






Factors affecting Grade 6 learners' reading performance in a rural school in Maluti, South Africa



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Background: Rural learners face severe reading challenges that are unique to their environment. The challenges include parents' low level of education, little or no parental support, lack of reading material, and parents' low socio-economic status. It is therefore important that rural education research highlights these challenges in order to help in addressing them.

Objectives: The study sought to explore the factors affecting the reading performance of Grade 6 learners from the Maluti District in the Eastern Cape.

Methods: The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was followed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively selected learners. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was used as a theoretical framework to anchor the study. Content analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: The findings showed that the reading performance of learners from rural areas such as the Maluti District was affected by several factors, specifically, the low level of education of their parents, a home environment that is not conducive for after-school reading, the parents' socio-economic status, and non-availability of reading material at school and at home.

Conclusion: Recommendations are made for appropriate interventions that seek to overcome the identified factors that hinder rural learners' reading performance. The study identified a number of contributing factors that are likely to serve as barriers to rural learners' reading performance. Knowing these factors is likely to assist teachers in making educated judgements regarding the teaching methods and the appropriate strategies to employ to help learners overcome the identified barriers to reading.

Keywords: illiteracy; reading performance; Maluti District; sociocultural theory; quantile schools.

Introduction

Reading is an important skill that helps learners find and communicate information, and its performance is governed by a variety of factors. The level of performance that learners demonstrate in this skill has implications for teaching and learning. Subsequently, the current study aims to identify factors that are associated with the reading performance of Grade 6 learners in a rural context. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA 2021), reading performance measures the capacity to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve goals, develop knowledge and potential, and participate in society. It entails decoding skills that enable children to read a text, as well as meaning-making or comprehension skills that enable children to understand, engage and get involved with a piece of text. However, the status of South African learners' reading performance is far from those outlined by PISA. South African learners' reading levels have been under scrutiny due to their poor performance in comparison with their counterparts in other countries (Rule & Land 2017; Spaul 2016, 2017; Willenberg 2018). Howie et al. (2017) reported on the factors specifically related to Grade 4 learners' poor reading performance in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2016). These factors include economically disadvantaged backgrounds of the majority of the learners, resource shortages in schools, teacher absenteeism, teachers' failure to complete the curriculum, teachers without the minimum formal qualification, parents' low level of education, parents' lack of involvement with the school, and parents' lack of participation in their children's education.

The reading performance of Grade 6 learners in South Africa, manifests in national as well as international reading comprehension evaluation tests. For example, the scores attained by South African Grade 6 learners in the 2017 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ III) evaluation paint a gloomy picture of the reading performance of

the South African Grade 6 learners. In this regard, Spaul (2017) used the 2017 SACMED III data set for South Africa to identify those factors that had a significant effect on learners' reading performance in Grade 6. Based on the findings of his study, he concluded that the 'socio-economic status of the school is important when understanding learner success or failure' (Spaul 2017:1). The results of the study conducted by Spaul further showed that the SACMED III data set confirmed disparities regarding the reading performance of Grade 6 learners. Specifically, the disparity was between the learners from wealthy and poor schools, which reflects inequalities in South Africa.

Further accounting for the disparities in South African education, Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) observed that learners falling in the lowest wealth quintile, especially those in the rural context, 'face severe challenges that are unique to their environment'. In addition, Du Plessis and Mestry are of the view that among the challenges are counted the lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient funding from the state, lack of resources, underqualified teachers, and multi-grade teaching. Du Plessis and Mestry argue that these factors serve as barriers to effective education, specifically reading with comprehension, whereas the factors that affect the reading performance of learners in the highest wealth quintile has a facilitative effect on the learners' reading performance. The inequality that manifests itself in the school system in South Africa is a concern that has drawn the attention of many scholars who draw a distinction between equality and equity in education (McMillan 2019; McNeel 2019; Peetz 2019; Wilson 2019). Agreeing with this, Gunn (2018) states that while equality is often associated with access and outcomes, equity recognises that different learners need different resources to achieve the same goals as their peers.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, rural learners face severe learning challenges that are unique to their environment. Lester (2012) furthermore points out that researchers on rural issues emphasise several characteristics of rural education that make the context unique. Supporting this view, Balfour, De Lange and Khau (2012) assert that rural education research should address the challenges peculiar to rural schools. They moreover lament the fact that rural research is under-researched and underdeveloped in South Africa. Therefore, rurality as an area of study forms the context of the current study as its aim is to focus on the factors affecting the reading performance of Grade 6 rural learners. Consequently, identifying the contributing factors to the learners' reading performance is likely to help teachers find ways to overcome the reading barriers. In other words, knowing the risks that hinder the reading process is likely to help teachers make informed decisions about the teaching methods and strategies to use to help overcome the barriers to reading in the rural context. Therefore, informed by the above-discussed literature, the current study sought to address the following research question:

- What are the perceptions of the Grade 6 learners in the selected rural primary school of the factors affecting their reading performance?

Theoretical framework

The study was underpinned by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) strongly believes that community and the environment play an important role in the process of making meaning by the learners. The main point of this theory is that individual development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded. Vygotsky believes that learning occurs through the social interaction with a skilful tutor or individuals with more knowledge or experience. This could be a parent, teacher or the child's peers. In the context of the reading process, the support provided by those individuals with more knowledge and experience is likely to facilitate the learners' comprehension of the text, thereby improving their reading performance. Vygotsky's theory also emphasises the role of culture in learning. Mirenoko and Sorokin (2018) argue that culture includes material objects like artefacts, ranging from a planetary scale to jewellery. Culture also includes non-material components like languages, literature, art, science, and external processes ranging from individual to collective modes of behaviour and internal processes like individual psyche. The relationship between culture and reading is acknowledged by Yousef, Karimi and Janfeshan (2014), who conducted research on the relationship between cultural background and reading comprehension.

The results of their study revealed that the means of all the groups regarding culturally familiar reading texts were higher than their means on unfamiliar context reading texts. Therefore, the way learners make sense of the reading material is determined by their cultural beliefs about the content of their reading. In the context of this study, the social and cultural beliefs of the rural learners could be different from those of the urban learners. This could serve as a determinant of the differences in their reading performance.

Rural education in South Africa

Although South Africa is a signatory to international protocols like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the education system in South Africa is still regarded as 'a tale of two systems' (Spaul 2012:1). The literature reveals that there is a huge gap between urban and rural schools and this gap manifests itself in the academic performance of the learners, especially their reading performance (Blease & Condy 2014; Du Plessis & Mestry 2019; Spaul 2017). Chakanika et al. (2012) view the disparity between urban and rural schools as a challenge that affects the whole African continent. In their study they identified factors such as lack of qualified teaching staff in rural areas, and factors that make it difficult for learners and teachers to attend rural schools, as contributing factors to the disparity between rural and urban schools.

In a South African context, Dube (2020) conducted a study that sought to determine the challenges faced by rural learners in the context of COVID-19. The results of her study indicated that, while the South African government was

promoting online learning as the only alternative in the context of COVID-19, this mode excluded many rural learners from teaching and learning due to a lack of resources to connect to the internet, the system that governs learning, and low-tech software. Another similar study that focused on the learning challenges in the rural context was conducted by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019). The results of this study produced findings that were similar to previous studies. Specifically, Du Plessis and Mestry observed that poor infrastructure and facilities, lack of qualified teachers, poor teachers' status, the unattractiveness of rural areas and curriculum challenges were the factors that posed barriers to the reading proficiency of the rural learners. The research shows that these factors put rural learners at a disadvantage with regard to learning. The main concern here is that the rural learners are exposed to the same curriculum and are expected to achieve the same learning outcomes as the urban learners, yet the learning support provided to the two groups is not the same. Thus, our focus in this study is on equity, which is defined by Gunn (2018) as the recognition that different learners need different resources to achieve the same goals as their peers. In the context of the current study, the authors are investigating the reading support that is likely to elevate or improve the reading performance of rural learners so that it is on par with that of urban learners.

Factors affecting the reading performance of learners in South Africa

Various researchers have looked into the factors that influence learners' reading proficiency. Van Staden and Bosker (2014), for example, conducted a study in South Africa to discover factors that predict reading literacy proficiency among Grade 4 learners. The findings of their study speak to the importance of encouraging engaged reading and instilling a love of reading in children from an early age, particularly through parental participation. As previously stated, Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) conducted a study in which they investigated the perceptions and experiences of teachers at rural schools in the town of White River in Mpumalanga. The investigation found that most of the schools lacked water, sanitation, or electricity and that classrooms were in poor condition. They concluded that these challenges have significant ramifications for successful teaching and learning, which holds true for reading instruction. Mulford and Johns (2004) conducted a similar investigation. They found that many rural schools lacked the minimum physical resources and basic infrastructure. They went on to mention that learners in rural regions are at a disadvantage when it comes to reading to learn, because of their parents' low socio-economic position. This is because most parents in rural areas work part time, have low levels of education and do not place high importance on education (Du Plessis & Mestry 2019:1). Based on the factors identified by Du Plessis and Mestry, it is apparent that parents who are illiterate and unemployed are likely to face challenges in purchasing reading materials for their children and supporting and motivating them to read.

A study by Naidoo, Reddy and Dorasamy (2012, 2014) furthermore attempted to understand teacher opinions on factors impacting reading literacy and solutions for improvement. The use of English as a medium of teaching, socio-economic obstacles especially little or no parental support, and high classroom size were highlighted as impediments to learners' mastery of reading in their study.

In other contexts outside South Africa, the factors inhibiting rural learners' reading development are similar. In the context of Nigeria, Olakunle and Christiana (2018) conducted a study that sought to examine learners' interest in reading and the availability of reading materials as they relate to and predict learners' achievement in English reading comprehension. The findings of their study revealed that learners' interest in reading and the availability of reading material were strongly related to their English reading comprehension, although only reading material could significantly predict learners' reading comprehension accomplishment. Dolean et al. (2019) conducted a study in Romania on the factors affecting learners' reading proficiency in multi-grade courses in rural elementary schools. The results showed that the teachers' scope of experience in teaching had a substantial impact on reading performance. Thus, the need to investigate rural learners' reading performance factors is crucial. The study seeks to determine the factors that influence the reading performance of a Grade 6 class in a rural context in South Africa.

Research methodology

Research design

A case study design was used in this qualitative investigation. Qualitative approaches, according to Hammerberg, Kirkman and Lacey (2016) are used to answer questions regarding experience, meaning, and perspective, most commonly from the participant's perspective. Because the focus of the current study was on the factors affecting learners' reading performance, this method was deemed appropriate as the selected learners were better positioned to share their reading experiences. Specifically, an explanatory case study was used to do a causal investigation of the factors affecting the reading performance of Grade 6 rural learners. In this study, 10 Grade 6 rural learners represented the case to be investigated, regarding their reading performance.

Participants

The school where the research was conducted is located in the Maluti District in the Eastern Cape. Ten Grade 6 learners were voluntarily selected for the purpose of the study. Sharma (2017:752) describes a voluntary or self-selection sampling technique as being appropriate 'when we want to allow units or cases, whether individuals or organisations to choose to take part in research on their own accord'. The mother tongue of the 10 volunteered learners is Sesotho and they chose to be interviewed in Sesotho. This did not present a problem as one of the researchers is a Sesotho speaker. The school was selected because it was close to one of the

researchers. All the participating learners were doing English First Additional Language (EFAL). They were between the ages of 11 and 15 years and the sample consisted of five girls and five boys.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews of 40–50 min each were conducted at their school with 10 EFAL rural learners. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions to get deeper detail of explanations from the participants (Maree, 2007). Therefore, the aim of qualitative interviews is to see the world through the eyes of the participant. In this study, the researcher who conducted interviews asked questions related to the factors affecting participants' reading performance. The following are some examples of the questions: Are your parents able to read? Do your parents show interest in your schoolwork? Do your parents assist with your reading activity at home? Do you have books to read at home? Are your parents employed? Do your parents buy you reading material like magazines and newspapers? As the researcher could not capture everything in his memory, he decided to take notes so that these notes could assist him in the data analysis. This technique helped the researcher to capture the exact phrases made by respondents. In addition, the researcher recorded the interviews with the permission of the participants.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns. Following this method, the transcribed data from the interviews were coded. A deductive approach to data analysis was implemented. We created broad topical categories of interest-based on the research question and interview questions. After that, we sorted the data into those categories. Four themes emerged from the coding. These are (1) the education level of parents, (2) learner's home environment, (3) the economic status of parents, and (4) availability or non-availability of reading resources. To answer the study questions, these themes were analysed and presented in writing.

Ethical considerations

As the ages of the learners ranged between 11 and 15 years, their parents and guardians were requested to fill in the consent forms. Learners were also asked to complete the assent forms to show their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher assured the participants of anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Basic Education and permission was requested and attained from the school principal.

Presentation of findings

In order to address the research question posed in the introduction, the themes that sought to provide answers are presented in the following discussion. Learners were

assigned codes to hide their identities; the codes ranged from L1 to L10, where L indicates learner. The order of the learners was determined by the order in which they were interviewed. For example, the learner who was interviewed first is L1. As already indicated above, four themes emanated from the data. Each theme and its effect on the reading performance of the rural learners is discussed below.

Theme 1: The education level of parents

Based on the collected data, 6 learners out of 10 indicated that their mothers could not read, while 8 learners indicated the same regarding their fathers. Only four learners indicated that their mothers could write, and two learners indicated that their fathers could write. It was clear that the majority of the selected learners were parented by people who were not able to read and write, and who were illiterate. In addition, the majority of learners declared that their parents had never been to school and as such showed no interest in their schoolwork. The following verbatim quotes support the above narrative:

'No Sir, my parents cannot read nor write. My parents never went to school. They cannot read; they cannot write. Both of them told me the first time I asked them to assist me for reading and writing that they are not teachers. They believe that teachers should do their work at school that is why they send me to school.' (L1, female, 13 years old)

'Yes, it is only my mother who is able to read though she passed Grade 2. My father never went to school. He cannot read and cannot write. My mother always tell me that I am in an advanced grade than her. She, therefore, cannot assist me. My father gets angry when I ask him for any help. I understand him because he has never been to school. They both told me what the job of the teachers was if they were to teach me again.' (L6, male, 15 years old)

'Yes Sir, both of my parents are able to read. My father passed Grade 8. My mother passed Grade 10. My mother is the one who is always keen to assist me. Although I think my father is in a position to assist me, he is lazy. He does not like schoolwork and he always tell me that the work he is doing at home keeps him busy and he is always tired.' (3, male, 14 years old)

'My parents said they never attended any formal schooling and as such are illiterate. They told me to understand that they could not assist me with any reading and writing. To them, for that matter, I was more educated than them. This worries me because sometimes I ask them to assist me with the general knowledge like isiXhosa idioms but they do not want to assist at all.' (L7, female, 14 years old)

'It is only my mother who attended up to Grade 9 while my father attended up to Grade 2 level of education. My father who could be assisting me is always away on duty. He is a truckdriver. Some days he is away for weeks and come home for a short time and always claims to be tired.' (L10, male, 13 years old)

'My mother passed Grade 1 only. She claims to be busy to do a teacher's work as she was not trained to be a teacher.' (L5, female, 13 years old)

Based on the above quotes, the majority of the parents of the sampled Grade 6 learners were not in a position to assist their children with their schoolwork, owing to their low level of education, or no schooling at all in some instances. This is

unfortunate given the important role parents are supposed to play in the education of their children, especially in motivating and helping their children to read. In this context illiteracy is a barrier for the parents providing educational support to their children. More specifically, if the majority of the parents cannot read, it is unlikely they will teach their children to read. This is unfortunate given the reading challenges that South African learners experience.

Asked if the parents showed any interest in the learners' schoolwork, 6 learners out of 10 indicated that their parents did not show an interest in their studies. The learners also doubted if their parents were aware of their responsibility regarding the role they were supposed to play in their child's education.

The followings were learners' responses:

'My parents do not show any interest in my studies and they do not even ask what we did at school. My mother works as a cleaner and my father is a security guard. When I ask them to help me with reading and writing my homework they tell me that their duty is to feed me and my role is to do school work as a learner.' (L9, male 13 years old)

'My parents are very passionate about my studies. Their passion is only shown in the form of a conversation and nothing beyond that. When I invite them to assist me they tell me that they are adults and cannot find themselves to be learners again.' (L4, female, 12 years old)

'My parents occupy me with household chores not the school activities. To my parents, I have a lot of time at school from Monday to Friday starting from morning up to the afternoon. At least when I come home I should relieve them with house chores. They give me no time for doing homework reading and writing.' (L1, female, 13 years old)

'No, my parents do not seem to know their responsibilities concerning my studies because every time after school all I am instructed to do is to herd cattle rather than doing my home works or study.' (L7, female, 14 years old)

'No, my parents do not know their responsibilities because I am always left at home to look after my younger siblings after school and they do not attend any school meetings. They do not even assist me with reading and writing whatsoever.' (L4, female, 12 years old)

'No, Sir, my parents never assisted me not even for a single day as they are always busy with household chores. Both parents told me that their duty is to feed me and buy clothes for me and not to bother them with school work when they are busy. My parents passed Grade 1.' (L2, male, 15 years old)

'No, Sir, my parents do not assist me at all as they always claim there were also never assisted by their parent during their times. They told me that I should tell my teachers to resign if they are tired of working or I should stop going to school if I do not want to learn. They both passed Grade 4.' (L9, male, 13 years old)

'Sometimes my mother assists me when she is available as she works far away from home and is not always there and she sometimes comes home exhausted. She admits though that she cannot understand other tasks as they belong to an upper grade than the one that she passed which is Grade 3.' (L10, male, 13 years old)

The above quotes point towards the education level of the parents and show that parents' ignorance as far as reading is concerned is a barrier to improving their children's reading performance. The parents' lack of education and motivation towards their children's schoolwork might furthermore be depriving their children of the opportunity to do their schoolwork at home. Instead of encouraging their children to study at home, they are only concerned about household chores.

Theme 2: The home environment

The second prominent theme is the home environment. Nine learners out of 10 declared that they did not have reading material at home. They did not have books at home as their parents could not afford books. They further stated that even if they somehow managed to get hold of books, they got easily misplaced in their homes as there were only a few rooms shared by everyone. The participants further pointed out that their parents did not allow them time to read at home for they had a strong belief that schoolwork was done at school only and not at home.

The participants responded as follows:

'There are no reading books at home. My parents claim to have lost their books because they were not being used by anyone. They feel that I have enough time and books at school. For those that I do not have, I can always borrow from friends or classmates.' (L2, male, 15 years old)

'No, there are no reading books at home because my parents did not attend school and there was no reason to buy them. To them, keeping books did not mean anything. Upon finding me reading I got into trouble as they feel I am trying to avoid working or assisting them with house chores. I have to be careful with my school books because one day I stopped my mother when she was pulling out a paper from my school textbook to make fire.' (L9, male, 13 years old)

'My parents do not allow me time to read my books at home instead they always occupy me with household chores. They keep on telling me that I have enough time at school to read and get books there because home is not a place to keep books.' (L10, male, 13 years old)

'My parents do not allow me altogether as they believe schoolwork must be done at school only. They keep telling that I am not the first one to go to school by referring to other relatives that went to school before me and did not have books but passed.' (L5, female, 13 years old)

The above quotes serve as testimony that the home environment is not conducive for the learners to practise reading. Apart from the absence of the reading material, the parents do not provide space for the learners to read because they believe that schoolwork is supposed to be done only at school. As far as the parents are concerned, any time after school is supposed to be utilised for household activities.

Theme 3: Socio-economic status of the parents

The third theme focused on the socio-economic status of the parents. Eight learners out of 10 indicated that their parents were not employed, and they only depended on the children's

grants. Two learners mentioned that their parents were working as intermittent domestic workers. The following are quotes from the participants:

'No, my parents are not employed and therefore cannot afford to buy me books. They tell me that I should choose between getting school uniform, getting fees paid and buying books. For them they cannot afford to pay for these school requirements or needs.' (L8, female, 13 years old)

'My parents do not give me money to visit the local library. In any case we do not have one in our area. Whenever I ask for permission from my parents to visit other learners to get assistance because they have books they always think that I am tricking them to go and play with my friends.' (L1, female, 13 years old)

'No, my parents do not buy me books or magazines because they are not working. Whatever little money they have is reserved for food. They will always claim not to have money when I ask for money for books. My father once told me that one cannot eat books therefore food is more important than books.' (L6, male, 15 years old)

'No, my parents do not buy books because they have no interest in reading magazines and newspapers, they prefer listening to the radio. If I ask for money for books they tell me that when they were going to school they shared books with other learners and relatives. I should learn to do the same.' (L9, male, 13 years old)

'Maybe my mother reads at work because she spends most of her time there and she seems interested in listening to the news and reading. She would tell me that I am spoilt- why should I buy books. Her salary is little.' (L3, male, 14 years old)

The implication of the above-mentioned quotes is that the social standing or class of the parents is a barrier to the reading performance of the selected learners. The majority of parents had no formal education, no income, and were unemployed. All these elements play a key role in the parent's ability to provide the necessary support to develop the reading performance of their children.

Theme 4: The availability of the reading material in the learners' home environments

The fourth theme focused on the availability of the reading material in the participants' home environments. To this end, all the learners indicated that there was no library in their school or community. The participants reported that their school at least had a corner library, which had a limited number of books. What caught our attention was that they were neither visiting it frequently nor borrowing books. Only 3 learners out of 10 indicated that they sometimes visit the corner library. The following are quotes from the participants:

'No, my community does not have a library. Even the school does not have the library.' (L10, male, 13 years old)

'Yes, we do have corner library in my school but there is none in the community.' (L5, female, 13 years old)

'I do not visit the corner library for we are only allowed to go after school. After school my parents expect me to quickly assist them with home chores. Our community does not have a library either.' (L1, female, 13 years old)

'Yes, though it is insufficient to cater to all the learners. Books are so few in the corner library and, sometimes, are irrelevant to the tasks of my grade.' (L3, male, 14 years old)

'I seldom visit it for there is a huge shortage of reading material. The books in the corner library are old and very few. My community does not have a library.' (L7, female, 14 years old)

The implication of the above quotes is that there is insufficient reading material in the school corner library. There was no evidence to show that even the few books that were available were utilised by the learners. Even those who claimed to be visiting the corner library infrequently had no clear purpose for their visit. In addition, it was clear that teachers did not assign learners tasks that would force them to visit the corner library.

Discussion of findings

This article sought to identify the factors that affect the Grade 6 learners' reading performance in one school in the Maluti District of the Eastern Cape with a view to creating awareness and devising strategies to address the identified factors. The concept of rural education and its uniqueness has been flagged in this study to make the study distinct from many studies that have reported on the reading performance of urban learners. It was mentioned in the introduction that few studies have been conducted on the factors affecting the reading performance of rural learners. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to add to the limited literature on the topic. The manner in which rural parents perceive their role and the support they are supposed to give their children is a reflection of their low literacy levels. In addition, the authors of this article believe that by understanding and nurturing the factors facing the reading performance of rural learners, parents and teachers could better encourage successful reading performance. The results of the study showed that the majority of parents were unable to assist their children with their schoolwork due to their low level of education or lack of any schooling at all in some cases. This is an undesirable state of affairs given the critical role parents are expected to play in their children's education, particularly in inspiring them to read. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which serves as the theoretical framework of the current article, the support provided by the individuals with more knowledge and experience is likely to facilitate the learners' comprehension of the text and as such improve their reading performance. According to this theory, the individuals with more knowledge and experience could be a teacher or a parent. However, in the context of the current study the parents could not play this important role due to their low level of education.

The results of the study revealed that illiteracy has become an obstacle for the parents in providing reading support to their children. If the majority of the parents are illiterate, it is doubtful that they can teach their children to read. This is disastrous given the reading difficulties that South African learners face. Moreover, the sociocultural theory stipulates that community and environment play an important role in the process of making meaning from what learners read. Therefore, it becomes a problem when the community members fail to execute their role in the reading development

of their children. This finding is in line with the Mulford and Johns (2004) study that revealed that learners in rural areas are disadvantaged when it comes to reading for learning, because of their parents' low socio-economic status. The findings also concurs with Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), whose study revealed that the poor socio-economic status of the rural parents can be attributed to the fact that most parents in rural areas work part time, have a low level of education, and do not place high importance on education.

The results of this study further showed that the learners' home environment was not conducive to reading practice. Apart from the lack of reading materials, parents did not provide a reading space for their children as they believed that schoolwork should be completed at school. According to the parents, any time after school was expected to be utilised for domestic activities. These findings concur with the findings of a study conducted by Dida, Obae and Mungai (2014) on the effect of domestic gender roles on learners' academic performance. The results of the study showed that there was a relationship between learners' involvement in domestic roles and academic performance. Specifically, the findings revealed that the more learners were involved in the domestic chores, the more they were late for school, and the more they were not able to complete assignments and therefore, the more their education was affected.

With regard to the socio-economic status of the parents, the findings of the study showed that the socio-economic status of the parents acted as a barrier to the selected learners' reading performance. This is due to the bulk of the parents' lacking a formal education, not having a source of income, and being unemployed. These factors all play a part in parents' capacity to give the required assistance for their children's reading development. This finding supports the finding obtained by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019). The results of their study revealed the low socio-economic status of parents to be a serious barrier preventing children from receiving a high standard of education and good quality of life.

The results of the study further revealed that the learners were not exposed to appropriate reading material in their homes or at school. Even those learners who claimed to visit the corner library on a regular basis had no apparent reasons for doing so. Teachers clearly did not offer learners assignments that would compel them to visit the corner library. This finding concurs with the finding of a study conducted by Olakunle and Christiana (2018) on students' reading-related factors as predictors of achievement in English reading comprehension. The results of their study revealed that the availability of reading material was significantly related to learners' achievement in English reading comprehension.

Although several interesting findings emerged in this study, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged. The sample size was very small; specifically, only one school and 10 learners were involved. The authors recommend a bigger

sample for future studies. However, through the implementation of a case study design, the current study managed to provide insights into the factors affecting the rural learners' reading performance. Therefore, the limitations of this study are not significant enough to render the benefits of this study's findings worthy. The authors believe that the findings of this study are transferable to other rural settings because the results presented could serve as directions to be followed.

Conclusion

This article provided a review of the factors affecting the reading performance of Grade 6 EFAL learners. The results indicated four factors that played a negative role in the reading performance of the learners. First, the education level of the parents was seen as a barrier as illiterate parents could not provide parental modelling and encouragement. Also linked to the illiteracy of the parents was the fact that reading at home was not a priority, which adversely affected the learners' reading performance. The socio-economic status of the parents is also linked to the education level of parents. A parent's socio-economic status appears to be a powerful determinant of learner literacy attainment. The study, unfortunately, shows that the low socio-economic status of the parents is a barrier to the development of reading performance.

Another pertinent factor is the parents' economic status. In this regard, the results indicated that the majority of parents were not employed and therefore could not afford to buy appropriate reading material for their children to study after school. In fact, the majority of parents did not view reading as a priority in their homes. The non-availability of books at home as well as at school was also viewed as significant. As having books at home cultivates a positive reading attitude, the researchers identified the absence of appropriate reading material as a barrier. The following recommendations are made in relation to the factors that emerged as negatively influencing learners' reading performance.

Recommendations

In the context of the study, the authors believe that literacy is a strategy for improving rural life and a weapon to fight poverty. The results of this study identified factors that may be regarded as barriers to learners' reading performance. Having this information is likely to assist the key stakeholders who are responsible for the reading performance of learners in rural schools. The stakeholders are parents, teachers, and the Department of Basic Education. The authors argue that the reading performance of rural learners requires a strong parent-teacher interaction. Teachers as professional partners are expected to play a major role in establishing this relationship. Teachers are encouraged to discover creative ways to involve parents in their children's reading. It seems this can be accomplished by keeping parents informed about their children's reading struggles and successes. As a result, frequent communication between the teacher and the parent

is likely to keep parents informed about what is going on at school with regard to the child's reading performance. Teachers should not just communicate bad information about learners' reading performance with parents; good information about learners' progress should also be shared with parents so that parents can celebrate their children's accomplishments.

The authors believe that discussing a learner's accomplishment in reading can help to establish a positive connection, so that for example when a teacher has to disclose something unpleasant it is less damaging to the parent-teacher-learner relationship. Teachers are more likely to stay in touch with parents if they share progress reports about their children's reading achievement. According to the study's findings, some parents are illiterate. As a result, the authors believe that collaboration should be encouraged not only between parents and teachers, but also among parents. Teachers, for example, could help foster the link between illiterate and literate parents so that the literate parents can assist the illiterate parents' children. This could be useful for parents who are neighbours.

A strong relationship between the Department of Basic Education and rural schools is also important. Teachers should be assisted through training by the Department of Basic Education on how to teach and assess reading. This could be accomplished by offering an early grade reading assessment tool to aid teachers in assessing learners' reading development at various intervals. In addition, there are literacy intervention programmes sponsored by the Department of Basic Education at public schools across South Africa, like *Masifunde Sonke*. Programmes like this should be introduced to the rural communities to support the rural schools. A strong relationship between the school and parents is recommended. As the results of the study revealed that the majority of parents are not educated, the schools should organise parents' meetings where the importance of reading at home is emphasised. This could be achieved by emphasising the role of the community versus the individual family. There should be a reading community service that assists learners after school. This community mini-library should hire local people who could assist as librarians and should allow local learners to borrow reading material.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

M.C. contributed the conceptualisation of the project and also helped with formal analysis. T.R. contributed with the original draft and data curation; J.J. helped with the methodology section, I.P.M. helped with projection

administration, validation and resources, and M.D. helped with writing, review and editing.

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Data availability

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