



An integrated approach to isiXhosa literacy teaching and learning in the foundation phase: Current practices and prospects

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Background: The current South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) promotes integration through the use of interdisciplinary themes for teaching in the Foundation Phase but does not provide explicit guidelines on the application of this approach in literacy teaching.

Aim: The study aimed to investigate teachers' current practices and the potential of an integrated approach in the teaching and learning of Grade 3 isiXhosa literacy.

Setting: The study was conducted in two primary schools located in the black townships of Cape Town, in the Western Cape province.

Methods: A case study design was used in this qualitative study. Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with two Grade 3 teachers were used to collect data.

Results: The findings indicate that teachers' intuitive use of interactive and learner-centred pedagogical strategies fostered the implementation of the integrated approach in isiXhosa literacy, yet missed opportunities to develop higher-order thinking skills. The findings provide insights into the potential of this approach, given a greater focus on innovative and inclusive pedagogies and teacher professional development.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the integrated approach could play a significant role in enhancing learners' conceptual, linguistic and emotional development when implemented correctly.

Contribution: This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on African language literacy teaching and learning – an area that remains under-researched. It advances scholarship in early literacy pedagogy and provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of the integrated approach, thus informing future research and practice in African language literacy teaching and learning.

Keywords: integration; isiXhosa; literacy; foundation phase; constructivism.

Introduction

Background

The integrated approach to education evolved as an area of research in the late 20th century and was adopted as an inclusive way of teaching and learning that discourages the division of knowledge into subjects (Beane 1995, 1999; Dowden 2011; Mathison & Freeman 1998). For decades, the use of integration in teaching has been recognised as a valuable tool for education transformation across the globe (Cross, Mungadi & Rouhani 2002; Msila 2007). For example, it is at the centre of education in Australia and China and in some African countries (Moss, Godinho & Chao 2019). It aims to promote active participation in learning through experiential learning and a recognition of learners' experiences, thus taking into account learners' needs and sociocultural backgrounds (Pavlis & Gkiosos 2017). It is recognised as a transformative multidisciplinary approach that fosters knowledge integration to accommodate diverse cultures and contexts, promoting the active engagement of learners through collaboration (Ferguson-Patrick, Reynolds & Macqueen 2018; Helmane & Briška 2017; Wall & Leckie 2017). It encourages critical and reflective thinking as learners integrate and relate concepts learned in one subject area to those gained in other subject areas (Helmane & Briška 2017). It is associated with learners' intellectual, emotional and social development.

Drake and Savage (2016) claim that countries that perform well in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), such as Finland and Canada, have policy provisions for integration. Finland, for example, uses an interdisciplinary project-based approach to learning (Halinen 2018). Korea's education policy also promotes an integrated curriculum (Kang 2019). The current South African Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) promotes integration as a way of teaching, through the use of interdisciplinary themes to help learners make connections between different subjects in the Foundation Phase (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). For example, the Foundation Phase Life Skills curriculum encompasses different subjects such as early Science, Social Studies, Physical Education and Arts and Culture to support the holistic development of learners. However, CAPS does not provide explicit guidelines on how to implement the integrated approach in literacy teaching in the Foundation Phase, when learners rely on concrete objects and situations to grasp concepts. As a result, the integrated approach has not had much effect in South Africa, as evident in the fact that literacy performance has not improved as it was introduced with outcomes-based education (OBE) in 1996. Foundation Phase learners have low reading proficiency, as reported in studies such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which reveals that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language (Spaull 2023; 2030 National Reading Panel Report 2025). The performance is especially bad in African languages (Spaull 2023; 2030 National Reading Panel Report 2025).

In this article, we argue that the lack of explicit guidelines on the implementation of the integrated approach to literacy teaching is a pedagogical gap that might compromise the intended benefits of this approach. Therefore, this article explores teachers' current pedagogical practices in implementing the integrated approach for isiXhosa literacy teaching and the prospects of this approach for enhancing literacy teaching in the Foundation Phase. It is guided by these two questions:

1. *How do Grade 3 teachers implement an integrated approach to isiXhosa home language literacy in the Foundation Phase?*
2. *What are the prospects for enhancing the integrated approach to literacy teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase?*

Guided by these research questions, the researchers analysed the strategies employed by teachers to implement the integrated approach and the prospects of this approach for literacy development in isiXhosa.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

In curriculum guidance across the globe, there is no common definition of integration, with the term used interchangeably with 'interdisciplinary', 'transdisciplinary' and 'multidisciplinary' in describing the curriculum (Dowden 2007; Fu & Sibert 2017). However, it is commonly understood as a teaching approach that embraces cross-curricular

connections to facilitate learning (Cross et al. 2002) and encourages collaborative learning to solve real-life problems (Chisholm 2005). Connection-making and collaboration occur as learners are exposed to knowledge from a variety of learning areas and disciplines (Moss et al. 2019). Integrating different subjects enhances learners' critical thinking skills, especially if the learning material relates to real-life situations (Altinyelken 2010).

This article draws on three integration models – interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary – to understand the concept of integration. The interdisciplinary model intentionally integrates content from different subjects and disciplines (e.g. languages, mathematics) around specific themes or problems (Becker 2020). This approach cuts across subject matter lines to address real-life problems and assists learners in making meaning of learning content (Helmane & Briška 2017; Pluim, Nazir & Wallace 2020). In applying this model in the classroom, teachers may draw from different systems of knowledge to facilitate learning and collaborate with one another to share perspectives and create new knowledge on identified problems.

The transdisciplinary model also promotes collaboration among teachers and other stakeholders, irrespective of disciplinary background and status, to solve social problems. This model takes a holistic and integrated approach to learning by combining concepts, knowledge and practices from different disciplines (Baumber et al. 2020; Scholz & Steiner 2015). The transdisciplinary approach provides a holistic learning experience that builds learners' social capacity and enhances learners' communication and listening skills through collaboration. Learners' collaborative discussions can be based on a common theme drawn from different disciplines to solve real-life problems. Therefore, the interdisciplinary approach is associated with the constructivist view of learning as learners are provided with opportunities to solve authentic problems and construct new knowledge together (Scholz & Steiner 2015).

With the multidisciplinary model, the same topic is studied from a variety of viewpoints in different disciplines, connected through cross-cutting themes (Pluim et al. 2020). This model enables learners to challenge both teachers and fellow learners to reflect on their own thinking from various viewpoints. In this way, the model develops learners' critical thinking and metacognition skills. Through collaboration, learners explore a variety of approaches to solve the same problem from different perspectives, discovering new knowledge in the process (Rogers et al. 2015; Sunarti et al. 2020).

These different integration models indicate that knowledge may be co-constructed and integrated from different sources and perspectives; hence, the assertion that integrated teaching has no boundaries (John 2015; Magoma 2016). In literacy teaching and learning, the integrated approach could

make use of cross-cutting themes from different disciplines to ensure literacy teaching across the curriculum.

The three models mentioned above align with the constructivist theory, pioneered by Piaget in the 1930s and augmented by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978). The constructivist theory acknowledges the social construction of knowledge and promotes its application through the use of interactive teaching and learning activities in the classroom. According to the theory, classroom interaction should include collaboration and problem-solving activities through discussions and group work, drawing from different perspectives (Ahlskog-Björkman 2017; Rogers et al. 2015). The teaching material should stimulate learners' thinking and problem-solving skills, enabling them to share their views and learn from each other (Syofyan, Zulela & Sumantri 2019). Learners' active participation should be stimulated through contextualised instructions and authentic tasks that are responsive to real-world problems (Schreiber & Valle 2013).

The constructivist theory embraces learner-centred teaching strategies that stimulate learners' critical thinking using a variety of interactive strategies that draw upon learners' own funds of knowledge. Constructivist approaches encourage participation and self-expression (Teo & Zhou 2017), allowing learners to construct their knowledge by connecting their learning to real-world experiences. These approaches encourage learners to explore new ideas through dialogue with each other, thus promoting the use of language for meaning making.

In this article, the various integration models and the constructivist theory provide an appropriate lens through which to view both teacher and learner practices and the way in which teachers apply integration and constructivist principles in implementing the integrated approach to enhance learners' literacy development. As literacy is defined as a cognitive and sociocultural construct (Bergbauer & Van Staden 2018; Davidson 2010; Ngaka & Masaazi 2015), the constructivist theory is well suited to analysing the development of cognitive and social skills among learners. The cognitive skills developed in isiXhosa literacy lessons include memory, auditory processing, comprehension and meaning making, while various social and communication skills are developed through the interaction and collaboration that form a part of integrated learning. In this article, the theory also sheds light on teachers' mediation and scaffolding of learning.

Literature review

Several international studies report on the benefits of using the integrated approach to teaching. For example, a comparative study at the University of Surabaya, Indonesia (Indana, Susantini & Bashri 2021) investigated the use of cooperative learning textbooks that adopted an integrated learning approach. The aim of the study was to use scientific

methods to enhance learners' collaborative problem-solving skills. In this study, the control group used an ordinary textbook with topics taught in isolation, while the experimental group used a textbook based on integrated and cooperative learning models around specific themes. The study results showed that the experimental group performed better than the control group.

Another study was conducted in elementary schools in Jakarta, Indonesia, by Syofyan et al. (2019), who investigated the effectiveness of integrated teaching materials based on problem-solving. The study showed that the use of integrated teaching material was more effective than the use of traditional methods that do not use teaching and learning materials, enabling learners to build meaningful knowledge (Syofyan et al. 2019). Ngaka and Masaazi (2015) assessed teachers' abilities in implementing an integrated curriculum, both with and without training, in Trinidad and Tobago. The findings showed that trained teachers were better able to implement the new integrated curriculum than those who had not been trained. Similarly, John (2015) investigated whether the use of explicit instructions in implementing the integrated curriculum enhanced teachers' abilities to meet the needs of learners in an inclusive environment. The findings indicated that teachers felt empowered to integrate all subjects and to use literacy across the curriculum through training (John 2015).

Several studies report on the challenges of implementing an integrated approach to teaching and learning. A study by Lam et al. (2013) investigated teachers' understanding of an integrated curriculum and its implementation in Singapore. This study reported that although the integrated approach has benefits, teachers struggled with limited subject knowledge and the inability to identify key concepts, resulting in superficial teaching disconnected from learners' social contexts. Similarly, Okoro and Okoro (2016) found that Social Science teachers in Rivers State in Nigeria demonstrated a limited understanding of integration and used inadequate teaching strategies that did not expose learners to different learning modes such as reflection, discussion and cooperative learning. In Ugandan primary schools, Altinyelken (2010) found that teachers had different understandings of the integrated approach and that their training had not adequately prepared them for its implementation. The lack of adequate resources was also a barrier to the effective implementation of integration. Likewise, Zin et al. (2019) reported that Malaysian pre-school teachers experienced difficulties in implementing the integrated approach due to their limited knowledge, time and resource constraints.

While studies on integrated approaches have been conducted in South Africa, very few have focused on the teaching and learning of an African language. Gxekwa and Satyo (2017) reported on the benefits of the integrated approach in isiXhosa literacy teaching in the Eastern Cape province. The results show that an integrated approach strengthens learners' understanding because they learn to work with the

same concepts and skills in more than one subject. Another South African study by Webb and Mayaba (2010) examined the effects of a scientific literacy strategy that integrated reading, writing, speaking and practical scientific activities on Grade 6 and 7 learners' general literacy skills in both English, the medium of instruction, and isiXhosa, their mother tongue. The results indicated a significant improvement in the learners' literacy skills in both languages.

The reviewed studies shed light on factors that enhance and constrain integrated teaching and the ways in which integration is planned and implemented in other countries. They also show the challenges associated with this approach. The literature reveals that research on an integrated approach to literacy development in an African language is limited, despite the promotion of this approach in the previous and current curricula of South Africa. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

Research methods and design

This study employed a qualitative research approach to collect data from two schools located in different townships in the Western Cape province, South Africa, where isiXhosa is used as a language of learning and teaching in the Foundation Phase. Qualitative studies seek to understand participants' perspectives about issues and how they make sense of their experiences (Creswell 2014); hence, they often use human research participants (Lincoln & Guba 2013). Also, a qualitative approach may employ different research designs and methodologies for different purposes, such as probing to elicit diverse and multifaceted data from the research participants (Thanh & Thanh 2015; Williams 2007). In this case, a case study design was used to examine Grade 3 teacher practices in the implementation of the integrated approach in teaching isiXhosa home language literacy.

Sampling

A sample was purposively selected from two primary schools (Schools A and B) located in black townships of Cape Town, in the Western province, South Africa. The sample was composed of two Grade 3 teachers who were home language speakers of isiXhosa and over the age of 45 years. Both held professional qualifications in teaching – a Primary Teachers' Certificate and a Higher Diploma in Education, and, for one, a Bachelor of Arts degree. Both possessed over 21 years' teaching experience.

The two Grade 3 teachers were selected because they were in an ideal position to provide rich information on the use of the integrated approach to teaching isiXhosa home language literacy in the Foundation Phase (FP). These teachers had undergone training in the current FP curriculum (known as CAPS), which promotes the use of the integrated approach for literacy teaching. They also taught all three subjects offered in this phase, namely Literacy, Mathematics and Life Skills, but classroom observations focused on how teachers integrated content from other subjects in literacy lessons.

Data collection methods

Data were collected by means of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The two Grade 3 teachers from two different schools were observed to gain an in-depth understanding of their implementation of the integrated approach in isiXhosa home language literacy teaching. An open-ended observation protocol was used to document teacher–learner and learner–learner interactions during isiXhosa literacy lessons, as well as the pedagogical strategies teachers employed to implement the integrated approach. Field notes were taken to capture the richness of classroom interactions, including verbal and non-verbal communication, the use of teaching and learning resources and the physical layout of the classrooms. Six isiXhosa home language literacy lessons were observed in each school over a period of 6 months in order to gain deep insights into the use of integration to scaffold isiXhosa literacy learning.

An interview was conducted with each teacher to complement the observation data. The interviews were conducted after classroom observations in both schools, and some of the questions were based on the observation data to probe further into issues of interest or those requiring clarification. Each interview lasted approximately 30 min–45 min. The interview questions were semi-structured and elicited information on teacher practices in the use of the integrated approach in teaching isiXhosa literacy to Grade 3 learners. The aim was to understand their current practices and determine prospects for the use of this approach in isiXhosa literacy teaching and learning. Masoga, Shokane and Blitz (2020) encourage the use of the research participants' home language in conducting interviews to create a closer relationship and better communication between the researcher and the interviewee. Chilisa (2012) expresses a similar view, stating that using participants' home language in interviews facilitates mutual understanding and prevents misunderstandings. In this study, isiXhosa was used as the primary language of the interviews although both teachers code-switched between isiXhosa and English as they were fluent bilinguals.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is commonly used to analyse qualitative data, revealing patterns within and across data that help to understand participants' experiences and perspectives (Lochmiller 2021). The classroom observation data were organised into field notes that interpreted what happened in Teacher A's and Teacher B's classrooms regarding the implementation of the integrated approach in isiXhosa literacy lessons. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis framework, the data from classroom observations and interviews were triangulated to ensure the credibility, validity and trustworthiness of the results. The classroom observation and interview data were transcribed verbatim to preserve their meaning. This process involved reading all transcripts and coding the data by hand to identify common patterns that emerged from the data. Inductive coding was

used to identify themes across the observation and interview data. Similar codes were grouped into categories, and similarities and differences were identified across the sets of data to develop themes that address the research questions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Western Cape, Research Ethics Committee (No. HS19/2/8). Before conducting the study, permission to involve the two schools in the research was sought and granted from the principals, teachers and parents and from the Western Cape Education Department. Consent letters and information sheets were distributed to the teachers and the principals, informing them about the purpose of the study. Both teachers gave their voluntary written consent to participate in the study.

To protect the identities of the teachers and the schools, pseudonyms are used. The schools are referred to as Schools A and B and the teachers as Teacher A and Teacher B. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured throughout the research process, and both participants were treated with respect.

Research findings

The research findings presented here support the two themes that emerged from data analysis, and they address the research questions that guided the study. The broad themes that emerged from the analysed data relate to teachers' pedagogical strategies and opportunities for innovative literacy practices.

Pedagogical strategies

The study findings revealed that the two Grade 3 teachers employed interactive pedagogical strategies to implement an integrated approach in their literacy teaching, making good use of cross-curricular themes and texts to scaffold learning, storytelling, collaboration, problem-solving and shared reading. The findings address the first research question and provide insights into teachers' pedagogical strategies in isiXhosa literacy lessons.

The use of cross-curricular themes and texts for scaffolding learning

The findings indicate that teachers did not integrate any Mathematics content into the literacy lessons that were observed, probably because the mathematical concepts are abstract and not directly relevant to the linguistic or communicative goals of literacy teaching. The findings also show that neither teacher struggled to integrate Life Skills content into their lessons through the use of cross-curricular themes and texts. Although there was no systematic planning for the integrated approach, teachers were able to scaffold learners' understanding through questions. However, few of the questions stimulated learners' higher-order thinking skills. The integration of life skills seemed to occur incidentally

through reading stories, but assessment activities did not cater for integration, especially in written tasks.

The cross-curricular themes covered by the two teachers were celebrations [*imibhiyozo*], disasters [*iintlekele*] and feelings [*iimvakalelo*]. The theme of natural disasters forms part of the Grade 3 workbooks and Life Skills textbooks. Under this theme, Teacher A chose a text on *umlilo* [fire], while Teacher B used a text on *iimpuphuma* [floods]. The selected themes were familiar to learners as both schools received learners from the nearby informal settlements where fires and floods are common, especially during winter.

These themes were introduced through texts, read by both the teachers and the learners. The themes incorporated knowledge from Geography and Natural Science and illustrated the possibility of drawing knowledge from different disciplines to enhance learners' critical thinking (Pluim et al. 2020). However, the two teachers used the themes to achieve different learning outcomes – Teacher A used the theme of fire to teach silent reading, while Teacher B used the theme of floods to teach grammar.

Regarding the theme of celebrations, Teacher A used a text about Mandela Day, celebrated on 18 July across the world. Teacher B focused on Valentine's Day, celebrated on 14 February. In both cases, learners were asked to read the texts, which the teachers used as a springboard to assess learners' understanding and application of knowledge in real-life situations.

Teachers also used the themes and texts to enhance learners' writing skills. For example, both teachers focused on *iimvakalelo* [feelings] and encouraged learners to reflect on their feelings by writing them down in diaries, thus enhancing their thinking and writing skills. In both schools, learners were asked to read the texts with the aim of stimulating an awareness of their feelings and their thinking and comprehension skills. Teacher B's learners were provided with a writing frame to scaffold their writing. The themes instilled important values such as empathy, kindness, sharing, respect and love for one another.

In both schools, learners engaged actively with the texts through reading. Their social context was used to foster literacy learning through reading, with the teachers encouraging them to draw from their social knowledge and personal experience to make meaning of the lessons and develop conceptual skills. Learners were also provided with opportunities to explore different text types such as fiction and expository texts, which were used to enhance learners' speaking, listening, reading and writing skills (e.g. writing a diary and organising facts).

The observation data were corroborated by the teachers in interviews, where they explained the significance of the themes and how they used them in literacy teaching and learning.

Teacher A explained how she incorporated the learners' social context through themes that depicted real-life examples about fire to teach learners about safety precautions. She said:

'Abantwana bethu bayathanda ukutshelwa, so ke utitshala uyakwazi ukutshintsha afundise ngaloo meko ... xa ufundisa uchaphazele yonke into nobomi bomntwana. Mhlawumbi ubonakalise okokuba le nto uyifundisayo ingamceda njani umntwana. No-CAPS mos utsho ukuba masifundise sibandakanya konke.' [Our learners experience fire disasters frequently, so we change our theme and teach about that situation ... when you teach, you include everything that affects the learners' lives, perhaps to show how the lesson could help the child. Even CAPS suggests that we integrate everything in teaching.]' (Teacher A, 49 years old, female teacher)

Teacher B explained how she used themes for integration:

'Siye sikhethe imixholo apha kwincwadi yezakhono zolwimi, ze ke sifundise ngeso sihloko ... Kaloku xa sifundisa ngale ndlela sichaphazela izinto ezininzi ezenzekayo nasekuhlaleni. Ukanti ke nencwadi le ye-workbook inayo imixholo esiyilandelayo. [We choose themes from the Life Skills textbook, and then we teach about that topic ... By the way, when we teach in this way, we include many things that happen in our society. Even the workbook has themes that we follow.]' (Teacher B, 46 years old, female teacher)

Teachers selected themes that aligned with the learners' lived experiences for meaningful engagement. In both cases, learners' responses revealed that they had experiences of house fires and flooding in the informal settlements in which most of them resided. In this case, learners' prior knowledge was used as a resource to make sense of the text.

Story-based approaches

The teachers used the stories in their textbook for different purposes, such as teaching grammar and vocabulary. For example, Teacher A read a story about a fire that broke out as a result of negligence and used questions to scaffold learners' thinking about safety in the home. Through questions, she assessed learners' vocabulary and their existing knowledge of the dangers of fire. The questions scaffolded and enhanced learners' listening skills, but at a fairly low level. Similarly, Teacher B used a story on floods to teach aspects of grammar, such as synonyms. She targeted certain words in the text and asked for their synonyms to enrich the learners' vocabulary, for example, *intlekele* [tragedy] and *ngephanyazo* [suddenly]. She focused on concepts and sentences that were unfamiliar to the learners to help them engage with and make meaning of the text. The questions stimulated the learners to think and encouraged them to make predictions, as the themes were familiar to them.

The story-based approach was therefore used to stimulate learners' thinking and comprehension and to foster a learner-centred environment through the question-and-answer method, problem-solving and collaborative learning in the form of group work. However, Teacher B (TB) provided no feedback to learners to support or consolidate their responses and guide them into deeper thinking about the issues raised.

Collaborative and problem-solving approaches

The teachers used the same texts to facilitate group discussions and problem-solving among the learners. For instance, Teacher A's learners were asked to discuss the causes of fire in informal settlements and to come up with solutions not provided in the text. They were encouraged to visualise a fire before they answered her questions to stimulate their imaginations and prior knowledge. In small groups, learners discussed how they could prevent fires and protect themselves, thus enhancing their life skills. In this way, learners were encouraged to apply their knowledge to solve a particular problem through collaboration.

There was active engagement between the teachers and learners and among the learners themselves. The learners were able to express their views confidently and demonstrated their abilities to solve some of the social and infrastructural problems they encountered. The dialogical interaction seemed to help them think about their choices and make inferences based on their experiences, thus enhancing active learning and learner-centredness. This strategy fostered learners' communication and problem-solving skills as they applied knowledge of what they had read to real-life situations.

Shared reading and the question-and-answer method

The teachers used the same texts that imparted life lessons for shared reading and to foster listening and comprehension skills through the question-and-answer method. Some questions were asked before reading to test the learners' prior knowledge although most did not stimulate the learners' higher-order thinking. For example, Teacher A introduced her lesson by asking whether learners had ever seen a house on fire. Thereafter, Teacher A read the text twice as learners listened attentively and then asked questions to assess their understanding of it. Teacher B's questions tested the learners' understanding of *intlekele* [disaster], which she linked with damaging floods in the context of her lesson.

Both teachers followed the correct reading stages, namely pre-reading, during reading and post-reading, using the question-and-answer method to assess skills such as listening, reading, comprehension and language use, all of which were fostered using texts and assessment activities. This strategy aligns with one of the CAPS requirements – that shared reading should focus on the learning of different skills, such as word identification, phonics, text features and comprehension (DBE 2011).

Prospects for integrated literacy approaches

The findings of this study show that there are promising prospects for enhancing the integrated approach to isiXhosa literacy teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase. These prospects include recognising the role of early literacy in the implementation of mother-tongue-based bilingual education, making greater use of African epistemologies (i.e. ways of knowledge grounded in African worldviews and cultures)

and enhancing innovative and inclusive pedagogies through teacher professional development.

Firstly, integrated teaching approaches have implications for improved literacy outcomes as they promote a holistic approach to language development through listening, speaking, reading and writing (Barton & Hamilton 2012). The combination of these skills could foster learners' comprehension, vocabulary development and fluency in their home language, which forms the foundation of additive bi- or multilingualism. This is preferable to marginalising learners' home languages, which leads to subtractive bi- or multilingualism, as seen in many South African schools today.

With the introduction of mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTBBE) in the Intermediate Phase in South Africa, strengthening the teaching of African languages in the Foundation Phase is crucial, as it provides a strong foundational literacy to enhance the transition to English as the language of learning and teaching from Grade 4 onwards. It also enhances the development of key concepts for learning in all subject areas. An integrated approach using the learners' home language can therefore strengthen their conceptual and cognitive development, improve their vocabulary and develop skills in other languages.

Secondly, in the case of African languages used for teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase, cross-curricular integration presents opportunities to incorporate African epistemologies, not only in the language used but also in affirmation of learners' cultures and identities. This approach could yield long-term cognitive benefits and inclusive educational environments that recognise learners' lived experiences and sociocultural backgrounds as useful resources in learning, thus bridging the gap between home and school literacies and enhancing learners' abilities in all subjects.

Thirdly, the use of integrated approaches in isiXhosa literacy teaching and learning presents opportunities for teacher development, which could focus on more innovative and reflective practices in their pedagogy. Teachers should collaborate across disciplines and be able to develop relevant and interdisciplinary materials of their own. This could be achieved through ongoing teacher professional development programmes and revisiting pre-service teacher training curricula to incorporate aspects of integration across the curriculum, including the integration of new technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) into the teaching of early literacy in African languages, thus enhancing multiliteracies.

Fourthly, various policies support an integrated approach to teaching and learning in South Africa. For example, CAPS promotes an integrated approach to teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase (DBE 2011). The Language-in-Education Policy (Department of Education [DoE] 1996) promotes additive bi- or multilingualism, which implies

using learners' home languages in teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase. Also, the National Reading Strategy and Early Grade Studies (DBE 2011) promote home language instruction and innovative pedagogies in literacy teaching. White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education (2001) promotes a flexible curriculum that responds to the diverse needs of learners. All these policies value learners' home languages and advocate inclusive practices, implying an integration of domains of knowledge for effective teaching and learning.

Fifthly, there are many research avenues that could be explored to advance the use of an integrated approach in literacy teaching and learning. For example, a study on the use of this approach in multilingual and under-resourced educational settings would be valuable. Future research could also focus on how integration enhances young learners' digital literacy skills, and longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term impacts of well-applied integrated approaches on learners' literacy development in African languages. It would be useful to explore teacher professional development models that support the effective implementation of the integrated approach in the classroom.

Discussion

This section discusses the key findings on the teachers' implementation of the integrated approach in isiXhosa literacy lessons, in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

Firstly, it was observed that the integrated approach was practised by the two teachers. Sunarti et al. (2020) maintain that the integrated approach may be facilitated by drawing from different subjects, disciplines and perspectives. In addition, Drake and Savage (2016) maintain that an integrated curriculum enhances the development of the 21st century competencies such as collaboration, creativity, communication, civic literacy and critical thinking. All these aspects were observed in the two teachers' lessons.

The findings of the study corroborate Pompsom's (2011) view that integrated teaching and learning can occur within single disciplines, as was seen in the integration of Life Skills into all the isiXhosa literacy lessons observed and analysed. In this study, learners drew on their own knowledge in areas such as geography, history and environment as they discussed the texts they had read (fires, floods and Mandela Day), thus enriching their personal and social well-being, as promoted by CAPS (DBE 2011).

The integrated approach is crucial for language and literacy learning as it enhances a variety of language skills such as listening, speaking and critical thinking and exposes learners to other subjects. It also facilitates learner-centred activities and aligns with Vygotsky's theory (1978) of social constructivism, which promotes collaboration as a means of mediating learners' thinking processes through dialogue. The approach aligns with the constructivist view that

learning is a social and collaborative activity, with active interaction among learners strengthening learners' oral literacy (Ahlskog-Björkman 2017; Schreiber & Valle 2013).

The integrated approach observed in this study also aligns with the constructivist recognition of learners' prior knowledge as a significant resource in mediating knowledge construction (Taber 2020). This recognition was apparent in the dialogical communication and collaboration encouraged by the teachers, which consolidated and validated the learners' understanding of their lessons. The recognition of learners' prior knowledge and experience also facilitated the development of their problem-solving skills in that they were encouraged to find solutions to fires and floods in the informal settlements where most lived.

Secondly, it is notable that themes and learners' social contexts are regarded as the fundamental elements of integration in the Foundation Phase literacy curriculum (DBE 2011; DoE 2002). According to Simms, Frausel and Richland (2018), the effective use of themes enhances learners' reasoning and higher-order skills and helps them address the social problems they experience in their environments. However, while the teachers made use of cross-curricular themes in their lessons, most of the questions did not reflect a higher-order cognitive demand. This suggests that the effective use of cross-curricular themes is mediated by teachers' pedagogical strategies and their ability to design cognitively demanding questions.

Both teachers integrated Life Skills in the form of familiar themes and texts to enhance learners' holistic development through reading, writing and reasoning, as suggested in the CAPS document (DBE 2011). The themes and texts were used as mediation and scaffolding tools to facilitate learner participation, especially as the teachers drew upon knowledge gained by the learners in their sociocultural environment to construct new knowledge. It could be argued that the use of familiar themes and Life Skills integration into isiXhosa literacy lessons enhanced learners' cognitive and social development. Learners were able to express themselves confidently in their home language, isiXhosa. This is in line with Teo and Zhou's (2017) view that familiar topics motivate learners to participate actively in lessons, as they draw from their background knowledge. It also aligns with the constructivist and sociocultural views that learners construct meaningful knowledge within a familiar environment through dialogue and learning activities initiated under familiar themes (Min, Rashid & Nazri 2012; Retnawati et al. 2017; Street 2016). This practice brings teaching and learning closer to learners' realities and provides teachers with the opportunity to link content to learners' real-life experiences (Mouraz & Leite 2013).

Thirdly, both teachers used collaborative and problem-solving approaches through group work that enhanced dialogical and problem-solving skills. Problem-solving approaches stimulate learners' cognitive skills and provide them with opportunities to build their own knowledge

(Syofyan et al. 2019). Group discussions promote clear communication and enhance listening skills, as learners have to organise information coherently as they engage with their peers (Spires et al. 2019). The use of dialogue is relevant in literacy teaching as it fosters joint accomplishment among learners through social interaction (Bergbauer & Van Staden 2018; Street 2005). Dialogue facilitates active learner engagement and foregrounds learners' voices in the learning process. Dialogical approaches align with the constructivist view of learning, which promotes the co-construction of knowledge by learners as they negotiate meaning, drawing on their prior knowledge to clarify their points of view (Van Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders 2017).

Fourthly, the findings indicate the value of texts and stories in facilitating integrated instruction. Both teachers focused on comprehension and vocabulary development using texts and stories. Stories may be aligned with themes to achieve a number of educational goals, such as scaffold learning, and to facilitate learners' reflective thinking (Davoudi & Sadeghi 2015). Through storytelling, teachers can draw attention to elements of grammar and extend learners' vocabularies as they make meaning of the texts in relation to their contexts. Aligned with themes, stories stimulate learners' imagination, instil morals and values and promote active engagement (Amalia 2018). Therefore, storytelling provides a range of educational, emotional and social benefits for learners (Bara 2021). Listening, speaking and thinking skills may be integrated and developed in literacy lessons through reading followed by writing exercises, and stories may also be used as a foundation for whole-class discussions.

Fifthly, shared reading is regarded as one of the key elements of the co-construction of meaning in learning. Shared reading aligns with the constructivist view that learning is a sociocultural practice fostered through social interaction (Mutekwe 2018; Newman 2020; Taber 2020). In this study, shared reading was used to facilitate conversations between the teachers and their learners and among the learners themselves. Learners engaged with the stories and negotiated meaning, drawing from both the stories and their own experiences. However, high-quality questions must be used to enhance learners' comprehension and critical thinking skills (Song 2016). In this case, learners were challenged to apply knowledge to real-life situations, but very few higher-order questions were asked. It may be argued that the teachers missed the opportunity to scaffold learners to their fullest potential.

Sixthly, while there are no explicit guidelines for implementing integrated approaches in CAPS, the teachers followed some of the principles of integration in their lessons with regard to the teaching and learning of literacy in the Foundation Phase. This entailed the incorporation of Life Skills into the reading and discussing of stories, and their proper use of the reading phases, namely pre-reading, during reading and post-reading. Their lessons fostered a variety of language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading and writing and used themes, texts, stories and assessment activities. In this regard,

it could be said that teachers displayed pedagogical and professional competence and a sound understanding of learner-centred approaches. They also exhibited a capacity to draw on learners' knowledge and experiences to implement interdisciplinary learning and to adapt their practices to meet their learners' needs.

Conclusion

Despite the small sample, this article presents useful findings that uncover the pedagogical strategies used by teachers to integrate different subject areas in literacy instruction in the Foundation Phase. The findings shed light on how teachers' intuitive decision-making guided their teaching practice, given that there are no explicit guidelines in CAPS for implementing the integrated approach in literacy instruction. These findings have pedagogical implications for teachers, particularly in transforming isiXhosa home language literacy teaching through the incorporation of indigenous knowledge, concepts and themes that cut across learning areas or disciplines. The use of culturally relevant materials such as isiXhosa folktales, idioms and proverbs within an integrated approach can affirm learners' identities and connect literacy learning to their lived experiences, rather than treating literacy as an isolated skill. Integrating language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, could further enhance learners' oral skills, vocabulary development and comprehension, which are crucial for literacy development. Through the integrated approach, teachers can also draw on oral, visual and digital texts to strengthen learners' meaning making and communicative competence.

This article has also shown that the integrated approach contributes to transformative literacy instruction in African languages, currently an under-researched area. This approach has the potential to enhance learners' conceptual, linguistic and emotional development when implemented correctly, especially if teachers are shown ways to develop more higher-order thinking skills among their learners. There is a need for constant teacher professional development that explicitly supports teachers in integrating cross-curricular knowledge in creative ways.

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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.

CRedit authorship contribution

Thembisa Kosi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Data curation. Vuyokazi Nomlomo: Resources, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Funding acquisition. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

There are no restrictions on data availability. The data supporting the findings of this study can be obtained from the corresponding author, Vuyokazi Nomlomo, upon reasonable request.

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