

Special Education Teachers' Readiness and Support Needs to Teach Reading in Secondary Classrooms

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ABSTRACT:

Effective reading instruction is fundamental to the academic development of students with learning disabilities; however, many special education teachers report challenges in delivering structured and effective reading instruction, particularly at the secondary school level. While policy frameworks emphasise inclusive and high-quality literacy instruction, there remains a gap between these expectations and classroom practices. This study aims to explore special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within secondary school contexts. This study employed a qualitative case study design involving ten special education teachers in a secondary school setting. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture teachers' experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices related to reading instruction. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights into teachers' pedagogical knowledge, instructional readiness, and perceived constraints. The findings reveal that teachers initially demonstrated limited knowledge of structured reading instruction, particularly in phonics-based approaches, and expressed low confidence in teaching reading to students with learning disabilities. However, engagement in classroom practice and reflective processes contributed to gradual improvements in instructional readiness. Despite this, teachers consistently reported systemic challenges, including time constraints, heavy workload, and the absence of structured instructional support. The study also highlights a strong need for targeted professional development, structured teaching resources, and institutional support systems to enhance the quality and consistency of reading instruction. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical insights into teacher capacity for reading instruction in secondary special education, an area that remains under-researched. The findings underscore the importance of aligning teacher training, instructional support, and policy implementation to bridge the gap between expectations and practice. Implications are discussed in relation to teacher professional development and the design of sustainable literacy interventions in special education contexts.

Keywords: reading, special needs teacher, special needs student, phonics.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely recognised as a foundational skill that underpins academic achievement, social participation, and lifelong learning (Lindstrom-Sandahl et al., 2023). For students with learning disabilities, the ability to read is particularly critical, as it determines access to curriculum content and influences their overall educational trajectory (Lindstrom et al., 2024). However, despite ongoing global efforts to improve literacy outcomes, a substantial proportion of students with learning disabilities continue to experience persistent reading difficulties, even at the secondary school level (Gotlies et. al, 2022 Kumar & Gore, 2016; Lindström-Sandahl et al., 2023). These challenges are often associated with deficits in phonological processing, decoding, and comprehension, which require systematic and explicit instructional approaches to address effectively.

Within this context, the role of special education teachers becomes central. Teachers are expected not only to deliver curriculum content but also to provide targeted and differentiated instruction that meets the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities (Zhou et.al, 2024). Effective reading instruction, particularly for students with learning disabilities, demands specialised pedagogical knowledge, including an understanding of phonics-based instruction, structured literacy approaches, and strategies for supporting decoding and comprehension. However, existing research suggests that many teachers lack sufficient preparation and confidence in delivering evidence-based reading instruction, especially in inclusive and special education settings (Lawrence et.al, 2024; Guthrie et. Al, 2012). This issue is further compounded at the secondary level, where instructional priorities often shift towards content delivery, leaving foundational literacy needs insufficiently addressed (Duke et.al, 2021). Although a growing body of research has examined reading instruction in early and primary education, relatively limited attention has been given to secondary school contexts, particularly within special education settings. This represents a

significant gap, as many students with learning disabilities enter secondary school without having mastered basic reading skills. Consequently, teachers at this level are required to address both foundational literacy deficits and age-appropriate curriculum demands simultaneously. In many cases, this dual responsibility creates tension between instructional expectations and practical classroom realities.

In addition to pedagogical challenges, systemic constraints such as limited instructional time, heavy workload, and insufficient access to structured teaching resources further affect teachers' ability to implement effective reading instruction (Nation K, 2019; Zhou et.al, 2024). While policy frameworks in many countries emphasise inclusive education and equitable learning opportunities, there is often a disconnect between these policy intentions and actual classroom practices (Lindstrom et al., 2024). Understanding teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs is therefore essential in identifying the factors that influence instructional effectiveness and in informing the design of sustainable professional development initiatives.

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to explore special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within a secondary school context. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the study aims to gain in-depth insights into teachers' understanding of reading instruction, their readiness to implement reading interventions, and the types of professional and instructional support required in secondary special education classrooms. The study also examines how teachers apply reading instruction strategies in practice and the challenges they encounter during implementation. By focusing on these interconnected dimensions, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher capacity and reading instruction for students with learning disabilities. The findings are expected to provide implications for teacher preparation, professional development, and instructional support in secondary special education settings.

Reading Instruction for Student with Learning Disabilities

Reading difficulties among students with learning disabilities have been widely documented, particularly in relation to deficits in phonological processing, decoding, and reading comprehension (Soosar S, 2024). These learners often require explicit, systematic, and structured instruction to develop foundational reading skills effectively. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of phonics-based and structured literacy approaches, which emphasise the relationship between sounds and symbols, as well as the development of decoding skills through repeated and guided practice. Such approaches have been shown to significantly improve reading outcomes, especially for students who struggle with conventional reading instruction.

Despite strong empirical support for structured reading instruction, many students with learning disabilities continue to experience persistent literacy challenges. This issue becomes more pronounced at the secondary level, where instructional focus tends to shift towards subject-specific content rather than foundational literacy skills (Yeatman J. & White A., 2021). As a result, students who have not mastered basic reading skills in earlier years often continue to struggle academically, highlighting the need for sustained and targeted reading instruction beyond primary education.

Teacher Knowledge and Pedagogical Capacity in Reading Instruction

The effectiveness of reading instruction is closely linked to teachers' pedagogical knowledge and instructional capacity. Shulman's concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) underscores the importance of teachers' ability to integrate subject matter knowledge with appropriate teaching strategies (Shulman, 1987; Shulman, 2005). In the context of reading instruction, this includes knowledge of phonics, language structures, and evidence-based instructional practices. Teachers must also be able to diagnose students' reading difficulties and adapt their instruction accordingly.

However, research indicates that many teachers, including those in special education, have limited formal training in evidence-based reading instruction (Lindstrom & Stewart, 2024; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). This gap in knowledge often leads to reliance on less effective or inconsistent teaching approaches, particularly in classrooms with diverse learning needs. Studies have also shown that teachers' confidence and self-efficacy play a significant role in their willingness to implement structured reading instruction (Conner et al., 2022). Without adequate knowledge and confidence, teachers may avoid or underutilise effective instructional strategies, thereby limiting student learning opportunities.

Teacher Readiness and Professional Development

Teacher readiness encompasses not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes, beliefs, and confidence in implementing instructional practices (Lindstrom et.al, 2024). In the context of special education, readiness is particularly important due to the complexity of addressing diverse learner needs (Zhou et.al, 2024). Effective reading instruction for students with learning disabilities requires teachers to be flexible, responsive, and equipped with a range of instructional strategies.

Professional development has been identified as a key factor in enhancing teacher readiness. Research suggests that sustained, practice-based, and collaborative professional learning is more effective than one-off training sessions (Lawrence et.al, 2021). Approaches such as coaching, mentoring, and action research enable teachers to reflect on their practices, experiment with new strategies, and refine their instructional approaches over time. These forms of professional learning are particularly relevant in special education contexts, where teachers often face unique and context-specific challenges (Albro, 2025).

Systemic Constraint and Classroom Realities

In addition to individual teacher factors, systemic and contextual constraints significantly influence

the implementation of reading instruction (Goswami U. 2002). Teachers frequently report challenges related to time constraints, heavy workload, and competing instructional priorities. In secondary schools, these challenges are often intensified due to subject-based timetabling and the expectation to cover a broad curriculum.

Furthermore, the heterogeneity of students' reading abilities within a single classroom presents additional complexity. Teachers may need to simultaneously support students at different levels of reading proficiency, ranging from basic letter recognition to sentence-level comprehension. Without adequate resources, structured materials, and institutional support, it becomes difficult for teachers to implement consistent and effective reading instruction. These constraints highlight the need to examine not only what teachers know, but also the conditions under which they teach.

Although extensive research has been conducted on reading instruction and teacher effectiveness, much of the existing literature focuses on primary education or general education settings. There remains a notable lack of research examining how special education teachers in secondary schools understand, implement, and experience reading instruction in real classroom contexts. In particular, limited attention has been given to teachers' readiness and support needs when addressing foundational literacy among older students with learning disabilities.

This study addresses this gap by exploring special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within a secondary school context. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, the study provides in-depth insights into teachers' lived experiences, instructional practices, and the challenges they encounter. In doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on teacher capacity, instructional quality, and the sustainability of literacy interventions in special education.

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within a secondary school context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the study seeks to gain in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The case study design allows for a detailed examination of a bounded system in this case, a group of special education teachers working within a specific school setting while considering the contextual factors that influence their practices.

This approach is particularly suitable for investigating complex educational phenomena where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. By focusing on a real-life setting, the study provides rich, contextualised insights into how teachers understand and implement reading instruction, as well as the challenges they encounter in their daily practice.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in a secondary school offering a Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) in Malaysia. This setting was selected due to its relevance to the study focus, as it caters to students with learning disabilities who often experience persistent reading difficulties.

A total of ten special education teachers participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in teaching students with learning disabilities and their experience in delivering reading instruction. The teachers varied in terms of teaching experience, training background, and exposure to structured reading instruction, allowing for a diverse range of perspectives to be captured.

All participants were actively engaged in teaching reading within their classrooms, making them well-positioned to provide insights into instructional practices, challenges, and support needs in real educational contexts.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which served as the main instrument for capturing teachers' perspectives and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allow for flexibility in probing participants' responses while ensuring that key areas of inquiry are consistently addressed across all participants.

The interview protocol was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on reading instruction, teacher knowledge, and professional readiness. Questions focused on areas such as teachers' understanding of reading instruction, their confidence in teaching reading, instructional strategies used, and the challenges they face in classroom implementation.

Each interview was conducted individually and lasted approximately **45 to 60 minutes**. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. This process ensured accuracy and allowed for detailed examination of participants' responses.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability in identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data.

The analysis process involved several stages. First, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where meaningful segments of data were identified and labelled. The codes were then organised into broader categories, leading to the development of themes that captured key patterns across the dataset.

Themes were reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure that they accurately represented the data and addressed the research objectives. Throughout the analysis process, attention was given to identifying both common patterns and variations in teachers' experiences, enabling a

comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the quality and credibility of the study, several strategies were employed in line with established criteria for qualitative research.

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of verbatim transcripts, allowing for accurate representation of their perspectives. Member checking was also conducted, whereby participants were given the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of their responses.

Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear and systematic audit trail of the research process, including data collection, coding, and theme development. This ensures that the study can be followed and evaluated by other researchers.

Confirmability was ensured through reflexive practices, where the researcher remained aware of potential biases and grounded interpretations in the data.

Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context and participants, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

All data were securely stored, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings to protect participants' identities. The study adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process, ensuring respect, transparency, and integrity.

FINDINGS

The analysis of interview data revealed four main themes related to special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading; (i) limited pedagogical knowledge of structured reading instruction, (ii) developing instructional readiness through practice, (iii) contextual and systemic constraints, and (iv) need for structured support and resources.

3.1 Limited Pedagogical Knowledge of Structured Reading Instruction

The findings indicate that many teachers initially demonstrated limited knowledge of structured reading instruction, particularly in relation to phonics-based approaches. While teachers were generally aware of the importance of reading, their understanding of how to systematically teach reading especially through phonological and decoding processes was often superficial.

Several teachers reported relying on traditional approaches such as syllable spelling, word memorisation, or textbook-based reading, rather than structured phonics instruction. This suggests a gap between general teaching practices and evidence-based reading instruction for students with learning disabilities.

"I usually ask students to read from the textbook or spell the words. I am not very sure how to teach using phonics step by step."

Teachers also expressed uncertainty in diagnosing students' reading difficulties, particularly in identifying specific issues related to phonological awareness and decoding. This lack of specialised knowledge limited their ability to provide targeted instruction.

Overall, the findings highlight that teacher knowledge remains a critical starting point, influencing both instructional decisions and confidence in teaching reading.

3.2 Developing Instructional Readiness Through Practice

Despite initial limitations, the findings show that teachers' readiness to teach reading improved

through practice and experience. As teachers became more engaged in implementing reading activities, they gradually developed greater confidence and flexibility in their instructional approaches.

Teachers reported that repeated exposure to teaching reading, along with opportunities to reflect on their practices, helped them better understand students' needs and adjust their strategies accordingly. This process reflects a shift from uncertainty to increased instructional awareness.

"At first, I was not confident, but after doing it several times, I started to understand how students respond and what works for them."

Teachers also became more responsive to individual student differences, adapting their instruction based on students' abilities, attention span, and learning pace. This suggests that readiness is not static, but develops progressively through engagement and reflection.

The findings emphasise the importance of practice-based learning in building teacher capacity, particularly in complex teaching contexts such as special education.

3.3 Contextual and Systemic Constraints in Implementation

The study found that teachers faced multiple contextual and systemic challenges that affected the implementation of reading instruction. One of the most prominent challenges was time constraint, as teachers struggled to allocate consistent time for reading instruction within a packed teaching schedule.

Teachers reported that reading sessions were often conducted informally or during "available time," rather than as part of a structured timetable.

"Sometimes we do reading when there is free time, but it is not fixed because we have many other subjects to teach."

In addition to time constraints, teachers highlighted heavy workload and multiple responsibilities, including administrative tasks, co-curricular activities, and managing diverse

student needs. These demands reduced their ability to plan and implement structured reading instruction consistently.

Another key challenge was the heterogeneity of students' reading abilities within the same classroom. Teachers had to simultaneously support students at different levels, from basic letter recognition to simple sentence reading, making it difficult to maintain a structured instructional approach.

These findings demonstrate that instructional challenges are not solely teacher-related, but are also shaped by broader systemic and contextual factors.

3.4 Need for Structured Support and Instructional Resources

The findings strongly highlight teachers' need for structured support, resources, and professional guidance in teaching reading. Teachers consistently expressed the need for clear instructional frameworks, particularly in implementing phonics-based approaches.

Many teachers reported that having access to structured teaching materials, such as phonics modules and guided activities, helped them organise their teaching more effectively and reduced uncertainty in lesson planning.

"When there is a module, it is easier because we just follow step by step. If not, we are not sure what to teach next."

Teachers also emphasised the importance of continuous professional development, particularly training that is practical, context-based, and directly applicable to classroom teaching. They expressed a preference for learning approaches that involve demonstration, collaboration, and reflection, rather than theoretical training alone.

In addition, teachers highlighted the need for institutional support, including structured scheduling, reduced workload, and collaborative opportunities with other educators.

Overall, the findings suggest that improving reading instruction requires not only enhancing

teacher knowledge but also strengthening the support system surrounding teachers.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within a secondary school context. The findings reveal a complex interaction between teacher capacity, instructional practice, and contextual constraints, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for improving reading instruction for students with learning disabilities.

Teacher Knowledge as a Foundational Constraint

The findings indicate that teachers' limited knowledge of structured reading instruction, particularly phonics-based approaches, serves as a key barrier to effective teaching. This aligns with previous research suggesting that many teachers lack sufficient preparation in evidence-based literacy instruction, especially in special education contexts. The reliance on traditional methods such as memorisation and syllable spelling reflects a gap between research-informed practices and classroom implementation.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which emphasises the importance of integrating subject knowledge with appropriate teaching strategies. Without a strong foundation in how reading develops and how it should be taught, teachers may struggle to deliver effective instruction, particularly for students with learning disabilities who require explicit and systematic approaches.

This highlights the need to reconceptualise teacher preparation programmes to include a stronger focus on structured literacy, ensuring that teachers are equipped with both theoretical understanding and practical instructional skills.

Readiness as a Dynamic and Practice-Based Construct

An important contribution of this study is the identification of teacher readiness as a dynamic

and evolving process, rather than a fixed attribute. While teachers initially reported low confidence, their readiness improved through repeated practice, reflection, and engagement in teaching reading.

This finding is consistent with literature on teacher professional learning, which emphasises the importance of experiential and reflective practices in developing instructional competence. Rather than relying solely on formal training, teachers benefit from opportunities to engage in real classroom practice, experiment with strategies, and reflect on student responses.

The findings also resonate with models of situated learning, where knowledge is constructed through active participation in authentic contexts. In this study, teachers' growing confidence and adaptability demonstrate how readiness can be developed over time when teachers are supported to engage meaningfully with instructional practices.

The Role of Contextual and Systemic Constraints

Beyond individual teacher factors, the study highlights the significant influence of contextual and systemic constraints on instructional practice. Time limitations, heavy workload, and competing responsibilities were consistently reported as barriers to implementing structured reading instruction.

These findings support existing research indicating that educational reforms often fail at the implementation stage due to a lack of alignment between policy expectations and classroom realities. While teachers may recognise the importance of reading instruction, structural constraints limit their ability to translate this understanding into consistent practice.

The heterogeneity of student abilities further complicates instruction, requiring teachers to differentiate their teaching while maintaining instructional coherence. This underscores the need for systemic solutions that address not only teacher capacity but also organisational and structural conditions within schools.

The Importance of Structured Support Systems

A key implication of the findings is the importance of structured support systems in enhancing reading instruction. Teachers expressed a strong need for clear instructional frameworks, structured teaching materials, and ongoing professional support.

This finding reinforces the literature on effective professional development, which emphasises the role of sustained, practice-based, and collaborative learning. The use of structured materials, such as phonics modules, was found to support teachers in organising instruction and reducing uncertainty, particularly for those with limited prior knowledge.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of institutional support, including structured scheduling and reduced workload, to enable teachers to implement reading instruction more effectively. This suggests that improving literacy outcomes requires a system-wide approach, rather than focusing solely on individual teacher performance.

Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it extends existing research on reading instruction by focusing on secondary special education contexts, an area that remains underexplored. While much of the literature emphasises early literacy, this study highlights the continued need for foundational reading instruction among older students with learning disabilities.

Second, the study provides empirical evidence on teacher capacity development, demonstrating how knowledge, readiness, and practice interact in real classroom settings. The identification of readiness as a dynamic process offers a more nuanced understanding of teacher development in special education.

Third, the study highlights the importance of aligning teacher training, instructional resources, and systemic support, offering practical insights for policymakers and educators. These findings

suggest that sustainable improvement in reading instruction requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the education system.

CONCLUSION

This study explored special education teachers' knowledge, readiness, and support needs in teaching reading within a secondary school context. The findings reveal that while teachers recognise the importance of reading instruction, their ability to implement effective practices is influenced by a combination of limited pedagogical knowledge, evolving instructional readiness, and significant contextual constraints. At the same time, the study highlights the potential for improvement when teachers are supported through structured materials, collaborative practices, and opportunities for reflective engagement.

A key conclusion of this study is that teacher capacity in reading instruction cannot be viewed as a fixed attribute, but rather as a developmental process shaped by experience, practice, and support. Teachers' readiness to teach reading improved over time as they engaged in instructional practice and reflection, suggesting that professional growth is best supported through sustained, context-based learning rather than one-off training initiatives. This underscores the importance of designing professional development that is practical, ongoing, and closely aligned with classroom realities.

The study also emphasises that improving reading outcomes for students with learning disabilities requires more than enhancing teacher knowledge alone. Systemic factors such as time allocation, workload, and access to appropriate teaching resources play a crucial role in shaping instructional practices. Without addressing these

structural constraints, efforts to improve literacy instruction are unlikely to achieve sustained impact. Therefore, a coordinated approach that integrates teacher development, instructional resources, and institutional support is essential.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest several implications. First, teacher education and in-service training programmes should place greater emphasis on structured literacy approaches, particularly phonics-based instruction tailored for older learners with reading difficulties. Second, schools should consider implementing structured reading programmes with clear instructional guidelines and materials to support teachers in delivering consistent instruction. Third, there is a need to create supportive school environments that allow teachers sufficient time and flexibility to conduct targeted reading interventions.

In terms of policy, the study highlights the need for greater alignment between inclusive education goals and classroom-level implementation. Policymakers should consider providing targeted support for reading instruction in secondary special education settings, including the development of age-appropriate materials and professional learning frameworks for teachers.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on reading instruction in special education by foregrounding the experiences of teachers in secondary school contexts. Future research could expand on this work by examining the impact of specific instructional interventions on student reading outcomes, as well as exploring collaborative models of teacher development across different school settings.

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AUTHOR DECLARATION

The author declares that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published previously, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged. The author further declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in improving the clarity, grammar, and overall language of the manuscript. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretations presented in this study are the sole responsibility of the author.