

Realising that the out-of-school environment could influence the development of Foundation Phase learners' literacy skills

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Background: In this article, an analysis is done of the out of school factors of Foundation Phase learners that could influence the proper development of these learners' language abilities. Specific reference is made to the home environment of Foundation Phase learners in rural Mpumalanga.

Aim: This article aims to draw attention to the fact that there are many factors in the out-of-school environment of Foundation Phase learners that could influence the young learners' ability to develop their language skills and language abilities well.

Setting: This article relates to the out-of-school environment of Foundation Phase learners with specific reference to the influence of the environment at home of Foundation Phase learners in four schools in rural Mpumalanga. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory is incorporated as it explains the home environment as the microsystem in a child's life. The home is the place where a child's first and vital education takes place and where the acquisition of language skill begins.

Methods: In this article, sections from a qualitative research project, as well as a literature review were used.

Results: The results show that there are many factors in the out-of-school environment of Foundation Phase learners that could influence the development of the learners' language skills and language abilities.

Conclusion: The authors argue that if teachers and other school staff members are aware of the many aspects arising from the out-of-school environment that could influence young learners' well-being and progress, especially with regard to language abilities at school, they could help to address and overcome the unconstructive language influences in the lives of their young custodians.

Keywords: literacy skills; Foundation Phase; out-of-school environment; home environment; families' socio-economic situation; parental involvement; role of siblings and grandparents; influence of the community.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, many literacy evaluations have been conducted in the Foundation Phase as well as the Intermediate Phase of South African schools. For instance, in 2001 the systemic evaluation (SE), which involved 52 000 Grade 3 learners, was conducted (Department of Education 2003:57). Other literacy assessments followed, such as the Annual National Assessments (ANA) in 2012, 2013 and 2014, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in 2009, the Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in 2000, 2007 and 2013, as well as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted in 2006, 2011 and 2016 (Govender & Hugo 2020:5–11). In most of these evaluations, the South African learners obtained low scores. Although various persons have analysed these forms of literacy testing, it cannot be denied that there is something wrong with the literacy abilities of young learners in the country. The most recent literacy study Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2016) shows, for instance, that the literacy levels in South African schools remain very low and that the South African score was the lowest overall score from amongst all the participating countries (Govender & Hugo 2020:19). The Department of Basic Education admitted in its 5-year strategic plan that the literacy levels of young South African learners are low (Department of Basic Education 2015:29).

The question arises why do so many of the South African young learners fail to develop their literacy skills, including reading, according to the requirements and standards of the Foundation Phase curriculum? Some factors are to be found in the school situation and questions such as the following arise: Are the teachers to blame? Is the school system or the curriculum to blame? Are there enough quality readers and other reading books in the classrooms? Are the children exposed to good language usage at school and do they listen to stories that interest them? Has enough research been conducted about the school environment of young learners? Some factors, however, arise out of school and questions such as the following can be asked: Could it be the home environment? Is it what happened at home before a child enters the formal school situation or what is happening at home when a child is in the Foundation Phase that hinders young children to acquire well-developed literacy skills? The reasons appear multiple and complex but need to be addressed.

A child's early years (3 to 8 years) are seen as important years where the foundation for lifelong education is laid. It is important that children should start to develop their abilities, especially, language abilities in these years – if not; it could be difficult to catch up later. This applies to literacy development, as this period is known as the pre-reading literacy period (Wildová & Kropáčková 2015:878). Talking and communicating with other people are crucial in these years and young children should be exposed to good language use. Children should also be encouraged to use language in different situations and comprehending oral language is vital. Van der Linde et al. (2016:87) stated that delays in communication are the most frequent impairment in early childhood years and could have a negative influence on the children's academic and social development.

In this article, it is attempted to use a section dealing with the factors in the out-of-school situation of a qualitative research project, as well as a literature review to shed light on some of the factors out of school that could support or hinder the development of children's language skills and eventually the development of their literacy skills. The article reveals that the out-of-school factors are to be found in the home environment and can also come from various family members and the children's communities. When one considers these out-of-school factors, the importance of a welcoming and accommodating school environment becomes clear. Such a school environment could make up for the deficits in the upbringing occurring in the out-of-school environment including the home environment of some young children (Ganga & Chinyoka 2017:41). If teachers and other school staff members were aware of the many factors arising from the out-of-school environment that could influence young learners' well-being and progress, especially with regard to language abilities at school, they could help to address and overcome the unconstructive language influences in the lives of their young custodians. It is especially in the home environment where the base for the future language development of young children is laid.

The home environment

A person's home, especially, a young child's home is regarded as the microsystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory. The home is the place where a child's first and vital education takes place because it involves close interactions with parents, siblings, other family members, neighbours and the nearby community. It involves daily activities and relationships that help to shape children's cognitive, social, moral and emotional involvement, which all directly influence children's development (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 2010:40). Chinappi (2015) aptly stated that when she asked a question about the leading influences in children's lives, a principal immediately responded by saying that:

[F]amily is number one in life, from the day a child is born until he/she enters school. It is there that children learn all they need to [learn] during the first few years of life. (p. 44)

The development of literacy skills

Children start to develop their literacy skills early in their lives and the family and home environment play an important role in cultivating the foundations for literacy acquisition and development. The literacy skills that young children develop at home are determined by the social and cultural needs of the adults in their environment (Joubert 2013:19–20). Literacy was initially regarded as the ability to read and write. Later the concept of literacy was extended to include language development and language learning. Numeracy is now seen as another component of literacy (Engelbrecht & Hugo 2019:4). Thus, literacy is a broad concept.

In most societies and classrooms, literacy is highly respected and, therefore, young children are usually well-motivated to become literate. Children may also start to adopt the reasons for learning to read and write as important for success at school and in life (Nolan 2007:221–222).

Literacy starts in the home of a child. It is a developing habit that is promoted in the family through speaking in and listening to the children's home languages, fun activities, games that involve language, experiences that extend the children's knowledge and vocabulary and story reading.

The development of literacy skills deals with sounds, words, sentences and language. Gunn, Vadasay and Smolkowski (2011:157) also mention language aspects such as alphabetic understanding, phonological awareness, vocabulary development and oral language. It is important that young children obtain varied experiences to develop their language, as this will help them to become skilled readers. At the same time, it will also help them to write, communicate and mingle with other children and people (Editorial 2017:300).

Methods

The data used in this article were obtained from a literature review and sections from a qualitative research project. In the

qualitative research project, which formed part of a thesis, Foundation Phase teachers from four schools in rural Mpumalanga were interviewed and classroom observation was employed. The data arising from the interviews were analysed and certain themes arose. Most of the themes shed light on factors in the school situation and especially in the classroom, which could influence the development of literacy skills in the Foundation Phase. As the focus of the article is on 'out-of-school' factors, the 'in school' factors will thus not be discussed. Some of the themes did, however, bring out-of-school factors, which could influence young learners' development of literacy skills to the fore. These out-of-school factors, as well as additional factors taken from literature are discussed in this article.

There are many designs in qualitative research, but the actual aim of qualitative research is to study and understand occurrences and experiences as they happen in real-life situations. Rich narrative data are often collected in qualitative research (Moser & Korstjens 2017). Creswell (2014:4) opined that that qualitative research provides a researcher the opportunity to understand and explore the significance that a person or a group of persons attach to a social problem or problems. In this article, the authors will therefore reflect on the research input from other authors and also make use of the feedback from the research project in Mpumalanga to better understand people's opinions about the out-of-school factors that could influence the development of young learners' literacy skills.

In qualitative research, researchers can use various methods. In order to understand the experiences and insights of people in qualitative research, researchers could make use of methods such as interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observation, questionnaires and they could also interpret data from textual materials (Mohajan 2018:2). In the qualitative research used in this article, interviews conducted with eight Foundation Phase teachers and classroom observation were used. Research about the development of literacy skills captured in articles was also included.

Methodological framework

In this article, constructivism is used which is also described as interpretivism by some authors. The aim of interpretivists is to describe how people make meaning of their world and what happens in it. Interpretivism refers to the approaches that emphasise the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life (Elster 2007). Qualitative research is regarded as the countermovement to a positivistic paradigm used in quantitative research and in qualitative research; reality is seen as well-organised. In the constructivist paradigm associated with qualitative research, it is accepted that reality has many interpretations and it is the aim of the researcher to describe how selected groups of people interpret and construct reality (Moser & Korstjens 2017). In the research project conducted in Mpumalanga, the interviews and the classroom observation helped the researcher to construct many factors that could influence young learners' development of literacy skills.

The article also aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory that forms the theoretical framework of the article. According to the ecological systems theory, a child's home environment is considered as the microsystem in the life of a child. The microsystem covers the associations that a child has with his or her direct environment and it includes the family and the neighbourhood (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel 2005:30–31). The home is, therefore, the most important system for a child as it plays a crucial role in the development and well-being of any child.

The microsystem covers the associations that children have with their surroundings, as well as their interaction with the surroundings. The aspects present in the microsystem of children are their family, the school and the neighbourhood.

Factors in the home environment that could influence the development of Foundation Phase learners' literacy skills

Families' socio-economic situation

David Berliner conducted years of research about the influence of poverty on family well-being in the United States (US). He strongly opines that the causes of educational problems in the US are to be found in the big number of American families who live in poverty. For Berliner the roots of problems in the education system are neither the curriculum nor the teachers, but rather the children's home environment (Strauss 2018). In this regard, Brito and Noble (2018:e12688) also stated that children's brain structures and neurocognitive skills are strongly related to the socio-economic status of the families where they grow up.

McKenzie and Loebenstein (2007:190) noticed that the stress arising from poverty often causes tension in the relationship between the parent and the child, which could lead to less parental involvement. In addition, children who grow up in poverty usually do not get enough nutritious food nor do they receive much-needed intellectual stimulation. A lack of intellectual stimulation can influence the social communicative skills of children negatively. A delay in the development of social communicative skills can for instance turn lead to underdeveloped expressive and receptive language abilities and in the opinion of McLaughlin (2011:1183), this can lead to 'increased difficulty with reading, writing, attention and socialization'.

With regard to South Africa, Van der Linde et al. (2016:90) mentioned the following risk factors that could lead to young children's delayed communication skills: poverty, a lack of unchanging housing, limited prenatal care and unsatisfactory healthcare. Regarding housing, aspects such as residential density, overcrowded houses and poor quality of residents could lead to parents being less interactive with their children. This could eventually influence the development of these children's communication skills negatively. Van der Linde et al. further stated that the communication delays in the sample of

children that they used in their research were high because many children were exposed to several of the risk factors.

It is understandable why McKenzie and Loebenstein (2007:190) regarded poverty as a major barrier to parental involvement. When one considers that poverty is a multifaceted situation with physical, as well as psychological and even language consequences, 'then the impact [of poverty] on the learner at school is immense' (McKenzie & Loebenstein 2007:190). Edwards and Ngwaru (2011:442) referred to the lack of disposable income in poor households especially in rural areas and thus items such as newspapers, magazines and books, which could stimulate children's literacy development, were barely available. There are also children who grow up with illiterate or only literate grandparents who cannot help them to develop language skills such as reading, writing and spelling. Taylor, Zubrick and Christensen (2016:297) draw attention to the lack of shared book reading in poor households. They opine that shared book reading at home helps to develop children's oral language, which could form a bridge from oral language to literacy.

Motivation to learn and the home environment

In a study conducted in rural parts of Asia regarding parents' involvement in the academic motivation of their children, Ghazi et al. (2010:93) reported that parents did not seem to be aware of their role in the education of their children, not to mention their important role in motivating their children academically. The parents did not help the children with their homework and only negative reinforcement was used to motivate the children.

The involvement of parents is very important to help motivate young children to read. Motivation to read could eventually play a vital role in children's success at school. Chinappi (2015:43) stated that when children are raised in homes where reading occurs often, the children tend to be more motivated towards reading for the rest of their lives. There are many factors involved in reading motivation, but one important factor that all the teachers and administrators interviewed by Chinappi (2015:44) mentioned, 'was the support, or lack of support that parents offered their children'.

Based on a longitudinal study, Nolan (2007:261, 265) drew attention to the role of the social context in developing children's motivation to become literate. The motivation to acquire reading and writing skills in terms of other subjects should usually increase from Grade 3 onwards. In the African context, Ganga and Chinyoka (2017:38) also stressed the importance of the commitment of all parents and caregivers' to child rearing. Any good child-raising practice could help to develop children's positive self-concept, which in turn could enhance their motivation to learn.

Self-concept and motivation go hand in hand. Research has shown that where a person has academic motivation and a good self-concept, a positive attitude towards school can be foreseen (Green et al. 2012:1111). However, the development

of a good self-concept and motivation to learn at school, start in the home environment. Research conducted by Ganga and Chinyoka (2017:38) reveals that the way in which parents rear their children either help children to develop a positive self-concept or a negative self-concept. This gives proof of the fact that parenting styles could influence a child's learning success at school and play an important role in the development of good literacy skills.

Factors related to family and community that could influence the development of Foundation Phase learners' literacy skills

Parents' involvement in the lives of their children

The quality of parents' involvement in their children's lives plays an important role in the children's academic progress. At the preschool level, some studies found a positive correlation between parents' involvement and the possibility that their children have to repeat a grade, as well as the children's reading abilities. Other studies, predominantly in urban schools, have shown that the children of parents who are uninvolved could achieve lower reading achievement (Huang & Mason 2008). There could be reasons why parents are involved or not involved in their children's development and progress at school.

The parents' level of education could for instance have an impact on the parents' involvement. It could be that level of parents' non-involvement in the lives of their children is related to the parents' own low levels of education. Homework could, for instance, be a problem as there are parents who are not able to help their children with homework because they have limited school education or are illiterate (Ghanney 2018:115). In Grades 1–3, where young learners are learning to read and their homework includes reading at home, parents' illiteracy could slow down their children's progress in becoming literate.

In research conducted in rural Mpumalanga to collect data for a doctoral thesis, the teachers raised their concerns about the parents' lack of involvement in their children's schoolwork. One of the participants remarked:

Some of the parents were working and spent less time with their children, whilst some parents were unable to help their children as they themselves were not educated, and did not understand what [*to do*] or how to help their children. (Masalesa 2016:203)

However, they also provided reasons why some parents did not help their children. Some parents arrived home late after work. There was also a group of parents who 'were unable to help their children as they themselves were not educated, and did not understand what [*to do*] or how to help their children' (Masalesa 2016:203).

In a research study in which 408 parents of children from various schools took part, Zedan (2011:23) reported that the

higher the education level of the parents, the more they generally support, encourage and supervise their children's education at school. These parents tend to have high expectations of their children and the progress that they make at school. According to Zedan it was also found that, relatively speaking, parents with a low educational level have the tendency to think that learning is not valuable. The children of these parents therefore do not get the necessary praise and help that they need. The children of educated parents are usually encouraged to reason about matters and to be curious and responsible. These attributes help them to do well academically. Drajea and O'Sullivan (2014:147) stated that the children of uneducated parents do not necessarily learn the skills at home that they need to perform well at school.

When considering the rural areas of South Africa, less-educated people often have unmanaged stress in their daily situations, which can restrict their opportunities to interrelate with their children. In contrast, parents educated beyond the high-school level are often more engaged with their toddlers and children (Serafini 2014:88). Drajea and O'Sullivan (2014:163–164) reflect on the influence of the education level of parents and the income of the family on children's development. The presence of literate siblings and grandparents could also contribute 'to create a rich home learning environment that is capable of enhancing cognitive stimulation and the child's own contribution to his or her education' (Drajea & O'Sullivan 2014). Cognitive stimulation that could enhance the development of the literacy skills of young children could be achieved through storybooks and listening to stories which are read, by paging through magazines and language and sound games but is usually not found in households where poverty prevails or where the parents and caregivers have a low educational level.

Parents also play the first major role in developing their children's acquisition and command of the home language. In a research study conducted in Mpumalanga, a teacher provided the following reason why some of the learners' in her class did not have a good command and acquisition of their home language. The teacher indicated that there was a 'lack of parent involvement in the child's education' (Masalesa 2016:161). This was confirmed by another teacher who said: '[T]here is limited support from the parents who are also expected to lay [a] foundation as far as early literacy is concerned' (Masalesa 2016:161).

According to Daile and Payne (2010:330) if parents are involved in their children's education it could have a big influence on how well their children acquire reading and progress in reading (Daile & Payne 2010:330). Reading is the most important literacy skill, and good reading abilities are vital in the school especially from Grade 4 onwards. Learning to read is a long and sometimes difficult process and should actually begin before a child enters the formal school situation. There are certain language skills, which are important for the development of reading skills – they require rich communication between adults and children and are necessary for brain development. The quality and

quantity of language used when talking to children could predict the development of children's language and literacy skills. A higher number of words spoken to young children can help to expand their vocabulary and language development, which will lead to improved literacy outcomes (Zauche et al. 2017:496).

Masalesa (2016) observed in Grade 1 classes in Mpumalanga that there were learners who found it difficult to read words and sentences in their home language. One of the teachers told her that some learners' reading and writing skills were not developing because of their poor abilities in their home language. A participant said for instance:

Most of the learners in the Grade One class are able to write using their home language (Sepedi) with guidance, especially those who attended Grade R, but surprisingly, they are not fluent speakers of the language. (pp. 161–162)

Another participant indicated: 'Both the learners' reading and writing skill[s] [are] not developed as far as their home language is concerned' (Masalesa 2016:161–162).

It is also important that parents or other adults at home read to children, as it is regarded as an investment in the children's language, literacy development and lifelong learning. When parents and children read together, it fosters the children's oral language and provides a developmental bridge from the oral language to literacy (Taylor et al. 2016:297). Parents should thus be encouraged to read to their children. This will help foster emergent literacy and develop the children's language abilities. This could eventually lead to a positive attitude towards literacy (Duursma, Augustyn & Zuckerman 2008:556).

One of the requirements to be able to read is the development of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is an awareness of the sounds of a language and for young children who still have to learn to read it is usually the home language. Young children have to be aware that words are made up of different sounds. Vasylenko (2017:76) opined that if phonological awareness is not developed, it could be one of the reasons why children develop reading problems. The teachers who were participants in the research in Mpumalanga indicated that one issue with learning to read was that the parents did not take out time to read with their children. One participant remarked:

Some of the parents were working and spent less time with their children, whilst some parents were unable to help their children as they themselves were not educated, and did not understand what [to do] or how to help their children. (Masalesa 2016:203)

The child-rearing practice of parents could also play a role in the way in which a child adjusts to the discipline and the classroom situation at school and attends to the important issue of mastering new information. In South Africa and in other African countries too, children are brought up in a mixed way of a traditional African and a diluted Western-orientated method of child rearing. Ganga and Chinyoka (2017:38) were further of the opinion that the child-rearing practices of

parents may either develop a positive self-concept that could enhance children's learning at school or could lead to a negative self-concept, which could hinder learning at school. Parenting styles and the involvement of parents could thus have a big impact on children's learning success, including the acquisition of literacy skills. Zeece (2005:313) aptly stated: 'Parents are viewed as children's first literacy teachers'.

The role of grandparents

Some children's grandparents play an important role in their lives and research related to the influence of grandparents on the lives and development of children is growing. According to Buchanan and Rotkirch (2018:136), the involvement of grandparents can lead to improved health and better social behaviour amongst their grandchildren. These aspects can play an important role in children's progress at school. However, a lack of involvement from the side of the grandparents, especially when the children live permanently with their grandparents, can have a negative effect on the children's development.

Axelsson, Lindqvist and Sandberg (2019) described instances when grandparents could facilitate children's reading and writing creativity and development. Grandparents and children could not only read or write together but could also play together to enhance literacy. The authors describe a situation where a grandmother and her grandchild wrote what had to be read as a reading task after school. Thus, reading became a fun task for the grandchild. Boshkova, Shastina and Shatunova (2018:284) wrote that grandparents could have a significant influence on their grandchildren's cognitive speech development because they recount the history of the country, they read books with the young ones and they help them with reading and mathematics. This was confirmed by 33% of the parents who formed part of a survey.

Poehlmann (2010:150–170) discussed a child's general development and the possible influence it could have on his or her speech and literacy development. She opined that when young children grow up with their grandparents the children sometimes develop delays in their general growth. This could include speech development and speech delays. When a preschool child, for instance, is not able to speak in sentences and the grandparents do not pick up the language problem it could continue when the child enters school. This could have a critical influence on the development of the child's literacy skills. Van der Linde et al. (2016:87) stressed the importance of early intervention when a child has speech and communication delays as this could have further consequences on the development of literacy abilities.

Not all children have grandparents but grandparents could play a role in children's language and literacy development. In some homes, children grow up with siblings who could, albeit unknowingly, also influence their language and literacy development.

The influence of siblings

Unknowingly siblings could have an influence on the language development of their younger brothers and sister. Malmeer and Assadi (2013:1226) reported that not only the mother and father or perhaps the grandparents but also young siblings could have an influence on a young child's language development. Their study involved young children and their older siblings, but all the children were still preschoolers. Their study found that the language of preschool children who had no siblings was more superior in the production of their home language as compared to preschool children who had older siblings but who were still preschoolers. However, the language comprehension of the latter group of preschool children who had older siblings who were still preschoolers was much better.

As far back as 1986, a study by Woollett (1986:235) already drew attention to the fact that the language of older siblings could have an influence on young children's language development. Woollett pointed out that the language between mothers and older siblings was more complex, was related more to social interaction and contained more questions and answers in comparison with the language that the mothers used when speaking to younger children. However, this more complex communication provided an environment for the younger siblings where the language was more stimulating and developmentally more difficult. Wang (2015:49) referred to siblings as 'cultural educators' and 'socialising agents'. Wang further discussed that in a growing number of studies it is revealed that older siblings can influence their younger siblings' language development directly or indirectly.

Axelsson et al. (2019) concurred that siblings can influence younger children's reading and writing development in terms of interest and motivation. In the interviews that were conducted parents mentioned how younger children would sit and watch whilst their older siblings did their homework. A mother reported how her young daughter, who was not as able as her brother would write, read when her older brother was writing and reading.

The positive influence of older siblings on the development of young children's home language was also clear from a study by Taylor (2017:2, 38–39). In his research that involved the use of the family's home language and a second language by older siblings, Taylor found that when the older siblings used the home language only, it was beneficial to the language development of younger siblings.

The size of the family

Mwamwenda (2010:29–30) opined that the size of the family could have a negative impact on the progress that children make at school. He states that the more the children in the family, the weaker the children's performance at school could be. In his opinion, this could partly be because in large families, children would receive less attention from their parents. This could also mean a lower living standard,

smaller living space, fewer learning resources and less privacy. In a study conducted in South Africa, Van der Linde et al. (2015:5) reported on the unfavourable impact that the number of siblings could have on the communication development of a younger sibling. In a big family, a young sibling often has speech delays. This could be because the older siblings speak more and often speak on behalf of younger siblings. In a big family parents have to divide their time and attention between the children. Participants in Masalesa's study confirmed that family size has implications for money that should be directed towards teaching and learning materials, as well as the quality of education thereof. Large families tend to demand bigger budgets to be able to compensate for the higher costs of required educational materials. It is, however, common in larger families for shortage of learning materials to occur or a low-quality resources to be bought. This could be a recipe for the poor performance of learners in reading and writing. One of the participants said: 'Most learners that come from large families which are poor come to school without [the] needed materials for schooling which subsequently affects their performance' (Masalesa 2016:50).

The impact of the community

Although the microsystem of a child consists predominantly of the child's home and the family, the community can also influence occurrences in the microsystem. Ghanney (2018:115) reported, for instance, that many illiterate parents not only turn to siblings and relatives but they also turn to community members for help with their children's education and their literacy homework. In the lives of parents, a community network is thus also important. Studies that were conducted recently show that the diversity of the neighbourhoods where young children grow up, shapes their social learning independently of their parents, caregivers or family members. It seems that in informal settlements, which consist of diverse neighbourhoods, and where people live near one another, the social and communication development of young children is supported (Van der Linde et al. 2016:90). In the past, this situation was seen as a risk factor, but now it is seen as a factor that could facilitate greater communication and speech interaction for young children, which could enhance the children's literacy skills (Van der Linde et al. 2015:5).

However, the influence of the community on children's language development and their home language development, especially, could also be negative. In the research that Masalesa conducted in Mpumalanga, a group of Foundation Phase teachers told her that some of the children in their classrooms often played and even stayed with people in the community such as their neighbours. These people did not speak the home language of the children. When this group of children came to school, their home language was not developed well and the problem was that in school the children's home language became the language of learning and teaching. These children struggled to socialise and communicate in class and their undeveloped home language abilities were

detrimental to their progress at school (Masalesa 2016:161). When a question about the learners' home language development was posed during the research project, the teachers were of the opinion that if the learners' home language was not well developed, it influenced their progress at school. This could pose a serious challenge to both learners and teachers. One participant stated for instance:

The learners struggle a lot to read out words and sentences; they also struggle a lot to write words and sentences in their home language. They get limited time to interact with oral and written texts, which as a result has an impact on their holistic reading and writing ability. (Masalesa 2016:161)

Conclusion

This article draws attention to the fact that there are many aspects in the out-of-school environment of Foundation Phase children, which could have a negative impact on their progress at school. This applies, especially, to the development of their language abilities and their literacy skills, which in turn could be the reason for inadequate progress at school. Two main factors that could influence the development of young children's language and literacy skills were discussed. Under the home environment as a factor the family's socio-economic situation and motivation for the young children to learn were discussed. The second main factor dealt with the possible influence of the family and community members on the development of children's literacy skills. The size of the family, as well as the possible influence of parents, grandparents and siblings was included. It is clear from the discussions in this article that the reasons why some young learners' literacy skills do not develop satisfactorily should not be sought in the school situation alone, but that there are many out-of-school factors that could play a role in the development of literacy skills in the Foundation Phase. These factors are to be found in the microsystem of a child as explained in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory.

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