

TEACHERS, METHODS AND MATERIALS: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN LEARNING TO READ IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN TWO KENYAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Over recent decades, various studies have decried the rising numbers of non-readers in Kenyan classrooms, within the context of a growing global phenomenon. This study aimed at ascertaining teachers' capacity to teach reading, the materials that they utilize to teach reading, and the overall challenges and opportunities in teaching reading. A mixed methods design was utilized, with a purposive sample of 8 urban (Nairobi) and 8 rural (Nyeri) primary schools, based on the best and worst performing schools in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education results of the year preceding the study. A total of 34 teachers participated in the study. Findings indicate that nearly half of the teachers neither taught reading nor knew the methods to use in teaching reading. A third of the teachers (31.9%) used phonics, while another third favoured the whole-word method. The study concludes that lower grade teachers are ill-equipped with methods of teaching reading, while remediation practice is hardly a focus. It would be necessary to introduce reading as a subject at the teacher training level, and designate reading time through the primary education course.

Key words: Teaching reading; Reading difficulties; Reading Competency; Literacy Levels; Learning Disability Association of America; Kenya.

Reading in Global and National Contexts

In recent decades, reading difficulty has been an area of interest to many educators both locally and globally. In the context of this paper, reading difficulties are understood as severe or significant discrepancies or delay in the acquisition of reading competency. For instance, a child with more than two years delay in development/acquisition of reading skills as compared to his/her level would be termed as having a reading difficulty. According to Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow (2003), becoming a skilled reader is very important in the society and one who is not skilled in reading is at a great disadvantage, both in school and at the workplace. Despite this, various authors and studies have decried that literacy achievement is a widespread problem (Gove & Cvelich, 2010; Dubeck, Jukes & Okello, 2012), and that a number of learners are unable to use reading as a functional tool for learning, getting new information, ideas, attitudes and values (Lerner, 2006).

Globally, estimates of the prevalence of reading disabilities have been as varied as the number of the studies. Over the decades however, various studies have attempted to gauge this measure. Ekwall (1976) estimated that learners with reading disabilities made up to between 2 and 30 per cent of the entire school-going population. However, his contemporaries argued that the prevalence depended on the definition used and the age of the population in consideration. Thus, the lower the class of learners studied, the higher the prevalence because of differing rates of maturation. In developing countries, estimates of children with reading disabilities (from grade 3) ranged between 20 and 30 per cent (Berger, Yule & Rutter 1975; Eisenberg, 1978). Later, Spreen, Risser and Edgell (1995) arrived at the estimation that the total prevalence of all forms of dyslexia combined were 20% in the USA and 15.7% in Italy, for those having I.Q. of 80 and above. The Learning Disability Association of America (2005) estimated that 15% of the U.S. population, or one in seven Americans, has some type of learning disability.

In Kenya, reading in English is taught at primary school level (pre-unit to class 8) as a basic skill, in addition to listening, speaking and writing (KIE, 2002). After 9 years of age, which in Kenya places them in grade 4, the learners are expected to learn all the subjects in the school curriculum without any difficulties, using English as the instruction medium. Information about the stages of reading development indicates that learners starting at this level should *read to learn*, where they use reading as a functional tool for acquiring new knowledge (Mercer & Mercer, 2001). This is contrasted to earlier levels (pre-school to grade 3), in which children should *learn to read* (Chall, 1989).

Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of literacy assessments, as a growing global agenda. In Kenya, various large-scale literacy assessments have been conducted, including the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), the National Assessment System for Monitoring Learner Achievement (NASMLA), the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality, and Uwezo among others. These assessments have established significant delays in the acquisition of basic reading competency. Evidence from the Uwezo assessment (2010 & 2011) estimates that only around 50% of children in grade 4 are able to read at grade 2 level, identifying significant delays in acquisition of reading competency among children in Kenyan primary schools. Indeed, studies have established that a significant number of learners

complete the primary school cycle without having achieved the basic levels of reading and comprehension (Commeyras & Iyenga, 2007; Kirigia, 1991; Uwezo, 2010/2011). Kang'ethe (1998) argues that as children grow older, they make more errors in reading because they tend to rely on visual clues rather than decoding the word and therefore deteriorate in acquiring appropriate reading skills. While the various learning assessments have given estimates of the prevalence of non-readers, such studies are unable to exclude environmental, cultural, socio-economic and language disadvantages among the non-readers, and thus may not give an accurate picture of the levels of reading disabilities among the non-readers (Lyon, 1996).

Reading difficulties among school-going children should be considered as a serious handicap in life in that children who do not learn to read may not succeed in life (Lerner, 2006). While various policy documents regret the high levels of school failure and wastage, measured in terms of school drop-out, repetition and absenteeism¹, we could argue that these phenomena are aggravated by the poor quality of learning, especially the weak foundations of reading and the subsequent frustration produced by learners' inability to *read to learn*. Indeed, reading difficulties have been attributed to the overall phenomena of drop-out (Jimmerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000), discipline problems and low self-esteem among learners (Wekesa, Poipoi, Wanyama & Begi, 2012). Secondly, reading difficulties and the weak foundations to reading have been linked to teacher quality (Kingdon, 1998; MacCutchen, Abbott, Green, Beretvas, Cox, Potter, Quiroga & Gray 2002; Saxena, Singh & Gupta, 1996; Wekesa et al 2012), teacher experience (Bashir 1994; Mugo, Mwoma & Limboro 2011) and the general classroom environment and practice. As Lerner (2006) argues, it is critical that teachers identify children with reading problems early and provide them with appropriate early interventions rather than practising the policy of *wait-and-fail* method.

As follow-up to the question of teacher practice in reading, this study interrogated the methods used by teachers in teaching reading, as well as the interventional strategies adopted by teachers against reading difficulties.

Conceptualizing Learning to Read: Re-visiting Jeanne Chall

The ground-breaking research conducted by Chall (1983) illuminated the understanding of how children acquire the reading competency. Four key stages of reading development are established, which start with pre-reading (stage 0), birth to 6 years, where the learner grows in his/her control of language both in semantics and syntax. The child increases his/her conceptual knowledge and begins to develop an understanding of the world around him or her. At this stage, the learner relies on non-visual information and contextual knowledge to begin reading. He/she also begins to develop insights into the nature of words and begins to realize that words are made up of sounds. Stage 0 is followed by stage 1, which may be referred to as *initial reading or decoding stage* (class 1 to 2 or ages 6 - 7). During this stage, the reader relies heavily on the text and focuses attention on visual information. The child begins to stare at

¹The Sessional Paper 1 of 2005 states that the cumulative dropout rate at primary level has been as high as 37%, repetition rates of up to 27%, and a survival rate as low as 40% (GoK, 2005).

print (decode) and sounding out words. At this stage, the child attempts to break the code of print, realizes that letters and letter combinations represent sounds, and is aware of vowels and vowel sounds.

Stage 2 known as confirmation of fluency is mainly for grade 2 and 3, or learners aged 7 to 8 years. At this stage, the child recognizes patterns of words and reaches a level of automaticity in word recognition. The child acquires orthographic knowledge of words. This stage is of gaining control of reading. Stage 3, which is the main focus of this study, is for grades 4 to 8, (9 to 14 year olds). This stage is unique in that the child reads for learning; in other words, the child uses reading as a tool while in stages 0 – 2, the child learns to read. At this stage, the child learns new information, ideas, attitudes and values. He/she grows in background knowledge, word meaning and cognitive abilities. Reading in this stage is essentially for facts and the reader typically comprehends from a singular viewpoint.

According to Gunning (1996), stage three is called reading to learn where learners are expected to refine their reading skills and apply them to obtain information from various types of texts. The researcher's opinion is that a non-reader in standard 4 may still benefit in basic academic skills if given proper remediation and especially if the teacher is aware that standard 4 and above is a crucial stage where learners should read by themselves and use the skill or reading to comprehend other academic skills. While, in all fairness, Chall's study should be termed as outdated, we find much life into these arguments, and much application to our Kenyan situation. Indeed, the layout of our primary education structure, with a major break after 9 years (grade 3), is a clear alignment to the milestones of acquiring reading, and distinct differentiation of the levels of learning to read and reading to learn. Chall's theorization has hence influenced our thinking in writing this paper, and we wish to pay clear tribute to this author.

Study Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods approach to interrogate teacher and classroom practices around reading difficulties. A teacher questionnaire was utilized as the main tool, and complemented by lesson observation and focus group discussion to achieve teacher consensus around a few key issues. The study included a total of 34 teachers in 16 schools: 8 schools in Nairobi (urban) and 8 schools in Nyeri (rural). The school sample was drawn from a combination of 1st and 4th quartiles in the school's performance (English subject mean score) in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) (terminal examination of the primary cycle in Kenya), in the year that preceded data collection. Data were analysed following statistical and thematic analysis procedures respectively.

Teaching Reading in Nairobi and Nyeri Schools: Interrogating Teacher Methods and Techniques

Various analyses have linked the methods and approaches used by teachers to teach reading and the actual competences that learners acquire in reading (Commeyras & Inyega, 2007; Dubeck et al, 2012; Mugo et al. 2011; Wekesa et al. 2012). Existing body of literature highlights a wide range of methods that are used to teach reading, among them the phonics method (Beard,

1987; Dubeck et al 2012; Runo, 2009), alphabetic method (Heilman, Blair & Rupley, 1981; Maneno, 2008), and the whole-word or look-say method (Dubeck et al, 2012; Durkin 1983; Lerner 2000). This study sought to establish the approaches that teachers utilized in teaching reading. Foremost though, only 76% of the teachers confirmed that they taught reading to their learners, while 9% did not teach reading at all. Another 15% were undecided.

Table 1: Methods used by teachers in teaching reading

Method	Teachers	%
Phonic	23	31.9
Whole-word method (look and say)	23	31.9
Alphabet method	4	5.6
Language experience	3	4.2
Others	8	11.2
Undecided	11	15.2
Total	72	100%

Analysis indicates that most teachers utilized either the phonic (31.9%) or the whole-word (31.9%) approaches. The alphabet method was utilized by only 5.6% of the teachers, while a few others utilized a method they referred to as language experience (4.2%). A significant proportion of teachers (11.2%) did not seem aware of the main methods of teaching reading, and indicated flashcards, sound and modelling word as among the reading methods they utilized. Another 11% of the teachers were undecided on the methods they used (would use), and did not respond to this question.

Beard (1987) justifies the effectiveness of the phonics method in teaching reading, arguing that the method has been in use since the middle of the 19th century. Phonics instruction is built upon teaching letter sound relationships. Learners are taught these techniques so that they are able to identify words that they do not recognize in print. According to Beard (1987), the method has three major purposes. First, the new reader learns that printed letters and letter combinations represent speech sounds, which are heard in words and that speech sounds heard in words are quite different from “cat” in the sentence “the cat ran after the mice”. Second, the reader learns to blend the sounds represented by the printed letters when he/she meets a word he/she does not recognize (Heilman et al. 1981). Third, the reader masters the use of all available cue systems in combination with letter-sound relationships, to identify words and comprehend written text. In teaching phonics, word meanings and comprehension should be given proper attention. In a study of schools at the coast of Kenya, Dubeck et al. (2012) argue that the teaching of letter-sound relationship as extremely efficient to teaching reading, and that systematic phonics instruction is a sure means of promoting reading achievement (citing Snow et al. 1998 and NICHHD, 2000).

While the phonics method is increasingly becoming entrenched in reading instruction in Kenya, a study by Maneno (2008) on identification processes of articulation and phonemic disorders in children with communication disorders in Nairobi established that most teachers did not

have phonological skills needed to effectively handle children with phonemic problems. The study also determined that children with learning disabilities who had phonological problems were labelled slow learners and could not get any assistance from their class teachers.

Arguably, the whole-word method (chanting, or look-say) is the most utilized method in teaching reading in Kenya (Dubeck et al. 2012). In this method, it is expected that learners will be able to identify words on sight without first having to go through conscious letter-by-letter analysis. The method is also referred to as “look and say” because learners are expected to say (identify) a word as soon as they look at it. According to Durkin (1983), whole word methodology is simply a matter of naming words and is used frequently by teachers and non-teachers. Students establish automatic stimulus – response patterns for dozens of frequently used words. Durkin (1983), further observes that these words must be “over-learned” to the point where recognizing words as whole words is automatic.

The whole-word method demands memorization of words, and is less suitable to the Kenyan situation, where children learn English as either a second or third language. The challenge is that children need to first build a critical mass of spoken vocabulary, in order to integrate concept meanings. Learners who have reading difficulties may have problems with sight words (whole word) because many of them may have learnt to use phonics. According to Lerner (2000), for a student to read fluently, he or she must recognize words instantly, without hesitation or further analysis. Referring to the method as *whole word with extensive choral repetition*, Dubeck et al (2012) contend that this method takes time, and memorization contributes more to language learning (vocabulary) than learning to read.

On the other hand, in the alphabet method (utilized by 5.6% of teachers in this study), the child learns to read by saying the names of the letters through which they learn to recognize and pronounce words (for example “em-ee-en). According to Beard (1987), the alphabet method overlaps with phonics in that the consonant letter names contain a phoneme with which they are commonly associated. The vowels also have names which contain “long” phonemes with which they are often associated (ae, ee, ie, oe, ue). While this study established use of the method, it is unclear on the extents of effectiveness of this method in teaching reading in Kenyan schools.

Teacher Training on Reading Methods

Further, teachers were asked to name the methods of teaching reading in which they had encountered during their pre-service training. In their responses, the phonics/phonetic method had the highest rating of 24 per cent, followed by the whole-word method at 14 per cent, look-and-say at 11 per cent, and the alphabet method at 8 per cent and finally the language experience at 4 per cent. In the other instances (14%), teachers ‘created own methods’, and mentioned flashcards (4%), naming pictures (3%) and silent word (3%) as among the methods introduced at the teachers’ training college.

Looking at the responses above, it is unclear as to whether teaching reading was systematically introduced during teacher training, or whether teachers had actually unlearned it over the years.

Indeed, teachers (during focus group discussions) felt that they were not given adequate knowledge and variety of methods to use when teaching reading. The analysis points to limited knowledge on the methods of teaching reading, a finding that agrees with Wekesa et al. (2012) and Dubeck et al (2012). The findings further agree with Wheelock (1995), who in a study for empowering teachers and learners, argues that improved learning depends on teachers who are knowledgeable about academic content and are able to employ a variety of teaching methodologies. Emphasizing on the value of teacher knowledge and skills, Newmann and Wehlage (1993) posit that authentic instruction should meet the standards of the following higher-order thinking, depth of knowledge, connectedness to the world, substantive conversation and social support for the student achievement. The foundation for these qualities stems from teacher training. As Blömeke (2012) proposes, it is important to interrogate the range of Opportunities to Learn (OTL) exposed to teachers during training and the knowledge outcomes of teacher training as a critical component of the teacher education reform agenda.

Materials Teachers Utilize to Teach Reading

In the study, teachers were asked to name the teaching materials they used in reading. From the responses, the textbook was the most commonly utilized teaching material. The textbooks utilized included Primary English (21%), New Peak Reader (21%), New Progressive English (19%), and Sound and Read (10%). However, it was difficult to ascertain whether they really used the books for teaching English language or teaching reading in English. While these basic reader series could be used as an approach and material to teach reading, teachers may have been using them as only texts in teaching English language.

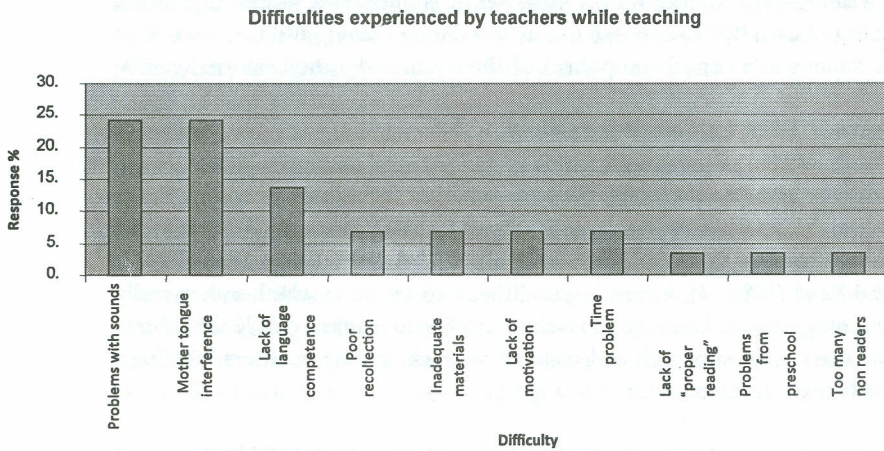
To clarify further, teachers were asked to indicate other supplementary materials they used when teaching reading. The materials named included storybooks, magazines, objects, poems, pictures, read books one and two, comic books, cut-out letters and flash cards. From the responses given by the teachers above, it was quite clear that many teachers are not aware of the supplementary materials necessary for reading intervention. There was no mention of any computer-based tools, indicating non-utilization of technology (Mercer & Mercer 2001) to facilitate reading.

From the analysis, it emerges that teachers are poorly-equipped to teach reading, with evident teacher failure in the creation of learning materials. The scarcity of learning materials has been decried by other studies, including Uwezo (2010/11), Commeyras and Iyenga (2007) and Dubeck et al (2012). Perhaps, rather than blaming the government for failure to supply adequate learning materials would be re-energizing teachers to re-discover a sense of industry, and the opportunity to invent own materials within their contexts. According to Lipson and Wixson (1997), teachers are expected to know the characteristics of the teaching/learning materials and the learners, and only then can they determine the level of difficulty of the contents that they present. However, research has indicated that pre-service training (alone) is inadequate to assure life-long agency among teachers, and that on-going professional development delivers value in improving the quality of teachers in Kenyan schools (Dubeck et al, 2012).

The Challenge of Teaching Reading

World over, it is documented that teachers face a myriad of challenges in teaching reading. In this study, teachers were asked to identify the key challenges that they faced in teaching reading, and in utilizing the methods they had identified earlier. The figure below summarizes the responses.

Figure 1: Difficulties experienced by teachers while teaching reading



The key challenges identified included problems in teaching sounds, mother-tongue interference, lack of language competence, poor recollection, inadequate materials, lack of motivation, inadequacy of time for teaching reading, lack of "proper reading" skills, overlay of reading problems from pre-school and having too many non-readers. Notably, one observes the tendency to blame external factors – learners (their inadequacies and ineptitude in learning to read, and failure of upstream teachers), materials (rather insufficient supplies from the powers that be), time (unfair competition from other subjects), and so on. However, analysis of these challenges reveals deeper problems in the approach to the teaching of reading at pre-school and lower-grade levels in Kenyan schools.

However, the issue of multi-lingualism has been identified as a challenge by many studies. In their study at the coast of Kenya, Dubeck et al. (2012) documented the lamentations of teachers, and their inability to process multi-lingualism as a reality to teaching reading. In their analysis, the challenge lay in the non-implementation of the language policy in Kenya, which stipulates that children ought to learn reading in the language they already speak when they enrol in school. Thus, teachers end up teaching reading in English, as though this were their first language. The opportunity to teach letter-sound in a language they already speak is lost,

and teacher turn to the look-say method, which is itself ineffective in teaching reading. Agreeing to this theory, Taylor et al. (1995) assert that children who come to school speaking other languages rather than the language used in the school may have problems in reading.

The prevalence of many non-readers is a reality in Kenyan classrooms, and authors have argued that teaching reading should no longer be a lower-grade affair, but that reading should be a running subject through the primary school cycle (Runo, 2010). But even then, as Maneno (2008) and Dubeck et al (2012) observe, teaching reading will remain a challenge, as long as teachers do not possess adequate capacities and authority to teach reading, and especially in using sounds (phonemes) effectively in aiding the learning to read.

(Re)mediating of Reading Difficulties

Research has demonstrated that readers can achieve at least grade-level reading skills if they are given intensive intervention to correct their reading deficiencies (Clay, 1985; Iversen & Turner, 1993; Pinnel, 1989, Wasik & Slavin, 1993). In this study, teachers were first asked if they paid any attention to remediating reading difficulties among their learners. It emerged that 88 per cent of the teachers were carrying some sort of remediation, while 12 per cent were not certain about this. Further, teachers were asked to identify the strategies they utilized to remediate reading difficulties in learners.

Among the key strategies cited were use of ability grouping (about 18%), giving story books/magazines to learners, identification of weak learners (over 12%) and use of peer teaching (about 5%). Others were varying methods of teaching, creating interest and advising parents to help. While the responses are encouraging as evidence of the existence of remedial programmes in our schools, concerns may be expressed on the ampleness of teacher knowledge and skills to implement impactful remediation.

It has been argued that remediation is a technical matter, and that it should be based upon sound instructional principles focused upon the needs of the learners on the basis of careful diagnosis (Wilson, 1972). Proper remediation calls for skilful teaching of the learners who are in need. Remediation falls into the following three categories (Wilson, 1972). To achieve this, teacher knowledge on the existing possibilities of remediation methods is critical, and this was evidently lacking, from the responses of the study participants. Teachers were unable to differentiate between the key strategies and levels of *on-the-spot*, *classroom*, and *clinical* remediation. While the first one is conducted immediately a learner makes an error in reading, classroom remediation calls for careful learner observation and diagnosis, and subsequent adjustment of the instructional strategy for the specific reading problem identified. At the higher level, clinical remediation is an off-site programme, targeted at serious reading deficiencies or disabilities, preferably through expert referral.

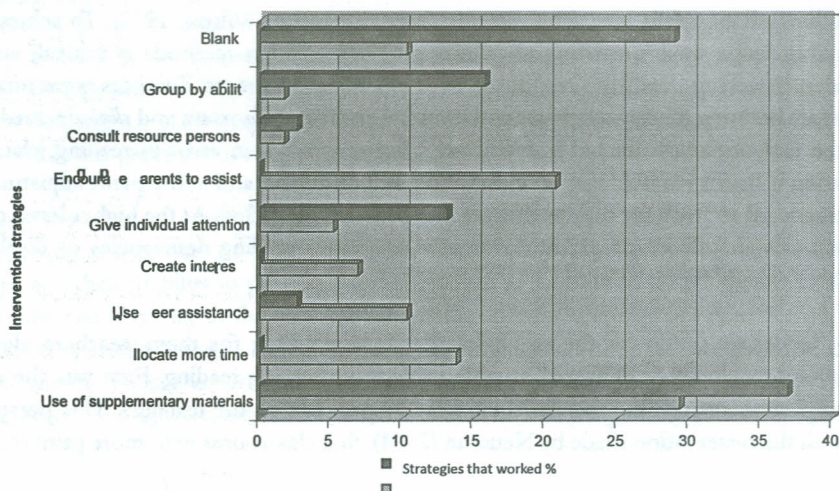
Seeking deeper reflection on the strategies that were working for them, teachers identified three key approaches that delivered notable value in improving reading. First was the use of more supplementary reading materials, cited by 30 per cent of the teachers. This perspective agrees with the observation made by Neuman (2004), that classrooms with more print materials

provide more support to the beginning of reading. Stodt (1981) suggested that teachers need to create opportunities for learners to experience success by selecting materials that interest them and those in line with student's level of ability. Use of supplementary materials was also identified as among the four strategies that were working in improving literacy achievement in primary schools at the coast of Kenya (Dubeck et al). Indeed, increasing reading materials not only brings excitement and contributes to the foundations of a reading culture, but contributes meaningfully to orienting children to knowledge seeking as part of lifelong learning (and prompts the reading to learn anticipated later in the reading curve).

Second, teachers observed that *ability grouping* of learners was working in improving reading. Teachers utilized this strategy to ensure that the motivation to read was maintained for every learner, while guarding against frustration for the poorer readers. This also allowed for individualized attention, in supporting learning to read within the lesson time. Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Collins and Mandel (2001) ascertained in their study, that ability grouping (by mixed or same-level ability depending on task) facilitated student literacy achievement. In their study, Dubeck et al (2012) identified ability grouping as the top key strategy that was working in improving literacy, and presented contrasting viewpoints on the effectiveness of homogenous (same-level) and heterogeneous (mixed-level) groups in improving reading. From the narrative of teachers presented in their study, it emerges that alternating these two approaches of ability grouping may lead to attaining equilibrium between supporting and encouraging poorer readers, while maintaining high reading motivation among the better readers, especially in large classrooms.

Third, teachers prioritised *individual attention* as a strategy that worked. Despite the large classrooms, teachers noted that sparing time to attend to poor readers, during the usual instructional time, can deliver value in improving reading in Kenyan classrooms. Other strategies that were found to work included use of peer assistance and consulting resource persons.

Figure 3: Interventional strategies used by teachers in remediating reading—those that were used and those that worked



Notably, parental participation was not identified as a working strategy by the study. This departs from the findings of various studies that have underlined the worth of parental contribution to the achievement of literacy in early years. For instance, Fantuzz (1995) established that learners who are given conducive conditions at home perceived themselves more socially confident and adjusted more positively in school. Dubeck et al (2012) also identified parental participation as a clear missing link in improving literacy achievement in Kenyan schools.

Conclusion

This paper has provided evidence on the teaching methods and materials, and explored the challenges and opportunities encountered by teachers in teaching reading. What emerges is that even with limited knowledge and skills in teaching reading, teacher agency exists in Kenyan classrooms, and it should not be considered that nothing is happening. However, as other Kenyan studies on reading have identified, the teacher capacity to teach reading is low, identified in the limited knowledge on methods and strategies. We argue that there is need for teacher support in teaching reading, and that there is need for mediation, for remediation to be accepted as a running practice at the various levels, and as a core component of teaching reading. However, teacher professional development, and especially a classroom-based one is called for, to facilitate expansion of choices in teaching reading, which every lower-grade teacher should possess. Only then, can the many non-readers in our classrooms today find support, and progress on time towards reading to learn.

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