



“We’re going to sit with a generation [of learners] who cannot even construct a CV because they can’t bloody read”: Reading interventions by English teachers

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Abstract

Teaching reading skills is one of the most intricate tasks expected of teachers. This is especially true since the COVID-19 pandemic because of the decline in Grade 4 learners’ reading comprehension levels. The Department of Basic Education indicated that the 2021 PIRLS report revealed that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners struggle to read with comprehension in their home language. This hinders Intermediate Phase learners’ ability to transition effectively from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*, given that they must start acquiring subject-specific knowledge. In this article, we explore how English Home Language (EHL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL) Intermediate Phase teachers have been teaching reading since the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an interpretivist qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design, we determined the reading teaching practices used by EHL and EFAL Intermediate Phase teachers to teach reading.

Keywords: English first additional language, English home language, intermediate phase, reading, reading skills, learning to read, reading to learn

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the reading development of Grade 4 learners increased (Spaull, 2022), since, as Howie et al., (2017) noted, the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) had already reported that 78% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in their home languages. Concern was exacerbated by extended school closures and lost teaching time as Mhlanga and Moloi (2020) pointed out. The 2021 PIRLS report confirmed that this influenced the reading development of Grade 4 learners negatively since 81% of South African learners in Grade 4 were unable to read with comprehension in their home languages by 2021 (Department of Basic Education, 2023). In effect, there has been a 3% increase in the number of Grade 4 learners who are unable to read for comprehension. This proves detrimental to their academic success since they should transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn* in Grade 4. In the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3), the emphasis is on *learning to read* that entails developing the ability to read by acquiring the five reading skills (Brown, 2014). These five reading skills are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Learning Point Associates, 2004). The fact that comprehension appears last on this list highlights the fact that should the preceding four skills not be adequately developed, the learner would not be able to understand what is being read. Reading skills continue to develop once learners have acquired them since speed and accuracy increase (Duffy & Roehler, 1987). The Foundation Phase Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) focuses on these skills in the teaching of reading (Department of Basic Education, 2011a; 2011b). By the time learners enter Grade 4, they are expected to have mastered these five reading skills since they now have to use these skills to acquire knowledge, also known as mentioned above, as *reading to learn*. Since the reading skills of many learners did not develop adequately during the Foundation Phase because of the pandemic, they struggle to use these skills to gain subject-specific knowledge in the Intermediate Phase. As a result, Intermediate Phase EHL and EFAL teachers have had to adapt their reading teaching practices to accommodate their learners' underdeveloped reading proficiency and to support them in its development.

Literature review

A teacher should facilitate the development of reading since it requires focused attention (Taylor et al., 2019). In effect, English teachers should know what each of the five reading skills entails. Phonemic awareness denotes an individual's understanding that spoken words consist of different singular sounds (Brown, 2014) while phonics relates to the knowledge that letters are associated with specific sounds (Paris, 2019). Fluency entails an individual's ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and easily, along with the correct expression (Grabe, 2010) while building vocabulary is primarily a mental process through which an individual must link words with their existing knowledge to comprehend what is being read (Hyso & Tabaku, 2011). Comprehension involves the culmination of these preceding four skills and is the process through which text is understood (Kirby, 2007).

Since the reading skills of Intermediate Phase learners are lacking and underdeveloped as Fesi and Mncube (2021) have noted, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) guided our study. The ZPD is defined as a learner’s current level of development with the next level of development possible only with guidance from an adult or in collaboration with a more knowledgeable peer. In both the Intermediate and Senior Phases, the aim is to strengthen the learners’ reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Department of Basic Education, 2011c), and the teachers are advised to teach reading by using a balanced approach that entails the teacher’s modelling good practice, and having the learners practise it in groups and apply it independently afterward. However, this is a rather daunting process for learners lacking basic reading skills. Fatyela (2021) explained that if the reading skills of some learners entering Grade 4 are not developed to the desired standard this influences their transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. This can result in a “fourth-grade slump” (Donaldson, 2010, p. 10). that refers to the decline in the learners’ reading abilities since, while lacking reading skills, they are required to read more challenging texts that are context-embedded This is opposed to the narrative reading texts that are emphasised in the Foundation Phase as Pretorius et al. (2016) have pointed out. Some learners should also transition from home language education to English as the language of learning and teaching. Most South African learners enter the Intermediate Phase with limited English language oral proficiency and vocabulary that proves insufficient to construct meaning from text. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds encounter further difficulty in learning through English as the medium of teaching and learning since they often lack exposure to the language and sufficient background knowledge to make sense of what they read. This makes English teachers pivotal to the support and development of learners’ reading skills and strategies.

The three steps used to teach reading are pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. These steps denote that the teaching of reading commences with broad and general inferences to what the text entails, looking at the title and images (if included), processing the information (the content in sentences and paragraphs), and then incorporating learners’ prior knowledge into what is being read to aid them in comprehending what they are reading (Kikas et al., 2021). The emphasis is on considering the reading text as a whole and the specific information conveyed through the text. This process also develops the learners’ critical thinking and their ability to ask questions about the text (Nurdina, 2018). One possible and desirable outcome is that learners will converse with the teachers and ask questions related to their understanding of the text, but during the COVID-19 pandemic this validation was unavailable because of school closures.

Methodology

The following research questions guided us in this article:

- How are Intermediate Phase teachers teaching reading since the COVID-19 pandemic ended?
- What challenges do Intermediate Phase teachers face when doing this teaching after the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study was structured according to an interpretive research paradigm, dependent on phenomenology as a strategy of inquiry (Botma et al., 2016). The dependence of this paradigm on phenomenology is related to the processes of necessarily interpreting and constructing meaning required to understand the participants' lived experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). The phenomenon explored was how three Grade 4 teachers and two Grade 5 teachers experienced teaching reading post-COVID-19 and the meaning they attached to it. Intermediate Phase EHL and EFAL teachers proved to be the most suitable participants for this study.

Participants and setting

We used purposive sampling to select Intermediate Phase EHL and EFAL teachers as participants. Teachers who teach English as either a Home Language or a First Additional Language were selected for participation. To ensure that the teachers would be able to provide insight into how their teaching of reading had changed, they had to have taught English prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and had to be teaching English to Intermediate Phase learners at the time of the research. The schools have a racially diverse demographic, and are located in a town in the North West province. School A offers English as a Home Language and Schools B and C offer Afrikaans as Home Language and English as First Additional Language. These schools are categorised as Quintile 4 schools since they receive less funding than do Quintiles 1 to 3 schools because the proportion of disadvantaged families are considered equal to or slightly above the national average (Van Dyk & White, 2019). Although it is implied that the schools are privileged, the socio-economic circumstances of the learners attending these schools vary. The three schools have different levels of parent involvement, and Teachers 1, 3, 4, and 5 also referred to the low literacy of some of the learners' parents. The schools are considered well-resourced; each school has a library and employs additional teachers using school body government funding. Schools A and B have more learners from affluent homes, but the COVID-19 pandemic did cause financial instability. School C has more learners from less privileged homes. All five teachers' classes had approximately 30 learners per class and about 120 learners per grade.

The teachers were contacted by an independent person via email, requesting them to participate voluntarily in this study. The participants included two Grade 5 teachers (one EHL and one EFAL) and three Grade 4 teachers (one EHL and two EFAL). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality the teachers were assigned a number in the data.

Data collection

We commenced with data collection through semi-structured interviews after ethics clearance was granted by the university's ethics committee¹ and the gatekeeper's permission had been obtained from the North West Department of Basic Education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the participants' perceptions and descriptions (Botma et al., 2016) of teaching reading to Intermediate Phase learners after the COVID-19 pandemic. The

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interviews were conducted in person and online,² depending on each teacher’s preference after having given informed consent to participate in this study. The interviews were guided by an interview schedule (following Fouché et al., 2021), and the open-ended questions enabled us to ask for clarification of teachers’ statements. This also determined the order in which we posed the questions considering that the teachers often unintentionally answered a few questions simultaneously. The areas of exploration specific to this article touched on the teachers’ teaching practices, beliefs, and experiences with teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase and their teaching of reading after the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then we analysed the data.

Data analysis

We employed thematic content analysis to analyse the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. We read and reread the data to code it while making notes in the margins of the transcribed interviews. The research questions guided us throughout this process so topics emerged from the preliminary coding. These topics were annotated in table format in a Word document. The table below presents the themes, categories, and sub-categories relevant to this article for ease of reference.

Table 1

Data analysis: Theme, categories, and sub-categories

Theme	Categories	Sub-categories
There is a larger gap between learners who can and cannot read since the COVID-19 pandemic	Providing additional reading support to struggling learners	Differentiating between and among learners’ reading proficiency levels Providing struggling readers with support in class Hosting extra classes after school Referring to phonics to support reading development
	Teaching comprehension by focusing on vocabulary	Implementing pre-, while-, and post-reading activities Encouraging the use of dictionaries Understanding that vocabulary development is influenced by learners’ limited exposure to the English language Focusing on phonics and decoding to aid in vocabulary development Writing weekly spelling tests
	Promoting independent reading	Holding book review competitions Making classroom libraries accessible to learners Implementing reading periods

The credibility of the study (see Birt et al., 2016) was enhanced by our making use of member checking. Teachers checked the transcripts of their interviews and confirmed that they were a true reflection of what they had said during the interviews.

Findings

A central theme that arose from the semi-structured interviews with the five Intermediate Phase teachers was that the gap between Intermediate Phase learners who can and cannot read has increased. This correlates with what Böhmer and Wills (2023) found in their quantitative research study from the 2016 and 2021 PIRLS report i.e., that there was a substantial increase of 13.1% in the number of Grade 4 learners “who are struggling with foundational reading and writing skills requiring remedial support” (p. 19). Throughout the interviews, the teachers highlighted that they need to focus more on teaching reading than was necessary before the COVID-19 pandemic. Teacher 4 referred to the importance of language teachers in teaching reading since “we’re going to sit with a generation who cannot even construct a CV because they can’t bloody read”, should there be no reading intervention. Teacher 4’s strong language emphasises the severity of the situation and shows concern for the learners’ academic futures. As a result, these teachers have altered their reading teaching practices to provide reading interventions and to accommodate the increase in the learners’ reading disparities in their classrooms. They achieve this by providing struggling learners with additional reading support, developing vocabulary while promoting comprehension, and encouraging independent reading.

Providing additional reading support to struggling learners

Four of the five teachers indicated that they each had a male learner in their classes who demonstrated a reading proficiency level associated with the Foundation Phase. Each of these teachers used reading interventions tailored to the level of reading support their learners required when possible. Teachers 1 and 5 hosted extra classes during break time or after school during which learners could read aloud. The teachers assisted them with pronunciation and encouraged them to reread the texts until they could do so fluently. Teacher 1 established that the struggling male learner whom she supported read fluently but relied on the visuals for cues as opposed to comprehending the text. She discovered this when she asked the learner to read the book backwards; he struggled when he could not rely on the images, thus indicating an issue with his reading skills.

Teachers 1, 2, and 5 determined that when struggling learners are identified early on, they can provide differentiated reading support. Teachers 1 and 2 initially provided their struggling learners with texts they could read, and gradually introduced more challenging reading material rather than focusing on the reading material the learners were expected to read. The aim was to increase learners’ reading proficiency, and all five teachers indicated that graded readers proved effective as part of their interventions. Wadesango (2021) explained that large class sizes bring two main challenges; the first is that learners possess different reading proficiency levels, which means that the reading texts are too difficult for some and too easy for others, and the teacher is unable to give equal attention to all learners. In order to mitigate these challenges, Teacher 3 referred to phonics to support the struggling learners during class, even though the teaching time did not always allow for this. She had the struggling learners sit in the front of the class so that she could intervene immediately if she found them

struggling with reading texts. She also made use of group reading and paired stronger learners with weaker ones so the stronger learners could model proficient reading and support the struggling learners. Teacher 5, however, noted that she did not make use of group reading because of the high number of struggling learners in her class. She explained that it was unfair of her to expect stronger learners to support more than five struggling learners and viewed it as ineffective practice in her context. The experiences of Teachers 3 and 5 show that the efficacy of group reading depends on the ratio between stronger and struggling learners.

All five teachers informally assessed their learners’ reading proficiency at the beginning of the year and made notes on their class lists and this allowed them to track learners’ progress throughout the year. The learners’ parents were notified of the problems surrounding reading and the teachers guided them on how they could support their children. Teacher 2 asked the parents to help their children practise reading at home and provided the page numbers of the texts they had to read. She then had the learners read aloud in class to check their progress. Teacher 4 noted significant improvement in the reading proficiency of one of her learners after the parents became actively involved. Teacher 3 faced the challenge of parents requesting extra classes for their children even though they were not struggling with English. As a result, she limited her extra classes to 20 learners, all of whom had an average of 45% and below for English. Teacher 3, however, felt rushed during these classes since she had to hold netball practice afterwards. Extra classes for Afrikaans and Mathematics also conflicted with her schedule, since only 30 minutes were allocated for extra classes per week. She stated that “in many cases, the same learners who require extra English classes also need extra classes in Afrikaans and/or Mathematics” and this meant that these learners often failed to attend her extra classes, and she was under pressure to provide sufficient support in very limited time.

During extra classes, Teacher 5 focused on reading comprehension since most marks in formal assessments are usually allocated to comprehension. However, this meant that she focused on teaching reading for assessment instead of developing learners’ reading proficiency. She explained that she helps them with pronouncing the words with which they struggle and asks them to tell her the meaning of the texts to determine whether they understand what has been read. Teacher 1 used the process approach by starting on focusing on the most basic reading skill—phonemic awareness—and proceeding to the most difficult—comprehension—(which is encouraged by CAPS) by focusing on phonics before discussing unfamiliar words with the learners, then moving to reading sentences and paragraphs, and then reading more extensive texts like books. This approach mirrors the bottom-up approach since the focus is on decoding words and ultimately constructing meaning from the text (Suraprajit, 2019).

Developing vocabulary and fostering comprehension

The teachers stated that the outcome of reading should be comprehension, but this is not apparent in their learners’ performance. Teacher 4 explained that she had learners able to read

and understand *To Kill a Mockingbird* (a prescribed Grade 12 EFAL novel (Department of Basic Education, 2019) and other learners who sounded out almost every second word in a reading text. In having her learners' reading abilities range from those unable to read at a Grade 5 level to others reading at a Grade 12 level this required vastly differentiated instruction to support them. Teacher 3 found that her learners spent most of their time decoding the text during comprehension tests, leaving them unable to complete the tests or truly understand what they had read. Hirsch (2006) noted that comprehension tests are not the most effective method to determine learners' reading skills or knowledge since their true value lies in their unpredictability. For him, the best way to prepare learners for comprehension tests is to broaden their general knowledge.

Teacher 4 discovered that her learners lacked both general knowledge and vocabulary and this impeded their ability to comprehend texts. All five teachers emphasised that vocabulary development is a prominent part of their reading-teaching practices. Teacher 3 employed a structured approach focusing on pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities to develop vocabulary. The pre-reading activity involved learners guessing what the text was about by referring to the images and the text's title. In some cases, she provided the learners with additional information and images to create context for them. While reading, she used code-switching (see Shafi et al., 2020) to explain unfamiliar words to the learners in Afrikaans and English, and she established that when she explained the words in Afrikaans the learners better understood them. Code-switching often proves effective in the classroom since it contributes to the expansion of the learners' additional language. As a post-reading activity, Teacher 3 encouraged her learners to search for the meanings of the newly acquired words and then draw or write the meanings in their personal dictionaries. The learners also put up the new words on the word wall.

All the teachers indicated that they teach English mostly to learners whose first language is not English. This proved challenging since code-switching was not always possible because some teachers had more than one language represented in their classrooms. Teachers 1 and 4 emphasised that the sounds attached to letters differ between and among Afrikaans, Setswana, and English. To aid the learners in communicating through the medium of English, the teachers focused on teaching phonics so that the learners could pronounce the words correctly. According to McCandliss et al. (2003), decoding enables an individual to pronounce a new printed word correctly. Teacher 1 used flashcards to display one letter of the alphabet at a time, and the learners had to pronounce the letter aloud. Similarly, Teachers 1 and 2 showed their learners the Letterland videos that were developed for teaching phonics by making use of a story-based approach (Letterland International, 2021). By using the alphabet song with their learners these two teachers reinforced the correct sounds attributed to letters. To further support their learners' phonics development, Teachers 1, 3, and 5 made use of Dolch words that are synonymous with sight words (see Mangieri & Kahn, 1977). The Dolch words account for about 50% of words in reading texts, and the list consists of 220 essential sight words.

Vocabulary pertains to an individual’s knowledge concerning word form, spelling, and pronunciation (Lessard-Clouston, 2021). Decoding and vocabulary can be regarded as reciprocal since vocabulary helps with decoding when the individual knows the meaning of the word (Perfetti, 2010). Vocabulary can, therefore, be explained by focusing on the meaning of words and on phonics—the sounds represented by the letters. Teacher 5 stated that she identified words related to the lesson and started her lessons by having the learners go through the words. Similarly, Teacher 3 introduced six new words weekly to broaden her learners’ vocabulary. The use of dictionaries featured prominently in aiding learners with developing their vocabularies. Teacher 2 played a vocabulary game based on the principle of code-switching since it involves learners searching for the provided word in Afrikaans and then reading the English definition and word. The learners worked in pairs, and the teacher monitored the learners’ searching process by walking to their desks when they put up their hands to show that they had the answers. The learners were awarded marks on the board and a winning team was identified based on them. Teacher 5 also encouraged her learners to consult the dictionary if they did not understand a word, especially when they were completing comprehension activities in class.

Teachers 1, 3, and 4 encouraged their learners to use dictionaries. However, Teacher 4 explained that many of her learners are too lazy to search for the meanings of unfamiliar words, and she noted that in their writing learners use words they cannot spell and do not understand. These teachers implemented weekly spelling tests to address their learners’ vocabulary development. Teacher 2 identified the words she would expect her learners to be familiar with from the Department of Basic Education Rainbow Workbooks (2022) and created a word list that was put up in the front of her classroom on which new words were added every week. Teacher 3 provided her learners with spelling words related to the content discussed during the week. The learners had to write down these words in their personal dictionaries and draw or write the meaning of the words. Teacher 5 provided her learners with spelling words they had to study, and every word incorrectly spelt during the spelling test had to be rewritten out five times with the correct spelling. The implementation of weekly spelling tests was the teachers’ way of ensuring that their learners received explicit support with the vocabulary included in the reading texts to help them comprehend what they read. Throughout the study, the teachers all valued the promotion of independent reading, as explored in the next section.

Promoting independent reading

Teacher 1 proposed that independent reading must be encouraged and made into a fun activity for learners; they must be shown that reading is not done only for assessment. The five teachers elaborated that they introduced different activities and methods to encourage independent reading. Classroom libraries worked effectively for Teachers 1, 3, and 5. Teacher 1 explained that when she bought books that her learners found interesting, they were automatically more motivated to read. She also stated that she could provide the learners with books they found interesting only by buying them herself.

Teachers 3 and 5 found the available teaching time limited, and in the end, only the more proficient learners could use their classroom libraries. This is because the learners could choose a book and read in the reading corner when their work had been completed. The learners who struggle to read often worked more slowly in general since it took them longer to grasp what was expected of them in the classwork. Teachers 1, 3, 4, and 5 were at schools in which learners had a book review template to complete once they finished reading a book. This approach was a way of encouraging the learners to read. The teachers stated that they usually had the learners tell them or the class what they had read before handing them the book review template since this approach ensured that the students also practised speaking and writing through the medium of English. At the end of each term, the learners who had managed to read a certain number of books and had completed the book reviews received incentives. Teacher 4 gave her learners a gold sticker for each book they had read if they could answer questions about it effectively. She found this practice beneficial since she ensured that the learners had read the books and understood what they read. Teacher guidance in choosing books suitable for their level of reading proficiency also proved essential, since Teacher 3 noted that one of her learners opted for an encyclopaedia. She discovered this when she asked what he had read and he could not tell her.

Teachers 1 and 4 dedicated time to reading periods, and Teacher 1 often took her learners outside to read, discuss their books, and swap books based on their discussions. This activity was like a book review, but instead of writing about it, they told each other about the books they were reading. Teachers 2 and 4 also implemented this strategy and found it to be effective. In addition, Teacher 4 incorporated drama activities during which learners had to act out texts in groups, thus encouraging them to read independently; this made reading interactive and enjoyable.

Discussion

The reading teaching practices and activities the five Intermediate Phase English language teachers used centred on interventions to address struggling learners and to help them develop their reading skills while keeping in mind the more proficient reader. Böhmer and Wills (2023) explained this occurrence in their study as an increase in heterogeneity after the COVID-19 pandemic; this quantitative study demonstrated that this is a national phenomenon and is not limited to the experiences of the five teachers who participated in our study.

These five teachers implemented interventions to support both the learners struggling to read and those reading proficiently. The interventions to support the learners struggling to read included individual extra classes during which they read aloud and received help with pronunciation and comprehension. Differentiated reading materials were also incorporated to build their learners' confidence as they progressed from easier to more challenging texts. However, the teachers could not support their struggling learners to the extent that they would have preferred because of the limited time awarded to extra classes by the schools and their also being responsible for extracurricular activities. Extra classes were also limited, so learners who would have benefitted from additional reading support were denied the

opportunity. According to Böhmer and Wills (2023), implementing remedial help is vital since it could keep learners from falling further behind in their reading abilities. They emphasised that teaching reading cannot be limited to the language classroom and explained that the learners in lower quintile schools were “disproportionately negatively affected” (p. 37) compared to those in wealthier schools. This is because of the lack of resources, support, and interventions at school and at home. Our study found that several learners are unable to read, even though the schools are regarded as being in Quintile 3, thus indicating that the number of learners struggling may be the only difference between this and other quintiles of schools.

The teachers in this study extended their teaching by encouraging parental support with guidance, but sometimes the parents were unable or uninterested in doing so. Group reading, with an emphasis on peer support, was also helpful if the stronger readers in the group did not have to support too many struggling readers. Reading support was thus extended to teacher support outside of class time and parental and peer support. Moreover, Böhmer and Wills (2023) found in their quantitative study that learners speaking African languages displayed a more significant decline in reading proficiency in comparison to Afrikaans and English-speaking learners.

These five teachers found that they needed to revert to phonics when teaching reading. They supported learners with practices such as decoding words and reading aloud to using flashcards, Dolch words, and Letterland. Continual exposure to phonics helped the learners develop their pronunciation and vocabulary. Vocabulary remains challenging, and it was found that some learners’ lack of comprehension was rooted in their lack of knowledge of the words they were reading. Effective practices implemented to aid the learners in developing their vocabulary included dictionary games, learners compiling personal dictionaries, word walls, code-switching between the learners’ home languages and English, and weekly spelling tests although Krashen (1989) found that spelling tests prove ineffective for vocabulary development. This can be attributed to the fact that explicit teaching of spelling focuses on decoding and learners’ orthographic knowledge (Bosse, 2015). The correct spelling of words contributes to a sturdy foundation for reference when reading but it is related to fluency and not comprehension (Moats, 2005). Krashen, therefore, suggested that the time allocated to spelling tests should instead be used for independent reading since the more learners read for fun, the more their ability to spell accurately also increases. It was also evident that the learners should be committed to acquiring vocabulary since participants explained that some learners are too lazy to consult a dictionary when they struggle.

Finally, teachers fostered independent reading since it helped the learners to become more proficient readers. This was done with book review competitions hosted by the schools and by the teachers monitoring the learners’ progress. Difficulties arose regarding learners’ ability to choose the most appropriate books to read, and the teachers had to assist them in this regard. The teachers also encouraged fun activities, like having the learners discuss the books they were reading and acting out a text provided by the teacher, thus encouraging independent reading.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the effects of the school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic are still evident in schools three years later, and English teachers are compelled to adapt their teaching practices to ensure that the gap between learners who can and cannot read does not increase. These findings correspond with the quantitative findings of Böhmer and Wills (2023), who established that the aftermath of COVID-19's school closures is still evident today and that reading interventions should feature prominently in schools. One of the limitations of this study was that the findings were specific to the contexts of the five teachers who participated. However, by comparing our findings to the quantitative findings of Böhmer and Wills, we can better appreciate the value the five teachers attached to their teaching experiences and practices.

It would be interesting to determine how the English language teachers in the rest of the country teach reading. English language teachers often provide substantial reading support to their learners during and after school to prevent them from being left behind. Based on their attempts, we recognise that reading development cannot be limited to the language classroom; it should also receive attention in subject-specific classrooms and at home. Essentially, these five teachers realised their vital role, not only in the immediate academic success of their learners but also in helping them reach future success since they require the skill of reading in everything they do in life. This study's findings may contribute to understanding the Intermediate Phase language teachers' current reality in relation to the teaching of reading to learners with different reading proficiency levels.

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