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Reading materials for teaching Intermediate Phase isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension: A qualitative analysis

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Background: Recent studies in South Africa posit that there is a lack of reading materials in African languages, and the limited materials available contain outdated content that does not pique learners' interests.

Objectives: This study aims to analyse the availability of reading materials for teaching inclusive reading comprehension in isiZulu to Intermediate Phase (IP) learners, with a focus on supporting at-risk readers and enhancing their reading skills.

Method: The study was conducted in uMkhanyakude district, KwaZulu-Natal province, and involved non-participant classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 10 purposefully selected isiZulu teachers from 10 different schools. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm and word learning theory, the qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The units of analysis in this study are the reading materials available for teaching IP isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension.

Results: Findings reveal a significant lack of appropriate isiZulu reading materials in public primary schools, which fail to engage learners or enhance their cognitive reading abilities. The limited materials available are outdated and do not resonate with learners' interests.

Conclusion: The study emphasises the need for curriculum developers to create relevant and stimulating reading materials tailored to the interests and cognitive needs of both at-risk readers and proficient readers.

Contribution: The research contributes to raising awareness of the critical shortage of African language reading materials and advocates for designing inclusive and effective resources to improve learners' reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: reading materials; inclusive reading; reading comprehension; at-risk readers; word learning theory.

Introduction

Reading practice in the Intermediate Phase for Grades 4–6 is crucial in cultivating learners' reading competence and improving their understanding of various linguistic aspects such as vocabulary, decoding, word recognition, phonological awareness, morphemes, phonics, and semantics that are embedded in reading. Comprehensive reading material is a key and the vehicle for developing reading knowledge in lower grades and instilling reading motivation. However, the availability of reading materials in African languages for many South African rural schools is still a challenge that hinders the progress of developing literacy skills. Most of the African language reading materials currently available for the Intermediate Phase classes do not adequately contribute to the goal of equipping learners with reading competence (Cekiso et al. 2022; Ntshangase 2023). Trudell and Schroeder (2007) state that teaching reading in African languages does not impart knowledge embedded in African linguistic repertoires. Moreover, this is even likely to worsen with the shortage of reading materials in African languages. The notion of inclusive reading is derived from the concept of inclusive education, which refers to teaching learners with learning challenges in the same classroom as learners who do not have learning problems as stipulated in the *Education White Paper 6* (Department of Education [DoE] 2001). In the context of this study, inclusive reading then means teaching reading comprehension in the same classroom to both learners with reading difficulties and learners with reading proficiency. To ensure inclusive reading, reading materials should have diverse reading content that aims to accommodate both at-risk readers and learners

with reading proficiency, and inform adequate pedagogical strategies to be implemented. According to Martins and Capellini (2021), at-risk readers are learners who have very low reading proficiency, which means that they read far below grade level. This study aims to analyse the availability reading materials for teaching Intermediate Phase isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension. The rationale of this study is to address the lack of isiZulu reading materials in the selected Intermediate Phase classes, and how this challenge distorts with the process of reading comprehension development.

Lack of reading materials in rural schools

According to the National Reading Strategy (2008), literacy difficulties are caused by a lack of reading materials that allow learners to read in their mother tongue. The majority of rural South African schools lack adequate reading areas, school libraries, and even books. Even the few classes that do have readers typically have them assigned to the incorrect grade level (National Reading Strategy 2008). Despite these challenging circumstances, parents and other school stakeholders must be deeply involved in helping teachers support the development of proficient readers.

The availability of reading materials is a profound aspect of inclusive education to stimulate learners' desire to read and ensure the provision of reading assistance to at-risk readers. Molin and Lantz-Andersson (2016) argue that reading teachers also have a role and responsibility to create reading materials in their classes. Learners in the classroom can also work collaboratively with the teacher to design materials such as reading charts. Reading material should stimulate learners' reading interest and instil reading confidence inside and outside of the classroom environment. Reading materials may include Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2023) workbooks, dictionaries, learners' work displayed on classroom walls, and the class library, as well as magazines, catalogues, brochures, newspapers and computer-based reading material. This article notes that more effort is made to ensure the availability of reading materials in learners' second language (English) as opposed to their home language which is isiZulu. Pretorius and Spull (2016) maintain that the scarcity of reading materials, particularly in African languages, the propensity of teachers to rely on oral chorusing of readings in class, and the absence of African languages reading assignments have also been linked to poor reading development particularly in African languages as also evident in the Progress International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) 2022/2023 outcomes. This speaks volumes about the status of African languages in the South African education system which portrays a sense of language inequality in the new liberal democratic dispensation achieved in 1994. This further gives an impression of imbalances in the distribution of reading materials between rural schools and their urban counterparts.

Distribution of reading materials between well-resourced schools and rural disadvantaged schools

According to Mhlongo (2019), the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Department of Education's Reading Policy Guidelines of 2006 revealed that Grade 6 Intermediate Phase learners had low reading scores across all academic areas, including languages. These findings are associated with the unfavourable learning conditions and poor access to quality education. The audit of South African school libraries revealed that there is a shortage of isiZulu reading books stocked by libraries (Mhlongo 2019).

Pretorius and Machet (2004) stress that learners in well-resourced schools have the advantage of attaining a high level of reading skills as opposed to learners from rural underprivileged schools. The scarcity of fundamental learning resources has a devastating outcome for learners' academic performance. A study carried out by Ramdan (2015) on factors jeopardising teachers' ability to teach reading in primary schools discovered that the main challenges encountered by teachers teaching in rural economically disadvantaged schools are associated with the unavailability of learning resources such as reading material. However, it is worth noting that the problem of the unavailability of learning resources may not be limited only to KZN province but to the entire country.

When less privileged schools are provided with sufficient learning equipment such as storybooks, and teachers and learners are motivated, they produce good results (Ramdan 2015). Many rural schools are too poor to buy printed resources such as storybooks on their own and require financial assistance. It is essential that rural schools must be provided with functioning libraries to improve the quality of education, in turn offers learners the opportunity to produce sound grade-level language literacy results.

Understanding language literacy in South Africa education context

Literacy is defined as having competence in reading and writing skills and being able to engage with the basic structures of language that form part of the learning process (Combrinck, Van Staden & Roux 2014). Literacy encompasses four basic learning skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This study focuses on the lack of isiZulu reading materials in the Intermediate Phase, and aims to enhance reading skills.

Reading remains a skill that is essential for the development of academic capabilities from primary to tertiary education. Basic literacy skills are prerequisite not only for academic development, but also for meaningful participation in society, economic development and lifelong learning (De Vos, Van Der Merwe & Van Der Mescht 2014; Govender & Hugu 2020).

South African studies have confirmed that education is currently facing severe challenges particularly in the development of literacy (De Vos et al. 2014; Govender & Hugo 2020; Land 2015; Naidoo, Reddy & Dorasamy 2014). South African learners in the primary grades demonstrate poor results and low literacy levels. The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2017) also maintains that poor literacy levels in primary schools pose a serious threat in the education context as a whole.

Various factors contribute to poor literacy levels in under-resourced schools. These factors include lack of parental involvement in children's literacy development, illiterate guardians, and shortages of learning material (Chetty 2019). Such factors prove that there is inadequate implementation of the Language in Education policy, which aims at sustaining learners' basic academic language development. Many under-resourced primary schools lack support structures for both teachers and learners; consequently it has an impact on learners' performance in literacy (Land 2015). In addition, many teachers lack pedagogical content knowledge to facilitate adequate reading lessons as well as what is expected of them in terms of pedagogical transitioning from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase (Ntshangase & Tshuma 2023).

Importance of reading materials in the pedagogical shift from Foundation Phase to Intermediate Phase

Pedagogical practices change when learners move from the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3) to the Intermediate Phase. At this level, different content subjects are taught using a variety of learning materials. The instruction in the Intermediate Phase is based solely on the whole class focusing on a different range of themes in the subject; hence, learning resource materials such as textbooks play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Ntshangase & Tshuma 2023).

In the context of reading comprehension in the Intermediate Phase, it is essential for learners to have reading accuracy skills, oral reading fluency, and the ability to read for meaning and enjoyment (Van der Walt 2021). Learners must be taught in the early reading grades to avoid persistent reading challenges in the upper grades. Learners must also have the ability to read the text for meaning using different reading strategies, describing their feelings based on the text, discussing the text, interpreting visual texts, comprehending, and responding suitably to the text (Naidoo et al. 2014).

Pretorius and Stoffelsma (2021) argue that the shift to the Intermediate Phase extends beyond the perimeters of a language switch, as learners transition from having only one teacher in the classroom to having multiple teachers teaching different subjects. Learners are exposed to a range of academic texts as they are expected to begin reading to learn rather than learning to read (Pretorius & Stoffelsma 2021). This transition justifies the need to also ensure the credibility and quality of reading materials, reading pedagogy strategies in the Intermediate Phase classroom and that teachers are equipped with effective pedagogical content knowledge to prepare learners for a smooth transition while ensuring inclusive reading.

The notion of inclusive reading in primary mainstream schools

According to Berkeley and Larsen (2018), inclusive reading is the capacity to teach reading skills in a classroom with both at-risk readers and proficient readers by utilising inclusive pedagogical instruction that meets the needs of all learners. According to the *Education White Paper 6* (DoE 2001), the idea of an inclusive education involves teaching learners who have been diagnosed with learning difficulties in the same classroom as students who do not have such issues.

Diversity and inclusion are promoted in university education programmes. Recently graduated teachers have found it difficult to support varied learning in the classroom without proper training for inclusive learning (including inclusive reading) (Subban & Mahlo 2017). The DBE offers a 'framework for standardisation of the procedures to identify, assess, and provide programmes for all learners who require additional support' in the *Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Help Policy* (SIAS) (DBE 2014:37).

Guidelines for identifying and screening students who need extra help because of learning disabilities are provided under the SIAS policy (DBE 2014). The South African education system has made an effort to create a policy that encourages the inclusion of these learners in the classroom, but it is still unclear how teachers should put inclusive policies into effect. Moreover, Ntshangase (2023) maintains that the current education policies do not include precise instructions on how inclusive reading should be taught in mainstream schools, and neither do reading initiatives like the Early Grade Reading Assignment and the National Ready Strategy. In addition, reading teachers underestimate the importance of reading motivation in the inclusive reading classroom which perpetuates reading challenges, particularly for at-risk readers. This study advocates that the notion of inclusive reading should be adopted by curriculum designers, policymakers, and reading materials creators to design suitable reading materials that contain reading content and activities that accommodates both at-risk readers and those with reading proficiency. Furthermore, the inclusive reading material advocated by this study should contain encouraging, rich content appealing to learners' lives.

Stimulating learners' motivation in the inclusive reading classroom

To encourage children to read, print experiences are necessary where learners are exposed to as many unfamiliar words as possible (Daries & Probert 2020). Teachers should encourage their learners to read independently and with enthusiasm (Dakhi & Damanik 2018; Nevo & Vaknin-Nusbaum 2020;

Zulu & Ndebele 2020). However, the key question remains: How can this be accomplished? Daniel Willingham (2017) discusses a strategy known as rewarding children for reading. Although rewarding a learner will create the desired behaviour in the short term, the long-term effect is to instil in them that their academic participation will always be rewarded. This means that if they were never rewarded in the first place, they would be less likely to participate well in the absence of a reward (Willingham 2017).

Willingham (2017) offers two main reading motivational strategies: maximising the value of reading and making the choice to do so easily. If there are enough engaging reading materials available to them, such as texts that relate to their everyday life or foster friendships, children will frequently take reading seriously (Rideout 2015). Comic books, books with specific song lyrics or about their favourite sports are a few examples of possible texts. These resources might be innately inspiring to a child even though they are not great literature. The amount of time learners spend reading depends greatly on their willingness to read as well as whether they are willing to go above and beyond what is expected of them (Willingham 2017). According to Rideout (2015), while 30% of teenagers said they enjoyed reading, they also said they were more interested in other activities such as watching videos and playing games. To make the most of reading opportunities, it is always crucial to have printed material in the classroom. To boost learners' chances of selecting a text of interest to them to read, parents can, for instance, stock their homes and other areas with a variety of reading materials (Castle, Rastle & Nation 2018). While motivation is a cornerstone of reading development, it must be noted that learners with reading difficulties may require extensive engagement to improve their reading cognitive abilities.

Challenges faced by at risk readers in language learning

In the majority of South African schools, learners use their home language in the Foundation Phase, and the language of instruction changes when transitioning from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase. Despite the constitutional obligation mandating everyone to learn and access quality education in their language of choice, many learners still learn in a language which is not their home language and reading problems tend to be masked as language proficiency issues (Land 2015). An associated assumption is that when learners have difficulty using reading as a tool for learning, their comprehension problems are understood to be a product of limited language proficiency rather than inadequate reading skills. Such reading difficulties are often misdiagnosed as language proficiency difficulties.

While there is a connection between language proficiency and ability to read, it should be noted that they are not synonymous. As Pretorius and Machet (2004:47) stress, poor literacy achievement cannot only be associated with second language instruction, because teachers and learners also experience challenges with African languages literacy. This has been confirmed with the PIRLS (2022/2023) findings regarding poor achievement in African languages reading. Many Intermediate Phase learners possess the ability to speak fluently in their home language but often struggle to read adequately.

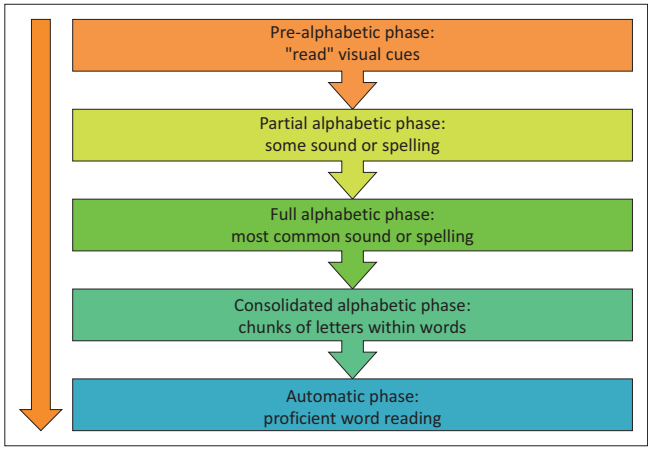
This study advocates that more literacy development opportunities must be made available in African languages. Learners develop competence in the second language by mastering their home language (Mezrigui 2011:243; Ntshangase 2023).

Phases of word learning theory

The phases of word learning theory was propounded by Ehri and McCormick (2008). The theory describes five phases a learner has to go through to achieve fluency, including other aspects that contribute to the development of reading skills. These phases are pre-alphabetic (Preschool), partial-alphabetic (Kindergarten), full-alphabetic (Grade 1) and consolidated-alphabetic (Grade 2), and the automatic-alphabetic phase (beyond Grade 2). Each of these phases (see Figure 1) consists of its own characteristics which are used to develop comprehensive reading and provide an effective guide to reading.

The concept 'learning theory' maintains that reading instruction should encourage learners to practise reading on a daily basis to enhance their knowledge of the alphabet as well as sight and high-frequency words.

Oral reading fluency assessments should be conducted regularly through observing learners and providing the necessary support that will help them to move from one phase to another (Ehri & McCormick 2008; Pikulski & Chard 2005). Having knowledgeable teachers who will employ the prerequisite reading pedagogical strategy remains key in building a strong foundation of literacy skills. Therefore, it is worth stating that at-risk readers need knowledgeable teachers who will provide the support that will help them



Source: Adapted from Ehri, L.C. & McCormick, S., 2008, 'Phases of word learning: Implications for instruction with delayed and disabled readers', in R. Ruddell & N.J. Unrau (eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading*, 5th edn., pp. 365–389, International Reading Association, Newark, DE

FIGURE 1: Ehri and McCormick's word learning theory.

succeed in reading. In addition, Ehri and McCormick (2008) claim that a classroom environment with printed word reading materials is important in enhancing learners' vocabulary skills (Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash 2020).

Ehri and McCormick (2008) further suggest the decoding strategy (also known as the word-attack strategy), which enables at-risk readers to be exposed to unfamiliar words. The decoding strategy identifies sounds of individual letters by means of holding them in memory and then blending them into pronunciations which are recognised as real words. The analogy reading strategy entails recognising how the spelling of a particular word is similar to a word that is already familiar. Analogising enables at-risk readers in the inclusive reading classroom to access the familiar word in memory and thereafter adjust their pronunciation in order to accommodate the new word. A sight-reading strategy uses memory to read words that have been attended to or read before. Ehri and McCormick explain that the sight of the word automatically activates its pronunciation, spelling, and meaning in memory. In other words, when readers have mastered sight words, it becomes less complex for them to recognise pronunciation without having to try figuring out the word.

The concept 'learning theory' is relevant to this study, since it deals with comprehensive reading strategies and further discusses critical phases a learner has to go through to develop reading fluency. Teachers can use the phases of word learning theory to develop adequate reading materials that feature learning of the alphabet as well as sight and high-frequency words. This theory also provides insights into reading instruction that is suitable for each learner's level of reading, such as modelled reading strategy and the repeated-reading strategy, et cetera. This benefits this study in exploring various reading pedagogical strategies that can work effectively for at-risk readers and for teachers teaching isiZulu reading comprehension while cooperating with effective reading materials. The present study is based on the premise that printed word reading material in the classroom is pivotal in improving learners' vocabulary knowledge, which is further detailed under word learning theory. Therefore, framing this study in the word reading theory can help the researcher to explain the data from this study.

Research questions

The following questions were posed to understand the context of reading materials availability for teaching Intermediate Phase isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension:

- What are the challenges encountered by teachers due to the lack of isiZulu reading materials?
- How do teachers in the Intermediate Phase classroom deal with the shortage of isiZulu reading materials?
- How does the shortage of isiZulu reading material affect learners' academic performance
- What isiZulu reading materials are effective for teaching inclusive reading comprehension?

Research design and methodology

This research is located within the interpretive paradigm. This is because the interpretive paradigm creates meaning that focuses on understanding people's experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius 2020). Through the interpretive paradigm, the study captured the experiences of teachers on the lack of isiZulu reading materials at the Intermediate Phase level. This study employed a qualitative research approach to better develop an in-depth understanding of reading material for isiZulu Intermediate Phase inclusive reading comprehension while also underpinning the challenges posed by lack of adequate reading material in teaching reading. Qualitative research is regarded as a form of socially responsive action that deals with people's interpretation of their experiences to better understand individuals' social reality and gain extensive knowledge of the surrounding circumstances (Flick 2018). Similarly, Crabtree and Miller's (2022) view of qualitative research is that of a systematic and subjective approach that addresses daily life experiences and assigns them appropriate meaning which in most cases is measured quantitatively. In other words, qualitative researchers focus on the interpretations, meanings, codes, processes, and relationships of social life. A non-purposive sampling method, a type of convenience sampling, was used to select 10 Intermediate Phase isiZulu teachers in the uMkhanyakude district across different primary schools. uMkhanyakude is situated in the Northern part of the KZN province where approximately 80% of the population speaks isiZulu as their mother tongue (Statistics South Africa [STATS SA] 2022:23]. While there are numerous studies investigating reading materials in English used as medium of instruction in many South African schools, there is a paucity of studies investigating isiZulu reading materials, particularly at the Intermediate Phase level (Brevik 2019; Elston, Tiba & Condy 2022). Intermediate Phase isiZulu teachers were purposively selected because:

- They prepare learners for transitioning into the Senior Phase where reading independently is profound.
- They have a better understanding of challenges that result from lack of reading materials, particularly in rural schools.
- There is drastic evidence indicating that many Intermediate Phase learners in SA cannot read for meaning (PIRLS, 2022/23).

Data from this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Classroom observations were conducted with each selected isiZulu subject teacher who was later interviewed. Observations was carried out to observe availability of isiZulu reading materials in the classroom during isiZulu reading comprehension lessons, whereas semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand teachers' perception and experience on the shortage of isiZulu reading material. The researcher purposively selected a sample of 10 Intermediate Phase isiZulu subject teachers to participate in both semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The researcher employed thematic analysis to analyse interviews and

observation transcripts. The researcher will examine the data collected closely and analyse it using the coding method; in other words, through 'grouping data and then assigning them into brother categories of related meanings and themes' (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout 2014:234). The researcher found it crucial to use triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness and comprehensiveness of data further and to counterbalance the limitation of each individual research method employed by the study. The units of analysis in this study are the reading materials available for teaching Intermediate Phase isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension.

The researcher needed to understand respondents' gender, age, and experience regarding reading isiZulu materials in the Intermediate Phase primary schools of uMkhanyakude district to determine whether these factors have any impact on learners' cognitive reading performance. Table 1 illustrates that all the study participants were qualified to teach, and they possess sufficient teaching experience for the isiZulu subject.

Research findings

Emerging findings reveal that there is a shortage of isiZulu language reading materials in rural schools. The poor distribution of isiZulu reading materials in public primary mainstream schools does not stimulate learners' reading interest and enhance their learning cognitive abilities (Pretorius & Spull 2016). The findings further revealed that most of the schools use outdated reading textbooks with content that may not be relevant to learners in the current education context (National Reading Strategy 2008). It is noted that the design principles of reading materials do not distinguish reading activities for both at-risk readers and learners with reading proficiency. In this case, it is arguable that at-risk readers and learners with reading proficiency should not be treated the same in the inclusive reading classroom. The following section provides data analysis and interpretation emanating from the research sub-questions.

Evidence of text-based teaching and learning resources in the classroom

Learning resources in schools are the driving force towards successful learning and teaching processes. This indicates that the shortage of learning resources may have a greater impact in sustaining poor-quality education, particularly in the rural school context. Many rural schools face a serious shortage of learning resources compared to their wealthier urban counterparts. The consequence of having poor learning resources is a high rate of learner drop-out. This is a clear indication that the South African education system is still unequal, despite the provisions of the South African Constitution (1996) that stipulates that everyone must have access to a good quality of education. However, rural schools remain the most marginalised and neglected institutions of learning when it comes to access to quality education. Table 2 presents observations on teaching and learning resources.

TABLE 1: Demographic information of participants.

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Teaching experience (years)	Highest qualification
T1	F	> 60	13–14	PGCE
T2	M	> 60	12–13	PGCE
T3	F	51–60	8–10	BEd
T4	M	51–60	8–10	BEd
T5	F	41–50	7–8	PGCE
T6	F	41–50	8–10	BEd
T7	M	41–50	2–4	Honours
T8	F	31–40	8–10	BEd
T9	F	31–40	5–7	BEd
T10	M	31–40	2–4	Honours

PGCE, Postgraduate Certificate in Education; BEd, Bachelor of Education.

All of the teachers that were observed used the DoE isiZulu textbook titled *Masihambisane.* Learners had to sit in groups to share one textbook, because copies were not available for every individual learner. T1 shared that they did not have reading material on the walls because the learners destroyed them every time. Such conduct indicates a lack of discipline among learners. None of the schools had libraries or any technological reading equipment to help learners read, such as computer-based reading materials and reading voice recorders. It is worth mentioning that the evidence from this study in terms of school reading material is also supported by the National Reading Panel (2008), which alludes to insufficient reading materials as a barrier towards reading development.

Data accrued from the teacher observations indicate that rural schools have an extreme shortage of reading materials that perpetuates reading problems. The present study suggests that rural schools are neglected when it comes to the distribution of learning materials. Nevertheless, the role of the KZN DoE to deliver adequate learning resources to schools and alleviate poor reading in African languages remains a matter of concern. Ninety per cent (n = 9) of the classes had reading charts displayed on the wall for reading practice, whereas 10% (n = 1) did not have any form of printed work in the classroom. The following section aims to understand the availability of reading materials available in classrooms.

TABLE 2: Teaching and learning resources.

Participant	Evidence of text-based teaching and learning resources in the classroom
T1	A sound chart was displayed on the wall in the classroom.
T2	The researcher observed that the classroom did not have any isiZulu reading charts on the wall, but many English reading charts were displayed on the wall.
T3	The classroom had an old chart of isiZulu consonant sounds which was not updated.
T4	The classroom had a chart with isiZulu consonant sounds.
T5	The classroom had a book corner where learning material is stored.
T6	Sound-letter charts were displayed on the wall consisting of double-consonant sounds.
T7	In the classroom there was a chart for a short story which aimed to teach learners about complex letter sounds.
T8	The classroom had reading charts which aimed to educate learners about three-sound alphabet letters.
T9	The class had a list of isiZulu vocabulary words on the chart consisting of different sound alphabet letters.
T10	The classroom had different charts displayed on the wall for isiZulu, which included numbers, vocabulary, letter sound and consonant sound.

What reading material do you have available for teaching and learning?

Developing reading materials for teaching reading comprehension serves as the basis of the language practice and language input for readers. Adequate reading materials contribute immensely to the achievement of teachers' and learners' objectives. While there is a lack of reading materials available in African languages, the current available materials contain content that is not updated (Mercado 2015). Yet it is the responsibility of the curriculum designers to develop comprehensive reading materials and pedagogical strategies that align with a particular language. It is noted that the design principles of reading materials does not distinguish reading activities for both at-risk readers and learners with reading proficiency. In this case, it is arguable that at-risk readers and learners with reading proficiency should not be treated the same in the inclusive reading classroom. Table 3 presents teachers' responses from semi-structured interviews on reading material available for learning and teaching source materials (LTSM) for teaching isiZulu reading comprehension.

Learning and teaching source materials play a critical role in developing learners' cognitive reading skills. The shortage of adequate reading materials in classrooms adds to the inclusive reading challenges facing teachers. The views of the participants from Table 3 indicate that KZN DoE does not deliver services as expected. As is evident from the interviews excerpts, it is difficult for teachers to implement the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in a learning setting that has a shortage of adequate materials. Nevertheless, 90% (n = 9) of the teachers interviewed based their concerns on the shortage of learning materials at their schools, which deeply distorts the process of learning and teaching. While it is undeniable that educators are essential to the success of any educational system, many African language teachers lack adequate training, which makes them heavily dependent on the resources supplied by the school. For mother tongue education initiatives to be implemented successfully, books that are specifically designed for educational purposes must be created. Data collected show that only 10% (n = 1) of teachers did not raise a concern about the lack of materials. The following sections provide teachers' responses from semi-structured interviews on the learning materials best suited for teaching inclusive reading comprehension to at-risk readers.

TABLE 3: Availability of learning and teaching source materials.

Participant	Availability of learning and teaching source materials
T1	We are relying on the old reading story books to teach isiZulu reading comprehension. Numerous concerns have been raised with the KZN DoE District office; however, to date nothing has been done, hence this places constraints on the reading teachers who must keep up with the expectations of CAPS.
T2	T2 outlined that their school does not have adequate resources available to cater specifically for at-risk readers but also generally there is a shortage of reading materials. 'For isiZulu reading comprehension we solely rely on "Masibambisane textbook" or else we take it upon ourselves to create reading materials that will develop learners reading competencies such as reading charts'.
T3	We are not pleased with the service we receive from our District office when it comes to delivery of learning resources, specifically here in the rural schools. Most of the primary schools in the uMkhanyakude District are under-resourced. When comparing the level of resources in urban schools, one can notice that urban schools are far better off than rural schools. This is a challenge to rural teachers because the curriculum set the same standards regardless of the availability learning resources.
T4	T4 was of the view that there have never been reading resources specifically for at-risk readers in this school. 'Resources that we have been using are for general learners not accommodating learners such as at risk readers in our classes. At some point, we use Foundation Phase textbooks for at-risk readers in the Intermediate Phase'.
T5	We do not have reading material only targeted at the at-risk readers, but we rely on DBE textbooks such as 'Masibambisane'. We also use different reading charts which I believe assist at risk readers in terms of fluency practice.
T6	T6 mentioned that their school does not have sufficient reading materials specifically for isiZulu home language. Most of the reading books available are for English. 'In isiZulu we usually use DBE textbook which is "Masibambisane" unless I design the material myself as a teacher'.
T7	In the inclusive classroom such as this one, I prefer using reading material that has visual images to help the at-risk readers use the illustrations displayed to comprehend the text.
T8	Even though our school does not have adequate reading materials especially for isiZulu, I try to design different reading charts that will help the at-risk readers to read. These reading charts are composed of different sound letters and short stories pasted against the wall.
T9	Our school does not have reading materials for isiZulu. The only material available is that of English. We have been reporting this problem in the DBE district office for more than 3 years, but nothing has been done to date.
T10	Since our school is located in the underprivileged rural community, the state of learning resources has been a major problem distorting the process of learning and teaching. The current available materials are very old and not updated. Learners get bored easily to read stories that happened over 50 or 100 years ago such as reading about King Shaka Zulu. We need updated reading materials in isiZulu that will relate into learners' real life.

DBE, Department of Basic Education; KZN, KwaZulu-Natal; DoE, Department of Education; CAPS, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.

Which teaching and learning resources are best suited for teaching inclusive reading comprehension to at-risk readers?

At-risk readers are typically in need of appropriate reading materials that will motivate them to cultivate their reading skills (Merga 2019). The following are teachers' views on teaching and learning resources best suited for teaching inclusive reading to at-risk readers:

> Even though we do not have sufficient textbooks in our African languages, there must be reading programmes in the schools that promote reading. Teachers need to design materials where even parents are invited to play a role in assisting their children to become skilled readers. (T3)

> For at-risk readers there is a need to come up with a system that will motivate children to read and write books. Parents, teachers and learners must all read, let parents buy reading materials for their children, have conversations with them and ask them to read aloud in the presence of their parents. This speaks to parental involvement. Parents need to have material such as recording devices that will record a story and allow learners to read further in the textbook to enhance their understanding of reading. If the reading problem is severe, schools need to buy the materials that are often used in the special schools to help these children read better. (T6)

> As teachers, we encourage one another to have a reading book corner. In other words, for every teacher teaching reading comprehension must have a corner where he/she puts books so that at risk readers can easily access the reading corner without having to come to the teacher to request a book. (T8)

> Teaching and learning resources suitable for inclusive reading to at risk readers should not be of a lower quality, because that will prevent these learners from progressing in terms of their reading proficiency. Teachers should therefore give struggling readers the reading materials that are equal to the grade they are in – not above or below the grade. (T9)

T3 mentioned the significance of implementing reading programmes that will generate enthusiasm for reading in learners. Effective reading programmes are of paramount importance for all learners in mainstream education, but for disadvantaged and minority learners with reading difficulties, who depend on schools to achieve reading success, reading programmes and sufficient reading materials are in a sense even more important.

T6's insights suggest that there is poor parental involvement in helping children to read. Undoubtedly, parents play a crucial role in assisting their children to read; however, it is an unfortunate fact that the majority of rural parents are not educated; hence, they may be less capable or motivated to teach children to read. That leaves educators with the entire responsibility to be at the centre of reading development. Alternatively, parents should be educated on how they could encourage their children to read, and which reading materials they need to buy for their children.

T9's views seem to condemn the idea of giving at-risk readers reading material that is below their grade level. Through observations and interviews conducted with teachers, it was noted that teachers believe that giving at-risk readers such material is in fact the right strategy to assist weak learners to enhance their reading skills. This entails that teachers should provide a variety of reading materials to at-risk learners. Providing below grade level reading material should be strategically used to allow learners to close the reading gaps they may have without polarising these nor increasing the gap between learners with reading proficiency and at-risk readers.

While there seem to be shortage of reading materials in most rural schools, community libraries can have a positive impact on learners' reading literacy by donating reading books and other necessary reading materials that will aid learners to improve their reading proficiency.

Discussion

Resources that support inclusive reading

Overcrowded classrooms

Internal factors such as classroom overcrowding hamper the idea of organising reading according to learners' reading abilities.

Availability of adequate books for learners to read and/or reading corner in a classroom

From the observations, all the teachers observed were using the DoE isiZulu textbook titled *Masihambisane*. Learners had to sit in groups to share because there were insufficient copies of the book. Other teachers mentioned that they relied on the old reading story books to teach isiZulu reading comprehension. In addition, they did not have reading materials targeting at-risk readers.

Availability of school libraries (to store books and to provide quiet space for reading outside the classroom)

Based on the observation conducted all the schools had no libraries nor any technological reading equipment to help learners read such as computer-based reading materials and reading voice recorders.

The fact that overcrowded classrooms contribute to an environment not conducive to learning is an indication of poor infrastructure in most rural schools (Meier & West 2020). An environment conducive to learning has the potential to yield excellent reading performance (Ntshangase & Tshuma 2023). Based on the observations and interviews where teachers raised significant concerns about poor reading material supply in rural schools, there is a sense that the DoE district office does not do enough to ensure a provision of adequate reading materials needed. This places constraints on reading teachers who are expected to meet the standard expectations of CAPS.

Strategic learner seating arrangements work effectively in a large, open classroom, but they are not feasible in an overcrowded setting, which is a reason why many teachers could not arrange a proper seating plan. Classroom overcrowding and lack of classroom management contribute heavily on the shortage of reading isiZulu material. Teachers lack classroom management skills to enforce discipline and good behaviour of learners. Learners lack discipline, which consequently leads to negative behaviour and lack of respect in the classroom which raises the question of the role of parents in instilling discipline in their children. Poor parental involvement in reading is still one of the main factors hindering the attempts to address the spreading of reading problems in primary schools (Boonk et al. 2018). Parents should take the responsibility to ensure that their children continue to read even at home. They can buy them reading materials such as interesting short stories, which will motivate them to read frequently. Teacher respondents mentioned that learners only practise reading when they are at school and instructed by the teacher to read. No motivation or desire pushes them to read independently. A lack of reading materials in rural schools contributes immensely towards poor learner motivation. In addition, learners are demotivated to read at home due to poor parental involvement (Daries & Probert 2020; Willingham 2017). Alternatively, phases of word learning theory framing this study make a positive contribution in shaping different types of reading materials that teachers could create for inclusive reading classrooms. The concept 'learning theory' (Ehri & McCormick 2008) further recommends effective pedagogical strategies that teachers could implement depending on learners' reading abilities such as modelled reading strategy and the repeated-reading strategy. It is for this reason that this study advocates the importance of ensuring that reading materials align with the pedagogical strategies when teaching reading comprehension in the inclusive classroom. The following section provides further recommendations for this study.

Recommendations

Provide adequate grade level reading materials in African languages in mainstream schools

One of the key findings that emerged from this study is the fact that rural primary schools do not have sufficient reading materials available in isiZulu. This deficit places constraints on teachers who are supposed to improve learners' reading skills.

The primary focus of the DBE should be on the distribution of relevant African language reading materials, if their objective is to address the reading crisis in South African local languages. While the DBE ensures the distribution of reading resources, it is recommended that LTSM developers design reading comprehension textbooks that range across different interests and genres to stimulate learners to read various kinds of texts to foster isiZulu reading comprehension. In addition, the African languages reading material should be updated regularly to meet learners' level of understanding, given that most of the schools use outdated reading textbooks with content that may not be really relevant to learners in the current education context. In other words, reading textbooks' topics should have contemporary interest. Apart from reading textbook materials, at this point, the researcher believes that a literacy-rich environment is paramount for developing reading development and democracy.

This study found that classrooms have more printed reading materials in English than in isiZulu, even though the 2022/2023 PIRLS outcomes show a drastic decrease in reading skills in South African local languages. In this regard, it is recommended that teachers be encouraged to create and put up isiZulu reading posters and pictures in their classrooms to stimulate learners' participation in reading comprehension activities.

The researcher holds a firm view that innovative teachers who make an effort to create meaningful reading materials and strive to establish a smooth reading environment where learners have a preference for a specific reading strategy are more likely to see an improvement in reading.

Limitations

It is important to note that the researcher only collected data from uMkhanyakude district; as a result, the findings of this study cannot be generalised. This study observed that there is still a gap in the transition stage of reading comprehension between the Foundation Phase and the Intermediate Phase. Teachers lack understanding of what the difference is and what is expected of them to deliver in these two phases when it comes to reading development. It would be appropriate to conduct a study that investigates learner reading development during the transition from the Foundation Phase to the Intermediate Phase and teachers' understanding of what is expected of them.

Conclusion

Teachers serve as the primary vehicles of knowledge transfer to learners; hence, it is paramount that they have at their disposal comprehensive and quality reading materials that will sustain learners' academic achievements. While this study has argued that teachers lack the skill to teach reading comprehension and utilise adequate reading materials in class, there is a need for immediate interventions to equip reading teachers with the appropriate knowledge to teach reading comprehension effectively and develop reading materials that align with learners' reading ability. Among the factors highlighted in this study was a shortage of updated isiZulu reading materials. Since there is an awareness of outdated reading materials, teachers need to be innovative and utilise their creativity to develop efficient and effective reading materials for at-risk readers. The National Reading Strategy (2008) points out that the lack of reading materials in African languages contributes immensely towards poor reading performance in primary schools. These discrepancies should be addressed urgently if the aim is to improve reading performance in primary schools. This study employed word learning theory; the aim was to analyse the availability of reading materials for teaching Intermediate Phase isiZulu inclusive reading comprehension. Data were obtained through non-participant classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 10 isiZulu reading teachers. Emerging findings revealed that there is shortage of reading materials in isiZulu in the rural schools situated in uMkhanyakude district. The finding further revealed that most of the schools use outdated reading textbooks with content that may not be relevant to learners in the current education context. In light of the shortage of reading materials in rural schools the DBE needs to establish a method in which reading material content creators design innovative materials that is relevant to learners. Reading materials should also consist of content that is designed to accommodate both at-risk readers and learners with reading proficiency in the inclusive reading classroom.

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Disclaimer

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