

# Foundation Phase Teachers' Perceptions of Implementing Formative Assessments in Teaching Reading: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Reading is a foundational skill that supports learning across all subjects and is particularly critical in the early years of schooling. In South Africa, English is taught as a First Additional Language in many primary schools, yet it also functions as the medium of instruction in higher education. This dual role emphasizes the need to develop strong reading skills from the Foundation Phase to ensure long-term academic success. Within this context, formative assessment is a key tool for supporting reading development, especially in classrooms where learners face systemic challenges. However, despite its recognized value, limited research has examined Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions and practices in implementing formative assessment for reading instruction. This study presents a systematic review of literature examining teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in applying formative assessment to reading. Drawing on Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, the review synthesized qualitative data from peer-reviewed studies and employed thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights. The study was guided by the following research questions: a) What does existing literature reveal about Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions the role and implementation of formative assessment in teaching reading? (b) What challenges and barriers do teachers encounter when implementing formative assessment in reading instruction? Findings reveal that teachers value formative assessment for its potential to enhance reading outcomes and learner engagement. However, their effective use of these strategies is constrained by systemic barriers including large class sizes, limited resources, inadequate training, time constraints, and curriculum demands. These barriers are further intensified by challenging socio-economic conditions that shape classroom realities. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on formative assessment in early literacy by highlighting both its pedagogical promise and its practical challenges. It offers recommendations for teacher professional development, policy support, and classroom practice to promote sustainable formative assessment approaches that strengthen reading instruction and improve learner outcomes in South African Foundation Phase classrooms.

**Keywords:** reading, teaching, foundation phase, formative assessment, South Africa

## 1. Introduction

Reading is a foundational skill that every child must acquire to succeed both academically and in life (Phajane & Mokhele, 2013). Brown (2014) explains that reading requires the mastery, integration, and application of multiple interrelated components that include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Furthermore, Brown (2014) insists that these elements are deeply interconnected and cannot be taught in isolation. In addition, reading is one of the four core language skills, alongside listening, speaking, and writing, that form the basis of effective communication and literacy development. The ability to read fluently and with understanding is essential for learners to access and engage meaningfully with content across the curriculum. When learners fail to develop strong reading skills during the early years, particularly in the Foundation Phase, they face long-term academic challenges that extend beyond language subjects. These difficulties often result in reduced motivation, low self-esteem, and persistent underachievement in other learning areas (Phajane and Mokhele, 2013; Oyowe, 2022; Hugo, 2010). In this context, the role of Foundation Phase teachers becomes critical. Their perceptions and implementation of formative assessment in reading instruction are vital to understanding and supporting learners' development. Formative assessments serve as essential tools for guiding instructional decisions, identifying learning gaps, and providing targeted support. It is acknowledged as a means of enabling teachers to adapt their teaching

strategies in real time, ensuring that reading instruction meets the diverse needs of learners (Sönmez and Cetinkaya, 2022; Dlamini, 2022). Investigating how teachers perceive and use formative assessments in the Foundation Phase is, therefore, a crucial area of inquiry in advancing reading outcomes and promoting equitable learning opportunities.

The perception of Foundation Phase teachers regarding these assessments can significantly influence their execution and subsequent learner outcomes. Research indicates that assessment is often seen as a significant source of apprehension (Stiggins, 2001). It is also believed that teachers who use assessment data can improve their effectiveness thereby, which in turn leads to enhanced learning (Pitsia et al., 2021). This finding suggests that a sound understanding, and implementation, of formative assessments is vital for fostering reading skills among learners. In examining pre-service teacher training Nel (2012), argues that there is a pressing need to rethink teacher education programmes to better align assessment practices with reading literacy instruction. This alignment ensures that future teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to employ formative assessments effectively in their classrooms. Research emphasizes the significance of cultivating positive perceptions about reading assessments among future educators (Benevides and Peterson, 2010). Teachers' beliefs about reading and its importance can significantly impact their teaching methodology, which consequently affects learner engagement and achievement (Marais and Wessels, 2020). The insights gleaned from educators' views highlight the necessity of creating a supportive environment where formative assessments are not merely seen as bureaucratic obligations but as valuable tools for enhancing literacy instruction (Williams and Ortlieb, 2014). It is hoped that the practical and effective use of assessments would allow Foundation Phase teachers to monitor progress and adjust their strategies, accordingly, thereby maximizing learners' learning potential.

### *1.1 Rationale for the Study*

The impact of effective assessment strategies in the Foundation Phase cannot be overstated, particularly in the teaching of reading. Such strategies provide teachers with continuous insights into learners' progress, enabling them to adapt instruction to meet diverse individual needs. In the Foundation Phase, where learners move from "*learning to read*" to "*reading to learn*," formative assessment plays a crucial role in identifying learning needs and guiding instruction. When foundational reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency, and comprehension, are not mastered early, learners often face persistent academic difficulties across subjects (Dlamini, 2022; Mokobe, Badenhorst, and Schlebusch, 2025; Phajane and Moipone, 2014; Alumbungu and Mpofu, 2025). Unlike summative assessment, formative assessment supports learning in real time, allowing teachers to diagnose challenges and adjust their teaching accordingly (Shepard et al.; Sherko and Malazada, 2019). William, Quadry, and Ojo (2025), as well as William, Mujib, and Belo (2025) highlight its value in tracking reading progress and tailoring support. Roskos and Neuman (2012) also emphasize the importance of interactive strategies such as questioning, observation, and guided reading, which not only inform instruction but also engage learners as they develop. Despite this, limited research has consolidated how Foundation Phase teachers perceive and apply formative assessment in reading instruction. This systematic review addresses that gap by synthesizing existing studies to uncover key themes, practical insights, and the difficulties associated with specific contexts. The findings have the potential of contributing to teacher training, curriculum design, and policy, particularly in supporting effective reading practices in diverse, resource-limited classrooms.

### *1.2 The Importance of Reading in the Foundation Phase*

Reading is a foundational skill that underpins all other learning and is vital for academic achievement, language development, and lifelong learning (Mafokwane, 2018; Torgesen, 2006; Segooa and Molise, 2024). In the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3), the development of reading skills is particularly critical, as it establishes the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional basis for future learning across subjects. If learners do not master reading during these formative years, they might face long-term academic difficulties, reduced self-esteem, and limited access to further learning opportunities. Poor reading proficiency not only impairs performance in language subjects but also undermines success in mathematics, science, and social studies, subjects that increasingly rely on reading to access content and demonstrate understanding. In South African, these challenges are further intensified by systemic issues such as inequality, under-resourced schools, overcrowded classrooms, and mismatches between home and school languages (Mokobe, Badenhorst and Schlebusch, 2025). As a result, early reading instruction must be both intentional and responsive, targeting the core components of reading, decoding, fluency, and comprehension with precision and consistency. Failure to master these skills early can result in entrenched learning gaps that become increasingly difficult and costly to remediate in later grades.

Formative assessment plays a key role in addressing these challenges. It supports a cycle of continuous improvement, enabling teachers to monitor learners' reading development in real time. As a diagnostic tool, formative assessment

helps teachers identify individual learner strengths and pinpoint specific areas where support is needed. Kanjee and Mthembu (2015) highlight the value of formative assessment in adapting instruction to meet learners' needs (see also Mtshweni, 2020). Questioning, observation, learner self-assessment, and structured feedback (Brookhart, Moss and Long, 2010) all inform instruction and actively engage learners in their progress. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends largely on teachers' understanding, professional capacity, and instructional choices. Therefore, investigating Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions and experiences of formative assessment is important. The outcomes of such an investigation can significantly illuminate both the opportunities and constraints that shape classroom practices and guide future professional development.

### *1.3 The Role and Impact of Formative Assessment in Supporting Reading in the Foundation Phase*

This section reviews three key studies on the teaching of reading in Foundation Phase classrooms with particular focus on the role of formative assessment in supporting literacy development. Formative assessment is widely recognised as a powerful pedagogical tool that enables teachers to monitor learner progress, provide timely feedback, and adjust instruction to meet learners' needs (Spector, Ifenthaler, Sampson, Yang, Mukama, Warusavitarana and Gibson, 2016; Chowdhury, 2019). The first study by Kanjee (2020) examines how formative assessment strategies are implemented in South African primary schools. The second study by Strauss (2024) explores the impact of professional development on Grade 3 teachers' ability to assess reading and provide targeted support. The third, by Hugo (2010), investigates broader challenges in early reading instruction, while also highlighting effective classroom practices and community-based interventions. Together, these studies offer valuable insights into current practices and the potential of formative assessment to improve reading outcomes in the Foundation Phase.

Kanjee (2020) offers a comprehensive national overview of formative assessment strategies in South African primary schools. Drawing on lesson observations and document reviews in both fee-paying and no-fee-paying schools, the study reveals that although most teachers introduced lesson objectives verbally, few made these explicit or linked them clearly to assessment criteria. Feedback, peer-assessment, and self-assessment were also inconsistently applied, indicating that while there is awareness of formative assessment, practical implementation remains weak overall. Building on this, Strauss (2024) focuses specifically on Grade 3 teachers and investigates how professional development influences their ability to assess reading and provide targeted support. Using an action research approach, Strauss (2024) found that although teachers improved their accuracy in administering running records (RRs) during professional development (PD), their instructional responses remained limited. Running records, which are formative assessment tools used to capture a child's oral reading behaviour in real time, provide insight into accuracy, fluency, error patterns, and comprehension. While teachers became more proficient in recording and scoring these assessments, many continued to focus narrowly on phonics rather than using the data to address comprehension challenges. This suggests that teachers struggled to identify deeper reading difficulties due to limited understanding of linguistic structures and a lack of adequate diagnostic tools. These findings highlight a critical gap in both training and classroom practice.

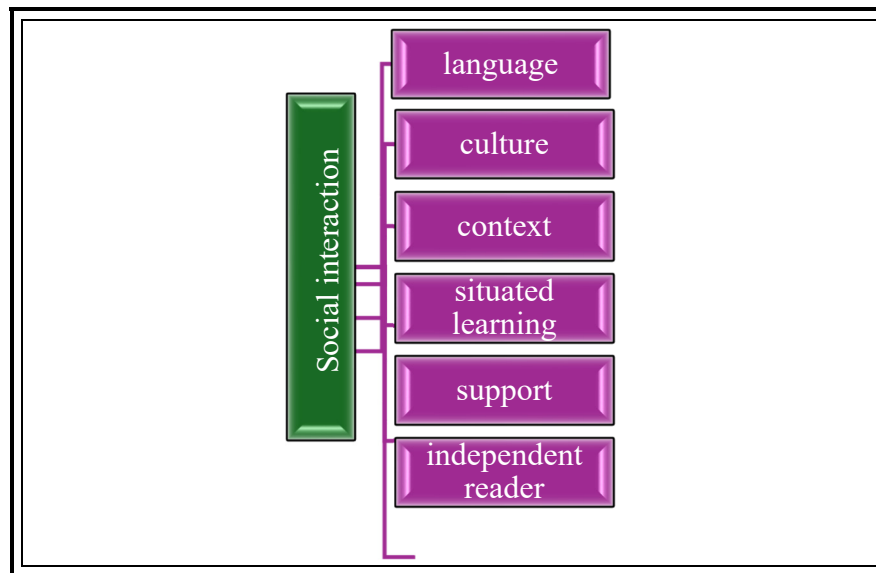
The third study by Hugo (2010) adds historical and contextual depth to the discussion, examining the broader challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers. Through mixed-methods research, Hugo identifies key barriers such as language mismatch, insufficient reading resources, and narrow instructional methods. Furthermore, the study illustrates the impact of expert teaching and community involvement. Teachers who demonstrated strong phonological awareness and asked inferential questions were more effective in engaging learners, while initiatives like one-on-one reading support from retired volunteers created meaningful opportunities for practice and feedback. These three studies reinforce the central role of formative assessment in raising reading standards in the Foundation Phase. They agree that while there is growing awareness of the importance of formative assessment, there remains widespread need for more structured training, access to diagnostic tools, and support systems to help teachers translate formative data into effective reading instruction. All three studies highlight the value of teacher expertise, learner motivation through personalized feedback, as well as the critical importance of moving beyond phonics to foster fluency and comprehension. Embedding formative assessment practices systematically, supported by professional development and classroom resources, holds the potential to improve reading outcomes significantly in early primary education.

The questions guiding this paper were as follows:

- 1) What does existing literature reveal about Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions of the role and implementation of formative assessments in teaching reading?
- 2) What challenges and barriers do Foundation Phase teachers encounter when implementing formative assessments in reading instruction?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Socio-cultural theory, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), is essential for understanding Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions of formative assessment in reading instruction, particularly within South African classrooms. This theory emphasizes the connection between culture and cognition through situational and contextual activities, events, and tasks (Panhwar, Ansari, and Ansari, 2016). It highlights the fact that learning is shaped by cultural, linguistic, and social interactions, suggesting that both reading instruction and formative assessment should be responsive to learners' cultural and social contexts to meet their diverse needs effectively, see Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Vygotsky's (1978) Social Interaction Principles (Adapted by the researchers)

Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory (1978) emphasize that learning is fundamentally rooted in social interaction. This theory highlights the role of language, culture, context, and guided support in shaping a learner's development, as illustrated in Figure 1. In South Africa, Foundation Phase teachers frequently operate in socio-economically challenged environments, which significantly influence their perception and implementation of formative assessment. Byker and Xu (2019) highlight the importance of educators engaging with the socio-cultural realities of their learners to design and apply culturally responsive pedagogies. Therefore, aligning teachers' understanding and practices with the communities they serve is essential for the effective and meaningful application of formative assessment strategies.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that incorporating local socio-cultural elements into teaching can enhance learners' engagement and motivation. Using culturally relevant materials in reading instruction helps learners understand better and allows teachers to evaluate progress within culturally relevant frameworks. Collaborative and reflective practices among teachers, as articulated in socio-cultural theory, foster a shared understanding and position assessments as integral to teaching and learning. However, implementing formative assessments is challenging owing to socio-economic problems such as inadequate teaching resources (e.g. limited access to age-appropriate reading materials, assessment tools, and classroom support materials), insufficient teacher knowledge and application skills, and a lack of sustained training. Addressing these requires professional development focused on socio-cultural aspects of teaching and assessment. Context-rich tasks, as highlighted by Shepard et al. (2012), can elicit learners' understanding and align with formative assessments grounded in socio-cultural realities. Formative assessment strategies based on socio-cultural theory can promote biliteracy in multilingual classrooms, as described by Prosper and Nomlomo (2016). Recognising linguistic diversity and creating assessments that reflect learners' home languages while promoting reading skills in the language of instruction fosters a positive learning environment and validates learners' identities, crucial for their motivation and success.

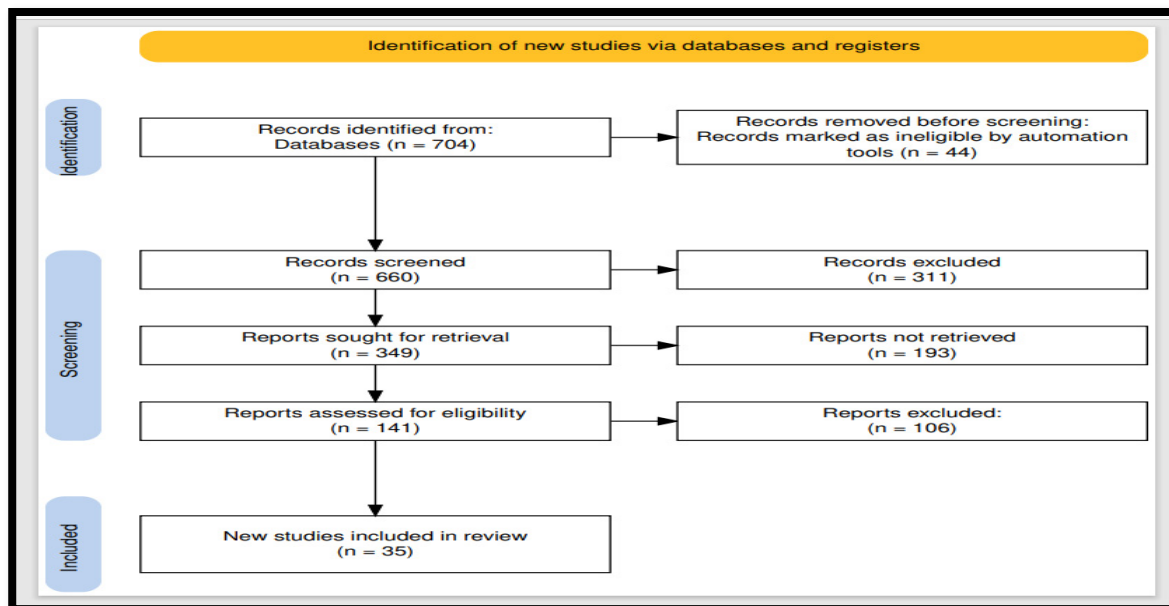
## 3. Methods

The study used a systematic literature review approach to analyse relevant literature. This approach involved a

systematic protocol to ensure rigour and reliability. The study adheres to the guidelines set forth by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol proposed 2010 and updated in 2015 (Haddaway et al., 2022; Moher et al., 2010; Shamseer et al., 2015). PRISMA provides a comprehensive framework that includes a series of steps to be followed in selecting and evaluating data. These steps ensure transparency and reproducibility in the review process and enhancing the credibility of findings. The researchers systematically identified, appraised, and synthesised the results of relevant primary studies, thereby providing a robust foundation for understanding the topic under investigation.

### 3.1 Literature Search

The study began by exploring the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers' implementing formative assessments in the teaching of reading. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across databases including ResearchGate, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Sabinet African Journals to situate the investigation within existing scholarship. Keywords employed in the search strategy included "formative assessment," 'teaching reading in the Foundation Phase,' and 'teachers' experiences.' The initial search yielded 704 records, which were subsequently refined through a series of screening and eligibility procedures to ensure relevance to the research focus (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** PRISMA Diagram (Source: Haddaway, N. R., Page, M. J., Pritchard, C. C., and McGuinness, L. A., 2022)

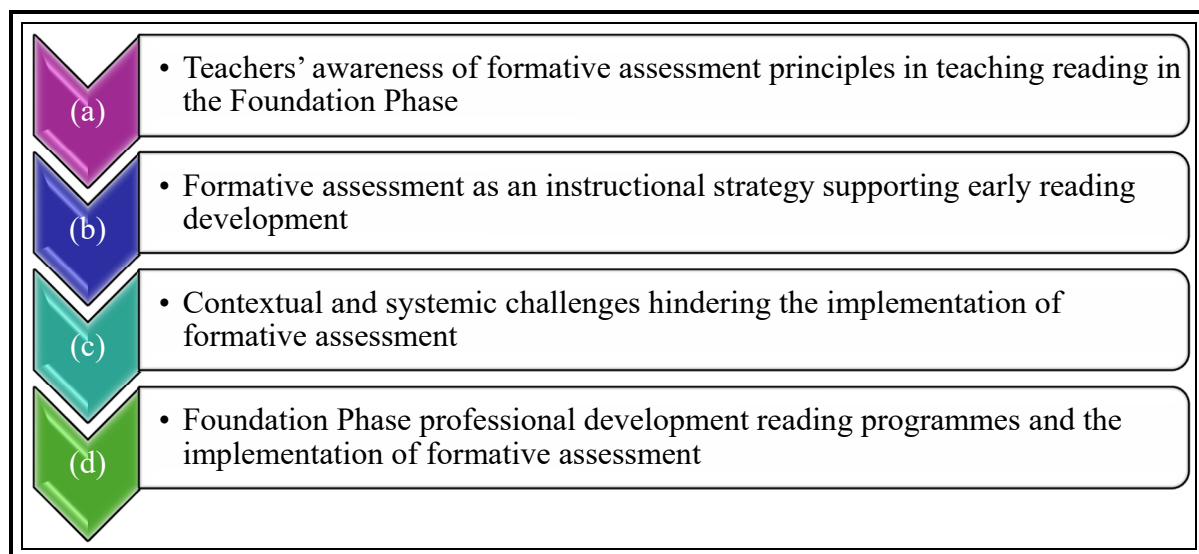
A total of 44 records were excluded for not meeting the study criteria. The remaining 660 entries were screened further and 311 were excluded on the basis of publication date, language, and access restrictions. Of the 349 reports selected for full-text retrieval, 191 were found ineligible. Final eligibility checks on 141 reports led to the exclusion of an additional 106, resulting in 35 studies that were deemed suitable for inclusion. The PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2010; Shamseer et al., 2015; Haddaway et al., 2022) visually maps this process, reflecting the systematic approach used. Owing to the limited number of selected studies, the authors carried out further searches via Google Scholar and A - Z databases. Additional studies were included based on their alignment with the study's focus and relevance to the topic (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Publications in the Study (Conceptualized by the researchers)

Included	Excluded
Publications written in English	Studies published in languages other than English
Publications focused on the Foundation Phase	Studies focused on the Intermediate Phase or university-level learners
Studies examining formative assessment	Studies focused on assessment types other than formative assessment
Studies focused on the teaching of reading in the Foundation Phase	Studies addressing other language skills (e.g., writing, speaking) rather than reading
Peer-reviewed scholarly articles	Non-scholarly or non-peer-reviewed publications
Full-text articles available	Studies with abstract only, without full-text access
Studies published between 2000 and 2025	Studies published before the year 2000
Accessible books via Google.com	Inaccessible books on Google.com

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The following themes emerged from the search, and they provide a comprehensive overview of the key areas of focus for the review (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Themes That Emerge from the Review (Compiled by the researchers' compilation)

The themes identified are a) teachers' awareness of formative assessment principles in teaching reading in the Foundation Phase, b) Formative assessment as an instructional strategy supporting early reading development, c) contextual and systemic challenges hindering the implementation of formative assessment, and d) Foundation Phase professional development reading programmes and the implementation of formative assessment.

##### Theme 1: Teachers' awareness of formative assessment principles

The study reveals that Foundation Phase teachers generally acknowledge formative assessment as a crucial and continuous element of effective reading instruction (Dlamini, 2022). Teachers demonstrated an understanding of formative assessment as a tool for supporting learner development by identifying reading difficulties early in the Foundation Phase, acritical stage when learners are learning to read, while also offering immediate feedback and providing differentiated support tailored to diverse learner needs (Ramollo and Kanjee, 2023; Kanjee and Mthembu, 2015; Mkhwanazi et al., 2014). This process fosters learners' metacognitive awareness, enabling them to take greater ownership of their reading progress and learning journey. However, the study found that despite this awareness, Foundation Phase teachers encounter significant barriers in implementing formative assessment effectively. These include time constraints, curriculum pacing demands, and administrative burdens related to documentation

(Mafokwane, 2017; Segooa, 2020). Teachers also reported difficulties in developing age-appropriate tools and maintaining consistency in assessment across varied reading levels (MacDonald, 2007). In under-resourced environments often marked by overcrowded classrooms and limited infrastructure, these issues are particularly acute. Mtshweni (2020) notes the difficulty of conducting individual assessments in such contexts, while Masipa (2014) highlights systemic problems such as insufficient training, inconsistencies in practice, and excessive workload.

By contrast, teachers in better-resourced schools face fewer obstacles. In these schools, it is observed that teachers can integrate formative assessment in daily instruction, use diverse assessment tools (e.g. digital platforms and reading portfolios), do collaborative planning, and adopt simplified record-keeping routines (Roskos and Neuman, 2012). These strategies have demonstrable potential to enhance instructional responsiveness and improve learner outcomes. This reflects Vygotsky's argument that social interaction and scaffolding are central to learning. Formative assessment functions as a mediating cultural tool that enables teachers to provide timely and developmentally appropriate support within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through formative assessment practices, educators can gauge learners' current abilities and design scaffolded support that moves them toward independent mastery. Furthermore, collaborative practices and peer-assisted learning reported in more affluent contexts reflect Vygotsky's emphasis on learning as a socially situated activity.

### **Theme 2: Formative assessment as an instructional strategy supporting early reading development**

This systematic review found that, within the Foundation Phase, formative assessment is conceptualized not merely as an evaluative tool but as a core instructional strategy for supporting early reading development. It promotes responsiveness by enabling teachers to identify reading difficulties early and on an ongoing basis through strategies such as observation, questioning and the analysis of learners' reading performance over time. These insights allow teachers to provide constructive feedback and to adapt instruction in differentiated ways that address learners' diverse needs. These practices allow teachers to make real-time instructional decisions, ensuring that struggling learners receive timely interventions to arrest reading problems (Mkhwanazi et al., 2014). The study further reveals that formative assessment enhances learners' metacognitive awareness. Helping learners reflect on their reading progress supports the development of self-regulation and encourages active engagement with texts. Teachers emphasized that this reflective process enables learners to take responsibility for their learning and to engage more meaningfully with reading tasks.

Kanjee (2020) demonstrates how formative assessment is critical to teaching and learning outcomes. Yan et al. (2021) also affirms its value as a pedagogical approach across subject areas, especially literacy. Roskos and Neuman (2012) go further to describe formative assessment as a "*powerful engine*" for improving reading achievement. Similarly, Shore et al. (2016) confirm that formative assessment strengthens reading comprehension and broader literacy skills. The perceived benefits of formative assessment, include early identification of reading difficulties, immediate constructive feedback, informed and responsive instructional adjustments, targeted interventions aligned with specific learning needs as well as promotion of metacognitive skills and self-regulation.

Although teachers strongly advocate the use of formative assessment, they also acknowledged persistent barriers such as large class sizes and time constraints that hinder its effective implementation. Nevertheless, there was consensus that consistent, well-supported use of formative assessment holds transformative potential in strengthening early reading instruction. This theme aligns closely with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), particularly in its emphasis on scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Formative assessment acts as a dynamic scaffold, providing tailored support that is responsive to learners' current capabilities and guiding them toward higher levels of competence. The feedback loop inherent in formative assessment mirrors the socially mediated learning described by Vygotsky, where teachers, acting as more knowledgeable others, draw on assessment insights to provide targeted support that is gradually withdrawn as learners develop independence. Additionally, the development of metacognitive skills through formative assessment supports the internalization of strategies, another key principle in Vygotsky's theory.

### **Theme 3: Systemic barriers to the implementation of formative assessment**

The findings reveal that although Foundation Phase teachers value formative assessment in reading instruction, a range of systemic and pedagogical barriers impede its effective implementation. These are associated with the specific socio-economic contexts in which teachers operate. In under-resourced schools, especially those in rural or low-income communities, teachers face significant obstacles such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient reading materials, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to professional development (Dlamini, 2022; Mtshweni, 2020; Mafokwane, 2018). Dlamini (2022), Mtshweni (2020), and Mafokwane (2018) have identified several constraints that teachers face when implementing formative assessment. These include inadequate time to conduct sustained and

meaningful assessments and the difficulty of balancing assessment responsibilities with teaching demands, particularly in high-enrolment classrooms. Teachers also face heavy administrative burdens related to documentation and record-keeping, which further limits the effective use of assessment. Another challenge is the lack of age-appropriate and developmentally aligned assessment tools for early readers, as well as inconsistencies in assessment practices across grade levels and schools. In addition, many teachers report insufficient training and low confidence in applying formative assessment strategies. Finally, language barriers and a shortage of reading resources remain critical concerns, especially in multilingual contexts where the language of instruction differs from learners' home languages.

According to Mafokwane (2018), these difficulties are rooted in broader systemic issues such as unequal resource distribution, weak teacher support systems, and insufficient investment in professional learning. Nel (2011) and Kanjee (2020) argue that teacher education programmes often underestimate the complexity of reading assessment, which leaves many teachers underprepared to apply formative assessment effectively in diverse classroom settings.

The study also found that while many teachers in well-resourced schools have successfully integrated formative assessment into reading instruction, those in socio-economically disadvantaged areas tend to struggle. Nkomo (2021) notes that time pressures hinder broader literacy practices such as extensive reading, and Strauss (2024) argues for assessment approaches that are responsive to linguistic diversity and large class sizes. Shore et al. (2016) show that the use of formative assessment in everyday instruction remains a challenge where structural support is insufficient. This theme aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) by underscoring how learning and development are mediated by the tools, interactions, and environments available to learners and educators. According to Vygotsky, the classroom serves as a socio-cultural space where access to resources, collaborative support, and guided participation shape cognitive growth. In under-resourced settings, the absence of necessary tools, both material and pedagogical, limits teachers' ability to scaffold learning within the learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Moreover, the lack of ongoing professional development curtails teachers' capacity to serve as effective "more knowledgeable others," thereby weakening the social foundation essential for formative assessment to function meaningfully.

#### **Theme 4: Professional development and reading programmes**

The study reveals that the effective implementation of formative assessment in Foundation Phase reading instruction is closely linked to the quality, relevance, and accessibility of professional development programmes. This highlights the need for sustained and systematic training that equips teachers with pedagogical content knowledge, assessment literacy, and the confidence to evaluate reading development accurately while adapting instruction to learners' needs. Although formative assessment is widely acknowledged as a transformative tool in literacy instruction, the findings suggest that its full potential remains unrealized due to gaps in teacher training and the lack of continuous support systems. Nel (2011) argues that there is a pressing need to strengthen teacher preparation programmes through rigorous, research-informed curricula that provide candidates with opportunities to develop a broad range of essential skills and knowledge. Emphasis should be placed on integrating reading literacy assessment into teaching practices. These insights affirm that many teachers enter the profession without sufficient exposure to assessment frameworks and without the confidence to apply them effectively in diverse and often under-resourced classroom contexts.

The study further supports Maebana's (2021) critique of current professional development initiatives which are often fragmented and misaligned with the real-world demands of Foundation Phase educators. Two central issues emerged from the data: a) that existing reading-focused professional development programmes are inadequate in equipping teachers with strategies to address classroom reading difficulties, and b) that the instructional models used in such programmes do not reflect the complexities and contexts of the Foundation Phase. These findings suggest a critical need for professional development that is responsive, practically oriented, and informed by the lived experiences and contexts of educators. In alignment with Singh (2009), participants also highlighted that successful reading instruction depends not only on teacher competence but also on the creation of supportive, resource-rich environments that enable sustained literacy engagement. This view is reinforced by Marais and Wessels (2020), who advocate professional development models that are grounded in the actual needs of educators, rather than top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches. They emphasize the importance of designing needs-based professional development that is continuous, participatory, and inclusive of mentoring and peer-collaboration components. From a socio-cultural theoretical perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), the study's findings resonate strongly with the principles of social learning and collaborative knowledge construction. In his conceptualization of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky (1978) posits that learning is most effective when it occurs through guided interaction and scaffolding within socially and culturally situated contexts. In this regard, teachers, like learners, require expert support, peer collaboration, and reflective dialogue to internalize new practices. Professional development, therefore, should not be



limited to occasional workshops but should instead function as a social learning space where educators co-construct knowledge, share challenges, and refine formative assessment strategies in real time.

### Research questions

#### 1) What does existing literature reveal about Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions of the role and implementation of formative assessments in teaching reading?

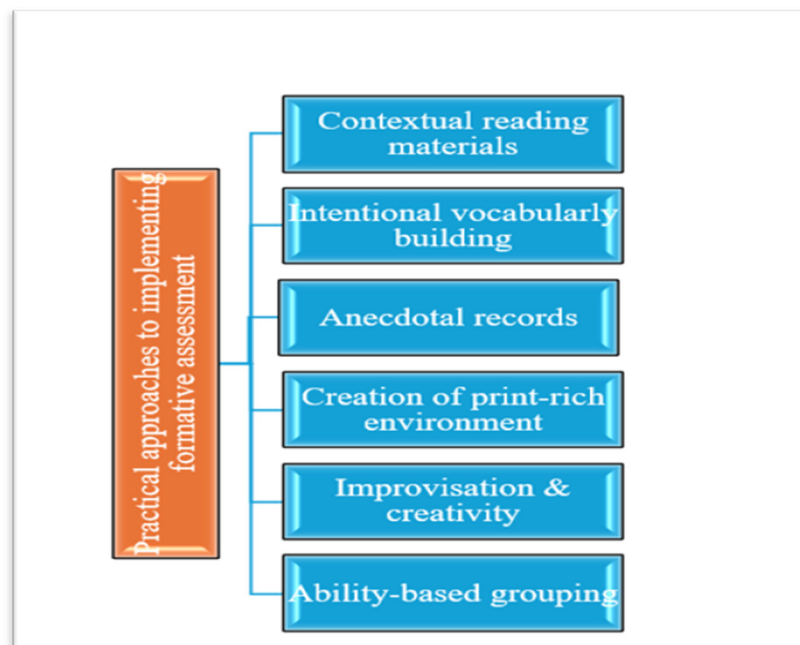
Foundation Phase teachers generally perceive formative assessment as a crucial tool for guiding and enhancing reading development. They value its role in providing immediate feedback, identifying learner needs, and supporting differentiated instruction. From a socio-cultural perspective, these perceptions align with Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of guided interaction and scaffolding in learning, as teachers see assessment not merely as a measurement tool, but as a process that supports learners within their zones of proximal development (ZPD).

#### 2) What challenges and barriers do Foundation Phase teachers encounter when implementing formative assessments in reading instruction?

Teachers encounter multiple barriers that undermine the effective implementation of formative assessment. Among these are overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of appropriate reading materials, limited opportunities for professional training, and inconsistent support from the broader education system. These challenges are especially pronounced in socio-economically disadvantaged schools, where resource constraints and systemic inequalities are most acute. Such obstacles hinder teachers' ability to provide individualized support and impede the overall learning process, limiting learners' progress and engagement. The findings therefore highlight the urgent need for systemic interventions, including targeted resource provision, and sustained professional development.

### Practical approaches to implementing formative assessment in under-resourced Foundation Phase classrooms

Given the difficulties faced by teachers in under-resourced schools, formative assessment strategies need to be practical, cost-effective, and seamlessly integrated into daily reading instruction. Teachers are encouraged to go the extra mile to create teaching and learning spaces that enable literacy development. This involves improvisation and the use of readily available materials, while effectively monitoring learner progress through formative assessment practices (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Practical Examples to Enhance the Implementation of Formative Assessment for More Effective Reading Instruction

These practical strategies can be both effective and appropriate, even in under-resourced settings, as they rely on teachers' creativity and initiative. The approaches are outlined as follows:

- a) Teachers can creatively use any accessible resources to facilitate reading instruction and track learners' progress. This flexibility allows them to adapt to the realities of their specific classroom environments.
- b) Teachers can keep brief, informal notes on learners' reading behaviors and progress during lessons. These records help monitor individual development over time and serve as a valuable resource for reporting to parents.
- c) Teachers can create word walls and reading corners using recycled or donated materials. These spaces expose learners to printed text and promote the love of reading, even in resource-limited settings.
- d) Grouping learners according to their reading abilities allows teachers to tailor activities and provide more focused support. This approach creates opportunities for customized, individual learning.
- e) Teachers can create word lists to help learners acquire new vocabulary before engaging in story reading. This preparation improves comprehension and enhances language development.
- f) Using specially developed short reading passages that include relevant images linked to sounds taught in class can improve both learning and comprehension. These materials should be context-based and reflect learners' everyday experiences.

These practices align with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, particularly the emphasis on social interaction and scaffolding. They empower teachers to support learner development within their zones of proximal development, even when facing systemic constraints.

## 5. Limitations of the Study

This systematic review on Foundation Phase teachers' perceptions of implementing formative assessment in reading instruction has several limitations. Firstly, the scope of the literature may have been restricted to specific regions and indexed journals, potentially excluding studies from less accessible sources. Secondly, the review focused exclusively on teachers' perceptions, thereby overlooking learners' experiences and classroom practices. Thirdly, the inclusion of only English-language studies from selected databases such as ERIC, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Sabinet African Journals may have excluded relevant local research, unpublished theses, or grey literature. Fourthly, most of the reviewed studies were situated within specific educational contexts, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to broader applications of formative assessment. Lastly, while teachers' perceptions provide valuable insights, limited attention was given to how formative assessment directly influences learner outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding its broader educational impact.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was anchored by two guiding research questions, a) how do Foundation Phase teachers perceive the role and implementation of formative assessments in teaching reading? and b) what challenges and barriers do teachers encounter when implementing formative assessments in reading instruction? These questions provided the framework through which the researchers identified the following key themes, a) teachers' awareness of formative assessment principles in early reading, b) formative assessment as a teaching strategy to support reading development, and c) the contextual as well as systemic barriers that hinder its implementation. The findings reveal that Foundation Phase teachers view formative assessment as a valuable tool for improving reading instruction. They recognize its importance in providing immediate feedback, identifying learners' needs, and tailoring instruction to accommodate diverse learning abilities. In practice, however, teachers' ability to use formative assessment effectively is limited by enduring challenges. Overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of appropriate reading materials, limited professional development opportunities, and inconsistent institutional support make it difficult for teachers to apply formative strategies consistently. These challenges are particularly severe in under-resourced schools, where socio-economic inequalities further restrict both teaching and learning opportunities. The study's findings resonate with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which highlights the importance of social context, mediated tools, and guided support in learning. This theoretical lens reinforces the understanding that while formative assessment can strengthen early literacy, its effectiveness depends on supportive conditions both inside and outside the classroom.

The study highlights that formative assessment has the potential to transform how reading is taught and how learners engage with literacy. However, realizing this potential requires more than teacher awareness. It demands systemic change. Professional development programmes must equip teachers with the skills and confidence to apply formative assessment effectively. Education policies need to provide stronger and more consistent support, while investments in classroom resources remain essential. Further research is crucial to move beyond theory and explore practical,

context-sensitive solutions for teachers in diverse South African classrooms. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies, in particular, could provide deeper insights into how formative assessment can be adapted, scaled, and sustained. Without such evidence-driven strategies, the promise of formative assessment to improve reading outcomes for all learners will remain largely unrealized.

## 7. Recommendations

- Education departments should provide continuous, needs-based training that equips teachers with practical, context-relevant strategies.
- Schools, especially those in low-income areas, should be prioritized for infrastructure support, reading materials, and digital tools.
- Clear guidelines on formative assessment practices, aligned with curriculum goals and that are multilingually inclusive should be developed and communicated to Foundation Phase teachers.
- Teacher mentoring programmes and professional learning communities that promote peer learning and reflective practices should be established.

## 8. Future Avenues and the Need for Empirical Studies

While the current findings are valuable, further empirical research is required to deepen understanding of the actual classroom practices and learner outcomes associated with formative assessment. Future studies should:

- investigate how formative assessment is implemented in diverse classroom settings across rural and urban contexts.
- explore the direct impact of formative assessment on reading achievement using classroom observations and learner performance data.
- examine how socio-cultural dynamics, such as language diversity and parental literacy levels, influence assessment practices and learner progress.
- Empirical studies will not only validate and expand upon the findings of the current study but will also provide evidence-based recommendations that can guide policy reform and teacher education practices aimed at improving literacy outcomes in the Foundation Phase.

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