

Challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the Foundation Phase

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ABSTRACT

South African teachers of the Foundation Phase in rural primary schools are concerned and nervous and eventually find themselves in a predicament regarding the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. Approximately, 50% of the learners experience reading difficulties when they transit from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase. This may be attributed to the teachers' lack of training, in-service training and workshops on the implementation of the NRS. The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers regarding the implementation of the NRS in the primary schools of Dikgale area, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study followed a qualitative research approach wherein a cross-sectional design was adopted. Ten (10) teachers from five mainstream primary schools were requested to take part in the study. Data was collected through interviews, observations and document analysis. Data was analysed using a thematic content analysis, which involved identifying common themes that emerged from the collected data. The preliminary findings were as follows: (a). Lack of teacher training in the form of workshops on National Reading Strategy, (b). The problem encountered in the interpretation of the National Reading Guidelines and (c). The attitude towards the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

Key words: Reading, National Reading Strategy, Literacy, Curriculum and Attitudes.

Introduction

It is a well-known problem that learners in South Africa struggle with reading, especially in English as a First Additional Language (Ralenala, 2005, Boakye, 2016 & Molotja, 2016). Therefore, teachers in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases in South African primary schools are faced with a serious challenge of addressing these illiteracy challenges. In an attempt to address the above stated problem, the South African government has implemented a variety of programmes in which workshopping and empowering of teachers are the priorities. The National Reading Strategy was found to be one of the

effective programmes to bridge the literacy gaps in South Africa. However, Maswanyane (2010) claims that teachers found themselves overwhelmed with the responsibility of implementing the NRS in the beginners' classes.

Singh (2011) also exposes these challenges when he states that the teachers' level of confidence in teaching reading and implementing the NRS in the Foundation Phase is very low. The case of low morale among teachers may thus emerge as a result of lack of thorough training in the form of workshops and in-service training necessary for the implementation of the NRS. Singh's

study further revealed that in the absence of workshops and professional development programmes, conflict aroused between the teachers' existing knowledge and the requirements of the NRS. In addition, Mensah (2017) conducted a study in the Umkhanyakude District of South Africa and found that experience in years and qualifications had an impact on the teachers' proficiencies and experiences of the NRS.

On the same breath, teachers' age has been found to have no relationship with their experiences with the NRS. The implementation of the NRS had some challenges as educators lacked proper skills to interpret the National Reading Guidelines. This is despite numerous efforts to offer workshops and other intervention strategies to alleviate the problem. Therefore, the question that we wanted to answer was: why teachers continue to feel inadequately prepared to implement the NRS in the Foundation Phase classrooms, despite the NRG which were distributed to all primary schools?

We deemed the question important because the findings might add value to the limited knowledge that exists on the challenges that are faced by the Foundation Phase

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teachers in the implementation of the NRS. Our study focussed more significantly on the Foundation Phase teachers who held the responsibility of implementing and administering the NRS to the first-year Foundation Phase learners. The Foundation Phase teachers are regarded as the most important role players and conveyor-belts of learning in the Foundation Phase because they are to lay proper foundation in the education of young children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thus far, no study was conducted on the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers regarding the implementation of the NRS in South African primary schools. A study by Sighn (2011) in Kwa-Zulu Natal

Province of South Africa, focused on Foundation Phase educators' knowledge and attitudes towards the implementation of the NRS. In the current study, we focused on the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers pertaining to the implementation of the NRS since the introduction of the policy in 2008. The National Department of Education in South Africa attempted to address the reading problems by instituting changes through the NRS because a large number of the Foundation Phase learners in primary schools was found to be struggling to read in their Home Language (HL) and in English as their First Additional Language (EFAL) (Magona, 2012). According to Brown (2007), the NRS is defined as the specific method of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information.

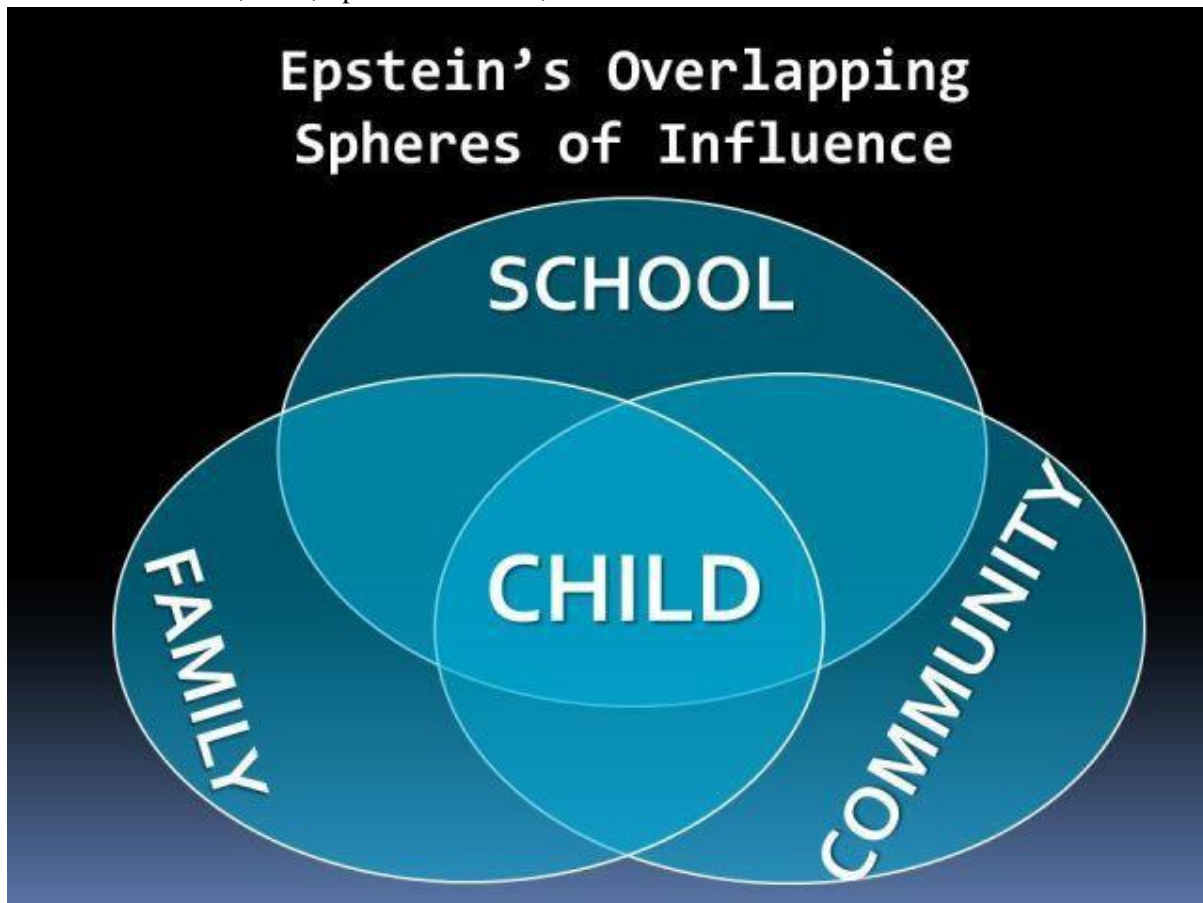
This information is important to obtain for two reasons: firstly, for policy makers who are working too hard to find solutions to the serious challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers on the implementation of the NRS so far. Secondly, such information might be helpful for teachers who face numerous and serious challenges in implementing the NRS in their classrooms.

EPSTEIN'S THEORY OF OVERLAPPING SPHERES

To understand the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the NRS, we used Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres. Epstein (2009) developed her theory of overlapping spheres of influence positing that learners learn more when parents, educators, and others in the community work together to guide and support them in the process of learning and development.

In this model, three contexts; home, school and community overlap with unique and combined influences on children through the interactions of parents, educators, community partners, and students across contexts (Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon, Simon, Salinas, Jansom & Williams; 2009; Epstein & Sanders,

2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2001, 1995, 1987). With attention to contexts and social relations, the theory of overlapping spheres influences the narrow focus of “parental involvement” from what an individual parent does to a broader and more realistic representation of how learners learn.



Epstein's (2009) theory of overlapping spheres

In this theory, the three spheres are used in combination to influence the full development of the learners in totality. Since learners play the most significant role in the education, the above structure locates them at the centre of learning. It is often argued that if learners own the program of learning, they are likely to develop and progress further in their studies. The external model of the theory illustrates that by designing, the three contexts can be pulled together or pushed apart by important intersecting forces such as the family, school and community backgrounds or experiences, philosophies, opportunities and actions (Epstein, 2009). Epstein (2001)

indicated that a major strength of the theory of

overlapping spheres of influence is that it serves as a lens through which an examination on how future teachers and administrators are prepared to understand the implementation of the National Reading Strategy as introduced by the National Department of Education in South African schools. Thus, this theory was considered appropriate as far as the teaching and the implementation of the NRS by teachers in the Foundation Phase is concerned.

METHODOLOGY

We applied a qualitative research method in which a cross-sectional case study design was adopted to examine the views of the Foundation Phase teachers. We considered the

approach appropriate because it allowed us to hear teachers' perspectives and experiences with the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The approach was found to be relevant and appropriate because it affords the teachers all opportunities to raise their voices and experiences regarding the implementation of the NRS than it can be with other approaches. Henning (2004) supports the above notion in stating that teachers may provide in-depth understanding of the NRS and equally express their challenges and attitudes towards the NRS.

Selection of the participants

The Dikgale, Mamabolo and Molepo (Dimamo) circuit of Dikgale area consists of 20 primary schools including one LSEN school. Dikgale area consists of villages sharing the boundaries with three Chiefs namely: Chief Mamabolo of Bjatladi Tribal Authority, Chief Mothiba and Chief Makgoba. The primary schools consist of 199 teachers of which 71 are male teachers and 128 are female teachers. Therefore, this study used a purposive sampling strategy. In purposive sampling, the aim is to select the cases that are likely to have rich information that is relevant to the study. The criterion that was used for selecting the ten (10) teachers was as follows: they should be hands-on in the teaching of English First Additional Language and Home Language in the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase levels. In addition, the selected teachers must have attended an on-going professional development programme on reading in the area where the study was conducted.

Furthermore, the teachers were recruited based on their experiences of teaching reading in the Foundation Phase classes in the primary schools of Dikgale area.

Data Collection

Data collection served as a way to collect

information to answer our research questions in to defend conclusions and recommendations which are based on our findings. We used in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis to collect data.

Interviews

The first instrument of data collection was interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to provide us with the opportunity to ask individual questions, and to refrain from limiting the field of enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). We deemed it fit to use interviews because they provided us with the opportunity to obtain first-hand information from the participants. The interview sessions were made up of introductory, follow-up and probing questions.

Observations

The second method of data collection we used was observations. Observations were performed during which field notes were taken. We preferred to use observations to obtain data because we wished to collect data from a natural setting, that is, the classroom situation. Observations, therefore, entail a systematic noting and recording of events, behaviour and objects in a natural classroom situation as selected for this study. Our observations relied solely on seeing and hearing.

Documents analysis

The third method of data collection used was documents analysis. This method entails looking deeply into the relevant documents, which, according to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith (2004) can serve as valuable sources of information. In this article, we obtained the ideas and different experiences regarding the challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers in implementing the NRS in the primary schools of Dikgale area. We found this method to be relevant and it gave us access

to valuable sources to support the findings obtained through the other two methods of data collection, namely, the interviews and observations.

Data analysis

Data was analysed through content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique for systematically describing written, spoken or visual communication. It provides a quantitative (numerical) description. Many content analyses involve media - print (newspapers, magazines), television, video, movies and the Internet as methods for summarizing any form of content by counting different aspects of the content. The process of our data analysis followed Creswell's model of data analysis. For the purpose of this study, data was analysed throughout the data collection process, and we constantly reflected on impressions, relationships and connections. The process of data analysis has been described as an "intellectual struggle" with the raw data collected (Basse, 2002). The verbatim accounts of the interviews were transcribed, different categories relating to the research topic formed and information from interviews, observations and document analysis were analysed and arranged according to themes. The aim of data analysis is to yield important and valid answers to the research question.

Findings from Interviews

Five findings emerged from the data analysis. The *first* finding pertains to the understanding of what the NRS is. Foundation Phase teachers demonstrated a narrow understanding of the NRS. This was discovered when the majority of the teachers gave different definitions on the NRS. This suggests that nothing has been done in terms of preparing and explaining exactly the meaning of NRS to the Foundation Phase teachers in South African Primary schools. One participant had the following to say: "The National Reading Strategy is all about to encourage teachers to study with the University of Limpopo and he further

indicated that the National Reading Strategy helps us to know the role we play must end up in the classroom". Another participant added by indicating that "the National Reading Strategy gives learners more exposure to their additional language. There are different types of readings that learners should learn, for example shared reading strategy which focuses on language and literacy development. The participant further said: "Group guided reading may be organised and teachers may work with each group once or twice per week". Another participant had the following to say: "the National Reading Strategy can be defined as a plan of action that can be used nationally in the teaching of reading. That is, Different methods

are applied to see which one can become the best in teaching reading." He continued further by indicating that "methods are searched which can be the best for all kinds of learners in South African Primary schools, so that they may become independent readers for the future." Lastly, the participant indicated that "it is there to make learners achieve better in their learning".

From the different definitions given on what the NRS is, it implies that enough has not been done in terms of teaching the teachers exactly what is meant by the NRS. This was not surprising because the exact and correct definition was not given. This implies that teachers do not read because the definition is provided in the National Reading Strategy guidelines. One of the participants added by saying that: "the National Reading Strategy promotes reading among learners but informs and supports teachers who are responsible for teaching learners to read". He continued to say that "the National Reading Strategy ensures that teachers learn reading in the classroom, assess, diagnose and measure the extent to which learners understand reading and monitor their progress to provide remedial action to those with reading difficulties." Despite these different challenges in terms how to define the National Reading Strategy; we found that these teachers

were not ready for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

The **second** finding was that the Foundation Phase teachers were not satisfied that they were doing the right things and therefore not confident that they were rightfully implementing the National Reading Strategy. For example, one participant said the following about the type of training or support administered by the Department of Education in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy they attended:

“we attended EGRA workshop where they were teaching us about reading strategies. They explained to us that the National Reading Strategy is a tool that is used to assess reading,

This finding is not a surprise because the lack of training on the implementation of the National Reading Strategy remains a nightmare (Singh, 2011; Phajane, 2012; Mzimane & Mantlana, 2016). As a result, Foundation Phase teachers find themselves in a predicament concerning the rightful manner of implementing the policy without proper training. In addition, another participant had the following to say that:

“I don’t think of any training done by the Department of Education, in actual fact I don’t know what is meant by the National Reading Strategy and I don’t remember being trained for this policy.”

The **third** finding was on the experiences that teachers observed after the introduction of the National Reading Strategy in the Primary schools on learners’ achievements. One of the participants had the following to say: *“In South Africa, there is a great challenge of learners who are unable to read.”* He continued to say: *“according to me, as teachers the introduction of this policy will be beneficial to both teachers and learners if enough support is given to us. It becomes a serious challenge to us because we struggle a lot in making the teaching of reading effective*

and we were given letters, words and paragraphs. In return, we implemented it in our schools”.

The other participants had the following to say:

“The Department of Education sent people to come and have workshops within one- day period once per quarter on Reading and literacy.” He continued to say: *“the facilitators focused on different reading strategies and the training was fruitful.”*

Contrary to the positive comments above, one participant from the same area had the following to say: *“we never attended any form of workshop on National Reading Strategy, this is the first time we hear about that (laughing).”*

as we don’t know what to do.” In addition, the participant had the following to say: *“No, these learners memorise the words and cannot write them on their own, that is, learners can speak the words but find it difficult to construct meaningful sentences. Even though the DoE has introduced different strategies on Reading and finally as teachers we are confused. Again, the issue of learning barriers is sometimes impacting negatively on children’s learning, for example; child headed families, abuse etc.”* The participant continued further to indicate that: *“Age cohort has a negative impact on reading because learners are promoted to the next grade even if they lack reading skills, knowledge and understanding of the content. Parents do not play an important role because some of them are illiterate.”* This impacts negatively on the performance of the learners. In addition, another participant said: *“Yes, there is a great improvement in schools because of the introduction of the Reading Strategy. Now learners are trying to sound the letters correctly.”* She continued to say: *“we are trying on these five main components of teaching reading, that is, phonics, word recognition, spelling, reading*

comprehension and skills. Even though it becomes difficult for the learners to read with understanding, they are able to identify the beginning, the middle and the end of the sentence.” The other participant agreed by stating the that:

“the introduction of the National Reading Strategy really brought changes in the performance of the learners because learners in South Africa have a huge reading problem and some are able to read on their own.”

The fourth finding was on the kind of challenges teachers experience, and what helped them in the process? One participant had the following to say:

“learners with barriers of learning just keep quiet during reading lessons. Their behaviour presents difficulties on the side of the teachers because we do not know how to help such learners.” In addition, she said: *“the strategy will help the shy learners to improve”*. Another participant had the following to say: *“the challenges that we have are overcrowded classes and this becomes difficult to group learners in classes of 50- 60 learners and we do not have enough space. We are trying to implement the strategy, but it takes us 5-10 minutes to arrange the learners in groups for the teaching of reading. We are learning the hard way and time allocated for reading is insufficient, with the type of learners in the 21st century who are not willing to learn.”*

The other observation we have made is that overcrowding in South African primary schools is a common factor. This was confirmed by one of the participants who said: *“Reading challenges, overcrowding in the classrooms, ohhhhhh! it makes me sick, that is the main reason why I fail to do shared reading.”* Another participant said: *“Learners can speak the words but cannot write full sentences and this is a serious challenge.”* She furthermore said: *“learners do read without understanding and they cannot spell the words correctly, as they use dialects from ethnic*

groups, for example, Batlokwa, Balobedu, etc. As a result of the already mentioned challenges, reading assessment will determine which learners are at risk in terms of reading difficulties and definitely requires additional support. The most important thing that I have learned is that as teachers we observed that as learners grow mentally, intellectually and socially, parental interaction becomes significant for the improvement of children’s learning.”

The **fifth** finding was on the strategies for effective reading for the Foundation Phase learners. One of the participants said: *“the learners should be encouraged to read on daily basis at schools and at home; parental involvement be encouraged to a great extent.”* In addition, another participant said: *“more time should be given regarding reading and teachers should be trained from time to time in order to put them on par in terms of the international benchmarks.”* On the other hand, one of the participants claimed that: *“leaners should be grouped in their levels of ability, those with reading difficulty should be given phonic to start with, and the use of pictures could help in teaching learners with learning barriers.”* On the same breath, one of the participants had the following to say: *“many books should be made available to the learners so that they can read on their own at home and at school during intervals. She continued to say that reading competitions may serve as the other strategies that are relevant for the improvement of reading, and this may encourage learners to develop a habit of reading once they know that they may be rewarded”*.

Findings from observations

In this article, large volume of data was collected through the use of observations. This data collection tool helped us to clearly read and understand the behaviour and attitudes of Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers, by observing their daily activities and practices on reading. The main aim of conducting observations was to gain deeper

insight into the challenges experienced by the Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. In so doing, we had the opportunity to collect in-depth and authentic data that will help us to understand the culture and the practices of the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of South Africa.

Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers allowed us to observe their lessons (the duration of classroom observation was 40 minutes) during which we recorded instructional methods, teacher's attitude, experiences, behaviour and the use of language when presenting their lessons and the availability of resources such as teaching media that are relevant and necessary for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. We took field notes using an observation guide which was specifically designed for this study. We observed that teachers only make use of two media of instruction when presenting their lessons and those are the Home Language (HL) and English as First Additional Language (EFAL). This was the case in all five

participating schools and the principles of **shared reading**, phonemic awareness

word awareness, **syllable awareness** and **alliteration** were not practiced in full.

Generally, the situation concerning the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases in the primary schools was found to be difficult. We observed that teachers are working hard to improve the results on reading levels, but there exists a serious lack of support from the Department of Education in terms of the supply of resources. We observed one important thing from one of the participating schools, whose performance in terms of reading has shown no improvements. Learners were packed in an overcrowded classroom of 70 and this impacted negatively on the teaching and learning processes.

Teachers found it hard to control the learners during the teaching of reading. Children would, for example, make excessive noise. The environment under which the process of reading took place was found to be unbearable.

The reading practices were normally made for 15 minutes and the time allocated for reading could not accommodate all learners in one day. We also observed that the types of books the learners in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases used for reading were story books, poems, rhymes, plays and graphical texts which were scarce. We tried to establish whether learners did understand what they were reading about and it was observed that few learners would remember what they just read. However, a considerable number could not remember due to the lack of books.

We also observed that it becomes difficult for learners to read for enrichment because in some of the primary schools, there are no libraries where extra books that are not used can be stored for future use.

Findings from the document analysis

Document analysis plays a key role in any qualitative study. It helps to provide researchers with the data on what other people have written regarding the phenomenon under study worldwide. In this article, we examined the availability of documents related to the National Reading Strategy such as the National Reading Guidelines, CAPS documents and also the records of work to ensure provision of remedial actions to be undertaken. In addition, we took photographs of different amenities and activities in the schools. We further reviewed documents such as

referral notes, the curriculum, Individualised Educational Plan (IEP) and assessment reports to obtain information about the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers pertaining to the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

This finding clearly shows that there is poor

The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges experienced by the Foundation Phase teachers in the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools of Limpopo Province, South Africa. This study revealed that a considerably large number of teachers had no effective exposure to the strategies of teaching reading in the Foundation and Intermediate Phases. This implies that no form of professional training programme was instituted since the introduction of the National Reading Strategy in 2009; and the Department of Education fails to make a follow-up regarding the progress of the strategy. The results of the study are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Maswanyane, 2010; Mhlongo, 2012; Singh, 2010; Mather, 2012; Ngubane, 2011; Theron & Nel, 2005) revealed that the process of training was ineffective and therefore resulted in the teachers feeling a sense of inadequacy to implement the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools. The findings of this study are comparable to the findings of Singh, (2011) although Singh's study was conducted in Kwa Zulu Natal Province. Over a period of ten (10) years since the introduction of the National Reading Strategy, there is still not enough that has been done regarding the training of all teachers for reading practices.

From our observations, the findings revealed that improper distribution of resources hinders the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in South African primary schools, especially those situated in the typical rural areas. Nor has enough been done in terms of preparing the Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers for the implementation of the

coordination of the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in primary schools. This arise as a result of limited support and resources that are necessary for this important programme.

DISCUSSION

National Reading Strategy.

From our document analysis section, it became evident that the Department of Education has failed to supply all schools with the necessary documents which are required for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary

schools. If supplied or interpretation regarding the document was made, since it was indicative by the teachers that they were made to interpret the National Reading guidelines on their own.

Given the fact that there is a shortage of workshops for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should develop ways and means through-which Foundation and Intermediate Phase teachers will be professionally developed for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the country.

Implications for the Education System

The study established that teachers were experiencing serious challenges with respect to being professionally prepared for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. The study indicated that not enough time was allocated for training the teachers for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy. Thus, most teachers in the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase in Limpopo Province did not receive any form of formal training for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in their pre-service education. They felt that justice had not been done in terms of preparing them for this new programme. The study may sensitise policy-

makers to consider the prerequisite time factor when approving any policy in the legislature or in the portfolio committees. It goes without saying that the DoE in Limpopo Province has failed to provide the necessary support for the implementation of the National Reading Strategy.

CONCLUSION

The study has pointed out the challenges experienced by Foundation Phase teachers regarding the implementation of the National Reading Strategy in the primary schools. It would appear that the on-going professional development programmes are ignored and disregarded as outlined in the study. We therefore recommend that on-going professional development programmes be introduced for the effective implementation of the National Reading Strategy in South African primary schools.

We therefore recommend that the Department of Education should take full responsibility in preparing their spade-workers for the effective implementation of any policy.

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