CHAPTER NINE

PHASE TWO FINDINGS:

CASE STUDIES OF TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS, CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS AND TEACHING PRACTICES FOR READING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

9.1 ORIENTATION

To complement and extend the results of the secondary analysis of the PIRLS 2006 teacher questionnaire data presented in Chapter Eight, the micro level classroom environments of selected Grade 4 teachers, the teachers' characteristics, their classes and teaching practices for the development of reading literacy at the six participating schools[56] are examined. Data presented in this chapter thus further address research sub-question 2, which is:

- *What are the practices of teaching Grade 4 reading literacy at each identified PIRLS 2006 achievement benchmark?*

The data presented in the chapter are derived from the analysis of: interviews with the Intermediate Phase Head of Department (HoD) and the participating Grade 4 teacher at each school; selected PIRLS 2006 teacher questionnaire items; learner workbooks; classroom observation; and the Opportunity-To-Learn (OTL) questionnaire. In section 9.2, each teacher's background and goals for teaching Grade 4 reading literacy are presented. This is followed by the discussion of: class size and learners' reading profiles (9.3); overall language teaching strategies (9.4); reading instruction activities (9.5); and reading comprehension practices (9.6) for reading literacy development in each teacher's class. In section 9.7, the data presented in the chapter are discussed and summarised.

9.2 TEACHER BACKGROUND AND GOALS

In this sub-section, the backgrounds of the Grade 4 teachers who participated in the research are described (9.2.1). This is followed by an exposition of these teachers' stated goals for the teaching of Grade 4 reading literacy (9.2.2).

[56]The six purposively selected schools which had a class average achievement at the PIRLS 2006 international benchmarks of EFL 550 (School A), EFL 475 (School B), EFL 400 (School C), and the South African benchmarks of EFL 325 (School D), EFL 325 (School E) and EAL 175 (School F).

9.2.1 Teacher background

The Grade 4 teacher at School A was in the age range of 50 to 59 years, and had 31 years of teaching experience and 10 years at Grade 4. She had attended teacher training college and held a Further Diploma in Education (FDE). As part of her teacher education she reported *areas of emphasis* as having been: English language; literature; pedagogy; teaching reading; remedial reading; reading theory; special education and second language learners. She had also received an overview or introduction to psychology and children's language development. In the two years prior to data collection, she reported having spent *6 to 15 hours* in Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) workshops or seminars. For her professional development, she read books or professional journals related to teaching in general and teaching reading in particular, *once or twice a year*. She also read children's books *at least once a week* for professional development. She reportedly read at home for enjoyment *every day or almost every day*. The teacher's discussions about her practices revealed a strong sense of responsibility at the school:

> *Obviously they trust us with their children so it's our responsibility and it's our duty and I think it comes naturally certainly to everybody here … to just go the extra mile for the learners* (P3, 3:182, 200:200).

The School B teacher was in the age range of 40 to 49 years. She had been teaching for 15 years altogether and reported that by the end of 2009 she would have eight years experience teaching at Grade 4. She had joined School B in 2002, prior to which she had taught preschool in Swaziland and had done relief teaching in the United Kingdom. The teacher held a 4-year College of Education Diploma but she did not indicate which topics formed part of her formal education or training. In the two years prior to data collection she had not spent any time in CPTD workshops or seminars that dealt directly with reading or teaching reading. For her professional development, she read books or professional journals related to teaching in general and teaching reading in particular, as well as children's books *once or twice a year*. During interviewing, she revealed a personal love of reading, mentioning that "*Well, I love reading, I'm like a bookaholic. I go through a book a week*" (P2, 2:60, 131:131).

The School C teacher, in the age range of 30 to 39 years, had been teaching English to Grade 4 learners at the school for two years, during which time she estimated she had spent *16 to 35 hours* in CPTD workshops or seminars. For her professional development, she read books or professional journals related to teaching in general and teaching reading in particular *once or twice a month*. She read children's books for these purposes *at least every week*. She was qualified to teach at both primary and high school levels. As part of her

formal training, she reported that English language; literature; pedagogy/ teaching reading; and reading theory had been *areas of emphasis*, but not psychology or remedial reading. She had received an overview or introduction to the topics of children's language development, special education and second language learning. Like the teachers at Schools A and B, the School C teacher read at home for enjoyment *every day or almost every day*. She had previously taught English and Life Orientation to Grade 10 to 12 learners for 11 years. She did admit that the change from high school teaching with predominantly EFL speakers to primary school teaching with mostly ESL speakers was:

> *… an incredible shift in the way you think, the way you teach, your entire approach to the subject. It's like going back the basics, especially when you go from Grade Twelve English to teaching Grade Four English and especially to second language speakers, so it's been a learning curve and I am constantly learning even now* (P5, 5:1, 4:4) (P5, 5:2, 5:6).

Nonetheless she felt that teaching at high school level had provided her with insights into teaching at primary school level:

> *… there are many children who are at high school level who don't have a grasp of the basics, so that has influenced me in trying to make sure that …*[my Grade Four learners] *have a very good grounding in English, especially as far as basic literacy is concerned…* (P5, 5:3, 7:8).

The School D teacher was between 30 to 39 years and had completed an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE). She had been teaching Grade 4 learners at the school for 15 years, and, had been appointed as HoD for Grades 4 to 7 in 2009 (P3, 3:79, 179:188). She reported spending *more than 35 hours* in CPTD for reading or teaching reading in the previous two years. For her professional development, she read books or professional journals related to teaching in general and teaching reading in particular *once or twice a month*. She read children's books *at least once a week* for professional development and reported reading for enjoyment at home *every day or almost every day.*

The School E teacher was in the age range of 30 to 39 years and had been teaching for 14 years and at Grade 4 for seven years. Having taught in many different school settings, when data collection took place at School E at the end of July 2009, she had been at the school for just over two months (P2, 2:2, 6:6), and in January 2009 had returned from teaching at a school for Maori learners in New Zealand. At this school, she had taught *"…the new entrants class, it was age 4 to 5, but then I had a combined class for age 11 and 12, 4, 5 and 11, and 12. I had to give them English, Arts and Culture, Life Orientation and golf"* (P2, 2:3, 7:25). Before moving to School E, she had taught Arts and Culture and Life Orientation to Grades 8, 9 and 10 learners at a high school and had also taught Grade 9 English at another private

school. Before teaching in New Zealand she had also taught a combined class of Grades 2 and 3 learners at a primary school, and also Business Economics, English and Afrikaans at a high school (P2, 2:3, 7:25). The teacher had a Senior Primary Teacher Certificate and three-year College of Education Diploma. She reported that English language; literature; pedagogy/ teaching reading; psychology; remedial reading; reading theory; children's language development; special education and second-language learning were all *areas of emphasis* as part of her training. The teacher had spent *6 to 15 hours* in CPTD workshops or seminars in the last two years, and read books or professional journals relating to teaching and learning or to teaching reading and children's books for her own professional development *at least once a week*. She read for enjoyment at home about *once or twice a month*. The teacher was enthusiastic about teaching, mentioning that *"I enjoy it myself every day each lesson that I give them, I enjoy every moment of it"* (P2, 2:1, 5:5).

The teacher at School F was in the age range of 30 to 39 years and had been teaching for 12 years altogether. She reported that she would have one year of experience teaching at Grade 4 by the end of 2009, prior to which she had taught in the Foundation Phase. The teacher held a three-year College of Education Diploma, for which she reported that English language, literature, pedagogy/ teaching reading and second-language learning were *areas of emphasis*. Reading theory and remedial reading were reportedly not part of her formal education and training. In the two years prior to data collection she had spent *less than six hours* in professional development workshops or seminars that dealt directly with reading or teaching reading. The teacher also indicated that she read books or professional journals related to teaching in general as well as children's books for her own professional development perhaps *once or twice a year*. She indicated reading books or professional journals related to teaching reading *once or twice a month*, and stated that she read at home for enjoyment *every day or almost every day*.

At Schools A, B, D, E and F, all of the teachers *agreed a lot* with the statements '*I am content with my profession as a teacher'*, '*I am satisfied with being a teacher at this school'* and '*I do important work as a teacher*'. The School C teacher however *disagreed a little* with the statement '*I am content with my profession as a teacher'* and only *agreed a little* with the statement '*I am satisfied with being a teacher at this school'*. Like the other teachers, she *agreed a lot* with the statement '*I do important work as a teacher'.*

9.2.2 Teacher goals

Five themes were apparent in the cross-case comparison of teachers' responses to a query about their goals for teaching Grade 4 reading literacy:

- The improvement of learners' spoken English
- Encouraging positive emotional responses to reading
- The development of learners' comprehension
- Reading skill development
- Vocabulary development.

The improvement of learners' spoken English was a teaching goal at Schools A, C and D with teachers expressing goals to improve learners' verbal expression and pronunciation. For example, at School C a goal was to:

> *…Have the child be able, at the end of Grade Seven to... be able to express themselves in proper English, verbally and written work... to be able to speak in fluent English…* (P4, 4:51, 70:70).

Encouraging positive emotional responses to reading was a goal for teachers at all schools, with the exception of School E. At schools A and B, the teachers wanted the learners to develop confidence in reading and expressing their opinions. A love for or enjoyment of reading was stated as a goal by teachers at Schools A, C and F. The School C teacher indicated:

> *…I want them to love reading…As long as they enjoy the story and they want to know what's coming next, I think that the love for reading is fostered* (P5, 5:5, 12:14).

Another positive emotional response goal was for learners to have empathy with what they had read at School B. The School C teacher specifically wanted the learners to become much more involved in and excited about English language and "*…to understand the importance of English in their everyday lives…"* (P4, 4:53, 70:70).

The development of learners' comprehension was a goal at Schools A, B, C, D and F. At Schools A, F and B this goal was voiced in terms of learners' ability to understand what they were reading. At School F, this was further expressed as a goal for learners to have the ability to retrieve information for themselves. The overall goal of comprehension was explicated as more specific processes by teachers at Schools A, B and C. The comprehension development goals at School A were for learners to find contextual clues in

texts and use them as well as their development of accurate transcription of answers for comprehension. At School B, a goal was to establish learners' reading strategies to aid comprehension by teaching them to skim, scan, and summarise the main ideas in texts (P1, 1:88, 112:112). At School C, the teacher linked her comprehension improvement goal to learners' English skills and the need to reinforce certain comprehension strategies:

> *…to improve their comprehension skills because I think a lot of them especially second language speakers, children who don't speak English at all at home, have a problem with understanding why, what, when, how. And so I want to reinforce those skills because without those skills they cannot function in any other learning area* (P5, 5:9, 14:14).

Various goals linked to learners' reading skill development were stated by the teachers at Schools A, B, C, D and F:

> *Our focus is on improving the reading because… that infiltrates into every other subject… so our aim is to make the children better readers and consistent readers* (School A, P3, 3:36, 53:53).

> *… the fluency of reading. Because* [I am] *trying to encourage them not to break the words up at this stage… try and scan the whole word, because some of them are still in the habit of…*[breaking it up]… *which hampers comprehension. I know that's how they do it lower in the school and it's necessary there, but by now they need to be reading the whole word* (School B, 2:77, 171:173).

> *I also want my children to be able to read the kind of passages that we have in class* (School C, P5, 5:8, 14:14).

> *I expect them to be very, very fluent in reading* (School D, P3, 3:67, 148:148).

> *… I want them to be able to read with understanding and be independent in their reading without somebody's assistance be able to read and understand…* (School F, P3, 3:33, 142:145).

At School E, the only teaching goal provided by the teacher was related to learners' reading development. The teacher's explication of her goals for teaching reading literacy perhaps revealed a lack of depth in her understanding of reading literacy development:

> *… I want them to become excellent readers... I always tell them, if you can't read, then you can't write… it's important for me that you must read… I really want them to become excellent readers…* (P2, 2:67, 218:221).

Another specific goal for learners' reading literacy development at Schools B and D was the development of learners' vocabulary. The School D teacher linked this goal to the improvement of learners' English proficiency by stating that

> *you know and increasing their vocab*[ulary], *you know because sometimes they want to say something in English…and they want to switch to Zulu* (P3, 3:61, 130:130).

A few other goals were stated for reading literacy teaching. At School A the goal was to "… *make children more language aware through the six outcomes* [of the RNCS for languages]"

with each receiving equal attention (P3, 3:35, 51:51). At School C, improvement of parental involvement was also indicated as a goal (P4, 4:54, 70:70).

9.3 CLASS SIZE AND LEARNERS' READING PROFILES

Although learner characteristics have been discussed in Chapter Seven, a few more indications of their reading profiles and class composition were provided by the teachers. As outlined in Table 9.1 (below), the teacher at the lowest performing school, School F, had the most learners in her class.

Table 9.1: **Grade 4 class composition**

	Number of learners in class	*Number experiencing problems with spoken English*	*Number needing remedial instruction*	*Number receiving remedial instruction*	*Learners' reading levels*
SCHOOL A 550 EFL	22	0	5	5	Above average
SCHOOL B 475 EFL	36	0	4	4	Varies greatly
SCHOOL C 400 EFL	120 (40)*	40	25	0	Average
SCHOOL D 325 EAL	39	-	-	-	-
SCHOOL E 325 EFL	40	20	6	6	Average
SCHOOL F 175 EFL	50	34	25	6	Below average

**The teacher response reflects the total number of Grade 4 learners she taught - 40 in each class.*

In contrast the teacher at the highest performing school, School A, had the least number of children in her class. Teachers at Schools B, C, D and E had between 36 and 40 learners in their classes in 2009. The lower the class average PIRLS 2006 achievement benchmark, the higher became the number of learners in each class. At School C, due to difficulties in addressing the learning needs of the learners in the Grade 4 classes due to class size, the school had restructured its Grade 4 classes so that instead of three classes of 40 learners, in 2010 there would be four classes with 30 learners (P4, 4:37, 56:56). It was felt that this was particularly important due to the changes with which Grade 4 learners needed support, such as moving from one classroom to another, larger classes and interacting with multiple teachers instead of just one for the first time (P4, 4:32, 40:48).

Very high numbers of learners in each of the classes at School E and F experienced problems with spoken English, whereas none of the learners at Schools A or B did. The teacher at School F specifically indicated that half of her class needed remedial instruction, although only an estimated six learners actually received it.

In the PIRLS teacher questionnaire, with the exception of the teacher at School D, teachers responded to the question "*According to your experiences, how would you describe the reading level of the Grade 4 learners in this class?*" The School A teacher reported that her 2009 learner group had 'above average' reading levels. The teacher at School B reported that she had a mixed ability class of learners, a point which is reflected in her response that her learners' reading levels varied greatly. The School C and E teachers judged their learners' reading levels as 'average'. The School F teacher described her learners' reading levels as below average.

9.4 OVERALL LANGUAGE TEACHING STRATEGIES

In sub-section 9.4.1, typical language teaching strategies at each of the schools are described. This is followed by an overall description of the language activities apparent in the review of learner language workbooks undertaken (9.4.2).

9.4.1 Typical language activities

Teachers were asked to give an indication of typical activities for Grade 4 Language during a school week. Some were able to provide more details than others. All of the strategies were different, revealing diversity in the manner in which teachers implemented the Language curriculum at Grade 4.

Learners at Schools A and B had a scheduled library period each week. Furthermore, at School A, the teacher read the learners' set work novel to them every day for 10 minutes. Thereafter, learners would either give a written or verbal response to this reading regarding the plot, the characters, the setting and questioning about 'who?', 'what', 'why?', 'when?', 'where?' Other than this core activity, different activities were planned for each school week. As an example, in the week of the research visit, learners were scheduled to write a story, work on language rules, do a comprehension, and complete an exercise on prepositions. The use of an eclectic approach was thought to have a positive impact on their engagement with reading literacy development at the school:

> *… we vary our techniques and I think because the children aren't given the chance to stagnate that they really just come to the party* (P3: 3:110, 113:113).

The learners at School A had exposure to different varieties of hearing and seeing English (P3, 3:125, 127:127), attending plays and pantomimes, writing drafts (P3, 3:45, 63:63) and role-playing (P3, 3:42, 63:63). Teachers had switched backed to the "old school" methods of

"talk and chalk" (P3, 3: 72, 91:91). Whereas previously they had focused on sound families and extensions thereof, with no formal spelling testing, they had since reverted to the Schonell list, to the most commonly misspelt lists, to spelling scope and sequence (VAKT technique), to dictation, and to progressive exposure to the occasional rule (P3, 3:73, 91:91). Contextual teaching was also emphasised.

At Schools B and D, more rigid scheduling was apparent with certain activities occurring on the same day each week. A typical week of Grade 4 Language teaching at School B encompassed: handing out spelling worksheets and going through them on a Monday; a literature study, which included class reading of a set work novel and working in a booklet of worksheets for the book on a Tuesday; grammar once a week; and sometimes taking learners outside to read in groups (P2, 2:32, 69:69). The learners also did creative writing (P2, 2:38, 69:73), and the teacher included a "thought for the day":

> *… some of them are not that easy, we've got a whole bunch of them… and one child would… come up and read the thought for the day and then we discuss it, it just takes two minutes in the morning* (P2, 2:71, 165:169).

The School D teacher reported that from Monday to Thursday learners mostly worked on the grammar component of their textbook. Fridays were dedicated to reading from a class reader. Teaching was theme-based with the teacher discussing a theme, getting learners to take out their dictionaries to check words, followed by grammar using their book for the next four days (P3, 3:41, 83:84). At School C, the learners had at least two periods of reading a week but if they finished their other work quickly a third was included. The teacher also tried to do a comprehension from a short passage once every two weeks. Vocabulary, language, writing and listening activities stemmed from this comprehension as teaching was theme-based. Sometimes another comprehension would also be completed in this period. The School E teacher also reported using theme-based teaching, explaining that she would normally do a reading lesson. A comprehension and spelling test that made use of language structures would then be compiled from the reading lesson and the learners would be given an assessment task at the end of the week (P2, 2:31, 92:96). In response to questions about a typical week, the School F teacher only responded that during the six-day timetable she tried to cover all of the LOs for Language[57] (P3, 3: 27, 112:119).

[57] These LOs are: Speaking; Listening; Reading and viewing; Thinking and reasoning; Language structure and Use; and Writing.

9.4.2 Learner workbook review: Language overall

Each teacher provided a learner's workbooks for English language, presumably including those of one of her most competent learners, since the books had few errors, were neat and legible, and showed positive teacher feedback (marked correct and containing written praise). If this was indeed the case then it seems that the workbooks were representative of written activities undertaken for reading literacy development at each school. Table 9.2 (below) outlines part of the analysis of the books undertaken for the time period between January and the end of June 2009. The numbers of pages in each book overall and with learners' actual handwriting were counted and the number and type of language activities evident in the books determined. After the analysis of the individual workbook content and comparison with the other workbooks, an overall judgement of the quality of the work output in each class was made, as presented in this sub-section.

Much more work output was evident in the workbooks of the learners at the schools which reached the PIRLS international benchmarks as opposed to the learner workbooks at the schools with averages below the international benchmarks. As an example, there were 68 pages of work in the School A learner workbook, with 40 activities as opposed to the School F learner workbook which had only 16 pages of work in it with 36 activities for the same period. Although the learner workbooks at School D and School F had similar numbers of language activities to Schools A, B and C, many of these activities were very short entries of a few lines.

The School A goal of curricular alignment was evidenced in the assignment of an LO and AS to each task in the learner's workbook. There appeared to be a balance in the activities for each of the Language LOs in the book. Much variety and creativity was evident in the workbook activities, specifically with the choice of texts for comprehensions. Contextual as well as theme-based comprehensions were used and worksheets and texts pasted into the book were from a variety of sources. At School B, with all of the work taken together, there was comprehensive coverage of the Language learning area. Much reinforcement was also present via repetitive activities. There was not much variety evident in the comprehension texts although most comprehension activities seemed to be focused on the set work literature studies with other language activities integrated.

Table 9.2: **Overview of language activities in the Grade 4 learner workbooks at each school**

Workbook review foci	EFL 550 School A	EFL 475 School B	EFL 400 School C	EFL 325 School D	EFL 325 School E	EFL 175 School F
BOOKS PROVIDED	BOOK 1: English language activities at the front and assessment tasks at the back	BOOK 1: English language BOOK 2: Handwriting exercises and Mini-comprehensions BOOK 3: Language word finding, crosswords and word puzzles ('English Spelling') LITERATURE STUDY: Activity booklets for the three set work novels for the year. At the time of the research visit (08/08/2009), the learners were halfway through the second booklet.	BOOK 1: English language	BOOK 1: English language	BOOK 1: English language BOOK 2: Assessment for all learning areas	BOOK 1: English language
DATE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES	26/01/2009-25/06/2009	26/01/2009-04/06/2009	16/01/2009-22/06/2009	16/01/2009-17/06/2009	14/01/2009-19/06/2009	14/ 01/ 2009-24/06/ 2009
NUMBER OF PAGES PER BOOK	BOOK 1 (front): ± 68 at front	BOOK 1: ± 22 BOOK 2: : ± 39 BOOK 3: ± 45 LITERATURE STUDY: ± 14 per book	BOOK 1: ± 27	BOOK 1: ± 35	BOOK 1: ± 18 BOOK 2: ± 6 assessments	BOOK 1: ± 16
NUMBER OF PAGES PER BOOK WITH LEARNER'S WRITING	BOOK 1 (front): ± 46	BOOK 1: ± 18 BOOK 2: : ± 39 BOOK 3: ± 45 LITERATURE STUDY: ± 14	BOOK 1:± 17	BOOK 1: ± 31	BOOK 1: ± 10 BOOK 2: ± 8	BOOK 1: ± 14
NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES PER BOOK	BOOK 1 (front): ± 40	BOOK 1: ± 17 BOOK 2: ± 47 BOOK 3: ± 46 LITERATURE STUDY: ± 39 per booklet	BOOK 1: ± 24	BOOK 1: ± 49	BOOK 1: ± 16 BOOK 2: ± 6	BOOK 1: ± 36

Workbook review foci	EFL 550 School A	EFL 475 School B	EFL 400 School C	EFL 325 School D	EFL 325 School E	EFL 175 School F
LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES PER BOOK	BOOK 1 (front): • Prepared reading text • Alphabetical order • Punctuation rules and punctuation • Parts of speech (Nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns) • Conjunctions • Synonyms and antonyms • Rhyming words • Sentence types • Homonyms and homophones • Plurals • Prepositions • Contractions • Degrees of comparison • Letter writing • Essay writing • Summarising text • Spelling	BOOK 1: • Writing • Alphabetical order • Parts of speech (Nouns, Adjectives, adverbs) • Punctuation • Poem-writing • Statements to questions BOOK 2: • Handwriting BOOK 3: • Jumbled words • Synonyms and antonyms • Homonyms • Word-finding LITERATURE STUDY: • Parts of speech (Nouns, verbs, adjectives) • Alphabetical order • Cloze procedure • Punctuation • Contractions • Opposites • Past tense • Similes • Creative thinking • Rhyming words • Masculine and feminine	BOOK 1: • Parts of speech • Punctuation • Vocabulary • Opposites • Prepositions • Creative writing • Apostrophes • Crossword puzzle • Handwriting • Conjunctions	BOOK 1: • Writing • Punctuation • Singular and plural • Grammar (10) • Spelling • Tense • Listening skills • Vocabulary • Prepared speech • Comparative adjectives • Opposites • Drawing	BOOK 1: • Parts of speech (Nouns, verbs) • Comparative adjectives • Rhyming words • Copy and complete sentences • Capital letters • Days of the week • Animal sounds • Tense BOOK 2: • Spelling tests • Labelling diagram of body parts • Sentences: fill in missing words from a list • Masculine and feminine nouns • Tense (am, is, are)	BOOK 1: • Conjunctions • Vowel sounds • The alphabet • Sentences • Spelling • Dictation • Word order • Pronouns • Fill in missing letter • Days of week • Months of year • Vocabulary • Capital letters • Sight words • Punctuation (full stop, question mark, comma) • Past tense • Parts of speech (verbs)

The School C learner's book also had a variety of activities. Clearly much preparation had gone into the choice of activities which were theme-based. Many worksheets were used but the teacher had also included extension exercises for advanced learners. Many of the comprehension activities included other language activities and there were a variety of comprehension texts revealing the intention to expose learners to multiple texts. The work was developmentally suitable for Grade 4 learners.

The School D learner's book was dominated by writing exercises, especially grammar. This output confirmed the teacher's explanation that the learners focused on grammar for four days of the school week. The exercises were all very short with between five and ten lines written per activity. Few written comprehension activities were evident, and those which were seemed to be have been taken from a textbook as there were no texts or worksheets pasted into the book.

There was minimal work in the School E learner's book, and according to dates entered for activities there were long periods of time without evidence of any written activity having taken place. The activities present were basic and based on rote-principles, with no evidence of attempts to extend learners' thinking and reasoning.

The exercises in the School F book were elemental, suggesting that the learners were in the early stages of English exposure. For example, written output dealt with sight words, phonics, the alphabet, days of the week, and body parts. The work mostly appeared to be copied verbatim from another source, probably the chalkboard. There was no evidence of any comprehension activities that would extend learners' thinking and reasoning abilities. Some of the work was titled 'homework', meaning that not all of the activities were even class-based. Most activities were 5-to-10 lines at the most. A single small photocopy handout of a story in the book was the only sign of extra resource material.

9.5 CLASSROOM READING MATERIALS, READING INSTRUCTION AND READING HOMEWORK

Following from this exposition of overall practices, the reading materials and reading instruction practices disclosed by teachers are presented in sub-section 9.5.1. In sub-section 9.5.2 time allocation for reading instruction and reading instruction practices are discussed. Thereafter, reading homework practices are outlined (9.5.3).

9.5.1 Classroom reading material use

Teachers at Schools A, B, C and E reported that they used the same materials with learners at different reading levels but that the learners worked at different speeds. At Schools D and F, the teachers indicated using different materials with learners at different reading levels.

Whereas the Grade 4 teachers at Schools A, B and C ostensibly had no major problems with access to reading materials, at the other schools reading material access was less optimal. Learners in the Grade 4 classes at Schools A, B and C had access to reading series (SCH A, P6, 6:13, 77:77) (SCH C, P5, 5:31, 42:42), however at School B the reading series had to be shared between the Grade 4 classes for group reading due to the limited number of books available in the series. As the teacher explained:

> *I've got some* [reading series] *books. We've got one box that we share between the entire grade… and there's only three of each kind of book. So if you put* [the learners] *in reading groups you have to put them in groups of three. It's really tricky… because they're expensive… whenever we sit them outside in the sun to read, then they read that, but they don't take them home, because there's not enough* (P2, 2:50, 98:103).

Perhaps revealing higher teaching expectations and/or learners' more advanced reading abilities, learners at schools A, B and C read set work novels, each of which were of similar length, genre and suitability for the Grade 4 learner's developmental status. At School A, learners read a set work novel per term, resulting in the completion of three novels (P5, 5:16, 44:50). At School B, the teacher also used three fiction titles per year for literature study, each with a workbook containing grammar exercises and comprehension questions for the learners to work through. Each Grade 4 class read these titles at different times of the year so that there were enough books for each class (P2, 2:91, 20:206). As an example of the type of novels used as set works, the three titles at School B were:

- *The Sheep-Pig* by Dick King-Smith (1983) (160 pages)
- *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White (1952) (192 pages)
- *Stig of the Dump* by Clive King (1963) (157 pages)

Learners at School C read two set work novels per year (P6, 6:12, 27:30), one less than learners at Schools A and B. The learners read *Charlotte's Web* and Roald Dahl's *Matilda*.

Suggesting the need to challenge learners in spite of their abilities, the teacher found that these novels were a positive reading experience for them:

> *…the choice of readers that I have requested for my Grade 4s this year… has really fostered an enthusiasm even in the weaker readers because once they get into the story even if the vocabulary is a little over their head*[s]*… As long as they enjoy the story and they want to know what's coming next, I think that the love for reading is fostered there and some of my children were bad readers, they didn't like reading, but after reading a little, they went and found Roald Dahl books in the library… so they're really enjoying it* (P5, 5:7, 12:12).

At Schools D, E and F, reading series and set work novels were not used. At School D, a textbook reader and a grammar book which did contain some reading materials was used to answer questions (P3, 3:43, 84:84). The teacher also mentioned that teachers were encouraged to use extra materials, extra books and handouts, and informally shared materials by photocopying (P3, 3:74, 164:164). Another strategy was to let learners watch a film of a book in the library first, ask them questions and then show them the book, thus motivating them to read it (P3, 3:57, 122:124). The teacher also found that the learners liked it when she read extra stories which were not from their readers (P3, 3:58, 124:126).

As mentioned in Chapter Seven, the School E teacher had problems with access to reading resources, having only 20 English readers for the 40 learners in her class. The learners thus had to share books, which could be frustrating especially if paired with a peer of differing reading ability (P2, 2:38, 122:131). The teacher had also been confused about whether to use materials for EAL or EFL learners, as although the learners were EAL learners were actually in an EFL medium class:

> *These are second language children, must I use, must I make use of second language material or first language material, then they called me in and said: "Okay, the English classes are first language, the two Afrikaans classes is second language." So, I had to go back and then draw up some work for first language learners and then second language learners* (P2, 2:8, 29:29).

At School F, learners did not have access to a class reader or any other reading books, so typed and photocopied stories were used for reading instruction. The teacher herself stated that she *"… can't say reading material is a challenge because I can improvise…"* (P3, 3:11, 30:30). The teacher also sometimes used magazine and newspaper articles where the learners read a text linked to the current theme for learning (P3, 3:31, 135:135).

Over and above reading series and set work novels, multiple text types were used for reading instruction at School A. As indicated by the Subject Area leader "*We try to focus on contextual and current affairs as well as folklore, animal tales etcetera"* (P5, 5:16, 44:50). Specific texts used for comprehension at Grade 4 included: newspaper articles; satirical

cartoons; pictures for visual literacy; recipes; and telephone directories (P5, 5:16, 44:50). Teachers at the school liked to work with current texts, meaning that they did not rely on published fiction and non-fiction texts. Current news texts were used instead, which meant that the learners could relate to them as they were hearing about them and seeing posters in their everyday environments. Sometimes two texts with a different slant on the same event would be used for comparative study purposes (P3, 3:81, 99:99). A variety of texts was evidenced in the School A learner's workbook too (see Table 9.1). At School C, the learner's workbook also had evidence of the use of a variety of texts types over and above reading series and set work novels, for example, visual literacy exercises, posters, poems, recipes, menus, a letter, advertisements, visual graphs and maps. Significantly, the School C teacher acknowledged that there was no single EFL textbook available that was appropriate for her ESL learners expressly as the language could be too abstract. Furthermore, the ESL textbooks had very simple language and she wanted her children *"… to be more than that…"* As a result, the teacher adapted to her learners' needs, using *"a bit from here, a bit from there…"* and making her own worksheets (P6, 6:23, 40:42).

At Schools B, D, E and F, the learners' workbooks did not reveal the same variety of exposure to different texts as those of Schools A and C. Nevertheless, the School B teacher reported making reading cards for her learners using expository texts from the children's sections of magazines. Moreover, she typed out comprehension cards to create work for them (P2, 2:70, 157:165), and they had a workbook containing crossword puzzles. In the School D, E and F learner workbooks, there was no evidence of use of a variety of texts. At School D there were no worksheets or texts pasted into the book and at School F there was only one photocopy handout of a story pasted into the book. At School E, there were three texts pasted into the book, all of which were short stories.

9.5.2 Classroom reading instruction time allocation and practices

Teachers specified via the PIRLS teacher questionnaire and interviews which reading instruction practices they undertook with their Grade 4 learners. At School A, one and a half to two hours were spent on reading instruction per week. At School B learners had one reading period a week. Nevertheless, due to the integrated nature of language instruction as part of her practices, it was difficult for the teacher to estimate how much reading instruction was done per week as the learners also read as part of other subject areas:

> *It's hard to say, because we do a lot of reading that's not English reading… We make booklets for, History, Geography. Like we did* [Mahatma] *Ghandi today. We read through about Ghandi and then we discussed Ghandi and then, and while I'm reading, they're reading along… and then they have*

to answer questions about it. So, it's a lot of reading and answering questions… we drill it quite a lot actually (P2, 2:45, 82:89).

At School C the learners had two periods of scheduled reading a week, but sometimes if they had finished their other Language work three periods would be undertaken. At School D there was only one designated reading period a week, of 30 minutes. It could not be ascertained how much time was allocated to reading instruction at School E as the teacher gave no indication that formal reading instruction formed part of her teaching practices. The School F teacher reported that the children spent ten minutes on reading at the beginning of every English period as reading was such a problem for them, unless it was a reading lesson specifically on the day (P3, 3:20, 63:64).

Table 9.3 (below) outlines the frequency of the teachers' use of different groupings for reading instruction. Reading was most frequently taught as a whole-class activity with teachers at schools B, C, D and E indicting that they *often* taught reading in this way. The teacher at school A also indicated that this *always or almost always* took place.

Table 9.3: Teacher reports on grouping for reading instruction

Grouping strategies	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Teach reading as a whole-class activity	Always or almost always	Often	Often	Often	Often	Often
Create same-ability groups	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	-	Sometimes
Create mixed-ability groups	Sometimes	Sometimes	Often	Always or almost always	-	Sometimes
Use individualised instruction for reading	Sometimes	Never or almost never	Never or almost never	Sometimes	-	Sometimes
Learners work independently on an assigned plan or goal	Often	Sometimes	Often	Sometimes	-	Sometimes
Learners work independently on a goal they choose themselves	Often	Sometimes	Never or almost never	Sometimes	-	Sometimes

Same-ability grouping tended to receive attention *sometimes* by five of the teachers. Mixed-ability grouping also only *sometimes* took place at schools A, B whereas it was a more frequent instructional strategy at Schools C and D. In comparison to their peers at Schools B and C who *never or almost never* had individualised reading instruction, *sometimes* learners at Schools A, D and F received individual instruction. Learners at School A and C *often* had opportunities to work on an assigned plan or goal. The School A learners also *often* worked on a goal that they had chosen themselves. In contrast, learners at schools B, D and F only *sometimes* had such opportunities.

In terms of types of reading instruction used, the teachers spoke mostly of teachers or learners reading aloud, silent reading and paired reading. Reading aloud in small groups or pairs occurred *once or twice a week* at Schools A and D and *every day or almost every day* at School E. Small group of paired reading was less frequent at Schools B, C and F occurring *once or twice a month.* Paired reading was used by the teachers at Schools A, B, C and D. Learners at School A did paired and shared reading, and, had to do a written review of their reading. Learners at School B did paired reading *once or twice a month* with three learners of the same ability reading together. A 'good reader' was paired with a 'slow reader' at School D so that the former could help the latter (P3, 3:53, 116:116). The School C teacher had learners do paired reading also, but did point out that she preferred guided reading so that she could assist learners with new vocabulary and pronunciation:

> *We do paired reading, but what I also found is that if children do paired reading, the pronunciations get all garbled and so sometimes I prefer guided reading rather than paired reading. I think it is more suitable for Grades Fives, Sixes and Sevens… when it's with a simpler passage perhaps, then paired reading work*[s] *but for something slightly more advanced, slightly new vocabulary, I find that guided reading works a lot better* (P5, 5:19, 20:20).

Although only teachers at Schools A, B, D and F mentioned silent reading as a strategy used for reading instruction during discussions, all of the teachers indicated how often they undertook silent reading in their responses to the PIRLS teacher questionnaire (Table 9.4, below).

Table 9.4: **Teacher reports on silent reading activities**[58]

Types of silent reading activities	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E[59]	School F
Ask learners to read silently on their own	Once or twice a month	Every day or almost every day	Never or almost never	Once or twice a week	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a week
Ask learners to read along silently whilst other learners read aloud	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a month	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a month
Give learners time to read books of their own choosing	Every day or almost every day	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a month	Never or almost never	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a week

The School A teacher reported getting learners to read silently on their own or whilst others read aloud perhaps *once or twice a month*. However, if one considers giving learners time to read books of their own choosing then they did do silent reading perhaps informally *every*

[58] Although only three variables for silent reading are reported in this table, 10 variables relating to reading instruction were included for the item in the PIRLS teacher questionnaire.
[59] The School E teacher's responses must be viewed with caution as the teacher responded *every day or almost every day* for each variable of item, and this response pattern was also evident for other items too. Given her discussion of her practices, her reporting seems unlikely.

day or almost every day. Although silent reading was reportedly undertaken *every day or almost every day* at School B, the teacher explained that there was no formalised silent reading as part of her classroom practice. The learners mostly did silent reading when looking for answers as part of a comprehension or when taking a book to read from the reading corner after finishing work (P2, 2:44, 78:81).

The School D teacher reportedly got learners to read silently on their own *once or twice a week.* She further explained that she gave learners handouts to read silently so that she could then ask questions to asses their understanding (P3, 3:54, 116:116). Although the School E teacher reported doing some form of silent reading *every day or almost every day* in class, this was not mentioned during interview discussions. The School F teacher sometimes did silent reading so that she could then check her learners' understanding, albeit not often as learners needed the teacher's assistance to read (P3, 3:2, 4:4). This explanation was in contrast to her questionnaire response in which she stated that learners read silently on their own *once or twice a week*.

Reading aloud was done by learners individually, by the class or by the teacher. The teachers at Schools A, B, C and E indicated that they read aloud to their learners e*very day or almost every day,* whereas the School D and F teachers reportedly only read aloud *once or twice a week*. Learners at Schools A, B, C and D also read aloud to the whole class *once or twice a week*. The teachers at Schools E and F reported that their learners read aloud to the whole class *every day or almost every day*.

Ten minutes of reading aloud by the teacher was undertaken daily at School A. The School B teacher explained that when reading the class set work novel:

> *Sometimes we'll just read for the whole hour, and they'll take turns reading going around the class. Other times we would read one chapter and then I let them work in their books* (P2, 2:32, 69, 69).

Additionally, the teacher pointed out that:

> *When we do 'Charlotte's Web', I'm reading with, I've got my own book. I read a little bit because some of the parts are quite difficult, so then I read the difficult ones and then people take turns, that's what we'll do… and… I read along with them…* (P2, 2:42, 77:79).

When reading their set work novel, the teacher at School C read aloud to the learners, stopping at points to let individual learners read aloud and discuss the text (P5. 5:17, 18:18). The School D teacher got learners to read aloud in class and also read to the learners. However, she found getting learners to read challenging as she had a class of 39 and only

one reading period a week (P3, 3:6, 18:18) (3:44, 84:84). The teacher read aloud for the School F learners and they had to follow in their books. A phonics approach using Grades 1 and 2 readers for reading instruction was still used for the learners at School F (P3, 3:6, 10:1) (P3, 3:12, 31:36). Although the teacher did not mention it, the HoD pointed out that teachers would read first and learners would then repeat to get used to the pronunciation of words (HoD, P1, 1:7, 10:10). Teachers also apparently had to use pictures or concrete examples and actions to aid learners' understanding (P1, 1:38, 119:123) (P1, 1:38, 119:123).

School A had a number of approaches to reading instruction, none of which were mentioned as instructional strategies by teachers at the other schools. The learners did half-an-hour of the *CAMI*[60] computer software reading programme, which involved language and comprehension skills. The learners also had half-an-hour of formal reading tuition a week, in which they are taught reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, analysis and synthesis (P3, 3:41, 53:63). An attempt was made to increase their reading speed, and progress in this regard was recorded every month (P3, 3:55, 72:75). Learners also did flash reading for word recognition (P3, 3:56, 72:75).

As indicated by Table 9.5 (below), teaching or modelling of reading strategies was a weekly activity at School A. Although the School E teacher indicated that she did this *every day or almost every day* there was no other evidence to support this. At the other schools, the teachers reported *never or almost never* teaching or modelling reading strategies, or only doing so *once or twice a month*.

Table 9.5: **Teacher reports on teaching or modelling of reading strategies**

School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Once or twice a week	Never or almost never	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a month	Every day or almost every day	Never or almost never

Given the teachers' discussion of her learners' English reading abilities, it was surprising that the School F teacher reported only teaching strategies for decoding sounds or words once or twice a month. Perhaps the importance of still teaching decoding strategies is highlighted by it being a much more frequent activity for higher performing school environments, such as School A or C (Table 9.6, below). It may also be that the lack of use of this strategy at School B is a reflection of it being unnecessary due to learners' strong decoding abilities.

[60] *CAMI* offers educational software for Mathematics and Literacy: www.camiweb.com

Table 9.6: **Teacher reports on teaching of reading strategies**

	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Strategies for decoding sounds or words	Every day or almost every day	Never or almost never	Once or twice a week	Once or twice a week	Every day or almost every day	Once or twice a month

9.5.3 Reading for homework

As outlined in Table 9.7 (below), the frequency of assignment of reading for homework varied at each of the schools. At Schools C and E, learners reportedly did reading homework *once or twice a week*. At Schools B and D reading was assigned for homework *three to four times a week*. At Schools A and F reading homework was reportedly given *every day or almost every day*. Teachers at Schools A, C, D, E and F indicated that when reading homework was assigned for any subject, 16 to 30 minutes were allocated, while at School B 31 to 60 minutes were allocated. The School B teacher explained that in the first term of the Grade 4 year, 15 minutes of reading homework was assigned. In the second term 20 minutes were given and thereafter 30 minutes (P2, 2:52, 103:105).

Table 9.7: **Frequency of assignment of reading for homework**

Frequency	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Every day or almost every day	●					●
3-4 times a week		●		●		
1-2 times a week			●		●	
Never or almost never						

The School F teacher's report on frequency of reading for homework did conflict with statements made by the school's HoD when he suggested that:

> *We have a difficulty giving learners homework. They will go* [home]*, nobody will help them… we just have to do it here at school* (P1, 1:18, 37:42).

The School B teacher relied on parental involvement in ensuring that reading homework was completed:

> [The learners] *must either take a book from the* [school] *library, the town library or* [one] *that their parents have bought them and their parents have to see that they read… I can't pick up* [if they have not done it]. *It's up to the parents and if they sign the book and say they've done the reading, I have to trust them, if they're lying… What can I do?* (P2, 2:54, 105:111).

The reading homework strategy at School A was structured to ensure that homework was done. From Grade 4 onwards, learners had to do 15 minutes of reading at home every day

from an individual choice of books. Learners then had to do a written review of what they had read, describing the plot, characters, scene and providing a summary (P3, 3:51, 63:69). Moreover, the school requested parents to do 10-to-15 minutes of family reading a day, a so-called *"…DEAR period, 'Drop Everything And Read', or RIBIT, 'Read In Bed It's Terrific'"* (P3, 3:130, 131:131). The learners reportedly had little time for reading for enjoyment at home due to homework and extra-mural activities (P3, 3:129, 131:131).

9.6 READING COMPREHENSION DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

In this sub-section, the strategies for reading comprehension development that the teachers indicated using are presented (9.6.1). The reading comprehension lesson observed in each teacher's Grade 4 class is considered (9.6.2) and an analysis of comprehension activities in the learners' workbooks provided (9.6.3). This is followed by consideration of teachers' responses to the Opportunity-To-Learn questionnaire regarding their learners' ability to comprehend the PIRLS 2006 reading passages (9.6.4).

9.6.1 Comprehension development strategies reported

The teacher at School A revealed more strategies to improve learners' reading comprehension than teachers at the other schools. For instance two models of teaching reading comprehension explicitly informed the teaching process. Both Barrett's (1976) taxonomy of reading comprehension and Bloom's taxonomy (1956) for thinking and reasoning (recall, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) were often integrated in a variety of ways into comprehension tasks (P3, 3:30, 47:47).

For vocabulary development specifically, School A Grade 4 learners had individual index books and had to write two words daily that were useful to them. They also did work using a dictionary and a thesaurus (P3, 3:52, 69:69) (P3, 3:53, 69:69) and were gradually encouraged to answer reading comprehension questions in their own words. Grammar inclusions were also included in comprehensions (P5, 5:38, 70:70). Other comprehension strategies cited included: colour coding; visual literacy (P5, 5:38, 70:70); pictorial sequencing of stories and visuals for texts; listening skills to test understanding; consolidation of character, theme, plot and setting on a mind map for written responses (P5, 5:28, 63:63); and teacher questions formulation with key words visually presented as the story progressed (P5, 5:27, 63:63).

Even parents received a list of questions they could ask their children in Grades One to Seven after they had finished reading a book. These questions included:

- Did you enjoy the book? Why?
- Why did you choose it?
- Who were the characters?
- Who was your favourite character? Why?
- How would you describe the character?
- Was there anything about the story that you did not like?
- Are there any words you did not know the meaning of?
- Can you retell what happened in the story? (P6, 6:2, 49:58).

Key comprehension elements such as 'Who? What? Why? When? Where? How?' were also points of focus for questioning after reading at home with parents (P3, 3:154, 157:157). The teacher reiterated the importance of the development of thinking and reasoning skills and learners' recognition of the importance of their own personal opinions, as suggested by the following:

> *We do a lot of 'what do you think?'* [questions] *and they know,* [they say] *'Mrs T, when it is what do you think, it's our own thinking processes'. And I've said to them 'It can't always be wrong', I said 'everyone thinks differently'* (P11, 11:84, 412:416).

According to the School B teacher *"Set comprehensions are only done perhaps once a month as the learners do lot of comprehension as part of their literature study work"* (P2, 2:33, 69:69). There were class discussions when reading the set work novel for literature study, with inference questions involved (P2, 2:61, 131:133).

Learners also did mini-comprehensions (P2, 2:67, 156:157) which required some inference skills and some other comprehensions that the teacher typed out for them (P2, 2:69, 161:161). Moreover, comprehensions were part of other learning areas, meaning that the learners had much exposure to reading and answering questions (P2, 2:46, 87:89). When asked, the teacher did not make mention of any specific comprehension strategies taught (P2, 2:67, 156:157).

Revealing further insights into South African teachers' comprehension development practices, having interacted with many teachers in other schools in the area, the School B HoD[61] was of the opinion that:

> *... the teachers are simply doing repetitive work which is good, to a point. They are doing question and answer, you know simple questions* [like] *"what colour was Joe's hair?" and that type of thing. They are not experimenting with clozed procedure, with open-ended questions and things like that* (P1, 1:34, 24:24).

Therefore, perhaps teachers were not setting enough inference questions, and only did recall questions which do not develop learners' thinking or reasoning. The HoD further highlighted that her Grade 7 learners were not able to summarise or find the main ideas in texts as these skills were "*not filtering through*" (P1, 1:90, 112:116).

Similarly to School A, the School C teacher reinforced comprehension skills by asking 'Why? What? When? How?', especially as her group were ESL learners and also needed to use these skills in other learning areas (P 5, 5:11, 14:14). The learners did a comprehension lesson from a short passage every two weeks (P5, 5:12, 15:16), with all other language lessons built around this comprehension (P6, 6:14, 25:26).

The teacher explained the process undertaken to try to improve learners' comprehension during such a lesson:

> *We have a limited amount of time to go through a comprehension passage so usually I do the unfamiliar vocabulary first… we discuss the new words… once we're reading at least the children have an idea of what's going on or what that word means or a vague idea. They can put it into context… I know many teachers favour giving children a chance to read during a comprehension lesson but I prefer to read it myself to them and then when they are answering the questions they must read it at least once on their own before they start answering questions because I feel that when I read it to them I use the correct inflections, the correct expression and correct pronunciations, because pronunciation is always a problem, so that's one of, that's some of the strategies I use* (P5, 5:12, 15:16).

The teacher felt that it was good to introduce the learners to new vocabulary in reading passages, even if it was not age-appropriate (P6, 6:5, 12:12). Sometimes a vocabulary lesson was held the day before a comprehension and sometimes the teacher introduced dictionary work for new vocabulary so that the learners learnt the lexical meaning and could then see the word contextually in the comprehension (P6, 6:16, 32:32). The teacher also tried to incorporate questions to encourage thinking and reasoning about what the learners

[61] Although the HoD was not the focus for investigation of teaching practices, her insights are nonetheless important and have thus been included in this section.

would do in the same situation (P6, 6:20, 35:36). Extension exercises were given to learners who worked quickly or who needed more cognitive challenge (P6, 6:20, 35:36).

When asked about comprehension development activities at Schools D, E and F, the teachers' discussions about practices revealed very little depth in their understandings of comprehension development. The School D teacher listed a number of strategies used for developing her learners' reading comprehension, which mostly seemed to revolve around oral comprehension work. These included: explaining difficult words; giving the correct tempo and mode; variation of tone when reading the story; showing learners' pictures mentioned in the story; involving learners by getting them to predict what would happen next in the story; and asking them how they would feel or what they would do in similar situations to those of the story. Code-switching was also used when learners struggled with a word (P3, 3:65, 144:146). The teacher further stated that she would let the children read to see if they were able to understand the vocabulary in a passage (P3, 3:3, 5:6), or get them to read silently then ask them questions (P3, 3:54, 116:116). When doing a theme-based comprehension lesson, the teacher would first try to elicit learners' prior knowledge on the topic and also did dictionary work to check words (P3, 3:45, 84:84).

Discussion with the School E teacher did not provide any insights into her comprehension development strategies. Except for stating that she gave the learners questions (P2, 2:41, 133:133), let them act out stories or do role-plays, held debates(P2, 2:42, 133:133) and got the learners to understand topic content, particularly as she was working on cross-curricular themes (P2, 2:44, 133:133), no other insights were available. The School F teacher asked questions after reading to check her learners' understanding (P3, 3:3, 4:4), and used spelling as a vocabulary development exercise (P3, 3:5, 6:12). Another strategy was to get a group of learners to choose a word from a theme the class was working on, discuss it, write a sentence and get the learners to exchange their sentences with the rest of the class (P3, 3:5, 6:12). The teacher also concluded that theme-based teaching for all learning areas also led to repetition of vocabulary (P3, 3:17, 47:58). As with teaching at School D, code-switching was used to assist learners' understanding of words (P3, 3:5, 6:12).

9.6.2 Learner workbook review: comprehension activities

Table 9.8 (below) presents the learner workbook review for comprehension activities. An estimate of the number of comprehension development activities in the books was made and the type of texts used for comprehension development activities in the books noted, together with an indication of the type of written comprehension questions asked.

Table 9.8: **Overview of comprehension activities in the Grade 4 learner workbooks at each school**

WORKBOOK REVIEW FOCI	EFL 550 SCHOOL A	EFL 475 SCHOOL B	EFL 400 SCHOOL C	EFL 325 SCHOOL D	EFL 325 SCHOOL E	EAL 175 SCHOOL F
NUMBER OF COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES PER BOOK	BOOK 1 (front): ± 20	BOOK 1: ± 3 BOOK 2: ± 29 Mini-comprehensions completed LITERATURE STUDY: 9 comprehensions in first literature study. Learners busy with second literature study which had 22 comprehensions	BOOK 1:± 11	BOOK 1: ± 6	BOOK 1: ± 3 BOOK 2: ± 0	BOOK 1: ± 4
COMPREHENSION ACTIVITY TYPES PER BOOK	BOOK 1 (front): • Listening comprehensions • Sequencing of a story • Text with multiple choice questions • Cloze procedure • Crosswords • Comic strips • Visual literacy • Fiction text with open-ended questions • Newspaper article review (headline, key words, main ideas, critical literacy skills) • Satire cartoon with questions • Questions for set work novel • Ordering of rambled sentences • Recipe and questions • Telephone directory entries and questions • Parts of story (title, author, illustrator, characters, setting, event, solution) • Book review	BOOK 1: • Text-based comprehensions BOOK 2: • Each mini-comprehension has four statements with answer options e.g. *The sun set very late today. We played outside until 7 o' clock at night. You can tell it is a) winter b) snowing c) summer* BOOK 3: • Crossword puzzles with clues LITERATURE STUDY: • There is comprehension question answering per chapter of each set work novel.	BOOK 1: • Text-based comprehensions • Visual literacy • Poster • Recipe • Poem • Menu (cross-curricular outcome with Mathematics) • Letter • Jigsaw sentences (sequencing of sentences) After June 2009: • Adverts • Visual graph • Map	BOOK 1: • Text-based comprehensions • Visual graph • Summary of characteristics	BOOK 1: • Text-based comprehensions • Visual text	BOOK 1: • Text-based comprehensions • Clozed procedure

The comparison of the number of comprehension activities and type of questions asked in each of the books provided the most meaningful insight into learners' opportunity to develop written comprehension skills in response to comprehension questions. The highest performing schools in the sample, Schools A and B had completed the most written comprehension activities. At least 20 written comprehensions with about 10 questions each had been completed at school A. For the PIRLS 2006, comprehension questions for texts must include questions which require the learner to focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information and ideas; make straightforward inferences; draw on and justify complex inferences and interpretations; and examine and evaluate content, language and contextual elements.

At Schools A, B and C, learners did appear to have exposure to these types of questions, whereas at Schools D, E and F the limited number of comprehensions in the learners' workbooks did not meet these questioning criteria. At School B, 12 larger comprehensions of about 10 questions each and 29 so-called 'mini-comprehensions' with one multiple choice question each were apparent. Nine of the larger comprehensions were based on a set work novel. School C was not far behind with 11 comprehension tasks of about 10 questions each evident. In comparison, at school D there were only 6 comprehension tasks evident, of which only 3 were text-based comprehensions. At school E there were only 3 comprehensions and only two text-based comprehension activities each with 10 questions. At School F there were only 4 comprehension activities and 3 of these were text-based, each with 7 to 8 questions.

The comprehension activities in the School A learner's workbook had a strong focus on reinforcing learners' focus on establishing the text's setting, main ideas, and characters, as well as summarising content and providing explanation of answers. Other language activities were integrated into the comprehension activities, with application questioning also prominent. Comprehensions contained a balanced number of information retrieval questions, straightforward inference questions and more advanced questions that required justification of inferences and interpretations. At School B, all of the mini-comprehensions required straightforward inference and used multiple choice options for answer provision. The other comprehensions had information retrieval, straightforward inference and justification for inferences and interpretations as questions. Examination of content, language and textual elements was present in the set work literature study books. In the School C learner's workbook, a variety of text types were used for comprehension, all advanced with the use of low frequency words which would pique the interest of a Grade 4 learner. Each comprehension had between 5 and 10 questions requiring

information retrieval, straightforward inference and justification of inferences and interpretations.

In the School D workbook, there were only three text-based comprehensions with five questions each. The questions required one-word answers and information retrieval. There were only two text-based comprehensions in the School E workbook, each with ten questions. All of the questions were text-based, requiring information retrieval only. There were only three text-based comprehensions, each with 7 to 8 questions. Two comprehensions required factual everyday knowledge (i.e. days of the week, months of the year). Only one comprehension was based on a story and required information retrieval only.

9.6.3 Comprehension lesson observation

A comprehension lesson was observed in each teacher's classroom. The analysis of each lesson focused on time allocation *(9.6.3.1)* and the suitability of the text and questions[62] chosen for the lesson *(9.6.3.2)*. The teachers' lesson expositions were compared[63] *(9.6.3.3)* and the nature of teacher-learner interactions scrutinised *(9.6.3.4)*.

9.6.3.1 Time allocation for lesson

School A had the shortest lesson time allocation of 29 minutes on the day of the research visit, as a result of shortened periods due to a school event. School F had only 33 minutes of lesson time too. However, no reason was given for this. Of the 33 minutes, the teacher only spent 16 minutes actively engaged in teaching the learners. At Schools A, C, D and E the majority of the lesson time allocated was utilised for active teaching by the teacher. At School B just under half of the lesson was used by the teacher for teaching.

9.6.3.2 Suitability of text choice and comprehension questions

The texts chosen for the lesson at Schools A, B, C and D were appropriate for Grade 4 learners in terms of storyline and cognitive level. Five of the teachers used a fiction text for the lesson, whilst at School B an information text was used. The text used at School D had the most words (932), whereas the one used at School F had the least words (175). School A had a 449-word text for the lesson while those used at Schools B, C and E were

[62] See Appendix K which provides the text and questions used for the lesson at each school.
[63] See Appendix L for a table which summarises the comprehension lesson observed at each school.

between 217 and 311 words. The passages at Schools B and C were slightly more challenging than the School A and D texts in relation to language used, vocabulary and potential for cognitive challenge. Indeed, perhaps revealing the ability to reflect and adapt her lesson strategies according to classroom experiences, the School C teacher admitted that the text was too difficult for her learners:

> *…upon reflection I won't use that passage again next year with my new grade 4s, simply because I think there were too many new words for them and maybe I would choose something slightly simpler, but not too simple* (P6,6:7, 17:18).

Nevertheless, the teacher did further indicate that:

> *… of course I don't always give them a difficult passage. Sometimes it is a simple passage from a first language textbook, but sometimes I think it's important for them to see there is more than just the basics and it's always good to introduce them to new vocabulary even if it is not totally age-appropriate vocabulary, in terms of words like 'startled' and 'dismay' but, once they get the words, even if half of them remember it, that's just equipping them with new knowledge* (P6, 6:6, 9:12).

The School F text was simplistic with high frequency English words and a storyline offering no opportunities for invoking higher order thinking from learners. The text was below the cognitive level of a Grade 4 learner but appropriate for the learners in the class, given the little exposure to English that they had. Although the School E text was suitable for the interests of a Grade 4 learner, it did not provide any opportunities for cognitive challenge. The School A, B, C, D and E texts each had a supporting illustration, however, the School A teacher was the only one observed who used this illustration as part of her lesson as an exercise in visual literacy. Whereas the School F learners were reportedly still concrete-bound in their reading, needing pictures to support their understanding, no illustration was linked to the text read. With the exception of School E, the texts used at the other schools each had comprehension questions which were used as part of the lessons. The School F text had only five questions, which each required straightforward information retrieval with minimal response requirements. As examples, three of the School F questions were:

- *How old is Seipati?*
- *What sickness did Seipati have?*
- *Where did she get the sickness?*

At Schools A, B and C, the texts each had 10 questions with a balance of information retrieval questions and questions requiring inference or application. For example, information retrieval questions included:

- *What job did Mrs Abrahams have in the school?* (School A)
- *At what time of the day did the event take place?* (School C)
- *What happens when a minnow is separated from its school?* (School B)

Examples of inference and application questions at the three schools were:

- *What would be the advantages of having Miss Matthews for a teacher? What would be the disadvantages?* (School A)
- *The writer says scientists like to know about animal behaviour. Do you think this is useful to us? Give reasons for your answer* (School B)
- *Explain why: Jim sat still, not daring to move* (School C)

A further 10 questions, mostly requiring inference or application, were included in the comprehension lesson for the School C learners. Revealing attempts at differentiation of content according to ability, the teacher explained that:

> *There's a selection of comprehension questions. For my average learners they will answer the questions we asked in class in full sentences in their workbooks, then I've got an extension exercise, which are more challenging questions, I think there's about ten* [for] *my faster, sharper workers* (P6, 6:10, 21:24).

At School D, most of the 10 questions required information retrieval. At School E, although questions for the text were available in the learners' reader, no questions were used as part of the lesson.

9.6.3.3 Lesson exposition

Table 9.9 (see below) presents a summary of the comprehension lesson undertaken at each school. In this section, each lesson process will be considered in terms of pre-reading activities, reading activities and post-reading activities.

Table 9.9: **Summary of lesson process at each school**

School A EFL 550	School B EFL 475	School C EFL 400	School D EFL 325	School E EFL 325	School F EAL 175
• Discussion of a contextual event leading into story • Vocabulary extension using words from story with naming of parts of speech included • Interpretation of illustration for story • Discussion of characters and how differences are apparent in the picture • Learners read paragraph from text silently • Learners read paragraph aloud • Teacher reads aloud • Read through comprehension questions • Learners highlight keywords in comprehension questions. • Teacher reads passage aloud, learners follow • Learners answer comprehension	• Hands out photocopied comprehension • Reads title of comprehension and asks what a minnow is • Reads story to children - stops to ask questions throughout this reading, also summarises key points in one of the main paragraphs, discusses the meaning of a word too. • Reads through questions with learners (discusses the answers for the first three questions and then discusses what is required to answer the rest of the questions without discussing the answers) • Children take out exercise books, paste comprehension into book and answer questions individually	• Tells learners they are going to read a story • Discusses title • Goes through new vocabulary by means of class discussion of meaning • Briefly refers to picture on page • Reads story, stopping to explain content and ask children questions • After story, asks learners what they would do in a similar situation. • At end, summarises discussion and gives a life orientation answer to how they should deal with such a situation • Goes through comprehension questions with learners which are discussed verbally.	• Tells learners they are going to read a story • Hands out text • Reads title and discusses which animal is big and which is small. Explains that hare is cousin to rabbit • Individual children read aloud. Teacher interrupts while each child is reading to explain and discuss content and vocabulary. • As text is divided into sections with questions, the teacher reads and discusses the questions at the end of each section. • When the story is finished the teacher asks the learners what lesson they learner learnt from the story and also whether they enjoyed the story • Learners read other library books	• Discussion of topic but teacher does not directly link this to story • 3 children read aloud and teacher asks questions in-between • Children underline vocabulary in the story that they do not understand • 8 children write one of their words on the board • Teacher goes through each of the 8 words explaining them and asking children for examples • Class reads story aloud • Teacher asks learners to write sentences with words that they underlined • Teacher asks a few questions about the story i.e. what happened? What next? • Learners do vocabulary exercise in their books.	• Tell learners they will read a story and answer questions • Teacher reads aloud • Teacher reads story again. First points out "name" of story. • Asks one learner to read first sentence and another to read last sentence. • Teacher asks comprehension questions. Praises learner for answering and the class clap. • Teacher gets learners to list other illnesses they have learnt about in Life Orientation • Teacher writes comprehension questions on the board, learners must copy and answer the questions.

- <u>Pre-reading activities for the lesson</u>

Pre-reading activities for each of the lessons were analysed. The School B teacher did not provide any introduction to the lesson, whereas the School F teacher merely pointed out that she would read a story and asked the learners to listen carefully. In this way, both the School B and F teachers missed opportunities to extend learners' experiences beyond the

content of the text, particularly as both indicated that the lessons fed into cross–curricular themes from other subject areas at the time.

The School C and D teachers did indicate the title of the story the learners were about to read and had brief discussions about it. Whilst the School C teacher then explained what the story was about on the basis of the title, the School D teacher did not. Rather, the School D teacher's discussion centred on facts about the two animals named in the title of the text to be read. The School E teacher tried to have a general discussion with the learners at the beginning of the lesson, which presumably was meant to link to the text's topic. However, the teacher did not expressly make these links during her introduction, making the discussion redundant, especially as the learners could not relate to her approach to introducing the topic. After the lesson the teacher tried to explain the goal of her introduction, which had not been apparent, but did acknowledge that the approach had not worked:

> *…maybe I didn't do it properly… but I wanted them to know that… you get wild animals that stays in the wild and then you get animals, the dog, the cat, that you don't normally get in the wild…* (P2, 2:17, 39:53).

In contrast, the School A teacher discussed a general event taking place at the time of the lesson and skilfully led this discussion onto the topic of the text to be read. Two other pre-reading activities were undertaken by the School A teacher following this discussion. Firstly, the teacher undertook a vocabulary extension activity using three words from the text to be read. She placed each of these words on the board, discussing them one-by-one. For one word, the teacher asked for a synonym, and for another word pointed out that it was a homonym. The teacher also asked what part of speech each word was and the learners did not hesitate to respond. Language structure and use was not integrated into any comprehension lesson observed at the other schools. The learners also had no difficulties in explaining each word's meaning. In explaining her approach to vocabulary extension, the teacher noted that:

> *...normally I would reinforce my parts of speech… all the time and say "okay, did you find the word weird? Give me a synonym" or- like I started - very basic and we'd really work with this… I would maybe say to them, "okay… find me a proper noun… see if you can find a conjunction, see if you can find a preposition" that kind of thing* (P11, 11:78, 376:376).

Secondly, the teacher did a visual literacy activity using a picture from the text to be read. The learners were asked about the two characters depicted and how they could tell that they were not the same age. In this way, learners' interest in the story was piqued and

they were already using higher order thinking skills to engage with the comprehension text.

The School C teacher also went through a list of eight new vocabulary words at the beginning of the lesson, taking at least a quarter of the lesson to complete prior to the reading of the story, and perhaps illustrating the time needed to support ESL learners' understanding of new vocabulary. The teacher explained that

> *There are times when we do the vocabulary lesson a day before and then we do the comprehension a day later and sometimes I introduce dictionary work with new vocabulary, so they have a vocabulary exercise, learning how to use a dictionary and then we go on to the comprehension exercise so they are familiar the dictionary meaning, the general use meaning of it and then contextually* (P6, 6:13, 31:32).

- Reading activities for the lesson

Table 9.10 (below) summarises the reading activities that took place in the lessons at each of the six schools.

Table 9.10: **Summary of reading activities**

School A EFL 550	School B EFL 475	School C EFL 400	School D EFL 325	School E EFL 325	School F EAL 175
• Learners read paragraph silently • Learners read paragraph aloud • Teacher reads story aloud twice	• Teacher reads aloud	• Teacher reads aloud	• Individual learners read aloud	• Individual learners read aloud • Silent reading to underline words not understood • Vocabulary extension • Class reads aloud	• Teacher reads aloud twice • Learner reads first sentence • Learner reads last sentence

The School B, C and F teachers read the text aloud to their learners. Both the school B and C teachers paused during the reading to explain words, summarise, emphasise a point or discuss content. The School C learners were also asked for their opinions. The School F teacher read the text aloud a second time but no discussions or explanations occurred during either reading. One learner read the first sentence and another read the last sentence after the teacher had helped him to find it. The School F teacher did later acknowledge that she

> *…should have allowed them to read more, because they only read about two sentences aloud, but they were reading with me when I was reading, but silently, so I should have allowed them to read more… But I did that because of time… In a double period, if I have double period at the same time, then they read, maybe four, five of them they read…* (P3, 3:38, 156:164).

At Schools D and E a few learners read the story aloud individually. At School D, three learners read the first segment of text. As with the School B and C teachers, the School D teacher interjected during the learners' reading to ask questions or explain words. As the entire text was split into three segments, with questions after each, the teacher would also discuss the questions orally after each one. At School E, the teacher then did a vocabulary extension activity which required the learners to read and underline words in the text they did not understand. Eight of these were written on the board and discussed in class. Thereafter, the teacher got her learners to read the text aloud together.

It was only at School A where multiple reading activities were undertaken. Prior to handing out the text, the teacher placed a paragraph from the text on the overhead projector and asked the learners to read it silently on their own and then together aloud as a class. The teacher then asked questions about the paragraph before reading the whole text to the learners and asking them to predict what would happen next, at the end of the story, before getting them to apply the story to a scenario in their own life worlds.

- Post-reading activities for the lesson

Post-reading activities involved either discussion or the answering of comprehension questions or both of these activities for each of the lessons observed. Although undertaken differently in each class, reading through the questions was a strategy at Schools A, B, C, D and F.

At School B the teacher first asked one inference question after reading the text and got the class to respond orally to the first three comprehension questions for the text. Thereafter, the teacher read through the other questions with the learners without discussing the answers. She did however point out what some questions would require from the learners, e.g. number of reasons they had to provide. The learners then took out their books and spent the rest of the lesson answering the questions.

At Schools C, D and F, comprehension questions were discussed orally and then the learners answered them in their books. When initiating discussions of the questions, the School C and D teachers undertook further probing for meaning with their learners around the issue under consideration. Although minimal, the School D and F teachers also discussed factual content for cross-curricular integration with other subject areas. The teachers did not make any cross-curricular links explicit.

At School A, the post-reading phase was much more strategically organised than for the other lessons observed. Like the other teachers, the School A teacher also read through each question with her learners. Although she did not discuss the answers, as the comprehension was to be used as an assessment task, she did discuss the answering requirements for some of the questions. Learners had to circle those which required only a one-, two- or three-word response, and they had to highlight the keywords in each of the questions provided. At this point, the teacher first handed out the full text to the learners, then re-read the story to them and asked them to look for the answers to the comprehension while she read. As the teacher explained:

> *normally some people… give them… [the text] first… And then they would give them the questions, but I work differently from this because I feel if you are reading the questions you must know what you're going to be finding out. It is no use just reading this and then saying, "oh well, these are the questions"… so… I always give both but I always start with my questions. And I think very often, it's very important when you're actually giving a comprehension, that you should actually try never to say "we are going to do a comprehension today", it is always good to say "I want to share a story with you" and then already, the kids, the kids love stories, I mean I read so much to them, I really do, and you will see they now want to… what was also quite a good idea, was to bring out a part of the story and say, "okay, what do you think?" With the predictions, okay, predicting the outcome, that I think is also very important (P11, 11:72, 356:358).*

At School E the teacher used the post-reading phase to continue the vocabulary extension exercise started during the reading phase. She explained that the learners should write a sentence with all of the words that they did not understand from the text. It was only at this point that the teacher briefly asked learners about what happened in the story. Only facts were described and the teacher did not probe for any further meaning from the learners. The learners then did the vocabulary extension activities in their books for the rest of the period.

9.6.3.4 Teacher-learner interaction

At School A, the teacher engaged in asking the learners questions which required them to think and reason throughout the lesson. Multiple learner perspectives were also encouraged. The following teacher (T) and learner (L) dialogue is an example of interactions in the class:

T: First of all, tell me how many characters do you see here?
L: Two.
T: Two. Okay, what do you notice about the character on the left?
L: It's a robot.
T: How do you know she's a robot?
L: Because they're plugging her in.

T: They're plugging her in. Right… if you compare the ages do you think they're similar or different in age?
L: Different.
T: How do you know that?
L: Because the one is older and the other one is younger.
T: What makes her look older?
L: Her skin.
T: Her skin. Yes?
L: It looks like she's worn out.
T: Okay. Yes?
L: She looks frail.
T: She looks rather frail, well done.
L: She's wearing glasses.
T: So you think older people wear glasses?
L: Yes
T: Okay, that's when we start losing the sight .Yes, you?
L: The dress that she's wearing, we don't normally wear that sort of dress.
T: Excellent. Okay, the fashion is different, well done.

The School A learners actively participated in the lesson with little or no prompting by the teacher. They remained engaged throughout the lesson and had no difficulties in responding to questions and discussions initiated by the teacher. The answers and reasons provided by learners revealed their above-average cognitive skills and advanced vocabularies. Nor were the learners afraid to question further when they wanted clarification of a task. They responded very quickly to prompts to use certain comprehension techniques, perhaps suggesting that these skills had been inculcated in the learners to a point of automaticity.

At School B, the learners freely engaged in the lesson by stating their opinions, which were acknowledged and accepted by the teacher. The learners did not seem to have any difficulties with the vocabulary in the text or the comprehension questions. No detailed discussions were held around the content of or questions for the story.

The School C learners eagerly participated in the lesson, answering questions posed by the teacher and stating their opinions. The teacher asked questions while reading the story and discussed issues around the content of the text with the learners. The teacher encouraged multiple perspectives by seeking multiple answers to questions. The learners struggled with the vocabulary of the story but the teacher was able to scaffold their understanding through discussion.

The School D learners were interested in the lesson and participated in answering questions posed by the teacher. However, when questioned directly by the teacher it was obvious that a few learners were largely unaware of what was going on in the lesson, due

either to non-comprehension or distraction. The teacher sometimes code-switched to explain a concept and allowed the learners to do so when answering questions. Sometimes a child answered a question and the teacher repeated the answer, summarised it or elaborated. The teacher did listen to different opinions expressed and did attempt to probe for meaning, although sometimes she failed to follow through with these attempts. In one instance, the teacher's discussion moved off-task from the content of the text revolving around the discussion of facts.

The School E learners seemed to enjoy participating in the lesson. However, they were not always able to answer the teacher's questions. The teacher did attempt to probe for meaning during the introduction to the story but the learners could not relate, probably as a result of a lack of prior knowledge upon which to draw. Other questions that the teacher asked tended to be closed or required retrieval of information only. The teacher only asked the learners to explain their answers further in a few instances.

At School F, the learners were passive and non-responsive to the closed questions that the teacher posed. In some instances, when a learner did respond, it was clear that he or she had not understood the story at all. Question and discussion by the teacher was simplistic, involving no thinking or reasoning by the learners, as evidenced by the following teacher- learner dialogue:

T: *Did Seipati have TB? What kind of sickness did she have?*
L: *HIV.*
T: *So do you think so?*
L: *No.*
T: *He is saying HIV.*
L: *Aids.*
T: *Aids, very good.*

Later during the analysis of the learner workbooks it was discovered that the learners had already done a comprehension exercise with the same passage the week prior to the classroom observation. Thus, even with repetition the learners were not able to comprehend the text or answer the questions. The teacher did code-switch briefly to Sepedi at stages during the lesson.

9.6.4 Opportunity-To- Learn

The Schools A, B, D and F teachers completed an OTL questionnaire. As stated in Chapter Five, teachers were asked to read one of the released literary passages used for

the PIRLS 2006 reading assessments and then answer open-ended questions in relation to it. The teachers gave their opinion on the suitability of the story for their learners in terms of length, the level of vocabulary, the cognitive level and the cultural appropriateness. They also indicated whether or not their learners would be able to successfully read the story independently and with comprehension. Furthermore, the teachers commented on the similarities and differences between this story and the type of fiction stories that they would usually give their learners to read to develop their reading literacy. The teachers were also asked about what kind of teaching support they would need to give their learners to help them to read and understand the story. The teachers' responses to these questions are considered in sub-sections *9.6.4.1* to *9.6.4.4*.

9.6.4.1 Suitability of the PIRLS 2006 literary passage

The Schools A, B and D teachers commented that the length of the story would be suitable for their 2009 classes. As the School D teacher stated, *"It's not too long, not too short. It would take enough time to read and explain difficult words in a single period and even give them time to ask questions/predict or give own opinion"* (P1, 1:1, 20:21). This suggests the need for teacher support in reading and understanding the story. In contrast, the School F teacher thought that "*the story is too long for a single lesson. It can be read and understood in two to three periods, excluding other skills"* (P2, 2:8, 4:5). The HoD at School B also read the passage and stated that *"… I read this comprehension… and I thought I'd like to give that to my class* [Grade 7] *and see how they cope with it, because it is long. These kids these days will no way be able to do that"* (P1, 1:96, 124:124).

Only the School A teacher thought that her learners would have no difficulty with the level of vocabulary used in the passage: *"much of the vocabulary comes easily to them as English is heard and spoken on a daily basis"* (P5, 5:9, 29:30). Although the School B teacher judged the passage's level of vocabulary as being "*perfect for* [first] *language readers"*, she argued that ESL learners in her class would battle with some of the words and they would need to be explained (P4, 4:2, 15:16). Similarly, although she indicated that the language used in the story was acceptable, the School D teacher felt that some easier synonyms could have been used for some of the words as her learners would not have had exposure to them. Also, the teacher suggested that some words would be difficult for the learners due to their life world experiences, wherein they would have had no exposure to the use of certain words, As an example, the teacher pointed out that *"…not all learners in our schools stay in big houses that have 'hallways' - maybe the learners can understand 'passage' better*" (P1, 1:5, 28:29). The School F teacher did not

think the vocabulary was appropriate for her class, suggesting that it would be better suited to learners at a Grade 6 level (P2, 2:9, 7:8).

In terms of the cognitive level of the story, the School A teacher expressed the view that the story was suitable for the developmental level of her learners, who would be able to absorb the details and process the information given to them. She suggested that if her learners used a "Who; What; Why; Where; When; How' technique" they would be able to respond to the story with full understanding (P5, 5:10, 31:32). The School B teacher reiterated that although the story was appropriate for Grade 4 learners, some of her ESL learners could battle with some of the language used, which would require discussion and explanation (P4, 4:3, 18:19). Both the School D and F teachers were positive about the thinking and reasoning level of the story, the School D teacher adding that the story would challenge her learners to think about the events depicted and help them to learn about the animal characters (P1, 1:3, 24:25). The School F teacher reasoned that, using their imaginations, it would be easy for her learners to think and reason about happenings in the story (P2, 2:10, 10:11).

The School A and D teachers expressed no difficulties with the cultural appropriateness of the text for their learners. The School A teacher felt that as animals were the main characters in the story this did not create cultural barriers for the learners (P5, 5:11, 33:34). The School D teacher argued that *"young readers enjoy fictitious and adventurous stories regardless of the 'racial' background or culture. To them it is an exciting and grabbing story that that will keep them at edge of their seats - I think they would be aware that it's fiction yet good to listen to"* (P1, 1:4, 26:27). Nevertheless, the School B teacher thought the story was more appropriate to Western culture (P4, 4:4, 21:22).

9.6.4.2 Learners' abilities to read the story independently with comprehension

The School A teacher reasoned that as her learners were exposed to a variety of reading materials and many had an extensive vocabulary (P5, 5:13, 40:40) they would be able to independently read and understand the passage successfully. The Schools B, D and F teachers were of the opinion that some of their learners would battle to read the story independently with understanding. In particular, the School B teacher felt that learners who did not read regularly, or for whom English was a second language, would continuously ask for help with such a passage (P4, 4:5, 28:30). The School D teacher thought that most of her learners would cope with the story, even though they might need to refer to a dictionary for difficult words. Also, some of her learners still had to sound out

words and were worried about "calling the word correctly" when reading impacting their comprehension (P1, 1:6, 30:31). The School F teacher believed that barriers to language use would impede her learners in reading and comprehending the story (P2, 2:7, 19:20), further stating that 60% of the learners would not be able to read the story on their own but would require her assistance (P2, 2:12, 16:17).

9.6.4.3 Comparison of PIRLS text and typical class texts used

Regarding similarities between the passage provided and typical texts used, the teachers provided differing responses. The School A teacher stated that similarly to the type of texts typically used, the characters were easy for the learners to identify with, the style and register were age-appropriate and familiarity with the setting apparent. The teacher also noted that the mood or tone of the passage was similar to several novels the learners used which shared the same genre (P5, 5:14, 44:48). The School B teacher was of the opinion that the text was similar to typical texts used in terms of language and interest, as well as being Westernised in context (P4, 4:7, 34:35). The School D teacher suggested that her learners had a similar story in their class reader (P1, 1:7, 32:34) and the School F teacher responded that it was similar in the use of learners' imaginations (P2, 2:2, 23:24).

The School B teacher could not think of any differences between the PIRLS passage and typical texts that she used (P4, 4:8, 37:38). The School D teacher also felt that there was little difference between the books her learners borrowed from the library and this story (P1, 1:8, 35:36). However, the Schools A and F teachers noted differences, the latter thinking that the story was too long as she usually used shorter stories (P2, 2:3, 26:27), the former acknowledging minor differences in that teachers at her school tried to focus on:

> *… contextual and current affairs as well as folk-lore, animal tales etcetera. This type of reading for understanding would be used occasionally, rather than regularly unless in the format of a class novel* [set work] *for the term* (P5, 5:15, 49:50)

9.6.4.4 Teaching support needed for reading the passage with comprehension

Support for reading mostly centred around help with phonological processing and the development of reading fluency. Although the School A teacher stressed that the teachers aimed to use 'a top down approach' that focused on meaning-making, learners were supplied with a phonemic chart to help them to decode. Sometimes visuals of sound families were given and syllabification could be used to help learners sound out longer words. Moreover, they were encouraged to use a marker/ruler above the line being read

to enhance fluency (P5, 5:17, 55:60). The School B teacher supported her learners' reading fluency by encouraging them not to syllabify words but rather to read whole words (a so-called Gestalt approach to reading); to read ahead of the word being said if reading aloud; and to be aware of punctuation marks, making use of them correctly (P4, 4:9, 45:45). In much the same manner, the School D teacher would help her learners with sounds with which they were unfamiliar, pronouncing words correctly, and using correct punctuation, but would also encourage them not to rush through their reading so as to facilitate comprehension (P1, 1:9, 38:42).

For assistance with comprehension, the Schools A, B, D and F teachers cited vocabulary extension as a main strategy. The School A teacher would specifically get learners to underline words they did not understand and use their dictionaries to assist them (P5, 5:24, 63:63). A number of other strategies were used by the Schools A, B, and D teachers. The School A teacher reported the most strategies[64], specifying that she would formulate questions and visually present key words as the story being read progressed. Pictorial sequencing of the story using visuals was another comprehension strategy employed, and the teacher worked on consolidating the characters, theme, plot and setting for written responses, via a mind map. Listening skills to test understanding was another strategy used (P5, 5:24, 63:63).

The School B teacher indicated that she explained any similes or metaphors used in a passage (P4, 4:10, 49:51). The School D teacher cited the use of pictures to aid understanding and asking learners questions requiring projection and inference as strategies. The teacher also felt that reading at the correct tempo with the appropriate mood and tone variation would help her learners to understand the story (P1, 1:10, 44:50).

The School F teacher seemed to be less certain of how to go about supporting her learners to read and understand the passage. The teacher only stated explanation of vocabulary as a strategy, otherwise she focused on provision of remedial assistance, spending time helping learners with learning barriers, having a lower teacher: learner ratio and the teacher herself attending more literacy development courses (P2, 2:4, 29:33).

[64] These strategies were also witnessed during the comprehension lesson observed.

9.7 DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY OF DATA

9.7.1 Teacher background and goals

- Teacher background

All of the teachers who participated were qualified, and, judging by their age ranges and reported years of teaching, each had much experience. The Schools A, B and D teachers had the most experience in teaching Grade 4 learners. The School E teacher had taught high school and Foundation Phase learners but this exposure did not seem to translate into any insights into her teaching practice at Grade 4. The School C teacher had also taught high school learners and acknowledged that this had helped her in understanding the reading needs of her Grade 4 learners. The School F teacher had taught at the Foundation Phase previously. All but one of the teachers reported reading at home for enjoyment on a daily basis. Most of the teachers were generally content with their professions and recognised the importance of their work. Except for the teacher at School B who had not attended any training, all of the other teachers reported having spent time in CPTD for reading in the previous two years.

- Teaching goals

Five overall teaching goals were identified in the analysis of each of the teacher's Grade 4 reading literacy teaching goals. These were: improving learners' spoken English; encouraging positive emotional responses to reading; learners' comprehension development; learners' reading skill development; and vocabulary development.

Three teachers wanted to improve their learners' pronunciation and verbal expression. Three teachers also wanted their learners to develop confidence in expressing their opinions and promote their enjoyment of reading. Comprehension development was a goal for five of the teachers, with three wanting to increase their learners' understanding specifically. It was notable that the School F teacher equated her comprehension development goal to getting learners to retrieve information independently, but not to any type of higher order thinking or reasoning goal. Other comprehension goals were more specific and related to learners' development of the ability to use contextual clues, do accurate transcription and develop skills in skimming, scanning and summation of main ideas in a text. Only teachers at the schools reaching the international benchmarks made mention of wanting to work on specific comprehension strategies with their learners.

Teachers at five of the schools had a goal to improve learners' reading, with some mentioning fluency or independent reading as goals. The only goal the teacher at School E had was to ensure that her learners were excellent readers, thus leading to the conclusion that there was a lack of depth in her understanding of reading literacy development. Vocabulary development was only mentioned as a goal at two schools, with code-switching being a specific issue the teacher wanted to eradicate at School D.

9.7.2 Class size and learners' reading profiles

The higher the number of learners in each class, the lower the school's class average benchmark in 2005. The highest performing school had the least number of learners in the Grade 4 teacher's class and the lowest performing school had the most. At School C, a strategy had been developed to rectify the situation of large class sizes at Grade 4 as it was felt that learners needed more attention and support due to the upheaval of the transition.

Two low performing schools, E and F, had the highest number of learners experiencing problems with spoken English, whereas no learners at the two highest performing schools, A and B, experienced such difficulties. The lowest performing school, F, also had the most learners - half of the class - in need of remedial instruction, according to their teacher.

On the assumption that the 2009 learners would have had similar achievement as their 2005 counterparts, the School A teacher judged her learners' reading abilities realistically, indicating that they had above-average abilities. The School F teacher's judgement that her learners had below-average abilities, and School C judgement of average reading ability, were also seemingly realistic.

9.7.3 Overall language teaching strategies

- Typical activities

There was much diversity in the teachers' approaches to the teaching of language to their Grade 4 learners. At School A, many different approaches were employed and strategies were altered on a weekly basis. School A was the only school where the teacher did reading as a daily activity with a written or verbal response linked to this. Other than this a variety of approaches and contextual teaching were used.

At Schools B, C, D and E more rigid approaches were employed, with certain activities taking place on certain days or during the course of a specific time for lesson implementation. The School B teacher focused on a reading period that incorporated comprehension, grammar and spelling in a typical week, sometimes also paired reading or creative writing. At Schools C, D and E there was one central activity, a reading lesson, theme discussion or comprehension, and all other activities were built around this activity over a cycle, week or over two weeks. The School C teacher did two periods of reading a week and a comprehension activity every two weeks with writing, listening and vocabulary activities stemming from the comprehension. At School D there was one reading period a week and four days of grammar built around a theme discussion and vocabulary extension. The School E teacher did a reading lesson at the beginning of the week with language structure and use, comprehension and spelling following this. Theme-based teaching with cross-curricular integration goals was evident at Schools B, C, D, E and F.

- Learner workbook output

Much more work output was evident in the learner workbooks at those schools reaching the PIRLS international benchmarks. Although the School D and F workbooks had a similar number of activities to those of Schools A, B and C, the activities were much shorter and less cognitively engaging or challenging for the learners.

The School A workbook showed much variety and creativity on the part of the teacher as well as comprehensive curriculum coverage. The School B workbook did not have a variety of activities, but rather there was evidence of much reinforcement and repetition. There were signs of much coverage of the language use and structure, thinking and reasoning and reading and viewing LOs. At School C, a variety of activities were also evident with signs of coverage of all of the language LOs. There were also extension exercises for advanced learners linked to the overall activity. At Schools A and C there were worksheets and texts from multiple sources, an aspect missing from the learner workbooks at the rest of the schools.

The School D learner workbook was dominated by short writing exercises, none of which required written expression. Grammar exercises were especially prominent and there was little evidence of comprehension activities. At School E there was minimal work output in the learner's book and the work that was available for analysis appeared to be based on rote principles. At School F, work output was minimal and elemental, suggesting that

learners were in the early stages of acquiring the language with the teacher following a phonological processing approach to reading literacy development.

On this basis it seems that learners in low-performing contexts do not get enough opportunities to consolidate their learning via written application. One possibility for the lack of written output at the low-performing schools may be that too much focus is being placed on speaking and listening skills with no transfer to written expression – an important factor in achievement throughout the rest of schooling.

9.7.4 Classroom reading materials, reading instruction and reading homework

- Classroom reading materials

Four of the teachers used the same materials with learners at different reading levels but the learners worked at different speeds. The Schools D and F teachers used different materials with learners at different reading levels. At the schools reaching the PIRLS international benchmarks there were no problems with access to reading materials, but reading material access at the other schools was less than optimal.

At Schools A, B and C, reading series and set work novels were used for reading instruction. The use of set work novels perhaps revealed that their learners at these schools were challenged more in their exposure to reading materials and that they had more advanced reading abilities than their peers at the lower-performing schools. The School C teacher stated that although the set work novels were challenging for her learners, she did not want to underestimate their abilities by choosing easier texts. School D only had access to a textbook reader with some reading passages. The teacher also sometimes read extra stories or used photocopy handouts. At School E, the teacher only had readers for half of her class, with no other materials evident. The School F teacher had no materials but stated that she could improvise with photocopy handouts. There were however a few Grade 1 and 2 readers in the class. Both the School C and E teachers had difficulties with materials for their ESL learner groups. The School E teacher was uncertain whether to use EFL or ESL materials and the School C teacher found it difficult to find ESL books that would still challenge her learners. Schools A and C were the only schools where the use of multiple text types was evident. The use of multiple text types for reading instruction is encouraged in the RNCS for languages (DoE, 2002a) so it

is not clear why the other teachers did not make attempts to use multiple texts in their teaching.

- Reading instruction

The Schools A, B and C teachers reported the most time allocation to reading instruction during a week, with up to two hours at each school. At School D, only 30 minutes was allocated per week and it was not clear how much time the Schools E and F teachers allocated, suggesting that perhaps they had no formalised time for reading instruction. Reading was reportedly most frequently taught as a whole class activity at each of the schools. At Schools C and D, mixed ability groups were frequently used. Sometimes individual instruction was used at Schools A, D and F but at none of the other schools.

Teachers seemed to use combinations of reading aloud, silent reading and paired reading in their teaching. Reading aloud in small groups or pairs was undertaken at Schools A and D once or twice a week and every day or almost every day at School E. At Schools B, C and F, reading aloud in small groups or pairs was less frequent, occurring perhaps once or twice a month. Teachers used guided, shared or paired reading methodologies. Reading aloud was done by the teacher, by individual learners or by all of the learners as a group. The Schools A, B, C and E teachers reported reading aloud to their learners every day or almost every day, although this seemed doubtful at School E. At Schools D and F the teachers also reported reading aloud to their learners once or twice a week. Learners also read aloud in class on a weekly basis at all of the schools, but the School D teacher did admit it was difficult to get all learners to read due to large class sizes.

Silent reading was only mentioned as a strategy at Schools A, B, D and F. At school A learners only did silent reading once or twice a month, while the School B learners did silent reading in some form every day, albeit not as part of a formalised teaching strategy. The School D and F teachers used silent reading to check their learners' understanding although the School F teacher did not do this often as her learners needed much support for reading. The School F teacher reported still using a phonics approach to reading instruction.

School A was the only school where the teacher reported a number of other strategies for reading instruction, including computer software, monitoring and increasing reading speed, flash reading for word recognition and 30 minutes of formal reading instruction a week, during which reading strategies were taught.

- Reading for homework

The School A and F learners reportedly had reading for homework every day or almost every day and the School B and D learners had reading for homework three to four times a week. The School C and E learners reportedly had reading for homework once or twice a week. The amount of homework reported at Schools E and F is problematic, as the School F HoD reported that learners at School F could not be given homework and also as there were reportedly no reading materials at either school which could be given to learners for homework. Teachers had to rely on parents to ensure that homework was done and it was only at School A where parents were given guidelines on how to interact with their children when doing homework, and where children were given activities linked to their homework to make sure it was done.

9.7.5 Comprehension development practices

- Typical practices

The School A teacher reported more strategies to improve learners' reading comprehension than teachers at the other schools. Strategies used for comprehension were vocabulary extension, grammar inclusions, visual literacy, pictorial sequencing, consolidation of characters, plot, setting in mind maps, question formulation with key words, recognition of multiple perspectives and personal opinion and colour coding. School A was also the only school where the teacher reported use of theoretical models to guide their teaching practices for reading comprehension development.

Comprehension instruction at the other schools was less dynamic. At School B, most comprehension activities were centred on a literature study for the learners' set work novel. There were also mini-comprehensions and infrequent exposure to other comprehensions. The School C teacher did one comprehension every two weeks with the learners, reading aloud to them and going through difficult vocabulary. The teacher at School D seemed to do much oral comprehension work, focusing on prediction, vocabulary, tone, tempo, application to own life world and activation of prior knowledge. At Schools E and F, the teachers seemed to lack understanding of reading comprehension development techniques. No insights were provided into the School E teacher's strategies and the School F teacher focused on asking questions after reading and vocabulary linked to spelling exercises. The School D and F teachers used code-switching to aid learners' understanding.

- Comprehension exercise output in the learner workbooks

The highest performing schools, A and B, had the most written comprehension exercises evident in their learners' workbooks. At Schools D, E and F a limited number of written comprehension activities were apparent. For the comprehension exercises in the Schools A, B and C workbooks, it was clear that the learners had exposure to questions requiring information retrieval, inference and interpretation. At School A in particular there was a strong focus on learner identification of setting, main ideas, characters, summary and explanation of answers. The Schools D, E and F workbooks had a limited number of comprehension activities, focused on information retrieval questions only.

- Reading comprehension lesson observation

For the reading comprehension observed, School A had the shortest lesson but it did integrate more activities than those of the other teachers. At School F, the teacher only spent 16 minutes actively teaching her learners, whereas at Schools A, C, D and E teachers spent the majority of the lesson teaching their learners. The text choice for the lessons at Schools A, B, C and D were appropriate for Grade 4 learners. With the exception of School D, the number of words for each of the texts was below 450, meaning that the texts were not very long. The Schools B and C texts were slightly more challenging than those used at Schools A and D. The School C teacher felt that it was good to give her learners more challenging texts for exposure and experience in working with less simplistic texts. The School E text was also suitable but provided few opportunities for cognitive challenge. The School F text was basic and likely geared to the level at which the learners were functioning and not the one expected of a Grade 4 learner. The comprehension questions for the lesson were also scrutinised. School F learners had the least number of questions to answer, requiring information retrieval and mostly one-word responses. Although slightly more complex in terms of language, the School D questions also only required information retrieval. At Schools A, B and C, 10 questions were asked. There was a balance in information retrieval, inference and complex reasoning questions. No questions were used in the lesson at School E.

Each of the teachers approached their reading comprehension differently, which is not in itself unusual as one would expect a variety of strategies to be used by different teachers to address the needs of learners. However, although the lessons were presented in different orders with varying degrees of expertise by the teacher, the overall approaches were similar. Some form of reading (learners reading aloud, teacher reading aloud) would

take place followed by the answering of reading comprehension questions. At some schools vocabulary extension was included prior to reading (A and C) or during reading (B, D and E). For schools C and E, the vocabulary extension took up the most teaching time for the lesson.

The School A teacher made the most use of prior-reading activities, including scene-setting, vocabulary extension with language structure and use, and a visual literacy activity invoking higher order thinking. At School E, the teacher attempted to discuss the theme of the lesson prior to reading but did not link this activity to the content of the text, rendering the discussion somewhat superfluous. At Schools C and D the teachers only briefly discussed the title of the story, followed by consideration of further details around this. No prior-reading activities were undertaken at Schools B and F. Thus, most of the teachers did not make optimal use of strategies to elicit learner participation or comprehension prior to reading.

A number of different reading activities were undertaken during the lessons. At Schools B, C and F the teacher read the text aloud to the learners. The B and C teachers also re-phrased text, discussed, explained and summarised content during reading. Learners were also asked for their opinions. At Schools D and E individual learners read aloud. The School D teacher interjected to ask questions or explain words. During the reading phase the School E teacher included a vocabulary extension activity. The teacher read aloud at School F and two learners read a sentence each. Perhaps if only a few learners read aloud individually during a lesson the other learners would remain passive in their reading and so not gain further experience. At School A, multiple reading strategies involved all of the learners, as they silently read a de-contextualised paragraph, read aloud as a class, or the teacher read to them and asked them to predict what would happen next in the story.

With the exception of the teacher at School E who continued a vocabulary exercise and discussed what happened in the story for the first time, post-reading activities at the schools mostly involved discussion and answering of questions. The School A, B, C, D and F teachers read through the comprehension questions. The School B teacher read through the questions, discussing the answers for some and pointing out requirements for others. At Schools C, D and F, all of the comprehension questions were discussed orally. At Schools C and D the teachers probed for further meaning. At School D and F the teachers discussed factual content further, for cross-curricular theme-based learning. The post-reading comprehension exercise at School A was the most strategically organised. The teacher read through the questions, discussed the answering requirements, got the

learners to highlight key words in the questions and read the passage to the learners again so that they could look for answers before writing them.

Learners at Schools A, B, C, D and E were for the most part actively involved in the lessons, although learners at Schools C, D and E had more difficulties answering questions than their peers at the other schools. Learners at School F were passive and had difficulties following what was going on the classroom.

- Opportunity-To-Learn

Only four teachers completed an OTL questionnaire. The School A, B and D teachers thought that the length of PIRLS text was suitable although the School D teacher approved the length in terms of a lesson with discussion and not as an individual assessment. The School F teacher did not think the text was suitable for her learners. The vocabulary in the text was considered appropriate for the School A learners and more appropriate for EFL than ESL learners at School B. The School D teacher thought that easier synonyms were needed in the text and the School F teacher did not think the vocabulary was suitable for her learners. All of the teachers were positive about the cognitive level of the story. Although the other teachers thought that the text was culturally appropriate for their learners, the School B teacher thought that the it was more appropriate for Western cultures. The School A, B and D teachers felt that the text was similar to the type of texts they used in class. However, the School F teacher thought that the text was too long for her learners.

The School A, B and D teachers mostly focused on strategies to increase learners' fluency in reading the text, when asked about the support they would need to give learners to read the text. For assistance with comprehension the teachers at Schools A, B, D and F teachers stated vocabulary extension as a main activity. Again, the School A teacher reported the most strategies to assist with comprehension. The School B teacher explained similes and metaphors and the school D teacher used pictures to aid comprehension. The School F teacher seemed to be less certain of how to go about supporting her learners to read and understand the passage. The teacher only stated explanation of vocabulary as a strategy.

9.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter has dealt with the presentation of data to partly answer research sub-question two for the study. Overall language teaching practices, reading instruction practices and comprehension development practices at each of the six participating schools were elucidated.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the data presented and discussed in this chapter and chapters Six, Seven and Eight will be integrated and interpreted to answer the overall research question for the study. Reflections on and implications of the study will also be considered

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