



Education Implementation Issues No.5

The Evolution of Literacy Pedagogics in South Africa: Shifts, Tensions and the Road Ahead

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August 2025



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1. Background

The evolution of literacy pedagogics in South Africa has been intricately shaped by a series of key policies and programmes that have profoundly influenced the country's educational landscape. Many policies have been developed and implemented since 1994 reflecting shifting ideologies, educational priorities, socio-political and global changes all of which have driven the transformation of teaching and learning in South African schools. Reflecting on these key policy moments allows us to trace how teaching and learning practices have evolved, revealing both significant successes and persistent limitations in our journey toward a more equitable and effective education system.

Taking a retrospective view such as the one in this paper, not only provides clarity about the progress made but also highlights the challenges we continue to face in improving literacy teaching and learning. The successes, like strides in curriculum reform, using structured learning programmes, large-scale teacher training, and the promotion of bilingual education, are balanced against ongoing struggles, including systemic inequalities, gaps in teacher knowledge, and the uneven implementation of policy across regions. By examining these developments through an epistemological lens, we are better positioned to understand how knowledge, learning, and pedagogics

were conceptualised during different time periods and how these ideas continue to shape current literacy practices. By adopting this perspective, we gain insights into the deeper, often implicit assumptions that have guided curriculum reform over time. It also allows us to explore why certain pedagogical discourses have emerged, how they have shaped literacy teaching and learning, and how they have adapted (or failed to adapt) to new challenges and contexts. This historical reflection is crucial not only for understanding where we have succeeded but also for identifying critical blind spots, areas of learning and pedagogics that have been overlooked, underdeveloped, or inadequately addressed. By recognising the pedagogics that have either weakened or gained prominence over time, we can better understand how to navigate the complexities of educational reform going forward.

2. Understanding Pedagogics: A Dynamic and Contextualised Practice

The concept of pedagogics foregrounded in this paper draws on the classroom-based research currently being implemented with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). This research, the National Longitudinal Teacher Pedagogy Programme (2024-2027)¹, argues that pedagogy extends beyond

¹ Implemented by the Teaching, Teacher and Teacher Education for Equitable and Quality Learning Consortium (TTTEQL) - NECT; Cape Peninsula University of Technology; Durban University of Technology; Nelson Mandela University; Tshwane University of Technology; UNISA; University of Fort Hare; University of Free State; University of Limpopo; Walter Sisulu University

theoretical discussions to practical observations and actions; it is more than just instructional techniques, it is a dynamic, relational, and structured process that unfolds within the learning environment.

This position draws on Robin Alexander’s ² work where pedagogy is framed as the interrelationship between teachers and learners in the classroom. This perspective aligns with Lortie’s (1975)³ concept of the ‘private world’ of classrooms, where interactions between teachers and learners ultimately determine the quality and equity of the learning experience. The classroom, therefore, is not merely a space for content delivery but a site of complex human interactions that shape educational outcomes and pedagogical practices.

Pedagogical research has also increasingly challenged deficit-based views of teachers, emphasising instead their agency in fostering high-quality learning. Inspired by Lingard et al. (2003) ⁴, this approach, known as productive pedagogy, shifts the focus from teacher shortcomings to the potential of pedagogical practices in creating equitable learning opportunities. Rather than positioning teachers as obstacles to learning, this perspective recognises their role as critical facilitators of learner success.

The table below presents the constructs that make up the adopted meaning of ‘pedagogics’ used and the questions that undergird the enquiry running through the paper.

Contracts	Questions
Instructional Practices	1. How is reading pedagogy defined in curriculum policy? 2. To what extent does curriculum policy promote a. Learner-centred approaches b. Higher-order thinking c. In-depth content coverage d. Cross-disciplinary links e. Authentic learning tasks f. Problem-based learning g. Clear learning expectations

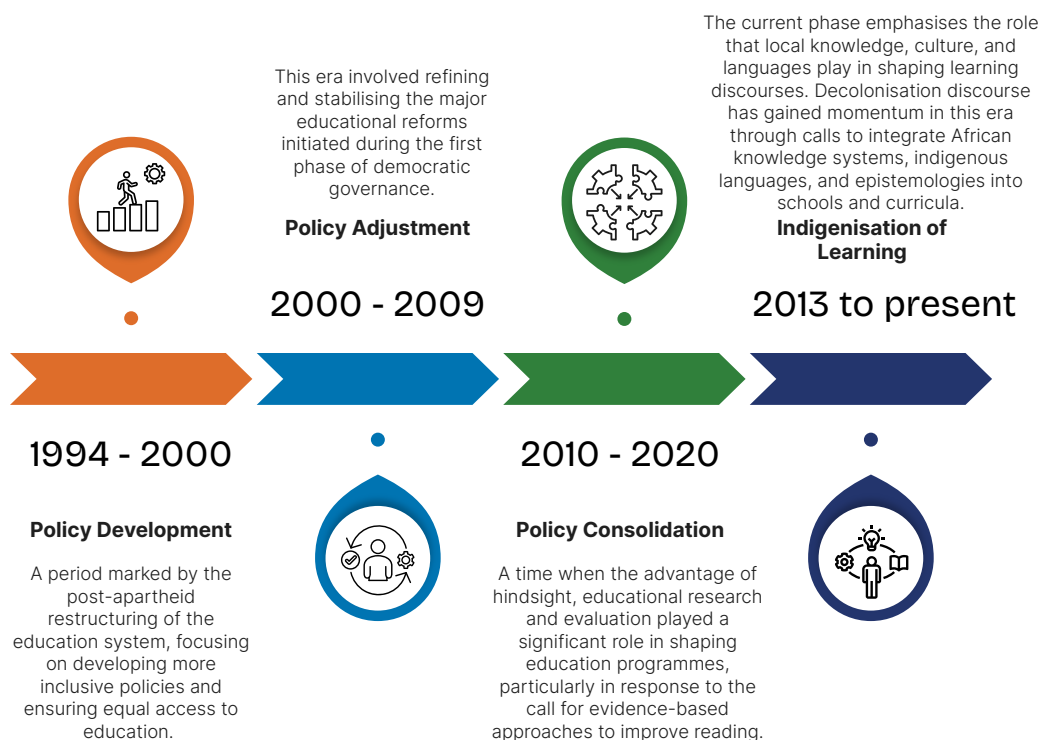
² Alexander, R. (2008). Education for all, the quality imperative and the problem of pedagogy. Institute of Education, University of London.

³ Lortie, D. C. (1975) Schoolteacher: a sociological study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Lingard, B., Hayes, D., & Mills, M. (2003). Teachers and productive pedagogies: Contextualising, conceptualising, utilising. Pedagogy, culture and society, 11(3), 399-424.

3. Our Analytical Framework

Four eras are identified as representative of defining moments in our understanding of how to improve literacy teaching and learning in South Africa:



This framework offers a structured approach to examining the evolution of literacy teaching and learning in South Africa, capturing key shifts in policy, research, and pedagogical thinking. It provides valuable insights into the increasing role of evidence-based practice and the growing recognition of local contexts in shaping literacy education. However, despite its strengths, the framework has inherent limitations. The categorisation into distinct phases risks oversimplifying the complex and often nonlinear nature of educational transitions. Policy and practice shifts do not occur in neatly defined periods; rather, they unfold gradually and often overlap as seen in Eras 3 and 4. As a result, strict chronological divisions may not fully reflect the nuances of literacy development, and some significant changes may fall outside the designated timeframes.

Nevertheless, the framework remains a useful analytical tool because it provides a coherent structure for identifying broad trends and key moments of pedagogical transformation in literacy education. By mapping developments into distinct eras, this paper enables researchers, policymakers,

and teachers to trace patterns of change, assess the impact of various interventions, and compare different phases of pedagogical reform. Despite its limitations, the framework supports a systematic analysis of how literacy policy, research, and practice have interacted over time, offering a foundation for deeper inquiry.

4. Era 1: Policy Development (1994–2000)

In the period immediately after apartheid, the newly established democratic government sought to create an inclusive and equitable education system. Initially, South African schools operated under the Revised Interim Core Syllabus (1994–1996), a transitional curriculum that was a modified version of the apartheid-era framework, with overtly racist and discriminatory content removed but with much of its subject-based, content-driven structure intact. While it provided a more unified learning framework across provinces, it was not a radical departure from previous pedagogics and was viewed by many as a bridging

syllabus before the introduction of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1997⁵. Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) was the pedagogical cornerstone of C2005 and symbolised a shift away from rote memorisation pedagogics towards a curriculum that foregrounded critical thinking, problem-solving, and formative assessment. Refer to **Annexure 1** for an analysis of C2005 in relation to the pedagogical framework presented above in Table 1, as well as summaries of other relevant policies and initiatives of this era.

A key pedagogical feature of OBE was its learner-centred approach, which emphasised active engagement and critical thinking rather than rote memorisation through breaking down rigid subject boundaries and promoting holistic learning. This shift aimed to develop independent, problem-solving learners who could apply their knowledge in real-life situations, moving away from passive knowledge absorption towards a more dynamic learning process. The curriculum was designed to accommodate diverse learning needs, ensuring that education became more accessible and responsive to different abilities and learning styles. Unlike the traditional content-heavy curricula of the past, OBE placed a strong emphasis on skills development, critical thinking, and competencies, rather than mere knowledge acquisition. This focus aimed to better equip learners for real-world challenges and the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. To support this approach, teachers were encouraged to adopt varied teaching methods that catered to different learning styles, with the aim of creating more engaging and meaningful classroom experiences. The introduction of Continuous Assessment (CASS) was introduced to provide teachers with an ongoing measure of learner progress, allowing for timely intervention and support. This approach was intended to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of learner development rather than relying solely on end-of-year exams.

With reference to the teaching of reading, C2005 adopted the whole language approach even though it did not explicitly define itself as such. However, its emphasis on integrated learning, meaning-making,

and discovery-based methods reflected many of the key principles of whole language theory. Reading was not treated as a discrete skill to be taught systematically but was instead embedded across learning different areas within C2005, with the assumption that children would acquire literacy naturally through exposure to text. Teachers were encouraged to foster reading through rich, meaningful experiences, allowing children to engage with stories, predict words using context, and construct their own understanding of text. The curriculum promoted the idea that reading should develop much like spoken language, through immersion and interaction, rather than through structured instruction. Children were expected to recognise words holistically, using context clues, pictures, and prior knowledge rather than decoding them sound by sound.

This approach was rooted in a constructivist view of learning⁷, which positioned learners as active participants in their literacy development rather than passive recipients of direct instruction. However, the absence of clear, structured guidance on decoding and fluency meant that many children, particularly those with limited literacy exposure at home, struggled to develop foundational reading skills. Without systematic phonics instruction, many early readers lacked the tools to break down words independently, making it difficult for them to progress beyond simple texts.

Overall, the strengths of OBE were aimed at transforming education into a more equitable, dynamic, and practical system that prepared learners for the complexities of the modern world. But while these strengths reflect the ambitious goals of C2005, many of them were not fully realised due to implementation and contextual challenges. The transition to OBE in South Africa, as introduced with C2005 proved to be extremely challenging for teachers in several important ways⁸. For example, OBE demanded a fundamental shift from content-centred teaching to outcomes-based, learner-centred learning. For many teachers, especially those trained under the apartheid system, this meant abandoning established routines and familiar teaching methods. Instead of focusing on content delivery, teachers had to plan

⁵ Department of Education. (1997). Curriculum 2005: Lifelong learning for the 21st century. Pretoria: Government Printer.

⁶ Goodman, K. S. (1986). What's whole in whole language? Heinemann.

⁷ Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.

⁸ Jansen, J. D. (1998). Curriculum Reform in South Africa: a critical analysis of outcomes-based education. Cambridge Journal of Education, 28(3), 321–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764980280305>

plan around specific skills and outcomes, which required extensive preparation and a nuanced understanding of each learner's individual progress. The emphasis on active, learner-centred teaching also meant teachers had to adapt to a facilitative role, where they encouraged learners to direct their own learning. This was unfamiliar to many teachers and required confidence in managing more open, interactive, and sometimes unpredictable classroom environments. Few South African teachers were equipped to do this especially as the system at that point was unable to support them in this complex development journey. And while Curriculum 2005 aimed to create a more engaging and meaning-focused approach to literacy, it ultimately failed to provide the necessary scaffolding for early reading development. This gap in structured instruction became one of its most significant weaknesses, contributing to poor literacy outcomes in the early grades and prompting a shift towards a more balanced literacy approach. Managing these challenges resulted in the system being unable to implement the bilingual and multilingual pedagogical strategies as set out in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP; 1997)⁹. This contributed to the development of reading pedagogy that centred on English and Afrikaans as dominant languages, drawing heavily on the work of the National Reading Panel (2000)¹⁰, which highlighted five essential components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

During the early years of OBE under C2005, teachers and learners faced a quiet but deeply felt crisis: the scarcity of reading resources¹¹. In classrooms across the country, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools, bookshelves stood mostly empty, offering little more than outdated textbooks and a handful of storybooks that often did not reflect the languages or experiences of the children who needed them most. Mother tongue materials were particularly hard to find in African languages. While the curriculum encouraged learning in home languages, the reality was that graded readers and storybooks in African

languages were simply not available. Phonics-based reading materials were also in short supply. As explicit phonics instruction was not part of C2005, decodable readers (carefully crafted books that help children practice letter-sound relationships) were almost non-existent in many schools. Without them, young readers were left to navigate texts that were often too complex, stumbling through unfamiliar words without the guided support that a strong phonics foundation provides.

Teachers found themselves without essential tools for modelling fluent reading and engaging young learners in group reading activities, which were largely unavailable in African languages. Beyond books, the print-rich environments that support early literacy were missing. Many classrooms had no posters, no alphabet friezes, and no high-frequency word charts. Without these visual supports, children had fewer opportunities to interact with text outside of structured lessons, making it harder for them to internalise key reading concepts.

Compounding these challenges was a lack of adequate professional development and support. While many workshops and training programmes were provided, they were often insufficient in depth or frequency, leaving teachers underprepared for, and confused about, the practical demands of OBE. Many training sessions focused on theoretical knowledge without offering concrete, hands-on strategies that teachers could implement in real classrooms. Without sustained support and follow-up, teachers were often left to interpret and apply complex new concepts on their own, resulting in uncertainty, frustration, and inconsistent implementation¹². And the transition to OBE also increased the emotional and psychological demands on teachers. The ongoing pressures to meet complex, layered outcomes, track each learner's individual growth, manage diverse and sometimes overcrowded classrooms, while adopting new methodologies was overwhelming. Many teachers reported feeling isolated and unsupported in the process, particularly in rural or under-resourced schools¹³.

⁹ Language in Education Policy Document (LiEP) (1997). Pretoria: Government Printers.

¹⁰ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read—An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). U.S. *Government Printing Office

¹¹ Jansen, J. D. (1999). Curriculum reform in South Africa: A critical analysis of outcomes-based education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 29(2), 199–214.

¹² Harley, K., & Wedekind, V. (2004). Political change, curriculum change and social formation, 1990 to 2002. In L. Chisholm (Ed.), *Changing class: Education and social change in post-apartheid South Africa* (pp. 195–220). HSRC Press.

¹³ Harley, K., Barasa, E., Bertram, C., Mattson, E., & Pillay, S. (2000). "The Real and the Ideal": Teacher Roles and Competences in South African Policy and Practice. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20(4), 287–304.

Key Observations

The review of the policies and initiatives from this era, as outlined above and further detailed in Annexure 1, highlights a distinct trend in the promotion of pedagogical approaches that centred around four key themes.

Firstly, Curriculum 2005 lacked structured guidance on teaching reading, instead promoting broad, learner-centred methods that were unsuitable for systematic literacy instruction. It de-emphasised phonics, expecting reading to develop naturally through exposure rather than direct teaching. Without a clear progression for key skills like phonological awareness and comprehension, teachers struggled, especially in under-resourced schools. The absence of explicit instruction led to confusion, leaving teachers without the materials or support needed to implement effective reading strategies, and impacting negatively on young learners' reading development.

Secondly, there was a noticeable shift towards teacher agency, recognising teachers as key decision-makers in shaping classroom practices. However, this transition occurred without the necessary guidance, professional development, or access to resources that would enable teachers to effectively adopt new OBE methodologies. As a result, many teachers struggled to navigate the increased expectations placed upon them, particularly in the absence of clear frameworks, mentoring, or structured support systems that could aid this shift towards more autonomous and adaptive teaching practices.

Thirdly, C2005 advocated for a broader and more balanced approach to assessment, incorporating both formative and summative assessment strategies. This reflected a move away from an over-reliance on high-stakes examinations toward more continuous, diagnostic, and learner-responsive assessment practices. The inclusion of formative assessments aimed to provide ongoing insights into learner progress, allowing for timely interventions and differentiated instruction. However, the effective implementation of such strategies remained a challenge, as teachers often lacked the necessary assessment literacy, training, and workload support

support to fully integrate these practices into their daily teaching.

Fourthly, efforts to manage C2005 implementation challenges meant that the bilingual and multilingual strategies outlined in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP; 1997) were not effectively realised. As a result, reading instruction practices increasingly centred on English and Afrikaans models. This marked a significant departure from the multilingual intent of LiEP, highlighting how systemic constraints sidelined the development of contextually appropriate multilingual pedagogies.

Taken together, these themes reflect an unevenly supported shift in pedagogical approaches, especially related to reading instruction. While the intent behind these reforms was to create a more responsive, inclusive, and learner-driven education system, the lack of sustained support, professional development, systemic resources and systemic reading instruction guidelines hindered their full realisation in practice.

5. Era 2: Policy Adjustment (2000–2009)

Responding to the implementation challenges of OBE, curriculum policy entered a phase of adjustment in the early 2000s. The introduction of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and its update, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002¹⁴, aimed to clarify expectations and reduce the complexity that teachers encountered with OBE in C2005. This era marked a shift towards a streamlined version of OBE, which while maintaining the outcomes-based philosophy, provided structural clarity and more easily measurable competencies. Refer to Annexure 2 for an analysis of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in relation to the pedagogical framework presented above in Table 1. The Annexure also contains a brief background of the other initiatives and policies in this era.

The RNCS aimed to address OBE challenges by streamlining and strengthening C2005 through moving towards a more balanced approach to pedagogics.

¹⁴ Department of Education. (2002). Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools): Policy. Pretoria: Government Printer.

While OBE in C2005 emphasised learner-centred approaches and active participation, it often left teachers uncertain about how to structure lessons effectively. However, the RNCS provided much clearer pedagogical guidance, ensuring that teachers had a stronger framework within which to plan and deliver lessons. By incorporating both structured content coverage and pedagogical skills development, the RNCS helped teachers balance conceptual understanding with practical application, making teaching more systematic and learning more coherent. Another critical enhancement brought by the RNCS was its focus on developing a strong knowledge base alongside skills development. While OBE had prioritised competency-based learning in C2005, it lacked the depth of subject knowledge required for progression. The RNCS responded by ensuring that content coverage was not only structured but also aligned to clear learning outcomes. This gave teachers confidence in what needed to be taught and allowed learners to build knowledge systematically over time. The introduction of well-defined learning outcomes provided a clearer roadmap for assessment, making it easier to track learner progress and ensure that evaluation methods were more consistent and meaningful.

In terms of reading instruction, the RNCS moved away from the pure whole language approach of C2005 and introduced a balanced approach to reading instruction that incorporated both skills-based (structured phonics) and meaning-based (whole language) components. The RNCS recognised that children begin developing literacy skills long before formal schooling. Thus, rich oral language exposure, print awareness, and storybook reading were recognised as essential precursors to formal reading instruction. This reflected Clay's (1991¹⁵) idea that reading develops in a continuous, natural progression, influenced by a child's literacy environment. Unlike Curriculum 2005, which largely neglected structured phonics, the RNCS introduced explicit phonics instruction in early grades. It aligned with the simple view of reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986¹⁶) where reading is seen as the product of decoding (word recognition) and linguistic comprehension. This shift ensured that children were systematically

taught how to decode words rather than relying solely on memorisation and context clues. The RNCS aimed to integrate phonics-based and meaning-based strategies, reflecting the principles of a balanced literacy approach (Pressley, 1998¹⁷). It provided structured guidance on phonemic awareness and phonics to support decoding, promoted fluency through guided and independent reading, and developed vocabulary and comprehension strategies to build deeper understanding. While C2005 had relied on an implicit, discovery-based approach where reading was expected to develop naturally, the RNCS provided explicit, structured guidance on teaching reading. It recognised that systematic instruction in phonics, fluency, and comprehension strategies were essential, moving South Africa's reading pedagogy towards a more balanced and evidence-based model.

But while the RNCS also acknowledged the importance of multilingualism in South African classrooms, the LiEP policy (1997) still remained inconsistently implemented across contexts due to systemic constraints. Despite this, the RNCS did make strides in clarifying assessment expectations and instructional strategies, giving teachers more time and confidence to focus on effective teaching rather than on navigating vague curriculum guidelines. Ultimately, these revisions and initiatives strengthened the original vision of OBE by providing more structure, ensuring knowledge acquisition, and supporting teachers in their pedagogical practices.

This period also saw the emergence of the Foundations for Learning initiative (FFL; 2008)¹⁸, which reinforced the shifts made in the RNCS by emphasising structure and routine in early-grade teaching. The campaign introduced a structured framework for teaching literacy and numeracy, ensuring that teachers had clearer guidance on lesson sequencing and progression. The FFL initiative also further strengthened this standardisation by providing daily lesson plans and clear benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. It offered structured support to teachers by outlining essential skills to be covered throughout the school year, reducing uncertainty and improving consistency in delivering the RNCS curriculum.

¹⁵ Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Heinemann.

¹⁶ Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7(1), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074193258600700104>

¹⁷ Pressley, M. (1998). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching*. Guilford Press.

¹⁸ Department of Education. (2008). *Foundations for Learning Campaign*. Government Gazette No. 30880, 14 March 2008. South Africa: Department of Education.

In addition to curriculum structuring efforts, the Quality Improvement, Development, Support, and Upliftment Programme (QIDS-UP; 2006)¹⁹ initiative played a vital role in ensuring that schools, particularly those in underprivileged areas, had access to essential resources. Recognising that effective teaching and learning required not only a well-defined curriculum but also the necessary materials to implement it, QIDS-UP focused on equitable resource distribution. The programme equipped primary schools with libraries, reading materials, and basic classroom resources, beginning to address the longstanding issue of resource shortages that had hindered meaningful curriculum implementation. By ensuring that schools had access to essential teaching and learning materials, QIDS-UP strengthened the broader efforts of the RNCS and the FFL campaign, enabling teachers to implement structured lesson plans and assessment tools more effectively.

But elements within the RNCS continued to pose challenges for teachers as critical elements were missing that could have supported them in making these significant shifts successfully. As with C2005, the departure from traditional, content-focused teaching methods continued to prove difficult as many teachers had been trained in a system that emphasised rote memorisation and standardised testing, so the continued shift towards a learner-centred approach and continuous assessment remained jarring. These shifts not only demanded new skills but also required teachers to foster environments where learners felt empowered to engage, question, and direct their own learning. For many, this level of interactivity and learner autonomy was unfamiliar and, at times, intimidating.

Additionally, the integration of subjects into thematic units continued to present significant challenges. Many teachers struggled to connect different learning areas cohesively, as they had previously been accustomed to teaching subjects in isolation. This requirement necessitated creative lesson planning and the ability to think holistically about curriculum design as well as teacher collaboration. For teachers working in resource-constrained environments, the lack of materials and support made it even more difficult to implement integrated learning effectively.

Moreover, while the RNCS emphasised critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teachers often felt unprepared to teach these higher-order skills. They needed support and resources to develop inquiry-based activities that encouraged learners to think critically and engage deeply with the content. However, many teachers had limited experience with these methodologies and found it difficult to implement them without guidance or practical examples.

Another critical element missing in this transition from C2005 to the RNCS was sufficient professional development and ongoing support. While some training opportunities were available, they often lacked depth and practicality. Many teachers reported that professional development workshops focused more on theoretical aspects rather than offering concrete strategies or follow-up support for implementing the RNCS in real classrooms. This disconnect left teachers feeling isolated and unsure of how to apply new concepts effectively. The absence of a robust support system for collaboration and knowledge sharing further exacerbated feelings of uncertainty and frustration among teachers.

Key Observations

The review of the policies and initiatives from this era, as outlined above and further detailed in **Annexure 2**, highlights a distinct trend in the promotion of pedagogics that centred around four key themes.

Firstly, the shift towards structured pedagogical guidance was a defining feature of this era. The introduction of the RNCS and the launch of the FFL campaign sought to address the ambiguities of C2005 by providing clearer expectations, structured content coverage, and improved assessment guidelines. This increased clarity enabled teachers to balance conceptual understanding with practical application, fostering a more systematic approach to teaching and learning. By introducing structured lesson plans, daily teaching routines, and clearer assessment tools, the FFL sought to standardise early-grade instruction and reduce inconsistencies in curriculum delivery. However, while this initiative provided much-needed

¹⁹ Department of Education (DoE). (2006). Quality Improvement, Development, Support, and Upliftment Programme (QIDS-UP): A strategic approach to addressing educational inequalities. Pretoria: Department of Education.

guidance, its success was contingent on teachers' ability to interpret and implement structured methodologies effectively.

Secondly, the shift from the implicit, discovery-based whole language approach of C2005 to the explicit, structured literacy instruction of the RNCS marked a critical turning point in South Africa's reading pedagogy. By incorporating both skills-based (phonics and decoding) and meaning-based (comprehension and contextual understanding) strategies, the RNCS laid the foundation for a more systematic approach to literacy instruction. This ensured that early reading development was not left to natural exposure alone but was actively supported through structured phonics instruction, guided and independent reading, fluency development, vocabulary building, and comprehension strategies.

Thirdly, teacher support and professional development remained a persistent challenge. While the RNCS aimed to improve instructional strategies, teachers often lacked the necessary professional development to implement the revised curriculum effectively. The emphasis on learner-centred and interdisciplinary approaches required a pedagogical shift that many teachers found difficult to navigate, particularly in the absence of sufficient training, mentorship, and ongoing support.

Fourthly, resource availability and equity remained critical factors in influencing curriculum implementation. QIDS-UP attempted to address systemic inequalities by providing essential teaching and learning resources, particularly in underprivileged schools. But despite these efforts, resource constraints continued to hinder curriculum delivery, further exacerbating disparities in educational outcomes.

Overall, while the RNCS and accompanying initiatives represented a significant evolution in policy and pedagogics, the persistent gaps in teacher support, resource distribution, and practical implementation underscored the need for further refinements. This era demonstrated that curriculum reforms must balance structure, flexibility, and practical feasibility

to achieve sustainable improvements in teaching and learning within the South African education system.

6. Era 3: Policy Consolidation (2010–2020)

The period from 2010 to 2020 saw the consolidation of curriculum policy and an increased emphasis on research, both local and international. The policy with the most transformative impact on pedagogics in this era was the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) of 2011²⁰, which consolidated the educational landscape by providing teachers with explicit curriculum guidelines and clear learning outcomes. In addition, a shift towards evidence-based practices, informed by international assessments such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study)²¹ took place where persistent challenges in literacy informed subsequent pedagogical shifts. Refer to Annexure 3 for an analysis of CAPS in relation to the pedagogical framework presented above in Table 1. The Annexure also contains a brief background of the other initiatives and policies in this era.

CAPS aimed to simplify curriculum implementation for teachers who were transitioning from the challenges posed by OBE and the RNCS to an even more structured approach. With well-defined assessment standards and a logically organised curriculum framework, CAPS aimed to enable the development of lessons that structured knowledge acquisition in a clear sequence. Its approach to assessment, through the provision of specific tools and methods, guided teachers on how to track learner progress and how to adjust instruction to meet learner needs effectively. CAPS also addressed the need for ongoing professional development by establishing workshops and training sessions to help teachers apply its principles. The emphasis on structured support, combined with simplified documentation requirements and improved resource availability, allowed teachers to focus more on instructional quality rather than administrative tasks. Unlike the RNCS, which often allowed for an open interpretation, CAPS created a tighter curriculum structure that teachers could confidently follow, ensuring consistency and clarity in instructional

²⁰Department of Basic Education. (2011). Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa.

²¹Howie, S., Combrinck, C., Roux, K., Tshela, M., Mokoena, G., & McLeod Palane, N. (2017). PIRLS Literacy 2016: South African Highlights Report. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, University of Pretoria.

approaches across the country.

The CAPS policy emphasised the adoption of instructional strategies focused on deep understanding, moving away from rote learning and towards a mastery of key concepts. This systematic content delivery, coupled with prescribed teaching guidelines, was aimed at enabling teachers to focus their pedagogical practices on essential learning outcomes, making instructional time more effective and goal oriented. CAPS also brought greater clarity and structure to assessment by including exemplar tools that supported both formative and summative assessment strategies. CAPS helped teachers know how to evaluate learners' progress systematically and consistently though providing assessment standards for each grade, providing clear benchmarks against which learner performance could be measured.

A cornerstone of the CAPS implementation process was extensive professional development recognising that effective curriculum delivery depended on teacher preparedness and confidence. Training sessions, workshops, and support materials were rolled out nationwide to guide teachers in understanding and applying CAPS principles effectively. These initiatives promoted continuous professional learning and collaboration among teachers, enabling them to share experiences, refine their instructional techniques, and collectively improve their practice. For many teachers who had previously felt overwhelmed by the complexities of C2005 and the RNCS, CAPS provided a more accessible and manageable curriculum framework, backed by a community of support.

Additionally, CAPS alleviated the administrative burden on teachers by streamlining documentation and reporting requirements. The introduction of simplified templates and clear guidelines for tracking learners' progress significantly reduced the time spent on paperwork, allowing teachers to dedicate more energy to their actual teaching. This reduction in the administrative workload was particularly impactful for teachers in under-resourced schools, where time and resources were already stretched. Moreover, the structured CAPS curriculum framework paved the way for the use of structured learning programmes,

which were designed to fit seamlessly within CAPS objectives and reduce teachers' workload in relation to planning. These structured programmes provided teachers with ready-made, curriculum-aligned materials and step-by-step lesson guides, ensuring consistency and alignment with CAPS goals while freeing teachers to concentrate on instructional delivery.

Throughout the Foundation Phase, CAPS emphasises a balanced approach to teaching reading, integrating phonics with comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development. By providing structured, systematic reading instruction, teachers equip learners with the skills they need to become confident, independent readers who can engage with texts meaningfully and with enjoyment. The policy approach is carefully structured, moving from oral language development to decoding and ultimately to comprehension, ensuring that learners acquire the ability to read with meaning. As reading begins with a strong foundation in oral language, young learners must first develop their listening and speaking skills before they can read and write. Teachers are required to create opportunities for rich oral interactions, helping learners build the vocabulary and language structures they will later encounter in print. Through songs, rhymes, stories, and conversations, children develop phonological awareness—the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words. This awareness is crucial for learning phonics, as it helps children understand that spoken words are made up of individual sounds that can be represented by letters²². CAPS makes provision for these strategies.

Phonics instruction also plays a key role in the early reading process in CAPS. The curriculum ensures that learners are explicitly taught the relationships between sounds and letters, allowing them to decode words by sounding them out. Teachers are required to introduce letters systematically, helping children blend sounds together to read words and segment words into sounds for spelling. The process is reinforced through daily practice with decodable books—texts that contain words made up of the letter-sound relationships learners have been taught. But as reading is not only about recognising words but also about making meaning from text, teachers use shared

²² Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

reading sessions where they read aloud while learners follow along in a Big Book or projected text. This allows children to see how print works and to develop fluency by listening to a model of expressive reading. Shared reading introduces learners to a variety of text types, including stories, poems, and informational texts, helping them develop comprehension skills such as predicting, sequencing, and making inferences.

CAPS stipulates that group guided reading sessions are required where the teacher works with small groups of learners who are at a similar reading level, providing support and prompting them to use different reading strategies. In these sessions, learners read aloud in turns, practicing decoding while also discussing the meaning of the text. This method allows for targeted teaching, ensuring that all children receive the support they need at their level of development. To develop fluency, learners are encouraged to read familiar texts multiple times, gradually increasing their speed and accuracy. High-frequency words, which appear often in texts, are explicitly taught so that learners can recognise them instantly without needing to sound them out. Vocabulary is expanded through exposure to varied texts and discussions about new words and concepts. Another CAPS reading strategy is the early introduction of independent reading where learners select books at either their reading or interest level to practice reading on their own. This not only builds confidence but also fosters a love of reading. CAPS encourages teachers to create a print-rich environment, with classroom libraries and reading corners filled with engaging books that reflect the learners' home language and cultural experiences.

But as CAPS is based on an English literacy model that was then versioned into African languages, some challenges remain in how reading is taught and learned in different languages. The structure and progression of literacy in English do not always align with the linguistic realities of African languages, leading to a potential mismatch between what is taught in classrooms and how children acquire literacy in their home languages. Many teachers were trained using methodologies suited for English and may not have received guidance on how to adapt their teaching for a language with different phonetic and

grammatical structures. As a result, many children appear to be struggling with reading, when in fact, they are being taught in a way that does not completely align with how literacy naturally develops in their home language. These issues are only being addressed now.

As the South African education sector began to more fully embrace structured pedagogy through CAPS, programmes such as the Gauteng Primary Language and Maths Strategy (GPLMS), Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) and Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS) emerged. All of these programmes employed structured literacy interventions, rooted in the Science of Reading that emphasised systematic phonics instruction, repeated practice, and continuous assessment to build reading fluency and comprehension. All of these programmes were aligned to the CAPS approach to the teaching of reading. Teachers in schools targeted by these programmes followed scripted lesson plans that outlined daily activities, ensuring that every aspect of literacy development was systematically covered. These plans incorporated the CAPS balanced approach to reading, combining phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Phonics instruction was explicit and structured, introducing letter-sound relationships in a logical sequence. Learners were given decodable texts designed to reinforce these phonics patterns, allowing them to practice blending sounds and recognising common words. High-frequency words were also introduced to help children develop automatic word recognition, reducing the cognitive load required for decoding new texts.

While the pedagogy used in the three programmes were similar and aligned to CAPS, the manner in which teachers were trained and supported on their implementation differed. Both the GPLMS and EGRS employed coaches who worked alongside teachers to demonstrate lessons, provide feedback, and offer ongoing professional development. These coaches were external to the system and played a vital role in ensuring that teachers implemented the lesson plans effectively, helping them build confidence and refine their instructional techniques. The support model in the PSRIP EFAL was centred around subject advisors in a systemic model aimed at ensuring long-term scalable

²³ Snowling, M. J., & Hulme, C. (Eds.). (2005). *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. Blackwell Publishing.

and sustainable impact.

But despite successes in these interventions, the 2021 PIRLS findings indicated that progress remained limited, with a significant number of learners still struggling to read for meaning²⁴. The COVID 19 pandemic's impact on schooling exacerbated challenges already experienced, as many children faced disruptions in learning that set back gains made by the above-mentioned interventions. These findings reinforced the importance of consistent, high-quality instruction and highlighted the need for further investment in teacher training and resources, especially for early literacy. The PIRLS outcomes have spurred ongoing reviews of literacy programmes, pushing the DBE and educational stakeholders to refine approaches, strengthen support for teachers, and ensure that reading is integrated into every aspect of the curriculum.

Key Observations

The review of the policies and initiatives from this era, as outlined above and further detailed in **Annexure 3**, highlights a distinct trend in the promotion of pedagogical approaches that centred around four key themes.

Firstly, the approach outlined in CAPS provided much-needed clarity on how early reading should be taught, ensuring that children develop foundational skills in a progressive and systematic manner. By integrating oral language development, phonics instruction, fluency, and comprehension, CAPS created pathways for learners to become confident readers. The emphasis on shared and guided reading, along with exposure to a variety of texts, helped children engage with print meaningfully and develop the ability to read for understanding. However, while the framework provided a clear structure, its application across different languages presented some challenges that needed to be addressed.

Secondly, CAPS reading pedagogics is based on an English literacy model, which does not always align with the linguistic structures of many African languages with more transparent orthographies.

The direct versioning of an English reading model into these languages has resulted in some disconnect between the way children learn to read in their home language and the instructional methods used in classrooms. This has created difficulties for both teachers and learners, as the strategies provided in CAPS do not always reflect the natural progression of literacy acquisition in African languages.

Thirdly, efforts to address these gaps are only now beginning to take shape, as policymakers and education specialists recognise the need for language-specific adaptations of reading instruction. Moving forward, it is crucial that literacy policies and teaching strategies be developed with the unique characteristics of African languages in mind. This includes designing phonics programmes that align with the syllabic structures of each language, developing decodable readers that reflect authentic language patterns, and equipping teachers with the training needed to deliver reading instruction that is linguistically appropriate. It also involves introducing morphological awareness only after learners have spent the first two years mastering basic decoding skills, typically around Grade 3. Without these adjustments, many learners will continue to face avoidable barriers to literacy development, even within the structured framework provided by CAPS.

Fourthly, the shift towards structured pedagogy in South African literacy instruction marked a significant departure from past approaches, aligning teaching methods more closely with international best practices. Through initiatives like GPLMS, PSRIP, and EGRS, structured literacy interventions introduced a systematic approach to reading that emphasised phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. By providing teachers with detailed lesson plans and targeted professional development, these programmes aimed to ensure instructional consistency and improve foundational literacy skills across schools. This movement not only reinforced the principles outlined in CAPS but also strengthened the role of research-informed pedagogy in shaping classroom practice.

The evolution of South Africa's educational landscape from 2010 to 2020 highlights a consolidation towards structured pedagogics underpinned by evidence-based

²⁴ Howie, S. J., & Combrinck, C. (2023). PIRLS 2021: South African Highlights Report. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, University of Pretoria.

practices grounded in research. The introduction of CAPS, reinforced by findings from national and international assessments like PIRLS, laid the groundwork for a more standardised approach to foundational literacy. Interventions such as PSRIP and EGRS further exemplified the commitment to improving literacy through systematic, research-informed methods, while the GPLMS provided a focused model for enhancing teacher support and instructional quality. However, the persistence of low reading proficiency in assessments like PIRLS (2021) underscores ongoing challenges, particularly in resource-constrained and multilingual settings.

7. Era 4: Indigenisation of Learning (2013–present)

This era explores the role of bilingual teaching and learning, an approach that has become more prominent in South Africa as strategies are being sought to more directly address the diverse linguistic needs of our learners. Refer to Annexure 4 for an analysis of bilingual teaching and learning in relation to the pedagogical framework presented above in Table 1. The Annexure also contains a brief background of the other initiatives and policies in this era.

The shift towards bilingual education reflects a broader understanding of how language influences learning, especially in foundational grades. Initially, the DBE developed the Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) policy, in 2013²⁵ aimed to promote multilingualism and strengthen the teaching and learning of African languages in schools. The policy was designed to ensure that all learners, regardless of their home languages, had the opportunity to learn an additional African language as part of the curriculum. Recognising the historical marginalisation of indigenous languages in formal education, IIAL sought to elevate their status by gradually incorporating them into the schooling system alongside English and Afrikaans. The initiative was intended to foster social cohesion, improve language proficiency, and support cognitive development by encouraging the use of more than one language in teaching and learning.

More recently, the Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE)²⁶ programme was piloted in the Eastern Cape, aiming to leverage learners' home languages as foundational tools for learning, allowing for cognitive and linguistic growth in a culturally responsive framework. While the pilot primarily focused on how bilingual practices could support learning in STEM subjects such as Mathematics and Natural Science in primary schools, it is also having an impact on the broader conversation on language instruction and teacher development in South African schools. The MTbBE pilot recognised the rich linguistic diversity of the Eastern Cape and built on that with specific pedagogical practices that acknowledged the importance of learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To produce the new repertoire of bilingual practices and the tools teachers require to implement them in their classrooms, significant financial and political investments are required. Then, comprehensive teacher training programmes in bilingual pedagogy need be fully developed. This training should cover techniques for translanguaging and learner assessment, enabling teachers to draw on both languages to explain and clarify concepts. Teachers also need to develop a deep understanding of language development, particularly in bilingual contexts, to support learners' progression from home language literacy to additional language proficiency. Training must also include bilingual approaches to assessment, equipping teachers to evaluate learner progress in both languages, and in the content of the subject, with tools that reflect the learners' linguistic realities.

With reference to the teaching of reading in African languages, there is an intersection between the MTbBE pilot and the Mother Tongue-based Reading Literacy (MTbRL) strategy. In this strategy morphology, the study of word structures and their meanings, is viewed as a critical component in decoding and encoding across indigenous languages. This approach means focusing on how words are built through complex morphological structures, where meaning is conveyed through various affixes that modify the root word. This contrasts somewhat with a phonetic approach, which focuses more on the sounds that make up words and emphasises phonics, or the relationship between

²⁵ Department of Basic Education. (2013). Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) in South African Schools Policy. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa.

²⁶ Department of Basic Education. (2024). Mother-tongue-based Bilingual Education Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.za/ArchivedDocuments/ArchivedArticles/Mother-tongue-based-Bilingual-Education-0224.aspx>

sounds and letters. A morphological approach in African home languages leverages the agglutinative nature of many of these languages, where words often consist of a root and multiple morphemes that convey nuanced meanings, grammatical relationships, and context. It is argued that teaching morphology would help learners understand and decode longer, complex words by recognising common morphemes, thereby enhancing vocabulary and comprehension²⁷. But the teaching of reading in African languages should not be framed as a choice between phonics or morphology, but rather as a balanced progression that begins with phonics and transitions toward morphological awareness. Phonics provides the foundational decoding skills that early readers need, while morphology allows learners to develop deeper comprehension and vocabulary growth as they become more fluent readers. A balanced approach ensures that literacy instruction is aligned with the linguistic structures of African languages, supporting both early reading development and long-term comprehension skills.

While the new repertoire of practices are being developed, teachers must continue teaching their learners, suggesting that current home language programmes could be used as an interim solution. For example, the existing PSRIP Home Language (HL) structured learning programmes could serve as a valuable interim strategy as they incorporate a balance between phonics instruction in Grades 1 and 2 and morphology instruction from Grade 3; and they are currently available in all home languages. This would give the DBE time to thoroughly test translanguaging pedagogies to develop an extended repertoire of practices and tools for teachers and subject advisors. It would also allow for the necessary curriculum reform to support this pedagogical shift and for the development of bilingual resources in content subjects like Maths and Science. Thus, a transitional process is recommended to give the education system time to research, develop, and test reliable home language pedagogical routines. By using PSRIP HL as a structured, consistent instructional framework, teachers and learners can maintain momentum in literacy development while the morphologically aligned approaches and resources are refined. The PSRIP HL programmes can bridge the

transition by continuing to develop foundational literacy skills and gradually integrating morphological principles, providing stability for learners and teachers until fully aligned based teaching resources and methods become available in all African languages.

Key Observations

The review of the policies and initiatives from this era, as outlined above and further detailed in **Annexure 4**, highlights a distinct trend in the promotion of pedagogical approaches that centred around three key themes.

Firstly, bilingual education and translanguaging have emerged as key pedagogics in addressing linguistic diversity in South African classrooms. The MTbBE pilot in the Eastern Cape represents a significant pedagogical shift, leveraging learners' home languages to enhance cognitive and linguistic development. This initiative acknowledges the importance of local languages in shaping learning experiences, particularly in STEM subjects, and signals a broader movement towards integrating bilingual instruction into national policy.

Secondly, the role of morphology in reading instruction gained prominence, with the MTbRL strategy advocating for a linguistic approach that aligns with the more unique elements of African languages. The recognition that literacy instruction should transition from phonics to morphology ensures that reading pedagogy is both linguistically appropriate and developmentally sequenced. This approach supports deeper vocabulary acquisition and comprehension, making it a promising avenue for improving literacy outcomes.

Thirdly, the need for a measured transition towards bilingual instruction was recognised, ensuring that existing literacy programmes provide continuity while new approaches are integrated. By leveraging structured learning programmes such as PSRIP HL, the education system can maintain progress in literacy while allowing for the gradual adoption of tested morphology and bilingual strategies. This phased approach ensures that both teachers and learners are

²⁷ Makalela, L. (2019). Ubuntu translanguaging: An alternative framework for complex multilingual encounters. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 37(3), 245–256. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2019.1613853>

supported during this period of pedagogical transformation.

This section argues that to improve learning, especially in African home languages, systemic reforms are essential, with a focus on capacity building at all levels of the education sector. It highlights the importance of aligning instructional methods, like the teaching of reading, with evidence-based practices that are also sensitive to the linguistic and cultural diversity of learners and using programmes we currently have. The emphasis is on creating an education system that is resilient, responsive, and capable of continuous improvement, thus ensuring that all learners have access to high-quality education that is both effective and equitable.

8. Critical Reflections on Pedagogic Reform

This paper that traces the evolution of literacy pedagogics in South Africa is not merely a historical recounting of policy shifts, rather it reflects the country's ongoing struggle to shape a system that is both equitable and effective. What emerges from the analysis is a portrait of education policy and practice as deeply intertwined with social change, systemic constraint, and ideological contestation. Each era introduced bold reforms, from the idealism of OBE to the structured pragmatism of CAPS and the contemporary turn toward bilingual pedagogics. Yet these reforms often reveal as much about the limitations of systemic capacity as they do about pedagogical vision.

The meaning behind these shifts lies in their cumulative lesson: no single policy moment can deliver transformation in isolation. The pendulum swinging from overly open-ended learner-centred models to highly structured approaches suggests a system seeking balance. What has become increasingly clear is that structure and contextual relevance are not opposing forces; rather, they must be purposefully combined. Reading pedagogies that are technically sound but linguistically misaligned will fall short. Equally, a pedagogy that honours local language and culture but lacks systematic progression risks deepening inequalities. The journey mapped in this paper underscores the need for an educational

risks deepening inequalities. The journey mapped in this paper underscores the need for an educational practice that is both evidence-informed and contextually grounded.

By tracing literacy pedagogics across the last 30 years, this paper offers more than a retrospective, it provides a framework for anticipating the future. As the sector enters a new phase, it does so with greater clarity on what is required for sustainable reform. Future efforts must attend not only to what is taught, but to how and in what language it is taught. The movement toward bilingual education represents a significant epistemological shift, one that recognises the structural features of African languages and the cognitive advantages of learning in one's home language. These emerging strategies offer a path forward, but they must be accompanied by a measured, supported transition. South Africa's education system cannot afford a new rupture. Instead, transitional approaches like the interim use of PSRIP HL materials should act as a scaffold while new bilingual models are developed and tested. These transitions must be designed with realism, recognising the current capabilities of teachers and the time needed to develop appropriate materials, curricula, and training. The framework developed in this paper supports such planning, enabling stakeholders to trace past trends while making informed, forward-looking decisions.

The implications of this analysis are far-reaching. At the policy level, it is clear that curriculum reform must be tightly coupled with teacher development and resource provision. At the pedagogical level, it calls for an approach that respects both the science of reading and the science of language, one that moves beyond the importation of English literacy models and roots instructional practice in the linguistic realities of the majority of learners. At the implementation level, the importance of phasing and sequencing, of not simply designing new models, but of building the institutional capacity required to implement at scale and with quality, is also signalled.

Looking ahead, the path to a more just and effective education system lies not in wholesale reinvention, but in strategic refinement. South Africa must retain its commitment to learner-centred pedagogy,

not as a vague ideal, but as a principle embedded in structured and supported classroom practice. The hard-won gains of balanced assessment and structured teaching routines, especially those refined through PSRIP and EGRS, must be preserved. At the same time, the system must build on promising innovations that reflect the linguistic structure of African languages. These approaches offer a chance to bridge the cognitive and cultural gaps that persist in monolingual, English-dominated models. A sustainable way forward demands a balance between continuity and change, between system-wide vision and ground-level feasibility. In short, we must move forward through deliberate, sustained progression rather than through sudden, destabilising shifts.

9. Conclusion

South Africa's literacy journey over the past three decades reflects a persistent effort to align pedagogical ambition with the realities of teaching and learning in diverse classrooms. While gains have been made, particularly in the adoption of structured, evidence-based instruction, challenges remain. Moving forward, the goal should be to create a system that is resilient, responsive, and contextually rooted. This requires recognising the pedagogical potential embedded in African languages, investing in the professionalisation of teaching, and ensuring that reform is sequenced, supported, and sustainable.

This paper has argued that the evolution of literacy pedagogics in South Africa is not complete; it is ongoing. By drawing on the lessons of the past and the insights of the present, the sector has an opportunity to craft a future that is both just and effective. In embracing linguistic and cultural diversity, supporting teacher agency, and building on evidence without becoming beholden to it, South Africa can shape a pedagogical future that truly serves all learners. This is not only an educational imperative, but also a social justice one.

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