

TEACHERS' USE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION IN GRADE 3

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**TEACHERS' USE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT
IN THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION
IN GRADE 3**

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this PhD thesis
to my mother, Esther,
and my late father, Johannes Mkofo Mkhwanazi,
for their immense contribution to my education.
My parents' ambition was to give all their children the
best education. Though my father has passed on, the
legacy he left still stands.
I am proud of you.
"Mpangazitha mazala Nkosi wena owazala uZwide
wazala uLanga"

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- ❖ Above all, I thank God, the Almighty, who sustained me throughout my studies.

DECLARATION

I, Hellen Ntombifuthi (Student Number: 22386549) declare that this is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. This thesis has not been previously submitted by me for any degree at another university.

Hellen Ntombifuthi Mkhwanazi

Date

ABSTRACT

The main objective of the research was to explore how teachers use formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 siSwati-speaking learners. While the research also sought to determine whether teachers' practice of formative assessment supported learners' comprehension of written text, it did not attempt to measure the learners' achievements. The research was prompted by the low reading performance levels of South African Grade 3 learners, including Grade 3 learners in Mpumalanga.

The study was qualitative in nature and was a case study of seven teachers from four primary schools. The paradigmatic position of the study was interpretive. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews, lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks. Interviews were taped and transcribed. Data from the three sources was analyzed and reported in an integrated way through themes.

The study developed a conceptual framework from the literature review. Various theories and concepts were identified, namely Vygotsky's theory of learning and socio-cultural perspective (1978), Engeström's activity system model (1987) and the formative assessment process (Harlen, 2000; Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Birenbaum, Kimron, Shilton & Shahaf-Barzilay, 2009). It was clear that effective use of formative assessment for reading comprehension requires collaboration between teachers and learners. Teachers should involve learners in the five phases of formative assessment of reading comprehension. The conceptual framework also implies that teachers should have pedagogical knowledge of the teaching of reading comprehension.

Findings of this study revealed that participating teachers lacked knowledge of formative assessment; consequently they did not plan to use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. Teachers did not communicate clear learning objectives and assessment criteria to the learners. As a result, learners did not know what they should achieve in a lesson and did not know how they should achieve it. Teachers did not develop learning activities that supported learners'

comprehension of the written text. Teachers often used literal and closed questions to assess reading comprehension. Teachers did not provide constructive feedback based on the learning objectives, and they did not comment on weaknesses and strengths with regard to the learning objectives. Teachers did not encourage learners to assess their own work or that of their peers. Therefore learners did not develop skills in assessing their own work; they relied on the teacher's assessment.

Furthermore, this study found that teachers were not trained in the teaching and formative assessment of reading comprehension. They did not have a variety of materials to teach reading to siSwati-speaking learners. Some schools did not receive the workbooks from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and had to make do with copies from the DBE workbook on a daily basis.

Recommendations ensuing from this research are that the Department of Basic Education and the Mpumalanga Department of Education should equip Foundation Phase teachers with knowledge of and skills in formative assessment applicable to the teaching of reading comprehension. In addition, the Mpumalanga Department of Education should provide a variety of reading material for siSwati-speaking learners to support the teaching and learning of reading comprehension.

KEYWORDS

- Feedback
- Formative assessment
- Foundation Phase
- Grade 3 learners
- Learning activities
- National Curriculum Statement
- Questioning technique
- Reading comprehension
- SiSwati-speaking learners
- Teachers

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANA	Annual National Assessment
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BEd	Bachelor in Education
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
GET	General Education and Training
MDoE	Mpumalanga Department of Education
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy
PTD	Primary Teacher's Diploma
SACMEQ	Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality
STD	Senior Teacher's Diploma
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a basic literacy skill that should be facilitated and learned from the early school years. Learners in the Foundation Phase often experience reading comprehension problems as they struggle to construct meaning from what they are reading. The lack of reading comprehension skills negatively affects learning and understanding of other subjects (Richeck, Caldwell, Jennings & Lerner, 1996).

Reading comprehension problems generally arise from various factors, including teachers' poor instructional and assessment practices (Block & Pressley, 2002; Zimmerman, 2011). Zimmerman argues that teachers produce good learner results if they know their subject matter, how to structure the material to be learned, use feedback to monitor the learners' progress and give support to those learners who are struggling to attain the objectives. Likewise, Block and Pressley (2002) note that effective instructional and assessment practices lead to positive growth in the development of reading comprehension of young learners, while poor instructional practices negatively influence such development. They also point out that reading comprehension improves when teachers design and implement activities that support the understanding of the text.

In most cases, learners' comprehension problems result because teachers are not knowledgeable about teaching reading comprehension (Searfoss & Readence, 1994; Block & Pressley, 2002). According to Searfoss and Readence (1994), teachers should use reading comprehension strategies that will allow on-going monitoring of learning and teaching and should provide feedback regularly to support learners' comprehension. Shepard (2005) also argues that formative assessment is important to support comprehension instructions. The implication is that teachers must familiarise themselves with various comprehension strategies to support learners' comprehension.

This study focused on teachers' practices of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 siSwati-speaking learners at the General Education and Training (GET) level in South African primary schools. These learners are studying siSwati as a home language in the Foundation Phase. The research is presented as a case study of seven teachers from the same circuit in Mpumalanga Province.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study was prompted by several surveys reporting that South African learners have poor reading skills, namely Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) (international study), the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) (regional study) and the South African Annual National Assessment (ANA) (national study).

The recent Grade 4 and 5 PIRLS, which described the reading achievements of learners, indicated that South African learners' performance lies below the expected standard (Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse & Zimmerman, 2011). The purpose of PIRLS was to investigate how well learners in Grade 4 and 5 are able to read in the language they have been taught since Grade 1. The PIRLS assessment instrument set four different levels of reading, namely low international benchmarks, where learners can respond to explicit stated information; intermediate international benchmarks, where learners can make straightforward inferences; high international benchmarks, where learners can interpret and integrate ideas and information; and advanced international benchmarks, where learners can examine and evaluate content, language and textual elements (Howie *et al.*, 2011).

Among other things, PIRLS reported that the majority of South African learners, particular those tested in African languages, struggle at all levels of comprehension. Only 6% of Grade 4 learners were able to read at an advanced level, while 71% of learners were only able to reach basic level. It also showed that South African Grade 5 learners tested in Afrikaans and English are performing below the international average score (Howie *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, the PIRLS study revealed that many South African teachers have an under-developed knowledge of what comprehension entails. This relates to statements that teachers are not trained well in teaching reading. Too often teachers know only one method of teaching reading, which may not suit the learning style of all learners and this affect their comprehension of the texts. The majority of teachers who participated in PIRLS had received less than six hours of in-service training that dealt with reading, specifically reading comprehension.

SACMEQ III (Moloi & Chetty, 2010) also found low achievement levels in reading comprehension. In particular, Grade 6 learners scored very low in all levels of reading comprehension. SACMEQ III tested reading competency at eight levels: pre-reading, emergent reading, basic reading, reading for meaning, interpretive reading, inferential reading, analytical reading and critical reading. The SACMEQ III report indicated that in 2007 the majority of Grade 6 learners in Mpumalanga were only competent in basic reading; 19% of learners were able to read for meaning and only 1% of learners were able to apply critical reading skills.

The overall low results and patterns in the Annual National Assessment (ANA) in Grade 3 Literacy also confirm that South African learners function at a low level of reading comprehension. ANA is an initiative of the South African government and the Department of Basic Education to determine the Languages and Mathematics levels of South African children and is prioritised as a central tool for tracking progress towards achieving the levels of literacy and numeracy. It is administered from Grade 1 to 6 and in Grade 9. The purpose of ANA is to provide credible and reliable information for monitoring progress in learner performance towards achieving the national goals of improving the quality of basic education (DBE, 2011a).

According to the 2011 and 2012 ANA reports, literacy is a serious challenge in Mpumalanga Province, as the learners' performance was below the national average. These reports indicated that majority of Grade 3 learners cannot read with comprehension. Few learners are able to extract information directly from a given text, and the majority of learners struggle to interpret and integrate ideas and information (DBE, 2011a; DBE, 2012a). The 2012 qualitative analysis concluded that

the majority of learners were unable to respond to comprehension questions correctly; they left blank spaces without providing the answer, and they transcribed the questions instead of constructing sentences to respond to the text (DBE, 2012a). These reading comprehension problems were common, especially among learners who learnt in an African language and learners who reside in rural and historically disadvantaged townships schools. It is an unfortunate situation that those learners should proceed to the next grades with few or no development of reading comprehension skills.

1.3 RATIONALE FOR THIS STUDY

From the above-mentioned studies, it is evident that South African learners have underdeveloped comprehension skills. As a result, they fail to do well in literacy. Poor learner performance in reading has become a worrying factor to the South African government, the Department of Basic Education and various stakeholders in education and has become a common theme in education discussions, conferences and the media.

Having been involved in the Foundation Phase in many capacities; as a teacher, curriculum advisor and lately as co-ordinator in the Systemic Evaluation Directorate, specialising in co-ordinating Annual National Assessments in Grade 1-6 and Grade 9 in Mpumalanga, I became concerned about low performance levels of the learners in literacy generally and reading comprehension in particular. The findings of PIRLS (Howie, Venter, Van Staden, Zimmerman, Long, Scherman & Archer, 2007; Howie *et al.*, 2011) and SACMEQ III (Moloi & Chetty, 2010) strengthened my concern. These studies pointed out that one of the reasons for this poor performance is teachers' lack of proper skills in and knowledge of teaching and assessment strategies.

The Department of Basic Education, in its Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), stipulates that in the Foundation Phase teachers should use formative assessment to support instructions and improve learners' learning (DBE, 2011c). In the international literature, formative assessment is also highly recommended to support learners' learning and to inform teachers' instructions (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In fact, most education institutions around the world have

adopted the use of formative assessment to support learners' learning and to guide teachers' instructions. The work of the Assessment Reform Group and the analysis of 250 research studies by Black and Wiliam (1998) confirm that when teachers use this method to guide their instructions, learners make significant gains (Taras, 2009; Stobart, 2008; Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan & Yu, 2009). Since the publication of the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), countries such as United Kingdom, Hong Kong, New Zealand and the United States of America have adopted it, and positive results have been achieved by those teachers who use it (Taras, 2009).

The question is: How do Grade 3 teachers employ formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension? A qualitative study searching for an answer to this question seemed to be needed.

I did not come across research studies conducted in South Africa concerning the benefits of formative assessment or its implementation by teachers. Although the literature study indicate that teachers in general do have problems with regard to the implementation of formative assessment in their subjects (because they lack knowledge and skills), only a few special programmes in South Africa support teachers with this implementation. There is an overwhelming need to develop techniques that will address the formative assessment of reading comprehension especially of siSwati speaking learners.

1.4 AIM OF THE STUDY

The specific aim of this research study was undertaken to describe, explore and obtain evidence-based data on the facilitation or not of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension in Grade 3. Against the background of the quantitative and systemic studies this research project could shed light on the low reading levels of learners in the Foundation Phase. The general aim of the study was to contribute to the improvement of policy and practice regarding the role of formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question was:

How do Grade 3 teachers use formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension?

The sub-research question:

- *What are the teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners?*
- *Which learning activities do teachers employ to support formative assessment of reading comprehension?*
- *What is the nature of feedback given by Grade 3 teachers when teaching reading comprehension in siSwati home language?*

1.6 CLARIFICATION OF THE KEY CONCEPTS OF THE TITLE

The meaning of the key concepts used in this study, namely reading comprehension, Foundation Phase, Grade 3, teaching, assessment and formative assessment, are explained in this section.

1.6.1 READING COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension is defined in several ways. Current definitions of reading comprehension acknowledge that it is a process of constructing meaning from the written text or passage, using a variety of skills and knowledge (Block & Pressley, 2002). I have adopted the definition by Gunning (2010), namely that reading comprehension is a constructive and interactive process between the written text, the reader and the context. For comprehension to take place, the learner should use his or her mental processes to construct meaning.

1.6.2 FOUNDATION PHASE

In South Africa, the Foundation Phase is the first phase of the General Education and Training (GET) band, which includes Grade R-3. The four subjects offered in Grade 3 are Home Language, First Additional Language, Mathematics and Life Skills (DBE, 2011c). The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) gives learners in the Foundation Phase the right to learn in the language of their choice, typically their home language (DoE, 1997). The rationale of the LiEP is to maintain the use of home languages as

the languages of teaching and learning, especially in the Foundation Phase .In this study the term Foundation Phase is used to refer to Grade R-3 learners.

1.6.3 GRADE 3 LEARNERS

In the South African education system, formal schooling starts in Grade R. Grade 3 learners usually are in the fourth year of formal schooling, and in normal circumstances they are between nine and ten years old (DBE, 2002a).

1.6.4 TEACHING

Fraser, Loubser and Van Rooy (1990) describe teaching as one of the means by which education is achieved. Teaching is an activity that aims to present specific learning content to somebody in such a way that person learns from it. By implication, it is therefore a technique used by the teacher to communicate ideas, intentions and new knowledge to the learners. Teaching is intertwined with learning, since learning takes place as a result of teaching. Learning is an activity in which the person taught actively benefits from teaching.

Authors and researchers of classroom practice view teaching as the mediation of learning. For example, Farrant (1986) states that teaching is “a process that facilitates learning”. According to Pauw (1990), learning mediation is a process through which a person acquires skills and knowledge and gathers experience, and his view is that learning mediation is influenced by interaction between people and environment. Pauw (1990) expands that teaching and learning mediation share the common features of which the most important are to impact or acquire knowledge, acquire essential skills and gather experience.

In this study teaching is seen from the socio-cultural perspective, i.e. teaching is an activity taking place as a result of the interaction between the teacher and the learners. The teacher facilitates the learning process with the aim of helping learners to learn. The learners have to participate actively in the process of constructing knowledge. When teachers facilitate learning, they should employ scaffolding activities to assist learners’ understanding of the text. In other words, the role of teachers as facilitators during the learning process is to provide opportunities for

learning. My description of teaching support that teaching is linked to mediation of learning.

1.6.5 ASSESSMENT

According to Department of Basic Education (DoE, 2002b), assessment is a continuous, planned process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about performance of learners in terms of outcomes. Assessment requires teachers to use a variety of appropriate strategies to enable them to provide constructive feedback. This definition entails that teachers must gather assessment information about each learner so that they can ensure that every learner achieves the desired outcomes. The definition also implies that every learner should be treated as an individual capable of achieving the outcomes.

The Department of Education (2002b) indicates four types of assessment: baseline, diagnostic, summative and formative. Baseline assessment usually takes place at the beginning of the lesson to establish what learners already know about the theme or content to be taught. Diagnostic assessment is conducted to identify strengths and weaknesses of the learners or the teaching methodology or barriers to learning. It may lead to some form of intervention or remedial action. Summative assessment provides an overall picture of the achievements of a learner. It can be conducted at the end of the lesson, a unit or a course. This study focused on the formative role of assessment.

1.6.6 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Researchers describe assessment as formative when teachers provide constructive feedback to support learning. According to the South African Department of Basic Education (2011c), formative assessment is developmental; teachers use it to give feedback to the learners and track whether they are able to achieve the learning objectives. It determines daily teaching and learning and may suggest ways in which learning activities can be changed to suit learners' diverse needs.

In this study, the concept of formative assessment refers to all learning activities undertaken by teachers and learners during the facilitation of reading intended to

support learners' comprehension of the written text, where feedback is critical to improve learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

1.7 READING COMPREHENSION AND ASSESSMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Reading comprehension and formative assessment are closely related to each other. In this section reading comprehension is contextualised in order to focus on the importance of reading comprehension and the role that assessment needs to play.

The Department of Basic Education, in the reading strategies (DoE, 2008c) and CAPS documents for Home Language (Grade R-3) (DBE, 2011C), identifies five components of the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase, namely phonetic awareness, word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency. In the facilitation of reading comprehension, the teacher should engage learners in a range of levels of thinking and questioning, and they should also work on metacognitive skills to teach learners to monitor their comprehension of the text.

According to the DBE (2011c) the teacher should introduce learners to comprehension as early as Grade R. From Grade 2 onward, the teacher should develop higher-order thinking through effective and higher-order questioning (DBE, 2011c). De Jongh (2000) also emphasise reading with understanding from the first year of formal schooling, stating that learners should perceive reading as reading for meaning.

The importance of teaching reading in the Foundation Phase is strongly emphasised in the South African curriculum. The Department of Education stipulates that in Grade 1-3 learners should be given an opportunity to read every day and that reading should occupy at least one hour (25%) of the daily timetable (DoE, 2008b). At present, the Department of Basic Education (2012) pays much attention to reading. For example, through the Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme (QIDS UP), the DBE supplies reading material and support through in-service training for reading to Foundation Phase teachers. The programme targets schools that serve the poor communities, where quality was

compromised due to lack of basic minimum resources and shortages of skilled personnel. Through QIDS UP, reading is guided by the documents *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades: a teacher's handbook* (DoE, 2008c) and a *National Reading Strategy* (DoE, 2008b).

Teaching Reading in the Early Grades (DBE, 2008c) provides practical teaching guidelines for the implementation of literacy focus time and language development periods. The *National Reading Strategy* (DoE, 2008b) clarifies the nature of the problem with and reasons for learners' poor reading abilities and offers more comprehensive goals. Six pillars are viewed as crucial to the success of the *National Reading Strategy*, namely monitoring learner performance; teaching practice and methodology; teacher training, development and support; management of the teaching of reading; resources; and research, partnership and advocacy (DoE, 2008b). These two documents are described briefly in the next section.

1.7.1 THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL READING STRATEGY

The South African *National Reading Strategy* is part of the Department of Basic Education's response to the learners' poor performance in reading. The goal of the reading strategy is to assist teachers to interpret the National Curriculum Statement and to promote writing skills. According to the Department of Education, the *National Reading Strategy* will help learners move through the education system; improve matriculation results; improve people's ability to communicate in an ever-changing world and bring economic benefit for the country by producing workers who are competent in their reading and writing skills (DoE, 2008b).

The *National Reading Strategy* provides key priorities and areas for focused intervention by all role players in the education system. It also details practical steps that should be taken at all levels of the system and by all stakeholders to ensure that the Department of Basic Education achieves the set objectives (DoE, 2008b).

In addition, the *National Reading Strategy* requires all learners to be able to read basic texts by the end of Grade 3 (DoE, 2008b). It also stipulates the reading comprehension skills that learners should acquire in each grade and emphasises that

teachers should use different texts to activate learners' reading comprehension skills; these may include visual texts, such as advertisements.

The National Department of Education has collaborated with the Provincial Department of Education to promote the *National Reading Strategy*. In some provinces, provincial reading strategies have been developed to support the national reading strategy.

Although the *National Reading Strategy* was a good idea, there were many challenges with regard to its implementation. It was found that teachers were not competent to implement it. The teaching conditions were not favourable; among other things, there was lack of school libraries (DoE, 2008b), and the Department of Education did not have funds to support the implementation of the National Reading Strategy. It was therefore abandoned.

1.7.2 TEACHING READING IN THE EARLY GRADES

Teaching Reading in the Early Grades is a resource book provided by the South African Department of Basic Education with the assistance of the *Read Education Trust* (DoE, 2008c). The purpose of the resource book is to help teachers to teach reading and writing effectively. It covers core aspects of the language subject in the Foundation and Intermediate Phase, the main focus being on the reading components and the teaching of reading. It gives suggestions for reading and writing learning activities and the time that should be devoted to them. The five components of teaching reading (phonemic awareness; word recognition (sight words and phonics); comprehension; vocabulary and fluency) should be taught explicitly and practised in context on a daily basis (DoE, 2008c).

Among other things, *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* advises teachers to closely monitor whether learners really understand and interpret what they are reading rather than simply "barking at print". This should be monitored from the very start of the reading process. It also emphasises that in the Foundation Phase the teacher should activate the readers' prior knowledge and that Foundation Phase learners should read aloud (DoE, 2008c).

The teacher is expected to employ various assessment strategies such as formative assessment and activities to assess reading and promote comprehension. However, it seems that teachers do not practise sound assessment and that there is not sufficient research on the implementation of assessment, especially related to reading and comprehension.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Currently there is no single theoretical framework that informs formative assessment (Crossouard & Pryor, 2012). The conceptual framework for formative assessment of reading comprehension in this study is based on a number of theories and concepts.

Researchers of formative assessment postulate that a theory of formative assessment should emphasise the active role of the learner in the construction of knowledge (Black & Wiliam, 1998; James, 2006; Taras, 2009). Another view of the theoretical framework of formative assessment is that it should be understood within the socio-cultural context, since formative assessment is a collaborative activity between the learners and the teacher in support of learning (Black & Wiliam, 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008; Shepard 2005). Shepard (2005) views formative assessment as instructional scaffolding, as he argues that teaching and support of learning through formative assessment should take place at the same time. Pryor and Crossouard (2008) point out that in order to provide the necessary support, the teacher should establish what the learner knows and can do with or without help of the teacher.

Black and Wiliam (2006) apply the activity theory within the socio-cultural perspective to explore teachers' practice of formative assessment, arguing that activity theory is an appropriate theory to understand learning in a classroom environment. However, according to Nicol and Marfarlane (2006) and Bennett (2011), the theoretical framework for formative assessment should empower learners to develop skills for self-regulated learning. These authors share the view that teachers' feedback should support learners to develop skills of self and peer-assessment, which equip learners to take control of their own assessment.

These ideas are all taken into consideration in the conceptual framework of formative assessment for reading comprehension in this study.

1.9 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative approach, as it sought to explore teachers' use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension in Grade 3. According to Gall, Borg and Gall (1996), the qualitative approach is probably the best means of uncovering problems in education and enables researchers to understand better the total environment in which education takes place. The research approach is interactive; in other words, the researcher gathers information in person, by interacting with participants in their setting (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

1.9.1 INTERPRETIVE ORIENTATION

The research project used an interpretive orientation. An interpretive orientation recognises multiple ways of understanding phenomena (Yin, 2009). It embraces the belief that human actions are intentional (Creswell, 2007). An interpretive framework "seeks to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2010). An interpretive researcher looks at a particular case. Thus it fits well with a constructivist view of knowledge, which holds that knowledge is not independent of the knower, and for that reason it will sit well with the philosophical understanding on which this study is based. I interpreted phenomena in terms of meanings the participants attributed to it (Creswell, 2007).

1.9.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

An explorative and descriptive case study was used to obtain a clear, in-depth understanding of the way Grade 3 teachers use formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension. A multiple case study of seven Grade 3 teachers in Mpumalanga was conducted at four primary schools. The teachers were from the same district office in one circuit office. The unit of analysis of this research project was Grade 3 teachers and their application of formative assessment. Grade 3 learners were also observed during the implementation of formative assessment, since they are part of the classroom environment.

1.9.3 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The purpose of data collection is to collect information in order to enhance understanding. For this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews, lesson observations, field notes and analysis of learners' workbooks.

The collection of data was guided by the formative assessment principles in Carless (2005), namely assessment activities given to learners; the nature of feedback given to learners; learners' responses to the verbal and written feedback and the impact of feedback on learners' performance.

1.9.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

All teachers participated in a one-on one semi-structured interview conducted during school breaks. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to probe more deeply and obtain "rich data" (Maxwell, 1996). They also allow follow-up questions (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Questions on the use of formative assessment to enhance learners' performance were formulated from the literature review. The interviews were recorded on tape and then transcribed.

1.9.3.2 Lesson observations

Data was also collected by observing lessons. According to Patton (2003), observation is a suitable strategy for collecting explorative data because it allows direct observation of behaviour as well as face-to-face interaction with teachers in a natural situation. Cohen *et al.* (2010) assert that observation enables the researcher to see things that might otherwise unconsciously be missed, to discover things the participants might not freely talk about in interviews and to access personal knowledge. I decided to be a non-participant observer since I did not want to have influence over the participant teachers. My intention was to observe interactions in the classroom without influencing the teachers so that they act more realistically.

1.9.3.3 Analysis of learners' workbooks

An analysis of learners' workbooks was conducted in order to understand how teachers give feedback on the written work and to determine the nature of feedback and the remedial work given after formative assessment. The analysis of documents strengthens the study, thus increasing its validity.

1.9.3.4 Field notes

During the observations of lesson I recorded the behaviours of the learners and teachers during the lessons as well as occurrences that took place during the lesson as part of field notes. I included my reflection of activities directly observed during the lesson. These various recorded observations strengthened the validity of the study and were relevant during the data analysis.

1.10 DATA ANALYSIS

As an interpretivist I used deductive and inductive data analyses approaches. The data from the interviews, lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks were transcribed and concepts that emerged from the data sources were identified, coded and then grouped together to form the themes.

Within-case and *cross-case analyses* were applied, as suggested by Merriam (2009) in a multiple-case study. In *within-case* analysis, each case is treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself and analysed separately. *Cross-case* analysis includes the identification of similarities or patterns across cases as well as differences in order to build abstractions. This process helped me to understand the teachers' use of formative assessment to the teaching of reading comprehension.

1.11 OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

The study is organised into seven chapters. The ensuing chapters broadly cover the following aspects.

Chapter 1 presents the study in broad outlines under the headings introduction, background to the study, rationale of the study, aim of the study, research questions, research methodology and data analysis process. Key concepts of the study are also explained.

In **Chapter 2** the international and national literature on formative assessment is surveyed. Good practice internationally on the use of formative assessment is covered, as are the components of formative assessment, challenges regarding the

implementation of formative assessment and professional development for formative assessment.

Chapter 3 discusses the international literature on teaching and the assessment of reading comprehension, with emphasis on reading in the foundation phase. Summative and formative assessment measures for reading comprehension in the lower grades and South African literature on reading comprehension are touched upon.

In **Chapter 4**, theories and concepts used for the conceptual framework of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension are discussed, followed by the conceptual framework applied in this study.

In **Chapter 5**, the research design, research methodology, data collection process and data collection instruments are discussed. The rationale for using these methods is explained, the context in which the study was undertaken is explained and ethical matters are addressed.

Chapter 6 presents the results of the data analysis and key themes that emerged from the data. Data obtained from each case is analysed and the categories from the case studies are established, followed by cross-case analysis.

In **Chapter 7** the findings are discussed with reference to each research question and literature. The conceptual framework for this study is revisited and the findings are interpreted. Recommendations are made to the Mpumalanga Department of Education, the head of department of the Foundation Phase, teachers in the Foundation Phase, higher-education institutions of learning, followed by suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER 2

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 presented an overview of formative assessment to contextualise the study. In Chapter 2 the literature on formative assessment is reviewed. Examples are cited from countries where this approach is well-established. A summary of empirical studies related to aspects of formative assessment in the international context is presented; these examples may positively influence teachers' use of formative assessment in their teaching of reading comprehension. Some of the current debates on this topic are discussed and aspects of formative assessment relevant to this study are identified. Gaps in the literature are also mentioned.

The components of formative assessment and the challenges related to the practice of formative assessment are discussed, and the chapter is concluded with literature on teachers' professional development regarding the theory and practice of formative assessment in the international and South African contexts.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The literature contains various definitions of formative assessment, and as yet there is no exclusive and widely accepted definition of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2006). However, various researchers share the view that when assessment is used to support teaching and improve learning, it plays a formative role during the learning process (Taras, 2009). Teachers should provide effective feedback to the learners to support learning (Black & Wiliam, 2006). In other words, the main purpose of formative assessment is to provide effective feedback which will help learners improve their learning.

Harlen (2006) refers to formative assessment as "*assessment for learning*". According to him formative assessment and "*assessment for learning*" are the same and can be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, he prefers the term "*assessment for*

learning”, claiming that formative assessment can give the impression that it is a specific type of assessment whereas “*assessment for learning*” emphasizes its function during the learning process. Black and Wiliam (2003) also assert that formative assessment does not refer to assessment itself, but to the function it serves in supporting learners’ learning, and shows that it is used to enhance teaching by meeting learners’ needs.

On the other hand, Swaffield (2011) argues that formative assessment and “*assessment for learning*” are two different things. In his view, the main distinctions between the two terms is that “*assessment for learning*” is an activity which should take place during the learning-teaching process and is concerned with the immediate future. Formative assessment, on the other hand, refers to the purpose of assessment and focuses on the curriculum goals. The implication is that “*assessment for learning*” takes place during the actual learning process to address specific learning objectives, while formative assessment does not take place in one lesson and does not focus on specific learning objectives.

In this study, the term formative assessment is used. This decision is influenced by the fact that the term “formative assessment” is widely used in the international literature to refer to assessment that takes place during the learning process to improve learners’ learning. In the context of this study, formative assessment therefore refers to all learning activities undertaken by teachers and learners while reading comprehension is being taught with the intention to improve learners’ comprehension skills, i.e. their ability to make sense of the written text. These activities may involve discussions, learners performing the work, the level of learners’ involvement during the learning activities, the nature of classwork given to learners, teacher’s analysis of classwork and homework, the support given by the teacher and feedback given to the learners. This study focuses on teachers’ use of formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. In the next chapter a critical review of the literature on reading comprehension is offered.

2.3 IMPLEMENTATION OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT WORLDWIDE

Worldwide, there has been a growing interest in the use of assessment by teachers to enhance learners' learning and to improve classroom instructions (Taras, 2009). The use of assessment to improve learners' learning was influenced by an analysis by Black and Wiliam (1998) of 250 research studies which confirmed that when teachers use formative assessment to guide their instructions, learners' work improves (Taras, 2009; Stobart, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2009; Swaffield, 2011). The suggestion made by Black and Wiliam (1998) that formative assessment should be developed to support classroom practice elicited a positive response from various people and institutions internationally. The review of the literature indicates that formative assessment has become a common theme at educational conferences and a focus for teacher development programmes (Bennett, 2011).

The United Kingdom (UK) has devoted much intellectual and emotional energy to supporting teachers with the implementation of formative assessment. Two major projects, namely *King's-Medway-Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP)* and *Learning How To Learn (LHTL)* were launched in the UK to support the development of formative assessment. The purpose of the two projects was to explore how ideas from research could be practised in real situations (Wiliam *et al.*, 2004). The literature shows that individual teachers who adopted and adapted ideas from the KMOFAP and LHTL could improve their classroom practice. These countries have shown significant changes in classroom practices and they have shown major improvements in learners' performance (Swaffield, 2011).

According to Taras (2009), formative assessment was first popularised in the UK around the 1980s. It began as a distinct movement based on the principles of supporting learners through assessment. The important feature of formative assessment in the United Kingdom, as reported by Taras (2009), was that it emphasised individualised learning. In the United Kingdom, individualised learning depends on teachers knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each learner through the use of formative assessment (Taras, 2009). Here formative assessment also emphasised quality feedback to learners. Teachers were expected to provide supportive feedback to learners on their daily work (Torrance & Pryor, 1998).

In the UK, formative assessment has been used in institutions of further and higher education learning to enhance learning. Teachers are taught to incorporate practices of formative assessment in their teaching practice (Daly, Pachler, Mor & Mellar, 2010). Formative assessment also forms part of the curriculum for the postgraduate certificate in education (Daly *et al.*, 2010). The book by Black and Wiliam (2003) about the principles and practices of formative assessment to enhance learning is used as a basic text in the postgraduate certificate programme (Daly *et al.*, 2010).

The potential of formative assessment to support learning has been recognised in countries such as Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and United States of America. These countries make much use of formative assessment in their education systems, having adopted principles of formative assessment from the Assessment Reform Group (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). According to Brown *et al.* (2009), countries who have adopted the principles of formative assessment from the Assessment Reform Group in their curriculum policies and classroom practice are likely to follow good international practice.

From the review of international literature on formative assessment it is apparent that countries have various reasons for introducing formative assessment into their policies and programmes and for supporting formative assessment practices. The literature also shows that countries differ on how they implement formative assessment in their schooling system.

In Hong Kong, prior to 1999, the education system was dominated by excessive testing and examining (Carless, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2009). From 1999 to 2001, educational reform was carried out through a project entitled “*Learning How to Learn*”, which had the specific goal of introducing formative assessment into classroom practice in primary and secondary schools (Carless, 2005). The main reasons for introducing formative assessment into their curriculum were to reduce excessive testing and examining and to provide information for both learners and teachers to improve learning and support teaching (Carless, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2009). The project was influenced by Black and Wiliam’s 1998 seminal review with the intention of putting the research into practice.

According to Carless (2005), important aspects of the implementation of formative assessment in Hong Kong are that: their principles of assessment focus on teachers and learners sharing the learning goals and for learners to recognise the standards they are aiming for. Formative assessment also encourages teachers to view assessment as part of the learning process and the use of effective feedback to inform learners of their strengths and weaknesses. Further than that, formative assessment encourages the use of assessment to probe higher-order thinking skills, creativity and understanding (Carless, 2005). Another important fact about formative assessment in Hong Kong reported by Forrester and Wong (2008) is that it focuses on collaborative assessment between the teacher and the learners and involves learners in carrying out self and peer-assessment.

In the USA, there is a strong focus on formative assessment to raise educational standards (Brookhart, Moss & Long, 2010). Formative assessment was introduced under the “*No Child Left Behind Act*” project of 2001; funds and resources were allocated by the state to allow the implementation of formative assessment and for teachers’ professional training in formative assessment. It is common in the USA that teachers participate in enquiry learning for professional development of formative assessment (Brookhart *et al.*, 2010). Brookhart reported that in many schools in the USA, formative assessment is conducted during instruction in order to give teachers and learners a clear idea of learners’ performance levels relative to the learning targets and how teachers might address challenges experienced by learners.

The research conducted by Gallagher and Worth (2008) reveals distinctions in the implementation of formative assessment in five states in the south-western regions of the USA. The aim of their study was to explore policies, programmes and practices of formative assessment in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Gallagher and Worth (2008) found that main aims of the implementation of formative assessment in these five states were to improve learning outcomes for all learners, to promote effective instructional practices across districts and to create a balance in the states’ comprehensive assessment system. However, it was found that state education agency policies and programmes varied across the south-eastern region.

Gallagher and Worth (2008) reported that a range of state laws and formal state directives were found in Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas. In Arkansas the academic improvement plan specified that the districts should implement the formative assessment component, but there were no guidelines for reaching that goal; as a result, some districts in Arkansas purchased a tool for formative assessment. In Texas formative assessment was implemented through the Technology Immersion Pilot, a project that administered online diagnostic assessment through test items provided to each district. However, in Louisiana the state allowed the Department of Education to provide all districts with an online formative assessment system, including a pool of custom items which were aligned to standards and training in the collection and reporting of data for formative purposes.

From the study by Gallagher and Worth (2008), I learnt that the use of formative assessment as an external assessment measure did not assist teaching or learners' learning. This implies that if formative assessment is not implemented effectively, it is unlikely to achieve its purpose, which is to support teaching and improve learning.

In England, the government strongly supports formative assessment. It has authorised the use of high-stakes tests as part of formative assessment. However, proponents of formative assessment do not support the use of summative measures for formative assessment, as they argue that tests and examinations measure the achievement of the learners instead of helping them improve their work (Stobart, 2008; Swaffield, 2011; Wiliam *et al.*, 2004). According to Stobart (2008), the school system in England is misinterpreting the practice of formative assessment: it has a managerial and monitoring function rather than contributing to learning. Wiliam *et al* (2004) question the use of tests for formative assessment: they hold that tests focus on recalling facts instead of encouraging higher-order thinking skills. I agree that tests should not be used for formative assessment, as they do not provide immediate feedback to learners to improve their learning.

The literature presented above shows that there is a vast corpus of research on the practice of formative assessment in developed countries. It is evident that developed countries emphasise formative assessment in their education system. It is also clear

that developed countries are able to implement formative assessment successfully in their policies because of the availability of funds and resources provided by the state at the national and local level. However, in some of those countries the implementation of formative assessment is not well understood and executed.

2.4 STUDIES ON FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

There is an apparent lack of research studies on formative assessment in the South African context. Therefore I studied international literature on this topic. The international literature on formative assessment covers several aspects of formative assessment. Some studies explore teachers' use of such assessment, while others aim to develop it in the classroom and support teachers with its implementation. Some studies explore the practice of key components of formative assessment, such as sharing of learning objectives, feedback, questioning and involvement of learners through self and peer-assessment in supporting learning.

Brown *et al.* (2009) conducted a study related closely to the present study. They examined the conceptions and practice of formative assessment among primary and secondary teachers in Hong Kong. However, they followed a quantitative approach; they collected data on teachers' conceptions and practices among a large number of teachers by means of a questionnaire, while the present study collected data from seven teachers using qualitative data collection instruments.

In the same study, Brown *et al.* (2009) measured four conceptions of assessment: assessment improves teaching and learning; assessment makes schools and teachers accountable; assessment makes learners accountable; and assessment is irrelevant. Their study reveals strong links between learners' accountability and improvement in teachers' conceptions and practices of assessment. They found that the majority of teachers believed that assessment supported learners' achievements in summative assessments. These teachers often use assessment in their classrooms to evaluate learners' achievements, however, they neglect the formative role of assessment.

Some studies of formative assessment also focus on the development of teachers' formative assessment skills. These include a qualitative study conducted by Torrance and Pryor (2001) in the United Kingdom, which intended to build on basic research already carried out by university researchers by investigating issues from a more practical and applied perspective. The aim of the study was to explore how a collaborative action research approach can be used for the professional development of teachers' formative assessment skills in primary schools. The study was conducted in collaboration with two universities in the UK and a team of teacher-researchers.

The study by Torrance and Pryor (2001) reported changes in classroom practice when teachers use formative assessment, particularly in clarification and communication of assessment criteria to the learners. It revealed that professional development for formative assessment assisted teachers to communicate clear quality criteria to the learners. It was reported in the same study that teachers learn to use a variety of questions to enhance learners' understanding and to guide progress towards the achievement of the learning goals. In addition, teachers learn to develop scaffolding activities to support learners' learning. Learners were encouraged to engage in a dialogue with each other as well as with the teacher. The study further revealed that teachers were positive about the development of formative assessment in their classroom practice.

Webb and Jones (2009) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the impact of teachers' professional development for formative assessment in primary schools in the United Kingdom. They came up with a programme to develop the skills of teachers so as to enable formative assessment to be used to support and improve learners' learning. They collected data by various methods, namely structured lesson observations; structured interviews, informal discussions and scrutiny of learners' workbooks. They used the activity theory to identify and analyse changes in the classroom. Their study reported changes in the roles of learners and teachers: learners were taking more responsibility for their own learning and supported one another in assessing their learning. It was also reported that teachers accommodated this change in their planning and interventions.

An important fact about the study conducted by Webb and Jones (2009) is that for formative assessment to be implemented successfully, a number of conditions need to be considered. These include teachers' beliefs, learners' beliefs, teachers' facilitation skills and the culture of the classrooms. Apparently, there is no single model for changing teachers' practice of formative assessment. Webb and Jones (2009) state that the important thing is that the approach to the development of formative assessment should help teachers to identify their individual needs and priorities and to do joint planning, to experiment and to share successes and failures, observations and evaluations.

William *et al.* (2004) conducted a qualitative study to examine the impact on learners' achievements when teachers develop formative assessment during their classroom practice. The study was conducted in England with 24 secondary school teachers and their learners in mathematics and science classes. The sample of the study was drawn from schools that had already begun to think of developing formative assessment in their classroom practice. The rationale of this sampling was to allow teachers who had knowledge and interest in formative assessment to participate, since it was advantageous for those teachers to disseminate information to other teachers in their school and other schools.

The study by William, *et al.* (2004) followed a collaborative approach whereby researchers suggested ideas how teachers could integrate formative assessment in their subjects instead of imposing them on teachers. They adopted the approach that there was no prescribed model for the effective implementation of formative assessment. In the early stage of teachers' professional development, they introduced teachers to the principles of formative assessment and allowed them to develop their own plans. During the second stage of the study teachers had an opportunity to discuss their own plans and to plan how they could put those plans into practice more effectively. In the third stage teachers were helped to integrate formative assessment principles in their subjects. The study indicated major improvements in the performance of learners whose teachers participated in the study.

From the above studies, it is apparent that formative assessment has the potential to improve teaching and support learners' learning. It is also clear that the success of formative assessment relies on the positive attitude of teachers towards formative assessment. It is also important to note that teachers' practice of formative assessment varied in each context.

2.5 OVERVIEW OF THE COMPONENTS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The review of international literature indicated components essential to the practice of formative assessment. These components are common to various researchers of formative assessment as adopted from the Black and Wiliam (1998) review and other teacher development research studies, such as Black and Wiliam (2003). These components are the sharing of the learning objectives with the learners; communication of the assessment criteria; giving effective feedback; and involving learners through self and peer-assessment.

Empirical studies of the practice of formative assessment confirmed that if these components are implemented effectively, learners stand a good chance to improve their learning (Black & Wiliam, 2003).

Researchers of formative assessment refer to these components as key strategies for formative assessment (Daly *et al.*, 2010; Bennett, 2011). These researchers propose that these components should form a framework for formative assessment that should be used to direct the instructional process. They presented components of formative assessment as part of the formative assessment process. They also assert that components of formative assessment are important to clarify the role of the teachers, peers and the learners during the learning process.

Wiliamson (2004) dealt with components of formative assessment within the formative assessment cycle of reading. He states that a good framework for the formative assessment of reading should communicate clear learning targets to learners, interpret the learners' work, behaviour and discourse for what it says about

the achievement, provide clear and descriptive feedback tied to the learning objectives and learners' needs and provide suggestions for improvement.

Swaffield (2011) mentions that components of formative assessment should be dealt with in relation to one another, as they form part of the cycle. Teachers should have a good understanding of each of these components, as they are the key to effective formative assessment.

On the other hand, some researchers discussed components of formative assessment as separate units without indicating how these components relate to one another (Brookhart *et al.*, 2010). It makes sense that components of formative assessment should be dealt with in relation to one another; they are discussed separately here since the intention is to address the role of each component in supporting learners' learning. They are addressed in the following section.

2.5.1 CLARIFYING AND SHARING THE LEARNING INTENTIONS WITH LEARNERS

Researchers of classroom practice agree that effective use of formative assessment requires teachers to clarify and share learning intentions with the learners (Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Black & Wiliam, 2003; Birenbaum, Kimron, Shilton & Shahaf-Barzilay, 2009; Wiliam *et al.*, 2004; O'Brien, 2008). They also agree that effective use of formative assessment is influenced by the learners' awareness and understanding of the learning goals and objectives that they should achieve. According to Black and Wiliam (2003), learners' understanding of learning objectives can be improved through discussion with their peers.

In addition, researchers of classroom practice share the view that teachers should communicate and clarify the learning intentions to the learners at the beginning of each lesson. According to Black and Wiliam (2003), sharing the learning intentions at the beginning of the lesson makes learners aware of what they are striving for. The implication is that teachers should know and understand the learning goals in order for them to identify the lesson objectives. Teachers should communicate the learning intentions to the learners, and learners have the responsibility to understand the learning intentions (Black & Wiliam, 2003).

Another important fact about the communication of the learning objectives is that they should assist teachers and learners to establish progress toward the ultimate goal (Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009). They add that teachers should be able to select relevant resources which would help learners to accomplish the learning objectives, as this information would assist teachers to determine where learners are and how they can reach the targets. In other words, if teachers do not understand the learning goals, there is a risk of inconsistent practice of formative assessment, since formative assessment is influenced by teachers' interpretation of the curriculum and understanding of the learning goals.

2.5.2 SHARING THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA WITH THE LEARNERS

Researchers of formative assessment argue that it is imperative for teachers to communicate clear assessment criteria to the learners (Reddy, 2004; Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009; Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008; Wiliam, 2006). They agree that teachers should communicate the assessment criterion at the beginning of each lesson. Bennett (2011) suggested that teachers should communicate the assessment criterion at the time they clarify the learning objectives, as this may assist learners to know at an early stage of the lesson on what and how they will be assessed on. However, Black and Wiliam (2003) argue that the assessment criterion should be communicated throughout the learning process, as this would help learners and the teacher to stay focused on what needs to be achieved. In my view, reminding learners of the assessment criteria will help learners to stay motivated.

Researchers of formative assessment emphasise that learners have the responsibility to understand the assessment criterion of the lesson (Swaffield, 2011). For the learners to be able to interpret the assessment criterion, they need to apply their cognitive skills. He suggests that learners should scrutinise various exemplars of formative assessment, compare exemplars and formulate the success criteria.

Another important fact about the assessment criterion, mentioned by Wiliam (2006), is that it should address the learning objectives and activities, as this may help learners to conduct self-evaluation, set targets for themselves and reflect on their own learning. The study conducted by Torrance and Pryor (2001) confirmed that

when the teacher shares and clarifies the learning intention to the learners, learners stand a good chance of improving their learning.

2.5.3 EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING

Effective questioning is a critical aspect of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). According to Bennett (2011), good questioning “engineers effective classroom discussions” because it helps the teacher and learners to determine where the learner is in terms of the progress in learning. Some researchers of formative assessment refer to questioning as a dialogue that takes place during the interaction between the teacher and the learners (Hume & Coll, 2009; Taras, 2009) while Bell and Cowie (2001) argue that effective questioning activates the dialogue, that the ensuing dialogue plays an important part in revealing learners’ current performance and that it effectively enhances further learning. They suggest that the dialogue should allow the learners to generate opportunities for furthering their understanding. Through dialogue learners should receive feedback on what they know, understand and can do.

The review of literature on classroom practice (e.g. the study conducted by Torrance and Pryor (2001), which intended to support teachers with formative assessment, indicates that questioning is an area which most teachers struggle with; teachers are not able to develop questions which assess higher-order thinking. According to Baird (2010), the main challenge regarding questioning is that teachers are not able to use open-ended questions to extract diagnostic information.

2.5.4 SELF AND PEER-ASSESSMENT

According to Black and Wiliam (1998), effective use of formative assessment depends on the active involvement of learners in their own assessment. This view has been supported by various researchers of formative assessment (Heritage, 2007; Forrester & Wong, 2008). Two techniques have been suggested by these researchers to promote involvement of learners, namely self and peer-assessment. Self-assessment aims to promote the involvement of the learners in their own learning, while peer assessment involves learners in the learning of their peers. In

other words, learners should have two roles during peer-assessment: they are being assessed and they are also assessors.

Sadler (1989) asserts that when learners develop skills of self and peer-assessment, they collaborate with their teachers in developing a shared understanding of their current learning status and of what they need to do to move forward in their learning. This engagement promotes metacognition among learners as they reflect on their learning, monitor what they know, understand and determine when they need more information (Heritage, 2007).

Researchers of formative assessment mention that when learners are involved in self and peer assessment, they develop critical cognitive skills which will make them to be able to reflect on their own learning (Forrester & Wong, 2008). These skills may help learners to develop self-regulation strategies as they learn how to adapt their learning strategies to meet their own needs.

Research on formative assessment confirms positive effects on learners' learning when learners use self-assessment. The major benefits of self-assessment, as stated by Carless (2005), are that it improves learners' participation and encourages them to interact with one another rather than just with the teacher. In his study, Carless (2005) reports that through self-assessment learners developed a sense of responsibility for their errors as they became sensitive to grammatical errors and found ways to correct them. This resulted in teachers appreciating the value of self-assessment, since it promoted self-regulation.

The potential of self-assessment to support learning was also reported in a study conducted by Wong (in Carless, 2005). In his study he found that self-assessment helped learners to improve their work; since learners asked for a second opportunity to do their presentation after assessing their own performance. This helped the learners to improve their performance after they had been given the second chance.

Another study that reported on improvement of learning when teachers use self and peer assessment was reported by Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999). They cited series of benefits for learners when they used peer assessment, which included that

peer-assessment allowed learners to revise their work and incorporate new understanding and constructive feedback into subsequent learning; it gave them a chance to demonstrate what they were capable of doing; it helped them realise what they had not learned and how their peers and teacher could help them develop critical-thinking skills and understand the subject.

Researchers of formative assessment agree that learners accept formative assessment better if they have a clear picture of the learning targets they should attain. They argue that if learners have clear understanding of the learning intention, they can become much more committed and able to carry their own assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). However, the research conducted by Curtis (2011) on formative assessment cited that self and peer-assessment are not likely to impact on learning outcomes, since learners lack meaningful understanding of learning objectives and use inappropriate assessment criteria. The study conducted by Hartzenberg (2000), which focuses on how teachers promote self and peer-assessment, revealed that teachers are not competent in supporting learners with self and peer-assessment skills. Hartzenberg (2000) also found that learners are not trained in the development of self-assessment skills. He suggests that teachers should help learners to develop an increasing critical awareness of their own achievement.

Although self and peer-assessment have been considered important to support learners' learning, doubts exist about the learners' objectivity when they assess other pupils' work. Mok (2011) investigated the conceptions of formative assessment among Junior Secondary learners in an English oral class in Hong Kong. Employing a case study approach to get the learners' conceptions, he found that while learners acknowledged the benefits of peer-assessment, the majority of learners said they were not good enough to carry peer-assessment. The same challenge was reported by Wong (Carless, 2005), who suggested that teachers should provide learners with checklists to facilitate learners' comments on their peers' performance.

2.5.5 FEEDBACK FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Feedback is a critical component of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Researchers of formative assessment agree that feedback is imperative to improve learners' learning. They also share a common understanding of what constitutes quality feedback for formative assessment (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996; Brookhart *et al.*, 2010; Lee, 2008). According to Brookhart *et al.* (2010), feedback for formative assessment should lead to positive action, describe learners' work against clear criteria, focus learners on specific strategies for improvement and involve learners in self and peer-assessment. Lee (2008) mentions that feedback for formative assessment should promote involvement of learners through analysing their work and should allow self-regulation of learning. Black and Wiliam (2006) emphasise that feedback for formative assessment should report on the learners' strengths and weaknesses and give suggestions for improvements.

Lee (2008) conducted a study which focused on exploring feedback in Hong Kong secondary classrooms for writing. In his study, they developed six characteristics of effective feedback for writing, which they adapted from Wiliam's (2001) definition of formative feedback and the principles of good feedback practice for writing (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). They stated that feedback is effective if learners are told about their strengths and what needs to be done; if information is communicated clearly in terms of what they have learnt, clarifies good performance and promotes a close link between teaching, learning and assessment. It must also provide learners with opportunities to act on teacher feedback and to improve their work and encourage learners to play an active role in managing their own learning. Lastly, it must be used to improve teaching.

The review of international and national literature indicates that feedback is a most challenging area to teachers (Nakabugo, 2003; Adendorff, 2007; Lee, 2008). The major challenge identified by Lee (2008) is that teachers fail to distinguish feedback that focuses on formative assessment and feedback that focuses on summative assessment. In the same study Lee (2008) reveals that teachers' feedback only reports on learners' errors in the assessment task and does not report on strengths and areas which need improvement. The same point was made in Wiliam (2006),

who distinguished between summative and formative feedback. He cited that feedback has a summative value if it intends to find out what learners have learnt, whereas feedback with formative value reports on strengths and errors and gives suggestions for improvement.

2.6 CHALLENGES REGARDING THE PRACTICE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The literature indicates various challenges faced by formative assessment practices worldwide. These challenges include the lack of a common definition of formative assessment, lack of formative assessment theory and the poor classroom practices of formative assessment. Challenges regarding the formative assessment are reported all over the world, even in the United Kingdom, where formative assessment is well established (Carless, 2005).

The present study focuses on challenges and strengths of formative assessment in classroom practice. Challenges regarding the implementation of formative assessment reported in this study include teachers' lack of knowledge of formative assessment (Carless, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2009); management of formative assessment information (Carless, 2005; Brookhart *et al.*, 2010); validity and reliability of formative assessment information (Singh, 2004; Carless, 2005; Paris, 2007) and teachers' lack of pedagogic content knowledge.

2.6.1 LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Studies of formative assessment indicate that in many classrooms formative assessment is not effective because teachers do not have knowledge and skills for formative assessment (Carless, 2005; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2009). According to these researchers, teachers lacked knowledge because they did not undergo training in formative assessment. Carless (2005) mentions that even those teachers who had attended training courses complained that these were not enough to equip them with skills and knowledge on formative assessment. Teachers' lack of knowledge of formative assessment was also reported by Nakabugo in the study conducted in Uganda (2003). He found that many teachers did not know what formative assessment was and how they should implement it in the classroom.

The literature indicates that teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in formative assessment makes classroom practice difficult, since the success of formative assessment depends on teachers having knowledge in order to develop effective strategies to support it (Carless, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2009). Researchers suggested that teachers can only acquire skills and knowledge for formative assessment through effective training and support.

2.6.2 MANAGEMENT OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

The practice of formative assessment in the classroom requires teachers to have information about the progress of each learner, so that they can assist learners accordingly (Carless, 2005). Literature indicates that researchers of formative assessment are concerned about how teachers should manage formative assessment data for each learner. There are various views and concerns regarding the management of such data.

Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) propose that teachers should manage formative assessment information for each learner through record-keeping. This view is supported by various researchers, who state that the purpose of keeping records for formative assessment is to enable the teacher to assist individual learners. Sadler (1989) also states that teachers should track performance for each learner in order to determine challenges and gaps regarding the achievements of the learning goals. However, Ruiz-Primo (2011) argues that it may be difficult for teachers to record everyday data for each learner and to interpret and use the evidence in large classrooms because of time constraints.

Some researchers do not support record-keeping for formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Nakabugo, 2003; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Nakabugo (2003) argues that teachers use marks and grades without giving information on how learners should improve their performance. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that teachers' use of records for formative assessment is a managerial function and compromises the learning function; teachers give marks without any intention of using them. Even though Black and Wiliam (1998) do not support the recording of formative assessment data, they emphasise that keeping records of formative

assessment data should lead to actions by teachers aimed at promoting learners' performance. Marshall and Drummond (2006) do not support the recording of formative assessments either, as they state that many teachers use formative assessment for managerial recording purposes rather than for directly contributing to learners' learning. Baird (2010) concludes that if the management of formative assessment is not well understood by teachers, it may lead to a heavy recording burden.

Challenges regarding the recording of formative assessment data were identified in several studies. Carless (2005) reported on teachers' attempts to introduce formative assessment through a target-oriented curriculum initiative in Hong Kong. The study revealed that teachers spent a lot of time recording data about learners, as they had confounded formative assessment with the recording of learner performance. Carless (2005) found that those records of achievement stated what the learners were able to do; partially able to do and not yet able to do. Teachers did not have the skill or the time to support learners with feedback; they were too busy collecting assessment data to help learners improve as well.

The same findings were reported by Topping and Fisher (2003) in their study on formative assessment of reading comprehension in the United Kingdom. In that study, they reported that teachers found it difficult to monitor and manage the day-to-day learner data – they were snowed under with papers and marks which did not enable them to support the learners' learning.

The literature cited above shows that the practice of formative assessment poses serious challenges to many teachers, as they lack knowledge and skills. They also lack strategies for managing and dealing with formative assessment, especially in large classrooms. As the literature shows, if teachers lack knowledge of formative assessment, they may end up wasting time performing tasks which have no impact on supporting learners' learning, e.g. recording marks that will not be used for any purpose.

2.6.3 TEACHERS' POOR CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

Another challenge cited in the literature which impacts negatively on the implementation of formative assessment is teachers' poor content knowledge (Brookhart *et al.*, 2010). Content knowledge refers to knowledge of the subject and should help teachers to know what to teach or what learners should learn. Researchers of assessment emphasise the importance of subject matter for teachers in order to be able to assist the learners accordingly, since formative assessment is dependent on the development of skills and knowledge of the subject (Crooks, 1988). According to Brookhart *et al.* (2010), teachers who have good content knowledge are able to communicate clear learning objectives to learners and can interpret learners' work, behaviour and achievement, and they are able to provide descriptive feedback which is related to the learning objectives and learners' needs

Watson (Carless, 2005), in his study on formative assessment of mathematics, observed two teachers as they practised formative assessment. He realised that both teachers had sound knowledge of the principles of formative assessment; nevertheless they struggled to put those principles into practice, as they had little content knowledge of mathematics. According to Watson, the interaction between teacher and learners was not a complex engagement with mathematics, and their formative assessment practices did not provide explicit information about progress in mathematics. He emphasised the necessity of good subject knowledge in formative assessment, arguing that the success of formative assessment depends on knowledge and skills in that specific subject.

Ruiz-Primo (2011) asserts that teachers should have pedagogical knowledge for formative assessment. He suggests that besides content knowledge, teachers should possess pedagogical knowledge, which should help teachers to interpret and act instinctively and contingently on learners' contributions. Pedagogical knowledge refers to strategies employed by teachers to support learners in learning. Heritage (2007) supports this view and remarks that teachers' content knowledge should include instructional strategies, since learners differ in learning styles and abilities. From the above discussion it is apparent that formative assessment practices are

effective when the teachers have sufficient knowledge of the subject and its pedagogy.

2.6.4 LACK OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT INFORMATION

Another issue cited in the literature is the quality of the information gained through formative assessment. Generally it is accepted that the results of any assessment are effective if they are valid and reliable. According to MacAfee and Leong (2007), the validity of an assessment leads to good decisions, good understanding of the learner and good corrective interventions. Research on assessment indicates that teachers can increase reliability by using different assessment strategies and assess on different occasions.

The validity and reliability of information obtained through formative assessment has been challenged by Singh (2004) and Carless (2005). According to Singh (2004), teachers are not knowledgeable about the reliability and validity of the formative assessment information. This also emerged in a study conducted by Carless (2005) in Hong Kong, where teachers participating in the study reported concerns about how formative assessment information can be accurate.

Black and Wiliam (2003) argue that reliability and validity should not be considered in formative assessment, since formative assessment is not used for accountability. Black and Wiliam (2003) contend that formative assessment is usually informal, embedded in all aspects of teaching and learning and conducted by different teachers as part of their own diverse and individual teaching styles, and that its main purpose is to promote learners' learning and teaching. However, Bennett (2011) argues that validity and reliability should be applicable to formative assessment, since formative assessment entails making conclusions about what learners can know and do.

2.7 TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The review of literature shows that a number of researchers suggest teachers' professional development for formative assessment because teachers lack skills and

knowledge to implement formative assessment effectively (Black & William 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 2000; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Carless, 2005; William *et al.*, 2004). In their view, the main purpose of teachers' professional development for formative assessment is to develop skills and expertise of teachers to enable formative assessment to be used to support and improve learners' learning.

Researchers have different views of the nature of professional development for formative assessment. According to Carless (2005), development for formative assessment should be on-going, involve close monitoring and should address factors which impede its implementation. According to Brookhart *et al.* (2010), professional development for formative assessment should take place through direct instruction and enquiry learning in teachers' classrooms. William *et al.* (2004) emphasised that professional development for formative assessment should equip teachers with content knowledge and suggest strategies to deal with learners' responses, and it should encourage active participation by teachers.

The literature shows that teachers' professional development for formative assessment takes place in various countries. Even in the countries where formative assessment is well established, it is common for teachers in primary and secondary schools to undergo in-service training for formative assessment practices (Webb & Jones, 2009; William *et al.*, 2004).

The literature also shows that teachers' professional development for formative assessment takes place through action research. Action research for formative assessment has been reported in various countries (Carless, 2005). Brookhart *et al.* (2010) consider action research an excellent technique to foster the professional growth of individual teachers. According to Waters-Adams (2006), action research is appropriate to understand how to make one's practice better. Researchers recognise action research as appropriate to improve classroom practice. Action research has been proven to be effective for teachers' professional development in formative assessment. This has been confirmed in various studies (Carless, 2005).

The study conducted by Brookhart *et al.* (2010) in the USA focused on teacher enquiry into formative assessment practices in remedial reading classes. Six remedial reading teachers in a rural district participated in a form of professional development called “*Teaching as International Learning*”, based on enquiry learning. The study reported improvements and changes in teachers’ classroom practice when they used action research for professional development in formative assessment. Teachers were able to implement components of formative assessment actively; they confirmed improvements in their practice, they wanted to stay in their current field longer and they showed openness to learning.

Another study of teacher development in formative assessment was conducted by Torrance and Pryor (2001). They used action research to investigate and develop formative assessment in the classroom. Their study was prompted by the finding of Torrance and Pryor (2001) that teachers implemented formative assessment differently. For example, teachers differed in the way they shared learning goals and assessment. Thus, the study focused on equipping teachers to share and clarify learning intentions with the learners. The study also aimed at supporting teachers with the management of their own classroom practice of formative assessment. Torrance and Pryor (2001) state that teachers should be able to investigate and reflect upon their classroom practice. The study reported positive impacts on the teachers and the learners as teachers learned principles of communicating and shared clear learning goals with the learners.

A study for professional development in formative assessment was conducted by Frey and Fisher (2008) in an urban American elementary school. Frey and Fisher (2008) used common formative assessment as a source of professional development in writing in the lower grades. The aim of using common formative assessment for professional development was to link assessment with instructions and plan interventions for learners who continued to struggle with reading and writing. The study was prompted by the realisation (among teachers during the staff development meeting) that they were applying formative assessment differently; using different assessment strategies, teaching different content and using different teaching materials. Teachers then joined reading specialists to develop a common practice of

formative assessment for writing, so that teachers at each grade level could examine learners' achievements. The study revealed that through professional development, common formative assessments helped teachers develop a common formative assessment practice.

A study at the University of Minnesota was conducted by Sato, Wei and Darling-Hammond (2008) on improving teachers' assessment practices through the National Board Certification process as a means of professional development. A 3-year longitudinal comparison group design was used to examine how the mathematics and science teachers' classroom assessment was affected by the National Board Certification. To achieve the National Board Certification, candidates were expected to complete a rigorous two-part assessment that included a portfolio completed by the teacher at the school site, which incorporated learners' work samples, video tapes of classroom practice and extensive analyses and reflection based upon these artefacts. The portfolio was meant to allow teachers to present a picture of their practices as shaped by the particular context of the teacher's school. This study confirmed that the teachers who had undergone some form of professional development had improved in their practice as teachers' reported change in their understanding of assessment. 90% of the teachers in the study indicated that their classroom practices had improved as a result of their participation in the National Board portfolio assessment process. They also reported that their ability to assess learners' learning had improved.

The studies discussed above indicate that teachers benefit from professional development in formative assessment. In these studies teacher development focused on supporting teachers with strategies for formative assessment. However, Curtis (2011) maintained that the responsibility for developing formative assessment lies with individual teacher, who must find ways to integrate formative assessment into her classroom experience. While this opinion is supported, it is suggested that teachers should be supported with practical examples in order for them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. This might also help them develop a positive attitude towards formative assessment in their subjects and boost their confidence in teaching their subjects. Carless (2005) points out that teachers' lack of knowledge

can negatively influence their attitude towards their subjects and formative assessment.

2.8 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In South Africa, there is limited literature presenting empirical evidence about the practice of formative assessment. The review of South African literature on assessment in general indicates on-going concerns surrounding teacher development in classroom assessment. Most teachers struggle with the new assessment practices, which include the practice of formative assessment. It is evident in the study conducted by Lumby (2007) on teaching for outcomes and its effect on assessment practices in Literacy and communications classroom, as teachers complained they have not been trained on assessment at tertiary level. In the same study, teachers indicated that they had attended only one in-service training course on assessment, which did not give them the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with classroom assessment.

The use of formative assessment to support teaching and learning has been emphasised since the introduction of outcomes-based education (OBE) in 1998 in the General Education and Training (GET) band. The DoE (2007b), in the National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for schools in the General Education and Training Band, stated that formative assessment should be part of the learning and teaching process and should take place on a continuous basis. The implication is that when the teachers plan their daily teaching, they should think how formative assessment activities will be used to improve their teaching and learners' learning.

Curriculum 2005 was developed on the assumption that continuous assessment would include a formative function of supporting teaching and learning (Nakabugo & Siebörger, 1999). Important aspects of formative assessment in Curriculum 2005 include that teachers should use different assessment strategies and those strategies should encourage self and peer assessment to further reinforce learning. Strategies should also encourage the use of feedback and provide corrective actions (DoE, 2007a).

The Curriculum and Policy Assessment Statement (CAPS) in South Africa requires the use of formative assessment in all subjects (DBE, 2011c). The CAPS document provides teachers with possible informal assessment activities that serve as stepping stones to prepare learners for formal assessment tasks. Although formative assessment forms part of the South African curriculum, there is no research that supplies conclusive evidence of this practice in classroom learning. Moreover, there are no guidelines to assist teachers with the implementation of formative assessment.

The review of South African literature indicates that formative assessment is not well understood by many teachers. This was evident in a study conducted by Singh (2004) in South Africa on school-based assessment. He reported that formative assessment was dealt with under the umbrella of classroom assessment, which is mostly continuous assessment. Consequently, some teachers refer to formative assessment as on-going and recurring assessment, while they are not aware of an important element in formative assessment such as feedback.

In another study, conducted by Nakabugo and Siebörger (1999) on the practice of formative assessment in Curriculum 2005 reading in primary schools, it was found that most teachers fail to assess learners formatively. Nakabugo and Siebörger (1999) classified teachers' use of formative assessment into three categories according to the number and frequency of appropriate and inappropriate assessment strategies. Out of seven teachers, only one was regarded as a frequent formative assessor. This teacher frequently engaged the learners co-operatively and interactively on the given assessment tasks. She frequently gave feedback to the learners in a way that supported their learning. Three teachers were classified as occasional formative assessors, as they did not always use appropriate assessment strategies to assess learners' ability to read. They occasionally used classroom assessment as a means of supporting and increasing learners' thinking and learning respectively. Lastly, three other teachers were seen as infrequent formative assessors. These teachers did not use assessment as a means of negotiating meaning and understanding with the learners, but simply told learners what was supposed to be done.

Mofokeng (2004) states that the in-service training provided by the DBE did not address the practical implementation needs of the teachers and did not ensure that professional knowledge was transmitted and that teachers were prepared to implement the new knowledge and skills. In another study, conducted by Ramothlale (2008) on the appropriateness of the current assessment model (continuous assessment) and common tasks for assessment (CTA) for the General Education and Training band, teachers said that they were not getting support regarding assessment from the senior management team. Ramothlale also reported that many school management teams (SMTs) appeared to be unfamiliar with the present assessment practices, and that this might be the reason they were not offering essential support to the teachers.

From the above discussion it is apparent that in South Africa assessment is a most challenging field for teachers. There is not much literature to support teachers on assessment, including formative assessment, in their subjects. Consequently, there is an overwhelming need to assist teachers with assessment.

2.9 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the broader literature on the essential features of formative assessment was reviewed. The review of the literature confirms positive results when teachers use formative assessment to support learning. However, there seem to be gaps in empirical research in the lower grades; most studies focus on higher grades and especially on mathematics and science (Adendorff, 2007; Sato *et al.*, 2008). Such gaps call for more empirical research, especially in the lower grades, to support teachers in their practice of formative assessment. The literature on formative assessment in South Africa indicates that teachers lack knowledge and skills in formative assessment because they are not trained.

In Chapter 3 the literature on teaching and the assessment of reading comprehension will be reviewed.

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CHAPTER 3

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 formative assessment was discussed at length. The argument in this study is that formative assessment has the potential to enhance teaching and improve learning especially concerning reading comprehension. In Chapter 3 I present the literature review on reading comprehension which focuses largely on the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension. Firstly, formative assessment is defined. Then South African literature on guidelines for teaching reading and comprehension are discussed. The development of formative assessment in the early grades and strategies for teaching reading comprehension are also described and discussed. Lastly, the literature on the assessment of reading comprehension is reviewed.

3.2 THE CONCEPT OF READING COMPREHENSION

The concept of reading comprehension is central to this study, and therefore it is necessary to explain how it is understood and used in this study. The definition of reading comprehension is based on a review of national and international literature.

Some researchers of reading view comprehension in a narrow perspective as the activity that takes place during the reading process. Factors such as word recognition; decoding skills, vocabulary knowledge and reading fluency are seen as influencing learners' ability to achieve meaning (McNeil, 1992; Parker, Hasbrouk & Denton, 2002; Block & Pressley, 2002). According to Block and Pressley (2002), for the reader to apply reading comprehension strategies effectively, he or she should be able to recognize most of the words in a text. Block and Pressley (2002) argue that teachers should teach decoding skills, teach vocabulary and encourage the development of sight words. Research conducted by Brownell (in Closs, 2010) revealed that readers who lack fluency spend excessive time decoding, which leaves less short-term memory available for comprehension.

Another perspective of reading comprehension was provided by Van Kraayenoord, Beinicke, Schlagmüller and Schneider (2012). In their view, word identification is very important for enhancing reading comprehension. Neddenriep and Hale (2010), however, state that while reading skills are an essential foundation for understanding, these skills do not guarantee comprehension.

Recent theorists of reading view comprehension as a constructive and interactive process between the written text, the reader and the context in the construction of meaning from the print (Gunning, 2010; Oczkus, 2004). These researchers agree that although these three aspects have an influence on the comprehension, they do not take place in the same way with all learners. In support of the three aspects which influence reading comprehension, Gunning (2010) mentions the following, regarding the text he mentions that written text differs in type, theme or topic, style and level of difficulty. As regards the learners, he indicates that learners vary in the amount and type of prior knowledge they possess, the strategies they use, their attitude towards reading and their work habits. He adds that the context in which reading comprehension takes place has an influence on the comprehension of the written text. He argues that the context involves information about when, where and why the written text is being read.

Even though researchers of reading define the term “comprehension” differently, they have a common understanding of the levels at which comprehension has to take place. Two separate levels of comprehension, namely literal and higher-order, can be identified in the literature. Most researchers believe that learners in the Foundation Phase should start by demonstrating competence in literal comprehension. Literal comprehension focuses on understanding information that is directly stated in the text (Richeck, List & Lerner, 1983; Taverner, 1990). For Smith and Robinson (1980), literal comprehension focuses on the primary and direct meaning of the idea. In the classroom environment, teachers give practice in literal meaning when they ask questions to which the answer is stated directly in the text.

On the other hand, some researchers of reading believe that learners in the Foundation Phase should be encouraged to apply higher-order comprehension skills.

Higher-order involves the following skills: evaluating; interpreting; synthesizing and inferential reasoning. These cognitive skills require the learners to search for information that is not directly stated in the text (Taverner, 1990).

In this study, reading comprehension is described as a constructive process between the learner and the teacher to assist learners to construct meaning from the written text. The critical aspects of comprehension strategies (see section 3.5) that are closely related to the present study and that will assist with the data gathering process are examined. However, the focus is on the reading components that influence the reading comprehension process. Of interest to this study is how teachers use comprehension strategies in a formative manner to support the teaching of reading comprehension.

3.3 SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE ON READING, READING COMPREHENSION AND ASSESSMENT OF READING

The South African literature contains several studies on reading, reading comprehension and assessment of reading. Most of them emanate from the international studies that monitor and evaluate the quality of basic education, such as PIRLS and SACMEQ. Since 2008, a number of initiatives nationally have been taken by the South African government and Department of Basic Education to improve learners' performance; however, some initiatives have been described as not successful.

3.3.1 FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING CAMPAIGN

In response to learners' poor performance in literacy and numeracy in South Africa, as revealed by PILRS (2006) and SACMEQ (2010), the former minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor, launched the *Foundations for Learning* campaign in 2008. This was a four-year campaign focusing on the Foundation and Intermediate Phase intended to ensure that learners had solid foundations for learning. Teachers in the two phases underwent training in 2008 and 2009. The *Foundations for Learning* campaign intended to provide schools with clear directives as to what was expected of schools and teachers as regards performance levels. The target of the

Foundations for Learning campaign was that by 2011 all primary schools would achieve a minimum performance of 50% (DoE, 2008a).

The *Foundations for Learning* campaign included a clearer specification of the material learners should have access to. It also explained to teachers how they should implement the curriculum and stipulated the time needed for different learning activities such as reading and assessment. Regarding time allocation for literacy activities, all learners in the primary schools were expected to spend at least 30 minutes on reading for enjoyment daily.

As part of this campaign, most schools in the country participated in the standardized test called Annual National Assessment (ANA) in 2008 and 2009, which involved testing Grade 1-6 learners in Mathematics and Languages. The results of those assessments informed the massive standardized assessment which is now compulsory for all Grade 1-9 learners in public schools and independent schools that receive a grant from the South African government.

3.3.2 THE ANNUAL NATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Annual National Assessment is an initiative taken by the South African government and the Department of Basic Education to improve learners' results. The president of South Africa, in his 2010 State of the Nation address, made a commitment to an independent, ongoing national system of standardized testing in Grade 3, 6 and 9 and set the improvement targets of 60% for levels of performance in literacy and numeracy by 2014. Annual National Assessment is prioritized as a central tool for tracking progress in achieving the levels of literacy and numeracy. Its purpose is to provide credible and reliable information for monitoring progress in learner performance towards achieving the national goals of "improving the quality of basic education" (DBE, 2012a).

The ANA results should be used to monitor progress and to guide the planning and distribution of resources to help improve language and mathematics knowledge and skills in the grades concerned. ANA is written in the language of learning and

teaching of the schools, which may be the home language of the learners in the foundation phase (DBE, 2012a).

Five key areas are viewed as crucial to the success of the Annual National Assessment. It should serve as a diagnostic tool identifying areas of strength and weakness in teaching and learning; expose teachers to better assessment practices; provide districts with information to target schools in need of assistance; encourage schools to celebrate outstanding performance; and empower parents by providing them with information about the education of their children (DBE, 2012a).

The 2012 ANA report reveals that in Grade 3 the national literacy average score was 35% and in Grade 6 it was 28%. The overall learners' performance in comprehension skills was generally low to poor. In most cases, learners tended to attempt only simple questions, i.e. those that require them to either extract information directly stated in the text provided or give one-word answers. Many of the learners were unable to respond to questions that required higher-order skills such as analysing, comparing etc. (DBE, 2012a).

As regards reading comprehension levels in Grade 3 literacy, it was reported that learners struggled to make meaning of written text and demonstrate comprehension by combining pieces of information from different parts of the text or story to construct a comprehensive answer. They were also unable to demonstrate the ability to make meaning of the written text by extracting information directly from the text or story. It was easier for learners to directly extract information from a given text using frequently used words (DBE, 2012a).

As regards the use of learners' home language as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), the 2012 ANA report revealed that learners were better able to express themselves in their home language. This finding contributed massively to finding ways of encouraging learners and parents to see the value of accessing learning in a language that is known and familiar to the learners (DBE, 2012a).

From the discussion above it is clear that learners' performance was far below the minimum national target of 60% to be achieved by 2014. A huge effort is needed to ensure that learners' literacy is improved. The recommendations made by the DBE are that teachers, school managements and parents should take joint massive action to support learners in their respective capacities. However, the practical and classroom causes of the problem were not investigated. The argument in this study is that teachers should consider the use of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading and reading comprehension (DBE, 2012a).

3.3.3 OTHER SOUTH AFRICAN STUDIES REGARDING READING

Mudzielwana (2012) conducted a qualitative study on how teachers teach reading comprehension to Grade 3 Tshivenda-speaking learners in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Her study emanated from PIRLS (2006), which indicated low levels of reading performance. She reviewed the literature on the teaching of reading comprehension, whereas the present study reviews the literature on the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension. Since I believe that teaching and assessment are linked to each other as both are significant and play a positive role in improving learning. In other words, this study is an expansion of her study because it considers formative assessment as a crucial component in teaching of reading comprehension.

The finding of the study by Mudzielwana reveals that teachers had limited understanding of reading comprehension strategies. She noted a number of challenges. Reading comprehension was not done across the subject. Teachers did not give comprehension instructions to the learners; in fact, teachers did not understand the comprehension instructions. There were no guideline documents to assist teachers with the teaching of reading comprehension, nor were there reading resources for the learners. Teachers also had difficulties with time allocation.

Mudzielwana's study is significant to my study, as it gives a picture of the nature of the challenges experienced by South African teachers in reading comprehension. It also confirms the findings of PIRLS (2006) that South African teachers have poor knowledge of teaching reading comprehension.

Another study of reading comprehension was conducted by Stols (2012) at an Afrikaans-speaking school in Gauteng Province, where learners achieved the highest scores in PIRLS (Howie, *et al.*, 2007). It focused on the role of comprehension strategy practices in reading achievement. The aim of her study was to identify reading comprehension strategies used in primary schools where the highest scores in South Africa were obtained. Findings of her study indicate that the use of teaching reading comprehension strategies is essential for learners to achieve any standard of reading literacy. Effective teachers of reading comprehension guide learners during the reading comprehension process and encourage learners to bring vocabulary and strategy knowledge to the act of reading. It also shows that good reading teachers motivate learners to regularly practice reading aloud and also to read silently for comprehension. She concluded that both approaches, if applied correctly, improve learners' comprehension of the written text.

From the above discussion it is clear that there is still much to be done in South Africa to support teachers in the teaching of reading comprehension. It is also apparent that good teachers employ comprehension strategies when teaching reading comprehension. Therefore much more emphasis on teacher training regarding the teaching of reading comprehension seems to be needed.

3.4 TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

The inability of many learners to read with understanding is an international phenomenon (Scharlach, 2008). Researchers have identified various reasons for poor comprehension. Two separate studies, conducted by Hilden and Pressley (2000) and Scharlach (2008), revealed that in the lower grades challenges to reading comprehension are often caused by teachers who are unable to provide instructions on reading comprehension strategies to learners. According to Hilden and Pressley (2000), this may be due to the difficulty of designing purposive comprehension instructions.

Teaching reading comprehension seems to be an 'old' problem. The study conducted by Durkin (Scharlach, 2008) thirty (30) years ago on the teaching of reading in the lower grades reported that teachers spent very little time in the classroom giving

comprehension instructions to the learners. The same study found that teachers dedicated less than 1% of their teaching time on teaching learners how to comprehend and learn new information from reading. Teachers only monitored learners' comprehension by asking questions after they had finished reading a text, rather than teaching specific strategies to help learners develop comprehension skills.

Recent researchers agree that comprehension instructions should be dealt with through the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive comprehension strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000; Block & Pressley, 2002; Oakley, 2011; Dymock & Nicholson, 2010; Kivinen, Galli, Kaarakainen, 2011; Spörer, Brunstein & Kiesche, 2008). Comprehension instructions refer to instructions teachers give to learners on how to go about their own construction of meaning from the text. Comprehension strategies also refer to the techniques used by learners to get information they need from the text. According to Dymock and Nicholson (2010), skillful readers use various comprehension strategies and they have a good understanding of how comprehension strategies work and when to use them. A study conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000) indicates that skilled readers use a set of reading strategies to help themselves to construct meaning as they read.

Recent research about reading has found that there is still little comprehension instruction taking place in the classroom. According to Oczkus (2004), learners are not exposed to comprehension instructions, and they are not aware that they should monitor their comprehension when reading. A number of current researchers emphasize the importance of comprehension instructions to promote reading comprehension and to enhance comprehension monitoring among the learners. Findings from various research studies have confirmed that comprehension instructions can contribute to improved reading comprehension levels (National Reading Panel, 2000; Block & Duffy, 2008). Also, the results of the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) (2009) showed that awareness of reading comprehension strategies improves the learners' scores in the reading tests more than reading widely for pleasure (Kiniven *et al.*, 2011).

In a study conducted by Kiniven *et al.* (2011) on the ReadIT, which is a testing method for training reading comprehension strategies in Finland, it was found that skillful readers are able to monitor their comprehension strategies as they understand their reading goals, skim the text in advance and make predictions and questions about the given topic, whereas “struggling readers” fail to understand keywords and make predictions in relation to the story or text.

Americans strongly support comprehension instructions in their literacy curriculum. For example, they have developed reading programmes to direct and guide comprehension strategy instructions in the Foundation Phase. These reading programmes are used to provide content and method of reading instructions which include the comprehension strategy instructions. They build the content of reading around the selection of learners’ literature and build instructions around the response to the literature.

3.4.1 GUIDELINES FOR THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION

Many researchers reported that teachers are not able to teach learners reading comprehension effectively. There are different views on how teachers should provide comprehension instructions to learners. These views provide guidelines for the teaching of reading comprehension. Villaume and Brabham (2002) propose that teachers should simply teach reading comprehension through telling learners about what skillful readers do, as they argue that skillful readers read with comprehension and are able to self-monitor their comprehension skills.

Kiniven *et al.* (2011) subscribe to the above view of skillful readers. They mention that skillful readers read frequently and are capable of reading various kinds of text in appropriate ways and are able to read with comprehension. The South African Department of Education (2008c), in its teachers’ handbook *Teaching Reading in the Early Grade*, describes skillful readers as those readers who read fluently and are able to make meaning when they read. In order to make meaning, they need general knowledge, such as knowledge of language and knowledge of letters and letter sounds. The Department of Education (2008c) further states that skillful readers are able to regulate their own learning. On the other hand, Grimes (Closs, 2010)

considers skillful readers as readers who use prior knowledge, make connections, visualize, infer, ask questions, determine importance and synthesize information they read. Armbruster, Lehr and Osborne (2003) believe that skillful readers are taught by skillful teachers; teachers who are able to identify and solve learners' confusion that emerges as learners try out the comprehension strategies they have been taught. The variety of these reading activities encourages learners to become independent readers.

According to Armbruster *et al.* (2003) learners should use cognitive skills in order to construct meaning from the text. They provide three principles on how teachers should provide comprehension instructions to learners. Their principles include that comprehension instructions should be explicit, modelled by skillful teachers and taught in a scaffolded pattern. These principles are supported by various researchers of reading and have been used to develop guidelines on teaching of comprehension strategies. An important aspect of these principles is that they emphasize the collaboration between the learner and the teacher, who share the responsibility to employ the metacognitive strategies. Learners are expected to play an active role during the comprehension process (Dewitz, Jones & Leahy, 2009). Gunning (2010) supports the active role of learners during comprehension. He states that if learners participate actively, they stand a better chance of self-monitoring their comprehension.

The first principle described by Armbruster *et al.* (2003) is that comprehension instructions should be explicit. However, the idea of explicit instruction means different things to different authors. To Villaume and Brabham (2002), an explicit instruction simply means giving a clear instruction about reading comprehension. According to Ellis and Worthington (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010), explicit comprehension instructions exist when teachers state clear goals, objectives and expectations to the learners. Raphael, Florio-Ruane, Gerorge, Levorn and Highfield (2004) hold the same view, suggesting that teachers should pose clear questions in order for learners to respond appropriately. Dewitz *et al.* (2009) support the view of Armbruster *et al.* (2003) that comprehension instructions must be explicit. According to Armbruster *et al.* (2003), explicit comprehension instructions should focus on

teaching metacognitive strategies. They emphasize that teachers should ensure that learners employ comprehension strategies; but they did not suggest how the teacher should go about this.

In support of the view of Armbruster *et al.* (2003) regarding explicit comprehension instructions, Almasi (2003) gives a detailed explanation of explicit information. He mentions three types of knowledge that teachers should communicate to the learners about the comprehension strategies, namely declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to a direct explanation of the strategy. Procedural knowledge concerns how to carry out the strategy, while conditional knowledge means knowing when and why the reading strategy should be used. Almasi's view of the importance of learners' declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge for the teaching of comprehension strategies is supported by Oakley (2011), who adds that the teachers should use the three types of knowledge for the assessment of reading comprehension.

The second principle described by Armbruster *et al.* (2003) is that comprehension instructions should be modelled. Researchers agree that this should be done by skillful teachers. They have a common understanding of the term "modelling", namely that modelling takes place when the teacher demonstrates how to apply the strategy. Researchers also agree that teachers should model comprehension strategies so that learners are able to use them successfully, and they share the view that modelling of the comprehension strategy should promote learners' active involvement during strategy instruction.

Closs (2010) supports the modelling of comprehension instructions, but adds that such modelling should be the first step in the teaching of reading comprehension. He emphasises that teachers should "show, not tell" the comprehension strategies. Dewitz *et al* (2009) agree with the modelling of comprehension instructions and suggest that the teacher and the learners should be involved in "guided practice", whereby a learner models the strategy under the guidance of the teacher.

The third principle described by Armbruster *et al.* (2003) is that teachers should scaffold the comprehension strategies (Raphael *et al.*, 2004). The idea of scaffolding to support learning originated from Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective. It supports the social constructivist view of learning, namely that comprehension takes place through the interaction between the teacher and the learners. According to Oczkus (2004), the teacher provides scaffolding instructions for reading comprehension if they provide the learners with the necessary support in the form of examples and meaningful opportunities to practice the strategy independently and with peers.

In support of the principles of teaching comprehension instructions Armbruster *et al.* (2003), Oczkus (2004) suggests guidelines on how teachers should teach reading comprehension. In her book entitled "*Interactive think-aloud lessons*", Oczkus (2004) provided examples of how teachers should give instructions and model and scaffold the comprehension strategies. This technique is used to verbalize the thought processes taking place at each step of strategy application. Oczkus (2004) developed three phases of the teaching of comprehension strategies. Firstly, the teacher should introduce the strategy; she should assess learners' prior knowledge of the strategy through questioning and then define or explain it. Secondly, teachers should model the strategy through interactive thinking aloud. During this phase, Oczkus (2004) emphasises it is important that the teacher should involve learners in activities which will make them think aloud about what they have learnt so far. During this phase, the teacher will provide guided practice of the strategy use. Thereafter, the teacher should give the opportunity to the learners to practice the strategy independently. In the last phase the teacher should give the learners an opportunity to reflect on how the strategy has helped them (Oczkus, 2004).

Scharlack (2008), in his study on the teaching of reading comprehension, designed an inclusive framework, called Students and Teachers Activity Reading Text (START), to support comprehension instructions by modelling and scaffolding eight comprehension strategies during teachers' read-aloud. The framework aimed to support teachers with comprehension instruction to grade five learners in the south-eastern states of the USA. START was designed to be easily implemented by

teachers, so that learners would be able to use these strategies in a self-regulated fashion. START actively engaged learners in a strategic manner during independent reading. The study showed that learners who used the START programme scored significantly higher in reading comprehension on the national standardized tests than those who did not participate in the programme.

From the above discussion it is clear that teachers should teach reading comprehension through comprehension strategies and should familiarize themselves with comprehension strategies and guidelines for teaching reading comprehension in order to assist learners. If teachers introduce learners to these principles, learners stand a good chance of developing reading comprehension skills and being able to monitor their own comprehension.

3.4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE

Researchers of reading believe that the development of reading comprehension should start in the first year of schooling, because reading comprehension is a prerequisite for all learning (Van Kraayenoord *et al.*, 2012; Scharlach, 2008). In the USA, some teachers believe that learners need to learn to comprehend the text even before they can read it on their own, as comprehension of instructions generally begins in pre-schools. Other US teachers believe that learners must learn how to decode the words in a story through phonics before they can comprehend the text. I agree that learners should start by decoding words in order for them to gain vocabulary knowledge, because vocabulary knowledge is important an important aid to reading with understanding.

In Grade 3, teachers have a huge responsibility to facilitate the development of these comprehension skills for all learners, since Grade 3 learners are at the stage of growing independence in reading (Gunning 2010). Grade 3 learners are mostly dependent on teachers' guided reading instruction to become independent readers (Saunders-Smith, 2009). However, learners have an obligation to take ownership of their learning, such as constructing their own knowledge for the understanding of the text (Gunning, 2010). This view is supported by Saunders-Smith (2009), who adds

that young learners should be able to use comprehension strategies in order to self-monitor their comprehension.

The literature indicates that teachers should implement comprehension strategies at different stages of the lesson, namely before, during and after reading. During the pre-reading stage, teachers are expected to develop activities that activate the learners' prior knowledge, as this will stimulate learners to read and comprehend. Kiniven *et al.* (2011) emphasize the use of questioning to activate such prior knowledge at the pre-reading stage. With regard to the reading stage, teachers should monitor learners' understanding and assist them with comprehension problems. After reading, teachers should check learners' understanding of what they have read. According to Kiniven *et al.* (2011), skillful readers are able to demonstrate knowledge of comprehension strategies in all three stages of the lesson.

Researchers of reading agree that teachers should focus on extensive comprehension instructions for all learners rather than successful readers only (Closs, 2010). Closs's study, which was conducted in a large suburban Michigan district and focused on teaching reading comprehension to struggling and "at-risk readers", found that if teachers used effective comprehension instructions and multiple reading comprehension strategies, four out of five learners improved to the grade level by the end of the study. The implication is that learners who are exposed to comprehension instructions stand a better chance of developing their comprehension skills than those learners who do not.

The literature on reading indicates that in the Foundation Phase comprehension instructions are usually given by the teacher reading aloud. Reading aloud for the Foundation Phase learners is supported by various authors, who believe that it promotes learners' new vocabulary, exposes learners to the variety of literature and contributes to their oral and written language development. According to Gunning (2010), the teacher should read the text aloud to the whole class or to a small group daily. The text should be at the appropriate listening level. Block and Pressley (2002) mention that when the teacher reads aloud, learners are in a better position to learn comprehension strategies. They suggest that before the teacher reads aloud, she

should choose a few vocabulary words that the learners may not understand and explain those words through examples and create sentences with those words. Block and Pressley (2002) claim that in this way, learners will understand previously unknown words and recognize them in the written text.

Some researchers of reading believe that learners are able to comprehend the text effectively if they read silently rather than aloud. However, research done in the Foundation Phase suggests that teachers should encourage learners to read aloud because teachers can then detect reading errors which may negatively affect learners' comprehension. Hale, Hawkins, Sheely, Reynolds, Schmitt and Martins (2011), in a study to investigate reading comprehension of lower-grade learners through reading silent and aloud, found no significant difference in comprehension between these two groups. On the other hand, research conducted by Miller and Smith (Hale *et al.*, 2011) reported that poor readers get higher comprehension scores when they read aloud rather than silently. This is because when a learner reads aloud, it becomes easier for the teacher to monitor the learner's reading and comprehension. For example, if learners read silently, they may skip words or pronounce words incorrectly, and the teacher will not be aware of those errors (Hale *et al.*, 2011).

The above discussion shows that a fair amount of research has been done about reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase. It has been established that teachers should have knowledge of and skills in teaching comprehension strategies and should know how and when to use those strategies. Comprehension strategies help learners understand the text of a story, but also enable teachers to design and implement activities that support the understanding of the text.

3.5 ASSESSMENT OF READING COMPREHENSION

This section presents what the literature says about the assessment of reading comprehension, especially about summative and formative assessment. Reading comprehension can only be successful facilitated if assessment plays an important role. Little research seems to have been conducted on the formative assessment of reading comprehension.

3.5.1 SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT MEASURES FOR READING COMPREHENSION

In the past, summative assessment measures such as standardized tests and examinations were solely used to assess learners' achievements in reading comprehension (Paris, 2007). Standardized tests are tests administered and scored in a predetermined, standardized manner (Popham, 2008). In most cases, standardized test results are used in a variety of decision-making contexts, and they are favoured since it is believed that they produce reliable and valid information about learners' performance and are considered as "high-stakes assessment" (Torrance & Pryor, 1998).

In most USA states, reading comprehension is still assessed by the state and districts as components of the evaluation of programmes and curricula. Here standardized tests are generally administered once a year and in a group setting. Paris (2007) reported that in many instances results of the standardized tests in the USA are used to identify and place learners into programmes and to determine whether learners can proceed to the next level.

In the United Kingdom, there is still a wealth of standardized assessment tools for measuring learners' abilities and reading comprehension. For example, Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (NARA) is a common assessment instrument which is used in the assessment of reading comprehension and word reading accuracy to measure learners' reading abilities (Cain & Oakhill, 2006). Another standardized assessment measure used to assess learners' reading is curriculum-based measurements (CBM). CBM is considered to be a valid and reliable measure for oral reading fluency and partially addresses reading comprehension. CBM frequently assesses oral reading fluency and the reading speed by counting the number of words that the learner can read correctly in one minute. Although the CBM has been viewed as effective for the assessment of reading fluency, it is criticized for not showing the relationship between reading fluency and comprehension (Neddenriep & Hale, 2010).

Most authors and researchers of reading do not support the dominance of summative assessment measures for reading comprehension (Paris, 2007; Fiene & McMahon,

2007). These researchers argue that standardized tests do not support the development of reading comprehension instructions, as they are not able to provide immediate feedback to the learners. In addition, standardized tests do not provide information about learners' construction of information. According to Leighton and Gierl (Svetina, Gorin & Tatsuoka, 2011) little is said in the literature about the meaning of reading comprehension test scores in terms of learners' skills and abilities.

Sweet (in Paris, 2007) questions the use of high-stakes exams to assess reading comprehension, as such exams do not rest on an understanding of reading comprehension as a developmental process or as a product of instruction. It does not examine the assumptions underlying the relation of successful performance to the dominant group's interests and values. Therefore it is not useful for teaching. Furthermore, it tends to narrow the curriculum, as it is "undimensional and method-dependent" and often fails to consider even minimal criteria of reliability and validity.

Fiene and McMahon (2007) do not support the use of standardized tests for reading comprehension either. In their research on assessing comprehension in a Wisconsin (USA) school district under the project called "*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*", they discovered that most teachers focused much on multiple-choice questions to prepare learners for the standardized assessment. They argued that standardized tests for reading comprehension do not guide teachers in making educational choices centred on learners' needs and they do not promote high-order thinking.

From the above discussions it is clear that summative measures have both advantages and disadvantages in measuring learners' reading comprehension abilities. Some researchers argue that it becomes a challenge if summative measures dominate the assessment of reading comprehension, because they do not support learners' development of comprehension skills, do not assist teachers to track learners' progress during instruction and do not assist teachers in improving their teaching strategies.

3.5.2 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT FOR READING COMPREHENSION

Worldwide, there is a growing interest in the use of formative assessment measures in schools to improve the teaching of literacy, including the teaching of reading comprehension. A number of researchers support the use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase (Paris, 2007; Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Risko & Walker-Dalhouse, 2010; Popham, 2008; Block & Pressley, 2002; Marcotte & Hintze, 2007; Williamson, 2004). All these authors share the view that formative assessment data should guide comprehension instruction and assist teachers to plan appropriate teaching for reading comprehension. Paris (2007) states that formative assessment in reading comprehension should assist in measuring learners' progress during the instruction and encourage teachers' feedback.

In the USA, formative assessment measures are commonly used to support learners' reading comprehension in the primary schools through school-based assessment or internal assessment. According to Paratore and McCormack (2007), the main purpose of formative assessment in school-based assessment is to provide teachers and learners with immediate feedback and to provide opportunities for teachers to interact with learners and adapt assessment to their individual needs. Paris (2007) indicated that in the USA, school-based formative assessment is also used to diagnose learners' problems in reading comprehension.

In the USA, some schools have adopted a system of common formative assessment to guide curriculum development. Frey and Fisher (2008) conducted a study in urban US elementary schools on the teachers' professional development for formative assessment in writing. The rationale of their study was that when teachers share formative assessment information, they are likely to share ideas that can positively influence their planning and teaching. The aim of their study was to link assessment with instruction and to plan interventions for learners who continued to struggle with writing. Frey and Fisher (2008) reported that the use of common formative assessment resulted in significant changes in learners' achievement in writing. The system improved the teaching of writing, it informed instructions for writing, it supported learners' development in writing and supported teachers' professional

development for writing. Although their study focused on the teachers' professional development in formative assessment of writing, the same principles can be used for formative assessment of reading comprehension.

In another study, Hale *et al.* (2011) mention various computer-based formative assessment techniques for reading comprehension which are common in the USA. These include maze, retell fluency, written retell and sentence verification. Maze assessments procedures are designed to assess comprehension while the learners are reading (Marcotte & Hintze, 2009). These computer-based formative assessment techniques have been proven to be reliable and valid for measuring reality skills in elementary and high schools in the USA. Each of these formative assessment techniques is explained in the following paragraphs.

Maze assessment supports the formative assessment role of the teaching of reading comprehension. In maze passages, following an introductory sentence every seventh word is deleted and replaced with three word options. Learners are expected to read the passage and circle the word that best fits the meaning of the sentence (Marcotte & Hintze, 2009). The authors believe that maze assessment is effective to measure active comprehension, as learners should attend to the meaning of the passage while they read and clarify mistakes by choosing the correct word from each set of options.

In the *retell fluency* assessment, the learner reads the passage aloud for one minute and is then asked to retell everything he or she remembers of the passage. For one minute, the learner retells the story, while the test administrator counts the words retold (omitting repeats and nonwords). Retell fluency has been supported because it provides a good indication of learners' overall reading proficiency and reading abilities (Marcotte & Hintze, 2009).

Written retelling is a more acceptable procedure, as it has been found to be a more useful formative measure of reading comprehension. Marcotte and Hintze (2009) confirm that written retell is an effective technique for promoting instructions. In their study they discovered that teachers use learners' written retell for ongoing

measurement, the teachers set ambitious goals and modified their instructional activities in relation to the learners' needs.

According to Topping and Fisher (2003), it is important that teachers closely monitor and manage both the quality and quantity of individualized reading for the formative assessment in order to support learners' learning. In their research (conducted in United Kingdom), they did field trials with a computerized system called 'accelerated reader' to monitor learners' reading fluency and reading comprehension. The purpose of their study was to explore the impact of the accelerated reader technique on reading performance in a variety of schools in the United Kingdom. The accelerated reader programme was intended to impact on learning effectiveness by providing structured and detailed feedback to the pupil and the teacher. It was expected that the feedback would lead to adjustments and promote more effective subsequent performance. Findings of their study indicated that the accelerated reader programme had potential to support learners in reading, since it provided learners with detailed feedback which helped them to become aware of their challenges which hindered the good performance of reading.

Another formative assessment measure used in USA to improve learners' reading comprehension in the lower grades is the Rtl model. This model entails direct interventions at school level to support learners who struggle to read with comprehension. This assessment measure is implemented under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEAS). Many school districts embrace the Rtl model. School psychologists are appointed to work with this model; they work with teachers to address learners' reading concerns, they require valid and sensitive measures to assess reading proficiency as well as evidence-based strategies to effect change in these skills (Neddenriep & Hale, 2010). In schools where the Rtl model is used, improvements in learners reading comprehension is reported.

The discussion above indicates that computerized programmes for formative assessment have potential to support reading. Computerized programmes make it easy for teachers to assess reading and reading comprehension. However, in South African schools it is not common for teachers to use computerized programmes for

assessing reading comprehension. I found important to discuss these computerized programmes as they addressed the assessment of reading comprehension and formative assessment of reading comprehension.

3.5.3 FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Most authors on reading agree that teachers should be able employ various comprehension strategies to accommodate all learners, as learners have different learning styles. Researchers also agree that comprehension strategies should be taught in an integrated way. Williamson (2004) pointed out that it is important for the teacher to first identify (through formative assessment) the nature of the problem that the learner is experiencing in order to come up with an appropriate strategy for assisting the learner. Formative assessment and reading comprehension are closely related to each other.

In addition, researchers of reading suggest that teachers should use multiple-strategy instructions to enhance learners' comprehension, as they believe that skillful readers use more than one strategy at a time. According to Spörer *et al.* (2008), using multiple instructions means teaching comprehension in an integrated way. The major concern highlighted by Spörer *et al.* (2008) is that little is known about how multiple strategies should be combined in a comprehension strategy, as there are few empirical studies that have addressed this issue. In response to this challenge, Spörer *et al.* (2008) conducted a research study to assist teachers with multiple-strategy comprehension instructions. The aim of their study was to explore the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching, an instructional practice that allows reading comprehension to be taught in an integrated way. Findings of their study confirm that reciprocal teaching has potential to support learners with reading comprehension.

Furthermore, researchers of reading suggested an on-going classroom-based assessment for assessing comprehension strategies (Oakley, 2011; Fiene & McMahon, 2007). An on-going classroom-based assessment acknowledges that reading comprehension should be assessed through various comprehension strategies and should take place in an integrated way. Moreover, on-going

classroom-based comprehension should be assessed over a period of time and in different contexts.

According to Fiene and McMahon (2007), comprehensive classroom-based assessment empowers teachers to support learners' performance, as it encourages teachers to examine learners' specific comprehension needs and to design instructions accordingly. Moreover, it should help teachers to provide immediate feedback to learners, inform teachers about the weaknesses and strengths of the learners and enable them to adjust instructions to meet each individual's needs immediately.

Fiene and McMahon (2007) conducted a study in the USA to evaluate the effectiveness of the classroom-based assessment approach in the teaching of reading comprehension. Their classroom-based assessment approach focused on different facets of the assessment of comprehension, which included prior knowledge, literal comprehension, interpretive comprehension, story parts, word meaning, organizing information, visualization, analyzing questions, generating questions, summarizing and the application of reading strategies.

In the same study, they identified three important patterns exhibited by the teachers: they modified instructions based on the comprehension needs of the learners; they often modelled questions as one facet of comprehension and they stressed text structures through the use of graphic organizers to organize information. They also noted that teachers analyzed learners' different responses, which revealed to them that reading comprehension required to be monitored regularly with a variety of text and should relate to learners' prior knowledge and reasons for reading. The results of their study confirmed that classroom-based assessment information is effective in guiding reading instructions and empowering teachers to teach reading comprehension, since teachers were able to adjust instructions so as to meet each individual's needs immediately.

Oakley (2011) conducted a study related to the present study. His study investigated the practice of teachers of 10 to 12-year-old learners in Western Australia when they

assess reading comprehension cognitive skills; the present study investigated teachers' use of formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners. However, he collected self-reporting data through interviews, while I observed and interviewed teachers. In his study he stated that in Western Australia cognitive strategies form part of the literacy curriculum, i.e. teachers are expected to teach and assess the metacognitive strategies to enable learners to choose and evaluate appropriate cognitive skills. He believes that the assessment of reading comprehension during the strategy practice may assist teachers to identify difficulties learners' experience and to provide support immediately. Findings of his study revealed that teachers were able to teach comprehension strategies, while they struggled to assess comprehension strategies.

From the studies referred to above, it is apparent that classroom-based assessment of the teaching of reading comprehension supports formative assessment. Classroom-based assessment for reading comprehension encourages daily monitoring of learners' progress. It can result in sequences of assessment that show progress over a period of time. The teacher can gain insight into comprehension strategies that learners should use to make meaning. Classroom-based assessment encourages teacher feedback to enhance learners' comprehension.

I agree that comprehension strategies should be taught and assessed in an integrated way; however, in this section comprehension strategies were dealt with independently in order to emphasize the formative role of assessment during the teaching of each strategy. Comprehension strategies include activating prior knowledge, making predictions about the text, questioning and summarising. These comprehension strategies are briefly discussed in the next section.

3.5.3.1 Activating learners' prior knowledge

Current researchers of reading agree that comprehension is enhanced when teachers activate learners' prior knowledge in order to establish whether learners have knowledge of the theme at hand and can connect background knowledge with the theme (Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1986; Raphael *et al.*, 2004; Closs, 2010). They also emphasize that teachers should recognize and activate prior knowledge at an early stage of learning through questioning. Heilman *et al.* (1986) argue that the

importance of prior knowledge should not be overemphasized, since learners come to the class with different and incomplete background knowledge. There is no specific body of knowledge for reading; any general background knowledge should assist learners with reading.

In addition, researchers of reading agree that teachers should provide an opportunity for all learners to share their background knowledge. They also argue that the teacher has a responsibility to shape and match learners' background knowledge with the teaching of reading comprehension. Dymock and Nicholson (2010) cite that activating relevant background knowledge helps learners to make connections between what they know and what they are reading. This task requires teachers to be familiar with the learners' context.

The role of prior knowledge in enhancing comprehension had been confirmed by many empirical studies. Closs (2010) conducted a study on the teaching of reading comprehension for the struggling and "at risk readers" at primary schools in the Michigan district (USA). He used various comprehension strategies, including activating prior knowledge to enhance learners' comprehension. As part of the study, learners had to participate in the extended literacy programme for the development of their comprehension skills. This included formative assessment. Various activities that activate prior knowledge were used, including brainstorming, prediction, questioning and topic talking. The findings of the study indicate that learners who participated in the extended literacy programme were on grade level by the end of the study and were able to read with comprehension.

The implication of the study is that when the teachers engage learners in activities that activate learners' background, learners stand a better chance to improve their comprehension skills.

3.5.3.2 Making predictions about the text

Prediction is a strategy used in the foundation phase to support learners' comprehension. Researchers of reading share common views about the use of prediction in the Foundation Phase (Oczuk, 2004; Raphael *et al.*, 2004; Scheckle, 2009). They agree that prediction should take place through questioning and should

be practiced throughout the reading process. According to Oczuk (2004) and Scheckle (2009), learners use prior knowledge and experience to make predictions in relation to the text to be read. The two authors share the view that teachers should model predictions during the three stages of teaching reading comprehension. The following examples of prediction were cited by Scheckle (2009) during pre-reading, the teacher can show learners pictures and predict what the story is about; during the reading stage, the teacher can pause and ask learners what will happen next, and in the last stage of reading the teacher can ask questions to reinforce prediction.

Scheckle (2009) proposed five steps for the teachers' use of the prediction strategy, and these steps can also be used for the comprehension strategies. Firstly, the teacher should give explicit information to the learners about what prediction is. The teacher should then model prediction or demonstrates to the learners how she would use the strategy. Thereafter she should involve learners by creating activities for the learners for the pre-reading, reading and post-reading stages. The teacher should then guide the learners when they perform those activities. The last step is when learners work individually or in groups; at this stage it is important for the teacher to encourage independent thinking. For example, during silent reading, she can ask the learners to predict and provide reasons for those predictions; this should lead to independent thinking (Scheckle, 2009). The use of prediction supports formative assessment of the teaching of reading comprehension, as teachers collect information to evaluate the learners' thinking ability and to support learners accordingly.

3.5.3.3 Questioning

Literature on reading indicates that questioning has been a popular strategy used for the development of reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase (Williamson, 2004; Gunning 2010). The literature also shows that teachers use the questioning technique for different purposes, one of which is to monitor and facilitate comprehension instructions. Questioning supports formative assessment of reading comprehension, as teachers collect evidence of learners' understanding in reading comprehension.

Most authors and researchers of reading agree that teachers should use various questions for the assessment of learners' comprehension. Questions should be asked at different comprehension levels and in various phases of learning. According to Stols (2012), the kind of questions and the manner in which they are asked can influence the type of cognitive processes in which learners are engaged and can also influence the learners' response.

The use of the questioning technique for formative assessment requires teachers to pay attention to incorrect learner responses. According to O'Brien, (2008) incorrect responses result from poor understanding of the reading material and insufficient prior knowledge. Nakabugo (2003) suggests that the teacher should analyze each question and the incorrect response to determine the type of reasoning the learner used to arrive at the answer. Cain and Oakhill (2006) also suggest that incorrect responses can be analyzed to determine the source of the errors.

For the assessment of reading comprehension, Cain and Oakhill (2006) and Popham (2008) suggest that teachers should use open-ended questions, as such questions can challenge learners' higher-order thinking and allow them to express their opinions, while short questions encourage them to memorize the reading material. Cain and Oakhill (2006) support the use of open-ended questions for reading comprehension, arguing that they promote the assessment of inference-making skills.

Research on teachers' use of questioning indicated that teachers do not give learners enough time to think during the assessment of comprehension. Gunning (2010) reported that teachers often expect an immediate answer, and when none is forthcoming they call on another learner. This can have a negative effect on the learners' development, as some learners may not even try to think out a response.

According to Searfoss and Readence (1994), the effectiveness of questioning depends on the teacher's questioning skills. He mentions that teachers who are skilled in effective questioning can set learners' thinking in motion by activating their prior knowledge about the topic; focus learners' attention by increasing their

motivation to read; monitor learners' comprehension by checking their understanding of aspects of the text and use learners' responses for further tailoring of the message. Researchers on reading believe the main challenge to teachers' use of questioning is that teachers lack skills for proper questioning; they frequently ask questions on a literal level (Stols, 2012). Teachers are advised to use various questions for the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension.

Research on reading comprehension indicates that self-questioning is not taught by teachers (Howie *et al.*, 2007). According to Fiene and McMahon (2007) self-questioning facilitates comprehension monitoring; if the learner is able to practise this strategy, she can analyze the question first for the correct answer. Self-questioning is an important aspect of formative assessment, as formative assessment emphasizes that learners should be fully involved in their learning in order to enhance ownership. Black and Wiliam (1998) mention that questions posed by the learners may provide teachers with unexpected opportunities to gather information about learners' understanding. This may lead to "incidental evidence". Wiliam and Black suggest that self-questioning should be reinforced during reading, as it helps learners to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

From the above discussion, it is clear that questioning is an important aspect of the formative assessment of reading comprehension. Teachers should use higher-order questions to enhance thinking and learners' reading comprehension. Higher-order questioning stimulates effective thinking. However, literal comprehension questions are also important, as they are a prerequisite for higher-order comprehension. The discussion also shows that it is important for teachers to encourage learners to do self-questioning.

3.5.3.4 *Summarizing*

Authors and researchers of reading believe that summarizing is an important strategy to teach comprehension in the Foundation Phase. In most cases, the teachers ask learners to show their understanding by summarizing the story, and this usually takes place after the text has been read. According to Oczkus (2004), summarizing is often challenging to learners, as it requires them to recall important events or details and to order points.

Oczkus (2004) highlights challenges that are commonly experienced by learners when summarizing. He mentions that learners often include many details, fail to provide enough details; retell the story; present the details in sequential order and do not use their own words. She suggests that in order to apply this strategy successfully, learners should recognize, organize and express the most important ideas in the text.

The use of the summarising technique supports formative assessment of reading comprehension, as it provides teachers with information on learners' comprehension level.

3.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Nationally and internationally, there is a debate whether reading comprehension should be assessed summatively or formatively in the early grades. While academic discourse will be looking at the merits and shortcomings of each assessment strategy, the key focus should be on auditing and diagnosing reading competencies, skills and knowledge that in the main determine reading skills in the early grades. However, the literature on assessment reflected the importance of determining learners' pre-knowledge, reasoning skills, decoding abilities and their ability to communicate responses both verbally and in writing.

Since teachers are primarily responsible for developing learners' reading skills, their training in teaching reading comprehension needs to be considered. With curriculum reform featuring prominently in the education landscape, the data collection instrument used in the study needs to determine teacher preparedness and training for teaching reading comprehension. The training of teachers to teach learners reading skills is not emphasized.

The literature emphasizes the importance of using an appropriate data collection instrument that will elicit a rich dataset (Babbie, 2013). Although standardized instruments are used in the USA, these instruments cannot be used in South Africa due to contextual variables. The language of teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase in South Africa differs in some cases, and curriculum competencies reflected

in Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (DBE, 2011c) and the US curriculum also differ slightly. CAPS emphasize learners' decoding and phonemic abilities, while the US curriculum focuses on critical thinking competencies (Brookhart *et al.*, 2010).

Teachers' views of reading comprehension are downplayed in the literature. In the present study, teachers are interviewed to determine their views of learners' abilities, which I will triangulate with data emanating from the examination of learners' workbooks.

3.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a comprehensive review of the national and international literature, supported by empirical studies, was undertaken in order to gain an understanding of the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension.

In Chapter 4 the theoretical framework underpinning this study is explained. Currently there is no single theoretical framework of formative assessment. Therefore, the concepts and perspectives obtained from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 were used to form the theoretical framework used in this study.

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CHAPTER 4

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. An extensive review of the literature in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 assisted in constructing the conceptual framework related to the formative assessment of reading comprehension. This chapter first discusses theories and concepts related to formative assessment of reading comprehension. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning, namely constructivism, is addressed because formative assessment is based on the idea that learners construct knowledge when they actively involve their thinking skills (James, 2006). The socio-cultural perspective is also discussed, since formative assessment is attributed to the social and cultural context of the learner (Black & William, 2006; James, 2006; Crossouard, 2009). Two critical aspects of the socio-cultural perspective, namely *scaffolding* and *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) are discussed.

Furthermore, Engeström's activity system theory (1987) is discussed, since it is appropriate for an understanding of the interaction between the teacher and the learner in a constructive environment (Black & William, 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). I also found it important to address Zimmerman's (1998) view of self-regulated learning, since formative assessment is based on the idea that teachers should support learners to develop skills for self-regulated learning in order for them to construct the written text independently. In addition the formative assessment process is discussed, followed by the conceptual framework of this study.

4.2 THEORIES UNDERPINNING THE STUDY

Knowledge of learning is important for planning the formative assessment of reading comprehension. It is imperative for teachers to understand how learning takes place, so that appropriate teaching and assessment strategies related to formative assessment can be used. In this section, theories and concepts related to the

formative assessment of reading comprehension are clarified which informed the development of the conceptual framework of this study.

4.2.1 VYGOTSKY'S THEORY OF LEARNING

Vygotsky (1978) proposed a theory about how people construct knowledge. This theory is commonly known as constructivism and has been widely used in the education sector all over the world (Nie, Tan, Liao, Lau & Chua, 2012). According to this theory, learning requires active engagement of the learners (James, 2006; Nie *et al.*, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) holds the view that learners are the constructors of their own knowledge and skills. He argues that learners should engage their thinking skills to construct knowledge for themselves (Block & Pressley, 2002). In other words, the learner should be cognitively active and stimulated in order for learning to take place in the classroom where self-exploration and independent learning is promoted.

In constructivism, prior knowledge is regarded as influential for the construction of new knowledge (James, 2006). Prior knowledge refers to knowledge, ideas and experiences which the learner brings to the classroom. The implication is that knowledge is a product of individuals, and learners should make reference to what they know in order to construct new knowledge.

Proponents of formative assessment support Vygotsky's theory of constructivism for the improvement of learning because they consider it relevant to explain how formative assessment should take place in a classroom (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Perrenoud, 1998; James, 2006; Crossouard, 2009). These researchers argue that formative assessment is related to constructivism, as both involve the teacher as the facilitator of learning and the learner as an active participant in a learning environment (James, 2006). According to Crossouard (2009), formative assessment contributes to an on-going process of learner development and relies on learners' cognitive skills to construct knowledge.

Informed educators of formative assessment share the view that prior knowledge is important to activate learners' thinking and construct new knowledge. According to James (2006), formative assessment is an integral part of learning because it is

important to stimulate learners' mental representations such as self-questioning, discussion, thinking aloud and self and peer-assessment. Cooper (2000) argues that each learner has unique prior knowledge, because prior knowledge consists of constructing conceptual relationships and meaning from information and experience already present in the learners' background. Likewise, Hall and Burke (2004) remark that learning takes place when the learners build their own unique representation of what was taught as new knowledge gets connected to each learner's unique set of prior knowledge. The implication in this study is that the learner should use his or her prior knowledge to make sense of what is taught in the classrooms and that learners should share ideas of their prior knowledge in relation to the introduction of the theme in order for them to be able to comprehend the written text.

Informed educators of formative assessment share the view that learners' thinking should be stimulated through the use of effective questioning. Baird (2009) suggests that teachers should use open-ended questions to stimulate learners' thinking, because such questions are relevant to assess what the learners know. The intention is to involve the learner and to prompt the learner to participate actively in his or her own learning process (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008).

Vygotsky's theory is also relevant to explain how learners comprehend the text (Gunning, 2010; Block & Pressley, 2002; Williamson, 2004). Gunning (2010) defines reading comprehension as a constructive process between the learner and the reading text in order for the learner to interpret meaning. Likewise, Block and Pressley (2002) state that the learner should use mental processes and cognitive skills to attach meaning to the text.

In the context of this study, learners are responsible for the comprehension of the reading text and therefore are participants in formative assessment. It is important for teachers to create activities which will stimulate learners' thinking. I observed how teachers stimulated learners' thinking through the use of formative assessment activities when facilitating reading comprehension

4.2.2 THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FOR LEARNING

The socio-cultural perspective is based on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning. The socio-cultural perspective considers the social and cultural factors as influential for learners to construct knowledge (James, 2006). According to this perspective, knowledge is a product of humans and is socially and culturally constructed. This perspective takes into account the importance of the context of the learner. The implication of the socio-cultural perspective is that when learners interact with others in the environment, their experiences and interpretation of the environment helps them to construct knowledge.

Researchers of formative assessment support the socio-cultural view of the practice of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam 2003; James, 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). They regard the classroom as a constructive environment and a socio-cultural context. In addition, these researchers view formative assessment as collaboration between the teacher and learners. This interaction supports the learning process. James (2006) refers to the relationship between individual thinking and the environment. She argues that individual thinking is influenced by factors in the environment; in the same way, the learners' encounter with their environment influences the way the learner thinks. Williamson (2004) notes that for the successful acquisition of skills and for learning reading comprehension, it is vital for teachers to create an environment that is similar to the social context of the learners, as this will stimulate learners' thinking. He suggests that teachers should use formative assessment to develop learners' comprehension skills.

Gunning (2010) adopts the socio-cultural perspective to explain how learners construct meaning of the text. He views the socio-cultural context as crucial for the learners to develop reading comprehension skills and knowledge. He believes that learners' engagement with others has a strong influence on what is comprehended, as the learner may learn new concepts from the environment which should help him or her with new vocabulary. He postulates that through the learner's engagement with peers, the learner may construct a vast vocabulary, and this should assist him or her in comprehension.

I agree with the notion that teachers should use formative assessment to promote learners' mastery of interpretative skills by creating an environment conducive to learners' acquisition and demonstration of comprehension skills. In my view, age-appropriate resources, suitably selected activities and assessment practices also contribute to learners' acquisition and demonstration of comprehension skills.

4.2.2.1 Vygotsky's concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding

The concepts of *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and *scaffolding* proposed by Vygotsky (1978) were considered relevant in this study. The two concepts originated from the socio-cultural perspective and are used to explain how learning takes place. They have been used widely in the education sector to explain how learning occurs during the teacher-learner interaction (Biggie & Shermis, 2004). In Vygotsky's view, adults and children should work together to support the child's learning (Biggie & Shermis, 2004).

In the classroom context, the teacher should work with the learners to assist the learner with his or her learning. According to Shepard (2005), effective assistance and proper guidance from teachers are valuable and necessary to help learners to improve. This kind of help is referred to as *scaffolding*. Scaffolding implies that learning is enhanced when it is supported by people with knowledge, like the teacher or other learners. The teacher serves as a mediator between the learner and the learning content. The teacher should facilitate the learning process by mediating learning activities (Biggie & Shermis, 2004).

Researchers of reading support the view of *scaffolding* for comprehension. According to Gunning (2010), learners' comprehension skills improve when the teacher designs and implements scaffolding activities that support the understanding of the text. Scaffolding in reading comprehension refers to the building-up activities provided by the teacher during learning to support the development of the learner (Block & Pressley, 2002). Block and Pressley (ibid) suggest the following activities for the development of reading comprehension: breaking the text into small parts; identifying and explaining new concepts; using graphic presentation of events in the book; identifying and responding to difficult questions as they arise. The study conducted

by Block and Pressley (2002) confirmed the value of scaffolding in learning. They reported that when learners were tested with tasks on their own, they struggled to do well compared with when they were working in collaboration with adults.

Researchers of formative assessment also support the view of scaffolding for learning to take place (Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Brookhart *et al.*, 2010; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). They view formative assessment practice as a scaffolding process. According to Torrance and Pryor (1998), formative assessment is the same as instructional scaffolding, because it is more teaching than assessment. However, Sadler (1989) argues that scaffolding is meant to be a temporal structure to assist learners to access a level of learning that learners cannot reach themselves. Sadler argues that when too much attention is spent scaffolding learners' learning, the learner may become dependent on teachers' scaffolding activities and never become independent (Tan, 2013).

The socio-cultural perspective also holds the view that teachers should understand what the learner is able to do or learn with and without assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). The difference between the two levels of functioning is called the ZPD (Sadler, 1989). Sadler's interpretation of the ZPD is that it is the gap between a learner's current level of understanding and the desired outcomes (1989). The ZPD emphasises the learner's engagement with the adult, as it enables learners to refine their thinking and their performance. This view is supported by Black and Wiliam (1998). They state that the teacher plays a crucial role in determining the kind of help needed by the learners and enabling learners to do well.

The implication of this theory for formative assessment of reading comprehension is that teachers should conduct a baseline assessment to identify learners' capabilities and challenges in order to get information about the learners' knowledge of the theme at hand. Teachers should be innovative in designing learning activities that promote comprehension of the text. They should focus on areas that are still developing; for example, in Grade 3 teachers might spend more time on developing learners' comprehension skills through the use of higher-order questions. They may

also use open-ended questions to probe learners' thinking. These formative assessment activities may help learners to improve their reading comprehension.

4.2.3 ENGESTRÖM'S ACTIVITY SYSTEM THEORY

Engeström developed his activity system theory from Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural perspective. The activity theory is based on the idea that learning is a collaborative and authentic activity. There should be a system between a human and social component in order to accomplish the activity (Engeström, 2001). The activity system theory provides the appropriate framework for understanding human activities and provides focus for designing the constructivist learning environment (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007).

Engeström (2001) presented his activity system theory as a triangular model with six interconnected components of human activity (Miao, Van der Klink, Boon, Sloep & Koper, 2009). These components comprise the subject performing the activity, tools supporting the activity, objects as an activity, rules governing the activity system, a community of practice in which the activity take place and division of labour to distribute responsibilities of the activity. The system should lead to the achievement of a set or planned outcome. If one or more of the components of the activity are not operating, the system may cease to function and the activity will not achieve the outcomes (Engeström, 2001; Miao *et al.*, 2009).

Educational researchers have applied Engeström's activity system model in their studies for various reasons. Some researchers have used it as a tool to understand and analyse the complex psychological phenomena involved in human activities and to facilitate an iterative learning process. Others have used it to identify guidelines for designing constructive learning environments (Yamagata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007). James (2006) emphasises the importance of collaboration in the activity theory of formative assessment and suggests that teachers should inform learners about what they need to achieve for the activity to become effective.

Researchers of formative assessment support the activity theory, as they regard it as relevant to explain how formative assessment takes place in a socio-cultural

environment (Harlen, 2006; Miao *et al.* 2009; Asghar, 2011). This theory has also been used to explore the collaboration between the teacher and the learners (Harlen, 2006). In this study, the activity theory offers a way of thinking about relations between the teacher and the learners in the classroom. It creates an opportunity to explore actions undertaken by the teacher and the learners in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

4.2.3.1 Description of the components of the activity system with reference to the present study

In this section, components of the activity theory are discussed and the relationships between them are explained with reference to the focus of this study.

❖ The subject

According to Engeström (2001), the subject refers to the individual or the group of individuals who have to perform the activity. Black and William (2006) refer to the subject of the activity system as one or more individuals who are the focus of an investigation. The question to be asked in determining the subject(s) of the activity theory is: who should perform the activity in the study?

In my study, the subject refers to seven Grade 3 teachers who engaged in formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension.

❖ Object

Engeström (2001) describes the object as the *“raw material or problem space at which the activity is directed”*. According to Engeström (2001), the concept of ‘object’ is of crucial importance in the activity theory, as there is no activity without the object. My interpretation of the object of the activity system is that it is a motivating influence behind the subjects’ participation in the activity.

The object of my study is teachers’ practice of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension. This includes all learning activities that take place during the learner-teacher interaction with the intention of supporting learners’ performance in reading comprehension.

❖ **Tools**

According to Engeström (2001), the activity is mediated by the tools. He refers to tools as what the subject uses for acting on the object. Yamagata-Lynch and Smaldino (2007) note that tools can be socially shared cognitive or material resources that subjects use to attain the objective. They also state that the choice of tool may affect the activity in different ways.

In this study, tools refer to resources and support teachers receive for the practice of formative assessment of reading comprehension. This include policy documents such as the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (DBE, 2012c), the *National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the General Education and Training Band* (DoE, 2007b), *Assessment Guidelines for Foundation Phase Grades R-3* (DoE, 2002), *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008c), learners' workbooks provided by the Department of Basic Education and textbooks for reading provided by Provincial Department of Education or the service providers. In addition to the above-mentioned documents, the workshops for formative assessment and/or reading comprehension serve as tools to support their practice of formative assessment when facilitating reading comprehension.

❖ **Rules**

Yamagata-Lynch and Smaldino (2007) states that rules can be informal and formal regulations the subject needs to follow while engaging in the activity. They mention that rules in the activity theory should prescribe how the subject and community of practice should go about the activity. According to Engeström (2001), rules of the activity system may refer to regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions

In this study, rules of formative assessment refer to what guides the teachers when they apply formative assessment to reading comprehension. These include curriculum requirements and rules of professional development for formative assessment. The formative assessment process adopted in this study involves five phases which guide teachers' practice of formative assessment. The process of formative assessment will be discussed in section 4.2.4.

❖ **Community**

Engeström (2001) describes the community of the activity system as the social and cultural group that subjects belong to. The subject is located within the community of people sharing the same objectives. He states that 'community' comprises the multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the same objectives. The subject's actions are shaped by participants in the community.

In this study, the community of the activity system refers to Grade 3 learners at whom the activity is directed.

❖ **Division of labour**

The shared responsibility as determined by the community is called the division of labour (Engeström, 2001). Division of labour specifies the actual roles for each participant during the activity (Black & Wiliam, 2006). For formative assessment to be effective, teachers must guide the formative assessment process, ensure the involvement of learners and ensure that learners act on the feedback.

In this study, activities which were considered important to the teacher for supporting learning include involving learners in assessment, marking of the classwork, writing comments about the learners' work (feedback); communicating the feedback to the learners, giving suggestions for improvement and monitoring learners' progress after feedback has been given. However, the learner should participate actively in formative assessment and act positively on the feedback given by the teachers.

❖ **Outcome**

Yamagata-Lynch and Smaldino (2007) describe an outcome of the activity system as the result that the subject faces as a result of the activity. They argue that the object should lead to the outcome. Theories of learning usually refer to outcomes in term of knowledge, skills and changed patterns of behaviour (Engeström 2001).

In the present study, 'outcome' refers to improved skills in teaching and learners acquiring of reading comprehension, since formative assessment (the activity) aims to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension.

4.3 ZIMMERMAN'S IDEA OF SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

One of the critical aspects of formative assessment is that assessment should be self-regulated. Psychological research of self-regulated learning has led to the development of a number of self-regulations models, one of the better known of which was developed by Zimmerman and is based on social-cognitive theory (Barak, 2010).

Zimmerman's model for self-regulated learning (1998) involves monitoring and control of behaviour, cognition and motivational beliefs during learning. Self-regulation of behaviour refers to active control of resources which are available to the learner. Cognition is the conscious mental process by which knowledge is accumulated and constructed (Barak, 2010), whereas motivation involves controlling motivational beliefs such as self-efficacy and goal orientation (Barak, 2010). Zimmerman's model implies that changes in the environment have an influence on the self-regulation of learning. Consequently, learners need to accept responsibility and accountability for their comprehensive abilities by setting own targets and determining whether targets have been reached.

Zimmerman describes self-regulation as a cyclical process consisting of three phases, namely forethought, performance and self-reflection. The forethought phase involves goal-setting and strategic planning. The performance phase involves strategy implementation and self-monitoring. The self-reflection phase involves evaluation and monitoring of strategic outcomes (Barak, 2010). He notes that for self-regulation to take place in the classroom environment, learners should carry out all these phases by themselves. Zimmerman's model of self-regulation has been tested several times and proven to be successful in research studies (Barak, 2010).

The argument is deliberated that formative assessment should empower learners to develop skills for self-regulated learning (Nicol & Marfarlane, 2006; Bennett, 2011).

According to Bennett (2011), sharing clear learning goals, effective questioning, effective feedback and self and peer-assessment are intended to help learners to take ownership of their learning.

Effective feedback actualises and reinforces learners' self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Davis & Neitzel, 2011; Clarke, 2001). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) develop a model and identified seven principles of good feedback practice that support self-regulated learning. They emphasise that the important aspect of the framework for formative assessment is that learners should be able to act on feedback and interpret their feedback in such a way that they will be able to carry on with their assessment in future.

Researchers of formative assessment consider that if self and peer-assessment (elements of formative assessment) are implemented effectively, they can enhance self-regulation of learning. According to Davis and Neitzel (2011), through effective feedback learners may develop self-assessment skills, which will equip them better to monitor their own performance independently because they will be able to compare their work with the learning objectives. They explain that learners will be able to identify gaps and then take strategic action to correct any identified discrepancies. Davis and Neitzel (2011) postulate that when learners have learnt the principles of self-regulated learning, they will be able to develop strategic approaches for engaging in academic tasks, including the ability to evaluate and monitor their achievement of academic goals, and to fine-tune their performance in this regard. Bennett (2011) argues that when learners support each other through self and peer-assessment, they learn to take responsibility for their own learning.

Furthermore, researchers of reading such as Williamson (2004) and Block and Pressley (2002) hold that formative assessment has potential to enhance self-regulated learning. They consider formative assessment as appropriate to guide the practice of reading comprehension strategies among learners. Teachers should therefore develop formative assessment activities that motivate learners to take control of their own reading comprehension.

The implication of Zimmerman's theory in this study is that learners should take control of their assessment. Teachers should employ formative assessment activities to teach learners to acquire self-regulating competence. These activities should be planned and used by learners. Teachers should also provide learners with effective feedback, so that learners will know where they need to improve. Through effective feedback learners will be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and will be able to carry out assessments on their own.

4.4 THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Researchers of assessment (Harlen, 2000; Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009) have used the formative assessment process to describe how assessment enhances teaching and supports learners' learning. They describe formative assessment as a cycle with different phases. However, they differ about the descriptions and the phases of the cycle.

Harlen (2000) presents a process of formative assessment in a cyclical model with four phases, namely the collection of evidence; interpretation of evidence; judgment of evidence and decisions about the next step. According to Harlen, the main function of the formative assessment process is to provide feedback which should help teachers to adjust their teaching and to improve learners' ability to achieve the learning objectives. He emphasises that formative assessment should drive the learning goal and suggests that teachers and learners should be active and work cooperatively in order for them to achieve the learning goal.

Likewise, Ruiz-Primo (2011) describes formative assessment as a process with four phases. He describes formative assessment within a socio-cultural context. He sees the formative assessment process as a social activity which extends beyond the classroom. The four phases of Ruiz-Primo's formative assessment cycle include clarifying the learning goals, collecting information, interpreting information collected and acting on the information collected. He also emphasises the importance of feedback to support learning.

On the other hand, Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) present the formative assessment process as having five phases, namely planning, collection of evidence, analysis or interpretation of the evidence, the use of evidence and evaluation of the intervention. Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) propose an assessment process that differs from others; they suggest that teachers should plan for the formative assessment process and should develop an intervention to support the learners. They also indicate that teachers should evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, since it will inform them about the next step.

I have blended ideas from the three theorists to develop a formative assessment process of reading comprehension. This process is presented within the theoretical framework of this study.

4.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

In this section the conceptual framework for the practice of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 siSwati-speaking learners is presented. Figure 4.1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the study. My model is informed by the assumption that effective use of formative assessment enhances teaching and supports learners' learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). I have used this conceptual framework to understand teachers' activities when using formative assessment in the facilitation of reading comprehension.

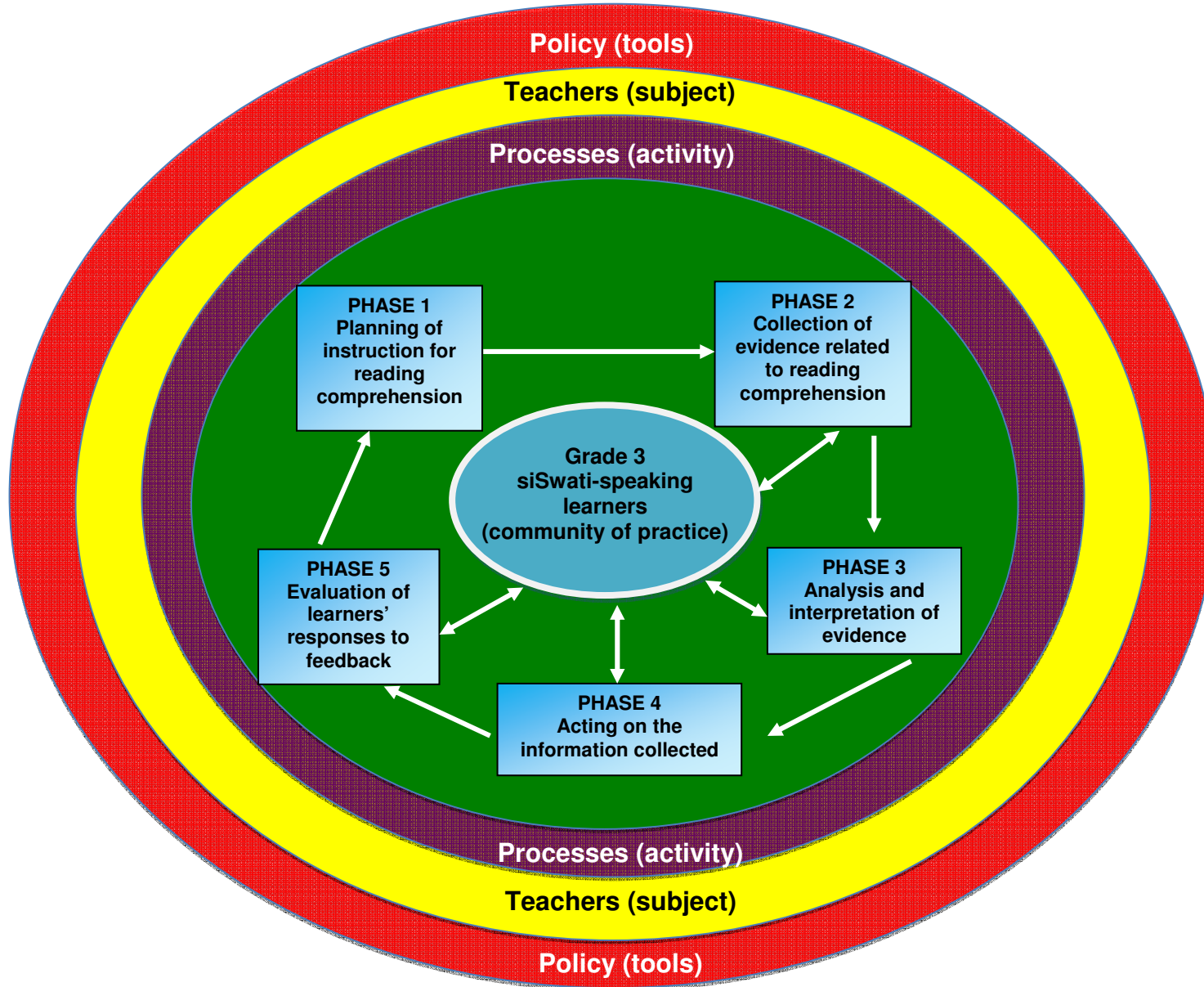


Figure 4.1: Conceptual framework for the formative assessment of reading comprehension

4.5.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual model depicted in Figure 4.1 is used to explain the formative assessment of reading comprehension. This model is cyclical and is adapted from the model of Vygotsky (1978), Engeström (2001) and Zimmerman (1998) for self-regulated learning and the formative assessment process. The suggestions made by Harlen (2000), Ruiz-Primo (2011); Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) have also been taken into consideration.

The conceptual framework related to the formative assessment of reading comprehension for Grade 3 siSwati-speaking learners start with policy context in the first circle (red). In the activity system (Engeström, 2001), the policy context may be defined as regulations (tools) which the teacher needs to follow while engaging in formative assessment of reading comprehension (activity). This may include policy documents, books for reading, pre-service training and in-service training to support teachers with the implementation of formative assessment in reading comprehension.

The second circle (yellow) represents the Grade 3 teachers. Teachers are subject of the activity system and play a major role during the formative assessment process. Teachers are responsible for guiding learning and facilitating the formative assessment process. It is imperative for teachers to design activities that will activate learners' prior knowledge and encourage learners' involvement. For the teaching of reading comprehension, teachers should use baseline assessment to determine learners' knowledge of the theme. Prior knowledge can also be enhanced through asking open-ended questions about the theme. Teachers also need to investigate what learners are capable of doing and knowing with or without help (ZPD). All this should help teachers to develop scaffolding activities to assist learners with the comprehension of the text.

The third circle (purple) represents the process of formative assessment. Teachers are responsible for choosing methodologies and books prescribed according to the policy guidelines for teaching reading comprehension and formative assessment. Teachers should choose reading material relevant for Grade 3 learners. The reading material should be challenging in such a way that it enhances learners' thinking

through higher-order comprehension skills. Grade 3 teachers should use the DBE workbook to select activities which will help learners achieve the learning objectives.

The fourth circle (green) reflects the interaction between the teachers and the learners. It also shows the collaboration between the teacher and the learners in the assessment process. This includes the facilitation of all phases of effective formative assessment intended to assist learners with the comprehension of the text. Teachers are responsible for guiding the learning and formative assessment process. The five phases represent rules of the activity system and provide direction of how teachers should go about the formative assessment of reading comprehension. The arrows in this phase connect to each other, which imply that each phase leads to the next. Teachers need to start by planning instructions. Teachers' planning should indicate the learning objectives (phase 1). In phase 2, they should collect data by assessing learners' work with reference to the learning objectives. The assessment should take place at the beginning of the lesson to determine what learners know about the theme. During the course of the lesson, teachers should collect assessment data to identify challenges and strengths in reading with comprehension. In phase 3 teachers need to analyse and interpret the assessment data to understand the strengths and the weaknesses of the learners. This is followed by phase 4, where teachers provide feedback to the learners about their performance. In this phase, the teacher should determine from the learners what the reasons for their errors are. In phase 5, teachers should evaluate learners' responses to the feedback discussed to determine whether the feedback was useful to the learners.

Learners are placed at the centre of the formative assessment process (blue). The implication is that learners should be responsible for their own learning and should take part in all formative assessment activities. By asking questions, the teacher can establish the level of learners' prior knowledge of the theme. Teachers should also use scaffolding activities to support learners' comprehension. Teachers should establish what learners know and can do with assistance and what learners know and can do without assistance. However, learners should be able to comprehend the text on their own. The two-headed arrows indicate that all the formative assessment activities revolve around the learners. The implication is that teachers should involve

learners in the five phases. The teacher should communicate clear learning objectives to learners, provide learners with clear feedback and involve learners through self and peer-assessment.

The five phases of the formative assessment (already mentioned) are not fixed and do not mean that the teacher should follow them slavishly. The teacher should decide on the phases and the process that suit their context of teaching; the phases represent a framework for thinking about how teachers should go about the formative assessment process. Each phase of the formative assessment cycle will be discussed below.

❖ **Phase 1: Planning of instruction for reading comprehension**

Learning activities during the interaction between teacher and learners start with planning. The objective of this phase is for teachers to organise instructional requirements, learning activities, material and assessment activities. Planning also involves the analysis of needs and the development of a plan to meet those needs. Planning involves the identification of the learning objectives which will be the focus of the lesson.

It is important for the teacher to carefully select the reading text and consider its length. The selection of the reading text should be guided by the content knowledge in the policy document. In addition, teachers should think about the different kinds of questions they will use to assess learners' reading comprehension. According to Department of Basic Education (2011c), Grade 3 teachers should use literal and higher-order questioning to enhance learners' thinking.

In addition, during planning Grade 3 teachers should consider formative assessment activities which can assist learners with comprehension. They also need to plan for the assessment activities and assessment criteria which will assist learners to reach their goals. When Grade 3 teachers are comfortable with their planning, they should be ready to put their plans into action.

❖ **Phase 2: Collection of evidence related to reading comprehension**

Formative assessment is based on the idea that much of what teachers and learners are doing in their classrooms can be described as potential assessment opportunities to collect evidence about learners' understanding (Black & Wiliam, 1998). According to Ruiz-Primo (2011), formative assessment practice includes everyday learning activities and potential assessment that provides for learners' learning. The purpose of collecting assessment information is to track learners' progress towards the attainment of the learning goals.

This phase should commence with the communication and discussion of learning objectives, so that the learners know what they will learn. During the course of the lesson the teacher should keep on revisiting the learning objectives in order to help the learners stay focused and motivated (Ruiz-Primo, 2011).

In addition, the teacher should discuss the assessment criteria with the learners so that learners will know what is expected from them to achieve the learning objectives. Teachers should use a variety of assessment strategies to collect evidence about the learners' learning. Assessment strategies for reading comprehension should include observation, questioning, classwork and homework. Teachers should promote teacher, self and peer-assessment.

During the facilitation of reading comprehension, it is important for teachers to ask questions that stimulate learners' comprehension (for example *why, how*). The teacher should also ask questions that invite learner participation (e.g. *who can expand on what Zama said; what would you do if you were in that situation?*). Teachers should also consider the differentiation of assessment activities. They should provide clear instructions about the learning activities and monitor the learners when they are engaged in the written assessment activity with the aim of supporting them.

❖ **Phase 3: Analysis and interpretation of evidence**

The objective of this phase is to make sense of the learners' responses to the questions used to assess learners' comprehension skills. It is imperative for the

teacher to analyse the learners' responses to each question. This should take place continuously and shortly after the administration of the task. The analysis of learners' performance should focus on identifying each learner's strengths and weaknesses in reading comprehension.

The teacher should analyse and interpret the individual learner's work in relation to the learning objectives and the predefined assessment criteria. Interpretation and analysis should provide information about the learners' ability to respond to literal and higher-order comprehension.

Analysis and interpretation of the data should help the teacher draw conclusions and make decisions about learners' ability to respond to lower and higher-order comprehension questions. The teacher should determine what the learner is struggling with and think about the best way to help the learner. Analysis of the assessment data should inform the teacher about learners' challenges and the kind of help needed by the learner.

❖ **Phase 4: Acting on the information collected**

The teacher should provide individual feedback to the learners. Teachers' feedback should include comments about challenges for each item and suggest actions for improving learner performance. Teachers should also comment on the strengths of the learners in order to motivate them, and they should make clear and simple comments so that learners will be able to understand and respond positively to those comments. The comments should also be communicated verbally to ensure that learners have understood them; this could help learners act on them.

In a classroom with many learners, the teacher may select common errors and involve learners in discussions regarding possible ways of dealing with those errors. Teachers should do the corrections together with the learners. The teacher needs to establish from the learners how they arrived at the answer. Other strategies which can be used to support learners' comprehension may include the provisioning of scaffolding activities, examples and modelling of the comprehension strategies.

❖ **Phase 5: Evaluation of the learners' responses to feedback**

The objective of this phase is to examine the way in which the learners understood and implemented the guidance they received in phase 4. The teacher should determine whether there is improvement; for example, the teacher may compare the new work against the feedback given to the learner earlier. He or she should compare the previous performance with current performance. The teacher should communicate changes that appeared in their current product compared with their previous product and compared with the intended goals (Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009).

4.5.2 THE IMPLICATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS

Formative assessment requires teachers to take a leadership role in the facilitation of reading comprehension. Therefore it is crucial for the teachers to master the formative assessment process. Teachers should also be familiar with the policy context of formative assessment.

Researchers of formative assessment do not support the systematic practice of formative assessment. Davis, Kumtepe and Aydeniz (2007) comment that if formative assessment is used as a framework for teaching, teachers need to change the way they interact with learners, how they set up learning situations and guide learners toward learning goals. In other words, the practice of formative assessment differs. Teachers should start by identifying the context the learners come from.

Another important fact regarding the practice of formative assessment is that teachers should possess sound pedagogical content knowledge. As indicated in Chapter 3, teachers should have knowledge of the teaching of reading comprehension in order for them to be able to incorporate formative assessment in their instructions. Teachers' knowledge of teaching reading comprehension has an influence on the implementation of formative assessment.

Since formative assessment takes place in a constructive environment, the teachers are expected to have the necessary skills to create a constructive environment that will enable learners to improve their learning and performance. They should also

provide scaffolding instructions and encourage learners to self-regulate the comprehension of the text (James, 2006).

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter theories and concepts which are used in the conceptual framework for this research study are explained. Harlen's model of the formative assessment cycle (2000), the formative assessment cycle of Ruiz-Primo (2011) and Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) were used to develop the formative assessment framework for this study. The discussion in Chapter 4 demonstrated my understanding of the theories and how these theories can be helpful in the formative assessment of reading comprehension, especially for Grade 3 siSwati- speaking learners.

In the next chapter, the research design and methodological process for this study will be discussed.

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CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4 the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study were addressed. Chapter 5 contains a comprehensive discussion of the research design and the research methodology choices and procedures that formed the empirical part of the research venture. The methods selected for data collection are justified as those most appropriate to the nature of the research questions. Also discussed are the unit of analysis, data analysis process, context of the research and strategies to ensure the credibility and authenticity of the study. The chapter is concluded with issues of ethics, as teachers and learners were consulted in a classroom environment.

5.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

5.2.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

An educational phenomenon, namely *teachers' use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension*, was explored with the intention of understanding and describing participants' actions in great detail. The most suitable way of conducting this study was through qualitative research (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2007), which involves understanding of a practical situation (Creswell, 2007). This research project was carried out in a school, i.e. in an educational setting.

The qualitative research approach has many attributes, one of which is that qualitative researchers study the phenomenon directly in its natural setting and that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Babbie 2013; Merriam, 2009). To satisfy these requirements, I spent six months in four schools, i.e. in the participants' natural setting, interviewing teachers, observing their lessons, taking field notes and analyzing their learners' workbooks with the intention of getting first-hand information on how they use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. The reason for conducting the study in a school was that I wanted to study participants' actions as they naturally occur. The advantage of studying a phenomenon in its natural

setting is that the actions are best understood as they occur, without external restraints and control (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The qualitative approach allowed me to capture accurate information, in the natural setting, on the way participants used formative assessment to support their facilitation of reading comprehension and learners' abilities to read and comprehend what they read.

Another feature of qualitative research is that it is concerned with the process rather than the product (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As mentioned in Chapter 1, my concern in this study was how teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension rather than how formative assessment affects the teaching of reading comprehension. Because of the nature of this research question, this study is qualitative; it concerns a process rather than the end product.

According to Babbie (2013), it is common for qualitative research to use inductive analysis of data with the intention of gathering data to build concepts or theories. In this study, I followed an inductive approach in the sense that I began by studying cases in their natural setting, describing events as accurately as possible. Themes of this research emerged from all sources of data.

5.2.2 INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith (2004) describe the research paradigm as a “framework within which theories are built which fundamentally influences how you would see the world; your perspective and how it shapes understanding of how things are connected. Holding a particular worldview influences individuals' personal behaviour, professional practice and ultimately the position taken with regard to the subject of research.”

I followed an interpretive paradigm to explore and describe teachers' use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. An interpretive paradigm recognizes various ways of understanding phenomenon (Yin, 2009). It embraces the belief that human actions are intentional (Creswell, 2007). Interpretive frameworks “focus on participants' understanding, descriptions, labels and meanings” (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This paradigm also seeks to understand and interpret the

world in terms of its actors (Cohen *et al.*, 2010). In this study, I followed the interpretive paradigm, as I studied teachers' actions in their natural setting. The interpretive paradigm assisted me to understand teachers' actions when using formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners.

5.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Various research designs are used in qualitative research. Johnson and Christensen (2011) hold that the choice of the research design depends on the nature of the study in terms of the research questions and the research aim that guides the investigation. Following this view, I decided on the case study design, considering that the emphasis of the main research question is on the in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, namely *how Grade 3 teachers employ formative assessment for the teaching of reading comprehension*. My choice is supported by the definition of the case study, namely that it is a detailed account, an in-depth analysis of one or more cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2011).

5.3.1 THE RATIONALE FOR USING THE CASE STUDY

According to Rule and John (2011), the identification of and decisions about the choice of case that would be relevant to the study depend on the number of issues. This might include the matter to be investigated, the nature of the case, the purpose of the study, the unit of analysis, research questions to be addressed and the number of cases to be investigated. In the subsequent paragraphs, I briefly discuss the rationale for using the case study design by considering the characteristics of case-study methodology in relation to the choice of the case study design in this study.

An educational case study is included because I was interested in understanding and describing an educational phenomenon. According to Rule and John (2011), in an educational case study the context of the school or classroom is essential for understanding the actions of teachers and learners. In line with Rule and John's views, I collected data from teachers and learners in their classroom context.

Another feature I considered was that the case is studied in accordance with the purpose of the study. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that the case can be instrumental or intrinsic. The cases are instrumental in the sense that they are used as instruments to examine a particular topic. The distinction between the two types of cases is that in the instrumental case study, the phenomenon is identified first and cases are selected later, whereas in the intrinsic case study the case comes first and the phenomenon of the case is selected later. Intrinsic case studies investigate unusual or unique individuals (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study I did an instrumental case study, as the research focus (*formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension*) was identified first and the cases to be studied were chosen afterwards.

Another description of the case study is a consequence of the number of cases or individuals to be investigated; this kind of the case is called a multiple-case study (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Rule & John, 2011). The present study is a multiple-case study, as I selected seven Grade 3 teachers as individual cases in four primary schools in Mpumalanga. I decided on the multiple-case study design because it would allow for comparable information across the cases. In addition, the intention of employing multiple-case studies was to gain greater insight into a research topic (Johnson & Christensen, 2011) and give a description in each case of how teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. With this information I wanted to identify the similarities and the differences between the cases.

According to Creswell (2007), the case study design is appropriate for research that requires an in-depth exploratory and descriptive enquiry into an activity or individuals. I selected a case study design, considering that the purpose of my research was to study and describe teachers' use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. In addition, the case was descriptive in the sense that the study aims to describe and attempts to answer the question 'how'. I observed teachers' use of formative assessment while they were teaching reading comprehension and then presented a detailed account of the phenomenon (Lichtman, 2010).

5.3.2 UNIT OF ANALYSIS

It is important for the researcher to decide what will constitute the boundaries of the case or to identify the unit of analysis before deciding to adopt a case study approach (Rule & John, 2011). Yin (2009) describes the unit of analysis as those things examined in order to create summary descriptions of all the units and to explain differences between them. Babbie (2013) adds that the unit of analysis is typically also the unit of observation, as they contribute to the understanding of the case.

In this study I explored one single issue, namely teachers' use of formative assessment in the facilitation of reading comprehension in Grade 3 in siSwati. I worked with seven teachers from four schools. The units of analyses were individual teachers in Grade 3 and their learners. Grade 3 learners were also part of the unit of analysis, because I could not observe how teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension without the presence of the learners. I was also interested to learn about the interaction between the teacher and learners through feedback as an aspect of formative assessment.

The principal criterion in the choice of schools was not to represent the population, but to select cases with rich information. Purposive sampling was used to select four schools with such information, as my intention with the selection of the cases was primarily to ensure that they were directly related to the focus of my study. Furthermore, the nature of my research questions required data to be collected from teachers who were directly involved with the practice of formative assessment. My choice of sampling is supported by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010): in purposive sampling the researcher selects cases which have rich information for the in-depth study.

The four schools were selected on the recommendation of the curriculum advisor for the Foundation Phase in the district office that supports all the schools in that circuit on curriculum implementation. The curriculum advisor recommended the four schools because of their history of co-operation and active involvement in the curriculum activities in the district. The curriculum advisor indicated that Foundation Phase teachers from the identified schools had undergone training on the National

Curriculum Statement (NCS) and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). These teachers were already implementing CAPS in their classrooms. I assumed that teachers who had undergone NCS and CAPS training would have knowledge of curriculum implementation, which might include reasonable knowledge of formative assessment.

The selection of the four schools also conformed to convenience sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2010), as I selected schools that were not very far from my work station. The decision was influenced by the fact that it would be easy and convenient to gain access to the participants for fieldwork. All schools selected were from one circuit.

5.4 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

According to Babbie (2013), it is important for the researcher to understand and interpret the specific cases and to describe the context of the cases in detail. Rule and John (2011) described the context as “the particular set of circumstances surrounding an event or a situation”. Meyers (in Babbie, 2013) noted that “the environment with its notions of multiple, interacting and contextualized systems, helps conceptualize the contexts in which the unit of analysis is embedded”. Babbie (2013) also agreed that the contextualized variables that influence the unit of analysis should be identified.

Johnson and Christensen (2011) point out that each case has internal and external context. The internal context of this case was teachers’ experiences, their qualifications, their support, skills and knowledge, observations and the nature of the classwork in particular. Johnson and Christensen (2011) describe the external factors as the geographical area and the special social, economic and demographic characteristics prevailing where the school is situated. The research was contextualized in terms of the research sites and the participants. The sites are individually presented per case (see Addendum 1 and 2).

Table 5.1: Research sites

School	Total number of learners in school	Total number of teachers in school	Number of learners in Grade 3	Number of teachers in Grade 3
School A	1100	26	129	4
School B	1025	24	124	3
School C	1400	35	140	3
School D	899	18	84	2

My study focused on Grade 3 teachers in schools in the Mgwenya Circuit in the Ehlanzeni District, Mpumalanga Province. The teachers were from four schools (A, B, C and D), all of which were government schools.

The four schools were situated in the same local township, within 3-6 kilometers of each other, in a previously disadvantaged black community with lower-income families. The majority of learners in all four schools were siSwati-speaking people; there were few XiTsonga speaking learners. I learnt that the XiTsonga-speaking learners were the children of Mozambican parents who had migrated to South Africa looking for a better life. They used the Lebombo border post, which is 95 kilometers from Nelspruit. All schools had electricity, running water and flushing toilets and were well maintained, with reasonably clean schoolyards. The schools were fairly well resourced, the basic teaching and learning resources being available. Schools B, C and D indicated that they had not received textbooks and learners' workbooks from the Department of Basic Education for 2012. All schools offered siSwati as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in Grade 3.

❖ **School A**

School A was 25 kilometers away from my work station. The school had been in existence for 23 years and offered Grade R to Grade 7. The learner enrolment was 1100, with 129 Grade 3 learners. There were four teachers for Grade 3, with a teacher-learner ratio of 1:36. The two participating teachers were teaching in the same classroom and were teaching the same learners. I was told that there was a shortage of classrooms in the schools and this was a biggest classroom. I found that

the classroom was big enough to accommodate 72 learners. The space was sufficient for the teachers to move around when assisting learners with their activities. Each learner had a chair and they were seated in pairs sharing a table.

The school received the learners' workbooks for 2012 in April 2012. Each learner had an original copy of the DBE siSwati workbook. The school usually uses readers for reading comprehension, but learners did not have original copies of the readers. Each teacher had a copy of the reader, which they received from the Mpumalanga Department of Education through the circuit office. There was one head of department for the Foundation Phase who taught Grade 2 learners. The head of department had already been teaching in the school for 15 years. Both teachers had CAPS documents which they had received during the CAPS training in June 2011.

Two participant teachers in school A were female and had the Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma. T1-SchA (pseudonym) was 42 years old. She had 18 years of teaching experience and three years of teaching experience of Grade 3 learners. T2-SchA was 49 years old and had 26 years of teaching experience. She had joined the current school two years earlier. She had 12 years of experience teaching Grade 3 learners. For the past 14 years she had been teaching Grade 1 learners in a rural school.

❖ **School B**

School B was two kilometers from school A. It had been in existence for more than 30 years and offered Grade R-7. The learner enrolment was 1025, with 24 teachers. In Grade 3 the learner enrolment was 124 with 3 teachers, giving a teacher-learner ratio of 1:41. There was one head of department for the Foundation Phase, who taught the Grade 2 learners.

Learners in this school did not receive the DBE workbooks for siSwati. Only the teachers had the original copies of the reader and the teachers' resource book, which they had received from the publisher. Teachers had to make copies of the DBE workbooks for the learners. Both teachers had copies of the CAPS document, which they had received during CAPS training. The school made use of a variety of reading

materials which they had copied from various materials. Learners had one original copy of the reader, which had been provided by the Mpumalanga Department of Education.

Both teachers in school B were female. T1-SchA was 41 years old, had 18 years of teaching experience and had been teaching Grade 3 for 8 years. She had a Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma. T2-SchB was 54 years old, with 32 years' teaching experience, and joined the school in 2011. For the past 10 years she had been teaching English to the Grade 7 learners in another school. She had a Senior Teacher's Diploma.

❖ **School C**

School C was three kilometers away from school B. The school had been in existence for more than 18 years, offering Grade R-7. Grade 1 and 2 learners were accommodated in a separate building 250 meters away from the main building. There was one head of department for the Foundation Phase, who taught Grade 1 learners. The school had been identified as the resource centre by the Mpumalanga Department of Education accommodating learners with physical disabilities. There were ramps to accommodate learners in wheelchairs. The learner enrolment was 1400, with 35 teachers. In Grade 3 the learner enrolment was 140 with three teachers, giving a teacher-learner ratio of 1:44.

The school was in its first year of offering siSwati in the Foundation Phase; for the past seven years they had been teaching in English. The school had not received copies of the DBE workbooks. Each Grade 3 had one original copy of the DBE workbook, which they had received from the curriculum advisor for the Foundation Phase. Grade 3 learners did not have readers, and teachers had to make copies of the readers for learners whenever they had to read a story.

Both teachers in school C were female. T1-SchC was 42 years old, had 20 years of teaching experience and had been teaching Grade 3 for eight years. She had a Junior Primary Teacher's Diploma. T2-SchC was 49 years old, had 28 years of teaching experience and been teaching Grade 3 for 12 years. Her qualifications

included a Primary Teacher's Diploma and an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) in Education Management.

❖ **School D**

School D was 23 kilometers away from my work station. The learner enrolment was 899, with 18 teachers. In Grade 3 the learner enrolment was 84 with two teachers, giving a teacher-learner ratio of 1:42. The school was 43 years old, with a renovated building (see Appendix 2). The school had no head of department for the Foundation Phase. The principal indicated that the post for head of department for the Foundation Phase was going to be advertised in the next advert. The school did not have learners' workbooks, readers or textbooks. T1-SchC had a set of books which included a reader, learners' workbook, teacher's book and learners' activity book, which she had received from the publisher as promotional material. She usually made copies of the readers for the learners.

T1-SchD was 40 years old, had four years of teaching experience and had been teaching Grade 3 learners. She joined the school in January 2011. She had a bachelor's degree (BA) without the teacher's qualification. She was in her final year of the postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme. She was employed temporarily by the School Governing Body and had attended CAPS training in 2011.

5.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions are imperative for understanding the choice of the research design and methodology, number of participants, data analysis and the type of evidence required to address the problem (Babbie, 2013). The main research question is: *How do teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension?*

Three exploratory research sub-questions logically flowed from the main research question. The sub-questions posed were the following:

- *What are the teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners?*

- *Which learning activities do teachers employ to support formative assessment of reading comprehension?*
- *What is the nature of feedback given by Grade 3 teachers when teaching reading comprehension in siSwati home language?*

The aim of the study was to produce primary data about teachers' use of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension. Each of the research questions was closely examined and linked to the methodology of the study in order to collect appropriate data.

The first sub-question looked at teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners. This question addressed four aspects. The first aspect sought to establish teachers' understanding of formative assessment. The second aspect addressed teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. The third aspect established the extent to which teachers were trained and supported to implement formative assessment effectively when facilitating reading comprehension. The fourth aspect addressed teachers' use of formative assessment in reading comprehension. I conducted semi-structured interviews with individual teachers to gather data on these four aspects.

The second sub-question looked at activities employed by teachers when teaching reading comprehension. This question was the key to the exploration of teachers' facilitation of formative assessment to enhance their facilitation of reading comprehension. I used the information obtained from the literature review to interpret teachers' actions. The main data gathering technique used to answer this question was the field notes.

The third sub-question looked at the nature of feedback given to learners on their performance of reading comprehension in Grade 3. This question is the key to understanding the quality of feedback given to learners. The main data gathering technique used to answer this question was the analysis of learners' workbooks. The learners' classwork books also assisted me to validate the data received from the

semi-structured interviews and documents. During the lessons I also observed the teachers giving verbal feedback to learners on their performance. Information obtained from the literature review on constructive and effective feedback as discussed in Chapter 3 helped me understand the nature of feedback required to support the teaching of reading comprehension.

5.6 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

In this section I present an account of the informal and formal data collection, for which I employed the data collection strategies. Literature on reading comprehension and formative assessment exists. However, the literature I reviewed confirms the minimal research on formative assessment of reading comprehension. It was therefore difficult to find evidence, at an international or national level, of research done on formative assessment of the teaching of reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners. I started to investigate data sources and possible methods suitable for the research project.

Although I had previous experience of supporting Foundation Phase teachers with curriculum implementation, I was still unsure how semi-structured interviews, the lesson observation schedule and analysis of learners' workbooks should be conducted and how to assist teachers to express themselves in order to provide data for addressing my research questions. After consulting the literature on reading comprehension and formative assessment, I constructed an interview schedule, lesson observation schedule and checklist for the analysis of learners' workbooks. I conducted semi-structured interviews, observed lessons and analyzed learners' workbooks in the pilot study. The result of the pilot study assisted me to identify gaps in my instruments.

5.6.1 INFORMAL DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

I commenced this research project by conducting a pilot study in the Piet Retief Circuit in the Gert Sibande district of Mpumalanga. The reasons for choosing these teachers were that I knew them as dedicated and hard-working teachers, and I thought that they would provide me with sound information as I had worked well with them in the past years when I was still a curriculum advisor for the Foundation Phase

in the Gert Sibande District. I conducted a semi-structured interview with each teacher for about 25 minutes and observed them teaching reading comprehension. I also analyzed their learners' workbooks. I did not use the pilot results for any other purpose in this study (Yin, 2009).

From the pilot study I learnt that teachers addressed reading comprehension in relation to the other language skills, such as creative writing, handwriting, language structure and use. In other lessons teachers did not assess reading comprehension, as they assessed other skills such as handwriting. It was difficult to record all learning activities on the observation sheet. I realized I needed to record all learning activities as part of my field notes, transferring them to the lesson observation sheet afterwards.

5.6.2 FORMAL DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

Case study research usually employs a variety of data collection methods and uses multiple methods in a single case in order to obtain relevant, in-depth and context-rich information (Rule & John, 2011). These authors add that the choice of data collection methods is determined by various factors such as the purpose of the study and the research questions. I found that the most valuable way of collecting data for the study was through the use of semi-structured interviews, lesson observation and document analysis, since the key research question required predominantly explorative data on how teachers use formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. I used the key research questions to guide the development of the data collection methods. Data was collected over two school terms.

5.6.2.1 *Semi-structured interviews*

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Grade 3 teachers to probe more deeply and obtain "rich data" (Babbie, 2013). Semi-structured interviews also allow the flexibility of asking follow-up questions (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Since the questions were semi-structured, the respondents had the opportunity to elaborate and provide other information relevant to this study. Given the exploratory nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were the most suitable means of collecting data and lead to insight and comprehension.

Questions for the semi-structured interviews (see Addendum 3) were developed prior to the interviews and guided the investigation without restricting teachers' responses. The aim was to ensure that information relevant to certain aspects was covered. These questions were formulated based on the literature review of the use of formative assessment to enhance teaching. The interview schedules focused on four aspects. The first aspects covered general questions about the teachers' background information. The second addressed information on teachers' knowledge of formative assessment and the application of that knowledge to the teaching of reading comprehension. The third addressed teachers' facilitation of formative assessment of reading comprehension, while the fourth addressed the interaction between the teacher and learners through feedback.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, but teachers were given latitude to respond, make comments or ask for clarity in the language they were comfortable with, such as their home language. I am familiar with the local home language, i.e. siSwati, which is the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) of all four schools. The use of siSwati in the interviews was not problematic. I only managed to conduct two interviews with two teachers per school during a week because the school management and Mpumalanga Department of Education only allowed interviews to be conducted after school hours.

I used a voice recorder with the permission of the participants to record the data from the semi-structured interviews. The reason for using a recording device was that it is quick and much less disturbing than taking notes. The length of the interviews varied from 20-30 minutes. I used a service provider for the transcription of interview data. I checked the quality of the transcriptions by choosing sections of the transcripts and checking their accuracy against the tape recording. More checking of the interview transcripts was done when I sent back the transcriptions electronically to the participating teachers to verify the content.

5.6.2.2 *Lesson observations*

I conducted lesson observations in an attempt to get in-depth data on how teachers use formative assessment when teaching of reading comprehension. I regarded lesson observation as suitable for data collection because it allows direct observation

of actions as well as face-to-face interaction with teachers and learners in their natural situation (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, observations allow the researcher to gain a holistic overview of the context under study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I was able to see things that might otherwise unconsciously be missed, discover things the participants might not freely talk about in interview situations and to access personal knowledge (Cohen *et al.*, 2010).

All teachers were observed inside their classrooms. This provided the opportunity to get first-hand information on the teachers' practice of formative assessment and the interaction with their learners on feedback strategies. The first phase of lesson observation followed shortly after the semi-structured interviews. The reason for the first phase of observations was to confirm some of the information the teacher had provided in the semi-structured interviews. It gave me an opportunity to determine whether teachers' conceptions corresponded to their practice. The other phases of observation were an aid to determine whether teachers used formative assessment in their teaching.

Lesson observations assisted me in collecting some information teachers did not supply during the interviews. When I attended the lessons; both the teacher and the learners were aware of my presence. The teachers informed learners about the purpose of my visit. My role in this process was to be a silent, non-participating observer, and I did not interfere with the lesson.

I observed seven lessons of each teacher with her class of Grade 3 learners. During the lesson observation, my focus was on the teacher and six sampled learners. I observed how the teachers posed questions to the learners during and after reading of the text to assess their comprehension. In addition, I observed the teacher-learner interaction through the feedback, teachers' facilitation of learners' responses to the feedback, the nature of feedback (written and oral) given to the learners and the course of events. I did not focus on learners' acquisition of knowledge, as that was not the aim of the study. Field notes were used to record these actions.

Before each lesson observation, I examined the teacher's lesson plan in order to gain an idea of the formative assessment activities to be carried out by the teacher in her class. An informal conversation with the participating teacher was conducted about the lesson plan in order to understand what the teacher planned to do in that specific lesson and how activities would proceed. After the observation I had another conversation with the teacher to clarify what I had observed and to obtain additional information about the lesson. These informal conversations served to narrow my focus on the research questions and guide the research study in order to obtain suitable information.

The observations and the informal conversations were recorded manually as field notes. In my field notes I included my empirical observations of events during the lesson, my interpretation of those events as well as notes about matters I needed to follow up with the teacher. I also documented my personal reflections, actions and learner-teacher interactions whenever they occurred. After each observation, I expanded and recorded my observations in my field notes (see attached DVD) in order to capture a clear picture of my observations and develop a tentative record of ongoing analysis and interpretation.

5.6.2.3 *Field notes*

I kept field notes to record lesson observations, personal observations, reflections and perceived body language of teachers while interacting with the learners. In the field notes I also recorded informal discussions with individual teachers after each lesson observation. I also recorded feelings and thoughts in the field notes, as advised by Lincoln (1989), and recorded information about teachers' lesson plans (see field notes on the attached DVD).

5.6.2.4 *Analysis of learners' workbooks*

I analyzed learners' workbooks for six learners in each classroom. I considered the analysis of learners' classwork books as necessary; it had to confirm the data collected from the teachers' interviews, whereas the learners' books would provide suitable evidence about the nature of teachers' written feedback pertaining formative assessment. The learners' classwork books assisted me to establish the frequency and the nature of feedback given to the learners. The aim was to reveal whether

teachers used formative assessment to support their teaching of reading comprehension.

The analysis of each learner's workbook took approximate 20 minutes. I used a notebook to capture the data from learner's workbooks. These form part of my field notes. In my view, the analysis of learners' workbooks has strengthened the study, thus increasing its validity.

5.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Hatch (2002) refers to the interpretation of data analysis in qualitative research as a systematic process of searching for the meaning in order to communicate what has been learned. Some important aspects of data analysis in qualitative research are that it is an ongoing process that usually takes place during the data collection process and is inductive, with themes emerging from the data (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). MacMillan and Schumacher state that there is no exclusive standard procedure for data analysis in qualitative research, but there are procedures and techniques that are used universally. In this study I analyzed the data manually, using ideas from various researchers.

Most researchers have criticized the case-study design for the lack of systematic handling of data. Rule and John (2011) suggest a system for organizing the data before the data collection begins and add that the system should also be used during data collection to help the researcher manage and monitor the process. Following their view, I used a three-step process, namely organization, actual data analysis and interpretation as a precaution to ensure the systematic management of the data analysis process.

The data analysis started during the data collection process (Slavin, 2007) and continued up until the time of reporting. Since the study used the multiple-case study, I applied the *within-case and cross-case analysis* as suggested by Merriam (2009). According to Merriam (2009), in *within-case analysis* each case is treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself and analyzed separately. The *cross-case analysis* involves the identification of similarities or patterns that appear across the

cases as well as differences. The purpose of this cross-case analysis was to build abstractions across cases, as suggested by Merriam (2009).

5.7.1 ORGANIZING THE DATA

The first phase of the data analysis was the data organization. The main purpose of data organization was to prepare for the coding, as suggested by Rule and John (2011). I started with the printing of the interview transcripts, observation schedules and field notes and the notes for documents analysis. I used large margins and increased the line spacing in order to add field notes and my interpretation.

5.7.2 ACTUAL DATA ANALYSIS

During the second phase of data analysis, I logged the three types of data sources (semi-structured interviews, field notes for observation and document analysis) according to each case. I read through each transcript of the data source to get the sense of the whole, as advised in Rossman (2011).

I then divided the sections into segments. As I read through the segments I made notes in the margins to formulate ideas. I assigned codes to different sections of the text (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Thereafter, I compared the codes, during which process I was able to identify patterns and relationships among the categories. Themes emerged inductively as I read through the patterns and relationships.

Having gone through all the documents of each case, I was able to generate initial codes from the data using coloured pens (Rule & John, 2011). I made a list of the codes with one column for each dataset. The next step was to compare the codes for duplication and to identify the patterns and differences. This process led to the formulation of themes.

5.7.3 DATA INTERPRETATION

The third phase of data analysis was interpretation and the drawing of conclusions. Patton (2003) notes that “interpretation means attaching significance to what is found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise

imposing order”. My interpretation was done by comparing the emerged themes with the literature. The aim of this analysis was to report on thematic findings which emerged from the participants’ interviews and other data sources. This helped me focus on what the literature regards as good practice in respect of formative assessment. In addition, the reason for data interpretation was to draw conclusions that would support me when answering my research question regarding the teachers’ use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension.

5.8 ENSURING THE QUALITY OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

I considered credibility as an indication that the research findings captured were the true account of what had been learned. Some authors refer to credibility as the trustworthiness of the study. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) describe credibility as the extent to which the findings are truthful and imply professional integrity, intellectual precision and methodological competence. I view the qualitative concept of credibility as one that refers to the presentation of a truthful account of the phenomenon that is described in the study.

5.8.1 CREDIBILITY OF THE STUDY

The following measures were put in place to ensure the credibility of this study. I used a multiple-case study design and different data collection instruments to thicken the data and strengthen my findings; thus triangulating the study as suggested by MacMillan and Schumacher (2010). First, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each individual teacher at her school with the aim of determining their understanding, conceptions and practice of formative assessment in reading comprehension. I supported this primary data collection strategy with lesson observations as well as the analysis of learners’ workbooks. The purpose of the use of these instruments was to validate the information received from the semi-structured interviews. I continuously reflected on my subjectivity and biases and aimed to remain open-minded in order to obtain insight into my personal orientation and prejudices that might influence my research and interpretations. I also made use of field notes to describe the research context and environment and to document lesson observations. Furthermore, I made use of member checking and provided the participants with interview transcripts so that they could verify, correct and elaborate

on their contributions. According to Babbie (2013), the use of member checks improves the participants' honesty and openness about themselves.

Validity in the semi-structured interviews was also achieved through the use of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with individual teachers on the same topic and posing the same questions to all interviewees, using the same methods of interviewing and analyzing the results of all interviews in the same style.

With this combination of measures, I attempted to improve trustworthiness and authenticity to ensure credible findings.

5.8.2 AUTHENTICITY OF THE STUDY

Another term related to credibility is authenticity. Authenticity refers to the outcome of the trustworthiness of the study and the ability of the researcher to report a situation through the eyes of the participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2010). In qualitative research the main measure to enhance the authenticity of the research is validity. Cohen *et al.*, (2010) state that validity in qualitative data may be addressed through “honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher.” In my study, I attempted to achieve authenticity by means of member checking and various data collection methods.

5.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to satisfy ethical principles, clearance for data collection was sought and granted by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria. Before commencement of this study, the Mpumalanga Department of Education granted me permission to conduct the study in four primary schools (see Addendum 4).

In accordance with the principle of informed consent, I visited the teachers a month before the data was collected. I explained the purpose and possible advantages of the study. I informed them that they could withdraw at any stage they wished before the research was conducted. I assured them that there would be no harm during the

course of this research. I also explained that the data would be treated in strict confidentiality.

Teachers who volunteered to participate in my study were provided with informed consent forms. We discussed the programme for data collection. I explained to them that interviews were to be conducted after the contact time, so that the normal teaching timetable of the various subjects would not be interfered with, and that I would record all interviews using a voice recorder.

A high level of confidentiality was maintained as regards the information gathered from the participants and in transcribing the interviews. I also used pseudonyms to conceal the identity of the participants.

As I was dealing with young learners, I observed the research ethics applicable to children. I wrote letters to the parents informing them of my intention to observe their children in their classes during the teaching and learning. I requested their permission and explained what the research was all about. In these letters I informed parents that the identity and confidentiality of their children would be protected, as advised by Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher (2009). I provided parents of the participating learners with the consent forms for permission to use their children's workbooks and to observe them during the learning process.

I visited the schools a week prior to the commencement of data collection to speak to the learners about my intention to observe them in class during teaching and learning and their role in the research. I assured them of the confidentiality and safety of the information. I promised to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants at all times. This was achieved by handling all data in such a way that the confidentiality and anonymity of the teachers and learners involved were assured. I did not disclose the identities of the participants, and I dealt with all information obtained during the research process in a confidential manner.

5.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the research design and approach used to undertake this study. It locates the study in the qualitative research paradigm. I employed a multiple-case study approach using the interpretive paradigm. The reason for adopting this data collection strategy is that it is the most relevant to the descriptive nature of this study. I described the context of the study and outlined the data collection process and the research questions.

In addition, I deliberated on the manner in which I handled technical considerations as well the quality of the research. In Chapter 6 I provide a detailed discussion of the analysis of the collected data.

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CHAPTER 6

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING OF THE FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Having described the research design, unit of analysis, instruments for data collection and the data collection processes in Chapter 5, I now report on the data analysis and findings in this chapter to establish teachers' perceptions and their practice of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension. I used content analysis as described by Neuman (2006) as a technique for examining content or information contained in written documents or other communication media. The content analysis of this study involved thematic analysis through coding and categorising of the themes which emerged from three data sources, namely interview transcripts, classroom observations and learners' workbooks.

I used both deductive and inductive data analysis approaches to formulate themes from the data. The two main concepts (formative assessment and reading comprehension) provided a foundation for analyzing the findings of the research on an *a priori* basis, which involved the use of a deductive approach in which themes acquired from the data were formulated (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Teachers' perceptions and practice of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension emerged with the deductive approach, and I identified them as three themes.

The inductive analysis approach helped me identify various categories of the three themes as it emerged from the data gathered through interviews. The interviews reported teachers' perceptions of formative assessment, challenges experienced by teachers when teaching reading comprehension, whereas the observation analysis of learners' workbooks was used to support these views on themes raised by teachers. The emergence of themes from the raw data which correlated with the literature review which will be addressed in the following chapter signified the richness of the collected data in terms of validity and reliability.

6.2 DATA ANALYSIS PROCESSES

Data collection and analysis were done concurrently throughout the entire research process. The latter commenced with the interviews of participating teachers, since this was the main technique of data collection. The transcriptions of the interviews provided rich data which I studied and analysed line by line. I divided it into meaningful analytical units (Maree, 2011), then transferred teachers' responses to each question to an A4 sheet. This helped me group the responses for each question, so that I could see ideas, comments and remarks emerging. I colour coded those ideas, comments and remarks that were repetitive to ensure the identification of themes.

The observation data was collected by means of field notes during class visits. I had not prepared an observation schedule prior to the observations. The results of the pilot study had revealed that a structured observation schedule might limit the data, therefore I recorded my observations as field notes, which contained information of all activities and interactions that took place between the learner and teacher related to formative assessment of reading comprehension. I studied the field notes on each individual teacher with the intention of extracting information about positive and negative aspects of formative assessment during the teaching of reading comprehension. I also recorded as field notes the learning activities which supported formative assessment using information obtained from my literature review on reading comprehension. I then compiled a list of all those activities to identify similarities and differences between teachers' practices of formative assessment. The information helped me compare teachers' practice of formative assessment.

I analysed the learners' workbooks as planned, the intention being to establish the nature of written feedback given to the learners as part of formative assessment of learners' responses when reading and comprehending a text. I expected this to reveal whether teachers understood and practised formative assessment, whereas the data from learners' workbooks provided me with information about the type and quality of the questions given to the learners and their written responses after reading a text. The data from the learners' workbooks revealed little about the feedback teachers gave learners. I therefore adapted my procedures and also relied on the

interview transcripts for information on feedback given after learners had performed a reading activity.

Data obtained from the observations of the lessons presented by teachers and an analysis of workbooks was used to confirm or contradict data obtained from the interviews, enabling me to identify similarities and differences across data. I evaluated the themes that emerged from the different data sources. I also conducted document analysis to validate the identified themes and deepen my understanding.

6.3 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis refers primarily to official policies and documents, which I examined critically in order to identify knowledge and skills that could be employed in a research study to shed light on teachers' use of formative assessment to teach learners reading comprehension skills. Table 6.1 provides a summary of documents that I consulted, their key features and significance of which are briefly outlined.

Table 6.1: Key policy documents consulted

Policy documents	Key features	Significance to the study
<i>National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for schools in the General Education and Training Band</i> (DoE, 2007b).	Instrumental in planning and conducting assessment.	Provides guidelines for conducting formative assessment.
<i>National Curriculum Statement: Assessment guidelines for Foundation Phase Grades R-3</i> . (DoE, 2002a).	Supports the implementation of the <i>National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for schools in the General Education and Training Band</i> . Provides guidelines on how Foundation Phase teachers can use outcomes-based assessment in their classroom practice.	Provides guidelines for conducting formative assessment.

Policy documents	Key features	Significance to the study
<i>Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS): SiSwati Home Language</i> (DBE, 2011c).	Specifies knowledge and skills that need to be taught and learnt on a term-by-term basis for each Grade in the Foundation Phase. In each Grade in the foundation phase, it lays the foundation for planning, teaching, assessing, reporting and evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching of reading comprehension.	Provides skills and knowledge for the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension.
<i>Teaching Reading in the Early Grades</i> (DoE, 2008c).	Highlights the importance of the core components for the teaching of reading and writing.	Specifies strategies for teaching reading comprehension.
Learners' workbooks (DBE, 2012c).	Provides suggestions for classwork exemplars and types of questions which should be used to achieve learning objectives of language skills, which include the teaching of reading comprehension. It also provides text which learners should read to enable teachers to assess their reading comprehension of the texts.	Provides guidelines for learning activities that support formative assessment.

The above-mentioned policy documents provided the overview of teaching and assessment of reading comprehension of Grade 3 learners in general and for siSwati-speaking learners in particular. Since these documents addressed teaching and assessment of learners in the Foundation Phase, they were part of the literature review. They were helpful to determine the measures which were in place to teach reading comprehension against the CAPS prescripts pertaining to home language development. I also wanted to investigate whether they were used in lesson planning, classwork exercises and reporting and whether their use made any difference to the reading comprehension proficiencies of siSwati-speaking learners when exposed to formative assessment. This was addressed during the interviews, lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks.

The following questions were instrumental in understanding the policy provisions on the formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension:

- What is the emphasis of formative assessment for the teaching of reading comprehension?
- What types of texts and questions should teachers use to assess reading comprehension?
- Which assessment strategies can teachers use to enhance reading comprehension?

In addition to the policy documents, the participant profile provided me with important information regarding teachers' qualifications, age, gender and teaching experience. These aspects contributed to my understanding of the cases of my study and provided me with a holistic picture.

6.4 PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, I gave the teachers pseudonyms and referred to them by number and school, for example, T1-SchA for Teacher 1 in School A. In Schools A, B and C, two Grade 3 teachers participated, while one Grade 3 teacher participated in School D. In School A, both teachers were teaching the learners in the same Grade 3 class. The other teachers each had their own Grade 3 class. Their biographical details are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2: Participant profile

Teacher	School	Class	Gender and age	Qualifications	Teaching experience (years)	Experience in teaching Grade 3 learners	Number of lessons observed
T1	A	Gr 3 A	F-42	PTD	18	3	5
T2	A	Gr 3 A	F-49	PTD	26	12	5
T1	B	Gr 3 A	F-41	PTD; ACE; BEd	18	8	5
T2	B	Gr 3 B	F-54	STD; ACE	32	8	5
T1	C	Gr 3 A	F-42	PTD	20	8	5
T2	C	Gr 3 B	F-49	PTD; ACE (Ed. Management)	28	12	5
T1	D	Gr 3 A	F-40	BA; 2 nd year in PGCE Programme	4	4	5

Key to abbreviations of the qualifications

ACE: Advanced Certificate in Education; PTD: Primary Teacher's Diploma; STD: Senior Teacher's Diploma; BA: Bachelor of Arts; BEd: Bachelor in Education; PGCE: Post Graduate Certificate in Education

The background information enabled me to know the research participants better and to advance my analysis in relation to their knowledge and experience in teaching Grade 3. The analysis of the results in Table 6.2 indicates that all seven teachers were female, which confirm research that the majority of teachers in Grade 3 and possibly in the Foundation Phase are female. Their ages ranged from 40 to 54, which is an indication that they should have matured sufficiently regarding knowledge and skills of teaching and to work with young learners. On the other hand, this indicates an alarming tendency of aging in the Foundation Phase teaching corps.

It was important to establish the level of qualifications of teachers, since research has shown that this has an influence on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Six teachers were qualified, having the minimum qualification of a teacher's diploma, while three, in addition to having the teacher's diploma, had obtained an ACE. T1-SchB had the highest qualification (BEd). T2-SchB was not qualified to teach Grade 3, since she had obtained a senior teacher diploma.

One of the participants (T1-SchD) was not a qualified teacher, having obtained only a BA degree without the professional qualification. She was currently in her final year of the PGCE programme, specialising in the Foundation Phase. She was being financed by the Mpumalanga Department of Education (MDoE) and indicated that she had been trained on the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2011c). She explained that she had majored in siSwati and Education, attended NCS training and enrolled for the PGCE programme. All these training and current studies placed her in a good position to become a knowledgeable Grade 3 teacher. Her BA qualification could be regarded as a temporary measure while she studied for a formal certificate in teaching. The reason why she was appointed without a teaching qualification could be that there is a shortage of siSwati speaking teachers in the Foundation Phase.

Teachers had varied teaching experience, ranging from four (4) to thirty (32) years. Six teachers had a sound teaching experience of more than 18 years, except Teacher 1 in School D, who had four years. Their sound teaching experience may mean that they had stayed long in the field and had experienced the curriculum developments in South Africa since 1994; these five teachers were already teaching in the Foundation Phase when Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) was introduced to schools in 1997. In addition, they were already in the field when RNCS was introduced in 2004, and were in a more advanced position since they had already implemented the NCS. I assume that these teachers were familiar with the learner-centred approach and the formative function of assessment.

T2-SchB had the most teaching experience, 32 years, and had been teaching Grade 3 for eight years. During the semi-structured interviews she indicated that for the past 24 years she had been teaching English in Grade 5 in another school, having started teaching Grade 3 only when she joined the present school eight years earlier. The reason for her move was to be closer to her home. Though she did not have a qualification for the Foundation Phase, she was knowledgeable about the curriculum, having attended the workshops on the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2004 and National Curriculum Statement (NCS) workshops in 2011 and having implemented these subsequently.

6.5 CODING SYSTEM APPLIED DURING THE INVESTIGATION

In this section I report on and discuss findings with regard to questions raised in interviews, information gathered during lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks. In Table 6.3 I outline the coding system used throughout this thesis for convenient reference to data. An example of my coding system is 'SM' for semi-structured interviews; 'FN' for the notes recorded on the notebook during the lesson observations; and 'LB' for the learners' workbooks. Each teacher participant was visited five times in her classroom while presenting a lesson. On the field notes, the number of the lessons per teacher was reported as follows: FN 1-5 for Teacher 1 from School A; FN 6-10 for Teacher 2 from School A; FN 11-15 for Teacher 1 from School B; FN 16-20 for Teacher 2 from School B; FN 21-25 for Teacher 1 from School C; FN 26-30 for Teacher 2 from School C and FN 31-35 for Teacher 1 from School D.

Table 6.3: Coding system applied during the investigation

Key to coding	Explanation	School	Class	Lesson
SM	Semi-structured interviews	A, B, C, D		
FN	Field notes for lesson observations	A, B, C, D	A & B	1-5 per teacher
LB	Analysis of learners' workbooks	A, B, C, D	A & B	

6.6 THEMATIC DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH

Data from semi-structured interviews, field notes for lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks was analysed in an integrated way. The themes and categories that emerged from the data are summarised in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4: Themes and related categories

Theme 1: Uncertainty about formative assessment	
Category 1	Formative assessment is the end-product of teaching and learning
Category 2	Formative assessment is a process that takes place in learning

Theme 2: Inconsistent practice of formative assessment	
Category 1	Poor questioning to assess reading comprehension
Subcategory a	Poorly phrased questions for verbal assessment
Subcategory b	Poor management of questions for verbal assessment
Subcategory c	Poor questions for written work
Category 2	Feedback varies in quality, quantity and format
Category 3	Minimal involvement of learners

Theme 3: Challenges experienced by teachers in relation to the teaching of reading comprehension	
Category 1	Lack of knowledge and skills for the teaching of reading comprehension
Category 2	Lack of knowledge and skills for the assessment of reading comprehension
Category 3	Shortage of teaching-learning material in siSwati

The data analysis provided me with the three broad themes, each with its distinct categories. I refer to the relevant policy documents to assist me when I present data. When I discussed the lesson observations, I integrated my findings with the content analysis of the other data and considered the data received from learners' workbooks as validation of my findings. In the next sections I describe the themes and their related categories in detail.

6.6.1 THEME 1: UNCERTAINTY ABOUT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

It was important to establish teachers' conceptions of formative assessment; what it means, its functions and how it is applied. During the pilot study, teachers were asked to give their understanding of formative assessment. However, the results revealed an inability to provide useful information about it, with three out of five teachers not feeling comfortable with sharing their understanding. The reason might be that they were not at ease with sharing their knowledge of a concept with which they were not familiar. For example, one teacher asked if I could ask an easier question as this one was too difficult for her to understand.

I then restructured the questions for the main study, asking teachers to share with me their understanding of ‘assessment’ and to state reasons why they assessed learners during the teaching of reading comprehension. I assumed that their responses would help me determine whether they understood the meaning and functions of formative assessment and practiced formative assessment in their classrooms.

All teachers were able to share their understanding of assessment and its purpose when teaching reading comprehension. One teacher (T1-SchD) was able to articulate her understanding of formative assessment. She gave the following description:

(SM/T1-SchD):

“Formative assessment is the continuous assessment that is conducted every day, with the intention to assist children. Through formative assessment the teacher can see what children know and what they do not know. Then the teacher should assist children with what they do not know.”

On the other hand, none of the other six teachers supplied useful information about formative assessment, with four of these teachers (T1-SchA, T2-SchA, T2-SchB, and T1-SchC) making no attempt to describe the term, while the other two teachers (T1-SchB, T2-SchC) indicated that they had come across formative assessment in the CAPS policy document. T1-SchB gave the following response:

(SM/T1-SchB):

“M...., formative assessment, let me think. I do not remember the meaning, but it is not the first time I come across formative assessment. Yes, I have seen it in CAPS document, although I do not remember the meaning. Ngitocabanga [I will think about it].”

In the same manner, T2-SchC responded:

(SM/T2-SchC):

“Eish... formative assessment (pause). Formative assessment, I have seen this word in policy document, but I am not sure about the meaning m.... Can we pass to the next question?”

Although most of the teachers seemed to lack the knowledge and the confidence to describe formative assessment, I identified two purposes of assessment in the teachers' response. One purpose is 'assessment is the end product of teaching and learning'. Another purpose is 'assessment is a process in learning'. Therefore I placed teachers' understanding of assessment into two categories. The data obtained during the lesson observations and analysis of learners' workbooks was used to confirm whether what they had said about assessment corresponded to what was being practiced in their classrooms.

6.6.1.1 Category 1: Formative assessment is the end-product of teaching and learning

According to Reddy (2004), assessment should be designed with one of four specific purposes in mind: baseline, summative, formative and diagnostic (DBE, 2011c). Formative assessment refers to all assessment activities undertaken by teachers during the learning process, the intention of which is to support learners' learning through feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

The interview data revealed that four teachers (T1-SchA, T2-SchA, T2-SchB & T2-SchC), when describing the concept assessment, mentioned only one type of assessment, namely summative assessment. As far as these teachers were concerned, assessment was merely used to evaluate the learner performance at the end of the learning process and that it should be based on what had been learned:

(SM/T1-SchA):

"You first teach based on the learners' book, learners learn and it is then that you can assess, you should assess every day."

(SM/T2-SchA):

"Assessment is to check whether the learners have learned something from the lesson that I have presented to them. Whether they do follow or understand the content of the lesson."

(SM/T2-SchB):

"In my opinion assessment is a tool that is used to ... to.... to... see, to see that kids have achieved objectives of the lesson or understand once I taught them."

(SM/T2-SchC):

“Assessment is usually when you check whether learners have understood what you were doing daily.”

I detected a pattern in their descriptions as I noted that the four teachers had the same understanding of assessment. Although they had expressed themselves differently, their description of assessment portrayed a linear process which involved the following: the teacher teaches, the learners learn, thereafter the teacher assesses. The implication of this process is that assessment is the end-product of the learning process.

Although four teachers indicated that assessment was the end-product of learning, they had different ideas about its format. For example, T2-SchB perceived assessment as a *“tool”* which should be used to evaluate whether learners had achieved the lesson objectives, while three teachers (T1-SchA, T2-SchA & T2-SchC) viewed assessment as an activity to evaluate the learning process. According to these three teachers, assessment as an activity was regarded as separate from their learning and teaching.

The data obtained from lesson observations and the analysis of learners’ workbooks confirmed that teachers frequently gave written work towards the end of the lesson for application. Teachers’ description of assessment as the end product of learning confirmed what I had observed during their lessons focusing on reading comprehension, namely that they frequently engaged learners in oral and written assessment activities. The teachers mostly followed a certain procedure, the teacher reading the text at the beginning of the lesson, instructing the learners to read the text and ask questions verbally during the activity and giving classwork towards the end of the lesson.

The learners’ workbooks confirmed that teachers usually did written assessment at the end of the lesson. The written work was based on what had been taught in the class. Out of 35 lessons observed, only on three occasions did the teachers not give written work. In her lesson 3, T2-SchA did not give written work but indicated that she

had to assess learners' reading by assigning them a mark. In her lessons 2 and 3, T1-SchC did not give written work, saying that she had planned to revise previous work in preparation for the forthcoming test in order to consolidate skills (pace of reading, finding out the theme, summarising what is read in point form) which had been taught and were to be tested. The implication could be that questions for tests were covered in the classwork, and the teacher wanted to assess whether learners were making progress with the reading comprehension skills.

To summarise, the responses of the four teachers (T1-SchA, T2-SchA, T2-SchB & T2-SchC) indicate that they had limited knowledge of assessment. They had based what understanding they did have on one function of assessment, namely summative, and I noticed that they gave written work at the end of the lessons as an assessment of reading comprehension activities.

6.6.1.2 Category 2: Formative assessment is a process that takes place in learning

Formative assessment is seen as a process taking place during teaching and learning in order to monitor learners' progress towards the achievement of the learning outcomes and to support learners during learning activities (Black & William, 1998). According to Brookhart *et al.* (2010), formative assessment should provide teachers and learners with information about the learners' performance levels compared with the learning objectives reflected in the lesson plans. Proponents of assessment emphasize that teachers should integrate formative assessment into the teaching instructions in order to facilitate teaching and learning (William, Lee, Harrison & Black, 2004; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008).

Three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) described assessment as a process that should take place during learning, believing it should be conducted in every lesson in the three phases of the learning process, namely in the beginning, during and towards the end of the lesson. Although these three teachers viewed assessment as a process, they did not give details of how it should take place. According T1-SchC, formative assessment should be based on what had been learned. She mentioned the three phases during which assessment had to be conducted, but gave no reasons for conducting assessment during those phases:

(SM/SC-T1):

“Assessment is a process of checking what the learners have gained in the lesson, but you can assess at the beginning of the lessons, in the middle or at the end of the lesson.”

Two teachers (T1-SchB & T1-SchD) talked at length and with confidence about the formative assessment process when explaining the concept ‘assessment’. T1-SchB gave the following description:

(SM/T1-SchB):

“Assessment is a process that should take place at the beginning, during and after teaching. There are many reasons why teachers should assess. At the beginning of the lesson teachers should assess to check how much learners know about the topic to be taught. In the middle teachers should assess to check whether learners are still following the lessons. At the end, teachers should assess to check the learner performance in that lesson. Assessment can be oral like observing the learners discussing about certain theme. It can be in a form of written work like the tests, classwork and assignment. Assessment should be done daily.”

T1-SchB was able to mention various purposes of assessment at various phases of the learning process. According to her response, the teacher should conduct assessment at the beginning of the lesson to obtain information about the learners’ knowledge of the topic (baseline function). During the lesson the teacher should conduct assessment to monitor the learners’ progress (formative function). At the end of the lesson the teacher should evaluate how much the learners had benefited from the lesson (summative function). She also talked about two forms of assessment, namely, oral and written assessment, giving examples of each. Her response indicates that she is aware that there is a need to use various assessment methods to support learning and teaching to a wider range of Grade 3 learners. According to the Department of Education (2007a), learners have different learning styles; therefore they should be taught and assessed through various forms of assessment.

In addition, T1-SchB thought that assessment should take place on a daily basis. During the observations of her lessons I noted that she frequently engaged learners

in verbal questioning at the beginning, middle and end of the lesson. During oral questioning she also paid attention to the weak learners. The data received from the analysis of learners' workbooks confirmed that they participated in written assessment activities of reading comprehension on a daily basis. Examples of these activities include the following:

T1-SchD described the term 'assessment' as:

(SM/T1-SchD):

"...a process that takes place during teaching and learning in the classroom. I need to assess children on everything they are doing in class, sometimes it is oral you can just observe them when they do work in class with other children. In language I assess them in listening, speaking, reading, phonics, or in writing. I also assess children to check my own teaching. For example, if many children in my class fail the test it means that I did not do well during teaching. I also conduct assessment to check the strengths and weak points of the children and I give them feedback afterwards. For example, if I want to know about their knowledge of antonyms, I give them the classwork, the classwork will tell me whether they know synonyms or not. If many fail it will mean I have to reteach synonyms."

The response of T1-SchD shows that she viewed assessment as a process which should take place during learning and teaching in the classroom, but she did not explain the process. She thought that learners should be assessed on a daily basis and in totality, although she did not elaborate on this. She displayed knowledge of the core content areas and skills for language teaching and was aware that all of these should be assessed; however, she did not talk about their relationship to reading comprehension. She may not have been aware that language skills should be taught in an integrated way, preferring to teach listening, speaking, writing and reading separately.

In addition, T1-SchD indicated that she used assessment in her classroom to evaluate the learners' strengths and weaknesses in various language skills. She also mentioned another purpose of assessing the learners in her class, namely to assess

her teaching strategy. She argued that if learners did not perform as expected, it meant that she had not done well during teaching and she would have to change her strategy and repeat the lesson. Although this teacher had a reasonable knowledge of the concept 'assessment' I did not observe all these activities during the lesson observations. Her classroom practice was similar to that of teachers with limited knowledge of assessment. In other words, there was a contradiction between what she said and what she did. During the lesson observations she asked questions orally, but did not deal with incorrect responses. I did not see her repeating the instructions as she had claimed during the interview.

In all lessons observed with T1-SchD she gave the class work to do at the end, but did not give feedback to the learners regarding their written work. I did not see evidence that she assessed the learners to evaluate her own teaching strategy. Her lesson plans indicated that she dealt with different content and skills about reading comprehension on different days. I also noted that she did not repeat information to those who did not at first understand. Furthermore, the lesson plans she submitted to me did not give an indication that she had repeated some of the lessons as part of the process of formative assessment.

In conclusion, three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) showed reasonable knowledge of assessment, since they had given relevant information about assessment and mentioned various aspects of it which I did not receive from the other participating teachers. None of the seven teachers mentioned the terms: *formative assessment*, *assessment for learning*, or *assessing formatively* in their description of what they understood about assessment. Out of the seven participating teachers, only one (T1-SchD) was able to share constructive knowledge of formative assessment. Her knowledge was informative, as she mentioned that it should be conducted daily with the intention of supporting learning.

6.6.2 THEME 2: INCONSISTENT PRACTICE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

According to Risco and Walker-Dalhouse (2010), all activities during learner-teacher interaction are formative if they are designed to improve learning. With this view in mind, I analysed all learning activities carried out by the learners during the learner-

teacher interaction related to reading comprehension in order to determine whether they supported learning. The data was vital in terms of the study (to understand how teachers engaged learners in learning activities and how they supported learners when teaching reading comprehension). This theme acknowledges that teachers were unable to use formative assessment to support learning, especially enhancing their reading comprehension. I have divided this theme into categories, namely poor questioning to assess reading comprehension; feedback varies in quality, quantity and format and minimal involvement of learners.

6.6.2.1 Category 1: Poor questioning when assessing reading comprehension

According to Black and Wiliam (1998), when teachers use assessment formatively they should apply a questioning strategy as an opportunity to improve and enhance learners' knowledge. However, Dechant (1991) warns teachers against the overuse of questioning when assessing reading comprehension, as he claims that teachers might spend more time on assessing rather than teaching reading comprehension strategies. The data indicated that participating teachers asked questions orally and in writing. Questions were asked at various stages of the lesson, namely at the beginning, during the course of the lesson and towards the end. The data revealed poor quality of questions used by teachers for the assessment of reading comprehension and poor questions for written work. I identified these two aspects as subcategories of theme 2.

(a) Poorly phrased questions for verbal assessment

At the beginning of the lessons, teachers asked questions for various purposes, including for assessment of learners' prior knowledge as acquiring new knowledge. However, some questions were not of good quality as those ones that challenged learners' thinking. For example, in her lesson 1, T2-SchA addressed the theme '*communication*' by asking the following set of questions verbally before introducing learners to the subject of *e-mails* (as a means of communication):

(FN-1/SA-T2):

Who knows a computer?

Where did you see it?

How does it look like?
Who was using it?
What was it used for?
Can you use a computer?

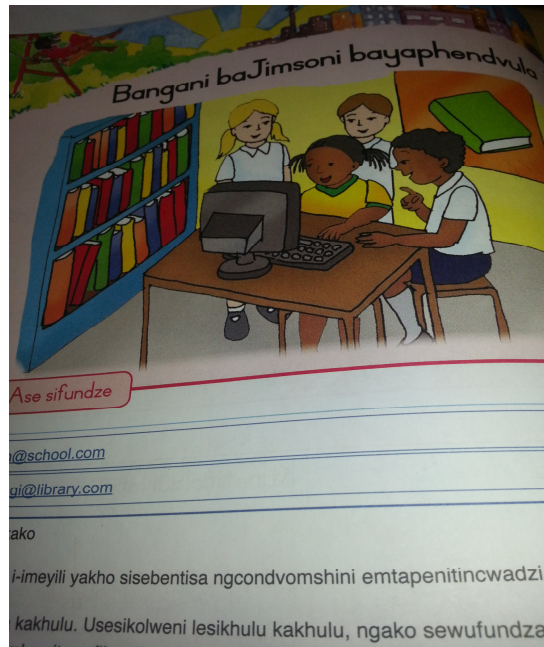


Photo 6.1: Picture of the lesson about e-mail

Although T2-SchA made an effort to activate learners' prior knowledge, she frequently used closed questions, which did not challenge learners' thinking and produced only a few words from learners in response. Photo 6.1 above indicates the lesson about e-mails, which was taken from the DBE workbook.

Questions asked by the teachers at the beginning of the lesson required learners to recall information of the previous lesson, but did not challenge them to recall factual information on what had been taught in the previous lesson. The teacher did not provide any other details for learners to assist them in recalling the specific knowledge she requested. This was clear in lesson 1, when T1-SchA started the lesson by asking the following question:

(FN-1/SA-T1):

"Give me the names of the three characters we have learnt about in yesterday's lesson."

On other occasions, two participant teachers (T1-SchA & T1-SchD) started their teaching by giving a summary as a way of recapping the previous lesson. Afterwards, they asked questions in relation to a summary of what information was gained from the previous lesson before they introduced a new one. The following examples are quoted from their lessons:

(FN-2/SA-T1):

“Yesterday we learnt about story writing. Let I remind you, when someone is planning to write a story he should take notice of the following things: characters and setting; the beginning; the middle and the end of the story. About the characters and the setting, she should ask the following questions: Who are the characters in the story? Where did the story take place? About the beginning, she should ask these questions: What happened at the beginning of the story? About the middle, she should ask: What happened in the middle of the story? About the end, she should ask: How did the story end?”

In the same manner, T1-SchD started the lesson by giving a summary of the previous work:

(FN-1/SD-T1):

“Yesterday, I told you about the important days in South Africa, which are celebrated each year. Usually those days are highlighted with a different colour on the calendar, in most cases they are written in red. Those days are: 1 January; 21 March; 27 April; 1 May 16 June; 9 August; 24 September; 16 December; 25 December; 26 December. These days should be celebrated by all South Africans. Employees do not work on those days.”

Thereafter, T1-SchD asked questions verbally in relation to the summary. She chose one learner to move closer to the calendar and instructed the learner to indicate the ‘first of January’ on the calendar, before asking another learner what was celebrated on that day. She picked other learners to identify other public holidays on the calendar and to mention the events celebrated on them. In my view the summary given before the beginning of the new lesson assisted the learners in responding to her questions appropriately, as many were quick to raise hands so that the teacher

could select them to answer the questions. However, the summary did not activate their critical thinking.

Teachers also asked questions at the beginning of the lessons to encourage learners to share their experiences and life stories. CAPS stipulate that Grade 3 teachers should enhance learners' thinking through the use of higher-order questions such as analysing, interpreting and evaluation (DBE, 2011c). It was common that teachers use lower-order and higher-order questions to activate learners' critical thinking during the discussions. However, teachers did not encourage learners to respond to higher-order questions for written work. In lesson 1, T1-SchB addressed the theme "*cultural rituals*", related to the pictures in Photo 6.2. She started her teaching by asking questions as a prelude to the picture stories in Photo 6.2. She picked two learners on different occasions to respond to the question. She phrased the questions in the following manner:

(FN-1/SB-T1):

"Is there anyone in the class who have attended cultural ritual?"

"Where did it take place?"

"Who was present?"

"How did the females dress?"

"How did the males dress?"

"Which activities took place such as dancing, singing, meals, etc.?"



Photo 6.2: Pictures of a lesson about cultural events

Afterwards, T1-SchB explained each picture to the learners. In my opinion, the picture was good to prompt learners thinking and arouse learners' reading interest. T1-SchB was creative as she formulated a picture text from various sources to enhance learners' comprehension skills. However, she did not have a good teaching strategy. In my view, she was supposed to ask learners to interpret each picture instead of telling the learners about the picture. The teacher may not have been aware of the importance of prior knowledge in supporting learners' comprehension.

(b) Poor management of questions for verbal assessment

Teachers often used lower-order questions to assess learners' comprehension, but there were few instances when teachers used higher-order questions. For example, in lesson 1 of T1-SchB, she asked learners whether they had enjoyed the cultural event. The question *"Did you enjoy it?"* required learners to evaluate the cultural event(s) they had attended. However, the teacher's strategy did not include further probing aimed at stimulating learners to discuss the event. She did not offer the learners an opportunity to express their feelings and reflect on their experiences. This might have been because that she did not have time to listen to learners' experiences and reflections, as she had to start a new lesson. Whatever the reason, she did not enhance learners' comprehension through effective questioning.

In another example, in lesson 4, T2-SchC used literal and higher-order questions to assess learners' comprehension of the text. She asked the following questions related to the poem in Photo 6.3

(LO-4 /SC-T2):

"Who wrote the poem?"

"To whom was the poem written?"

"Why did the learner write the poem to her teacher?"

"How did the teacher feel about the poem? And give reason for your answer?"

It was good that teachers used a range of different types and levels of questions during the facilitation of reading comprehension, but the manner in which they were used and managed did not support learners' understanding of the text. The teachers

did not correct learners who gave incorrect responses; they simply asked another learner to give the correct answer.

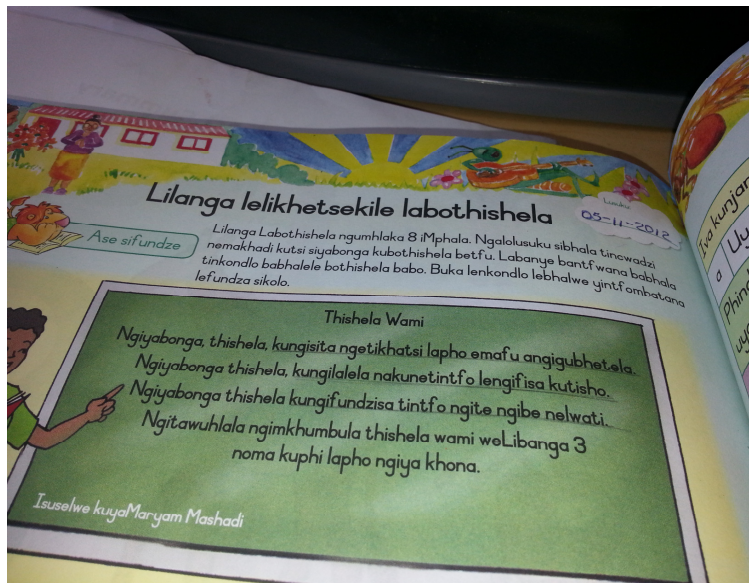


Photo 6.3: Illustration of a poem used during the lesson

(c) Poor questions for written work

In my field notes, I noted that teachers usually asked written questions towards the end of the lessons. In some instances learners had to answer the questions in their workbooks, while in other instances teachers wrote the questions on the chalkboard for the learners to respond individually in their exercise books. When learners were busy with the classwork, the teachers usually walked around the class to observe how they were managing their work. In my field notes I noted teachers reading questions and clarifying the instructions to the learners during the completion of the classwork in their books. Even though the teachers assisted learners to understand the instructions for the activity, it is my view that teachers should train learners to read instructions and questions independently, so that the learners would be able to carry out activities on their own. This practice of teachers reading to learners is at odds with DBE prescripts, where learners are expected to read on their own first. In addition, reading comprehension features prominently in the ANA, where the learner is expected to answer questions independently.

The analysis of the learners' workbooks confirmed that teachers seemed to be experiencing difficulties in developing questions and tasks according to CAPS guidelines. Teachers who did not use the assessment activities from the DBE learners' workbook usually formulated their own questions to assess learners' comprehension. In many instances those questions did not expose learners to higher-order thinking; they only tested memory and recall. Higher-order thinking skills such as explanation, evaluation and comparing were not assessed in the class. Questions used by the teachers sometimes required learners to respond in only one or a few words. Examples of such cases include the following:

In lesson 1, T2-SchC (after the reading of the passage in photo 6.4) asked the following questions as part of the written assessment task:

(FN-1 /SC-T2):

1. *Who was driving the bus?*
2. *According to the passage, who was not well?*
3. *Who used to repair the bus?*
4. *What was in the bus?*
5. *Who said the following words "Excuse me I am sorry?"*

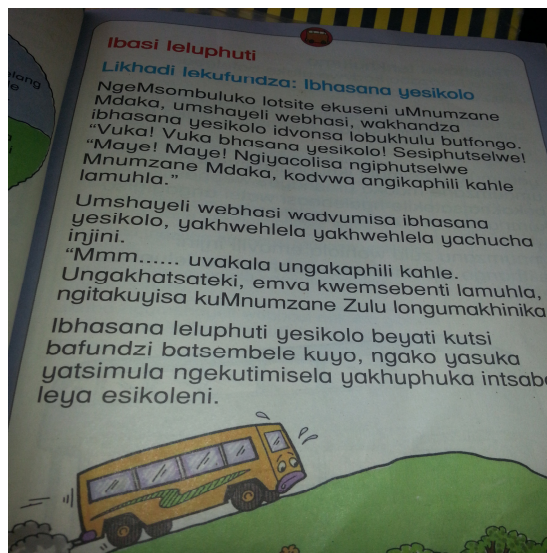


Photo 6.4: Picture of the reading text used by T2-SchC

In another case, in lesson 1, T1-SchD used a reader from a publisher which had both literal and higher-order questions. For verbal questioning she engaged learners in

both types of questions, but for the written work she only allowed learners to respond to the lower-order questions. I overheard her instructing the learners:

(FN-5 / SD-T1):

“You should respond only to the first four questions since the other questions are too difficult for you.”

In a similar case, in lesson 2 of the same teacher (T1-SchD), she gave learners copies of the reading piece, underneath which were five questions based on the story (photo 6.5a). She asked five questions verbally and further clarified them for the learners. For each question she wrote the correct response on the chalkboard. On the written work she told learners to read the same questions that they had dealt with during verbal questioning and advised them to refer to the responses on the chalkboard if they encountered challenges in responding. Photo 6.5b indicates the learners’ responses.

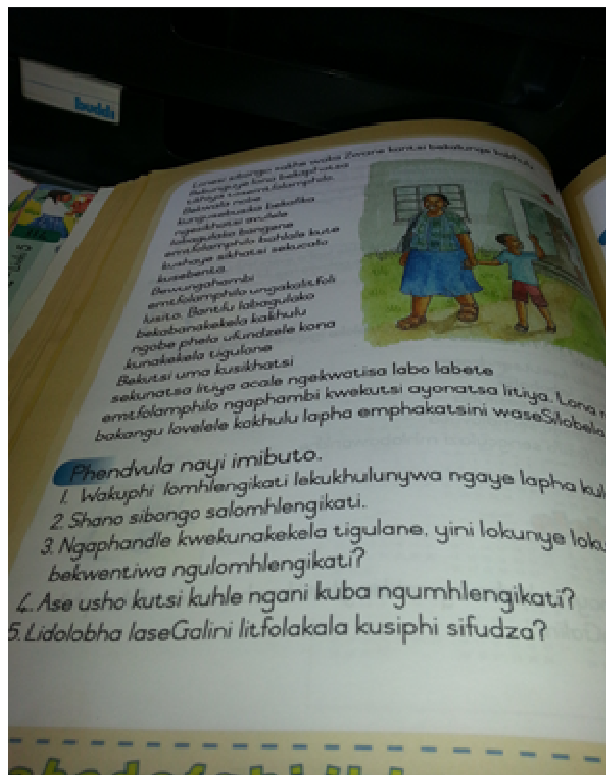


Photo 6.5a: Questions from the reading text in School D

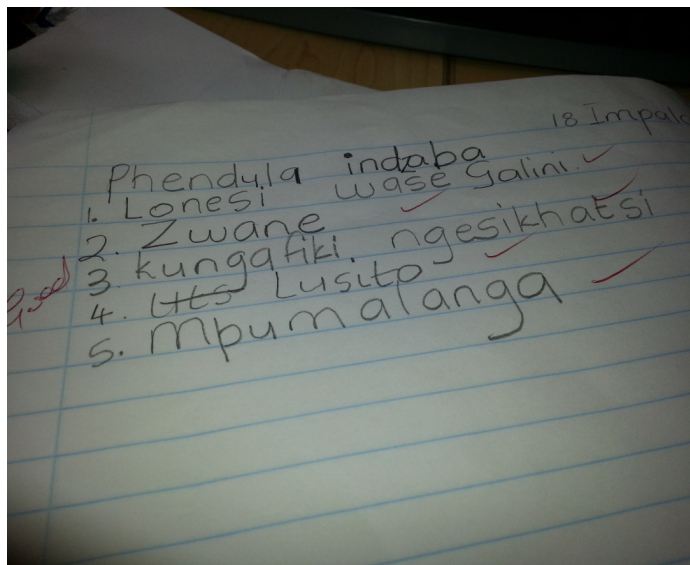


Photo 6.5b: Example of learner's responses to comprehension questions

During the conversation with T1-SchD, I asked her why she had given the same questions to the learners to respond verbally and in writing. She indicated that many learners in her class struggled to read complex questions and were unable to write long sentences. She stated that she preferred to use short questions for written work. I further asked her how the learners coped when they wrote an external assessment, such as the annual national assessment and provincial assessments, since in these assessments the teachers were instructed not to assist learners. Some questions in those tests require learners to read complex questions and to answer in long sentences. She said that she usually assisted learners during those assessments to respond to the complex questions. This implies that the T1-SchD did not comply with instructions of external assessment guidelines, as she had no confidence that learners would be able to deal with challenging questions independently.

In another case, T2-SchC, after reading the text, instructed learners to read it, then asked questions which were written underneath. Of the seven questions, five assessed higher-order comprehension. However, for the written task, she instructed learners to give synonyms for words which she wrote on the chalkboard. In my field notes I noted that this assessment task did not address the learning objectives or activities written on the lesson plan. My analysis was that there is a discrepancy between planning and application of formative assessment, since teachers appeared

not to be confident in assessing reading comprehension, but preferred to assess learners' language skills.

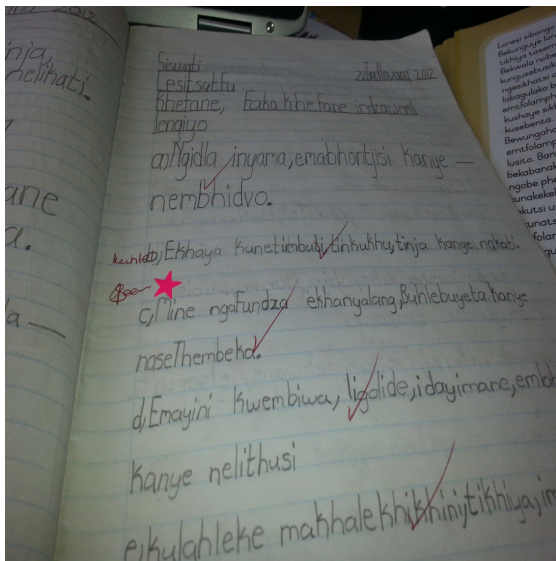
I also noted that some of the participating teachers gave a written task with few activities, and this did not activate learners' thinking. For example, in lesson 4 of Teacher 2 from School C, she instructed the learners to read a poem from the DBE learners' workbook. Underneath the poem there were five assessment activities, but for the written work she instructed them to respond only to the first. The instruction for the first activity was: *"What are the three things the girl thanked her teacher for? Underline them in the poem and write them down."* My analysis was that the activity was too short to be written as an assessment task for Grade 3 learners and assessed only lower-order comprehension skills: underlining the correct answer in the workbook, then writing out the same response. Furthermore, the same activity was dealt with through verbal and written work.

It was difficult to determine the learners' performance levels and strengths of written tasks because of the poor quality of the written questions and assessment tasks, and because some were not linked to the lesson objectives or learning activities.

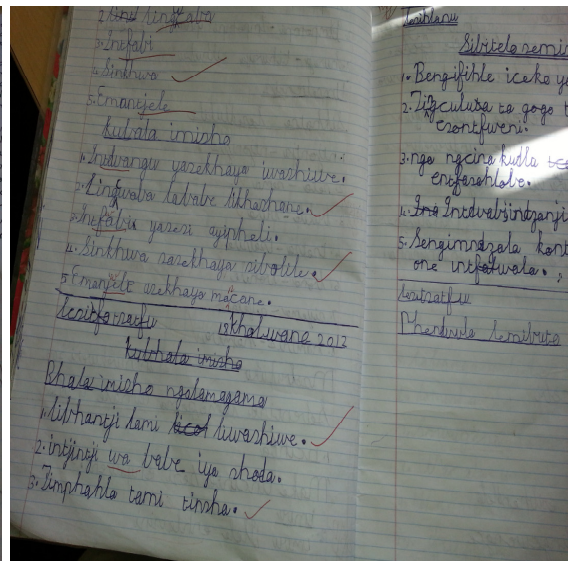
6.6.2.2 Category 2: Feedback varies in quality, quantity and format

Feedback and the form it takes are crucial aspects of formative assessment to enhance learning, especially learners' reading comprehension. Literature on assessment suggests that feedback for formative assessment should provide information to teachers and learners about the progress of the lesson (Sadler, 1989). According to Black and Wiliam (1998), teachers' feedback should report on the learners' strengths and weaknesses, thus motivating them to learn and highlight areas that require improvement. Data on teachers' feedback was therefore informative in evaluating whether teachers used assessment formatively. Information about the nature of feedback on written work was obtained through the analysis of workbooks, whilst interview data was used to analyse teachers' understanding of feedback.

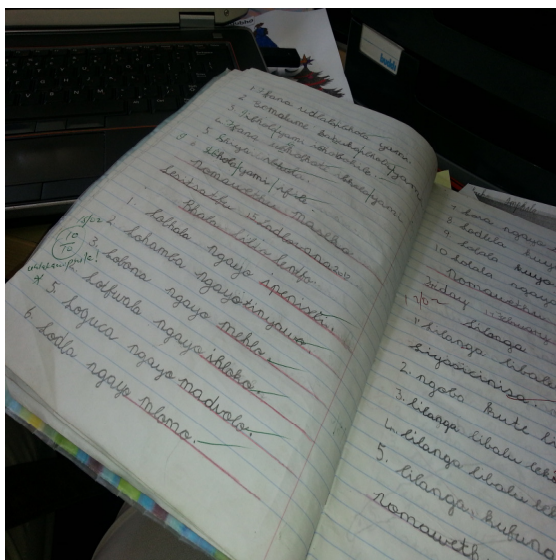
The analysis of the learners' workbooks revealed that all teachers at this time experienced difficulty in providing learners with constructive feedback on the written tasks. These written activities mostly assessed learners' reading comprehension after reading a text. The following were observed: ticks for the correct responses; crosses for the incorrect responses and total marks. T1-SchB usually used simple evaluative comments such as "good, very good". T1-SchC sometimes used general comments such as "You are a star, I am proud of you". The following pictures in Photo 6.6 are examples of feedback given by teachers.



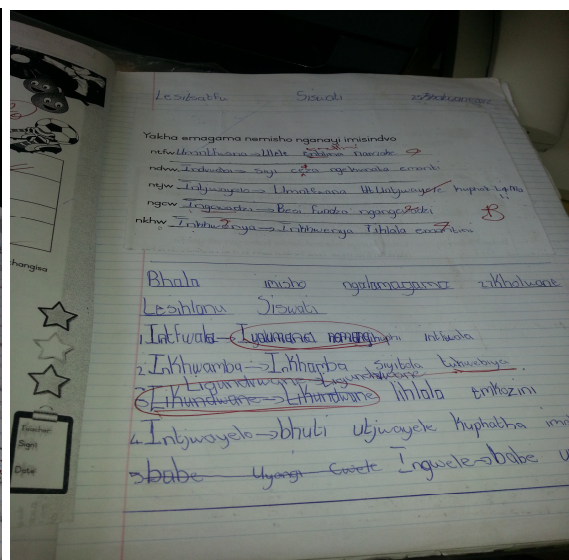
T1-SchC



T2-SchC



T1-SchB



T1-SchD

Photo 6.6: Examples of learners work and teachers' feedback

The analysis of the workbooks revealed various ways used by teachers to deal with errors in written work and showed that they were not consistent in dealing with them. The following actions were observed: Two teachers (T1-SchB & T2-SchB) usually corrected the learners' work by writing the omitted letter or word. Three (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) frequently used a red pen to write the correct response on top of the incorrect one. Sometimes T1-SchB and T1-SchD circled the incorrect words with a red pen. One teacher (T2-SchB) usually put a question mark next to the incorrect response without writing the correct answer. None made comments regarding the learners' errors.

The analysis of learners' workbooks also indicated that two teachers (T1-SchB & T1-SchC) acknowledged learners who performed well in the tasks. These two teachers usually attached stickers for learners who received good marks. In addition, Teacher 1 from School C drew a smiley face. However, these teachers did not write comments as feedback.

Teachers' lack of useful written feedback for learners was confirmed through the interview data. When the seven teachers were asked during the interviews to share their understanding of the term 'feedback', they gave responses outlined in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5: Teachers' responses on the understanding of "feedback"

Participant	Understanding of "feedback"
SM/ SA-T1	<i>Feedback is the work I do with the learners after we have marked the classwork.</i>
SM/ SA-T2	<i>The corrections or remedial work we do in a classroom with the learners.</i>
SM/ SB-T1	<i>I do feedback with learners so that they will see their errors.</i>
SM/ SB-T2	<i>After kids have written a test or the classwork, we do the corrections on the chalkboard; I give them a chance to correct each other. If I see that no one knows the answer, I help them. That is my understanding of feedback.</i>
SM/ SC-T1	<i>Feedbacks are the corrections that we do after the written work. We do it on the chalkboard, sometimes they write them on their classwork; mostly we do them orally because I need their concentration more than anything else.</i>
SM/ SC-T2	<i>Feedback is the corrections to show those who did not get the answer correct, so that they will see their mistakes.</i>
SM/ SD-T1	<i>It is information we give to each child about her work, so that she do better in future.</i>

Analysis of these responses revealed that five teachers lacked basic information about feedback and considered it to be merely the corrections teachers and learners engaged in after the written tasks. They did not view it as an intervention to support learners' improvement, and from their responses I noted that they all associated it only with the written work, not mentioning that it should also be given during verbal questioning. Responses on individual interviews confirm the findings of the lesson observations, as teachers did not give feedback to the learners during the verbal questioning.

Although two teachers (T1-SchB & T1-SchD) showed understanding of the term "feedback" by providing useful descriptions and viewed it as helpful in improving learners' performance, there was no evidence from the learners' workbooks to substantiate their claims that they could apply feedback to improve their facilitation and assessment strategies. The analysis of the learners' workbooks confirmed that since the start of the academic year, teachers had not given any feedback after the written work had been assigned and assessed. Teachers could not demonstrate their knowledge of feedback during the lesson observations.

6.6.2.3 Category 3: Minimal involvement of learners

Learner involvement is one of the principles of formative assessment, which requires teachers to allow learners to participate actively during the lesson (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Data from the observations and field notes indicated that teachers dominated the lessons in various areas, as they instructed learners to perform learning activities related to reading comprehension. For instance, reading comprehension usually included reading of the text; reading of questions about the text; reading of the instructions; responding to questions verbally; constructing sentences related to the text; explanation of words from the text; sharing their experiences about the text in writing classwork. In many lessons, teachers were in control of the process as they asked questions and learners raised their hands. Usually the teacher 'picked' a learner of her choice to answer the questions, thus limiting the number of learners who had an opportunity to participate.

When performing the learning activities, in all lessons teachers gave instructions verbally before the learners undertook the activities. In most lessons, teachers read

the instruction from the textbook and explained it. Only one teacher (T1-SchB) usually instructed the learners to read aloud the instructions from the textbook before explaining the instructions to the learners. The one occasion when learners were taught to read and act out the instructions independently was in lesson 2 of T1-SchB. She used the previous Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests to train learners on reading and responding to the instructions on their own. She began by informing them that ANA require them to read and respond to the questions independently, then asked all to read the first instruction aloud and explain the instruction verbally. She then told them to read the next instructions individually and to share with a friend the meaning of the instruction. Thereafter, she chose one learner to explain to the class what the instruction required them to do. She repeated this with all the instructions on the ANA instrument.

In her lesson 4, T2-SchA informed learners that they should read and respond to instructions individually. However, she did not attempt to help them to read or understand instructions independently. In the same lesson she instructed all learners to read the instructions, and only afterwards did she clarify the instructions. This again shows that learners were not supported to read and understand instructions on their own in preparation for external assessments. Although the other teachers did not encourage learners to read and understand instructions on their own, the instructions were well received by the learners, some of whom I saw responding to the instructions as expected. During the interviews I noted that all teachers were aware that learners in Grade 3 should be able to read and act out the instructions independently. When I asked during the interview why they did not allow learners to read and respond to questions, the teachers indicated that the learners could not cope with reading and understanding instructions on their own.

In many observed lessons, oral and written assessment was carried out by the teachers. For the latter, teachers wrote the questions on the chalkboard or instructed learners to do the assessment on the DBE learners' workbook. In lesson 2 of T2-SchC, she instructed the learners to mark each other's work, but she did not follow up whether this had been done. The fact that the teacher did not follow up implies

that she had no intention of training learners to assess their fellow learners' work and viewed the exercise as a compliance measure prescribed by CAPS.

6.6.3 THEME 3: CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS IN RELATION TO THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION

This theme discusses challenges that participating teachers described when facilitating reading. During the semi-structured interviews, a question was posed to all teachers about their confidence to teach reading comprehension. All expressed a lack of confidence, citing various challenges. T1-SchB stated that she was not sure whether she acted appropriately in her class, as she was not qualified to teach Grade 3 learners and was not fluent in siSwati:

(SM/SB-T2):

"I am not confident to teach siSwati ... to me it is a little bit of a challenge because I am not a siSwati language speaker and I did not do the junior primary teachers diploma at college. My home language is isiZulu, although there is not much difference between the two languages, but it is difficult when I have to teach misindvo [sounds], as I cannot pronounce them correctly. I also struggle to read siSwati, sometimes the kids correct me; I hope you have noticed that in my lesson. Angitsi [Did you]?"

T2-SchB also revealed that she had expressed her concern to the school principal, but it was not being addressed. In my field notes I noted that she exhibited low self-esteem, often having to verify the correct pronunciation of words with the learners. This might have been a result of being uncomfortable with siSwati.

Other teachers also raised challenges regarding the teaching of reading comprehension, with some suggestions on how to deal with it. I placed these in three categories, namely: lack of knowledge and skills to facilitate reading comprehension; lack of knowledge of and skills to use formative assessment to enhance reading comprehension; and shortage of teaching-learning material in siSwati.

Each of the three challenges will be dealt with separately in the next sections as they form categories of this theme. The lesson observation data was used to support the challenges raised by the teachers during interviews.

6.6.3.1 Category 1: Lack of knowledge and skills for the teaching of reading comprehension

During the individual semi-structured interviews, all teachers except T1-SchD indicated that they lacked the appropriate knowledge and relevant skills to teach reading comprehension. They said that since they had started working they had received no training on how to teach it. There had been a workshop on the implementation of CAPS in 2011, held by the Mpumalanga Department of Education (MDoE), but they were not happy about its duration or content, feeling that it did not help them teach reading comprehension. Teacher 2 from School C expressed her concern as follows:

(SM/SC-T2):

“...the CAPS workshop I have attended was not specific to the teaching of reading comprehension. It was about siSwati in general. In that workshop we were orientated to the changes of the curriculum. Sibonelo [for an example] they told us about the new terminologies for CAPS, for example, we now use the term content, concepts and skills instead of learning outcomes and assessment standards. About reading, we were told that learners should read every day and that we have to do shared reading; paired reading and group guided reading, but we did not do practical examples for those strategies.”

This was confirmed by Teacher 1 from School C:

(SM/SC-T1):

“We attended the CAPS training once and that is not enough to support us on the teaching of siSwati. We did not unpack those skills and knowledge for literacy. In my classroom, I just do what I think is right and I am not sure whether I am on the right track.”

In addition, the six teachers felt that they needed assistance from the MDoE to teach reading comprehension, suggesting workshops through short courses and regular

and continuing classroom support. T2-SchB recommended that the workshops should involve practical work and should be presented the whole day:

(SM/SB-T2):

“We need a workshop where we shall deal with reading and do those reading strategies practically. The curriculum implementers should demonstrate those strategies. Last year, we were called for a workshop which started at one o’clock, we spent two hours. I did not learn much in that workshop as I was tired. I suggest that if workshops can be called for the duration of the whole day, at least starting in the morning when everyone is still fresh. We do not gain if we are tired.”

During the semi-structured interviews, teachers were also asked about strategies and time spent developing learners’ reading comprehension skills. The analysis of their responses confirmed that they lack important knowledge and skills, with none providing relevant responses to strategies and time spent developing learners’ comprehension skills. Rather, they indicated that they spent much time teaching reading instead of developing reading comprehension skills of the learners. They also failed to give convincing reasons for thinking that their strategies for enhancing the learners’ skills were working well. The following are some of their responses regarding the development of reading comprehension skills:

(SM/SD-T1):

“...., I mostly instruct them to read as a group, I like group reading because even those who do not understand the words by listening from others they begin to have understanding of the word. Mostly I use the group work; it works very well in my class. I have four groups, A; B; C and D at times I just switch children around those groups, because sometimes they play in those groups, I just mix children in other group. So grouping the children work very well in my class”.

(SM/SB-T2)

“Firstly, I start with the explanation of the new words that kids are not aware of. I then read the story aloud and ask kids to listen to my reading. Then I instruct them to read after me, while they are reading I correct their

punctuations and the pronunciation of words. I ask them questions orally. After that I choose groups to read. I can choose two or one to read if we still have time. Thereafter, I tell them to answer the questions in writing. That is the strategy I usually use for reading”.

From their responses, I noticed that these teachers were aware that the teaching and assessment of comprehension should take place during the reading process. However, I noticed that they failed to distinguish between teaching reading and reading comprehension skills, as their responses referred to reading only. This could be an indication that they lacked knowledge of what reading comprehension means and how to teach the skills for reading comprehension.

Regarding the time spent on developing reading comprehension skills, teachers gave various responses, with time ranging from two to five days in a week. However, during the 35 lessons observed, I did not see teachers developing learners’ reading comprehension skills. The reason might be that I was not always present in their classrooms. Teachers’ responses revealed that some of them were not sure about the time spent on developing reading comprehension:

(SM/SA-T1):

“Teaching reading comprehension, I can say three times or four times because everything that learners do in the class is about reading, it means that reading is continuing.”

(SM/SB-T1):

“Almost every day I use the reading strategies, because when I am teaching those flashcards, pictures and demonstrations help learners to read the comprehension story. Learners look for difficult words on the dictionary.”

Teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills for teaching reading comprehension was also seen in their responses to the question: *How do you notice if the learner has comprehension problems?* The purpose of this question was to determine strategies used by teachers to identify learners with comprehension problems. The response of T1-SchD was irrelevant, as she said that she supported learners through group work and allowed them to do learning activities of the lower grade. In my analysis, the

teacher contradicted the NCS, as it stipulates that learners who have learning barriers should be supported within the content knowledge and skills of the same grade to acquire comprehension skills (DoE, 2007a). She responded in this manner:

(SM/SD-T1):

“I can see that, even the other children informed me that this one is not reading. I know them and I know who have reading comprehension problems. But I do not take them out from the groups because it will make them to feel inferior. So I allow them to work in group, as I said I assist them and make individual time with them. When I assess them I give them simple work to do for example, they have to count the verbs while others respond to the comprehension questions. I just try to keep them busy so that they will participate in lesson.”

According to the response of T1-SchC, learners have comprehension problems if they do not give the correct answer:

(SM/SC-T1):

“If I ask questions orally the same learner fails to give me correct answer in many occasions. I then detect that he or she experience comprehension problems.”

T2-SchC said that a learner who could not read was likely to have comprehension problems:

(SM/SC-T2):

“Ngiyacabanga kutsi utibonele, [I think you have seen], while they were reading, I came closer to check who is not reading. If I see that the learner does not read obviously that learner does not understand. Then I monitor the learner during reading that is why you have seen me moving up and down to check whether they really read in order for them to understand.”

These teachers' lack of knowledge of the teaching of reading comprehension negatively affected their teaching strategies in siSwati. This was detected during the lesson observations, as most teachers used similar strategies in all lessons.

Furthermore, in most cases lesson plans were not linked to the learning objectives or learning activities which they presented in their lessons.

6.6.3.2 Category 2: Lack of knowledge and skills for the assessment of reading comprehension

Information about the assessment of reading comprehension was crucial in determining whether teachers were using various assessment strategies and whether they supported learning. In the context of this study, assessment strategy means the approach that the teacher followed when assessing reading comprehension (DoE, 2007).

During the interviews, six teachers mentioned the lack of appropriate knowledge and skills for assessing reading comprehension. Their responses revealed that the only time they had been capacitated in assessment was during the CAPS training, as assessment was one of the content areas dealt with in the programme. However, they felt that they had not learnt much, as they were introduced only to the new assessment methods and not given practical activities. Teacher 1 from School C said that her lack of knowledge and skills in the assessment of reading comprehension had a negative impact on learners' achievement. She pointed out that she struggled to come up with an effective strategy for assessing learners with barriers to learning:

(SM/SC-T1):

"...Another problem, I think I am not doing well in assessment because my learners do not do well in ANA tests and quarterly assessment. I do a lot of assessment practices with them but they still fail. Maybe there is something I do not do right. Also, I am not happy with my assessment of the learners with barriers. I give them easy assessment activities, but they fail. My learners struggle a lot with the departmental assessments. I have reported this challenge to my HOD and we have discussed it in the phase meeting, but I still need workshops on assessment."

During the semi-structured interviews, teachers were asked to describe how they assess learners' understanding of the text. No teacher was able to give a meaningful description of how she approached assessment. With the exception of two (T1-SchA and T1-SchC), all mentioned various ways of assessing comprehension instead of

giving descriptions of the assessment process and format of reading comprehension. The following activities were noted from the teachers' responses on the assessment of reading comprehension: oral questioning, classwork, individual work, group work and CASS.

All teachers mentioned the use of CASS for the assessment of learners' understanding of the text, regarding it as one of the forms of assessment. Teacher 1 from School A also referred to CASS as the recording of marks during the reading process:

(SM/SA-T1):

"I assess in different ways, for example, I think you have noticed on my last lesson with you, while the learners were reading individually, I asked the other teacher to take CASS marks for me. She recorded the marks. Assessment is done in different ways; I usually apply CASS method but in other instances I give them classwork."

In my field notes I noted that Teacher 1 from School C confused CASS with observation. During the conversation after the observation of lesson 2, she made the following statement:

(FN-2/SC-T1):

"I observe them every day when they are engaged in different learning activities. I have to observe them in totality for example, their behaviour, attitude, knowledge and skills. Because of time and the overcrowding I do not record the observation marks every day. Sometimes I observe, but at least twice a day I should record their marks. Sometimes I give them an activity of ten marks. I sometimes give them formal tasks for observation."

Observation and CASS are not the same thing. Observation is one form of assessment, which may take place through CASS. The teacher can observe learners on a daily basis while they are performing the activities, but it is not necessary to record observation results on a daily basis (DoE, 2007). On the other hand, CASS can be described as an assessment tool that is or can be used throughout a learning

process (DoE, 2007). The purpose of CASS is to collect data regarding learners' achievement (Siebörger & Macintosh, 1998).

Two teachers from the same school (T1-SchC & T2-SchC) mentioned that they did receive school support on assessment, as they held the phase meetings once a term. These meetings were part of their year programme and were organised by their head of department (HoD). They indicated that the purpose of these meetings was to support one another on curriculum issues, including the practice of assessment for reading comprehension. On the other hand, the five other teachers indicated that they had not received any support from their schools on assessment. T2-SchB, who was not qualified to teach Grade 3 learners, raised her frustration as follows:

(SM/SB-T2):

“Since I have joined this school we never had a professional development meeting. Yes, we meet once a term to discuss the number and the dates of assessment tasks and IQMS issues. I really feel that I am not supported in this school... They are fully aware that I am not trained for the foundation phase. At least my colleague tries to clarify other things but that it not enough.”

Teachers' lack of appropriate information on assessment was confirmed during the lesson observations. I noted that teachers frequently used one assessment strategy, i.e. questions and answers, for assessment of learners' comprehension after reading a given text. According to Oakley (2011), teachers should use a variety of assessment strategies for the assessment of reading comprehension, as learners differ according to their capabilities and they do not learn in the same way. The use of various assessments strategies, such as performance tasks, projects and observation, supports the principles of formative assessment, as learners are considered as unique individuals with different abilities.

The analysis of the learners' workbooks also confirmed that teachers lacked knowledge of and skills in assessing reading comprehension. This was revealed by teachers setting assessment tasks of poor quality. The dominance of the closed question was an indication that they lacked important knowledge of assessment.

6.6.3.3 *Shortage of teaching-learning material in siSwati*

In the electronic document *Teaching Reading in Early Grades*, the DoE (2008c) suggested the use a variety of reading material and texts in the lower grades in order to activate a love of reading in learners. Texts that were suggested for the teaching of reading in the lower grades included magazines, newspapers, learners' own writing, stories, songs, poems, stories, non-fiction texts and advertisements (DoE, 2008c). It is stated in *Teaching Reading in Early Grades* that teachers should assess learners' comprehension skills to identify learners who excel and those who experience challenges in mastering reading comprehension skills, in order to support them accordingly (DoE, 2008c).

Although teachers knew about these documents and the suggested materials during the semi-structured interviews, all participating teachers complained that they lacked or had a shortage of appropriate material for the teaching of siSwati, including readers and learners' workbooks. This perceived failing by the Mpumalanga Department of Education to provide storybooks and readers in siSwati was the major challenge to learners' proficiency in reading comprehension that participants highlighted, as indicated by T2-SchC:

(SM/SC-T2):

"It is a little bit tough, especially in this school, we did not receive resources for teaching siSwati, no readers and learners' workbooks. Many of my learners cannot read the words with three to four sounds."

T2-SchA indicated that she had one original copy of a reader, and that she had recommended the same reader be ordered for all Grade 3 learners in her school as she thought that it was a good resource for teaching reading. An order was placed, but up until the time of the interviews no books had been delivered. Consequently, she made copies of the reader, which presented further problems:

(SM/SA-T2):

"For the teaching of reading comprehension I prefer to use the reader. Yaa, the reader that I am using is very good. It has good sounds, three to four sounds that are relevant for the Grade 3 children. It is not like the workbooks"

which have two sounds for the Grade 3 learners. Uyati iworkbook [You know] it is not good kufundzisa misindvo [to teach sounds], it is too easy for the Grade 3 learners. That is the reason I use the reader because it gives me what I want for the Grade 3 learners. But one reader is not enough for mnyaka wonkhe [the whole year]. I need more readers to teach siSwati. In 2011, our HOD gave us the LTSM catalogue for us to choose the readers, we ordered 2 types of readers for siSwati including the one I am using, but we did not receive the readers so far. I have to make copies; sometimes those copies are not clear.”

T1-SchA indicated that it was difficult to teach reading without the appropriate material and that she writes her own story:

(SM/SA-TI):

“Inkinga lenkulu mabhuku,[the main problem is books] though we are trying, but we really need books, because for the learners to write the word, they must see it, we do not have proper material that support that to write words, sentences and stories in siSwati. Most of the books we have do not provide four letters sounds. Sometimes I try to create a story myself in order to accommodate the four letter sounds.”

Another important issue raised by T2-SchC was that all schools in this circuit were in their first year of teaching through the medium of siSwati in Grade 3. She indicated that in the previous years all schools in the circuit had been teaching through English because of the lack of teaching material in siSwati. She also highlighted that textbooks for Mathematics and Life Skills for Grade 3 learners were written in English, creating confusion amongst the learners. According to her, all these issues negatively affected learners’ comprehension and performance in siSwati.

T2-SchC described the challenge:

(SM/ SC-T2):

“...In this circuit we have been teaching through English because we did not have textbooks in siSwati. During the CAPS training we were told to teach through siSwati. This is our first year of teaching through siSwati. We were told to use the workbook from the department since it is written in siSwati, but

I have one copy and learners do not have. We were not given the readers. The textbooks for Mathematics and Life Skills that we are using are written in English. Our learners become confused, when we do siSwati, now and then I have to remind them that they should speak siSwati not English. Ngalesinye sikhatsi ngisebentisa libhuku la Grade 2 ngifundzisa misindvo [sometimes, we use Grade 2 reader to teach sounds] that they have missed ka [in]Grade 1 and 2, at the same time ngifundzisa misindvo yaka Grade 3 [I have to teach Grade 3 sounds] , really it becomes a problem. The year is too short to catch up with all that work. Then, how I can expect learners to do well in comprehension if they do not know misindvo [sounds]?”

The lack of important resources that ought to be supplied by the DoE seemed to detract from teachers' confidence in teaching of reading, as evident in the response of T2-SchC:

(SM/SC-T2):

“I am not confident to teach reading since I do not have readers...”

This last response showed that teachers' lack of important and language-relevant materials contributed negatively to the learners' development of reading comprehension, as learners were not exposed to the skills and knowledge of the relevant grade. During the observation of lesson 3 with T2-SchC, I noted that she used a Grade 2 reader. When I followed this up with her, she indicated that she did not have other readers.

During the lesson observation I noticed that the DBE learners' workbook was the teaching material that was used most by the teachers in School A. During the conversation with the two teachers from the School A, I learnt that the school had enough original copies of the learners' workbook, and each teacher had one copy of the same reader. The school had made enough copies of the reader for all learners. But they were kept at the school and used there only, which means that learners were not allowed to take them home to read.

In School B both teachers had one original copy of the DBE learners' workbook, which they had received from their curriculum advisor for the Foundation Phase. They used the DBE learners' workbook as their primary teaching resource for siSwati, making copies for all learners. In my field notes I noted that sometimes the copies were not clear (the ink was faded). Both teachers reported that sometimes they developed learning activities from various siSwati textbooks which they had collected from various teachers in nearby schools. Each teacher also had one copy, which they had received from a nearby school. They indicated that they made copies for all learners when necessary.

In School C the two teachers used different resources for teaching reading. During the informal conversation, Teacher 1 from School C indicated that she had one original copy of the DBE learners' workbook in siSwati, which she had received from the circuit office. However, she mentioned that she did not use the DBE learners' workbook since learners did not have copies. She claimed that it was not a good resource book either, since it contained spelling errors in siSwati and did not accommodate the appropriate sounds for Grade 3. She explained that when she dealt with reading comprehension she preferred to use previous questions papers. In my field notes for lessons 1 and 2 of this teacher I confirmed that she used ANA 2010 and 2011 question papers.

T2-SchC also had one original copy of the DBE learners' workbook, which she had received from the circuit office. She indicated that she used it occasionally and made copies for selected learning activities. In lesson 5 it was noted that the learning activity in which they were engaged had been drawn from the DBE workbook. The teacher used various resource books for teaching siSwati which she had collected from different teachers in other schools.

T1-SchD had one original set of books from the same publisher, which she had received at one of the meetings organised by the teachers' union with which she was affiliated. She indicated that in that meeting a certain publisher had made a presentation for the purpose of advertising her books and gave one set to all teachers present. She said that the books were in line with CAPS and gave proper

guidance on how to teach siSwati. She had recommended that they be ordered for all learners, but did not use the DBE learners' workbook at all.

I noticed that teachers who frequently used the DBE learners' workbooks had an advantage when orientating their learners to various reading texts. This was confirmed during the lesson observations. Teachers who did use them were not confined to one type of text to facilitate reading comprehension. A variety of written texts were used by those teachers who were using the DBE learners' workbook, namely picture stories, book stories, diaries, e-mails, postcards, invitation cards, poems and letters. In contrast, the other three teachers (T1-SchC, T2-SchC & T1-SchD), who did not or did not frequently use the DBE learners' workbook, usually used book stories from any sources to facilitate reading comprehension. The conclusion is that the DBE learners' workbooks were helpful by providing teachers with various reading texts to support formative assessment for reading comprehension.

6.7 CONCLUSION

Data obtained from the interviews, observations and documents was analysed and reported on in an integrated manner through themes. The analysis revealed that participating teachers lacked information on formative assessment, including knowledge about its nature, purpose and implementation. Consequently they could not use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension.

In the final chapter the findings presented in this chapter will be used to address the research questions. I will highlight the implications of the study, topics for further research and overall limitations of the study, and formulate recommendations flowing from the findings to address the practice of formative assessment. I will also report on the contribution of the study to the wider body of knowledge available.

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CHAPTER 7

SYNTHESIS, DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, I presented data on teachers' practices of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension. The methods of inquiry included semi-structured one-on-one interviews, observation of the lessons, analysis of the learners' workbooks as well as field notes. Data analysis was guided by my research focus and relevant literature consulted. The findings were presented as themes which emerged from each set of collected data and across all data.

Teachers expressed concerns about their lack of knowledge and skills in formative assessment, teaching and assessment of reading comprehension. They reported that they had attended a Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) workshop which was intended to help them with the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). However, the workshop did not focus on the practice of formative assessment when teaching and assessing reading comprehension. Five teachers also indicated they were not supported on curriculum matters at their schools and mentioned the shortage of relevant material for the teaching of reading comprehension.

Data from the interviews indicates that six teachers were not able to share their understanding of formative assessment, whereas one teacher (T1-SchD) was able to give meaningful information about formative assessment. Even though six teachers were not able to describe formative assessment correctly, they were able to share knowledge about the role of assessment. Three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) demonstrated reasonable knowledge of assessment, as they indicated various purposes of assessment and phases when assessment should take place. On the other hand, four teachers (T1-SchA, T2-SchA, T2-SchB & T1-SchC) showed limited knowledge, as they described the assessment of reading comprehension mainly in terms of testing and practicing the evaluative role.

Teachers' lack of skills in teaching and assessing reading comprehension was confirmed during classroom practice. They failed to develop quality questions to assess learners' comprehension of the text, were unable to provide learners with effective feedback and failed to implement activities that encourage active participation of the learners.

In this chapter, I synthesize teachers' use of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension by discussing and interpreting the findings against the literature on formative assessment of reading comprehension. I also present findings with reference to the conceptual framework of this study. Towards the end of this chapter recommendations are made to Mpumalanga Department of Education (MDoE), head of department in the Foundation Phase, teachers in Grade 3 and teacher training institutions. My contribution to knowledge and possible future research are also discussed in this chapter.

7.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In this section I present a synopsis of the preceding six chapters. The introduction, background and rationale of the study are offered in Chapter 1. Apart from personal and professional perspectives of the research focus, issues of low achievement levels in reading and the inability of the learners to read with comprehension are the major challenges facing the South African schooling system. Low reading levels of South African learners were reported in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) published in 2007 (Howie *et al.*, 2007). The PIRLS conducted in 2011 maintained that reading comprehension is still a challenge to many South African learners, particularly in African languages such as siSwati (Howie *et al.*, 2011).

The reports from both the PIRLS studies stated that teachers' instructional and assessment practices are among factors which impact negatively on learners' reading achievements. The PIRLS report recommended that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should strengthen classroom practices by providing support to teachers, particularly on teaching and assessment practices related to reading (Howie *et al.*, 2007). I agree with this view. If teachers know what formative assessment is and how to apply it they may learn how to assist learners regarding

comprehension. Research conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998) confirmed that effective use of formative assessment supports classroom practice and improves learners' achievement.

The background and the rationale for this study assisted me to formulate the main research question, namely: *How do Grade 3 teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension?* In addition to the above question, also stated in Chapter 1, I briefly discussed the conceptual framework, research methodology, data analysis and ethical measures for the study. I concluded Chapter 1 by giving the structural outline of the study.

In this study I offered two chapters to the literature of the research focus. Chapter 2 provides literature on empirical studies related to reading comprehension. Authors and researchers of reading are of the view that the best way to teach reading comprehension is through meta-cognitive comprehension strategies (Mudzielwana, 2012). According to Williamson (2004), assessment of reading comprehension should serve various purposes and take place through various assessment techniques. However, he pointed out that there is limited literature on formative assessment of reading comprehension. I also encountered this challenge during the literature search of formative assessment for reading comprehension. I hope that this study will contribute to the literature of formative assessment for reading comprehension.

Chapter 3 is the second literature review chapter. I explored literature on formative assessment. It is apparent from the literature that formative assessment has received much consideration in various countries, schools and higher-education institutions around the world (Curtis, 2011). Formative assessment is well established especially in developed countries such as United Kingdom (UK), Hong Kong, New Zealand and Australia. However, some teachers in those countries still experience challenges with its implementation (Carless, 2005). Research conducted in African countries indicated that implementation of formative assessment is weak because many teachers lack knowledge and skills pertaining to formative assessment (Nakabugo, 2003; Adendorff, 2007).

In Chapter 4, I reported on the conceptual framework underpinning the study. The conceptual framework was developed from various sources including constructivism theory and socio-cultural perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978). I addressed two concepts of socio-cultural perspectives, namely *scaffolding* and *zone of proximal development*. In addition, I discussed Engeström's activity system theory (1987) because I consider this theory relevant to the description of practices and interactions in a socio-cultural environment. I also discussed Zimmerman's (1998) view of self-regulated learning, since formative assessment is based on the idea that teachers should support learners to develop skills for self-regulated learning in order for them to construct the meaning of the written text independently.

I discussed the research design and research methods of the study in Chapter 5. I explained the interpretive research approach that guided me to explore teachers' use of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. The interpretive research approach is based on the belief that people are unique and construct knowledge of the social reality from their point of view (Yin, 2009). I also explained my intention of adopting a case study design and described the unit of analysis.

In Chapter 6, I presented the findings of the study in relation to the themes which emerged from the data. The themes were: formative assessment supports learning; inconsistent practice of formative assessment; and challenges experienced by teachers when teaching and assessing reading comprehension. The findings highlighted the fact that teachers lack general knowledge of formative assessment, and as a result they struggle to implement formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension. In this chapter (Chapter 7) I offer a discussion and interpretation of the findings of this research project.

7.3 LITERATURE CONTROL

In order to corroborate the findings, existing literature was consulted as presented in Tables 7.1 to 7.4. I presented literature that supports my findings. However, some of my findings were contrary to the literature. In other instances I presented findings about which the literature is silent. Lastly I offer new insight from my findings. In Table 7.1 I offer evidence in support of my findings.

Table 7.1: Comparing of findings with existing knowledge: supportive evidence

Theme 1 : Uncertainty about formative assessment			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
Formative assessment is the end product of teaching and learning	O'Brien (2008); Curtis (2011)	Formative assessment can be used to evaluate learners' acquisition of knowledge and skills.	In this study, teachers asked questions through written work to evaluate learners' comprehension skills.
	Baird (2010)	Formative assessment can be conducted at the end of the lesson. This may include classwork, homework and tests.	In this study, teachers gave classwork at the end of the lesson to assess learners' progress.
	Nakabugo (2003)	Teachers associate formative assessment with continuous assessment.	In this study, many teachers viewed assessment as an activity conducted on a regular basis. However, the teachers of my case study did not mention the formative function of assessment.
Formative assessment is a process that takes place in learning	Black & Wiliam (1998); Birenbaum, Kimron Shilton & Shafaf-Barzilay (2009); Wiliam (2006); Wiliam <i>et al.</i> , (2004); O'Brien (2008)	Formative assessment supports learners' learning and improves learners' cognition and interpretive skills.	In this study, three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC and T1-SchD) out of seven were of the view that formative assessment should take place during the learning process in order to support learning. This indicates that few teachers in my study have a good understanding of the formative function of assessment in support of learning.
	Brookhart <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Formative assessment is conducted during teaching and learning in order to give teachers and learners information about the learners' level of performance compared with the learning objectives.	In this study, teachers conducted assessment during the lesson through verbal questioning and written work to get information about the learners' understanding of the text.

Theme 1 : Uncertainty about formative assessment			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
	Torrance & Pryor (2001)	Formative assessment supports teaching.	In this study, one teacher (T1-SchD) indicated that she used formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension.

Theme 2 : Inconsistent practice of formative assessment			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
Poor quality of questions to assess reading comprehension	Oakley (2011)	Most teachers use questioning technique to assess reading comprehension and to provide information about the learners' progress.	In this study, the questioning technique was used mostly to assess reading comprehension. Teachers may not have been exposed to other assessment techniques.
	Smith & Robinson (1980); Stiggins, Grisworld & Wilkelund (1989)	In the Foundation Phase the practice of reading is dominated by literal questions; higher-order questions are used infrequently.	In this study, grade 3 teachers frequently used literal questions for the assessment of reading comprehension, while higher-order questions were rarely used.
	Torrance & Pryor (2001)	Teachers experience difficulty in developing quality questions for assessing reading comprehension.	In this study, questions used for the assessment of reading comprehension were more about recalling facts than critical thinking as based on teachers' interpretation of the curriculum.

Theme 2 : Inconsistent practice of formative assessment			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
	Oakley (2011)	The use of questioning for written work is limited by the level of learners' writing ability.	In this study, some learners did not write meaningful sentences when responding to the comprehension text in writing. Learners were unable to display grammatical competence both in writing and verbally.
	O'Brien (2008)	Teachers do not give ample "wait time" for the learners to think about an answer during the application of the questioning method.	In this study, six teachers did not give reasonable "wait time" for the learners to think about an answer. This might imply that teachers did not have time to recast learners' responses or to expand on learners' sentences.
Feedback varies in quality, quantity and format	Nakabugo (2003); Torrance & Pryor, (2001)	Teachers lack skills and knowledge for effective feedback.	In this study, teachers' feedback on written work did not focus on errors and did not give information and suggestions to the learners on how to improve.
Minimal involvement of learners	Ramoroka (2007)	Minimal learner involvement during the classroom practice.	In this study, teachers dominated the lessons. This impedes performance. The reason might be that the idea of achieving an outcome is not yet developed among teachers; they still use the conventional teaching method.

Theme 3: Challenges experienced by teachers in relation to the teaching of reading comprehension			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
Lack of knowledge and skills for the teaching of reading comprehension	Mudzielwana (2012)	There are no guidelines on how teachers might best teach reading comprehension.	In this study, teachers indicated that they did not undergo training for teaching reading comprehension. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) did not provide guidelines to teachers regarding the teaching of reading comprehension.
Lack of knowledge and skills in the formative assessment of reading comprehension	Oakley (2011)	There are no guidelines on how teachers might best assess reading comprehension.	In this study, teachers complained about the lack of knowledge, skills and support for the assessment of reading comprehension. DBE did not provide exemplars to teachers regarding the assessment of reading comprehension.
	Oakley (2011)	Teachers reported a lack of confidence regarding the assessment of reading comprehension.	In this study, teachers reported that they were not confident to assess reading comprehension.
	Watson (in Marshall & Drummond (2006)	Teachers are unable to integrate formative assessment in their subjects.	In this study, teachers were unable to integrate formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension.
	Carless (2005); Brown <i>et al.</i> , (2009)	The implementation of formative assessment is weak since it is not well understood by teachers.	In this study, teachers lacked skills and knowledge of formative assessment as reflected in National Curriculum Statement (NCS).

Theme 3: Challenges experienced by teachers in relation to the teaching of reading comprehension			
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	My interpretation
Shortage of teaching-learning material in siSwati	Ramsuran (2004); Singh (2004)	The lack of relevant instructional material impacts negatively on the implementation of formative assessment.	In this study, teachers complained of the lack of siSwati reading material and the DBE learners' workbooks to teach reading comprehension. They also reported that siSwati workbooks have grammatical errors. The reason might be that those workbooks were literally translated from English and not by a specialist in siSwati.

The literature confirms findings of this study that teachers differ in their understanding of formative assessment. Few teachers viewed formative assessment as a practice that intends to support learners' learning, while others are only aware of the summative role of assessment. In addition, the findings of this study match statements in the literature that teachers have inconsistent practice of formative assessment. Questioning was the main assessment technique used to assess reading comprehension. It was common for teachers to use literal questions for the assessment of reading comprehension. Such questions do not support the development of comprehension skills. Teachers did not provide effective feedback to the learners. The literature confirmed that challenges pertaining to teachers' practice of formative assessment emanate from the fact that teachers did not receive proper training in formative assessment.

Table 7.2: Comparison of findings with the existing knowledge: contradictory evidence

Theme 1: Uncertainty about formative assessment				
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	Contradiction with what is known	My interpretation
Formative assessment is a process during learning.	Asgar (2012); Birenbaum <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Effective feedback on learners' work is part of formative assessment and supports learning.	In this study, teachers did not give effective feedback to support learners' performance because of limited training and lack of standardized guidelines.	Teachers had limited knowledge of and skills in providing learners with effective feedback to influence their performance. Teachers were unable to diagnose challenges in learners' learning.
	Baird (2009)	Teachers can extract more diagnostic information through open-ended questions.	In this study, teachers did not use open-ended questions to extract diagnostic information.	Teachers lacked skills in using open-ended questions for diagnostic purposes. They relied mostly on low-order questions.
Assessment is the end product of teaching and learning	Marcotte & Hintze (2009); Bennet (2011)	Summative assessment supports learning if the information is used to improve teaching.	In this study, teachers did not use assessment data to improve their teaching.	Teachers did not analyze assessment data. Thus assessment data did not inform their planning. The reason might be that teachers were not aware of the role of assessment data in supporting planning for the new lesson.

Theme 2: Inconsistent practice of formative assessment

Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	Contradiction with what is known	My interpretation
Poor quality of questions to assess reading comprehension	Wiliamson, (2004); Torrance & Pryor (2001)	For the development of reading comprehension skills teachers should use a variety of questions.	Teachers did not use a variety of questions for the assessment of written work.	Teachers did not consider the cognitive level of their learners in their planning and assessment.
	Fiene and McMahon (2007)	Effective questioning in reading promotes learners' active involvement and enhances understanding.	In this study, teachers frequently asked closed questions. On few occasions open-ended questions were asked. Few learners participated in questioning.	Teachers lacked skills to use effective questioning to promote learners' involvement and to enhance understanding.
Feedback varies in quality, quantity and format	Black and Wiliam (2006); Nakabugo, (2003); Taras (2009)	Feedback for formative assessment should be given in the form of comments and should focus on the achievement of lesson objectives.	In this study, teachers marked and provided only the marks, sometimes evaluative comments to the learners.	Teachers were not trained in feedback strategies and they lacked knowledge of effective feedback.

Theme 3: Challenges experienced by teachers in relation to the teaching of reading comprehension

Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	Contradiction with what is known	My interpretation
Lack of knowledge and skills in assessment of reading comprehension	Oakley (2011)	Teachers report using a variety of strategies to support the teaching of reading comprehension.	In this study, teachers were unable to mention strategies they used to assess reading comprehension	Teachers did not have knowledge of reading comprehension strategies.
Lack of knowledge and skills in teaching reading comprehension	Oakley (2011)	Teachers report that they are reasonably confident that they are able to teach reading comprehension.	In this study, six teachers indicated a lack of confidence in teaching reading comprehension.	Teachers lacked knowledge of reading comprehension skills.

Theme 2: Inconsistent practice of formative assessment				
Category	Author and year	Existing knowledge	Contradiction with what is known	My interpretation
	Asghar (2012)	Teachers integrate formative assessment in their classroom practice.	In this study, teachers were unable to integrate formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension.	Teachers were not taught by their subject advisors on how to integrate formative assessment in their teaching practice.
	Oakley (2011)	Majority of teachers indicate that they have received professional development for assessment of reading comprehension	In this study, all teachers indicated that they did not receive professional development training in reading comprehension.	Professional development of reading comprehension did not take place in Mpumalanga as it was not planned by DBE.

Findings of this study contradict the literature. The literature indicates that feedback and active involvement of learners are components of formative assessment and teachers should use them to support learning. Teachers should provide effective feedback that will inform learners about their strengths and weaknesses (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In this study, teachers did not provide effective feedback to the learners to help them understand the written text. They did not actively involve the learners in the assessment of reading comprehension either. The reason might be that teachers were not knowledgeable about the role of feedback as support for learning, and they were not aware of the value of involving the learners in their assessment.

Table 7.3: Comparing of findings with the existing knowledge: silence in the data

Trends in literature	Author and year	Interpretive discussion of findings
Formative assessment requires teachers to discuss learning objectives with the learners.	Torrance & Pryor (2001); Black & Wiliam (2006), Birenbaum <i>et al.</i> (2009); Wiliam <i>et al.</i> (2004); O'Brien (2008)	In this study, teachers informed learners about the learning objectives; learners did not have inputs to the learning objectives. Thus, there was no discussion between the teacher and learners about learning objectives.
Formative assessment requires teachers to communicate and clarify the assessment criteria to the learners.	Reddy (2004); Birenbaum <i>et al.</i> (2009); Torrance & Pryor (2001); Pryor & Crossouard (2008); Wiliam (2006)	In this study, the assessment criteria were not communicated to the learners. The reason might be that teachers lacked knowledge of the communication of assessment criteria.
Formative assessment encourages learners to take control of their own assessment.	Swaffield (2011); Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006); Black & Wiliam (1998); Pryor & Crossouard (2008); Mok (2011); Webb & Jones (2009)	In this study, assessment was conducted mostly by the teachers. Teachers did not encourage learners to assess their work (e.g. self-assessment, peer assessment).
Formative assessment helps learners to develop skills for self-regulated learning.	Black & Wiliam (1998); Asghar (2011); Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006); Oakley (2011), Davis & Neitzel (2011);	In this study, learners were passive as they acted on teachers' instructions. Teachers did not use formative assessment to develop self-regulated learning. The reason might be that teachers lack knowledge of and skills in the use of formative assessment for self-regulated learning.

Literature on formative assessment requires teachers to discuss learning objectives with the learners in order for the learners to have a clear understanding of what they are striving to achieve (Torrance & Pryor, 2001). It also requires the teacher and the learners to discuss the assessment criteria in order to know the skills and knowledge they will be assessed on (Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009). However, in this study teachers did not negotiate the learning objectives and they did not communicate the assessment criteria to the learners. The reason might be that teachers were not aware of the importance of negotiating the learning objectives with learners.

Table 7.4: Comparison of findings with the existing knowledge: new insights

Themes and categories	Description	Interpretive discussion
Teachers who upgrade their educational qualifications are likely to learn about formative assessment.	Teachers who are currently enrolled for education qualifications displayed knowledge of formative assessment.	The curriculum at higher-education institutions provides information on formative assessment in PGCE programmes, BEd and MEd coursework.
Formative assessment takes place haphazardly during the learning process.	Even though teachers did not plan to use formative assessment for their teaching instructions, elements of formative assessment were identified in teachers' practice.	Formative assessment is indirectly part of the learning process.

Findings of this study indicate that formative assessment forms part of the curriculum at higher-education institutions in South Africa, as two teachers who were currently enrolled for an education qualification displayed knowledge of formative assessment. I also discovered that even though teachers did not plan to use formative assessment for teaching reading comprehension, formative assessment did take place unplanned and haphazardly.

7.4 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS IN TERMS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section, findings are discussed with reference to the research questions and the conceptual framework of this study. The findings I present are supported by discussions relating to the literature reviewed and the conceptual framework of the study. This enabled me to enrich the thesis in terms of comprehensiveness. The main research question is:

How do Grade 3 teachers use formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension?

To enable me to address the main research question, I investigated the following sub-questions:

- *What are the teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension to Grade 3 learners?*

- *Which learning activities do teachers employ to support formative assessment of reading comprehension?*
- *What is the nature of feedback given by Grade 3 teachers when teaching reading comprehension in siSwati home language?*

7.4.1 WHAT ARE THE TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION TO GRADE 3 LEARNERS?

During the interviews with individual teachers, I asked them to indicate their understanding and views of formative assessment and to state the need to assess learners in reading comprehension. I expected that responses from the teachers would help me to elicit teachers' conceptions of the role of formative assessment in teaching reading comprehension. This is supported by Brown *et al.* (2009), who assert that in order to understand teachers' practice of formative assessment, it is necessary to investigate what teachers think of formative assessment and how they make use of it. Findings of this study revealed two conceptions of formative assessment, namely that formative assessment means evaluation of learners' comprehension skills and that formative assessment supports learning and teaching instructions.

❖ Formative assessment means evaluation of learners' comprehension skills

Findings indicate that four teachers considered formative assessment to be an activity which should only take place at the end of each lesson in order to evaluate learners' comprehension skills. According to these teachers, formative assessment should be based on what was learnt and taught during the lesson. Their conception implies that teachers are in control of the learning process, as they set targets and ensure that learners achieve those targets.

Conceptions of teachers portrayed classroom practice as a smooth and linear process where the teacher teaches, learners learn, then the teacher assesses to ensure that learners have reached the targets. This conception was congruent with studies conducted by Torrance and Pryor (1998), Nakabugo (2003), Hargreaves

(2001), Baird (2009) and Curtis (2011), which indicated that teachers usually associate formative assessment with the evaluation of learning, as they perceive formative assessment as a formal activity intended to provide information about learners' performance.

Teachers' conception of formative assessment as the evaluation of comprehension skills was clearly evident in their practice. They frequently conducted assessments towards the end of the lesson. In many classrooms I observed teachers reading the text; instructing learners to read the text; teachers asking questions verbally; teachers providing learners with written work and marking the learners' workbooks. Findings of this study confirm the findings of Baird (2009) that teachers usually conduct assessments at the end of the learning process through written work.

In my view, teachers' conception of formative assessment as the evaluation of comprehension skills was influenced by their lack of knowledge and skills in formative assessment and reading comprehension, as all teachers indicated that they were never trained on formative assessment, teaching and assessment of reading comprehension. This finding was also made by Nakabugo (2003), Carless (2005) and Ramoroka (2007). According to Webb and Jones (2009), effective implementation of formative assessment depends on the teachers' knowledge, skills and strategies they use to perform complex instructional practice.

❖ **Formative assessment supports learning and teaching instructions**

Three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) viewed formative assessment as the process which should take place during teaching instructions to support learning. They mentioned various phases during the teaching of reading comprehension when assessment has to be conducted, namely at the beginning, in the middle and towards the end of the lesson. T1-SchC and T1-SchD talked at length about assessment as they explained the purposes of conducting assessment at each phase of the learning process and emphasized that teachers should use different forms of assessment for the formative assessment of reading comprehension.

T1-SchD further mentioned the use of formative assessment data to inform future lesson planning and intervention programmes to support reading in the Foundation Phase. The use of formative assessment to support learning and instructions is supported by proponents of formative assessment such Black and William (1998), Harlen (2000), William *et al.* (2004), William (2006), Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) and Ruiz-Primo (2011). They consider teachers as key factor in using formative assessment to improve learning and teaching in the Grade 3 classrooms.

However, the classroom observations revealed that there was some difference between what the three teachers (T1-SchB, T1-SchC & T1-SchD) stated about formative assessment and what they actually did in their classrooms. Teachers usually asked few questions, with few learners participating, and they gave classwork towards the end of the lesson. I visited T1-SchD on three consecutive days to study how she used formative assessment to influence her planning, as she claimed during the interview. However, there was no evidence of the use of assessment information to plan for the new lesson, and I did not see any relationship between any lesson and the previous lesson. This finding mirrors the conclusion drawn by Brown *et al.* (2009), who reported that teachers responded more on conceptions than on their practice of formative assessment, as teachers were able to express their knowledge of formative assessment while that knowledge was not observed during the classroom practice.

The fact that two teachers (T1-SchB & T1-SchD) who were currently enrolled with education institutions of higher learning were able to cite the role of formative assessment in support for learning might imply that teachers who are currently enrolled for improving their teaching qualifications or who have just received their qualifications are likely to have learnt about formative assessment. The reason might be that formative assessment forms part of the curriculum in education institutions for higher learning. This finding was incongruent with a study conducted by Crossouard, Pryor and Torrance (2004), who found that one teacher, who had little experience and had recently completed his PGCE programme, had limited theoretical knowledge of formative assessment compared with the experienced teachers. The implication might be that in countries where in-service training on formative assessment takes

place, teachers learned and practiced formative assessment in their teaching to support learning, while teachers who were new in the field did not.

Research conducted by Taras (2009) in Hong Kong portrayed formative assessment as a crucial component of the curricula of both undergraduate and post-graduate higher-education studies. In this case, teachers in Hong Kong are privileged to get knowledge of formative assessment during their initial training. This may have a positive impact in the schooling system, since they are able to support learners through formative assessment from their first years of teaching. Therefore, the curriculum package for pre-and in-service training needs to emphasize formative assessment role in reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase.

7.4.2 WHICH LEARNING ACTIVITIES DO TEACHERS EMPLOY IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION?

Researchers of formative assessment such as Black and Wiliam (1998), Nakabugo (2003) and Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) view formative assessment as part of teaching and learning rather than a stand-alone activity. According to Nakabugo (2003), formative assessment is related to the teaching approach, as both take place during the learning process. He considered that a teaching approach that emphasizes learners' participation and constructivism facilitates formative assessment.

Nakabugo (2003) supports the view of Black and Wiliam (1998) that learning activities which support teaching and learning and emphasize learners' participation have a formative role. Birenbaum *et al.* (2009) shares this view and adds that teaching and learning activities should start with planning; the planning should indicate how formative assessment will take place and how teachers will collect evidence of learners' progress towards the achievement of the learning goals.

Findings of this study indicate that teachers' lesson plans did not provide much information on how formative assessment was to take place. Nevertheless, the lesson plans contained learning activities that contained elements of formative assessment. I support the view that formative assessment is part of learning and teaching, and I have reported all learning activities which took place during the

siSwati lessons as part of formative assessment. These activities are: communication of the learning objectives; reading of the text; assessment of learners' comprehension skills and checking learners' workbooks. Yet, when interviewing the teachers they lacked knowledge about the role and functions of formative assessment. In the next section I discuss and comment on each of these activities in order to address the second research question.

❖ **Communication of the learning objectives**

Authors and researchers of formative assessment emphasize that teachers should communicate and clarify learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson, so that learners will know what they are striving for in a particular lesson (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009; O'Brien, 2008, Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Asghar, 2012). They argue that this will assist learners to take ownership of their learning.

Findings of this study indicate that it was common for the teachers to inform learners of the learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson. However, in some instances learning objectives were not well translated from the curriculum, as some teachers wrote themes as learning objectives that did not provide information about skills and knowledge learners should achieve by the end of the lesson. This might be due to the fact that these teachers were unable to interpret CAPS in terms of how they needed to communicate the content to the learners.

According to Ruiz-Primo (2011), incorrect and inconsistent communication of the learning objectives may lead to poor learning, since learners will have no knowledge of what they are striving to achieve in particular lesson. In my view, if teachers are unable to state clear learning objectives, they are unlikely to be able to develop sound activities which will support learners in achieving core knowledge for the grade. The study conducted by Brookhart *et al.* (2010) in the USA confirmed that when teachers communicate clear learning goals to the learners, learners are likely to improve their performance.

❖ **Reading of the text**

The Department of Basic Education, in *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (2008c), emphasizes that teachers should introduce learners to various reading activities to support the development of learners' comprehension skills. Data from the lesson observation indicates that teachers and learners were involved in various reading activities, namely teachers and learners reading the text aloud, learners reading the text silently, teacher and learners reading questions about the comprehension text and the teacher reading the instructions for activities.

In addition, teachers used various reading strategies such as shared reading, group reading and independent reading. Learners were instructed to read individually, in pairs and in groups. It was common for teachers to explain new words before the reading of the text. On other occasions teachers instructed learners to explain words and construct sentences using the new words. These findings are in accordance with *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008c) and Saunders-Smith (2009), both of which require teachers to be creative in the lower grades when designing and developing activities which will activate the love of reading in the learners.

During the interviews teachers highlighted that when they were trained for CAPS, their curriculum advisor introduced them to strategies for reading and provided them with the handbook *Teaching Reading in the Early Grades* (DoE, 2008c) to help them with the teaching of reading. During the observation of their lessons I confirmed that participating teachers had knowledge of reading strategies. However, it was not clear how they used reading strategies to enhance the development of comprehension skills. When I asked them how their knowledge of reading supported the development of reading comprehension, they were unable to give meaningful explanations. Perhaps teachers were not shown during the CAPS training how they could use reading activities to enhance comprehension skills. Another possibility is that reading comprehension did not form part of the programme for CAPS training. Or reading comprehension may not have been emphasized during their pre-service training or did not form part of the programme at colleges (six participating teachers attended the same college of education).

The fact that four participating teachers still had only a teachers' diploma they had obtained 18 years earlier as their highest qualification may mean that they were never exposed to classroom practices such as reading comprehension. The findings of Mudzielwana (2011) suggest that some teachers in Limpopo are not capacitated to teach reading comprehension, since this may not have formed part of the pre-service and in-service training.

❖ **Assessment of learners' comprehension skills**

In South Africa, the DBE (through the *National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the General Education and Training Band, 2007b*) requires teachers to assess learners continuously by means of various assessment methods. South African teachers are also expected to implement formative assessment to support learning process (DBE, 2011c). According to Singh (2004), teachers should use appropriate assessment methods and practices to support the implementation of formative assessment. He stated that the use of appropriate assessment methods and practices can only be achieved if teachers have a solid understanding of the subject content and types of assessment and how to implement them.

Findings of this study indicate that two assessment techniques frequently used by most teachers are questioning and written work. It was common for teachers to ask questions at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of reading. Williamson (2004) reported the same finding; that questioning has always been the popular strategy used in the early grades. Proponents of reading support the use of questioning during the learning to develop and facilitate learners comprehension skills. However, Oakley (2011) emphasizes the use of various assessment techniques for reading comprehension.

Findings of this study indicate that teachers' use of lower-order questions for the assessment of written work did not activate higher-order comprehension skills, whereas CAPS states that in Grade 3 teachers should activate learners' thinking through the use of higher-order comprehension questions (DBE, 2011c). According

to Baird (2010), open-ended questions can support learners' learning, as they are suitable for extracting diagnostic information from the learners.

❖ **Control of learners' workbooks**

Findings of this study indicate that teachers frequently checked and controlled the learners' workbooks. This finding is in accordance with the finding of Nakabugo (2003) that teachers marked the learners' work regularly. During the lesson observation I noted that some of the learners' written activities were marked immediately, especially the work of learners who finished the work before the end of the lesson. In other cases, teachers marked the learners' workbooks during their free time or after the contact time, when learners had left the classrooms. It might be that the main reason why teachers checked the learners' work was to comply with their school policy, as they indicated during the interviews that learners' work should be assessed before new activities commenced.

7.4.3 WHAT IS THE NATURE OF FEEDBACK GIVEN BY TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION IN SI-SWATI HOME LANGUAGE?

Literature on formative assessment emphasizes that teachers should provide effective feedback to learners. According to Black and Wiliam (1998), feedback for formative assessment should be given regularly in the form of comments and should provide information to the learners regarding the learning objectives. Furthermore, it should concentrate on weaknesses and should give information and suggestions on how to improve (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Clarke (2001) emphasises that it was imperative for feedback to focus on strengths in order to motivate the learners.

Torrance and Pryor (2001) suggest that feedback for formative assessment should provide information about the extent learners were able to complete the task and the ways in which quality could be improved. Sadler (1989) also states that effective feedback should provide descriptive and criterion-based information which informs the learners where they are in a learning progression, how their understanding differs from the desired learning goal and how they can move forward. The study conducted by Brookhart *et al.* (2010) show that when teachers provide clear descriptive

feedback which is tied to the learning objectives and learners' needs, learners are likely to improve their performance.

Findings of this study indicate that teachers did not provide learners with effective feedback on their verbal and written responses to comprehension questions. Teachers' feedback did not focus on the learning objectives and did not suggest actions for improvement. Instead, teachers gave marks and simple, evaluative comments as feedback. Data from interviews also revealed that six teachers lacked knowledge of formative assessment and feedback. It also showed that some teachers referred to feedback as corrections and remedial work given to the learners after they had marked the learners' work.

The lack of information regarding feedback could be caused by the fact that participating teachers did not know how to provide feedback to learners on their comprehension skills proficiency. The concept of feedback may have been neglected in the Foundation Phase curriculum, since teachers tend to focus more on objectives and less on informing learners where challenges exist in their content and on assisting learners to effect the necessary changes to improve their competencies in reading comprehension. Similar findings were also reported by Nakabugo (2003) in Uganda, where teachers failed to provide learners with feedback that would help learners improve their learning.

7.4.4 HOW DO GRADE 3 TEACHERS USE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE TEACHING OF READING COMPREHENSION?

Findings of this study indicate that teachers did not plan to use formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension, since they lacked knowledge of formative assessment and skills to employ formative assessment. This could be because most of these teachers were not trained on formative assessment, teaching and the assessment of reading comprehension during their pre-service and in-service training.

However, findings of this study indicate elements of formative assessment which were not consistently practiced. It was found that teachers made some attempts to

communicate learning objectives, but learning objectives did not provide information about the skills and knowledge learners had to acquire. Teachers collected assessment data through verbal questioning and classwork, but, they often used lower-order and closed questions. These questions did not stimulate learners' thinking and did not enhance learners' comprehension skills. Teachers made attempts to give feedback, but feedback was not effective as teachers did not provide learners with comments about their strengths and what learners needed to improve. The feedback given did not encourage learners to expand their thinking and revise their work.

Furthermore, during the interviews teachers complained that they did not have relevant material to teach reading comprehension. The fact that teachers lacked resources, skills and knowledge of teaching and assessing reading comprehension implies that formative assessment was not effective and did not enhance the teaching of reading comprehension. Consequently it did not aid learners' reading comprehension.

7.5 REFLECTIONS ON THE THEORY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework explained in Chapter 4 was critical to understand how teachers use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. The conceptual framework of this study was developed from various sources, namely Vygotsky's theory of learning and his socio-cultural perspective (1978), Engeström's activity theory (2001), the process of formative assessment (Harlen, 2000; Ruiz-Primo, 2011; Birenbaum *et al.*, 2009) and Zimmerman's model of self-regulated learning (see figure 4.1).

Grade 3 teachers were the subject of the activity theory of this study, whereas Grade 3 learners were the community of practice of the activity system of this study. Teachers were responsible to guide learning in the classroom. They were expected to support learning in reading comprehension by providing formative assessment activities in support of learners' comprehension skills (activity).

Generally, the South African government provides Grade 3 teachers with tools such as books, readers, curriculum documents and workshops to support them with the implementation of the curriculum. Books and readers are subjected to a stringent selection system to ensure that they are suitable for the learners' levels of development. However, this study found that teachers did not have relevant resources for teaching reading to siSwati-speaking learners. These findings are congruent with findings of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) (DBE, 2012c), which found that the majority of classes they visited contained very few reading books. NEEDU (DBE, 2012c) also reported that few teachers were able to teach and assess reading in general. The lack of books plays a role in how formative assessment was understood and implemented in the classroom; as De Jongh (2000) points out, if there are no good resources, it will not be possible to teach.

In addition, workshops conducted by Foundation Phase curriculum advisors did not show teachers how to teach and assess reading comprehension. Teachers (the subject of the activity system) failed to interpret books, readers and curriculum documents. This was evident from the type of questions asked by the teachers: their questions were more about recalling, and there were few instances when teachers used high-order questions. This was shown in section 6.6.2.1. Teachers were also unable to use the relevant material effectively.

Regarding the process, the findings of this study also indicate that there was no collaboration between teachers and learners in the assessment (process). Although teachers were aware of formative assessment for reading comprehension (they made attempts to commutate learning objectives, assess prior learning, use questioning and provide feedback to learners), the findings indicate that teachers lacked the strategy for conducting formative assessment; they struggled to formulate activities which would enhance learners' comprehension skills. Mostly, they did not communicate clear learning objectives. They did not provide constructive feedback and failed to provide opportunities for learners to assess their work and the work of their peers. In addition, there was no evidence of teachers providing scaffolding support to the learners. In some instances, learners were not corrected when making

errors and teachers did not establish the cause of those errors. Teachers did not focus on supporting learners with higher-order thinking. For example, teachers did not ask questions that required learners to compare, evaluate or synthesize information; instead, they were asked questions that merely required them to recall facts.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that teachers did not have guidelines (rules) on how they should go about the practice of formative assessment in reading comprehension. Although they planned for instruction, they did not have a plan for applying formative assessment of reading comprehension. Even though teachers collected the assessment data, there was no evidence that the data was analyzed and interpreted to inform the future planning of activities. Teachers did not provide learners with corrective and supportive feedback because they lacked knowledge of proper feedback. Learners were not able to react to feedback, as they were not informed about their challenges and strengths concerning their work. I therefore conclude that the teaching strategies employed by teachers did not help learners to comprehend the text independently (outcome of the activity theory).

In summary, findings of the activity system of this study indicate challenges and gaps between the components of the activity system. It is clear that the participating teachers did not use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension, since they lacked knowledge and formative assessment skills. This might mean that the curriculum advisors did not guide teachers in the use of formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension, and the fact that teachers did not have relevant resources to teach reading comprehension had an a negative impact on the practice of formative assessment. Findings of this study support the view of Asghar (2012) that if learners are not actively involved in the activity system and are not aware of their teachers' agenda, formative assessment is unlikely to realize its potential.

7.6 MY CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The study focused on two important aspects of education, namely teaching of reading comprehension and the implementation of formative assessment in that

process. Thus, it contributes to the literature of reading comprehension by providing research-based evidence on teachers' practice of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension. The study highlights positive and negative aspects of teachers' use of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension.

Formative assessment is one of the most effective classroom interventions to support teaching and improve learning (Black & William, 1998). It is a central aspect of classroom assessment that connects teaching and learning. Regardless of its power to support learning and teaching, the research shows that it is the field that is less explored in the developing countries. Thus, this study makes a contribution to the classroom practice in the context of a developing country.

The study indicates that participating teachers were not familiar with the term formative assessment. They were not able to integrate formative assessment into their teaching instructions. Although research on reading has proven that formative assessment has the potential to support teaching and learning in reading comprehension, teachers are still not equipped to implement formative assessment in reading comprehension.

In addition, this study indicates that formative assessment took place indirectly and haphazardly in many classrooms. This seems to be an anomaly. It is my view that formative assessment emerged as a phenomenon. Regardless the evidence that most of the teacher participants of this study did not plan for formative assessment as they were not aware of its role in supporting learning, formative assessment emerged in certain sense. This finding is supported by the remark made by Nakabugo (2003) that formative assessment and teaching approaches are related to each other. According to Nakabugo teaching approaches which emphasize constructive learning facilitate formative assessment.

The lack of teacher training on formative assessment hindered the effective practice of formative assessment in the classrooms, as the majority of the teachers were unable to describe, plan and practice formative assessment.

The research may contribute positively to improving the low learner performance in literacy if teachers can start to focus on formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. This finding is supported by the request made by Black and Wiliam (1998) for research that supports teachers to establish new practices in formative assessment. The findings may also serve as an indicator to the DBE and MDoE when planning the intervention programmes to assist teachers with classroom assessment.

I explored the implementation of formative assessment in four schools with seven Grade 3 teachers. Although the results of this case study cannot be generalized to include all contexts, the findings could be transferable to other similar cases, as I have given a detailed description of my case study.

7.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

I have formulated recommendations about formative assessment of reading comprehension that need to be addressed in the light of the findings of the study.

7.7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MPUMALANGA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (MDoE)

I found that teachers lack knowledge and skills for teaching reading comprehension, and moreover, that they do not plan to use formative assessment to support the teaching of reading comprehension. Therefore, I recommend that the MDoE support teachers through professional development programmes which should focus on giving teachers the knowledge of teaching reading comprehension strategies and formative assessment for reading comprehension.

Teachers' professional development for formative assessment should take place through workshops in various subjects. In this case, it should show teachers how to integrate formative assessment into reading comprehension. It should also cover knowledge of formative assessment principles and key components of formative assessment, namely strategies for providing effective feedback to the learners, effective use of questioning and self-assessment and peer-assessment. The

workshops for capacity building should be facilitated by experts in the field of formative assessment.

Professional development for formative assessment should be ongoing and take place regularly over a period of time. It should provide direct instructions and practical examples in order for teachers to acquire skills and knowledge for integrating formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. It should also encourage teachers to practice active participation.

After the workshops, there should be close support for teachers in the classrooms. The MDoE, using experts in formative assessment, should guide and support teachers when implementing formative assessment in their classrooms. They should also guide teachers by providing practical examples from the learners' workbooks to interpret formative assessment data so that they can adjust their teaching of reading comprehension. The support should focus on the deepening of teachers' knowledge of the subject content and responses to learners and strategies.

The MDoE should introduce enquiry-based learning to teachers in their own classrooms. This could assist teachers to plan, implement and evaluate their practice of formative assessment, to investigate and reflect on their classroom practice with the intention of improving on their teaching and assessment and may lead to teachers' regulation of formative assessment.

In addition to the above, the MDoE should provide schools with the necessary resources to support the implementation of formative assessment. In this case, schools should be provided with siSwati reading books and workbooks to support teachers and learners with learning activities for the practice of formative assessment. Furthermore, the MDoE should train teachers in the use of the activities in the workbooks to enhance learning and teaching. The MDoE should support schools with exemplars for formative assessment.

It is also necessary for the MDoE to empower School Management Teams (SMTs), in particular the head of department in the Foundation Phase, with skills and

knowledge for formative assessment so that they will be able to support teachers and monitor the implementation of formative assessment for reading comprehension in the classrooms.

7.7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE AT SCHOOLS

Heads of departments at school are responsible for managing the curriculum and dealing with curriculum issues. They should provide support to teachers on classroom practice. They should assist teachers in developing tasks of high quality and ensure that teachers use a variety of questions for assessing reading comprehension. It is also imperative that they monitor the use of learners' workbooks to assist them in providing constructive feedback to the learners.

Heads of departments in the Foundation Phase should learn more, so as to get a better understanding of classroom practices. They need to equip themselves with knowledge of formative assessment and reading comprehension so that they will be able to assist teachers with various strategies for teaching and assessing reading comprehension. Some teachers in the study complained that they had never been trained in curriculum matters in their schools. The reason might be that heads of departments have little knowledge of classroom practice, as they are not equipped for their role of managing the curriculum in this phase.

In addition to the above, heads of department should encourage teachers to participate in teacher learning communities for formative assessment. In Mpumalanga this usually takes place through cluster meetings. Cluster meetings are formal or informal meetings held with the group of teachers who reside in the same area and are meant for teachers to support one another in curriculum matters.

7.7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO TEACHERS

One of the principles of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement is that teachers should become life-long learners (DBE, 2011c). The implication is that teachers should take responsibility for their learning. They need to acquaint themselves with new developments in education and share the information among

themselves. In that way they can improve their professional knowledge and classroom practices. Information may be obtained through various sources such as the internet, library and conferences. If there are no resources and teachers are not exposed in such occasions, there will be no opportunities for them to learn.

I therefore recommend that teachers should learn about the theory (different relevant concepts) and assessment practices by looking at information from various sources. Teachers should also participate in education programmes to improve their classroom practice and participate in cluster and school meetings to share knowledge with other teachers. This will improve their professional knowledge of and skills in formative assessment of reading comprehension.

7.7.4 RECOMMENDATIONS TO TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

I recommend that teacher education institutions should develop and present a module on the assessment of reading comprehension to student teachers. This module should include formative assessment and include practical examples for students to use formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension in the Foundation Phase.

7.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This was a baseline study of the implementation of formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension. The qualitative nature of this study brings new insight to the systemic and quantitative studies in this knowledge domain. The fact that I discovered that teachers are unable to implement formative assessment effectively emphasizes the need for further studies.

The following are ideas for further research:

- A baseline study that includes many teachers from various districts should be conducted to get a broader picture of teachers' use of formative assessment in the province.

- An in-depth study that explores and develops various components of formative assessment in the subject languages (e.g. teachers' use of feedback, self and peer-assessment, effective questioning).
- A purposeful research study which will document teachers' use of formative assessment to improve learners' learning.
- Research that will focus on the use of formative assessment for self-regulated learning.
- A participatory action research study that will focus on developing formative assessment knowledge and skills for the teaching of reading comprehension.
- A large scale intervention programme to support teachers with the implementation of formative assessment when teaching reading comprehension.

7.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The fact that this was an exploratory study of teachers' practices of formative assessment and included seven teachers from one circuit in one district limited the scope of the study. Participating teachers were from schools in the same demographic area, with the same socio-economic background. These schools were managed in one circuit office and participating teachers were supported by the same curriculum advisor. Therefore the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all Grade 3 teachers in Mpumalanga Province. However, I have described the cases in depth because the aim was to investigate and describe how teachers use formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension for possible transferability purposes (Silverman, 2005). Therefore, this case could be used to provide a research-based model for exemplar practices in the formative assessment of reading comprehension.

Another limitation is that the study only documented teachers' conceptions and practices of formative assessment, without providing the intervention programme to support teachers. The school and teachers in this study were not trained on formative assessment, so they lacked knowledge and skills in formative assessment. It could be regarded as unfair to the teachers to be interviewed and observed in a field they

were not knowledgeable about. However, teachers are supposed to know what formative assessment is and to practice it. The data obtained about the teachers' practice of formative assessment was therefore limited.

Studies on formative assessment have suggested that implementing formative assessment would be best done at the beginning of the new school year, as teachers need to renegotiate the learning contract (William *et al.*, 2004). However, data for the study was collected in the period of six months from May 2012 to October 2012, and each teacher was visited five times. The timing may have been convenient but the time could have been too short to allow conclusions about teachers' practice of formative assessment. I may have missed important data, such as teachers developing the teaching of reading or reading comprehension through formative assessment as I did not come to schools on daily basis.

The conceptual and theoretical framework was used to determine how formative assessment supports teaching. However, my conceptual and theoretical framework did not include all elements of formative assessment, such as self and peer-assessment, and it did not show how formative assessment supports self-regulated learning as it stated that the teacher is in control of the formative assessment process. The teacher is the one who communicates the learning objectives to the learners.

Data for the lesson observations was collected manually. Record sheets were not used during the lesson observations. This may have negatively influenced the data analysis process, as I may have missed important data.

My presence could have made some of the teachers in the case study feel uncomfortable. However, I had a meeting with the teachers' prior to the data collection to explain the purpose and processes of the study and to request them to remain open and comfortable when responding to interview questions and presenting their lessons.

7.10 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that teachers did not use formative assessment to enhance the teaching of reading comprehension. Teachers' feedback did not support learners to revise their work and expand their thinking. I acknowledge that this is a case study and that it is hard to draw conclusions that can be generalized. However, this study reflects that teachers' assessment practices may detract from the development of learners' comprehension skills. As formative assessment has been proven to support teaching and improve learning. I argue that the findings of this study may serve as new insight to schools which have challenges of low performance levels in reading comprehension portrayed by ANA results. Furthermore, the findings of this study may raise awareness at the Department of Basic Education generally that teachers must be supported with knowledge and skills in formative assessment in order to improve their teaching and to support reading comprehension.

There is a critical need for teachers' professional development in formative assessment in order for them to conceptualize the role of formative assessment in improving teaching. Teachers' professional development programmes should focus on supporting teachers with the integration of formative assessment in their teaching experience. In addition, teachers should learn skills in providing learners with effective feedback that will support the learners' learning in general and in reading comprehension specifically.

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ADDENDA

Addendum 1

Maps of South Africa

Addendum 2

Photos of schools visited

Addendum 3

Interview schedule

Addendum 4

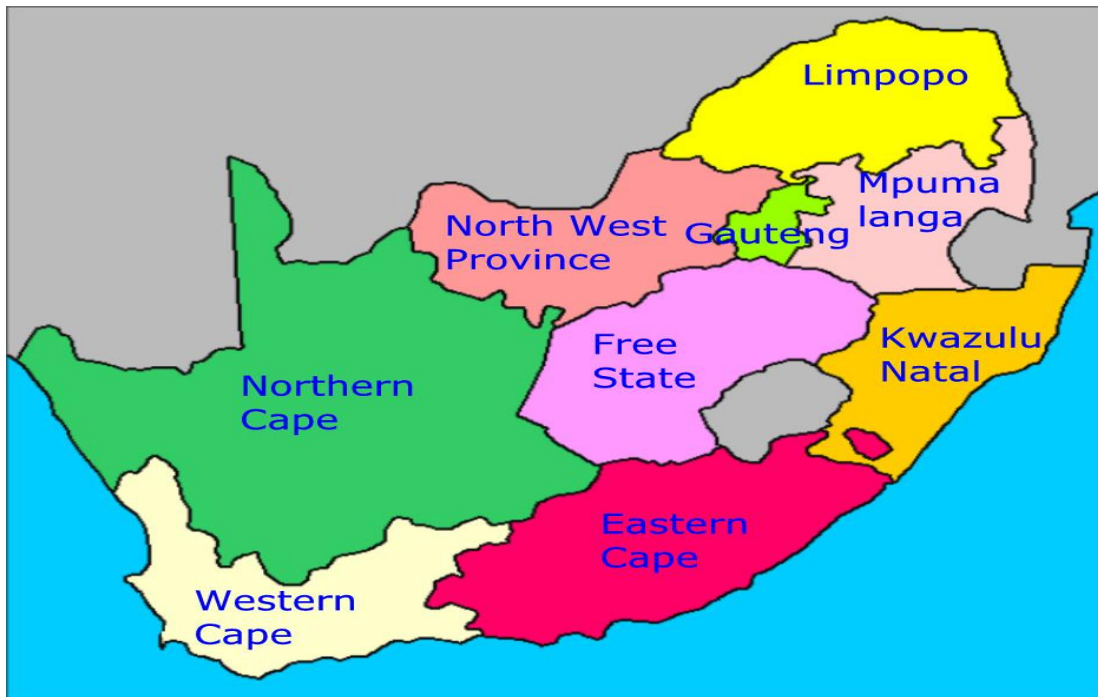
Permission to conduct the study from MDoE

DVD

ADDENDUM 1



MAP OF SOUTH AFRICA



MAP OF SOUTH AFRICA

ADDENDUM 2

SCHOOLS VISITED



CLASSROOM BLOCK IN SCHOOL A



CLASSROOM BLOCK IN SCHOOL B



CLASSROOM BLOCK IN SCHOOL C



CLASSROOM BLOCK IN SCHOOL D

ADDENDUM 3

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR GRADE 3 TEACHERS: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

The purpose of the interview: To get information about the teaching and assessment of reading comprehension in siSwati home language.

A: Background information of the teacher

- 1. How many years have you been teaching?*
- 2. What qualifications do you have?*
- 3. Tell me about your teaching experience.*
- 4. How do you find teaching Grade 3 learners?*

B: Teaching of reading comprehension in siSwati home language

- 5. Do you teach reading comprehension?*
- 6. How do you teach reading comprehension?*
- 7. In a week, how often do you teach reading comprehension?*
- 8. How do you find teaching reading comprehension in Grade 3?*
- 9. Do you have resources to assist you in teaching of reading comprehension?*
- 10. If yes, which are those resources?*
- 11. Who offered you the resources?*
- 12. Do you think the resources you are using support you to teach the reading comprehension?*
- 13. How do you use the resources to plan a lesson for reading comprehension?*

C: Assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension in siSwati home language

- 14. What do you understand about assessment?*
- 15. How do you assess learners' understanding of the text?*
- 16. In a week, how often do you assess learners' comprehension of the text?*
- 17. Share with me the purpose of assessment of reading comprehension.*
- 18. Are you confident to assess learners' comprehension of the text?*

D: Understanding and uses of formative assessment of reading comprehension

19. *Share with me your understanding of formative assessment?*
20. *Do you assess formatively when teaching reading comprehension?*
21. *Share with me how you use formative assessment in the teaching of reading comprehension in SiSwati Home language lesson?*
22. *How confident are you in using formative assessment in reading comprehension?*

E: Feedback to learners about their performances

23. *Do you give feedback to learners when they have finished the assessment task?*
24. *How do you give feedback?*
25. *What is the purpose of giving feedback to learners?*
26. *Do you think learners benefit from the feedback, why do you think so?*
27. *How would you determine that the feedback has improved learning to the learners?*

F: Remedial work for reading comprehension in siSwati home language

28. *How do you plan for remediation when learners did not achieve the learning objectives*
29. *How do you monitor the success of the remediation?*
30. *How would you describe a learner who has acquired the reading comprehension skills?*

G: Teachers' challenges and support

31. *Do you encounter challenges regarding the teaching, assessment or formative assessment of reading comprehension?*
32. *Which challenge (s) do you encounter when using formative assessment in teaching of reading comprehension?*
33. *How do you deal with those challenges (s)?*
34. *Is there any support you receive for those challenges?*
35. *From whom do you receive that support?*
36. *To what extent do you think the support assist you?*
37. *Do you have any ideas to share about the teaching or assessment of reading comprehension?*