

# Building a strong foundation: Learning to read; reading to learn

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**T**he period from five to 10 years of age is critical in the development of children's reading, writing and thinking skills. This coincides with teaching and learning in the foundation phase (grades R – 3), and continues into the intermediate phase (grades 4 – 6). All further learning rests on these foundations, which should enable children to reach their full potential and function effectively in society. Yet recent studies show that South Africa's learners are falling behind internationally and failing to master basic literacy skills.

This essay explores:

- Why is literacy important?
- What is the scope of the problem in South Africa?
- What are some of the main causes of the problem?
- How can literacy be strengthened?

## Why is literacy important?

Literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write simple sentences. Over the past two decades a broad definition of literacy has evolved. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society".

Literacy does not simply provide educational and economic benefits. It also gives people the tools to access a range of other socio-economic and political rights.



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**Table 9: Performance outcomes of South Africa's learners in PIRLS, 2006**

Percentage of learners at or above the given international benchmark score of:	Mark (benchmark/competence)	Learner outcomes				
		All countries %	South Africa %	Afrikaans* %	English* %	African languages* %
	400 (low/basic)	94	22	55	52	4 – 14
	475 (intermediate/some)	76	13	35	36	0 – 3
	550 (high/competent)	41	6	17	18	0
	625 (advanced/fully competent)	7	2	5	5	0

**Source:** Various tables and textual information from the PIRLS report in: Howie S, Venter E, Van Staden S, Zimmerman L, Long C, Scherman V & Archer E (2007) *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2006 summary report: South African children's reading literacy achievement*. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.

**Note:**\* For South Africa's grade 5 learners with Afrikaans, English or an African language as home language. Ranges of figures reflect the spread across the nine remaining official languages, with Sesotho- and Setswana-speaking learners performing at the top of the range.

Literacy unlocks learning. First one learns to read. Then one reads to learn. In other words, reading becomes the key to unlocking further knowledge and skills.

Research confirms this common-sense understanding. Early learning reportedly enhances learning and information processing later in life. Early success or failure impacts on future performance. Cunha's research team demonstrated how the returns on teaching and learning investment are greatest during early childhood. People benefit most from education and development that occurred when they were eight years old or younger. These benefits also outweigh the costs of attempting to remedy learning problems later in life.

Once set on the learning path, learners cumulatively gather more skills, knowledge and understanding. Logic, common sense and research concur on the benefits of building a strong foundation.

### What is the scope of the problem in South Africa?

South Africa's learners are falling behind internationally. The country achieved the lowest score on the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which evaluated the performance of grade 4 learners from 40 countries. However, South Africa's results were based on the performance of grade 5 learners. Table 9 reveals just how far below international benchmarks the majority of the country's learners performed. Only 22% of learners from South Africa achieved the low benchmark, compared to 94% of learners from all countries.

Language also had an impact on learner performance. Learners were evaluated in all 11 official languages. Those who completed tests in English and Afrikaans performed far better than those completing tests in African languages. In South Africa many learners have a different language of instruction from their home language. These learners

performed poorly compared to those whose school and home languages were the same. This situation also applied to African languages, except for learners who completed the Tshivenda test, although not being Tshivenda-speaking. These findings illustrate how issues related to the language of instruction can further compromise learners' performance. However, learners whose home language was not English or Afrikaans, but were learning through these languages, did significantly better than many who were learning through their African home languages. This finding points to factors other than language that influence learning.

The report also pointed to a range of factors related to the home (early literacy, access to books, parents' level of education and reading habits); learner (attitude towards reading, self-concept, and out-of-school activity); and school (access to books, teaching strategies, and classroom practices) that determined the success of early literacy development.

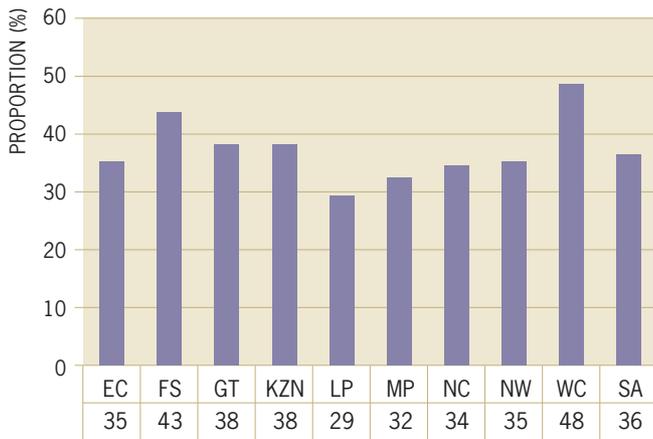
Local findings signal that literacy is already a problem in the foundation phase. In 2008 the Department of Education released the provisional findings from the 2007 grade 3 national assessment.<sup>1</sup> Learners' mean literacy score improved from 30% in 2001 to 36% in 2007. This reflects some improvement in teaching quality, but the low achievement level remains cause for concern. Over half of the learners failed to master the contents of the learning area on which much of their future studies rest.

A range of competencies were evaluated, including reading and viewing text, interpreting written text (thinking and reasoning), and creative writing. Learners performed best with reading and viewing, and worst with thinking and reasoning. Only 15% of the participating schools (23% of the participating learners) achieved the benchmark of 50%.

Variations between the provinces point to the devastating effects of poverty (visible in proxies such as the number of books available at home, parents' level of education and the

<sup>1</sup> The comprehensive report was pending at the time of writing.

**Table 10: Variation of grade 3 literacy scores of learners across provinces in South Africa**



**Source:** Department of Education (2008) 2007 Grade 3 Systemic Evaluation. Pretoria: DoE. [Leaflet]

nutritional status of learners), as well as other factors such as access to books at school, qualified teachers and the effective use of teaching time. Learners from poorer and less developed provinces such as Limpopo performed worst with an average score of 29%, followed closely by Mpumalanga at 32%. Western Cape learners performed best with a score of 48%, followed by Free State learners at 43%. Exploring the Free State situation further may teach us more about effective implementation in rural areas. Table 10 shows the variations across provinces.

In a 2006 study, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) assessed the language performance of approximately 78,000 grade 8 learners in the Western Cape. Here learners scored best with multiple-choice questions but struggled to produce their own written responses. They also had difficulty interpreting texts from other learning areas. Xhosa-speaking learners found it particularly difficult to deal with language content across the curriculum, most likely because of the difference between their mother-tongue and the language of instruction. Of the Xhosa-speaking learners, 41% failed to achieve any significant learning outcomes (ie, they scored less than 29% on the test), while only 1% of these learners scored higher than 59% on the test.

These findings suggest that problems in foundation phase literacy teaching and learning may have far-reaching effects for secondary school-learner performance. Prinsloo's findings from the HSRC's PlusTime Project examined the impact of increased teaching time after school hours on the performance of grade 8 learners, and suggested that this intervention was simply too late to address the deficits in learning that probably developed in the foundation phase.

## What are the causes of the problem?

An HSRC team led by Reeves, Heugh and Prinsloo evaluated literacy teaching at 20 schools in Limpopo during 2007/2008. The focus was on first and additional (second) languages in grades R – 4. Following a literature review, information was collected through textbook analysis, reviews of learner workbooks, assessment tools and other documents, classroom and school site observations, questionnaires, and interviews with individuals and focus groups. District officials, school principals, school management teams, school governing bodies (including community representatives and parents), teachers, teacher training institutions and learners participated. Research teams of four experts spent two full days at each school.

Four broad areas of concern were identified in the report written under Reeves' leadership:

### Not enough challenge, pace and volume in school work

Learners do not read and write nearly enough at and after school. It is not good enough for a whole classroom of grade 1, 2 or 3 learners to have only 10 exercises comprising two five-word columns in their workbooks after 25 weeks of school. Learners simply do not get enough opportunity to practice reading and writing. Classrooms need to be print-rich, but are not, and the absence of a reading culture in classrooms further aggravates the situation. Curriculum coverage also falls short in the process.

### Absence of specific and good literacy instruction

About half of the schools did not have grade R teachers with appropriate qualifications. As a result, learners do not develop strong pre-literacy skills. In subsequent grades, teachers often fail to engage in specific language and literacy development instruction. The relevance and quality of teacher training is of great concern. Therefore, many teachers do not know and follow the correct steps to develop learners' literacy skills. Learning programmes are not deliberate, well-structured and detailed enough. Teachers struggle to specify learning outcomes or use assessment effectively. Mentoring and support infrastructures are lacking, especially staff such as curriculum advisors and the required district and circuit officials. In addition, only 15% of teachers, phase organisers or heads of department had post-graduate qualifications.

### Lack of integration between learning areas and learning support materials

Learning materials (textbooks) do not articulate well across grades and learning areas. The complexity of language (vocabulary and syntax) differs sharply between materials written in the mother-tongue and the additional language of instruction, and also between materials for the foundation phase (grades 1 – 3) and grade 4 onwards. Therefore, by the



end of grade 3, learners simply haven't achieved the competencies they need to engage with texts in the intermediate phase. The quality of day-to-day instruction in bi- or multi-lingual contexts remains problematic. The research suggests that one should neither delay the introduction of a first additional language, nor let go of mother-tongue teaching too early. When this change happens too abruptly (towards the end of grade 3 or early in grade 4) it can damage competencies in both languages. Learners face an impossible transition hurdle that may leave them struggling for the rest of their school careers. Appropriate teaching and learning materials are also not always available.

### **Poor homes and communities**

Limited access to pre-school and playgroup facilities, limited access to books and reading, and low levels of adult literacy — all make it harder for learners living in poor communities to develop a strong grounding in basic literacy. This situation reduces parents' involvement in and support of learners' school and homework. It also makes it harder to foster a love for reading and a hunger for knowledge. Parents and school governing bodies often do not have a good grasp of the intricacies of language and literacy development, and may pressurise schools to switch to English-only teaching at the earliest opportunity without understanding the long-term consequences.

Various factors concerning management, organisation, teacher training and the provision of materials and facilities further complicate the situation. For example: The largest classes observed during the study were 57 in grade 1; 90 in grade 2; 83 in grade 3; and 112 in grade 4. This makes teaching and learning almost impossible.

### **How can literacy be strengthened?**

The Limpopo study made a number of recommendations to address these problems and improve literacy teaching in the province. To be effective the plan needs to respond to local conditions, align with national policy, have a clear budget, set exact timeframes, assign accountability, and follow precise targets and standards for monitoring and evaluation. Here are some of the proposed solutions:

#### **Grade R**

Optimise pre-school literacy benefits to children by having enough well-qualified teachers following excellent programmes at good facilities.

#### **Building a common understanding**

Ensure everyone understands the need for strong literacy development in multi-lingual settings, and align official directives, practical implementation and interaction.

## Case 8: The Book Box Project: Promoting a love of books and reading

The Book Box Project provides books and a range of creative activities that are designed to foster a love of books and reading in the classroom. Many of the activities are designed for small groups of learners to use independently, freeing the teacher to work with smaller groups of learners, while the rest of the class are meaningfully occupied.

The book boxes are designed by foundation phase student teachers attending the School of Education at the University of Witwatersrand and are one of the core course-work assignments. Students make two identical book boxes. They keep one book box for their own use when they qualify, and the other is donated to a school in a disadvantaged area. Each book box is unique, yet each box contains the following items:

- A children's fiction or non-fiction book.
- Three bookmarks.
- A read-along tape of the core book.
- A three-dimensional item related to the core book.
- A few games or activities.
- A checklist of all items in the book box.
- A teacher's manual containing learning outcomes and assessment standards linked to the National Curriculum Statement as well as activity instructions and additional notes for the teachers.

### A resource in literacy programmes

Book boxes contain a number of activities to develop an interest in books. They expose learners to a range of texts including poetry, rhymes, instructions, and narrative text, and provide an opportunity for learners to practice their reading skills. Story-telling or retelling using the toys, puppets and sequence cards can be done in English or the mother tongue. Block puzzles, jigsaw puzzles and card games such as 'Snap!' can also be played using the learners' mother tongue, and some book boxes have been translated which further promotes the development of indigenous languages.

### Contribution to teaching and learning

Book box activities have enabled teachers and learners to use a wider range of activities in the classroom. Besides literacy learning, the book boxes indirectly promote a number of life skills. Children learn to respect resources and take responsibility for their use and care. They learn about obeying rules,



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honesty, taking turns and following instructions. Teachers have models of well-prepared homemade resources, new approaches to learning and teaching, materials to support multilingual teaching and independent workstations.

### Reach and impact

Since 1997 the Book Box Project has donated over 700 book boxes to previously disadvantaged schools in four provinces. The book boxes have encouraged many schools to create reading corners in classrooms, small reading rooms and even libraries. The project has brought together people from different communities who all are working to promote literacy development in South Africa.

**Source:** Place JM (2004) *The College Book Sack Project in the Kwen Basin Farm Schools of Mpumalanga: A Case Study*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



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## Language of instruction

Introduce the first additional language early but gradually, without sacrificing the home language. Start by introducing oral activities early in grade 1; add literacy (reading and writing activities) late in grade 1 or at the start of grade 2; strengthen reading and writing in the first additional language up to grade 6 (parallel to teaching the home language); and include explicit work across the curriculum towards the end of grade 3 and throughout grades 4 – 6.

## Teacher training

Provide teacher training and support to strengthen the teaching of reading and writing — in both the home and first additional language — across the foundation and intermediate phases following best standards and bi-lingual teaching methodologies. A critical question concerns the inclusion of training of teachers for grade R and younger as a priority at universities. Level 5 courses do not adequately prepare teachers for this critical phase, especially in disadvantaged communities.

## Textbooks, readers and literacy-rich classrooms

Place good materials in the hands of every learner daily during class time, and for taking home to read. Ensure that classrooms display abundant wall charts, fact sheets, posters and learner work, which are then used to encourage interactive literacy engagement. Case 8, the Book Box Project, on p. 64 presents one example of best practice.

## Teaching time (time on task)

Make every minute count; use teaching and learning timeframes efficiently; get through plentiful volumes of daily classroom activity; and do regular (if not daily) homework for reading and writing from the first day in grade 1.

## Home and community support

Foster improved home, family and community support, including libraries. The Foundations for Learning Campaign of the Department of Education is a good beginning to enhance early-learner and adult literacy development in an integrated way. This initiative has to be sustained, and much more needs to be done.

## What are the conclusions?

Literacy is the key to further learning and development. Yet national and international studies show that South Africa's learners are struggling to master basic literacy. The research studies cited in this essay suggest some of the central problems, their probable causes and potential solutions. Learners do not receive good instruction; learning programmes are poorly integrated across learning areas, grades and materials; and there is little support for literacy and learning at home or in the community. These problems can be addressed by strengthening grade R teaching and learning; improving

teacher training programmes; using quality textbooks and learning materials; respecting teaching time; addressing the issues related to languages of instruction; and enhancing home and community support to learners.

These recommendations are echoed in a report by Barber and Mourshed, who maintain that the right people should teach in schools, with sufficient instructional capacity, to give every child the opportunity to succeed. Chisholm's work on children's right to education in South Africa also points to the limitations of process, quality, under-delivery and poverty.

Access to basic education is not simply about providing facilities or having learners come to school every day. Access to education implies access to quality education. *Good* learning and *good* teaching are essential, for without quality there can be no meaningful access. This can happen only when good teachers, using the best learning materials and approaches, make optimal use of all the available teaching time. Not a minute should be wasted.

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