From 0 to 100% - How Raithby Primary turned their literacy performance around

Michael le Cordeur

Abstract

Recent literacy results show that only 44% of all Grade 3 learners in the Stellenbosch district, and just over 50% of all Grade 3 learners in the Western Cape, performed at an appropriate level (WCED, 2009c). According to education specialists, the problem starts in the Foundation Phase, during which learners fail to acquire the basic skills in literacy (Heugh, pers. comm.; Webb, pers. comm.). This article reflects on how a previously disadvantaged school turned around its performance in literacy by changing both its style and attitude towards teaching reading, after the circuit manager concerned decided to intervene at the school. In this article, I will argue that low levels of literacy call for a change of attitude and strategy, and the execution thereof, which should reach deep into the instructional practices of reading teachers,[1] who tend, it is believed, to rely mainly on their use of the traditional approach. This approach suggests that learners are passive decoders of graphic-phonetic systems, and that they need to learn letters (sounds) first, before they can read words (Alderson, 2000). As opposed to the traditional bottom-up or top-down approaches, an interactive approach is recommended. The framework for the teaching and assessment of Grade 3 learners at Raithby Primary, in terms of the interactive approach over a period of three years, is described. The literacy results obtained by the learners over this period show that, with the interactive approach, the reading ability of learners could improve, provided that the teachers adopt a positive attitude towards the teaching of reading.

Introduction

In order for our young learners to compete in the global knowledge economy, we need to ensure that they have the best grounding in literacy possible. The MEC for Education in the Western Cape, Donald Grant, confirms this statement: "Ensuring the requisite competency in reading and writing for our learners is a key priority for our country and equipping our learners with skills required to be literate is non-negotiable" (WCED, 2009a). Unfortunately, numerous studies over the years have shown that South Africa's learners are falling behind international standards, with the Western Cape being no

---

[1] The term *teacher* is preferred throughout the article, in preference to *educator*.

exception to the general downturn (WCED, 2009c). Currently, too many of our learners are being pushed through the system, despite being unable to master literacy skills. Unable to cope at higher levels as a result, many of these learners either drop out of school, or fail to pass Grade 12. We therefore need to ensure that learners are properly equipped to meet the challenges of the latter stages of their schooling from the beginning of their school careers. The mastering of reading and writing skills is critical to the entire process. The problem of the poor literacy levels attained is next discussed in detail.

Problem statement

Poor literacy levels are not a problem that is limited to South Africa. According to Lenski (2008, p.39): "The majority of the USA's middle school students cannot read at the proficient level and up to 71% of eighth-grade students may be considered struggling readers." In the current article the focus is on South Africa, and particularly on Raithby Primary School. Results show that South African learners consistently underperform and are not only regarded as among the weakest in the world, but also among the weakest in Africa. According to Bloch (2009, p.12), 60% to 80% of South African schools are dysfunctional: "They produce barely literate and numerate learners and [I] believe the country is headed for a national education crisis." Experts argue that the problem starts in the Foundation Phase, during which many learners are failing to acquire the requisite basic skills in literacy (Heugh, pers. comm.; Jansen, 2009; Ramphele, 2008; Webb, pers. comm).

Background to the intervention

Since 2002, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has spent a significant amount of its budget on improving literacy levels in schools. It has become evident (WCED, 2009a) that too few of the Western Cape's learners have been attaining the benchmarked literacy levels. As a result, the WCED launched the first provincial study of Grade 3 literacy skills in 2002. The study revealed that only 32% of Grade 3 learners were reading at the prescribed level (WCED, 2004).

Such a finding resulted in the Department initiating a number of interventions aimed at improving the levels of literacy in some of our schools. The results of the interventions have shown that we are making significant progress in

teaching literacy skills, with the pass rate for literacy in Grade 3 having improved by 17.8% since testing first started in 2002: 39.5% in 2004, 47.7% in 2006 and 53.5% in 2008 (WCED, 2009a).

Prior to the launching of such initiatives, Raithby Primary School consistently recorded poor literacy results. In 2002, the Grade 3 learners scored the lowest mark (0%) in the Stellenbosch district; by 2004 their mark had improved, but only to 15% (WCED, 2004). Fearn and Farnan (2008) were convinced that, if an appropriate solution were not found, it would lead to increased levels of underachievement. However, both Peer and Reid (2001) and Townend and Turner (2000) pointed out that, although the problem would not disappear overnight, there could be a marked improvement in reading if the necessary assistance were provided.

At the time of the intervention, I was the circuit manager responsible for Raithby Primary School. After I had conducted intense discussions with the staff at the school, as well as with the WCED, a decision was taken to intervene. The vehicle chosen for the intervention was the interactive approach of teaching reading. The adoption of such an interactive approach towards dealing with reading problems and/or illiteracy has been advocated in the literature for more than two decades (Carrell, 1988).

The current article can, therefore, be viewed as a report on such an intervention, rather than as research *per se*, and will, therefore, not include the description of a research design or methodology. The article rather aims to point out to teachers, and, more specifically, to teachers at Raithby Primary why the traditional method of teaching reading – which I shall discuss later in the current article – did not achieve the desired results.

Scope of intervention

The approach followed by teachers when teaching reading is under scrutiny – in my view, this is one of the fundamental reasons for the large number of struggling readers[2] in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3). First, some key terms in the current study will be explained, followed by a discussion of the traditional method of teaching reading, according to the bottom-up and the top-down approaches. An overview of the interactive approach as an

---

2   The term *struggling reader* is defined fully in the next section.

alternative method of instruction follows. Secondly, the intervention conducted, and examples of teaching reading activities taught, at Raithby Primary School will be discussed. The test conducted to determine the success of the intervention will then be described. Finally, I will discusses the results of, and present some concluding remarks about, the study.

Method

The current article investigates South Africa's poor literacy rate by means, firstly, of a literature review (Denscombe, 1998; Mouton, 2001), and, secondly, by a research intervention. Even a critical review of the literature concerned requires the support of an empirical study to test our new insights (Mouton, 2001).

Literature review

Mouton (2001) states that a comprehensive and well-integrated literature review is essential to any study. Such a review provides you with a good understanding of the issues and debates in the area in which you are working, as well as an understanding of current theoretical thinking and definitions, along with a description of previous studies and their results. According to Mertens (1998), a literature review can also be used to study previously produced literature about a topic. In the current case, such a review can also provide a theoretical framework for the teaching of reading and the nature of reading problems. Mouton (2001) warns against the limitations of a literature review, stating that, at best, a literature review can only summarise and organise the existing scholarship, so that we still need to undertake an empirical study to test our new insights into the identified problem.

Definitions

As the terms *reading* and *literacy* are key terms in the present study, I shall define them in this section of the article.

According to Alderson (2000), *reading* refers to the meaning that a reader both derives from, and contributes to, a text. Experts (Alexander, 1997; Heugh, 2006) agree that poor reading skills lead to the weakening of academic

performance, thereby hindering a learner's overall development. Such weak performance often leads to the adoption of a negative attitude towards reading, which manifests itself in such emotionally unsound responses as a fear of, and shyness towards reading, as well as to general feelings of frustration and a poor self-image.

The WCED's strategy with regard to *literacy* rests on the assumption that explicit teaching of phonics will take place (Le Cordeur, 2004, p.234) embedded in a "whole language" approach, in terms of which the making of meaning is stressed. The constructivist approach is applied, with both reading and writing being considered critical co-components of development (WCED, 2006). Within the framework of the current study, we will regard literacy as the ability to read, write and spell accurately. Nathanson (2009) points out that, although the same teacher usually teaches both reading and writing skills, teachers rarely make the appropriate connection between the two. However, according to Manyike and Lemmer (2010), reading and writing are independent skills, with effective literacy development being dependent on the interconnection between the two. It is also true that, within the wider community, literacy skills are largely judged by a person's ability to spell correctly (Van Staden, 2010).

In a previous section of the current article, I showed that the learners at Raithby had struggled to master reading skills over a long period of time, which led to the result of 0% for literacy in 2002. Although those children who enter Grade 1 and who have not yet learned to read cannot be classified as struggling readers, it is clear from the above-mentioned results that the problem was not just confined to the Foundation Phase. The present study aims to inform teachers about the characteristics of struggling readers, in order that they might be alerted to the need to provide timely support. I will now discuss some of the characteristics of a struggling reader.

The struggling reader

Researchers (see Caskey, 2008; Lenski, 2008) view struggling readers as learners who experience difficulties reading at school. Lenski (2008, p.38) defines the term *struggling reader "as learners* who have experienced difficulty with school based reading". Caskey (2008, p. 170) concurs with the above: "[T]hey are often stigmatised as learners who grapple unsuccessfully with written text". Peer and Reid (2001) point out that learners who struggle to

read often develop a poor self-image and subsequently fabricate excuses as to why they should not read. If such readers continue to fail in their efforts to read successfully, they will often blame their poor reading on a particular disability, instead of realising that reading is merely a skill which they can still acquire. Burns, Roe and Ross (1999) state that those who struggle to learn to read often exhibit behaviour-related reading problems, such as visual disorders, poor spelling, poor verbal abilities, poor reading comprehension and reading speed, listening problems, poor handwriting, and the inability to make notes. Experiencing such problems often leads to the adoption of a negative attitude towards reading, which manifests itself in emotional responses, such as fear of reading, shyness about reading, frustration, embarrassment, and a low self-image. Teachers must equip themselves to identify learners with reading problems as soon as possible, so that they can provide the necessary assistance (Townend and Turner, 2000).

The process of teaching reading skills

The aim of teaching reading skills is to create suitable and sufficient opportunities that allow the learner to learn to read. With the necessary assistance and effective reading strategies, struggling readers can read effectively, provided that they are given specific guidance. Walker (2000) believes that a reading programme should complement the rest of the activities in the classroom. For her, the teaching of the reading process is the sum of the text being read, the reader, the teaching reading technique, and the reinforcement task that has to be performed. The ideal situation would consist of a specially trained teacher presenting a specific literacy programme to such learners. Before I present my discussion of the interactive literacy programme, I will first discuss the traditional approaches which are adopted towards the teaching of reading.

Approaches to the teaching of reading

According to Alderson (2000), two methods of processing information when teaching reading are important within the traditional approach. *Bottom-up processing* is activated by incoming data that enter the system at ground level. *Top-down processing* suggests that language consists of systems that are integrated and interdependent on one another.

The bottom-up approach
According to Carrell (1988), the bottom-up approach is a systemic model that uses the written word as point of departure. Firstly, the graphic stimuli (letters/sounds) must be deciphered. Secondly, the deciphered stimuli are decoded as sounds, which are then joined or recognised as words, with meaning then being shaped accordingly. Each component involves sub-processes that occur independently of one another, but which build on one another. Such an approach has long been associated with the phonetic approach to teaching reading, which requires that learners first learn the sounds of the letters before they read words. According to this traditional view, readers are passive decoders of graphic‒phonemic‒syntactic‒semantic systems. Carrell (1988) emphasises two aspects of the bottom-up approach that can be used during teaching to improve reading: grammar and vocabulary. Research has shown that an in-depth knowledge of grammar can significantly contribute to the development of reading. Carrell (1988) states that beginner readers experience difficulty in abstracting the core meaning of sentences and paragraphs if they have not been taught the basics of grammar. According to her, vocabulary building during the teaching of reading skills should receive much more attention than it currently does.

The top-down approach
The top-down approach defines language as integrated and interdependent systems. The reading activity is a holistic process that cannot be subdivided without disrupting the process. The top-down approach emphasises the importance of the reader's contribution to the text. Reading is regarded as a psycholinguistic guessing game, during which readers guess or predict the meaning of the text on the basis of minimal information, using existing activated knowledge to explain it (Alderson, 2000).

Accordingly, the readers' experience of the reading process, their knowledge of the content, the structure and the grammar of the language, as well as of specific types of text, and both their general and their specific knowledge of the topic are all involved in the reading process. Top-down processing is, therefore, also known as concept-driven processing (Carrell, 1988). If learners rely too much on concept-driven (or top-down) processing, they are inclined to make semantic reading errors. Their answers to questions that they are asked about their reading are often proof of superficial reading. Although such learners might have a sketchy idea of what a text that they read is about, their skills are insufficient to conduct a thorough reading, as is required in the case of comprehension tests (Taylor, Pearson, Harris and Garcia*,* 1995).

The interactive approach
In the previous sections, details of the bottom-up and top-down approaches were given. The limitations of both approaches were indicated. Neither the bottom-up, nor the top-down, approach is an adequate characterisation of the reading process. As reading is a holistic process, it cannot be divided into subsections without disrupting the process, Alderson (2000) suggests that an interactive approach to the teaching of reading should produce the best results.

Teaching must emphasise the interactive (whole-language) approach, as the whole, the paragraph and the sentence are as important as are the separate parts. Good teaching leads the struggling reader from the whole to the parts, and then back to the whole (Dechant, 1994; Hiebert, 2006; Le Cordeur, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 1995). Dechant (1994) emphasises the role of the reader in the approach, because the reader has so much to contribute towards the reading process. The reader must interact with the text, and be taught to do so. Meaning comes from diverse sources, and any source may, at any given time, be responsible for transferring meaning. Information from one source often relies on the information from another source, with the reader creating meaning through the selective use of information from all available resources (Alderson, 2000).

Supporters of the interactive model, such as Eskey (1988), claim that readers process words and letters while they are formulating hypotheses about the possible meaning of the text. One of the reasons why the interactive model is recommended so widely is because it moves away from the idea that reading follows either a top-down, or a bottom-up, approach. The top-down approach emphasises high cognitive skills, such as forecasting and background knowledge of the text, whereas the bottom-up approach focuses on the decoding of language. The balance between the two approaches is restored by the interactive model (Taylor *et al.*, 1995). According to Carrell (1988, p.89), "[g]ood reading is a more language-structured affair than a guessing-game". Readers with different backgrounds who experience diverse emotions will tend to form different meanings from the same text. The more meaningful an association is for the learner, the quicker that learner will learn it, and the sooner a lasting association will be made with it, thus leading to better reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1988).

Therefore, it makes sense that struggling readers should improve both their bottom-up word recognition skills and their top-down interpretation strategies. The one approach must not be seen as a substitute for the other; rather, they complement each other, because, as Eskey (1988, p.95) quite rightly remarks,

"[g]ood reading – that is fluent and accurate reading – can result only from a constant interaction between these processes". It is clear, therefore, that teachers should use a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies to teach reading.

The interactive strategies implemented at Raithby Primary during the intervention will now be discussed according to three indicators of progress in reading skills, namely reading fluency, reading comprehension and reading attitude.

Reading fluency
Researchers (Fawcett and Rasinski, 2008; Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2000; Nunes (Ed.), 1999; Stanovich, 2000; Walker, 2000) point out that learners are expected to acquire a vocabulary of more than 80 000 words very early in their life. Teaching vocabulary is, therefore, very important, notably for those learners who come from such historically disadvantaged backgrounds as Raithby Primary. Those learners who learn to read early (in Grade 1) come to read considerably better than do others. The former do not struggle with the decoding of words, their general knowledge is broadened, and their word recognition skills are expanded. According to Fawcett and Rasinski (2008), the skill to recognise words is central in the reading process. Thus, the learners at Raithby Primary were taught to read single words using visual leads, phonics and sight words; to read single sentences using word recognition strategies; to read new text with the help of predicting, phonics and visual aids; and to read single sentences without visual leads by using such word recognition strategies as those mentioned above.

Reading comprehension
Various researchers (see Caskey, 2008; Snow, 2000; Taylor *et al.,* 1995*)* hold the view that reading teaching that aims to advance the struggling reader's reading comprehension must emphasise meaning as the objective of reading. Therefore, in order to improve the learners' reading comprehension, they were taught such strategies as making prior acquaintance, summarising and self-questioning, as such strategies would promote their comprehension of the content of a text. Learners were also taught to monitor their comprehension while reading; to answer questions by using retrospection, a self-monitoring list and question-and-answer methods; and to use such general reading comprehension strategies as forming images while reading, reverse questioning, and compiling a story map while reading. They were also taught

to ask questions during or after a reading activity, as well as to conduct self-questioning about the activity, so that they can have enough recovery strategies to improve their comprehension.

Reading attitude

Attitude suggests a lasting acquired tendency to react either positively or negatively to certain matters, such as reading, in a certain way. *Affect*, such as mood and emotion, sometimes forms part of motivation and attitude. According to Hugo (2001), both affective and cognitive components are involved in the reading process. The functioning of one's cognitive domain is strongly influenced by the affective domain. The question arises as to whether attention is paid to the development of the affective or the emotional domain of learners during teaching. According to Alexander and Heathington (1988, as supported by Coleman, 1998), over-much emphasis is placed on the cognitive domain, at the expense of the affective. Such an emphasis is out of place, because affective factors are dynamically involved during the reading process. If teachers were to guide learners to experience reading positively, the latter would come to approach the decision to read with greater perseverance than they might otherwise have. Other factors that play an important role in the reading process are self-motivation, interest in a topic, and mental motivation, such as curiosity. If learners themselves were to choose their own reading matter, they would tend to exert greater effort in understanding the text concerned than they would if the matter were chosen for them (Le Cordeur, 2004).

Intervention

First, I will describe the site, the population and the socio-economic environment in which the study took place, in order to give some background to why the learners concerned obtained the lowest mark (0%) for literacy in 2002 in the Stellenbosch district.

The site and the population

Raithby Primary School is situated on the R45 between Stellenbosch and Somerset West. The school was founded in 1846 by the Methodist Church of South Africa, and is still located alongside the church on grounds which were

donated to the school by the church. According to the WCED's poverty index, this predominantly rural school is classified as a quintile 2 school[A] which, on a scale of one to four, defines the school as poor (WCED, 2009b). The school population comprises learners who come from families with a low socio-economic status within the larger community of the Stellenbosch district in the Western Cape. The medium of instruction at this school is Afrikaans, with 99% of the learners having Afrikaans as their mother tongue, and English being taught as the first additional language.

The demographics of the learners

At the time of the study, 131 learners, the majority of whom could be classified as coloured people,[B] were enrolled at the school, which provided instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 7. It is important to note that, at the time at which the study was conducted, the school had only one class per grade, which, in the case of Grades 2 and 3, was a multi-grade class, meaning that the two grades concerned were taught in the same class by the same teacher. Learners in Grade 1 were taught by Ms C. Anthony, with those who were in Grades 2 or 3 being taught by Ms E. Abrahams. Of the learners, 18 were enrolled for Grade 2 and another 18 for Grade 3 in 2008. Only one learner did not come from a poor background, with all the others concerned living on the surrounding wine farms, with few or no resources for assisting their reading. The only learner who came from a middle-class background was the child of a teacher. Many of the children came to school hungry, though the WCED's Feeding Scheme provided at least one meal per day to each learner. During an interview with the principal, he mentioned that as many as 80% of the learners were the children of single parents who nearly all had to work on the wine farms as labourers and who were largely illiterate. Only two of the learners had attended pre-school at the church (Olivier, pers. comm.). In the light of the above-mentioned facts, it is understandable why many of the learners were struggling to learn to read, and why, according to the principal, it had taken Ms Anthony six months to teach them even the basic alphabet.

Sample

A purposive sampling design was applied in the current study (Mouton, 2001), in which all the learners in Grade 1 in 2006 participated. The learners concerned were envisaged as being in Grade 3 in 2008, when the next WCED

Grade 3 assessment tests would take place (WCED, 2008). The advantage of using purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher to focus on certain participants (in the present case, learners) who are likely to possess certain knowledge that is critical to the research undertaken (Denscombe, 1998). Of the 18 learners in Grade 1, 12 were boys and 6 girls. Only one learner did not have Afrikaans as the mother tongue, with the exception being a Xhosa boy, who stayed with his grandparents because his parents were still living in the Transkei. Since the boy concerned attended the school from Grade 1, he had a very good understanding of Afrikaans by the time that the test was conducted in 2008. One could argue, therefore, that language was not a barrier during the intervention.

The demographics of the teachers

At the time of the study, Raithby Primary School had six teachers, including the principal, who taught Grade 4. Apart from Ms E. Abrahams who, as mentioned before, taught both Grades 2 and 3, each teacher was responsible for teaching one grade. All the teachers had Afrikaans as their mother tongue, which played a pivotal role in the success of the intervention, as it meant the absence of any language barrier. During the three-year intervention period, there was no staff turnover. What is even more significant is that not one teacher was absent during the intervention, proving how committed the teachers concerned were to enhancing the school's literacy profile. Though all the teachers were adequately qualified to teach their respective grades, from the start of the intervention some of them, including Ms Abrahams, decided to further their studies. Despite already being in possession of a teaching diploma, Ms Abrahams improved her qualifications by studying for a BEd degree (Foundation Phase) at a university of technology in order to improve her ability to teach literacy. Concerns have been raised about the teachers' own levels of literacy, with the question being raised of whether they could understand and apply reading strategies. However, over the course of the three-year interventions it became clear that the problem did not lie with the amount of knowledge possessed by the teachers themselves, but more with their approach and attitude towards the teaching of reading skills. The teachers received relevant training, which enabled them to apply their own knowledge in such a way that they understood how to teach reading, especially in terms of the interactive approach, and how to improve their own teaching methodology. The teachers' attitude towards their work has significantly improved, which has led to the improvement of their learners' level of literacy.

The teachers' commitment and enthusiasm were also seen during the five-week long World Cup soccer tournament, during which, despite it being a holiday, they voluntarily stayed at work for two more weeks (without extra remuneration), so that they could provide a meal for the learners who were in desperate need of such sustenance.

Background to the intervention

In 2002, the school's literacy results were met with disbelief and severe disappointment. The staff had to deal with the stigma of their school being awarded the worst results in literacy in the local circuit. In addition, the results of 2004, released in 2005, showed scarcely any improvement, with only 15% of the Grade 3 learners and 11% of the Grade 6 learners performing at the accepted level. As circuit manager, in 2005 I subsequently convened a meeting with all the relevant stakeholders: the staff, the principal, the governing body, and the circuit team (the composition of which I shall describe in the next section). The general feeling was that an intervention that would improve the levels of literacy at Raithby was urgently called for.

Nature of the intervention

The resultant intervention covered the following aspects:

- The staff received training in capacity-building, as the adoption of a positive attitude towards the intervention was considered essential to the success of the intervention.
- The parents were made co-responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, in terms of which they accepted certain responsibilities, such as ensuring that their children regularly attended school.
- The teachers received intensive in-service training from the departmental officials involved (see the details pertaining to the circuit team in the next section).
- All parties consented to signing an agreement of commitment.
- The intervention started with the beginning of the school year in January 2006, from which time the new Grade 1 learners were taught literacy by means of the interactive approach.

The composition of the circuit team

The circuit team that agreed to be part of the intervention consisted of the officials described below:

● The *circuit manager* accepted overall responsibility for the intervention. His suitability for the role was due to him having a good working relationship with both the school staff and the rest of the team, as well as him himself having previously conducted research into literacy.

● The *subject advisor* for literacy had 14 years experience of working in the circuit, and was, at the time of the intervention, studying for her BEd Honours degree. Her role in the intervention was to develop and provide the necessary learning support material concerning the interactive way of teaching reading.

● The school was allocated a qualified *learning support teacher* at the start of the intervention in 2006. Her responsibility was to form small groups of those learners who could be seen to be falling behind, so that she could give them individual attention.

● After having attended the above-mentioned in-service training, the *teacher* concerned was better equipped to teach literacy. Her positive attitude, which was reinforced by the presence of her own child in her class, helped to set the scene for a successful intervention. (Her studies were already mentioned earlier.)

The test

The test to which reference is made in the current study was conducted in October and November of 2008, and was aimed at investigating the literacy levels of all Grade 3 learners in the province. Such a test is conducted on a biennial basis, with the 2008 test forming part of the fourth round of testing since 2002. It should be noted that the tests concerned are WCED assessment tests, and are **NOT** the systemic evaluation tests of the national Department of Education. The intention of the Grade 3 assessment is to measure the performance of, and to track the progress made by, learners towards achievement in literacy (WCED, 2008).

As with the previous assessment in 2006, the entire cohort of Grade 3 learners was tested in 2008. The test was administered by the WCED[C] and was based

on the standards set out in the WCED's *Benchmarks for Literacy and Numeracy and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS)*, which meant that the assessment was suited to the linguistic and cultural diversity reflected in a South African classroom. The application of such a test also implied that the teacher concerned had to be retrained to teach literacy according to the *Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)* (WCED, 2008). The learners sat for the 120-minute long test on 14 October 2008, with officials of the Joint Education Board (JET) acting as invigilators. No other adult was allowed in the test venue. The test was applied in order to ascertain the learners' ability to read, write and spell (WCED, 2008).

The rationale behind using benchmarks during the test
The benchmarks in literacy for Grade 3, which articulate nationally agreed minimum acceptable standards in literacy, form part of a national literacy plan agreed to by the National Department of Education and all nine provincial departments. The benchmarks reflect the minimum acceptable level of essential elements of literacy. The setting of such benchmarks was facilitated by referring to empirical data that the WCED had obtained in previous tests. Similar work from overseas was also consulted. While the benchmarks represent minimum acceptable standards, the schools concerned must strive to develop the full talents and capacities of all learners concerned. Data are reported by the WCED to the wider community in relation to the achievement or non-achievement of such benchmarks (WCED, 2009d). The three parts of the test are described below.

Part One: Reading (Comprehension)
As Afrikaans was the language of learning and teaching at the school being investigated, the learners were given an Afrikaans story to read. The story was about a baby turtle trying to reach the sea. After reading the story, learners were expected to answer the questions independently. They were given 40 minutes for the task. The story and questions allowed for the application of the following benchmarks:

● illustrations that clarify meaning, with words that were new and strange being supported by the illustrations;

● very little vocabulary that is likely to be inaccessible, with words that tend to be difficult for a Grade 3 learner to understand being clarified by illustrations or the text;

● predictable text structure, with an orientation including characters and a setting in place and time, with a complication (trying to get back to the sea) and a resolution (reaching the sea) typical of narratives;

● predictable sentence structure in statements, questions and commands; and

● compound and complex sentences of two to three clauses, containing prepositional and adverbial phrases.

Part Two: Writing
For the second part of the test, the learners were asked to write an adventure story about a legendary creature. They were given some pictures, including one of a huge creature called 'Big Foot' (*Grootvoete*), and one sentence, giving some details about each creature (for Big Foot the sentence was: 'Everyone knows that I can make myself invisible, but I have other secret powers too' (*Almal weet ek is onoorwinlik, maar ek het ander kragte ook*.) The instructions were read aloud to the learners by the teacher. The learners were then asked whether they understood what to do, and reminded that they had to choose only one creature for their adventure. The learners had 40 minutes in which to complete the task. Some of the benchmarks that were addressed in the test were the following:

● the composition of a simple story by the learner, with the story making sense to the reader and showing a basic understanding of the writing task;

● the incorporation in the text of subject matter that was related to the task and topic, briefly expressed and organised according to some of the basic structural elements of the story;

● textual subject matter showing a basic understanding of the task, and evidence of some gaps in story logic;

● use of the following textual features appropriate to the text type and task:

– simple statements in the form of sentences in grammatically correct word order;
– some compound sentences, combining clauses with 'and';
– some complex sentences in reported and direct speech;

    – phrases and words to locate events in place and time, such as 'in the mountains', and to specify means, such as 'with a message', with such phrases and words sometimes being used at the beginning of sentences, such as 'Once upon a time. . .' or 'One day. . .';

    – vocabulary appropriate to the subject matter of the text; and

    – capital letters at the beginning of sentences and for names, and full stops at the end of sentences over 80% of the time

Part Three: Spelling

In the final part of the test, the learners were asked to write another adventure story about a legendary creature. They were given some pictures, including one of an eagle*,* with one or two sentences giving some details about each creature (for the eagle the sentences were: 'I am so huge that I could block out the sun with my wings. I also like to eat naughty kids'). The instructions were read aloud by the invigilator. The learners were then asked whether they understood what to do, and reminded that they had to choose only one creature for their adventure.

Some of the benchmarks that were addressed in this sample were that the learner accurately spelt the following:

- frequently used and readily recognised words;
- some words of two syllables with common spelling patterns; and
- one-syllable words with common spelling patterns.

Attention was also paid to whether the learner attempted to spell accurately a relatively wide range of words, and what type of errors were made in the spelling of such words (WCED, 2009d).

The learners were given 40 minutes in which to complete the task. On completion, the tasks were collected by the invigilator and marked by the JET.

Limitations of the test

The above-mentioned test had some limitations. In speaking to the teacher, as well as to other teachers and principals in the circuit, much dissatisfaction was expressed about the learners having to write all three parts of the test without a break in between. In addition, the test was very long, taking into account that the learners were only in Grade 3 and between 8 and 9-years-old. Furthermore,

the test was written directly after the learners had to complete another two-hour test of numeracy. Concerns were expressed that the learners had become tired, which had led to a drop in their concentration and, consequently, a drop in the standard of their performance (Abrahams, pers. comm.).

In the next section, I shall describe the outcomes of the test and the results which were obtained by the Grade 3 learners of Raithby Primary School.

Test outcomes

After three years of being taught reading and literacy skills the interactive way, the class of Grade 3 learners was subjected to the systemic assessment test of 2008. The results of the WCED assessment test for Grade 3 were published on 6 March 2009. On the question of whether the interventions had been successful, Donald Grant, the MEC for Education in the Western Cape at the time, reacted as follows: "The results of these interventions have shown that we are making significant progress in literacy" (WCED, 2009c). The report on the degree of literacy which was obtained by the Grade 3 class of Raithby Primary in 2008 is set out in the following tables (see the certified copies, Annexure A). Table 1 indicates an 81.2% increase since 2006, and a 100% increase since 2002, which is described by the WCED (2009c) as being a substantial improvement over their previous performance.

Table 1:   Assessment results of Raithby Primary in literacy: 2002–2008

Assessment	2002 (%)	2004 (%)	2006 (%)	2008 (%)	Difference between 2006 and 2008	Result
Literacy	0.0	15.0	18.8	100.0	81.2	Substantial improvement

Table 2 provides an overall view of the literacy results attained by the learners at Raithby Primary School, with comparable percentages for circuit, education district (ED), and province. The NCS assessment standards were used for the assessment, with 50% considered the required attainment standard (pass percentage) for learners. The assessment test consisted of literacy-related questions directed at grade levels 1 to 3.

Table 2:   Percentage of learners achieving at grade level for literacy

Literacy	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3	
	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)
Raithby	98.8	100.0	92.3	100.0	74.0	100.0
Circuit 1	94.4	98.7	78.1	91.8	49.9	51.9
ED: Cape Winelands	92.6	97.2	74.1	88.0	43.7	44.0
Western Cape province	93.4	97.5	75.1	87.6	50.4	53.5

Table 3 is based on the categorisation of each question in the literacy test in terms of knowledge and skill. The table reflects the average and pass percentage obtained per grade at Raithby Primary School for literacy.

Table 3: Percentage of learners passing literacy knowledge/skill items per grade level

Skill	LO	Assessment Standard	Assessment items	Performance					
				Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3	
				Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass %
Reading single words	3	- Uses visual cues to make meaning - Uses know-ledge of phonics and sight words	Choose one of four pictures to match given word	98.8	100				
Reading single sentences with visual cues	3	Uses word recognition strategies to read unfamiliar texts (phonics, contextual cues, predicting)	Short sentence with missing word, and a choice of four words to complete the sentence			97.1	100		
	6	Works with sentences							
Reading single sentences with visual cues	3	Uses word recognition strategies to read unfamiliar texts (phonics, contextual cues, predicting)	Short sentence with missing word, and a choice of four words to complete the sentence			87.5	98.9		
	6	Works with sentences							

Compre-hension, based on mind map text	3	- Uses word recognition strategies to read un-familiar texts - Makes meaning of written text • Reads a variety of texts • Reads graphical texts, such as maps and flow diagrams	Mind map with pictures for visual cues						85.9	100
	5	- Processes information in different ways: mind maps, tables, charts, etc. - Picks out selected information from a text and processes it								

Key: LO = Learning Outcome
1 = Listening; 2 = Talk; 3 = Reading; 4 = Writing; 5 = Thinking and reasoning; 6 = Grammar

Discussion of the results

By comparing the literacy results attained by the Grade 3 learners with the scores obtained by the same grade in previous years at Raithby Primary, one can conclude that it is possible that the implementation of the interactive approach of teaching reading made a difference in the level of literacy attained at the school. Such a conclusion concurs with the findings of the literature study, in which evidence was found that application of the interactive approach tends to produce outstanding results. However, learning to read is a complex process, as classrooms are complex environments, with learner success depending on multiple interweaving factors. Therefore, it would be presumptuous to say that the adoption of a different teaching approach was alone responsible for the improvement obtained. Many factors that impact on classroom teaching might have contributed to the improvement, some of which I shall now explain.

Positive factors

A few factors played a pivotal role in ensuring the successful course of the intervention that led to obtaining the 100% result attained. One positive factor was that Ms Abrahams taught the same class in both Grades 2 and 3, which led to the development of a special bond between the teacher and learners concerned. The role of the principal in the intervention should also be acknowledged, as he remained positive, and inspired his staff to do the same, throughout the exercise. The circuit manager also played a key role in the intervention, as, having studied literacy, he expressed a keen interest in the intervention, and regularly monitored the process during his normal visits to the school. In no way did such monitoring entail the policing of demotivated teachers, because their commitment to the intervention was indubitable, as has already been indicated.

Closing remarks

This study reflected on the low literacy rate of South African learners and pointed out some of its possible causes. The study scrutinised various approaches to teaching reading, and concluded that teaching reading in our schools does not meet expectations, as the way in which teachers teach reading tends to impact negatively on learners' literacy levels. Teachers are used to the traditional approaches to teaching reading, which often only entail the decoding of sounds. Different teaching approaches that can improve literacy and comprehension skills are seldom explored. Teachers make little effort to encourage a positive attitude towards reading among learners, which might make a sustained difference in the lives of struggling readers. However, I must caution that the lessons learned from a single case at one school cannot be regarded as the answer to all the literacy problems in South Africa. What makes this study relevant to the South African context is that the research was conducted in the field over many years, and the relevance of the resources consulted and the results obtained from the intervention described suggest that, with using the interactive approach and by adopting the right attitude to such teaching, teachers can improve the literacy level of most struggling readers.

References

Alderson, J.C. 2000. *Assessing reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Alexander, N. 1997. Language policy and planning in the new South Africa. *African Sociological Review*, 1(1): pp.82–98.

Alexander, J.E. and Heathington, B.S. 1988. *Assessing and correcting classroom reading problems.* Illinois: Scott, Foreman, Little, Brown College.

Bloch, G. 2009. *The toxic mix: what's wrong with South Africa's schools and how to fix it.* Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Burns, P.C., Roe, B.D. and Ross, E.P. 1999. *Teaching reading in today's elementary schools*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Carrell, P.L. 1988. Interactive text processing: implications for ESL/second language reading classrooms. In Carrell, P.L., Devine, J. and Eskey, D.E. (Eds), *Interactive approaches to second language reading.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.75–124.

Caskey, M.M. 2008. Comprehension strategies that make a difference for struggling readers. In Lenski, S. and Lewis, J. (Eds). *Reading success for struggling adolescent learners.* New York: The Guilford Press, pp.170–189.

Coleman, D. 1998. *Working with emotional intelligence.* London: Bloomsbury.

Dechant, E.V. 1994. *Whole-language reading: a comprehensive teaching guide.* Basel: Technomic Publishing.

Denscombe, M. 1998. *The good research guide for small scale social research projects*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Department of Education (DoE). 2009a. *Grade 3 systemic evaluation baseline assessment of literacy*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Eskey, D.E. 1988. Holding in the bottom: an interactive approach to the language problems of second language readers. In Carrell, P.L., Devine, J. and Eskey, D.E. (Eds). *Interactive approaches to second language reading.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.91–97.

Fawcett, G. and Rasinski, T. 2008. Fluency strategies for struggling adolescent readers. In Lenski, S. and Lewis, J. (Eds), *Reading success for struggling adolescent learners.* New York: Guilford Press, pp.155–170.

Fearn, L. and Farnan, N. 2008. Classroom instruction for struggling writers. In Lenski, S. and Lewis, J. (Eds), *Reading success for struggling adolescent learners.* New York: Guilford Press, pp. 207–226.

Heugh, K. 2006. Die prisma vertroebel: taalonderrigbeleid geïnterpreteer in terme van kurrikulumverandering. *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 46(2): pp.63‒76.

Hiebert, J. 2006. *An interactive approach to learning*. Melbourne: Trinity College University Press.

Hugo, A.J. 2001. Lees en studeer op tersiêre vlak: Die affektiewe komponent van lees verdien ook aandag. *Tydskrif vir Taalonderrig*, 35(2)*: pp.141–144.

Jansen, J. 2009. Soek probleem by skole, nie universiteite. *Die Burger*, 14 July, p.7.

Juel, C. and Minden-Cupp, C. 2000. One down and 80 000 to go: word recognition instruction in the primary grades. *The Reading Teacher*, 53(4): pp.1–5.

Le Cordeur, M.L.A. 2004. Die bevordering van lees met behulp van media-lees-onderrigstrategieë vir Afrikaans (graad 7): 'n Gevallestudie. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Lenski, S. 2008. Struggling adolescent readers: problems and possibilities. In Lenski, S. and Lewis, J. (Eds). *Reading success for struggling adolescent learners*. New York: Guilford Press, pp.37–57.

Manyike, T.V. and Lemmer, E.M. 2010. English reading and writing performance of Xithonga-speaking Grade 7 learners in township schools: a case study. *Per Linguam*, 26(1): pp.29‒46.

Mertens, O.M. 1998. *Research methods in education and psychology: integrating diversity with qualitative and quantitative approaches.* London: Sage Publications.

Mouton, J. 2001. *How to succeed in your master's and doctoral studies: a South African guide and resource book.* Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Nathanson, R. 2009. Fast-tracking the literacy development in street children: a reading and writing project for street children. *Per Linguam*, 25(1): pp.7–29.

Nunes, T. (Ed.). 1999. Learning to read: an integrated view from research and practise. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Peer, L. and Reid, G. (Eds). 2001. Dyslexia: successful inclusion in the secondary school. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Ramphele, M. 2008. *Laying ghosts to rest: dilemmas of the transformation in South Africa.* Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Snow, C. (Ed.). 2000. Reading for understanding: towards an R&D program in reading comprehension. Santa Monica: RAND.

Stanovich, K.E. 2000. Progress in understanding reading: scientific foundations and new frontiers. London: Guilford Press.

Taylor, B., Pearson, D.P., Harris, L.A. and Garcia, G. 1995. Reading difficulties, instruction and assessment. 2nd edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Townend, J. and Turner, M. (Eds.). 2000. Dyslexia in practice: a guide for teachers. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.

Van Staden, S. 2010. Improving the spelling ability of Grade 3 learners through visual imaging teaching strategies. *Per Linguam,* 26(1): pp.13–28.

Walker, B.J. 2000. Diagnostic teaching of reading. 4th edition. Oklahoma State University: Merrill.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2004. *2002 Grade 3 assessment results.* 7 March. Circular 0014. Cape Town: Government Printers.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2006. *WCED literacy and numeracy strategy 2006–2016*. Cape Town: Government Printers.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2008. *Grade 3 literacy and numeracy assessment tests*. Research Circular 0001/2008. 19 June. Cape Town: Government Printers.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2009a. *Western Cape's literacy and numeracy challenges*. Media Release. 14 July. Cape Town: Government Printers

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2009b. *Subsidies allocations to public schools for 2009.* Circular 51/2009. Cape Town: Government Printers.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2009c. *Grade 3 assessment results of 2008*. Circular 0018/2009. 6 March. Cape Town: Government Printer.

Western Cape Education Department (WCED). 2009d. *WCED literacy and numeracy strategy 2006–2016: Using Benchmarks*. <http://curriculum.wcape.school.za/site/20/res/detail/wced> 23 August 2010.

Personal communications

Abrahams, E. 2010. Personal interview. Raithby Primary School, Stellenbosch, 23 August.

Heugh, K. 2010. Email to M. le Cordeur, 17 August.

Olivier, A. 2010. Personal interview. Raithby Primary School, Stellenbosch, 18 August.

Webb, V. 2010. Email to M. le Cordeur.15 August.

Endnotes

A

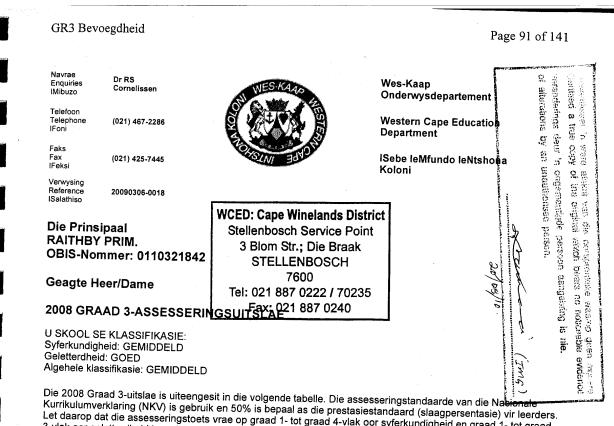The scale concerned rates a school as 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, or 4 = wealthy.

B

The term 'coloured' is used only to refer to previously disadvantaged people, and must by no means be seen as the author's condoning of a system that labeled people on racial grounds.

C

The test was administered by the WCED under the supervision of Dr R.S. Cornelissen (telephone 021 467 2286 or email rcornelissen@pgwc.gov.za).

GR3 Bevoegdheid

Navrae Enquiries IMibuzo	Dr RS Cornelissen
Telefoon Telephone IFoni	(021) 467-2286
Faks Fax IFeksi	(021) 425-7445
Verwysing Reference ISalathiso	20090306-0018

Wes-Kaap
Onderwysdepartement

Western Cape Education
Department

ISebe leMfundo leNtshona
Koloni

**Die Prinsipaal
RAITHBY PRIM.
OBIS-Nommer: 0110321842**

WCED: Cape Winelands District
Stellenbosch Service Point
3 Blom Str.; Die Braak
STELLENBOSCH
7600
Tel: 021 887 0222 / 70235
Fax: 021 887 0240

Geagte Heer/Dame

2008 GRAAD 3-ASSESSERINGSUITSLAE

U SKOOL SE KLASSIFIKASIE:
Syferkundigheid: GEMIDDELD
Geletterdheid: GOED
Algehele klassifikasie: GEMIDDELD

Die 2008 Graad 3-uitslae is uiteengesit in die volgende tabelle. Die assesseringstandaarde van die Nasionale Kurrikulumverklaring (NKV) is gebruik en 50% is bepaal as die prestasiestandaard (slaagpersentasie) vir leerders. Let daarop dat die assesseringstoets vrae op graad 1- tot graad 4-vlak oor syferkundigheid en graad 1- tot graad 3-vlak oor geletterdheid ingesluit het. Tabel 1 tot 7 gee die uitslae vir hierdie grade.

Tabel 1 en 5 gee 'n algemene oorsig oor die syferkundigheids- en geletterdheidsuitslae vir u skool, met vergelykbare persentasies vir u kring, onderwysdistrik (OD) en provinsie. Tabel 2 en 6 voorsien die persentasie leerders wat per graadvlak in die verskillende intervalskale slaag en lig die slaagpersentasie van die skool in tabel 1 en 5 verder toe. Tabel 3, 4, en 7 is gegrond op die kategorisering van elke vraag in die syferkundigheid- en geletterdheidstoets, ingevolge kennis en vaardigheid. Hierdie tabelle doen verslag oor die slaagpersentasie by u skool per graad vir kennis en vaardigheid in beide syferkundigheid en geletterdheid.

Oorsig 2006 vs 2008

Assessering	2002	2004	2006	2008	Verskil tussen 2006 en 2008	Uitslae
Syferkundigheids-uitslae		15.0	18.8	**41.2**	22.4	Aansienlike verbetering
Geletterdheidsuitslae		15.0	18.8	**100.0**	81.2	Aansienlike verbetering

Besonderhede van uitslae

Resultaat	Beskrywing
Aansienlike verbetering	Resultate styg met meer as 10%
Verbetering	Resultate styg tussen 5% en 10%
Geringe verbetering	Resultate het met tussen 0% en 5% verbeter
Het onveranderd gebly	Geen verandering
Geringe verswakking	Resultate het tussen 0% en 5% verswak
Verswakking	Resultate het tussen 5% en 10% verswak
Aansienlike verswakking	Resultate het met meer as 10% verswak
Nie van toepassing	Nie getoets in vorige siklus nie

Syferkundigheidsuitslae

Tabel 1: Bevoegdheid op graadvlak

Syferkundigheid	Graad 1		Graad 2		Graad 3		Graad 4	
	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%
Skool: RAITHBY PRIM.	79.8	94.1	51.0	52.9	**45.3**	**41.2**	32.7	29.4
Kring: 1	72.6	82.0	49.6	50.2	**43.1**	**38.1**	27.9	19.9
OD: CAPE	64.7	72.7	42.8	40.4	**35.5**	**28.4**	23.6	14.8

2008 Graad 3-assesseringsuitslae

OBIS-NOMMER: 0110321842
SCHOOL SE NAAM: RAITHBY PRIM.

Tabel 7: Persentasie leerders wat die graadvlak vir kennis of vaardigheid per graadvlak in geletterdheid bereik het

Vaardigheid	LU*	Assesseringstandaard**	Assesseringsitems	Prestasie					
				Graad 1		Graad 2		Graad 3	
				Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%
Lees van enkel woorde	3	• Gebruik visuele leidrade om sin te maak • Gebruik kennis of fonetiek en sig-woorde	Kies een uit vier prente om by 'n woord te pas	98.8	100.0				
Lees van enkel sinne met visuele leidrade	3	Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees (fonetiek, kontekstuele leidrade, voorspelling)	Kort sinne met 'n ontbrekende woord en met 'n keuse van vier woorde om die sin te voltooi			97.1	100.0		
	6	Werk met sinne							
Lees van enkel sinne sonder visuele leidrade	3	Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees (fonetiek, kontekstuele leidrade, voorspelling)	Kort sinne met 'n keuse van vier woorde om die sin te voltooi			87.5	100.0		
	6	Werk met sinne							

Begripstoets gebaseer op breinkaartteks	3	• Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees.
		• Maak sin van geskrewe tekste:
		  o Lees 'n versamelling van tekste
		  o Lees grafiese teks soos kaarte, vloeidiagramme
			Breinkaart met prente vir visuele leidrade					85.9	100.0

	5	• Verwerk inligting op verskillende maniere – breinkaarte, tabelle, diagramme, kaarte, ens. • Kies sekere inligting uit die teks en verwerk dit							

Begripstoets gebaseer op 'n uitgebreide uittreksel	3	• Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees
		• Maak sin van geskrewe teks:
		  o Lees 'n versamelling van tekste
		  o Identifiseer oorsaak en gevolg
			Paragraaf in verhalende styl met fotografiese leidrade. Daar is altesaam drie kort paragrawe en 12 sinne					65.5	82.4

	5	• Gebruik taal om te dink en te redeneer:
		  o Verstaan en gebruik van taal vir logika redenering, oorsaak en gevolg samevatting.
		  o Kies inligting uit 'n teks en verwerk dit
		  o Opsomming van inligting							

* **Leeruitkomste in NKV**

Michael le Cordeur
Department of Curriculum Studies (Afrikaans)
Stellenbosch University

mlecorde@sun.ac.za