

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world in this generation of the 21st century, no child can access education without basic literacy. In the South African context, for example, one of the democratic rights of every child is access to education – the ability to read and write. Not only does reading enable every child to communicate with texts in his/her environment, but it also becomes the doorway and foundation to being able to write. Thus, Gunning (2004:4) states:

Reading is magical because it opens the door to a vast world of information, fulfillment and enjoyment. After having learned to read the person is never quite the same.

As the world advances in knowledge and technology, there are dramatic changes that take place around us which affect the way we perceive the world. During my early years of childhood before I started primary school education, I recall that in my home in the rural area, we used to sit around the fire in the evenings to listen to words of wisdom from our grandparents. At the time, our grandparents expressed shock at how technological advancement had affected young people's brains. Although many of them could not read and write, they believed that they were the source of knowledge which they felt obligated to pass on by word of mouth to our generation and those to come. Books and the internet have taken over the role of the elderly because they are the current source of knowledge and have become the foundation of being literate.

Despite the fact that elders' role of passing knowledge has become virtually extinct because of industrialization, modernization, and the increasing dominance of busy schedules and lifestyles which leave the education of children to books and the internet, it is sad to note that there are some communities still lagging behind in literacy levels. These are not only rural communities with little access to amenities such as libraries, schools or technology. Often, urban communities in

fast-growing, prosperous cities also struggle with literacy and reading. Of particular interest in this study are learners in disadvantaged communities, for example in Alexandra Township in the city of Johannesburg in South Africa. Alexandra, located near Sandton, is adjacent to one of the most prosperous urban centres in Africa and an economic hub of Gauteng. Yet in Alexandra there are many learners whose literacy levels are a cause for concern, despite the fact that they are in the final year of primary education.

There are many complex reasons – historical, social, and educational – that contribute to the ‘lagging behind’ of some learners in Alexandra, as we shall see. However, this study focuses specifically on educational issues, in particular the process of acquiring reading literacy in local schools. In order to research and assess this process, this study focuses on the work of the Phenduka Literacy Project, a nonprofit organization which is concerned with advancing reading skills in Alexandra schools. The research report also describes and analyses the methods used by the Phenduka Literacy Project in improving the reading levels of Grade 7 learners in an Alexandra school before these learners could proceed to high school. It is therefore appropriate to first introduce readers to the context of the study.

1.1. Context of Study

1.1.1 Phenduka Literacy Project

The Phenduka Literacy Project is a nonprofit, educational organization based in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, which was registered with the Department of Social Development in August 2001 (Beynon, 2001). Recognizing that literacy and reading levels are a serious problem in Alexandra schools, its major aim is to improve reading proficiency and enhance the literacy levels of Grade 7 learners in some of the disadvantaged primary schools in Johannesburg’s Alexandra Township by using creative and innovative teaching and reading methods (Beynon, 2006). Currently, the Phenduka Project operates

in four of the twelve primary schools in Alexandra after being granted permission by the Ministry of Education in October 2001 (Beynon, 2006).

The four selected primary schools in Alexandra which undergo a two-week cycle of reading intervention by Phenduka are Dr Knak Primary School, Gordon Primary School, Iphuteng Primary School and Ithuthe Primary School. These schools are close to each other, thereby making it easily accessible for Phenduka facilitators who still work under severe financial constraints. However, the research site for this study is Dr Knak Primary School.

Based on the Phenduka experience, it appears that most Grade 7 learners in Alexandra schools are reading at levels that will not enable them to cope with high school textbooks and programmes. In addition, at least four or five Grade 7 learners at each school are not reading at all (Beynon, 2001 & 2006). It is these poor readers who are the primary focus of Phenduka's reading intervention. The facilitators of the Phenduka Project suggest that, had it been possible to operate in the lower grades and for longer periods, learners would benefit more, but unfortunately there is no capacity for expansion at the moment because limited funds do not permit them to employ more teachers (informal interview with Beynon, 2007).

However, Phenduka's intervention does highlight the desperate need for a more extended and extensive programme of literacy intervention. This research report in part aims to assess the potential of such literacy and reading intervention programme.

1.1.2. Background of Alexandra Township

Alexandra Township is located 3km from Sandton, one of the most affluent suburbs of Johannesburg. It is very close to Limbro Business Park where a large part of the city's high-tech and service sector is based. It is also near East Gate, one of the city's biggest shopping centres. Smith (2002) states that 87% of

Alexandra's population is black and young, in the age group 17-35 years, and that the average age group is 23 years because the township experiences high levels of population instability, high incidence of crime and is one of the places where HIV, the deadly disease, is rife. These statistics by Smith (2002) give an indication that Alexandra is one of the townships in South Africa which houses a youthful population.

According to a 2001 census, **Alexandra has one of the highest incidences of people over 20 years of age without schooling, with almost 50% of people aged 5-24 currently not receiving schooling and living in informal settlements** (Wilson, 2001). There are high levels of unemployment and the family members who are working are in the low-income range (Beynon, 2004). In support of the above findings, Wilson (2001) points out that many working families in Alexandra Township have an average income of R1 029, which is unevenly distributed. As a result of the above factors, Alexandra has problems of overcrowding, lack of investment and shortage of essential social services aggravated by diffusion of informal housing. Smith (2002) states that the dominant languages in Alexandra are: Zulu (30%), Sotho Pedi (26%), Tswana (12%) and Xhosa (10%).

When I first visited Alexandra Township in May 2007, I was shocked to see shack dwellings very close to each other and sprawling over many parts of the Township, uncollected garbage, potholed, narrow crowded roads, and unattended sewage flowing between the dwellings across the roads. As I moved closer to Dr Knak School, I spotted one or two decent houses or a block of flats among the shacks. Having passed the nearby affluent suburb, Sandton, with clean streets and beautiful luxurious mansions, these appalling conditions made me feel as if I was in a different city altogether, not Johannesburg, the "city of gold". The environment suddenly changed when I arrived at the school which had well maintained classrooms and grounds. There was, however, evidence of

overcrowding in the classrooms, which restricted teachers' movement between learners' desks during teaching.

1.1.3. The learning environment in Alexandra

Teachers in Alexandra schools face numerous challenges in terms of space, resources, materials, training and so on. These problems are aggravated by "the legacy of the apartheid education system or 'Bantu Education' during the period 1953-1994, which was premised on racial segregation and discrimination, poor funding and low standards of education" (Stein, 2004). In support of this view Beynon (2004:150) argues that teachers in such disadvantaged areas like Alexandra still struggle to narrow the educational gap which was created during the apartheid era despite "the introduction of a civic-orientated, outcomes-based curriculum that has sought to align the discourse of schooling more closely with the cultures and values of the composite population of its classrooms".

Typically, many classes in Alexandra schools consist of 50-60 learners who come from one of the most disadvantaged urban communities in South Africa. Although most of the classrooms I saw were clean, with doors and windows intact, they were not spacious enough to accommodate 50-60 learners. There were only a few texts or textbooks available and few other learning facilities conducive for learning (own observation, 2007). In support of the above observations, Stein and Newfield (2006:3) point out that disadvantaged schools in Africa "are poorly equipped in relation to English: there are few textbooks and reading material available, and teachers themselves are often not fully proficient in the language". These conditions prove highly detrimental to literacy learning and reading amongst learners, some of whom are functionally illiterate even at Grade 7 level (Beynon, 2001).

Although teachers may acknowledge the existence of poor readers in their classrooms, the shortage of resources always becomes a hindrance in such learning environments (Beynon, 2001). In support of this opinion, Mcquillan

(1998:86) argues that “just as we would not ask a doctor to heal without medicine, so we should not ask teachers and schools to teach without the materials to do so”. Macquillan (1998) further argues that the gap between good readers and poor readers can be closed provided learners have a rich supply of interesting and appealing reading material, a place and enough time to read. The reading intervention period by Phenduka is a limited one due to institutional constraints: schools are unable to make more time available if they are to finish their learning programmes and prepare the Grade 7 learners for their final assessments (interview with Beynon, 2007).

1.1.4. How Phenduka Selects Poor Readers

The first thing the Phenduka facilitators do at each school is to identify learners with reading difficulties. These learners are identified by means of a diagnostic reading session for all Grade 7 learners, during which they separate the learners who cannot read from the rest. Once the learners with reading difficulties have been identified and taken to a separate venue by the facilitators, they are immersed in a two-week learning process which aims to improve and enhance their reading proficiency. The Phenduka facilitators also run workshops specifically for the teachers at each school, to provide support on skills-training for incorporating remedial teaching of reading methods into whole class-teaching (Beynon, 2006).

1.2. Aim

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the methods used in a short term literacy intervention by the Phenduka Literacy Project in Dr Knak Primary School in Alexandra Township. This case study focuses specifically on describing and analysing the use of ‘Phonics’ and ‘Whole Language’ approaches to literacy and reading pedagogy, within a particular educational site. The reading intervention by Phenduka, which is the focus of this research, was undertaken with a selected group of Grade 7 learners identified as ‘poor readers’ in the school, during the first school term between January and February 2008.

While taking into account the importance of multimodal communication in Phenduka's literacy programme, this research considers the broader debate around the efficacy of Phonics and Whole Language approaches, as well as how and why Phenduka has incorporated these approaches into its pedagogy and teaching methods. Although not the major aim of the study, this research also investigates how Phenduka's application of phonics and whole language approaches in teaching reading supports the objectives of Outcome Based Education (OBE) in South Africa.

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the key methods used by the Phenduka Literacy Project in teaching reading to a selected group of poor readers? How and why are these methods selected?
- How are the methods shaped by two key literacy approaches, namely Phonics and Whole Language teaching?
- What role do these methods and approaches play in defining Phenduka's programme and developing reading proficiency amongst poor readers?

1.4. Rationale

Why focus on reading? In many South African communities such as Alexandra, literacy and specifically reading levels continue to be disappointing (Beynon, 2001; Place, 2004). It is crucial to have an in-depth understanding and expertise in the methods of teaching reading to poor readers – what works and what does not. Being able to read with understanding is crucial in any learning environment because it determines the learner's performance in all academic subjects that are taught at school. Reading proficiency is also a key factor in future success in the world of work, citizenship, and social interaction (Hughes, 1972; Beynon, 2001 & 2006).

In most literate societies, 'reading' as a skill receives more attention than any other aspect of education because it is used to judge how successful the teacher and the school are in overall academic prowess (Nuttall, 1982; Kamhi & Catts, 1989). Although in some cases individuals can have a successful career without being able to read, Kamhi and Catts (1989:xi) argue that "individuals with reading difficulties are always at a disadvantage especially in coping with academic work that requires more reading and often have deficit in spoken language".

Literacy does not only influence learners' academic success, but it also determines their job prospects and self-esteem because literacy is a key to success in the workplace and in the wider techno-community (Beynon, 2001). Learners in schools who face difficulties with literacy and reading or with understanding written texts often enter into a cycle of avoidance, resistance and resentment, and fall further and further behind. In support of this view, Kamhi and Catts (1989) and Beynon (2004) argue that individuals with reading difficulties are always at a disadvantage in coping with academic work that requires more reading. Such students may resort to playing truant or getting involved in anti-social behaviour as a means of overcoming their lack of proficiency and frustrations in failing to engage with or grasp what is imparted to them.

Beynon (2001) investigated the possibility of an alternative approach to literacy practice that would facilitate access to literacy in ESL readers at middle school level. Her research was based on an Action Research intervention undertaken by Phenduka between February and June 2001. While emphasizing the multimodal nature of Phenduka's teaching methods, another important area that lay outside the scope of Beynon's research was the ways in which Phenduka's literacy pedagogy was shaped by two major approaches, mainly Phonics and Whole Language, in improving reading proficiency. This research seeks to describe and analyse the combination of Phonics and Whole Language teaching of reading used by Phenduka.

Literacy and reading proficiency remains a key concern in South African schools and communities, specifically in disadvantaged communities such as Alexandra Township (Beynon, 2004; Place, 2004; Stein, 2004). Yet Phenduka's short-term interventions in teaching reading amongst Grade 7 learners appear to have a high success rate (Beynon, 2006). Given that Phenduka continues to conduct its interventions in Alexandra schools, addressing the pressing need for improving reading levels amongst Grade 7 learners, and by its own account has attained a high success rate amongst the target group of poor readers, it seems well worthwhile to revisit and introduce new perspectives in the research carried out by Beynon (2001).

There is an ongoing debate around the use of Phonics and Whole Language approaches to literacy, and where these two approaches can be used successfully (Turbill, 2002; Gough, Ehri & Treiman, 1992; Meek, 1991; Kamhi & Catts, 1989). It is envisaged that undertaking this research would contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the teaching of reading using Phonics and Whole Language in disadvantaged communities which experience the scenario of having learners dragged into high school with poor reading skills. Teachers in such disadvantaged communities may feel that they have something new to learn from the Phenduka methods that would motivate them to alter their methods of teaching and specifically the teaching of reading, thereby enhancing learners' proficiency in reading skills which in turn may improve learners' literacy levels.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter focuses on important theories that have a bearing on the methods of teaching reading to learners of English as a second language or English as an additional language. More specifically, this section discusses views by different researchers about the theories of phonics, whole language and balanced approaches in an attempt to describe and analyze the methods of teaching reading used by the Phenduka project discussed in this study. The debate around the efficacy of these approaches and their application to the pedagogy of teaching of reading in a South African context is considered, against the backdrop of how these support the Outcome Based Education (OBE) or the Revised National Curriculum statements (RNCs) of the syllabus at Grade 7 levels. In this same chapter, a comprehensive literature review of key issues and debates on teaching reading is provided.

2.1 Literacy and Reading

It is important to clarify the meaning of the terms 'literacy' and 'reading' as they are used in this study to describe Phenduka's teaching methods, because these two terms form the core of this study. What usually comes to the reader's mind after hearing the word 'literacy' is the traditional definition which means 'to be able to read and write' or 'the ability to use language to read, write, listen and speak'. Walsh (1991) summarises literacy as people's ability to use language in an effort to make sense of the world, with the world here encompassing both inside and outside the school environment.

However, I find the meaning of 'literacy' as defined below by Australia's Department of Education and Employment (Turbill, 2002:9) very useful, practicable and relevant when applied to the South African educational system in this 21st century:

Literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately, in a range of contexts. It is used to develop knowledge and understanding, to achieve personal growth and to function effectively in our society. Literacy also includes the recognition of numbers and basic mathematical signs and symbols within text.

Literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening and critical thinking with reading and writing. Effective literacy is intrinsically purposeful, flexible and dynamic and continues to develop throughout an individual's lifetime.

In applying the above definition of literacy to the South African and particularly the Alexandra Township context, one realizes that many children still have problems in reading English texts because of the legacy of apartheid which did very little to provide competitive education in such areas, and this has affected children's personal and academic growth. The above quotation reveals the importance of integration within literacy and the fact that literacy continues to change over time, with the inclusion of knowledge of numeracy playing a vital role in determining an individual's level of literacy. However, modern literacy tends to put emphasis on writing and reading, which are both social acts involving an implied contract between the individual and his/her society. A reader's job is, therefore, to read texts around him/her attentively, critically and with understanding.

On the other hand, McEwan (2002) asserts that literacy is dependent on learner's ability to master the sound and spelling of words in order to be able to read texts independently. However, she emphasizes the fact that "there must be constant exposure to and reading of a wide variety of well written narrative and expository texts, and well designed strategy instruction in order for literacy to be

a reality” (McEwan, 2002:23). I find McEwan’s arguments stated above in favour of the usefulness of Phonics instruction as an important approach which contributes to the learner’s ability to read, especially when she states that learner’s mastery of sounds and spelling of words play a vital role in the reading process.

There are multiple meanings that are used to refer to ‘reading’, depending on the context in which they are used (Thompson, Tunmer & Nicholson, 1993; Smith, 1985). In support of this view, Marsh and Hallet (1999:71) suggest that “there is an oversimplified view of reading [because] research and theory about learning to read has generated much heated debate”. Reading, in general terms, refers to the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language or of finding meaning that a reader constructs from text. In this study the term ‘reading’ is defined in terms of a learner’s ability to look at and understand written or printed words/sentences in given texts.

Although in most cases the reading process appears to be a personal activity, Veit, Gould and Clifford (2001:32) argue that “reading emerges from what both writer and reader bring to the text”. The above argument indicates that there is always an interaction between a reader and a writer, although each person’s reading experience will be unique. Gunning (2004) reiterates that today’s reading is unlike reading in the past which was passive and the reader only got the meaning of the author, but it requires that there be a more active role by the reader in constructing meaning from the text. However, Smith (1985) argues that it is not worth trying to find a single suitable definition of the word ‘reading’ but to focus on what is involved in reading.

The above theorists have useful information to take heed of when dealing with cases of poor reading in schools, especially in the context of this study wherein Grade 7 learners are reading at levels of foundation phase at primary school. Gunning (2004) advocates active participation from the learner which is very

useful in the classroom because once learners take charge of their learning, positive results would be achieved. Today's learning demands that learners not only "swallow" what is presented to them but be able to use their critical thinking abilities to the utmost.

Kamhi and Catts (1989) suggest that the more comprehensive definition of reading is that which is associated with skill in comprehending texts, especially "those that are made of different kinds of modes – written, visual, audio [because learners] will not be able to explore reading and writing if they are taught language in isolation from reading schemes" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005:4). In support of this view, Eskey (2002:5) argues that "simply sounding words is not reading in this era of communicative language teaching [but] to read a text successfully is to know the meaning of that text". I find the above ideas useful in teaching learners to read because getting the meaning from the text should be the core of any learning process.

Simpson (1962) in the works of Nicholson (1998) argues that reading should not be regarded as a skill to be taught but as a habit to be insisted on, in order to discourage learners from guessing at new words. A learner would in turn be able to correct his/her wrong guesses of words by understanding the context in which the word occurs and all phonetic elements that are related to it.

The learners we teach nowadays are bombarded by modernity and yet many teachers still rely on methodologies which are familiar to them but are old and unproductive (Beynon, 2004). Examples of such poor and old methods include activities such as asking learners to repeat words after the teacher, writing wrongly spelt word/s three or four times, filling the blanks or copying the given definition. I believe that this would not help struggling readers because they would lose interest in doing work that is difficult and would always wait to be "spoon-fed" by teachers. Gust (1995) argues that such methods of teaching

hinder children's thinking because they do not liberate the child in any way. In support of this perception, Beynon (2004:150) further relates the ills of this habit based on her observations in schools she visited in Alexandra Township where "reading lessons in Middle School level mostly take the form of individual children reading aloud in turn for a minute or two from a text, which is approached 'cold' with no prior discussion of the topic or story". From the above procedure of teaching reading, it is made clear that only strong readers are catered for while weak readers are humiliated when their incompetence is exposed to the rest of the class.

Relating the above views to my observations and experiences as a teacher, the classroom has become an arena where a teacher becomes the active source of knowledge by taking full charge of the learning process and learners become either active or passive recipients of knowledge. For example, the common pattern of the teaching/learning process is that in which the teacher dominates the learning process by doing most of the talking throughout the lesson or asking learners to respond to questions. Learners in turn respond orally or in timed written exercises. This habit does not involve the learners fully in the learning process and in some schools it has contributed to making many learners fall far behind in their literacy and reading levels (Beynon, 2004).

Veit, Gould and Clifford (2001:31) argue that "reading is by no means a passive experience but that which requires active participation from the reader in order to bring words on the printed page to life". In support of this idea, Miller (1998) suggests that a reader must exercise the same care and attention that he/she does when he/she writes in order to become an effective reader. From the above arguments, the reading activity becomes a personal, unique activity which calls for the learner's alertness, flexibility and openness. The arguments by Veit, Gould and Clifford (2001) and by Miller (1998) may pose challenges or problems to teachers who are dealing with struggling readers, because such learners would have already given up on trying and would need the teacher's

encouragement and assistance until they can stand on their own as independent readers.

The ability to read can also serve as a catalyst that is used to spark the ability to write (Miller, 1998; Walsh, 1991). The first step that a Grade 1 educator teaches a child is reading before he/she introduces the child to writing because people “learn by reading and what is learnt can in turn be used in writing” (Miller, 1998:1). In support of the above view, the great Latin American thinker, José Martí, argues in Walsh (1991:94) that “to learn to read is to take a step forward [and] to learn to write is to take a step upward”. Both Miller (1998) and Walsh (1991) agree that there is a correlation between a learner’s ability to read and to write because being a good reader will help one become a more effective reader. I find these ideas very useful to consider as guidelines in describing and analysing Phenduka’s teaching methods with regard to learners with reading difficulties.

From a different perspective, it is important to have an idea of what children bring to reading when they start school. Schank (1982) argues that when children enter the first grade at school, their minds are not like “a blank page” because they will be able to speak their language very well although they may be considered illiterate. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to know something of the outside world that is currently known by the child before teaching the child to read and write in order to build upon it (Vygotsky, 1978; Schank, 1982).

The key ideas given by the above theorists or experts in the field of literacy that I find important to consider in this study when dealing with poor readers would be to establish the learners’ reading cultures at home and the level of proficiency in their home language, in order to capitalize on that in teaching them a second language. For example, if many learners enjoy listening to fairy tales, a teacher can use such texts in teaching them to read or make use of similar sound

combinations from the learners' home language when teaching those sounds of English words.

2.2 Approaches to Teaching Reading

The different uses of the term 'reading', which depends heavily on the context as different authors have suggested above, might have contributed to the emergence of several debates on how the teaching of reading to learners in the school environments should be done. However, Smith (1972) argues that there is no method which is superior to the other because *any* method is likely to work better with some children than with others. To expand on this view, Turbill (2002:1) states that "each new way has had its share of criticism, mistrust, and attacks by those who appear to want to cling to an old way". The prominent theoretical debate that forms the background to this study is that between **Phonics** and **Whole Language** approaches to the teaching of reading. In my study, I consider the effectiveness of these approaches, specifically in relation to poor readers in disadvantaged communities such as Alexandra Township.

Marsh and Hallet (1999:73-74) argue that children should be introduced to all levels and aspects of the reading process so that they gain meaning from text. In support of this view, they suggest **five** (5) distinct areas of reading which are very useful in teaching learners with reading difficulties. These are as follows:

- Literacy awareness – understanding and experience of print and how print corresponds to spoken language or communicates meaning.
- Syntactic awareness – becoming familiar with patterning and sequence of language.
- Word recognition – recognizing words as visual shapes rather than as printed combination of letters.
- Phonological awareness – knowledge of how words can be broken down into or built up from individual units of sound.
- Orthographic awareness – knowledge about the writing system and how letters and letter strings are used to represent words.

The above information is especially useful to consider when teaching reading because it incorporates important ideas in teaching reading using the phonics or whole language approaches, the two approaches under consideration in this study. Marsh and Hallet (1999) advocate that teachers establish learners' background knowledge in order for learners to get meaning from texts, which is the main reason why people read. The given ideas can be used to lay a firm foundation that would enable learners to comprehend given texts and to improve their reading and writing skills.

2.2.1 Phonics/'Bottom up' Approach

It is important to have a clear understanding of what the term "phonics" means because it is one of Phenduka's crucial methods in teaching learners to read. The South African Concise Oxford Dictionary defines phonics as a method of teaching people to read by correlating sounds with alphabetic symbols. In other words, what the definition implies is that phonics is a skill-based approach wherein learners decode or work out the meaning of a text by finding the relationship between the spelling of words and the way words are spoken.

The phonics approach lays emphasis on phonemic awareness or sounds of letters of the alphabet. In most cases there is a tendency to confuse phonics with phonological awareness. Schuele and Boudreau (2008) state that phonological awareness is demonstrated by the child's ability to analyse sound structures of oral language, and phonics on the other hand is when the child is able to work with letters that represent the sounds of oral language. In simple terms, phonological awareness does not involve print material while phonics does.

Thompson, Tunmer and Nicholson (1993) suggest that there are three crucial steps in teaching reading using phonics and these are learning the alphabet, identifying phonemes in words, and segmenting sounds within words. Once the

three steps are mastered, learners are said to be in a position to work out how written words can be decoded phonologically (Thompson *et al.*, 1993).

When teaching reading using phonics, learners are taught the rules about the way words are written, spelt and sounded (Hughes, 1972; Gough, Ehri & Treiman, 1992). In other words, this approach to the teaching of reading is based on the relationship of a word and a letter. It is also referred to as the '**bottom up**' model, and as suggested by the name, "instruction proceeds from simple to complex" (Gunning, 2004). The child's task is to learn to convert graphic characters into phonemes so that the printed form could be mapped to its spoken form (Thomson, Tunmer & Nicholson, 1993). This model helps learners sound out words or tackle unfamiliar words as a basic skill by associating the sound of a letter/s with the printed matter (Hughes, 1972; Smith, 1985; Thompson *et al.*, 1993).

Although phonetic rules may help learners to sound words in English and those from their first language correctly, differing students' vocabulary and English dialects may be a problem in pronouncing words correctly (Reghner, 2003). In support of the above view, McEwan (2002:39) argues that "although many educators have concluded that phonics must be taught, the available approaches on market are confusing, even to a relatively knowledgeable educator". What is made explicit by these view is that phonics may not be easy to teach and also that there is no uniform pattern used by educators in teaching reading using phonics.

Hughes (1972) argues that phonics requires a child to be knowledgeable of combinations of vowel and consonants, for example, '**an, en, in, at**', in order to be able to build up words. I find the above view necessary because most words are formed by a combination of vowels and consonants. Although phonics is a commonly used technique for teaching learners to read, Hughes (1972) warns that this method may involve meaningless drills and learners may concentrate so

much on sound and in turn ignore comprehension. From a different perspective, Hughes (1972), Thompson *et al.* (1993) and Reghner (2003) assert that phonics teaching may include many interesting discovery activities and games which are fully enjoyed by children if they are carefully graded, regular and systematic.

What is made clear by the different theorists mentioned above is that phonics instruction is an important approach that aids reading, especially as a foundation to learning how to read. In the context of this study, poor readers need to be introduced to phonics before other methods are incorporated. However, what should be modified is making available clear methods of phonics instruction to teachers who have struggling or poor readers so that the ultimate goal of improving reading proficiency is reached.

2.2.2 Whole Language/‘Top Down’ Approach

Whole language is considered a controversial approach to teaching reading compared to the phonics approach. It is derived from constructivist learning theory and the work of Psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Reghner, 2003). Children learn by connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge in what Vygotsky refers to as the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). The more knowledgeable peers or adults play a vital role in assisting learners to learn new things that are a little above their current understanding, in incorporating new knowledge into existing knowledge base.

Another label for whole language approach is **Goodman theory** because it was introduced by Kenn and Yetta Goodman. They established that children would be good at learning to read if the tasks are made meaningful and purposeful (Schank, 1982; Liberman & Liberman, 1992). In support of Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development”, Liberman and Liberman (1992) urge teachers to build on the language development children have already obtained before they reach school, and above all to appreciate who the learners are, where they come from, how they talk and what experiences they had before coming to school.

From the above views on whole language, it becomes explicit that unlike the phonics approach which is teacher-centred and is direct instruction, the whole language approach to teaching reading is learner-centred instruction because emphasis is placed on the learners' finding the meaning of texts rather than on their sounding different words as separate units. In contrast to the phonics method which shows how well the reader might process print without using context, whole language makes use of context(s) to support the reading process.

However, whole language is criticised for encouraging learners to guess words by looking at the picture on the page or memorizing a few frequently used words (Bertelson, 1987; Liberman & Liberman, 1992; Thompson *et al.*, 1993; Reghner, 2003). Following this argument, learners may fail to read big words or become good readers as there would be a tendency to skip over words they do not know or predict words that they think would come next when reading text/s.

Although the focus of the whole language approach is on the learner and is a highly recommendable approach to learning, I think that this approach may not be appropriate to use with learners in disadvantaged communities like Alexandra where teaching/learning resources are still limited, because it places a burden on teachers to develop their own curriculum. Reghner (2003) argues that when using this approach, teachers are expected to provide a literacy "rich" environment for their students and this to me poses problems for teachers, especially in schools where there are few or no libraries to use and the textbooks are very limited.

Today, most practitioners accept integration of the two approaches; phonics and whole language. Teachers in South African schools, including some teachers in Alexandra Township, have limited theoretical understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach because the syllabus/new curriculum is also not very clear in differentiating between the two or suggesting how to combine the two approaches.

2.2.3 A Balanced Reading Instruction

While there are some reading acquisition theorists who champion the “phonics” approach and others who advocate the “whole language” approach, these approaches are certainly not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the “debate” may be resolved by drawing on the strengths and advantages of each, and designing a combined approach which I refer to as a “Balanced Reading Approach”. Tompkins (2003:14) defines a **Balanced Approach** as a “decision making approach through which teachers make thoughtful and purposeful decisions about how to help children become better readers and writers”. Taking into consideration the view by Hughes (1972) that no method of teaching reading is superior to the other, Tompkins (2004) further argues that the goal of this approach is to develop life-long readers and writers.

The most important thing to do would be to engage learners in a variety of activities, such as visual images in the form of pictures or concrete objects, which would enable them to have hands-on experience or be able to realise the full potential of the faculties of their bodies by gesturing, gazing, tasting, or smelling. Kress *et al.* (2001:1) argue that “learning can no longer be treated as a process which depends on language centrally or dominantly [because] meaning is an effect of all modes acting jointly”. What is meant by the above argument is that learners can find meaning of texts by being exposed to a variety of learning activities.

In *Modern English Teacher* (April 2007, 16.2), the editor emphasizes the importance of creativity in the classroom as being the heart of language teaching despite the fact that teachers’ innovative skills are always stifled by the need to follow a prescribed text, syllabus requirements and exam. The current generation of learners demands that teachers be familiar with what interests them, such as using pictures as the basis for drills, speaking and role play activities, because creative thinking always leads to new ideas and activities. In support of the above

view, Simon Mumford (in *Modern English Teacher* 2007, 13) argues that “non-verbal communication [such as] body language, intonation and sounds which are not words but have meaning, are more important than the actual words in conveying meaning”. For example, learners can act out stories so that they remember what they have been taught, rather than merely reading the words without using gestures.

The Outcomes-Based Education which forms the foundation of the curriculum in democratic South Africa encourages a learner-centred and activity-based approach to education (Revised National Curriculum Statement, 2005). The Learning Outcome 3 (Reading and Viewing) in the Revised National Statement for Grades 7-9 states that “the learner must be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and critically to the aesthetic, cultural emotional values in text”. This learning outcome relates to a balanced approach which views the teacher as an informed decision maker whose aim should be to provide special assistance and supplementary learning activities of an additional language in order for learners to be effective in the language of learning and teaching.

Township schools like those in Alexandra need the curriculum intervention that would try and address the aftermaths of the imbalances of education of the apartheid era because English usage was restricted and “teachers and learners in such schools are still incompetent in English to cope with the demands of the syllabus” (Heugh, 1992; Beynon, 2001). Under the apartheid regime, most black South Africans were indoctrinated with a racist curriculum of inferiority and English was less used as a language of instruction in the classroom, although English already enjoyed a high status quo in most African countries and the world at large for trade and commerce.

The aims of any programme which seeks to improve literacy levels in a democratic South Africa should “enable students to read without help unfamiliar

authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding", (Nuttall, 1982:21). Although Eskey (2002) believes that reading cannot be taught but learnt, there is a lot that teachers can do. For example, teachers can engage learners in interesting activities that would draw their attention to the given texts. In support of this view, Eskey (2002) further asserts that proper guidance and right opportunities enable most learners to learn to read and even read better. However, Nuttall (1982) warns teachers that if they provide too much help to the learners, reading problems may occur when learners fail to become independent readers.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter sets out the research design employed in this study. It consists of sections focusing on the research approach, the research site and the research participants used in the study. The chosen methods and techniques used for collecting data are described in a linear progression; starting with the selection of the school under study, the diagnostic testing carried out in order to identify poor readers from the rest of the Grade 7 learners, and the activities that lead to the end of the assessment. There is also a brief description of the research participants and ethical considerations that were adhered to in getting data from participants.

3.1 Research Approach

The research is **qualitative** and is carried out as a case study aimed at coming up with a rich description of certain situations, settings, processes and relationships (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Therefore, this study does not intend to present empirical 'results' or a 'scientific' assessment of the Phenduka Project's methods and success rates. Instead, it uses classroom observation, analysis of teaching material and semi-structured interviews as research instruments. The focus is particularly on the methods used by Phenduka with a group of learners with reading difficulties who have been selected for the reading intervention sessions. The broad context for the study is a period of observation at Dr Knak Primary School, where Phenduka's methods of teaching reading was closely observed, described and analysed, using Phonics and Whole Language approaches as the lens.

Padgett (2004:115), however, warns that "anyone undertaking qualitative research needs to possess curiosity and to have perseverance". She further

argues that despite the fact that qualitative research is difficult, these two concepts are important because they “keep a researcher listening, pushing to ask for more and digging a little deeper to understand” (Padgett, 2004:115). The reasons for doing a qualitative research as stated above by Padgett (2004) made me curious to know what methods would help learners in the seventh grade to be able to read when they have failed to do so for the past six years at primary school. Therefore, this research was undertaken with an inquisitive mind and I had to do my best to follow each teaching/learning session by Phenduka very closely. In other words, this research, like many other qualitative research projects, was carried out as an attempt to get to the core of the misunderstood matter.

3.1.2 Case Study Research

The choice of a case study approach to the research is based on the idea by Bassey (1999:39) that a case study research in a specific educational context is the kind of research that is capable of “informing educational judgments and decisions in order to improve educational action”. I found the above argument very relevant to this particular research report because reading disabilities are a cause for concern in many educational settings in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa. Therefore, any valuable knowledge on dealing with reading difficulties would be most welcome, because learners can only succeed in their academic work if they are taught to access written or print matter at school and in their life experiences. In this particular study, the research seeks to describe and analyse the methods used to improve reading proficiency and whether these methods could be of benefit to poor readers and those in charge of them.

The major aim of such research is to allow the researcher to have a closer account of the meaning that teachers convey when they interact with learners and to describe the methods used that lead to learners’ improving their reading proficiency when exposed to the combination of phonics and whole language approaches in teaching reading. This research is based on a case study of

particular instances of the Phenduka Literacy Project's intervention in Dr Knak Primary School in Alexandra and focuses specifically on the methods used with a group of learners selected to undergo Phenduka's intense multimodal reading skills development programme.

Leedy and Ormrod (2005), Bell (1983) and Yin (2003) describe a case study as that which allows the researcher to collect data on the individual(s) programme(s) or events on which the investigation is focused. A case study enables a researcher to "learn more about a little or poorly understood situation and to investigate how an individual or programme changes over time, as a result of certain circumstances or interventions" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:135). In this particular instance of a reading intervention by the Phenduka Literacy Project in one of the disadvantaged educational settings, Yin (2003) asserts that a case study is an ideal approach in answering 'how' and 'why' questions about a process or event.

In further support of the advantages of a case study method, Bell (1993) asserts that it allows the researcher to identify the various interactive processes at work which may remain hidden but are crucial to the success or failure of systems or organisations. Bell (1993), Yin (2003), and Leedy and Ormrod (2005) agree on the fact that a case study is ideal in carrying out a survey because key issues which warrant further investigation are identified, and that it is useful in analysing private or public supported interventions like the Phenduka Literacy Project. Although some general trends may emerge, there are limitations to the extent to which one can generalize about other schools in Alexandra and elsewhere. Generalizing is, therefore, speculative and tentative in a case study research.

3.2 Research Site

The chosen research site in this study is a government primary school situated in the Alexandra Township and falls under the Gauteng Department of Education

(GDE). The learning environment of this school is described in detail in an earlier section subtitled 'Context of Study'.

My observations of the teaching/learning process took place in the school staffroom which was the only available room the school could allocate to the Phenduka facilitators to use with poor readers. The Phenduka facilitators had to rearrange the chairs and tables to create a favourable learning environment and to enable them to make use of the whiteboard at the front of the room. Charts and other learning material had to be stuck on the board when there was need to do so.

3.3 Research Participants

The research participants consisted of two Phenduka facilitators with a total of about thirty-five (35) Grade 7 learners who were selected for reading intervention at the Dr Knak Primary School. The total number of poor readers given above was not consistent in each reading session because of absentee learners and those who faked illness or remained in their classroom, waiting to be reminded every time to attend the reading session. I suppose the reason why learners faked illness was related to the stigma of being labelled 'poor readers' by their teachers and fellow classmates in the mainstream classrooms.

The discrepancy in learners' attendance should not be misunderstood to be due to boredom of the methods used by Phenduka or the school's failure to organise its learners, but could be due to other factors that have to do with learners' intrinsic motivation to learn, which is beyond the scope of this research. It should be noted that the Phenduka facilitators had limited time with the poor readers at Dr Knak; therefore, the allocated time with cooperative readers who came on time was to be fully utilized.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Non-Participant Observations

In this research, I was an observer accompanying the Phenduka facilitators to Dr Knak Primary School during the first school term in the year 2008. It was through careful **observation** of Phenduka's activities in the classroom and the taking of classroom-based **field notes** that I was able to describe and analyse Phenduka's methods used for teaching reading using Phonics and Whole Language approaches and the application of these to pedagogy. This was done by spending some time at the research site and interacting regularly with the Phenduka facilitators. Bogdan and Biklen (1992:79) argue that "as time is spent with subjects, the relationship becomes less formal". This was useful to me as a researcher because it increased the level of comfort of the Phenduka facilitators and the learners, which made them to be free and to confide in me without fear of being demeaned in whatever they did.

The classroom observations were structured but flexible and also free-flowing to allow me to change focus from one thing to another as new and significant proceedings presented themselves (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). For example, at one point I observed activities that were related to phonics and whole language approaches and on the other I jotted down any other information that cropped up which I thought could be related to my study.

3.4.2 Researcher as 'Participant Observer'

In a research study of this nature, field notes alone are not always sufficient to capture the richness of what is observed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Using a single method would affect the authenticity of research findings. Besides recording the proceedings during the teaching/learning session, I was an active participant in most activities such that learners could not differentiate my role from that of the Phenduka facilitators. The aim in doing this was to encourage learners' full and

genuine participation without them trying to impress me as an observer had they known that I was observing them.

I participated in carrying out the initial diagnostic test which separated a total of about 35 poor readers from the three Grade 7 classes at the school. A simple passage entitled 'Brave Little Rat' (see appendix section) was used to test learners' reading abilities. After each learner had gone through the passage, he/she was marked in different categories on an 'adjustable diagnostic sheet' made in five columns by the Phenduka facilitators (see appendix section). I also listened to some of the selected poor readers read given passages individually at the end of each session, an exercise that was meant to test the learner's progress.

There were challenges, however, that I faced in being a 'participant observer', because at times I did not get adequate time to write in detail what transpired during the lessons. I had to try to overcome these by writing what transpired soon after the lesson of the day and also by capitalizing on feedback that I got from the interviewees.

3.4.3 Interviews

In addition to the field notes taken during each session, I also made use of **semi-structured interviews** with the Phenduka facilitators to enrich classroom observations. These interviews were conducted towards the end of the period of the reading intervention at Dr Knak Primary School in order for the facilitators to clarify their methods before I completed my field work at the school. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) assert that semi-structured interviews are likely to yield a great deal of useful information that a researcher might not have planned to ask. For example, the interviewees did not only stick to the questions asked but expanded on their feedback, thereby touching on important data. The interviewing of the Phenduka facilitators was aimed at revealing the extent to which phonics and whole language approaches of teaching reading form part of their methods.

The interview questions included in the appendix section were given to the Phenduka facilitators a week before the end of my field work at the school so that they could have a general idea of the information I was going to get from them. The key questions were to describe the methods they use, the criteria used in choosing them and their perception of the two approaches, phonics and whole language. The aim was to keep them focused on the required information. In conducting the interview, I took to heart the suggestion by Leedy and Ormrod (2005:147) that I should “find a suitable location, get written permission, maintain rapport and general feelings of closeness and trust [with Phenduka facilitators] to gain information without revealing [my] own perspectives of their teaching methods”. For example, I utilized the times they had their tea breaks at the school and also had chats with interviewees over a cup of tea and snacks at a coffee shop after the learning sessions.

3.4.3 Photographs

During class observations, photographs were taken of the learning area (in this case the staffroom), the Phenduka facilitators in action with Grade 7 learners, and the materials used during the teaching/learning of reading sessions. In taking pictures, learners' privacy was considered by avoiding snapshots that reveal learners' identity. The photographs in the main text of this study are used as evidence in describing and analysing Phenduka's methods.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Since this research is based largely on observational field notes and interviews with Phenduka facilitators, every effort was made to get their written consent before data was collected. The permission of the school principal at Dr Knak Primary School as well as that of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) was sought in order to carry out the research at the school, and this was granted. The necessary documentation was submitted to the University of the

Witwatersrand Ethics Committee and the duplicate of it is included in the appendix section of this report.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter I present the findings of this study and outline the nature of the data collected through classroom observation, the teaching/learning material used, and semi-structured interviews. The results of the study are interpreted in terms of data obtained in the months of January and February 2008, at Dr Knak Primary School in Alexandra Township, situated adjacent to the city of Johannesburg.

However, what should be noted regarding this chapter is that only important information which relates directly to the research questions of this study would be reported; a process of carefully considered selection and omission has been applied to the data obtained during classroom observation. Therefore, trivial incidents that occurred during my field work – for example, the mood of the participants (the Phenduka facilitators, the researcher and the Grade 7 poor readers) during the reading intervention sessions – are not included. When reporting on the findings, I have tried to be objective and have avoided concealing negative or unexpected results. It should be emphasized that the process of selection and omission in no way ‘skews’ or distorts the findings.

The activities which took place in the classroom and the feedback obtained from semi-structured interviews with the Phenduka facilitators, which illuminate an investigation into **phonics** or **whole language** approaches, are reported. Additional details and information which back up the results of this study are made available in the appendix section and any limitations to this study are noted in the last chapter where conclusions are drawn and recommendations made.

Above all, my main concern in this chapter is to report on the findings regarding the key issues of the study, as outlined earlier on as the 'research questions'. In providing the findings, I singled out the general patterns that emerged from classroom observations, teaching/learning material and the interviews, regarding Phenduka's methods of teaching reading to poor readers. Specifically, I paid attention to particular instances in which the **phonics** and **whole language** approaches to teaching reading were applied. Therefore, the findings of the research that are discussed below are grouped into three categories, namely: teaching/learning material; classroom observations; and semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Teaching/Learning Material

Phenduka facilitators used a variety of English teaching/learning material with the struggling readers. Although most of the reading texts they used for reading lessons were not from the Grade 7 text books used at the school and neither were they written and published by Phenduka, these facilitators modified most of them to suit the learners they were teaching (Beynon, 2001). The texts used for reading, for example, were fairy tales or fables that they obtained from different bookshops or libraries, and these stories were full of humour and satire to motivate and draw interest from poor readers (interview with Phenduka, 2008). However, Phenduka had to rewrite the stories in a simpler version or paraphrased the stories to contain vocabulary that was simpler than the original ones. The context of the stories was in no way compromised, for the facilitators only fidgeted with the vocabulary of the texts. Learners were only exposed to original versions of the story when their reading proficiency had slightly improved.



Fig I

CHARTS SHOWING PRESENTATION
OF VOWEL SOUNDS MARKED IN RED
INK OR UNDERLINED

LEARNERS IN ACTION: READING COMMON
WORDS WITH VOWEL SOUNDS



following teaching/learning material in their effort to engage the poor readers in reading:

- Whiteboard on the front wall of the staffroom at Dr Knak Primary School and the movable paperboard where all the written work by facilitators was done.
- Clearly labeled and colourful charts of different sizes (small, medium and large) with vowel sounds, blends and common verbs written in legible large font. These were well arranged and stuck on the whiteboard or at the front wall of the staffroom according to the order of concepts to be taught. For example, the charts that had vowel sounds came first before the charts that had blends and common verbs, respectively.
- Letters of the alphabet, both in large and lower case, written in large print such that the person sitting at the back row of the room could see these clearly. The alphabet chart also indicated the number of sounds each letter has, and had pictures showing examples of words that are formed by the letter of the alphabet. For example, letter 'e' was represented by the picture of an egg, and it also represented three sounds as in the words **egg**, **term** and **feet** (See figure 1 for presentation of these words on a chart)
- Plastic containers with single letters of the alphabet. These are bought in toy shops and are commonly used by children at pre-school level or at foundation phase at primary school to build any words by following given examples of words on the board or chart.
- The progressive chart with names of poor readers written against the number of activities learners were assessed in, such as common verbs, blends, story one (1) etc. On this chart the facilitators put stickers of smiling shining faces or ticks to motivate and encourage the learners to

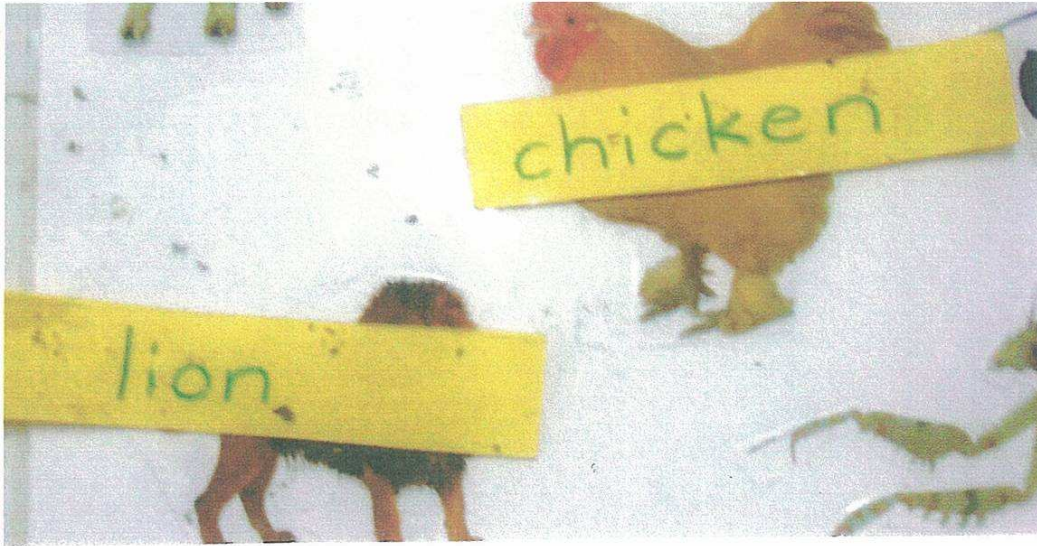
keep working hard, because this drew competition among learners to work as hard as they could to have more stickers than fellow progressing readers.

- Flashcards with sentences extracted from stories that learners had read earlier on (see Appendix B for some of the stories from which sentences were extracted). The flashcards with written names of fruits, vegetables and other objects were used to label the correct given picture (see figure 2).
- Simple and difficult versions of the fairy tales and fables printed on worksheets were used to measure learners' progress. Although these stories were written in English, I realized that the content was on familiar rural or countryside life experiences, such as the use of fire as a source of energy and for cooking and the activities of wild animals like elephants, and this made the reading exercise relevant because among the poor readers about two-thirds either joined the urban school from rural areas or frequently visited their relatives in the rural areas during school holidays (interview with Phenduka, 2008). The facilitators read the stories first before learners were engaged in paired reading, which was a noisy activity.

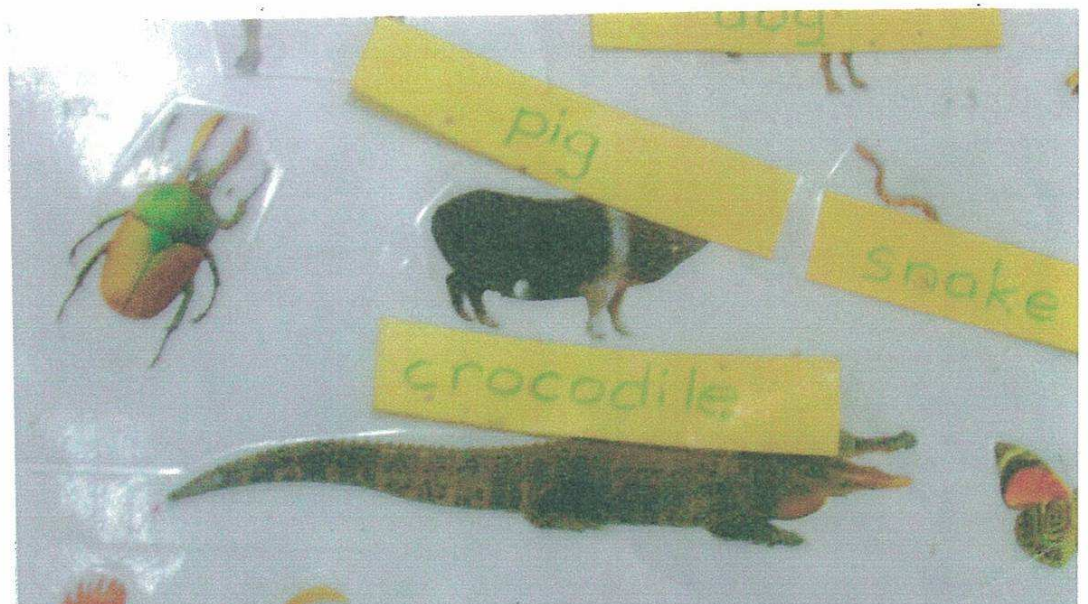
4.2 Observations

Classroom observations took place in the staffroom at Dr Knak Primary School where about thirty five poor readers, split in two groups, with one group called 'Cheetahs' and the other 'Leopards', met two Phenduka facilitators during the reading intervention period of 2-3 weeks in the months of January and February in the year 2008. The Cheetahs were those learners that were catching fast on learnt material and the Leopard group consisted of those learners who were slow in grasping learnt concepts. Each group met the Phenduka facilitators for one

Fig 2



Flash cards used to label
the correct given picture



who were picked from three classes of 42-43 learners each. The learners selected for the programme are categorized as follows under columns one (1) and two (2) of the Adjustable Diagnostic sheet: those with no literacy and those who could read a few words, respectively (see Appendix A for sheet used).

The learners sat in three rows of chairs joined together, all facing the board at the front of the staffroom, in order to utilize the available space in the room. There were no desks where learners could lean or write on, but there were big tables arranged behind the chairs (see fig 3 and 4 for the sitting arrangement). During the learning sessions, I either sat or stood at the back row or at the side taking notes. Once in a while I would help in identifying readers who had excelled in an activity in order for them to get a sticker to place against their names, or I would listen to them read as part of their end-of-day assessment.

The figures which follow are based on the initial diagnostic test carried out by Phenduka facilitators in selecting poor readers from Grade 7 classes at the school. Ten (10) out of thirty-five (35) learners had no literacy or could not read a single English word, and fifteen (15) out of thirty-five (35) learners could read a few English words of a simplified version of the story 'Brave Little Rat' (see appendix B for full story). I also found out that English is the language of instruction at the school and Sepedi is learners' first or home language. This information was important for me to know how this influenced the way learners sounded words during phonics instruction. On the other hand, it is important to know the learners' prior knowledge and experience of sounds in order to build on it (Vygotsky, 1978; Nuttall, 1996).

Below is a chronological description of prominent teaching/learning activities that were observed during the day and from the beginning to the end of the reading programme:

- Firstly, learners were re-assessed on their knowledge of letters of the alphabet (A-Z) by asking them to read the alphabet as the whole group.

Fig 3



STAFFROOM AT DR KNAK SCHOOL
SHOWING THE CLASSROOM SITTING
ARRANGEMENT.

how often and how many books they read at leisure time. One third of the group said they read books in their home language but had difficulty in reading English texts. Two learners admitted that they were not familiar with the alphabet but were assured that knowledge of the alphabet was not the key to learning words: rather, their knowledge of word-sound was more important. To elaborate on this point, an example of the word '**cat**' was given which the facilitators spelt without writing and asked learners to identify the word. No learner gave the correct answer but when the same word was sounded out 'letter by letter', most learners identified the word.

- Secondly, learners were encouraged to master five rules of sounding words, namely: (1) know your sound; (2) sound the word out from left to right; (3) push the sound in your brain; (4) know many words automatically; and (5) never give up. The learners said the rules out aloud orally and in unison by incorporating actions and repeating after their teachers because the rules were not written down. The reading aloud by learners was done in order to lay a strong foundation for learning how to read (McEwan, 2002).
- Sounds of the alphabet were taught by indicating how many sounds each letter had, for example, letter 'a' with 5 sounds as in the words **apple, ace, arm, a** and **awful**. However, particular emphasis was put on the five vowel sounds: *a e i o u* and *y*. Each time a word was sounded, actions that demonstrated an example of a word with the particular sound were done by both the facilitators and poor readers (see fig 4 which demonstrates the actions done by the facilitators and the learners in sounding words).
- Thirdly, revision and repetition of work previously done took place before new work was introduced. For example, learners repeated the 5 rules of sounding words out loud, read examples of words which demonstrated vowel sounds with appropriate actions and matched pictures with correct

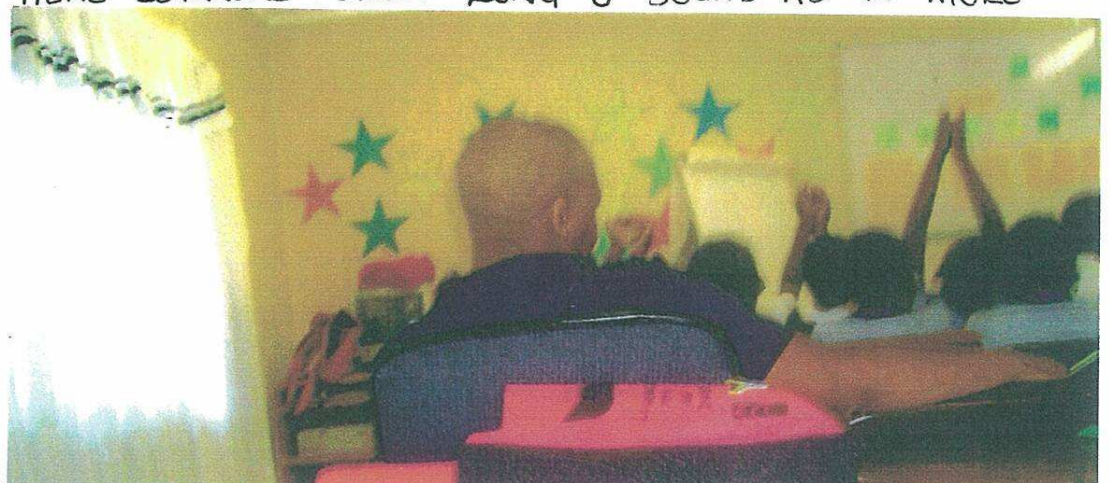


Fig 4

PHENDUKA FACILITATORS
AND LEARNERS IN ACTION
SHOWING DIFFERENCE
IN SOUNDS BY USING
ACTIONS.

HERE LEARNERS SHOW
THE SOUND OF "g" AS
IN WORD "GIRAFFE"

HERE LEARNERS SHOW LONG "O" SOUND AS IN "MORE"



classroom activities was always broken; that is, facilitators did not always follow the same sequence of activities for the previous day in order to discourage learners from guessing at what comes next instead of mastering the learnt concepts (Nuttall, 1996).

- Fourthly, blends that form words, for example '**cr-**' for *cry* or '**br-**' for *bread*, were later introduced, followed by sentences on flashcards and on the board, and by poems and simplified versions of stories that contained learnt vowel sounds and blends. For example, one of the sentences learners were taught to master vowel sounds with was '**I eat red apples at the park**', and the other sentence used to help learners practice on learnt blends was '**Look at the grey sky in the clouds**'. Individual words were learnt before the whole sentence was read aloud by the entire group of learners.
- Every time a story was introduced to the learners, the two facilitators worked together in telling the story to the class; while one related the story, the other did actions or mimed the story. Working in pairs, learners then retold the story to each other or to the rest of class, as had been demonstrated by facilitators, although learners were encouraged to add their own exciting or appropriate gestures.
- Lastly, at the end of each session, assessment was either in the form of individual or chorus reading of words or stories to the facilitators, or writing previously learnt words with blends or vowel sounds. The learners' progress was then assessed and marked on the progressive chart using stickers or ticks.

4.2.1 Questions/Puzzles that Emerged during Observation

As I observed the Phenduka facilitators teach poor readers, I was most interested in seeing how they blended phonics and whole language approaches. This was important to me because this study is based on an analysis of Phenduka's methods and how they combine the two approaches in enabling poor readers to read English texts. The major questions I had were the following: Why did the Phenduka facilitators repeat work previously done in most sessions? Why did they place such emphasis on making the learners know the sounds of the alphabet before exposing them to reading English texts, choral reading aloud by learners and/or using gestures every time they taught? Why did they rely on texts/stories of different levels of difficulty, which were not even extracted from Grade 7 text books used at the school?

On the other hand, there are different suggestions given by theorists on methods of teaching reading. Nuttall (1996:10) argues that "meaning is not lying in the text to be passively absorbed but the reader has to be actively involved to get the meaning out". Could this have been Phenduka's idea when they put emphasis on using actions and gestures in telling stories or in asking learners to read aloud? McEwan (2002) also suggests that "literacy is absolutely dependant on students' mastery of sounds and spelling of words as an aid to accurate independent reading". I find the above ideas useful to consider when teaching reading to poor readers and, in this case, the learners that Phenduka was teaching.

4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

The importance of using semi-structured interviews in this study was highlighted in the previous chapter. Although there were two Phenduka facilitators involved in the teaching of the reading programme, most of the information from the interviews came from the Director of Phenduka Literacy Project who was one of the interviewees and to whom I had more access because we used the same transport to and from the school. However, the other interviewee's responses

were considered and incorporated with those of the Director who was the representative of the Phenduka facilitators. Their responses helped to clarify and elaborate on the puzzles and questions that emerged during observation of the reading intervention sessions: for example, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate clearly between **Phonics** and **Whole Language** approaches used during the teaching/learning process.

Moving from general comments to a more specific overview of Phenduka and its strategies for teaching reading to poor readers, below is a summary of the **responses** I received in the interview. I also included my own summary/comment and direct quotations from interviews, in order to engage with the collected data and to maintain richness and texture because including the 'voices' of interviewees also adds veracity to the research. The interviews were carried out before the end of my field work at Dr Knak and at the end of Phenduka programme at the school. This helped me to be able to review the responses I had earlier obtained.

General Questions

4.3.1 What are the principles of the Phenduka Literacy Project?

The responses to the above question indicate that the principles which help define Phenduka's programme are, broadly speaking, democratic, theoretical and psychological, and involve cooperation with schools. These are discussed in more detail below.

Democratic principles

Phenduka facilitators reported that first and foremost, the programme was informed by South African democratic national principles on education, one of which states that every child must have a reasonable education (Beynon, 2001; interview with Phenduka, 2008). They took cognizance of the fact that South

Africa has a long history of unequal education among its citizens during the apartheid era and the education system is still suffering the consequences of this history, despite the efforts of the present government to reverse the situation. The Phenduka Programme seeks to contribute towards the national vision of education for equality by using their skills, resources and knowledge in one of the most disadvantaged communities, as reflected in the following statement:

No child can assess education without basic literacy; therefore, we try our best to remediate what some schools are failing to deliver. In carrying our programme we take into consideration the ideas by Gardner (1993) that different individuals have different strengths and capacities regarding levels of intelligence, therefore, clear different modalities are required for different learning styles. There is no doubt that our use of a wide range of teaching/learning activities opens challenges to all learners and in turn promotes democracy in education (from interview with Phenduka facilitator, 2008).

Theoretical principles

According to my informants, the Phenduka facilitators adhered to the principle that whatever they did in the classroom was in line with the educational principles of Outcome Based Education (OBE). Some examples of OBE principles that Phenduka puts into practice are the following: learners are not to be considered as passive recipients of knowledge, but as 'makers of meaning' in their own right; the promotion of group work in teaching; and using different learning styles in order to support weak learners, so that progress is identified in every learner (RNCS Grades 7-9 'Schools').

Furthermore, the informants stated that Phenduka's teaching sought to endorse the stated OBE principles for teaching learners at primary school level. For example, to be in line with OBE the curriculum used by Phenduka was to be "sensitive to issues of poverty, inequality, race, gender, age, disability, and such challenges as HIV/AIDS" (RNCS Grades 7-9 'Schools'). As mentioned earlier in the first chapter of this study under the section 'context of study', learners under

the Phenduka programme already faced most of the above challenges directly and indirectly and Phenduka had a role to play in considering these challenges during their teaching.

However, Phenduka facilitators were quick to point out that as far as they were concerned there are also some gaps or omissions in OBE policy documents, as stated in the RNCS. For example, senior phase teachers (Grade 4-7) are given little or no guidance regarding literacy teaching, thereby leaving teachers struggling with poor readers without help (interview with Phenduka, 2008). The belief by these teachers is that adequate teaching has been given to learners at foundation phase, that is Grade1-3 (Beynon, 2001)

Realizing this gap, Phenduka facilitators indicated that although they try to use as much of the latest literacy research as possible, particularly regarding methods of reading, their methods may be described as 'trial and error' which they continuously refine in order to suit the environment at hand: "we try different modalities now and again that are suitable for learners we teach and avoid remedial jargon which tends to set limits" (response by Phenduka interviewee, 2008). The expression 'recent research' as used here by Phenduka refers to modern methods of teaching reading suggested by experts and theorists in the field of literacy, which Phenduka extracts from books and other relevant educational journals.

Incorporated with their principles, Phenduka facilitators revealed that in choosing teaching/learning methods, they always considered the fact that most of the learners selected for the reading intervention programme have little English skills and many of them come from families with illiterate parents/guardians where there is little or no modeling or valuing of reading culture.

Phenduka facilitators were well aware that Alexandra is one example of a community in South Africa which is educationally disadvantaged and has inadequate resources because of the result of apartheid and its legacy.

Therefore, Phenduka used both Phonics and Whole language approaches in teaching reading so that the two approaches compliment each other. Nuttall (1996:17) argues that “both approaches are important strategies for readers because a reader continuously shifts from one focus to another”. An example to this effect is that a learner can only fully understand or get the meaning of a sentence extracted from a passage/text if its context is known, otherwise an interpretation different from that one in the text would be given.

Psychological Principles

Talking from the experience of interacting with poor readers in Alexandra Township, the Phenduka facilitators argued that the self-esteem of many learners attending their programme was low because there is the stigma of being labelled ‘poor readers’. Due to this fact, Phenduka facilitators reported that they are trying their best to boost learners’ self-esteem by making sure that their teaching and assessment of learners does not create stereotypes or set limits to what learners can do. For example, they tell learners that although they cannot read, their level of intelligence is in no way comparable to foundation phase learners (from Phenduka interview, 2008). This in a way boosts learners’ self-esteem when they are told that they have potential to do better and be like their fellow classmates.

Principle of cooperation with schools

According to my informants, Phenduka’s reading intervention in Alexandra schools was not meant to discredit what teachers were already doing in classrooms. To further elaborate on the above point, the interviewees defended the approach taken by the Phenduka programme by stating that the facilitators were ‘non-judgmental’ and always cooperated closely with the schools. An example given to this effect was that Phenduka facilitators never criticized methods used by teachers. Phenduka facilitators also complied with the time slot

the schools gave them to work with poor readers, approached schools beforehand for permission to work with poor readers, explained their principles and practices beforehand, and worked only with schools that accepted and welcomed their reading intervention.

4.3.2 Why focus on reading, particularly with Grade 7 learners?

Results revealed that Phenduka considers reading as the initial step towards literacy and that a learner cannot learn to write without knowing how to read. Miller (1998:1) reiterates the above argument that “we learn by reading and what is learnt can in turn be used in writing [because] reading can serve as a catalyst to spark writing”.

Phenduka’s central argument is that Grade 7 is the final year at primary school, this is, the last opportunity to ‘get it right’ before going on to more challenging work at high school. In addition, at high school it is assumed that all learners are literate and able to read with some competency. In support of the above assertions, the interviewees agreed that teachers in upper grades at primary school or in high school always assume that learners have been adequately drilled on how to read during their foundation phase education. Therefore, what this means is that there is very little chance that poor readers would be taught basic reading skills at Grade 7 level, and even less chance once they are in high school.

4.3.3 What are the challenges/difficulties that Phenduka faces in schools?

There are many complex challenges that face Phenduka in its reading intervention. Firstly, the interviewees pointed out that they work under very difficult circumstances since they do not have a meeting space or classroom of their own and have to rely on what the schools – often under-resourced and short of space – offer them. Often, this involves spaces that are not ideal for the needs

of the reading intervention. Secondly, informants explained that since their programme works hand in hand with the existing school programme and curriculum, at times they are interrupted or arrangements are changed. For example, at Dr Knak Phenduka was allocated the staffroom and at times had to wait with learners outside while staff meetings took place in their designated teaching space.

Some additional challenges that Phenduka facilitators said they faced were:

- Inadequate or no storage for their resources;
- Unsuitable writing furniture for learners;
- Inadequate learning area that does not enable them to do a variety of learning activities, for example, no space for gesture work since learners are close to each other during the learning sessions;
- Little or no back-up from Grade 7 teachers, with the result that their work is not consolidated once they move to another school. Although teachers are invited and encouraged to participate in the reading intervention, not all attend the sessions to allow a sharing of ideas.

Specific/Focused Questions

4.3.4. What are Phenduka's key methods of teaching reading?

Learners are taught the basic tools of reading with maximum practice for every child, for example, drilling of sounds of letters of the alphabet with particular emphasis on vowel sounds and blends. Once these have been taught repeatedly, learners are introduced to common words where different single units of vowel sounds or blends are pushed together to sound whole words.

The learning activities that the interviewees said they used include the following:

- Choral reading of common words on charts and on whiteboard or flashcards;
- Word matching or labelling of pictures;
- **Scaffolding**, especially when telling stories. Gunning (2004:6) defines scaffolding as “support and guidance provided by an adult that helps a student function at a higher level”. In their attempt to apply scaffolding in their teaching, the Phenduka facilitators outlined the typical guided steps they take in telling stories, as follows: the teacher uses pictures and gestures to tell the story before learners retell the same story by applying proper gestures, as have been demonstrated to them, then vocabulary from the story is reinforced on boards or flashcards before learners start reading a simplified version of the story;
- Reading simple to more difficult version of stories;
- Drawing specific features related to the story or labelling given diagrams, for example, labelling body parts;
- Fill-in exercises or writing sentences extracted from the story.

Above all, Phenduka facilitators emphasized the importance of repetition and reading aloud in every reading activity as a way of building up component skills and helping learners become familiar with the learnt concepts.

4.3.5 Phonics in Phenduka's methodology

Phenduka facilitators indicated that they include the phonics approach in teaching learners to read, especially when they teach learners sounds of the alphabet (vowel sounds and blends). Phonics is “a teaching method aimed at matching the specific sounds of the English language with individual letters” (McEwan, 2002:16). Considerable description of this method has been given in Chapter Two (2) of this study.

Another instance where phonics instruction is used within Phenduka programme is when the facilitators ask learners to apply their knowledge of single sounds to pronounce common words (pushing together different unit sounds to come up with a word). According to Phenduka facilitators, phonics instruction is explicit teaching which gives learners 'tools' and the capacity to pronounce words. In support of the above view, Samuels and Farstrup (1992:104) argue that "Phonics merely provides a tool that enables students to 'attack' the pronunciation of the words that are not recognizable at a glance; hence the term word attack". On the other hand, Phonics makes reading easier because instruction proceeds from simple to complex (Gunning, 2004).

However, the informants pointed out that there are disadvantages in sticking too closely to phonics instruction because it can become boring and repetitive. It is also not child-centred or necessarily relevant to a child's life, although it offers the basic foundation in a child's learning to read. Samuels and Farstrup (1992:104) believe that phonics is not the end point to teaching reading because it is not a single procedure [and] under the label of phonics can be found a variety of instructional strategies for teaching the relationship between letters and sounds". It creates problems for teachers to stick to phonics instruction because there are a variety of approaches in the market (McEwan, 2002).

4.3.6 Whole language in Phenduka's methodology

The Phenduka facilitators considered a whole language approach to be an important learning paradigm for developing reading, since it engages learners' emotions and is able to motivate them. Emphasis on a whole language approach is placed on comprehension or getting the meaning of a text; that is, the curriculum is presented from whole to parts by first teaching themes or context before moving to specific skills (Weaver, 1990; Schlafly, 1996). By so doing, the children's thinking skills are enriched because this approach does not tell learners how to think but to do the thinking (Gust, 1995).

In their teaching/learning activities, Phenduka facilitators gave examples of activities that demonstrated a whole language approach. These included activities in which learners guessed at words by merely looking at the pictures on the chart (Schlafly, 1996). For example, by looking at the picture of a lion learners could easily pick the word '**lion**' to match with the given picture (see fig 2 for such examples). Another activity that incorporated whole language teaching in the classroom was when facilitators and learners used gestures every time they sounded words or retold stories. The learners were then able to make a reasonable guess at the next step when they got a rough idea of the writer's argument (Nuttall, 1996).

On the selection of resources, the idea of using stories, most of them fairy tales or fables, was said to be a way of promoting whole language teaching. In this approach, learners are not only drilled on their knowledge of the sound of letters of words and facts of the story, but are also encouraged to explore the subjects they are learning and to question the facts (Flanagan, 1995). Thus, Phenduka confirmed: "We try to give children the chance to talk or work with each other in retelling stories, to read independently and study the information, write about what they are learning and at times express their understanding of the stories they read in class through drawing" (interview with Phenduka, 2008).

However, the Phenduka facilitators pointed out there are disadvantages of using the whole language approach in a community where resources are limited. The interviewees argued that it is an elite and expensive approach to use because it demands that learners be familiar with a lot of resources. Therefore, they argued that it does not accommodate poor learners who come from illiterate families where there are no books to read or where learners have no access to the libraries.

Whole language has been criticized for teaching children to guess at words (Reghner, 2003). On the other hand, the approach demands that teachers build

on what learners already know (Vygotsky, 1978; Gust, 1995; Reghner, 2003), but can the application of this approach be possible in places like the Alexandra community where poor readers have to deal with the stigma of being labeled such and resources are still limited? This becomes a real challenge because it demands that teachers be as much resourceful as ever.

4.3.7. Can the two approaches be used together successfully?

In response to the above question, both interviewees emphasized that the two approaches should be used together in order to complement each other because both have advantages and disadvantages. To further elaborate on this opinion, the interviewees argued that learners have different levels of ability, skills, commitment and motivation and therefore using a variety of teaching methods is an attempt to accommodate all learners. They further argued:

When we carried our own survey of the thirty five poor readers in Grade 7 that we have selected for our programme, there was no learner who confirmed that he/she enjoys listening to the teacher talk all the time. All learners supported that they be fully engaged in what they do in class so as to take positive and constructive charge of their learning. We then realized that we teachers are sometimes concerned with methods that we like and are easy for us, thereby neglecting the interests of learners we teach. (interview with Phenduka, 2008)

The above response by Phenduka supports the view given by Tompkins (2003:14) that most teachers recognize the value in using a combination of phonics and whole language approaches because “there is no ‘quick fix’ and no program to meet children’s needs”

This chapter has given a summary of the findings of collected data in this study. In the next chapter, these findings will be interpreted in detail and analysed by focusing on the patterns that sources of data suggest, in line with the theories discussed in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the previous chapter, data collected during the field work of this study was presented. In this chapter, in addition to summarizing the main findings of this study, I will examine and analyse the data in an attempt to respond to the following central questions of this research report:

- What are the key methods used by the Phenduka Literacy Project in teaching poor readers in Grade 7 at Dr Knak Primary School?
- How and why are these methods selected?
- How are the methods shaped by the two approaches, phonics and whole language?
- How can a combination of the phonics and whole language approaches help define Phenduka's programme and reading proficiency amongst poor readers?

The literature review in Chapter Two outlined some major thematic strands of this study by analysing relevant ideas put forward by influential theorists and experts in the field of phonics, whole language and literacy or reading in general. However, this chapter outlines and discusses the patterns drawn from the findings as supported by the literature. Conclusions would be drawn from the research findings and some recommendations made, which may be useful to schools, teachers and the Department of Education in South Africa, and more specifically to curriculum developers in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) in terms of possible ways to remedy poor reading proficiency, especially in disadvantaged communities.

5.1 Discussion of Results

In working towards the end product of this study, I took into consideration the ideas by Bogdan and Biklen (1992:153) who argue that the analysis of data in a qualitative research is “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to increase your understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others”. Based on the above key point, this concluding chapter focuses in particular on analysing data collected for this study in terms of finding patterns; that is, selecting what is most important and relevant in order to respond to the major objectives of study as already outlined above. As I read through my field notes I realized that there were patterns of collected data that stood out. These are highlighted and discussed below.

5.1.1 Teaching/Learning Material

In this section, I examine the type of material used by Phenduka, by describing its general characteristics and taking into account whether and how these materials are shaped by phonics or whole language approaches to reading. I am interested in establishing whether a ‘pattern’ of practice and theory can be discerned.

In the previous chapter, where the teaching/learning material was presented, I mentioned that Phenduka’s material included the following: large colourful charts, letters of the alphabet with pictures showing particular word sounds, flashcards, and different versions of stories or fables on work sheets. The stories (simple to complex) were designed by Phenduka specifically for those poor readers in Alexandra schools who are undergoing the reading intervention. I found this initiative by Phenduka, namely the designing of their own material to suit the learners at hand, very important because using material content which is familiar to the learners motivates learners, especially poor readers whose interest in education is already low, with some having already considered themselves hopelessly unable to catch up with fast readers.

Some readers of this research may dispute the use of Phenduka's simplified versions of stories, which might be considered to be of a Grade 3 rather than a Grade 7 level. However, Nuttall (1996:10) advises teachers to make the learning of an additional language interesting instead of using texts in which "getting the meaning is an uphill struggle and the learner's progress is continually blocked by problems of unfamiliar vocabulary or ignorance of facts".

Of particular interest about the teaching/learning material used by Phenduka was the selection of a wide variety of material which Phenduka members designed themselves and used to teach struggling readers. They did not rely on the prescribed English textbooks for Grade 7 used at the school. The charts were large, colourful and illustrated, and were used, for example, to teach learners how to blend learnt words with appropriate pictures from fruits, animals and other objects familiar to the learners. Phenduka's efforts in designing the reading material for poor readers at Dr Knak school support the idea by Mumford (2007:3) that creativity in the classroom should be at the heart of language teaching because "teaching English to the current generation demands that teachers use pictures as basis for drills, speaking activities and role play because creative thinking always leads to new ideas and activities".

Reflecting on Phenduka's teaching/learning material, I observed that they preferred using material with colourful pictures rather than words alone. I found that this method fully engaged most of the learners because pictures were 'eye-catching' and so drew learners' attention. Phenduka also used an alphabet with pictures. By simply looking at the pictures accompanying each letter, for example letter 'a' with a picture of an apple or letter 'e' with a picture of an egg, learners were able to say aloud the sound presented. Mumford (2007) mentioned earlier argues that if we use different concrete objects around us in teaching language, that becomes a good motivating factor in learning how to read more than using the actual words in conveying meaning.

The teaching/learning material also revealed the fact that Phenduka facilitators used charts with single letter sounds, for example, the five vowel sounds (a, e, i, o, u), before they used charts with sounds formed by combining two letters which they referred to as blends, for example, *br* for 'bread', *cr* for 'cry', *dr* for 'drive' etc. Phenduka's method of presenting material with single letter sounds before that with blends in teaching learners to read is important in phonics instruction. Flanagan (1995:28) argues that "children learn to read words by combining and blending sounds [because] the more letter/sound correspondences a child can remember, the better able a child is to read words".

The stories that Phenduka used were didactic, full of humour and satire, and ranged from simple versions of stories to more complex ones. These stories also have a bearing on the values and lives of communities in South Africa. The content of the stories focused on themes such as thunderstorms, flooded rivers and animals; which are related to familiar life experiences, particularly of people living in the rural areas where folktales or fables are recounted to children by their grand parents around warm fires in the evening and where many of the values and customs of different cultures are still upheld (see Appedix B for stories used).

As indicated earlier on in this study, most poor readers at Dr Knak Primary School have joined this school from the rural areas. Even those children among the group of poor readers who are born and bred in town generally have a high regard for rural traditions because their parents have respect for rural values. Therefore, Phenduka chose its material with these rural origins in mind. Vygotsky (1978) and Liberman and Liberman (1992) urge teachers to know where learners come from, and what experiences they had before they came to school in order to build on those. In support of the above view, Gust (1995:3) suggests that "before [teachers] cram any more info into students' minds [they] must first discover what students already know [and must] look for strengths rather than weaknesses".

In addition to selecting materials on the basis of their relevance to familiar contexts, the content of the material is also shaped by the key principles of the phonics approach to teaching reading. Below is an example of the first paragraph of the simple version of the story “Brave Little Rat” which was used by Phenduka facilitators:

It rains and rains and rains.
The water comes up and up and up.
The people go up the mountain.
The animals go in a boat. (See Appendix B for full story).

In the above story the repeated word sounds are “rains” and “up”. The words in this example that can be a problem to identify when single letters are sounded out are “the”, “people” and “boat”. Flanagan (1995) points out the manner in which a story, written like the one above, can help children read books with success if they remember the letter combinations of words. Most of the words in the above extract make it possible to read them by relying on the general phonic rule of breaking words into single units of sound in order to pronounce the whole word.

From the above extract, the learners can, for example, combine the single letter sounds r-a-i-n-s to pronounce the word “rains”. Yet if they spell the word it becomes difficult to recognize it. However, Flanagan (1995:29) further argues that the limitation of passages such as the one given above is that children would be “obliged to read material that are especially written on the basis of phonics rules and would be held back from reading a range of real books”. In support of the above view, Liberman and Liberman (1992) assert that reading is made difficult when learners are taught how to process print without using context. This problem occurs when “whole language is broken into bite size, abstract little pieces because of the general traditions by teachers and schools to take language apart into words, syllables and isolated sounds” (Liberman & Liberman, 1992:345). These theorists’ views support the argument that one needs to combine phonics and whole language in teaching reading.

5.1.2 Phenduka's Methods of Teaching Reading

The interviewees' responses as well as my observations of their classroom practice indicated that the key methods used in teaching reading were based on phonics: learners were given maximum practice in knowing the *sounds* of letters of the alphabet, with emphasis on *vowels sounds* and *blends*. In other words, there is more "drill and drill" on letter sounds before learners are introduced to common words where they put different letter sounds together to sound words (blending). This is one distinct area of reading which is important in phonics instruction. Marsh and Hallet (1999:73) refer to it as "word recognition – one important area that enables a learner to recognize printed form of their names and brand names of favourite cereal, thereby enabling them to recognize words as visual shapes rather than as combination of letters".

Drawing from the responses of the interviewees, it is clear that the facilitators' emphasis is on making the learners understand the alphabet by knowing how the *spelling of words* relates to *the way words are sounded* or spoken. Although phonetic rules are used by Phenduka as the foundation to helping students sound out English words, Schlafly (1996) argues that such methods of teaching are a problem because children have different vocabulary and dialects that vary in their pronunciation rules and would have to depend on teachers' direct instruction. Schlafly (1996) suggests that the learning of sounds has to be rewarded constantly, for example, giving an "A" for good performance, so that learners continue practising sounds because they would have made great effort in trying to change their dialect in order to sound English words. I observed that every time a learner sounded a word correctly he/she was praised or given a sticker for good performance by the Phenduka facilitators to place against his/her name on the progressive chart.

Chapter Four also noted that 'choral reading' and the 'repetition' of common words written on flashcards, charts and whiteboard were part of Phenduka's key

methods of teaching. This kind of teaching is applauded by various experts in the field of literacy. McEwan (2002:24) supports the method of 'reading aloud' in the learning process because "it plays a vital role in a child's early literacy experiences [since] it lays a strong foundation for learning to read". Although poor readers at Dr Knak School have passed the age of elementary school learning, they still need to be taught the basic skills because their reading levels are still far below those of their classmates. Miller (2002:29) also argues that reading aloud motivates learners to want to read, and on the other hand "it offers teachers opportunities to share with kids [their] love of reading and learning" and "to model fluency and reading behaviours". One of the interviewees pointed out:

We use as far as possible latest research on methodologies of teaching and learning. Our methods are 'trial and error'. We try hard to attune our methods to the environment at hand based on situated practices. The New London Group (1996:33) defines this as 'part of pedagogy that is constituted by immersion in meaningful practices within a community of learners who are capable of playing multiple and different roles based on their backgrounds and experiences.' We believe that we have a role to play as mentors to guide the poor readers in Alexandra Township community schools (interview with Phenduka facilitator, 2008).

The above quotation makes evident the fact that Phenduka does not believe there is only one particular method that can be said to be the best in teaching learners to read, neither do they believe that one particular method would be ideal in any given situation, because they advocate that methods should be chosen by assessing the situation at hand. Drawing from their argument, they do not have a specific key method of teaching reading to poor readers because their methods incorporate what is "best on the market" and at the same time assessing whether it is ideal for the learners they would be teaching in a particular place and time.

During my fieldwork, I observed whole language methods as well. For example, part of the reading/learning activities by Phenduka included the use of gestures every time the learners sounded words or when teachers related stories to

learners. Learners also matched common words of fruits, vegetables and animals with relevant pictures. In such instances, learners were able to draw on their intelligence and experiences to understand the text (Nuttall, 1996). This approach to reading is an example of *whole language instruction* which McEwan (2002:21) describes as a “meaning-based emphasis approach” because it makes use of context to support the reading process. The learners consciously try to get a rough idea of the text by what Nuttall (1996:17) calls “making a reasonable guess at the next step”.

The incorporation of whole language reading activities in Phenduka’s methods is supported by Gust (1995:8) who argues that a whole language approach enriches children’s thinking skills because it includes the following activities which are vital for learning:

- Observation
- Comparison
- Sorting
- Sequencing
- Prediction
- Classification
- Decision-making
- Inquiry
- Problem-solving
- Analogy and
- Creative thinking

I found that the first six of the above activities were evident in Phenduka’s reading activities, for example, when learners were asked to observe and imitate the gestures teachers had shown them when sounding words and telling stories, and when matching words with pictures or matching suffixes with given prefixes of words. This engaged most learners who were feeling a bit bored during phonics instruction when they were taught word sounds. It was however difficult to assess whether learners were able to solve problems, especially when they joined the mainstream class of average and good readers, given the limited time Phenduka had to assess and assist the poor readers at the school.

5.2 Conclusion

The results of this research project indicate that Phenduka facilitators used a combined approach of *phonics* and *whole language* in teaching poor readers in Grade 7 at Dr Knak School. They called this a 'balanced approach'. Gunning (2004:9) explains that this balanced approach is the method which "teaches skills directly and systematically". In support of this view, Tompkins (2003:14) reiterates that "many teachers recognize value in [phonics and whole language approaches because] there is no 'quick fix' or programme to meet children's needs". Many theorists discussed in this study, such as Schlafly (1996), Tompkins (2003) and Gunning (2004), recognize the contributions of different approaches in teaching learners to become life-long readers and writers, but on the other hand they advise teachers to make use of those approaches that have proven to be effective.

The Phenduka facilitators also paid particular attention to the learners they taught by applying a mnemonic device (a device that helps us remember more complex ideas) which they abbreviated as '**DETOUR**' as explained below:

D Diagnose

E Engage

T Tools of reading

Open up a range of learning channels/modalities

Use maximum practice

Repetition of texts

Briefly, a typical Phenduka lesson or series of lessons would use the above pattern of 'DETOUR' by doing the following: dispelling negative feelings of inadequacy in poor readers by assuring them that their problem can be solved if they concentrate; starting teaching of learners with easy oral work, for example, teaching sounds of the alphabet before teaching actual words; using a variety of modes of learning like role play and gestures in telling stories; alternating paired reading with either group reading or choral reading; and making learners read the same texts several times.

At the end of my field work at Dr Knak where I observed the Phenduka facilitators at work with poor readers, I noticed, in a general context, that the methods employed had a positive impact on the learners. Most of the learners' reading and writing skills showed significant improvement. Class participation by the learners increased during the Phenduka reading programme.

What has been made explicit from my findings is that there is no need to choose *between* phonics and whole language approaches in teaching learners to improve their reading proficiency. Rather, in the context of Dr Knak School and many other similar township schools, the ideal approach to teaching reading would be a 'balanced approach' which combines the phonics and whole language approaches. In this study, classroom teachers are only given directions and ideas on what the Phenduka Literacy Programme does to improve literacy in a disadvantaged setting. However, this does not guarantee that what Phenduka does with poor readers would work in all other situations.

5.3 Reflections and Recommendations

Further case study research on literacy programmes that deal with poor readers would be most welcome. In the case of my research it became clear that the literacy/reading problems endemic in Dr Knak School are merely the 'tip of an iceberg'. Phenduka Literacy Project's intervention operates in only one of the many disadvantaged communities in fast-growing and older-resourced urban contexts; yet there are thousands of learners in the rural areas of South Africa or in other developing countries in Africa or even in the world at large who are experiencing the same problems as the learners in Alexandra Township. In some schools in these places, the Phenduka approach – combining phonics and whole language – may be highly appropriate, but in others different approaches may work better.

New research on teaching reading continues to reshape the approaches to reading problems in different contexts. These new approaches can be incorporated by curriculum developers to come up with a wide variety of resources that would improve literacy, especially in the learning of English which has become the dominant language of instruction in classrooms. On the other hand, set textbooks should include a wide variety of activities that consider learners' values and experiences in order to make learning an interesting activity. Teachers should also grab any opportunity to introduce reading programmes at their schools as a 'life privilege' so that they carry on developing literacy and reading skills once programmes have left their schools.

Parents back at home should not leave the burden of improving reading proficiency to teachers at schools. They can play a vital role in funding or sourcing funds for such reading programmes as Phenduka so that the intervention could start at foundation phase in order to arrest reading problems at an early stage. On the other hand, the creation or expansion of libraries in disadvantaged communities is imperative so that learners can utilize these facilities in order to develop a culture of reading and to cultivate a love for books. I have no doubt that this would improve learners' reading levels when they start school. Financial support is also needed to train many facilitators at all levels (Grade 1-7) and to build specialized rooms that would allow school teachers to get involved when such programmes are run in their schools.

Above all, there is no end to learning from what other teachers do. I learnt quite a lot from my observations of the Phenduka programme, and I enjoyed every minute of the sessions at the schools, which were exciting, appealing and beneficial to learners who were labelled 'poor readers' by their classmates. It was exciting to see how these ones gained momentum and improved in their reading proficiency. The excitement I had was like watching my own baby learn to walk for the first time. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages of using phonics and whole language approaches as shown by different theorists of

reading/literacy, I would recommend this combined approach as an ideal approach to use in Alexandra type schools.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Adjustable Diagnostic Sheet

[illegible]

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF STORIES USED

Brave Little Rat

d

Long long ago, there was a flood.

It rained and rained and the water covered the land.

The people climbed up the mountain.

The water rat, the duck and the turtle made a boat.

They sat on the boat and floated on the water.

Meanwhile, the people prayed to God to save them.

God said : "Bring me some sand from the bottom. Then I will make a new land.

The people said to the animals "Get us some sand from the bottom."

First the duck dived down into the water. But he could not reach the sand.

Then the turtle dived down, down, down into the water.

He got nearly there, but he had to turn around and come back.

Then the brave little water rat said he would go.

He took a deep breath and dived down, down, down into the water.

He got to the bottom, and took some sand in his mouth.

He swam back to the boat but water was going into his lungs.

Duck and turtle were sitting in the boat, watching for him.

They saw the water rat's body.

They pulled him onto the boat. "He is dead!" said duck.

Duck started to cry but turtle opened the water rat's mouth.

Inside his mouth he found some sand.

He took the sand out and now water rat could breathe.

Duck threw the sand high in the sky.

Then God made a new land for the people and animals with the sand.

Rat and Duck and Turtle

It rains and rains and rains.

The water comes up and up and up.

The people go up the mountain.

The animals go in a boat.

God says: Get me sand.

Duck goes down, into the water.

No sand.

Turtle goes down, down into the water.

No sand.

Rat goes down, down, down into the water.

He gets sand.

Duck throws the sand in the sky.

God makes a new land.

rains	mountain
water	duck
animals	rat
says	boat
throws	turtle
sand	land

The Elephant.

The elephant has a long nose.

It is called a trunk.

He uses it to pull down trees.

He uses it to pull down bushes.

He uses it to pull down branches.

He uses it to suck up water.

He uses it to take a shower.

He also has long teeth.

They are called tusks.

He uses them to dig up bushes.

The elephant has big ears.

He uses them to hear.

He flaps them to make a cool wind.

The elephant has a tiny tail.

The elephant mother uses it to lead her baby.

Would you like to ride an elephant ?

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interviews with Phenduka Facilitators

General Questions

1. In broad terms, what are Phenduka Literacy Project's general principles?
2. Why is there a need of such literacy intervention in Alexandra?
3. Why do you focus specifically on reading?
4. What broadly distinguishes your methods from those used by teachers at the school?
5. Describe the learners you target as well as their learning environment
6. How do your teaching methods link with Outcome Based Education (OBE) or Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) outcomes?
7. What are the challenges /difficulties that are confronting you in your reading intervention? How do you overcome these?

Specific/Focused Questions

1. How would you define /explain your key methods?
2. Describe the activities you use and the outcome of these activities. In doing these
Activities, what do you hope to achieve? (Their aims and purpose)
3. How often do learners perform/complete tasks? (Frequency you give learners activities and if by any chance these activities are repeated)
4. What follow-up work is done with learners, once a 'cycle' of literacy intervention has been completed?
5. How do you involve teachers in the process/ intervention?

Focus on Phonics and Whole Language

6. To what extent and how are your methods informed by the "phonics" and/or "whole language" approaches to literacy/teaching reading?

7. When you designed the literacy intervention, were your approaches/methods shaped by an understanding of the debate around phonics and whole language?
8. Which approach do you consider appropriate to your learners, and why?
9. Based on your experience in teaching poor readers, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
10. Can the two approaches be used together successfully? Elaborate on this.