

**A study of reading assessment  
in the Grade 4 classrooms**

**By**

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**A thesis submitted in complete fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Master of Education (Language and Media)**

**University of KwaZulu-Natal**

**2013**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study is part of the first phase of a broader action research project that focuses on reading at a foundational level among both adults (Levels 1 and Levels 2) and children (Grade R – 4) in both IsiZulu and English, with the purpose of promoting a reading culture among educators, learners and other stakeholders in the learning community of the school.

The study focused on the assessment of reading in English among Grade 4 learners at a rural primary school in Kwazulu-Natal. This focus included the methods and techniques used to assess learners reading at Grade 4 level. Also, it focused on the skills that are being assessed in reading. The broad purpose of the study was to investigate, analyse and understand the assessment of reading and the impact it had on Grade 4 learners' development and growth in reading. The study shared the same objective as the broader project, which was to promote a reading culture. However, in order to create a reading culture, teachers need to use appropriate forms and tools of assessment and need to understand the role of assessment in the development of reading skills among young children. The purpose of reading assessment is to monitor the development of reading skills, to observe each learner's progression in reading, and to allow teachers to design methods to assist learners in achieving desirable reading strategies. In the light of this, the study's purpose was to identify the methods and/or forms of assessment that a teacher used to assess reading in her classroom as the basis for an intervention to improve the culture of reading at the school.

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

- What forms of assessments do teachers use in their reading classroom?
- What reading skills are being assessed and developed?
- How does the teacher assess reading? What process is used?
- What types of texts are being used to assess reading in the reading classroom?

In order to answer these questions the researcher used case study as the methodology and collected data using questionnaires, observations and interviews with the Grade 4 English teacher and school principal as well as kept a personal reflective journal. The data was analysed by means of content analysis and was coded according to the themes and patterns that emerged during the transcription process.

To briefly sum up the findings that surfaced from the study, it was clear that the participants were aware of the importance of teaching and assessing comprehension of reading however, these were not practised in the classroom. In other words, the teacher focused on assessing decoding, pronunciation, fluency, accuracy and book handling skills; there was no assessment of comprehension. Furthermore, reading was only reading aloud and was repetitive in that learners first listened while the teacher read the text aloud, then they read the same text together as a class aloud, they read it again in groups aloud and finally were called individually to the front of the class to read a few lines from the text aloud for assessment. This reading assessment was a formative form of assessment, however reading was also assessed on a continuous weekly basis

but was informally conducted. Lastly, there was a recurrence in the way the participant assessed reading in her classroom and the way in which her teacher assessed her reading while she was at school. These findings were just a few of the many findings that have been discussed in detail in Chapter Four of the dissertation.

## DECLARATION

I, Mitasha Nehal, declare that

- i. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.
- ii. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.
- iii. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers.
- iv. The thesis does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the thesis and in the References sections.

Signed:

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Mitasha Nehal

20 January 2013

As the candidate's Supervisor I agree to the submission of this thesis.

Signed:

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Dr. Peter Rule

20 January 2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my dear husband.**

I would like to express my thanks and heartfelt gratitude to the following people who dedicated their precious time in assisting me to successfully complete my thesis:

- The God of my understanding.
- My parents Rupan and Romilla Nehal and my brother Shaveer Nehal for their support, patience and encouragement which made me believe that this journey was possible. Also, to my parents for teaching me to believe in myself, to persevere and never give up.
- My husband Divesh Singh for his unconditional love, motivation and support throughout this journey.
- Mr. and Mrs. P.E. Singh, Akash, Surina, Letisha and the rest of the family for all their love, support and encouragement.
- Dr. Peter Rule for his dedication and guidance.
- The research participants without whom this study would not have been possible.
- Nazrana Mather who assisted in the editing of my dissertation.
- To each and every individual that assisted me through this journey, know that I appreciate all that you did.

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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

<b>ANA</b>	Annual National Assessment
<b>DoE</b>	Department of Education
<b>ESL</b>	English Second Language
<b>MoI</b>	Medium of Instruction
<b>PIRLS</b>	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
<b>RNCS</b>	Revised National Curriculum Statement
<b>SACMEQ</b>	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background and Context

Reading is an essential life skill that every individual needs to fully develop as it affects their lives. However, many South African schools seem to be having difficulty in producing learners that are skilled in reading. This seems to be an ongoing problem and is evident yearly in our poor Grade 12 results. Thus, South African children were proclaimed to be the dunces of Africa, in an article which was featured in the *Sunday Times* newspaper in July 2000 (Pretorius, 2002). This article provided feedback on the findings of a comparative study of literacy and numeracy rates of primary school children from 12 countries in Africa, with South African children in general performing poorly in comparison to their African peers on both literacy and numeracy measures (Pretorius, 2002, p.93). In addition, recent research conducted by Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2001 and 2006) as well as Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (2002) have shown that South African children are poor performers in literacy and numeracy in comparison to their sister countries in Africa.

The Department of Education (DoE) administered a countrywide survey to analyze and reflect on the literacy levels in primary schools. It was discovered that learners across the country had low levels of reading ability (DoE, 2005). Due to the incompetence and low levels of reading of learners, the *National Strategy for Reading*, which was a programme that promoted reading in

schools to improve the competence and reading levels of all learners, emerged and was implemented by the government across all schools to help overcome this problem (DoE, 2008, p.3). Despite the implementation of this programme learners in various grades are still performing poorly, they cannot read, comprehend or spell words correctly but yet are being promoted to the next grade year after year.

Many learners are placed in a complicated situation where they are being taught in a language that is not their primary language. “As a result many find it difficult to perform well academically” (Pretorius, 2004, p.2). Due to this language barrier learners are struggling to master the key reading skills resulting in them producing poor reading scores. This also places a strain on teachers as they experience difficulties in teaching and assessing these learners’ reading skills. Research indicates that learners can perform better in reading if teachers use bilingualism in their classrooms (Pretorius, 2002, 2004; Shembe, 2003). From my experience this is true as teachers are able to code-switch to explain key words that may arise during reading sessions which assists learners in understanding the word and its relevance to the text. Due to these challenges that both teachers and learners encounter it makes me question, how do teachers assess reading? What skills do teachers focus on assessing?

As an Intermediate and Senior Phase educator, I was initially concerned about the reading skills that teachers emphasize during the teaching of reading because many learners are able to decode words, yet have no understanding of what the word means. In addition, they are unable to read

fluently. From my experience and observation a lot of attention is placed on teaching children to decode words in Foundation Phase and this seems to be continuing through the Intermediate Phase, with little or no attention placed on other reading skills such as comprehension which is crucial. My experience is consistent with Pretorius' observation that "during the learning to read stage from Grade 1-3, there was, and still is an overemphasis on decoding skills, with very little attention given to the development of comprehension skills" (Pretorius, 2002, p.82). According to Pretorius (2002) this results in learners progressing to higher grades by simply 'barking at texts' because they have no understanding of the text. Thus I believe that it is important to understand and identify the methods with which teachers assess reading and what skills they focus on during the assessment of reading as this will shed light on the reason why our learners are struggling in literacy and what can be done to improve our literacy levels.

## **2. Focus and Purpose of Study**

The study was part of the first phase of a three year broader action research project that focuses on reading at a foundational level among both adults (Levels 1 and Levels 2) and children (Grade R - 4) in both IsiZulu and English, with the purpose of promoting a reading culture among educators, learners and other stakeholders in the learning community of a contiguous primary school and adult learning centre. Phase 1 in the broader action research study consisted of an in-depth study of the school's and the community's reading practices with possible improvement plans, while Phase 2 will focus on designing an implementation of improvement plans and lastly Phase 3 will provide an evaluation of the implementation plan.

The school is situated in the heart of a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal. Learners who attend the school live in the area and many are from poor backgrounds. The Medium of Instruction (MoI) from Grade 1 to Grade 3 (Foundation Phase) is IsiZulu, which is the learners' primary language. The Medium of Instruction changes in the Intermediate Phase to English. Learners are slowly introduced to English in Grade 2 and Grade 3. From Grade 4 to Grade 7 learners are taught in English but teachers tend to code-switch from English to IsiZulu to make learners understand. However, all assessments are written in English.

The study focused on the assessment of reading in English among Grade 4 learners at this rural primary school. This focus included the methods and techniques used to assess learners' reading at Grade 4 level. Also, it focused on the skills that are being assessed in reading. The broad purpose of the study was to investigate, analyse and understand the assessment of reading and the impact it had on Grade 4 learners' development and growth in reading. The study shared the same objective as the broader project, which was to promote a reading culture. However, in order to create a reading culture, teachers need to use appropriate methods of teaching and assessment and need to understand the purpose of assessment in reading in order to develop reading skills among young children. In this study I understand the purpose of reading assessment as being to monitor the development of reading skills, to observe each learner's progression in reading, and to allow teachers to design methods to assist learners in achieving desirable reading strategies. In the light of this, the study's purpose was to identify the methods and/or forms of assessment that teachers used to assess reading and the reading skills that were assessed in their classroom as the basis for an intervention to improve the culture of reading at the school.

### **3. Rationale**

I have always had an interest in reading and as an English teacher I particularly enjoyed the teaching of literature. I always ensure that my learners and I read a range of good stories in different genres. I also enjoy motivating learners to read by challenging them to read through fun activities that are pleasurable.

As a first-time Grade 4 educator teaching English to English Second Language (ESL) learners, I began to explore my learners reading skills. During initial interactive sessions at the beginning of this year with my learners I was shocked to find that almost half of my class were experiencing difficulties reading, their vocabulary was limited and they had difficulties pronouncing words. While they were able to decode most words, they encountered difficulty with comprehension. This had made me question what reading skills educators focus on developing. How do they assess if learners have developed these skills and what corrective tasks they do with their learners to improve reading development?

Society in general is fully aware that reading is an important life skill that shapes the life of every child. As a result reading is being taught at schools. However, schools may be encountering difficulties teaching children to read or teachers are not assessing learners' reading appropriately. Consequently, the literacy gap in South Africa is widening. This is evident in research conducted by PIRLS in 2006 (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007), in which South African Grade 4 learners performance in reading tests was so poor that they were ranked last out of 40 countries.

South Africa's reading crisis was recognised in the National Department of Education's letter to all primary school principals published in the *Mail and Guardian* (2006) pleading with them to 'Teach our children to read' (Mackie, 2007, p.5)

...our assessments of how well our children read reveal that a shockingly high number cannot read at the appropriate grade and age level. Many simply cannot read at all. We cannot allow this to continue. We are therefore challenging all our primary schools to improve the reading skills of all their learners.

However, from my personal experience I do believe that primary school learners are still struggling to read despite the National Department of Education's plea. As a result, I have decided to investigate other Grade 4 educators' methods of assessing reading in their classroom and the reading skills that they assess. (In this dissertation the term 'skills' is often used which refers to the various concepts that the teacher tries to develop and master in each learner. However, reading does involve much more than the skills highlighted in the dissertation such as learners' vocabulary knowledge as well as sociocultural knowledge to name just a few).

In addition, although there are some studies of reading at a primary level in South Africa (Pretorius, 2000, 2002, 2004; Verbeek, 2010), I have not encountered many studies that actually investigate the assessment of reading in Grade 4 classrooms in South Africa, even though our

RNCS document states that reading needs to be assessed at all grade levels. As a result this has created the desire within me to go into classrooms and investigate reading assessment.

#### **4. Key Research Questions**

The following questions were used to evaluate what methods teachers used to assess reading and what skills they assessed during their reading lessons:

- What forms of assessment does the teacher use in her reading classroom?
- What reading skills are being assessed and developed?
- How does the teacher assess reading? What process is used?
- What types of texts are being used to assess reading in the reading classroom?

#### **5. Key Definitions**

This study focused on two key processes: reading and assessment. In addition to these terms various sub-terms have been identified and are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

There are various theorists that define and understand reading differently. Through my own experiences and observations, I understand reading as a cognitive-linguistic activity as well as a socially constructed behavior. I share this understanding with many other theorists (Pretorius, 2000, 2002, 2004; Bielby, 1999; Harrison & Coles, 1992), because we understand reading as a

process made up of various components that a reader needs to learn and master in order to be able to read. This understanding of reading and its components is further discussed in Chapter 2.

In addition to my understanding of reading, I share the same understanding of assessment as Teale, Hiebert and Chittenden, 1987; Shearer and Homan, 1994; and Afflerbach, 2007: a way of collecting information to meet diverse needs. It occurs in many stages of an educational system, which could draw upon a variety of instruments and strategies. In addition, it can allow one to diagnose a problem that may exist and from the diagnosis recommendations and solutions can be designed. The variety of assessment instruments that are used in the classroom to assess learners' reading is highlighted and discussed in Chapter 2.

## **6. Research Methodology**

This study is a qualitative case study located within an interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative research design allowed for an in-depth analysis of the research questions. In addition, it allowed the researcher to ask the 'why' questions and to find ways of improving the results (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). In relation to the qualitative tradition, the interpretivist approach was also appropriate in this study, as it allowed the researcher to gain insight and an understanding of the teacher's experiences and reasons for choosing and using certain forms of assessment and reading skills in her reading classrooms. Also, it provided a clearer understanding of the impact her choice of assessments had on her learners because it was the teacher that defined the meaning of the situation in her classrooms.

In addition a case study approach was used because the researcher aimed to capture the reality of the participants' experiences and thoughts about the reading assessment situation in the Grade 4 classroom (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p.182). Similarly, Rule and John (2011, p.4), state that a case study is a “systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context in order to generate knowledge”. Furthermore, the use of a case study was most appropriate to this research as the purpose was to collect rich thick information that would later assist in designing an intervention programme for the next phase of the action research project.

The study used a range of data collection methods such as interviews, questionnaires, observations and personal reflections. These methods were conducted with the Grade 4 English educator and principal for data gathering purposes. The methodology chapter, Chapter 3, includes a detailed description of the sampling technique used as well as the design of the questionnaire, interview and observation schedules and the way in which the data were analysed using codes and themes.

## **7. Outline of Chapters in the Thesis**

Chapter 1 outlines the background, focus, purpose and context of the study. It also highlights the research questions and summarizes the research methodology that was used in the study. Chapter 2 is the literature review and it includes the conceptual frameworks that supported this study. The research methodology is presented in Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 discusses the findings from

the analysis of data. Chapter 5 is the conclusion of this study which highlights the key findings as well as possible recommendations that will assist the broader study in phase 2 and in phase 3.

## **8. Conclusion**

This chapter provided a brief overview of the background and context of the study as well as the thinking underlying the dissertation.

The next chapter will discuss the literature and conceptual framework that underpin this study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter reviews some of the literature that has enlightened my thinking about investigating reading assessment at Grade 4 level. The chapter consists of two sections, the first being the literature review and the second the conceptual framework. The purpose of a literature review is

to advance our collective understanding. A researcher or scholar needs to understand what has been done before, the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what they might mean. A researcher cannot perform significant research without first understanding the literature in the field. Not understanding the prior research clearly puts a researcher at a disadvantage (Boote & Beile, 2005, p.3).

Thus it is important that a literature review is presented in a dissertation.

The following themes were established for this literature review section: definitions of reading and assessment, reading performance in South Africa, approaches to reading including the psycholinguistic and sociocultural approaches, four roles of a reader, reading skills that are taught and assessed, and the various forms of assessment. These themes form the basis of the research and are discussed in detail. Also, this chapter reviews literature relating to the development of reading proficiency in children and how assessment assists the teacher to know what to teach the child next. The purpose of the second section is to highlight the conceptual

context for the case study by considering the field of literature regarding reading and assessment and the context in which reading takes place. The teacher's perspective and practice can be understood in the context of concepts about the reading assessment process. The framework that guided the study will be discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review for this dissertation will focus mainly on South African research on reading performance. First, I provide a definition of reading and highlight the different skills that are linked to reading. Then, I present details on the reading performance in South Africa, by looking into various studies that were conducted in South Africa around this topic. Thereafter, I discuss two approaches to reading, the psycholinguistic approach and the sociolinguistic approach. I also, provide a brief overview of the four roles of a reader. Lastly, I define assessment and review assessment and reading.

### **2.1. Reading**

There are various theorists that define and understand reading differently. I had initially chosen to use and adapt the definition of reading as “a receptive language process. It is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs” (Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1988, p.12). I believe reading is a process in which the writer encodes meaning in the form of language and the reader decodes the language to establish an understanding. In addition to the above definition, I realized that reading is also a sociocultural process in that “reading takes place and is learnt within a broader social context. Schools and teachers constitute an important component

of this social context” (Pretorius & Machet, 2003, p.47). Thus reading can be understood as socio-psycholinguistic process as it entails both psycholinguistic processes and a sociocultural context. Reading is an influential factor which is of utmost importance in the development of children as it is imperative for their success, in that reading allows them to think, assimilate and understand various texts and to develop their knowledge. In addition Browne (1998, p.3), states that the engagement “with print promotes the ability to think about issues and ideas and develops understanding and agility with language in all its forms”. These conceptions of reading will be further interrogated and elaborated in section 2.4 below.

## **2.2. Components (skills) emphasized in the teaching of reading**

Many recent studies into the teaching of reading conducted by the governments of the USA (Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000), England (J. Rose, 2006), Australia (Australian Government, 2005), and South Africa (Teaching Reading in the Early Grades, 2008), all support integrated approaches and offer an outline of the critical fundamentals of reading which should be taught. These studies emphasize the following five components of teaching reading:

- Phonemic awareness;
- Word recognition (decoding);
- Comprehension;
- Vocabulary;
- Fluency.

However, a few theorists (Shanahan, 2003; Pressley, 2001; Cunningham, 2001; Weaver, 2002 and Allington, 2004) have had varying views and opinions on these five components. They believe that these five components are not the only components that need to be used in the teaching of reading but that there are also many more components. Allington (2004) suggests five components that can be used to improve the teaching of reading:

1. Provide access to interesting texts,
2. Ensure readers read appropriate texts according to their level,
3. Be mindful that writing and reading have mutual positive effects,
4. Balance whole class teaching with small group and side-by-side instruction.
5. Make expert tutoring available.

Despite the varying views of the theorists I chose to keep my focus on the five components of teaching reading (phonemic awareness which refers to the individual sounds in each spoken word, word recognition (phonics) which is the decoding of words, comprehension is the understanding of words, vocabulary which is the understanding of a wide range of words and fluency which is the ability to read accurately and smoothly), although Allington's (2004) strategies are also extremely crucial in the teaching of reading. The reasoning behind my choice is due to the fact that South African teachers are required to follow the RNCS policy document that encourages the teaching of phonemic awareness, decoding, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency across the Intermediate Phase but more especially in Grade 4. In addition, these are the focus areas that teachers are familiar with and use in most of their reading classrooms.

Fluency, decoding and phonetic interpretation are important as they assist a reader to understand the meaning of the text. “In order to accurately decode words, readers need to be able to accurately identify the sounds represented by the letters or letter combinations and use both letter-sound and meaning cues to determine the exact meaning of the word in its context” (Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005, p.703). If learners are able to identify sounds, thus being able to decode words, it will assist learners in becoming fluent readers that have an understanding of the text.

A number of studies indicate that the South African educational system tends to focus on surface decoding skills rather than developing comprehension skills. During research conducted by Pretorius (2002) it was found that “during the ‘learning to read’ stage from Grades 1-3, there was and still is an overemphasis on decoding skills, with very little attention given to the development of comprehension skills” (Pretorius, 2002, p.82). This has resulted in learners’ moving up the ladder to Grade 4 with ‘unpolished’ reading skills. This is evident in research conducted by Pretorius (2000): she found that learners had developed good decoding skills but their comprehension was poor. “Decoding is a necessary reading skill but it alone does not constitute reading: comprehension is the sine qua non of reading” (Pretorius, 2000, p.34). Furthermore, Pretorius (2000) states that for whatever purpose learners read they will only achieve that purpose if they understand the text. Therefore it is important that teachers integrate all reading components (decoding, comprehension, fluency, phonemics and vocabulary) during the teaching and assessing of reading.

### **2.3. Reading Performance in South Africa**

In recent years two large studies conducted by Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2001 and 2006) as well as Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (2002) focused on the performance of learners in literacy and numeracy. The results of these studies overall showed that South African learners were performing dismally in literacy as compared to their counterparts regionally and internationally.

The SACMEQ II project was conducted from 2000 to 2003. The study provided detailed information on the mathematics and reading achievement of 42 000 learners in 2 250 schools in 14 sub-Saharan countries. The research was conducted using learner, teacher and principal questionnaires and learner and teacher tests for literacy and numeracy. The tests used in the research correlated with the school curricula. The language used in the questionnaires and tests were English, and the questionnaires specifically investigated the teaching of English.

The data was presented in different ways, but all highlighted the poor performance of South African students. In the reading test, the mean scores of South African students placed the country 9th out of the 14 African countries, ahead of Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zanzibar, but falling behind Uganda, Mozambique, Botswana, Swaziland, Tanzania, Mauritius, Kenya and Seychelles in that order (Mothibeli, 2005, p. 3).

It was found that 36, 7% of South African Grade 6 students met the minimum requirements, and 19, 1% the desired level of mastery according to the committee's scoring system. The committee designed a scaling model which clustered test items in terms of the specific skills that were

needed to answer each item and these skills were ranked in terms of eight levels of literacy competency. From this method it showed that 50% of South African students in Grade 6 were unable to read beyond a very basic level (this is highlighted in Table 1). Furthermore, SAQMEC II revealed that 50% of South African students and 40% of students in all the 14 countries were only able to interpret meaning in short, simple sentences. However, the South African results varied in that learners performed extremely well in certain skills and poorly in other skills. This is indicative of the unevenness of reading achievement within the system. In table 1 we are able to see that overall South Africa is below average with preponderance of learners at low levels of achievement, but also the high categories are above average.

**Table 1: Grade 6 Learner skills levels for the SACMEQ II reading tests, highlights South African percentages and average for 14 Sub-Saharan African countries**

(Source: Mothibeli, 2005, p.4 & 6)

Reading Level	Descriptor	South African percentage	Average percentage for 14 countries
<b>1</b>	<b>Pre-reading:</b> Matches words and pictures involving concrete concepts and everyday objects. Follows short simple written instructions	12.2%	6.7%
<b>2</b>	<b>Emergent reading:</b> Matches words and pictures involving prepositions and abstract concepts: uses cuing systems (by sounding out, using simple sentence structure and familiar words) to interpret phrases by reading on.	18.8%	14.9%
<b>3</b>	<b>Basic reading:</b> Interprets meaning (by matching words and phrases, completing a sentence, or matching adjacent words) in a short and simple text by reading on or reading back.	19.1%	18.4%
<b>4</b>	<b>Reading for meaning:</b> reads on or reads back in order to link and interpret information located at various parts of the text	16.0%	20.3%
<b>5</b>	<b>Interpretive reading:</b> reads on and reads back in order to combine and interpret information from various parts of the text in association with external information (based on recalled factual knowledge) that 'completes' and contextualizes meaning	9.4%	16.8%
<b>6</b>	<b>Inferential reading:</b> reads on and reads back through longer texts (narrative, document or expository) in order to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer the writer's purpose	7.0%	10.7%

<b>7</b>	<b>Analytical reading:</b> locates information in longer texts (narrative, document or expository) by reading on and reading back in order to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer the writer's personal beliefs (value systems, prejudices and/or biases)	10.9%	8.4%
<b>8</b>	<b>Critical Reading:</b> Locates information in longer texts (narrative, document or expository) by reading on and reading back in order to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer and evaluate what the writer has assumed about the topic and the characteristics of the reader –such as age, knowledge and personal beliefs (value systems, prejudices and/or biases)	6.6%	3.8%

In separate studies conducted by PIRLS in 2001 and 2006, South African learners' reading abilities were compared with those of learners internationally. A total of 40 countries participated in the research in 2006. In South Africa alone more than 30 000 Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners' reading was assessed (Zimmerman, Howie, du Toit, 2008). The study focused on three aspects of reading literacy: comprehension, purposes of reading, and reading attitudes and behavior. The research findings were analyzed using a scaling system which was designed by PIRLS (Mullis, et al. 2007). The average international performance was 500 points, with the Grade 4 learners in South Africa achieving on average 235 points, while the Grade 5 learners achieved an average of 302 points. Both the grades proved to be well below the international average performance (van Staden & Howie, 2008).

**Table 2: Percentage of South African learners reaching the PIRLS 2006 international benchmarks**

Source: Zimmerman, Howie & du Toit (2008, p.33)

PIRLS 2006 international benchmarks	International median (%) (Grade 4)	South African median (%)	
		Grade 4	Grade 5
<b>Low (400)</b>	94	13	22
<b>Intermediate (475)</b>	76	7	13

<b>High (550)</b>	41	3	6
<b>Advanced (625)</b>	7	2	2

From the study it is clear that South Africa has a reading crisis and that many learners are proving to be unskilled and unable to read. However, it is important to note that the South African context may differ to that of other countries' contexts that participated in the study, given that South Africa is a Developing Third World Country. Table 2 illustrates that only 13% of Grade 4 learners have reached the Low International Benchmark in comparison to a 94% average of Grade 4 learners internationally. Shockingly, only 7% of South African Grade 4 learners were reading at a literal level as compared to an average of 76% of international Grade 4 learners.

Further to the SACMEQ and PIRLS study, many South African children at primary school level are proving to be unskilled readers. For over a decade a number of articles have been written in our local newspapers (Sunday Times, 2000 'Dunces of Africa'; Mail & Gurdian, 2007 'South Africa's children cannot read'; Sunday Times, 2011 'We need a state of emergency to take us back to the blackboard', Sunday Times, 2011 'Literacy Levels Plunge';) highlighting the reading crisis in South Africa. In addition, various South African researchers (Pretorius, 2000; Matjila & Pretorius, 2004; Pretorius & Ribbens, 2005; Fleisch, 2007 and many more) have also conducted studies around reading in South Africa and have all referred to South Africa's reading crisis.

Aitchison and Harley (2006) conducted research in South Africa to reveal the serious literacy problem that we are encountering. In their study Aitchison and Harley (2006) made a shocking discovery that in 2001 only 51% of South Africans had more than a Grade 9 education. This

highlights that just under half of the South African population has very little or no education, which has a negative impact on the country's literacy levels. Table 3 highlights the percentage of South Africans with different levels of education.

**Table 3: Levels of education of South Africans aged 15 and over**

(Source: Aitchison & Harley, 2006, p. 91)

<b>Level of education of citizens older than 15 years</b>	<b>1995 October Household Survey</b>	<b>1996 General Population Census</b>	<b>2001 General Population Census</b>
Full general education (Grade 9 and more)	14.3 million (54%)	13.1 million (50%)	15.8 million (52%)
Less than full general education (less than Grade 9)	12.2 million (46%)	13.2 million (50%)	14.6 million (48%)
<i>Less than Grade 7</i>	7.4 million (28%)	8.5 million (32%)	9.6 million (32%)
No schooling	2.9 million (11%)	4.2 million (16%)	4.7 million (16%)

In addition the South African Department of Education also conducted Systemic Evaluations in Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 to understand the performance and progress made in these grades. They also found that learners were performing poorly in literacy (DoE, 2003). These studies and findings all highlight the ongoing struggle that South Africa is experiencing in terms of reading in schools and in society.

A number of factors have a considerable influence on this reading crisis in South Africa. A few of these were highlighted in the PIRLS 2006 Summary Report by Howie et al (2008), namely: economic factors, social inequality, language barriers and classroom sizes. Many learners come from impoverished backgrounds and disadvantage homes thus resulting in a lack of reading

material and resources. This has a disadvantaging effect on learners and it also makes teaching reading difficult as learners lack the knowledge and skills that each learner should bring to the classroom, such as vocabulary. In addition, due to poverty and the social inequalities that reside among South Africans, many learners do not attend pre-schooling which also affects reading scores because many important skills that are taught early in a child's life are lacking. Language barriers also affect reading scores as many learners are learning in a language that is not their mother-tongue and lastly class sizes are large in South Africa. It is further stated that in order to overcome this crisis all reading research in South Africa needs to be reviewed in order to revise and design new development initiatives (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Du Toit, Scherman & Archer, 2008).

#### **2.4. Approaches to reading**

Over the years there has been 'great debate' on approaches to reading. These debates have centered on the issues of which approach is most 'correct' in the learning and teaching of reading, the phonics approach versus the psycholinguistic approach. Lyster (2003, p.39) indicates that, "the key differences between them indicate contrasting conceptions of how learning occurs as well as competing philosophical orientations". The phonics approach, which is often referred to as a bottom-up approach, in essence perceives learning as the acquisition of a set of sub-skills in an encoded sequence. These sub-skills then merge to form the whole skill which refers to whole language. The whole language approach is called a top-down approach, and it sees learning as a holistic process.

In discussing a holistic approach to reading or the top-down approach Verbeek (2011) understands reading to be a cyclical rather than a linear process as it involves the use of visual, perceptual, syntactic and semantic approaches which all contribute to comprehension. Thus this approach to reading can be seen as a socially constructivist one,

what is learned cannot be separated from the context in which it is learned, the purposes or goals that the learner brings to the situation are central to what is learned and the knowledge and meaning are socially constructed through the processes of negotiation, evaluation, and transformation (Cambourne, 2002, p.26-29).

I share the same views as Weaver (1994) in understanding reading as a transaction between the mind of the reader and the language of text, in a particular situational and social context. In other words we believe reading incorporates a psycholinguistic and sociocultural approach, therefore these two approaches will be discussed.

#### **a. Psycholinguistic approach**

The psycholinguistic approach to reading was developed from the 1960s by influential theorists Frank Smith and Yetta and Kenneth Goodman. This view “is simply that reading is better understood when it is viewed in terms of linguistic processes and that language processes are important in the processing of print” (Dechant, 1991, p.15). Also, “Goodman (1965/2003) has studied what he refers to as children’s “miscues” (as opposed to their errors) while reading orally, and he uses these miscues to show how readers can actively construct meaning. This work has had a huge impact on the way the reader’s efforts are valued in that errors became seen as generative rather than negative” (Verbeek, 2011, p.21).

In addition, the Goodmans' (1965/2003) phrase 'psycholinguistic guessing game' became very popular as they used it to explain how readers constructed the meaning in a text. This psycholinguistic guessing game consists of using syntactic, semantic and graphic information to guess what the text will be about (Samuels & Kamil, 1984, p.187). Dechant (1991, p.16) states that:

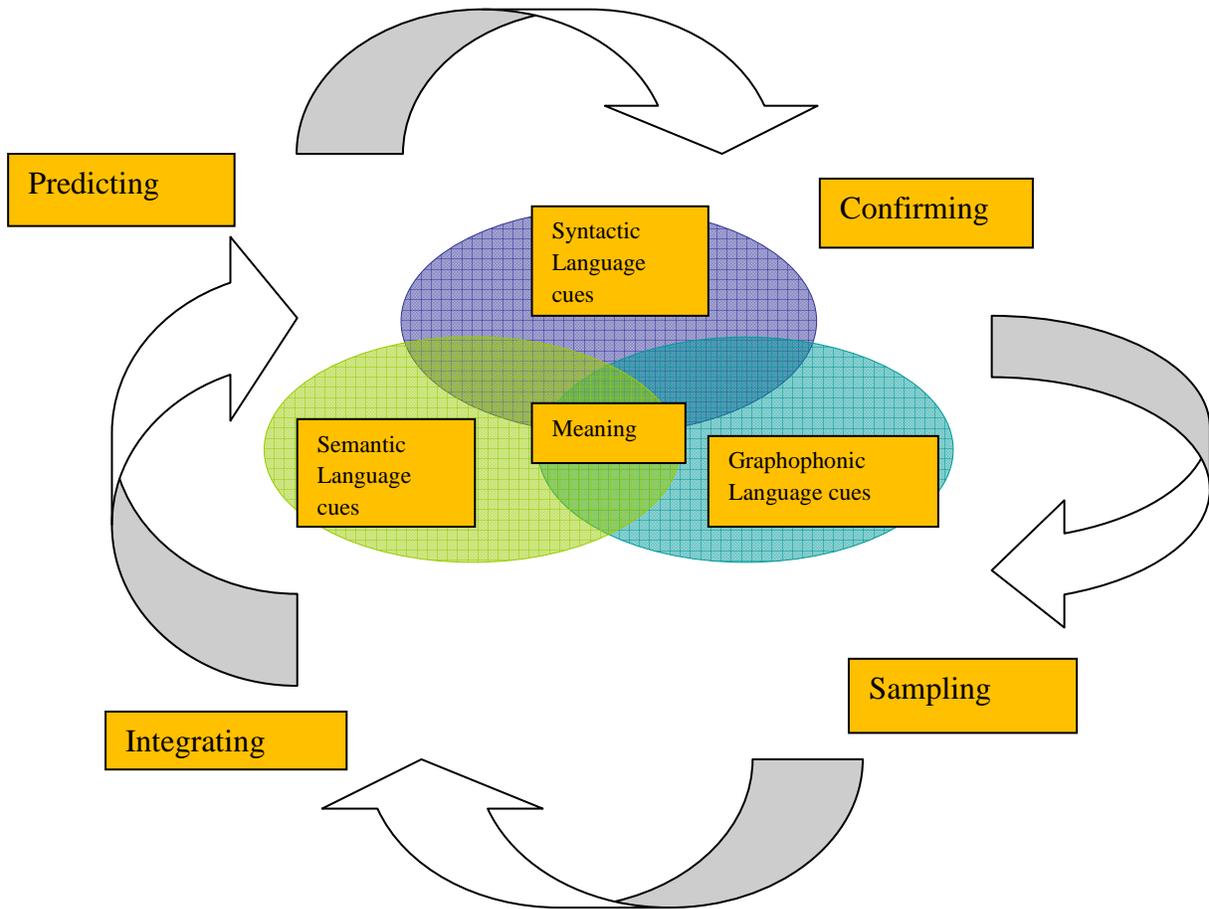
for Goodman, reading begins with a graphic display as input and ends with meaning as output. Goodman suggests that the eyes of readers move across a line of print picking up minimal visual cues. These cues together with knowledge of language, their world knowledge, and the meaning of the previous text, allow readers to make guesses as to what will follow and what the words are.

This process engages an interaction with the reader's thoughts and language. According to this process and Goodmans' (1965/2003) view of reading, the graphic cues chosen by the reader are briefly stored in the short-term memory, the reader then makes tentative decisions about what the word could likely be and stores it in the medium-term memory. The reader then verifies this with what they know and if it is correct it is stored in the long-term memory. However, if it is incorrect the reader goes back to the text for more clues and this cycle continues (cited in Harrison & Coles, 1992, p.7-8).

Barrentine (1999, p.3) illustrates a "language-based model of how reading happens", using Goodman's (1965) representation of a psycholinguistic approach to reading. Figure 1 highlights this language-based model.

**FIGURE 1: LANGUAGE-BASED MODEL OF HOW “READING HAPPENS”: THE READING PROCESS**

Source: Barrentine (1999, p.3)



This model highlights Barrentine’s understanding of the reading process. She believes that language information consists of sounds and symbols which she refers to as graphophonic language, grammar (syntactic cues) and semantic cues which are in the text and the reader’s background knowledge. Through interaction with the text the reader is able to predict, integrate, sample and confirm the meaning of the text. This process is cyclical and ongoing.

Frank Smith (1978/1994) also made a considerable contribution in the psycholinguistic approach. He argued that individuals learn to read by reading and that the teacher's role is not to teach reading but to help them read "by making reading easy, not by making it difficult" (Smith, 1978, p.139). Smith (1994, p.54), also believes that when readers read they use four sources of information:

1. visual information (information that was last seen e.g. the last word seen on the previous page),
2. orthographic information (spelling of words),
3. syntactic information (grammatical information), and
4. semantic information (background knowledge/information).

In addition, Smith (1994) argues that the more skilled reader uses fewer visual cues; instead they can construct meanings by making informed decisions based on what they already know or by using the other three sources of information.

Lastly, Smith (1978/1994,) states that there are no methodical exercises or kit of materials for teaching children how the world uses written language. They actually learn without anyone knowing that they are learning, simply by involving themselves in literate activities with individuals who use written language. He also believes that it is in 'literacy clubs' that learners learn more about reading and writing. In addition, "children in the literacy club have opportunities to see what written language can do, they are encouraged and helped to do those things themselves. They learn to be like other members of the club" (Smith, 1994, p.217-218).

To briefly sum up a complex process, psycholinguistic theorists believe reading is a process that involves an interaction between the mind of the reader and the linguistics of the text.

### **b. Sociocultural approach**

Many theorists such as Halliday (1975), Heath (1983), Wells (1986), Street (2001), Purcell-Gates (2004), Cook-Gumperz (2006), share the same belief that reading is learnt and taught in social context and as a result it is a social and linguistic process. In other words reading should be learnt and taught using a sociocultural approach. The term social context refers to the individual's home, community, school, media and instructional interactions. This approach is partly a response to the perceived inadequacies within a purely psycholinguistic approach to reading.

Sociocultural theorists also believe that reading is not an individual process, but a process that involves social groups in various contexts which on most occasions has a positive effect on the reader. Verbeek (2011, p.30) states that:

the social meanings and uses of literacy in different contexts (not only in the school) are of key interest, as is an awareness of power and the nature of knowledge, social class differences in the meanings and uses of literacy in these contexts and the intergenerational maintenance of such differences.

The influence of social identity (class, race and gender) both on what the reader brings to the text and on how he or she interacts with the text is of interest.

Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000, p.8) have identified five theoretical assumptions that they believe to be key in the understanding of literacy as a social process.

1. Literacy is best understood as a social practice.
2. Different literacy practices are connected to different domains of life.
3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations and some literacies are more powerful than others.
4. Literacy is historically situated.
5. Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

Within this view, it is clear that literacy is wider than print based reading and writing. Thus it can be said that the sociocultural approach to reading combines the written language in the text with the reader's values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and social relationships that have been inculcated in him or her from different contexts such as home, community, school and the media (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004). As a result, they (the theorists mentioned above) believe that the teaching and learning of reading should not only focus on the language of the written text which is important but also allow the reader to use their social and cultural backgrounds to learn to read and understand.

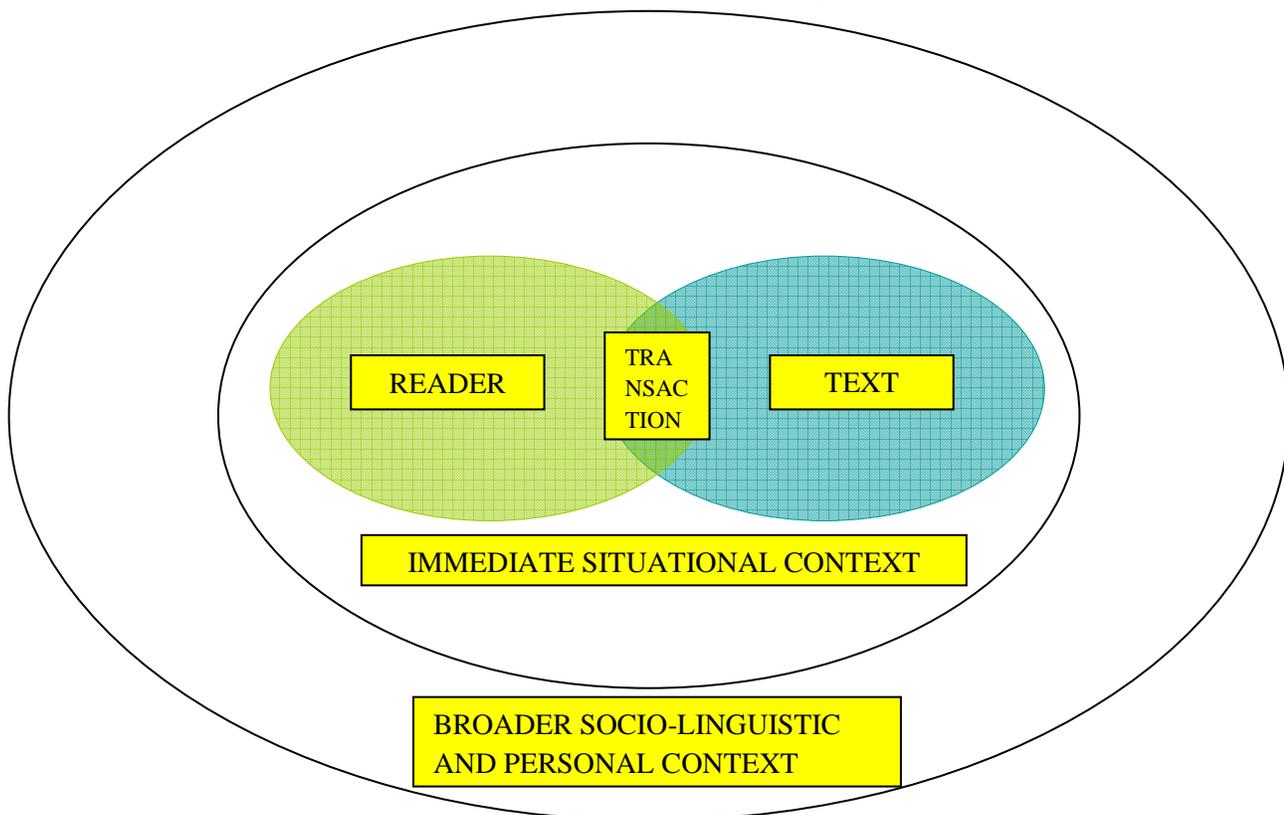
Rose (2004) also subscribes to a sociocultural approach to reading. He believes that initial reading should occur at home and that learners that come from literate backgrounds and cultures have a greater advantage over learners who do not receive support from their families and communities.

### c. Socio-psycholinguistic approach

Weaver (1994) understands reading to be a socio-psycholinguistic process. Her understanding of reading links the sociocultural approach to reading with the psycholinguistic approach to reading. In other words, this approach builds on and synthesizes the ideas of the previous approaches (psycholinguistic and sociocultural approaches). In doing so she designed a model that illustrates the process of reading using a socio-psycholinguistic approach.

#### **FIGURE 2: READING AS A SOCIO-PSYCHOLINGUISTIC APPROACH**

(Source: Weaver (1994, p.30))



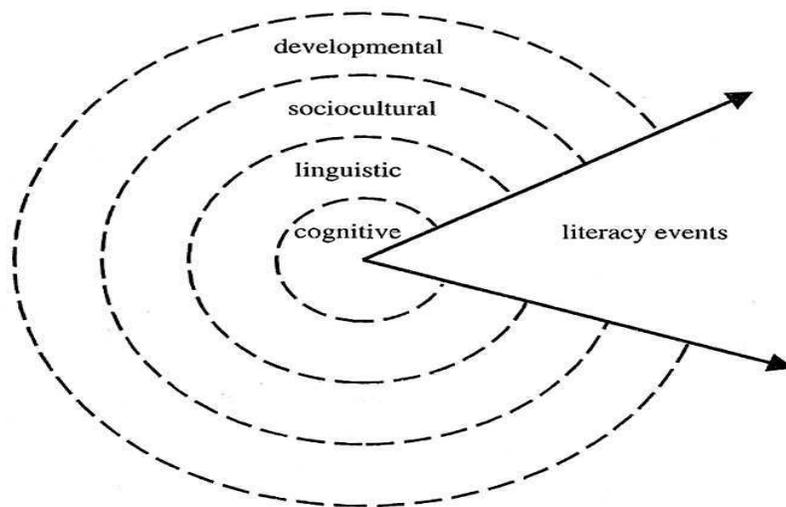
This model illustrates that a transaction occurs between the text and the reader within a social and situational context. Weaver (1994) refers to the social context as the readers' background and the situational context as the testing situation. Thus she believes that "reading is not merely a

psycholinguistic process, involving a transaction between the mind and reader and the language of the text. Rather reading is a socio-psycholinguistic process” (Weaver, 1994, p.29).

Similarly Kucer and Silva (2006) also designed a model that highlights the interrelation of the psycholinguistic (cognitive and linguistics) and sociolinguistic (background knowledge and language) approaches to reading. Kucer and Silva suggest that literacy is a multidimensional process in which the reader or writer is a code breaker or code maker, a meaning maker, a text user and text critic and a scientist and construction worker. Kucer and Silva (2006), illustrates the dimensions in figure 3.

### **FIGURE 3: DIMENSIONS OF LITERACY**

(Source: Kucer and Silva, 2006, p.4)



According to Kucer and Silva’s model (2006, p.3) at the centre is the cognitive dimension. This dimension includes the various mental processes required in literacy. This then develops into the linguistic dimension. This dimension consists of all the language components such as

graphophonic, syntactic and semantic aspects that assists in determining meaning. The next dimension in the model is the sociocultural dimension which represents factors such as background and cultural experiences. Lastly the model reveals the developmental dimension in which the reader or writer becomes a meaning maker and a text user and critic.

Thus this model together with Weaver's (1994) model, considering the uniqueness of each model, highlights that reading is a socio-psycholinguistic process.

## **2.5. Four roles of a reader**

According to theorists Freebody and Luke (1990), there are four roles of a reader and these roles will assist the individual in become a successful reader. This model consists of the following roles:

- a. Code breaker
- b. Text participant
- c. Text user
- d. Text analyst

### **a. Code breaker**

A successful reader is one that engages well with the text that they read.

To be a successful reader, an individual needs to successfully engage the technology of written script. There are two aspects to this technology: the nature of the relationship between spoken

words and written symbols, and the contents of that relationship  
(Freebody & Luke, 1990:8).

In other words a reader needs to understand and acknowledge the technology used in the text in order to become a life-long successful reader and this entails more than the basic skills learned and taught at school.

b. Text participant

“By this term we mean developing the resources to engage the meaning-systems of the discourse itself” (Freebody & Luke, 1990:9). In order to be a successful reader the reader needs to comprehend the text and in trying to understand the text the reader needs to use their knowledge that surrounds the topic as well as their textual knowledge. In addition, the reader’s background knowledge also assists in the comprehension of the text. In doing so the reader improves its ability of being a successful reader.

c. Text user

A text user is a reader that tries to understand what their purpose is in relation to the text. This purpose relates to their social surroundings. “Being a successful reader is being able to participate in those social activities in which written text plays a central part” (Freebody & Luke, 1990:10). In other words, the reader tries to identify what the purpose of the text is and what is their role as a manager of the text. In addition, the reader is able to draw appropriate conclusions that link the different aspects of the text.

d. Text analyst

This concept refers to the critical reading of a text. During this process the reader is aware of the language used in the text as well as ideas that are used in the text. Freebody and Luke (1990:13), believe that the role of a text analyst is,

based on the notion that all discourse entails a particular construction or ‘picture’ of its readership, not only in the sense of the reader’s knowledge but equally importantly in the sense of the ideological position of the reader.

Moreover, Freebody and Luke (1990) believe that although making sense of the text is important it is also crucial that the reader uses an ideological perspective when reading and understanding the text.

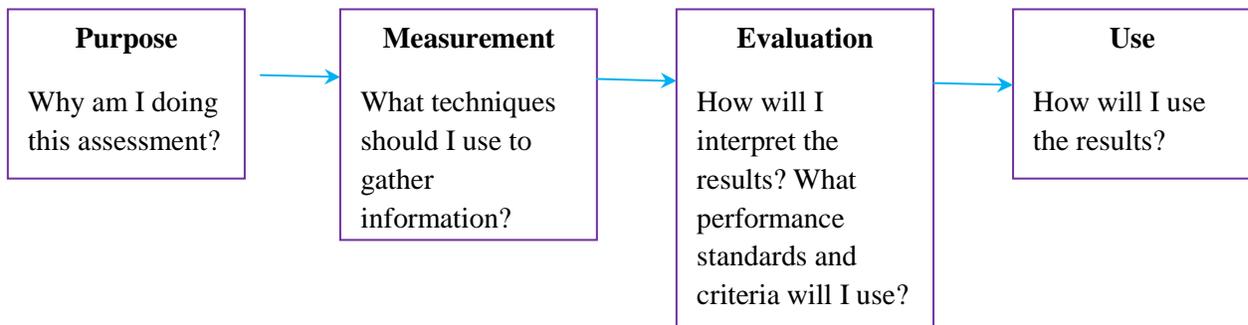
If a reader is able to integrate the four roles of a reader while reading, they are proclaimed as ‘successful readers’ according to Freebody and Luke (1990). In addition, they believe that although the teaching of reading skills such as decoding, comprehension, phonics and so are important, this does not develop a successful reader. A successful reader needs to be able to ‘unpack’ a text and in order to be able to do this the reader needs to enact the four roles of a reader. However, from the PIRLS (2006) and SACMEQ II findings (Table 1 p.17) it is clear that many South African learners unfortunately do not enact all four roles of a reader. They are code-breakers as learners are able to decode texts, but many learners lack comprehension skills thus they struggle to understand the text (text participant), they do not understand the purpose of the text (text user), and very few learners are able to critically analyse a text (text analyst).

## 2.6. Assessment

Although assessment is a broad term, many individuals and institutions share similar understanding of the concept. According to Teale, Hiebert and Chittenden (1987, p.773), “assessment means gathering information to meet diverse needs. It occurs on many levels of an educational system, but always draws upon a variety of instruments and strategies”. Similarly the DoE (2002) defines assessment as “a continuous, planned process of gathering information about the performance of learners” (RNCS, 2002, p.113). The RNCS further state that assessment provides an indication of learner achievement in the most useful and professional way and ensures that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills (RNCS, 2002, p.113). McMillan (2001, p.9) designed a model that identifies the essential components that need to be considered during assessments in the classroom.

### **FIGURE 4: COMPONENTS OF ASSESSMENT**

Source: McMillan (2001, p.9)



MacMillan (2001) believes that it is important that teachers plan assessments and consider the four components of assessment that are illustrated in figure 4. It is crucial that the teacher

understands the purpose for carrying out an assessment and this understanding must be clear and precise. Also, the techniques that will be used to gather this information need to be identified in advance; these can include written tests, essays, assignments and so on. The next step will be the interpretation of the results that have been gathered using different measurements. It is important that the criteria chosen in the evaluation process are clear and easily understood by the teacher and the learners. The criteria used can be in the form of rubrics, checklists, scoring guidelines or performance levels. Lastly, once the assessment has been conducted and evaluated, the teacher needs to decide what will be the use of this assessment. The use of the assessment can consist of involving parents, grading learners, providing support to learners or particularly improving teaching and instructional methods in the classroom.

## **2.7. Reading and Assessment**

Reading assessment may be understood as “the gathering of information to determine a student’s developmental reading progress; it answers the question *at what level is the student’s reading?*” (Shearer & Homan, 1994, p.1). However, reading assessment can be for several purposes other than those mentioned. It follows from this that teachers need to continuously monitor a child’s reading progress and their development of reading skills, to ensure that their learners are reading at their required grade level. This monitoring of the development of reading skills can be done through the process of reading assessment as “reading assessment allows us to assess and understand the strengths and needs of each of our students” (Afflerbach, 2007, p.4). In addition Torgesen (2006, p. unpaginated) states,

timely, reliable assessments indicate which children are falling behind in critical reading skills so teachers can help them make greater progress in learning to read. Reliable and valid assessments also help monitor the effectiveness of instruction for all children; without regularly assessing children's progress in learning to read, we cannot know which children need more help and which are likely to make good progress without extra help.

Reading and assessment share a close relationship because it is through assessment that teachers can understand their learners' reading abilities. Also, reading assessment gives the teacher the opportunity to evaluate individual learners' strengths and weaknesses in terms of their reading skills. However, Teale, Hiebert and Chittenden (1987) have argued that reading assessment should not be a one-shot test of a child's knowledge of reading and writing. "Effective assessment of young children's literacy development can never be done by a single instrument. Teachers need to develop assessment batteries that include different methods and evaluate different facets of literacy" (Teale, Hiebert & Chittenden, 1987, p.774). In addition, there are various methods that teachers can use to gather assessment data to assess learners reading skills and levels of reading and these do not always have to be formal.

According to Rose (2004, p. unpaginated), "evaluation is not simply or primarily through formal assessments, but continues relentlessly in the form of ordinary classroom interaction, in which teachers ask questions". Similarly, the US Department of Education also believe there are various ways in which teachers can assess learners reading, "teachers can test students, analyze

student work samples, observe students performing literacy tasks, or interview students on their reading skills” (US Department of Education, 2006, p. unpaginated).

Teale, Hiebert and Chittenden (1987, p.773-774) stated that the best literacy programmes, assessment facilitates the goals of the curriculum and shows the following characteristics:

1. Assessment is part of instruction.
2. Assessment methods and instruments are varied.
3. Assessment focuses on a broad range of skills and knowledge reflecting the various dimensions of literacy.
4. Assessment occurs continuously.
5. Literacy is assessed in a variety of contexts.
6. Measures are appropriate for children’s development levels and cultural background.

Although differently worded, the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1994, 15-34) share the same ideas as Teale, Hiebert and Chittenden (1987) which are: the purpose of reading assessment is to improve teaching and learning; the assessment process should include various methods and sources of data; assessments must consider and reflect on the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing and roles that school, home and society have on literacy development; and assessment must allow for critical inquiry into curriculum and instruction.

According to these theorists’ understandings of the characteristics of reading and assessment, it is clear that reading and assessment work together: it is important to assess various reading skills

that are taught and learned during reading sessions and different forms of assessment should be used to gather reliable and fair results. Furthermore, “if we (teachers) simply model our assessments on existing reading tests, we ignore many of the aspects that we value and teach” our learners (Valencia, 1990, p.338). Therefore, teachers need to use a variety of appropriate methods of assessment because learners may perform differently in tasks that assess the same skill, for example “a learner may not recognize a letter on a test sheet but readily identify it in a familiar book” (Teale, Hiebert, & Chittenden, 1987, p.774).

In addition, teachers need to also be aware of and familiar with their learners’ backgrounds when considering and constructing assessment tasks. Inequality in assessment tasks and methods can arise due to different backgrounds and top the presence or absence of scaffolding from parents. In Rose’s (2004), research that was conducted with indigenous Australian children it was identified that parents who were highly literate scaffold their children’s literacy development before they begin school, while children who did not receive this support were instantaneously disadvantaged and were unable to cope in terms of their success in reading development.

Similarly, many learners in South Africa learn to read in English, which in many cases is a second language which they are only just beginning to learn. This does have a negative impact on their reading performance, as many students do not have support at home or materials that can positively influence their reading performance. Often the differences in reading among learners creates what has been called a Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986), where the learners with reading

support become richer and better readers while those that lack reading support and guidance become poorer, exacerbating the reading crisis. Therefore, it is important that teachers choose a variety of assessment forms, methods and techniques that assess all grade appropriate reading skills as well as provide support and guidance to all learners in order for them to become successful readers.

## **2.8. South African Reading Assessment Standards**

The South African Department of Education has designed a set of learning outcomes and assessment standards with the intention of assisting teachers in their classrooms during the teaching and assessing of the different learning areas. According to the RNCS (2002, p.66-68) document, South African teachers need to adhere to the following criteria when teaching and assessing reading (Learning Outcome 3) at grade 4 level:

- Learners must have a basic understanding of some elements of stories and poems (title, context, character and social issues)
- Learners vocabulary needs to be continually developed
- Learners must be able to identify words that begin with the same sounds or imitate sounds
- Learners must read for information and pleasure (fiction and non-fiction books that are of appropriate reading and language level).

The RNCS does recognize that reading involves both decoding and comprehension and does recommend a wide range of reading for different purposes. However, it is unclear in the above assessment standards whether all or only some of the criteria must be met for learners to have achieved in this learning outcome of reading and viewing. In addition, “they also do not provide teachers with guidance as to ‘warning signs’ for reading problems so that appropriate action can be taken” (Pretorius & Machet, 2003, p.48-49). Furthermore, they have failed to provide actual methods of determining if learners have achieved assessment standards set out. In other words many teachers struggle as they are unaware of ways in which they could assess learners reading ability. This leaves both teachers and learners disadvantaged, as “many teachers may be unaware that their learners are have reading difficulties or they may feel powerless to address these problems as a result of factors such as large classes and inadequate resources” (Pretorius & Machet, 2003, p.49).

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

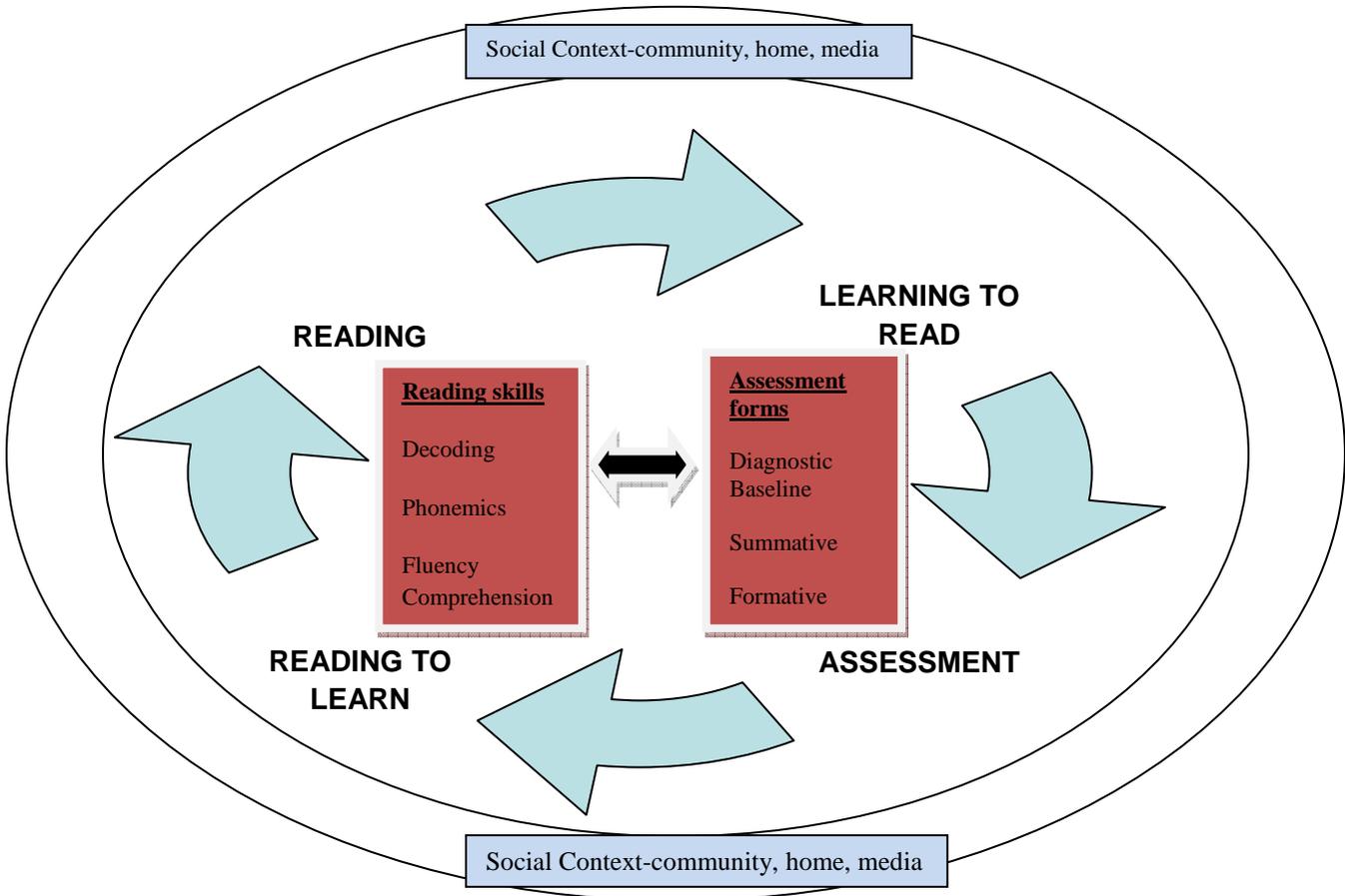
The study focused on two core concepts namely reading and assessment. It was important that the study identified what reading and assessment were and the relationship that they share as the entire study focuses on reading assessment. The relationship that reading and assessment share was briefly explained earlier in the chapter but will be explicitly explained in this section.

Reading is a process and “by this we mean the way we make sense of print, translating the black marks on the page into meaning” (Bielby, 1999, p.1). This process is dependent on the way the

individual is taught to read and their own drive to make meaning of the world. According to Goodman (1970), the process of reading consists of the decoding of print as well as the construction of meaning of the print (cited in Harrison & Coles, 1992, p.5). However, decoding and the construction of meaning are not the only processes when learning to read. Following from this position, Figure 5 highlights the socio-psycholinguistic process and relationship that reading and assessment share as I understand reading and assessment. The diagram emphasizes that reading is taught by teaching various reading skills which are learned and taught in a social context consisting of parents, teachers, peers and the media. Children use these skills to 'learn to read'; these skills are then assessed using various forms of assessment and the mastery of these skills allows children to 'read to learn' (Pretorius, 2000). It is therefore clear that reading and assessment share a close relationship as they work together to create lifelong, confident readers.

**FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READING AND ASSESSMENT**

Source: Own design



### **3.1. Decoding and Comprehension**

The main skills that are linked to reading are the components that allow an individual to read and these are: decoding, comprehension, phonemic awareness and fluency. Flippo (1999, p.99) states, “teaching children to comprehend what they are reading as they read is a vital aspect of making them lifelong readers” and will award them the opportunity to be empowered with regard to their education. In order for learners to read they must be able to decode.

Decoding involves the oculomotor, perceptual and parsing aspects of reading activity whereby written symbols are translated into language, while comprehension refers to the overall understanding process whereby meaning is constructed within sentence units, between adjacent sentences, and across larger units of text to the meaning of the text as a whole (Pretorius, 2002, p.80).

These two skills are of great importance as Pretorius (2002) states that it is through decoding that learners 'learn to read' and comprehension allows them to 'read to learn'. Decoding and comprehension are the core skills that learners need to master which would assist a reader to become competent in reading.

However, many schools have 'side-lined' comprehension in the foundation phase as they believe it should be taught in the later part of schooling because they believe that the foundation phase should consist of teaching children to read (Grade 1-3) and as they progress (Grade 4-up wards) reading should be used to learn. This understanding has been revealed in a USA study, where comprehension tests are regularly given; however, the teaching of comprehension strategies is seldom conducted (Alligton & Cummingham, 2003). Research conducted by Macdonald (1990) and Strauss (1995) at disadvantaged South African schools discovered that students developed fluent decoding skills but their comprehension skills were poor and underdeveloped. Duke and Pearson (2002), believe that this problem can be resolved if teachers use various strategies to teach comprehension.

Several analyses of research on the development of improved comprehension skills (Block & Pressley, 2001; Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992) concur that:

- Reading comprehension can be improved by effective teaching and that comprehension involves active thinking which is improved when comprehension strategies are made clear to the learner through explicit demonstrations.
- Teachers need to stop relying on “comprehension questions” which assesses the recall of information and neither improves proficiency nor promotes independent and effective thinking skills while reading. Again, teacher demonstration of useful strategies is important.
- It takes time and repeated practice to learn comprehension strategies. (Cited in Verbeek, 2011)

The above strategies can be used by teachers as a guide to improve their teaching of comprehension skills.

### **3.2. Vocabulary**

People across the world may have different and varying understandings of what the term ‘vocabulary’ means, “to many, the word vocabulary may suggest a reductionist perspective in which words are learned by memorizing short definitions and sentences” (Nagy & Scott, 2004, p.574). Vocabulary is closely linked with comprehension. Thus learners with a limited vocabulary may encounter difficulties understanding a text. Graves and Watts-Taffe (2002, p.141), state researchers for over a century researched vocabulary and found that:

- Vocabulary knowledge is a crucial indicator of verbal ability.
- Difficulties in vocabulary influence reading ability.
- Teaching vocabulary can improve learners' comprehension.
- Disadvantaged learners often have limited vocabulary.
- Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor for learners underachieving at school.

Therefore it is important that teachers develop learners' vocabulary at school as many South African learners are learning in a second language and thus they have a limited knowledge of vocabulary.

### **3.3. Fluency**

Fluency relates to the speed and accuracy at which a reader reads. Samuels (2002) believes that fluency and comprehension are closely tied: "fluency is important because it exerts an important influence on comprehension; that is, to experience good comprehension, the reader must identify words quickly and easily" (Samuels, 2002, p.167). Consequently, it is important that teachers encourage and develop learners to read fluently. Samuel (2002) believes that fluency can be developed in the classroom by using a repeated reading technique. This technique encourages learners to read and reread a text many times to improve reading fluency as it develops word recognition, accuracy and increased speed. This technique also received positive feedback from the National Reading Panel (2000) as they conducted research in many classrooms using this technique. In addition, it has been suggested that this technique can be used right through Grade 4 and with students who seem to be having reading difficulties in elementary and senior classes.

However, I believe there is no necessary link between fluency and comprehension. Teachers might emphasize fluency without linking it to understanding, resulting in fluent ‘barking at print’ as we see in some South African classrooms.

Samuel (2002) also identifies methods in which reading fluency can be assessed. He states that the teacher should use two texts that are unfamiliar to the learner. The first text should be used as a listening comprehension, where the teacher reads and asks the learners questions and the second text should be used to allow learners to practice their reading and then they should read the text aloud. The teacher can then look for the following indicators to assess learners’ fluency: rate of oral reading (should be above 60 words per minute), few or no word recognition errors and good expression.

### **3.4. Forms of Assessment**

In order to assess a child’s reading ability, teachers need to use different forms of assessment. This would allow them to understand and analyze their learners’ reading levels and the reading skills that they have mastered and those they have not yet mastered.

This can be done through a number of ways such as summative assessment, formative assessments, diagnostic assessments and baseline assessments. The RNCS policy (2002, p.114) states that formative assessment “monitors and supports the process of learning and teaching, and is used to inform learners and teachers about learners’ progress so as to improve learning”, while summative assessment “gives an overall picture of learners’ progression at a given time”,

diagnostic assessment “is used to find out about the nature and cause of barriers to learning experienced by specific learners” and lastly baseline assessment is used to establish what a learner knows. It is crucial that the forms of assessments that are used by the teacher are reliable and are of assistance to help develop their learners’ weaknesses and strengths in reading. These forms of assessments should assess all reading skills and should not solely focus on a few reading skills such as only decoding and fluency.

The forms of assessment chosen by the teacher should link all reading skills that are expected to be achieved in grade 4. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the forms of assessment they choose and the reasons why they have chosen that specific assessment and what skills they are going to assess.

Also, it is through assessment that the teachers have the power to assist, support, reinforce and develop reading skills in their learners. This is emphasized in the Vygotskian model (1978, 1991), where, “learning takes place in the *zone* between what learners can do independently and what they can do with the support of a teacher” (Rose, 2004, p. unpaginated). Furthermore, this model believes that teachers can create successful learners that perform at a high level despite their level of independence (what they can or cannot do independently) (Rose, 2004). The only way that teachers can excel at developing important reading skills such as decoding, comprehension, knowledge of phonemics and so on, that will allow their learners to be successful lifelong readers, is through the use of appropriate and reliable assessment forms.

### **3.5. Considerations when Assessing Reading**

Teachers need to be aware of the factors that may have an impact on learners' reading performance. One of the major factors in South African schools that teachers need to always be aware of is that many learners come from different socio-economic, language and cultural backgrounds. This will therefore affect learners reading performance.

Children from some backgrounds will have had massively more experience of being read to and of sharing and enjoying books with a parent or care giver than other children. Some children will come from homes where there are no books and where reading is not a significant part of their way of life that they have brought up in ( Bielby, 1999, p.29).

In addition, many learners come from an oral rather than a reading culture (Pretorius, 2000, p.34). This implies that they are rarely exposed to storybooks and have very little practice with print. Other factors that may affect learners reading are personal characteristics such as lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes and low self-esteem (Browne, 1998, p.123). Importantly, teachers need to take these factors into consideration when designing reading assessments for their learners. Furthermore, if teachers are aware of the various factors that impact learners reading performance, "it will help them (teachers) to focus their teaching and address the particular problems each child has" (Browne, 1998, p.123).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the literature that encouraged my thinking during the study as well as in the conceptual framework that guided my thoughts through this research. The first section of the chapter discussed the background to reading in South Africa, definitions to reading and assessment, the skills that are taught in the reading classroom and the forms of assessment.

In the second section of the chapter, I explained the relationship that reading and assessment share using a diagram. I also, provided detailed explanations of the various reading skills and forms of assessment that was discussed in the first section of the chapter.

The next chapter focuses on the Research Methodology used in this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the process involved in conducting the case study. The chapter consists of two parts; the first part explains the methodology and research techniques used within this study while the second discusses the process used for data analysis and interpretation.

The intention of the study was to investigate how the grade 4 English teacher at a particular school assessed reading with her classes. The larger goal was to assist the school in developing a reading culture within the school community.

This research study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- What forms of assessment does the teacher use in her reading classroom?
- What reading skills are being assessed and developed?
- How does the teacher assess reading? What process is used?
- What types of texts are being used to assess reading in the reading classroom?

Reading skills and the forms of assessment are crucial for our understanding of how a teacher assesses reading. In order to provide an in-depth study, the methodology used needs to provide a true reflection of how the teacher assesses reading and what skills are assessed.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Paradigm**

Chalmers (1982, p.90) defines a paradigm as “made up of the general theoretical assumptions and laws, and techniques for their application that the members of a particular scientific community adopt”. Hence a paradigm can be understood as a comprehensive belief-system, world view or framework that channels research and practice in a field (Willis, 2007, p.8). Today researchers in the social science field have competing paradigms to choose from such as the critical theory paradigm, positivist paradigm and interpretivist paradigm.

The study was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm differs from the positivist view that the world exists ‘out there’ and that relationships between things can be easily measured. Researchers who adopt a positivist approach often use quantitative methods of research such as experiments and surveys that yield measurable results. By contrast interpretivists believe that not everything can be easily measured even though the world is changeable. In addition, interpretivists focus on understanding and observing people’s behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. Furthermore, they are aware that “humans behave the way they do in part because of their environment. However, that influence is not direct. Humans are also influenced by their subjective perception of their environment-their subjective realities” (Willis, 2007, p.6). As a result an interpretivist tries to understand how people make sense of the contexts in which they live and work.

The interpretivist paradigm was most appropriate in the study. It allowed me to gain insight and an understanding of the teacher's experiences and reasons for choosing and using certain forms of assessment in her reading classrooms and the impact her choices of assessment had on her learners. Gaining this information was important because it was the teacher that was central to defining the meaning of the situation in her classroom.

Interpretivists believe that it is through asking questions and by observing that they can understand the situation that they are studying. As a result they see themselves as probable variables in the study (Bassegy, 1999, p.43). Also, the data collected by interpretive researchers are usually verbal: interview transcripts, reflections and observations which will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. These data collection methods create a rich language sense and "perhaps because of this quality, the methodology of the interpretive researcher is described as qualitative" (Bassegy, 1999, p.43).

## **2.2. Qualitative Research**

In designing this study I was interested in "observing and asking questions in real-world settings" (Patton, 1987, p. 21) and in "understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 1998, p.6). As a result it seemed most appropriate to draw upon a qualitative research tradition. Also, this tradition allowed for an in-depth analysis of the research questions. Cohen et al (2000) and Litchman (2006, p.8), suggest that "the main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of human experiences".

Qualitative research differs from that of quantitative research which requires statistical data and where research is conducted in fixed controlled surroundings. Instead qualitative researchers try to understand areas such as human behavior, thoughts and feelings. Terre Blanche, Durheim and Painter (2006) state that qualitative researchers want to make sense of feelings, experiences, social situations, or phenomena as they take place in the real world, and therefore want to study them in their natural settings. Also, qualitative research tends to be associated with words as the unit of analysis rather than numbers and descriptions. Furthermore, it is associated with small-scale research, researcher involvement and a developing research design (Denscombe, 2003, p.232-235).

My study is associated largely with words which were retrieved from observations of lessons, interviews, questionnaires and personal reflections. It was a small-scale study, which focused on specific factors and variables were not controlled or isolated. Moreover it occurred in its natural setting which was the English classroom.

In order to evaluate how the teacher assessed reading in her classroom, the study had to be conducted within a qualitative tradition which involved the use of qualitative research methods to describe the teacher's understanding and methods of assessing reading. I used a number of research techniques and instruments to do this such as questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations and diary entries.

### 2.3. Case Study Methodology

I chose to conduct the research as a case study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allowed me to gain insight and an understanding of the way in which reading was assessed at Grade 4 level which created a rich and thick description of the case (Rule & John, 2011, p.7). Secondly, case studies are a ‘step to action’: they can initiate the action and add to it (Bassey, 1999, p.23). This was important in the context of the larger action research project. Thirdly, case studies are versatile and can be combined with other research approaches (in regard to this study, my case study is the first part of a broader action research study). Lastly, case studies as products are easier for diverse audiences to comprehend and may therefore have greater impact with a wide range of stakeholders than some other types of research (Bassey, 1999).

Case studies are understood and defined in different ways by different theorists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When researchers refer to a case study they may be referring to the process of the investigation, the unit of study, and/or the product of the investigation (Merriam, 1998). In addition to the process, unit of study and product, Rule and John (2011), believe that case studies can also be understood as a particular type of genre. Bassey (1999) and Rule and John (2011), provide various theorists’ definitions of case studies; however, I found Bassey’s (1999) definition of educational case studies relevant to my study as it influenced my thinking in the research:

An educational case study is an empirical enquiry which is: conducted within a localized boundary of space and time (i.e. a singularity); into interesting aspects of an educational activity, or programme, or institution, or system; mainly in its natural context and within an ethic

of respect for persons; in order to inform the judgments and decisions of practitioners or policy makers; or of theoreticians who are working to these ends; in such a way that sufficient data are collected (Bassegy, 1999, p.58).

As stated in this definition, the current case study was a singularity study that is the investigation into reading assessment in a particular grade which was the Grade 4 English classrooms, at a particular school in KwaZulu-Natal and at a particular time (2011/2012).

The case (unit of analysis) in the study was the Grade 4 English class at one particular school. The study used a single case as the school only has one grade 4 English teacher. Also I intended to study the case in great depth and I had an easy access to the institution. However, there is a limitation in this kind of study in that “the findings of the study cannot necessarily be generalised to other cases” (Rule & John, 2011, p.21). The focus within the case was reading and assessment. In addition the study consists of an embedded unit of analysis (Rule & John, 2011, p.18) which was the teacher’s knowledge about assessing reading, the teacher’s belief about assessing reading and the teacher’s practice during reading assessment.

This was a case of reading assessment in South African schools and it aimed add to understanding of the wider occurrence of assessing reading in South Africa.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1. Sampling**

The sample used in the study was selected purposively. “In purposive sampling researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality” (Cohen et al, 2000, p.103). The purpose of the study was to understand how the Grade 4 English teacher at a specific school in KwaZulu-Natal assessed reading. As a result, the sample used in the study had to include the Grade 4 English teachers. The total number of grade 4 English teachers at the school is one. The English teacher teaches all three Grade 4 English classes. Thus the sample size was small but Rule and John (2011) state that in a case study research the size of the sample is influenced by the purpose of the study and the resources available for the study. This study of a single instance of reading assessment attempted to achieve a depth of analysis rather than a breadth of coverage. In addition, the principal of the school was chosen as one of the interviewees because she has an influence on the reading policy and reading culture of the school. Thus, I felt that it was important to get her understanding of reading and assessment as she would have a wide view of reading at the school and in the community. Whilst, I interviewed the principal, I focussed specifically on the Grade 4 English teacher as she is directly involved in the teaching and assessing of reading at Grade 4 level.

This sample is biased in that it did not represent the wider population. However, in a case study researchers are not focused on the representiveness of the sample but on its ability to gain data which allows for a full, in-depth and trustworthy account of the case (Rule & John, 2011, p.64).

The in-depth account of the case allowed the study to be more reliable and for the researcher to get a better understanding of the assessment methods used by the teacher.

### **3.2. Research Techniques and Tools for data collection**

The process for the collection of the data for this research began halfway through 2011 and ended in May of the following year. A series of meetings was held with the head of the school and the teacher involved in the study, to understand the reading culture at the school and how the teacher assessed reading in her classrooms. In order to understand how and what the teacher assessed in her reading classrooms and the impact it had on her learners I used four techniques to ensure crystallisation. These were a questionnaire for the teacher and principal, a semi-structured open-ended interview with the teacher and principal, semi-structured observations of reading lessons, personal reflections written in a diary and examination of 45 learner books. By using a variety of techniques I was able to develop a more adequate representation (Gillham, 2002, p.81). Also, a multi-method approach has the potential of enriching and cross-validating the research findings (Gillham, 2002, p.84).

The first step was to establish the teacher's background in reading and her understanding of reading assessment. This was achieved by using a questionnaire. The teacher and principal were asked to fill out the questionnaire to give me an idea of their histories and practices as readers. In addition to this the teacher and the principal were interviewed and interview questions related directly to reading assessment. The reason why I chose to design a questionnaire that focused on

the participants' reading histories is because the way in which a teacher learns to read as a child may influence the way in which he/she teaches reading in their classrooms. In addition, it provides some data for addressing the research question of how reading is taught and assessed.

The semi-structured interview schedule was designed to explore a more in-depth understanding of reading assessment in Grade 4 and the principal's overall understanding of reading assessment in order to provide a school context for understanding reading and assessment in the grade 4 classrooms. This was conducted during the initial orientation to the school as a whole which was comprised of a meeting with the principal and the entire staff of the school and an initial observation of the school. Also, 12 of the teacher's reading lesson were observed. The same lesson was observed in two different classes, so a total of 24 classroom observations were conducted. During the observations, the teacher's methods of assessing reading and the tools she used to assess reading were observed.

### **3.3. Primary Sources of Data for Analysis**

- Questionnaire
- Transcripts of interview data
- Classroom observation notes and learner books
- Personal reflections

### **a. Questionnaire**

I designed a closed-ended structured questionnaire as one of my research instruments because there was a certain amount of information that I could collect quickly and easily. The questions focused on finding out more about the teacher and principal: their background, their reading histories, practices and their beliefs about reading and assessment because I felt this information might have an impact on the way in which reading and assessment are dealt with at this school.

I chose to use a questionnaire to give the teacher a feel for and understanding of the research focus. Also, it was easier to retrieve information about the participants' backgrounds and their understanding of reading and assessment culture as they did not need to express themselves verbally. Before distributing the questionnaire to the participants I piloted the questionnaire at a local school in my area (school was chosen for convenience) to get feedback on the clarity and workability of the questionnaire (Gillham, 2002, p.19). Four teachers filled in the pilot questionnaire: one from the Foundation phase, two from the Intermediate phase and one from the Senior phase. Before doing this I explained to the principal at the school where the questionnaire was piloted the reason why teachers were required to test the questionnaire for me. Both the principal and teachers were willing to co-operate with me.

The questionnaire was short with three sections: participant's background information, personal reading habits and views on reading and assessment. The questionnaire also provided me with

some background information which related to the interviews that followed. Furthermore, it was user friendly in that the participants needed to only tick boxes.

## **b. Interviews**

“Interviewing has long been the most popular method in qualitative research and is often used in case studies. Interviews usually imply one-on-one discussions between the researcher and the research participants, a sort of guided conversation” (Rule & John, 2011, p.64).

I designed two interview schedules, one for the principal and the other for the teacher. The teacher’s interview schedule consisted of 13 pre-set questions that guided the interviewee into answering the research questions, while the principal’s interview schedule consisted of 15 questions that gathered information on the whole school’s reading assessment policy and practices. Since these were semi-structured less formal interviews I was able to ask the participants to elaborate on certain responses so that these gave me clarity. Also, I was able to rephrase questions and explain the questions to the participants when I noticed they did not fully understand the questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.268). Furthermore, the semi-structured interview approach that I chose to use allowed our conversation to be flexible and it guided the dialogue that materialized during the interview.

I conducted the interviews at the school, in the comfort of the teacher's classroom and the principal's office during their available time. The participants were given a copy of my letter and signed a declaration that they had read the letter and agreed to be a part of the study. Preceding the interview, I explained to the participants that all information that was gathered would be dealt with in utmost confidentiality and that the interview would be recorded and analysed but no names would be disclosed.

The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were typed up and electronically saved and a hard copy was printed. The transcripts were analysed using codes, which are discussed below in section 5.

### **c. Observations**

“Observation methods are powerful tools for gaining insight into situations” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p.315). Observation allows the researcher to see what is actually happening in a school or classroom. In order to gain more insight into the teacher's actual lessons and settings in the classroom I conducted semi-structured observations. The reason I chose to conduct semi-structured observations is so that additional information could also be obtained during the observations. These observations of the teacher's lessons were conducted in two different classrooms that are streamed (each class is graded according to learners' abilities for example higher achieving learners are placed in one class while lower achieving learners are placed in

another class). Although the observations were conducted in two different classrooms, the same lessons were taught.

I had an observation schedule with questions, ideas and themes that guided my observations and assisted me in collecting the required data. The themes that I focused on in my observation schedule were: the process of teaching reading, methods that were used to assess reading, feedback given to learners, spatial arrangements of learners and dealing with errors. These themes provided me with in-depth data. Also, since the observations were semi-structured it gave the space to record observations which fell outside of the themes that were set out in the schedule such as learners' participation in the lesson. In light of this, these observations helped to monitor the teacher's exact assessment methods. This allowed me to make additional comments on the findings in Chapter 4.

#### **d. Personal Reflections (dairy)**

“Like all data, a diary constitutes a record. Diaries are usually private and contain intimate accounts and reflections” (Altrichter & Holly, 2005, p.27). At the start of the study I kept a reflective journal (dairy) in which I wrote down all my personal experiences and feelings that I encountered during the study. I also made note of the environment that surrounded me during the study which were not included in the interview and observation schedules. According to Altrichter and Holly (2005), research diaries or reflective journals allow the researcher to make note of any detours or side roads that may be taken during the research study. The diary also

gave me the opportunity to keep track of the journey from the start to the end which I was able to share in my dissertation.

My diary did not constitute of any specific format. I freely wrote down my experiences and feelings on a regular basis.

#### **4. Ethical Considerations of the Research**

Cohen et al. (2000) and Rule and John (2011) believe that ethical relationships and practice are vital aspects that enhance the quality of the research. They also believe that ethically sound research contributes to the trustworthiness of the research. As a result, during the research I ensured that I followed all ethical procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the study and the protection of the participants. Also, Rule and John (2011, p.112) state that “research ethical requirements flow from three standard principles, namely: autonomy, non-maleficance (do no harm) and beneficence”. I used these three standard ethical principles in my study.

The participants involved in the study were given letters that explained the study and their role in the study and they signed a declaration that stated they voluntarily accepted to participate in the study. Also, learners’ were given letters to take home that explained the study to their parents and that their interaction with their teacher while was teaching would be observed.

In addition, the purpose and aim of the study were clearly explained to the participants to ensure that they were familiar with the study. Moreover, the participants were assured that all information supplied by them to the researcher and all the data collected and recorded were strictly confidential and were to be used for research purposes only. Also, the identities of the participants would be protected in that they remain anonymous.

Furthermore, the participants were assured that throughout the research process they and their organisation would not be harmed in any way. Moreover, permission was sought from the Department of Education and ethical procedures of the University of KwaZulu-Natal were followed to ensure that the research was completely ethical.

I also tried to ensure that the study was trustworthy and one way of measuring if the research was trustworthy was through internal validity. During the interview process I used a tape recorder to make certain that all information was captured and that all the data captured in the study was accurate. Also, a peer assisted me in transcribing and coding the data to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Furthermore, the study used crystallisation which “points to the multi-faceted nature of reality, where additional sources and methods show up additional facets” (Rule and John, 2011, p.109). Crystallisation was made up of interviews, observations, questionnaires and personal reflections, which all helped in answering the research questions and providing a trustworthy study.

## 5. Data Analysis

I began my data analysis by listening to the tapes of the interviews and observations as they were audio recorded. I listened to these recordings a number of times before I began the transcription process at the same time making reference to my field notes. This helped me to identify themes and patterns in the data. The transcriptions from the taped interviews and classroom observations were analysed by means of content analysis. Cohen et al (2007, p.476) states that content analysis “takes texts and analyses, reduces and interrogates them into summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes in order to generate or test a theory”.

I then began to code the themes and patterns that were identified in the transcription process. “Codes are labels that highlight different themes or foci within the data. Coding is a process of choosing labels and assigning them to different parts of data” (Rule & John, 2011, p.77). Although this was a time-consuming method, it allowed me to translate my data into a manageable and comprehensible form. It also had a significant impact on my findings, recommendations and conclusions as it allowed me to get close to the data (Rule & John, 2011, p.77). I, together with my peer coded the transcripts of the interview as well as the observation notes.

I chose to manually sort and code the data rather than electronically as I wanted to be involved and aware of the categories and themes that were identified. My analysis of data involved

reading of data to identify emerging themes. In the coding process I identified and highlighted the following themes:

- Forms of assessment
- Errors made during reading
- Reading/teaching practice
- Reading in the classroom
- Reading methods
- Reading skills

These themes were further broken down to simplify the data. From this I was able to elaborate on the findings, make recommendations and draw the conclusions.

## **6. Limitations**

There were a few limitations that arose in the study:

- i. Initially the teacher was reluctant to share her information due to fear of being 'labelled'. However, after a clear explanation of the aim and purpose of the study the teacher felt more comfortable to open up.
- ii. The study did not allow the findings to be generalised to other cases.
- iii. There was a slight language barrier between the teacher and I, however a translator was not needed as I managed to simplify my questions to develop a better understanding.

- iv. There was also a limitation in the sample, in that just one teacher was used. However, this was due to the policies of the school in that they only have one English teacher in grade 4.
- v. This study was biased, as there is potential for bias to exist in all research. I tried to control my own bias by using multiple methods and sources of data collection and by discussing my data analysis and interpretation with a group of peers and my supervisor.

## **7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reviewed the research methodology and research design that was used in this study. Within the research methodology section, I discussed in detail the tradition that I used in the study that being a qualitative tradition, interpretivist paradigm and the use of a case study as the method.

In addition, I discussed the data collection techniques, these being interviews, observations, questionnaires and my personal reflections. Also, the data analysis process was discussed, together with the limitations and ethical conditions of the study. The next chapter outlines the findings of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter reports on and provides an analysis of the research findings of this study. As discussed in Chapter Three, this study used four different sources to collect data, namely:

- Questionnaires (which were completed by Participant A and Participant B),
- Interviews (with Participant A and Participant B),
- Observations of Participant A's reading assessment lessons, and
- Personal reflections

This chapter presents the following findings:

- The forms of assessments that the teacher used in her reading classroom.
- The reading skills that she assessed and developed.
- The process the teacher used to assess reading.
- The kinds of texts that were used to assess reading in the reading classroom.

These findings will assist in answering the core questions of this study which are: What forms of assessments are being used? What reading skills are being assessed in the Grade 4 reading classroom? In addition many themes emerged from these perspectives which overlap with each other. In order to present the data and analysis in a user friendly way, I have decided to discuss

the themes that emerged from the study as a whole rather than discussing the themes that emerged under each perspective.

I begin this chapter by providing a thick description of my initial feelings, experiences and encounters on the way to the school and at the school as well as a detailed description of a Grade 4 reading assessment lesson. These descriptions have been extracted from the personal journal that I kept throughout this research study. Thereafter, I provide the findings from the questionnaires, interviews and observations.

## 2. The Magnificent View

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*A vehicle packed with eager yet nervous M.Ed students and lecturers leaves the university parking lot with lots of chirping about our expectations of our individual studies. Each one of us given the opportunity to share and discuss our topics. While each student speaks the rest of us attentively listen to the radiant voices of our peers that are filled with excitement, fear and uncertainty. As I listen to a peer speaking, her voice begins to drift into the distance and my thoughts take over: **I wonder exactly where in the rural area the school is situated? What materials have been used to build the school? How big is the school? What do the classrooms look like?***

*Suddenly my thoughts are disturbed and the voices in the vehicle are silent. As I peek out the window of our slowly moving vehicle my eyes lighten up and my mouth drops open and I silently whisper **WOW**. We are high up on a winding, narrow tarred road surrounded with the most*

*magnificent view of farms, mountains and greenery that I never knew exists in Pietermaritzburg. The farm workers are wearing huge brimmed grass hats to protect them the sweltering sun, as they are working in the sugar cane fields, some harvesting the crop while others prepare the fields for sowing of seeds for a new season.*

*As we continue to travel on this road I notice the lack of information boards and billboards, all I see are one or two damaged and faded election posters that are still hanging on poles alongside the road. My eyes drift from the placards to the rural settlements. Some houses are made from bricks, others from mud and some were huts with thatch roofs. We pass many people, young and old, men and women standing on the side of the road, I assume waiting for a taxi to take them into 'town' (the hub of Pietermaritzburg). Suddenly our vehicle slows down, the road is bumpier and from a tarred road it now becomes a gravel road. Also, the sudden brake in the vehicle is due to cows that are occupying the road, young children that are playing on the side of the road with stones and a group of protesting young men outside a 'spaza' shop which is on the side of the road. Curious about the protest, we continue up the steep hill. Not far from the protest stands a large school, secure with tall wire fences and a large gate that is operated by a security guard. Happily the security guard steps out of his wooden office and approaches the vehicle to welcome us to the school with a pleasant smile and loud "Goodmorning Sir" and he opens the school gate. We park the vehicle next to the other vehicles as we assume that is the parking area.*

*To my amazement I see a large brick building, I was expecting to see a much smaller building a little less 'posh'. As I jump out the vehicle my eyes take in the large grounds covered with lush green grass, with a few newly planted trees. The grounds are immaculately clean. The crowing of a rooster is the only sound that I hear at this school, classes are quiet and no learners are in sight it seems they are all busy in their classes.*

*We quickly gather outside the vehicle and march to the office building which is a few steps away from the car park area. We enter through an open glass door and step onto white porcelain tiles*

*that are spotless. On the left of the door is big glass notice board that boasts a few pictures of the staff and school as well as trophies and a thank you card. Under this notice board are a couple of neatly placed chairs covered with white chair covers. As I peep straight across the passage I see a few more classrooms and another large muddy play area.*

*We all enter through another door - this is the secretary's office, a more open planned office. Behind a computer on a paper-filled desk sits a polite young lady who quickly stands up and warmly greets us in IsiZulu. She acknowledges our meeting with the principal and staff members. She then directs us the principal's office "straight down the corridor, it's the door on the right". We all make our way in a single file to the principal's office.*

*Before we knock, the door is opened by a smartly dressed middle-aged woman. We make our way into her office and before we sit we each briefly introduce ourselves and have a quick handshake with the principal of the school. As we make ourselves comfortable on the chairs arranged for us, I quickly look around the office. Her table is neat with a computer, a few pieces of paper, a novel and a telephone. Behind her are two posters that cover the wall, one being the rules of the school and the other is the school's timetable, both written in English. To the left and right of the table are filing cabinets that are filled with files and in front of the table is a large window with open curtains that shows-off the car park area and play ground. After a quick meeting we are taken to the staff room, which is in the same building. There are long tables that teachers sit around during meetings and plenty of chairs. In this room there is a library corner filled with dusty books and textbooks. All these books have been donated by many organizational groups but unfortunately these books have little relevance to a primary school. The warm staff gathers into the staffroom and we expose our topics to the staff.*

*The view to the school and from the school is mesmerizing. The school is well organized, spick and span and appreciative of all the help and support they receive from various organizations.*

This extract presented a detailed description of my impressions and observations on the way to the school and at the school which provided a background for understanding the reading culture in the community. Through this description the following assumptions can be made around the reading culture in the community and school:

- Many community members are manual workers (they work on farms in the area). This means that their jobs do not require much reading and writing.
- The protest could highlight the lack of employment or services in the community, which is frustrating the young members of the community and could also show that schooling has no real meaning because even after school they are left jobless. This impression is confirmed by the number of young people seen on the streets in the area.
- There are no boards around the community that encourage members to stop and read.
- At school the literacy materials around the school consist of an information board that has very little reading content that members of the community and learners can read.
- Other materials that were noticed in the principal's office: were a novel and 'school literacy' information such as the school rules and timetable. There were no other reading materials that encouraged or promoted reading.
- Additional materials that were stored in the staff room were seemingly not read by the staff members or learners; instead they collected dust.

These initial impressions suggested that there was a very poor or limited reading culture in the community and at the school.

### **3. The Reading Environment Through the Eyes of an Observer**

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*On my first day as an observer, I am escorted from the staff room to the Grade 4 classroom (my first observation lesson) by the principal of the school. I stumble over a few stones that are lying on the muddy pathway of the playground. As I look around I see two ladies chatting as they stir a large black pot that is placed over a fire. The smell of samp and beans is intoxicating and makes my stomach rumble. The principal quickly explains that the school runs a feeding scheme that is funded by the Department of Education and the two ladies that are stirring the pot are volunteer cooks from the community.*

*As we walk on a neatly concreted corridor, we pass two classes that are still and learners are busy with work. We arrive at the third class and the principal knocks on the door. The echo of the children saying “come inside” is clear, but the teacher opens the door, rather quickly. After a quick greeting, the principal takes her leave and I take a few minutes to turn around and look at the pretty garden outside the classroom.*

*I step into a large classroom that is neat. Learners are silent but their eyes are filled with curiosity. I stand at the front of the spacious classroom and greet the learners. They look at each other and eventually stand up to greet me. As they sit down, they begin to shuffle and their whispers get a little louder. They are quickly silenced and attentive as the teacher introduces me as a ‘visitor’. Their smiles are bright and inviting despite what I assume are many personal*

*hardships and troubles. Every learner in class is adorned in their full school uniform despite it being worn out.*

*As I make my way to the teacher's table at the back of the class, I notice the walls of the class are filled with decorative art consisting of different educational posters, numbers that learners wrote on pieces of paper as well as different words both in IsiZulu and English such as "wall", "window" and "cupboard". At the back of the class is a spare desk that is covered by piles of learner textbooks that are neatly stacked next to each other. I pull out the teacher's rather hard chair and I sit behind her desk.*

*While, the teacher is preparing to start her lesson, I observe the seating arrangement of the learners. A speedy count of the learners in the class adds up to 40. The class is separated into three sections and learners are seated in groups of four. Learners in the row to my extreme right (row 1) and the middle row (row 2) are silently and attentively awaiting their teacher's instructions. Surprisingly, I notice that some learners on my left (row 3) have their heads on the table flipping through a numeracy book looking uninterested. I begin to question the reason for these learners' behavior and before I can answer my own question, a whisper from the teacher answers my question: "These learners cannot read and write. They usually do Grade 1 work." These learners are excluded from the reading lesson!*

*A popular reader textbook is handed to every learner in the class except row 3 learners. Learners all turn to the page number as instructed by the teacher. The lesson of reading aloud begins. The teacher reads the text and learners are following in their textbooks. The teacher is reading slowly, accurately and fluently with expression. Learners are staring at their books, their facial expressions are blank. The teacher finally reaches the end of the text and she begins to read the same text again...*

*I am excited that the teacher completed reading the text again but I am disappointed that she never took the story any further. Learners' understanding of the text is not being assessed and the teacher is not asking any questions nor are the children. Instead the teacher is writing down vocabulary words with their meaning and only a few learners are assisting in the process. After writing down a few words, she notices the children seem bored and stops ... to be completed for homework. The whole class is now reading aloud. Reading is continuously interrupted to correct reading errors. After this process, group reading begins, also in the form of reading aloud, and finally individual reading aloud is being assessed.*

*The lesson is long and tiring for the teacher, learners and me. A sigh of relief is heard from learners, I notice a few yawns and some arms being stretched and a few chuckles that acknowledge the end of another lesson.*

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Although this classroom was 'literacy rich' in that there were many informative posters around the class, their function was to beautify the classroom rather than encourage purposive reading among learners that would assist in deepening their knowledge and understanding around various issues. Also, it seemed like the teacher's purpose for assessing reading was to fulfill departmental requirements rather than develop the important reading skills such as comprehension in her learners and assist those learners that encounter reading difficulties. In addition reading was a monotonous task that drained the teacher and her learners. The reading assessment lesson was not exciting; although new vocabulary items were written on the board with definitions, learners did not seem to learn any new words that they could understand and relate to their lives and experiences. Thus my impression was that a reading culture was not being encouraged in the classroom nor were learners being motivated to read; instead reading

was seen as a somewhat laborious and not very meaningful task in so far as textual meaning was concerned. Rather, the meaning seemed to lie in the ritual or procedure of reading aloud, which included an assessment component.

The findings from the questionnaires, interviews and observations will be presented in the next section of the chapter.

#### **4. Discussion of the Findings**

The findings discussed in this section are presented thematically.

##### **a. Teachers as learners: experiences of reading and assessment**

The participants have been in the teaching field for many years and are seniors at the school. However, Participant B has never taught Grade 4 whilst Participant A has only been teaching Grade 4 classes for a few years. Both the participants are qualified educators with teaching degrees. In addition, Participant B is currently furthering her studies in the field of education.

The participants both seem to have a love for reading and they read for information and for pleasure on a regular daily basis. They are both bilingual and thus read various materials (such as books, newspapers and magazines) in English and IsiZulu. In addition, they stated in the questionnaire that they buy books once a month although neither of the participants borrows

books from the library. Also, the one participant indicated that she hardly ever read books to her children whilst the other participant read to her children once or twice a week.

During the interviews participants were asked to explain how they learned to read and what their reading experiences were at school. Each participant learned reading differently but their feelings towards reading are the same.

Participant A said she learned to read at home with the help of her parents. Her parents usually brought books home for her to read and they would sit with her and guide her reading: “they monitored my reading so when I went to school I was ahead of my peers” (Participant A, 2011). This resulted in her feeling confident thus classifying herself as a ‘good reader’. “Every time the teacher would call me to the front to read. For me a good reader is someone that reads fluently and does not make errors” (Participant A, 2011). Despite the assistance she received from her parents she recalls the learning of reading as difficult “but because of the support I had at home I became a good reader, I enjoyed reading and had good reading experiences” (Participant A, 2011).

In contrast Participant B learned to read at school only. She did not have any support or reading material at home to assist her in developing her reading skills due to socio-economic reasons. “There was no support at home because my mother had to move away for work reasons and I lived with my grandmother who could not read or write. I learned to read through practice, the more I read the more I learned to read” (Participant B, 2011). Also, she recalled that it took her a

very long time to learn to read because she did not practice reading at home, reading was only done at school, mainly group reading. She also said that she learned to read more when she became a teacher, because in this profession they were expected to read a lot and use that reading to prepare for lessons: “that’s how I grew into reading. But right through school reading was difficult” (Participant B, 2011). The conceptual framework designed in Chapter 2 highlights the statement made by Participant B, which demonstrates a cyclical process in which one learns to read and then they read to learn which occurred in Participant B’s reading process. Also, decades later there still seems to be the same reason for why learners are struggling and performing poorly in reading, this being socio-economic reasons and the lack of parental support. This was identified in Participant B’s responses as well as in the PILRS Summary Report (2008).

Despite the participants different learning to read experiences there was a similarity in the way in which their reading was assessed while they were at school. Both their teachers assessed their reading based on reading aloud. Their teachers would call them usually in alphabetical order to individually read for a mark and neither of their teachers gave them their reading assessment results. However, Participant B’s teacher gave learners advance notice that their reading would be assessed and they were familiar with the procedure because at the end of every year reading assessments were conducted. In contrast, learners at Participant A’s school were unaware of their assessment dates, “we were never aware of when this would take place” (Participant A, 2011). Also, Participant A’s teacher never asked them any questions after they read individually to the teacher for a mark, while Participant B’s teacher asked learners questions after they read to assess if they understood what they read. In addition, Participant A and Participant B

experienced different emotions with regard to their reading assessment as learners at school. “I always enjoyed reading assessment because we could show how good we were at reading, it was fun. I just knew I had to read my best and my aim was 10 out of 10” (Participant A, 2011). On the other hand, Participant B recalled her reading assessment experience as “a very scary situation because we didn’t know from which page our teacher would ask us to read from nor did we know what kinds of questions the teacher would ask us” (Participant B, 2011).

To sum up, information provided by the two participants enabled an understanding of how they learned to read and what their reading experiences were like while growing up. There was a commonality in participants’ reading assessment experiences in that reading was assessed through reading aloud and there was a lack of reading comprehension assessment, especially written comprehension. Also, it is clear that reading had been a challenging and difficult task yet with the appropriate support, guidance and assistance learners could have good reading experiences which could develop their reading skills and turn them into confident readers. In addition, the participants’ reading and assessment experiences can also be passed down in that, the way in which they were taught reading and assessed and what their teachers found to be important skills are used in their classroom and it’s how they feel reading should be taught and assessed to date. Participant A’s teacher never focused on comprehension nor does she, while Participant B’s teacher always asked them questions to assess their understanding of the text thus she believes that accuracy and comprehension are two important reading skills.

### **b. Participants feelings about teaching and assessing reading**

In this section of the questionnaire both participants shared similar feelings regarding most questions about the teaching and assessing of reading. Both participants believed that *the assessing of reading can only be done through reading aloud with the teacher mainly assessing a learner's ability to read out words* as they both agree that *the purpose of reading assessment is to see if learners are able to read out words*. However, Participant B indicated that she disagreed with the following statement: *assessing learners understanding of what they read is not very important*, whilst Participant A was unsure. Furthermore, the participants disagreed that *group reading and silent reading are not helpful for learners to master reading skills*. Also, the participants had differing views about the correction of mistakes that learners make while they are reading, with Participant A stating that she strongly agreed that *while a child is reading and says the incorrect word such as house instead of home, stop and correct the mistake immediately* whereas Participant B disagreed with the statement. Also, Participant A felt *that learners should be given texts that they are familiar with during reading assessment* with Participant B disagreeing.

Lastly, both participants indicated that they agreed with the following statements:

- *If a learner is unsure of a new word repeat that word a number of times so that they recognize it on sight.*
- *Reading and writing are linked and that they should be used collectively.*

To conclude, it is clear the participants did read and enjoyed reading for pleasure. In addition, there were similarities and differences in the participants' views and understanding of reading and assessment. Also, participants shared the view that reading can only be assessed through reading aloud.

**c. An overview of the classroom observations**

<b>CLASS – GRADE</b> 4	<b>DATE OF LESSON</b>	<b>TOPIC OF LESSON</b>	<b>READING METHOD</b>	<b>ASSESSMENT ACTIVITY</b>	<b>KEY OBSERVATIONS</b>
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>14:06:2011</b>	Boffy's Crazy Invention	Learners sat in groups during this reading session.  They listened to the teacher reading aloud and later got a turn to read in groups and individually-both aloud.	Teacher asked a few questions to test understanding but these were randomly answered by learners.  Learners individually read aloud in the front of the class.	The teacher wrote down the words that were difficult according to learners.  The explanations of words were incomplete.  Only a few questions were asked to assess understanding.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>26:07:2011</b>	A perfect pair	Reading method used was the same as 14:06:11	Teacher asked a few questions based on text.  Learners individually read aloud in front. Learners completed an activity that was based on the text.	Learners did a written task but the questions were all entry level, such as true and false, match the columns.

<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>28:07:2011</b>	Steve gets it right		Learners were all called to the front of the class and formed a semi-circle while the teacher read the text aloud-learners listened.  Again it was basically reading aloud that was assessed.	Learners seemed more excited as they were able to understand the text.  The teacher tried to explain the text.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>02:08:2011</b>	Sandile and the silver city	Reading method used was the same as 14:06:11	Informal group reading was done. Teacher walked around the class listening to groups of learners reading aloud. All the groups read at their own paces.	During this session learners that didn't know words simply moved their mouths as if they were reading.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>04:08:2011</b>	Sunflower house		Learners were asked to write a paragraph on their dream house.  Reading aloud was assessed.	Teacher did not provide a vocabulary list to assist learners in their writing piece.  Integration of language was not applied – the importance of using adjectives.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>16:08:2011</b>	A great big hug		Teacher focused on intonation, she read with expression and expected learners to do the same.  Reading aloud was assessed.	Learners were responsive as they were able to understand the text.  Learners were able to define some words on their own, so the teacher didn't need to

					provide her understanding of words.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>18:08:2011</b>	The secret of Mapungubwe		Reading aloud was assessed.  Learners also did a task on unscrambling words.	After learners unscrambled words, these were not explained to them.  The teacher did not explain the text, went straight into reading aloud.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>17:04:2012</b>	The Super Team		This was informal reading assessment, learners volunteered to read aloud.	Speech bubbles were ignored.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>19:04:2012</b>	A bright future		Learners read aloud - showed no emotions during this session.	Learners were less interested as they didn't understand the text.  The class with slower learners were lost and confused.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>08:05:2012</b>	That's how they do it!	Reading method was the same as  14:06:11	Learners read aloud.  Completed a comprehension task. The questions were simple elementary level, direct reference questions.	Teacher went through the task and provided all the answers, learners were not required to think.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>10:05:2012</b>	Blue dragonflies		Reading aloud was assessed.  Thereafter, teacher wanted them to make	Learners were interested in the imagery in the text but the teacher highlighted

				Mothers Day Cards	these images. They were ignored.
<b>A &amp; C</b>	<b>17:05:2012</b>	The birds choose a king	Reading method was the same as 14:06:11.	Reading aloud was assessed.	All learners got a chance to read the text.

The following elements were identified from the above table which provides an overview of the classroom observations:

- **Reading aloud:** the teacher and learners constantly read aloud in groups and individually, silent reading was a non-existent classroom practice.
- **Individual reading:** individual reading aloud was assessed although group reading was also very popular in the teacher's reading method.
- **Neglect of comprehension:** comprehension skills were seldom integrated in the reading lesson, not one of the key skills that teacher focused on developing. Also, visuals and speech bubbles were not read or discussed.
- **Reading assessment:** this was mainly conducted orally, where learners read aloud individually for marks. Although there were some written tasks where learners answered questions these were mainly literal questions that linked to the text.
- **Texts:** Most the texts used were short stories. Texts were not repeated, thus it was always learners' first encounter with every text. The texts used did not follow any themes; they were random stories from a textbook.

#### **d. Understanding of reading and assessment**

When participants were asked the question *what is your understanding of reading*, both seemed to have a similar view, in that both believed that reading is about understanding texts. Participant B stated that:

reading is about reading with understanding. It's not just pronunciation but it also depends on how the child reads. If a child sees a punctuation mark, he or she must show they understand what the punctuation mark means in terms of the story; for example, where there is an exclamation mark which shows surprise, the child must be surprised (Participant B, 2011).

Participant A said that “reading helps the child to become a lifelong learner because in everything they do they need to know how to read and what we are reading. They need to be able to read and understand what they read for every career” (Participant A, 2011). However, during the observations of Participant A's reading assessment lessons learners' understanding of the text was not important. During the reading assessment lessons the teacher did not assess learners understanding of the text in that she did not focus on asking learners questions about the text to assess if learners understood what they were reading. Also, she did not make a concerted effort in explaining the text to learners. Instead the lessons were based on assessing if learners were actually able to read out the words in the text aloud. In contrast her understanding of reading was not practiced in her reading assessment lessons.

Participants were asked *what is your understanding of assessment?*: and both had difficulty explaining in detail what they understood by the term assessment. Participant A said that for her “(...*thinking*...) understanding of assessment is to see how much a child knows and what the child knows” (Participant A, 2011). In her reading classrooms, it was evident that she linked her understanding of assessment to her assessing of learners’ reading in that she individually called up her learners to read to the class to see if learners had acquired the reading skills that she taught and if they were able to recognize and say out or read out the words from the text.

In contrast, Participant B provided an overview on the types of assessments, “(*paused a lot and hesitantly answered*) there is the end of the year assessment that wants the end result. There is also the Annual National Assessment (ANA) that begins in February” (Participant B, 2011). The ANA is a national departmental examination that assesses learners’ literacy and numeracy skills across the foundation, intermediate and senior phases. In addition the participant expressed her school’s feelings towards this examination:

it is really frustrating us, we feel that our learners are not ready by that time.

We spend time preparing learners in February rather than teaching them new

work. But it is also good because ANA is a diagnostic assessment and it will

help us to improve after the assessment so that by the end of the year they

are much better than they are at the beginning of the year (Participant B, 2011).

In terms of the literacy results of ANA Participant B was able provide a quick summary of the two phases 2011 results of her school, “Foundation Phase does much better than Intermediate Phase. Foundation phase achieved above 60% but when it comes to the Intermediate Phase the results went down” (Participant B, 2011). She does believe that the drop in results from Foundation Phase to Intermediate Phase can be linked to the language change because the medium of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3 is IsiZulu at this school and from Grade 4 to Grade 7 the medium of instruction changes to English as well as the increase in the number of learning areas in the Intermediate Phase. Similarly, Matjila and Pretorius (2004) share the same beliefs as Participant B in that learners that learn in a language that is not their primary language have extreme difficulties resulting in them performing poorly at school.

Furthermore, Participant B was asked what she believed was the purpose of assessment and she stated that “the purpose of assessment is to improve our teaching as teachers and the learners have to improve their learning strategies. Also, it allows teachers to see if what they have taught has been understood” (Participant B, 2011). However, at this school the Grade 4 teacher does not teach reading strategies. The views that the participants have shared of their understanding of assessment as well as the purpose of assessment corresponds with Lambert and Lines (2000, p.4) understanding: “assessment is a process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils’ responses to tasks and the purpose of assessment is to provide feedback to teachers and pupils about progress in order to improve future teaching and learning”.

During the interview session Participant A was asked, *How often do you assess reading in your classroom and why do you assess reading?* Her response to the first question was that she randomly conducted formal assessment three times per term and that she did not have a specific day on which her children were aware that she would be testing their reading for marks. However, she did mention that she did informal reading assessment on a regular weekly basis where learners would read aloud together as a class and then in smaller groups. Her reason for doing this weekly informal assessment was to identify and assist struggling readers. These regular weekly reading sessions that Participant A had with her learners tied in with the schools reading policy which was explained briefly by Participant B, in that the school has a reading period every week in which all other work stops and learners all read in their classrooms.

There are groups of learners in each class that are grouped according to their reading ability and overall performance. The teacher has to help those that are struggling to read during this time while the other learners that are ahead have to take a book from the reading corner and read. Each learner has to tell the teacher what they have read from the book (Participant B, 2011).

However, from the classroom observations, I noticed that the ‘struggling learners’ were separated from the rest of the class. They were excluded from the reading lessons and other lessons because the teacher said they could not read and write. Thus they were given Grade 1 work to do. Although on every classroom visit they were given work to do, most of these

children chose not to do it, they were neglected by the teacher thus the lack of interest in the task they were expected to complete.

#### **e. Participants Practices of Assessing Reading**

Since Participant B is no longer a class teacher and does not teach English classes I asked her *how she thinks children should be taught reading*. She provided insight as to when she was a class teacher how she taught and assessed reading. She claimed that she liked teaching reading and thinks she was successful in that aspect of teaching. “The approach that I used and encourage my teachers to use is to read for the children first. I like theme teaching so I like to tell them a story or read a story to them and then assess their listening skills” (Participant B, 2011). She then stated that she would give her learners the text and ask them to read to assess if they are able to recognize the words that were earlier mentioned. “They can then do group reading and then follow with a comprehension” (Participant B, 2011). There seems to be a resemblance in the way the participant was taught reading and the way she teaches reading: her teacher used group reading to teach reading and so does she, also comprehension was a key factor during the teaching and assessing of her reading and she continued to highlight the importance of comprehension in her lessons.

Also, Participant B believed that reading and writing are interrelated. Thus she feels that once learners have completed their comprehension task, they should be asked to do a creative writing

piece based on the text and using the same themes that they were introduced to in earlier activities.

My children have enjoyed this approach a lot. Recently I have been helping the struggling Grade 7 learners with reading and I requested the ECHO [a newspaper reading supplement], they have learned new themes. Now they read better and can write in a flowing way and they can link the themes they have learned to reality (Participant B, 2011).

In addition she mentioned that she believed that it was important to link the approach used to teach reading to reality so that learners can relate easily and make links to what they have learned and how they have learned it to what they see and experience. This is a socio-psycholinguistic approach, which is the integration of readers' background knowledge to the actual text.

In contrast, Participant A has her own method of teaching and assessing reading that she believes works well in her classroom. As mentioned earlier in the chapter Participant A believed that learners should be assessed on a text that they are familiar with. As a result, on the days of their assessment she gave learners texts that they have never seen but familiarized them with the text through her method of teaching and assessing reading. She explained the method that she uses: "I first do whole class reading, then group reading and then individual reading because it allows

learners to become familiar with the words in the story and this then allows them to read fluently and accurately. I find this method works well in my class” (Participant A, 2011).

During class observations, this method was evident in the teacher’s reading assessment lesson. At the start of her lesson she did not introduce her lesson to learners nor did she briefly explain what the lesson would entail, reader textbooks were handed out with each child receiving their own reader. Learners were unaware that their reading skills were going to be assessed. There was a consistency in the way Participant A began her reading assessment lessons and the way in which her teacher reportedly conducted their assessment lessons when she was at school, in that neither of the teachers told their learners that their reading was going to be assessed. Learners were caught ‘off-guard’. The only difference was that Participant A familiarized her learners with the text while her teacher did not familiarize them with the text that they were expected to read.

Participant A began each of her lessons by reading the text to learners slowly and learners were expected to follow in their books. No background information was given about the text. Also, the teacher did not read speech bubbles or additional textual information that was inserted within the visuals nor did she discuss or encourage learners to look at the visuals in the texts. All additional information and visuals were ignored. Thereafter, she would request learners to write down all new and difficult words that they may have come across during her second reading of the text. On the second reading of the text, Participant A often read the text slightly faster, but constantly

emphasized punctuation marks and accurately sounded out the words. After she would complete reading the text for the second time, learners were asked to call out the words that they may have written down and she would write them on the board as per the learners' lists, she never once wrote down a word she may have thought to be difficult if the children did not call it out.

In the one lesson the following words were written on the board: 'invention, hammered, genius, situation, workshop, dizzy, geography, disgrace'. The teacher began to define the words that she wrote on the board with the help of some learners that had dictionaries. Those that didn't have dictionaries sat quietly and simply listened to the teacher. The meanings of words were written on the board but the meanings of these words were not in relation to the text, they were simply dictionary meanings. Also, the teacher did not link these words to the learners' lives, understandings or experiences. Furthermore, the teacher did not complete the task she began; instead she asked learners to complete the task of defining the words at home. In my opinion that was a problem because I felt those learners who did not have their own dictionary or parental assistance were immediately disadvantaged because they would be unable to complete their homework task.

This dictionary work never occurred in the other lessons. In other lessons the teacher simply wrote the words learners gave her and provided a briefing meaning according to her understanding of the word. The meanings of the words were never written on the board. Learners

simply copied the words from the board into their personal dictionaries, the meanings of these words were never written. This method occurred in 23 of the 24 lessons observed.

English was an additional language to all the learners sitting in this classroom and it could either be their second or third language. Thus the teacher needed to spend more time explaining and ‘unpacking’ the texts for learners so that they could build their vocabulary and also have a clearer understanding of the text. This would have made the texts more exciting for learners and would have been a learner-friendly text.

The teacher then went on to whole class reading, group reading and then individual reading which was assessed. In addition, Participant A followed the same method in the class with mostly struggling learners (classes were graded according to learners overall academic performance) and with mostly stronger learners. The only difference was that in the weaker class during whole class and group reading, learners read after the teacher whereas in the other class which was the academically stronger class reading was not prompted. However, during the interview she said “I change my teaching methods to help learners that are experiencing reading difficulties. For learners that are slower I take more time to express words. I also focus on breaking up words so that they can say it accurately. I try to use the same passages across all reading levels but change the way in which I teach reading” (Participant A, 2011). This was not evident during the observations.

During the formal individual reading assessments, learners were called to the front of the class to read a few sentences. The teacher immediately corrected errors such as incorrect pronunciation of words, misuse of punctuation marks, incorrect handling of the book and inaccuracy.

Participant A made learners repeat words several times when they were incorrectly pronounced or when sentences were inaccurately read. Samuel (2002) agrees with the method of repetition that Participant A used in the teaching and assessing of reading as it is believed to be a good way to teach learners to read fluently and accurately.

To conclude, each participant has their own way of teaching and assessing reading that they find works in their classrooms. However, there are similarities in their understanding of teaching and assessing reading as well as differences in the methods that the participants considered useful.

The similarities that participants shared in their methods were: reading was assessed using reading aloud, word recognition was important and this was done through repeating the text, correct observation of punctuation marks as well as accurate and fluent reading was encouraged.

The differences were: Participant A did not assess comprehension while Participant B thought that was crucial; also, Participant B linked reading and writing while Participant A did not include any writing in her lessons.

**f. Reading Skills and Forms of Assessments used during Reading  
Assessment**

Participants were asked what reading skills they assess or which reading skills they think teachers should assess. Participant A stated that she focuses on assessing the following skills during reading assessment: pronunciation of words, punctuation, fluency, accuracy, how learners hold the book and comprehension. During the reading assessment lessons it was clear that the teacher focused on all the skills she mentioned except for comprehension. During all the lessons the teacher read the text to learners a few times and learners got the opportunity to read the text together as a class, in groups and then individually. The teacher never discussed the meaning of the text with her learners and only four of my 24 classroom observations did she ask them questions to see if they understood the text. Although this was done, the questions did not require learners to critically think, it was simple entry level questions where answers were clearly visible in the texts. According to many theorists, reading is referred to as a socio-psycholinguistic approach (as discussed in Chapter 2), which requires the teaching of reading skills focusing on cognitive and linguistic skills as well as the learners background knowledge. Unfortunately this approach was non-existent in Participant A's reading classrooms, although she focused on the cognitive and linguistics she failed to explain the purpose and importance of these skills. For example, learners were expected to observe punctuation marks such as a full-stop and they were made aware of these but were unaware of the function of these punctuation marks and the importance of stopping at a full-stop because the teacher never once reminded learners that a full-stop signifies the end of a sentence. Nor did the teacher relate the texts to learners' backgrounds, which assists in understanding and relating to a text.

This method that Participant A used in every reading lesson (teacher reads the text aloud, class reads the text aloud, groups read the text aloud and finally learner's individually read the text aloud) was to familiarize learners with the text and the words in the text (pronunciation of words) as all learners are ESL learners and may not have come across such words. She also felt it helped learners to read accurately and fluently as they were familiar with the text. In addition, the teacher ensured that she emphasized the punctuation marks in the texts, so that when learners read the text they did the same. For example when they came across a comma they paused or if there was a question mark at the end of the sentence their voice tone changed and they would ask the question, but none of this was ever explained to learners. Also, when learners stood in the front of the class their book handling skills were corrected as illustrated in Figure 6 and Figure 7. Figure 6 shows the way in which children normally held the book. According to the teacher this was the incorrect way of holding a book. She taught children to hold the book as illustrated in Figure 7. When learners did not hold the book correctly she stopped them while they were reading and corrected learners and showed them how to hold the book. Again the reason for holding the book a certain way was never explained to learners.

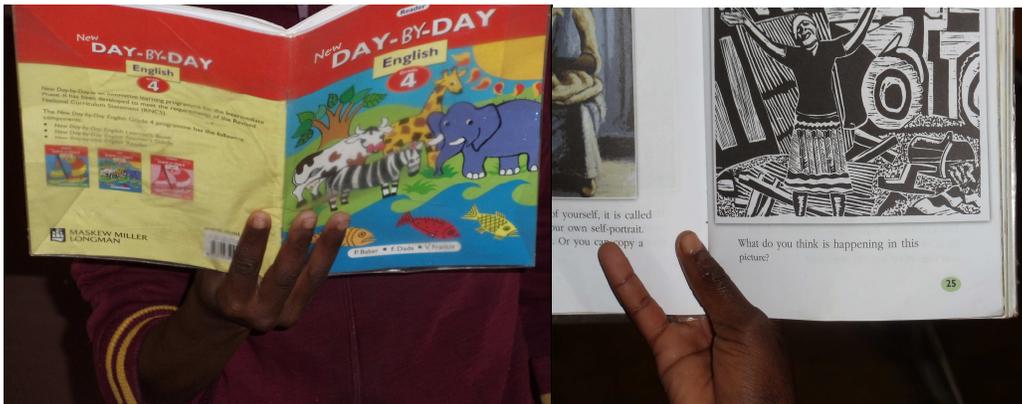
**FIGURE 6: INCORRECT WAY IN WHICH THE BOOK WAS HELD**

Source: Photograph of a learner incorrectly holding a book during the reading assessment lesson



**FIGURE 7: CORRECT WAY IN WHICH THE BOOK WAS HELD**

Source: Photograph of a learner correctly holding a book while reading



Similarly, Participant B mentioned that she believes teachers should assess the following reading skills: understanding, recognition of punctuation marks, pronunciation and accuracy. “It’s not about fast reading but about accuracy. What we have realized is that learners fail not because

they don't know but because they can't read accurately and they don't understand instructions. So they need to be accurate and comprehend" (Participant B, 2011). Thus she believes that teachers should focus on accuracy and comprehension.

In addition, Participant B stated that she feels that teachers need to assess reading throughout the year on a daily basis as a continuous assessment rather than only assessing reading at the end of the year. She stated that continuous reading assessment would help learners to improve their reading skills and also reading assessment should not scare or intimidate learners but rather encourage them to read at home as well. In contrast Participant A only mentioned that she conducts formal and informal reading assessment in her Grade 4 English classrooms; this was evident during observations of her reading lessons. However, her reading assessment is a continuous assessment because on a regular weekly basis she assesses reading. She uses a checklist as an assessment tool, "I have 3 sections that I need to assess on the checklist. I use a checklist because all the language teachers at our school use this form. It is also clear and easy to understand" (Participant A, 2011). When Participant A was asked what the 3 sections were, she was hesitant and could not explain what she meant by the 3 sections. Participant B also mentioned that the school has a common assessment tool but referred to it as a rubric as compared to Participant A's term checklist. On viewing Participant A's checklist and Participant B's rubric, to me it was a mark sheet which consisted of the number of reading assessment tasks that were required per term, learner names with learners marks for each reading assessment task. A sample of this is given in Figure 8.

**FIGURE 8: SCHOOL’S COMMON READING ASSESSMENT TOOL**

Source: The School

LEARNER NAMES	TERM 1			TERM 2			TERM 3			TERM 4		
	ASSESS.1	ASSESS.2	ASSESS.3									

This created a concern as it made me question whether the participants were unfamiliar with the different types of assessment tools, their names and purpose. Also, the checklist did not have a set of criteria by which the teacher assessed learners, which meant that learners could have been unfairly assessed and the actual mark per learner per reading assessment task could not be justified or explained.

In conclusion, the participants share similar ideas and views in terms of the reading skills that need to be developed and assessed in learners. However, there seems to be differing views in terms of their understanding of assessment tools and the forms of assessments that should be used in the assessing of reading. This could be due to the lack of workshops and training from the government or due to personal preferences or understandings.

### **g. Promotion and Encouragement of Reading**

The school did promote and encourage reading across all grades. However, the principal of the school acknowledged that there were many challenges and barriers that the teachers encountered in the teaching and assessing of reading.

The school has a reading policy that is adhered to by every member of the staff. This promotes and encourages reading at the school. As mentioned earlier in the chapter there are weekly reading periods in which learners read and teachers assist struggling readers. Also, the school runs internal reading competitions that motivate and encourage teachers and learners to work hard at teaching and learning reading skills so that they can win trophies and be praised during the competitions. Also, once a month on a Friday the school has a reading assembly where each class gets a chance to either read a story, poem or newspaper article to the entire school. This is done with the assistance of class teachers.

Despite these positive tools used to promote and encourage reading at school, the principal did feel that the school lacks a reading culture among both learners and teachers. She stated that both teachers and learners only read to pass or complete tasks and there is no reading for enjoyment. In addition, she felt that teachers struggled to teach reading because the method that many teachers used to teach reading did not include all the reading skills, as a result disadvantaging learners. Also, from my observations, Participant A did not use a variety of reading texts and resources which could assist in the encouragement of reading among learners. Texts were mainly

stories from textbooks which were loaned to learners for the lesson. Furthermore, classrooms had posters but these posters were not used to learn from or to read from in the lessons observed but their purpose was more to beautify the classroom. In addition, newspaper articles were not part of the classroom resources and children were not exposed to adverts, cartoons and comics that could assist in encouraging them to read and thus developing their reading skills.

#### **h. Learner books**

A total of 45 learner books were looked at to understand what kinds of comprehension and written tasks were actually done. The writing in learners' books consisted mainly of language tasks. Written tasks such as formal and creative writing were not a frequent occurrence. Such tasks were done in 5 week intervals. In most cases the written tasks had no relevance to the previous work, they were mainly random topics. Such written pieces consisted of Valentine's Day cards, Mother's Day cards, Father's Day cards and short paragraph writing pieces such as my weekend, my best friend and my dream house.

While comprehension activities were answered on a monthly basis, all questions required answers that were straightforward. Answers were extracted directly from the texts. Learners' thoughts were never challenged and critical thinking was never required. Questions were straightforward, levels of questioning never varied. Although there was always a variety of sections within the comprehension task such as true and false questions, fill in the blanks, match columns and unscramble words, none of these questions required substantiating answers.

Thus it can be said that comprehension skills were not practiced frequently although these are regarded by many theorists as an extremely important skill.

## **5. Summary of the Findings**

It is interesting to note that both participants found reading to be challenging and difficult to learn while they were at school. However, if it is supported (at home, in the community) while learning to read, it builds the readers confidence despite it being a difficult set of skills to master.

Although participants used different methods of teaching and assessing reading, the skills that they wanted to develop and assess in their learners were the same, these being comprehension, word recognition, pronunciation, awareness of punctuation marks, fluency and accuracy.

However, during the classroom observations the focus was not on comprehension. Instead, the teacher's main aim was to develop learners' accuracy and fluency in reading aloud and to observe the correct use of punctuation marks. Also, reading did not consist of analyzing visuals that were in the text and speech bubbles were ignored because the teacher believed it was not important "because they are someone else's words" (Participant A, 2011).

In addition, although written comprehension tasks were being conducted it was not a daily or weekly task. This was done once in two to three weeks. This was found during the observation of

learners' school books. Also, writing tasks such as formal and creative writing were not a frequent task.

Participants also believed in reading aloud, which consisted of whole class reading, group reading, and individual reading. Silent reading was not included in the participants' ideas and methods of teaching reading. Also, they used repetition in the teaching of reading and before assessing reading as they believed it assisted in mastering learners' ability to read accurately and fluently. In addition, texts that were used in the reading classrooms were from textbook readers, and no additional supplements or resources were used.

The forms of assessments that participants used were continuous assessment, formal assessment and informal assessment which was formative. Reading was assessed continuously throughout the year, with three formal reading assessments per term. In addition, informal reading assessment was done regularly on a weekly basis where learners read and the teacher walked around helping with the pronunciation of words. All these forms of assessments were based on oral performance not on comprehension. Although participants mentioned that checklists and rubrics were used to assess reading, there were no criteria on the actual checklist that the participant used; instead it looked like a mark sheet. There was a misunderstanding in the participants' understanding of a checklist and rubric. Also, the criteria that the participant used to assess reading were not explicitly stated thus raising questions about the validity and reliability of the marks she allocated to learners.

Lastly, there seemed to be a consistent pattern in the way in which the participants' reading was assessed when they were at school and the way in which they assess reading in their classrooms. The ideas and methods of assessing reading did not change or improve for these participants over the years. Their minds were set on their one way of assessing reading which involved learners reading aloud with little or no emphasis on comprehension but more on word recognition, accuracy and fluency. Also, the teacher used the same format and method of assessing reading. She did not use learners' previous results to develop their skills or improve her methods of assessing reading. Furthermore, reading seemed to be assessed more as a departmental and school requirement rather than wanting to improve learners' reading levels.

## **6. Relating these findings back to the Literature Review**

Within this study we have taken a socio-psycholinguistic approach to reading within which the concept of reading is both a linguistic and cognitive process as well as a social process (Weaver, 1994). This approach was evident in Participant A's reading to learn process. Within her social context she was encouraged to read and resources were available to her and in this context she was also taught to read (linguistic and cognitive process). In addition, this approach created a confident reader. However, many of the Grade 4 learners at this school did not have the advantage or the opportunity of experiencing reading at a social level. This surfaced during informal conversations with the Grade 4 staff members and the head of the school. Many learners came from impoverished backgrounds and lived with their illiterate grandparents either

because their parents had passed away or they had moved away from home to other suburbs or towns to earn a living. In addition, the teacher never once tried to link learners' background knowledge (which may be limited) to texts that they were reading to make them understand and relate to the text and also enjoy the texts that they were reading.

The findings highlight that decoding, fluency, accuracy and book handling skills were important in the reading assessment lessons rather than comprehension. Pretorius (2002) had also found similar results in research that she conducted in that teachers focused on decoding skills rather than comprehension. In addition Macdonald (1990) and Strauss (1995) also found that teachers relied on decoding skills rather than comprehension. This resulted in children from disadvantaged schools being good at decoding but their comprehension skills were poor. This was also found in the PIRLS 2006 research study in which socio-economic factors had an influence on learners reading scores. Also, the poor reading levels among learners can be linked to language barriers as learners were not taught in English, a lack of support and poor reading cultures in their social context and teachers lack of knowledge in teaching reading as well as their poor reading cultures that emerged from the findings (Pretorius & Machet, 2003). In addition, learners did not portray the four roles of a reader classified by Freebody and Luke (1990), learners were only code-breakers, mainly because the teacher focused on this skill and neglected the other three roles which were text participant, text user and text analyst.

Samuel (2002) revealed that one way of developing learners' fluency in reading can be done through repetitive teaching. This was evident in the way in which reading was taught and then assessed at this school. Texts were repeated to learners several times before they read the text individually. Also, words that were pronounced inaccurately or words that learners could not say were repeated a number of times.

Also, it is evident that the teacher focused more on assessing if learners were able to read 'learning to read' (refer back theoretical framework: Figure 5) rather than learners being able to 'read to learn'. The assessment of reading was focused on the linguistics of reading that being saying out words, observing punctuation marks, reading fluently and accurately. These skills together with comprehension form part of the learning to read process. Comprehension also forms part of the cognitive, reading to learn process. However, comprehension was non-existent in the reading assessment lessons.

Smith's (1994) statement that children learn to read like others in a reading club, is very significant in the study, as children will learn to read in ways that their teacher reads. In this study the teacher characterizes reading as reading aloud and comprehension is absent from reading, thus children will model this and read aloud perhaps with no understanding.

In addition all the terms and concepts that participants used in their understanding of reading and assessment and methods in which they assessed reading have been discussed in Chapter 2.

## **7. Conclusion**

In attempting to determine how the Grade 4 teacher assesses reading, the skills she focuses on and the forms of assessments she uses to assess reading, an analysis of the interviews and observations suggests that the teacher tends to focus on the 'how to' aspect of reading and largely ignores reading for meaning, although she is aware that reading for meaning should be taught. Also, the teacher used formal and informal continuous assessment in her classroom but did not mention other forms of assessment that could possibly be used to assess reading. In addition the participant seemed to be following the methods that her teacher used to assess reading.

The study was limited in that it focused only on reading assessment at Grade 4 level and only one teacher taught English in Grade 4.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter revisits the research topic, the purpose and research questions and briefly summarizes the methodology used in this study. It also summarizes the findings of this study. Lastly this chapter provides recommendations and outlines conclusions of this study.

#### **2. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify the methods and/or forms of assessment that the Grade 4 English teacher at a specific school used to assess reading and the reading skills that were assessed in her classroom as the basis for an intervention to improve the culture of reading at the school. It is important to understand how the Grade 4 teacher assesses reading, the reading skills she considers important and the forms of assessment that are used to assess reading, as Grade 4 is the beginning of a new phase and the change of the MoI from IsiZulu to English . As mentioned in Chapter 1 this study was part of the first phase of a broader action research project that aims at developing a reading culture at the school and in the community.

This school is a primary school situated in a rural area outside Pietermaritzburg. The school consists of Grade One to Grade Seven learners and offers afternoon classes for ABET learners. Learners that attend this school are English Second Language learners who live in and around

this area. Learners at the school are taught in IsiZulu for the first three years and from Grade 4 the medium of instruction becomes English. Also, the school is a non-fee paying school, fully subsidised by the government.

### **3. The Key Research Questions**

- What forms of assessment does the teacher use in her reading classroom?
- What reading skills are being assessed and developed?
- How does the teacher assess reading? What process is used?
- What types of texts are being used to assess reading in the reading classroom?

### **4. The Research Methodology**

This research used a case study methodology. It was qualitative in nature and aimed at providing an in-depth description of a case. In addition the study was conducted within an interpretivist paradigm as it allowed me to gain insight and an understanding of the teacher's experiences and reasons for choosing and using certain forms of assessment and reading skills in her reading classrooms. Thus data was collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and personal reflections.

The data analysis methodology that I used was influenced by the Content Analysis method. This method encourages the identification of themes (Rule & John, 2011). A coding system was used to analyse the collated data.

## 5. Summary of Key Findings

In Chapter Three it was noted that one of the limitations of the study was that of the sample used in the study. Due to school's policy only one teacher teaches Grade 4 English at the school and the principle of the school was also interviewed to provide more insight on her understanding of reading assessment. However, one cannot presume that their views represent the other teachers in the school or other schools. Importantly, this study provides insight into reading assessment but further research would have to be conducted in order to gain further insight.

Participants had a fairly good understanding of reading and assessment and the purpose of teaching and assessing reading. In addition they both seemed to enjoy reading for information and pleasure and read on a daily basis. There were many similarities and differences in the way participants assessed reading and thought reading should be assessed, the skills that were important and the forms of assessments that are used or should be used to assess reading. Overall we can deduce:

- a. Although participants were aware of the importance of assessing comprehension, focus was mainly placed on 'how learners read': pronunciation, fluency, accuracy and their book handling technique.
- b. The method used to assess reading was systematic and consistent. The procedure consisted of teacher reading aloud and learners following, the teacher reads the text again, then the whole class reads aloud together, groups of learners read aloud and finally individual reading aloud is assessed.

- c. Reading was done through reading aloud and silent reading was not encouraged and used in the classroom.
- d. The texts that were used to assess reading were not linked to previous lessons and were unfamiliar to learners, through the use of repetitive teaching of the texts learners quickly become familiar with the texts. Also, the texts used to assess reading were from Grade 4 reader textbooks. They were all short stories of about 3 to 4 pages. Some of the texts were relevant to learners' lives which made them enjoy reading while other texts had no relevance to learners' lives and experiences.
- e. Reading was assessed using a formative method in that the teacher assessed reading to become more aware of learners performance in reading and this was done through formal assessments three times per term and informally on a weekly basis. Thus reading was assessed continuously which served as a summative method of assessing reading. Again the forms of assessments focused on reading aloud.
- f. The tools used to assess reading were unclear, the one participant said the school language committee designed a rubric that teachers used. However, the other participant said she used a checklist that was used by all language teachers but to me it was a mark sheet. Also, there were no criteria on the so-called checklist or rubric.
- g. There was a correlation between the way in which participants were assessed in reading when they were school children and the way they assessed reading in their classrooms.

- h. Learners that were unable to read and write (teachers referred to these learners as “weak students”) were excluded from the lessons, they were given Grade 1 work to do in a Grade 4 classroom. Also, many of these learners have repeated the grade and will be pushed to the next grade despite their inability to read and write.

## **6. Relating these findings back to the literature review and theoretical framework**

South Africa has a literacy crisis. This is evident in studies that have been conducted in South Africa such as SACMEQ and PIRLS that were discussed in chapter 2. This is due to the lack of reading and a poor reading culture. This has resulted in poor reading performances amongst our learners both at school and tertiary institutions (Pretorius, 2000).

In this study the teacher focused mainly on assessing her learners’ ability to read, the ‘learning to read’ process (Figure 5: Chapter 2). This seems to be the focus of many teachers that teach and assess reading across South Africa. Many South African researchers (Pretorius, 2000 & 2002; MacDonald, 1990; Struass, 1995; Verbeek, 2011; Aitchison & Harley, 2006; Fleisch, 2007) have also found that teachers tend to focus on teaching learners the mechanics of how to read rather than understanding what you are reading. In addition, the findings from this study confirm the findings of the other researchers mentioned earlier, where teachers mainly focus on: word

recognition, phonics, phonemic awareness, accuracy and fluency with very little or no emphasis on comprehension skills.

In addition, the teacher used a formative form of assessment in her classroom, which is intended to support the process of teaching and learning (RNCS, 2011). However, there was no evidence from the classroom observations that the use of this form of assessment contributed to the teaching and learning of reading because the teacher used her 'normal method' of assessing reading. She did not enhance learners' ability to understand the text - again it was more about 'learning to read' rather than 'reading to learn'. From my observations the choice of assessment had no bearing on improving the teaching and learning reading but was rather a requirement from the school and department.

## **7. Recommendations**

In order to develop a reading culture and improve reading assessment at this school I recommend:

- Teachers need to devote more time to understanding the reading process and assessment.
- Teachers need to be familiar with various reading skills that need to be taught and assessed.
- Teachers need to be exposed to various strategies that can be used to develop learners' comprehension skills.

- Workshops and training should be made available for teachers to broaden their understanding of different methods of assessing reading and the significance of using a variety of assessment tools.
- The school should encourage book clubs for both learners and teachers to encourage and develop a reading culture among all stakeholders.

## **8. Conclusion**

I conclude my study with both a sigh of relief to have finally completed my research but also with sadness. This journey of discovering how a teacher at a rural school assesses reading in her Grade 4 classroom has been an overwhelming experience for me. It gave me the opportunity to view and experience the warmth, love and openness that this school, the staff and learners had to offer as well as the challenges and barriers that they encountered in the teaching and assessing of reading and their eagerness to learn and better their knowledge and expertise. This was truly a humbling experience for me, one that I will always treasure.

Learning to read and using the correct methods to teach and assess reading can be a daunting and challenging task as the findings have revealed. However, with more exposure and research around this field of reading assessment I am confident that we as educators will eventually overcome our shortfalls and challenges and become more knowledgeable assessors of reading.

I hope that my study provides the reader with substantial insight on the way in which reading has been assessed at this particular school at Grade 4 level and would encourage readers to pursue more studies within this field of reading assessment.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: UKZN Ethical Clearance Certificate



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Tel No: +27 31 260 8350  
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25 October 2011

**Ms M Nehal (204518515)**  
School of Language and Media

Dear Ms Nehal

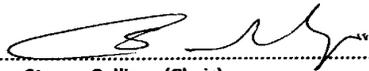
**PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/1034/011M**  
**PROJECT TITLE: A study of reading assessment in Grade 4 classrooms**

In response to your application dated 26 September 2011, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.  
**PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.**

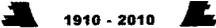
I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully



.....  
**Professor Steven Collings (Chair)**  
**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

cc. Supervisor – Dr PN Rule  
cc. Mrs S Naicker

  
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**Appendix 2: Informed Consent for Participants**

**Consent for participation in a Reading Research Project.**

I am currently a student enrolled at University of KwaZulu-Natal, completing my masters degree in language and media with a focus on reading assessment. One of the requirements for my studies is to complete research through interviews with you as an educator and observations of you assessing reading in your grade 4 classrooms. The purpose of the study is to investigate and understand the assessment methods and skills that are being assessed in the grade 4 reading classroom. My supervisor is Dr. Peter Rule of the School of Education and Development of the same University. He may be contacted at: School of Education and Development, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Private Bag X01, Scottsville, 3209. Tel: 033 260 6187. The data collected will be used by our team of researchers consisting of lecturers from the university and other masters' students to assist your school in designing a programme that will contribute to a reading culture at Maqongqo Combined School.

I herewith request your participation in my research. I will explain the process to you before hand and I do not foresee any harm or risk caused to you or your classroom. Participation in the study is voluntary and the information you give me will be treated in confidence and will only be used for academic purposes. Your name will not be used in the study. You are also free to withdraw from the research process at any time if you so choose. The findings of the research will contribute to developing a reading improvement plan for the school.

If you are willing to grant me permission for participation, kindly complete the consent form below.

Kind Regards,

Mitasha Nehal

-----  
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**CONSENT FORM**

I ....., herby grant you permission to conduct a your data collection with me.

.....

.....

Signature of Teacher

Date

### **Appendix 3: Informed Consent for Parents**

#### **INFORMATION FOR PARENTS FOR RESEARCH ON READING ASSESSMENT IN GRADE 4 CLASSROOMS**

#### **Aims of research**

- To document how teachers assess reading in the Grade 4 classroom.
- To find out why teachers assess reading in this way.

#### **Who is doing the research?**

Mitasha Nehal

A Bachelor of Education Masters student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Specialization: Language and Media Studies

#### **Research Supervisor who may be contacted for further information**

Dr Peter Rule

Education Building

University of KwaZulu-Natal

#### **How your child was identified to take part in this research**

All the Grade 4 English teachers at your child's school are taking part in this research. The research is about how teachers assess English reading. Your child was identified to participate in the research because he/she is in Grade 4 at the school.

#### **What does this research require of your child?**

Your child will follow the teachers lesson by reading a text and their teach would assess their reading in the presence of the researcher.

#### **When will the research happen?**

The research will take place during October/November 2011 at times which are negotiated with the teacher and school principal.

#### **How will your child benefit from being involved in this research?**

Neither your child nor his/her teacher will benefit financially from being involved in this research. It is possible that the teacher will become more aware of effective assessing practices, and that this will benefit your child.

**What risks are involved?**

Your child will not be asked to do anything that causes any discomfort or anxiety or danger! The observations will not be used against him/her in any way.

**Will your child remain anonymous?**

Your child’s identity will not be revealed in this research. He/she will be referred to by a false name if necessary.

**What will happen if your child withdraws from the research?**

Your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. He/she can decide not to participate at any stage and for any reason, and this will have no negative results.

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**Consent form:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (full names of parent/guardian) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of the information provided below, and the nature of the research project, and I consent to the involvement of my child \_\_\_\_\_ (full name of child) in the research project. I understand that my child will be observed during reading assessment lessons. I accept the assurances of the research team that no harmful or disrespectful use will be made of these observations.

I know that my child is free to stop participating in the research at any stage.

**NAME OF PARENT/ GUARDIAN:** .....

**SIGNATURE OF PARENT/ GUARDIAN:** .....

**DATE:** .....

*NOTE:*

Parents and guardians should be given time to read, understand and question the information given before giving consent. This should include time out of the presence of the investigator and time to consult friends and/or family.

## Appendix 4: Questionnaire

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Teacher,

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out information about reading assessment in Grade 4 at your school.

Please answer all questions. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions asked because each teacher has their own beliefs and practices about reading assessment. All answers will be confidential.

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire.

Mitasha Nehal

M.Ed Student from UKZN

**SECTION: A – Teacher’s background information**

{ Please tick (√) in the correct box }

1. Age category

20 - 29	
30 - 39	
40 - 49	
50 and older	

2. How long have you been a teacher?

1 – 5 years	
6 – 10 years	
11 – 15 years	
16 – 20 years	
21 or more years	

3. How long have you been teaching Grade 4?

1 – 5 years	
6 – 10 years	
11 – 15 years	
16 – 20 years	
21 or more years	

4. What qualifications do you presently hold?

<b>Qualification(s)</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Year</b>
Matric certificate		
Teacher training certificate (2 years)		
Teacher training certificate (3 years)		
University degree		
Post-graduate degree		
Post graduate teacher’s diploma		
ACE		
Other (give details)		

**SECTION: B – Your Personal Reading Habits**

Below are 10 questions about your reading behavior. Please indicate **how often** you do the following by placing a tick (✓) in the suitable column.

<b>PERSONAL READING HABITS</b>	<b>Every day</b>	<b>One or two times a week</b>	<b>Once a month</b>	<b>Hardly ever</b>	<b>Never</b>
1. I read for pleasure					
2. I read to find information background information for my lessons					
3. I read newspapers					
4. I read magazines					
5. I buy books					
6. I read stories to my own children/(used to read stories when they were younger)					
7. I loan books from the library					
8. I enjoy reading					
9. I read books and other texts in English					
10. I read books and other texts in Zulu					

**SECTION C – Your feelings about the teaching and assessing of reading**

Please read each statement and tick the box which best expresses your feelings about each statement.

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Reading can only be assessed when a learner reads aloud					
When assessing reading, a teacher mainly assesses learners ability to read out words					
The purpose of reading assessment is to see if learners are able to read out words					
Assessing learners understanding of what they read is not very important					
If a learner doesn't know a word tell him to 'sound it out'					
If a learner is unsure of a new word repeat that word a number of times so that they recognize it on sight					
While a child is reading and says the incorrect word such as 'house' instead of 'home', stop and correct the mistake immediately					
Group reading and silent reading is not helpful for learners to master reading skills					
Learners should be given texts that they are familiar with when assessing reading					
Reading and writing are linked. They should be used be used collectively					

## **Appendix 5: Interview Schedule (Head of School)**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. What is your understanding of reading?
2. How did you learn to read?
3. Can you recall and share some of your reading experiences when you were at school?
4. How do you think children should be taught reading?
5. Do you have a reading policy at school? If so, can you briefly explain it.
6. How do you promote and encourage reading at school among learners and the teachers?
7. What do you think are the key barriers to reading for teachers and children at the school?
8. What is your understanding of assessment?
9. What do you believe is the purpose of assessment?
10. How would you encourage teachers to assess reading? What assessment methods should they use?
11. What skills do you think teachers should focus on when teaching and assessing reading?
12. Does your school have a common reading assessment format/programme that all language teachers use when assessing reading or do you believe that teachers should design their own programmes and formats according to their phase?
13. How do your pupils perform in national assessment tasks? Please comment on their performance.
14. What challenges do you think your teachers possibly experience when assessing reading?
15. What kinds of support would you as a principal like in order to support reading in your school?

## **Appendix 6: Interview Schedule (Grade 4 teacher)**

### **Interview Questions:**

1. What is your understanding of reading?
2. Tell me about how you learnt to read and your reading experiences as a school learner.
3. What is your understanding of assessment?
4. When you were in school, how did your teacher assess reading?
5. What were your experiences of reading assessment at school?
6. How often do you assess reading in your class?
7. When do you assess reading? (Do you have specific days for reading assessment?)
8. How do you assess reading? What methods do you use to assess reading in your class?
9. a) What types of assessment tools do you use? (eg: rubrics, checklists, memos) Can you show me a copy of the tools?  
b) Why have you chosen these/this assessment tool?
10. What reading skills do you focus on when assessing reading?
11. Why do you assess reading in your class?
12. How does your assessment of reading relate to your teaching of reading? Does assessment help you to teach reading? If so, in what ways?
13. What kind of remediation do you do after analysing learners reading performance?

## Appendix 7: Observation Schedule

<b><u>Focus</u></b>	<b><u>Key questions</u></b>	<b><u>Observations</u></b>
<b>Introduction of lesson</b>	How does the teacher introduce the lesson? (Does the teacher inform learners that he/she will be assessing learning? Are the criteria discussed?)	
<b>Teaching of reading</b>	What methods does the teacher use to teach reading? What activities take place? What do learners do?	
<b>Assessment methods/ Procedures</b>	What kinds of assessment does the teacher use?  Describe the procedure that the teacher follows during the reading assessment lesson. Does she have a format in which she assesses?	
<b>Feedback to learners</b>	What kind of feedback is given to learners? How is feedback given to learners?	
<b>Assessment materials</b>	-What materials does the teacher have with her/him during the reading assessment	

	<p>lesson? (rubrics/ mark book/ text)</p> <p>-Describe the reading text that is used during the assessment lesson (is it familiar to learners?)</p>	
<b>Spatial arrangements</b>	<p>Describe the seating arrangements of learners during reading sessions.</p> <p>Where is teacher during these assessment lessons?</p>	
<b>Dealing with errors</b>	<p>How does the teacher deal with errors that learners make during the assessment?</p>	