

The Impact of the Social Environment on the Teaching and Learning of English Reading at Grade One level in Tsholotsho Rural District of Zimbabwe

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Abstract— This case study explores the impact of the social environment on the teaching and learning of English reading at Grade One (1) level in Tsholotsho; which is a rural district in Zimbabwe. Employing a qualitative research method, this study utilizes focus groups to investigate the complex relationships between social environmental factors and English reading outcomes. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool was used to assess reading proficiency. The study draws on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to understand the interconnectedness of social factors influencing English reading development. Findings largely reveal that rural grade one learners face challenges in reading comprehension, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. The social environment: including parental involvement and level of literacy, socio-economic status, and community support, significantly influence the teaching and learning of English in rural set-ups at grade 1 level. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions and support systems to foster a conducive learning environment and improve reading proficiency among learners at this level considering that their reading success is critical for future educational endeavours. By exploring the nuances of the social environment in as much as it influences English reading development, this research aims to inform evidence-based strategies for improving the quality of reading in rural communities.

Keywords— social experiment, teaching, learning, English, Zimbabwe.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English reading to grade one learners in rural schools is a complex process that is affected by various factors; including teacher skills, parental involvement, parental illiteracy, and socio-economic environment. This study explores the perspectives of teachers and parents; revealing challenges such as teachers' lack of skills, parental illiteracy, limited parental involvement, and socio-economic disparities. Parents and guardians play a crucial role in assisting children with their English reading homework. Teachers often provide clues such as drawings and pictures, indicating objects and their names, which parents use to help their children at home. Homework is typically assigned twice a week. Parents, particularly grandparents, assist children by allocating specific times for homework and play.

The reliance on teachers' homework assignments highlights the limited resources available at home for supporting English reading. Findings from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) revealed that, rural grade one learners struggle with reading comprehension, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. These challenges are interconnected and influenced by

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, highlighting the need for urgent attention from stakeholders to bridge the educational gap and foster a culture of reading at grade 1 level.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

An important aspect to highlight regarding reading is its social dimension because reading essentially operates in a social context, (Castillo and Bonillo, 2014). Similarly, Wentzel (1996) supports this idea when reflecting on the social aspect of reading; stating that learners read for social reasons because they construct and share the meanings gleaned from reading with friends and family. Similarly, Stahl (2022) points out that, it is more effective to view the reading process as a reciprocal or interactive one in which readers' development in one component of reading can support their growth. For children's later school success, the first years are crucial (Kurtulmus, 2016). A study by Chikuni (2024) recommends explicit instruction in reading strategies, creating a supportive learning environment, and promoting engagement through interactive activities.

According to Nor Shahriza (2007), the home environment plays a critical role in pupils' reading ability. It can affect someone either positively or negatively. In the home environment, there are many factors which can cause a child to have reading difficulties. These include lack of motivation, parents' literacy levels, poverty, lack of support by parents or guardians and the community at large. The home environment is therefore very important for a child's growth in all aspects of life and this includes reading. For one to thrive academically, a conducive home environment is very cardinal.

Dudych (2015) believes that an effective reading program includes a home reading component. Time spent practicing reading at home is essential to consolidate the reading skills being taught at school. In order for learners to be successful readers, they need to read; the more reading practice they have, the better they will get. A teacher needs to foster the home-school connection and create an open relationship with families in order to foster parental participation in school programs such as reading. Parents are often challenged by not knowing how to help their children with reading tasks. It is a teacher's responsibility to promote reading at home and to make efforts to provide parents with the support that they need to make home reading an interesting and successful experience for both parents and children (Dudych, 2015). Research in Taiwan found out that school facilities, policies and peer influence are crucial factors in promoting reading activities in elementary schools leading to improved reading outcomes and exceptional performance in international reading assessments (Huang, Tsai, and Huang, 2015).

Social interaction plays a crucial role in children's learning and development for it allows them to construct knowledge and understanding through collaborative dialogue and shared experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Castillo and Bonillo (2018) point out that reading is an interactive process in which the reader gives sense and meaning to the content and issues he or she gets in touch with. Parental education levels and family dynamics play a crucial role in shaping rural students' reading achievement and literacy development (Richardson et al., 2017). Most parents in rural areas may have limited education and literacy skills, making it difficult for them to support their children's reading development (Kannapell et al., 2018). Martin (2011) says that a classroom teacher observed that families of her students wanted to help their children academically at home, but were often frustrated due to lack of skills and

understanding of how to help the learners. From this observation, Martin conducted a study to determine how to remove the barriers that inhibit parental support of a child's reading development at home. She determined that in order for home reading to be effective, teachers should give parents clear instructions, academic support, and the necessary tools. Giving parents specific guidance for homework removes the barrier that inhibits parental support.

Learning to read cannot be forced, but each step along the way must be celebrated and seen as growth toward developing a lifelong reader (Dudych 2015). Martin (2011) further notes that it is evident that some families are willing to help children with reading homework but lack of skills to help them was found to be hindering the teaching of reading at home. Research has shown that parents and caregivers want to support their children's learning at home, but often lack the confidence, skills and knowledge to do so effectively (Henderson and Map, 2002). This is an indication that lack of knowledge on the part of parents or guardians is one of the key factors that affect the teaching of reading in rural schools.

Many studies point to the fact that parental or guardian involvement generally plays a vital role in the growth and development of children (Nurhayati, 2021). The low level of literacy among the parent population of rural communities, placed burden on teachers as they struggle to teach learners whose family backgrounds disadvantage children's learning ambitions. Although parents are typically seen as the primary educators of their children, their lack of engagement and investment in their children's reading, as reported in prior research, underscores the difficulties teachers encounter in rural settings (Wilde et al., 2017). Thus, the importance of parental involvement in children's academic and social development has been widely accepted (Kurtulmus, 2016).

Some researchers report that parents may seem reluctant to get involved in school activities because they feel uncertain of their role (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005) or they feel that teachers have a negative attitude to their involvement in the learning process (Michael et al., 2007). Other studies have consistently found that parental involvement in children's education is a strong predictor of academic achievement, but that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may face barriers in providing the much-needed support (Epstein, 2001). Most students in rural areas usually have low

performance compared to students in urban areas because it relates to their parents' educational level. Family involvement in reading activities can significantly impact a student's performance, hence, parents' educational level is therefore a strong predictor of student achievement (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Creating a home library or book corner can provide access to reading materials and foster a love of reading in children (Krashen, 2004). Parental involvement in a child's education has been accepted as a crucial element. Studies on parental involvement do not only prove their positive effect on a child's development, but also present specific links among the structure of the involvement and children's academic achievement and social emotional outcomes (Kurtulmuş, 2016).

In a study done in Latvia Europe on factors influencing reading literacy at the primary school level by Geske and Ozola (2008) the study discovered that, the socioeconomic position of a family considerably influences students' reading literacy achievement. Learners' reading literacy is substantially influenced by the collaboration of parents and children at the pre-school age, collaboration at age of ten is not that important anymore, except regular joint visits to a library or a bookstore. The authors recommend parents to pay additional attention to early development of a child's reading literacy during the pre-school age period and teachers to stimulate students reading full texts of literary works appropriate to the primary school level and pay additional attention to promotion of reading outside the school. The same source (Geske and Ozola, 2008) report that it is evident that reading skills are mostly acquired at early childhood level and if a child fails to acquire these skills earlier, it might be a challenge to acquire them at upper grades. This means that reading foundation must be laid at ECD level and infant level.

Research has consistently shown that socioeconomic status (SES) is a strong predictor of reading achievement, with learners from lower-SES backgrounds tending to perform lower on reading tests (Sirin, 2005). Studies have found that parental education, occupation and income are all significant predictors of learners' reading literacy achievement (Kirsch et al., 2002). Children's home settings have also been found to play a critical role in children's own construction of reading in the context of play. Children from families with one or two siblings, usually have better achievements in reading literacy as they have comparatively more reading materials to use.

Lyons, Allyn, Noreen John, and Carmel (2013) carried out research on reading competence among Irish children attending schools in areas designated as socially disadvantaged. The results of the study are encouraging in that the children in the study, who are attending schools designated as socially disadvantaged, are acquiring satisfactory literacy skills. Research has shown that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve literacy skills comparable to their peers from more advantaged backgrounds if given effective instruction and support (Lyons, Allyn, Noreen John, and Carmel, 2013). A study done in South Africa by Mescht (2015) points out that, it has become commonplace to blame a range of home and environmental deficits for the low levels of literacy achievement amongst rural and disadvantaged children. The difficulties of becoming a reader in rural South Africa today should not be underestimated. Furthermore, the writer points out that, young children in remote, under-resourced areas have access to pleasurable experiences with texts that set them on a lifelong quest for learning. It reminds teachers and teacher educators that disadvantaged environments may still provide rich, affirming literacy learning experiences for children.

Mescht (2015) believes that it does not mean that the home environment needs to be wealthy or to be in a big city, rural children can be equally advantaged or even more so, as long as there are adults around to help them learn. This study disagrees with other studies which believe that rural schools have a negative influence on learners' educational achievement including reading competence. Mescht (2015) avers that location of a school does not matter and even the socioeconomic status. He believes that the environment of rural areas can also enable learners acquire reading skills just like learners in the urban environment. Research has shown that rural and disadvantaged children in South Africa face significant literacy challenges. However, studies (Molestane, 2016; Prinsloo, 2017) indicate that these challenges cannot be attributed solely to individual or home-based deficits. Research has consistently shown that the major contributors to poor literacy levels are not the children's cognitive abilities or teacher quality, but rather the socio-economic conditions, such as poverty (Chikuni, 2024).

Many parents agreed that educated parents' have an effect on student achievement because this group of people have better communication with teachers (Erdener, 2016). The author further states that parental

involvement has an influence on children's educational engagement at all school levels. Reading in rural schools is hindered because schools in rural areas are neglected by most governments. The disparity between rural and urban schools is not new, but rural districts in these areas really struggle to appoint well qualified and experienced teachers who are able to teach effectively (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). This is an indication that most learners in rural schools cannot read because most governments neglect rural schools, and this is one of the factors that affect reading of English to grade one learners in rural schools.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research paradigm, approach and design

Generally, major and most fundamental building blocks of any research methodology are its paradigm, approach and design. The study was guided by the interpretivist philosophical paradigm in generating data from the selected sample. In the context of research, interpretivism is an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social setting is essential to decoding the meaning of the data that can be gathered around a phenomenon. It essentially accepts that reality is relative and has multiple facets all depending on the context of the individual attaching meaning to that truth (Creswell, 2013). In harmony with Maree & van der Westhuizen (2013), this paradigm defines the approaches that were used to embrace the way parents and teachers gave meaning to the data that they provided during data collection and interpretation processes.

The current study adopted the qualitative research approach to address the objectives of the research. This approach attempts to discover truth by exploring how and why participants interact with each other (Nieuwenhuis, 2013). The use of a qualitative approach to describe a given phenomenon provided an in-depth representation of the relevant inputs from all the relevant grade 1 teachers regarding their practices in teaching reading. In addition, using a qualitative approach for this study allowed for a thick description of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2016). The researcher employed a multiple case study. A case study focuses on a single phenomenon in depth by interviewing a limited sample of participants and closely examining a bounded system (McMillan & Schumacher 2006). The case study investigates a particular event in its context and the researcher defines the case and its boundaries (Punch & Oancea 2014). The case in this study is practice of teaching reading to grade one learners. It sought to

understand the meaning attached to social factors in the teaching of reading in rural schools from the Zimbabwean teachers' point of view.

3.2 Population, Sample and Data Collection

Instruments

Population is a group of individuals who have the same characteristic (Creswell 2012). Shukla (2020) defines population as a set or group of all the units on which the findings of the research are to be applied. In this research, the population comprised of all primary school teachers, all parents and all learners in primary schools of Tsholotsho district. In finding participants for this study, the researcher used purposive sampling to select teachers. Purposive sampling provided the investigator with a chance to have a wider understanding on the teachers' practices in teaching reading to grade one learners. As noted by Gall, et al. (2007), purposive sampling can also increase variance and thus improve the validity of the findings. Six grade 1 teachers from two schools were interviewed. This helped the investigator in understanding the phenomenon in different contexts. In this study sampling was done at two levels. Firstly, schools sampled were rural schools. Secondly, these teachers were teaching grade 1 learners. Therefore, 6 teachers were purposively selected for observation and interviews, and six parents were conveniently selected for interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather data from both teachers and parents. A focus group may be viewed as a group of individuals selected from a specific population and assembled by the researcher in order to discuss and comment, from personal experience and perspective; on a topic or problem that is the subject of the research (Powell, Single, and Lloyd, 2010). Focus group data provided the opportunity to analyse the strength with which teachers and parents involved in the study held opinions within their group (Harding, 2013). Where they presented with opposing opinions or directly challenged, the individuals either modified their position or defended it. Bringing together all the comments that the individuals made enabled the researchers to determine whether their view changed in the course of discussion and, if so, further examination of the transcript revealed which contributions by other members brought about the change. Quite a number of advantages of using focus groups were considered for this study, including the fact that they are quick and cheap, generate rich data and moderator can interact with the participants, which

allows for follow-up questions, among others. At the collective level, focus group data can sometimes reveal shared understandings or common views by the participants. Thus, FGDs were noted to be appropriate in soliciting data from both teachers and parents on the impact of social environment on teaching English Reading to Grade One (1) Learners in Tsholotsho Rural District of Zimbabwe.

The generated data was reflectively analysed starting from the time it was collected whilst still in the field just like what researchers say that data analysis in qualitative research is in parallel with data collection (Creswell, 2016). This enabled the researchers to discover important sources and information that was possibly overlooked in the design. This was achieved in three ways, first; having consultative meetings with respondents, secondly; having field note summaries and thirdly; having data summary sheets (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008). The recorded FGDs were transcribed, mostly in verbatim and analysed to draw appropriate meanings and implications.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

4.1 Presentation

This study highlighted the importance of parental involvement and socioeconomic factors in literacy development to rural grade one learners in rural schools in Tsholotsho Rural District of Zimbabwe. Through use of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving teachers and parents, some very interesting data was gathered.

Most parents revealed that lack of literacy amongst them means that they cannot assist their children with reading at home, resulting in learning being confined to school hours. One parent said 'We cannot speak English as compared to parents or guardians in town which makes our children lag behind. We lack resources, and another issue is that we are not learned and sometimes it becomes difficult for us to assist our children with reading homework. Personally, I even lose interest to assist my child because I am not educated. The curriculum which was introduced came up with difficult words. Long back at grade one level, children were reading small words with three letters or so. It is unfortunate that these days at grade one level, they read very big words which are beyond their grade. We are not educated, and we cannot read those big words'. Parent 6 shared the same sentiments and pointed out that 'My lack of knowledge as a guardian affects my child's progress. I am not educated of which I cannot assist with homework as I cannot read and write. My grandchild

only gets knowledge from the teacher, and this affects her a lot'.

One of the teachers said 'Having illiterate parents and guardians in the community really affects the learning of English reading. As others said, illiterate parents and guardians cannot assist their children with reading or other forms of homework. Children in rural areas are only exposed to reading at school. This is a huge disadvantage to rural learners, which consequently leads to their failure to read. Most of these learners leave with their grandparents who do not understand the English language, hence cannot teach their grandchildren English reading'.

Teacher 2 articulated that 'This community in terms of literacy haaaa, they are far much below standard. This affects the grade one learners because even if you give the learners reading homework, the parents or guardians do not know how to read so they can't assist the learners. Most of the parents and guardians in this community are generally illiterate'. Teacher 1 disclosed that 'Lack of knowledge of the parents and guardians in this rural community affects grade 1 reader because they are not educated as compared to parents in enlightened communities such as in towns and cities. This means that in this community, there is no one to assist the children with reading homework. Schools located in rural areas therefore have some disadvantages including a gap in those who can assist children to read at home'.

Teacher 4 pointed out that, 'Parents and guardians' literacy is below standard. Most of the parents are themselves school dropouts or they simply didn't get the opportunity to go to school. Learners in this community, if they see someone coming from South Africa driving a nice car, they think that going to South Africa is the best thing they can do'. Another teacher explained that 'Lack of parental encouragement and the disruption caused by travelling of parents to South Africa for employment opportunities negatively affected children's development of English reading skills. If you go around the community you will find that, some children are not going to school. The children sometimes attend school once in a week. However, sometimes other, children can even spend three to four weeks without coming to school, hence absenteeism is affecting their reading progress. While some parents show interest on assisting their children with reading, many are unable to do so due to their illiteracy'.

Teachers were also of the view that parental illiteracy completely hinders grade one learners from doing homework. One of the teachers had this to say, 'We give the learners homework and write in the communication book the instructions for parents to follow but learners come back to school without having done the homework. This is because most parents in this community cannot read. Communication between teachers and parents is primarily through communication books, but this method is ineffective when parents are illiterate or disinterested. Some teachers use vernacular languages, like Ndebele, to explain homework instructions to parents, attempting to bridge the literacy gap. However, the overall low literacy levels among parents and guardians, who are often grandparents, significantly hinders the learners' reading progress.

Teacher 3 pointed out that 'This community does not seem to support the learning of children including helping grade 1 learners to read. They believe in going to South Africa to seek for any type of job. Education to them is of no use because to them what is important is going to South Africa. They prefer to migrate to South Africa due to economic hardships. However, this decision comes at a cost, as they must leave behind their children and grandchildren, sacrificing the opportunity to assist them with their educational tasks, including reading homework.' In another FGD, one teacher reiterated that 'Teachers need support from home. In this community, parents do not value education hence, learning ends at school and at home parents have nothing to offer. This means that the home environment does not support the learning of English reading at grade one level and other levels. As teachers, we make an effort to send WhatsApp messages to parents requesting them to assist their children with reading homework, which is however derailed by their illiteracy and sometimes lack of interest to assist with school-related tasks.

4.2 Discussion

The family plays a vital role in the child's learning and school achievement including reading. This means that parents contribute to the child's reading development and general academic achievement in various ways (Belaic, 2021). The parents and guardians' literacy influences the learning of English reading. Participants' responses revealed that, most of the parents and guardians' illiteracy hinders the promotion of English reading in rural schools. Most of the parents are unable to read or write, which consequently hinders their

engagement with teachers to support their children's reading. It was evident from the current study that most of the parents do not attend school consultation programmes due to literacy-related barriers. Lack of support at home means that learning ends when school hours are over, and children do not have the opportunity to reinforce their reading skills outside the classroom.

As highlighted before, children of poor and illiterate parents are more likely to experience educational disadvantages as these variables restrict access to educational resources and opportunities including reading opportunities, (Mackay, 2005). Similarly, Hannon, (2013) states that parents with limited literacy skills face significant challenges in supporting their children's learning including struggling to read school documents and engaging in homework activities, which this study noted to hinder grade one children's reading progress. The influence of parental illiteracy, poverty and lack of value for education impacts negatively on grade one learners' development of reading skills, which is consistent with research that asserts that the home environment plays a significant role in determining reading ability (Hart & Risley, 1995; Krashen, 2004; Dickinson & Tabors, 2002).

Vygotsky's (1978) social cultural theory echoes the importance of social interaction in developing reading skills. However, this study highlights limited social interaction due to illiterate parents or guardians in the studied rural community, thereby hindering English reading at grade one level in rural schools. Bronfenbrenner's theory also sheds light on the microsystem interactions between children's families, teachers and peers. This study's findings mirror how these social interactions are compromised in rural schools which definitely affects learners' reading outcomes. The mesosystem interactions between home, school and community are also impaired while the exosystemic factors such as parental poverty and illiteracy exacerbate the challenges associated with reading ability at this level.

The study also revealed that some teachers have adopted creative solutions, such as using a 'WhatsApp Group' to communicate with parents and provide guidance on reading homework. However, the overall low literacy and interest levels in the community significantly hinders the grade one learners' reading progress. Additionally, the rural setting often limits exposure to English reading and use outside of the classroom,

affecting learners' ability to practice and improve their English reading skills.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The teaching of English reading at grade one level in rural schools was found to be influenced by an intricate interplay of various factors, parents' illiteracy and general socio-environmental conditions at home and school. While interactive methods for teaching English reading have shown effectiveness in making learning enjoyable and engaging for young learners, the broader challenges such as poverty, long distances to school, low family and community literacy levels remain significant obstacles that need to be addressed to achieve sustainable reading and general academic achievement for grade one learners.

Drawing on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- a. If access to quality Basic Education is to become realistic in rural communities, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Zimbabwe), Local Government Education Boards, stakeholders and communities need to establish strong collaboration and coordination of activities in order to improve the school and home learning environment
- b. Primary schools should establish strong partnerships and collaboration with parents and communities in a bid to foster the improved teaching and learning of English reading at infant level
- c. Given the limited resources in rural areas, parents can be encouraged to purchase reading books with picture-word matches. These resources can empower parents to teach reading to infant learners, using pictures as a guide to introduce vocabulary and object recognition.
- d. Primary school education stakeholders should put in place learning programmes that can assist illiterate parents to be able to assist learners in doing homework.
- e. Future studies could explore how parents in rural areas can be empowered to create a supportive social environment for grade one English reading at home.
- f. In the current study, the sample size used was small, future studies may use a bigger sample so as to broaden the implications of the findings.

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