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Beyond Assessment: A Policy Review of PIRLS and Early Grade Reading Interventions in South Africa

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Abstract. The chronic reading difficulties that have been recorded in successive cycles of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) since 2006 in South Africa are one of the most serious and complex issues confronting the country's education system. The mean scores of Grade 4 learners in South Africa have generally been lower than the international mean score of 500 in each of the assessment cycles (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021), with about 81% of learners in the 2021 cycle unable to read for meaning. This policy review paper critically discusses the progress South Africa has made regarding the outcomes of PIRLS, the design and implementation of the Early Grade Reading (EGR) interventions, policy gaps, and proposes evidence-based suggestions for policy system change. The Simple View of Reading (SVOR) and Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory of Literacy provided the theoretical framework for literature review, and a qualitative document analysis, informed by Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), was used. This article contends that South Africa's reading problems are not only pedagogical, but structural, characterized the presence of structural inequalities, poor policy implementation, language policy tensions and inadequate teacher development. The review concludes that effective reading improvement will occur if we have a coherent, sustained, and equity-centred reform effort that is grounded in research and evidence, centres on instruction, and takes into account the socio-economic factors that influence literacy.

Keywords: PIRLS; early grade reading; South Africa; reading policy; literacy; Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS); policy analysis; language of instruction

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1. Introduction

The importance of early grades reading achievement in shaping lifelong learning, educational trajectory and economic engagement is well-understood. Achievement of reading for meaning by the end of the foundation phase is generally recognised as pivotal because it represents the shift between “learning to read” and “reading to learn” and is essential for learners to participate in meaningful ways in learning across the curriculum. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) offers an internationally standardised assessment of reading comprehension at Grade 4 and is one of the most significant reading tests to measure foundational literacy across education systems globally.

In the PIRLS context, Grade 4, a critical juncture in the school trajectory, is characterised by students' ability to comprehend concepts as a means to facilitate their further academic learning and cognitive growth (Mawoyo & Vally, 2020). From South African perspective, however, various national and international test scores over the last 30 years showed a serious lack of progress in basic literacy skills, especially in the ability to read for meaning in any language to the end of Grade 4. Notably, despite a wide range of policy changes and significant investments to enhance literacy achievement in the basic education system, these challenges have continued.

Literacy in South Africa remained a serious concern as evidenced by the 2021 PIRLS cycle that occurred amidst the COVID-19 disruptions. The average for South Africa was 288, below the score of 2016, which highlighted concerns about regression despite government policy interventions and the work of literacy improvement programmes (Mullis et al., 2023; Mawoyo & Vally, 2020; Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019; Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023). The current low literacy performance experienced at all levels of schooling over the various PIRLS cycles confirms the broader picture of South Africa's literacy performance being among the lowest globally and one of the longest-standing challenges in the field of education in similar developing settings. This has heightened concerns about the effectiveness of these very large-scale literacy interventions, the extent to which foundational reading policies are being implemented, and the degree to which evidence-based reforms have led to lasting system-level improvements (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018).

PIRLS is a very useful longitudinal lens on which South Africa can be measured over time, as it is conducted every five years in over 50 countries. In the first five cycles in which South Africa measured up to the international performance tables, after participating in PIRLS in 2006, there had been significant concerns regarding the country's performance, especially in the 2016 and 2021 cycles (Howie et al., 2017; Mullis et al., 2023; Mawoyo & Vally, 2020; Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023). These continued poor literacy results have been driven despite a rich and dynamic policy environment, with several literacy initiatives at the early grade level developed by different levels of government, donors, and the

non-governmental sector. The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS), Funda Wandu programme and programmes related to the National Reading Coalition are attempts to strengthen reading teaching and the outcomes of reading in the foundation phase. However, the title of "Intervention evidence to sustained, system-wide literacy improvement" remains a challenge as evidenced by the limited gains in PIRLS (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023). The fact that the results of these reading initiatives remain poor in South Africa suggests that the problems that need to be addressed are not only structural and policy issues but also reflect broader issues. There is growing evidence from existing research that reading comprehension is a result of the interplay of decoding fluency, vocabulary acquisition, language proficiency, teacher pedagogical knowledge, home literacy environments, instructional quality, and socio-economic inequalities.

These dimensions form the theoretical foundations of the "simple view of reading" and other theoretical frameworks surrounding literacy development, specifically in multilingual and resource-constrained settings (Schaefer et al., 2023; Roper et al., 2021; Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019). Language policy issues in South Africa further heighten the complexities of literacy acquisition. Despite the national policy's emphasis on the teaching of a home language in the early grades, and then the adoption of English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), there is empirical evidence of a disconnect between the policy level and the classroom level. The lack of ability to read for meaning in one's home language and/or English is of great concern to many learners who enter Grade 4 without this skill, and questions exist about the quality of instruction, language transition practices and the support systems that teachers provide (Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019; Mescht, 2023; Long & Bowles, 2024).

Although successive PIRLS cycles have consistently documented South Africa's poor reading performance, the persistent repetition of these findings raises a more pressing policy question: why have extensive assessments and evidence generation not translated into sustained improvements in literacy outcomes? Much of the existing literature has focused on describing learner performance or evaluating individual reading interventions in isolation. However, there remains limited synthesis of how nearly two decades of PIRLS evidence has informed policy development, implementation, scalability, and system-wide reform.

This gap underscores the urgency of moving beyond repeated assessment of reading achievement critically examining whether current policies and early grade reading interventions have effectively addressed the structural, instructional, and implementation challenges that continue to undermine literacy development. Accordingly, this review provides an integrated policy analysis that links PIRLS trends with evidence from major early grade reading initiatives to identify persistent policy gaps and propose strategies for sustainable literacy improvement.

This paper then synthesises PIRLS results from this background and evaluates early grade reading (EGR) interventions in South Africa, with a policy-focused perspective. The study seeks to highlight the policy gaps and the successful interventions of the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) and related stakeholders to increase skills in reading in the foundation phase. Specifically, two questions are explored in the light of triangulation of the 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021 PIRLS results with the overall literacy intervention literature: What policy gaps emerge in the field of EGR when this data is triangulated? and, how well have South Africa's EGR interventions, especially EGRs initiated by the DBE and the large-scale or NGO-based programmes, demonstrated their ability to improve reading achievement among foundation-phase learners?

The paper is grounded in a policy and implementation perspective that acknowledges that learning to be literate is a multi-dimensional and systemic process, not the result of single interventions. In assessing the effectiveness of EGR initiatives, this framing also takes account of the quality of implementation, scalability, teacher professional development, language of instruction and contextual socio-economic realities. The paper aims to use PIRLS performance trajectories to shed light on both the conditions for the success and failure of literacy interventions and highlight lessons to be learned for fostering sustainable improvements in basic reading skills.

The paper draws together a snapshot of the current status of early grade reading interventions that have been implemented in South Africa, such as government interventions like the EGRS, GPLMS and the more recent DBE-affiliated interventions, as well as NGO-driven interventions and research-based interventions like Funda Wandé and the Primary School Reading Improvement programme (PSRIP) (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018). The review also analyses evidence on effectiveness of these interventions with a focus on the role of methodological design such as randomised controlled trials and impact evaluations for improvement of foundational reading skills.

In the process, the paper critically assesses if gains in phonics, decoding, vocabulary building, and reading fluency have paralleled gains in comprehension and relevant reading competencies for PIRLS (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019; Shalem & Clercq, 2023; Roper et al., 2021; Begna, 2023). Lastly, the paper identifies gaps in policy and offers recommendations for how to achieve sustained, system-wide improvements in early grade reading, focusing on language policy, teacher professional development, assessment systems and on the alignment between the production of evidence, and the implementation of the policy in education (King & Gove, 2024; Graham & Kelly, 2018; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023; Meiklejohn et al., 2021).

2. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a concept that offers a set of ideas for the understanding and interpretation of a research problem and helps explain the relationship between the variables and directs research. The Simple View of Reading (SVR) and Socio-cultural Theory of Literacy are two complementary theories that are used in informing this study. These frameworks offer a glimpse into the teaching and learning conditions that impact early grade reading in South Africa.

2.1 The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading was developed by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 and further refined by Hoover and Gough (1990). This theory views reading comprehension as a function of decoding and linguistic comprehension. This is modelled by the equation:

$$RC = D \times LC$$

The model proposes that accurate word recognition together with language comprehension is needed to attain effective reading comprehension. A deficiency in any of these components leads to weak reading achievement. The relevance of the SVR in this study is that PIRLS results show that there are enduring weaknesses in the teaching of basic literacy in many South African schools, which affects learners' decoding and comprehension. Thus, the framework offers a convenient way to evaluate the quality of early grade reading interventions in their coverage of both aspects of the reading process.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Theory of Literacy

According to the Socio-cultural Theory of Literacy, proposed by Vygotsky (1978), learning to be literate is a socially and culturally mediated process that depends on language, interaction, and context. This theory focuses on the importance of socio-economic factors, family literacy contexts, parental engagement and culture in the process of becoming literate as well as on literacy learning in the classroom. This is especially important in South Africa because there is a high level of socio-economic disadvantage and linguistic diversity which impacts on children's reading attainment. PIRLS results always identify students from disadvantaged and non-English-speaking backgrounds as consistently weaker readers and point to the structural and contextual influence on the development of reading. The theory also provides for the significance of home-language teaching in the early grades and the contribution of family and community literacy practices to the development of reading.

2.3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) complements the Simple View of Reading and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory by explaining how children's literacy development is influenced by multiple, interacting environmental systems. The theory proposes that learning is shaped not only by individual cognitive abilities but also by relationships within the family, school, community, and broader policy environment. In the South African context, factors such as socio-economic inequality, school resources,

teacher support, language policy, and educational governance interact across these ecological systems to influence reading outcomes. This theory, therefore, provides an appropriate framework for examining how policy implementation, institutional capacity, and contextual conditions affect the effectiveness of early grade reading interventions. It was used in this study to interpret the broader systemic factors underlying persistent literacy challenges and analyse how interactions between learners, schools, communities, and education policies contribute to the success or failure of reading interventions.

The three theoretical frameworks informed both the analytical lens and interpretation of the reviewed evidence. The Simple View of Reading (SVR) was used to assess whether early grade reading interventions and literacy policies adequately addressed the core components of reading development, including decoding, language comprehension, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This framework enabled the review to evaluate whether the interventions targeted the foundational skills necessary for reading achievement as reflected in successive PIRLS outcomes.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory complemented this analysis by examining the extent to which literacy policies and interventions recognized the broader social and contextual factors that influence reading development, including home language, teacher support, family literacy practices, school environments, and socio-economic conditions. Together, these frameworks provided an integrated lens for identifying policy strengths, implementation limitations, and systemic gaps in South Africa's early grade reading initiatives.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview and research orientation

The methodology used in this study was a qualitative policy-review approach, which involved reducing and analyzing reports from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021, and the reports of Early Grade Reading (EGR) interventions that were conducted in South Africa, specifically the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS). The study was viewed in an interpretive and critical perspective, as it sought to reanalyse and interpret the existing evidence to identify patterns, gaps in the policy, challenges in implementation and tensions in the South African policy landscape (Mawoyo & Vally, 2020; Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019; Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023).

3.2 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative policy review design because the research sought to critically examine how evidence from successive PIRLS assessments and early grade reading (EGR) interventions has informed literacy policy and practice in South Africa. A qualitative policy review was considered the most appropriate approach as the study did not aim to generate primary data or measure intervention effectiveness statistically, but rather to synthesize and interpret evidence from multiple document sources to understand policy development, implementation, and outcomes. The design enabled the integration of findings from PIRLS reports, government policy documents,

intervention evaluation reports, and peer-reviewed literature to identify recurring patterns, implementation challenges, and areas of convergence and divergence across the evidence base.

Furthermore, the qualitative policy review facilitated a systematic examination of the relationship between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. By comparing the objectives of literacy policies with evidence from intervention evaluations and longitudinal PIRLS findings, the study was able to identify persistent policy gaps, implementation barriers, and contextual factors that have limited improvements in reading achievement. This approach also supported the development of evidence-informed recommendations by synthesizing lessons from successful interventions and highlighting opportunities for strengthening literacy policy and practice in South Africa (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Mescht, 2023).

3.3 Data sources and collection

Literacy policy documents and early grade reading interventions were identified, and data gathered from several of these were used for the study. This section presented data from primary sources, such as reports and data from the 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021 cycles. The following reports were examined to explore trends in reading achievement, policy implications and systemic literacy challenges over assessment cycles. Other data sources covered reports of EGR interventions, including the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), and evaluations of interventions like FundaWande and the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS). The design, implementation and outcomes of interventions to support structured pedagogy, instructional coaching, teacher learning and provision of reading materials in the foundation phase were examined across these documents (Roper et al., 2021; Long & Bowles, 2024).

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and Basic Education (DBE) literacy policy framework documents were also reviewed to assess the consistency of policy intentions, PIRLS results, and the available evidence for the effectiveness of the EGR interventions (Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Begna, 2023). To gain a contextual interpretation and triangulation of findings, supplementary literature was consulted that had a focus on language policy, multilingual education, literacy instruction and foundational learning in South Africa (King & Gove, 2024; Ssenkande et al., 2022).

3.4 Search strategy and eligibility

This document search process was carried out in four stages. A first scoping exercise was conducted to identify relevant PIRLS reports, reports on DBE's interventions, DBE policy documents, and peer-reviewed literature on literacy policy and reading interventions through the use of databases and platforms such as Google Scholar, EBSCOhost and official South African government websites.

Documents were considered in the screening and eligibility stage if they focused on: (a) PIRLS cycles or EGR interventions within the South African context; (b) full text; (c) public availability and/or access through institutional databases; and (d) literacy outcomes, effectiveness of interventions, policy implementation, or foundational reading development. Documents were not included unless they were directly relevant to South Africa, were purely theoretical with no policy relevance, or could not be verified as having been published.

3.4.1 Document sampling

A purposive document sampling strategy was employed to select documents that were directly relevant to the study objectives. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the review sought to analyze authoritative sources that provided evidence on South Africa's reading performance, literacy policies, and early grade reading interventions rather than obtain a representative sample of all available publications. Documents were selected based on their relevance to PIRLS outcomes, literacy policy implementation, and evaluations of early grade reading programmes.

3.4.2 Selection criteria

Documents were included if they: (i) focused on South Africa's participation in the PIRLS 2006, 2011, 2016, or 2021 assessment cycles; (ii) examined national or provincial early grade reading interventions; (iii) reported on literacy policy, implementation, or intervention outcomes; (iv) were published by recognized institutions such as the Department of Basic Education, universities, international organizations, or peer-reviewed journals; and (v) were available in full text. Documents were excluded if they were not specific to the South African context, focused solely on theoretical discussions without implications for literacy policy or practice, lacked sufficient methodological detail, or duplicated evidence reported elsewhere.

Table 1: Documents Reviewed, and Purpose

Document category	Purpose	Number reviewed*
PIRLS reports (2006, 2011, 2016, 2021)	Examine literacy trends	4
DBE policy/framework documents	Review literacy policy and national literacy initiatives	4
Intervention evaluation reports	Assess EGR interventions and programme effectiveness	6
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Provide empirical evidence on literacy, language policy, reading interventions, and implementation	27
Other reports (government, books, working papers, World Bank/RISE, technical reports)	Supplement policy and contextual evidence	8
Total		49

3.5 Data extraction and coding

Data extraction centred on determining the key information of each document, such as the purpose of the study, the methods used, the interventions, the

literacy outcomes, the language policy issues, and the policy recommendations. A priori, the four major analytical strands developed around the goals of the study were: (i) PIRLS findings and interpretation; (ii) policy gaps in EGR interventions; (iii) evidence regarding the effectiveness of EGR interventions; and (iv) policy recommendations and implementation challenges.

Coding was done in an iterative manner, and emerging themes were incorporated throughout the coding process. The coding and synthesis process led to cross-document comparisons of convergent and divergent findings from each of the PIRLS cycles, evaluations of literacy interventions, and policy documents. Scalability of interventions, language of instruction challenges, teacher capacity constraints, socio-economic inequalities, and challenges to the literacy monitoring and assessment systems emerged as key themes (Graham & Kelly, 2018; Roper et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Ssenkande et al., 2022).

3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was undertaken through an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and synthesizing evidence across all included documents. Initial codes focused on intervention design, implementation fidelity, teacher professional development, language of instruction, learner outcomes, monitoring and evaluation systems, scalability, and equity considerations. These codes were subsequently grouped into higher-order themes representing recurring policy strengths, implementation challenges, and evidence gaps.

Each policy gap reported in the findings was supported by triangulated evidence from at least three sources: (i) PIRLS assessment reports that identified persistent literacy outcomes, (ii) evaluations of early grade reading interventions that examined programme effectiveness, and (iii) policy documents and peer-reviewed studies that discussed implementation experiences. This triangulation enabled the study to distinguish between limitations related to intervention design, implementation fidelity, resource constraints, language policy, and system governance, thereby ensuring that the identified policy gaps reflected consistent patterns across the evidence base rather than isolated findings. (Graham & Kelly, 2018; King & Gove, 2024).

In order to increase the analytical trustworthiness of the coding process and the thematic interpretations, a second researcher was consulted occasionally. This process helped to ensure consistency of interpretation and reinforced the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Mescht, 2023). The findings were also triangulated over multiple document sources to enhance the face or content validity. When inconsistencies and contradictions were apparent in the reports and policy documents, these were analysed and discussed in the analysis, owing to the complexity of the SA literacy policy landscape (Graham & Kelly, 2018; Roper et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Begna, 2023; Ssenkande et al., 2022).

4. Results and Findings

The review identified six interrelated findings across the analyzed documents. These findings reflect recurring patterns observed in PIRLS reports, national literacy policy documents, and evaluations of early grade reading interventions. Collectively, they demonstrate that while South Africa has generated substantial evidence on reading achievement and implemented several promising literacy interventions, persistent implementation challenges, language policy constraints, inadequate teacher support, and socio-economic inequalities continue to limit sustained improvements in foundational reading outcomes. Table 2 summarizes the major findings, supporting evidence, and their policy implications.

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings, Supporting Evidence, and Policy Implications

Key finding	Supporting evidence	Policy implication
Persistent low reading achievement	PIRLS 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 consistently show South Africa performing below the international benchmark, with approximately 81% of Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning in 2021.	Reading reforms should move beyond assessment towards sustained implementation of evidence-based literacy strategies.
Effective interventions remain limited in scale	Evaluations of EGRS, GPLMS, and FundaWande demonstrate improvements in reading outcomes, particularly where structured pedagogy and instructional coaching were implemented, but these programmes have not been consistently scaled nationally.	Successful interventions should be institutionalised and implemented across provinces with adequate resources and monitoring.
Weak implementation of language policy	Although policy promotes home-language instruction in the Foundation Phase, implementation is inconsistent because of limited teaching materials, inadequate teacher preparation, and early transition to English.	Strengthen mother-tongue-based bilingual education through improved teacher preparation and expanded literacy resources in African languages.
Teacher capacity remains a major constraint	Intervention studies consistently report that teachers require ongoing professional development, structured coaching, and support in evidence-based reading instruction.	Expand continuous professional development, instructional coaching, and mentoring for Foundation Phase teachers.
Monitoring and evaluation systems are inadequate	PIRLS provides valuable benchmarking but is conducted every five years, limiting timely identification of literacy challenges and policy responses.	Develop regular national literacy monitoring systems linked to early intervention and continuous assessment.
Socio-economic inequalities continue to shape literacy outcomes	Learners from disadvantaged communities consistently perform worse because of poverty, limited access to books, weak home literacy environments, and unequal educational resources.	Literacy policy should be integrated with broader social development initiatives, including school libraries, nutrition programmes, early childhood development, and family literacy programmes.

4.1 PIRLS in South Africa

The PIRLS results reveal a continuing reading crisis in South Africa and a failure to meet international standards in reading performance in the Foundation Phase. In the 2006 PIRLS cycle, it was found that about 80% of learners in South Africa were unable to read for meaning, suggesting significant system failures in FDL (Meiklejohn et al., 2021). The national average score of 253 was well below the international benchmark score of 500, indicating large scale problems with basic reading comprehension skills (Howie et al., 2007; Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Swartz, 2023).

There was moderate improvement between 2006 and 2011, with average scores rising to 323, but this growth levelled off in the years that followed and scores hovered around 320 in 2016, prior to a significant drop to 288 in 2021 (Govender & Hugo, 2020; Mullis et al., 2023; Swartz, 2023; Zimmerman, 2014). Longstanding structural inequities and the disruptions in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been linked to the decline seen in the 2021 cycle (Swartz, 2023; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019; Mthimkhulu et al., 2024).

The results also showed that PIRLS revealed reading comprehension deficiencies as well as major gaps in basic literacy acquisition. Many South African learners were not yet fluent and had not acquired basic decoding skills (Janks, 2011; Swartz, 2023; Giacobazzi et al., 2021), and this was not reflected in the approach taken in PIRLS 2006. While PIRLS is a valuable source of international benchmarking information, the assessment has limited diagnostic value in relation to foundational reading skills like phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency, which could help narrow down policy interventions (DBE, 2023; Swartz, 2023; Apccohet al., 2024).

The pre-PIRLS assessment in 2011 also highlighted the extent of foundational literacy issues, with many Grade 4 learners not being sufficiently prepared to undertake the standard PIRLS assessment level (Howie et al., 2012; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019; Swartz, 2023; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019). Weak reading for meaning in all PIRLS cycles adds to the previous concerns about the effectiveness, sustainability and reach of policies and interventions implemented in the South African education system (Zimmerman, 2014; Swatz, 2023; Ларссон et al., 2024).

4.2 Policy gaps in early grade reading interventions

The policy gaps presented in this section emerged from the triangulation of PIRLS findings, evaluations of major early grade reading interventions, and national literacy policy documents. Rather than relying on individual studies, the analysis compared intended policy objectives with reported implementation experiences and literacy outcomes to identify recurring weaknesses across the evidence base. Only gaps consistently supported by multiple sources were included in the synthesis.

Several gaps within the policy and implementation were identified as impacting on the poor reading outcomes in South Africa. The scalability and consistency of implementation across provinces is one of the key challenges. Other

interventions (e.g., Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS), and FundaWande show signs of success, but they are not sufficiently implemented and adopted nationwide (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018). The PIRLS 2021 results also showed that gaps in literacy achievement are growing between affluent and disadvantaged schools, and that poverty, low access to books and low levels of parent literacy continue to negatively affect literacy outcomes for many communities (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023).

Another important policy issue was that of language of instruction. South African education policy recommends using the home language as a medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, but there is inconsistent implementation and little or no support. Many learners are rushed to use English as the language of learning and teaching without acquiring sufficient literacy skills in their home language, which impacts the comprehension and fluency of reading in English (Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023; Long & Bowles, 2024; Ssenkande et al., 2022). In addition, the language policy implementation is affected by the lack of quality reading materials in indigenous language and the inadequate teachers' preparation for multilingual literacy instruction (Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023; Ssenkande et al., 2022).

The results further revealed a lack of focus on basic reading skills in policies. While comprehension is the main concern of PIRLS, a large number of SA learners fall short in decoding, phonics and fluency skills, which are fundamental building blocks of reading comprehension. Phonics, vocabulary, and fluency activities are not always a focus of literacy interventions in the Foundation Phase, across the phases (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Mescht, 2023; Begna, 2023). Limited teacher capacity is also a key obstacle to effective reading instruction within literacy programmes, with many teachers lacking in knowledge of evidence-based reading strategies and structured literacy approaches (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Shalem & Clercq, 2023).

Poor monitoring and evaluation systems also limit efforts to improve literacy. There are major data gaps in the monitoring of learner progress and outcomes of interventions at national and provincial levels because PIRLS assessments are conducted once every five years. Current national assessments are not always well-designed to align with the foundations of literacy and thus are not well-suited to the purposes of early identification and timely intervention (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Roper et al., 2021; Shalem & Clercq, 2023). Translating evidence into responsive policy interventions is therefore slow, and fragmented (Hwa et al., 2020; Shalem & Clercq, 2023).

4.3 Effectiveness of early grade reading interventions

The results show that some interventions in Early Grade Reading that have been adopted in South Africa have had positive outcomes, particularly when structured pedagogy, instructional coaching and quality learning materials were used when teaching literacy. One of the most important evidence-based

interventions in the South African context was the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS). There is evidence that coaching-based interventions provide an added benefit to structured lessons and reading materials, and that the learners achieved around 40% of a year's learning compared with the control groups (DBE, 2023; Roper et al., 2021).

In the same way, positive literacy outcomes were found in programmes where teacher support, coaching and additional structured literacy resources are provided regularly, for example Funda Wandé and GPLMS (Roper et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Begna, 2023). The interventions in this report indicate that effective implementation of evidence-based instructional support models may be effective in improving reading outcomes. Despite these positive findings, the majority of successful interventions have been at the pilot level or province level to date and have not been scaled up or sustained nationally.

The findings also suggest that there is continuing variation in funding, provincial coordination and teacher sustenance systems, which affect the sustainability of literacy interventions. Furthermore, interventions that included parental engagement and home literacy support showed moderate gains, highlighting the need for greater community engagement in literacy development than classroom-only interventions (Roper et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Begna, 2023).

4.4 Evidence-based solutions and policy recommendations

Addressing the South African reading crisis needs a comprehensive, coherent, as well as sustained reform that operates simultaneously at the levels of classroom instructions, teacher growth, system governance, language policy as well as monitoring and evaluation. The following recommendations are grounded in the evidence reviewed in this paper.

4.4.1 Institutionalize evidence-based reading instruction at scale

In order to make a difference, literacy policies need to go beyond small pilot programmes to a whole systems approach. Structured pedagogy, structured lesson plans, instructional coaching, have been shown to have a significant impact on reading outcomes when implemented effectively (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Roper et al., 2021). The results indicate further need for scaling up the implementation of EGRS-informed instructional coaching and structured literacy models in all Foundation Phase classrooms in Province. This will need sufficient resourcing, coordination, and ongoing monitoring to make sure that the implementation is done correctly.

All Foundation Phase home languages should be planned in a structured manner, and should include explicit teaching of phonics, fluency, word knowledge and comprehension skills, in keeping with the Simple View of Reading (SVoR) model (Begna, 2023; Shalem&Clercq, 2023). Furthermore, the implementation of each intervention should be monitored and evaluated using regular classroom visits, coaching visits, and formative assessments of the learners to ensure that literacy intervention activities result in measurable gains at scale (Roper et al., 2021; Meiklejohn et al., 2021).

4.4.2 Strengthening teacher education and ongoing professional development

The results demonstrate that teacher capacity is a significant impediment to quality literacy instruction. Ongoing professional development and growth are needed to provide teachers with evidence-based strategies they can use in the classroom to teach reading, including strategies for phonics instruction, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension skills (Shalem&Clercq, 2023; Begna, 2023). Initial teacher training for Foundation Phase teaching should, therefore, be reinforced to make sure that the teachers they produce are equipped with theoretical knowledge and skills in reading instruction, including literacy teaching in African languages (Hwa et al., 2020; Roper et al., 2021).

In order to reconceptualize both pre-service and in-service teacher training curricula, there should be collaboration between universities, teacher training institutions and the Department of Basic Education (DBE), using existing evidence on effective literacy instruction (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023). Teacher support with sustained coaching and mentoring similarly needs to be ongoing in order to enhance the quality of classroom literacy practices as well as instruction.

4.4.3 Reform language of instruction and policy practice

The outcomes of the review revealed that implementing the language policy is still a challenge in the South African literacy context. While policy and research support mother-tongue based bilingual education, it is often undermined by the lack of teacher preparation for MTBE, reading materials in indigenous languages, and ineffective accountability systems (Mtambo& Tshuma, 2023; Long & Bowles, 2024; Ssenkande et al., 2022). The introduction of early grade reading markers by the DBE is a step forward in tracking early literacy skills and providing early remediation (DBE, 2020).

The results indicate that there is a need for the governments to greatly increase the supply and dissemination of good quality materials in all African languages to be used for reading in all African languages including reading graded readers, big books and supplementary reading materials (Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018). There is a need to extend these successful models like FundaWande (structured reading in isiXhosa) and Sepedi across all official languages, with quality assurance and teacher training support (Hwa et al., 2020; Meiklejohn et al., 2021). Moreover, it is necessary to raise awareness within the public about the concerns of parents about instruction in African-languages and the importance of developing good home-language literacy as a basis for further language learning (Ssenkande et al., 2022; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019).

4.4.4 Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems

The results also show the importance of comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems that will be able to monitor the literacy progress more consistently. PIRLS has value as a source of international benchmarking data, but it also has a lag time of five years between assessments which makes it difficult to act quickly and respond to policies (Roper et al., 2021; Shalem&Clercq, 2023). National literacy assessments based on the foundation reading benchmarks are, therefore, required every year to provide support for

ongoing monitoring, targeted intervention, and evidence-based decision-making.

The review also reveals that parent/community participation needs to be improved as part of literacy enhancement strategies. Parental involvement interventions are shown to have moderate but significant improvements in learner literacy outcomes based on evidence from EGRS (DBE, 2023; Roper et al., 2021). Therefore, enhancing the family literacy initiative and school/community partnerships could help develop reading beyond the classroom.

4.4.5 Address socio-economic determinant of literacy

The findings show that literacy development takes place in larger socio-economic and ecological settings. As a result, classroom-based interventions will fail to yield lasting benefits to students from low-income and food-insecure families and communities who have suffered from home literacy and community violence (Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018). It is, therefore, important that literacy policy is part of a broader social development initiative which fosters children's readiness to learn.

This encompasses expanding Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes that build oral language skills, emergent literacy and school readiness; expanding school and community nutrition programmes; increasing investment in school and community libraries; and enhancing parental literacy and family engagement programmes (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Mescht, 2023). For the benefit of South Africa's ongoing structural inequalities in literacy outcomes, such integrated approaches are needed.

4.4.6 Prioritize early intervention in foundation phase education

The results strongly support the need to focus on early intervention in Grades R-3 so that they learn the foundational skills of reading before moving to higher grades. The research consistently shows that, if a child fails to develop a basic reading ability in the early years, there will be long-term challenges in learning and low educational progression (Van der Berg, 2015; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). Policies should thus be directed towards providing critical early literacy support, problem-solving, and evidence-based early literacy instruction so that all learners are able to “read to learn” by Grade 4.

Therefore, the findings of this study show that a significant improvement in South Africa's literacy outcomes will take place when there is a system-wide overhaul of the schooling system that incorporates evidence-based instruction, teacher training, language-responsive learning, effective monitoring and tracking systems and other socio-economic support systems (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018).

5. Discussion

This review was guided by two research questions: (i) What policy gaps emerge when evidence from the 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 PIRLS cycles is triangulated with evidence from early grade reading interventions? and (ii) To what extent

have South Africa's early grade reading interventions demonstrated effectiveness in improving reading achievement among Foundation Phase learners? The findings indicate that, while South Africa has developed a substantial evidence base through PIRLS and implemented several promising literacy interventions, persistent implementation challenges have limited their translation into sustained system-wide improvements in reading outcomes. The discussion, therefore, focuses on the implications of these findings for literacy policy, educational practice, and future intervention design.

The findings were interpreted through the complementary perspectives of the Simple View of Reading and Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory. While the SVR provided a framework for evaluating whether interventions adequately addressed the cognitive foundations of reading, the socio-cultural theory highlighted how contextual factors such as language policy, teacher capacity, family support, and socio-economic inequalities influenced the implementation and effectiveness of these interventions. This integrated theoretical perspective explains why improvements in reading outcomes require both evidence-based instructional practices and supportive policy environments.

5.1 Policy implications

The first research question focused on identifying policy gaps across the reviewed evidence. The analysis revealed a persistent disconnect between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. While the Department of Basic Education has introduced several policy reforms and literacy initiatives, including CAPS, the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), and national reading benchmarks, these initiatives have often been implemented inconsistently across provinces, limiting their overall impact (Department of Basic Education, 2020; Department of Basic Education, 2023; Meiklejohn et al., 2021).

Similar observations have been reported by Graham and Kelly (2018), who argue that literacy reforms are most effective when evidence-based instructional approaches are implemented systematically and supported through sustained institutional commitment. The findings, therefore, suggest that future literacy policies should prioritise implementation fidelity, coordinated national scale-up of proven interventions, and continuous monitoring rather than introducing additional isolated pilot programmes.

The findings further demonstrate that language policy remains a significant implementation challenge. Although South Africa's language-in-education policy promotes home-language instruction during the Foundation Phase, inconsistent implementation, inadequate teaching resources in African languages, and early transition to English continue to undermine reading development (Long & Bowles, 2024; Mtambo & Tshuma, 2023; Ssenkande et al., 2022). These findings reinforce previous studies demonstrating that successful literacy policy requires alignment between curriculum policy, language policy, teacher preparation, and resource allocation rather than isolated policy reforms (Taylor & Von Fintel, 2016; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Balfour, 2019).

5.2 Implications for teachers and classroom practice

The second research question examined the effectiveness of early grade reading interventions. The evidence consistently demonstrates that interventions incorporating structured pedagogy, instructional coaching, and continuous teacher support produce more favourable literacy outcomes than interventions focusing solely on curriculum reform or the provision of learning materials (Roper et al., 2021; Hwa et al., 2020; Begna, 2023). These findings support the Simple View of Reading, which emphasises that effective reading instruction must simultaneously develop decoding and language comprehension to improve reading comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

However, the review also indicates that many Foundation Phase teachers continue to face challenges in implementing evidence-based reading instruction because of limited professional development, insufficient coaching, and inadequate preparation for multilingual literacy instruction (Shalem & Clercq, 2023; Meiklejohn et al., 2021). These findings suggest that literacy reform should prioritise continuous professional development, structured mentoring, and instructional coaching as integral components of teacher support rather than once-off training initiatives. Sustained investment in teacher capacity is likely to yield greater long-term improvements in learner achievement than curriculum revisions alone.

5.3 Implications for learners

The findings further demonstrate that learners' reading achievement is influenced by factors extending beyond classroom instruction. Persistent socio-economic inequalities, limited access to books, weak home literacy environments, and inconsistent implementation of home-language instruction continue to shape literacy outcomes across successive PIRLS cycles (Mullis et al., 2023; Schaefer & Kotzé, 2019; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019). These findings are consistent with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which recognises literacy development as a socially mediated process influenced by family, community, language, and educational contexts.

Accordingly, improving learner outcomes requires integrated literacy strategies that combine evidence-based classroom instruction with strengthened family literacy programmes, early childhood development initiatives, improved access to reading materials in indigenous languages, and targeted support for disadvantaged schools. Addressing these broader contextual factors is essential if improvements achieved through classroom interventions are to be sustained over time (Mescht, 2023; Graham & Kelly, 2018; Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

5.4 Implications for future literacy interventions

The review also highlights important considerations for the design of future literacy interventions. While interventions such as EGRS, GPLMS, and FundaWande have demonstrated positive impacts under supported implementation conditions, relatively few have achieved sustained national implementation or long-term evaluation (Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Roper et al., 2021). Future interventions should, therefore, place greater emphasis on

scalability, implementation fidelity, and sustainability, supported by routine monitoring systems that allow timely identification of implementation challenges. Given that PIRLS assessments occur only every five years, complementary national literacy assessments and continuous programme evaluation are required to provide more responsive evidence for policy decision-making (Department of Basic Education, 2023; Roper et al., 2021).

Future research should also move beyond measuring learner performance to examine how contextual factors—including language policy implementation, teacher support systems, district-level governance, and socio-economic inequalities—influence the effectiveness of literacy interventions across diverse educational settings. Such evidence will contribute to more contextually responsive and equitable literacy policies capable of improving foundational reading outcomes at scale.

5.5 Overall interpretation

Overall, this review demonstrates that South Africa's reading crisis is no longer characterised by a lack of evidence but by the challenge of translating evidence into sustained educational practice. Nearly two decades of PIRLS assessments, together with evaluations of major early grade reading interventions, provide clear guidance on the instructional and policy conditions required to improve literacy. The priority should, therefore, shift from repeatedly identifying literacy challenges towards strengthening implementation capacity, investing in teacher development, supporting learners through language-responsive and context-sensitive approaches, and embedding continuous evidence-informed decision-making within the education system. Only through such coordinated and sustained efforts can South Africa achieve meaningful and equitable improvements in foundational reading achievement (Mullis et al., 2023; Meiklejohn et al., 2021; Graham & Kelly, 2018; Roper et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

Although the challenges faced in South Africa are stark, they are not unique and can be learnt from comparative evidence, as well as from comparative literature which highlights what has brought transformation and meaningful gains in early grade reading results in other LMICs. There has been reading progress of a magnitude comparable to that of EGRS with large-scale structured pedagogy programmes that give teachers clear instructions, training and regular coaching (Piper et al., 2018). Political leadership at the highest level of government, sufficient and sustained funding, good implementation capacity, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and openness to programme design adjustments based on monitoring and evaluation data are key critical success factors in these instances. While PIRLS has played a significant role in raising awareness of South Africa's reading problems, policies so far have been inconsistent and of small scale.

To effectively address the crisis, interventions that have been proven to work must be implemented on a national scale, teacher training must be enhanced, policies of language in education must improve, and systems of monitoring

learners' reading progress must be strengthened. Since 2006, South Africa has been involved in PIRLS and has produced a wealth of data that will provide much insight into the performance of Grade 4 learners in reading and how the education system continues to fail the majority of learners in this vital skill. The direction of PIRLS scores both from the hideous results of 2006 and the guarded optimism of 2011, through the lack of improvement of 2016 and the decline of 2021, is the story of a system that has acknowledged it is failing, yet has not yet mustered the political will, institutional capacity and unwavering commitment to achieve fundamental and fair change.

This policy review has contended that a multi-dimensional analytical approach is needed to address South Africa's reading problem, as it is necessary to consider the cognitive nature of reading learning, the social and structural contexts of reading learning, the ecology of supportive systems are associated with children's reading pathways, and the discursive and political processes in which policy is made and implemented. If these much-needed changes are not realized, South Africa could be perpetually grappling with low reading literacy rates, despite the many educational policies and interventions that have been implemented.

7. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could have influenced the preparation or content of this work.

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