Whopping low reading literacies in South Africa: are we surprised? lessons from Limpopo province

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Reading is a dynamic and complex process which takes years for learners to learn. Without the acquisition of reading skills for comprehension and decoding, it is near impossible for learners to proceed successfully with further learning. Studies show that learners without skills to read for meaning cannot continue with their studies and, therefore, drop out of school. The results from the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) paint an extremely gloomy picture, namely, that the ability of learners in Grades 4 to 6 in South Africa to read for meaning has deteriorated to 81% from 78% in the 2016 PIRLS, the lowest of all countries that participated in the survey. The purpose of this study was to investigate the factors causing South African learners to perform abysmally in the PIRLS and Annual National Assessments. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, and an interview schedule was used to collect data. Eight primary school teacher-librarians who attended the community engagement project organised by the researcher were interviewed telephonically to get in-depth data. The findings indicate that there are myriad and multifaceted factors that contribute to low reading literacies among learners. The majority of schools, particularly those in disadvantaged rural communities, lack well-resourced and staffed libraries to enhance the development and acquisition of reading habits and skills in learners. Furthermore, with high poverty levels in the country, the majority of households cannot afford to buy materials for leisure reading to develop and instill a reading culture in children. The study recommends collaborations among the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Arts and Culture and private sector companies to turn the tide. Failure to transform the patterns would result in high dropout rate, failure rate, and even unemployment rate, as well as crime rate in the future.

Keywords: reading, reading materials, school libraries, PIRLS results, learners, literacy, South Africa

1 Introduction and background to the study

Burns (2006: 1) states that "reading is a complex process that takes several years to learn, and the more advanced aspects of reading, such as analysis or synthesis of ideas, takes several years more." It is a skill or competency that learners must acquire in the earlier stages of their development to acquire information and knowledge essential for them to pursue and further their studies (Mojapelo 2020). The National Reading Barometer (2023: 1) states that:

> Reading gives us power – to learn new things, tell our stories, and shape our futures. It helps build a stronger, more equal economy and a connected society. It improves educational outcomes, economic opportunities, critical thinking abilities, empathy, civic engagement, and child-adult relationships.

People can only read when they are exposed to adequate reading materials. It is indisputable reality that people can develop reading habits and culture only when they have equitable access to the diverse information sources in different formats. In a school situation, learners without the ability to read for meaning cannot comprehend or decode what they have read. Learners without these essential skills are unable to proceed with their studies. While reading is a skill like other skills, Spaull, Pretorius and Mohohlwane (2018: 1) maintain that "reading is the skill that all other skills depend on". That implies that the acquisition of rudimentary reading skills is a prerequisite or scaffold for learners to acquire other skills. Without the acquisition of reading as a skill, it would be extremely difficult for learners to acquire other skills. Learners without the ability to read for meaning normally fail and eventually drop out of school, increasing the drop-out rate. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2022a: 3) highlights that:

> The school dropout rate is of particular concern because students who drop out of school prematurely will experience a lack of access to higher education, fewer job opportunities and lower wages than their peers who finished their schooling.

Spaull et al. (2018: 1) confirm as follows:

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> Learning to read for meaning is the most important skill that children learn in primary school. If a child cannot read well, then they will not be able to do well in any subject at school; they will not be able to pass matric or get a well-paying job.

As skills are not biologically inherited, they must be taught and acquired. In the didactic situation, literacy teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to teach learners to develop and acquire requisite reading, numeracy and writing skills. However, a number of contextual factors are indispensable for the development of reading habits and skills and the advancement of a reading culture, particularly among learners. Chetty (2019) states that "key factors for literacy underachievement include lack of resources, parental support, lack of teacher knowledge, changes in the curriculum, absence of cognitive activities and the social complexity of poverty." A plethora of information sources and a conducive space or environment are some of the prerequisites for learners to develop reading habits, to acquire reading skills and to develop a reading culture. Stent (2023:1) states that:

> Fewer primary school children cannot read for meaning now than before the COVID pandemic, and most children entering grade two do not know the alphabet. But despite a literacy crisis, there is no national reading plan, no proper budget, no accurate reporting, and no progress on implementing vital interventions.

2 Reading literacies and apartheid Bantu education in South Africa

Burns (2006: 1) states that "readers come from a multiplicity of backgrounds, with divergent levels of knowledge, verbal skills, motivation, and reasoning abilities." This is even more true for South Africans who experienced apartheid system in all spheres from1948 to 1994. Nowicki (2019: 1) states that "South Africa has one of the worst literacy rates in the world as well as the continent. Even African countries with a far lower gross yearly income have better literacy rates." With an adult literacy rate of 87%, South Africa is generally ranking lower than other developing countries such as Mexico and Brazil (Khuluve 2022). A number of contextual factors are relevant to this, for example, in previous times, people were encouraged to learn to write and read only to be able to write letters to their loved ones who were working in Johannesburg, far away from disadvantaged rural communities. Yet, it is indisputable that literacy acquisition is an essential element for the broader socio-economic development of nations. Khuluvhe (2022: 2-3) states that:

> Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. It measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

> A functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and for enabling her/him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for her/his own and the community's development.

However, according to Nkosi (2021), only 6% of the South Africa population has university degrees compared with countries such as France (18%), Finland (24.3%), Australia (31.4%), the United Kingdom (33.9%) and Belgium (34.7%) that have much higher proportions of adults with degrees. It is worth mentioning that South Africa performs better compared with other African countries such as Burundi (0.9%), Mozambique (1.8%), Senegal (2.8%) and Zimbabwe (3.3%). In South Africa, the majority of older blacks are functionally illiterate because they did not receive the formal education necessary for them to acquire reading, writing, and calculating skills. Consequently, illiteracy among older black adults may be high in South Africa partly because of the oppressive, discriminatory laws and policies associated with the apartheid education system prior to 1994.

According to Chetty (2019: 1), "literacy development is 'situated'; it occurs in and through children's interactions in their homes, communities, and school settings (Reid et al. 2004), and is a complex process influenced by culture, language, and socioeconomic factors". In South Africa, child literacy statistics are even lower, with around a third of children in the country being illiterate. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016: 1) note that "the widespread low performance of South African learners on literacy assessments is by now well documented". It is a stark reality that primary school learners perform poorly in reading, writing and numeracy in comparative and standardised international and national assessments. The 2016 PIRLS results indicate that Grade 4 learners could not reach the low international benchmark because they were unable to locate and retrieve explicitly stated information or make straightforward inferences about events and reasons for actions, which is a huge hurdle for the learners to continue with their studies (Howie et al. 2017).

The 2021 PIRLS results (see Figure 1) paint an even gloomier picture in that the reading literacies of learners from Grades 4 to 6 have deteriorated to 81% from 78% in the 2016 PIRLS results. The country continues to present the lowest performance in any language, including learners' home languages, of all countries that took part in the survey (DBE 2023).

StatsSA (2022a: 7) documents that "the early childhood development (ECD) phase was particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions. Since some ECD programmes remained closed, parents preferred to keep their children at home. Non-attendance of school increased from age 15 and was the highest among 18-year-olds." Although Covid-19 is blamed for the loss of learning in South Africa, the truth is that all countries, and as such all learners, were affected by the pandemic. The DBE (2023: 4) reports as follows:

> For South Africa, the PIRLS 2021 study reveals very low performance levels on learners' ability to read for meaning as they turn 10. South Africa, at 288 score points, performed significantly below the PIRLS centre point of 500. Singapore (587) was the highest performing country. All African countries performed below the international average.
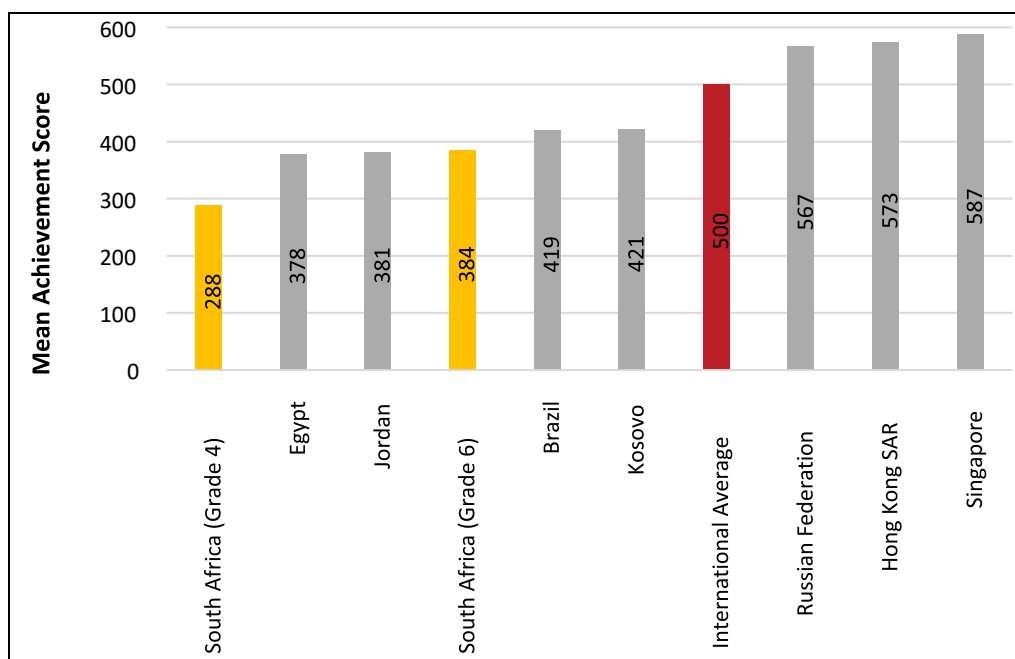
Figure 1: South African Grade 4 and 5 achievements compared to other PIRLS countries (Source: DBE 2023:4)

The results clearly indicate that reading is not taken seriously in African countries. In the mostly rural provinces of South Africa such as Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, the results are even more appalling owing to inadequate provision of well-equipped and functional community and school libraries. The 2021 PIRLS results further reflect that Grade 4 learners are faring poorly even in their home languages, with Setswana affected the worst as far as learners' reading skills are concerned (DBE 2023).

The 2021 PIRLS results corroborate the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) conducted by the DBE which indicate that most learners in Grades 1 to 3 cannot read and write proficiently – even in their own African languages. Abject poverty in the majority of black households, along with the remnants of the apartheid education system from 1948 to 1994, are to blame for this anomaly. Spaull (2015: 34) argues that:

> Learners who cannot read fluently by the end of Grade 4 cannot engage with the rest of the curriculum in meaningful ways. This is primarily because in Grades 1 to 3, the curriculum focuses on "learning to read", whereas, from Grade 4 onwards, it focuses on "reading to learn."

As observed by Spaull (2018), "there is an ongoing crisis in South African education, and the current system is failing the majority of South Africa's youth." It is critical to acknowledge the root cause of the literacy crisis in South Africa. In South Africa, the apartheid ideologies and philosophies and its ramifications for the entire education system have been well-documented even before 1994 when the new, democratic government came to power.

When the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 under D.F. Malan, apartheid was born in the country where the population was divided into four distinct groups, namely, blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians. To enforce racial segregation and discrimination in the country, an avalanche of Acts such as Bantu Education Act 1953 (No. 47 of 1953), Group Areas Act 1950 (No. 41 of 1950) and Reservation and Separate Amenities Act 1953 (No 49 of 1953) were promulgated by the apartheid regime with disastrous consequences for the nation (Giliomee et al. 2022). Soudien (2002: 211) states that "the year in which the Bantu Education Act was passed 1953, stands out as the founding moment of the apartheid government's separate education policy." As a result of this Act, all educational institutions such as schools and

universities were based on racial lines. Skin colour was used to divide the citizens. Bantu Education Act of 1953 advocated and guaranteed compartmentalisation of education along racial lines. Black learners in particular were destined and subjected to the inferior education so that they could be cheap labourers in companies or factories headed by their white counterparts. In his principles to make determinations, the native affairs minister, H.F. Verwoerd stated that:

> The Bantu must be guided to serve his own community in all respects because there is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour (Simpson 2021, 148).

Giliomee et al. (2022: 458) state that:

> In 1953 the government took control of black education. It was keen to eliminate the church and mission schools whose teachers mostly rejected the apartheid policy and had extended English influence. The assumption of control went hand in hand with a major extension of inferior mass education to blacks.

To achieve its mission, the government funding for black learners was the lowest of all other racial groups to offer them inferior quality education without adequate educational resources. Giliomee et al., (2022: 45) state that 'bantu education suffered from inadequate funding' for black schools to afford to buy only chalkboards and chalks. "Although a few mission schools provided good education, the overall state of black education was extremely poor… without adequate educational resources such as libraries" (Giliomee et al. 2022: 45). Under these Acts (Bantu Education Act, Group Areas Act and Reservation and Separate Amenities Act), it was unthinkable for black and white learners to attend school together. As stated by Mboya (1993: 76), kind of schooling offered to black learners during apartheid (1948 to 1994) did not "guarantee them the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the socio-politico-economic realities of South Africa." To ensure inferior quality education, Mboya (1993, 85) states that "because there were no reading facilities or well-stocked libraries with relevant books in the Black communities, there is generally a low interest in reading. … books written by the oppressors describe the development of the Black child, if it is mentioned at all, in an appendix or as a symbol of deprivation". Even in the new political dispensation, only 7% of the schools have well-resourced and functional school libraries. In Limpopo province, with only 2% of the schools with functional school libraries, the situation can even be more appalling (Mojapelo 2014).

During apartheid South Africa, lack of public and school libraries in the homelands reserved for blacks exasperated low reading literacies of learners and their teachers. Even today (2023), huge backlogs in the provision of community libraries in provinces which are made up of two or three homelands speak a volume. It implies that majority of the black learners do not have equitable access to the reading materials and consequently lack reading habits, skills, and culture. It is unfortunate situation that lack of adequate information resources in black schools continues to contribute to the low literacy levels of both teachers and learners even in the post-apartheid South Africa. It is astonishing that, even in the new democratic dispensation, the majority of poor schools in disadvantaged rural communities are still information-poor environments (Strand & Britz 2018) not conducive for effective reading, teaching and learning.

3 Problem statement

Reading is a rudimentary or basic skill that learners should acquire in the early stages of their development to continue with their studies. Without the acquisition of this indispensable skill, it is very difficult for learners to acquire other skills. It is not an innate skill and must, therefore, be taught for learners to acquire the knowledge and information essential for learning. Reading increases the vocabulary of learners and also stimulates their cognitive structures and abilities. However, a plethora of information sources in diverse formats and a conducive environment, among other things, are essential contextual factors to inculcate reading habits among and reading skills in learners.

Unfortunately, the results of the 2021 PIRLS indicate that 81% of learners in Grades 4 to 6 in South Africa cannot read for meaning (DBE 2023). That means that this cohort of learners lacks comprehension and decoding skills to understand what has been read, which poses a hurdle for these learners to continue with their studies, and they normally drop out of school. The Zenex Foundation (2022: 3) observes that:

> Despite more than two decades of efforts to improve the quality of literacy performance in South Africa, the inability of children to read remains an endemic problem. South Africa's development agenda cannot succeed unless learning to read and write for meaning is placed at the centre of this agenda.

4 Purpose and objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate the factors that contribute towards low reading literacies in South African schools. The study was guided by the following objective:

- To determine the factors that contribute towards low reading literacies in learners in South African primary schools.

5 Literature review

Various information sources were consulted to underpin the study and various socioeconomic factors that lead to reading backlogs or gaps in the entire reading ecosystem, which lead to literacy underachievement in schools, were identified as discussed below:

5.1 School libraries

School libraries are hubs for teachers and learners to meet the objectives of the curriculum of the day. Universally, well-resourced, and staffed school libraries are places enhancing literacy development. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2015: 16) states that:

> A school library is a school's physical and digital learning space where reading, inquiry, research, thinking, imagination, and creativity are central to students' information-to-knowledge journey and to their personal, social, and cultural growth. This physical and digital place is known by several terms (e.g., school media centre, centre for documentation and information, library resource centre, library learning commons) but *school library* is the term most commonly used and applied to the facility and functions.

However, 29 years into the new political dispensation in South Africa, only very few (7%) schools in the country, which are mostly former Model C schools, have well-resourced and staffed libraries. That could be regarded as a legacy of apartheid rule from 1948 to 1994. The situation in mostly rural provinces such as Limpopo, where only 2% of the schools have well-resourced and staffed libraries, is even direr (Mojapelo 2014). According to the IFLA (2015: 15), one of the roles of the school library is to enhance reading:

> Reading and literacy capabilities – abilities and dispositions related to the enjoyment of reading, reading for pleasure, reading for learning across multiple platforms, and the transformation, communication, and dissemination of text in its multiple forms and modes to enable the development of meaning and understanding.

As such, school libraries should exist to provide learners with access to a variety of information sources in diverse formats. Lack of such thus partly explains why provinces such as Limpopo are faring poorly relating to reading advancement and Grade 12 results. Tilvawala, Myers and Diaz (2009) relate the poor performance of secondary learners in developing countries such as Kenya to poor school library environment and lack of necessary information literacy development. This implies that the lack of well-resourced and functional school libraries and poorly established libraries are detrimental to the literacy level of learners in schools. They further state that the non-availability of diverse library resources may force learners to read only what they are taught in the classroom deterring their literacy development. According to the IFLA (2015: 15), one of the roles of the school library is to enhance reading:

> Reading and literacy capabilities – abilities and dispositions related to the enjoyment of reading, reading for pleasure, reading for learning across multiple platforms, and the transformation, communication, and dissemination of text in its multiple forms and modes to enable the development of meaning and understanding.

For this role to be achieved, learners need to have access to a plethora of the information sources in diverse formats.

5.2 Dedicated and knowledge school libraries

Manpower is critical for the effective management of a school library and dedicated and professionally qualified librarians are essential to manage resources (Paton-Ash & Wilmot 2015). The IFLA (2015, 8) argues that "school library services and programmes should be under the direction of a professional school librarian with formal education in school librarianship and classroom teaching". The IFLA (2015: 8) further notes that "school librarians work with administrators and teachers to develop policies that guide the creation and maintenance of the library's collection of educational materials." Zorica (2022: 2) states that "they encourage critical thinking and creativity, and, in their work, they must demonstrate excellent communication skills, computer competence and pedagogical approach".

However, in South Africa, lack of DBE positions for school librarians at both the national and provincial levels impedes the ability of schools to have effective and functional school library and information services (Shonhe 2019). The IFLA (2015) states that:

> The most important role in the work of school libraries is played by the school librarians. They encourage critical thinking and creativity, and, in their work, they must demonstrate excellent communication skills, computer competence and a

pedagogical approach. In the 21st century, school librarians must follow the trends of their profession, while also educating students and others about the school library.

In Limpopo, although new school buildings are constructed that make provision for library spaces, lack of dedicated and qualified librarians prevents the available library spaces from being functional. Some schools consequently use such library spaces for other purposes, for example, as extra staff rooms.

5.3 Community libraries

In cases where well-resourced and staffed school libraries are non-existent, community or public libraries are mandated to provide users, including learners, with a wide variety of reading and learning materials. However, there is a backlog of 2 732 community libraries in South Africa (Department of Arts and Culture 2018). In Limpopo specifically, there is a backlog of 200 community libraries, which means that the majority of disadvantaged rural citizens still operate without such facilities. Without access to community libraries, citizens do not have access to information for socioeconomic development. Without community libraries, learners do not have access to storytelling activities that would encourage reading. Without community libraries, teachers cannot access block loans of reading materials for use by learners in schools. That makes it difficult for learners to develop the information literacy and reading skills that are essential for life-long and independent learning.

The apartheid government contributed to uneven provision of community libraries in South Africa. In the homelands which were reserved for blacks from 1948 to 1994, there were no community libraries (Laishley & Zinn 2015). Well-resourced and staffed libraries were in the white communities where blacks were barred from going to because of the notorious Group Areas Act 41 of 1950 and pass laws, which enforced racial zoning of people (Giliomee et al. 2022). Another act was the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 49 of 1953 that enforced racial segregation concerning public premises, vehicles, and services. That meant that black learners were barred from using library facilities in advantaged, white communities reserved for white learners (Giliomee et al. 2022).

5.4 Family libraries

Family libraries can play a significant role in the development and acquisition of reading habits and skills in children. Money is essential to purchase a wide variety of reading materials to instill reading habits and a reading culture in children in the home. However, owing to high unemployment and poverty levels, poor citizens cannot afford to purchase diverse leisure reading materials for their children negatively contributing to poor or low literacy levels (Seekings & Nattrass 2015).

5.5 Storytelling at home

In the olden days, parents used to tell their children stories around the fireplace at night (Ngoepe. Maluleka & Shekgola 2021). As such, children learnt different themes from the different stories narrated by their parents. However, since the advent of television and other electronic gadgets such as smartphones in South Africa, parents no longer tell their children stories because they watch the news and 'soapies' (Mojapelo 2020). That results in children no longer enjoying opportunities to learn from storytelling.

Storytelling can also stimulate and motivate children to read stories from books. It can furthermore encourage children to love books. In a didactic situation, storytelling is a teaching and learning weapon that teachers can use to inculcate reading habits and skills in learners (Mojapelo 2020). In Limpopo, there are few community libraries in disadvantaged rural communities where learners can attend story telling events (Mojapelo 2014).

5.6 Poverty and unemployment

Seekings and Nattrass ((2015) aver that poverty and unemployment affect the lives of citizens negatively. It is indisputable that poor people cannot afford to buy a wide range of reading materials for leisure reading. The high rate of youth unemployment in South Africa (62.1%) means that most youth cannot afford to buy reading materials to enhance their reading skills (StatsSA 2022b). On the other hand, unemployed poor parents cannot afford to buy leisure reading materials for their children. That makes the development and acquisition of reading habits and skills challenging in the home environment.'

5.7 Illiterate parent

According to Khuluvhe (2022: 2),

> South Africa has a high level of illiteracy, which cannot be viewed independently of the apartheid policies that were in place prior to democratization in 1994, inseparable from the developed–developing context of the country. The implications of apartheid were far reaching (sic) and served to entrench inequalities and poverty along racial and gender lines.

In South Africa, adult illiteracy was at 10.5% in 2021, with women at 11.3% and men at 9.6%. (Khuluvhe 2023). The higher illiteracy rate among women is regrettable as women are more directly responsible to raise children; as such, literate women would have the potential to teach their children how to read and write. Illiteracy among parents hence partly explains why so many children cannot read and write at appropriate levels. Not being readers themselves, illiterate parents are also unable to encourage their children to embrace reading to acquire reading habits and skills. "In 2021, KwaZulu-Natal was home to the largest number of illiterate adults in South Africa (918 935), followed by the Eastern Cape (567 624) and Limpopo (508 239)" (Khuluvhe 2023: 6). That implies that the majority of learners who cannot read and write find themselves in mostly rural provinces. It is noteworthy that these provinces incorporated two to three prior homelands reserved for blacks during the apartheid era, resulting in such areas being disadvantaged and marginalised (Giliomee et al. 2022).

5.8 Literacy teachers
In a school setting, language or literacy teachers are responsible for teaching learners how to read. It stands to reason that they must have good reading and writing skills themselves to teach learners how to read and write effectively. However, in South Africa more than 50% of the cohort of teachers schooled during the apartheid era coming from schools in information-poor environments. Consequently, they are not ardent readers themselves and one wonders how they can teach learners to read. Spaull (2018) states that Foundation Phase teachers (Grades 1-3) do not know how to systematically teach reading; the poorest schools in the country are extremely text-poor and there is wasted learning time during the school day. That would suggest that that cohort of teachers need training or workshops on how to teach learners to read. The DBE, therefore, has a responsibility to ensure that such teachers are capacitated to teach learners to read effectively.

5.9 Book clubs
The establishment of book clubs is essential to encourage even reluctant learners to read (Boloka 2020). However, that is a wanting practice, especially in disadvantaged rural communities, which means that learners residing in such areas miss out on environments providing opportunities where they can be encouraged, as well as motivated by their peers, to read.

5.10 Transition from mother tongue instruction to English
Totemeyer (2023: 3) states that:

> The development of a reading culture in any country is largely determined by demographic and socio-linguistic factors. Socio-economic factors also play an important role and sometimes political factors as well. The official language policy adopted for a country at large, and more specifically for the schools, decisively influences the reading proficiency and reading behaviour of society. This in turn has ramifications not only for literacy and the culture of reading, but also for the publishing industry.

With 11 official languages, South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country. However, the DAC (2003) states that English is a language used in government, courts of law, education, business, and the media. In accordance with DBE language policy, learners should be taught in their home languages. However, while learners in Grades 1 to 3 in South Africa are taught in their African languages as languages of teaching and learning, black learners are mostly subjected to switching over to English from Grade 4 onward. English language remains a dominant language in South Africa because the country was a British colony which means that colonial legacy is still lingering in the country detrimental to the teachers and learners who struggle to teach and learn in this language which is not their mother tongue. Although the Language in Education policy stresses multilingualism, African languages are still marginalised deterring their linguistic development (Ngoepe, Shaku & Letsoalo 2022). As English is a foreign language and not their mother tongue, learners naturally struggle to learn using it. Spaull et al. (2018) states that:

> The sobering reality is that because many children are quickly pushed into learning in a new language (English), and this is a major factor contributing to their low academic success. The negative effects of early illiteracy cascade to adversely affect the development of cognitive skills and later educational development.

Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016: 2) argue that, "given that the majority of learners in South Africa do their schooling through a language that is not their home language, it is natural to posit language as a factor for poor comprehension, especially in First Additional Language (FAL) reading."

In South Africa, learners whose mother tongues are either Afrikaans or English, on the other hand, do not experience this transition because they continue to use their home languages throughout their schooling. That partly explains why the majority of black learners are unable to read for meaning in Grades 4 to 6.

5.11 Reading material in African languages

Learners need to read in their indigenous languages before they master to read in foreign languages such as Afrikaans and English. However, in South Africa, lack of reading materials in African languages which are "not economically viable" is well-documented hindering the development and acquisition of reading habits and skills necessary to continue with their studies (Totemeyer 2013: 8).

5.12 Internet and digital infrastructure

The advent of telecommunications and information technology has made digital or online reading possible. Online readers use smartphones, computers, laptops, and tablets to access online reading materials. However, robust digital infrastructure is indispensable for learners to access online reading materials and, unfortunately, unstable internet connectivity remains problematic in the disadvantaged rural communities of South Africa. In this regard, the National Reading Barometer (2023: 6) reports that "digital reading has grown significantly, although access remains unequal, and many readers still prefer paper".

5.13 High data costs

Because readers are migrating from print to online reading, data costs should be affordable to allow them to access online reading materials. But South Africa is known for high data costs, which makes data unaffordable for most readers because of high unemployment and poverty levels.

6 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, and an interview schedule was used to collect data from teacher-librarians of primary schools in the Lebopo Circuit, Mankweng Cluster, Limpopo. During a workshop in the school library, which formed part of a community engagement project organised by the researcher, eight of the 18 teacher-librarians were interviewed telephonically to collect in-depth data. Because all the schools were in quintiles 1 to 3 (Van Dyk & White 2019) meaning that they are located in disadvantaged rural communities, interviewing eight participants only was deemed sufficient for data collection. Convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants. The participants were assigned codes to ensure anonymity.

7 Presentation and discussion of findings

Qualitative data collected from the participants were used to generate themes to present the findings. Duplication of the data from the participants was avoided as far as possible in presenting findings.

When asked to indicate what they thought contributed to low reading literacies in the country, the participants responded as follows:

7.1 Inadequate reading materials

Participant A:

> There is no library at this school. Despite lack of library reading materials, our outdated CAPS reading books are not enough. We make photocopies for the learners to read at home. Learners do not respect photocopies and they damage them easily. There are inadequate reading materials in African languages necessary for the beginners before they can read on other languages such as English and Afrikaans.

Participant C:

> As our school does not have a central school library, the DBE officials encourage us to establish the reading corners. There are no library reading materials at this school. We use only workbooks for the learners to encourage learners to read.

Participant E:

> Security is a huge challenge at our schools. Our school was vandalised several times over the years and computers and photocopiers were all stolen. There are no security guards at the school. There are also no electronic security systems. Thieves break in and steal what they want. The school managed to buy only three laptops recently and we take them home for safekeeping.

Participant F:

> Unfortunately, there are no community libraries nearby. We cannot do block loans of reading materials to augment our few reading materials as our community library is some kilometres away.

From the findings, it is clear that most of the schools, particularly in disadvantaged rural communities, lack well-resourced and staffed libraries and adequate reading materials to encourage learners to read. As observed by Mojapelo and Dorudolu (2022), the majority of the schools in Limpopo even lack adequate information and communication technologies such as computer networks, tablets and smartphones for online reading. Reading, therefore, remains a huge challenge caused by inadequate reading materials and resources in schools and most community libraries are far away located geographically. Vandalism is also a challenge as security measures are non-existent in most schools.

7.2 Illiteracy among parents or guardians and in child-headed families
Participant D:

> *Illiterate parents cannot teach and support their children to read. Very few parents teach and support their children to read. As most young parents are working in Gauteng, most learners come from child-headed families without reading support. Some children are orphans, while their guardians are illiterate.*

Participant C:

> *Very few parents can read and write, and they lack motivation to encourage their children to read. Some parents only come to school to complain when their children have failed. We also see them when they are collecting reports.*

The findings indicate clearly that illiterate parents are a stumbling block in encouraging and motivating learners to read and write. Because teachers alone cannot teach learners to read and write, parents have a pivotal role to play in supporting their children in that regard. Learners from literate families can read and write better than learners with illiterate parents.

7.3 Age cohort
Participant A:

> *In this country, learners cannot fail twice in a particular phase. It means that even Foundation Phase learners who do not know how to read are promoted to the Intermediate Phase. How will they read for meaning in Grade 4 when they did not learn basic reading skills in [the] Foundation Phase? This is a problem that we are faced with. Even learners with mental challenges are promoted to the next grades even if they cannot read.*

Participant B:

> *This is the huge challenge because even learners who did not master how to write and read cannot be in a phase twice because of this age cohort rule or principle. Learners pass even when they do not know the letters of the alphabet. The problem goes into the next class and most of these learners, unfortunately, do not cope. Even in the Senior Phase, some Grade 8 and 9 learners cannot read as they lacked a foundation. In the Intermediate Phase, there is no time to teach learners how to read because of subject teaching and the increased high number of subjects.*

Participant E:

> *In [the] Intermediate Phase, because of subject teaching and more subjects, it is a challenge because teachers are concentrating on the work output [rather] than teaching learners to read. We are rushing to cover up the syllabus.*

Participant F:

> *To avoid high failure rate, learners are pushed into the next classes at the DBE offices. Even some parents are condoning this trend when collecting reports for the kids. No parent wants to see her child failed.*

In compliance with and the implementation of the age cohort policy of the DBE, teachers have no other option but to promote or condone even learners who failed to master the letters of the alphabet in the Foundation Phase. That is the reason why learners reach the Intermediate and Senior Phases without mastering reading. How can that cohort of learners read for meaning in the Intermediate Phase if they did not learn to read in the Foundation Phase?

7.4 Inclusive education

Participant D:

> *Learners with mental challenges are allowed into mainstream schools instead of [attending] the learners with special education needs (LSEN) schools. They are not coping at all. Unfortunately, some parents are in denial that that their children have mental challenges.*

Participant F:

> *We are not trained to teach learners with mental challenges how to read. Unfortunately, some parents send their children with mental challenges to our school, and we cannot segregate them. Teachers in LSEN schools are in a unique position to understand and teach these learners with mental challenges.*

Participant H:

> *To accommodate learners with mental challenges, we are encouraged to use other assessments. Oral assessments are used particularly for learners with mental challenges at the expense of the reading and writing assessments. [This] cohort of learners [does] not bother to read or write. Some learners even refuse to talk and unfortunately all forms of punishments are forbidden.*

While inclusive education is a step in the right direction to do away with segregation of learners, it cannot be taken for granted that teaching and learning (education) is the same for LSEN learners as for learners in mainstream schools. From the findings, it is clear that teachers in mainstream schools do not have the capacity and skills to teach learners with mental challenges to read and write. With the assistance of the educational psychologists at circuit or district offices, such learners could be identified easily so that they could receive the necessary attention from teachers trained and qualified in handling them. Unwavering support of the parents during the remedial process is crucial and denial by some parents about this challenge is unthinkable.

7.5 Inadequate training of language and literacy teachers

Participant G:

> *The current cohort of young teachers [is] not well trained. Most of them obtained their teaching qualifications at universities. However, imparting knowledge for them is a huge challenge. They speak English fluently but lack adequate methodology of teaching learners to learn and read. Universities are known for putting emphasis on content. The defunct and closed colleges of education were producing competent teachers who were able to teach learners how to read because the emphasis was on methodology of teaching and learning. Workshops are needed to capacitate these half-cooked teachers.*

Participant F:

> *Teachers who cannot impart knowledge and reading skills are barriers to [the] learning and reading of learners. As reading is a skill that must be taught, it is essential for teachers to be capacitated on teaching learners how to read.*

The National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase (DBE 2020, 5) thus—

> *…seeks to help teachers and curriculum specialists understand that the reading methodologies used to teach reading in African languages differ in some ways from English, especially with regard to the early stages of learning to read when children learn how to link letters to sounds, and to use this knowledge to read words (decoding). Currently, the influence of reading methodologies used in English is so strong that it overrides the development of reading methodologies and pedagogies that are appropriate for African languages.*

Furthermore, because reading methodologies and strategies in English and African languages are not the same, reading workshops, particularly for new and the young cohort of teachers, are indispensable to turn the tide in schools.

7.6 Learners from other villages or communities

Participant H:

> *Learners from other villages use [a] variety of modes of transport such as taxis and buses. When I organise, afternoon reading sessions, they are not there because they use common means of transport. The same applies when morning reading sessions are organised.*

As most learners use communal means of transport to and from schools, morning and afternoon reading sessions are not plausible.

7.7 Dedicated and qualified teacher–librarians

Participant C:

> *Our school has a central school library. However, learners must borrow reading books donated by the Biblionef only in the morning and in the afternoon when it is open. It is closed most of the time because our 'teacher–librarian' is a full-time teacher. As we are few at the school, there are no free periods. Dedicated, knowledgeable and qualified teacher–librarians are needed in schools for teachers and learners to borrow few available reading materials.*

In South Africa, all government schools operate without school librarians because there are no positions on the DBE organogram to hire them. That results in the library facilities in new school buildings being closed most of the time as teachers are in classrooms teaching. Book donations are still in boxes at some schools because of a lack of manpower to classify, catalogue and accession reading materials for loaning by both teachers and learners.

7.8 Overloaded teachers

Participant B:

> *With a ratio of 1:35, most schools do not have adequate teaching staff. With many subjects from Grade 4, teachers are overloaded. We cannot even pay individual attention to the learners with reading challenges.*

Participant A:

> *In [the] Foundation Phase, we teach only four subjects, while from [the] Intermediate Phase, we teach eight subjects, which need more manpower. With the current teacher–learner ratio, schools with low learner enrolments are understaffed and teachers are overloaded.*

From the findings, it is clear that schools with low learner enrolment have few teachers, resulting in overload. Without free periods, it is impossible for the available teachers to give individual attention to learners with reading challenges.

7.9 Transition from teaching and learning in African languages to English

Participant E:

> *In the Foundation Phase, the languages of teaching and learning are African languages. From Grade 4, which is [a grade in the] Intermediate Phase, learners switch over to English, which is foreign to them. This is one of the reasons learners struggle to read, particularly in English.*

Participant C:

> *This transition is not smooth at all. This partly explains why most learners cannot read for meaning from [the] Intermediate Phase [onward], because they must still learn to read in English, which is a foreign language to them. Even most teachers are struggling to teach learners to read in English as it is not their mother tongue.*

From the findings, it is clear that the transition from being taught in African languages in the Foundation Phase to English in the Intermediate Phase is a tedious process for learners. Even teachers are challenged as they are obliged to teach learners in English from Grade 4 onward while English is not their mother tongue. This arrangement disadvantages Black learners in particular, while white learners are taught in their home languages throughout their studies.

8 Summary, conclusion, and recommendations

Reading is a skill that must be acquired by learners in the Foundation Phase to further pursue their studies. Without the skill to read for decoding and meaning, it is impossible for learners to continue with their studies, and they drop out of school. Adequate reading materials in diverse formats are indispensable at homes, schools, and public libraries for learners to acquire reading habits and to develop a reading culture. Provision of well-resourced and functional libraries in all schools cannot be overemphasised. The uneven resource provision of the apartheid era is still visible in South Africa 29 years into democracy and teachers and learners from disadvantaged rural communities are worst affected.

In a series of opinion pieces to the *Sowetan Newspaper*, Ngoepe (2022a) suggests several interventions such as storytelling at schools (storytelling can also spark a passion for reading from a young age, especially in our country where the level of literacy is low and there is no culture of reading), turning abandoned schools in rural areas into community libraries (Ngoepe 2022b), reimagine and repurpose libraries so that the communities being served will Rediscover themselves. As well, Ngoepe and Mojapelo (2022) saw it fit to rethink the importance of creating spaces for literacy to build resilience and ensure quality and inclusive education for all.

The PIRLS 2021 results reflecting an illiterate rate of 81% paint an even gloomier picture of the literacy levels among Grades 4 to 6 learners in South Africa than the results of the PIRLS 2016. The literacy levels have clearly deteriorated over the past few years. An avalanche of socioeconomic factors contributes to this undesirable situation. The study concludes that low literacy levels are concerning.

The study makes the following recommendations:

- The DBE, DAC and non-governmental organisations and private sector companies should collaborate and come up with a well-coordinated and articulated strategy to encourage reading among learners.
- The DBE should ring-fence an adequate budget through the Norms and Standards Grant for schools to procure and acquire diverse, quality, and relevant reading materials to encourage reading in schools.
- The DAC should roll out more community and mobile libraries specifically in disadvantaged rural communities.
- The DBE should contract security companies to ensure that all school assets such as computers and books are protected.
- The DBE should appoint adequate educational psychologists and teacher assistants to assist teachers, particularly in teaching learners with mental challenges in mainstream schools. Educational psychologists should also engage the parents or guardians of affected learners.
- The DBE should employ dedicated, knowledgeable, and qualified teacher–librarians to work in library facilities on a full-time basis so that teachers and learners can borrow reading materials anytime they so wish.
- The DBE should have a legislated reading policy to be implemented effectively in all schools.
- The DBE should adhere to its language policy and allow all learners to use their home languages as teaching and learning languages.
- The DBE should liaise with telecommunications companies such as Vodacom, Telkom and MTN so that schools could obtain a robust broadband internet service for teachers and learners in disadvantaged rural communities to access e-reading materials to encourage digital or online reading.
- Private sector companies should donate funds and ICT resources such as computers or laptops to schools to encourage online or digital reading.
- DBE officials should organise more reading workshops to capacitate language and literacy teachers to learn how to teach learners to read for meaning.
- The DBE should do away with the age cohort rule so that only learners who can read could proceed to subsequent classes.
- DBE and DAC officials should encourage learners at schools and community libraries to establish reading or book clubs.

The overview given in this study has obvious limitations in terms of small sample of teachers while excluding learners and parents. Therefore, future studies should cover the entire country and include learners and parents.

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