



Reading instruction in early grade classrooms

– Ursula Hoadley (UCT)

The focus of this note: The focus in this note is on issues relating to reading at the level of the classroom. What aspects of reading instruction, reading teachers and reading pedagogy require our attention to ensure that all children in South Africa learn to read for meaning by the age of 10 by 2030? The note draws on Hoadley (2018); Hoadley and Boyd (forthcoming) and Ramadiro and Porteus (2017).

1. What are we doing right as a country?

Curriculum policy: South Africa has had a stable curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS), for 10 years which has prioritized reading in the timetabling of instructional activities in the Foundation Phase. In 2012, CAPS introduced an explicit, balanced approach to reading focusing on international best practice and attention to the five pillars of reading. Supplanting a ‘whole language’ curriculum which left teachers without clear direction in the direct teaching of reading, the five pillars specify precisely the components that need to be covered in teaching learners to read: phonics and phonemic awareness; vocabulary; fluency; comprehension and oral language development. The CAPS introduced more structure indicating time to be spent on different activities, and mandated different types of reading, like read alouds, group guided reading, shared, paired and independent reading. In 2020 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) published the National Reading Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase. The Framework recognises that reading methodologies must be aligned with the distinctive linguistic features of African languages. It unpacks the teaching of decoding skills (phonological awareness, phonics) and dense morphology that pose challenges for young children in the early stages of learning to read in African languages.

Improved resources: Since 2011 the DBE has supplied all learners from Grade R to Grade 3 with ‘Rainbow’ workbooks in all 11 official languages. These comprise curriculum-aligned, systematic sets of colourful worksheets with accompanying fiction and non-fiction text to support the teaching of reading. The workbooks have become widely used by teachers, in many classrooms constituting the primary learning and teaching resource material (LTSM). Crucially, the workbooks introduced more text into classrooms, particularly those where there was a shortage or absence of appropriate text in learners’ home languages.

There have also been many initiatives that have placed early grade readers in classrooms, created classroom libraries and established and resourced school libraries. In many of these initiatives the focus has been on increasing the availability of text in African languages. For example, the Vula Bula anthologies (appropriately sequenced in terms of the linguistic demands of reading in different African languages, comprising 200 illustrated colour pages with 16 – 20 stories each at different grade levels) were provided to every Grade 1 to 3 learner in the Eastern Cape in 2019 and 2020.

Structured pedagogy reading programmes: The last decade has seen wide-scale implementation of a number of structured pedagogy programmes aimed at the improvement of early grade reading. Some

notable programmes have included the Early Grade Reading Study, National Education Coalition Trust, the Jika iMfundo programme and Funda Wandu. These programmes provide a combination of scripted lesson plans, coaching and training and learning materials. The programmes provide teachers with daily instructional routines that offer the potential for more purposeful and predictable reading instruction over time. They structure learning around engagement with text and focus on the development of the key components of learning to read mentioned above.

2. What are we doing wrong as a country?

Monitoring and supporting teachers: Daily reading and the adherence to productive instructional routines requires appropriate classroom-based monitoring and support. Monitoring of teachers' work in the classroom is generally conducted through checking learner exercise books and workbooks to assess coverage. This kind of monitoring does not ascertain whether or not reading is happening in classrooms, especially whether learners are provided with opportunities to read on their own. Shared, paired and group guided reading is not monitored. Thus there is no way of ensuring that the crucial mechanism through which learners learn to read (by reading) happens on a daily basis. In addition, HODs and subject advisors do not spend time observing teachers and teaching with them in order to model good practice and support teachers to engage in these practices in their lessons.

Low expectations: Teachers have low expectations of their learners and especially the ability of less able learners to read. Weaker learners are frequently ignored or treated as incapable of learning. Overall, lessons and especially classroom discussions aimed at oral language development are pitched at a very low cognitive level, introducing little new and challenging content. The focus of reading instruction is on low levels of text decoding, with less attention paid to these as a basis from which to develop comprehension.

Time wastage: Loss of instructional time occurs at a number of levels. The first is teacher absenteeism from school. The second is teacher absenteeism from the classroom during instructional hours. Thirdly, the very slow and seemingly intransigent pace at which learning happens in classrooms contributes to weak curriculum coverage. Inefficient practices, such as the marking of learner books during class time, phonic drills and copy-writing, crowd out time for reading comprehension and meaningful writing activities.

Books in the home: There are two sites of acquisition for learning to read: the school and the home. Most learners are exposed to very little text in the home and few opportunities to engage with books, especially story books, outside of school hours. The responsibility for developing reading thus falls wholly to the teacher. Learners require more exposure to text and more opportunities to practice reading than what is made available during school hours.

Teachers' reading practices: There have been a small number of studies of teachers own reading practices which indicate that early grade reading teachers do not read for pleasure themselves. It is difficult for teachers to teach reading for meaning or to prioritise reading if they do not read themselves. A lack of reading impacts teachers' own literacy levels, their vocabulary, appreciation of genre and knowledge of text structure as well as their distinguishing between spoken language and written text. These all affect the quality of reading instruction, including at the early grade levels.

3. What needs to change (and how might that happen) if we are to reach the goal of all children reading for meaning by age 10 by 2030?

Provision, support and monitoring of texts for reading: Although there have been improvements in the availability of texts there remain insufficient texts in many classrooms to ensure that learners

read enough. In addition, where texts are made available these are often not used. Appropriate ways of monitoring the actual use of a range of texts in classrooms need to be found. Teachers need support in organising and managing the plethora of graded reading series, levels and types to ensure quality instruction.

Better understanding of local pedagogies: Although CAPS prescribes a range of reading methodologies, a narrow range are actually deployed in classrooms. We don't yet know what successful reading pedagogy in the majority of South African schooling contexts looks like. Certain prescribed forms, like group guided reading, simply do not take root in classrooms. There is a need to conceive and demonstrate a successful pedagogy that engenders learning in these specific contexts.

Text in the home: Learners need to be given age-appropriate texts to take home to optimise exposure to text out of school and enhance the possibilities for reading with caregivers, siblings and neighbours.

Teacher preparation: Initial teacher education needs to focus on preparing teachers for reading instruction in contexts that represent the majority of classrooms, that articulate with the contextual affordances and constraints and language resources of these classrooms. In addition, teacher preparation should focus on teachers' own reading and foster reading as a regular and pleasurable activity that is about retrieving meaning from text.

References

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