

Strengthening of Parents' Skills on Learners' Learning, Reading and Homework in Limpopo Primary Schools: Experiences Relating Interventions at the Schools' Site

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Abstract:- The success of learners in reading and homework depends on the collaboration and communication between teachers and parents. South African Schools Act (SASA) (1996) stipulates that school-based educators need to collaborate with teachers to ensure quality education. There is a national dissatisfaction of the status of the ability of learners to read for meaning lately in South Africa (PIRLS, 2006;2011,2016,2021). Based on this state of affairs, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) with Performance Solutions Africa (PSA) established a project called Reading and Leadership Strengthening in South Africa (REALS) to strengthen parents' skills in supporting reading and homework at home. PSA trained 18 427 (75%) parents in 81 purposively identified schools in Limpopo Province Districts (24 schools in Sekhukhune East District; 23 schools in Sekhukhune South District; 20 schools in Mogalakwena District and 14 schools in Waterberg District). Purposive sampling was used to select the sample of the study. Parents were trained on how learners learn to read and on how to support their children in reading and homework. The study aimed at investigating the impact REALS SA project made on strengthening parents' skills to support their children with reading and homework, and collaboration and communication between schools and parents about learners' school activities. Data was collected by document study and interviews from one SGB Chairperson, Deputy Principal and Departmental Head in each of the three districts. Content and Narrative analysis were used to analyse the collected data. The study revealed that parents' skills on supporting their children in reading and homework improved. The total number of parents trained (75%) suggested that parents are willing and appreciative to be developed to support their children. The study further uncovered improved collaboration and communication between schools and parents pertaining the children's reading and homework. The findings of this study have implications for the continued parents training in all the primary and secondary schools in South Africa. To ensure continuity of the learners' support, the study also propose that the CMs monitor and evaluate implementation in schools. Furthermore, it is recommended that a module on

parent-learner support in learner's reading and homework be included in the Teachers' Training courses;

Keywords:- REALS, Strengthening, Parents' Skills, Reading, Homework, Experience, Collaboration, Communication, SMT Members

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading for meaning is key to learners' performance in schools. This noble requirement can be achieved through collaboration and communication between schools and parents regarding learners' school activities. South African Schools Act (SASA) (1996) stipulates that parents should be meaningful partners in school activities and envisages that educators need to collaborate with parents to ensure quality education. However, due to the fact that parents are not professionally trained, schools need to "convey information to parents about how to assist their children with school work" Lancy & Bergin (1992). The general outcry of learners' inability to read for meaning in South Africa suggests that there might be problems with the communication and collaboration between schools and parents on the support of children reading. The shameful finding by Progress in International Reading Literacy Study PIRLS (2006(87%); 2011 (82%); 2016(78%); 2021(81%) of learners in South African who cannot read for meaning in any language clearly indicates a need of children support in reading and homework (Mullis, von Davier, Fishbein, Reynolds & Wry, 2023). Based on this state of affairs, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) with Performance Solutions (PSA) as a service provider established Reading and Leadership Strengthening in South Africa (REALS) project to strengthen leadership and parents' skills in supporting children with reading and homework. This study focused on parents' skills in supporting their children with reading and homework.

➤ Problem Statement

Parental involvement in learners reading and homework plays a pivotal role in learners' achievement (Mahuro & Hungu, 2016). Research revealed that majority of South African primary schools are unable to read with comprehension in any of the languages (2006, 2011, 2016, 2021). Based on this finding, REALS SA with PSA as a

service provider trained parents and SMT members on how to support learners with reading and homework, and on collaboration and communication about learners' school activities between parents and schools. The problem in this study is the parents' skills to support learners on reading and homework.

➤ *Reals Project*

REALS project was designed to assist school level (development of resources to teach reading/literacy in the classroom and at home, supporting of District Managers; Subject Advisors; School Management Teams and teachers' development in assessment for learning (AfL) in English) and the education system (review of Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) and impact of recovery ATPs on teaching and learning). Approximately 220 Quintal 1-3 schools were randomly selected from KwaZuluNatal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo Provinces. REALS SA Coaches trained 10 parents in each school in the province on how to support reading and homework, and each of the 10 trained parents were to train 30 parents in the respective school consecutively until all the school parent community are trained.

➤ *Aim of the Study*

The study aimed to investigate the impact REALS programme made on strengthening schools and parents on supporting learners in reading and homework.

➤ *Research Objectives*

- To ascertain parents' skills in supporting their children on reading and homework;
- To investigate collaboration and communication between schools and parents about children's reading and homework; and
- To determine the impact REALS programme made on developing schools and parents to support their children with reading and homework.

➤ *Research Questions*

The study sought to answer the questions underneath:

• **Parents' Questions:**

- ✓ How were you supporting your child with reading and homework before REALS programme?
- ✓ How does the school collaborate with you about your child's reading and homework?
- ✓ What impact has REALS programme made on your skills to support your child on reading and homework?

• **Principals' Questions:**

- ✓ How does your school collaborate with parents regarding their children's reading and homework?
- ✓ How is your communication with parents after the REALS programme training in your school?
- ✓ What impact has the programme brought in your learners' reading and homework?

• **Teachers' Questions:**

- ✓ How do you collaborate with parents regarding your learners' reading and homework?
- ✓ How is your communication with parents after the REALS training?
- ✓ What impact has REALS programme brought on your learners' reading and homework achievement?

II. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research approach was adopted to underscore the study. Data was collected by document study and interview. Content and narrative analysis were employed to analyse the data collected. The rationale to use document study was due to the fact that the researcher wanted to obtain the total number of parents and SMTs trained as well as supplementing data obtained from the interview. Bowen (2009) highlights that document study provides a critical means of tracking change, development and the verification of the finding derived from the interview, hence the usage of the method in this study. The study also employed interviews to a new insight of the parents' skills on supporting their children in reading and homework (Folkestad, 2008; Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The collected data was analysed by content and narrative analysis. Document study and interviews were employed to supplement each other to ensure the authenticity of the study results.

III. SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

Purposive sampling was used to obtain the study sample. Mogalakwena, Sekhukhune East, Sekhukhune South and Waterberg district schools formed the sample of the study. Attendance registers from all the schools in the sample were collected through emails and WhatsApp for document study while 1 SGB Chairperson, 1 principal and 1 teacher from each district was interviewed. A total of 90 schools, 162 SMT members and 25110 were expected to be trained.

IV. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Discussions and the findings of the document study and the interviews are outlined underneath.

➤ Document Study Analysis and Discussions

Table 1: Document study data

District	Schools		Expected		Total trained		% Trained	
	expected	trained	SMT	Parents	SMT	Parents	SMT	Parents
Mogalakwena	24	20	40	6200	40	4107	100%	62%
Sekhukhune East	25	24	48	7200	48	7155	100%	99%
Sekhukhune South	25	23	46	6900	46	4773	100%	69%
Waterberg	16	14	28	4200	28	2392	100%	57%
Total	90	81	162	24500	162	18427	100%	75%

Table 1 indicates that 90 schools were involved in the study but 81 schools were trained. 180 SMT members and 24500 parents were expected to be trained. Some schools failed to train parents regardless of the fact that their SGB members were trained (4 schools in Mogalakwena District, 1 in Sekhukhune East District, 2 in Sekhukhune South District and 2 in Waterberg District). 2 SMT members (Principal/Deputy Principal; teacher) were expected to be trained in all the schools. It is observed that in Sekhukhune East 99% of the parents were trained. This might be attributed by the size of the schools in the district or by the fact that most of the schools completed training of parents.

It is worth noting that at the time of the study majority of the schools were still training the parents. As each of the 10 trained parents had each to train 300 or more parents until all the parents of a specific school were trained, it is also worth noting that some of the schools have large enrolment while some have small enrolment hence uneven parents totals in different schools. According to Table 1. 18 427 (75%) parents were trained. The fact that a high percentage of parents (75%) were trained suggests a willingness and appreciation of the parents to support their children on their education journey. This finding is consistent with Minj (1999) who revealed that majority of parents are involved in their children's learning activities. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassier & Burow (1995) in their study that found that parents want to be involved more effectively in their children's school learning to improve the learner's achievement. However, in another study by Okeke (2014) it was revealed that although parents care for the children's education, they do not know how to get involved. All members of SMT (principal & departmental head) in all the schools were trained.

➤ Interview Analysis and Discussions

The analysis and discussions of data collected from the parents, principal and the teacher follow:

➤ Findings from the parents' interview

In answering the question "**How were you supporting your child with reading and homework before REALS programme?**", the study found that parents support their children with reading and homework, however they did not have the necessary skills to support their children in reading

and homework. This finding aligns with Auerbach (1989) who highlighted parents lack of the essential skills to support their children with school activities. Vellymalay & Kumar (2012) affirm that parents become more involved if they are kept informed and explained about all the school educational events and activities. It is therefore important that schools involve parents maximally, specifically in children's reading and homework.

Parents submitted their narratives as follows:

- Parent 1 had this to say "Oh, what can I say, REALS has enlightened us with many things. In the past we thought that we were assisting our children with reading and homework but now realise that we were not doing it correctly. All we were doing was to monitor if they read and write homework without involving ourselves in the process. Now we know that we should be with them in all their reading and homework so that we be able to support them where they falter. The school did not tell us how to support our kids".
- Parent 2 lamented "Sir, previously I was rude and harsh when I supported my child with reading and homework. Little did I know that I should be humble and patient to my child. I am really happy about the knowledge I gained. From now henceforth I think I will guide my kid as expected".
- Parent 3 and 4 also indicated that they were assisting their children with reading and homework and sometimes even beating and humiliating them when they failed and they indicated that they will no longer use punitive measures when supporting their children.

On the question "**How does the school collaborate with you about your child's reading and homework?**" the study revealed that schools collaborate with parents about the school activities but minimally on how children read because they lack the necessary expertise and therefore unable to be fully engaged in the reading and homework processes. The finding resonates with Myende & Nhlumayo (2022) who indicated that parents understand their involvement in their children's education but believe that schools need to empower them. The need of collaboration is rated high for children's performance and hence involvement of parents by schools in the reading and

homework of learners is paramount (Syriopoulou-Delly & Polychronopoulou, 2019).

Parents highlighted how they collaborated with schools as follows:

Parent 1 confirmed “I think our school does not collaborate with us about how to support our children with reading and homework. They just instruct our children to inform us to help with their schoolwork. You know, we are made teachers these days” Similarly, Parent 2 indicated her concerns by saying “Really, as parents we are trying our best, we have been assisting our children with reading and homework, unfortunately I now realise that we were not doing it correctly according to what we were trained”. Parent 3 and 4 also indicated on the need of collaboration and communication on the learners reading and homework. Parent 4 highlighted this by saying “.... there is a serious need of collaboration between the school and parents for learners to perform excellently in reading and homework”.

The finding on the question “**What impact has REALS programme made on your skills to support your child on reading and homework?** Is as outlined below:

Almost all the parents highlighted how successful they are in assisting their children with reading and homework. Parents also indicated that through the application of what they learned in the programme their children’s reading and homework was gradually improving. Based on the submissions of the parents, this study concludes that REALS SA programme has impacted positively to the parent’s skills on supporting their children with reading and homework. Importantly, the parental attitudes towards reading and homework seems to have impacted positively on the performance of the children (Phahlamohlake, 2017).

Parent 2 highlighted the impact of the programme by saying “Wow, REALS has done wonders to all of us, since the training I developed a timetable which I employ to assist my children on reading and homework. I make sure that I am always with them step by step. Lately, my children enjoy reading and do better in homework”.

➤ *Findings from the Principal’s Interview*

With regard to the question “**How does your school collaborate with parents regarding their children’s reading and homework?** the study revealed that principals collaborate with parents in most of the school events and activities, however with regard to reading and homework they highlighted challenges such as limited parent’s level of education, uncondusive conditions for after-school reading and the socio-economic status of the parents. The finding of this study is in consistent with Cekiso, Rabeleman, Jadezweni, Madende & Dieperink (2022) and Maluleke (2014) affirmed that low level of parents’ education, their socio-economic status and uncondusive conditions obstruct collaboration between schools and parents. Principals indicated on how they collaborate with parents as follows:

- Principal 1 said “Yes, I think my collaboration with the parents is Ok of late. I emphasize that they assist their children on reading and homework in each parents

meeting. Engagement with parents on reading and homework is actually been delegated to the departmental heads and subject teachers and they submit the progress monthly. I am told things are going well” When probed about the availability of programmes for parents’ development on helping reading and homework the principal admitted that these are not available. He said “No! no! no! we don’t have parent development programmes in place, all we do in the parents meeting is to emphasise that they monitor their children. Thank you”

- Parent 2 & 3 highlighted that collaboration between them and parents with regard to learners reading and homework has improved because majority of the parents either communicate through WhatsApp or come to the schools to discuss either with the principal or teachers. Principal 3 indicated “Thanks very much to REALS, previously we had serious problems with parents’ attendance in the meetings but presently, the attendance is good. Teachers are reporting positively on the learners reading and homework achievement”
- Principal 4 on the other hand complained of some frustrations. She said that most of the children live in child-headed families and some with illiterate grandmothers and this makes collaboration difficult. She complained “You see, we are trying our best, but collaboration is often made difficult in our schools because most of the parents are illiterate, some leaners’ parents are working while some stay alone”.

Consequently, from the responses to the question “**How is your communication with parents after REALS programme training?**” the study found that the communication between the parents and the principals with regard to learners’ reading and homework has improved after the REALS training.

All the principal declared that REAL’S interventions improved communication between parents and schools, between parents and educators as well as between parents and their children with regard to reading and homework. Principal 3 applauded REALS programme by saying “... through the intervention of REALS, communication among SMT members with parents and learners about learners reading and homework gas drastically improved. The introduction of WhatsApp groups has made communication effective and efficient for everybody in our school”.

In answering the question “**What impact has the programme brought in your learners’ reading and homework?** “, the study found that the learner’s reading and homework has significantly improved. This finding is confirmed by Tizard, Schofield & Hewison (1982) who revealed a highly significant improvement by children’s reading who received extra support at home than extra support at the school. The principals highlighted the improved learners reading and homework, improved collaboration and communication among parents, SMT, educators and learners as the impacts REALS SA programme made to their schools.

➤ *Findings from the Teacher's Interview*

On the question **“How do you collaborate with parents regarding your learners’ reading and homework?”** the study revealed that teachers collaborate with parents, however, there was lack of sound relationships between parents and teachers. The finding is confirmed Lewis, Kim, & Bey (2011) study which found poor relationship as one of the factors which affect collaboration between parents and teachers negatively. In another study by Viskovic’ & Jevtic’ (2017) highlighted insufficient teachers’ competence to collaborating with parents due to lack of being professionally developed with the competences needed for collaboration with parents.

All teachers highlighted good collaboration with parents and thanked REALS interventions. Teacher 1 explained on how she collaborated with parents by saying “My collaboration with the parents is Ok. I usually invite them by WhatsApp and sending learners to tell them to come to school. Previously most of the parents were uncompliant when called, but at least, now after REALS interventions things are now improving”. This submission was supported by Teacher 3 when he said “You know, REALS has come to our rescue, previously when we call parents regarding reading and learners reading and homework, the attendance was poor but lately we see satisfactory attendance”.

Regarding the question **“How is your communication with parents after the REALS programme training?”** the study revealed that communication between teachers and parents has improved although it was hindered by the level of parents’ education, teachers’ competences on collaboration with parents and lack of parent’s time due to home commitments.

The finding of this study is in keeping with Cekiso, Rabelemane, Jadezwi, Madende & Dieperink (2022) who found low level of parents’ education and lack of time as factors bottle-necking suitable communication between teachers and parents.

The sampled teachers accepted and appreciated the improvement of communication between themselves and the parents. Teacher 1 appreciated “Wow, I did not think that one day parents can respond satisfactorily when called for their children’s reading and homework discussions. Really, I am so impressed”. Teacher 4 added “REALS has helped us improve our communication with the parents by establishing WhatsApp groups and this is paying dividends. Almost all the parents in my class are communicating positively”.

On the question **“What impact has REALS programme brought on your learners’ reading and homework achievement?”** the study found that REALS programme has impacted positively on the parents’ involvement to support their children and also on the learners’ reading and homework achievements. The finding indicates that parent involvement at home has a more significant effect on the success of their children. Carter (2002) confirms this finding in his study when revealed that

parent involvement has a significant impact on the learners’ outcomes and that involvement at home has a more significant effect on learners. This suggests the need of empowering all the parents on how to support their children at home.

- Teacher 1 confirmed the impact of REALS programme by indicating “It took us a long time to get a remedy to empower parents on how to support their children at home. Presently, we see good collaboration and communication between ourselves and parents with regard to reading and homework of our learners. The REALS training has improved parents’ attendance in all our school parents’ events and activities. Yoh, what can I say? The impact is unmeasurable”.
- Teachers 2 highlighted the impact of REALS programme “Sir, this programme has a huge impact in our school. We had a serious communication with parents previously. Lately we are able to communicate with them successfully through Face-to-Face meetings and WhatsApp groups. I recommend that if it can be possible all the parents in all schools in Limpopo be trained. This might maybe improve Grade 12 results in our province”.
- Teacher 4 applauded the impacts of the programme by thanking the DBE and PSA for having included their school in the project. She had this to say “I honestly thank the department and PSA for having chosen our school among so many schools in Limpopo Province. Our learners through the assistance they get from their parents are lately competing to read both in the classrooms and at the assembly. Our school has benefitted a lot from this project. I am thankful for this and hope that the training is extended to all the schools in primaries and secondaries. In the province”.

V. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study focused on schools in Mogalakwena, Sekhukhune East, Sekhukhune South and Waterberg Districts. This is a limited target population of parents, principals and teachers which may not represent all schools participating in REALS PROJECT in the three provinces, namely KZN, Eastern Cape and Limpopo. This makes it difficult to generalise the findings beyond the four districts in which the study was conducted. It is left to the reader to decide how relevant the findings are to their particular settings.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is the responsibility of schools and parents to collaborate, communicate and support learners with reading and homework for quality education. However, there is an outcry that learners cannot read for meaning in any language in South Africa, hence a high learners failure rate. One of the contributing factors for poor learners’ performance is the parents’ skills to support their children with reading and homework. The study investigated the impact of REALS programme in strengthening parents’ skills to support their children’s reading and homework. The study revealed that parents’ skills to help their children with reading and homework has improved after REALS interventions. The

study further found that collaboration and communication among the parents, principals, teachers and learners has significantly improved. This study conclude that REALS SA programme impacted positively to the strengthening of parent's, principal's and teachers' skills in supporting learner's reading and homework.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- Parents development programmes on learner's reading and homework be extended for all primary and secondary schools in South Africa;
- Programmes on collaboration and communication among parents, principals, teachers and learners regarding children's reading and homework be implemented in all schools;
- The study also recommends that the CMs monitor and evaluate implementation in schools to ensure continuity of the learners' support.
- A Module on parent-learner support on learner's reading and homework be included in the Teachers' Training courses;
- It is also recommended that a large-scale study be undertaken on the topic for the generalisation of the results in South Africa.

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