

Teachers' Perspectives of Teaching Reading in the Intermediate Phase IsiZulu Home Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT Numerous studies have been published on the challenges that South African teachers face in teaching reading, and an interactive pedagogical interventional approach has been proposed. This qualitative study aims to understand the perspectives of isiZulu Home Language teachers regarding what informs their pedagogy of teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase. Data were generated using focus group discussions with 13 teachers. Guided by the theory-practice gap, the paper reveals that pedagogy is not lost in translation due to the lack of teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge, as many researchers have suggested. Underlying factors exist, including incomprehensible learners' workbooks, the misfit between curriculum and practice, and insufficient reading hours allocated in the annual teaching plan. The paper concludes that unless these issues are addressed, the pedagogy of reading in the isiZulu Home Language classroom will continue to be lost in translation.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on best practices of teaching reading has dominated the academic space globally, especially in South Africa, where teachers are found to be lacking essential knowledge on how to empower their learners. The deficit in employing best teaching practices when teaching reading in the early grades is manifested in how South African learners fare on reading competency tests compared to their peers globally. Therefore, this paper was developed to focus on the teaching of reading in isiZulu Home Language in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6) in the South African context. Barends and Reddy (2024), Dagada (2022), Ngema (2023), Phala and Hugo (2022), Ntshangase (2025), and Spaull et al. (2020) reveal that many South African isiZulu Home Language learners in the Intermediate Phase find it challenging to read fluently and with comprehension in their home language. Dagada (2022) attributes this challenge to the fact that most isiZulu-speaking learners in underprivileged schools are taught by teachers who lack a professional strategy for teaching reading in isiZulu in the Intermediate Phase. According to Dagada (2022), the lack of a professional strategy might

be attributed to the training teachers received during their in-service teacher programmes. Therefore, reading is an overlooked or under-researched phenomenon in African languages, and teachers do not take it seriously as a cognitive oral activity (Phala and Hugo 2022), which is also influenced by the lack of emphasis on reading when teachers are trained at teacher education institutions (Ntshangase 2025). This indictment is not only to teachers, who are at the forefront of teaching reading in schools, but all stakeholders, including government, policymakers, academics and writers of books, have a pivotal role to play in ensuring that the pedagogy of reading is not lost in translation.

Considering that reading is a powerful cognitive skill that links with other language skills, such as listening, speaking and writing, isiZulu teachers must possess both the content and pedagogical knowledge of teaching reading in the early grades. This knowledge is pivotal because all the assessments conducted by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) indicate that reading literacy in South Africa is questionable compared to other countries, and the lack of content and pedagogical knowledge of teachers is a major contributory factor to the crisis (Spaull

et al. 2020). The PIRLS results of 2006 and 2011 indicated poor performance of Grade 4 South African learners, even when they read texts written in their indigenous home language (Spaull et al. 2020). In 2016, another PIRLS reading comprehension assessment was conducted. The results indicated that 78 percent of South African Grade 4 learners have not yet developed reading proficiency in the home and second languages (Spaull 2023).

In 2021, it was discovered that 81 percent of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read with understanding in any language, including the indigenous African languages of South Africa (PIRLS 2021). This result led to a call by the South African Department of Basic Education Minister for all stakeholders in education to devise intervention strategies to address this national crisis (Spaull 2023). Therefore, this paper heeds this call by exploring all avenues and strategies to salvage the situation, and the most immediate intervention is determining what teachers, as mediators of learning, do in their classrooms. Therefore, this paper interrogates isiZulu Home Language teachers' perspectives on teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase. In focus group discussions, isiZulu teachers deliberated on what works and what does not by reflecting on their teaching practice and experiences of teaching reading in isiZulu Intermediate Phase classrooms, providing a critical analysis of pedagogies to teach reading in an authentic classroom environment.

This paper will appeal to local and international scholars because reading is a global topical phenomenon that many researchers are working on collaboratively to ensure learners in the early grades can read fluently and with understanding (Spaull 2023). Therefore, local and international communities must be aware of the context under which isiZulu Home Language teachers in the Intermediate Phase in South African underprivileged schools operate.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of this paper is to establish teachers' perspectives of teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language classroom.

Research Question

This paper addresses the problem of teaching reading in an isiZulu Home Language classroom

by providing practical solutions and answers to the following research question: What are teachers' perspectives of teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language classroom?

Literature Review

Teaching reading cannot go without mentioning critical literacy and multiliteracy, which are integral to teaching learners how to read. Consequently, the literature reviewed in this paper is divided into two headings: critical literacy as a conduit for social justice and change, and multiliteracies as vehicles of change.

Critical Literacy as a Conduit for Social Justice and Change

South Africa is a multicultural and multilingual country, boasting 11 official languages, namely, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu (Reagan 2020) and since 2023, South African Sign Language has been added as the 12th official language. The world is moving towards seeing language not as a separate entity but as a conduit for social justice and change (Louloudi 2022). Therefore, teaching reading in a South African context requires teachers and learners to be critical of how language and power shape one's thinking. Social justice and change in the educational landscape "translate into educational policy and curriculum development" (Louloudi 2022: 60).

In 1994, South Africa became a democratic country and all the oppressive laws that obstructed the agenda of social justice and change were revoked (Ntshangase and Bosch 2020). Due to political changes, a new constitution was adopted in 1996, laying the foundation for an inclusive language policy, where learners were granted a constitutional right to be taught in their home languages (Department of Education 1996). However, the reality is that the indigenous African languages were used for teaching and learning only in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3). In Grade 4, there was an abrupt transition from mother-tongue instruction to English, which is a second language for many South African learners, especially in underprivileged communities (Ntshangase and Bosch 2020).

The misalignment between language policy and practice impacted curriculum development in

the Intermediate Phase. It is crucial to understand the three key pillars of curriculum design: knowledge, social preparation, and personal development, as outlined below:

When designing a curriculum, content and aims are crucial, and what one selects and prioritises for inclusion. It should straddle three realms of knowledge, which is predominately academic but is peppered with cultural elements, social preparation has elements which will assist students in making themselves au fait with societal trends and needs, and finally, personal development, which identifies elements that are crucial to learning and development from the learners' personal and educational needs and interests (Pillay 2019:12497).

Based on what is presented above, "it seems that the goal and basis for [curriculum] development is the [learners]. So, there should be many benefits from curriculum development that can be felt by [learners]" (Nursaputr and Aisyah 2024:58). South Africa's reality is that learners from underprivileged schools do not benefit from the curriculum design because education is not built on the firm foundation of their home language, which results in many of them being semi-lingual, meaning that when the transition from home language instruction to the English medium of instruction happens in Grade 4, they have neither developed language proficiency in their home language nor the target language, which is English (Ntshangase and Bosch 2020). Therefore, these learners will find it extremely challenging to engage with the curriculum because of the language barrier. Furthermore, the curriculum is designed with the English native-speaker learner in mind, who has linguistic and cultural differences from native speakers (Hlatshwayo et al. 2020). Therefore, a curriculum must not endorse polarisation because it is "an active conceptual force that is dialectical in being inclusive and democratic by its very constitution to enable varied voices in its social construction" (Hlatshwayo et al. 2020:3). The knowledge covered in the curriculum is already biased towards the native English speakers and, therefore, not inclusive as the curriculum design requires it to be.

The misalignment between language policy and curriculum development highlights the gaps in the South African education system that manifest gross inequalities, lack of inclusivity, polarisation, class dynamism, marginalisation of indige-

nous languages, linguistic imperialism, and lack of social justice and change. All these power struggles and dynamics are crucial in reimagining critical literacy in the South African context so that the failure of the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language learner to read with understanding is gauged on how a language is used to promote division instead of social cohesion, social justice and change.

Multiliteracies as Vehicles of Change

The world is rapidly changing, and so are one's approaches to teaching reading in the school environment. Multiliteracies, or many literacies, exemplify the change required in the 21st-century classroom (Suwalska 2021). According to Suwalska (2021), multiliteracies are crucial in teaching reading in this period of global change because they create a space for teachers and learners to use various texts that embrace epistemological diversity, which involves all types of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge systems.

Multiliteracies allow learners to use the knowledge systems they draw from their communities. This learning experience is critical in fostering understanding of the text because, as learners progress from one grade to another, the going gets tougher, and they must draw from the reservoir of knowledge they bring from home and communities (Vygotsky 1978). This philosophical thinking of working collectively among learners, teachers, parents and communities is deeply rooted in tripolar education and the theory of social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978). The intricacies of multiliteracies are summarised below.

As the learners are getting older, the texts used during lessons where multiliteracy is introduced are increasing in difficulty. The texts present fictional and non-fictional heroes and encourage students to argue their viewpoints. Teachers must guide students' observations and interpretations of varied texts to influence their choice of understanding and expression (Suwalska 2021:207).

The reality is that teachers cannot effectively guide learners in navigating the interpretations of different texts they read if they are not equally well-versed in the epistemological diversities of knowledge, cultures, philosophies and cosmologies of communities and situative situations from which the learners come. Therefore, teachers must

understand multiliteracies because “multiliteracies framework is built upon the notion that diverse forms of communication exist within different media, each adhering to specific content and formal rules” (Huot et al. 2025:10). This is crucial because if isiZulu Home Language learners in the Intermediate Phase are exposed to different media, they will acquire essential cognitive skills and knowledge to read and understand different texts in different contexts.

Teachers must have the content and pedagogical knowledge of the subject they are teaching. If they lack this, they will not guide learners to greater heights, and the pedagogy of teaching reading will always be lost in translation, especially in the South African context, where most learners are taught in their second language (English). Not only will the pedagogy be lost in translation, but the content will also make no sense, especially where most existing textbooks are translated from English to isiZulu or any other South African indigenous official language (Buthelezi 2021; Sikhakhane 2021). Therefore, teachers must understand the significance of multiliteracies so that learners are not disadvantaged when they are taught reading in the isiZulu Home Language classroom. Teachers are mandated to transform their classrooms and use multiliteracies as vehicles of change.

Theoretical Framework

The theory-practice gap underpins this paper because of its significant role in marrying the content and pedagogical knowledge of teachers with their practical knowledge of teaching the subject in an authentic classroom environment. Teachers must research what they teach and teach what they research so that they are aware of the “silent disconnect between these two components [theory and practice]” (Phillips and Condy 2023:214) when they are in an authentic classroom environment.

It was mentioned earlier that the world is changing rapidly, and teachers must adapt to these changing realities. Knowledge is like fluid, and fluid takes the shape of the container in which it is poured. The context under which knowledge is taught is as volatile as the knowledge itself. The fluidity of knowledge and context is better encapsulated in the following words.

In the South African context, the fluidity of knowledge and context is currently even more evi-

dent as education policies and classroom scenarios, as well as practices, have changed radically and at a fast pace following the political transformation in 1994. These changes were required to address the discriminatory practices of the previous dispensation. Since then, South African classrooms have become very diverse regarding different languages, cultures, races, religions and abilities represented by the learners in the class (Neethling and Nel 2021:1).

The classroom diversity illustrated in the paragraph above has further widened the gap between theory and practice in South African schools. According to De Greeff and Els (2024), theorising what teachers must do does not necessarily widen the gap, but the failure to bridge theory and practice when teachers teach their learners in an authentic classroom environment is problematic.

IsiZulu Home Language teachers feel the gap between theory and practice. They experience it daily in their isiZulu classrooms. Therefore, against this background, the theory-practice gap was chosen as the theoretical framework guiding this paper. The aim is to hear teachers' perspectives on what works and does not work in their classrooms and how they must be capacitated to close the theory-practice gap so that learners benefit immensely and improve their reading comprehension.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were generated from 13 isiZulu Home Language teachers using focus group discussions in the workshop attended by the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language teachers from the KwaZulu-Natal Umlazi District, South Africa. The University of KwaZulu-Natal isiZulu Education Discipline organised the workshop, which was held at the Edgewood Campus.

The workshop aimed to disseminate best pedagogical practices for isiZulu teachers on how to teach reading, provide support and guidance, offer theoretical and practical knowledge on assessment strategies, offer research-based and capacity development knowledge on using technology, and develop teaching materials that spark learners' interest and sharpen their reading skills. Furthermore, the workshop addressed the marginalisation of indigenous African languages in South Africa's post-apartheid education system. The workshop adopted the principles of participatory action re-

search methodology, where in-service teachers discussed what works and what does not by reflecting on their day-to-day encounters with learners in their isiZulu classrooms. The teachers critically analysed how interactive teaching methods and strategies can be used to teach reading in an authentic classroom environment.

Twenty teachers (13 home language and 7 second language) attended the workshop. During the workshop, data were generated through focus group discussions by Group A (isiZulu Home Language teachers) and Group B (isiZulu Second Language teachers) on teaching reading. In this paper, the researchers only report on the responses provided by Group A. The responses from Group B will be analysed in a different paper because their experiences differ.

The focus group discussion approach was deemed fit for this workshop because it is “recognised for understanding and exploring in-depth individual perspectives, experiences, behaviour, and phenomena in each sphere through non-numerical data” (Mwilongo 2025:2). Focus group discussions are crucial because “its unique combination of timely feedback and deep insight ensures valid data will be collected” (Mwilongo 2025:4). Through rigorous engagements, participants were asked to verbally report their thoughts about teaching reading in the isiZulu classroom, and they wrote their ideas on presentation charts. This paper reports data from the group presentations, and audio and written data are quoted verbatim and will be kept safe for future verification to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. The focus group discussions allowed participants to engage and ask questions, and constructive feedback came from the teachers and workshop facilitators. Teachers shared their first-hand experiences of teaching and assessing reading in their classrooms during these engaging sessions. Focus group discussions, as a form of collaborative learning, gave teachers a feel of what it is like to learn from each other to use the technique to teach learners reading in an authentic classroom context.

The thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data from isiZulu Home Language teachers. Through a qualitative approach, the paper provides a narrative description of the data identified, analysed and presented as themes (Braun and Clarke 2021). The descriptive nature of the thematic analysis approach allows researchers to

consider “its six steps: transcript creation and data familiarization; keyword identification; code selection; theme development; conceptualization through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes; and, finally, the development of a conceptual model” (Naeem et al. 2023:2). All these steps were observed during the data presentation and analysis in this paper.

All ethical clearance considerations were followed when the study was conducted, and the ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the relevant institution with ethical clearance number HSSREC/00008535/25.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers were asked several questions during the workshop’s group discussions. These questions range from the challenges they encounter when teaching reading to how they digitalise the isiZulu classroom, collaborate among themselves and with the community to generate learning materials, navigate around implementing the curriculum, whether they get enough professional development from the government, and lastly, how they marry theory and practice (pedagogy). The data from the teachers are presented according to themes and analysed and discussed succinctly. All questions were asked in English, but participants responded in isiZulu. Their responses were then translated into English.

Theme 1: Challenges of Teaching Reading in the Intermediate Phase Classroom

The said theme includes the following sub-themes of learners struggling to read, limited resources to promote reading in isiZulu Home Language, and the effects of overcrowded classrooms, as presented and discussed below.

The first question posed to the isiZulu teachers in the workshop during the focus group discussion is as follows: What are the major challenges you face when teaching reading in isiZulu Home Language in the Intermediate Phase?

Table 1 summarises the group’s responses.

Five literacy issues emanate from the data presented above: phonology vs reading, morphology vs reading, pronunciation vs reading, punctuation vs reading, and reading proficiency. Starting with phonological awareness, it is concerning that

Table 1: Responses to theme 1, question 1

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Abafundi abanalo ulwazi lwemisindo nokululumbanisa nokwakha igama.	Learners lack phonological and morphological knowledge.
Abanye abafundi abakwazi ukuphimisa imisindo ngendlela eyiyona.	Other learners cannot pronounce words properly.
Abanye abafundi abakwazi ukuhlonipha izimpawu zokuloba.	Some do not respect punctuation when they read.
Isivininini abafundi abafunda ngaso asikho ezingeni.	Reading proficiency is still problematic to many learners.

teachers indicate that their learners cannot read certain sounds in isiZulu Home Language. This issue is cause for concern because “phonological processing, understood as the cognitive ability that handles sounds and their mental representations, is essential for language acquisition and reading skills” (Yépez-Moreno et al. 2025:420). Phonological awareness is critical in reading literacy because it is “essential for the creation, application, and organization of knowledge in a knowledge society” (Yépez-Moreno et al. 2025:426). Therefore, if isiZulu learners lack phonological awareness, they will be unable to read the text with understanding and comprehend the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values contained in the text.

Regarding morphology and reading, it is crucial to note that “morphological awareness has been widely acknowledged as a critical component of language learning, particularly in supporting vocabulary development and reading comprehension among [...] learners” (Zidan 2025:900). The inclusion of morphology in teaching reading will ensure that isiZulu learners are aware of prefixes, suffixes and root words so that they can link these with syntax, which will increase their reading fluency and comprehension of the text. This is crucial in the teaching of reading because, while most approaches and strategies in the Foundation and Intermediate phases have traditionally emphasised phonics, the role of morphology has largely been overlooked (Zidan 2025).

Regarding pronunciation, teachers must train their learners how to pronounce sounds, syllables and words in the context where and how they are used. Goodwin (cited in Wahyuni 2022:46) assert that “in teaching pronunciation, the goal of instructions threefold: to enable our learners to understand and be understood, to build their confidence in entering communicative situations, and

to enable them to monitor their speech based on input from the environment”. The above cannot be achieved if learners are not taught how to make a “connection between a text, a reader and social context with in which the activity take place” (Wahyuni 2022:48).

Punctuation is critical in reading because if learners are not taught how to adhere to different punctuation marks or use them incorrectly, it might lead to misunderstanding the message. This is because “to fully understand the written message, the reader (just like the writer) needs to understand what a sentence is, how it is marked in the text, and where and why he or she needs to pause and to stop while reading it. Thus, the communication between the writer and the reader can only be possible if both actors are equipped with the same knowledge” (Dolean and Prodan 2023:2). Therefore, isiZulu Home Language learners cannot comprehend the text unless they are well-taught on how to use punctuation marks.

Reading proficiency is vital in literacy because it shows the learner’s “ability to read, understand, and interpret text accurately and fluently” (Abao 2025:863). Reading with proficiency is always tied to learners’ academic performance in all the subjects they do in school (Abao 2025). Therefore, it is critical that isiZulu Home Language learners in the Intermediate Phase ultimately demonstrate a high level of reading proficiency so that they can read with meaning and excel in all their subjects.

The second question regarding teachers’ challenges was: How do limited resources (textbooks/reading materials) impact your teaching?

Table 2 summarises the group’s responses.

Three issues are raised in the data presented above: shortage of books, learners’ dependence on teachers’ interpretation of images, and a lack of reading practice beyond the classroom. All these

Table 2: Responses to theme 1, question 2

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Izincwadi zokufunda azanele, azikho izinhlobo ezahlukenene, okwenza abafundi bagcine bengakwazi ukuthola ulwazi olufanele.	The existing books are not enough, and there is no variety so that learners are exposed to different topics or knowledge.
Izikole azinayo imishini yokuphrinta ngombala ogqamile, okwenza izithombe othisha abazisebenzisayo uma befundisa noma behlola zingagqami kahle. Kuze kudingeke ukuba kube nguyena othisha ochaza okusesithombeni.	Schools do not have colour printing machines, which makes the pictures teachers use to teach, unclear. Sometimes, learners will not recognise the images on the picture, and the teacher will end up telling them what the image is.
Abafundi baze bagcine behlanganyela incwadi eyodwa futhi isale esikoleni, bangahambi nayo emakhaya.	Learners will share one book, and they leave it in school when they go home.

issues negatively impact the academic success of Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language learners, which affirms studies indicating that most South African learners cannot read proficiently and with comprehension when they reach Grade 4, even if they read in their home language (Barends and Reddy 2024; Dagada 2022; Ngema 2023; Ntshangase 2025; Phala and Hugo 2022; Spaull et al. 2020). If teachers lack sufficient teaching resources, such as books, collages, smartboards, computers and data projectors, they will find it challenging to marry theory with practice when teaching reading. Therefore, learners are not exposed to various reading texts, and multiliteracy is compromised. Thus, Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language learners are denied the opportunity to use multimedia to interpret, produce and assess different texts in different contexts or forms (Huot et al. 2025). If learners are not exposed to different texts, their understanding of global topical issues, especially on the agenda of social justice and change, will be minimal. It is also disturbing that teachers must tell learners what is in the pictures due to a lack of infrastructure, such as colour printing machines. This lack is detrimental to learners' ability to develop visual cognitive skills, widening the gap between

theory and practice, which goes against the precepts of marrying theory and practice, because reading is not only about reading the letters of the alphabet but also incorporates visual literacy. Moreover, visual literacy encourages "not only analytical and cultural literacy; there is reinforced critical literacy too" (Suwalska 2021:208). Therefore, learners deserve to be exposed to multiliteracies with "information full of verbal, visual and numerical symbols" (Suwalska 2021:208). The fact that learners cannot take books home to practise reading on their own or with the help of peers or parents is a cause for concern. This is against the principles of tripolar education, which asserts that the construction of new knowledge is the responsibility of teachers, learners/peers and communities where learners come from (Vygotsky 1978).

The third question regarding teachers' challenges was: How do large class sizes affect your ability to provide individualised reading support to your learners?

Table 3 summarises the group's responses.

Three issues are highlighted in the data provided above: the inability of teachers to identify at-risk readers, the inability of teachers to assist struggling learners, and the excessive marking

Table 3: Responses to theme 1, question 3

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Akulula ukusheshe uthole umfundi onenkinga yokufunda nodinga ukulekelwa.	It is not easy to identify learners who have reading challenges so that interventions are made early.
Awukwazi ukubalekelala abafundi abadinga usizo.	The teacher will end up not attending to learners who need assistance.
Isikhathi esiningi uthisha usichitha emaka imisebenzi yabafundi nokwenza kube nzima ukusebenzisa izindlela ezahlukenene zokuhlola.	The teacher spends most of their time marking, which makes it difficult to give different assessment activities.

workload on teachers. Ntshangase (2025) observes that teachers in the Intermediate Phase find it challenging to assess students who are at-risk readers, even though the Department of Basic Education have policies advocating for inclusive education. Ntshangase (2025) asserts that the problem is that there are no clear guidelines in the policies for teachers to follow on how to assess, accommodate and assist at-risk readers in the mainstream educational setup. The statement explains why teachers would rather opt not to assist learners who are struggling with reading because they have not been capacitated to do so. Another concern is that learners are not supported through different formative assessments meant to enhance learners' reading skills because they are preoccupied with marking. Learners in the isiZulu Home Language do not need to be assessed only when summative assessment is needed because that defeats the process of assessing for teaching, not assessing of teaching. After all, reading is a fundamental skill that must be taught continuously because it is directly linked to a holistic academic achievement and development of learners (Sedlmayr and Weissenbacher 2025). The study by Lopes and Oliveira (2025) stresses the importance of teachers intervening as early as possible in identifying learners who are at-risk readers so that all learners receive equal academic attention and assistance aimed at improving their reading literacy. Drawing on Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, Lopes and Oliveira (2025:33) emphasise the following:

In contrast to computerized interventions examined in this review, where teachers, researchers, and educational support personnel were only present to provide technical support when needed, traditional interventions involved students interacting with implementers and, in some cases, peers during learning. Through this interaction, a supportive, literacy-rich environment is created, where shared reading experiences encourage students to adopt an active role in learning, engaging with it cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally.

This suggests that isiZulu Home Language teachers do not necessarily need advanced digital

technologies or specialised psychological and clinical training to support at-risk readers. Rather, they need to employ appropriate pedagogical interventions that motivate learners to read more and strengthen their literacy skills. Evidence shows that if "a child does not learn to read in primary school, then they will not be able to use reading to access the curriculum in secondary and tertiary education" (Crawford et al. 2025:74). Furthermore, Crawford et al. (2025:74) state that "high levels of literacy promote human capital accumulation, thus promoting income, employment, health benefits, and social participation for individuals, and poverty reduction and economic development for societies." Therefore, it critically important that isiZulu Home Language teachers become the agents of change in their classrooms by supporting their learners in every possible way, despite socio-political challenges such as poverty, crime, inequitable language policies and the legacy of racial segregation. IsiZulu Home Language learners, like all South African learners, irrespective of race, social status, creed or geographical location, deserve equitable access to quality education. Every learner, whether academically gifted or experiencing difficulties, requires support to build self-confidence and resilience. This reflects the true essence of holistic development, which involves nurturing the learner in all spheres of life and faculties of their existence so that they gain the confidence and skills needed to succeed academically and in life (Sedlmayr and Weissenbacher 2025).

Theme 2: Digitalisation of the isiZulu Classrooms

Regarding integrating technology in an isiZulu classroom, teachers were asked the following: How do you incorporate technology into your reading lessons, if at all? What digital tools (if any) do you use to support reading instruction in isiZulu?

Table 4 summarises the group's responses.

Theme 2 paints a gloomy picture of the South African public schooling system, especially in the

Table 4: Responses to theme 2, question 1

isiZulu response	Translated to English
Ezobuchwepheshe azikho ezikoleni. Othisha kuthiwa abazithengele bona ezobuchwepheshe. Izikole uthola ukuthi zihlinzekwa ngamakhompuyutha kungene amasela antshontshe.	Technology in our schools is non-existent. Teachers are asked to buy their own technological devices. Schools that received donations of computers become victims of crime and all the computers will get stolen.

context of underprivileged schools. It is appalling to note that while schools globally are now experimenting with using artificial intelligence to make learning and teaching much more efficient and effective, some schools still have no computer rooms, and teachers rely on traditional teaching tools, such as a chalkboard and chalk (Bahari et al. 2025). This finding is despite studies showing the benefit of modern technologies and interactive digital platforms in stimulating learners' engagement and interest during learning and teaching (Ahiaku et al. 2025; Ntshangase 2023). Ahiaku et al. (2025) found that it is not only the lack of computers and other digital resources that is hindering the integration of technology in teaching and learning, but also that the other critical issue is connectivity. In many non-urban and underprivileged South African schools, the reality is that teachers cannot even use their smartphones or tablets to access learning materials while on school premises (Ahiaku et al. 2025). This highlights that South Africa still has a considerable distance to cover in digitalising classrooms when compared to global trends. In language classrooms, it is crucial that learners become engaged in interactive and collaborative learning experiences with their peers through various digital platforms (Bahari et al. 2025). It is concerning that while technology is reshaping the teaching of languages and other subjects around the world, South Africa is still grappling with the issue of providing both computers and reliable network coverage to schools in underprivileged communities (Muyambi and Ramorola 2025). As a result, the use of advanced technologies for the teaching and learning of reading in isiZulu Home Language classrooms, which are largely attended by learners from the non-urban and underprivileged communities, remains an unattainable goal for the majority of South African learners. Furthermore, it is even more heart-breaking to note that teachers who teach in schools with reasonable connectivity are asked to use their money to buy technological devices. This

occurs despite the call by scholars, educationists and community leaders for government to provide adequate infrastructure and digital resources to all schools in order to bridge the gap between privileged and underprivileged institutions (Muyambi and Ramorola 2025). In cases where schools have been provided with infrastructure and digital resources, the responsibility lies with the respective communities to safeguard and maintain them. However, Ngidi and Ntinga (2025) note that many communities fail to value and protect the infrastructure and digital resources that are provided either by private funders or supplied by the government, even though these were intended to alleviate poverty and address economic exclusion. Community members' apathy towards the value of education for their children and failure to treasure and protect the property that will empower their children, such as the donated computer rooms, shows how broken society is.

Theme 3: Collaborations Among Teachers and the Community

Regarding collaborations, teachers were asked the following question: Do you collaborate with the community or other teachers to develop reading materials or share teaching strategies for isiZulu?

Table 5 summarises the group's responses.

Theme 3 is two-fold. First, it shows teachers' zeal to bridge the gap between theory and practice by collaborating with learners, teachers and communities to enhance teaching reading in schools. The concepts of annual literacy days and festivals are highly commended. This response aligns with tripolar education, where the responsibility of teaching learners is placed on the teacher's lap and becomes a collective responsibility for all stakeholders, including teachers, learners and communities (Vygotsky 1978). However, the second part of the theme perpetuates teachers' dependency on the government. Teachers forget that, as

Table 5: Responses to theme 3, question 1

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Kuba neLiteracy day njalo ngonyaka. Kuba neLanguage Festival njalo ngonyaka. Othisha abahlangani nabanye othisha noma nomphakathi ukwakha izinsizakufunda/izinsiza kufundisa. UHulumeni nguye othumela izin sizakufunda/ izinsizakufundisa.	We organise a literacy day annually. We organise a language festival annually. Teachers do not meet or collaborate with the community to generate reading materials. It is the government that provides materials.

foot soldiers, they can come together and write beautiful and meaningful learning material to use in their circuits and districts, reducing their reliance on government-provided resources. Teachers understand their learners and their cultural contexts much better than anyone else. If teachers are capacitated to develop teaching and learning materials, learners will be exposed to diverse modes of expression, which will help them understand their cultural contexts better because they will be reading meaningful texts (Suwalska 2021). The failure of teachers to capitalise on shared community knowledge, where collaboration with parents and local stakeholders could generate teaching materials, deprives them of valuable opportunities to learn from one another, particularly in relation to how technology can be utilised to accomplish the task of developing learning resources. Globally, the use of technology to create educational materials is recognised as a key global trend in education (Kunwar et al. 2025). According to Kunwar et al. (2025:146), “digital tools have become essential in today’s education, providing many helpful ways to improve teaching and learning. These tools include things like e-books, websites, videos, educational programs, online classes, slideshows, and interactive games”. Garay Abad and Hattie (2025) further highlight that teachers’ professional growth is closely linked to collaboration with peers, learners and communities in the development of teaching materials. This professional and personal growth is manifested in different stages, as portrayed below:

Early-career teachers engage in exploratory adaptation, modifying materials frequently to fit their classroom needs. Experienced teachers exhibit selective refinement, making smaller, targeted modifications rather than completely restructuring resources. This shift from creative adaptation to strategic expertise suggests that material engagement changes as teachers develop greater pedagogical confidence (Garay Abad and Hattie 2025:9).

Table 6: Responses to theme 4, question 1

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Izincwadi zokusebenzela zabafundi azihambisani no-CAPS.	There is no correlation between learners’ workbooks and CAPS.
Imisindo kumashadi alethwa nguHulumeni iphambene ngenxa yokuthi isuselwa esiNgisini. Isibonelo: b = ibhola.	The sounds in the charts provided by the government are wrong because they are adopted from English sounds. For example, b = ball.
Abafundi badinga izinsizakufunda ezahlunekene ukuze kuthuthuke ikhono labo lokufunda okubhaliwe.	Learners must be provided with various types of reading materials so that they develop their reading skills.

It is therefore critically important that isiZulu Home Language teachers in the Intermediate Phase do not wait for the government provision of learning materials for them to teach reading in their classrooms. Instead, they should actively collaborate with a range of stakeholders, including community members, some of whom may possess business expertise or connections that can be leveraged to sponsor the creation and development learning resources. Teachers must remain cognisant of the fact that “using these digital tools has many advantages” (Kunwar et al. 2025:146). Interactive digital platforms are essential tools in education, particularly in terms of convenience, accessibility, collaboration, interactivity, instant feedback and adaptability to diverse learning styles and contexts (Ntshangase 2023).

Theme 4: Misfit Between Curriculum and Practice

Regarding balancing the curriculum and practice, teachers were asked: Do you face any challenges in balancing the demands of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) with the unique linguistic features of isiZulu? Can you give examples of how you navigate these challenges?

Table 6 summarises the group’s responses.

The second question about balancing the curriculum and practice was: What changes or improvements could be made to the current curriculum to better support teaching reading in the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language classroom?

Table 7 summarises the group’s responses.

Theme 4 explains why there is a disjuncture between curriculum and practice. It shows that no matter how teachers try to bridge the gap between theory and practice, the fact that the working materials they or their learners use do not speak directly to the curriculum says a lot about why South African learners are underperforming in

Table 7: Responses to theme 4, question 2

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Izinto ezifundwayo azihambelane nesikhathi samanje.	The topics in the curriculum must be aligned with global educational trends.
Akungaphindwaphindwa imisebenzi eyodwa emisebenzini yabafundi futhi ayihambelane nekharikhulamu.	The learners' workbooks are repeating the same thing and must be aligned with the curriculum.
Izincwadi zemisebenzi yabafundi azizwakali ngenxa yokuthi azihunyushiwe kahle zisuselwa eziNgisini. Nathi singothisha sigcina sidideka.	Learners' workbooks do not make sense because the meaning is lost in translation when they are being translated from English to isiZulu. Even us, as teachers, fail to deduce the meaning of what those workbooks are asking.
I-annual teaching plan (ATP) ayihambelane no-CAPS.	The annual teaching plan (ATP) must be aligned with CAPS.

reading literacy compared to other learners globally (PIRLS 2021). Several issues are at play in the isiZulu classroom, including language policy, the hegemonic power of English, linguistic imperialism, poor translation of materials, incomprehensible learner workbooks, and an obsession with the annual teaching plan (ATP). Most learning materials are directly translated from English, which is a major concern because the meaning, in most cases, is lost in translation (Buthelezi 2021; Sikhakhane 2021).

The example the teachers gave in the quotation about the /b/ sound for 'ball', which is taken from English and transferred incorrectly to 'ibhola' in isiZulu, shows how content and pedagogy can be lost in translation. 'Ibhola' does not have a /b/ sound; instead, it has a /bh/ sound. This issue is just the tip of the iceberg, as teachers indicated that even the learners' books are poorly translated, and therefore, they make no sense at all. The hegemonic power of English is detrimental to the agenda of social justice and change and is paramount to linguistic imperialism (Ntshangase and Bosch 2020). Furthermore, the ATP is not aligned with the CAPS; therefore, teachers must adhere to the ATP to the core. Failure to do so will result in them having to answer to the Head of Department and subject advisor. The obsession with the ATP derails progress in teaching reading and how it is supposed to be taught, leaving the pedagogy of teaching lost in translation.

It makes one wonder whether assessment should be so rigid that teachers feel so disempowered that they do not exercise their autonomy to assess their learners how they want to and teach them how they deem fit. If teachers are forced to follow the ATP and the learners' workbooks, char-

acterised by numerous irregularities and incomprehensible direct translations, and are regressive and detrimental to social justice and change, how will isiZulu Home Language learners achieve excellence in reading with fluency and comprehension? According to Ketonen and Nieminen (2025:16), teachers need to reclaim their professional autonomy or agency in designing meaningful tasks for their learners because "assessment is imperative, as it plays a central role in mediating teachers' public power". This suggests that the one-size-fit-all kind of approach employed by the South African Department of Basic Education, particularly through the ATP, does not serve the interests of either teachers or learners and can hinder the academic success of learners.

Theme 5: Lack of Professional Development

Regarding professional development offered by the government, teachers were asked: What kind of professional development or support would most benefit you in improving your teaching of reading in isiZulu?

Table 8 summarises the group's responses.

Theme 5 shows a burning desire for isiZulu teachers to learn so that they can balance theory and practice. Teachers are entitled to professional development because lifelong learning "provides opportunities to acquire and refine new skills, enhance abilities, and boost confidence in various areas of life" (Debbarma and Shivam 2025:40). Therefore, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education must provide sufficient and regular professional development to help isiZulu Home Language teachers grow as professionals in their field. Learners' academic success depends on teachers who can bridge the theory–practice gap.

Table 8: Responses to theme 5, question 1

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Sincane isikhathi othisha abanikezwa sona uMnyango weMfundo KwaZulu-Natali sokuthuthukiswa kwamakhona, okuba amahora amabalwa, kusukela ku-12:00 kuya ku-15:00, futhi usuku olulodwa ngonyaka.	The time dedicated to workshopping teachers by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education is limited. The workshops last for a few hours (12:00-15:00) and only for one day a year.
Othisha badinga ukuthuthukiswa ukuze bakwazi ukuhlangabezana nezidingo zabafundi.	Professional development for teachers is critical so that they are capacitated with knowledge of how to provide the needs for learners.

Theme 6: Teachers' Approach to Teaching Reading

The first question directed to teachers regarding pedagogy was: What methods do you use to teach reading in isiZulu?

Table 9 summarises the group's responses.

The second question directed to teachers regarding pedagogy was: How do you integrate phonics, phonemic awareness and word recognition in your lessons?

Table 10 summarises the group's responses.

The third question directed to teachers regarding pedagogy was: How do you incorporate oral traditions, such as storytelling, in your reading lessons?

Table 11 summarises the group's responses.

The fourth question directed to teachers regarding pedagogy was: How do you approach teaching reading comprehension in isiZulu? What techniques have you found effective?

Table 12 summarises the group's responses.

Table 11: Responses to theme 6, question 3

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Ukulingisa Ukucula	Dramatisation Singing

The fifth question directed to teachers regarding pedagogy was: How do you address the issue of learners transitioning from reading in isiZulu to reading in English in Grade 4?

Table 13 summarises the group's responses.

Theme 6 refutes what many studies reveal, that is, teachers lack content and pedagogical knowledge on teaching reading (Ngema 2023; Simelane et al. 2024). The depth of the teachers' responses on pedagogy during the workshop's focus group discussions, which were not rehearsed because they only encountered the questions as they were posed, demonstrates that teachers have a deep knowledge of what and how to teach it. They know the pedagogy, but the problem is the context under which they teach, limiting them from being in-

Table 9: Responses to theme 6, question 1

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Ukuthola ulwazi lwangaphambilini ngokusebenzisa izithombe.	Probing prior knowledge through pictures.
Ukuqagela ukuthi indaba ikhuluma ngani ngokuhlaziya isihloko.	Guessing the content by analysing the title.
Ukufunda kuzwakale okuholwa nguthisha.	Teacher reading aloud.
Abafundi bakhipha amagama abangawazi bese achazwa ngabafundi noma nguthisha.	Learners identify difficult vocabulary and explain it either by learners or teacher.

Table 10: Responses to theme 6, question 2

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Kukhishwa imisindo. Isibonelo: /s/. Umsindo lowo bese kwakhiwa ngawo igama noma imisho.	We give learners sounds; for example, /s/, which they will use to form a word or use the word to construct sentences.

Table 12: Responses to theme 6, question 4

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Ukubuza imibuzo ehlokolozayo	Asking thought-provoking questions
Ukufundisa ngezimpawu zokuloba	Teaching punctuation marks
Ukufundisa izindlela zokuphimisa imisindo	Teaching pronunciation and intonation
Ukuhlaziya isihloko	Analysing the title
Ukuhlaziya isifundo esitholakalayo	Analysing the moral lesson
Ukuhlaziya abalingiswa	Analysing the characterisation of characters
Ukuyamanisa okufundwayo nempilo yabafundi	Linking the text with learners' real-life situations

Table 13: Responses to theme 6, question 5

<i>isiZulu response</i>	<i>Translated to English</i>
Ukuthuthukisa ulwazimagama lwabafundi	Increasing learners' vocabulary
Ukubafundisa imisindo	Teaching phonics and phonemic awareness
Ukubenzela izibizelo	Giving them a spelling test

novative and phenomenal teachers. The responses indicate that many factors are at play, such as the ATP, incomprehensible learner books due to poor translation, lack of multiliteracy resources and cramped classrooms. One of the most crucial obstacles is that many isiZulu learning materials are translated from English to isiZulu, and consequently, the meaning is often lost in translation (Buthelezi 2021; Sikhakhane 2021). When the meaning is lost in translation, pedagogy is likely to follow suit because languages are cultural epiphenomena, as they, and their varieties, emerge at the developmental stages in the life of a culture. In some crucial respects, they are peculiar to their culture, and therefore, the meanings of specific terms used in the language of their culture are not readily transferable to the languages of other cultures. "Some culturally-laden terms do not have semantic equivalents in the languages of other cultures" (Moran 2023:59).

The above quotation is a direct indictment of isiZulu teachers, writers, curriculum developers, subject advisors, curriculum specialists, government officials and all stakeholders in education to do something about writing materials that are not authentic and not translated from other languages, such as English. Learners must be able to resonate and identify with the culture portrayed in the reading texts to read fluently and with comprehension.

CONCLUSION

This paper could rewrite the narrative about how reading is taught in the Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language classroom. The paper challenges teachers to collaborate with colleagues, learners and communities to drive change in teach-

ing reading. The proposed change starts with teachers being proactive in collaborating among themselves, with learners and communities, to develop meaningful materials instead of waiting for the government to provide them. Guided by the theory-practice gap, the paper concludes that Intermediate Phase isiZulu Home Language teachers do not lack content and pedagogical knowledge of teaching reading, and many underlying factors hinder the progress, such as incomprehensible learner workbooks, a misfit between curriculum and practice, and insufficient reading hours allocated in the ATP. The paper concludes that unless these issues are addressed, the pedagogy of reading in the isiZulu Home Language classroom will remain lost in translation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data presented, analysed and discussed above, the following recommendations are brought to the fore:

Teachers and learners must embrace critical literacy and be critical of what they read to make education meaningful and produce learners who will advocate for social justice and change. The change must begin in the classroom where both teachers and learners collaborate as a team to construct new knowledge. This new knowledge should be built upon learners' prior understanding, drawing from the indigenous knowledge systems present in their communities.

Multiliteracy must be core to teaching reading in the isiZulu Home Language classroom so that learners are exposed to various texts that will open

their minds to global issues, especially social justice and change. These texts should be developed collaboratively by teachers, learners and community members, utilising modern technologies to support the process. Parents or influential community members can use their social standing to attract donations or funding, thereby contributing to the collective to overcome poverty and economic exclusion. This collaboration is essential as knowledge construction is the responsibility of teachers and all stakeholders. Therefore, teachers, learners and communities must join the party to become active owners and contributors to the new knowledge.

The government must provide regular professional development to teachers so that they can be lifelong learners who will, in turn, bridge the gap between theory and practice. Additionally, the government must address and eliminate barriers to quality education, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, limited network connectivity, crime, social inequalities and insufficient resources.

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