




# Teachers' voices on the poor reading skills of Setswana-speaking Foundation Phase learners



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**Background:** Proficient reading skills are crucial for Foundation Phase learners to develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The 2021 PIRLS assessment highlighted alarmingly low reading proficiency among ten-year-olds. Effective reading instruction, and a positive reading environment are essential for developing confident, skilled readers.

**Objectives:** This research focused on the reading instruction challenges of selected Setswana-speaking Foundation Phase teachers in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda Education District in the North West Province in South Africa.

**Method:** Using a qualitative approach, the study employed a multiple case study design, incorporating interviews and document analysis.

**Results:** The findings revealed significant challenges for Grade 3 teachers in teaching reading to Setswana-speaking students. A key issue was inadequate training in reading instruction methods, which hindered their effectiveness. Teachers also lacked sufficient subject knowledge of Setswana, complicating their ability to support reading development. Additional problems included a severe shortage of essential resources: textbooks, visual aids, and access to libraries were limited, depriving learners of necessary reading materials and opportunities.

**Conclusion:** The study highlighted the critical role of teacher training and sufficient resources in effective teaching and the impact of their absence on instructional challenges. It underscored the need for education authorities to address the difficulties rural schools and their staff face.

**Contribution:** Currently, there is no effective system in place for teachers in this district to enhance reading instruction and better support their learners. This research aimed to address this gap by establishing how the extent of these problems may help identify measures to address them.

**Keywords:** foundation phase; reading skills; Setswana-speaking learners; insufficient sources; teacher training.

## Introduction

Reading for comprehension and enjoyment is arguably the most essential skill that primary school learners acquire. Cain, Compton and Parrila (2017) observe that understanding the link between written and spoken language is crucial for all future learning. Traditionally, educationists view literacy development, which builds on basic reading skills, as a key indicator of school effectiveness.

Early readers in primary school not only show improved socio-emotional well-being through better communication and self-expression but also gain confidence from effective reading (Cain et al. 2017). Unfortunately, Pretorius et al. (2016) found that many South African learners do not develop fluency, accuracy, and comprehension in reading. This, according to these authors, is true whether learners are assessed in Home Language (HL) or in First Additional Language (FAL) English. Spaull (2013) observes that, by the end of Grade 3, most learners lack reading fluency and comprehension. This finding correlates with both national and international assessments such as the Annual National Assessment Tests (ANA) from 2011 to 2014 and the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) (Brink 2017).

Every 5 years, South African learners participate in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which assesses reading comprehension and monitors trends in reading literacy.

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The 2016 PIRLS revealed that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners struggled with reading comprehension (PIRLS 2016). This issue persisted and worsened according to the 2021 PIRLS results, released in Pretoria in May 2023, which showed a concerning 3% increase in the number of learners unable to read with understanding (NASCEE 2023). The results highlighted very low performance in reading comprehension among 10-year-olds, with South Africa scoring 288 points, well below the PIRLS centre point of 500. South Africa's total PIRLS score dropped from 320 points in 2016 to 288 in 2021, far below the PIRLS average of 500 points. The failure to acquire essential reading skills early has profound consequences for learners' future scholastic achievement. From the PIRLS results it is evident that most learners are academically marginalised as they struggle to engage with the curriculum in higher grades, widening their learning gap (Pretorius et al. 2016). Unless these learners master basic reading and writing skills in their HL and participate in meaningful literacy activities early on, they will remain disadvantaged and continually play catch-up.

### Purpose of the study

A growing body of research shows a correlation between teachers' instructional competence and the quality of teaching or learner outcomes (Cain et al. 2017; Cherry 2020). Van der Merwe (2015) asserts that reading instruction requires knowledgeable, strategic, adaptive, and reflective teachers. However, evidence suggests that South African teachers are not fully aware of their responsibility to meet their learners' language-related needs (Sebole, Khosa-Shangase & Mophosho 2019) and lack the methodological skills to promote effective reading due to inadequate training (Manditereza 2014). This indicates the need for teacher training in reading norms related to curriculum measurement – a set of standardised and well-researched procedures for assessing and monitoring learners' reading proficiency and academic development (Compton 2023).

This research focused on the reading instruction challenges faced by selected Setswana-speaking Foundation Phase teachers in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda Education District (DKKED) in the North West province (NWP) in South Africa. Currently, no effective capacity-building initiatives exist for teachers in this district to assist their learners in reading effectively. This research sought to address this gap by examining the challenges faced by Setswana-speaking Foundation Phase learners with poor reading skills and determining how the extent of these issues could inform the development of effective solutions. To achieve this goal, the following questions guided the research:

- What challenges do Grade 3 teachers experience when teaching reading skills to Setswana-speaking learners?
- How do teachers identify learners with reading problems in their classes?
- What are the needs of Grade 3 teachers in terms of support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to assist Setswana-speaking learners with poor reading skills?

## The significance of reading proficiency

Pretorius et al. (2016) stress that, given South Africa's bilingual education system, most learners should become biliterate. This means they need to be capable of speaking, understanding, reading, and writing in multiple languages, including their HL and a FAL, right from the start of their schooling. For most learners in South Africa, English becomes the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) from Grade 4 onwards. For this reason, a strong foundation in reading skills for English as an FAL is crucial which, in turn, relies on robust HL reading proficiency in the early grades (Friesen & Haigh 2018).

Effective teachers, who are knowledgeable about reading in both HL and FAL, can significantly impact learners' academic progress (Mkandawire 2017). In high-poverty schools, where learners face a higher risk of reading difficulties and academic underachievement due to the challenges of low socio-economic status (SES), teachers who adopt evidence-based reading practices and create print-rich environments can help prevent or reduce these issues (Sebole et al. 2019). Thus, teacher expertise in reading is significant in mitigating the negative effects of low SES on learners' reading proficiency and overall academic success.

Cekiso (2017) identifies the lack of pedagogical and content knowledge in reading instruction among South African Foundation Phase teachers as a significant concern, directly affecting the quality of literacy education. Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlwane (2020) concur, warning that this shortfall impedes early childhood development and may result in long-term negative effects for learners, especially in a country with already alarmingly low literacy rates. Brink (2017) and Stott and Beelders (2019) emphasise that teachers should have a good understanding of the purpose and components of reading, their interrelations, development, and the necessary strategies to set young learners on a successful path to reading proficiency, especially in Grades R–4. Pretorius et al. (2016) describe the cognitive processing involved in reading as complex, rapid, and largely invisible, occurring within the mind and making direct observation challenging. Research over the past three decades has significantly elucidated how fundamental reading skills interact, develop, and evolve as learners progress through the grades (Compton 2023; Stott & Beelders 2019). Making this information readily accessible to teachers is crucial.

Many contemporary reading techniques used in South African classrooms are derived from early reading instruction practices in English—a language with a systematic and robust orthography (Rule & Land 2017). However, according to Winberg, Dippenaar and De Lange (2020), African languages, which are syllabic and have transparent orthographies, may require different instructional approaches. Research (Sebole et al. 2019; Stott & Beelders 2019) found that vowels are central to syllables in English, Afrikaans, and African

languages; it is essential for teachers to understand these basic linguistic concepts and their implications for early phonics education. Unfortunately, Winberg et al. (2020) point out that current teacher training programmes often fail to address these fundamental linguistic differences and similarities across languages, contributing to a lack of basic linguistic competence among teachers and uncertainty regarding phonics education.

Rule and Land (2017) believe that gaining a deeper understanding of the linguistic and orthographic aspects of South African languages will help teachers better grasp the standards influencing reading development in English, Afrikaans, and African languages. The inconsistent and sporadic compliance with reading skill assessments (Rhode 2015) often stems from a lack of understanding of the assessment's purpose and methodology. Therefore, the author opines that enhancing teachers' content knowledge related to reading also contributes to their pedagogical expertise.

### Important components of teaching reading

By Grade 4, learners should be able to read quickly, fluently, with proper intonation, and, most importantly, comprehend what they read. Teaching reading skills focuses on three essential components: decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension:

- **Decoding:** involves teaching learners to connect their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to pronounce unfamiliar words accurately. Key aspects of decoding include phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge and phonics, word recognition, and oral reading fluency (Rimensberger 2014). Phonological awareness is the ability to recognise sounds within a language, while phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate these sounds. Research has shown that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of early reading success (Rohde 2015). Alphabetic knowledge involves understanding letter-sound relationships, which is crucial for decoding new words (Miller 2019). Word recognition is the ability to identify words effortlessly, which frees up cognitive resources for comprehension. Oral reading fluency (ORF) is the ability to read aloud accurately and with appropriate expression, which bridges the gap to understanding the text (Lee & Szczerbinski 2021).
- **Vocabulary:** development is crucial for reading proficiency. Learners who read regularly have richer vocabularies, enhancing their language skills, including listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing proficiency (Hatton & Sapp 2018). Teachers should focus on expanding both active and passive vocabularies and differentiating between high-frequency and academic words. Vocabulary instruction should also consider the differences between languages, such as English and agglutinating languages like Setswana (Lee & Szczerbinski 2021). The opaque orthography of English, with a spelling system that

is characterised by many irregularities and exceptions, poses significant challenges for phoneme-grapheme correspondence. This contrasts with the more transparent orthography and open syllable system found in Setswana and other African languages, which generally facilitate more straightforward phoneme-grapheme mapping (Winberg et al. 2020).

- **Comprehension:** requires readers to understand texts on three levels: literal, inferential, and evaluative. Most primary school learners struggle with comprehension beyond the literal level, which impacts their overall academic performance (Mkandawire 2017). Reading development follows a consistent sequence influenced by learners' environments and experiences. Teachers should identify the stages of reading development in their learners and tailor their instruction accordingly (Cain et al. 2017). Effective comprehension strategy instruction involves selecting appropriate strategies, demonstrating their use, and guiding learners in their application. Understanding different text types and their structures is also essential for supporting learners' reading and writing skills across various genres (Behrens 2014).

With the above as background, the next section describes the research methodology followed to explore challenges posed by poor reading skills of Setswana-speaking learners in the Foundation Phase; some strategies incorporated by teachers to remediate the problem, and measures that can be taken to address the problem.

## Research design

The authors used a qualitative, contextual, and explorative research design in this study. This design was considered to be best in gathering useful knowledge and viewpoints as expressed by teachers who instruct learners directly in Setswana as their First Language (FL), normally referred to as HL, on a daily basis. They spoke for themselves and explained their perspectives using words and other non-verbal gestures. The approach was inductive, as it would give a clear understanding of the participants' views and capture their perceptions in their own words (Babbie 2015; Badenhorst & Van der Merwe 2017). The strategy of enquiry was a multiple case study design. These perspectives are presented in Table 1.

## Participants

Two primary schools (School A and School B) with Setswana as the LoLT situated in the Tlokwe sub-district in the NWP were selected as research sites. Two focus groups were conducted with ten Grade 3 teachers from the selected schools (five per school), taking into consideration the following characteristics: the teachers were in full-time employment by the North West Department of Education and the teachers were working with Foundation Phase Setswana-speaking learners. In addition, one Head of Department (DH) for the Foundation

Phase (DH-A and DH-B) was selected from each school. The participants' teaching experience varied, with the least experienced teacher (from School A) having two years of experience, while the most experienced teacher (from School B) had 34 years of teaching experience.

## Data analysis

To analyse and interpret the data, a qualitative data analysis process was followed in which the information was coded and categorised. After transcribing the data of each interview, meaningful analytical units, as described by Leedy and Ormrod (2021), were identified and coded to signify each particular segment. An external coder was assigned to verify data. The participants were identified as FGA-T1, (Focus group A- Teacher 1), FGB-T2 (Focus group B, Teacher 2), and so forth. The process of *in vivo* coding was followed, in which the same codes were reapplied to similar segments of the data. The data were then structured by categorising the codes and identifying the main themes and categories according to which the data were interpreted. The focus was on recurring themes that emerged from the reading of the verbatim transcripts. Leedy and Ormrod (2021) indicate that the task of interpreting data is to identify the *important* themes or meanings in the data, and not necessarily *every theme* (Badenhorst & Van der Merwe 2017).

## Ensuring validity of the research

The validity of any study must ensure alignment between the explanations of the phenomena being examined and

real-world conditions (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Ensuring trustworthiness is essential for establishing the reliability of qualitative findings. It involves key components such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Babbie 2015). The validity of qualitative research designs, therefore, involves the extent to which interpretations and concepts hold shared meaning for both the participant and the researcher. Both parties should agree on the description, composition, and, most importantly, the meaning of events (McMillan & Schumacher 2014). Table 2 outlines the strategies employed to enhance validity throughout the study (Badenhorst & Van der Merwe 2017).

## Ethical considerations

Ethical measures included obtaining permission from the Humanities Faculty Research Committee (No. HREIC SF 18/05/11/2024), the provincial Department of Education and the school principals to undertake the research before collecting the data. Similarly, informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all the prospective participants (teachers) after they had been informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, the risks, benefits, alternative procedures, and the measures implemented to ensure confidentiality (Badenhorst & Van der Merwe 2017; Creswell & Creswell 2018; Johnson & Christensen 2011). To ensure the protection and safekeeping of data obtained from interviews, data were encrypted and stored in secured computer files in compliance with the university's data management policy. As an added measure, personal identifiers were anonymised within the data to safeguard participants' privacy.

**TABLE 1:** A simplified scheme of the different perspectives, research strategy and data collection and analysis utilised in this study.

Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Data collection
Interpretivism	Reality can be comprehended and interpreted, but it cannot be predicted or controlled.	Knowledge emerges from observing and interpreting.	Interpretative inquiry: interviewing
Constructivism	Reality can only be understood by those who experience it firsthand.	Knowledge is built through the self-aware actions of individuals who are directly engaged in those actions.	Case study: personal narratives, lived experience in two nested settings

Source: Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D., 2018, *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, 5th edn., Sage, Los Angeles, CA.; Badenhorst, J. & Van der Merwe, R., 2017, 'Trial and error? An inquiry into implementing a "straight-for-English" approach with Foundation Phase students with inadequate English proficiency', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52(7), 1040–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616630994>

**TABLE 2:** Strategies to increase and enhance validity during data collection and analysis in the current study.

Strategy	Description
<b>Data collection</b>	
Participant language: accounts	Collected direct statements from participants, including verbatim accounts of lived experiences, transcripts, and information from documents.
Mechanically recorded data	Used digital recorders
Low-inference descriptions	Documented accurate and detailed descriptions of the participants and their context, supplemented with field notes and reflections immediately following each interview.
Non-participant observation	Observed alongside the interviewer (moderator) and took field notes on both verbal and non-verbal cues exhibited by participants.
Member checking and participant review	Participants received the researchers' synthesis of all interviews (Adapted from McMillan & Schumacher 2014:407–409)
<b>Data analysis</b>	
Avoiding subjective interpretation	The researchers strove to maintain objectivity during data analysis. Each researcher independently recorded their own field data to facilitate comparison later.
Coding of data	The researchers meticulously coded the data, which was then verified by an external coder. Generalisations were made with strict adherence to the data to substantiate any claims.
Avoidance of unsupported inferences	Data were not used selectively to falsely verify findings.
Avoiding unfair segregation of data	The researchers took measures to guard against their own expectations and preconceived notions regarding the research.
Avoiding subjective interpretation	Obtained verbatim accounts of lived experiences of participants.
Avoiding researcher bias	All steps in the data analysis process were verified by an external coder.

Source: Badenhorst, J. & Van der Merwe, R., 2017, 'Trial and error? An inquiry into implementing a "straight-for-English" approach with Foundation Phase students with inadequate English proficiency', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52(7), 1040–1056. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616630994>

## Results and discussion

### Research question 1

#### Which specific challenges are experienced by Grade 3 teachers when teaching reading skills to Setswana-speaking learners?

The main reading challenges identified by the participants related to reading without comprehension and meaning, reversal of words, ignoring punctuation marks, lack of decoding words, lack of assimilation, lack of phonemic awareness, and voluminous content.

DH-A was convinced that learners read without understanding. She argued that one of the biggest challenges is that learners can read aloud and pronounce words correctly but do not understand what they read. They read without comprehension, and she mentioned 'most of them with difficulties are those who reverses [*sic*] the letters, for example "b", "d" and "p" and they read aloud hesitantly word by word'. According to her, learners also tend to ignore punctuation, skipping full stops and commas, which further affects their understanding.

The above observation is consistent with the findings reported by Cain et al. (2017) and Rohde (2015) who argue that a learner who fails to comprehend words is normally one who fails to decode concepts and new words. Another reading challenge is posed by assimilation (previous knowledge). Cherry (2020) states that when learners undergo poor assimilation, they fail to process new information or experiences and find it difficult to read.

One of the Setswana learners gave the following example:

Speaking Setswana inside the classroom – now the phonemic and phonemic awareness can be the challenge, that it can be the cause. Remember, the learner must first hear the sound, after hearing the sound they must be able to pronounce. Pronunciation ... and he must be able to form the word. Now, after forming the word, this learner must be able to formulate the word to the sentence. Now, challenge can be the phonemic awareness, the hearing of sound. (FGA-T4)

This observation aligns with Rimensberger (2014), who noted that four decades of research demonstrate that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of early reading success, applicable to both HL and FAL contexts. According to Sebole et al. (2019), learners who have difficulty hearing sound modifications tend to read and write more slowly compared to those with strong phonemic awareness. Recognition of phonemes involves identifying and differentiating distinct sounds in spoken language (Mkandawire 2017). Georgiou (2021) explains that effective phoneme recognition relies on auditory discrimination, the ability to differentiate between similar sounds, and phonological awareness—all of which involve understanding the role of phonemes within words. Although the ability to distinguish between different speech sounds is something that everyone is born with, some learners, according to Rimensberger (2014), are more adept than others. The good news is that learners can all be trained to master this and teachers should be aware of how to achieve this.

Challenges related to curriculum requirements and assessment were also mentioned. One participant from School B (FGB-T4) emphasised the importance of appropriately tailoring the Grade 3 assessment to suit the learners' developmental stage and environment. He highlighted that expecting Grade 3 learners to write two paragraphs or compose a piece with a picture or specific topic might be overwhelming and unfair. The speaker expressed concern that such expectations could hinder the development of learners' talents rather than nurturing them.

### Research question 2

#### How are learners with reading problems identified and assisted?

Research consistently emphasises the importance of early identification of learners with reading problems (Friesen & Haigh 2018; Sebole et al. 2019). Failure to do that will result in learners falling behind, jeopardising their academic progress. Notably, Piaget's (1977) theory holds that all learners should be taught reading skills in such a way that, in later life, the majority are able to employ complicated, elevated thought processes, as their brains would have acquired a solid foundation of schema formation in any given circumstances. Rohde (2015) confirms that such solid schemas would help individual learners simplify their interface with the world.

Participants were of the opinion that the quickest strategy to identify a learner with reading challenges was to observe any isolated learner in the classroom during the reading lesson. Such learners normally struggle in, 'speaking and reading, ... because this learner cannot read' at all.

One participant (FGB-T1) discussed how a learner's reluctance to engage with a simple text may signal an underlying issue, 'the learner is not resisting, the learner is just afraid, the fear that I cannot do what I'm expected to be doing'. The speaker noted that this fear becomes evident when the learner attempts to write, as their written work often lacks coherence. They emphasised the interconnectedness of reading and writing, 'because reading and writing go hand in glove. So, the learner who struggles to read really cannot write something that has got really meaning and sense onto it'.

According to Clay's emergent literacy view, early literacy instruction is possible for all struggling learners who should be assisted to read and write (Rohde 2015) as long as this support strategy is applied correctly to differentiation and individualistic support of learners. By implication, teachers ought to be patient with them to apply the landmark notion of complementary instruction. Complementarity implies that the learners can read words from memory rather than using decoding, and analogy and prediction are possible. It refers to reading words such as 'thump' by analogy to 'jump' (Cain et al. 2017). This ability, however, is attained slowly.

DH-B argued that teachers ought to be cognisant of learners' age and different levels of reading abilities when engaged in reading instruction. Teachers need to select appropriate reading strategies for their learners. When identifying learners who read proficiently, teachers can choose texts that align with their reading levels:

Now, in Grade 3 when you see that this learner cannot be able to read their Grade 3 texts, now you choose the Grade 2 texts that suit their levels, so this learner can be able to read. And maybe, if you identify that this learner can read, now you move to the other level. (DH-B)

She emphasised that, for learners who struggle to read, starting with foundational phonics at an appropriate level is crucial until they achieve proficiency.

FGA-3 had a salient view with regard to learners' levels of reading abilities. She highlighted the varying abilities of learners in reading and comprehending text and cautioned that learners who struggle with understanding while reading are still in the process of learning and transitioning from basic reading skills to comprehending what they read, 'so, supplying them with plenty of vocabulary daily assists them to be able to read with understanding'.

For effective assessment of reading skills, educators should possess a comprehensive understanding of the stages involved in reading development, as well as the expected reading and vocabulary milestones across different grades within the Foundation Phase (DBE 2014). By the end of Grade 3, learners should have achieved proficient reading skills in both their HL and English, as subsequent education will be conducted primarily in English starting from Grade 4. Teachers must also be equipped to evaluate the various components of reading, which include phonological awareness, syllable recognition, listening comprehension, concepts of print, alphabetic familiarity, sound-letter associations, word recognition, morphological understanding, fluency, text comprehension, and vocabulary. As Rule and Land (2017) observe, educators need to discern which of these elements should be assessed in each grade of the Foundation Phase and how to address ongoing assessments for learners who may be lagging behind.

This notion strengthened Behrens' (2014) argument that it cannot be assumed that when learners read, they automatically comprehend the texts assigned to them to read. However, when learners eventually read successfully, a new world opens for them and this leads to mental freedom (Behrens 2014). The same view was advanced by FGB -T1, who said she 'would give them [*learners*] extra time to read and conduct one-on-one reading sessions with them'. This was corroborated by FGA-T4 who explained that she exposes her learners to various media such as newspapers, books, magazines, or even cartoons. She often assigned extra paragraphs or pieces of text to read at home to improve their reading skills. This measure concurs with Behrens (2014) who maintains that learners would fare better in their reading

when they understand why they have been dispensed a particular reading text and how they should respond to it. FGB-T3 also focused on, 'shared reading, group reading, then individual reading' and believed in giving extra reading work on phonics and simple texts for learners to read at home.

This observation aligns with Rimensberger (2014), who noted that four decades of research demonstrate that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of early reading success, applicable to both HL and FAL contexts. Learners who have difficulty hearing sound modifications tend to read and write more slowly compared to those with strong phonemic awareness (Rohde 2015). Recognition of phonemes involves identifying and differentiating distinct sounds in spoken language. Effective phoneme recognition requires auditory discrimination, which allows individuals to distinguish between similar sounds and phonological awareness, which involves understanding how phonemes function within words (Lee & Szczerbinski 2021).

Mkandawire (2017) conducted research to assess the educational benefits of using mother tongue-based instruction, which is familiar to learners, compared to other languages, for teaching reading and writing literacy skills to Grade 1 at the primary level. Based on the findings of the research, the author underlines the significance of introducing various kinds of text in this regard, observing that academic achievement depends on the capacity to read and write all school-based genres, including recounts, reports, procedures, explanations, discussions, and arguments. According to Mkandawire, it is crucial to integrate various kinds of text in literacy training from the start. In agreement with authors such as Compton (2023) and Miller (2019), Mkandawira emphasises that teachers must understand how informational texts differ from social texts in terms of text structure, vocabulary and the types of illustrations used. They must also understand the purpose, general text structure, and associated language features of each informational text type in order to support learners' reading and writing of different genres competently.

FGA-T2 was in favour of the use of basic alphabetic reading words from the prescribed reader; for example, he emphasised re-reading the vowels, A-E-I-O-U. He further suggested that visualisation was a better strategy for learners who struggle or have barriers in reading because:

[T]hey understand more by seeing pictures and if there is a ball concept presented, a picture of a ball ... must be available for learners to break down the word b-a-ll during conceptualisation.

FGB-T1 upheld the same view of charts or pictures during teaching to aid learners' conceptualisation. She said a one-on-one session is conducted with learners using a chart of letters of Setswana. Learners are first guided to read letters individually, maybe a-b, and then she identifies another letter to form a word – such as '*bah*' – then continues until they form a word using those letters.

These statements underline important implications for the orthography of the Setswana language, which has a consistent relationship between sounds and letters, making it easier for learners to decode and read words. Georgiou (2021) observes that, in a transparent orthography (in this case Setswana), these strategies emphasise a phonics-based approach to literacy instruction, which can have positive learning outcomes. It is also significant that both participants highlighted the importance of mastering foundational alphabetic principles, such as repeatedly practising vowels and letter-sound relationships (A-E-I-O-U), which helps learners build strong phonemic awareness.

The use of visual aids, such as pictures, also support learners who struggle with reading (Bakhtiar, Mokhlesin & Zang 2021). This is especially relevant in transparent orthographies, where breaking words into smaller units (e.g. 'b-a-ll') helps learners connect sounds with corresponding letters and meanings. The integration of visual representation, like a picture of a ball, enhances phonetic understanding and reinforces conceptual comprehension (Bakhtiar et al. 2021). Thus, phonics-based instruction proves effective in this context, helping learners decode words by first recognising individual letters and then combining them to form words (e.g. 'b-a-h'). Learners can consistently map letters to sounds, promoting smoother reading development.

### Research question 3

#### **What are the needs of Grade 3 teachers in terms of support from the Department of Basic Education to assist Setswana-speaking learners with poor reading skills?**

In view of Winberg et al. (2020), the priority of the DBE is to promote reading success since the majority of South African schools serve underprivileged, low SES communities and the marginalised. FGB-T1 was of the view that the department should provide schools with reading resources and offer reading skills training to teachers of all grades, as reading challenges do not start in Grade 3. She emphasised the need for more resources:

So more resources need to be provided and training skills, even if it comes to training the community to assist. Maybe they can initiate a programme like community works programme [CWP] or extended public works programme [EPWP], whereby they train youth of the community to assist these learners with reading. (FGB-T1)

FGB-T5 highlighted the importance of the DBE's ongoing programmes to promote early reading among learners. He mentioned programmes like the Reading Support Project (RSP) and similar initiatives that taught teachers basic skills to assist learners with reading, such as how to hold a book. He stressed the need for the Department to continue implementing such programmes. However, the majority of participants from both schools felt strongly that the training they receive is inadequate and superficial. FGA-T2 expressed concern and noted that, while the Department promotes inclusive education, it fails to adequately train educators to

effectively implement this policy. As a result, teachers often focus on learners who understand the material and neglect those who are struggling.

Brink (2017) warn that many teachers lack the knowledge and abilities to teach reading, using the reading strategies outlined in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) and that they frequently feel overwhelmed by the task. Furthermore, they lack the training to use adequate and differentiated reading approaches in the Foundation Phase classroom. Researchers such as Winberg et al (2020) and Manditereza (2014) confirm this when they emphasise that teachers lack (and need) training on methodical skills to promote effective reading. According to Pretorius et al. (2016), it is not unexpected that teachers have difficulty implementing these approaches because, typically, teacher development institutions do not incorporate them into their curricula. Furthermore, the DBE's distribution of workbooks, big books, posters and graded readers has left teachers feeling overburdened while they previously lacked the bare necessities for the classroom. The vast majority of teachers are not equipped to use these texts in a meaningful way and, as a result, they are unable to use the resources to inspire learners to read for pleasure or to read with meaning.

A significant finding highlighted by Manditereza (2014) is the absence of dedicated courses for teaching reading to Foundation Phase teachers in the entire country, both for potential and current teachers. The scarcity of research on reading, particularly in African languages like Setswana, was also mentioned in their study. This viewpoint was supported by empirical evidence, with participant FG2-T3 strongly expressing that there are few reading materials available in Setswana, along with limited resources. Consequently, there is a lack of enthusiasm among teachers when it comes to teaching reading instruction. Many South African Foundation Phase teachers currently teach reading in an ad-hoc and unsystematic manner, lacking essential knowledge, including phonemic awareness both in teachers and learners as argued by Brink (2017), Murray (2016), and Spaul (2013).

In response to what needs they would bring to the attention of the Minister of Basic Education should they ever have the opportunity, DH-A suggested creating a project to support learners' reading at home, acknowledging that many parents are illiterate. Alternatively, she proposed training community youth through reading programmes like the Community Works Programme (CWP) and the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) at schools or local areas. This would not only help learners improve their reading but also create job opportunities. This view was fully supported by participants from both focus groups. FGA-T5 underscored the importance of assigning dedicated reading coaches to schools. She emphasised that these coaches are essential for guiding teachers, particularly in understanding and implementing group-guided reading and shared reading as outlined in the CAPS document.

FGA-T5 remarked: 'Teachers need mentors within schools to assist them with these reading methods. And the coaches must be from the Department of Education, not from the NGO's [*non-government organisations*]'.

DH-B was particularly vocal about the volume of work required by the Foundation Phase CAPS. She noted that Grade 3 learners are very young and still learning often through play. She pointed out that the support materials provided to schools contain too much content for young learners:

We find the learners and the teachers being frustrated by too much content because work is allocated weekly. This is what they do per week and then, without even mastering, the teachers have to cover the particular content without sufficient time for mastery. (DH-B)

## Conclusion

The implicit aim of the study was to explore the reading instruction challenges faced by selected Setswana-speaking Foundation Phase teachers in two selected schools in a NWP education district in South Africa, how participants identify and address reading difficulties, and their support needs. Several main challenges in reading among learners were identified, including reading without comprehension, reversing words, ignoring punctuation marks, and lacking skills in decoding words. The research emphasised the importance of teacher training on reading instruction and how the availability of resources, or lack thereof, impacts the instructional complexities of teaching learners with reading barriers. The findings highlight the need for education authorities to understand the challenging circumstances faced by rural schools and their teaching staff on a daily basis.

It is important to note that the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other Foundation Phase teachers, as generalisation was not the intended goal. The focus on two schools within a specific district, limited the participants' experiences to the context of those schools and their experiences may not be applicable to teachers in other primary schools with different working conditions. Therefore, the factors and dynamics specific to the target schools may not necessarily be applicable to other societies and schools in different provinces. It is crucial to acknowledge that the research design employed in this study was qualitative and followed a case study approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of poor reading skills within a specific context.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers suggest recommendations in more detail in the next sub-sections.

### Recommendations for teachers

Teachers are encouraged to actively participate in lesson study, a collaborative approach to professional development

that has proven effective in enhancing teaching practices and improving learner outcomes. In this method, educators form small groups to collaboratively plan, observe, and analyse lessons. This process facilitates reflection on teaching strategies and continuous improvement through peer feedback.

In addition to embracing lesson study, teachers should also take ownership of their professional development by organising peer workshops. Although external support from the DBE is valuable, it may not always address every challenge or keep pace with evolving educational trends. By forming small, informal groups within their schools or among neighbouring schools, teachers can regularly workshop topics of importance such as subject-specific strategies. They can exchange ideas on effective approaches from their own classrooms, offer hands-on solutions, and provide practical advice.

The integration of technology into teaching practices is also crucial for modern classrooms. Teachers should explore and adopt various technological tools to enhance learning experiences. Digital collaboration platforms, such as Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams, enable teachers to share resources and communicate more efficiently. By leveraging technology, teachers can improve learner engagement, streamline administrative tasks, and dedicate more time to meaningful instruction.

To remain competitive with global educational trends, teachers should seek out best practices from international schools known for their excellence, such as those in Finland, Singapore, or New Zealand. This can be achieved by researching international teaching frameworks, and connecting with educators from other countries through online platforms. These strategies provide opportunities to learn about cutting-edge practices and innovations in teaching, allowing teachers to adapt successful models to their local context.

### Recommendations for the Department of Basic Education

Continuous and improved training opportunities should be provided to teachers to enhance their confidence and address any content knowledge gaps, particularly in Setswana.

There is a dire need for the DBE and district offices to provide adequate resources. The provision of libraries would expose learners to a wider range of literature and foster a love for books.

Recognising the content knowledge gaps among teachers identified in previous studies, the development of standard guidelines for effective reading instruction is recommended.

In conclusion, the reading proficiency of learners in South Africa is very complex, and no 'quick fix' is available. Considering that the majority of South African learners



struggle with reading, writing and mathematical skills at Grade-appropriate levels, and many are functionally illiterate and innumerate, improving instructional reading to address poor performance has become a crucial priority for the country. This is essential for the country to be on par globally, as demonstrated by participation in international tests of achievement.

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### Data availability

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

### Disclaimer

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