

## EXPLORING FACTORS INFLUENCING TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS OF LEARNERS' READING PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

*Research demonstrates that teachers' expectations could influence learners' reading achievements, both positively and negatively. Specifically, teachers' expectations determine the level and type of instruction they would map out for learners, which can, in turn, impact learners' academic outcomes. The goal of the current study is to explore the factors influencing teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices in two South African schools. The study was qualitative and followed a case study design. A sample of six teachers was purposively selected based on the criterion that they were English First Additional Language teachers of reading in the Intermediate, Senior and Further Education and Training Phases. The researcher employed semi-structured, face-to-face interviews to collect data and a process of inductive analysis of the qualitative data. The results revealed that teachers' expectations concerning their learners' reading practices were determined by several socioeconomic factors. These include learners' reading culture, ill-disciplined learners, a lack of parental support regarding reading, a lack of resources, poverty, and a lack of knowledge and responsibility. The findings also demonstrated that, despite unfavourable learning settings, teachers had unique strategies for improving their learners' reading achievements.*

**Keywords:** teachers' expectations, reading performance, socioeconomic factors, reading instruction, reading pedagogy

### INTRODUCTION

A variety of factors can influence reading pedagogy and language teaching in general. Teacher expectations are a major element of these factors since what teachers expect of their learners affects their teaching strategies (De Boer, Timmermans & Van der Werf, 2018; St Clair-Thompson, Graham & Marsham, 2017; Rubie-Davies, 2008). Therefore, teacher expectations and classroom practices are inextricably linked. As such, Johnson, Wildy and Shand (2019: 45) highlight significant discoveries in teacher expectation research, such as the consequences of teacher expectations on learners, teachers' differential treatment of learners, as well as learners' responses to teacher expectations. The current study explores factors influencing teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices.

In addition, research shows that South African primary school learners perform poorly in international tests regarding their reading proficiency compared with their peers from other countries (McBride, 2019; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Rule & Land, 2017). The results of the

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2006, 2011, 2016) testify to this challenge. Thus, exploring the factors influencing teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices should be considered a crucial part of providing solutions to this challenge.

Currently, emerging studies examine learners' reading practices and explore potential factors underlying these practices. The amount of time learners spend reading and the types of reading material they consume have recently become important aspects of such research (Arslanoglu & Mor, 2018; Maharsi, Izam Ghali & Maulani, 2019; Nootens, Morin, Alamargot, Gonçalves, Venet & Labrecque, 2019). The results of these studies have indicated that the low levels of learners' reading achievements are related to a multitude of factors. These factors include low levels of reading comprehension (Ryan, 2006), a lack of motivation and engagement (Hatteberg & Steffy, 2013; Boakye, Sommerville & Debusho, 2014), negative attitudes towards reading (Marek & Christopher, 2011), a lack of confidence in reading (Lei, Bartlett, Gorney & Herschbach, 2010) and various external factors.

The current research has observed that to promote learner learning, specifically reading, teachers must be aware of learners' achievements, as well as their individual learning resources, since this knowledge is the basis of effective instructional decision-making and enables teachers to provide sufficient support to individual learners (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2017). According to Jussim, Robustelli and Cain (2009), such evaluations include teachers' expectations of learners' learning and future achievements.

Rubie-Davies (2008) defines teacher expectation as the beliefs teachers hold about the potential achievement of learners. Research confirms that the importance of teacher expectations in facilitating learners' learning has long been recognised (De Boer et al., 2018). Rubie-Davies (2008) reveals that teacher expectations influence teacher behaviour and the subsequent achievement of their learners. Thus, such expectations determine the level and types of instruction teachers plan for learners and can impact learners' academic outcomes. In support of the significance of teacher expectations, Tomlinson and Javuis (2012) find that learners treated as being high-achieving acted like high achievers, whereas learners treated as being low-achieving performed like low achievers. Thus, expectation can create reality. A growing body of research reveals that teachers demonstrate a positive bias in evaluating the work of high-expectation learners by providing them with more response opportunities, more challenging instruction and more praise; furthermore, teachers interact with such learners in supportive and caring ways (De Boer et al., 2018). Similarly, the results of the study conducted by De Boer et al. (2018) showed that teachers with high expectations of their learners spent more time providing a framework for such learners' learning, provided them with more feedback, probed such learners with higher-order questions and managed those learners' behaviour more positively. On the other hand, teachers with low expectations of their learners provided fewer learning opportunities for their learners. Research on the link between teacher expectations and learners' learning practices further reveals that learners' specific characteristics, such as differences in race, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, age and prior knowledge, determine teachers' expectations of learners' achieving their potential. Tomlinson and Javuis (2012) argue that teachers should adjust their expectations and instructional practices to enable all learners to learn at a high level. Although an overwhelming amount of literature establishes associations between teacher expectations and learner learning, too little research has investigated merging teacher expectations with learners' reading practices, especially within the South African context. Such insight would likely make teachers aware of the influence of their expectations on learners' current reading practices and, subsequently, adjust their goals and teaching methods for all learners to achieve a high level of learning.

Therefore, this paper aims to contribute towards teachers' ability to adjust their expectations to create room for learners' reading improvement. The following research questions are addressed to achieve this important goal:

- What factors determine teachers' expectations regarding learners' reading practices?
- What instructional practices do teachers use to prevent low expectations from having detrimental effects on learners' reading achievements?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teacher expectations

Teacher expectations refer to teachers' views of their learners. Rubie-Davies (2008) defines teacher expectations as the beliefs teachers hold about the potential achievement of learners. Similarly, Barriga, Rodriguez and Ferreira (2019) define teacher expectations as the belief teachers have in the achievement potential of their learners. Barriga et al. (2019) explain that teacher expectations have been studied in developed countries like New Zealand, Germany and the United States of America, yet the construct has not been researched in depth in less developed countries. Rubie-Davies (2010: 697) comments that 'student characteristics have been investigated in order to find aspects that potentially influence teachers' expectations'. She states that learners' ethnicity, social class, gender, diagnostic style, personality and social skills, names, siblings and the teacher's background as a learner are some of these factors. She further explains that some of these characteristics have a greater and more long-lasting influence on instructors' expectations than others. Cáceres-Serrano and Alvarado-Izquierdo (2017) likewise argue that socioeconomic factors are key explanatory variables in many variations observed in educational achievement, notably in reading performance. There is growing evidence that teachers may differentiate their behaviour between individual learners because of their expectations, such as setting lower expectations for some learners, providing briefer (or no) feedback on learner errors and less positive feedback after correcting answers, and allowing learners less time to answer questions. For example, Brophy and Good (1970) declare that teachers demand better performance from children of whom they have higher expectations and further, are more willing to applaud such performance when elicited. In contrast, they are less inclined to appreciate good performances from learners for whom they have low expectations and, as such, are more willing to accept poor performances from those learners. The authors of this article believe that this behaviour by instructors, whether or not intentional, prevents low-achieving learners from improving their reading skills. Indeed, it encourages the low achievers to stagnate while their more accomplished peers make progress in reading.

Alderman (2004: 174) declares that when teachers consider intelligence a stable learner quality, they are more likely to identify learners as either 'smart or dumb and teach them according to the classification'. In addition, Barriga et al. (2019) argue that factors such as SES can skew instructor expectations; teachers exhibit positive bias in appraising the work of high-expectation learners (Barriga et al., 2019). Teachers provide more challenging instruction, give more praise, and interact with high-expectation learners in supportive and caring ways, whereas low-expectation learners receive fewer learning opportunities.

De Boer et al. (2018) suggest that teachers must become aware of the consequences of their expectations on learners' reading achievements. The scholars insinuate that teacher expectations can be erroneous or biased towards certain learner groups, and teachers need to be cognisant of this possible bias. Correspondingly, Gentrup, Lorenz, Kristen and Kogan

(2020) state that to promote optimal learning, it is crucial for teachers to be aware of learners' accomplishments and specific learning resources, as this knowledge is the foundation of good instructional decisions and enables teachers to provide adequate support to individual learners.

### **Factors influencing teachers' expectations**

As previously stated, socioeconomic considerations are considered a powerful explanatory variable as regards the influence of teachers' expectations on learners' reading practices. According to Berger and Archer (2016), socioeconomic factors, such as a family's financial status, parents' educational level, race and gender, all have an impact on the quality and availability of schooling. As a result, the authors attempt to deconstruct the relationship between SES and learners' learning, specifically reading. According to Cáceres-Serrano and Alvarado-Izquierdo (2017), SES might be linked to reading because it may affect the development of effective reading skills.

Buckingham, Wheldall and Beaman-Wheldall (2013) note that several studies suggest moderate to high correlations between SES and reading. They explain that this claim is supported by the fact that children from low-income families have significantly lower literacy levels than their counterparts from higher-income families. In addition, a study by Barbarin and Aikens (2015) focused on learner SES as a factor influencing teacher expectations and determined that teachers perceived learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to have less promising futures than those from backgrounds with more favourable socioeconomic characteristics. Barbarin and Aikens (2015) further remark that these expectations might encourage teachers to use diversified instructional approaches, which could negatively impact their learners' academic progress, particularly in reading.

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2008) states that SES includes not only money but also educational attainment, financial security and subjective evaluations of social standing and social class. The APA points out that SES can include both quality of life and the possibilities and privileges afforded to people in society. Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier and Maczuga (2009) believe that children from low-SES homes and communities gain academic skills at a slower rate than children from higher-SES households and communities. Furthermore, Buckingham et al. (2013) note that children from low-SES homes are less likely to have experiences that foster the development of essential reading abilities like vocabulary and oral language.

Van Bergen, Van Zuijen, Bishop and De Jong (2016) declare that children's earliest reading ability is linked to their home literacy environment, the number of books they own and the level of parental involvement. Allowing for all the above elements, Orr (2003) concludes that low-income families have limited access to learning materials and experiences, such as books, computers and tutors necessary for a positive literacy environment.

Given the factors discussed above and considering the importance of teacher expectations of learners' learning and reading achievements, this study investigated such expectations in two South African schools.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research approach and design

The study discussed in this paper followed a qualitative research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note that qualitative research aims to investigate phenomena from an individual point of view, paying close attention to the context from which they emerge. Considering that this study focused on teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices, the researchers deemed a qualitative approach informed by a case study design appropriate. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) explain that a case study is a flexible investigation used to develop a holistic understanding of a phenomenon, such as factors that influence teachers' expectations of learners' reading practices, within such a phenomenon's natural environment. Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey (2016) point out that qualitative research is used to address questions about experience, meaning and perspective—usually from the participant's perspective. Hence, the researcher considered a qualitative approach suitable since the current study focused on teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices; moreover, the selected teachers were well-positioned to share their expectations about the reading practices of their learners. An explanatory case study was used specifically to explain factors influencing the teachers' expectations.

### Data collection method

The researchers conducted semi-structured, individual face-to-face interviews with six teachers who were teaching English First Additional Language (EFAL) at one primary school (two Intermediate Phase teachers) and one secondary school (two Senior Phase and two Further Education and Training Phase teachers). The authors developed interview questions based on the research topics provided in the introduction and used them as a guide for the interviews between January and April 2021. Each interview lasted between 50 and 60 minutes at the participants' school premises during their free periods. The school principal and the participants gave consent for the interviews to be conducted and recorded by completing informed consent forms.

### Research participants and sampling methods

The participants consisted of two Intermediate Phase teachers, two Senior Phase teachers and two Further Education and Training (FET) Phase teachers. Foundation Phase teachers were excluded because Foundation Phase learners' behaviour differ markedly from the other phases. In the South African context, Grades 4–6 form the Intermediate Phase, Grades 7–9 are the Senior Phase, and Grades 10–12 constitute FET (Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2008). The researchers opted to obtain information from representatives from the three above-mentioned phases to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing teachers' expectations of learners' reading practices. Specifically, the rationale was to ascertain any similarities or differences between the different phases regarding teachers' reading expectations. In total, six participants were selected purposively based on the criterion that they were EFAL teachers teaching reading in the above-mentioned phases. Purposive sampling occurs when a researcher selects participants from a population representing or informing a specified issue (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014: 152). The researchers utilised this type of sampling to select six teachers from two schools, of which three teachers were from each school. The teachers' ages ranged from 27 to 58 years, with three having earned B.Ed. Hons

degrees and three holding M.Ed. degrees in Education. The sample comprised four women and two men.

### **Data analysis**

The qualitative data for this study were analysed inductively. Creswell (2014) states that an inductive method is a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, which involves making sense of the data by dividing it into text segments, labelling the segments with codes, and then reducing and collapsing these codes into themes. Thomas (2003) asserts that the purpose of inductive data analysis is to condense extensive and diverse data into a summary format, as well as to establish clear links between the research objectives (derived from the research questions) and the results from the raw data. In this study, the three researchers jointly analysed the data generated from the transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews. They assigned labels to data sections based on recurring words, phrases or clauses, resulting in a collection of inductive codes that were conceptualised and discussed under themes, as suggested by Thomas (2003). In the current study, the three researchers worked independently yet simultaneously on the same transcribed data and subsequently discussed and collated their analyses and interpretations of the text during a scheduled meeting. There were no differences regarding the data analysis process.

### **Ethical considerations**

The Tshwane University of Technology granted ethical clearance for conducting the study; the Department of Basic Education, Gauteng Province, granted permission to visit schools and interview the selected teachers. The two permission documents were presented to the district office and two school principals, who later permitted one of the researchers to conduct the interviews at both schools. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

## **FINDINGS**

The section below discusses the findings that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews held with six teachers. The codes T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 and T6 were used to ensure the participants' anonymity. In the context of this study, the 'T' represents 'teacher'.

### **Factors influencing teachers' expectations of the reading practices of their learners**

The participants indicated a wide range of factors contributing to the theme of their expectations of their learners' reading practices. These expectations emanated from the teachers' experiences with learners. Since they interacted with learners daily, the participants were well-positioned to understand the reading behaviour of their learners. The teachers' expectations were also influenced by their awareness of their learners' backgrounds, including the learners' parents and the community at large. All the teachers mentioned socioeconomic conditions as the main contributing factor. This factor was divided into the sub-themes of learners' reading culture, ill-disciplined learners, a lack of parental support regarding reading, poverty, a lack of resources, limited knowledge and a lack of responsibility. These factors are discussed individually below.

### ***Learners' reading culture***

The Intermediate Phase, Senior Phase and FET Phase teachers lamented that learners lacked a reading culture and were uninterested in reading. The teachers admitted that although there was little reading material in their classrooms, learners were not interested in reading and that this pertained even to the prescribed texts provided. Furthermore, all interviewees stated that many learners used the internet for fun rather than reading. Moreover, access to electricity has made television accessible in many homes. Consequently, learners preferred to watch television for leisure purposes instead of using access to electricity to read books, whether online or in print. Responding to the question, T6, a male Grade 11 teacher, said:

Yes, our learners are lazy to read. You cannot believe that they do not read outside the classroom context. I read the prescribed material with them in class, and they stop where we have stopped for the day. They cannot read ahead. It is also clear that they do not do revisions on what has been read when they are at home. When you ask them where we stopped the previous day, you will notice that some of them are lost, and you must revise the previous lesson so as to link it with the current reading. Then, how can you expect them to read outside the classroom context on their own? (T6)

Responding to the same question, T4, a female Grade 9 teacher, mentioned that:

To prove that the learners we teach do not read at home or outside the classroom, I expected them to bring back their books at the end of the year so that we can keep them for the new group that will register next year. I was expecting them to bring the books back after they have written my subject. To my surprise, there are those who brought back books two days before the paper was written. To me, they looked like they were just in a hurry to finish the year, otherwise reading and preparing for the exams was none of their business. But the same people will expect to pass at the end of the year. I know they spend their time on TV. (T4)

Based on the discussion above, the participating teachers' perceptions of the reading culture of their learners are that learners are not interested in reading, despite the (limited) availability of reading materials in their school environments. The teachers also believe that learners do not practise independent reading. In some cases, the learners were found wanting when the teacher asked what had been discussed in the previous lesson in order to revise the previous lesson and link it with the current reading. Often, the learners had completely forgotten the previous lesson. Although the strategy of moving from the known to the unknown is a good teaching strategy, learners are unable to summarise information from a previous lesson as they have not revised their work. The teacher's attempt to activate the learners' background knowledge about what is to be taught is a good teaching practice; however, learners' inadequate reading prevents the strategy from being successful. Therefore, teachers must find a way to improve learners' reading culture by encouraging them to read independently and extensively. Since learners have developed an interest in watching television, teachers could link television programmes to what learners are reading in the classroom.

### ***Ill-disciplined learners***

The participants also mentioned poor discipline. Maintaining discipline in a classroom influences learning by creating a stress-free atmosphere for allocating time to varied activities, shaping learner character and increasing motivation. The absence of discipline has the opposite effect. Teachers in the two schools used for the study tied such ill-discipline to the school community. Because a school is a microcosm of the community it serves, it reflects the socioeconomic level of the community, according to the participants. Some learners' behaviour was deemed disruptive to learning, particularly reading. Participants specifically described several of the learners as disruptive. Responding to this question, T6, a male Grade 11 teacher, said:

These days, learners are unruly, and they turn school into a war zone. In our school, there are learners who roam around for the whole day without getting into their classrooms. Such learners are not doing well in reading and writing, and as teachers, unfortunately, we are not trained to teach those learners with severe reading challenges. Some of such learners become angry and fight with the teachers, especially female teachers. They know that due to the abolition of corporal punishment, teachers are powerless. (T6)

T3, a female Grade 5 teacher, contributed the following:

In our school, drugs are sold within the school premises. Last week, we were forced to call the police when one unruly boy was chasing other learners with a knife. Crime is rife in schools, as well as in the community. People use crime to make [a] living. In my school, when the bell rings at the end of the break, it means nothing to our learners unless there is a teacher to chase them back to the classrooms. Reading, as the mother of the learning process, is not exonerated from this kind of behaviour. I believe that learners who have difficulty reading will be less motivated to read more or visit the library. However, we keep on forcing our learners to read. It is not something they seem to enjoy, and I doubt if they can do it voluntarily. (T3)

The above verbatim quotes illustrate that teachers sometimes face the dilemma that some learners display unruly behaviour, which teachers are not trained to manage. For example, residents of the township area where the study was conducted did not escape the negative impact of social ills associated with historical segregation (Nelson Mandela Organisation, n.d.). According to Penzhorn (2006: 95), the community is plagued with problems such as severe poverty, inadequate infrastructure, crime, a high level of substance abuse, soaring numbers of teenage pregnancies, family instability, an increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS, and a high unemployment rate as a result of the Group Areas Act (Act no 41 of 1950). The nature of the community is not conducive to learning and teaching, and this places teachers in a difficult position.

Furthermore, the researchers noted that elements such as overcrowded classrooms were prevalent, which could contribute to the unfortunate disruptive behaviour of unruly learners. Such behaviour, in turn, affects learning, specifically reading. For this reason, teachers still struggle to instil discipline in their classrooms because, in the past, they could rely on corporal punishment to do so. Consequently, when corporal punishment was abolished in South African



schools, it appears that no alternative mechanism was developed to replace it, which is one of the reasons why teachers have to deal with learners' unruly behaviour.

### ***Lack of parental support***

The lack of parental support was one of the factors affecting teachers' expectations of their learners' reading habits. According to the participants, this element is linked to parents' inability to assist learners by acquiring reading materials such as newspapers, books and magazines. Additionally, the teachers reported that parents fail to assist their children with their schoolwork, which is especially crucial in the lower grades, where literacy concepts are introduced. One of the explanations provided in support of the aforementioned is that parents are ignorant of the need for parental involvement in children's literacy development. Responding to this question, T5, a male Grade 10 teacher, indicated the following:

Parents feel that it is none of their business to involve themselves in the reading development of their children. To me, this is not strange because teachers spend only five hours per day with the learners and parents spend 16 hours, but in most cases, teachers are the ones who identify learners' psychological problems. So, what I am trying to say is that some parents do not seem to be interested in the welfare of their children. When it comes to reading, they do not have time to assist their children. In fact, at home, they do not even give learners time to read. They think that reading is part of schoolwork and, therefore, should be done under the guidance of teachers at school, not [at] home. To some parents, after school means that children should focus on [the] chores. Some children prepare meals for the following day and have no time to read at home. (T5)

Based on the verbatim quote above, it seems some parents have specific expectations for the roles their children should play in the home, which exclude learning that takes place at home. Specifically, it appears that parents do not seem to understand that learning continues even after school; for example, preparations for the next day's classes are done after school. Parents believe that after school, their children should be free to focus solely on chores and preparing meals for the family. This belief could stem from the school being in a low-income community with many single-parent homes. Consequently, learners are required to assist with home chores, unlike in middle-class homes, where domestic workers assist with home chores. To address this challenge, schools should introduce after-school activities beyond sports and cultural activities. Some rural schools provide so-called afternoon studies during which teachers take turns monitoring and supervising learners doing homework and preparing for the next day's lessons. For example, if formal school activities end at 3 pm, learners can be given one hour to do all their schoolwork, including homework and preparations, under the supervision of a teacher. Learners could then be released at 4 pm.

### ***Poverty***

The study identified another factor, poverty, affecting teachers' expectations of their pupils' reading habits. Some participants stated that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this factor. They said that the pandemic had resulted in many people losing their jobs and a drop in the standard of living in many homes. According to the participants, the majority of parents in relies fully on government aid. Because such parents find it difficult to obtain reading materials for their children, the children depend mostly on school-mandated texts. The participants stressed the impact of poverty not only at home but also in the classroom because poor schools

do not have a wide range of reading material since they cannot afford to purchase it for their learners. Responding to this question, T2, a female Grade 4 teacher, said the following:

It is difficult for our learners to buy extra reading material because their parents are not working. In this area, poverty manifests itself in that the bulk of our learners reside in the informal settlement. Specifically, they stay in shacks because this is the only shelter their parents can provide. They use the government grant to buy food and clothes for their children. Since [the] majority of parents are not working, they use the little amount of money to pay for community burial societies since they do not afford registered insurances like Old Mutual and Sanlam. We try to understand their situation; hence, we focus more on the prescribed reading provided by the school. (T2)

The verbatim quote above is a true reflection of the SES of parents and learners. Since some parents are unemployed, they find it difficult to buy the necessary reading resources for their children. This unfortunate situation has a bearing on learners' reading opportunities, which might, in turn, affect their reading ability negatively. This situation is also linked to the rampant inequality characterising the South African educational system. The schools where the researchers collected data are classified as no-fee schools. Such schools are supposed to be supported by the government as the parents do not make any financial contribution in terms of paying school fees. Due to the government's failure to fulfil its promises, these schools have trouble providing quality education because they lack the necessary resources. The prevailing circumstances in these schools are a clear reflection of the discrepancy between rich and poor schools in the public schooling system. The teachers, as members of these rural communities, are aware of this difference; hence they mention it as one of the factors that might affect learners' reading proficiency compared to their peers from middle-class communities.

### ***Lack of resources***

The participants identified the lack of resources as a further variable affecting teachers' expectations. Other factors, such as poverty, are associated with this component, i.e., a poor community would be unable to provide resources to their children. Accordingly, the scarcity of resources is considered a factor affecting both the school and the community. Responding to this question, T5, a male Grade 10 teacher, indicated the following:

Sometimes I find it difficult to give my learners work that will need computers and [the] internet. Parents from this community cannot afford to buy laptops for their children. They spend whatever little amount they have on buying food for their children. Therefore, our learners only depend on the learning resources schools might provide. (T5)

In response to this question, T1, a female Grade 4 teacher, said:

The problem is not only with the learners' backgrounds, like their homes and families. The schools that are in an area that is poverty-stricken are not likely to provide the relevant learning resources to their learners. There are many resources that are not available in our schools. Even the few technology devices that are available in our schools are not used by teachers. For example, in our school, we have an overhead projector that is supposed to make teaching and learning easy. However, we are not using it. It has gathered dust in the

principal's office. Government gave teachers laptops, but we are not using them. The problem is that we were given laptops without being trained on how to use them. I received mine three years ago, but I cannot even remember the pin for the sim card I was given and therefore cannot open it. It goes with one's interest in technology. (T1)

Similar to the discussion above on poverty, the lack of resources also reflects the SES of the parents. Since some parents are unemployed, they do not have money to buy reading resources for their children. Another important factor is the attitude of the teachers themselves. They do not seem to utilise the technology intended to expose learners to online reading material. In truth, the Department of Basic Education is to blame since one of the participants mentioned that the DBE provided them with laptops but provided no training on how to use those laptops. It is also clear that the government does not follow up and monitor whether or not the laptops are being used. Thus, the learners are highly disadvantaged in terms of resources even though some electronic devices are available in their schools. The teachers' negative attitudes towards the use of technology are highly concerning. They seem to resist change even if such change is intended to facilitate assistance to them. This situation deprives learners of the opportunity to read the relevant material, considering learners are supposed to be exposed to a variety of reading materials from online databases for them to practise reading and improve their culture of reading.

### ***Lack of knowledge and responsibility***

Another factor considered an influence on teachers' expectations is parents' lack of knowledge. In this study, a lack of knowledge refers to a lack of comprehension or information about a concept. Apart from poverty and the lack of resources, most parents seemed uninformed. The participants stated that some reading resources are not prohibitively expensive, yet parents do not purchase them because they lack knowledge about the importance of providing reading materials within the home environment. Other indicators reflecting a lack of knowledge, as noted by the participants, include parents' and guardians' being unaware of and having low regard for education. The parents seemed unaware of the importance of learners acquiring literacy skills early in their education. The participants also mentioned a sheer lack of responsibility on the part of some parents. Supporting this view, T1, a female Grade 4 teacher, said:

Due to their unawareness of the importance of acquiring literacy skills in the Foundation Phase, sometimes parents do not esteem (*sic*) assisting their children with schoolwork as important, and because of socioeconomic challenges, many parents lack an awareness of the value of the information contained in the books. (T1)

T6, a male Grade 11 teacher, contributed to the topic by saying:

Since many parents leave (*sic*) on government handouts and houses, they seem to have outsourced their responsibilities to parent their children to schools and government. They do not view buying books as [a] priority because they expect the government to assist them with everything. Sometimes we invite them to come to school when there is a problem with their children. When they come to school and observe that their children are on (*sic*) the wrong, they always ask

teachers to punish the learner. It means they have distanced themselves from the education of their children. (T6)

### **Teachers' instructional practices to improve learners' reading achievements in cases of low reading expectations**

The second research question focused on teaching techniques teachers employ to help learners improve their reading skills. This research question centred on what influenced teachers' expectations of their learners' reading achievement in the classroom. The teachers' responses to this question were based on their observations of learners' reading performance and behaviour during reading lessons. Participants mentioned a variety of strategies, including teaching learners how to write summaries, holding reading debates, using picture books and drawings (especially for beginner readers), involving parents, providing intervention classes, making reading resources available and improving reading instruction. Responding to this question, T6, a male Grade 11 teacher, said:

Our learners find it difficult to summarise a text. To assist them I use the seven steps of teaching or writing a summary. These are: reread the original text, make a list of key points, note supporting evidence, start with a context sentence, describe the key concept of the text, follow up with supporting evidence and write a thesis statement. Sometimes I give them a passage to summarise as their homework and on the following day I check if they followed the seven steps I taught them in class. (T6)

Also responding to this question, T1, a female Grade 4 teacher, said:

Learners find it difficult to use their background to (*sic*) what they are reading. Sometimes, this confusion is caused by the lack of finding equivalent definition[s] of the concepts they learn at school and the same concepts in the context of their homes. For example, in Grade 1, one of the reading lessons is based on describing a house. The concept of a house my learners have is different from what they are taught at school. To close this gap I bring a picture of a modern house where [the] focus will be on the different rooms in a modern house, like [read] kitchen, dining room, bedroom, lounge, etc. I even ask my learners to draw a structure of a modern house. (T1)

Also responding to this question, T5, a male Grade 10 teacher, said:

My learners cannot get at the meaning of unfamiliar words in context. They want to rely on the dictionary. This becomes difficult since hardcopy dictionaries are hard to find these days in our schools. I always provide them with tips to help them guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words in context. They also find it hard to visualise. I always refer them to everyday life, and I always find a way to make [an] example about their homes, because the idea is to make them link what they are learning at school with what they already know. Their challenge is to take the story as is. They find it difficult reading beyond the printed text. (T5)

Responding to the same question, T5, a male Grade 10 teacher, mentioned the following:

I think, as teachers, we must improve our teaching methods, especially the methods we use for teaching reading. I am thinking of using various reading strategies that might facilitate learners' understanding of the texts they read. I think we should move away from the traditional methods of teaching reading where the focus was only on the content of the text. We should assist our learners read beyond the text. (T5)

Expanding on the subject, T5, a male Grade 10 teacher, said:

We should, in my opinion, motivate our learners. If we wish to change our learners' reading habits, we must find a strategy to urge them to read. We could, for example, enhance reading time, reading for pleasure, text variety and reading time. Above all, we should re-evaluate our assumptions about our learners' current reading abilities and future reading achievement. One of the most potent motivators is our confidence as teachers that every learner can become a great reader. In other words, we should have high expectations about the reading achievement of our learners. (T5)

Even though the teachers devised good instructional strategies to improve the reading proficiency of their learners, none of them mentioned that they shared their expectations with the learners. It was clear that whatever expectations the teachers had of their learners were kept to themselves. This situation does not motivate or assist learners to develop an interest in the reading process. Sharing their expectations with the learners could likely serve as a goal-setting mechanism since learners would work hard to meet the teachers' expectations. Teachers mentioned the poor circumstances in the community at large. However, the teachers do not seem to be working hard to create an environment conducive to learning. None of them mentioned how they motivate learners by verbally praising successful progress or accomplishment and providing motivating feedback immediately. Although they mentioned the lack of learners' independent reading as a factor, teachers had no clear strategy to encourage learners' independent learning in support of learner autonomy.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This study intended to investigate the elements influencing teachers' expectations of their learners' reading practices as well as instructional approaches that could help them improve. This section analyses and summarises the research findings, considering what is already known about the research problem under investigation. The results of the study reveal that teachers' expectations regarding their learners' reading practices are determined by several socioeconomic factors. These include learners' reading culture, learners' poor discipline, lack of parental support regarding reading, poverty, lack of resources, and lack of knowledge and responsibility. Although the teachers may or may not have been living in the community in which the schools are situated, they grew up and were schooled in similar environments and are in a position to be able to identify with the issues. However, since these teachers are now in a position of (relative) privilege, they may have imposed an idealistic view of schooling on a community radically different from the norm.

The findings of our investigation accord with several previous studies. For example, studies focusing on learner SES as a factor influencing teachers' expectations suggest that teachers

perceive learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds as having a less promising future than those from backgrounds with more favourable socioeconomic characteristics (Barbarin & Aikens, 2015). In a similar study, Van Bergen et al. (2016) discovered that children's initial reading ability is linked to their home literacy environment, the number of books they own and parental involvement. Also arriving at similar findings, Orr (2003) argues that poor families have restricted access to learning materials and experiences, such as books, computers and tutors required for a positive literacy environment.

The findings also demonstrate that teachers' expectations can influence learners' reading achievement both positively and negatively. It was obvious in the current study that teachers had low expectations of their learners' reading practices. This conclusion is crucial because it indicates a potential deficiency in future research on teachers' knowledge of the significance of their expectations in determining their learners' reading achievement. Teachers are more likely to adjust their attitudes to their learners' prospective reading achievements if they have this information. According to the findings of a study conducted by Tomlinson and Javius (2012), learners who are considered high achievers act like high achievers, while learners perceived as low achievers act like low achievers. The findings of Tomlinson and Javius's (2012) study could serve as a cautionary measure for participants in the current study. Future research focusing on instructors' knowledge of the influence of their expectations on their learners' reading achievement is critical because it may assist teachers in understanding the potential of their expectations to shape reality. A study by De Boer et al. (2018) supports this viewpoint by warning that teachers should be mindful of the impact of their expectations on learners' reading achievement.

De Boer et al. (2018) further demonstrate that despite unfavourable learning settings, teachers have unique strategies for increasing their learners' reading achievement. In this context, teachers discussed several techniques they had used and which could be adopted to improve learners' reading achievement. However, they seem to have low expectations of their learners, which might defeat the purpose of their teaching techniques and the various teaching strategies employed. Thus teachers must become aware of the effect of their expectations on learners' achievements.

The results of the study by Tomlinson and Javius (2012) on educators' reading instruction adjustments are consistent with the findings of the current study. According to Tomlinson and Javius (2012), teachers should change their goals and instructional methodologies so that all learners can reach high levels of learning. Moreover, the study by De Boer et al. (2018) discovered that teachers with high expectations for their learners spend more time developing a framework for their learning, provide them with more feedback, probe their learners with higher-order questions and control their learners' behaviour positively.

## **CONCLUSION**

The various studies referred to in this paper indicate that teachers' expectations could influence learners' reading achievements both positively and negatively. The current study unmistakably shows that teachers have low expectations of their learners' reading practices due to the factors discussed above, which could negatively influence these learners' reading achievements. Teachers must recognise the role of expectations in the reading success of their learners because teachers' expectations to an extent determine reality and, as such, impact learners' academic achievements. The introduction cited several studies mentioning that teachers who have high expectations about the reading proficiency of their learners improve the reading

proficiency of the learners, whereas those with low expectations seem to undermine achievement. Therefore, the teachers who participated in the current study should set a higher standard by having higher expectations of their learners and devise strategies to teach at a high level, despite the socioeconomic factors that impinge on learners' academic success.

The study's findings also demonstrate that, despite unfavourable learning settings, teachers use strategies for increasing their learners' reading achievement; furthermore, in this context, the teachers discussed several techniques to increase learners' reading achievement. However, these teachers were not doing enough to create a conducive reading environment for learners to improve their reading proficiency. Consequently, the recommendation is for teachers to become aware of their negative or low expectations of learners' reading achievements before they employ the suggested techniques to improve learners' reading achievements.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Although this research obtained important findings related to teachers' expectations regarding their learners' reading practices, some limitations of the study are acknowledged. The reliance only on semi-structured interviews to collect data is a significant limitation. One might expect that participants sometimes tell a researcher what the researcher would want to hear. The small size of the population sample is another limitation. This study recommends that a larger sample size is considered to increase the statistical significance of the findings in similar future studies.

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