

## *The Use of Grade-Level Readers in the Foundation Phase*

Martha Khosa, University of Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

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### **Abstract**

Grade-Level Readers in the form of Reading Anthologies are provided in South African Foundation Phase classrooms (Grades 1-3) for home language learners in order to promote their reading interest and make teaching reading easier. However, evidence shows that teachers lack an understanding of teaching reading in line with methodologies prescribed in the curriculum. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in impacting reading instruction and promoting reading in the Foundation Phase classroom. A qualitative case study underpinned by Tomlinson's theory of differentiation was used to collect data in six quintile 1 and 2 (five categories of schools from the poorest to the least poor) primary schools. Grade 3 reading lessons (with grade-level readers used as the main resource during Group Guided Reading activities) were observed. Data from the lesson observations were analysed manually by using thematic analysis. Classroom observations revealed the teachers' lack of knowledge in teaching reading and their inability to cater for differences and diversity in the Foundation Phase classroom. In view of these findings, it is recommended that teachers should be provided support through coaching from relevant stakeholders such as Non-Profit Organisations, education district officials and academic experts in teaching reading so that they can be able to teach reading cognisant of the differences existing in their classrooms.

Keywords: Grade-Level Readers, Foundation Phase, Reading Anthologies

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## **Introduction**

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

This study looked at the use of home language Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the South African Foundation Phase classroom. Unlike single readers, Reading Anthologies are collections of different stories compiled at the appropriate level of learners. Very little research (if any) has been done in terms of examining the use of Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase. Studies conducted to date focus on single readers (Prior, Fenwick, Saunders, Quellet, O'quinn & Harvey (2011; Kontovourki, 2012; Seals, 2013). This study was an intervention which occurred in the form of providing isiZulu home language Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase to a randomised sample of 100 Quintile 1 – 3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal and teacher guidelines which were intended to help teachers use the anthologies effectively in their classrooms. In order to establish whether the provision of Reading Anthologies had implications for reading practices and whether they promoted reading in the classroom, an in-depth qualitative case study design was used to gather data in six quintile 1 and 2 schools. Hence, Grade 3 reading lessons (with the RAs used as the main resource during Group Guided Reading activities) were observed in the sampled schools.

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were posed: *What is the impact of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies on reading instruction? How effective are Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in promoting reading in the FP classroom?* To answer these questions, the article first discusses the literature related to this topic and unpacks Tomlinson's differentiated model as the theory situating this study. This is followed by describing the method used to collect data. Finally, the main findings, implications and conclusion are presented.

## **Literature Review**

Relevant sources in terms of looking at the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies were outsourced using academic databases such as JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and ERIC. The literature reviewed is conceptualised according to the following themes: Grade-Level Reading Anthologies, the role of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase classroom and using Grade-Level Reading Anthologies according to the Foundation Phase curriculum.

### ***Grade-Level Reading Anthologies***

As already mentioned, Grade-Level Reading Anthologies are collections of different stories compiled at the appropriate level of learners in each grade. Each learner is given their own Reading Anthology for use in the South African Foundation Phase classroom and to take home for practice. The anthologies are categorised according to various grades (Grades 1-3) and reading development or colours (blue representing level 1 for struggling readers, green representing level 2 for averaged readers, and red representing level 3 for advanced readers). Anthologies, according to their levels, provide learners with opportunities to access a wide range of stories written in their home language. They contain colourful pictures; however, they are paperbound (softcover) books which makes it challenging to sustain them, given their fragility. An alternative to using softcover texts which are unsustainable, is to opt for eBooks. However, although eBooks are sustainable and useful in developing children's literacy skills better than print books (López-Escribano, Valverde-Montesino, García-Ortega, 2021) – accessing eBook reading material may be a challenge for under-resourced schools in particular, historically disadvantaged ones. In this case, it is recommended, as per the Teacher's Guide that teachers should teach learners to take good care of the anthologies for the purpose of sustaining them. *Bibliodef* (the programme theory of donor organisation) also assert that access to books which are looked after and age-appropriate is beneficial in several ways, which include inter alia, improving literacy skills and promoting confidence and improvement in learning (Nassimbeni & Desmond, 2011).

### ***The Role of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Foundation Phase***

Grade-Level Reading Anthologies provide learners with opportunities to develop their home language, given that they have been compiled in all the South African official languages which are used as the languages of learning and teaching in the Foundation Phase. Text conventions (e.g., illustrations and pictures) characterising these anthologies help learners comprehend the text better (AL\_Hinaai, 2021). This is also supported in a study that examined the effect of pictures on reading comprehension for learners with reading impairment. Findings in this study showed that texts with pictures could help to improve reading comprehension (Razalli, Thomas, Mamat & Yusuf, 2018). A similar study which looked at the role of illustrations and pictures in reading comprehension revealed that accurate illustrations and pictures have positive effects on reading comprehension (Parks, 2020).

Another significant role of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies is the fact that they enable teachers to conduct various reading activities, such as Group Guided Reading, paired and independent reading with learners. Moreover, teachers can use the anthologies according to their learners' reading abilities - this, according to Kuhn et al. (2006), helps to promote reading development in young learners.

### ***Using Anthologies According to the Foundation Phase Teacher's Guide***

Reading anthologies, according to the Teacher's Guide, are graded readers which are used for various reading activities, such as Group Guided Reading, Paired and/or Independent Reading (Department of Basic Education, 2020).

*Group Guide Reading:* At the beginning of the year, the teacher conducts baseline assessments (short assessments to establish the learner's reading level) to place learners in their relevant ability groups.

In terms of using the Grade-Level Reading Anthologies according to what is stipulated in the guide, teachers are expected to allow and encourage learners to take the anthologies home, where they will read with the support of their parents or caregivers. Learners are expected to return the books to school for reading in class and the teacher is supposed to make a reading record page for each learner to monitor their reading progress and to know when it is time to move them to a different group. Given the fragility of the texts, teachers are expected to teach learners to look after the books.

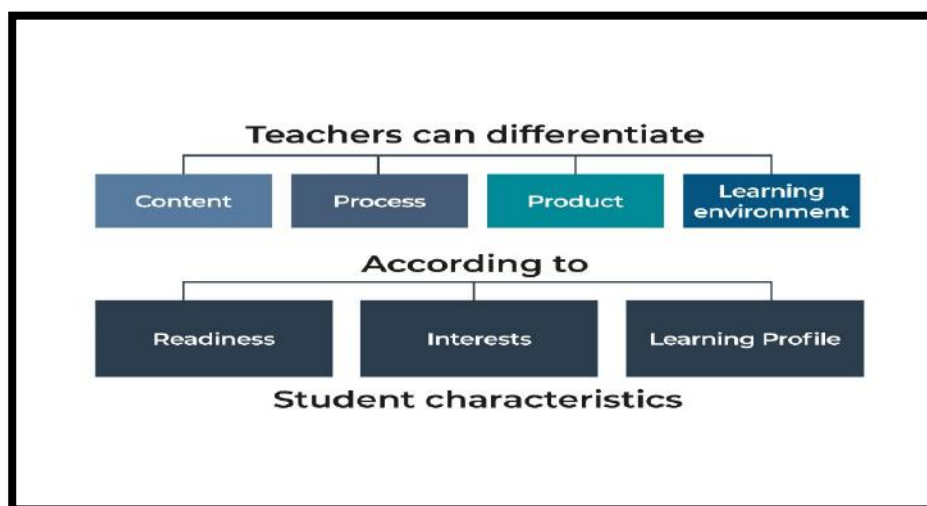
For reading every day during Group Guided Reading Activities, the teacher sees two small groups of 6 to 10 learners (each for 15 minutes) where he/she uses the Reading Anthology, which is at the learners' reading level. The teacher is expected to read with each group once or twice a week. During Group Guided Reading lessons, the teacher should give learners opportunities to read aloud from the anthology while he/she listens carefully and helps them if they struggle. Given that learners are not gifted the same – some would easily catch up with reading; hence, they should be moved to more advanced levels, while others would need more support before moving to the next level.

*Paired Reading:* Paired Reading provides opportunities for the teacher to read aloud with a learner who struggles to read by him/herself or learners taking turns to quietly read to each other. This activity normally happens when the teacher is busy with a small group.

*Independent Reading:* Independent reading gives learners opportunities to read the anthology alone in class or at home. Like Paired Reading, Independent Reading also occurs in class when the teacher is working with his/her small group of learners during Group Guided Reading activities.

### **Tomlinson's Differentiation Model**

Tomlinson's (2003) model of differentiation was found to be compatible with examining the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in this study. Tomlinson describes differentiation as factoring students' individual learning needs before designing a lesson plan. This model provides teachers with opportunities to tailor instruction to accommodate differences and diversity in their classrooms. It enables teachers to modify their classroom organisation, curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment procedures to address the individual learning needs of their students (Tomlinson, 1999). The diagram (Figure 1) below shows the model which FP teachers can use to differentiate classroom elements (content, assessment, teaching methodology, and learning environment) according to the learners' characteristics (readiness, interests, and learner profile) and through a range of instructional and management strategies. This model is meant to assist teachers in ensuring that all learners, despite their differences, benefit from the entire learning process.



**Figure 1: Model of Differentiation in Language Learning**  
(Department of Basic Education, 2017, p. 38)

Evidence has also shown the effectiveness of differentiated instruction on both struggling and apt learners (Hamman, 2014; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020). For example, in a study that examined the effectiveness of differentiated instruction strategies between the control group ( $n=59$ ) and experimental group ( $n=29$ ) of Grades 4 and 5 English Foreign Language learners in Jordan, findings revealed that employing differentiated instruction enabled the experimental group to perform better than the control group in reading comprehension (Magableh & Abdullah, 2020).

### **Inclusion in Differentiated Classroom**

Inclusion in education, according to Kirschner (2015, p. 2), refers to “the inclusion of persons with physical and mental impairments such as sensory or mobility limitations, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, language disorders, behavioural disorders, and autism spectrum disorders.” An inclusive classroom environment requires teachers to effectively implement a differentiated approach which enables them to meet the diverse and heterogeneous needs of all learners in the classroom (Webster, 2014). With South African teachers having to deal for long with many differences at varying levels in their classrooms (Singh, 2004), the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement emphasises the role of inclusion in organising, planning, and teaching (Department of Basic Education, 2011). An inclusive classroom environment makes learners feel safe, valued and respected (Garibay, 2015). However, research has shown that most teachers still do not know how to plan instruction that accommodates diversity in their classrooms (Mahlo, 2017; Adewumi & Mosito, 2019. Omodan & Ige, 2021). For example, a study that examined challenges associated with management of diversities in South African High schools found that language, cultural and personal relativism, learning impairment and comprehensibility were the dominant challenges faced in diversity management in all the schools visited (Omodan & Ige, 2021).

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted in six quintile 1 and 2 schools (4 Primary and 2 Combined Schools) selected from a randomised sample of 100 quintile 1-3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal. A qualitative case study design was used to observe

one Grade 3 isiZulu home language lesson in each of the six schools. The Grade 3 class in each school was selected randomly and automatically included teachers of the targeted classes. Notes were taken throughout the research gathering process to supplement data captured through video and audio recordings during observations. A lesson observation instrument reflecting the realities and demands of the FP curriculum (Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement) and prepared by Zenlit Intervention (2016), a video recorder and notes to supplement data were used to gather information about six HL reading lessons in the Grade 3 classrooms. The lesson observation instrument was adapted to suit the focus of this study, and it is divided into two sections. **Section A** covers details of school visits. **Section B** comprises lesson observations, which looked at the following aspects: classroom teaching and learning environment, the use of Reading Anthologies in the classroom, Group Guided Reading Activities and opportunities afforded to learners to read in isiZulu home language. Only one Grade 3 classroom was observed per school, and all the teachers in each of the six schools volunteered to participate in the study. Observations in each classroom lasted approximately 10 to 30 minutes.

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

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

## **Conclusion**

### **Findings**

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

#### ***Classroom Teaching and Learning Environments***

Most classes observed were not creative print-rich environments. Some classrooms had dull walls which did not display colourful learning charts or posters, as shown in Figure 1. Although all the six Grade 3 classrooms in the schools sampled had a classroom library corner, the classroom of the School B teacher was the only one where the Grade-Level Reading Anthologies were displayed on the library bookshelves. The visibility of single

readers in the classroom of Schools A and E suggested that teachers and learners were not effectively using the anthologies provided to promote reading. Thus, although teachers received the Reading Anthologies, it seemed as if some used them superficially, suggesting that they preferred the single readers to the Reading Anthologies provided. In the classroom of School C, there was no evidence that TC used the anthologies with learners in her classroom. All the Reading Anthologies in the classrooms observed did not seem to have been covered to sustain their use, suggesting that they were not taken care of. Three classrooms (Schools A, B and E) had a library corner, but the classroom in School B seemed to be the only one with an organised library corner, and the anthologies displayed on the bookshelves in School B were still in good condition compared to other classes. Each learner received a copy of the reading anthology in the classroom of Schools A, B and D, whereas in the classroom of Schools E and F, learners either shared the book in pairs or in groups. In the classroom of School C, there was no sign showing that the teacher and her learners used the reading anthologies.

### ***The Use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the Classroom***

*Grade-Level Reading Anthologies* in all the classes observed were used for Group Guided Reading, reading aloud, or choral reading in groups or as the whole class. Paired/Independent Reading was only done in the classroom of TA. Children in her class were called up to read to the whole class during the Group Guided Reading slot while the other learners listened. Only TB used the anthologies according to the learners' level of reading development (as shown in Figure 2), given that the books catered for the developments/grades. For example, in her classroom, TB gave learners in one group whose reading was accurate and fluent Reading Anthology3 (for Grade 3) while the struggling readers in the second group were given Reading Anthology1 (the Grade 1 book), suggesting that although the second group was in Grade 3, they could only read Grade 1 level readers - which might have been sourced from Grade 1/2 teachers because Grade 3 classes did not receive Grade 1 level readers. The Grade 3 teachers in the five other schools visited used the same Reading Anthology3 text with all the learners, suggesting that they might not be aware of their individual learners' reading development.



**Figure 2:** Grade 3 Group Guided Reading activities in School B classroom

### ***Group Guided Reading Activities***

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

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

### ***Opportunities for Reading in the Home Language***

Although teachers had challenges conducting Group Guided Reading activities according to what is stipulated in the curriculum, it was intriguing to note that in most classrooms (except School C) observed, they used the anthologies provided to conduct a choral reading with learners. For example, in the classroom of School A, choral reading was done during Group Guided Reading in pairs/independently and in groups, as shown in Figure 3 below. This seems to have increased the amount of time spent reading in the learners' isiZulu home language during school time.



**Figure 3:** Group Guided Reading Activities in School A Classroom



## ***Teacher's Guide***

The provision of RAs in KwaZulu-Natal schools included the Teacher's Guide to help teachers use the anthologies in line with what is recommended. However, from what was noted during observations, there was no evidence showing that teachers used the guide to support teaching and learning in their classrooms. This was supported by the fact that none of the teachers had a reading record to note the reading progress of the learners as recommended in the guide and neither did they seem to understand how to conduct Group Guided Reading.

## **Implications of Findings**

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

***Classroom Environment That Supports Reading:*** Findings revealed that most classrooms were not print-rich environments – they lacked creative reading corners. These deprived learners of the opportunity to easily access graded readers or to read them for enjoyment.

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

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

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

In view of the findings in this study, it is evident that reading challenges in the South African classroom are not necessarily about the shortage of reading material because the Department of Basic Education strives to ensure that each learner has a copy of a text to read in the classroom and at home. As mentioned earlier, this could be about the teachers' lack of knowledge in teaching reading according to the methodologies recommended in the curriculum in terms of implementing differentiated instruction (Jager, 2016; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Hence, it is recommended in this study that in terms of following Tomlinson's (2003) model of differentiation, teachers should be provided support through

coaching from relevant stakeholders such as Non-Profit Organisations, education district officials and academic experts in teaching reading in line with the principles of inclusion and differentiated model in the Foundation Phase classroom. This will enable them to teach reading cognisant of the differences existing in their classrooms. Nonetheless, there's a need for studies to look at the use of Grade-Level Reading Anthologies in the other Foundation Phase grades, as this study focused on Grade 3 only.

### **Limitations of the Study**

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

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**Contact email:** [KhosaM@ufs.ac.za](mailto:KhosaM@ufs.ac.za)