Research Article

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Teachers' Philosophies on Literacy Teaching and Learning in Five Rural Primary Schools in the Western Cape-George District

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Abstract

This qualitative study analysed Foundation Phase teachers' philosophies on literacy teaching and learning. The analysis revealed a range of understandings that teachers' tuition varied from drill work in class, to imaginative and engaging education that drew upon the inner resources of learners' own knowledge. In most cases in this study, those teachers who displayed a limited and unreflective philosophy of learning literacy, mirrored their limitations in class; while the teachers with a broader understanding of the ethos, ethics and stipulations of literacy requirements demonstrated, even in trying circumstances, to deliver inspiring and quality literacy instruction. Five schools with eight Foundation Phase teachers in a rural area near George in the Western Cape Province of South Africa participated in this study. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were the methods of gleaning data which were analysed and categorised to reveal dominant patterns of thought, behaviour and pedagogy.

Keywords: *Teacher, Literacy, Teaching and Learning, Primary Schools, Western Cape*

1. Introduction

Understanding teachers' philosophies necessitates continual reference to the historical context of education as well as the state of literacy in South Africa today. Chisholm (2011) maintains that learners from poor rural areas in South Africa are faced with the handicap of poverty and the problem of going to a school that still displays the wounds of discrimination and poor funding as experienced

during apartheid (Chisholm, 2011). Chisholm (2011:52) argues that the most essential in school are resource management, quality of teacher and their number, textbooks, discipline, classroom practices, assessment management, feedback and home background (Chisholm, 2011).

Sonn (2016:iv) in her research study which was based in a rural education district where "past unequal spatial, educational and social stratifications persist", argues that although social justice is supposed to be embedded in the South African constitution and various policy documents as an important concept and vision for a democratic South Africa, it is still not a reality. This is despite the fact that South Africa has been a democracy for twenty-two years, the South African society still reflects the entrenched racial and class divisions of the past (Sonn, 2016:iv). Sonn (2016) claims that the position taken in her study is that "social justice and social injustice are inextricably linked".

In tests conducted by Progress International Reading Literacy Study (Howie, PIRLS 2006, 2011 & 2016) it has become evident that South African primary school learners' literacy skills and abilities are substantially below the norm for their age and grade, both continentally and inter-continentally. The low literacy levels of learners in South Africa is a cause of concern among different stakeholders such as educators and parents: even though "during the past decade, much attention has been given to both the literacy rates in South Africa and how classroom teaching of reading is envisioned and studied" (Condy, Chigona, Chetty and Thornhill, 2010:261). South Africa has continually scored lowest when compared to other countries whose learners have participated in the international assessment of learners' achievement for PIRLS 2006, 2011 & 2016. Among 40 participating countries, South Africa had a lower rating than all the other countries. Kuwait and Morocco had higher national literacy scores than South Africa (PIRLS 2006). In the PIRLS 2016, South Africa was the lowest-scoring country out of 50.

The WCED Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2006-2016 states that: "Systemic research conducted by, *inter alia, Gesselschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit,* and the National Department of Education, in addition to other indicators together with the assessments of Grade 3 learners' competencies and numeracy in the year 2002, indicate that the literacy and numeracy skills of learners in the province are "poorer than what is expected to progress successfully" (WCED, 2006:1).

It was mentioned in the same WCED document of 2006 that: 36% of Grade 3 learners achieved the expectation in reading and numeracy whilst the majority of them performed lower than expectation" (WCED, 2006:2). Most alarming of the same systemic results was the performance of learners from rural areas which indicated that only 15% performed at the Grade 3 level of literacy.

Reading standards of these young learners were well below the national standards for most Grade 3 learners (WCED, 2006). This predicament has drawn some educational researchers to investigate the root cause of such underperformance in literacy tasks. Poor performance in rural schools is often blamed on logistical problems such as lack of textbooks (Prinsloo, 2014).

Lack of parent participation in learners' education and weak functioning of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) are regarded as contributory factors (Modisaotsile, 2012:1). Other researchers place the blame upon teacher and learner absenteeism. It has been noted that almost 20 per cent of teachers are absent on Mondays and Fridays (Modisaotsoile, 2012:4) and that absenteeism peaks to one-third of staff members at month-end. Richek, Caldwell, Jennings and Lerner (2002:24) state that frequent transfer and learner absence from school may affect their success. Learners who are absent for a long time may miss important lessons. Frequent change of school in a year may lead to changes in teaching material and approaches (Richek *et al.,* 2002:24). The PIRLS 2006 analysis "showed little correlation between hours taught and achievement; due to complex factors such as instructional time not spent in effective and productive ways" (Howie *et al*., 2006).

The fact that there are so many diverse, and at times conflicting, explanations for the low literacy rates in South Africa suggests that there may be something fundamentally flawed with classroom practice. Murphy (2004:25) claims, for instance, that: some factors such as poor teacher efficacy, little teacher expectations, inappropriate and watered down programmes caused failure in literature. It is facile, however, to raise concerns about the symptoms of dysfunctionality without first pausing to contemplate what may be the root causes of ineffective classroom tuition. Instead of

analysing the outward effects of dysfunctional schooling and apportioning blame, this research investigation posits that more essential questions need to be asked. In many cases, teachers bear certain assumptions, prejudices and inherited outlooks concerning literacy teaching which, in this paper, are termed teachers' philosophies. The nature of these individual philosophies may substantially affect the efficacy of the tuition in literacy conducted in the classroom.

As a result of this supposition, the core question posed by this study is: 'What philosophies do primary teachers have about literacy?

2. Materials and Methods

This study comprises a phenomenological study which is appropriate to research that strives to discover and comprehend peoples' experiences and views of a specific phenomenon (Delport & Fouche, 2002:268). Teachers' articulations of their teaching often fall within the tradition of phenomenology because the researchers intend to investigate what beliefs, prejudices, political bias and social experience lie behind the practices and thoughts of how these selected teachers teach literacy in Grade 3 classrooms.

2.1 Case Study Research Design

This qualitative study identifies, analyses and interrogates what philosophical assumptions underlie the teaching and learning of literacy. For this study, a case study design has been implemented. A case study entails studying one case or a collection of cases "for learning more about a little known or poorly understood observational situation or social phenomenon" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The term 'case study' "has to do with the fact that a limited number of units of analysis, often only one, such as an individual, group or an institution, are studied intensively" (Welman & Kruger, 2001:190 in White, 2005:105).

The researchers explore a phenomenon that is time bound and activity such as an event, institution, programme, social group process, and gathers thorough information through the use of different means of data collection techniques at a certain time (White, 2005:105). In this study, the researchers sought to explore the opinions and beliefs of teachers around teaching and learning of literacy. A case study is a relevant design because it provides latitude to focus on an individual or group in a school setting which manifests characteristics of the main interest in teaching and learning of literacy. In this instance, our case study consists of Grade 3 teachers who, by being in the Foundation Phase (FP), teach literacy as a key component of the FP curriculum. This is the same component for which data was collected.

2.2 Sampling

Sampling involves a selection of "a portion or a smaller number of units of a population as representative or having particular characteristics of that total population" (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011:223). In this instance, the case consists of a group of eight selected teachers who teach literacy at five rural primary schools. The researchers use a purposive sampling technique from a population of five schools in the George district of the Cape Province, South Africa. Teaching literacy in rural primary schools drove the sample selection. Eight teachers recruited from five schools participated in interviews and teaching observations. All the Foundation Phase grades (R-3) at the participating schools are represented by two or three teachers. These teachers taught between 0-5 up to 11-15 years in Grade 3. Three teachers are from Coloured schools (Quintile 3 which refers to poor schools) where Afrikaans is the medium of instruction or teaching and learning. They teach both Afrikaans and English. Two teachers are from IsiXhosa speaking schools (Quintile 3) and three other schools are from the Former Model C schools (Quintile 5: well-funded and with rich backgrounds or environment) one White English school with English culture and two White Afrikaans schools with

Afrikaans culture. A good example to explain this disparity is that of Sriprakash (2013:326) who states that South Africa, like India, is experiencing "a bifurcation between underfunded fee-free rural schools and English-medium, fee-paying, capitalist, middle-class schools in urban areas". Sriprakash (2013:326) expresses concern about "differences between schools in cities and rural areas; in terms of class structures, capitalism and politics in education in modern India". It should be noted that although this number might appear a small sample, methods of data collection and analysis used generated rich evidence in terms of the research questions.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013:182) emphasize the importance of obtaining reliable data. They further state that "a research study stands or falls by the reliability and verifiability of the data on which it is established or constructed". Since this is a qualitative study, "quality is maintained and established through the researchers' ability to generate understanding and therefore making findings and the process dependable" (Golafshani, 2003:600).

Of particular interest in this study was to produce data that could foster an understanding of the phenomenon of teachers' philosophies on the teaching of literacy. Guided reflection suggested by Kwenda, Adendorff and Mosito (2017) was adopted as a framing strategy during the data collection process. For each method of data collection used, teacher thinking and responses were guided through a series of questions at different schools within the district of the Western Cape at rural schools in George; with special reference to Grade 3 teachers. The data were obtained by using a judicious combination of two main methods: one-on-one semi-structured interviews and classroom observation.

2.4 One-on-one semi-structured interviews

Palmerino (2006) points to the following qualities of one-on-one interviews in qualitative research: (i) they can dig deep into issues (ii) in-depth one-on-one interviews, administered through various media provide immense value (iii) they can expose the best thinking of every participant or respondent without the withdraws or retracts of group dynamics (iv) good or bad ideas from one participant do not dominate or affect the thoughts of any other participant; this alone enhances the quality of the information acquired and (v) they evoke the whys behind participants' reactions.

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder to ensure that the researchers captured all the participants' responses. Participants responded to a set of questions which were purposefully designed, considered and adapted in advance. Using semi-structured interviews strikes a balance between broad research which depends largely upon unstructured interviews and a structured descriptive or interpretive approach. It was of pivotal importance to develop a set of trenchant and probing questions in advance (Bless *et al*., 2013:113).

2.5 Classroom observations

Henning (2008:7) argues that observation should be regarded as collecting or gathering data and involvement in the actions of participants in the research environment and getting to know their ways of doing things differently. Bless *et al.,* (2013:117) explain that juxtaposed or contrasted with other data collection techniques, observation presents rich, comprehensive "context-specific descriptions, which are close to the insider's perspective". Observation complements "other research methods, conducted in parallel, stimulates theoretical development, prompts initiatives for further research, and assists in validating available findings" (Bless *et al.,* 2013).

In this study, classroom observations were recorded and videoed. The main aim was to examine and interrogate alignment between teachers' responses in interviews and what they do as they teach:

to cross-check the extent to which their practices reflect opinions shared during interviews. During the observation, the camera followed everything that the teacher and the learners were doing.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Ethics by definition "are generally considered to deal with beliefs about what is right or wrong, proper or improper, good or bad" (White, 2005:210). The researcher "is responsible for the ethical standards to which the study adheres" (White, 2005:210).

Before commencing with data collection, researchers strictly followed the ethical guidelines of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). First, a proposal was submitted to the Faculty Research Committee (FRC) to determine the logic and relevance of the proposed study. Once the FRC approved the study, an application for ethical clearance was sent to the Faculty Ethics Committee who determined whether the study complied with ethical stipulations. Among other considerations, the researchers should ensure that the participants' privacy is not invaded and that no harm is posed to participants; who were informed that the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Before they participated in interviews, clear and accurate information about the research was provided. They were required to complete consent forms.

Once the study was ethically cleared by the university, the next stage of ethical clearance involved seeking permission from the Western Cape Education Department to solicit the participation of schools and teachers in the study. When schools were approached and principals had given permission and identified the relevant sample of teachers in FP, participants were assured that the information provided by them would not be disclosed in any form other than within the context of the research and that their identities would remain confidential. Permission to make use of a tape recorder and video camera was sought from the participants before the interviews and lesson observations, respectively.

2.7 Setting up and conducting the interviews

Although interviews are a significant part of this study, they cannot of themselves form the basis for all data: Interviews are social interpersonal encounters in addition to being methods of data collection which is seen as a part of life (Cohen et al., 2007). For semi-structured and one-on-one interviews, we carefully planned and used a precise system to confirm that all ethical requirements and logistical were adhere to.

Once participants had agreed to the interviews, time-tables for interviews were adhered to. We arrived on time at different schools for each one-on-one, semi-structured interview. After the formalities of greeting participants at different schools, we thanked each one for agreeing to be part of the interview process. Participants were requested to feel comfortable and ask questions about the procedure and its purpose. They were informed that the interviews are discussions on their experiences. The type of interview, and the objective of the research were explained to all the participants. The consent letters were also explained to each participant. We informed them that interviews would be recorded for each one-on-one interview and that we needed to obtain their informed consent to participate in the interview. The participants only signed the consent letters when they agreed and were comfortable with the process. For each one on one interview conducted, an audio-recorder was used.

All interviews were conducted in English but some participants switched from English to Afrikaans or isiXhosa; depending upon the language spoken by the interviewee; so we were obliged to pose some of the questions in three languages. One of the researchers was fluent in all the languages spoken in the Western Cape: English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa so we experienced no difficulty with the code-switching entailed.

The order of the questions was followed per the schedule; except when participants preferred to

deal with two closely related questions at one time. Researchers probed a lot of the responses that produced additional answers and questions. This process was not the same for all participants. In general, interviews with participants took between 35 to 45 minutes; depending on the respondent because some tended to explain at length, while others were brief.

2.8 Data processing and analysis

Keeping in mind that "data analysis of qualitative data takes place simultaneously with data collection, the first step in data analysis is managing data so that can be studied" objectively and studiously (White, 2005:186). Management of data in this study entailed:

i. Listening to interviews and watching videos to get a general view of the raw data.
ii. Transcribing audio interviews and video data into a readable text.
iii. Familiarising ourselves with the transcriptions and the first interpretation of reflections to identify emerging themes (reading);
iv. Examining the emerging themes in-depth to seek understanding of what could be participant's philosophies on teaching and learning of literacy
v. Categorizing further themes that can be probed with the study questions "Interpreting and synthesizing organized data into general conclusions or understandings"

Before data are analysed, such information should be converted "into a kind suitable to manipulation and analysis" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:98). Data were downloaded onto a computer after interviews and sent via e-mail to transcribers for transcription.

Analysis of data from one-on-one, semi-structured interviews was transcribed from tape-recordings and then analysed. Transcribed data was read from the begin to the end. At the first level, several themes were underlined using different colours. These themes were then tabulated for all the transcriptions. Themes were categorised into main themes. We then explored relations and overlapping between themes.

2.9 Analysis of data

In this study, the post-data collection analysis commenced with reading the transcribed responses of the participants across one question and recording the oral reflection.
Observations were examined and interrogated to detect such alignment or misalignment between what teachers say and do as they teach. The data were analysed by adapting an analytic model used for making sense of the classroom observations in Mosito (1999) in which guiding questions for video-taped classroom observations were: what is the teacher doing? And what is the learner doing?

2.10 Quality and Trustworthiness of the research process and product

Producing reliable data that leads to an understanding of the phenomenon under study is central to qualitative research. In this study, several strategies of quality assurance were implemented. These are the (i) role of the researchers as instruments, (ii) triangulation (iii) Piloting or testing the instruments and methods (Maxwell, 2013; 2008 & Golafshani, 2003).

2.11 Credibility and Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2008; 2013) describes researcher bias and reactivity as two specific threats to the validity and reliability of the qualitative study. Maxwell refers to the standards of rigour in a qualitative study: dependability, credibility, transferability and conformability. These are key factors in ensuring credibility and trustworthiness of research projects in this area (Maxwell, 2013; 2008).

To test the instruments and methods once they had been developed, we pilot-tested the topic with a small sample of three teachers who were not part of the main study sample. The pilot group

established whether the instruments were appropriate for the study or needed adjustments to help improve and meet their purpose (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 1998; Nunes, Martins, Zhou, Alajamy & Al-Mamari, 2010). This foundational knowledge helped to refine any ambiguous questions or ambiguities of phrasing in the questions set preliminarily.

A pilot study is usually conducted tentatively to ascertain trends and the feasibility of the project. The purpose "is to determine whether the relevant data can be obtained from the participants". In this study, a pre-interview was conducted with three teachers at rural schools in the Foundation Phase. The pre-interview enabled us to rephrase unclear questions. It also gave researchers ideas of how long the interviews may last which is essential in interview schedule with participants in the formal investigation. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources. For example, each audio recording was individually transcribed by independent transcription experts. During the process of data analysis, all transcriptions were read and quotations were often cited directly from transcriptions.

2.12 Triangulation

Triangulation is the process of employing more than one procedure in a study in order to explore many angles to enhance data richness and reliability (Cohen et al., 2007:141). Researchers used triangulation as a means to establish validity and reliability in qualitative research as well as to increase confidence in the findings. In this study, we used data triangulation that was of relevance to the focus of the investigation. Data sources including observation, documents, interviews, informants and oneself are referred to as triangulation (De Vos 2000). Information was gathered in this study using different sources in order to check that a theory is confirmed in many ways.

3. Results

3.1 How long have you been teaching in this grade in particular? Please explain your experiences during this period

Teachers participating in this investigation taught between 0-5 up to 11-15 years in Grade 3. During the periods in which they taught, Grade 3 teachers indicated diverse experiences based largely upon the kinds of schools (former Model C[1] or Quintile 3) at which they taught rather than the length of their service in the teaching profession.

Teachers in this category at Quintile 3 schools asserted that the chief difficulty that they encountered during teaching was that of language; and after that, the challenge of mixed cultures. The medium of instruction at these Quintile 3 schools was either isiXhosa or Afrikaans but, in practice, comprises a mixture of amaXhosa and so-called Coloured patois. Some Somalian refugee children were present.

So Voice 028 in the interviews stated that:

> *"We have a difficulty in our learners because they are struggling…especially in literacy…because at home they are speaking Afrikaans others and most of them now we have these foreigners …from Burundi … they are not used to the language… "*

They explained that the mixtures of languages and cultures created a substantial difficulty for teachers who attempted to apply their philosophies in improving literacy performance. Some learners

[1]*Model C refers to semi-private Whites only government schools pre-1994 in South Africa. The term is still commonly used to describe former whites-only government schools even though this categorisation of schools is no longer applicable.*

were still at grade 1 level generally which means learners who could not read, write and had no vocabulary; while those who were at grade 2 literacy levels were learners who struggled to read, write and had limited vocabulary. The learners at grade 3 level were few and were drawn from comparatively literate homes where they had easy and frequent access to books, social media and the internet.

Other teachers who have taught for 11-15 years in Quintile 3 schools often have learners from other home language backgrounds who were struggling. Teachers have found many of these learners lacking the vocabulary needed to ask questions, formulate answers and collaborate freely in class. Such learners often struggled to spell and write. The teachers had to prepare considerably to overcome this problem.

Two teachers from the affluent former Model C schools (Quintile 5) included in this sample, both with 15 years of teaching, explained that learners at their schools were privileged. They stated that the school had all the learning resources, classrooms, apparatus and secondary material they needed as well as well-qualified teachers. Their literacy levels were adequate; yet not better than 15 years previously.

Voice 020 stated that:

> *"um look we're fortunate at this school, our children are very privileged so they come from fairly literate homes where they're exposed to books um on a regular basis but at the same time I still find that there is not enough reading at home I think…Um and nowadays with technology the way it is, they get electronic gadgets for gifts instead of books, as we're used to as children, we always received books. So yeah I think that all plays a part in general literacy."*

Although she taught 2 years at the school (Quintile 5 Ex-Model C school), she had taught for many more years in other counties. Voice 20 stated that: "I still find that there is not enough reading at home. I think". This teacher claims families are too busy and that there are too many electronic gadgets.

Voice 002 confirmed that she found "things like nursery rhymes don't get taught to the children anymore at home".

Voice 002 from Former Model C further stated that:

> *"I've taught, I can't tell you exactly, I would say it's in excess of 13 years I've been in that classroom, uh in grade 3. Uh you want my experience teaching there… specifically with language. [Yes, Literacy specifically]. I would say um, I would say that over the years um, initially I would say there was a very high level of expertise in the language. What we have been finding over the last, I would say four or five years is that um children are, we're experiencing more children with learning barriers to learning. Um we are finding that we are teaching children who come from other home language backgrounds which is sometimes a problem. Um and so we are having to address more and more um learning barriers with regard to language. Learners lack vocabulary Um things like uh uh vocabulary. A lot of the children don't have the necessary vocabulary to understand. What I've noticed too is that things like nursery rhymes um don't get taught to the children anymore at home. The parents don't teach them these things that we grew up with. If you think I'm being teaching for 30 years so I grew up with nursery rhymes you know"*

Voice 004 explained she had taught for thirty years. This teacher emphasised the importance of rhyme and stimulation of the auditory sense to make up for a contemporary culture that lacked such factors.

Voice 004 from Former Model C explained that:

> *"If you think I'm being teaching for 30 years so I grew up with nursery rhymes you know, no tv… um yes so things like rhyming become very important exercises in the grade 3 class. With the 3rd term now there's more emphasis on poetry but I also emphasize a lot on the rhyming of words. Because a lot of children don't have the auditory perception to pick up rhyming and they find it very difficult to write rhymes. Um so rhyming for me is a very important aspect as is poetry, you know children need to learn to express, some children read very softly so one has to really hone in on audibility when they're reading and fluency."*

Voice 31 has similarly been teaching for '+- 20 years' and developed her system of dividing her grade 3 class into ability groupings in the class. She claimed her experience alone enabled her to do this. Her first instinct was to know her learners before she committed to a teaching strategy.

Voice 31 stated that:

> *"My teaching experience is +/- 20 years from now, the whole phase, foundation phase, but in Grade 3 I think I've got +/- 10 years. The first time I came here I taught Grade 3 and I'm still in Grade 3 even right now. The experience I got there is that when I came here in Grade 3, I experienced that the learners, I had to divide my learners into three groups. In my class I had Grade 1,2,3 in the same class, because I found out that they can't write, they can't read, they can't even form some words. So I had to make an intervention that I had to divide them into these groups Grade 1, 2 and 3. I had to go back to Grade 1 work, Grade 2 work until I got to Grade 3 work. It was a very difficult experience, in fact it still does, even right now coz it's still happening. "*

3.2 How do you teach literacy?

Some teachers stated that they taught literacy through reading stories and comprehension. The whole class read with them or they divided a single class into groups with group leaders. They read to the teacher while listening to them: they listened to the teacher reading to them. They demonstrated to learners the correct way of reading with expression, fluency and emphasis on punctuation. One teacher from a Quintile 5 school indicated that she taught the way she was taught then. However, they gave different beliefs or philosophies of how they taught literacy as stated in the dimensions above, for example:

Voice 009 remarked that:

> *"I um for me um I go about the way I was taught at school…like pictures and different colours and um bigger words and then smaller words so that everything doesn't look the same."*

Voice 002 said that:

> *"…the children read to me with their group readers, um each child gets a turn to read pages…then we do group reading…um then there is listening to myself reading…"*

Voice 020 stated that:

> *"We…we make it fun for them. We join in on the planning but we have a basic framework and I think that also joins in by the planning…you have listening activities that they are to listen for, or a games…talking activities where you break the language development, their language knowledge and their vocabulary knowledge because a lot of kids vocabulary is very limited."*

Voice 004 responded by saying:

> *"How do I teach literacy? Well you know you've got all your aspects of literacy, you got your oral work, you got your phonic work, you got your creative writing, your handwriting, your grammar and um your reading of course. So all these aspects when you look at it as a whole, work together to um give the child all these things that they need…You have to look at the child's strengths and weaknesses and build on the strength and try and build up on the weaknesses."*

When it came to comprehension, reading was followed by questions; both closed and open-ended questions and re-telling what they had read; in their own words. This process was followed by creative writing sessions in which learners were requested to write their own stories.

Voice 019 stated that:

> *"Comprehension…I read it with them I ask them to read it so I have the comprehension piece. Then I do*

the questions with them and if there's for instance…I also want them to understand when you have one word answers and when you have a full sentence…"

Voice 031 explained that:

"Ok, if I'm going to teach a comprehension, before I'm going to read this comprehension first, and to understand this comprehension first. And I then took some words that I think are going to be difficult for them, and write them in flashcards. From those words I took out the sounds… From there I ead this comprehension and they are going to listen to me and use all the punctuation, reading punctuations everything. "

At some Quintile 3 schools, teachers first came together as grade teachers and discussed the topics and themes for the week. They screened the learners and grouped them according to their literacy levels: that is, a different group for each different level.

Voice 027 explained that:

"We get together as the whole grade teachers. We all use one story…. observe the children before we get together to plan. We have different groups for different levels. We go according to what level they are in. We make the work easier for those in the lower level. We observe them first, and then we divide them and group them. "

3.3 What informs your choice of teaching methods and strategies?

Many of the teachers interviewed admitted that they taught according to whatever strategy seemed appropriate or pragmatic at the time.

At some schools their methods were determined by the literacy level of learners. They used the method that could best assist learners, whether in Mathematics or any other subject.

Voice 004 said that:

Yes, obviously you have to look at their level of experience, their levels of ability, um what the're learning at the time…Um again you're going to grade your activities according to what the child is able to do…group your learners.

Voice 028 asserted that:

"Err…hey there are many methods and it depends on the situation in your class then I can see my kids they don't follow me so I need to change my approach…"

Voice 020 explained that*:*

" You work with the whole group but there are times where you have to work in smaller groups. That is when I see how my kids differ for example, we work in smaller groups when we do reading because the one group might be stronger, more advanced than the other group. So the child determines it but also the class or the year group…the other year your kids might differ so much and you have to work in smaller groups and call them to the mat. It depends on the type of kids you have and also the needs of the kids because this group of kids might need more practice. You I think it depends on where every child is in his development and then we work on the three groups or four groups or two groups."

Voice 002 ascertained that:

"Um it can be related to your class, how the learners are learning. You have 30 learners in your class; they each have a different style. Perhaps this year you teach in one way because it benefits the majority of the class, then you might find you have a special needs child who does not understand the way you're teaching. You change your method to suit your child, you change your method um to suit the time you have."

Voice 004 stated that:

"...obviously you have to look at their level of experience, their level of ability, um what they're learning at the time. Um and you're going to grade your activities according to what the child is able to do. You know you get some very weak and your learning barriers...Um you have to try and organise your or grade your instructions to suit each level that you are teaching."

3.4 Observations

All the eight lessons observed revolved around the teaching of the alphabet, spelling of words, reading and following teacher instructions. Only one of the eight lessons reflected a multidimensional understanding of what it means to be literate: literacy seemed to be understanding words in a context (a picnic in this case), listening for details and understanding, questioning and contributing opinions and extracting new vocabulary from which the alphabet and spelling can be taught. These two scenarios present very clearly two types of assumptions about roles that should be performed in teaching foundational literacy. On one hand, the majority are teachers who played a dominant role through which they regard themselves as vessels of knowledge which then translates into teacher-centred learning where learners are mostly on the receiving end of whatever teachers are conveying. On the other hand, we see one teacher who creates a teaching-learning scenario where learners are co-creators of knowledge.

4. Discussion

Teachers' philosophies are a mix of assumptions, prejudices and inherited outlooks concerning the subjects they teach (Schönwetter et al., 2002; Cohen, 1999). These perspectives can be likened to a range of teachers' beliefs about *why*, *what* and *how* information is taught, *whom* he or she teaches, and their opinion about the nature of learning.

Tedick and Walker (1994 in Karaata, 2011:245) suggest that whether it is second language teaching or instruction, teacher preparation is crucial to expose or uncover the "conceptions, beliefs, and values that underlie the descriptions and prescriptions, or thoughts that guide teachers' practices in classrooms". Also, Karaata (2011) explains that when the word belief is associated with teachers, 'teacher beliefs' "it refers to teachers' pedagogic beliefs or those beliefs of teachers that are relevant to their teaching practice" (Karaata, 2011:245).

Karaata's (2011:245) definition of teachers' beliefs is functionally close to teachers' philosophies: a teacher's beliefs about *why, what* and *how* information is taught, *whom* he or she teaches, and the nature of learning (Cohen, 1999). These teachers' beliefs relate to principles that lie first in the teacher's own life experiences, values, the environment in which this teacher lives, interacts with others and the philosophical approaches that he or she has assimilated.

Sturtevant and Linek (2003) state that there are various factors that teachers commonly consider to be reliable and proven guides to how they teach: taking into consideration learners' individual needs, barriers to learning and environmental factors. Considering such a global assessment of pedagogic elements in the classroom is at present broadly defined as inclusive education (White Paper 6). Shaik (2016) believes that "there is a strong link between teachers' personal beliefs and the influence they have on their teaching practice".

It was stated that, if literacy teachers are fixed in their modes of thinking and unable to adjust their literacy teaching to the social and intellectual backgrounds of their learners, learners will not be able to identify with the literacy lessons and will remain semi-literate: which appears to be what is happening. If, however, teachers are made fully aware of their own mode of teaching, and trained to reflect critically upon their own practice, they are more able to recognise the knowledge and skills latent in their learners; using this knowledge as a scaffold for further and more interactive knowledge construction. This would enable the teacher to become a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983; 1987).

In practical terms the teacher has to reflect on before, during and after the literacy lesson on whether their method fully reaches and empowers the learners.

Teacher colleges have subsequently realised that teachers need to learn to become reflective of their own actions and style. A prescriptive transfer of theory alone is not sufficient. This is underscored by the views of Jacobs, Vakalisa and Gawe (2011), teachers are described as "agents of change". In order to achieve this and ensure that the challenges that face the learners are addressed, the authors reiterate teachers have to reflect on theory and practice. Larrivee (2000) describes the process as moving beyond the knowledge of discrete skills to a point where the teacher's skills are not only modified to fit different contexts but also internalised to the enable the teacher to invent new strategies to enhance learning for the learners. For this reason, the skill of reflective teaching is an important aspect in the professional development of the teacher (Larrivee 2000 in Taole, 2015:168).

The study revealed that some teachers taught literacy through reading stories and comprehension. The whole class read with them or they divided a single class into groups with group leaders. They read to the teacher while listening to them: they listened to the teacher reading to them. They assisted those learners who found it difficult to read and demonstrated to the learners the correct way of reading with expression, fluency and emphasis on punctuation. Mbatha (2018:77) explains that scaffolding in a language classroom may be facilitated by reading pictures, reading aloud, shared reading and guided reading. The teacher should always provide assistance or support to learners.

From a Vygotskian perspective, the ideal role of the teacher is to provide scaffolding or collaborative dialogue to assist learners in the tasks within their ZPD. In this study, the teacher as a mediator and facilitator of learning is regarded as a central figure in accounting for ways in which he or she plays such a role in a classroom environment. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the key role of teachers, adults and competent peers in learners' accomplishment of a specific level of 'cognitive development'. His theory dwells on social interaction for assisting development. Gouws, Kruger and Burger (2008:53) aver that "The mediator performs the function of providing intellectual 'scaffolding' for the learners so that they can become independent" (Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2008:53 cited in Louw, Van Eden & Louw, 1998).

Teachers demonstrated a range of approaches, philosophies or strategies they used in teaching literacy. To reiterate here, according to Fisher (2001:3) in terms of the classroom reality, a teacher does not merely teach the mechanics of reading and writing, he or she enthusiastically encourages and assists young learners to think for themselves, to read texts critically and to solve problems imaginatively. In such a classroom, learners are not being told what to think because they are allowed to experience at first hand a community of inquiry: one in which they are exposed to, and enabled to, "internalise the skills and habits of higher-order thinking" (Fisher, 2001:3).

Some teachers explained that they read comprehension as well, another strategy they chose to teach literacy. The reading of comprehension was followed by questions; both closed and open-ended questions and re-telling what they had read in their own words. This process was followed by creative writing sessions in which learners were required to write their own stories.

Rose (2011:94) proposes a "genre-based, three-tier integrated model for teaching language across the curriculum in an interactive social setting". In Rose's model, "comprehension is considered more important than reading". During the first level, the learner is prepared for reading by having them placed in a broad context. The second level requires the teacher to read the text to the learners after which it is analysed with particular reference to the language patterns and the structure to understand what they have read and heard. In the third phase, sentences are chosen from the text and written on pieces of paper. The words are then cut up and the learners are required to make new sentences from these words. Rose (2011:94) claims that "this process helps students to exert control over meanings and complex patterns, as well as spelling and word recognition".

One teacher at a former Model C or Quintile 5 school claimed that she continued to teach literacy the way she was taught when she was still a learner. Killen (2007) contends that the "changing demands and responsibilities exerted on teachers necessitate that they must be reflective

to respond appropriately to their altering situations". Teachers are: confronted with learners who have various needs, and their teaching needs to cater for all of them; irrespective of their cognitive, social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Those who do not reflect upon their practices will be likely to teach as they were taught and thus, ineffective teaching strategies will be replicated (Braun & Crumpler, 2004:61). For Taole (2015:167), it is crucial for teachers "to critically review or reflect upon how they teach". This self-reflection "ensures that teachers develop proper and efficient teaching strategies and augment their teaching practice".

Further probing about teachers' philosophies on how they teach literacy continued; the next question was about what informed their choice of methods. They responded to this question by stating that they were informed by learners' levels of proficiency. They explained that they first identified their learners' strengths and weaknesses within large groups and then went on to divide them according to their literacy levels; choosing the most appropriate methods and strategies. For those who experienced barriers to learning, teachers had to augment their teaching styles and methods of teaching. They had monitored the progress of the learners in their work books or classwork; analysing them and providing formal assessments tasks; employing different methods and strategies.

It was revealed in this study that there are many methods and teachers used them all if needed at that time. Many of the teachers interviewed admitted that they taught according to whatever method or strategy seemed appropriate or pragmatic at the time. They used the method that could best assist learners; whether in Mathematics or any other subject. They claimed that they looked at the methods they could employ to help those learners whose levels were low at that time. The study affirmed that whatever subject teachers taught, be it Life Skills, Numeracy or Literacy, they embraced shared reading, group reading as well as questions and answers. In their daily teaching some used these methods constantly or consistently. They adopted the same methods; bearing in mind learners' individual cognitive and literacy levels. They interchanged these methods; depending on the varying levels of ability exhibited by learners.

It is argued that teachers should be knowledgeable and acquainted with the curriculum as '*what'* to teach. Departments of Education set out clear outlines in the form of curriculum statements that serve as a general guide as to 'what' should be taught. In South Africa, the guidelines are currently in the form of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In CAPS, the Department of Basic Education has set up a prescribed curriculum that sets out content in terms of knowledge, concepts and skills that learners should be taught (DoBE, 2011:8). It is reasonable to expect that teachers' beliefs about the subject literacy in this instance may well reveal their particular understandings of the prescribed content.

In this study, the majority of literacy teachers seem to have framed what guides what they teach around CAPS. It was established that CAPS provides topics and themes that a teacher can choose from and some teachers chose a topic and a theme according to the particular environment and the situation in which they existed. Nearly all of the participants in this study maintain that the topics and themes are in the CAPS document provided by the department of education.

The teachers in this study afford the national curriculum the respect it requires as it appears to be a common reference point from which they decide what they teach. As indicated above there are teachers, whose influence on what to teach stems from a nuanced understanding of where literacy opportunities come from. The literature on teachers' philosophies makes clear that a good philosophy on teaching is one that is located in some theory about learning, development and the context in which teaching-learning unfolds (Schönwetter *et al.,* 2002). It is clear that to these authors a teacher's individually-held philosophy on teaching involves uniquely assimilated internal processes or thinking which allow the teacher to account for *what is taught*, *why it is taught* and *to whom*.

5. Conclusion

This study provided an overview of the dire predicament of literacy in South African classrooms. It highlighted the fact that South African primary school learners' literacy skills and abilities are below

the international norm for their age and grade. Ensuing from this reality and concern, this study sought to capture the philosophies of Foundation Phase teachers concerning their teaching of literacy.

The study explained that it is crucial for teachers to critically review or reflect on how they teach. This will make certain that they develop proper and efficient teaching strategies and augment their teaching practice. The changing demands and responsibilities exerted on teachers necessitate that they must be reflective to respond appropriately to their altering situations. Teachers are confronted with learners who have various needs; and their teaching needs to cater to all of them; irrespective of their cognitive, social, cultural and economic backgrounds.

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