



Advisory Note 6

# What does the South African Systemic Evaluation tell us about learner reading proficiencies?



Nwabisa Makaluza (Stellenbosch University)

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## 1. Introduction

It is well known that 81% of learners in South Africa did not reach the 2021 PIRLS low international benchmark. This statistic has been useful in awakening the country to the dismal performance of the education system and the impact of covid-19 related learning losses. Furthermore, it has made it necessary to further examine what learners below the low international benchmark are able to do. With careful reading, the 2022 South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE) diagnostic (Department of Basic Education, 2024) and technical reports (Department of Basic Education, 2024) can help us to understand which skills learners have acquired by the end of Foundation Phase. The diagnostic report makes use of four performance levels in which learners can be classified, in ascending order: Emerging, Evolving, Enhancing, and Extending. These are the categories that will be used to describe learner performance here. This background note summarises these reports under the following questions: (a) Which foundational literacy skills *should* the learners have attained by the end of grade 3 (b) Which performance levels have learners attained by the end of their Foundation Phase schooling, and (c) What is the role of assessments in shaping implementation plans to improve foundational literacy skills?

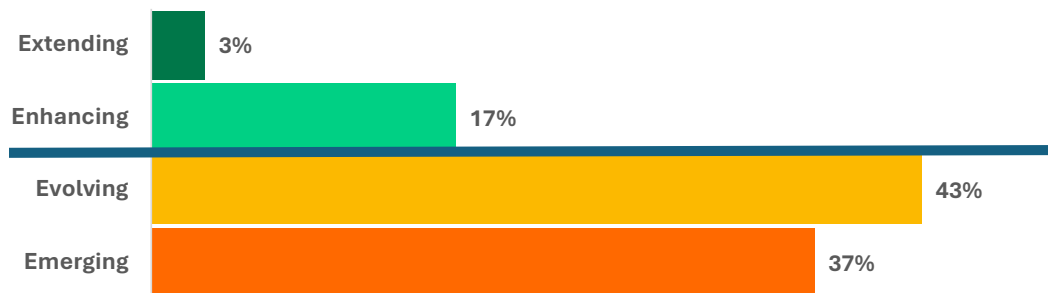
## 2. Which foundational literacy skills should the learners have attained by the end of grade 3?

According to CAPS, grade 3 learners should be able to read all the phonics that have been taught thus far and decode unfamiliar words. They should also be able to read complex texts and be able to draw basic conclusions from the texts that they have read (Department of Basic Education, 2011). It is also internationally accepted that at the minimum, learners should be able to: locate, retrieve, and reproduce explicitly stated information as well as make simple straightforward inferences from text they've read (Mullis, et al., 2023). The "Enhancing" category in the SASE diagnostic report, which is stated as the expected grade 3 performance level, corresponds with these competencies. Only 20% of learners in grade 3 were able to achieve this level and higher. Which raises the question, what *do* learners know by the end of grade 3?

## 3. Which performance levels have learners attained by the end of grade 3?

There is almost an even split between learners who are at the beginning of developing their foundational reading skills at the "Emerging" performance level (37%) and those who have some grasp of reading skills but need help from their peers and teachers (43%). These are the areas that we will concentrate on for the rest of the report.

Figure 1: Percentage of Grade 3 learners by performance levels



Source: DBE (2024) South African Systemics Evaluation 2022

Table 1: Description of performance' levels in the 2022 South African Systemics Evaluation

Level	Level Definition	Grade 3 Descriptor	Implications for teaching
<b>Extending (3%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrating advanced understanding of knowledge and skills</li> <li>Applying skills in innovative and creative ways in complex contexts</li> <li>Able to learn independently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and use information from different sources appropriately</li> <li>Read a variety of unfamiliar texts, using reading skills learnt.</li> <li>Read a complex/difficult text independently.</li> <li>Analyse texts for socio-cultural values, attitudes and assumptions.</li> <li>Draw advanced conclusions from texts read.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenging for more independent exploration and self-assessment</li> <li>Focus on fostering creativity to apply knowledge and skills novel and challenging contexts</li> </ul>
<b>Enhancing (17%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrating the required grade-level knowledge and skills</li> <li>Applying their knowledge and skills in authentic contexts</li> <li>Moving towards independent learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrating the required grade-level knowledge and skills</li> <li>Applying their knowledge and skills in authentic contexts</li> <li>Moving towards independent learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide tasks that encourage critical thinking, and problem-solving</li> <li>Support the application of knowledge and skills in real-world contexts</li> </ul>
<b>80% Grade 3 learners have not achieved grade-level proficiency</b>			
<b>Evolving (43%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Constructing the required grade-level knowledge and skills</li> <li>Adapting their understanding and application of knowledge and skills through interactions with teachers and peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read single and double sounds learnt so far.</li> <li>Read and comment on a simple story</li> <li>Read a simple text independently and identify key details in a text.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build on existing knowledge and skills</li> <li>Address specific areas of weakness</li> <li>Provide additional practice opportunities in applying knowledge to real-world context</li> </ul>
<b>Emerging (37%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beginning to develop grade-level foundational knowledge and skills</li> <li>Works with teachers and peers to construct new knowledge and skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have knowledge of basic single sounds, learnt so far.</li> <li>Read a simple text or short story with the teacher's help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on building foundational skills</li> <li>Provide scaffolded instruction and detailed feedback</li> <li>Offer ample opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world context</li> </ul>

Source: DBE (2024) South African Systemics Evaluation 2022

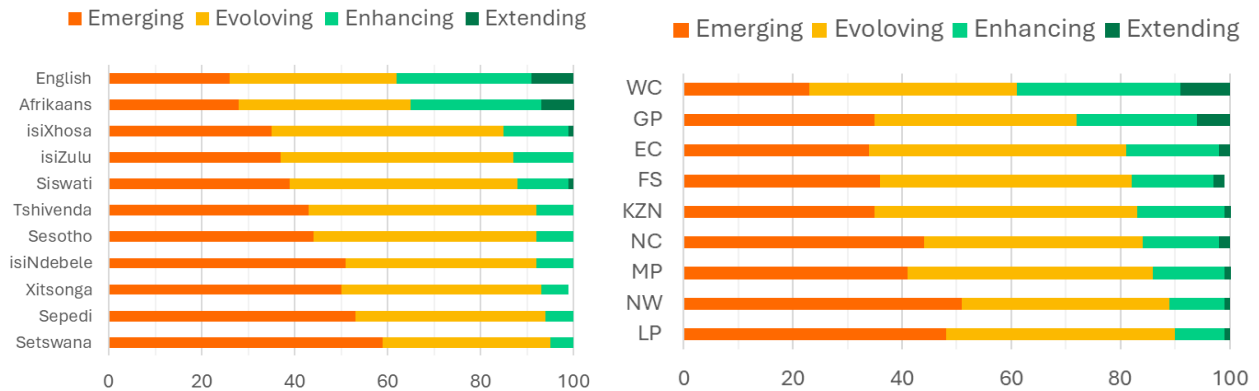
**a. Provinces**

Provincial disaggregation of the national statistics follows the usual rank order of learner performance in the Foundation Phase. In four provinces (Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape) more than a 40% of learners are still performing at the emerging level. These are skills that should have been attained in the early years of foundation phase. This raises the need for specialised intervention to help learners transition into the evolving performance level. All the provinces have struggled to move learners from the evolving performance level to grade-level proficiency. These results reflect the combination of true performance level and covid-19 lockdown related learning losses.

**b. Languages of Learning and Teaching**

Turning to languages, we see six languages (Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, Sesotho, and Tshivenda) with more than 40% of learners who are in the emerging performance level. These languages are predominantly spoken in the four lowest performing provinces. Again, we see a large proportion of learners who are in the evolving performance level and have not acquired the necessary skills for independent learning. This pattern means that more than 85% of learners cannot demonstrate the required grade-level skills for nine languages, however this is less severe for English (62%) and Afrikaans (65%) learners. Which illustrates the ongoing historical disparities that need targeted language specific intervention.

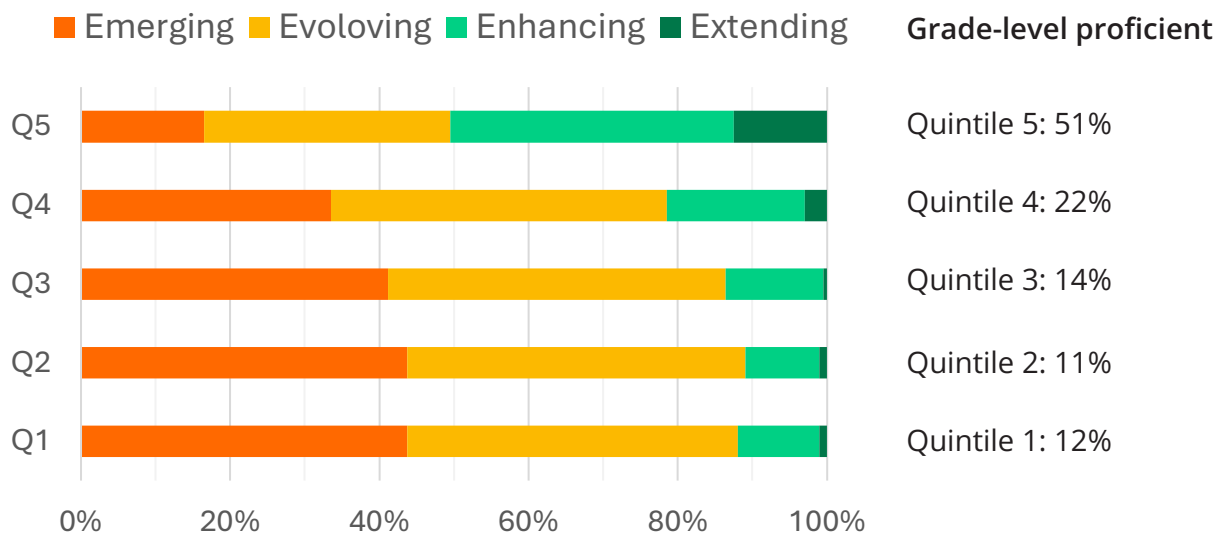
Figure 2: Provincial and language distribution of Grade 3 learners by performance levels



**c. Quintiles**

The school's socio-economic status as reflected by the quintile classification is a critical explanatory factor of learners' performance (Gustafsson & Taylor, 2022). No-fee schools (quintiles 1-3) have more than 40% of learners who have emerging foundational skills while this applies to 34% of low-fee schools (quintile 4) and only 17% of fee-charging schools (quintile 5). Although quintile 5 schools perform much better than low- and no-fee charging schools, only half of their learners have managed to meet the grade level proficiency. This indicates that there is considerable work that needs to be done throughout the schooling system.

Figure 3: School quintile distribution of Grade 3 learners by performance levels in the 2022 SASE

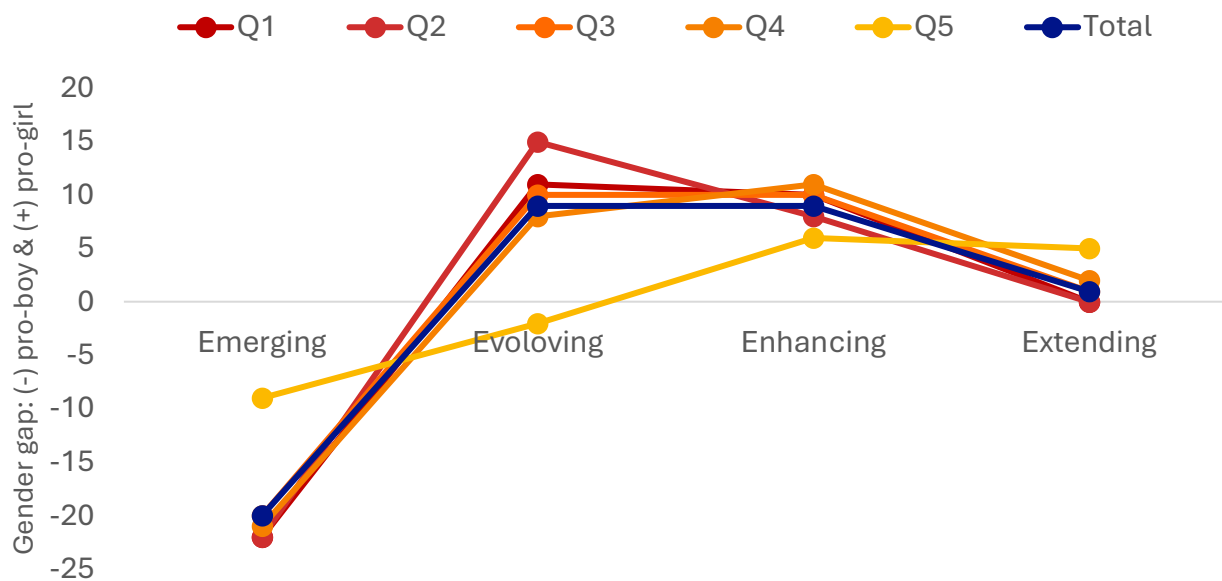


Source: DBE (2024) South African Systemics Evaluation 2022

**d. Gender**

Of growing concern, is the gender gap where girls outperform boys in learning outcomes. There is an overrepresentation of boys in the emerging performance level and an underrepresentation in the higher order categories. Figure 4 shows that this inequality is most pronounced in the low- and no-fee charging schools and is fairly reduced in the better resourced and better performing quintile 5 schools.

Figure 4: Gender gap within school quintiles of Grade 3 learners by performance levels in the 2022 SASE



Source: DBE (2024) South African Systemics Evaluation 2022

The persistent patterns described in this section give us a clearer indication of the task ahead of us. A large proportion of learners will leave the foundation phase at a level where they

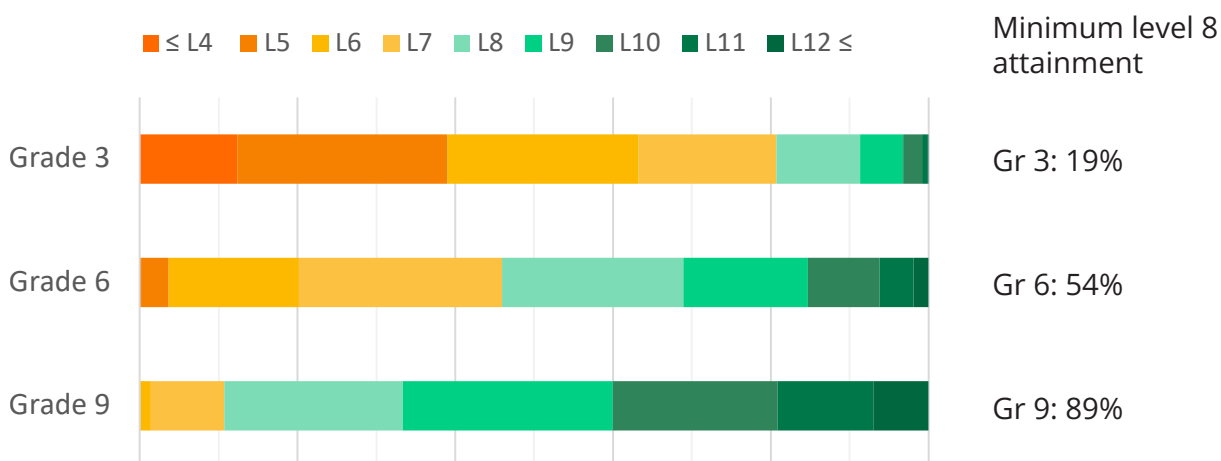
are only beginning to develop foundational reading skills. Another equally large proportion of learners still need assistance in reading by the time they enter the intermediate phase.

**e. Intermediate and Senior Phases**

An additional complexity to entering the intermediate phase is that the language of instruction switches to English for nine African languages. This means that the learner must: (a) learn the foundational skills they missed out on, (b) meet the increased difficulty of the subjects, and (c) achieve (a) and (b) in a language they may not be proficient in.

To get a sense of which skills learners have acquired in the later grades, we turn to the SASE Technical Report which has 14 reading proficiency bands with accompanying reading scale scores. Comparing the two reports’ performance bands, it seems the grade 3 “Enhancing” category in the diagnostic report maps onto level 8 and 9 of the technical report. We see that about 46% of grade 6 learners did not reach this proficiency level. By the end of the intermediate phase at grade 6, 42% of learners have attained the level 6 and 7 performance bands which seem to correspond to the grade 3 “Evolving” category. However, at this stage only 4% of learners are at the lowest performance levels.

Figure 5: Percentage of Grade 3, 6, and 9 learners by proficiency levels



Source: DBE (2024) South African Systemics Evaluation 2022

**4. What role can these assessments play in improving foundational literacy skills?**

**a. Setting and measuring progress toward targets and goals**

The 2022 SASE can be used to take a snapshot of our progress towards the National Development Plan goal (National Planning Commission, 2017) as well as the Department of Basic Education’s goal of all children reading at grade level proficiency by the age of 10. A large drawback, however, is that the results are not released timeously.

The release date of the 2022 Systemics was in November 2024. This information could have been useful for covid learning losses responses by the department. With this information,

provinces could set their own realistic targets within their Annual Performance Plans because the sample is representative at that level. The technical report disaggregates the data at a district level; however it is not representative at this level. This limits the use of the report towards district and school improvement plans.

The limitations of use of these assessments as accountability mechanisms are both technical and political in nature. From a technical perspective, the results cannot be used to by individual teachers to improve their practice nor can it be used to inform parents of individual learner's performance because the assessment is not census-based (Nuga Deliwe & Van der Berg, 2022). From a political perspective, holding schools accountable to learner performance in earlier grades has attracted teacher union hostility which has resulted in the end of previous assessments such as the ANAs (South African Democratic Teachers Union, 2014). The step by the department to bring back some form of national assessments is commendable.

**b. Responsive Provincial Implementation plans**

*i. Ensure a minimum set of resources in classrooms*

Every classroom should have a set of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) that they need for teaching reading. The DBE recommended minimum package of resources for Foundation Phase includes: Teacher's Guides, Anthologies of graded/levelled readers, Big books, Phonics Friezes, Flashcards, Vocabulary posters, and Handwriting charts (Department of Basic Education, 2022). It is important to verify that teachers and learners have these materials, particularly in under resourced environments. However, a resource drop without high-quality training on the use of the materials is unlikely to improve learning outcomes or change teaching practices. The SASE Whole School Evaluation monitors contextual factors which influence learner performance including access to LTSM (Department of Basic Education, 2024) has the potential to shed light on the department's progress on creating an enabling schooling environment.

*i. Targeted Teacher Training*

One of the clear benefits of the systemics is that it allows for better targeting of interventions. Provincial Education Departments can now target their teacher training towards the areas that need most attention. For example, if North West knows that 51% of its learners and 59% of Setswana LOLT learners are at the emerging performance level. Their teacher training could focus on how to teach letter-sound knowledge using phonics friezes and how to assist learners to read simple texts from graded readers. On the other hand, the Western Cape only has 23% of learners in the emerging performance level and 38% of learners in the evolving performance level. Therefore, they might want to focus its efforts on getting teachers to move learners over the grade-level threshold. The focus could be on teaching comprehension strategies that learners can use as they progress towards more independent reading.

Successful interventions that have included teacher training in their programs skew the

nature of the training towards modelling, discussion, and practice (Mejia). This type of training should equip teachers with the practical tools they need to build learners' foundational skills and knowledge on how to use effective teaching strategies to target problem areas. Most importantly it would give teachers in-situ examples of how to move away from the "drill-and-chorus" method of teaching that is prevalent in classrooms. -

## 5. Conclusion

The Systemic Evaluations have the potential to play an important role in sector planning, support, and accountability. With these results, we can understand the performance of learners at the end of their Foundation Phase. Nationally, only 20% of grade 3 learners have met the expected grade-level proficiency, 40% have some grasp of foundational skills but are not yet able to apply these skills independently, and 37% are still beginning to develop these skills. These patterns persist through various demographics and the information can be used by provinces to provide targeted interventions to ameliorate the learning crisis. The potential strength of the evaluations to be ingrained in the system, however, depends on them being collected in predictable cycles and their timeous availability.

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