

Assessing the Reading Levels of Grade 5 Learners at a South African Primary School

Implications for Literacy Development and Educational Interventions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on exploring the reading skills of grade 5 learners in rural South Africa, particularly in under-resourced quintile 1 schools. The study used a mixed-method approach and analyzed quantitative data from error-count tests using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from teacher interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. The sample of the study comprised learners from three primary schools, and their reading skills were evaluated through structured error-count assessments. The findings show that many learners are performing far below their grade level, and the number of errors made corresponded with low reading levels. Thematic analysis of teacher interviews and classroom observations identified the major barriers, namely; the learners' inability to transition from mother tongue instruction to English, lack of reading materials at home, and poor enabling conditions in the schools. The results underscore the need for focused efforts such as specialized instruction in reading, professional development activities for teachers, and greater funding for impoverished schools.

Keywords

developing literacy skills, reading skills, learners in grade 5, South African primary school, educational programs, multilingual education

INTRODUCTION

The capability to read proficiently is of paramount importance for attaining the desired level of academic achievement and essential cognitive development (Chileshe et al., 2018; Acedillo, 2023). Draper & Spaul, (2015) asserts that the three most recent and credible assessments regarding reading outcomes in primary grades are the pre-Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (prePIRLS Grade 4, 2011), the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, Grade 6, 2007), and the National School Effectiveness Study (NSES, Grades 3, 4, and 5, conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2009). As per national and cross-country assessments like the Progress in International reading literacy study (PIRLS), many primary school learners in South Africa are unable to comprehend what they read. Willenberg (2018) argue that literacy is regarded as one of the essential skills which serves as the basis of academic achievement and lifelong achievement. The importance of being able to read well is that learners will be able to acquire knowledge, sharpen reasoning skills, and participate actively in the society (Rule & Land, 2017). It is important to note that in South Africa, the level of reading achievement in primary schools is woefully inadequate and a majority of South African learners do not manage to reach the most basic level of reading (Olakunle & Christiana, 2018; Naidoo et al. 2014). Evidence from numerous studies has pointed to the fact that it is a necessity to conduct repeated researches to measure reading abilities and explore possible factors related to the underachievement of literacy (Draper & Spaul, 2015; Rule & Land, 2017).

The reading proficiency of Grade 5 learners is especially important as they are ‘reading to learn’ instead of ‘learning to read’ (Sotelo, 2024; Prinsloo, 2009). At this stage, learners are expected to read and understand more advanced texts in different subjects (Bello et al. 2023). A number of learners still seem to have fundamental reading problems that bar them from doing mathematics, science, and a number of other subjects which are dependent on reading (Paige, 2021). Low literacy levels are a contributing factor to poor academic performance, increased dropout rates, and a lack of useful opportunities in the future (Prinsloo, 2009). It is, therefore, important to appreciate the reading skills of Grade 5 learners as it can reveal the effects of early literacy programs, especially when reading skills are the focus of the program.

Primary School learners in South Africa face a myriad of challenges when it comes to reading, as many of them stem from profound socio-economic factors (Peetz, 2019). Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, inaccessible reading materials, lack of proper training for teachers, and language challenges in a multi-national classroom all affect the outcome of literacy (Naidoo et al., 2014). Most learners in the primary grades are taught using their mother tongue only to shift to English during middle grade. Not only does this result in poor comprehension but poor fluency as well (Lester, 2012). The purpose of this study is to analyze the reading abilities of Grade 5 learners at a particular primary school in South Africa and consider the consequences for enhanced educational support and literacy development. The study analyzes learners' reading abilities using standardized reading tests, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. This study focuses on addressing the literacy development gap by recommending solutions aimed at the most effective reading instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The State of Literacy in South Africa

As reported in PIRLS 2016, 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read for comprehension, regardless of the language (IEA, 2016). This reveals a grave concern in lower-level teaching methodologies pertaining to literacy development. South Africa has strikingly low levels of literacy, which numerous studies show continues to be a challenge due to underwhelming reading skills amongst primary school learners (Van Staden & Bosker, 2014; Bello et al., 2023; Cilliers & Bloch, 2018). Policies on languages, together with multilingualism, contribute meaningfully to literacy within South Africa (Willenberg, 2018). South Africa has eleven languages and the education system encourages teaching using the native language from the lower grades till the end of Grade three, after which English is used from Grade four (Abadzi, 2006). Unfortunately, this change creates significant issues for learners, especially those who are underprivileged and do not have access to English anywhere else except the classroom (Spaull, 2016). Numerous studies have established that a majority of learners have challenges in reading fluency and comprehension because of low levels of proficiency in their home language and in English (Gunn, 2018; Blease & Condy, 2014). Disparities in socioeconomic status also profoundly affects the literacy curve in South Africa. Studies indicate that learners hailing from poor families do not have supporting parents, relevant reading resources, or even schools that are adequately funded (Van der Berg, 2007; Habók & Magyar, 2018). In the same vein, it is also important to note that wealthier schools, particularly former Model C schools, enjoy better literacy outcomes and access to qualified teachers, libraries, and digital learning tools (Bello, 2023). Furthermore, many township and rural schools face issues such as overcrowded classes, underqualified teachers, low instructional time, and poor time management all of which result in inadequate reading skill development. All these factors deepen the literacy divide gaps of underprivileged and privileged learners.

Factors Affecting Reading Proficiency

A range of factors in substitution, such as the level of cognitive development, instructional strategies, socioeconomic status, language constraints, and even the availability of materials, affect reading proficiency (Prinsloo, 2009; Slavin, 2008). Tomas, et al. (2021) note the strong emphasis that early cognitive skill development has on shaping reading skills, stating that learners with strong phonemic awareness and vocabulary stand a better chance at reading fluency and comprehension further down the line. The teaching techniques used in a classroom influence how learners learn and develop reading skills. For example, Bello (2023) notes that South African schools largely stick to rote learning and memorization and do not use phonics or comprehension-based teaching approaches. Effective literacy instruction entails the explicit teaching of phonological awareness, vocabulary, and reading fluency (Madani, 2016). Unfortunately, most educators are not trained adequately for specialized reading instruction. Additionally, studies indicate that the absence of clearly defined reading instruction frameworks, particularly in low-performing schools, is detrimental to reading achievement (Willenberg, 2018; Van Staden & Bosker, 2014; Spaull, 2016; Prinsloo, 2009).

Reading skills are equally influenced by external socioeconomic parameters. According to Jansen (2019), children from low-income households are at a disadvantage because of a lack of books, poor learning environments, and uninvolved parents when it comes to literacy. In contrast, children coming from affluent families have easier access to a variety of reading materials, private tutors, and well-equipped schools, all of which aid reading development. Reading development is already complicated by multilingual context, like in South Africa. The country's language-in-education policy enforces a mother-tongue approach in the lower grades and shifts to English in Grade four. However, Pretorius & Ribbons, (2005) indicate that learners seem to be struggling because they don't have much English exposure inside or outside the classroom. This leads to poor comprehension, which has a negative effect on other school work. Moreover, the shortage of appropriate teaching resources and trained teachers skilled in African languages increases the challenges connected with basic literacy. Access to reading materials, as well as library facilities, is equally important in attaining

reading proficiency. As noted in Fleisch's (2018) research, a significant number of South African boarding schools and rural or underprivileged schools do not have fully stocked libraries or provided with suitable reading books for younger learners. School and home illiteracy combine to stifle literacy attainment. Community reading activities and mobile libraries were set up intending to tackle this problem but ensuring that books are consistently available and creating a readers' culture along with support from overseas will promote helpful long-term change.

Phonics-Based Instruction in Literacy Interventions

Development research has proven the effectiveness of phonics instruction, reading, teacher training, and curriculum methods on literacy outcomes. Moreover, digital resources have emerged as effective supplemental tools and educational efforts are essential in overcoming literacy and reading challenges learners face (Haleem et al. 2022). In South Africa, several programs have been designed to assist primary school learners with reading. As stated by Spaul (2019), early literacy intervention programs are most productive when they focus on the building blocks of reading like phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has introduced nation-wide programs like the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) and the Read to Lead Campaign aimed at fostering a reading culture in the country for learners. Despite these promising measures, overarching issues such as poor implementation of policies, inadequate training of teachers, and lack of resources and funding to poor schools has stifled the success of these initiatives. Mobile reading applications, interactive e-books, and online literacy programs have been designed to complement instruction beyond the classroom scope (Dube, 2020; Nindy & Kustijono, 2017). Programs like Nal'ibali and Book Dash have utilized technology to offer learners access to reading materials that are suitable for their developmental stages and available in multiple languages. As is the case for other technology driven interventions, the benefits for many disadvantaged learners without access to devices, stable internet connections, and the ability to navigate basic digital tools, remains restricted.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that merges qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyze the reading competency of fifth graders at a primary school in South Africa. A case study design was used focusing on three conveniently sampled schools from the Motupa Circuit in the Mopani District of the Limpopo Province. The study population consisted of Grade five learners from 19 primary schools within the circuit. For budgetary and logistical reasons, three schools were chosen and 105 students were sampled using convenience sampling. For triangulation purposes, data was gathered through several instruments which included: a text reading assessment to gauge fluency and comprehension, video recordings to capture reading behaviors such as errors, a structured observation checklist to record reading errors, learners' tests to gauge comprehension performance, learners' diaries to document thoughts about reading, and open ended interview to gather constructivist retellings from learners and teachers. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilized to analyze the data. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts, and the video recordings were checked for any mistaking reading errors. The learners' test scores were analyzed for rate of understanding, while their diary excerpts offered candid comments about the difficulties related to literacy. To improve validity, triangulation was employed by verifying data from different sources, thus providing a holistic picture of the learners' reading skills.

RESULTS

Findings from Error-Count Tests

The results of this study underscored the reading difficulties experienced by grade five learners in a rural South African setting. According to the 2008 National Reading Strategy, all learners are supposed to read basic texts by the end of Grade 3. All the schools are quintile 1. Error-count tests were conducted using an observation checklist by the selected schools. From a sampling frame of 113 grade five learners from School A, 60 learners participated in the study. Descriptive statistics were analyzed to determine the occurrence of reading difficulties, and learners' performance was analyzed with quantitative data analysis strategies. To allow validity, valid sampling, proper instrumentation, and statistical treatment were done according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000).

The NRS (2008) indicated that its objective is for all learners to achieve the ability to read basic texts by the end of Grade 3. Motupa Circuit is located in a rural area, thus lacking both former model C schools and better-resourced educational institutions. Therefore, all the schools examined are classified as quintile 1. All chosen participants from the three schools underwent error-count assessments utilizing an observation checklist. At School A, there are 113 learners in grade 5, of which 60 were selected to participate in the error-count test. The researcher utilized descriptive statistics to ascertain the frequency of specific phenomena during learners' reading activities. The researcher determined the learners' age to verify its alignment with their grade level.

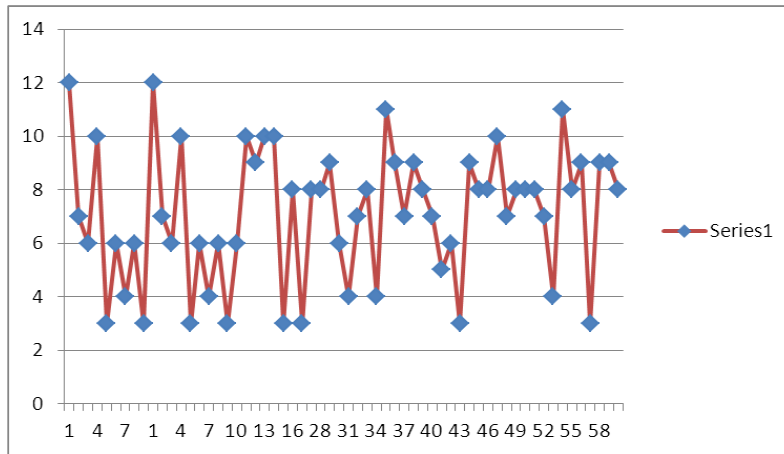


Fig. 1 Distribution of error-count scores for School A

The mean score of fifth-grade learners at School A, as illustrated in Fig. 1, is 8.37%. This indicates that a significant proportion of learners, specifically 43 out of 60, achieved scores ranging from 6 to 10. The correlation between score and error frequency indicates that a higher score corresponds to a greater number of errors. Consequently, 72% of learners achieved scores ranging from 6 to 10. This indicates that intermediate phase learners were reading below the expected grade level and age cohort. The Standard Deviation (STDV) is 8.90, indicating significant variation in the reading levels of intermediate phase learners in grade 5. Four learners unfortunately scored between 10 and 12 errors out of a total of 12 possible errors. Consequently, they were considered to be reading significantly below the expected grade level. Only 13 learners achieved the appropriate grade level in reading, representing 22% of the total learner population.

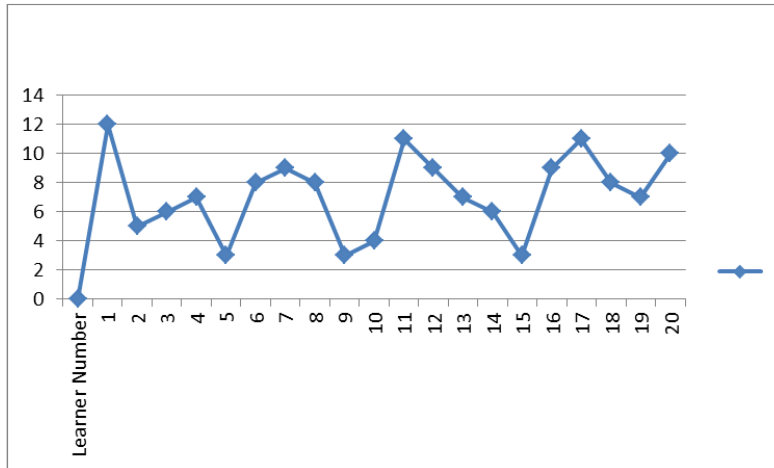


Fig. 2 Distribution of Scores - School B

The mean score of fifth-grade learners in School B is 7.3%, indicating that a significant proportion of students achieved scores ranging from 6 to 10. The increased number of errors suggests that learners at School B were reading below the expected grade level and age cohort compared to learners in School A. Sixty-five percent of the students at School B achieved scores ranging from 6 to 10. School A exhibited the lowest performance, with a rate of 72 percent. The combined number of learners reading below grade level and those reading significantly below grade level is 16, representing 80% of the population. The standard deviation at School B is 2.74. The reading levels at School B are nearly equivalent.

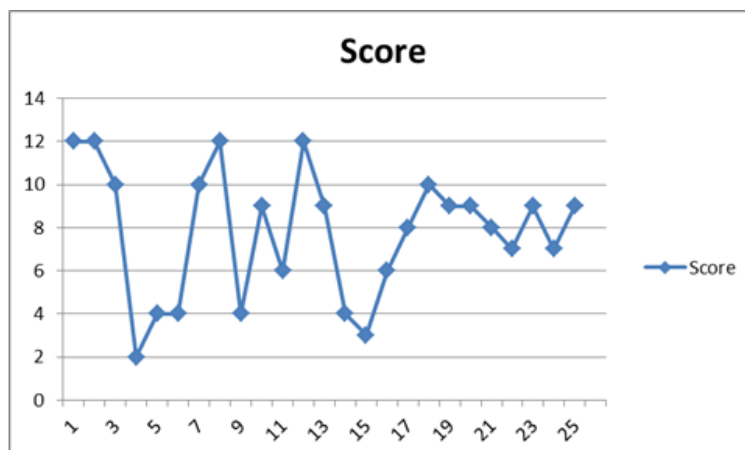


Fig. 3 Distribution of Error-count Results - School C

In School C, a sample of 25 learners was selected. The average score for this school is 8, as indicated in Fig. 3. The standard deviation is 3, which is lower than that of School A, suggesting that learners are performing at similar levels. However, a concerning statistic is that 60% of learners are reading below their age and grade level. Additionally, 16% of learners are reading significantly below their age and grade level, categorized as frustrational level. Overall, 76% of the population at School C reads below grade level, including both those reading below and far below grade level.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate an alarming pattern regarding the reading skills of fifth-grade learners from the three participating schools, as a considerable portion of the sample performed below the average expected level. In School A, 72% of learners achieved scores between 6 and 10. This shows that most of the learners lack sufficient comprehension skills to extract the intended meaning from the reading exercises. The high standard deviation (8.90) indicates that there is considerable dispersion of reading competence which is, in turn, very low. In addition, four learners with the highest error rates were coded as reading well below the grade level which also confirms the intermediate phase learners' reading difficulties. Although 22% of learners were able to reach grade-level proficiency, this achievement was not sufficient considering the overall pattern of reading skills among learners, which falls below the expected standard. The relationship that exists between score and frequent errors further supports the argument, much more proficient learners still make frequent errors while reading for meaning, suggesting very low reading ability.

In a like manner, the reading proficient levels at School B and School C exhibit the same proportions of underachievement. In School B, for instance, 65% of learners obtained scores within the range of 6 to 10, which sustains the tendency of under-grade reading. Even though the school had a lower standard deviation of 2.74, which indicates that students' reading performance was more homogeneous, the alarming reality is that 80% of learners were reading at or below considerably sub-grade levels. In comparison, School C had a somewhat lower percentage of learners who could not read, yet still, 76% were reading sub-standards. In School C, a standard deviation of 3 indicates a low achievement spread with some uniformity in reading performance, yet the reality is most students continue to struggle with literacy. Such results point to the need for immediate action, like remedial reading classes and teacher-sponsored literacy programs, aimed at fixing the gaps in reading skills noticed in all three schools.

Reading Proficiency Levels

The results suggest that most Grade 5 learners from the selected primary school lack basic reading skills such as word identification, reading fluency, and comprehension. In-class listening showed that many learners with lower word recognition skills read slowly and haltingly, often mispronouncing words, which interrupted their reading flow. Teacher interviews reveal that learners display inadequate vocabulary skills and even greater lack of understanding of texts, especially when English, a foreign tongue to them, is the medium of instruction. This is consistent with earlier findings regarding the problems associated with shifting from a mother-tongue language to English as a language of instruction (Pretorius, 2010). Educators cite a lack of reading resources at home and school as a reason for low reading proficiency levels. Most learners come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which makes accessing books more difficult, and reading is not promoted beyond the classroom. When asked if the school principle or management team provide resources to improve reading levels, one educator indicated that,

“Ah! According to me, we don't have, if you ask them something in order to help the learners to read, they will just say, we are waiting for the government, learners don't have enough resources for reading, they use the old ones they found”.

Further, when asked if there anything the teachers can do to improve your learners' reading level? Another educator revealed that,

“I try to communicate with learners through English, but this does not help as almost all the educators, including the principal, communicate with learners in their home language”.

In addition, reviewing learners' reading assessment results shows that a substantial number of learners perform below the expected literacy standards appropriate for their grade level. As reported by the educators, some learners are able to decode text but do not move beyond basic comprehension skills to inferring and summarising more complex ideas and concepts presented in the texts. The absence of a systematic school-based reading intervention program is also a contributing factor to the illiteracy gap teachers have found.

Language Barriers

The study highlights that language barriers have serious effects on decoding skills due to the shift from learning mother-tongue instruction to English as the language of the learning in Grade five. Observations indicate that learners have a hard time decoding and understanding the English language. A number of them depend on the vernacular to understand the reading material. Engaging with teachers and school administrators reveals that there is a fundamental gap when it comes to the learners' exposure to English outside the classroom, making it difficult for them to reach required fluency levels. Guardians and parents, especially those in rural and economically disadvantaged regions, predominantly use vernacular dialects and do not speak English at all within the household. This lack of exposure means learners do not have ample opportunities to practice reading or speaking English which fosters low confidence levels when reading and interacting with English texts. Furthermore, teachers notice that code-switching is a frequent occurrence in classrooms, as they have

to explain English reading exercises in the learners' first language. While this approach enhances comprehension, it may also impede the progress of developing English literacy skills.

Socioeconomic Influences

The data indicates the situation is critical in less privileged areas, where socioeconomic status significantly determines the reading skills of Grade five learners. Most learners belong to working-class families who cannot access basic resources such as books, learning materials, or modern technology for education. Reports from teachers indicate that an alarming proportion of their learners do not have access to a personal book and depend on school books, which are usually insufficient. Furthermore, classroom sessions reveal that learners from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to struggle with reading flow and understanding text, most probably because of the lack of print-rich settings in the home environment. In support of this finding, Pretorius and Mokhwesana (2009) identified several contributory factors, including poverty, low adult literacy levels, the apartheid legacy affecting educational quality for black children, under-resourced schools, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher training. Numerous factors at the macro level are unlikely to change in the near future, and schools and teachers have minimal control over them. Nonetheless, numerous factors within the school and classroom context are under the control of teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Curriculum Adaptations

From the research findings, it is apparent that curriculum changes considerably support the reading skills of Grade five learners within a multilingual setting. Some teachers noted that the curriculum is inflexible and does not consider the varying language and literacy capabilities of learners. Most learners in the school under study, face challenges with reading skills, particularly with the shift from mother-tongue instruction to English. Therefore, adjustments to the curriculum, such as increased teaching and learning materials that are bilingual and more adaptable teaching strategies, were shown to foster better engagement and understanding among learners.

• Teacher Training Programs

The findings of the present study shows that the training of teachers is paramount for improving literacy instruction; however, there are severe deficiencies in the scope and depth of professional development offered to the teachers. From the interviews, it appeared that teachers are given some form of initial literacy training. A majority of them, however, do not use modern evidence-based reading techniques. Numerous teachers express that they are not equipped to teach reading correctly, particularly in multi-lingual settings where learners shift from their mother tongue to English. The absence of postgraduate professional advancement opportunities hinders their ability to incorporate the most recent research and instructive methodologies regarding reading. The evidence indicates that systematic training in phonics, comprehension, and language learning strategies focused on teaching the acquisition of language is essential in enhancing reading performance.

• Strategies for Promoting Engagement from Parents

Based on the data, it is apparent that parental participation is vitally important in the reading development of Grade five learners despite, on average, being low in the school under study. The discussion with teachers and school management revealed that parental involvement in the literacy development of children is very low because of socioeconomic constraints like long working hours, low literacy, and inadequate educational materials at home. Many teachers noted that although some parents are concerned about their children's education, they feel unprepared to provide any support, especially when the English language is involved, due to their English illiteracy. This lack of support negatively affects children's motivation and progress in reading.

• Integration of Technology

The study reveals that technology integration into the reading curriculum at the school is quite basic, with a lack of access to digital tools and technology disparity among learners. Teachers noted that computers and tablets are available, but these are centralised and not set apart for reading activities, resulting in restricted accessibility for learners in upper primary grades. Consequently, learners have only limited opportunities to interact with digital learning resources. The study's findings also noted that teachers showed a willingness to integrate more advanced technology into their instruction, but were constrained by a lack of proper training and adequate technical support. Such restrictions tend to cancel out opportunities to use technology to enhance reading instruction and limit learners' exposure to diverse and interactive platforms that would enable them to acquire essential skills.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research show an alarming pattern regarding the reading skills of Grade 5 learners in rural South African regions, especially within underfunded schools categorized as quintile 1. In error-count tests, the majority of learners were categorized as non-readers as they failed to meet the basic reading standard for their grade. Across all three schools, a large proportion of learners made a lot of errors when reading which suggests their ability to decode text, read it fluently, and understand the text is critically impaired. From the statistical data there is a reading gap as a number of

learners put in almost no effort and achieved dramatically low literacy skills. The noted challenges in reading can be attributed to language issues and limited opportunities to use English. Learners from these rural schools have difficulty both reading and understanding English texts because they shift to English instruction in higher grades after receiving lower grade mother-tongue instruction. Learners do not get sufficient English exposure at home because guardians and parental figures communicate mostly in their vernacular. Most teachers claim that a lot of code-switching is done in the classrooms to aid understanding in the lesson. This may be true but such practices, while aiding immediate comprehension of the subject matter, may delay the acquisition of English literacy. These problems are compounded by a serious lack of reading materials and the absence of organized remedial programs, which renders learners unable to improve their reading skills.

The socioeconomic aspects are very crucial to the reading gaps proportions presented in this study. Due to a lack of financial resources, learners fail to obtain adequate books and materials leading to a total literacy environment outside the school. The results indicate that low income, poorly trained staff, high pupil to teacher ratios, and long standing education inequities continue to result in poor reading outcomes. These problems need to be dealt with head on through some form of strategic approach, for example, through offering remedial reading courses, conducting teacher training, and offering more resources to poorer schools. Without precise measures to eliminate the literacy gap, these learners would remain trapped with poor reading skills endlessly further narrowing their educational avenues and outcomes.

One of the most notable salient points from the results of the study was the need to equip teachers to address the core issues for meeting the learning needs of the learners. As suggested by the findings, teachers who underwent specialized training in reading instruction, language development, and differentiated pedagogical methods were more adept at helping learners develop literacy skills. However, this lack of training may hinder teachers' effectiveness in teaching reading. Therefore, the study recommends comprehensive, ongoing teacher training on reading digital pedagogy and other related areas. Such professional development should be practical and tailored to the needs of diverse classrooms, enabling teachers to employ differentiated instruction and adjust their strategies to meet the needs of different learners. Another concern that emerged from the study was the inadequacy of parental involvement in nurturing learners' reading skills. Many parents want to help their children with literacy but are often limited by socio-economic circumstances and low literacy levels themselves. This study argues that schools need to have simpler mechanisms for engaging parents, such as community literacy programs or proactive communication between teachers and the families. Empowering parents with knowledge and resources to facilitate reading at home greatly increases the likelihood of learner academic success.

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