



# Challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the creative writing curriculum



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**Background:** Teaching creative writing in the early grades provides learners with the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas which contributes to their holistic development. Curriculum documents have been neatly laid out, yet in practice, it is challenging, and teachers struggle to find effective ways of teaching and assessing creative writing skills.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges that teachers experience in implementing the creative writing curriculum in Grade 3.

**Method:** The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach which used an exploratory case study design. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit six Grade 3 teachers from two selected primary schools. Focus group interviews, classroom observations and document analysis were used to generate data.

**Results:** The results revealed that the intended curriculum for teaching writing skills is not necessarily the curriculum that is implemented in schools. Teachers were frustrated although helpful guidelines were available in the policy document. Genres like opinion writing were neglected.

**Conclusion:** The impact of and challenges (such as didactical neglect, subject-related issues, and negative teacher attitudes) related to misinterpretation or even a lack of knowledge of curriculum documents were discussed, and practical recommendations were made.

**Contribution:** The study recommends that a joint effort be made between all role players, such as the school management and teachers to deal with the challenges stemming from a lack of knowledge of curriculum documents. Teacher training programmes should include curriculum knowledge as part of their training.

**Keywords:** challenges; intended curriculum; teacher knowledge; teaching strategies; creative writing.

## Introduction

Creative writing is a crucial and complex skill that needs to be explicitly taught to learners in the Foundation Phase. Göçen (2019) view creative writing as the effective communication of knowledge, feelings, thoughts, wishes, and dreams using symbols following grammatical rules. Therefore, it can be regarded as an essential skill to communicate effectively. Different studies have revealed that most learners struggle to write creatively in the Foundation Phase (Julius & Hautemo 2017; Woods 2015; Wyatt-Smith & Hackson 2016). In Namibia, the Namibian Institute of Educational Development's (NIED 2012) national investigation of the literacy and numeracy skills of junior primary learners established that most learners do not reach the basic literacy skills. The learners' low ability in writing may be caused by factors such as poor reading and writing practice, low motivation, a lack of ideas and ineffective writing strategies (Faulkner, Rivalland & Hunter 2010; Graham 2019). Understanding that creative writing demands focused effort from the writer leads to the next question about what competencies are needed to master this complex skill. Therefore, teachers of writing need to be well informed about writing and the development thereof as well as writing instruction strategies (Faulkner et al. 2010; Graham 2019).

To teach creative writing effectively, there is an expectation that teachers should possess an understanding of the curriculum and other supporting policy documents. Curricular knowledge is regarded as an understanding of curricular and instructional plans offered for teaching a subject or skill at various grade levels (Deng 2018). This knowledge is then used by teachers as a

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framework within which to operate (Deng 2018). Curriculum plays a vital role in the teacher's planning because it directly informs what eventually happens in the classroom. In an implemented curriculum, practitioners individualise curricula to suit their contexts (Richards 2017). The official curriculum refers to the teaching and learning of relevant subject knowledge as determined by the authorities such as the Ministry of Education. On the other hand, the enacted curriculum refers to what takes place in the classroom as the curriculum framework is interpreted by the classroom teacher (Wyatt-Smith & Cumming 2003). Other researchers refer to an intended and implemented curriculum (Tan-Sisman 2021). The challenges that teachers experienced when teaching writing include poor basic skills of learners, and a lack of curriculum and pedagogical knowledge which in turn lead to the discrepancy between the intended and the enacted curriculum (Shikalepo 2020).

The study intended to examine the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the creative writing curriculum in Grade 3 in two primary schools in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia.

## Statement of the problem

A directorate within the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC), National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), is mandated to develop the curriculum policy documents in Namibia. The last education reform was discussed in Cabinet's 3rd/25 March 2014/001 meeting which led to the curriculum reform for basic education and the 8-year implementation plan (Josua, Auala & Miranda 2022; NIED 2015).

A nationwide in-service training of all junior primary teachers and school principals was launched before commencing the implementation of the above-mentioned revised curriculum for the junior primary phase in 2015. Julius and Hautemo (2017) emphasise that Grade 4 and higher-class teachers face challenges of poor writing skills in learners which were not dealt with during the lower primary years. Namibia's low reading and writing proficiency remains a major concern (Katukula, Set & Nyambe 2023; Shikalepo 2020).

Mackenzie, Scull and Munsie (2013) highlight this worldwide issue and call for more knowledge on the teaching of writing in the early years. This is because learners who do not master the skill find school particularly challenging. Moreover, learners who have difficulty in writing could be missing valuable learning opportunities which may seriously negatively influence their lives if it is not managed well (Mackenzie & Hemmings 2014). Considering this, it is essential to start developing creative writing early in the child's school career. Other studies in teaching creative writing highlight that understanding curricula and instructional strategies for teaching a subject or skill at different grade levels is part of curriculum knowledge and thus essential knowledge for teachers (NEEDU 2013;

Ngubane 2018; Taylor 2019:263–282). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how the creative writing curriculum informs the instruction thereof. This research aimed to explore what challenges teachers experience when teaching creative writing in Grade 3.

## Research question

What challenges do teachers experience when implementing creative writing curriculum guidelines in Grade 3, in two Windhoek schools, Namibia?

## Theoretical framework

The study is framed within Lee Shulman's model of teacher knowledge of curriculum implementation (Shulman 1986; Shulman & Shulman 2004) and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) model of Mishra and Koehler (2006). The rationale for choosing this theory is that Shulman advocates that during lesson planning and teaching, teachers use sources of knowledge such as curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of goals and purposes, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of educational contexts, settings and governance (Guerriero 2014; Niemelä & Tirri 2018). The model acts as a guide in understanding the kind of knowledge that teachers need to possess to effectively execute their task. It was not going to be proper for this study to examine the challenges that teachers experience in implementing the creative writing curriculum without discussing what is expected of them as per the Ministry of Education.

In this study, the most relevant of Shulman's categories are briefly described, followed by a discussion of the concerns and barriers teachers reported in their teaching of creative writing. Thereafter, there is a summary of which advocated components of the curriculum teachers include or omit when teaching. The three categories of Shulman (1986, 1987) that are the most relevant to this study are discussed regarding creative writing instruction, namely content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge.

Being a teacher is an intricate affair using a variety of knowledge sources, especially in this time of rapid technological development. For this reason, Mishra and Koehler (2006) highlight teachers' technological knowledge, in addition to content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, as crucial for effective teaching. Their TPACK model identifies several points at which technological knowledge (TK) intersects with content knowledge (CK) and General Pedagogical Knowledge (GPK) (Mishra & Koehler 2006). Technological CK (TCK) is the understanding of the mutual relationship between technology and content. Technical professional knowledge (TPK) is the professional knowledge that teachers have about using technology in non-subject-specific teaching and learning scenarios. This implies that educators should be able to use technology for pedagogy in general, regardless of the disciplines they teach. It is

reasonable to anticipate that over time, the use of technology in pedagogy for certain subject matter will remain mostly unchanged (Mishra & Koehler 2006). For the teacher with TPACK, knowledge of technology, pedagogy, and content is synthesised and used for the design of learning experiences for learners (Koehler et al. 2016). When using TPACK, a teacher's expertise in material, pedagogy, and technology is combined and used which is why this, together with Shulman's curriculum knowledge, provides a relevant theoretical framework for this article.

## Content knowledge

Content knowledge refers to the teacher's cognisance of the realities and structure of their subject or discipline (Deng 2018; Guerriero 2014; Koehler et al. 2016; Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize 2017; Niemelä & Tirri 2018; Shulman 1986). Besides having subject knowledge, a teacher must recognise why these are the given realities and comprehend how meaning is made in the creative writing class. It is essential to regard writing as a process instead of a product. Creative writing is crucial, hence an understanding of what it encompasses is needed. It is the teachers' knowledge and understanding of writing and approaches to writing that influence the success of any curriculum and pedagogy (Ngubane 2018). The young writer needs explicit scaffolding to develop syntactic and thematic coherence in their texts, and to enhance their use of punctuation and cohesive devices (Del Longo & Cisotto 2014). Incorporating technology can enrich learner experiences and provide both teacher and learner with opportunities for creative problem-solving (Koehler et al. 2016).

The argument is thus that the more subject content knowledge the teacher has, the more confident and the more effective the teaching will be. In addition to this, Shulman (1987) asserts that the chance to develop better pedagogical content knowledge increases with the increase of content knowledge. The young writer needs explicit scaffolding to develop syntactic and thematic coherence in their texts, and to enhance their use of punctuation and cohesive devices (Del Longo & Cisotto 2014). Thus, teachers must find strategies and approaches that bring about optimal learning and teaching.

## Curriculum knowledge

Shulman (1986) defines curriculum knowledge as teachers having a thorough mastery of all subjects taught in the classroom and realising that there is only one curriculum currently in use. Hence, understanding different teaching methods, curriculum objectives, and instructional materials are all parts of curriculum knowledge (Deng 2018; Maharajh et al. 2017; Niemelä & Tirri 2018; Shulman 1986). Three forms of curriculum data are highlighted, namely lateral and vertical curriculum knowledge as well as knowledge about alternative curriculum materials (Niemelä & Tirri 2018). Whereas lateral curriculum knowledge means the knowledge that a teacher has about the other school subject concepts

their learners are learning about and how these relate to their own subject, vertical knowledge encompasses the knowledge of what was already covered before and what will be covered in their own subject area (Niemelä & Tirri 2018). Knowledge of alternative curriculum materials underscores how critical it is for teachers to understand that they have access to more resources, that there are diverse approaches to framing a curriculum, and that they may choose from a variety of strategies (Niemelä & Tirri 2018). The lack of curriculum knowledge is often cited as one of the challenges in curriculum reform and curriculum integration (Niemelä & Tirri 2018; Nkosi & Mkhize 2017). The implication is that knowledge of the curricular framework is essential to ensure delivery and particularly provide the teacher with the context to design a writing framework. In support of this, Taylor (2019) also identifies three factors that support effective teaching: CK, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and curriculum knowledge.

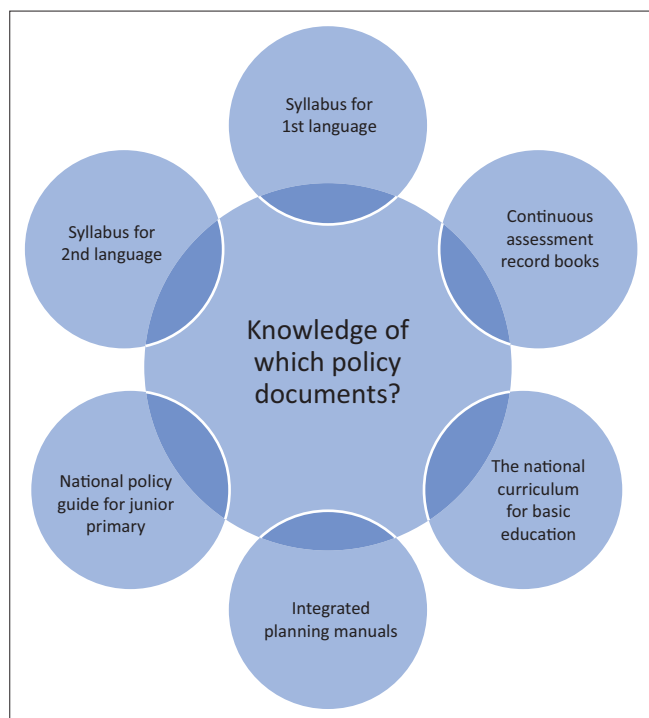
## Pedagogical content knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge is teachers' skill to make content clear and logical to learners (Guerriero 2014; Shulman 1986). However, mere comprehension is not enough; true learning is also linked to judgement and action (Shulman 1986). This is PCK. It includes examples, metaphors, analogies, illustrations, activities, assignments, and demonstrations that enhance learning. This specific skill includes understanding possible challenges perceived by learners, general errors, and ways to ensure that optimal learning takes place.

## Literature review

The use of specific materials included in a curriculum by instructors to teach and assess learning is known as curriculum implementation (Deng 2018; Wiles & Bondi 2014). A set of objectives is addressed by instructional recommendations, scripts, lesson plans, and possible assessments in curriculum designs. Fidelity is essential to ensure successful curriculum enactment (Wiles & Bondi 2014). That is why it is important to understand what teachers' beliefs entail as this impacts the decisions they make when planning lessons (McNeill et al. 2016). Continuous professional development and collaborative opportunities for teachers have the potential to increase the probability of implementing curricular inventions and instruction with fidelity (McNeill et al. 2016). In addition to this, Nevenglosky (2018) highlights the importance of teacher understanding when implementing curricula and how this has a direct impact on learners' progress. Teachers can only understand the curriculum fully if they have comprehensive knowledge thereof. In the case of the Namibian Department of Education, the curriculum documents that the teacher needs to be knowledgeable about are depicted in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the relevant policy documents about teaching creative writing are depicted. The teacher needs to be



**FIGURE 1:** A depiction of the policy documents required by teachers to teach creative writing.

knowledgeable about the broad curriculum, much more than the content formulated in the syllabus. A comprehensive understanding of all the relevant documents will highlight the advocated components in the writing curriculum. For example, the contextual, integrated, thematic approach to lessons and a learner-centred approach are featured repeatedly. To select suitable strategies, the teacher needs knowledge about the different strategies to teach creative writing. For example, in shared reading and writing, both the teacher and learners interchangeably take on the roles of the reader and writer, whereas in independent reading and writing, the learners read and write on their own while the teacher monitors learners (Willson & Falcon 2018). Not only are these approaches to writing well documented but they are also endorsed in the curriculum documents.

### Strategies of teaching creative writing

The process of writing is often regarded as complicated problem-solving which involves planning, translating, and reviewing stages (Flower & Hayes 1980; Göçen 2019). Different researchers maintain that the development of writing skills takes place later, harder, and slower than other language skills such as speaking, listening, and reading skills (Bayat 2016; Dai 2010; Göçen 2019). Teachers are thus required to create a conducive writing environment where learners can write freely, and to help learners develop writing abilities that they can use throughout their lives (Göçen 2019). Hence, the acquisition of relevant pedagogical content knowledge is regarded as crucial for teachers. Following are some of the evidence-based strategies that are used to teach creative writing.

### Shared writing

Shared writing is a strategy that assists in ensuring that learners are properly prepared for a writing task in the early grades. It is helpful to provide the learners with a sample of the genre of writing before assigning them a writing task in that genre. Shared writing involves generating a writing product with learners, supporting them to create a shared text representing the learners' ideas with the teacher's scaffolding and writing. This activity can be done on a flip chart or the board so that everyone can follow the process. Shared writing is a powerful way to ensure children are properly prepared for a writing task (De Lange, Dippenaar & Anker 2020). Before the children begin to write on their own, the teacher and children construct a text together on the topic. As the children suggest sentences, the teacher writes down what they say, getting their assistance and thinking aloud to show how it is done.

### Interactive writing

Interactive writing, in which the teacher and learner work together to make up a text, is another supported writing practice with several resemblances to shared writing. Learners participate also by sharing their ideas, but in interactive writing, the teacher and learners share the task of writing. The teacher creates, writes, and thinks aloud but this time, the teacher provides opportunities for learners to take the chalk or pencil to write letters, words, phrases, or sentences with the teacher's guidance. The benefits of shared and interactive writing are well recorded (Culham 2014; Graham & Alves 2021).

### Guided writing

Guided writing refers to group work where the teacher focuses on the development of specific competencies, while the rest of the class continues independently. The creative lesson is concluded by summarising the target competencies and learners relating their personal victories (Willson & Falcon 2018).

### Summary

The above discussion revealed that teachers' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and their approaches to writing, influence the success of the acquisition of creative writing skills by learners. The importance of understanding the process of writing as well as investigating the best strategies to teach it in the early years was explored. The process of acquiring writing skills does not happen easily but gradually, which necessitate knowledgeable teachers, capable to deliver well-planned, interactive lessons.

Teachers should not only know the syllabus, but also be knowledgeable about the broad curriculum and all the relevant supporting documents. Curriculum knowledge includes knowledge of various teaching strategies, learning objectives, and instructional materials. Possessing such knowledge has the potential to transform classroom practice and learners can benefit optimally.



## Methodology and research design

Merriam and Grenier (2019) contend that qualitative research refers to a systematic scientific investigation to construct a comprehensive, narrative account that assists the researchers to comprehend a social or cultural phenomenon. Therefore, this study adopted a qualitative approach embedded in an interpretive paradigm. Furthermore, Fouché, Strydom and Roestenburg (2021) posit that the qualitative research approach is primarily employed to grasp social phenomena from the perspective of participants. This resonates with the viewpoint of Creswell and Creswell (2018), which underscores that a qualitative approach enables researchers to investigate phenomena within specific contextual settings which suits this research design. The natural setting in this context refers specifically to the creative writing lessons. Therefore, the researcher is trying to get a picture of the actual situation from the participant's angle (Merriam & Grenier 2019). The interpretive paradigm made it possible for researchers to understand how the participants of the study interpreted the phenomenon under study as they engage with the data (Fouché et al. 2021). In this context, this meant understanding how the teachers interpret and experience the teaching of creative writing. The researchers understood that the study as a social phenomenon needs to be understood through the participants' perspectives, and not the perspectives of the researchers (Haenssger 2019). Therefore, the teachers' perspectives were used to make meaning of how they perceive creative writing teaching.

A case study design was selected in this research to enable researchers to thoroughly investigate the firsthand experiences of the research participants and explore the concerns and barriers experienced when teaching creative writing in Grade 3. Among the fundamental qualities of the case study is its use of a variety of sources to obtain information (Fouché et al. 2021). Consequently, this is another reason it would make sense to employ the case study design. The multiple data collection plan of this research includes focus group interviews, lesson observations and document analysis. The case study was thus conducted for the following reasons:

- It provided the researchers with an opportunity to study the participants in their natural setting, the classroom and, more specifically, the creative writing lesson.

- It provided the researchers with access to the real-life situation, such as the actual implementation of teaching creative writing strategies in the classrooms (Fouché et al. 2021).

Therefore, the case study design was deemed suitable for this research to obtain rich data within the natural setting, in a multimethod manner.

## Participants and sampling technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit six Grade 3 teachers from two selected primary schools. Purposeful sampling enabled the researchers to locate and choose participants that were relevant for the study due to their experience in teaching Grade 3, having relevant qualifications and their willingness to participate in the study (Palinkas et al. 2015). Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) contend that purposive sampling is also known as judgement sampling as it is the intentional selection of a participant based on the attributes they possess. The participants were selected because they taught Grade 3 and were regarded as knowledgeable and information-rich about the teaching of creative writing in Grade 3. The participants were chosen also for their willingness to participate in this research. The demographic profile of the participants is depicted in Table 1.

## Data collection methods

The data collection methods included classroom observations, focus group interviews and document analysis. The researchers used field notes and audio recordings during the focus group interviews. In addition to this, lessons were observed using an observation guide, which were centred on how the creative writing lessons were conducted. Thereafter, learner scripts were analysed by using a guide to triangulate the obtained data. Learners' scripts were assessed to observe the types of activities, feedback and corrections, and common mistakes made in spelling, grammar, sentence construction as indicated in the analysis guide.

The researchers spent two periods per week in Grade 3 classrooms of the two selected schools for 4 weeks and were able to view the learner scripts and syllabus. Creative writing is scheduled once a week and therefore one writing lesson was observed per week with each participant. Comprehensive notes on the writing instruction lessons were compiled and photographs of the teaching aids and chalkboard notes were

**TABLE 1:** Socio-demographic profile of teachers.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years of teaching	Qualification	Languages trained to teach	Native language	Culture group
<b>School 1</b>							
Teacher X	48	F	10	Diploma + Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)	English Afrikaans Rukwangali	Rukwangali	Kavango
Teacher Y	25	F	2	Basic Education Teaching Diploma	English + Afrikaans	Otjiherero	Herero
Teacher Z	38	F	9	Diploma in Junior Primary Education	Afrikaans + English	Afrikaans	Afrikaner
<b>School 2</b>							
Teacher A	31	F	9	B. Ed (Pre- and Lower Prim)	English + Afrikaans		Coloured
TB	27	M	5	Diploma in Junior Primary Education	English + Afrikaans	Nama	Griqua
TC	36	F	10	Diploma in Junior Primary Education	English + Afrikaans	Otjiherero	Herero

taken. The observation guide provided the structure within which to operate during lesson observations, to ensure that the desired data were captured. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasise that observations afford one the chance to record data as it transpires in a real location and real situation to experience the actual activities relating to the research. In this case, the lesson observation was centred on how writing was taught.

## Procedure

The focus group interviews were conducted in each of the two schools. The focused interviews were conducted at the respective schools for 60 min per session. An interview guide was used to guide the discussions. The researchers did lesson observations in 6 classrooms for 40 min in each class. Document analysis included scrutinising public documents like the: (1) national curriculum, (2) integrated planning manual for Grade 3, (3) Grade 3 first language syllabus and (4) Grade 3 assessment record book to determine the expected outcomes of creative writing.

## Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the collected data obtained through the focus group interviews, lesson observations and document analysis. After the first interview, a more intense analysis determined whether additional themes and concepts were uncovered to strengthen or deepen the understanding of scientific approaches to teaching writing effectively. Comparing material within all the categories to discover nuances, hints and variations helped to gain a better understanding of the data. The researchers followed the six-phase guide by Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarising themselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) point out that qualitative researcher is sometimes regarded as the research instrument concerning the ability to construe meaning and define and interpret experiences, perceptions, and contexts.

## Ethical considerations

The ethical clearance certificate was obtained from UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee on 6 July 2022. The ethical clearance number is: 2022/07/06/36576158/15/AM. Permission to conduct the study was then sought from the Ministry of Basic Education in Namibia and the school principals of the two participating schools. Upon receiving permission, the researchers sought consent from the participants after being informed of their right to terminate their participation any time they felt uncomfortable. Researchers sent letters to parents explaining the purpose of the research to acquire their informed consent.

The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities. To identify the participants in the text, researchers used pseudonyms namely School 1 with Teachers X, Y, Z, and School 2 with Teachers A, B and C.

## Findings

### Classroom observations

Teachers primarily introduced new vocabulary by using flashcards, and they added visuals to help students grasp concepts. Students eagerly offered vocal responses during the lesson's opening class discussions, in which they fully participated. But as soon as they had to start writing, it appeared as they did not want to. Teachers often go over the punctuation and grammatical rules linked to the wall displays before students receive their worksheets or books. Nonetheless, students were frequently approaching teachers for help with word spelling. Instructors put the vibrant images and flashcards up on the board for students to see so they could finish the writing assignment. There was no mention of using dictionaries, nor was there any motivation to do so. There was neither encouragement nor facilitation of collaboration among learners while they worked on their writing assignments. Pupils appeared to be overburdened; they would frequently ask for help finding words, ask to write in or out of margins, or concentrate more on letter formation than on really getting their ideas down on paper.

### Document analysis

The analysis of all the national policy document pertaining to teaching writing as shown in Figure 1 revealed the following information, depicted in Table 2.

Table 2 shows how essential information regarding the creative writing curriculum is spread across different documents. The implication hereof is that it is required of the

**TABLE 2:** Summarised content of junior primary curriculum documents.

Name of official document	Authors	Guidance and/or Information pertaining to creative writing
National policy guide for Junior Primary	National Institute for Educational Development (NIED 2015a; 2015b), a directorate within the Ministry of Education, (MoE).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic approach to teaching</li> <li>• Learner-centred approach</li> <li>• Checklist to evaluate your teaching</li> <li>• Assessment – Types of assessment, and their recording</li> <li>• Principles of assessment</li> <li>• Examples of assessment approaches</li> <li>• Levels of questioning</li> <li>• Monitoring and marking of written work</li> <li>• Aims of marking</li> <li>• Guidelines to marking</li> <li>• Practical considerations when marking</li> </ul>
The integrated planning manual for Grade 3	National Institute for Educational Development (NIED 2015a; 2015b), a directorate within the Ministry of Education (MoE).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advantages of integration</li> <li>• Learning support</li> <li>• Resources such as stories, songs, and games</li> <li>• Methodologies, e.g. shared writing, modelled writing, guided writing, diary</li> <li>• Progression of phonics, sight words</li> </ul>
First language syllabus	National Institute for Educational Development (NIED 2015a; 2015b), a directorate within the Ministry of Education (MoE).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning objectives:</li> <li>• Produce neat and legible final pieces of work using the writing process for example</li> <li>• Use pre-writing strategies to gather information on a topic, e.g. share ideas with fellow learners and organise ideas and information before writing</li> <li>• Draft a piece of writing, selecting a text form to suit the purpose, e.g. diary entry, letter, recipe</li> <li>• Replace, add, and reorder words and sentences</li> <li>• Reorder sequence of ideas or facts</li> <li>• Recognise and correct most punctuation, grammar and spelling mistakes using use dictionaries and other resources</li> <li>• Discuss your own and others' writing to get or give feedback</li> </ul>

teacher to have sound knowledge and understanding of all the relevant documents so that lesson planning can be aligned to the curriculum. For example, the national policy guide lays out in detail the goals of marking to direct teachers toward reaching curriculum objectives. These goals include valuing the learner's learning style, strengths, and weaknesses to inform future lesson planning, demonstrating the standard of work expected of the learners, and demonstrating respect for their effort. In addition, certain pragmatic factors are specified, including:

- Remarks must be constructive, considerate, unique, and varied wherever feasible.
- Grading student work in class should be appreciated since it provides a chance for timely learning that supports instruction and deters learners from making the same mistakes twice.

This aligns with Shulman's principle that teachers need to use a variety of knowledge sources when planning and executing lessons, including curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (Guerrero 2014; Niemelä & Tirri 2018).

## Focus group interviews

Data were also collected through focus group interviews at each school. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity, for instance School 1 with TX, TY and TZ and School 2 with TA, TB, and TC. The participants' responses are displayed in Table 3.

Two themes and three categories emerged from the collected data:

- Theme one: Lack of motivation.
  - Sub-theme: Lack of oral skills of learners.
- Theme 2: Lack of curriculum knowledge.
  - Sub-theme: Lack of diverse strategies.
  - Sub-theme: Lack of strategies to assess creative writing.

### Theme 1: Lack of motivation

The participants were asked about what they found challenging when they taught creative writing. All the participants from the two schools revealed that there were

challenges and uncertainties around the teaching of creative writing in Grade 3. The results suggested that the Grade 3 teachers perceive writing as difficult to teach and they experienced a lack of diverse strategies in teaching creative writing at primary schools in Namibia. Below are verbatim accounts from two participants:

'Like for me ... I just don't know where to begin; I don't know whether I am doing the right thing or the wrong thing. Sometimes that child who is struggling never improves. So, I don't know ... maybe we need a guideline on how to teach writing.' (Participant TC, 36, F, 10)

'[L]ike for reading we start with the sounds, incorporate the pictures ... but for writing, the guidelines are just broad ... just creative writing.' (Participant TA, 31, F, 9)

The teachers believed that the learners do not like writing and their negativity affects the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) with which they teach. This is reflected in the following response:

'Learners do not like to participate in writing – they always moan. I must admit, I don't like it either because it is such a struggle.' (Participant TZ, 38, F, 9)

During the lesson observations and document analysis it became evident that the language skills of learners like punctuation, spelling and syntax were not up to standard. This seemingly adds to the frustration of teachers. Therefore, the next sub-theme, poor oral language, emerged. Oral skills are crucial for the action of putting thoughts into writing and it was evident that teachers made up for the lack thereof by constantly providing the spelling of words or putting up words on flashcards.

**Sub-theme: Poor oral skills of learners:** The teachers complained that the basic skills were not in place and referred to poor spelling, syntax, and the lack of vocabulary, which led to generating this sub-theme as a lack of oral language skills. This is confirmed by a teacher's remark:

'But now you struggle with learners without vocabulary, so you have to build that first and repeat it during the writing lesson, so, you try to reinforce it with a relevant picture.' (Participant TX, 48, F, 10)

Teachers regard learners as reluctant to engage in writing and they blame this reluctance on the basic skills which were not mastered in the previous grades:

**TABLE 3:** Responses from focus group interviews.

**Q: What do you find challenging when you teach creative writing?**

TX: 'here we are ... they did not master the basics ...'

TB: 'We sometimes copy stories or activities from textbooks'

TZ: 'Learners do not like to participate in writing- they always moan - I must admit - I don't like it either because it is such a struggle'

TX: 'We still have learners in grade three who cannot write at all ... English is not our 1st language, but we must do it'

TZ: 'Afrikaans is not their second language but we must follow the syllabus'

TX: 'We were never taught how to teach writing'

**Q: What about using strategies like Shared writing and other methods?**

TX: 'Shared writing is a great idea but takes a lot of time-learners are already having a backlog- after COVID-19, they are behind'

TA: 'I feel like creative writing is about how this child can make up a whole paragraph out of the small picture that we gave them'

**Q: What do you look at when you assess writing?**

TY: 'It depends on the teacher ... for me punctuation and correct spelling'

TX: 'When we are writing, if you have more pictures for them to draw, colour, they focus ...'

TC: '... before I start with the spelling, first I read and try to understand what the learner was trying to say, does it correlate with the topic, and then there they also score a mark or two. Then how their ideas are following one another. Spelling, grammar, and sentence construction'

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

'The basic skills are not in place – going to higher order things like creating stories is a tall order.' (Participant TZ, 38, F, 9)

Teachers perceived a lack of support and guidance as adding to their frustrations and feelings of being ill-equipped:

'We were never really taught how to teach writing and the things from the syllabus are too much – you end up choosing fun things like making an invitation.' (Participant TC, 36, F, 10)

We still have learners in Grade 3 who cannot write at all. ... So, if the instruction says, 'write a story', that is the instruction, and this child has no clue, even how to start it, just to build sentences. (Participant TY, 25, F, 2)

The analysis of the documents, where learner scripts were scrutinised, showed that the same kind of activities were done. A topic with vocabulary was explored and learners wrote sentences based on the pictures and vocabulary flashcards. Learners repeated similar mistakes and poor progress was made throughout the year. Learners also relied heavily on teacher support and continuously asked for assistance with the spelling of words. Out of 20 observed lessons, only one employed shared writing as a strategy to teach writing.

## Theme 2: Lack of curriculum knowledge

Participants could not discuss what the curriculum outlined in terms of creative writing except for mentioning that learners are required to write stories and make invitation cards:

'We teach vocabulary, integrate the grammar, we did (punctuation) and after the oral discussion, they write. We support the writing, check whether they started and assist with spelling.' (Participant TZ, 38, F, 9)

To remind teachers about the strategies as outlined in the integrated manual for Grade 3, a question on shared writing was asked:

'I prepared the shared writing lesson after I read up on it a bit. I enjoyed it. It takes a lot of time ... yeh, I do like using it and will do it now and then.' (Participant TA, 31, F, 9)

The writing curriculum in its totality was not well understood by the participants. The document analysis showed that essential information is contained in different documents and some, like the guidelines on marking, is not readily available in the syllabus or planning manual which are most frequently used by teachers. Although the documents propose different strategies to teach creative writing, little of this was observed during the lessons:

Therefore, a need for different strategies was identified and the following sub-themes emerged:

- Lack of strategies to teach creative writing.
- Lack of strategies to assess creative writing.

### Sub-theme: Lack of strategies to teach creative writing:

Teachers regard poor learner progress as a hindrance preventing them from covering the syllabus and from

venturing into new strategies. Their time and effort are seemingly invested into getting learners' basic language skills up to date and expanding the vocabulary of learners:

'If the instruction says, "write a story", that is the instruction, and this child has no clue, even how to start it, just to build sentences. So, it is very challenging at that point because you find a learner who will write something, then this one will just write for you things that don't make sense and you cannot give them a mark for that, and also it will keep you behind because this child needs a mark, you cannot give a zero mark either.' (Participant TY, 25, F, 2)

'Shared writing is a great idea but takes a lot of time – learners are already having a backlog – after Covid-19 they are behind. We were never taught how to teach writing – just a few ideas were given, but now you struggle with learners without vocabulary, so you must build that first and repeat it during the writing lesson, so you try to reinforce it with a relevant picture. ... The other thing that makes writing exceedingly difficult is, we focus more on the language, let's say this week we are teaching about verbs, we focus more on the verbs than creative writing itself.' (Participant TY, 25, F, 2)

In contrast to the process approach, where the focus of writing instruction is more on what is needed in writing and rewriting texts and moving through stages such as pre-writing, writing, revising, and editing, is the product approach (Flower & Hayes 1981): the teachers seem to be more concerned with the product. The process of improving first attempts does not enjoy any priority and does not receive any attention. Strategies like shared writing were regarded as demanding extra effort while guided writing and interactive writing were not even discussed as possible methodologies of teaching creative writing, although they are mentioned in the curriculum. The data collected from the document study pertaining to learner books as well as the lessons observed showed slight variation in the types of activities and a repetition of similar mistakes in learners' writing.

### Sub-theme: Lack of strategies to assess creative writing:

'We don't know how to assess their work, so we just try. ... I look at spelling and punctuation.' (Participant TX, 48, F, 10)

'Before I start with the spelling, first I read and try to understand what the learner was trying to say, does it correlate with the topic, and then there they also score a mark or two. Then how their ideas are following one another. Spelling, grammar, and sentence construction.' (Participant TC, 36, F, 10)

'It depends on the teacher ... for me ... punctuation and correct spelling.' (Participant TY, 25, F, 2)

'When we are writing, if you have more pictures for them to draw, colour, they focus.' (Participant TX, 48, F, 19)

Participants regarded the official curriculum documents as lacking information or guidance on assessment. However, those documents are indeed incredibly detailed and provide a lot of information and guidance. For instance, learner marking is identified as a valuable analytical exercise in those documents which has the potential to catapult the development of writing skills to another level.



## Discussion of the findings

### Concerns and barriers in teaching creative writing

Teachers reported that, unlike phonics and reading, they do not have curricular guidelines on creative writing and felt ill-equipped to teach it effectively. In a similar vein, research showed that when instructors felt more comfortable instructing writing, they spent more time doing it, and students in their classes wrote more (De Smedt, Van Keer & Merchie 2016; Hsiang, Graham & Yang 2020; Rietdijk et al. 2018). Teachers in this case study pointed out that they were willing to bring new strategies into their teaching because they were not confident in themselves and even felt they were not adequately prepared to teach creative writing. They also highlighted that their learners were reluctant to participate in writing activities and lacked the basic skills of writing such as the correct use of capital letters. Teachers also revealed that most learners struggled with a lack of vocabulary. These challenges highlight the importance of teachers applying a variety of knowledge sources in their teaching, inclusive of curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge as Shulman proposes (Guerriero 2014; Niemelä & Tirri 2018; Shulman 1986; Shulman & Shulman 2004). As found in other research (Nevenglosky 2018), teacher understanding when implementing curricula has direct bearing on learners' advancement. The need for explicit scaffolding to enhance learner knowledge in the use of punctuation and cohesive devices (Del Longo & Cisotto 2014) means that teacher knowledge must be consolidated to bring about the learning required.

### Implemented and intended curriculum

The curriculum is a whole as a model, a document, including the organisation of the educational environment, decisions made by teachers regarding the learning process, and the opinions of society, families, and external authorities (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards 2018). The implemented curriculum encompasses that which is translated into classrooms and schools. The teacher remains the most crucial factor in ensuring that the intended curriculum is indeed implemented. However, the findings showed that teachers did not implement the curriculum guidelines and sometimes did not know about them. That could be why shared writing, writing journal and even opinion pieces did not feature in the writing lessons. It seemed that the teachers wrongfully followed the syllabus as an independent document. Moreover, writing is perceived more as a product than a process. Teachers selected options like making invitation cards rather than explicitly providing scaffolded instruction to develop writing skills in genres like opinion. The advocated components like improving writing and shared or modelled writing methodologies as well as corrective feedback were missing in the classrooms.

Figure 2 shows what the intended curriculum wanted to achieve and how the curriculum was implemented. The intended curriculum advocates for the use of evidence-based methodologies such as shared writing and provides opportunities to write different genres and for different

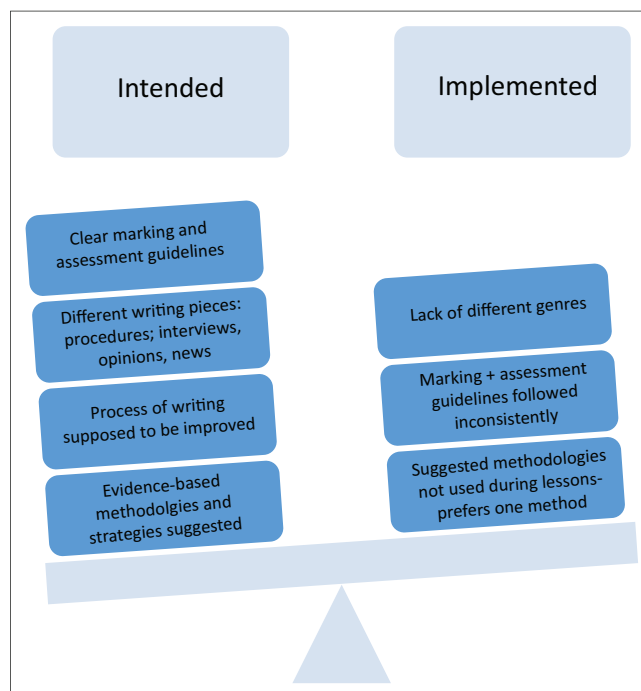


FIGURE 2: Curriculum implementation with respect to creative writing.

purposes like instructions, procedures, conducting interviews and opinion writing.

However, it was observed that teachers focus mostly on genres like the narrative and the descriptive. Opinion writing was not discussed and the opportunity to develop writing skills in this genre has been neglected. Similarly, the learners' books revealed mostly descriptive writing activities. On the other hand, clear guidance on the assessment of creative writing like providing extensive feedback is outlined in the curriculum. Considering this, action should be expected from the young writer after feedback has been provided. Therefore, reworking the same writing piece is supposed to be encouraged in the class. Assessment should only take place after proper scaffolding and ample time for practice runs. Assessment guidelines were not followed consistently, and teachers lacked diverse strategies to teach creative writing.

### Limitations of the study

Data for the article were generated using two schools; therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalised. The researchers depended on the honesty of the participants in the study. The research was limited to two primary schools in the Khomas Region in Namibia. This research only focused on the opinions, viewpoints, and participation of the teachers in Grade 3. Further research is needed to determine the strategies that may be used to monitor the development of creative writing in the Foundation Phase.

## Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the creative writing curriculum in Grade 3. The findings revealed that teachers find teaching creative writing challenging and regard a lack of curricular

guidance, inadequate training, and limited language skills of learners among the reasons for the poor progress. In addition to this, inadequate curriculum knowledge resulted in the intended curriculum for teaching creative writing skills not necessarily being the curriculum that was implemented in schools. Although the curriculum documents outline interactive strategies wherein the modelling of proficient writing practices is encouraged, teachers still detected poor learner progress. In addition to this, teachers did not employ diverse strategies as outlined in the curriculum. This study may prove to be of value to mitigate the challenges experienced in teaching creative writing and to ensure the effective implementation of the writing curriculum in Namibia.

Therefore, the study recommends that the school management and the regional officials provide intensive support to teachers by regularly providing refresher courses on curriculum documents and what they entail. Teachers may be encouraged to create and participate in professional learning communities and collaborations where, among others, curriculum knowledge and understanding are discussed and barriers to accurate aligning or crafting coherence are addressed. Furthermore, this study recommends more time be spent on creative writing instruction and aligning lessons with curricular outcomes. This study also recommends that teacher training programmes include a thorough study of curriculum documents as part of their training.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of

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