


Community engagement: Resourced reading clubs in 12 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape

**Author:**Jamiellah Domingo¹ **Affiliation:**¹Faculty of Education, IIE Varsity College, Port Elizabeth, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Jamiellah Domingo,
jdomingo@emeris.ac.za**Dates:**

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Background: Low literacy levels in South African rural primary schools continue to be challenging, with many schools not having access to adequate resources. The private higher education institution (HEI) responded to a call for authentic, meaningful engagement to become an implementing partner in a rural district for literacy development intervention, which was funded by an education support foundation.

Objectives: The study focused on examining the perceptions and responses of teachers and reading club facilitators to resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development in 12 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape.

Method: Employing a qualitative, multi-site case study positioned within a constructivist paradigm explored how through community engagement-resourced reading clubs were used as a vehicle for literacy development in 12 rural primary schools; data were gathered through observation, monthly facilitator feedback reports, open-ended questionnaires, and focus group discussions with teachers, reading club facilitators, and monitors. Thematic analysis was used to develop themes across data sources.

Results: Findings indicated that the dedicated reading club facilitators viewed the training as skills that extended their impact beyond schools. Participants reported increased learner motivation, access to relevant reading materials, and sustained reading practices. Facilitators demonstrated growing confidence, agency, and competence. Schools reported notable improvements in learners' reading attitudes and participation.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the value of resourced reading clubs, grounded in community engagement, and supported through structured implementation processes to offer a sustainable model for literacy development in rural schools.

Contribution: The study provides evidence that resourced reading clubs can serve as replicable, sustainable literacy intervention in rural South African contexts.

Keywords: community engagement; implementation science; literacy development; reading clubs; rural schools.

Introduction

South African primary school learners continue exhibit low literacy and reading comprehension levels, particularly in rural schools where access to resources, teacher expertise, and sustained literacy support remain limited (Cilliers & Bloch 2018; Spaul 2013). Teachers in the Intermediate Phase (Grade 4–6) and Grade 7 teachers are generally not trained in explicit reading instruction and how to develop higher-order comprehension skills of children in primary schools (Fatyela et al. 2021). Grade 4–7 teachers thus face difficulties supporting learners who still struggle to read when they exit the Foundation Phase (Fatyela et al. 2021). These gaps are often compounded by the socio-economic challenges experienced in rural communities. These challenges include poverty, limited access to books, reduced learning time, and overcrowded classes. The lack of access during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic further widened the gap for learners in these areas (Maluleke 2020). This context foregrounds an urgent need for sustainable, community-supported literacy interventions within schools.

Although various literacy interventions have been introduced evidence suggests that their implementation and sustainability remain inconsistent, especially in under-resourced areas (Carter et al. 2024). Condy (2023) further posits that numerous research studies demonstrated a direct relationship between reading instructions and reading achievement levels in

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standardised testing. We are often focused on Foundation Phase literacy interventions to ensure better outcomes for learners once they reach Grade 4, because of the constant reference to South Africa's poor performance in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Therefore, this study included Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase teachers, and interventions included all grades. The problem addressed in this study is the lack of resources to address the lack of reading proficiency among rural primary school learners across grades, and the limited capacity of teachers to provide reading support. There is a need for literacy support that is resourced and can be systematically implemented in rural areas.

Cilliers and Bloch (2018:1) state that, 'literacy is important in the rural areas, where it often still lags behind'. Furthermore, Spaul (2013) showed that learners in rural areas and townships performed worse than their urban counterparts. The challenges related to language and literacy in rural Eastern Cape schools, and particularly our targeted school district as communicated by teachers, were poor socio-economic conditions, distance from support structures, lack of resources, poor literacy programmes and ineffective literacy teaching, poor learner support networks between classroom, school and home, lack of teacher development, capacity, lack of time, and complex language communities. School communities were willing but lacked sufficient resources and skills to address the multifaceted challenges and diverse strategies required. To address this gap, this study focuses on a community engagement project involving 12 rural primary schools in four towns, administered by the same education district office in the Eastern Cape.

The need for the comprehensive community engagement project aimed to address these issues and strengthen collaboration between stakeholders (Christie 2022). The project introduced resourced reading clubs facilitated by trained Education Assistants (EAs) and Reading Champs (RCs) from the community, referred to as Reading Club facilitators. Training workshops, reading resources, furniture, stipends for facilitators, and events were all supported and funded by the private Higher Education Institution (HEI) and Education Support Foundation (ESF). The aim was to upskill participants with strategies to teach reading, provide opportunities to engage in reading activities, and offer access to context-relevant reading material for literacy development.

To address the research question, 'What are the perceptions and responses of teachers and reading club facilitators to resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development in 12 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape?', there is an initial literature review related to community engagement, reading and reading interventions, and the justification thereof. Next, the choice of Implementation Science and Sociocultural Literacy theory, as theoretical framework in relation to this study, is explained, followed by the presentation of a detailed Research Design, which includes

methodology, research setting, participants, data collection methods, and analysis. The ethical considerations, including the ethics clearance number, are provided, and this is followed by the results, the interpretation, and discussion thereof, as well as its value to the community and the conclusion.

Literature review

In this literature review, the community in this engagement is clarified, and reading clubs as an intervention strategy are reviewed. This is followed by a critical review of reading interventions, concluding with a justification for this study.

Community engagement

Community engagement within educational contexts recognises communities as active partners in learning and change. Communities, including teachers, parents, learners, and other stakeholders shape how learning is understood, how resources are used, and how interventions are sustained (Cherrington et al. 2018). To understand the context of this study, one first needs to understand the context of the community.

Cherrington et al. (2018) further describe the community as complex and dynamic systems that shape how meaning is constructed, how individuals within the group relate to one another and the other groups, and how power is distributed and experienced. Universities are tasked by policy to address societal challenges by engaging with communities to bring about change (Department of Education 1997). Private higher education institutions are new to the space of community engagement and seek to learn with and from those with whom they engage, hence our commitment to this project.

Sathorar and Geduld (2021) posit that considering the community voice will yield sustainable benefits. Successful engagement is only possible if it is built on trust (Sathorar & Geduld 2021). The communities in this study comprised the researcher, academics serving as workshop developers and presenters, funders acting as observers, teachers, principals, community volunteers trained as reading club facilitators, senior education specialists acting as advisors, learner support staff, parents, and learners. The communities found an ideal home in the reading clubs as they were multifaceted and required multiple role players to be both functional and sustainable. The study community comprised 12 no-fee primary schools in the same Education district but across four towns. English was the first additional language of all the schools; three schools had isiXhosa as home language, and nine schools had Afrikaans as home language. Teachers at the schools shared the same language contexts as the learners.

Reading clubs as an intervention

According to Gardiner (2008), schools in rural areas often have very limited resources; this includes reading books in

home languages and structured opportunities to practise reading. The distance from main centres hampers access to resources, and teachers often lack the time and skill to offer support. As language and literacy were the key concerns of the school community, it made sense to establish and grow reading clubs within schools. This brought the resources to the school, and the dedicated reading club facilitator became an in-house resource to not only support structured opportunities but also to compensate for the lack of time available from teachers. Positioning the reading clubs in school facilitated easy access, and as most learners were within walking distance from their schools, it also provided an opportunity during class for support. To establish a reading culture in a community, the reading environment in the home, school, and community must be improved simultaneously (Doiron & Asselin 2010). Adults in the home do not always have the time, skill or reading material to establish reading practice at home. Training community members who were appointed by the Department as education assistants and reading champs provided an opportunity to simultaneously improve the reading culture in the school communities. Scheckle (2022) further states that learners from poorly resourced schools, both in South Africa and internationally, have limited access to books; this was evident in all the schools involved in the project. Where there is limited access to reading material, a reading club provides a space for learners to engage in reading practices and develop their literacies around the books they read (Scheckle 2022). However, these schools lacked funds to acquire books, and this was not provided for; Department of Education budgets only made provision for textbooks. Children need books to read that are not only associated with learning.

Reading, and therefore other literacy practices, is not neutral; context informs the meaning-making process. It is thus essential to provide context-relevant books. Doiron and Asselin (2010) further state that the books must be in local languages and reflect local interests; furthermore, learners must have a choice in what they read, to foster meaningful literacy engagement. This is especially relevant in the Intermediate Phase, where reading is no longer taught, but rather practised, to encourage mindful reading for comprehension and engage learners. This project aimed to establish well-resourced reading clubs to enable learners to read books that they enjoy, to firstly establish a reading practice and secondly, provide an opportunity to develop their reading-for-meaning skills. Training of reading club facilitators, provision of books and other resources are central factors in ensuring the success of the interventions, but this requires dedicated time and space. Scheckle (2022) suggests that previously disadvantaged schools can utilise reading clubs as sites to develop reading strategies. The opportunities afforded by reading clubs can be viewed as reading practice intervention.

Review of reading interventions

International and South African research highlights the importance of structured reading strategy instruction,

vocabulary development, and skilled teaching reading methods for successful interventions (Carter et al. 2024). Additionally, effective teacher education and the resourcing of reading materials were highlighted as crucial components for improving reading comprehension outcomes. However, despite some positive findings, the effectiveness of literacy interventions in South Africa remains inconsistent, largely because of implementation challenges, limited teacher capacity, and variability in intervention programme quality (Mguga et al. 2023). This variability led to inconclusive results regarding the overall effectiveness of the interventions.

The Literacy and the Right to Basic Education Report further questions the effectiveness of interventions and argues that the PIRLS statistics released in 2023 revealed that 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016 (Huston, Polzer-Ngwato & Morse 2023). The government has commissioned various interventions, and it is essential to note that most intervention studies focus on the Foundation Phase to improve learners' preparation for the PIRLS assessments, resulting in limited support for Intermediate Phase learners and teachers. The effectiveness of these interventions remains questionable, with little evidence to suggest that they are successful (Mguga et al. 2023). This might be because there is no assurance of sustainability or effective implementation. This study specifically focuses on both Foundation and Intermediate phases, and sustainability is at the forefront of the engagement project.

However, Oxley and De Cat (2021) found, in their research on language and literacy interventions in the United Kingdom, that the most effective among existing language-based interventions are those that target word-level skills, specifically vocabulary, spelling, and morphological awareness. This has not been the key focus of this study. The focus was mainly on reading for enjoyment to establish a reading practice – support to struggling learners included a focus on vocabulary and spelling before focusing on reading for meaning. Comprehension-based interventions showed smaller effects, suggesting that reading comprehension is more difficult than learning vocabulary. The review also identified a lack of provision for older children; this justifies the decision to include the Intermediate Phase in the project.

It is therefore possible to deduce that positioning the reading club as an intervention for literacy development for all learners can address the concerns referred to above. Carter et al. (2024) further emphasised the necessity for a more rigorous scientific approach in future research to strengthen the evidence base for reading comprehension interventions in the South African context. In addition, Holmes et al. (2021) state that involving schools in intervention processes can enhance relevance and adaptability of interventions, leading to more trustworthy research findings. The authors further emphasise the importance of involving beneficiaries in the

design of interventions to align them with evolving needs of schools, thereby facilitating their adoption in practice. It therefore makes sense that participants should be at the forefront of voicing the what and the how, and a community engagement project provides an opportunity for this.

The Bua collective contends that the topic of how we teach reading has been a subject of debate, and these contestations have often been described as the literacy wars (Abdulatif et al. 2018). In the context of this study, the author had no intention of becoming involved in these debates and drew on the available resources. The Science of Reading (SOR) primarily focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in the foundational grades, and it involves a structured approach. This study situates the reading clubs not as formal teaching spaces but as flexible environments supporting multiple literacy practices that contribute to reading development. Pretorius and Spaull (2016) concede:

[T]hat while phonological awareness and knowledge of letter-sound relationships are important predictors of early reading development, by Grade 3 their influence diminishes as other skills at the lexical and text level exert greater influence. (p. 53)

Decoding, comprehension, and fluency may then be incidental consequences that can arise through exposure and repeated practice. It must be noted that this complemented reading support within the reading club, but it was not a primary focus. The preceding training of the reading club facilitators drew on multiple strategies suited to the needs of each school and considered engagement in various literacy practices as part of literacy development.

Justification

To address these challenges, the Eastern Cape Department of Education in the district of this study has released a reading improvement plan outlining the requirements, as shown in Figure 1. To date, very few of these have been provided by the Department of Education, and this engagement project aimed to address this gap specifically. Carter et al. (2024) strengthen the argument for a multi-pronged approach to interventions in schools, which aligns with the choice of an implementation science framework to guide this research study.

The community engagement and implementation were already in place before the document in Figure 1 was released and met all the specified requirements. The excerpt in Figure 1 mentions key change levers: planning and communication (already completed in consultation and collaboration with all 12 schools); teacher development (teachers trained in all 12 schools in both phases as seen in the graph in Figure 2); resource provision (all school provided with all resources as seen in Table 1); parent and community support (reading club facilitators were drawn from parents and community members); monitoring,

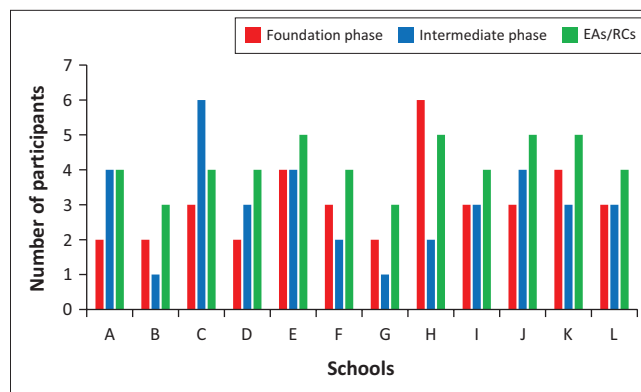
The objective of the plan is to improve the reading competencies of primary school learners in IsiXhosa, English and Afrikaans within the Sarah Baartman Education District. To achieve this, the district has chosen to use the following key change levers:

- Planning and communication.
- Teacher development.
- Resource provision.
- Parent and community support and partnerships.
- Monitoring, research, and feedback.

This district improvement plan details the reading challenges, district profile, theory of change, and implementation plan. The document concludes with annexures that outline success conditions and communication strategies aimed at increasing community awareness of the plans as well as a results framework for 2024 and 2025.

Source: Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2023, *Sarah Baartman reading improvement plan 2024–2026*, p. 2, viewed 18 May 2025, from <https://fundawande.org/img/cms/news/ECDOE%20Reading%20Strategy%20Document%20-%20Digital%20-%20Final%20compressed.pdf>

FIGURE 1: Sarah Baartman reading improvement plan.



EA, education assistants; RC, reading champs.

FIGURE 2: Number of participants trained in each school.

research, and feedback (implementation was monitored throughout, data collected for research and findings will be shared, and we also had reflection sessions). It can thus be concluded that we adhered to all departmental requirements. The National Research Council (1998) states that effective teaching strategies, supported by professional development and adequate resources, can significantly improve reading outcomes and the community engagement project aimed to provide this. To ensure the success of this intervention, the community engagement project aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing materials, training, and implementation support.

Theoretical framework

The study was underpinned by two complementary frameworks: Implementation Science and Sociocultural Literacy theory. Together these frameworks offered a structured way to design, implement, and interpret the resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development within the rural school context. The initiative aimed to provide resources and training to enable teachers and reading club facilitators to offer meaningful support, encourage learners to continue reading to develop their

TABLE 1: Workshops, training, resources, and events.

Workshops and training	Resources and events
Inclusive practices support and training	More than 6000 books delivered to schools.
Ramp up reading training for teachers, education assistants and reading champs	Portable stocked book trolleys
Reading comprehension strategies for intermediate phase	Stationery twice a year for book making, writing and other creative literacy activities
Reading club management and facilitation	Reading club furniture
Digital skills training	Provided reading clubs at each school with between 5–10 tablets depending on their learner numbers, for digital reading and additional learner support.
Multilingual storytelling	Read aloud day showcase event with awards World book day event Literacy day event

literacy skills, and grow their self-confidence. The HEL, with the support of the monitors, teachers, reading club facilitators, and departmental officials, all worked together to ensure the sustainability of the reading clubs within a structured framework.

Implementation science framework

The use of Implementation Science is an emerging field in literacy studies (Duda & Wilson 2018). The purpose of this study was to investigate resource-rich reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development in an engagement project with 12 previously disadvantaged schools in a rural Eastern Cape district. Everyone needed to have a clear understanding of the expectations, so that the reading club as an intervention programme could be implemented with genuine commitment (Duda & Wilson 2018). Throwing interventions and resources at schools will not solve our current literacy crisis, as shown in the review of literacy interventions above. Duda and Wilson (2018:6) suggest that three components must be considered for successful interventions:

- Factors that influence the selection and adoption of effective interventions.
- Local use of effective implementation methods.
- The contexts within which the implementation is applied.

The choice to position the reading club within an implementation science framework enhances validity by systematically researching and applying evidence-based practices to ensure that interventions are not only practical in the schools but also feasible, relevant, and successful in real-world settings (Fixsen et al. 2005). By applying this framework, the study could be systematically planned for implementation and evaluation, ensuring that the interventions were effective, sustainable, and tailored to the unique needs of the 12 schools (Nilsen 2020). This had the potential to enhance the likelihood of achieving meaningful improvements in literacy development. Reading club activities and interactions contributed to a shared learning and development experience. Nilsen (2020) describes a far

more generalised approach to using the Implementation Science Framework, which was applied to this study in the following ways:

Implementation strategies

These strategies focused on preparing the conditions for successful reading club implementation by training EAs and RCs to become reading club facilitators. Schools were provided with context-relevant books and stationery. Reading club spaces were equipped with appropriate furniture and relevant material. In addition, there was continuous coaching and monitoring.

Implementation outcomes

Outcomes were assessed through regular monitoring, facilitator reporting, attendance registers, and feedback from teachers and monitors. Measures included: consistency of reading club sessions to build the confidence; and competence of the reading club facilitators. School support was crucial to ensure learner participation and engagement and integration of reading support within the classroom from the reading club facilitators.

Determinant frameworks

The framework addressed contextual factors that influenced implementation, such as time constraints in classes, teacher workload, access to reading material, and buy-in from community members.

Process models

The structured implementation of the reading club programme included: weekly schedules; term plans; literacy events; reflections; monthly facilitator feedback reports; and twice a month monitoring visits.

Evaluation frameworks

Evaluation occurred continuously through observations, reflective sessions, feedback reports, and focus groups, ensuring that the intervention was responsive to the evolving needs of the schools. These five steps of Implementation Science enabled the author to document how the reading clubs were initiated, supported, and sustained across the 12 schools, and how contextual dynamics shaped their functioning. It strengthened the interpretation of findings by linking participant experiences to the structures and supports embedded in the intervention. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for implementation science, as they enable in-depth exploration of the context, environment, processes, and the support mechanisms, as well as the perceived connections between research and practice (Shingles et al. 2024). This process provided an opportunity for the reading clubs to become a space where learners and reading club facilitators could engage with relevant reading material through reading, storytelling, writing, drawing, poetry, and dramatisation away from school literacies in social, cultural settings.

Sociocultural literacy theory

The study, while underpinned by an implementation science framework, was also grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of literacy. Sociocultural literacy theory emphasises the social and cultural aspects of learning (Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky's theory emphasises the role of social interaction, guided participation, and collaboration within a community in facilitating literacy development. Vygotsky's theory further aligns with the principles of community engagement, where learning is shaped through engagement with others and where we learn with and from each other (Jaramillo 1996). While implementation science focuses on the systematic implementation of strategies and integration of literacy interventions within real-world settings, social cultural literacy theory contextualises literacy practices, making them relevant for the participants, and it is socially mediated between all participants. By integrating Vygotsky's theory, this study acknowledges that reading clubs function as social learning environments, where reading club facilitators and teachers can bring text to life by constructing meaning through engagement, scaffolding texts to provide support, and align lived experiences with culturally embedded literacy practices. Reading club facilitators can co-construct meaning through discussions, shared reading and storytelling. Through this collaborative process, literacy becomes more relevant, meaningful, and practical, aligning with a constructivist approach (Dyasi & Mosito 2022).

Research methods and design

A constructivist, qualitative study aimed at examining the perceptions and responses of teachers and reading club facilitators to resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development in 12 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape, through community engagement.

Methodology

A qualitative multi-site case study design within a constructivist paradigm was used to generate data during this study. A multi-site case study framed this study to understand how the reading clubs operated within the context of all 12 schools (Creswell et al. 2016). The multi-site case study further allowed for comparisons across schools, highlighting both shared and unique experiences (Yazan 2015). The constructivist paradigm enabled the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants, placing value on multiple perspectives and lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell 2017). The choice of a qualitative research design was appropriated because of the multi-faceted nature of this study, and it fostered an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of the participants and the role of the researcher (eds. Denzin & Lincoln 2005). The author was an active participant and served as trainer, facilitator, monitor, observer, implementing partner, and researcher in the engagement project.

Research setting

The study took place in 12 previously disadvantaged schools within the Sarah Baartman district in the Eastern Cape, which is 250 km from the HEI. All the participating schools were no-fee schools. The schools were spread across four towns in the rural educational district.

The district is predominantly Afrikaans. Two of these towns can be described as hamlets. The contexts of the schools are best understood by their language contexts. English was the first additional language in all 12 schools; three of the schools had isiXhosa as home language, and nine of the schools had Afrikaans as home language. The teachers had the same language contexts. The schools are under-resourced and are all situated in poor socio-economic communities. Unemployment is high, and schools have limited fund raisers to complement funding. The reading clubs initially targeted Grade 1–4 learners but expanded to include Grade 5–7 learners as the capacity of the reading club facilitator increased. Learners were not research participants but were beneficiaries of the intervention.

Participants

Participants were Afrikaans and isiXhosa mother tongue speakers. Teachers in Foundation phase taught in their mother tongue. The Intermediate Phase teachers taught Afrikaans Home Language and isiXhosa Home Language, and/or English as First Additional Language. Schools had a Foundation Phase coordinator and an Intermediate Phase; however, because of the size of Schools B and G, they only had one coordinator. The participants included the trained teachers and the one appointed reading club facilitator at each school. All 12 reading club facilitators were observed, submitted their monthly written feedback reports, and participated in the focus group discussions. The open-ended questionnaires were for all participants after each workshop, and 22 (10 Foundation Phase and 12 Intermediate Phase) coordinator teachers participated in the focus group discussions; the two independent monitors submitted written summary reports of their observations. Over the four years of engagement, we only had three men throughout the project – the rest were women. All the participants lived in the communities or the district that they served.

Data collection

The engagement project was divided into two phases:

Phase 1: This phase specifically addressed teaching strategies and support for inclusive education, as well as how to address barriers. Upon concluding this phase, feedback from participants indicated that they required support with reading, as it was perceived as a significant barrier to learning. Reading clubs were established in all 12 schools to support reading intervention, and planning

for resourcing and implementation commenced. During this phase, teachers (as coordinators), education assistants, and reading champions (as reading club facilitators) were trained to use applicable resources and reading strategies for interventions across different grades and to facilitate reading within their designated roles. Reading books were provided for Grades 1–4.

Phase 2: By 2024, all the schools had regular reading club sessions, and each school had a dedicated reading club facilitator who was paid a stipend. Each school created a dedicated space for its reading club, and it was provided with stationery, reading books for learners in Grades 5–7, stationery, and other relevant reading club material. There was also an independent monitor who visited the 12 schools fortnightly to offer support. This observation was to monitor whether the training was effective, and that the reading club facilitator was able to confidently implement the strategies and facilitate the sessions. It also provided an opportunity to observe the support given by the coordinators, and whether they were managing the administration and resources effectively.

As time was identified as one of the main constraints by teachers, the provision of a full-time reading club facilitator was a valuable resource for this intervention. It was important for teachers to be actively involved as coordinators to give facilitators the necessary support, and to ensure that they align activities with the planning. The private HEI was mandated to train educational assistants and reading champions to facilitate reading and offer in-class reading support. The ESF provided all funding for the stipends, reading books, reading club resources, and stationery. Furniture, literacy events, and funds for monitoring and training workshops.

Although multiple data collection tools were used throughout the project, this study only focuses on the data sets collected through the observation of the reading club facilitators, the written monthly reports, the focus group discussions, and the open-ended questionnaire responses. Yin, Stake and Merriam contend that the researcher must draw data from multiple sources to capture the complexity of the case under study in its entirety; this also enhances trustworthiness through triangulation (Yazan 2015).

Observation

Observation was conducted at all 12 reading clubs, and informal discussions were held with the reading club facilitators and coordinators at each school following the observations. The observations were conducted by the two independent monitors who visited each school every second week to observe scheduled sessions and offer support and guidance. As the researcher and implementing partner, the author performed monitoring every second month through observation and reflection sessions. The

purpose was to observe whether the training received was effectively implemented and whether resources were used optimally.

Monthly reading club facilitator reports

The monthly reports provided detailed descriptions of learner attendance, activities, challenges, successes, and engagement. They served as an accurate record of implementation and were an authentic reflection of what happened on the ground.

Open-ended questionnaires

Open-ended questionnaires were issued to all participants after each workshop or training session; these included teachers and reading club facilitators, and captured perceptions of support, resources, impact, and challenges allowing for readjustment. Although this was in English, it could be answered in any language. Participants were provided with hard copies, and a digital copy was provided on WhatsApp.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted and recorded, with teachers serving as coordinators and reading club facilitators. The focus group sessions were an ideal way to gather rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences and beliefs, based on the data generated over the months of engagement (De Vos et al. 2012). The focus groups provided a communal space for participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with one another in response to questions and to reflect on their journey. The group interaction encouraged participation and provided an opportunity to generate high quality data and address concerns, especially considering the limited responses in the questionnaires (De Vos et al. 2012). The data collection tools used, reflected how resourced reading clubs were implemented, experienced, and perceived across contexts as shown in the data analysis.

Data analysis

A narrative of thematic analysis was employed to compare and link the results obtained from the qualitative data, facilitator reports, focus groups, open-ended questionnaires, and observations (David & Sutton 2011:596). Furthermore, Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013) states that qualitative analysis aims to describe and understand respondents' lived experience and examine how they construct personal meaning. It also aims to describe the range and diversity of participants' experiences while amplifying their voices and studying participants in their natural contexts. An in-depth data analysis at the end of the study was conducted to establish how the teachers and reading club facilitators perceived and experienced the resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development.

Qualitative thematic analysis ‘works with a wide range of research questions, especially those related to participants’ experiences or understanding and construction of particular phenomena in particular context’ (Braun & Clarke 2006:87). In this study, the author used the phases of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke. The primary sources of data required for analysis were reports and notes of observations, the reading club facilitators’ monthly reports, responses on the open-ended questionnaires, and transcripts of recordings made during focus group discussions. Transcriptions had to be accurate to ensure participants’ voices came through unaltered. In addition, multiple readings were made of the observation reports, the facilitator reports, and the responses to the questionnaires. Manual coding schemes were used to make it easier to group the responses, and as patterns emerged, themes were identified. The themes were named, and it was ensured that the language used was unbiased and understandable to all participants (Creswell & Creswell 2017). The dominant themes that emerged were agency, legitimacy, confidence, accomplishment, commitment, and gratitude and reflect in the ways in which the participants engaged in the project and made sense of the intervention. These experiences of the participants can be interpreted through both Implementation Science and Sociocultural Literacy theory. The increased agency and confidence reported by facilitators show how training, coaching, and access to resources supported their ability to perform their roles with greater competence and consistency. As the reading club facilitators began to see the positive outcomes in learners, a sense of accomplishment and legitimacy emerged. This suggests that the intervention strengthened their sense of achievement and validated their contribution within the school and community. From a sociocultural perspective, the themes of commitment and gratitude highlight how literacy practices are shaped by relationships, shared values, and culturally embedded interactions. The reading clubs became social spaces where facilitators and learners co-constructed meaning, affirmed one another, and developed deeper emotional investment in the programme. Together, these theoretical perspectives show that the success of the intervention was influenced not only by the resources and support guiding implementation but also by the social and cultural dynamics that shaped the lived experiences of the reading club facilitators.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the private HEI where the researcher is employed. The ethics clearance number is R.00048 (REC). Approval and consent to conduct the research were granted by the relevant authorities at the Department of Education in the Sarah Baartman District and the Circuit Management Cluster. Informed consent was obtained from all 12 school principals, the two monitors, the teachers who served as coordinators, and the reading club facilitators. Participation was voluntary and participants understood

that they could withdraw from the project at any time. Pseudonyms were used for all schools and participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

To investigate the resourced reading clubs as a community engagement intervention, the research question ‘What are the perceptions and responses of teachers and reading club facilitators to resourced reading clubs as a vehicle for literacy development in 12 rural primary schools in the Eastern Cape?’ had to be answered. The discussion is based on the findings and highlights the themes that emerged from participants’ responses and interpretation of results.

Reading club facilitators

There was a poor response to the questionnaire, but the reading club facilitators were diligent in submitting their reports, were eager to be observed, and were very vocal in the focus group sessions. They were free to speak in the language that they were comfortable with, as can be seen in Box 1. Many of the facilitators entered the project feeling ill-equipped to lead the reading clubs. During discussions, they shared how, after each workshop, they felt more empowered, and after each reading club session they felt more capable. Their confidence and sense of accomplishment grew as they designed activities and planned events, as can be seen in Box 2. They were further validated when learners would rather attend reading club than enjoy breaks. They also expressed sincere gratitude for the opportunity for employment, and the stipend provided an income. Their commitment was evident, and this was reflected in the attendance at the training workshops as well as the number of volunteers who came forward to serve as facilitators of the reading clubs. The reading club facilitators felt confident leading the reading clubs, and a clear sense of accomplishment emerged during the focus group discussions. Their monthly reports, along with shared photographs and videos on their reading club activities via the Language and Literacy WhatsApp group, depicted a fun and interactive space. Because of limited funding, the 12 reading club facilitators could only work twice a week in

BOX 1: Excerpt from focus group discussion on 04 November 2024.

‘Die kinders respekteer my. Ek weet wat ek doen en ek weet ek kan enige tyd by juffrou S hulp kry. Ek werk met juffrou S om program op te stel. Ek is dankbaar vir die werk, maar ek het ook uitgehelp toe ons nie betaal word nie. Ek wil nou verder studeer en soek ’n beurs want ek hou van die kinders leer. Ek gee nou ook ekstra klasse by my huis na skool. My dogter kan ook nou lees en sy is net vyf, want sy is elke dag met my by die skool.’

[‘The children respect me. I know what I am doing and I know I can get help from Miss S at any time. I work with Miss S to set up the programme. I am grateful for the work, but I also helped when we were not being paid. I now want to continue studying and am looking for a scholarship because I enjoy teaching the children. I am also giving extra classes at my house after school. My daughter can also read now, and she is only five, because she is with me at school every day.’] (Facilitator, School C)

BOX 2: Excerpt from the focus group discussion on 21 April 2025.

‘In the beginning I wasn’t sure but now I can see the difference that I am making. I now know how to help children choose books and how to talk about books and readings. I like storytelling and I am proud and happy to be part of the project.’ (Facilitator, School L)

their respective schools in 2024 but were contracted for 5 days a week for 10 months in 2025.

Implementation Science explains this shift as opportune conditions created through training, resources, and monitoring that allowed the reading club facilitators to grow in confidence and competence. Sociocultural Literacy Theory further positions this growth through interaction, guided participation and shared literacy practices. This growth was evident when the facilitators were observed during their reading club sessions.

Resources

All the schools were no-fee schools; thus, stationery was provided twice a year. Stationery supplies offered a creative outlet, demonstrating that reading comprehension or understanding the text does not have to be abstract. The summary of the questionnaire responses clearly showed that teachers and reading club facilitators alike valued the resources. They indicated that learners enjoyed the creative activities the most and loved creating their own stories. This was only possible with the resources and training provided, as shown in Table 1. The resources in Table 1 shows the extent of support provided to the schools.

All schools received books for double the number of learners in the targeted grades. The books were relevant to the age group, and the context and languages were appropriate. Schools appreciated the ability to select their own book titles – it gave them agency, allowing them to tailor the selection to their school's needs. In addition, the schools were also supplied with stocked book trolleys, which made it easy to move them to where they were needed for in-class support. The Intermediate Phase especially appreciated the book trolleys, as learners with reading challenges could use any available reading material. Getting a book in every child's hand was key to the success of the reading clubs. There is always the risk that if resources are provided, the gratitude of the communities might influence the feedback. However, the participants appeared to be sincere and authentic during all interactions with the author, as can be seen in the excerpt from written responses in Box 3.

The findings show how resourced reading clubs, grounded in community engagement and supported through Implementation Science structures can contribute to literacy

BOX 3: Excerpts from participant responses.

'We would like to acknowledge the tremendous impact Varsity College's contributions have had on our school library. Their support has played a significant role in broadening the learners' vocabulary. This was especially evident during our spelling competition earlier this month, where the students performed exceptionally well.' 'Additionally, the library trolley has been a fantastic resource, allowing the entire school to access a variety of books as it made its way from one classroom to the next. This initiative has provided all students with the opportunity to explore different books, further enhancing their reading experience.' (Teacher, School H)

'This project came exactly when we needed it. It has given us things that can bring change for our learners.' (Teacher, School B)

Die ouers is dankbaar en as juffrou op onse Facebook page kyk sal juffrou al die comments sien. [The parents are grateful, and if the teacher looks at our Facebook page, she will see all the comments.] (Teacher, School K)

development in rural schools. Providing resources is an enabling condition for successful implementation.

Value to teachers

The engagement project brought meaningful value to the teachers, particularly in the day-to-day realities of teaching in under-resourced and high-pressure school environments. During focus groups discussions, teachers expressed that having trained reading club facilitators especially eased the pressure of time to support learners. The project also introduced practical strategies and much-needed resources, which teachers could immediately apply in their own classes to strengthen reading practices. Beyond classroom support, teachers appreciated that the afterschool reading clubs helped build learners' interest and confidence in reading, which had a positive influence on their formal schoolwork. The partnership with the HEI and ESF created a sense of shared purpose, and provided teachers with a supportive space to reflect, learn together, and feel less overwhelmed by the literacy challenges they face, as can be seen in Box 4. Overall, the questionnaires completed by teachers all agreed that the project added value by reinforcing teachers' efforts, improving learner engagement, and fostering a stronger culture of reading within the school community.

Value to the community

Fifty EAs and RCs appointed by the Department of Education were trained, although we only appointed one trainee per school as a paid reading club facilitator. These trainees had been upskilled and returned to their communities, as relayed in Box 1, where they could support their own children, neighbours, or family members with homework or, specifically, with reading. It has been reported by schools that an unintended consequence of the initial training is that some of these trainees have been offering extra reading lessons and support to struggling learners in their communities. This meant that the community engagement and implementation of our programme had a ripple effect in the community, extending beyond the confines of the classroom or school borders into accessible support for learners who generally would not have had access to support structures. The broader community also became involved when schools showcased literacy events such as Read Aloud Day, World Book Day, and Literacy Day. School H also took learners from their reading club to visit a hospital and an old age home to showcase their reading – this was a delightful picture that they shared in the WhatsApp group. This provided learners, teachers, and facilitators with a sense of

BOX 4: Excerpt from the focus group discussions on 21 April 2025.

'The success of the reading clubs is all because of the reading club facilitators' dedication, our principal who pushes us to keep on going and want reports and planning all the time. We could not have done this without the support from you and even the department came to see how we are running our reading club. We can see the difference...and it has really helped the teachers. I like that we share with each other and that we all just want what is best for our kids. We love our reading room. The new mats and cushions make it look bright; we now have to work out times for all the grades because all the children want to be there all the time.' (Teacher, School J)

accomplishment and gratitude from those they visited. This ripple effect reflects strong community engagement and aligns with literature, emphasising participatory approaches (Holmes et al. 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study directly addresses the challenges outlined in the introduction, particularly the need for strengthened reading support in rural schools. The findings show that structured training, supported by both material and human resources, enabled the effective establishment of reading clubs and eased teachers' time pressures by providing dedicated reading club facilitators. These facilitators sustained momentum through regular sessions and engaging activities, creating meaningful literacy spaces for learners. The study demonstrates that clear, co-constructed implementation processes can respond to the constraints identified at the outset and contribute to more sustainable literacy development in rural South African primary schools. This article further demonstrates that a resource-rich reading club can indeed serve as an effective vehicle for sustained literacy development.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Jamiellah Domingo: Conceptualisation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Visualisation; Writing – original draft; Writing–review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author, Jamiellah Domingo, on reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They

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