

Chapter # 18

THE USE OF GRADE-LEVEL READERS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE

Martha Khosa

University of the Free State, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Grade-Level Readers in the form of Reading Anthologies are provided in South African Foundation Phase classrooms (Grades 1 to 3) for home language learners to promote their reading interest and make teaching reading easier. However, evidence shows that teachers lack an understanding of teaching reading in line with methodologies prescribed in the curriculum. This study examines the effectiveness of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in impacting reading instruction and promoting reading in the Foundation Phase. A qualitative case study underpinned by Tomlinson's theory of differentiation, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Krashen's Input Hypothesis were used to collect and analyse data in six quintile 1 and 2 (categorised as the poorest) primary schools. Grade 3 reading lessons (with grade-level readers used as the main resource during group guided reading activities) were observed. Data from the lesson observations were analysed manually by using thematic analysis. Classroom observations revealed the teachers' lack of knowledge in teaching reading and their inability to cater for differences and diversity in the classroom. In view of these findings, it is recommended that teachers be provided support through coaching from relevant stakeholders so that they can teach reading cognisant of the differences existing in their classrooms.

Keywords: grade level readers, foundation phase, reading anthologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

To cater for diversity and multilingualism in the South African context, Grade-Level Reading Anthologies have been developed in all 11 official languages taught in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) classroom. However, the outcomes of Progress in International Reading Literacy Study between 2006 and 2021 show that the percentage of Grade 4 learners who cannot read for meaning in any language declined from 87% (2006) to 82% (2011) and down to 78% (2016) but increased back to 81% (2021) (Department of Basic Education, 2023). Although there was an outbreak of COVID-19 which disrupted the entire education system worldwide, the history of a 5% and 4% decline in the previous year's suggests that even if the pandemic had not disrupted the normal teaching and learning process, the percentage of learners who cannot read for meaning would not have dropped below 70%. There are several reasons contributing to the current literacy crisis in South Africa, and this includes inter alia the teachers' lack of knowledge in implementing Differentiated Instruction (a strategy for accommodating various learning needs) in the classroom (de Jager, 2016; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020; Phala & Hugo, 2025). For this reason, the Department of Basic Education is calling for more advanced training of teachers to improve reading literacy in primary schools.

Unlike single graded readers, Reading Anthologies are collections of different stories compiled at the appropriate level of learners. Recent empirical work both internationally and in South Africa suggests that Grade-Level Readers and structured guided-reading programmes can improve early reading outcomes but only when materials are used together with teacher training and structured routines (Van Der Mescht, 2023; Kitsili & Murray, 2024). Large South African evaluations of early-grade reading interventions and programme reviews show that providing high-quality texts must be combined with teacher support, assessment routines and clear guided-reading practice to produce measurable learning gains (Department of Basic Education, 2024). Research from smaller South African studies also highlights that teachers often lack the specific pedagogical knowledge to conduct group guided reading as intended. For example, Kitsili and Murray (2024) found gaps in teachers' knowledge of small-group organisation, text selection and formative monitoring during group guided reading in township Foundation Phase classrooms. International and classroom-level studies of graded readers further indicate mixed findings, highlighting that graded texts increase access and opportunity to read but can fail to match perceived reading difficulty unless teachers continuously match texts to learners and scaffold appropriately (Arai, 2022). Together, these findings underline a recurrent pattern, asserting that book provision alone is insufficient; it must be coupled with teacher professional learning, routines for assessment and explicit guided-reading practice (Zenex Foundation, 2019).

This study looked at the use of home language Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the South African Foundation Phase classroom. Very little research (if any) has been done in terms of examining the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase. Studies conducted to date focus on single graded readers (Seals, 2013; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Taylor, Cillier, Prinsloo, Fleisch & Reddy, 2019; Phekani, 2023). This study was an intervention which occurred in the form of providing isiZulu home language Reading Anthologies to a randomised sample of 100 Quintile 1 to 3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal and teacher guidelines which were intended to help teachers use the anthologies effectively in their classrooms. To establish whether the provision of Reading Anthologies had implications for reading practices and whether they promoted reading in the classroom, an in-depth qualitative case study design was used to gather data in six quintile 1 and 2 schools. Hence, Grade 3 reading lessons (with the Reading Anthologies used as the main resource during group guided reading activities) were observed in the sampled schools.

For this study, the following research questions were posed: *What is the impact of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies on reading instruction? How effective are Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in promoting reading in the Foundation Phase classroom?* To answer these questions, the article first unpacks theoretical framework used to situate this study and discusses the literature related to this topic. This is followed by describing the method used to collect and analyse data. Finally, the main findings, implications and conclusions are presented.

1.1. Theoretical Underpinnings of Differentiated Literacy Instruction

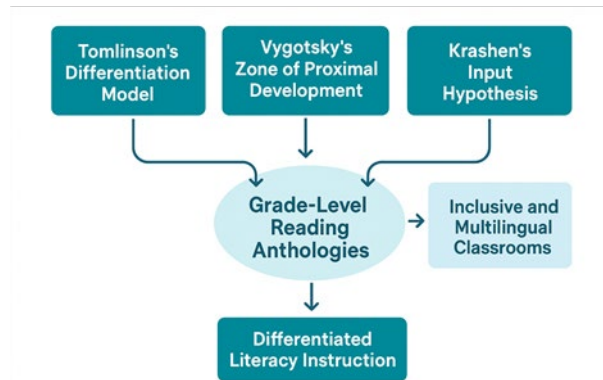
Tomlinson's (1999, 2003) Model of Differentiation underpins this study as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how teachers adapt content, process, and assessment to accommodate learner diversity. The model's relevance to Foundation Phase literacy teaching lies in its emphasis on aligning instructional strategies with learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Tomlinson describes Differentiation as the process of factoring in learners' individual needs before designing a lesson plan, thereby enabling teachers to tailor instruction to accommodate differences and diversity in their classrooms.

Through this approach, all learners, regardless of linguistic background or reading ability, can engage meaningfully with literacy instruction.

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction in improving literacy outcomes for both struggling and advanced learners. For instance, Magableh and Abdullah's (2020) quasi-experimental study involving Grades 4 and 5 English as a Foreign Language learners in Jordan revealed that learners exposed to differentiated instruction significantly outperformed those in the control group in reading comprehension. Similar findings by Alghamdi (2022) and Groenewald, Nkosi and van der Walt (2024) affirm that differentiation fosters inclusive participation and promotes equitable learning outcomes across varied contexts.

In multilingual and socioeconomically diverse South African classrooms, Differentiation is not only a pedagogical strategy but also an inclusive imperative. According to Kirschner (2015), inclusion refers to the integration of learners with physical, cognitive, linguistic, and behavioural differences into mainstream classrooms, ensuring their participation in meaningful learning experiences. An inclusive classroom thus requires teachers to implement differentiated approaches that meet the heterogeneous needs of all learners (Webster, 2014). Within the South African context, where teachers routinely navigate linguistic, cultural, and ability differences (Singh, 2004), the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement emphasises inclusion as a guiding principle for teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Such environments foster a sense of belonging and value among learners (Garibay, 2015). However, research indicates that many teachers still struggle to design instruction that effectively accommodates classroom diversity (Mahlo, 2017; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Omodan & Ige, 2021). For example, Omodan and Ige's (2021) study on managing diversity in South African high schools identified language, culture, and learning impairments as key challenges affecting inclusive classroom practices. Theoretically, this study is also grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, both of which complement Tomlinson's model by explaining how learners progress through scaffolded and differentiated literacy support. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development emphasises that learning occurs when tasks are slightly beyond the learner's independent level and supported through teacher or peer scaffolding. Similarly, Krashen's Input Hypothesis posits that language acquisition happens when learners receive *comprehensible input*, texts that are slightly above their current proficiency ($i + 1$), and are supported to make meaning from them. Below is a visual image showing how Tomlinson's Differentiation, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and Krashen's Input Hypothesis converge in the Grade-Level Reading Anthologies framework.

Figure 1.
Tomlinson's Differentiation Model with sociocultural and language acquisition theories.



The Grade-Level Reading Anthologies operationalise these theoretical principles by providing graded, scaffolded reading materials that bridge learners' current and potential reading competence. In practice, this means that teachers can use Grade-Level Reading Anthologies to differentiate reading instruction, group learners according to reading ability, provide targeted scaffolding, and progressively advance learners through more complex texts. Thus, by integrating Tomlinson's Differentiation Model with sociocultural and language acquisition theories, this study situates the pedagogical use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies within a robust theoretical framework that links differentiated instruction, inclusion, and literacy development in multilingual Foundation Phase classrooms.

1.2. Literature Review

This section explores literature relevant to the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase classrooms. Academic databases such as JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and ERIC were used to locate relevant literature. The literature reviewed is conceptualised to provide a critical understanding of how Grade-Level Reading Anthologies contribute to reading development, scaffolding, comprehension, and addressing learner diversity in multilingual contexts. The discussion is grounded in sociocultural and language acquisition theories.

1.2.1. Grade-Level Reading Anthologies

Grade Level Reading Anthologies are collections of different stories compiled at the cognitive levels of learners from Grades 1 to 3. In the South African Foundation Phase classroom, each learner receives an anthology to use in class and at home to promote reading practice. As shown in Figure 2, these anthologies are differentiated by level and colour (blue for struggling readers, green for average readers, and red for advanced readers), enabling teachers to tailor reading instruction according to learners' abilities. They provide learners with opportunities to access a wide range of stories written in their home language.

Figure 2.
Reading Anthologies differentiated by level and colour.



Research highlights that age-appropriate, reading texts significantly enhances early literacy acquisition and reading fluency (Wang, 2021; Khair, Rafik-Galea, Yasin, Noor, & Armum, 2025). Although the Foundation Phase anthologies contain colourful pictures; they are paperbound (softcover) books which make it challenging to sustain them, given their fragility. An alternative to using softcover texts which are unsustainable, is to opt for eBooks. However, although eBooks are sustainable and useful in developing children's literacy skills better than print books (López-Escribano et al., 2021), digital access remains a challenge in under-resourced and historically disadvantaged schools (Moyo & Phiri, 2022). Therefore, printed anthologies remain essential tools for literacy development in such contexts, aligning with *Biblioneef's* (the programme theory of donor organisation) emphasis on access to culturally relevant and age-appropriate reading materials to foster literacy and learner confidence (Nassimbeni & Desmond, 2011). It is thus recommended, as per the Teacher's Guide, that teachers should teach learners to take good care of their Reading Anthologies for the purpose of sustaining them. *Biblioneef* further adds that access to books which are looked after and age-appropriate is beneficial (ibid).

1.2.2. Role of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase

Grade-Level Reading Anthologies play a central role in developing learners' literacy in their home language, as they are available in all official South African languages used as the languages of learning and teaching in the Foundation Phase. Text conventions such as illustrations and pictures in these anthologies help learners comprehend texts better (Al Hinaai, 2021). This is supported by studies showing that texts accompanied by pictures can improve reading comprehension, particularly for learners with reading difficulties (Razalli, Thomas, Mamat & Yusuf, 2018; Parks, 2020). Accurate and contextually relevant illustrations therefore serve as important pedagogical aids that enhance learners' understanding and engagement with texts.

Another significant contribution of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies is their support for differentiated literacy practices. These anthologies enable teachers to implement a variety of reading activities such as group guided reading, paired reading, and independent reading (Department of Basic Education, 2020). Differentiated reading instruction according to proficiency level aligns with Tomlinson's (2003) Differentiation Model, which advocates tailoring content, process, and outcomes to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Empirical studies further confirm that Differentiated Instruction positively influences reading comprehension and learner motivation (Magableh & Abdullay, 2020; Alghamdi, 2022). In multilingual classrooms, where learners' home and school languages often differ, Grade-Level Reading Anthologies also serve as valuable tools for bridging linguistic and cognitive gaps. They allow learners to draw on their multilingual repertoires while developing proficiency in the language of learning and teaching, fostering both language acquisition and identity affirmation (Cummins, 2017; García & Wei, 2019). This makes them particularly relevant in the South African context, where multilingualism is both a linguistic reality and a policy goal.

Recent educational policies and curriculum frameworks have increasingly recognised the importance of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies and graded readers as tools to support differentiated and scaffolded reading development. In South Africa, for instance, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement encourages the use of reading texts that correspond with learners' reading abilities and language proficiency levels (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This emphasis reflects a broader global shift toward inclusive and evidence-based literacy instruction that accommodates diverse learner needs (UNESCO, 2023). Grade-Level Reading Anthologies thus align with policy objectives promoting equity, access, and quality learning, as they provide level-appropriate materials that enhance reading fluency, comprehension, and motivation among early readers.

Finally, the effective pedagogical use of these anthologies depends largely on teachers' professional knowledge and ability to select and use appropriate materials. Well-trained teachers are better positioned to match texts to learners' developmental stages, scaffold comprehension, and integrate reading into broader literacy development goals (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Continuous professional development that focuses on reading pedagogy, assessment of reading levels, and material selection is therefore crucial. When teachers are empowered to make informed pedagogical choices, Grade-Level Reading Anthologies become powerful tools for promoting meaningful and sustained literacy growth among Foundation Phase learners.

1.2.3. Using Anthologies According to Foundation Phase Teacher's Guide

The Foundation Phase Teacher's Guide outlines the pedagogical use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies according to structured reading activities such as group guided reading, paired reading, and independent reading (Department of Basic Education, 2020).

Group guided reading: At the beginning of the year, teachers conduct baseline assessments to establish learners' reading levels and group them according to ability. In line with the guidelines, learners are encouraged to take their Reading Anthologies home for reading practice with parental or caregiver support. The teacher monitors progress through an individual reading page for each learner, which helps determine when learners are ready to move to a different level. This process reflects Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development, as learners receive guided support that gradually decreases as their competence increases.

Given the fragility of the texts, teachers are also expected to instil in learners a sense of responsibility in handling books both at home and in the classroom. During daily group guided reading sessions, the teacher typically works with two small groups of 6 to 10 learners for about 15 minutes each, using anthologies matched to their reading levels. The teacher listens carefully as learners read aloud, providing support and feedback where needed. Learners who progress quickly are advanced to higher levels, while those who need more time receive additional support before moving on.

Paired reading: Paired reading creates opportunities for collaborative learning where the teacher reads with a struggling learner, or learners take turns reading to each other. This practice fosters peer support and reinforces fluency and confidence, aligning with sociocultural learning theories that highlight collaboration as central to knowledge construction (Wood, Briner & Ross, 1976).

Independent reading: Independent reading allows learners to read the anthology on their own, either in class or at home, promoting autonomy and self-motivation. This practice echoes Krashen's (1985) principle of *free voluntary reading*, which posits that exposure to comprehensible and interesting texts naturally enhances language acquisition. Like paired reading, independent reading often takes place while the teacher is engaged with small reading groups.

The successful implementation of these reading activities depends largely on teachers' pedagogical competence and their ability to apply sound reading instruction principles. The *Teacher's Guide* provides a structured framework, but its effectiveness rests on teachers' understanding of how to select suitable materials, scaffold learning, and assess progress accurately. As Pretorius and Spaul (2016) argue, teachers who are well-trained in reading pedagogy are better equipped to match texts to learners' developmental levels and foster comprehension through guided support. Conversely, limited training can result in inappropriate text selection, mechanical reading practices, and minimal learner engagement. Therefore, continuous professional development focusing on reading pedagogy, formative assessment, and Differentiated Instruction is crucial. When teachers are empowered to implement the graded reading programme as intended, Reading Anthologies become powerful tools for developing learners' literacy, comprehension, and a lifelong love of reading.

Although existing studies affirm the value of graded readers in promoting literacy development, there remain limited research on how Grade-Level Reading Anthologies are implemented within differentiated literacy instruction in multilingual South African classrooms. Few studies have examined how teachers scaffold reading comprehension using graded materials in ways that align with sociocultural and language acquisition theories, or how inclusive and differentiated practices intersect in resource-constrained contexts. This study, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by exploring the pedagogical use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in Foundation Phase classrooms to enhance reading comprehension within differentiated and multilingual learning environments. Guided by the said aim, the next section describes the methodology used to collect and analyse classroom observation data.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The reading anthologies were investigated through classroom observations to understand how teachers implemented and used them to support Differentiated literacy instruction in multilingual Foundation Phase classrooms. The study was conducted in six quintile 1 and 2 schools (4 Primary and 2 Combined Schools) selected from a randomised

sample of 100 quintile 1 to 3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal. A qualitative case study design was used to observe one Grade 3 isiZulu home language lesson in each of the six schools. The Grade 3 class in each school was selected randomly and automatically included teachers of the targeted classes. Notes were taken throughout the research gathering process to supplement data captured through video and audio recordings during observations. A lesson observation instrument (*See Appendix A*) reflecting the realities and demands of the Foundation Phase curriculum and prepared by Zenlit Intervention (2016) was used to gather information about six home language reading lessons in the Grade 3 classrooms.

The lesson observation instrument was adapted to suit the focus of this study, and it is divided into two sections. **Section A** covers details of school visits. **Section B** comprises lesson observations, which looked at the following aspects: classroom teaching and learning environment, the use of reading anthologies in the classroom, group guided reading activities and opportunities afforded to learners to read in isiZulu home language. Only one Grade 3 classroom was observed per school, and all the teachers in each of the six schools volunteered to participate in the study. Observations in each classroom lasted approximately 10 to 30 minutes.

For the purpose of this study, the qualitative data from the observations were analysed manually by using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for doing qualitative thematic analysis. The first phase involved transcriptions and translations of lesson observations from isiZulu to English, ensuring familiarity with the data and identifying patterns in meaning across the data. The second phase involved generating initial codes from the data, moving back and forth. The third step involved sorting all potentially relevant coded data extracts into themes which were guided by the research questions posed for the study. In the fourth step, the coded data extracts for each theme were reviewed to check whether they formed a coherent pattern. The fifth step involved determining what aspects of the data were captured by each theme. The final sixth step involved the writing up of the report.

Ethical principles were considered in this study. The study was led by the Department of Basic Education in partnership with the Wits Consortium and entailed evaluating one of its programmes in public schools. Consent was obtained from all participants in the evaluation. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants and schools (e.g., Grades 3 teachers are referred to as TA to TF, and schools as School A to School F). Having outlined the research methodology, it is now essential to turn to the analysis and interpretation of the data.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from classroom observations are presented according to the following themes: classroom teaching and learning environments, the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase classroom, group guided reading activities, Teacher's Guide and opportunities for reading in the home language.

3.1. Classroom Teaching and Learning Environments

Most classes observed were not creative print rich environments. Some classrooms had dull walls which did not display colourful learning charts or posters, as shown in Figure 1. Although all the six Grade 3 classrooms in the schools sampled had a classroom library corner, the classroom of the School B teacher (TB) was the only one where the Grade-Level Reading Anthologies were displayed on the library bookshelves. The visibility of single readers in the classroom of Schools A and E suggested that teachers and learners were not effectively using the anthologies provided to promote reading. Thus, although teachers received the Reading Anthologies, it seemed as if some used them superficially, suggesting that they preferred the single readers to the Reading Anthologies provided. In the classroom of School C, there was no evidence that TC used the anthologies with learners in her classroom. All the Reading Anthologies in the classrooms observed did not seem to have been covered to sustain their use, suggesting that they were not taken care of. Three classrooms (Schools A, B and E) had a library corner, but the classroom in School B seemed to be the only one with an organised library corner, and the anthologies displayed on the bookshelves in School B were still in good condition compared to other classes. Each learner received a copy of the reading anthology in the classroom of Schools A, B and D, whereas in the classroom of Schools E and F, learners either shared the book in pairs or in groups. In the classroom of School C, there was no sign showing that the teacher and her learners used reading anthologies.

3.2. The Use of Grade Level Reading Anthologies in the Classroom

Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in all the classes observed were used for group guided reading, reading aloud, or choral reading in groups or as the whole class. Paired/independent reading was only done in the classroom of TA. Children in her class were called up to read to the whole class during the group guided reading slot while the other learners listened. Only TB used the anthologies according to the learners' level of reading development (as shown in Figure 2), given that the books catered for various reading developments. For example, in School B, the Grade 3 teacher (TB) allocated Reading Anthology 3 to the group of fluent readers and Reading Anthology 1 to a second group of struggling Grade 3 readers, which is a clear practice of level-matching that aligns with the Teacher's Guide. By contrast, in five other classrooms the same Grade-Level Reading Anthology (Anthology 3) was used for the whole class regardless of reading level. These contrasting cases from the six observed classrooms provide concrete, case-based evidence that while the resource (anthologies) can support differentiated practice, teacher enactment varies widely.

Figure 3.
Grade 3 Group Guided Reading activities in School B classroom.



3.3. Group Guided Reading Activities

Group guided reading lesson activities where teachers used the anthologies were observed in all six Grade 3 classrooms in each school. According to the South African National curriculum, teachers should see two small groups daily (each for 15 minutes). However, from what was observed, two Grade 3 teachers in Schools A and B were the only ones who managed to see two groups for about 15 minutes each as per the recommendations in the curriculum. However, Schools C, D, E and F spent less than 12 minutes with a small group or the whole class. Although it was group guided reading time, all the teacher's engaged learners on choral reading (reading aloud with the whole class or groups). This defeats the purpose of group guided reading, which is intended for differentiated teaching, where teachers get to listen to learners reading individually in each group. Although research has shown that choral reading, when used as one of many reading activities, can positively influence reading fluency and comprehension (Kodan & Akyol, 2018), whole class or group chorusing can be misleading because it creates the impression that everyone is reading, it does not provide teachers with opportunities to observe individual reading behaviours and identify areas that need attention. Some teachers did not organise activities to engage the other groups when they were busy with their ability groups, so the rest of the class played and made noise.

During a 15-minute group guided reading lesson in School B, TB split the class into two small groups. The first group of six readers (identified by TB as 'fluency readers') read from Reading Anthology 3 independently while TB listened and made short running notes; the second group of six received Reading Anthology 1 and TB scaffolded decoding and vocabulary (predicting, picture cues and echo reading). As a result, TB was able to observe individual miscues and give targeted prompts, which is consistent with Tomlinson's readiness principle and Vygotskian scaffolding. In School C, by contrast, the teacher (TC) used anthology 3 for the entire class and led choral reading for 10 minutes; there was no small group listening or individual reading records. These two classroom cases illustrate how the same resource (Reading Anthology) can either be enacted in a differentiated, scaffolding

manner or used in a superficial, whole-class way, producing very different instructional affordances for struggling readers.

According to the initial planning, teachers knew in advance that there would be observations so that they could prepare their reading lessons; however, none of the teachers produced evidence that they were prepared for their group guided reading lessons, suggesting that what was observed seemed to be a true reflection of what is usually happening in most Foundation Phase classrooms, which is not in line with what is recommended in the curriculum policy document. This also suggests that teachers did not plan beforehand because they do not know how to organise and plan for teaching that accommodates diversity (Mahlo, 2017; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Omodan & Ige, 2021).

3.4. Opportunities for Reading in the Home Language

Although teachers had challenges conducting group guided reading activities according to what is stipulated in the curriculum, it was intriguing to note that in most classrooms (except School C) observed, they used the anthologies provided to conduct a choral reading with learners. For example, in the classroom of School A, choral reading was done during group guided reading in pairs/independently and in groups, as shown in Figure 4 below. This seems to have increased the amount of time spent reading in the learners' isiZulu home language during school time.

Figure 4.
Group Guided Reading Activities in School A Classroom.



3.5. Teacher's Guide

The provision of Reading Anthologies in KwaZulu-Natal schools included the Teacher's Guide to help teachers use the anthologies in line with what is recommended. However, from what was noted during observations, there was no evidence showing that teachers used the guide to support teaching and learning in their classrooms. This was supported by the fact that neither of the teachers had a reading record to note the reading progress of the learners as recommended in the guide and neither did they seem to understand how to conduct group guided reading.

4. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

This section presents implications relating to the following findings: classroom environment that supports reading, the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies, and lack of knowledge to conduct group guided reading.

Classroom environment that supports reading: Findings revealed that most classrooms were not print-rich environments; they lacked creative reading corners. These deprived learners of the opportunity to easily access a range of reading texts or to read them for enjoyment.

The Reading Anthologies in all the classrooms observed did not seem to have been covered to sustain their use. Given that soft covers are used on these books, it is likely that they may get torn easily and lose pages if they are not taken care of. Therefore, learners may not enjoy reading books which have incomplete pages.

The use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies: Reading Anthologies provide teachers with opportunities to use the texts according to the learners' reading level. However, findings showed that most teachers gave all the learners the same reading anthologies, suggesting that they do not have the knowledge to accommodate differences and diversity in their classrooms. According to Tomlinson (2003), struggling learners require additional support to foster their understanding and fill in knowledge gaps. These findings have negative implications for struggling learners who are unlikely to be afforded individual learning support and may rarely catch up with their peers.

Lack of knowledge to conduct group guided reading activities: Findings also revealed that most teachers did not seem to have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills in conducting group guided reading. This was in spite of the provision of the Teacher's Guide which was meant to help teachers use the anthologies for teaching reading according to what is prescribed which raises the question of whether the Teacher's Guide was worthwhile. Given the importance of these activities in providing teachers with opportunities to implement differentiation, this suggests that the 'one size fits all' approach prevails at the disadvantage of struggling learners who need extra support.

In view of the findings in this study, it is evident that reading challenges in the South African classroom are not necessarily about the shortage of reading material because the Department of Basic Education strives to ensure that each learner has a copy of a text to read in the classroom and at home. As mentioned earlier, this could be about the teachers' lack of knowledge in teaching reading according to the methodologies recommended in the curriculum in terms of implementing Differentiated Instruction (de Jager, 2016; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). These cases mirror findings from recent South African evaluations and programme reviews, which revealed that book provision increases opportunities to read but does not automatically translate into Differentiated Instruction or improved outcomes unless teachers receive targeted professional development and routines for group organisation, text selection, formative monitoring and record-keeping (Zenex Foundation, 2021; Department of Basic Education, 2024). Consequently, scaled book distribution should be accompanied by systematic in-service coaching, simple assessment tools (reading records) and follow-up classroom support, an approach supported by programme evaluations and Non-Government Organisation practice in South Africa.

5. LIMITATIONS

Data collected in this study was not without limitations. According to the initial planning, teachers knew in advance that there would be observations so they could prepare lessons. However, none of the teachers observed had a lesson plan for their reading lesson. This suggested that what was observed seemed to be a true reflection of what usually happens in the classroom, which is not in accordance with the recommendations in the Teacher's Guide.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies and how they can be sustained in the Foundation Phase classroom and at home. Based on the analysis conducted, it can be concluded that the provision of anthologies in the King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal seemed to have increased opportunities for the learners' home language reading in the Foundation Phase classroom. Teachers also generally expressed relief that they had graded resources for use in the classroom. However, it limited the use of the Reading Anthologies in that teachers used them without following what was prescribed in the guidelines.

REFERENCES

- Adewumi, T. M., & Mosito, C. (2019). Experiences of teachers in implementing inclusion of learners with special education needs in selected Fort Beaufort District primary schools, South Africa, *Cogent Education*, 6(1). doi:10.1080/2331186X.2019.1703446
- Alghamdi, R. S. (2022). The impact of differentiated instruction on reading comprehension and motivation among EFL learners. *Language Teaching Research*, 26(5), 655-670.
- AL Hinaai, S. N. (2021). What is the importance and impact of illustrations in children's books? An investigation into children's responses to illustrations. *Arab Journal for Scientific Publishing (AJSP)*, 92-118.
- Arai, Y. (2022). Exploring perceived difficulty of graded reader texts. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 34(2), pp. 249-270. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1369521.pdf> (ERIC)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Cummins, J. (2017). *Language, literacy, and multilingualism: Bridging policy and pedagogy*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- de Jager, T. (2016). Perspectives of teachers on differentiated teaching in multi-cultural South African secondary schools. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 53, 115-121. doi:10.1016/j.stueduc.2016.08.004
- Department of Basic Education. (2011). *Guidelines for responding to learner diversity in the classroom through curriculum and assessment policy statements*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
- Department of Basic Education. (2020). *Foundation Phase Teacher's Guide: Teaching Reading in Home Languages*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Basic Education. (2023). *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021: South African Preliminary Highlights Report*. <https://www.up.ac.za › media › shared ›>
- Department of Basic Education. (2024). *Early Grade Reading Programme I Evaluation Findings Summary Report*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Manuals/EGRP%20LTSM/EGRPEvaluationEndlineReport.pdf>
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2019). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education* (2nd ed). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Garibay, J. C. (2015). Creating a positive classroom climate for diversity. *UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development*, 4.
- Groenewald, R., Nkosi, P., & van der Walt, S. (2024). Differentiated instruction for multilingual learners in South African schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 44(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v44n1a2024>
- Khair, N. S., Rafik-Galea, S., Yasin, Y., Noor, M Md., & Armum, P. (2025). Enhancing Preschoolers' Reading Fluency through Shared Reading with Decodable Texts: A Quasi-Experimental Study. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(III), 2609-2618. <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300204>
- Kirschner, S. R. (2015). Inclusive Education. In W. G. Scarlett (Ed.) *Sage Encyclopedia of Classroom Management* (pp. 1-16).
- Kitsili, N. A., & Murray, S. R. (2024). The challenge of incorporating new methods: The case of group guided reading in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 14(1), a1487. doi:10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1487
- Kodan, H., & Akyol, H. (2018). Effects of choral, repeated and assisted reading strategies on reading and reading comprehension skills of poor readers. *Education and Science*, 43(193), 159-179.
- Magableh, I. S. I., & Abdullah, A. (2020). Effectiveness of differentiated instruction on primary school students' English reading comprehension achievement. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 19(3), 20-35. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.3.2>
- Mahlo, D. (2017). Teaching learners with diverse needs in the Foundation Phase in Gauteng Province, South Africa. *Special Issue – Student Diversity*, 1-9.
- Moyo, N., & Phiri, L. (2022). Digital inequality and early literacy in rural Southern Africa. *International Review of Education*, 68(4), 529-546.
- Nassimbeni, M., & Desmond, S. (2011). Availability of books as a factor in reading, teaching and learning behaviour in twenty disadvantaged primary schools in South Africa. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science*, 77(2), 95-103.
- Omodan, B. I., & Ige, O. A. (2021). Managing diversity in schools: The place of democratic education and ubuntuism in South Africa. *Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v17i1.854>
- Onyishi, C. N., & Sefotho, M. M. (2020). Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Differentiated Instruction in Inclusive Classrooms: Implication for Teacher Education. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(6), 136-150.
- Parks, H. L. (2020). *Using picture books to increase comprehension of expository texts in students with learning disabilities* (Master's thesis, Kent State University College).
- Phala, T. A. & Hugo, A. J. (2025). Differentiated instruction for Grade 3 reading challenges: South African teachers in full-service schools. *African Journal of Disability*, 14(0), a1549. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v14i0.1549>
- Phekani, M. N. (2023). Exploring a contemporary picturebook with young readers in the foundation phase. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 13(1), a1290. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v13i1.1290>
- Pretorius, E. J., & Spaull, N. (2016). Exploring relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension amongst English second language readers in South Africa. *Reading & Writing Journal*, 1-23. doi:10.1007/s11145-016-9645-9
- Razalli, A. R., Thomas, R. O., Mamat, N., & Yusuf, N. (2018). Using text with pictures in primary school to improve reading comprehension for hearing impaired students. *Journal of ICSAR*, 2(1), 19-27.
- Seals, M. P. (2013). *Impact of leveled reading books on the fluency and comprehension levels of first grade students*. Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University.
- Singh, S. (2004). *Responding to learner diversity in the classroom: Experiences of five teachers in a primary school in KwaZulu-Natal* (Master's thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal). Retrieved from <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/items/3efd99df-d1f6-439c-9fcc-59f6d398ae82>

M. Khosa

- Spaull, N., & Pretorius, E. J. (2019). Still falling at the first hurdle: Examining early grade reading in South Africa. In N. Spaull & J. Jansen, J (Eds.), *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality* (pp. 1-23). Cham: Springer. <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18811-5>
- Taylor, S., Cilliers, J., Prinsloo, C., Fleisch, B., & Reddy, V. (2019). *Improving early grade reading in South Africa, 3ie Grantee Final Report*. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie).
- Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C. (2003). *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Van der Mescht, C. R. (2023). What are we really teaching? The implications of including phonics instruction in Group Guided Reading. *Reading & Writing*, 14(1), a386. doi:10.4102/rw.v14i1.386
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Webster, T. (2014). The inclusive classroom. *Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 6(2), 23-26.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17(2), 89-100.
- Zenex Foundation. (2019). *Early Grade Reading Study - Technical Report*. North-West Province: Zenex Foundation/Department of Basic Education. Available at: <https://www.zenexfoundation.org.za/early-grade-research/>
- Zenex Foundation. (2021). *Developing an Alternate Approach to Group Guided Reading (GGR) Research Study in Early Grade Literacy*. Johannesburg: Zenex Foundation. Available at: <https://www.zenexfoundation.org.za/developing-an-alternate-approach-to-group-guided-reading-ggr-research-study-in-early-grade-literacy/>

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Full name: Martha Khosa

Institutional affiliation: Department of Languages in Education, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, South Africa

Institutional address: University of Free State, Nelson Mandela Drive, Par West, Bloemfontein, 9300

Email address: Khosam@ufs.ac.za

Short biographical sketch: Dr. Khosa is a senior lecturer and researcher focusing on multilingual education, literacy development, language in education, and language policy in teacher education.