

African Journal of Education and Practice (AJEP)

**Exploring the Teaching of Reading in Lower Primary Classes: A Case Study of One
Government Primary School in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda**

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Article History

Received 9th October 2024

Received in Revised Form 7th November 2024

Accepted 3rd December 2024



How to cite in APA format:

Mrutu, N., & Kulwenza, R. (2024). Exploring the Teaching of Reading in Lower Primary Classes: A Case Study of One Government Primary School in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda. *African Journal of Education and Practice*, 10(6), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.47604/ajep.3105>

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to investigate the methods teachers use to teach reading in lower primary classes at a government primary school in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda, focusing particularly on how these methods impact learners' reading competences.

Methodology: A qualitative case study approach was utilized, employing interviews and document analysis to gather data from six teachers, one head teacher, and one District Inspector of Schools (DIS).

Findings: The findings highlight the use of phonics, whole language, and balanced methods. Further, they reveal that teachers are conversant with these methods and understand how they affect learners' reading skills. The DIS noted that his office provides textbooks for students and offers supervisory support via school inspectors. The data also indicated that the head teacher, in his management role, provides informal mentorship to lower primary teachers. Despite teachers' familiarity with teaching methods and the support from the DIS and head teacher, challenges such as limited resources and large class sizes hindered their full effectiveness.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends strengthening in-service and pre-service teacher training to equip educators with approaches to teaching reading in challenging, under-resourced contexts.

Keywords: *Phonics, Reading, Instruction, Mentorship, Resources, Training*

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching young children to read is a foundational skill that significantly impacts their academic success and lifelong learning journey. Reading is not merely a basic literacy skill; it is the cornerstone of all learning and cognitive development (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). The ability to read fluently equips children with the tools necessary to access, understand, and apply knowledge across all subjects, fostering both their academic growth and overall intellectual capacity.

A systematic approach that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies has proven to be effective in fostering early reading skills (Foorman et al., 2019). According to Ehri (2020), teaching children how to decode words through phonics is crucial, as it enables them to recognize word patterns and apply these patterns to new words. Phonics instruction helps bridge the gap between spoken and written language, facilitating a deeper understanding of the structure of words and sentences (Wanzek et al., 2018).

Additionally, research supports the importance of creating an engaging and supportive reading environment in which children are encouraged to explore language through various activities, such as shared reading, storytelling, and interactive discussions. Providing opportunities for children to read aloud and engage in conversations about texts helps develop comprehension and critical thinking skills, laying a strong foundation for future learning (O'Connor et al., 2021). Teachers play a pivotal role in this process by using scaffolding techniques to support children's gradual independence in reading (Hoffman et al., 2020).

The importance of learning to read extends beyond the immediate benefits of literacy. Early reading proficiency has been linked to better academic outcomes in later years, as students who are able to read well by the third grade are more likely to succeed in all subject areas, including math, science, and social studies (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2020). Moreover, early literacy skills are closely tied to a child's self-esteem and motivation to learn, as children who struggle with reading often experience frustration and disengagement from school (Snow, 2019).

Background: Ugandan Context

Uganda has made significant strides in promoting literacy among young children, particularly through initiatives aimed at improving early childhood education. The government, in collaboration with various stakeholders, has implemented programs to enhance access to quality education and improve reading skills at an early age. Despite these efforts, challenges still persist, affecting the overall literacy outcomes for young learners.

One of the key initiatives aimed at improving early literacy in Uganda is the *Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP)*, launched by the Ministry of Education and Sports with support from development partners such as USAID. This program focuses on developing foundational literacy skills among children in primary schools by introducing evidence-based reading instruction in local languages during the early years of schooling (RTI International, 2019). According to the Uganda National Examination Board (UNEB), the initiative has yielded positive results, with notable improvements in children's reading fluency and comprehension by the end of Primary 2 (UNEB, 2020). Programs like these have positively influenced local schools, including the case study school in Kocheke Sub County, by providing resources, teacher training workshops, and literacy support to help improve early reading competencies.

Additionally, the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy* introduced in 2016 places a strong emphasis on early learning and literacy as a critical component of child development. The policy advocates for age-appropriate and culturally relevant teaching methods that cater to the needs of young learners. This policy has helped raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education and literacy, especially in rural areas where access to education has been historically limited (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2016). In response to the shortage of trained teachers in foundational literacy, teacher support programs have been launched to enhance instructional capacity, with a focus on phonics and balanced literacy methods. These initiatives include in-service workshops and peer learning opportunities led by Coordinating Centre Tutors (CCTs) who work with teachers in remote areas. Schools like the one in Kocheke Sub County benefit directly from such programs, which provide resources and instructional support crucial for early reading skills. This network of support allows teachers to stay updated with effective literacy instruction methods, even in under-resourced settings.

However, despite these advances, Uganda still faces significant challenges in achieving widespread literacy among young children. One of the primary issues is the shortage of trained teachers who are equipped with the skills to effectively teach reading at the foundational level. A study by Nag et al. (2019) found that many teachers in Uganda lack sufficient training in early literacy instruction, particularly in using phonics-based approaches and other proven methods for teaching reading. This lack of training impacts the quality of instruction and contributes to lower literacy rates, especially in rural schools where resources are limited.

Moreover, Uganda faces challenges related to language of instruction. While local languages are used in early grade reading programs, the transition to English in later grades can create difficulties for children who have not fully developed reading skills in their mother tongue (Trudell & Piper, 2020). This transition can lead to confusion and a lack of fluency, which hinders overall literacy development. Furthermore, educational resources, including books and reading materials in local languages, remain scarce, especially in underserved regions (Buhere et al., 2018).

Statistics show that literacy rates among young children in Uganda remain below desired levels. According to the 2019 *Uwezo Uganda Learning Assessment*, only 30% of children in Primary 3 could read a Primary 2-level text in their local language, and just 10% could do so in English. These statistics highlight the urgent need for more targeted interventions to address gaps in early literacy development (Uwezo Uganda, 2019). Similarly current research emphasizes the importance of evidence-based strategies for teaching reading to young children.

This study explores the methods used by teachers to teach reading in one government primary school in Kocheke Sub County in Uganda. Special emphasis is placed on understanding how these methods impact learners' reading competences. The study was guided by the following questions

1. What methods do teachers use to teach reading in lower primary classes at a government primary school in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda?
2. How do the teaching methods used by teachers influence learners' reading competencies in lower primary classes?
3. What role do the head teacher and District Inspector of Schools play in supporting reading instruction in lower primary classes?

4. What challenges do teachers face in effectively implementing reading instruction methods in lower primary classes?
5. How can pre-service and in-service teacher training be improved to better equip teachers to teach reading in under-resourced contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite numerous initiatives aimed at improving early literacy in Uganda, significant challenges continue to hinder effective reading instruction in lower primary classes. While programs like the Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP) and the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy have laid a foundation for literacy advancement, gaps remain in both resources and teacher training, particularly in rural and under-resourced regions like Kocheke Sub County. Many teachers lack sufficient training in foundational literacy methods, including phonics, whole language, and balanced approaches, which are critical to building early reading competence. Additionally, schools often face shortages of instructional materials, limiting teachers' ability to provide comprehensive reading support. Large class sizes further complicate individual attention, making it challenging for teachers to address the specific needs of struggling readers.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the methods currently used by teachers in a government primary school in Kocheke Sub County to teach reading, with a focus on understanding how these approaches impact learners' reading competencies. By identifying specific challenges—such as resource limitations, inadequate training, and class size constraints—this research aims to provide targeted recommendations to improve early reading instruction in similar contexts.

The primary beneficiaries of this study are the teachers and students of Kocheke Sub County, as the findings will inform teacher support initiatives, guide resource allocation, and highlight effective strategies that can be adopted in classrooms. Additionally, education policymakers and stakeholders will benefit from insights into the contextual needs of rural primary schools, helping them refine early literacy programs and interventions to bridge the gap between policy objectives and on-the-ground implementation. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the development of a more effective, inclusive, and sustainable framework for literacy education in Uganda's lower primary schools.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching young children to read is a complex process that draws upon multiple instructional approaches, each of which addresses different aspects of literacy development. The theoretical framework for teaching reading to young children is grounded in three major approaches: phonics, whole language, and the balanced method. Underlying these three approaches is a combination of cognitive and constructivist theories of learning. From a cognitive perspective, reading involves the mental processes of decoding, recognizing patterns, and building fluency, all of which are emphasized in phonics instruction (Ehri, 2019; Castles et al., 2018). Constructivist theory, on the other hand, stresses the importance of active learning, where children construct meaning based on their experiences, prior knowledge, and interaction with texts—principles that align with whole language instruction (Goodman & Goodman, 2014).

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is also relevant in this context, particularly in the balanced method. Teachers play a crucial role in scaffolding students' learning, providing support that enables learners to move from simple decoding tasks

to more complex comprehension and critical thinking skills. By combining direct instruction with opportunities for independent reading, teachers can help children develop reading competence within their ZPD (Kim et al., 2022).

Whole Language Approach

In the whole language approach, cultural relevance plays a crucial role in fostering engagement and motivation among young learners. By integrating students' cultural backgrounds and personal experiences into literacy instruction, educators create a more inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives. This cultural relevance not only enhances students' motivation but also allows them to see their lives reflected in the texts they read, promoting a deeper connection to literacy.

Additionally, the whole language approach emphasizes active learning. Children are encouraged to explore texts, discuss stories, and make predictions based on their prior knowledge. This process aids in comprehension and promotes critical thinking as students analyze and interpret various texts in a supportive environment (Goodman & Goodman, 2014).

Balanced Approach

The balanced method also incorporates cultural relevance by selecting texts that resonate with students' diverse backgrounds. This alignment enhances motivation and relevance, making reading more meaningful. By integrating culturally relevant materials, teachers validate students' identities and encourage a deeper connection to literacy (Kim et al., 2022).

Moreover, Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is pivotal in the balanced approach. Teachers assess students' current literacy skills and provide tailored support to help them progress. This might involve direct instruction in phonics combined with opportunities for independent reading. By scaffolding learning experiences, educators can help children transition from basic decoding to complex comprehension tasks, ensuring that instruction is responsive to individual learning needs (Kim et al., 2022).

In resource-limited environments, the balanced method plays a critical role in addressing reading challenges by providing a flexible framework that can adapt to available resources. Educators can leverage community knowledge and local contexts to create engaging literacy experiences without requiring extensive materials. For instance, teachers may use oral storytelling, local folklore, and community experiences to enrich reading instruction, ensuring that literacy is relevant and accessible to all students. This adaptability is vital in fostering literacy development where traditional resources, such as books and technology, may be scarce.

Integration of Cognitive and Constructivist Theories

Both the whole language and balanced approaches reflect a blend of cognitive and constructivist theories. While cognitive theories focus on the mechanics of reading—such as decoding and fluency—the constructivist framework emphasizes how learners engage with texts and construct meaning through their experiences. This integration allows educators to address the multifaceted nature of literacy development, catering to the cognitive processes involved while also fostering a rich, culturally relevant learning environment.

In summary, constructivist principles, particularly the focus on cultural relevance and active learning, significantly influence the effectiveness of whole language and balanced approaches by promoting engagement, critical thinking, and a supportive learning atmosphere that acknowledges and values students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. The balanced method

provides a valuable strategy for overcoming reading challenges in resource-limited environments, ensuring that all children have opportunities to develop their literacy skills.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design & Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach following a case study design to explore the teaching of reading in lower primary classes, focusing on the instructional methods used by teachers to support learners' reading competencies. Qualitative case study research is an effective approach to explore complex educational settings, providing in-depth insights into instructional practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method allows for an exploration of contextual factors, such as teacher pedagogical choices and classroom environment, that can significantly impact reading outcomes for students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, conducted at a government primary school in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda, data were collected through interviews with six teachers (Two preprimary teachers, two primary one/grade 1 teachers, and the last two were primary one/grade 1 teachers), one head teacher, and one District Inspector of Schools. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had specific knowledge and experience relevant to the instructional methods for teaching reading. This method allowed the selection of individuals who could provide rich, detailed insights into the phenomena being studied, making it particularly suited for qualitative research where depth of understanding is essential.

Selection of Participants

The six teachers were selected based on their roles and experiences in teaching reading at different grade levels:

- **Two pre-primary teachers:** Focused on early literacy skills and foundational reading strategies.
- **Two primary one (Grade 1) teachers:** Engaged in teaching reading to learners who are typically new to formal education.
- **Two primary two (Grade 2) teachers:** Worked with learners who have begun to develop basic reading skills and are progressing towards more advanced competencies.

This stratified approach ensured a diverse range of perspectives on teaching reading across various stages of early literacy development.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, with teachers, head teacher and the district inspector of schools. Interviews focused on the methods teachers used to teach reading, how they implemented these methods, and their perceptions of how the methods impacted learners' reading abilities (King et al, 2018). Documents were also analyzed to support interview data, more specifically we analyzed lesson plans, scheme of work, thematic curriculum and syllabus to understand how the teaching methods were integrated into daily instruction.

RESULTS

The development of reading skills in early education in the sampled government school is supported by three main instructional approaches: phonics, whole language, and the balanced method. Each of these methods has been noted by researchers to improve specific aspects of

reading, but their effectiveness can vary depending on how they are implemented and the context in which they are used.

The Use of Phonics to Influence Reading Competence

Phonics instruction focuses on teaching the relationships between sounds (phonemes) and their corresponding letters (graphemes), enabling learners to decode unfamiliar words by breaking them down into their component sounds (Zaheer & Rahman, 2016). This method emphasizes decoding skills and has been particularly effective in helping learners read new words independently. For instance, Torgesen et al. (2016) found that systematic phonics instruction significantly improved students' reading skills, particularly among those with reading difficulties. However, while it builds word recognition, it may not address other critical areas of reading, such as fluency and comprehension.

Phonics was widely used by teachers in lower primary grades to teach learners how to decode words. Teachers reported that this method enabled learners to develop essential word recognition skills, allowing them to read unfamiliar words independently. For example, learners were taught to break down words into sounds, which they then blended to form complete words. This technique was especially beneficial for learners who had a basic understanding of letters and sounds.

However, teachers also noted that while phonics was effective for teaching word recognition, it did not always translate into reading fluency. Learners who relied solely on phonics often read slowly and hesitantly, focusing more on decoding individual words than on understanding the text. This gap in fluency was particularly evident among learners who had not attended pre-primary education and "slow learners," as they struggled with the foundational skills required for phonics instruction. For example, one participant noted that while the phonics method helped learners read words correctly and fluently, letter names and sounds confused some learners, especially "slow learners." She highlighted that letters such as 'a' and 'i' are sounded as /e/ and /i/, respectively, which could be confusing, as these are also the names of other letters (Watuwa, September 2021). This observation is consistent with the findings of McCutchen et al. (2022), who noted that students with limited phonemic awareness often struggle with decoding and, as a result, may experience difficulties with reading fluency.

Teacher documents revealed that in some cases, teachers introduced whole words to learners before breaking them down into smaller units, emphasizing subparts later. The *NPSC Teacher's Guide for Uganda* recommends teaching letter-to-sound relationships by breaking down known words into phonetic components (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, many teachers still relied on the "look and say" method, in which words were taught as wholes without breaking them into smaller units. While literature-based, this method can limit natural reading acquisition, making it difficult for learners to develop functional reading skills (Xue & Meisels, 2018).

The Use of Whole Language to Influence Reading Competence

The whole language approach promotes reading as a natural process, emphasizing comprehension and context over individual sounds (Goodman & Goodman, 2014). Learners are encouraged to engage with texts as a whole, using prior knowledge and the context of the reading material to understand unfamiliar words. This method is known to improve fluency and comprehension but may not provide adequate support for learners who struggle with decoding skills.

Teachers who used the whole language approach reported improvements in learners' comprehension and overall fluency. By encouraging learners to engage with entire texts, this method allowed them to grasp the context of what they were reading, facilitating a more fluid reading experience. Teachers noted that learners who were taught using whole language methods could better utilize contextual clues to decipher unfamiliar words, thereby improving their reading comprehension.

However, the whole language approach also presented challenges. Teachers expressed concerns that while learners could understand familiar texts, they struggled with unfamiliar words because they had not developed strong decoding skills. Although this method proved effective in enhancing fluency and comprehension, it was less helpful for learners who lacked a basic knowledge of phonetics. For example, teacher Hellen pointed out that children read more effectively when they could see what they were reading. She stated, "When I see and touch, I remember 80%, and when I do not see, I remember 5%, this suggests that using pictures corresponding to the words aids reading effectiveness." (Hellen, September 2021).

The *Teacher's Guide* suggests incorporating pictures and corresponding words to support reading (Ministry of Education, 2016). This aligns with practices where familiar objects (e.g., family members) are associated with words to enhance understanding. However, the documents indicated that asking learners to draw their own pictures, rather than the teacher drawing for them, could engage learners more effectively. Teachers' use of culturally relevant images reflecting learners' environments also facilitated word recognition and reading. The use of local context in teaching aligns with the *NPSC's* guidance and demonstrates an appreciation of students' social and cultural backgrounds in reading instruction. This is supported by the work of Kucer (2019), who emphasizes the importance of connecting reading instruction to students' lived experiences to foster engagement and understanding.

The Use of the Balanced Method to Influence Reading Competence

The balanced approach to reading instruction integrates both phonics and whole language strategies, aiming to develop comprehensive reading skills in young learners. This method has been shown to support decoding abilities, reading fluency, and comprehension by blending explicit phonics instruction with opportunities for students to engage in meaningful texts (Gunning, 2018; Reutzel & Clark, 2020). Research indicates that the balanced approach is effective because it promotes the ability to decode unfamiliar words while simultaneously fostering a love for reading through exposure to authentic literature (Ehri, 2019). This combination helps students not only understand the mechanics of reading but also appreciate its purpose and enjoy the process (Hoffman et al., 2021). The balanced approach encourages differentiated instruction tailored to the individual needs of learners, ensuring that all students, regardless of their starting point, can become proficient and motivated readers (Kim et al., 2022).

The balanced method had the most significant impact on learners' reading competence. Teachers reported that this approach provided learners with a strong foundation in both decoding and comprehension, enabling them to develop into well-rounded readers. Learners were taught to break down words using phonics while also engaging with whole texts to build fluency and comprehension.

Teachers observed that learners who were taught using the balanced method demonstrated better overall reading abilities. They were able to decode unfamiliar words while maintaining a good understanding of the text. This combination of skills resulted in greater reading

confidence and a more positive attitude toward reading. However, implementing the balanced method required more time and resources than other methods. Some teachers expressed concern that they lacked the necessary training to use it effectively (Pressley, Allington, & Pressley, 2023). For example, one participant (teacher Naume) noted that she teaches letter-sound relationships and shows students a picture of the word they are reading. She explained, "When I am teaching the digraph 'ch,' which might form the word 'aichum,' learners may mention different things and fail to grasp the real concept of 'ch.' That's when I bring in a picture of a doctor injecting a patient and use the word 'aichum,' so they can see and understand how the digraph is used in the word" (Naume, September 2021).

The Role of Education Administrators in Influencing Reading Competence

Interviews with District Inspector of Schools (DIS) highlighted their role in supporting head teachers and teachers to improve reading in schools. DIS primarily inspected and monitored schools, identifying challenges and opportunities for improvement. They also distributed reading materials based on the number of learners, although the supply was often inadequate. Additionally, they conducted workshops to train head teachers on reading instruction, expecting them to pass this training on to their teachers. However, he noted that only few head teachers fully implemented these strategies. DIS also promoted teacher peer learning through school visits, encouraging teachers to observe practices in other schools. Monthly school visits were conducted to monitor head teachers' supervision efforts and explore ways to enhance teaching and learning.

The head teacher explained that the district organized workshops, particularly focusing on teaching reading in lower primary grades. For example, a workshop on spelling bee techniques was held, and some teachers were trained and later passed on their knowledge to others. Coordinating Centre Tutors (CCTs) also guided teachers on reading activities, identifying issues for discussion during post-conference meetings. Teachers were trained in various reading methods, such as grouping learners, chorus reading, individual reading, guided reading, and phonics instruction.

The head teacher also highlighted several challenges teachers faced while teaching reading, including large class sizes. He explained that "big numbers in class make reading ineffective," a challenge echoed by several teachers. Other challenges included delayed government funding, which limited the ability to purchase instructional materials, forcing teachers to work without adequate resources. Additionally, poor parental involvement was cited as a major issue affecting learners' performance, with few parents attending school meetings or supporting their children's education.

Interviews with the District Inspector of Schools (DIS) underscored the critical role of education administrators in fostering reading competence. However, disparities in the implementation of reading strategies across schools highlighted systemic challenges that hindered progress. Although the DIS provided workshops and training sessions for head teachers to enhance their instructional techniques, the effectiveness of these initiatives varied significantly from one school to another.

One major challenge identified was the inconsistency in the application of training received by head teachers. While the DIS expressed optimism about the potential of workshops to improve reading instruction, he noted that only a few head teachers fully implemented the strategies discussed. This inconsistency can stem from several factors, including the head teachers' varying levels of commitment, differences in administrative capacities, and the lack of follow-

up support. As a result, teachers in some schools benefited from comprehensive training, while others were left without essential guidance, exacerbating disparities in reading instruction quality.

Furthermore, the distribution of reading materials, while well-intentioned, often proved inadequate. The DIS indicated that although they provided resources based on learner enrollment numbers, the supply was frequently insufficient to meet the needs of all students. This discrepancy in resource allocation left many teachers struggling to implement effective reading programs, as they lacked the necessary materials to support diverse instructional strategies. Some schools reported having to rely on outdated or poorly maintained resources, limiting teachers' ability to engage students meaningfully. This situation is corroborated by Sweeney et al. (2021), who argue that insufficient resources can undermine teachers' efforts to foster a rich literacy environment.

The head teacher further elaborated on the challenges faced by teachers, particularly regarding large class sizes. He stated, "Big numbers in class make reading ineffective," a sentiment echoed by several teachers interviewed. The impact of overcrowded classrooms on individual attention and engagement cannot be overstated; teachers often struggle to provide the necessary support to each learner, leading to disengagement and diminished reading skills. Katz et al. (2020) found that larger class sizes correlate with lower student achievement, particularly in foundational skills such as reading, as teachers may find it challenging to implement differentiated instruction in such settings.

Delayed government funding emerged as another significant barrier to effective reading instruction. The head teacher noted that insufficient and inconsistent funding limited their ability to procure essential instructional materials. Teachers often resorted to creative, yet inadequate, solutions to teach reading, such as using homemade resources or relying on outdated textbooks. Harris (2019) highlighted that delays in funding can significantly disrupt teaching processes, leading to a cycle of under-resourced classrooms and, ultimately, diminished student performance.

Moreover, poor parental involvement was cited as a critical issue impacting learners' performance. Many teachers observed that few parents attended school meetings or actively supported their children's education, which can adversely affect students' motivation and engagement in reading activities. Epstein (2018) emphasizes that strong parent-teacher partnerships are vital for fostering a supportive learning environment. In schools where parental involvement was lacking, teachers found it challenging to create a cohesive reading culture, as they were unable to reinforce reading practices at home.

The disparities observed in the implementation of reading strategies across schools reveal a complex interplay of factors affecting educational outcomes. Addressing these systemic challenges will require a coordinated effort among education administrators, teachers, and parents to create an equitable and effective reading environment for all learners.

Discussion

The results of this study underscore the importance of employing a variety of instructional approaches to teach reading in Uganda's lower primary classes. Phonics instruction plays a vital role in developing word recognition and decoding skills, which are foundational for reading proficiency (Zaheer & Rahman, 2016). However, phonics alone is insufficient for fostering fluency and comprehension. As noted by Chia and Chan (2017), phonics must be

complemented by strategies that help learners engage with whole texts and understand meaning.

The whole language approach enhances fluency and comprehension by allowing learners to make connections between context and unfamiliar words (Goodman & Goodman, 2014). However, without the foundational decoding skills provided by phonics, learners may struggle with unfamiliar words, as observed in the study. The use of visual aids, such as culturally relevant pictures, was beneficial in reinforcing word recognition and meaning, a practice supported by Chu & Chen (2014).

The balanced method, which integrates phonics and whole language approaches, provides the most comprehensive support for learners' reading development. By combining the strengths of both methods, the balanced approach addresses the limitations of each individual method. This aligns with research by Ehri (2019) and Gunning (2018), who highlight that a combination of decoding and comprehension strategies produces the best outcomes for young readers. However, effective implementation of the balanced method requires ongoing teacher training and sufficient resources to support differentiated instruction (Kim et al., 2022).

The role of education administrators is also critical. Although workshops and monitoring systems are in place, challenges such as large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and delayed funding need to be addressed for sustained improvements in reading competence. Peer learning among teachers, promoted by DIS visits, is a positive step, but more systemic support is needed to overcome resource constraints.

The challenges identified in this study observing many Sub-Saharan African contexts, several similarities emerged. For instance, in countries like Kenya and Tanzania, research indicates that inadequate teacher training and resource shortages significantly hinder effective reading instruction (Ochieng et al., 2020; Tilya, 2021). Large class sizes are also a common issue, limiting individual attention and support for learners, as noted in studies from Ghana and Nigeria (Agyeman et al., 2018; Okebukola, 2019). Furthermore, poor parental involvement remains a challenge across the region, affecting children's motivation and performance in reading (Akintunde & Fagbemi, 2022; Nwankwo & Akubue, 2020). These shared challenges underscore the need for comprehensive educational reforms that address teacher capacity, resource allocation, and community engagement to improve reading outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While Uganda has made significant progress in promoting early reading skills, challenges related to teacher training, resource availability, and parental involvement continue to hinder optimal outcomes. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring that all children acquire the reading skills necessary for future academic success.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study was limited to one primary school in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should explore how these methods impact learners' reading competences across a wider range of schools and educational contexts.

Recommendations for improving reading instruction in lower primary classes include:

Teacher Training: There is a need for more comprehensive training in the balanced method. Teachers should receive ongoing professional development to ensure they are equipped to integrate phonics and whole language strategies effectively. Policymakers should also consider

implementing mentorship programs that pair less experienced teachers with veteran educators to foster skill development in real classroom settings.

Provision of Instructional Materials: Schools need to be supplied with sufficient reading materials to support the implementation of all three reading methods. Provision of adequate resources is yet another initiative that, if embarked upon, will allow teachers to provide learners with a variety of reading experiences that enhance their decoding and comprehension skills. Additionally, policymakers should prioritize resource allocation to rural schools, ensuring that they receive equitable access to instructional materials. This could involve establishing partnerships with NGOs and community organizations to facilitate resource distribution.

Class Size Management: Teachers should be supported on approaches for teaching and assessing large classrooms. Reducing class sizes could yet be another solution, allowing teachers to provide more individualized attention to learners, ensuring that each child receives the support they need to develop reading proficiency. To achieve this, policymakers might explore strategies such as recruiting additional teachers specifically for rural schools or incentivizing teachers to work in these areas through financial support or housing allowances.

Improving Teacher Recruitment: Policymakers should establish targeted recruitment strategies to attract qualified teachers to rural areas. This could include offering scholarships for education students who commit to teaching in rural settings after graduation or implementing loan forgiveness programs for teachers who serve in underserved communities.

Conclusion

Teaching children to read in the sampled school in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda, is a complex task that requires the use of multiple instructional approaches, including phonics, whole language, and the balanced method. While phonics builds decoding and word recognition skills, and whole language fosters comprehension and fluency, the balanced method offers the most comprehensive support by integrating both strategies. However, effective implementation of these methods is hampered by challenges such as insufficient teacher training, limited teaching and learning resources, large class sizes, and delayed government funding. Strengthening teacher professional development is critical for enabling educators to adapt and apply these approaches effectively. The landscape of reading instruction in Kocheke Sub County, Uganda also highlights the need for robust support from well-trained education administrators, such as District Inspectors of Schools (DIS) and head teachers. These administrators play a vital role in providing oversight, facilitating teacher training, and promoting peer learning. Their engagement is pivotal to ensuring that schools have the resources and support they need to improve reading outcomes. Parental involvement is another crucial element in fostering reading competence. Many teachers reported that poor parental engagement negatively affected learners' performance, suggesting that parents must play a more active role in supporting their children's literacy development.

There is a pressing need for future research into resource-efficient methods for teaching reading, particularly in rural and under-resourced environments in Uganda and similar contexts. Such research should focus on identifying low-cost instructional strategies, innovative uses of existing materials, and community-driven approaches that leverage local resources. Exploring how technology can be adapted for these settings, even in low-connectivity areas, would also provide valuable insights. This research is crucial for developing scalable solutions that can improve reading outcomes for learners in challenging educational contexts.

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