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The challenge of incorporating new methods: The case of group guided reading in South Africa

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Background: South Africa is a country with a reading crisis: 81% of Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning in Grade 4. Teaching methods and practices have been identified as a primary cause; there is an over-reliance on choral methods, very little focus on meaning, weak feedback and assessment, and little interaction with books.

Aim: This article reports on the kinds of knowledge required to teach Group Guided Reading (GGR) and the extent to which teachers enacted this knowledge in their practice, using Shulman's (1987) knowledge categories.

Setting: The research was carried out in three no-fee, township primary schools where isiXhosa was the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Methods: The research took the form of a case study of three teachers, who were given support, including coaching, to implement GGR. Data were generated through classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews using videos; the data were analysed using Shulman's knowledge categories (1986, 1987).

Results: Teachers demonstrated sufficient pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to put GGR into practice. However, no assessment was observed, and two of the teachers chose not to put the learners into reading ability groups, both of which are core elements of GGR.

Conclusion: New methods of teaching do not always take account of local circumstances.

Contribution: Group Guided Reading was developed in countries where classes are small, and classrooms are spacious and well-equipped.

Keywords: teacher knowledge; teacher practices; early grade reading; group guided reading; Foundation phase; reading baseline assessment.

Introduction: The reading crisis in South Africa

South Africa is a country with a reading crisis: the recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 results (DOE 2023; Spaull 2023) indicate that 81% of Grade 4 learners who were assessed in the language in which they had learnt to read (usually their mother tongue) were unable to read for meaning. Not only are the majority of South African learners exiting the Foundation Phase (FP) unable to read for meaning, but their letter-sound knowledge, word recognition and fluency are also very poor (Spaull, Pretorius & Moholwane 2020). Decoding skills are the foundation, and fluency is the bridge, to comprehension; it is therefore not surprising that the PIRLS test results would show that these learners are not comprehending what they are reading. There is a chain of fundamental reading skills that are not being developed: oral language including vocabulary, phonological awareness, alphabetic knowledge, letter sound knowledge, oral reading fluency and comprehension.

Although it is important to acknowledge the role played by the context in which teaching and learning takes place (Allais, Cooper & Shalem 2019; Ramadiro & Porteus 2017), teaching methods and practices have been identified as a primary cause. In many classrooms, there is an over-reliance on choral methods, very little focus on meaning, weak feedback and assessment, and little interaction with books (Hoadley 2017; Hoadley & Boyd 2022).

Attempts to overcome the reading crisis

The fact that the majority of children are not learning to read for meaning by the end of the FP, first became evident with the results of PIRLS 2006 (Howie et al. 2007). In response, a new campaign was introduced by the then Minister of Education, Dr Naledi Pandor, with the intention of improving South Africa's performance by placing more emphasis on foundational reading, writing

and mathematics skills. The Foundations for Learning Campaign (FLC) (DOE 2008a) introduced a Reading and Writing focus time similar to the British Literacy Hour (Wearmouth & Soler 2001), with new reading activities that teachers were expected to incorporate into their existing teaching practices. These were Shared Reading, Group Guided Reading (GGR) and Word and Sentence Level Work. Of these, GGR was given prominence in the curriculum and allocated more time than the other reading activities. The FLC recommended how teachers should conduct the reading activities, the resources needed and how to assess each reading activity (DOE 2008a, 2008b).

Group Guided Reading was unfamiliar and distant from the existing practices of teachers in no-fee schools where the majority of children learn to read in their Home Language in the FP (Hoadley 2017). Group Guided Reading is a method developed in the United States (Fountas & Pinnell 2010) with the purpose of supporting learners who are at the same level of reading, using an appropriate text to guide them in developing reading strategies that will eventually help them to read for meaning. The Department of Education (DOE) in 2012 announced officially its decision to adopt these imported teaching strategies as part of its curriculum policy represented by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).

However, the introduction and adoption of these strategies did not take into consideration the circumstances in no-fee schools in South Africa such as class and classroom size, availability of resources (graded and levelled readers) and training needed to ensure that teachers were able to conduct these reading activities effectively. The ongoing discussion around class size in South Africa suggests that this has an impact on learning outcomes (Spaull 2016; West & Meier 2020; Köhler 2022). In no-fee, Quintile 1–3 schools in the Eastern Cape, the ratio of teacher to learner can exceed 1:46 (Spaull 2016). West and Meier (2020) add that:

> One of the influential factors associated with poor performance and grade repetition is overcrowded classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms occur as a result of a shortage of teachers, a lack of school infrastructure and a high number of poorly resourced no-fee [*quintiles 1–3*] schools. (p. 2)

Incorporating Group Guided Reading into existing teaching practices

What is Group Guided Reading?

Group Guided Reading is a literacy teaching strategy in which the teacher works with a small group of 6–10 learners of very similar reading ability, using levelled texts matched to their reading level, for two 15-min sessions each day of the week (DBE 2012; Fountas & Pinnell 2010 and 2012; Place et al. 2008). A reading baseline assessment is carried out at the beginning of the year to put learners into flexible reading ability groups. Internationally, different types of tests are used for this purpose; in South Africa, the EGRA test is often used alongside the national reading benchmarks (Ardington et al. 2020; DOE 2010).

The reading baseline assessment should be carried out twice a year with the intention of assessing the progress each learner has made during the middle of the year and the support they might still need going forward. The use of reading ability ensures that learners are reading texts at the right level. Teaching at the right level (TARL) has been shown to be one of the most effective ways of improving reading achievement, especially for struggling learners (Berry et al. 2020). Group Guided Reading lessons are meant to be structured in a way that addresses reading gaps identified in the reading baseline assessment. Each learner should take a turn to read aloud while the others follow in their own books under the teacher's guidance (Fountas & Pinnell 2010 and 2012). The teacher should use the opportunity to carry out formative assessment, provide feedback and monitor each learner's progress over the year. The teacher is meant to model different reading strategies and try out different teaching techniques to maximise individual learners' decoding, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension skills that should eventually result in learners becoming independent readers (Ford & Opitz 2011).

Group Guided Reading requires good planning and classroom management because the teacher must design literacy activities for the groups that are working at their desks while she or he is in the reading corner with the reading group. The teacher must also monitor these learners from her or his position on the mat. It is important that this groupwork at the desks provides genuine opportunities to learn because children are engaged in it for 2 h a week (DBE 2020; Pretorius & Murray 2016). Group Guided Reading requires that good routines be established, transitions be managed swiftly, and learners can self-regulate.

Group Guided Reading is a complex activity in which the teacher has to orchestrate a number of different activities and aspects of the process. It requires different kinds of knowledge and skill, such as a good understanding of reading development and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson 2000), assessment strategies, text difficulty, and how to model and teach decoding and comprehension strategies. The success of the activity depends on good time management and pacing of instruction.

Research on teachers' uptake of Group Guided Reading

From the outset, teachers found difficulty in incorporating GGR into their daily teaching practices because it was a new teaching method for which they had received little practical, on-site training or guidance in implementation. A case study carried out in three public schools in the Western Cape by Kruizinga and Nathanson (2010) examined teachers' understanding of GGR and checked whether the teachers in the study were implementing the GGR programme as intended. The study found that teachers were not implementing GGR

effectively, including at a former model-C school which was one of the three selected schools.

Teachers were not following the GGR programme as prescribed by CAPS: learners were not put into reading ability groups and were consequently not reading text at the right level; instead, they were all given the same text. Furthermore, teachers were observed as using the GGR period as a time for each learner to read aloud and not as an opportunity to formatively assess learners and monitor their reading progress.

Findings from studies such as those of Kruizinga and Nathanson (2010) have led to people suggesting that GGR is not an appropriate method for our context. For example, the Zenex Foundation, a non-profit organisation, is calling for an alternative method to be used in South African schools, claiming that GGR 'is not working in South African classrooms as envisaged' (Zenex Foundation 2021:4). Zenex points to two factors they believe that make it difficult for South African teachers to implement GGR: large classes (number of learners allocated to each teacher) and learners' multilingual backgrounds.

Support for teachers to implement Group Guided Reading

Since the Kruizinga and Nathan (2010) study, there have been efforts to support teachers in using GGR. In the *Early Grade Reading Study I* (EGRS I) in the North West province, teachers were provided with learning materials, lesson plans and practical support in the form of instructional coaching; this resulted in an increased use of GGR. However, the study reports that even though teachers were incorporating GGR into their daily teaching practices they were:

> [*S*]truggling with differentiating between different ability groups, which might suggest that teachers either lack assessment opportunities to gauge where learners' reading abilities are, or that teachers are struggling with the concept of differentiating itself. (DBE 2017:29)

Fleisch and Dixon (2019) report on case studies of teachers' practice carried out as part of the EGRS I. Improvements were observed in the use of time and the quality of teaching. However, teachers had difficulty with what Fleisch and Dixon (2019) describe as 'more complex practices' such as GGR. They describe how in GGR:

> Teachers took learners to the carpet and attempted to follow the lesson steps … But implementing group guided reading requires a level of knowledge and view of literacy not contained in a scripted lesson plan. It requires a move from decoding to inferential meaning-making by the use of carefully phrased questions. Although the processes of group guided reading are mostly followed, teachers' gaps in *content knowledge* indicate a lack of embodied/habituated understanding of this pedagogy. (p. 9)

Hoadley (2017) reports on the findings of the *Schools Performing Against Demographic Expectations (SPADE)* Project. Like Fleisch and Dixon (2019), she found that although shifts in pedagogy were observed, they 'appeared to be largely surface rather than substantive' (Hoadley 2017:13). She reports on whether or not teachers were able to explain clearly to learners what was expected of them, to assess learners and provide feedback on progress, to make concepts clear, and to lead learners to synthesise and broaden concepts. She found that good teachers were able to make the requirements for activities explicit and to some extent monitor and intervene while learners were involved in a task, but they found it more difficult to respond to learners in effective ways. She provides an example from a GGR lesson in which she concludes that although 'the form of guided group reading' is present, the teacher does not provide:

> [*S*]pecific strategies or engagement to decode unfamiliar words and no attention is given to retrieving meaning from the text. A broader sense of what it means to read - i.e. decode and retrieve meaning [*and pleasure*] from text is absent from the activity. (2017:30)

The current study

The research reported in this article was carried out by N.A.K., in fulfilment of his Master's in Education. He had been a literacy coach and had taught isiXhosa Method in a BEd (Foundation Phase Teaching) programme and was seeking to get a better understanding of the difficulties teachers experienced with GGR. His research investigated the kinds of knowledge required to teach GGR and the extent to which teachers enacted this knowledge in their practice, using Shulman's (1987) knowledge categories: subject content (SC), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), curriculum knowledge (CK), general pedagogical knowledge, (GPK) and strategic knowledge (SK).

Research design

The study was qualitative in nature using a case study method (Creswell 2009; Denscombe 2007). The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of what kind of knowledge was required to teach GGR effectively and how teachers enacted their knowledge in practice. The questions guiding achievement of the research aim were as follows:

1. How is GGR conceptualised in the curriculum documents and what knowledge does this assume teachers (and learners) have?
2. What content knowledge (CK), PCK and curriculum knowledge (Curr K) are enacted in teachers' practice of GGR? What role is played by GPK?
3. How do teachers understand GGR and on what knowledge do they draw?

Conceptual framework

The study drew on Shulman's categories of knowledge (1986, 1987, Shulman is cited in Berry 2015), and these were later used as the framework for the analysis of the data. Shulman's knowledge categories are briefly outlined below.

Subject content knowledge

Subject content knowledge refers to the facts, concepts and skills related to the discipline or field of learning, in this case early literacy, and the way in which this is structured

and organised. In the case of reading, subject content knowledge includes a knowledge of the language in which reading is being taught and the ability to read proficiently in that language. It also includes some formal knowledge of its phonology, morphology, grammar, semantics and orthography, and of its literature, which in the case of the Foundation Phase includes children's literature (Cremin 2019; Cremin et al. 2008). Finally, it includes knowledge of how children learn to read in that language (Buckingham, Wheldall & Wheldall 2013; Moats 2014; Moats & Lyon 1996; Taylor 2014).

Pedagogical content knowledge

Pedagogical content knowledge refers to the knowledge of how to teach the specialised content of the field of learning, in this case, reading. It involves choosing the most effective ways of communicating the concepts and transmitting the skills so that they are accessible to young learners and can be used in learning to read (Shulman 1986, 1987). For teaching reading, it also includes knowledge of the specific aspects that learners of different ages and from different backgrounds are likely to find easy or difficult. For example, in GGR, a teacher should recognise that fluency is a critical aspect of reading and the bridge from decoding to comprehension. One way to teach this is to demonstrate fluent reading to learners and explain and exemplify the importance of speed, accuracy and prosody.

Curriculum knowledge

Curriculum knowledge includes a broad knowledge of the current curriculum, in this case the *Foundation Phase Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*, and knowledge of the specific curriculum for reading in isiXhosa Home Language. It includes a knowledge of the range of resources available for teaching reading, for example, children's literature in isiXhosa, both fiction and non-fiction; Big Books; flash cards, word walls and vocabulary books for developing new vocabulary, among others. In the case of GGR, teachers would need to be knowledgeable about different series of graded or levelled readers and how to match them to the reading ability of each group. The grading of isiXhosa reading material is in its infancy; Katz and Rees (2022) state that it was only in 2010 that appropriate isiXhosa reading material in the form of the Vula Bula series, was produced by the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy; prior to that the material that was available was translated from English:

> [*B*]efore Vula Bula, texts had been developed with little appreciation for the agglutinative nature of African languages and their consistent orthographies. In transparent orthographies, reading is typically taught using purely phonics-based approaches focusing on grapheme-phoneme correspondences. (Katz & Rees 2022:121)

At a recent Literacy Indaba hosted by the Zenex Foundation, West (2023) spoke of the need to develop systematic methods of grading texts for young readers in African languages, which are not currently available.

Teachers would also have to be familiar with how to select activities from the *Rainbow Workbooks* provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to keep the learners who are working at their desks, usefully occupied while the teacher is on the mat with the reading group during GGR lessons.

General pedagogical knowledge

According to Shulman, general pedagogical knowledge includes overarching theories of learning and assessment, teaching strategies, and classroom management strategies such as routines and time management. For example, in the case of GGR, the teacher uses a routine to get learners quickly to the reading corner. General pedagogical knowledge is also important for designing and monitoring the activities of the children who are not in the reading group; if these children are not engaged in worthwhile literacy activities, the objectives of GGR will not have been met. Monitoring, assessment and feedback are critical for GGR. Assessment is especially important because it gives feedback to the learners on the progress they are making with reading and guidance about how to improve. It also informs teachers whether their teaching of reading has been effective for all or some of the learners.

Strategic knowledge

Strategic knowledge comes into play when the teacher confronts different situations or problems where no simple solution is possible. It requires judgement and the ability to weigh up different options.

Research methods

The study was carried out in three no-fee, township primary schools where isiXhosa was the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). The teachers and the learners were all isiXhosa speakers. The schools were all participating in an intervention focusing on the improvement of FP teaching and learning. The focus of the case study was on Grade 3 because by this stage the learners should be familiar with GGR and able to read allowing the teachers to focus on the more conceptual aspects of the activity. The boundaries of the case (Merriam & Grenier 2019) were that the single activity studied was GGR in Grade 3 classrooms in no-fee schools participating in an intervention where the LoLT was isiXhosa.

Data were generated through document analysis, questionnaires, observations, stimulated recall and semi-structured interviews. Six GGR lessons were observed for each teacher and video-recorded. Semi-structured interviews were carried out immediately after each lesson to get a general impression of how the lesson went. Two stimulated recall lessons were carried out after school for each teacher. They involved watching the videos individually with the teachers, stopping at pre-determined points, and asking them to reflect back and unpack what was happening at that

point in the lesson. Short, structured questionnaires were administered to obtain biographical data about the teachers and their experience of teaching reading. The multiple data sources made it possible to triangulate data. Triangulation involves comparing the data from one source with data from another source to find out whether they confirm or contradict one another (Bertram & Christiansen 2014). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Rhodes Education Higher Degrees Committee (reference number: 2021-5114 6165).

Data analysis commenced with the analysis of two curriculum documents: the *isiXhosa Home Language CAPS* (DBE 2012) and the *National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase* (DBE 2020). The latter is a policy document which describes the pedagogy to be used in relation to the CAPS, including how to use GGR. The documents were analysed using Shulman's (1986, 1987, 2015) knowledge categories. The results were used to support the analysis of the school-based data. This analysis began with transcribing three observation videos for each teacher and the audio-recordings of the stimulated recall interviews, and then interpreting and classifying the text in the lesson observation transcripts using Shulman's knowledge categories. This was then tabulated. The second level of analysis involved comparing the tabulated lesson observation data with the stimulated recall interview data to better understand the data and draw conclusions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University, Ethical Review Research office (No. 2021-5114-6165).

Results

Document analysis

The analysis of the two curriculum documents referred to above revealed that both documents assumed that teachers had the necessary knowledge that would enable them to teach GGR successfully. Drawing on Shulman's (1986, 1987, 2015) knowledge categories, Table 1 summarises the types of knowledge assumed by the two documents.

Observation and interviews

One Grade 3 teacher from each of the three schools was purposefully selected for the case study (TA, TB and TC). These teachers had been part of the literacy intervention for two and a half years and had thus received extensive training, opportunities for practice and coaching from the literacy intervention, which included how to conduct GGR. TB and TC were mentoring BEd students on teaching practice, who were able to assist them during GGR lessons. The three teachers in the study provided an opportunity to examine knowledge and practice in favourable circumstances such that research could identify what was possible with regard to the adoption of GGR.

Brief biographical information is provided in Table 2.

As can be seen from Table 2, the teachers were diverse in terms of age, gender, qualifications, experience and continuing professional development (CPD). Two of them were Intermediate Phase trained and one had a Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma which included both Foundation and Intermediate Phase.

TABLE 1: Types of knowledge teachers require in order to teach Group Guided Reading effectively.

Subject Content Knowledge	Knowledge of *the language* (in this case, *isiXhosa*) and *early reading development* necessary for teaching and assessing learners during GGR. Teachers must be knowledgeable about the five components of reading (phonological awareness, phonics [letter-sound knowledge], fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) and how these contribute at different stages of learners' reading development. They must be fluent readers themselves. They should be able to differentiate between different levels and types of text.
Pedagogical Content knowledge	Knowledge of *how* to teach reading during GGR to learners of different ages and abilities (differentiation). For example, teachers are expected to know that they should start by conducting a reading baseline assessment as well as how to do this and interpret the results in order to identify each learner's reading level and put them into ability groups. They should be able to match texts to learners' different reading abilities. They should be able to teach the five components of reading explicitly, for example, to explain the focus of a GGR lesson and model fluency and different comprehension strategies. They should also be able to use this knowledge to provide feedback to individual learners and opportunities to act on this.
Curriculum knowledge	Knowledge of the curriculum with regards to GGR, for example, teachers should be knowledgeable about procedural aspects of conducting GGR: time allocation, what must be covered, how it should be done and assessed and what resources should be used; all these are important aspect of GGR that make it work successfully.
General pedagogical knowledge	Overarching theories of learning and assessment, teaching strategies and classroom management strategies with reference to GGR. For example, teachers would be expected to know how to put their learners into groups, establish GGR routines, and train them to work independently and to self-monitor while the teacher is busy with the reading group on the mat. Teachers should be skilled at providing feedback as part of formative assessment.
Strategic knowledge	Requires teachers to have in-depth understanding of early literacy, the context and the learners; a sophisticated set of teaching skills and good strategic thinking which would enable them to respond appropriately to any situation that may arise while teaching GGR.

GGR, Group Guided Reading.

TABLE 2: Biographical information regarding teachers in the study.

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Qualification	No. of teaching years	Latest reading training received and other related teacher training
TA	Male	25–34	PGCEIP MA	1–5 years	Enrolled for an advance certificate in FP literacy teaching Literacy intervention
TB	Female	55–60	JPTD	11–15 years	Literacy intervention EGRA training Jolly phonics training NECT training
TC	Female	45–54	HDE in Intermediate Phase BA (IsiXhosa, linguistics and psychology).	11–15 years	Literacy intervention

JPTD, Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma; HDE, Higher Diploma in Education; TA, Teacher A; TB, Teacher B; TC, Teacher C; PGCEIP, Postgraduate Certificate in Education Intermediate Phase; MA, Masters in Arts; BA, Bachelor of Arts; FP, Foundation Phase; EGRA, Early Grade Reading Assessment; NECT, National Education Collaboration Trust.

Resources used by the teachers

The observation and interviews took place in 2021, during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, when the schools in the study were operating on a rotational basis in which learners attended on alternate days. This meant class size was reduced by half, making it easier to manage GGR. However, learners had to wear masks and observe social distancing, and they received less tuition resulting in losses in their reading development (Ardington et al. 2021).

All three teachers had allocated a place that learners recognised as the reading corner; the reading corners had limited resources for pleasure reading in all three classes; however, TB had more reading resources than the other two teachers. The teachers varied in how they used their resources for GGR lessons. All the teachers used the Vula Bula Anthologies, which had been made available to all FP learners in the Eastern Cape by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (Spaull 2019) for their GGR lessons. TA and TC who had mixed ability groups used the Grade 3 Vula Bula anthologies exclusively with the learners who could read even though some of them were not at this level, suggesting that they did not understand differentiation in learning to read. TB was the only teacher who was consistent in choosing a Vula Bula text that was appropriate for the group she was working with; for instance, because there are no isiXhosa graded or levelled readers when working with a group that was not at a level where she could use the Grade 3 Vula Bula anthology, she chose either a Grade 2 or a Grade 1 Vula Bula text. Both TA and TB prepared a decoding lesson for their struggling readers using flash cards, but TB started off with an easy Grade 1 Vula Bula text before doing her decoding activity. After reading a one-word text in the Grade 1 anthology, TB instructed her learner (L) or learners (LL) to put their books aside and prepare to work with her using the flash cards she had prepared related to the word(s) they had read, together with a phonics table. TA, on the other hand, used the flash cards he received from the intervention.

Both TB and TC were mentoring BEd students on teaching practice who acted as teaching assistants during GGR.

Subject content knowledge

All three teachers were fluent in isiXhosa; however, with regard to expanding children's language knowledge, which is critical for comprehension, TC stood out in terms of the breadth and depth of her vocabulary teaching:

> Niyambona bantvana bam, ndingam qhawulanga likhona igama alibise rongo pha khaliphinde Ngqina, likhona igama olibise rongo pha khanimchazeleni ngeliphi? [*See here my children, without disturbing you there's a word that Ngina mispronounced there, re-read it again Ngqina, there's a word you mispronounced there, show him which word is that?*] (TC)

> "Ngemilinganiselo" [*The measurements.*] (L1 and L5)

> Okay, yintoni imilinganiselo kanene? Jongapha …[*Okay, what are measurements again? Look there …*] (TC)

> Kukulinganisa umgubo kwenzele milingane [*It is to measure flour to size?*] (L3)

> Uthi ke yena kukulinganisa umgubo kuze milingane. Mhlambi uthatha ikopi agalele umgubo… usebenzisa ntoni ukuze ilingane kengoku lemigubo yakho? [*He's saying it is to measure flour to size. Maybe you take a cup then you pour flour … what do you use in order to bring your flow into size?*] (TC)

TA allowed more use of English vocabulary than the other teachers though this may have been the result of the text he was using, which included a range of animal names which learners often know in English rather than isiXhosa:

> Ndibona icrocodile, titshala. [*I can see a crocodile, teacher.*] (L6)

> Uthi ubona icrocodile! Mmmmh [*esolatha umfundi olandelayo ngamehlo akhe* [*He says he sees a crocodile! Mmmmh* {*indicating to the next LL with his eyes.*}] (TA)

However, he did indicate in his interview that he was preparing learners for the Intermediate Phase where English becomes the LoLT.

All three teachers demonstrated some knowledge of reading development. This was evidenced by the fact that they were able to identify the struggling learners and plan a GGR; lesson for them at an appropriate level and using appropriate resources. The focus for these learners was on decoding. With the stronger readers, on the other hand, they focused on fluency and comprehension. Although the teachers were able to demonstrate this knowledge, they were unable to articulate in any depth the choices they made during the GGR lesson. This suggests that their subject content knowledge was limited. TA was best able to articulate his choices perhaps because of his qualifications and the fact that he was enrolled in an Advanced Certificate in Foundation Phase Literacy Teaching.

Pedagogical content knowledge

All three teachers seem to have procedural knowledge on how to conduct GGR; teachers began their GGR lesson by giving the whole class an activity to do, followed by calling the selected group to go to the reading corner. Routines were in place; each child had their own anthology and opportunity to read. The teachers from the study appeared to understand that GGR is a period where learners get an opportunity to practise reading individually under teachers' guidance and get feedback from the teacher.

All the teachers had conducted a baseline assessment at the beginning of the year using the intervention's reading baseline assessment where they assess up to 10 learners a day assessing their decoding, fluency and comprehension skills. The teachers used marks from their reading baseline assessment to group their learners. However, two of the teachers (TA and TC) had chosen to use mixed ability grouping for all those learners in the class who were able to decode, which is not in

line with the recommendations in the curriculum documents. This suggests that their understanding of the purpose of baseline assessment is limited.

All three teachers appeared to know their learners well and were able to use this knowledge to differentiate their instruction as far as the struggling learners were concerned; this was seen when TA and TB prepared a special lesson designed for these learners. The teachers seemed to know where to start with these learners; they prepared a series of decoding activities resulting in learners mastering the decoding strategy they were being taught on that day. However, they did not differentiate at higher levels, suggesting they did not fully understand differentiation in relation to early grade reading.

All three teachers were able to demonstrate some competence in developing fluency. However, their focus was more on pronunciation and pacing and less emphasis was placed on reading with prosody and expression, which suggests less emphasis on meaning-making.

Similarities were also observed in how the teachers taught vocabulary. Learners would be asked to explain a new word and once they had defined it correctly, the teacher would then ask one of the other learners to use it in a sentence to check whether they knew how to use it:

> Ingaba intlango yendawo enjani okokuqala? [*What does a desert look like? What kind of a place is it?*] (TA)
>
> Komile [*It is dry.*] (L2)
>
> Komile andithi? [*It is dry' isn't it?*] (TA)
>
> Yes titshala [*Yes, TA.*] (LL)
>
> Yintoni igama layo ngesilungu? [What is the nam*e of it in English?*] (TA)
>
> Desert. (L5)
>
> Desert andithi? [*Desert, is it not so?*] (TA)
>
> Yes, *titshala*. (LL)

Again, TA chooses to develop learners' vocabulary in both their home language and English.

It was further observed that teachers used questioning as a tool to assess learners' understanding of the story being read and to engage with learners about what they were reading, which seemed to not only assess understanding but also to develop some comprehension skills. The teachers also demonstrated the ability to use learners' prior knowledge to develop their comprehension skills. The extract below shows how TA used questions to encourage the learners to infer the moral of the story:

> [*N*]ehagu yayikhona apho, okay eyonanto ibalulekileyo kengoku kwelibali silifundileyo bekuyintoni? Siye safunda ntoni, belisifundisa ntoni elibali? Ucingba belisifundisa ntoni, Ukho ucingba belisifundisa ntoni sana hvam? [… *a pig was also there, okay what was the most important thing now in this story we read? What did we learn, what was the story teaching us? What do you think it was teaching us, Ukho, what do you think the story was teaching us my child?*] (TA)
>
> Ukulima … [*To plant …*] (L3)
>
> [*B*]elisifundisa ngokulima, uthi vena belisifundisa ngantoni, ngokulima, oh yes ewe lisifundisa ngako ukulima yah, okay. Omnye ucingba yintoni enye esiye sayifunda kwelibali? M.m siphinde safunda ntoni? Hmhmhm [*chuckles*]… yintoni enye, wena xa ucinga kwelibali njengokuba ubulifunda uye wa, yintoni enye oyewayifunda? Ewe sana hvam? [… *it was teaching us to plant, she says that it was teaching us what, planting, oh yes it teaches us about planting yeah, okay. What do the others think we've learnt in the story we read? Ah ha what did we learn again? Hmhmhm* {*chuckles*} … *what else, when you think during the time you were reading this story what did you, what else did you learn? Yes my child?*] (TA)
>
> Kuba tishara, masinga zithatheli phantsi intwe zincinci … [*Because teacher, we shouldn't undermine small things …*] (L2)
>
> [*K*]uba masinga zithatheli phantsi intwe zincinci andithi? Kuba sibonile kwelibali intoba impuku. ufika kwayo, sikwazile intoba sithini, umnqathe siwukhuphe andithi, okay yah omnye umntu uyawfunda ntoni? Asifundanga nto singabanve nhe …? [… *that we shouldn 't undermine small things, isn 't that so? Because we saw in this story that the mouse's arrival, we were able to pull out the carrot isn't that so, okay yeah what did the other person learn? Didn't we learn anything as others right … ?*] (TA)

Curriculum knowledge

All three teachers seem to have procedural knowledge of how to conduct GGR as outlined in the CAPS and the National Reading Framework. All the teachers had conducted a baseline assessment at the beginning of the year and had grouped their learners, although two of them had chosen to use mixed ability grouping for those who could read, which is not in line with the recommendations in the curriculum documents. They all had reading corners and mats provided by the intervention. They all used reading anthologies provided by the provincial education department which, although not formally graded or levelled, gradually increased in level of difficulty. They had planned a literacy activity to keep the other groups occupied at their desks. The teachers varied in terms of timekeeping: TC kept strictly to the time specified in the curriculum whereas the other two teachers were driven by the needs of the learners and tended to run over time.

General pedagogical knowledge

Group Guided Reading depends on good classroom management to ensure that the groups working at their desks and those in the reading corner are on task. The teachers varied in their classroom management styles. TB and TC assumed more authority in the classroom, whereas TA adopted a more democratic style and wanted his learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. The latter strategy was not observed to work, perhaps because learners were attending on alternate days and the observation period was short. In addition, TA was the only one of the three teachers who did not have a teaching assistant who could work with the other groups while the teacher was with the GGR group.

Clear instructions are also key in the implementation of GGR. The more experienced teachers, TB and TC gave clear instructions to learners, whereas TA, who was a novice teacher, was less explicit. Similarly, TA was less explicit when giving feedback to learners during GGR; he did not tell the learners where they were going wrong and how to improve.

Although two of the teachers provided adequate formative assessment, none of them kept records of this which would have enabled them to monitor their learners' progress. There was no evidence that teachers saw GGR as an opportunity to monitor learners' progress.

Although all three teachers carried out a baseline assessment, two of them chose to have mixed ability groups for GGR. Their rationale for this was that in mixed ability groups, the stronger learners could assist the weaker ones. This suggests a lack of understanding of the purpose of differentiation and the role of the teacher in GGR.

Strategic knowledge

In this study, strategic knowledge was defined as knowledge and reasoning that teachers draw on to make decisions as a response to learners' needs under specific conditions. In the study, we observed two instances in which teachers' strong beliefs about learning influenced their decision-making. Two teachers (TA and TC) chose to put their learners in mixed ability groups for GGR despite the curriculum requiring ability groups. The reasons for this were their belief that the stronger learners could help the weaker learners, and in the case of TC, she wanted her learners to feel equal to each other.

This belief may be appropriate for some reading activities, for example, Paired Reading, but in the case of GGR it runs counter to the curriculum's intention to provide an opportunity for differentiated teaching (Berry et al. 2020; Tomlinson 2000).

In a number of instances, TA expressed his belief in a democratic style of teaching and a classroom in which learners enjoyed rather than feared reading. He allowed learners to choose the text they would read in GGR and who would start reading. In an interview, he said:

> I don't want them to feel forced. I don't want them to feel that I'm forcing them to read … because they must be excited … so they must read as much as they want and then stop when they feel that now they can no longer go beyond so that tomorrow when they come here again they don't feel threatened that we are going to be asked to read from here to here and then I don't want that. So … I always say, we have to create ourselves classes that allow learners to be who they want to be without also sacrificing their ability to learn. (TA)

He was pleased that in his classroom his learners have come to realise that:

> We don't have a teacher because … we're all learners so I'm learning, they're learning. (TA)

These beliefs lead to a particular interpretation of GGR:

> I don't want to have, when it comes to GGR, I'm still new with it. One thing, I don't want to find myself in is to channel it much for them, I want it to be explorative, I want them to find themselves wandering in it. Not me having to ask them questions. (TA)

Discussion of results

Our analysis of the curriculum documents introduced in 2012 and 2020 shows that since Kruizinga and Nathan's study (2010), teachers have received and are continuing to receive considerably more information and guidance about how CAPS expects them to teach GGR. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the teachers in this study demonstrated more knowledge in implementing GGR; however, there was commonality in that they did not use GGR as an opportunity to formatively assess learners and monitor their reading progress.

Where these teachers were similar to those in more recent studies that have included some support and training (Fleisch & Dixon 2019; Hoadley 2017) was that they were able to manage the procedural aspects of GGR proficiently. It should be noted, however, that two of the participants, TB and TC, both had BEd students in their classes, who were able to assist with groupwork.

In addition, the teachers in this study also demonstrated some of the more conceptual aspects of the GGR pedagogy that have not been observed in other studies. They had taught learners decoding strategies, which they encouraged them to use during GGR, and one of the teachers had discussed challenging vocabulary. They drew on learners' background knowledge and asked questions to link the texts to learners' lives. They were able to differentiate instruction for struggling readers who could not decode (Tomlinson 2000). However, two of the teachers did not differentiate for the other learners, partly because of their beliefs but perhaps also because their assessment knowledge was weak (Kanjee & Mthembu 2015).

Where these teachers were similar to those in the previously mentioned studies (Fleisch & Dixon 2019; Hoadley 2017) was that they did not ask many inferential questions nor required elaborated answers from learners. However, there were constraints in terms of resources and time for them to do this. The anthologies the teachers were using did not always allow for deep engagement. Furthermore, it is difficult with a group of six learners to hear each one read aloud and to ask inferential questions requiring elaborated answers in 15 min; perhaps, the Shared Reading activity is a better opportunity for this kind of engagement. The teachers covered some but not all of the reading skills and strategies reportedly taught by teachers internationally in Grade 3 (Howie et al. 2017); for example, they did not compare different texts, make generalisations or draw many inferences from the texts.

Something we did not take account of in the design of the study was the influence of teachers' beliefs and attitudes, yet as the results show this influenced their practice. Shulman himself acknowledged that his original concept of teachers' knowledge (1986, 1987) did not sufficiently take account of 'emotion, affect, feelings and motivation' nor the 'moral character of teaching' (2015:7).

Conclusion

We believe this study has contributed in the following ways to our understanding of whether or not and how a new method of teaching such as GGR is taken up into teachers' practices:

- New methods of teaching do not always take account of local circumstances. GGR was developed in countries where classes are small, and classrooms are spacious and well-equipped. A response to this has been the introduction, in some South African contexts, of Teaching Assistants (DBE 2021; Farrell et al. 2010; Spaull et al. 2016), reading anthologies and a recent initiative to develop methods of grading readers in African languages such as isiXhosa (Katz & Rees 2022; West 2023). Innovations such as GGR can thus spur further innovations and adaptations of the method.
- The complexity of a new teaching method is not always recognised, for example, its distance from teachers' current practice and where training needs to focus. This cannot all be achieved as part of in-service training; it needs to be addressed in pre-service BEd and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes.
- The introduction of new teaching methods does not always take account of teachers' attitudes and beliefs, for example, in the case of TA and TC, the democratic impulse not to differentiate, and in the case of TA alone, to encourage his learners to take responsibility for their own learning. While this is laudable in some respects, it goes against the purpose of GGR. During training, teachers need opportunities to express their views about how a new method will work in their context.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.A.K., upon reasonable request.

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