IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR SUPPORTING READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

by

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gladys Claris Gowo, hereby declare that this PhD thesis, titled *Identifying and Understanding Enabling Conditions for Supporting Reading Literacy Development for Primary Schools in Zimbabwe,* is my original work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Pretoria, South Africa. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other University. Proper referencing has been done acknowledging other people's work, which has been used to support this study in accordance with Departmental requirements.

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- Compliance with approved research protocol,
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- Informed consent/assent,
- Adverse experience or undue risk,
- Registered title, and
- Data storage requirements.

DEDICATION

Firstly, I dedicate this thesis to the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Angels and Saints for granting me the ability to invoke wisdom, knowledge, courage, guidance and good health of mind and body during the course of the study.

I also dedicate this thesis to my deceased father and siblings as well as my fellow LCBL sisters who were inspirational and forces to be reckoned with and who always wanted to see me as an achiever.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis documents an investigation seeking to identify enabling classroom conditions that promote the development of reading literacy competencies among lower grade learners in some selected high-performing schools in Zimbabwe. National and regional surveys have revealed that most lower grade learners in public schools proceed to higher levels of academic schooling unable to read.

The study employed a multiple case study within an interpretivist paradigm. Data were gathered through document analyses, interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions with 23 participants, four of which were school principals, 18 teachers and one Education Officer. The Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge model informed the conceptual framework for this study.

The findings indicated the impact of the guided reading approach, the effect of societal value systems and the contribution of organised pedagogical approaches on reading literacy development. Whilst the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) determines curricula content materials for all schools in the country, most high performing schools design school-based reading syllabi that involve parental participation. Furthermore, school governing bodies of most high performing schools in Zimbabwe ensure that each class has a well-resourced library and lower grade learners in high performing schools have a daily session of mandatory exposure to printed media. Teachers facilitate and tend to learners with exceptional reading challenges. Such reading literacy development programmes constitute reading as part of the school culture of high performing schools in Zimbabwe.

The analysis of the teaching of reading literacy in high-performing schools identified four critical enabling factors namely: the need to develop reading as part of school culture, the need to involve parents in assisting their learners with homework activities in reading, teacher competencies (including the ability to interpret syllabi appropriately) and the provision of adequate reading resources. Furthermore, the study culminated in the design of a Multifaceted Reading Literacy Development Model including eight important factors for reading literacy development namely:

interpretation and implementation of curriculum; professional development of teachers; curriculum materials and other resources; school-level reading policies; mentoring and monitoring; parental involvement; teaching approaches, strategies and methods; and professional competencies and attributes.

The significance of the findings provides hope for those in educationally deprived environments in that, regardless of where the school is located, lower grade learners have the potential to acquire competent reading skills provided the above-mentioned conditions exist. As resource availability alone is inadequate, teachers need to upgrade their pedagogical skills continuously and schools need to exchange experiences and knowledge to suit local/contextual realities.

Key words: competence, reading curriculum, reading literacy development, enabling classroom conditions, high performing schools, Zimbabwe.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

'A' Level	Advanced Level
ACER	Australian Council for Education Research
ATS	Association of Trust Schools
CBD	Central Business District
CDU	Curriculum Development Unit
CE	Certificate in Education
CIET	Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training
CUZ	Catholic University in Zimbabwe
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EFA	Education for All
EMERGE	Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence
ERI	Early Reading Initiative
GCE	General Certificate of Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MDC	Movement for Democratic Change
MoPSE	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NBPP	National Braille Printing Press
NEALL	National Education Audio Logical Laboratory
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLPAP	National Language Policy Advisory Panel
"O" Level	Ordinary Level
PCER	The Planning Commission Evaluation Report
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLAP	Performance Lag Assessment Progress
PSC	Public Service Commission
RPS	Reading Panel Study

PTA	Parent Teachers' Association
RRB	Reading Record Books
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SDC	School Development Committee
SOAP	Sound awareness, Oral language, Alphabet knowledge, Print awareness
SRB	Social Record Book
TIC	Teacher In Charge
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Learners Education Fund
USA	United States of America
UZ	University of Zimbabwe
USNRP	United States National Reading Panel
ZANU PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZELA	Zimbabwe Early Literacy Assessment
ZIMSEC	Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council
ZIMVAC	Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Report
ZJC	Zimbabwe Junior Certificate

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to understand enabling classroom conditions that could be applied to improve the acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grades in the Zimbabwean primary school education system. The development of reading is the most important skill a child needs to acquire as it is the gateway skill offering access to a wide range of learning opportunities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reports that at least 773 million youth and adults still cannot read and write, and 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2008). This means that reading literacy is believed to be a crucial communication skill which enables people to participate fully in contemporary socio-cultural, economic, political and educational societies (UNESCO, 2008). Taylor, Peterson, Pearson and Rodriguez (2002) further support this notion indicating that teachers need to be sure which curriculum content materials, as well as the pedagogical approach, are most appropriate during reading literacy development practices. It is therefore imperative for teachers to understand their role in developing reading literacy skills, as these are the backbone for all educational fundamentals in the lower grades of the foundation phase of any education system and essential skills throughout schooling and later in life.

Reading literacy does not only mean being able to decode text but points to comprehension as well. This aligns with the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study's (PIRLS) 2006 definition of reading literacy, which is:

> The ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment (Mullis, Kennedy, Martin & Sainsbury, 2004:3).

Machet and Tiemensma (2009) perceive the ability to read as an essential academic component for intellectual development particularly in the highly techno-computerised

education systems of the 21st century. They argue that learners who have not developed reading proficiency are unable to effectively function in an information and generally computerised education society. The goal of reading is, therefore, to understand written texts particularly in a society where the written word is ubiquitous and where the acquisition of communication competencies in today's socio-economic, highly modernised civic societies is vital (Gentaz, Sprenger-Charolles, Theurel & Colé 2013).

Influenced by the belief that reading ability is an important attribute, the Reading Panel Study (RPS, 2004) in the United States of America (USA) declared reading as the cornerstone of educational achievement. It is the foundation of lifelong abilities – the source of all kinds of literacies vital in contemporary societies. Platas-García, Castro-Manzano and Reyes-Meza (2020) indicate reading as an academic phenomenon that transcends cultural barriers, religion and philosophical presumptions, and, in one way or the other, is necessary to communicate standing points through comprehensible communication systems and approaches.

Similarly, the Government of Zimbabwe through the Nziramasanga Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (CIET) (1999) revealed the need to develop reading competences (Zimbabwe, 1999). Because reading is inseparable from conceptualising literacy, it is imperative that ministries responsible for educating the nation should prioritise the development of reading literacy among learners from as early as enrolment in the elementary school education development phase. (Zimbabwe, 1999) to form a foundation for the later schooling where reading to learn becomes the focus of reading development.

Even though there have been many attempts to ensure the development of literacy, an international reading literacy crisis has emerged.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In recent years, countries in the developed world such as the USA and those in developing countries, have experienced considerable reading challenges amongst its early childhood citizens. In the USA, the analysed data from 19 nationally representative data sets found that the number of learners recording low reading achievements has increased over the past four decades amongst learners from low

socio-economic environments. The 2011 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that Grade 4 low-income learners scored approximately 75% of a standard deviation lower, on average, than middle-income learners, while with Grade 8 learners, this gap was 65% lower than the standard deviation. As a result, intervention strategies have been implemented with the intention to address low levels of reading literacy (Kim & Quinn, 2014). For example, one of these strategies included 41 classroom- and home-based summer reading interventions involving learners from kindergarten to Grade 8. The findings highlighted the potentially positive impact of such an intervention on the reading comprehension ability of low-income learners (Kim & Quinn, 2014).

Research in India also reports that there are high levels of illiteracy with about 305 million illiterate people. This illiteracy level is attributed to poor education quality with teacher incompetence being one of the many factors (Batra, 2017). Similarly, the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) and the Planning Commission Evaluation Report (PCER) indicated that low learning outcomes in primary schools across India, specifically in reading and mathematics (Vyas, 2014), are also linked to the performance of poor-quality teachers. The ACER 2012-13 reports that 54% of students are unable to read a second-grade text in the 5th grade and a similar trend was also observed for Grade 3 students who were administered a Grade 1 text. Consequently, most learners are struggling to acquire reading skills (ACER 2013), with the same being applied to numeracy skills. Thus, should such an academic scenario prevail, it is not surprising these learners will be challenged to contribute towards the development of their country's economy (ACER, 2013).

The 2008 UNESCO Report reported that there are high levels of illiteracy in Sub-Saharan Africa and especially in West Africa, as well as South Asia and some Arab countries. Various studies across Africa have indicated that reading literacy has become a serious cause for concern since most learners struggle to read beyond their grade level (EFA, 2012:130). Many learners spend two or three years at school unable to identify vocabulary, which according to Torgesen (2000) and Paris (2005), is a critical requirement for lower grade learners in any primary school education system. For instance, in Mali, 94% of Grade 2 pupils could not read a single word in French. In Liberia, most students at the end of Grade 2 were unable to read a single word in a simple paragraph using the language of their daily instruction (Gove & Cvelich, 2011).

Two states in northern Nigeria assessed 4 000 Grade 3 learners in the language of instruction, Hausa, and another local mother tongue languages. Some 18% and 29% of pupils from the two states respectively were unable to read full words. In addition, the same students performed poorly on a reading comprehension test (EFA, 2012:130).

In South Africa, the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reported that South African learners, tested in all 11 languages, achieved the lowest score (253 (4.6) for Grade 4 and 302 (5.6) for Grade 5) out of 45 educational systems tested (Howie *et al*. 2008). The results indicated that South African learners were ranked last out of 40 participating countries with almost 78% of the Grade 5 learners not reaching the lowest reading benchmark of 400 (Howie *et al.,* 2008). In the 2011 PIRLS assessment, the Grade 5 learners were only tested in Afrikaans and English and achieved a score of 421 (7.3) with Afrikaans being 427 (10.7) and English 419 (8.8), well below the international average of 500 (Howie *et al.,* 2012).

Since the Grade 4 learners performed poorly in PIRLS 2006, a simpler test, pre-PIRLS, was implemented for developing countries in 2011. In South Africa, pre-PIRLS was administered in all eleven official languages. Of the three countries writing the easier version, South African learners achieved 461 (3.7) in comparison with Colombia 576 (3.4) who achieved 76 above the international average and Botswana 463 (3.5) who fell 47 points below the international average (Howie *et al*., 2012). Despite the increase in reading performance achievement, evidence has indicated that in PIRLS 2016, most South African learners were still below the average of 500 (PIRLS, 2016:3).

In the 2016 PIRLS cycle, it was reported that 78% of Grade 4 learners were not able to reach the lowest benchmark, which means that they could not locate explicit information. This contrasts with only 4% internationally not reaching this lowest benchmark. Of concern is that only 0.2% of South African learners were able to attain the Advanced Benchmark (Howie *et al.,* 2017).

In South Africa, Mudzilwema (2012) found that reading literacy in the Foundation Phase with Venda learners was compromised as most learners did not receive adequate opportunities to develop strong literacy competence in either their mother tongue or in English. She attributes this to the difficulty that teachers have when

teaching reading, citing policy problems regarding the teaching of reading comprehension, a contradiction between theory and practice of teaching reading comprehension, the non-availability of books, but most particularly, the lack of teachers trained to teach reading comprehension (Mudzilwema, 2012:193).

Large-scale tests such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assist in monitoring education in Sub-Saharan Africa. SACMEQ assesses and monitors education in reading and mathematics understanding at Grade 6 level. Zimbabwe participated in SACMEQ I (1995-1998), and III (2007-2011). The Zimbabwean results from SACMEQ III are reported in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Pupil mean scores for reading in Zimbabwe in SACMEQ III

	Pupil mean scores 2007	
	Reading	Mathematics
Bulawayo	590	577
Harare	599	585
Mashonaland Central	481	500
Mashonaland East	464	486
Mashonaland West	497	510
Midlands	533	551
Manicaland	466	488
Matabeleland North	477	486
Matabeleland South	464	474
Masvingo	516	532
ZIMBABWE	508	520
SACMEQ III	512	510

Values in **Green** = 10 points or more above SACMEQ II mean of 500

Values in **Black** = less than 10 points above or below SACMEQ II mean of 500

Values in **Red** = 10 points or more below SACMEQ II mean of 500

(Source: SACMEQ, 2011:5)

The SACMEQ III international mean score was calculated at 512 points for reading with Zimbabwe performing four points below the mean. The mean scores presented in the above table reveal problems in reading literacy development across the country. More than half the participants achieved below the international mean score of 512, although pupils in some provinces (Bulawayo, Harare, Midlands and Masvingo) performed above the international mean score. However, the overall score still indicates poor performance in reading.

The SACMEQ I and III results are reported in Table 1.2. These results give greater insight into the level of Zimbabwean learners' performance considering reading literacy skill and competence.

Table 1.2: Percentages of Grade 6 pupils reaching reading competency levels in 1995 and 2007

Reading Skill Levels			1995	2007	Change
Level	Description	Skill/Competence	%	%	%
1	Pre-reading	Matches words and pictures involving concrete concepts and everyday objects.	2.3	6.0	+3.7
2	Emergent Reading	Matches words and pictures involving prepositions and abstract concepts.	6.8	12.5	+5.7
3	Basic Reading	Interprets meaning (by matching words and phrases, completing sentences).	19.1	18.7	-0.4
4	Reading for Meaning	Reads to link and interpret information located in various parts of the text.	30.4	20.7	-9.7
5	Interpretive Reading	Interprets information from various parts of the text in association with external information.	21.3	15.0	-6.3
6	Inferential Reading	Reads to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer the writer's purpose.	10.7	11.0	+0.3
7	Analytical Reading	Locates information in longer texts (narrative, document or expository) in order to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer the writer's personal beliefs (value systems, prejudices and biases).	6.9	11.7	+4.8
8	Critical Reading	Reads from various parts of the text so as to infer and evaluate what the writer has assumed about both the topic and the characteristics of the reader	2.4	4.5	+2.1

The above table compares SACMEQ I (1995) and III (2007) results according to the hierarchical reading levels. Although some improvement has been seen between 1995 and 2007, there are significant areas of concern, which relate to the foundation of reading literacy development at lower grades. From the information presented in the table, there is evidence that most upper primary learners (Grade 6) in Zimbabwe are yet to become independent readers. While these learners are expected to be able to infer meaning of literary texts, the majority operate as emergent readers. To this end, one can conclude that only those learners in high performing schools seem to appear to be independent readers who can analyse given literary texts.

In 2011/12, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) provided teaching and learning material to all Zimbabwean schools as an initiative to enhance learner performance. In 2012, the Zimbabwe Early Literacy Assessment (ZELA), in collaboration with the Australian Council Educational Research (ACER), assessed reading and mathematics at the end of Grade 2. This baseline study found

that the percentage of pupils performing at or above the grade-appropriate level after completing Grade 2 was low. More than half the pupils fell below the appropriate level, as can be seen in the reading scores presented in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Pupils' results of the 2012 ZELA Baseline Study

LEVEL	PERCENTAGE OF PUPILS
Above grade level	9.2
At grade level	37.6
Below grade level	53.2

(ZELA, 2012:12)

Pupils' distribution across achievement levels indicates that at the end of Grade 2 in both subjects, more than half (53%) of the pupils were below the required grade level. Furthermore, the study highlights that several pupils, mostly in rural areas, were unable to read or write. Some pupils were noted as non-readers who could neither supply their names nor numbers for test papers allocated to them. Other pupils could not complete tests or respond to questions (ZIMSEC, 2013). These findings allude to pupils' inability to read as they lack the basic reading skills expected to have been acquired at this level.

Possibly related to problems in reading are the findings from further research conducted in the Eastern Province of Zimbabwe showing the low reading performance that affects performance in Mathematics (Nkoma, Zirima, Chimunhu & Nyanga, 2013). Learners in both primary (Grade 4 to 6) and secondary (Forms 1 to 3) schools were tested in Mathematics, and all performed significantly below their grade levels. Only 24% of students at primary level were performing at or above their grade level. In addition, only 15% from a sample at secondary school level were found to be performing at or above their form level. This means that, on average, 76% and 85% of pupils at primary and secondary levels respectively, were performing at levels below their grade or form (Nkoma *et al*., 2013).

These results could be a consequence of poor reading skills that have not been developed at lower grades. Howie's (2002) research on factors that have an indirect effect on pupils' performance in Mathematics, found that one of the strongest predictors of achievement in Mathematics was pupils' proficiency in English. From the various studies discussed above, it becomes apparent that reading literacy at lower

grades is an issue affecting not only affecting Zimbabwe but several other countries all over the world, which aligns with Zimmerman's (2014) comment that low reading attainment remains problematic in both developed and developing countries.

Low reading literacy scores of pupils in Zimbabwe at lower grade levels have been reported by SACMEQ and ZELA. In summary, half of the learners are reading below the required grade level and progress to upper grades not having acquired basic reading skills. The reading performance at lower levels shows that learners are not acquiring the basic reading skills of decoding and encoding, which are critical skills to master at this level.

National studies have also reported on low reading literacy scores. Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) found that a greater percentage of lower grade primary school learners struggle to master grade-specific reading abilities. This finding aligns with the Nziramasanga Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (Zimbabwe, 1999) which reported the need to improve elementary learners' quality of reading in Zimbabwe. The commission advocates for nine years of basic education aiming to equip learners with literacy, numeracy and practical skills. In this regard, the acquisition of these skills is important at the foundation phase since it influences an individual's future. The same commission also noted that learners' inability to read could be attributed to several factors which include the issue of language policy development, the expansion of primary schools, over-enrolment, and untrained teachers with full teaching responsibilities that only qualified and competent practitioners are expected to oversee (Zimbabwe, 1999). However, over twenty years after the publication of the Commission findings, the government is yet to put in place conditions necessary to enable learners to acquire competent reading skills at elementary level.

This issue of language was raised by Ndamba (2008), who argues for the recognition and implementation of the indigenous language policy described in Zimbabwe's 1987 Education Act (revised in 2004). According to this Act, elementary learners in the Zimbabwean education system should be taught in their first language, either Shona, Ndebele, Tsonga, Ndau or Karanga. From Grade 4 onwards, curriculum instruction then takes place in the second language, namely, English. Although English is foreign to most lower grade learners in Zimbabwe, it is the language of business and an

international language, and it is thus necessary to develop proficiency. In this regard, Borich and Tombari (1997) and Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) indicate that the inclusion of English later in higher grades promotes not only bilingual education but also stimulates and accelerated intellectual growth. However, successful transition from the native language to the second language, which becomes the language of instruction, is dependent on sound knowledge of the first language. This aligns with Mwamwenda (1996) and Ndamba (2008) who argue that phonetics and phonological knowledge of any language influences mastery of linguistic structures of the other languages spoken in the same geographical location.

Zimbabwe, like other multilingual countries, has had some success amongst learners particularly regarding spoken language skills transfer. As Ndamba (2008) further indicates, once elementary learners master their respective first languages, learning the other languages' reading, writing and speaking skills becomes less problematic However, it should be noted that such skill transfer is not automatic (McLaughlin, 1987). Learners must first master reading and writing skills in their first language before any attempt is made in the second language (Miti & Monaka, 2009; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). This statement has value, as research conducted in Zambia where English (L2) was introduced and taught side-by-side with indigenous languages, has revealed that results were very poor. Towards the end of the elementary learning phase, it was discovered that learners could neither read nor write meaningfully both in L1 and L2 (Miti, 1995).

Initiatives have been implemented in many post-independent African states to improve literacy levels of citizens to align with Sustainable Development Goal 4.6 which calls for all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women to achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030 (UN, 2021). However, it is possible to suspect that many primary school learners in the wider Zimbabwean education community have not been provided with opportunities to develop appropriate grade-specific reading literacy abilities. This contrasts with high performing schools whose curriculum provisions, teaching styles as well as reading development programmes, are impressive.

High performing schools in Zimbabwe have continuously registered progress with the acquisition and development of reading literacy among lower primary school learners.

Reading literacy has been achieved through creating educational opportunities to foster the acquisition of competent reading skills among learners particularly during the foundation phase of primary schooling. Such opportunities include the establishment of a reading and writing study framework, which provides equal educational opportunities among all learners (Pitre, 2014) and teacher-parent collaborative efforts to support and supervise learners' homework. In principle, teachers provide reading and writing activities and parents are requested to assist their learners in learning how to read and write at home. Varghese and Wachen (2016) indicate that the many parents are determined to become involved to ensure that their children perform at their best. It is then possible to assume that teachers could capitalise on this parental effort to utilise the study materials to improve learner performance output. Reading motivation among elementary learners is something that is difficult to achieve without such parental care, involvement and good will (Domina, 2005; Reese, Sparks & Leyva, 2010).

Taking the above into account prompted the researcher to investigate conditions prevailing in high performing schools that could assist in creating equal opportunities for reading development for Zimbabwean learners who attend poorly resourced primary schools in other parts of the country. Developing a reading culture in schools strengthens the teaching of reading in early grades in all primary schools regardless of geographical location and socio-cultural and economic circumstances. I argue that establishing a reading framework at lower grade levels creates a reading culture among learners who develop a love for reading, which provides a foundation for learning and supports academic achievement.

1.3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Creating a reading culture in schools has been successful in closing the gap between low and high achievers, as can be seen in high performing schools in Zimbabwe, establishing and maintaining rigorous academic standards. Most high performing schools, through the readership accountability programmes across grades, have established conditions that are necessary to nurture the development of reading literacy during the foundation phase of primary school learning which thus creates a culture of reading.

Kruger (2005) views culture as a way of life, a life strategy aiming to counter human challenges within a specific social environment. In this regard, high performing schools have designed and implemented strategies, which become part of the school culture, to counter poor achievement among learners at the end of a learning phase such as Grade 7. This academic strategy ensures that lower grade learners are assisted in learning to read by acquiring and developing comparable reading literacy skills for reading to learn, which is vital for other subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Reading proficiency is critical to understanding other academic literacies regardless of educational level. Without the ability to read and understand the written word, mastery of concepts in other curricula is challenging.

In this study, the researcher's intention is to understand how lower grade learners could best be assisted to achieve grade-specific reading literacy proficiency. Developing the culture of reading among learners does not only guarantee understanding of academic concepts but also increases the desire to read. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, reading development is an important skill in the highly computerised contemporary educational context.

There are possible advantages to acquiring reading skills during early childhood. Research over several years has shown that those first few years are critical to the learning-to-read process. For instance, as early as 1988, Juel) and Drew (2012) reported that most learners who have acquired appropriate age-level reading competencies maintain their comprehension skills later in their lives as opposed to those who have persistently struggled to identify words and derive sense from sentences. Juel cited data from Sweden (Lundberg, Frost & Peterson 1988) and New Zealand (Clay, 1979) suggesting that regardless of learners' age and language or the instructional method used, "a child who does poorly in reading in the first year is likely to continue to do poorly" (Juel,1988:22). This statement, made in 1988, has emerged in research conducted on reading literacy over the intervening years as researchers grapple to find ways to address the reading literacy crisis.

Similarly, Lee and Wong (2014) and Lee (2017) confirmed that it is at the foundation phase that human beings acquire competent reading skills. As Pretorius and Spaull (2016) understand, oral reading efficiency is based on the learner's ability to read and understand mother language. Yet, failure to read and understand mother language

can be a serious impediment to master curriculum concepts that are explained and/or illustrated in a foreign language. Without mastering reading and understanding mother languages, it is unlikely that learners will understand other subjects of the curriculum later in their respective academic advancement phases. Thus, early reading literacy developments are crucial for later success in reading and at school.

Communities become innovative and productive because of their literacy levels through the Education for All (EFA) 2012 initiative. It is against this background that this study seeks to provide an understanding of enabling classroom learning conditions to assist lower grade learners acquire competent reading skills during their foundation phase in the Zimbabwean primary school education system.

1.4 LOCATING MYSELF WITHIN THE STUDY

This section charts interest in the teaching of reading and the understanding I have gained over the years about the value of a solid foundation of reading literacy. Since my early teenage years, I have been a passionate baby-minder with great interest in playing with small learners ranging from zero to 10 years. I enjoyed playing indigenous Shona games such as *pada, nhodo, tsoro* as well as playing local musical instruments like *mbira, hosho* and *mazambi*. These play experiences turned into learning adventures for all of us. My grandmother, *Mbuya* Rona Zvikaramba, sometimes joined us adding new song lyrics, figurative as well as idiomatic expressions typical of the Zezuru cultural arts education system where learners are taught how to pronounce and articulate vowels, words and phono-aesthetics (*mahon'era / mazembera*). These are critical in language development in most Shona dialects of Zimbabwe, and this inadvertently set me on the path of realising the value of early literacy development.

My love for teaching reading was motivated by my mother, *Mbuya* Regina Gowo, who, during the colonial era, was appointed to teach the Shona language to white commercial farmers and their children in farming areas around the town of Banket. I participated in the lessons as an 'assistant teacher' and consequently, developed an interest in assisting non-readers acquire necessary Shona linguistic competencies.

I came to the realisation that similar language reading skills could be applied in other languages such as English, Karanga, Kore-Kore and Ndau. Because of my constant interaction with white learners being taught Shona linguistic structures and systems,

my understanding of phonetics and phonology gave me a foundation for when I enrolled for lower primary education. My Sub A (Grade 1) teacher often assigned me to groups of fellow classmates during reading lessons in both Shona and English. I realised that reading is an academic activity, a skill that is critical in the mastery of other curriculum instructional materials for contemporary schooling not only in Zimbabwe but also elsewhere in the world.

My early childhood experience of the development of reading skills later influenced my curriculum choices both at high school and tertiary levels of education. During secondary education, I developed great interest in language studies. I passed my O-levels with distinction, and I owe this success to the quality of my lower primary education, primarily my strong reading abilities at the foundation phase.

I enrolled for a primary teacher education course at Seke Teachers' College in 1989, studying early childhood development – the infant phase, a choice influenced by the desire to acquire further pedagogical competences with a focus on reading skills for elementary primary school beginners. At that time, most lecturers in the English Department were British trained, hence, their mastery of the English language was outstanding.

Upon completing my initial teacher education programme in 1993, I was deployed to Martindale Primary School, which is one of the best former Group A schools in Zimbabwe with some remnants of the old system of teaching reading as a critical educational component of the primary school education system. At this school, I opted to teach reading skills to upper grade learners with reading challenges and offered remedial lessons.

I was later transferred to Darwin Primary School in Mashonaland Central Province. I found that the Grade 6 class learners allocated to me were unable to read at their grade level. Learners' inability to read at their grade level was influenced by factors such as lack of reading materials amongst others. It was vital to address the challenges faced by the learners and prepare them for the Grade 7 examinations. Part of my responsibilities included sourcing reading materials for the school, organising workshops, coaching clinics for fellow colleagues who were untrained as well as supervising all local examinations for the entire school. It was during this period that I was able to build on and enhance, my competence in teaching reading.

From 1998 to 2007, I taught at several schools in Zimbabwe. I always opted for non-performing classes with the intention to prove that once learners master reading skills, their understanding of other subjects of the curriculum becomes possible.

In 2007, I resigned from teaching and enrolled for further studies. During this period, I was given the opportunity to teach at the Catholic University in Zimbabwe (CUZ). At CUZ, I discovered that even at university level, some students struggle to read with comprehension, and I was able to assist students with acquiring reading competences, which I believe are critical for concept mastery regardless of educational level.

1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Reading literacy proficiency is a challenge to most primary school learners worldwide resulting in a global literacy crisis. Indications are that learners complete the first three grades of lower primary education with a considerable lack of basic reading skills (EFA, 2013). This is the case notwithstanding the availability of educational resource materials such as textbooks, classroom provisions and learning environments as well as the presence of grade/level-specific qualified teachers. Additionally, most primary schools in developing countries, Zimbabwe in particular, have a high teacher-pupil ratio which makes it difficult for learners to secure individualised help from their teachers to master competent reading skills. Consequently, a greater percentage of learners with limited abilities in reading to learn are promoted to the next grade despite not having acquired and developed grade-appropriate reading skills. What is required, is that learners at lower grades are guided to master word and sentence construction skills because these are the foundations to any effective understanding of written texts. As reported by Van Staden (2010), lack of reading skills prevents learners from participating in all subjects of the curriculum in a meaningful way, which influences academic performance particularly during summative evaluations and assessments conducted at phase ends such as Grade 7.

The Zimbabwean primary school education system comprises three segments: lower ECD A and B and Grades 1 and 2, and the junior phase Grades 3-7. The choice to use the elementary primary school phase as the research cohort is influenced by the nature and academic focus of this study. This is the very beginning of the westernised education system where primary school candidates are exposed, for the first time, to the development of reading and writing skills. As the researcher, I intended to direct

the research focus to how lower primary school learners acquire basic reading competences in the early years of their primary education and has three reasons for doing so.

In the first instance, if learners can acquire reading skills from the first year of schooling, they will be able to better comprehend written literature (Kim & Quinn, 2014; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Learners who become adults with poor reading skills are significantly disadvantaged in modern societies that demand effective reading abilities in the workplace. As a matter of concern, adults who are unable to read and write accurately are generally only employed in lower paying jobs which often require physical labour and could be viewed as the least satisfactory occupation in modern economies (Fuchs, Fuchs & Kazdan, 1999). Thus, assisting lower grade learners to acquire competent reading skills could be viewed as one of the most fundamental human survival skills in this modern techno-computerised global economy (Torgesen, 2000).

In the second instance, considering the serious consequences of early reading disabilities, particularly on learners' cognitive development, the main thrust of this study is to establish conditions necessary for allowing lower grade learners to acquire and develop competent reading literacy skills as early in their academic life as possible. In other words, the ultimate intention of this study is to help lower primary school learners understand printed materials at levels consistent with their grade-appropriate comprehension skills. Readers in the foundation phase of educational development often find difficulty in recognising words by sight, fail to recognise words, and struggle to use phonetic cues to help pronounce and articulate words and sentences. In this regard, failure to articulate words in sentences denies learners the opportunity for cognitive development. Reading theories suggested by Ehri (1998) and Share and Stanovich (1995) argue that the ability to decode phonemes enables relative fluency and effortlessness in identifying new words in texts. If learners lag in the development of reading skills, they may develop negative attitudes towards reading itself (Felton & Brown, 1990) and their intellectual development could be seriously undermined.

In the third instance, this study concentrates on the foundation phase to equip both pre-service and in-service foundation phase teachers with the necessary pedagogical

content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and competencies to ensure that lower grade learners are effectively guided to acquire and develop grade appropriate reading literacy skills, so they are fully equipped with a solid foundation to progress through the phases. Secondary and high school curricula demand competent reading abilities while at the same time, they do not place attention on the development of important reading skills and strategies (Fuchs *et al.,* 1999). It is argued, therefore that, to ensure maximum learner performance output later in their academic lives, learners should be exposed to regular and systematic reading sessions at lower grades so that they cope with higher academic demands, particularly as at secondary and high school levels, limited remedial work is available for addressing reading deficits.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Taking the above background into account, the main question that guides this research is: *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe?*

The main question necessitated the formation of sub-questions. These sub-questions are formulated as follows:

- To what extent does the intended primary school curriculum promote the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in the Zimbabwean education system?
- Which pedagogical competencies are required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at the lower primary level?
- Which enabling classroom features/conditions characterise the nature of support of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- How can the identified enabling conditions in high-performing schools be applied in low-performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system?

The primary aim of this study is to determine enabling classroom conditions that could be applied to improve the acquisition of reading literacy skills for lower grades in the Zimbabwean primary school system. To achieve the primary aim of this research, the specific aims are:

1. to ascertain the extent to which the intended primary school curriculum promotes the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in the Zimbabwean education system
2. to identify the pedagogical competencies required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at the lower primary level
3. to determine the enabling classroom features/conditions characterise the nature of support of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe
4. to establish how the identified enabling conditions in high-performing schools could be applied in low-performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system

Finding answers to the above stated research questions could collectively identify the necessary classroom conditions that promote the acquisition of reading competencies at lower primary school grades. It is possible to assume that the acquisition of intellectual competencies is also determined largely by the quality of the curriculum, resource material provisions as well as the presence of well-trained and competent reading educators.

1.7 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This research seeks to understand enabling classroom conditions that could be applied to improve the acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grade learners in the Zimbabwean primary school education system. Accordingly, it is necessary to take cognisance of reading strategies used by some high performing schools for possible application in the wider Zimbabwean primary school education community where learners struggle to match their reading abilities with grade specific competency benchmarks. Edwards (1995) and Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) confirmed that most primary schools in the wider Zimbabwean education community are not attentive to the fact that academic achievement of learners is dependent on the quality of foundation reading skills acquired during the lower grades of the primary phase.

On that note, reading theorists such as Chall (1967), Clay (1991) and Ehri (1995) concur that critical reading and writing skills are acquired during early childhood both at home and at school. This is further supported by Iwahori (2008), Lee and Wong

(2014) and Lee (2017), indicating that learners build on and perfect these skills in higher grades as they continue interacting with peers, adults and their immediate learning environments. It is against this background that the researcher advocates for an increased focus on the development of reading skills to reduce the occurrence of reading difficulties among elementary learners in the Zimbabwean primary school education system. This is achieved by identifying enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grade in lower grades in high performing schools and suggesting how these could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe.

Snow *et al.* (1998) identified crucial learning components that lower grade learners are expected to master and develop to acquire appropriate grade-specific reading competencies. These include learner mastery of the alphabetic principle, knowledge of phonemes, oral reading fluency, the ability to identify vocabulary and the comprehension of words in sentences. These skills lay the foundation for effective acquisition of reading competencies at the lower grade level. Teachers should, as a result, be aware of the focus in the teaching of reading literacy.

Thus, there is reason to believe that one of the most effective ways to prevent reading challenges in learners is to ensure that they do not lag during the early development phase of learning to read at the early years of the primary phase (Torgesen, 2000). Acquiring oral reading literacy, identifying vocabulary and phonemic awareness alone does not constitute adequate reading skills. It has been found that learners at this level are often able to read words in literary texts but are unable to construct meaning. To curtail such challenges among learners, it is imperative that educators guide learners in constructing meaning in all that they read before proceeding (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). It is therefore important that the essence of reading development at lower grade levels be fully conceptualised so that a solid foundation is laid to ensure that learners' academic achievement over the entire school phases is not compromised by lack of reading literacy.

Informed by these arguments, Paris (2005) identified five components that should be implemented for effective learning. These components are the alphabetic principle, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, phonemic awareness and comprehension. Thus, any instructional reading material must provide opportunities for development of these

skills as well as additional study materials for remedial learning particularly for those learners who seem to be resistant to instructional drives and activities (Torgesen, 2000).

1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Torgesen (2000) argues that the major goal in the teaching of reading is to establish conditions necessary for the acquisition of competencies in language mastery and reading fluency. This study is important in the Zimbabwean primary education system for several reasons. Firstly, it seeks to establish classroom features that characterise competent learning environments that promote the acquisition and development of literacy skills among lower grade learners in high performing schools in Zimbabwe. Secondly, this study tries to establish the extent to which the intended primary school curriculum is designed to promote the acquisition of effective literacy development skills among lower grade learners in high performing Zimbabwean primary schools. To this purpose, there is potential to further interrogate the same and find means and ways to assist those schools located elsewhere in the country realise how best they can capitalise on the identified strengths to improve reading performance in their respective schools. Thirdly, this study seeks to establish further teacher competencies as regards to lesson delivery. As Shulman (1987) points out, knowledge of curriculum content materials outside one's understanding of appropriate pedagogical approaches to assist learners to acquire specific literacy skills is null and void. Finally, this study seeks to find out how all these critical significances could be applied in those school communities where learners struggle to acquire age- and grade-specific literacies and yet the Zimbabwean primary school curriculum provisions are clear for all to apply. Thus, should the results of this study yield positive results, the researcher would advocate for these enabling conditions in high performing schools to be applied in other schools where there is a reputation of not doing well in terms of reading literacy development.

The researcher further believes that this study will help to improve practice of the teaching of reading to guarantee literacy development in the Zimbabwean primary school education system. Such knowledge has the potential to provide a model for low performing schools in other parts of the country where literacy development has been perceived as below average. Creating enabling conditions could assist teachers in the

teaching of reading and assist learners in acquiring and developing age-appropriate reading literacy skills in lower grade learners that could help them to meaningfully participate in other academic activities in later academic years.

Added to this, this study is critical in the Zimbabwean primary school education system as it may provide useful information on appropriate curriculum content materials, pedagogies as well as literature examples for use as part of wider elementary language study guides. Because the acquisition of reading skills transcends language uniqueness (Cekiso, 2017; Paris & Oka, 1986), some of the new knowledge, ideas and contributions emerging from this study could be useful in the teaching of majority local languages found in Zimbabwe. A major requirement is identifying language specialists of specific local linguistic varieties such as Ndau, Tsonga and Karanga. Such language specialists could partner with curriculum developers, teachers and lecturers at higher education institutions to design more literature and pedagogical strategies for teaching reading in Zimbabwean schools. The researcher arrived at this position because Zimbabwe is both multicultural (Nota, 2010) and multilingual where most people do not know or even attempt to speak languages other than their own local ones (Ndamba, 2008).

The findings emerging from this study could assist in providing both pre-service and in-service education practitioners with the necessary pedagogical content knowledge and competencies to teach reading literacy skills to learners in early grades in the Zimbabwean primary school education system. The presence of several local languages such as Ndebele, Shona and English signify the existence of a plethora of language differentiations, varied curriculum content systems and structures as well as multiple pedagogical provisions that could be harnessed for the hybridisation of a reading literacy framework to be implemented at primary school level in Zimbabwe. This study is neither Shona nor Ndebele nor English exclusive; it intends to provide ways, approaches and systems to develop reading literacy among lower grade primary school learners in Zimbabwe. Reading competence is critical for every communication situation. Considering these and other ideas propounded in this research, this study seeks to find possible ways to support reading literacy development programmes and activities in low performing schools in some underprivileged education communities in Zimbabwe.

1.9 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

For the purpose of understanding this research, the subsequent definitions are used in the following way:

Competence is the ability to execute specific activities. According to Harter (1982), learners' self-esteem increases as they become more competent in executing certain educational activities well. Lower grade learners become motivated knowing that, just like adults, they can read the printed word. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers, parents and all stakeholders in the Zimbabwean education system assist lower grade learners in acquiring reading competencies to learn. As they grow into adulthood, learners, thus, become efficient citizens who contribute meaningfully to the development of their country.

Curriculum refers to what is studied in the class by specific learners of a particular age-group in an educational community. Nelson (1994) views a curriculum as all the planned teaching and learning activities in schools that are geared towards the realisation of educational goals, visions and societal aspirations. Van den Akker (2013) further argues that a curriculum appears in different forms such as the intended, implemented and attained curriculum. This study seeks to understand enabling classroom conditions that promote the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade levels in high performing Zimbabwean primary schools and is centred on the implemented curriculum.

Enabling classroom learning conditions could be viewed as learning environments suitable for acquiring appropriate reading skills. These conditions could be used in conceptualising curricula's instructional materials (Hopkins, 2008). These may include, but are not limited to, the availability of textbooks, qualified teaching personnel, conducive classrooms and acceptable teacher-pupil ratio.

High performing schools are those former Group A schools of the pre-independence era that were well-resourced and catered for privileged learners of the white colonial establishment. Immediately after independence in April 1980, influential people secured places for their children in these schools. Even currently, these high performing schools have the resources needed for educational achievement. It is notable, however, that high performing schools attract teachers with outstanding,

specialised backgrounds (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Hence, learners under their educational guidance perform relatively well when compared with those learners enrolled in other schools with limited resources.

Literacy is the ability to conceptualise both written and non-written ideas with limited assistance (Richards & Pilcher, 2018). Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual (Mullis et al., 2004). Thus, it is the ability to read, write and use language proficiently. Establishing the learning conditions appropriate to facilitate the acquisition of competent reading skills among lower primary school learners is an example of the definition of the term literacy in this study. Because young learners acquire other human abilities such as speaking from within local socio-cultural and geographical proximities in which they are born, they are only able to achieve literacy through exposure to reading and writing activities that usually occur in a systematised learning environment (Salmeron & Garcia, 2011).

Reading skills is the understanding of phonemes in word and sentence construction, the knowledge of vocabulary, the alphabetic principle, oral fluency and comprehension of written texts. The development of these skills is critical towards the learner's acquisition of reading skills (Kucukoglu, 2013).

1.10 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Table 1.4 provides a visual representation of the research process. This process is further discussed in Chapter 4 (Research Methodology). As illustrated in the table, this study applies interpretivism as the epistemological framework (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Nieuwenhuis, 2013; Creswell 2014). The researcher used a qualitative rather than a quantitative research approach because it offers room to answer both the 'how' and 'why' questions concerning the phenomenon under study.

Table 1.4: Visual representation of the research process

ASPECT	EXPLANATION
Paradigmatic Approach	Interpretivism was used to ensure that participants shared their individual experiences regarding the challenges they faced when teaching reading skills to lower grade learners.
Research Design	A case study design was chosen for this study because it was flexible and allowed participants to share their individualised perceptions about knowledge construction processes (Sanjari *et al.,* 2014).

ASPECT	EXPLANATION
Selection of Participants	Purposive sampling was used to select 23 participants (4 school principals, 18 teachers and 1 education officer) from high performing primary schools in Harare's urban districts. Participants were requested to share their views regarding how they teach reading skills to enable learners to perform well in comparison with other poor performing schools in Zimbabwe.
Data Collection Strategies	Data were collected using appropriate qualitative approaches namely, document analysis, interviews, observations, a questionnaire and focus group discussions (Papadopoulos, Scalon & Lees, 2002:271).
Data Documentation	Field notes, audio-video recordings as well as transcribed data from documents used by elementary primary school teachers at high performing schools comprised the data documentation.
Data Analysis	Inductive thematic analysis was employed through coding and axial coding as well as generating themes and sub-themes to understand what made particular schools perform better than others in the Zimbabwean Primary School education system.
Ethical Considerations	The following ethical considerations were respected: • Informed consent and voluntary participation from principals, learners and parents. • Participants were promised that their names would not be published. • A professional relationship was established with participants centred on mutual respect, understanding and trust • Ethical consent from the University of Pretoria and from the Education Department in Zimbabwe to conduct the study
Quality Criteria	To ensure trustworthiness of research findings, the following criteria were applied: • *Credibility* – through the application of different data collection instruments (document analysis, interviews, observations). • *Transferability* – through encouraging other researchers to carry out similar projects in other related educational environments. • *Dependability* – by encouraging fellow educationists and researchers to realise that repeating the process does not guarantee similar results. Instead, this indicates multiple realities. Thus, the study is dependable. • *Confirmability* – through triangulation of information gathered from different data collection instruments towards eradication of researcher bias; and • *Authenticity* – through achieving congruence between the research paradigm and research methods used to gain understanding of the phenomenon under study.

1.11 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1 is the general introduction and background of the study. It described the background to the study, contextualised the study, presented the problem statement, with the rationale and significance of the study. In addition, this chapter clarified some pertinent concepts, and a brief outline of the research methodology was given.

Chapter 2 focuses on the contextual framework of this study. The major aim of describing the context is to conceptualise the current situation in which lower grade primary school learners are guided to acquire reading skills and competencies during the initial phase of primary schooling in Zimbabwe.

Chapter 3 presents a review of the literature. The aim with this chapter is to gain in-depth understanding of both traditional and contemporary theories dealing with how lower grade learners acquire reading competencies as part of school curricula in best performing schools. The researcher intends to find ways to apply such teaching and learning strategies in underperforming schools in other parts of the country should the University of Pretoria's examiners and the Zimbabwean government accept the outcome of this research.

Chapter 4 outlines in detail the methodological and paradigmatic frameworks. The research sample and sampling procedures, methods used to collect data as well as ways of analysing ideas gathered through document analysis, interviews, observations as well as focus group discussions are also discussed in detail. The chapter justifies the researcher's selection of the methods and procedures.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the findings of the research, which helped the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study. Four themes emerged from the analysed data. Ideas are gathered and categorised in relation to the main question and sub-questions of the study. The same chapter discusses themes, sub-themes as well as other variables impacting the study.

Chapter 6 concludes the research report. It starts with the general overview of the study, presents the conclusions drawn from the findings emerging from data analysis. The chapter also reflects on the methodology that guided the study and a reflection of the conceptual framework. The chapter also offers a list of recommendations regarding possible implementation of the findings generated by this study.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 focuses on presenting the contextual framework of the study. The major aim of describing the context is to conceptualise the current situation in which lower grade primary school learners are guided to acquire and develop reading literacy skills and competencies during the initial phase of primary schooling in Zimbabwe. Lower primary levels lay the foundation for intellectual achievement in the later years, professional excellence and entrepreneurial success. Without mastering basic readership competencies, it is possible that there could be serious limitations to understanding written instructions, communication technology as well as general expressivity of any curriculum ideas regardless of educational level.

This chapter briefly describes the history of education in Zimbabwe, the impact of expanded education provisions in the post-independence and democratic Zimbabwe, the role of Christian enterprise in educating indigenous Africans, the structure of the entire Zimbabwean education system (primary, secondary, tertiary education) and the cumulative effect of the Early Childhood Education (ECD) programme. All these aspects have considerable bearing on why the researcher regards the development of reading literacy skills during elementary learning in Zimbabwe as critical to a learner's mastery of other subjects in the school curriculum.

2.2 THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

For more than four decades after political independence (18 April 1980), Zimbabwe has witnessed commendable expansion in terms of establishing more primary and secondary schools, teacher training organisations as well as the provision of financial resources in all sectors of the economy – all these strides aim for the holistic development of Zimbabwean citizens. Despite such achievements, Townsend and MacBeath (2011) have reservations regarding the quality of the primary school curriculum, particularly for most under-privileged native Zimbabwean learners. Although there is evidence of the positive impact of the western-oriented education initiatives in Zimbabwe, Richards and Govere (2003) indicate that the presence of

separate education systems in Zimbabwe do not provide equal opportunities for all learners in the country.

During the colonial era, schools were established to cater for different races. As a result, learning resources and materials were unequally supplied to these schools. Hence, schools in the former Group A category, which were preserved for the privileged white minority settlers in the country, received more resources than those found in the B and C categories. Kanyongo (2005) argues that the curriculum intended for European learners was designed to prepare young white learners for economic, political and technological dominance and leadership while the curriculum for the black majority was aimed at preparing them as labourers. Learners coming from indigenous African local communities were trained to become, amongst other professions, carpenters, bricklayers, welders and painters with limited exposure to leadership preparatory curriculum provisions (Kanyongo, 2005). For this reason, Rule and Land (2017) believe that it is critical to borrow reading methodologies and techniques from how during the colonial era, English as a foreign language, was taught to natives and try to implement these in today's lower grade literacy development programme.

According to Sturges and Neill (1998), indigenous African learners in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular, were not expected to excel in comprehending literary texts and instructional materials but were forced to absorb practical skills and wait to receive working orders from their white counterparts. Such discriminating academic treatment did not develop a reading culture in today's parents and their children (Sturges & Neill, 1998). Based on this understanding, it is not surprising that parents who, at one point received their primary education at one of these former Group A schools, are aware of the value of developing competent reading skills. Hence, they have become involved and have been able to assist their children complete their homework after school. Conversely, there is reason to suspect that parents who were taught practical skills during their time at school may not have intrinsic motivation to uphold the value of developing competent reading abilities during the early years of primary school learning.

On 18 April 1980, Zimbabwe attained its political independence ushering in a new socio-political order that emphasised a non-racial society. Racial discrimination was legally outlawed, and education was declared a human right for all citizens (Kanyongo, 2005). Both national and educational leaders embarked upon a revolutionary path to

bring about innovation in education in terms of redressing past inequalities and disparities about educational provisions. Education and training sectors were democratised creating educational opportunities for most school-going learners as well as those who had dropped out of school because of the political instability caused by the liberation struggle in the country. The new policy in the new Zimbabwe initiated the provision of free primary school education, which quadrupled learner numbers in primary schools and doubled learner numbers in secondary schools (Kanyongo, 2005).

This expansion of access to education led to 2 401 primary schools enrolling 81 958 pupils in segregated schools during 1979. In 1989, the number of primary schools increased to 4 504, with an enrolment of 2 274 178 pupils. Immediately before independence in 1979, there were 177 schools with a learner population of approximately 66 000. By 1999, the number of secondary schools in the country had increased to 1 502 with an enrolment of 695 882 learners (Townsend & MacBeath, 2011). This expansion in education, as a result, placed much pressure on human, financial and infrastructural resources as well as on teaching and learning resources (Townsend & MacBeath, 2011).

Most of the pupils who completed Form 4 at the average age of sixteen could not all be absorbed in senior high schools or in vocational and professional colleges for teaching, nursing or extension work. Because the current government discouraged separate development in education, it was soon realised that most secondary school learners despised practical subjects and favoured those subjects preparing them for managerial jobs (Mandiudza, Chindedza & Makaye, 2013).

Since learners preferred school curricula which were more academic and theoretical in nature, they did not undergo any relevant practical training (Vandenbosch, 2006). It soon emerged that there was a need for more people with practical skills to match the ever-changing industrial demands. Broadened access to education had outstripped the government's capacity to provide adequate resources. By 1990, teaching and learning materials became inadequate (Kanyongo, 2005) and resulted in many of the schools' infrastructure becoming inadequate due to an inability to cope with the magnitude of provisioning challenges.

Every year on average, more than 300 000 school leavers joined the job market. It was difficult or rather impossible for most of these school leavers to find employment, demonstrating the mismatch between the labour market and the education system. In addition, the high dropout rate in the education system was compounded by a high failure rate (Mpondi, 2004). High dropout and failure rates resulted mainly from failure to pay school fees due to low-income families' substantial financial constraints. In addition to the high failure rates amongst learners, most teachers moved to neighbouring countries in search of better living conditions, increased salaries, and greater job security (Ploch, 2010).

The year 2000 saw a decrease in the political, social and economic stability in Zimbabwe (Ploch, 2010). Due to a strong opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), in a bid to remain in power, embarked on several propagandistic activities such as the chaotic land reform programme, unfair treatment and imprisonment of members of the opposition party, and election rigging (Mawire, 2008). These events marked a turning point in post-independence Zimbabwean history insofar as the society became characterised by high inflation rates and the devaluation of the Zimbabwean currency. Corruption and violation of the rule of law increased and there was limited observance of property rights. This resulted in excessive joblessness among Zimbabwean citizens, food shortages, riots, targeted sanctions and a serious limitation of foreign currency inflow.

These external forces had a negative effect on the education system in terms of infrastructural decay and reduction of the status of the teaching profession. Teachers openly sympathised with the opposition party, and this attracted unfair vindictiveness and censorship from the ZANU PF government (Ploch, 2010). The deterioration of socio-economic conditions had a devastating effect on teachers' economic conditions which could be one of the reasons why teachers sought greener pastures in the neighbouring country, South Africa (De Villiers & Weda, 2017).

To retain teachers, additional incentives were introduced by the-then Minister of Education, David Coltart. He wanted to counteract the mass exodus of professionals from the Zimbabwean education system because of poor remuneration, hyperinflation and political unrest (Moyo, 2010). These incentives for teachers, however, were not

applied according to a standard formula or equally to all Zimbabwean schools. As Nkambule (2022) posits, teacher incentives varied significantly from region to region and from school to school with rural schoolteachers being the most affected by inconsistent remuneration arrangements.

Due to economic instability and the general political unrest in the country over several years, the Zimbabwean education system has been and continues to be seriously threatened by a limited supply of financial resources and skilled labour (Ploch, 2010). Acute shortages of textbooks, physical infrastructure and essential facilities like libraries and laboratories were exacerbated by large teacher-pupil ratios which result in a lack of individualised teaching. Equally hampering the education sector was a lack of remedial and informative forms of assessment to identify individual talents and dire learner needs (Zimbabwe, 1999).

Kanyongo (2005) underscores the impact of the limited number of specialist teachers in language areas, Mathematics and Science as another factor hindering the development of competent curriculum resource materials for lower grade learning in the Zimbabwean education system. Further concerns over rampant absenteeism among teachers who sometimes abused sick leave benefits to engage in cross border trading in neighbouring countries, also occurred (Kanyongo (2005). Such absenteeism occurred because of limited supervision from the District Education Office due to financial constraints (Grauwe, 2008).

2.3 THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN EDUCATION

When Europeans settled in Rhodesia (now called Zimbabwe) around 1890, they enacted laws to legalise the provision of separate education systems for white and indigenous black African citizens despite sharing the same geographical location and economic environment. Education provision for the white minority was under the direct support of the government while African education was entrusted to Christian missionary enterprises (Kanyongo, 2005).

Despite operating on limited budgets, missionary activities recorded several positive results for education for Africans. The spread of the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) had a positive effect on the general lives of indigenous African people. Besides enabling Africans to read and write, education prompted the mental awakening of Africans. Africans became politically rejuvenated and began to realise

the value of self-rule, which motivated them to refuse dominance by colonial settlers. Most of the political leaders who fought for Zimbabwean independence had a missionary education background (Kanyongo, 2005).

While education for white citizens was made compulsory in 1930, African education was optional. The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934 denied Africans the opportunity to acquire technical educational skills at polytechnic institutions such as the Harare Polytechnic Institution (Industrial Conciliation Act, 1934:8). However, in 1944, the colonial government raised grants for African education and for the first time there was participation in African secondary education. Goromonzi High School (in Mashonaland East) was the first public high school for African learners, but it was under strict instructions to only recruit a limited number of high performers. This bottleneck system was just window dressing to appear as if indigenous African learners were afforded opportunities to access higher education.

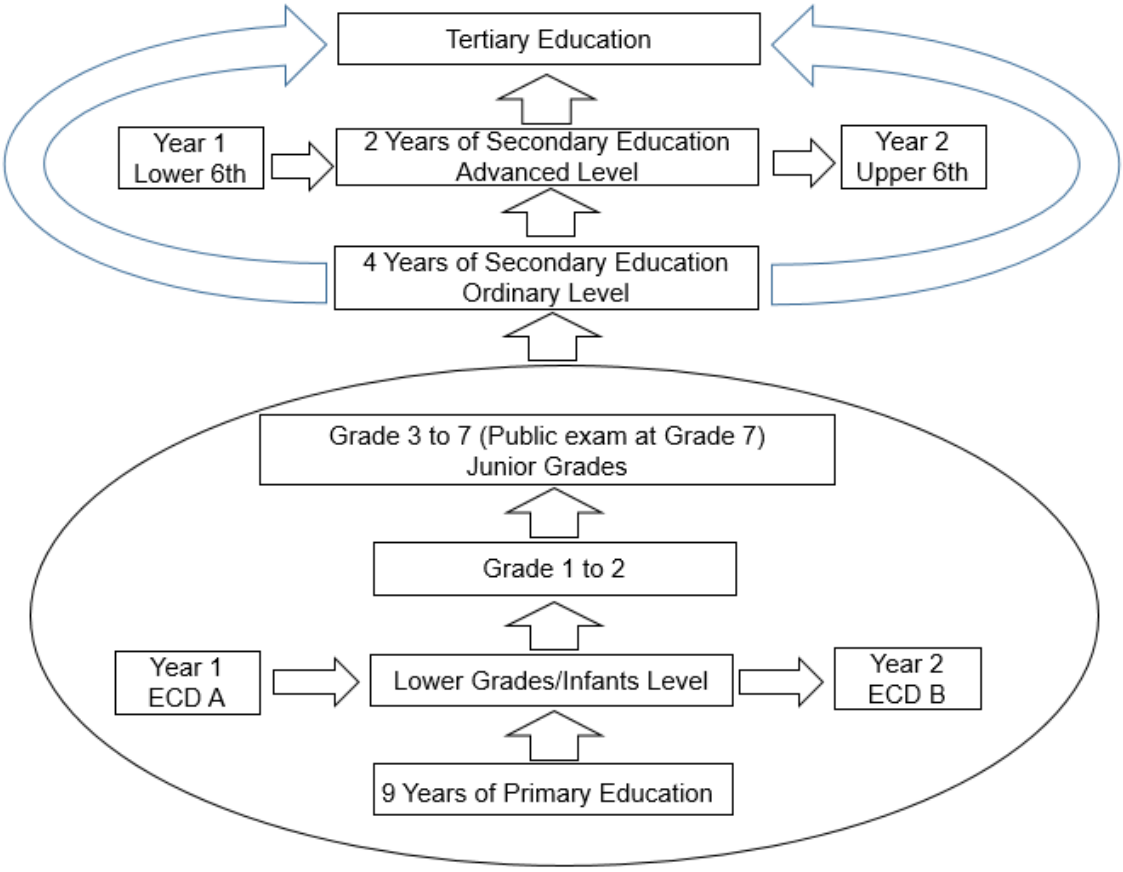
In 1953, the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (presently the University of Zimbabwe) was established. It was granted a charter to operate only as a multiracial organisation. This development facilitated the recruitment of black African students unlike polytechnic institutions that, under the protection of the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1934, denied black African learners' the opportunity to study with their white counterparts. Because of the bottleneck in the system (Richards & Govere, 2003), Africans struggled to gain access to university education. This bottleneck in the education system, which was as notorious as the Industrial Coalition Act of 1934, restricted indigenous Africans' participation in higher education (Townsend & MacBeath, 2011).

During the 1980 election campaign, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) extensively used the promise of education reform to attract voters. ZANU-PF promised that primary and secondary education would be compulsory and free. They promised to expand adult literacy and education as a human right (Sichone, 2003). As the first democratically elected party in 1980, ZANU-PF delivered their promise introducing compulsory and free primary education and developed an education policy that spelt out three aims for providing education in Zimbabwe.

The first aim emphasised that education should develop pupils in building a new culture derived from the best of Zimbabwean heritage and history. The second

emphasised that the new curriculum for Zimbabwe was to underline initiative, self-reliance, innovation and creativity. The third aim emphasised that the new approach to education was to place greater emphasis on transforming teacher education. The government was to assume a central role in the provisioning and financing of education (Kangai & Bukaliya, 2011). The compulsory and free status of Zimbabwean primary education since 1980 has resulted in high enrolment not fully backed by the infrastructure and other critical resources such as inadequate financial assistance to schools. Due to the magnitude of provisioning and the inadequacy of economic capacity, secondary education was not free and compulsory (Kanyongo, 2005). To offer an idea of the transformation of education, Figure 2.1 presents the structure of the Zimbabwean education system.

2.4 THE STRUCTURE OF THE ZIMBABWEAN EDUCATION SYSTEM



(Source: Kanyongo, 2005)

Figure 2.1: Visual representation of the Zimbabwean education system

Zimbabwe's education system is under the stewardship of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). (Edwards, 1995; Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2013). In this regard, the aim of the MoPSE is to provide education of high quality to all its citizens. The MoPSE's objectives are outlined in the Ministry's mission statement that states:

> The Ministry of Education is committed to the provision of good quality basic, secondary and continuing education to all learners and adults through school and other learning centres and multi-media approaches to produce individuals with potential to contribute towards development. In the quest for efficiency and effectiveness, the Ministry cherishes, in its clients and employees, the value of critical thinking, innovation, self-discipline, self-actualisation, consultation and involvement, teamwork, transparent, professionalism and the role these play in development (Zimbabwe, 2001:5).

A policy framework governs the Zimbabwean education system, and it is through this framework that the historical imbalances in the education system were rectified. Substantial expansion of education occurred during the 1980s, driven by the need to satisfy the nation's desire to provide quality education to indigenous Zimbabweans, of which it had been deprived during the colonial era. The education system is governed by the Education Act of 1987, amended in 1991, and its main goals are to:

- Abolish all forms of racial discrimination in education.
- Create a unitary national education system.
- Introduce free and compulsory primary education.
- Provide secondary education to all post primary school graduates.
- Provide state support for non-formal adult education and literacy programmes.
- Decentralise the management and administration of the education system to promote efficiency and equity in the development of regions; and
- Expand teacher education programmes to release more trained teachers into the school system and reduce the use of untrained and under-qualified teachers and expatriates (Zimbabwe, 2001).

The following section focuses on presenting and describing primary education introduced in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

2.4.1 Primary Education

In Zimbabwe, primary education used to be a seven-year cycle but is currently a nine-year circle (see Table 2.1) (Kanyongo, 2005). There is an automatic promotion from one grade to the other. Primary education, as Mapolisa and Tshabalala, (2013) indicate, is mostly tuition-free, except for the levies parents are expected to pay depending on individual school type and circumstances. Such levies may be in the form of a building fund and sport fees. The curriculum for primary schools is centrally designed and developed by MoPSE through the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU), which designs syllabi and teaching materials. This applies to government and public schools as most private schools are independently run. Subjects taught in primary schools are Mathematics, English, either ChiShona or IsiNdebele, Social Studies, Environmental Science, Religious and Moral Education, Music, Art and Craft, HIV/AIDS Education and Physical Education (Edwards, 1995; Kanyongo, 2005).

At the end of Grade 7, pupils write a public exit examination before proceeding to secondary education. The examinations are centrally prepared by the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC). At Grade 7 level, pupils are tested in the following four subjects/areas: English, Mathematics, ChiShona/IsiNdebele, Agriculture, and a general paper that comprises Social Studies, Environmental Science, Religious and Moral Education, Music, Art and Craft, HIV/AIDS Education, and Physical Education. Pupils' performance in the Grade 7 public examinations determines the type of school they may attend for secondary education as some secondary schools are selective and may set selection criteria based on the Grade 7 results. This tends to restrict, to some extent, pupils' access to certain secondary schools (Edwards, 1995).

Within primary schooling in Zimbabwe, public schools are run by the government, or are church-owned schools run by the various church denominations or are urban and rural council schools run by the responsible authorities, and private schools are run either by individuals, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), a Board of Trustees or by companies.

There have been many changes to curriculum implementation in most of these schools. This was because of challenges such as the availability of physical and competent human resources as well as the general school academic culture (Mafa, 2012). Most teachers in primary schools hold diplomas in education from teacher training colleges, while others have a Bachelor of Education degree from local or foreign universities. However, there are some untrained teachers, especially in isolated parts of the country where trained teachers are unwilling to teach or where a genuine shortage exists, which may affect the provision of quality education.

2.4.2 Secondary Education

Zimbabwean's post primary education is made up of two sections, namely, the secondary phase (Form 1-4) and the advanced phase (Forms 5 and 6) (see Table 2.1) (Kanyongo, 2005).

At the end of Year 4, candidates write examinations in different subjects towards the award of the General Certificate of Education (GCE). In the past, there used to be an examination written at the end of the first two years of secondary education, the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) examination (Kanyongo, 2005). The ZJC examination was discontinued in 2000 since running an examination of that magnitude was no longer sustainable. Depending on how candidates achieve during the O-Level examinations, the advanced level is offered to those who have passed at least five subjects. In other words, O-Level results are used for general certification in education, employment and selection purposes to university and other tertiary institutions of higher learning.

Unlike primary schools, parents pay fees for secondary education. Parents may choose to send their learners either to boarding schools or day schools. Boarding schools tend to be well-resourced and provide better quality education than the day schools; however, boarding schools are expensive compared to day schools. As is the case in primary education, the secondary school curriculum is centrally designed by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU).

2.4.3 Tertiary Education

Upon completing the prescribed Ordinary level school curriculum, candidates have two major options for further education and training namely, proceeding to Advanced level and/or choosing a professional course for specialisation (Nota, 2010). Figure 2.2

illustrates some of the courses that candidates may choose as their areas of professional specialisation.

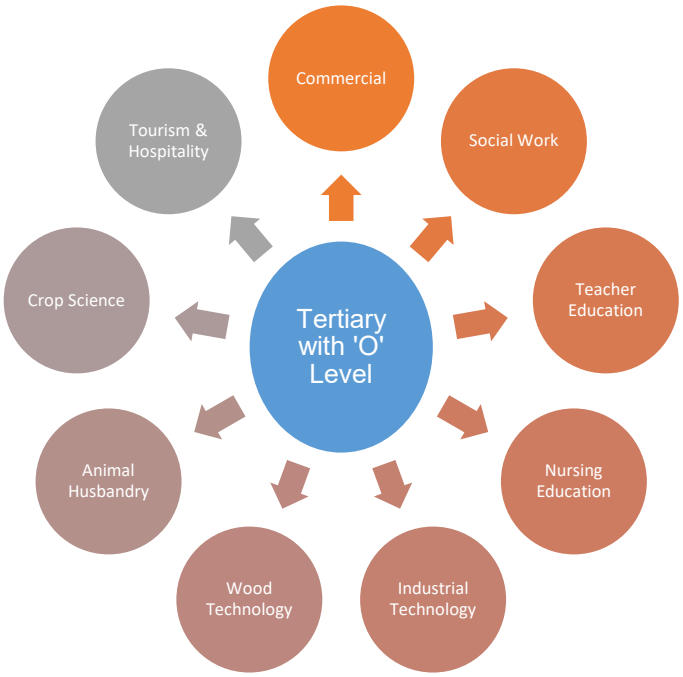


Figure 2.2: Professional areas of specialisation

In addition to basic education, primary and secondary education are also offered to those with special needs, some of whom may require special resources and infrastructure (Kanyongo, 2005).

2.4.4 Special Needs Education

Until independence in 1980, the Zimbabwe government's involvement in the provision of special needs education was minimal (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2004). Only a few schools catered for the education of students with special needs, and the majority were either privately or church owned. Education for people with special needs as Chitiyo and Chitiyo (2007) explained, had been seen as charity work rather than a right. After independence, the government legislated for the provision of education for all. It established a division of the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education to cater for the provision of quality education to all students with special needs. This involved training staff for special needs education and setting up structures for learners with special needs, for example, the National Education Audio Logical Laboratory (NEALL) that produces hearing aids for the hearing impaired and the National Braille Printing Press (NBPP) that prints textbooks for the blind. All these

gains in education at all levels were made possible through the Ministry's objectives (Samkange, 2015).

By 1990, Zimbabwe had virtually achieved Universal Primary Education and, on the African continent, its literacy rate of 92% was second only to Tunisia (Ogunniyi, 1996). However, in the past years, Zimbabwe has faced several challenges that included the 'brain drain' and this has affected the quality of education in the country (Majoni, 2014). Trained teachers migrated to neighbouring countries for greener pastures, which left classes attended to by untrained teachers (De Villiers & Weda, 2017). As a result, Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) indicated that teaching and learning was compromised. In the wake of the economic meltdown, most parents could not afford school fees, which meant that attendance at schools was irregular as most learners were returned home for non-payment of fees.

However, the decline in learner enrolment at the primary education level has resulted in a growing number of out-of-school learners and youth who do not have access to basic education (Chinyoka, 2014). According to the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Report (ZIMVAC, 2012) about 20% of learners in rural areas were not attending school. A study conducted by Tawodzera (2013) indicated that most school-going children do not only fail to go to school but their respective households are food insecure. To those that remain at school, their academic performance is generally low (Chinyoka, 2014). As a result of the above factors, the concept of inclusivity in the Zimbabwean education arena remains a contentious issue (Mafa, 2012).

2.5 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: CURRICULUM IMPLICATIONS

Bissaco *et al*. (2020) explain that Early Childhood Development (ECD) is an essential preparatory stage for primary education that every child should pass through despite physical and intellectual conditions. Samkange (2016) adds that in Zimbabwe, it is compulsory for all mainstream primary schools to have an ECD department that is equipped with resource material which enhances the development of reading skills among lower grade learners as early as possible. Just as in Malawi, all the nurseries and crèches in Zimbabwe have adopted this move to offer ECD A and B to very young learners. ECD A caters for the 0-4-year-olds while the B category concentrates on learners between 5 and 6 years who are believed to be in their final ECD learning phase and are ready to enrol for Grade 1 (Neuman, McConnell & Kholowa, 2014).

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (Nziramasanga Commission) highlighted the importance of ECD education (Zimbabwe, 1999), and as a result, the government of Zimbabwe with the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education developed an ECD diploma and a degree programme to train ECD teachers and promote the development of specialised training in early childhood. The government established more learning centres and provided ECD specialist teachers regardless of geographical location. Learners in rural areas can now access ECD education in schools, enrol for ECD A and B for two years before proceeding to primary education (see Figure 2.1).

As previously indicated in the introduction and background to this study (Chapter 1), the acquisition of essential reading abilities is critical to learner understanding of curriculum content, especially during the primary school phase. In this regard, the lack of grade-appropriate reading literacy skills impacts negatively on the learners' desire to acquire other academic skills such as solving mathematical problems, logical presentation of ideas as well as the general development of plausible communication skills. Regardless of linguistic specifications, the ability to read in any language facilitates understanding of other subjects in the curriculum.

As Machet and Tiemensma (2009) indicate, the goal of developing reading literacy is to help learners understand written texts and to enhance effective communication in societies. Because reading is inseparable from curriculum understanding, it is critical that the Ministry of Education prioritises reading skill development to assist lower grade learners in developing a reading culture which ensures that comprehension and critical reading skills support the learning of other subjects in the curriculum. Thus, this study aimed to identify classroom conditions that enable the acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grade learners in Zimbabwe. This could have serious curriculum implications for primary school learning in the country, given the background that most lower grade primary school teachers struggle to teach reading in a systematic way (Cekiso, 2017).

Measures to ensure that lower grade learners are given the opportunity to follow the intended curriculum are only possible once they can read. This means that in the lower grades of the primary school, it is vital that learners learn to read so that as they move through the phase, they use their skill in reading to learn. The intended curriculum is

basically the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the enacted curriculum. This is often captured in the content standards as well as in other documents such as schemes of work. It is imperative, therefore, that lower grade teachers understand that their major role is to create a classroom culture that develops reading motivation among learners.

It is interesting to note that Zimbabwe has a clear reading curriculum that may not be fully conceptualised by most lower grade teachers. Because of limitations as regards the number of qualified lower grade teachers who can competently teach reading to elementary learners, it is not surprising that most schools operate with teachers who do not seem to understand the pedagogy of teaching reading as an academic component of primary school learning (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016).

2.6 CONCLUSION

The above description of the Zimbabwean education context shows that the pledge by the post-independence Zimbabwe government to offer free primary education has helped to promote literacy development for most indigenous people in the country. The introduction of a new ECD curriculum policy, together with the training of specialist lower grade teachers in Zimbabwe, is another milestone reached in improving reading literacy development among learners during the early years of the primary phase. The role of the missionary enterprise in educating Zimbabweans is again an achievement that should be applauded, regardless of other negativities experienced because of the colonial legacy in Africa, in general, and Zimbabwe, in particular. Today, the abolition of separate development in the country has helped to deracialise professional training while the implementation of the recommendations made by the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (Zimbabwe, 1999) are still to be fully implemented.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 presents a review of the literature focusing on, amongst other things, the importance of developing reading literacy skills from a learner's entrance into primary schooling and understanding components of literacy-rich classroom environments. Challenges facing lower grade primary school teachers and learners regarding word identification, decoding as well as meaning attached to literary study texts are identified in this chapter and challenges associated with assessment of learner competency in reading are highlighted. Investigating these aspects is critical towards developing understanding of enabling classroom conditions that could be applied to improve lower grade learners' reading skills acquisition and development in the Zimbabwean primary school education system.

3.2 LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe, like many other African countries such as South Africa, is not only multicultural and multilingual (Delport, 2006) but also is geared towards maximum elimination of illiteracy. Lower grade learners in Zimbabwe also endure, amongst other things, long distances to and from school as well as unfriendly local environmental conditions (Mapolisa & Tshabalala, 2013). Since the socio-ethnic and political composition of the Zimbabwean community is characterised by different languages, cultures and belief systems, Munhuweyi and Masuku (2002) argue that it is imperative that lower primary school education provision is sensitive to local uniqueness. Because language is a critical component of culture (Kramsch, 1995), the report of the National Language Policy Advisory Panel (NLPAP, 1998) recommended that previously marginalised languages be taught and used as the languages of instruction, particularly in the lower grades of ECD and Grades 1 2 and 3.

As occurred in Zambia (Miti, 1995), the first post-colonial government in Zimbabwe (under President Robert Gabriel Mugabe) upgraded the status and role of local languages as primary media of instruction. The existence of several cultures and diverse languages in Zimbabwe necessitated the development of a language policy to address curriculum issues for effective social integration in schools (Bergman,

Watrous-Rodriguez & Chalkley,1995; Tokwe, 2018). This policy stated that the first three grades of primary schooling be taught in the vernacular (Gudhlanga, 2005).

Immediately after the enactment of this language policy, indigenous languages gained greater recognition and pre-service teachers were encouraged to specialise in their home languages (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002, Richards & Govere, 2003). Bergman *et al.* (1995) further insisted that none of the so-called 'superior languages' such as English and French can aid learning, particularly at lower grade levels, as well as the mother tongue. Local languages thus are most appropriate as the medium of instruction for all lower grade subjects in Zimbabwe.

The use of local languages as the medium of instruction at lower grade levels in Zimbabwe has an important advantage: it minimises challenges with expression and comprehension because schools are located directly in the physical socio-linguistic communities and cultural environments (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002). Cummins and Danesi (1990) argue that literacy development using mother tongue languages helps to formulate cognitive schemes that are critical in classifying and organising curriculum study materials. This understanding is advanced by Halliday (1978) and Davies (2008) with Dillon (2012) indicating that no language can completely replace home language. Therefore, mother tongue should remain as the 'root' language for curriculum instruction at lower grade level.

English is not indigenous to the Zimbabwean socio-cultural and education community. English is a second language (L2) while local languages such as Shona, Ndebele, Karanga, Ndau and Tsonga are first languages (L1). Ndamba (2008) indicates that once the learners master their first languages, reading and understanding of other languages becomes less stressful. One reason is that most languages use the same alphabet, thus, the same phonic principles and prescriptions are applied during word construction processes. This means that speech habits as well as developing reading, writing and listening skills during the acquisition of L1 are easily transferrable to learning second and third languages. As Munhuweyi and Masuku (2002) postulate, human languages share several cognitive and academic proficiencies, and this makes it possible to transfer literacy skills across languages. However, it is important to establish a solid foundation in the home language (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016).

Based on the socio-political and educational history of Zimbabwe, some indigenous language teachers, learners and parents have less respect for the teaching and subsequent value of mastering linguistic competencies of vernaculars. Nzewi and Maramura (2021) argue that it is necessary to decolonise the subjugated African mind first before anything indigenous is considered as valuable curriculum content for contemporary schooling in Africa. This position is further supported by Babaci-Wilhite, JaJa and Lou (2012) who indicated that there is need to promote an indigenous framework that values traditional philosophies emanating within local communities, languages and cultural arts practices as instructional materials for post-independence education systems of independent countries, regardless of continental origins.

The National Language Policy Advisory Panel (NLPAP) states that English becomes the main medium of curriculum instruction from Grade 4 upwards (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002). The use of English as the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards has been difficult to apply mainly because most primary schools in Zimbabwe are in typical monolingual speech communities. Similarly, most primary schools in high density suburban environments are also monolingual, the stipulation to use English during school time has been, once again, difficult to apply (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002).

Promoting multilingual education in Zimbabwe is important and one needs to allay learners' fears that the use of L1 during school time negatively impacts L2 acquisition. As previously mentioned, English is the language of instruction for all subjects from Grade 4. The Zimbabwean *Primary School English Syllabus for Grade One* (CDU, 1984) outlines meaningful skill transfer from L1 to L2. Teachers are encouraged to use local languages more than L2 at lower grade levels (in most cases, L2 is English). The emphasis on the acquisition of oral skills in both L1 and L2 is critical for the development of reading and writing abilities in both indigenous (L1) and English as a second language (L2). However, Ndamba (2008) warns that internalising sounds constituting L2 words before being mastered in the vernacular is an academic disaster regarding the development of reading skills for both indigenous (L1) and foreign languages (L2). Learners need to demonstrate considerable understanding of spoken English as a second language so that they can acquire adequate early reading vocabularies and eventually develop good writing skills (Chisita, 2011; Council *et al*. 2016; Musingafi & Chiwanza, 2012).

Travers *et al*. (1993) and Pretorius and Spaull (2016) advise that such cognitive and analytical competencies are only achievable once the first language is maintained and where indigenous language speakers are not stigmatised. However, Pearl and Lambert (1962) suggest that bilingual learners who use both L1 and L2 equally develop greater creative and mental reflexive skills than monolinguals as they value both languages differently. This aligns with Hakuta, Friedman and Diaz (1987) who found that bilingual learners demonstrate higher levels of cognitive and analytical thinking than their monolingual counterparts, provided appropriate teaching strategies have been applied (Masuku, 2002). In contrast, Miti (1995) indicates that the simultaneous teaching of L1 and L2 during the lower grades of primary schooling in Zambia has resulted in learners who were unable to read in either language. As another side to the language debate, Chivhanga and Chimhenga (2013) argue that the use of English as the sole medium of communication and curriculum instruction as early as pre-school, is considered the major reason that candidates at high performing schools in Zimbabwe have always performed better than their counterparts across the country.

Researchers have offered many sides to the language argument. The UNESCO Committee of 1953 recommends that the best medium of instruction, particularly for lower grade learners, is the mother tongue since pupils understand it better and express themselves with fewer hurdles (Mwamwenda, 1996). Bamgbose (1991), who cites a case study in Nigeria to establish the effectiveness of L1 as compared to the use of L2 for lower grade learners, supports this position. The results of the study endorse the general understanding that the use of indigenous languages, instead of English as the medium of instruction for lower grade learning, better facilitates the acquisition of competent reading skills.

Lessow-Hurley (1990) argues that as soon as the child is enrolled for early childhood development programmes, they are already equipped with adequate vocabulary and syntax in their mother tongue. This, he further argues, provides a strong foundation for literacy development that will be the key focus of the Grade One curriculum. Davies (2008) and Freeman and Freeman (1992) and Lee (2017) concur that once learners who are in the lower grades, can consolidate their understanding of the vernacular, such knowledge is transferred to master L2 linguistic technicalities. This means that

people learn other languages, drawing on linguistic skills acquired from their mother tongue.

Ignoring the mastery of L1 while idolising the mastery of foreign languages is not only detrimental to reading literacy development (Miti, 1995), but a direct devaluation of lower grade learners' socio-cultural and political contexts. Munhuweyi and Masuku (2008) insist that it is a pity that most African countries use L2 as both the language of instruction in schools and that it is the language of business in industry and commerce. This is notwithstanding the fact that L2 is the language of the minority in these countries. However, many parents in Zimbabwe are reluctant to support literacy development of local languages. Instead, they think knowledge of English is not only a sign of intelligence but also a direct avenue towards lucrative employment. Hence, their understanding of education is one's mastery of good English. It is possible that a lack of pride in the use of local languages as the medium of instruction in most primary schools in Zimbabwe has led to the Grade 7 learners' high failure rate, particularly in Shona and Ndebele (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002). From my personal experience in teaching at some high performing schools in Harare, there are useful pedagogical strategies acquirable via primary language usage towards the teaching and learning of English as L2. This strengthens the basis of this study to explore and understand enabling classroom conditions that support the acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grade learning in the Zimbabwean education system.

It becomes apparent that the teaching of reading as an academic discipline at lower grade level must involve the mastery of both spoken and reading skills of the first language (Huseyin, 2013). There are intellectual gains from the mastery of L1 as the foundation of learning English which becomes the medium of instruction for later years in education. Ultimately, language skills as well as the preservation and reinforcement of learners' cultural identities are integrated because of recognising the value of L1 in the acquisition of reading skills and competencies (Cummins & Danesi, 1990). As Munhuweyi and Masuku (2002) postulate, this is not only to facilitate oral communication skills, but also to preserve indigenous peoples' cultural identity, practices and beliefs.

Strong mastery of reading skills for both L1 and L2 is essential. Teachers should recognise the importance of helping lower grade learners master L1 as a precursor to

acquiring L2 reading competencies. Munhuweyi and Masuku (2002) further state that support for L1 as the medium of instruction is not only an appropriate medium of instruction, but it also provides political ammunition to repel colonial propaganda aiming to mentally subjugate Africans, particularly about the value of their indigenous languages, cultural practices and their creative thinking abilities. South Africa's language dilemma, for example, comes from how Afrikaans and English are both used as languages of academic instruction from lower grade to university level. South African indigenous languages such as Tshivenda, isiZulu and Sesotho have not been accorded equal status for academic advancement purposes. Elevating Afrikaans to such a high linguistic status for academic use in South Africa was possibly a political strategy to consolidate white Afrikaners' political authority while neglecting to award other indigenous languages with similar status (Mkhize & Balfour, 2017).

Freeman and Freeman (1992) claim that for teachers to operate effectively in multilingual societies, they should be multilingual. For example, most South African lower grade teachers in communities where Afrikaans, English and isiZulu are spoken, are encouraged to master all languages to operate effectively (Ngcobo *et al.,* 2016). Similarly, teachers at primary schools in Zimbabwe's Midlands province are also expected to master Shona, Ndebele and English to guide lower grade learners with acquiring competent reading skills in all three languages. The greatest challenge for teachers in multilingual communities is probably establishing which of these languages is the primary vernacular. Hence, one needs to enquire to what extent lower primary school teachers are conversant in all languages represented by the learners' environment.

Ndamba (2008) insists that lower grade learners who learn through L1 are at an advantage over those whose curriculum instruction is provided through L2. However, the language of instruction at school is often not the same as the one spoken at home (Miti & Monaka, 2009), which could result in a higher failure rate amongst African learners. Informed by these perspectives, the following section discusses conceptual bases that guide this research.

3.3 CONCEPTUALISING AN EARLY READING INITIATIVE (ERI) IN ZIMBABWE

Most learners in the country could easily be classified as coming from limiting backgrounds in terms of resources for educational development. Zimbabwe's

economic status in the past two decades is less favourable to class differentiation so it is possible then to assume that most learners in Zimbabwe come from similar family economic backgrounds (Forrest, Johnston & Poulsen, 2013).

In addition to the above socio-economic conditions, the realisation that the majority of primary school learners in Zimbabwe were being promoted to next grades without adequately demonstrating their reading abilities (Ogunniyi, 1996), prompted the government of Zimbabwe, through the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU), to initiate the Early Reading Initiative (ERI) study programme to equip primary school teachers with readership pedagogical competencies through in-service training (Nota, 2010). As a matter of policy, primary schools in Zimbabwe are required to develop early reading skills with lower grade learners as soon as candidates enrol for Early Childhood Development (ECD) at any registered learning institutions in the country. Failure to do that, leads to professional censorship particularly from the Zimbabwean Public Service Commission (PSC) and other concerned stakeholders, such as parents and human rights organisations (Chinyoka, 2014).

Thus, the Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), in collaboration with CDU, crafted the Early Reading Initiative (ERI) Curriculum Document (Zimbabwe, 2015). Lower grade learners are expected to undergo a specialised reading development programme to acquire competent reading skills as early as possible. N'Nambi (2005) articulates the importance of teaching reading to every lower grade learner because understanding of other curriculum subjects depends on the learner's ability to read. For the past two decades, Zimbabwe has witnessed relatively low annual pass rates because most candidates reach examination time unable to read fluently (Chinyoka, 2014; Zimbabwe, 2015).

Iwahori (2008), Lee and Wong (2014) and Zimmerman (2014) further insist that success in any learning is determined by one's ability to read. This means that learners should be assisted with mastering the basic mechanics of reading and comprehension. Hence, they can learn all subjects of the curriculum with less challenges. To reduce the level of reading disabilities among lower grade learners in Zimbabwe, the ERI identified strategies to assist teachers with developing teaching programmes and activities to promote effective mastery of reading skills among early grade learners in primary schools. These vital reading literacy skills include auditory

discriminatory skills, auditory memory skills, vocabulary development skills, tactile discrimination, visual memory as well as book arrangement skills. These skills are emphasised during the early childhood learning phase as learners prepare to enrol for Grade 1 and are individually presented and discussed in the subsequent sub-sections.

3.3.1 Auditory Discriminatory Skills

It is critical for early childhood learners to develop a thorough understanding of, amongst other things, the applicability and use of different sounds, word rhythms and tone in word construction (Clemens, Shapiro & Thoemmes, 2011; Council *et al.,* 2016; Lundberg *et al*., 1988). These auditory discrimination skills are important for the development of reading skills in Grade 1. In this regard, Snow *et al*. (1998) argue that teachers can use, among other approaches, poems, rhyming words, song and dance, telling and listening to stories as well as imitating animal sounds.

Regarding learner achievement, Stebbins, Pierre and Proper (1977) suggest that an assessment guide for teaching pre-reading skills be developed. The guide measures the extent to which learners have mastered the skill. Teachers are expected to continuously assess learners as they engage in learning activities mainly through observation, portfolios and a developmental checklist. Because every learner comes from a specific cultural community with distinct languages, moral values and belief systems (Lie, 1995), they are exposed to a variety of musical arts activities providing different sound production systems and styles which are reliable sources of phonetics and phonological development (Delport, 2006).

By encouraging lower grade learners to identify different sounds produced by musical instruments, learners develop not only listening skills but internalise sounds that constitute most speech sound formations derived from alphabet letters (Eze, 2014). Using musical instruments such as drums, jingles, shakers, bottles, clappers and triangles, learners can play the ‘blindfold game’ in groups where they name objects and their respective sounds. Ultimately, learners master different skills, for instance, instrumental performance skills, listening skills as well as internalising word sounds critical for the development of preliminary reading skills in preparation for Grade 1.

3.3.2 Auditory Memory Skills

The ability to remember a sound is critical for the development of early reading skills, particularly for lower grade learners during the early year of the primary school phase

(Kim & Quinn, 2014). Auditory memory skills are developed through repetition, rhythm and rhyme. During the process of acquiring these skills, lower grade learners may listen to musical sounds in areas outside or far away from view. The teacher then asks learners to relate specific sounds with particular sound producing gadgets. Such activities are important because they guide learners to learn through listening. Encouraging learners to memorise, repeat and recite different sounds learnt previously, results in a greater understanding and mastery of phonemes being promoted (Juel, 1996).

Learners derive a great deal of fun and joy from such learning experiences. Hence, learners quickly remember what kind of sounds they previously practised (Butler, 2006). Hirata and Kelly (2010) further support this position indicating that most of such learning experiences are more group activities than individual work, where there is the potential for reciprocal learning. Listening is an essential skill in language development that ultimately lays a strong foundation for reading readiness. The focus of such learning experiences, therefore, is to assist learners in identifying sounds around them, repeating sounds from memory, imitating sounds from the immediate learning environment as well as matching sounds with their sources (Kuhl, 2004).

3.3.3 Vocabulary Development Skills

Lower grade learners usually enter early childhood learning already equipped with substantial mother tongue vocabulary (Munhuweyi & Masuku, 2002). However, in this phase, the major aim for teaching reading is to assist lower grade learners in learning to read to read to learn (Lee 2017; Tokwe, 2018). Learners are expected to accurately identify printed words with less difficulty and understand the meaning of these word. The development of verbal, non-verbal and vocabulary skills can help lower grade learners identify words correctly.

It is imperative, therefore, that teachers identify activities that allow learners to express themselves using verbal and non-verbal language as well as guiding them to communicate using appropriate language registers (Lee & Wong, 2014; Snow, 1983). In addition, role-play, group work, telling and listening to stories, as well as field trips where learners have opportunities to announce who they are, are valuable strategies (Drew, 2012; Lundberg, 1984; Read, 1971, 1986). The use of photographs, mirrors as

well as diagrams also help learners develop strong vocabulary foundation frameworks for use in constructing meaningful sentences.

Regarding the use of non-verbal language for expression, learners are expected to interpret non-verbal forms of communication where the teacher can show a communication sign and then ask learners to interpret it. Road signs, for example, are good examples that can be used to interpret meaning. In doing so, learners can identify vocabulary that ultimately adds to the oral literature every learner has accumulated since birth (Chisita, 2011). Musingafi and Chiwanza, 2012) suggest that teachers narrate short stories, encouraging learners to listen responsively. In turn, learners are encouraged to tell their own stories. As lower grade learners grapple with trying to narrate their individual stories, they are learning two things almost simultaneously, namely, vocabulary expansion and learning to perfect the logical flow of events.

It is vital that attention is given to the development of vocabulary skill, as Juel (1988), who tracked 54 children at a school in Austin, Texas from the beginning of first grade to the end of fourth grade, revealed that most learners who become poor readers later in their academic lives, entered the first grade with limited phonemic awareness.

3.3.4 Visual and Tactile Discrimination

Literacy development is possible once learners accumulate substantial vocabulary to facilitate verbal communication (Snow, 1983). One of the ways to achieve this is to guide lower grade learners to determine similarities and differences between objects or symbols by sight. Lower grade learners are expected to identify objects by colour or size as well as what is missing, which one is odd, and/or what is wrong. Thus, developing visual discrimination skills enhances letter recognition (Kim, Linan-Thompson & Misquitta, 2012; Snow, 1983).

During class activities, lower grade teachers guide learners to identify similarities and differences between objects and request them to find words to describe them. Teachers can use teaching strategies such as discussion, games, poems and observation. For more consolidated results, lower grade learners may also provide educational media such as stones, bottles, bricks and leaves. Learners may be asked to play a blindfold game asking each other to feel and describe how particular objects feel. Regarding matching games to further consolidate learner memory, learners observe pictures and recall details as well as find similarities and differences (Clay,

1979; Dillon, 2011). Through such class activities, lower grade learners develop the ability to observe, identify, demonstrate, recall and match objects. Along the process, learners master substantial vocabularies that are critical for the development of pre-reading skills, which makes it easier for Grade 1 learners to master reading skills as early as possible.

3.3.5 Visual Memory

The ability to recall images that have formerly been observed stimulates the acquisition of early reading development skills. The ability to recollect information previously observed involves active mental storage and improved retrieval skills. For instance, recalling the image of a flying bird, a green bus involved in an accident, the outstanding qualities of a particular avocado tree, or the skilfulness of a cat are good examples of how teachers can assist lower grade learners in developing visual memory (Clay, 1967; Iwahori, 2008).

Teaching activities may include requesting learners to recall the location of objects in different places, identifying their main features as well as recalling the sequence of objects in the order they were originally presented (Kuhl, 2004; Lee, 2017). Among other approaches, lower grade teachers may use puzzles, role-play and drama, song and dance, problem-solving strategies, discussion, group work, and discovery methodologies. Regarding teaching activities, lower grade teachers may demonstrate, among other things, the activity called *Follow the leader* while learners observe and later imitate. A series of more exciting activities using maps, images, patterns, letters and numbers may be used in a diversified manner to strengthen learners' visual memory. These activities help learners to concentrate, remember and repeat actions and activities.

The following section focuses on the conceptualisation of literacy-rich classroom environments and how these could create enabling conditions for effective acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grade learners in the Zimbabwean education system.

3.4 CONCEPTUALISING A LITERACY-RICH CLASSROOM LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Literacy development is an art, a critical skill in all contemporary societies (Pretorius, 2014). It is imperative, therefore, that teachers become aware of the purposes of imparting reading and writing skills to learners as soon as they enter the school system. Lower grade teachers are expected to understand what learners find interesting to keep them motivated during lessons in their respective classrooms. Social and physical factors are critical towards creating conducive learning environments for literacy acquisition and development. The classroom environment is important because it motivates or hinders the desire to read among lower grade learners. It should be an environment with opportunities to integrate reading literacy with other curriculum concepts such as solving and understanding mathematical problems as well as assisting learners to develop sense of the locality in which they stay (Booth & Booth, 1994; Lee, 2017). In addition, attractive displays in the classroom motivate lower grade learners to develop a love for reading (Booth & Booth, 1994; Iwahori, 2008). Colourful, aminated charts pinned to classroom walls, for example, are important teaching and learning aids to promote learners' interest in rehearsing word and sentence construction activities.

More specifically, the classroom environment should provide conditions that enable reading literacy development (Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Holdaway, 1979, 2001; Lee & Wong, 2014). Learners learn to read information they frequently see. It is important for teachers, therefore, to realise that in the absence of grade-appropriate reading texts within classrooms, learners struggle to develop an interest in reading. Thus, enabling classroom environments for lower grade learners should:

- Be well organised, illustrating a daily classroom routine.
- Provide a place to keep individual belongings safe.
- Have labels naming all items in the classroom, for example, a table, chair, door, window and so on.
- Provide a wide variety of written materials for strategic reading exposure; and
- Display learners' work that is changed weekly (Babaci-Wilhite *et al.,* 2012; Salinger, 1996).

The above suggestions are reinforced by Ball and Gettinger (2009), who assert that classroom environments filled with educative displays, labels and a wide variety of reading materials provide greater opportunities for language growth. Similarly, home environments should complement school efforts to promote the acquisition of competent reading skills, primarily during the early years of primary schooling. This could be achieved by creating reading rooms with almost similar displays as those found in classrooms at school (Kim & Quinn, 2014).

Salinger (1996) suggests that apart from the main library at the school, every lower grade classroom should have a library, age specific reading materials and equipment, furniture and be well-ventilated. Reading is a process that improves through frequent practice. The existence of reading resources fosters the desire to read among learners although most lower grade learners may not be able to read what they see at once, but they may begin their reading literacy journey with access to picture books which they are encouraged to 'read'.

As parental involvement is critical towards promoting learners' literacy development, the following sub-section focuses on the value of parental involvement in the acquisition of competent reading skills during the lower grade primary school education programme. Thereafter, the discussion involves word recognition skills, vocabulary development, phonics instruction, teachers as facilitators of language development and evaluating literacy development.

3.4.1 Parental Involvement

According to the language policy derived from the Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987, all three main languages – Shona, English and Ndebele – are supposed to be treated as equally important media for curriculum instruction in Zimbabwe (CDU, 1984). The language policy in Zimbabwe advises that the language that is most indigenous to a particular ethnic group in the country should be the language of instruction at lower grade levels in all primary schools within the same ethnic community (Ndamba, 2008).

In this case, implementing the use of local languages as the medium of instruction does not only uplift the status of ethnic languages in education, but allows parents from previously disadvantaged communities to realise the importance of early literacy skills as the foundation for their children's acquisition and development of reading. This means that parents may become more involved and develop greater interest in

reading in their mother tongue once they realise the value of early literacy development as the foundation for reading. In the process, they can then guide their children in mastering early reading skills as they do their homework. Tokwe (2018) argues that parental involvement in family literacy development initiatives also provides critical opportunities for adult family members to enhance their own skills.

Language development is at the epicentre of the developmental processes of any culture (Council *et al.,* 2016; Pretorius & Stoffelsma, 2017). Parents are part of the community elders, and custodians of culture, morals and belief systems. Hence parental involvement in teaching their children to read, provides them with opportunities to transfer moral values and belief systems through direct instruction and presenting learning examples and activities that are related to their environment (Stright, Neitzel, Sears & Hoke-Sinex, 2001). Because every aspect of life in this contemporary world involves reading, it is important that parents become more involved in helping their children acquire reading skills at home (Paris, 2005; Strauss, 2012).

It is important that parents provide conducive home environments for their learners to acquire appropriate literacy skills even before they enrol for primary school education (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Seligman, 2012). Parents need to realise that they are their children's first teachers and that language communication skills used in the home are critical in their children's literacy development. The role of teachers then is to work hand-in-hand with parents to develop understanding of their role in promoting their children's literacy development. This means that literacy development is not only the school's responsibility. As Rosen and Myrberg (2009) suggest, literacy development is a joint venture between parents and teachers, schools and local communities. There should be regular interaction between teachers and parents to increase cordial relations among stakeholders of schools.

Come and Fredericks (1995) suggest including parents in organising literacy development workshops, inviting parent volunteers to assist specific classes with reading activities, donating leisure books such as novels and magazines as well as designing study programmes for all learners at home. Strickland and Morrow (1990) suggest that parents and teachers should encourage the reading of stories, which could provide pleasurable learning sessions since there could be opportunities for

lively debates about the story. Storybook reading, thus, provides opportunities for impromptu questioning, open discussion, sharing personal reactions as well as life experiences. All these activities promote the development of reading skills among primary school learners (Seligman, 2012).

Come and Fredericks (1995) suggest that teachers may assist parents with developing effective reading programmes for their children at home through:

- Active debates, listening as well as helping their children express ideas as straight and to the point as possible.
- Providing picture books for their children, starting from infancy.
- Providing other study materials such as computers, exercise books, reading rooms with appropriate furniture as well as a variety of toys to improve vocabulary development for young learners.
- Encouraging learners to narrate in their own words what they have read or seen in books.
- Assisting learners with the reading of menus, street signs, and any other forms of print materials available; and
- Modelling commendable reading habits by reading books regularly.

Learners must always see their parents reading something to understand the value of literacy skills in the contemporary world. Through sharing reading materials with learners at home, parents initiate young learners in the permanent desire to interact with print materials. Young learners will develop intellectual behaviours such as word and letter pointing, as well as recognising similar sounds. This understanding is supported by Gettinger and Stoiber (2008) and Catterall, Ross, Aitchison and Burgin (2011) who state that learners consolidate their understanding of linguistic terms, sound-related terms, identify word meanings based on their prior understanding of previous literary texts.

The following section focuses on resources that could be used to promote the development of word recognition skills at lower grade levels.

3.4.2 Word Recognition Skills

Learners who manage to internalise large vocabularies become good readers as opposed to those who struggle to master substantial amounts of words (Jenkins *et al.,*

2003; Strauss, 2012). Good readers recognise words and decode words instantly and this makes them read fluently and efficiently. Word recognition skills are critical for the development of effective reading skills, particularly at lower grade levels of primary school education (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). As important, is accurate and automatic word recognition as the preamble to understanding any literary materials, which is mainly achieved through reading fluently (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001).

Adams, Jones, Lefmann and Sheppard (1991) argue that learners need encouragement to learn the letters of the alphabet, spelling sounds and their respective patterns, text structures, as well as syntactical patterns. However, she discourages the use of unnecessary drills forcing learners to memorise words with limited use in sentence construction. Learners must be encouraged to read literary materials frequently to increase their instant word recognition abilities (Allen, 1998; Wingate, 2012). However, as some learners struggle to develop an interest in reading, such students need high interest reading materials to stimulate their desire to read. Gill (1992) cautions that learners should not be given reading materials that frustrate them because this might prevent learners from understanding meaning in texts.

Lower grade learners, thus, must be exposed to age-appropriate study materials following direct instruction through which they learn best (Adams, 1990). Such reading programmes, according to Seligman (2012), must be guided by clearly defined aims and objectives, well sequenced activities as well as detailed examples and checklists for effective evaluation of learner achievement. Duff *et al*. (1988) indicates that the idea of giving direct instruction to recognise and use words in sentences is not a matter of giving learners activities to complete, but carefully explaining and modelling expected from them as young readers. This will help learners understand the mental processes critical in conceptualising reading.

Duff, Laura and Beth (1988) explain that systematised direct instruction is important particularly for those lower grade learners who struggle to master phonics and decoding skills. Without these skills, young learners might completely fail to master essential reading technicalities (Lyon, 1995). However, Stahl (1994) cautions against teaching words in isolation of contextual meaning. She argues that it is possible for lower grade learners to recognise words and pronounce them correctly but still be unable to understand what they mean. This implies that direct instruction has

limitations (Wingate, 2012) and to counteract some of these limitations. Sears, Carpenter and Burstein (1994) encourage lower grade teachers to identify reading contexts in the form of simple comprehension passages. Such an approach provides opportunities for learners to contextualise word recognition skills within specific geographies and this stimulates their desire to relate individual experiences and explore further (Sears *et al*., 1994). In the process, lower grade teachers can ask learners to, for example, identify sounds of words and this will help learners internalise rhymes and the rhythm of words.

Such learning activities expose lower grade learners to reading texts that contain patterns they can quickly identify. Gifted learners will be able to write their own simple stories based on what they have previously read and mastered. Hence, their vocabularies could be enlarged and internalised for future use. Walker (2003) argues that it is not the case that all learners master these skills at once. Some learners lag and will need further assistance in identifying word patterns and improving fluency in reading.

According to Stahl (1994) and Marulis and Neuman (2010), lower grade learners need to develop abilities to recognise words instantly without analysis. The learners' ability to instantly recognise and understand words makes it easier for them to develop rapid and fluent reading skills in contrast to where readers pause trying to analyse unfamiliar words. Because most lower grade learners in multilingual communities come to school equipped with substantial mastery of vocabularies both in L1 and L2 (Ndamba, 2008), the role of the teacher, then, is to turn all the words learners know into a written format for sight recognition.

Before lower grade learners internalise sight recognition skills, there is need to ensure that they have substantially developed visual discriminatory skills (Snow, 1983). Lower grade learners must be able to detect word similarities and differences in printed passages. Artley (1996) suggests that there is a need to develop large stocks of sight words first and then teach strategies to recognise words in printed literature passages. This, Artley (1996) argues, helps lower grade learners master word sounds along with their understanding of the use of prefixes and suffixes using relevant examples in sentences.

Teaching English sight words at lower grade levels in multilingual societies is critical because:

- English language contains words that are not spelt the way they sound. Words such as *once, know* and *thorough* need to be internalised through sight reading.
- Learning and internalising words that are irregularly spelt during initial stages of teaching reading stimulates the desire to engage in reading.
- Since single letters have no meaning, presenting learners with whole words at the beginning of early reading lessons provide opportunities for learners to associate reading with meaning rather than memorising names of letters of the alphabet; and
- After mastering substantial vocabularies, lower grade teachers can begin teaching phonics, which is critical for understanding written texts in English as a foreign language (Artley, 1996).

Choosing sight words is very important if lower grade learners, particularly in non-English speaking communities, are to master new words for effective communication (Akkerman & Bakker 2011). Palmer (1985) argues that most initial sight words should not only be meaningful but also useful in the sense that learners must be able to incorporate them in their daily speech. Words such as *at, it, and, go, am*, should be taught as sight words so that lower grade learners begin to use them in sentences. For example:

> I ***am*** going to school.
>
> I want to ***go*** to the toilet.
>
> Look ***at*** the chalkboard ***and*** start writing.

Teaching sight words using word examples that help learners communicate and understand their immediate classroom needs assists lower grade learners developing positive attitudes towards reading (Palmer, 1985). Because words that are frequently used in daily communication are at the centre of every effective classroom instruction, teachers should write such words on work cards and advise learners to indicate letters that constitute the words and use them in sentences (Fry, 1977; Marulis & Neuman, 2010).

Miller and Veatch (2010) suggest that creating word walls of terms and phrases such as *Drinking Water*, *Playgrounds, Wet floor, Danger, No Trespassing*, and so on, assists lower grade learners to learn through repetition of words indicating situations that are important in their lives. This strategy is helpful to students who struggle to master basic reading techniques because each time they approach a written post, they are reminded of what they are expected or not expected to do (Schwab & Lew-William, 2016), thus internalising that which is required of them.

Calfee and Piontkowski (1981) suggest that reading aloud and requesting learners to repeat is one of the most effective ways to identify vocabulary. This approach is effective in both L1 and L2 because it provides a meaningful context to learn sight words as learners associate written symbols against sounds that constitute words and phrases (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007). Lower grade teachers may use such learning initiatives such as individual, paired work and group activities with teachers using pictures as well as actual objects with written notes indicating the names of such objects (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), for example, *chair, table, bench, ball, shelf*, and so on. Palmer (1986) is satisfied that as learners learn to recognise words along with their visual configurations, it promotes their desire to read and explore more and thus create scenarios for developing vocabulary.

3.4.3 Vocabulary Instruction and Development

Vocabulary development is a sophisticated learning process, which may be difficult to generalise and pinpoint at exactly which age learners might master specific words and their meanings. McConaughy (1978) states that young learners learn to differentiate opposites and develop more discriminating skills as they grow older. For instance, anything that is round is a ball. Be it an orange or an apple, anything round is a ball. They will later differentiate which one is the actual ball and which one is not. In time, they accrue a larger vocabulary to match specific objects that may look similar. Similarly, some learners as old as 10 years may not be able to differentiate *sister* and *girl, brother* and *boy*. Yet, younger learners might master these differences slightly earlier than others (Walker, 2003).

Pressley (2002) indicates that learners increase their vocabulary during lower grade levels of primary school, particularly in being exposed to reading literature from different sources such as picture books, magazines, newspapers, short stories and

novels as well as content-specific textbooks (Sears *et al.,* 1994; Marulis & Neuman, 2010). Schmitt, Jiang and Grabe (2011) indicate that lower grade learners could potentially increase the words they learn as they repeatedly interact with written texts. Learners who have limited exposure to written materials may not match their counterparts who regularly exposed to books and magazines (Pressley, 2002).

As previously indicated, learners' individualised family experiences help to contribute to their vocabulary development (Brabham & Villaume, 2002) and individualised life experiences could later in their academic lives serve as a major source of creativity in composition writing (Varghese & Wachen, 2016). Topics such as *The day I will never forget* are based purely on individualised experiences emanating from family challenges, happy moments as well as sad encounters that candidates later in their academic lives may exploit to improve their linguistic expressivity.

Brabham and Villaume (2002) argue that learners accumulate substantial vocabulary through daily conversations with other people within communities. Therefore, language-rich environments promote easy mastery of expressions through, for example, the use of folklore, idioms and figurative expressions in most ethnic African communities. Idiomatic expressions among the Ndau people of Zimbabwe (Ndamba, 2008) for instance, are known as being the major source for theatre development initiatives among most play artists in Manicaland province. Lower grade learners in some selected primary schools located in these language-rich environments could become accomplished orators in contrast to their counterparts whose linguistic communities do not create learning conditions for such development (Miti, 1995).

In turn, Pitre (2014) indicates that lower grade teachers are expected to read short stories aloud to the class and encourage learners to identify any new words with teacher assistance of simple definitions. It is important that vocabulary instruction takes place throughout the day as opposed to confining meaning interpretation to language lessons or reading classes. Learners need to develop vocabularies in every subject of the curriculum (Richards & Pilcher, 2018) to master subject-specific terms such as melody, pitch, note values and rhythm which are used in music. Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) indicate that there is a need for intensive vocabulary coaching regardless of educational level to support this understanding. She argues that

intensive vocabulary coaching helps learners to read and understand subject-specific content successfully.

Developing vocabulary is not as easy as most people think (Nagy, 1998). Lower grade learners cannot understand new words they find in books because they, in most cases, are unable to infer word meanings according to context. Teachers therefore need to include essential words in stories and try to relate such word meanings to the child's experiences as closely as possible. Stories related to the daily existence of every learner in class are needed. For instance, stories to do with cooking, eating, drinking and playing could help young learners to make sense of the text (Davis & McDaniel, 1998). Teachers may approach the teaching of vocabulary through encouraging learners to actively participate in finding meanings of new words, assisting learners with finding words with similar meanings with the one in the text, assisting learners with developing skills to integrate new words in their familial background, providing strategies for learners to develop their vocabularies independently and encouraging learners to construct simple sentences using the new words (Schmitt *et al.,* 2011; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014).

Nelson-Herber (1986) specifies that exposing learners to a wide array of texts, increases their vocabulary. Teaching that involves construction of word meanings is also effective for improving greater understanding of comprehension passages. Vocabulary instruction enhances the comprehension of written literature only when the context is given alongside the general definition of the word to further support this understanding (Stahl, 1986; Wingate, 2012).

The following sub-sections focus on phonics and elements that constitute effective phonetics instruction.

3.4.4 Fundamentals of Operational Phonics Instruction

To achieve effective phonics instruction, teachers need to provide appropriate learning contexts as well as sensible reinforcement examples as a prerequisite to the acquisition of competent reading skills among lower grade learners (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Both auditory and visual discrimination skills are important for the operationalisation of effective phonics instruction (Snow, 1983).

Elkonin (1963) points out that since young learners can identify differences between letters of the alphabet before they can associate such letters with specific sounds. This means that teachers should ensure that lower grade learners have mastered the similarities and differences between letters and the sounds they produce. Lower grade learners should be assisted in understanding that speech is composed of separate word sounds (phonemes) and these different sounds are combined to create meaning (Salmeron & Garcia, 2011). This perspective is supported by Juel (1988), who explains that by understanding the alphabetic principle, lower grade learners most likely begin to learn words that are often repeated and are predictable in the daily routine of class activities. Once lower grade learners master phonic associations, they begin to realise the relevance of the letters of the alphabet and sounds as part of meaning conveyance rather than as isolated bits and pieces of meaningless sounds.

An effective reading programme should provide appropriate reinforcement opportunities and may include the constant practice of letter identification as well as their associated sounds (Clay, 1979; Dillon, 2012). It should also include strategies such as using words in sentences as well as writing short paragraphs (Drew, 2012; Spiegel, 1990), because lower grade learners tend to internalise phonics generalisation through regular interaction with word sound systems which leads to a broader conceptualisation of reading as an academic activity.

The irregularity of the English spelling system provides numerous opportunities for phonics generalisability. This could be the direct opposite of the spelling systems of most indigenous Zimbabwean languages that are spelt almost the same as letter sounds of the alphabet (Wolf-Schein, Afako & Zondo, 1995). Lower grade learners must be assisted in understanding that generalisation of word sounds help them to derive pronunciation and not the meaning (Dillon, 2012; Elkonin, 1963; Erastus, 2013). For some words that are irregular in terms of their spelling patterns, it is difficult to learn the correct pronunciation without assistance from the teacher. The task of understanding the generalisation of different sound symbols in English as a second language is even more difficult for L1 learners who had learnt sound-symbol associations in their first languages (Bailey, 1967; Burmeister, 1968). As such, lower grade teachers in multilingual education systems should be cautious about the teaching irregular sound and word systems of L2 in indigenous African speech communities (Miti,1995). Hence, lower grade teachers are encouraged to use both

drill and repetition strategies to maximise learners' understanding of speech patterns, which in turn promote the development of reading skills among lower primary school learners in Zimbabwe (Ndamba, 2008).

3.4.5 Teaching Phonetics

Adams (1990) indicates that here are two major approaches to the teaching of phonics to primary school lower grade learners. These are synthetic and analytic approaches. Downing (1973) thinks that it is possible to combine both synthetic and analytic approaches to come up with 'word families' that emphasise the teaching of onsets and rimes.

3.4.5.1 The synthetic approach

When using the synthetic approach to teach phonics, lower grade teachers should instruct learners to pay attention to relationships between letters of the alphabet (Wyse & Styles, 2007). Because there is no direct relationship between letters and sounds (Meltzer & Herse, 1969), the use of drill methods helps learners to understand the applicability and use of speech sounds in the acquisition of competent reading skills for lower grade primary school learners in Zimbabwe.

Adams (1990) suggests that teachers may use work cards on which, for example, letter ***b*** appears. Lower grade learners are then instructed to respond to the sound. Next, pupils are requested to blend the identified sounds to form words and then sentences. The teacher's role is to encourage lower grade learners to pronounce sounds produced by these letters of the alphabet continuously until words have been accurately mastered (Jones, Clark & Reutzel, 2013). It is critical, however, that lower grade learners are guided in mastering word segments with clear meaning identification (Dillon, 2012; Tovey, 1980).

Johnson and Baumann (1984) caution that teachers must not assume that there is an automatic transfer of skills to unfamiliar or new words. It is necessary to ensure that learners master substantial vocabularies for effective acquisition of competent reading skills during the early grades of primary schooling. Through the synthetic phonic approach, learners are sometimes asked to pronounce syllables that may have limited sense but later are exposed to written materials that may help them in identifying new words with ease (Snow, 2016).

3.4.5.2 The analytic approach

Understanding words by sight is critical in the development of effective reading skills for lower grade primary school learners. Dillon (2012) emphasises that the analytic approach encompasses the teaching of words by sight together with sounds produced by those letters of the alphabet. In this regard, Downing (1983) and Drew (2012) contend that many lower grade learners prefer this approach to any other, mainly because it avoids the distortion that sometimes occurs when such letters are pronounced in isolation. Hence, it is important that learners develop a substantial vocabulary to master sound patterns that will ultimately provide the base for the acquisition of competent reading skills during the foundation phase of primary schooling (Richards, 2010).

Adams (1990) indicates that to help learners sound new and unfamiliar words with limited challenges, teachers need to encourage lower grade learners to isolate vowels that constitute those words first and then blend them with consonants. The following methods are critical when using the analytic approach to teaching phonics:

- At first, lower grade teachers are expected to read simple comprehension passages aloud with examples of phonic activities where learners are instructed to dramatise, discuss, and/or comment immediately after the teacher finishes.
- Secondly, teachers are expected to introduce the foundational phonic elements {*a,e,i,o,u*} and learners are instructed to sound specifics letter of the alphabet as well as the combined vowels and consonants such as *ma me mi mo mu* (Shona).
- Thirdly, lower grade teachers are encouraged to provide short stories underlining words that contain the targeted phonic elements to which learners are instructed to pay attention.
- Fourthly, teachers are encouraged to instruct learners to read sections of comprehension passages paying particular attention to the identified key words as the teacher listens; and
- Finally, lower grade teachers are encouraged to instruct learners to read book sections as they listen and correct mistakes (Trachtenburg, 1990).

These analytical steps to the teaching of phonics must not be treated as separate elements of the school curriculum (Glisan, Swender & Surface, 2013). Instead, these

activities should be interwoven into language teaching activities, particularly with English as a foreign language.

3.4.5.3 Combining approaches

Downing (1983) and Dillon (2012) argue that it is possible to combine both synthetic and analytic approaches that involves the teaching of onsets and rimes. This approach entails that the teacher breaks down syllables before the vowel (onset) and the remaining syllables (rimes) that also start with vowels. Allen (1998) and Johnston (1999) explains that these rimes belong to word families that are sometimes referred to as phonograms. Table 3.1 below illustrates this approach:

Table 3.1: Showing onsets and rimes

Word	Onset	Rime
Black	bl-	-ack
Jack	j-	-ack
May	m-	-ay
Hut	h-	-ut
Hat	h-	-at

Clay (1993) and Gunning (1995) concur that the use of onsets and rimes is a very simple way of explaining how word building occurs, particularly in teaching phonics to lower grade learners. They agree that lower grade teachers may write a list of onsets and rimes separately on the chalkboard and ask learners in small groups and pairs these to build words. Johnston (1999) further suggests that teaching a one-word family (rime) enables learners to identify a substantial list of vocabularies that belong to that word family and increase learners' vocabulary. For learners who quickly understand, they could be set simple comprehension passages with difficult words that they are expected to try out while the teacher closely monitors their successes and challenges (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011).

Lower grade teachers are expected to provide different examples and more activities should be given to learners still in small groups and pairs to make sure that they master the use of phonics (Jones *et al.*, 2013). For example, teachers may write words on the chalkboard that lower grade learners have previously learned as sight words, such sight as *daddy, dog, donkey, did, do* and *Dennie*. Teachers may ask learners to pronounce them and then ask learners to pick similar sounds in the word examples.

Should answers be in the affirmative, teachers can then ask learners to identify where exactly the sound similarity occurs. Learners are usually able to point out that the similarity is at the beginning of each word. Learners could be asked to identify the letter of the alphabet that is not only common but also dominant in all the examples (Schwab & Lew-Williams, 2016). Again, lower grade learners will quickly pick out that the most dominant letter in this category is ***d***. Learners then, individually, in pairs and in small groups could identify more words that start with letter ***d*** and have similar sounds as those examples given at the beginning of the lesson.

Snow (2016) cautions that lower grade teachers need be very careful when teaching learners of the existence of some letters of the alphabet that may be pronounced differently depending on the word building circumstances as well as their meanings. Such an example involves the soft sound that is sometimes produced by the letter ***c*** of the alphabet. Johnston (1999) argues that when letter ***c*** is followed by ***e, i*** or ***y*** it has a soft sound that is sometimes sounded as ***s***. Examples of such words include *cent, cycle* and *city*. Teachers need to point out that, for instance, in the word *cycle*, the first ***c*** that is followed by ***y*** is the one that becomes softer while the next ***c***, followed by ***l***, sounds like **k**.

It is important that lower grade teachers emphasise phonemic awareness to facilitate the learning of onsets such as ***f*** and the consonant blend ***fr***. Allor and McCathren (2003) state that lower grade learners need to be aware of initial and blend consonants (such as ***b*** and ***br, f*** and ***fr, g*** and ***gr***) to be able to create meaningful word units. They argue that lower grade learners need to be reminded regularly of the relationship between consonants and vowels rather than the relationship between groups of phonemes.

From the examples cited above, it is critical that lower grade teachers alert learners to the importance of key words that contain phonograms or rimes. Gaskins, Gaskins and Gaskins (1991) state that it is prudent for lower grade teachers to regularly advise learners what they are going to learn, why it is important, and how to formulate examples and that it is critical for lower grade teachers to highlight the importance of analysing words and their respective spelling patterns because this will enable learners to master the correct pronunciation of words. Shelby-Caffey and Jenkins (2014) who explain that programmes emphasising word identification are pivotal in

guiding lower grade learners with acquiring reading skills and competencies, support this. These methods will help most lower grade learners acquire the phonic skills necessary for mastering reading skills during the early grades of primary schooling in Zimbabwe, as without being able to read, real learning is stifled.

3.4.6 Teachers as Facilitators of Language Development

Day, Connor and McClelland (2015) argue that both the physical and socio-emotional environments of the classroom promote or hinder learners' literacy development. Teachers, as facilitators, are therefore expected to create conducive learning environments where learners become enthusiastic and want to learn. The classroom arrangement on its own represents the teacher's philosophy of learning (Wilson & Cole, 1991) and teachers who believe effective learning comes through regular interaction with peers, provide opportunities for paired and group work.

It is critical for teachers to consider how to ensure that their classroom venues promote effective literacy development. Examples could be by providing learning environments containing attractive, interesting and varied study materials to stimulate the desire to learn among lower grade learners (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). More importantly, providing an interesting learning and well-furnished environment without creating an appropriate socio-emotional learning atmosphere is inadequate. Maphalala (2017) suggests that there is need to create a community of learners, proving adequate motivation, as well as creating a learner-friendly learning environment.

She further indicates that the teacher must guide all learners to know and appreciate one another through informal class discussions. As a class, both the teacher and learners agree on class rules that they think will help them to achieve class goals (Roberts, 1993). Once pupils discover that they are important members of a community of learners, they are generally motivated to conform to the general rules and regulations and thus become interested in all academic activities. Kohn (1996) suggests that such learning environments produce responsible learners who demonstrate competent reading skills as well as the desire to read.

Teachers should therefore lead by example by reading a variety of literature sources and being role models with good reading habits. This means that teachers must create conducive environments that encourage learners to become enthusiastic readers

through encouraging them to discover how literacy development leads to intellectual growth (Palmer, 1994).

3.4.7 Evaluating Reading Literacy Development

Every academic endeavour must be evaluated. Evaluating learners' reading progress is critical because it enables the teacher to discover the strengths and weaknesses of each individual learner in the class. Rowe and Hill (2010) indicate that it is necessary to establish what literacy challenges learners face, regardless of the socio-educational environment, which is verified through evaluation of performance. Because measurement and evaluation of any educational enterprise occurs in a sophisticated academic domain, tools to measure individual achievement require appropriate teacher competencies (Sledge & Pazey, 2013).

Serafini (1997) argues that assessment and evaluation of learner achievement in the teaching of reading is not synonymous with testing one's ability to identify words and phrases. Instead, evaluation of learner performance should be the sum of daily observations, results of the entire learning experience, interviews and a careful analysis of learners' work. Pareto (2014) indicates that the primary purpose for evaluating learner performance is three-fold, namely, to categorise learners according to intellectual proficiency, to provide academic accountability and, most importantly, to guide teaching and learning instruction.

Lower grade teachers therefore must have a reasonable understanding of each learner's performance to plan learning activities in advance that best suit them. Hence, assessment and evaluation should be a continuous process where the teacher observes and interacts with learners throughout the learning activities (Torgesen *et al*. 1999).

3.5 CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY

This study's conceptual framework draws upon several theories including classroom processes, as discussed in the literature. The various sections discussed in this review, align with classroom conditions that support reading literacy development. The conceptual framework for this study is based on the Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence (EMERGE) (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007), and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model (Shulman, 1987). The combination of

these conceptual models provides an understanding of how particular high performing schools in Harare manage to create learning environments that enable lower grade learners acquire and develop competent reading skills during the early grades of primary schooling in Zimbabwe.

The EMERGE model provides a framework needed to guide lower grade learners in acquiring reading competencies. Shulman's PCK model relates teachers' curriculum knowledge to their understanding of teaching strategies to impart such knowledge to learners in formal schooling systems. Each of these models is discussed in the subsequent sub-sections.

3.5.1 The Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence (EMERGE)

The Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence, or EMERGE, designed by Gettinger and Stoiber (2007), is a literacy programme focused on low-income children. The goal of the model is to ensure children begin school with the fundamental skills necessary for learning to read. The model is premised on the following philosophical underpinnings:

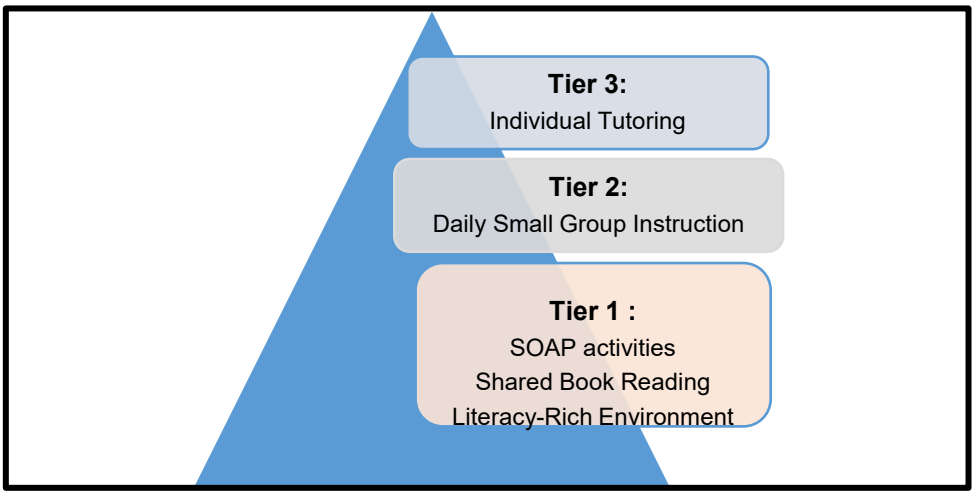
- The ability to read is centred on the acquisition of phonological awareness, alphabetical knowledge, as well as oral language and print media awareness.
- Lower grade learners who acquire these skills benefit more from formal instructional content than those learners without them.
- Success in the acquisition of these skills requires consistent and coherent curriculum instruction that is intentionally prepared for lower grade learners as early as possible.
- Young learners require continuous exposure to and well-structured interaction with printed media as well as regular practice in oral and written literature.
- Acquiring competent reading skills is dependent on the availability of conducive literacy environments both at school and at home; and
- Lower grade teacher competency is a non-negotiable requirement that needs constant upgrading through regular engagement in high quality professional development programmes (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007).

It is important that stakeholders strive to create learning centres that provide opportunities for the acquisition of critical reading skills within a formal learning

environment. Coupled with reading facilities and opportunities provided by the home environment, there is reason to believe that lower grade learners acquire reading skills more easily than when such conditions are limited.

It follows, therefore, that the ultimate goal of EMERGE is to provide rigorous and highly qualitative staff development programmes for lower grade teachers so that they acquire reasonable competencies to design and evaluate scientifically based early reading literacy curriculum content materials. Because parental involvement is critical towards promoting learners' literacy development, EMERGE strives to provide sensible links between parents and teachers to collaborate in assisting lower grade learners with competent reading skills acquisition and development during the early years of primary schooling.

Added to this, EMERGE advocates for the provision of reading resource materials that learners are allowed to take home while parents supervise homework activities for their learners. This, according to Gettinger and Stoiber (2007), influences the development of collaborative reading habits between teachers, parents and learners. Thus, learners are regularly exposed to multiple opportunities to interact with print media. Accordingly, EMERGE is not applicable to the English language alone. Neither is it continent specific. Instead, it can be applied to any language provided appropriate strategies (as prescribed in the model) have been followed. The following diagram illustrates the EMERGE model.



SOAP = **S**ound awareness, **O**ral language, **A**lphabet knowledge, and **P**rint awareness

(Source: Adapted from Gettinger and Stoiber, 2007:201)

Figure 3.1: The EMERGE hierarchical model

EMERGE, originally designed to assist learners coming from less conducive home environments in selected countries, is a three-tiered literacy development plan that aims to provide equal opportunities for all learners to acquire high quality reading skills under intensive individualised instruction.

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, the first stage *(Tier 1*) advocates for the use of a reading development curriculum that is derived from well-researched materials. Stipulated under Tier 1 is the need for a well-furnished classroom full of instructional study materials to support learners' phonological awareness, oral language skills, alphabet knowledge as well as print media awareness (SOAP or **S**ound awareness, **O**ral language, **A**lphabet knowledge, and **P**rint awareness). In Tier 1, the main purpose is to create a conducive environment for lower grade learners to acquire and develop reading skills under the guidance of expert educators who are continually exposed to professional development initiatives such as workshops, coaching clinics and weekly support sessions with experts. This tier links to the need for teachers engaging in continuous professional development. In *Tier 2*, learners are involved in small group activities where they accomplish predetermined reading tasks under the teacher's close supervision and guidance. The groups normally comprise not more than six learners so that the teacher is able to pay attention to each individual learner's challenges. Once the teacher manages to identify a learner's problem, s/he can prescribe solutions. This tier links with teachers' competence and skills. Lastly, *Tier 3* focuses on individualised help including intensive coaching to ensure that learners acquire competent early reading skills. It is under Tier 3 that teachers are expected to identify learners with specific challenges and recommend possible remedial intervention. This tier links with parental involvement where parents are engaged with extra reading activities to support learners.

Each tier in the EMERGE hierarchical model provides for intense skill drilling and individual assistance from highly qualified and experienced lower grade teachers. There are two main features that are constantly visible across all tiers. These features are:

- All tiers emphasise the need to strengthen the fundamental SOAP reading skills. Sound awareness refers to learner's ability to understand word rhymes, rhythms, segments and letter blending. Under oral language, learners are

expected to master vocabulary, understand comprehension passages as well as develop expressive language skills. Knowledge of the alphabet includes learner's ability to identify letters of the alphabet as well as different sounds they produce.

- The tiers emphasise the need to follow a consistent curricular path that progresses through specifically designed content via systematised pedagogical approaches. Added to this, regular professional development sessions enable lower grade teachers to implement the approved lower grade reading curricula with high levels of pedagogical practices.

The EMERGE model is a combination of classroom conditions and practices, a multi-layered intervention programme that is designed and presented by highly qualified reading education practitioners towards preparing lower grade learners for future academic success in school (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007). This value in implementing such an intervention programme is further substantiated by Clemens *et al.* (2011) and Council *et al.* (2016) who indicate that many children face reading challenges later in higher grades because they failed to acquire essential reading literacy skills when they began school. Resultantly, struggling to read means that such learners rarely catch up and this could be the reason for the majority being referred to special education (Chitiyo & Chitiyo, 2007; Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2004) or develop an aversion to reading. Chinyoka (2014) substantiates this, indicating that reading failure demotivates learners to the extent of dropping out of school.

Varghese and Wachen (2016) argue that assisting lower grade learners is not just the role of the school alone. Instead, children's literacy development should start in the home. Because of the critical role that families play in promoting reading literacy development among lower grade learners (Domina, 2005; Hui-Chen & Kimberly, 2008), the parental involvement component of the EMERGE model is thus, viewed as one of the evidence-based curricula activities within the multi-layered model. Parents therefore, should also provide reading resource materials to promote the development of print-related skills. Armed with these and other early literacy skills, Hui-Chen and Kimberly (2008) and Kucirkova, Littleton and Cremin (2017) further argue that given such circumstances where parents assist their children at home, parental involvement in their child's reading has been found to an important determinant of language and

emergent literacy and with this support, lower grade learners will find that they are able to establish themselves with ease in the school environment.

The EMERGE model, it is further argued, incorporates a multi-layered intervention approach to reading literacy development ultimately focusing on individual learner needs as well as equipping teachers with skills to recognise early indicators of learning delays and challenges. Collectively, both Shulman (1987) and Gettinger and Stoiber (2007) underscore the importance of teacher quality in curriculum interpretation as well as the use of appropriate pedagogies in teaching reading at lower grade level.

Based on these conceptual underpinnings, the EMERGE model aims at fulfilling four goals, namely:

- To implement a multi-tiered instructional model that utilises research-based practices towards the development of reading skills among lower grade learners through increasing the amount of time learners occupy on shared book reading activities.
- To implement monitoring procedures to identify learners with reading challenges as well as prescribing relevant solutions to such problems.
- To create high quality literacy-rich learning environments that support the development of reading skills to foster curriculum comprehension and appreciation; and
- To provide continuous staff development sessions anchored on literacy development needs of lower grade learners in schools (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007).

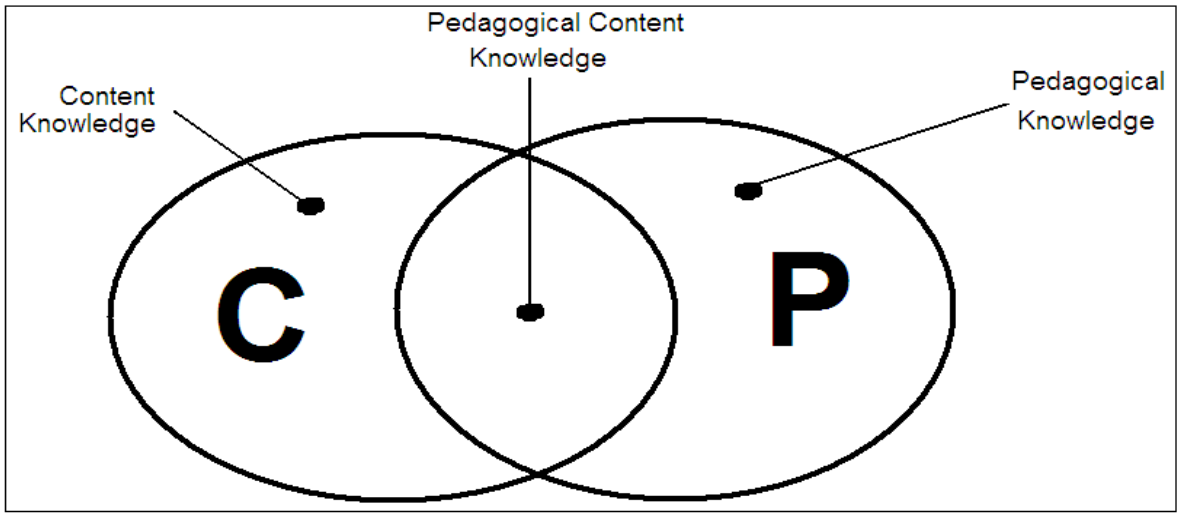
At the centre of the EMERGE model is the emphasis on teacher quality. Sledge and Pazey (2013) argue that teacher effectiveness is measured by one's ability to evaluate their performance well before looking at other variables that contribute towards learner achievement in academic work. Teacher self-introspection (Inocian, 2013), thus, could be viewed as one of the attributes that the EMERGE model propounds. As Gettinger and Stoiber (2007) further suggest, lower grade teachers use scientifically based classroom practices and approaches to ensure maximum achievement in all reading activities. In this regard, the EMERGE model aims at improving teachers' understanding of teaching literacy development through the application of evidence-based teaching strategies within enabling learning environmental conditions, which is

supported by Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model (Shulman, 1987) discussed in the next sub-section.

3.5.2 Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model

Shulman (1987) argues that teachers must understand both the subject curriculum as well as teaching strategies applicable to specific levels of learner categories. By implication, lower grade teachers are expected to demonstrate clear mastery of the reading curriculum content as well as appropriate teaching approaches to ensure that learners understand how to link alphabet letter sounds to word pronunciation. Hence, competent teachers are result oriented. They are outstanding education practitioners whose thrust is centred on the acquisition of robust intellectual grade-specific reading skills.

Teacher competence is a non-negotiable protocol (Nota, 2017) and therefore Shulman's PCK model (Shulman, 1987) is applicable to this study in understanding classroom conditions that enable reading literacy acquisition among lower grade learners in some selected high performing schools in Zimbabwe. Figure 3.2 illustrates Shulman's PCK model.



(Source: Adapted from Nota, 2017:46)

Figure 3.2: Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model

Shulman (1987) understands that it is only when the teacher demonstrates equal understanding of both content and grade appropriate teaching strategies that learners benefit meaningfully. In other words, it is the intersection of content and pedagogy

where real learning takes place. It is important, therefore, that lower grade teachers are versatile in their approach to teaching SOAP activities to guarantee effective acquisition of competent reading skills among lower grade learners in Zimbabwe. Shulman (1987) stresses the importance of two critical positions that underlie the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) model. These are reading as a critical academic component of the lower primary education curriculum, and knowledge of specific teaching strategies to assist lower grade learners in learning how to read to read to learn (Shulman, 1987).

3.5.3 Presentation of the Conceptual Framework for the Study

In particular, two theoretical perspectives, namely the EMERGE (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007) and PCK (Shulman, 1987) models were identified as conceptual bases guiding the study to establish enabling classroom conditions that promote the development of reading skills among lower grade learners in high performing schools in Zimbabwe.

Figure 3.3: Conceptual framework for the study

Specific reading development skills such as auditory discrimination, vocabulary development, visual memory and word development skills were discussed in relation to how these skills could be presented within the framework of the identified

conceptual bases to ensure that learners acquire competent reading skills, as discussed in Section 3.4 in relation to how reading literacy is taught in lower grades.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a review of the literature which began with a section on literacy development in Zimbabwe in colonial and post-colonial times with a discussion on the value of indigenous languages for early year learning and the introduction of English as the medium of instruction. This was followed by the research literature and models contributing to the conceptual framework underpinning the design and thinking for this study.

The following chapter focuses the research design as well as the methodological preferences that guide this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and discusses the research design as well as the methodological preferences underpinning the study. Justification is given for choice of the interpretivist paradigm and the qualitative approach as the methodological framework guiding this research (see Table 4.1). The choice of data collection strategies (interviews, observations, focus group discussions, document analysis) and the data analysis strategies is justified. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical considerations, as guided by the University of Pretoria's Ethics Code, the Helsinki Declaration (Escobedo *et al*. 2007), the Nuremberg code (Berg, 2001), and the Belmont Report (Ryan, 1979).

The first section of this chapter refers to the role of the researcher and how this is viewed and justified throughout the process.

4.2 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

This study sought to investigate the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe. The researcher sought to understand the pedagogical competencies required of teachers (Shulman, 1987) who teach reading skills at lower grade levels in Zimbabwe. The intention was to observe the actual teaching experiences and learners' acquisition of reading skills in their natural settings with the aim to understand conditions which should be created to help lower grade learners acquire appropriate reading literacy skills needed for formal school education. As such, an interpretivist paradigm (Leedy 2005) was deemed most appropriate to underpin this research.

As a participant observer, the researcher's role was to seek an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of others (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), namely, early childhood education teachers, lower grade learners and school heads as there is reason to believe that this topic is of particular importance for post-

colonial Zimbabwe if the vision 2020 of addressing illiteracy is to be achieved (Zimbabwe, 2005).

Having taken cognisance of how the interpretivist paradigm has influenced this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Diversi, 2007; Usher, 1996), the fact that high performing schools have successful reading programmes needs to be acknowledged. At this juncture, it was critical that the researcher indicated that bias is an unavoidable reality in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Thus, it is important that this bias regarding the phenomenon under study is acknowledged. The bias was a direct influence of the researcher's personal experience of how private schools value the importance of developing competent reading programmes for lower grade learners. Lower grade levels are the foundation of any intellectual success stories. This collective perception by most high performing schools' stakeholders (parents, teachers, learners) seem to resonate with Munhuweyi and Masuku (2002) and Ndamba (2008) who argue that academic proficiencies are related to early acquisition of literacy skills regardless of which language of instruction is used.

In order to dilute researcher bias that high performing schools usually assist lower grade learners with acquiring competent reading skills, the researcher was reflective during the data collection, analysis and interpretation; however, she may not have been able to completely eradicate that bias in her approach, but being reflexive helped identify acceptable professional conduct so as not to glorify undeservingly the quality of education in high performing schools that are generally private and well resourced. Some public schools produce candidates who perform even better than those nurtured in private schools which is witnessed later in post-primary as well as in tertiary education programmes where the distinction between learners from high performing schools and those from low performing school could be difficult to ascertain (Zimbabwe, 2005).

According to Morrow (2005), reflexivity is an effective strategy for countering bias in qualitative studies particularly when individual assumptions could influence the outcome of the research effort. Thus, reflexivity compels researchers to confess what could be their bias during their research. The researcher's reflection as an insider participant could have been influenced by the desire to give an honest opinion regarding the way private schools operate. Private schools are not only well resourced,

but they recruit competent teachers and provide conducive learning conditions for the acquisition of intellectual skills, which may not be the case in most of the public schools in other parts of the country. Thus, instead of declaring unfounded objectivity, the researcher has declared her position (Escobedo *et al.,* 2007).

Individualised opinions of the researcher are not penalised in qualitative research (Malone, 2003). Clough (2004) adds that qualitative researchers struggle to clearly define their roles in relation to their participants. Banister (2007) argues that the researcher is dominant, hence, it is necessary to strike some balance between the power relations of researchers and their respective participants. The personal relationship had with former colleagues in some of these private schools (high performing schools) enabled the researcher to conduct the research 'with' rather than 'on' them (Yin, 2016), as could have been the case had she the quantitative approach been an option. Having openly declared her individual perspectives as well as biases regarding the phenomenon under study, the researcher now focuses on the research design and methodology.

4.3 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The study sought to address the main research question: *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe?*

To support the main research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- To what extent does the intended primary school curriculum promote the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in the Zimbabwean education system?
- Which pedagogical competencies are required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at the lower primary level?
- Which enabling classroom features / conditions characterise the nature of support of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- How can the identified enabling conditions in high-performing schools be applied in low-performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system?

An overview of the methodology framework is given in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Framework for research design and methods

Research Paradigm	Interpretivist paradigm
Research Approach	Qualitative research approach
Research Design	Interpretive multiple case study design
Selection of Sites and Participants	Purposive sampling of: • High performing schools • Primary school principals • Lower grades teachers • Education officer • Lower grades classes
Data Collection Strategies	Document analysis, interviews, observations, focused discussions and in-class activities
Data Analysis	Inductive thematic analysis
Ethical Consideration	• Informed voluntary consent • Confidentiality • Protecting participants from harm • Role of the researcher • Reflexivity • Trust
Quality Criteria	• Credibility: Prolonged fieldwork, researcher reflexivity, peer review and data triangulation. • Transferability: In-depth description and purposive sampling. • Dependability: Data cross check and triangulation. • Confirmation: crystallisation and reflexivity. • Authenticity: Member checking and contributions

This study sought to identify classroom conditions that enable and support reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing schools. The main question was designed and aligned to the assumption that, although it is a policy that all primary schools in the country follow syllabi for different levels of education, there are some high performing primary schools whose classroom conditions enable learners to acquire competent reading skills more than others. Interpretivism and a qualitative approach with a case study design formed the blueprint for guiding the research

Usher (1996) and Mouton (2002) concur that all research is based on specific philosophical perspectives that determine the study direction. Thus, it is imperative to

understand what these perspectives are. The next section of this chapter identifies and discusses the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative inquiry as the framework of my study.

4.4 RESEARCH PARADIGMATIC STANDPOINTS

This study is anchored in qualitative research, and this has influenced the researcher's choice of an interpretivist paradigm as the epistemological framework. These paradigmatic standpoints informed the ontological, epistemological, methodological as well as the axiological perspectives governing the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

4.4.1 The Interpretivist Paradigm

According to Kuhn (1962, 1977), the term paradigm is a Greek word referring to a pattern. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) define the term 'paradigm' as referring to a system of worldviews applicable human communities of researchers to generate new knowledge. Accordingly, a paradigm could also be viewed as a system of structures used to generate new ideas through intensive academic and scientific procedural practices and measures.

Research is grounded in specific cultural practices that are defined according to participants' belief systems, norms and values to come up with new knowledge or ideas (Kuhn, 1977). Schön (1995) describes educational research, within which this study is situated, as a social science associated with groups of people located within specific geographical environments. This could mean that every local community has the mandate to demarcate the kind or type of ideals they believe are worthwhile for the development of their society; that is, separating knowledge from non-knowledge. What a particular community perceives as worthwhile intellectual endeavours may not necessarily be the same in the next community. Diversi (2007) states that meaning is not universal, rather it is context based. Schön (1995) and Diversi (2007) believe that every group is free to decide what is worth learning as well as to define how that group should learn in order to acquire basic context-based competencies as strategies for survival.

In the quest to understand enabling classroom conditions for reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing school in Zimbabwe, the researcher needed to understand the value of assisting lower grade learners with

acquiring competent reading skills as soon as they enrol for early childhood development programmes. It was important to establish the pedagogical competencies required of lower primary school teachers tasked with teaching young learners to read thus facilitating their learning endeavours. As a result, the researcher chose the interpretivist paradigm (Leedy, 2005) to use a multiple case study design to gather information from individuals, programmes and organisations in their natural settings.

In the context of this study, communities that own and control private schools have realised that providing excellent resources (physical, human) in their respective schools, result in the provision of quality learning for learners. In addition, these stakeholders are aware that the presence of resources minus appropriate utilisation of the same does not improve learning in their respective schools. Hence, parents of the learners who are enrolled at these high performing schools participate in the day-to-day reading activities and programmes of specific classes and grades to support learners in acquiring and developing intellectual competencies to ensure academic performance. Thus, this research seeks to understand how best these intellectual practices could be harnessed for possible implementation in poor performing schools in Zimbabwe. Since this study sought to understand classroom conditions that enable reading literacy development at lower grade levels, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed most appropriate to inform the perspectives of the research.

The interpretivist paradigm views reality and knowledge as flexible rather than rigid, subjective rather than objective, contextual rather than general, and qualitative instead of quantitative (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher did not approach this study with predetermined conclusions for participants to endorse (Nieuwenhuis, 2013). Instead, she entered into this research with the intention of developing an understanding of how high performing schools in Zimbabwe approach the teaching of reading literacy at lower grade level. The choice to employ interpretivist perspectives is anchored in the understanding that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm is generally supported by observation and interpretation.

However, it is understandable that the nature of reality (ontology), individual perception regarding how people came to know what they know (epistemology), one's ability to

apply specific data collection strategies (methodology) as well as the understanding of the values and belief systems govern the motivation to carry out this study (axiology) in that sensible research processes can produce worthwhile ideas as new curriculum content and pedagogical approaches for possible implementation in the contemporary Zimbabwean lower primary school education system.

To observe is to gather data to do with specific human behaviours within specific geographical locations, social events and programmes. To interpret is to attach meaning. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) conclude that the interpretivist paradigm strives to understand social circumstances, grounding meanings on inferences made through interacting with people who are directly involved in specific intellectual development programmes of their local communities. In this regard, high performing schools are social entities located within the Zimbabwean educational community, which are independent groups with programmes that benefit their learners' cognitive development.

4.4.2 Application of Interpretivism

Several researchers such as Cohen *et al*. (2000, 2011), Leedy (2005), Leedy and Ormrod (2014) and Zuber-Skerritt (2011) believe that interpretivism is a systematic way of data collection and analysis. Since the intention is to seek an in-depth understanding, the researcher felt that of the three referral traditions (positivist/empiricist, hermeneutic/interpretive, critical theory epistemologies), the interpretivist research tradition was the best suited to this study. Creswell & Guetterman (2019) argues that participants are not objects of the research. Instead, they are subjects of the research with the capacity to make sense of their experiences. It is against this background that interpretivists believe that knowledge is socially constructed within specific geographical contexts.

Since this study sought to understand the practices of high performing schools with the intention of applying such ideas in similar learning circumstances located in other sections of the Zimbabwean primary school education communities, multiple realities associated with the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Nieuwenhuis, 2013) were needed. The interpretivist paradigm underpinned this study through the lenses of its ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological foundations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

4.4.2.1 Ontology

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that reality is not always singular but is largely multifaceted. The understanding of this ontological view is that no two individuals are the same. Thus, the researcher is convinced that participants' understanding of what enabling classroom conditions are that facilitate the development of competent reading skills among lower grade learners, is purely subjective to that educational community.

It is acceptable for particular groups of people in societies to have subjective opinions regarding what is worth being identified as useful knowledge. Understanding of this ontological position is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2003), who argue that human experiences are never the same. Thus, it was necessary to seek an in-depth understanding of how these particular groups of people perceive their world to learn from them.

The researcher was convinced that the 'real' understanding of the value placed on assisting lower grade learners to acquire competent reading skills as early as possible does not exist outside the practice of nurturing young learners into a reading culture. The understanding of this ontological perspective places value on the need to acknowledge that knowledge is generated through collective efforts such as those efforts by some high performing schools in Harare.

4.4.2.2 Epistemology

Nieuwenhuis (2013) contends that the most distinguishable characteristic of interpretivism is the understanding that both the researcher and participants are joint producers of knowledge. Having spent some years teaching lower grade learners in some of these high performing schools in Harare, the researcher established a personal professional relationship with some of the identified research participants, taking cognisance of the fact that such closeness to participants, particularly fellow former lower grade teachers, had the potential to assist in gaining valuable knowledge about the acquisition of competent reading skills among lower grade learners in Zimbabwe. This understanding affirmed that knowledge production is not an individual but a group effort.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) add that the quality of knowledge production in qualitative research is partly influenced by the degree of closeness between the researcher and

participants. The interaction with seasoned lower grade teachers during field work, reminded the researcher of cooperative study initiatives as part of in-service training (Nota, 2010) that enriched her understanding of the need to create conducive learning environments for the development of reading literacies in Zimbabwean primary schools.

As the study leader immersed in interpretivism, the researcher became partners with participants in the creation of new learning approaches and ideas to create classroom conditions that enable reading development at lower grade levels in Zimbabwean primary schools.

4.4.2.3 Methodology

Interpretivist methodology means that research should capture what participants interpret as new insights worth sharing with other education stakeholders. (Nieuwenhuis, 2013; Schön, 1995; Usher, 1996). The researcher used primary qualitative data collection strategies that included document analysis, participant observation, interviews as well as secondary strategies such as class activities (Cohen *et al*. 2000). These data collection strategies allowed participants to discuss their experiences of how particular classroom conditions enable lower grade learners in Zimbabwe to acquire competent reading skills from the moment they enrol for primary education (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

4.4.2.4 Axiology

In qualitative research, it is acceptable to hold a set of beliefs and value systems. As co-researchers, both the researcher and participants are allowed to hold personal beliefs and values (Nieuwenhuis, 2013). However, assisting lower grade learners to acquire and develop competent reading skills as soon as they enter the primary school education system, makes academic sense. Both the researcher and participants shared the belief that there is need to guide learners to acquire competent reading skills during the early grades of the primary school phase so that the learners' ability to read enables them to read to learn. The researcher was however, of the opinion that there is limited intellectual growth among learners should they demonstrate reading disabilities during of the early grades of their primary schooling. The researcher could not conceal this belief (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin, 2007) but such

beliefs should be respected regardless of one's religious, socio-cultural and political persuasions.

Ambert, Adler, Adler and Detzner (1995) argue that it is important for stakeholders in education to remember that knowledge is socially constructed from the nature of reality. Therefore, learning environments should strive to create learning opportunities for the acquisition of competent reading skills among learners in any given academic situation. Through analysing documents, observing learning experiences, interviews as well as investigating class activities, educators understand that contextual realities in any given learning environment are important.

4.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

Effective study programmes follow orderly research paths. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) view research methodology as a system of procedures for data collection and analysis. Cohen *et al*. (2011) suggest that even though there are three major modes of research specifications, the most popular are quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Creswell (2013, and 2014) states that it is possible to combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to come up with what he termed mixed methods. However, in line with the interpretivist paradigm, this study lies within the qualitative research approach.

Cohen *et al*. (2011) argue that an effective research methodology ensures that the research approach is objective and systematic enough to guarantee the manufacture of valuable new knowledge. They further argue that the difference between quantitative and qualitative methodologies lies not only in the purposes each of them pursues, but also in terms of the way in which data is gathered, analysed and interpreted. Table 4.2 illustrates differences between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and offers a reason for the choice of a qualitative approach.

Table 4.2: Positioning qualitative research in contrast to quantitative research

Orientation	Quantitative	Qualitative
Supposition regarding Worldview	There is a single reality	There are multiple realities
Purpose of Research	To establish relationships between variables	To understand social conditions within specific local environmental conditions

Orientation	Quantitative	Qualitative
Research Methodology	• Study map should be established earlier. • There should be a hypothesis; and • The study is generally deductive in nature	• The study can change strategies depending on what the researcher is aims to achieve. • A hypothesis is not important; and • The research is inductive in nature
Role of the Researcher	The researcher is strictly a non-participating outside observer	The researcher is a participant-observer
Generalisability of Findings	Results are applicable to wider communities and transcends contextual barriers	Results are an in-depth context-based description of events

(Source: Adapted from Creswell, 2005)

This study focused on identifying enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing schools and how these could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe. As such, the researcher followed the qualitative research route (Yin, 2016). Slavin (1992) and Sanjari *et al*. (2014) concur that qualitative research strives to explore phenomena in specific local environments. Johnson and Christensen (2012) explain that qualitative research aims to extract knowledge from individualistic perceptions. Therefore, qualitative research holds that knowledge is socially constructed (Merriam, 2002). This view is further supported by McMillan and Schumacher (2014) who argue that participants are reliable sources of context-specific knowledge systems.

This research fits into the qualitative approach since the broader aim of the study was to understand enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing schools and how these could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe. The researcher experienced the subjective nature of these reading programmes that enabled lower grade learners to acquire competent reading skills during the foundation phase of primary school education system.

4.5.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Research

Although the qualitative research approach has been commended for its strength to gather knowledge systems from secluded communities, it has its limitations.

Researchers (Cohen *et al*., 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2014; Mason & Boscolo, 2004; Nieuwenhuis, 2013).). Sanjari *et al*. (2014) argue that the use of small samples in qualitative research is deemed one of its biggest weaknesses as small samples are easy to manipulate. This is why Eisner (1998), Cohen *et al*. (2011), Nieuwenhuis (2013), and McMillan and Schumacher (2014) caution that researcher biases, interests and motivations should be made very clear throughout the study as they have the potential to distort reality.

Researcher bias and personal opinions and motivations have the following effects:

- Researcher bias and personal opinions seriously impact the research design.
- Researcher bias may influence the choice of research participants who might not be equally trustworthy.
- Participants may not necessarily represent the entire population.
- Some participants could be previously influenced to maintain a particular position to promote the interests of the researcher; and
- The background to the study could be compromised (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Although Nieuwenhuis (2013) and Sanjari *et al.* (2014) share the perception that results collected through qualitative research are not generalisable, they, at least, could generate theories. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) believe that qualitative research requires researchers to constantly interact with participants as they continuously analyse data to develop greater understanding of the phenomenon under study.

To conclude, as Lund (2005) assumes, qualitative research is a systematic approach that strives to gain an in-depth understanding of behaviour patterns in their natural settings. This has justified the researcher's decision to avoid quantitative and mixed methodological approaches because their respective approaches would not have allowed the quality of insights possible with a qualitative research design.

4.5.2 Rationale for a Qualitative Study

Creswell (2013) and Johnson and Christensen (2012) argue that human learning is best understood through the application of qualitative inquiry. It is important that researchers choose research approaches that suit the phenomenon under study in a

way that does not distort real meaning. Accordingly, Nieuwenhuis (2016) indicates that the purpose of using qualitative research is to investigate without manipulating procedures of knowledge construction. The researcher's intention was to develop an understanding of how high performing schools create conducive learning environments that generate opportunities for the acquisition and development of competent reading skills for lower grade learners during the early grades of primary schools in Zimbabwe.

A qualitative methodological approach to educational research allowed for an in-depth understanding of how lower grade teachers in high performing schools design programmes and create supporting environments for the acquisition of competent reading skills. Quantitative methods could have obscured some valuable insights the researcher hoped to gain from regular interaction with the participants, hence the need to use a qualitative approach.

The next section focuses on research methods paying particular attention to the applicability and use of descriptive case studies.

4.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research design involve the examination of phenomena in their natural settings. A multiple case study design was chosen because of its flexible nature, offering the opportunity to collect data from different groups of participants to understand the phenomenon under study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Sanjari *et al.*, 2014) and to compare and contrast contributions from participants so that falsehoods are detected through data triangulation (Nieuwenhuis, 2013).

4.6.1 The Interpretive Multiple Case Study

Interpretivism is the research paradigm, the philosophical view through which the researcher was able to view data gathered from participants. The actual data collection process was based on a qualitative multiple case study design. Yin (2016) contends that a research design advises what the research intends to do as well as how and where it is done. It also specifies the category of participants and the reason why such participants were chosen and not others. Leedy and Ormord (2014) state that research

participants, data collection and analysis approaches constitute the nucleus of the research design.

In addition, Creswell and Guettermann (2019) views a research design as tactics and measures for conducting research that encompasses ideas from general assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The choice of a research design is determined by the nature of the problem under investigation. The researcher, therefore, opted to use the multiple case study research design to understand classroom conditions that enable reading literacy development in selected high performing schools with the intention to see how these could be applied in the wider Zimbabwean education system.

Yin (2014, 2016) contends that case studies are the most flexible of all designs because they retain the holistic nature of real-life events while, at the same time, exploring undiscovered learning opportunities (Berg, 2001). Hence, issues are not dealt with using one viewpoint, but through several outlooks that allow the disclosure of multiple facets of the phenomena under study. Possible information sources may include, but are not limited to, participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

The researcher's choice to use multiple case study designs was influenced by realising its strength in answering the how and why questions to do with the phenomenon under study. In this research, multiple case study design has enabled the researcher to understand that the acquisition of competent reading skills is not achieved effortlessly. Instead, competency in reading is achieved through well designed study programmes that guide learners to develop word recognition strategies, effective phonics instruction and development as well as conceptualising the role of lower grade teachers as facilitators of learning (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Torgesen, 2000).

In addition, the use of a multiple case study design encourages regular collaboration between the researcher and participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) which helps to produce well organised research ideas and perspectives. Qualitative methodologies are reliable ways to guide the construction of new knowledge in the social sciences. The next section focuses on the applicability and use of the multiple case study designs in educational research.

4.6.2 The Application of Multiple Case Study Designs

Yin (2014, 2016) argues that case study designs are the most flexible of all designs since they try to gain an in-depth understanding of a research topic. An interpretive multiple case study design was chosen because it potentially explains how lower grade learners are assisted with developing reading skills to learn. Without the acquisition and development of these critical reading skills, Torgesen (2000) argues, there is limited opportunity for intellectual growth.

Ambert *et al.,* advocates for the use of a multiple case study design because …

> a single case [study] can be seen as potentially problematic unless there is a highly limited number of persons in a particular category … unless it presents several realities or perspectives in the ethnographic tradition (1995:886).

This statement validates the choice to use different types of high performing schools with some being run by trust organisations in Harare and others by the Zimbabwean government. The researcher regards all these groups of participants as bounded cases (Stake, 2003) that assist in understanding and identifying classroom conditions that potentially assist lower grade learners with acquiring and developing competent reading literacy skills during the lower grades of their primary schooling. By using these bounded cases, a comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading skills at lower grade level was established and the identified successful procedures in specific classroom conditions could be applied in other cases in the Zimbabwean primary school education system.

Stake (2008) argues that a case study design is more than just a data collection strategy. He advocates for the realisation among education practitioners that it is necessary to identify a case study design that best suits specific research problems. Berg (2001) articulates that case study methodologies are not only information gathering techniques but are operational outlines for possible application in the study of social sciences for educational development. In as much as there are advantages to using a case study design, there are limitations which are presented in the following section.

4.6.3 Limitations of the Interpretive Multiple Case Study Design

Nieuwenhuis (2013) and Leedy and Ormord (2014) concur that case study designs have been criticised for their lack of numerical generalisability. However, Yin (2014) argues that case studies can be generalised especially if the researcher considers the use of several participants in different settings. In this study, different groups of participants from different high performing schools were included to create opportunities to generalise the findings. The inclusion of several participants from different organisations in high performing schools meant that the knowledge gathered could be of great use once transferred to other educational settings in the Zimbabwean primary school education system.

This view is supported by Meriam (2002) and Yin (2003) who claim that case studies are used to generalise outcomes if the researcher's intention was to apply such results to wider education communities. The views that oppose and support the applicability and use of a case study design in qualitative research is testimony that there is no research that is free from blemishes. However, the use of multiple data collection strategies exonerates researchers from some of the allegations that a particular research approach is less effective.

4.7 RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods refer to the strategies, processes or techniques that are utilised in the collection of data during research in order to create a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

4.7.1 Selection of Research Sites

Schools situated in the Harare Metropolitan Province as well as some selected former Group A schools in the city that all possess the characteristic of being high performing schools, were identified as the population for this study (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008). The four categories of school types are categorised as A, B, C and D. Category A represents private schools established by trust organisations. Most trust schools are located in affluent suburbs and, generally, they are the most expensive schools in Zimbabwe (Matsa & Masimbiti, 2014). Categories B and C represent government schools located in both the CBD and affluent suburbs. They are more affordable than categories A and D. Lastly, Category D represent private schools that are run by church organisations (Mangwaya, Blignaut & Pillay, 2016).

Table 4.3: Similarities and differences amongst case study schools

Areas	Similarities	Differences
Knowledge of learners' reading levels	All the teachers are trained to teach the level at which they are teaching and display considerable understanding of the learners' reading levels	School A uses an international curriculum while others use the local curriculum, but all achieve the same goal of enabling reading at grade level. Schools A and B start teaching reading in Reception B equivalent to ECD B. In Schools B and C, reading starts in Grade 1.
Knowledge of reading components/strategies	The teachers use balanced approaches to teach reading Teachers have a passion for teaching reading at lower grades	Schools A and D are private schools while B and C are former Group A government schools. Quality and culture of doing things largely differ.
Knowledge of curriculum	Teachers' knowledge of the curriculum is high.	In addition to use of the national curriculum, School A refers to international curricula
Teachers' attributes	All are female teachers and teaching grade levels that match their qualifications and specialisation	It is only in School B where there is a male teacher among the ECD teachers
Motivation	Well-motivated by the fact that the schools are in town and receive support from schools and parents, periodically get incentives (food hampers, tuition waivers, generous educational trips)	Remuneration is different across school types because Schools A and D are private schools and B and C are government schools

4.7.2 Participant Selection

In this study, non-probability sampling was most appropriate for the interpretivist case study (Creswell, 2019). Specifically purposive sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) was applied as it assumes that the researcher wants to "discover, understand and gain information" (Merriam, 1998:61) and thus select information-rich cases. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) indicate that purposive sampling is premeditated choice of informers based on their capacity to illuminate specific themes, concepts or phenomenon under study.

Using purposive sample selection, the researcher focused on characteristics of informants (such as prolonged stay at high performing schools witnessing excellent learner performance, individual participant's experience in teaching in low performing schools and participants' academic and professional qualifications) that would assist in answering the identified research questions (Cohen *et al.* 2000, Nieuwenhuis, 2013). Participants were identified by school heads on behalf of the researcher because of their experience in teaching reading at lower grade level in high performing primary schools in the Harare Metropolitan province. The main participants in this research are presented in Table 4.4

Table 4.4: Participants sampled for this study

Participant	School	Pseudonym	Designation
1	A	Sithembile	School Principal
2	B	Peterson	School Principal
3	C	Regina	School Principal
4	D	Johnson	School Principal
5	A	Jane	Teacher
6	A	Nomsa	Teacher
7	A	Jennifer	Teacher
8	A	Josephine	Teacher
9	A	Margaret	Teacher
10	A	Memory	Teacher
11	A	Phiona	Teacher
12	B	Susan	Teacher-in-charge
13	B	Sherry	Teacher
14	B	Grace	Teacher
15	B	Patience	ICT Teacher
16	B	Janet	Teacher
17	C	Shylet	Teacher-in-charge
18	C	Mary	Teacher
19	C	Beauty	Teacher
20	C	Julian	Teacher
21	D	Linda	Teacher
22	D	Jude	Teacher
23	MINISTRY	Mildred	Education Officer

The four (4) schools principals were all female, were qualified and held a Diploma in Education with one principal holding a B.Ed. in ECD. Experience in the lower grades ranged from 5 to 7 years. In addition, an Education Officer, who supports the ECD in schools was also sampled.

The eighteen (18) teachers were allocated to the lower grades of Grades 1, 2 and 3. All teachers, bar one, were female, well qualified with either a Diploma in Education or a B.Ed. in ECD or primary education. Experience in the lower grades ranged from

7 to 40 years. This meant than most teachers had been have been in service for quite some time with a lot of knowledge of the curriculum, presented in schemes of work and lesson planning books.

All participants automatically formed a community of practice in this study (Ilari, 2010), based on the researcher's long-standing professional relationship with most lower grade teachers in high performing schools in Harare. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their actual identities (Ambert *et al*. 1995; Nieuwenhuis, 2013).

Early childhood teachers and school heads/teacher-in-charge assisted in the identification of literacy-rich classrooms as well as lower grade learners with whom the researcher was able to regularly interact observing how they were assisted in acquiring and developing word recognition skills. Teaching strategies used by the majority of these lower grade teachers assisted in developing an understanding of content and pedagogy used in high performing schools. In addition, lessons were observed to ascertain how young learners developed their reading skills and to identify phonetics and phonological issues (Torgesen, 2000).

Several groups of lower grade learners were identified for class observation in their respective classes without necessarily selecting them individually. Permission was secured from their parents and guardians regarding their intended participation in this study. This follows the Belmont Report on the use of learners as subjects of research that states that there should be written consent from parents and guardians prior to their children's participation (Ryan, 1979).

Despite the researcher benefitting from the teachers' reading lessons and approaches in these high performing schools, purposive sampling, like any other sampling procedure is subject to potential limitations (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). Leedy (2005) and McMillan and Schumacher (2014) caution that by choosing study participants freely and at will, researcher bias could adversely affect the outcome of research findings. To counteract this challenge, the researcher was guided by the understanding that "human behaviour is [always] affected by knowledge of the social world" (Nieuwenhuis, 2013:60).

The aim, thus, was to witness participants constructing and reconstructing knowledge as informed by their regular interaction with learners in literacy-rich classroom environments. Education superintendents were invited to participate in a focused

group discussion mainly to give their views regarding performance disparities displayed by high performing and low performing schools within their jurisdiction. This could, probably be deemed helpful in identifying how these best classroom practices of high performing schools could be applied in those schools whose results are sometimes below average.

4.7.3 Data Collection Procedures

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative research approach, data gathering and analysis in this study were an on-going process throughout the research. Cohen *et al*. (2011) argue that each set of analysed results shapes the next so that the data gathering process moves through a spiral of planning, acting, observing and evaluating learner achievement in the acquisition of reading skills in a systematic and interrelated manner resulting in a continuous cycle.

Data were collected through the use of appropriate qualitative methodologies (, Cohen *et al*., 2011; McMillan & Schumacher 2014; Papadopoulos *et al*., 2002) and the use of different data sources, such as document analysis, in-depth interviews, participant observation and focus group discussions which enabled the researcher to triangulate information in order to flush out falsehoods and to maximise the trustworthiness of the findings (Nieuwenhuis, 2013). The following sub-sections discuss each of the data collection strategies.

4.7.3.1 Document analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure of analysing documents relevant to the research topic. In this study, documents such as lower grade syllabi for languages, both national and international, schemes of work and teaching plans, social record books, learner workbooks, reading record books and diaries (Cohen *et al.* 2000; Nieuwenhuis, 2013) were analysed to establish the extent to which these documents corroborated the development of reading literacy among lower grade learners in the Zimbabwean education system.

Of interest was the existence of a parent register as well as their ‘evaluation’ of learner reading performance (Cohen *et al.* 2011; Sledge & Pazey, 2013). All these documents were made available to understand how classrooms that enable reading literacy

development at lower grade levels in high performing schools could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe.

4.7.3.2 Interviews

The use of interviews as a data collection strategy was used to elicit information from participants where it was difficult to observe and when it was important to find out how the participant interpreted the world around them (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Merriam, 1998). The type of interview varied dependent on the context (Leedy, 2005). Both individual face-to-face interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted.

Face-to-face individual interviews enabled the researcher to collect more concrete information that could not have been gathered using other strategies (Wragg (2002:148). This is particularly valid as semi-structured and unstructured questions were used during the interviews. The semi-structured and unstructured questions were followed by probing questions. The probing questions allowed participants to freely describe, narrate and explain issues with limited restrictions (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). Interviewees provided information that the researcher might have been initially reluctant to consider for inclusion (Nieuwenhuis, 2013).

In this study, the main purpose of interviewing lower grade teachers, was to understand enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in the high performing schools and possibly how such conditions could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe. (*cf.* Appendices H and J).

The four school heads/teacher-in-charge were interviewed to confirm the different types of schools within their areas of education jurisdiction as well as to confirm whether there were reading curricula for lower grade learners in place in their schools (*cf.* Appendix L). Should differences in terms of learner achievement be present, the other aim in interviewing school heads was to ascertain how the strategies used at these high performing schools could be applied in other schools where such academic achievement has not been witnessed (*cf.* Appendix K).

The use of focus group discussions (involving all 16 teachers in the ECD, Grades 1-3 at each of the four schools) as a data collection strategy, provided opportunities for the teachers to compare their ideas with each other. Priest (2006) believes that active participation in group discussions enables participants to share contextual factors that

promote or hinder intellectual growth. Johnson and Christensen (2012) argue that through open discussions with a group of participants regarding the phenomenon under study, the researcher can combine information collected from different sources as preliminary to data coding procedures.

In the focus group discussions in each of the four schools, the researcher ensured that each member in the group was given adequate time to give their personal opinions with limited restrictions (Wragg, 2002). A set of questions was prepared for the discussion following a specific research route (Krueger & Casey, 2000). These questions built on one another, moving from general to more specific questions. Focus group discussion questions were aimed at self-disclosure among participants, Bagnoli and Clark (2010) and therefore participants had the opportunity to determine long- and short-term goals of the group (Cohen *et al.*, 2000) (*cf.* Appendix I).

In this study, lower grade teacher participants had the opportunity to give detailed descriptions of how they guided learners in acquiring competent reading skills to facilitate their learning (Felton & Brown, 1990). In addition, the focus group discussions enabled participants to discuss the type of reading materials available and strategies that could be applied to improve the development of reading literacy as well as how learners acquired competent reading skills during the lower grades of schooling. Focus group discussions provided opportunities for participants to revise and reconstruct the lower grade reading curriculum to align it with modern trends of schooling such as the use of computer technology and internet facilities. This was possible through sharing ideas in well organised group discussions and the teachers' desire to understand enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development in Zimbabwean primary schools. Similar questions during interviews were tendered during focus group discussions.

4.7.3.3 Participant observations

The use of observation as a data collection strategy is not only reliable but a flexible way to transcend socio-contextual variations (Moyles, 2002). Kaplan and Duchon (1988) argue that it is mainly through observation that both researchers and participants can give vivid descriptions of events as they unfold during data collection. Chi (1997) believes that because observation is sensitive to local environmental conditions, there is a greater possibility that the researcher might gain valuable

insights into the situations under study. It is acceptable that research participants may not be fully aware of the value of their contributions during the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1995); however, what is important, according to Mouton (2002), is the existence of a non-threatening environment where participants are free to express their ideas and perceptions. Such an environment is critical for reaching reliable conclusions. The researcher as well, managed to scrutinise class-specific reading resource centres with the intention to find out how these are equipped to promote the development of reading skills among lower grade learners in high performing schools in Zimbabwe.

In this research, the researcher used participant observation to have a further opportunity to interact with both teachers and learners in their natural learning environment (Cohen *et al.* 2011). The idea of getting closer to natural setting is one of the most prominent facets of the interpretivist approach to research (Leedy, 2005).

4.7.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation in qualitative inquiry is an important phase because it seeks to attach meaning to how participants view their world. Nieuwenhuis (2013) points out that qualitative research strives to attach meaning regarding how participants analyse attitudes, values and belief systems to give informed conclusions about their construction of reality. To extract accurate perceptions from participants, there are several modes of qualitative analysis that are suitable for use within specific research designs. Chief among them include narratology, conversation, hermeneutics and discourse modes of data analysis; however, this study's data analysis was informed by discourse analysis (Nieuwenhuis, 2013).

This research was an ongoing process and was an iterative cycle with data collection and analysis. Hence, data, once transcribed, were analysed in three main stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Sinkovics, Penz & Ghauri, 2008). Open coding comprises the pointing and tagging of keywords in the data that had been transcribed while axial coding involves categorising information into themes and sub-themes (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Selective coding summarises both open and axial coding with considerable focus on the central themes and how these could be presented for further scrutiny (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Once the three stages of data analysis were completed, the presentation of findings could be done, and these are to be found in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

To ensure that the collected data were valid, the researcher relied on Guba's (1981) model to assess the trustworthiness of the research. Guba (1981) identified four criteria to assess trustworthiness of research projects, and these include truth, value, applicability, consistency and are the pillars for reliable research findings for both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (Guba, 1981). The use of standardised tests and measurements used in experimental studies can be generalised to provide explanations encompassing large study populations (Cohen *et al*., 2011). In contrast, qualitative studies are ungeneralisable, and this makes determining trustworthiness difficult. Table 4.9 illustrates Guba's (1981) terms used to describe trustworthiness in different research paradigms.

Table 4.5: Comparison of criteria by research paradigm

Criterion	Quantitative Paradigm	Qualitative Paradigm
Truth value	Internal validity	Credibility
Applicability	External validity	Transferability
Consistency	Reliability	Dependability
Neutrality	Objectivity	Confirmability

(Source: Adapted from Krefting, 1991:271)

Since the study lies within the qualitative paradigm, the following terminologies are used consistently throughout the research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability with each being discussed in the sub-sequent sections.

4.8.1 Credibility

Krueger and Casey (2000) argue that using multiple data collection strategies such as document analysis, interviews and observations enhances the findings' trustworthiness. This is because the triangulation of information collected from different sources using different strategies reduces researcher bias and minimises the impact of each strategy's weaknesses.

To avoid making unfounded claims, the researcher deliberately asked probing questions during the interviews in rephrased ways to determine falsehoods (Shenton,

2004). During the focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to cross check each other to verify contributions. Each participant was encouraged to read through conversation transcripts of their interviews to affirm congruence between what was captured and their original intentions. Consequently, rigorous analysis of contributions maximised the quality of the final presentation of the results.

4.8.2 Transferability

To ensure that the results of this study are applicable to education, similar studies should be conducted in other educational contexts and environments. Shenton (2004) argues that the purpose of transferability as a construct is not to generalise findings but to ensure that an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study is developed. In the case of this study, the intention was to understand enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development in Zimbabwean primary schools. However, Nieuwenhuis (2013) indicates that it is not the responsibility of the researcher to ensure transferability of results but that of the one intending to apply the newly identified knowledge in another environment. It is important to realise that transferring such knowledge to a new teaching and learning environment calls for careful contextual adjustments and consideration of the learners' intellectual levels. If it is possible to apply study results to new educational contexts, the problem of transferability is solved (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).

4.8.3 Dependability

The key to qualitative inquiry is to find ways to learn from participants and not to control them. This is because qualitative research promotes the respect for uniqueness as opposed to repetition. Even if the process is repeated, it does not necessarily mean that similar results will be collected (Krefting, 1991). Instead, Shenton (2004) believes that the emergence of different results after previous study results have been applied, signifies the presence of multiple realities. This also alludes to the existence of a variety of solutions or approaches to increase the vitality of a learning experience. Morrow (2005) concludes that in-depth interpretations of findings allow study results to be repeated and applied in other education circumstances.

4.8.4 Confirmability

The triangulation of information collected using different data collection strategies helps to minimise researcher bias and confirm research findings. The recruitment of

different schools with different sets of teacher participants provided an argument for developing reading literacy for various schools in Zimbabwe regardless of their geographical location. Because data collection and analysis were an on-going process, contributions from each participant were scrutinised by fellow participants to ensure that all information provided was reliable (Shenton, 2004).

4.8.5 Authenticity

Smith (1999) and Stake (2006) concur that authenticity is achieved when the researcher demonstrates that different realities have been considered. The inclusion of different high performing schools in Harare, resembling different education realities, helps to authenticate the study's findings. The researcher's intention was to provide in-depth descriptions of participants' views of enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing primary schools and investigate how these could be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe. Fossey *et al*. (2002) indicate that the similarity between paradigmatic perspectives as well as the research methods used helps to increase the authenticity of research findings. Therefore, the use of interpretivism as the epistemological paradigm together with a case study design helped to link this study with the research objectives and authenticate the findings.

4.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical considerations associated with qualitative research encompass issues that arise primarily from the nature of the data collection strategies. Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden (2001) argue that qualitative researchers are sometimes unsure of the final outcome of the study especially when one considers the influence of personal relationships between the researcher and participants. Given the possibility that qualitative researchers are at liberty to choose their participants, the issue of bias remains an issue of concern. Because researcher bias can tilt research findings to suit specific political desires and undeclared perceptions, the study outcomes could be adversely affected.

To avoid misinterpretation of contributions and understating valuable contributions (Robley, 1995), consideration the Nuremberg Code (Berg, 1995), the Helsinki Declaration (Escobedo *et al.,* 2007) and the Belmont Report (Ryan, 1979) were taken into consideration as well as the University of Pretoria's Ethics Code in guiding

educational research. These declarations, codes and guidelines collectively protect human research subjects from possible abuse by researchers, outlining conditions under which research studies should be conducted and specifying that the consent document should be signed without fail by the researcher and participants. The consent document should indicate that:

- Participants are fully informed regarding the value of the study both to individual participants and collectively to local communities.
- Participants have understood the parameters of the study.
- Participants have not been forced to participate in the research activity; and
- The researcher has advised participants that s/he shall provide constant and timeous updates regarding the progress of the study (Gay *et al*., 2006:408).

Leedy and Ormrod (2014) maintain that local individuals' participation in the generation of new knowledge enables communities to own and demarcate their own knowledge systems. This understanding is reflected in the study considering how lower grade teachers in selected high performing schools employ successful and innovative strategies within a conducive learning environment to teach young learners to read.

4.9.1 Informed Consent

Informed consent for voluntary participation in research is one of the most important benchmarks for quality research. It is an ethical requirement to ensure that participants are fully aware of the benefits, challenges and sacrifices before accepting the offer to take part in any research enterprise. Escobedo *et al*. (2007) and Nieuwenhuis (2013) concur that once participants agree to contribute to the research, they are expected to sign the consent form. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) highlight that the consent form is not a legal instrument binding participants to forced participation. Despite signing the consent form, participants could still withdraw at any time of the study even without giving reasons.

Participants in this study were not forced to share ideas with the researcher regarding how they managed to create conducive learning environments for their respective schools. Since most of these high performing schools are private schools that operate on capitalist ideologies, participants may not have been prepared to publicise the real cause behind their success. Should there be competitors struggling to outclass their

performance, this study most likely could be viewed as the whistle-blower. Hence it could be reasonable for them not to have wanted to share their ideas with 'outsiders'. Researchers could be viewed as 'outsiders' because their need for information is intended for external use that might also be of limited value to those contributing.

Like Walford (2005), the researcher continuously advised participants that they were free to withdraw at any time without giving reasons. This validates the research findings because participants voluntarily provided information. Hence, as part of the researcher's regular monitoring, participants were constantly asked if they were still interested in continuing to contribute their ideas.

4.9.2 Participant Confidentiality and Anonymity

Maintaining anonymity in qualitative research is difficult to achieve if one considers the number of occasions the researcher interacts with participants in their natural settings. Regardless of socio-cultural, political and/or religious persuasions, Oliver (2003) believes that people have privacy that should not be tampered with. The same applies to both high performing schools as well as participants drawn from these schools. These schools have the right to refuse any investigation regarding their internal academic operations even though it is noble to find out how best other people can learn from their academic achievements. The right to privacy must be respected at all costs.

To ensure that the researcher observed this requirement, participant schools and individual teachers were not identified by their real names. Schools were coded as Schools A, B, C and D while pseudonyms for individual teachers were used (Lahman *et al.,* 2015). Participants were told that they may cross check their contributions to maximise the trustworthiness of the study (Guba, 1981). Shenton (2004) argues that allowing participants to cross-examine their individual contributions is critical regarding the truthfulness of their perceptions submitted for study purposes. From a philosophical perspective, Poetz and Schreier (2012) argue that by agreeing that those are their actual perceptions, participants feel empowered, and they can claim authority over new ideas in creation. In the case of this study, participants immediately after transcription, were asked to proofread their contributions and deem them a true reflection.

4.9.3 Researcher-participant relationship of trust

The researcher is a former member of the private school teachers' union and has strong ties with some of the senior members still serving at the selected high performing primary schools in Harare. Her position of authority as a Roman Catholic nun could be misconstrued by the generality of lay members of the teaching establishment. In addition, some teachers may have thought that the intention in requesting their participation was to unearth teacher incompetence, which meant that some may have felt uncomfortable.

Casey (2004) advises that it is necessary to separate the researcher's dual roles: one being a *bona fide* religious member who participated in the overall administration of all church-run institutions, and two being a researcher. Orb *et al.* (2001) states that separating roles could be difficult. Taking her cue from Smith (1999), the researcher explained from the beginning that the purpose of her interaction with participants was not to find out how they were performing. Neither was her intention to gather information to do with improving the school or their working conditions. Instead, she made it clear that she was a doctoral student at the University of Pretoria, guided by the university's policy guidelines on conducting research as well other declarations such as the Helsinki Declaration (Escobedo *et al*., 2007) that stipulates the legal framework for using human beings as research subjects.

Holloway and Wheeler (2002) add that separating researcher roles in qualitative research promotes respect and trust between the researcher and participants. As a religious leader in the church, one might be tempted to ask whether the researcher owes her greater loyalty to the principles and guidelines of scientific research. She is a trained educational leader who was continuously guided by the University of Pretoria's ethical guidelines on educational research as well as international treaties such as the Nuremberg code (Berg, 1995) and the Belmont Report (Ryan, 1979) governing the use of human beings as research subjects and as such ascribed to all ethical considerations.

Table 4.8 illustrates the ethical guidelines that the researcher observed during her study.

Table 4.6: Ethical guidelines framework

Stages Followed	Elements for Ethical Consideration
Prior to the Research	• Compiled and defended the research proposal. • Obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria SM 15/04/01 (*cf.* Appendix A). • Obtained approval from the Zimbabwean government (*cf.* Appendix C); and the responsible authorities (Harare Province) (*cf.* Appendix D) to involve their academic staff members (school heads/teachers-in-charge, lower grade teachers) in the Harare province (*cf.* Appendices E, F and G) • Obtained permission from parents and guardians to allow their lower grade learners to be observed as they learn in their respective classes where the research took place (*cf.* Appendices E and F).
Start of the Research	• Contacted participants and presented them with the consent form. • Instructed them to think about the request for at least 48 hours to ensure that they have enough time to decide to participate in this study. • Informed them of the purpose of the study, benefits as well as possible challenges that might be encountered. • Informed them that they were free to withdraw from the research activity at any time without giving reasons.
Data Collection	• Informed participants that data were going to be collected through document analysis, interviews, observation as well as focus group discussions. • Consented to all research sites and venues suggested by participants. • Developed and maintained trust of the participants continually promising them that they would be treated with respect throughout the study.
Data Analysis	• Avoided plagiarism, academic fraud and misstating facts. • Constantly referred to my intention to avoid bias. • Avoided taking sides with participants and remained focused on the dictates of qualitative inquiry, multiple case study design as well as the interpretivist research epistemological design.
Reporting Findings	• Remained truthful and honest regarding the announcement of findings and did not falsify evidence regarding data findings and conclusions.
Publishing of the Study	• Asked if participants would like to receive copies of the final document. • Constantly consulted my supervisor regarding protocols for circulation of the final document to the international community.

4.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the epistemological and methodological perspectives that informed the study. The researcher was motivated to use the qualitative research approach and an interpretive case study design based on the research questions and motivation for the study in contrast to research approaches, such as quantitative and mixed research methodologies. The strengths and weaknesses associated with the applicability and use of a qualitative approach, the interpretivist paradigm and a multiple case study design was presented. The samples were described, and the choice justified. Data collection comprising document analysis, observations, interviews and focus group discussion, were described and argued with data analysis being informed by discourse analysis and occurring within three stages. The final sections of the chapter discussed methodological norms and ethical issues considered in the process of the research.

The following chapter focuses on the presentation of findings emerging from the data to describe enabling conditions supporting reading literacy development at lower primary levels.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 focuses on the presentation of data gathered from a range of data collection strategies employed to identify enabling conditions that support reading literary development at lower grade level in Zimbabwean high performing schools. This chapter also provides an interpretation of the themes emerging from data analysis to answer the main research question of: *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe?*

The following sub-questions emerged.

- To what extent does the intended primary school curriculum promote the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in the Zimbabwean education system?
- Which pedagogical competencies are required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at the lower primary level?
- Which enabling classroom features / conditions characterise the nature of support of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- How can the identified enabling conditions in high-performing schools be applied in low-performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system?

To set the scene, a description of the participant schools is given. School A falls under the category of Association of Trust Schools (ATS) while Schools B and C are former Group A government schools. Schools A and B are in one of Harare's affluent low-density suburbs while School C is in the Central Business District (CBD). School D is a private church-related school and is in an area that is generally dominated by the Indian community. Parents in Zimbabwe determine the type of school their learners attend depending on family values and the family's financial resources. Data were

collected from four grades: Early Childhood Development (ECD) A and B, Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3 classes.

The multiple case study design (Merriam, 1998) which guided the study, allowed for an in-depth understanding of how the development of reading skills at lower grade levels enable learners to acquire cognitive skills to master various curricula. The four selected schools had something in common regarding the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade levels. Data were collected using different strategies, which included interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis and observations. The findings are not treated separately but are discussed together. The themes are presented with quotations from interviews, observation field notes and focus group discussions. In addition, the themes are discussed and interpreted with support from the literature.

5.2 THE FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

As a preamble to the discussion, Table 5.1 presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of data, aligning them with the secondary research questions

Table 5.1: Themes and sub-themes

Secondary Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
To what extent does the intended primary school curriculum promote the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in the Zimbabwean education system?	**Theme 1:** Policy and Planning – the intended curriculum	1.1 The ideal and formal curriculum 1.2 Unpacking the intended curriculum
Which pedagogical competencies are required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at lower primary level?	**Theme 2:** Teacher – the perceived curriculum	2.1 Professional competencies 2.2 Teaching approaches methods and strategies 2.3 Teacher attributes
Which enabling classroom features/conditions characterise the nature of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe?	**Theme 3**: School – the implemented curriculum	3.1 Implementing the curriculum 3.2 Reading Culture- School effectiveness 3.3 Attitudes- teachers, parents and learners 3.4 Home background and parental involvement

Secondary Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
How can the identified enabling conditions in high performing schools be applied in low performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system?	**Theme 4:** Enabling conditions for the development of reading literacy	4.1 Curriculum 4.2 Reading policy and teaching/lesson plans 4.3 Curriculum content material 4.4 Mentoring and monitoring 4.5 Professional competencies and attributes 4.6 Teaching approaches, methods and strategies 4.7 Professional development 4.8 Attitude, home background and parental involvement

5.2.1 Theme 1: Policy and Planning: The Intended Curriculum

Theme 1 emerged in response to the research question: *To what extent does the intended primary school curriculum promote the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in* the Zimbabwean education system? The relationship between the first sub question and Theme 1 is explained and illustrated in sub-themes 1.1 and 1.2. However, each sub-theme is independent of the other, but they collectively try and answer the identified first sub-question.

To answer the first sub-question regarding the extent to which the intended primary school curriculum promotes the acquisition of effective reading skills at lower primary level in Zimbabwe education system, this study argues that the existence, availability and proper use of policies and plans governing the acquisition of reading skills is critical in high performing learning processes. Policies and plans to support the acquisition of reading literacy development skills are considered the foundation of competent teaching and learning experiences.

5.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: The ideal and formal curriculum

Reading is an academic component that requires maximum attention (Adams, 1990; Drew, 2012; Karefillidou & Papageorgiou, 2005). It is critical that schools as educational organisations ensure that the curriculum is designed, interpreted and implemented in ways that promote effective acquisition of competent reading skills. Reading literacy development is a well calculated academic achievement that is integrated into the teaching systems representing the vision of central government through curriculum developers and the consumers of the education system. The

curriculum aims at developing learners' ability to read texts with fluency and comprehension to develop a reading culture (MoPSE, 2015:3-4). As Zimbabwe had undergone political change, education too, as explained in Chapter 2, has also experienced a change. A national curriculum, developed by the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education Schools, was implemented in January 2017. The implementation of the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022 (MoPSE, 2015) is aimed at modernising the education system to be in line with global trends. The Curriculum Framework is aimed at strengthening Early Childhood Development (ECD) as it was felt that the previous curriculum did not place enough emphasis on this stage of the education system. This curriculum helps learners prepare for life and work by ensuring that they are equipped with requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes (MoPSE, 2015) with the learning outcomes being prescribed for each of the levels.

A guided reading approach, informed by policy and planning, is supported by graded resource materials, which are vital in the teaching of English as a foreign language to lower grade learners. It is therefore important to first consider the Intended Curriculum

5.2.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Unpacking the intended curriculum

Acknowledging the importance of the curriculum in developing reading policies and plans is vital to support the teaching of reading literacy in schools in Zimbabwe. The following section focuses on how policies and plans have been identified as one of the major enablers towards the acquisition of competent reading skills among lower-grade learners in Zimbabwe. Reading literacy development is viewed by teachers as being vital for success in today's world. One of the respondents from a church-related primary school offered her perspective: *Reading is the backbone of all competences in the contemporary world. Without being able to read, how can a person communicate in this computerised world of technology?* Teachers interviewed were aware of the value of reading and becoming literate: *Think of the use of today's cell phones, computers, washing machines, access to your cash from the bank, walking around cities…you name it, one has to be literate. Without reading literacy, a person is completely shut out from communication with the rest of the outside world…* (Interviewee 22: Jude).

It is thus vital that teachers can take the intended curriculum, unpack it for greater understanding and use it to guide the development of a reading plan. Teachers derive curriculum content from the intended curriculum designed by curriculum policy makers with recommended textbooks, with the actual teaching being guided by educational standards for each of the grades. The formal or intended curriculum is supported by locally developed documents such as schemes of work and practical teacher and learner guides as well as teachers' understanding and interpretation of the curriculum. Most high performing schools are tasked with developing policies to regulate reading as a critical component of literacy development regardless of geographical location, economic gigantism and/or religious inclination (Nota, 2017).

Peterson, a school principal explained what is expected at his school: *Teachers are advised to prepare all their teaching documents during school holidays. They are further advised that supervision starts as soon as schools open and finding the teacher busy compiling schemes of work during learning sessions will be disciplined accordingly* (Interviewee 2: Peterson). Analysis of documents used by teachers to teach reading skills revealed that, apart from the general schemes of work and other documents prescribed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), schools are required to develop schemes of work, reading skills assessment forms, and remedial as well as social record books, which would guide them to ensure that learners during the course of the year acquire and develop grade-appropriate reading literacy skills.

The analysis of teachers' policies and plans revealed that there are well-planned procedures in place to promote the acquisition of competent reading skills. The teachers' schemes of work contained a comprehensive road map for the teaching of reading to lower grade learners enrolled for the first time in primary school. In addition, the schemes of work had long-term goals and objectives used as curriculum pointers that are useful for teaching reading at lower grade level. These long-term curriculum pointers act as the foundational base for any education system, which Harden (1986) noted decades previously. From the long-term aims, objectives are derived and should be specific, measurable, achievable, result-oriented and time-framed (Tear *et al.*, 2005). Teachers in high performing schools ensure that for effective teaching and learning to take place by unpacking the curriculum, they develop proper documentation of learning experiences, methodological approaches and standardised

evaluation procedures. Teachers revealed that using ICT has helped them produce good schemes of work that are typed, and the content improved as they review other reading curricula on the internet. One of the respondents stated that *Those teachers who are computer illiterate are assisted by the ICT teachers and now are confident to produce their own teaching and reading material as well as writing learners' reports to parents. There are a variety of things a teacher can do using ICT* (Participant 6: Nomsa).

Teachers using the Ministry of Education's national curriculum were able to comment on how curriculum changes, with the implementation of the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022, have affected their teaching of reading. Beauty explained that: *the first post-independence curriculum was not as comprehensive as the colonial one as well as this current curriculum. The new curriculum is very interesting and very good because most of the learners are being able to read* (Interviewee 19: Beauty). However, teachers in high performing schools, when asked to explain how teachers respond to the intended curriculum, explained their use of the curriculum: *It is correct that we, as high performing school teachers are expected to follow the national syllabus when teaching reading at lower grade level. However, at the school level, we consider so seriously several factors when teaching lower grade learners at an affluent school. Chief among these factors include learners' family backgrounds, the geographical location of the school as well as the nature and levels of parental incomes. For example, a learner coming from a rich family who has been exposed to several print media at home may come to school already able to read and write. Given such a situation, naturally, the teacher has to provide more challenging work to the learner in order to justify their existence in the classroom as facilitators of learning. Usually, we try to expose learners to much more challenging work than what is given in the National document. We also use international syllabi such as the University of Cambridge in order to ensure that our learners will definitely be the best as compared with other candidates during public examinations at the end of the primary school learning phase – Grade 7* (Interviewee 14: Grace).

From the above statement, it seems that all schools are required to follow the national curriculum as set out by the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education. However, there is

reason to believe that high performing schools do not just rely on just the national syllabus for teaching reading, but they also consult international curricula and expose learners to graded readers and study materials that develop superior reading literacy, which could result in a difference of reading literacy developed by learners in public schools. To offer some idea of the reasons for teachers referring to international programmes such as the Cambridge programme, Table 5.2 gives a comparison.

Table 5.2: A comparison between Cambridge and National reading programmes

National	Cambridge
Locally accredited but can be compared with other examination programmes to verify the suitability	Internationally accredited
Designed specifically to suit the Zimbabwean context	Flexible to suit specific educational contexts, cultures and ethos
Relies heavily on outdated materials	Aligned to the latest research trends
Less systematic - providing a general approach to the teaching of reading at lower grades without specifically indicating stages to follow	Systematic and comprehensive
The syllabus is not supported by corresponding resources. Learners rely on individual teacher's creativity and innovativeness	The curriculum offers a teacher guide, schemes of work and corresponding textbooks and reading resources

To give further understanding of how teachers in high-performing schools present curriculum content materials to learners, a participating teacher from a church-related high-performing school had this to say: *We don't just wake up and teach. We take our time to look into what the national syllabus is expecting every one of us to do. Since we aim to achieve higher, we find ways to make sure that our learners always do better than the rest. This being the case, at the school level we are naturally forced to design our own curriculum content materials which are always more of a higher order than the ordinary intellectual reading prescription designed by the central government for all schools in the country. The intended reading curriculum remains at the top of everything in terms of reading literacy development in all Zimbabwean schools but at the organisational level we develop our own that responds to the educational needs and expectations of the community which we serve* (Interviewee 12: Susan)

The intended curriculum, which comprises curriculum content, teaching strategies and learning aids as well as time allocation stipulations, is enacted at school level. The curriculum is meant to guide teachers regarding ways the intended curriculum should be put into practice. The perceived curriculum takes into consideration how individual

teachers understand and interpret the national syllabus leading to the design of schemes of work, teaching plans, progress as well as remedial records for learners.

Jennifer explained how teachers at high performing understand, interpret and implement the curriculum: *At our school we are allocated classes around November of every year in order to give us enough time to prepare for the coming academic year. It is between this period until schools open in January that teachers are expected to draw their schemes of work, teaching plans as well as other professional documents well in advance so that as soon as we open learning begin to take place without wasting time. On the other hand, departmental leadership always makes a serious follow up to ensure that the documents prepared are up to standard. Our schemes of work are supervised on weekly basis to ensure that all teachers are complying with organisational standards. Every week Heads of Departments would always make strict follow up on teacher evaluations. A sample of books per subject is submitted to the HOD with the intention to verify if every curriculum detail indicated in the schemes of work has been satisfactorily covered. Regarding local examinations, class teachers are not allowed to set for the classes they teach. Teachers set examinations for classes they don't teach. This is done to ensure that teachers don't just prepare learners to pass local examinations and, in a way, impress both school administration and parents. In this regard, the teacher's philosophical understanding of the curriculum is realised through learner performance as witnessed by end of year results* (interviewee 7: Jennifer).

From the above statements, it seems that teachers take the national curriculum, unpack it to develop a deep understanding of what is required in terms on content and skills. Armed with this understanding, teachers then develop annual teaching plans which guide them in developing lessons, finding relevant teaching materials and appropriate graded readers. There is reason to believe that high performing schools take the intended curriculum designed by the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education and use that as a benchmark to understand what is needed at each grade. However, to ensure that their learners perform well, teachers also use additional curricula or syllabi sourced from other countries to enhance and extend their reading literacy teaching as well as designing and creating their own curriculum content materials to ensure that their learners are exposed to learning opportunities that aim at academic excellence.

It is important to note that the reading approaches and strategies suggested by both the Zimbabwe National Curriculum and the Cambridge programmes are similar. For example, the use of teaching approaches such as phonetics, the look-and-say method as well as the picture and word approaches are similar across the two curricula and applicable to different languages when teaching reading. The major difference noted during the study is as follows:

The Cambridge Curriculum is supported by relevant resources and teachers are equipped to use the material through in-service training. High performing schools continuously upgrade the intended syllabus with appropriate resources such as the graded readers, library facilities as well as general support from parents. All these attributes are not found in the local curriculum. The absence of appropriate reading materials to support the curriculum makes it challenging for teachers. However, the government of Zimbabwe introduced the Early Reading Initiative (ERI) programme to improve the quality of the teaching of reading in public schools, a gap that was realised after using the UNICEF textbooks that were distributed to all schools except in private schools that use the Cambridge Curriculum.

A further requirement outlined in the reading policy requires lower grade teachers to keep separate Reading Record Books. When asked the importance of keeping a special record book for reading, Jane explained: *Reading record books are intended to capture strengths and weaknesses of every individual learner in order for the teacher to find specific solutions to the reading problems identified* (Participant 5: Jane). Teachers are constantly aware of their students' abilities and can identify strengths and weaknesses to promote effective learning experiences.

The findings reveal that having policies in place, being well prepared in terms of proper documentation as well as being well resourced with relevant curriculum materials, which promotes the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade level, is vital. In addition, being monitored by the principal ensures that teachers are not only supported but also supervised and mentored in the planning and implementation of a guided reading approach that will inform the development of reading literacy in early grade learners. Principals were aware of their role in the supervision of teaching and learning and particularly literacy development among learners. *It is the duty of the school head to ensure that all teaching documents are in place at the very beginning*

of each term. These documents include schemes of work, record of marks, remedial as well as the Social Record Book (SRB). When supervising these documents, the school head needs to verify whether what each respective class teacher indicates are the strengths and weaknesses of each learner are substantiated with concrete evidence as captured in the learners' work (Interviewee 1: Sithembile). Another principal added that: *At the beginning of every term, I make sure that all important documents are in place and then I have lesson and class observation at least three times per term for each teacher* (Interviewee 15: Patience).

In addition, the Ministry plays its role as well. The Education Inspector responsible for infant education reiterated the importance of ensuring that learners receive guided instruction so that they acquire important literacy development skills as early as possible. *As the Education Office responsible for infant education, it is my responsibility to ensure that I supervise all schools as regards literacy development initiatives in all schools under my educational leadership jurisdiction* (Interviewee 23: Mildred). The supervision of policy planning and implementation is a non-negotiable position, and this makes it the epicentre of reading literacy development initiatives in high performing schools.

However, findings in this study show that there are significant differences between the intended, perceived and implemented curriculum for schools. A concern though in many schools in Zimbabwe, is the teachers' ability to interpret, analyse and implement the lower grade reading literacy development curriculum adequately. This entails, among other things, the teacher's ability to interpret syllabi, break down study materials into manageable units, and identify corresponding teaching strategies and learning activities. Although high performing schools in Zimbabwe are well guided by the national vision, goals and strategies, the actual implementation of reading literacy development for each respective school is informed by local organisational goals illustrating the position of the school in the societal strata.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Teacher Characteristics and Classroom Operational Curriculum

The second theme attempts to answer the research question *Which pedagogical competencies are required of teachers to enable them to effectively teach reading skills at lower primary level?* Of importance is the teacher him/herself, their attributes and readiness to teach reading using organised reading sessions and systematised

pedagogical approaches as the basis for the acquisition of effective reading literacy development skills. The sub-themes, derived from the main theme, are professional competencies, teaching strategies, approaches and methods and teacher attributes.

5.2.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Teachers' professional competencies

This sub-theme summarises the impact of teachers' professional competencies as critical for developing lower grade learners' ability to acquire valuable reading skills during the early years of primary schooling. A brief discussion on teacher qualifications and recruitment sets the scene for the section.

The participants, who were experienced teachers (10-20 years) and whose appointment to their schools was based on their previous performance, were very aware of their academic and professional qualifications. All participants held basic pre-service teacher education qualifications (certificates or diplomas in education) from various teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe, all under the supervision of the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). Ten participants indicated that they had upgraded their qualifications to at least bachelor's degrees in education with a specialisation in early childhood development. Three teachers had proceeded to master's level while the remainder indicated that, although they did not find opportunities for degree studies, they had benefitted from workshops, and short-term courses as well as their individually guided models of teacher development (Tallerico, 2005). Although some teachers in the high performing schools only had minimum qualifications, such as the Certificate in Education, they were highly experienced and committed to maintaining the high standards they had learned from their predecessors during the colonial era having received considerable 'apprenticeship' from the original British-educated mentors. These participants were among the 'high performing participants' whose commitment to quality teaching and maintaining high standards was critical in maintaining academic integrity in the contemporary Zimbabwean education system.

Of interest to the study is the recruitment process for positions in higher performing schools. Candidates were interviewed and recruited on merit which contrasts with recruitment in government schools where teachers are deployed from the Public Service Commission. Although teacher recruitment is done differently in government-controlled high performing schools, learner achievement is still outstanding.

Participants felt that their teacher education training prepared them for the role that they play in the teaching of reading literacy. This could be the basis of high performing standards even though some follow different reading curricula. Teachers in high performing schools stated that interpretation and implementation of the curriculum depends on teacher competencies. This means that teacher competencies include a teacher's ability to analyse and interpret the national syllabus, design school-based teaching plans (schemes of work), match content and pedagogical approaches (Shulman, 1987), identify solutions to specific learning challenges, and assess and evaluate learning outcomes. Teachers' knowledge regarding the subject matter (SCK) as well as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) is critical in the development of reading skills among lower grade learners regardless of the school's location: *Knowledge of how to represent and formulate content knowledge in ways that make it understandable to learners is imperative in building learners' reading skills* (Participant 21: Linda). As Shulman (1987) indicates, teachers who have knowledge of the subject content without understanding teaching strategies are less effective.

Mary explained that apart from their qualifications and experience, their professional competence was guided and supported by the curriculum: *We are given the national syllabus where we derive our own school-based syllabi. In our school-based syllabi, we take into consideration contextual and environmental variables to be part of what we finally present as school-based reading curricula. Like in other schools, reading is just reading. There is nothing much we add except that this school is a former group A school, so we put more emphasis on reading.* Mary also discussed the role that collaboration plays, particularly when workshops are arranged by the Ministry: *We benefit from the cluster workshops where we are guided by officials from the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) focusing primarily on syllabus interpretation. Through such interactions, we learn from each other particularly on how to derive specific termly aims and objectives that we then use to develop our school-based schemes of work* (Interviewee 18: Mary).

In terms of professional development, the Ministry of Education is involved with teachers assisting them with the teaching of reading at lower grade levels. Janet explained: *We have staff development sessions. Chief among them is the Early Reading Initiative (ERI), which emphasises reading development among learners. Ministry of Education officials periodically visit schools to supervise the development*

of reading skills among lower grade learners in the entire country regardless of whether they are high performing or otherwise. We have been invited to attend several workshops to do with the development of reading skills at lower grade level in Zimbabwe (Interviewee 16: Janet). Patience discussed cluster meetings: *We meet at cluster level where the Ministry organises workshops particularly on how to teach reading at lower grade. Nevertheless, we have a school-based syllabus for lower grade learners that is derived from the national curriculum. At this school, we are encouraged to use the school-based curriculum using resources within our local environment* (Interviewee 15: Patience).

The above discussion aligns with pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), as indicated in Chapter 3, which relates to an equal understanding of both content and grade appropriate teaching strategies or the intersection of content and pedagogy where real learning takes place. In the context of the teaching of reading, PCK is what teachers know about the teaching of reading and what they know about how to teach it (Shulman, 1987) to ensure that learning takes place. Continued professional development, whether through additional courses, cluster meetings or self-study, is vital to ensure development of teacher competencies.

Monitoring and mentoring of teachers also assist in developing teacher competencies. Susan, the teacher in charge (TIC), explained that supervision of fellow colleagues is very important no matter what these experienced teachers have achieved in the past. When learners present with reading challenges, Susan explains that: *Usually I go back to that specific teacher with notable problems with her class and try to help her improve her teaching style. I will supervise/monitor all teachers in an effort to find out where exactly the problem is emanating from* (Interviewee 12: Susan).

Collaboration among staff members was also identified as a factor for developing teacher competencies. Shylet offered advice to lower grade teachers whose learners are struggling to acquire competent reading skills: *My advice is that they must devise a method to allocate teachers specific subject areas where they have strengths to help those in need. At the end, teacher complementarity will solve the problem. Again, teachers need to organise lesson and classroom observations in order to learn from each other. Sharing ideas always help both the one demonstrating and those observing. During lesson and class observation, there is no one regarded as the best*

teacher (Interviewee 17: Shylet). In the same vein, junior teachers appreciated the collaboration with seasoned teachers as well as their mentoring, the ICT department and the schools' continuous development programmes.

On the other hand, teachers' understanding of the psychology of human development provides professional guidance to remedy reading disabilities among lower grade learners. It is important for teachers to understand learners' psychological development. Phiona acknowledged that: *It is extremely important that teachers understand the psychology of child development for a variety of reasons. Chief among them include helping teachers to understand the kind of help learners with reading disabilities need. Some may require extra coaching; some may need professional counselling mainly from absent-mindedness that could have been caused by social problems. Some learners may fail to internalise reading skills purely because they have mental challenges. Without understanding the psychology of human development, teachers might end up recommending wrong positions to the TIC and this is the major reason why teachers must understand the psychology of child development as prerequisite to their appointment as lower grade teachers* (Interviewee 11: Phiona).

When probed to highlight if it is justifiable for teachers in higher grades to refuse to teach specific classes where reading disabilities have been identified, Phiona answered: *As I have just explained, psychological aspects of the learners come in. Learners are not machines. Their levels of understanding are different. Therefore, the teacher in the next grade needs to understand the different stages of human development as well. Some learners might be having IQ problems. Learners do not operate at the same level even though they are exposed to the same reading programmes and activities in the same class. Even if you are a competent teacher, the psychological challenges of learners could impede the acquisition of competent reading skills among learners. Both the school administration and parents must find experts to alleviate learners from such psychological challenges that could be beyond the teacher's control.* An extra competence that every lower grade teacher should have, is a qualification in counselling, she added: *Yes. It is very important because counselling helps the teacher to understand the background of learners as well as possible challenges associated with particular learning challenges. That knowledge*

helps to curb such reading and learning challenges in general before it is too late (Interviewee 11: Phiona).

Teachers are often faced with learners who present with reading disabilities despite the availability of competent teachers, reading resources and a conducive learning environment. Jennifer suggested: *At the end of the year in Grade 3, there is need for intensive assessment, and then those facing reading challenges will be allocated for remedial guidance in specific subject areas. It is after the remedial assignment that they are recommended to enrol for specific grades that may be suitable for their levels of achievement. We call this clinical remediation* (Interviewee 7: Jennifer). However, other factors may hinder timeous acquisition of reading competencies despite the availability of competent teachers as well as abundant resources, she added: "*The other challenge that makes it impossible to achieve 100% reader achievement is the teacher-pupil ratio. For example, in a class where there are 50 learners, the teacher is expected to give individualised attention to at least 10 pupils per day in order to cover all 50 pupils in the class. Obviously, this becomes very difficult for the teacher to listen to every pupil reading in the event that the class has such an unacceptable number of learners who require the teacher's maximum attention. Those who do not receive adequate parental assistance at home will be seriously affected. Finally, there are those who are naturally less gifted in intellectual mastering of concepts, will always lag behind despite availability of resources. According to me, this is a very serious psychological problem not only for learners but also for the teacher. For learners, some may generally feel unwanted because the teacher seems not to be aware of their presence. For the teacher it becomes very strenuous, laborious and time consuming to attend to every learner on time and effectively. Always at the back of their mind, the teacher will be asking themselves whether it is fair not to equally pay maximum attention to the needs of learners in class. Resultantly, it is possible for teachers to ignore and proceed as if everything is correct. However, it is always realised very late in the learner's academic life that somewhere, somehow, they did not receive proper academic guidance* (Interviewee 7: Jennifer).

To ensure teacher competence, continuous professional development is required to maximise performance output. In high performing schools, as per policy and culture, each staff member participates in a compulsory week's in-service training and preparation before schools open: *We have in-service training for each subject at the*

beginning of each term at least three days before schools open (Participant 8: Josephine). To promote the development of reading as part of school culture Sherry explained that: *We have staff development sessions. Chief among them is the Early Reading Initiative (ERI), which emphasises reading development among learners. Ministry of Education officials periodically visit schools to supervise the development of reading skills among lower grade learners regardless of whether they are high performing or otherwise. We have also been invited to attend several workshops to do with the development of reading skills at lower grade level in Zimbabwe* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

In addition, some schools organise staff development sessions, which are taken seriously, to keep teachers abreast of any changes in the teaching of reading and other topics that enhance the teaching of reading literacy. Besides in-service training, many lower grade teachers who have first specialist degrees such as in infant education, have been motivated to enrol at international as well as local universities to upgrade their qualifications.

5.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Teaching approaches, methods and strategies

The teaching of reading literacy development requires systematised pedagogical approaches. The impact of using organised reading sessions and systematised pedagogical approaches is the basis for effective teaching of English reading skills. Teacher competency is considered the cornerstone for learners' ability to acquire reading literary development, which resonates with Shulman (1987) that educators' understanding of teaching strategies helps them to create appropriate learning conditions to assist learners to acquire and develop reading literacy competence.

Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013:15) argue for balanced literacy, which is viewed as "a philosophical perspective that seeks to combine, or balance, skill-based and meaning-based instruction in order to ensure positive reading and writing results in children". They further argue that teachers' positive beliefs about utilising such an approach in the classroom is critical. As many learners come to school with substantial vocabularies in their mother tongue, teachers are encouraged to diversify their approaches to the teaching of reading through the use of curriculum instructional materials to maximise learner participation and achievement. Learners present with different learning styles and teachers should utilise a range of teaching strategies in

the teaching of reading literacy. This means that teachers should consider a student's natural or acquired abilities to deal with certain learning situations and provide a variety of reading literacy content in a learner-centred approach.

The greater part of the early childhood primary school curriculum aims to promote the acquisition of effective reading literacy skills to prepare young learners to learn. As previously indicated the national curriculum and reading policies developed by schools as well as the policies and plans contain a comprehensive road map for the teaching of reading to lower grade learners. While some learners might be quick to learn new concepts and technologies, others could be slower at acquiring new skills. It is imperative, therefore, that the teacher should know the preferred learning style of each student and take that into consideration when designing a course (Barbour & Cooze, 2004). This means that, whenever possible, material should be presented and taught using various methods of instruction that, combined, will be acceptable for each type of learner. Wing-Yin, Chang and Stephen (2005) suggest that phonological awareness, visual processing and speed naming of objects is critical to reading literacy development among lower grade learners regardless of cultural, socio-economic and educational contexts. Based on this understanding, lower grade learners are bound to improve their literacy development skills, provided appropriate teaching strategies have been applied regardless of relative below average performance levels of most learners in low performing schools.

Sherry explained her approaches and methods with very early learners: *We start with singing, singing numbers and traditional rhymes. We engage learners in oral activities, naming and identifying themselves as well as objects in the class and the general environment. Learners sing days of the week. In other words, they have planned activities to help logical understanding of day-to-day human activities within the contextual environment of the teaching and learning education circumstances. Such activities enable the teacher to assess the degree of literacy among newly recruited lower grade learners in the school. Again, we use picture reading where learners are asked to identify names of objects shown. In a way, such activities clearly demonstrate each learner's level of understanding using the already known environment. This aligns with the general policy to encourage teachers to derive learning activities from the local contextual environment. From picture reading, teachers usually introduce*

learners to the letters of the alphabet in both English and Shona. We use sounds of the objects. Letters of the alphabet are taught using known examples of words and pictures, e.g., the letter a, the picture of an apple and the word apple written against it. The same method applies to all letters of the alphabet. At this level (ECD), we focus more on sounds than real words. The picture helps the child to identify the letter sound. Sherry also emphasised the importance of rhymes in teaching reading to ECD learners and she clarified: S*uch activities help lower grade learners to develop sentence construction skills* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

Margaret, who has 30 years of experience teaching at a high performing school explains her strategy: *I use phonetic sounding, cyclic reading and reading games. I also use picture books, magazines and display charts for learners to read on their own during their spare time. During class activities, I make sure that all learners in my Grade 1 class are able to quickly identify word sounds correctly, pronounce at first sight and then proceed reading* (Participant 9: Margaret). All these approaches from experienced lower grade teachers in high performing schools could be viewed as excellent examples of teaching approaches and strategies.

Similar teaching strategies were mentioned by Nomsa: *I prefer picture reading to any other study materials applicable to teaching reading at lower grade level. I normally provide a lot of pictures of animals and objects and then, ask learners to sound together with pictures, sound them on their own and sometimes combine them both. Word building usually occurs as learners try to associate what they see in pictures and what is written underneath* (Participant 6: Nomsa). The analysis of schemes of work indicated that most lower grade teachers emphasise the development of phonetic skills more than other skills such as writing.

Observation of class activities revealed that teachers demonstrated a preference for teaching word sounds and pronunciation as well as engaging in activities that instil in learners the ability to identify and sound words instantly. To those learners who struggled to identify word sounds at first sight, remedial activities were organised as indicated in their respective remedial books. Participants emphasised the value of mastery of word sounds in reading literacy development.

Phonetic knowledge and other strategies mentioned above, are strategic in the teaching of reading. Knowledge of phonics and look-and-say sight vocabulary are

valuable foundations which support reading literacy development, positively support the child's ability to read and ensure that learners can read at grade or above grade level. Teachers in the high performing schools displayed competent knowledge about the components of teaching reading, different strategies and as well as the need to create balance by desisting from using only one method.

Several studies about teaching reading revealed that phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading programme, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached (USNRP, 2000). Other reading materials such as picture reading should be given equal weighting during lesson delivery because restricting learners to the same activity stifles their reading literacy development. A balanced provision of appropriate study materials for the teaching of reading is a critical component of lower grade learning.

In all high performing schools, teachers made use of a wide variety of instructional materials for the teaching of reading literacy. Interviews, focus group discussions as well as lesson observations revealed that teachers were knowledgeable about which curriculum content is most suitable for their lower grade learners. This knowledge and implementation of the curriculum was revealed in learners' workbooks with written exercises reflecting a variety of activities designed to help them acquire and develop competent reading skills. Some schools had separate workbooks for phonics, spelling, comprehension, and language representing the developmental aspects of reading skills.

As previously indicated, teachers should know what literature appeals to the learners (Pretorius, 2014). Participants from the high performing schools demonstrated their competence in selecting material that appeals to learners. All classrooms had functional libraries or reading corners with story books that learners would enjoy. During reading time, teachers read interesting stories to the learners, or learners participate in group reading or even individual reading, all of which develops a culture of reading and develops reading literacy.

One of the most notable reading instructional strategies that is prevalent in most high performing schools is the use of computer technology. E-Learning and ICT labs were available and functional in the high performing schools. It was noted that learners come to schools already fluent in other literacies and knowledgeable about using

modern technological gadgets, having been exposed to a variety of gadgets like smart phones. Participants were fully aware that learning in contemporary society should be supported by ICT and as a result, this mode of learning has become a prerequisite in the teaching of reading literacy. In addition, teachers these days acknowledge that they must be creative in order to stimulate active participation in learners. It was reported that in one high performing school that parents contributed to purchasing tablets for the learners so that each child had his/her own devise to use throughout the day without sharing. Participants indicated that considering the impact of modern technology in contemporary Zimbabwean schools, the use of ICT tools is not only critical but also unavoidable. This was evident that all high performing schools had functional computer labs and e-learning was taking place from as early as ECD. The conclusion was drawn that contemporary education is heavily reliant on the use of modern technology gadgets.

Janet highlighted the importance of developing grade-appropriate reading literacy skills which should be in place before a learner proceeds to the next grade: *I think there is need to have all lower grade learners individually assessed as regards their reading readiness. Instead of rushing the child to proceed to higher levels when they are still not ready. I think at national level, it should be a policy that when lower grade learners are unable to read, they must not be allowed to proceed to the next grade. Considering the size of our classes now, teachers may not be able to provide adequate individual help to all learners* (Interviewee 16: Janet). It is thus crucial that learners develop a solid foundation of reading literacy through each grade for the teacher in the next grade to build upon that foundation. There have been occasions in high performing schools where learners who are challenged in developing reading literacy skills, have been promoted. Jenifer explained what happened at her school: *At our school, such a problem was discovered that learners in specific classes were allowed to proceed to the next grade while still unable to read. It was solved by specifying that teachers take through from example, ECD A to ECD B, Grade 1 to Grade 2. This transition is achieved together with the submission of documentary evidence indicating each learner's reading level.* Jennifer explained how this problem was solved: *At the end of the year in Grade 3, they will be assessed, and then those facing reading challenges will be allocated for remedial guidance in specific subject areas. It is after the remedial assignment that they are recommended to enrol for specific grades that*

may be suitable for their levels of achievement. We call this clinical remediation (Interviewee 7: Jennifer).

Although teachers usually adhere to the national curriculum, their teaching approach in many instances, is inclined to the western teaching approaches, as designed and presented by the Oxford-Cambridge Reading Scheme. In some cases, teachers merge local curriculum content materials and with the Oxford-Cambridge curriculum. This assists in developing a context-based programme which could have the potential to increase learner achievement depending on how these teachers are able to match content and pedagogy, as illustrated by Shulman (1987) in his model, the Pedagogical Content Knowledge Model. This means that many teachers are motivated to design their own reading schemes, blending different curricula to suit the learners' and contextual needs.

Participants from high performing schools acknowledged the use the Cambridge-Oxford curriculum and University of Cambridge curriculum materials. The Oxford-Cambridge Reading Tree Scheme for example, when used appropriately, assists learners in mastering reading skills at their grade level before progressing to the next. The Oxford Reading Books come in series and range from simple to complex, ideal for the various learner levels. In many cases, the high performing schools supplement these books with additional state-of-the-art resources. Learners start reading at Reception 1 and by the time they move to Reception 2 and Grade 1, most learners are able to read simple words and two and three letter phrases/sentences. The curriculum is structured in such a way that Reception teachers know what they should cover in that level; and this occurs for each of the levels with the curriculum setting out a progressive plan for the development of reading literacy. This means that participants could speak confidently about the richness of their curricula in developing learners' reading literacy which for lower grade learners means focusing on word identification, word building and simple sentence construction activities. Participants, during focus groups discussions, revealed that the reading schemes they used, offered successful outcomes. Sound interpretation and implementation of a reading curriculum impacts positively on learners' reading output. In the high performing schools, the intended curriculum was well understood by all lower grade teachers and well implemented as indicated by reading records. These reading records show learners' reading levels and the books the learner has read as well as notes about the

readers' strengths and challenges, which are passed on to the teacher of the next grade.

In addition, to assist teachers, especially with large class sizes, Susan, the teacher in charge, feels that her role as a teacher in charge, is to ensure that learners are also supported: *I usually supervise reading. We emphasise the development of reading at lower grade since failure to acquire appropriate reading skills may hinder progressive learning throughout the learner's academic life. I stress the importance of reading in both languages applicable in the school. By the end of Grade 2, the majority of learners will be able to read* (Interviewee 12: Susan).

As assessment is integral to teaching and learning, teachers continuously assess their learners' progress in reading: *We design our own grade-specific assessment tests. Teachers may not necessarily set for their specific grades. For example, those teaching Grade 1 may set tests for Grade 2 and vice versa. It is not difficult for the teacher to set tests for classes they are not currently teaching since they teach those classes on rotational bases. In other words, all teachers in the department are well versed with the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of reading development at lower grade level. Of course, these tests are not really standardised, but they offer greater opportunities to guide learners in the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade levels. The reading tests start from simple to complex. For example, the teaching of words as they are subsequently coined to develop into sentences* (Interviewee 22: Jude).

In terms of assessment of the development of reading abilities among lower grade learners, Susan elaborated: *We have an assessment file for each learner, which prescribes learner-reading achievement for all Grades 1 to 7. Each time teachers receive a specific grade to teach, learners' assessment files have to be submitted to them. Files contain information regarding learner achievement, challenges and possible solutions to alleviate the identified problems. In other words, the files contain useful information regarding the child's reading performance levels* (Interviewee 12: Susan). Keeping records specifically for supervising reading development promotes the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade levels. This academic strategy of constant monitoring of learner reading achievement is also echoed by Sledge and Pazey (2013). However, keeping records through the various grades,

assists the teachers in identifying each of their learners' strengths and weakness, which informs the development of the teaching plan.

Janet, as well as teachers in high performing schools, were aware of using assessment to inform further learning as well as keeping records of learner progress: *I usually revisit previous class activities and try to establish the extent to which their learners have mastered prescribed concepts. Through such kinds of assessment procedures, I will then be able to advise and recommend to the TIC that the child is ready for the next level/grade. This information is also useful to the parent – useful in the sense that the parent can decide whether to keep their child in the same grade or to proceed but to the learner's academic risk* (Interviewee 16: Janet).

Certain programmes have been put in place to assist both teachers and learners, particularly with reading literacy development. The Early Reading Initiative (ERI), funded by Global Partnership for Education (GPE), was introduced in 2013 to increase teacher performance and management by equipping them with additional teaching and learning skills. The Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP), aimed at helping the learners address weaknesses, is believed to have developed from concepts missed at lower levels thus affecting their present performance (Mahanya, 2018). Janet commented on the effectiveness of ERI and PLAP in developing reading literacy, assessing it and providing support for learners who are challenged with reading: *ERI is good at lower grade level for continuous assessment purposes. PLAP offers remedial measure for learners with reading challenges. In other word, PLAP was introduced to remedy learning challenges that had been caused by the mass exodus of quality teachers because of brain drain. This was intended to accelerate learner achievement so that they catch up with others* (Interviewee 16: Janet).

In addition, support is given to learners whose reading literacy development is lacking. Shylet, a teacher-in-charge at her school, explained how help is given to learners who are challenged in developing reading literacy skills during the early grades of their lower primary schooling: *For those who might not be able to read, there are teachers who volunteer to give further assistance. Traditionally, all learners who start their lower grade education at this school usually become independent readers. There could be one or two cases, but the rest are always able to read. However, we have cases where learners transfer from other school; those are the pupils that usually present with*

reading challenges. Nevertheless, we have programmes where volunteer teacher assists and in the majority of cases, such learners improve as well. To minimise such challenges where transferees struggle to match our reading standards, we assess their reading levels in order to affect appropriate placements according to their levels of their reading abilities. Transferees pose a serious problem because some of them come from schools where reading is not a priority. In addition, lower grade teachers record sounds and post them in WhatsApp groups where parents are advised how to assist their learners in sounding words in order to read" (Interviewee 17: Shylet).

A competent teacher extracts relevant content from the curriculum, develops it and uses their pedagogical skills to implement it such as in *employing a variety of strategies/methods* (Interviewee 17: Shylet). However, it is the teachers' attributes, such as willingness, dedication and enthusiasm towards providing individual help to all learners that is effective in reading literacy development.

5.2.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Teacher attributes

Attributes refer to qualities someone or something possesses. In this case**,** teacher attributes refer to important qualities a teacher possesses to be effective. These may include enthusiasm, positive attitude, passion, skills in communication, listening, collaboration, adaptability, empathy and patience (Lynch, 2016). These attributes should be evidence in conjunction with teacher competencies and teaching and learning approaches, methods and strategies.

The role of teachers in learner achievement is critical regardless of educational level. Thus, the existence of a competent teaching blueprint and availability of reading resource materials may not be sufficient to enhance reading skills acquisition processes among learners. Teacher attributes, therefore, have a major influence on learners in acquiring and reading literacy skills during the ECD phase or the early grades of primary schooling. It takes a special person to work with young children and create an environment conducive to learning.

A study carried out by EFA in 2012 and 2013 argued that most of the learners' progress is largely influenced by the quality of teachers entrusted to deliver curricula and in addition, the school climate should also be enabling – thus a conducive environment is imperative in learners' performance. School climate is considered

imperative as it creates a good working ground for the learners to develop reading literacy.

Grace explained: *The majority of teachers in the department of early childhood development are so enthusiastic with teaching. They love their teaching profession. They derive a lot of happiness when they guide lower grade learners to acquire competent reading skills. To me, their effort is as a direct result of some kind of a calling to the teaching fraternity as a profession. They are different from some of those teachers elsewhere who are always thinking of monetary values as the measuring standard of their effort in the classroom. At the year, as a teacher, you have the majority of learners in your class graduating to the next grade whilst they are able to read at grade level, even above. This shows that the majority of teachers in ECD are highly motivated to ensure that learners acquire the most fundamental reading skills before they are progressed to the next grade. This, somehow, becomes a school policy that not even a single learner is allowed to proceed to the next grade without being able to read. Our headmaster is very strict on that. Should teacher X keep on giving excuses as regard to what might have caused their learners not to acquire desirable reading competencies, he recommends that you leave the school before tarnishing the academic image of our school. Therefore, in our case as lower grade teachers, it is a requirement NOT to let learners proceed without being able to read. In fact, one could be asked to explain why learners from her class in the previous year are unable to read* (Interviewee 14: Grace). This statement aligns with the idea that learners need to progress to the next grade having achieved the grade-appropriate reading skills.

Susan gave her explanation of attributes needs in lower grade teachers: *There are many. Chief among them include patience, tolerance, motherly love, commitment, creativity (for example, creating reading games). This is because learners are different. Come down, put yourself in their level. Play with them, be like them. This is the reason why we wear dustcoats because they always touch all over the teacher's body sometimes with dirty hands. Because of our commitment to ensure we reduce ourselves to the level of these little ones, the school provided us with dustcoats. I think you can see all of lower grade teachers at our school wear dustcoats*. (Interviewee 12: Susan).

Julian explained that: *a teacher must be resourceful. She must have short and exciting stories relevant to the level of learners. From these simple stories, learners can then dramatise and be creative. When learners dramatise these stories, teacher begin to assess the extent to which their learners have mastered the concepts learnt. In some ways, lower grade teachers should encourage learners to be creative by adding sensible statements to the nouns identified in the story. In addition, teachers must have a positive attitude towards learners in their classes. They must also appreciate the learners' backgrounds. The teacher must also be tolerant. Teachers must be patient in order to be able to take them through all learning developmental stages* (Interviewee 20: Julian).

Of interest was the issue of gender exclusiveness of lower grade teaching in the high performing schools, as well as the issue of age. Phiona explained: *Usually elderly female teachers have that motherly love. They are generally tolerant with young learners. Even female teacher who are relatively young are discouraged from teaching the very little lower grade learners. These relatively young female teachers are coming just for the sake of earning a living. They desire to teach but their passion for the young learners is somehow limited. Elderly teachers seem to demonstrate their passion and enjoyment towards the development of young learners. You will find out that young learners are, feel very comfortable in the company of these elderly teachers than they could do with young female teachers with similar qualifications. Lower-grade teaching requires understanding the nature of the learners in their infancy. Generally, those who are prepared to come down to the level of lower grade learners* (Interviewee 11: Phiona).

Further specific skills and competencies that lower grade teachers should demonstrate are: *being patient. Do not rush the child while they are reading before you. The teacher again has to be resourceful. They need to be loved. Once learners suspect that the teacher is hostile, the next thing is that they do not learn anything. Instead, they are ever afraid of the teacher, which is professionally unacceptable. Young learner enjoys the use of motivation and rewards. For example, I designed small stars on cards and when the once-struggling learner succeeds in reading, immediately I give them that star. I display learners' work on the wall with stars indicated to show that today they have managed to read. Teachers must also work closely with the parents in order to create conducive home learning environment. It is also imperative that teachers must*

know the background of their learners in order to assist appropriately. Lower grade teachers need to be highly tolerant (Interviewee 12: Susan).

Thus, as Nota (2017) insists, teacher competency, the application of a range of teaching approaches, methods and strategies and teacher attributes is a non-negotiable protocol in literacy development.

5.2.3 Theme 3: School – the Implemented Curriculum

This section elaborates on findings which attempt to answer the research question: *Which enabling classroom features/conditions characterise the nature of reading literacy development in primary schools in Zimbabwe?*

5.2.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Implementing the curriculum

Reading is an academic component that requires maximum attention (Adams, 1990; Drew, 2012; Karefillidou & Papageorgiou, 2005). It is critical that schools as educational organisations ensure that the intended curriculum is interpreted and implemented in ways that promote effective acquisition of competent reading skills. However, as previously reported, in many schools in Zimbabwe, teachers' ability to interpret, analyse and implement the lower grade reading literacy curriculum adequately, is a concern. This entails, among other things, the teachers' ability to interpret the curriculum, break down content into manageable units and identify corresponding teaching strategies and learning activities as well as teaching and learning materials.

As previously indicated, the national curriculum, the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022, developed by the Ministry of Education, is used in most schools with some using additional curricula for guiding the teaching of reading. Participants from the high performing schools acknowledged that using international curricula allows them to follow global trends, particularly when it is focuses on developing grade-appropriate skills which assists learners in mastering reading skills at their grade level before progressing to the next. Some schemes are accompanied by reading resource materials which range from simple to complex, ideal for the various learner levels. In many cases, the high performing schools supplement these books with additional state-of-the-art resources. In many cases, schools are well resourced with access to reading material, the use of a school library and/or library

corner and in addition, teachers design their own reading schemes, blending different curricula to suit the learners' and contextual needs.

Participants felt that their teacher education training prepared them for the role that they play in the teaching of reading literacy, particularly for the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum, which depends on teacher competence. A competent teacher extracts relevant content from the curriculum, develops it and uses pedagogical skills to implement it. This was evidenced in the analysis of the professional documents, the classroom displays and the confidence the teachers portrayed in their lessons where teachers used of variety of teaching approaches and methods, as well as curriculum instructional materials to maximise learner participation and achievement. Teachers were aware that learners present with different learning styles and that they should utilise a range of teaching strategies in the teaching of reading literacy. This means that teachers should consider a student's natural or acquired abilities to deal with certain learning situations and provide a variety of reading literacy content in a learner-centred approach, taking into considered the preferred learning style of each student (Barbour & Cooze, 2004).

In all high performing schools, teachers made use of a wide variety of instructional materials for the teaching of reading literacy, being very aware of the curriculum content and their learners' ability and interests. As previously indicated, teachers should know what literature appeals to the learners (Pretorius, 2014). Participants from the high performing schools demonstrated their competence in selecting material that appeals to learners with learners being able to select their own reading material from the school libraries or classroom reading corners. In addition to reading by themselves, participating in group reading, teachers also allocated time to read interesting stories to the learners, which assisted in developing a culture of reading.

Utilising appropriate reading resources for the foundation phase creates academic opportunities for the acquisition of reading skills at lower grade levels. The analysis of various documents and infrastructure (schemes of work, remedial books, reading assessment books, class libraries), as well as data from interviews and focus group discussions revealed that the acquisition of competent reading skills is influenced by the quality and quantity of reading resources learners are exposed to during their learning. Mary explained that: *At this school, we have sufficient resources to use when*

teaching reading at lower grade level. The availability of resource enables learners to acquire competent reading skills. Like as I have just mentioned, we have all the reading resource materials at this school as compared with other schools. For this reason, we, our achievement later at Grade 7 level is far much better than the majority of other primary schools in the entire country" (Interviewee 18: Mary). Sherry who teaches at a government primary school located in the CBD explained: *We have several book types such as readers and other graded reading books. Other schools do not have reading resource books that learners take home to practise reading as daily academic and homework activities. Every learner is provided with reading books to ensure that they have considerable exposure to print media regularly. That is where we are mostly different from other schools* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

A participant from another privately-owned high performing school explained resources at her school: *We have a variety of readers in this school. These readers are provided according to the reading age of the child, grade and the material. The reason for grading the reading stuff is to encourage reading enjoyment. These learners read according to their different levels of understanding. It is not surprising to realise that, in the same class, learners are at different reading stages. Some learners could be more advanced than others – still in the same grade could, some could be reading level 1, others 2 or 3 while the gifted ones could be much higher than their grade-specific reading abilities*. However, it seems that this school is still dependent on books sourced many years ago before independence: *All the books that we are using today were used during the colonial period to instil competent reading skills among lower grade learners. We are still using textbooks as far as those that were used by whites written in 1973. Such books are much more informative than the current textbooks. In addition, we use Sunrise reader, Cathy and Mark, as well as John and Janet and many others* (Interviewee 17: Shylet). Of interest is that Shylet found that even though the school used 'traditional' readers from a previous era, they tended to be more successful in developing reading literacy skills.

Janet discussed resources found at her school: *We have a class library supported by parents. We also have computer labs that have a software program called Ruzivo (Knowledge), which the school subscribes to periodically in order for learners to continuously access to gain useful information relevant towards their studies for specific grades* (Interviewee 16: Janet).

Understanding the value of developing a foundation of reading literacy skills, Patience felt that it was the duty of school administrators to ensure that the school was well resourced: *I encourage school administrators to source relevant reading resource materials for lower grade learning because this is the foundation for commendable reading achievement. Use of ICT is very critical for research. Again, it helps teachers to find latest trends of teaching reading as a critical academic activity for lower grade learning in contemporary primary schools' learning adventures. Finally, the use of smart phones to create chart groups to exchange knowledge. There is what we call TIC link around Zimbabwe* (Interviewee 15: Patience).

In contrast to the situation in well-resourced schools, participants were aware that *some parents in other sections of the Zimbabwean educational communities are generally poor, it becomes very difficult for them to provide reading materials for their learners. At the end, those learners end up failing to grasp basic reading skills. Should this kind of scenario take place, teachers in such environments must be informed that reading materials do not necessarily mean textbooks alone. Magazines, newspapers, and other print materials constitute relevant reading materials for use at lower grade reading initiatives. All they need to do is to cut pictures and other relevant statements and capitalise on these little resources found within local environments to teach reading"* (Interviewee 9: Grace). This means that teachers need to be resourceful and utilise easily accessible materials to create their own curriculum content material. Julia suggested encouraging teachers to: *improvise using locally available resource materials. There is learning everywhere. Use resources that learners can easily identify and acquire form their local communities* (Interviewee 20: Julian).

Implementing the curriculum effectively, does have its challenges. An aspect to consider is that of teacher-pupil ratio, as this affects teacher-pupil interaction. This ratio is critical particularly where there is need for individualised help for the learners. In classes where the teacher-pupil ratio is high (for example 1:50), it becomes challenging for teachers to offer individualised support for those learners who are struggling to acquire the basic skills. A participant from a church-related school raised the issue of the number of learners in one class: *I would like to emphasise the impact of teacher-pupil ratio in class. Some time ago, it was not surprising to find out that the teacher-pupil ratio was 1:25 and these enabled teachers to pay maximum attention to individual learners. This is the direct opposite of today's education system where*

teacher-pupil ratio is nearly 1:70. How can the teacher be able to assist each learner daily without compromising the quality of reading performance? Previously when the class sizes were manageable, it was possible that all learners would progress to the next grade able to read. Big classes are always difficult to provide quality guidance. Therefore, the general reading environment is comprised mainly because of class size (Interviewee 12: Susan). However, in private schools there are generally a smaller number of learners in each class in comparison to government schools.

As Ndamba (2008) articulates, language development which does not include literature from local languages, is not only inconsistent with the spirit of cultural and educational inclusivity of post-independent Zimbabwe but is also a language teaching approach that is generally exclusive. The official language policy of the 1987 Education Act, revised in 2004, clearly spells out that lower grade learners are to receive education instruction in their first languages. Therefore, the emphasis on the use of English (which is L2 of most learners in Zimbabwe) in the majority of these high performing schools may not necessarily be commendable. Affording equal readership status to all languages at lower grade levels promotes the acquisition of reading skills and competencies more so than when teachers concentrate only on one language (English), which is generally used as the language of both communication and instruction in the schools.

5.2.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Developing a reading culture

Establishing a reading as part of school culture enables learners to acquire reading competencies at lower grade levels. This sub-theme focuses on the importance of establishing reading as part of the school culture: *At this school, we have what we call the reading culture. We have emphasised so strongly, reading. Every child is expected to start reading as low as ECD A. We have what we call picture reading. Picture reading emphasises that the child logically depicts the story through understanding picture displays and/or factual sequence. In Grade 1, we emphasise sounds. We do not teach them names of letters of the alphabet. Instead, we teach them through identifying alphabetical letters by the sounds they produce. The reason for using sounds is to help the child identify words and articulate them correctly. We further emphasise that our lower grade learners complete specific reading activities daily. Again, teachers in the lower grade department are advised to supervise and monitor*

each learner to ensure that no one is left behind. It is a policy at this school that learners are given reading activities as daily homework. Teachers then, make sure that every morning each learner reads before their respective class teachers to ensure that all assigned activities have been completed and concepts mastered. We encourage learners to read individually before the teacher not as group work. This reading culture does not end at lower grade level but goes until Grade 7 (Participant 12: Susan).

Sherry believes in the necessity of developing a reading culture: *There is absolute need to develop reading cultures at our respective schools in Zimbabwe. Reading should be emphasised in all languages spoken in the school environment* (Interviewee 13: Sherry). Developing a culture of reading begins with a motivated teacher: *The first thing early in the morning is to engage learners in intensive reading programs for between 30 and 45 minutes daily – Mondays through Fridays"* (Interviewee 20: Julian) and time set aside for reading: *The fact that I value the importance of reading, I take this as my priority before everything else. Even on my timetable, reading is the first thing to do every day* (Interviewee 17: Shylet). The development of a reading culture in schools supports the fact that it is important to ensure that all learners can read as early as possible.

Teachers are aware that the earlier reading literacy begins, the greater the reward. It was noted that reading literacy began at the ECD level with learners being introduced to picture books with accompanying literacy activities. In addition to working individually with the teacher, learners are tasked with reading activities to complete at home, where parental involvement comes into play.

For a reading programme to be successfully implemented and for reading culture to be developed, the school needs to be fully resourced. It emerged that many of the high performing schools are situated in affluent suburbs in Harare and because it is a fee-paying school, it is well resourced: *At our school, we have zvikwanisiro (sufficient resources) to use when teaching reading at lower grade level. The availability of resource enables learners to acquire competent reading skills … we have all the reading resource materials at this school as compared with other schools* (Participant 16: Janet). Schools offer learners a library session which *is the time slot on the timetable that is exclusively reserved for reading for enjoyment. We have a variety of*

readers in this school. These readers are provided according to the reading age of the child, grade and the material. The reason for grading the reading stuff is to encourage reading enjoyment. These learners read according to their different levels of understanding (Interviewee 20: Julian).

Teachers are aware that there are factors that promote the development of reading skills among lower grade learners: *The child's background, literacy levels of parents, parental involvement, reading culture at this school as well as the availability of resources as well as competent teachers in the school. The environment is also another important factor. Lastly, orientation with parents advising them of basic requirements for promoting reading achievement for their learners* (Interviewee 3: Regina) and it is not just one factor but a combination of these. Within the school environment, developing a culture of reading is vital and this goes together with the availability of resources and the competence of teachers.

Trends in literacy education focus on the importance of reading literacy programmes and teaching strategies implemented in the classroom. Many high performing schools have reading literacy programmes in place to assist lower grade learners acquire reading literacy skills as soon as they enrol for primary school education. As previously discussed, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) implemented programmes, namely, the Early Reading Initiatives (ERI) and the Performance Lag Assessment Progress (PLAP) to assist in developing reading literacy. These programmes were introduced after realising that the many lower grade learners in Zimbabwe were struggling to match grade-specific reading competencies. *This programme has helped to improve the way how reading literacy development at lower grade level in* most of our schools is going (Interviewee 20: Mildred), which aligned with Sherry who found that: *ERI focuses on continuous assessment purposes while PLAP offers remedial measure for learners with reading challenges* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

Developing a reading culture is reliant on teachers exposing learners to appealing literature appeals to the learners and impacts the learners' reading habits (Pretorius *et al.,* 2016). Many classrooms in high performing schools have functional libraries with story books that are appealing to learners. During reading time, teachers read interesting stories to the learners and ask them questions or learners are given the

opportunity to dramatise the story. On the timetable, there is also group reading where each group is assigned its own book taking turns to read which means that learners are exposed to many reading initiatives, which impact positively on their reading performance and develop a love for reading.

In addition, the presence of ICT resources in some schools supports the reading literacy programme. The teaching and learning process of reading at lower grades is enhanced with the use of modern technology. The use of ICT tools, such as interactive boards, is not only critical but also unavoidable in today's world where high performing schools are equipped with functional computer labs for e-learning to take place for all learners from ECD to Grade 7.

Being well-resourced may be the case in high-performing schools but there are challenges with low performing schools, which are often located in poor socio-economic areas: *Although schools are encouraged to do their best to ensure that lower grade learners acquire necessary reading competencies during the foundation phase, the greatest challenge we face is resource mobilisation* (Interviewee 23: Mildred). Julian offered an example: *Upon completing my initial teacher training, I was deployed at one of the schools in the peri-urban close to Mutare in Manicaland province. The only reading was carried out as we instructed learners to answer specific comprehension passages and it ended there. The issue of library sessions was non-existent* (Interviewee 20: Julian).

Teacher competency is not only measured by one's ability to utilise appropriate reading resources provided by the school. Instead, competent teachers are always resourceful. *From my experience in teaching in poorly resourced schools, I always managed to teach reading because I capitalised on the use of reading resources from the local environment. For example, I use to collect pictures from any print media and try to create words that suit the level of my learners. From these pictures, I developed phonics instruction that, by the end of the year, my grade 1 class was outstanding* (Interviewee 12: Susan). Sherry added: *Reading materials do not necessarily mean textbooks. Magazines, newspapers and other print materials constitute relevant reading materials for use in lower grade reading initiatives* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

Provision of adequate reading resource materials without the provision of competent, dedicated and experienced teachers, however, does not help much in the

development or reading competencies among lower grade learners. This position is supported by one of the participants: *I think both teacher competency and availability of resources are equally important. All that is needed is balancing both the availability of resources and teacher competencies to produce esteemed results* (Interviewee 11: Phiona) and develop a culture of reading.

As previously indicated, the use of ICT adds to the creation of a conducive climate in the school. The current learners have been exposed to ICT and making use of digital reading programmes can augment traditional print-based reading programmes and assist in developing both reading literacy and a culture of reading.

The impression gained from the above responses and interpretation is that for learners to acquire and develop competent reading literacy skills, a reading culture with all mitigating factors needs to be established. Without these vital reading literacy skills, it becomes challenging for real learning to take place.

Despite the existence of a reading culture in high performing schools, many non-readers have been identified. Jennifer explained that: *It is possible that parents are different in the way they help their learners with homework. Nevertheless, our expectation as teachers is that parents at home also reinforce what have been learnt at school. Unfortunately, we have realised selected cases where parents regardless of economic status, do not value the need to assist learners with homework assignments. This will result in poor learner performance* (Interviewee 7: Jennifer). To develop a reading culture amongst learners, attention needs to be given to attitude to reading, home background and parental involvement.

5.2.3.3 Sub-theme 3.4: Attitude, home background and parental involvement

This sub-theme reiterates the value of attitude to reading, home background, parental involvement and teacher-parent collaboration in assisting lower grade learners in acquiring and developing reading literacy skills during the early grades of primary schooling in some selected high performing schools in Zimbabwe. Many learners nowadays enter the classroom with a wealth of background knowledge, rich in vocabulary and experiential learning from the various environments to which they were exposed. Much of this acquisition of knowledge and experiential learning begins at home. As teachers, it is important to be cognisant of the role that parents play in a child's early literacy learning (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011) as parental

involvement is helpful in assisting learners to acquire competent reading skills at lower grade levels.

However, learners' individual differences in language and early literacy skills at the beginning of school, have been attributed to the quality and quantity of language interactions with their parents and exposure to print in the home environment. Learners whose attention is drawn to printed material around them, will gain the important message that print conveys meaning (Montero, Newmaster & Ledger, 2014).

While reading enjoyment is more important for learners' educational success than their family's socio-economic status, research indicates that the earlier parents become involved in their learners' literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer lasting the effects (Kucirkova *et al.,* 2017), particularly as reading has been found to be central to all educational endeavours because understanding of other curricula is achieved through reading (Guthrie, Mcrae & Klauda, 2007). Shared book reading, for example, is one way in which parents, early childhood educators and other caregivers help learners acquire literacy skills and develop a positive attitude to reading.

Learners coming from print-rich environments are easily identifiable as those whose parents have introduced them to books as early as possible because they are generally motivated to interact with print media (Collins & Halverson, 2010). Involvement with reading activities at home has a significant positive influence not only on reading achievement, language comprehension and expressive language skills (Varghese & Wachen, 2016), but also on learners' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe, 1991). Learners' early reading experiences at home prepare them for formal literacy instruction (Montero *et al.*, 2014).

As a result, parents in these schools expect the teacher to be competent and demonstrate their competence in teaching their learners to read and build on what has already been established at home, particularly as today's learners have been exposed to the technology as a further source of material and information: *Today's learner is advanced because at home most of them use their parents' study rooms which have computers linked to internet, they already come knowing how to search things on the*

internet, so as teachers, if we do not keep abreast, we remain backward and the learners will always be ahead. Sometimes the learners bring to school downloaded reading material which shows their parents take seriously their study (Participant 4: Johnson).

Parental involvement in their children's literacy practices is a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Domina, 2005) and is considered one of the most influential strategies to promote literacy development among lower grade learners. The supportive part that parents play in promoting their children's reading is a strategy of teacher-parent collaboration. Phiona explained: *Teachers and parents assist each other in guiding young learners to acquire competent reading skills. We give them reading activities to read at home and the parents assist them at home. They have reading diaries indicating specific pages and content to be covered daily where parents sign that their learners have mastered the assigned work* (Interviewee 11: Phiona). Parents should realise the importance of reading alongside their child or becoming involved in reading activities. Such involvement develops the culture of reading which can be transferred from parent to child in the home environment and ultimately to school. Research shows that learners who see their parents reading at home, will be successful in their early reading literacy development (Derderian-Aghajanian & Cong, 2012); therefore, parental involvement in reading activities at home enables learners to perform well at lower grade levels.

In some schools, early reading literacy programmes are supported by parents who assist with daily class readings from 07:00-07:30 prior to leaving for work. Having their parents involved, seems to have motivated the learners to master the art of reading, primarily to show their parents that they are doing well at school. Because of the teamwork, parents, teachers and learners become naturally motivated to do their best to develop reading literary and in addition, it gives parents the opportunity to track their children's reading level and progress: *In this economic hardship, parents sacrifice their time and resources providing class teachers with teaching and learning materials to ensure that learners read. It gives me enthusiasm to help the learners to read when I realize the effort parents make* (Participant 10: Memory). Thus, parental involvement in their children's reading performance impacts positively on the learners' reading performance and in developing a sustained interest in and a love for reading. This

interest motivates parents to purchase or source additional reading material for both school, class and home libraries so that leisure reading continues as a shared activity at home. Beauty confirmed that: *Parental involvement in reading activities is also helpful. Parents are also persuaded to provide learning resources such as laptops and other reading materials for their learners. Personally, I have witnessed tremendous literacy development among lower grade learners should parents decide to contribute. For example, some parents could even go further by requesting to make copies of reading materials for specific classes where their learners are admitted. Some parents work in high offices or organisations that have some relevant materials to the development of reading. They help us considerably* (Interviewee 19: Beauty).

Parental involvement illustrates collaboration between school and home to create enabling conditions to improve learners' reading performance. When parents take responsibility for their children's learning, most learners acquire and develop grade-appropriate reading literacy skills. By creating a strong connection between parents and teachers, the child is more likely to understand the importance of literacy in all aspects of his or her life. Frequent visits to the school are appreciated as is the support given by parents at school events, and this influences learners when they know their parents participate in school functions. The level of parent involvement revealed by high performing schools has reciprocal effects on both home and school and with good outcomes. Parents may also get involved through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and School Development Committees (SDC), volunteering in the child's classroom, grading spelling tests, or attending special events. Each aspect of participation is effective in building a positive home-school relationship. In fostering this relationship, parents demonstrate their love for learning and the school.

Memory explained how she reaches out to parents in various ways: *We communicate through phone calls, emails, notes, and in person. Every teacher has a register with learners' contacts. If it is a serious issue that is when we go through the Administration. These days with technology we also send homework pages through the media, WhatsApp* (Participant 10: Memory). Communication with the parents is critical to the child's learning and teachers understand the different needs, expectations and timetables that parents have. Therefore, it is important that teachers fully understand the importance of family involvement in the acquisition of reading skills at lower grade

levels. This school-home connection has a greater impact on learners' later academic life (Reese *et al*. 2010; Varghese & Wachen 2016).

In some cases, parents need to be motivated to become involved. Jennifer explained that: *We continuously advise parents of the need to assist their learners wherever possible to make sure that they acquire reading competencies in order to learn. We always remind them that reading is critical for any academic achievement. Without adequate reading skills, learners will not be able to understand anything in class. Because some parents fail to provide reading resource for their learners, it becomes very difficult for the teacher to use their personal resources to assist. At the end, those learners without reading resources may end up failing to read, but this may only constitute a small number of non-readers. However, it is important for parents to provide appropriate age-specific reading materials* (Interviewee 7: Jennifer).

In other cases, teachers try to motivate parental involvement in literacy by teaching parents how to incorporate effective reading interventions at home. Reese *et al.* (2010) state that parental involvement in teaching young learners how to read and write motivates learners because learners enjoy the non-threatening home environment. One strategy that could be effective is 'meet the teacher' or consultation days organised by the school where parents meet to discuss the educational wellbeing of their learners. Such days create opportunities for collaboration with the teacher to assist in the reading literacy development of their children.

Teachers need to develop an effective approach to maximise parents' learning experience so that they provide conducive learning environments in their homes for the benefit of young learners (Reese *et al.* 2010; Lee & Wong, 2014). This could happen through literacy development workshops which equip parents with skills and basic reading strategies. This then can be used to reinforce what their children have learnt at school and create opportunities to acquire reading competencies (Hui-Chen & Kimberly, 2008). This process ensures that parents are actively engaged in the learning activities so that they leave the workshop feeling confident enough to apply what they have learned at home. Huag and Doleis (2007) argue that without motivation, parental involvement is unlikely. In most cases, parents participate in literacy development initiatives when they understand why such programmes are important.

Hui-Chen and Kimberly (2008) indicate that once parents are knowledgeable about literacy skills, they can assist their child with phonics, context clues, picture clues, as well as other word recognition techniques. This view is further supported by Reese *et al.* (2010) indicating that families establish opportunities for learners to engage with language and print through interacting with their child, and developing early literacy skills, such as oral language, vocabulary and print awareness and letter knowledge.

It is the responsibility of every parent in one way or another to support the reading literacy development of their children even in low socio-economic communities or rural areas where reading resources are scarce. Research indicates that learners from low-income homes often have difficulty learning to read. Derderian-Aghajanian and Cong (2012) attribute this to low-literate parents lacking the skills to support their learners' efforts to gain literacy with parents' inability to read being synonymous with them being unable to support the development of their learners' reading skills. Varghese and Wachen (2016) indicate that learners usually achieve a literacy resembling that of their parents, suggesting that there may be an inter-generational transmission of literacy within families (Mullis *et al.,* 2003).

Parents who are low income generally do not read to their children, let alone read themselves (Cassidy *et al.,* 2004). If parents or other adults do not have the necessary skills for providing literacy-rich experiences or exposure to varied and extensive vocabulary, then their children will lag other learners of the same age. There is thus a need to educate low-income parents about reading development and instruction. This will help them develop a better understanding of their children's progress and to actively participate in the school system. Educating low-income parents would also allow parents a shared responsibility in educating their children rather than delegating this authority solely to the school. Parental knowledge about reading is crucial because between Grades 3 and 6, students' confidence in their reading ability tends to decrease (Bradley, 2010:25).

However, some educated parents may not necessarily be available to assist their learners with homework at home. Thus, teachers need to constantly remind parents that their participation in assisting young learners develop reading skills is critical. Mullis *et al*. (2003) suggests that there is a positive correlation between the child's school performance, education and income level of parents. This means that in the

Zimbabwean context, parents need to support the reading performance of their learners. Most parents and some educational institutions think that parental involvement is for a specific group or class of people, and some do not want to become involved. Phiona explains that: *Our expectation as teachers is that parents at home also reinforce what have been learnt at school. Unfortunately, we have selected cases where parents, regardless of economic status, do not value the need to assist learners with homework assignments. In other instances, some parents do not even support the purchase of these readers that we believe help learners develop competent reading skills* (Interviewee 10: Memory).

Of concern is the issue of mother tongue (indigenous language) vs English: *This is the greatest challenge with contemporary parents. They disregard their mother languages because of their social status. Yet, home languages play a critical in the development of second languages* (Interviewee 11: Phiona) and form a foundation for the development of additional languages and facilitates the process. As previously indicated, the national curriculum states that mother tongue should be used in the lower levels but in many instances, the language of instruction is English.

A final issue that could be raised, is that learners enrolled in high performing schools come to school daily throughout the term. This contrasts with selected rural, mining and farming communities, where school attendance is determined by seasons of the year. Seasonal conditions affect learner performance and regular absenteeism negatively impacts reading development and achievement.

To sum up, the findings emerging from the analysed data collected through interviews and focus group discussions, observations and document analysis resonate with a study conducted in America on parental involvement in that parental determinants in learners' reading achievement include running workshops for parents to build skills in parenting and understanding their learners at each grade level; workshops for parents on creating home conditions for learning; creating opportunities for communication from the school to the home for information about learner progress and needs; holding parent-teacher conferences with all families; surveying parents each year for their ideas about the school; volunteering in classrooms to assist teachers and students; and volunteering to help in other non-classroom parts of the school (Jongyeon, 2017)

The findings suggest the need for lower grade learners to be nurtured both at school and at home. Creating an environment conducive to learning at home and at school and developing a culture of reading where learners participate freely in learning activities, could assist in ensuring that reading literacy skills are acquired and developed by learners. Parents, therefore, need to understand that their participation in assisting their children is not optional but a requirement for maximum learner achievement, particularly at lower grade level.

5.2.4 Theme 4: Enabling conditions for the development of reading literacy

The findings, in response to the research question *How can the identified enabling conditions in high performing schools be applied in low performing schools of the Zimbabwean primary school education system?* revealed that there are common variables in all the case studies regarding the acquisition of competent reading skills at lower primary levels in Zimbabwean schools. Although there could be differences in the reading curriculum and the way study materials are presented, developing reading skills at lower grade levels is the most emphasised priority at the selected high performing schools.

5.2.4.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Curriculum

One of the critical ingredients that separate high and low performing schools is how the intended curriculum is unpacked, interpreted and implemented in each of the schools. Jude explains: *There is no magic in guiding lower grade learners to acquire competent reading skills. Well-structured reading curricula always yield results as compared to that which is haphazardly done in other schools. At our schools for example, whether your child is in Grade 1A, or 1B or 1C, be assured that they learn the same curricula stuff every day. Even if you are to examine their daily in-class work, all learners in the same stream are given same unless if the child resembles learning challenges that require remedial work. That is when they are separated and given slightly different work that will eventually help them to understand missed concepts. In other words, curriculum uniformity has helped us to achieve greater results since we do teamwork - in everything we do, starting from preparing schemes of work, our teaching plans as well as in-class reading activities and written tests. Above all, every concept is planned alongside appropriate and age-specific activities as well as pedagogies. Ultimately, learners achieve. This is definitely not the same in the majority*

of public schools where teachers are free to choose what to teach without sharing with fellow grade-specific teachers (Interviewee 22: Jude). During focus group discussions, Jane confirmed that: *Following a systematised curriculum is always beneficial. Our curriculum is well structured starting from the most preliminary introduction of sounds, word construction as well as correct articulation and intonation. All learners that pass through our reading programme do not struggle in higher grades because we don't leave anything to chance. We ensure that our curriculum structure is designed in a way that learners will only proceed to higher grades upon successfully completing the designed reading curricula* (Participant 5: Jane).

Mary explained that: *We are given the national syllabus where we derive our own school-based syllabi. In our school-based syllabi, we take into consideration contextual and environmental variables to be part of what we finally present as school-based reading curricula. Like in other schools, reading is just reading. There is nothing much we add except that this school is a former group A school, so we put more emphasis on reading* (Interviewee 18: Mary). However, she added that: *We benefit from the cluster workshops where we are guided by officials from the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) focusing primarily on syllabus interpretation. Through such interactions, we learn from each other particularly on how to derive specific termly aims and objectives that we then use to develop our school-based schemes of work* (Interviewee 18: Mary).

In line with earlier discussions, the intended curriculum is systematically unpacked and interpreted to develop an incremental reading programme so that its implementation ensures curriculum quality, which is vital in the acquisition and development of reading literacy skills at lower grade level.

5.2.4.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Reading policy and teaching/lesson plans

The development of a reading policy at school-level is beneficial in improving reading literacy development among lower grade learners in Zimbabwe. Mildred who is the Education Officer responsible for infant education at a particular district office, emphasised that: *Reading literacy development does not take place in isolation of policy design and implementation. The reading literacy development policy for example, at national level should be brought down to districts where district literacy development teams are expected to formulate specific policies as approaches to the*

teaching of literacy development among schools paying particular attention to contextual needs. Once the district team has agreed on a particular structure, schools will then guide grade specific teachers to work as teams to design reading literacy curricula in a special way that will be used for a particular level of learners. In this regard, the presence of policies and strategies will definitely promote the acquisition of reading skills and competencies (Interviewee 23: Mildred).

Grace concurred that: *Without reading development policies as well as corresponding curricula activities and approaches, teachers cannot help learners in any way. For teachers to perform up to expected school or district standards, there should be well laid down policies, teaching strategies as well as competent reading literacy development curriculum packages and resources. With all these in place, surely lower grade learners do well* (Interviewee 14: Grace). The teaching of reading literacy at lower grade levels needs to be guided by national policies, a range of approaches as well as student-centred activities. These, in conjunction with curriculum interpretation and inhouse reading policies, will equip teachers with the relevant guidelines to develop coordinated lessons plans which assist learners in acquiring competent reading skills at lower grade level and allow for continuity of reading development through the grade levels.

5.2.4.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Curriculum content material

Reading literacy development relies heavily on the quality of curriculum content materials. However, this is dependent on teacher's ability to unpack and interpret the curriculum and distil key concepts as well as using a range of appropriate teaching approaches. Shulman (1987) suggests that the availability of reading resources outside teacher's ability to identify appropriate strategies and formulating grade-specific learning activities, is less helpful. Susan explained how they ensure the effective teaching of reading literacy at her school: *We take our time to scrutinise as well as unpacking syllabi to make sure that we prepare sufficient study materials for learners. Since our aim is to perform higher than the rest of schools in the country, we always find ways to ensure that every concept is twinned with appropriate resources as well as teaching approaches and activities. We are naturally forced to design our own school-based curriculum content materials that will propel our learners to greater intellectual heights. Our curriculum content materials are not just taken from textbooks*

prescribed in the syllabi; we create supplementary reading resource materials to ensure that the quality of our curriculum is outstanding. Come national examinations, our learners outstandingly shine (Interviewee 12: Susan). During focus group discussions, Grace explained: *Normally, we are allocated our classes early beginning of third term in September every year and this gives enough time to prepare for the coming academic year. During this period towards December holiday, teachers will have enough time to gather relevant curriculum content materials which will be very useful as soon as schools open. Definitely we will not be the same as those schools who allocate teaching loads beginning of the year. Once teachers are allocated teaching loads beginning of the year it means they are going to spend a lot of time preparing what to teach. Together with other school-wide activities such as athletics, the majority of learners may not have been exposed to any meaningful teaching as the term comes to an end* (Participant 14: Grace). In addition to working systematically through the intended curriculum, using the national reading policy and developing a school reading policy, teachers are involved in sourcing additional reading resources such as graded readers appropriate for learners' levels and to teach the various reading skills as well as creating their context appropriate supplementary materials which will scaffold the learners in the acquisition and development of reading literacy.

5.2.4.4 Sub-theme 4.4: Mentoring and monitoring

Mentoring and monitoring of newly recruited teachers is one of the most emphasised activities of high performing schools in Zimbabwe. The idea to develop professional relationships between experienced and less experienced teachers in high performing schools has helped to promote consistency towards maintenance of performance standards. The importance of attaching newly recruited staff members to seasoned teachers is explained by Susan: *As I explained during our previous focus group discussion, every new teacher recruit is exposed to a systematic induction exercise to acquaint with our school's operational standards and expectations. It is after the induction exercise that the new teacher recruit will be attached to the most experienced teacher particularly the one teaching the same grade level to ensure that they are initiated into the 'teaching culture' of the specific department or grade level* (Interviewee 12: Susan). Grace explained that: *At our school, the mentoring process of newly recruited teachers is relatively long depending on the satisfactory performance of the mentee. Usually, it stretches throughout the whole probation period*

before one is fully tenured. Only those teachers who demonstrate outstanding performance abilities have their contracts renewed. Newly recruited teachers are expected to satisfy mentors of their suitability to remain at our school, who in turn, recommend them for final consideration as permanent teachers. Without the recommendation from one's mentor, their appointment as substantive classroom practitioners at our school, is less likely. In this regard, the mentor is expected to monitor everything starting from the teacher's deportment, way of dressing, moral behaviour, degree of professionalism, ability to interpret syllabi, ability to work as team, ability to teach, and probably one's desire to engage in further education and training. These, among other things, are points that are always considered when monitoring suitability for permanent appointment at our school (Interviewee 14: Grace).

Newly recruited teachers are guided to understand core values of their respective schools where they are mentored and regularly monitored to make sure they understand the school culture and are equipped for the teaching and learning process.

However, monitoring of permanent teachers is also important to maintain learning outcomes no matter what these experienced teachers have achieved in the past. Susan as the teacher in charge referred to noticeable learning challenges that may result from inefficient colleagues: *Usually I go back to that specific teacher with notable problems with her class and try to help her improve her teaching style. I will supervise/monitor all teachers in an effort to find out where exactly the problem is emanating from* (Interviewee 12: Susan).

Monitoring extends to learners as well. *Teachers in the lower grade department are advised to supervise and monitor each learner in order to ensure that no one is left behind* (Interviewee 12: Susan). Teachers are required to keeping records specifically for supervising reading development. The analysis of documents used by teachers to teach reading skills revealed that apart from the general schemes of work and other documents prescribed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), high performing schools have developed reading policies that require lower grade teachers to keep separate Reading Record Books (RRB). Jane explained: *The RRB are intended to capture strengths and weaknesses of every individual learner in order for the teacher to find specific solutions to the reading problems identified"* (Interviewee 5: Jane). Susan explained what happened in her school: *We have an assessment file*

for each learner, which records learner-reading achievement for all Grades 1 to 7. Each time teachers receive specific grades; learners' assessment files have to be submitted to them. Files contain information regarding learner achievement, challenges and possible solutions to alleviate the identified problems. In other words, the files contain useful information regarding the child's reading performance levels" (Interviewee 12: Susan). In implementing monitoring procedures, teachers can identify learners with reading challenges as well as prescribing relevant solutions to such problems.

5.2.4.5 Sub-theme 4.4: Professional competencies and attributes

Teacher professional competencies and attributes are critical in learner achievement and can positively or negatively impact the entire learning environment. Phiona explained the value of professional competencies: *The role of professional competency in the matrix of literacy development is very clear. As I previously mentioned, availability of resources alone outside proper application of teacher competencies is less effective. This alludes to the fact that teachers should always resemble the highest degree of professionalism in everything that they do. A professional teacher is the one who, among other things, is able to articulate his / her roles and responsibilities in the school. The one who is capable of interpreting syllabi, one who is able to identify appropriate teaching strategies and activities without being forced to do a certain educational activity in a particular way. A professionally competent teacher is always very creative. It is this innovative quality that most private schools thrive to identify in new teacher recruits before they finally permanently appoint certain individuals to particular teaching positions. Without demonstrating high degree of professionalism, our school management is always reluctant to permanently appoint individuals to substantive positions* (Interviewee 11: Phiona). Elaborating on teachers' competence, Linda stated that: *Knowledge of how to represent and formulate content knowledge in ways that make it understandable to learners, is imperative in building learners' reading skills* (Participant 21: Linda).

Some participants identified positive attributes such as being *resourceful …teachers should have a positive attitude … be tolerant. … be patient … appreciate learner backgrounds* (Interviewee 20: Julian). Grace focused on negative personal attributes: *There are certain personality traits that seriously undermine teachers' professional*

competency. For example, if one is a drunkard, it is possible that the next day after a short break such as Monday the drunkard teacher will be suffering from serious weekend hangover. Whether they like it or not, performance output in this condition is always compromised. Thus, it is important that teachers take stock of their personal attributes and measure of such behaviour patterns suit particular learning environments (Interviewee 14: Grace)

5.2.4.6 Sub-theme 4.6: Teaching approaches, methods and strategies

Teaching is a learned profession where candidates are expected to acquire competent skills to be able make ideas and concepts comprehensible to the learner (Shulman 1987). This means teachers must understand both the subject content outlined in the curriculum as well as teaching strategies applicable to specific levels of learner categories. It seems that teacher training programmes focus on the development as professional content knowledge, which equips teachers with a wide range of approaches methods and strategies to teach reading literacy. In this study, most lower grade teachers in the four schools had obtained relevant degrees in infant education and some were enrolled at international as well as local universities to upgrade their qualifications and professional abilities.

As an example of methods and strategies used, Sherry explained: *We start with singing - singing number and traditional rhymes. We engage learners in oral activities, naming and identifying themselves as well as objects in the class and the general environment. Learners sing days of the week. In other words, they have planned activities sequential to help logical understanding of day-to-day human activities within the contextual environment of the teaching and learning education circumstances. Such activities enable the teacher to assess the degree of literacy among newly recruited lower grade learners in the school. Again, we use picture reading where learners are asked to identify names of objects shown. Such activities clearly demonstrate each learner's level of understanding using the already known environment. This aligns with the general policy that encourages teachers to derive learning activities from the local contextual environment. From picture reading teachers usually introduce learners to the letters of the alphabet in both English and Shona* (Interviewee 13: Sherry). Sherry then elaborated on how learners master letters of the alphabet: *We use sounds of the objects. Letters of the alphabet are taught using*

known examples of words and pictures, for example, the letter a, the picture of an apple and the word apple written against it. The same method applies to all letters of the alphabet. At this level (ECD), we focus more on sounds than real words. The picture helps the child to identify the letter sound. Sherry explained the importance of rhymes in teaching reading to ECD learners as "*such activities help lower grade learners to develop sentence construction skills"* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

Margaret, who has never studied beyond the initial teacher education course but has been teaching at this high performing school for more than 30 years, explained: *I use phonetic sounding, cycling reading and reading games. I also use picture books, magazines and display charts for learners to read on their own during their spare time. During class activities, I make sure that all learners in my Grade 1 class are able to quickly identify word sounds correctly, pronounce at first sight and then proceed reading"* (Participant 9: Margaret). Nomsa described what she did: *I prefer picture reading to any other study materials applicable to teaching reading at lower grade level. I normally provide a lot of pictures of animals and objects and then, ask learners to sound together with pictures, sound them on their own and sometimes combine them both. Word building usually occurs as learners try to associate what they see in pictures and what is written underneath* (Participant 6: Nomsa).

However, the *Ministry of Education officials periodically visit schools to supervise the development of reading skills among lower grade learners in the entire country regardless of whether they are high performing or otherwise. We have been invited to attend several workshops to do with the development of reading skills at lower grade level in Zimbabwe* (Interviewee 16: Janet). Patience explained how continuous development assists teachers at her school: *We meet at cluster level where the Ministry organises workshops particularly on how to teach reading at lower grade* (Interviewee 15: Patience).

In conjunction with the use of various approaches and methods, resources assist teachers in the teaching of reading. Phiona explained that: *It is not a secret that our school is one of the well-resourced schools in the country. No one will dispute that. Every class has its own library while every department such as the infant department has also its library. These class and departmental libraries provide grade specific study materials that include teachers' guide specifically dealing with appropriate teaching*

strategies and activities for specified curricula content materials. Every literacy development activity is aligned to corresponding teaching strategies and activities. If correctly applied, not even a single learner is left behind unless they have serious psychological problems that affect their thinking. Coupled with teacher creativity and innovativeness, it is possible to believe that learners will acquire basic literacy development competencies much easier that in situations in other schools where resources are very scarce (Interviewee 11: Phiona). Susan added that: *Having well-resourced classrooms without knowledge regarding how to put those resources to good use will not help to improve anything. At our school we have teachers' guides with well laid down procedures and steps guiding the teaching of every literacy development concept for lower grade learners. Given the opportunity to use these resources elsewhere in any local environment, I think learners will acquire competent literacy development skills regardless of the geographical location. Once teachers have all resources available, full knowledge of teaching strategies, approaches and activities applicable for a particular learning experience, I am confident that literacy development will improve* (Interviewee 12: Susan).

From statements above, it is possible to conclude that knowledge of content alone outside pedagogical understanding of teaching strategies and activities will not help to improve learner achievement in any way. Thus, teachers are always encouraged to find corresponding teaching approaches to grade-specific curriculum content materials well in advance of any literacy development activity or exercise.

5.2.4.7 Sub-theme 4.7: Professional development

Although it is the norm that high performing schools only hire qualified and experienced teachers, the analysis of research findings revealed that academic excellence enjoyed by most high performing schools is greatly influenced by regular professional development sessions through workshops, seminars and in-service training programmes. Mary acknowledged that: *Teacher performance always needs to be revised, checked and remain balanced. We learn new things from peers as we interact through regular staff development initiatives. At our school for example, we attend once every week workshops and seminars to do with literacy development at least once every term. From my personal experience, I discovered that once I attend a staff development session, my teaching the following week will always be improved.*

I always try to include some of new ideas I learnt from the workshop to ascertain how applicable such approaches could be before I endorse them as competent strategies to use when teaching literacy development to lower grade learners. Personally, I realised that these in-service training experiences always sharpen my understanding of both the subject content as well as the approaches to use when delivering a particular curricula concept at lower grade level. It is now in my blood that professional development is key to my ability to move with time. Failure to engage in staff development workshop will naturally cause teachers to use outdated resources materials as well as teaching approaches (Interviewee 18: Mary). Patience reiterated the need for continuous professional development: *Nowadays there is no way out you can remain a competent teacher without engaging in professional development exercise. For instance, this technological world is very unfriendly to teachers who frown in-service training. Learners themselves are coming from well-to-do families who can afford of expose their children to the use of computer technology even at home. Now at school, the teacher is unable to guide even a single activity. Do you think parents will support your stay at their school? This is the reason why I think it is critical that teachers remain afloat in terms of their ability to move with time (*Interviewee 15: Patience).

From the information above, outstanding academic performance rates at particular high performing schools is advanced through teacher attendance at professional development programmes. Such participation in further education and training will always help teachers to keep abreast with latest trends of the teaching process. Thus, learners always benefit as opposed to situations when teachers remain stuck in outdated teaching approaches mainly because of their failure to engage in in-service training initiatives.

5.2.4.8 Sub-theme 4.8: Attitude, home background and parental involvement

The issue of human attitude has considerable impact on learner achievement in school. Analysis of the study's research findings revealed that the home background including the attitude of parents, has great influence on how learners perceive the value of education in their lives. Shylet suggested that: *Literacy development at lower grade level needs to carefully considered and organised. Remember it takes place almost simultaneously with the transition from spending the whole day with familiar*

members (at the home environment) as well as trying to adjust towards spending more time with a fairly unfamiliar adult in the person of the lower grade teacher. Parents, therefore, are expected to ease the possible tension that may arise especially if the teacher is a complete stranger to the learner. Some parents even suggest spending some few minutes interacting with the teacher in the presence of the new learner to ensure that they (learner) quickly accept that the parent may not leave them in the hands of total strangers. It is during this period that teachers, parents and learners may want to understand each other better to avoid developing negative attitudes against each other. Once there is good rapport between and among them (teachers, learners, parents) that's when the mood to start focusing on literacy development begins. In the event that there is distrust among them, real learning usually may not take place. Thus, it is from this level that teachers would then begin to interact with parents to stimulate their involvement towards assisting children with homework and all other possible ways they can support the general learning of learners at school. In some cases, some parents volunteer to provide resources to facilitate the teacher's work so that they concentrate on the actual learning facilitation process (Interviewee 17: Shylet).

Parental involvement is vital in literacy development. Initially, this should be in the home with the acquisition of early literacy skills as language development is at the epicentre of the developmental processes of any culture (Pretorius & Stoffelsma (2017) and then it should be a joint venture between parents and teachers (Rosen & Myrberg, 2009). This means that: *Teachers and parents also assist each other in guiding young learners to acquire competent reading skills. We give them reading activities to read at home and the parents assist them at home. The learners have reading diaries indicating specific pages and content to be covered daily where parents sign that their learners have mastered the assigned work … our expectation as teachers is that parents at home also reinforce what has been learnt at school* (Interviewee 11: Phiona).

Sherry concurred that: *Parental attitudes are central to learner achievement at lower grade level. for example, we give learners homework to do at home and we expect parents to assist them. The following morning you discover that a particular hasn't done their homework. Always you try to find out possible challenges leading to non-*

compliance to help with the homework activity. In some instances, learners will always report to school that their parents were too busy to help them since they will be tired from work. Such attitudes may not help their children in anyway. Take for example if only the whole class had not been able to do the homework, do you think the teacher will sit down to help such learners whose parents are not interested in assisting in homework? [She rhetorically asked]. *The answer is NO! As the teacher I will proceed with the day's work and give more homework. Should that persist, I will always seek audience with the parent to make sure that we remind each other regarding the effect of parental attitudes towards literacy development"* (Interviewee 13: Sherry).

Jude reiterated that: *Parents are expected to provide literacy development resources particularly during the time when learners are outside school environment. Since the majority of parents are able to read and write, I see no problems with parents helping their children to read. If parents are reluctant to support their children's literacy development initiatives, then there could be problems* (Interviewee 6: Jude).

From the statements above, there is reason to believe that human attitude and involvement of the parents can greatly influence learners' in-school achievement.

The findings from the fourth theme, which identified enabling conditions found in high performing schools, are used to inform the development of a multifaceted reading literacy model that could be applied in low performing schools to promote reading literacy development in those Zimbabwean school communities where learners were generally below grade-specific performance abilities.

5.3 CONCLUSION

Current lower grade primary school reading programmes in selected private schools in Zimbabwe are informed by the national curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education through the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). Most high performing schools rely on locally based curriculum blueprints that are heavily influenced by the former colonial reading initiatives, which they believe are more results-oriented than the post-independence literacy development programme. More specifically, the development of reading as part of school culture, the availability of adequate

resources, the presence of competent teachers as well as parental involvement are generally viewed as pillars for the acquisition of competent reading skills during the foundation phase of lower primary schooling in selected high performing schools in Zimbabwe.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was motivated by the need to determine classroom conditions that enable reading literacy development in selected high performing schools in Zimbabwe to understand how the conditions could possibly be applied in low performing primary schools elsewhere in the country. The idea of classifying Zimbabwean schools as either high or low performing could be viewed as a direct consequence of the stratified nature of its education system. Former Group A schools (which in Zimbabwe are known as private schools) are generally regarded as high performing, while most other schools are regarded as public learning institutions (see Section 4.4.4). Classification as either high or low performing schools is based on several dependent factors such as the availability of resources, class size, higher school levies and high staff remuneration. Public schools are relatively inexpensive hence, the majority of low-income families usually enrol their children at these schools.

Although the research was not conducted in low performing schools, some of the current teachers in high performing schools were previously seconded to teach in those schools regarded as low performing. The analysis of their individual contributions during interviews and focus group discussions revealed considerable disparity between high and low-performing schools. Therefore, this disparity in terms of learner achievement, formed part of the researcher's justification to seek an understanding of enabling conditions that promote the development of reading skills at lower grade levels in Zimbabwe.

This chapter presents a summary of how the research was conducted, the theory underpinning the research and the main findings that emerged based upon the data collected and its interpretation. Reflections on research findings within the conceptual framework and the research methodology are outlined while main conclusions followed by the conclusions, drawn from the empirical study, are presented. The contribution to research is the development of a Multifaceted Reading Literacy Development (MRLD) Model which emphasises that the development of reading

literacy is dependent on several factors. Finally, recommendations for future practice, policy development and future research are offered.

6.2 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

The research which was driven by the aim to address the question *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high-performing schools and how could these be applied in low-performing schools in Zimbabwe?* took place in high-performing primary schools in Zimbabwe.

Chapter 1 This chapter presented the general introduction and background of the study. It described the background to the study, the context of the study, and presented the problem statement, with the rationale and significance of the study. The major aim of describing the context was to conceptualise the current situation in which lower-grade primary school learners are guided to acquire reading skills and competencies during the initial phase of primary schooling in Zimbabwe. In addition, this chapter clarified some pertinent concepts, and a brief outline of the research methodology was given.

Chapter 2 focused on the contextual framework of this study. The major aim of describing the context was to conceptualise the current situation in which lower-grade primary school learners are guided to acquire reading skills and competencies during the initial phase of primary schooling in Zimbabwe. A conceptual framework was developed through the discussion of two main theories.

Chapter 3 presented a review of the literature. The aim of this chapter was to gain an in-depth understanding of both traditional and contemporary theories dealing with lower-grade learners acquiring reading competencies as part of school curricula best-performing schools.

Chapter 4 outlined in detail the methodological and paradigmatic frameworks. Research sample and sampling procedures, methods used to collect data as well as ways of analysing ideas gathered through document analysis, interviews, observations as well as focus group discussions were also discussed in detail. The chapter also justified the researcher's selection of the methods and procedures used in the study.

Chapter 5 presented and discussed the findings of the research, which helped the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study. Ideas were gathered and categorised in relation to the main question and sub-questions of the study. The same chapter discussed themes, sub-themes as well as other variables impacting the study. Four themes emanated from the analysed data and eight sub-themes were derived and discussed.

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are based upon the data gathered to answer the overarching question of *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe?*

The conclusions indicate how reading literacy development in high-performing schools in Zimbabwe is promoted. Furthermore, the conclusions are discussed to show how the teaching of reading literacy differentiates between high-performing and low-performing schools. On the other hand, the conclusions assist in understanding the context in which teachers promote reading at the class level. The discussion should be able to address the main questions on what conditions enable reading at lower grades in high-performing schools and how this could be applied in low-performing schools.

There are eight main conclusions drawn from this empirical research, which are discussed under the theme headings of curriculum, reading policy and teaching lesson plans, curriculum and content material, mentoring and monitoring, professional competencies and attributes, teaching approaches, methods and strategies, professional development and attitudes, home background and parental involvement and are discussed to show how critical they are in promoting reading literacy at lower grades in Zimbabwe.

6.3.1 Interpretation and Implementation of the Curriculum

The availability, knowledge, understanding of the curricula, appropriate supportive reading materials coupled with the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, skills and creative implementation and integration of the reading curricula are central to the enabling conditions for reading development.

The four high-performing schools had diverse reading curricula in place for teaching reading literacy development. Two schools, which are former Group A government schools, used the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MOPSE) curriculum for primary schools. This was supported by the new intervention Early Reading Initiative (ERI) as well as teachers' initiatives borrowed from colleagues in Private schools (Section 5.2.1.2). The other two schools used the Cambridge Reading Curriculum. All teachers in the four schools displayed knowledge and understanding of the intended, implemented, and attained curriculum. Regarding the intended curriculum, the schools had copies of the curriculum. Two schools had the Cambridge Curriculum while the other two had the Zimbabwe local curriculum. It is one thing to have the copies and another to interpret and implement. It was evident from the teachers' schemes of work and lesson plans that the teachers, as the main actors, were able to interpret and implement the curriculum being used in the schools, which confirmed aspects raised in Chapter 1.

Evidence showed that the schemes of work were developmental and showed congruence with the lesson plans as well as learners' activities. The schemes of work reflected objectives set in the curriculum and these objectives were accomplished through learners' activities (Section 5.2.2.2). The conclusions of the findings show that there are clear objectives for reading skills to be progressively developed. In all four schools, learners' developmental levels were in evidence in learners' workbooks and aligned within the allotted time, as well as supported by sufficient and relevant materials (Section 5.4.2).

The intended curriculum in the four schools is supported by diverse and relevant resource materials (Section 5.2.1). Indicators as school level such as curriculum, handbooks, timetables and schemes indicated that the intended curriculum is well understood and achieving its goal is that learners progress from one grade to another being able to read at a specific grade level and beyond. All four schools assess student reading competencies using standardised tests such as the Schonel Reading Test, which measures a learner's reading age and/or the Burt Word Reading Test, which provides a measure of an aspect of a child's word reading skills, that is, word recognition. The conclusions show that early assessment of learners' reading skills is vital for progression as well as putting interventions in place to curb illiteracy or address reading problems. Low-performing schools could also assess learners' reading levels

using the same tests instead of delaying remediation. Teachers who once taught in low-performing schools, but are now at high-performing schools, admitted that low-performing schools rarely test learners and do not have standardised tests (Sections 5.4.2; 5.2.2.1) to help assess reading competencies or levels of lower grade learners.

It is possible for the conclusions of this research to be used in low-performing schools in the teaching of reading literacy to enable learners to read at grade level. The low-performing schools use the local curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, but it needs to be an updated curriculum so that teachers have documents to guide them in reading literacy development. Knowledge and understanding of the intended, implemented and attained curriculum could be done through seminars and workshops to assist teachers in low-performing schools.

What appears to be the impeding factor in developing reading literacy in low-performing schools is the availability of relevant resource materials since support is minimal or not there. Implementation of the reading curriculum is supported by a wide range of specific graded reading books and materials which learners use to practise reading. The low-performing schools lack resource support from the Ministry to acquire sufficient reading materials to effectively support reading literacy development (Section 5.2.3.3). High-performing schools have competent and knowledgeable teachers who are specialised, specifically recruited and appointed through a series of interviews (Section 5.4.5). In contrast, in low-performing schools, teachers are deployed by the government with teachers not being specifically qualified or experienced to teach that subject or class. This means that low performing schools often assign teachers who are not specialised in early childhood development to teach lower grades. As cited and recommended in the Nziramasanga Commission (1989) (Chapter 1.), the policy for deploying and recruiting teachers should change to ensure quality education in all Zimbabwean schools.

It is not just the deployment and recruitment that poses challenges in low-performing schools. During the time this study was conducted, education in Zimbabwe was affected by many factors that include:

1. *Teacher incapacitation:* teachers constantly went on industrial action making it impossible for schools to operate or function well, which had a ripple effect on developing reading skills in lower grades.

2. *Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and inability to conduct online lessons:* Schools temporarily came to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in specialised teachers in low-performing schools leaving the profession. While learners in high-performing schools were not physically attending classes, lessons did not stop because online lessons were introduced. These lessons were initiated by the schools when resources such as access to computers and the internet permitted. In low-performing schools, learners were not exposed to any form of schooling and for some period, did not attend school, which had a negative effect on the teaching and learning process.
3. *Economic downturn:* Zimbabwe is in a socio-economic crisis that is affecting all sectors including education. Teachers in low-performing schools are civil servants and receive low remuneration. Part of the incapacitation experienced by the teachers is a result of low salaries, in contrast to teachers in high performing schools, who are motivated by high and sound remuneration and incentives.

During the time this study was carried out, the factors cited above had a negative bearing on supporting the reading literacy development of lower grade learners. There were other disruptions of classes due to the socio-economic and political challenges experienced in the country, which had a negative effect on teaching and learning of reading literacy. Teachers remained at home due to incapacitation, but they continued to demand remuneration even though classes in low-performing schools were left unattended. In other words, low-performing schools lack the capacity to operate during a pandemic or in any crisis (Sections 5.2.3.3; 5.2.3.3).

For the curriculum to be fully supported, several areas should be given attention:

- Policy on recruitment should ensure that specialised teachers with skills to interpret and implement the curriculum are appointed to achieve the desired outcome of learners' proficient reading literacy at the end of lower grades.
- Remuneration of specialised teachers should be commensurate with their job description to ensure that teachers, who are capacitated to implement the curriculum, are retained in schools for consistency (Section 5.4.6)

- Involvement of all stakeholders is needed to provide relevant resource materials that support the low-performing schools in the development of reading literacy as well as making progress with the provision of online learning.

The objectives and aims of this study were achieved as it intended to discover the extent to which the curriculum is implemented in Zimbabwean schools. The research paradigm (interpretivist) provided the lens with which to view participants' experience on the knowledge of the curriculum and how they understand and implement it in their schools to foster children's reading literacy development. This study concludes that without a clear understanding of the intended curriculum and how to implement it, reading literacy at lower grades will not be attained.

6.3.2 School-level Reading Policy and Teaching/Lesson Plans

The existence of a school-level reading policy (the 'perceived' curriculum) with associated detailed lesson plans including holistic reading activities implemented within a realistic explicit timetable for each class is vital for reading literacy development.

The reading literacy development policy for Zimbabwe, such as The Early Reading Framework (ERF) which is a new, non-statutory guidance document released by the Department for Education (DfE), was developed at national level (Section 5.2.4.2) and cascaded down to district level and then schools. Each policy in conjunction with the curriculum, informs the development of inhouse reading policies which offer guidelines for teachers in planning their lessons. Working in collaboration with other teachers, the curriculum is unpacked and interpreted with a range of appropriate teaching approaches being considered for each level to deliver the content material.

The four high-performing schools each had developed an inhouse reading policy as well as teaching lesson plans which aligned with a timetable for each class. The following areas of reading literacy were included in the lesson plans: storytelling, phonics, spelling, reading to the teacher, group reading, reading games and comprehension, grammar, and writing. These activities support the development of reading literacy skills in reading, listening, speaking and writing. (Section 3.5.2.1) in lower grades. It was policy in the four schools that all activities were done in line with the timetable, across all four classes from ECD through to Grade 2. Each class in the

four schools displayed a timetable indicating the different times reading was done at the class level. The timetable was diverse showing how reading was prioritised allocating more time than other subjects. Each teacher used the different times to develop reading literacy skills according to the implemented curriculum and the lesson plans (Sections 5.2.2.2.2; 5.4.2).

Work, according to the policy documents and lesson plans in the various grades, was scaffolded (Section 3.5.2.3), laying the foundation for the next stage or grade. It is evident in high-performing schools that organised reading literacy lessons achieve the best outcomes. This is something achievable and the low-performing schools could adopt functional reading policies that support the teaching of reading literacy in an organised progressive manner. Low-performing schools could also ensure that lesson plans align with the timetables and are followed systematically to develop reading literacy. It is one thing to have a policy that determines what needs to be done but it needs to be enacted through lesson plans and a timetable which ensures that time allocated for reading literacy development is used effectively. High-performing schools are guided by policy created a national level as well as inhouse, which assists in consistency. Teachers in high-performing schools demonstrate competence in content knowledge in their schemes and lesson plans (Section 5.2.2.2) as well as their teaching, ensuring that learners have enough time to practise the skills gained through the various activities indicated on the timetable (Section 5.2.3.1).

6.3.3 Curriculum Content Material

Teachers in high performing schools demonstrate a deeper understanding of the contents of the reading curriculum in their teaching as well as demonstrate a more effective use of the reading materials.

Teachers derive curriculum content from the intended curriculum designed by curriculum policy makers with recommended textbooks, with the actual teaching being guided by educational standards for each of the grades (Section 5.2.1.2). The effective use of curriculum content material is also significant as it develops the learning skills, processes and attitudes that have a future bearing on the development of reading literacy. Curriculum content material should promote the authenticity of the subject matter (Konstantina, 2020; Hoyes & Pridham, 2019) and consider the cultural aspect of the learners' background. The teaching of reading literacy should be learner-

centred, considering the interest of the learner who learn best if the subject matter is meaningful to them. Content should consider learner ability, be well presented, sequenced and organised to maximise the learning capacity of learners. In other words, it must be holistic, catering for individual differences and learning styles. The content should be useful in solving current and future problems (Section 5.2.4.3) and applied to life experiences (Sections 1.1; 1.5).

Content should be valid, varied, relevant to life suitability and starting from simple to complex, covering all the domains of learning. In line with the curriculum, content is organised in a hierarchical order that learning becomes cumulative as knowledge builds up progressively (Section 1.2). Ultimately the knowledge enhances the knowledge, skills and attitudes in other subjects with learners gaining competence through the emphasis on particular reading literacy activities. This is vital in assuring the transference of knowledge. When learners can read, they will be able to do well in other subjects because all subjects involve reading. They learn to read to read to learn (Pretorius, 2013; see Section 1.3.5).

Curriculum content is written considering learners' learning outcomes, gathering materials and activities, planning assessment and reflection, revising and collaborating. Curriculum content material has several components that include self-sufficiency which is the homework given to learners to carry out at home. Teachers in high-performing schools daily give learners reading homework that promotes reading skills (Section 5.2.3). High-performing schools conform to the aspects of curriculum content aimed to promote reading literacy development. The selection of content material is important as it promotes the desired outcomes so that learners progress to the next grade being able to read at grade level or above. All the aspects mentioned above on curriculum content were visible in the selected schools.

The points raised in this discussion on curriculum content could be easily applied in low-performing schools without many resources being required. The conclusions on curriculum content confirm what was discussed in the literature review and raise new insights, especially on the selection of relevant content, which is supported by appropriate resource materials.

6.3.4 Mentoring and Monitoring

Mentoring of new/novice teachers and monitoring of all lower grade teachers for consistency and adherence to the internal school-level reading policies and curricula as well as undertaking formal and informal formative assessment of learners' work create enabling conditions for reading literacy for high performing schools.

Mentoring and monitoring are key elements that defined the four high-performing schools investigated in that it enabled effective reading literacy development. Mentoring in these schools is threefold. New teachers are assigned to a mentor who is an experienced teacher to help them to understand the curriculum as well as the system of the school (Section 5.2.2). Mentoring and monitoring are positive aspects that support and facilitate learning and development between a person with more experience, knowledge or expertise in a certain field and a person who is less knowledgeable or is new to that field (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). As pre-service teachers, trainees are offered multiple opportunities to practise and refine their teaching practice, thus gaining experience prior to being appointed to schools.

In all four schools, lower grade teachers are monitored by the teacher-in-charge as well as the Deputy Head to ensure uniformity and conformity to the system. This is done through inspection of lesson plans, lesson observations and the examination of learners' workbooks (Section 5.4.2). Such a system in place ensures that reading literacy development is achieved. In addition, to inhouse monitoring, different boards including the School Administration and the Ministry of Education inspectors monitor education at the school level. The monitoring function in the schools creates opportunities for participation, involvement in an awareness platform for dialogue between the state and citizens to build trust with teachers, effecting concrete improvement in the functioning of schools (Hayes & Pridham, 2019).

Monitoring is an important element of governance not just as a means of tracking performance but also for planning and policymaking. It was clear in these selected schools that high-performing schools use monitoring tools ensuring that the structures and systems in place collect adequate information, process the information and have a feedback mechanism for the different stakeholders such as teachers, learners as well as parents (Section 5.2.2).

Teachers in high-performing schools monitor learners' classwork as well as homework daily and give feedback. Learners are mentored and monitored to develop their reading literacy skills. To assist in the lower grades, each teacher has an assistant teacher who helps with the monitoring of the reading progress of every learner before assigning any new work daily (Section 5.2.4.4).

Mentors have a vital role in framing feedback as a motivating and learning-focused process to be welcomed and not dreaded. Regular feedback helps both the novice teacher and learners make progress. In mentoring, the mentor identifies the area that needs help and identifies key actions to assist in making a difference. Learners are given opportunities to practise the actions set and it encourages them to develop quickly. It is about support transition, academic instruction and social support and is underpinned by mutual respectful relationships (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). Foundations of mentoring are drawn from rhetoric frameworks grounded in social constructivism, social learning, applied learning and developmental theory (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). This aligns with the theory of constructivism that informed this study. The framework informs aspects of collaborative learning outlining the multiple benefits of increasing academic success and motivation to anyone being mentored or monitored.

The objective of mentoring is to increase academic knowledge and skill. Success is only possible when the mentor has the expertise, experience and ability to scaffold the personal construction of meaning for the mentee. Reading is successful in high-performing schools because mentoring and monitoring are two aspects taken seriously and are executed by experienced staff. Less able students require support and scaffolding to promote and enhance deep learning and mentor experiences (Hayes & Pridham, 2019). Building relationships takes time and effort and requires communication skills such as active listening, questioning techniques and body language. Teachers in high-performing schools know how to build relationships with their stakeholders, especially the learners. In mentoring, positive feedback is key and has a positive bearing while negative feedback or focused judgement has a negative impact on well-being, confidence, and ultimately the desire to learn (Hobson *et al.,* 2020).

In the high-performing schools, learners are given ample opportunities to practise a specific skill both in a low stake environment of the classroom and outside the classroom. This too helps to gain learners' attention and focus on important business ensuring that what has been taught, has been learned (Section 5.2.2). An effective mentor supports learners to make connections, which empower them considering their own developmental needs and set their own actions. In the high-performing schools, learners read different graded readers according to their reading stage, which motivates learners and ensures that they do not lag. Effective mentors create an environment where learners can progress, thrive and remain focused, which assists them with their progress, increases their resilience and boosts their self-confidence (Hobson *et al.,* 2020).

The aspects discussed under the sub-theme of mentoring and monitoring in the preceding paragraphs were evident in all four schools. Reading skills and competencies cannot be developed in the absence of monitoring and mentoring new teachers as well as learners in the classroom. Low-performing schools could also do the same to mentor new and inexperienced teachers who join them. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry (1989) indicated that most low-grade classes are taught by teachers who have no idea of the level they will be teaching. An issue that further exacerbates the dire situation in education is that there is currently an exodus of teachers leaving the country for greener pastures, creating a gap in the workforce which influences aspects such as the development of reading literacy in lower grades. However, teachers who have been trained to teach in primary schools could be mentored by experienced teachers to teach reading in lower grades. Schools in the same cohort could organise in-service training and be mentored by experienced teachers in their cluster. This could be organised by the different school heads or by the Ministry of Education district officers in charge of lower grades. Low-performing schools could also design their own reading tests or use the same test identified in high-performing schools. The conclusion drawn on mentoring and monitoring points to critical elements not done in low-performing schools. It is a question of teacher attitudes and not something that requires monetary resources to implement in low-performing schools.

6.3.5 Professional Competencies and Attributes

Teachers in high-performing schools display high knowledge of subject content, learning theories and teaching strategies and can employ their pedagogical skills to effectively teach within the context of their own subject and phase.

Teachers in all four schools are holders of certificates in education, diplomas in education, degrees with a couple working towards postgraduate qualifications for teaching in the lower grades. Qualifications are deemed essential by teachers to successfully perform their pedagogical and didactic duties. At the time this study was carried out, many people in Zimbabwe, including teachers, were doing part-time or online studies with local or international universities. Teachers identify their own developmental needs and continue to improve their own professional practice (Evangelou. & Fykaris, 2023). Teachers in high-performing schools acknowledged that teaching is rewarding but it can also be extremely challenging leading to stress and burnout if not managed well (Section 5.2.4), citing that the demands of teaching in high profile schools require one to constantly upgrade their knowledge and skills to match the expectations of their clientele. However, teachers should prioritise their own well-being, manage workload, manage learners' behaviour and balance the demands of their own work life.

Effectiveness at work is associated with both personal traits and didactic and pedagogical skills and pedagogical knowledge (Evangelou. & Fykaris, 2023; Shulman 1987). High-performing schools aim at excellent learner performance, offering equal enjoyment of opportunities by all learners; however, teachers do face challenges such as multicultural tensions and the increasing dominance of technology as well rapid renewal of knowledge. If teachers are not equipped for handling diversity, conflict with stakeholders may emerge. In that regard, schools aim at preparing learners not only for the present but also for the ever-changing future (Section 5.2.4.1). Hence, teachers in these environments should possess the qualifications and professional knowledge required in this era (Section 5.2.4). Competence in teaching presupposes the individual qualities and attitudes of teachers as well as skills and knowledge that arise because of their work. A good teacher should possess a wide range of qualifications and experience which could schematically be classified as personality traits, attitudes and beliefs (Harselett *et al.,* 2000).

Personality traits, related to the professional role of a teacher, can be nurtured and developed through initial education and continuous training. Studies have shown that traits such as flexibility in terms of the appearance to learners, a sense of humour, a sense of fairness, patience, enthusiasm, creativity, care and interest in the students, all contribute to the effectiveness of teachers (Malikow, 2005; Sahin & Adiguze, 2012). Howie (2002) emphasises that classroom conditions that include teacher attributes and other conditions, such as the availability of resources, are critical towards learner achievement in reading. This resonates with what participants in four schools asserted regarding the attitude of teachers and how it affects their degree of commitment to their duties, the way they teach and treat their students. At the time this study was carried out, teachers in Zimbabwe displayed negative attitudes because of low remuneration. Attitudes affect the way one chooses, evaluates and comprehends knowledge acquired as well as the way one benefits from this knowledge in practice. Participants cited that staff development is mandatory, but when there is a negative attitude towards work, teachers do not take professional growth as an enhancement in their work. It is taken as a burden (Section 5.2.3)

Teachers have different attributes such as love of children, a love of the profession, a personal drive to be effective and consistent, consciousness, imagination and creativity, a sense of humour, determination, tenacity and enthusiasm (Liakopoulou, 2011). These attributes were present in the teachers sampled from the four selected schools, evident in the way teachers instruct children and deal with parents. In these schools, there is no room for teacher rudeness and arrogance because of the community they serve. Participants cited that learners report to their parents whenever they are mistreated, and the law will take its course (Section 5.2.3).

Currently what seems to be a drawback in low-performing schools is the attitude shown by teachers to help learners to read. Teachers tend to charge parents for extra lessons which low-income parents cannot afford to pay, resulting in some learners not mastering reading skills. This monetary implication has a negative bearing on literacy development in Zimbabwean schools.

An additional challenge in low-performing schools is the absence of teachers as well as learners. At the time this study was carried out, it was a common phenomenon in most low-performing schools that teachers were absconding from classes due to what

they called incapacitation, resulting from low remuneration which resulted in learners not attending classes regularly, leading them to miss reading concepts introduced in their absence. This relates to time on task and the opportunity to learn.

6.3.6 Teaching Approaches, Methods and Strategies

Implementing (internationally) recognised teaching approaches, diverse teaching methods and strategies for reading appropriately are effective enablers for learners learning to read progressively at grade appropriate levels.

Learning to read and write is a basic skill that not all children in the world master sufficiently well. In many countries, major problems include too little time spent at school and a lack of teachers (Holmqvist, 2018). This was not the case in the four high-performing schools. Learners were learning to read progressively at grade-appropriate levels. Both teachers and learners do not miss classes unless there is a special reason. They both report to school on time and instruction for reading takes place when all learners are there. Hence no learner is left behind. It seems that these schools have developed a culture of reading. Teachers in these selected schools use diverse teaching approaches, strategies and methods when teaching reading (Chapters 3 and 5), which align with the notion that reading is enabled by diverse variables (Pretorius, 2012).

The teaching approaches, strategies and methods observed in the high-performing schools are supported by the literature on approaches employed in the teaching of reading (Section 3.3). For example, the implementation of the curriculum in lower grades of high-performing schools was guided by the Orton Gillingham's Approach (OGA) which purports reading comprehension will emerge once decoding skills and vocabulary knowledge are well developed (Joshi, Dahlgren & Boulware-Gooden, 2002). OGA is a multisensory method of teaching language-related skills that focuses on the use of sounds, syllables, words, sentences, and written discourse. Instruction is explicit, systematic, cumulative direct, and sequential. The selected schools use OGA by starting from simple to complex; starting with letter sounds and rising to comprehension (Section 5.2.3). This progression was evident in learners' workbooks and homework books showing letters to words, sentences, and whole text. These schools have sufficient resources to develop learners' vocabulary facilitating the development of decoding skills. Poor word recognition skills can act as a bottleneck

and impede comprehension causing the reader to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy decoding a word and losing the meaning of the passage (Joshi *et al.,* 2002).

Another approach used in the high-performing schools was the Spalding Method (SM) which emphasises letter-sound rather than letter names and emphasises spelling through writing. Teachers recommended that lower grade teachers discourage learners using the names of letters but rather the letter sounds (Section 3.5). Learners were confident in sounding letters and thus quickly developed their reading skills. Alphabetic phonics and the use of the Letterland approach, a phonics-based approach to teaching reading, writing and spelling, are important in word recognition as they are multisensory, systematic and sequential (Joshi *et al.,* 2002). The reading practice in these schools is supported by the literature, as discussed in the review of literature (Chapter 3).

Direct Decode (DD) or word recognition and whole language instruction, was another strategy used by the teachers in these four schools. Several components are used in multi-sensory phonemic awareness (Joshi *et al.,* 2000). Alphabet activities, reading, spelling practice, comprehension and vocabulary development were evident in all four schools in learners' workbooks for both classwork and homework. Different learner workbooks were available for spelling, and other components that develop reading skills (Section 5.2.3)

Another approach that was used by the selected schools is the Balanced Approach (BA) or Multisensory Approach (MA) which is good and diverse (Joshi *et al.*, 2002). With this approach, phonic skills are taught in a systematic and explicit fashion showing significant gains in phonological awareness and decoding skills. Participants cited that phonological awareness is a precursor to skilled reading (Section 5.2.1). Systematic phonics instruction from the very early grade levels is an effective tool to combat reading failure and should be part of the curriculum at every school and teachers reported that with this approach, all learners progress to the next grade being able to read. Learners' knowledge of phonics was noted in these schools; however, learners' inability to read is usually related to a lack of knowledge of phonics (Section 5.2.3). Several studies demonstrate that explicit decoding instruction that emphasises systematic synthetic phonics, an approach which teaches children to recognise letters

(graphemes) and their associated sounds (phonemes), yields better results than other instructional methods (Joshi *et al.,* 2002).

The conclusion is that diverse and recognised teaching approaches, strategies and methods are effective enablers for teaching reading in lower grades. The congruence of the variables discussed in this section will support reading at lower grades in low-performing schools, which means that these schools could employ the same approaches and methods when teaching reading. Availability and presence of competent teachers who do not resort to one approach but use varied approaches, will result in a positive outcome. All aspects should be present for the development of successful reading competencies.

The economic crisis of a country has a negative impact on reading which in turn, will affect the future of the citizen as well as the country (Section 5.2.3). In Chapter 1, it was cited that the ability to read has a positive bearing on learners' further education as well as the country's workforce. Low-performing schools, which form most of the education system in Zimbabwe, lack the knowledge of strategies because some schools do not have specialised lower grade teachers who are well equipped with subject and pedagogical content knowledge to employ diverse methods to cater to the different reading abilities of learners. In high-performing schools, teachers cater to learners' different learning styles and abilities. Learners do not read the same material and several approaches call for diverse materials relevant to the learners' reading needs. Some learners would be on sounding letters while others would be on words and others on sentences, with teachers noting each learner's progression (Chapter 3, Section 5.2.3). When class instruction is ineffective and inadequate, it becomes instructionally dysfunctional (Joshi *et al.,* 2002). Poor instruction has a more direct impact on the reading performance of children in the early years or grades, which will persist as children advance through the education system (Joshi *et al.*, 2002) (Chapters 1, 3, and Section 5.2).

6.3.7 Professional Development

In high performing schools, professional development is an integral part of the schools' management approach to reading literacy development.

Teachers' training may be classified into three fields, subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and didactics and teaching practice (Shulman, 1987) and should equip

teachers with the knowledge and skills needed in their practice. However, initial teacher training does not always adequately prepare teachers, particularly if there is curriculum change, or learners with special educational needs and learning challenges. Further training can allow teachers to build their interaction skills and learn strategies for helping learners to achieve their full potential. In-service training allows teachers to interact with learners in real-time and practise areas that they are struggling with until they feel comfortable dealing with these situations in the classroom (Liakopoulou, 2011).

Several interventions were in place in high-performing schools that support teachers' However, teachers' needs vary according to their personality characteristics, years of experience, age, gender and specialisation (Liakopoulou, 2011). Professional development gives teachers the chance to reinforce existing skills as well as learn new ones that are not covered during teacher training. professional development. Schools design in-service training programmes to keep abreast with the trends of the time (Section 5.2.1).

Today's educators need a range of skills to qualify as good teachers. They need in-depth subject knowledge, strong social skills, strong understanding and analysis, and practical application of knowledge. To be able to achieve all these, continuous professional development is crucial. Engaging in continuous professional development, teachers identify areas where they can improve and change their styles, discover new teaching strategies to be more effective (Liakopoulou, 2011), which helps them address their students' needs. To keep up with the changes and prepare their students for the future, educators need to develop themselves continuously (Liakopoulou, 2011).

Continuous professional development allows educators to get knowledge and insights into various areas of the subjects they teach. With continuous professional development, they also know what's happening in their field and how they can improve their teaching to attain and maintain the high standards (Liakopoulou, 2011). In selected high-performing schools, participants cited that through professional development, they discovered changes that are taking place in the teaching of reading in lower grades. Research shows that continuous professional development for teachers could improve student achievement, enabling teachers to keep pace with the

best practices and latest trends in their profession. It also helps them in crafting personalised and practical lessons for their students (Liakopoulou, 2011).

Teachers in high-performing schools constantly upgrade and sharpen their skills. For example, at the beginning of every term, teachers attend seminars to remain relevant and to reinforce the relevant methods and approaches to help learners read. The two high-performing schools that use the Cambridge curriculum reported that they periodically invite international specialists to train their teachers on current trends in reading literacy. In addition to attending professional development organised by the schools, most teachers in high-performing schools were holders of first degrees and others with postgraduate qualifications in teaching lower grades. Remuneration in high-performing schools makes it possible for the teachers to take the initiative and upgrade their knowledge and skills by registering for further education and training at universities.

Teachers in high-performing schools were aware that continuous professional development keeps them motivated as they constantly access professional help to become better educators (Section 5.2.4.6). It allows them to step out of their routine and become a learner themselves, reinforcing their skills and taking on new knowledge.

Professional development has been shown to increase teacher motivation, confidence and commitment to teaching. Learning new skills and applying them in the classroom can lead to a more stimulating and effective teaching environment (Liakopoulou, 2011). Teachers in high-performing schools cited confidence as one of the qualities strengthened through professional competence, considering that learners in high-performing schools start school already rich in a variety of literacies. A teacher who is not competent will not fit in this kind of environment and may not be able to cater to such learners.

Participants who once taught in low-performing schools confirmed the viewpoint that opportunities for continuous professional development are scarce in low-performing schools; but in addition, there was the lack of motivation for teacher capacity development in low-performing schools, which points to the difference between the two types of schools which could have a major impact on the effective delivery of the curriculum and in the teaching of reading literacy, in particular.

In high-performing schools, technology was visible and used both in teaching and administrative tasks. Older teachers were trained as part of professional development to use computers by the ICT teachers. At the time this study was carried out, schools were suffering the effects of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Teachers were forced to transition teaching their classes online. Teachers in high-performing schools did not have many challenges because they were able to conduct online classes as they were well equipped with ICT skills and the necessary infrastructure. Most of their records and documents including schemes of work, are electronic.

Apart from teaching, teachers spend a large part of their time interpreting the curriculum, developing relevant lesson plans, creating assessments and keeping student records, as well as doing other paperwork. The introduction of school management software has changed the way teachers handle this aspect of teaching. Teachers in high-performing schools have adopted technology and through continuous professional development, teachers have become skilled at managing their time efficiently, using technology to focus more on teaching and tutoring their students.

Through continuous professional development, teachers become better goal-setters and are helped to set SMART goals. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-bound (Liakopoulou, 2011). Teachers in high-performing schools have timelines to complete their reading curriculum at grade level (Section 5.2). School management follows up by ensuring teachers meet timelines in their classes. Low-performing schools could empower their teachers also to have timelines that determine the content to be covered in the progression of activities.

Professional development is not just beneficial to teachers alone. It also benefits the learners as well as society. Rapid technological change will continue to transform the way things are done. It will make many jobs obsolete and create many new ones (Liakopoulou, 2011). Today's students will need to equip themselves with new technical skills, 21st century skills, people skills and competencies to perform effectively as future professionals.

6.3.8 Parental involvement, Attitude, Home Background

Parental attitude, involvement and home background is a powerful force in the development of their children's reading literacy.

Parental involvement was evident in all the four selected high-performing schools, particularly with the support in reading literacy development. Early reading experiences with their parents prepare children for the benefits of formal literacy instruction. Parents who introduce their babies to books and literacy resource materials give them a head start and an advantage over their peers throughout primary school. Involvement with reading activities at home from an early age has significant positive influences not only on reading achievement, language comprehension but also on students' interest in reading and attitudes towards reading.

Parental involvement in the education of their children begins at home with the parents providing a safe and healthy environment, appropriate learning experiences, support and a positive attitude about school (Section 5.2.3). Several studies indicate increased academic achievement in students that have involved parents (Epstein, 2009; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Rumberger *et al.,* 1990; Whitaker & Fiore, 2001). Studies also indicate that parental involvement is most effective when viewed as a partnership between educators and parents (Davies, 1996; Emeagwali, 2009; Epstein, 2009).

Educators, parents and community members may have different opinions regarding effective involvement practices and the ways each can contribute to the educational process but when there is good rapport, all works for the good of learners. It was clear in high-performing schools that the partnership between home and school was strong. Both educators and parents have a good understanding of effective parental involvement practices that promote student achievement. In high-performing schools, both teachers and parents play a pivotal role in promoting reading literacy development; for example, parents created a duty roster to assist with listening to learners reading the prescribed pages of assigned graded readers or work cards (Section 5.2.4).

Joyce Epstein, founder, and director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University and a leading researcher of parental involvement, asserts

that school, family, and community partnership programmes help to improve policy and practice to increase student academic achievement and student success (Epstein *et al.*, 2019). Epstein identified a framework that contains six important factors regarding parental involvement. This framework is based on findings from many studies identifying factors that are most effective regarding children's education (Epstein, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2009). These six factors are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community.

Parenting – includes all the activities that parents engage in to raise happy, healthy children who become capable students. Unlike teachers, whose influence on a child is relatively limited, parents maintain a life-long commitment to their children. Activities that support this type of involvement provide information to parents about their child's development, health, safety or home conditions that can support student learning. Parents could attend training or courses specially designed for parents, family support programmes to assist families with health, nutrition and other services, home visits at transition points to elementary, middle and secondary school.

Communicating – Families and schools communicate with each other in multiple ways. Schools send home notes and flyers about important events and activities. Parents give teachers information about their child's health and educational history. A school website is an additional mode of communication with parents and families. At least once every term, there is conferencing with parents to assist families in keeping abreast with the school policies such as a regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.

Volunteering – applies to recruiting and organising help and support from parents for school programmes and students' activities. There are three basic ways that individuals volunteer in education. First, they may volunteer in the school or classroom by helping teachers and administrators as tutors or assistants. Second, they may volunteer for the school; for instance, fundraising for an event or promoting a school in the community. Finally, they may volunteer as a member of an audience, attending school programmes or performances, which includes school/classroom volunteer programme to help teachers, administrators, students and other parents, parent room

or family centre for volunteer work, meetings and resources for families, annual postcard survey to identify all available talents and locations of volunteers.

Learning at home – pertains to providing ideas and information to parents about how they can best assist their children with homework and curricular-related decisions and activities. Activities to encourage learning at home provide parents with information on what children are doing in the classroom and how to help them with homework. Includes information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade, information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home, as well as family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work. These activities produce a school-oriented family and encourage parents to interact with the school curriculum.

Decision-making – refers to including parents in school decisions and to developing parent leaders and representatives. Parents participate in school decision-making when they become part of school governance committees or join organisations, such as the parent-teachers association (PTA). Other decision-making activities include taking on leadership roles that involve disseminating information to other parents. Parental involvement is an important factor for successful education organisations, advisory councils or committees for parent leadership and participation, independent advocacy groups to lobby for school reform and improvements, and networks to link all families with parent representatives. All schools in Zimbabwe have School Development Committees (SDC) equivalent to the PTA. The SDCs in the four high-performing schools are active and as a development board, they link home and school and lobby for improving and providing school resources. Besides the SDC, each class chooses a class representative who becomes the liaison person between grade parent and their teacher. The researcher found this arrangement ideal for purposes of attending to learners' needs on time instead waiting for the school administration to decide. Low-performing schools could also adopt the structure of decentralisation.

Collaborating – with the community pertains to identifying and integrating community services and resources to support and strengthen schools, students, and their families (Liakopoulou, 2011), which confirms the role parents play in supporting reading (Section 1.2). Parents in high-performing schools collaborate to support the school in different ways like health, cultural, recreational, social support and other programmes

or services. It was clear in high-performing schools that parents offer their professional skills and competencies thus minimising costs of hiring experts. Each of these factors can lead to various results for learners.

Today's parents are often preoccupied with the distractions and demands of daily life. Burdened by low-income, inflexible work hours and language barriers, some parents are unable to attend school activities or participate in the schooling of their children on a regular basis (Ho, 2009). Bæck (2010), as well as Lee and Bowen (2006), cite cultural norms, insufficient financial resources and lack of educational attainment as barriers to parental involvement in school. Davis (1996) found that many parents suffer from low self-esteem and others have not experience success in school themselves and therefore lack the knowledge and confidence to help their children. Parents who did not experience success in school may view it negatively (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Zimbabwe has different categories of schools (Section 4.4.4). The categories explain why some schools are supported and others not. Low-performing school parents are described by Lee and Bowen (2006) as lacking the enthusiasm to support their children because they have not had exposure to supporting the school. To remove such a culture in low-performing schools, District school inspectors could have excursions with Administrators and SDCs of low-performing schools visiting high-performing schools to learn how to support their learners.

Evidence was found in the interviews with teachers who had taught previously in low-performing schools and are now in high-performing schools (Section 5.2.4.1), indicating how some of the parents of low-performing schools lack cooperation to support the teachers or schools with even minimal resources. Teachers cited that some of the parents do not supervise the children with homework. This conclusion confirms what is cited by Bowen as well as Epstein on the importance of parental care in reading development.

6.4 REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY

This section discusses strengths and weakness of the methodology used in the study and what could be done differently should a similar study be carried out. Thus, the discussion interchangeably provides arguments for and against.

This study, investigating enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high performing schools in Zimbabwe, was underpinned by the interpretivist research paradigm (Section 4.3). The choice to use interpretivism as the research paradigm was based on the understanding that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation where reality is subjective, socially constructed and comprised of multiple realities. Thus, the interpretivist paradigm underpinned a qualitative approach (Section 4.3.3) and an interpretive multiple case study research design (Section 4.3.4). This paradigm provided opportunities to view teachers' experiences of how they teach reading successfully in high performing schools. What they shared provided data which was analysed resulting in key findings and main conclusions for this study. The following data collection instruments were used to collect data from the research participants: document analysis (schemes of work, planning books, Social Record Books, Children's Workbooks, Reading Supervision Roster), interviews (to corroborate information provided in documentary analysis), participant observation (to understand and interpret the context), and focus group discussions (to triangulate data collected through other instruments) (see Sections 4.4.6.1 – 4.4.6.4). The focus was on understanding how lower grade learners in high-performing schools acquire and develop reading literacy competencies.

Data, collected through this empirical research and analysed through an iterative cycle of inductive thematic analysis, were analysed against the background that most lower grade learners in public schools may not necessarily be exposed to similar enabling classroom conditions for literacy development. Primary school learners' reading literacy levels in Zimbabwe are influenced by the educational environment in which the learner is found. Learners enrolled at high-performing schools are usually exposed to better learning conditions than their counterparts in other sections of the Zimbabwean education community (see Section 3.4). The analysed data were classified into themes and sub-themes (Table 5.1) and the findings are presented in Chapter 5.

Leedy (2005) and Nieuwenhuis (2013) concur that very few researchers truly believe in objectivity in the way they collect, analyse and present data. To try to avoid the challenges posed by researcher bias, the researcher applied the process of researcher reflexivity. Reflexivity was essential in this qualitative study since the

research was heavily dependent upon the information that participants provided from questionnaires, discussions and interviews led by the researcher. By and large, this information could have been influenced by the underlying previous experiences, beliefs and judgements or practices of the researcher of previously being a classroom teacher across primary school education. The researcher avoided bias, but past experiences helped to conclude that trends in education change in different epochs of history and do not remain static.

In this study, the choice of methodology was relevant to the phenomenon under study. Using interpretive multiple case studies helped to collect enough data in the four selected schools resulting in substantial findings and conclusions. The participants in these schools were from different educational backgrounds which helped to collect rich data that was of comparative nature between high-performing and low-performing schools without the researcher necessarily going into low-performing schools. If the study had been conducted in low-performing schools, it would have been difficult to identify best practices and conditions that enable reading proficiency in lower grade learners. Diverse data collection methods helped to elicit the desired insight of how learners acquire and develop reading literacy in lower grades. Reviewing learners' workbooks was an opportunity to match and align the various components of developing reading at lower grades. The curriculum was visible and concrete through learners' activities. Teachers' documents would not have been adequate to provide data without looking into the implementation shown through learners' reading competencies in both written and oral reading in the classroom.

However, there is always another side of the coin. What could have been done differently was to compare four schools considered as low-performing and learn directly from them instead of extracting the information through the participants who once taught in low-performing schools. The comparison of high and low performing schools would help to triangulate and validate data from the different school types. The collection of data could have started in term one when the year begins so that the development of reading could be tracked from the start, especially for ECD A and Grade 1. However, learners' handbooks as well as previous planning books for teachers were evidence of the developmental stages that reading at lower grades follow.

6.5 REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study's theoretical framework was drawn from two conceptual bases namely, the Exemplary Model of Early Reading Growth and Excellence (EMERGE) (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007) and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model (Shulman, 1987). The motivation for choosing these two theoretical models guided the study in identifying enabling classroom conditions for reading literacy development in high performing Zimbabwean primary schools and was necessitated by the presence of reading performance abilities among learners in different types of schools in Zimbabwe. The conceptual framework outlined in Section 3.3.3, illustrated that there is no single factor that enables the development of reading literacy but a combination of multiple factors. Four of the quadrants (curriculum interpretation, school type, pedagogical knowledge, psychosocial school environment) depict what the initial conceptual bases (EMERGE and PCK models) illustrated. The essence of the EMERGE framework by using three tiers was to create a conducive environment for learners guided by competent educators undergoing regular professional development who were able to utilise effective approaches and methods that enabled individualised and adapted learning opportunities.

The findings, described in Chapter 5 in detail, confirm what was outlined in the framework that reading is promoted by diverse variables. The same idea resonates well with Howie (2002), in a study of factors related to mathematics achievement. Howie (2002) found a relationship between classroom conditions that includes teacher attributes and other conditions like the availability of resources, are critical towards learner achievement and in this case, in reading literacy performance.

At the end of each learning phase, learners are exposed to the same assessments or examination materials without considering the impact of diverse learning conditions which they have experienced. What informed the application of these two models for the conceptual framework was the disparity in terms of reading abilities of learners in different learning environments in Zimbabwean schools.

It was important to understand classroom conditions that enable the acquisition of competent reading skills among lower grade learners in selected high-performing schools not only for the researcher's personal academic and professional enrichment,

but also for the improvement of teaching and learning in Zimbabwe. This confirms the objectives and aims of this study of identifying enabling conditions that support reading at lower grades in Zimbabwe. In this regard, the use of two conceptual models was intended to facilitate the transferring of some of their reading curriculum content and corresponding pedagogies to Zimbabwe's public schools where there is a high failure rate recorded at the end of learning phases such as Grade 7.

This study concurs with Dickinson and Sprague (2001) that there is a need to understand conducive learning environments that promote the acquisition of reading literacy development among lower grade levels regardless of socio-cultural, religious and political persuasions. This implies that lower grade teachers are expected to demonstrate considerable understanding of what makes it possible for young learners to learn to read. It is in the lower grades where every future expert, academician, researcher, technician and other scholastic achiever is assisted in learning how read to learn (Section 1.5, Chapter 3). Without proper acquisition of competent reading skills at lower grade levels, it is not surprising that learners struggle to understand curriculum content, regardless of educational level.

A multifaceted reading literacy development model illustrating variables impacting on learners' reading literacy development was proposed for schools in Zimbabwe demonstrating that the findings and conclusions of this study generated new knowledge that was not displayed in the literature review of this study. The salient features of the new model relate to the combination of classroom variables as well as other variables found outside the classroom but critical for enabling reading. Previous studies show factors that impede learners from acquiring specific reading competencies. However, the findings and conclusions of this study resulting in the model presented below, are evidence of what enables reading, which could also be applied in all schools for the same purpose and achieving similar results.

6.6 THE MULTIFACETED READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT (MRLD) MODEL

Research by researchers and reading literacy development specialists such as Gettinger and Stoiber (2007), Howie *et al.* (2017), Pretorius and Spaull (2016) and Zimmerman (2017) have helped with insights regarding the reality that reading literacy development is not promoted by a single factor. Instead, it is a product of a

multifaceted approach that includes the classroom, the school and the home environment. This means that reading literacy development is dependent on a variety of factors.

The design of the Multifaceted Reading Literacy Development Model is a combination of the ideas gathered from the review of the literature, the conceptual framework and research findings and conclusions emphasising that reading literacy development is enabled by the presence of several variables. Thus, the Multifaceted Reading Literacy Development (MRLD) model informs educationists of enabling classroom conditions for reading literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe, regardless of school type.

Figure 6.1: The multifaceted reading literacy development model (MRLD)

The MRLD Model, which is a balanced literacy instruction programme supporting reading literacy development, illustrated in Figure 6.1, helps to understand how the development of reading literacy is enabled. The balanced literacy programme works in relation to other conditions. In the MRLD model (Figure 6.1), reading literacy development is at the centre and surrounded by diverse factors that illustrate that it is

not a single factor that enables reading literacy, but a combination of multiple factors. The MRLD model is represented in eight factors, namely, curriculum interpretation, school type, psychosocial environment, parental involvement, pedagogical knowledge of curriculum instruction and teacher attributes. Six of the factors, implementation and interpretation of the curriculum, type of school, infrastructural resources and other resources, professional competencies and attributes, attitudes and psychosocial school environment, as well as teaching approaches, methods and strategies and mentoring and monitoring depict what the initial conceptual bases (EMERGE and PCK models) illustrated while the other two, parental involvement and professional development are a result of the research findings.

Based on the factors presented in the MRLD model (Figure 6.1), there is reason to conclude that the process of acquiring reading skills, requires a collective effort between home and school. In this regard, the major strengths of the MRLD model are its emphasis on the regular application of all variables illustrated in the model, each of which is discussed in the conclusions (Sections 6.3.1. to 6.3.8).

6.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions of this study, the researcher would like to offer recommendations for educational practice and policy development as well as for future research. The conclusions of this study, as elucidated in the preceding paragraphs, are clear elements showing that effective reading literacy development at lower grades is possible when different variables are considered in all schools regardless of type.

6.7.1 Recommendations for Practice and Future Training

The findings of this study indicate that, in general, lower grade teachers at the selected high-performing schools are competent educators whose performance is beyond reproach. It follows that teaching is a learned profession where teachers are expected to balance their knowledge of the curriculum and their ability to use appropriate pedagogical approaches (Shulman, 1987).

With this in mind, the researcher would like to make the following recommendations:

- The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) should ensure that curricula for reading literacy development are regularly revised to avoid the circulation of outdated curricula in schools. Workshops on curriculum interpretation should

be provided introduce teachers to appropriate and innovative teaching strategies for lesson delivery.

- The Zimbabwean government should aim at providing adequate reading resources for all schools on time so that teachers have enough time to prepare their school-based curriculum blueprints before schools open. It follows that the same government, through its various district education departments, should establish centres to facilitate resource distribution and monitor reading literacy development to complement the successes of the ERI.
- The teaching of reading literacy requires the services of competent specialist teachers. Teachers who demonstrate a thorough understanding of phonetics, word building, sentence construction and auditory discrimination skills should be appointed to teach in the lower grades of the primary schools.
- Curriculum designers should take note of the importance of providing specific approaches to the teaching of early reading to assist non-specialist lower grade teachers in developing the skills and competence to teach reading literacy.
- To fully realise the value of creating a reading culture as part of school culture, lower grade teachers need to develop a positive attitude towards early childhood development and particularly early reading literacy development. It is critical that lower grade teachers regularly engage in staff development sessions such as in-service training, workshops and coaching clinics. In addition, the Zimbabwean government could provide scholarships for lower grade teachers to engage in further studies to promote their competence in fostering development of reading literacy in the country.

Through the implementation of the recommendations, the researcher hopes that the situation in Zimbabwe's primary schools regarding reading literacy development undergoes improvement.

6.7.2 Recommendations for Policy Development

The researcher would like to tender the following recommendations for policy development on the following issues:

- curriculum review.
- knowledge of curriculum content
- development of reading literacy policies.

- appointment of specialised teachers to teach lower grades regardless of school location.
- the provision of resources for schools.
- regulation of teacher-pupil ratio for lower grade classes.
- continuous professional development for its education practitioners.
- good working conditions; and
- remuneration to guarantee teacher effectiveness and retention.
- developing mentoring and monitoring tools at all levels

6.7.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings and conclusion of this study suggest that future research could perhaps:

- Investigate the impact of parental involvement in teaching reading at lower grade primary school levels.
- Explore ways in which young learners can scaffold each other's understanding of phonetical knowledge through cooperative learning.
- Investigate challenges faced by lower grade teachers whose schools have limited study resources and are situated in less supportive local environments.
- Identify variables impacting reading literacy development in multilingual educational communities.
- Identify strategies and/or techniques for effective teaching and assessment of reading literacy development at lower grade primary school levels in Zimbabwe; and
- Determine the use of school-based curriculum study programmes in the acquisition of competent reading skills in other public-school environments.

6.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In this section, the general limitations faced during the course of research is discussed. The first limitation revolves around the use of a very small number of participants drawn from four schools used as case studies. Thus, the sample may not fully represent the entire Zimbabwean high-performing school population. Despite the use of a small number of participants from these schools, the researcher was satisfied that the interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis and focus group

discussions provided an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Cohen *et al.* 2011).

A further limitation relates to possible personal bias. Literature provides acceptable arguments regarding how to deal with researcher bias. For example, Yin (2016) argues that the use of multiple case study designs as well as the use of different data collection strategies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014), reduces the impact of researcher bias in qualitative research. Thus, it is more probable that the researcher's original ideas could be challenged by in-depth viewpoints derived from different information sources and data collection strategies.

In this study, the researcher's bias may be a direct consequence of how she grew up during the colonial period in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where the teaching of reading was strongly emphasised as an extremely critical condition for teaching learners to understand other curricula content and study materials. Although reading during the pre-independence era was mainly centred on the need to acquire competencies in English, she realised that it is also possible to transfer such competencies towards the teaching of indigenous languages as well. Since sounds derived from letters of the alphabet are generally similar across most languages spoken in Africa, , the researcher has no doubt that her bias against the imposition of English as the main language of curriculum instruction has been resolved. This previous experience of the researcher helped to validate the research findings and achieve the main conclusions of the research. The researcher may not have been at a high-performing school during her years of primary education but has vivid memories of how lower-grade teachers emphasised spelling, dictation, comprehension, grammar and essay writing both in English and Shona. If the learner was unable to read, mastery of such components could not be achieved. This previous experience also mediated positively in this study since the researcher did not go into the field blank.

Another limitation relates to the languages used during fieldwork. The researcher chose to interact with participants using both English and Shona, realising that most lower grade teachers were more comfortable expressing their views when using their mother tongue. Considering the idiomatic and figurative nature of the Shona language's expressivity, some of the expressive illustrative cues may not have been fully translated into English. This, the researcher thinks, impacted the actual

presentation of the original meaning proffered by participants. Because the researcher could not secure the services of an expert linguist who is knowledgeable in both Shona and English, her interpretation of some sections causes some considerable disquiet as she deals with fears that this may hinder drawing a sensible conclusion to the research.

Finally, the researcher was a former teacher at one of the church's high-performing schools and is currently completing a doctoral degree at a prestigious South African university. This may have made some participants reluctant to freely express their views. The researcher suspected that the reason could be that they were worried that she was trying to establish how less knowledgeable they were. The researcher overcame this challenge by continually reassuring participants that she valued their input through analysing their teaching documents, engaging them in structured interviews, joining their classes as a participant-observer as well as documenting their input through focused discussions. She then emphasised that the final product is a collective effort to be celebrated as a team.

Despite these limitations, the researcher remains highly optimistic that this study is not only relevant but also very useful in the post-colonial Zimbabwean primary school education system. Developing reading as part of school culture, ensuring parental involvement, the availability of adequate reading resources as well as competent teachers are essential in helping learners acquire and develop competent reading literacy skills at lower grade levels regardless of environment and/or the educational contexts.

6.9 A FINAL WORD

This study sought to identify classroom conditions that enable reading literacy development at lower grade levels in high-performing schools and how these could be applied in low-performing schools in Zimbabwe. The researcher identified several critical issues. Chief among them includes the need to appoint competent lower grade teachers entrusted with assisting young learners to acquire the best possible reading competencies as soon as they enrol for their initial primary schooling, develop and articulate a reading culture in schools and provide adequate and relevant reading resources. It remains the researcher's contention that we can learn from the British-

oriented reading programmes that most high-performing schools use to produce excellent learners.

This study offers evidence in the form of a model of enabling conditions that promote reading literacy development which indicate that it is not a single factor that will enable reading literacy development at lower grades. One factor will not create a reader, both home and school should work together in partnership to support the national or school-based curriculum. It was the researcher's desire to assist both learners and lower grade teachers, regardless of the school type, to realise that reading literacy is the cornerstone to academic success. However, to achieve this, one looks to the African proverb:

It takes a village to raise a child.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Education
Fakulteit Opvoedkunde
Lefapha la Thuto

Ethics Committee
29 June 2016

Dear Ms Gowo

REFERENCE: SM 15/04/01

We received proof that you have met the conditions outlined. Your application is thus approved, and you may **continue with your fieldwork**. Should any changes to the study occur after approval was given, it is your responsibility to notify the Ethics Committee immediately.

Please note that this is **not a clearance certificate.** Upon completion of your research, you need to submit the following documentation to the Ethics Committee:

- Integrated Declaration Form (Form D08),
- Initial Ethics Approval letter and,
- Approval of Title.

Please note:

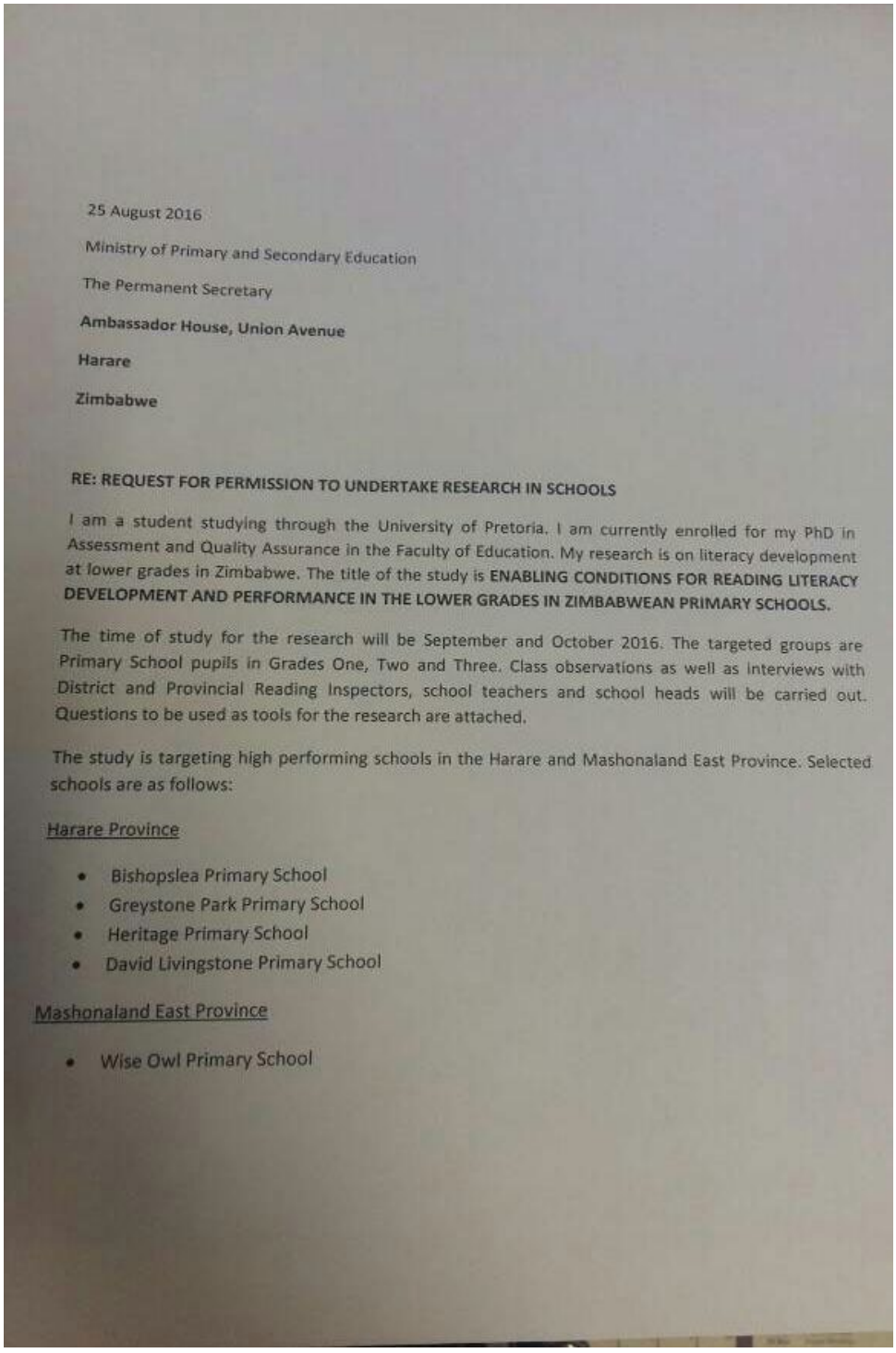
- ***Any amendments* to this approved protocol need to be submitted to the Ethics Committee for review prior to data collection. Non-compliance implies that the Committee's approval is null and void.**
- ***Final data collection protocols and supporting evidence (e.g.: questionnaires, interview schedules, observation schedules) have to be submitted to the Ethics Committee *before* they are used for data collection.***
- ***Should your research be conducted in schools, please note that you have to submit *proof* of how you *adhered* to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) *policy* for research.***
- ***Please note that you need to keep to the protocol you were granted approval on should your research project be amended, you need to submit the amendments for review.***
- ***The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education does not accept any liability for research misconduct, of whatsoever nature, committed by the researcher(s) in the implementation of the approved protocol.***
- ***On receipt of the above-mentioned documents you will be issued a clearance certificate. Please quote the reference number: SM 15/04/01 in any communication with the Ethics Committee.***

Best wishes

Dr. Maithumeleng Ntho-Ntho
Ethics Assistant

Prof Liesel Ebersöhn
Chair: Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

Appendix B: Application Letter to the Ministry of Education



25 August 2016

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

The Permanent Secretary

Ambassador House, Union Avenue

Harare

Zimbabwe

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS

I am a student studying through the University of Pretoria. I am currently enrolled for my PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Education. My research is on literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe. The title of the study is **ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

The time of study for the research will be September and October 2016. The targeted groups are Primary School pupils in Grades One, Two and Three. Class observations as well as interviews with District and Provincial Reading Inspectors, school teachers and school heads will be carried out. Questions to be used as tools for the research are attached.

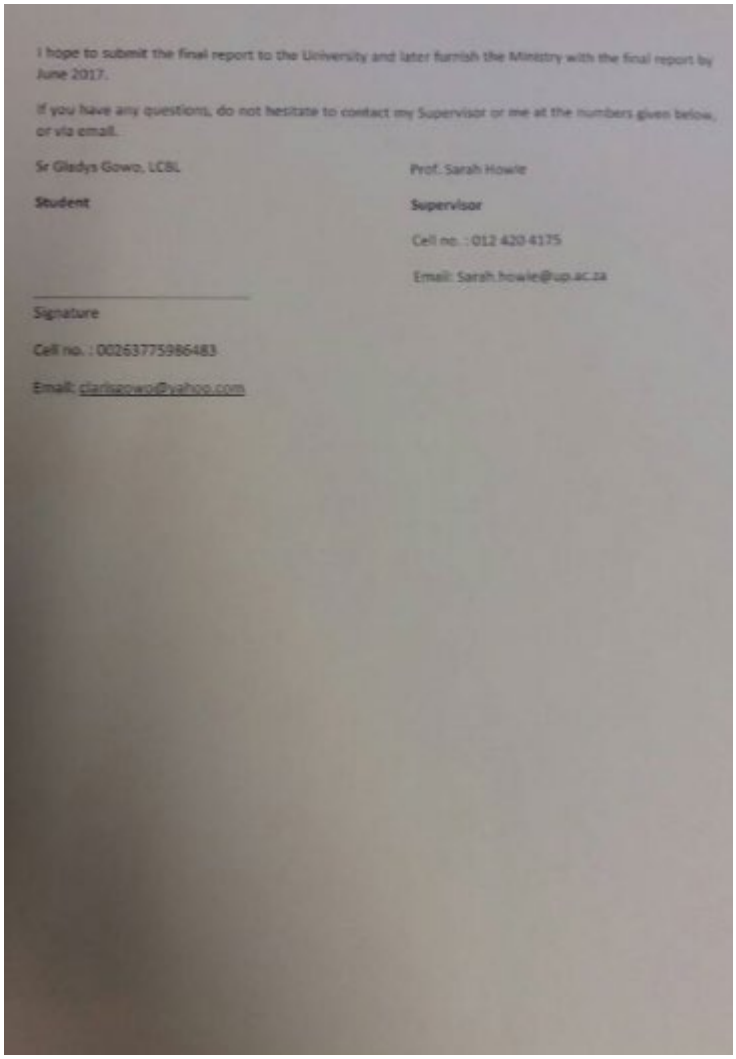
The study is targeting high performing schools in the Harare and Mashonaland East Province. Selected schools are as follows:

Harare Province

- Bishopslea Primary School
- Greystone Park Primary School
- Heritage Primary School
- David Livingstone Primary School

Mashonaland East Province

- Wise Owl Primary School



I hope to submit the final report to the University and later furnish the Ministry with the final report by June 2017.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact my Supervisor or me at the numbers given below, or via email.

Sr Gladys Gowo, LCBL
Student

Signature

Cell no. : 00263775986483

Email: clarisagowo@yahoo.com

Prof. Sarah Howie
Supervisor

Cell no. : 012 420 4175

Email: Sarah.howie@up.ac.za

Appendix C: Head Office Approval Letter

Reference: C/426/3 Mashonaland East
Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
P.O Box CY 121
Causeway
Harare

29 September 2016

Sr Gladys Gowo,LCBL
Education Secretary
Archdiocese of Harare
40 Livingstone Avenue
Harare

RE: PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH AT BISHOPSLEA , GREYSTONE PARK,HERITAGE AND DAVID LIVINGSTONE PRIMARY SCHOOLS :HARARE METROPOLITAN PROVINCE AND WISE OWL PRIMARY SCHOOL: MASHONALAND EAST PROVINCE

Reference is made to your application to carry out a research at the above mentioned schools, both in Harare Metropolitan Province and Mashonaland East Province on the research title:

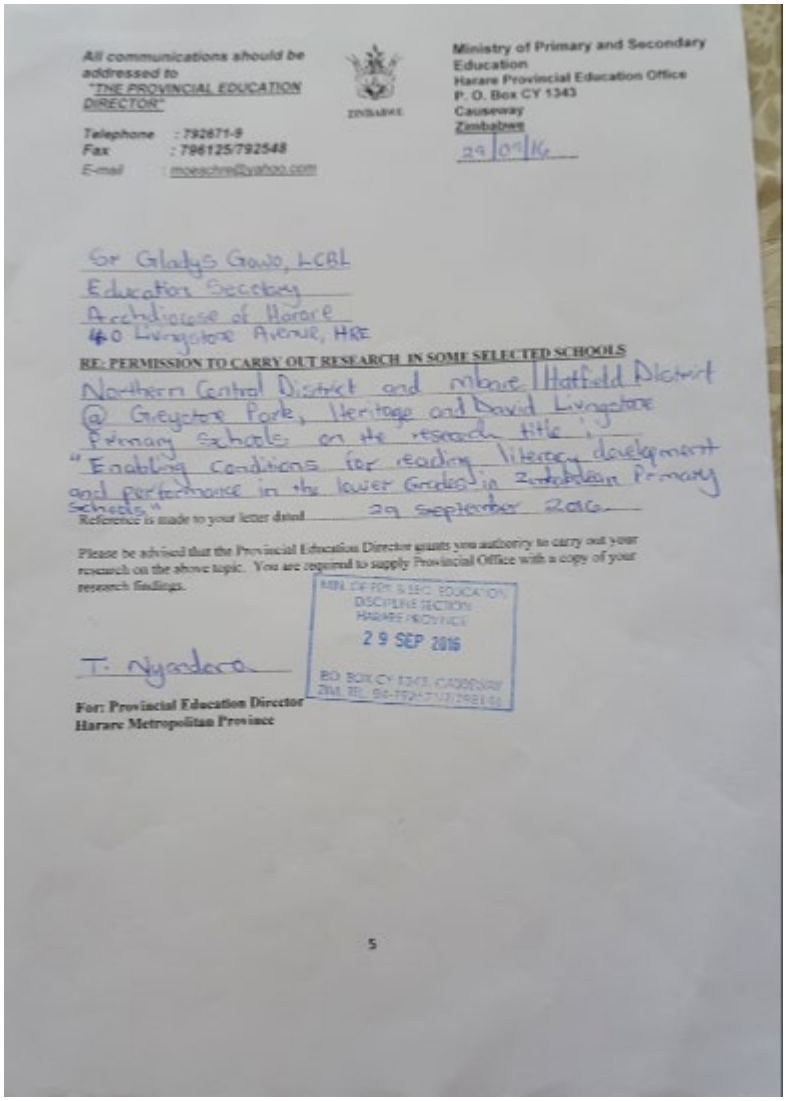
"ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS "

Permission is hereby granted. However, you are required to liaise with the Provincial Education Directors,Harare Metropolitan and Mashonaland East Provinces, who are responsible for the schools which you want to involve in your research. You should ensure that your research work does not disrupt the normal operations of the schools. You are also required to seek consent of the parents/guardians of all learners who will be involved in the research.

You are required to provide a copy of your presentation and a report of what transpired to the Secretary for Primary and Secondary Education by December 2016.

F. Fundira (Mrs)
Acting Director: Policy Planning, Research and Development
For: SECRETARY FOR PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION
cc: PED -Harare Province &Mashonaland East Province

Appendix D: Letter of Approval from Harare Province



All communications should be addressed to "THE PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR"

Telephone : 792671-9
Fax : 796125/792548
E-mail : moeschre@yahoo.com

ZIMBABWE

Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
Harare Provincial Education Office
P. O. Box CY 1343
Causeway
Zimbabwe

29/09/16

Sr Gladys Gowo, LCAL
Education Secretary
Archdiocese of Harare
40 Livingstone Avenue, HRE

RE: PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH IN SOME SELECTED SCHOOLS

Northern Central District and Mbare Hatfield District @ Greystone Park, Heritage and David Livingstone Primary Schools on the research title; "Enabling conditions for reading literacy development and performance in the lower Grades in Zimbabwean Primary Schools"

Reference is made to your letter dated 29 September 2016

Please be advised that the Provincial Education Director grants you authority to carry out your research on the above topic. You are required to supply Provincial Office with a copy of your research findings.

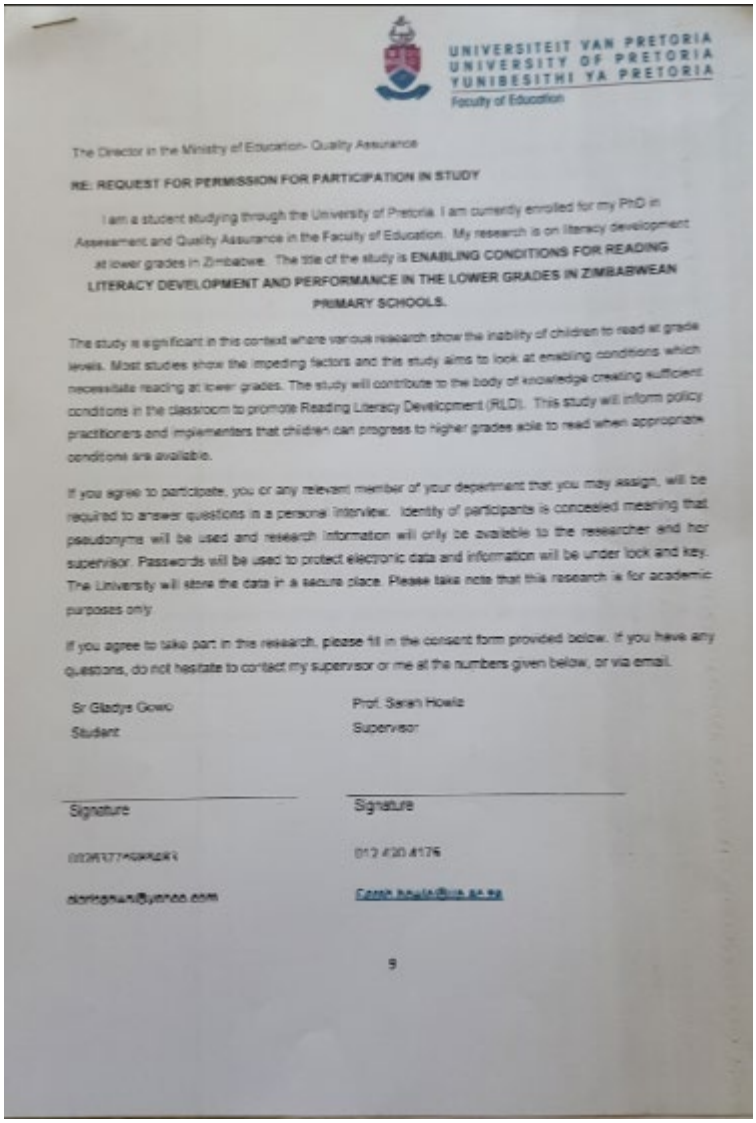
MIN. OF PRY & SEC. EDUCATION
DISCIPLINE SECTION
HARARE PROVINCE
29 SEP 2016
P.O. BOX CY 1343, CAUSEWAY
ZIM. TEL: 04-792671/3/796125

T. Nyandoro

For: Provincial Education Director
Harare Metropolitan Province

5

Appendix E: Participants' Request Letter



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA
Faculty of Education

The Director in the Ministry of Education- Quality Assurance

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

I am a student studying through the University of Pretoria. I am currently enrolled for my PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Education. My research is on literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe. The title of the study is **ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

The study is significant in this context where various research show the inability of children to read at grade levels. Most studies show the impeding factors and this study aims to look at enabling conditions which necessitate reading at lower grades. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge creating sufficient conditions in the classroom to promote Reading Literacy Development (RLD). This study will inform policy practitioners and implementers that children can progress to higher grades able to read when appropriate conditions are available.

If you agree to participate, you or any relevant member of your department that you may assign, will be required to answer questions in a personal interview. Identity of participants is concealed meaning that pseudonyms will be used and research information will only be available to the researcher and her supervisor. Passwords will be used to protect electronic data and information will be under lock and key. The University will store the data in a secure place. Please take note that this research is for academic purposes only.

If you agree to take part in this research, please fill in the consent form provided below. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact my supervisor or me at the numbers given below, or via email.

Sr Gladys Gowo	Prof. Sarah Howie
Student	Supervisor
Signature	Signature
[illegible]	012 420 4176
[illegible]	[illegible]

9

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA
Faculty of Education

The Schools Inspector

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

I am a student studying through the University of Pretoria. I am currently enrolled for my PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Education. My research is on literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe. The title of the study is **ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

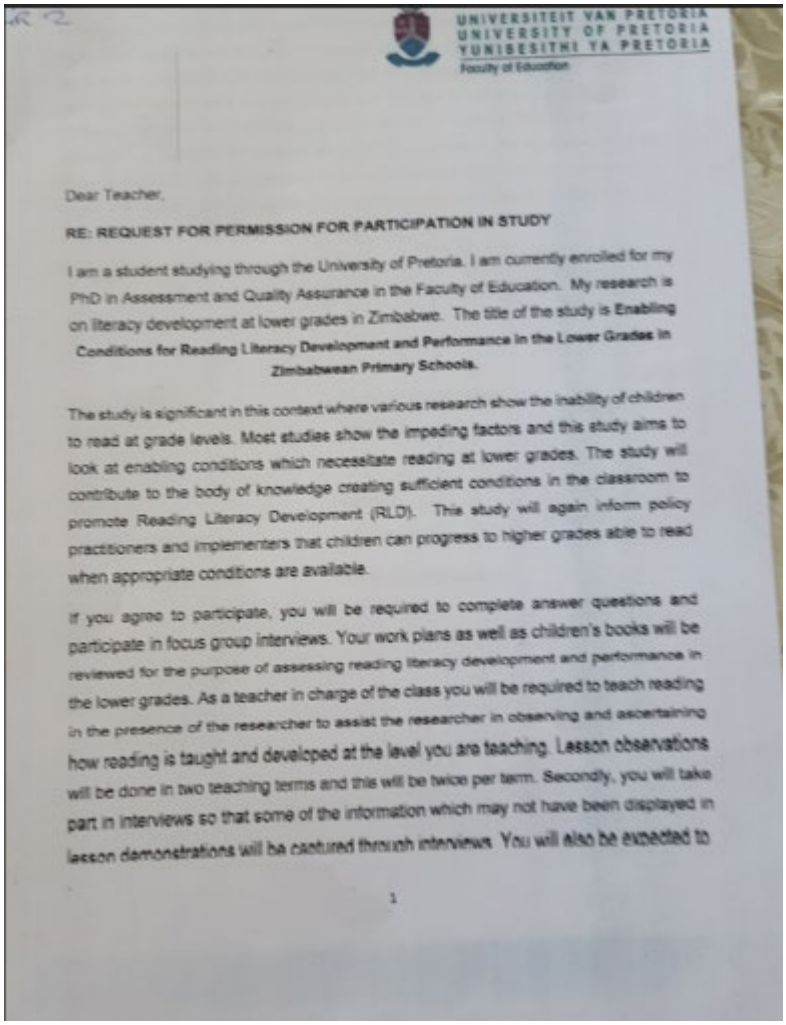
The study is significant in the context where various research show the inability of children to read at grade levels. Most studies show the impeding factors and this study aims to look at enabling conditions which necessitate reading at lower grades. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge creating sufficient conditions in the classroom to promote Reading Literacy Development (RLD). This study will again inform policy practitioners and implementers that children can progress to higher grades able to read when appropriate conditions are available.

If you agree to participate you will be required to answer questions in a personal interview. However, participation is voluntary and participants are allowed to withdraw anytime they feel uneasy to continue. Identity of participants is concealed meaning that pseudonyms will be used and research information will only be available to the researcher and her supervisor. Passwords will be used to protect electronic data and information will be under lock and key. The University will store the data in a secure place. Take note that this research is for academic purposes only.

If you agree to take part in this research, please fill in the consent form provided herewith. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact my supervisor or myself at the numbers and email addresses given below.

Sr Gladys Gowo	Prof. Sarah Howie
Student	Supervisor
I	
Signature	Signature
[0026377598648]	012 420 4175
cenggowo@yahoo.com	Sarah.howie@up.ac.za

6



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA
Faculty of Education

Dear Teacher,

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

I am a student studying through the University of Pretoria. I am currently enrolled for my PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Education. My research is on literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe. The title of the study is **Enabling Conditions for Reading Literacy Development and Performance in the Lower Grades in Zimbabwean Primary Schools.**

The study is significant in this context where various research show the inability of children to read at grade levels. Most studies show the impeding factors and this study aims to look at enabling conditions which necessitate reading at lower grades. The study will contribute to the body of knowledge creating sufficient conditions in the classroom to promote Reading Literacy Development (RLD). This study will again inform policy practitioners and implementers that children can progress to higher grades able to read when appropriate conditions are available.

If you agree to participate, you will be required to complete answer questions and participate in focus group interviews. Your work plans as well as children's books will be reviewed for the purpose of assessing reading literacy development and performance in the lower grades. As a teacher in charge of the class you will be required to teach reading in the presence of the researcher to assist the researcher in observing and ascertaining how reading is taught and developed at the level you are teaching. Lesson observations will be done in two teaching terms and this will be twice per term. Secondly, you will take part in interviews so that some of the information which may not have been displayed in lesson demonstrations will be captured through interviews. You will also be expected to

1

Appendix F: Individual Consent Form

I, _____ agree to take part in the research project titled: ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.

I understand that I will be interviewed about this topic for approximately an hour per session at the school and time that will suit me, but that will not interfere with school activities or teaching time. The interview will also be audio taped.

I understand that my work plans will be copied and analysed through document analysis by the researcher.

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of:

Voluntary participation in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time

- *Informed consent*, meaning that research participants must at all-time be fully informed about the research process and purposes, and must give consent to their participation in the research.
- *Safety in participation*; put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind
- *Privacy*, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of human respondents should be protected at all times; and
- *Trust,* which implies that human respondents will not be respondent to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature:_____

Date:_____

Dear Students

REF: Assent Letter for Grade 1, 2 and 3

What is a research Study?

Research studies help us learn new things and new ideas are tested firstly by asking questions and lastly find answers.

This paper talks about our research and the choice that you have to take part in it. We want to ask you any questions that you have. You can ask question any time.

Important things to know...

- You get to decide if you want to take part
- You can say 'No'
- No one will be upset if you say 'No'.
- If you say 'Yes', you can always say 'No' later.
- You can say 'No' at any time.
- We would still take good care of you no matter what you decide.

Why are we doing this research?

We are doing this research to find out how you learn to read by joining observing your reading lessons and review your workbooks.

What would happen if I join this research?

If you decide to be in the research, we would ask you to do the following?

- Attend reading lessons
- Read aloud to the researcher
- Allow the researcher to have access to your workbooks
- Respond to questions when the researcher asks you.
- In the process you may be taken photographs as well as being video recorded during reading lessons

Could bad things happen if I join this research?

We will try to make sure that no bad things happen.

Could the research help me?

We think being in this research may help you because it will improve the knowledge and some of the skills that that you need to use in learning how to read.

What else should I know about this study?

You are not obliged to be in the study if you do not feel like. Any time you can opt out of the research even if you had started with others. You simply inform the researcher or any authority in the school.

Is there anything else?

If you agree to be in the research, you can write you name below, and we will also write our name too as a sign that we have all agreed that we want to take part in the research.

Name of Participant
……..

Name of the
Researcher……..

Signature of the
Researcher……

Date---------- Time----------

Dear Learners

RE: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION FOR PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

I am a student studying through the University of Pretoria. I am currently enrolled for my PhD in Assessment and Quality Assurance in the Faculty of Education. My research is on literacy development at lower grades in Zimbabwe. The title of the study is **ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE LOWER GRADES IN ZIMBABWEAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS.**

The study is significant in this context where various research shows the inability of learners to read at grade levels. Most studies show the impeding factors, and this study aims to look at enabling conditions which necessitate reading at lower grades. The study then will contribute to the body of knowledge creating sufficient conditions in the classroom to promote Reading Literacy Development (RLD). This study will inform policy practitioners and implementers that learners can progress to higher grades able to read when appropriate conditions are available.

Lesson observations will be done in two teaching terms, and this will be twice per term. Learner's workbooks will also be assessed in order to check the development of reading. As learners you will also be asked to read as a way of establishing the reading performance at each grade le vel. Identity of participants is concealed meaning that pseudonyms will be used, and research information will only be available to the researcher and her supervisor. Passwords will be used to protect electronic data and information will be under lock and key. The University will store the data in a secure place. Take note that this research is for academic purposes only.

This letter serves to advise that both teachers and learners will be observed during relevant reading lessons and the students' books will be assessed. The observations are for the purpose of gathering data for the above mentioned study.

Sr Gladys Gowo	Prof. Sarah Howie
Student	Supervisor
Signature	Signature
[00263775986483]	012 420 4175
clarisgowo@yahoo.com	Sarah.howie@up.ac.za

Appendix G: Institutional Consent Form

I, _____ agree to take part in the research project titled: *Enabling Conditions for Reading Literacy Development and Performance in the Lower Grades in Zimbabwean Primary Schools.*

I understand that the researcher subscribes to the principles of:

Voluntary participation in research, implying that the participants might withdraw from the research at any time

- *Informed consent*, meaning that research participants must at all-time be fully informed about the research process and purposes, and must give consent to their participation in the research.
- *Safety in participation*; put differently, that the human respondents should not be placed at risk or harm of any kind
- *Privacy*, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of human respondents should be protected at all times; and
- *Trust,* which implies that human respondents will not be respondent to any acts of deception or betrayal in the research process or its published outcomes.

Signature:_____

Date:_____

Appendix H: The Teacher Interview Protocol

Main Research Question: *What are the enabling classroom conditions that support reading literacy development at lower grades in high performing schools and how could these be applied in low performing schools in Zimbabwe?*

Description	
Time of the interview	
Duration	
Date	
Place	
Interviewer	
Interviewee	
Pseudonym	
Male/ Female	

Appendix I: Focus Group Questions

Questions:

1. What type of qualification do you have as a Grade 1, 2 or 3 teacher?
2. What is your specialisation?
3. What programmes do you have in the school for reading development?
4. Besides school programmes, what other conditions/ programmes do you have in place that enable reading at lower grades in your school?
5. By the time learners move to next grade, will they all be reading at grade level?

Appendix J: Interview Questions for Teachers

1. Gender ……
2. Age……
3. Number of years in service ……
4. Number of years at this particular station and teaching this grade……
5. Qualifications……
6. What do you think has helped you to teach reading at lower grades?
7. What are the enabling classroom conditions required for the development of reading literacy and performance in your school type for your grade and other lower grades in your school?
8. What reading curriculum do you have as a school and how different is it from other schools? Have you designed your own or you follow the Ministry of Education one and for the option you have followed please explain why?
9. Explain the staff development or in-service training that is organised by the school to enhance reading development in the school?
10. What strategies and instructional methods do you use to teach reading at this grade and why?
11. What contribution do parents make in the development of reading in your class and school?
12. What type of qualification do have as Grade 1, 2 or 3 teacher?
13. What is your area of specialization?
14. For how many years have you been teaching this grade or any other lower grade? Can you say your experience has helped you to teach reading at this level?
15. What methods do you employ when teaching reading at your grade?

16. Is it your own initiative to use the methods and strategies that you use?
17. What programmes do you have in the school for reading literacy development?
18. Besides school programmes, what other conditions/ programmes do you have in place that enable reading at lower grades in your school?
19. By the time learners move to next grade, will they all be reading at grade level?
20 What makes other learners to read and others not?
21. How do you as class a teacher help low performers in their reading?
22. What place do parents have in the reading performance of their learners?
23. What help do you get from the District Offices to foster reading in your school?
24. What other factors can you cite that you think are essential for enabling reading at lower grades?

Appendix K: Interview Questions for Head Teachers

1. Gender ……..
2. Age (in years)……..
3. Teaching Qualification……
4. Teaching experience……
5. Experience as head ……
6. What enabling conditions are there in your school to promote reading at lower grades?
7. What programmes do you have in place for In-service Training on the teaching of reading at lower grades in your school? And how often?
8. What role do you play as the Head in fostering reading development in your school?
9. What curriculum do you use for teaching reading and what was your reason for selecting this curriculum?
10. What role does Ministry of Education play in developing reading literacy at lower grades?
11. How do you assess reading in your school and how often?

Appendix L: Structured Interview Questions for Education Inspectors

1. Gender…….
2. Age (in years) …….
3. Experience as an inspector……..
4. Before this position as inspector, did you teach in the primary school and specifically in the lower grades?
5. What curriculum do schools use for teaching reading?
6. Do schools have the liberty to design their own reading programme or they strict follow what is provided by Ministry?
7. What programmes do you have in place as in-service training for the lower grade teachers?
8. Why is it that some schools do well in terms of teaching reading and others have learners who progress reading below grade level?
9. What do you think are the enabling factors for developing reading literacy in lower grades?
10. How do you assess reading in schools under your jurisdiction, at what levels and how often?

Appendix M: Teacher Observation Checklist

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS

TEACHERS' ENABLING FACTORS

Province…… School ……

District …… Class……..

Teacher…… Subject ……

Researcher …… Date ……

1. Does the teacher have the knowledge of the Reading Stages of the learners?

Knowledge of Stages of Reading	ECD	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Remarks
Pre-Reader Level					
Emergent Readers					
Early Readers					
Developing Reader					
Independent Reader					
Knowledge of reading Components / Strategies					
Phonemic Awareness					
Word Recognition					
Sight Vocabulary					
Word Matching					
Comprehension					
Knowledge of Curriculum					

Knowledge of Stages of Reading	ECD	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Remarks
Interpretation of Syllabus					
Teacher Attributes					
Gender					
Age					
Professional Qualifications					
Experience of teaching Lower Grades					
Number of years in service					
In-Service Training					
Motivation					
Intrinsic					
Extrinsic					
Remuneration and Incentives					
Pedagogical Skills					
Demonstrations					
Lecture					
Balanced methods					
Reading Aloud					
Group activities					
Interaction with learners					
Spellings					

Knowledge of Stages of Reading	ECD	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Remarks
Writing					
Daily Assisted Reading					
Comprehension activities					
Poems					
Songs					

Appendix N: Classroom Observation Checklist

	ECD	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Comments
Class Size					
Class Appearance					
Print Environment					
Sitting Arrangement-Boys & Girls					
Teaching & Learning Resources					
Class Library					
Class Discipline					
Reading Timetable					
Ability Groups					
Reading Related Corners					
Work Cards					
Assessment & Evaluation Schedules					
Remedial Schedules					
Classwork					
Homework					
Learners' Work Books					
Reading Checklist for Learners					
Teacher's Professional Documents					
1 Curriculum					
2 Scheme Book					
3 Plan Book					
4 Reading Records					
5 Other Related Documents					
Interactive Learning					
E-Learning					
Interactive Learning					

Appendix O: School Observation Checklist

School enabling Factors

Province …… School Code…….

District …… Head ……

Researcher …… Date ……..

Areas	Excellent	Good	Not there or needing improvement
Class Climate Physical Environment			
State of Buildings			
School size			
Teacher Pupil Ratio			
Noise levels			
Professionalism			
Reading Staff Development			
Collaboration of Teachers			
Support from Responsible Authority			

Areas	Excellent	Good	Not there or needing improvement
Support from Ministry of Education			
Support from Parents			
Reading Handbook for Lower Grades			
Assessment Schedules			
School library			
e-learning / ICT Lab			
School Reading Time Table			
Availability of resources			
Remedial classes			
Vision and Mission Statement			

Description/Comments

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Appendix P: Proof of Editing

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For editing of Master's Dissertations
and
Doctoral Theses

This letter serves to confirm that editing and proofreading was done for:

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IDENTIFYING AND UNDERSTANDING ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR SUPPORTING READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

Cilla Dowse
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