



Teacher reflections on implementing an extensive reading intervention during COVID-19

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Teaching reading is a complex act, and is made more challenging if the teaching environment is very complicated as it was in many contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic. This unfavourable context required teachers to engage in regular reflections to make critical decisions about how to respond to the pandemic and its regulations to improve their practice. Post pandemic, the current study captures the reflections of two Foundation Phase (FP) teachers who were asked to reflect on their experience of implementing an extensive reading programme with 7-10 year-old learners amidst COVID-19 lockdown in a township in South Africa. This qualitative, interpretative study used data generated through self-reflective journals and focus group discussions to document experiences of two participating teachers. Analysis of the reflections show that COVID-19 regulations negatively impacted the successful implementation of the programme. However, teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of implementing the programme during this time, as they became more reflexive and reflective in their practice. Findings imply that challenges in implementation should not be regarded as obstacles of weakness but as new opportunities of knowledge. Recommendations for implementing reading programmes post-COVID-19 are provided based on the data collected.

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The emergence of a novel coronavirus in 2019 (COVID-19) disrupted learning in institutions around the world. In many countries, schools had to be temporarily closed, affecting "...more than 91 per cent of students worldwide, around 1.6 billion children and young people" (UNESCO, 2020a). According to UNESCO (2020a), this was the first time in history where teaching and learning was disrupted so universally.

On the 15th of March 2020, South Africa declared a national state of disaster, and measures were put in place to contain the spread of the virus. This included travel restrictions and the closure of all educational institutions. A national lockdown was then announced, starting on the 26th of March, 2020. Since then, many

learners, especially in institutions of Higher Education have not had proper schooling experience and this has widened the existing educational inequalities within South Africa. In the past years, research indicates that learners-particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic status communities experienced learning loss in reading during the long school term breaks (Shinwell & Defeyter, 2017). Some learners in these communities were out of school for more than a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The long-term effects of this learning loss has yet to be fully accounted for.

According to UNESCO (2020a), school interruptions cause irremediable consequences on literacy development for Foundation Phase (FP) learners (Grades 1-

3) who are still learning to read and write. Data released in January 2022, reveals that South African “children have lost 1, 3 years of learning in 2020 and 2021 due to rotational timetables and school closures, this is the equivalent of wiping out 6,5 years of learning progress in South Africa” (Spaull, 2022). In addition, Bao et al. (2020) conducted a study during COVID-19 school closures with kindergarten children to compare their literacy loss pre-COVID-19 and during school closure. Findings of their study show that when schools were closed due to COVID-19, children lost 67% of their literacy abilities. However, their analysis showed that reading books daily to children, implementing reading intervention programmes, and making reading books accessible to all children could mitigate literacy loss during school closures.

In South Africa, the disruption to teaching and learning has impacted learners differently. For example, learners in fully-resourced private schools (Quintile 5 schools) had strong support structures at school and home. Knowledgeable teachers in these settings continued to provide access to learning materials via online platforms throughout the pandemic and lockdown period. Thus, the effect of the pandemic on these learners may be minimal. However, the pandemic had a greater impact on a majority of the learners who are from disadvantaged communities with under-resourced schools. For many households, smartphones and internet data to access online learning resources were out of reach. In addition, activities proven to slow literacy loss during school closures such as reading clubs, reading circles, and summer literacy activities were not available because of COVID-19 closures (Bao et al., 2020). Thus, most learners simply had to stay home and wait for the easing of the lockdown regulations that would allow them to go back to formal schooling.

It was in this context that the current study inspired by the research of Sun, Loh and Nie (2021) took form. Sun (2021) examined Singaporean primary school students’ changes in reading enjoyment, reading amount, and their access to resources in print and digital formats during the COVID-19 school closure. Findings of

this study showed that leisure reading was a preferred activity during the pandemic among primary school students in Singapore. Similarly, in the current study, the researcher implemented a community-based extensive reading (ER) programme targeting FP learners in an effort to offer them continuous literacy experiences in a social learning environment. However, complex COVID-19 regulations made this a difficult task. Hence, this study sought to understand the challenges encountered by teachers when they implemented the reading programme during COVID-19 lockdown. Findings of this study will provide researchers, governments, and non-governmental institutions with important insights into what challenges can be expected when implementing a reading intervention amid a pandemic in disadvantaged communities. The study also explores the benefits of such interventions to the community and recommendations which can be considered to better prepare organisations and researchers to sustain reading interventions during and post-pandemic.

Research questions

The primary research questions are:

1. What were the challenges experienced with implementing a community-based ER programme during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Were there any notable insights from implementing a community-based reading programme during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literacy in South Africa

Although nearly 99% of South African children aged between 7 and 15 have access to basic education, the majority of these learners continue to perform below grade level expectations in literacy and numeracy in post-apartheid South Africa. Prior to the pandemic, Spaull and Kotze (2015) showed that by Grade 4, most learners are already two grades behind curriculum expectations. This research further revealed that only 16% of South African Grade 3 children are

performing at an appropriate Grade 3 level (Spaull and Kotze, 2015. p.11). In addition, local and international research has found that 29% of Grade 4 learners are illiterate, while 58% cannot read for meaning. Research shows that learners are promoted to the next grade without foundational skills, content knowledge, and competencies required in preceding grades.

Learners in the FP do not have the capacity to study independently at home and need parental support. However, most parents/guardians with children in lower quintile schools (no-fee paying schools) are mostly illiterate, aged, or working long hours. This makes it almost impossible for them to assist learners at home. The FP is considered a priority area in the education sector, with the 2030 Reading Panel setting a goal that all children should be reading for meaning by age ten by 2030 (Reading Panel Background report, 2022). However, new research shows that South Africa "...will only reach 95% of Grade 4's reading for meaning in 80 years' time, the year 2098" (Spaull, 2022). While these poor literacy and numeracy levels for learners have been compounded by COVID-19 and continue to rise, it is imperative that FP learners overcome these problems. As the matters stand, teachers are caught in the tension on how to use the Curriculum Recovery Programme to address some of the backlogs that have been created. Thus, intervention programmes, similar to the one implemented in this study are important to support and accelerate learning out of school.

The impact of COVID-19 on the FP learner

In South Africa, the return to school was staggered by grade from June 2020, with rotational timetables for all grades except Grade 7 and Grade 12. Given that no-fee paying schools (70% of total schools) have larger class sizes, essentially all no-fee schools practiced rotational timetables in 2020 and for much of 2021. Rotational learning is where half of the children in a school attend on one day and half on another, so at the end of the week one group would have attended school three times while the other twice. As a result of learners

attending schools on alternate days, learners in the Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase (up to Grade 5) lost about 198 or 60% of school days (Shepherd, Mohohlwane, Taylor and Koetze. 2021). To measure the impact of the pandemic on South African young learners, new data shows "the average 10-year-old in 2021 knew less than the average 9-year-old in 2018 before the pandemic" (Kotze, Wills, Ardington, Taylor, Mohohlwane and Diliwe, 2022). Previous estimates of learning loss among Grade 2 and Grade 4 South African learners showed that during 2020, these children lost almost 70% of a year of learning (Ardington, Wills and Kotze, 2021).

The 2021 issue of the International Journal of Education indicates that the short-term losses in school time globally is up to one year and could accumulate to 2,8 years of long-term lost learning. In the past, studies have been conducted focussing on the impact of school closures due to holidays and vacations on academic achievement. These studies show that during the school summer breaks, children lost about one month of literacy skills (Christodoulou, Cyr, Murtagh, Chang, Lin, Guarino, Hook and Gabrieli, 2017; Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay and Greathouse, 1996; Johnston, Riley, Ryan and Kelly-Vance, 2015). However, there are literacy activities that can be implemented to reduce this 'summer slump' in literacy development such as allowing children to attend summer school, have access to libraries, or participate in other out of school literacy-rich activities (Christodoulou et al., 2017; Johnston, et al. 2015). As experienced in many contexts and alluded to by Bao et al. (2020), during COVID-19 lockdown, many children, especially in disadvantaged communities, had limited access to literacy rich activities. Schools and libraries, which were their primary source of literacy development, were closed. The consequence of this is an urgent need to determine catch up programmes and other alternatives that will reduce COVID-19 lockdown literacy loss.

The Nature of ER

ER mainly focuses on reading for meaning while intensive reading mainly focuses on language (Bell, 1998; Waring, 2006). Researchers refer to ER as reading for pleasure, sustained silent reading (SSR), free voluntary reading (FVR) or book flood. According to Bamford and Day (2004), ER is “an approach to language teaching in which learners read a lot of easy material in the new language. They read for general, overall meaning and they read for information and enjoyment” (p. 1). Renandya and Jacobs (2016) state that ER involves “students reading large amounts of motivating and engaging materials which are linguistically appropriate over a period of time where they read with a reasonable speed for general understanding, with a focus on meaning rather than form” (p. 99). The purpose of ER is “to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading” (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, pp.193-194). When learners are involved in ER, they have control over what they are reading (material that interests them), when (time), how (pace) and where (place) it is convenient for them to read. The learner continues with their reading because they are absorbed in the reading activity. The level of material read can be slightly below, at, or barely above their level of competence (Krashen, 2011). Thus, reading is individual and silent; and reading speed is faster, not deliberate and slow (Day and Bamford, 2002).

According to Hidayati, Renandya and Basthomi (2022), there are “classroom-specific variables that should be considered during the actual implementation of ER programmes...teachers should take into account students’ literacy backgrounds, their proficiency in the target language, their motivation to read, the availability of suitable ER reading materials, the reading culture of the school” (p.4). Thus, the ER programme implemented in this study had some aspects of both intensive and ER approaches. For example, within the reading programme, learners had opportunities for independent reading, shared reading, and paired reading, reading aloud and they also

participated in post reading activities as shown in Table 2. Unlike the traditional approach of ER, in this study, reading was initially modelled and scaffolded by the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO: the teachers). This was done to motivate learners and encourage collaborative learning since most of the participants were early readers, still learning to read in their mother tongue and were not used to the idea of reading independently and silently. It was thought that simply immersing them in books without scaffolding would frustrate them in their reading instead of igniting a love for reading. Overall, the learners in this study needed support, and opportunities to read on their own, read with others, be read to, talk about their reading, and engage in other exciting post reading activities such as role play.

The Benefits and Limitations of ER

A synthesis of research on ER by researchers such as Jeon and Day (2016); Wang and Kim (2021) and Hidayati et al. (2022), has demonstrated substantial effects of ER on language development. For example, for second language learners, ER can improve their reading; enhance writing skill, expand vocabulary (Chang and Renandya, 2021; Elley and Cutting, 2001; Krashen, 1993; Kweon and Kim, 2008; Liu and Zhang, 2018; Maipoka and Soontornwipast, 2021; Nkomo, 2018; Nkomo, 2020; Nkomo, 2021). ER can also improve spelling and improve grammar and prediction skills. Further benefit of ER is the increase in students’ positive attitudes toward reading (Waring and Husna, 2019; Zhou and Day, 2021) and improved reading behaviour (Dickinson and Nakayama, 2018) and develop automaticity (Appleton, 2006; Walter, 2006). According to Lems, Miller and Soro (2017), ER is considered “the best universal method to help all learners consolidate their reading comprehension” (p.221).

Despite the aforementioned benefits, ER is an approach that has been less used by teachers and researchers in South African contexts. Day and Bamford (1998) argue that there are various reasons for this which include costs involved, time needed to fit this in the already overloaded curriculum, outsourcing age appropriate books and

finding books that learners can read for enjoyment in addition to the class readers.

ER in South Africa

As discussed earlier, there are notable benefits associated with ER, thus, adopting this approach was considered to be the best way to nurture reading. According to Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), ER is not a foreign concept in South Africa. In fact, experienced teachers are aware of it, but many do not implement it in their classrooms. The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2011) clearly outlines a more structured way to teach reading and provides a substantial amount of time for reading to take place in the classroom. However, Paul and Clarke, (2016) argue that the reason why ER is not well implemented and visible in classrooms is that teachers do not have adequate training in how to acquire quality literacy and language skills. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) indicate that a teacher's understanding and teaching of reading has high correlation to their own reading practices. Studies of teachers' own reading practices indicate that early grade teachers do not read for pleasure themselves. For example, at a teacher's training workshop on literacy and language knowledge skills, a survey was conducted to see how many teachers read for pleasure and the type of content they read. Only 16% of teachers showed that they read extensively at home and were able to quote their favourite authors from books they have read. The majority of the teachers only read magazines and newspapers for pleasure and had minimum knowledge about children's literature. This kind of results points to impacts on reading practices in the classroom (Pretorius and Klapwijk, 2016).

External factors are also a contributing factor why ER happens occasionally or does not happen at all. As alluded to earlier, a number of schools are situated in low-income areas where some children live with illiterate parents and schools are poorly resourced. Most learners are exposed to very little text in the home and have few opportunities to engage with books, especially story books, outside of school hours. Only 7% of schools have a functional

library, but with limited African language books that young learners can read for enjoyment (Draper and Spaul, 2015). Thus, the responsibility for developing reading falls wholly on the teacher. Learners require more exposure to text and more opportunities to practice reading than what is made available during school hours.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, a social learning environment was established guided by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), language learning is a social activity as it takes place through meaningful interactions rather than isolated language activities.

As a social activity, the reading programme implemented in this study emphasised reading as an enjoyable experience, rather than as another demanding classroom task. Within the constraining environment of the pandemic, the researcher promoted opportunities for learners to share their reading, support each other, and create a collaborative space and present reading as a pleasurable activity where learners took control of their reading. Establishing such an environment was a way of nurturing reading for enjoyment, which might ultimately have a positive impact on learners' reading attitudes and motivation, leading to increased reading and academic success.

Methodology

Research design

This is a case study. A case study is a "systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context in order to generate knowledge" (Rule and John, 2011 p. 135). It also allows the researchers to gain in-depth understandings of real-life occurrences in which various situations occur (Yin, 2011). Hence, qualitative methods were best suited to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of two teachers trained to implement a reading programme during lockdown. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic presented a unique research opportunity that the researcher used in order to explore the teachers' practices, challenges encountered

and new insights of implementing a reading programme in a constraining environment.

Site and Participants

This was a small scale study established in a remote and print poor township in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Two FP teachers, were identified by the researcher mainly because the researcher had previously worked with them in other reading projects and they were based in this particular community. The two teachers were trained to implement an ER programme. The study entailed working with 20 FP learners aged between 7- 10. This group of learners came from the same community but attended different schools. Of importance is that although they attended different schools, they all use their home language of isiXhosa as a language of learning and teaching. Most of the learners

had limited experience with independent reading or ER as they are still learning to read. Because of COVID-19 pandemic regulations, learners were split in two groups of 10 and paired according to their reading ability (strong and weak learner). Each group was assigned to a teacher trained to implement the reading programme as shown in Table 1.

Research Process

The study was carried out in 2021 over a duration of 5 weeks, when South Africa was on lockdown adjusted alert level 4 (28 June to 25 July 2021). Of relevance to this study, the adjusted level 4 conditions meant that schools and institutions of higher education closed contact classes from 30 June 2021. In addition, premises normally open to the public such as churches, libraries, places for entertainment and recre-

Table 1: Learner and teacher demographic data

Group A	Grade 1: 2 learners (2 boys) Grade 2: 3 learners: (2 girls and 1 boy) Grade 3: 5 learners (3 girls and 2 boy)	Teacher A: Female, 26yrs old. Foundation Phase teacher for 4yrs. Qualification: Bachelor in Education (FP)
Group B	Grade 1: 1 learner (Girl) Grade 2: 4 learners: (2 girls and 2 boys) Grade 3: 5 learners (3 girls and 2 boys)	Teacher B: Female, 34yrs old. Foundation Phase teacher for 10yrs. Qualification: Bachelor in Education (FP); B.Ed. Honours.
Age	Aged between 7-10 yrs. (Grade 1 to 3)	

All learners are isiXhosa mother tongue speaker. IsiXhosa is also used as a language for teaching and learning in their schools. The two teachers are bilingual (isiXhosa and English)

ational centres were closed (Department of Co-operative Governance, 2021). However, small group gatherings were permitted as long as the attendants observed certain COVID-19 regulations.

To begin the research process, as the primary researcher, I (the researcher) trained two teachers about ER. During the training I explained the nature of an ER programme, thus making them aware of the ER ground rules. I demonstrated and modelled how each session would be structured as shown in Table 2. The teachers then had to select learners from the community who were in the FP and were willing to be part of the programme. They explained to the parents and the learners the structure and the

duration of the reading programme. In addition, they explained the importance of reading for enjoyment and the relevance of the reading programme. Arrangements were also made about the time and venue to conduct the reading programme.

Next was the implementation phase. In implementing the reading programme, the researcher adopted a formative intervention approach. To initiate a formative intervention, participants are faced with challenges in their daily lives (Engestrom, 2011). In this case the main challenges were the lockdown and lack of access to reading resources and reading opportunities. In a formative intervention, the researcher and the participants examine the challenge and

develop innovative concepts which are not predictable to the researcher. There is also flexibility within a formative intervention. The contents of the intervention are subject to negotiation between the researcher and the participants.

During the implementation phase, the teachers met with the learners in the afternoons, twice a week for an hour over a duration of 5 weeks. Table 2 provides a summary of the structure of each reading session.

In the reading programme, learners had access to interesting books written in

English and isiXhosa as shown in Table 3. The language used in the books was at accessible levels, appropriate for learners still learning to read. The books also included colourful illustrations and were less than 20 pages long. In each reading session, learners chose books they were interested in reading during that week. They also took books home to continue their reading. At the end of a 5-week intervention, each learner was expected to have read at least 5 books, assuming they would read one book every week.

Table 2: Planned structure of each reading session

Duration	Activity
5 mins	Ice breaker (singing, word games, ring game)
5 mins	Check in (marking of the attendance register)
10 mins	Teacher reads aloud or reads with the learners (shared reading)
20 mins	Independent or paired reading
10 mins	Feedback session (book talks, book summaries)
5 mins	Lending and borrowing of books
5 mins	Concluding activity (writing of book reports or entering on the reading log)

Table 3: The Extensive Reading Programme book stock

Quantity	Description
27	IsiXhosa story books
51	English story books
54	Bilingual books (isiXhosa-English)
30	Informational English books (Nature, Science)
4	Informational bilingual books (Children's Rights)

Data generation tools and analysis

Data analysis was done concurrently with the implementation of the reading programme. Because of the limitations associated with the pandemic, data presented in this study was collected from the teacher's weekly reflective journals, weekly follow-up interviews and focus group discussion. There was no value in asking learners with little understanding of ER as their data would have distorted the

findings. Rather, it was beneficial to reflect on the teachers' experiences to determine the challenges and the effect of the reading programme.

Reflective journals are widely acknowledged as an effective means of allowing people to think deeply and critically about their own practices, thoughts and feelings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). In addition, Ortlipp (2008) states that journal writing is a subjective experience that

reflects a teachers' introspection and reflection about what was happening at the time. Thus, the teachers started self-reflective journals pre, during and post programme implementation. They documented their experiences of planning and execution of each reading session, emotions and experiences of challenges encountered and lessons learnt. Self-reflective journals became the space where they could use the "...privileges of the self-reflective approach, which allowed them to use their experiences to understand and interpret the connectivity between self and others" (Roy and Uekusa, 2020, p 4). The teachers logged into their journals at the end of each reading session, totalling to 10 journal entries from each teacher. These were later analysed by the researcher to make sense of the teachers' experiences. In addition, follow up online interviews were held with each teacher as a way of member checking, to prevent choosing themes that were pre-determined by the researcher's views of the programme.

Weekly online focus group meetings were held with the teachers at the end of each week. In these sessions, teachers reflected and described their weekly experiences, how they tackled challenges they encountered, and also suggested ways in which they could improve other sessions. These discussions offered a sense of ease and comfort and provided the researcher and the teachers a space to talk about their experiences openly. This discussion allowed for self-reflection, debate, and rethinking the programme. Xerri (2018) indicates that focus groups are about self-disclosure and thus, in this case, focus groups offered an emotionally safe atmosphere that allowed for talk about experiences of implementing a reading programme in a constraining environment. It also allowed for less formal discussions in which the researcher and the participants would speak freely and pick up on ideas from their self-reflective journals. The main advantage of using focus group discussion was that participants fed off the experiences that they brought up in discussion, providing insight into their literacy experiences with young learners at the same time observing COVID-19 protocols.

Focus group discussions were recorded, stored and later transcribed verbatim. The researcher and the participants discussed their self-reflective journals making decisions as to which reflection should be added to support a particular argument. Data analysis was initially done individually, where the primary researcher looked at each participant's self-reflective journal and the focus group discussions recordings. This led to the identification of categories and codes.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis process entailed organising the data, coding, sorting, categorisation, identifying themes, findings and applying theory and literature to explain the findings. Thus, theoretical concepts from the socio cultural theory were used to analyse the data collected on implementation. It helped the researchers understand the teachers' experiences of implementing a reading programme amid COVID-19.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I infuse the findings and discussion with relevant literature and theoretical concepts to provide a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences in implementing a reading programme during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in South Africa. It is important to highlight that most of the challenges encountered were a result of the strict COVID-19 regulations. The researcher and the participants were aware of the importance of following advice provided by the health authorities to protect themselves and others around them by following all the COVID-19 protocols and taking all necessary precautions. However, these had an impact on the successful implementation of the reading programme to develop reading for pleasure as would have been expected in a normal context. Responses representing teacher participants' reflection on the implementation of the reading programme are presented descriptively.

Complexity and crisis: Implementing an ER programme amid COVID-19 Lockdown

Following is a discussion of data capturing the teachers' experiences with implementing an ER during COVID-19 lockdown.

The impact of social distancing on reading

Social distancing regulations were put in place to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus. However, social distancing posed real challenges in the implementation of the reading programme that was guided by a socio-cultural theory which encourages reading to be presented as a social activity. Also, when learners attend school in person, reading is done by the teachers and the learners. Two teacher participants had the following to say with regards to social distancing and reading for pleasure:

Participant A:

At times I feel we are doing intensive reading or a hybrid of extensive reading. Although the learners are enjoying the reading, I feel something is missing. For example, sitting close to each other, doing a picture walk together and perusing the pages of the books together, which is something exciting. But unfortunately we have to keep reminding the learners about the 1m distance.

Participant B:

True, everything seems to be individualised although we have fun pre and post reading activities. We can't do paired or group guided reading in this set up. A metre apart is just too long when you want learners to experience the fun in reading.

Thus, social distancing made it harder for the teacher participants to successfully teach reading, and explore and implement other reading strategies. The participants agreed that with this limitation, the pleasure of reading was not fully realised.

Impact of masks on reading

When the reading intervention was implemented, everyone was required to put on their masks in public spaces to also prevent the spread of the virus. As highlighted by the participants, the properly fitted masks posed another challenge to the successful implementation of the reading

programme. The way teachers engage with books can have a lasting academic impact on young children's attitudes and feelings about reading and school. In an ideal situation (without masks), teachers are able to demonstrate, model, use gestures and sometimes pause while reading books aloud, but this was impossible to do during COVID-19. Although, there are shield masks, these were costly and not afforded by many people in the community where the study was conducted. Reflecting on the use of masks during each reading session, Participant B made the following comments about the effect of masking on reading:

Participant B:

Since these are English second language learners, there are times when I am reading aloud to them and want to teach then letters and sounds in English so as to develop their phonological and phonemic awareness skills. This however, is difficult to do unless I take off my mask but I will have to stand far away from everyone but they won't clearly see my mouth movement.

Strategies mentioned by Participant B are, of course, easier to do in face-to face classes, without masks or the advanced transparent shield masks. This complication about masks was also alluded to.

Participant A:

It's very difficult to tell the learners to Mask up and read or to ask them to watch how I read or move my mouth when I read with my mask on. Mask up and read? Hah, how is that possible with the mask up?

Considering that these young learners were still learning to read, masks were a big hindrance when it came to modelling reading. In their study, Crosson and Silverman (2022) found that, on average, teachers reported that they reduced instruction time for literacy skills such as comprehension and book discussions. As also evidenced in this study, the teacher participants reported that they encountering a number of barriers to literacy instruction and nurturing reading for pleasure for the

learners because of the strict COVID-19 regulations.

Challenges experienced with the closure of recreational and educational facilities

Under lockdown alert level 4, the closure of schools, libraries, churches and recreation centres had an impact on the successful implementation of the reading programme. For many young learners, the lockdown period meant they would only get back to meaningful, structured learning and play once schools reopened. Not all learners in South Africa have access to data. Most online resources require connectivity to the internet or a smart phone. With schools and libraries closed, finding a safe venue where learners could sit comfortable and maintain social distance while they engaged in reading activities became a challenge. The participants ended up using an open field to get reading started. Later on, a community member offered them access to her garage. As the regulations eased, they were further given access to a church and an ECD centre which was not being utilised.

In a normal context, the increased learner attendance observed throughout this reading programme would be celebrated. However, as mentioned by the participants, during the lockdown this caused a number of challenges. Due to the limited space, social distancing, and the limited number of people allowed in each venue, they had to turn away many learners so as to maintain the 20 learners they started the programme with. Participant B expressed her feelings about this stating that

Participant B:

I really feel bad about turning these young learners away. You can tell that they are thirsty to read with us. But, there is nothing we can do. We have to adhere to the COVID-19 protocols.

The two participants reflected on this challenge and decided to give the non-participating learners photocopied books so that they could read on their own at home.

Insights from setting up an ER program amid COVID-19 Lockdown

As alluded to by Kuutti (1996), within an activity system, contradictions are bound to

surface, but should be considered as opportunities of new learning. Faced with the mentioned challenges, the two teachers, did not give up on the reading programme, they reflected on their practices and came with innovative ways of working under such a constraining environment.

Pedagogical reasoning and thinking about planning and implementation

In this section, the focus is on the participants' pedagogical reasoning and action (Shulman, 1987) about implementing a reading programme during lockdown. The participants talked about how they made pedagogical choices taking into consideration the constraining environment in which reading was happening in. With COVID-19 regulations enforced, the two participants became reflective and reflexive in their practice. They had the following to say about their pedagogical reasoning behind their planning and implementation process of the reading programme:

Participant A:

Before each session, I had to make thorough preparation. I had to pre-read the stories, select difficult vocabulary and make flash cards. I had to find ways that would compensate for my reading with a mask to make reading fun.

Additionally, Participant B added that she selected her reading aloud stories taking into account the lived experiences of her learners. This included issues around losing a loved one, sickness and poverty

Participant B:

I had to be very cautious in selecting my stories and teaching resources. I was aware these were young learners and I did not want to trigger them. I knew we were all affected, all of us knew someone who has had the virus, or passed on because of it.

Participant A also talked about how her pedagogical reasoning about implementation was based on nurturing reading for pleasure and getting children fall in love with stories. With this in mind, she considered other reading strategies.

Participant A:

Yes, we couldn't successfully, implement paired reading and all, but there were other strategies we explored like read aloud, shared reading, individual reading and even giving them books to take home. So at the end, they read, they had fun.

From the above, it is evident that pedagogical reasoning about planning and implementation of the reading programme comprised of making decisions about the format of each reading session, the resources to be used, and the teaching strategies to be employed to maximise learners' reading for pleasure experience within a constraining environment. Additionally, intensive self-reflection and evaluation of pedagogical practices brought new comprehension where the role of the participants had to shift to "decision makers who design their...learning environment as needed, in real time, by focusing on approaches to teaching that endure through changes in learning context, learning content and pedagogies" (Mishra, Koehler and Kereluik 2009, p. 52). What is also evident is that the teachers did not allow the COVID-19 regulations stop them from achieving the initial goals of the research programme, which was to nurture reading for pleasure during lockdown. Instead, they reflected on their teaching, practices and learning that led to the consolidation of new understandings and learning from teaching experience. Reading aloud became one of the reading strategies they implemented. A study conducted by Oaxaca, Lezama and Angeles Sanchez (2022) on developing children's English learning by reading aloud demonstrates that the reading aloud project had positive effects on young English language learners, since it was a great experience by itself.

Collaborative learning

The pandemic made it difficult for all learners to meet at school due to rotational learning. Hence, a community based reading programme was implemented which resulted in collaborative learning between the teacher participants and learners from different schools. The primary researcher was aware that in collaborative learning

spaces, there are bound to be clashes (contradictions) because of the participants' varied attitude, beliefs and life experiences, hence the reading programme was guided by rules. The participants consciously guided the learning process without taking over the process and that promoted social skills. The teachers and the learners shared responsibilities within the reading programme which included taking turns in reading, book discussions, monitoring attendance and managing the accession register. This routine and interactions between the teachers and the learners provided learners with many opportunities to observe and participate in these activities, and over time they took responsibility of their own learning and participation in the joint activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In addition, learners enjoyed the new expanded network which included the teachers who provided them with weekly reading opportunities, modelled and scaffolded their reading. According to Cook and Urzua (1993), younger learners benefit from a positive reading role model who will listen, understand, and care about teaching them while making learning fun. Having a group of learners from different schools, but all staying in the same neighbourhood provided an opportunity to create friendships and grow in their love for reading.

Community involvement

Communities and the home environment play an important role in developing children's literacy (Nuryanti and Iswara, 2021). I can also attest to this based on the positive response received from the community where the reading programme was implemented. During the setting up and implementation phase of the reading programme, the two teachers encountered challenges with securing a conducive venue to conduct the reading sessions. Knowing the importance of reading, and seeing how children were enjoying reading, some community members offered the teachers their spaces. They acknowledged the benefits of the reading programme, highlighting that it was keeping their children off the streets. To get started, a community member offered the teachers her garage (carport) to use while they looked for

an alternative venue. They were allowed to use one of the ECD centres, which was underutilised, and a church offered their premises. The teachers were impressed by this positive response.

Participant A:

It is good to see parents coming together for such a good cause. Unfortunately for now we cannot accommodate every child in this community.

Participant B:

Many people are willing to assist us but, they are afraid of the rife vandalism in this area once they keep their venues open to the public. This is very sad as there are people with good intentions of using the venues to benefit the community

The learners' love for reading was increased because of the weekly reading opportunities in a social learning environment. Reflecting on each reading group, the teachers observed that voluntary reading was happening regularly within and out of the set reading programme hours. This provided opportunities for learners to take books home and read with adults, a significant factor promoting reading. In a study conducted by Wepner and Caccavale (1991), learners with the most parental involvement showed the most significant improvements. According to Bao et al. (2020) "...reading to children is an effective low-tech alternative, which could also promote a love of books and social-emotional connections between parents and children". In addition, Niklas and Schneider (2013) found that, regardless of the family background, having a reading parent, reading to the child, and the availability of books in a household had an impact on pre-schoolers' vocabulary and phonological awareness as well as the further development of literacy competencies. In addition, time parents spent reading with children gave them an insight of what their children were reading. This also gave them an opportunity to enjoy the reading activity and bond with their children.

Emergency of learners' transformative agency

The agency of the learners noticed by both teachers within the constraining conditions was astonishing. Learners began to read more, and gather in their own reading groups and with reading buddies. Through the implementation of reading programme, these young learners saw that reading could be a social and enjoyable activity. The teachers also observed an improvement in learners' confidence as they volunteered to read and talk about their reading. Learners who were initially shy and reserved became confident and participated in the reading activities. Learners saw each reading session as a place of growth as they were all treated equally and encouraged to read in a low anxiety environment. As reported by the teachers, learners in their groups revealed their natural ability to become responsible members of the reading programme. They monitored the process of lending and borrowing of books, making sure that all books were returned in good condition. They became equally capable of taking over the teachers' roles as they could organise the venue, maintain discipline, collect and display books. All these were good indicators of transformation and sustainability. Baker (2003) contends that the "...same conditions that enhance motivation in classrooms will enhance motivation at home: choice, collaboration, and risk-free environments" (p. 102).

Recommendations: Post COVID-19

There is enough evidence that COVID-19 will not be going away anytime soon (World Health Organization, n.d.). Even if it becomes a thing of the past, institutions and communities should be prepared for times when another pandemic will strike. The recommendations suggested in this paper can help facilitate the transition back to face-to-face teaching and learning context and are not difficult to implement in school or out of school programmes.

As learners return to school, there is need for learner support at a wide scale such as whole class reading intervention because all learners were affected by school closures in some way. In disadvantaged

communities, the focus must be on intervention programmes and strategies that will accelerate learners' acquisition of literacy and numeracy which are foundational skills for all future learning. This will address skill deficits experienced by all learners due to the extended school closures because of COVID-19. For example, Burns et al. (2015) and Preast et al. (2020) implemented a modified whole class interventions and findings of their study demonstrated immediate positive effects after just 10 school days.

As evidenced in the study, communities play an important role in education. Parents should be encouraged to provide additional reading activities in the home setting and nurture reading because "Literacy in children is a partnership between educators, parents and children." Schools should see them as partners and include components of literacy activities to be implemented at home to supplement school efforts. Learners should be allowed to take different kinds of books and material home where they can read widely and often with their parents. As noted in this study, there are safe, under-utilised spaces in communities which can be used as literacy spaces. Access to these places can be granted once communities come together, and are aware of the importance of access and exposure to literacy activities in and out of school. Finally, as a result of COVID-19, many teachers will require additional support to meet the needs of children whose learning has been disrupted. A recommendation can be made for education officials and other stakeholders to arrange additional support for teachers.

Conclusion

While the full extent of COVID-19's impact on literacy and learning in the FP will not be clear anytime soon, this study provides evidence that during and after the initial shock of the pandemic, researchers, in collaboration with community members found ways of making reading accessible to the young learners. Even in the midst of continued uncertainty and disruption, learners had reading opportunities, although

the experience was different to pre pandemic times.

In addition, there are important limitations that need to be highlighted. For example, the researcher would have followed traditional data collection methods such as expanding the scope of the research by interviewing parents, and observing the learners at school, but due to the restrictions on face-to-face contact, this was not possible. Consequently, alternative ways were sought to generate data taking into account the complicated research context. It must be noted that this is a small-scale study, hence the findings are not generalisable. However, the findings show what happened in this particular context and provide important and authentic insights into the experiences of the researchers at a time of an international pandemic. Therefore, this study is of relevance, in that other researchers can build on it by identifying practices which can be applicable in similar situations. Due to COVID-19 and the long break from learning, learners are likely to experience setbacks in their reading skills, thus, class-wide, inclusive reading interventions should be implemented. These reading interventions will have to be aligned to learners' needs to be effective.

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