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Curriculum Advisors' and Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Reading in Foundation Phase Classrooms

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Abstract. This article aims to examine curriculum advisors' and teachers' perceptions of teaching early reading in Foundation Phase classrooms. It also aims to provide recommendations to alleviate overlaps based on the findings. A qualitative approach was used to gather data through semi-structured interviews. Purposeful convenience sampling was used to study two curriculum advisors and five Grade 1 teachers from five schools in the Mopani district of Limpopo Province. Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that the curriculum advisors and teachers vary in their perceptions of early reading. Both curriculum advisors perceived that teachers change slowly, teach early reading unsystematically, and show superficial compliance, but do not really abide by guidelines, while teachers say the National Curriculum does not give them enough time to teach properly or attend to struggling learners. Teachers also expressed their frustration in managing large classes. This research article contributes to the body of knowledge in creating an awareness that new curriculum requirements are tools used for aligning teachers with change.

Keywords: early reading development; Foundation Phase; home language; curriculum

1. Introduction

Teaching early reading is a challenge for many Foundation Phase (FP) teachers. This has a negative impact on learner performance, given the findings that many learners in South African classrooms fare poorly in reading, despite being tested in their home language (HL) (Howie et al., 2017; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Research on teachers' perceptions of early reading has shown that there are many factors contributing to this crisis. Some of these factors include inadequate early reading instruction, ineffective teacher training workshops which fail to address the *what* and *how* of changing teacher behaviour in curriculum implementation (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016), and overcrowded classrooms (Spaull, 2016). Developing early reading skills in the FP classroom requires expert teachers who

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are knowledgeable about reading, know how to remediate reading problems, and inspire and motivate learners to become skilled readers (Pretorius, Jackson, McKay, Murray & Spaull, 2016). Despite an explicit curriculum and teachers' training workshops and interventions, early reading development remains challenging. Research has shown that many FP (Grades R-3) teachers do not know how to teach early reading in line with the reading methodologies stipulated in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Pretorius et al., 2016).

Currently, very little research (if any) has been done regarding CAs' perspectives on the challenges of teaching reading in the FP. Studies to date have focused mostly on teachers' perceptions of reading instruction in the FP (Cekiso, 2017; Segooa, 2020). This article aims to learn more about CAs' and teachers' perspectives on the challenges of teaching early reading. It offers opportunities for further observation and analysis of actual CAs' practices in understanding their role in curriculum implementation for teaching reading in the FP. The following are key research questions guiding this paper: "How do CAs view the challenges of teaching early reading and their support of teachers in the FP classroom?" and "How do Grade 1 teachers perceive their teaching of early reading in the FP classrooms?" The article first discusses factors that influence early reading development. This is followed by describing the research method used to collect and analyse data. Thereafter, it presents findings, followed by a discussion and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Factors that influence early reading development

Factors such as poor pedagogic content knowledge, weak forms of assessment, lost learning opportunities, overcrowding and inferior classroom management have been found to characterise poor classroom practices that create barriers to quality education. Each of these factors is briefly examined below.

2.1.1. Poor pedagogic content knowledge

Content knowledge entails what teachers need to know about a subject in order to teach effectively. In contrast, pedagogic content knowledge (PCK) integrates knowledge of what should be taught with an understanding of how to teach learners in the classroom. In literacy instruction, PCK involves teachers' knowledge about the basic elements of reading, how they relate to one another, how they develop, and what is required to teach them. Poor teaching practice can arise from poor teacher content knowledge and poor PCK, negatively impacting learner performance. For example, Pretorius (2014) examined Grade 4 learners' (n=31) literacy skills in both isiZulu home language and English first additional language in South Africa and found that teachers in Grade 4 classrooms lacked knowledge of teaching early reading according to methodologies prescribed in the CAPS document, e.g. the teaching of syllables in the African languages such as *ba-be-bi-bo-bu-* were chanted in chorus from the chalkboard with little connection between these syllables and their occurrence in words and sentences of extended texts.

Proponents of educational change agree that changes in schools must first occur in the classroom (Moyo, 2017). However, change does not come about simply by

telling teachers to change their classroom practices. Teachers can impede the effectiveness of curriculum change and implementation if they lack content knowledge and pedagogic skills, if they do not know how to teach according to CAPS recommendations and if their perceptions of reading and how to teach it are different from those proposed in the curriculum. These factors, in turn, can delay the effective delivery of CAPS in the classroom.

2.1.2. Weak forms of assessment

Another factor that contributes to poor classroom practices is weak forms of assessment. Assessment is integral for identifying learning problems, informing teaching, and addressing specific learning needs. There are different types of assessments, including baseline, formative and summative assessments, each administered for its specific purpose. Teachers are guided by what is stipulated in the CAPS policy documents, which prescribe the requirements for the assessments that are supposed to be carried out. However, regardless of clear guidelines in the assessment policy documents, implementing classroom assessment remains a challenge. In a study on assessment practices in the Maune circuit of Limpopo Province, from a sample of Grade 9 Natural Science teachers from high performing schools, Kibirige and Teffo (2014) found that teachers' understanding of the roles of assessments ranged from 0% to 60%, with many items scored at 40%. This suggests a huge difference between actual and ideal assessment practices. Moreover, the findings may also have far-reaching implications in terms of compliance with stipulations in the curriculum.

2.1.3. Lost learning opportunities

Different perceptions exist in terms of the factors contributing to the loss of engaged time in the classroom. Some feel that potential engaged time is wasted on managing learner behaviour, routine paperwork, interruptions, delays, special events, and other off-task and off-topic activities (Rogers & Mirra, 2014). Others believe that engaged time is wasted due to informal school closures, teacher absenteeism, delays, early departures, and poor use of allocated time (Abadzi, 2009). Poor utilisation of engagement time in the classroom emanates from poor planning or no planning at all, lack of homework, lack of reading and writing activities, and superficial marking of learners' exercise books.

The South African CAPS specifies the amount of time allocated per activity in all phases (Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase Grades 4-6, Senior Phase Grades 7-9, and Further Education and Training Grades 10-12), so that teachers can plan their classroom activities according to the time allocated. However, many teachers do not take learners' work home to mark, and necessary administration or planning is often done in class during engagement time. Time wastage in South African classrooms is evidenced by off-task activities. In a study exploring the extent to which non-academic incidences impact on instructional time during the teaching of English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the Western Cape Province, Tiba (2012) revealed that inappropriate use of pedagogic strategies, poor use of code-switching, and unsuitable teaching exemplars contributed to the loss of instructional time in the EFAL classroom.

2.1.4. Inferior classroom management

Classroom management refers to the teacher's efforts to establish and maintain a classroom environment that is conducive for teaching and learning (Brophy, 1986). Teachers use various strategies (e.g. classroom rules and routines, prior planning, efficient use of classroom time, self-regulated learning, etc.) to manage their classrooms. The ability of the teacher to manage students through the engagement of the abovementioned strategies is important for achieving positive educational outcomes (Oliver & Reschly, 2007).

In terms of classroom rules and routines, teachers should model, explain, and practice how learners behave during different reading activities (Funda Wande, 2019). For example, knowing what to do when transitioning from one activity to another, how they should sit, where they should sit, and what they should do when they finish their assigned work is important for ensuring that learners remain calm and focused. This also helps learners develop self-regulation skills (the ability to work independently with minimal supervision), which are very useful when the teacher is occupied with other activities such as paired reading or group guided reading. Research has also shown that classroom rules and routines are important for maintaining effective classroom management (Alter & Haydon, 2017).

2.1.5. Overcrowding

An overcrowded classroom has no 'exact size,' as it is determined by the number of learners per teacher (i.e. learner-educator ratio) within a particular context. In South Africa, the learner-educator ratio (LER) for primary schools, as stipulated in the DBE policy, is 40: 1 (Motshekga, 2012). However, the actual number of learners in South African classrooms may reach 50:1 or even higher (West & Meier, 2020). Teaching reading and writing in overcrowded conditions is unlikely to be effective, particularly in the lower grades. In a study investigating the impact of overcrowded classrooms on FP teachers (n=10) in Tshwane West district, West and Meier (2020) found that overcrowding in the FP classroom is associated with a lack of discipline, ineffective assessment, and no individual learner support.

Researchers have identified possible strategies that can be used to deal with large classes. For example, Taylor et al. (2017) believe that good classroom management practices such as establishing routines, reorganising classrooms, and working in small groups while other groups are instructed to engage in different literacy activities enable teachers to provide better instruction in large classes of at least 38 to 45 learners. However, they noted that very large classes of 50 learners or more hamper effective teaching. This is supported in a study that examined how teachers in Kano State approach reading instruction in primary grade classes of approximately 160 learners per class. The findings revealed that overcrowded classes prevented teachers from understanding their learners' reading development (Adamu, Tsiga & Zuilkowski, 2020).

3. Research method

A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was used to obtain data regarding CAs' and teachers' early reading perspectives in the FP classrooms.

3.1. Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to interview the CAs and teachers to gain their perspectives on teaching reading in the FP. The interview schedule was divided into two sections: Section A dealt with the biographic data of participants, as shown in Table 1. Section B covered semi-structured interviews based on the respondents' perspectives on the challenges of teaching reading in the FP. The reliability and validity of the research instrument were ensured by using an audio recorder to record the interviews, and notes were taken to supplement the data recorded.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted in five schools (one Grade 1 teacher per school) which were sampled conveniently and purposefully. Table 1 shows summary information about the CAs and the teachers. CA1 and CA2 refer to the two curriculum advisors, and T1 to T5 refer to the teachers. CA1 (male) was responsible for Khujwana circuit in Mopani West and CA2 (female) for Man'ombe circuit in Mopani East in the Limpopo Province. Both CAs had Foundation Phase experience as teachers. They also had Bachelor in Education (BEd) honours degrees, and their ages and years of experience showed they had long been involved in the FP. The five teachers from five schools were all females, and they all had FP teaching experience. Teachers also had the required qualifications to teach in South African primary schools. Two had BEd honours degrees, two had BEd degrees, and one had an education diploma. The youngest teacher was 26 years old, and the oldest was 50.

Table 1. Background of the CAs and Grade 1 teachers

Participant	Gender	Age	Qualifications	FP experience	Years of experience as CA/teacher
CA1	Male	60	BEd Honours	Yes	10
CA2	Female	50	BEd Honours	Yes	8
T1	Female	50	BEd Honours	Yes	25
T2	Female	26	BEd Degree	Yes	4
T3	Female	49	BEd Degree	Yes	24
T4	Female	48	Primary Teachers Diploma	Yes	10
T5	Female	50	BEd Honours	Yes	23

3.3. Procedures for collecting data

Teachers were interviewed for approximately 30 minutes and two CAs in the provincial education department (also referred to as subject advisors) were interviewed for 35 minutes. Teachers were asked approximately 75 questions related to their perceptions about the development of learners' reading in the Grade 1 classroom, while the CAs were asked 21 questions relating to their outlook on supporting teachers in developing learners' reading in the FP classroom. Due to their busy schedules, CA2 was interviewed telephonically after hours in the evening. Questions were posed to the CAs and teachers regarding their perceptions of early reading in the FP classrooms. Interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken for supplementary purposes.

3.4. Data analysis

The transcript segments from the recorded interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages; namely, becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes from the data and printing out the transcripts, searching for themes, reviewing and reorganisation of themes, and lastly, naming themes.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa (ethical clearance number AL_MK025-2017) by the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages Research Ethics Review Committee members and the Limpopo provincial education department. Consent was obtained from the relevant stakeholders (the provincial education department, principals of schools, teachers, and CAs). All participants had the opportunity to sign consent forms before participating in the study and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

3.6. Limitations of the study

This study was not without limitations. The sample was small, being based only on two CAs and five Grade 1 teachers. A large number of participants can provide detailed generalizable results. Another limitation is that teachers' questions were one-sided - they were not given opportunities to provide their views regarding the support they received from the CAs in developing the learners' reading in the FP classroom. Further studies could explore teachers' perceptions regarding the curriculum support from the CAs as departmental officials.

4. Findings

In order to answer the research questions (How do the CAs view challenges of teaching early reading and their support of teachers in the FP classroom? and How do Grade 1 teachers perceive their teaching of early reading in the FP classrooms?), the following three themes derived from the CAs' and teachers' perceptions of teaching reading in the FP classroom are presented: pedagogical issues relating to difficulties in teaching early reading, structural issues relating to difficulties in teaching early reading, and support from CAs in the form of mentoring teachers.

4.1. Pedagogical issues relating to difficulties in teaching early reading

Both CAs raised issues they perceived to contribute to the ineffective development of early reading in the FP. These include challenges regarding the nature of change and adapting to reading instructional approaches required by CAPS. Additionally, the CAs and teachers provided differing views regarding the engaged time for reading instruction.

4.1.1. The nature of change

Since the implementation of CAPS in 2012, provincial education departments have held workshops and several interventions, in the form of designing professional development materials, to help teachers adapt their classroom practices according to CAPS. However, according to CA2, some teachers *have not reached the expected level* in teaching according to CAPS. CA1 added that

improvement is not that fast. Although teachers are still experiencing challenges adapting to the new curriculum changes, CAs seem to be trying their best to support them in various ways using the workshop model. CA1 explained that *we invite teachers in each and every workshop so that they can learn from the workshops that it is important for them to do the same in their classrooms.* If teachers are given opportunities to attend workshops for their professional development and still find it difficult to adapt to changes, this could suggest that the workshop training might not be effective for curriculum implementation. Even though teachers are expected to align their teaching with what is prescribed by the curriculum, CA1 pointed out that *teachers are not forced to follow exactly what the template dictates*, indicating room for flexibility and creativity. The task of adapting curriculum materials to the learning environment depends on, inter alia, how knowledgeable teachers are about the curriculum content and its instructional strategies. The CAs acknowledged that teacher change remains a challenge, despite factors they felt had been put in place to facilitate change.

4.1.2. Adapting to reading instructional approaches required by CAPS

Despite CAPS explicitly clarifying how things should be done in terms of teaching reading, the CAs felt that teachers still do not know how to teach reading. For example, CA1 said, *teachers don't understand how to teach learners – for some, it is still challenging to break away from the 'traditional way' (teacher-centred approach) of doing things in the classroom.* CA1 also confirmed that teachers have difficulty in adjusting to reading instructional approaches required by CAPS. In particular, he was concerned about their difficulty in focusing on what was important and recognising that the approach to teaching reading in African languages differs in some ways from English, and CA2 added:

> *When I go to schools, teachers would complain that many learners struggle to identify and sound letters. But the bottom line of the challenge for teachers is teaching learners to master the sounds. For example, you will find that teachers have pasted letter cards on the wall. I usually tell them that if I could hear children naming letters instead of sounding them, they will have to explain themselves because those learners need to know sounds so that even if the learner has to write the letter, he/she must know how to sound that letter.*

CA2 was concerned about teachers teaching letter names (common in English) instead of focusing on letter sounds in African languages, given that these languages have larger sets of letter sounds that are transparent and that mastery of this knowledge base is key to reading. This dilemma causes teachers to stick to their 'traditional' ways of teaching reading, which compromises learner achievement in the classroom. Local research has also indicated that teachers do not understand how early reading should be taught in the FP. For example, Segooa (2020) has shown in her study that teachers' practice of teaching reading is not consistent with what is stipulated in the curriculum.

4.1.3. Engaged time

For teachers to effectively use engaged time, CAPS requires them to be well organised and good at planning. However, both CAs raised concerns about time management in the FP classroom when they explained:

> *We expect them to divide their learners into different groups so that they can be able to at least see two groups per day for 15 minutes – but some will tell you that 15 minutes is not enough* (CA1) *and there is time allocated for each component; sometimes, they complain that the time allocated is too little - so when I demonstrate, I show them that no-no-no…this time is sufficient* (CA2).

CA1 pointed out that *teachers spend too much time singing with the learners.* Singing with learners in the classroom during early learning can be considered part of a hidden curriculum, including assumptions and expectations about learning that are not officially communicated within the learning environment (Alsubaie, 2015). It is an undocumented curriculum used to communicate acceptable or unacceptable behaviours implicitly.

On the other hand, singing is common in early grade classrooms and integral to African culture. It is also typically used in routines when teachers change from one activity to another, change the rhythm of teaching, or motivate feelings of solidarity. It can also fill up the time or create an impression of communal learning. However, the problem arises when teachers spend a lot of time on such activities to the point where they overspend the time allocated for the official curriculum. Spending time singing with learners will not necessarily develop their ability to decode words, while developing alphabetic knowledge will.

According to both CAs, time seems to be an issue for the teachers. Carnoy et al. (2012) also found that Grade 6 teachers in the North West Province had only taught 40% of the scheduled lessons for the year. Most of the engaged time had been lost on activities not included in the official curriculum. In this respect, research confirms robust relationships between engagement time and student achievement (Lei, Cui & Zhou, 2018), suggesting that if the allocated time for different reading activities is lost, it is likely to compromise learners' reading development and academic achievement. Regarding the official time allocated for teaching reading in the Grade 1 classroom, T1, T2, T4 and T5 expressed dissatisfaction, explaining:

> *The department says we should spend 15 minutes, but for me, I think it's not enough as children differ, some can quickly catch up, but others take time to get the message* (T1), *I am supposed to spend 15 minutes per group, but because there are learners who take time to learn, I sometimes overlap with extra minutes* (T2). *They say we should do shared reading in 15 minutes, but because my class is overcrowded, 15 minutes is not enough – it takes a lot of time to include the learners* (T4), and T5 added *I normally spend 15 minutes, but it is not enough, sometimes as a class manager, I just decide to add some extra time depending on what I am doing with the learners.*

Although teachers lamented the lack of time needed to cater for the diverse learning needs in their classrooms during reading lessons, it may sound like a handy excuse. This also suggests that some of the things teachers do in their classrooms might contribute to consuming engagement time with learners, forcing them to teach beyond the stipulated time.

CAs and teachers perceive the allocated time for teaching various reading activities in the FP classroom differently. The CAs believed that sufficient time was allocated for teaching reading; however, teachers felt it was not enough to do all they were supposed to do with learners.

4.2. Structural issues relating to difficulties in teaching early reading

4.2.1. Overcrowding

The LER for South African public primary schools is 40:1 (Motshekga, 2012). The DBE has many sound educational policies, but problems persist because of classes with more than 50 learners. This also confirms the findings which have shown that class sizes in many South African public schools reflect unevenness in implementing policy. The CAs also acknowledged the challenges of overcrowding when saying, *I will say classes may be overcrowded with learners* (CA2) and *Ma'am, overcrowding is a problem to teachers because they can't handle teaching, "ke ra gore"* [I am saying] *there is nothing you can do to avoid it – it is beyond your control* (CA1). According to CA1, despite overcrowding, teaching is still expected. Similarly, CA2 is aware that overcrowding is a problem, especially for teachers who do not have strategies to deal with large classes. Both CAs felt that teachers must find ways to deal with overcrowding because it seems to be escalating and teachers cannot control how many learners are enrolled in their classrooms. Marais (2016) agrees that overcrowding in South African public schools is an ongoing problem but also recommends that this can be mitigated to some extent through training teachers in skills geared to dealing with overcrowded classrooms. T4 expressed her frustration in managing an overcrowded classroom. She indicated that *the class is crowded. I have to arrange desks the way you see them. Having 62 learners in one class in Grade 1 is a challenge. An overcrowded class like this will take you years to conduct each activity in the classroom.* T4's response suggests that she has not been trained to deal with overcrowded classrooms. She further said:

> *I conduct shared reading, learners remain seated on their desks because there is no space to invite them to sit in front of the class. But I make sure that I read louder so that even children at the back can hear, but they can't see the words – those who can see are those who are sitting on the front desk.*

T4 does not seem to understand the purpose of shared reading, which is meant to show learners how texts work. It is important for all learners, even those sitting at the back, to *see* the text during shared reading. Although teachers and CAs agree on the fact that overcrowding is a challenge in terms of teaching and learning effectively, there seem to be overlaps in the sense that the CAs do not seem convinced that overcrowding can prevent teaching and learning as there are various strategies that can be used to control learners. However, teachers felt they couldn't teach effectively in overcrowded classrooms, possibly because they lacked strategies for dealing with large classes.

4.3. Support for teachers in the implementation of CAPS

4.3.1. Early Grade Reading Assessment

Both CAs indicated the importance of conducting baseline assessment when they explained:

> *I actually advise them to record the performance of the learner so that they can be able to follow up on whether there is progress or not because they don't do it once, they can assess first – they can determine the second term or even third term* (CA1) and *Teachers should have a checklist where they record the results of baseline assessment so that when I request it, I can be able to see that they have tested the learners* (CA2).

CAs emphasised record-keeping for baseline assessment outcomes. CA1 commented:

> *EGRA is the tool that I usually advise teachers to use so that they can be able to test learners' oral reading skills and thereafter use the questions of the text from EGRA to ask learners questions based on the text that they have read.*

The DBE promotes the use of early grade reading assessment (EGRA) because it helps teachers identify children who are not at grade level in early reading skills (e.g. children with poor phonological and phonemic awareness in Grades R and 1, poor letter-sounds knowledge in Grade 1, or poor oral reading fluency and oral reading comprehension in Grades 2 and 3), it helps teachers assign children to ability groups more accurately, and it provides a base for monitoring progress. However, as will be noted later, most teachers interviewed did not seem to use EGRA to test what their children knew and instead seemed to rely on intuitive or informal assessments. For instance, T2 indicated that she assessed learners throughout the lesson by observing them, while T4 indicated that she assessed learners individually when they lined up to submit their handwritten work.

Teachers seemed aware of the need to conduct a baseline assessment in their Grade 1 classroom. For example, T1 explained that *I tested them during the first weeks of reopening; it was orientation, so I used that opportunity to get to know the learners.* Regarding keeping records of baseline assessment, T1 said: *Yes, I recorded somewhere, but most of my files were damaged because of the rain.* Her evasive answer, in which she claims to have lost the records, suggests that she might not have done the assessment. T2 said, *I only assess learners during lessons by asking them questions to check how far they know, but I did not conduct the formal baseline assessment.* Asking learners questions can help a teacher gauge their comprehension of text but does not provide an accurate or systematic assessment of decoding skills. T3 explained that *I don't usually record because after testing the learner, I have an idea of where the learner should fit- whether under the group of those that are slow or smart,* suggesting that T3 seemed to have informally assessed her learners' knowledge at baseline. After assessing learners, teachers are expected to record the outcomes so that they can use the results for monitoring purposes, but T3 seemed to have lost the opportunity to use baseline data to inform her teaching; she seems to have done this rather superficially, for compliance, without understanding the potential usefulness of what teachers are expected to do with assessment data.

Nevertheless, T3 indicated that she relied on a general impression to know her children's reading capabilities. This is a generalised approach that reveals lack of awareness of the importance of analytic detail in tracking learners' reading progress. Furthermore, teachers are unlikely to remember ongoing and changing details about learners, especially when classes are large. T4 said: *I know most of them by now, that's why when I give them handwriting activities, they line up one-by-one, here next to my table, then I check their work and if they did not do it correctly I show them the right way.* It is interesting to note that T4 uses handwriting outcomes to assess her children's levels of learning. However, one can't assess phonics knowledge or fluency by checking written work. The method of checking work that T4 describes is also one that wastes valuable learning-teaching time since learners wait in line for their books to be checked instead of the teacher taking their books home for marking and using classroom time more productively.

Both CAs and teachers share similar sentiments regarding conducting learners' baseline assessment; the CAs felt that teachers must record their learners' baseline assessment outcomes, but teachers do not seem to value this type of assessment, since none of the teachers interviewed seemed to have actually conducted their learners' baseline assessment.

4.3.2. Classroom management

In respect of advising teachers to encourage learners to work independently while the teacher is busy with other literacy activities, the CAs said:

> *We normally encourage teachers to train learners to self-regulate so that it could be easier for them to focus on certain groups of learners while other learners know what is expected of them* (CA1) and *one of the other ways that I normally advise teachers who have big classes is that I tell them to teach children in their classes what we call self-regulation skills* (CA2).

Given that a large number of learners in one classroom can impede classroom management and discipline, both CAs indicated that they advised teachers to use self-regulated learning strategies to minimise disruptions. Research has also shown that self-regulation is one of the strategies used for maintaining effective classroom management (Alter & Haydon, 2017). The reasons T4 gave for not doing group guided reading (GGR) properly suggested poor classroom management and routines. Regarding managing learners during GGR activities, T4 said:

> *Seeing groups several times even if I want is a problem because they are many – sometimes, I miss helping other learners who really need my attention because I will be rushing to attend to other groups.*

T4 claimed that she found it difficult to work with two groups in one day, as per CAPS recommendations. Her reason for not giving full attention to her small group was that other learners are too noisy, but she might be failing to give other learners appropriate work to do independently during GGR. T5 said:

> *They make a noise, but I make sure that I concentrate on a group that I am busy working with. Learners do make noise even if I have given them other tasks to keep them busy.*

T5 seemed unable to control her learners during GGR activities, suggesting that they were not well trained to work independently when the teacher is occupied with other literacy activities. CAs and teachers are not in agreement regarding classroom management. According to the CAs, teachers can easily manage their classes if they have trained their learners to work independently. However, teachers do not seem to have trained learners to work independently during GGR.

5. Discussion

This article focused on CAs' and teachers' perceptions of the challenges of teaching reading in the FP classroom. Based on the findings drawn from the qualitative approach, the CAs' and teachers' perceptions of early reading were presented. The concern about the slow pace of change to develop children's early reading skills in the FP classroom is valid and requires subsequent interventions. This article has uncovered differing perceptions on the challenges of teaching reading in the FP classroom. On one hand, CAs perceived that teachers change slowly, teach reading unsystematically in the FP classroom, and show superficial compliance without actually abiding by guidelines; in short, they (teachers) seem to resist change. These findings corroborate the findings by Segooa (2020), who established that FP teachers' practice of teaching reading is inconsistent with the recommendations in the CAPS curriculum policy.

On the other hand, teachers claim that CAPS does not give them enough time to teach appropriately or attend to struggling learners. This view is negated by the CAs, who counter that teachers have the tendency of spending a lot of time on activities which are not included in the official curriculum. These findings are similar to those reported by Tiba (2012). According to teachers, the challenges of teaching reading in the FP classroom are further exacerbated by overcrowding. West and Meier (2020) also confirmed that teaching reading in overcrowded conditions poses challenges which, according to Adamu et al. ((2020), may likely prevent teachers from understanding individual learners' reading development. However, the CAs refute the teachers' claim regarding the impact of overcrowding because there are different strategies teachers could use to effectively control and manage learners. Baseline assessment in the FP classroom is vital in informing classroom instruction. However, findings in this study revealed that the teachers interviewed do not seem to value the approach of establishing the learners' reading levels through conducting baseline assessments. This corroborates previous findings, which showed a lack of teachers' understanding of the roles of assessments (Kibirige & Teffo, 2014), suggesting that assessments in many classrooms are not undertaken as prescribed in the curriculum.

6. Conclusion

The findings in this study revealed that teachers experience challenges in teaching reading simply because they are not adequately able to deal with large classes. Although the CAs challenge the teachers' views on the basis of engaging with relevant strategies, it is recommended that teachers should be trained in skills specifically to deal with overcrowded classrooms. Regardless of managing large classes, findings also revealed that teachers cannot effectively conduct GGR activities because they are interrupted by learners who are not in the focus group.

According to these findings, it is recommended that teachers should explicitly train learners at the beginning of the year to work unsupervised during GGR lessons. The findings also revealed that the CAs and teachers were not in agreement regarding the engaged time with learners. Teachers seemed dissatisfied with the time allocated for teaching different reading activities; however, the CAs felt that the time allocated was sufficient, claiming that teachers waste it on activities not included in the official curriculum. For this reason, it is suggested that teachers strictly control their engagement in songs with learners to save valuable teaching and learning time.

Overall, it is further recommended that in addition to the professional development of teachers through the usual approach of in-service training, provincial education departments and CAs should consider adopting the coaching model. This approach will provide teachers with opportunities to develop practical strategies to deal successfully with their classroom challenges. It can also help teachers to fulfil their role as agents of change for effective reading instruction. Hence, this research article contributes to the body of knowledge in creating an awareness that new curriculum requirements are tools used for aligning teachers with change.

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