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Unearthing Literacy Proficiency Levels among Young Zambian Language Learners: A Case of Some Selected Primary Schools in Nkeyema District

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Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to investigate indicators of low literacy proficiency levels among young language learners in Nkeyema District- Zambia. Also, the study sought to investigate methods used by teachers in teaching and assessing literacy skills in selected schools. The study used both descriptive and exploratory research designs during investigation. Importantly, Random sampling techniques such as Systematic and cluster were used to select required population where 6 Primary schools were selected from six Zones as well as 06 Head teachers, 06 Senior teachers, 12 class teachers and 80 learners. Further, instruments used to collect data were questionnaires; one to one guided interview; Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and learner's assessment items. This study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods in analyzing data collected using tables, graphs and pie- charts. Data was later analyzed manually in some cases and a combination of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and MS Excel. What is more, the study findings revealed that there is less attention to language underpinnings by teachers on important literacy skills such as: alphabetic knowledge; decoding; phonemic awareness, reading comprehension and Fluency. Consequently, the study found out that most teachers are incompetent in Literacy teaching and assessment methodology. Findings also reviewed that Grade 4 and 5 learners Literacy performance in fluency, reading comprehension and writing were low. Conversely, the study discovered that most schools were over- enrolled as compared to teaching staff; there is less School – community partnership in literacy activities; schools not having school libraries; absence and inadequate teaching and learning materials. The study recommended that the Ministry of Education through teacher Education Department should intensify on training of Inservice teachers on literacy teaching and assessment methodology; Standards officers and school administrators should ensure that teachers' supervision and monitoring are done intensively so that literacy teaching procedures are followed as well as correct use of Literacy assessment designs and remediation done to challenged learners.*

Keywords: *Literacy, Proficiency levels, language, young learner, assessment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Various stakeholders and the general public have concerns on undesirable literacy levels among young Zambian language learners. The said has an impact on both an individual and the nation at large. On top of this, teachers have been trained and various pedagogical approaches have been designed so as to address mentioned challenge but no positive results seen in sampled schools of Nkeyema District – Western Province. Conversely, Literacy proficiency results for young learners are not pleasing in area of study and this could be seen from timely assessment results from Standardized National Literacy Assessments initiated by USAID through Let's read project and other National Assessments conducted. Unfortunately, most young learners are not performing well in literacy skills like fluency, reading comprehension, Vocabulary and Writing. This prompted, the researcher to undertake a study focusing on literacy teaching and assessment methods and indicators towards low literacy proficiency levels among young learners. Becoming literate means being able to think independently, being able to make sense of what one sees, hears and being able to share one's ideas, thoughts or feelings through spoken, pictorial, written or other forms of language (Jayaram, 2016). Literacy is extended to reflect linguistic and cultural diversity as well as the multiplicity of communication channels through which people may choose to make and transmit meaning (Fellows & Oakley, 2014). UNESCO (2006) as reflected in Neema (2015), defined literacy as "Basic learning needs to be addressed throughout life, enabling individuals to develop the knowledge, skills necessary to fully participate in society". Also, literacy is a human right, a tool of personal empowerment and a means for social and human development.

Zambia has been grappling with significant literacy problems for a long time, with the majority of its children are not performing as well as their counterparts on cross-national literacy comparisons. Due to poor reading and writing abilities, many students fail to cope with the demands of school and drop out of school. Deciding on an appropriate language policy to improve literacy achievement has been a sticky point. Shortly after independence, the mother tongue-based instruction policy was replaced by a Straight-for-English Zambia Primary Course policy, which seems to have worsened literacy achievement among school children. Many calls were made to replace the problematic English policy, but were overlooked because English was viewed as a means to high paying white collar jobs. However, when the situation became unattainable, the Primary Reading Program (PRP) was implemented. The PRP involved teaching initial literacy skills in the learner's mother- tongue before introducing English language instruction at second grade. Unfortunately, although it scored some successes in the local languages, when English language components were introduced many children faltered mainly because teachers were not properly oriented and methods used did not suit the opacity of the English orthography. It was envisaged that increasing the mother tongue teaching period from one to 3 years would help to improve English literacy achievement in later stages. Therefore, the Primary Literacy Program (PLP) replaced the PRP. In the PLP, mother-tongue instructions increased to 3 years, and children are introduced to English language literacy at fourth grade. There have been significant successes with the PLP, although more still needs to be done. The major drawback is failure to acknowledge that learning to read the English orthography requires more synthetic phonics-based instructions. Additionally, Zambia needs to work on its early intervention and remediation facilities, especially the development of culturally- responsive assessment tool (Kaani & Joshi, 2023)

Additionally, in 2014 Zambia adopted and implemented the Primary Literacy Programme (PLP). In the mentioned programme, the grade one Literacy course is guided by the five key competencies (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension that emphasizes beginning teaching of the letter sounds in familiar language, blending sounds into syllables and forming words (Chileshe et al, 2018). The methodology involves introducing letter sounds scoped and sequenced from simple to complex in each familiar language. The PLP replaced the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) an initiative was introduced in 1999 to improve literacy levels among Zambian school children. As Mwansa (2017) postulated, PRP proved to be ineffective in developing reading fluency in Zambian languages because the transition to English was too abrupt, just after a year, Chileshe et al (2018) stated that replacing PRP by PLP, therefore meant to facilitate acquisition of literacy skills, which have been seen to be falling among primary school going children even after introduction of PRP. However, the importance of Literacy in early childhood cannot be ignored because it is the foundation for learning and academic achievement later in a person's life (Mkandawire, 2015).

Also, evidence from international assessments from student's literacy are very low among Zambian children in comparison to their counter parts (Kanyika & Kelly, 2000, Stemler et al, 2009) as cited in Kaani & Joshi 2013). Results from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGME); Nielsen, 2014 and the Programme for International Students Assessment for Assessment for International Students Assessment for Development (PISA-D); Examinations Council of Zambia and OECD, 2019 showed that " Zambia still lagged behind many countries in terms of literacy achievement". Findings of the PISAD assessment revealed that the mentioned country had a high share of students performing below the baseline level of proficiency in all subjects. (Kaani & Joshi, 2023). Likewise, Mmasa & Anney, 2016), disclosed that " poor literacy and numeracy teaching practices is a common problem that affects primary education system in Tanzania and else where in the world in particular developing countries. Further, it was mentioned that " as a result of ineffective literacy teaching practice around the globe, enormous population are still illiterate despite being in schools and support from international community to address the problem. For example, recent UNESCO data indicated that 24 % of all illiterate adults lived in Sub- Sahara Africa, 12 % in East Asia and the Pacific (UNESCO, 2013).

In relation to the Ministry of Education stipulated minimum level reading proficiency, approximately four percent of Grade 2 learners met the mentioned bench mark at Midline. This represents a decrease from the baseline assessment which found that about eight percent of students reached the minimum level reading proficiency in non- word reading, reading fluency and comprehension. No student reached the proficient reader (fluent reader) bench mark, the said reduction was for all languages of instruction in Zambia assessed, all of which show reduction in the percentage of learners achieving the MOE bench marks at Midline (MIDLINE EGRA Summary Notes, 2022). There are major challenges in learning outcomes in Zambia, despite a high primary school completion rate of 86% (MOE, 2020). In 2011, Grade 6 learners in all nine Zambian provinces scored below the international means for reading and math according to the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality study (SACMEQ III, 2010).

The EGRA Baseline study in 2018 showed that only 10.2% of learners assessed in the five provinces (Eastern, Southern, Muchinga, Western and North-Western) read fluently and comprehended grade level text (EGRA Baseline report, 2018). The Monitoring Impact on Learning Outcomes (MILO) study reported that only 1.8% of learners assessed in early primary in 2016 and 2.3% in 2021 attained the minimum proficiency level in reading (UNESCO, 2022). Over the years, the USG, through various projects, has provided support to the Government of Zambia to help improve reading outcomes, and one such project is the USAID Let's Read.

A. Statement of Problem

Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broad cast media and digital media (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Despite this fact, most pupils in area of study have low literacy proficiency levels especially in fluency; writing and reading comprehension. The mentioned is as a result of teachers' incompetency in teaching and assessment of literacy. Conversely, Nkeyema District is not performing well in mentioned literacy proficiency skills as established from National Literacy Standardized Assessment results tracking reports (USAID, 2023). The above prompted the researcher to carry out an investigation on this..

B. Purpose of the study

The purpose of study was to establish the causes of low literacy proficiency levels among young language learners as well as methods used by teachers in teaching and assessment of literacy skills in selected Primary Schools in Nkeyema District, Western Province.

C. Research Objectives

- 1) To unearth factors surrounding literacy proficiency levels among young language learners in Nkeyema District.
- 2) To establish methods used by language teachers in teaching and assessment of literacy skills among young learners in Nkeyema District.
- 3) To ascertain interventions to improve literacy levels among young learners in Nkeyema District.

D. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by four Literacy theories: Vygotsky Cognitive Development theory (1978); Maturationist theory led by Arnold Gesell in the early twentieth century; Emergent Literacy Theory by Marie clay and Whole language Theory. To share more about the mentioned, Vygotsky Cognitive Development theory (1978) stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition and the above theory posted that " Learning is necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally, organized, specifically human psychological function". According to the above scholar, much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with skilled tutor. The tutor may model behavior and provide verbal instructions provided by the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (often the parent or teacher), then internalizes the information using it to guide or regulate their own performance. (Grey, J, Dube, G, 2016). In relation to this, a contemporary educational application of Vygotsky's theories is reciprocal teaching used to improve students' ability to learn from text. In this method, teachers and students collaborate in learning and practicing four key skills: summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting. Alternatively, this is also relevant to instructional concepts such as " scaffolding and apprenticeship in which a teacher or more advanced peer helps to structure or arrange a task so that a novice can work on it successfully.

Additionally, the Maturationist Theory led by Arnold Gesell in the Early twentieth century claimed that " children learn how to read when they have acquired all of the necessary cognitive skills. Under this assumption, cognitive maturity supersedes physical maturity and that parents as well as educators do much in terms of reading readiness to speed the process up for the child. In fact, the main characteristic of Maturationist theory is that a child's reading readiness can be evaluated through a series of tests. It is understood that all children develop through a similar predictable sequence of events at a pace determined by internal and external factors. Internal factors include genetics, learning styles and personality while external factors include living situation, parenting styles, cultural backgrounds and social experiences.

What is more, Clay's research showed that children do not go through a set sequence of skills prior to learning how to read and that reading readiness was an accurate term. Importantly her findings demonstrated that children entered literacy through the simultaneous development of reading, writing and speaking skills. The back bone of emergent literacy is an active engagement between adults and children in activities that foster literacy skills.

For example, children exposed to reading and writing at an early age use those experiences to become literate themselves. They learn the conventions of different forms of literacy and then independently apply those skills to reading and writing (Martin & Steward, 2023).

Moreover, the Whole Language Theory posits that the development of a fluent reader is not merely about mastering phonetic cues or decoding skills. Instead, it underlines the importance of the reader's interaction with the text and the subsequent process of constructing meaning. This theory promotes the idea of a strategic reader who actively engages with the text, drawing on their existing knowledge to comprehend and interpret the information presented. Also, this theory perceives reading as an integrative process that connects the reader, the text and context and it emphasizes the importance of comprehension and meaning making in reading.

E. Significance of Study

It is anticipated that the study will contribute to the knowledge gap among various stakeholders interested in diagnosing literacy levels among young language learners in Zambia as well as scientific and post methods used in teaching and assessment of literacy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Causes of low Literacy Levels Among Young Language Learners

There are various factors leading to low literacy proficiency levels among young language learners which include : the shortage of teachers especially qualified teachers , over- crowded classrooms, lack of regular teacher training and relying on note memorization in classroom can hamper critical learning and sustainable development goals for education aims for children everywhere to be able to complete free, equitable primary education, new qualified teachers are needed, investing in the teaching skills of current teachers (Soko, 2018). According to the Hong Kong Education Bureau special education research Centre (2013) teachers should be aware of firstly the characteristics of learners with learning difficulties including : Poor memory; short attention span and are easily distracted by other things; relatively poor comprehensive power; lack of self- confidence and relatively low self – expectation; weak in problem solving; fail to grasp information effectively and mix things up easily; have difficulty in understanding new concepts; fail to transfer knowledge to the related learning areas appropriately; need more time to complete assignments or task.

On one hand, Shimanga (2013), mentioned that ‘many empirical researches and evidence-based studies have shown that there are certain prerequisites in the teaching of reading and writing. Methods which focus on these prerequisites: Phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluently and comprehension may succeed in teaching reading. Research also states that “ that some pupils reading difficulty may be a result of a mixture of phonological processing, visual and auditory system failure or due to neurological and genetic reasons. (Fletcher, etal 2010, as cited in Shimanga, 2013). Also, Chapman & Prochnow (2000) as cited in Shimanga (2013), stated that “ some children struggle to read due to lack of motivation in learning to read. Again, three motivational aspects for reading by learners were cited as: developing self-confidence towards reading; realizing both their strengths and weaknesses and appreciating the benefits or rewards of reading. Importantly, children that come from well to do families or homes where both or one of the parents has a stable income, tend to do fairly well at school with a lot of self- esteem and concentration levels compared to those who come from poor and starved families (Shimanga, 2013).

In like manner, Hamilton, (2012), as cited in Shimanga (2013), highlighted that “ reading difficulty can be attributed to a number of causes, major among them is reading disability but also including environmental factors such as insufficient reading instruction or lack of exposure to reading materials, impairments such as cognitive, language or hearing; terminal illness and psychological problems

Further, Mutolwa (2019), found out that “ lecturers teaching literacy and language in colleges of education were not fully prepared to prepare effective and practical teachers of reading or literacy and language education.”. The study also revealed that lecturers were finding difficulties in implementing teacher education programmes because they didn't understand the content of the 2014 revised policy. Still however, the above scholar mentioned that outdated instructional methods and inadequate teacher education are among the contributing reasons for poor learner performance in Zambia. Alternatively, low literacy levels in primary school can be solved by scaffolding learning through instruction in local languages (NLF, 2013). The said, together with a well – defined literacy teaching Programme will improve results. Unfortunately, most teachers are incompetent in literacy teaching methodology which can have a negative impact on children's literacy development. In point of fact, the rationale for teaching in a local language is rooted in scientific research which support developing a learner's language abilities, vocabulary, intrinsic knowledge of grammar rules and use of his or her language, in order to develop reading and writing skills.

Further, in 2014, Zambia adopted and implemented the Primary Literacy Programme (PLP) and the Grade 1 literacy course, is guided by the phonics-based approach with the five key competencies (Phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension) that emphasizes beginning teaching of letter sounds in familiar language, blending sounds into syllables and forming words (Chileshe, et al, 2018). The said methodology involves introducing letter sounds scoped and sequenced from simple to complex in familiar language. The PLP replaced the Primary Reading Programme (PRP), an initiative that was introduced in 1999 to improve literacy levels among Zambian school children. As Mwansa (2017) postulated, PRP proved to be ineffective in developing reading fluency in Zambian languages because the transition to English was too abrupt. However, just after a year, Chileshe, et al, (2018), stated that “ replacing PRP by PLP therefore meant to facilitate acquisition of literacy skills, which have been seen to be falling among primary school going even after introduction of PRP. Correspondingly, Mkandawire, (2015) alluded that “ the importance of literacy in early childhood cannot be ignored because it is the foundation for learning and academic achievement later in a person’s life.

On the other hand, regarding literacy teaching methodology, Zambia is described to have a mixture of training teachers and orientation. This can be seen from various curriculum changes of which teachers in government Primary schools have not been subjected to uniform training. For example, before the introduction of the Primary Reading Programme (PRP) in the late 1990s, the Zambian Government through the Ministry of Education had adapted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach under the Zambia Basic Education Course (ZBEC) and the emphasis of this approach was on the use of language for communication rather than on its form (Mubanga, 2015). The above scholar mentioned that “ before the ZBEC was introduced, early literacy was taught through another approach called the Audio- Lingual approach under the Zambia Primary Course (ZPC)”. Unlike the CLT, the Audio – Lingual approach was characterized by its emphasis on language form rather than the function and use of language. Again, this scholar, stated that “ the quality of instructions could be uneven and would turn out to be negative as the shift from one teaching methodology to another may not be automatic, language of instruction policy issues, inconsistencies in teacher training programmes and methodologies have all a bearing effect on what remains for the children in academic skill acquisition. With the above background, teachers’ literacy teaching methodology has been compromised and not consistent because of a lot of transformation of National Curriculum and has some negative impact on learners’ literacy development if not well addressed. The identified gap of knowledge needs more research.

Most pupils have poor literacy skills as a result of teachers’ incompetency and the poor teaching methodology they use to teach reading in class. Further, it has been highlighted that the most significant factor in student’s learning is the quality of the teacher (Mohammed & Ofori, 2018). In relation to this, Botha et al (2008) as cited in Mohammed & Ofori (2018), mentioned that one of the factors resulting in pupils poor reading, learning and achievement are the teachers because most of them are not trained to teach basic reading. Further, it was pointed out that many teachers have under- developed understanding of teaching literacy, reading and writing. As a result, they do not know how to teach reading to pupils and they do not know how to stimulate pupils’ reading both inside and outside the classroom. Also, Lucas (2011) as quoted in Mohammed et al (2018) lamented that “ most pupils have poor literacy skills as a result of teachers’ incompetency and the poor teaching methodology they use to teach reading in class. In like manner, Linder (2008), as cited in (Mohammed & Ofori, 2018) disclosed that “ most pupils have low reading abilities as a result of primary school teachers’ difficulties in moving beginning readers toward immediate reading skills, pupils’ lack of exposure to reading strategies and the prevailing attitude among teachers towards reading strategies and the prevailing attitude among teachers towards reading strategies. Similarly, a study conducted in Kenya by Matthew, Elizabeth & Margret (2016), reviewed that “ a complexity of contextual factors, including poverty, health, late enrollment and limited access to print contribute to delayed reading acquisition.

Rany (2013), also noted that pupils may have low reading ability due to school heads not availing the necessary course books for practice reading, lack of appropriate curriculum to help improve pupils reading abilities and classroom environments that are crowded and noisy for an appropriate teaching pedagogy to be identified. Apart from learners’ ability to critique, assimilate and challenge texts, critical reading practices are instrumental in real-life situations. Janks (2010:21 as quoted in Madoda & Rautenbach, 2020.) approached the reading process from three perspectives: (1) decoding, (2) reading with the text and (3) reading against the text. And the said scholar explained that ‘decoding’ signifies linguistic knowledge and the proficiency of the written word. ‘Reading with the text’ denotes interpreting the written word by attaching one’s own meaning, ideas and values to the text. ‘Reading against the text’ refers to the critiquing of the text that provides a deeper insight into the word, by combining individual and social knowledge and experiences with the possibility of promoting, challenging or disregarding the ideological effects of the text. Ultimately, it is this critical engagement with the text that constitutes learners’ critical reading practices, which are essential life tools for academic success and a journey of lifelong learning (Madoda & Rautenbach, 2020).

Subsequently, the consequences of low literacy are many. They negatively affect individuals in their daily lives and can jeopardize their future (Yardaman, 2023). Low literacy in individuals stems from different, generally inter related causes which, together, create a series of often insurmountable barriers for those concerned. Some of the causes are: undiagnosed learning disabilities, hearing or vision loss, lack of a role model (i.e. no one in the family or house hold stresses reading or education). In the same way, children living in poverty are at risk of slow language development. Research shows that the linguistic richness of an early childhood environment not only improves linguistic ability in child hood but has a permanent effect in that language remains above the norm throughout life (Levitas, 2022). For example, in America, the early literacy of immigrant children tends to be influenced by their lack of English Language skills and the fact that English may not be spoken in the home. (Richard & SNOW, 2012). On top of this, the literacy skills of black children are more likely to be affected by a lack of cognitively stimulating activities in the home or of other parenting practices that foster literacy and knowledge.

Consequently, Hayati & Osman (2022), pointed out that “ students with reading difficulties generally have some problems such as having short memory, not being able to concentrate their attention, being emotionally weak, reading without thinking, lack of eye – motor coordination, reading the words by turning them back and having problems to divide the plot into stages.” Conversely, the inability of students to read may stem from various causes, whether originating from the students themselves, such as lack of interest, teachers who are not proficient in language instruction, inappropriate teaching methods not aligned with students interests or parents who do not prioritize promoting reading (Thong-art, 2014). To add further on this, the mentioned may be influenced by cultural differences as some children belong to families of migrant laborers who constantly relocate for work within Thailand, developmental delays and a lack of motivation for learning (Anuruthwong, 2013). To react on this, teachers who are not proficient on literacy teaching methodology will negatively impact young language learner’s literacy development. Importantly, basic skills in literacy are prerequisites for academic learning, economic development and stability through the ability to effectively participate in the labour market, meaningful participation in society, life long learning, sustainable development, individual well-being and even civilization (DeVos& Merwe, 2014)).

However, early reading difficulties can translate for some students into delayed vocabulary growth, poor comprehension and a lack of motivation to learn in the school setting even up to the later grades (Yewande & Joan ,2017). Similarly, Stanovich, 1986 as reflected in Yewande & Joan, (2017) mentioned that “ motivational spinoffs of reading failure can lead to increasing global performance deficits.” Likewise, Spanish studies on reading disabilities indicated that phonological skills, as assessed by the testing of phonemic awareness or nonsense word decoding, are related to reading and spelling acquisition. Further, findings have also indicated that pure phonological deficits are less manifested in the Spanish language since Spanish grapheme-phoneme correspondence is regular (Yewande& Joan, 2017).

B. Literacy Teaching and Assessment Methods used by Teachers

With reference to literacy teaching in South Asian countries, much less is known about children ‘s language proficiencies when they join school at age 5 to 6. While languages seem to co – exist in a multilingual setting in these countries, there are clear hierarchies between languages and most non- dominant languages are not considered adequate for use in the domain of school education in any formal manner (UNICEF, 2019). To consolidate on this, literacy includes the capability to read with understanding, write to express one’s thoughts and feeling and apply this capability to do day to day work. It also, includes appreciating, examining and questioning a given text- be it oral or written (Luke & Freebody, 1999 as cited from UNICEF, 2019). Actually, teaching of language and literacy should be a balance of both lower order skills focused work (phonological awareness, decoding, writing letters and words correctly; and High – order, meaning – based work (Oral language development, including listening comprehension, conversation, reading, engaging with books, drawing and creative writing), What is more, CECED & CARE, 2016, disclosed that ,” it is widely accepted that the balanced and comprehensive approach is the best model for early literacy instruction”. While children are learning to decode, they should continue to engage with books, listen and respond to interactive reading aloud of story books and then write or draw in response to the text being read to them. Also, teaching of symbols (letters and vowel diacritics) can be organized in a clustered manner so that children can begin to read and write simple words and meaningful sentences soon after learning a few symbols instead of waiting to learn all symbols (which by themselves do not carry meaning) first. In fact, language and literacy development should include development of thinking and reasoning skills. of endeavor (USAID, 2015). In relation to this, diagnostic achievement tests are frequently referred to as norm referenced because their scores are compared to scores of students from a norm sample. A norm sample is a group of individuals who are administered the same test items in the same way (i.e. using standardized procedures). Comparing students’ scores to a norm sample helps identify strengths and needs (Kristen, 2016).

Moreover, standardized diagnostic assessments have high reliability and validity and are typically commercial products. The first step toward teaching literacy is conducting an assessment and as a teacher, starting with a literacy assessment will help determine the type of tools needed to support each individual student's literacy processing system (Rodger, 2019). The above-mentioned assessments provide teachers with a more in-depth analysis of a student's learning weaknesses and strengths. They are often given to specific students in order to gather more comprehensive information (Angela, et al 2023). For example, curriculum-based measurements, which are also criterion referenced are used to determine a student's knowledge level of a specific standard. Likewise, diagnostic assessment is the use of a tool such as a test to determine the knowledge and skill level of a student prior to a lesson and the said assessment establishes a baseline to compare what a student knows prior to a lesson. Developing teachers' assessment ability to assess learners for fostering their learning, including educational tradition and assessment culture, needs better comprehension of the complexity of and dynamic interactions among curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, student and teacher learning needs and the contexts of learning and teaching (Xu & Brown, 2016).

To develop teachers' assessment literacy, that is the knowledge assessors need to possess for accomplishing the actions that are relevant to assessment (Inbar- Lourleg, 2017 as quoted in Rezagah, 2022), teachers understanding of assessment and its interrelation with other key factors including the wider policy context and the social, cultural and professional, contexts is required (Livingston & Hutchinson, 2016). The above scholars introduced a framework conceptualizing assessment literacy, consisting of six components, including knowledge base, teacher conception of assessment, institutional and socio- cultural contexts, teacher assessment literacy in practice, teacher learning and teacher identity (re) construction as assessors. There are some features that qualify assessment literate teachers as highlighted by Stiggins (1991) and Kob (2011) as appeared in (Rezagah, 2022), which are as to ; start assessment with clear purposes ; comprehend the significance of assessing various types of interrelated achievement targets; adapt appropriate methods for assessing different achievement goals ;sample and collect the achievement of the students according to representative performance task and to avoid assessment bias as well as misrepresentation that emerge from technical and practical problems.

Being assessment literate means " having the capacity to ask and answer critical questions about the purpose for assessment, about the fitness of the tool being used, about testing conditions and about what is going to happen based on the results" (Inbar, 2008) as quoted in Rezagah (2022). To elaborate more on this, assessment literacy depends upon teachers' being able to use their assessment – related knowledge effectively in their contexts Kahl et al. (2012) as quoted in Serpil & Derin (2020), described assessment literacy as enclosing some abilities to select and build different aims such as accountability, instructional programme evaluation student growth monitoring and or promotion and diagnosis of specific students' needs. Additionally, Liosas (2013), as reflected in Serpil & Derin (2020), claimed that " it gives a common framework for the teachers to improve the quality of education for all students by developing rigorous standards and aligning instruction and assessment." Assessing a language is multidimensional job for language teachers since it requires assessing four main basic skills of English: listening, speaking, reading, writing. Each skill has different assessment tools, approaches and techniques in an educational setting. So, it is the teacher's job to decide when and how to use those tools and techniques (Serpil & Derin, 2020). Consequently, Stiggins (2001), as cited in Serpil & Derin (2020), stated that " there are numbers of teachers and administrators who have low level of assessment literacy and that level of literacy cause students to be assessed inaccurately and avoid them to show their full potential.

In Zambia there are kinds of assessments used to assess learners' performance and discussed below are some of those types. The SBA standards are embedded in the school curriculum, and assessment procedures and expected outcomes of instructions are outlined in the ZECF (2013). SBA has two components, namely, classroom assessment and school-based continuous assessment (SBCA). There are five types of classroom SBA defined by the frequency with which it is administered, i.e., daily, weekly, monthly, end-of-the-term assessments, and the conventional school homework (MOE, 2015). Daily and weekly assessments are formative and informal group administered diagnostic tests used to inform lesson planning, whereas monthly and end-of-term assessments are formal and summative in nature. Unlike daily, weekly, and end-of-term tests, monthly assessments are individually administered, but all of these assessments are meant to generate individual students' proficiency standards and performance level descriptors to determine literacy aptitudes and school placement, develop individual remedial interventions, and establish the efficacy of remedial program (Kaani & Joshi, 2023).

High stakes assessments are managed by the examination council of Zambia (ECZ), a quasi-government organization whose functions are to set and conduct nationwide assessments and issue certification to deserving candidates at grades 7, 9, and 12. High stakes assessments are the most important determinant of school success in Zambia. Due to the scarcity of school places in higher grades, only those who meet a given criterion on high stakes examinations are guaranteed places and proceed to the next grade level. The ECZ also conducts an annual Grade 5 national assessment (G5NA) in reading and mathematics to ascertain the quality of

learning before subjecting children to first high stakes testing 2 years later. Unfortunately, Kaani & Joshi (2023) mentioned that “these tests focus more on assessing English language skills, as the regiolect languages are by this stage relegated to the status of school subjects, and not necessarily literacy competence.” Due to a lack of reliable tests with appropriate diagnostic norms to refer to, assessment and identification of literacy problems, especially specific learning disabilities, are more generic in nature. Hence, instead of giving children with specific disabilities meaningful labels of specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or dysgraphia to facilitate appropriate interventions, assessors often resort to generic and often meaningless labels such as reading difficulties for fear of misdiagnosis and subsequent litigation (Kaani & Joshi, 2023). To consolidate on the above, most teachers are incompetent in assessment methods such as diagnostic and norm – referenced assessments and this makes it difficult to give special learning attention to learners of various disabilities. On one hand, Matafwali & Serpell (2014) stated that “the major drawback to Zambia’s quest to improve literacy achievement, especially children with specific learning disabilities, is the lack of facilities equipped with culturally an appropriate diagnostic apparatus.”

C. Understanding Literacy and Literacy Proficiency Levels

Further, it has been acknowledged by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) that literacy levels in South African primary schools are low and that remedial action or interventions targeting literacy were required (Department of Basic Education 2015). Still however, several curriculum models (Outcome Based Education), the Revised National Curriculum statement (RNCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) were implemented at different stages after 1994 to improve teaching and learning (Govende & Anna, 2020). Curriculum transformations resulted in the development of national assessment tools, such as systematic evaluation and the Annual National Assessment (ANA) and participation in international literacy assessments such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), the Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) and the Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRIS). The above studies revealed that South African learners demonstrated unacceptably low levels of competencies in the foundational skills of literacy (Govende & Anna, 2020). Overall, Systematic Evaluation (SE) revealed extremely low levels of reading and writing ability across the country, and highlighted that large numbers of South African children were unable to read (Department of Education 2008, as cited in Govender & Hugo, 2020). Further, the said assessment of Primary school learner’s literacy achievement at the end of the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) and at the end of the Intermediate Phase (Grade 6). SACMEQ studies showed clearly that some Grade 6 learners were illiterate. The said implied that these learners had not developed basic reading (Govender & Hugo, 2020). Approximately, 215000 children from 40 countries and 45 education systems participated in PIRLS 2006, and about 30 000 Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners from 441 South African schools were tested in the 11 official languages of the country (Howie, etal 2008, as cited in Govender, 2020). Consequently, South African learners attained the lowest scores, with nearly 80 % unable to reach the low International Benchmark, implying that they had not achieved basic reading skills (Venter & Howie, 2008, as cited in Govender & Hugo, 2020).

Alternatively, the South African Grades 4 and 5 learners’ average scores were 253 and 302, respectively. Both these scores were substantially lower than the PIRLS Scale average of 500 and the most shocking results were those of the Grade 5 learners who scored significantly lower than the Grade 4 learners from the other participating countries. As a matter of fact, approximately 325 000 learners from 50 countries participated in the PIRLS Literacy and in South Africa, about 20 000 Gradees4 and 5 learners from more than 400 schools were tested in the 11 official languages using pre- PIRLS (Howie etal, 2017).

Moreover, most learners in South African classrooms cannot read according to the grade level. This has been linked to what is occurring in the classroom. Several studies have shown that classroom pedagogies are most likely to influence student learning achievement (Martha, 2022). In a qualitative study involving 582 educationists and learners, Mmasa and Anney (2016) examined Grade 2 and 3 learners’ mastery of literacy skills in Kiswahili. Findings reviewed serious literacy problems in the way teachers teach literacy in public primary schools, where most teachers lacked adequate skills. The above was reflected in learner performance, which showed that 64 % of Grade 2 and 45 % of Grade 3 learners could not read, write or do simple numeracy tasks. On top of this, the teacher’s ability to instruct a particular subject plays an important role in promoting teaching and learning. As a matter of fact, children must receive quality education to prepare them to cope with reading to learn as they proceed to higher grades. However, several pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), curriculum knowledge, limited opportunities for writing and lost learning time have been identified as barriers to effective teaching of early reading. The highlighted are some of major contributing factors to low literacy levels as well as poor literacy diagnostic methods used to assess young language learners.

Also, Save the Children conducted an Early Grade Reading Assessment in Somalia in 2020 and findings of study were that “the highest scores were observed in the vocabulary knowledge Subtask (94.6%) while the lowest scores, in the letter sound fluency. The average score for the letter sounds per minute (clspm).

Average scores in other EGRA measures were as follows: phonemic segmentation, 38.7%, familiar word fluency, 25.5 correct words per minute (cwpm), non – word decoding fluency, 21.6 correct non – words per minute, oral reading fluency, 32 cwpm and reading comprehension, 40.5 % correct number of questions.” Subsequently, in 2012, the USAID / Zambia Read to succeed (RTS) project conducted a baseline assessment of 4000 grades 2 and 3 pupils in selected districts across six provinces. Similar to the 2011 EGRA results, the RTS project found that 89 % of grade 2 pupils and 80 % of grade 3 pupils were unable to correctly read a single word on the ORF passage (Rhodwell, 2013). Concurrent with RTS is the Time to Learn (TTL) project, which is designed to provide educational resources and improve teacher skills, pupil performance and pupil support in community schools at national scale (USAID /ZAMBIA, 2018).

Many findings support the opinion that Zambian children are not gaining basic literacy skills. The baseline study of the Zambian Primary Reading Programme conducted in 1999 noted that among grade 1 – 6 learners that were tested, the majority of children that attempted to read, read at two grades below grade level in English and three grades below grade level in their own Zambian language (National Literacy Framework, 2013). The Grade 5 National Assessment Survey for 2006 and 2008 reflected learning achievements below 40 % in both English and Zambian Language (35.3% and 39.4% respectively) and this percentage has been stagnating since 1999. On top of this, the Grade 5 National Assessment Survey and the EGRA survey, both from 2010 have shown poor reading and writing abilities among learners. The South African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ III) of 2010 noted that among Grade 6 learners that were tested in reading, only 27.4 % were able to read at a basic competency level (NLF, 2013). The mentioned translates that more has to be done in terms of improving literacy levels among young Zambian language learners.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The current study used both Descriptive and Exploratory designs so as to investigate the identified problem in a coherent and logical way. Research design constitutes the blue print for collection, measurement and interpretation of information and data (USC Libraries, 2023). Further, research design is a comprehensive plan for data collection in an empirical research and blue print aimed at answering specific research questions or testing specific hypotheses (USC Press books, 2019).

B. Research Sites

The study was conducted in six selected primary schools in Nkeyema District- Western Province, namely: Kahare, Kalale, Kandende, Nkeyema, Munkuye and Situtu from which respondents were selected. The said District is the first District from Kafue National park bordering with Central Province and an area of 3,564 km².

C. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study was 1004 which comprised of Headteachers, Senior teachers and class teachers. The participants of the study were selected from 6 primary schools in Nkeyema District – Western Province of Zambia. The said schools were sampled from 6 Zones in said District (i.e. Nkeyema, Mawilo, Shimano, Kandende, Munkuye & Kamasisi Zones). From each Zone, one School was selected. Population in research is defined as a complete set of elements that possess some common characteristics defined by the sampling criteria (Rashid, Natalie, 2022).

In the mentioned study, the sample consisted of 104 participants. A representative sample of 80 learners, 12 teachers, 6 Senior teachers and 6 Headteachers from selected schools were sampled. Sample is a finite part or subset of participants drawn from the target population in research while sample size is the number of observations or individuals included in a study or experiment (Coursera, 2023). In addition to this, sample is a crucial consideration in research because it directly impacts the reliability and extent to which one can generate findings to the larger population. Simple random sampling procedure was used to select 80 learners from selected Primary schools. To shed more light on this one, a systematic random sampling technique was used where every fifth pupil in class list was picked for participation in study.

EdTech (2023) defined systematic sampling as “an adaptation of random sampling which doesn’t give everyone independent chance of being selected.” For Headteachers, Senior teachers and class teachers, cluster random sampling procedure was used where schools were selected from 6 Zones and from each Zone, one school was selected from the mentioned. For class teachers, two participants were selected from each school. Importantly, EdTech (2023) mentioned that “with cluster sampling, the unit of analysis is based on intact groups rather than individuals.”

D. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a method or process in which one systematically applies techniques to describe, draw conclusions from or evaluate data (Rachael & Brianna, 2022). Alternatively, the mentioned is the process of cleaning, changing and processing raw data and extracting actionable, relevant information that helps businesses make informed decisions (Karin, 2023). Similarly, data analysis is the method in which data is collected and organized so that the researcher will be able to look at the data and determine relationships. With above explained, the researcher used combined qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. On top of this, qualitative methods were used to analyze behavioral and verbal data collected during interviews and focus group discussions. In this respect, Narrative analysis method was used while working on interpreting human experiences and motivations by looking closely at the stories people told in a particular context and collecting verbatims through interviews. Again, narratives collected were transcribed into written formats and then coded in order to identify themes, motifs. Similarly, using qualitative method, the researcher had to go through non- numerical data and analyzed it. The mentioned was used to derive data via words, symbols, pictures and observations.

Still however, qualitative data analysis turns non – numerical data into insights and provides rich insights for refining strategies and uncovering growth opportunities (User Pilot, 2024). Alternatively, Quantitative data analysis is the process of making sense of numerical data through mathematical calculations and statistical tests. The mentioned study used the said method to analyze and interpret data from questionnaires administered to teachers which are scientific in nature. According to research objectives, some data collected using questionnaires, was presented in numerical form and this required the researcher to use tables, graphs and charts to interpret and present data collected using questionnaires and assessment items administered to learners, scores were to be analyzed using SPSS where mathematical calculations were to be done using statistical tables, bar graphs and pie charts. Also, the study used narrative analysis method where stories for participants were identified, analyzed and interpreted while themes, patterns, motifs were identified using thematic qualitative method of data analysis. Both discrete and continuous data were used in this study. To shed more light of this, discrete data is information that can only take certain fixed variables while continuous data can take any value and varies over time. This could be seen from analyzed data presented using pie charts and bar graphs.

E. Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations enhance research validity and maintain scientific or academic integrity. Scribbr (2022), stated that “ ethical considerations in research are a series of guidelines researchers should follow when conducting research into behavior to ensure a safe and secure environment for the participants to be protected from psychological, physical or emotional harm.” In relation to the above, the researcher avoided forcing respondents to take part in the study. However, permission consents were obtained from participants which were acknowledged through signing of said consent forms. Also, the research topic was clearly stated in those consent letters. During current study, the researcher was fully conscious of the need to abide by ethical rule of confidentiality and participants were assured that personal details were not going to be written on any research document and that they were to be referred to by an assigned number than their names. Similarly, the investigator, guaranteed anonymity to respondents. Also, participants were assured that all responses during research were to be solely for study and not communicated to any non-authorized person. In this respect, the ethical rule of results communication was considered. Moreover, the researcher made sure that research work was free from plagiarism as well as research misconduct. Alternatively, considering the ethical rule of right to withdraw, participants were given chance to withdraw if they were not ready to go ahead in research. Finally, the researcher got permission from the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS), to conduct research in selected schools.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study findings were presented according to research objectives set:

A. Causes of low Literacy Proficiency Levels

According to study results, below are some of causes of undesirable literacy proficiency levels among young language learners. The study findings revealed that there is less attention to language under pinnings such as alphabetic knowledge; phonics; phonemic awareness; decoding; fluency; Reading comprehension and vocabulary. Further, the study revealed that most teachers in research site have less knowledge in literacy teaching methodology of mentioned literacy skills. Consequently, it was ascertained that most schools were over enrolled as compared to teaching staff available. To shed more light on this one, at one school visited, it was found that the total pupil enrolment was 752 (i.e. ECE To Grade 9) and only 06 teachers were permanently deployed at that station. Also, pupil absenteeism is one of causes of undesirable learner performance in literacy. In certain schools, some learners were engaged in child labour activities during learning time. And this has led to learners missing more literacy skills.

Coming to over enrolment, most teachers were finding it difficult to conduct one to one reading assessment. Also, it was discovered that most schools do not have school libraries and there are inadequate supplementary reading books for learners, teachers not properly using library assessment methods in administering literacy tasks, there is less school community partnership in literacy activities. Coming to availability of teaching and learning materials for reading for lower Primary section, the study found that teachers used the following teaching and learning resources to teach literacy: Chalk board (95%); text books (60%); Supplementary reading resources (5%); real objects (15%). Study results also showed that most schools used standard literacy which involves use of standardized procedures. Above results have been presented in tables and figures that follow:

Table 1: Causes of low Literacy Proficiency Levels.

S/N	Indicator of causes of undesirable literacy levels	NO. of Respondents	Percentage by responses
1	Less attention by teachers to language underpinnings (i.e. alphabetic knowledge, decoding, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension).	18	75 %
2	Teachers incompetency in literacy teaching methodology and assessment	18	75 %
3	Over enrollment of learners in schools	15	62.5 %
4	Less school community partnership in literacy activities	16	66 %
5	Lack of school Libraries	18	75 %
6	Truancy among learners	14	58 %
7	Absence and inadequate teaching and learning materials for reading	17	70 %
8	Inadequate teaching staff	15	62.5%
9	Inadequate classroom space	15	62.5%
10	Less attention to learners with specific learning disabilities	18	75 %

Source: Findings from Research 2024.

B. Methods used by Language Teachers in Teaching and Assessment of Literacy Skills

Research results showed that most teachers used traditional methods of teaching literacy such as question and answer method; whole class method; Teacher's exposition method and word recognition. However, methods like phonics; syllabic and content whole word methods were not used. As a matter of fact, the mentioned methods and techniques are not adequate for teaching literacy especially teaching of reading. The main goal of reading comprehension, which is underpinned by two core sets of skills. The first being oral language comprehension, which is the ability to use and understand spoken language; and the second one is decoding, which is the ability to read familiar words accurately and decode unfamiliar words that are out of context (World Bank Group, 2022).

To consolidate on this, Chirwa (2007) as cited in Chitondo (2021), disclosed that “ there are different approaches to teaching initial reading and the common ones used in teaching reading are the phonics; Look and Say; Whole language experience approach and the Syllable approach. In this regard, it is essential for a language teacher to have knowledge in mentioned approaches so as to improve reading levels among young language learners. In contrast, systematic phonics approach is not mostly used in field of study.

To shed more light on this one, Pride Reading Program (2024), disclosed that “ systematic phonics is a method of teaching of reading that emphasizes the systematic acquisition of letter – sound correspondences. In similar study conducted in America in 2022, it was reported that most teachers used balanced literacy and this had a negative impact on some learners. Despite the mentioned fact, study results revealed that the said method of literacy teaching was not used by most teachers.

More recently, the international Dyslexia Association coined the term structured literacy as a comprehensive approach that teaches the structure of language (phonology, orthography, Syntax, Morphology, Semantics, Discourse) in an explicit systematic, cumulative and diagnostic way.

As a matter of fact, structural literacy covers the five key concepts identified by National Reading Panel and adds word recognition and written expression, as well as expanding comprehension to include both listening and reading comprehension. (Cambium Learning Group,2024). Essentially, structural literacy is proven to be effective for all students but more importantly essential for students with dyslexia. Despite this fact, the current study discovered, that learners with specific learning disabilities were not attended to as expected. This needs serious interventions. On top of this, improving literacy proficiency will require challenging the status quo of literacy instruction and transitioning toward an evidence backed approach that is proven to help every student learn to read. Explicit literacy instruction rooted in the science of reading, the decades of cognitive and neurological research into how reading is processed in the brain, is proven to close equity gaps and achieve the goal of literacy for all. (Lexia learning, 2022). Transitioning to science of reading based instruction, whether structured literacy approach or otherwise, will improve students reading below grade level catch up their peers and help us achieve a more just and equitable world in which every student can enjoy reading (Cambium Learning Group, 2024). The above discussed can be seen from results reflected in the table that follows:

Table 2: Literacy Assessment Methods used by teachers in research site.

Name of literacy Assessment	Percentage as administered by teachers
Informal Literacy Assessment (i.e. easily incorporate all areas of literacy)	20 %
Formal Literacy Assessment (i.e. involve the use of standardized procedures)	70 %
Diagnostic Literacy Assessment (i.e. focus on specific components of literacy: word recognition, decoding, reading comprehension)	10 %

Source: Research Findings: 2024.

Table 3: literacy skills taught during lessons in schools.

Literacy skill	Comment	Frequency
Phonemic Awareness	Moderately taught	24
Alphabetic Knowledge	Not taught	25
Decoding	Minimally taught	23
Letter sound	Averagely taught	21
Writing	Moderately taught	20
Reading aloud	Moderately taught	20
Fluency	Not taught according to standards.	25
Vocabulary	Minimally taught	23
Reading Comprehension	Reading comprehension steps not followed as expected	23

Source: 2024 Research results.

C. Literacy proficiency levels among young language learners in Nkeyema District: Western Province – Zambia

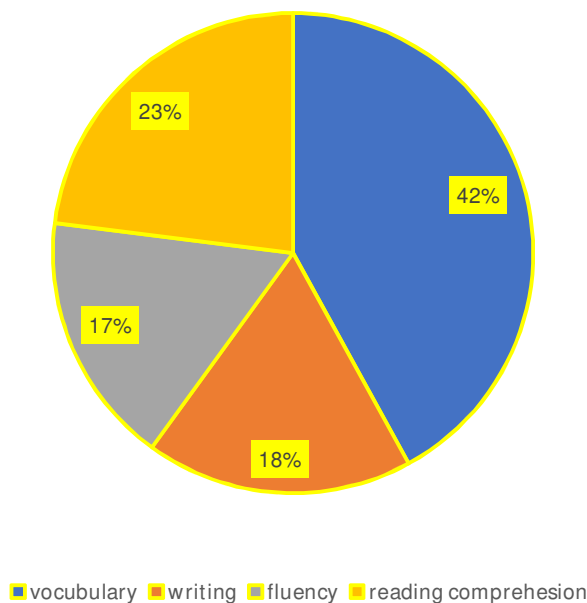
The current study revealed that girls out performed boys for both grades 4 and 5 in four skills assessed in research site and mentioned results were as follows: Vocabulary: Boys: 30%, Girls: 54%- Average percentage score: 42%; Reading comprehension: Boys :17 %, Girls: 29 %. Average percentage score: 23%; Writing: Boys: 13.5%, Girls: 23%. Average percentage score: 18.25%; Fluency: Boys: 12%; Girls: 22.5 %. Average percentage score: 17.25%. Conversely, at certain centres, G5 Learners failed to read fluently a given G4 reading passage and their reading level was 2 grades below their current grade. Consequently, 20 learners failed to read a single word from given passage. However, fluency is a skill where most learners have challenges in field of study. The results are clearly tabulated in the table as well as pie chart that follow:

Table 4: Grade 4 & 5 Literacy Proficiency levels by Gender for schools assessed in field of study:

S/N	SKILL	PERFORMANCE BY GENDER		TOTAL AVERAGE PERFORMANCE
		B	G	TOTAL
01	Vocabulary	30%	54 %	42 %
02	Reading comprehension	17 %	29%	23 %
03	Writing	13.5 %	23 %	18.25%
04	Fluency	12%	22.5%	17.25%

Source: 2024 Research Findings.

figure 1: literacy proficiency levels on assessment administered to grade four and five learners.



Source: Research Findings: 2024.

In relation to this, a National assessment that was conducted in Bangladesh in 2013, results revealed that only a small percentage of Grade 3 pupils (8%) and about a quarter (25 %) of Grade 5 pupils demonstrated some capacity to read inferentially and could retrieve directly stated information but found it more difficult to recognize nuances or draw inferences (UNICEF,2019).

D. Ways to improve literacy proficiency levels among young learners

Importantly, Dennis Child (2007) as noted from Chitondo (2021), pointed out that “Low literacy levels in primary schools can be solved by scaffolding learning through instruction in local language and that the rationale for teaching in a local language is rooted in scientific research which supports developing a learner’s language ability- vocabulary, intrinsic knowledge of grammar rules and the use of his or her language in order to develop reading and writing skills.”

Combining a variety of activities is very effective for learning. Some of these activities are similar for all groups while other activities are tailored to the level of a specific group. Moving from teaching by grade to teaching according to the level of the learner is an important element of the Catch-Up programme based on the Teaching at the Right Level model. It is well-known that learners learn in many ways. Hence, activities need to be designed to actively engage and stimulate different kinds of learning. Learners normally listen, read, and write in the same lesson. In a literacy period, some basic activities are carried out. These include reading aloud, phonetic games, vocabulary exercises, and writing. There are some activities that are common to all the levels such as informal discussion and mind map activities. However, phonetic activities and word games vary according to the level of the group, what they can do comfortably and what is challenging. Mind map activities are used across levels to develop vocabulary and to help learners think thematically around concepts (Catch-up Literacy Teacher’s Guide, 2023).

Learning through play is another catch up method that can be used by teachers to assist learners that are behind in literacy. Importantly, Young learners often learn through play. When learners are provided with opportunities to play in their classes, they not only learn meaningfully but also become motivated and incentivized to learn. Learning through play also helps learners build confidence and develop other essential socio-emotional skills.

V. CONCLUSION

There are important components necessary for effective literacy development at early grades as highlighted by National Literacy Curriculum Framework (2013) which includes: Pre- reading; Punctuation and fluency; Pre – writing; Phonemic awareness; Phonics; Words; Sentences; Comprehension and Writing. Despite the importance on the effective development of literacy levels among young learners as shared in mentioned policy document, the study conducted in six selected Primary Schools in Nkeyema District – Western Province revealed that Grades 4 and 5 learners assessed during study didn’t perform well in literacy skills such as: Fluency; Reading Comprehension; Vocabulary and Writing. Results from mentioned study, revealed that there is less attention to language skills by teachers such as alphabetic knowledge; decoding; phonemic awareness; fluency; phonics; vocabulary and reading comprehension. Importantly, Spaull & Pretorius, (2019), mentioned that both decoding and comprehension are dependent on oral reading proficiency and this includes vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension and knowledge of grammar. However, the most challenging literacy skill to learners noted was fluency.

Further, the study results showed that most teachers used formal literacy assessment which involves the use of standardized procedures that require administering and scoring the assessment in the same way for all learners, also It focuses mostly on reading and writing tasks leaving other literacy areas such as speaking, listening, viewing and performing. Again, other literacy assessment methods such as diagnostic and performance literacy assessments were less administered. Despite this fact, clear performance targets linked to instructional goals were not met. Importantly, teachers who are language assessment literate can design and administer effective testing activities, interpret students scores accurately, formulate appropriate teaching and making rational education decisions (Shen,2022). The additional factors that contribute to low literacy proficiency levels among young Zambian language learners are : over enrolment of learners in schools; Less – school community partnership in literacy activities; Absence and inadequate teaching and learning materials in reading; lack of school libraries; inadequate classroom spaces in some schools; less attention to learners with specific learning disabilities; inadequate literacy teaching methods such as explicit science instruction and systematic phonics method. Essentially, explicit science instruction involves direct teaching of all concepts with clear, concise instructions and demonstrations, it builds from the simplest concepts to more complex ones, ensuring that no critical learning step is missed while systematic phonics method of teaching reading emphasizes the systematic acquisition of letter- sound correspondence.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study’s recommendations are as underlisted:

- 1) The Ministry of Education through the Provincial Resource Centre Coordinators (PRCCs); District Resource Centre Coordinators (DRCCs); Zone Inservice Coordinators (ZICS) and School Inservice Coordinators (SICS), should train teachers on how to provide explicit instruction covering the following skills: Phonemic Awareness; Phonics; Alphabetic Knowledge; Fluency; Letter sound knowledge; Decoding; Word recognition and Comprehension.

- 2) Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers and Senior teachers should facilitate acquisition of more library books so that school libraries are furnished with various reading materials.
- 3) Schools should intensify on homework policy through teachers giving reading books and literacy tasks to be completed at home with guidance from adults.
- 4) Repeat Policy at all grade levels should be implemented by all schools for learners not progressing well in terms of literacy: Parents / guardians should be engaged as well.
- 5) Schools to use diverse strategies to support struggling literacy learners and all learners with learning disabilities: Education standards officers: Special education should be engaged in providing professional advice to address problems faced by challenged learners.
- 6) Class teachers should track learner's attendance using class and period registers. Also, school management teams should oftenly check learners exercise books.
- 7) The Ministry of Education through Curriculum Development Department, should revise the curriculum sufficiently focusing on literacy instructions and more periods be allocated to literacy lessons.

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