

Challenges And Solutions In Implementing Reading Policies In The Foundation Phase: A Multiple Case Study From The Lichtenburg Circuit, North West Province

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Received: Aug 13, 2024; Revised: Sep 25; Accepted: Sep 30; Published (unedited first): Oct 4, 2024

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CITATION: Fourie A-M, 2024. Challenges And Solutions In Implementing Reading Policies In The Foundation Phase: A Multiple Case Study From The Lichtenburg Circuit, North West Province. *Management and Economics Research Journal*, 10(4): 9900097. <https://doi.org/10.18639/MERJ.2024.9900097>

ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the policies guiding reading instruction and investigate how these policies are implemented in the FP to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences in this area. Implementing reading policies effectively in the FP is crucial for fostering early literacy skills, which form the foundation for lifelong learning. However, teachers often encounter various challenges that impact the successful application of these policies. This article explores the complexities associated with implementing reading policies within the FP, specifically focusing on the Lichtenburg Circuit in the North West Province. The Lichtenburg Circuit, a unique educational setting within the North West Province, provides a valuable multiple case study for examining these challenges and identifying effective solutions. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research focused on the perspectives of Subject Advisors, Principals, HoDs, and FP teachers in three primary schools within the Lichtenburg circuit. Thirteen participants were purposively selected, and data were collected through document analysis, observations, and interviews. Thematic analysis revealed that the CAPS is the primary policy used for reading instruction, yet it lacks explicit directives on teaching reading, leading to challenges in implementation and application by teachers. By investigating the experiences of English Home Language this article aims to uncover the specific difficulties teachers face and assess the support mechanisms available. The findings will offer insights into improving policy implementation and enhancing literacy outcomes for young learners. The objective of this article is to identify and analyze the key factors that influence teachers' implementation of reading policies in the FP. This article aims to understand how various contextual, professional, and institutional elements shape teachers' approach to applying reading policies in their classrooms. By examining these factors, the article seeks to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers in translating policy into effective practice, ultimately contributing to the development of more supportive and practical strategies for improving reading outcomes in the FP. The purpose of this article is to investigate and evaluate the challenges and solutions in implementing reading policies, using the Lichtenburg Circuit in the North West Province as a multiple case study. The article also seeks to uncover the specific challenges that teachers encounter in implementing these policies and to analyze how these obstacles impact the effectiveness of reading instruction. The article aims to provide insights and recommendations for improving the implementation of reading policies to better support FP teachers.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), Reading Policies, Implementation, Foundation Phase, Challenges, Solutions.

ABBREVIATIONS: ANA: Annual National Assessment; CAPS: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement; FP: Foundation Phase; PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; EFAL: English as a First Additional Language; LoLT: Language of Learning and Teaching; HoD: Head(s) of Department.

1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is on reading and the associated policies, particularly how teachers in the FP interpret and implement these guidelines. Since 2010, there have been growing concerns about the educational achievements of South African learners, with reports indicating alarmingly low-performance levels [1].

Recent assessments and studies continue to highlight inadequate reading abilities among primary school learners in South Africa, particularly within the FP, a trend that has persisted since the early 2000s. At the provincial level, the North West Department of Education [2] has acknowledged the importance of addressing underachievement, a growing public concern discussed by parents, teachers, experts, and the media. In 2013, the provincial target for language proficiency in Grade 3 was set at 53.8%, with an overall target of 54% for the North West Province. However, reports from the Lichtenburg circuit revealed that in both 2013 and 2014, 11 out of 19 schools failed to meet these language targets, showing minimal improvement during that period. PIRLS 2016 [3] and 2021 [4] is an international study assessing reading literacy among Grade 4 learners. The 2016

PIRLS results showed that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, including those in the North West Province. While the 2021 PIRLS results were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, early indicators suggest that the pandemic has worsened learning outcomes, as disruptions in education likely exacerbated existing literacy challenges. Despite the discontinuation of the ANA in 2015 [5], provincial assessments and reports from the Department of Basic Education continued to monitor reading outcomes across South Africa. These evaluations consistently highlighted significant literacy challenges in both rural and urban schools. A lack of resources and gaps in teacher training have been identified as major factors contributing to the slow progress in improving literacy rates. As a result, many learners still struggle to meet the required reading proficiency levels, underscoring the ongoing need for targeted interventions and support in the education system.

Similarly, Wyse and Bradbury [6] emphasized the need for teachers to receive adequate training to effectively teach beginner readers and implement reading strategies. Effective teaching requires well-trained teachers who are skilled in areas such as assessment, planning, and classroom management. In response, the Department of Basic Education and provincial departments have introduced several policies and guidelines aimed at improving reading instruction in the FP. These include the CAPS for Home Language, the National Reading Programme, the Early Grade Reading Assessment, and various school-based policies. Despite these efforts, the extent to which these resources are utilized by teachers remains unclear. Critics like Madondo and Koen [7] have pointed out that some teachers lack the necessary depth of knowledge and motivation to teach reading effectively. Given these challenges, this article seeks to explore how teachers in the FP implement reading policies and how these processes are managed to enhance reading outcomes among learners.

ANA: Both public and state-funded independent schools participate in these assessments. These assessments serve as a proxy for the quality of education and provide detailed information on the knowledge and skills that learners display or fail to display in each grade. They are conducted in languages and mathematics.

CAPS: The document used in South African schools to guide teachers on the subjects that are included in a course of a study or that are taught at a school. The CAPS document is used at all South African schools.

FP: The FP ranges from Grade R (reception year) up to Grade 3 and accommodates learners from the age of five up to the age of nine. The FP is the first phase of formal schooling in South Africa.

Implementation: A specified set of activities/guidelines to put into practice according to a certain program.

Reading policies: Reading is a multifaceted process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation. Learners learn how to integrate these facets to make meaning of print.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CURRICULUM

A curriculum is a structured plan guiding what learners should know, how they should be taught, and how educational systems should be organized to facilitate learning. Miller and McDonald [8] describe it as the framework that provides educational opportunities and influences how learners utilize these opportunities. It encompasses what is taught, who teaches it, and how it is delivered, ultimately shaping learners' knowledge and perceptions of their subjects. Stiggins [9] expands on this by noting that a curriculum includes both content and process, adapting to the unique needs and developmental stages of each learner. It is like a roadmap or a race course that guides learners through their educational journey, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed in life. In this article, curriculum is defined as an integrated plan that connects content areas, guiding teachers on what and when to teach. It includes teaching methods, different activities and materials designed to support effective classroom instruction. It is crucial to ensure that learners achieve a deep understanding of the material, master necessary skills, and experience overall personal and academic development, thereby significantly enhancing the quality of education [9].

2.2 POLICY

Policy [10] is a term with varied definitions, as different authors interpret it in diverse ways. Policy plays a crucial role in both private and public institutions. Private policies are developed by individuals or private entities, whereas public policies are crafted by governmental institutions. Policy refers to a set of actions or plans agreed upon by governments, businesses, or individuals.

School policy [11] is formal actions taken by educational institutions to promote consistency and standardization. From these definitions, it is evident that policy revolves around the formulation and implementation of action plans by either government bodies or institutions acting on their behalf. In this study, policy refers to educational legislation and guidelines

created at national, provincial, and school levels, all aimed at fulfilling the objectives of South Africa's education system. Education policy remains a key focus for governments globally, as the policy framework profoundly influences each learner's experience.

In this article, policy is viewed as a guiding framework that informs teachers' actions and decision-making processes within schools. By understanding and applying educational policies, teachers can ensure consistency and standardization in their instructional practices, aligning their teaching methods with broader goals. Additionally, teachers play a crucial role in implementing these policies to suit their unique classroom contexts, allowing them to address the diverse needs of their learners while adhering to the overarching educational objectives set by national or provincial guidelines. This empowers teachers to ensure that policies are effectively applied at the ground level.

2.3 IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation is defined as the execution of strategies that involve establishing necessary structures, systems, processes, and policies [12]. It involves applying or executing a plan, idea, or standard derived from the policy. In the context of education, implementation refers to putting policies into practice, often guided by legislation, to achieve educational objectives. It is at this stage that policies are tested in real-world settings to assess their effectiveness [12].

Implementation is highly relevant to teachers as they are responsible for putting educational policies into practice in their classrooms. Teachers serve as the key agents who execute strategies derived from policies, ensuring that curriculum guidelines, teaching standards, and other educational objectives are effectively met. This involves adapting policies to the unique needs of their learners while maintaining consistency with broader educational goals. Teachers must also establish the necessary classroom structures, processes, and instructional methods to facilitate the successful implementation of policies. In doing so, they help assess the real-world impact of these policies on student learning and outcomes.

2.4 POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Policy implementation, as defined by Leithwood and Seashore-Louis [13], involves executing tasks according to specific policies with a focus on achieving intended goals. The successful implementation depends on the policy design, the capacity of implementers, and the organizational context. This process is seen as an interaction between setting objectives and working toward their achievement. Two primary approaches to policy implementation exist: the "top-down" and "bottom-up" models. The top-down approach emphasizes the role of policy designers and decision-makers in guiding implementation, while the bottom-up approach focuses on how policies are interpreted and applied at the local level, where implementers have more discretion [13]. Matland [14] notes that while the top-down approach offers consistent policy guidance, it may overlook ground-level complexities, whereas the bottom-up approach allows for flexibility but can lead to inconsistencies.

In education, policy implementation directly impacts classroom practices and teaching effectiveness. Successful policy implementation requires adequate resources, training, and guidance before national roll-out, with effective communication being crucial. Teachers play a vital role in this process, needing to be aware of learner development stages and applying appropriate teaching strategies. However, even with adherence to policy guidelines, faulty implementation can occur due to inadequate resources, capacity, or ill-suited policies [15].

In this article, policy implementation is seen as the ongoing process by which teachers interpret, adapt, and apply policies in their daily work. This involves making informed decisions, being accountable, and addressing the unique needs of learners, which Coburn [15] describes as teachers "making sense" of their circumstances.

2.5 EXISTING FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF READING POLICIES

Dixon [16] highlights the significant challenges teachers face when implementing curriculum policies, largely due to unclear guidelines. Many teachers express frustration with the CAPS and feel a need for more workshops to help them accurately interpret and implement it. This reflects a broader issue in South Africa's education system, where top-down policies often fail to consider teachers' practical realities. Spaul [17] notes that while CAPS was intended to provide clearer guidance, many teachers still struggle with its interpretation due to a lack of explicit directions on key concepts. He advocates for ongoing workshops to enhance teachers' understanding of the curriculum and critiques the insufficient time allocated for home language instruction, particularly for reading sessions. The importance of a well-resourced classroom environment in supporting effective reading instruction, which many South African schools lack [17].

The need [18] for diverse teaching methods, especially in bridging the gap between home language and EFAL instruction. The Wits Education Policy Unit critiques teachers' content knowledge, pointing to issues in lesson planning and curriculum implementation. For CAPS to be effective, teachers need better resources and clearer guidance on complex terms. Many issues in education stem from either the policy framework or the implementation process. Spaul [17] notes that gaps in learner knowledge often widen over time, complicating remediation. Further challenges, including inadequate teacher training,

lack of consultation in policy formulation, increased workloads, and poor school management, all of which contribute to stress and hinder effective policy implementation.

Despite numerous studies on reading in South Africa, many learners still struggle with basic reading skills. Although teachers may be familiar with CAPS methods [19], they often fail to apply them effectively in practice, revealing a significant gap in policy implementation, particularly in the FP. Effective policy implementation requires comprehensive teacher training and consistent application of policies at all levels. Educational managers play a crucial role in this process, but poor management often leads to suboptimal learner performance, undermining the potential impact of educational policies [19].

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SENSE-MAKING THEORY

This study employs sense-making theory to elucidate how teachers interpret and implement reading policies within their classrooms. According to Brown and Flood [20], sense-making is a process where individuals attempt to comprehend unexpected or confusing events by interpreting clues from their environment. The process is the integration of knowledge, practice, and understanding, considering factors such as policies, curriculum standards, assessments, and teachers' visions for their curriculum work. Maitlis and Christianson [21] further identify three significant areas within sense-making theory: organizational sense-making for strategic change, organizational learning and innovation, and sense-making in the interpretation of policy messages within educational contexts.

Sense-making theory [20,21] is relevant to this article as it provides a framework for understanding how teachers implement reading policies. It emphasizes the disruption of existing norms and the subsequent process of making and unmaking sense of new phenomena. This theory is particularly appropriate for examining the complexities involved in teachers' efforts to understand and apply reading policies in their classroom practices. The sense-making is a continuous process of improvement involving seven key characteristics: identity, retrospect, enactment, social cues, ongoing cues, extracted cues, and plausibility.

Identity in sense-making refers to how social interactions and experiences continually shape individuals' self-conceptions. This process involves questioning who we are, what we are doing, and why it matters, influenced by how others perceive and respond to our actions.

Retrospect is the use of past experiences to understand and make sense of present situations. It involves comparing similarities and differences from previous events to provide meaning to new or ongoing circumstances. Teachers often realize changes in their behavior or leadership styles by reflecting on their past actions.

Enactment involves making sense of experiences within one's immediate environment. It is created by the environment itself, as teachers interact with their surroundings to form a coherent understanding of their experiences.

Social cues highlight the social nature of sense-making, where transformation and change occur within a challenging teaching context. Social cues involve feeling a sense of belonging, building support networks, and fostering understanding and bonding among group members.

Ongoing cues underscore the continuous nature of sense-making, where teachers constantly interpret and re-interpret their environment to make sense of daily occurrences. This ongoing process enhances openness to criticism, sharing opinions, and making informed decisions.

Extracted cues involve focusing on specific elements that help make sense of a situation or event. In the context of teaching, for example, teachers might focus on teaching styles, theoretical understanding, and knowledge to shape their behavior and influence others.

Plausibility refers to the creation of an emerging narrative, such as developing a new teaching style. This involves deconstructing and reconstructing existing stories to better understand and understand the situation.

Sense-making [20,21] involves teachers using their knowledge and experiences to interpret their situations, often shaped by interactions with others. This social activity is never solely individual but is influenced by the actions and words of others. Teachers, for instance, make sense of the curriculum by deciding what content to teach, how to teach it, and what perspectives to emphasize. Teachers must navigate this complex process daily, making quick yet thoughtful decisions about curriculum implementation. Despite its apparent simplicity, sense-making in the classroom is a multifaceted process that requires continuous reflection and adaptation. The literature suggests that not much research has been conducted on how teachers engage in sense-making regarding policy implementation in their daily classroom practices, either individually or collaboratively. In summary, sense-making theory is a valuable framework for exploring how teachers interpret and implement reading policies in their classrooms. It provides insights into how these processes are managed and how they shape teachers' teaching practices, ultimately impacting learners' experiences.

4. RESEARCH PARADIGM - INTERPRETIVISM

This study, grounded in the interpretivism paradigm [22], views the role of teachers through the lens of understanding the unique and diverse experiences within educational environments. In the context of teaching, interpretivism emphasizes that teachers'

assumptions, methods, and approaches significantly shape the learning environment and learner outcomes. By analyzing the experiences and meanings teachers and learners attach to classroom interactions, teaching strategies, and curriculum implementation, teachers can gain deeper insights into how these elements influence learning.

Through this lens, teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but active participants in shaping the learning experience based on their interpretations of classroom dynamics. This paradigm highlights the importance of understanding the specific social and cultural contexts in which teachers operate, allowing them to better comprehend how learners engage with the content, how policies are implemented, and how teaching methods affect learning outcomes. By focusing on the subjective experiences of both teachers and learners, the interpretivism paradigm offers valuable insights that can lead to more informed teaching practices and improved student engagement and success [22].

5. RESEARCH DESIGN - MULTIPLE CASE STUDY DESIGN

A research design establishes the strategic framework for any study, outlining how the researcher will approach the investigation. In the context of teaching, a multiple case study design is particularly useful for exploring complex educational practices and experiences in specific settings. A case study [23] involves an in-depth exploration of one or more "cases," such as individual teachers, classrooms, or schools, within a defined time and activity boundary. This method allows for the detailed gathering of information using various data collection techniques over an extended period, providing a comprehensive understanding of how educational practices unfold.

For this study, the multiple case study design was selected to identify the challenges and solutions in implementing reading policies in the FP classrooms. By investigating multiple cases, I could explore the similarities and differences in how different teachers understand and apply these policies. This approach helps to provide a broader perspective on the challenges teachers face when putting reading policies into practice.

The primary goal of this study was to gain deep insights into how teachers integrate policy into their daily teaching activities and what challenges they experience. Through class observations, interviews, and detailed data collection, the study aimed to capture a rich, comprehensive description of the teachers' experiences. This approach reveals how teachers interpret their work environments and the personal and professional meanings they assign to their teaching practices, shedding light on how policy is understood and enacted in real-life teaching settings [23].

6. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN: A QUALITATIVE DESIGN

The research methodology influencing the research approach and the decisions made throughout the process [24]. In education, the nature of the issue being investigated such as how teachers implement reading policies or adapt teaching strategies plays a vital role in determining the research approach. This approach guides the inquiry strategies, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring that the research captures the complexities of teaching and learning.

Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring educational phenomena within natural classroom settings, aiming to understand the experiences and meanings that teachers and learners attach to their interactions and practices. In teaching, this approach allows teachers to explore not only what happens in the classroom but also why it happens and how it impacts learning. It prioritizes the significance of teachers' and learners' perspectives on teaching and learning.

Qualitative research in teaching emphasises the insights that emerge from real-life classroom interactions and interactions. This method enables researchers to capture rich, complex descriptions of how teachers approach challenges, develop instructional strategies, and adapt to changing educational policies. Qualitative research is especially valuable in teaching because it delves into the human elements of the educational process, exploring behaviors, beliefs, emotions, and relationships that influence both teaching and learning [25].

One of the main advantages of qualitative research in teaching is its flexibility. It allows for iterative interviews with teachers, leading to more in-depth information about classroom practices. This adaptability helps to develop a nuanced understanding of educational challenges, fostering insights that can improve teaching strategies and ultimately enhance learning outcomes.

7. SITE SELECTION

The study took place in three English-medium primary schools within a specific educational circuit in the North West province of South Africa. These schools were chosen due to their unique position as the only ones in the circuit using English as the language of instruction, making them ideal for examining teaching practices in this context. Each school consists of a single class per grade, accommodating around 300 learners, with class sizes ranging from 45 to 60 students. The staffing at each school includes a principal, a HoD, and one teacher per classroom from Grade R to Grade 3. The schools, being government-funded, offer a representative view of public education practices in the area.

The selection of this particular circuit was based on its proximity to the researcher, enabling ease of access to crucial data. When conducting educational research, the research site [26] needs to be both practical and relevant to addressing the research questions. In this context, these schools provided a diverse group of teachers, each offering unique insights into their teaching methods, making the site suitable for a qualitative case study. The variety of teaching experiences among the teachers ensured a comprehensive understanding of how English-language instruction and reading policies are implemented in different classrooms, contributing valuable information for the study.

8. PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The study made use of purposive sampling that was strategically chosen to access participants with specific knowledge and experience pertinent to the implementation of reading policies. This sampling method is particularly suited to this study as it ensures that the data collected is both in-depth and directly relevant to the study's focus on reading policy implementation in the FP. The participants were carefully selected to provide a well-rounded perspective on the implementation process. The selection includes (three primary schools was chosen):

- Teachers: One educator from each grade (Grade 1 to Grade 3) in each of the three schools involved in the study.
- HoD: One HoD from each school, offering insights into departmental oversight and support.
- Principals: One principal from each school contributes a leadership perspective on policy implementation.
- Subject Advisors: Two subject advisors specializing in home language within the Lichtenburg circuit, providing expertise on curriculum guidance and support.

The study's total sample size consists of 13 participants: 9 Educators, 1 HoD, 1 Principal, and 2 Subject Advisors. This purposeful approach ensures that the study captures a diverse range of perspectives from various roles within the FP. By including participants from different levels of the educational system, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how reading policies are implemented and perceived across different educational contexts.

9. DATA GENERATION STRATEGIES

The data generation methods used in this study align with the principles of qualitative research, focusing on gaining a deep understanding of how teachers implement reading policies in the FP. In a teaching context, qualitative methods provide structured yet flexible approaches for gathering data. The choice of methods such as classroom observations, interviews with teachers and school leadership, and document analysis (such as lesson plans and curriculum guidelines) is critical in capturing the complexities of educational practice. These methods are tailored to explore the experiences and challenges faced by teachers in their daily teaching activities.

For this study, a combination of document analysis, classroom observations, field notes, and interviews with teachers, HoDs, principals, and subject advisors was employed. Document analysis involved reviewing lesson plans and curriculum guidelines and reading policy documents to understand how these are interpreted and used by teachers. Classroom observations provided real-time insights into teaching practices, allowing the researcher to observe how reading instruction is delivered and how policies are applied in practice. Field notes documented the nuances of the classroom environment and teacher-learner interactions, offering contextual insights that enrich the findings. Interviews with teachers, HoDs, principals, and subject advisors added depth to the study by exploring their perspectives on reading policy implementation, the challenges they face, and the support they receive. These combined methods provide a comprehensive view of the implementation of reading policies, highlighting both the successes and the areas where further support and development are needed in the FP.

10. DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis is a methodical technique employed to review and evaluate a range of documents, whether they are printed or digital [28]. This approach is often used in qualitative research to gain deeper insights into the subject under investigation through researcher-generated documents produced during the study. Document analysis is frequently combined with other qualitative methods to achieve triangulation, which enhances the credibility of the research findings.

In this study, triangulation was utilized to bolster the credibility of the qualitative research. The integration of data from document analyses, observations, interviews, and field notes aimed to improve the credibility, objectivity, and validity of the findings. Specifically, the researcher conducted a detailed analysis of various Department of Basic Education documents and policies, including internal school reading policies. The focus was on examining sections of teachers' language files related to reading and assessing their compliance with the established policies. Key documents reviewed included assessment programs, work schedules, reading programs, formal tasks (both pre- and post-moderation), lists of learning and teaching support materials, timetables, daily/weekly preparations, meeting minutes, and intervention plans.

Critical documents analyzed comprised the CAPS for home language, assessment programs, work schedules, annual teaching plans from subject specialists in the English Home Language, and formal tasks. This document analysis provided insights into how teachers implemented these policies, the types of documents they utilized related to reading in the FP, and their interpretation and application of these materials. Through this approach, valuable information was obtained regarding the practical application of policies and the use of related documents by FP educators.

10.1 OBSERVATIONS

Observations were conducted in natural classroom settings to provide an accurate depiction of teaching practices [29]. Observations should occur in natural environments to capture authentic interactions and dynamics. An observation schedule was crafted to focus specifically on reading instruction, with visits scheduled during designated language periods to align with the school timetable and accommodate both the participant's and the researcher's availability.

An observation protocol should include detailed plans for recording data, such as notes on participants, the setting, and key events or activities. This protocol may also detail the time, place, and date of observations. The researcher aimed to maintain a detached stance during observations to ensure objective analysis, capturing detailed and descriptive notes. The observations were carried out in August 2016, with each school being visited for two days. During these visits, the researcher observed the teaching practices of Grade 1, 2, and 3 educators, focusing on how these practices conformed to the guidelines outlined in relevant policies and documents. Interviews with principals and Heads of Departments (HoDs) were conducted during these visits, while subject advisors were interviewed at separately arranged times.

The observations focused on language periods when reading activities were incorporated. The researcher documented various elements of the classroom environment, including educational posters, language displays, and available resources such as big books, reading books, and flashcards. Additionally, the researcher noted the reading and assessment strategies employed by the educators. These observations provided insights into how educators interpreted and implemented reading policies and documents in the FP. Detailed field notes were taken, particularly during reading lessons, to support a comprehensive analysis of the observed practices.

10.2 INTERVIEWS

Interviews [30] are a structured dialogue led by the interviewer to obtain relevant information. Despite being time-consuming, interviews are a crucial data collection tool, providing in-depth information and allowing for follow-up questions as needed. Interviews enable the interviewer to explore areas of interest as they arise and foster a confidential atmosphere that encourages participants to share information. Effective interviewing [30] requires thorough preparation and practice to develop the necessary skills for analyzing and evaluating collected data. Interviews involve direct interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, which can significantly influence the quality of the data gathered. In this study, interviews were conducted in the natural settings of classrooms and relevant offices to obtain firsthand insights into the activities taking place in these environments. Interviews are considered a powerful method for understanding human behavior, especially when direct observation is not feasible, such as in exploring individuals' interpretations of their surroundings [30]. This method was employed in this study to:

- Gather additional information,
- Clarify ambiguous statements,
- Explore various topics in-depth,
- Provide a detailed account of educators' understanding and implementation of reading policies in the FP.

Interviews were conducted with educators, including Heads of Departments (HoDs), Principals, Grade 1, 2, and 3 teachers, and subject advisors. As noted by Bush (2012), interviews serve as a primary means of information gathering and offer the opportunity for probing questions and observation of non-verbal cues, which enriches the data collected. For this study, individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate detailed engagement through prompts and gestures. The semi-structured format, with its predetermined yet flexible questions, allowed for a more open exchange of information. This flexibility enabled the interviewer to adapt questions based on the responses from interviewees, providing the opportunity for further clarification and exploration.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were selected to allow for in-depth probing and to accommodate varying responses [30]. An interview guide was used to structure the discussions and probe key areas of interest. Effective interviewing skills involve a combination of observation, empathic sensitivity, and intellectual judgment. The researcher established a supportive and secure environment by explaining the research aims, ensuring confidentiality, and outlining the interview process. The pace and timing of the interviews were managed carefully to maintain a productive dialogue.

Interviews were recorded through note-taking and audio recording. Conducted privately in appropriate settings, the interviews followed observations to capture detailed insights that might not have been evident through observation alone. After each interview, participants were thanked for their contributions, and the confidentiality of their responses was reiterated.

10.3 FIELDNOTES

During classroom visits, the researcher carefully documented both visual and auditory observations. This included recording how students interacted with the teaching materials and their levels of attentiveness during lessons. Field notes were utilized to capture these observations and initial interpretations [31]. These notes provided a basis for in-depth analysis and informed the focus of subsequent interviews, facilitating a thorough and insightful examination of classroom dynamics.

11. DATA ANALYSIS

The study employed inductive analysis [32]. Inductive analysis involves building patterns, categories, and themes from the ground up by organizing data into progressively abstract units. This iterative process requires moving between the data and emerging themes until a comprehensive set of themes is established. Inductive analysis can include interactive collaboration with participants to refine and shape the themes that arise from the analysis.

For this study, inductive analysis was applied to data collected from interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim [32]. The researcher integrated information from observations, field notes, documents, and interview transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the data. A systematic process was followed, involving data recording, transcription, and coding into themes and categories. After coding, the data were organized according to these themes and categories to ensure robust analysis and accurate thematic development.

12. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

During the interviews, teachers identified several factors that influence their teaching of reading. Among these, overcrowded classrooms, the learning environment, inadequate materials, language issues, and a lack of training in the FP were highlighted as significant challenges. Overcrowding was particularly concerning, with more than 40 learners per class, a ratio far exceeding the Department of Education's prescribed 1:40. This overcrowding not only affects the quality of education by limiting individual attention but also complicates classroom management and discipline.

Language barriers further compound the challenges, as the LoLT is English, while most learners speak Setswana at home. Learners only use English during class, which restricts their exposure to the language and limits their ability to fully engage with the curriculum. These factors collectively hinder effective reading instruction in the FP, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and support.

12.1 OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS

The issue of insufficient classroom space emerged as a significant challenge in the FP, severely impacting teachers' ability to carry out effective teaching practices. Observations and interviews revealed that none of these classrooms had adequate space to create a reading corner or even to lay down a carpet for group-guided reading sessions. This limitation is not only due to the high number of learners exceeding the Department of Education's recommended ratio of 1:40 but also because the physical space itself is too small to accommodate all the learners comfortably.

One Grade 2 teacher highlighted the challenges of managing such overcrowded classrooms, stating, "*With the overcrowded classes, I do not have the courage to divide them into groups, move the tables, and do group-guided reading. Shared reading and individual reading is the way out.*" Similarly, a Grade 1 teacher expressed frustration, saying, "*We sit with a lot of children in the classroom; we struggle to do all the work as prescribed by the CAPS document.*" The lack of space and the overwhelming number of learners prevent the effective implementation of key teaching strategies, such as group-guided reading, which are crucial for supporting learners' reading development.

The overcrowding issue not only hinders the physical organization of the classroom but also negatively impacts the quality of education. As another Grade 1 educator pointed out, "*Overcrowded classrooms are a problem. We are in the FP, but no quality education can take place, just do the work and hope they understand it.*" This situation leaves weaker learners at a disadvantage, as insufficient time and space to provide the individualized support they need further exacerbates the challenges of delivering effective reading instruction in the FP.

12.2 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The learning environments in the FP classrooms varied significantly in terms of resources and conditions, impacting the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Observations and interviews with teachers revealed a mix of well-maintained spaces and those in dire need of renovation, with a consistent theme of insufficient resources across all classrooms.

In Grade 1 and Grade 2 classrooms, the walls were painted, and there were enough tables and chairs for the learners. The walls featured some posters, though only a few were directly related to reading. The teachers had access to various teaching materials, such as flashcards, big books, shared readers, and colorful pictures. However, the number of readers was insufficient to provide one for each learner, which limited the ability to engage all learners equally in reading activities. Despite these challenges, teachers made the most of the resources available, using them to support their teaching as best as possible.

In contrast, the Grade 3 classroom was in a much poorer condition. The rooms needed significant renovations, with cracked tiles and peeling paint on the walls. The deteriorating physical environment made it difficult for the teachers to create a stimulating learning atmosphere. The teachers lamented the inability to paste posters or put up pictures, which is essential for reinforcing daily lessons and creating an engaging classroom environment. The Grade 3 educator explained, *"My classroom is in bad shape. My walls are painted, but the paint is coming off. My floor is cracked, and this is not exposing the learner at all to a learning environment. I cannot paste any posters on the walls or put up pictures that the learners can see."*

Across all classrooms, the lack of additional resources was a recurring issue. Despite the basic provisions of tables, chairs, and some teaching materials, there were significant gaps in resources needed for effective teaching. Many teachers reported that the school did not have the funds to purchase additional materials, forcing them to rely heavily on the chalkboard and the Department of Basic Education workbook. One Grade 3 educator expressed frustration with this situation: *"I have learned to work without any other resources, even though you budget for it, you just do not get any resources."* Similarly, a Grade 1 educator noted, *"The classrooms were painted last year, but the resources that we had we must use because there is no money to buy any other resources."*

Overall, while some classrooms were well-maintained, the lack of sufficient reading materials and the poor condition of other classrooms created significant barriers to providing a high-quality education. These challenges highlight the need for improved resource allocation and better maintenance of learning environments to support the educational development of learners in the FP.

12.3 LANGUAGE ISSUES

Teachers in the FP face significant challenges related to the LoLT in their classrooms. Although English is the designated LoLT, most learners come from homes where Setswana, Afrikaans, Sepedi, or Zulu are the primary languages spoken. This linguistic mismatch creates a barrier to effective learning, particularly in reading and comprehension, as learners are not fully proficient in English.

The CAPS document prescribes activities that assume a certain level of English proficiency. However, due to the learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, teachers are often forced to adapt these activities to suit the learners' actual language abilities. This adjustment not only increases the teachers' workload but also compels them to modify the curriculum's standards, potentially compromising the intended educational outcomes. A Grade 1 educator highlighted this issue, stating, *"Because we are an English medium school where the home language is English, the learners struggle to read and sound because they speak another language at home. The learners speak very broken English."*

Furthermore, the language barrier extends beyond the classroom. Many parents are unable to assist their children with homework or reading practice because they are not proficient in English. This lack of support at home exacerbates the difficulties learners face, as they have limited opportunities to practice English outside school hours. Another teacher noted, *"The learners come from the townships to the English medium schools, and only in class time do they speak English. Outside and during break time, the learners speak Setswana. The parents cannot assist the learners because they do not understand English."*

The situation creates a challenging learning environment where teachers must continually adjust their teaching methods and materials to accommodate the learners' language needs. Despite these efforts, the language gap remains a significant obstacle to achieving the educational goals set out by the CAPS document. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes language support for both learners and their parents, as well as professional development for teachers to better equip them to handle the linguistic diversity in their classrooms.

12.4 LACK OF TRAINING IN THE FP

The interviews revealed significant challenges related to the qualifications and training of teachers in the FP, raising concerns about their ability to effectively implement the CAPS. Notably, one Grade 2 teacher admitted to not being qualified to teach in the FP, while the Grade 3 teacher had experience only in Grade 1. This lack of specific qualifications casts doubt on their ability to deliver quality teaching and learning, as the successful implementation of the CAPS document requires a deep understanding of its content and objectives. A Grade 1 teacher remarked, *"Due to the fact that we have only maybe once a year training, we struggle to use the CAPS document and are not sure how to use it."*

Subject advisors echoed these concerns, highlighting the recurring issue of inadequate training and the constant need to support teachers who may be unfamiliar with the demands of the FP. One subject advisor explained, *"A huge challenge for*

me as a subject advisor is that I will support an educator and help where I can, but next year, that educator is moved to another class. Then I have to do the same training, orientation, and support with the new educator again." This cycle of re-training indicates a lack of continuity and stability in the teaching staff, which undermines the consistency and effectiveness of curriculum delivery.

Despite all teachers being formally qualified for the FP, there remains a significant gap in their ability to interpret and implement the CAPS document effectively. This gap is attributed to insufficient ongoing training and support. Teachers expressed the need for more targeted and frequent training sessions to help them better understand and apply the CAPS guidelines. As one Grade 2 teacher suggested, *"I suggest that the subject advisors must do training according to the needs of the educators or add all the problems on the agenda and try to resolve them at the training."*

The teachers' struggle with the CAPS document underscores the critical importance of continuous professional development. Without proper training and a thorough understanding of curriculum requirements, teachers may inadvertently make errors in interpretation and implementation, leading to significant negative consequences for teaching and learning quality. Addressing this issue requires a coordinated effort from subject advisors, HoDs, and other educational leaders to ensure that all teachers are adequately equipped to meet the demands of the CAPS document and provide the highest standard of education possible.

12.5 OTHER FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TEACHING

The implementation of the CAPS document in the observed schools reveals several significant challenges that affect the quality of education. In Grade 1 and 2 classrooms, the timetable was followed correctly, adhering to the time allocation specified by the CAPS document. However, in the Grade 3 classroom, the time allocation did not align with the CAPS requirements, indicating a deviation from the expected standards. Although the lessons were implemented with the CAPS document in mind, there were notable discrepancies in the application of the curriculum. According to the Annual Teaching Plans provided by subject advisors, some aspects of the curriculum were incorrectly applied. A key example is the lack of group-guided reading sessions, which were not observed in any of the classrooms. One Grade 2 teacher expressed frustration with the curriculum, stating, *"Education is politics; 'up there,' they create the document and don't care if it is going to work down here. What was good in the past they took away, and since then, there have been almost five curriculums, each one more difficult to interpret and implement."*

At School B, the situation was exacerbated by the absence of a HoD for the past two years, leaving teachers without the necessary guidance and support. This lack of leadership has led to uncertainty among teachers about what they should be teaching, significantly hindering their ability to implement the curriculum effectively. A Grade 2 teacher lamented, *"We are working on our own, no HoD for the past two years, and the principal is not involved at all. This makes teaching difficult if we are not sure what is going on."*

School C faced a different set of challenges, primarily financial constraints that severely limited the availability of essential teaching resources. Teachers at this school struggled to obtain the necessary materials, such as readers, which are stipulated by the CAPS document. The lack of financial resources forced educators to either share limited resources or go without them altogether. A Grade 1 teacher reflected on the situation, saying, *"The CAPS document stipulates certain things like readers, but the school does not have money to buy readers. I learn to use the resources I have and make the best of what there is."*

These issues highlight the broader systemic problems within the education system, where the successful implementation of the CAPS document is hampered by inadequate support, leadership, and resources. Without addressing these underlying challenges, the goal of providing quality education as envisioned by the CAPS document remains difficult to achieve.

13. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THESE CHALLENGES

Improving the implementation and challenges in the FP requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses both systemic challenges and the day-to-day practices of teachers. Drawing from the insights gained through data collection methods such as classroom observations, document analysis, and interviews, the following solutions and strategies can enhance the effective application of reading policies:

13.1 TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Class Size Reduction Initiatives

Hire Additional Staff: Schools can seek funding to hire more teachers, assistants, volunteers or students, allowing for smaller class sizes and more individualized attention for learners.

Split Classes: Implementing split classes for certain grades can distribute learners more evenly across available classrooms.

Positive Classroom Climate: Foster a supportive and inclusive classroom culture where learners feel safe to express themselves and engage in discussions, promoting respect and collaboration.

Flexible Scheduling

Staggered Timetables: Introducing staggered schedules can reduce the number of learners in classrooms at any given time, providing a more manageable environment for both teachers and learners.

Rotating Classrooms: Allowing learners to rotate between different classrooms or learning spaces can help alleviate overcrowding in any one area.

Utilization of Alternative Spaces

Use of Common Areas: Libraries, assembly areas, pavilions and other common areas can be adapted for classroom use, providing additional learning spaces.

Outdoor Learning Spaces: Utilising outdoor areas for lessons can create a more dynamic learning environment while alleviating pressure on indoor classrooms.

Community Partnerships

Collaboration with Local Organisations: Schools can partner with local community organizations to access additional resources and spaces for learning, such as community centers or universities/colleges.

After-School Programs: Developing after-school programs can help distribute learner populations throughout the day, reducing classroom congestion during regular hours.

Enhancing Teaching Strategies

Cooperative Learning: Implementing cooperative learning strategies allows learners to work in small groups, fostering collaboration and engagement while managing classroom dynamics.

Flipped Classroom Models: Utilising flipped classroom approaches can reduce the need for large group instruction, allowing learners to engage with materials independently before class discussions.

Advocating for Policy Change

Lobby for Funding: Schools can advocate for government support and funding aimed at reducing class sizes and improving infrastructure.

Community Awareness Campaigns: Raising awareness about the impact of overcrowded classrooms can garner community support for initiatives aimed at addressing this issue.

Diversification of Teaching Methods

Innovative Pedagogies: Encouraging teachers to move beyond traditional lecturing methods can enhance reading instruction. Training sessions can introduce diverse teaching methodologies, such as guided reading, small group work, and the use of multimedia resources, which cater to different learning styles and promote engagement.

Collaborative Practices: Establishing platforms for teachers to share effective practices and resources fosters a culture of collaboration. Peer observations and co-teaching opportunities can provide valuable insights into successful teaching strategies.

Resource Allocation and Accessibility

Adequate Teaching Materials: Ensuring that teachers have access to a wide range of teaching resources, including reading materials aligned with the CAPS document, can facilitate effective reading instruction. Schools should invest in diverse texts and interactive materials that reflect learners' interests and backgrounds.

Utilizing Outdoor Spaces: Encouraging the use of outdoor environments for group activities can enhance collaboration and make learning more dynamic. Creating flexible classroom layouts that support group work can help mitigate space constraints.

Enhanced Assessment Practices

Formative Assessments: Incorporating formative assessment practices allows teachers to monitor learners' progress and adapt instruction accordingly. Continuous assessments, including oral and written tasks, can provide insights into individual learners' needs and inform instructional decisions.

Collaborative Assessment Strategies: Engaging teachers in the development of assessment criteria and sharing insights on learners' performance can create a supportive environment for professional growth and improve learner outcomes.

Leadership and Support Structures

Empowering Leadership: School leaders, including principals and Heads of Department, play a critical role in supporting policy implementation. Providing guidance, resources, and encouragement to foster an environment conducive to effective reading instruction.

Subject Advisor Involvement: Involving subject advisors in training sessions and workshops can enhance teachers' understanding of curriculum expectations and offer tailored support in implementing reading policies.

13.2 LANGUAGE SOLUTIONS

Bilingual Education Programs: Implement bilingual education models that allow learners to learn in their home language alongside the target language, helping them to build proficiency in both.

Language Support Specialists: Employ language support specialists to provide targeted assistance for learners struggling with language barriers, offering individualized tutoring and resources.

Professional Development for Teachers: Provide training for teachers on effective strategies for teaching EFAL and incorporating learners' home languages into instruction.

Incorporate Culturally Relevant Materials: Use teaching materials that reflect learners' cultural backgrounds and languages, making learning more relatable and engaging.

Peer Tutoring and Collaboration: Establish peer tutoring programs where more proficient learners can assist their classmates in language learning, fostering collaboration and confidence.

Interactive Language Activities: Utilise interactive activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, and games, to encourage language use in a supportive and engaging environment.

Parent and Community Engagement: Involve parents and the community in language programs to reinforce language skills at home and provide additional resources and support.

Assessment of Language Proficiency: Regularly assess learners' language proficiency to tailor instruction and interventions according to their individual needs.

Create a Language-rich Environment: Foster a language-rich classroom environment through signage, labels, and diverse reading materials in both the home language and the target language.

Use Technology and Multimedia Resources: Incorporate technology and multimedia resources, such as language learning apps and online platforms, to provide additional practice and exposure to the target language.

13.3 ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Regular baseline training at the beginning of each school year is crucial for refreshing teachers' knowledge of the CAPS document and ensuring they are up-to-date with reading policy developments. Only one of the schools in the study conducted such training, highlighting the need for a more widespread approach.

In-School Training: Promoting in-school training opportunities allows teachers to stay informed about new developments and reinforces correct policy implementation. These sessions can include workshops.

Ongoing Professional Development Programs: Establish regular professional development workshops and training sessions focused on current educational practices, curriculum updates, and effective teaching strategies.

Mentorship and Peer Support: Pair less experienced teachers with seasoned teachers for mentorship, providing guidance, support, and opportunities for observation and feedback.

In-School Training Initiatives: Implement in-school training sessions that are tailored to the specific needs of teachers, allowing for collaboration and sharing of best practices among colleagues.

Online Learning Platforms: Provide access to online courses and webinars that teachers can complete at their own pace, covering various aspects of teaching and pedagogy.

Collaborative Learning Communities: Create professional learning communities where teachers can meet regularly to discuss challenges, share resources, and learn from one another.

Needs Assessment Surveys: Conduct surveys or assessments to identify specific training needs and areas for improvement among teachers, ensuring that professional development is relevant and targeted.

Incentives for Participation: Offer incentives, such as stipends or recognition, for teachers who actively engage in professional development opportunities.

Resource Allocation for Training: Ensure that schools have the necessary resources, such as funding and materials, dedicated to teacher training and development.

Workshops on Policy Implementation: Provide workshops specifically focused on understanding and implementing educational policies, including reading policies, to ensure teachers feel confident in their application.

Collaboration with Higher Education Institutions: Partner with universities and educational institutions to offer accredited training programs, workshops, or courses that can enhance teachers' qualifications and expertise.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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