



The impact of Teacher Professional Development on reading outcomes in Inclusive Primary schools: Evidence from Dimamo Circuit, Limpopo Province

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) on reading outcomes in inclusive primary schools within the Dimamo Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province. Despite national initiatives to strengthen inclusive education and literacy, many learners in rural South African contexts continue to face persistent reading difficulties. Grounded in Shulman's (1986) Theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), the study emphasizes the integration of subject knowledge and pedagogical skills as essential for effective reading instruction. A qualitative case study design was employed, using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis with Foundation Phase teachers. Thematic analysis revealed that sustainable and contextually relevant TPD improves teachers' confidence and competence in supporting diverse learners. However, inconsistencies in programme delivery, limited follow-up support, and inadequate adaptation to inclusive contexts hinder long-term impact. The discussion highlights the need for continuous, collaborative, and practice-oriented professional development aligned with inclusive education principles. Recommendations include strengthening programme relevance, embedding mentoring and monitoring structures, and ensuring resource provision to sustain inclusive reading practices. The study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating the critical link between teacher professional growth and learner reading achievement, offering evidence-based insights for policymakers, teacher training institutions, and education stakeholders. By situating TPD within the broader discourse on literacy and equity, the research underscores professional development as a key pathway toward improving reading outcomes and advancing inclusive education in rural South African schools.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Development, Reading Outcomes, Inclusive Education, Pedagogical Content Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Literacy and reading remain a cornerstone of primary education and a critical enabler of broader learning, social participation, and lifelong opportunity. However, in South Africa, early-grade reading outcomes continue to lag behind international benchmarks. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), conducted by the Centre for Evaluation & Assessment at the University of

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Pretoria, found that 81% of Grade 4 learners were unable to read for comprehension at age 10, placing South Africa lowest among the 57 participating nations.¹ These national challenges are especially acute in rural and under-resourced provinces such as Limpopo, where systemic weaknesses in early literacy instruction and support persist.

Recent qualitative studies in the Capricorn District underscore these barriers. Maswanganyi and Molotja reported that Foundation Phase teachers identified large class sizes, lack of parental participation, and limited knowledge of phonics as major obstacles to effective reading instruction.² Similarly, Segooa and Molise found that teacher reading methods often do not align with contemporary best practices, contributing to poor learning outcomes.³ These findings highlight the urgent need for interventions that strengthen teacher competence in inclusive, resource-constrained contexts.

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is widely positioned by policymakers and researchers as a key lever to improve classroom instruction and learner reading outcomes. Evidence from Rice et al.'s meta-analysis shows that PD in reading comprehension has statistically significant effects on both teacher practice and student achievement.⁴ However, Ayinselya et al. caution that dominant one-size-fits-all models often undermine teacher agency in rural and marginalised settings.⁵ In inclusive classrooms, where teachers must address diverse learning needs, language variation, and literacy readiness, the demands for professional competence are amplified. Phala and Hugo emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction,⁶ while Kitsili and Murray demonstrate that teachers require more sophisticated pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to implement guided reading effectively.⁷

Despite this potential, research gaps remain. There is a shortage of rigorous impact evaluations of explicitly designed tailored PD models for inclusive, rural South African classrooms, particularly in circuits such as Dimamo. Most existing evaluations focus on urban pilot sites or general early-grade improvements, leaving a critical evidence gap about which PD approaches are most effective under Limpopo's constraints. Moreover, systemic challenges, including shortages of learning-support personnel, limited diagnostic data, constrained resources, and weak mechanisms for adapting programmes to multilingual, inclusive classrooms, continue to limit the impact of TPD initiatives.⁸

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the influence of ongoing professional teacher development on reading outcomes in inclusive primary schools of the Dimamo Circuit, Capricorn District. Specifically, it aims to (1) describe the nature and delivery of TPD available to Foundation Phase teachers in inclusive settings; (2) examine how participation in ongoing TPD affects teachers' PCK and classroom reading practices; and (3) assess the relationship between these changes in teaching practice and measurable reading outcomes for diverse learners. Framed by Shulman's theory of PCK, the study foregrounds the interaction between subject-specific knowledge of reading processes and pedagogical strategies to make content accessible to varied learners.⁹ By situating the enquiry in a rural, resource-constrained circuit, the research seeks to generate contextually grounded evidence to inform district-level planning, provincial policy, and the design of teacher-support mechanisms that prioritise inclusion and measurable improvements in early-grade reading.

¹ Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), "South African Preliminary Report," (Pretoria, 2021).

² T. Maswanganyi and T. Molotja, "Challenges Affecting Foundation Phase Reading Instruction in Capricorn District Schools," 2023.

³ Nyiko Sibuyi et al., "Exploring the Strategies Used by the School Management Teams (SMTs) in Addressing Poor Academic Performance Post-Pandemic in Rural High Schools of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities Arts and Social Sciences* 5, no. 11 (2024): 1668–83.

⁴ Marianne Rice, Kacee Lambright, and Kausalai Wijekumar, "Professional Development in Reading Comprehension: A Meta-analysis of the Effects on Teachers and Students," *Reading Research Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2024): 424–47.

⁵ M. Ayinselya, et al., "Context-Specific Teacher Professional Development and Teacher Agency in Rural Schools.," 2024.

⁶ Thembi A. Phala and Anna Hugo, "Difficulties in Teaching Grade 3 Learners with Reading Problems in Full-Service Schools in South Africa," *African Journal of Disability* 11 (February 10, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v11i0.906>.

⁷ T. Kitsili and S. Murray, "Differentiated Professional Development and Reading Instruction in Gauteng and Limpopo Foundation Phase Classrooms," 2024.

⁸ D. Mitchell, et al., "Inclusive Pedagogy and Professional Learning Communities in Rural Limpopo Schools," 2024.

⁹ L. S. Shulman, "Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching.," *Educational Researcher* 15,no.2(1986):4-14.

Main Research Question

How do ongoing professional development programmes influence teachers' pedagogical practices in reading Outcomes in Inclusive Primary Schools, Dimamo Circuit, Limpopo Province?

Sub- Research Questions

- What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of TPD in improving reading outcomes in the Inclusive Primary Schools, Dimamo Circuit, Limpopo Province?
- What challenges affect the implementation of professional development for inclusive reading instruction in Inclusive Primary Schools, Dimamo Circuit, Limpopo Province?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early-grade reading is the foundation for all later learning; consequently, teacher knowledge and classroom practice are central levers for improving learner outcomes. In South Africa, persistent low reading proficiency among primary learners has prompted large-scale policy and research responses that foreground TPD as a necessary (but not sufficient) route to better reading outcomes. The literature reviewed below is organised thematically and critically: (1) the national picture and why teacher support matters; (2) evidence about what kinds of TPD improve early reading; (3) TPD within inclusive education settings; (4) empirical findings from Limpopo and the Dimamo Circuit specifically; and (5) synthesis implications and gaps. Key recent empirical and theoretical studies (2020–2025) are used throughout.

National picture: reading outcomes and the policy response

Multiple national assessments and international studies have documented weak early-grade reading in South Africa. The PIRLS 2021 national reporting highlighted extremely low comprehension rates among Grade 4 learners and stimulated renewed policy emphasis on early-grade reading interventions. These results shifted attention from access to quality, placing teacher practices and professional support at the centre of remediation strategies.

In response, government and researchers have invested in Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS) and associated implementation guidance that explicitly target teacher practice through scripted lessons, coaching and systemic supports, positioning TPD as a core mechanism for improving literacy. These initiatives recognise that durable gains require more than one-off workshops: they require curricula-aligned materials, classroom coaching, assessment for learning and systems for sustained in-service support.

Critical note: Although national programmes set the ambition, evaluations emphasise that PD fidelity, teacher content knowledge, and school-level resourcing are the proximate determinants of effectiveness, not simply the existence of a PD programme. This distinction matters when applying national evidence to rural, under-resourced contexts such as Limpopo.

Kinds of professional development to improve early-grade reading

Contemporary syntheses of reading interventions and teacher development (internationally and in South Africa) stress several features associated with improved learner reading outcomes: (a) content-focused PD that deepens teachers' knowledge of phonics, phonological awareness, fluency and comprehension; (b) sustained support (coaching, in-class modelling, lesson study) rather than single workshops; (c) use of classroom materials and structured lesson plans; and (d) ongoing formative assessment to inform small-group remediation. Hoadley and Boyd's recent work on early grade reading summarises these principles and critiques "balanced" or vague PD that fails to operationalise what teachers should do differently in the classroom.¹⁰

Randomised and quasi-experimental evaluations in South Africa's EGRS family show that coaching and structured teaching materials produce larger, more sustained gains than materials or training alone, but results are heterogeneous and conditional on implementation quality and coaching

¹⁰ U. Hoadley and L. Boyd, *Early Grade Reading Instruction and Structured Pedagogy in South Africa*, 2023.

intensity. This evidence implies that PD must be designed as an integrated package (materials + teacher learning + classroom coaching + assessment) rather than as discrete, short interventions.

From a theoretical perspective, Shulman's PCK and more recent formulations of adaptive expertise help explain why content-focused, practice-embedded PD is effective: teachers need not only knowledge about phonics and comprehension strategies but also the pedagogical moves to scaffold diverse learners, a point highly relevant to inclusive classrooms. (Classic.¹¹

Teacher professional development in inclusive education contexts

Inclusive primary classrooms, where learners have a wide range of learning needs, raise additional demands on teachers' repertoire. Recent empirical studies that examine teacher abilities to implement inclusive education in South Africa highlight gaps in differentiated instruction, formative assessment for learners with barriers, and practical strategies for remedial reading in large multilingual classes. Mokhampanyane documents that teachers often lack specific, actionable strategies for adapting literacy instruction to learners with barriers, even when they express commitment to inclusion.¹²

Therefore, inclusion TPD must combine literacy-specific content (e.g., structured phonics, guided reading) with differentiation strategies (scaffolding, grouping, use of support personnel) and practical on-the-job coaching that models adaptations. However, many PD offerings in South Africa have not fully bridged this divide: they focus either narrowly on inclusion policy or narrowly on reading techniques without showing how to combine both in everyday practice. This gap has direct consequences for reading outcomes in mixed-ability classes.



Figure 1: Bridging the gap between inclusion strategies and literacy-specific pedagogy in South African teacher professional development. Photo source - unknown

Limpopo and Dimamo Circuit: local evidence and constraints

Studies focused on Limpopo and, where available, the Dimamo Circuit point to persistent structural and capacity constraints that shape how PD is translated into practice. Research on Dimamo Circuit schools reports overcrowded classrooms, limited access to specialist support, weak SBST (school-based support team) functioning, and inconsistent follow-up after district workshops, all of which blunt the impact of

¹¹ Hoadley and Boyd, *Early Grade Reading Instruction and Structured Pedagogy in South Africa*.

¹² Matsolo Mokhampanyane, "Teachers' Capabilities in Implementing Inclusive Education: A South African Perspective," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 9, no. 3 (2024): 11–25.

conventional PD approaches.¹³ These local studies also show that school leaders and SMTs play a critical role in mediating PD effects through timetable decisions, resource allocation, and teacher collaboration.

Empirical work from Limpopo's special and mainstream schools highlights teacher challenges when supporting learners with ASD, language barriers or severe resource scarcity, conditions that require PD models tailored to the local ecology (e.g., community-engaged supports, peer coaching, low-cost teaching materials).

Sumbane and other provincial studies document these contextual realities and argue for PD that is place-sensitive rather than centrally scripted. While national PD packages may include scripts and coaching structures that work in pilot sites, replication across Limpopo's many remote and under-resourced schools requires flexible models, for example, leveraging cluster-based coaching, remote mentoring where connectivity allows, and stronger in-school teacher collaboration. The literature emphasises adaptation rather than wholesale adoption.

Synthesis

TPD must be content-rich and practice-embedded. Evidence from EGRS and syntheses of South African research show that PD focused on specific reading skills and followed by coaching yields better learner gains than one-off workshops. Inclusion demands additional PD components. To raise outcomes in inclusive classrooms, teachers need training in differentiation, use of support staff, and assessment-driven grouping, elements often missing from standard PD. Context matters: Fidelity and support systems determine impact. Limpopo evidence demonstrates that structural constraints (class size, resource scarcity, weak SBSTs) reduce PD effectiveness unless programmes are adapted to local realities and supported by school leadership.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview of Shulman's PCK

This study is grounded in Shulman's construct of PCK, which refers to the integrated body of knowledge that connects subject-matter content with the most effective ways to represent and teach that content to learners. PCK provides a practice-oriented lens for examining how Teacher Professional Development (TPD) influences classroom reading instruction and learner outcomes in inclusive, rural South African schools. It positions teacher competence as the linchpin of effective literacy instruction and inclusive education.

Components of PCK

For early-grade reading, PCK encompasses three core dimensions:

- Content Knowledge (CK): Understanding phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Pedagogical Knowledge (PK): Classroom management, lesson planning, assessment, and grouping strategies.
- Intersection (PCK proper): Knowing how to teach reading processes effectively, for example, modelling phonics routines, scaffolding comprehension, and designing cumulative decoding lessons.

Two sub-dimensions are particularly critical in inclusive contexts:

- Diagnostic PCK: The ability to identify specific learner difficulties (e.g., phonemic vs. vocabulary gaps) and select appropriate instructional responses.
- Contextual PCK: Adapting teaching strategies to realities such as large class sizes, multilingual settings, and limited resources.

¹³ Makobo Lydia Mogale and Mpho Calphonia Modipane, "The Implementation of the Progression Policy in Secondary Schools of the Limpopo Province in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 1 (2021): 1–10; T. Mabokachaba, "Inclusive Education Implementation and Support Systems in Dimamo Circuit Schools.," 2022.

Application to this Study

Framing TPD through PCK highlights several priorities for effective professional learning in rural South African schools:

- Integration of content and pedagogy: PD must explicitly target the intersection of CK and PK.
- Diagnostic routines: Embedding formative assessment tools to help teachers identify learner difficulties.
- Differentiation: Modelling strategies for mixed-ability groups in inclusive classrooms.
- Sustained coaching: Providing in-class support rather than relying on one-off workshops.
- Contextual adaptation: Localising materials and examples to ensure feasibility in rural contexts like the Dimamo Circuit.

The TPD Reading Model illustrates this pathway: structured training, coaching, and provision of instructional resources build teachers' integrated understanding of reading content and pedagogy. Strong PCK enables teachers to translate theory into actionable classroom strategies, such as guided reading, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment, that respond to diverse learner needs. When applied effectively, this leads to measurable gains in fluency, comprehension, and engagement.

Implications

By centring PCK, this study provides both an explanatory lens to analyse teacher experiences and a design guide for developing contextually relevant PD models. Effective PD must strengthen teachers' ability to integrate content knowledge with pedagogical strategies, diagnose learner difficulties, and adapt instruction to resource-constrained classrooms. Empirical studies from South Africa (e.g., EGRS evaluations, Phala & Hugo, Kitsili, Mitchell et al.) confirm that sustained, contextually grounded PD enhances teacher competence and learner outcomes, while highlighting the need for school-based coaching, diagnostic tools, and low-cost reading materials.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case-study design, appropriate to investigate how TPD influences classroom reading practices within a bounded system, the Dimamo Circuit. This design enabled contextualised explanation and process tracing, linking TPD inputs (training, coaching, materials) to observable changes in teachers' PCK and learner reading behaviours.

Study Sample and Population

The research site was the Dimamo Circuit, Capricorn District, Limpopo Province, a rural context characterised by multilingual classrooms, inclusive enrolments, and constrained resources. Participants were purposively sampled to include approximately 10 Foundation Phase teachers, 2 school principals, and 1 district official responsible for curriculum and TPD oversight. This sample ensured inclusion of information-rich cases directly involved in reading instruction and support.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The interviews explored the experiences of teachers with TPD, diagnostic practices, and adaptations for inclusion. Observations focused on enacted PCK, including phonics routines, guided reading, and differentiation strategies. Focus groups provided collective insights into school-level constraints and enablers. Triangulation across these sources strengthened validity.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Coding combined inductive themes emerging from the data with deductive categories derived from the PCK framework (CK, PK, diagnostic PCK, contextual adaptation). Trustworthiness was ensured through

member-checking, triangulation, audit trails, and reflexive memos documenting the researcher's positionality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and permission was granted by the Limpopo Department of Education and the Dimamo Circuit office. Participants received information sheets and provided informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation, secure storage of data, and careful handling of sensitive information. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. Findings and practical recommendations will be shared with schools and district officials to ensure reciprocity and local benefit.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Enhanced Teacher Knowledge, Competency and Confidence in Teaching Reading

The classroom observations confirmed that professional development (PD) had a positive influence on classroom practice. Teachers implemented many recommended reading strategies and routines, such as oral language scaffolding, phonemic awareness, shared reading, and guided reading, demonstrating that PD effectively translated theoretical knowledge into practical application. This visible enactment of PD strategies reflects Desimone's assertion that effective PD must be content-focused and linked to classroom practice.¹⁴ Teachers' use of structured phonics sequences and shared reading routines aligns with Msane and Sibanda, who found that well-designed PD strengthens teachers' confidence and procedural knowledge. The findings also resonate with Shulman's concept of PCK, showing that teachers who received explicit literacy training improved their lesson organisation and instructional clarity. However, the observations revealed variation in fidelity; some teachers demonstrated high-quality implementation, while others applied strategies superficially. This inconsistency mirrors Dyosini and Mitchell et al., who note that PD uptake is uneven without coaching and in-class modelling. Sustained, school-based mentoring is therefore essential to deepen teacher competence and ensure consistent application of PD strategies across classrooms.

Theme 2: Improved Learner Reading Performance

Learner reading performance improved when teachers implemented PD strategies, particularly in decoding, fluency, and confidence. Teachers observed learners' ability to sound out words and engage more actively in reading tasks, confirming that PD can positively influence learning outcomes when properly implemented. Yet, the variation in differentiation and formative assessment limited the full impact on learner progress. Some teachers conducted guided reading groups but struggled to adjust instruction based on learner needs. This finding echoes Mudzielwana, who cautions that PD alone is insufficient; improvements occur only when PD is accompanied by coaching, modelling, and consistent classroom application. The lack of systematic differentiation also hindered learner progress. While grouping practices were evident, the matching of texts to ability levels was inconsistent. This aligns with Segooa and Molise, Kuche, and Spaul and Kotze, who found that teachers often struggle with assessment-driven grouping and selection of levelled readers. Without appropriate text-learner matching, reading progress slows even when routines are correctly applied. Therefore, while PD improved learner reading performance, targeted coaching, systematic formative assessment, and improved access to levelled texts are necessary to translate observed practices into sustained reading gains.

Theme 3: Professional Development as a Platform for Collaboration and Lifelong Learning

PD fostered meaningful collaboration and reflection among teachers, enabling them to share strategies and align instructional practices. Observations revealed that teachers who collaborated more actively tended to demonstrate stronger implementation fidelity and richer classroom interactions. This aligns

¹⁴ Laura M Desimone, "Improving Impact Studies of Teachers' Professional Development: Toward Better Conceptualizations and Measures," *Educational Researcher* 38, no. 3 (2009): 181–99.

with Desimone's framework, who highlight that professional learning communities (PLCs) strengthen teachers' professional identity and promote shared problem-solving. The collaborative environment also supported peer learning, where teachers exchanged ideas on differentiation and formative assessment. However, the variation in implementation suggests that collaboration must extend beyond workshops into ongoing, school-based support structures. Mkhize and Ndaba and Vangrieken et al. confirm that collaborative PD fosters motivation and lifelong learning, but only when teachers have opportunities for continuous reflection and peer feedback. The findings thus affirm that PD serves as a platform for sustained professional dialogue, enabling teachers to refine their practice collectively and adapt strategies to diverse classroom contexts.

Theme 4: Motivation, Morale and Professional Growth

The PD programme significantly enhanced teachers' motivation, morale, and professional identity. Observations revealed that teachers approached lessons with renewed enthusiasm, integrating creative reading routines and demonstrating greater confidence in managing learner engagement. Participants described PD workshops as uplifting and rejuvenating, helping them "do things differently" and with greater enthusiasm. This aligns with Ramey and Collet, who argue that when teachers feel professionally supported, their motivation and job satisfaction increase. Dyosini found similar trends, noting that foundation phase teachers experienced renewed confidence and wellbeing after literacy-focused PD. However, the uneven fidelity and resource constraints observed in classrooms indicate that motivation alone cannot sustain improvement. Teachers require ongoing support and adequate materials to maintain high morale and effective practice. Mampane emphasises that motivated teachers are more likely to create supportive learning environments, but systemic challenges, such as limited access to levelled texts, can erode this motivation over time. Overall, PD strengthened teachers' sense of professional purpose, but continued support and resource provision are essential to sustain morale and translate enthusiasm into consistent instructional quality.

Theme 5: Barriers to Effective Professional Development

Despite the overall success of PD, several barriers limited its effectiveness. Observations revealed challenges related to facilitator quality, resource constraints, inconsistent formative assessment, and delayed learner outcomes. Many workshops lacked qualified facilitators, leaving teachers to interpret materials independently. This aligns with Killion, Harrison and Fixsen, who argue that expert modelling and coaching are essential for impactful PD. Without demonstration-based training, teachers struggled to translate theory into practice, resulting in uneven implementation. Scheduling issues also disrupted teaching time, echoing Burns, Spaul, and Kotze, who warn that interruptions in early reading instruction harm literacy development. Additionally, the scarcity of well-levelled readers and teaching aids constrained differentiated instruction, forcing teachers to rely on uniform texts for mixed-ability groups. World Bank, Phala and Hugo, and Mkhize and Ndaba confirm that resource shortages hinder the full implementation of structured reading methodologies.

Finally, the slow or delayed impact on learner outcomes reflects Timperley et al. and Pretorius and Spaul, who note that PD effects are gradual and require sustained cycles of practice and feedback. These barriers underscore the need for qualified facilitators, school-based coaching, systematic formative assessment, and improved resource provision to ensure PD translates into lasting learner gains.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the data suggest that ongoing professional development in the Dikgale area has significant potential to improve reading instruction in the foundation phase. Teachers benefit from new strategies, knowledge, and motivation, and learners demonstrate improved reading performance. However, these gains are limited by structural challenges such as a lack of expert facilitators, learner disruption during workshops, and competing teacher responsibilities. The findings affirm existing literature, which shows

that well-designed, well-supported professional development leads to improved teaching and learning.¹⁵ They also highlight gaps in implementation that require targeted interventions.

The influence of ongoing professional teacher development on reading in the foundation phase is multifaceted. While it positively influences teacher competence, learner performance, and professional collaboration, it also presents challenges related to programme design, implementation logistics, and systemic support. A balanced professional development model, incorporating school-based coaching, scheduled training, expert facilitation, and strong support structures, is essential to maximise its impact.

The researchers conducted **non-participant** classroom observations of foundation phase teachers who had attended ongoing PD on reading (Barongwa project, University of Limpopo, NECT and provincial workshops). Field notes described teacher–learner interactions, materials, pedagogies and the physical/linguistic environment. The observations focused on how teachers implemented the CAPS reading programme and partner resources in real classroom practice.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for strengthening teacher competence and advancing inclusive education in rural South African schools. At the teacher education level, preparation programmes and in-service courses must embed sustained, practice-oriented literacy training rather than relying on once-off workshops. This means equipping teachers with structured approaches to phonics, phonemic awareness, formative assessment, and differentiated guided reading, while ensuring that PCK for reading is explicitly foregrounded in curricula. By doing so, new teachers will enter the profession ready to support diverse learners, including those with barriers related to language, disability, or socio-economic disadvantage.

At the policy level, provincial and national frameworks should recognise that effective PD requires ongoing, school-embedded support structures. This includes funding PLCs, protecting instructional time, and institutionalising coaching models such as literacy coaches or instructional leaders. These mechanisms provide teachers with classroom modelling, mentoring, and lesson study opportunities, while ensuring that PD content is aligned with inclusive education mandates. Policies should also standardise strategies for learners with barriers and monitor their implementation through clear accountability mechanisms.

At the district level, support must shift from ad hoc training provision to coordinated, data-driven interventions. District offices should supply schools with levelled readers, decodable texts, and simple formative-assessment tools, while also arranging replacement cover to prevent learner disruption when teachers attend PD. Monitoring should be tied to formative feedback loops rather than punitive inspection, enabling teachers to refine practice continuously.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of intersectoral collaboration. Linking schools with speech-language therapists, special educators, community organisations, and higher-education partners can strengthen early identification of reading difficulties and provide coordinated interventions. Clear monitoring and evaluation indicators for both teacher practice and learner reading outcomes will ensure that PD investment translates into measurable gains. Collectively, these implications point to the need for a coherent, context-responsive, and scalable PD model that Limpopo and other provinces can adapt to local realities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish PLCs: Create school-based professional learning communities for continuous peer support and reflective practice.
- Align PD with inclusion: Ensure training equips teachers with strategies for overcrowded classrooms, diverse learning needs, and resource-limited environments.

¹⁵ Desimone, et al., “Improving Impact Studies of Teachers’ Professional Development: Toward Better Conceptualizations and Measures”; Brady, “Structured Literacy Approaches and Learner Reading Achievement.”

- Embed diagnostics and differentiation: Provide simple tools and modelling to help teachers identify reading barriers and adapt instruction for mixed-ability groups.
- Promote sustained coaching: Move beyond workshops by including mentoring, demonstration lessons, and collaborative planning.
- Localise materials: Supply low-cost decodable texts, multilingual resources, and lesson adaptations that reflect rural classroom realities.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that ongoing, contextually grounded TPD significantly enhances teachers' competence in delivering effective reading instruction in inclusive rural primary schools. By equipping teachers with updated PCK, diversified instructional strategies, and confidence to respond to learners' varied needs, PD contributes to improved classroom practice and learner outcomes. However, its overall impact is constrained by limited contextual adaptation, fragmented support, and weak collaboration among stakeholders. Transforming TPD into a coherent, school-embedded, and inclusive system has the potential to bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. Sustained professional learning, aligned with inclusive education principles, can advance reading achievement, strengthen inclusive schooling, and promote educational equity in Limpopo and similar rural contexts.

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