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THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS AND PARENTS IN USING READING ANTHOLOGIES WITH FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS

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Abstract

Given the low performance in reading literacy among South African learners, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) created opportunities for the provisioning of isiZulu Home Language (HL) Reading Anthologies (RAs) in the Foundation Phase (FP) (Grades 1-3) classroom. This article aims to examine teachers' and parents' experiences in using these RAs with learners and explores how their sustainable use could be supported. A qualitative case study was used to gather data in six quintile 1 and 2 schools. Grade 1 and 3 teachers were interviewed. Focus group discussions with parents of learners were undertaken in each of the six schools sampled. Interviews revealed the convenience of having one book with multiple selections of stories written in children's HL – making teaching reading in the classroom easier. Group discussions showed that the provision of RAs strengthened parents' involvement in supporting and encouraging their children's reading. In view of these findings, it is recommended that the DBE should continue supporting reading in the FP by sustaining the provisioning of the RAs at home and in the classroom. Hence, effective training and workshops are necessary for teachers and parents to manage and use these resources.

Keywords: reading anthologies, home language, foundation phase, graded readers, reading practices

Introduction

The provision of resources in the Foundation Phase (FP) classroom (Grades 1 – 3) has been one of the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) priorities for improving the quality of teaching and learning for all South African learners. Although there is a serious lack of reading materials in many African countries, the situation is better in South Africa compared to some of our neighbouring countries, given its "highly developed economy and an advanced infrastructure" (South Africa, 2021, p. 380). The country's education budget in relation to GDP was reported at 6.6% in 2021, which is considerably more compared to other African countries, where it is usually below 5/6% of the GDP. However, despite investing more in education, reading literacy achievement for South African learners remains low. This could be because of a lack of reading culture (Krolak, 2005), where learners are deprived of opportunities to experience the joy and pleasure of being read to and easy access to a variety of texts to practice their newly developing reading skills on a daily basis. For example, the DBE's second Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS II) in Mpumalanga has found that most teachers in Grade 1 classrooms only used the DBE workbooks during reading lessons instead of exposing learners to texts which should help them develop literacy skills and broaden their knowledge in general (DBE, 2017).

This article reports on teachers' and parents' uptake of resources in an intervention which occurred in the first half of 2021 in the form of providing isiZulu Home Language (HL) Reading Anthologies (RAs) to a randomised sample of 100 Quintile 1 – 3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). In addition to the RAs, parents were given two laminated A4 colour posters to help them communicate various activities to children and encourage them to read.

The study has contributed by adding interesting data to African early grade reading research in terms of examining the experiences of teachers and parents in using the RAs with FP learners and exploring how their sustainable use could be supported in the classroom and at home for promoting reading in African HLs. To achieve the said research objectives, the following research questions were posed:

- What are the teachers' and parents' experiences in using the RAs with FP learners?
- How can sustainable use of the RAs be supported in the classroom and at home?

The use of graded reading anthologies in the FP classroom

Teaching early reading is a complex task, given that children develop reading skills differently and reach benchmarks at different times (N'Namdi, 2005) as demonstrated in the findings which showed the extent of letter-sound knowledge where out of 4138 Grade 1 learners, 40% scored between 26-39, as the highest score and 13% scored zero (Spaull, 2023). For this reason, it is important for teachers to consider selecting books that match the reading levels of their learners. Hence, the introduction of graded reader anthologies not only in the English language but also in African HLs (e.g., Xitsonga, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, isiSwati, isiNdebele, and Setswana) as shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. Home Language Reading Anthologies

The graded RAs shown above are paperbound (softcover) books often held together with glue, suggesting the level of their fragility. They are a collection of stories arranged according to the various reading levels (from simple to complex) in a single book. In the FP classroom, HL RAs are given according to grades and the learner's reading level. For example, Grade 1 learners are given their Grade 1 anthology, Grade 2s receive both Grades 1 and 2 RAs, while Grade 3s get both Grades 2 and 3 anthologies. Grades 2 and 3 learners are given anthologies from their previous grade to accommodate those who are grade level behind in reading. Easy access to RAs is one of the approaches emphasised by Spaull and Pretorius (2019) in terms of achieving reading success during early learning. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) also maintain that access to books in the classroom provides opportunities for learners to become successful readers. Evidence has shown that the provision of graded reading materials in the classroom enables teachers to motivate and help learners develop vocabulary, grammar and reading fluency (Alby, 2017). Monica (2016) and Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek and Winberg (2022) also assert that graded reading materials written at various reading levels or selected carefully are essential in maximising reading opportunities for learners in an enjoyable and relaxing manner. In a study that examined the benefits of graded reading, Alby (2017) found that when learners read at their reading ability, they stand a better chance of developing their reading confidence and fluency. During interviews, teachers also indicated that the RAs benefited a wide range of learners, from those struggling to read to those who are good readers. More importantly, RAs make it easier for teachers to provide learners with opportunities to access multiple selections of stories (in a single book) they can relate to, resulting in a large quantity of reading (Nation & Waring, 2013) which can be implemented in different reading activities such as shared reading, guided reading, independent/paired reading and read alouds.

The use of graded RAs at home

Because children from impoverished households have limited access to books (Franzen & Allington, 2009), the provision of RAs at home can increase the level of children's interest in reading and promote effective communication between teachers and parents. Pushpanathan (2013) argues that parents should play their role at home in providing their children with many different reading experiences – such as reading aloud with them or children reading aloud to their parents or caregivers. This calls for parents and teachers to work together in helping and supporting learners to become interested in reading. A study that examined parental involvement in relation to students' reading performance revealed significant outcomes for students whose parents were involved in guiding and assisting them to become successful readers (Bendanillo, 2021; Çalışkan & Ulaş, 2022).

Sustainability of RAs in the classroom and at home

Sustainability is an ideal solution to preserving reading materials available in class and at home for easy access to reading. Nhan-O'Reilly (2014, p. 31) recommends the following ways teachers can use to preserve written material and books in their classrooms so that they can remain in good condition for longer:

- Teachers can store their books in the classroom reading corner where children can access them easily.
- Dust the shelves regularly so that the books stay clean.
- Wipe the covers of the books too.
- Keep the shelves and books away from any damp or wet areas so that the books stay dry.
- Ensure that before a session which involves using the books, students have clean, dry hands.
- Teach students and other teachers not to break the spine of books and to handle them carefully.
- If the cover or the spine of a book is damaged, it should be repaired straight away.
- If a book has been badly damaged and is unreadable, it should be removed from the shelf and replaced.

However, caring for books does not mean that children should be deprived of using them as this will likely prevent the purpose of promoting reading interest (Nhan-O'Reilly, 2014). On the other hand, for parents or caregivers to assist and support their children with reading, they rely on the material that teachers give to the children to take home with. Hence, parents are also expected to take proper care of these reading materials by showing their children how to do likewise. For example, when parents are reading to their children, they should turn the pages carefully, and when they are finished using the book, they should return it to the bookshelf or a place where it will be stored safely – and sometimes ask their children to do the task, as this helps in teaching children to care for these books (Nhan-O'Reilly, 2014).

Research methods and design

The study was conducted in six quintile 1 and 2 schools (4 Primary and 2 Combined Schools) selected from a randomised sample of 100 quintile 1-3 schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu Natal. A qualitative case study design was used to interview one Grade 1 and one Grade 3 teachers who volunteered to participate in the study from each of the six schools. Interviews with teachers lasted approximately 30 minutes. Four focus group discussions with a maximum of six parents of the FP learners were also conducted per school and lasted about 20-35 minutes. Notes were taken throughout the research gathering process to complement data captured through audio recordings during interviews and focus group discussions. To allow teachers and parents of the learners to express themselves without language restrictions, interviews were conducted in their Home Language, isiZulu.

Teacher interviews and focus group discussions were analysed manually using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for qualitative thematic analysis. The first phase involved transcriptions and translations of interviews and focus group discussions from isiZulu to English, ensuring familiarity with the data and identifying meaningful patterns 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 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 considerations were considered in this study. The study was led by the Department of Basic Education 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 1 and 3 teachers are referred to as T1 and T3, and schools as Schools A to F).

Findings and discussions

The following section presents and discusses data collected from the teachers and parents regarding their experiences of using the RAs with FP learners. The presentation and discussion highlight themes guided by the following research questions: What are the teachers' and parents' experiences in using the RAs with FP learners? How can sustainable use of the RAs be supported in the classroom and at home? This study was done in six quintile 1 and 2 schools in the King Cetshwayo District of KZN. A sample was drawn from 100 quintile 1-3 schools. Grades 1 and 3 teacher interviews and focus group discussions with a maximum of six parents of FP learners per school were undertaken.

Teacher engagement strategies in using RAs

Teachers indicated that they used the RAs with learners in the classroom for different activities:

We use them for group guided reading, shared reading and shared reading which we discuss with pictures and then I read them first as a teacher and then they read, then form groups (TA1).

When they are reading in groups, I call them and tell them that a book has been chosen for us today. I take the book and open a page where learners are also supposed to open. Thereafter, I choose a group and focus on helping them while the other groups are given some handwriting tasks. I help them like this until the end of the activity (TD1).

I give them their books and tell them to take them home and read. I ask them to read the story on page 30 and then they can really read it and come back and read it in class. I ask them to read what they learned at home in groups or individually. Thereafter, I give them their exercise books and ask them to write about what they read on page 30 while others write about that story on page 40. I ask questions before they write and answer and then write (TE3).

I give the children books, they choose the ones they like and then they learn and then I help them if there is a problem, because there are learners who can't read because of age then I give them Grade 1 books (TB3).

When I teach them, the first thing I do, show them the picture and ask them what they think the story is about, they say what they see and then I ask what the story will be about and then they guess, 'Miss, I see it will talk about this and that and someone says it will talk about this.' Then we start reading the story to them and see if they can hear it because the story has questions at the end and we answer the questions (TE3).

Teachers indicated that the provision of RAs helped them to use different reading slots such as shared reading, group guided reading (GGR) and read alouds with learners. The engagement of the RAs through the said reading approaches in the classroom seems to be helping teachers meet their learners' diverse learning abilities and ensures that the way the RAs are used is varied and interesting (Nhan-O'Reilly, 2014). The reading slots have different purposes; for shared reading, the teacher reads the text with learners, discusses elements of the text (words, language, tense, setting, etc.), shows them how we construct meaning as we read, discusses pictures and how they relate to the text, etc., while GGR enables teachers to support learners individually in reading texts appropriate for their reading level. Read alouds are done by teachers to share stories, foster an enjoyment of stories and reading, role model a good reading style, improve the learners' ability to process information, widen their vocabulary and increase the chance of understanding what they are reading.

Given the aim of increasing opportunities for the learners to access reading material at their reading level, it was interesting to note that some teachers (1 of the 6 teachers) mentioned that they sent learners home with black and white copies of the anthologies for their parents to support and encourage them to read. This sounded like giving learners some reading homework which could be effectively done with the support of parents or caregivers (a common feature of high performing schools but seldom encountered in poor performing schools). The strategy of involving parents in children's learning is emphasised in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. Local research also attests to the benefits associated with teacher-parent collaboration in children's learning (Ramadikela, 2012; Mathekg, 2016).

Other teachers claimed that they encourage learners to make independent choices of the storybooks they think they will enjoy reading. This strategy is great for encouraging learners to read anthologies for pleasure (Nkomo, 2021). However, this felt like teachers were saying things that they thought sounded 'good.' It may be acceptable for letting learners select storybooks in their reading corner in general, but the RAs are aimed at providing learners with reading material at their level. Allowing weak readers to choose an anthology above their level is not helpful, nor is it okay to let good readers get away with reading easy texts.

The usefulness of RAs in the classroom

Teachers indicated the usefulness of reading anthologies when they said:

It is very useful because it combines all these little booklets, puts them together, it is easy to use (TF3).

In my opinion, these books are useful because they have put together different stories that they can't throw away. It has questions we read and answer (TE1).

We talk about pictures; the thing that helps us the most is because the book has a lot of pictures; they see what the book is about before they read it (TA1).

The responses above indicate the usefulness of RAs, as they are unlikely to be lost or misplaced, unlike smaller books. Some teachers liked that the RAs included clear questions which are probably helpful for them to establish the level at which learners can comprehend what they have read. Another significant use of the RAs, according to the teachers, is the inclusion of colourful pictures in various selections of stories. Pictures make stories attractive and colourful and entice children into a text. Al_Hinaai (2021) emphasises that picture books help children comprehend the text better. They can hook children into a lifelong love of reading (Reading Is Fundamental, 2010). This also helps struggling readers because they can use pictures to establish the meaning of words used in the text. However, although a picture walk can help the child get a sense of what the story is all about, they do not help them to decode, which is important for figuring out known and unknown words. Teachers also noted the use of the anthologies when they indicated that *we use them daily so that they can learn the home language (TE3)*, and *when I teach isiZulu, they should improve vocabulary as they read with understanding (TA3)*.

Another important use of the RAs is emphasised by TE1 when she said: *They are at their level; I really like that these stories have colourful pictures that make the kids develop an interest in reading, and the language used is not difficult*. Given that the RAs are categorised according to various grades (Grades 1 to 3) and reading development or colours (blue representing level 1, Green for 2 and Red for 3), this helps teachers cater for diverse learning needs during reading time. Hence, TB3 indicated that the RAs helped her develop an understanding of her learners' reading abilities.

Parental engagement strategies in using the RAs

According to the aims of the DBE_Terms of Reference, learners in the FP were supposed to be given the anthologies to take home with so that their parents could encourage them to read as a way of strengthening collaboration between parents and teachers in supporting learners.

Parents indicated that *we sit down and read (P2 of School E)*; *we do it together (P3 of School C)*. *I work with her (P1 of School A)*. Using the shared reading approach to help and encourage children to read at home is beneficial for the children, and it can also make teaching reading in the classroom easier. Other parents commented that *I tell him to read and when he still struggles, I will read to him ((P6 of School C)*, *I will read it first and you read it (P1 of School A)*. These responses suggest that parents relied on scaffolding (where they first provided support and then stepped back for independent learning) to help children read. Scaffolding involves two aspects (modelling and practice). Thus, by reading first, parents gave their children opportunities to watch and listen so that they could do the reading without being assisted. In addition to using shared reading and scaffolding, one parent commented that *I read it to him and explain it to him and then I ask him if he understands, but if he does not understand, I explain what the sentence means in isiZulu (P2 of School A)*. Another parent added that *I help him by explaining the meaning of the words (P4 of School A)*. It is interesting to note that besides helping and encouraging children to read, parents are also involved in developing their children's vocabulary in the isiZulu HL by reading aloud to them and clarifying words that sound difficult. Among the parents who participated in the focus group discussions, there were caregivers who indicated challenges of not being able to read and finding it difficult to support children in reading. However, their eagerness to see children read made them seek help from their neighbours. Hence, one granny said: *I go to my neighbours because there are learners who have passed this stage and ask them to please show us how we can help my grandson (P3 of School C)*.

The use of RAs at home

The provision of the RAs encouraged parents/caregivers to become actively involved in their children's reading. For instance, P4 of School B said: *they are helpful - when we have them at home, we have a reason to help our children learn*. This suggests that it was a great idea to share the HL RAs with parents, given their commitment to supporting and encouraging children to read at home. Parents also emphasised reading and writing improvements which seemed evident from the provision of the RAs when they said: *All is well because he knows how to write most of the words (P4 of School C)*. *I feel delighted because I can see the progress of my child in the class he is in; he can even point out the words to read (P1 of School C)*; *I feel so good that I have nothing to worry about because I see my child is doing well (P2 of School E)*. The provision of the RAs also seemed to have helped

parents become aware of their children's reading behaviour. This is confirmed by P1 of School E when saying: *I am happy because I can see where my child is still struggling; they are helpful because I can see where the child is missing.* In addition, *our children see pictures that help them not play dangerous games and see pictures that encourage them to do well* (P5 of School B). The response of P5 suggests that the provision of RAs at home has also given their children something efficient to keep them busy; hence, *you will see him take the book and read by himself* (P3 of School C), suggesting that the provisioning of books can increase opportunities for children to read at home.

The use of colourful posters at home

In addition to the RAs provided, parents were given two laminated A4 colour posters (Figure 2) to help them communicate various activities to children and encourage them to read.

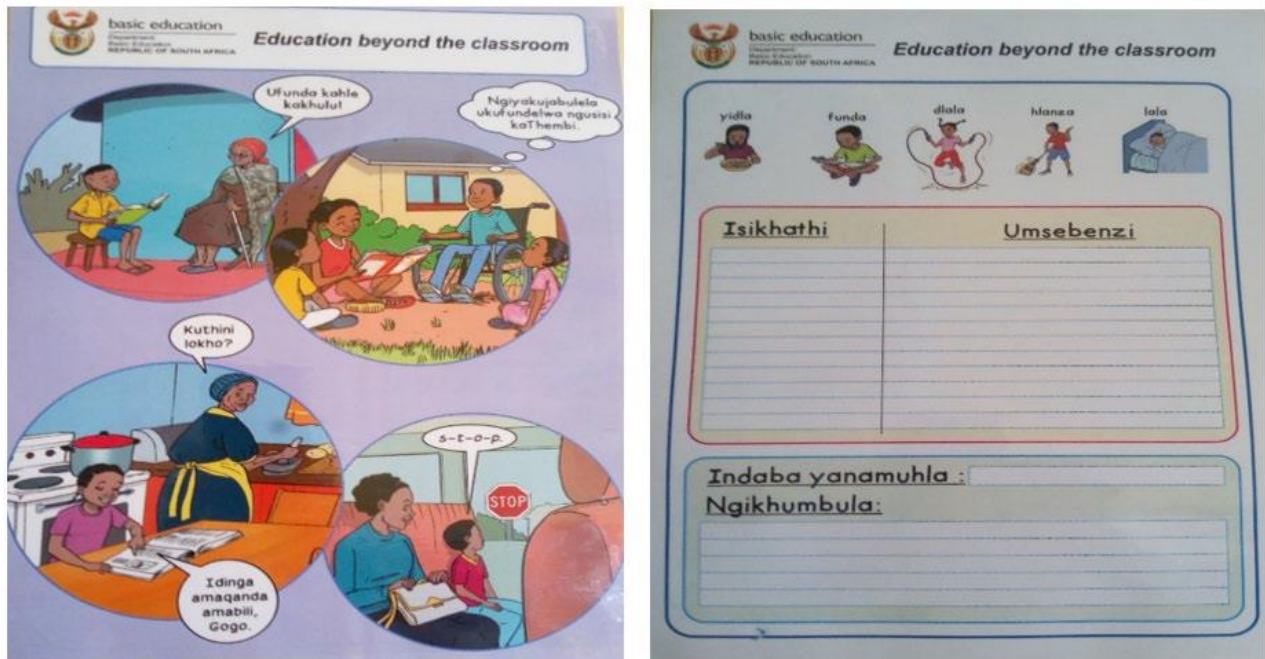


Figure 2. Colourful posters for parents

The posters helped parents remind children about their daily routines accommodating reading. For example, P5 of School A said: *She puts books there, undresses and goes to play,* and P6 of School B added, saying: *I ask her to eat first and then she does her homework.* Parents' responses suggest that colourful posters were quite useful in that they helped them know what activities (which included the time to eat, learn, play, clean and sleep) children should conduct throughout the day after school.

Sustainability of reading anthologies in the classroom

In terms of sustaining the use of RAs in the classroom, teachers made positive remarks in this regard:

It would be nice to cover them clean and put them on the shelves. Let's just find a well-crafted corner in the classroom so we can keep them neat and tidy (TA3).

I tell them not to tear the paper, to look after it because we will still use it for the rest of the year (TE1).

I ask the children to cover the books, not to write on them because even when they answer, they do not write on them so that others can find them in good condition and use them. I sometimes tell them that if they lose them, they will have to pay for them and that they will not get their progress reports (TE3).

Most teachers seem to agree with sustaining and prolonging the usage of the RAs. They emphasised that the books should be taken care of by covering them and putting them in a place where they will not be damaged easily.

However, overprotection of the anthologies in the classroom seems to interfere with the process of encouraging and motivating children to take the books home. For example, teachers said:

I provide the learners with the little books that they can take home. It helps but not the new ones; we are trying to make sure that we keep them from getting dirty (TD3).

We said we were careful not to flood them at home. We are trying to protect the books so that they do not pour water on them at home. Yes, they use them in the classroom (TD1).

If it could happen that we have given the learners these books and they happen to lose them, they may not be used regularly. The older learners go with them, but the small group we make copies for them and tell them that they are not supposed to be torn (TB1).

The responses above suggest that teachers are more concerned about safeguarding the RAs than developing their learners' interest in reading; hence, they do not encourage them to take the books home. Nonetheless, teachers like TA1 emphasised that *they take them home, which I always encourage them to do when they come to class the next day with the books, to show that they have learned to read ahead*, while others commented that *I make copies for them and paste them into their homework books (TB1)*. Although some teachers are more concerned about safeguarding the RAs (which is equivalent to preventing the purpose of the RAs from being achieved), it is worth noting that others have their learners' interests at heart, given their effort of replacing the original RAs with black and white copies for the children to take home with.

Sustainability of RAs at home

Given the fragility of the RAs provided, parents emphasised the importance of taking care of them to sustain their usage. Hence, P6 of School A said, *I take care of it by putting plastic cover and Sellotape and explaining to her that the book is not for playing with it. You don't use crayons in this book because it's for reading*. Another parent added that *I think we should use them in a clean place; before he looks at the book, the child must wash his hands first (P2 of School E)*. All the parents seem to agree that they need to take proper care of the books brought home from school. Besides, books are expensive; therefore, it is understandable that parents want them to last long so that children can use them over and over again. P1 of School B also added that *keeping them in good condition can be a good way to take care of them and teach children to take care of the books so that they do not look old and can continue to help others*. Thus, apart from parents taking full responsibility for the sustainable use of books, they also emphasised the significance of teaching their children to look after their books. P3 of School B further said *I also say let them continue, let them bring them home and help us, we must tell our children to put them in order*. According to this response, sustainable use of the RAs can also be maintained through consistent provisioning of books at home, especially African HL reading books.

The main takeaways

The findings revealed that teachers were pleased with the provision of the anthologies in their classrooms, given that during reading time, each child has the opportunity of receiving a copy that is at their learning development level. Since the RAs are categorised according to grades and reading development levels, findings also revealed that some teachers found it easier to allocate books that matched the learners' strengths in reading. However, other teachers still need support in developing strategies for knowing their learners' reading abilities so that they can group them accordingly and offer instructions that meet their learning needs. Interviews with teachers also revealed the convenience of having one book with multiple selections of stories written in the HL. Hence, they claimed that the RAs made teaching reading easier.

The provision of RAs at home increases the level of children's interest in reading. This was emphasised by P3 of School C during group discussions with parents. Access to books also seemed to have strengthened the involvement of parents in supporting and encouraging their children's reading. For example, some parents claimed that they got involved by reading aloud to their children and giving them a chance to read independently. Research has shown that children who are read aloud at home develop stronger early literacy skills and better language abilities (Duursma, Augusty & Zuckerman 2008; Niklas, Cahrssen & Tayler, 2016). Other parents claimed that the books helped them track their children's reading abilities. Thus, if they noticed that a child struggled to read, they stated that they provided the necessary support and then gave them a chance to practice by themselves. Findings also showed that some teachers deprived learners of opportunities to take the anthologies home. Although other teachers gave learners black and white copies of the original RAs, this is better because learners were given something to read at home.

Regarding the use of colourful posters given to parents in terms of promoting the effective use of the RAs, responses from parents during discussions suggested that they were able to understand and follow instructions laid on the posters. In this case, this helped them support and encourage children to develop acquaintance in their

daily routines which included reading. FP teachers use routines and schedules to manage reading instructions in their classrooms - this seems to be aligning well with children's daily home routines. Hence, Burden (2003) emphasises that routines help create smooth transitions between activities; therefore, teaching children routines at home is also bound to be beneficial in the classroom.

As emphasised by Nhan-O'Reilly (2014), reading books need to be managed and cared for. The Findings in this study revealed that both teachers and parents felt that books should be covered to sustain them. They also emphasised the need to store the books safely and teach children to wash their hands before taking them from the bookshelves or where they are displayed clearly. From the experience of losing lots of reading books, other teachers claimed that it would be safe to store them in the classroom rather than encourage learners to take them home, suggesting that safeguarding books is a priority for teachers rather than encouraging and motivating reading for pleasure and enjoyment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from the teachers' and parents' interviews regarding their experiences of using the RAs with FP learners, it is recommended that the RAs should be provided in the classroom and in communities across South African languages continuously. Hence, teachers and parents/caregivers should be trained, encouraged, and supported effectively in managing and using the RAs with learners in the classroom and at home to help children access various reading texts daily.

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