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Moving beyond a balanced approach to reading instruction – In search of a contextualised alternative

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Background: The teaching of reading or reading instruction has largely been carried out in terms of well-developed pedagogies in the field. These pedagogical approaches are, however, derived from research and development in a broad international context, and are often adopted by and implemented in various country settings. Given the contextual variation and resource disparities in South Africa, we feel such settings where approaches are adopted and used to represent a 'one size fits all' approach can be less than ideal.

Aim: To explore scientific approaches to reading instruction as alternative approaches that are context specific.

Setting: This article questions reading instruction as prescribed in the National Curriculum of South Africa.

Methods: A conceptual review of literature was conducted to distil and propose alternatives to the dominant discourses for reading instruction.

Results: Given the resource disparities and contextual variations, we argue for and propose a structured approach to reading instruction.

Conclusion: Such an alternative should consider scientific evidence, and the teaching of reading needs to be explicit and systematic as well as contextually relevant. We believe it holds promise for improvement in literacy rates as it provides flexible and adaptable approaches.

Contribution: We advocate for an alternative approach to reading instruction that is grounded in scientific evidence and emphasises explicit, systematic, and contextually relevant instruction.

Keywords: teaching of reading; reading instruction; approaches to reading instruction; early learning; balanced approach to reading.

Introduction

Colonial practices exhibit high resilience and continue to exert an influence on education, particularly language and literacy education in South Africa. The teaching of reading and reading instruction is cited in many seminal studies as probably one of the most problematic areas in the educational arena, resulting in dismal statistics in literacy and numeracy, both in South African schools and internationally (Pretorius 2002; Ribbens 2008; Spaull 2022). These results are often attributed to inadequate and decontextualised approaches to the teaching of reading and reading instruction. The resultant deficiencies necessitate the adoption of contextually relevant literacy interventions in schools and call for concerted efforts by researchers and practitioners to review alternative approaches to remedy these untenable trends.

Ribbens (2008) writes:

> Will learners in South Africa ever learn to read? Illiteracy in our country has reached unacceptable levels. At 'our current trajectory of improvement, we will only reach 95% of Grade 4s reading for meaning in 80 years' time (the year 2098)'. (p. 106)

The quotation above describes the miserable picture currently in existence in South Africa. In the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), South African children lagged significantly behind the rest of the world. Of 57 countries, South African learners performed the worst – with 81% of Grade 4 children unable to reach the lowest international reading benchmark (i.e. could not read for meaning in any language). This state of affairs can be ascribed to generalised data generated without accounting for disparate conditions in the broader context. The data do, however, provide useful trends to analyse the performance of learners' ability to read. This is an

Note: Special Collection: Interrogating Coloniality in South African Primary Schools.

alarming statistic considering that in Grade 4 children are expected to independently use reading to learn (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2023). These factors have led to the ominous literacy landscape.

For decades there have been numerous disputes regarding how individuals learn to read, and this is captured in the work related to the Reading Wars. The Reading Wars refers to the debates and arguments over how children should be taught to read. This debate has historically revolved around two main approaches: a phonics approach, which emphasises explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondences, and a whole-language approach, which focusses on meaning and literacy-rich environments for children to discover reading skills (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018:5). It is clear now that a variety of earlier well-established abilities are necessary to be a proficient reader. Teaching children to read is undoubtedly the most important and challenging responsibility an early primary school teacher (foundation phase [Grade R–3] in South Africa) will face. But just how do children learn to read and what is the best method to teach them? While the debate in methodology and pedagogy will likely continue, what we can all agree on is that teaching reading is not a 'one size fits all' approach and not one method works for every child (Gear 2021).

Literacy is a fundamental aspect of education and plays a critical role in the development of individuals and societies. In view of this, the South African DBE has attempted to initiate several interventions to promote effective literacy instruction and alleviate the low literacy rates among primary school learners (DBE 2011). Yet, despite a broad and clear body of evidence to support and guide the delivery of good quality, structured literacy education, the national curriculum – Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) – has opted for and proposes a balanced approach to literacy instruction (DBE 2011) as the approach for the teaching of reading. The term 'balanced approach' is often associated with educational programmes that incorporate a variety of instructional approaches but lack a robust emphasis on systematic instruction (Castles et al. 2018:39).

It is our opinion that the adopted approaches and interventions were part of a process of importing and implementing approaches developed and in contexts outside of the country. Jansen (2019) posits that when we interrogate 'institutional form' and 'curricula content', universities (and we believe schools) in Africa take their inspiration from a Eurocentric modernity largely through the histories of colonialism. In a sense, these represent dominant approaches to reading teaching, and its adoption and use can be construed as a form of colonialisation. It is our contention that the teaching of reading needs to be decolonised and that current dominant approaches need to be replaced by contextually sensitive emergent approaches that consider systematic and explicit teaching.

Gear (2021) indicates that she has witnessed, first hand, the back-and-forth debate over which method is 'the best' one to teach students how to read. She adds that there has been much debate between supporters of two approaches to the teaching of reading namely explicit phonics instruction and those who favour a whole-language approach (both discussed later). Gear highlights that she has seen the reading teaching pendulum swing back and forth between these two approaches numerous times, sometimes swinging completely to one side or the other, other times landing somewhere in between. With each dramatic swing, there is often renewed interest followed quickly by a new curriculum, new resources and a complete shift in the landscape of reading instruction. There are other methods that are regularly used for the teaching of reading in addition to the dominant approaches mentioned above and key approaches are discussed in this article.

In 1997, the American government established a National Reading Panel (NRP) to investigate the most efficient and effective ways to teach reading following the many debates highlighting the 'reading wars' (NRP 2000). This panel assessed over 100 000 research artefacts and published a comprehensive report in 2002. Emerging from this research study were the five key elements of reading instruction, namely phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (NRP 2000).

Embracing the findings of the NRP, this article argues for the urgent need to transition away from a balanced approach to reading instruction as proposed in CAPS and advocates for a systematic, structured approach that is scientific and evidence-based for South Africa. We consult and draw on the latest research in the field and distil a process, as presented later in the article, that we feel is a more appropriate approach to reading instruction. We present a comprehensive overview of the benefits of such an approach and provide compelling evidence for the potential benefits of a systematic and scientific approach to reading instruction in South Africa.

Research methodology

For this normative article, a broad conceptual review of the literature related to reading and literacy instruction was undertaken. Key ideas were drawn from certain approaches to develop what we consider to be a context-specific approach which could serve as an alternative to dominant approaches currently used in many contexts.

A conceptual review of the literature was undertaken to explore and understand how reading is taught. Concepts such as 'reading approach', 'reading strategies' and 'reading instruction' were used to navigate the existing literature. A conceptual review of the literature is distinctly different to a traditional literature review. Where a traditional literature review summarises and synthesises a particular topic or subject, a conceptual literature review delves into the theoretical foundations and frameworks that underpin research in a specific field (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou 2016:60).

For this conceptual review, the emphasis was on examining the theoretical models, constructs and paradigms related to reading instruction that have been proposed in the literature, as it is necessary to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the conceptual landscape within reading instruction. For this conceptual review, we had to critically analyse how different researchers have conceptualised and defined the key terms, theories and ideas related to reading instruction as well as the gaps, inconsistencies or debates.

Another aspect of the research involved a critical analysis and understanding of the key approaches and methodologies underpinning the teaching of reading in the CAPS curriculum. Ideas and theoretical perspectives gleaned from the conceptual review served as analytical tools for this part of the research.

Decolonisation in education

Education practices and processes are notoriously conservative and resistant to change. Many countries emerging from colonised histories found it difficult to shed and move away from established practices that have become entrenched and almost normalised. The clarion call is for these practices to be decolonised and replaced with locally relevant approaches that are closely linked to local contextual needs. This, we believe, is relevant to the teaching of reading, currently mandated in terms of the CAPS. So, how can we briefly describe decolonialisation and ideas for its application in education?

Decolonisation is the process of undoing colonising practices. Essentially, it is a process, not a one-time event during which it is imperative to keep reflecting throughout, and not to be discouraged that it is not always straightforward. Within the educational context, this means confronting and challenging the colonising practices that have influenced education in the past, and which are still present today. Asher (2009) writes:

> The work of decolonization entails not only our self-reflexive efforts to work through mind-numbing alienation and essentializing divides, but also the commitment to transformation in social and educational contexts. (p. 75)

Mgqwashu and Makhathini (2017:36) indicate that 'decolonised education is rooted in connections to place'. Place-based education is context-sensitive drawing on local practices and cultures in its application. This they find empowers students and helps restore cultural knowledge of place and communities.

According to Le Grange (2016:5), 'decolonisation is the undoing of colonisation'. Lumadi (2021) describes decolonising the curriculum as an attempt to liberate all aspects of (higher) education for equality and justice, with critical thinking on and/or from different perspectives of topics. Thus, decolonisation enhances participation and recognition of marginalised groups in the production of knowledge.

It is our contention that the ideas on which reading education processes form part of the imperatives of the CAPS curriculum had their genesis in contexts outside of South Africa. They were seemingly uncritically adopted and implemented as good practices and thus can be viewed as a form of colonialism. These practices we believe in terms of our research have served their purposes and need to be reviewed. We agree with Mbembe (2016) that the decolonisation of content, language and other structures of the education system is critical to develop new practices delinked from colonial histories. Thus, decolonisation has the potential to enhance the participation and recognition of marginalised groups in the production of knowledge and developing pedagogies and approaches that are better suited to local communities. We review core ideas on the teaching of reading and teaching and learning related to reading instruction and analyse the CAPS curriculum and its imperatives in the section 'Approaches to reading instruction: an overview'.

Approaches to reading instruction: An overview

The conceptual review was undertaken to look back on some of the most well-known methods of reading instruction over the past five decades to provide some context about where we have come from and where we might be heading.

The balanced literacy approach developed out of what is referred to as 'the reading wars' in the 1980s is a debate in the educational field between the 'whole language' approach and a 'phonics first' approach (Riley 2020). The 'whole language' approach is grounded in meaning-making and the whole-word model of teaching reading (Hempenstall 2002). Supporters of the whole language approach believe the whole-word reading to be more economical and that the overall shape of the word, rather than decoding into the sound parts, would provide leading clues for beginning readers. Researchers, such as Weaver (1998), make the argument for a whole-language literacy approach by stating, 'Children in a whole language classroom typically get off to as good of a start or even better than their peers in a skill-intensive classroom'. This statement is based on the belief that it is easier for children to divide words into onsets (the initial phonological and/or sound unit of a word) or rimes (the string of letters following the initial letter sound) than to divide them into separate phonemes. According to whole language proponents, the 'phonics first' approach teaches phonics first and intensively in isolation, resulting in children's knowledge of literature taking a back seat (Weaver 1998). As a result of these beliefs, it was concluded that a combination of both would be most effective and thus the balanced literacy approach was born (Riley 2020).

The 'whole language' approach, in which the balanced approach to reading instruction is grounded, views reading and writing as natural processes, much like speech development (Hempenstall 2002). Traditionally a balanced approach to the teaching of reading can be visualised as a

balancing scale with a separation between the different areas (components) of reading and its development (Weaver 1998). On the one side of the scale, there is phonological awareness, phonics and other word-identification skills, whereas, on the opposite side of the scale, there is reading and writing of literature and other texts. In this approach to reading instruction (balanced literacy), the reading skills are viewed separately from their intended use and are taught before their use. According to this principle, learning to read and write should be as equally effortless as learning to talk (Hempenstall 2002). This has, however, been highly debated. The report issued by the NRP (2000) underlined a push from reading viewed as a natural process to reading as a difficult skill that is developed more effectively under some educational conditions than others.

The balanced literacy approach to the teaching of reading, which has been widely adopted in South African curricula, is often criticised for its lack of a systematic and evidence-based foundation for instruction (Duke & Cartwright 2021), and as such produces varied success for children's reading development. In contrast, systematic and scientific approaches to reading instruction, such as a phonics-based approach, have been shown to be effective in improving literacy outcomes in a variety of contexts (Adams 1990; eds. Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). This is echoed in the findings of the NRP (2000) which emphasises the systematic and explicit teaching of the underlying principles of reading and writing, such as phonemic awareness and decoding skills.

For our research, it was imperative to understand how the CAPS as a curriculum proposes reading should be taught and in order to contrast this to the scientific evidence that has evolved as a result of the research discussed and described in this article. This will provide a space to understand the current practices and thus allow for the provision of an informed perspective on alternative approaches.

Reading and literacy instruction in South Africa: A curriculum perspective

The South African language curriculum for the foundation phase encourages the use of a 'balanced, flexible language rich daily program' (DBE 2011:21) to offer learners the literacy opportunities to develop the language skills required of them for academic success. Weaver (1998:18) explains that the balanced literacy approach, as described in the South African curriculum, is based on how 'good readers recognise words automatically'. The CAPS curriculum demands a top-down approach to reading instruction. This approach assesses how a skilful reader reads and the skills they implement to read. Campbell (2021) links this type of thinking to the earlier beliefs of the 'whole language' approach. Furthermore, Campbell (2021) states that this is an approach focussed on saving instructional time, focussing on the result of a 'skilled reader', rather than on building the foundational skills of early reading. Campbell's findings build upon Weaver's (1998) earlier research which states that a balanced approach to reading instruction focusses on the strategies good readers use, such as predicting, monitoring comprehension, and confirming or correcting what has been read. Weaver (1998:18) states that 'good readers' use strategies such as 'continue to read' or using 'everything they know to get meaning', rather than focussing on skills such as decoding unfamiliar words. The DBE's (2008) view is that reading develops in three phases – 'before reading, during reading and after reading'. These phases inform the daily instructional practices used in South African classrooms. Even though these are valid phases of reading instruction, it is not an approach to teach reading.

This view of reading instruction is also reflected in the CAPS curriculum's grouping of skills for the instruction of language. Four categories are used to illustrate how language should be taught: Listening and Speaking, Reading and Phonics, Writing and Handwriting with Thinking and Reasoning and Language Structure and Use. According to the CAPS curriculum (Home Language), each of these categories is viewed as separate sections with separate time allocations and taught through separate activities (DBE 2011:9–10). These categories are misleading as they separate reading from writing (Riley 2020) which is problematic (Sedita 2023:3). In addition, the CAPS curriculum suggests that reading is taught through focussed lessons stipulating that:

> Time everyday must be put aside for focused lesson covering reading (Shared Reading, Group Guided Reading, and Paired and Independent Reading). (DBE 2011:11)

This is an example of the guidance the curriculum provides for teachers to teach reading. Shared Reading, Group Guided Reading, Paired and Independent Reading, and Read Aloud are strategies proposed to teach and practice the act of reading (DBE 2011) as opposed to including explicit guidelines on how to teach the skills needed for reading. These strategies, included in the balanced approach, as stipulated in the CAPS, allow learners to practice reading at the cost of learning to read. Weaver (1998:18) describes this as 'a little of this, a little of that', with no relationship between the 'ingredients' of learning to read or the instruction of the foundational skills of learning to read.

Table 1 provides an overview of the guidance and/or information provided to teachers in the CAPS (Home Language) curriculum regarding how to plan, structure and implement particularly reading instruction in the Foundation Phase classroom.

Table 1 summarises the prescriptions for reading instruction as offered in the CAPS curriculum. It also illustrates how lessons should be structured and what alternative teaching strategies teachers can draw on at different facets of the reading lesson. Recommended resources are also described. Table 1 also highlights that shared reading (a reading strategy) can be used to introduce a text to learners. Recommendations made for the focus of the shared reading lesson include the discussion of the features of the text, identification of language patterns and phonics, discussion

TABLE 1: Reading and literacy instruction in the foundation phase.

Curriculum prescriptions	Guidelines for teachers or facilitators of learning
Curriculum prescriptions include:	• Small group (6–10 learners) instruction is imperative • Graded or levelled texts should be used during instruction (DBE 2011:11) • Group-guided reading should be used • Ability group teaching should be employed as a strategy. This implies that all the members of the group read the same 'levelled text' under the guidance of the teacher • Teachers should draw on word-attack strategies when learners face unfamiliar words
Structure of a reading lesson	Teachers should draw on the following five steps when doing Group Guided Reading using levelled texts (DBE 2011:13–14): • *Step 1:* Introduction of text • *Step 2:* Picture walk and talk • *Step 3:* First reading of text • *Step 4:* Discussion of what was read • *Step 5:* Second and subsequent reading
Alternative strategies to consider	• *Shared reading* can be used to address steps 1 and 2. This can be done with the teacher sharing the big book with the whole class sitting on mats around the teacher. This should be done so that teachers can focus on concepts of print, text features, phonics, language patterns and word identification strategies and building comprehension (DBE 2011:12). Shared reading lessons should progress over 2–4 days (DBE 2011:12) • Steps 3 to 5 can be done within the group guided reading context should these groups be ability groups with a small number of learners. However, the curriculum also suggests that *paired reading and independent (individual) reading* can be used to address these steps These steps should be done daily as the class reading activity to develop learners' reading fluency and comprehension (DBE 2011:12)

of word identification strategies and drawing on learners' background knowledge of the topic of the text to build comprehension. These foci are associated with whole language strategies (Weaver 1998).

Despite reference made to the crucial components of reading instruction, namely phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and reading comprehension (NRP 2000), guidelines for the explicit instruction of these components are absent and hidden within the proposal emphasise the teaching of reading strategies as opposed to fundamental buildings blocks that lead to reading. Table 1 also highlights how the use of levelled texts is encouraged for Group Guided Reading. According to Riley (2020), the use of levelled texts in a guided reading structure is typical of the implementation of the balanced literacy approach. Typically, these levelled texts are not centred around spelling patterns but are rather levelled according to background knowledge, sentence length, font size or repetition of words (Riley 2020). To be able to engage with these types of texts successfully, learners need to draw on strategies such as predicting, monitoring comprehension and confirming the appropriateness of what has been read or trying to correct what does not fit for context (Weaver 1998).

Table 1 also emphasises the use of Shared Reading as an alternative reading strategy. Teachers are to use the shared reading sessions to expose learners to and introduce the text. The focus should be on the concepts of print, text features, phonics, language patterns and word identification strategies, and building comprehension (DBE 2011:12). Thus, learners would be probed to read unfamiliar words by drawing from contextual clues such as the pictures (semantics) establishing language patterns (syntax) and possibly sounding out words. Such lessons teach learners to use cues from the text to read. By implication, this is drawing on the 'cueing system' (Hempenstall 2002) making reading a guessing activity.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement emphasises that reading is taught through reading strategies such as group-guided reading, shared reading, paired reading and independent (individual) reading. However, CAPS acknowledges the importance of teaching phonics in a balanced approach to reading instruction.

Phonics: An important component of reading instruction

According to Weaver (1998), the balanced literacy approach follows a constructivist model, where knowledge is constructed by the learner naturally. However, the belief that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics explicitly should not be negated as it is a component of reading that would be taught explicitly.

The balanced approach to reading instruction defines reading as the processing of written symbols and texts to derive meaning – the focus is placed on meaning making first. Using strategies such as identifying words quickly, makes it easier to attend to meaning. Weaver (1998) continues that teaching phonics first makes learning to read 'more difficult'. In the balanced approach to reading instruction, it is believed that 'phonically regular' texts such as 'Nan can fan Dan' are harder to read than more natural texts. Weaver (1998) argues that repeatedly reading the same words in context leads to being able to recognise the word outside of context. Weaver (1998) refers to a project carried out by Chomsky (1972), where children listen to audio and 'read' along. Both Chomsky and Weaver believe that listening to the audio and repeatedly reading the text helped learners to recognise more words by sight by internalising letter-sound patterns. Weaver (1998) continues by saying that children's phonics knowledge will develop through repeated exposure to text and words, such as reading predictable texts.

In this explanation of a balanced approach to reading instruction, meaning making is placed at the core of reading instruction, above the explicit and systematic instruction of phonics skills. This belief is mirrored in the CAPS curriculum, as there is limited guidance on using a specific phonics approach or explicit guidance to the sequencing of sounds and selection of text across the various languages. Moreover, the CAPS curriculum (2011:15) mentions that the 'teaching of phonics is not an isolated activity and should be linked to the

Shared Reading program', thus reflecting Weaver's belief that the teaching of reading should be contextual. No further detail about how teachers can do this is provided. And so, adopters of the balanced approach to reading instruction tend to support a less proficient reader by providing them with less sophisticated texts, rather than systematically and explicitly teaching them phonics skills (Weaver 1998).

The CAPS curriculum offers very limited information on how to include the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency) explicitly and systematically into reading instruction (DBE 2011). However, there is a strong focus on 'text talk', learners' prior experiences, visual elements of the text and prediction strategies. Riley (2020) summarily describes these strategies as three-cueing. Three-cueing typically depends on the reader's prior experiences and context to understand the text. In three-cueing, learners are taught to look for cues within the text to decipher meaning. These cues include meaning cues, 'does it make sense?'; sentence cues, 'does it sound right?' and lastly, graphic cues, 'does it look right?'. Using three-cueing is problematic in South Africa as it requires all learners to have homogenous lived experiences. However, this is not the reality of most South African learners, especially given the minimal access to multicultural texts in South Africa (Dippenaar et al. 2017:103), and so they rely solely on their prior experiences and contexts are only somewhat useful for the instruction of reading and should not be used as a core instructional strategy. It is evident that CAPS places minimal emphasis on the instruction of phonics for decoding and encoding, a skill learners require to tackle any reading challenge they face.

In fact, the CAPS curriculum states that:

> [*T*]he teaching of spelling will be informal during Grades 1 and 2, and only in Grade 3 a more formal spelling program should be implemented with periodic, informal spelling tests and dictations. DBE (2011:16)

This approach is inherently flawed as recent research unequivocally indicates that children achieve optimal reading proficiency through systematic, explicit and integrated literacy instruction (NRP 2000). Delaying the implementation of a formal or structured approach until later grades deprive children of sufficient time to acquire the essential skills required for independent reading, thus rendering them ill-prepared when entering Grade 4, where the curriculum demands the ability to 'read to learn'.

The challenges of reading instruction in South Africa

The guidelines offered in the CAPS curriculum allude to drawing on the three-cueing system (cf. Table 1). Systems such as three-cueing have been proven to be dangerously flawed in terms of how skilled reading is developed. Hempenstall (2002) goes as far as to claim that such strategies even contribute to the difficulties experienced by many struggling readers. Hempenstall (2002) argues that practices, such as three-cueing, levelled texts, and separating literacy skills, flow from a historically ineffective system that does not promote beginning reading skills, such as decoding, and consequently hampers the path to learning to read. Relying heavily on guessing words from context clues (semantic, syntactic and visual cues) can lead to inaccuracies and hinder the development of strong decoding skills. Additionally, levelled texts, where students are given materials at their supposed reading level, may limit exposure to more challenging texts that can promote growth in reading abilities.

In contrast, a structured literacy approach to reading instruction foregrounds phonics instruction as essential for building a strong foundation in reading. Proponents of this approach emphasise the importance of teaching phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding skills in a structured, explicit and sequential manner, enabling students to decode words accurately and develop reading fluency (Duke & Cartwright 2021:530). By focussing on the foundational skills of reading, proponents argue that a structured literacy approach better equips struggling readers to overcome difficulties and become proficient readers.

While the balanced literacy approach may have some credibility in a well-developed, strong education system, South Africa faces many challenges to the successful implementation of such an approach. Implementing a balanced approach to reading instruction requires a well-trained and knowledgeable teaching force. In South Africa, where teacher training and professional development opportunities may vary and resources are constrained (Abdulatief et al. 2018), ensuring consistent implementation of the balanced approach across schools and classrooms is a significant challenge. Adequate resources, including a wide range of diverse and relevant reading materials, are essential for the successful implementation of a balanced approach as it relies heavily on drawing on children's background knowledge and context. However, in many areas of South Africa, schools may face resource constraints, including limited access to quality books and materials. With 12 official languages, South Africa's linguistic diversity also poses a challenge, and it can be difficult to provide sufficient materials and support for all languages. Finding appropriate and relevant materials in each language can be a considerable task (Dippenaar et al. 2017), and this can hinder the full potential of a balanced approach as the approach depends on it.

An exposition of the CAPS curriculum highlights that reading strategies are proposed as methods to teach reading in a balanced approach. However, the low results of the recent PIRLS study show that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners fall below the lowest internationally recognised level of reading in their language of learning (DBE 2023). By implication, the suggested approach to reading instruction cannot persist.

Various aspects related to approaches to reading instruction were consulted and analysed in this research. A revised approach to address the literacy crisis could not be identified, but the research revealed that scientific evidence needs to be considered when designing reading instruction. This scientific evidence is illustrated and discussed in this section.

Is there an alternative approach for reading instruction that should be considered for South Africa? The negative results of the recent PIRLS study show that 19% of South African Grade 4 learners can read at an internationally recognised level of reading in their language of learning (DBE 2023). Therefore, it becomes vital to turn to the latest research on how children come to be comprehending, independent readers. The challenges South Africa faces in literacy instruction have been ongoing since the dawn of democracy and continue to worsen (Spaull 2013). As such, it is arguably unviable and ineffective to continue to adopt any form of a balanced or whole-language approach. It is, therefore, imperative and urgent to embrace a scientific, structured and explicit approach to literacy instruction.

Reading is not an intuitive activity like speaking. It depends on high-quality instruction that highlights and values the developmental character of literacy education and:

> [*T*]he passage of children through successive stages of literacy, in each of which the reading and writing tasks change qualitatively, and the role of the instructor has to change accordingly. (Snow 2006)

It has become globally accepted that traditional, whole-language or balanced-literacy approaches that emphasise reading as a natural activity that children acquire by being exposed to a print-rich environment is refuted by the Science of Reading (Schwartz & Sparks 2019).

Our evaluation of the CAPS curriculum supports Howie's (2023) statement that teachers are inadequately prepared and guided, not only to teach reading but to also assess their learners' reading development and to plan instruction accordingly. Howie (2023) puts forward that most newly qualified teachers have expressed that they 'figure it out, once they start teaching'. Research found that beginning readers need 'systematic, explicit, engaging and success-oriented instruction' that builds on good quality foundational literacy experiences because 'effective reading instruction must be flexible enough to address individual learners needs wherever they are in their literacy development' (Kuhn & Stahl 2022:25).

The immediate question we need to ask is if there is an approach to reading instruction that is systematic, explicit, engaging and success-oriented? How could such an approach exist if the learner population is diverse in terms of context, learning needs and ability. How could such an approach exist if the learner population is influenced by resource allocation? The research did reveal that reading instruction is dependent on science and a systematic approach to teaching.

Discussion

'Teaching reading is rocket science'. (Moats 1999:11; 2020:3)

The purpose of this conceptual review was to examine the theoretical models, constructs and paradigms related to reading instruction. It is necessary to understand this so that we can provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the conceptual landscape related to reading instruction. Not only did we learn that no single approach can be employed to teach reading, but the literature proposes that reading instruction needs to be based on scientific evidence and the teaching of reading needs to be explicit and systematic. Much of the above is included in a broad enquiry-based approach discussed here and on which we draw in this research.

The science of reading

A renowned scholar in research related to reading and the teaching thereof, Louisa Moats, has stated since 1999 that the teaching of reading is rocket science (Moats 1999, 2020). Her work captures the research related to reading instruction and she describes the knowledge base that is essential for pre-service teacher candidates and practising teachers to master if they are to be successful in teaching all children to read.

We have seen and heard the phrase 'the science of reading' in the public discourse lately. This is no new development or approach to reading instruction. The science of reading refers to the recognised body of scholarship (information) on how people become literate (Goodwin & Jiménez 2020:3). It provides a body of knowledge which can be considered as guidance to inform instructional decisions on how to teach reading.

The science of reading has been used for decades to support policies and instructional methods based on studies of the fundamental cognitive mechanisms of reading. It describes the brain processes involved in reading, it defines the computational models of reading acquisition and similar topics related to how humans come to be comprehending readers (Graham 2020; Schwartz & Sparks 2019; Shanahan 2020). Advances in research techniques have revealed the complex interplay of several elements that contribute to the development of reading skills (Moats 2020).

The science of reading captures emerging statistics, offering compelling proof that explicit decoding instruction (such as phonological awareness and phonics) is shown to be most advantageous to reading performance (Petscher et al. 2020; Shanahan 2020). This confirms 'the bedrock findings about reading and effective teaching of reading that were known (more than) 20 years ago' (Moats 2020:5). This quality, empirical data from over 100 000 sources (NRP 2000) should increase our confidence that particular policies and practices will be more 'effective and beneficial' (Shanahan 2020) if they are grounded in the science of reading.

Thus, the phrase 'science of reading' refers to a comprehensive body of knowledge and research that encompasses all aspects of reading instruction, acquisition, development and comprehension (Graham 2020). It provides evidence-based insights into how individuals become literate and inform instructional decisions on how to teach reading effectively. This interdisciplinary field draws on research from cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience and education to understand the underlying processes and components involved in proficient reading. It encompasses various crucial components such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and reading comprehension which the NRP lists as the 'big five' in reading instruction (NRP 2000). By understanding the science of reading, teachers can make informed decisions on instructional approaches, interventions and strategies that are grounded in empirical research.

In essence, it is not a method or an approach to teaching reading. Rather, the science of reading serves as a vital resource for educators, policymakers and researchers offering a comprehensive understanding of how reading skills are acquired and providing guidance to inform effective teaching methods to ensure successful literacy development in learners. The cornerstone of the science of reading is that phonics and decoding abilities are central to successful reading instruction and that these abilities are taught through 'systematic, explicit, engaging and success-orientated instruction' (Duke & Cartwright 2021:539). By implication, educators, policymakers and researchers should draw on this body of scholarship to inform their teaching repertoires and policy development and implementation.

Unfortunately, it comes as no surprise that normal classroom methods frequently diverge significantly from what is advised by our most reliable sources because a large portion of this research is sadly not yet incorporated in teacher training programmes, commonly used curricula or professional development (Talbot 2022). As a result, reading achievement is not as robust as it should be for most children, with negative effects on learners (Moats 2020). What the research is saying and how children are taught are at odds with each other. South Africa has been slow to recognise this essential body of knowledge but the government, with significant support from the civil society sector, has begun to make efforts to incorporate the science of reading in school-based interventions and professional development opportunities indicating there have been shifts towards systematic and scientific approaches to literacy instruction, albeit superficial shifts (WCED 2022).

When it comes to making prescriptions about reading instruction, we should base our decisions on solid instructional research (which have been tried and evaluated before being recommended) (Shanahan 2020). In this regard, there is no need to do research on the best way to approach reading instruction because the science of reading clearly outlines this (Hanford 2018). However, what research has shown to be effective for teaching young children to read is evidently not broadly valued in current South African practices. The evidence from our research led us to explore a structured approach to reading instruction.

An alternative approach: A structured approach to reading instruction

Reading failure can be prevented. 'Researchers now estimate that 95 percent of all children can be taught to read by the end of first grade' if good quality, scientifically based literacy instruction starts early (Moats 2020:23). Archer and Hughes (2011:3) indicate that it is no longer sufficient to offer reading instruction or professional development based on personal philosophy or outdated beliefs. This is detrimental to children's progress as is evidenced in South Africa (DBE 2023). Rather, 'instruction should be based on learners' needs and guided by research' (Kuhn & Stahl 2022; Archer & Hughes 2011). Furthermore, Archer and Hughes (2011:6) encourage scientifically informed, systematic and explicit instruction as presented in this section.

Scientifically informed instruction implies that the instructional decisions made by teachers should be embedded in current, rigorous research. In fact, decisions made for instruction should be made on how best and effectively to support reading development. Systematic instruction refers to instruction that 'follows a planned scope and sequence of skills that progresses from easier to more difficult as one concept builds on another' (Moats 2019:10), and such instruction is structured, well-planned and explicit. Archer and Hughes (2011) further state that such instruction incorporates teaching approaches that are 'unambiguous and direct' as in both the design and delivery procedures. Collectively, these three terms (scientifically informed, systematic and explicit) form the bedrock of a structured approach to literacy instruction.

Explicit instruction requires that teachers logically select and sequence the content into instructional units 'based on learners' cognitive capabilities (e.g. working memory capacity, attention and prior knowledge)' (Archer & Hughes 2011). In this way, learners are supported and scaffolded through the learning process (in terms of individual needs) via explicit descriptions and examples of the instructional aim or objective. Clear explanations and demonstrations of the reason and justification for acquiring the new skill are supported, and continuous practice with feedback until autonomous mastery has been attained (Archer & Hughes 2011) is central. Put simply, through explicit instruction learners are 'shown how to perform a task before being expected to do it on their own' (Marchand-Martella & Martella 2013).

Employing explicit instruction in teaching should not be considered an 'add-on feature'. Explicit instruction demands planning as lesson objectives need to be considered. How lessons are presented will also be impacted as teachers often need clear explanations of concepts and model demonstration

of skills (Archer & Hughes 2011) before learners are offered an opportunity for guided practice (Moats 2019) so they can work towards independently mastering the skill. Such lessons need to be concluded by reviewing and consolidating the skills that were learnt.

Such teaching and/or instruction should take into account the learner's independent mastery of the skill and whether or not reteaching is necessary. So, assessment cannot be generalised as the aim of explicit instruction is mastery. Within explicit instruction, the learners' ability to generalise the skill should be assessed and not whether they are able to merely regurgitate information or mimic activities.

Systematic instruction works in tandem with explicit instruction as the focus is placed on the order in which skills should be taught. As learning language is cumulative (i.e. one concept builds on another), it is critical that 'instruction follows a planned scope and sequence of skills that progresses from easier to more difficult' (Moats 2019) so that automatic and fluent application of these skills enables more complex reading. In her description of the scientifically based concept called the Simple View of Reading, Moats (2020) describes it as follows:

> that reading comprehension is the product of word recognition and language comprehension. Without strong skills in either domain, an individual's reading comprehension will be compromised. A reader's recognition of printed words must be accurate and automatic to support comprehension. The development of automatic word recognition depends on intact, proficient phoneme awareness, knowledge of sound-symbol (phoneme-grapheme) correspondences, recognition of print patterns such as recurring letter sequences and syllable spellings, and recognition of meaningful parts of words (morphemes). (p. 5)

From this, it can be inferred that reading instruction needs to include explicit, systematic teaching of word-recognition (decoding) skills from which learners can build vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (NRP 2000). However, each of these skills depends on the development and integrity of its subskills (Moats 2020) as illustrated here: building decoding skills depends on the acquisition of foundational language skills, encompassing phonemic awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, morphology, syntax and semantics, and it lays the groundwork for proficient reading and writing abilities.

These skills build on one another to ensure learners become skilled readers. There is strong evidence to suggest that most students benefit from structured teaching of basic language skills when it comes to learning how to read. This includes instruction on phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency and comprehension strategies. Such structured teaching can help students build a strong foundation in reading and improve their ability to decode, comprehend and communicate through written language (Moats 2019).

Conclusion and recommendations

It is clear from our inquiry that current practices are seemingly remnants of imposed practices from contexts outside of the country. In short, these imported practices and their accompanying resources and pedagogies are not well suited to the South African context. A process of decolonisation which entails a process of undoing colonising practices characterised by ongoing reflection could be useful in the teaching of reading and teacher development. Within the educational context, this means confronting and challenging the colonising practices such as a balanced approach to reading instruction that have influenced education in the past and which are still present today. While some efforts are prevalent to shift practices related to reading instruction (an example includes the *National Framework for the Teaching of Reading in the African Languages in the Foundation Phase*), the fundamental tenets in the curriculum and what teachers are required to do have remained unchanged.

The current, balanced approach to reading instruction as proposed in CAPS is seemingly failing learners. South Africa's chronic reading failure calls for urgent and emphatic adoption of a scientific, explicit and systematic approach to reading instruction. At the core of our challenge is arguably the quality of teacher training. Moats (2020) tells us that 'Teaching Reading is Rocket Science' and teachers need to face the complexity of the task. The need for teachers to receive better training, ongoing education in terms of professional development and adequate resources for effective reading instruction should be a call to action instead of a reason for criticism.

What is evident from our research is the ongoing discrepancy between what teachers (pre-service and in-service) require and what they have been provided with. Advocates of the science of reading are correct in asserting that there is a significant amount of high-quality cognitive and neuroscientific research on the topic of reading and that instruction based on this research has not been sufficiently emphasised in teacher education or the South African curriculum. The evidence from this research underscores the importance of teaching basic language skills, in order to promote strong reading abilities. By bringing this evidence-based approach to the forefront of teacher education and classroom instruction, it may be possible to improve literacy outcomes for students and promote more effective reading instruction overall. The science is clear – a structured approach to reading instruction which draws on scientifically informed, systematic and explicit instruction appears to be a viable alternative approach to reading instruction for learners to become competent readers.

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Authors' contributions

Z.B. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, the analysis of the results and the writing of the manuscript. C.R. contributed to the conceptualisation of the article as well as the writing of the manuscript.

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