

# The Experiences of Foundation Phase Teachers Regarding Reading Literacy Interventions at an Underperforming School in Gauteng Province

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**Abstract** South Africa’s education system has been characterized by various curriculum changes since 1997 given that basic education is a priority of this government and policies have specifically been aimed at improving the overall standard of education in the country. Despite these curriculum changes, the findings of tests such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2006 revealed that South African learners had obtained the lowest overall reading literacy average out of 45 participating educational systems and the South African Consortium for Measuring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) highlighted that the majority of children in South Africa’s primary schools are not even reading at the minimal required level. In view of the publicised results of PIRLS 2006 and SAQMEQ 2008, several reading literacy interventions, known as the Foundations for Learning (FFL), Annual National Assessments (ANA) and Gauteng Province Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) have been launched in the past few years to improve literacy and numeracy results in the country. Notwithstanding, the increasing prevalence of low reading literacy results in South Africa raised questions about the effectiveness of interventions intended to improve reading results (in: GDE, Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy, 2010–2014, Government Printer, Pretoria, 2010). Given the background of this study, the primary aim was to establish the essence of the participant FP teachers’ lived experiences regarding the implementation of interventions for reading literacy such as FFL, ANA and GPLMS in order to theorise about the effectiveness of these interventions. The secondary purpose was to add to the body of knowledge concerning FFL, ANA and GPLMS

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implemented as interventions to improve reading literacy results in South Africa. To achieve these purposes, a phenomenological case study was conducted at one of the 832 identified underperforming schools in Gauteng with eleven Foundation Phase teachers. Three methods were used to collect data namely focus group interviews, non face to face interviews and artefacts. The focus group interviews were held in grade context whilst interview forms were given to each of the eleven participants and they were requested to complete it comprehensively in the absence of the researcher. Data from all interviews were corroborated through selected artefacts which were mentioned during the interviews or discovered by the researcher throughout the study. The key findings of this study show that the participants perceived FFL, ANA and GPLMS as mandatory interventions for reading literacy that are unwanted and repetitious. Most importantly the participants deemed ANA as unreliable and unfair whilst FFL and GPLMS were deemed unsuitable for the diverse needs of the learners at this school. In view of the findings, this study concluded that there is limited value in providing mandatory interventions to teachers with the intent of improving the reading literacy results of learners with diverse needs that are contextually bound.

**Keywords** Annual National Assessment · Foundations for Learning · Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy · Mandatory interventions · Reading literacy · Qualitative research · Underperforming school

## Introduction

That there is a crisis in South Africa's education system has been indicated not only by media reports but also by academic research and peer-reviewed articles. For example, the media reported the Annual National Assessment (ANA) results of 2008 as a 'scandal' and proclaimed that "Teachers are clueless". Most importantly, Lawrence (2011, p. 13) confirmed that the media had continually published a grim picture of "low literacy levels in the Foundation Phase since the launch of Curriculum 2005 in March 1997", with Jansen (2007, p. 7) arguing that "The root of our educational crisis lies not in 'Matric' but in the foundation years where we fail to provide children with the basics of scientific literacy... in which they can build in later years." It seems as if the crisis in education is linked to the lack of literacy acquisition in the foundation years. FP teachers are thus at the forefront in addressing low reading literacy results and ensuring that all learners learn to read and are equipped to participate in a broader society, in accordance with the requirements of the National Curriculum Statement (Lawrence 2011).

## Background

Basic Education is a priority of the South African government, with policies since 1997 having aimed at improving the overall standard of education in the country (Pugh 2011). This has led to major curriculum changes since 1999 as summarised in the table below:

Name of curriculum	Description
Curriculum 2005	Launched in 1997 and commonly known as Outcomes based education (OBE)
Revised National Curriculum Statement	Initial implementation in 2004 and commonly known as RNCS
Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement	Implementation in 2012 and commonly known as CAPS

In spite of various curriculum changes from 1997 to 2004 (see above table) the findings of tests such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) of 2006 revealed that South African learners had obtained the lowest overall reading literacy average out of 45 participating educational systems (Mullis and Foy 2007), and the South African Consortium for Measuring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) highlighted that “more than half of the children in South Africa’s primary schools are not even reading at a minimal level to allow them to survive” (Fleisch 2008, p. 19). In consideration of the publicised results of PIRLS 2006 and SAQMEQ (mentioned in the above section), several literacy interventions, known as campaigns or strategies, have been launched in the past few years to improve literacy and numeracy results in the country. At the outset, the Foundations for Learning (FFL) campaign was launched in response to the results of the abovementioned studies (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2008). The purpose of this intervention campaign was to increase the average literacy and numeracy results in South African schools to 50%, by providing appropriate resources, detailed daily lesson plans and establishing teacher forums in all districts (Meier 2011). More significantly, FFL was launched in 2008 as a national compulsory campaign to reinforce and consolidate the reading, writing and numeracy skills of all children (Gauteng Department of Education [GDE] 2010) in an attempt to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of FP learners who had not achieved the required standards of the NCS (Lawrence 2011). What is more, ANA was highlighted as one of the non-negotiable issues of FFL (RSA 2008) and enforced in all primary schools to provide standardised evidence of learner achievement in literacy and numeracy that would enable teachers and districts to plan effectively for the improvement of literacy and numeracy results (Meier 2011). ANA was highlighted as one of the non-negotiable issues of FFL (RSA 2008) and enforced in all primary schools to provide standardised evidence of learner achievement in literacy and numeracy that would enable teachers and districts to plan effectively for the improvement of literacy and numeracy results (Meier 2011). ANA has also been identified as one of the key strategies by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to annually measure learner achievement in Grades 3, 6 and 9. Towards the end of 2014 a target of 60% achievement was expected in the basic literacy and numeracy competencies of learners. It was intended that ANA would have the following four effects on South African schools (GDE 2010): First and foremost, ANA will expose teachers to better assessment practices by providing well-constructed memoranda to all schools in the country. Furthermore, ANA will assist districts with the identification of schools in need of support. Before ANA there was no reliable way for districts to

identify which schools performed better because assessments were not standardised. ANA will also motivate schools to celebrate outstanding learner achievement by providing them with a clearer picture of how well they are performing in comparison with others facing similar socio-economic challenges. Finally, ANA will inform parents about children's achievement regarding literacy and numeracy achievement so that parents of the school governing body (SGB) as well as parents in general may have a better understanding of the literacy and numeracy competencies of their children.

Despite the four effects of ANA discussed in the above section, the results of the first ANA, which was administered to 90% of South African schools during November 2008 in a trial run, highlighted that the majority of learners within Gauteng province achieved below 50%, the target of FFL. These results were consistent with those obtained from the SACMEQ and PIRLS. According to Meier (2011) the ANA results for the province show a correspondence with the "scandalous" label in the Sunday Times press (2014) and consequently the GDE concluded that: "the underachievement of Gauteng learners in literacy suggests that existing policies and programmes are less than fully effective to improve the literacy results in Gauteng" and consequently FFL was abandoned before the four-year period had elapsed (GDE 2010, p. 7).

The Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy (GPLS) was then developed by the GDE to address current weaknesses in existing policies and programmes, and enforced in 792 Gauteng primary schools identified as underperforming (GDE 2010). The key aim of GPLS was to increase the literacy average in Gauteng province from between 35% and 40% to at least 60% by 2014. In order to realise this aim national and provincial documents stated that GPLS would focus on the following aspects: ANA for all Grades 3 and 6 learners; workbooks; readers' and teachers' guides; detailed lesson plans; and the deployment of coaches (GDE 2010). It is important to note that a Mathematics intervention was added in 2012, and GPLS is currently known as the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS). A total of 832 underperforming schools were targeted to improve reading literacy and Mathematics achievement (Masterson 2013).

The increasing prevalence of low reading literacy results in South Africa raised questions about the effectiveness of interventions intended to improve reading results (GDE 2010). According to Pugh (2011 p. 14), "If policies fail to deliver the results that they have promised, then studies to pinpoint exactly where the failure lies are of critical importance". For that reason, the aim of the phenomenological case study reported in this article was to theorise about the effectiveness of interventions such as ANA, FFL and GPLMS that have been implemented to improve reading literacy in South African classrooms since 2008.

## Research Question

The primary research question is: What is the essence of the Foundation Phase teachers' lived experiences regarding the implementation of interventions for reading literacy at an underperforming school in Gauteng?

## Research Aim

The primary aim of this article is to report the findings of the essence of the Foundation Phase teachers' lived experiences regarding the implementation of interventions for reading literacy at an underperforming school in Gauteng.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which underpins this study was used to offer practical ways of viewing reading literacy teaching and learning practices in South Africa. The overarching framework of reading literacy is inclusive education, whilst cognitive theory and socio-cultural theory are ideally incorporated within inclusive education as an integrated approach.

## Inclusive Education as the Overarching Framework of Reading Literacy

Curriculum changes such as C2005, RNCS, NCS and CAPS, as well as FFL, ANA and GPLMS, have been effected in South Africa since 1997 to address the crisis in the education system, as described in chapter one. These interventions to improve reading literacy are seemingly connected to inclusive education, since the commitment of the Ministry in Education is outlined in Education White Paper 6 about the early identification of the diverse needs of learners and intervention in the Foundation Phase (DoE 2001), and devising a strategy that:

- (1) Accepts and respects that all learners are different in some way and have different learning needs.
- (2) Enables education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of learners.
- (3) Acknowledges and respects differences in learners, irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability or HIV status.
- (4) Acknowledges that learning also occurs in the home and community.
- (5) Changes attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula and the environment to meet the needs of learners.
- (6) Empowers learners by developing their individual strengths and enabling them to critically participate in the learning process (DoE 2001, p. 16).

In view of the above discussion, the Ministry of Education accepts that learners' needs are diverse and if not met may lead to barriers to learning or exclusion from the learning system. Again, the diverse needs of learners may be due to physical, mental, sensory neurological and developmental impairments, psycho-social disturbances, differences in intellectual ability, particular life experiences and socio-economic deprivation; an inflexible curriculum; inappropriate languages or language of learning and teaching (LoLT); inappropriate and inadequate support

services; inadequate policies and legislation; non-recognition and non-involvement of parents; and inadequately and inappropriately trained education managers and teachers (DoE 2001, p. 7). Education White Paper 6 also states that it is possible to identify barriers to learning that occurs within the education and training system. Interventions or strategies at different levels are crucial to avoid barriers to learning contributing to the exclusion of learners from the curriculum, or the education and training system. These levels consist of the classroom; the school; the district; the provincial and national departments (DoE 2001).

Having examined inclusive education as the overarching theoretical framework, the next section examines cognitive theory and socio-cultural theory as ideally incorporated within inclusive education.

### **Cognitive Theory of Reading Literacy Development**

Cognitive theorists typically believe that reading literacy is taught and learned (Davidson 2010) and that a developmental approach to literacy is essential for its acquisition. As discussed in Sect. 2.3.1, phonological awareness consists of four developmental progression skills, namely rhyming, learning individual syllables in words, learning initial sounds in words and hearing sounds within words. Gillon (2004) asserts that these progression skills should be taught in stages for reading acquisition. Purcell-Gates (2007) and Tierney (2009) agreed that the skills of reading and writing must be taught systematically, whilst Chall (1983), concerned about the poor reading results of learners from bilingual and low socio-economic families, contended that the stage theory helps to identify the difficulties these learners face and to guide teaching practices for literacy.

In response, Davidson (2010, p. 251) argues that guidance from cognitive theories are “undeniably needed for promoting print literacy”, with Tracey and Morrow (2006) having suggested that cognitive theories guide teaching activities in literacy classrooms.

### **Socio-cultural Theory of Reading Literacy Development**

The theory that learning and development are socially and culturally situated can largely be contributed to research by the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978), who stated that the family, community and society into which the child is born are where learning and literacy emerge. Likewise, Tracey and Morrow (2006) argue that reading literacy cannot be separated from its setting and Purcell-Gates (2007 p. 203) affirm that “an obvious link between learning to read in school and using literacy in one’s life is that of skill acquisition”. According to Lee et al. (2003) socio-cultural theorists assume that the beliefs, values and attitudes of individuals should be considered in conjunction with cognitive theory when interventions are designed, for maximum learning.

## An integrated Approach to Reading Literacy

Davidson (2010) argues that a cognitive view of reading literacy practices discriminates against learners from a diverse background and hampers their success in literacy learning. In support of the above statement by Lee et al. (2003) and Davidson (2010) suggests that cognitive and socio-cultural theories are incomplete on their own, yet each is essential to provide accessible and equitable reading literacy instruction for all learners. As a result, Davidson (2010) proposes an integrated approach to reading literacy which would be more inclusive of all students as it leans towards a more balanced provision of reading literacy instruction.

## Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen as appropriate and my choice of a qualitative approach was informed by two compatible paradigms (Creswell 2009), namely constructivism and interpretivism. Both paradigms share the basic tenet that reality is socially constructed and is founded on the tradition of *hermeneutics*, the study of interpretation that involves understanding the viewpoint of others through their explanations (Mertens 1998). A case can be defined as a set of individuals bounded by a place and time (Creswell 2014). The onus is on the researcher to identify the case and to set boundaries, in this inquiry 11 Foundation Phase teachers were identified as a case, because they were bounded by a place and time. They teach at an underperforming school in the Gauteng province and have been implementing interventions to improve reading literacy since 2008. A case study design was thus considered suitable as I had a case with boundaries and my purpose was to provide an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell 2007). It was also crucial to understand these multiple interventions for reading literacy through those who implemented it in classrooms and to document the real-life experience of these interventions (Simons 2009).

## Data Collection and Sample

A case study allows the researcher to use multiple sources and techniques in the data collection process (Maree, 2004) and for triangulation to facilitate its validation (Denscombe, 2011). To this end I conducted three focus group interviews, 11 non face-to-face interviews, and collected various artefacts during the focus group interviews. Each process elicited a different perspective of the phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). In addition, the 11 Foundation Phase teachers were purposefully selected due to their suitability and convenience for this study (Creswell 2009; Terre Blance et al. 2006), being at the forefront of the low reading literacy results in South Africa. Their work at an underperforming school in Gauteng had included implementing interventions to improve reading literacy since 2008, so I believed they would be knowledgeable about the topic under investigation (Rubin and Rubin



2005) and therefore yield rich data (Krueger 1998) that would answer the primary research question.

## Data Analysis

Ary et al. (2010) describe data analysis as a complex and time-consuming process, since the researcher has collected a large amount of interview transcripts and information from documents that must be examined and interpreted. My data collection strategies generated transcripts and visual data (Creswell 2009) which provided three data sets. I used inductive content analysis as the data directed the emerging codes and themes rather than imposing myself on them (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). The data were constantly compared within and across each data set whilst focusing on the research question (Merriam 2009): firstly within each data set; then across each data set for example the three transcripts of the focus group interviews; and finally across all the data sets namely the three transcripts, ten interview forms and the various artefacts.

As a novice researcher I felt overwhelmed during the process of analysis and I realised that I required a structured approach that would not only provide a framework but also assist me with the complex process of data analysis. Several approaches were available for the analysis of phenomenological studies, such as proposed by Giorgi (1970) and Moustakas (1994) but I decided that the most appropriate for this study was that of Colaizzi (1978). Although the latter is a historical resource it coincided with the phases of inductive content analysis proposed by Creswell (2009), which included organising and preparing data for analysis; reading through the data repeatedly; the coding process; themes and description of data; and interpreting the meaning of themes or descriptions. The steps proposed by Colaizzi (1978) were also understandable and applicable to this study and the only method of phenomenological analysis that require the validation of results by returning to the participants (Polit and Beck 2010). The steps of Colaizzi (1978) previously used by Sanders (2003) as well as Speziale and Carpenter (2007) are described below:

- Step 1 Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content.
- Step 2 Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted for each transcript. These statements must be recorded on separate sheets indicating page and line numbers.
- Step 3 Meanings should be formulated from these significant statements.
- Step 4 The formulated meanings should be sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes.
- Step 5 The findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.
- Step 6 The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described.
- Step 7 Validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.



## Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research is likely to be personally intrusive (McMillan and Schumacher 2006) therefore ethical guidelines are important to ensure that participants are not harmed (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout this study, detailed as follows.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Education Academic Ethics Committee at the University (Appendix A1, p. 169), after which permission was sought from the GDE (Appendix A2, p. 170) and the principal before beginning research at the school (Appendix A3, p. 171). Participants were called to an informal meeting in which information regarding the purpose of the study and their role during the study was explained. When all the participants had agreed to participate in the study they were requested to complete and sign consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the study and grant me permission to video record the focus group interviews using the informed consent form (Appendix A3, p. 171). They were also informed that participation in the study would be voluntary and they could withdraw at any given time without repercussions.

## Trustworthiness

Qualitative research has to demonstrate trustworthiness for rigor, validity and reliability in all stages of the study, including data collection, data analysis and descriptions (Speziale and Carpenter 2007; Vivar et al. 2007). For that reason measures to ensure trustworthiness, such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability and authenticity were undertaken throughout the research process.

## Discussion and Interpretation of Key Findings

### Foundation for Learning (FFL)

*Participant FP Teachers' Opinions About FFL as a National Strategy to Improve Reading Literacy in SA*

The Foundations for Learning (FFL) campaign was launched in response to the results of PIRL 2006 and SAQMEQ 2008, which stated that more than half South African learners were not reading at the required level. The purpose of FFL was thus to increase the average literacy and numeracy results to 50% by providing appropriate resources and detailed lesson plans, and establishing teacher forums in all districts (Meier 2011). However, the implementation generated only one positive opinion as opposed to nine negative ones from the participants of this study in the first theme cluster of this emergent theme.

### *Positive and Negative Opinions About FFL*

One participant was positive: “I think FFL was a good thing ... they worked out our lesson plans ...” (T1 L94). The positive findings of this study uphold those of a study conducted by Meier (2011), about how the participant FP teachers experienced the implementation of FFL positively. Notwithstanding, the other participants FP teachers at Funeka Primary were negative about FFL: “To me I felt it wasn’t user friendly” (T1 L113); “...I think that the person that set that file up ... didn’t have experience in JP Junior Primary” (T1 L126–127); “It was like the teachers were more confused...” (T3 L138); “No that file was difficult to understand...” (T3 L139); and “Teachers were not workshopped about FFL.” (N2 L116). The negative opinions of the participants of this study contradict those of participants of a study conducted by Meier (2011) in which it was felt that the FFL material was user-friendly, with clear implementation guides and initial training provided by the DBE. More negative opinions were evident in the focus group interviews conducted with the FP teachers at Funeka Primary: “... was not successful” (T3 L141); and “It was a failure in any case” (T3 L146). It is significant that the last two statements of the participants endorse that by the GDE (2010, p. 7), that “FFL was deemed not effective to improve the literacy results in Gauteng.”

### *Opinions About Why FFL Was Not Successfully Implemented*

The participants had the following opinions about why FFL was not successfully implemented: “Teachers were not workshopped about FFL” (N2 L116); “I think READ and FFL was implemented at the same time at our school” (N3 L115–116); “I think we were using too many programmes at this school” (N4 L116–117); “I think no training was provided for the teachers” (N8 L115); “That was the worst programme ever ... It was difficult to understand and no workshops were held for us” (N9 L115–118); “I am not interested in FFL. It was just nonsense” (N10 L116–117). The participants shed more light on the reasons the participant FP teachers deemed FFL ineffective as opposed to those of the DoE, largely based on the ANA results of 2008 (see chapter two). The FP teachers in this study indicated a feeling of lack of training for teachers regarding FFL, a lack of expertise on the part of designers of the FFL files, difficulty understanding the content of FFL files, too many programmes being simultaneously implemented at this particular school, and a lack of interest in FFL.

### **Annual National Assessment (ANA)**

#### *Participant FP Teachers’ Attitudes Towards ANA as an Opportunity to Assess Teaching Practices and Learner Achievement in Reading Literacy*

ANA was one of the compulsory issues regarding FFL (Republic of South Africa 2008), and enforced in all South African Primary schools. The aim was to provide standardised evidence of learner achievement in literacy and numeracy that would enable teachers and districts to plan effectively for the improvement of literacy and

numeracy results (Meier 2011). Ultimately, ANA has been identified as one of the key strategies by the DBE to annually measure learner achievement in grades 3, 6 and 9. A few participants were positive about ANA whilst others displayed a negative attitude, as the following findings reveal.

### *Positive and Negative Attitudes Towards ANA*

A few participants displayed a positive attitude towards ANA: “I think I really liked the ANA because in a way it was like your yardstick where you measure if all the kids in all the other provinces are on par ...” (T1 L141–142); “I agree, I think it’s a good thing for teachers to assess yourself” (T1 L144). “I like the ANA, although after the ANA tests it was discovered that our children are not on par” (T3 L163); “... I like ANA” (T3 L184). These positive findings corroborate the statement by Meier (2011) that ANA provided standardised evidence of learner achievement in literacy and numeracy that would enable teachers and districts to plan effectively for the improvement of literacy and numeracy results in South Africa. These FP teachers indicated that ANA provided a yardstick to measure if their learners were on par with counterparts in other provinces and provided a way to measure the effectiveness their own teaching practices.

In contrast, some participants displayed a negative attitude towards ANA: “... it’s not a true reflection.” (T1 L148); “And also they are comparing us with affluent schools ... We are being measured with schools that are way above us and we are like low down here with our socio-economic...” (T1 L150–152); “They aren’t on the level of Model C schools ... Our children are struggling to act onto that level and with the result ... our results are going to be low each time regardless of how hard we are trying” (T3 L189–191). With regard to the negative attitudes of the participant FP teachers towards ANA, the findings substantiate Meier (2011), who found that an ex-model C school performed exceptionally well in the ANA of 2008 and 2009 as opposed to so-called township schools given that Funeka Primary is a township school (see Sect. 4.3.1).

### *Attitudes Towards the Reliability and Fairness of ANA*

Responses to the question about the reliability and fairness of ANA yielded one positive response: “ANA is fair because it is about the work that is covered in class ...” (N1 L51–52); whilst most of the participants responded negatively: “I really don’t think ANA is fair because the question papers are too long for Grade 1 learners which makes it difficult for the learners to understand” (N2 L50–53); “I don’t think ANA is fair because it is mostly for the private schools. I also don’t think it is reliable because teachers invigilate their own classes and mark own question papers” (N3 L51–54); “No because ANA is for the child who speaks English at home but the majority of our learners speak other languages at home” (N5 L51–53); “No I don’t think so. The ANA papers are either too easy or too difficult for our learners” (N6 L51–52); “It is also not fair because in the foundation phase all the pressure is on the grade three teachers and learners to do well in ANA” (N9 L56–59); “It also does not cater for learners with barriers to learning” (N10

L56–57); “I really don’t think its reliable and fair because the grade one and two educators can read the question papers for the learners, but the grade three educators can’t read the question papers to the learners” (N4 L52–57). The negative findings of this study confirm the view of Spaul (2013, pp. 7–8), that:

Although the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) are one of the most important and needed policy innovations ... given the way that these tests are currently implemented – including the formulation, marking, invigilation and moderation procedures – they cannot be used as a reliable indicator of progress.

The view of Spaul (2013) is refuted by NEEDU (2013), which states that teachers are exposed to good teaching practices and appropriate test standards because they administer and mark ANA tests themselves. Moreover, due to the ANA results teachers are able to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their own learners and understand the efficacy of their own teaching strategies. Finally, Howie et al. (2012) proclaim that the criticism of the content and level of ANA has been addressed by the DoE and the process is still “in its infancy and currently underfunded.” However, an announcement was recently made that five teacher unions and the DBE were at ‘loggerheads’ regarding the administering of ANA 2015 since the DBE was committed to continue with the ANA in December, despite the stance of teachers unions regarding ANA. The five unions (SADTU, NAPTOSA, SAOU, NATU, PEU) have thus taken a stand against the plans of the DBE, making it clear that ANA is not effective in its current form, nor beneficial to the education system as it does not contribute to effective teaching and learning (Abreu 2015).

## **Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy**

*Participant FP Teachers’ Feelings, Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding GPLMS as the Current Intervention to Improve Reading Literacy Achievement in Gauteng*

The Gauteng Primary Literacy (GPLS) was implemented in 792 underperforming schools to address current weaknesses in existing policies and programmes and focused on the following aspects: ANA for all Grade 3 and 6 learners; workbooks; readers and teacher guides detailed lesson plans; and the deployment of coaches (GDE 2010).

### *Feelings About Teaching at an Underperforming School*

In response to the question about how the participants felt regarding teaching at an underperforming school, they expressed different feelings: “Bad. I don’t feel good because your self-image is tarnished and you uhm labeled, you have a low morale...” (T1 L213–215); “... Like you stupid or something,” (T1 L218); “... I don’t have a problem with being at this school because I know I’m working” (T1 L219–220); “But I really appreciate uhm being labelled as underperforming because the department now they are playing their role in supporting the teachers

..." (T2 L199–200); "I feel privileged because at least I can make a difference ..." (T3 L212). Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) note that any change in process can lead to feelings of panic, fear, inadequacy, frustration, struggle and incompetence. Some of the feelings experienced by most of the participants correspond with the feelings mentioned by Hargreaves and Fullan (1998), as some of the participants indicated that they felt demoralised, inadequate and incompetent. On the other hand, a few indicated that they appreciated that they were teaching at an underperforming school. These conflicting feelings revealed by the participants during the findings are in line with that of Hargreaves (2004) who found that teachers' responses to mandatory change were largely negative. He also found that mandatory change is usually associated with government changes and is often disliked because it is forced upon teachers without their involvement, and that positive emotional feelings towards mandatory changes are not common and are most likely to be experienced by female teachers.

### *Beliefs About Consequences of Teaching at an Underperforming School*

The participants shared their beliefs about the consequences of teaching at an underperforming school as follows: "Pressure is being put on us, the pressure you can't always stand ... It's the GDE, its coaches" (T1 L237–238); "It's a lot of workshops" (T1 L241); "The visits because they want to see whether we are implementing ..." (T2 L259); "But with these lesson plans they want you to do it as it is there. They have a problem if you use your own initiative" (T2 L204–205); "No remedial is, there is no remedial actually included" (T3 L316); "It's the same approach like the old days, the top down approach we must just listen and take it and implement it. You can't turn left or right or use your own resources, examples or strategies because it's a fixed plan already and you must follow it" (T3 L331–33); "Ja facilitators tell you strictly to follow the plans the way it's given to you" (T3 L335); "This comes from the top. They are the ones telling us what to do ..." (T1 L69–70). "... the people u there Angie and then Motshega and them ..." (T1 L74). Based on the findings of this study the participants believed that one of the consequences of teaching at an underperforming school was the feeling of intense pressure caused by the GDE and the coaches. Another was the "top down approach" of interventions for reading literacy which the participants were compelled to follow. It is interesting to note the argument by Kallaway (2007) that the top-down policies (in improving literacy) which bypass and neglect teachers' knowledge and insights will not have the desired outcomes. He also mentioned that teachers were not consulted or their years of teaching experience, and it was not affirmed or acknowledged. The implication of Kallaway's (2007) argument could be that these "top down" approach interventions for reading literacy that the participants must implement in their classrooms may not improve the reading literacy levels of the learners at this particular school.

*Participant FP Teachers' Perceptions About Aspects of Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS)*

Different aspects were highlighted by the participants during this theme cluster, such as the GPLMS lesson plans; strategies or methodologies; graded readers; and the process of coaching and mentoring which will be discussed in the next section.

- Lesson plans

A few participants indicated various reasons they liked the lesson plans: "I like the structure of the lesson plans because I for example know which sounds to teach ..." (N3 L145–146); "They are helpful for teachers because we know which components to teach everyday ..." (N5 L145–146); "I like the lesson plans because it is structured. I know which components to teach on a daily basis ..." (N9 L145–146). Detailed lesson plans were provided by the DBE as part of the intervention strategies of GPLMS to provide guidance in terms of the pacing and progression of the teaching of reading literacy (GDE, 2010). The findings of this study thus confirm the foresight of the GDE (2010) that the detailed lessons plans will provide guidance in terms of pacing and progression. In this instance it provided guidance in terms of the daily teaching of the different components mentioned in theme cluster 4.3 (Appendix F1, p. 255).

- Strategies or methodologies

Most of the participants disliked the strategies and methodologies: "I am not impressed with the GPLMS strategies because it was forced down on us. We had no say in the matter ..." (N1 L145–146); "I feel that I am being undermined. I have a lot of experience but I am forced to follow ready made GLMS lesson plans like a moron even though it is not helping the learners in my class!" (N2 L145–148); "... I don't like the strategies because it limits the teachers. I think GLMS is too rigid because the coaches said we are not allowed to use other strategies" (N9 L147–150). Circular 6 of 2012 (DBE 2012a, b, p. 2) visibly endorse the findings of this study as it stipulates in upper case letters that: "THESE ARE THE ONLY LESSON PLANS AND ASSESSMENTS to be used by the prioritized schools...for [the] duration of the strategy."

Hargreaves (2004) believes that education authorities generally risk effective change due to the following factors: non-involvement of key stakeholders; poor field testing; insensitivity to teacher emotions and feelings; and disregard of research results on similar measures in other countries. Given the findings of this study, it can be argued that the DBE risked the effective implementation of interventions for reading literacy at Funeka primary due to non involvement of key stakeholders as some participants pointed out that they were not involved as stakeholders concerning GPLMS. Another participant pointed out that the strategies or methodologies of GPLMS were ineffective for the learners in her class. This could be a result of poor field testing and disregard of research results on similar measures in other countries. For example, Howie et al. (2012) note that New Zealand and the Netherlands both engage in OBE, such as South Africa, yet these

two countries did not achieve low reading literacy results as South Africa in PIRLS 2006.

- Graded readers

Most participants were in agreement that the graded readers were not on the level of the learners: “I agree with the other teachers because the graded readers are way too advanced for our learners and the font is definitely too small for lower grade learners” (N1 L158–160); “I feel that the font is too small for grade one learners. The learners cannot relate to the stories because it is about animals that they are not familiar with and they struggle to understand words like here cut cal the can.” (N2 L158–163); “It is true. The font is too small for the grade 1 learners and the learners are not familiar with some of the animals in the readers and they struggle to read these books ...” (N3 L157–160). “You know I agree. I don’t like these readers. It can go ...” (N4 L158–159). “The readers are not on the level of the learners because ... this reader is about a family who went on a trip and took photos about this trip. Most of our learners come from poor communities and they never go on holiday and when we ask them for photos for their profiles they don’t have photos” (N6 L161–166); “I agree about the readers. The stories are not interesting and I like readers that you can use with your themes. Like maybe if you are busy with ‘This is me’ then the books must be about children” (N7 L159–161); “I agree the readers are nonsense. You must read them. Especially the first book for Grade 3. It is about a drunk pirate” (N8 L157–159); “That is true because most of our learners do not understand the graded readers; they do not enjoy the stories” (N9 L158–160); “It is on a high level due to the fact that the words are too difficult for our learners. The learners also can’t relate the stories to their personal life. I hate the first reader for grade three: Tablecloth over the mountain” (N10 L159–165). Conversely, one participant did not agree: “I don’t really share that sentiment and I also don’t understand the ‘level’ issue. What I picked up is that there is a repetition of words from the one story to the other one” (N5 L157–160).

One of the principles regarding learner support material and books outlined in the National Policies for Education: South Africa (OECD 2010, p. 180), is that “Teachers should have the responsibility (and the skills) to evaluate and select the books and materials that best suit their learners.” Lawrence (2011) claims that teachers understand the strengths, needs and culture of their learners, however, based on the findings of this study, it appears that the participants did not evaluate or select the graded readers for their learners as it was one of the aspects of GPLMS (see emergent the four). The participants emphasised that these graded readers were not suitable for the learners at this school as the font was too small; for grade one learners in particular. Besides these readers were not interesting and learners were unable to relate to the stories or the vocabulary, some of which was too difficult. In relation to the font size mentioned by one of the participants, O’Brein et al. (2005) asserted that younger children need larger print (font size) for optimal reading performance. This suggestion is supported by Hughes and Wilkens (2002), who mentioned that children’s books are easier to read if the font size is increased. Bearing in mind that the graded readers were found to be uninteresting, Bond et al.



(1994) affirmed that dull or uninteresting reading material may cause reading difficulties. On the subject of learners who are unable to relate to the readers, the National Reading Panel (2000, p. 107) acknowledged that readers “access their background knowledge to construct meaning from text,” therefore, if the learners were unable to relate to the stories it implies that they did not have the necessary background knowledge to construct meaning of these graded readers. With regards to the findings of this study that the vocabulary of the graded readers was too difficult for the learners, Irwin (1991) substantiated that research has shown that a lack of ‘word familiarity’ can also affect reading comprehension.

### *The Process of Coaching and Mentoring*

According to the DBE (2011) the GPLMS coaches are literacy experts who will provide coaching and support to teachers so that they are able to implement GPLMS effectively in their classrooms. The definition of the DBE (2011) for the GPLMS coaches is supported by Harrison et al. (2006, p. 1056), who defines a mentor as a “more experienced individual, willing to share his or her knowledge with someone less experienced in a relationship of mutual trust.” In spite of this, the participants’ attitudes in terms of the coaching and mentoring aspect of GPLMS do not support either definition, as is evident in: “I don’t think we need this coaching or mentoring because we are experienced teachers...” (N1 L168–170); “I don’t mean to be disrespectful but the coaches are not equipped to develop us because they do not have Foundation Phase experience. Our first coach did not even know how to say the [s] sound. She introduced it as [sir] in our very first workshop” (N2 L168–173); “The coaches are nice people but they don’t have the experience to coach us. They even told us that they were teaching at high schools before GPLMS” (N3 L168–170); “You know I did not have a problem with the class visits because I want to develop but I really don’t know whether I developed ...” (N5 L168–170); “I have a problem with the class visits of the coaches because they just sit and watch your lesson but they don’t give any lesson demonstrations for development.” (N6 L168–170); “It makes me very angry because we don’t need coaches to tell us how to teach and especially since the coaches are not able to show you how to teach.” (N7 L168–170); “I don’t understand it because the coaches never demonstrate lessons or give us feedback about our lessons” (N10 L169–171).

All the participants described the procedures or strategies employed by the coach to develop their understanding of GPLMS as workshops at the beginning of the term, class visits and video workshops: “We have regular workshops on how to use the GPLMS plans; and core methodology. Then we had video workshops...” (N2 L180–183); “Class visits... workshops and last but not least we also attend video workshops” (N6 L180–182); and “Class visits were done by the coaches according to a timetable. PLG’s at the beginning of each term to workshop us about the lesson plans. Video workshops” (N8 L180–184). The opinions of the participants are confirmed by the DBE (2012a, b) that outlines one of the roles of the coaches as providing support, school-based workshops and peer learning group training for teachers at prioritised schools.

In addition, Neuman and Wright (2010, p. 70) stated that “Coaches were encouraged to ‘establish rapport, build trust and provide useful suggestions rather than evaluate or judge teachers’ performance.” In contrast the opposite is uncovered in this study as is evident in the manner in which all the participants stated their opinions about the abovementioned strategies which were used by their coaches to develop them: “I personally found the workshops very boring ... because the coaches were mostly reading the information from the lesson plans ... the class visits I don’t like it because I feel that I am being watched under a microscope ... The video workshops made me laugh so much because it was just make believe classrooms ...” (N1 L192–199); “The workshops were boring ... we could read and understand it without these workshops because it is not rocket science. The video workshops were a big farce. Perfect teachers and perfect learners” (N2 L192–197). “I think the workshops are a waste of time because we just have to sit and listen to the coaches but they don’t demonstrate any lessons ...” (N3 L192–194). “I don’t like the class visits because it is just window dressing. We only use the methodology when the coach is there ...” (N4 L192–194); “I don’t think the strategies were very effective ... The workshops were not hands on. We just listened to the coach while she was reading information about the lesson plans. I don’t know what to say about the video workshops because really, that was not a true reflection of what happens in our classrooms” (N5 L198–200); “... I don’t like it. The workshops are boring ... Maybe the coaches think the video workshops are good but I don’t think so” (N6 L194–196); “The teachers always complained about the workshops they felt it was a waste of their marking/assessment time” (N8 L195–197); “I did not like the class visits that much maybe because I did not benefit from it at all” (N9 L192–193); “I hated the class visits because it reminded me of class inspections. I already said the workshops were boring and the video workshops were a big joke amongst the teachers ...” (N10 L192–197).

Overall, the findings of this study with regard to the coaching and mentoring process of GPLMS contradict the statement by the DBE (2011) and Harrison et al. (2006 p. 1056), given that the participants do not regard the coaches as literacy experts who could support the participants in implementing GPLMS effectively in their classrooms. One example was the participant who pointed out that the one coach was unable to pronounce the s-sound correctly during a workshop. The participants also did not regard the coaches as mentors who willingly shared their experience, as a few mentioned that the coaches merely observed their lessons but did not give feedback about the participants’ lessons or demonstrate them in the participants’ classrooms. Moreover, the findings confirm that the participants did not enjoy the workshops, most reporting that they were boring or a waste of time. They also regarded the video workshops as a “joke”, a “farce” or not a true reflection of what happened in their classrooms. In closing, the class visits appeared to be more of an evaluating process than providing useful suggestions. This was evident when one participant mentioned that the class visits reminded her of class inspections, whilst another revealed that they made her feel as if she was being scrutinised under a microscope.

Participant FP teachers’ personal feelings and attitudes regarding intervention strategies to improve reading literacy in their classrooms.

Harris (2016) claims that “The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows” This quote is relevant to the discussion of this emergent theme as the participants shared their personal feelings about interventions to improve reading literacy in their classrooms that could provide a clearer understanding of these interventions, as is evident in the discussion of the following theme clusters.

### *Suitability of Interventions for Reading Literacy to Address the Needs of Learners*

Most of the participants felt that the interventions for reading literacy were not suitable for learners in their classrooms: “... Suitable—I don’t think so. I said the print in the books, the readers ...” (T1 L335–338); “Whereas READ stories were more about the family, they know about the family ...” (T1 L351); “... they are not coping with the readers that are prescribed for their grade” (T2 L344–345); “Even my ones they still can’t read that Grade 1 book” (T2 L346); “Sometimes with these slow ones they must give us a chance ...” (T2 L357); “... not really because ... in grade three you must go back to grade one to fetch some readers there ... because only one group is on that book, the level they supposed to be on in Grade three ...” (T3 L342–345); “The strategies of GPLMS are definitely not working for our learners.” (N3 L150–151); “It doesn’t impress me that much ... GPLMS really doesn’t cater for the learners who struggle.” (N4 L145–152); “... I don’t like the methodology of GLMS. If you check the lesson plans from grade one to grade three you will see it is the same for these grades. The learners are not on the same level! (N6 L145–149); “I don’t think it is working—too much activities for the learners so they can’t finish it on time. You know I think the teachers are more and more developed each day, but our learners are still struggling” (N8 L145–149). At this point it is important to note that two participants indirectly indicated that GPLMS was not suitable for “slow” or “struggling” learners whilst another participant explicitly stated that GPLMS was not suitable for learners who were struggling. According to Rude and Oehlkers (1984), slow learners are defined as those who seldom read at the required grade level due to limited intellectual abilities. Likewise, Hall (2005) suggests that struggling learners usually read 1 or 2 years below the required grade level. As mentioned in chapter two, Hall and Harding (2003) argue that effective literacy teaching cannot be packaged in prescriptive programmes based on a uniform assumption that one solution suits all cases. Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2004) support this argument by suggesting that scripted, “one size fits all” programmes will not be conducive to learners with diverse literacy instructional needs as five-day lesson cycles, in which all learners are expected to be on the same level by the end of the week, do not consider the diverse needs of struggling readers.

In spite of this, FFL and GPLMS contained prescribed detailed lesson plans that formed part of the packaged strategies to improve reading literacy (DoE 2008; DBE 2010). The findings of this study confirm that GPLMS is based on the assumption that there is a uniform solution since the strategies are the same from grade one to grade three. For example, on a Monday, all the FP participant teachers had to teach a particular sound according to the core methodology (Appendix F1, p. 257; Appendix F1, p. 265; Appendix F1, p. 271) which is the same from grades one to

three, and informed the FP teachers how to teach a particular sound verbatim (Appendix F1, p. 251; Appendix F1, p. 257; Appendix F1, p. 260).

Lastly, the findings of this study confirm that interventions for reading literacy that have thus far been implemented at this particular school were unsuitable for the learners due to the substantial workload for the learners as some had been identified as slow or struggling by the participants. As Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2004) noted, it is important to match instructional materials from scripted lesson plans to learners' needs rather than the scope or sequence of these lesson plans, since only some of the learners had the level of skills assumed in the lesson plans. Finally, the inappropriate level of the graded readers has previously been linked to lack of learners' background knowledge, vocabulary words are too difficult for learners, and the font is too small for grade one learners.

### *Participant FP Teachers' Personal Thoughts About Interventions for Reading Literacy*

The findings of this study about the personal thoughts of the participants regarding interventions for reading literacy are substantiated by the observation by Hargreaves (2004, p. 294) that "Educational change for today's teacher, it seems, is largely conceived of as external change that is unwanted, imposed, repetitious and sometimes repellent..." Likewise, a few participants indicated that these interventions for reading literacy were unwanted and imposing upon them, as evident in: "We will not even miss it, but we will still use their lesson plans just because it means less work for the teachers. The core methodology can also disappear just like the ministers disappear that forces these programmes down our throats" (N8 L220–225). "I want to tell the people of GPLMS that they must come to our school and ask us about our learners before they draw up programmes we understand the problems of our learners..." (N7 L220–222) and "...the government must stop wasting so much money on lesson plans, DBE books and graded readers because we don't need those. We have more than enough resources at our school" (N10 L228–231). Finally, some of the participants also distinguished the interventions for reading literacy as repetitious and repellent: "I feel there are too many changes in the educational field and it confuses the teachers and learners. We are jumping from the one letter of the alphabet to the next when it comes to programmes that we have to implement at school to improve literacy. Just look at it: ANA, FFL, GPLMS. What is next? HELL? And you know what—I am screaming it from the rooftops—IT DOES NOT HELP THE LEARNERS AT OUR SCHOOL" (N1 L220–231); "GPLMS made me feel like a student teacher, because of the way we treated. We were constantly workshoped and visited by the coaches. I also felt demoralised and underestimated. I was not allowed to apply my past knowledge and ideas ..." (N2 L220–226); "GPLMS puts the teachers in a box and if teachers are not creative like us, they will stay in that box. Angie and them must realise that their programmes are not working for the learners at our school" (N3 L220–225); "Why did these GPLMS people bring this programme to our school? They really don't know us or our learners or parents. Do they even care that this programme is not working for the

learners of our schools or that they are wasting a lot of money with these programmes?” (N4 L220–227).

In view of the personal thoughts of the participants about interventions for reading literacy, different emotions, such as disgust, frustration, sarcasm, anger and rebellion towards the Ministry of Education were evoked in the participants while they were answering this particular question. This is noticeable in the use of exclamation marks; capital letters throughout a sentence; and the general tone of the participants' voices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study is that it was conducted by a novice researcher even though reading literacy is regarded as a complex topic by researchers such as Lawrence (2011). However, as an experienced Foundation Phase teacher the researcher could relate to the lived experiences of the participants regarding interventions for reading literacy such as FFL, ANA and GPLMS, having also implemented them.

This study was limited to underperforming schools since GPLMS was primarily implemented at them in the Gauteng province. This makes it difficult to generalise but it was not the purpose of the study to generalise the findings and the participants provided ample data for the purposes of this study concerning the implementation of interventions for reading literacy, such as FFL, ANA and GPLMS.

The third limitation is that the findings represent only the Foundation Phase (Grades one to Grade three) of this school even though Grades four to seven also implement the same interventions for reading literacy. For that reason, the findings may not be a reflection of the entire school. However, the focus of the study was on the Foundation Phase teachers as the latter are at the forefront of the poor reading literacy results in South Africa.

The fourth limitation is that the GPLMS coaches were not amongst the participants and it would have been interesting to gain insight into their lived experiences regarding coaching strategies utilised by them to ensure that the FP teachers are empowered about GPLMS.

A final limitation is that the non face-to-face interviews were conducted in the absence of the researcher so feelings of anger, frustration and disgust expressed by the participants in the interview forms only became known during the analysis process, so the researcher was unable to soothe these. In spite of this, some of the participants thanked the researcher afterwards for allowing them the opportunity to voice their opinions about the interventions for reading literacy that were imposed upon them.

## Recommendations

The first recommendation relates to the mandatory interventions. It was concluded in a preceding section that interventions for reading literacy, such as ANA, FFL and GPLMS are mandatory, given that ANA was highlighted as one of the non-negotiable issues of FFL (RSA 2008) and enforced in all primary schools to provide standardised evidence of learner achievement in literacy and numeracy whilst Meier (2011) claimed that FFL conveyed a military approach as all primary schools were expected to increase their average results in literacy and numeracy to no less than 50%. Additionally one of the participants mentioned the “top down approach” of interventions for reading literacy which they were compelled to follow. Kallaway (2007) argued that the top-down policies (in improving literacy) which bypass and neglect teachers’ knowledge and insights will not have the desired outcomes. He also mentioned that teachers were not consulted or their years of teaching experience affirmed or acknowledged. The implication of Kallaway’s (2007) argument could be that these “top down” approach interventions for reading literacy that the participants were expected to implement in their classrooms may not have improved the reading literacy levels of the learners at this particular school. For that reason, the DBE and policymakers should consult widely with teachers and draw on their experiences, since it was made known that education authorities risk implementation of effective interventions for reading literacy due to the following factors: non-involvement of key stakeholders and insensitivity for teacher emotions and feelings.

The final recommendation is about interventions for reading literacy that were based on the assumption that “one size fits all”. One of the gaps addressed in chapter four pointed out that inclusive education is about supporting all learners so that their full range of learning needs can be met. It is also concerned with interventions which accept that all learners are different in some way and have different needs (see Sect. 2.2). Again, as noted in Sect. 2.5, the DoE emphasised that a common approach does not imply that “...all children must be taught in the same way at the same time. Good education allows for different contexts—it differentiates between children and does not treat all children in class as a single unit.” Similarly, Hall and Harding (2003) argue that effective literacy teaching cannot be packaged in prescriptive programmes based on the assumption that ‘one size fits all’. This viewpoint is also supported by Hall (2004) who argues that reading literacy is more complex than in the past but national policies still implement prescribed literacy practices in schools, whilst literacy policies should be more inclusive of learner diversity. Finally, Lawrence (2011) argues that it is not practical to adopt a single approach to teach literacy in a diverse school. In spite of this, FFL and GPLMS contained prescribed detailed lesson plans that formed part of the packaged strategies to improve reading literacy (DoE 2008; DBE 2010). The findings of this study corroborated the viewpoints and arguments raised in this section as the participants pointed out that the uniform GPLMS lesson plans are not suitable or effective for the diversity of learners in their respective classrooms. Accordingly, the DBE and other policymakers should adopt an inclusive approach

when interventions are developed to ensure that all stakeholders are consulted, so that the full range of learning needs can be met.

## Areas for Future Research

As outlined in Education White Paper 6 (DoE 2001), the DoE is committed to early identification of the diverse needs of learners and intervention in the Foundation Phase. According to the DoE (2002), all children can learn and require support, therefore attitudes, curricula and environments must be adjusted if they are to meet those needs. Townsend (2011) confirms that learners are the main focus of the education system and if they experience barriers to learning the educational system must be adjusted to meet their needs. Although several attempts have thus far been made to adjust the environment of learners through various curricular changes and interventions for reading literacy, such as ANA, FFL and GPLMS, there remains a concern about the low literacy levels of South African learners (see chapter one). In view of the proclamation in Education White Paper 6 that diverse learner needs may arise due to inadequate policies and legislation (DoE 2001), as well as the findings of this study, it can be argued that the low literacy levels of South African learners arise due to mandatory interventions for reading literacy such as FFL, ANA and GPLMS. In view of the preceding discussion, further research is required concerning this contentious issue.

## Conclusion

Masterson (2013, p. 13) claimed that “valuable time and resources have been invested in FFL, ANA and GPLMS... [so] research that sheds light on the effectiveness of these interventions can set the appropriate course for future teacher development programmes.” The findings of the phenomenological study reported in this article have shed light on interventions for reading literacy such as ANA, FFL and GPLMS with the intention of improving future interventions for reading literacy in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders. These interventions were deemed ineffective by the participants as the participants firstly confirmed the statement by Spaul (2013) that ANA is not reliable as a standardised test and five unions publicised that ANA in its current form is not conducive to effective teaching practices. Moreover, FFL was deemed a failure by the DBE as well as by the participants. Likewise, GPLMS was considered ineffective for the diverse needs of the learners at an underperforming school in Gauteng concerning the same aspects on which this intervention was built, such as ANA for Grades 3 and 6 learners; resources that include the mandatory lesson plans and graded readers; and the GPLMS coaches. The primary aim of this study has therefore been achieved as I have theorised about the effectiveness of these interventions and came to the conclusion that FFL, ANA and GPLMS were based on a uniform approach, and these mandatory interventions were not suitable or effective for the learners at this underperforming school, as their needs were contextually bound.



In terms of the ineffectiveness or failure of these interventions for reading literacy, I take solace in a quote by Edison (2001–2016): “I have not failed, I have just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” Furthermore, a quote by Ford (2001–2016): “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again, only this time more wisely” made me realise that cooperation and consultation could be a wise solution for future effective solutions of reading literacy as the participants revealed that they were not consulted regarding the mandatory or “top down approach” interventions for reading literacy which they were compelled to implement with the intention of improving the literacy and numeracy results and Kallaway (2007) argued that the top down approaches that bypass and neglect teachers’ knowledge and insights will not have the desired outcomes, which in this instance are to improve the low reading literacy results in South Africa. Hargreaves (2004) was also concerned that education authorities generally risk effective change due to the following factors: non-involvement of key stakeholders; poor field testing; insensitivity to teacher emotions and feelings; and disregard for research results on similar measures in other countries. As a result, I highly recommended that our government unite with teachers in a continual effort to improve the reading results of South African learners.

#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** All authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

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