



EDUCATION: EVERY CHILD MUST READ BY AGE 9

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TITLES IN THE POVERTY TRAPS SERIES

Policy Brief 1: Education: Every child must read by age 9

Policy Brief 2: Poor childhood health can condemn children to poverty for life

Policy Brief 3: Social and family influences trap many children in poverty

Policy Brief 4: How geography can trap children in poverty

Policy Brief 5: How lack of assets affect child poverty and social exclusion

Despite progress in the policy and economic sphere since the political transition, many South African children are still caught in poverty traps and are socially excluded. Poverty traps occur where there are self-reinforcing mechanisms that cause poverty to persist. Poor children require an enabling environment in terms of health, education, assets, social and family networks, and geography to escape a poverty trap. Children caught in poverty are also potentially subject to social exclusion, the process that excludes them from full participation in society.

One manifestation of poverty traps is a high degree of chronic poverty. Recent data indicate that about 41% of South African children are chronically poor, while another 32% are in households that moved in and out of poverty between 2008 and 2012. Almost all chronically poor children are also in structural poverty. That means that their households have too few assets and productive potential to allow them to break out of poverty – a real poverty trap. Children caught in structural and chronic poverty are likely to become poor adults, whose children in turn will grow up poor, illustrating that the poverty trap has an intergenerational dimension. That also makes it more likely that such children will experience social exclusion.

The persistent nature of poverty traps means that the characteristics of the poor are slow to change. Today, as before the political transition, children caught in poverty traps are most likely to be black Africans, to live in rural areas of the former homelands, and to have poorly educated parents. Weak family structures also mean that they often do not live with both parents.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING EARLY LEARNING RIGHT

Educational research in South Africa has consistently shown that most South African students acquire learning deficits early on in their schooling career and that these backlogs are the root cause of underperformance in later years. In an influential study¹ on South African schooling, researchers concluded that “at the end of the Foundation Phase [Grades 1-3], learners have only a rudimentary grasp of the principles of reading and writing.” It is very difficult for learners to make up for this cumulative deficit in later years, especially in subjects with strongly interlinked concepts that build on previous knowledge, like mathematics and science. In these subjects, “the sequence, pacing, progression and coverage requirements of the high school curriculum make it virtually impossible for learners who have been disadvantaged by their early schooling to ‘catch-up’ later sufficiently to do themselves justice at the high school exit level”¹ It is for this reason that many education researchers conclude that any intervention to improve learning in South Africa needs to occur as early as possible.



When faced with limited resources and a choice of where to intervene in the schooling system, the counsel from both the local and international research is unequivocal: the earlier the better.

- **Most children in South Africa are not acquiring basic reading skills by the end of Foundation Phase (grades 1-3).** The first three years of schooling are regarded as the “learning to read” phase as children acquire the ability to decode text and convert print symbols into language. Thereafter they enter the “reading to learn” phase as they acquire new information through the skill of reading. Children who cannot read properly are precluded from further learning.
- **There are large inequalities in reading achievement between rich and poor children.** The prePIRLS study of 2011 showed that 1 in 3 children in remote rural areas were illiterate at the end of grade 4, compared to 1 in 5 children in urban and suburban schools.
- **Early intervention is educationally and economically the prudent policy choice.** The later in life we attempt to repair early learning deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes. Interventions that focus on grades 9-12 are unlikely to succeed given that most students already have severe learning deficits by this point. In many instances these deficits are practically insurmountable at this stage. It is thus essential that children complete the Foundation Phase (grades 1-3) with no learning deficit before they tackle the next grades.

Furthermore, a strategic focus on the foundational skill of reading is arguably one of the most judicious uses of the educational budget.

Given South Africa’s high levels of inequality, it should come as no surprise that poor children in South Africa find themselves experiencing many disadvantages including a lack of social, emotional and cognitive stimulation in early childhood. These children then enter a primary school system that does not equip them with the skills needed for success in life, let alone to remediate the large learning deficits they have already accumulated to date.

When faced with limited physical and human resources, and a choice of where to intervene in the schooling system, the counsel from both the local and international research is unequivocal; the earlier the better. The need to focus on the primary grades, and especially the pre-primary years, is not only because underperformance is so widespread in these phases, but also because remediation is most possible and most cost-effective when children are still young. This is primarily because the human brain is most plastic and malleable in early childhood and thus particularly susceptible to beneficiation or harm.

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Also, due to the cumulative negative effects of learning deficits it is usually not possible to fully remediate learners if the intervention is too late (i.e. in high school), as too many South African interventions are. As Nobel Laureate Professor James Heckman explains, “Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in early years are much more costly than early investments wisely made, and do not restore lost capacities even when large costs are incurred. The later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes”².

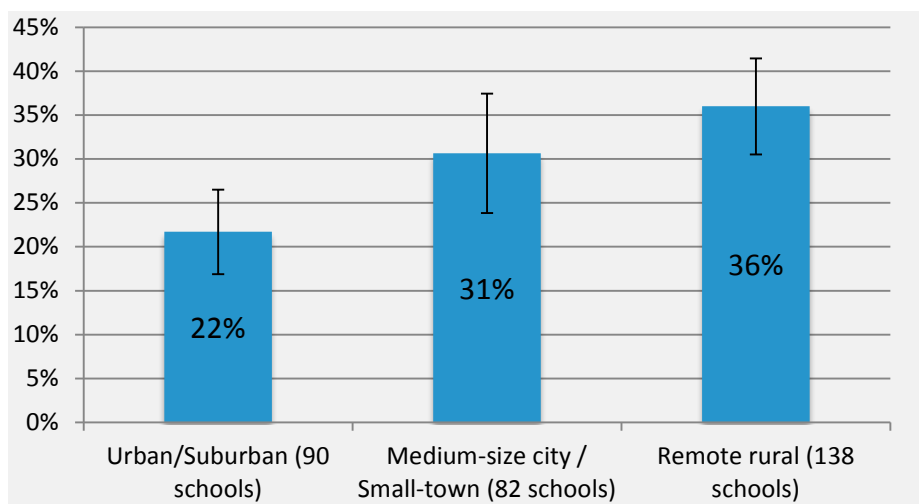


FIGURE 1: Proportion of South African grade 4 learners that are completely illiterate based on school location, i.e. learners who could not "locate and retrieve an explicitly stated detail" (the Low International Benchmark) in prePIRLS 2011.

Perhaps the best example of this is with respect to the skill of reading. In functional schools worldwide the foundational skill of reading is developed in the first three years of schooling. This is partly why grades 1-3 in South Africa are referred to as the 'Foundation Phase'. In these grades children develop decoding skills to convert print symbols into language.³ Once children have 'cracked the code' of how to read they can then use this skill to acquire new information.

Put differently, grades 1-3 can be thought of as the **learning to read phase**, while grade 4 onwards can be thought of as the **reading to learn phase**.

Many South African children do not successfully learn to read in the Foundation Phase and therefore cannot read to learn when they move into the higher grades. Figure 1 above reports the proportion of grade 4 learners who were illiterate in 2011 by school location. This data is from the prePIRLS study which tested a nationally representative sample of students in the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) of the school in the Foundation Phase, which for most students is an African language. In suburban and urban schools, 1 in 5 students were illiterate, while in remote rural areas 1 out of every 3 students were completely illiterate in any language. It is worth noting that the 'Urban/Suburban' category here includes both township schools and suburban schools, hiding large inequalities between these two types of schools.

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Why reading?

The acquisition of reading is foundational to all subsequent learning, yet South African schools are seriously underperforming in this regard. The PIRLS study of 2006 showed that a striking 80% of South African children were not yet reading with comprehension after five years of schooling. The problem is particularly severe amongst poor children. Consequently, massive inequalities in educational achievements are established early in primary school and research shows no evidence of these inequalities being reduced in later years. Therefore, early interventions such as improving the acquisition of reading amongst poor children, can be expected to have larger effects than interventions later in the school system.

Although the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Provincial Education Departments are implementing various strategies to support early grade reading, there is little or no sense of what is working and why. Moreover, there are competing models of support in the system. For example, the teacher union and Provincial Education Department collaboration initiative appears to favour traditional models of teacher training workshops, the Western Cape LITNUM strategy runs in-service training courses (one focussing on teaching reading) through the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute (CTLI), whereas Gauteng provides additional graded readers and clearly scripted lesson plans and employs specialist reading coaches who visit teachers on a monthly basis to observe lessons and offer assistance. Yet there is no systematic information of which of these interventions work, and if they do, which is best. It is important that a national reading strategy be based on scientific evidence regarding what most improves the acquisition of reading in South African schools.

There are other reasons for the focus on reading rather than a broader focus on literacy or numeracy. The main reason is that reading is a gateway into all other learning including writing, numeracy, and to becoming an independent learner. A second reason is that it is easier to run a campaign around reading and to raise public awareness around how well children should be reading than to do so for literacy or numeracy more generally. Building an intervention around reading is something that many stakeholders and society at large can identify with. This includes parents. In fact, there is a clear need to raise expectations amongst parents (and teachers for that matter) about how well (and how quickly) their children should be learning to read.

**This is an excerpt from a proposal for a Randomised Control Trial titled "Improving Early Grade Reading in South Africa" by Stephen Taylor.*

EXISTING RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

In South Africa there have been a number of research studies characterizing classroom-based reading and literacy practices with an aim to understanding why South African children battle to read, both in their home language and in English. A recent literature review⁴ highlighted nine descriptive features across these studies: (1) lack of learner opportunity to handle books and bound text, (2) limited teaching of reading and writing, (3) students mainly read isolated words rather than extended texts, (4) focus is on decoding rather than comprehension of text, (5) little or no elaboration on learner responses, (6) learning is largely communalised rather than individualised, (7) little formal teaching of vocabulary, spelling and phonics, (8) lack of (good) print material in classrooms, and (9) numerous complex language challenges where the majority of learners learn an additional language which is not their home language.

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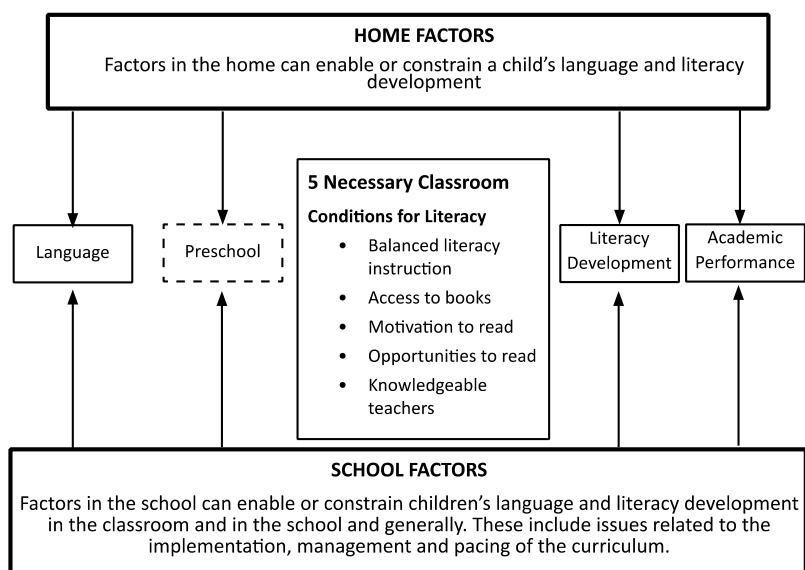
A recent study⁵ has identified five necessary conditions for the development of literacy. These are set out below:

“Irrespective of the language in which early schooling is done, all children need to be explicitly taught to read, and *what happens in the classroom* has critical consequences for how well children learn to read. In order to meet minimum standards in literacy education and training, there are five necessary conditions that need to be obtained in classrooms in order for literacy to develop:

1. **Phonics need to be taught systemically;** automaticity in decoding needs to be developed. This can only be achieved through an understanding of the alphabetic principle which underlies our written language systems, and through constant and regular reading practice. At the same time, attention also needs to be paid to meaning making. Reading is, after all, about comprehension.
2. **Children need easy access to books.** Children need to see books in their lives on a daily basis; there should be books in the classrooms, books to read for leisure and to take home to read.
3. **Children need to be constantly motivated to read.** A culture of reading needs to be cultivated in the classroom, with reading perceived to be a pleasurable activity and teachers showing enthusiasm for reading on a daily basis.
4. **Children need to be given plenty of opportunities to read,** in and outside the classroom.
5. **Classrooms need knowledgeable teachers.** Teachers need to understand the different components of reading and how they develop, and know how to assess decoding and comprehension so that they can identify where problems lie and take appropriate action.

The five classroom conditions for literacy above are critical and can go a long way in launching children on sound literacy trajectories. If these conditions are not present in classrooms, then literacy development will not take place, irrespective of other favourable factors in the home or school environment that support learning.”

FIGURE 2: Pretorius' (2014) integrated model of literacy development



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PRIORITIZATION AND POLICY FOCUS

On a practical level, the Department of Basic Education needs to develop a small number of clear, succinct, measurable goals that are to be widely disseminated and understood by all parents, teachers and government officials. The three or four goals should focus on basic learning outcomes that every single child should master, with clear age or grade-related benchmarks defining when children should reach them. To provide one example, the Ministry of Education in Brazil has the following core education goal for primary schooling: *“Teaching all children to read and write by the end of the third year of basic education at the latest”*⁶. Given the language dynamics in South Africa one could add *“...in their mother tongue”* to the above succinct goal. The ability to read is also relatively easy to assess, even for otherwise under-educated parents since the adult literacy rate in South Africa was 89% in 2009/10 according to the UNDP⁷. One of the main reasons for setting and publicising these types of goals is to bring parental and teacher expectations in line with the grade-appropriate minimum standards. The 500+ page Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for the Foundation Phase can be overwhelming for teachers and it would be unreasonable to expect most parents to read or understand the full document. Setting simple measurable over-arching goals provides the locus around which all other interventions and initiatives must orbit. Prioritisation is essential if learning outcomes are to improve in South Africa and the apex priority must always be learning outcomes. There is clear local and international evidence that the acquisition of early literacy skills (and particularly reading) is a fundamental prerequisite for further learning and thus a wise over-arching goal for the Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase is a strategic point in the schooling system and reading is a strategic goal to focus on within this phase. Leveraging these two key points shows promise for improving the educational outcomes and life opportunities of all South African children, and particularly those from poor and marginalised backgrounds.

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EDUCATION

EVERY CHILD MUST READ BY AGE 9

- Most children in South Africa are not acquiring basic reading skills by the end of Foundation Phase (grades 1-3), precluding them from further learning.
- There are large inequalities in reading achievement between rich and poor children.
- The later in life we attempt to repair early learning deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes.

The South African Human Rights Commission Report:

Poverty traps and social exclusion among children in South Africa

<http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/Poverty%20Traps%20Report.pdf>

<http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/Poverty%20Traps%20Report%20Summary.pdf>

¹ Taylor, N., Muller, J., & Vinjevd, P. 2003. *Getting Schools Working*. Cape Town: Pearson Education.

² Heckman, J. 2000. Policies to foster human capital. *Research in Economics* (54), 3-56.

³ Pretorius, E. 2014. Supporting transition of playing catch-up in Grade 4? Implications for standards in education and training. *Perspectives in Education*, 32(1), pp 51-76.

⁴ Hoadley, U. 2012. What do we know about teaching and learning in South African primary schools? *Education as Change*, 16:2

⁵ Pretorius, E. 2014. Supporting transition of playing catch-up in Grade 4? Implications for standards in education and training. *Perspectives in Education*, 32(1), pp 51-76.

⁶ MoE Brazil. 2012. *UNESCO Round Table on Literacy: Ensuring child literacy and decreasing illiteracy for young people, adults and the over 60s*. UNESCO. [Online] Available:

<http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/Brazil.pdf> [15 Jan 2014]

⁷ UNDP. 2011. *Human Development Report*. United Nations Development Programme.

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