed various interventions, including skills development programmes and focused teaching materials (DBE 2008; 2015a; 2021a; 2021b; 2022). Teachers are responsible for implementing these interventions, making their perspectives on their effectiveness and their experiences with applying them essential for understanding how to enhance reading literacy in classrooms (Fleisch & Dixon 2019). However, research on teachers' experiences with the programmes and materials (discussed in the next section), particularly the reading support initiatives provided by the DBE in South Africa, is limited (Du Plessis & Marais 2015; Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll 2005).

The research reported on in this article addresses this gap in the literature by exploring how Grade 3 teachers in Gauteng province experience the reading literacy support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. One of the study's key aims was to understand teachers' experiences of and attitudes toward these support programmes and materials. Additionally, the research aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on the contributions of these resources and their impact on learners' reading literacy development. The question that guided the research was: 'What are the experiences of Grade 3 teachers in Gauteng with the reading literacy support programmes and materials provided by the DBE?'

The next section reviews the literature on reading literacy skills in South Africa and highlights the necessity for government intervention. This is followed by a brief discussion of the theoretical framing of the research. Next, the methods used to collect and analyse data are described. Finally, the study's findings are presented and discussed.

## Reading literacy skills in South Africa and the need for government intervention

Reading literacy in South Africa is in a dire state, with research revealing that most South African learners struggle to achieve basic reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3 (DBE 2023; Fatyela et al. 2021). In the 2016 PIRLS assessment, 78% of learners in South Africa did not reach the lowest benchmark for reading proficiency. This percentage increased to 81% by 2021. By then, South African learners' average scores had also declined, dropping from 320 (out of 700) points in 2016 to 288

points in 2021, which is significantly below the international average benchmark of 500 points (DBE 2023). This decline highlights a need for government intervention to improve literacy outcomes, as low reading literacy skills hinder learners' educational progress and socio-economic development. In addition to poor PIRLS performance, South Africa has historically lagged other countries in reading literacy. According to the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) reports, South African learners ranked 10th out of 14 participating countries in reading proficiency as far back as 2007 (Spaull 2013). Ardington et al. (2020) conducted a study on beginner reader achievement in Nguni languages, revealing that learners who have difficulty with decoding skills and understanding the alphabetic principle by the end of Grade 2 are at a higher risk of requiring remedial support in subsequent grades and are likely to struggle with reading comprehension. Arends and Fonseca (2024) investigated how Grade 4 learners engaged with a short text that required cohesive reading as well as some background knowledge and vocabulary. Their findings indicate that learners struggle to apply inferencing skills and fail to read cohesively across sentences and paragraphs, with limited vocabulary significantly affecting their comprehension of the text. The severity of the reading literacy crisis in South Africa has been evident for decades, and without stronger government intervention, significant improvement is unlikely.

Research indicates that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds face obstacles in developing reading literacy skills, with learners from lower-income households typically lagging about two years behind their more economically advantaged peers (Howie & Van Staden 2012). This disparity is often linked to inadequate academic support at home, as many parents are unable to assist with reading due to their own literacy challenges (Zuze & Reddy 2013). Other barriers that affect learners' reading literacy development include language barriers and limited access to reading materials in many schools (Biesman-Simons 2021; Mojapelo 2023). The socio-economic factors impacting reading literacy skills are compounded by South Africa's multilingual context (Broom 2004). The country has 11 official languages, with the Foundation Phase curriculum advocating for mother-tongue instruction. While the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) promotes multilingualism, implementing effective literacy instruction across so many languages is challenging due to resource constraints (Mojapelo 2023). Furthermore, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated the literacy crisis. School closures during the pandemic caused a significant loss in learning time, setting back literacy development even further (Ardington, Wills & Kotze 2021; Spaull & Van der Berg 2020).

The persistence of the reading literacy crisis in South Africa underscores the need for more effective and sustained government action (Nel 2018). This includes addressing socio-economic disparities, enhancing teacher training, and ensuring that learners have access to high-quality, culturally relevant reading materials in their home languages. A

coordinated, well-funded approach is essential to ensure that South Africa can make meaningful progress in reading literacy and support the broader educational and economic advancement of the nation (Taylor et al. 2019). The DBE has implemented several initiatives to address this crisis. The 'Masifunde Sonke' campaign was established in 2000 and later developed into the 'Read to Lead' campaign under the National Reading Strategy in 2015. This strategy includes the creation of school-based libraries, the 'Drop All and Read' initiative for weekly reading sessions, and the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), which led to the Early Grade Reading Programme (EGRP) aimed at training teachers how to support learners in their reading development (DBE 2022; Taylor et al. 2019). Additionally, the DBE provides reading materials such as grade-appropriate readers, 'big books', and 'Rainbow workbooks', supported by a Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM) budget to ensure that schools can access these resources (DBE 2021b).

Since teachers are responsible for teaching reading, supporting reading skills development, and implementing reading literacy support programmes and materials provided by the DBE, it is important to research their experiences with these programmes and materials. This includes understanding their perceptions of the programmes' effectiveness in supporting learners' reading literacy skills. However, there is limited research on teachers' experiences with DBE reading support programmes and materials. Teachers' involvement in the design and implementation of these interventions is crucial to their success (Fleisch & Dixon 2019). This study sought to address this gap by exploring Grade 3 teachers' experiences with DBE reading support initiatives, as they provide valuable insights into the classroom implementation of these interventions (Van der Mescht 2013; Wawire 2021).

### Framing the research: Pedagogical content knowledge and reflective practice

The research was framed using the theory of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and reflective practice, as introduced by Shulman (1986). This framework helped examine whether the DBE's reading literacy programmes and materials influenced how teachers approached reading instruction, particularly in using interventions to improve learners' reading literacy skills. PCK refers to the combination of teaching skills (pedagogy) and subject-specific content knowledge (Shulman 1986). To teach reading effectively, teachers must have both pedagogical expertise and content knowledge (Pretorius & Klapwijk 2016). This knowledge includes understanding how to support learners' reading development or *learning* how to read, which is a critical component of PCK (Abell et al. 2009). Given that reading instruction requires both subject-specific knowledge and pedagogical strategies, PCK provides a useful lens for understanding how teachers integrate these elements in their practice. By using PCK as a framework, this study captures the nuanced ways in which the DBE's reading literacy support programmes and materials contribute to the development of teachers' reading instruction approaches. In the research that is reported on in this article, emphasis was

placed on how the DBE's reading literacy support programmes and materials influenced teachers' PCK and how this shaped their instructional practices in the classroom (from the perspectives of the teachers themselves).

Reflective practice, as defined by Cirocki and Widodo (2019), involves critically assessing teaching experiences before, during, and after instruction. This process is intricately linked to teachers' PCK, enabling them to continually refine their teaching strategies and knowledge (Loveless 2011). Through reflection, this theory argues, teachers can better leverage DBE support programmes and materials to improve learners' reading outcomes (Sari, Drajiati & So 2021).

## Research methods and design

### Research design

This study employed a generic qualitative research design to explore Grade 3 teachers' experiences with reading support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. Qualitative methods were chosen because they enable researchers to capture participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2018).

### Setting and participants

Data were collected from 15 purposefully selected Grade 3 teachers across six primary schools in Johannesburg South, Gauteng, and these schools were selected for their diverse socio-economic contexts. This sampling provided diverse perspectives from both township and urban schools, which, as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight, are crucial in qualitative research. Table 1 provides an overview of the study participants and the type of area where their schools are located.

### Data collection

Data collection took place in April and May 2023, using semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for participants to share their experiences with DBE support programmes and materials while enabling the researchers to ask follow-up questions if necessary (Green & Thorogood 2014). In the one-on-one interviews, participants were encouraged to speak openly without influence from others. Focus group interviews involved six groups (with two to three teachers from the same school in each group), fostering discussion on shared experiences with the support programmes and materials (Dawson 2007). This method encouraged the co-construction of knowledge through discussion (Merriam & Tisdell 2016).

**TABLE 1:** Overview of participants.

School	Participants	Area
School A	Teachers 1, 2 and 3	Urban
School B	Teachers 12 and 13	Urban
School C	Teachers 4, 5 and 6	Township
School D	Teachers 7 and 8	Township
School E	Teachers 9, 10 and 11	Township
School F	Teachers 14 and 15	Township

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Maykut & Morehouse 1994), where interview transcripts were coded and categorised into 'units of meaning'. These units were organised into 10 provisional categories, which were then compared for similarities and differences in words and phrases. This process led to refinements that resulted in the final themes, which serve as the study's findings. Triangulation of individual and focus group data enhanced the study's credibility (Mays & Pope 1995), ensuring reliable and valid findings (Howell 2016).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained on 18 November 2022 from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg (Sem 2-2022-093), and the necessary permissions from the Gauteng Department of Education and participating schools were secured. Participation was voluntary, and teachers could withdraw at any time, ensuring minimal disruption to the learning programme at the schools where data were collected (Rahimi 2014).

## Discussion of findings

The data analysis process generated three themes that encapsulated the teachers' experiences with reading support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. The themes are presented and discussed in the sections that follow.

### Theme 1: Teachers' differing familiarity and engagement with reading literacy programmes and materials underscore the need for targeted support

The analysis of the data revealed varying levels of familiarity with and engagement of teachers with reading literacy support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. Very often, this awareness was limited and tied to a specific *programme* (and largely disconnected from any structured schema of resources), as illustrated in the following comment:

'There's the one that we do in February, the reading ... Reading Aloud. Reading Aloud, so we do that, but that's where we read out loud to the children. The Drop All and Read is implemented weekly because it's the one where we're doing the ... group guided reading.' (Teacher 12, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

However, this teacher's reference to the 'Read Aloud' activity shows a misunderstanding, as this event is part of 'World Read Aloud Day', founded by LitWorld in 2010 (LitWorld 2024), and not a DBE-initiated programme. This comment reflects confusion about the origins and distinctions of different literacy support programmes. Similarly, other teachers displayed misconceptions, such as confusing 'Click Foundations', 'Reading Eggs', and the 'Sunshine Reading' programmes with DBE initiatives. In fact, Click Learning, established by an NGO, aims to provide computer access and online literacy support programmes (Click Learning 2022; Olivier et al. 2022). The 'Sunshine Reading' programme,

is also not DBE-affiliated (Sunshine Books 2024). These examples highlight a communication gap between the DBE and teachers regarding the literacy programmes available, which impacts how the relationship between these programmes is understood.

During focus group discussions, confusion among teachers was often clarified by their peers in dialogues during interviews:

Teacher 7: The DBE doesn't offer any support programmes.

Teacher 8: Click foundation is not?

Teacher 7: No, it's not from the DBE. It's our own initiative.' (Focus group interview, School D, May 2023)

Even though the DBE aims to improve reading literacy through its programmes (DBE 2008; 2021b), teachers sometimes viewed these initiatives as ineffective or insufficient:

'The reading programmes don't actually accommodate what the child needs.' (Teacher 13, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'It's hard to group the children [*referring to the 'Drop All and Read' programme*]. The DBE expects us to group the children with similar reading abilities, but we don't have the resources.' (Teacher 12, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

The findings also suggest that some teachers possess little or no knowledge of the DBE's literacy support programmes:

'I couldn't name them, but I've heard of the department having reading programmes.' (Teacher 3, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'We don't have reading programmes.' (Teacher 4, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

This was followed by a collective agreement from teachers from the focus group interview at School C, held in May 2023.

'There's no support provided by the DBE.' (Teacher 6, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'None. There are no reading support programmes.' (Teacher 15, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

This lack of awareness negatively affects curriculum planning and learning outcomes, as the intended purpose of DBE programmes is to support reading skill development (DBE 2021c). Teachers miss the opportunity to fully leverage these programmes to assist in developing learners' reading literacy skills. According to Wawire (2021), teachers' first-hand classroom experience provides invaluable insight into ways the DBE could improve support for reading literacy. Without teacher awareness of and experience with these initiatives, the DBE cannot adequately assess their effectiveness or provide targeted support interventions. Notably, none of the participants mentioned the Early Grade Reading Programme (EGRP), a key DBE initiative piloted in 2016 (DBE 2021a), which may indicate a disconnect between what teachers perceive as literacy programmes and what the DBE provides.

Teachers also demonstrated varied knowledge of DBE-provided reading literacy *materials*. Some expressed appreciation for the DBE's resources but also noted challenges with their implementation:

'We have the DBE books that we have access to. We've got their textbooks, but the textbooks that we've got ... in my opinion, those books are on a higher Grade or a higher level of reading for the kids. They usually only reach that level at the end of the year, so the DBE book has definitely been a good, uhm, kind of support structure.' (Teacher 9, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'What the DBE has given us that they call support is the "Rainbow book" which at Grade 3 level isn't suitable, especially the English one.' (Teacher 13, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

The DBE 'Rainbow workbook', created in line with the South African curriculum (DBE 2011), was considered useful by teachers as it introduces core literacy skills like letter sounds, sight words, and comprehension (McKay & Spaul 2022). However, some teachers expressed concern about the workbook's alignment with the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* despite evidence of strong alignment between the CAPS and DBE workbooks (Hoadley & Galant 2016).

The textbooks and readers, sourced from the national catalogue, offer limited flexibility for teachers. According to a 2017 School Monitoring Survey, 69% of teachers indicated they used preselected textbooks from the national catalogue (DBE 2018). This standardisation can sometimes hinder classroom learning, as materials may be deemed 'too advanced' for learners. Studies suggest that forced uniformity in resources can reduce their effectiveness (Moats & Hancock 2012; Nel 2018).

Other materials, such as 'big books' and readers, procured through the LTSM budget, were frequently mentioned in interviews. These resources indicate the DBE's efforts to provide supplementary material to support reading literacy development that teachers acknowledge and use in the classroom. However, there were still claims from teachers in semi-structured and focus group interviews that they had received little to no reading literacy materials from the DBE:

'I'd say the DBE books, but otherwise, none [*collective no*].' (Teacher 1, Focus group interview, School A, May 2023)

'No, not really. We just have readers that we have at the back; that's it.' (Teacher 8, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'You are left to your own devices. If you find that you have learners who are struggling, you need to come up with ways and solutions to help those learners. So, there's no set programme from the department.' (Teacher 7, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'Not for English.' (Teacher 7, Focus group interview, School D, May 2023)

'You have to work out your own support.' (Teacher 2, Focus group interview, School A, May 2023)

The lack of reading literacy materials limits teachers' ability to fully support learners' reading literacy development and to expand their own PCK (Kultsum 2017).

The data indicated a need for differentiated and targeted support in teaching reading, including teacher support or workshops as additional strategies to improve learners' reading literacy skills. Teachers believed that training focused on effective reading instruction and how to assist learners with reading difficulties would be beneficial in improving literacy outcomes. These views are supported by the following quotes:

'Yes, I think teacher support is needed, especially in teaching reading.' (Teacher 2, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'The department should invest in proper training of teachers [*when it comes to teaching reading*].' (Teacher 9, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'I think they should have more workshops on how to support the children with reading difficulties.' (Teacher 10, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'We have so many special needs learners, they [DBE] should send us for some workshop on how to deal specifically with those learners. To guide us and to send us proper resources.' (Teacher 11, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'We need workshops on how to teach reading, especially to learners who can't read.' (Teacher 14, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'The programmes that they want us to implement shouldn't be a "one size fits all", it should meet each child at their level of [*reading ability*].' (Teacher 3, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'We definitely need more resources. Basic resources and I also feel like we also need workshops.' (Teacher 11, Focus group interview, School E, May 2023)

Participants highlighted the need for differentiated and tailored support in teaching reading, emphasising the importance of teacher training, the introduction or reintroduction of updated reading literacy programmes and materials by the DBE, and adjustments to the curriculum and support resources. Teachers expressed a desire for training specific to their classroom contexts, as they often face challenges like repetitive training and insufficient guidance on teaching in diverse contexts. Their first-hand knowledge of classroom realities provides valuable insights for improving literacy support programmes and materials (Sniltveit et al. 2016). Teachers' experiences can help identify strengths and weaknesses in the support programmes and materials provided by the DBE, paving the way for future development (Govender & Hugo 2018). Collaboration between the government and teachers is essential for the ongoing enhancement of learners' reading literacy skills through the effective implementation of literacy programmes and materials (Spaul & Taylor 2022).

## Theme 2: There is a wide variation in how teachers apply the reading literacy programmes and materials

The analysis of the data revealed a wide variation in how teachers use the reading literacy programmes and materials provided by the DBE. Some teachers reported using resources such as the 'Drop All and Read' programme, 'big books'

readers, DBE 'Rainbow workbooks', and textbooks. When asked how often these materials are used, teachers shared the following:

'The "Drop All and Read" is implemented weekly.' (Teacher 12, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'We do include it in our lesson planning. You will see on our lesson plans for shared reading that we use the "big books".' (Teacher 1, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'The DBE "Rainbow workbook" is used daily.' (Teacher 2, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

The teachers' practices align with the DBE's guidelines, which emphasise the importance of developing reading skills through daily activities (DBE 2011). However, time constraints imposed by the curriculum, particularly the tightly scheduled Annual Teaching Plan (ATP), limits the ability of teachers to focus on reading literacy and incorporate support materials as frequently as desired (Green & Condy 2016; Rapetsoa & Singh 2017).

In contrast, some teachers reported limited or no use of DBE programmes and materials:

'No, I don't implement [support programmes and materials] often because I don't know of any.' (Teacher 5, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'I don't use support materials often.' (Teacher 4, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

'No, because there aren't any.' (Teacher 15, Focus group interview, School F, May 2023)

The inconsistency in how teachers apply the reading literacy programmes and materials provided by the DBE impacts the government's efforts to improve reading literacy in South African classrooms (DBE 2008; 2015b; 2021c). While some studies, such as the School Monitoring Survey (DBE 2018), indicated that 68% of teachers use the DBE 'Rainbow workbook', others, like Hoadley and Galant (2016), found that many teachers do not consistently use it to provide additional reading literacy support. McKay and Spaul (2022) noted 'teacher satisfaction' with the DBE 'Rainbow workbook', which has become an extensively used resource (Spaul & Taylor 2022). However, the inconsistent use of these materials by some teachers could limit the potential impact on learners' reading literacy development and restrict the DBE's ability to fully assess and refine its programmes and materials based on comprehensive feedback.

### **Theme 3: Teachers are not convinced that provided reading literacy programmes and materials consistently impact learners' literacy skills**

This theme explores teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the DBE-provided reading literacy support programmes and materials. Since the study is qualitative, it emphasises the perspectives of participating teachers (Green & Thorogood 2014; Henning et al. 2018), meaning the findings are based on subjective views rather than an objective

evaluation of the DBE's initiatives (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin 2020). A thorough assessment of the impact of the programmes and materials would require quantitative methods using numerical data and statistical analysis and a considerably larger sample size (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Teachers shared differing opinions about the impact of the DBE-provided support programmes and materials on learners' literacy skills based on their firsthand experiences with the materials. For instance, Teacher 13 expressed dissatisfaction with the 'Drop All and Read' programme, feeling it does not address diverse reading abilities:

'I don't think it is effective [*in supporting learners' reading skills*] because it's one-sided. It doesn't accommodate the learners' diverse needs.' (Teacher 13, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

Similarly, Teacher 12 highlighted the challenges of limited resources for learners at different reading levels, which impacts the overall effectiveness of the DBE programmes:

'We don't have enough resources for the children who really struggle, or to support the average and the top readers. We just don't.' (Teacher 12, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

Considering these challenges, increased collaboration between the DBE and teachers could potentially improve reading literacy outcomes by combining knowledge, skills, and resources (Nel 2018).

Some teachers were completely unaware of the DBE's programmes, meaning these programmes clearly fail to impact their teaching practices, rendering them ineffective for these teachers:

'There's no effect because I don't know about them. So, I can't use them.' (Teacher 5, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

Another teacher added:

'It hasn't [*had any effect*] because I haven't been properly introduced to them. ... Probably very ineffective then, I guess, in that case.' (Teacher 9, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

The lack of teacher knowledge and implementation (Govender & Hugo 2018) significantly affects their ability to improve reading literacy. Some teachers even indicated that the materials had little or no effect on learners' reading abilities, with some reporting that they had never used them. This raises concerns, as teachers may dismiss the effectiveness of the programmes or materials without fully engaging with them. Although the DBE claims to have improved its literacy programmes and materials (DBE 2021a; 2021c), interventions need to be applied consistently and aligned with learning outcomes for long-term improvement (Spaul & Taylor 2022).

There were also varied opinions on specific materials, such as the DBE 'Rainbow workbooks' and LTSM. Some teachers noted a positive impact on reading abilities, particularly when parents engaged with the DBE-provided books at home:

'I think, to some extent, it is effective because there are parents who make use of the DBE book at home to help their kids with either reading or reading activities, and that boosts their reading at home.' (Teacher 9, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

However, other teachers, like Teacher 1, pointed out that while shared reading sessions may aid comprehension, some learners still struggle with independent reading:

'For some learners, it helps; for other struggling learners, it does not quite help ... they comprehend what was read, but they cannot read individually by themselves.' (Teacher 1, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

Some participants criticised the DBE 'Rainbow workbook' and argued that it is not appropriate for all reading levels, which can hinder reading development. This is like findings by the Center for Public Education (2015). When learners are provided with materials that do not match their skill level, it can lead to disengagement or a lack of motivation (Nel 2018).

Lastly, Teacher 3 raised concerns about the inclusivity of the DBE's literacy materials:

'I don't feel that it's inclusive ... should it have been inclusive, we would have had [better reading outcomes].' (Teacher 3, Semi-structured interview, April 2023)

In summary, teachers' views on the effectiveness of DBE reading literacy programmes and materials varied, with some finding value in them, while others highlighted significant limitations, particularly in accommodating diverse reading needs.

## Conclusion

Given South Africa's significant challenges in reading literacy (Biesman-Simons 2021; Spaull & Taylor 2022), the DBE has introduced several interventions, including the 'Drop All and Read' programme, the EGRP, and resources like graded readers, 'big books', and DBE 'Rainbow workbooks'.

This study revealed variations in teachers' experiences with the DBE literacy support programmes and materials, which could influence their reading instruction methods and the overall effectiveness of these initiatives in improving learners' reading literacy skills. While some teachers praised the interventions, others expressed dissatisfaction or a lack of familiarity with them. Interestingly, some teachers referred to programmes not officially endorsed by the DBE, such as the 'Read Aloud' programme, the Click programme ('Reading Eggs'), and the 'Sunshine Reading Programme'. Additionally, opinions varied regarding the appropriateness of DBE materials. Some teachers found the LTSM books too challenging for their learners, while others felt that the DBE 'Rainbow workbooks' were either suitable or too basic for their learners. These differing perspectives could influence both the utilisation and perceived effectiveness of DBE reading literacy support initiatives.

Participants shared varied experiences with DBE initiatives, suggesting that the programmes and materials may have varying impacts on their PCK development. While some

teachers reported positive experiences with the reading support programmes and materials, others had little or no experience, resulting in minimal or no improvement in their reading instruction. Furthermore, some teachers were unaware of the available reading literacy programmes and materials, leading to underutilisation (and potential stagnation in their PCK). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of DBE support programmes and materials in developing teachers' PCK relies heavily on individual teacher experiences. The results highlight the importance of developing PCK for effective reading instruction. As noted by Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), teachers lacking well-developed PCK face significant challenges in teaching reading. McKay and Spaull (2022) also emphasise that the DBE 'Rainbow workbook' was partially designed to address gaps in teachers' PCK in teaching reading by providing structured, practical materials to support teachers in delivering effective reading instruction.

Given that teachers have varying levels of knowledge and use of the DBE-provided reading support programmes and materials, and they report different impacts on their PCK, particularly in reading instruction, the findings suggest that teachers need targeted support and training to address their specific needs. Teachers of reading would benefit from tailored interventions based on their individual reading instruction abilities and requirements.

Exploring teachers' experiences is crucial for the DBE to develop effective interventions, as teachers offer valuable insights into classroom realities and their experiences with the support programmes and materials provided by the DBE. This input can play a significant role in improving reading literacy in South Africa.

## Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study's qualitative design emphasised participants' perspectives and experiences, which limited the assessment of the effectiveness of the DBE reading literacy support programmes and materials. Teachers' accounts of effectiveness were primarily based on their observations rather than on quantitative measures derived from testing. Additionally, the small sample size affected the conclusions that could be drawn from the data, as gathering rich insights on the programmes and materials proved challenging due to some teachers' limited knowledge of DBE initiatives. The study's localisation to the Gauteng province restricts the generalisability of the findings to other provinces in South Africa. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, this limitation leaves it to the reader to determine the applicability of the study's findings to other contexts.

Future research should focus on several key areas to enhance the effectiveness of DBE reading literacy support programmes and materials. First, studies should include larger and more diverse samples across different provinces to improve generalisability. Second, incorporating quantitative measures of effectiveness, such as standardised testing or assessments, will provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the support

programmes and materials. Conducting longitudinal studies could also offer insights into the long-term impacts of DBE initiatives on reading literacy skills and teachers' PCK development.

By addressing these areas, future research can contribute significantly to enhancing the effectiveness of DBE reading literacy support initiatives in South Africa.

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

## Authors' contributions

C.K. conducted the research and composed the bulk of the article. D.v.d.M. and C.K. conducted supervision, composed the remainder of the article and reviewed and edited the article.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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