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Challenges faced by intermediate phase isiZulu teachers in teaching inclusive reading

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ABSTRACT

Despite several interventions put in place to alleviate the reading crisis in South African education, many teachers still experience challenges in teaching reading comprehension. The situation is even more dire with regards to teaching inclusive reading to at-risk readers in mainstream schools in under-resourced settings. Very few studies have been conducted to investigate the pedagogical strategies in teaching inclusive reading in the intermediate phase (IP) isiZulu classrooms. This study aims to investigate the pedagogical challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers who are teaching reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in the mainstream schools of uMkhanyakude district, in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal province. This qualitative study is guided by the Word Learning Theory which posits that reading instruction should enhance learners' knowledge of the alphabet and high-frequency words. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations and interviews with 10 IP isiZulu teachers based in uMkhanyakude district. The qualitative data were analysed by the researcher through coded thematic analysis. The units of analysis in this study are IP teachers' pedagogic strategies in teaching inclusive reading. The findings indicate that IP isiZulu teachers struggle to organise meaningful and cohesive reading strategies. Strategies employed are not structured to address specific reading challenges and consequently at-risk readers in mainstream schools remain inadequately catered for. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge related to the pedagogical strategies best suited for developing inclusive reading.

Keywords: at-risk readers; inclusive reading, word learning theory, simple view of reading, reading strategies.

CITATION

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1. Introduction

The implementation of an inclusion policy for learners with diverse needs in the South African education context has been a matter of interest since 1994. The principles of the Salamanca statement assert that every learner has a constitutional right to receive quality education. The concept of an inclusive education is also stipulated in the Education White Paper 6, which stipulates that learners with learning challenges should be included in the same classrooms as learners with non-learning problems (Department of Education, 2001). The idea of inclusive reading is therefore included under the umbrella of inclusive education stipulated in the Education White Paper 6. This study understands inclusive reading concept as the teacher's ability to teach both at-risk readers and healthy progress readers in one classroom using effective reading pedagogical strategies (Berkeley & Larsen, 2018). Reading problems among learners appear to be perpetuated by the challenges facing teachers in the inclusive reading classrooms such as inadequate pedagogical strategies. These strategies are often perceived to be inflexible and resistant to acknowledging and accommodating at-risk readers (Land, 2015). It is a problem that many teachers at mainstream schools are insufficiently skilled to adapt their pedagogical strategies to accommodate at-risk readers (Donohue & Bornman, 2015: 34). This may place constraints upon teachers who are expected to deliver the content to at-risk readers in Intermediate Phase (IP) classes, using current pedagogical strategies. This study aims to investigate the pedagogical challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers when teaching reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in the mainstream schools of uMkhanyakude district, in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal province.

2. Research questions

- How do IP isiZulu teachers teach reading comprehension to at-risk readers during pre-reading, while reading and post-reading phases?
- What are the pedagogical challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers when teaching reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers?
- What pedagogical strategies can be suggested as being effective for teaching inclusive reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in mainstream schools?

To further explain the background and context of the research questions the following section reviews literature on international assessment of reading, the importance of developing home language reading skills at the IP level, characteristics of at-risk readers and perspectives on inclusive reading. The section on curriculum stipulation on developing reading in the home language provides background information on how teachers should teach reading comprehension to at-risk readers (Question 1); while the section on challenges faced by teachers when teaching reading comprehension provides insights for interpreting research question 2. The section on strategies for improving reading comprehension provides insights for interpreting research question 3.

3. International assessments of reading

Poor academic performance demonstrated by South African learners in literacy assessments is well documented in the systematic reports such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA) report, International Reports based on the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) and the South African Results of the Progress in International Reading (PIRLS). Figure 1 presents PIRLS 2021 results for Grades 4 and 6 achievement by language of test.

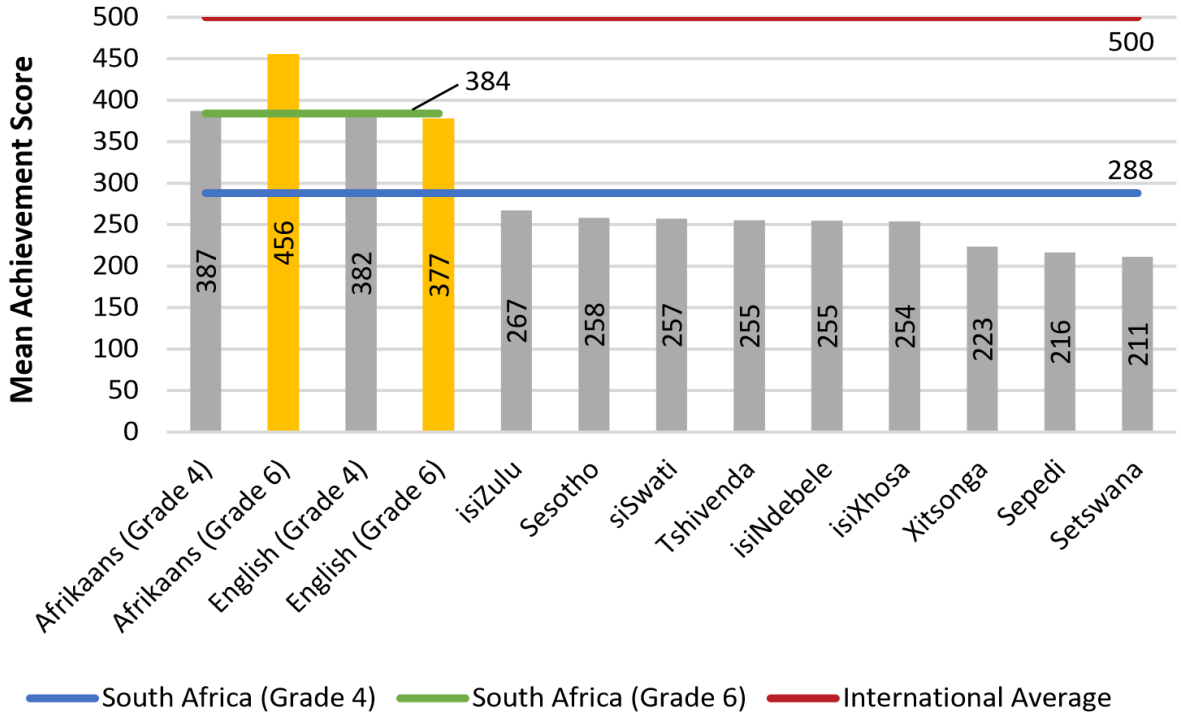

Figure 1: Grade 4 and 6 PIRLS achievement by language of test (PIRLS 2023)

Figure 1 illustrates that at Grade 4 level Afrikaans scored (387), while English scored (382). These are the only languages with a test score above the South African average of 288. The rest of the African languages including IsiZulu (267) are pegged below the average score. At Grade 6 level, Afrikaans (456) is the only language performing above the national average of 384 points. While the Afrikaans and English national mean scores are higher than those in African languages, a major cause of concern is that both the Grade 4 and 6 national averages are below the international mean achievement score of 500.

Spaull (2016) maintains that among the major factors attributing to the poor performance in African languages are the early pushing of learners into learning in a new language (English or Afrikaans) even though they have not sufficiently acquired literacy knowledge in their mother tongue. This compounds the poor performance in African languages literacy. Based on the figures presented in Figure 2, there is an urgency to distribute reading materials across all languages and to equip teachers

with comprehensive pedagogical knowledge to teach reading at primary school level. By so doing, learners may be in a better position to improve their language proficiency not only in English or Afrikaans but also in their mother tongue.

4. The importance of developing reading skills in the home language at IP level

The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis states that certain first language (L1) knowledge can be positively transferred during the process of second language learning (L2) (Cummins, 1979). Dolean, (2022) reiterates linguistic interdependence by stating that acquiring reading proficiency in one's native language can be transmitted to other languages. This suggests that reading proficiency in isiZulu language can be cognitively transferred to the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) which is English in this context. Pretorius and Stoffelsma (2021: 28) also discuss the degree to which vocabulary expansion in one's native language positively influences vocabulary growth in a second language. Furthermore, Tshuma (2021) emphasises that learners who have strong foundational knowledge of both home language and second language have exceptional benefits in their academic learning. Therefore, this study focuses on the development of reading skills isiZulu as this would expand learners' academic opportunities not only in isiZulu as home language but also in English as a LoLT.

It was essential for this study to particularly focus on the IP level because it is where intensive reading is required as learners transition from the foundation to the intermediate phase; and begin to acquire reading independence, increase their knowledge of vocabulary as well as read for meaning and understanding (Pretorius & Stoffelsma, 2021). The learners' transition point is important, however; the teachers' use of effective reading strategies to help learners transition smoothly is even more crucial. Therefore, all teachers should be responsible for teaching learners to read and read to learn throughout their academic careers (Ntshangase & Tshuma, 2023). Thus, reading at the IP level and beyond should be intensified to adequately equip learners for senior grades and investigating the challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers when teaching inclusive reading is of paramount importance.

5. At-risk readers in mainstream schools

In the education context at-risk readers are regarded as learners who struggle to acquire reading skills and as a result achieve poor results (De Witt, 2018; Rule & Land, 2017). This type of learner may have difficulties acquiring reading cognitive skills such as word recognition, reading fluency or vocabulary. These cognitive components are the fundamental basics of reading development and attributes for defining at-risk readers. However, researchers are of the view that the concept of at-risk readers must be expanded to recognise learners who are also disengaged from literacy (Rule & Land., 2017; Wise et al., 2016; Rasinski & Young, 2017). The learners are unmotivated and most likely have extremely low confidence in their reading and self-efficacy. They have less confidence in their reading ability whether for enjoyment, pleasure or academic purposes. In addition, at-risk readers

specifically in primary schools, can be characterised as having a low working-memory capacity and processing capacity compared to healthy-progress readers (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007). These learners do not meet the requirement of reading for their grade level. Thus, this study regards at-risk readers as learners who exhibit both aspects: learners who struggle to read and those who are unmotivated to read.

The status of 'at-risk reader' is conferred by a teacher, usually based on the teacher's continuous observation of the learner during reading, monitoring the learner's development of skills, fluency and confidence in reading comprehension, effective reading, and reading accuracy (Knight et al., 2017). Considering the status of at-risk readers in the inclusive reading classroom, teaching reading should incorporate strategies that caters for at-risk readers while providing guidance and immediate reading interventions that will help learners improve their reading skills. Effective inclusive reading strategies are primarily important to ensure that at-risk readers are academically supported, and they have meaningful participation in the classroom.

6. Identifying at-risk readers

The Simple View of Reading is a tool which can be used to identify at-risk readers. It was propounded by Gough and Tunmer (1986) as a product of decoding and comprehension: Reading Comprehension = Word Reading x Language Skills for Reading. This model emphasises how reading comprehension, word reading and language skills all relate to achieve a sound level of literacy. Assessing learner achievement on word reading and language skills using the model is done with reference to four quadrants (categories) of readers, with differing strengths and weaknesses as illustrated in Figure 2. The different learner reading levels also imply differing levels of support required from the teacher.

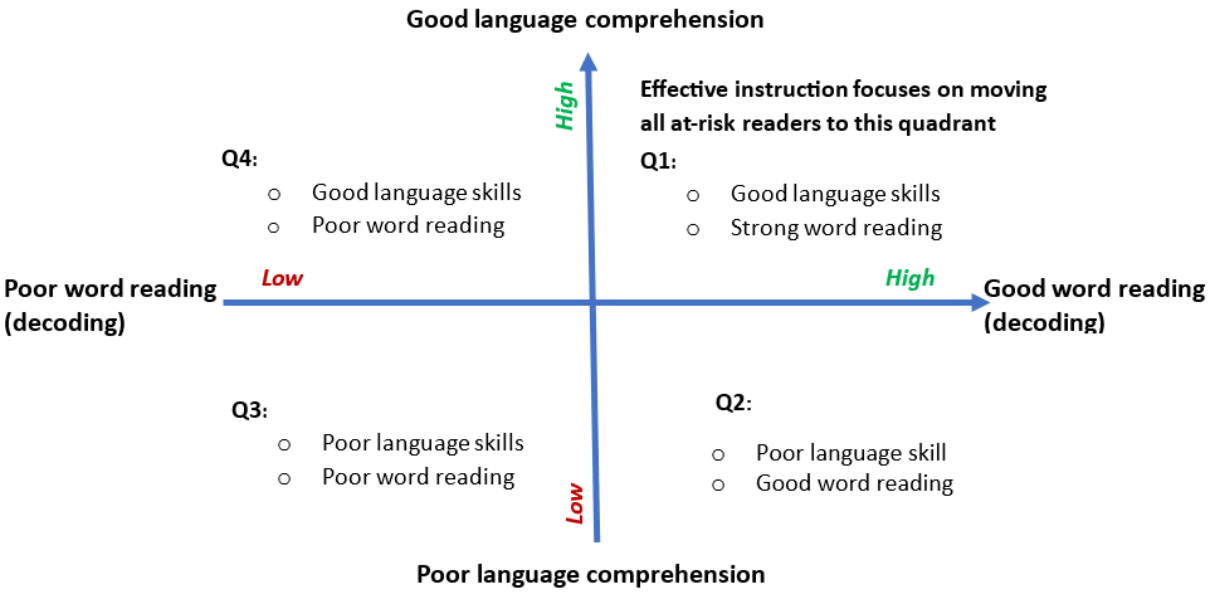

Figure 2: Simple view of reading (adapted from Gough & Tunmer, 1986)

Each quadrant represents different word-reading and language skill combinations. The quadrants classify learners according to their reading profiles and indicate their instructional needs. It is the objective of successful reading teaching for at-risk readers to position learners in the top-right quadrant, or Quadrant 1 (Q1) (Knight et al., 2017). The bottom two quadrants, Q2 and Q3, designate learners with reading difficulties. Learners who struggle with word reading are assigned to the two left-side quadrants, Q3 and Q4. Placed in the bottom-left quadrant, Q3, are learners who have multiple areas of weakness. The simple view of reading brings together word reading and comprehension abilities to promote holistic literacy without concentrating on just one aspect of literacy development. The model maps the position of at-risk readers in reading comprehension, which enables IP teachers to identify at-risk readers in the inclusive reading classroom and provide the necessary support.

7. Inclusive reading

Berkeley and Larsen (2018) define inclusive reading as the ability to teach reading skills in a classroom that includes both healthy-progress readers and at-risk readers through implementing inclusive pedagogical instruction that caters for all. The concept of inclusive reading in mainstream schools has not been given sufficient attention; rather the focus has been on reading comprehension only. The inclusion of learners with reading comprehension difficulties in mainstream schools is influenced by a number of factors such as pedagogical practices that do not seem to accommodate the idea of inclusive reading and less cognitive support provided to at-risk readers (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). These factors are viewed as hindering inclusive reading and compromising the mandate of inclusive education in White Paper 6, which seeks to accommodate all the learners irrespective of their learning challenges.

A study conducted by Ngema (2023) on pedagogical content knowledge of teachers in teaching isiZulu reading revealed that teachers seem to have misconceptions and inadequate knowledge of how to develop basic foundational reading skills; they lack the capacity to choose appropriate strategies for teaching reading that suited the learners' individual needs. Furthermore, Ntshangase and Tshuma, (2023: 49) state that university teacher education departments do not adequately equip IP isiZulu pre-service teachers with the necessary pedagogical strategies to teach inclusive reading to at-risk readers in mainstream schools. Therefore, simply including at-risk readers in mainstream schools without proper inclusive reading pedagogical practices and equipping teachers with comprehensive inclusive reading knowledge and skills can do little to improve the reading comprehension skills of at-risk readers. Managing inclusive reading requires inclusive pedagogical practice content that provide strong emotional support as part of teaching reading to allow learners to understand their specific learning challenges and feel strongly supported.

The Portfolio Committee of Basic Education, in engagement with the Department of Basic Education (2018/2019), expressed their concerns about the inclusion of learners with learning challenges in the mainstream education, which is not taking place as expected. Despite the government's efforts in

developing policies such as the Screening Identification Assessment Statement, which supports inclusive education, this policy does not provide guidance on inclusive reading nor does it indicate how teachers should practically implement inclusive reading in their classrooms.

8. Strategies for improving reading comprehension

Reading strategies are the key in developing reading skills for learners in the primary grades. Researchers point out that effective reading instruction in the lower grades is essential in laying down the basic literacy skills required in learners (Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Donohue & Bornman, 2015; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). Failure to develop reading skills in the lower grades may seriously affect learners as they proceed to the upper grades (DeVos, Van der Merwe & Van der Mescht, 2014). Reading strategies for primary learners, particularly in the IP, should focus on the acquisition of letter names, sounds and then syllable blending to enable learners to master the code (Pretorius, 2016; DeVos et al., 2014; Naidoo et al., 2014).

There are a number of effective reading strategies recommended for use in developing reading comprehension skills. Ahmadi (2017) suggests the top-down reading strategy which promotes a connection between reading and meaning by stressing that a learner must be initially introduced to the entire sentence and paragraph, and only after that should they learn about smaller units of language such as words. Verbeek (2010) suggests the Mastery Learning Movement approach, which focuses on breaking difficult processes of reading into their subcomponents and having them taught separately. The approach provides teachers with an opportunity to use skills-based worksheets to assess phonics, comprehension and vocabulary skills. In the learner-centred whole language methodology for reading instruction (Ahmadi, 2017), the teacher is perceived as a facilitator of learning and connector of rightful materials and methods to provide adequate support to learners, particularly at-risk readers. In this instance, the teacher draws on existing past knowledge, which can be built on. Honig (2001) suggests that balanced instruction ensures that both reading and writing receive equal attention, and combines direct and strategy instruction. Direct instruction focuses on reading comprehension skills such as decoding, phonics and segmentation, while strategy instruction focuses on the "global skills for general approach to reading". The combination of both approaches is fundamentally important when developing reading comprehension skills amongst at-risk readers (Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

9. Curriculum stipulations for teaching reading skills in IP isiZulu Home Language

There is overwhelming evidence that the Curriculum Assessments Policy Statement (CAPS) contributes to the reading problems specifically in South African indigenous languages (Land, 2015; DeVos et al., 2014). Some challenges include:

- inadequate reading pedagogies that do not transfer the actual knowledge of indigenous languages to learners studying reading as home language;
- learners who are not native speakers of English ought to acquire reading in two different languages simultaneously in Home Language (HL) and English, which is often used as the language of instruction in many South African schools. This increases the chances of contradictions between the CAPS for ESL, particularly in the Foundation and IP phases;
- learners are expected to cope with two sets of vowel sounds. Many African learners find it difficult to recall the different sounds of the five letter vowels. They can find it easier to chant ***a e i o u***, however, they will struggle to read them in a constructed word (Cronje, 2021);
- For IP, there is a CAPS document for HL available in all 11 South African languages (CAPS, 2012). However, each document is a translated version of the CAPS for English HL with minor additions and removal of certain aspects.

De Vos et al. (2014: 3) argue that the CAPS document designers are less knowledgeable about South African indigenous languages. Some of the limitations in the CAPS for IP isiZulu Home Language, for example, include irregularities of isiZulu structure (Cronje, 2021). For instance, CAPS explains that there are various ways of spelling words, whilst isiZulu consists of a transparent written system yet does not form sounds in different ways. The impression from CAPS that fluency comprehension and vocabulary need to be practised daily will not have any impact in developing learners' reading skills because they already know these aspects by heart (Cronje, 2021). There is a difference between what is stated by CAPS and what African learners already know and have been doing in their past experience, which includes reading in pairs and in groups repeatedly (Rule & Land, 2017: 4). What is most valuable is that a teacher needs to guide and monitor reading for approximately 10-15 minutes each week (Rule & Land., 2017). Thus, the need to understand teachers' challenges and perspectives on teaching inclusive reading remains important.

10. Teacher challenges in engaging with comprehension instruction

Research indicates various reasons for the challenges that teachers face in reading comprehension instruction. Block and Duffy (2008) stress that being a teacher who teaches comprehension strategy is challenging, demanding and time consuming. Without professional teacher development it would be challenging using comprehension instruction to promote learners' reading skills. Teachers are not confident in reading strategies which they believe are the cause of poor reading performance (Klapwijk, 2011).

Sailors (2008) points out that there is a lack of research on the professional development of teachers regarding reading comprehension instruction. Most studies focus on reading instruction and the acquisition of decoding skills. Teachers seem to be inadequately prepared to teach comprehension as various studies in South African school contexts have shown (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016; Klapwijk, 2011; Mengual-Andres & Viana-Orta, 2015; Subban & Mahlo, 2017).

All teachers should have adequate skills to teach literacy comprehension and language acquisition regardless of the subject they teach in the classroom (Lu et al., 2022). The fact that the teaching of skills related to language usage such as listening, reading, writing and speaking is allocated to the language teacher only is a challenge. Language teachers tend to think that all problems related to language literacy are theirs (Moswane, 2019). Similarly, the focus of teacher education preparation programmes appears to be along these lines. Comprehension courses are limited to future language teachers only, instead of enabling all pre-service teachers (in all content areas) to acquire comprehension knowledge and pedagogy strategies (Klapwijk, 2011).

11. Phases of word learning theory

The world learning theory was developed by Ehri and McCormick, (1998). It is a well-recognised theory in the field of developing reading skills, particularly for beginner readers as well as struggling readers. The word learning theory consists of 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 (first grade), consolidated-alphabetic (second grade) and automatic-alphabetic phase (beyond second grade) as illustrated in Figure 3:

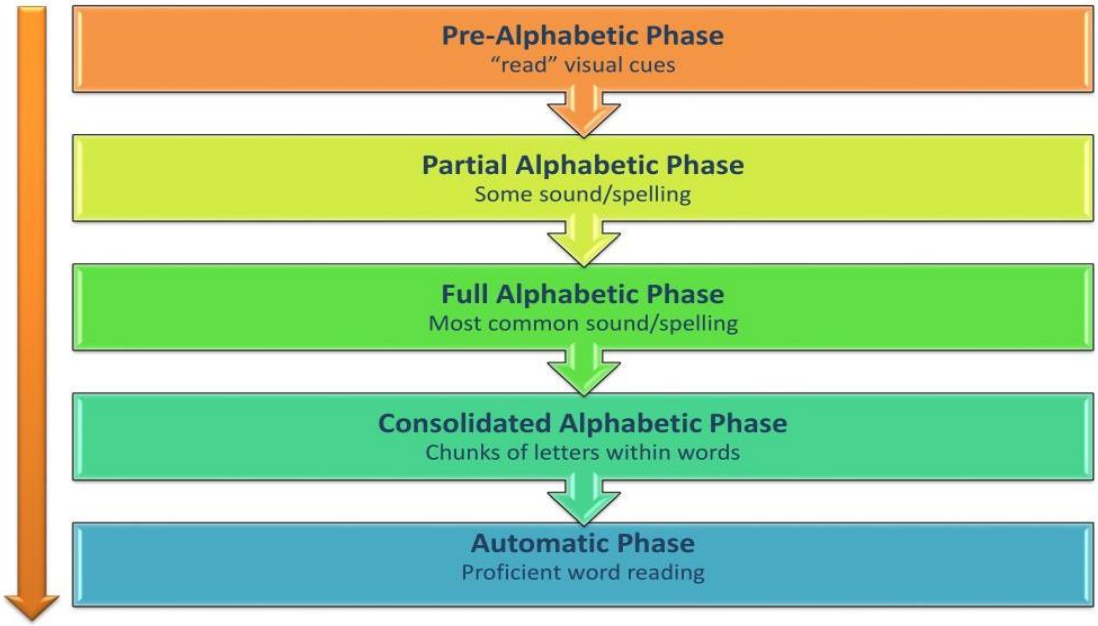

Figure 3: Phases of word learning theory: Ehri and McCormick (2008)

Each of these phases is characterised by comprehensive reading strategies that can help learners acquire the necessary reading skills. The phases act as a guide for teachers; for example, during the pre-alphabetic phase the teacher must focus on letter recognition and phonics awareness (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). In the partial-alphabetic phase, the teacher should model how to manipulate

sounds and words. In the third phase, the teacher should allow learners to re-read the text many times while practising pronunciation, including various sounds to encode them. The word learning theory is relevant to this study as it deals with pedagogical strategies which influence the critical phases a learner has to go through to develop reading fluency. Such strategies can effectively address the needs of at-risk readers in inclusive classrooms.

12. Research design and methodology

Crabtree and Miller (2022) indicate that qualitative research allows the researcher to gain insights and develop theoretical perspectives or new concepts related to the situation, personality or phenomenon. It is against this background that the researcher chose to frame this study within a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences and pedagogical challenges encountered by teachers who are teaching IP isiZulu reading comprehension to at-risk readers in the inclusive classroom. Non-probability sampling was used to select ten IP isiZulu teachers from ten mainstream primary schools situated in uMkhanyakude district, KwaZulu Natal Prince, where 81% of the population speaks isiZulu as their mother tongue (Statistics South Africa, 2022: 23). uMkhanyakude was selected because it is among the poorest districts in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in terms of socio-economic status; and it is the researcher's home area. The researcher is familiar with the context and has a vested interest in better understanding social issues affecting the education landscape, including the literacy levels of learners in the district.

The ten schools were selected because they are mainstream schools who also enrol at-risk readers. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations followed by teacher semi-structured interviews. One IP isiZulu teacher from each of the ten schools was selected to participate in the non-participant classroom observation. The same teacher who was observed was further interviewed. Non-participant classroom observations was carried to observe reading teachers on the pedagogical strategies they implement when teaching inclusive reading comprehension. The researcher made filed notes based on the observation of pre-, while and post-reading strategies employed by teachers to teach inclusive reading. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand teachers' experience and challenges in teaching inclusive reading for at-risk readers. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded by the researcher. The researcher transcribed interview recordings. Coded thematic analysis was employed to analyse both the interview and observations transcripts. The unit of analysis in this study is IP teachers' pedagogic strategies in teaching inclusive reading. Ethical clearance (H22/01/20 Wits University) was issued by the Ethical Clearance Committee for permission to conduct this study.

13. Participant demographic information

Table 1 presents the participants' gender, age, experience in isiZulu reading comprehension teaching and their highest qualifications.

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participants	Gender	Age (years)	Experience (years) teaching IP isiZulu	Highest qualifications
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

Understanding respondents' gender, age and experience in teaching isiZulu reading comprehension skills was necessary to determine whether these factors have any influence on teaching inclusive reading. As illustrated in Table 1, all the respondents were qualified to be teachers and they had sufficient experience teaching IP isiZulu as a subject. It is also important to note that all the participants are based in mainstream primary schools in uMkhanyakude District.

14. Research findings

The key finding of this research is that IP isiZulu teachers struggle to organise meaningful and cohesive reading strategies. Strategies employed are not structured to address a particular reading challenge, and therefore at-risk readers in mainstream schools remain inadequately catered for. The next section presents teacher and learner activities in the pre-, while- and post-reading stages as observed in isiZulu reading comprehension lessons.

Variable 1: How do teachers teach reading comprehension to at-risk readers during pre-reading, while reading and post-reading phase?

Reading preparation is used by teachers to achieve certain tasks through providing comprehensive guidance to learners to practice and learn literacy skills such as reading (Salem, 2017). **Pre**-reading exercises lay down the reading foundation and explain different reading areas that may constitute difficulties. The **while**-reading phase is the most important and critical phase of reading that enable the reader to comprehend and engage with the text thoroughly. The **post**-reading stage involves activities that focus on summarising, responding and applying critical thinking skills from what was read in the text. Table 2 presents the strategies used by teachers as observed in the non-participant classroom observations.

Table 2: Strategies used by teachers in pre-, while- and post-reading activities

	Pre-reading teacher & learner activities	While-reading teacher & learner activities	Post-reading teacher & learner activities
T1	*T1 compiled a list of vocabulary words from the text and worked together with learners to define them.*	*T1 read the text together with learners, ensuring that learners are reading at a normal reading pace.*	*No reading activities or reading tasks were given to learners in the post-reading stage.*
T2	*Learners defined complex key terms in the text before reading happened. T2 wrote the list of key words on the chalkboard and asked learners to define those words while assisting them.*	*T2 asked all learners to read aloud. While learners were reading T2 moved around the classroom to monitor the reading.*	*There were no reading activities nor reading engagements in the post-reading stage.*
T3	*Before reading took place, T3 explained the importance of telling a story and its significance to learners. T3 further explained different kinds of isiZulu stories.*	*T3 asked learners to read the text in groups of 6-7. As learners were reading, T3 requested one group member to stand up and re-tell a certain paragraph they had read.*	*No reading activities or reading tasks were given to learners in the post-reading stage.*
T4	*No form of pre-reading engagement was done by T4 to prepare learners to read the text.*	*Learners were requested to read the comprehension text aloud. T4 did not seem to pay attention to or provide assistance to many learners struggling to read.*	*T4 did not provide any form of reading activities in the post-reading stage.*
T5	*Learners were instructed to read the text without any form of preparation.*	*While learners were reading the text aloud, T5 did not assist learners struggling with word pronunciation.*	*No reading activities or reading tasks were given to learners in the post-reading stage.*
T6	*T6 instructed learners to look at the visual images displayed in the text to get clearer understanding of the text.*	*T6 asked learners to group themselves in groups of 7-8. Each group was given a particular section they should read in the textbook.*	*T6 instructed learners to answer comprehension questions in groups in the post-reading stage.*
T7	*Before reading began, T7 explained the context of the story and explained the gist of the topic explicitly while engaging learners.*	*T7 read the text to the learners and requested them to underline complex concepts while the reading was underway. Once the teacher was done reading, learners raised their hands to state the words they underlined with the aim of defining them. T7 used phonemes knowledge and manipulation of letters, which automatically influenced better spelling as learners were reading.*	*T7 asked learners to sit in groups of 6 to discuss the story and answer written questions.*
T8	*T8 explained different ways learners can analyse the text.*	*T8 noted that learners were struggling to spell out letters with click sounds such as "Q" in isiZulu. T8 engaged learners to practise letter sounds that have click sounds.*	*As T8 was about to give a reading task to learners after reading, the time ran out and they had to end the lesson.*
T9	*T9 used a short video clip to provide background knowledge for the text which was about the battle of Isandlwana between the Zulu kingdom and the British Empire that took place on 22 January 1879.*	*During the lesson, other learners were not reading, the teacher did not notice that because the classroom was overcrowded. However, T9 stimulated a friendly reading atmosphere.*	*After reading, T9 selected few learners to come to the front of the class to retell the story and the lesson they learned from the story.*
T10	*No form of preparation done by T10 prior to reading.*	*T10 grouped learners according to their reading abilities, then asked them to read aloud in groups all together.*	*There were no reading activities provided for learners in the post-reading stage.*

Pre-reading

During pre-reading, T1, T2 and T7 prepared learners by creating a list of key words in the comprehension text and requested learners to define them. This kind of reading preparation strategy is useful in enhancing learners' vocabulary and preparing at-risk readers for reading to master precision of understanding and automaticity. T6 and T9 used visual images to prepare learners to read the text. It is important to note that for some of the learners in the mainstream schools auditory visual learning may not be a natural way to learn. These learners may need to learn using certain objects that can assist them to remember new information (Warnick & Caldarella, 2016). However, this strategy accommodated at-risk readers in the reading process. T8 used text analysis which provided an opportunity for at-risk readers to further develop vocabulary and reflect on their analysis when reading was underway. The majority 70% (*n=7*) of the teachers used effective pre-reading strategies; however, 30% (*n=3*) of the teachers did not engage leaners in preparations for reading before the actual reading commenced. Teachers often skip the pre-reading stage and begin in the actual reading stage, consequently placing learners at risk of developing reading difficulties even before they begin to read (Lailiyah et al., 2019). For example, T4, T5 and T10 distributed reading textbooks and instructed learners to begin reading without introducing any form of scaffolding. The problem at this stage is the way in which teachers activate learners' background knowledge which does not always align with learners' real-life experiences. Teachers fail to provide practical demonstrations that connect to learners' real-life experience which will enable them to easily recall the meaning of complex words as they are about to read the text.

While-reading

In the while-reading stage, almost all the teachers provided opportunities for learners to read. However, what is most essential at this stage is the pedagogical practice employed by the teacher in the inclusive reading classroom to improve at-risk readers' reading skills. In almost every reading lesson observed there was no sense of an inclusive reading pedagogical practice; for example, all teachers (apart from T7) employed a reading strategy that do not cater for at-risk readers reading problems as demonstrated by T4 and T5. Even though other teachers such T3 and T6 used group reading strategies, it was not clear how at-risk readers were being catered for. Apart from that, there is a serious cause for concern regarding teachers' lack of knowledge when it comes to engaging learners with decoding isiZulu words to ensure reading accuracy. During the while-reading stage, none of the teachers observed used decoding practices in their classrooms. Teachers are not knowledgeable about reading strategies such as the Mastery Learning Movement approach, or the bottom-up and top-down reading methods, which are the driving forces for developing reading comprehension.

Post-reading

Table 2 shows that 60% (*n=6*) of teachers did not engage learners in a post-reading phase. These teachers may have purposefully disengaged learners from the post-reading phase based on the predictable reasons that they lack adequate knowledge on what is expected of them at this point, or they opt not to engage learners deliberately. Consequently, this has a negative impact on reading development because learners are not provided any opportunity to apply their understanding or importantly, exhibit their ability to read for meaning. T8 could not grant learners the opportunity to write and provide connections and critical thinking about the text because of time restrictions. Had T8 paced the lesson well, there would have been time for at least one post-reading activity. On the other hand, 40% (*n=4*) of the teachers engaged learners in post-reading activities such as discussing the text, asking questions about the characters of the story and the role they played. This led to learners making connections between the new information learnt and their personal lives by also demonstrating reading for understanding and for meaning.

Based on the classroom observations, teachers lack the fundamental knowledge to adequately teach word decoding and language comprehension, which then compromise the purpose of developing reading skills to at-risk readers. The word learning theory framing this study suggest that decoding strategy is primarily important when teaching reading to at-risk readers since it exposes them to unfamiliar words. Erhi and McCormick (1998) assert that decoding strategies identify sounds of individual letters by means of holding them in memory then blending them into pronunciations which are recognised as real words. Furthermore, the Simple View of Reading by Gough and Tunmer (1986) also emphasises the teaching of decoding and comprehension skills. According to the Simple View of Reading language comprehension and word recognition serve as crucial components of reading when teaching at-risk readers (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

The Simple View of Reading is self-evidence that explicit instruction in word recognition, sentence comprehension, familiarity with the language text and vocabulary are important in reading development. Through the simple view of reading teachers could have used the four quadrants to identify at-risk readers based on their reading deficiencies during the pre-reading stage. During the while reading stage teachers should use language comprehension and word decoding as a guide towards effective reading instruction. Post-reading is the reading assessment phase, yet grading and assessing learners improvement must be based on the word decoding and language comprehension criteria.

While lesson observations sought to get a general understanding regarding the strategies used by IP teachers to prepare learners to read, teacher interviews probed this aspect further by examining pedagogical strategies used to teach isiZulu reading comprehension to at-risk readers in IP. The section below presents teacher responses to the three interview questions posted.

Question 1: What are the pedagogical strategies used when teaching isiZulu reading comprehension to at-risk readers?

Reading pedagogical strategies are key in developing reading skills for learners in the primary grades. Researchers posit that effective reading instructions in the lower grades are significantly important in laying down the basic literacy skills required in learners. Failure to develop reading skills at a lower grade may consequently affect a learner as they proceed to the upper grades (Agbofa, 2023).

> **T1:** "*I use a reading aloud strategy which helps in ensuring that learners project their voices accurately and they have good pronunciation. Apart from that, reading aloud strategy reinforce confidence in the learner pronunciation and gives me opportunity as a teacher to pay attention to the at-risk readers and provide extra support."*
>
> **T4** "*My classroom is decorated with a variety of printed reading materials with the purpose of instilling love for reading and reading for pleasure. Alternatively, I use the reading spelling award strategy to motivate them to read. The reading spelling award strategy brings tremendous results and it further conscientise them to read well so that they can win themselves those small prizes. To check their reading understanding, I list different words alphabetically on the chalkboard, then I would twist them up and ask learners to point the word I am pronouncing."*
>
> **T8:** "*I use reading groups, peer reading and individual reading. I think it is important to expose learners to various reading pedagogy to deal swiftly with reading problems they encounter. Also, using different pedagogy gives me opportunity to reflect in each lesson and make improvement."*

The respondents' views appear to be significant and comprehensive in developing reading skills. All the teachers interviewed implement various reading strategies that seek to stimulate learners' interest to read. However, it was noted that their pedagogical strategies do not significantly focus on the linguistic knowledge that will improve learners' reading skills. These include decoding skills, word identification, reading lexical quality constituents, phonemics awareness, syllables awareness and others as also observed in classes. This gap indicates that teachers may not be doing enough to reinforce reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in the inclusive classrooms. In other words, teachers do not teach reading intensively, but rather they just facilitate reading. Pretorius (2013) also holds a firm view that the majority of South African teachers do not teach reading comprehension adequately; instead they facilitate reading lessons through providing reading practices only, but not cultivating the reading skills required to improve learners' reading abilities. Furthermore, instructions are predominantly in English, which then marginalises the development of sound reading comprehension skills in African languages. Land (2015) maintained that reading methodologies often utilised for reading acquisition in Sub-Saharan Africa are typically adopted from the European socio-educational context; they do not represent the linguistic structures of reading in African languages.

Question 2: What are the pedagogical challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers while teaching reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers?

According to Cortez (2017), the pedagogical strategies which teachers use do not align completely with effective strategies that are supposed to ensure the inclusion of at-risk readers. This shows that teachers need to be assisted with specific pedagogical strategies that could be used for developing reading comprehension amongst at-risk readers. 70% (*n=7*) of the teachers' views indicate that there is a gap between the prescribed pedagogical practice in the curriculum and actual classroom practice in terms of adhering to the inclusive education regulations.

> **T2**: *"The main problem is that we are teaching in inclusive classrooms, in conjunction to that* ***we do not have inclusive pedagogical strategies presented in our curriculum or reading policies to balance between teaching at-risk readers and skilled readers.*** *We are not provided enough time to deal with learners with learning challenges. The curriculum expects us to deal with admin activities, teaching overcrowded classes, covering a syllabus in the learning environment that lacks adequate resources".*
>
> **T8**: "*The current pedagogical strategies stipulated in our curriculum do not address the real challenges that we are facing in schools.* ***Also, the education policies do not provide comprehensive guide on how we should deal with learners with reading problems".***
>
> **T9**: "*It is difficult to implement inclusive pedagogical strategies in the learning environment that involves different learners with unique problems.* ***As the teacher, you must deal with at-risk readers whilst you must also cater for those that can read better.*** *I am of the view that it would be better if learners are separated based on their leaning cognitive ability. In that way, it would be easier to use one strategy that caters for all learners in class".*

Clearly, the expectations of the curriculum and inclusive policy do not align with what currently transpires in the classrooms. Nevertheless, teachers appeared to be extremely occupied with other activities and it became difficult for them to concentrate on effective teaching. This suggests that the curriculum places a huge workload on the teachers, which undermines their primary task of teaching. Teachers' concerns are also central to CAPS, which appears to have been translated from English to local languages, as also alluded to in this study. However, 30% (*n=3*) of teachers are of the view that the current pedagogical strategies are effective, but teachers require extra training; this points to the importance of understanding the role of teacher education programmes in preparing pre-service teachers with effective teaching skills to teach inclusive reading in mainstream schools.

Question 3: What pedagogical strategies can be suggested as being effective for teaching inclusive reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in mainstream schools?

Teachers' knowledge of reading pedagogical practice is vitally important in developing reading skills among struggling readers in the classroom (Cortez, 2017). Teachers are regarded as key in laying down the basic literacy skills required to improve learners' reading competency. Teacher responses

indicate that the different pedagogical strategies suggested can impact on reading development in different ways.

> **T3**: "*I would say that it would depend on what you want your learners to achieve at the end of the lesson; for example, if the aim is to improve their vocabulary, you will have to employ the vocabulary reading strategy. If you want to improve their pronunciation, you will have to engage learners using the reading pronunciation strategies".*
>
> **T4**: "*One strategy that can be used is that you divide learners in the class according to their performance; for example, when teaching pronoun or vocabulary you are teaching them at different levels based on their performance, it is easy to move from one level to another. Hence, you can easily apply different strategies in each group provided that you know their level of reading. But this may not be possible if there is large number of learners in one class".*
>
> **T8**: "*I think as the teacher you must be aware of reading area which seems to be problematic to your learners then apply appropriate reading strategy. For example, if the problem is about pronunciation, then you should use repetition strategy until learners are able to pronounce words adequately".*

The views of T3, T4 and T8 suggest that before a teacher attempts to use a particular reading strategy, they must firstly examine and understand the reading skills that appear to be problematic to learners. This suggests that teachers should engage in action research before implementing interventions to assist at-risk readers. Using a researched reading strategy may assist learners to easily move from one reading level into another. However, T5 and T10 shared the following insights that promote using audio-visual reading materials as one of the effective strategies:

> **T5**: *"Apart from a reading aloud strategy which is used regularly, one of the most effective reading strategies is the visual aid reading strategy. In this strategy, teachers can use pictures that are common and ask learners to name those pictures. Learners can also play a memory game by using certain words that rhyme. Teachers may have these words printed on the pasteboard/card stock. Lastly, teachers may give learners the task of coming up with their own new words using syllables that are furnished on the flash cards.*
>
> **T10**: "*I would recommend the use of peer reading strategy and visual reading material strategy when teaching reading comprehension".*

Audio-visual materials play a significant role in developing reading skills in both healthy progress and at-risk readers. While T5 and T10 suggested these useful strategies, they did not use them in the lessons observed.

Although teachers recommended very useful pedagogical strategies, some of the suggested reading strategies may not adequately cater for inclusive reading. These include the whole class reading strategy suggested by T2 and T6, which could exclude at-risk readers from participating in reading comprehension. As also became evident from observations and interviews responses on the pedagogical strategies, teachers' pay less attention to at-risk readers in reading comprehension

lessons. The pedagogical strategies they implement do not accommodate at-risk readers, but they often focus on healthy-progress readers.

15. Discussion and recommendations

Teachers' inadequate mastery of pedagogical strategies for developing reading comprehension

The components of reading can be viewed as the cardinal pillars for developing reading comprehension skills. The components include vocabulary, spelling, fluency, phonological awareness and morphological awareness (Kendeou et al., 2016). It is important to note that these components can be integrated in different ways depending on the language taught (Pretorius, 2013). For example, blending phonemes to form isiZulu word such as *s/i/y/a/f/u/n/d/a* cannot be the same as blending an English word, which then means there is a need to be knowledgeable about how to break down, identify and manipulate the phonological structure of a word in that language (Elleman & Oslund, 2019). Data gathered from the study participants suggest that IP isiZulu teachers have not mastered the necessary pedagogical strategies required to teach reading skills to both healthy-progress and at-risk readers.

Structuring reading strategies for inclusive reading

The word learning theory guides teachers on reading development. For example, during the pre-alphabetic stage, the teacher should focus on letter recognition and phonics awareness (Ehri, 2020). Thus, teachers must assist learners to match letters with word sounds, incidentally also learning spelling rules then use this knowledge to decode and encode words (Castle, Rastle & Notion, 2018). In other words, when a word is repeated, learners become familiar with the words and recognise them in chunks. For example, in the isiZulu terms '*asifundi, bafundile* and *zisafunda*' learners will eventually understand the common root, which is *-fund-* meaning 'to learn'. In the partial-alphabetic phase, teachers' pedagogical strategy should model how to manipulate sounds and words. The third phase emphasises that teachers should allow learners to re-read the text many times while practising pronunciation, including the various sounds to encode them. At-risk readers can identify unfamiliar terms when these are frequently repeated. Erhi and McCormick (1998) posit that oral reading fluency assessments should be conducted regularly through observing learners and providing the necessary support that will help them move from one step to another. Data from both the lesson observations and teacher interviews revealed the use of unstructured pedagogical strategies, leaving at-risk readers without the necessary support.

16. Recommendations

Increasing reading instruction time in the inclusive reading classrooms

Vaughn et al. (2012) state that one of the most crucial strategies to strengthen academic interventions in subjects like reading is to extend learning time. Enhancing reading instruction time can afford teachers the opportunity to cover more reading topics and materials in greater depth for at-risk readers. Time is a valuable resource in schools, so determining the best way to increase time for reading instruction is crucial. Evidence also suggests that certain learners need a longer period of time; increasing the frequency or duration of the reading lesson can enhance outcomes for individuals with reading challenges (Rivkin & Schiman, 2015). There should be an awareness among teachers that some learners may need additional weeks or months of assistance, especially if the objective is to boost cognitively challenging activities such as isiZulu reading comprehension that are unlikely to be quickly addressed fully.

Guided reading

Guided reading refers to a pedagogical approach that seeks to assist individual learners learn how to process reading comprehension challenges while developing reading fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). Guided reading is designed to take place in a small reading group to allow effective interaction between learners. Learners receive opportunity to be assisted individually on the specific reading area they struggle with. This study recommends that schools should introduce guided reading programmes which will be monitored and facilitated by specialised guided reading teachers who are well equipped to deal with the reading challenges facing at-risk readers in class. The role of these guided reading teachers is to oversee the guided reading lesson, while ensuring that learners strive to reach their reading potential. In the case of at-risk readers in the inclusive reading classrooms, these specialists are quick to respond and provide necessary support and guidance. The guided reading programme will further provide opportunity for at-risk readers to consult individually or in small groups on their reading problems they experience in classroom. A guided reading programme will not only ensure that at-risk readers in the inclusive reading classroom are provided with the extra support needed, but it will also ensure that teachers have some relief from their workload; the findings of this study indicate that there are numerous concerns raised by teachers regarding their workload and high expectations from the Department of Education, which then hampers the quality of teaching.

Motivating at-risk readers to read

Motivating learners to read involves exposing learners to a variety of words and text. Teachers must expose learners to text during classroom activities and through homework. However, what learners

will achieve at that time will be minimal compared to what they can achieve when reading independently (Daries & Probert, 2020). Teachers need to foster a love for reading, especially independent reading, so that at-risk readers maximise the value of reading and readily make the choice to read. Learners often take reading seriously if there are sufficient interesting opportunities created around them, such as texts that relates to their daily lives or that make them connect with their friends (Barber & Klauda, 2020). The desire to read is strongly connected with the ability to read itself: learners are often motivated to read if they are competent in it rather than when they are struggling (Knight et al., 2017). This means that motivation must not be addressed separately from the pedagogical strategies. Pedagogical strategies for at-risk readers should address elements of motivation for a purpose of encouraging reading.

17. Limitations of the study

Data for this study were collected from ten selected schools in uMkhanyakude district; therefore, the findings of the study cannot be generalised. There is a need for further research on the implications of policies governing inclusive reading in mainstream schools. It is necessary to examine the role of reading policies in reinforcing inclusive reading knowledge, specifically in African languages at mainstream schools.

18. Conclusion

Reading problems in South African schools have been recognised as a crisis that requires urgent solutions, hence the Department of Basic Education has sought to implement interventions to curb this problem. However, the PIRLS 2021 outcomes reveal that reading challenges still persist. The present study is framed by Word Learning theory; the aim was to investigate the pedagogical challenges faced by IP isiZulu teachers who teach reading comprehension skills to at-risk readers in the mainstream schools of uMkhanyakude district, in the Northern part of KwaZulu-Natal province. Data were obtained through non-participant classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with ten isiZulu IP teachers. Key findings of the study reveal that teachers do not adequately prepare for inclusive reading and there is a possibility that they lack the necessary knowledge to teach inclusive reading effectively. In the light of the current reading challenges in schools, there is a need for implementing effective reading pedagogical practices that accommodate at-risk readers included in the mainstream schools. While the CAPS document sets the expectation that all learners must meet the standards guide, little is said about the standards when teaching at-risk readers in mainstream classes. Simply including learners with reading difficulties in the regular classrooms without a proper plan of instruction, is equivalent to excluding them from academic activities and meaningful class participation.

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