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Views on Empowering Parents to Support their Children with Literacy Skills

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the views of teachers and parents on strategies for empowering parents to effectively support their children with literacy skills. Literature sketches a bleak picture of the poor literacy performance of South African primary school learners. This qualitative study utilising a case study design, was conducted at two primary schools in the Mangaung district of Bloemfontein's Free State Department of Education (FSDOE). The participants were selected through the purposive sampling method and data were collected through interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The data was presented and analysed within themes aligned with the literature, conceptual framework and the objectives of the study. The findings disclosed that parental support regarding literacy is insufficient and that both teachers and parents are experiencing immense challenges with poor literacy skills among learners. The findings brought forth some noteworthy suggestions for empowering parents to support their children with the improvement of literacy skills. The main conclusion derived from the study is the need for a greater focus on strategies to involve parents in literacy improvement. It is recommended that future research focus on strategies to enhance parental empowerment for improved support to their children with literacy skills.

Keywords: literacy skills; reading; writing; parental involvement; empowerment

1. Introduction

The South African government recognises the importance of education as a fundamental right for all citizens, including vulnerable groups of learners (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2000; Franklin & McLaren, 2015; South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC] 2012). It is believed that solid literacy skills should serve as the basis for education and the development of further studies: "Literacy is the cornerstone of academic achievement and an important foundation for lifelong learning" (Aramamneh, Saqr &

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Areepattamanill, 2023, p. 2). Hence, the government has committed itself to improving basic education for better literacy outcomes. Literacy skills refer predominantly to reading and writing (in the language curriculum), although it includes speaking and listening (Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021).

Research in South Africa indicates that advancing literacy skills, particularly in reading and writing, poses significant challenges, especially for those facing tough contextual hardships (SAHRC, 2006; Plaatjies, 2021). The SAHRC has warned since 2006 that South African schools dealing with challenges such as poverty and uninvolved parents perform poorly compared to their wealthier counterparts in more affluent suburbs. These schools are categorised in the South African educational setup as quintile 1 to 3 schools (schools regarded as economically poor), while quintile 4 and 5 schools are regarded as financially prosperous. Within this setup, parents are struggling to support their children, while teachers also find it difficult due to the learning difficulties that many children experience (Plaatjies, 2021; Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021).

Additionally, the issue of multilingualism adds to the woes for both parents and teachers (see Venketsamy & Sibanda, 2021; Carter, Podpadec, Pillay, Babayigit & Gazu, 2024). Teachers are challenged by learners from different linguistic backgrounds as many parents are sending their children to schools where the medium of instruction is other than their home language. A report by USAID (2020, p. 4) mentions that "according to Ethnologue: Languages of the World, published by SIL International, there are 34 languages in South Africa. Of these, 30 are living and four are extinct. Of the living languages, 20 are indigenous and 10 are non-indigenous". As a result, numerous South African classrooms have a diverse linguistic makeup, presenting challenging difficulties in language instruction and learning. Multilingual classrooms are not confined to the South African educational landscape, it is a phenomenon commonly experienced worldwide due to global mobility and migration (Parveen, Rasool & Jan, 2022). Referring to the South African context, Howie, Combrinck, Roux, Tshele, Mokoena and McLeod Palane (2017) point out that up to a staggering 80% of South African learners switch to a language other than their home language at school. This language is predominantly English, even though it is often the second language for many learners (Omidire, 2019).

The following part delves into other reasons for conducting the study.

Despite numerous intervention strategies implemented by education authorities over the last decade, both diagnostic and systematic evaluation reports revealed that the literacy performance of most learners in South African schools is still far below the standard (Rule & Land 2017; Chetty 2019; Govender & Hugo, 2020; Carter et al., 2024). This data was obtained from authoritative literacy assessment reports such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA), the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), and the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS). Chetty (2019) and Govender and Hugo (2020) note further that the 2016 PIRLS report revealed that an astonishing 78% of learners in South

African schools could not meet international standards by the end of their fourth grade. This percentage contrasts starkly with the international benchmark of 4%. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that nearly 80% of fourth-grade learners struggle with reading comprehension and that over half of first-grade learners are unfamiliar with the letters of the alphabet (Metelerkamp, 2023). The 2016 PIRLS results also indicated that South Africa ranked last in the reading component out of the 50 countries participating in the assessment.

The second and perhaps the most crucial reason for steering this investigation is the critical role that solid literacy skills can play in a child's schooling career and beyond (Aramamneh, et al., 2023; Carter et al., 2024). Reading skills, for instance, significantly impact academic performance in all subjects because comprehension is essential for a thorough understanding of the content (Mohammed & Amponsah, 2018; Vasylenko, 2017). Writing skills on the other hand, according to Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021, p. 400), "is a fundamental and practical skill that, among others, enables one to be more than the passive recipient of linguistic input, more importantly, fosters critical thinking abilities". Moses and Mohamad (2019) add that excellent writing skills are crucial for learners' academic performance and emotional and social development.

The third consideration for doing the study deals with the thorny issue of context. Literature on literacy education is characterised by extensive conversations regarding the influence of contextual factors on literacy skill development and the connection between learners' home environment and their performance. Prinsloo (in Landsberg, Kruger & Swart, p. 52) argues that "challenging contextual factors often result in adverse outcomes, stressing the widely held belief that supportive home environments are crucial to developing literacy skills".

The last contemplation for conducting the study deals with the key role of parents in children's literacy development. Recent research reports have demonstrated a positive link between effective parental involvement and children's academic success (Naicker, 2020; Athiemoolam & Kwayiyo, 2022;). Regarding support specifically in literacy, Zhang, Inoue, Cao, Li and Georgiou (2023) point out that parents can make a significant contribution to the development of literacy skills. By providing considerable support during the developmental years, reading challenges may decrease during the school years, also contributing to reducing difficulties with writing skills.

The preceding paragraphs highlighted the importance of literacy skills and the challenges associated with it. Although several studies have alluded to the invaluable role of parents in support of their children's literacy skills, less is known about how parents – especially those from disadvantaged contexts – should be empowered to provide support to their children. Recent research by Hartle (2020); Hulme, Webber, Fox, Ricketts (2022); National Family Learning Forum; Shapiro and Taylor (2022); Aramamneh et al. (2023); DesJardin, Stika, Eisenberg, Johnson, Ganguly and Henning (2023) have heightened the need for more research in this area. This study aimed to close this research gap by

exploring how parents can be empowered to enhance their children's literacy skills.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To articulate the obstacles that impede parental support to children.
- To describe the challenges that teachers and parents encounter when supporting learners with reading skills.
- To describe the challenges that teachers and parents encounter when supporting learners with writing skills.
- To articulate parents and teachers views on the completion of school homework.
- To explore perspectives on how to empower parents to assist their children in developing literacy skills.

The next paragraphs focus on the conceptual grounding and the review of related literature.

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

Jabareen (2009) defines a conceptual framework as a network or a 'plane' of interlinked concepts that comprehensively understand a phenomenon. The concepts that constitute a conceptual framework support one another, articulate their respective phenomena and establish a framework-specific philosophy. According to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), the researcher's experiences, knowledge, convictions and values can contribute to the conceptual framework. Based on the ideas of these scholars, the central core of the study is grounded in relevant concepts, literature and previous research on reading and writing development. These concepts and theoretical perspectives were critically discussed, but with a focus within the home environment. Taking this into account and considering the central theme of the study, namely investigating empowering strategies that can assist parents in supporting their children with literacy skills, we first examine specific areas in literacy where learners face difficulties.

The 2016 and 2021 PIRLS results revealed a plethora of difficulties with reading that are evident among South African primary school learners. Learners struggle to read with comprehension, there are concerns regarding exposure to extensive reading texts and insufficient learner commitment (Chetty, 2019; Mullis, von Davier, Foy, Fishbein, Reynolds & Wry, 2023). Word recognition and the processing of individual sounds are another area of concern. Mohammed and Amponsah (2018) also highlighted the prevalence of underdeveloped phonemic awareness, negatively impacting fluent reading. Furthermore, learners struggle with identifying and recognising words in the lower grades and have an underdeveloped working memory. Vasylenko (2017) stresses the importance of fluent reading as learners should not struggle with word recognition if expected to read quickly for comprehension. Difficulties in reading hinder general knowledge, spelling, reading abilities and vocabulary development.

Research indicates that mastering writing "is a challenging activity that necessitates the use of numerous linguistic components" (Elbashir, 2023, p. 58).

Therefore, it can be regarded as even more challenging in schools where multilingualism is common. For example, Chetty (2019) found in his study that learners who spoke isiXhosa or Afrikaans as their home language but were taught in English struggled with writing and completing assignments where they had to write sentences and paragraphs based on provided subjects. The study also highlighted difficulties with language usage, spelling and the completion of homework. Plaatjies (2016) in turn, discovered that factors such as poor concentration, emotional and behavioural problems, lack of motivation and insufficient organisational skills in learners also hinder the completion of writing tasks, making it a daunting teaching task for teachers. Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021, p. 400) agree that "writing, due to various intrinsic attributes and extrinsic factors seems to be the most challenging skill for language teachers". Careless attitudes towards the completion of writing and a lack of persistence are also hindering factors, along with the difficulties that learners experience in the planning of writing tasks. Their thoughts stray easily from the subject, their writing pace is slow and they often possess limited general knowledge (Plaatjies, 2016), which can also be partly alluded to as what Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021, p. 400) ascribes: "It (writing) is often a solitary, burdensome undertaking." Killen (2015) concludes that learners with limited writing abilities keep their sentences short and provide only limited information. Due to their limited vocabulary, their sentence structures are limited, ideas are not logically presented and sentence structures are repetitive. To address some of these shortcomings, Aram and Shachar (2024) believe that participation in writing activities at home, such as writing names, lists, notes, tags and birthday cards is crucial, as well as involvement in activities such as library visits (see also Pfof & Heyne, 2023).

As reading and writing should be practised at home, the next discussion elaborates on the importance of a conducive home environment.

Schoeman (2018) asserts that numerous factors within the family dynamics or the home literacy environment can directly or indirectly hinder the completion of homework activities. One such hindering factor seems to be parents' educational levels, which may disable efficient support (Buyukalan & Altinay, 2018; Dry 2019). This factor was confirmed by the PIRLS 2016 and 2021 results showing that parents with better qualifications and in more advanced professions, strongly correlated with learners' performance (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2016; Mullis et al., 2023). Plaatjies's study (2021) concluded that the support requirement for many parents is simply unattainable. It is a situation that is often rooted in the fact that many learners are regarded as first-generation learners, meaning that they grew up in households without a tradition of attending school or pursuing formal education (Malkani & Rose, 2018).

It is common knowledge that a conducive home literacy environment includes physical resources such as books and a suitable workspace. The PIRLS data demonstrated that the availability of resources in the home, such as books, a dedicated room and internet access are also strongly correlated with learners' performance (Mullis et al., 2016; Mullis et al., 2023). This point is particularly meaningful in the sense that many first-generation learners are confronted by

inadequate study facilities at home, illiterate parents and the need to contribute to the household economy (Malkani & Rose, 2018). Other critical factors that hamper support are the absence of quality preschool education in disadvantaged communities and insufficient exposure to digitalisation. DesJardin, et al. (2023, p. 189) assert that "the preschool years are a significant time in a young child's life for developing fundamental skills in language and early learning", while Aram and Shachar (2024, p. 524) state that "given the increasing role that digital technology plays in the lives of young children, digital tools can be an additional means of supporting young children's literacy development". According to Naicker (2020), South African policy documents such as the White Paper 6 and the Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) emphasise the vital role of parents in providing support, as it enhances motivation and achievement (Wu, Barger, Oh & Pomerantz, 2022). Continuous practice and support at home contribute to developing literacy and language skills (Mascarenhas et al., 2017). Hence, the support offered by parents is a significant factor that can either contribute to or hinder performance. Athiemoolam and Kwayiyo (2022) confirm this point by stating that good literacy performance depends on extensive home literacy activities and a rich literacy environment (see also Hulme, et al., 2022). This factor was pointed out as another vital success indicator in the PIRL's results of 2016 and 2021, with the data showing that learner performance increases with consistent parental engagement in literacy activities (Mullis et al., 2016; Mullis et al., 2023).

Homework often sparks controversy among educators and parents, resulting in differing opinions on advantages and disadvantages, appropriate grade levels, the effect on academic performance and whether homework should be given or not (Haffila, Sarifa & Mansoor, 2018; Hanratty, Miller, Brennan-Wilson, Cockerill, Davison, Roberts & Winter, 2019). The results of the PIRLS assessments, however, confirmed a positive relationship between the frequency of homework and higher reading scores (Howie et al., 2017). According to Pfeffer (2018), the DBE emphasises that homework is a requirement but that schools should establish their homework policies. Homework strategies that promote literacy can make a significant difference.

Confidence and motivation form an essential aspect of the learning process. Al-Fadley, Al-Holy and Al-Adwani (2018) think that a lack of confidence and interest in reading is often attributed to parents' insufficient support and exposure to literature. Still, it appears that parents in disadvantaged areas are unable to buy books and magazines; this impacts motivation negatively regarding engagement in regular book-reading activities. Mohammed and Amponsah (2018) also found that insufficient confidence and motivation can decrease learner interest. This lack of interest contributes to a reluctance towards reading and eventually hampers the entire reading process. As a result, confidence and motivation are affected, making the child vulnerable in terms of literacy as they may struggle to meet the unique demands of reading and writing. In this regard, the behaviour and example set by parents can play a significant role in fostering increased confidence and improved motivation, aiming for enhanced proficiency in reading and writing skills. The example of the parent is also a contributing factor; if parents do

not read, children will also not read. Pfof and Heyne (2023, p. 2630) conclude that "Parents might affect their children's reading behaviour by acting as a role model".

3. Method

This study employed an interpretivist paradigm to enable the researcher to understand the issue from the participants' perspective, including teachers and parents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A qualitative research approach was used to address the study's objectives effectively. McLeod (2019) suggests that qualitative researchers aim to examine phenomena in their natural settings and gain insights and knowledge about the connections individuals bring forth, aligning with the principles of the qualitative approach. This study employed a case study design to understand better a specific phenomenon: how parents can be empowered to support their children with literacy skills. Additionally, the case study design considers the influence of real contexts, recognising that context significantly shapes both causes and consequences (Cohen et al., 2018).

The target group for the research comprised language educators and parents from two schools in the Mangaung district, Free State Province. The two schools were sufficient to respond to the objectives of the study as the selected participants have a sound understanding of the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). With the purposive selection method, a specific group of participants (teachers and parents) based on common characteristics (learner challenges in literacy) were selected. Data was collected during July, August and September 2023. At school 1, data was obtained via open-ended questionnaires from six teachers in the foundation and intermediate phases. The parents at school 1 were not responding to the invitation to partake in the study. Open-ended questionnaires are described by Cohen et al. (2018) as extremely valuable for obtaining feedback on various sensitive topics. They are also cost-effective, reliable, valid and quick to complete. The questionnaires were pre-tested before the final distribution. The initial idea was to use open-ended questionnaires in also collecting data from the parents but many responses were very blunt and therefore the researcher decided to conduct interviews with some parents of Grade 4 to 6 learners. This strategy allowed for asking follow-up questions for more clarity and depth. This approach ensured that the findings could be triangulated, and thus the validity of the findings. The researcher received six questionnaires back from parents and conducted six interviews at school 2.

The thematic data analysis approach was employed, which aligns with an inductive approach and involves identifying new themes that can emerge from the data, as described by Harding (2013). As mentioned earlier, context plays a crucial role in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013), so the contextual influences on literacy were also considered during the analysis process. Following the advice of Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017), the researcher first read through the data, taking notes of patterns and key points. The data were coded according to specific phrases, categorised and then developed into themes that were analysed further scrutinising for patterns and connections within and between themes. To ensure intuition the researcher spend considerable time in the field, and after the collection of the data immersed himself in the raw data, reading it repeatedly to

discover what was not immediately obvious. In ensuring creativity, the researcher used the services of a research assistant with a sound understanding of the context and community to distribute the questionnaires. This ensured greater participation and more comprehensive responses from the participating parents. In writing the summary, the focus was mainly on the identified themes and discussed the key points in conjunction with the objectives of the study. Permission was obtained from the Free State Department of Education and the research project was assigned an ethical clearance number (UFS-HSD2020/0531/21/22). The study followed the guidelines outlined by Resnik (2020) to ensure sound ethical principles, including aspects related to anonymity. Therefore, codes were assigned to each participant. For example, TP1S1 stands for Teacher Participant 1, School 1, while PP3S2 stands for Parent Participant 3, School 2. The integrity of the study was ensured by adhering to the principles of trustworthiness. Credibility was achieved by ensuring the findings reflected the raw data through participant member-checking. Transferability was guaranteed by considering conformability, which aims to present the researcher's feedback without biases (Diane, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012).

4. Findings

Maxwell (2013, p. 30) declares that "an essential aspect of qualitative studies is the consideration of the specific context in which research is conducted, and therefore it was imperative to present this context comprehensively. School 1 is located on the city's outskirts and school 2 is in the city. Learners at school 1 use the transport facilities of the school while parents or caregivers drop learners at school 2. Both schools enjoy quintile 5 status, which is questionable as both schools are characterised by poverty. The learner enrolment at school 1 is relatively low, with 364 learners. School 2 has a massive learner enrolment of 1 420 learners. This school seems to be overcrowded. School 1's educators total 13, while school 2 has 47 educators. The home language at school 1 is Afrikaans, which is also the medium of instruction. The home language at school 2 is mainly Sesotho, with English as the medium of instruction. Some learners speak Afrikaans and there are teachers whose home language is Afrikaans. School 1 has two English educators while five are involved in Afrikaans. School 2 has five educators for English and four educators for Afrikaans.

4.1 Theme 1: Obstacles that impede parental support to children

The findings from both schools indicate that parental support in literacy is inadequate. TP6S1 highlighted several reasons that could be attributed to this lack of support:

Working parents get late at home and are too tired at the end of the day to provide sufficient support. The learners have sports activities and travel by bus and other public transport, which also steal time and they begin late with homework. Unfortunately, homework is not seen as a priority. Schoolwork is the teacher's responsibility, according to the views of parents.

TP2S2, who holds the position of subject head, with more than 23 years' experience as a language teacher, echoed the same sentiments, adding that parents blame teachers for poor performance. The data suggests also that parents

and grandparents cannot support their children as they cannot read or write (PP82).

4.2 Theme 2: Challenges that teachers and parents encounter when supporting learners with reading skills

Teacher participants at both schools pointed out several troublesome challenges that learners are confronted with regarding reading skills:

The learners fare poorly in the curriculum. Some learners read very well and comprehend what they read. Some learners struggle to read. It is especially long words that are a challenge for them. Some learners do not want to read aloud in the class situation, and others can also not follow and stay with as others read" (T1S1).

A progressive strategy was shared by PP7S2, who approached support in the following manner:

I expose her to magazines that I also read to broaden her vocabulary. She also reads the newspaper with me. Especially news articles, and in that manner, she is always up to date with what is happening around us. She must know the more I read, the more my imagination will improve.

The feedback from both parents and teachers indicated that careful attention should be paid to the issue of multilingualism:

For learners who have Afrikaans as their First Additional Language subject, the reading texts Piekfyn (sic) Afrikaans and Platinum are hopelessly difficult. They face challenges as most of their home languages are Sotho, Tswana or Xhosa, and English as their FAL. Consequently, the work becomes complicated for these learners already grappling with learning the language. Often, I find myself having to explain many Afrikaans concepts in English to them. Moreover, some parents are unable to speak a single word in Afrikaans. (TP2S2).

PPS2 shared her experience as follows:

"My child finds it difficult with Afrikaans and other African languages. Although Sesotho is our native language and we speak it at home, she never attended schools that taught Sotho.

Participant 5, at school 1, expressed her view on the topic of reading time as follows:

As mentioned, reading is essential. If children provide enough attention to reading, will they improve their literacy.

The data from the parents revealed that learners have poor reading habits and few pay visits to the library. One of the parents suggested the following strategy for improvement:

I should enrol my child for extra classes and maybe get a personal tutor also to let my child read more. The tutor can also expose my child to different reading materials – take them to the library perhaps. (PP9S2).

The data showed that some children are more interested in their cellphones. Hence, one of the parents made an extremely noteworthy recommendation to use cellphones more productively and creatively:

Maybe something like an app could be used and schoolwork uploaded to the app, and then you can also monitor it. (PPS2).

In addressing reading difficulties, teacher participants recommended that children should read easier books to boost their confidence. Teachers also identified a need for improved communication and engagement. Parents, on the other hand, expressed the demand for follow-up meetings between them and teachers as evidenced by the response of TP4S1:

Communication is key – effective communication between the educator, learner and parents. It works like a triangle. There should be a relationship between the parent, teacher and learner to address reading and writing barriers. (PP9S2).

The data disclosed that parents realise the necessity for a more positive attitude towards reading and writing. They also suggested the necessity for appropriate support in diverse school environments, as well as reading materials and programmes. Participant 4's suggestion highlights the obligation for improved parental backing and support initiatives from the school:

Teacher guidelines, encouragements, support and reminders.

4.3 Theme 3: Challenges that teachers and parents encounter when supporting learners with writing skills

Based on the feedback received from TP6S1, it can be deduced that learners encounter numerous obstacles regarding their aptitude for writing. Their spelling and comprehension skills are below standard, with a noteworthy decline in their writing skills in the aftermath of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. TP2S2 underscored the profound influence of language competency in the development of writing proficiency. Furthermore, she pinpointed the obstacles that non-native English speakers encounter. The complexities associated with the current curriculum were also highlighted:

There are some who try, but a large group can barely write sentences in English. If the work is simplified and there are fewer activities that children have to do per quarter, better retention can be achieved, especially with writing and language skills. (TP2S2).

The findings alluded to other problematic aspects including messy handwriting, incorrect sentence formation from the board and sentences starting with lowercase letters. Learners face challenges in both pronouncing sounds correctly and writing independently. Additionally, they experience difficulties with sentence and paragraph construction and creative writing. TP1S1 views the difficulties that learners experience as follows:

If learners are unable to read or comprehend words, they will struggle to write stories or compose sentences that make sense. They might be able to narrate and discuss stories orally, but their writing is hindered as they cannot grasp the meaning behind their own words.

For several reasons, TP6S1 expressed significant concerns regarding the type of assistance offered by parents when it comes to their involvement in writing activities:

Parents should understand that it is beneficial to check their learners' writing, but it is important not to correct all the mistakes for them. Additionally, parents often fail to read their learners' writing and may not have a clear understanding of the appropriate level their child should be at. Some parents who review their learners' writing tend to over-correct, eager to fix mistakes as fast as possible. On the other hand, some parents neglect to check if the work is completed or not. It's essential to strike a balance – while extreme cases exist, only a few parents provide the necessary support for their children to complete the work on their own.

It is heartwarming to note, though, the strategies suggested by some parents to provide support, as evident in the excerpt below:

The workload has significantly escalated; there are moments where I find myself doubting while assisting them. During such instances, I regularly reach out to my dad, stepmom or sister, who are also educators, for support. Numerous factors contribute to occasional moments of doubt.

The participants suggested some feasible suggestions to empower parents in literacy education, such as courses, writing courses (TP1S1) more resources and activities for parents. One of the parents (PP9S2) recommended more parent evenings and suggested that specialists be recruited to support them. Another parent agrees:

There must be programmes to keep us on how to go about to support learners. Present workshops to teach us. Make parents part of literacy understanding (PP10S2).

4.4 Theme 4: Teachers and parents' views on homework completion

The teachers complained that the completion rate of tasks at home is significantly low with more than half of the class failing to finish them at home (TP6S1; TP7S2). The participants motivated why they rather opt for completion of work at school:

No, it is challenging to get completed homework if learners receive homework. Therefore, activities are done in class so if learners struggle with their work or a certain question, assistance will be given by the teacher. (TP7S2).

There appears to be limited parental involvement in homework assistance. However, illuminating findings indicate that parents guide their children in tasks that hold measurable value, prompting teachers to conduct formal evaluations within the classroom setting:

Parents do not support children with homework, but when formal assessments are sent home, they complete their work for them – not helping or building or learning their children with building their skills. (TP1S1).

Once again, multilingualism emerged as an intriguing factor when it comes to homework as illustrated by the following quote by another teacher:

I try to send as little homework as possible home. Parents may teach the children incorrectly because it is a third or fourth language (TP2S2)

The data revealed that parents are experiencing similar challenges related to multilingualism. One of the parents (PP9S2) alluded to the fact that her Grade 5 child is struggling with English Home Language, as she is exposed to English only at school and is unable to comprehend certain aspects of the content.

4.5 Theme 5: Empowerment strategies for parents for literacy improvement

According to the data, schools' efforts to involve parents in literacy education are deficient in significance and careful planning. Some participants mentioned the existence of WhatsApp groups that were established during the Covid-19 pandemic (TPS2S1) and quarterly parent evenings (TPS3S1). However, it was found that parents generally did not attend these events and that WhatsApp messages were often left unread. Teachers sometimes had to reach out to parents to address essential matters personally. One of the parents singled out the importance of parental commitment:

As a parent, you have to start with yourself. You must foster a love for reading in your children. You must also foster a love for writing at (sic) your children. Children learn through what they see. If they see my mother has a passion for reading and writing, they will adopt the same behaviour. Our learners are visually inclined and we must incorporate that with reading and writing to create a love for reading and writing (PP7S2).

The data demonstrated that it is crucial for teachers to thoughtfully evaluate the relationship between parents' responsibilities and the obligations they impose on parents. Furthermore, teachers should be attentive to parents' abilities to adequately assist their children and the relationship between the expected levels of parental engagement and parents' resources. TP2S1, a seasoned teacher alluded to this critical element:

Addressing literacy problems in schools requires a holistic approach. To effectively adapt and overcome the challenges of today, it is essential for every school to have access to a range of professionals, including a remedial teacher, psychologist and even an occupational therapist.

A 29-year-old single mother suggested various approaches that may empower parents' capabilities in literacy instruction:

In order for us to monitor our children's progress at school, parent evenings should be conducted twice per term. Most parents do not even know what literacy is. More workshops should be made available that focus on literacy aspects. (PP7S2).

4.6 Discussion of the findings

From the teachers' responses, it can be concluded that they realise the importance of parental support for literacy improvement. This finding is supported by Wu et al. (2022) who add that parental support leads to the development of motivation. Another important finding hints at the consequences of late working parents, which is supported by research conducted by Buyukalan and Altinay (2018), Sedibe and Fourie (2018), who demonstrated that parents' long, inflexible working hours and other life demands may hamper sufficient support to their children. Accusations by teachers that parents do not regard homework support as a priority may create the sometimes unfair assumption of parental apathy towards parents in disadvantaged communities. Apart from the wearying working hours, Plaatjies (2021) attributes the insufficient support of working-class parents to a lack of the knowledge required. This notion is understandable given the fact that parents (and grandparents) with low education levels perceive the contemporary curriculum as highly complex and as a result, find it difficult to provide support with school tasks (Plaatjies, 2021). Since parents, except for those who are also teachers, are not fully familiar with what is expected in the literacy curriculum, teachers should provide directives for developing literacy activities. Aram and Shachar (2024) think that to help parents support their child's writing effectively, parents should be taught the basics of effective support, which is characterised by providing warm, gradual help and constant encouragement.

The data revealed that learners face challenges with reading and writing longer words and that they are reluctant to read aloud in the classroom. Furthermore, they find it difficult to comprehend and maintain focus when listening to the reading of others. These findings raise questions about teacher capabilities in terms of pedagogical content knowledge. This is consistent with the findings by Carter et al., (2024) who question the quality of South African pre-service training programmes in reading, and therefore teachers' abilities in reading instruction. The findings highlight the necessity for daily reading activities in support of enhancing children's reading skills. This finding aligns with Vasylenko's (2017, p. 75) study, which suggests that "parents should allocate a specific time for daily reading activities to enhance the learner's comprehension and vocabulary skills". In addition to this, the findings revealed that multilingualism is a colossal factor hampering learners' reading abilities. This finding is supported by Omidire (2019), who cautions that literacy development is often complicated and that teachers are often not sufficiently trained to teach English as an additional language.

The study exposed learners' poor reading habits and lack of interest in using the local library. This points fingers at parents who may not be role models in this regard. This finding is a contradiction of what is discovered by Alramamneh et al. (2023, p. 3) who declare that: "Empirical studies have consistently shown that parental reading habits profoundly shape their children's reading skills". Literature suggests shared reading approaches to stimulate enjoyment in reading. Saracho (2017) advocates for the involvement of parents in shared reading activities where they can read relevant texts in their home environment,

promoting the development of language skills, emerging literacy and reading performance. Parents should play a key role by encouraging and ensuring that library visits happen regularly. This idea is supported by Pfof and Heyne (2023, p. 2630) who write that "parents affect children's reading behaviour by providing opportunities for further interactions in relation to reading such as joint library visits." Encouragement is generally associated with high expectations, which is another crucial strategy for improved literacy skills. Parents who had higher expectations were inclined to create a richer home learning environment, resulting in improved children's reading skills (Yang et al., 2023).

The data revealed that some participants realised the advantages of learner interest in cellphones. Considering the rapid increase in cellphone usage in the digital age, this is not strange. This finding is supported by several researchers such as Griffith, Hagan, Heyman, Heflin and Bagner (2020), who assert that young children's literacy activities at home nowadays go beyond the use of traditional literacy tools and include digital devices, smartphones, computers, tablets and interactive applications. Hence, the suggestion to use cellphones for literacy learning is a noteworthy one. The application of digital devices in learning is further confirmed by Hartle (2020) who noticed that the interactive media that surrounds children in the 21st century can serve as tools to support children in various domains such as literacy. The feedback from the teachers proposed that learners should read easier books, while parents voiced a quest for reading materials, programmes, teacher guidance, support and reminders. For this to happen, communication and support from the schools seems crucial. Al-Fadley et al. (2018) advise that teachers should improve their communication skills and receive training on how to interact with parents. These approaches can lead to greater awareness of diverse learner needs, cultural backgrounds, learner progress, improved parent-teacher engagement, as well as increased parental involvement in decision-making regarding their children's education and skills development (Rapp & Duncan 2012; Naicker, 2020). The quest for more resources is in line with the stance of Stutzel (in Athiemoolam & Kwayiyo, 2022) and Vasylenko (2017), who underscore the need for literacy-rich home environments, which includes printed materials and books, which in turn will lead to solid platforms for the enhancement of literacy skills.

With respect to the need for guidelines, the researcher takes the position that awareness should be created amongst parents to enhance a vibrant reading culture. Such culture should make provision for daily reading time, library visits, reading problem identifications and creating vocabulary lists with difficult words. Parents should also be sensitised on how to demonstrate enthusiasm during the process.

The findings showed that learners struggle with spelling, comprehension, poor handwriting, sentence construction, paragraph and creative writing. This was confirmed by Elbashir (2023) who clusters writing challenges among learners in word choice, sentence structure, spelling, organisational and cognitive problems. The participants alluded also to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted learners' writing capabilities negatively. The research by Böhmer and Willis (2023) confirms that the pandemic led to learning losses and influenced performance in

literacy negatively as demonstrated by the PIRLS results of 2021. An interesting finding was that teachers felt that the writing curriculum should be simplified and that activities per quarter should be reduced. This is perhaps a sign that teachers are experiencing difficulties in completing the curriculum and are struggling to teach writing skills. Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2021, p. 400) confirm that "writing, due to various intrinsic attributes and extrinsic factors seems to be the most challenging skill for language teachers", while Moses and Mohamad (2019) agree that it is evident that even educators encounter difficulties in effectively instructing writing activities.

The concerns raised about parent dedication, the type of support that parents provide, and the challenges for non-native English-speaking learners with writing are all evidence of the daunting task. First-generation parents, on the other hand, have doubts as to if the support that they provide is on the standard. Mcnube (in Mapongwana, Rembe, Chinyama & Wadesango, 2021) cautions that teachers' expectations about parental support is a thorny issue, leading to the alienation of parents: "if a school defines and interprets parents' participation in terms of, *inter alia*, assisting their children with their homework, contribution in any classroom activities or reading for children at home, parents would be excluded since some of them never attended the school themselves or they would be unfamiliar with the knowledge used at school." Teachers' suggestions for improved support with writing seem therefore to be largely unrealistic. It is worth noting that parents cannot be held liable for the betterment of writing skills, which is widely regarded as a difficult skill to teach and according to (Elbashir, 2023, p. 58) "a challenging activity that necessitates the use of numerous linguistic components". Therefore, Athiemoolam and Kwayiyo (2022) caution that teachers should recognise that parents are not responsible for assisting them in covering the entirety of the curriculum. It should be concluded that the instruction of writing skills falls within the purview of a well-trained language instructor. Consequently, parents should assume a supplementary role aimed at bolstering academic progress and should never supersede the pivotal role of the teacher (Sun & Rungrojsuwan, 2019).

From the data, it can be deduced that the completion of homework also presents a daunting challenge. There seems to be limited involvement from parents in general in support of homework while the completion rate is low. This non-participation is confirmed by research conducted by Mapongwana et al. (2021, p. 153) claiming that: "The fundamental and venerable problem is constituted by the reluctant or non-existent participation of parents in school matters in general and in curricular activities". Other challenges include cases where parents do the work on behalf of learners. The data confirmed that some parents find support difficult due to the issue of multilingualism, especially in English. Parveen et al. (2022) confirms the idea that learners in multilingual classrooms may have different linguistic backgrounds, which may hamper learning. The findings indicated that these challenges prompt teachers to set aside time in class for the completion of homework. Another reason for this strategy is that parents sometimes do the work for the learners. This is an indication that learners have a poor understanding of certain reading and writing skills, as confirmed by the teachers in this study. This,

in turn, raises questions about teachers' subject and pedagogical content knowledge expertise. In the same vein, Carter et al. (2024) attribute it to South African constraining factors such as weak instructional practices and teachers' inadequate subject knowledge. If teachers are unable to address the learning difficulties, it is needless to say that many parents are burdened with so many academic-related challenges such as low literacy levels and find it extremely difficult to supply efficient support. Hulme et al. (2022, p. 260) claim that "Parents with low literacy may therefore need support to help their children with reading."

The suggestions by parents indicate that there is a definite need for a literacy support programme for them. This idea is supported by Mapongwana et al. (2021) whose study similarly revealed that there is a lack of significance in and efficacy of the reciprocal collaboration between parents and schools. To respond to this challenge, Hulme et al. (2022, p. 260) suggest family learning programmes: "literacy is a key focus for family learning programmes, which teach parents about the reading skills children need to develop, with the aim of increasing parents' involvement and confidence in helping their children learn to read." Providing the challenges experienced with writing skills, it should form part of such a programme. The necessity for a comprehensive approach to address the challenges such as the generational gap, has also been highlighted. This idea is aligned with the work of Badrasawi, Yahefu and Khalid (2019, p. 47) who state that "to achieve success in children's education, there should be a comprehensive cooperation among schools, communities and parents", developing a multi-faceted parental involvement model that allows for parents to participate actively, and fosters relationships based on respect and understanding of effective literacy promotion strategies (see also Sun & Rungrojsuwan, 2019). Within such a programme, "parents learn how their children are taught in school and are encouraged to develop their own skills in a supportive peer group environment" (Hulme et al., 2022, p. 260).

5. Limitations of the study and areas for further research

- In terms of the methodology employed, individual interviews or focus group discussions with a bigger sample size of the parents could have allowed the researcher to obtain more detailed and specific information from participants to gain a broader understanding of the subject matter.
- Since the sample size is relatively small, the findings cannot be considered representative of the larger population.
- This study showed that research is needed to explore effective instructional methods and interventions that address the needs of diverse language groupings.
- Due to the breadth of the topic, further research could investigate parents' role in enhancing writing and reading skills as distinct constructs.
- Hence, this study showed that it is imperative to investigate the development of a model for improved parental involvement in improving literacy skills.
- Given learners' interest in cellphones and other technology, research is needed on how these can be utilised in literacy education.

- Strategies should also be researched that focus on addressing the literacy skills of learners in high schools.

6. Conclusion

The study demonstrated that parental support for children in general is problematic for parents. The implication of this is lower academic attainment in literacy, which can also influence overall academic achievement. Furthermore, the study underscored the importance for hosting additional information sessions focusing on the literacy curriculum. This is critical so that parents obtain a better understanding of the content, challenges and possible strategies for enhanced support. Other topics that deserve urgent attention are strategies to deal with multilingualism, homework support (including suggestions to use resources) and the use of digital devices. Strategies for how to deal with these issues have been described, especially for the South African education context. From a leadership perspective, it is equally important that school principals, as instructional leaders, work with relevant academic heads and teachers to develop concrete plans to improve active parental involvement in curriculum matters. In the South African context in particular, it is imperative that school principals and teachers should undertake rigorous professional development sessions to study the influence of contextual factors, on learning and adapt teaching approaches and support strategies accordingly.

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