RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examining Teachers' Ratings and Perspectives on Literacy Acquisition in the Early Childhood Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Literacy continues to plague education systems, particularly in the Caribbean; none withstanding teachers' perceptions can inform strategies to improve students' literacy achievement. The study examined teachers' perspectives on literacy acquisition to understand the literacy instruction provided in the early childhood classroom. Data was collected from Grade I and II teachers through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire using an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design. Teachers rated their students' reading readiness and emergent literacy as high, indicating that their students acquire literacy through teacher-centered and child-centered approaches in literacy instruction. Significant disparities occurred between districts and literacy professional development levels. The main challenges cited for literacy acquisition were poor school attendance, poor attitude towards reading, lack of parental involvement, slow adaptation to change, and the unavailability of resources. Teachers shared a perspective of using a balanced approach, which represents a combination of skills-based and emergent literacy approaches to deliver literacy instruction. Quality literacy instruction, a mixture of constructivist and teacher-centered approaches marred with parental involvement developed through focused literacy parenting sessions and a literacy-rich environment, can support the development of literacy acquisition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, there have been debates on how students should acquire literacy in the early childhood classrooms. Though there has been less discourse on the issue in the international arena, small states, such as Grenada, continue to have challenges in teaching literacy in schools. Stone *et al.* (2024) concluded that despite increases in attendance and enrollment worldwide, children are yet to acquire basic reading skills. It has been established in the Literature that there is a link between the development of initial academic competencies and the future achievement of children (Weber & Heidenreich, 2018). Rabiner *et al.* (2016) assert that children can have unexploited subsequent academic achievement due to not realizing their early academic competencies goals, thus widening the gap over time as their motivation to achieve declines.

The performance data of students in the late and exit grades in primary and secondary schools suggest a deficit in literacy performance. In addition, there is no clear evidence that the programs implemented to address literacy in primary schools improve the literacy capacity of the students. Moreover, it is not known what the driving factors are that influence early childhood educators' choice and use of instructional strategies to serve the students' literacy needs. Of these factors, educational researchers have surmised that teachers' assumptions about teaching and learning critically impact pedagogical practices (Giles & Tunks, 2015). However, teachers' knowledge of literacy acquisition and its impact on literacy development in Grenadian students has yet to be discovered.

Data from examinations done internally and externally indicate that there is a cause for concern. Minimum Competency Testing, an internal assessment done at the Grade 3 level, indicates that the students are performing above the mid-point level in Language Arts. However, the results have gradually declined over the last five years. Other internal assessments, such as MCT at Grades 4 and

5, indicate that the students have been performing below acceptable standards over the last five years. An external assessment, the Caribbean Primary Exit Examination, revealed a similar trend, indicating that the performances in Language Arts are below the acceptable standards of the Ministry of Education. Poor performance in Language Arts in Grades 4, 5 and 6 suggests that early academic skills, particularly literacy, have been underdeveloped in primary schools.

Though literacy assessment data on student performance is readily available, there is a need to have information on how teachers perceive the acquisition of literacy, their attitude toward literacy-related instruction (reading) and the quality of instruction delivered to the early learners. This research can add to the Literature and provide significant insights into the motivation behind teacher literacy instruction. These understandings can be instructive in evaluating and developing the implemented literacy programs in schools and how students are supported, thereby improving student performance. The study's findings can guide future professional development to aid in the early childhood delivery of quality literacy instruction, and the planning unit can use this study to inform strategies and policies to improve literacy in schools.

The study examined early childhood educators' ratings and perceptions of students' literacy acquisition. The first phase of quantitative questions guided the study. After analyzing the quantitative questions, the study adhered to the qualitative questions.

1.1. Quantitative Questions

Do early childhood teachers' evaluations of literacy acquisition differ by (i) gender, (ii) educational attainment, (iii) training, (iv) teaching experience and (v) professional development and (vi) District?

1.2. Qualitative Questions

Central Question: What are early childhood educators' perceptions of early learners' literacy acquisition and the challenges surrounding literacy instruction?
Research Sub-questions:

RSQ1: What are early childhood educators' views on how early learners acquire literacy?
RSQ2: What factors explain early childhood educators' beliefs and knowledge of literacy acquisition?
RSQ3: What are the challenges associated with providing instruction to cater to literacy acquisition in the early childhood classroom?
RSQ4: How do educators deal with the challenges of providing instruction to cater to literacy acquisition in the early childhood classroom?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study was grounded in the Skills-Based Reading Readiness and Emergent Literacy perspectives to guide the perspectives on Literacy acquisition supported by the development theories (e.g., Piaget, 1966, 1983; Vygotsky, 1962/1988) in language learning. Related studies with results similar to the research questions used by the present study were incorporated.

2.1. Skills-Based Reading Readiness Perspective

The skills-based reading readiness perspective is rooted in teacher-centered methodological practices to facilitate literacy instruction (McMahon *et al.*, 1998; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). According to Crawford (1995), the skills-based readiness curricula are highly organized, focusing on the teacher rather than the learner. According to McMahon *et al.* (1998), the novel purpose of reading readiness stemmed from the maturation theory of learning, contingent on teacher-led, whole-group instruction. This theory advanced the idea that instruction must be determined by the child's developmental level at which he or she can grasp new concepts and skills. Interestingly, applying the maturation theory of learning to literacy acquisition was transformed and understood as the passage of time when the child can be indoctrinated with introductory reading activities and instruction (Downing & Thackray, 1971). Hence, Bonello (2018) contends that rather than awaiting reading readiness in the child, teachers should incorporate prerequisite reading skills in children notwithstanding maturation and ability to learn factors.

2.2. Emergent Literacy

Scholars and practitioners took issue with the skills-based approach to literacy acquisition, which eventually led to the development of the term "emergent literacy" in the 1980s and 1990s. This concept is considered the child's ability to interact with reading and writing concepts and activities. The valuing of early learners' efforts to be involved in literacy actions influenced the key literacy strategies to be facilitated in early childhood education classrooms. This approach is contingent on constructivist learning theories, which state that cognition is developed in children through social interaction. According to Morrow and Dougherty (2011), emergent literacy describes a child-centered, constructivist approach to early literacy learning. This viewpoint was developed from conceptualizing learning opportunities that peaked through ordinary exploration and play-based practices, familiarized and promoted by educational pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey.

Clay (1975) pioneered the philosophy that literacy acquisition can begin before the admission of prescribed instruction to children. She advocated that reading and writing be facilitated concomitantly and interrelatedly rather than chronologically, using "developmentally appropriate practices." Such practices, she claimed, involve fraternizing literacy experiences into the environment to hasten children's use of language. According to Wolfe and Nevills (2004), literacy is developed through work and play conditions where these strategies are utilized.

2.3. Balanced Literacy Approach

Foorman *et al.* (2016) concluded that early childhood educators had been fixated on phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as the foundation of literacy. Previous research indicates that teachers need to be more highly prepared to

teach the core concepts of the five pillars of reading and, therefore, may be unable to provide adequate instruction and support to all learners (Clark *et al.*, 2018; Pittman *et al.*, 2020). A large-scale review of Literature on teacher preparation indicates that the level and variation in content knowledge for reading instruction significantly varies based on required coursework across preservice teacher programs and institutions (Hudson *et al.*, 2021).

In order to reconcile the benefits of both approaches to literacy acquisition, educators resorted to adopting a balanced literacy program. Pressley *et al.* (2023) purport that the balanced approach endeavored to resolve the issue by integrating the fortes from both approaches. However, Kurtz *et al.* (2020) claimed that while balanced literacy incorporates some features of both flanks, it can be argued that it is pulled mainly from the meaning-emphasis ethos. Moreover, Fisher *et al.* (2020) argue that effective reading instruction combines phonics-based instruction, meaning-based comprehension and vocabulary instruction through explicit teacher instruction and collaborative student-centered learning. Studies affirm that high-quality, longitudinal, and scientifically sound professional development opportunities are the most effective support for effective reading instruction. Interestingly, Kindall *et al.* (2018) focus on the competencies of the school leader to influence teachers' pedagogies to deal with the academic needs of students.

2.4. Challenges in Literacy Instruction

The Literature has identified parental involvement, poor teacher instruction in reading, school attendance, attitude towards reading, and availability of resources or material, among several issues or challenges related to literacy acquisition. For example, Merga (2020) identified recurring barriers to literacy acquisition, including literacy skill gaps, absenteeism, home factors, student attitudes and engagement, school and systems factors, and learning difficulties and disabilities influencing learning.

The provision of reading instruction continues to be a challenge for teachers of early learners. Wolf (2018) contends that children can suffer emotional distress through bad reading experiences; therefore, teachers must ensure that they provide quality learning experiences in reading. Moats (2020) concluded that the experiences gained by learners are through untested teaching practices, and as a consequence, the contention is that teachers should provide a learning environment that is based on techniques guided by educational research and effective practice models.

Barrett-Tatum *et al.* (2023) results indicated that teachers described the difficulty of adequately providing literacy instruction due to a lack of resources. They further highlighted the need for more time to teach and time to plan adequate literacy instruction as a limiting impediment.

Numerous studies have revealed that literacy teachers face significant obstacles to integrating technology into their classes (Picton, 2018). Although today's classrooms are enriched with various technological tools and resources, teachers must use these opportunities effectively in their educational processes (Kopcha, 2012). Hutchison and Woodward (2018) underlined the importance of technology, especially in literacy lessons, and pointed out the difficulties teachers face in integrating technology into these lessons.

3. Method

A mixed methodology was selected to conduct the study, which incorporates elements of both qualitative and quantitative approaches and integrates the two forms of data collected. An exploratory sequential mixed methods research design was used, which involved a two-phase data collection project in which the researcher collected quantitative data in the first phase, analyzed the results, and then used the results to plan (or build on to) the second qualitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.1. Population and Sampling

The study's population will consist of Grade One and Two Teachers of Public Primary Schools throughout Grenada. These teachers were selected because they are part of the mid-section of early childhood education, where children develop or acquire literacy. These grades are also where the first set of Ministry of Education early assessment protocols is used to gauge literacy development.

In the Quantitative Phase, using the population size 160, a simple random sample of 112 participants (70%) were asked to participate in the study. However, the rate of return for the questionnaire was 71.4%. In the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling technique was used, and teachers were selected for the interviews based on experience, training, and school performance during the internal assessment. Thirty teachers were contacted; however, twelve teachers were interviewed as no new information was acquired after the sixth interview.

3.2. Sources of Data

The study utilized a survey instrument in the quantitative phase and semi-structured interviews in the qualitative phase. The survey instrument is a questionnaire comprised of two components. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert-type rating scale that requested the teacher rate each item on a scale ranging from Not Important (1) to Very Important (5).

A demographical section was used to collect vital descriptive data to identify the characteristics of the study's participants. The second component is used to determine teachers' literacy acquisition ratings. It is an adaptation of the Literacy Acquisition Perception Profile (LAPP) developed by McMahon *et al.* (1998). The LAPP produces a separate score for its two subscales—reading readiness skills and emergent literacy.

A self-developed interview schedule was used to collect qualitative data. The Literature and the study's quantitative findings guided the development of this instrument. The participants responded to questions and probes that required them to share their views on how early learners acquire literacy, factors explaining their beliefs or knowledge of literacy acquisition, their attitude towards literacy instruction, and the challenges associated with literacy acquisition in early childhood classrooms.

3.3. Reliability and Validity

The questionnaire instrument was checked for internal consistency and reliability. The Cronbach Alpha revealed that the Literacy Acquisition instrument (LAPP) had excellent internal consistency (0.864). The Emergent Literacy subscale also had excellent internal consistency (0.747). However, the Reading Readiness subscale had poor internal consistency. Consequently, item 13 was removed from the subscale to improve the internal consistency reliability (0.79).

A team of literacy experts found both instruments valid and piloting was undertaken to ensure that they could capture the necessary data and address the research questions posed by the study. The researcher also utilizes member checking of the teachers' interview transcripts.

3.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics involving the means and standard deviations and inferential statistics involving parametric testing were used to interrogate the quantitative data. The t-test for independent samples and one-way ANOVA analysis were used. In the qualitative phase, the thematic approach was used to make sense of the data collected from the interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis involves six steps to analyze and interpret qualitative data. These steps include "preparing and organizing data, coding data, developing themes based on codes, representing findings through narratives and visuals, interpreting findings based on literature, and establishing the validity of findings" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 237).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study used consent forms to ensure voluntary participation from Grade One and Two teachers and to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity in data collection, analysis and reporting. Confidentiality and anonymity were further maintained by using safeguards such as informing participants of the study and any possible risks, using pseudonyms for the teachers and schools participating in the interviews, informing them of their rights to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw at any time without any explanation to the researcher mainly since the researcher works for the Ministry of Education. Other actions involved protecting the confidentiality of the data during and after the research process.

Permission was gained from the respected sources to utilize the document or instrument to collect data.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Findings

The quantitative sample for the study is given in Table I, which indicates that the data was collected from 80 teachers across Grade 1 and Grade II, with a high incidence of female teachers. More than half of the sample comprised trained teachers (64%) and teachers with less than 20 years of teaching experience (56%). Most teachers sampled reported low-level training in general and literacy professional development.

4.2. Quantitative Findings

4.2.1. Research Question 1: Influence of Teacher Demographics on Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Literacy Acquisition and Attitudes Towards Literacy Instruction

The teachers rated their students' Reading Readiness (m = 40.12, SD = 5.96) and Emergent Literacy (m = 40.10, SD = 5.28) as high. These ratings suggest that they perceive their students to acquire literacy through teacher-centered and child-centered approaches to facilitating literacy learning in early learners.

a. Grade Level, Experience Levels, Qualifications, General PD

The t-test for independent samples revealed no significant differences between the means scores of Grades I and II teachers and between the teachers with low PD levels and teachers with high PD levels for the reading readiness and emergent literacy scales.

b. Literacy Professional Development Levels and School Districts

Table II displays the means and standard deviation scores of the teachers' ratings of literacy acquisition and attitude toward literacy instruction. The teachers with low-level literacy PD agreed with the reading readiness perception of literacy acquisition, unlike those with high-level Literacy PD Consequently, the t-test for Independent Samples determined a significant difference between the two means (t = 2.234, df = 64, p = 0.029). Teachers with low-level literacy PD are ascribed to reading readiness as the preferred method of teaching reading over teachers with high-level literacy PD.

Although the teachers with low-level literacy PD expressed a firm agreement with the Emergent Literacy subscale, unlike those with high-level literacy PD, the t-test for the Independent Sample revealed no significant difference between the two means.

The means and standard deviation scores of teachers' perceptions of literacy acquisition and attitudes toward literacy instruction are displayed in Table III. The one-way between-groups ANOVA revealed significant differences among the districts' means {F (6, 69) = 4.930; p < 0.005}. The results of the Tukey HSD post hoc test indicated that the teachers of District One had significantly lower scores than District Four and District Seven; District Five had a significantly lower score than District Two, District Four and District Seven; and District Six had a significantly lower score than District Seven. This result suggests that the teachers in District Four and District Seven ascribe more to reading readiness as the preferred approach to teaching reading than those in District One. Likewise, the same can be said about Districts Two, Four, and Seven about District Five.

Similarly, the one-way between-groups ANOVA found significant differences among the districts' means for the Emergent Literacy subscale {F (6, 69) = 4.930; p = 0.026}. However, the Tukey HSD post hoc test results did not reveal where the differences exist.

TABLE I: The Demographic Details of the Teachers in the Sample

Demographic variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Female	78	97.5
Male	2	2.5
Grade		
Grade 1	40	51.3
Grade 2	38	48.7
Qualification		
Trained graduate	18	23.1
Untrained graduate	18	23.1
Trained non-graduate	32	41.0
Untrained non-graduate	10	12.8
Experience levels		
Less than 20 years of experience	46	56.1
More than 19 years of experience	36	43.9
Districts		
District 1	4	5.3
District 2	20	26.3
District 3	14	18.4
District 4	16	21.1
District 5	12	15.8
District 6	4	5.3
District 7	6	7.9
PD levels		
Low-level PD	59	86.8
High-level PD	9	13.2
Literacy PD levels		
Low literacy PD level	52	78.8
High literacy PD level	14	21.2

TABLE II: Descriptive Statistics of the Teachers' Literacy Acquisition Ratings and Attitude Towards Literacy Instruction Scores

Literacy variables	Literacy PD levels	N	Mean	SD
Reading readiness	Low	52	41.19	5.77
	High	14	37.21	6.46
Emergent literacy	Low	52	41.19	5.33
	High	14	38.21	5.39

4.3. Qualitative Findings

4.3.1. Descriptive Findings

Table IV presents the study's qualitative findings. The findings indicate that the main information was obtained from six female primary school teachers with varying years of experience and training at the Grade One level.

4.3.2. Sub-Question 1: What are Early Childhood Educators' Views on How Early Learners Acquire Literacy?

This question sought information on early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early learners acquire literacy, centering their views on reading readiness and emergent literacy approaches. Two themes emerged from the data related to sub-question 1: reading readiness and the learning environment.

Most teachers believed that children obtained literacy based on reading readiness, while only a few teachers explained that the learning environment is crucial for literacy acquisition. The teachers interviewed emphasized the foundational knowledge and skills students should possess before entering a learning environment, a crucial aspect of reading readiness. One teacher highlighted the importance of knowing letter sounds, names, and the ability to write one's name as essential prerequisites for effective learning, indicating that these skills are critical for students to be ready to engage with reading material, as stated by Ms. Cyrus:

I am talking from both a teacher's and a parent's point of view. I believe that the first teacher comes from parenting. There are basic things that students should be coming into knowing, and that is the letter sounds, names, and the ability to write your name, okay, so basic things that I believe that the students should come in with, so the teacher now would build from that condition. (Ms. Cyrus)

The teachers emphasized the importance of creating a supportive environment for children who still need to read.

TABLE III: Descriptive Statistics of the Teachers' Literacy Acquisition Ratings and Attitude Towards Teaching Reading Scores

Literacy variables	Districts	N	Mean	SD
Reading readiness	District 1	4	33.75	4.11
	District 2	20	41.95	4.49
	District 3	14	40.57	6.44
	District 4	16	42.81	4.48
	District 5	12	35.83	6.41
	District 6	4	34.00	8.08
	District 7	6	44.50	1.97
Emergent literacy	District 1	4	34.25	3.59
	District 2	20	41.00	4.81
	District 3	14	40.71	5.84
	District 4	16	42.50	4.32
	District 5	12	37.67	5.25
	District 6	4	36.75	7.80
	District 7	6	41.83	2.04
Literacy attitude	District 1	4	31.75	3.30
	District 2	20	33.10	5.35
	District 3	14	32.93	3.67
	District 4	16	36.25	4.97
	District 5	12	29.67	3.20
	District 6	4	30.25	4.11
	District 7	6	35.00	2.19

TABLE IV: Demographic Characteristics of the Teachers Interviewed

Pseudonym	Years of experience	Teaching experience at grade level	Training	Grade
Ms. Cyrus	10	10	Trained	1
Ms. Cliver	40	8	Trained	1
Ms. Pember	35	25	Trained	1
Ms. Delonte	14	7	Untrained	1
Ms. Fortune	8	8	Untrained	1
Ms. Sidney	16	11	Trained	2

They discussed how associating with others who are reading can help a child feel more comfortable and motivated to start reading themselves.

In addition, the teachers highlighted the necessity of preparing students who may need to come with the required foundational skills. According to the teachers, this preparation is crucial for reading readiness, as it involves creating the right conditions for learning to occur. The mention of different paces at which children learn further underscores the importance of ensuring that all students are adequately prepared to begin their reading journey. It was further stated that the transition from kindergarten to first grade and the challenges that arise due to gaps in readiness could result in a 'whole new learning process.' This statement underscores the importance of being prepared for reading and literacy tasks, which is central to reading readiness.

4.3.3. Sub-Question 2: What Factors Explain Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs and Knowledge of Literacy Acquisition?

This sub-question sought to explain factors that explained the teachers' beliefs and knowledge of early learners' literacy acquisition. The data analysis revealed three themes: technology, the learning environment and planning instruction and assessment.

The teachers highlighted the impact of technology, specifically tablets, on children's literacy and social skills. They contrasted the current generation's reliance on technology with past generations, suggesting that excessive tablet use may hinder children's ability to engage in meaningful conversations and develop critical thinking skills.

The teachers addressed the concept of 'environment' by emphasizing the importance of a literacy-rich setting for children. They conceptualized that the environment plays a crucial role in the educational development of children. The teachers explained that the school environment impacts literacy, indicating that environmental factors play a significant role in children's understanding of literacy. Ms. Fortune explained that:

> Even within our school environment, you plan to have print but necessary words, and they (the children) would understand what a print-friendly environment is. (Ms. Fortune)

The teachers expressed their perspectives on the importance of planning or preparation, instruction, and assessment in developing foundational literacy knowledge for students. The teachers mentioned 'basic things that students should come in with,' indicating a clear instructional expectation that students must be ready with specific skills before entering the classroom. The teachers emphasized

the role of both parents and teachers in preparing students for instruction or setting up conditions for learning. In addition, the teachers illustrated a perspective on the instructional approach taken in their educational environment, emphasizing the importance of focusing on student needs and ensuring that students receive the necessary support, even if it means not completing the curriculum as planned.

The teachers referred to a proactive approach to planning for their students' educational needs. They mention being able to 'better plan for the upcoming students' and conducting a diagnostic assessment to understand their reading levels. Those views indicated a strategic and organized preparation method for the academic year. As stated by Ms. Sidney:

> Basically, the results I get from the students. So, coming in, especially for this for this year, we were able to better plan for the upcoming students. So, for this year, I gave them a diagnostic at the beginning. So, I tested that; I tested the reading level. I took them from wherever they were, and I try to document as much as possible. (Ms. Sidney)

4.3.4. Sub-Question 3: What Are the Challenges Associated with Providing Instruction for Literacy Acquisition in the Early Childhood Classroom?

Five themes, namely School Attendance, Poor attitude towards reading, Parental Involvement, Adaptation to change, and Resource availability, emerged to answer research sub-question 4.

The teachers highlighted the challenges faced in literacy acquisition, explicitly mentioning the regularity of students at school and the impact of parental involvement. They mentioned disabilities, both seen and unseen, that affect children's learning. One teacher, in particular, referred to the impact of school attendance on students' preparedness for instruction and assessment, indicating a direct link between attendance and academic performance. Ms. Delonte stated:

> So, I'll have some children, if something is happening, an event, they'll put out for that event. Sometimes, some children from our school, our classrooms in that event, and the next day, you might not see them, and we might have something important like a test, and you may find they're not ready for it because school is not the priority for them. (Ms. Delonte)

Observations were made of students' negative attitudes towards reading. The teachers used phrases like 'they fear' and 'they feel intimidated' to indicate a poor attitude towards reading. The teachers claimed that students are reluctant and anxious about engaging with reading materials, particularly those perceived as below their level.

The teachers opined that the home environment is equally crucial while schools play a role in literacy education. All the teachers expressed that reinforcement at home is necessary to complement what is taught in schools,

highlighting the importance of parental involvement in literacy development. Most teachers believe there needs to be more support or reinforcement for the students at home. One teacher highlighted that a gap will affect the students' literacy acquisition if additional support from home does not supplement classroom learning. Ms. Cliver supported this view by affirming:

> Early learners model what they hear, what they see around them. So, parents talk to the children in the proper sentences, expose them to print in the house, and chat with them. I think those things are good. I think the more print a child sees around them and the conversations you as parents have with them helps. (Ms. Cliver)

Most teachers pinpointed the challenges students face in adapting to new strategies and changes in instruction. One teacher emphasized this point by using key descriptors such as the students are 'one class behind' and 'less adaptable to change,' indicating a struggle to accept and implement new learning methods. The teachers working with one strategy for a while before introducing another further highlighted the students' difficulty adapting to change. Another teacher illustrated the view on adaptation by observing how different groups of students adapt to change, where the first group being 'adaptable to change' and 'accepted much easier' highlights their ability to adjust, while contrasting it with the current group, which are described as having more difficulty due to their slowness to adapt to change.

Most teachers reflected on the inadequacy of the support provided, specifically the provision of materials, suggesting that while some resources may be available, they must be more effectively utilized. One teacher used the phrase 'drop the ball' to indicate a resource management or availability failure. Another teacher emphasized the need to prioritize resources and support for children, indicating that the current resources need to be increased to meet the needs of the students. Identifying resource availability as a pending issue led another teacher to focus on adjusting or lessening the teacher-to-student ratios to available materials to necessitate effective teaching. It is believed that fewer children per teacher ensure that each child receives adequate attention and materials.

4.3.5. Sub-Question 4: How do Educators Deal with the Challenges of Providing Instruction to Cater to Literacy Acquisition in the Early Childhood Classroom?

The themes that emerged to provide answers to research sub-question 5 were consistency in practice, technology, parenting sessions, professional development or training and a variety of strategies.

The teachers directly mentioned the use of technology in the educational environment, indicating an intention to incorporate technological tools to address challenges in teaching and learning relating to literacy acquisition. Most teachers highlighted the impact of technology, specifically tablets, on children's literacy and social skills. One teacher suggested using videos to overcome time constraints and enhance learning materials. Another teacher contrasted

the current generation's reliance on technology with past generations, suggesting that excessive use of tablets may hinder children's ability to engage in meaningful conversations and develop critical thinking skills. The view cautions against the overuse of technology to deal with the existing challenges. Ms. Delonte proclaimed:

> They (the students) are more into the tablet and not really looking at too much of the educational stuff. (Ms. Delonte)

The teachers mentioned trying different approaches while maintaining consistency, indicating an understanding of different learning styles and the difficulties children may face in their learning processes to acquire literacy. Teachers consistently communicated with parents about how to help their children with specific challenges. Regularly advising parents on supporting their children's reading and writing skills demonstrates a consistent approach to addressing educational needs. Some teachers emphasized being 'consistent,' highlighting the importance of maintaining a steady and reliable practice in their educational approach, essential for supporting children who struggle with learning at different paces.

The teachers underscored that while schools play a role in literacy education, the home environment is equally crucial. They believed that reinforcement at home is necessary to complement what is taught in schools, highlighting the importance of parental involvement in literacy development. One teacher suggested there is a need for more structured sessions that involve parents in literacy, indicating that there is a gap in current parenting sessions. Another teacher emphasized the need for more focus on literacy within parenting sessions. However, most teachers supported the view of parenting sessions to deal with literacy challenges as Ms. Pember defended:

> We tried it twice, once or twice, but the key parents we wanted did not come. Others came to the first session, and they realized what the session was about, felt intimidated, and did not come back to the other sessions. But these are this the parenting session was there towards helping the parent at home. So, the correct thing at home, right? From some parents, we got results. (Ms. Pember)

The teachers underpinned a proactive approach to professional development by seeking assistance and ideas from various educational leaders, including the language curriculum officer and the literacy coach, to address literacy concerns or issues. The statements made by the teachers reflected a commitment to improving their practice through collaboration and support, an essential aspect of professional development. As stated by Ms. Pember:

> Usually, we have a good relationship with the language curriculum officer whenever she comes to the school or person. So, whenever she comes to the school or if I need to reach out to ask a question, depending on what I'm facing, usually that is available. I would ask for help. My principal has a degree in literacy, so I will speak to her for assistance or, you know, just cool ideas. My Hod is also my literacy coach. So, I do mutual assistance when there is a challenge. (Ms. Pember)

There was consensus among the teachers on using various strategies employed at the school level to address student literacy challenges. The teachers discussed how they have identified literacy as a significant issue and have implemented specific strategies, such as organizing reading days and allowing students to progress through different reading levels. This approach demonstrates a recognition of the diverse needs of students and the importance of creating a supportive environment that encourages reading without intimidation. Some teachers emphasized the need for varied instruction and materials to address literacy education challenges effectively. Teachers commented on using proactive approaches to adapting to change in their teaching methods. They are willing to seek advice, explore new strategies, and reflect on their practices, all critical components of adapting to change. The mention of being 'open to getting ideas' further emphasizes their adaptability and readiness to embrace new approaches to provide instruction in literacy.

5. Discussion

The teachers in the study perceived literacy acquisition through mostly teacher-centered approaches in the classroom and the existence of a print-rich environment. This study's teachers' ratings and voices strongly support a skills-based reading readiness approach, even though the ratings also favor the emergent literacy approach. The teachers' perceptions aligned with Fisher *et al.* (2020) commendation on what should encompass effective reading instruction, which is using a balanced mixture of the two approaches. The teachers are likely aware of both approaches to literacy acquisition. However, they may be more engaged in practicing or promoting a systematic and direct approach to teaching literacy rather than allowing the child to construct their knowledge or understanding of literacy. In addition, they may have interpreted the literacy policies and practices the Ministry of Education purported to be a skills-based approach to teaching literacy.

Implementing a skills-based approach is also more accessible and less risky, involving fewer materials and space for learning. The qualitative phase of the study revealed that teachers cited the unavailability of materials and the learning environment as challenges within the literacy classrooms. The qualitative phase of the study further explained the teacher's reasoning for using a skills-based reading approach as an appropriate means to acquire Literature. The teachers focus on the learning environment and planning, instruction and assessment, which are critical components in implementing a systemic or structured approach to teaching literacy. It is apparent that the teachers' use of materials in the early learner's classroom is controlled, and the teacher manipulates the learning environment to adopt a more explicit or direct form of instruction in the classrooms. Central to teachers' explanation of how students acquire literacy is the teacher

planning, instruction and assessment. This explanation suggests that children need to be given sufficient opportunities to construct their knowledge and understanding of literacy.

The study found no significant difference in the teachers' ratings of literacy acquisition based on Grade level, experience level, qualifications, and general professional development level. Similarly, Giles and Tunks (2015) found no significant differences in the teachers' ratings based on grade and educational levels. However, they found a significant difference based on teaching experience on the reading readiness scale. The teachers may have engaged in consistent practice as they have similar backgrounds and training. Furthermore, the guidance received from the Ministry of Education may have encouraged this consistency.

A significant difference was found for literacy professional development levels and by the school district. Teachers with low-level literacy P.D. are ascribed to skills-based reading readiness as the preferred method to teach reading over teachers with high-level literacy P.D. This finding signifies that the teachers' available training in literacy education develops their knowledge and beliefs of using more constructivist approaches to teach reading. It may also be interesting to note the type of development activities and training done by school districts as this may explain the differences among the districts. It may be helpful for the Ministry of Education to develop and implement more child-centered literacy training programs and practice effective monitoring of the implementation of such professional development.

The study highlighted that teachers perceive the challenges of poor school attendance, poor attitude towards reading, lack of parental involvement, non-adaptation to change, and lack of literacy resources as fundamental to deterring students from developing their literacy skills. These challenges are familiar, as a discourse in the Literature mentions areas related to these challenges.

Barrett-Tatum *et al.* (2023) results indicated that teachers described the difficulty of adequately providing literacy instruction due to a lack of resources. They further highlighted the need for more time to teach and time to plan adequate literacy instruction as a limiting impediment. Hutchison and Woodward (2018) discussed teachers' difficulties integrating technology into these lessons. In the Merga (2020) study, teachers attributed absenteeism as a barrier to literacy acquisition, citing "transience, truancy and 'chronic' absenteeism" and "school refusal." To support the teachers in this study's conclusion on using various teaching strategies to deal with the challenges in literacy acquisition, Moats (2020) bemoans the lack of preparatory programs for teachers, professional development or curricula that utilize current research to influence teaching practices.

The teachers in this study believe that in order to deal with the challenges associated with literacy acquisition, the following must be addressed: the teachers must be consistent in their teaching practice, the technology must be used appropriately and effectively, parenting sessions must be directed at teaching parents how to support the learning of literacy in the classroom, professional development or training must target teachers implementation of literacy approaches and a variety of literacy strategies must be used in the classroom. In Miller's (2024) study, teachers felt that providing high-quality, research-based resources enabled teachers to apply research-based strategies and pedagogy more effectively.

Concerning using technology appropriately, Christ *et al.* (2019) concluded that technology integration in literacy instruction can promote active learning, interaction, and student participation. McGee and Welsch (2020) stated that technology integration involves using various technologies, such as websites, apps, and digital media, to support and enhance literacy skills and practices. Kizil and Kizil (2024) proposed that by integrating technology into literacy education, teachers can become agents of change and create learning environments that support the diverse needs of their students. A study by Hutchison and Woodward (2018) showed that students in the classrooms of teachers who participated in technology training performed significantly better in digital literacy.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the results suggest that teachers adopt a more skills-based approach to reading while having positive attitudes toward reading instruction. Poor literacy performance in the later grades suggests that there can be issues with developing early academic skills, particularly in literacy. Early childhood educators need to unpack their beliefs, knowledge, assumptions and practices in literacy education and retool themselves in the most appropriate approaches to provide quality literacy instruction or develop an environment that supports the development of literacy acquisition. The issue is compounded as, evidently, the teachers are operating in a literacy environment filled with challenges that frustrate developing students' literacy skills and knowledge. Those challenges are manageable once educators find the appropriate mix of blending the use of teachers and parents to develop literacy acquisition. In addition, trust must be centered around developing a constructivist approach with the homes and schools to foster an environment that encourages the child to make sense of literacy concepts and skills.

This study has implications for policy, practice and theory in acquiring literacy education of early learners. There is a need to engage parents and develop their parenting skills in literacy instruction in homes to improve literacy development in early learners. Early childhood educators must guard against curricula or school practices that are highly prescriptive and test-preparation-oriented, explicitly focus on academic skill building, and consider using a more balanced approach to literacy acquisition in early learners. They must also encourage using "developmentally appropriate learning practices" centered on play, exploration, and social interactions. The study's findings suggest that greater emphasis must be placed on literacy-related professional development or training for early childhood educators to advance appropriate child-centered methodology mixed with explicit instruction from teachers to enhance literacy acquisition. The study should have considered the existing literacy programs in schools,

and therefore, additional research is necessary to evaluate school-wide literacy programs, policies, and practices within the education system.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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