

How Grade-R teachers' inability to promote a 'love for books' influences the acquisition of early literacy skills in Grade-R learners in Zambezi Region, Namibia

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Abstract

Promoting a love for books is key to learning to reading and writing in pre-primary grades. This can only be achieved through the use of qualified human capital at this level of schooling with adequate support from Regional Advisory Services (RAS). Research claims that learners who are regularly exposed to reading materials find a positive basis and impetus for literacy learning. This paper thus reports on a study that investigated the significance of promoting a love for books in Grade-R (in the Namibian context, Grade-R refers to Grade 0) classrooms in the Zambezi region, Namibia. The study also shares the significance of this move as well as what teachers should put in place to promote it as a way to accelerate the emergence of learner early literacy skills in their respective Grade-R classrooms in the Zambezi region. The data were analysed using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory through themes and statistical analysis of emergent Early Grade Reading Assessment (eEGRA) test. Data were collected through interviews, lesson observation as well learner output in the eEGRA test which learners took at the beginning of their Grade One year.

Keywords: *emergent literacy, foundational literacy, Grade-R, Zambezi region, pre-primary*

Context and literature review

What love for books?

Research reveals that Namibian Grade-R teachers do not promote a love for books (Nzwala, 2018). This was confirmed by their classroom practice as well as absence of book corners in their classrooms (Nzwala, 2018). Important to note however is that what determines children's early literacy skills development is how much the "child was read to, how much the child has been playing with words and books as a way to develop a love for books, and how much the child pretended to be a reader (through pictures) when they played with language" (Zeiler, 1993, p. 111). A love for books could also be promoted by providing learners with age appropriate books in the book corner where children can choose from as a way to demonstrate that "books are a part of their daily routines" (McMonagle, 2012, p. 15). This implies that Grade-R learners should be subjected to literacy learning enabling environments; environments where they can manipulate or handle books; where they talk about books; and develop stories on pictures during book handling and manipulation.

According to Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, and Zhang (2012), during these sessions, children get to know how to handle books as well as how a book works. Fang (1996) and Joubert, Bester, and Meyer (2011) further observed that pictures (in books) enable Grade-R learners to learn to associate pictures with their life experiences thus stimulating concept formation in that, as learners discuss a picture, concepts are developed. It is in this context that Namibia MoE (2015, p. 11) states that "learners should link words with pictures by predicting; identifying and matching words to pictures". Grade-R learners thus only internalize new learning contents after making links with their prior knowledge and experiences thus promoting their higher mental functions (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). This can best be achieved in the book corner due to the fact that a child explores the adult world in the book corner by pretending to read picture books, as modelled to them by the teacher (Karpov, 2003). The role of picture books on early literacy development is also reiterated by Weeks' (2003) case study which found the contribution of picture books in developing early literacy skills. Weeks

concluded that, through picture books, learners interact with graphics thus qualifying picture books as effective semiotic tools which inspire children to love books (Weeks, 2013).

Oral language

Through the above activities; oral language, one of the key drivers of emergent literacy is promoted, discouraging the perception that a culture of reading is fading in our society (Hardy & Hastings, 2016). In a Grade-R class there should be “lots of talk with teacher-initiated conversations with learners aiming at directing their conceptual learning as well as introducing new words into their vocabulary” (Johnson, 2016, p. 130).

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003, p. 6) claim that “to be confident readers, children need lots of opportunities to build spoken language by talking and listening, as well as learning about print and books”. Therefore, class environments of children should be avenues for emergent literacy learning where a child interacts with print materials regularly. According to Zygorus-Coe (2001), if children are exposed to reading literacy-related situations before they enter formal school, they will be better equipped to succeed in learning to read in Grade One. In this context, Zeiler advances that “teachers do not make children into readers; they (children) make themselves into readers” (1993, p. 109). The teacher’s role in a classroom is thus to mediate emergent literacy by addressing opportunities to sing, recite, dance, discuss and listen to language. Namibia MoE (2015, p. 1) further states that one of the aims of the Pre-primary curriculum is to “develop children’s language and communication skills with opportunities for all to talk and communicate in a widening range of situations, to listen carefully and to respond to others, and further to practise and extend the range of vocabulary use”.

According to the National Research Council [NRC] (2000, p. 188), an environment that is “well endowed with books has the potential to provide learners with opportunities to pretend to read and to learn to identify and handle books,” thereby promoting oracy. When teachers encourage children to pretend to read, children begin to understand the adult world and start to prepare for its challenges prior to engaging with it (Bodrova, 2008). However, oracy cannot be promoted if it is not

consciously mediated by a teacher. Mediation of learning is important for learners not to learn the wrong thing (Wood, Smith, & Grossniklaus, 2001). This is because the child’s learning always “occurs in a social context in cooperation with someone more skilful” (McLeod, 2014, p.6). According to research, teachers should be encouraged to ask questions that offer learners opportunities to explore and apply their critical-thinking skill through discussion (O’Carroll & Hickman, 2012). Therefore, Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, and Vehovar (2003) suggest that questions should not only be closed-ended but also open-ended. While closed-ended questions only demand one specific answer (yes or no answer, for example), open-ended questions allow learners to freely express their opinion in context, based on prior experiences (Reja et al., 2003).

Research question

The overarching question this article addressed was: What is the significance of promoting a love for books in Grade-R classrooms in Namibia? This key question was further explored through the following sub-questions:

1. What do Grade-R teachers do to promote a love for books in their classrooms in Zambezi region?
2. How are Grade-R classrooms in Zambezi region organized to promote a love for books?

Theoretical framework

The research was guided by Lev Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural theory (SCT) of ‘how children learn’. The theory supports the child’s societal experiences as key to mastering literacy competences in Grade-R (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky, through his SCT claims that the child’s social, cultural and historical backgrounds are integral in any form of learning, and should thus not be ignored. Based on this background, the child is able to understand curriculum related content if linked to their environmental experiences. The SCT thus aligns well with Namibia’s junior primary curriculum which organises learning along cross curricula themes of social environment, cultural environment, and health, safety and nutrition (Namibia MoE, 2015). The SCT also claims that the child’s development of critical reasoning is informed by how much the

teacher engages their cultural and background knowledge as the child's background is the basis of new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2017). This notion is further advanced by Strauss and Gregory who claim that SCT is "linked to a socio-constructivist understanding of the acquisition of knowledge" (Strauss & Gregory, 2017, p. 59).

Further, SCT is learner centred as it celebrates collaboration and interaction during classroom activities (Vygotsky, 1978; Namibia MoE, 2015), thus aligning well with the progressive principle or ideal of learner-centred education, which is Namibia's philosophy of teaching and learning (Namibia Ministry of Education [MEC], 1993). Vygotsky (in Bonamigo, 2016), expressed that when learners interact through stories, they enter their Zone of Proximal Developments (ZPDs) and start to think critically about what they are taught with the help of more knowledgeable others (MKOs) like siblings, teachers and elders. The philosophy of learner-centred education recognizes the learner's existing knowledge as the starting point in the learning process (Namibia. MEC, 1993).

Methodology

Research design and data generating techniques

The study takes the form of a case study and adopts a mixed methods approach, which combines both qualitative and quantitative designs. I chose this approach to address the thesis of this investigation in more depth. While qualitative design is represented, in this research, by qualitative data (of interview and observations); quantitative design is represented by quantitative data of learner scores in the eEGRA test taken by learners early in Grade One. Other than addressing the depth and width of the study in terms of data collected, the significance of a mixed methods approach, to this study couldn't be overemphasized. Through this approach, the researcher was able to probe the extent of teachers' promotion of a love for books as a way of mediating emergent literacy skills of Grade-R learners. According to Okeke and van Wyk (2015, p. 209):

Qualitative research is concerned with the understanding of how a particular

individual or group of individuals think and the meanings they attach to their actions and in the quest to understand these meanings, qualitative researchers are encouraged to adopt ways that enable them to represent the voices or actual words of the participants in their research reports thus making the qualitative approach thick and descriptive.

The probability that one method cannot provide all of the required data was confirmed by various data sets, for example, quantitative data generated through the eEGRA test which used Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) as the tool of analysis, at the 0.05 significance level. This data showed variation in learners' performance and the extent of such variance, thus either confirming or rejecting the null hypothesis.

Sampling

Six different schools were drawn (two each) from the urban, peri - urban and rural contexts to participate in this study. This was a way to establish how teachers in different contexts promoted a love for books. Two teachers (one Grade-R teacher and one Grade One teacher) were sampled from each school using purposive sampling technique. A sample of nine learners per school was drawn using stratified random sampling technique. In total six teachers, and 54 learners constituted the sample of this study.

Findings

Findings of this study revealed that Grade-R teachers, despite what they said during interviews, did not demonstrate promoting 'a love for books', as there were no book corners in their classrooms where learners could go to and practice to handle books. In this paper Grade-R teachers are referred to as Urban School Teacher 1 (UST¹); Urban School Teacher 2 (UST²); Peri-Urban School Teacher 1 (PuST¹); Peri-Urban School Teacher 2 (PuST²); as well as Rural School Teacher 1 (RST¹) and Rural School Teacher 2 (RST²) respectively. In answering the question 'How do you promote a love for books' this is what they had to say:

Dialogue Box 1: Responses to the question: “How do you promote a love for books?”

UST¹: I normally encourage my learners to love the books. For example, when they see picture, they love books with pictures. So I normally encourage them that books are good, and books can help them to develop their knowledge. They really love books.

UST²: I think I would always tell them stories with storybooks that have large pictures and less content in it because they do not know how to read these words, so I would always use this book to tell them stories.

PuST¹: In order for my learners to love books, I must create a reading corner, put a lot of story books there, sit in reading corner, each learner picks a book only to check pictures, they tell you what is happening in the pictures.

PuST²: I use to give them books to read during that reading period.

RST¹: I teach learners to love books; I give learners books with pictures.

RST²: Sometimes I use to give the books to learners, like these picture books.

While one teacher, UST² indicated that she told learners stories with storybooks to develop their love for books, another teacher, PuST¹, motivated learners to love books by creating a reading corner. PuST¹ further said that she made storybooks available to learners to boost their love for books saying that “each learner picks a book only to check pictures”. This is an assumption the teacher makes and not something dictated by the curriculum. The child needs to see words and pictures as well as to use the pictures to interpret the text. The researcher also observed that PuST¹ did not have a reading corner in her classroom at which she claimed learners to go to read. One teacher, PuST² said that she gave learners books to read during reading periods. The teacher’s use of the concept ‘reading periods’ was inappropriate for Grade-R suggesting that the teacher saw Grade-R as a formal grade because what she said only starts in Grade One and beyond and is not part of the Grade-R learning programme, thus failing to recognize the difference between Grade-R, which is informal and the formal Grade One. It also suggests that the teacher is unconsciously showing that she was a former primary school trained teacher, and was not specifically trained for Grade-R. Further, she did not observe the Grade-R daily programme, which did not make provision for formal reading.

The Grade-R programme is a lot loose and therefore the learner should be able to go to the reading corner during fantasy play, structured activity and even before school starts. The Grade-R curriculum suggests that

fantasy play is very crucial and that children should be afforded the opportunity to handle books in the reading corner. The researcher also noticed that teachers generally overemphasize the use of pictures as a way to promote a love for books. This may have been derived from their hanging onto the curriculum document which prescribes ‘picture reading’ as a strategy for foundational literacy acquisition. The teachers could have set up an activity in which the children could have made their own books and ‘read’ them to the class or their peers. This way the child is learning about what a book is made up of and developing their language skills in the ‘retelling’ of their story.

While four teachers, UST², PuST¹, RST¹ and RST², expressed that they gave learners books with pictures as a way to motivate them to develop a love for books, one teacher, UST¹ said that books were good, as they helped them to develop their knowledge suggesting that a child handling a book and looking at the contents might develop knowledge, but only if there was someone present who could help mediate learning through the semiotic tool of a book. If this teacher is simply leaving the child to learn entirely through self-discovery there is a risk that they might learn the wrong thing (Wood, Smith, & Grossniklaus, 2001). This style is Piagetian and was criticized by Vygotsky, who regarded social interaction as critical in the development of learners’ critical thinking and that the child’s learning always “occurs in a social context in cooperation with someone more skilful” (McLeod, 2014, p.6).

While there is nothing wrong with a child going into a reading corner by themselves and pretending to read, this must also be offset by regular story times and the teacher sometimes sitting in the reading corner with the children and looking at a book together or answering questions a child might have about a book. Five teachers, UST¹, UST², PuST¹, RST¹ and RST² who supported the use of pictures to develop a love for books among children were not explicit whether the learner was making the connection between text and pictures. This is what the teachers assumed the learner was doing. This assumption possibly stemmed from what the curriculum document prescribes. For example, “learners should link words with pictures by predicting; identifying and matching words to pictures” (Namibia MoE, 2015, p. 11).

It should be noted that teachers PuST¹, RST¹ and RST² were beginning to acknowledge the fact that learners developed a love for books through exposure to reading corners and to picture books which they could

manipulate. However, the teachers did not show any evidence of exposing learners to books during lessons. Furthermore, RST²'s indication (like PuST²'s) that “sometimes I use to give the books to learners, like these picture books” suggested the teacher only gave learners books in the past and not any longer as she was not observed giving picture books to learners during the researcher's data collection period. As stated earlier, this could be attributed to the fact that none of the teachers observed had a book corner in their classroom for learners to go to and handle books.

Despite the teachers' not having ‘book corners’ for book handling opportunities of their Grade-R learners, schools demonstrated a very positive output in the eEGRA test on the question that tested learners' book handling acquaintances or skills establishing no significant difference in performance among the schools. The researcher tested learners' abilities on each question part as shown in the table below with each question part scoring ten marks.

Table 1: Scores on how schools performed on Question1: Handling of a book

Schools	US ¹	US ²	PuS ¹	PuS ²	RS ¹	RS ²
Question Parts						
1 Learner correctly holding book	9	9	8	8	9	9
2 Learner turning pages correctly	8	8	7	7	6	8
3 Pretend read	8	9	7	8	7	9
4 Learner ability to show title of book	2	6	4	4	8	7
5 Learner ability to show cover page	6	8	8	2	7	7
Mean	6.6	8	6.8	5.8	7.4	8

To compare the mean scores of the schools in Table 1, the researcher formulated statistical null hypothesis (H_0) shown below:

- H_0 = There is no significant difference in performance of various schools on Question 1.
- H_1 = There is a significant difference in performance of various schools on Question 1.

The p-value as per the analysis of One-Way ANOVA $\alpha = 0.05$, $df = 5$, is 0.4152 (Appendix 1). Since the p-value (= 0.4152) is greater than $p = 0.05$, we cannot reject the H_0 and thus conclude that there is no significant difference in the performance of the various schools on Question 1. Table 1 shows that PuS² recorded

the lowest mean score of 5.8 points with US² and RS² recording the highest mean values of 8 points respectively. The mean score of 5.8 recorded by PuS² is as a result of question parts 4 and 5 in which learners underperformed, thus calling for support in those areas, such as ability to show both the title of the book and the cover page of the book. It also reveals and suggests that learners were not sufficiently prepared on the question parts in which they underperformed.

Since the focus of this research was also on the learners, the study sought to establish how individual learners at the different schools performed on Question 1 of this study. Each learner's mark is expressed as a percentage as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Scores on how learners performed on Question 1

Schools	Learner marks in%								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
US ¹	80	60	80	80	60	80	100	60	60
US ²	80	60	100	80	100	80	100	100	100
PuS ¹	60	80	80	20	100	40	100	100	100
PuS ²	20	60	60	20	80	100	100	60	80
RS ¹	20	40	100	100	100	80	100	100	100
RS ²	60	100	80	100	100	100	100	60	100
Mean	53.3	66.7	83.3	66.7	90	80	100	80	90

The results show a p-value of 0.0194 (Appendix 2). Since the p-value (= 0.0194) is smaller than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and conclude that there is a significant difference in the performance of learners on Question 1. The sources of variance could be attributed to Learners 4 with the highest variance of 1386.667, and Learners 7 with the least variance of 0 (Appendix 2). The table further shows that Learners 1 produced the least mean value of 53.3 marks with Learners 7 at each school producing the highest mean value of 100 marks. This shows a significant difference between the two mean scores. The least mean score of 53.3 points is as a result of the poor performance by Learner 1 of PuS² and Learner 1 of RS¹ suggesting that the two learners had challenges in answering Question 1 as they recorded among other learners the least mark of 20 points each.

Discussion

Lack of books and book corners: Developing a love for books is a curriculum requirement for literacy learning in Grade-R in Namibia (Namibia MoE, 2015). As a result, inculcating a love for books in learners, and using book corners, promote a reading culture throughout a child's life. Therefore, such behaviour may avert and deter the growing concern that the culture of reading is fading in our society (Hardy & Hastings, 2016). Mediating foundational literacies through learner exposure to books as semiotic tools are key to developing a love for books, which also support literacy learning in Grade-R. Semiotic tools are important as they encourage abstract reasoning which is key to the internalization of learning content and development of higher mental processes (Vygotsky, 1978; McLeod, 2014). Therefore, Grade-R teachers should read many interesting books to learners,

introduce learners to picture books, as well as read to them from large-sized books. Moreover, teachers should afford learners the opportunity to handle and pretend to read picture books themselves, from left to right and top to bottom. According to Namibia MoE (2015, p. 11), Grade-R teachers should assist learners to develop skills that will help them to "pretend to read silently and aloud from storybooks".

While the Namibian Grade-R literacy curriculum advocates that, "learners should read silently and aloud from storybooks" (Namibia MoE 2015, p. 11), silent reading inhibits the learners' development of vocabulary and self-expression. When Grade-R learners pretend to read from books, they do not only develop a love for books, but also develop critical literacy skills like directionality, recognition of both beginning and end sounds in words, and correct sequencing of pictures, which are essential in promoting the reading skills of children. Learners who are exposed to books get to know how to handle books better than when they are simply exposed to ordinary loose pictures. Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, and Zhang (2002, p. 168) believe that picture books "teach children how a book works because most children recognize, interpret and express themselves through pictures long before they master print".

Fang (2006) also supports the notion of exposing children to books by observing that books attract children to pretend to read, thereby promoting children's love for books. When a child sees a picture in a book, it is easier for him or her to interpret the picture by associating it with the label underneath it than pure text. Fang (2006) and Joubert, Bester, and Meyer (2011) observed that pictures in books enable Grade-R learners to learn to associate

pictures with their life experiences and that pictures stimulate concept formation in that, as learners discuss a picture, concepts are developed.

Though promoting a love for books in Grade-R classrooms in Namibia is a key objective of this paper, findings show that learners were not afforded the opportunity to handle books; they were not afforded time to explore books, despite the Namibian Grade-R literacy curriculum directing that children should demonstrate the “proper way of handling books” (Namibia. MoE, 2015, p. 11). This study further found that teachers did not consciously mediate foundational literacies by encouraging learners to pretend to read, and they did not afford learners opportunities to pretend to read both from ordinary books and from picture books. This was due to the fact that the observed Grade-R classrooms lacked books and book corners where learners could go to manipulate books and pretend to read from picture books. According to Karpov (2003), Vygotsky found that a book corner was key to literacy learning in Grade-R, due to the fact that a child explores the adult world in the book corner by pretending to read picture books, as modelled to them by the teacher.

Weeks’ (2003) case study on the power of picture books found that picture books play an important role in developing early literacy skills. Weeks’ (2003) study also established that, through picture books, learners interact with graphics which points to picture books as effective tools in inspiring children to love books. When children are introduced to books, they get exposed to print, develop skills of book handling and directionality as they page through the books. This is supported by Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003, p.6) who claim that, “to be confident readers, children need lots of opportunities to build spoken language by talking and listening, as well as learning about print and books”. Through talking, learners share their prior knowledge and experiences which are embedded in their communication with others (Vygotsky, 1978). This study also found that teachers did not challenge their learners’ critical reasoning skills by asking them explorative questions which would have enabled them to give answers based on their prior knowledge and experiences. This is due to the fact that Grade-R learners only internalize new learning

contents after making links with their prior knowledge and experiences (Cohen & Cowen, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Although research participants indicated that they promoted a love for books by creating reading corners and equipping reading corners with reading materials, telling learners’ stories by using storybooks, giving learners books with pictures, and availing storybooks to learners, their classroom practice demonstrated the opposite. The study established that teachers did not afford learners the opportunity to handle books, teachers did not read to learners; they did not create opportunities for learners to talk about books as there were no book corners where learners could practise handling books and pretend to read, or story-times in which discussion around books could take place as a way to advance learners’ oral skills. Furthermore, not all the schools had libraries where teachers could take their learners to experiment with books. Thus, this research found that there was a significant deficiency, or a serious lack, of both the reading culture and reading materials in the classrooms of the sampled teachers.

In support of reading materials in Grade-R learning environments, the National Research Council (2000) noted that an environment that has lots of interesting, age-appropriate books will provide learners with the opportunity to handle books and pretend to read. Therefore, when children pretend to read from books, the process should be consciously mediated by the teacher for learners to optimally benefit from the exercise, thereby strengthening both the literacy learning process of children and their explorative skills.

Results of this study revealed teachers’ failure to consciously mediate foundational literacies by encouraging classroom talk about books, reading to learners and encouraging learners to handle books, which discouraged not only a love for books, but also the development of basic literacy skills. Research claims that, “reading ability has to do with the child’s linguistic competencies, his or her experiences, how much the child was read to, how much the child has been playing with words and books as a way to develop a love for books, and how much the child pretended to be a reader when they played with language” (Zeiler, 1993, p. 111). When teachers encourage children to pretend to read,

children gradually start to understand the adult world and prepare for its challenges prior to engaging with it (Bodrova, 2008). It was also established that participant teachers did not offer their learners the opportunity to play with language, owing to teachers not conducting Grade-R lessons in a play-based manner.

Conclusion

Children's manipulation of reading materials is key in paving the way to conventional reading in a formal classroom setting. This paper therefore explored this notion as well as its benefit to both children and teachers. This was confirmed by both learners' and schools' overall performances in the eEGRA test. Therefore, despite being untrained to handle Grade-R learners, teachers are encouraged to ensure, with the support of Regional Advisory Teachers, that they introduce learners to books early enough during their pre-primary years as it builds a strong literacy foundation prior to formal learning.

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APPENDIX 1

ANOVA: Single Factor

SUMMARY

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>
US ¹	5	33	6.6	7.8
US ²	5	40	8	1.5
PuS ¹	5	34	6.8	2.7
PuS ²	5	29	5.8	7.2
RS ¹	5	37	7.4	1.3
RS ²	5	40	8	1

ANOVA

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	18.7	5	3.74	1.043721	0.4152	2.620654
Within Groups	86	24	3.583333			
Total	104.7	29				

APPENDIX 2

ANOVA: Single Factor

SUMMARY

<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>
1	6	320	53.33333	746.6667
2	6	400	66.66667	426.6667

3	6	500	83.33333	226.6667
4	6	400	66.66667	1386.667
5	6	540	90	280
6	6	480	80	480
7	6	600	100	0
8	6	480	80	480
9	6	540	90	280

ANOVA

<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	10000	8	1250	2.612229	0.019407	2.152133
Within Groups	21533.33	45	478.5185			
Total	31533.33	53				