



# Comparison of English Reading Comprehension Level Between Primary Three Learners of Public and Private Schools: Case of TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools. Enabling and Hindering Factors

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**Abstract:** *Literacy in reading is essential for all learning and achievement in life, particularly in the information age. According to a National Examination and School Inspection Authority (NESIA) report, the primary three learners in Rwanda do not meet the standards of English literacy. This study sought to compare reading comprehension levels between primary three learners of public schools and those from private schools. Two hundred and thirteen (213) learners were randomly selected and ten (10) primary English teachers were purposively involved in the study. The study was guided by the Simple View of Reading Theory developed in 1986 by Gough and Tunner and supported by Hoover and Gough (1990). English reading test administered to learners was taken from UNESCO's Global Proficiency Framework for Reading (GPF) document. The results showed the lower reading comprehension of learners from public schools as compared to those from private schools. It was also revealed in public schools that the unavailability of reading materials, limited time allocated to reading and big class size hinder reading performance. It was recommended that the government should provide enough reading materials in public schools. Parents should support children at home in the reading tasks.*

**Keywords:** *Reading, Comprehension, Public schools, Private schools, Primary three, Learners*

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## 1. Introduction

Success in today's interconnected, information-driven culture depends more than ever on one's ability to read and comprehend what they are reading (Yildirim & Rasinski, 2014). Target 4.6 of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is that by 2030 young people and a significant part of adults, both males and females, acquire literacy and numeracy skills (Murray, 2017). An increasing body of research is showing that reading fluency is crucial for success while learning to read English (Yildirim & Rasinski, 2014). In both local and international education literature, the importance of

learning to read before the end of the third year of primary school is well understood and accepted (Spaull, 2013).

In the Rwandan context, the Ministry of Education introduced the 7-year program to increase access to high-quality education across all levels of education and give young Rwandans the skills they need to participate actively in global economic activities. One crucial goal to achieve in this program is giving priority to enhancing high-quality education beginning with the development of fundamental skills in schools such as promoting literacy in the English language. According to the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) of 2013-

2018, which was elaborated in the lens of Vision 2020, the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) rolled out in schools in 2015 credited the importance of improving literacy by developing key reading skills in early grades. To follow up on whether this significant policy is implemented, the Learning Achievement in Rwandan Schools test learners' Kinyarwanda and English literacy, as well as numeracy skills with an emphasis on P3, P6, and S3 (MINEDUC, 2023)

Moreover, a decade ago, the government of Rwanda successively improved language policies, especially, the language to use as a medium of instruction in lower primary levels. For example, the medium of instruction for nursery and the first three years of primary school was changed from English to Kinyarwanda in March 2011 (Rurangirwa, 2012). This was done in line with UNESCO's regulation about children's education in their native language as the medium of instruction (Hilaire & Ferreira, 2015). Late in December 2020, the government of Rwanda instructed primary school leaders to teach subjects in English. The government adopted this policy to produce Rwandans who can integrate into English-speaking global societies and the labour market. English, therefore, was raised to become the language of instruction in lower primary level in 2020 up to now (William, 2020).

Following the adoption of English as the major language of instruction, learning outcomes and monitoring findings reveal a significant gap in primary three learners' skills in English reading. For instance, in the monitoring reports of TTC curriculum implementation, which include pre-service teaching practices, 90% of student-teachers in TTC Nyamata indicated a significant gap when it comes to teaching English reading (REB, 2022). This information is added to NESA's report, which states that just 10% of primary three students perform at or above the required level on the literacy test.

Since the learning achievement assessment places a lot of emphasis on public schools, learners in private schools may be reading differently from those in public schools. This motivated the researcher to investigate his observation of student-teachers' classroom instructions at TTC Nyamata Demonstration schools as regards the apparent different reading comprehension levels between public and private school learners. Private school learners in primary three seem to show higher reading proficiency levels than those of public schools. This becomes problematic as learners at the same level are expected to perform the same regardless of the type of school. The aim of this study, therefore, was to compare the English reading proficiency level of the primary three learners from the two types of schools mentioned and to investigate the factors that cause reading variability in those learners.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How different are the reading comprehension levels of primary three learners of public and private schools at TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools?
2. What are the enabling and hindering factors of reading comprehension levels of primary three learners of TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools?
3. How can the gap between the reading comprehension levels of primary three learners of public and private schools be narrowed?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The concept of reading

Reading is a concept that has been given great attention by many researchers (Gumede, 2018). When trying to review reading literature one can say that its concept has evolved. The first definition of reading was postulated by Huey (1908) who defines reading as the process of gathering or choosing from what is written. Thorndike (1917) later on characterised reading as reasoning and an active process related to problem-solving from prints. Huey and Thorndike's views inspired current models that characterise reading as more than the understanding of orthographic symbols (Tamrackitkun, 2010). On the other hand, other conventional researchers consider reading to be a concept that cannot occur without comprehension (Gumede, 2018). Reading happens when there occurs word recognition and comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990). The current definition of reading includes other components. For instance, Desta, (2020) defines it as the action of quickly recognizing and comprehending word groups. It is a thorough procedure that encompasses oral fluency and engagement.

### 2.2 The Simple View of Reading Theory

The Simple View of Reading theory developed in 1986 by Gough and Tunner and supported by Hoover and Gough (1990) serves as the basis for this study. The theory directs teachers' decisions when they are making reading instructions (Drayer & Kaz, 2014). This was one of the deciding reasons for the theory because other theories do not guide teachers on how to deal with second language learners. Reading's ultimate goal is to generate meaning from the text for a particular purpose. According to the Simple View of Reading, a reader must have adequate decoding (phonemic, phonological awareness and fluency) and linguistic abilities (vocabulary and comprehension). USAID (2019) also postulates these foundational reading skills namely phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension as the key skills to teach and learn in early grades (including the primary three level under

this study). In any case, it is suggested that reading comprehension for third through fifth-grade learners regardless of age or aptitude, depends on both decoding and linguistic comprehension. As opposed to first language learners, who learn English as both their Second and Foreign language (ESL and EFL learners). To show how reading activities can be completed by a good reader, reading comprehension skills must be taught explicitly and with modelling (Lai et al., 2004). This very important proponent of the theory echoed how reading is challenging for ESL learners, including those who are the subject of the study.

The theory also specifies reading instruction methods and the usage of reading resources as important factors in the successful and effective teaching of reading skills (Ligembe, 2014).

### **2.3 A synopsis of research about comprehension level between public and private schools**

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2003) private schools in the US outperformed non-charter public schools in reading and mathematics. Imam (2016) found that making inference while reading is a much better predictor of students' performance in Science and Mathematics in public schools than it is in private schools in his study on the impact of reading skills on students' performance in these subjects. In their investigation into the relative efficacy of public and private schools in Kenya, Bam and Riley (2018) also discovered that students in private schools outperformed those in public schools in reading and math by between .24 and .52 standard deviations. Gumede and Boakye (2020) also assessed on the reading comprehension skills of form 2 students in Zimbabwe's Bulawayo Central District and found that there is a significant gap in reading comprehension between students in government schools and those in private schools, with the average score for students in private schools being 91.64% as opposed to 26.63% for students in public schools. Therefore, it was critical to clarify the disparities in reading comprehension between learners from Nyamata Teacher Training College's private demonstration schools and those in public schools in light of the findings from the writers mentioned above.

### **2.4 Enabling and hindering factors of effective reading skills**

Many researches have been conducted about what enable and hinder learners reading comprehension. In her research about the teaching of reading in Botswana government schools, Biakolo (2007, as cited in Ntereke & Ramoroka 2017), found that the restrictive nature of the reading materials and teachers' failure to model

reading instructions have a negative impact on students' reading abilities. On the other side, there are some interventions that teachers and other educators can employ to bridge the gap in reading abilities of students (Madolimovich, 2022). Destefano et al., (2012) appreciated the use of educational resources. More precisely, if a school has a bookstorehouse that is also routinely used, students perform a little bit better in reading. Missing out the chance to interact with texts when they are still young makes it difficult for students to develop strong reading habits as they grow adult, and their performance in reading is poorer than that of those who carried out several readings from the library (Owusu-Achew, 2014). He also attributes the low reading ability to learners who do not systematically use a good series of textbooks and readers in class since it creates a good pedagogical pathway from the teacher to the learner and vice-versa. When the school is provided with reading materials like books, it develops learners reading fluency (Akyol, 2014). In their research, Dara (2019) identified motivation as the primary cause of poor reading comprehension. Low English reading comprehension and lack of language proficiency, in general, were mostly caused by motivation, with student personality, learning strategies, and teacher personalities trailing closely behind (Dara, 2019). This adds to Fitria (2019) in his study about the correlation between reading interest and reading comprehension. The more students become highly motivated in reading, the greater their score in reading comprehension increases (Fitria, 2019). In light of the aforementioned factors, it was necessary to go deeper into this issue by evaluating the reading comprehension levels of the two types of schools (public and private) and looking into what enable versus what hinder comprehension, respectively. This helped the research generate suggestions for narrowing the inequalities in reading comprehension among schools under study.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research design**

To gather and analyse data, this study used a mixed methodology. This design integrates both qualitative data collection (such as data collected from interviews with English teachers) and quantitative data collection (like those from questionnaires and reading test). It entails making philosophical assumptions, and applying both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2012), neither the quantitative nor the qualitative approach is adequate to capture the patterns and specifics of the situation when it is taken separately. Precisely this study employed a mixed method to triangulate findings from how primary three learners perform in reading grade-level text and how teachers view reading in their classes and what challenges experienced by both teachers and learners.

## 3.2 Population and sampling procedures

The population of this study are English teachers and learners in TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools in Bugesera District as (Creswell, 2012) advised that everyone involved and who shares the same characteristics qualifies for the study. The sample size was obtained from the population of both primary three teachers and learners of English in TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools. To calculate the sample size, this study used a 10% margin error and a confidence level of 95%. The study applies the formula of Madow (1968) to determine the sample size. The calculated sample of 213 primary learners to be administered to the reading comprehension test was used. Below is-how the sample size was calculated using the formula shown below.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + [N * (e)^2]}$$

Where:  $n$  = Sample Size,  $N$  = Study Population,  $e$  = Margin of error

$$\text{Thus, } n = \frac{455}{1 + [455 * (0.05)^2]} = 213$$

Random sampling was applied to get 213 primary three English learners from eight public schools and two private schools. Depending on the number of learners in each demonstration school, the researchers calculated a proportional number of learners that were employed for the study.

Besides, a purposeful sampling method was used to get 10 primary three English teachers for the study. Purposeful sampling permits the researcher to have a deep understanding of the phenomenon in the study by intentionally selecting appropriate participants (Hameed: Taherdoost, 2016). Thus, ten teachers who teach English in primary three at TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools were purposefully sampled.

## 3.3 Data collection instruments

### 3.3.1 English reading test

The English reading test was administered to 185 primary three learners from public schools and 28 learners from private schools to assess their comprehension level. The test was taken from UNESCO's Global Proficiency Framework for Reading (GPF) document which provides grade three reading text examples to be referenced in the assessment. According to GPF, a grade three learner who meets the global reading standard should be able to accurately read a text of eight to ten sentences and questions to retrieve information with words like "what", "who",

"when", "where". Each learner was given time to read the whole story which was composed of fifty-five words and eight sentences, but the assessor counted the number of words the learners would have read accurately to assess the reading phonics and fluency ability. Five comprehension questions were asked to check their comprehension level which according to USAID (2019) is the ultimate goal of reading.

### 3.3.2 Questionnaire

Eight English teachers from public schools and two from private schools filled out a questionnaire. It comprised close-ended questions about opinions about strategies used to teach reading skills in English, English reading materials availability and use in their classes as well as primary three learners' reading motivation.

### 3.3.3 In-depth Interview

The interview was administered to primary three English teachers to triangulate teachers' responses about enabling and hindering factors of English reading comprehension.

## 3.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Consideration

The investigator requested authorization from Bugesera district office as the organ possessing the authority to collect data from the selected schools. The permit letter then was presented in the respective schools and teachers were informed about the whole process. The researcher acknowledges that participants are independent individuals who should be eager to give true information and bring to the natural process of the research conduction.

## 3.5 Data analysis procedures

To determine the extent of variability, IBM SPSS statistics 28.0 was utilised to measure dispersion Means interpretation based on mean actual limitations in the interpretation of five-point Likert scale answers where the mean within 4.21-5.00 is very high, 3.41-4.20 is High, 2.61-3.40 is Neutral, 1.8 -2.60 is Low and 1-1.80 is classified very low (Bizimana & Orodtho, 2014). ANOVA was used to determine the normal distribution of words read correctly and the variability of reading comprehension by school type. Qualitative data were analysed following these steps: Step one was about transcribing the interview data or collecting the responses from questionnaires. For the second step, the researcher initially gathered a general comprehension of the data and considered its overall ideas. The third step involved using Microsoft Excel to code, categorise and create themes that were narrated. The fourth step was

the writing of all findings, and demonstrating how they are related.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Quantitative analysis of English reading test

The reading test consisted of sub-tasks namely the words that a learner can read out of the total words that comprised the story and five comprehension questions. The sub-tasks were decided through the lens of the Simple view of Reading Theory (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) guiding this study which postulates the interdependence between word recognition and

comprehension for EFL learners. Learners were given time to read the story, which according to UNESCO, was supposed to be at the learners' level. After reading, students were quizzed on their comprehension using Bloom's taxonomy-level questions of remembering. The researchers presented the reading test findings using statistical charts that display learners' performance scores and their corresponding percentages to make them easy to understand. ANOVA was also used to determine the normal distribution of words read correctly and the variability of reading comprehension by school type

##### 4.1.1 Analysis of scores about total words read correctly

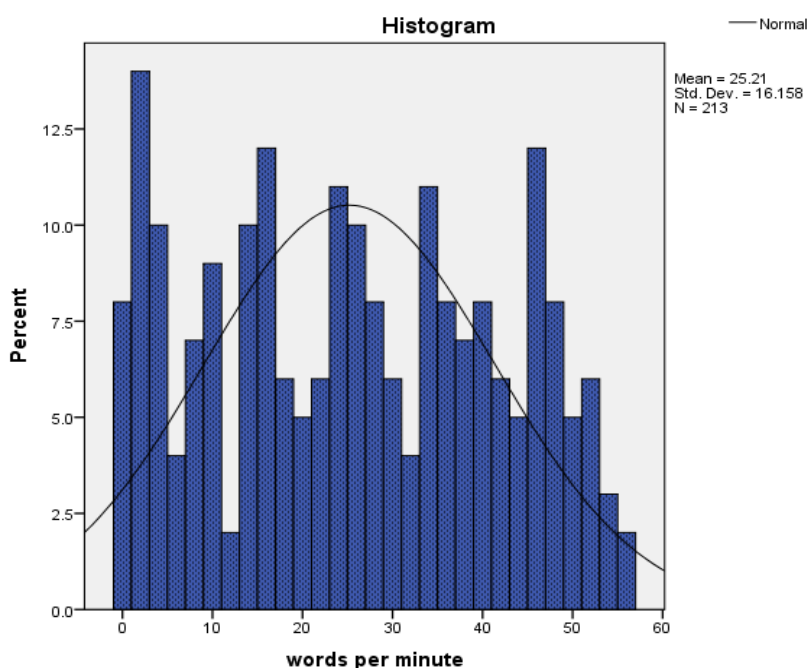


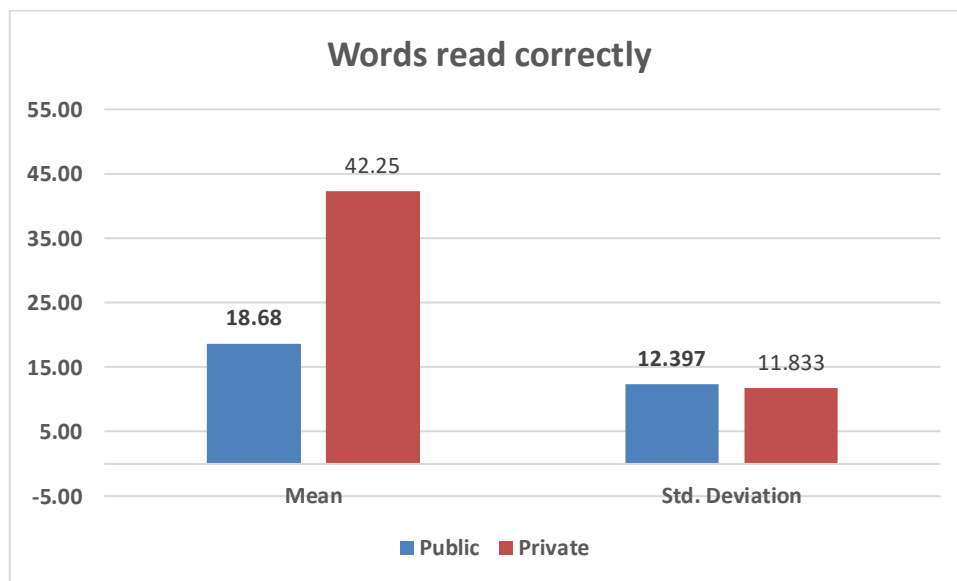
Figure 1: Normal distribution of the total words read correctly

Source: Primary data, 2023

The above figure shows that a great part of the 213 learners (when both public and private schools are analysed together) were able to read only 0–10 of the total 55 words that made up the story. It is also observable that a great percentage of learners scored below 30 out of 55 points. The mean point was around 25.3 while the standard deviation was around 16.1. This shows that a significant portion of learners attending

TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools did not read even half (twenty-eight) of the words that made up the entire text. However, there is an observable variance between scores when the two types of schools are analysed separately. The following chart displays the equal distribution of learners' reading comprehension scores between public and private schools:

#### 4.1.2 Analysis of total words read correctly by school type

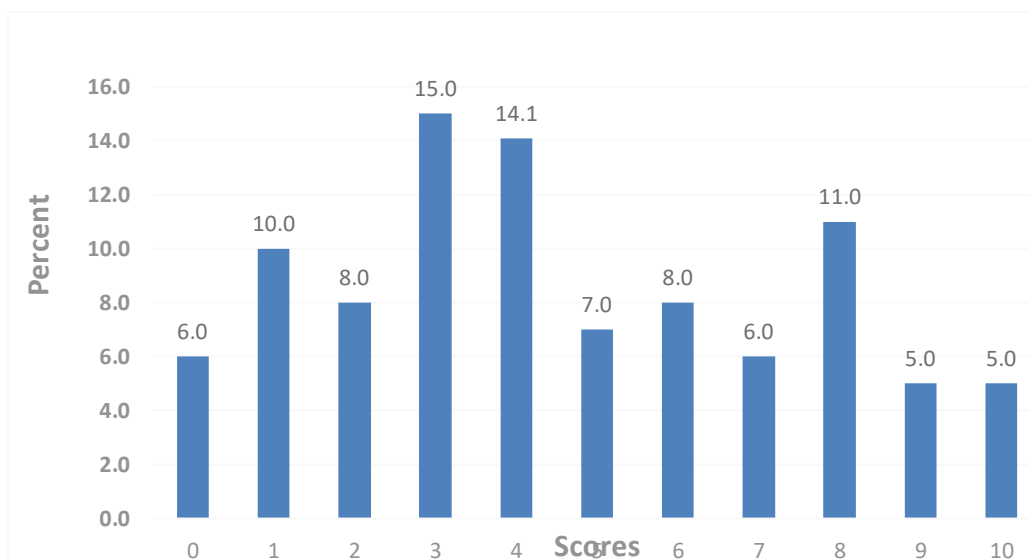


**Figure 2: Comparison of mean and standard deviation about total words read correctly by school type**

The study statistically compared word recognition scores between public and private school learners. According to the chart above, the results from word recognition skills indicate that in public schools the mean score out of 45 was 18.68, while the standard deviation was 12.397. The same figure shows that at the

private school level, the mean score was 42.25 while the standard deviation was 11.833. These word recognition statistics indicate that learners at private schools possess a reading fluency level higher than those from public schools.

#### 4.1.3 Analysis of reading comprehension scores



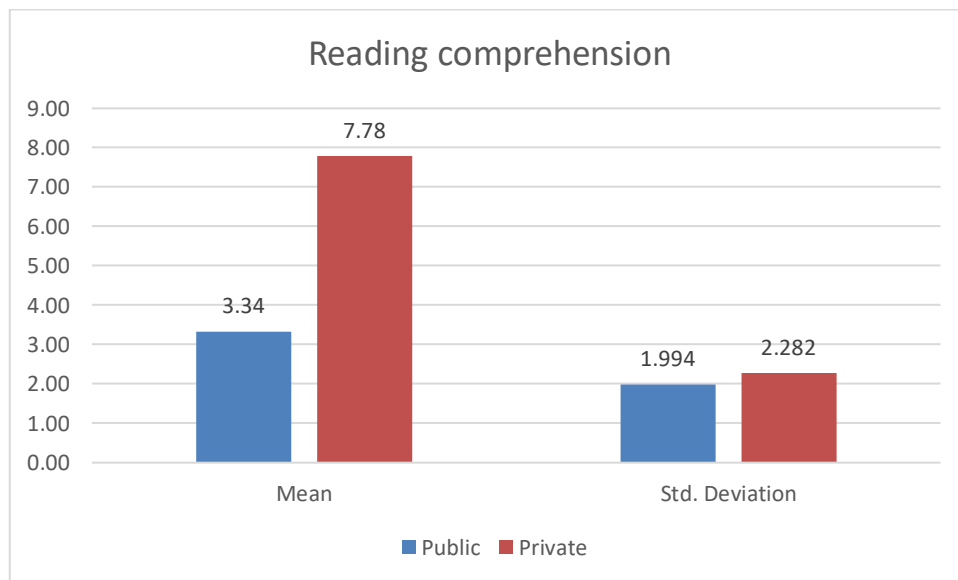
**Figure 3: Distribution of learners' comprehension performance scores**

The figure shows that 15% of the 213 learners (both public and private together) to whom the tests were given scored three out of ten on total comprehension scores. A high number of them as illustrated in the

figure scored below five. Six per cent (6%) of the students scored zero out of ten while only 5% scored ten out of ten. This shows that a significant portion of learners attending TTC Nyamata Demonstration

Schools were not able to answer the reading comprehension questions. The results from reading subtasks (fluency and comprehension) support the theory guiding this study. The theory postulates a strong dependence between word recognition or fluency and comprehension. Word recognition and reading

comprehension are interdependent for a reader to succeed in reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990). The following figure depicts the results of an advanced reading comprehension analysis between public and private schools under this study:



**Figure 4: Mean and standard deviation of comprehension scores by school type**

According to the chart above, the results from comprehension questions indicate that in public schools the mean score out of 10 was 2.14 while the variability to the mean was 1.130. The same figure shows that at the private school level, the mean score was 7.23 while the standard deviation was 2.023. The comprehension test performance difference between public and private school learners was significant as the average shows above. This confirms the variability in test scoring for reading comprehension asked for the year three learners in TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools.

## 4.2 Analysis of teachers’ responses from the questionnaire

English teachers in grade three were questioned about enabling and hindering factors namely the teaching techniques, existence of materials and learners' reading motivation. The most significant difference that came out of the study was tools that facilitate their students to improve their reading proficiency in English. The table below highlights the difference in material availability.

**Table 1: Responses about availability of reading materials by school type**

Statements	Existing				Not Existing			
	Public schools		Private schools		Public schools		Private schools	
	Freq	Per (%)	Freq	Per (%)	Freq	Per (%)	Freq	Per (%)
My Classroom is equipped with print materials	2	25	2	100	6	75	0	0
In my Class learners access decodable story books	1	12.5	2	100	7	87.5	0	0
The school library contains levelled readers	0	0	1	50	8	100	1	50
Existence of English curriculum textbooks for learners	3	37.5	2	100	5	62.5	0	0

Source: primary data

It is clear from the above table that there are significant differences in the availability of reading materials between public and private schools. The majority of primary three English teachers from public schools indicate that there are no curricular textbooks, leveled readers, or decodable storybooks available. The majority of them also admitted that their classes lacked print resources. The responses of instructors from private schools, however, indicate that these reading materials are well-stocked at their institutions, as shown in the table1. There is a wealth of printed material in their classes as well. This is a very big challenge as Simple View of Reading Theory asserts that if learners are not given a chance to interact with books in their early years it makes it difficult for them to develop strong word recognition and reading comprehension, and their reading performance is poorer than that of those who used libraries. The Simple View of Reading is supported by Ligembe (2014), who asserts that having simple access to written texts is a requirement for successful reading comprehension (the ultimate purpose of reading). Lonigan et al., (2018) supports the availability of reading materials levelled to the reader as a significant asset to the Simple View of Reading Theory.

#### 4.4 Qualitative analysis of primary three English teachers’ semi-structured interview

##### 4.4.1 Teachers’ perspectives about causes of poor English reading

When learners took a reading test, it revealed that learners from public schools’ English reading abilities were lacking. This raised the question of what English teachers believe to be the primary causes of this. Seven teachers from public schools stated that primary three English learners' low reading ability in English is associated with the little time they spend reading. They replied that reading tasks the learners carry out are limited to the classroom time. That is because, as they replied, when they get home no one is ready to help them read or encourage them to read. Teacher E said that: *The majority of the learners I teach have parents or guardians who do not know how to read and write. That results in the learners missing someone to assist in their lessons. Reading for learners, therefore, is limited to classroom instructions only.* This is relevant to Aldnhani & Abu-Ayyash (2020) who concluded that reading skills are improved when learners have a read over time.

According to 3 teachers from public schools, a student's ability to read is influenced by their prior English-language exposure. This had occurred, according to the teachers, due to the language policy, whereby all subjects were taught in Kinyarwanda in earlier grades. When one teaches them how to read, they face so many vocabularies that they don’t get their meaning. That also blocks their reading comprehension skills. Teacher B said: *when I teach reading, I spend much time explaining in Kinyarwanda words that learners do not understand. In my experience, the texts found in primary three textbooks are difficult for my learners to decode. It requires me to bring the easier passages from books of primary one or two. Little by little I start teaching them to read primary three texts. This results*



*in lagging behind in the curriculum content.* This is in line with (Sibomana, 2014) who asserted that when English became the language of teaching, it resulted in the classroom instructions becoming only making up of drilled repeats following the teacher's instruction in English with very little comprehension of the context which hinders learners' deep understanding and their ability to receive high-quality education.

However, according to two private school teachers who participated in the survey, the majority of their learners had reading skills that are above grade level three. This is due to the fact that as they stated, the bulk of their learners come from educated parents who have supported them since a young age. The majority of private schools did not follow the policy's straightforward implementation when Kinyarwanda was proclaimed an official language of teaching in lower primary. Because of this, there was no disturbance in the reading abilities of their students.

The majority of public school teachers also blamed the lack of reading materials for students' low English reading skills. All respondents cited the dearth of reading materials at their schools, including storybooks and read-aloud, and some even claimed there were none. They also said that the curriculum textbooks are not enough. Teacher A said: *at our school, there is no other book that my learners can read independently. It is as if the only passages they read are the ones I write on the chalkboard. The number of curriculum textbooks is very small. In my class, one book is shared by three desks. How can twelve learners share only one book?* This issue of reading materials is in parallel with this study's reviewed literature. Whereby missing out the chance to interact with texts when they are still young makes it difficult for students to develop strong reading habits as they grow adult, and their performance in reading is poorer than that of those who carried out several readings from the library (Owusu-Achew, 2014)

Class size was also mentioned to contribute a lot to the poor English literacy in the schools under investigation. Eight teachers from public schools (100%) explained that their classes are so big that they hardly find time to attend to learners individually. Teacher A said: *at school, every class is attended by over 50 learners. How can teachers find time for every learner who struggles to read? It results in failing to know where learners struggle in literacy.* The researcher got interested to go deep this case of class size. According to UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (2016), teacher-pupil ratio in primary school level is 42. Then 8 teachers (100%) of public schools reported that their classes highly exceed this UNESCO's standard. This hinders them to reach out to individual learners so for them to know where they struggle and how best to support them. In private schools there is a big difference. Two teachers (100%) involved in the study reported that their class size is effective. All of them reported a class size which is less than UNESCO's standards. They say that this brings

about a positive atmosphere in their classes and therefore it is very easy to know where every learner struggles.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings shed light on the quality of reading comprehension of primary three learners at TTC Nyamata Demonstration Schools. The statistical analysis of reading scores revealed a significant disparity between learners in public and private schools. Learners from private schools outperformed those from public schools.

From the survey and in-depth interview with the English teachers from the participating public and private schools, the enabling and impeding aspects of the reading skills results were determined. Lack of reading materials, such as grade-level readers, storybooks, and curriculum textbooks, contributed to the students' poor reading abilities in public schools. Little to no time that parents and instructors commit to helping their children and students read both inside and outside of the classroom in public schools has a detrimental impact on English reading. In a short period of time, the language policy adopted by public schools, which initially designated Kinyarwanda as the primary language of instruction before switching to English, had a part in this issue. This was cited by teachers in these schools as having a detrimental effect on the fluency of their students' English reading. Big Class size in public schools was also mentioned to contribute a lot to the poor English literacy in the schools under investigation. However, students in private schools that performs better in reading texts at grade level benefit from their educated family who have been there for them since they were young. They also benefit from the print-rich atmosphere and small class sizes provided by their schools, which allow their teachers to provide comprehensive support.

### 5.2 Recommendations

This study found a significant difference between public and private schools in terms of fluency in reading English. Therefore, suggestions for closing it ought to be made. Teachers and other key players in public schools, including the government and parents, must play a significant role in this issue as follows:

1. Public school teachers must set aside adequate time each day for their learners to read independently, both within and outside of the classroom. Additionally, teachers in these schools should urge learners in primary three to read the few books available in their classrooms.

2. The Ministry of Education through its affiliated organ, REB, should provide enough literacy materials such as English curriculum textbooks and supplementary readers to the schools for learners to read them either in the classroom or outside when they are at home.

3. Given the amount of time learners spend with parents at home, parents of public schools' learners should encourage their kids to read. To achieve that, schools and parents should work together to encourage reading at home. Parents could also remove negative filters such as hunger, family strife, and any other psychological barrier that may be impeding their children's reading development.

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