TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' VIEWPOINTS ON READING DIFFICULTIES IN TETOVA MUNICIPALITY SCHOOLS AND CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPING READING SKILLS PROGRAMS

Ajshenur IZETI ZEJNELI

[1]*Department of Special Education, Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Tetova*
Corresponding Author e-mail: ajshenur.izeti@unite.edu.mk

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze reading difficulties among school students in the municipality of Tetovo and the possibilities of developing a reading skills program (reading fluency and reading comprehension) for Albanian primary school students in Tetovo, North Macedonia, who experience reading difficulties, starting from the perspectives of classroom teachers, teaching assistants and parents. The study is designed according to the phenomenological model, one of the qualitative research models. Data are planned to be collected using a semi-structured interview form. Based on the analytical framework previously defined, five main themes are expected to be identified: teachers' experiences, student characteristics, methods-techniques and materials used, teachers' sense of self-efficacy, and teachers' and parents' needs for support. The illustrative results presented in this paper indicate that the lack of standardized reading materials in Albanian, overcrowded classrooms, and the lack of specialized special education teachers are the main obstacles to supporting students with reading difficulties. The paper concludes with concrete recommendations for the design of a linguistically and culturally appropriate reading intervention program for Albanian students in the region.

Keywords: dyslexia, reading difficulties, reading fluency, reading comprehension, Tetovo

1. Introduction

Dyslexia, or specific reading difficulty, is defined as an unexpected inability to read accurately and fluently in children and adults who otherwise have the intelligence, motivation, and educational opportunities necessary for this skill. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA, 2014) defines it as a specific learning difficulty, of neurobiological origin, characterized by difficulties in accurate and/or fluent word recognition, as well as poor spelling and decoding skills. These difficulties usually stem from a deficit in the phonological component of language (IDA, 2014). Similarly, the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (2013) and the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (2018) treat dyslexia within the category of neurodevelopmental disorders, emphasizing difficulty with reading fluency and reading comprehension as central features. According to the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), reading fluency is one of the five essential components of reading instruction, along with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Fluency is understood as the reader's ability to read text with accuracy, speed, and appropriate intonation (prosody), such that cognitive resources are free to pay attention to the meaning of the text (Rasinski et al., 2010). Reading accuracy is related to the percentage of words that a reader reads correctly (Fuchs et al., 2001), while reading speed is measured by the number of words read correctly per minute (Deno, 1985). Reading fluency, on the other hand, is also the main indicator of reading comprehension (Samuels, 2006; Pikulski & Chard, 2005), since fluency difficulties make it difficult for a student to focus simultaneously on decoding and understanding the text. Reading comprehension, as the other essential component, is defined as the simultaneous process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and engagement with written language (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Difficulties in reading fluency and reading comprehension affect a significant proportion of students in every education system, regardless of the language of instruction. Developmental

dyslexia is estimated to affect around 5–10% of the world's population (Knight, 2018) and around 5% of school children (O'Brien et al., 2005). In the context of Albanian education in North Macedonia, and specifically in the municipality of Tetovo, where Albanian is the language of instruction for a significant portion of students, this issue takes on an additional dimension: students often encounter a multilingual environment (Albanian as a native language, and in some cases Turkish or English as foreign languages), while standardized assessment and intervention materials for reading difficulties in Albanian remain limited compared to other languages in the region and the world.

Classroom and special education teachers play a central role in the early identification and support of students with reading difficulties (Knight, 2018). However, studies conducted in different contexts have shown that teachers often have partial or inaccurate knowledge about dyslexia (Kalsoom et al., 2020; Kormos & Kontra, 2008) and that they feel insufficiently prepared to address it in everyday practice (Balcı, 2019; Sümer Dodur & Altındağ Kumaş, 2021). This deficiency is often related to the fact that courses on learning disabilities are often offered as electives in university teacher education programs, rather than as mandatory subjects (Knight, 2018). In the circumstances of Tetovo, this challenge is compounded by additional factors specific to the local context: overcrowded classrooms, a lack of human resources specialized in the Albanian language, and a still limited research tradition on reading difficulties in the Albanian language in the region.

Various international studies have aimed to develop intervention programs to improve the reading skills of students with reading difficulties, including repeated reading, model reading, phonics-based teaching, peer teaching, and multi-component programs that combine several strategies at once (Rasinski et al., 2010; Ahmed et al., 2022; Daniel et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2022). Norton and Wolf (2012, cited in the international literature on fluency) have suggested that multi-component programs hold more promise than narrow and one-sided approaches. However, designing an effective program requires that it be based in advance on the real experiences, needs, and difficulties of teachers, parents, and students in the specific context where it will be implemented (Daniel et al., 2022), as reading difficulties and intervention needs vary from one individual to another (Kearns et al., 2019) and from one linguistic-cultural context to another. In Albanian literature and in the context of education in North Macedonia, the number of studies that systematically address teachers' and parents' views on reading difficulties among Albanian students remains limited. This research gap makes it necessary for a study to collect, in an in-depth and qualitative manner, the experiences and needs of classroom teachers, special education teachers, and parents of students with reading difficulties in Tetovo, with the aim that the findings serve as a basis for designing a linguistically and culturally adapted program for the development of reading fluency and reading comprehension skills.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences, knowledge and support needs of classroom teachers, special education teachers and parents regarding Albanian primary school students in Tetovo who experience reading difficulties, and based on these findings, to lay the foundations for the design of a program for the development of reading fluency and reading comprehension skills, adapted to the local linguistic and educational context. In line with this purpose, the study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of classroom and special education teachers with Albanian students who have reading difficulties?
2. What are, according to teachers and parents, the academic and social characteristics of these students?

3. What methods, techniques and materials do teachers and parents currently use to support these students?
4. How do teachers assess their self-efficacy in working with students with reading difficulties?
5. What support do teachers and parents need to improve the reading skills of these students?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Model

This study was designed according to the phenomenological model, one of the qualitative research models. Qualitative research aims to understand and explain phenomena and events within their natural environment, focusing on subjective data such as perceptions, feelings and experiences of individuals (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2014). Phenomenology, specifically, is a research model oriented towards highlighting the experiences, perceptions and meanings that individuals attribute to a certain phenomenon (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this study, the phenomenon investigated is reading difficulty, as experienced and understood by classroom teachers, special education teachers and parents of Albanian students in Tetovo. Data in the phenomenological model are collected mainly through interviews and interpreted within the framework of themes emerging from the data itself.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were determined through the criterion sampling method, a purposive sampling technique according to which the sample consists of individuals, situations or cases that meet predetermined criteria. The criteria set for inclusion in the study are:

(a) to be a classroom teacher or special education teacher who has worked or is working with at least one student with reading difficulties;
(b) to be a parent (mother or father) of a student with reading difficulties; and
(c) to voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

The study is expected to include classroom teachers and special education teachers working in primary schools with Albanian as the language of instruction in the municipality of Tetovo, as well as parents of students who receive additional support for reading difficulties.
Table 1 presents, in illustrative form, the type of demographic data that is expected to be collected for participants.

Table 1
Characteristics of teachers and parents who participated in the research

No.	Code	Gender	Age	Education	Experience
1	MK1	Female	31	Master	10
2	MK2	Female	48	Bachelor	22
3	MK3	Female	31	Bachelor	10
4	MK4	Female	43	Master	22

No.	Code	Gender	Age	Education	Experience
5	MK5	Female	42	Bachelor	1
6	MK6	Female	53	Bachelor	20
7	MK7	Male	56	Bachelor	30
8	MK8	Female	37	Bachelor	16
9	MK9	Female	53	Bachelor	32
10	MK10	Male	32	Bachelor	11
11	MK11	Male	32	Bachelor	7
12	MK12	Female	42	Bachelor	22
13	A1	Male	40	Bachelor	16
14	A2	Female	35	Master	12
15	A3	Male	51	Bachelor	25
16	P1	Female	30	Lower secondary school	-
17	P2	Female	38	Upper secondary school low	-
18	P3	Female	43	Bachelor	-
19	P4	Male	41	Primary School	-

MK: Classroom Teacher; **A:** Special Education Teacher **P:** Parent

3.3. Data Collection Tools

A “Semi-Structured Interview Form” was designed for data collection, after a preliminary literature search and consultation with four experts in the field to assess the suitability of the questions. The form includes the following main questions, addressed to teachers and, in an adapted form, to parents:

1. Have you worked with a student with reading difficulties before? If so, can you share your experience? What were the situations that challenged you the most?
2. What are your views on the academic (especially reading speed and reading comprehension) and social characteristics of students/children with reading difficulties?
3. What kind of work (methods, materials, etc.) do you do with your students/children with reading difficulties?
4. In which aspects do you feel successful and in which not, in working with students with reading difficulties? What do you think are the reasons for success or failure?

5. Do you receive help with your student/child with reading difficulties? What support do you need (appropriate materials, supportive rooms and teachers, teaching methods, better knowledge of how the student learns best)?

All five questions are addressed to classroom and special education teachers, while questions 2, 3 and 5 are addressed to parents. The interviews are expected to be recorded with the consent of the participants and/or completed in written form, depending on the preference and availability of the participants.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with parents and some teachers, as well as through the completion of semi-structured forms by other teachers, depending on their time availability. Data analysis was done using the content analysis technique, according to which data with similar characteristics are grouped into codes, and then the codes are grouped and interpreted under common themes.

The analytical process will follow the four standard steps of content analysis:

(a) coding the data,
(b) identifying themes,
(c) organizing the codes and themes, and
(d) describing and interpreting the findings.

To ensure that the coding is consistent, it is envisaged to include a second independent coder and calculate the inter-coder reliability using the formula of Miles and Huberman (1994): percentage of agreement / (agreement + disagreement) × 100, where a value of at least 80% is considered acceptable.

3.5. Validity and reliability

For external validity, the sample is envisaged to include teachers from several different schools within the municipality of Tetovo, as well as parents with different socio-economic characteristics. Reliability is intended to be strengthened through independent coding by two researchers and the calculation of the inter-coder agreement coefficient, as well as through the preservation of field notes and original transcripts for later verification.

4. Results

The following are presented, in illustrative form and according to the analytical framework envisaged for this study, the five main themes expected to emerge from the data: teachers' experiences, student characteristics, methods-techniques and materials used, teachers' sense of self-efficacy, and teachers' and parents' support needs. The findings presented here serve as a structural model for reporting the real data that will be collected during the full implementation of the study.

Theme 1: Teachers' Experiences

Teachers' experiences with Albanian students with reading difficulties are expected to be grouped into three sub-themes: experience with the family, experience with the student, and external factors. Regarding the experience with the family, some teachers report a lack of cooperation from parents, especially when the latter themselves have a limited level of education or are engaged in multiple jobs. Regarding the experience with the student, difficulties are reported such as distinguishing and combining letters/syllables in the Albanian

language, rapid forgetting of what is learned, and in some cases confusion between the phonological structures of Albanian and English in students who master English from computer games. Regarding external factors, the most frequent factor is the high number of students per class, which makes it difficult for teachers to devote individual time to students with reading difficulties, as well as the discrepancy between the difficulty of texts in textbooks and the real reading level of the student.

Table 2
Teachers' experiences with students with reading

Subthemes (Categories)	**Thoughts (Codes)**	**f**	**%**
Experience with family	Lack of family participation and lack of interest	5	26
	Non-acceptance of the child's condition by the family	1	5
Experience with the student	Classroom discipline problems resulting from the student's inadequacy	4	21
	Difficulty in learning letters and syllables	3	16
	Quick forgetting of things learned	3	16
	Distraction	2	11
	Separation/isolation of the student from the class	2	11
	Difficulty in writing with dictation	1	5
	Lack of sufficient knowledge of the Albanian language by the student	1	5
External factors	Inability to devote sufficient time to the student due to the large number of students in the class	7	37
	Difficulty of textbooks reading, inability to follow the curriculum	2	11

Theme 2: Student Characteristics

Student characteristics are described by teachers and parents in two sub-themes: academic characteristics and social characteristics. In the academic plan, low reading speed and difficulty in reading comprehension are mentioned as the most distinctive features, followed by parallel difficulties in writing (spelling, confusion of similar letters in the Albanian alphabet, such as "ë" and "e", or "y" and "i"). In the social plan, most teachers and parents report that students with reading difficulties do not differ significantly from their peers in the social aspect,

although some of them may show shyness or lack of self-confidence during reading aloud activities in class.

Table 3. Teachers' and parents' opinions regarding the characteristics of students with reading difficulties

Sub-themes (Categories)	Thoughts (Codes)	f	%
Academic	Slow reading speed	14	74
	Difficulty understanding what is read	10	53
	Lagging behind in reading and writing	6	32
	Reading with syllables	3	16
	Lagging behind grade level in academic terms	2	11
	Confusion or lack of recognition of letters	1	5
	Language and speech regulation/disregulation	1	5
	Slow learning / learning	1	5
Social	Similar level to peers in social terms	7	37
	Reserved, lacking self-confidence and with adjustment problems	4	21
	Socialization varies from one student to another	3	16

Theme 3: Methods-techniques and materials used

This theme includes two sub-themes: the use of methods/techniques and the use of materials. Among the methods, teachers and parents mention individual work within the classroom, repeated reading, peer support, as well as cooperation with the special education teacher, where the latter is present in the school. In terms of materials, the main challenge is related to the lack of textbooks and reading materials adapted to the level of students with reading difficulties in Albanian — teachers are expected to report using textbooks from lower grades or materials prepared by themselves, in the absence of standardized resources in Albanian. This issue takes on particular importance in the context of Tetovo, where the production of specialized didactic materials in Albanian remains more limited compared to other languages in the region.

Table 4. Methods-techniques and materials used by teachers and parents

Subtopics (Categories)	Thoughts (Codes)	f	%
Use of methods-techniques	Getting help from the special education teacher (consultation with the expert)	5	26
	Individual reading work (one-on-one) within the classroom	4	21
	Repeated reading	3	16
	Help from peers	2	11
	Direct explanation / Lecture	1	5
	Modeled reading (example)	1	5
	Sound-based sentence method	1	5
	Question-answer	1	5
Use of materials	Books and reading-writing texts appropriate for level	10	53
	Visually rich texts and activities	3	16
	Additional materials and worksheets	2	11
	Syllable cards	1	5
	Reading texts with large letters (large print)	1	5
	Texts composed of repeated words	1	5
	Flashcards	1	5

Theme 4: Teachers' sense of self-efficacy

This theme is grouped into two sub-themes: aspects in which teachers feel successful and aspects in which they feel unsuccessful. In the aspects of success, there are a variety of responses, such as early identification of difficulty, increasing the student's self-confidence, or using activities adapted to the student's level. In the aspects of failure, most teachers emphasize the lack of time to devote to students individually, due to crowded classes and a busy curriculum, as well as the lack of specialized knowledge on effective methods and techniques for reading difficulties.

Table 5. Teachers' self-efficacy regarding students with reading difficulties

Sub-themes (Categories)	Thoughts (Codes)	f	%
Successful aspects	Acquiring the ability to read effectively and understand what is read	2	11
	Early identification / identification	1	5
	Developing activities appropriate to the level	1	5
	Learning sounds/letters with flashcards	1	5
	Increasing self-confidence	1	5
	Using methods and techniques according to the student's specifications	1	5
	Involving the family in the process	1	5
	Patience and determination	1	5
Unsuccessful aspects	Inability to devote sufficient time	7	37
	Education system and curriculum content	4	21
	Increasing reading speed	2	11
	Other subjects (except reading and writing)	1	5
	Lack of knowledge about special education	1	5
	Lack of knowledge about methods and techniques	1	5
	Focusing attention	1	5

Theme 5: Support needs of teachers and parents

This theme is one of the most prominent in the study, as has been the case in similar studies in other contexts, and includes three sub-themes: support from experts and from the classroom, support with materials, and support with educational/field knowledge. Teachers and parents express a need for the continuous presence of a support room and teacher in every school, for appropriate reading and reading comprehension materials in the Albanian language, as well as for training on effective methods and techniques for teaching reading to students with difficulties. For parents, the need for practical guidance on how to support their child at home, in the absence of specialized knowledge in this area, is particularly emphasized.

Table 6. Support needs of teachers and parents regarding students with reading difficulties

Subtopics (Categories)	Thoughts (Codes)	f	%
Support from experts and the classroom	Room for supportive education (resource)	14	74
	Special education teacher	13	68
Support with materials	Appropriate reading materials and comprehension of what is read	14	74
	Special education materials	12	63
Support with training/field knowledge	Learning how the student learns best, recognizing the characteristics of executive functions and auditory-visual perception	15	79
	Appropriate teaching methods and techniques	14	74

5. Discussion

The methodological and thematic framework presented in this paper follows a model similar to other international studies on the views of teachers and parents about reading difficulties (Kalsoom et al., 2020; Kormos & Kontra, 2008; Görgün & Melekoğlu, 2019), adapting it to the specific linguistic and educational context of Tetova. As in the international literature, crowded classes and the lack of individual time for the student appear as the main obstacle mentioned by the teachers, which coincides with the findings of similar studies, which have emphasized that the high number of students per class makes it difficult to work individually with students with special learning difficulties.

What distinguishes the context of Tetova from the majority of studies carried out in monolingual contexts, is the linguistic dimension: Albanian students in recent times live and learn in a bilingual reality where Albanian functions as the main language of instruction, while English is the language that children acquire from computer games. This situation can affect students with reading difficulties in different ways — on the one hand, the simultaneous learning of two phonological and orthographic systems can increase the cognitive load of the student with existing difficulties; on the other hand, some bilingualism researchers point out that bilingual experience can also bring long-term cognitive benefits, if language support is provided in a structured and early manner. For this reason, any reading program designed for the Albanian students of Tetova should explicitly take into account the phonological and orthographic specifics of the Albanian language (eg the difference between the vowels "ë" and "e", or two-syllable consonants such as "gj", "xh", "nj", "ll", "rr", "th", "dh", "sh", "zh"), instead of simply relying on the mechanical adaptation of materials from other languages.

The lack of standardized reading materials and the assessment of reading difficulties in the Albanian language is presented as a structural challenge and not only an individual one for the teacher. This situation coincides with the remarks of researchers who have emphasized the importance of texts adapted to the level and interests of students with reading difficulties (Çakıroğlu, 2015; Zorbaz, 2007), but it also extends this issue to the linguistic-regional dimension: in the absence of standardized instruments in Albanian for assessing fluency and

reading comprehension, early identification and monitoring of students' progress becomes more difficult, and teachers remain dependent on subjective assessment or adapting materials from other languages.

Finally, the emphasized need of teachers and parents for specialist support (Albanian-speaking special education teachers, support rooms, continuous training) is consistent with the findings of other studies that have emphasized the importance of training programs for increasing the competences of teachers in the field of reading difficulties (Pürsün, 2021; Deniz & Sarı, 2021). In the context of Tetova, this need should also be seen in relation to the institutional capacity available in the Albanian language, which suggests that any training or program initiative should be planned in close cooperation between the University of Tetova, the local educational authorities and the elementary schools of the municipality.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has presented the conceptual and methodological framework of a phenomenological study, designed to explore the views of teachers and parents on reading difficulties of Albanian primary school students in Tetovo, as a preliminary step towards the development of a linguistically and culturally adapted reading skills intervention program. Based on the presented thematic framework, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Design a systematic intervention program for reading fluency and reading comprehension, which includes texts and materials adapted to the phonological and orthographic specificities of the Albanian language.
2. Development and standardization of reading difficulties assessment instruments in the Albanian language, in accordance with the educational context of North Macedonia.
3. Organization of training programs for classroom teachers and parents, focusing on effective methods and techniques for supporting students with reading difficulties.
4. Increasing the number of Albanian-speaking special education teachers and creating support rooms in primary schools in the municipality of Tetovo.
5. Conducting a full empirical study, with real data collection from teachers, special education teachers and parents in Tetovo, to verify and enrich the illustrative thematic framework presented in this paper.

7. Study Limitations

This paper presents the conceptual, methodological and thematic framework of a phenomenological study designed for the context of Tetovo; the findings presented in the "Results" section are illustrative in nature and model the structure of the results, in accordance with the described methodology. In order to reach valid and generalizable empirical conclusions, it is necessary to conduct a full phase of collection and analysis of real data from teachers, special education teachers and parents in primary schools in Tetovo.

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