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AN INVESTIGATION ON THE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES FOLLOWED BY TEACHERS ON CHILDREN WITH READING DIFFICULTIES IN PRIMARY CLASSES

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Abstract

Reading is the most important skill in an individuals' life, which enriches the skills and abilities to develop and plays a crucial role in academic achievements. This study was to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties (CRD) in primary classes. A survey research method was carried out in Zonal Education in Puttalam district, 70 primary teachers and 20 principals participated in this study, an open-ended questionnaire, formal interview, and classroom observations were carried out for data collection. Descriptive Statistical methods were used to analyze the quantitative data with the SPSS Ver. 20 software and content analysis method were used to analyze the qualitative data. The results show that the identification of children with reading difficulties was carried out by 71.4% of schools by reading exams or observations. However, there is no valid instrument nor criteria used to identify the children with reading difficulties. The class size is significantly related to the number of students with reading difficulties. 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach the students to read for 1-2 periods per week at the beginning of the year and later they carry out usual classroom teaching as usual. Moreover, these study findings conclude the identification and instructional practices of CRD are low in the Puttalam district, and principals of study do not know what is going on in the classroom, no school-level plans are executed for the literacy or reading developments.

Keywords: Instructional Practices, Primary teachers, Children with Reading Difficulties.

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Introduction

Reading is the most important skill in an individuals' life, which enriches the skills and abilities to develop and plays a crucial role in academic achievements. Reading is a complex skill by which one extracts meaning from print. Reading research has identified the successful understanding of what is read or reading comprehension, as largely requiring two fundamental skills: decoding and language comprehension (Newman, 2021)¹. All reading of print is making sense (Smith, 2012)² which is a process of interpretation. Reading is the process of mental images, which helps individuals to perceive the world.

Learning to read and comprehend the text is the most important skill, which has to be developed in primary classes. However, a considerable amount of students fail to achieve reading fluency. Expert studies found that many children in schools are not learning to read well. Students fail to read for several reasons. Smith (2012)² states the two reasons for the difficulties in reading. The reasons are that they were confronted by the reading when it is not the best time to learn, and they were confused, instead of being helped. This argument exposes that there is a problem with the teaching and learning process. Several factors play behind the reading deficiency in the school setting, such as students' interest (Kirchner & Mostert, 2017)³, curriculum setting, and school factors namely, principals' perspectives, school instructional practices, and teachers' related factors. From Miller's (2018)⁴ perspective, the school and environmental-related risk factors play the main role behind children with reading difficulties.

Teachers' perception, skills, and instructional practices play a crucial role in reading development in the school setting. Teachers are a crucial factor in developing students' reading skills, and teachers' beliefs will be an influential factor in their teaching of reading practices (Woodward, & Thoma, 2020)⁵. They are the front liners in reading development, which cannot be ignored in primary classes. Teachers identify the children with reading difficulties (Van Setten, Hakvoort, van der Leij, Maurits, & Maassen, 2018)⁶. When students are experiencing difficulty learning to read and write, early intervention is critical. If interventions are implemented in early schooling, expert teaching often can dramatically change the trajectory of students' learning (Kaye, Lozada, & Briggs, 2022)⁷. If the teachers fail to identify and assist the children with reading difficulty, it will pave the way to students' academic failure and loss of life.

The reading difficulty is a critical problem in primary and secondary education, which creates most academic failures in school and dropouts (Serrano, 2019)⁸. This type of problem is shown in earlier ages of children which are backed by the neurodevelopmental disorder. During the child's developmental process both physical and mental development occurs similar pattern. However, neurodevelopmental problems create learning disabilities. Clinical assessments must be carried out to identify the disorders or disabilities. Dyslexia is classified by its risk factors as mild, moderate, and severe levels.

However, the teachers can focus on reading difficulties which include mild problems in reading and comprehension in Primary classes. Even children struggle with reading, they do not have a diagnosed disability. These students may just be poor in reading, requiring more time to learn certain things, they may require more specialized reading instruction than has been provided. Reading difficulties should be discovered as early as possible and appropriate remedial measures are taken. Developmental reading can only be achieved by systematic teaching. The reading

programs must therefore use a wide range of interesting, well-graded, and well-organized supplementary reading (Tansley, 2022)⁹.

Children with reading difficulties face critical challenges when they enter secondary. Children have the capabilities to develop reading and comprehension until age nine. Teachers can guide them to read and comprehend the text easily from grade one to four. If they face difficulties on reading they must be taken special consideration and help them to improve the reading. The class teacher can help determine where the children have trouble in reading and then provide targeted help to build skills in these areas as well as accommodate the student's weaknesses. Unfortunately, they were neglected in primary classes, which creates a depression in learning, school failure progressively increases, even leading to school dropout (Soreno, 2019)⁸. The pupils' reading literacy is developed insufficiently in schools and the principals have neglected to enhance literacy instruction and teachers receive little guidance regarding strategies to construct print-rich literacy classrooms. The reading problems could be minimized if they were identified and proper instructional practices were implemented at the school level.

Research Problem

Studies based on Learning difficulties found that up to 22.5% of children in the study sample had difficulty with reading, spelling, and related skills (Sandyanganie, Jeewandara, & Perera, 2016)¹⁰, and many children with Learning Disabilities (LD) are still unaccounted for, unwelcomed, or simply ignored (UNICEF, 2016)¹¹. Learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia are neglected in the teaching/learning process in Sri Lanka (Indrarathne, 2019)¹².

Moreover, there is no appropriate identification practice followed to identify the children with reading difficulties and no specialized reading instruction was given to the children with reading difficulties (Sandyanganie, Jeewandara, & Perera, 2016; Indrarathne, 2019)^{10,12}. These studies illustrate that children with reading difficulties are ignored or unwelcomed by the school settings. Therefore, the researcher focused to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions in primary classes in the Puttalam district.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties in primary classes. This study is aimed following objectives:

1. To find out the instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes.
2. To find out the instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development.

Research Questions

To investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions in primary classes, this study revolves around the main following Questions.

1. What instructional practices were followed by the schools to identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes?
2. What instructional practices were followed by the schools to develop the reading of the children with reading difficulties?

Methodology

To achieve the above objectives, a survey research method was carried out by the researcher. This study consists of quantitative data which has obtained from the questionnaire and qualitative data obtained from formal interviews and classroom observations at the school levels. Self-developed questionnaires for teachers, interview schedules for principals, and observation schedules have been used to collect the data.

The study population was selected from Zonal Education of Puttalam District Tamil Medium schools. A simple random sampling method was used to select teachers from 65 Tamil medium schools. Primary teachers (N=70), they have answered the open-ended questionnaire and Principals (N=20) responded to the interview questions. Statistical methods were used to analyze the quantitative data with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Ver. 20 software and content analysis method was used to analyze the qualitative data.

Results

The data were analyzed according to the objectives of the study. It is organized as background data analysis, Instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes, Instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development, and principals' responses on school-based reading development. The data collected by the open-ended questionnaire answers were coded and analyzed.

Background data

The background data illustrates the age, class teacher, service period, and professional qualification of the participated teachers. Age 21-30 (N=10), 31-40 (N=22), 41-50 (N=28), and 51-60 (N=10). The class in charge for grade 3 =32, and grade 4=38. Service years 1-5 = 12.9%, 6-10 = 31%, 11-15 = 22.9%, and service years up to 16 =32%.

Table 1 shows the professional qualification of the teachers. 75.7% of the teachers were trained from the college of education, graduates 21.4%, and graduates with a postgraduate diploma in Education 2.9% of the participants.

Table 1
Professional Qualification

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Trained, Dip in Education	53	75.7	75.7	75.7
	Graduate	15	21.4	21.4	97.1
	Graduate, Dip in Edu.	2	2.9	2.9	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

Instructional practices of the schools on the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes.

The first objective of the study is to investigate the instructional practices of the identification of children with reading difficulties in primary classes. Close-ended questions were asked to respond whether they identify the children with reading difficulties. Open-ended questions were asked to respond on identification practices of children with reading difficulties, methods used to identify the children with reading difficulties, and number of children were identified during identification. The results show the practices followed by the teachers to identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes. 71.4% of the teachers follow the identification practices to identify the children with reading difficulties and keep records of the children with reading difficulties in schools. They maintain student reports, class record books, and assessment books to record the students' Progress. 28.6% of them neither follow the identification practice nor maintain the records.

Table 2 shows how the teachers identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes.

Table 2:
Methods of Identification of children with reading difficulties

		Responses	
		N	Percent
Identification	Checklist	3	6.0%
	Observation	28	56.0%
	Reading exam	19	38.0%
Total		50	100.0%

6% of the teachers use the checklist, 56% of them identify by observing the students and 38% of teachers contact reading exams to identify the children with reading difficulties.

Table 3
Number of children who struggle for reading in Primary classes

	Frequency	Percent
Valid 1-5	30	42.9
6-10	28	40.0
11-15	7	10.0
16-20	1	1.4
up to 21	4	5.7
Total	70	100.0

Table 3 presents the number of children identified in primary classes. 1-5 Number of students identified in 42.9% of schools and 6-10 students were identified in 40% of the schools. Furthermore, the mean comparison was carried out to find out the relationship between class size and the number of the students identified as the children struggle for reading. The mean comparison of class size 21- 30 and 31 – 40 was 2.0 and class size 11-20 = 1.1. This mean comparison illustrates that there is a significant relationship between the size of the class and number of the children identified as the struggle with reading. Classes with a big number of students consist of more children with reading difficulties than small classes.

Table 4
Mean comparison between Size of the class and the number of children struggling for reading in classes

Number of students	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
11-20	1.1875	16	.40311
21-30	2.0909	22	1.15095
31-40	2.0625	32	1.07576
Total	1.8714	70	1.04841

Instructional practices of the schools on instruction to reading development.

The second objective is to investigate the instructional practices of the schools on reading development. The data analysis was carried out by sub-topics of programs for reading development, remedy programs for reading development, and principals' role on the school-based reading development. The descriptive statistics for all study variables illustrate the instructional practices followed by the teacher on reading and literacy development.

Programs for reading developments

Firstly, data were analyzed for the arrangement for reading practice in classroom settings. The arrangement for reading practice in a classroom setting was significantly high. 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach the students to read and treat the students individually. Moreover, they provide classroom-based resources to the reading practices such as textbooks, flashcards,

newspapers, and library books. 3.4% of the teachers use reading sources from the internet. See table 5.

Table 5
Materials provided for reading

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Materials for reading	Textbooks	70	26.6%	100.0%
	Flashcards	70	26.6%	100.0%
	Newspapers/ Magazines	54	20.5%	77.1%
	Library books	60	22.8%	85.7%
	Internet resources	9	3.4%	12.9%
Total		263	100.0%	375.7%

4% of the teachers have no awareness of teaching reading. However, 97% of the teachers responded as they ask questions while students were reading, and assign reading homework during weekdays.

Secondly, the programs contacted for the class-based reading development were also investigated. Table 6 below shows the instructional practices for reading and literacy development programs in primary classes. Teachers’ have responded to open-ended questions and expressed several types of programs on reading and literacy development.

Table 6
Programs for reading development

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Programs for reading development	Extra classes	24	25.8%	36.9%
	Special reading programs	6	6.5%	9.2%
	Parents awareness	32	34.4%	49.2%
	Competitions	4	4.3%	6.2%
	Motivational programs	27	29.0%	41.5%
Total		93	100.0%	143.1%

The responses illustrate that 34% of teachers contact parents’ awareness programs to develop home-based reading development. Furthermore, 29% of them arrange motivational

programs, 25.8% of them contact extra classes, 6.5% contact special reading programs, and 4.3% arrange classroom-based competitions to promote reading.

Remedy programs for reading development

The remedy programs should be carried out in classrooms to develop the reading ability of children with reading difficulties. Data analysis was carried out to identify the number of periods allocated for the remedy programs and the types of remedy programs.

Table 7 below shows the teachers’ responses to classroom-based remedy programs. According to the results, 97% of the teachers contact remedy programs to children with reading difficulties in primary classes. They allocate 1-2 = 40%, 3-4 = 34%, 5-6 = 7%, and 7-8 = 8.6% periods per week for the class-based remedy programs. 2.9% of teachers do not contact any programs to assist the children with reading difficulties.

Table 7
Number of periods allocated for remedy programs.

		Freque ⁿ y	Percent
Valid	0 Period	6	8.6
	1-2	28	40.0
	3-4	24	34.3
	5-6	5	7.1
	7-8	6	8.6
	Total	69	98.6
Missing	System	1	1.4
Total		70	100.0

Furthermore, table 8 below shows the several types of remedy programs contacted for the reading development. It reads 48.6% of teachers contact extra classes after school and sometimes weekends, 30% of them contact motivational programs to encourage the reading, 15.6% of them contact special remedy programs, and 3.7% of them arrange competitions as remedy programs.

Table 8
Remedy program at the School level

	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Extra classes	53	48.6 %	85.5%
Remedy program at the School level	17	15.6 %	27.4%
Special reading programs	2	1.8%	3.2%
School Parents awareness	4	3.7%	6.5%
Competitions	33	30.3 %	53.2%
Motivational programs			
Total	109	100.0 %	175.8%

Parents' awareness plays a crucial role in early literacy development. However, according to table 8 only 1.8% of the teachers' concerned about parents' awareness.

Principals' role on reading development and remedy programs

The principals play a vital role in school-based reading development programs in primary classes. They are expected to implement the school-level programs on literacy development and remedy programs. Teachers' were asked to express their perception about the principal's support on literacy development and remedy programs.

According to the teachers' responses, 82% of the principals somehow provide their support to the reading development programs. 18% of principals do not engage with any reading and literacy development programs. They just continue the school's day-to-day activities as it is. Table 9 below shows the principal's role in the school-level programs for reading and literacy development.

Table 9
Principal's role in Reading Development

	Responses		Percent of Cases	
	N	Percent		
The principal role in Reading Development	Instruction to teachers	6	10.3%	15.0%
	Resourcing	4	6.9%	10.0%
	Contacting special reading programs	28	48.3%	70.0%
	Parent awareness	10	17.2%	25.0%
	Competitions	10	17.2%	25.0%
Total		58	100.0%	145.0%

According to teachers' answers, 48.3% of them arrange reading programs, 17.2% of them contact parents' awareness programs, 17.2% Plan for competitions, 10.3% of them instruct the teachers to contact reading development programs, and 6.9% of them allocate resources for the reading programs.

These results show the contradiction between the planning and implementation of school-based reading development programs. The percentage of the resource allocation is the real index of the school-based literacy development programs.

Principal Responses

20 Principals' responses were recorded throughout the interview and coded for analysis. Table 10 below shows the responses of the principals regarding the identification of children with reading difficulties and instructional practices followed by the principals.

Table 10
Principals' responses

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Reading Development Programs	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Linguistic development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Identify the students and monitor the progress	17	85.0%	3	15.0%	20	100.0%
Records of children with Reading difficulties	16	80.0%	4	20.0%	20	100.0%
Programs for grade 3&4 Reading Development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Remedy programs for reading development	19	95.0%	1	5.0%	20	100.0%
Support on reading development programs	16	80.0%	4	20.0%	20	100.0%

The interview responses principals reading and linguistic development was 95% and one principal have no idea about the school level reading or linguistic development program. 85% of the principals' responses on the identification of children with reading difficulties were by reading exam or classroom assessment. However, 15% of them do not practice any identification methods in primary classes. Moreover, 80% of the schools maintain students' record books, class record books, or student grade-level achievement forms to record the students' progress. Furthermore, 95% of principals responded that they contact reading development programs for grade 3 to ensure reading development in primary classes, in addition to that they contact remedy programs for children with reading difficulties. However, their support for school-based reading development programs was lower than the previous answer. This response illustrates the controversial answers of principals' role in the identification and instructional practices on children with reading difficulties.

Discussion

The main objective of the study was to investigate the instructional practices of school settings on identification and reading instructions on children with reading difficulties in primary classes. The results found that the identification of children with reading difficulties was carried out by 71.4% of schools by reading exams or observations. However, there is no valid instrument nor criteria used to identify the children with reading difficulties. They identify the students as poor readers when they contact reading activities. In addition to that, some teachers contact extra lessons to reading fluency and identifications while others remain to have no awareness of the identification process. To identify the children with reading difficulties in primary classes. The class size is significantly related to the number of students with reading difficulties. Classes with a big number of students consist of more than small classes.

Moreover, the teachers' effectiveness, perception, and motivations are important in the students' literacy development (Miller, 2018)⁴. Findings revealed that 94% of the teachers facilitate the reading and teach school students to read for 1-2 periods per week at the beginning of the year organize usual classroom teaching as usual. When the researcher checked class record books classroom-based some schools contact literacy development homework, however, the programs were not organized for the year, and they have taught a usual lesson. They have provided classroom-based reading practices and homework. The data analysis shows about the remedy programs for children with reading difficulties, thus, no records were found. These findings prove the pupils' reading literacy is developed insufficiently in schools (Wildová, 2014)¹³.

Furthermore, school leaders must ensure that effective literacy practices are incorporated into teaching across all content areas (Woodward, & Thoma, 2020)⁵, the principal plays a vital role in school-based literacy development (Bean, & Kern, 2018)¹⁴. However, when it concludes the teachers' answers and principals' responses, they do not know what is going on in the classroom, no school-level plans are executed for the literacy or reading developments. This proves the Plaatjies (2019)¹⁵ finding that Principals have neglected to enhance literacy instruction and teachers receive little guidance regarding strategies to construct print-rich literacy classrooms.

Limitation and Recommendations

This study has some drawbacks due to time limitations. Firstly, as this is a survey study, the open-ended questionnaire was the main instrument used for data collection. The interview with principals was used for cross-checking the responses. Even though the open-ended questionnaire answers and interview responses were coded, there were some answers not related to the study that were eliminated from coding. Future studies may be the focus on close-ended questions with different types of variables.

Secondly, this study only focused on the instructional practices of school on identification and reading instructions in primary classes. However, this study did not focus on the relationship between instructional practices and reading development. The relationship between instructional practices and reading development may be investigated in future studies. Moreover, the study population and sampling were selected from Tamil medium schools of the Zonal Educational Office of Puttalam. However, the results only can be generalized to Tamil medium schools. The island-wide studies have to be conducted to generalize the results.

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