

(Re)envisioning and (re)imagining roles and collaborations of the stakeholders in tackling the reading crisis in South Africa: a literature review

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Thirty-one years into the new political dispensation, South Africa is still experiencing a reading crisis, particularly in the basic education band, where the majority of learners cannot read for meaning at their appropriate grade and age level reading norms. A myriad of contextual realities contribute to this reading crisis. The 2021 Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) results indicate clearly that 81 per cent of learners from Grades 4 to 6 lack basic reading skills and, therefore, cannot read for meaning, which contributes to a reading crisis in the country. It is alarming that this cohort of learners cannot read with understanding, even in their own home languages, such as Sepedi, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Setswana. In South Africa, the reading crisis has multiple and negative ramifications in the entire education system. Despite numerous interventions and strategies by the government through the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the situation is not improving but worsening. The purpose of the study was to investigate roles and possible collaborations that various stakeholders can play in embarking on tackling the reading crisis in the basic education band. The study adopted a literature review, which was regarded by the researchers as a qualitative research approach. A wide range of books, articles, theses, dissertations and magazines were consulted to study the roles and collaborations various stakeholders can embark on in tackling the reading crisis in the basic education band in South Africa. As the government, through the DBE, cannot be the only stakeholder responsible for tackling this impasse, the study recommends that collaborations or partnerships among the various stakeholders are essential in tackling the issue of the reading crisis in primary schools.

Keywords: reading, comprehension, education, learners, primary school, South Africa

1 Introduction and background to the study

South Africa is a country characterised by multifaceted challenges such as high unemployment, socio-economic inequalities, erratic power supply, porous borders, the high number of undocumented immigrants, corruption, high crime rates and an unequal bimodal education system, negatively affecting citizens of this developing country (Zenex Foundation, 2022). Thorne (2024:1) indicates that “employment dropped by 22,000 in the last quarter of 2023, raising the official unemployment rate by 0.2 of a percentage to 32.1%.” As observed by Cronje (2022:183), “South Africa probably has the highest percentage of jobless citizens in the world.” In disadvantaged rural communities, unemployment is a vicious and intergenerational cycle which affects millions of the people particularly youth.”

Even in the new political dispensation, the education system in South Africa is not immune to the persistent avalanche of challenges the country is facing. Whittaker et al. (2022), citing Roodt (2018), point out that “South Africa is a developing country with an education system that remains in crisis, despite three decades of democracy. The vestiges of South Africa’s oppressive past continue to plague a system where repeated efforts at top down transformation and curriculum renewal have failed to create the change required.” Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019:5) mention that education contributes greatly to economic growth, as it determines workers’ productivity. By reducing poverty and inequality, education can advance the prosperity of a nation. They added that it is likely that South Africa’s generally low quality of education has contributed to slow economic growth. Owing to the current bimodal education system in the country, schools for the majority of black learners are resource-constrained environments, leading to ineffective teaching and learning. The Zenex Foundation (2023:4) states that:

The word bimodal is used to suggest that the current system of public education represents two distinct universes of schools - a small universe serving 20% of the nation’s wealthiest children and a vast universe of schools serving the remaining children.

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This is a clear indication of an unequal education system characterised by disparities in the provision of educational resources, which persisted well 31 years into the democratic South Africa. The Grade 12 results between public and private schools clearly show this bimodal education system in the country. A lack of adequate educational facilities, such as well-resourced and functional libraries, computer and science laboratories in the majority of schools, is an indication that more must still be done to improve the quality of education, particularly in the disadvantaged rural communities (Ngoepe & Mojapelo 2022). A lack of well-resourced and functional libraries in poor schools is an impediment to poor black learners acquiring reading habits, reading skills and a reading culture, and to read with understanding. Emphasising the importance of reading, Hardy (2024:3) states that:

Reading and the benefits thereof are crucial to building a literate society and libraries are central to this. We cannot abdicate our role in building a reading culture and as long as the levels of literacy remain low in our country, we have a duty to turn this around.

Acquisition and development of information literacy skills by teachers and learners in poorly resourced schools remains a nightmare owing to a lack of resources such as networked computers and laptops, tablets and relevant, good-quality books, including e-books. Almeida and Esteves (2022: xvi) state that:

Language is one of the greatest predictors of personal, social, academic, and professional success. Reading is a cornerstone for learning and no child will know academic success if their reading ability is compromised. The ability to read is one of the most important tools for good cognitive development in children. No one is born a reader; instead, learning to read is a process that requires time, effort, and availability.

However, in South Africa, reading inability is an endemic crisis, which greatly affects the majority of learners in primary schools. Unfortunately, it has multiple negative ramifications in the entire education system. National Reading Coalition (2019:3) states that:

Under-performance in reading has consequences way beyond primary schooling. Learners who cannot read fall behind in the early grades and never catch up academically to successfully complete their education. They drop out of school or complete without having access to higher education. This has social and economic consequences that are exacerbated in rural areas. Reading improvement in primary school must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Millan and Millan (2019), citing Mpofu (2015, 130), observe that “the majority of the academically underprepared students come from lower socio-economic status (SES) communities where multiple barriers to both a successful transition into university and completion of tertiary studies are evidenced.” Statistics South Africa (2022:1) states that:

In 2020, a rapid increase in the number of out-of-school children and youth in South Africa was noted. This was mainly due to school closures during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. Distance learning was not an effective measure in South Africa as access to digital learning was limited. In 2021, when schools could still not be fully open, most schools settled for in-school learning with some form of hybrid model entailing instructions of rotational attendance combined with distance education.

Statistics South Africa (2022:1) further states 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.”

In South Africa, “the public school system is structured according to quintiles, which reflects the SES of the communities served. Of these, three fifths (Q1-Q3 schools) serve 226 deeply impoverished communities while higher quintiles (Q4-5) and private school offerings serve the remaining two fifths of lower middle to high-income families” (Whittaker et al. 2019; Van Dyk & White 2019). Unfortunately, the majority of schools in the lower quintiles (Q1-Q3) are in impoverished communities and are, therefore, dysfunctional and characterised by a lack of educational resources, such as well-resourced and functional libraries for reading development and advancement. Kurtz, Roets and Biraimah (2022) observe that “dysfunctional schools are the cause of unequal educational outcomes as they are unable (or unwilling) to provide a cultural bridge between diverse school and home cultures.”

Dean, Pascoe and Le Roux (2021,1) state that “the majority of South African learners are not developing the reading skills expected for each grade when compared to their international peers.” As observed by Spaul (2015), this is a

multifaceted problem linked to a complex interplay of educational, political, social and economic factors.” In South Africa, there are many multifaceted factors that contribute to this reading crisis in most schools. Howie et al. (2017) state that “factors related to learners’ underperformance include resource constraints, inadequate teacher training, poor instructional practices, low parental literacy levels, learning in a second or additional language, and high rates of absenteeism.” National Reading Coalition (2019:3) points out that:

It is universally acknowledged that the ability to read for meaning is critically important as it helps the mind to grow and develop through exposure to new ideas. Reading also boosts creativity and is the foundation of a good education. Without reading, one cannot understand the economy, access information, or fully develop emotionally and socially. Reading opens one’s mind to a whole world of new possibilities, it reinforces our sense of individuality and our ability to achieve.

Reading encourages abstract thinking in learners, which is essential to impart knowledge and skills. 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 connected society. It improves educational outcomes, economic opportunities, critical thinking opportunities, critical thinking abilities, empathy, civic engagement and child-adult relationships.

As reading cannot take place in a vacuum, a rich and conducive environment and seamless access to a plethora of information sources in diverse formats are imperative for learners to learn to read effectively and, more importantly, to read for meaning and acquire requisite reading skills, particularly in the Foundation Phase. However, Cronje (2022) warns that overwhelming learners with resources such as reading materials is not a solution. Teachers need to use suitable and quality resources to assist learners in achieving the outcomes of reading.

Primary school learners in the Foundation Phase need to master the letters of the alphabet to read and write words that result from the mingling of the letters of the alphabet. More importantly, from the sentences they read, learners should be able to comprehend and decode what they have read – which is attaching a meaning to what they have read. They must also be in a position to answer questions deriving from what they have read. Attaching meaning to what was read involves cognitive and thinking capabilities, which learners should have. Information-rich environments, such as well-resourced and functional community and school libraries, are suitable scaffolds or platforms for Foundation Phase learners to learn the letters of the alphabet, words and, finally, sentences.

Mumpuniarti (2017:243) states that “improving literacy and numeracy is the main priority and becomes the national strategy in most of the countries in the world. Many countries introduce various educational plans and pedagogical practices to improve literacy and numeracy.” However, thirty-one years into the new political dispensation, South Africa is experiencing an alarming reading crisis, particularly in primary schools where Grade 4 to 6 learners cannot read for meaning at their appropriate grade and age levels. It is distressing that this cohort of learners cannot read for meaning even in their own home language, such as Sepedi, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Setswana. Stent (2023:1) states that:

Fewer primary school children can 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.

In South Africa, it is distressing that out of nine provinces, only two (Gauteng and Western Cape) have spelt out programmes to try to mitigate and tackle the reading crisis in their schools. The Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy, targeting 1 040 underperforming schools from Grades 1 to 7 in both literacy and mathematics, is an example of such interventions (Zenex Foundation 2023, 5). During the hard lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the world, the majority of learners in the basic education band lost substantial learning time, exacerbating the reading crisis in South Africa. The National Development Plan 2030 states that:

By 2030, South Africans should have access to education and training of the highest quality, leading to significantly improved learning outcomes. The performance of South African learners in international standardised tests should be comparable to the performance of learners from countries at a similar level of development and with similar levels of access. Education should be compulsory up to Grade 12 or equivalent levels in vocational education and training.

On the other hand, the staggering reading performance of primary school learners in the country leaves much to be desired compared to learners from other countries. The country cannot be compared to other African countries, such as Zimbabwe in terms of literacy development. The recent 2021 PIRLS survey results are a clear indication that primary school learners from Grades 4 to 6 in the Intermediate Phase of the basic education band cannot read for meaning. In simplistic terms, it means that learners do not derive meaning from what they have read. The inability to read for meaning means that this cohort of learners cannot proceed with their studies as they lack comprehension and decoding skills essential for them to further their studies. Among the countries that took part in the PIRLS study, South Africa performed very poorly, coming last out of all countries since 2006 when the survey was first conducted.

The majority of the learners in primary schools cannot read for meaning even in their own home language (DBE 2022). This is a challenge on its own, as this cohort of learners cannot proceed with their studies, as they did not acquire the requisite cognitive and reading skills essential for them to further their studies. McBride (2019:1) states that “South Africa is unique among upper middle-income countries in that less than half of its primary school children learn to read for meaning in any language in lower primary school. Out of the 50 countries surveyed in PIRLS, South Africa came last.”

2 Problem statement

South Africa is a developing country with an avalanche of challenges, including the reading crisis. Over the years, the PIRLS and ANA results have been barometers indicating that there is a reading crisis in the country. Since Covid-19 pandemic, the PIRLS 2021 results have been indicating an increasing number (81%) of learners in Grades 4 to 6 who cannot read for meaning. It is distressing that this cohort of learners cannot read for meaning in their own home languages. The DBE alone cannot be responsible for this reading crisis. Other stakeholders also have roles to play in tackling this impasse in the country. According to Almeida and Esteves (2022:1),

Although schools play an important role, it is important to stress the role that the family and the community have in promoting reading, contributing to the creation of efficient and motivated readers who share a taste for knowledge. Therefore, moments of collaboration between teachers, family, and community should be created to stimulate reading and thus promote the school and personal success of students.

3 Purpose and objective of the study

The purpose of the study was to forge the roles various stakeholders can play in tackling the reading crisis in the country. The objective of the study was to indicate the roles that various stakeholders can play in mitigating this problem.

4 Research methodology

The study has adopted a literature review, which is regarded by the researchers as a qualitative research approach. A wide range of books, articles, theses, dissertations and magazines were consulted to study the roles and collaborations that various stakeholders can embark on the reading crisis in the basic education band in South Africa.

5 Role of the various stakeholders in addressing the reading crisis in South Africa

Various stakeholders have a significant role to play in addressing the reading crisis in the country. The National Reading Barometer (2023:1) states that:

To improve reading in South Africa, a whole of society approach is needed. Adult reading practices, home literacy environments, library and community resources, social norms around reading, policies and budget allocations, publishing industry activities and accessible data impact reading -supporting its growth starts with up-to-date information.

5.1 National Department of Basic Education

As the overseer of education in both primary and secondary levels of the schooling system, the national DBE has a mandate to supply all schools with adequate, diverse, attractive and quality reading materials to enhance literacy development, particularly in schools situated in disadvantaged rural communities without well-resourced and functional libraries. Adequate provision of reading materials in all languages used in schools is a stepping stone to cultivating a reading culture in learners and cannot be overemphasised. Without adequate reading materials in a wide range of formats in a school environment, it will be nearly impossible to instil a reading culture in learners. With an adequate and ring-fenced budget, schools will procure reading materials in diverse and multiple formats for learners in different grades and in different languages used in schools.

Therefore, adequate budget by the DBE is essential to hire qualified and competent personnel who will work collaboratively with literacy teachers to teach learners to read and to cement reading activities in schools. With an adequate budget, the DBE can also acquire more vehicles to create mobile libraries to regularly service disadvantaged rural schools with reading materials to encourage reading. Buses can also be bought with installed networked computers so that even learners in disadvantaged rural communities can access online reading materials (Ngoepe & Mojapelo, 2022). However, costs can escalate as more funds are needed for repairs, maintenance, security, subscription to the online materials, salaries of the drivers and laboratory assistants and many other consumables.

5.2 Universities

Since the inception of the democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, colleges of education, which were established for the training of teachers, do not offer teacher training any longer. Some of these institutions were converted into multipurpose centres, while others were converted into district and circuit offices.

Universally, universities are mandated to perform teaching, learning and research activities, and community engagement projects. Cronje (2022:181) avers that “higher education institutions (HEIs) are in a unique position to shape the future of a country by educating and training prospective workers, policymakers and leaders.” Teachers are no exception. Through community engagement projects, lecturers have established projects, particularly in disadvantaged rural communities of their choice, to equip citizens with essential skills to tackle challenges they are facing.

With the demise of colleges of education in South Africa, universities were mandated to produce teachers for both primary and secondary schools. An oratorical reading approach was adopted at the colleges of education during teacher training, and mechanical skills of fluency and reading aloud were adopted without emphasising reading pedagogies and assessments essential for learners to read for meaning. This created a large void, as learners think they have mastered reading when they are reading aloud, reading fluently and proficiently and pronouncing words correctly without understanding what they read. No reading assessments were done to test if learners read with comprehension and understanding. Rule and Land (2017:1) state that:

Teachers told us they assessed pupils' reading ability just as they were assessed by their teachers: by having them read aloud. Marks were allocated for individual oral reading performance. This was based not on understanding the passage, but on fluency and pronunciation. There was no written assessment of reading comprehension. Reading was about memorising sounds and decoding words.

Rule and Land (2017) state that ... oratorical reading is a cycle repeated from one generation to the next unless it is broken. As stated by Almeida and Esteves (2022:3), “learning to read is not just a mechanical exercise of translating a graphic stain into a set of sounds, which is why, currently, the great challenges facing the teaching of reading are: teaching to read critically; teaching to enjoy reading; creating lifelong reading habits.” As teachers teach learners to read the way they were taught, universities need to come up with pedagogical renewal of reading strategies and interventions so that learners can be taught to read with understanding. Teaching literacy and assessments must be the norm to determine whether learners were reading with understanding (Cronje, 2022). Rule and Land (2017) state that:

Universities need to teach reading as a process that involves decoding and understanding text in its context, not just as a “mechanical skill”. Countries such as India, with its great diversity and disadvantaged populations, have begun to address the need for this change in how reading is taught.

It is apparent that the DBE needs to liaise with the universities throughout the country regarding teaching teachers new reading strategies, interventions and assessments, which will assist learners to read for meaning (Cronje 2021). Effective reading instructions for teachers by universities cannot be overemphasised (Gabriel & Allington, 2016). Through community engagement projects, universities can kickstart reading interventions, programmes and strategies specifically to enhance reading for meaning in primary school learners. The Department of Information Science at the University of South Africa has various projects in the country. It has an Annual Storytelling Festival, which is a project where schools are visited every year in September, which coincides with Readathon or Literacy Month, for storytelling to encourage reading in schools (Mojapelo 2023). The focus of the project is primary schools. Local and international storytellers from the United States, India and Ghana have been invited to this annual event (Ngoepe, Maluleka & Shekgola, 2021). Good orators from local communities are also invited to narrate stories to the learners to stimulate reading (Mojapelo, 2020). Best and winning stories from learners were published as anthologies, and they were given back to the schools to be part of their library collection.

In 2023, the project included reading competitions where different learners competed against each other. Certificates of participation and other awards were given to the winners. Through these community engagement projects; lecturers can also assist literacy teachers to solicit reading materials from non-governmental organisations such as Biblionef and Room-to-Read for their library collections. Universities can also be proactive by making arrangements with teachers to enable learners from the adjacent or nearby schools to use reading materials in their libraries.

5.3 Department of Arts and Culture

As community libraries fall within the ambit of the Department of Arts and Culture, collaborations and partnerships with the DBE are essential. Given a shortage of schools with well-resourced and functional libraries in the country, block loans of reading materials are a viable solution for learners to access the reading materials. This arrangement can give even learners from disadvantaged rural communities equal access to reading materials to enhance reading in schools. Although schools are not dumping sites for weeded reading materials, community libraries can make arrangements with schools to donate weeded materials for poor learners to access reading materials. Community libraries, through their librarians, can plan, together with teacher-librarians, to hold events such as storytelling and Readathon (Literacy Month) together to encourage, instil and stimulate reading in learners. Storytellers can also be hired to visit community libraries to encourage reading during the events.

Community librarians can also visit nearby schools to make learners aware of the newly acquired reading materials in community libraries to encourage learners to read.

5.4 Family literacy interventions and projects

Families play a pivotal role in the development and advancement of literacy (Gabriel & Allington 2016). They have a responsibility to kickstart a collection of reading materials to encourage a reading culture in a family setup. Fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers also have a role to play in assisting children to read for leisure with a view to preparing them for the Foundation Phase. Bornman (2017) emphasises that parents have a role to play in the literacy instruction of children, including children with disabilities.

However, as observed by Pitt et al. (2013:4), “parents largely lacked knowledge about and ownership of their right to be involved in the decisions shaping their children’s education; despite having high hopes for all their futures through the education of their children.” Almeida and Esteves (2022:7) state that:

Parents or guardians should, therefore, be involved in this whole process. It is important that reading is accompanied, from an early age, by the family, at home, namely, reading aloud. The family is the primary context for child development, and the development of the taste and curiosity for reading is a fundamental strategy to be developed, namely, through the first contacts with books appropriate to the child’s age and interests, with the reading of stories, through the children’s observation of their parents reading, among others, playing a role of preparation and stimulation for the formal learning of reading.

Bornman (2017) states that family literacy intervention is important and should be viewed as a complement to early childhood and Foundation Phase education. This report emphasises the appropriateness of family literacy intervention strategy and stresses that many South African children live in poverty where such intervention is sparse. As a result, survival concerns are more immediate than literacy. This is particularly true in disadvantaged rural communities where poverty and unemployment levels are high, and subsequently, poor people lack the money to buy reading materials for their children.

5.5 Book publishing industry

In South Africa, it is a well-documented reality that reading materials in African languages are few or inadequate in school and community libraries, with severe consequences (Totemeyer, 2013). This is evident in old public libraries where materials were available in English and Afrikaans. This led to the undermining and development of African languages to the advantage of the English and Afrikaans languages. The DAC needs to ensure that community libraries are stocked with adequate reading materials in African languages to enable the literacy advancement and development of black learners in particular (Totemeyer, 2013). It is also time for the book publishing industry to publish reading books in African languages, which were marginalised during the apartheid era.

5.6 Digital infrastructure by network providers

Information technology plays a crucial role in providing support to teachers, learners and the learning process in a school setup (Matolong 2020). Dean et al. (2021:1) opine that:

Information and communication technology (ICT) reading interventions can help children with reading difficulties, especially those in resource-constrained environments who otherwise might not have support.

Today, there are multitudes of online and digital reading materials that learners can access seamlessly using their networked laptops, computers, tablets and smartphones to enhance their reading skills and lifelong learning (Combrinck & Mtsatse, 2019, Matolong 2020). However, internet connectivity is poor, particularly in disadvantaged rural communities, while data costs are high. The DBE needs to liaise with network companies or providers such as Vodacom, MTN and Telkom to strengthen broadband access in disadvantaged rural communities for learners to access diverse online reading materials. The DBE needs to negotiate lower data costs with service provider for learners to access online reading materials.

5.7 Multilingualism and DBE language education policy makers in schools

Totemeyer (2013) points out:

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. The most cost-effective system for education would be to choose a language for the medium of instruction that the majority of the population can speak and in which books and other educational materials are readily available.

On the other hand, South Africa is a melting pot, a multilingual and multicultural country. The country has 12 languages, which have all been declared official languages, including sign language, which was officially declared an official language in 2023. However, the new government following the 1994 elections has declared English to be the language of teaching and learning, particularly in black schools – a colonial legacy as South Africa was a British colony (Department of Education 2003). Makalela (2017) observes that:

Whereas the post-independent states in Southern Africa have attained independence from colonial rule for more than two decades, the language policy and practices largely remain similar to the ones introduced by the former colonial countries. Generally, the policies still reflect a monolingual bias toward the former colonial languages to the detriment of local African languages, which are not used in high prestige positions such as education.

In a multilingual country such as South Africa, “prioritising literacy development in a single language, rather than building on the bilingualism of most South African children to develop bi-literacy results in privileging English, an already powerful language and English-speaking children” to the disadvantage of other local languages and black learners in particular (Zenex Foundation 2023, 11). Languages of teaching and learning are destined for development and growth. However, even after South Africa became a democracy in 1994, “African languages have not been fully resourced to serve as languages of teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase”, hindering their growth and development (Zenex Foundation 2023:11). The Zenex Foundation (2023:11) reiterates that all official languages in South Africa are “very unequally resourced to develop children literacy, especially in African languages.” Ramadiro and Porteus (2017) indicate that literacy teachers who had to teach through an African language in the Foundation Phase were being trained in English, which is pure marginalisation and negligence of African languages even in the post-apartheid South Africa.

However, researchers indicate that English as a foreign language to the majority of black learners in South Africa is a barrier to both teaching and learning. In the South African schooling system, learners in the Foundation Phase use their home languages for teaching and learning. However, from Grade 4 onwards, black learners have no option but to switch over to English, as their black languages have not been gazetted for teaching and learning. The Zenex Foundation (2023:4) states that:

For many learners in poor communities, there is often no chance from the drudgery that is school. This is compounded by the fact that after Grade 3, most learners are required to learn all subjects through English, a language that they have not mastered - nor have some of their teachers.

The Zenex Foundation (2023:11) further states that "... the fact that African language speaking children from Grade 4 are forced to use the same textbooks as English home language children clearly advantages English speakers and disadvantages emergent bilinguals" who are dominantly black learners. The current Language Policy in Education is biased because it ensures that black learners in particular are disadvantaged, although provision is made by the same policy for the learners to choose teaching and learning languages of their choice. The current policy particularly favours white learners, as they are taught in their home languages, which are English and Afrikaans, from Grade 1 to university level at the expense of their black counterparts.

Curriculum transformation in the education sector is a non-negotiable imperative in the new political dispensation in the country (DBE 2020). However, the government is very slow in sanctioning the use of home languages for teaching and learning in black schools. In the current setup, black languages are grossly neglected and marginalised for teaching and learning at the expense of the foreign English language. This partly explains why primary school learners, particularly from Grades 4 to 6, struggle to read for meaning, numeracy and writing. To make matters worse, black learners are taught by black and incompetent teachers who lack adequate methodologies and knowledge of teaching English as a foreign language in black schools. Reading workshops organised by the DBE are essential in capacitating and upskilling literacy teachers with reading skills that learners must be taught. The DBE and education policy makers need to work swiftly to streamline the use of all languages (multilingualism) in the classrooms in the country for teaching and learning purposes.

5.8 Out-of-school literacy initiatives

During school holidays, out-of-school literacy initiatives such as reading clubs or reading groups can be established to "expand children's opportunities for pleasurable and stimulating engagement with text (print, digital and oral) – as listeners, as readers, as writers, as performers." (Zenex Foundation 2023:17). The significance of establishing reading clubs cannot be overemphasised, as they assist in resuscitating the reading culture in learners and inactive readers. They also assist in preventing learners from loitering streets during school holidays. Retired teachers can work collaboratively with interested people, such as community librarians in community libraries, to establish reading clubs or reading groups that are aimed at enhancing the acquisition of literacy development (Mbuiwa 2020).

On the other hand, private sector companies have a responsibility to fully support the establishment of reading clubs with funds for the acquisition of reading materials and furniture such as desks, tables and chairs for learners. It is also essential to have steel cabinets to house or accommodate reading materials. Despite security and accommodation, flannel boards and marking pens are imperative to teach learners to learn to read.

5.9 Media

Broadcasting companies such as the South African Broadcasting Company, both radio and television, need to produce slots that promote reading in the country, particularly during calendar days such as Library Week, Literacy Month and Mother Tongue Month. Newspapers countrywide also have a pivotal role to play in encouraging a reading culture in the country. All media outlets need to partner with organisations such as the Library and Information Association of South Africa, Nal'ibali, Biblionef and Room-to-Read and schools countrywide to celebrate such days. Advertising companies can also generate posters and billboards encouraging reading in the country during celebrations of events such as calendar days (DBE 2019). Media outlets can also run reading competitions for learners to encourage reading in the country.

5.10 Non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a pivotal role to play in advancing reading development and the abilities of the learners. NGOs are particularly essential in forming partnerships with DBE and schools to assist in rolling out reading interventions and well-spelt out reading programmes. NGOs such as Biblionef and Room-to-Read can donate reading materials for disadvantaged rural schools to establish library collections of reading materials in their corner or classroom libraries. They can also assist in training teacher-librarians concerning the organisation and retrieval of reading library materials in schools. The Equal Education (EE) Bookery Project was established by the EE in the Western Cape to assist schools in Khayelitsha township to kickstart library collections (Equal Education 2011).

6 Conclusions

The study concludes that reading is a prerequisite skill for learners to continue learning. The DBE alone cannot be held accountable for the reading crisis in the country. The study recommends that collaborations and partnerships among various stakeholders in tackling the reading crisis in the country cannot be overemphasised

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