



LITERACY & THE RIGHT TO BASIC EDUCATION

RESULT 13.1

By: Sipesihle Mguga, Ona Xolo, Sheniece Linderboom and Cameron McConnachie



EDUCATION IS THE
FOUNDATION UPON WHICH
WE BUILD OUR FUTURE.

Christine Gregoire



CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

pg 01

PART A

Social and Legal Context

pg 02

PART B

Literature Review

pg 11

PART C

Government Interventions
and Data Analysis

pg 19

PART D

Improvement Recommendations

pg 33

INTRODUCTION

THE INABILITY OF SOUTH AFRICAN LEARNERS TO READ FOR MEANING HAS PLAGUED OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR MANY YEARS.

The most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021)¹ statistics released in 2023 revealed that 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language. This is up from the 78% in 2016. These extremely low literacy rates have spurred on numerous stated promises to address the poor levels of literacy in the country through various government interventions. The effectiveness of these interventions continues to be scrutinised, with few indications that they are successful.

This paper reviews numerous government interventions from as early as 2005 to date to understand their effectiveness and to make recommendations on possible steps, particularly legal ones, necessary to make improvements.

THIS PAPER IS PRESENTED IN FOUR PARTS:

PART A outlines the social and legal context of the literacy problem in South Africa and the extent of the crisis. We also touch on the importance of literacy and what our Constitution and courts say about the right to education in relation to literacy.

PART B reviews the literature on literacy policies, strategies, frameworks, and interventions.

PART C looks at the specific interventions and provides commentary on:

- i) whether the literacy interventions are being implemented, and if not;
- ii) the reasons behind the lack of implementation of these literacy interventions.

PART D will present the Legal Resources Centre's recommendations on legal interventions to improve literacy levels at the foundation phase.



81%

**OF GRADE 4
LEARNERS IN
SOUTH AFRICA
CANNOT READ**



*EDUCATION IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON
WHICH YOU CAN USE TO CHANGE THE WORLD.*

Nelson Mandela



PART

A

SOCIAL AND
LEGAL CONTEXT

SOCIAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT

SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IS IN AN ONGOING CRISIS.

The majority of the country's nearly 24 000 public primary and secondary schools are failing to provide access to quality, inclusive and equitable basic education.

Systemic failures in the basic education system include: the inequitable distribution of education resources; a literacy crisis beginning at the foundation level; unaccountable delays in the provision of crucial early childhood development; and neglectful accountability in implementing legislative frameworks designed to mitigate barriers to accessing quality and inclusive basic education.

The following statistics paint a shocking and disturbing picture of how dire the crisis is in our basic education system:

- i. In 2019, 63% of children in South Africa did not receive any form of childhood development (no daycare centre, crèche, access to an early childhood development (ECD) centre, nursery school or pre-primary school).
- ii. The 2021 PIRLS reported that 81% of Grade 4 learners (grade age norm is ten years old) in South Africa could not read for meaning in any language, including their home language, up from 78% in 2016.
- iii. Forty-percent of learners will drop out of school before writing their matric examination.
- iv. Only 15 to 20% of learners entering school in Grade 1 leave school with a high school pass that grants them access to higher education, and most of those learners come from high-fee-paying schools.

The prevalence of low-quality matric passes and high drop-out rates are a polycentric problem, but many commentators agree that low literacy levels are a significant contributor. The ability to read for meaning is an essential component of the right to basic education.² The impact of illiteracy is that there are likely to be ill effects on children, which may be difficult - if not impossible - to reverse. First, the lack of literacy affects a child's academic performance. All academic subjects involve reading, writing, and understanding, and if a learner cannot understand what they are reading, or they cannot read at all, they will not be able

to make progress in their learning.³ It is important for learners to learn how to read in the first three years as there is no explicit teaching of how to read after Grade 3. If a learner is poor at reading at the end of Grade 3, it is unlikely that he/she will make sufficient improvement to be able to read and understand all of the texts required in order to engage with the curriculum from Grade 4 onwards. The lack of literacy also has an impact on whether a child stays in school. A learner may decide to drop out of school because they feel that they have tried their best to improve their academic performance, but they have lost all hope as the curriculum is inaccessible without the ability to read for meaning.⁴

Considering the important role that literacy plays in a learner's ability to realise their right to basic education as enshrined in the South African Constitution, the inability of 81% of Grade 4 learners to read for meaning is a serious indictment of the state's ability to provide quality basic education. Structurally, South Africa maintains one of the most unequal education systems in the world. Black learners in the country continue to suffer from multiple forms of intersecting disadvantages and barriers to accessing quality and inclusive education, and a serious obstacle to using education as a tool to address systemic inequalities in South Africa. In the context of our jurisprudence that guarantees an immediately realisable right to basic education, we pose the question: Do learners have recourse to the law in trying to assert their rights in relation to education generally and literacy in particular?

Section 29 (a) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides that everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education. The Constitution deals with the right to basic education differently from other rights. This was clearly articulated in *Governing Body of Juma Masjid Primary School v Essay N.O* when Nkabinde J stated that "unlike some of the other socio-economic rights, this right is immediately realisable. There is no internal limitation requiring that the right be 'progressively realised' within 'available resources' subject to 'reasonable legislative measures'".

¹ The South African Human Rights Commission, *The Right to Read and Write* (2021).

² C Meiklejohn, L Westaway, A.F.H Westaway and K.A Long, (2021) "A review of South African primary school literacy interventions from 2005 to 2020"(2021), *South African Journal of Childhood Education*. page 4 of 11

³ Strickland, D. Riley-Ayers, S. *Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years*. National Institute for Early Education Research (2006). <<https://www.readingrockets.org/article/early-literacy-policy-and-practice-preschool-years>>

The right to basic education is regarded as a crucial constitutional right and it is widely accepted that reading is critically important to access basic education. In *Minister of Basic Education v Basic Education for All* Navsa JA quoted Kofi Annan, the 7th Secretary General of the United Nations, to emphasise the importance of literacy:

“Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development, an essential complement to investments in roads, dams, clinics, and factories. Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. Especially for girls and women, it is an agent of family health and nutrition. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right”.

This was echoed by President Ramaphosa in February 2019:

“[E]arly reading is the basic foundation that determines a child’s educational progress, through school, through higher education and into the workplace. All other interventions - from work being done to improve the quality of basic education to the provision of free higher education for the poor, from our investment in TVET colleges to the expansion of workplace learning - will not produce the results we need unless we first ensure that children can read.”

The various interventions made over the last three decades in South Africa’s democratic dispensation to improve literacy levels have had limited impact. In 2011, in a pre-PIRLS⁵ assessment, it was found that 58% of a sample of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning, while 29% were reading illiterate. It was posited that whether children are tested in their home language or in English, the conclusions are the same: the vast majority of South African children cannot read for meaning by the end of Grade 4, and almost a third are still functionally illiterate in English by the end of Grade 6.



24k

**PUBLIC PRIMARY
& SECONDARY
SCHOOLS ARE
FAILING TO
PROVIDE ACCESS
TO QUALITY
BASIC EDUCATION**

⁵ PrePIRLS is based on the same view of reading comprehension as PIRLS but is designed to test basic reading skills that prerequisites for success on PIRLS.

In 2015, Draper and Spaull looked at oral reading fluency (ORF) on a large scale using data for 17 772 children in rural schools in Grade 5.⁸ ORF is defined as the ability to read text quickly, accurately, and with meaningful expression. ORF has been found to be a reliable indicator of reading comprehension.

Draper and Spaull found that the English ORF of Grade 5 rural students was very low. Forty-one percent of the sample were considered to be non-readers in English, reading at less than 40 words correct per minute. According to Pretorius and Spaull, developmentally, the greatest growth in ORF typically occurs in the early school years between Grades 1 to 4.⁹ This is why it is important to address literacy in the early years of a learner's life.

There is conflicting information about what is considered the optimal or sufficient reading rate.¹⁰ According to Higgins and Wallace, some authorities suggest that 180 words per minute when reading silently may be a threshold and that a speed below this is too slow for efficient comprehension or the enjoyment of text.¹¹ Others suggest that silent reading rates of ESL readers should approximate those of English home-language (EHL) readers (closer to 300 words per minute), especially if the English Second Language (ESL) is also the language of learning and teaching (LOLT). Despite there being a significant range in what experts believe is an acceptable rate, they clearly illustrate how far behind South African learners are and why the literacy issue warrants urgent attention.

The most recent and reliable study, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016), revealed that 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning using the "Low International Benchmark".¹² While there have been marginal improvements in early grade reading outcomes over the past two decades - 13% of Grade 4 children in 2006, 18% in 2011, and 22% in 2016 who could read for meaning - at this rate of improvement, South Africa will only get to 90% of Grade 4 children reading for meaning by the year 2084. It is worth noting that these are pre-pandemic estimates. According to the Reading Panel's Background Report published in 2023, it is possible to use new research on learning losses in the Western Cape to estimate the likely change due to the pandemic. The assessment used in the Western Cape tested all Grade 3 and Grade 6 children in 2021 in both language and mathematics. The results revealed that the Grade 3s and 6s that passed the language test at the lowest possible level scored at least 30% on the test. At Grade 3, the percentage passing at this low level dropped from 68% (2019) to 59% (2021), and from 85% (2019) to 76% (2021) at Grade 6, with the largest declines seen in learners from low-income households. The report further shows that if the learning losses seen in the Western Cape are experienced by South Africa as a whole (a conservative assumption), then the percentage of Grade 4 children that cannot read for meaning will increase to an estimated 82%.¹³



*NINE-TENTHS OF EDUCATION
IS ENCOURAGEMENT.*

Anatole France

⁸ This was gathered by the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) in 2013.

⁹ E Pretorius and N Spaull, Exploring relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension amongst English Second language readers in South Africa (2016).

¹⁰ K Draper and N Spaull, Examining oral reading fluency among rural Grade 5 English Second Language (ESL) learners in South Africa: An analysis of NEEDU 2013 (2015).

¹¹ Ibid

¹² The next iteration of PIRLS results are expected to be released in early 2023.

¹³ Reading Panel, Background Report (2023) Pg9.

Numerous studies¹⁴ have been conducted to investigate the causes of South Africa's literacy crisis and a plethora of problems have been identified. These range from poor teaching skills, a lack of access to books, poor teaching conditions, and a lack of support at home, to language challenges, curriculum uncertainty, and the absence of regular assessments.¹⁵ In the *"Laying Firm Foundations - Getting Reading Right"* report (2016), Spaul, van der Berg, Wills, Gustafsson and Kotze identified factors underlying weak reading results, and these included insufficient policy focus on early childhood development and primary schooling, language issues, weaknesses in the instructional core (teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skill), home background, and extreme class sizes in the foundation phase.

The next section will review the policies, frameworks, strategies, and interventions that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and other research institutions have developed to address the low literacy levels.

POLICIES, STRATEGIES, AND INTERVENTIONS

The factors that contribute to poor literacy levels are matched by the number and scope of interventions aimed at addressing them.¹⁶ With time, at the macro level, a loose consensus seems to have emerged over what, broadly speaking, the most necessary strategic interventions are to improve literacy.

These were first set out in the DBE's 2008 "National Reading Strategy" (NRS) and can be summarised as:

- i. The importance of continuous monitoring and assessment of learners' reading levels to assist teachers and the national and provincial education departments to identify shortcomings and provide the necessary support.
- ii. Sufficient number of hours dedicated to teaching reading with effective teaching practices and methodologies.
- iii. The provision of ongoing teacher training on the best teaching strategies and practices, with ongoing support from district curriculum officials.
- iv. The effective prioritisation of the management of literacy teaching, particularly by the principal.
- v. The critical role that having sufficient, available, quality reading resources in schools plays for teaching reading.
- vi. The need for ongoing research, partnerships, and advocacy.



15 - 20%

**OF LEARNERS ENTERING
SCHOOL IN GRADE 1 LEAVE
SCHOOL WITH A HIGH
SCHOOL PASS**



¹⁴ Laying Firm Foundations Getting Reading Right - May 2016 (This project was done to investigate the causes of weak South African student performance in literacy and numeracy in the Foundation Phase Grades 1 - 3), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study - 2016, The Early Grade Reading Study - 2017

¹⁵ National Reading Strategy (Pg 8 -10), February 2008

¹⁶ Amongst many others, the Eastern Cape Reading Plan, Western Cape Reading Strategy, KwaZulu-Natal Reading Plan, Gauteng Reading Plan, the Limpopo Reading for Meaning Improvement, The National Integrated Plan for Early Childhood Development (NIP-ECD) launched in 2015 aimed to improve access quality ECD services for all South Africans children including literacy development, The Read-to-Lead Campaign launched in 2012, The Accelerated Reader Programme-introduced in 2014, the Foundation Phase Reading Improvement Programme.

The more general/systemic aims of the NRS include putting reading firmly on the school agenda, clarifying and simplifying curriculum expectations, promoting reading across the curriculum to affirm and advance the use of all languages, encouraging reading for enjoyment, and ensuring that not only teachers, learners and parents understand their role in improving and promoting reading, but also the broader community. The ultimate goal of this NRS is that all learners must be able to read basic texts (for meaning) by the end of Grade 3. The NRS implores all reading interventions to align with the NRS and has informed the development of at least two provincial reading plans: the Eastern Cape Reading Plan (2019) and the Western Cape Reading Strategy (2020), both of which reflect the six strategic interventions outlined above.

Despite being in place for more than 13 years, the NRS's status and uptake is unclear. Literacy rates remain appallingly low, and nothing suggests this is likely to change soon. Seemingly excellent strategies have been developed to improve literacy rates in South Africa; however, very much like the NRS, their full implementation remains a problem. In 2019, the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) pioneered the production and distribution of books to every Grade 1 to Grade 3 child.¹⁷ These books were anthologies of graded readers that increase in difficulty. These anthologies were distributed to 463 276 children.¹⁸

The DBE has designed different interventions to address the low levels of literacy in the country. In the North West and Mpumalanga, the DBE initiated the Early Grade Reading Study,¹⁹ and thereafter contributed to the development of two reading plans, one in the Eastern Cape (the Eastern Cape Reading Plan) and the other in the Western Cape (the Western Cape Reading Strategy).

A review of literacy interventions in South African primary schools published in August 2021²⁰ examined reports and articles on literacy interventions published between 2005 and 2020. The review paper's primary focus was the impact of four large-scale interventions and 17 small-scale interventions aimed at addressing South Africa's literacy crisis in schools,²¹ by strengthening the relationship and interface between learners, teachers, and resources.²²

The main inputs of the various literacy interventions reviewed included a combination of teacher training workshops, in-classroom coaching, scripted lesson plans, literacy resources, and assessment tools.²³ Sadly, the impact of the interventions was negligible, and the authors found that little progress is being made in addressing low literacy levels.²⁴

The authors concluded that "the interventions under consideration have had some positive impact and they do provide pointers to successful approaches, models or pedagogies, but are not making a significant dent on South Africa's literacy challenges".²⁵

They further deduce that "there is little evidence of large-scale, coordinated interventions implemented over sustained periods to make the required impact on national literacy levels".²⁶

The 2017 Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) evaluation report,²⁷ like the review paper findings, emphasises teacher training and support, literacy resources, teaching reading and writing, and assessment oversight as key pillars of interventions aimed at improving literacy levels in South African schools. The report also recommends that "the Department of Basic Education (DBE) must collaborate with universities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and corporate partners to conduct research on effective in-service education and training for teachers" with the sub-recommendation that "Areas requiring the most urgent attention are programmes that enable primary school teachers to teach literacy...".²⁸

These recommendations, while not explicit, suggest the need for increased investment in literacy-improving interventions. If there are inadequate efforts to address the key pillars, South African schools' low literacy levels will persist.

It is evident that the DBE and the Provincial Departments of Education (PEDs) are aware of the literacy problems and, importantly, have identified ways to try and address them. However, there is very little evidence to suggest that the interventions or policies are being consistently implemented, properly funded, or appropriately supported.

¹⁷ This was a collaboration between the Eastern Cape Department of Education, Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy, the Zenex Foundation, and the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation

¹⁸ <http://ecdoe.co.za/news/detail/eastern-cape-pioneers-book-printing-and-distribution-scheme-to-pupils#> (accessed 17 May 2021)

¹⁹ Early Grade Reading Study was a study conducted by the Department of Basic Education to formulate the best ways to support the teaching of reading in the African languages in the foundation phase by comparing different approaches, with onsite coaching and a parental support programme.

²⁰ Meiklejohn, C., Westaway, L., Westaway, A.F.H. & Long, K.A., 2021, 'A review of South African primary school literacy interventions from 2005 to 2020', *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 11(1), a919. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v11i1.919>

²¹ Large-scale interventions are statistically verified, and small-scale interventions are in-depth interventions generally piloted literacy ideas or sought to test mechanisms to improve literacy.

²²⁻²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid at page 9.

²⁷ DPME/Department of Basic Education (2017) Implementation Evaluation of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R to 12 Focusing on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation/Department of Basic Education

²⁸ DPME/Department of Basic Education (2017) Implementation Evaluation of the National Curriculum Statement Grade R to 12 Focusing on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation/Department of Basic Education at page 128

NEARLY
87%
 OF TEACHERS RELY PRIMARILY
 ON GETTING THE ENTIRE
 CLASS TO READ IN CHORUS



None of the literacy interventions or policies developed by the DBE or PEDs are legally binding, and this hampers monitoring, accountability, and enforcement. It is in this context that the LRC argues that there is a need to develop South African jurisprudence so that the right to basic education in terms of Section 29 of the Constitution explicitly includes the right to be able to read for meaning and requires the minister to promulgate literacy regulations to facilitate the achievement of the right.

In the early 2000s, Richard Allington identified six essential elements of effective primary school literacy.²⁹ These were expressed in a handy mnemonic device of the “six Ts” - time, teaching, texts, testing, tasks and talk. Not all have been extensively researched, but at the macro level, consensus seems to have emerged over what, broadly speaking, the most necessary strategic interventions are to improve literacy. South African literacy academics have analysed these aspects through a South African lens and their findings help us understand what most affects reading outcomes in our classrooms. We argue that at least the first four of the “Ts”, viewed through a South African perspective, must be adequately addressed by the state through the proposed regulations as part of the content of the right to read.

We now analyse the key pillars linked to literacy interventions identified in the abovementioned review paper, the 2017 CAPS evaluation report, and other resources.

TEACHER TRAINING

A lack of teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skill has been identified as a major contributor to low literacy levels in schools.³⁰

According to the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit’s (NEEDU) National Report (2012), almost all teachers in the 134 rural schools visited did not have a good method to teach foundational level learners how to read, and the report concluded that nearly 87% of teachers rely primarily on getting the entire class to read in chorus.³¹ When evaluating the reading pedagogy component in one of the classrooms, repetitive chorusing was used during a shared reading exercise.³² Although the repetitive chorusing method showed that the learners were familiar with the story, the NEEDU evaluators note that “...there appeared to be an emphasis on reading as a collective decoding of symbols rather than on reading for individual understanding.”³³

According to the Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) Working Paper 05/16 titled, “A review of the research literature on teaching and learning in the foundation phase in South Africa” (working paper),³⁴ the chorusing method causes several problems.³⁵ Though not exhaustive, the main problems with the chorusing method are that oral discourse dominates, resulting in time lost for reading and writing;³⁶ the classroom interaction pattern creates a dominant collective reaction in which learners are socialised into passive recipients of knowledge;³⁷ limited to no individual interaction with written content;³⁸ and curriculum coverage is limited due to the exercise’s slow pacing.³⁹ According to the working paper⁴⁰ cited above, the barriers to the implementation of learner-centred pedagogies have been identified as resource constraints, low teacher knowledge, and teachers’ deeply held (cultural) ideas about teaching and learning, particularly the conventional relationship between adult as authority and student as learner.⁴¹

²⁹ R. L Allington (2002), What I’ve learned about effective reading - from a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers.

³⁰ Pretorius, E, Spaull, N, Jackson, M, Murray, S. 2016. Teaching Reading (and Writing) in the Foundation Phase A Concept Note; Ayvaz-Tuncel, Z. & Çobanoğlu, F., 2018, ‘In-service teacher training: Problems of the teachers as learners’, International Journal of Instruction 11, 159 - 174. <<https://doi.org/10.12973/iji.2018.11411a>>

³¹ National Education Evaluation and Development Unit. 2012. National Report: The State of Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Phase.

³² The chorusing method involves the classroom teacher taking on an authoritarian role and instructing learners to imitate the information relayed to them in a group setting.

³³ National Education Evaluation and Development Unit. 2012. National Report at page 37.

³⁴ Hoadley, U. 2017. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP). ‘A review of the research literature on teaching and learning in the foundation phase in South Africa’. Stellenbosch Working Paper Series No. 05/16.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid at page 19.

³⁷ Hoadley, U. working paper 05/16 at page 57.

³⁸ This leaves learners at a disadvantage when required to read on their own and ultimately will affect their scores should they participate in individual assessments. (Khanyisa project - Limpopo).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hoadley, U. 2017. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP). ‘A review of the research literature on teaching and learning in the foundation phase in South Africa’. Stellenbosch Working Paper Series No. 05/16.

⁴¹ Ibid.

The DBE also identified teacher training and support as a critical component in the development and successful implementation of the NRS.⁴² Teachers who are unable to teach reading often contribute to the school's low literacy levels because learner-teacher interactions are critical to learning to read. To support teacher development, the NRS emphasised the importance of teachers obtaining "accredited training courses in reading strategies to be offered at tertiary institutions".⁴³ According to the NRS, "teacher development programs in reading strategies, for both pre-service and in-service teachers, will focus on the pedagogy of reading, and will provide special guidance for teaching reading in mother tongue."⁴⁴

The review paper highlighted that almost all of the interventions reviewed had a teacher professional development phase indicating the centrality of teachers in improving literacy results. The study also found that while many interventions see teacher training as a starting point, "large once-off training workshops have limited success".⁴⁵ It was unclear what the teacher training programmes entailed, but the authors of the review paper state that it is "vital to address the quality of literacy teaching" when implementing literacy interventions.⁴⁶

According to the review paper, teacher coaching, pre-service teachers assisting teachers in overcrowded classrooms, or scripted lesson plans could all help to improve literacy teaching.⁴⁷ "Any intervention that does not directly address teacher professional development nor provide complementary teaching will have little impact on the literacy development of South African learners".⁴⁸

In the 2017 CAPS evaluation report, there was unanimity that current approaches to continuing professional development (CPD) are not working despite numerous CPD programmes in Literacy and Mathematics.⁴⁹ According to the Teacher Professional Development Master Plan 2017-2022, for example,⁵⁰ the current approaches to education development are providing on-site based activities which are aimed at enhancing classroom practices and off-site based professional development workshops such as collaboration

with various university institutions to develop and implement quality teacher education programmes.⁵¹ The view that workshop training is ineffective is widespread among district-level subject advisors.⁵² The 2017 CAPS evaluation report found that no in-school CPD was provided at all in half of the sample schools, while the schools that did have CPD were generally confined to attending staff meetings, joint planning sessions and end-of-year moderation.⁵³

Worryingly, four of the five "key blockages" hindering the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) identified by the evaluation report relate to the training of teachers and their use of classroom time: the initial education of teachers (ITE) is insufficient, there is ineffective in-service training (CPD), and there is poor use of time in schools.⁵⁴

One of the questions asked in the 2017 CAPS evaluation report was whether the CAPS training was well delivered. There were significant shortfalls in the training provided to primary and secondary school teachers in the sample.⁵⁵ Of the 22 teachers interviewed in the primary teacher sample, three had not attended any in-service training on CAPS and of the teachers that had attended, three-quarters did not receive any training on analysis of assessment data.⁵⁶ This effectively means that the teachers received no training on what their assessment results meant for their learners. There were also significant shortfalls in training on the Principles of CAPS, Content Knowledge, and Assessment and Methodology.⁵⁷

There was also a widespread view amongst district-level subject advisors that workshop training was ineffective. The reasons given were that teachers are often too tired to concentrate in the afternoons, they have transport and family duties to think about, and when they did attend training, they felt that little was achieved.⁵⁸ Subject advisors also expressed the view that "the ones who need it most don't come to workshops".⁵⁹ These findings were not made directly in relation to the training of teachers in literacy, but they do suggest what the systemic problems are that hinder effective literacy training for teachers.

⁴² Republic of South Africa: Department of Education. National Reading Strategy. 2008.

⁴³ National Reading Strategy. 2008. Page 15

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Meiklejohn, C., Westaway, L., Westaway, A.F.H. & Long, K.A., 2021, 'A review of South African primary school literacy interventions from 2005 to 2020', South African Journal of Childhood Education. Page 5

⁴⁶ Ibid at page 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing on The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 13.

⁵⁰ Department of Basic Education. Teacher Professional Development Master Plan 2017- 2022. Page 9

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing on The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 13.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing on The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 14.

⁵⁵ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 100.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 103.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

There are, however, glimmers of hope. One of the successful interventions, the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), as reported in the 2017 technical report on the Impact Evaluation (technical report),⁶⁰ approached the teacher training component with a focus on an in-depth classroom coach.⁶¹ According to the EGRS technical report, intensive classroom-based coaching over two years resulted in a 40% increase in learning over learners who did not receive any intervention.⁶² Although larger classes of about 38 to 45 learners benefit the most, the authors state that “... in the very largest classes (50 or more learners), the impact of EGRS interventions was smaller, possibly indicating that beyond a certain threshold, it remains difficult to conduct effective teaching.” This emphasises the importance of eliminating excessive class sizes (50+) in the Foundation Phase.⁶³

The long-term future of the South African school systems rests heavily on the extent to which universities are training teachers to address the demands of Quintile 1 to 3 schools.⁶⁴ There is much evidence indicating that the four-year Bachelor of Education degree could be far more efficient if it focused more explicitly on Literacy and Mathematics instruction for primary schools and the pedagogical content knowledge of all prospective teachers.⁶⁵ Importantly, commentators feel the priority should be to develop a programme for teachers to teach reading and writing effectively in the foundation and intermediate phases since all other school learning depends on literacy proficiency.⁶⁶

TIME SPENT ON READING AND WRITING

The National Curriculum Statement (CAPS) for Foundation Phase sets out the time allocation for each subject taken in Grades R to 3.⁶⁷ According to this document, a Grade R learner should spend ten hours a week on their home language, seven hours on Mathematics, and six hours on life skills, totalling 23 hours of learning per week.⁶⁸ Grades 1 to 2 have similar time allocations to Grade R; however, the time allocated for home language is reduced to seven or eight hours per week.⁶⁹ In Grade 3, home language remains at eight or seven hours a week.⁷⁰ In Grades 4 to 6, there are six hours per week that should be allocated to Home Language out of the 27.5 hours of learning.⁷¹ In Grades 7 to 9, Home Language is allocated five hours per week and 4.5 hours in Grades 10 to 12.⁷² But is this enough?

Some experts have emphasised the importance of spending time reading and writing. Reading teachers who were successful “had children actually reading and writing for as much as half of the school day” and were able to limit the time spent on other “activities” that take up time in less effective classrooms.⁷³ Beyond the CAPS recommended standard, however, there is no clear indication of the exact number of hours that should be spent on reading and writing for learners to get the most out of the material. Effective teachers of reading engage in “more guided reading, more independent reading, more social studies and science reading than students in less effective classrooms”.⁷⁴

The CAPS document provides minimum time allocations for Home Language learning so schools can choose whether to give more or less time to Home and First Additional Languages depending on the needs of their learners.⁷⁵ In the Foundation Phase, the Home Language curriculum is divided into three main areas of focus: listening and speaking, reading and phonics, writing and handwriting.⁷⁶ This requires teachers to be in tune with their learners’ needs. Although DBE does not prescribe how the minimum or maximum time should be broken down into different components, suggestions are made to guide teachers through the CAPS document.

The CAPS document makes special provision for reading and writing focus time. This must be done every day, for reading lessons (shared reading, group guided reading, paired and independent reading, phonics) and writing (shared writing, group writing and individual writing, grammar and spelling activities).⁷⁷ During reading and writing focus time, the teacher should do group guided reading with two groups while other children are busy with consolidation activities such as written comprehension, phonics, spelling, grammar and writing, or paired or independent reading.⁷⁸

⁶⁰ Taylor, S., Cilliers, J., Prinsloo, C., Fleisch, B. & Reddy, V., 2017, The early grade reading study: Impact evaluation after two years of interventions, Technical Report. Department of Basic Education, Pretoria.

⁶¹ Taylor, S. et al. 2017. Pretoria.

⁶²⁻⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ JET Education Services. 2017. “Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)”. Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 125.

⁶⁵⁻⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Annexure A - Table 1 - Time allocation for each subject taken in Grades R to 3

⁶⁸ Department of Basic Education and Training. 2011. “Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement Grades R-3”. Government Printing Works. 6.

⁶⁹⁻⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Department of Basic Education and Training. 2011. “Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement Grades R-3”. Government Printing Works. 7.

⁷³ Allington, R. L. (2002). What I’ve learned about effective reading instruction - from a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers. Phi Delta Kappan, 83(10), 740 - 747.

⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Department of Basic Education and Training. 2011. “Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement Grades R-3”. Government Printing Works. 8.

⁷⁷ Department of Basic Education and Training. 2011. “Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement Grades R-3”. Government Printing Works. 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid



PART

B

LITERATURE REVIEW

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHILDREN LEARN THE ALPHABETIC SYSTEM NOT ONLY THROUGH READING BUT ALSO THROUGH WRITING.

When children learn to write, they learn to segment words into constituent sounds.⁸⁰ This makes it easier for learners to get a grasp of how to read or familiarise themselves with letters.

Data from the National School Effectiveness Study (NSES) looks at children's opportunity to learn language and write text.⁸¹ The NSES followed a group of children for three years, beginning in Grade 3 in 2007 and ending in Grade 5 in 2009.⁸² Each year, approximately 16 000 children participated in data collection, with a cohort of 8 383 being tracked over all three years.⁸³

The NSES study found that most Grade 5 learners write in their books only once a week or less. Only 3% of South African Grade 5 learners wrote in their books every day. Approximately half of the exercises in Grade 4 and Grade 5 exercise books were single-word exercises. The lack of written work was identified as one of the shortfalls in South African schools.⁸⁴ According to the NSES study (and various other studies), "writing aids in the retention and comprehension of ideas, information, and experiences".⁸⁵ As highlighted in the NSES study, "the lack of extended writing in books is of the greatest concern as learners only write one paragraph every month and a half of school." The study pointed out that the majority of exercises in the Grade 4 books (78%) were half a page or less.⁸⁶

According to another research report titled "Identifying binding constraints in education: synthesis report"⁸⁷, 44% of Grade 4 learners had not written a single paragraph during the school year.⁸⁸ The report quotes the NSES study by highlighting that "nearly two-thirds of all Grade 4 classrooms in the sample (62% and 63%, respectively) had not written any paragraphs throughout the year".⁸⁹ The NSES study concludes that "because writing occurs very rarely in South African classrooms, it must rank high on the priority list in the South African school system, particularly for children in poor homes".⁹⁰

10

THE AGE AT WHICH CHILDREN SHOULD BE READING



79 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). 2012. Learning to Read and Write: What Research Reveals. <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/learning-read-and-write-what-research-reveals>

80 Ibid.

81 Taylor, N. 2011. The National School Effectiveness Study (NSES) Summary for the Synthesis Report

82 The research design focused nationally representative sample of 268 schools on demonstrating the entire school population, and in order to address this consideration, a was selected for the study.

83 Taylor, N. 2011 at page 2.

84 Taylor, N. 2011 at page 7.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Van der Berg, S. Spaul, N. Wills, G. Gustafsson, M. Kotzé, J. 2016. Identifying Binding Constraints In education synthesis report. Programme to support Pro-poor Policy development (PSPPD). Journal of Education and Practice.

88 Van der Berg, S et al. 2016 at page 9.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

In 2013, NEEDU conducted a writing activities evaluation in 133 rural primary schools from across South Africa, with an in-depth study conducted in four schools per province (a total of 36 schools). In the subsample of 36 schools studied in depth, only 23.7% of writing activities prescribed by CAPS were completed. In five schools, there was no extended writing at all, and in another five schools, there was only one or two pieces of writing from June to November.⁹¹

Learners in some schools write one or two pages per day on average throughout the year, while the majority write a page twice a week or less frequently. These gaps reflect different learning opportunities for learners, particularly in determining whether or not learners have engaged in sufficient writing activities. It is also worth noting that the researchers examined the DBE workbooks and discovered that in the entire sample of 133 schools, more than 80% of the children completed less than one page per day in their mathematics and language workbooks.⁹² While not nationally representative, the 36-school analysis confirms the findings of other studies of a similar nature, highlighting that “not only are the frequency and volume of writing generally far too low, but they are highly variable across the sample...”.⁹³

“*NOTHING WILL WORK,
UNLESS YOU DO.*
Maya Angelou



91 NEEDU National Report 2013 at page 44.

92 identifying binding constraints in education: synthesis report

93 NEEDU Evaluation. 2013

READING

Shared Reading (and/or Shared Writing) as an instruction method is critical according to the curriculum statement for Grades R to 3. It is supposed to take place in the first 15 minutes of the Reading and Writing Focus Time, and the teacher should work with the whole class.⁹⁴ This should happen two to four days a week, and it requires an enlarged text for the whole class to read, such as Big Books, posters, a text on an overhead transparency or individual texts for each child.⁹⁵ Group guided reading⁹⁶ should take place every day and involves the teacher in a session with a group of six to ten children for 10 to 15 minutes, with two groups reading with the teacher every day.⁹⁷ Paired reading can take place at any time.⁹⁸ Children sit in pairs to read together or take turns reading. Independent reading helps develop fluency.⁹⁹ Some teachers give children individual reading to do at home. Extra reading practice, done on a regular basis, plays a vital role in learning to read. This pedagogical approach, however, has proven difficult to implement in many South African schools.

In the 2017 CAPS Evaluation report, it was found that in all the schools that were visited, frequent disruptions to the timetable occurred for a variety of reasons, including, *inter alia*, training, union meetings, memorial services, and choir competitions.¹⁰⁰ At school level, fieldworkers observed how many classes were without teachers during the first period on the second day of the field visit and the last period on the first day.¹⁰¹ On average, 18% of teachers were not in class during each of these times.¹⁰² One of the main reasons for this is that many officials do not accept responsibility for school functionality even though, in terms of their job specifications, they are obligated to intervene in these institutions.¹⁰³

In July 2009, the Minister of Basic Education appointed a task team to investigate the challenges experienced in the implementation of the school curriculum. One of the Ministerial Task Team's recommendations was to reduce teachers' workloads, particularly administrative requirements and planning, to allow for more time for teaching.¹⁰⁴

This is due to the administrative burden associated with assessment and planning appearing to have a negative impact on teaching and contact time.¹⁰⁵ Given the recommendation below to conduct more standardised testing to assess literacy levels and progress, a thorough review of the entire assessment model may be required to ensure teachers are not overburdened with unnecessary administrative and assessment duties, many of which may be of limited value.

The 2017 CAPS Evaluation report indicated that time management is a problem in all four districts interviewed but that no attempt has been made to assess the problem's precise extent.¹⁰⁶ The explanations offered by interviewees for the dysfunction emphasised weak leadership and the negative attitudes and poor discipline exhibited by some educators who are protected from disciplinary action by unions.¹⁰⁷ Other findings include that the attendance register was not kept up to date. On both days of the visit, only four teachers out of 38 had signed in by 10:00, and throughout the previous week, only eight had signed in.¹⁰⁸ The register is, however updated periodically because in the prior weeks the register had been signed by most teachers. Teacher absenteeism is so rampant that at four of the schools, half of the time allocated in the timetable was lost.¹⁰⁹

Ensuring that children receive enough time to develop suitable and age-appropriate reading and writing skills must surely become a priority. We now look at the materials that may be necessary to ensure that time is spent as effectively as possible.

⁹⁴⁻⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Group Guided Reading requires as full set of appropriate graded readers (18-24 titles) which includes a minimum of 8 copies of each reader as each learner in the group must have their own copy of the text for GGR to work as it should. Paired reading can make use of the same set of Graded Readers. Extra Reading Practice requires access to a sufficient classroom/school library with a variety of fiction and non-fiction titles that range from below to above the reading ability of all learners in the class.

⁹⁷⁻⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 113.

¹⁰¹ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 11.

¹⁰²⁻¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 3.

¹⁰⁵⁻¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 85.

¹⁰⁹ ET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 86.

TEXT

Many researchers contend that the availability of reading materials appears to be the most consistent predictor of teacher effectiveness in primary schools.¹¹⁰ Children who do not have access to reading materials perform poorly in school. According to researchers who conducted a review of available data on literacy, a lack of instructional materials, such as syllabi and textbooks to use during the teaching and learning process, has a negative impact on effective teaching.¹¹¹

Schools that are well-equipped with relevant educational resources such as reading materials, libraries, and even laboratories perform significantly better in standardised assessments than those that do not have such resources. The availability of instructional materials such as charts, textbooks, and syllabi, on the other hand, is a major factor that ignites teacher effectiveness in primary schools.¹¹² However, if teachers lack didactical and pedagogical skills and these resources are underutilised, learners will fail.¹¹³ The need for well-trained teachers and sufficient texts is critical for improving literacy results.

The 2017 CAPS evaluation report asked whether teachers had the Learning and Teaching support materials (LTSM) recommended by CAPS. It was found that in district A, the reported shortage was critical, especially in secondary schools.¹¹⁴ The HODs interviewed for this district were unanimous that every year, the learning materials ordered are either short delivered or not supplied at all.¹¹⁵ In the primary schools in District A, the lack of resources was highlighted as a major obstacle to teaching and learning. Even at the best resourced school, there were not enough graded readers for their Home Language or English First Additional Language for learners to read alone.¹¹⁶

Insufficient or delayed delivery of learning materials is pernicious. In 2022, 4810 schools in the Eastern Cape province began the school year without learning materials. The Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) issued a memorandum on 12 January 2022, informing schools and stakeholders that there were delays in the provisioning of LTSM to schools for the academic year 2022 due to a budget shortfall.¹¹⁷ The ECDoE included a plan to resolve the delays in the memorandum; however, the proposed plan was unacceptable because it would have meant that textbooks would be distributed to schools between March and May 2022, despite the fact that the school year began on 19 January 2022. Thousands of Eastern Cape learners were left without learning materials and instructed to rely on materials from previous years. It was not until late March 2022 that learners in the 4 810 schools started receiving learning materials. This came after the Makhanda High Court ordered the ECDoE and the DBE to immediately provide learners in the Eastern Cape with the necessary learning materials.¹¹⁸

The CAPS document includes a list of suggested resources for teaching reading and writing to learners in Grades R to 3.¹¹⁹ While the provision of resources is beneficial to learning, it is useless if the resources are not used in accordance with the CAPS document. The fieldworkers in the 2017 CAPS evaluation report looked at the use of books by learners during their classroom observations in the Grade 2 classroom of the sample.¹²⁰ The most frequently used book was the Mathematics exercise book, which was used in 84% of the classes observed.¹²¹ The next most frequently used book was a Language exercise book used in 58% of the classes observed.¹²² However, the DBE Language workbook was used in 50% of the classes.¹²³ In close to 40% of all the classes observed, however, no printed material, either in the form of textbooks or workbooks, was used during the lessons.¹²⁴

¹¹⁰ Crabbe, R.A.B.; Nyingi, M.; Abadzi, H. 2014. *Textbook Development in Low Income Countries: A Guide for Policy and Practice*. Washington, DC: World Bank; Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SAQMEC 2010);

¹¹¹ Matimbe (2014)

¹¹² Njumba (2013)

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 73. Annexure Table 3: Availability of LTSM in primary schools

¹¹⁵⁻¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) Provision of LTSM for 2022 academic year. 12 January 2022. Memorandum Khula Community Development Project v The Head of Department of the Eastern Cape Department of Education (Unreported Case NO 611/2022 Eastern Cape Division, 22 March 2022)

¹¹⁸ Annexure Table 4: recommended resources for teaching reading and writing in Grades R-3

¹¹⁹ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 74.

¹²⁰⁻¹²⁴ Ibid.

TESTS

The Annual National Assessments (ANAs) were piloted in 2011 and rolled out nationally the following year.¹²⁵ The ANAs consisted of tests written by some 9 million learners annually in Grades 1 to 6 and Grade 9 in Languages and Mathematics.¹²⁶ According to the 2013 DBE report on the inauguration of the ANA, the purpose of the exercise is to expose teachers to best practices in assessment, to target interventions to schools that need them the most, to give schools the opportunity to be proud of their own performance and to provide parents with better information on their children's education.¹²⁷ The programme was suspended in 2016 following resistance from teacher unions.¹²⁸

A review of the ANA, which was commissioned by the DBE and undertaken by the World Bank, points out a major difficulty in attempting to combine accountability with formative assessment. A dominant perception by teachers is that ANA is used by government as an accountability instrument by means of which their work is judged, and a dominant perception by learners is that the ANA is extremely high stakes.¹²⁹

It is not just the test design that needs to be considered in rendering tests horizontally and vertically comparable. It is also the rigorous standardised test administration, scoring and data capture.¹³⁰ Using teachers to undertake the testing promotes the diagnostic elements of the ANA but also compromises its systemic evaluation potential and increases the stakes attached to the results.¹³¹ During the 2013 administration of the ANA a significant degree of cheating was detected, predominantly in the Eastern Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal.¹³²

Furthermore, the reliability of the test results was brought into question by incomplete data capture in 2013.¹³³ Following an analysis of the 2013 data, it was concluded that the majority of districts did not display sufficient completeness of data collection to allow for meaningful district-level reports.¹³⁴ For example, for the Grade 3 level Language marks, only 29 out of 86 districts had at least 85% of learners' data captured.¹³⁵ This can cause high variability from year to year, rendering vertical comparison unreliable.

The implementation of ANA began to raise serious concerns and questions about the initiative's substance and enhancement.

Teacher unions raised a number of concerns about ANA, including the fact that the system is not given enough time to correct itself, the need for a more intensive teacher development programme, and the fact that ANA should only be written after it has been redesigned.¹³⁶ Proposals for the appointment of service providers who would work on the redesign of the ANA programme were also shared during the inauguration. There are others who believe that ANAs can be used differently. For example, run them as a baseline as opposed to a summative assessment. Conducting them in January rather than in October/November would take the sting out for teachers as, essentially, we are testing the previous teacher's work, so it does not feel as potentially threatening. The other benefit would be that it would empower teachers if used as a diagnostic tool to guide teaching for the coming year.

In July 2015, the Minister released the draft National Policy on the Conduct, Administration and Management of the ANA for public comment as an initial step towards redesign.¹³⁷ Through this process, a number of weaknesses and limitations were identified, including, amongst others, that the purpose of the ANA was unclear;¹³⁸ there was a lack of clarity regarding the utilisation of results and data; comparing schools' performances led to competition between schools and "teaching to the test"; and there was an absence of clear protocols for the release and use of data.¹³⁹

Education experts believe that "purpose" is the driving force that determines the design of an assessment, the type and extent of data collection, and the sources of data and levels of analysis.¹⁴⁰ In this light, two possible purposes of national assessment were discussed in the draft policy by academic experts in the field of national assessments. In this light, two possible purposes of national assessment were discussed by academic experts in the field of national assessments in the draft policy. The first purpose is to measure the state of the system by undertaking a high-level assessment of the correctness and effectiveness of policies, structures, and processes. This type of assessment could be compared to international studies like the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ).¹⁴¹ This form of assessment does not make any demands on teachers, and most schools would not be included in the sample.

¹²⁵⁻¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation Of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 48.

¹³⁰⁻¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education. 7.

¹³⁷ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education. 11.

¹³⁸ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education. 10-12.

¹³⁹ Weaknesses of ANA that needed to be addressed continued: not user-friendly; administration process opened itself up to abuse; burden of accountability on class teachers and schools; lack of transparency at various critical levels; unclear link between ANA results and 'subsidy allocation'; no monitoring of planned interventions; verification of the ANA results not related to contextual issues and that ANAs took away teaching time and overburdened school resources

¹⁴⁰ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education 13.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

The second form of assessment is for the purpose of allowing schools to know if their learners are progressing at the desired rate and what must be done to sustain or improve this.¹⁴² This makes it necessary to have a regular universal assessment of all learners in a particular phase, which will provide developmental data to schools and teachers, used only to improve the quality of teaching and the performance of learners.¹⁴³ These results could also be used by schools to signal specific support needed from the District, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and parents.¹⁴⁴

It was strongly advised by experts that there should be an annual, universal assessment of all learners at the end of the Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phases (Grades 3, 6 and 9).¹⁴⁵ The purpose of these assessments would be to identify the strengths and weaknesses of individual or groups of learners in numeracy and literacy.¹⁴⁶ It was further suggested that these assessments should be aligned to CAPS and designed to cover the work of the entire phase and not just that grade. Furthermore, they should focus on the application of content more than the recall of items, but questions of all orders should be included.¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that these assessments should not be considered for progression purposes and copies of the tests, model answers, and results should be freely available as development tools.¹⁴⁸ The draft policy proposes that the primary level of reporting should be at school level to allow schools to diagnose learning gaps linked to CAPS.¹⁴⁹

In addition to the Universal Assessment, experts also advise on a systemic assessment conducted through sample-based assessment.¹⁵⁰ This form of assessment will evaluate the functioning of the system and test the validity of the policies and practices of the DBE.¹⁵¹ Systemic Assessment would also allow for international benchmarking and trend analysis across years, with confidential anchor items and questionnaires administered independently. It is recommended that the assessment be conducted periodically within a two or four-year cycle to avoid the same learners being tested every three years. These assessments should be independently conducted and quality assured, and should place no additional burden on schools and teachers.¹⁵²

The draft policy also indicates that there must be a clear distinction between the types of assessments that can be used, each serving a different purpose. The first is a **summative assessment** tool. The summative assessment approach's goal is to gain a better understanding of whether the learner has acquired the necessary content knowledge or to determine what knowledge the learner has not acquired. The summative assessment tool does not assess the child's potential for learning. The summative assessment method provides little pedagogical benefit because it only focuses on the learner's current knowledge base.¹⁵³ The summative assessment approach can be a good tool if used to structure lesson plans and develop teaching strategies and overall curriculum coverage as it informs teachers about what the learner(s) does not know.¹⁵⁴



*IT TAKES A BIG HEART TO HELP
SHAPE YOUNG MINDS.*

Unknown

^{142 - 144} Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education 14.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education 15.

^{148 - 152} Ibid.

¹⁵³ Hardman, J. 2020. Folly of school assessment in a pandemic. <<https://mg.co.za/education/2020-09-13-folly-of-school-assessment-in-a-pandemic/>>

¹⁵⁴ It is important to mention that teachers, in general share very little information with one another from one grade to the next so anything learnt about a cohort of learners just before they are progressed is effectively lost. Often times, summative universal assessments feel more like teacher assessments than learner assessments. By the end of the end of the year teachers have done all they can do for that group of learners. This perception leads teachers to coach learners through the tests, which then affects the legitimacy of the assessments.

The **formative assessment** approach (formative evaluation, feedback, or assessment for learning) is the second type of assessment that can be used to develop and improve learner content attainment. The formative approach enables learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to improve their self-regulation. The formative assessment approach also fosters teaching and learning skills, either directly by the teacher reflecting on their own practice and their peers' practices, or indirectly through in-service training programs and other interventions designed to address issues identified by the assessment.¹⁵⁵

The current pedagogical culture is far from ideal in terms of formative assessment: there is little learner talk, insufficient frequency and quality of reading and writing, and a lack of meaningful communication between teachers about curriculum issues, pedagogy, and assessment.¹⁵⁶ The formative assessment approach cannot be completely relied on because it is only used to assess how learners engage with the material covered during that period of evaluation. A summative or standardised assessment may be required to supplement the formative assessment approach.

Following the discontinuation of the ANAs after the review in 2015, there was a stalemate with teacher unions regarding the writing and impact of the ANA, which resulted in the proposal and development of another assessment programme, the National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF) - also known as the National Assessment Programme (NAP).¹⁵⁷ The DBE created the draft version of the NIAF, which was completed in July 2016. According to the DBE, the NIAF framework was designed to address the shortcomings of previous assessments through three complementary tiers of assessment, namely a systemic evaluation, a diagnostic assessment, and a summative assessment.¹⁵⁸

The systemic evaluation would be conducted with a sample of learners in Grades 3, 6 and 9 for a three-year cycle, and would monitor learner performance and report on the quality of learning outcomes. The diagnostics tests would be designed to assist teachers to identify and remediate learning gaps, while the national summative assessment would form part of the end-of-year examination conducted at schools.

The DBE proposes that the data from the universal assessments be used to assist teachers, schools, and districts to develop focused interventions; give an indication of any support needed; guide schools in setting standards; provide information to learners and parents; design and attract teachers to targeted development programmes, and to be a common source of information.¹⁶⁰

The DBE also proposes that sample-based systemic evaluation results be used to improve operational systems, guide departments in setting targets in relation to the national benchmarks, provide information on the system to benchmark performance, and enable educators to interpret the information to create interventions to improve performance.¹⁶¹

Interestingly, the draft NIAF displays signs of having considered the recommendations made by experts in the review of the ANAs. The draft of the NIAF, which was completed in 2016, and scheduled to be implemented in 2019, never materialised. To date (April 2023), the NIAF framework has not been implemented, leaving a major assessment gap in the South African education system. Without the data collected from nationwide assessments, it is very difficult to understand and assess the state of our education system and determine how to improve it. It is not clear as to when the framework will be implemented or why it has taken so long.

CONCLUSION

The review above highlights some of the mechanisms that the DBE needs to prioritise to improve literacy levels in quintile 1 to 3 schools. The literature strongly advocates for the following issues to be comprehensively dealt with in order to improve literacy: effective **teacher** training programmes, adequate **time** to be consistently spent on reading and writing, adequate and relevant literacy **texts** made available in all schools, and a standardised **testing** tool developed and effectively implemented per the recommendations in the ANA review and NIAF draft.

Various interventions, frameworks, policies, and research aimed at improving literacy have been implemented in various South African schools. The policies, framework, and interventions were segmented, and nothing was legally binding. We now assess the extent to which specific policies are being implemented and their effectiveness.

¹⁵⁵ JET Education Services. 2017. "Implementation Evaluation of The National School Statement Grade R To 12: Focusing On The Curriculum And Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)". Johannesburg: JET Education Services. 48.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development of a National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education. 6.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Department of Basic Education. 2016. "The Development Of A National Integrated Assessment Framework For 2016 And Beyond". Department of Basic Education 26.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.



PART
C

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS
AND DATA ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW

REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS AND DATA ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

The government's implementation of specific interventions aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the literacy levels of foundation phase learners are numerous. We will focus on literacy interventions implemented by the South African government in quintiles 1 to 3 schools in the Eastern Cape (the Eastern Cape Reading Plan), Limpopo (Limpopo Reading for Meaning Improvement Plan), KwaZulu-Natal (the KwaZulu Natal Reading Strategy), and the Western Cape (the Western Cape Reading Strategy). Quintiles 1 to 3 are classified as no-fee schools, which make up 60% of the country's public schools.¹⁶²

The review is based on information gathered from interviews with schools and DBE officials in each of the provinces. These questionnaires allow us to explore to what extent these literacy interventions have been implemented and what impact they have had on targeted groups, if any. Additionally, we will look at factors that hinder the successful implementation of the interventions.

As mentioned above, the 2008 National Reading Strategy requires the PEDs to provide the necessary resources and support to ensure its success. It would follow that PEDs develop their reading plans/interventions to further detail the plans to improve literacy within the respective provinces. Our desktop research revealed only a few PEDs had developed and released reading strategies, namely, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape. We located an (outdated) 2012 literacy strategy published by the Northern Cape Department of Education, and we have requested a copy of KwaZulu-Natal's reading strategy following media reports of the launched reading strategy to improve literacy in October 2020 (at the time of writing this report we had not received a copy of the strategy). The Gauteng Department of Education does not appear to have a reading strategy.

The Eastern Cape reading plan (2019 - 2023) is built on five strands and three enabling conditions. These strands emphasise the following:

- a Roles and responsibilities: all state officials must support the reading plan in order for it to be implemented;
- b Teaching and training: training for monitoring and teaching reading must be provided;
- c LTSM for reading: schools must be provided with Learner and Teaching Support Material (LTSM) for reading;
- d Assessment for reading: reading assessments must be conducted; and
- e Advocacy for reading: reading advocacy must be undertaken by all parties.



60%

**OF SCHOOLS ARE
NO-FEE SCHOOLS**

¹⁶² Equity and 'No Fee' Schools in South Africa: Challenges and Prospects, Sayed & Motala, 2012

The three enabling conditions are:

- a. Eliminating extreme class sizes: eliminate all extreme class sizes in the Foundation Phase - typically classes with 45 learners or more.
- b. Screening for eyesight and hearing: in accordance with the Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) mechanism, ECDoE will screen all Grade 1 and 2 learners for vision problems and provide spectacles where needed; furthermore, the ECDoE will screen all Grade R and Grade 1 learners for hearing problems and refer them to local clinics if they identified as needing additional support; and finally.
- c. Providing home and community support: the ECDoE will provide resources to parents, caregivers, and communities to encourage reading to children and to promote a love of reading.

The Western Cape Reading Plan (2020-2025) is built on six pillars and they are;

- a. Learner support through various intervention strategies;
- b. Provision of Learning and Teaching Support Material to strengthen teaching practices;
- c. Teacher Professional Development to ensure quality teaching;
- d. Research to ensure that the appropriate strategies are used;
- e. Advocacy through various mediums to ensure mass mobilisation; and
- f. Parental/Community involvement to ensure all stakeholders are involved and fulfilling their roles.

All pillars are underpinned with an e-learning component, monitoring and evaluation and mass mobilisation. The strategy also includes a learning-focused support pathway. The strategy highlights the support pathway, which is a detailed structure of how the reading strategy will be most effective. The three main structures of the support pathway are a support needs assessment, an individual support plan, and a group support plan.

The purpose of the field research was to investigate the DBE and Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) response to South Africa's literacy crisis. As discussed earlier, there is a National Reading Strategy, and a number of PEDs have established plans for improving literacy levels in their respective provinces. The LRC's investigation focused on whether schools are aware of the national strategy and their provincial policy; whether there are problems with implementation; and if so, which aspects are problematic.

METHODOLOGY

The LRC gathered data through questionnaires distributed to 39 schools in four different provinces. Literacy levels are considerably lower in poor, no-fee primary schools (quintiles 1 to 3)¹⁶³ in South Africa and are generally the focus of interventions to improve literacy levels. We, therefore, only selected no-fee schools in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal from which to gather data. The questionnaires were administered in 2022 and took place telephonically, via email and in person.

The schools that were chosen to complete the questionnaire were identified randomly, but there was considerable difficulty in getting teachers to complete the questionnaires unless we visited the school in person. This meant that some circuits or districts were over-represented in some provinces (e.g., Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal) and may not accurately reflect the situation across the province. It is also not possible to make a direct comparison of the findings provincially as the questionnaires were tailored to ask about each province's provincial reading policies. Despite this, general comparisons can be made, and some conclusions will be drawn at the end of the data analysis section.

We now look at the data gathered from each province and will assess the levels of compliance with the national and provincial literacy strategies within the paradigm of the four "Ts". We will discuss whether there are sufficient **texts** in the classroom, **teacher's training** and confidence in their ability to teach literacy, **testing** and how assessments are being dealt with, and **time** spent on literacy. We also summarise the responses in relation to parental involvement and the role of subject advisors, two issues that most reading plans and strategies highlight as important for literacy success.

¹⁶³ The South African funding models creates 5 categories of schools, called quintiles. The schools in the lower quintiles (1 to 3) are declared no-fee schools, and do not charge school fees. These schools get the majority of their funding from the government. Quintile 4 – 5 schools receive a small amount of funding from the government and are therefore allowed to charge school fees.

EASTERN CAPE

The ten Eastern Cape primary schools that completed the questionnaire ranged in size from 200 to 1078 learners. None of the schools suffered from serious overcrowding as none had a class size of more than 45 learners. Sadly, only 22% of the schools questioned were aware of or had even heard of the Eastern Cape Reading Plan, and no school had received the videos or PowerPoint presentations explaining the plan that was supposed to reach all primary schools in the Eastern Cape. No school was receiving the quarterly “Newsletter on Reading Plan Progress”, nor the pamphlets with suggestions for monitoring reading, or the monitoring tools.

In relation to **text**, all Eastern Cape schools were meant to receive foundation phase readers in terms of the reading plan. Worryingly, only 22% of the schools surveyed had received them. On a more positive note, however, half of the teachers surveyed had received the Vula Bula anthologies¹⁶⁴ and eight workbooks,¹⁶⁵ and all teachers either had a basic classroom library or school library for their learners. When teachers were asked whether they had received the various resources recommended by the national guidelines of 2008¹⁶⁶ (including graded readers, independent reading books, sets of small alphabet cards, sight words on sheet cards, lined phonics books, and personal dictionaries), the response was disappointing and indicative of the haphazard manner that the provincial department (ECDoE) works. There is not a single resource that is being fully distributed to all the schools, and for almost all items, less than half of the schools had them.

The picture in relation to **teacher training** was not much better. None of the schools that responded had received the “schedule of training and personal development opportunities.” The Eastern Cape Reading Plan also provides that department heads in schools would receive 50 hours of face-to-face and/or online literacy training every year between 2020 and 2023. At the time of completing the questionnaires in late 2022, two-thirds of the respondents reported that no literacy training had taken place, and the one teacher who had received training was unsure if the training was in fulfilment of the policy. Not surprisingly, the cascade training where department heads would train teachers using the knowledge they had gained did not take place, and only one foundation phase teacher received some of the prescribed 20 hours of training in teaching reading in home language and First Additional Language (EFAL).

Regarding **testing**, the ECDoE Reading policy provides that all teachers will receive the standardised “Reading Assessment Tool Video” on the administration of the reading assessment tool. However, only 40% of the teachers actually received the video and the accompanying training. When the teachers were asked about their learners’ abilities to read for meaning, a wide range of answers were given. One teacher said all their learners could read for meaning, and one reported that it was between 40% and 50%. Two schools reported that it was difficult to know, and both cited rotational timetabling as a complicating factor.

One reported that, *“It’s difficult to tell for 2021 as we were using the rotational timetabling, and that made it difficult to track. Some learners were good in the first quarter of the year but because they did not attend schools as often, they forget what they learnt”.*

Another stated, *“In the entire school, it is hard to say as it differs per term. There are those learners that are fairly good and do not require individual attention. I could say that it is about 20 learners (that can read for meaning). But there are a group of learners who require a bit more work and because of the rotational timetabling, it was difficult to keep track and also get a sense of their progress. I do know that the number of learners that can read for meaning is low in our school, but the learners manage to pass the grade”.*



ONLY
22%
OF SCHOOLS
RECEIVED
FOUNDATION
PHASE READERS

¹⁶⁴ Vula Bula is the first graded reading programme in African Languages where progression from level to level is based on the phonics of each language. The book series was developed by the Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy. The books were developed in the relevant African languages as opposed to being translated, and progress is in accordance with the natural phonic progression of each language.

¹⁶⁵ These were developed by the Department of Basic Education under the leadership of the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, and the Deputy Minister Of Basic Education, Dr Reginah Mhaule. These workbooks form part of the DBE’s range of interventions aimed at improving the performance of South African learners in the first six grades.

¹⁶⁶ The Department of Basic Education gazetted “guidelines” for the recommended reading material which set out what could be described as the minimum package required.



The majority of teachers reported that they use Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)¹⁶⁷ systems to assess their learners' abilities to read. Only two teachers reported using different assessment tools, which were the "Dibbles Assessment Tool" and just "continuous assessments". When they were asked how they felt about standardised testing and whether they thought it would be helpful or not, all the teachers responded in the affirmative.

Below are some of the responses from the teachers.

"We are of the view that standardised testing is helpful. It helps a teacher put things in place".

"I like it. You know where you need to intervene".

"I think this should be the way to go. It would help teachers understand where learners are in terms of literacy levels and how to improve. It would be good to have a flexible system that will allow learners progress to be identified more clearly. Such as pre-assessment at the beginning of the year, an assessment mid-term to see progress, then a quarterly assessment before a final assessment at the end of the year. They must also allow different levels such as diagnostic assessments - giving children who have trouble reading a different approach. These can be theme specific - such as phonic awareness, oral fluency, and comprehension".

"I would be happy if standardised testing for literacy would take place. Literacy skills are important throughout all learner subjects and if we were able to do so using tests, it would be easier to identify where learners lack (ability) and implement some intervention programme for those learners. I think it would be helpful in that way".

"I think that it is a good mechanism to improve literacy. It can really assist teachers",

"It is helpful, gives a benchmark as some learners have different abilities ...".

¹⁶⁷ Early Grade Reading Assessment is an assessment tool used to measure the reading proficiency of learners in the early grades of primary school (typically grade 1-3). EGRA is designed to identify learners who are struggling with reading and to provide teachers with information about their students' reading abilities so that they can plan appropriate instructional interventions.



When teachers were asked about their learners' ability to read for meaning, most teachers reported that their learners' reading ability ranged between 30% - 50%. When the participants were asked what attributed to these percentages, the teachers cited different factors. One teacher who reported that 50% of their learners could read for meaning attributed the improvement to the Whistlestop intervention.¹⁶⁸

One teacher attributed their low numbers to rotational timetabling, stating that, ***"The rotational timetable was difficult to administer, and learners did not register what they learnt adequately. Not enough time has been spent on teaching reading as well as monitoring learners' literacy progress."***

Another teacher also blamed the rotational timetabling, ***"In the last 18 months we have been using the rotational timetabling and this has made it difficult for learners to retain the information they acquired in class because they have been home too long. We had to adjust our teaching schedules to try and assist but not much has changed"***.

One of the teachers from a school where learners had high literacy levels reported that *"Their literacy levels are high because we provide them extended opportunities like attending libraries"*. We asked teachers who reported literacy rates of 50% or lower whether they had reported the matter to the provincial department (ECDoE) and if so, how had the department responded. The responses were very disappointing as all the teachers said they had reported the problems to the department but that their calls for help fell on deaf ears.

When the participants were asked about the **time** spent on shared and group reading exercises, the responses were also varied. Most of the teachers reported spending two to three hours per week on shared reading and two to three hours on group reading. Other teachers reported that the time spent differed per term but that they tried to do reading exercises every day. One teacher reported that she was not too sure about the actual amount spent on shared reading, group reading, and paired reading. She said that she just follows the curriculum and only deviates occasionally.

A TEACHER WHO REPORTED THAT

50%

OF HER LEARNERS COULD READ, ATTRIBUTED THE RESULTS TO THE WHISTLESTOP INTERVENTION



¹⁶⁸ Whistlestop (WSS) was piloted in 2017 through a partnership between GADRA Education, St Mary's Primary School and St Mary's Development and Care Centre (DCC). The basic intention of the school is to improve literacy foundations and capacity. The basic structure that has framed the intervention is that 48 learners per grade are allocated to one of four groups. That is, there are 4 groups of 12 learners each. Each group is taught on a daily basis (Monday to Friday). The length of the lessons for the Grade 3s is 45 minutes, whilst the Grade 6s/4s were taught for 60 minutes on a daily basis. The school implements a 'whole language approach', this refers to a literacy philosophy which emphasizes that children should focus on meaning.

Subject advisors are officials from the Department of Education who provide a supportive environment for improving performance where the required standards are not met and enhance the capacity of teachers to apply the curriculum leadership and curriculum management competencies required in their positions.¹⁶⁹ The issue of a shortage of subject advisors has been raised by several researchers. We asked the teachers about the kind of assistance they received from the subject advisors and how frequently they visited their schools. All of them reported that the number of subject advisors allocated to their districts had decreased.

Subject advisors assist teachers with literacy and reading, so it is concerning that most of the participants reported that subject advisors do not visit their schools often enough and that the visits have decreased. When asked whether they found the subject advisors to be helpful, most of the participants had quite positive things to say. One teacher said, *“Very helpful because they know more than us teachers. They also have access to updated information. They help monitor our progress and give good advice.”* Another reported, *“Yes, they usually provide us with up-to-date information, and they are able to work with the teacher very well. The monitoring really helps keep us on track.”* Another reported, *“Yes, they are helpful, especially in the foundation phase”.*

In conclusion, we asked the teachers what they believed should be done to improve literacy levels at their schools. The teachers provided similar answers, and all stressed the need for more support from the provincial department (ECDoE), and more resources. The need for more parental involvement and reading clubs that learners can join during school holidays was also mentioned.

Below are some of the responses from the teachers.

“We need to have reading clubs during school holidays, (and) more parent buy-in. This is because the foundation phase is all about reinforcement. It makes a huge difference when parents are positive about education regardless of whether they can read or not - just showing interest in the child’s schoolwork”.

“Something confusing is that there are learners who leave the foundation phase, and we are sure they can read for meaning, but then intermediate phase teachers say they can’t. I’m not sure why not. Maybe we need more resources, but I am not sure which resources. More parent involvement. We do run a programme where we try to get parents to assist with homework (the home school partnership) developed by an NGO (Wordworks), but no parents are showing interest. Maybe I could receive more training on how to teach literacy”.

“The department does not seem to support us, but we have put up our learners’ marks on SASAMS and the Data Driven Districts dashboard. Now that we know about the reading plan, we will communicate this to the district and hope they will support us and provide us with updated materials”.

“More time spent working on improving literacy levels, learners being back at school full time, relevant resources provided to schools, professional development for teachers and support from DBE”.

“Eliminate overcrowding (and), we need resources, i.e. books. Our books in the library are outdated”.

“Parents need to be more involved; learners need to learn to engage with books; more training is needed”.

Overall, the Eastern Cape appears to have an excellent Reading Plan, but it is not being implemented. The plan covers the four “Ts” but there has been poor to non-existent take-up of the various “pillars”. The fact that so few of the teachers were even aware of the plan is of huge concern. It is not surprising that there are huge discrepancies amongst schools in terms of the materials teachers have at their disposal, the training teachers have received, the way testing is done, and the time spent on literacy activities in the foundation phase. We now assess the data gathered in the Limpopo province.



A BOOK IS A GIFT YOU CAN
OPEN AGAIN AND AGAIN.

Garrison Keillor

LIMPOPO

Seven schools in the Limpopo province in the Sekhukhune District were visited for this research. Five of the schools were classified as quintile 1, while two did not provide a response but were also no-fee schools. The seven schools visited had enrolments ranging from 166 to 772 learners, with an average of 30 learners for every teacher.

Limpopo's "Reading for Meaning Improvement Plan 2020 - 2025"¹⁷⁰ is a singularly unimpressive document and completely fails to grapple with the reasons for our literacy crisis. Even more concerning is that the plan eschews the four "Ts" and is very vague about practical ideas for how to improve literacy. The recognition of the role that "text" plays in improving literacy levels is found in two of the plan's "deliverables":

- 1 **"Setting up and reviving reading corners in schools. The process of setting up these reading corners will be managed by reading champions and teachers..." and,**
- 2 **"Mobilising reading resources from organisations that are ready to donate readers. These reading resources will be in all languages spoken in the province and housed in reading clubs."**

The only mention of testing is a disparaging one. **"... the restraints caused by standardised testing, grades, and the different 'hoops' learners are required to jump through at different levels in their schooling can damage their appreciation for independent reading."**

That is the sum total of the LDoE's reading plan's engagement with the four "Ts", and it was not surprising that teachers in the province were unaware of any reading plan.

In relation to **text**, and in the absence of any guidance from the province, we asked Limpopo teachers whether they had the recommended literacy resources for Grades 1 to 3 as set out in a 2008 Gazette from the DBE or resources mentioned in the National Reading Strategy. The schools were asked whether they were aware of the recommendations and whether they were fully or partially implementing the LTSM recommendation.

Five of the seven teachers reported that half, or less than half, of their learners had access to a set of small alphabet cards. None of the learners at the seven schools had access to sight word sheets, unlined jotters, or lined phonics books. Only two of the seven schools had access to big books and independent reading books in terms of teacher materials, but these were the only materials available to the teachers at the two schools.

The schools did not complete the questions regarding graded readers or lists of reading words, possibly indicating they were unfamiliar with these resources. Three of the seven teachers did have libraries at their schools.

Little information was gleaned from the questionnaires regarding **teachers** and their training, but two teachers stated they had never received literacy training, and the two schools emphasised the importance of such training for teachers.

In respect of **testing**, six of the seven schools stated that they use the EGRA system to assess learners and track literacy levels at the school. Two schools that used EGRA thought that it was helpful, especially in determining whether learners can read for meaning. One of the schools that found EGRA useful stated that the school sets aside an hour in class where learners read and teachers provide feedback and have used this method to identify learners who cannot comprehend. Furthermore, this exercise revealed that learners were unable to pronounce certain words, which was one of the reasons they could not understand what they were reading.

One school stated that they were chosen to pilot EGRA and implement it in their school. However, it is unclear how long this period lasted and whether it was beneficial in identifying learners who needed literacy intervention. The one school that was not using EGRA said this was because the school was not chosen as a school to roll it out because of low enrolment numbers. The school developed its own assessment tool. The schools using EGRA felt they were not provided with the necessary support or training to use it properly.

In terms of the number of learners teachers thought could read for meaning, the average response was between 30% and 50% of learners. Two of the schools reported that the number of learners who could read for meaning was low to moderately low, and two schools indicated that some learners could read for meaning and comprehension, but the total number of learners in this category was low.

Another school reported that the average number of learners per class who could read for meaning was 40%, and that the school began an intervention in the second term of 2022 to improve learners' reading abilities in the intermediate phase. According to the school, the intervention increased the school's literacy levels by about 60%. The school does not, however, provide any additional information regarding what the intervention entailed or how it was implemented.

¹⁷⁰ Limpopo Reading For Improvement, https://www.edu.limpopo.gov.za/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&download=929:reading-for-meaning&id=37:documents

One of the schools surveyed reported that 90% of its learners in Grades 3 to 7 could read for meaning. Another school reported that 80% of their learners were able to read for meaning.

Only two of the seven schools provided information on how much **time**, or hours per week, teachers spend with learners on shared reading. The two schools did not specify the number of hours spent on shared reading, but one school stated that it happened when the teachers used the foundation phase big book. The school's method of using the foundation phase big book was for the teacher to read and the learners to listen to what the teacher was saying. The second school simply stated that shared reading was an ongoing activity.

In terms of **subject advisors**, five of the seven schools visited indicated that subject advisors assisted the schools with literacy interventions and reading plans. The responses, however, varied across all seven schools in terms of how frequently subject advisors visited the schools and whether this had increased or decreased. Subject advisors did visit the schools, according to the seven schools, especially for the foundation and intermediate phases. One school stated that subject advisor visits were rare, and the school did not receive adequate support, whereas another school stated that subject advisors visited the school every term. Another school indicated that subject advisors normally visited if that school was performing poorly in the district.

It is worth noting that two of the schools where they had visits from subject advisors indicated that subject advisors were supportive and added value or were beneficial to the teachers by providing necessary material and, in certain instances, providing workshops for teachers. It was not indicated how frequently the subject advisors conducted such workshops or provided the necessary materials.

Parental involvement was difficult to assess but appears low. Four of the schools indicated that learners either read to parents or have homework assigned to them, but none of the schools provided a reading book for parents to sign. Four schools stated that they had provided other avenues for parental involvement, such as parent meetings, but that parent meetings are rarely, if ever, attended.

When the schools were asked what they thought was needed to improve literacy levels, one of the seven schools indicated that teachers needed literacy training. According to the school, none of the teachers at that school had attended workshops on literacy. Another school indicated that their school had been identified as one of the schools to pilot the robotics and coding programme but that additional support from the department was required to assist learners with the robotics and coding literacy programme.

Based on the analysis above, the overall impression regarding the state of literacy levels and teaching in the seven schools in the Sekhukhune district was that there are still low levels of literacy. To improve literacy levels, there appears to be general agreement on the need for, among other things, additional departmental support and more visits from subject advisors who appear to provide useful content to teachers and workshopping.





2/12
SCHOOLS DID NOT
HAVE ACCESS TO
LIBRARY FACILITIES

KWAZULU-NATAL

Between February and September 2022, a total of 13 responses were received from KZN schools. Nine were quintile 1 schools, two schools were in quintile 2, and two schools were in quintile 3. The total learner enrolment numbers at the schools ranged from 111 to 1365. The foundation phase class sizes ranged from 12 learners to a whopping 66 learners in a class.¹⁷¹ It is apparent that overcrowding is an issue within the province. Concerningly, of the 13 teachers who responded, only three indicated they were aware of the KZN reading plan.

In relation to **text**, the schools were asked whether they had the recommended literacy resources for Grades 1 to 3 as set out in a 2008 Gazette from the DBE or resources mentioned in the National Reading Strategy. The resources teachers were asked about included learner workbooks, sets of small alphabet cards, sight word sheets, lined phonics books, personal dictionaries, teacher's big books, graded readers, lists of reading words per reader, and independent reading books. Overall, not one of the schools had all the recommended resources in use at one time. When the responses regarding resources are aggregated, approximately 24% of teachers were not aware of a recommendation at all, 1% were aware but not implementing, 57% had heard of and were at least partially implementing the recommendation, and 18% of the recommendations were being fully implemented. In relation to personal dictionaries, one school noted that parents purchased these for their children. Some schools did not answer all the questions regarding resources. Twelve out of the 13 schools responded to the question on access to library facilities. This is one of the means adopted by the National Reading Strategy to improve reading; to ensure that all foundation and intermediate phase classrooms have a "reading/library corner" with exciting story books in all the languages spoken in the class. Only two of the schools did not have any access to library facilities.



¹⁷¹ Four of the responses were not correctly/completely captured.

When asked if **teachers** had received literacy training, seven of the 13 schools responded positively, while six said they had not. The training provided was received from the department. The teachers generally found the quality of the training to be “fair”, and they had learnt reading skills and how to teach and assess reading. Four of the schools said that they were taught how to use the “annual teacher tracker”, though one teacher registered some concerns about the tracker.

“... our teachers use the Annual Teachers Tracker workbook which we were provided during Covid. However, I feel that this workbook is not sufficient. The biggest problem I have picked up is that it means that we are teaching a summarised curriculum. This was practical during Covid as we had learners attending as per the rotational timetable, but I don’t understand why we are still using it. I also feel that it is out of touch with the realities of rural learners as some of the activities the learners are expected to complete are not as easy to complete.”

Interestingly, 87.5% of the teachers responded that they were confident in their ability to teach reading.

In relation to **testing**, all the schools said that learners were being tested for literacy during the course of the year but that the type of tests varied. Ten of the 13 schools supported standardised testing largely because they viewed it as an opportunity to identify problems and then correct them. One school noted a concern about the provincial department (KwaZulu Natal Department of Education) progressing learners. *“I think (standardised testing) would be good but, unfortunately, the DBE will still want us to push the learners that have low marks as they are getting old or there is not enough support for the learners staying in the school for too long”.*



87%

**OF TEACHERS RESPONDED
THAT THEY WERE CONFIDENT
IN THEIR ABILITY TO TEACH
READING**

Most of the schools used EGRA and/or the tools provided in the annual teacher tracker. When asked how many children could read for meaning, the school’s literacy levels were estimated to be between 30% and 80%. Such an enormous divergence between schools raises the question of whether schools are accurately able to gauge the reading abilities of their learners. When given an opportunity to state the reason why they would rate their schools in such a way, this ranged from a lack of support and limited teaching time, to overcrowding and the ability to work closely/one-on-one with learners. Approximately 60% of the schools confirmed that they did communicate with the provincial department when literacy levels were below 50%; however, 71.4% confirmed that they did not receive additional support from the department after doing so.

There was a sizeable range in the responses to the amount of **time** spent in group and shared reading. Five teachers spent less than an hour per week on shared reading, while seven teachers spent between one and three hours on this activity. One teacher spent four to five hours on it in their classroom. In relation to group reading, the majority of the teachers spent between one and two hours engaged with this, though four teachers spent less than an hour on it per week.

When asked about the support provided by **subject advisors**, the schools did not have detailed information on how many schools each subject advisor is responsible for or how many they attend to. The general response was that the subject advisors had a lot of schools to attend to, and so this meant schools usually only received one visit per year from the subject advisor. The schools did respond favourably in respect of the general helpfulness of the subject advisors when called upon to assist. This included assistance provided on the implementation of literacy interventions and reading plans.

In the view of the teachers who responded, **parent involvement** was largely lacking. The teachers felt parents/guardians did not assist due to their inability to read for meaning themselves. Some schools, however, did suggest that the parents were either too busy or not interested in their children’s literacy.

Overall, it is hard to make general observations about the state of literacy in the KZN province due to the small number of responses and the fact that only one district was surveyed. The responses do, however, provide worrying indicators. When coupled with the deficient provincial reading plan, it appears there is an enormous amount of work to do to improve literacy rates in Limpopo.

WESTERN CAPE

Nine of the schools interviewed were no-fee, quintile 1 schools and ranged in size from a tiny 28-learner school in Oudtshoorn to a 1 608-learner school in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Class sizes ranged from 11 to 43 in the foundation phase of the various schools. One respondent did not complete the questionnaire sufficiently for their responses to be included in the analysis.

Encouragingly, 90% of the teachers were aware of the “Western Cape Reading Strategy” (WCRS). While the research data indicated that teachers believe literacy levels in their schools are worryingly low, there were positive indicators that teacher training, resources provisioning, and some testing was taking place.

In relation to whether the teachers were aware of and implementing the various “pillars” of the WCRS, the responses were also encouraging. Seven of the teachers were aware of the “learner support strategies” that needed to be employed and had begun implementing the recommendation. One teacher said that the recommendations were being fully implemented, and one teacher was aware of the recommendation, but the school was not implementing it.

“ EDUCATION IS THE PASSPORT
TO THE FUTURE.
Malcolm X





Six of the nine respondents were aware of and had begun implementing the “Screening Implementation Assessment and Support Policy”, while two teachers said that it was being fully implemented.

Regarding **text** and the provision of materials in the foundation phase classrooms, the responses were generally positive. All nine teachers were providing DBE language workbooks. Eight of the teachers were providing all their learners with access to books. Seven of the nine teachers were fully implementing the recommendation to provide learner workbooks and access to readers, and two teachers were able to comply partially. Six of the nine teachers were providing graded readers in their classrooms, and three were in the process of trying to implement this. The provision of a dictionary to each learner was only happening in one teacher’s classroom. While two teachers were able to provide some dictionaries, four were not providing any, and two were unaware of the recommendation regarding dictionaries.

Regarding the provision of materials for foundation phase teachers in terms of the WCRS, the results were similarly positive. Eight of the nine teachers said they had been provided with access to reading material and posters; seven of the nine teachers had been provided with a curriculum and assessment policy statement, flashcards, alphabet cards and EGRA toolkits; six teachers had been provided with a core graded reader; and four teachers had been provided with games. In those instances where there was not full provision, the teachers were aware of the recommendation, and there was at least partial compliance.

Teachers were also asked whether they had heard of and could implement the DBE’s 2008 gazetted guidelines regarding literacy resources in Grade 1 to 3 classrooms. Seven of the teachers were aware of the guidelines, and adherence was generally positive. Most teachers reported that learner workbooks, alphabet cards, sight words on cards, unlined jotters, lined handwriting books, lined phonics books, lined spelling books, and stationery were all being provided. Only the supply of personal dictionaries (as indicated earlier) was poor. Most teachers had access to “big books”, graded readers, lists of reading words per reader, and independent reading books.

In relation to the DBE’s national reading strategy and access to libraries, six of the teachers reported having a mini-library or reading corner in their classroom, and three said there was access to a mobile library in the community.

Half of the **teachers** have received either online or face-to-face literacy training outside of WCED literacy training programmes, but they all felt the quality of that training was only “fair”. Seven of the nine teachers said they were confident in their ability to teach reading.

Almost all the teachers (eight of nine) **tested** their learners using the Early Grade Reading Assessment on a quarterly basis. Many indicated that it was helpful, but one teacher commented that it was “very time-consuming”. All seven of the teachers who responded to the question of how they felt about standardised testing were positive about it, saying they thought it would be “helpful”. Almost 90% of the teachers (seven of eight) believed that less than 50% of the learners in their respective schools could read for meaning.



50%

**OF LEARNERS IN
SCHOOLS IN THE
WESTERN CAPE CAN
READ FOR MEANING**

Without standardised testing, however, this was just an estimate. All the teachers who believed there were poor literacy levels at their schools stated that the department had been informed of the problem and had provided additional support. When asked what still needed to be done to improve literacy at their schools, the teachers provided a range of responses. One felt they needed a library. One thought offering remedial classes would help. Two suggested more compulsory reading time across the school. Another thought the curriculum should be altered to reduce time spent on unnecessary topics to make way for more reading comprehension activities.

When it came to the length of **time** spent on various reading activities, a range of responses were given. On a weekly basis, teachers spent anywhere between an hour and five hours doing shared reading and group reading. This clearly suggested that teachers feel they are at liberty to teach and practice literacy skills how they choose to.

In respect of the advocacy pillar of the WCRS, which requires a range of activities, including celebrating World Book Day, promoting reading activities, and remedial actions for specific language challenges, four teachers confirmed that this was being fully implemented, while five teachers said they were aware of the specific goals and there was some compliance.

The **parental involvement** pillar of the WCRS seemed to have the least uptake. Only two teachers confirmed they had engaged parents to support the reading strategy; three said there had been some attempts to do so; two said there was no movement on this issue; and one was unaware of the

recommendation that they should be engaging parents.

When prompted with options, almost all of the teachers (eight of nine) indicated that they tried to engage with parents around the improvement of literacy through homework, and three said they required learners to read to their parents/guardians.

The teachers were also asked about the number of **subject advisors** in their district and the frequency of their visits to their school. Only one of the nine teachers knew how many subject advisors worked in the foundation phase in their area (two), and two teachers believed that the number of subject advisors had been on the increase in the last three years. Five teachers indicated that the subject advisors did assist with literacy interventions and reading plans when they visited, but only two teachers felt that they visited enough.

Five of the nine teachers indicated that their school had participated in either provincial or national reading campaigns, including the spelling bee, PSRIP, EGRA, and a Funda Wande programme. Three teachers also indicated that they were aware of the SLP, PRLS, GROW SMART, and T2P interventions.

Overall, the data from the Western Cape suggests that it is doing the most of the four provinces surveyed to address the literacy crisis. All of the four "Ts" are receiving substantial attention, and the estimated literacy rates, while low, reflect an acknowledgement of the extent of the problem. By and large, sufficient text, fair quality teacher training, and some testing are all being supplied or practiced. The one area where there was considerable inconsistency was the amount of time being spent on various literacy activities.



PART

D

IMPROVEMENT
RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

LRC'S RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THE LITERACY LEVEL AT THE FOUNDATION PHASE

In this research paper, we began by setting out the social and legal context of the literacy problem in South Africa and the extent of the crisis. We also touched on the importance of literacy and what our Constitution and courts say about the right to education in relation to literacy. We outlined that the purpose of the right to basic education has been clearly articulated both in statute and by our courts as ***an indispensable tool with transformational objectives and a foundation for a child's lifetime learning and work opportunities***. We contend that it is not possible for this purpose to be realised if the majority of our learners cannot read and write with understanding by a prescribed age.

We then canvassed the plethora of literacy interventions, reading campaigns, and policies which the Department of Basic Education and some provincial departments have developed. As we have illustrated above, however, the literature and interviews with teachers suggest that as excellent as the interventions may be, they rarely get fully implemented, if at all. Unfortunately, because these interventions and policies are not laws, there are few to no accountability measures available to stakeholders to ensure that they are implemented, and there are no repercussions for the department if they are not. We believe binding reading regulations to facilitate the enjoyment of the right to basic education by ensuring that learners are guaranteed of receiving, at the very least, a reasonable opportunity to acquire the skills to read and write for meaning by the age of ten, should be promulgated by the Minister.

Many South African education/literacy experts argue that in order to improve literacy, there must be a concerted improvement in at least four areas, namely, **time, teaching, texts and testing**. We believe that there would be nothing contentious in the development of regulations that covered these four areas, as the proposed content of the regulations has been contained in an array of DBE policies and strategies over the last 20 years. We submit that a clear legal framework in the form of binding reading regulations that clarify minimum inputs, roles, responsibilities, and timelines would be an important development with the potential to accelerate improvements in literacy rates.

As it has clearly been articulated by the teachers interviewed, a lack of access to reading material and quality instruction is a significant barrier to literacy development in many parts of South Africa, particularly in no-fee paying schools. Binding reading regulations will help address this issue by requiring schools to provide a certain level of reading materials and instruction.

Based on the evidence above, the LRC concludes that implementing binding reading regulations that clarify and simplify reading inputs and curriculum expectations will be beneficial for learners with low literacy levels in South Africa as it will help ensure that all learners have access to high-quality texts, teaching, testing and that sufficient time is spent teaching reading.

10

THE AGE AT WHICH CHILDREN SHOULD BE READING







LITERACY
& THE RIGHT TO
BASIC EDUCATION

-  LRCSouthAfrica
-  lrcsouthafrica
-  Legal Resources Centre
-  LRCSouthAfrica
-  <https://www.lrc.org.za>

CAPE TOWN REGIONAL OFFICE

Block D, Ground Floor, Aintree Office Park
cnr Doncaster & Loch Roads, Kenilworth,
Cape Town 7708

Tel: +27 21 879 2398

Fax: +27 21 423 0935

DURBAN REGIONAL OFFICE

11th Floor, Aquasky Towers,
275 Anton Lembede Street,
Durban 4001

Tel: +27 31 301 7572

Fax: +27 31 304 2823

GRAHAMSTOWN REGIONAL OFFICE

116 High Street, Grahamstown 6139

Tel: 046 622 9230

Fax: 046 622 3933

JOHANNESBURG REGIONAL OFFICE

2nd Floor West Wing, Women's Jail, Constitution Hill
1 Kotze Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg 2001

Tel: 011 038 9709

Fax: 011 838 4876