

GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP
AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

by

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GRADE SIX EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES OF THE 2020 GRADE ONE READING GAP IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

I declare that this dissertation, titled **GRADE SIX EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES OF THE 2020 GRADE ONE READING GAP IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT**, is my work and that all the sources used, quoted, and acknowledged emerge from accurate referencing.

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Dr D. Lees

30 June 2026

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother in heaven, Motshabi Zipporah Mokgadi, who always wished I would become a better person through education. With this degree, I promise to carry the name of the Mokgadi clan and raise it above the sky.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gap created among the 2020 Grade One cohort following COVID-19 disruptions in the Moses Kotane District of the North West Province, South Africa. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory, the study employed an exploratory single-case study design within a qualitative research approach. Twelve Grade Six educators from six primary schools participated in the study. Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections and analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings revealed that COVID-19 significantly disrupted foundational reading development, resulting in persistent challenges related to phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension among the affected cohort. Educators reported difficulties in addressing these reading gaps due to overcrowding, limited resources, lack of parental involvement, language barriers, and curriculum pressure to follow the Annual Teaching Plans. The study further found that educators implemented several intervention strategies, including extra reading classes, small-group reading, individual reading support, parental involvement initiatives, and the use of print-rich materials to support literacy recovery. The study concludes that the effects of COVID-19 on early-grade reading continue to influence teaching and learning in the Intermediate Phase at the selected schools. It recommends increased curriculum support, regular intervention programmes, improved access to information and communication technology resources, and ongoing professional support for educators in rural schools.

Keywords: COVID-19, Curriculum recovery, Educator experiences, Grade One, Intermediate phase, Learning gap, Literacy, Moses Kotane District, Reading gap, Rural schools,

KAKARETSO

Thutopatlisiso e e ne e batlisisa maitemogelo a barutabana ba Mophato wa Borataro mabapi le sekhutlo sa go bala se se neng se dirilwe mo go baithuti ba Mophato wa Ntlha wa 2020 go latela ditshikinyego tse di bakwang ke COVID-19 mo Seterekeng sa Moses Kotane mo Profenseng ya Bokone Bophirima kwa Afrika Borwa. Thutopatlisiso e ne e ikaegile ka Tiori ya Bronfenbrenner ya Bioecological Systems mme ya dirisa mokgwa wa patlisiso ya boleng mo go rarabolelong ya dikhaso tse di rileng. Barutabana ba le 12 ba Seema sa Gare go tswa kwa dikolong tse thataro tsa praemari ba ne ba kopa go tsaya karolo mo thutopatlisisong. Data e ne e kokoantswe ka dipolelano tse di buwang ka makwalo le ditlhaloso tse di kwadilweng mme tsa sekasekwa go dirisiwa tlhatlhobo ya kaedi ya Braun le Clarke. Diphetogo di senotse gore COVID-19 e ne e sentswe thuto ya go bala go go theilweng, go baka ditshwetso tse di itshoketseng tsa tlhaloganyokgang ya madumo, phonics, go bala ka bokgabane, tlhaloganyo ya mafoko le go tlhaloganya mo go baithuti ba a amegang. Barutabana ba ne ba bega mathata a go rarabolola dikhutlo tse tsa go bala ka ntlha ya go tletlega ga diphaposi, dikamoso tse di lekaneng, go tlhoka go nna teng ga baganetsi, dikgwetlho tsa puo le katlego ya dithuto go latela Maano a Thuto a Ngwaga. Thutopatlisiso e boetse e fitlhela gore barutabana ba ne ba diragatsa mekgwa e mentsi ya go thusa, go akaretsa dithuto tse di okeditsweng tsa go bala, go bala mo dipokanong tse nnyennye, thuso ya go bala ya motho ka mosi, mananeo a go akaretsa baganetsi, le tiriso ya dikgwebo tse di tshelang go rotloetsa go alafiwa ga bokgoni jwa go bala le go kwala. Thutopatlisiso e gopotsa gore ditlamorago tsa COVID-19 mo go baleng ga mophato wa ntlha di ntse di ama thuto le go ithuta mo Seemeng sa Gare. E atlenegisa go oketsa thuso ya dithuto, mananeo a a tlwaelegileng a go thusa, phitlhelelo e e tokafaditsweng ya didirisiwa tsa ICT le thuso e e tswelelang ya boitekanelo jwa barutabana kwa dikolong tsa magae.

Mafoko a botlhokwa: COVID-19, Tsosoloso ya kharikhulamo, Maitemogelo a morutabana, Kereiti ya Pele, Mokgatlhelo wa magareng, Diphatlha tsa thuto, Bokgoni jwa go buisa, Setereke sa Moses Kotane, Phatlha ya go bala, Dikolo tsa magaeng

ISIFOTHO SOPHANDO

Olu phando lufumanisa amava ootitshala bebanga leSithandathu malunga nesikhewu sokufunda esenziwe phakathi kwabafundi bebanga lokuqala lika-2020 ngenxa yoterhe olubangelwe yi-COVID-19 kwiSithili saseMoses Kotane kwiPhondo leMantla Ntshona eNingizimu Afrika. Uphando lwalukhokhelwa yiThiyori yoBunjani beNkqubo yoBuqingqwa kaBronfenbrenner kwaye lwasebenzisa indlela yophando lwezinto eziphilayo ngaphakathi kwesakhiwo sokuphanda ngamatyala amaninzi akhangela. Ootitshala abali-12 beSigaba seGrade Ephakathi besuka kwiiskolo ezintandathu zamabanga aphantsi bathathe inxaxheba kolu phando. Idatha yaqokelelwa ngodliwano-ndlebe oluvulekileyo olusebenzisa imibuzo nangamanqaku abandakanywa kwimibhalo kwaye yahlaziywa kusetyenziswa uhlalutyo lwemixholo loBraun noClarke. Iziphumo zembula ukuba i-COVID-19 yaphazamisa gqitha uphuhliso lwemfundo yokuqala yokufunda, nto leyo yabangela iingxaki ezihlala zikhona ezinxulumene nokuqonda amagama ngokuwa, i-phonics, ukubaleka ekufundeni, ulwimi nezinto ezibalulekileyo, kunye nokuqonda phakathi kwabafundi abachaphazelekileyo. Ootitshala baxela iingxaki ekujikelezweni ezi zikhewu zokufunda ngenxa yokuzala kwezikolo, izixhobo ezilinganiselweyo, ukungabibikho kwabazali, imiqobo yolwimi kunye noxinzelelo lwekharikhyulam lokulandela iMikhakha yeMfundo yoNyaka. Uphando luphinde lwafumana ukuba ootitshala basebenzisa iindlela ezininzi zokuhlangabezana nazo, kuquka amaqela ongezelelweyo okufunda, ukufunda ngamaqela amancinci, inkxaso yokufunda ngamnye, imizamo yokubandakanya abazali, kunye nokusetyenziswa kwezinto ezinezifundo ukuxhasa ukuphila nokufundisa kwakhona. Uphando luphetha ngokuthi iimpembelelo ze-COVID-19 ekufundeni kwabangela izigaba zokuqala ziqhubeka ukuchaphazela ukufundisa nokufunda kwi-Intermediate Phase. Lincoma inkxaso eyongezelelweyo yekharikhyulam, iinkqubo eziqhelekileyo zokungenelela, ukufikelela okuphuculweyo kwizixhobo ze-ICT kunye nenkxaso eqhubekayo yoluntu yootitshala ezikolweni zasemaphandleni.

Amagama aphambili: i-COVID-19, Amava katitshala, Ukubuyiselwa, Ibanga lokuQala, Isigaba esiphakathi, Izikhewu zokufunda, Ulwazi lokufunda, ISithili saseMoses Kotane, Isikhwe sokufunda ukufunda, Izikolo zasemaphandleni

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Term
ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
ESSER	Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
FAL	First Additional Language
LOLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
MKLM	Moses Kotane Local Municipality
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PLC	Professional Learning Committees
SBA	School-Based Assessment
SMT	Senior Management Team
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNISA	University of South Africa

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1. CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

China was the first country to identify COVID-19 in late 2019. This infectious disease spread internationally, leading to lockdowns, social distancing measures, and disruptions to education and the economy (Tang & Chin, 2021). The delivery of curricula and resources in the education sector was also negatively affected by COVID-19 (Mahaye, 2020). Consequently, emergency remote teaching (ERT) was suddenly introduced worldwide (Gouëdard, Pont & Viennet, 2020), resulting in a negative impact on rural schools that lacked sufficient curriculum resources to pivot to online learning, thereby increasing educational inequalities among learners in under- and well-resourced schools (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Owing to the lockdown, inequalities in the capacity to deliver quality education in many disadvantaged schools were highlighted internationally (Bashman, 2020; Basilaia et al., 2020).

In South Africa, online distance learning replaced traditional face-to-face teaching and learning in most schools during the lockdown period (Chisadza et al., 2021). The South African lockdown officially commenced on 27 March 2020, and Grade One learners had to stay at home until 24 August 2020, resulting in a 26-week reading and learning gap for them (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). Following the easing of lockdown restrictions in September 2020, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) implemented a rotational timetable. However, because learners did not attend school at all during the second term, the curriculum across many subjects was trimmed to accommodate this academic loss, resulting in a substantial increase in reading gaps in most South African schools (Mishra et al., 2020). Simultaneously, Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) were shortened, leaving certain topics unaddressed and not formally assessed.

Rotational teaching, introduced as part of the teaching recovery strategy, involved dividing learners into small groups and allowing them to attend school on alternate days or within staggered time sessions (Lehy, 2024). This approach aimed to ensure continuity of learning while adhering to health protocols and preventing further disruption to the academic year. However, evidence suggests that this model was

more manageable for well-resourced than for disadvantaged schools, enabling the former to sustain teaching and learning more effectively during lockdown (Dube, 2020).

Research shows that Foundation Phase learners, including Grade One learners, in 57 Eastern Cape and 180 Mpumalanga no-fee charging schools lost 56%–60% of the school days in the 2020 school year (Ardington et al., 2021). In the North West Province, Foundation Phase learners lost approximately 37% of school days in 2021 due to rotational timetables, following a 2020 school year where more than half of the planned curriculum time was missed (Ardington et al., 2021; Wills & van der Berg, 2024). The disruption placed additional pressure on the educators to implement the 2021 curriculum while simultaneously addressing knowledge and skills that learners had not adequately developed during 2020. The 2020 Grade One cohort was denied the opportunity to learn fundamental skills, such as reading, as prescribed by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of the Foundation Phase (Ardington et al., 2021). By the start of the COVID-19 disruptions, this cohort had completed only one full academic year in Grade R, which did not adequately support the formal development of reading skills.

When the researcher began his tenure as a primary school principal in May 2021, amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, he became aware of reading difficulties among learners through class monitoring of the *Drop All and Read* sessions organised by the school for the 2023 Grade Four learners, who were Grade One learners in 2020. Subsequently, during principals' meetings held in 2025, two years after the implementation of the reading intervention, primary school principals from other sub-districts were experiencing similar challenges among the 2020 Grade One learner cohort, who had progressed to Grade Six by 2025. In particular, significant reading gaps were identified. The principals specifically referred to learners' difficulties in phonics and phonemic awareness, as outlined in the CAPS learning requirements. These difficulties led the researcher to infer that the 2020 Grade One learners had developed a reading gap, mainly because the 2020 academic year was academically compromised for them. This perception prompted the researcher to explore the possible long-term effects of the Grade ones' disrupted education in 2020 on their foundational reading skills as experienced by the Grade Six educators. Importantly,

the study does not assume that COVID-19 was the sole cause of the reading difficulties, as challenges in reading proficiency existed before the pandemic. Rather, the study sought to understand the Grade Six educators' experiences and perceptions on the reading gaps of their learners.

In 2023, in-school monitoring conducted at the researcher's school where he is the principal, on Grade Four learners who formed part of the 2020 Grade One cohort, indicated that these learners continued to experience significant reading proficiency challenges resulting from the learning disruptions caused by COVID-19 lockdown. This phenomenon is consistent with international findings, which indicate that COVID-19 negatively affected learning (Kaffenberger, 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). Similarly, local studies have revealed the impact of COVID-19 on South African education, including diminished achievement and increased educational inequalities (DBE, 2022; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020).

According to Hoadley (2023), COVID-19 has exacerbated reading gaps in South African schools, particularly among learners in the 2020 Grade One cohort, underscoring the persistence of reading disparities across primary schools and necessitating urgent attention. Key areas, such as phonics, vocabulary, and fluency, pose significant challenges for learners in South African schools (Barends & Reddy, 2024; Carter et al., 2024; Nomlala & Baidoo, 2025).

This research study aimed to investigate the extent to which reading in the 2020 Grade One cohort in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District was adversely affected by COVID-19. To achieve this, the researcher investigated this phenomenon by drawing on educators' experiences regarding the perceived 2020 Grade One reading gap. At the time of data collection in 2025, the 2020 Grade One learners were in Grade Six.

The next section details the background to the research.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The rural educational context in which the study is situated presents several challenges that may affect learners' reading development, including limited access to educational resources and connectivity, as well as broader socio-economic factors. For example, Sumida and Kawata (2021) emphasise that compared with urban areas, rural areas often experience reading gaps due to inequalities among learners, including differences in language proficiency and prior learning experiences as well as in school resources. Hernández-Torrano (2018) also emphasises that a lack of connectivity, demographic considerations, and socio-economic issues in rural schools contribute to reading gaps. These challenges not only include limited access to resources but also a lack of community engagement to encourage reading, linguistic diversity, poor infrastructure, and cultural differences (Hernández-Torrano, 2018). Additionally, whereas the implementation of online learning in privileged schools during the COVID-19 lockdown was possible, the capacity of rural schools to make this transition was limited by a lack of the necessary technology to support such a teaching and learning approach (Nambiar, 2020).

The Bojanala District Municipality is situated in the former homeland areas, historically designated under apartheid policies for Black South African communities, in the North West Province of South Africa, with the Moses Kotane District encompassing large rural communities in this area. According to Worku (2020), the Moses Kotane Local Municipality (MKLM) had a total population of 265,668 in 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Furthermore, 64,5% of the population in the Rustenberg Municipality, within which the Moses Kotane District is situated, lived below the upper-bound poverty line in 2020 (Rustenberg Local Municipality, 2022). It is thus likely that the high poverty rate in this district contributed negatively to the challenges of implementing online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown due to insufficient digital resources and reliable internet connectivity experienced by many households (Mazibuko, 2021).

The Moses Kotane District is one of the four education districts administered under the Bojanala Platinum District Municipality in the North West Province. The district comprises 110 primary schools and 46 secondary schools, with only a few schools benefiting financially from the surrounding mining industry (Bongwe, 2017; Moses

Kotane Local Municipality, 2026). Prior to COVID-19, the Moses Kotane Local Municipality (MKLM) faced several socio-economic challenges, including poor infrastructure, deteriorating road networks, and limited resources (Moses Kotane Local Municipality, 2019). Furthermore, before COVID-19, youth employment across the North West Province was reported at 47.4% among youth aged 18–34 years, highlighting the municipality's existing socio-economic vulnerabilities (Godana, 2022). Bongwe (2017) attests to the presence of socio-economic challenges in this municipality prior to COVID-19, including high levels of illiteracy, which negatively impact the learning and earning potential of residents in the sub-district. Similarly, Worku (2020) reported that pre-COVID-19, the unemployment rate stood at 52.4%, and only 38.7% of the residents had completed matric.

These insights reveal that the district was already experiencing economic and educational challenges before COVID-19, which potentially increased vulnerability to COVID-19-related disruptions in teaching and learning. Such socio-economic challenges of unemployment and illiteracy led to reduced provision of ERT in rural schools across South Africa, with a consequent increase in COVID-19-related reading gaps (Makumbe, 2020).

Fleisch and Alsofrom (2022) synthesise research on instructional coaching in South Africa's Early Grade Reading Studies, including evidence from the Early Grade Reading Studies in South Africa (EGRS) conducted in the North West Province. This exacerbated existing achievement gaps, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Payne (2024) noted that COVID-19 also impacted reading skills, particularly in phonics and comprehension, due to inconsistent teaching and learning. The disruption affected learners' ability to reach critical reading milestones, such as mastering basic sight words and developing reading fluency.

The following section outlines the Rationale of the study.

1.3 RATIONALE OF AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study addressed the need to understand the longer-term implications of the reading disruption experienced by learners who entered Grade One in 2020. Although reading difficulties in South African schools existed before the COVID-19 pandemic,

the disruption of formal teaching and learning during the pandemic created conditions that may have further constrained opportunities for the development of foundational reading skills. The 2020 Grade One cohort is therefore important to investigate because these learners experienced emergency education during a critical stage of literacy development and then progressed through the schooling system with potentially different levels of reading proficiency.

Existing literature has documented the effects of COVID-19-related disruptions on learning and literacy development, including reduced instructional time, interruptions to classroom-based teaching, and unequal access to learning resources (Ardington et al., 2021; Patrinos et al., 2022). However, there remains a need for research that examines how these disruptions are experienced and understood by educators who have taught learners from the affected cohort in later grades. There is a limited understanding of how Grade Six educators perceive and describe the perceived reading challenges of learners who were in Grade One during the 2020 disruptions, and if educators are responding to these perceived challenges within their specific school contexts.

The study is further motivated by the importance of the transition from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase for learners. By Grade Six, learners are expected to use reading as an essential means of accessing learning across subjects (DBE, 2011). Difficulties in foundational reading skills may therefore have implications beyond language learning and may affect learners' participation and engagement with the wider curriculum. Understanding educators' experiences may provide insights into the nature of the reading challenges they encounter and the strategies they use to support learners who continue to experience reading difficulties.

The focus on Grade Six educators in the selected rural primary schools in the Moses Kotane District is deliberate. These educators work within a particular educational and socioeconomic context and could provide contextually situated accounts of their experiences. The study does not assume that COVID-19 was the sole cause of learners' reading difficulties, because reading proficiency challenges existed before the pandemic. Rather, it seeks to understand twelve selected Grade Six educators' perceptions of the perceived reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort. These

educators did not have first-hand experiences of the learners' learning experiences in 2020. However, they were able to compare these learners' reading levels in Grade Six in 2025 compared to their previous cohorts of Grade Six learners' reading levels. By examining their experiences regarding the reading level of the 2025 Grade Six learners, the study may contribute to a better understanding of selected educators' experiences of reading levels of their current Grade Six learners and provide contextually relevant insights for educators, school management teams and education officials responsible for supporting reading development in rural schools.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework for the study.

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Salawu et al., (2023), a theoretical framework guides a research study and helps with analysis of the data. Similarly, Eisenhart (1991) describes a theoretical framework as an anchoring base for the literature review and the study's methods and analysis.

The theoretical framework chosen for this study was Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (1979). Several South African studies have successfully used Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) as a framework for educator experience-focused studies (Davies, 2021; Pewa & Mzimela, 2024). Although this theory is often used to explain learners' development, it is pertinent to this study for addressing the long-term effects of Grade One emergency education during the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' reading competence as experienced by Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory in education emphasises that a learner's development is influenced by various environmental systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). In this study, the use of this theory enabled the researcher to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gaps among Grade Six learners and the implications of these gaps for teaching and learning. A detailed discussion of each system and its specific relevance to this study is provided in Chapter Two.

Briefly, at the microsystem level, the immediate classroom interaction between educators and learners was disrupted by COVID-19, affecting reading instruction. The mesosystem highlights the relationship between school and home, where limited parental support may have further widened the reading gap. The exosystem encompasses external institutional decisions, such as curriculum recovery plans and assessment circulars, which shaped educators' experiences. The macrosystem includes broader socio-economic and policy influences, including the CAPS and the Language of Teaching and Learning (LOLT) policy, as well as rural disadvantage. The chronosystem captures the long-term trajectory of disruption from 2020, when these learners were in Grade One, until 2025, when they were in Grade Six. Against this background, the study sought to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of teaching learners who entered Grade One during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently progressed to Grade Six with reading gaps. The study specifically aimed to understand how these educators experienced and responded to the reading challenges encountered by these learners. Each of these systems is examined in detail in Chapter Two.

The next section covers key concepts pertinent to the study.

1.5 KEY CONCEPTS

Certain concepts are frequently used in this study write-up. An explanation of these pertinent concepts is provided next.

1.5.1 Reading gap

In this study, the term *reading gap* refers to the inability to read without stammering or misspelling, as well as limited reading access and reading without understanding (Keith, 2018). The reading gap can have long-term consequences for learners' academic success, particularly in higher grades (Hicks, 2023). Reading gaps can be understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), which suggests that learners encountering reading gaps in Grade One may struggle to develop essential reading skills, including phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, in upper grades.

1.5.2 Learning gap

The term *learning gap* refers to any insufficiency in knowledge or skills for a specific age of learner in an age-appropriate activity due to discontinuities and disruptions in a learner's academic life (Huang & Hung, 2017). In this study, the concept specifically refers to the reading gap that emerged among learners whose Grade One schooling was disrupted by COVID-19 and emergency education measures.

1.5.3 Grade R

In the South African education system, Grade R is referred to as the Reception Grade (Department of Education [DBE], 2021). It is the year of schooling that precedes grade One and provides young children with foundational experiences that prepare them for formal schooling (DBE, 2021). Grade R forms part of the Foundation Phase and provides opportunities for the development of early literacy, numeracy, language, social and cognitive skills that support children's transition into Grade One.

Grade R is pertinent to this study because the 2020 Grade One cohort had completed only Grade R before entering formal schooling just before the COVID-19 disruptions. This made their transition to formal reading more vulnerable than under normal circumstances.

1.5.4 Grade One

Grade One is the first formal education grade. During Grade One, learners transition from Grade R to more structured learning. Grade One learners are usually aged six if born before June in the year of commencing school or seven-years-old if born after June during their first year of formal schooling (Segooa, 2023).

Focusing on the Grade One cohort of 2020 is important because Grade One marks the beginning of formal schooling in South Africa. It is also the first year of a three-year phase of foundational learning, known as the Foundation Phase, which lays the groundwork for future academic achievement. Consequently, any reading gaps encountered during 2020 might have negatively affected the performance of learners in other grades, jeopardising the quality of teaching and learning.

1.5.5 Language of learning and teaching

Language of Learning and Teaching refers to the language in which learners are taught and assessed. It can be a native language for Foundation Phase learners and English or Afrikaans for Grade Four learners and beyond (Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). This is because in South Africa, African languages are recognised as the Language Of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) in the Foundation Phase, while English or Afrikaans may become the language of learning and teaching intermediate Phase and beyond (DBE, 1997a; 1997b)

A lack of development of sufficient reading skills during the Foundation Phase may negatively affect learner performance in the Intermediate Phase, as English is the LOLT for grades above the Foundation Phase in South African schools (Ntombela, 2019). Not only do learners need to develop adequate oral communication skills, but they also need to learn phonics and literacy. The 2020 Grade One learners may have missed out on reading opportunities due to COVID-19-related academic disruptions (Bouraima & Zonon, 2020).

1.5.6 Rural schools

According to Azano et al., (2020), rural schools are educational institutions located in areas far from facilities, with some of such areas encountering poor infrastructure, and distant from cities and towns. As emphasised by Azano et al. (2020), limited resources, combined with limited technology, negatively impact learners' reading abilities. This definition of rural schools is relevant to this study because all the participating schools are in rural communities within the Moses Kotane District, where resource constraints may have contributed to learners' reading gaps. Most rural schools in the Moses Kitane District are classified within the lower school quintiles, such as Quintiles 1–3. Government schools are classified into five quintiles according to the socio-economic conditions of the communities they serve. Quintile 1 represents the most disadvantaged schools, while Quintile 5 represents the most affluent (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2024).

1.6 PROBLEM STATEMENT

South Africa has long faced literacy challenges, with many learners struggling to read for meaning as expected at particular grade levels (Reimers, 2022). National and international assessments have consistently shown that a large proportion of learners fail to acquire foundational reading skills during the Foundation Phase, resulting in persistent reading difficulties in later grades (Kuhfeld, Lewis, & Peltier, 2023). These literacy challenges are particularly severe in rural and under-resourced schools, where learners often have limited access to reading materials, educational support, and literacy-rich learning environments (Samar, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b).

The COVID-19-related academic disruptions further intensified the literacy crisis. School closures, rotational timetables, curriculum trimming, and interruptions to traditional teaching substantially reduced opportunities for the 2020 Grade One learners to develop foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Dlamini, Maharaj, & Dunn, 2021). Because Grade One represents the beginning of formal literacy instruction, disruptions during this critical stage may have had lasting consequences for learners' academic development.

Research has shown that early reading difficulties often persist throughout a learner's schooling career if not effectively addressed. Learners who fail to acquire foundational reading skills in the early grades frequently experience challenges in later grades, where reading becomes the primary means of learning (Gustafsson & Deliwe, 2020). However, despite the COVID-19-related reading gaps, the 2020 Grade One cohort was promoted to Grade Two as per the National Assessment Circular Two of 2020, which required that all learners progress to the next grade (Hoadley, 2020). This circular addressed COVID-19-related learner assessments and evaluations, including curriculum trimming, mark adjustments, progression, and promotion to higher grades (Hoadley, 2020). The curriculum-trimming policy is likely to have negatively impacted the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort, resulting in reduced reading proficiency and widening reading gaps during the lockdown period. The 2020 Grade One learners arrived in Grade Two in 2021, where they continued to experience a trimmed curriculum. They were eventually introduced to the Intermediate Phase in

2023, where they encountered the Grade Four to Six Intermediate Phase curriculum, comprising subjects such as Mathematics, Languages, Life Skills, Natural Sciences and technology and Social Sciences, with the language of learning and teaching determined in accordance with the school's language policy (Department of education, 1997b).

Although existing studies have documented the impact of COVID-19 on learning loss and literacy development, limited research has explored how 2025 Grade Six educators in rural South African schools experienced and responded to the reading challenges of learners who were in Grade One during the 2020 COVID-19 disruptions. In the Moses Kotane District, where many schools face socio-economic and resource-related challenges, little is known about educators' experiences teaching this cohort and the strategies they used to address the resulting reading gaps. This study, therefore, sought to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One reading gap in the Moses Kotane District to better understand the long-term effects of COVID-19 disruptions on literacy development and identify possible interventions to support reading recovery.

The next section outlines the main research question and its sub-questions, which supported the study's aim and objectives.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the problem statement of this study, the main research question was *How do Grade Six Educators in the Moses Kotane District experience the 2020 Grade One Reading Gap?*

The following research sub-questions were formulated to address the main research question:

1. To what extent was the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort adversely affected by COVID-19 in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District?

2. How do Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District perceive and describe the impact of emergency education in Grade One on learners' reading ability in Grade Six?
3. What do the existing literature and the study findings reveal about strategies for addressing the reading gap among Grade Six learners in the Moses Kotane District following the implementation of emergency education when these learners were in Grade One?

The next section focuses on the aim, objectives, and research methodology that guided this study.

1.8 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1.8.1 Aim of the study

The research study aimed to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of addressing the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort in the Moses Kotane District.

1.8.2 Objectives of the study

The following were the objectives of the study:

1. To determine the extent to which the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort was adversely affected by COVID-19 in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District.
2. To explore how Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District perceive and describe the impact of emergency education in Grade One on learners' reading ability in Grade Six.
3. To identify strategies, informed by the existing literature and study findings, for addressing the reading gap among Grade Six learners in the Moses Kotane District following the implementation of emergency education when they were in Grade One.

1.9 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Gupta and Gupta (2022), a research methodology helps researchers identify, collect, and analyse data received from a specific research study. It also determines the direction of the research and provides the study's overall philosophical background (Mohajan, 2017).

This section details the application of relevant strategies for answering the research questions using case studies. It also provides an overview of the research methods, including the study sample, data collection method, data analysis approach, and strategies to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

1.9.1 Research design

A research design is defined as any structure that sequentially organises proposed research work, supports the research that answers the research questions, and enables the collection of data accordingly (Asenahabi, 2019). Case study research was particularly relevant to this study because it enabled an in-depth examination of Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gap among learners whose Grade One education may have been adversely affected by COVID-19 in 2020. The participant educators were not the same educators who had taught the Grade One cohort in 2020. However, based on their years of experience in teaching Grade Six, they would be able to share their perceptions and experiences against teaching Grade Six cohorts before. The case study design therefore provided an opportunity to develop a contextualised and nuanced understanding of the possible impact of COVID-19-related academic disruptions on their reading abilities (Schoch, 2020).

Specifically, the study employed a qualitative single case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018) to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gap among learners whose Grade One education was disrupted by emergency education measures implemented in response to COVID-19. The case was bounded by the phenomenon under investigation, namely Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One cohort's reading gap, within the context of selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. Six primary schools were selected as research sites, with two Grade Six educators participating from each school. The inclusion of

educators from different schools enabled the researcher to obtain perspectives from across different school contexts while maintaining the educators' experiences of the reading gap as the central case under investigation.

1.9.1.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of principles that guide research throughout the study, shaping how the researcher perceives reality and the methods employed to investigate the problem statement (Pathiranage et al., 2020). The interpretive paradigm is a framework for interpreting information from participants' experiences and perspectives (Kekeya, 2021) and facilitates researchers' in-depth understanding of the research problem. This paradigm was employed because the study sought to understand the experiences and perspectives of Grade Six educators regarding the long-term effects of the reading gap among learners whose Grade One education may have been impacted as a consequence of COVID-19. The paradigm enabled the researcher to engage directly with current Grade Six educators to understand how they perceive and make sense of the reading challenges experienced by these learners in Grade Six.

1.9.1.2 Research approach

The study employed a qualitative approach to explore Grade Six educators' experiences and perspective of the 2020 Grade One learners reading gap in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. Qualitative research enables a thorough knowledge of unique situations and conditions (Tisdell, Merriam & Tuckey-Payrot, 2016) as it attempts to extract deeper meaning and insights from situations (Maree, 2022). Using this approach enabled participants to share their experiences and perceptions, providing useful background information on which to base recommendations (Nassaji, 2015). Through this approach, the researcher was able to understand how Grade Six educators interpret and make sense of the reading challenges encountered by learners who experienced the disruption of their Grade One education.

1.10 RESEARCH METHODS

Research methods serve as tools and strategies that assist researchers in studying their area of interest by gathering data, which they later analyse to solve their stated problem (Johannesson & Perjons, 2021). This study explored current selected Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gaps created by COVID-19 disruptions among the learners of the 2020 Grade One cohort. The research methods described below, including participant selection, data collection techniques, and data analysis, were employed as essential components to conducting meaningful and insightful research.

1.10.1 Selection of participants

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to understand the central phenomenon of a problem statement (Ramsook, 2018). For this study, educators from six rural primary schools in the Moses Kotane District were purposively selected to explore the impact of COVID-19-related academic disruptions on the reading ability of Grade Six learners who were subjected to emergency education in their Grade One year due to COVID-19. The selected schools were considered appropriate research sites because they had lacked sufficient resources to sustain teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The participants were Grade Six educators who had at least five years of teaching experience at the same school prior to COVID-19, were employed at the same selected school during and after the lockdown period and had direct experience teaching learners affected by the pandemic. Accessibility and logistics were also considered to ensure that participating schools were located within roughly the same radius, thereby reducing transportation costs and facilitating the researcher's access to resources. Participants were thus purposively selected based on their accessibility/proximity and their experience of teaching at the same school throughout the period under investigation.

1.10.2 Data collection techniques

Data collection is the process of gathering data to address a problem statement and is a crucial stage in the research process (Pitikoe-Chiloane et al., 2025). To gather data, two qualitative research methods were employed: open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections. Both of these research methods were appropriate for this particular study, which depended on obtaining honest and comprehensive responses from the participants. Open-ended questioning allowed the researcher to ask more questions to facilitate genuine, in-depth participation (Adams, 2015). With open-ended, semi-structured interviews, participants often feel more at ease when discussing their thoughts with the researcher (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to understand the context in which participants lived and worked, thereby facilitating the interpretation of their experiences. Participants in open-ended, semi-structured interviews can provide the researcher with additional insights into their challenges, enabling exploration of new avenues related to the topic (Beitin, 2012). An in-depth investigation is a requirement for adopting open-ended interviews, as it enables participants to thoroughly examine their experiences, perceptions, and motivations (Beitin, 2012). It also allows people to freely express themselves without being limited by closed questions. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to prepare questions in advance to accordance with the research objectives while retaining sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their views and experiences (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Each participant underwent a face-to-face interview with the researcher in a quiet space at their school, lasting for approximately one hour.

Written reflections were chosen as the second data collection method because they typically elicit participants' opinions, observations, struggles, and lessons learned (Prior & Lunsford, 2009). Written reflections promote flexibility and anonymity, providing individual perspectives that make them more valuable than focus groups, where data can be easily collected from a larger group, potentially offering a broader range of insights (Palys, 2008). Through the Grade Six educators' written reflections, the researcher gained deeper insights into the pandemic's impact on learners' reading

gaps. The reflections helped identify key factors contributing to the educators' experiences of COVID-19-related reading gaps and elicited opportunities for participants to propose strategies for addressing them.

1.10.3 Data analysis

In qualitative research, data may be collected in various forms, including oral responses obtained through interviews, which can be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data analysis involves systematically organising, categorising and interpreting the collected data to identify meaningful patterns and themes (Bhandari, 2017).

A thematic analysis of the open-ended, semi-structured interviews and participants' written reflections, using Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach, was undertaken in this study. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and flexibility within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2021), and it helps to answer research questions about the participants' experiences, views, and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The researcher employed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps of thematic analysis: familiarising, generating initial codes, assessing themes, generating themes, and defining and labelling themes.

1.11 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define trustworthiness as a way to validate and ensure a high standard of research. In a qualitative research, researchers employ specific methodological strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the research process, findings and interpretations rather than relying primarily on the concepts of reliability and validity (Stahl & King, 2020). Through trustworthiness, the researcher ensured that the study was honest and transparent, with a reasonable conclusion. The critical strategies that confirmed transparency and trustworthiness in this qualitative research study are credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

The next section outlines the ethical considerations that informed the study.

1.12 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide a researcher's research ideas and procedures. They require the researcher and participants to follow specific rules during data collection to avoid costs, risks, and conflicts at the end of the data collection process (Khan, 2024).

The researcher obtained approval to conduct the research from the University of South Africa's Ethics Committee (Ref: 2024/11/15/000000/323/06/RB) and the North West Department of Education before data collection commenced. Approval to conduct the research at the six sampled schools was received, and the researcher informed the interested participants, teaching the Intermediate Phase, that their participation in the study was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time if deemed necessary. Additionally, participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. The ethical measures taken to uphold the study's ethical standards are expanded on in Chapter Three.

The section below provides an overview of each chapter in this dissertation.

1.13 CHAPTER DIVISIONS

This dissertation comprises five chapters.

CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATION

This chapter provided an overview of the research topic, its context, and the study's significance. The chapter introduced the research problem: to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One reading gap in the Moses Kotane District. It also provided a brief explanation of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) as the theoretical framework of the study. The chapter also covered key concepts related to the study, the research questions and sub-questions, the aim and objectives of the study, the research methodology, as well as trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE READING GAP OF THE GRADE ONE 2020 LEARNER COHORT

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature underpinning the study, organised around the three formulated research sub-questions. It examines the impact of COVID-19-related disruptions on early-grade reading internationally and in South Africa, explores educators' experiences and perspectives on the resulting reading gap, and reviews interventions and strategies to address reading deficits. The chapter is framed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), which is explained as relevant to the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research methodology used to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One reading gap in the Moses Kotane District. It discusses the research design, sampling strategies, data collection methods, thematic analysis, and the tools employed for data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents, discusses, and interprets the findings. It incorporates the theoretical framing of the study and links the research question, sub-questions, and the aim and objectives. The three themes are divided into sub-themes to form meaning and to present the findings in a logical and coherent manner. The discussion of the findings links to the literature review in Chapter Two.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, the key findings of the study are summarised, conclusions are drawn, and appropriate recommendations are made. The study's conclusions are presented, along with a description of its limitations.

The next chapter, Chapter Two, explores the theoretical framework and reviews the pertinent literature.

2. CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE READING GAP OF THE GRADE ONE 2020 LEARNER COHORT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One provided a general overview of this study, while Chapter critically examines relevant literature on reading gaps, reading development, the effects of COVID-19 on foundational literacy, and educators' experiences in addressing persistent reading difficulties. The chapter engages with existing knowledge to establish what is known about reading gaps among learners who experienced disruptions to their early literacy development and to identify gaps in the existing body of knowledge. It further provides the theoretical and conceptual foundations for understanding educators' experiences and perspectives in addressing the reading gaps among the Grade Six learners who were in Grade One in 2020 . in doing so, the chapter positions the present study within the existing body of literature and provides a rationale for investigating how educators experience and address the continuing effects of the reading gap in rural schools in the Moses Kotane District.

The literature review in this chapter is organised into four main sections. Section 2.2 reviews literature relevant to the theoretical framework used in this study, namely Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (1979). The remaining sections critically examine existing related research on educator experiences and perspectives of the reading gap that may have occurred during COVID-19 and establishes how this study fits into the relevant body of knowledge (Snyder, 2019). Section 2.3 examines the impact of COVID-19-related disruptions on early-grade reading. It draws from both the international and national literature on learning loss, reduced instructional time, and the specific impact of academic disruption on foundational literacy skills. Section 2.4 explores educators' experiences and perspectives in identifying, understanding, and addressing reading difficulties and reading gaps among learners. Section 2.5 reviews recommendations, interventions, and strategies to address reading gaps, including pedagogical approaches, policy responses, and targeted support programmes relevant to primary school contexts.

Figure 2.1 provides an illustrative roadmap for Chapter Two. The chapter begins with a presentation and discussion of the theoretical framing for the study. Thereafter, the literature review is organised to align with and address the three sub-questions that guided the study.

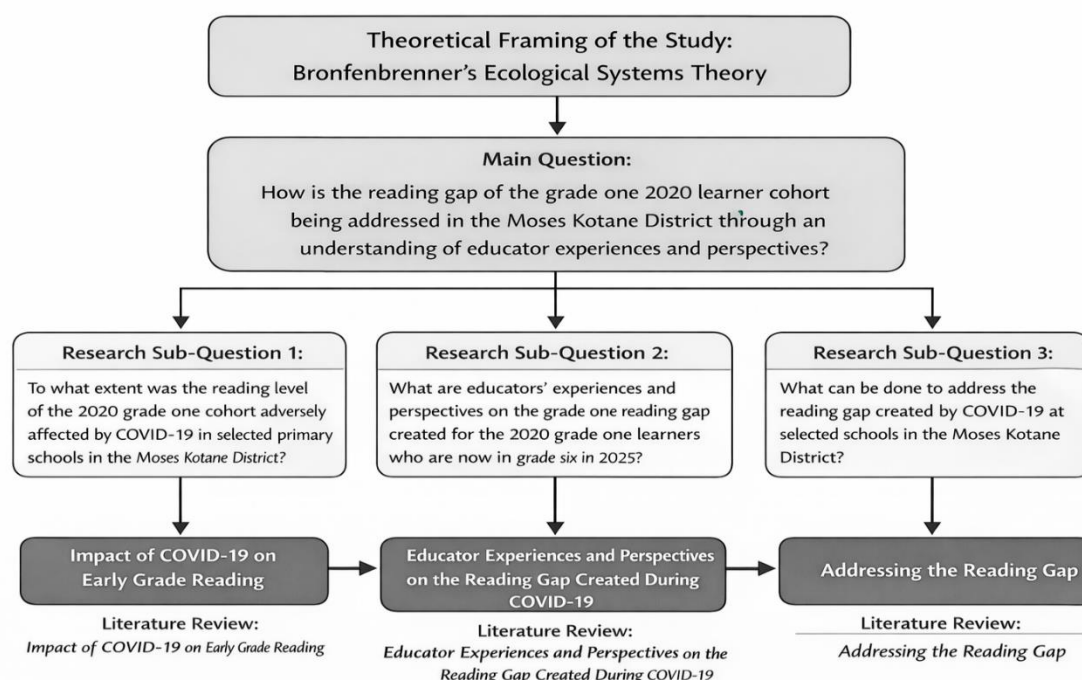


Figure 2.1: Illustrative roadmap of the literature review (own design)

Figure 2.1 shows the relationship between the main research question and the three sub-questions that guided the literature review.

The theoretical framework underpinning the study is discussed next.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the theoretical framework that underpinned the study and guided the analysis of Grade Six educators' experiences and perspectives regarding the 2020 Grade One reading gap in the Moses Kotane District.

A theoretical framework serves as a foundational guide, comprising models, theories, and concepts that inform research (Kivunja, 2018). It introduces and discusses the theory used and explains the necessity of investigating the research problem. It serves

as the foundation for a researcher's study (Kivunja, 2018). The full application of this theoretical framework to the study is presented in this section.

In this study, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) was used to frame an understanding of how multiple, interconnected environmental systems have influenced Grade Six educators' experiences regarding the Grade One reading gap. This theory is particularly relevant because it facilitated the exploration of classroom-level practices, school-home interactions, and broader systemic factors, such as policy changes, which have shaped how Grade six educators in the Moses Kotane District have experienced and addressed the reading gap for the 2020 Grade One learner cohort. This theory describes how human development is influenced by interconnected sets of environmental systems (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017).

Figure 2.2 illustrates how Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory was contextualised to examine Grade six educators' experiences and perceptions of the reading ability and reading challenges experienced by the Grade Six learners who were the 2020 Grade One cohort and therefore subjected to emergency education in Grade One due to the COVID-19 regulations.

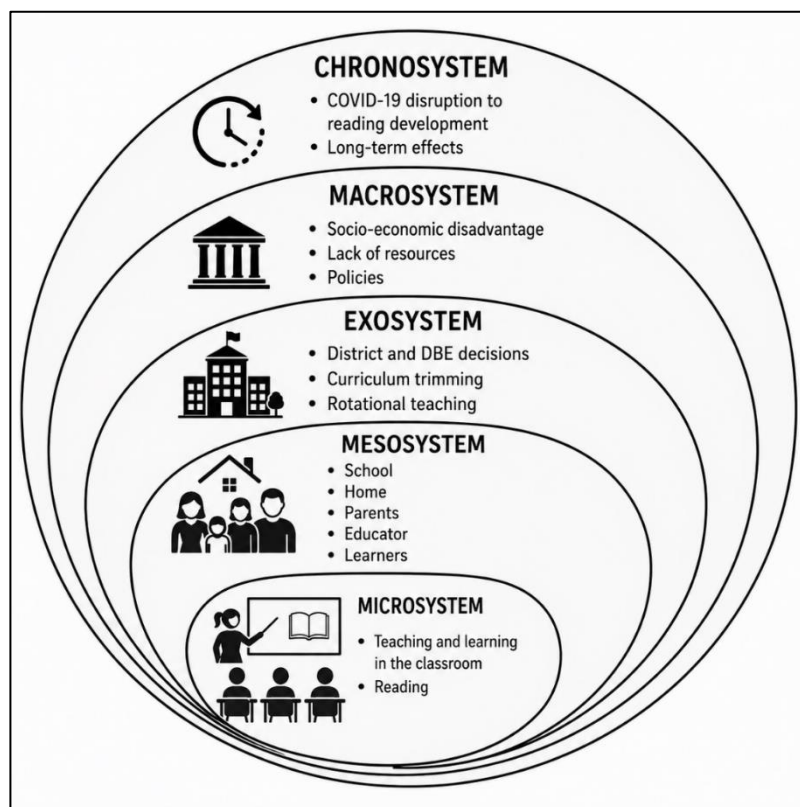


Figure 2.2: Levels of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems that may have Affected Grade Six Reading Challenges (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's model, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) is a relevant theoretical framework to use for this study because it helped to explain educators' experiences in relation to the 2020 Grade One reading gaps across multiple environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. This theory provided an understanding of how different environmental systems have influenced educators' experiences in supporting learners experiencing reading gaps. Furthermore, the theory offers a valuable curriculum perspective by demonstrating that curriculum development, implementation, and learner achievement are shaped by broad ecological factors that extend beyond the classroom. It therefore highlights the importance of considering the wider social, institutional, and environmental contexts that affect teaching, learning, and curriculum delivery. The bioecological systems are described below.

2.2.1 Microsystem

At the microsystem level, the theory highlights the immediate environment in which teaching and learning occur, as outlined by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979). In the context of this study, the microsystem provides a lens for considering the Grade Six classroom as an immediate educational environment in which educators and learners interact during teaching and learning. Literature on literacy development highlights the importance of classroom interactions, instructional practices and the availability of learning resources in supporting learners' reading development (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). The microsystem therefore guided the study to explore educators' experiences and perspectives of supporting Grade Six learners with reading challenges following the disruption to Grade One education during COVID-19.

It is at the microsystem level that daily interactions take place. These include or are influenced by teaching, reading activities, availability of reading materials, learner attendance, and behaviour (Calhoun, 2025). Similarly, Crawford (2020) explains that

a child's immediate environment plays a vital role in the development of their academic performance. This includes the classroom and teacher-learner environment, both of which play a crucial role in shaping learners' academic improvement, such as in reading (Li & Zhang, 2022).

In the COVID-19 context, the microsystem was impacted by classes in 2020 being disrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown regulations, which shifted the microsystem from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote online classes, which had a long-term effect on learners' reading development (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). The Grade Six educators worked directly with learners in 2025 who had missed key aspects of reading in their Grade One year (in 2020), including daily phonics instruction, reading fluency, and comprehension (Kaczrowski-Taylor, 2025). When these learners were in Grade One, they struggled to adapt to online learning (Martin et al., 2022). This resulted in reading gaps, as some learners could not read at home. Educators also faced challenges in delivering remote lessons, especially in guiding learners in reading or providing reading materials (Kruger et al., 2023). Research on rural South African schools during the pandemic further underscores the severity of this disrupted microsystem (Lubemba, 2024; Ramdin & Mabaso, 2026). As a direct consequence of the 2020 lockdown, the immediate interaction between educators and learners was severed (Breckenridge, 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), resulting in disrupted teaching time, curriculum trimming, rotational timetables, and learners entering Grade Six with weak foundational reading skills. These specific conditions shaped how educators, including those in the Moses Kotane District, taught reading and how they experienced and perceived their professional responsibilities in the post-COVID-19 period.

2.2.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to interactions among microsystems, particularly the relationship between the school and the home (parents), aimed at improving learners' academic performance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017; Honickman, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, parental involvement in supporting reading development became increasingly important, and in many cases, the limited relationship between parents and educators widened the learners' reading gaps (Gustafsson & Nuga, 2020). The theoretical framework helps to consider how these

weakened connections continue to affect the educators' ability to support learners in later grades.

The mesosystem is relevant to this study because it underscores the importance of collaboration among learners, educators, parents, and other relevant stakeholders in addressing reading gaps. More specifically, the mesosystem focuses on the relationships and interactions between the different settings in which learners participate, particularly the relationship between school and the home environment. From this perspective, parental involvement, learner attendance, and families may influence learners' literacy development. Limited parental support and inconsistent learner attendance can weaken the connections between the home and school environments, thereby creating challenges for educators in supporting learners who experience reading difficulties (Mahmud, 2025).

The relationship between schools and families may also be influenced by learners' social and socioeconomic circumstances. Munje and Mncube (2018) highlight the challenges that may arise when parental involvement and communication between schools and families are limited. In context of literacy development, limited parental support may make it difficult for educators to communicate learners' reading difficulties to parents and to encourage reading-related activities at home (Munje & Mncube, 2018).

2.2.3 Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that the exosystem includes broad institutional structures that indirectly influence teaching and learning. In the context of this study, the exosystem is relevant because educational policies, district-level decisions, curriculum arrangements, and institutional support may influence the conditions within which educators address learners' reading development. During COVID-19, disruptions to schooling, including curriculum adjustments and reduced instructional time, affected opportunities for learning and contributed to learning losses. Spaul and van der Berg (2020), for example, documented the potential effects of school closures and disruptions to learning on educational outcomes in South Africa. Although their analysis was conducted during the pandemic, their work provides important contextual

evidence for understanding how disruptions to the education system may have affected the development of foundational literacy skill.

Within the exosystem, educators experienced the interruption of parts of the year's curriculum due to a disruption of the academic year from March to July 2020. Upon returning from lockdown on 26 July 2020, educators had to implement rotational timetables to maintain social distancing (Hoadley, 2020). Assessment circular S17 of 2021 issued by the DBE, outlined the revised assessment weighting for School-Based Assessments (SBAs) and had to be followed (Jambaya, 2023).

In the context of this study, the exosystem is particularly important because it captures the institutional decisions that Grade Six educators had no control over, yet which profoundly shaped their teaching and learning experiences. Decisions such as curriculum recovery plans, assessment circulars, resource allocation, and staffing shortages directly influenced educators' teaching strategies, increased their workloads, and contributed to the stress of managing a persistent reading gap among the learners of the 2020 Grade One cohort.

2.2.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the wider socio-economic and cultural context that may influence educational experiences and outcomes. Research has documented the economic disadvantages experienced by communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as disparities in access to educational resources (Bridgman et al., 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In rural contexts, limited access to resources such as books, technology and supportive learning environments has been identified as factor that may contribute to inequalities in literacy development. These broader socio-economic and contextual factors have implications for learner outcomes and educators' experience and perspectives.

It is at the macrosystem level that values, policies, and socio-economic conditions may be explained. At the school level, the implementation of prescribed CAPS requirements and Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) policies shape educators' classrooms practices and responses to reading challenges.

Previous research has identified rurality, limited internet connectivity and inadequate access to digital resources as challenges affecting teaching and learning during periods of educational disruption. In contexts where internet connectivity is limited, communication between educators, schools, parents and learners may be constrained, making the transition from face-to-face to remote forms of teaching more difficult. Such constraints may have implications for educators' capacity to support learners' literacy development during periods of disrupted schooling (Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023).

2.2.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem focuses on life transitions and the role of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Batty (2022), the chronosystem also relates to predictable environmental changes that may affect a learner's individual lifetime, such as changes at the start of their formal schooling. This is pertinent to the study, as COVID-19 impacted learners' lives through the disrupted educational setting experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort, which also affected the educators' experiences. The long-term effects of this disruption are evident, as many of the 2020 Grade One cohort who progressed to Grade Six in 2025 still experience gaps in foundational reading skills (Hoadley, 2025). It is at the chronosystem level that life events and their changes over time are explained. In terms of the chronosystem in the school context, COVID-19 disruptions, long-term learning losses, and educators' perspectives on learners' progression from Grade One to Grade Six are discussed below.

The chronosystem concept helped the researcher to understand how early disruptions have continued to influence later educational learning experiences for educators and learners. It draws attention to the changes over time experienced by learners from 2020 (Grade One) to 2025 (Grade Six) and how these changes affected educators' experiences of reading in the classroom. Spaul and van der Berg, (2020) reported on the way the COVID-19 lockdown in the first quarter of the 2020 negatively affected the academic year. However, the impact of the emergency education implemented during this time had a much longer negative effect than originally anticipated. Educationists were especially concerned about the long-term impact of remote emergency education on Grade One learners' reading development (Stark et al., 2026; Van der Berg &

Böhmer, 2025). The changes over time following COVID-19 disruptions in 2020, and the ongoing effects of the lack of foundational reading skills on reading and consequently also learning in Grade Six, thus reflects the chronosystem, which teachers need to recognise when approaching and addressing educational challenges.

Learners who struggled in their 2020 Grade One year may still face ongoing challenges due to curriculum trimming and the implementation of Circular S17 of 2021, underscoring the importance of foundational skills for future learning (Jambaya, 2023). Loss of learning in the Foundation Phase may have long-term consequences in higher grades, as learners are promoted without accruing the basic knowledge and skills they should have developed before promotion (Venketsamy, 2025).

Overall, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) is relevant to this study, as it provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the multiple, interconnected factors influencing educators' experiences. The theory highlights that the reading gap is not only a classroom issue but may also be shaped by broader social, institutional, and time-related contexts. These theoretical propositions provide a basis for examining Grade Six educators' experiences and perspectives of the reading gap among learners whose reading development was disrupted during their Grade One year in 2020.

Although the theory provides a useful framework for understanding how home, school, community, policy, and socio-economic factors interact to influence literacy development, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on learner outcomes rather than educators' experiences. This study extends the application of the theory by exploring Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gap among learners whose reading development was disrupted during their Grade One year in 2020.

The chapter now turns to a review of the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on early-grade reading.

2.3 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EARLY-GRADE READING

The education system worldwide was affected by COVID-19, resulting in significant reading loss among early grades globally. This section examines the impact of COVID-19 on early reading by focusing on learning loss, reduced instructional time, and disruptions to foundational literacy skills. The review begins with a consideration of the international literature before the focus is narrowed to the South African context and the realities of rural, under-resourced schools, as the educators who participated in the study hail from such schools.

2.3.1 Reading loss during COVID-19 internationally and nationally

Owing to widespread disruption to education systems worldwide caused by COVID-19, emergency remote teaching (ERT) was introduced, which limited opportunities for effective teaching and learning (Gurung, 2021; Hassan, Mirza & Hussain, 2020). Notably, due to the COVID-19 lockdown and subsequent social distancing requirements, which resulted in curriculum trimming, rotational timetabling, and emergency remote teaching, educators reported challenges in delivering effective instruction, and in many cases, a substantial portion of the curriculum was not covered (Sharp, Nelson, Lucas, Julius, McCrone & Sims, 2020). Whereas some countries attempted to implement online learning, this approach was not equally accessible to all learners globally.

International organisations such as UNESCO (2020b) and UNICEF (2021) have highlighted that learners from low-income households, rural areas, and marginalised communities were the ones most affected by COVID-19, resulting in dropout and possibly grade failure. These learners faced limited access to digital resources, inadequate home learning environments, and reduced parental support (Jiang et al., 2022). As a result, COVID-19 exposed existing educational inequalities and significantly disrupted early reading development. (Filipe & Frota, 2023; Meredith, 2026; Pilonieta et al., 2024).

Reading gaps in South Africa widened due to the loss of contact time during the COVID-19-related prolonged school closures from March 2020 (DBE, 2020b). During this time, learners were unable to engage consistently with educators, resulting in

limited educator support and slower academic progress. This was detrimental to Foundation Phase learners, whose reading development depends on traditional or face-to-face teaching and guided learning (Gustafsson & Deliwe, 2020). Learners from disadvantaged communities experienced greater difficulty maintaining and developing reading skills than their more advantaged peers (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Consequently, the pandemic deepened existing inequalities within the South African education system.

The reading losses experienced during COVID-19 extended beyond the loss of traditional teaching time because Foundation Phase learners also missed important opportunities to develop essential reading skills such as letter-sound recognition, phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, and reading comprehension (Vaz, 2024). These skills are typically developed through daily teacher-guided reading activities, shared reading, group reading, and continuous feedback (Ramsa & Rawian, 2021). Owing to school closures, rotational attendance, and limited access to online learning resources, many learners progressed to higher grades without mastering these foundational reading competencies (Van der Berg & Böhmer, 2024). Consequently, Intermediate Phase educators encountered learners who struggled to read age-appropriate texts fluently, comprehend written information, recognise common vocabulary, and engage meaningfully with learning activities that required independent reading (Nomlala & Baidoo, 2025). In rural schools, where access to books, libraries, internet connectivity, and parental academic support was limited, the effects of these reading losses were particularly pronounced and continued to influence learner performance several years after the pandemic.

2.3.2 Reduced reading time during COVID-19

One of the most important pieces of learning in the Foundation Phase that was lost due to reduced teaching time during COVID-19-related disruptions was reading. Rotational timetables shortened teaching time, and ERT not only affected reading in 2020 but also affected learners in the years beyond the pandemic (Hassan et al., 2020).

In the United Kingdom, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds lost an estimated three to four months of learning during the first lockdown alone (Stringer & Keys,

2021). Approximately 50% to 70% of reading time was lost internationally, and eight to 10 weeks were lost due to lockdown, with many learners missing daily guided reading, phonics lessons, and literacy activities that would normally accumulate to the amount of reading hours required for sufficient reading exposure each week (Ardington et al., 2021; Ehsan, 2024).

In the United States, the shift to remote learning reduced reading time for many early-grade learners, with some districts reporting that learners received as little as two to three hours of direct instruction per day compared with the typical six-hour school day (Kuhfeld et al., 2023). Consequently, learners received approximately 50% to 67% less face-to-face teaching time than they would have if lessons were not disrupted (Nikolopoulou, 2022). During the lost time, learners had fewer opportunities for reading practice and non-teacher-guided reading as well as fewer literacy development activities. The COVID-19 disruptions proved particularly harmful to the development of reading, which requires consistent, structured, and repetitive engagement with text, phonics, and oral language activities (Ellis, 2026).

In South Africa, COVID-19-related rotational timetables and curriculum trimming substantially reduced contact teaching time in the Foundation Phase, particularly time for reading development (DBE, 2020). The shortening of Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) left critical phonics and reading content unaddressed and unassessed (DBE, 2020b). Learners in rural schools were further disadvantaged because many educators and learners lacked access to digital devices and stable internet connectivity, limiting their ability to send and receive reading materials via online channels during lockdown (Dube, 2020). Compared with their urban counterparts, learners from rural areas could not make up for lost reading time through online learning due to either connectivity issues or parents' inability to afford data to support internet access (Nchabeleng, 2025).

Consequently, the 2020 lockdown hindered Grade One learners from engaging in daily classroom interactions and receiving guided reading activities and educator support. Thus, they subsequently lost valuable, irreplaceable opportunities to develop essential reading foundations (Fleisch & Alsofrom, 2022). The cumulative effect of reduced

instructional time also created a structural gap in early literacy that would prove difficult to remediate in subsequent years (Fleisch & Alsofrom, 2022).

2.3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on foundational reading skills

The disruption caused by COVID-19 had a direct and lasting impact on the development of foundational reading skills. Foundational literacy refers to learners' ability to read, comprehend, and engage with age-appropriate texts, laying the foundation for future learning and academic success (Breckenridge, 2024). Foundational literacy encompasses the core competencies required for reading, including phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension (Breckenridge, 2024). These components are sequential and interdependent; a weakness in one area invariably compromises development in others. For this reason, any disruption to early grade reading instruction carries significant long-term consequences.

Internationally, research conducted in the immediate aftermath of school closures revealed that learners who missed out on traditional teaching showed measurable declines in phonemic awareness and phonics acquisition (Kuhfeld et al., 2023). Studies in Australia have found that early-grade learners demonstrated lower scores in letter-sound knowledge and word recognition following extended periods of remote schooling during COVID-19 (Jackson et al., 2023). In the Netherlands, a natural experiment comparing learner progress during and after lockdown found a marked decline in foundational reading skills among Grade One to Three learners, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2021).

In the South African context, the 2020 Grade One cohort experienced interrupted reading instruction during the most critical stage of their early literacy development. As a result, many learners progressed through the education system without mastering basic reading competencies such as letter-sound relationships, blending, and decoding (Grobler, 2022). Hoadley (2023) further confirms that COVID-19 widened reading gaps among the 2020 Grade One cohort, with these effects persisting as learners progressed to higher grades. Local research has identified areas of concern including phonics, vocabulary, and reading fluency (Phala & Hugo, 2022). From a language-development perspective, learning is cumulative and dynamic, with new

linguistic representations built progressively on earlier and simpler forms of knowledge through ongoing interaction and feedback over developmental time (Rowland et al., 2026). Consequently, inadequate development of foundational reading skills may constrain learners' ability to establish connections with more complex language and reading knowledge in subsequent grades.

Many of the 2020 Grade One learners have progressed through the education system without mastering basic reading competencies. This has created ongoing and compounding challenges for Intermediate Phase educators who are required to support them in reading-dependent subjects (Payne, 2024; Petralis, 2026).

The literature reviewed consistently indicates that COVID-19 negatively affected early-grade reading development worldwide. Although researchers agree that school closures, reduced instructional time, and interruptions to teaching contributed to reading loss, the severity of these effects differed across contexts. Learners from disadvantaged and rural communities were generally more affected than those with access to educational resources and parental support. This study seeks to investigate the impact of COVID-19-disruptions on early-grade reading development by focusing on educators' experiences of learners' reading gaps in schools within the Moses Kotane District.

2.4 EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE READING GAPS CREATED DURING COVID-19

This section reviews existing literature on educators' experiences and perspectives regarding learning and reading gaps associated with COVID-19- related disruptions. Although previous studies have examined educators' experiences of the challenges associated with disrupted teaching and learning, the literature varies in terms of the educational phase, geographical context, nature of the learning loss examined, and the period in which educators' experiences were investigated. Particular attention is therefore given to studies addressing educators' experiences of reading difficulties, classroom realities, adaptive responses, and contextual factors, with consideration of research conducted in disadvantaged and rural school contexts. The review subsequently identifies the specific aspects that remain insufficiently explored in

relation to the reading experiences of the 2020 Grade One cohort in the Moses Kotane district.

2.4.1 Educator experiences during and after COVID-19

Internationally, research has documented a range of challenges educators experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown (Atilas et al., Mishra et al., 2020), particularly in maintaining learners' engagement and supporting literacy development when face-to-face instruction was disrupted and learners whose parents had limited literacy levels or were unavailable to assist at home (Gutierrez-Woods, 2022; Moehlen & Subasi Singh, 2022). These challenges were particularly pronounced in contexts where access to learning resources and opportunities for reading outside school was limited (UNESCO, 2020b).

The difficulty of assessing whether learners were developing basic literacy skills, such as letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and decoding, during ERT is widely reported (Breckenridge, 2024; Sucena et al., 2022). In countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, educators struggled to conduct meaningful formative assessments virtually, particularly with young learners who needed hands-on, guided support (Sharp et al., 2020). Many educators reported feeling professionally isolated and under-supported, as they lacked both the technological resources and the training for effective online early-literacy teaching (Johnson & Coleman, 2025).

In South Africa, educators experienced substantial disruption to teaching and learning during COVID-19, particularly due to the complete loss of face-to-face interaction with Foundation Phase learners (Grobler, 2022). The sudden shift from traditional classroom settings to remote learning created challenges for both educators and learners, especially in rural contexts where digital access was severely limited (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Owing to a lack of resources, parental support, and governmental support, many educators in rural areas lacked the means or alternatives to transition to ERT that required consistent access to smartphones, data, and the internet (Motsumi & Khumalo, 2024). As a result, teaching during lockdown in these contexts often ceased entirely.

The transition to remote teaching, when it occurred, required educators to rapidly adapt to new teaching modalities, often without adequate training or institutional support (Bridgman et al., 2020). Educators reported difficulties in maintaining learner engagement, providing immediate feedback, and monitoring learner progress in virtual environments (Makumbe, 2020). This disruption affected the bioecological process of learner-teacher interaction that is central to reading development in the early grades (Breckenridge, 2024).

2.4.2 Educator perspectives on the reading gap

International research conducted across different countries indicates that the return of learners to school after COVID-19 revealed significant disruptions to learning progress, particularly in reading. Studies conducted in diverse educational contexts reported that many learners returned to school with gaps in foundational literacy and language skills, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary, letter-sound knowledge and basic word recognition (Kuhfeld et al., 2023; Pichany, 2024). The common aspects learners struggled with, which included basic literacy concepts such as letter sounds, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and simple word recognition, were among the skills that were expected to have been mastered in the previous year (Johnson & Coleman, 2025). Grades One and Two were the grades that educators in primary school reported as being school-unready, as they lacked basic literacy skills (Knotts, 2023).

Internationally, educators reported difficulty teaching grade-level content while simultaneously addressing foundational reading gaps that emerged during lockdown (Sharp et al., 2020). Educators also reported severe pressure to recover learning losses within limited teaching time, while also contending with continued challenges linked to overcrowding and limited teaching resources (UNESCO, 2021). The emotional strain associated with seeing learners behind academically and lacking in confidence is widely acknowledged in the literature, alongside a greater acknowledgement of the importance of parental involvement and home literacy support than was recognised in education pre-COVID-19 (Kumar & Singh, 2026; UNICEF, 2021b). In an Indonesian context, Nadian and Afifi (2023) found that educators have responded to reading challenges by using strategies such as oral

feedback, opportunities for learners to read aloud, and other classroom-based approaches aimed at improving reading performance and learner confidence.

Alongside frustration with systemic inequalities that affected literacy recovery efforts, educators have also reported developing greater resilience, adaptability, and creative low-resource teaching approaches (Rwodzi & de Jager, 2021). Educators participating in a study conducted in the context of South Africa, reported that they developed a greater awareness of learners' social and emotional needs following the pandemic (Bridgman et al., 2020).

In South Africa, educators similarly reported returning to school in 2021 to find learners with significant gaps in foundational reading skills (Gustafsson, & Deliwe, 2020; Van der Berg et al., 2022). Learners in the Foundation Phase also demonstrated measurable declines in reading proficiency following the 2020 disruptions (Ardington et al., 2021). Educators in rural schools were particularly affected, as they had limited access to remedial resources and support structures (Mtande & Ross, 2024; Mukuna & Aloka, 2020; Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). Locally, studies have confirmed that reading gaps among the 2020 Grade One cohort were most evident in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and reading fluency (Hoadley, 2023; Phala & Hugo, 2022).

Continued frustration with systemic inequalities affecting rural schools and literacy recovery efforts is evident in the South African literature (Mokonyane & Radebe, 2025). Educators observed and recorded significant reading gaps among learners post COVID-19, and their perspectives on the nature and causes of these gaps are well documented in both the international and local literature (Ardington et al., 2021; Shaul et al., 2024). These authors further concur that educators from various primary schools have also reported that many Foundation Phase learners advanced to their higher grades without mastering foundational reading skills, creating ongoing, cascading challenges in classroom instruction.

The perceived severity of the reading gap is particularly pronounced in under-resourced schools, where access to digital tools and learning materials during COVID-19-related disruptions was limited (Makumbe, 2020). According to Statistics South Africa (2020), socio-economic inequalities played a significant role in widening

educational disparities during the pandemic. As a result, educators in rural and low-income schools consistently describe the COVID-19-related reading gap as not merely an academic issue, but a systemic and contextual challenge requiring sustained, long-term intervention at multiple levels of the educational system.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated extensive research on its effects on education, including disruptions to teaching and learning, learning losses, and challenges experienced by educators. However, fewer studies have examined how these disruptions continue to shape educators' experiences and perspectives several years after the initial school closures, particularly in relation to persistent reading difficulties among learners. Evidence focusing specifically on educators' experiences of addressing these longer-term reading gaps in rural South African contexts also remains limited. Consequently, this study contributes to the literature by examining how Grade Six educators continued to experience and address reading gaps among learners who were in Grade One in 2020.

2.5 ADDRESSING THE READING GAP

This section reviews literature on intervention strategies and support mechanisms to address reading gaps among learners following the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is specifically on pedagogical approaches, policy responses, targeted support programmes, and classroom-based interventions implemented to support reading recovery in primary schools. The section further explores how educators responded to persistent reading difficulties among learners who experienced disruptions to foundational literacy development during the pandemic.

The review begins with international literature on reading intervention strategies, then the focus is narrowed to South African and rural school contexts. Attention is given to educator-centered approaches that support reading development, including differentiated instruction, remedial teaching, guided reading, parental involvement, and curriculum support initiatives. The section reviews literature on how educators experienced and responded to reading gaps among learners following the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus also includes identifying learners' reading difficulties and responding to these difficulties through various classroom-based practices and available support structures.

2.5.1 Identifying learners' reading difficulties

International literature indicates that identifying reading difficulties is a critical step in addressing post-pandemic learning loss among primary school learners (Delgado, 2023; Payne, 2024). Researchers across countries like the Netherlands and Germany have found that many learners returned to school with deficiencies in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension due to prolonged school closures and interrupted instruction (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022; Schult, Mahler, Fauth & Lindner, 2022). In the United States, educators were required to conduct both informal and formal assessments to determine the extent of reading loss and to identify learners who required additional support (Pesnell, 2020). Other schools in different countries used diagnostic assessments, classroom observation, and oral reading activities as key tools for recognising reading difficulties and for developing intervention strategies for learners with reading difficulties post-COVID-19 (Ammour, 2021). Studies further show that educators who regularly monitored learner progress were better positioned to implement effective reading support programmes (Ciampa & Jagielo-Manion, 2021; Korinth & Nagler, 2021). Guided reading activities, one-on-one assessments, oral questioning, and differentiated classroom tasks have enabled educators to identify specific learner weaknesses and provide focused interventions (DeVries, 2023). International evidence therefore suggests that early identification of reading barriers is essential for improving literacy outcomes and preventing long-term academic difficulties (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri & Suman, 2022).

Internationally and locally, educators have implemented targeted reading interventions such as Drop All and Read, one-on-one reading support, and spelling bees to provide struggling readers with focused attention and boost learner confidence (Ablao, 2025; Kaffenberger et al., 2023; Musiyarira, 2023.). These adaptive strategies reflect educators' commitment to improving learner outcomes despite limited resources.

The South African education system has placed considerable pressure on educators to recover learning time lost during COVID-19 while ensuring curriculum coverage and learners' progression. As a result, educators have experienced increased workload, emotional fatigue, and staff turnover (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). Educators also

face pressure to cover the prescribed curriculum despite evident learning gaps. The need to balance curriculum coverage with remediation places additional strain on educators, often limiting their capacity to provide individualised support to learners (Kaffenberger et al., 2023). Educators reported experiencing stress, anxiety, professional guilt, and a sense of responsibility for addressing learning losses that were caused by circumstances beyond their control (UNICEF, & Education International, 2021). These challenges have heightened the importance of identifying reading difficulties, especially in rural and under-resourced schools (Mokonyane & Radebe, 2025).

2.5.2 Classroom-based strategies for addressing reading gaps

Internationally, a range of classroom-based pedagogical approaches was deployed in the aftermath of COVID-19 to address reading gaps among primary school learners (Goodman, 2023). Explicit and systematic phonics instruction was widely adopted as a foundational intervention. In England, the government reinforced its commitment to systematic synthetic phonics instruction following the pandemic, with additional investment in phonics training programmes for teachers and the provision of decodable reading books for struggling readers in primary schools (Clark & Picton, 2020). In the United States, numerous schools implemented structured literacy programmes to address phonological and decoding deficits identified in post-COVID-19 assessments of learners (Kuhfeld et al., 2023).

Breckenridge (2024) identifies reading aloud, storytelling, shared reading, group-guided reading, and targeted independent reading as evidence-based classroom pedagogies effective for supporting struggling readers. These approaches are widely documented in the international post-pandemic literature as strategies schools actively implemented to regain lost ground in literacy. Reading aloud by educators was found to improve learners' vocabulary and comprehension, while also fostering engagement with texts by learners who had lost the habit of reading during lockdown (Shahid et al., 2025). In both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases, shared reading has been found to be effective for supporting collaborative interaction between educators and learners using a shared text, as it builds comprehension skills through group engagement (Parkes, 2023).

Guided reading in small groups is another widely documented post-pandemic intervention. Research by Alamos and Williford (2020) has found that small group guided reading sessions enable educators to provide more targeted feedback and support to learners with specific decoding or comprehension difficulties. This approach has proved especially valuable in South African classrooms characterised by overcrowding because it enables educators to focus on learners with the greatest needs during dedicated group-reading time (Mofokeng, 2025). Similarly, Krashen (2018) emphasises the value of free voluntary reading for language and literacy development. In South African schools, the Drop All and Read (DEAR) approach has also been incorporated into school-based reading practices as a means of promoting a culture of reading (Wyngaardt, 2026)

Various strategies for addressing reading gaps have been implemented in the South African context. Some schools have reinforced the reinstatement and strengthening of dedicated reading periods, the distribution of graded reading books and newspapers to learners, and the introduction of additional morning reading sessions before the start of the formal school day (Fleisch & Alsofrom, 2022). Strategies adopted by educators include the creation of Professional Learning Committees (PLCs), which seek support from school management and make pragmatic adjustments to pacing and content delivery to align with classroom realities. Many educators have also used creative strategies to incorporate reading into their instruction, fully implement group-guided reading, and practice Drop All and Read (Bridgman et al., 2020).

Schools with limited resources, especially in rural settings, experienced setbacks during post-pandemic recovery efforts (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). These constraints include limited access to digital devices, inadequate reading materials, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient infrastructure to support ERT. In the Moses Kotane District, these contextual constraints were particularly evident, as the district's historical under-resourcing was compounded by COVID-19 disruptions (Mazibuko & Thebe, 2025). However, despite limited resources, educators have continued to implement the Drop All and Read programmes advocated by the DBE, which strengthen reading skills (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022).

2.5.3 School and system support for reading recovery

At the school and system levels, a range of documented interventions were implemented internationally and in South Africa to support reading recovery following COVID-19. In the United Kingdom, the Education Endowment Foundation launched a national tutoring programme in 2021 that provided funding for small-group and one-on-one tutoring support for disadvantaged learners in primary schools, with a specific focus on literacy and reading recovery (Stringer & Keys, 2021). In the United States, several states implemented *learning loss* programmes under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, which financed reading interventions, extended school days, summer reading camps, and the hiring of additional reading specialists in high-need schools (Kuhfeld et al., 2023).

In many countries, educators were provided with professional development in structured literacy, systematic phonics, and differentiated instruction through both government and NGO funding, equipping educators to address reading gaps more effectively (UNESCO, 2021). Professional Learning Committees were also established in numerous school districts to facilitate collaborative planning, shared assessment of learner data, and the development of evidence-based reading recovery plans (Brown, Horn & King, 2018). Research by Cavanagh and King (2020) has found that educators participating in structured PLCs reported greater confidence in addressing reading difficulties and demonstrated improved instructional practice compared with those working in isolation.

In South Africa, the DBE implemented curriculum recovery plans in 2020 and 2021 to address learning losses caused by COVID-19 disruptions. These plans included trimming ATPs to focus on essential content, providing workbooks and reading materials to learners, and deploying subject advisors to support schools in prioritising foundational literacy (DBE, 2020a). Some provincial education departments also implemented catch-up programmes and additional literacy support sessions in primary schools identified as the most severely affected by the pandemic (Khutwane, 2024).

At the school level, documented responses in South Africa include the implementation of Drop All and Read programmes in some schools, in-school workshops and PLCs among Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase educators, and the introduction of

structured reading programmes such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to track learner progress (Hoadley, 2023). According to Amin and Mahabeer (2023), subject advisors at the district level have also provided guidance to educators through workshops focused on identifying reading gaps and adapting curriculum delivery to address them. Chen and Adams (2023) confirm that support from subject advisors, particularly for new educators, would effectively reduce learning loss and help educators address literacy challenges.

In rural school contexts, district-level support structures can play an important role in strengthening educators' capacity to address literacy. The researcher, as a school principal in this context, has first-hand knowledge and experience of the value of subject-advisor support, reading recovery initiatives, collaborative planning, and school based professional development in supporting educators who work with learners experiencing reading difficulties.

2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPIRICAL STUDY

This chapter reviewed the literature relevant to the study and provided the theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding the reading gap as experienced by the 2020 Grade One learner cohort. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory was presented as the theoretical framework underpinning the study, demonstrating how interactions among the home, school, community, institutional, and broader socio-economic environments influence learners' reading development and educators' experiences.

The literature further revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted early-grade reading development through school closures, reduced instructional time, curriculum trimming, and limited access to learning resources. These disruptions resulted in persistent challenges in foundational reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

The chapter also reviewed literature on educators' experiences and perspectives regarding the challenges associated with supporting learners who were doing Grade One in 2020 and were possibly affected by COVID-19 related learning disruptions as late as them being in Grade Six in 2025. The literature highlights challenges such as

overcrowded classrooms, inadequate parental involvement, limited resources, and curriculum pressures, which may affect educators' capacity to support learners experiencing persistent reading difficulties.

Furthermore, the literature identified a range of strategies for addressing reading gaps, including early identification of reading difficulties, targeted classroom interventions, strengthened parental involvement, educator professional development, and sustained support from schools and the Department of Basic Education.

The next chapter, Chapter Three, outlines the research methodology used to investigate the research questions.

3. CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Two, specifically Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), this chapter outlines the research methodology and processes used to collect data. A qualitative research approach within the interpretivist paradigm was employed to address the main research question and its related sub-questions.

According to Clark et al., (2021), a research method is a tool used to identify, select, process, and analyse data for a study. In this study, an exploratory single-case study approach was adopted. As a guide, Table 3.1 presents a summary of the research paradigm, research design, sampling methods, participant selection procedures, and the data collection methods and instruments used in this study.

Table 3.1: Summary of research methodology

COMPONENTS		
RESEARCH LOCATION	Moses Kotane District	
RESEARCH DESIGN	Exploratory Single Case Study	
RESEARCH PARADIGM	Interpretive Paradigm	
RESEARCH APPROACH	Qualitative Research Approach	
SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS		
Purposive sampling		
DATA COLLECTION		
Open-ended, Semi-structured Interviews and Written Reflection		
DATA ANALYSIS		
Braun and Clarke’s Six-Step Thematic Analysis		
TRUSTWORTHINESS		
Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, and Transferability		
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS		
Confidentiality, Anonymity, Right to Withdraw, and Risk Factors		
PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION	AIM	DATA COLLECTION TOOLS
How do Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District experience the 2020 Grade One Reading gap?	To investigate how the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One learner cohort is being addressed in the Moses Kotane District by examining educators' experiences and perspectives.	1. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews 2. Written reflection
SUB-QUESTIONS	AIM	DATA COLLECTION TOOLS
To what extent was the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort adversely affected by COVID-19 in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District?	To gain in-depth insight into educators’ perceptions of how reading gaps affect learners’ academic progress.	1. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews 2. Written reflection
How do Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District perceive and describe the impact of emergency education in Grade One on learners’ reading ability in Grade Six ?	To explore educators’ experiences and perspectives regarding the reading gap of the 2020 Grade One cohort, now in Grade Six in 2025.	1. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews 2. Written reflection

What do the existing literature and the study findings reveal about strategies for addressing the reading gap among Grade Six learners in the Moses Kotane District following the implementation of emergency education when these learners were in Grade One	To establish effective strategies to be used to address the reading gap experienced.	1. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews 2. Written reflection

3.2 RESEARCH LOCATION

The study was conducted across six primary schools in the Moses Kotane District, located within the Moses Kotane Local Municipality in the North West Province of South Africa. Figure 3.1 illustrates the geographical location of the Moses Kotane Local Municipality within the North West Province and South Africa.

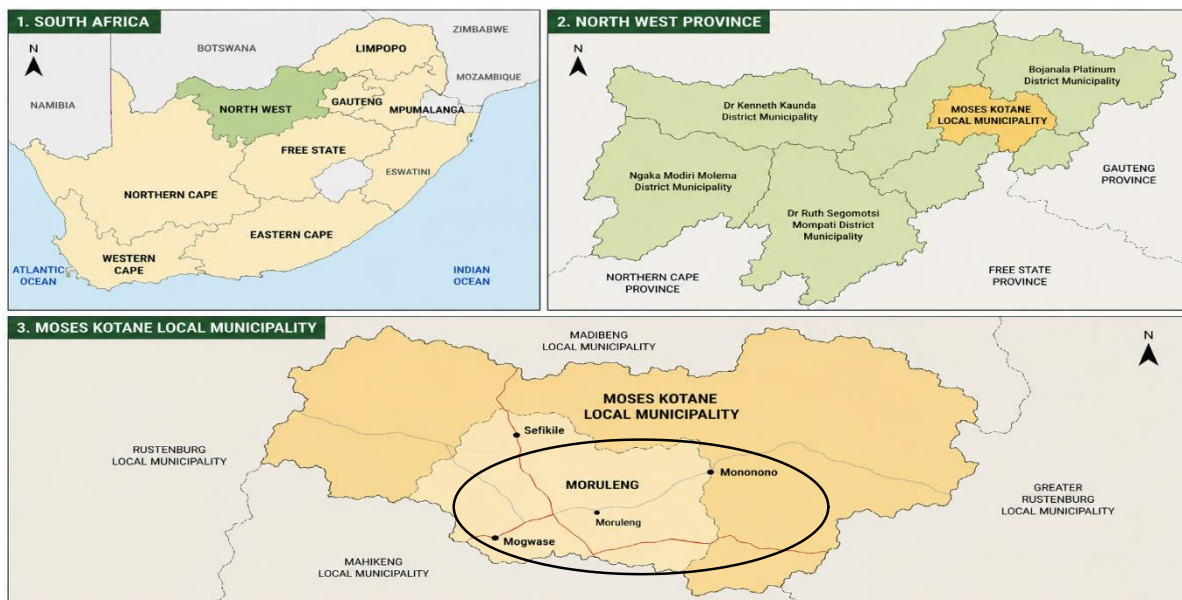


Figure 3.1: Geographical location of the study area in the Moses Kotane Local Municipality, North West Province, South Africa. (Source: Researcher's compilation based on Google Maps (2026)).

The selection of this location was informed by the nature of the research question, which requires an in-depth understanding of educators lived experiences within their actual teaching environments rather than a theoretical or desktop-based analysis. Conducting the study in this district enabled the researcher to engage directly with participants in schools where reading challenges are being experienced.

In addition, conducting the study in the Moses Kotane District was considered practical and appropriate because the researcher works within the district and could therefore access the selected school and participants without extensive travel. This accessibility reduced travel-related costs and enabled the researcher to conduct the study while continuing with his professional responsibilities as a school principal. At the same time, the researcher remained mindful of the need to maintain objectivity and to distinguish his professional experiences from the data collected through the research process.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed an exploratory research design, which to investigate an under-researched educational challenge, namely the reading gap experienced by investigation of Grade Six educators' the 2020 Grade One cohort in the post- COVID-19 context. The exploratory design enabled an in-depth such as Grade One reading gaps in the post-COVID-19 context. The exploratory nature of the study enabled a flexible, in-depth investigation of Grade Six educators' experiences and perspectives regarding learners' reading development.

The study used a qualitative single case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018) to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gap among learners whose Grade One education was disrupted by emergency education during COVID-19. The case focused on Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One cohort's reading gap in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. Six primary schools were included as research sites, with two Grade Six educators participating from each school. Including educators from different schools provided a range of perspectives while keeping their experiences of the reading gap as the central focus of the case.

In this study, educators from selected schools were treated as individual cases. This enabled the exploration of similarities and differences in their experiences and perspectives regarding learners' reading gaps.

3.3.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm refers to the philosophical worldview that guides a research study by shaping assumptions about reality, knowledge, and the process of generating knowledge (Khatri, 2020). This study was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that multiple realities may exist, shaped by individuals' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the world (Noon, 2018). This interpretivist paradigm was essential for this because it enabled an in-depth exploration of Grade Six educators' experiences and perspectives regarding the reading gaps among the 2020 Grade One cohort.

According to the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is generated through understanding the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences within specific social contexts rather than by seeking a single objective truth (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivism acknowledges that individuals may interpret the same phenomenon differently because their experiences and social contexts shape their perceptions and meaning (Goba-Medne, 2022). This paradigm was appropriate for the present study because it provided a philosophical foundation for exploring how Grade Six educators understood and interpreted the reading gaps experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort. The educators' experiences and perspectives were therefore considered as socially situated interpretations of the phenomenon rather than as a single, objective account of learners' reading development (Marrocco, 2024).

Following Kankam (2019), the interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate for this study because it sought to understand Grade Six educators' experiences of the reading gaps among learners who entered Grade One in 2020 in the Moses Kotane District (Veatch, 2023). Because educators may hold different views and interpretations regarding the causes, nature, and impact of these reading gaps, the interpretivist paradigm enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and perspectives. This paradigm, therefore, provided a suitable

philosophical foundation for exploring the meanings educators attach to the reading challenges faced by this cohort of learners (Hatch, 2023).

According to the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is collected to understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences within specific social contexts rather than by seeking a single objective truth (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivism recognises that individuals may interpret the same phenomenon differently because their experiences and context shape their perceptions and meaning (Goba-Medne, 2022). This paradigm was appropriate for the present study because it provided a philosophical foundation for exploring how Grade Six educators understood and interpreted the reading gaps experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort. It enabled the researcher to examine educators' experiences and perspectives within their specific educational contexts while recognising the possibility of multiple interpretations of the phenomenon (Veatch, 2023).

Interpretivism, however, also has disadvantages, such as findings being influenced by the researcher's interpretations, which can potentially lead to biased analysis and conclusions (Rana, 2022). In addition, due to the qualitative nature of data collection and analysis, this approach can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, and it may also be limited to specific contexts and individuals, making it challenging to generalise findings to broader populations (Rana, 2022).

This was evident in this study, where Grade six educators expressed differing views regarding the causes, extent, and impact of reading gaps among learners who entered Grade One in 2020. Instead of seeking a single objective explanation, the researcher sought to understand these multiple perspectives within their specific educational contexts. Although this reliance on subjective experiences may limit generalisability, it provided rich insights into educators lived experiences and strategies for addressing reading challenges.

3.3.2 Research approach

As introduced in Chapter One, this study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore educators' experiences and perspectives, with the aim of understanding the impact of COVID-19 on 2020 Grade One learners. According to Bhandari (2017), the

qualitative research approach aims to understand the deeper meaning of a problem and how to resolve it. Thus, by using a qualitative approach, the researcher sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how Grade six educators experienced, interpreted, and responded to the reading challenges observed among learners in their classrooms.

The qualitative research approach was considered suitable because the study focused on educators' subjective experiences rather than on measuring variables or testing hypotheses. By engaging directly with participants and examining their perspectives, the researcher was able to obtain rich and detailed insights into the factors contributing to the reading gaps and the ways in which educators experienced these challenges within the Moses Kotane District.

Table 3.2 presents the characteristics of a qualitative research approach and their application in this study.

Table 3.2: Characteristics of the qualitative approach and its application in the study

Characteristics of the qualitative approach	Application in the study
Source of data in its context	Educators participated and served as the primary source of information on how COVID-19 affected the reading levels of the 2020 Grade One learners in the Moses Kotane District.
Perspectives of participants	The researcher gleaned and reported on the educators' perspectives and experiences during COVID-19 regarding reading levels of the Grade One (2020) and Grade Six (2025) cohorts.
Theoretical context	Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) was used as the theoretical framework for the study.
Researcher as a tool	The researcher collected data from educators, who were participants in the study.
Interpretive nature	The study informed the findings based on the researcher's interpretations.

Variety of sources of data	The researcher employed open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections to collect data.
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Source: Adapted from Motloun (2025: 50)

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design, using a single-case study to investigate Grade Six educators' experiences and perspectives of the 2020 Grade One reading gap in the Moses Kotane District. The exploratory design was appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of educators' experience and perspectives regarding the long-term effects of the reading gap across different school context. The single-case study enabled the researcher to explore the Grade Six educators' in depth within the bounded context of selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District, while drawing on their experiences and perspectives within this context across different schools.

The next section deals with the research methods used in this study.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODS

The following subsections describe the methods used to select participants, collect and analyse data, establish trustworthiness, and address ethical consideration in the study.

3.4.1 Selection of participants

According to Subrahmanyam (2025), to research a specified goal and objective that a researcher aims to achieve, the selection of participants should ensure that relevant information is obtained that leads to a conclusion. While selection of a large participant population might yield a bigger data set with more differentiated data, a large amount of data may not be necessary to meet the aim and objective of the study.

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because it enables researchers to deliberately select information-rich participants who can provide detailed insights into the research problem (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020).

A total of 12 Intermediate Phase educators were selected from six rural public schools in the Moses Kotane District. Two educators from each school participated in the study. This sample size was considered sufficient for generating rich qualitative data and identifying recurring patterns within an exploratory single case study design (Mtisi, 2022).

The selection of schools within a single rural district was guided by the need to maintain contextual consistency, as schools in the same area share similar socio-economic conditions, resource constraints, and educational challenges (Mncube, 2023). All participants thus had experience of teaching within the South African rural education contexts, where limited resources and infrastructure continue to influence learner achievement and literacy development (Roux et al., 2023). Focusing on schools within a single district enabled the researcher to maintain contextual coherence, reduce unnecessary variability, and develop a deeper understanding of reading gaps within a specific educational setting, rather than producing broad, overly general findings (Andre-Bechely, 2007; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

The final sample consisted of 12 educators from six selected rural public primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. Two educators were purposively selected from each participating school. All participants had teaching responsibility for Grade Six learners, although some also taught other intermediate Phase grades and Grade Six before collection of data within five years. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 63 years and had between 10 and 30 years of teaching experience. The participants' profile, including gender, age, highest qualification, and teaching experience, is presented in Table 3.3. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria and possessed relevant teaching experience of the 2020 Grade One cohort at the Grade Six level. This approach was appropriate for the qualitative interpretive nature of the study because it enabled the researcher to obtain information-rich accounts from participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 3.3 presents the profile of participants, including their age range, grade taught, subject specialisation, qualification, and total years of teaching experience.

Table 3.3: Profile of participants

Participant No	School	Grade teaching	Subjects Taught at Time of Study	Age (Years)	Qualification
P1	PSA	4–6	English and Social Sciences	33	BEd & BEd (Hons)
P2	PSA	4–6	Maths, English, and Social Sciences	35	BEd (Senior Phase)
P3	PSB	5 & 6	Maths and Social Sciences	40	BEd (Senior Phase)
P4	PSB	5 & 6	Setswana	54	BEd (Senior Phase)
P5	PSC	4–6	Social Sciences	42	BEd & BEd (Hons)
P6	PSC	4–6	Maths and Natural Sciences	39	BA & Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
P7	PSD	6	Tswana and Natural Sciences	59	BEd & Hons
P8	PSD	4–7	Life skills, English, and Creative Arts	63	University Diploma in Education for Secondary Teaching (UDES) & Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)
P9	PSE	4–6	Life skills and Setswana	55	UDES & ACE

P10	PSE	4–6	Social Sciences	34	Higher Cert in Education & BEd (FET)
P11	PSF	4–6	Life Orientation and Social Sciences	42	BEd (Senior Phase)
P12	PSF	5–6	Natural Sciences and Maths	39	BCom, BCom Hons & PGCE

3.4.2 Data collection

This study employed two qualitative data collection methods: open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled the researcher to obtain rich, detailed descriptions of educators' experiences regarding the reading gaps created among the 2020 Grade One cohort during COVID-19 (Aguas, 2020). Combining these methods also strengthened the depth and trustworthiness of the data by allowing participants to express their experiences verbally and in written form.

3.4.2.1 Open-ended, semi-structured interviews

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection or generation method in this study. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to prepare guiding questions while still providing participants with the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives (Roulston & Choi, 2018). In this study, open-ended questions enabled participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences teaching Grade Six learners who had reading gaps resulting from the COVID-19 disruptions in 2020.

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face in their own classroom at their respective schools. Interviews were conducted during the day, after timetabled school hours. The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded on the researcher's mobile phone. The interview questions and interview protocol are detailed in Appendix H.

3.4.2.2 Written reflections

Written reflections were used as a secondary data-collection method to provide participants with an additional opportunity to reflect privately and in greater depth on their experiences. Written reflections enabled participants to describe their observations, challenges, and recommendations regarding the reading gap experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort. This method also enabled participants to raise issues that they may not have expressed during the interviews (Kimball & Daniel, 2020).

In line with the study's research questions, the written reflections assisted the researcher in identifying educators' perspectives on the reading challenges faced by the 2025 cohort of Grade Six learners and the strategies that could be used to address the reading gap these learners faced.

Participants were requested to complete written reflections after the individual, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The purpose of collecting written reflections after the interviews was to provide each participant with an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the issues discussed and to express additional thoughts that they may not have felt comfortable sharing during their interview. Written reflection is recognised as a valuable qualitative data collection method because it promotes critical thinking, self-awareness, and deeper engagement with personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Schön, 2017). Participants were provided with a reflection guide (see Appendix J) containing open-ended prompts to help them structure their reflections. They were given one week to complete the written reflections, allowing sufficient time for thoughtful consideration while ensuring that the interview experiences remained fresh in their minds. All participants had access to both personal and work-related computers, and they agreed to type their written reflections to promote legibility. Completed reflections were submitted electronically to the researcher's personal email address, ensuring convenience and maintaining an accurate record of the data. The written reflections complemented the interview data by enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the study's findings. An example of one participants' written reflection is provided in Appendix J.

3.4.3 Data analysis

The data from the open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022; Trainor & Bundon, 2021). The use of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to organise participants' experiences and perspectives into meaningful themes aligned with the research questions.

The recordings were later transcribed using AI Transcribe, a cell phone AI transcription software application, after which the researcher manually checked and corrected the transcripts for accuracy. All audio recordings and transcriptions were password-protected and stored securely on the researcher's and supervisor's laptops to ensure confidentiality. An example of an interview transcription is provided in Appendix I.

3.4.3.1 Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis

The six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) thematic analysis are outlined below and were used to analyse the interview and reflection data.

Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

Braun and Clarke (2022) explain that familiarisation involves reading and re-reading the data to develop a deep understanding of the content. In this study, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts and written reflections while listening to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the participants' responses.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

This step involves generating codes, in which meaningful segments of data relevant to the research question are identified (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this study, the researcher highlighted recurring ideas and phrases related to educators' experiences, reading difficulties identified, intervention strategies, and the effects of COVID-19 on reading development.

Step 3: Searching for themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), this step involves grouping related codes into broader categories or themes. The researcher organised similar codes into categories such as reading challenges, educator experiences, parental involvement, and intervention strategies.

Step 4: Reviewing themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2022), the researcher should, after data collection, always review themes to determine whether they accurately represent the data. In this study, the researcher compared the themes identified from the open-ended, semi-structured interviews and the written reflections to ensure consistency and alignment with the research questions.

Step 5: Defining and naming themes

In this step, Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that the researcher should ensure each theme has meaning and is named according to the central ideas emerging from participants' experiences and perspectives. In this study, the researcher refined and named the themes according to the central ideas emerging from participants' experiences of and perspectives on the reading gap resulting from COVID-19-related learning disruptions.

Step 6: Producing the report

This is the final step that integrates themes into a coherent discussion supported by quotations extracted from participants' interviews and reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In Chapter Four of this study, the themes are presented, discussed, and integrated with the main research question and sub-questions and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

3.5 MEASURES FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness refers to the strategies used in qualitative research to ensure that the findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, trustworthiness was achieved through measures to ensure dependability, credibility, and confirmability.

3.5.1 Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability in this study, the researcher maintained a detailed audit trail that included interview schedules, transcripts, a Microsoft Excel coding procedure, and written reflections. These records provided a transparent account of the data collection and analysis processes.

Furthermore, the researcher compared information from the open-ended, semi-structured interviews and the written reflections to identify recurring patterns and determine whether participants' views were consistent across the two data sources. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings by providing an understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.5.2 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' experiences and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility in this study, the researcher spent sufficient time engaging with participants during the data collection process to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and to build rapport that encouraged open and honest responses.

Member checking was also employed to enhance credibility. Member checking is a process in which participants are given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information they provided (Motulsky, 2021). In this study, participants were asked to confirm that the researcher had correctly understood and accurately recorded their responses during their interview. This process was conducted after the interview and helped reduce the risk of misinterpretation and ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' intended meanings.

In addition, peer debriefing was conducted through regular discussions with the research supervisor. Peer debriefing involves seeking the views of knowledgeable colleagues or experts to review and challenge the research process and interpretations (Ahmed, 2024). During the researcher's supervisory meetings with his

supervisor, the coding process, emerging themes, and interpretation of findings were critically examined to ensure that they were grounded in the data and aligned with the research questions. This process strengthened the study's credibility by reducing researcher bias and improving the accuracy of the findings.

3.5.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings are shaped by participants' responses rather than by the researcher's bias, motivation, or personal interests (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It concerns establishing that the interpretations and conclusions are grounded in the participants' accounts and can be traced back to the data.

In keeping with the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher acknowledged that his experience, assumptions and perspectives could potentially influence the interpretation of participants' accounts. Reflexivity was therefore maintained throughout the research process by critically reflecting on personal assumptions and interpretations during data collection and analysis. The researcher also ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the interview transcripts and participants' written reflections, rather than being based on personal expectations.

Furthermore, all themes and interpretations were developed directly from the interview transcripts and participants' written reflections using Microsoft Excel. The researcher also engaged in regular discussions with his supervisor to critically review the analysis process and ensure that interpretations remained closely linked to the participants' accounts and the original data.

3.5.4 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts, settings, or groups that share characteristics with the research environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks statistical generalisation, qualitative research aims to provide sufficient contextual information to enable readers to determine whether the findings are applicable to their own situations.

To enhance transferability, the researcher provided a rich, detailed description of the research context, participants, and the procedures used in the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasise that thick descriptions enable readers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the setting and to make informed judgments about the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Detailed information regarding the participants' backgrounds, the educational setting, and the data collection process was therefore included.

In addition, purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. By clearly describing the characteristics of the participants and the criteria used to select them, the researcher enables other researchers and readers to assess the extent to which the findings may be transferable to similar populations. Furthermore, detailed accounts of the research process and findings were presented to facilitate comparison with other studies and contexts. These strategies strengthened the study's transferability.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical principles are fundamental standards that guide researchers in conducting research in a manner that protects the rights, dignity, well-being and interests of research participants. Vanclay et al. (2013) identify several principles relevant to research involving human participants, including respect for participation, the right to withdraw, avoidance of harm, confidentiality, anonymity and protection of research data. These principles are important because participation in research may expose individuals to physical, psychological, social or professional risks, and researchers therefore have an ethical responsibility to minimize potential harm and protect participants throughout the research process.

The ethical conduct of this research was further informed by the three fundamental principles outlined in the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, 1979). Respect for persons requires recognition of participants' autonomy and their right to make informed and voluntary decisions about participation. Beneficence requires researchers to avoid harm, minimise potential risks, and

maximise possible benefits. Justice requires fairness in the selection and treatment of research participants.

In this study, these principals were operationalised through obtaining ethical clearance from the University of South Africa ethics committee (Appendix A). Permission to conduct the study was also granted by the North West Department of Education (Appendix B) and informed consent from all participants before data collection (Appendix C). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, their rights to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Thereafter, permission was sought from the principals of the participating primary schools before approaching educators to participate in the study (Appendix E).

3.6.1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study by ensuring that all information shared by participants remained private and accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Participants signed informed consent forms (Appendix C) and participant information forms (Appendix F and Appendix G), which explained the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and the way the collected information would be used. All electronic data, including interview recordings, transcripts, and written reflections, were password-protected and securely stored on the researcher's laptop. In accordance with the university's research ethics requirements, all research data will be retained securely for a period of 15 years after completion of the study, after which it will be permanently destroyed. To further protect confidentiality, participant codes rather than names were used during data analysis and reporting.

3.6.2 Anonymity

Participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms and participant codes. Individual participants were identified using codes ranging from P1 to P12, while participating schools were identified as PSA to PSF. These codes were used throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting. No identifying information, such as participants' names, school names, or personal details, was included in the study

write-up. The use of codes ensures that participants cannot be identified by readers of the study.

3.6.3 Right to withdraw

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed through the informed consent form (Appendix C) that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or negative consequences. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. The researcher respected the participants' autonomy and ensured that no individual was pressured to participate or continue participating in the study. This principle aligns with ethical research practices that emphasise voluntary participation (Khan, 2024).

3.6.4 Risk factors

The study posed minimal risk to participants. As the study focused on educators' experiences and perspectives, no physical harm was anticipated. Potential risks were limited, and to further minimise them, interviews were conducted in a private classroom setting in the participants' schools, allowing them to express themselves freely and comfortably. Participants were informed that they could pause or end the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

3.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the research methodology employed in this study to determine Grade Six educators experiences and perspectives of the long-term consequences of COVID-19 disruptions on the reading ability of the 2020 Grade One cohort in the selected primary school in the Moses Kotane District. The chapter began with an overview of the research location, followed by a description of the research design, which incorporated the interpretivist research paradigm, a qualitative research approach, and an exploratory single-case study as the research type. It further described the research methods, including the selection of participants, data collection through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections, and the data analysis procedures using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis. The chapter

also discussed the measures implemented to ensure trustworthiness and the ethical considerations that guided the study.

The next chapter, Chapter Four, presents, discusses, and interprets the study findings, determined from analysis of the data.

4. CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Three focused on the study's research methodology. Chapter Four presents and discusses the data collected from 12 Grade Six educators in six primary schools within the Moses Kotane District. The study explored Grade Six educators' experiences of the 2020 Grade One reading gap in this district.

Data generated from semi-structured, open-ended interviews and educators' written reflections were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2022), resulting in themes that aligned with the main research question and sub-questions. The discussion of the findings in relation to the study's theoretical framework and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two is supported by participant responses, presented as direct quotations.

The subsequent sections of this chapter present and discuss the study's key findings.

4.2 RESEARCH PROCESS

The data collection procedures, ethical considerations and permissions applicable to the study were described in Chapter 3, Section 3.6. Twelve Grade Six educators from six selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District participated in the study. These educators were purposively selected because they were teaching at the same school at the time of the study and could therefore provide informed accounts of the learners' reading abilities and reading challenges at Grade Six level.

Following data collection, the interview recordings were transcribed and checked against the audio recordings for accuracy. The interview transcripts and written reflections were then prepared for analysis. The researcher repeatedly read and the data to become familiar with the participants' responses and identify meaningful patterns. The data were coded and organised into themes and sub-themes in accordance with the thematic analysis process. The data were analysed thematically through coding and the development of themes and sub-themes. The findings are presented in relation to the research sub-questions, supported by verbatim quotations

from participants, and linked to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

The next section presents the findings, organised per theme.

4.3 RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS TO THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

The data analysis yielded three main themes, which aligned with the study's research sub-questions. Table 4.1 shows the links between each research sub-question and the themes and sub-themes identified.

Table 4.1: Themes and sub-themes

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS	THEMES	SUB-THEMES
To what extent was the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort adversely affected by COVID-19 in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District?	Impact of COVID-19 on reading levels.	1. The impact of ERT on reading development in Grade One. 2. Parental involvement. 3. Resourcefulness demonstrated by educators and schools to continue teaching and learning.
How do Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District perceive and describe the impact of emergency education in Grade One on learners' reading ability in Grade Six ?	Grade Six reading challenges.	1. Reading challenges. 2. Need for additional support. 3. Below-expected reading levels. 4. Specific reading difficulties.
What do the existing literature and the study findings reveal about strategies for addressing the reading gap among Grade Six	Addressing the reading gap through educator recommendations.	1. Teacher Professional Development. 2. Supporting foundational reading skills.

learners in the Moses Kotane District following the implementation of emergency education when these learners were in Grade One?		3. Provision of supporting resources.
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The three themes and their associated sub-themes are presented and discussed in the subsections that follow. Alphanumeric tags (e.g., P11, INT, or P11/WR) indicating whether data emanated from interviews (INT) or written reflections (WR) were utilised to direct quotes to maintain confidentiality and provide an audit trail.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Impact of COVID-19 on reading levels

The findings related to this theme are presented according to the sub-themes: Lockdown and its effect on reading development in Grade One, Parental involvement in learners' education, and Educators' and schools' resourcefulness in continuing teaching and learning during the pandemic.

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1 (a): The impact of ERT on reading development in Grade One

The findings indicate that COVID-19 lockdown disrupted the development of foundational reading skills among the 2020 Grade One cohort, with educators reporting persistent difficulties in decoding, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary among learners who later progressed Grade Six. Participants described learners as struggling to recognise and decode simple words and, in some cases, relying on guessing when reading. For example, P11/INT explained that learners were unable to decode words properly and often guess when reading, suggesting that some learners had not adequately acquired foundational reading skills during the early grades. Similarly, P3/INT reported that the school experienced significant reading gaps following the temporary school closure, noting that most learners were unable to read when they returned to school in September 2020. The disruption was further associated with changes in schooling arrangements and reduced instructional time. P2/INT explained that the curriculum had to be trimmed and that learner attendance was reorganised through platooning and staggered attendance because social distancing requirements restricted the number of learners who could be

accommodated at school at the same time. In addition, P6/INT reported that overcrowded classrooms and limited resources continued to contribute to the reading gaps that had emerged during the lockdown period. These accounts demonstrate how the disruption of regular classroom instruction was experienced at school level and how subsequent constraints affected opportunities for reading support. This interpretation is consistent with Kuhfeld et al. (2023), who reported significant learning losses among early-grade learners, while Tadesse and Muluye (2020) found that prolonged school closures exacerbated existing educational inequalities, particularly in rural contexts where schools had limited capacity to provide online learning. Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), the findings suggest disruption within the microsystem, as learners lost regular interaction with educators and instructed classroom reading instruction, while the mesosystem was affected where the connection between school and home could not adequately support continued learning. The findings therefore suggest that the reading difficulties experienced by the cohort cannot be understood solely in terms of individual learner performance; rather, they, were shaped by disruptions to the educational environments and relationships through which reading development normally occurs. .

The data indicate that the disruption of traditional face-to-face teaching during lockdown constrained opportunities for structured reading instruction among Foundation Phase learners, particularly Grade One learners who were still developing foundational literacy skills. This interpretation is supported by Grobler (2022), who argues that COVID-19 had a negative effect on learner performance. The findings also correspond with the literature discussed in Section 2.3 of Chapter Two, which highlights the effects of interrupted instruction and limited access to educational resources on early-grade learning. From Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological perspective, the disruption affected the microsystem by limiting regular teacher-learner interaction and structured reading instruction. It also affected the mesosystem by disrupting the relationship between school and home during the lockdown. In the participating rural schools, these disruptions were further compounded by limited access to digital resources, infrastructure and other forms of educational support . The existing literature further indicates that reading gaps among Foundation Phase learners may

contribute to challenges in reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension skills in later years (Spaull & van der Berg, 2020).

According to Kuhfeld et al. (2023), learners from rural areas were negatively affected by microsystem limitations to educational resource access during lockdown. Grade One learners lacked access to digital reading resources, which compromised the development of their reading abilities, especially among learners who were new to the phase or school. The lack of such resources impacted the exosystem (community infrastructure) and was exacerbated by macrosystem (societal inequalities) factors that contribute to inequality and social challenges, such as the digital divide.

Ciampa and Jagielo-Manion (2021) state that lockdown reduced learners' opportunities to physically engage with their educators, visit libraries, or interact with peers. These challenges were also reported by all participants in their open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Social distancing hindered learners from working closely with their educators to receive immediate feedback on activities delivered via remote teaching (Reimers, 2022). Because of the rapid transition to alternative teaching methods during lockdown that required online engagement, learners with limited access to online resources and limited reading support at home experienced even greater difficulties in reading development than their peers.

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1(b): Parental involvement

Participants acknowledged the crucial role of parents during the ERT as is evident from the following participant comments:

Although most of the parents from our school were cooperative during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, their commitment did not fully address the reading gaps we are currently experiencing (P2/INT).

The lack of parental support and limited resources prevented the successful implementation of online teaching in rural schools (P1/INT).

The data thus concurs with the literature reported in Section 2.3.1 (Breckenridge, 2024), emphasising that parental involvement played a core role in the success or failure of ERT implemented during 2020.

Although some parents were willing to support their children in order to keep up with the curriculum requirements, various factors hampered their collaboration with teachers:

P1/INT reported challenges as follows:

We were fortunate to have had cooperative learners and parents who participated in WhatsApp teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not all learners participated due to poor connectivity and limited daily mobile data for parents.

4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 1(c): Resourcefulness demonstrated by educators and schools to continue teaching and learning

The findings indicate that educators adopted various strategies to mitigate the effects COVID-19 on learners' academic progress. Participants acknowledged that limited resources created challenges for learning continuity, with P10/INT noting that the lack of resources hindered learners' academic progress. However, the findings also demonstrate educators' resourcefulness in attempting to address these challenges. Following the reopening of schools, educators reassessed learners' progress, identified areas of difficulty and provided additional support to learners who had experienced learning losses. This included encouraging parents to use learning materials that had been shared through WhatsApp during the lockdown and providing additional classes to help learners reconnect prior knowledge with the current curriculum (P2/INT). Participant 4/INT explained that, after schools reopened, educators focused on reassessing learners' progress, correcting work completed during the lockdown and providing additional support to learners who had lost academic momentum. P9/WR reported that they implemented catch-up strategies and remedial activities to assist learners who had fallen behind academically during lockdown, and they provided struggling learners with individualized attention to strengthen their foundational literacy skills.

The findings indicate that the COVID-19 lockdown disrupted the development of foundational reading skills among the 2020 Grade One cohort. Participants reported that, when learners returned to school, many struggled to decode words, recognise simple words and read age-appropriate texts. P11/INT mentioned that some learners from their school were observed to guess words rather than decode them, suggesting

that important foundational reading skills had not been adequately developed during Grade One. The disruption was particularly evident in the continued reading difficulties experienced by learners in Grade Six, who required additional support despite having progressed through subsequent grades.

A key factor underlying these difficulties was the interruption of regular face-to-face teaching during the lockdown. Participants explained that teaching had to be adapted through measures such as rotational attendance and alternative forms of communication, which reduced learners' opportunities for direct interaction with educators. P1/INT explained that in their schools, WhatsApp was used to maintain teaching and learning; however, this approach could not reach all learners because some families had limited access to smartphones, mobile data and reliable connectivity. Consequently, learners' exposure to structured reading instruction and opportunities to practise reading was uneven. The findings therefore suggest that the interruption of direct teacher–learner interaction was particularly consequential for Grade One learners who were still acquiring basic literacy skills.

The findings also reveal that the effectiveness of home-based learning was influenced by the level of parental support available to learners. P3/INT noted that some parents were willing to assist their children but required guidance on how to support reading development, while others did not engage with the school because of limited educational resources or other constraints within the community. Although some parents participated in WhatsApp-based learning, participation was not consistent across all learners because of limited connectivity and access to mobile data (P2/INT). This indicates that the disruption of schooling was not experienced uniformly; learners' ability to continue learning depended partly on the support and resources available within their homes.

Resource constraints further shaped learners' experiences during and after the lockdown. Participants described limited educational resources and overcrowded classrooms as factors that continued to affect efforts to address the reading gaps after learners returned to school (P6/INT and P4/INT). Schools consequently had to reassess learners' progress, revisit previously taught content and provide additional support to learners who had fallen behind. Participants described using catch-up

activities, additional classes and remedial support to address these difficulties (P10/INT). These responses demonstrate that educators did not simply resume the pre-lockdown curriculum; they adjusted their instructional practices in response to the learning gaps identified among learners.

Taken together, the findings show that the reading difficulties experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort were associated with an interruption of face-to-face instruction, unequal access to alternative learning opportunities, varying levels of parental support and continuing resource constraints. The findings are consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter Two, which identifies the disruption of schooling and unequal access to educational resources as important factors associated with learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than suggesting that the literature independently explains the findings, the present study demonstrates how these factors were experienced within the rural school context investigated.

From a Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological perspective, these findings can be understood in terms of the disruption of the learning environments and relationships through which reading development normally occurs. The interruption of regular teacher–learner interaction affected the microsystem, while the weakened connection between schools and homes affected the mesosystem. At the same time, limitations in community resources, connectivity and educational infrastructure created broader environmental constraints on learners' opportunities to engage in learning. The findings therefore demonstrate how the different environments surrounding learners interacted to shape their reading experiences during and after the lockdown.

The findings further show that educators played an important role in responding to the consequences of disrupted learning. P2/INT, similarly with P4/INT and P10/INT mentioned that they assess learner progress after schools reopened and revisited previously taught content and provided additional instructional support to learners who had not acquired the expected reading skills to measure their vocabulary. This resourcefulness was particularly important in the rural school context, where limited resources constrained the available options for supporting learners. The educators' responses therefore formed an important part of the process through which schools attempted to address the reading gaps that had emerged during the lockdown.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Grade Six reading challenges

This theme addresses the second research sub-question and focuses on the Grade Six reading challenges

4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2(a): Reading challenges

This sub-theme emerged from the analysis of the open-ended, semi-structured interviews and the participants' written reflections. It focuses on the reading challenges experienced by the 2025 Grade Six cohort following the learning disruptions associated with the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

The participants reported that learners experienced difficulties with reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and decoding. These difficulties were evident when learners struggled to recognise unfamiliar words, pronounce words correctly and understand what they were reading. Some learners also showed reluctance to engage in reading activities, including oral reading, which further affected their participation in classroom reading tasks. Educators responded by providing immediate assistance with pronunciation, spelling and word meanings to support learners' understanding and reading development.

The findings of this study reveal persistent difficulties in reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary among the 2025 Grade Six learners. Participants reported that these learners continued to experience challenges with foundational reading skills, particularly decoding unfamiliar words and reading with understanding. These difficulties suggest that weaknesses in foundational literacy acquired during the early grades persisted into Grade Six.

Participants further indicated that learners often required additional support when encountering unfamiliar words and struggled to read fluently and comprehend texts independently. These findings suggest that the disruption of foundational learning during COVID-19 had consequences that extended beyond Grade One, with some learners continuing to experience reading difficulties several years later. This interpretation is consistent with the literature discussed in Chapter Two, which identifies weaknesses in foundational literacy as a factor that can contribute to

continuing reading difficulties (Honickman, 2023; Krashen, 2018; Phala & Hugo, 2022).

4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2(b): Need for additional support

The participants emphasised that learners facing reading challenges require additional support to overcome these challenges and achieve reading proficiency. Additional support may include targeted interventions, classroom story reading, shared reading, group-guided reading, and independent reading.

P8/WR, noted:

During our extra classes, we group learners by ability and offer individualised support to those who are severely struggling.

P12/INT, noted:

Learners read well when they are taken one-on-one with the educator in their own quiet space. They feel the need to read and ask questions to figure out certain words to make their reading more understandable.

P8/INT, noted:

All learners need fair support, designed specifically to provide individualised attention, to help struggling learners be on the same level as the rest of their classmates.

The need of the 2025 Grade Six learners for additional reading support, as reported by the participants, highlights the severity of the reading gap identified in the findings of this study. These findings underscore the importance of early, targeted interventions to address reading difficulties and improve learner outcomes in the Foundation Phase. Further, they reflect the importance of structured support systems within schools to strengthen learners' literacy development.

4.3.2.3 Sub-theme 2(c): Below-expected reading levels

Participants highlighted that determining the reading levels of primary school learners is essential, as it enables educators to track learners' progress by grade and make improvements when specific grades fall behind.

P9/Int noted:

When school closed, our school lacked access to online teaching due to limited resources, and, sure, parents also did not have smartphones.

P6/WR stated:

The 2025 Grade Six learners performed below expected reading levels compared to previous cohorts.

These findings indicate that many of the 2025 Grade Six learners taught by the study participants performed below grade level. This reflects long-term learning loss, which could be related back to COVID-19 learning disruptions, and aligns with research that indicates prolonged school closures have significantly disrupted learners' academic progress, particularly in foundational reading skills. Dube (2020) explains that the prolonged school closure from 26 March 2020 caused disruptions at the microsystem level, leading to many learners struggling with reading. Upon the return to face-to-face, in-class teaching and learning, not all learners were able to catch up with their reading skills, which resulted in reading levels falling below grade-level expectations. The broader educational context, serving as an exosystem, has also contributed to the below-expected reading levels experienced among the 2025 Grade Six learners.

It was clear from the participants' responses that the reading gap resulting from COVID-19-related learning disruptions in 2020 is a central issue still challenging both educators and learners. In addition to highlighting the reading gap, study participants also specified some of the reading skills and abilities with which the learners the 2025 Grade Six cohort struggled. These include decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

P6/WR, noted:

Some of my learners' stammer when they read and, along the way, simply spell or pronounce the words as they wish.

P3/WR, mentioned:

Some learners get nervous during oral assessments and are unable to read aloud in class, while other educators place greater emphasis on explicit teaching of decoding skills and reading for meaning to reduce reading difficulties among learners.

These findings emphasise the importance of foundational reading skills such as phonics and decoding, the teaching and learning of which were significantly disrupted during COVID-19. They also highlight the central role of educators in identifying specific reading difficulties that contribute to persistent reading gaps, allowing for targeted support and intervention to address these challenges effectively.

Research on literacy development shows that learners who struggle with decoding often experience difficulties developing reading fluency (Payne, 2024). In turn, limited fluency negatively affects reading accuracy and reduces learners' confidence in reading activities (Petrakis, 2026). These observations suggest that learners require frequent, structured opportunities to practice reading in a supportive environment that fosters learner confidence.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Addressing the reading gap through educator recommendations

Theme 3, addressing the reading gap through educator recommendations, responds to the third sub-question of the study, which explored what could be done to address reading gaps created by COVID-19 disruptions in the selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. This theme and its associated sub-themes therefore align with strategies to improve literacy outcomes.

Within the context of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), the macrosystem, which reflects broader institutional and policy-level influences on education, is of particular relevance to interpretation of Theme 3. The findings related to Theme 3 are presented according to the sub-themes: Enhance educator capacity; Focus on phonics, fluency, and comprehension; and Engage technology, resources, parents, and community involvement in supporting learners' development.

4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3(a): Teacher Professional Development

The participants emphasised the need for strengthened professional support and resources to address the reading gaps that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. P1/INT recommended workshops focusing on phonics and reading comprehension, together with training on differentiated teaching, multimodal learning and online teaching approaches. Similarly, P2/INT emphasised the role of school management in supporting educators through the provision of relevant reading materials and coaching on strategies for addressing COVID-19-related reading gaps. P10/INT also recommended additional training for language educators to strengthen their capacity to teach reading effectively. At the classroom level, P7/INT explained that the disruption caused by COVID-19 required educators to adapt their teaching techniques and develop different reading-teaching methods to address the resulting learning gaps. Taken together, these accounts indicate that educators responded to the reading difficulties not only through learner-focused interventions, but also by adapting their instructional practices and identifying a need for continued professional development and institutional support.

These findings are consistent with findings documented in a UNESCO (2021) report, which highlight the importance of educator professional development in improving learner outcomes. Similar findings were reported by Nadian and Afifi (2023), who found that educators who participate in ongoing professional development programmes are better equipped to deliver effective teaching. Likewise, Brown et al. (2018) have argued that continuous professional development enhances educators' pedagogical knowledge, teaching practices, and learner achievement. Collectively, these studies suggest that sustained professional development and adequate support structures are essential for improving classroom reading instruction.

4.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3(b): Supporting foundational reading skills

The participants emphasised the importance of supporting foundational reading skills to enhance reading development and address reading gaps.

P5/INT emphasised the importance of focusing on phonics and fluency in language teaching to improve learners' reading levels. Similarly, P7/INT highlighted the need for language educators to teach comprehension strategies to assist learners in

addressing reading difficulties. These responses suggest that reading development requires attention to multiple foundational skills, including phonics, fluency and comprehension, rather than focusing on a single aspect of reading.

The disruption to reading opportunities during COVID-19 lockdown was also evident in the participants' account. P11/WR indicated that some learners were not provided with schoolwork, including reading activities, during the lockdown and returned to school experiencing significant difficulties with reading and understanding texts. This suggests that the interruption of regular reading practice may have contributed to the reading difficulties observed after learners returned to school. However, schools also attempted to maintain reading activities during the lockdown where possible. P2/INT reported that the school distributed reading materials to parents through a WhatsApp group to encourage learners to continue reading at home. This demonstrates that educators and schools attempted to maintain learning opportunities despite the disruption caused by COVID-19.

These findings presented in Section 4.3.3.2 indicate that participants regarded explicit and systematic reading instruction as important for addressing learners' reading difficulties. In particular, P5/INT emphasised the importance of focusing on phonics and fluency, while P7/INT highlighted the need to teach comprehension strategies. These findings suggest that reading difficulties experienced by learners cannot be addressed through a single reading skill but require structured instruction that develops several interconnected aspects of reading.

This finding is supported by Fleisch and Alsofrom (2022), who emphasise the systematic teaching of phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension in the Foundation Phase and beyond. The participants' emphasis on phonics and fluency also corresponds with Shahid et al. (2025), who found that group-guided reading and explicit phonics and fluency instruction can support learners' decoding and reading accuracy. Furthermore, the findings concerning the need for sustained reading support are consistent with Hoadley (2023) and Chen and Adams (2023), who highlight the potential contribution of structured reading programmes and comprehension development. Collectively, the participants evidence and the reviewed literature

indicate that addressing reading gaps requires sustained, systematic and comprehensive reading instruction rather than isolated reading activities.

4.3.3.3 Sub-theme 3(c): Provision of supporting resources

The participants identified various forms of support that could contribute to learners' reading development, including parental and community support, technological resources and access to relevant reading materials. These forms of support were grouped under the sub-theme "Provision of supporting resources" because they represent resources available within and beyond the school that educators identified as important for sustaining and strengthening learners' reading development.

P3/INT explained that technology, including reading software and applications, could support learner engagement and reading development. This view suggests that educators regarded technology as a potential supplementary resource for extending reading opportunities beyond the classroom. However, P9/INT highlighted an important of reading as it could also be used to improve engagement of community structures such as Sunday schools, community librarians, and youth Programs.

Participants further described educators' efforts to provide direct support to learners experiencing reading difficulties. P5/INT indicated that during lockdown in 2020, educators were unable to offer online classes or remote learning opportunities to their school's rural location and limited access to technology and internet connectivity for conducting Zoom meetings or other online teaching and learning activities. This finding demonstrates that lack of resources also plays a major role in the learners' inability to read. It also suggests that although technology could provide additional opportunities for reading development, unequal access to digital resources limited its usefulness in some of the participating schools

Parental involvement also emerged as an important source of support, although participants indicated that it was influenced by socio-economic circumstances of families. P2/WR observed that parental involvement was generally limited in the rural school context and linked this limitation to learners' restricted access to technological resources and high levels of unemployment in the community. Similarly, P4/INT explained that unemployment, poverty and limited educational opportunities could

prevent parents from fully participating in their children's education, particularly when they could not afford the technological resources required to support learning. These findings suggest that limited parental involvement should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of interest in learners' education; rather, it may reflect as a socio-economic barrier affecting families' capacity to provide support.

Community structures were also identified as an additional source of support for learners' reading development. P6/WR indicated that working with NGOs is also important, as they may be a key to addressing reading gaps within local churches. The statement was backed by P9/INT that reading could be supported through community structures such as Sunday schools, and community libraries. In addition, P7/INT reported that a church had visited the school to provide Bibles and other reading materials and that Sunday School reading programmes were used to support learners' reading skills. These responses suggest that community-based structures can complement school-based reading interventions by providing additional reading materials and opportunities for learners to engage with texts beyond the classroom.

The need for rapid transition to online learning precipitated by the COVID-19 lockdown has highlighted the role of technology in supporting learning when the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning model is disrupted. The need for alternative, technology-based methods of teaching during the pandemic has also revealed the digital divide and social injustices prevalent in rural schools.

In this era, technology has become an important tool for supporting teaching and learning, including the development of reading skills. Research findings indicate that digital resources can enhance reading, teaching, and learner engagement (Makumbe, 2020). However, the digital divide remains a significant challenge, particularly in under-resourced communities where many learners and their families have limited access to digital devices and reliable internet connectivity. These findings are consistent with Moehlen and Subasi Singh (2022), who argue that unequal access to educational technology continues to widen learning disparities among learners. Similarly, Jiang and Kosar Altinyelken (2024) contend that access to appropriate learning resources is essential for supporting literacy development and improving learner outcomes.

The Sub-theme 3(c) findings further highlight the importance of parental involvement in supporting learners' reading development. These findings align with those of Kumar and Singh (2026), who report that parental involvement positively influences learners' learning and reading abilities beyond the classroom. Gustafsson and Nuga (2020) emphasise that learners benefit when parents actively engage in reading activities, monitor homework, and provide opportunities for regular reading practice at home. Such involvement contributes to the development of vocabulary, comprehension, and overall literacy skills.

In addition, the Sub-theme 3(c) findings suggest that community support can strengthen reading development among learners, for example, through Sunday School reading programmes. Cavanagh and King (2020) argue that collaborative literacy initiatives involving schools, families, and community stakeholders create supportive learning environments that promote reading engagement. Furthermore, Tadesse and Muluye (2020) maintain that partnerships between schools and local communities can expand learners' access to reading materials and literacy support programmes. Collectively, these studies suggest that technology, parental involvement, and community participation are critical components of a comprehensive approach to improving learners' reading proficiency.

4.4 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that COVID-19 disruptions in 2020 have had a significant and lasting impact on learners' reading development. The disruption of foundational literacy instruction, particularly for learners in the 2020 Grade One cohort has resulted in persistent challenges in fluency, comprehension, and decoding.

These findings align with existing literature, which highlights the long-term consequences of early learning loss. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that reading development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, as explained by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979).

Factors such as limited parental involvement, insufficient resources, and inadequate institutional support have contributed to the reading gap experienced in schools in the Moses Kotane District. Addressing these challenges, especially in rural schools,

requires a collaborative approach involving educators, parents, and the Department of Education.

Table 4.2 summarises the three main themes identified in this study and the related key findings.

Table 4.2: Summary of themes and study findings

Theme	Findings
Impact of COVID-19 on reading levels.	1. COVID-19, which produced lockdown, led to a decline in reading levels. 2. COVID-19 produced a reading gap, particularly in Grade One. 3. COVID-19 increased the existing reading challenges, particularly among the vulnerable learners and the 2020 Grade One learners. 4. Post COVID-19, many learners are struggling with reading.
Grade Six reading challenges.	1. Educators experienced a significant reading gap compared with the previous cohorts of Grade Six learners. 2. Educators face challenges of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary among the learners. 3. It was experienced that digital learning is crucial for successful ERT in times of crisis such as pandemic or environmental disasters. 4. Adaptation of various teaching techniques is crucial. 5. It was experienced that the digital divide and social injustice have a substantial impact on teaching and learning.

Addressing the reading gap through educator recommendations	1. Regular training and support to address the reading gap is needed. 2. Regular professional development for migrating and new educators is crucial. 3. Ongoing monitoring, mentoring, and support to sustain improvement in reading instruction are needed. 4. Adaptation to new technologies is needed.
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4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reported on the analysis of the data and consequent emerging findings on the impact of COVID-19 disruptions in 2020 on learners' reading development. The findings revealed that learners in the 2025 Grade Six cohort, who were in Grade One in 2020, continue to experience challenges related to fluency, comprehension, and decoding. Furthermore, the findings indicate that COVID-19 disruptions have negatively affected learners' reading progress and have influenced educators' teaching experiences, perception and classroom practices.

The following chapter presents the conclusions, recommendations and implications arising from the study.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Four presented and analysed the data collected via open-ended, semi-structured interviews and written reflections from educators. The findings were organised and discussed according to the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis. The chapter highlighted educators' experiences of and perspectives on the reading gaps faced by learners in the 2020 Grade One cohort, who had reached Grade Six in 2025, as well as the challenges and intervention strategies implemented to support learners' reading development.

This chapter presents a summary of the study and draws conclusions based on the findings discussed in Chapter Four. The chapter links the findings to the study's purpose and the research questions. In addition, it provides a synthesis of the main findings and outlines the study's limitations. It also presents recommendations for educational practice and future research on strategies to mitigate the reading gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic among learners in the 2020 Grade One cohort, who were in Grade Six in 2025.

5.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section summarises the study's key findings. The study addressed the main research question and its three sub-questions and provided insights into educators' experiences and perspectives regarding the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One learner cohort.

5.2.1 Key scholarly review findings

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two reveals that COVID-19 disrupted foundational literacy development, particularly in disadvantaged and rural schools. Foundational reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, have been negatively affected. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) shows that reading development is influenced by interactions among the home, school, community, and broader socio-economic environments. The

literature reviewed also highlights the importance of collaborative intervention strategies to address learning losses.

5.2.2 Key empirical findings

The study revealed that COVID-19 had a significant and long-term impact on the reading development of the 2020 Grade One learner cohort in the selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District. Educators reported that some learners progressed to Grade Six without fully developing foundational reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, decoding and reading comprehension. While these reading difficulties were commonly reported by the participating educators, their experiences also highlighted differences in the circumstances of the schools and the support available to learners during and after the lockdown period. These differences related particularly to parental involvement, access to learning and technological resources, and interventions implemented after schools reopened. Some educators reported attempts by their schools to maintain learning through the distribution of reading materials and communication with parents, while others described challenges related to poor connectivity, limited technological resources and socioeconomic conditions in learners' home environments. Overall, the educators indicated that these reading difficulties continued to affect learners' academic performance in Grade Six.

These findings demonstrate how Grade Six educators experienced the continuing effects of COVID-19-related educational disruption on the reading development of the 2020 Grade One cohort within the bounded context of the study. These challenges include overcrowded classrooms, pressure on the curriculum, insufficient parental support, limited departmental support, and diverse reading abilities among learners in the same classroom. Educators also expressed concern about the long-term consequences of the disrupted 2020 academic year on learners' confidence, participation, and overall literacy development.

The study also found that educators from different schools have implemented various intervention strategies, such as extra morning reading classes, Drop All and Read programmes, and reading competitions. Schools also requested support from parents,

the community, and churches to demonstrate a commitment to mitigating reading gaps, even under difficult teaching conditions and limited school resources.

The findings of this study align with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which highlights the negative impact of COVID-19 on early grade reading development, particularly in schools with limited resources. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) helps to explain how different environmental systems, including the home, school, community, and broader socio-economic conditions, influence both learners' reading development and educators' experiences of addressing the reading gap.

5.3 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

5.3.1 Main research question

How do Grade Six Educators in the Moses Kotane District Experience the 2020 Grade One Reading Gap?

The study concludes that the reading gap experienced by the 2020 Grade One cohort persists among learners who reached Grade Six in 2025 (Hoadley, 2023; Van der Berg & Böhmer, 2024). The findings indicate that COVID-19 disrupted the acquisition of foundational reading skills, particularly phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension (Breckenridge, 2024; Phala & Hugo, 2022; Vaz, 2024). Educators reported that many learners continue to experience difficulties in reading-related tasks, which negatively affect their performance across the curriculum (Nomlala & Baidoo, 2025; Payne, 2024; Petralis, 2026). These findings correspond with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which documented disruptions to COVID-19 school closures (Ardington et al., 2021; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020) and highlighted the importance of sustained reading instruction for the development of these skills (Ramsa & Rawian, 2021). The persistence of difficulties in phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension identified in this study therefore extends the concern raised in Chapter Two (Hoadley, 2023; Phala & Hugo, 2022) by demonstrating that disruptions experienced during the Foundation Phase were still evident when the cohort reached Grade Six.

The study further concludes that addressing the reading gap requires a collaborative approach involving educators, school management teams, parents, communities and the Department of Basic Education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Brown et al., 2018; Hoadley, 2023). This finding corresponds with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which identified parental involvement (Munje & Mncube, 2018), community support, access to appropriate reading resources and school-based interventions (Breckenridge, 2024; Fleisch & Alsofrom, 2022) as important factors in supporting learners reading development. However, the present study demonstrates that the effectiveness of such support is influenced by the rural and socioeconomic contexts of the participating schools, including limited access to technological resources and connectivity (Dube, 2020; Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020).

Conclusions for each research sub-question are considered next. The sub-questions guided the emergence of the themes and sub-themes generated from analysis of the participants' responses.

5.3.2 Research Sub-question 1

To what extent was the reading level of the 2020 Grade One cohort adversely affected by COVID-19 in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District?

The findings of this study suggest that the reading development of learners who formed part of the 2020 Grade One cohort was substantially affected by the disruptions associated with COVID-19 (Ardington et al., 2021; Hoadley, 2023; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020). Across the six selected schools, the 12 participants described persistent reading difficulties among learners in the 2025 Grade Six cohort, which they perceived as being associated with the disruption of formal teaching and learning during 2020. Although the participants' accounts cannot be generalised to all learners in the district, the consistency of their experiences across the selected schools strengthens the interpretation that COVID-19 related disruptions contributed to difficulties in learners' reading development (Grobler, 2022; Van der Berg et al., 2022).

Participants identified a range of reading difficulties, although these were not necessarily reported by every participant. The difficulties include weakness in

phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, reading fluency and reading comprehension (Breckenridge, 2024; Phala & Hugo, 2022; Vaz, 2024).

The COVID-19-related teaching and learning disruptions were compounded by several contextual factors. The lockdown, which commenced in March 2020, meant that Grade One learners were absent from formal schooling for approximately six months. Upon their return, the curriculum was trimmed in accordance with National Assessment Circular Two of 2020, and a rotational timetable was implemented, further reducing learners' contact time with educators (DBE, 2020b; Hoadley, 2020). In the Moses Kotane District, where schools lacked the technological infrastructure to transition to online or remote learning, these learners received little to no reading teaching during this critical period. Unlike their peers in more resourced schools, these learners had no access to online teaching or even WhatsApp teaching during lockdown, and parents were largely unsupportive due to high rates of poverty, unemployment, and lack of parental involvement (Dube, 2020; Gustafsson & Nuga, 2020; Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023).

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on reading ability can be understood across multiple systems. At the microsystem level, the immediate classroom relationship between educator and learner, which is essential for guided reading instruction, was severed during lockdown (Breckenridge, 2024; Spaull & van der Berg, 2020). At the mesosystem level, the link between school and home that ordinarily supports literacy development was disrupted, as parents were neither equipped nor guided to support their children's home reading (Gustafsson & Nuga, 2020; Munje & Mncube, 2018). At the exosystem level, policy decisions such as curriculum trimming and progression circulars shaped the conditions under which learners entered Grade Two without having mastered Grade One competencies (Hoadley, 2020; Jambaya, 2023). At the macrosystem level, broader socio-economic inequalities in the Moses Kotane District, including poverty, unemployment, and rural disadvantage, amplified the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on learners who were already among the most vulnerable in the South African education system (Bridgman et al., 2020; Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023). The chronosystem underscores that the effects of COVID-19 disruptions did not remain confined to 2020; rather, as these learners progressed from Grade Two

through to Grade Six, the reading gap persisted and, in some cases, widened, because subsequent grades assumed a level of foundational literacy that many of these learners had never acquired (Hoadley, 2023; Venketsamy, 2025).

In conclusion, the findings indicate that the 2020 Grade One cohort experienced persistent reading difficulties that remained evident when the learners reached Grade Six in 2025. Across the six participating schools, educators reported that learners continued to experience difficulties with foundational reading skills, including phonics, fluency, vocabulary, decoding and comprehension. The educators further perceived this cohort as experiencing more pronounced reading challenges than those they had encountered in their teaching experience. These findings suggest that the disruption to foundational reading instruction during the COVID-19 period may have had lasting implications for learners' reading development. However, these conclusions are limited to the experiences and perspectives of the 12 educators who participated in the study and should therefore not be generalised to all Grade Six learners in the Moses Kotane District or beyond .

5.3.3 Research Sub-question 2

The second research sub-question revealed the theme: Grade Six Reading Challenges, which Four sub-themes emerged within this theme: Reading challenges, Need for additional support, Below-expected reading levels, and Specific reading difficulties.

The findings reveal that Grade Six educators in the Moses Kotane District have experienced significant professional and emotional challenges because of teaching the 2020 Grade One cohort in Grade Six in 2025 (Kaffenberger et al., 2023; Spaul & van der Berg, 2020). Four dimensions of educator experience emerged from the data, as explained below.

In terms of reading challenges, educators consistently described learners who stammered during oral reading, guessed at unfamiliar words rather than decoding them, struggled to read with fluency, and demonstrated limited comprehension of grade-appropriate texts (Nomlala & Baidoo, 2025; Phala & Hugo, 2022). Several participants noted that learners displayed a pronounced reluctance to read aloud,

which they attributed to embarrassment and anxiety arising from these learners' limited reading ability. This reluctance was itself understood as stemming from years of progressing through the grades without adequate remedial support, which had eroded these learners' reading confidence.

Regarding the need for additional support, participants universally indicated that the regular timetable was insufficient to address the reading gaps of this cohort. Extra classes, small-group teaching, one-on-one sessions, and ability grouping were among the strategies educators had introduced voluntarily, often without formal departmental sanction or resourcing (Alamos & Williford, 2020; DeVries, 2023; Mofokeng, 2025). This reflects what Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) would describe as educator agency within the microsystem, with individuals adapting their immediate teaching environment in response to conditions shaped by factors far beyond their control.

In terms of reading levels, every participating educator confirmed that the 2025 Grade Six cohort performed below expected levels compared with previous cohorts at the same grade level. According to the participants, this was evident not only in oral reading assessments but also in learners' written responses across subjects, where weak decoding and limited vocabulary hindered their ability to engage with content in Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and English First Additional Language (Payne, 2024; Petralis, 2026).

Regarding specific reading difficulties, the most consistently reported challenges were decoding and phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Breckenridge, 2024; Phala & Hugo, 2022; Vaz, 2024). Participants noted that the foundational phonics gap, which should have been systematically addressed in Grade One, had created a cascading effect—learners who could not decode were unable to read fluently, and those who could not read fluently were unable to comprehend. This aligns directly with the established understanding in literacy research that reading development is

cumulative and that early gaps, when unaddressed, compound over time (Breckenridge, 2024; Rowland et al., 2026).

5.3.4 Research Sub-question 3

This question aimed to identify what can be done to address the reading gap created by COVID-19, as experienced by learners and educators in selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District.

The findings of this study indicate that some participants still need educator workshops to help them bridge the reading gap caused by the pandemic. They also mentioned technology and digital skills, resources, and materials that the Department of Education should provide to enable learners to use them in future situations when face-to-face teaching and learning might be disrupted, as happened during COVID-19 (Dube, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Regarding enhancing educator capacity, as requested by some participants, it was clear that many Intermediate Phase educators feel underprepared to address foundational literacy gaps in learners who are several years past the stage at which those gaps should have been remediated. Targeted professional development, in the form of workshops focused on reading pedagogy, phonics teaching, and differentiated teaching strategies, is urgently needed (UNESCO, 2021). These workshops should be practical and delivered by a subject education specialist with experience in literacy development in both the Foundation and Intermediate Phases. Regular monitoring visits by the district monitoring team or officials should follow, to ensure that newly acquired skills are applied in classrooms and that educators receive ongoing support rather than once-off training sessions (Amin & Mahabeer, 2023; Chen & Adams, 2023).

A deliberate and sustained focus on phonics, fluency, and comprehension is essential (Breckenridge, 2024; Kuhfeld et al., 2023). The study found that the specific reading difficulties experienced by the 2020 cohort are rooted primarily in incomplete phonics instruction in Grade One, which has produced cascading deficiencies in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Educators must be supported to return to phonics-based instruction with these learners, even within the Grade Six context, by integrating it into language periods without abandoning the prescribed curriculum. Reading pedagogies

such as shared reading aloud, as discussed in Chapter Two, should be formalised in language lesson plans (Breckenridge, 2024; Parkes, 2023), and daily reading practices such as the Drop All and Read programme should be consistently implemented and monitored (Bridgman et al., 2020; Spaul & Pretorius, 2022).

Participants identified the engagement of technology, resources, parents, and the wider community as important but currently underdeveloped avenues for the support of reading development. The Department of Education must address the digital divide in rural schools by providing appropriate technological devices and support to ensure that schools in areas like the Moses Kotane District have the infrastructure necessary to enable digital learning (Dube, 2020; Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023). Where technology is unavailable, print-rich resources such as graded readers, levelled books, and newspapers should be provided (Fleisch & Alsofrom, 2022). Parents, even those with limited literacy, can be engaged through school-based workshops that demonstrate simple home reading practices (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Furthermore, several participants identified community structures such as churches, Sunday schools, and local libraries as underutilised partners in supporting reading development, and schools should be encouraged and supported to formalise these partnerships.

At the systemic level, it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education develop a targeted reading recovery programme specifically for the 2020 Grade One cohort, given that the gap created during COVID-19 is well documented (Ardington et al., 2021; Hoadley, 2023), and the affected learners remain within the schooling system. Such a programme should be evidence-based, adequately resourced, and implemented consistently across districts where the impact of the pandemic on early-grade reading has been most severe, including the Moses Kotane District.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing insight into the long-term literacy consequences of COVID-19 from the perspectives of Grade Six educators working in rural schools. This study not only focuses on learning losses during COVID-19 but also extends its findings by examining how reading gaps and difficulties that originated in Grade One during 2020 continued to affect learners in Grade Six (Hoadley, 2023; Van der Berg & Böhmer, 2024).

The study contributes context-specific evidence from the Moses Kotane District, an under-researched rural setting. It highlights the challenges educators face in addressing persistent reading gaps and identifies practical strategies that can help schools, districts, and policymakers support literacy recovery. The findings further contribute to understanding how broader social, educational, and contextual factors influence reading development following major educational disruption (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roberts-Tyler et al., 2023).

In conclusion, addressing the reading gap created by COVID-19 requires coordinated action across all levels of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model: from the classroom and the home to the school and the district, and ultimately to national policy (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). No single intervention will be sufficient. However, the educators who participated in this study have demonstrated that meaningful progress is possible when they are equipped, supported, and resourced to respond to the needs of the learners in their care. The study ultimately affirms that while COVID-19-related disruptions created the gap, it is the collective responsibility of educators, schools, the department, families, and the community to close it.

Most importantly, the greatest contribution of the study is using the theoretical lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) and the relation of factors in each system on reading proficiency as outcome of ERT during the pandemic.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are based on the findings presented and discussed in Chapter Four in relation to the three themes and are aimed at addressing the reading gaps experienced by the 2020 Grade One learner cohort, who were in Grade Six in 2025. The recommendations range from those relevant at the immediate classroom level to those applicable to broader institutional support structures. Specifically, the recommendations made are for educators, school principals, and the broader North West Department of Basic Education. These recommendations are intended to strengthen reading intervention strategies, improve support for educators and learners, and contribute towards addressing the long-term effects of COVID-19 disruptions on reading development in rural schools.

The suggested recommendations are described below.

5.4.1 Recommendations for educators

The findings suggest that every educator, regardless of whether they are a language educator, should emphasise reading in their teaching and learning approaches. Language educators should use the subject policies and their Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) as a guide to improve reading development in their respective periods.

The qualitative approach and case study method used in this study have added value to the data collected, as they have enabled the generation of necessary information. Data collected from the educators has addressed the research questions and informed recommendations for educators. The participants believe that the use of pictures and print-rich materials is constructive and may encourage learners to develop a faster reading pace. Reading-curriculum workshops are essential, especially for language subject educators. District officials, such as the subject advisors, should visit the selected participating schools to monitor the progress and improvement of reading after the provision of curriculum support.

The findings of this study highlight that educators are required to be lifelong learners and find multiple ways to mitigate the reading challenges faced by their learners. It is also imperative that educators attend subject workshops to provide learners with adequate support to overcome their reading challenges, as well as to offer relevance in their extra classes. During extra classes, language educators should focus on reading pedagogies such as reading aloud, guided-group reading, and shared reading.

5.4.2 Recommendations for school principals

School principals and Senior Management Teams (SMTs) should strengthen school-based reading support programmes to assist learners who continue to experience reading difficulties. Such programmes may include Drop All and Read, as well as spelling bees and debating team initiatives. Departmental heads for language should ensure that extra classes offered by educators are relevant and are aimed at improving fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding skills.

Principals should further promote a reading culture within schools by ensuring the availability and effective use of reading materials such as newspapers, posters, and print-rich materials. Drop All and Read and peer-reading activities should be emphasised by both the principal and the departmental head and communicated to educators and learners.

The principal and the SMT should provide continuous support to and monitoring of educators responsible for language subjects. This may include in-school workshops, Professional Support Forums (PSF), and the facilitation of subject advisor visits the school. Principals should also encourage parental involvement by regularly communicating with parents about learners' reading progress and providing home-based reading support.

Furthermore, principals should work closely with the Department of Education and relevant stakeholders to secure adequate reading resources, learner support materials, and educator development opportunities.

5.4.3 Recommendations for the Department of Basic Education

The findings of this study have revealed that educators in rural schools continue to face challenges in addressing reading gaps exacerbated by COVID-19 disruptions, due to limited resources, insufficient support, inadequate training, and the digital divide. It is therefore recommended that the North West Department of Basic Education (DBE) strengthen support systems for rural schools or schools with limited resources through continuous curriculum support and reading support. Subject advisors should conduct regular school visits to support educators with practical strategies for reading instruction, curriculum implementation, learner support, and assessment practices. These support visits should not only focus on monitoring compliance but also on mentoring and guiding educators in addressing reading difficulties in overcrowded, under-resourced classrooms.

The DBE should further prioritise ongoing professional development programmes for educators, particularly those teaching languages. Workshops and training sessions should focus on practical, affordable classroom-based reading interventions that can be actioned in under-resourced schools. In addition, newly appointed educators

should receive induction and have access to curriculum support programmes to strengthen their understanding of ATPs, reading instruction methodologies, and learner support strategies. Such support may help educators respond effectively to learners' diverse reading needs in the Intermediate Phase.

Based on the study findings, it is also recommended that the Department of Basic Education gradually strengthen digital and technological support in rural schools. The department could begin by providing basic information and communication technology support, educator training, and, where possible, shared technological resources.

Furthermore, the DBE should work collaboratively with school principals, communities, and relevant stakeholders to improve access to reading materials and infrastructure in rural schools. Churches may also be requested to emphasise reading during their Sunday school classes.

5.5 AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was conducted in six schools in one cluster within the Moses Kotane District. Further research could be conducted in other clusters within the Moses Kotane District and in different provinces to determine whether similar COVID-19-related reading gaps exist among the 2020 Grade One learner cohort.

Future studies could also undertake comparative investigations of the effects of COVID-19 disruptions on 2020 Grade One learners' reading development in disadvantaged South African schools and similar schools in less and more developed countries. Such comparative research could provide valuable insights into how different educational systems responded to the pandemic and identify additional effective strategies to mitigate learning losses in early-grade reading instruction.

Further research could also explore the long-term impact of COVID-19-related learning disruptions on learners' reading achievement as they progress through subsequent grades. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of the lasting effects of the pandemic on literacy development and inform future intervention programmes.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to six selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District of the North West Province and involved only 12 Grade Six educators. As a result, the study's findings cannot be generalised to all schools in South Africa. However, the study provided valuable insights into educators' experiences of the COVID-19-related reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort in rural schools.

The study further relied on participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the reading gap created during COVID-19. As qualitative research involves interpretation, participants may have experienced and understood the phenomenon differently, depending on their individual teaching contexts and experiences. In addition, the researcher's own background and experiences in the education sector may have influenced the interpretation of participants' accounts and the conclusions drawn from the data. Although efforts were made to minimise potential researcher bias by maintaining reflexivity, applying the same interview approach across participants and systematically analysing the data according to the identified themes, the researcher's perspectives cannot be entirely separated from the research process.

Another limitation of the study is that the research focused specifically on educator experiences. It therefore did not include the perspectives of learners, parents, departmental officials, or other relevant stakeholders who may have provided broader insight into the challenges and intervention strategies related to the study.

5.7 CONCLUDING REMARK

This study found that the experiences and perspectives of the 12 participating Grade Six educators, the reading difficulties associated with the 202 Grade One cohort continued to be evident when these learners reached Grade Six in 2025. Participants identified the need for sustained support, including targeted reading interventions, collaboration among educators, SMT and parents, and ongoing professional development. Within the context of the six selected primary schools in the Moses Kotane District, these findings suggest that continued and coordinated support may assist in addressing persistent reading difficulties. However, given the qualitative case study design and the limited number of participants from one district, these

findings should be interpreted within the context of the study and should not be generalised to other schools or district.

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APPENDIX A: UNISA ETHICAL CLEARANCE



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 15 November 2024

Decision: Ethics Approval form

Ref: **2024/11/15/000000323/06/RB**

Name: **Mr Obakeng Mokgadi**

Student No.: **50870920**

Dear Mr Obakeng Mokgadi

Researcher(s): Name: **Mr Obakeng Mokgadi**

E-mail address: 50870920@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **0789965521**

Supervisor: Name: **Dr Lees DC**

E-mail address: leesdc@unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **0609865888**

Title of research: *GRADE FIVE EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES OF THE 2020 GRADE ONE READING GAP IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT.*

Qualification: MEd (Curriculum and Instructional Studies)

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above-mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period **2024/11/15** to **2027/11/15**.

*The **low risk level** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on **15 November 2024** in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
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3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. The study's risk level is Category 2- Low risk: Human participants are involved and there is foreseeable risk of inconvenience. Non-vulnerable adult participants and non-sensitive information is involved.
9. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2027/11/15**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number **2024/11/15/00000323/06/RB** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof RB Monyai
Acting Head: CEDU Research
monyarb@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean: CEDU
qakisme@unisa.ac.za

Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

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**APPENDIX B: NORTH WEST DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION PERMISSION TO
CONDUCT RESEARCH**



education

Department:
Education
North West Provincial Government
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Garona Building, Mmabatho
First Floor, East Wing,
Private Bag X2044,
Mmabatho 2735
Tel.: (018) 388-3429/33
e-mail: sgedu@nwpg.gov.za

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT-GENERAL

Enq. : Dr T Phorabatho
Tel. : 018 388 3071/3433

To: Dr Lees DC
Faculty of Education
University of South Africa

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH: MR OBAKENG MOKGADI

Permission is hereby granted to Mr Obakeng Mokgadi to conduct research titled: "GRADE FIVE EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES OF THE 2020 GRADE ONE READING GAP IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT" subject to the following conditions:

- He contacts the District Director with this letter of permission to arrange for details of data collection.
- Considering that your research will involve both educators and learners, the general functionality of the school should not be compromised.
- The participation in his study should be voluntary.
- The principles of informed consent and confidentiality should be observed in strictest terms, and
- The findings of his research should be made available to the North West Department of Education upon request.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

**MR MV SESHIBE
ACTING SUPERINTENDENT-GENERAL**

DATE



Let's Grow North West Together



APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR EDUCATORS

Title of the study: Grade Six Educators' Experience of the 2020 Grade One Reading Gaps in the Moses Kotane District

Researcher : Mokgadi OD

Discipline : Master of Education in Curriculum and Instructional Studies

Email address : 50870920@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Purpose of the study: The purpose of the study is to investigate the reading gaps experienced by the Grade Six educators for the 2020 grade one learners due to COVID-19.

Procedures: The researcher will activate the tape recorder and ask participants questions based on their teaching experience. Participants are requested to be candid and answer questions based on their experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Duration and location: The procedure will take between 45 and 60 minutes, and the research will be conducted in a quiet, safe setting, such as an office or a designated classroom.

Participant's requirements: The participant will only be required to answer the set questions and explain what they know in response to the questions asked.

Risks: There will be no additional harm or risks beyond those inherent in everyday life. A break is required during the interview if the participant feels tired or disturbed.

Benefits: The collected information may assist educators, the school, and the participant in understanding the levels at which their learners are performing, which can help identify gaps in learning to read.

Compensation and costs: There will not be any cost for participating in this study. Participation in the study is voluntary.

**APPENDIX D: PERMISSION LETTER TO THE HEAD OF THE NORTH WEST
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

Mokgadi OD

Monakato village

Rustenburg

0331

Superintend- General (HOD)

North-West department of education

Mafikeng

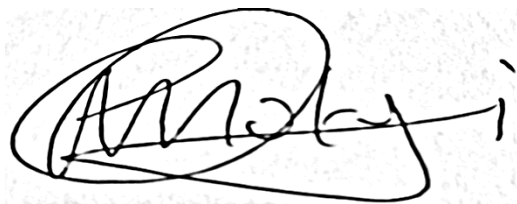
0370

Dear Sir

Request for permission to conduct educational research in the Moses Kotane District, six sampled schools under the Mogale circuit.

I hereby request your permission to conduct research for my master's degree in sampled primary schools in the Moses Kotane district for School 1, School 2, School 3, School 4, School 5 and School 6 known to the principals of such schools.

The purpose of this research is to explore GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. M. Kgosi', written over a light blue grid background.

Mokgadi Obakeng Daniel

APPENDIX E: PERMISSION LETTER TO THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS



07 February 2025

School 3 Primary School

Dear Principal

Request for permission to conduct research at your school.

Title of the title of your research: GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

As a master's degree student at the University of South Africa, I am requesting permission to conduct research at a school in the Moses Kotane District. The study aims to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of addressing the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort in the Moses Kotane District. The school was chosen due to its possible impact on teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research will involve interviews with two Grade Six educators per school, using a purposeful sampling of 12 educators who have taught for five years in the same school prior to COVID-19. However, potential risks include participant generalization, time-busyness, ethical considerations, recall bias, and interpretation bias. The study will not reimburse or offer incentives for participation. Feedback will be provided through multiple steps, including initial comments, pilot interview questions, and peer review.

Thank you in advance.

Yours in education

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mokgadi", is written over a light blue grid background.

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Title: GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

I, **MOKGADI OBAKENG DANIEL**, am doing research under the supervision of Dr. DC LEES, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, towards a Master of Education at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study titled: GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The study aims to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of addressing the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort in the Moses Kotane District.

WHY AM I INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited to participate in this study because of your valuable expertise and experience as an educator. Your insights, experience, and presence in the education system during COVID-19 are essential for the research objectives. I obtained your contact details through your principal, with whom I work closely as my counterpart. Approximately 12 participants will be involved in this study, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining confidentiality. Your participation is crucial in contributing to a comprehensive understanding of teaching practices and their impact on student learning outcomes.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The participant's role in the study involves participating in semi-structured interviews. These interviews will delve into your experiences and perspectives on the Intermediate Phase teaching. Questions will cover your academic performance with the current Grade Six learners as compared to the previous cohort, and how COVID-19 adversely affected the education system and your school, particularly. Each interview is expected

to last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Additionally, participants may be asked to provide demographic information and background details relevant to their teaching experience. Your contribution through these interviews is invaluable in enriching the research findings and informing educational practices.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are not obligated to consent to participate. If you choose to participate, you will receive this information sheet for your reference and will be asked to sign a written consent form (or an assent form for participants under 18 years old). You have the freedom to withdraw from studying at any time, without providing a reason. However, it's important to note that if you have already submitted identifiable material, such as responses to interview questions, it may not be possible to withdraw once submitted. Please be assured that all personal data will be handled confidentially and in accordance with applicable data protection regulations. Your decision to participate or cancel will not impact your relationship with the researcher or any associated entities.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participating in this study offers educators the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices, gain insights into effective methodologies, and contribute to the advancement of educational research. By sharing their experiences and perspectives, educators can potentially enhance their professional development and refine their instructional approaches. Furthermore, their input may directly inform the development of tailored pedagogical strategies designed to optimize student learning experiences.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

Potential inconveniences or discomforts for participants in this study may include the time commitment required for interviews, potential emotional distress from reflecting on teaching experiences, concerns about privacy and confidentiality, and the possibility of social or professional repercussions if their participation becomes known.

To mitigate these risks, measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality, obtain informed consent, protect privacy, and provide access to support resources. Participants will be informed about available indemnity and/or insurance coverage, if applicable, to protect them from harm or injury resulting from participation in the study.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to insist that your name will not be recorded anywhere and that no one, apart from the researcher and identified members of the research team, will know about your involvement in this research. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym. You will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods, such as conference proceedings.

Please note that confidentiality agreements should be submitted to the Research Ethics Review Committee for consideration. Your answers may be reviewed by individuals responsible for ensuring that research is conducted correctly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you permit other people to see the records.

Participants are informed that their anonymous data may be utilized for various purposes, including research reports, journal articles, and conference proceedings. Privacy will be safeguarded in any publication, ensuring that individual participants remain unidentifiable. However, absolute confidentiality or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, particularly in instances such as observational discussions.

Participants are informed that their anonymous data may be utilized for various purposes, including research reports, journal articles, and conference proceedings. Privacy will be safeguarded in any publication, ensuring that individual participants remain unidentifiable; however, absolute confidentiality or anonymity cannot be guaranteed, particularly in instances such as focus group discussions.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. The future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval, if applicable. Information will be securely destroyed, if necessary, with hard copies shredded and electronic copies permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive using relevant software programs. Additionally, any other forms of data storage, such as external drives or cloud storage, will be securely wiped or destroyed in compliance with data protection protocols.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No payment or reward will be offered to participants for their involvement in this study. Additionally, participants will not incur any costs associated with their participation. This decision is made to uphold the principle of fair procedures, ensuring that all participants are treated equitably and that their involvement is based solely on their willingness to contribute to the research objectives.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa (Unisa). A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you wish to do so.

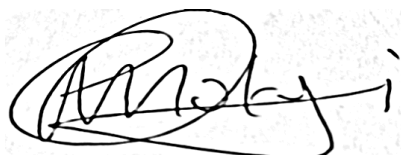
HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please get in touch with Mokgadi Obakeng via email at 50870920@mylife.unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible for the first year following the publication of the study.

If you have concerns about how the research was conducted, you may contact Dr. Lees.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.



Mokgadi Obakeng Daniel

APPENDIX G: RETURN SLIP FOR PARTICIPANTS



I, participant eight, confirm that the person requesting my consent to participate in this research has informed me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconveniences of participation.

I have read and understood the study as explained in the information sheet, and I had sufficient opportunity to ask questions. It was explained that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty. I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications, and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the interview and confirm that I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant's name and surname X

Participant's signature X

Participant eight X

Researcher's name and surname Researcher's signature

Mokgadi Obakeng Daniel

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mokgadi", written over a light blue grid background.

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

SECTION A: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

Form to be filled in by the researcher on behalf of the participant before the interview commences:

Information required	Participant information
Date of interview	16-05- 2025
Name of participant (Optional)	Participant Eight
Gender	Female
Age	DEIDENTIFIED
Highest qualification	DEIDENTIFIED
Number of years of educator experience	DEIDENTIFIED
Grade and subjects taught by the educator	DEIDENTIFIED
Name of school(s) taught at	School DEIDENTIFIED
Allocated pseudonym	P8

SECTION B: INFORMATION TO BE SHARED WITH PARTICIPANTS

- a) The purpose of this study is to explore Grade Six educators' experiences of addressing the reading gap among the 2020 Grade One cohort in the Moses Kotane District .
- b) This interview, as well as the others collected for this study, will be the data collection method for the study in question, along with classroom observations of your teaching. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed for data analysis. You will be given a transcript of your data for approval before it is included in the research write-up.
- c) Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
- d) The signing of a consent form is necessary before the commencement of the interview. You may withdraw from the interview at any given time. The interview is confidential, and a pseudonym will be used instead of your real name. You will be offered a transcript copy once it has been typed to validate the content. Additionally, you will be provided with an electronic copy of my thesis once the study has been approved and finalized.
- e) The interview will be 1–1 ½ hours in duration.
- f) Have the participant read and sign the consent form.

SECTION C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. How many years did you teach grade one before 2020?
2. How were the grade one learners' reading abilities and attitudes pre-, during, and post-COVID-19?
3. If the current learners are also encountering reading difficulties, do you think the problems are like those of learners of 2020? Please explain.
4. Because the 2020 academic year was trimmed, do you think the 2020 grade one exhibited sufficient reading skills?

5. If yes, describe how you managed to develop sufficient reading skills, and if the answer above is no, kindly explain how insufficient the reading skills were.
6. Can you describe your reading experience in dealing with grade one learners who exhibited in 2020?
7. Based on your experience of teaching reading in grade one, do you think some strategies can be adopted to improve the reading levels of 2020 learners?
8. Is there anything else you would like to bring to the researcher's attention, on reading that the intermediate educators could do?
9. In your opinion, what support or resources would have been beneficial in helping to address the reading gaps observed in grade one learners of 2020?
10. What other recommendations do you have for addressing reading gaps among future grade one learners in case of another pandemic, based on your 2020 experiences?

SECTION D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Questions.	Clarifying Probes – explain the answer in more detail.	Elaborating Probes – explore the content in more depth.
1. How many years did you teach grade one before 2020?	Could you elaborate on your experience teaching Grade One before 2020?	How did your teaching approach or strategies change during the COVID-19 period to address reading difficulties?
2. The study examines the impact of COVID-19 on the reading abilities and attitudes of grade one learners.	What specific aspects of reading abilities and attitudes changed during the COVID-19 period?	Can you describe a specific instance or examples of learners' reading abilities or attitudes that stood out to you during the COVID-19 period?
3. The question asks if current learners are experiencing similar reading difficulties to those of 2020 learners.	How do you define reading difficulties in the context of your experiences with grade one learners?	How do you think the reading difficulties of current learners compare to those of learners in 2020 in terms of severity?

4. The 2020 academic year was cut, so does it seem that the 2020 grade one exhibited sufficient reading skills?	Could you elaborate on what you mean by 'sufficient reading skills' in the context of grade one learners?	How did the trimming of the academic year impact your teaching approach and reading instruction?
5. The question asks for an explanation of how one can effectively develop sufficient reading skills, and if not, how insufficient their reading skills were.	How did you assess the reading skills of your learners to determine if they were sufficient or insufficient?	Can you describe a particular learner's reading progress that stood out to you, either positively or negatively?
6. In 2020, you had the opportunity to work with grade one learners.	What specific reading experiences stood out to you when dealing with grade one learners in 2020	How did you adapt your reading instruction to meet the diverse needs of your learners?
7. Based on your experience of teaching reading in grade one, do	Can you provide examples of strategies that you think could	What do you think are the most critical factors influencing

you think some strategies can be adopted to improve the reading levels of 2020 learners?	improve reading levels for grade one learners?	reading development in grade one learners?
8. Is there anything else you would like to bring to the researcher's attention, on reading that the intermediate educators could do?	How do you think intermediate educators can support reading instruction in grade one?	How can educators collaborate to address reading gaps across different grades?
9. The question seeks your opinion on the necessary support or resources to address the reading gaps observed in 2020 grade-one learners.	What specific resources or support do you think would have made a significant difference in addressing reading gaps in 2020?	What role do you think parents or guardians can play in supporting reading skills at home?
10. What other recommendations do you have for		

addressing reading gaps among future grade one learners in case of another pandemic, based on your 2020 experiences?		
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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT FOR PARTICIPANT 08: FACE-TO-FACE.

TITLE OF THESIS : GRADE SIX EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES ON ADDRESSING THE READING GAP AMONG THE 2020 GRADE ONE COHORT IN THE MOSES KOTANE DISTRICT

DATE OF AUDIO : 16 May 2025

LENGTH OF AUDIO : 55 minutes

TRANSCRIPTION LEGEND : RESEARCHER

: PARTICIPANT 08

INTERVIEW QUESTION 1: Kindly introduce yourself and tell me how long you have been in the teaching profession, and what subjects you are qualified to teach.

Good day, I am (P8), a PL one educator at school six. I have been in the teaching profession for a considerable amount of time, having started my career at the age of 21. Let's see, I am currently X years old, and I have been teaching for X years now. However, I had a break in between.

I began my teaching journey at X Primary School, where I gained valuable experience and skills that helped me throughout my career. In 2007, I resigned due to personal reasons, but I returned to the profession in 2010, when I joined X Primary School. I have been teaching here for over 13 years now, and I have grown to love school and the community.

As a qualified educator, I am proficient in teaching a range of subjects. Currently, I am teaching X. I enjoy teaching these subjects because they allow me to be creative and help learners develop essential skills. English is a fundamental subject that requires a strong foundation, and I take pride in helping my learners improve their language skills.

Life Skills is also an important subject that helps learners develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The Creative Arts allow learners to express themselves and tap into their creativity.

Throughout my career, I have seen many changes in education, and I have had to adapt to new teaching methods and curricula. However, my passion for teaching has remained constant. I believe that education is the key to unlocking the potential of our learners, and I am committed to providing them with the best possible education.

As a dedicated educator, I have encountered numerous challenges, yet I have also experienced multiple rewards. Seeing learners learn and grow and knowing that I have played a role in their development is incredibly fulfilling. I am proud to be part of the School D Primary School staff, and I am committed to continuing to provide high-quality education to our learners.

I am also aware that our school is part of a larger community, and I am proud to be contributing to the development of our learners in the Moses-Kotane district. I am looking forward to continuing to work with my colleagues, including our principal.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 2: Please share with me the story of your school's teaching and learning experiences from the beginning to the end of 2020.

As a teacher at X Primary School, I can share with you the story of our teaching and learning experience during the year 2020. At the beginning of the year, everything seemed normal, and we were following our usual teaching schedules and lesson plans. However, in March 2020, COVID-19 hit, and the government implemented lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus.

Unfortunately, our school, located in a rural area, lacked the necessary resources to continue teaching and learning remotely. We lacked the required infrastructure, technology, and internet connectivity to support online learning. As a result, we had to suspend classes, and our learners were unable to attend school for an extended period.

During the lockdown, we, as educators, sought ways to support our learners, but it proved to be a challenging task. We did not have the means to reach them remotely,

and many of our learners lacked smartphones or the funds to purchase data. We relied on occasional radio broadcasts and TV lessons, but it wasn't easy to ensure that all learners had access to these lessons.

When the lockdown was eventually lifted and schools were allowed to reopen, we faced a severe challenge in getting our learners back to school. Many of them had fallen behind, and we had to work hard to bring them up to speed. We implemented various strategies, including extra classes and daily homework assignments.

Despite the challenges, our school management team and staff worked together to ensure that we assisted those who were weak and conducted intensive weekly monitoring.

Looking back, COVID-19 presented a severe challenge for our school, but it also taught us valuable lessons about resilience and flexibility. We learned to appreciate the importance of being proactive, adapting to the 21st century, and being technologically inclined, because this pandemic had a substantial negative impact on our learners, particularly in terms of their reading progress. This pandemic also taught me that educators from rural areas should not fold their arms and wait for the government, but they need to be innovative and have effective strategies to be on the same level as the city schools, despite limited resources.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 3: Were the grade one learners disadvantaged in their reading learning in grade one in 2020, or were they not disadvantaged? Please elaborate on your answer IN TERMS OF THE LEARNERS YOU CURRENTLY TEACH.

COVID-19 had a severe negative impact on the reading progress of 2020 Grade One learners, as they did not complete a full academic year. With schools closed due to lockdown, learners in rural areas like ours, with limited resources, were particularly disadvantaged. Without access to digital devices such as smartphones, strong network connectivity, or online learning platforms, many learners fell behind in their reading skills. The lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers, combined with the absence of structured learning environments, made it challenging for learners to develop their reading abilities.

In comparison to my current learners in 2025, I noticed a big difference. Those who started Grade one in 2020 are now in Grade Six, and while some have caught up on their reading, others still struggle. COVID-19 has impacted their foundational reading skills, and it is evident that their reading is negatively affected, as some lack reading fluency, struggle to read with understanding, and exhibit limited vocabulary development. Some learners are still playing catch-up, and it is heartbreaking to see them struggle with reading skills that they should have mastered years ago. On the other hand, our current grade one learners can read significantly better than the current Grade Six learners when they were in grade one around October 2020.

The inability of rural school to provide teaching and learning during lockdown due to limited resources has also affected these Grade Six learners, causing them to stay behind with reading abilities. On that note, the school failed to provide quality teaching and learning for almost six years because we were running behind the annual teaching plan and losing sight of reality.

Another sad part is that before COVID-19, we faced challenges in providing adequate resources, including textbooks, educational materials, and technology. However, as always, we improvised to manage to provide some level of education by being creative and resourceful. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the limitations of our resources became apparent. Without digital infrastructure, we would be unable to provide remote learning, which would severely impact our learners' progress. We are still feeling the effects of this today, as many learners are behind in their reading skills.

As an individual, I do not think we will win this now because we still face the challenge of overcrowding in our school. As we speak, the current Grade Six class is packed with 65 learners in one class. However, we are working to bridge the gap, irrespective of the circumstances, and we want to invest in digital tools. The challenge is securing the installation of TVs in classrooms and other digital tools, such as projectors.

Despite these challenges, we are committed to providing the best possible education for our learners. We are also considering donations from various companies to support the use of digital tools.

It is a lesson that digital tools are used and implemented in schools to avoid any academic loss in the future, should there be a pandemic that suspends face-to-face teaching and learning. We must also engage parents and show them the importance of education so that they can play a role in the event of a similar pandemic.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 4: How did teaching and learning take place for the school's grade one 2020 learners during the COVID-19 lockdown period when learners could not come to school? In your answer, please explain what the school did to ensure that teaching and learning, especially reading, continued for the grade one learners during that time.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, teaching and learning for all learners, including the grade one students in our school, came to a standstill. Unfortunately, due to limited resources and inadequate infrastructure, we were unable to offer online classes or remote learning opportunities. As a result, learners were unable to access educational activities and teaching during that time.

The school's inability to provide teaching and learning during lockdown meant that learners were left to figure things out on their own, and many primary school learners rely on educators' or parents' words for instruction to learn.

In terms of reading and learning, we were unable to continue teaching and learning activities during lockdown. Our Grade One learners were unable to access reading materials, teaching, and practice during that time, which undoubtedly hurt their reading development. We were concerned about the potential long-term effects of this disruption on our learners' reading skills and overall academic progress.

When learners returned to school after the lockdown, we assessed their reading skills to identify areas where they needed support. We also developed a targeted intervention to help learners catch up on their reading, including extra classes.

When learners returned to school, I worked closely with content subject educators to assess the learners' reading skills and develop targeted interventions to support their reading development.

One of the challenges we faced was identifying ways to support learners who were severely struggling with reading. We often called parents for intervention sessions and requested extra help from them to practice reading at home.

We recognized that parents play a critical role in supporting their children's learning; hence, we reached out to them for support and to ensure that they were equipped to help their children's reading development.

We are not working on developing other strategies to mitigate the impact of future disruptions and ensure that teaching and learning can continue, even in the face of adversity. We are also working to eliminate the reading problem in our school.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 5: Please describe exactly what reading learning the learners were exposed to during 2020 and what, if any, reading learning was lost. (Educators may refer to CAPS or ATP).

All educators, including those teaching grade one learners, are guided by CAPS and ATP. Therefore, according to the CAPS document for grades one to three in languages, all learners are expected to develop foundational reading skills, which include phonemic awareness, decoding, and comprehension. The ATP for grade one reading outlines specific skills and knowledge that educators should impart to the learners during the year.

However, due to the lockdown, learners did not have access to face-to-face classroom teaching, also known as traditional teaching. They also suffered a loss due to the non-provision of online teaching and learning during that time.

In terms of specific reading skills, I mentioned that learners were supposed to develop phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills. They were also supposed to develop comprehension skills through reading and discussing a range of texts. However, without regular face-to-face teaching, many learners fell behind in developing the mentioned skills.

The lack of teaching and practice in reading during lockdown meant that learners missed out on critical learning opportunities. They did not have the chance to develop the phonics and decoding skills I have just mentioned. As a result, learners

experienced the greatest loss as they did not acquire the foundational reading skills that are crucial for future reading success and academic progress.

These challenges also pushed us to emphasize regular oral assessment, including reading. Learners also require consistent and explicit instruction in reading to develop foundational reading skills. Explicit teaching of reading, I mean, they need to be introduced to reading of stories, poems, and informational texts because many did not have the opportunity to study that, and educators were focused on ATP, forgetting to develop these learners. This support can include implementing and monitoring spelling BEEs, drop all, and read.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 6: The 2020 Grade One learners are now in Grade Six. Kindly describe whether the current Grade Six learners' reading skills and abilities are at the level they should be. Please elaborate on your answer.

The 2020 Grade One learners are now in Grade Six in 2025, and as their teacher, I have had the opportunity to assess their reading skills and abilities. Unfortunately, I can confirm that many of them are still not at the level they should be. The five-month lockdown negatively impacted their learning, as not only numeracy and other subjects were lost, but reading was also affected.

Remember, reading and writing serve as a significant and fundamental tool for learning in the foundation phase, and if a learner is unable to read, they will not be able to write. Unfortunately, reading does not only take place in an English subject, but it is a tool that can be applied across all subjects.

When I assess their reading skills, I notice that many of them are struggling with fluency, reading with understanding, and vocabulary development. Many learners read slowly, some do not pronounce words well, while others stammer when reading. This is concerning, as the Grade Six class marks the end of the Intermediate Phase, and we expect them to be more at ease with reading and to be able to read with accuracy, including comprehending complex texts.

Another area where learners are struggling is reading comprehension. They are having trouble understanding the meaning of texts, identifying the main idea, and

making inferences. This is likely due to a combination of factors, including limited exposure to complex texts and insufficient practice in reading comprehension strategies.

In addition to phonics and comprehension, learners are also struggling with vocabulary development, as I mentioned. They are not exposed to a wide range of texts and vocabulary, which limits their ability to develop a robust comprehension of complex texts and communicate effectively.

When I examine the reading skills that learners should have mastered by the end of Grade Six, I become concerned because many of them are still behind.

It is heartbreaking to see learners failing to read passages or extracts during corrections in the classroom, as I mentioned, some of whom stammer and would take time to respond. I have also noticed that they read without listening to themselves or understanding what they are saying.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 7: Please share how any potential reading gaps for grade one learners were addressed and implemented *by the school* during and after the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Given that we did not offer any teaching and learning during lockdown in 2020, the potential reading gaps for the Grade One learners were high. When school reopened after the lockdown, we realized that many learners had fallen behind in their reading skills.

The school implemented various strategies to address these gaps. We provided extra classes specifically for reading to support and practice learners to read intensively. We also worked closely with parents through intervention, requesting that they read with their children at home, so that these learners could improve their reading development.

One of the strategies we implemented was to provide one-on-one reading sessions, where learners read to educators in the absence of other learners, and we focused on the areas we thought learners fell behind in.

After the lockdown, we also focused on building learners' confidence in reading, as we realized that some learners were stammering and lacked confidence in public reading due to the gap increased by the lockdown.

The school also worked to provide additional resources to support reading development. We provided learners with newspapers to increase and promote reading in our school, with a focus on phonics, fluency, and accuracy.

The process of closing reading gaps is ongoing, as we do this in the morning by reading aloud to all learners. However, the school's approach to addressing reading gaps has been complicated because not all learners show interest.

INTERVIEW QUESTION 8: Please provide recommendations on what could be done to address the reading gap of the current Grade Six learners.

To address the reading gap for the current Grade Six learners, I would recommend providing a strategy where on one day all learners are summoned to read aloud in the classroom to assess those with difficulties, so that we can do individualized support, and on the second day, we focus strictly on the struggling learners by giving them an extract to read. Such an extract should focus on specific reading skills such as phonics, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. We need to teach learners to pronounce words correctly and to identify complex words.

As I mentioned, this intervention could be beneficial if delivered in a small group or one-on-one setting, rather than a large group approach, which may not be as effective in helping to attain the goal. Many learners reading in a group becomes a problem because one learner hides behind the other.

School management should also monitor intensive reading programmes to ensure that reading instruction is indeed taking place and that learners are given guided practice, which can later develop into independent reading.

Educators should also use summarizing, visualizing, and questioning styles after reading to assess the ability of reading with understanding and to develop critical thinking skills. By teaching learners how to approach this, then learners will be ready to face the formal examination.

Regular assessment in language subjects and feedback is also crucial in addressing the reading gap. Educators should utilize them to enhance reading skills and provide timely, detailed feedback to maintain and intensify the reading momentum.

APPENDIX J: WRITTEN REFLECTIONS

Please write a written reflection; it would be appreciated if your answers could be as detailed as possible.

1. Do you observe difficulties with phonics, decoding, or fluency among the 2020 grade one learners currently doing Grade Six in 2025? If so, how did you address these challenges?

The 2020 Grade One learners who are in Grade Six in 2025 are still not at their full potential due to the five-month lockdown. Reading and writing are fundamental tools for learning, and many struggle with fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. They read slowly, pronounce poorly, and stammer, which is concerning as they are entering the Intermediate Phase. Reading comprehension is also struggling due to limited exposure to complex texts and insufficient practice in effective strategies. A lack of exposure to a wide range of texts also hinders vocabulary development. Many learners are still behind in reading skills, such as correcting passages and listening to themselves.

2. How do the current 2025 Grade Six cohort's reading abilities compare to previous cohorts?

Due to the disruption caused by the 2020 lockdown, which affected their academic development, particularly their reading skills, the reading proficiency of the current 2025 Grade Six cohort differs significantly from that of previous learners in the same grade. Through extra classes, it is evident that the current grade seven learners, who were in grade six in 2024, perform significantly better than the 2025 Grade Six learners. The 2024 Grade Six learners can express themselves, have confidence in speaking, and speak English fluently.

3. What phonics resources have you used to improve the reading abilities of the current Grade Six learners?

Our deputy principal, who serves as the school's curriculum manager, has advised and supported us in the use of phonics training videos and word-building materials. The management has recently purchased additional reading materials, including posters, to enhance the reading skills of our Grade Six learners. From time to time,

the management monitors whether the classrooms are print-rich so that we can be pragmatic.

4. What strategies would you employ/have you used to address the reading gaps for current 2025 Grade Six learners who struggle with reading?

To enhance and encourage reading in our school, we provided learners with newspapers and focused on developing phonics, fluency, and accuracy. We continue the process of closing reading gaps by reading aloud to all our learners in the morning. After a specific period, we now focus on the targeted learners and give them special attention to ensure that all learners attain our goal and close the reading gaps.

5. What recommendations can you give to lessen and improve reading gaps for the current Grade Six cohort?

To address the reading gap encountered by the 2025 Grade Six learners, a strategy of one-day classroom reading aloud and individualized support for struggling learners is recommended. Focusing on specific reading skills, such as phonics, decoding, fluency, and comprehension, small-group or one-on-one sessions can be beneficial. School management should monitor intensive reading programmes and use summarizing, visualizing, and questioning styles to assess understanding and critical thinking skills. Regular assessment and feedback are also crucial for increasing reading skills and maintaining a positive reading environment.

6. What professional development or resources would you suggest for educators who need to address reading challenges for current Grade Six learners?

Particularly for language subject teachers, I recommend that the department initiate professional development workshops to enhance a variety of reading skills that can be imparted to learners. The government should also help schools work collaboratively with municipalities to establish libraries and provide relevant reading materials to the schools. Reading clubs, debate, and other extracurricular activities related to reading should be emphasized.