


*International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*  
Vol. 24, No. 7, pp. 671-695, July 2025  
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.7.33>  
Received Apr 25, 2025; Revised Jun 12, 2025; Accepted Jul 4, 2025

## The Role of Teachers in Fostering Literacy Practices among Preschoolers in South Africa

**Thinawanga Portia Mavhandu**   
University of Zululand,  
South Africa

**AH Mavhandu-Mudzusi**   
Department of Health Studies,  
University of South Africa, South Africa

**Azwidohwi Philip Kutame**   
University of Venda,  
South Africa

**Segun Emmanuel Adewoye\***   
Department of Psychology, College of Human Sciences,  
University of South Africa

**Abstract.** Using a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research approach, this article explored the roles of teachers in fostering literacy practices among preschoolers in selected schools in South Africa. Fifteen preschool teachers were interviewed at the preschool centers where they are employed. Interviews and environmental field notes were used as data sources. A thematic analysis strategy was applied to analyse the data. The findings revealed that teachers take on the roles of nurturer, researcher, facilitator, and advocator, depending on circumstances dictated by the literacy practice interactions in the classrooms. The role of nurturer is regarded as the foundation for teacher-preschooler interactions, which opens possibilities for preschoolers to engage and participate in more literacy activities in the classrooms. The roles of teachers in fostering literacy practices in the classrooms develop and change over time in relation to the rapid growth of preschoolers, group dynamics, and preschooler-teacher relationships. This article suggests that the teacher's role in fostering literacy practices within the classrooms is complex and ever-changing and requires integrated mobilization of literacy resources for all stakeholders.

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\*Corresponding author: Segun Emmanuel Adewoye; [adewose@unisa.ac.za](mailto:adewose@unisa.ac.za)

**Keywords:** Literacy practices; literacy skills; preschoolers; teachers; role

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) in the year 2020 mandated governments worldwide to increase efforts to build their population's comprehensive literacy skills, particularly children (WHO, 2020). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 reinforce this call to action. The fourth Sustainable Development Goal on Education (SDG4) calls for equitable, quality education that promotes lifelong learning for all. SDG Target 4.2 explicitly highlights that by 2030, countries should "ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (United Nations, 2015). In response to the literacy development call, regions and countries established various initiatives to address literacy provision (Piper et al., 2018). Africa as a region also made a commitment in support of universal education and literacy provision in the preschool phase.

The commitment is displayed through the African Charter and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), as elaborated by Aidoo (2008). The South African initiatives that pay attention to literacy foundations for children from birth to age of four include the National Early Learning Standards (S. A. D. o. B. Education, 2009) and the National Curriculum Framework (Motshekga, 2015). The literacy component within these initiatives focused on building effective communication, such as developmentally and culturally responsive listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As such, strong foundational literacy skills during preschool (Peng et al., 2019) backed by quality classroom literacy instructions (Managhan, 2020) underpin later literacy achievement (Rohde, 2015).

Preschool education is the keystone in a preschooler's life and development that offers many kinds of stimuli for growth and learning. The added value of preschool education services depends on the high-quality pedagogy implemented in the classrooms. For sustainable literacy learning, the classroom experiences should provide preschoolers with appropriate materials and learning experiences (Chapman & O'Gorman, 2022; Kilinçci & Bayraktar, 2021). Research indicates that fostering literacy skills in this sense requires the provision of different materials and related activities (Pianta, 2016), which all depend on teachers' roles.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering literacy learning and development among preschoolers during classroom interactions (Adewoye & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2025). The education preschool teachers provide significantly impacts the future literacy achievement of the children in their care. Archana and Rani (2017) view a teacher as an individual in the classroom with the proficiency, tools, and information necessary to edify children's knowledge. As such, Hornblower et al. (2012) define the teacher as someone who helps children generate knowledge and competence through teaching.

In addition, Harmer (2015) outlines the different metaphors to describe teachers. These include "actors" perpetually on stage and "orchestral conductors" guiding

conversations and establishing the tempo and ambiance in the classroom. These metaphors highlight preschool teachers' crucial role in cultivating fundamental skills among preschoolers, including literacy, a developmental precursor or prerequisite for formal reading and writing, and instilling a lifelong drive for literacy excellence.

High-quality literacy practice experiences provided by the teachers in the classrooms help shape and influence children's literacy development for school and later life outcomes (Dennis & Horn, 2011). How teachers execute and implement teaching practices can greatly either positively or negatively impact the literacy development of the pre-schooler, as noted by Majzub (2013). Thus, pre-schoolers exposed to optimal literacy practices are more inclined to excel in literacy acquisition compared to their counterparts who lack such exposure (Johari & Yunus, 2021). Therefore, preschool teachers must comprehend their roles and the impact of such roles on children's reading and writing experiences.

In addition, the effectiveness of teachers in fostering literacy practices is influenced by multiple factors that are internal to teachers, as well as personal and external (Cunningham et al., 2009). Personal factors include the skills and knowledge gained from pre- and in-service training on literacy practices as a subject (Cunningham et al., 2009). These training programs help teachers understand how pre-schoolers learn literacy practices, affecting their instructional methods. This knowledge also equips teachers to comprehend the learning theories necessary for effectively guiding and supporting pre-schoolers in learning literacy.

The complexities of a teacher's role in literacy practices bear the influence of external factors, including policies that dictate the learning goals and outcomes expected from pre-schoolers. In the South African context, these policies include the National Early Learning and Development Standards (S. A. D. o. B. Education, 2009) and the National Curriculum Framework for children from birth to four years (D. o. B. Education, 2015). These policies require preschool teachers to be innovative and creative in their approach to achieve the desired goals, regardless of the curriculum materials, pedagogical approach, or literacy program, as emphasized by Gannon and Dove (2021).

Despite government initiatives, children are still completing preschool with insufficient literacy skills (Spaull & Hoadley, 2018), which profoundly impacts the quality of primary school literacy education. This is confirmed by the low literacy rates achieved by South Africa in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reports, which monitor school literacy and the quality of primary school education (Govender & Hugo, 2020). The PIRLS reports indicate that more than 78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning (Roux et al., 2023). This implies that literacy practices for pre-schoolers are not making the desired impact, as most children are entering formal schooling with a limited literacy foundation.

Various studies have extensively explored effective literacy practices for pre-schoolers (Justice et al., 2018; Norling et al., 2015). However, a limited number of studies have examined essential aspects of classroom settings for pre-schoolers' literacy development (Bracefield & Woodgate, 2020) and the direct link between teachers' roles and literacy practices. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on the specific roles of teachers in fostering literacy among pre-schoolers in the classroom. Consequently, to comprehensively understand literacy development in preschool settings, it is imperative to investigate the roles of teachers in fostering literacy among preschoolers in the classrooms. This study aims to address this gap. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the roles of teachers in fostering preschoolers' literacy practices to gain a broader perspective on literacy development in preschool settings. Accordingly, the research question for this study was:

- The role of teachers in fostering literacy practices among pre-schoolers in South Africa

## 2. Theoretical framework

The influence of teachers on the development of foundational literacy skills in preschoolers finds support in Vygotskian theory (Vygotsky, 1978). According to sociocultural theory, adult-child interactions provide cultural and social guidance that mediates children's development of thinking and problem-solving skills (Smagorinsky, 2022). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory emphasises that child development, including literacy, relies on interactions with the social environment. Notably, Bodrova & Leong (2018) regards the classroom as a social world and underscores that children's interactions shape their reading and writing identities. In terms of literacy practices, sociocultural theory focuses on social interaction, the more knowledgeable partner (e.g., the adult in teacher-child interactions), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Bodrova & Leong, 2018).

Vygotsky believed that cultural and social interactions are crucial for children's development; therefore, the nature of interactions is important, especially in diverse environments like South Africa (Weiten & Hassim, 2016). According to Vygotsky's theory, children actively participate within their zone of proximal development through social interactions and receive valuable guidance from caregivers and older individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD reflects the cognitive space between what children can achieve independently and what they can learn with the assistance of teachers (Kostogriz & Veresov, 2021).

Knowledgeable teachers utilise this space by providing structured support with new information when the child is prepared and receptive to understanding or absorbing new concepts (Irshad et al., 2021). The teacher's role, according to Vygotsky, involves connecting spoken and written language for preschoolers. The theory emphasises that a preschooler's participation in literacy activities is crucial for learning. These shared literacy experiences are important for connecting children's everyday lives and developing their reading and writing skills. According to Irshad et al. (2021), many preschool teachers overlook this

connection. However, based on sociocultural theory, continuous social interactions in the classrooms are key to teaching literacy in preschool.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

A descriptive phenomenological study was followed, as highlighted by Gill (2020) to explore how teachers contribute to developing literacy skills among preschoolers. The design helped to clarify the real-life experiences of teachers in the classroom, gained from the participating teachers' narratives of their experiences and feelings, to produce in-depth descriptions of the role of teachers in fostering literacy practices among pre-schoolers in South Africa. This phenomenon is difficult to quantify, and new insights are required, so, in agreement with Creswell (2014) that a phenomenological design should be used to analyse a phenomenon as the participants narrate it, the purpose of our study being to listen, comprehend, and interpret the meaning pre-school teachers ascribed to their experience of fostering literacy practises among preschoolers is best achieved using a phenomenological research design

#### **3.2 Study setting**

This study was conducted in Centurion, Tshwane Municipality, located in the Gauteng province of the Republic of South Africa. The study specifically targeted preschools in Ward 66, Region 4. All the participants were preschool teachers of preschoolers between the ages of three and five years, with 5 located in Lyttleton, 5 in central Centurion, and 5 situated in Irene. The study looked at the preschool phase, focusing on preschool teachers as the population of this study.

#### **3.3 Participant and Sampling Strategies**

Following Rahman (2023), maximum variation purposive sampling was used to identify and select information-rich preschool teachers to ascertain the role of teachers in fostering literacy in the classrooms. Pseudonyms were used to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (Heaton, 2022). Only participants who met the criterion for inclusion were included in the study. The criterion was participants whose age ranges from 30 to 45, participants with 5 to 25 years of preschool teaching experience, and participants who are registered preschool teachers.

All the participants (n=15) were females. Regarding age, there were 5 participants below the age of 35 and 10 over the age of 35. Out of fifteen participants, 11 had five to ten years of work experience, with 2 having more than twenty years of experience in preschool teaching and 2 with less than five years. The participants held various qualifications that enabled them to become registered preschool teachers, ranging from NQF level 1 (n=3), NQF 3 (n=3) to NQF level 5 (n = 9).

#### *Instrumentation*

The selected participants participated in in-depth face-to-face interviews and environmental field notes for data collection. The interviews and field notes collection took place from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2023. Data saturation was reached after the twelfth participant. The researcher conducted individual in-

depth interviews, using open-ended questions, to elicit detailed responses about the participants' roles in fostering literacy practices in the classrooms. Probing and follow-up questions were used to obtain rich data, and each interview was recorded using an audio recorder. The interviews lasted for about 60 minutes each. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal aspects, such as tone of voice, body language, and environment. Data collection and analysis were iteratively performed until data saturation was reached.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The researcher analysed the data using a thematic approach, as highlighted by Byrne (2022). After each in-depth interview, the audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim. To establish and create meaningful patterns, we analysed the themes through a coding method that included familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, checking for themes, scrutinising the themes, and defining and naming the identified themes. The researcher carefully read and re-read the transcripts, identifying codes and grouping similar codes into subthemes, themes, and superordinate themes for each transcript.

After comparing all the transcripts, similar categories, themes, and sub-themes were combined, and participant quotations were identified with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. A code-recode procedure was carried out on the data. The same data was coded twice, with a gap of over two weeks between each coding session. The results of the two coding sessions were compared, and the mentor and supervisors were consulted for guidance and verification of codes. Both themes were compared and discussed, resulting in a final table with relevant transcript excerpts. This process increased the validity of the identified themes and reduced subjectivity.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness of the study**

To ensure trustworthiness, this study followed the criteria offered by Rose and Johnson (2020). The criteria observed included credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. To ensure credibility, the researcher used member checking and validity checks. Twelve participants reviewed the transcripts to ensure their views were accurately captured. Field notes were used to document details that could not be recorded. All interviews were transcribed, analysed, and agreed upon by the researcher, mentor, and supervisors. Detailed descriptions of the participants, the research setting, the data collection method, and data analysis were provided to ensure transferability. Authenticity was ensured by using participants' direct quotations and maintaining an audit trail of the research process.

### **3.6 Ethical measures**

The University of Zululand Research Ethics Committee approved the study. In addition, the Department of Basic Education, Gauteng, and the preschools' management, where data were collected, permitted the study to be conducted at their centres. Participants were thoroughly informed that their participation was voluntary and that they reserved the right to withdraw their participation in the study at any time, should they wish, without any negative consequences.

Therefore, a signed informed consent form was obtained from each participant to ensure that their participation was voluntary. To maintain confidentiality, convenient and comfortable venues suggested by participants were used for data collection. In addition, the personal details of the participants were not shared with unauthorised persons. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in the interview transcripts and the presentation of the findings. All the research data, such as audio-recorded interviews, transcripts, and field notes, are safely kept in code-locked electronic folders to prevent unauthorised access.

#### 4. Findings

This section focuses on presenting and interpreting the results, which are organised according to the themes that emerged from data analysis. This is done according to the extracted superordinate themes and subthemes.

**Table 6.1: Summary of the results**

Superordinate theme	Theme	Subthemes
Roles of teachers in fostering literacy practices	Nurturer	Ensure safety and protection around literacy practice materials
		Build trusting relationships
		Encourage exploration of literacy practice experiences
	Researcher	Enhance own literacy practice, knowledge, and teaching methods
		Understanding of NCF for children from birth to four years.
	Facilitator	Decisions on literacy practices are made in the classrooms
		Use a variety of methods to expand literacy practice experiences in the classroom
	Advocator	Liaise with parents about preschoolers
		Resource acquisition
		The well-being of the children

The table above summarises the subthemes and themes under the superordinate theme on the roles of teachers in fostering literacy in the classrooms. Themes under this superordinate theme included the roles of nurturer, researcher, facilitator, and advocator.

##### 4.1 Theme 1: Build trusting relationships

This role talks about the safety and protection of preschoolers during literacy practice interactions in the classrooms. The subthemes covered include ensuring safety and protection around literacy practice experiences, building trusting relationships, and encouraging exploration of literacy practice experiences in the classrooms.

#### 4.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Ensuring safety and protection around literacy practice experiences

The Guidelines for early childhood development services regarding equipment as part of the minimum standards stipulate that classrooms must be clean and safe for preschoolers. Thus, teachers must take reasonable precautions to protect preschoolers from physical, social, and emotional harm or threats posed by themselves or others. Participants indicated that they take extra care in ensuring that children are safe in the classroom, although, at times, it is not possible. The following views of participants show consideration of safety and protection during literacy activities and classroom transition times.

*"I keep my eyes on the tools... just as much as I look at how they use them during activities, but when children are this many (26 children), it is not always possible to work alone." (Bella)*

*"When you receive the child, look at the child to see his appearance (sic) when he arrives ... like, if they play with scissors and cut their hair, and you miss it, the parents will blame you for things that happened at home." (Unathi)*

*"Going to the bathroom is done with a song, one hand on the head and the other on a friend's shoulder (single file), to ensure that children do not hurt each other." (Nancy)*

Teachers have expressed concerns over the challenges of ensuring safety and protection in classrooms because of the large number of children in a class. Love et al. (2007) highlight that, with children coming to preschools at varying developmental levels, despite being the same ages, safety becomes a critical aspect that requires constant attention from teachers, due to the children's different levels of ability in using and handling literacy tools.

In this study, teachers reported that safety goes beyond lesson times, including arrival times and bathroom breaks; teachers should be vigilant and watch over the children all day. This includes occasions when there are interactions with literacy practice material as part of free-choice/centre settings and large-group settings. The responsibility of ensuring the safety and protection of children without an assistant is a daunting task for teachers.

Limited literacy practice materials and overcrowding influence the literacy practice experiences that teachers can provide for preschoolers. As such, the teachers indicated whole group interactions as the preferred approach because, with this approach, children are exposed to the learning material for a specific time, and then the space is cleared for the safety and protection of the children. However, when teachers cannot leave some literacy practice materials and tools because of safety concerns, it goes against the sociocultural teaching approach for literacy practice provision in the classroom, which supports the provision of supervision of preschoolers during both group and individual literacy practice interactions in the classrooms.

#### 4.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Building a trusting relationship with pre-schoolers

Besides safety and protection, for learning to happen, preschoolers need to have a trusting relationship with the teachers in the classroom. The teachers in this

study acknowledge that preschoolers are fueled to learn and explore materials through the affirmation and warmth of trusting relationships. The following quotes indicate how trusting relationships are fostered with preschoolers.

*"I do not feel like I am their teacher only; I am also a parent to these children. I am more of a mother when the parents are away, to be honest."*  
(Thandi)

*"For children to connect with all the reading and writing activities in the classroom, I function like being the mother ... during the whole day, talking with them in class."* (Unathi)

*"When children are happy, they enjoy learning, and it is even easier for them to listen to you and understand what you say. However, if you teach them and they fear you, they struggle to listen to you and what you teach (sic)."* (Marie)

Participants are aware that their duty in the classroom extends beyond teaching literacy. Their behaviour influences the preschoolers' responses and feelings in the classroom. Studies have shown that the relationship between teachers and preschoolers, which emphasises conceptual understanding, providing feedback, and engaging in conversations during instruction, promotes literacy and language outcomes (Pianta et al., 2016). Ho and Funk (2018) add that the nurturing abilities of the teacher can promote socioemotional development, emanating from a trusting relationship that teachers establish with children. Also, physical contact, such as hugs and expressive acknowledgment of effort and product, appears to rub off and foster emotional resilience. These high levels of motherly affection are facilitators of secure attachments and exploratory systems that fuel preschoolers to learn and enjoy literacy.

In a trusting relationship, children feel comfortable asking questions, independently solving problems, trying new activities, and verbally expressing themselves; all the things that teachers encourage for the development of literacy skills (Ho & Funk, 2018). These attributes align with the sociocultural view of fostering literacy. A nurturing relationship between the teacher and preschoolers facilitates a secure relationship and is an indicator of greater exploration of knowledge, higher test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure relationships, according to Stemmert (2019).

#### *4.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Encourage exploration of literacy practice experiences*

Trusting relationships alone are insufficient for preschoolers to learn and understand literacy practices; exploring literacy practice experiences is required. Though it is documented that print-rich environments that provide opportunities and tools for preschoolers to see and use written language for a variety of purposes are recommended in literacy teaching practice. Some participants indicated that this is not practical in preschool classrooms because of limited resources, as indicated in the following comments:

*"I will encourage the visual child to be more active when I use visual material. When I have things to be touched, I will encourage the touching one to play with materials ... that way, I reach them using their learning*

*styles, even though sourcing material is hard work for me at times."*  
(Cindi)

*"I put things on different tables, and the children must rotate throughout the day; for example, there will be puzzles, that table will be colored pins and frames, the next table will be coloured, and the other will be books (sic). Children often fight when they do not want to rotate."* (Zondi)

Teachers are aware of their responsibility to create a classroom setting that is inviting for preschoolers to interact, explore, and engage with materials and tools as part of their daily routine; however, there are not always sufficient literacy practice resources for all the preschoolers in the classrooms. The quality of the educational environment hinges on teaching and learning resources in the classrooms (Ball & Gettinger, 2009). Baroody and Diamond (2016) confirm that the preschool classroom's literacy environment is closely related to children's interest and involvement in literacy activities and their early literacy development.

Guo et al. (2012) noted that a classroom's literacy environment can be linked to a preschooler's early reading skills based on how it stimulates interest and engagement in literacy practice materials. If a classroom has engaging literacy activities, children who actively participate and pay attention to these activities are more likely to practice early reading skills frequently than those who are disengaged or uninterested (Baroody & Diamond, 2016). As a result, interested and engaged children are more likely to perform better on early reading tasks.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Enhance literacy practice, knowledge, and teaching methods**

This theme covers the importance of teachers continually enhancing their own knowledge of literacy practices teaching (theories, strategies, and methods), understanding policies that guide literacy practice teaching in preschools, and understanding literacy practices teaching resources.

##### *4.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Enhance own literacy practice, knowledge, and teaching methods*

Standard one from the International Literacy Association, as highlighted by Kern et al. (2018) requires teachers to possess foundational knowledge, displayed through an understanding of the theoretical and evidence-based foundations of literacy practice processes and instruction, to support preschoolers' literacy development. In addition, Skweyiya (2006) reinforces that this standard should be one of the conditions of employment for preschool teachers. However, the reality in the classrooms concerning fostering literacy practices contradicts this standard.

*"I would like to learn new things to improve my literacy teaching for my classroom, but money and time are always a problem for us."* (Faith)

*"I feel I can do more with children, but I must use my activities, such as reading magazines, since I do not know of training and workshops to assist us."* (Emma).

*"It is not like I did not want to study in life, but I did not have the finances to do so. But must the government people do something? They should expose us to more teaching methods and all that for these literacy things."*  
(Bella)

The teachers were aware of the knowledge gaps they were attempting to fill on their own; however, there is a need for assistance to ensure that their literacy practice understanding extends to include literacy theories and strategies, as well as how these link to activities provided in the classroom. The participants all indicated a need for some type of support or professional development to make fostering literacy practice easier and more efficient.

The quality of education preschoolers receive largely depends on the pedagogical skills of their teachers. As stated by Mligo et al. (2016), teachers who lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of pedagogical skills often struggle to provide quality education to their young learners. This contrasts with the sociocultural theory, which views the teacher as the knowledgeable partner during literacy interactions, as the theory suggests that teachers possess a wealth of knowledge and understanding, as pointed out by Vygotsky (1978). Kirkby et al. (2018) argue that teachers with strong pedagogical skills are better equipped to guide children effectively and respond more sensitively to their questions.

However, Bartlett and Mogusu (2013) point out that having content knowledge alone is insufficient to provide children with high-quality teaching. Even if teachers understand pedagogical skills and approaches, they may struggle to apply them effectively in a practical setting. Therefore, it is important for teachers to possess knowledge about the subject they teach and how to guide and encourage children towards spontaneous learning.

*4.2.2 Subtheme 2.2: Understanding of literacy practice policy guidelines for preschoolers.* Professionalism, as a preschool teacher, is displayed when teachers know and use ethical guidelines and other professional guidelines, as indicated by Children (2020). These guidelines come in the form of competence, content, and service guidelines. In the South African context, preschool teachers have the following documents that emphasise professional guidelines, including literacy practice provision: the South African National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy of 2015; the Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Programmes Leading to Qualifications in Higher Education for ECD Educators (PMRP) (D. o. H. Education & Training, 2017); and Guidelines for ECD Services. Skweyiya (2006) emphasises the need for teachers to align their teaching practices with the country's guidelines. This implies that teachers should know and implement what is specified in the guidelines.

However, the participants shared a contrasting view:

*"We do not have any curriculum for preschools below Grade R, not officially.... There is no curriculum. Furthermore, that is why we use any literacy resources in this preschool (sic)." (Anna)*

*"Nothing, we do not get any support from external sources. We have to provide our teaching (sic) and staff development. It is very hard." (Anna)*

The teachers' responses indicated they are unaware of the policies relevant to the preschool education sector. However, based on the abovementioned policies, teachers are expected to implement them to help preschoolers acquire skills. Teachers' practices echo their professional training and the guiding policy of

education, which gives precedence to values imported from outside the local or national culture. Thus, to understand the meaning teachers attach to the classroom practice and its role in classroom settings, as well as to the preschooler's development, it is necessary to explore the basis of the beliefs and practices of the teachers, as shared by Kejo (2017). According to Vygotsky's theory, a teacher is expected to be more knowledgeable in the classroom. Thus, the implementer must be well-informed for any policy to succeed. This knowledge can only be acquired through proper training, orientation, re-orientation, or in-service training, as suggested in Blackburne (2020).

Similarly, Ahmadi and Lukman (2015) argue that teachers are the major hub around which the successful implementation of a new curriculum revolves. Therefore, teachers should be provided with sufficient professional development and training opportunities in various areas, including policies, if curriculum implementation is effective, and the discrepancies between the expected practices and what is being implemented in preschool classrooms must be addressed.

Teachers must receive sufficient professional development opportunities and training, including orientation to policies. As such, policymakers and other stakeholders are encouraged to offer support to teachers to enable them to implement policy guidelines in their teaching practices effectively. By working with policymakers, teachers can create a conducive environment for preschool literacy education that aligns with the country's guidelines and facilitates appropriate literacy learning.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Expands literacy practice experiences in the classroom**

This theme covers decisions on literacy practices provided in the classrooms and methods of expanding literacy practice learning experiences in classrooms.

#### *4.3.1 Subtheme 3.1: Decisions on literacy practices provided in the classrooms*

Standard 2 of the International Literacy Association (Kern et al., 2018) requires the teacher to have a deep understanding and knowledge of the elements of a balanced, integrated, and comprehensive literacy curriculum and to have developed expertise in enacting that curriculum. A similar sentiment is shared in the Guidelines for ECD Services, which requires teachers to provide varied instructions for children in the classrooms (Skweyiya, 2006). Thus, a balanced approach to literacy practice teaching implies that teachers know and understand when and how to implement an approach for the benefit of preschoolers. However, there is often a mismatch between the actual and perceived knowledge of literacy instruction, as expressed by the participants below:

*"It is not easy to teach children what they need when you do not have the teaching material or have too little material that cannot be shared amongst all children in the classroom." (Finah)*

*"We do not get enough resources to work with; the preschool gives each classroom little things to use (sic), and what we get at the beginning of the year is meant to last a class for the whole year, even if the number of children increases." (Cindi)*

Participants indicated that the problem was a need for more resources. At the same time, their remarks imply that even the teaching approach suggested by international and national policies needs to be adhered to in the classrooms. However, the participants lacked the reference materials to link classroom literacy practices with national and international set standards. While the teachers in this study believed they struggled to deliver effective teaching due to inadequate teaching resources, another contributing factor was the lack of knowledge on funding teaching material policies.

The lack of knowledge on funding processes raises questions about the transparency of the preschool funding system for preschool education. Based on the funding system, the percentage allocated to teaching material is often insufficient to cover the cost of stationery literacy, including the low-cost teacher-made material for the classrooms.

Worse still, when teachers acquire teaching and learning resources, they are often insufficient because of the constantly growing class sizes. This indicates that the preschool subsidy is insufficient, which affects literacy in the classrooms. A shortage of teaching resources impacts the choice and decisions about literacy practices that should be provided in the classroom. Also, school management and teachers acknowledged that a shortage of resources negatively affects classroom teaching in preschool centers.

#### *4.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Expanding literacy practice learning experiences in the classroom*

The teachers expand literacy practice learning experiences in the classrooms when they spark the preschoolers' interest, engage the children in literacy practice interactions, and offer challenges for the preschoolers to move beyond their present level of understanding, as described by Pentimonti and Justice (2010). This requires in-depth knowledge of both literacy development, which is a challenge, as most participants struggled to motivate their reasons for choosing and using literacy practice teaching methods with the children in their classrooms.

Although most participants indicated that they demonstrated and explained what preschoolers need to do with literacy practice materials during interactions, they struggled to provide the reasons. Furthermore, there was no uniform approach to literacy practices offered in various preschools, and different areas of literacy practices were emphasized in different classrooms. In addition, the participants highlighted the use of various classroom methods to foster literacy practice experiences for children, which were exacerbated by the shortage of teaching and learning materials. The participants shared the following views on random methods utilized in the classrooms to expand and extend knowledge and skills relating to literacy practices. The use of books as a strategy was explained as follows:

*"I make them play with any books, even though they cannot read the words they see in the picture." (Cindi)*

*"Fostering literacy is by enjoying reading books (sic), but they cannot read to each other yet; they mainly look at the pictures. I even asked them,*

*what is happening in this picture? Explain to me what you're seeing in this picture."* (Zondi)

Participants highlighted praising children as another method used in expanding literacy practice learning.

*"This needs patience because some children take longer to learn things, and in that case, I praise them for any effort shown during the activity and allow them more time to manipulate literacy materials."* (Nancy)

*"I guide them when they are not doing an activity well, like colouring, and, most importantly, praise them when they put in the effort."* (Thandi)

Modelling appropriate behaviour is another literacy teaching method highlighted by the participants as useful in expanding literacy practice learning in the classroom.

*"Children copy and repeat behaviours of those around them, so I sit and read in the reading corner when I want them to play with books."* (Unathi)

For this reason, teachers have some ideas of the teaching methods to facilitate literacy practice, but they struggle to sequence activities due to a poor understanding of literacy development and a lack of reference material for literacy teaching. Mayer (2007) indicates that children make more progress in literacy practice experiences when supportive teachers surround them. In preschool classrooms, teachers are supportive and knowledgeable when they are available to answer the questions of children thoughtfully, acknowledge literacy practice strengths, scaffold their literacy practice activities, and encourage further engagement through verbal affirmations (Mayer, 2007).

Moats (2014) states that literacy domain knowledge is crucial for preschool teachers and mentions that there are strong theoretical reasons to suspect linkages between teacher knowledge and the ability to teach literacy effectively. According to Smagorinsky (2022), classroom instruction should help preschoolers develop skills they have not yet mastered; consequently, such instruction will precede the preschooler's development of skills required to complete specific tasks.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Resource acquisition**

This role involves the ability of the teachers to recognize areas in which advocacy is needed and understand the actions needed to improve the circumstances of the children regarding learning literacy skills. In this study, advocacy includes liaising with the parents, advocating for teaching resources, and advocating for the well-being of the preschoolers.

#### 4.4.1 Subtheme 4.1: Liaise with parents of pre-schoolers

Kern et al. (2018) ask teachers to be advocates for each of the preschoolers under their care every day by protecting their rights to read; however, parents do not always understand the intentions of the teachers. In South Africa, the Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services stipulate that relationships between the family and the teacher should be developed and supported (Skweyiya, 2006). The participants express contradictory views on their experiences with parents, as most teachers are experiencing no to limited participation from the parents, as indicated below:

*"I will then say to the parents, your child is having a difficult time with cutting, please, and I will give some home activities to the parents to do at home; some parents don't do such exercises."* (Elsie)

*"I have a child in my class, and parents have been very forthright and honest that they are busy; they don't have time for preschool work, they've told me that the nanny is there to do the job."* (Anna)

Advocacy is more beneficial when applied as a two-way system. The ideal situation is where a teacher can talk about progress and concerns regarding the child to the parents, and parents can also talk freely to teachers about anything that concerns them about their child. Participants indicated that they often attempt to share issues regarding behaviours, progress, and illness of the children with parents, although parents do not always contribute, as an equal partner, to the learning experiences of their children.

Positive connections between parents and teachers have been shown to improve children's academic achievement, social competencies, and emotional well-being, especially since good behaviours can be harnessed, both at school and at home (Hujala et al., 2009). When parents and teachers work together as partners, the communication between the two sides improves, they develop stronger relationships with one another, and establish skills to support children's literacy behaviours and learning (Stone, 2021). A good relationship with parents has many advantages, such as fostering positive teacher morale, children who display good behaviour, as well as parental confidence and interest in the education of their children.

#### 4.4.2 Subtheme 4.2: Advocacy for resources

In this study, advocacy for resources entails teachers engaging constructively with preschool management to persuade them to source resources for teaching literacy practices required in the classrooms. The Guidelines for ECD Services (Skweyiya (2006) indicate that there must be enough equipment and resources that are developmentally appropriate for preschoolers in the centre. However, preschool teachers are constantly confronted by instances where they must negotiate for teaching and learning materials from the preschool management. The following quotes highlight how teachers must negotiate for teaching materials:

*"When the principal cannot provide, she asks the parents on my behalf. Where possible, the parents provide, without problems (sic)."* (Finah)

*"Sometimes, I asked parents to bring the boxes, maybe oats or egg boxes. I use the boxes and old containers for teaching purposes. With the little*

*teaching material we get from the preschool, it is very helpful when parents provide what they are not using at home.” (Nancy)*

Teacher advocacy is key to cultivating equitable education systems (Linville & Whiting, 2019), but is achievable by being the voice of preschoolers and their families, to improve their literacy practice educational experiences. Therefore, teachers should be supported when voicing concerns regarding teaching and learning materials since such opinions are based on the need to make positive changes, either in teaching practice or the development of skills for children.

Advocacy is, therefore, built on ideas of diplomacy and negotiation and involves dialogue, not just demands (Ortiz & Fránquiz, 2019). These skills are necessary for teachers since advocacy seeks to make changes rather than just to voice concerns. Teachers need to have a constructive relationship with the preschool management to make desired changes (Martzoukou & Abdi, 2017).

For effectiveness in advocacy, teachers should feel comfortable about opening up, asking questions, seeking advice, and sharing their experiences with preschool management (Ortiz & Fránquiz, 2019), which have been shared by the participants. This is possible when teachers understand that they occupy a unique position in identifying and understanding the individual needs of preschoolers, which, in turn, offers them the opportunity to play a key role in protecting and promoting the educational rights of the children under their care. Therefore, teachers must act when the preschool management does not provide sufficient teaching and learning resources. As such, teachers can mobilize and change their working conditions and the public’s perception of the value of preschool literacy and how it affects the well-being of preschoolers in the long run.

#### *4.4.3 Subtheme 4.3: Advocacy for the well-being of the preschoolers*

Most participants claimed that, based on their preservice training, they learned the vital responsibility and accountability in preventing, identifying, and reporting child abuse and neglect to ensure every child can learn. Even though there were no specific cases flagged, participants indicated their readiness to act when they noticed signs or symptoms of abuse and neglect of children under their care.

*“I am even a social worker because some children come here, and they do not even get food, and they come with dirty clothes (sic). Children start isolating the child and refuse to share space and materials with him.” (Bella)*

*“I sometimes take the role of a police officer when I notice behaviors I cannot explain to the child during activities. I observe the pattern and will then call the parents in, talk to them, and tell them what I am worried about. Some parents do assist with explanations.” (Anna)*

An advocacy role is necessary because abuse and neglect are linked to impairments across a range of domains and at all ages (Kobulsky et al., 2020). Cognitive impairments can have devastating effects on, among others, language development, executive functioning, intellectual performance, and, particularly,

foundational literacy skills. Language development is central to all the other foundational literacy skills (Rohde, 2015). Literacy is at the heart of all the content subjects, and it is often integrated into all areas of teaching and learning.

As such, signs of abuse or neglect are among the factors likely to place children at risk of literacy learning (Kobulsky et al., 2020). These involve observing preschoolers' conduct during interactions with literacy practice experiences in the classroom, examining physical symptoms, and considering information provided in parent interviews; sensitive teachers can spot signals of potential abuse and neglect, as highlighted in this quote:

*"You realize that he does not participate in activities, or he is naughty in the classroom. But, since you have had the child for a while, you can see it is not like him." (Unathi)*

Therefore, the teachers must stay alert to signs of neglect and abuse and be ready to act and collaborate with law enforcement agencies, as required by the Guidelines of ECD Services.

Furthermore, the Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Services (Skweyiya (2006) indicate that teachers need to be trained to recognise early signs of child abuse and protect children. In this study, the participants shared that they understood this role well and would instinctively act when needed. In addition to upholding moral and professional standards, teachers have a special role in speaking up for preschoolers in ways that no other adult, besides the parents, can (Martzoukou & Abdi, 2017). Research indicates that this requirement for advocacy/duty of care becomes even more crucial if the primary caregiver at home is the suspected abuser (Kobulsky et al., 2020).

Therefore, teachers need to have confidence in their own abilities, nurture their own risk-taking potential as advocates, and explore opportunities to exercise advocacy for their preschoolers. However, since advocacy in preschool often takes place beyond the classrooms, teachers require a degree of self-motivation and the ability to present facts to succeed. Successful outcomes on small attempts to intervene can lead to further engagement with advocacy and a sense of accomplishment as a teacher.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed that teachers actively and effectively participate in literacy practices. They assumed various roles, such as nurturing, facilitating, researching, and advocating, depending on the preschoolers' interests, needs, resources, and developmental status. Teachers view the role of nurturer as the basis for literacy learning. Thus, they emphasise that harnessing emotional stability encourages children to explore, learn, and practice problem-solving easily in the classroom. Throughout the day during literacy interactions, teachers often shift between roles to enrich and advance the preschoolers to the next level of development. In doing that, they creatively assume specific roles to provide maximum support for preschoolers based on the circumstances during literacy practice experiences.

The research findings emphasise the importance of teachers fulfilling specific and professional roles to deliver literacy-based learning experiences for preschoolers effectively (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). A "perfect fit role" refers to the scenario where teachers adeptly align the learning requirements of preschoolers with the necessary support to facilitate optimal learning outcomes. This level of proficiency in role delivery is attainable for teachers who possess the requisite qualifications, knowledge, and experience (Cunningham et al., 2009).

These assertions are further reinforced by McLachlan (2010), whose investigation sought to uncover the essential knowledge and practices teachers should possess in the context of literacy in preschool settings. However, the study uncovered a challenge, as it revealed that none of the teachers had received formal training in literacy practices. Furthermore, the study identified the need for specific reference materials to be readily available to support fostering literacy practices within the classroom.

The research also indicated that the pre-service teacher training program was lacking in adequately equipping teachers to promote literacy development in the classroom. Consequently, there was a noticeable misalignment between the expected training outcomes and the actual demands of the teaching role, leading teachers to seek supplementary resources to support their efforts independently.

Furthermore, the research indicated that a lack of training in teaching literacy prevents teachers from gaining the pedagogical content knowledge necessary for literacy practices. This knowledge is a crucial aspect of teachers' professional capabilities. By understanding how children learn and how to provide appropriate early literacy instruction, teachers can effectively nurture essential foundational literacy skills in preschoolers. These findings are consistent with an extensive review of preschool teachers' literacy practices, which revealed that many teachers struggle to engage children in intentional literacy activities (Chambers et al., 2016).

Fortunately, an increasing body of research indicates that targeted professional development could serve as a potential solution for enhancing the quality of preschool literacy practices. Several studies have shown that teachers who underwent training exhibited improvements in their instructional practices compared to their non-trained counterparts and witnessed substantial advancements in their children's language and literacy skills. However, participation in professional development programs is contingent upon the teachers' working conditions. The study findings also suggested that the infrastructure supporting the professional development of preschool teachers is not well-established; consequently, many preschool educators do not have access to funding or other essential resources to support their in-service training needs.

The lack of adequate pre-service teacher training and insufficient in-service support contribute to a deficit in knowledge and the utilisation of research-based literacy practices by teachers. These hinder their ability to effectively foster literacy in the classroom. Within the sociocultural perspective, teachers are seen

as jugglers, needing to skillfully cater to the diverse needs of preschoolers and push them towards further growth. Teachers risk missing opportunities to transition seamlessly between roles during planned classroom activities without proper knowledge. This impacts the timely scaffolding necessary to guide preschoolers from their actual developmental zone to their zone of proximal development in literacy experiences.

## **6. Conclusions**

The research study aimed to understand the important role of teachers in promoting literacy in selected preschool classrooms in Centurion, Tshwane Municipality. The findings revealed that teachers recognise the importance of their role in literacy development but are often limited by a lack of knowledge and resources in implementing literacy practices. The literature review emphasised that literacy practices should be based on theories and research-based methods to ensure a strong foundation. It also highlighted the need for teachers to have sufficient resources to support implicit and explicit literacy experiences in the classrooms. Despite the lack of resources and training, teachers expressed the importance of support from the government, which also needs attention, as evidenced by the fact that none of the participants had received any literacy practice training.

An aspect that is important if the government is to achieve quality preschool education and realisation of the UN Agenda 2030 plan. By investing in teacher training that's grounded in South Africa's multilingual reality and designing flexible, inclusive curricula, educators can more effectively promote literacy in the early years. This will lay the foundation for lifelong learning and help close the literacy gap, especially in disadvantaged communities.

## **7. Limitations**

The current study has some limitations, which can impact the generalisability of the findings. First, the study was conducted with 15 preschool teachers. This implies that the study was contextualised within a particular setting and that some aspects of the findings may not translate to other preschool settings. However, given the nature of classroom routines for preschoolers, it is likely that other teachers will share many of these experiences and roles discussed in this study. Although it was intended to include gender-representative participants, only female participants were included due to the shortage of male participants at the sampled preschools.

This may have influenced the study's results, as only female perspectives of the phenomenon existed. In addition, future studies can expand the findings of this study by adding other methods for data collection, such as classroom observation and document review, to enhance the corpus of literature surrounding the role of teachers in fostering interest among preschoolers in literacy practice experiences and the outcomes thereof. Furthermore, future studies should expand the sample to include diverse teachers.

## 8. Recommendations

This research study provided discussions of the findings obtained from a situational analysis. The study's findings provide insights into the role played by teachers in fostering an interest in literacy practices in preschool classrooms as articulated by the teachers. The study findings highlighted a gap in resources and information that teachers constantly must manage when implementing their role of fostering an interest in literacy practices, which presented a different view of the existing preschool literacy practice model.

To comprehensively understand and augment the role of teachers in fostering literacy among preschoolers, the adoption of a holistic approach is recommended. This approach must encompass the various components of the system, including context, input, processes, and feedback. An approach that brings context influences from a global, national, and local level to foster literacy practices in preschool classrooms. Emphasising requisite inputs, such as financial, material, and human resources, is crucial to positively influencing the processes involved.

Essential processes include quality assurance activities, the organisation of preschool literacy services, communication, and the orchestration of preschool literacy experiences, to achieve the intended outcomes. Such a holistic approach is essential for teachers to ignite an interest in literacy practices and promote the development of foundational literacy skills among preschoolers, ultimately better preparing them for school.

Furthermore, the government, as the custodian of preschool education and for upholding, protecting, and respecting children's rights, should, in addition to providing subsidies to preschools, start to support preschools with literacy teaching materials that are developmentally appropriate and support teachers to be able to effectively fulfil their role of developing literacy among preschoolers, as required by both national and international standards.

In the preschool centers, in addition to the provision of teaching resources, preschool managers/principals should support the teachers by sourcing and encouraging participation in opportunities for continuous learning, self-improvement, and updating their knowledge about literacy practices and other related matters.

## 9. Data Availability

Data pertaining to this study are obtainable upon request

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