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Understanding Reading Comprehension Challenges in Learners with Developmental Disorders

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ABSTRACT

The article explores reading comprehension challenges faced by learners with developmental disorders. The study aims to identify the specific barriers and inform targeted interventions. The research involves a purposively selected sample population of 40 learners aged between 6-12 years diagnosed with dyslexia, attention disorder, autism spectrum, and hyperactive disorder attending school at Mambilima Special School. Using a mixed-method approach, data collection combined standardized reading assessments, observational studies, and structured interviews with educators and parents to gain comprehensive insights into the learners' reading behaviors and difficulties. The research is guided by the Social Constructivist Theory that highlights the interaction between cognitive development and social context in understanding reading comprehension. The mixed-methods research methodology facilitates the nuanced analysis of quantitative data from reading assessments alongside qualitative data gathered through interviews. Statistical analyses, including thematic analysis, were employed to explore the patterns in reading performance and the subjective experiences of learners. Results indicate that learners with developmental disorders exhibit unique reading comprehension challenges, characterized by difficulties in decoding, poor vocabulary knowledge, and challenges in making inferences. The findings also reveal that contextual factors, such as teaching strategies and classroom environment, significantly influence learners' reading outcomes. The study underscores the importance of tailored instructional approaches and collaborative support systems to enhance reading comprehension skills in this population, ultimately contributing to more effective educational practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a foundational skill that significantly influences academic achievement, social integration, and lifelong learning. For learners with developmental disorders, mastering this skill presents persistent and complex challenges that affect their ability to access and process textual information. According to Snowling & Hulme (2012), Developmental disorders, such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and other cognitive impairments, often disrupt essential reading processes, including decoding, vocabulary acquisition, and inferential thinking. These difficulties not only impede academic progress but can also contribute to low self-esteem and increased frustration, further exacerbating learning obstacles.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) estimates that approximately 15% of children worldwide experience developmental disabilities, with many of these children facing significant literacy challenges. Shaywitz et al. (2020) state that Dyslexia, for example, affects 5-10% of school-aged children and is characterized by difficulties in phonological processing, which makes word recognition and reading fluency arduous tasks. Similarly, learners with ASD may struggle with understanding figurative language, making inferences, and grasping narrative coherence due to deficits in the theory of mind and executive functioning (Randi et al., 2010). For learners with ADHD, inattentiveness, and impulsivity can impair sustained focus and comprehension, limiting their ability to construct meaning from texts (Willcutt et al., 2012). Without appropriate interventions, these learners may fall further behind their peers, perpetuating cycles of academic underachievement and social isolation.

In Zambia, the literacy struggles of learners with developmental disorders are magnified by contextual factors such as limited access to specialized resources, undertrained teachers, and societal stigma. Mambilima Special School, located in Mwense District, stands

as one of the few institutions dedicated to serving children with special needs, yet learners continue to face substantial reading comprehension difficulties. Research suggests that the quality of the learning environment, including the use of differentiated instructional strategies, classroom accommodations, and teacher support, plays a pivotal role in shaping reading outcomes for learners with special needs (Mutua & Dimitrov, 2021). For example, classrooms that employ multi-sensory learning techniques, such as using visual aids, auditory cues, and kinesthetic activities, have been shown to improve reading engagement and comprehension for learners with dyslexia (Hall, 2020).

As Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory posits, cognitive development is deeply intertwined with social interaction, and learners benefit from collaborative learning environments that scaffold their evolving skills (Vygotsky, 1978). In practical terms, this means that peer-assisted learning, small-group reading sessions, and guided discussions can create supportive spaces where learners gradually build their comprehension abilities through collective effort. Furthermore, teacher-led modeling of metacognitive strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing can help learners become more intentional and reflective readers (Pressley & Gaskins, 2006).

This study explores the reading comprehension challenges encountered by learners at Mambilima Special School, aiming to identify the cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors that contribute to these difficulties. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative data from standardized reading assessments with qualitative insights gathered through structured interviews and classroom observations. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of learners' reading behaviors, as well as the perspectives of parents and educators who play critical roles in supporting their development. By collecting data through multiple lenses, the study can more accurately capture the nuanced interplay between individual learner profiles and external influences.

In addition, the research investigates the impact of specific teaching practices on learner outcomes. For instance, studies have shown that structured literacy programs, which emphasize systematic phonics instruction, can significantly enhance reading accuracy and fluency in children with dyslexia (Moats, 2019). Similarly, integrating social stories and visual schedules into classroom routines has been found to improve narrative comprehension and reduce anxiety in learners with ASD (Gray, 2018). Understanding which strategies are most effective within the local context of Mambilima Special School will be crucial for developing sustainable, evidence-based interventions.

By investigating the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing reading comprehension, this research aspires to generate evidence-based recommendations for improving literacy interventions. The findings are expected to inform the development of tailored instructional approaches, teacher training programs, and policy initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive education practices. Ultimately, the study's goal is to contribute to a more equitable educational landscape where learners with developmental disorders are empowered to achieve their full academic potential and thrive as active participants in society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding reading comprehension challenges among learners with developmental disorders is a global research priority. These challenges manifest across diverse contexts, influenced by neurological, social, cultural, and educational factors. This literature review explores the global, African, sub-Saharan, and Zambian perspectives on reading comprehension difficulties, highlighting the research findings, interventions, and gaps that inform this study.

Reading comprehension deficits are extensively studied worldwide, with research emphasizing the cognitive and linguistic processes involved. According to Snowling and Hulme (2012), developmental disorders such as dyslexia, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) disrupt reading abilities through impairments in phonological processing, attention regulation, and social cognition. Shaywitz et al. (2020) opine that dyslexia affects about 5–10% of children globally, causing persistent difficulties in decoding and word recognition.

In the United States and Europe, large-scale studies have explored the efficacy of interventions like phonics-based instruction, multi-sensory learning, and technology-assisted reading programs. Research by Torgesen et al. (2001) found that early phonemic awareness training significantly improved reading outcomes for children with dyslexia. Similarly, social stories and visual aids have been shown to enhance comprehension in learners with ASD (Gray, 2018). These interventions, tailored to specific cognitive deficits, offer hope for more inclusive educational systems.

Despite these advances, studies suggest that contextual factors including socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and teacher training profoundly influence intervention success (Catts et al., 2017). For instance, Hart & Risley (2003) suggest that children from low-income households often have limited access to resources like specialized reading programs or experienced educators, which can widen the achievement gap. Furthermore, Justice et al. (2018) state that, a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers in low-resource settings may limit their ability to effectively implement evidence-based strategies.

The global research landscape highlights both progress and persistent challenges. While scientifically validated interventions are available, their effectiveness is often mediated by environmental and systemic factors. This underscores the need for comprehensive approaches that combine cognitive science with social policy to ensure all learners, regardless of context, can develop essential reading comprehension skills (Stanovich, 2000).

In Africa, research on reading comprehension in learners with developmental disorders is growing, though still limited compared to Western contexts. Mutua & Dimitrov (2021) highlight that many African countries face systemic challenges, such as under-resourced schools, limited access to diagnostic tools, and cultural stigma around disabilities. These factors hinder early identification and intervention, exacerbating reading difficulties.

Studies in Kenya and South Africa indicate that classroom strategies adapted to local contexts can improve literacy outcomes. For instance, Pretorius & Spaull (2016) found that structured literacy programs, combined with mother-tongue instruction, enhanced comprehension in struggling readers. However, many learners with developmental disorders remain marginalized due to large class sizes, insufficient special education training, and limited policy enforcement (Abosi & Koay, 2008).

In sub-Saharan Africa, research highlights the compounded impact of poverty, cultural beliefs, and educational inequities on learners with developmental disorders. According to Klibthong & Agbenyega (2018), inclusive education policies are often poorly implemented, leaving children with disabilities without the necessary support. For example, in Nigeria, a study by Olusola & Adebayo (2019) found that only 30% of public schools had special education teachers, limiting the effectiveness of literacy interventions.

Despite these challenges, regional initiatives are emerging to address reading comprehension deficits. Mtahabwa (2020) points out that in Malawi, programs integrating storytelling, community involvement, and teacher training have shown promise in improving literacy for children with diverse learning needs. These localized interventions emphasize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogies that reflect learners' linguistic and social contexts.

In Zambia, the landscape of reading comprehension for learners with developmental disorders is shaped by limited resources and inconsistent policy implementation. Mambilima Special School, one of the few institutions serving children with disabilities, exemplifies both the potential and limitations of special education in the country. According to Kalindi & Chalisa (2019), many Zambian teachers lack specialized training, relying on general instructional methods that fail to accommodate diverse learning profiles. This gap in expertise often leads to a mismatch between teaching strategies and learners' unique cognitive needs, further hindering academic progress.

Studies have shown that incorporating local languages, multisensory techniques, and small-group instruction can improve reading outcomes. Chansa-Kabali & Westerholm (2014) demonstrated that phonemic awareness training in learners' home languages enhanced word recognition and fluency. Local language instruction helps bridge the gap between learners' everyday linguistic experiences and academic content, fostering more meaningful connections to reading materials. However, structural barriers such as inadequate teaching materials, high student-teacher ratios, and societal stigma continue to impede progress. For instance, a study by Sampa (2020) highlighted that rural schools often lack access to even basic literacy resources, leaving teachers without the tools to implement effective reading interventions.

Efforts to address these gaps include teacher capacity-building programs and advocacy for inclusive education policies. The Zambian Ministry of Education has begun integrating special education training into teacher preparation curricula, aiming to equip educators with the skills needed to support learners with developmental disorders (Ministry of General Education, 2021). Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) have partnered with local communities to provide teacher workshops and resources tailored to special needs education.

Yet, sustained progress requires ongoing research, community engagement, and policy reinforcement. Continued investment in teacher training, alongside efforts to raise public awareness and reduce stigma, could create a more supportive educational environment for learners with developmental disorders. Research by Mwale & Mulenga (2022) underscores the importance of parental involvement and culturally relevant pedagogies, suggesting that a holistic, community-centered approach could significantly enhance reading comprehension outcomes. This growing body of local research, paired with global insights, offers a path forward for creating a more inclusive and effective education system in Zambia.

The literature underscores that reading comprehension challenges among learners with developmental disorders are multifaceted issues influenced by cognitive, social, and environmental factors. While global research provides valuable insights into effective interventions, local adaptations are essential for success in diverse contexts like Zambia. This review highlights the need for more region-specific studies, collaborative teaching practices, and policy-driven solutions to create equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted cognitive process that relies on the integration of various linguistic and mental faculties. For learners with developmental disorders, this process often presents considerable challenges, affecting their ability to engage meaningfully with texts. This framework seeks to explore and explain these challenges by drawing on established theories and identifying key factors that influence reading comprehension.

Cognitive Load Theory by Sweller (1988) provides a foundational understanding of how limited working memory capacity can hinder the processing of complex texts. Learners who struggle to manage cognitive load may find it difficult to retain and synthesize textual information, leading to breakdowns in comprehension. This aligns with the Simple View of Reading Gough & Tunmer

(1986) which emphasizes the dual necessity of decoding skills and linguistic comprehension for reading success. When either component is impaired, overall comprehension suffers, illustrating how deficits in foundational skills can ripple through the reading process.

Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978) adds a valuable dimension to understanding reading development by highlighting the role of social interaction and scaffolding. Guided support from teachers, peers, or family members can help learners navigate the complexities of reading, reinforcing the notion that literacy development is not solely an individual cognitive task but also a socially mediated process.

Several key constructs interact to shape reading comprehension outcomes. Decoding skills enable learners to translate written symbols into speech, while vocabulary knowledge facilitates the understanding of word meanings and their relationships. Working memory and executive function are essential for manipulating and organizing information during reading, while metacognitive strategies allow learners to monitor and regulate their comprehension processes.

The relationship between these constructs is intricate. Learners with developmental disorders may experience decoding and vocabulary deficits that disrupt comprehension. Working memory limitations can further exacerbate these challenges, making it harder to maintain textual coherence and integrate information across sentences. Yet, research suggests that targeted interventions, such as strategy training and scaffolded instruction, can mitigate some of these difficulties. Additionally, a supportive literacy environment characterized by responsive teaching practices and active parental involvement can enhance reading outcomes and foster a positive reading culture.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate reading comprehension challenges among learners with developmental disorders at Mambilima Special School. The combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for a nuanced understanding of both measurable reading outcomes and the subjective experiences of learners, teachers, and parents. The methodology is structured around research design, sample selection, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques, all guided by the Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes the interaction between cognitive development and social context (Vygotsky, 1978).

A mixed-methods design was chosen to capture the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension difficulties. Quantitative data provides objective measures of reading abilities, while qualitative data enriches the findings by capturing personal insights and contextual factors influencing literacy development. Scholars such as Kombo & Tromp (2011) argue that integrating these approaches strengthens research validity, as the limitations of one method are offset by the strengths of the other.

The study purposively sampled 40 learners aged 6–12 years. The sampled learners were distributed as follows; 10 diagnosed with dyslexia, 10 with attention disorders, 10 with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and 10 with hyperactivity disorder. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants represented a range of developmental disorders affecting reading comprehension (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, 10 teachers and 10 parents participated in the study to provide broader perspectives on learners' reading behaviors and classroom dynamics. This multi-stakeholder approach enhances the study's comprehensiveness, as highlighted by Cohen et al. (2018), who stress the importance of triangulating data sources in educational research.

Three primary data collection methods were employed. These include standardized reading assessments, observational studies, and semi-structured interviews. During standardized reading assessments, tools such as the gray oral reading test (GORT-5) and the Peabody picture vocabulary test (PPVT) were used to assess learners' decoding skills, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency. These assessments provide reliable, quantifiable data on reading performance (Wiederholt & Bryant, 2012). In addition, classroom observations were conducted to examine learners' engagement, reading strategies, and teacher-student interactions (Siame, 2019, 2022; Siame & Banda, 2021). This method aligns with Angrosino's (2007) argument that observational research captures real-time behaviors that may not emerge in interviews or tests. The semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents explored perceptions of learners' reading difficulties, effective instructional strategies, and systemic barriers to literacy development (Siame & Banda, 2024a, 2024b). Kvale (2007) states that the semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on significant issues.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze reading assessment scores, identifying patterns and correlations among different developmental disorders. Pallant (2020) states that SPSS software facilitated the analysis, generating insights into the prevalence and severity of various reading challenges. Thematic analysis was conducted on interview and observation data to identify recurring themes related to instructional practices, learner experiences, and contextual influences. Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasize that thematic analysis is particularly useful for uncovering complex social dynamics, making it well-suited to this study's objectives.

Informed consent was secured from parents and guardians, while assent was obtained from learners. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, in line with the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents the key findings on reading comprehension challenges among learners with developmental disorders at Mambilima Special School. Data is analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, incorporating statistical representations through bar graphs, charts, and tables to highlight key patterns and trends. The discussion interprets these findings concerning existing literature, providing insights into their implications for educational practice.

5.1 Reading Performance among Learners with Developmental Disorders

The study utilized standardized reading assessments, including the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-5) and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), to evaluate decoding skills, fluency, and comprehension levels. The results indicate significant variations in reading abilities among learners with different developmental disorders, shedding light on the unique struggles and strengths of each group.

Table 1: Reading Performance Scores by Disorder Type

Disorder Type	Average Decoding Score	Average Fluency Score	Average Comprehension Score
Dyslexia	45%	50%	40%
ADHD	60%	55%	50%
ASD	50%	45%	55%
Hyperactivity Disorder	55%	60%	48%

Table 1 reveals that learners with dyslexia scored the lowest in decoding (45%) and comprehension (40%). These results support previous findings by Shaywitz et al. (2020), which indicate persistent difficulties by learners with dyslexia in word recognition due to phonological deficits. The study shows that learners with dyslexia often misinterpret words, skip lines, or confuse similar-looking letters, making it harder to grasp overall meaning. This result and analysis align with Snowling & Hulme's (2012) argument that phonological impairments are a core feature of dyslexia, affecting the entire reading process. Results reveal that learners with ADHD had the highest score in decoding represented by 60%, second highest score in fluency represented by 55%, and second highest score in comprehension indicated by 50%. The above results show that the learners with ADHD were the highest performers in reading comprehension at the institution under research. The research also reveals that learners with ASD were the lowest in fluency. It can be argued that autism affects speech and pronunciation. The results further show that learners with hyperactivity were the highest in fluency (60%), second highest in decoding (55%), and second lowest in comprehension (48%).

Therefore, the average score in the three areas accessed for learners with dyslexia is 45%, learners with ADHD is 55%, learners with ASD is 50% and learners with hyperactivity disorder is 54%. Based on the analysis above, it can be concluded that learners with ADHD were the highest (55%), followed by learners with hyperactivity disorder (54.3%), then learners with ASD (50%), and the lowest was the learners with dyslexia (45%). It can be argued that learners with ADHD do not have serious comprehension challenges as opposed to learners with dyslexia who proved to have more serious challenges in reading comprehension. Therefore, teachers of learners with dyslexia are expected to choose the most suitable teaching strategies to mitigate the reading comprehension challenges of learners with this developmental disorder.

The pie charts below demonstrate the average scores by disorder type:

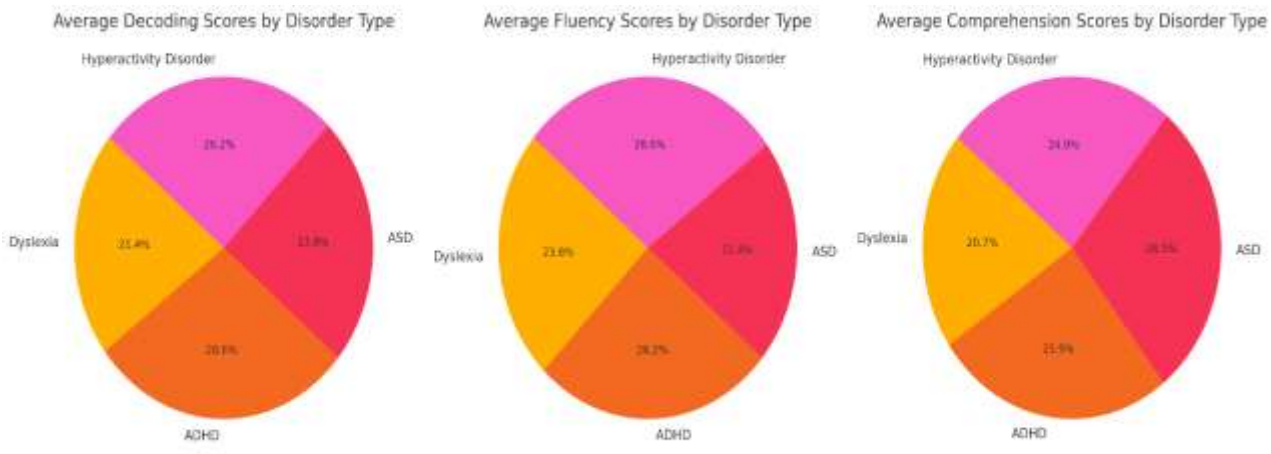

Figure 1: Average Reading Comprehension Performance Scores by Disorder Type

In contrast, learners with ADHD demonstrated higher decoding scores but lower comprehension, possibly due to attention lapses during reading tasks. Torgesen et al. (2001) found that even when learners with ADHD could decode words accurately, they often lost track of narrative coherence or missed crucial details, leading to fragmented understanding.

Learners with ASD performed relatively better in comprehension but struggled with fluency. Gray (2018) highlighted that while many learners with ASD can understand text content, their social communication challenges and preference for rigid routines might make fluid, expressive reading more difficult. The findings suggest that these learners benefit from structured reading interventions and visual supports to aid comprehension.

Interestingly, learners with hyperactivity disorder scored highest in fluency, possibly due to their high energy levels and rapid speech patterns. However, their comprehension scores were inconsistent, reflecting difficulties in sustaining attention for long passages, a finding echoed by Catts et al. (2017), who stressed the impact of impulsivity on sustained reading.

The decoding score, fluency score, and comprehension scores of the sampled learners with developmental disorders are outlined in Figure 2 below:

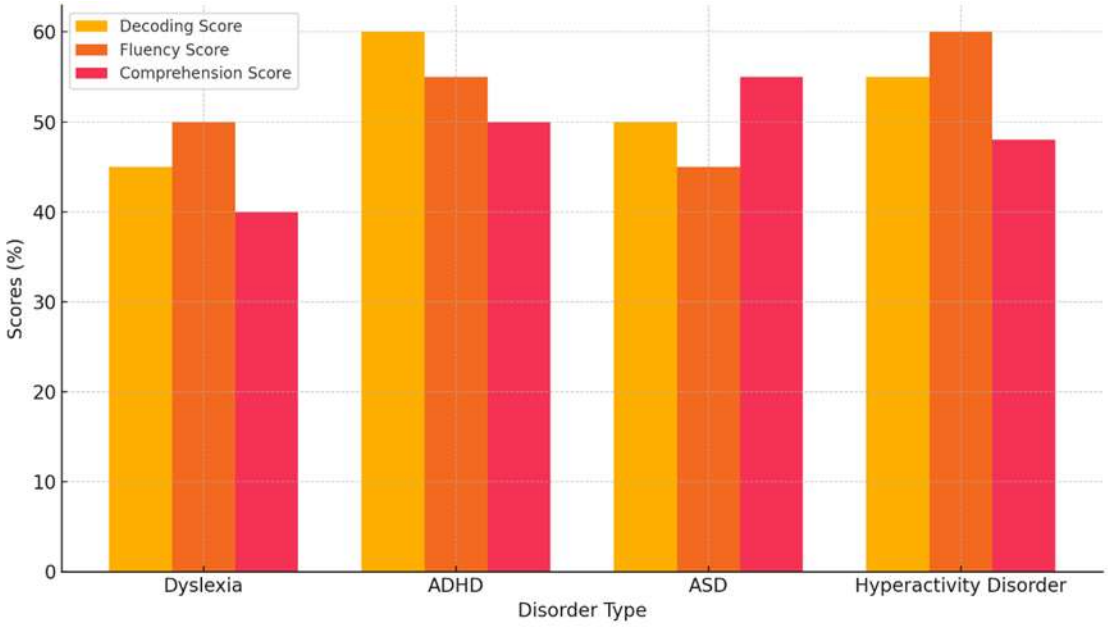

Figure 2: Reading Performance by Disorder Type

The results in Figure 2 emphasize the need for tailored interventions. For example, learners with dyslexia may benefit most from phonics-based approaches, while those with ADHD might need strategies to build sustained focus. Learners with ASD might excel with visual aids and predictable reading routines, while those with hyperactivity disorder may require frequent breaks and interactive reading activities.

It can be argued that understanding these nuanced differences allows educators to create targeted reading programs, bridging the gap between cognitive limitations and academic success. Therefore, there is a need to explore the effectiveness of various teaching strategies in addressing these challenges.

5.2 Effect of Teaching Strategies on Reading Outcomes

Teacher interviews and classroom observations provided insights into the instructional methods used by teachers for the sampled developmental disorders. The results are illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies

Teaching Strategy	Percentage of Teachers Reporting Positive Impact
Phonics-Based Instruction	75%
Multisensory Learning	80%
Visual Aids & Social Stories	70%
Small-Group Instruction	65%

The results in Table 2 reveal that phonics-based instruction and multisensory learning strategies significantly improved reading performance, particularly among learners with dyslexia who had the lowest average score as shown in Table 1.

The findings in Table 2 are summarized in the bar graph illustrated in Figure 3 below:

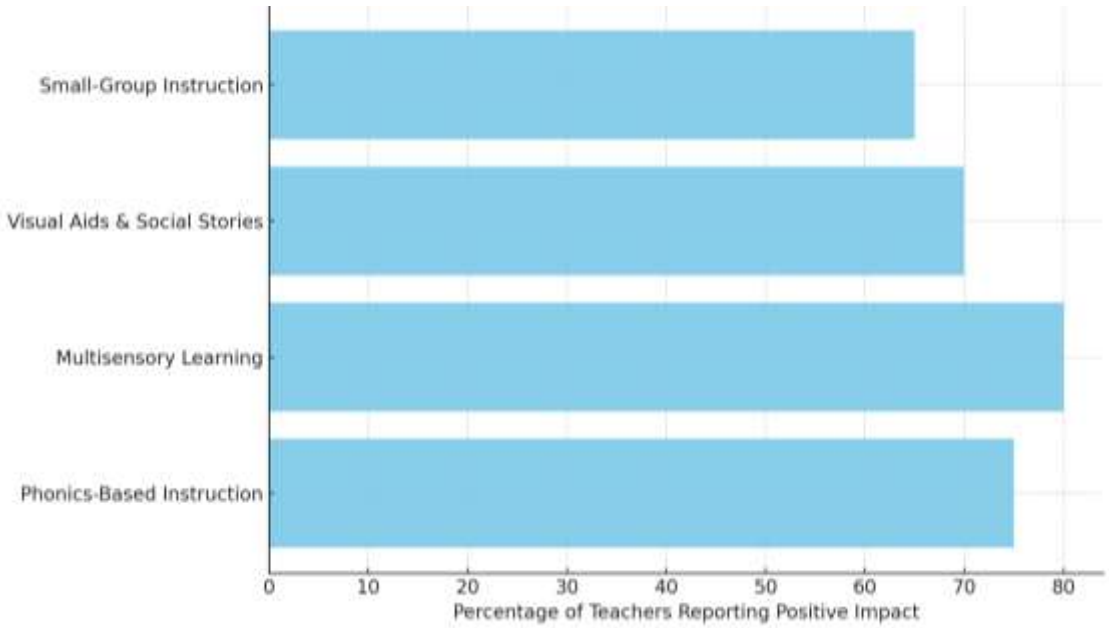

Figure 3: Teacher Perceptions of Effective Strategies

Figure 3 shows that the most effective way of teaching reading to learners with disabilities is using a multisensory learning strategy which is represented by 80%. Multisensory learning involves using activities that appeal to different senses of learners with disabilities to help them comprehend what they read. The second most effective strategy for teaching reading to learners with disabilities is by using phonic-based instructions. Phonics is associated with sounds which leads to word recognition. The third effective strategy is using visual aids and social stories which account for 75% of the participants which is related to Chansa-Kabali & Westerholm's (2014) study on the benefits of using learners' home languages to improve comprehension. The results show that the last effective strategy is small group instruction which is represented by 65%. It can be argued that all the strategies discussed under this subheading are effective because they represent above 50%.

Therefore, teachers handling learners with disabilities can adopt these effective reading strategies based on the disability and availability of teaching and learning materials. The above findings align with Torgesen et al. (2001), who opines that phonemic awareness training enhances reading outcomes.

5.3 Contextual Factors Affecting Reading Development

Qualitative data from interviews with teachers and parents highlighted key contextual barriers, including inadequate teaching materials, high student-teacher ratios, and stigma associated with developmental disorders. The results are presented in the table below:

Table 3: Contextual Challenges and Their Impact

Contextual Factor	Reported Impact (%)
Limited Teaching Resources	85%
High Student-Teacher Ratios	78%
Societal Stigma	60%
Lack of Specialized Teacher Training	70%

Table 3 shows that the highest contextual challenge of learners with disabilities is limited teaching resources representing 85%. This challenge is followed by a high student-teacher ratio which occupies 78%, followed by a lack of specialized teacher training for learners with disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD with 70%. Table 3 further reveals that societal stigma for learners with disabilities was the least challenge that contributed to contextual challenges during reading comprehension representing 60%. It can be argued that the stigma against learners with disabilities during reading comprehension has dropped. On the other hand, the study reveals that schools for learners with disabilities are grappling with teaching and learning materials that are favorable for the learners in question to promote good reading habits and comprehension among learners with disabilities. These results are in line with Catts et al. (2017), who identified socioeconomic status and teacher preparedness as critical factors in intervention success. This shows that teachers handling learners with disabilities are expected to prepare materials adequately. Material preparation can be done in collaboration with the government and other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations.

6. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Decoding and fluency are the major challenges for learners with disabilities when it comes to reading comprehension. Learners with dyslexia struggle the most and require targeted phonics instruction. Contextual barriers are yet another challenge which is caused by inadequate teaching materials and high student-teacher ratios. It has been observed that the teaching strategies employed for learners with special disabilities matter. Therefore, multisensory and phonics-based approaches can be used to improve reading outcomes among learners with disabilities.

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