Psycho-social factors that inhibit literacy development in the primary schools of Capricorn District, Limpopo Province

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the psycho-social factors that inhibit or enable literacy development in the Foundation Phase in primary schools within the Capricorn District, Limpopo Province. The purpose of the study was to identify key psycho-social challenges that affect literacy acquisition and to propose strategies to create enabling environments for literacy development. A qualitative research approach was employed, using an exploratory case study design. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with nine Foundation Phase teachers across three rural schools, as well as document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed five key findings: socio-economic status, lack of parental involvement, poverty, parental negligence, and child-headed households are major psycho-social barriers to literacy development. The study also found that inadequate school resources further exacerbate these challenges. The implications of the study suggest that interventions aimed at improving literacy in the Foundation Phase must consider the broader psycho-social context of learners. There is a critical need for targeted support that includes teacher training, parental engagement, and enhanced resource allocation. These findings underscore the importance of adopting a holistic approach to literacy development that addresses both in-classroom practices and the home environment

Keywords: Psychosocial factors, quality education, literacy, intervention strategies, inhibit

Introduction

The development of literacy in the Foundation Phase is critical for ensuring learners' long-term academic success and their ability to function effectively in society. However, in many South African primary schools, psycho-social factors continue to hamper the effective delivery of quality education, particularly in literacy development. Recent studies have shown that socio-economic challenges, parental involvement, and school resources play a significant role in learners' ability to acquire literacy skills (OECD, 2019; Osher et al., 2021).

Schools in underprivileged communities, especially in rural areas, face severe difficulties that include poverty, child-headed households, and parental negligence (Mpofu et al., 2021). These psycho-social factors often result in malnutrition, poor attendance, and diminished cognitive development among learners (Alves et al., 2018). According to Osher, Dwyer, Jimerson, and Brown (2021), enabling environments—where learners feel safe and supported—are crucial for literacy development. However, many schools in South Africa struggle to create these environments due to resource limitations and socio-economic disparities (Van De Walr, 2018).

Despite interventions by the Department of Basic Education to address these challenges, such as the introduction of policies like the Safe School Policy, the issues persist (DBE, 2020). There remains a significant gap in understanding how psycho-social factors, specifically in rural settings, inhibit literacy development and what strategies can effectively mitigate these challenges (OECD, 2019).

Therefore, the present study sought to understand the psycho-social needs of learners from their own perspective, as well as from that of all other stakeholders. To this end, the study sought to answer the following research questions: what psycho-social factors enable and/or inhibit literacy development in primary schools? What strategies are used to make schools enabling environments that can foster literacy development? Answers to these questions are important for the following reasons. Firstly, they can provide educators with knowledge and skills on how to identify these factors and how to mitigate against them.

Secondly, they can provide learners with opportunities, such giving them a voice to express their own problems

Literature review

Schools as enabling environments

reating an enabling environment is essential for supporting the holistic development of learners, particularly in the Foundation Phase, where literacy development is critical. Schools that foster a safe, nurturing, and supportive atmosphere can positively influence learners' academic outcomes, emotional well-being, and social development (Osher et al., 2021). Research shows that children are more likely to thrive in environments where they feel a sense of belonging and where the school climate promotes safety and inclusivity (Duru-Bellat & Daley, 2020).

In South Africa, the lack of enabling environments, particularly in under-resourced rural schools, has been a barrier to achieving quality education (Mpofu et al., 2021). Many schools continue to struggle with maintaining safety, managing resources, and addressing psycho-social issues such as poverty, child-headed households, and inadequate parental involvement (Ncube & Maree, 2022). The Department of Basic Education has made efforts to address these challenges, including policy frameworks that aim to create safer, more inclusive learning environments (DBE, 2020).

Recent studies indicate that enabling environments go beyond physical safety; they include the psychological and emotional well-being of learners. Schools need to foster positive relationships between teachers, students, and the community to enhance literacy and overall academic performance (Jones et al., 2022). The presence of trained teachers who can address psycho-social challenges and implement evidence-based strategies is critical for ensuring that schools become true enablers of academic and personal growth (Mokoena & Themane, 2023).

Psychosocial factors

Psycho-social factors are integral in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of learners, particularly in their literacy development. These factors, which include mental health, socio-economic status, family structure, and social support, can either enhance or inhibit learning in the early stages of education (Osher et al., 2021). Research has shown that learners facing poverty, neglect, or family instability often struggle to engage fully in the classroom, impacting their ability to develop foundational literacy skills (Mpofu et al., 2021; Themane et al., 2022).

One critical psycho-social factor is the socio-economic status of learners. Children from low-income families are more likely to experience malnutrition, which affects cognitive development and literacy acquisition (Van De Walr, 2021). Furthermore, poverty often limits access to educational resources and parental involvement, both of which are essential for early literacy development (Alves et al., 2020).

Parental involvement has been identified as a key determinant in learners' academic success. However, in rural and economically disadvantaged communities, many parents are either unable or unwilling to engage in their children's schooling, further hindering literacy development (Baatjes & Matlala, 2023). These challenges are exacerbated in child-headed households, where older siblings must assume adult responsibilities, leaving little room for academic engagement (Mogale, 2023).

Moreover, the psychological readiness of learners, influenced by their home environments, plays a significant role in their ability to learn. Children from unstable or abusive households are more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral issues, which can manifest as disengagement or disruptive behavior in the classroom (Nkosi & Dube, 2021). These factors highlight the need for holistic approaches that address both educational and psycho-social needs to improve literacy outcomes in the Foundation Phase (Osher et al., 2021).

Literacy development

Literacy development in the Foundation Phase is a critical component of early childhood education, as it lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and communication skills. Contemporary perspectives emphasize the importance of developing literacy through a variety of methods, including phonics, comprehension strategies, and early exposure to texts (ACARA, 2020). Literacy is no longer confined to the capacity to read and write, but also includes abilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and computer literacy, which are crucial in the twenty-first century global economy (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2021).

Research has shown that poor psycho-social factors, including poverty and limited access to educational resources, significantly hinder literacy acquisition (Susin et al., 2020). Moreover, schools in under-resourced rural areas face compounded challenges, where learners often begin school without basic literacy skills, exacerbated by factors like poor nutrition and insufficient parental support (Krog & Stephens, 2021). A study by Graham, Rogers, and Ziviani (2021) found that early interventions, including targeted literacy programs and teacher support, can significantly improve literacy outcomes, even in disadvantaged environments.

The need for inclusive and adaptive approaches to literacy development is crucial in diverse classrooms where students come from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. According to Seligman (2021), teachers must adopt differentiated instruction strategies to cater to these differences, ensuring that all learners can succeed. Additionally, Woolfolk (2021) highlights the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation in learners, as engaged and motivated students are more likely to persevere in acquiring literacy skills despite external challenges.

The impact of poor psychosocial factors on literacy development

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted how psycho-social factors negatively influence literacy development, especially in rural and underprivileged settings. Poverty, lack of parental involvement, and inadequate resources are significant barriers to effective literacy acquisition in early childhood education (Mpofu et al., 2021). Learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often suffer from malnutrition, which negatively affects cognitive function and development, thereby hindering their ability to acquire essential literacy skills (Alves et al., 2018).

Furthermore, child-headed households and parental negligence have been identified as critical factors that exacerbate the psycho-social challenges learners face, resulting in high absenteeism and low academic achievement (van der Berg, Spaull, & Taylor, 2022). These learners often lack emotional and social support, which further diminishes their ability to concentrate and engage in classroom activities (Kendziora & Osher, 2021).

Moreover, schools in these contexts often fail to provide safe, enabling environments that foster learning. According to Osher et al. (2021), enabling environments are crucial for supporting learners' literacy development. However, due to resource limitations, many schools struggle to maintain such environments, contributing to low literacy outcomes (DBE, 2022). Teachers in these settings are often under-resourced and under-trained, further hampering the provision of quality education (Mlambo, 2020).

The compounding effect of these psycho-social barriers highlights the need for targeted interventions that address both the educational and socio-emotional needs of learners, particularly in rural and low-income areas (Mathekga, 2021).

Strategies to enhance literacy development

Beamish (2019) shows that teachers need to use evidence-based strategies in order to promote positive learners' behavior and maintain productive classroom environments. This implies that teachers have to work hard to convince learners through visible aspects that will enhance their interest in reading and writing. Nash, Schlösser, and Scarr (2016) explain the proactive and reactive strategies that teachers could use to address the learners' challenging behaviors in the classrooms. Proactive strategies include a range of positive and preventative strategies such as teaching, and reinforcing classroom routines and behavior expectations, where learners are actively engaged in reading and writing so as to encourage appropriate behavior. Reactive strategies, on the other hand, are the teachers' negative responses to learners' inappropriate behavior, such as verbal reprimands, giving learner extra responsibilities like sweeping the classroom and collecting papers, and exclusionary such as time-out, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions, and of which teachers do not feel-good implementing these types of strategies.

Seligman (2011) identified pillars that are helpful in boosting the teachers' morale to work positively with learners in the process of teaching literacy. The pillars are:

a) Positive emotions - teachers must feel good about going to work, do their work and feel happy to interact with the learners. In this case the teachers would work well with learners in the process of teaching the learners reading and writing.   b) Engagement - teachers would actively engage in their work and find ways to improve their daily work. Teachers ensure that all learners are actively engaged in reading and writing. c) Relationships - teachers would develop mutual relationship between each other and interact positively with the learners to ensure that there will be productive lessons.

This would influence the lesson positively, because learners learn better in the environment where there is a sense of belonging. Schunk (2012) also said that learners actively construct their own knowledge through interaction with the environment that allows them, because the social environment is a facilitator or mediator of learning. d) Meaning - teachers find encouraging reasons to work. The teachers create meaning in the teaching and learning process and therefore, have the zeal to work with learners to ensure that literacy development becomes successful. e) Achievement - the teachers would have a burning desire to assist learners achieve to a quality education. This implies that the teachers will not only teach learners to read and write for the sake of passing, but to achieve quality literacy development. This is the aim of this study, to engage teachers in a collaborative way that would enable them to improve and sustain their experience of handling the toxicities in the way that will enable the quality teaching of reading and writing in the foundation phase. The study also intended to actively involve teachers as co-constructors of knowledge and not recipients of the end results.

O'Carroll (2011) proposes that teaching reading and writing needs a teacher to realize learning experiences, because it is important to be aware of different approaches and also the language. She further said that learners have to master and understand the language before engaging in the process of learning the aspects in reading and writing, e.g. knowing the letters and their sounds. In addition, Woolfolk (2013) also indicates the importance of learning styles as a way to enhance literacy development for learners. He refers to learning styles as the different approaches that learners use when they want to learn and understand reading and writing.

Singh (2012) on the other hand reiterates that teaching literacy needs teachers to acknowledge that diversity exists in the classrooms and some learners may find the language used in teaching as a barrier. This variety may manifest as disparities among the learner population, for example, cultural and racial distinctions that will also imply various languages as home language, differing linguistic ability, or variances in the amount of exposure to the language used in reading and writing. It is the role of the teacher to address such barriers to ensure that all learners learn at the same level. Hence, the current study seeks to explore how teachers deal with such challenges in order to produce quality results in the teaching and learning of reading and writing.

Teaching literacy in an environment that have poor psychosocial factors leads to negative end results, and therefore, there is a need for South African teachers in the foundation phase to acknowledge the need to meet the demands of quality teaching and learning. Various approaches are offered to enhance the quality delivery of literacy development. Attention was given to strategies to address poor psycho-social factors in order to embrace and acknowledge the importance of achieving quality reading and writing. Some strategies and practical suggestions are provided for teachers to ensure that the environment of teaching and learning is a safe space and provides learning opportunities.

Theoretical perspective

To understand factors that inhibit literacy development, the study adopted Stephen Brookfield's Model of Reflection (1995). Brookfield suggests four lenses through which instructors might engage in the process of critical reflection: (1) autobiographical, (2) students' eyes, (3) our colleagues' experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. In brief the four lenses can be explained as follows:

The autobiographical lens – By this lens, he means that the basis of reflective teaching is when teachers reflect on their own teaching. It helps teachers to assess their own pedagogy when working with learners. If teachers can self-reflect, they will know where to improve to identify psychosocial factors that enable or inhibit literacy development.

The second lens concerns the learner's eye. Brookfield emphasizes the necessity for teachers to understand their students' experiences. Teachers can accomplish this via assessing students' perspectives on teaching techniques, exam procedures, focus groups, and interviews. This will make their instruction more adaptable. The learner's eye lens emphasizes the importance of existing power dynamics between teachers and students. Formal assessments, in-class evaluations, focus groups, interviews, and feedback could all be used to change the relationships and learners' learning habits.

The colleagues' experience: This lens contends that teachers should intensively engage with their colleagues regarding mentoring, advice, and feedback on tackling psycho-social factors that could inhibit literacy development. This could assist teachers to enhance their knowledge through interaction and enable them to utilize the ideas garnered from their learning circles, collaborative problem-solving teams and critical

conversations and evaluations. This means that teachers work effectively and are able to counteract the teaching and learning challenges by working collaboratively. It is through these collaborations that teachers can be able to know inhibiting factors for learners.

Theoretical literature: The fourth lens concerns the need for ongoing professional development. When teachers engage in ongoing professional learning and development they will be empowered with relevant knowledge and skills to identify psychosocial factors that inhibit literacy development.

Method

The study followed a qualitative research approach because the researchers wanted to understand the phenomenon in its entirety. Qualitative research allows participants to fully narrate their views (Cresswell, 2018). Qualitative approach allows the researchers to what type of need and the type of psychosocial support needed in terms of aiding literacy in primary school learners.

Research design

The study adopted an explorative case study design. The purpose of this explorative case study was to understand the phenomena at hand at the local level. It is where the participants together with the researchers uncover in-depth the issues being investigated (Gray, 2009). In this case, the researchers sought to explore the type of psychosocial issues or factors that inhibit literacy development in rural schools of Capricorn district.

Sampling

The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers use their discretion to select specific variables from the target population. This method relies heavily on the researchers' judgment and contextual understanding (Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling was chosen to focus exclusively on teachers currently instructing in the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3) within rural schools in the Capricorn District. Three schools in this district were identified, and three teachers from each school will be interviewed, resulting in a total of nine participants.

Data collection

Data collection in this study was conducted through interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow participants to articulate their perspectives in depth. An open-ended questionnaire guided the interaction between researchers and respondents, facilitating a flexible dialogue that enabled the researchers to follow the interviewees' narratives with minimal interruption. Prior observations were conducted to help the researchers gain insight into the respondents' emotions and perceptions. This approach was instrumental in understanding teachers' views on the psychosocial factors that hinder or impede literacy development in their schools. One-on-one interviews proved advantageous as they were initiated by the interviewer with the objective of eliciting specific information from the respondents. Throughout the interviews, a predetermined set of questions was utilized, ensuring consistency in wording and order as outlined in the interview schedule.

Document analysis were also be used to collect data. The purpose of documents such as the curriculum or any other support material used to offer psychological support is to check the nature and impact of them in implementation to aid literacy amongst learners.

Procedures of data collection

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/111/2023: IR). The nature and purpose of the study were thoroughly explained to the participating teachers, and informed consent was secured from them prior to their involvement in the research.

Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis entails organizing data into categories and identifying relationships among them (Creswell, 2019). Among the various methods for recording interviews, the most commonly used are voice recorders and field notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To facilitate data accessibility for analysis, a voice recorder was utilized, with the participants' consent, to record individual interviews in a manner that was neither obstructive nor distracting. This method enabled the verbatim transcription of all interviews

(Silverman, 2002). Supporting this approach, Babbie and Mouton (2010) describe analysis as the process of "breaking up" information into manageable themes or categories to comprehensively understand the data collected.

After transcription, the researchers organized the information and identified emerging themes or categories, subsequently interpreting the transcribed data logically to develop an overall description of the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2019).

Findings

The study investigated the psychosocial factors that inhibit and or enable literacy development among Foundation Phase learners (Grade R to 3) that teachers experience from learners. From the data analysis process five themes emerged, namely: 1) social class, 2) lack of parental involvement, 3) poverty, 4) parental negligence, 5) child-headed families.

Social class

Teachers pointed out the issue of socio-economic status affected learners' ability to concentrate and learn, given their tender age, they cannot understand why they lack certain material things. Learners from low socioeconomic status backgrounds do not have additional stationery, uniforms, and breakfast from home. Learners in lower grades find it difficult to understand social classes therefore their learning is negatively impacted. Teachers further indicated that there are some learners who are from families that are unable to provide good nutrition to their children and therefore they will come to school hungry and wait for the feeding programme to eat, such learners find it difficult to cope in standing in front of other learners when it is time to read.

Lack of parent involvement

Teachers highlighted that there is a lack of parental involvement in learners' academic activities. Teachers further revealed that the majority of parents do not show interest in taking part in their children's learning. Also, teachers indicated that some parents do not participate in helping their children with homework.

Poverty

Teachers reiterated the issue of poverty in rural schools is a dominant psychosocial factor that affects learners in literacy development. Teachers highlighted that learners are malnutrition due to the lack of proper food at home. Teachers noted that the provision of nutritious food for learners at that tender age is important for their cognitive development. Some kids struggle to develop literacy skills due to the lack of proper food that aids cognitive development. In addition, teachers pointed out that some of the learners in the classes do have passion to read and write, however, they do not have courage due to their social backgrounds which do not provide an opportunity for them to develop confidence.

Parental negligence

Teachers averted the issue of learners who are faced with parental negligence as a psychological problem that affects their learning. The teachers indicated that some parents in the rural schools neglect their children for their own reason, particularly learners whose parents are young and single. The learners are left home alone to care for themselves while the parents are a way to stay with their boyfriends. Such learners experience sexual abuse by other inhabitants who take advantage of them staying alone. Teachers discover the problems during teaching because the affected learners would display unusual behaviors that relate to psychological or emotional damage (such as untidy appearance, isolating themselves, crying while they are supposed to read, sleeping while others are writing, showing fatigue and not having confidence).

Child headed homes

There is a challenge for learners who are left under the care of their siblings who are also minors. The lack of parental care leaves them to fend for themselves, and that leads to a lot of absenteeism due to a lack of monitoring and support. Some of them start being exposed to using drugs and sexual activities at an early age.

Lack of resources

Strained government resources, not enough posters and technologies to assist with visuals. Teachers pointed out that learners in the foundation phase learn better with posters and visuals, and the schools do not have enough to provide for all the resources in this regard

Discussion- Conclusions

The study sought to find out which factors inhibit or enhance literacy development for the Foundation Phase learners in the Capricorn District. The findings from the study were six, namely: social class, 2) lack of parental involvement, 3) poverty, 4) parental negligence, 5) child-headed families and 6) lack of resources. The above results indicate that learners face a variety of inhibitors that are psychosocial in nature which makes it difficult for learners to read with comprehension and to be able at the required level.

Typically, Foundation Phase learners start to comprehend simple linguistics from the age of 6/7. In South Africa, those kids start what we call grade Rs. The Learners in that age group are supposed to be able to at least be able to somewhat spell their name and surname, as well as be able to count at least up to 10 (Schunk, 2012). Psychosocial factors have been found to be a significant inhibitor in young children from acquiring basic reading and writing (Schunk, 2012).

 Alves, Susin, Damé-Teixeira and Maltz (2018) indicated that kids that face economic disadvantage tend to develop basic literacy in the intermediate phase. This finding was highlighted in by Alves, Susin, Damé-Teixeira and Maltz (2018)   whereby malnutrition due to poverty and lower economic status was a big factor in restricting the appropriate cognitive growth in kids aged 5-12 (Van DE Walr, 2018). Furthermore, Van De Walr articulated that malnutrition slows down the rate at which the human brain of kids develops, this finding is consistent to the one found in the study by Susin, Damé-Teixeira and Maltz in 2018, which focused on how poverty and malnutrition hinders child development

The study examined the growth rate of children (4-12) from different economic and social backgrounds (upper class and lower class). The results were based on how nutrition or diet plays a role in brain function development. The kids were put à through a variety of tests in literacy such as spelling, and numbers. (Schorn and Perisic, 2017). For the results to be tangible the study took a period of 12 months and it shows that kids from poor backgrounds, their minds are affected by the poor quality of food they eat thus resulting in slow development. This was an indicator that their literacy skills are poor due to the diet they consume which links to the aspect of poverty and social class that was found by the study (O'Carroll, 2011).

Psychosocial factors such as economic disadvantage is key factors incompetence of learners in regard to literacy, further other factors adding on top to malnutrition are the lack of parental involvement in learners' education. The findings from the study also indicated that there's minimal to no involvement of parents in the education of their children (Woolfolk, 2017). The rural setting of the study indicated that most parents of these learners are illiterate. Rural areas not only in Capricorn but SADEC have low literacy rates among adults (Human Development Bank Data, 2018). South Africa's rural literacy rate amongst adults between (27-60) is 63% (Human Development Bank Data, 2018). This means the parents of these learners in the foundation phase cannot positively participate in the learning of their children such as helping with homework because they are uneducated themselves.

Parents not being able to being involved also hinders the motivation of learners to fully engage and be determined to learn (Tsaura, 2018). Learners in the foundation phase have been found to imitate adult behaviours and habits, adults who show interest in reading artifacts such as newspapers, magazines etc. around kids tend to spark interest in kids to also read (Sidikwe, 2016). Psychologist call this positive outward motivation however since the low illiteracy rates in these rural areas, the only adults that show these positive behaviors are teachers and teachers have a limited time with learners so that acts an inhibitor to the development of literacy in these learners.

The lack of parental involvement is further perpetuated by the fact most of these learners migrate to urban/semi urban places to seek employment thus leaving child headed homes or homes that the grandparents look after. History grandparents were disadvantaged in terms of getting education, so they also don't play much role in adding literacy at home. The participants highlighted that in some homes older children take care of their younger siblings, those in foundation phase but since they are in school themselves, they have little to no time to get involved in their schooling as their primary concern is the physical wellbeing of these younger siblings (Tsaura, 2018).

Child-headed households are a significant issue in rural South Africa, with approximately 55,000 children living in 33,000 such homes as of 2018, representing 0.9% of all children in the country. The majority of these

households are concentrated in three provinces: Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Eastern Cape. This is alarming as teachers highlighted that children that come from child headed homes have shown a high rate of absenteeism which further impacts their academic activities negatively. Research has shown that children who come from child headed home are often have to repeat grades because they failed due to not being in school frequently (DoE, 2011).

The negative impact that this psychosocial factor has on learners is severe because it has an impact on the high dropout rate of these learners (DoE, 2011). These learners after dropping out become at risk of being exploited for cheap labour, substance and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse and crime. Child headed homes are a breeding ground for juvenile delinquency caused by the lack of parents (Swarnie, 2017). It is alarming that child-headed home numbers are increasing in South Africa (Stats SA, 2018).

Conclusion

These afore mention psychosocial factors have shown to be negatively impacted the literacy of learners in rural Capricorn, as they struggle to comprehend what their teachers are teaching in classrooms. These factors furthermore overlapped in their competency to engage constructively in social engagements with their peers, the hinder age occurs in a manner that they display ill-discipline and unruly classroom behaviors making it difficult for teachers to effectively teach and learn in the foundation phase.

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