



Has reading instruction in early grade classrooms changed over the last decade?

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The focus in this note is on issues relating to reading at the level of the classroom. What aspects of reading instruction have changed over the last ten years? The note draws on Hoadley and Boyd (2022).

1. How has the broader policy context in relation to reading shifted over the last decade?

There have been four key shifts in relation to the reading landscape in the last 10 years.

The national curriculum was reformed and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was introduced in 2012. This highly specified curriculum delineated the main components for reading instruction: phonics, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency. It also mandated different forms of reading: shared, paired, independent and group guided reading (GGR) as well as read-alouds and oral language development (listening and speaking). The CAPS also specified the required amount of time to be spent on different aspects of reading instruction

More text was introduced into classrooms. The main source was the DBE workbooks from 2011, providing all Foundation Phase learners with a CAPS-aligned workbook containing fiction and non-fiction text and activities in all 11 official languages. A second major source of text was increased development of readers. Notable in this regard was the Vula Bula series, readers that have been appropriately sequenced in terms of the linguistic demands of reading in different African languages (as opposed to being direct translations from English as occurred in the past) (see Katz & Rees, 2022). In 2019, Vula Bula anthologies (a collection of the storybooks into grade level single volumes) were distributed to all learners in the Eastern Cape, with positive reading shifts in reading outcomes reported (see Ardington & Spaul, 2022).

The Annual National Assessments (ANAs) were run from 2011 to 2014. These provided the first major national assessment of reading at the primary school level. The low scores on the ANAs showed results which were much more accessible and direct for teachers than those of PIRLS or SACMEQ. Despite extensive criticism of the tests, they served to alert the system generally to the very low levels of reading across the grades.

There was a growth in large-scale interventions to support reading, most notably the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Maths Strategy (GPLMS), the Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS I and EGRS II), the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes (PILO), National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) and Funda Wande. These large-scale studies followed a 'structured pedagogy' approach that has become a dominant approach in interventions across Africa and elsewhere to address the identified 'reading crisis' (Piper & Dubeck, 2021). They provide a combination of scripted lesson plans, coaching and training and learning materials aimed at more purposeful and predictable reading instruction over time focused on the development of the key components of learning to read.

2. In what ways has reading instruction in classrooms shifted over the last decade?

A review by Hoadley (2012) outlined reading instructional practices in South African primary school classrooms, found severe shortages of texts across classrooms associated with a largely oral pedagogy focused on decoding single letters, words and sentences. Little evaluation was evident across classrooms, pacing was found to be extremely slow and teachers' levels of competence in teaching reading was weak. A follow up review in 2022 (Hoadley & Boyd, 2022) considered classroom-based research conducted between 2010 and 2020 to assess whether there had been changes in teachers' instructional practices in the context of the changes in the reading landscape described above.

Positive shifts

Improvements in three areas of reading instruction were identified in the context of large-scale projects that measured student outcomes in relation to interventions. These were firstly, greater access to, and use of, text, in particular, text in African languages. Secondly, more structured and routine reading instruction (where lessons were more likely to be focused around a text and more coherent). Thirdly, the teaching of a wider range of reading activities within lessons. These factors correlated with improved reading outcomes. These aspects were also found to be improved in classrooms not subjected to interventions, the shifts probably rooted in two key policy interventions – CAPS (more structured teaching of a range of reading activities) and the DBE Workbooks (more African language text available and used in classrooms).

Mixed findings

In relation to time use there were mixed findings in the review. On the one hand, research found much less wastage of instructional time than in the past. On the other, the very slow pacing of instruction found previously persisted, with excessive time allocated to copying and marking work, activities that hold little learning potential. Teaching reading at this level requires careful, sustained and patient engagement that occurs at a relatively fast pace to keep learners' interest, with regular changes in focus / activity in order to meet the relatively short attention span of learners this age. Rather, what was found were long chunks of time on single, simple activities lacking in energy.

Stasis

Three aspects to reading pedagogy were found resistant to change: teacher knowledge, individualisation, and feedback. Reading and writing are not understood and practised as individual activities. Whole class activities are given precedence over individual meaning making, and the teacher takes primary responsibility for making sense of text and presenting this to the class. Writing consists almost entirely of copying either teacher-generated or collectively created text. Learners in this form of pedagogy are a largely **passive, collective and undifferentiated** grouping.

Teacher knowledge is seen in two ways. teachers struggle to manage text appropriately and strike a balance between comprehension and enjoyment of the text, and teaching decoding and text structure.

Engagement with the text is often limited to everyday meanings and discussions, not providing sufficient depth of interpretation to enable reading to advance learners' knowledge. Understanding teachers' **pedagogic orientation to text** may require understanding how teachers themselves learned to read and write and whether and how they read in their everyday lives. Secondly, teachers avoid more challenging aspects of teaching (non-constrained skills) and hold very **low expectations** of learners. Tasks are simplified and only low level, factual questions that require no inferencing are asked in classrooms.

Positive shifts	Some shift	No change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability and use of texts • Teaching a range of range of reading strategies • Structure and routine to lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less time wastage • Slow pace • Weak time management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of cognitive demand • Lack of individualizing • Slow pace • Lack of feedback • Low levels of teacher knowledge

References

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