An Investigation on the Instructional Practices Followed By Teachers on Children with Reading Difficulties in Primary Classes.

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Abstract

Reading is the most important skill in an individuals' life, which enriches the skills and abilities to develop and plays a crucial role in academic achievements. This study was to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties in primary classes. A survey research method was carried out in Zonal Education in Puttalam district, 70 primary teachers and 20 principals participated in this study, an open-ended questionnaire, formal interview, and classroom observations were carried out for data collection. Descriptive Statistical methods were used to analyze the quantitative data with the SPSS Ver. 20 software and content analysis method were used to analyze the qualitative data. The results show that the identification of children with reading difficulties was carried out by 71.4% of schools by reading exams or observations. However, there is no valid instrument nor criteria used to identify the children with reading difficulties. The class size is significantly related to the number of students with reading difficulties. 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach the students to read for 1-2 periods per week at the beginning of the year and later they carry out usual classroom teaching as usual. Moreover, principals do not know what is going on in the classroom, no school-level plans are executed for the literacy or reading developments.

Keywords: **Instructional Practices, Primary teachers, Children with Reading Difficulties.**

Introduction

Reading is the most important skill in an individuals' life, which enriches the skills and abilities to develop and plays a crucial role in academic achievements. Reading is the process of making meaning from written texts and reading is comprehending from print (Anderson et al, 1985). All reading of print is making sense (Smith, 2012) which is a process of interpretation. Reading is the process of mental images, which helps individuals to perceive the world.

Learning to read and comprehend the text is the most important skill, which has to be developed in primary classes. However, a considerable amount of students fail to achieve reading fluency.

Expert studies found that many children in schools are not learning to read well (Starting Out Right: A Guide To Promoting Children's Reading Success, 1999: NRC, 2004: Sideridis, et al, 2006: McLaughlin, 2012).

Students fail to read for several reasons. Smith (2012) states the two reasons for the difficulties in reading. The reasons are that they were confronted by the reading when it is not the best time to learn, and they were confused, instead of being helped. This argument exposes that there is a problem with the teaching and learning process. Several factors play behind the reading deficiency in the school setting (Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2002), such as students' interest (Kirchner & Mostert, 2017), curriculum setting, and school factors namely, principals' perspectives, school instructional practices, and teachers' related factors.

Teachers' perception, skills, and instructional practices play a crucial role in reading development in the school setting. Teachers are a crucial factor in developing students' reading skills, and teachers' beliefs will be an influential factor in their teaching of reading practices (Saracho, 2002: Byrne et al. 2010: Jose, & Dharma Raja, 2011: Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015: Borg, 2018: Woodward, & Thoma, 2020b). They are the front liners in reading development, which cannot be ignored in primary classes. Teachers identify the children with reading difficulties (Woolley, 2008: Van Setten, et.al, 2018) and assist them to read fluently by teaching reading (Piasta, et al 2012: Snow, et al., 2021). If the teachers fail to identify and assist the children with reading difficulty, it will pave the way to students' academic failure and loss of life (National Research Council (US) Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 2001).

The reading difficulty is a critical problem in primary and secondary education, which creates most academic failures in school and dropouts (Serrano, 2019). This type of problem is shown in earlier ages of children which are backed by the neurodevelopmental disorder. During the child's developmental process both physical and mental development occurs similar pattern. However, neurodevelopmental problems create learning disabilities (DSM-5, 2013).

Clinical assessments must be carried out to identify the disorders or disabilities. The reading difficulty is given the diagnostic label specific reading and spelling disorder or popularly known as developmental dyslexia. Dyslexia is classified by its risk factors as mild, moderate, and severe levels.

However, the teachers can focus on reading difficulties which include mild problems in reading and comprehension in Primary classes. Even children struggle with reading, they do not have

a diagnosed disability. These students may just be poor in reading, requiring more time to learn certain things, they may require more specialized reading instruction than has been provided.

Children with reading difficulties face critical challenges when they enter secondary. Children have the capabilities to develop reading and comprehension until age 9. Teachers can guide them to read and comprehend the text easily from grade one to four (Willis, 2009). If they face difficulties on reading they must be taken special consideration and help them to improve the reading. The class teacher can help determine where the children have trouble in reading and then provide targeted help to build skills in these areas as well as accommodate the student's weaknesses.

Unfortunately, they were neglected in primary classes, which creates a depression in learning, school failure progressively increases, even leading to school dropout (Soreno, 2019). The pupils' reading literacy is developed insufficiently in schools (Wildová, 2014) and the principals have neglected to enhance literacy instruction and teachers receive little guidance regarding strategies to construct print-rich literacy classrooms (Ward, & Filatotchev, 2009: Plaatjies, 2020). The reading problems could be minimized if they were identified and proper instructional practices were implemented at the school level.

Research Problem

Sri Lanka has introduced several curriculum changes by Improving the Quality of primary and secondary education to ensure educational attainments and maintain the global level. Though, the policies have been introduced the situation has not to get changed yet. Studies based on Learning difficulties found that up to 22.5% of children in the study sample had difficulty with reading, spelling, and related skills (Sandyanganie, et al, 2016), and many children with Learning Disabilities (LD) are still unaccounted for, unwelcomed, or simply ignored (Wijeratne, 2009: UNICEF, 2016) Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia are neglected in the teaching/learning process in Sri Lanka. (Indrarathne, 2019). Moreover, Priyanka & Manavee's (2016) studies found that the most common disabilities that affect Sri Lankan children include reading disorders like dyslexia, disorders of written expression, and Dyscalculia.

These studies illustrate that children with reading difficulties are ignored or unwelcomed by the school settings. Moreover, several criticisms were issued by the society, there is no appropriate identification practice followed to identify the children with reading difficulties

and no specialized reading instruction was given to the children with reading difficulties. Therefore, the researcher focused to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions in primary classes in the Puttalam district.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties in primary classes. This study is aimed following objectives:

- To find out the instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes.
- To find out the instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development.
- To provide suggestions to identify the children with reading difficulties and provide best instructional practices to develop the children with reading difficulties.

Research Questions

To investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions in primary classes, this study revolves around the main following Questions.

1. What instructional practices were followed by the schools to identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes?
2. What instructional practices were followed by the schools to develop the reading of the children with reading difficulties?

Methodology

To achieve the above objectives, a survey research method was carried out by the researcher. This study consists of quantitative data which has obtained from the questionnaire and qualitative data obtained from formal interviews and classroom observations at the school levels. Self-developed questionnaires for teachers, interview schedules for principals, and observation schedules have been used to collect the data.

The study population was selected from Zonal Education of Puttalam District Tamil Medium schools. A simple random sampling method was used to select teachers from 65 Tamil medium schools. Primary teachers (N=70), they have answered the open-ended questionnaire and Principals (N=20) responded to the interview questions. Statistical methods were used to analyze the

quantitative data with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Ver. 20 software and content analysis method were used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results.

The data were analyzed according to the objectives of the study. It is organized as background data analysis, Instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes, and Instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development. The data collected by the open-ended questionnaire answers were coded and analyzed.

Background data

The background data illustrates the age, class teacher, service period, and professional qualification of the participated teachers. Age 21-30 (N=10), 31-40 (N=22), 41-50 (N=28), and 51-60 (N=10). The class in charge for grade 3 =32, and grade 4=38. Service years 1-5 = 12.9%, 6-10 = 31%, 11-15 = 22.9%, and service years up to 16 =32%.

Table 1 below shows the professional qualification of the teachers. 75.7% of the teachers were trained from the college of education, graduates 21.4%, and graduates with a postgraduate diploma in Education 2.9% of the participants.

Table 1: Professional Qualification

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Trained, Dip in Education	53	75.7	75.7	75.7
	Graduate	15	21.4	21.4	97.1
	Graduate, Dip in Edu.	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes.

The first objective of the study is to investigate the instructional practices of the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes. The results show the practices followed by the teachers to identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes. 71.4% of the teachers follow the identification practices to identify the children with reading difficulties and keep records of the children with reading difficulties in schools. They maintain student reports, class record books, and assessment books to record the students' Progress. 28.6% of them neither follow the identification practice nor maintain the records.

Table 2 shows how the teachers identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes.

Table 2: methods of Identification of children with reading difficulties

		Responses	
		N	Percent
Identification	Checklist	3	6.0%
	Observation	28	56.0%
	Reading exam	19	38.0%
Total		50	100.0%

6% of the teachers use the checklist, 56% of them identify by observing the students and 38% of teachers contact reading exams to identify the children with reading difficulties.

Table 3: Number of children who struggle for reading in Primary classes

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1-5	30	42.9
	6-10	28	40.0
	11-15	7	10.0
	16-20	1	1.4
	up to 21	4	5.7
	Total	70	100.0

Table 3 above presents the number of children identified in primary classes. 1-5 Number of students identified in 42.9% of schools and 6-10 students were identified in 40% of the schools. Furthermore, the mean comparison was carried out to find out the relationship between class size and the number of the students identified as the children struggle for reading. The mean comparison of class size 21- 30 and 31 – 40 was 2.0 and class size 11-20 = 1.1. This mean comparison illustrates that there is a significant relationship between the size of the class and number of the children identified as the struggle with reading. Classes with a big number of students consist of more children with reading difficulties than small classes.

Table 4: mean comparison between Size of the class and the number of children struggling for reading in your class

Number of students	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
11-20	1.1875	16	.40311
21-30	2.0909	22	1.15095
31-40	2.0625	32	1.07576
Total	1.8714	70	1.04841

Instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development.

Programs for reading developments

The second objective is to investigate the instructional practices of the schools on reading development. The descriptive statistics for all study variables illustrate the instructional practices followed by the teacher on reading and literacy development.

Firstly, the arrangement for reading practice in a classroom setting was significantly high. 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach the students to read and treat the students individually. Moreover, they provide classroom-based resources to the reading practices such as textbooks, flashcards, newspapers, and library books. 3.4% of the teachers use reading sources from the internet. See table 5.

Table 5: Materials provided for reading

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Materials for reading	Textbooks	70	26.6%	100.0%
	Flashcards	70	26.6%	100.0%
	Newspapers/ Magazines	54	20.5%	77.1%
	Library books	60	22.8%	85.7%
	Internet resources	9	3.4%	12.9%
Total		263	100.0%	375.7%

4% of the teachers have no awareness of teaching reading. However, 97% of the teachers responded as they ask questions while students were reading, and assign reading homework during weekdays.

Table 6: Programs for reading development

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Programs for reading development	Extra classes	24	25.8%	36.9%
	Special reading programs	6	6.5%	9.2%
	Parents awareness	32	34.4%	49.2%
	Competitions	4	4.3%	6.2%
	Motivational programs	27	29.0%	41.5%
Total		93	100.0%	143.1%

Table 6 above shows the instructional practices for reading and literacy development programs in primary classes. Teachers' have responded to open-ended questions and expressed several types of programs on reading and literacy development. The responses illustrate that 34% of teachers contact parents' awareness programs to develop home-based reading development.

Furthermore, 29% of them arrange motivational programs, 25.8% of them contact extra classes, 6.5% contact special reading programs, and 4.3% arrange classroom-based competitions to promote reading.

Remedy programs for reading development

97% of the teachers contact remedy programs to children with reading difficulties in primary classes. They allocate 1-2 = 40%, 3-4 = 34%, 5-6 = 7%, and 7-8 = 8.6% periods per week for the class-based remedy programs. 2.9% of teachers do not contact any programs to assist the children with reading difficulties.

Table 7: number of periods allocated for remedy programs.

Table 8: Remedy program at the School level

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Remedy program at the School level	Extra classes	53	48.6%	85.5%
	Special reading programs	17	15.6%	27.4%
	Parents awareness	2	1.8%	3.2%
	Competitions	4	3.7%	6.5%
	Motivational programs	33	30.3%	53.2%
Total		109	100.0%	175.8%

Moreover, table 8 shows 48.6% of teachers contact extra classes, 30% of them contact motivational programs, 15.6% of them contact special remedy programs, and 3.7% of them arrange competitions as remedy programs

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	0 Period	6	8.6
	1-2	28	40.0
	3-4	24	34.3
	5-6	5	7.1
	7-8	6	8.6
	Total	69	98.6
Missing	System	1	1.4
Total		70	100.0

Principal role on reading development and remedy programs

The principals play a vital role in school-based reading development programs in primary classes. According to the teachers' responses, 82% of the principals somehow provide their support to the reading development programs. 18% of principals do not engage with reading and literacy developments. They just continue the school's day-to-day activities as it is.

Table 9 shows the principal role in the school-level programs for reading and literacy development. They arrange reading programs 48.3%, contact parents' awareness program 17.2%, Plan for competitions 17.2%, instruct the teachers 10.3%, and allocate resources 6.9%

Table 9: Principal role in Reading Development

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Principal role in Reading Development	Instruction to teachers	6	10.3%	15.0%
	Resourcing	4	6.9%	10.0%
	Contacting special reading programs	28	48.3%	70.0%
	Parent awareness	10	17.2%	25.0%
	Competitions	10	17.2%	25.0%
Total		58	100.0%	145.0%

Principal Responses

20 Principals' responses were recorded throughout the interview and coded for analysis. Table 10 below shows the responses of the principals regarding the identification of children with reading difficulties and instructional practices followed by the principals. The interview responses principals reading and linguistic development was 95% and 1 principal have no idea about the school level reading or linguistic development program. 85% of the principals' responses on the identification of children with reading difficulties were by reading exam or classroom assessment. However, 15% of them do not practice any identification methods in primary classes. Moreover, 80% of the schools maintain students' record books, class record books, or student grade-level achievement forms to record the students' progress.

Table 10: Principal responses

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Reading Development Programs	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Linguistic development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Identify the students and monitor the progress	17	85.0%	3	15.0%	20	100.0%
Records of children with Reading difficulties	16	80.0%	4	20.0%	20	100.0%
Programs for grade 3&4 Reading Development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Remedy programs for reading development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Support on reading development programs	16	80.0%	4	20.0%	20	100.0%

Furthermore, 95% of principals responded that they contact reading development programs for grade 3 to ensure reading development in primary classes, in addition to that they contact remedy programs for children with reading difficulties. However, their support for school-based reading development programs was lower than the previous answer. This response

illustrates the controversial answers of principals' role in the identification and instructional practices on children with reading difficulties.

Discussion

The main objective of the study was to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties in primary classes. The results found that the identification of children with reading difficulties was carried out by 71.4% of schools by reading exams or observations. However, there is no valid instrument nor criteria used to identify the children with reading difficulties. They identify the students as poor readers when they contact reading activities. In addition to that, some teachers contact extra lessons to reading fluency and identifications while others remain to have no awareness on the identification process. To identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes. The class size is significantly related to the number of students with reading difficulties. Classes with a big number of students consist of more than small classes.

Moreover, the teachers' effectiveness, perception, and motivations are important in the students' literacy development (Saracho, 2002: Byrne et al. 2010: Jose, & Dharma Raja, 2011). Findings revealed that 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach school students to read for 1-2 periods per week at the beginning of the year organize usual classroom teaching as usual. When the researcher checked class record books classroom-based some schools contact literacy development homework, however, the programs were not organized for the year, and they have taught a usual lesson. They have provided classroom-based reading practices and homework. The data analysis shows about the remedy programs for children with reading difficulties, thus, no records were found. These findings prove the pupils' reading literacy is developed insufficiently in schools (Wildová, 2014).

Furthermore, school leaders must ensure that effective literacy practices are incorporated into teaching across all content areas (Woodward, L., & Thoma, J. 2020: Bean, Et al., (2018) the principal plays a vital role in school-based literacy development (Bean, & Kern, 2018: Sebastian, Et al., 2018). However, when it concludes the teachers' answers and principals' responses, they do not know what is going on in the classroom, no school-level plans are executed for the literacy or reading developments. This proves the Plaatjies (2019) finding that Principals have neglected to enhance literacy instruction and teachers receive little guidance regarding strategies to construct print-rich literacy classrooms.

Limitation and Recommendations

This study has some drawbacks due to time limitations. Firstly, as this is a survey study, the open-ended questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. The interview with principals was used for cross-checking the responses. Even though the open-ended questionnaire answers and interview responses were coded, there were some answers not related to the study that were eliminated from coding. Future studies may be the focus on close-ended questions with different types of variables.

Secondly, this study only focused on the instructional practices of school on identification and reading instructions in primary classes. However, this study did not focus on the relationship between instructional practices and reading development. The relationship between instructional practices and reading development may be investigated in future studies.

Moreover, the study population and sampling were selected from Tamil medium schools of the Zonal Educational Office of Puttalam. However, the results only can be generalized to Tamil medium schools. The island-wide studies have to be conducted to generalize the results.

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