

Getting reading right: Building firm foundations

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The Millennium Development Goals aimed to achieve universal access to primary education by 2015. Attendance rates in South Africa remain high, with 97% of children attending school,¹ yet most children are still not acquiring basic skills. While the number has been increasing in recent years, only 57% of a cohort will pass matric and about 21% will qualify to go to university.² Stark differences exist between the wealthiest 25% of schools and the vast majority of schools serving largely poor Black students, and these deficits are already entrenched early on in the foundation phase.³

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have a strong focus on reducing inequalities and aim to address issues of access and quality across the life course. This essay argues that, in order to address these deep-rooted challenges in the South African schooling system, we need a concerted prioritisation of learning to read. Drawing on the latest evidence, the essay identifies low levels of reading proficiency as one of the root causes of poor schooling outcomes, and goes on to suggest potential solutions. It makes the case by addressing the following questions:

- Why does reading matter?
- How many of South Africa's children are learning to read?
- By what age should children learn to read?
- Why are so many children not learning to read?
- What has been done to improve reading in the past?
- What reading initiatives are currently underway?
- What is the way forward?

Why does reading matter?

In the 21st century, we live in a world that is flooded with written language, or print. We see it in our newspapers, on our contracts, on the screens of our cell phones and the pages of our school books. From the policies of government to the signs on our roads, text is an essential ingredient in modern life. Print is everywhere. And this is why reading is so important.

Learning to crack the code of how we represent spoken language using symbols is a big part of why we go to school. We learn the differences between "b" and "d", or between "p" and "q". Moving from letters and syllables to words and sentences we can read about pirates, pigs and pixies or earthquakes and igloos. Once we have cracked the code the possibilities are endless. This is the joy of being initiated into the literate world.

Aside from the practical importance of reading to make our way through the world, reading – and writing – are essential for

participation in formal education as the ability to decode text, read with comprehension and learn from reading is the bedrock of most activities in institutions of learning. If reading is not mastered early on, progress in schooling is restricted.

The phenomenon of "schooling without learning" where children progress through the grades without gaining knowledge and skills can largely be attributed to the fact that many learners do not learn to read properly despite enrolling and staying in school. These learners never get a firm grasp on the first rung of the academic ladder and fall further and further behind even as they progress into higher grades. Learners that can barely decode text in their home language cannot "survive" at school, let alone thrive. For learners to reach their full potential later in life they must first learn to read fluently and with comprehension in the early years.

Learning to read also has a strong social justice imperative: the value of literacy extends beyond the classroom, and should ideally equip children with the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate actively in society.⁴ Good reading skills enable children to learn much more than their teachers might offer and it enables them to learn independently. More broadly, reading is a conduit to more abstract ways of thinking about the world. Books transcend immediate contexts, opening up possibilities for the transformation of existing realities and the discovery of new ones. They allow the reader to participate in "society's conversations about itself".⁵

How many of South Africa's children are learning to read?

Nationally representative surveys show that more than half (58%) of South Africa's children do not learn to read fluently and with comprehension in any language by the end of grade 4.⁶ The most recent and comprehensive analysis of children's reading capabilities in South Africa was the prePIRLS study of 2011.⁷ The aim was to assess the reading capabilities of grade 4 learners in whatever language their school used in grades 1 – 3. This should be the language in which they are most literate in.

In South Africa, the majority (70%) of learners learn in an African language in grades R – 3, but then switch to English in grade 4, with 90% of grade 4 learners in South Africa taught in English.⁸ The prePIRLS study assessed more than 15,000 grade 4 learners from 341 schools across the country in one of the 11 official languages.⁹ The results paint a picture of a reading crisis in our country. The 2015 prePIRLS results are expected in December 2017.

Figure 20 illustrates stark inequalities in reading outcomes between the wealthiest 10% of primary schools and the rest. While

65% of learners in the wealthiest 10% of schools reach the “high” or “advanced” benchmark, less than one in 10 learners reaches this benchmark in the poorest 70% of schools. If a learner cannot reach the “low” benchmark they can be regarded as “reading illiterate” since they cannot locate and retrieve an explicitly stated detail in a given text.¹⁰ Similarly those who cannot reach the “intermediate” benchmark in prePIRLS cannot read for meaning (or pleasure for that matter) since they cannot make straightforward inferences or interpret obvious reasons and causes.¹¹

By what age should children learn to read?

The South African curriculum, like most other curricula, sees the first three years of schooling as the “learning to read” phase during which children acquire the skills they need to navigate the world of words. From grade 4 onwards, they enter the “reading to learn” phase where they use what is assumed to be a firmly established skill to make meaning of the texts that they are reading, and encode their own ideas in their writing. Literacy is the competence upon which most formal learning depends. Without a firm foundation of reading, schooling can become an ongoing struggle.

Early reading failure leads to later learning failure.¹² While it is broadly acknowledged that reading with fluency and comprehension in at least one language should be achieved by grade 3, there are as yet no clear benchmarks for reading achievement in the South African context. Clear benchmarks could also help to establish measurable and shared definitions of what constitutes reading with fluency and comprehension in home, first and second additional languages across the grades.

Why are so many children not learning to read?

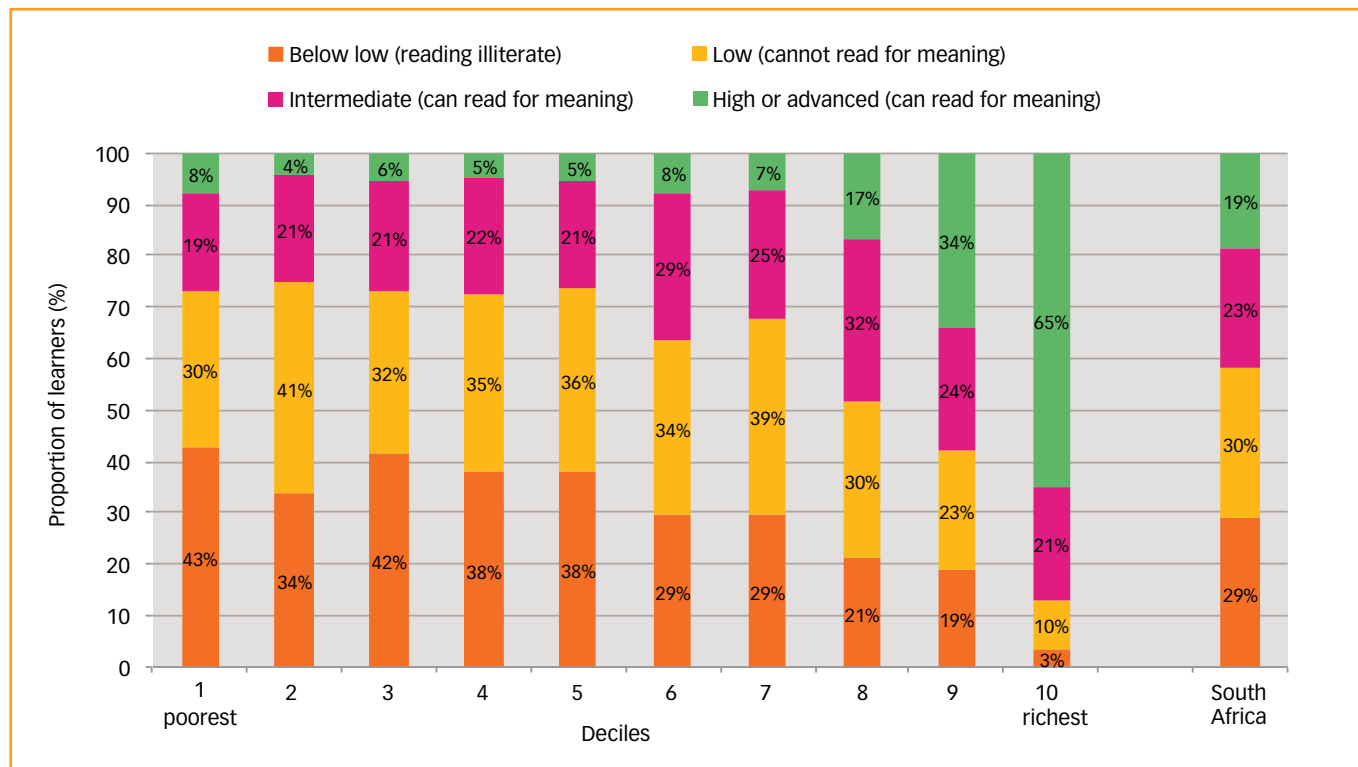
There are many reasons why children are not learning to read, and multiple factors often coincide to restrict children’s ability to acquire this essential competency. For example, extreme poverty, malnutrition and stunting compromise children’s cognitive development. Foetal alcohol syndrome and HIV may lead to developmental delays and disability, and learning disabilities are often not identified early, if they are identified at all (as noted in the inclusion essay on p. 84).

Below we list the key factors preventing children from becoming competent readers.

The early years: Reading begins in the home

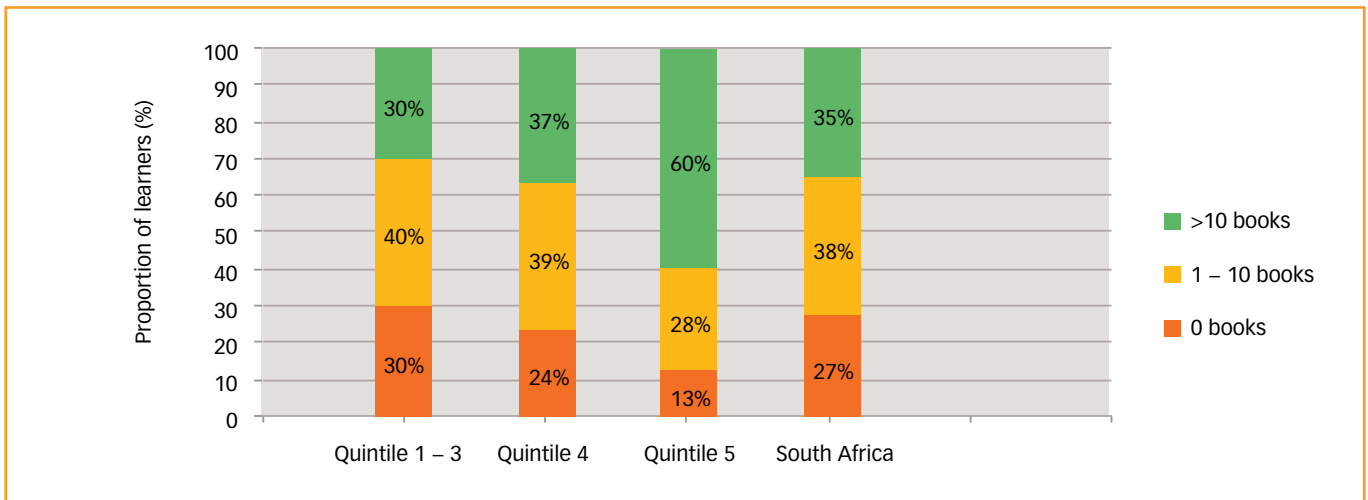
Learning to read begins in children’s earliest interactions with their families and communities, as case 4 (on p. 49) illustrates. In the early years, talk and the development of vocabulary are crucial, and strong foundations in oral language are essential to enable fluent reading with understanding. Through everyday exposure to print (especially reading stories, seeing others reading and using reading and writing for everyday tasks like writing a shopping list) children learn the pleasure and the value of the printed word. The more children interact with spoken and written language, the better readers they become. Given that spoken language differs from written language, hearing others read aloud creates an important foundation that children will then build on. As children enter school and learn to read formally ongoing support for reading in the home – especially reading for pleasure – helps children to become better readers.

Figure 20: How many learners in grade 4 can read?



Source: Author’s calculations using pre PIRLS 2011 data.

Figure 21: The prevalence of books in the home, 2013



Source: Authors' calculations using Verification ANA 2013 data.

The 2013 Verification Annual National Assessment (V-ANA) asked grade 3 learners how many books they had in their homes. Figure 21 shows that a third of children in schools in the poorest quintiles reported having no books, with an additional 40% indicating that they have 10 books or less. As many children have almost no exposure to books at home and few opportunities to read with others, the school becomes not only the primary site of learning to read, but the *only* site of learning to read for many children.

Leadership: Promoting a culture of reading in schools

In order to develop readers, a culture of reading needs to be established in the school. Principals, heads of department (HODs) and other school leaders are crucial to establishing a concerted school-wide focus on reading. Resources need to be channeled towards providing textual resources and expertise to support reading instruction and special reading programmes. Heads of departments need the time and knowledge to develop expertise in reading instruction amongst teachers. School leaders need to be able to recognise good reading instruction when they see it, facilitate sharing of good practice, and support ongoing staff development in reading instruction for those in need. Recent research has shown how principals and HODs have a very rudimentary knowledge of reading, and of when and how particular reading-related skills should be taught.¹³ In other words, expertise in reading instruction is thin amongst leaders in schools. But what about teachers?

Teachers: Instilling a love of reading

Teachers' own levels of literacy and reading practices impact on reading instruction. Pretorius and Machet identify what they call the "paradox of the primary school professional" in the South African context: "Primary school teachers are professionals who are supposedly deeply involved in developing literacy skills in their learners. Yet it is precisely in the domain of literacy that many teachers are themselves unskilled. Many primary school teachers come from communities with a strong oral culture and so they are

not inclined to be readers themselves, nor are they familiar with the traditions of storybook reading or books for young people."¹⁴

In addition to teachers' own literacy practices and resource constraints, many learners have physical, emotional and cognitive impediments to learning to read. The most obvious example are children who need spectacles but don't have them. Spectacles are a common sight in suburban schools but not in rural areas, largely because of a lack of screening, diagnosis and treatment.

Teachers require support and skills in dealing with the complexities of teaching reading, and especially in multilingual contexts. What support do teachers get in this regard?

Mixed messaging: Changing approaches to teaching reading

Teachers have been exposed to a wide range of messages on how reading should be taught and assessed in schools. Over a period of 14 years, there has been a shift from a radical "whole language" approach under Curriculum 2005 (C2005), to a highly specified "proficiency" approach in the current 2012 Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). The key messages on what reading instruction is, and how reading should be taught, changed radically in a relatively short time. C2005 suggested that the ability to read is "caught" while handling written texts in an integrated whole language classroom, whereas CAPS provides highly specified, procedural steps for teaching reading with a focus on developing basic skills such as aligning sounds and their written counterparts. Teacher professional development has struggled to keep pace with these changes.

There has been much contestation around the different approaches (akin to the "reading wars" elsewhere), contributing to a lack of clarity around the most appropriate way in which to teach reading. Little explicit attention is paid to reading in pre-service teacher training programmes in South Africa.¹⁵ At some universities less than 10% of the credits required to become a foundation phase teacher are about literacy or reading, despite this being the most important skill children learn in that phase. In

addition, while it is accepted that children learn to read in different ways and at different rates, the vast majority of children (90%+) can learn to read within three years. In other words, there are no clear guidelines to inform teachers what level of reading is expected at different grade levels and how this may best be assessed. Given this lack of clarity and support around how to teach reading, what do teachers do in their classrooms?

Reading instruction: Reflecting on current practice

Classroom practices during apartheid, especially in schools in poor communities, emphasised technical decoding skills and oral drill sequences in the teaching of reading. Learners in the majority of schools could often decode text (i.e. pronounce sounds and words) but had little understanding of what they had read.¹⁶ This formed part of the aversion to the teaching of phonics after 1994. The first post-apartheid curriculum policy undermined the explicit and systematic teaching of phonics, reading and writing. Findings from classroom-based studies in recent years (as outlined in box 6), indicate that classrooms are communalised with little focus on individual learners. Low level, oral discourse predominates, and the focus in reading has been on isolated words, rather than reading connected text. Opportunities to handle books, learn vocabulary and engage in writing activities have also been severely constrained.

The advent of CAPS and a number of other programmes (such as the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy) has provided teachers with greater clarity on how to teach reading and there has been a concerted attempt to shift towards a text-based pedagogy. Clear guidelines for teaching reading are stipulated in the curriculum. However, many of the practices indicated in box 6 persist, especially very slow pacing, limited exposure to extended texts in reading and writing activities, and a failure to differentiate learners according to ability for targeted instruction. In most classrooms, learners are still introduced to an extremely basic and impoverished notion of what it means to read and a limited set of resources with which to critically and pleasurably engage with text.¹⁷ The scarcity of texts is a serious obstacle to learning to read. How can learners learn to read without access to sufficient and suitable texts?

Playing football without a ball: The availability of texts

Conventional publishing models which rely on economies of scale are unable to provide texts in sufficient number or variety, especially in Africa where a multitude of languages are spoken, some by relatively small populations.¹⁸ The lack of access to books is similar to learning to play football without a ball, a “preposterous” idea but relevant to hundreds of thousands of learners in developing countries who are expected to acquire literacy skills without books.¹⁹

The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) found that the importance of structured reading material was not well understood in schools and materials were not available, with only 29% of monograde and 23% of multigrade schools having an adequate supply of readers. The NEEDU

report spells out the importance of this: “Graded readers provide structured progression, guiding learners through progressively more complex texts while providing sufficient practice at each stage of the process.”²⁰

Where they are available, African language readers are often problematic in that many of them are straightforward translations of readers from English into African languages and do not take into account the structural features of African languages.²¹ What often happens in this process of translation is that the element of grading in a reader is lost. Simple English words and sentences when translated into African languages result in long, often complicated phrases, made up of many letters and syllables in the African language.

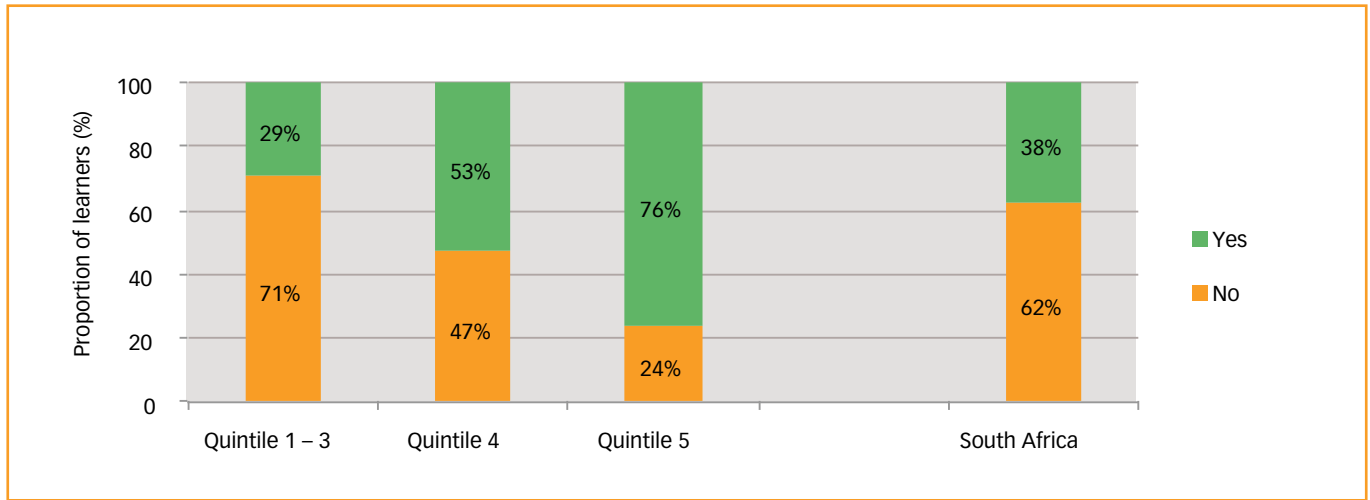
If children do not have access to books at home, the most common alternative is a school library. In 71% of schools in the poorest quintiles there was no school library available.²² The School Monitoring Survey found similar results, with only 31% of primary schools having a central school library and an additional 29% having either a mobile library or a classroom library.²³ Thus about 40% of primary schools have no library whatsoever (school, mobile or classroom).

Figure 23 shows that among those Grade 3 respondents who were in schools with no school library (62% of respondents), 30% of them indicated that they had no books at home and a further 40% indicated that they had only 1 – 10 books at home. If one takes this as a percentage of the total sample, then 19% (62% × 30%) of the children surveyed in the V-ANA 2013 had no access to any books, either at school or at home, and a further 25% (62% × 40%) had access to less than 10 books. We can therefore say that if we combine books at home and books in the school library in V-ANA 2013, 43% of all Grade 3 children have access to less than 10 books to read. Note, V-ANA did not ask about mobile libraries and classroom libraries. If we include these and use the DBE figure of

Box 6: Findings from key classroom-based studies on teaching reading in South African primary schools²⁴

- Lack of learner opportunity to handle books and bound text.
- Limited teaching of reading and writing.
- Learners mainly read isolated words rather than extended texts.
- Focus is on decoding rather than comprehension of text.
- Little or no elaboration on learner responses.
- Learning is largely communalised rather than individualised or differentiated.
- Little formal teaching of vocabulary, spelling and phonics.
- Lack of (good) print material in a range of languages in classrooms.
- Numerous complex language challenges where the majority of learners learn in an additional language which is not their home language.

Figure 22: The availability of school libraries in primary schools in South Africa, 2013



Source: Authors' own calculations, using Verification ANA 2013 data.

40% who have no library whatsoever (from the School Monitoring Survey 2011) then only 21% of all Grade 3 children have access to less than 10 books to read.

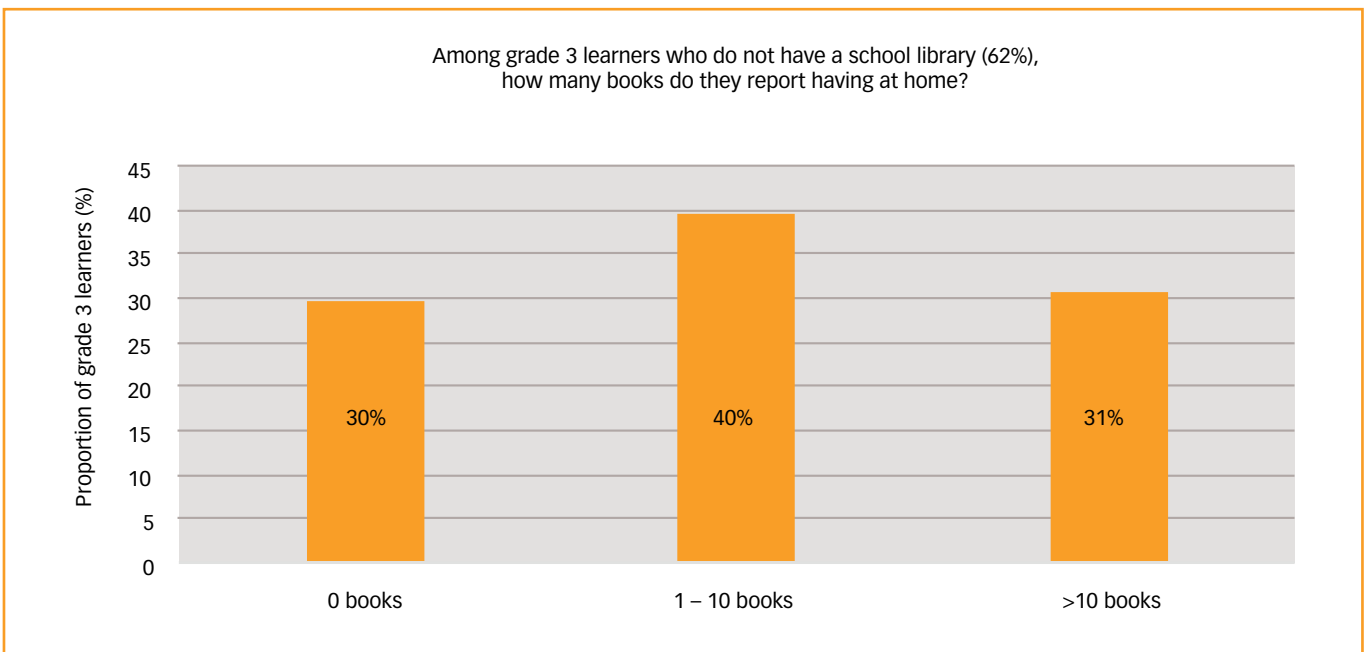
What has been done to improve reading in the past?

The finding that there is a reading crisis in South Africa is not new, and there have been several programmes to remedy the situation – some more successful than others. These include the National Reading Strategy (2008), the Foundations for Learning campaign (2008), the Systematic Method for Reading Success (2008), the Numeracy and Literacy Strategy in the Western Cape (2006), and the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (2010), to name only the most prominent. Given the large number of literacy

interventions and reading programmes that have been launched by the national and provincial education departments, it is prudent to ask why almost all of these initiatives were not sustained for more than a few years. If anyone is to develop a new strategy to ensure all children read, it is essential to determine why previous initiatives did not stand the test of time.

Developing a new national reading strategy should not feel like *déjà vu*, with a convening of experts, a launching conference, a temporary budget and a brief discussion of how committed government is to solving the reading crisis. Reading goals must be embedded within the core activities of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to ensure that they outlive any one particular programme or drive.

Figure 23: Children's access to books anywhere, 2013



Source: Authors' own calculations, using Verification ANA 2013 data. (Note figures sum to 101% because of rounding.)

Case 10: Rigorous evidence of what works – The Early Grade Reading Study

Stephen Taylor & Nompumelelo Mohohlwane (Department of Basic Education)

The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) is a large-scale evaluation led by the Department of Basic Education in collaboration with academics from the University of the Witwatersrand and Georgetown University in the United States. The project aims to build evidence about what works to improve the learning and teaching of early grade reading in typical foundation phase classrooms in South Africa.

The project began in 2015 and is working in 230 schools in the North West province, where three different home language reading interventions are being evaluated. This randomised control trial makes extensive use of mixed methods (classroom observation and detailed case studies) to provide both quantitative estimates of programme impact as well as an understanding of where, how and why different elements of the programme are working.

The intervention, which provides teachers with structured lesson plans aligned to the curriculum (CAPS), additional reading materials and on-site teacher coaching, is showing the

clearest positive impact by the end of grade 2. The other two interventions (lesson plans, materials and central training, and a parent involvement intervention) are having a small positive impact which may be larger amongst particular sub-groups.

The clearly effective coaching intervention is helping boys to catch up to girls who are substantially ahead of boys in grade 2 literacy. Programme impact is particularly large in urban township settings, but there is little impact in deep rural settings – and it may be that rural schools require a very different type of support.

This study presents arguably the most robust evidence to date of an effective reading intervention model with the potential to operate on a large scale. When supported by high quality on-site coaching, a structured learning programme can improve the teaching and learning of reading. The two teacher support interventions are continuing for a third year (grade 3) and the results will be released in 2018.

What reading initiatives are currently underway?

Existing reading initiatives are not sufficiently addressing the literacy crisis in South African schools. However, there have been some recent positive initiatives. The provision of DBE workbooks and graded readers in many schools has increased the availability and use of text. Coupled with the CAPS curriculum which specifies particular reading pedagogies, more children have the opportunity to handle books than before. Government's prioritising of reading is evident in a number of programmes. These include the proposed implementation of an improved national assessment programme and new reading campaigns such as Read to Lead and Drop All and Read. Most encouraging is that the government is taking the lead with intervention programmes to improve reading outcomes, for example the Early Grade Reading Study in the North West (case 10).

What is the way forward?

We suggest at least eight key ingredients to move from our current low levels of literacy to one where all children learn to read and thrive at school:

1. **Training:** Foundation phase teachers need meaningful opportunities to learn about reading in coherent, consistent and sustained programmes. Classrooms need knowledgeable, highly literate teachers. Teachers should be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge of well-structured learning programmes that address all the building blocks for reading (vocabulary, decoding, comprehension, etc.). Support, monitoring and feedback to teachers are crucial aspects of on-going training.
2. **Texts:** We need to improve the provision of textual resources, including the quantity, the quality and the range of languages in which these are provided. It is not possible to teach children to

read without a minimum set of graded readers in the language of learning and teaching, together with additional fiction and non-fiction books at the right level. The management and care of these resources are critical to their on-going provision.

3. **Benchmarks:** There is a need to establish reading benchmarks for different grades and for first, second and third languages. Clear benchmarks would also help to establish measurable and shared definitions of reading success.
4. **Time:** Children need plenty of opportunities to read in and outside the classroom. Reading (individually, with others, at school, at home) must become a daily routine for all South Africa's children.
5. **Tests:** Without some kind of standardised annual assessment at primary school level it is not possible to determine which schools are imparting the necessary numeracy and literacy skills to their learners. South Africa is unique in the region in that it is the only country without some kind of primary school exam. (Note these are not only used as gateway tests for promotion purposes. In many countries, they are diagnostic.)
6. **Eliminating excessive class sizes:** It is simply not possible to teach children to read in class sizes of 50 or more children. In Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, 27% of foundation phase learners are in classes with more than 50 children.²⁶
7. **Leadership for literacy:** The management of schools needs to facilitate the use of texts; the development of a culture of reading in schools; and a school-wide focus on reading instruction, its improvement and the reading outcomes of learners.

We need a consistent and system-wide focus on reading – from national assessment to district programmes. Reading needs to be consistently prioritised across the sector and across levels of government. All stakeholders need to commit to the goal that all

children must learn to read fluently and with comprehension in their home language by the end of grade 3. Literacy is the foundation for quality education and has the capacity to unlock human potential and enhance outcomes across the life course – contributing to children’s thriving; enhancing skills development, productivity and

inclusive economic development; and ensuring that they are able to exercise their rights and freedoms. Learning to read is a building block for the creation of a more equitable, peaceful and sustainable future as envisioned by the SDGs.

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