

# Teaching the Life Orientation Subject in South African Schools through the Story-Reading Method: An Empirically Validated Proposal

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## ABSTRACT

*The historic introduction of the Life Orientation subject in South African schools is a product of a progressive and laudable educational policy that is very much needed in the evolution of the new people of South Africa. Unfortunately, the nation has, for several years been unable to derive the expected dividends from such a great venture in that since its inception the LO subject has continued to be let down by flawed implementation strategies. This study aimed at contributing towards addressing this challenge using a qualitative methodology. The findings showed that all five participants were unanimously satisfied with and endorsed the proposed educator's guide intended to facilitate the implementation of the LO curriculum in South African schools. The study recommends the need for the DBE to make provision for training in the LO subject content as well as exposure to various social environments that could aid educators to establish a social ecology that promotes supportive and caring interactions. The study was considered significant. It has generated a validated educator's guide for use in teaching the social issues component of the LO curriculum in post-Apartheid South Africa.*

**Keywords:** *Life Orientation; Grade 7 Curriculum; South African Schools; Story Reading Technique; African Centred*

## Introduction

One of the decisive measures taken by the South African Department of Basic Education towards the building of a new people of South Africa through the educational process in the aftermath of the post-Apartheid dispensation was the introduction of the Life Orientation subject in South African schools aimed at equipping learners for the complex social settings and situations in which they find themselves. In this regard, within the National Curriculum Statement: Grades R – 12 serves to identify knowledge, skills and values grounded in local contexts to be imparted to learners while acknowledging global imperatives. Life Skills designed for learners in

Grades R – 6 and Life Orientation for learners in Grades 7 – 12 have since been made compulsory subjects in South African schools.

The above structure implies that from grade 7 onwards a shift from Life Skills to Life Orientation occurs, indicating progression from simple to complex content (DBE, 2011). This shift is reflected in a change from content designed for young children to content intended for pre-pubescent and adolescents. The central aim of the Life Orientation subject as stated in the National Education Curriculum is to support, guide, and influence learners to play an active role in society and contribute to the economy; thereby enhancing their level of maturity and

general functioning in the community. This means that the LO subject encapsulates non-academic abilities which encompass the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours that promote the quality of one's life and minimise or prevent dysfunctional behaviours, producing responsible South African citizens (Rooth, 2005).

Some research indications are however available which show that a number of unanticipated problems have emerged against the effective implementation of the teaching of the LO subject in South African Schools. For example, studies by Rooth (2005); Christiaans (2006) & Van Deventer (2009) found that South African educators were not ready and competent to implement the LO curriculum as they voiced out their lack of confidence in their abilities to teach such a subject. Another obstacle was the discovery that many learners in South African schools came from communities with histories of a multitude of *social ills* such as alcoholism and substance abuse, child abuse, violence, sexual licentiousness and other criminal activities (Christiaans, 2006). Worse still, in the study by Ahmed et al. (2009), the participant educators revealed that workshops and in-service training they were exposed to, did not provide much intrinsic educational value directed at addressing the aforementioned social issues that the learners carry-over from their homes, or surrounding communities and neighborhood into the schools. Similarly, in a study by Helleve, Flisher, Onya, Mukoma, & Klepp (2009) it was discovered that many educators found it awkward to mention words such as 'vagina' and 'penis' in their native language as this is culturally inappropriate. Additionally, Francis (2012) conducted a study which gave insight into some of the educator's perceptions of LO. One of the major findings of his study was the educators complaint that the subject content is too varied as it combines physical education, career guidance, religion, health education, human rights and citizenship education; all of which the educators found to be overwhelming to cope with. Along the same lines, Brown (2013) noted that a lack of classroom resources and a limited amount of Life Orientation textbooks contributed to the lessons being dull and the structure repetitive as the educators followed a set routine of note-taking and then attempted discussion. Yet learners appeared more interested if the lesson was discussion-based and centred on something that they could relate to.

What is argued in the article is that one way to navigate through these obstacles against effective teaching of the LO in South African schools is through recourse to the use of the story reading technique.

### **Objectives of the study**

While the larger study of which this report is a part had

three specific objectives, only one of them is addressed in this report; namely. To explore the participants' evaluation of the proposed educator's guide and the story reading technique to teach social issues in the South African classroom. Similarly, although the original study that generated the data for the present report investigated three major research questions, the present report will only highlight the findings arising from an exploration of only one of those three questions, namely: What are the participants' evaluations of the educator's guide and the story reading technique proposed for use in South African classrooms to teach social issues?

### **Literature Review**

As understood in this study, Story Reading is a narrative presenting an account of a written incident either true or fictitious designed to interest, evoke emotion and/or instruct a reader. Hence, according to Pillay (2012), among the advantages of story reading are: acquisition of new vocabulary; enhancement of listening skills; enhancement of memory capacity. Indeed according to Pillay (2012) too: (1) stories encourage development of feelings, as emotions are real when a learner is reading and/or listening to stories which enhance their thinking capacity; (2) stories are based on morals; and (3) stories are thought provoking; making the learner curious which encourages them to ask questions leading to discussion and interaction in the classroom setting.

Gama (2015) similarly notes that during story reading: The interactive session encourages the learners' imagination; and that by using a story-reading technique, a subject becomes familiar and easy to relate to, and classroom management becomes more plausible. Along the same lines, Martinez & Roser (1985) state that: When a parent or teacher reads the same story to children several times, the children begin to attend to different aspects of the story than they did on the first reading. Rothfeld, (2017) concurs that: Stories influence the readers in ways that promote feelings for the imaginary characters facilitated by the ongoing process of review and reflection particularly on experiences that mirror the reader's own personal situations. In the same way, Mezirow (2000, p.20) posits that "imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by 'trying on' another's point of view". In that way, stories teach people about life, about themselves and about others. Hence story reading is understood in the literature as a way for students to develop an understanding, respect and appreciation for one's culture and members of other cultures, and can promote a positive attitude in people from different lands, races and religions (Fluence, 2018). No wonder, as Chase (2018) sees it "we think in story

form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story. Stories inform, inspire, teach and guide us (Chase, 2018, p. 548)''

Given the above, what is argued in this article is that when children read stories that contain feelings of fictitious characters it can help them understand and accept their own feelings.

## **Research Objectives**

The specific objective of this research is to subject the proposed educator's guide designed for facilitating the teaching of LO curriculum in South African schools to the scrutiny of the study participants. Hence, the central aim of the research is to determine the extent to which the study participant agree or disagree with the appropriateness of the proposed educator guide for the use for which it is intended.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

Within the design of this study it was planned to recruit various participants such as (1) curriculum developers, (to help determine the grade level of the educator's guide); (2) Graphic designers (to help create graphic illustrations and layouts of the educator's guide; and those to evaluate the educator's guide.

Ultimately, five participants were recruited into the study sample, through purposive sampling. The participants included: (1) Two grade 7 LO Educators (Ms QN and SK) from different schools- quantile 3 and quantile 4 (to evaluate the educator's guide and implement the story reading technique in a classroom setting).(2) One grade 7 Subject Advisor from the DBE (to provide guidance on preparation for teaching and learning through the story reading technique; evaluate whether the educator's guide is informed by the curriculum and supplements textbooks or not; & evaluate whether the stories match different learner abilities. (3) One senior phase LO Lecturer (to evaluate the educator's guide and give feedback on its use with student teachers to supplement textbooks). (4) One intermediate phase Life Skills' (LS) Lecturer (to determine progression of the educator's guide from Grade 6 subject matter). The two lecturers were from South African universities located in two different provinces.

All five participants were females between the ages of 35–55 years. Four were Africans, and one was white.

The above list shows that purposive sampling that was used in this study focused on selecting participants who have experience developing content or teaching LO. An essential guiding principle in purposive sampling for

the present study, as noted by Koerber and McMichael (2008) was to explore maximum variation, which refers to the inclusion of participants who reflect different perspectives concerning the phenomenon under study. In order to present the various viewpoints of persons who have specialized in LO, 'expert' sampling was adopted (Etikan & Bala, 2017). In other words, the participants are active in the facilitation of LO in Basic Education or Higher Education and Training.

The participants were encouraged to critique all aspects of the educator's guide. Hence, the outcome of this study is of importance to educators who lack the capacity to effectively deliver the LO curriculum towards achieving its stated objectives.

Based on these clarifications, the study's direct participants consisted of five LO facilitators and grade 7 learners who played the role of indirect participants because the first author observed and noted (did not engage with the learners or tape record the lesson) their behaviour during the implementation of the story reading technique. Smalley, et al. (2015, p. 479) define indirect participants as those who "may be affected by the intervention through their routine exposure to the environment in which the intervention is being deployed."

### **Instruments**

The study used individual interviews, a reflective worksheet, and participant observation to generate data. In-depth interviews were used so that the participants are given opportunity to describe their experiences with LO teaching and respond to the presented educator's guide and story reading technique (Creswell, 2013). With the participants' permission, all interviews were tape-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and confirmed by the first author.

### **Procedure**

The data was generated in three stages:

Stage 1: Pre-implementation interviews with all five participants. In this stage, the first author briefed each participant on the study and interview purpose. All relevant documentation was emailed to participants prior to the interview (information sheet, consent form, and semi-structured interview schedule). The interview was divided into two sections. Section A focussed on the participants' experience with LO. Once this section was completed, the participants were issued a copy of the educator's guide. Section B focussed on the participants' first impressions of the educator's guide and their understanding of the story reading technique. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Stage 2: Observation of the implementation of the story

reading technique [Educators].

Participant observation requires researchers to immerse themselves in the participants' natural setting for an extended time. In this study, the first author and the research assistant observed the educators as they facilitated the LO lessons with the aid of the presented educator's guide.

Stage 3: Post-implementation interviews with all five participants. At this third stage, the participants were asked to analyse the presented educator's guide in relation to the focal areas it encompasses. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and thirty minutes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The first author obtained ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Protocol reference number: [details omitted for -anonymized peer review]) and was granted permission to access the DBE schools and personnel. Bell and Bryman (2007, p.71) highlight some of the ethical considerations reflected in this study. Following their criteria the authors ensured: *Privacy: Confidentiality and Anonymity; Accuracy: Honesty and Transparency; Property: Affiliation and Reciprocity; Accessibility.*

### **Data Analysis**

The study adopted the phenomenographic method to data analysis. Phenomenography is based on the idea that people perceive and experience the same phenomenon in different ways. In this regard, the study's data analysis process employed the eight-step analysis process outlined by Bruce (1994, p. 117): Familiarisation; Reflection (level 1); Comparison; Reflection (level 2); Condensation; Explication; Categorisation; and Articulation.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Presentation of Results**

The findings of this study are presented according to the central research question explored as follows: What are the Participants' Evaluations of the Educator's Guide and the Story Reading Technique Proposed for Use in South African Classroom to Teach Social Issues? The findings of this study in response to the above question are highlighted below; with the participants' responses being presented in line with the six OECD/DAC evaluation criteria for assessing the adequacy or not of a proposed intervention. The evaluation criteria have been conflated into three categories: (1) relevance and coherence; (2) effectiveness and impact; (3) efficiency and sustainability.

### *Category 1: The Relevance and Coherence of the Proposed Educator's Guide*

Study participants under this category returned evaluation comments that showed that they strongly supported the relevance and coherence of the educator's guide and the story reading technique proposed. Some of the recorded voices of the participants in connection to their assessment of this category came from LS Lecturer, LO Lecturer, Ms SK, and Ms QN. Thus, commenting on the Educator's guide's relevance, LS Lecturer declared: *I think the guide is spot-on! Let's bring back what we grew up knowing and learn from that, like our grannies used to tell us stories and we would learn from those stories. Now there are characters on TV and Facebook and stuff like that and they (learners) will tell stories that are happening there. Nowadays, (her tone dropped) the problem is that TV is the educator more than the educators and parents.*

Commenting in a similar vein on the extent of coherence of the proposed educator's guide LO Lecturer stated: *I think any learner would be able to understand and I think a good teacher will be able to apply any content to the learner's context. If it is not applicable to the learners, teachers can ask for an example from the child's own life that relate to what happened to Musa or what happened in the second story so I do believe even if children's circumstances are different, there are things that they can relate with.... but I do believe that there is a need for an Afrocentric approach in almost all the content we teach across the board, so I think this is very necessary.*

Ms. SK emphasised the relevance of the educator's guide and the story reading technique that it encompasses: *I think it is relevant because it is in line with the curriculum, topics like peer pressure and drug use are relevant and are prescribed in the curriculum. It also reflects on the knowledge that the learners already have... it is something that they know, they've seen in it their homes.*

In her own case, Ms QN cited particular instances that showed her positive assessment of the relevance and coherence of the educator's guide proposed. Commenting in this regard she noted: *Recently we were doing the different types of substances which are illegal and legal substances and the symptoms which include changes... physical changes, emotional changes and changes at school and with others so when we were doing the story, we also find some types of substances that were being used by the characters, so it links with what we are doing in the classroom. Also, other LO initiatives must align with the curriculum so, this guide is fine because it can be used with any The above conceptions demonstrate that the participants gave a positive evaluation regarding the extent to which the educator's guide is relevant and its contents coherent for teaching LO in South African schools.*

*Category 2: Effectiveness and Impact of the Educator's Guide as a Tool to Facilitate the Story Reading Technique.*

The participants evaluated the effectiveness of the educator's guide as a tool to facilitate the story reading technique. The focus was on identifying (in)consistencies in the educator's guide to allow for well organised implementation. Participants also commented on the possible impact or effects of the story reading technique on learners.

In relation to their comments on the effectiveness of the Introduction: Title page, Instructions, and Information Box, one of the participants Ms. QN averred: *I think the cover page is very attractive, the colours blend well. The quote is relevant and compliments the hot air balloon. I like the hot air balloon because there are speech bubbles or balloons inside the guide, so you see the first balloon on the outside. The balloon also, as a mode of transport, is not too fast or too slow for you to see everything. The view is beautiful as you are in the sky, , and you ride a hot air balloon if the sky or weather is clear. So, I think this means that the educator, as the driver in the classroom, should create a fun environment where the content is delivered and move at a moderate pace and learners can read and formulate opinions from what they see. Then, the educator must link that to the curriculum as the quote there says: "The story is our escort; without it we are blind." It is for the educator to open the eyes of the learners by transporting their minds and imaginations through the story to reach the outcomes of the lesson. So, each time the lesson starts, the learners board the hot air balloon as each topic is introduced through the story. That is my understanding of the cover page. Contributing a similar comment, LS Lecturer asserted: I think it (title page) is very creative and free spirited... because it means you go where you want. From the time the story is given to you, and you see the pictures, the transportation has started. There is no 'traffic' (she smiled).*

In her own case, Ms. SK affirmed: *The objectives and instructions... even the information box and everything... it is in line with the curriculum documents. The information box makes you, as an educator understand more before you go to learners to present the lesson. Contributing an affirming statement, LS Lecturer observed: Learners might see Musa in one of the learners and I don't want a situation in my class where there would be a learner that is now called Musa because of the story. So, the "Remember to" box is very important because sometimes educators may forget or take it for granted that the learners will be mature or understanding but this is not always the case, so it helps to start with this note so that it sets the tone for when reading the story and engaging in discussions.*

Now, with regard to their comments on the adequacy or not, of the formulation of the stories and story structure presented in the educator's guide, the participants

contributed very encouraging responses. Commenting in this regard for instance, LO Lecturer affirmed: *The first story was awesome. I loved it because of the fact that learners can explore ways of saying "no" while they are in the safe environment of a classroom. I think the problem is: if the learners don't have Life Orientation lessons, they have to think of ways to respond when they are in the situation itself and then they don't have enough time to initiative.*

*come up with such response or with responses that will help to protect themselves. I think children find themselves in situations that they don't want to be in but they don't know how to react so from a teacher's point of view, I think this story is a wonderful opportunity for learners to think of responses that they can use outside of the classroom when needed. I was proud of that girl (Nolwazi) to say "no" I think it so applicable to the lives of the learners. It fits in part of their development phase... it is very important. Subject Advisor similarly noted: The first story... I actually saw it as a very good example of teaching learners' assertiveness skills. For the second story, I was kind of like, shame, this child... losing Gogo who was supportive. I mean it is a good story if it gets you, as a reader, to be emotionally involved., Of course, educators and some learners will identify with losing a loved one but the story itself is not too emotionally upsetting.*

For Ms. QN: *The stories are well presented. Story 2 is a bit longer than the other stories... like story 1 part 1 and part 2 it was a little bit short and I think it was good for those learners who can't concentrate for a long period of time. I think the language was fine, even the new words were not that hard or difficult... it wasn't too easy but again it was not too hard, it catered for almost all the learners. Perhaps just those who struggle to read might have been left behind when reading but they understood the stories and participated in discussion. According to Ms. SK: Story 2 wasn't that long because they are used to reading stories which are even longer than this one in languages... not in LO. In LO, they are used to just paragraphs... one paragraph, short ones, so this (stories) is good for them.*

The LO Lecturer asserted: *For story 2... it was such a nice story to read. The 1st part was such a nice positive story and all of a sudden it ended. In the 2nd part, it became a negative experience for Musa which I think could help learners who are in the same position. You know if someone who has had a pleasant life and suddenly something happens which changes everything, I think it is important for children because that can happen to all of us at some time. Things can happen that throw one's life off course. Similarly, Subject Advisor noted: You got story1 part1 and that is followed by part2 in the next period. If you were to simply have 1 long story instead of having story1 part1and story1 part2, maybe it would be too long for the learners. We're talking about Grade 7's therefore we must be mindful of the fact that English as a medium of*

instruction can be a barrier for some learners so the fact that the stories have been broken up in this way, with questions for each, I think it is actually a very good way of introducing the lesson.

In her own case, LO Lecturer stated: *For now, I agree with the number of characters in the story, more characters can be added later. I think for part 3.... introduce new characters and situations in relation to the curriculum as you go along. These characters could also be used to help educators teach learners about sex education and more. It's easy to incorporate in the curriculum and wouldn't take long at all. Now, it is clear in going through these conceptions that the participants agree that the formulation of the stories are, on the whole, adequate and that the characters are well chosen and represent ordinary people that could be found in the life and world of the learners.*

*Category 3: Efficiency and Sustainability of the Proposed Educator's Guide and the Story Reading Technique*

In terms of efficiency, Ms. QN noted that: *It would be lovely to have this resource especially as I can use these stories for assessment purpose because they already there. The questions are already there, I can just make a few adjustments like adding more questions or maybe making variety of the questions but within the story. Similarly, Ms. SK averred: I think it (educator's guide) is different because there are stories here which on other manuals or textbooks there will be... maybe one or not that much. But here, there is story 1 part 1 and part 2 so there is continuity in the learning process as there are still the same characters.*

LO Lecturer stated: *So, this is a wonderful opportunity to start a discussion and, yah, I felt sorry for the little boy (Musa). Student teachers can be equipped with facilitating sensitive topics in class and dealing with learners who are in such situations. She continued: I think that educators need to be workshopped on many things and I think that in general teachers cannot have enough continuous development. I think it a very important part of any profession to be continuously developed and to keep on studying and being exposed to new content and measures. I think that teachers would be able to match this guide to the curriculum and understand clearly what to do without having to be workshopped on it.. She continued: I know in the textbook that I use for my students, there is what they call a "Brain buddy" and that brain buddy goes through the textbook to each chapter with you and ask a few questions so in this character (Brain buddy) there is that continuity but yours is different because it is a story. In the Life Orientation books that I have used; I haven't come across an information box with symptoms and things like that... not when I was a teacher as far as I can recall... I think it is unique and good to have. She concluded: I also think it will work well online as we are moving to a digital age so this tool will be easy to use for learners and teachers. LS Lecturer*

*confirmed: I've seen case studies in manuals about a certain child's circumstances or experience to answer question on but what is unique in this educator's guide is continuation of the same character in different situations from topic to topic is really good for coherence between real life and the classroom. Subject Advisor added: There is no such thing as a prescribed textbook... not just for LO but for all subjects, educators look for a textbook that addresses a particular sub-topic, but if you add more stories, this will work very well as an additional support material because sometimes educators hold on to textbooks that don't cover the whole curriculum.*

In her own case, Ms. QN notes: *I think the stories simplify things because I introduce the lesson with the story and then link the story to the lesson.*

## Discussion of Results

The above conceptions demonstrate that the study participants responded positively to adopting story reading as a choice technique in delivering the social issues content. One of the advantages they mentioned is that this technique can increase cultural awareness about beliefs and values that are different to one's own. All the participants in this study agreed that the design and layout of the educator's guide is appropriate for Grade 7. In this regard, they concur with Akcanca (2020) that comics aid in visualising and contextualising learning. All participants also found the guide to be user friendly as there are a few characters that they need to consider when planning the lesson and the components of the guide are integrated into the curriculum. For example, Weeks 1–4 correspond with the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and the textbooks typically used in the classroom. They equally believed that the story reading technique can be used to organize lessons and enhance the educators' confidence in facilitating difficult topics. They also stated that the guide can be adapted to any teaching method or classroom instruction for LO. The participants highlight the advantages of the assessment tasks (informal), as without them, reading the story is ineffective because the story cannot be integrated with the subject content if the learners have not understood it.. In alignment with the new taxonomy of educational objectives by Marzano and Kendall (2007) the participants highlighted some of the benefits of the assessments proposed in the educator's guide. All the assessments were viewed as appropriate for Grade 7.

On the whole, the participants are positive in their assessment of the formulation of the stories and the story structure proposed. They also agreed that the story reading technique is consistent with the traditional African cultural approach to the use of stories to generate lessons for children.

In sum then, the participants viewed the educator's guide and the story reading technique as relevant to Grade-7 learners in South Africa and coherent with the CAPS. They equally agreed that the stories could be useful outside the classroom as some learners do not receive guidance from home about how to respond to risky situations and peer-pressure. They also noted that, although the theme of the stories is substance use and abuse, which the participants deemed important, the stories can be used to teach other topics as learners are already familiar with the characters. These topics can include assertiveness skills and sexuality education. The participants found the length of the stories and vocabulary to be appropriate for Grade 7.

## Conclusion

The educator's guide developed and evaluated in this study comprised two stories with an engaging plot and a simple narrative arc: a clear beginning, middle, and end of the story. Hence each story is easy to follow from one week to the next. The characters mentioned in the stories have unique personalities, hobbies, and goals. They also have relationships with other characters that are realistic to learners. The guide was evaluated and positively validated by 5 LO facilitators who believe that learners might gain insight into how they engage in interpersonal interactions if they can identify themselves in a character and observe how that character interacts with others. Thus, the key contribution of this study lies in its development and validation of an educator's guide that can be used to teach the social issues component of the LO curriculum in the post-apartheid South Africa.

## Limitations and Recommendation

The schools and educators that were part of the study are located only in two districts in KwaZulu-Natal. The presented educator's guide and story reading technique has not been piloted in other districts and provinces. However, it has been determined in this study that the educator's guide and story reading technique are transferable across South African classrooms.

In the light of the findings, it is recommended for the DBE to make provision for training in the LO subject content as well as exposure to various social environments that could aid educators to establish a social ecology that promotes supportive and caring interactions. This may help to enhance the learners' emotional development and communication skills as they work on developing their identities. Improving self-awareness is also important for educators. Educators can keep a personal journal where

they document their thoughts and feelings about the lesson in relation to their personal values, professional skills and general behaviours.

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