2030 READING PANEL

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What can and can't we expect from Grade R? Evidence from the Roots and Shoots study

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1. Introduction

In 2024, South Africa passed the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill, making Grade R compulsory for all children (Republic of South Africa, 2024). In 2026, this policy enters its first year of practical implementation (Department of Basic Education, 2024). This moment marks a significant milestone in the country's long-standing commitment to strengthening early learning, and it reflects the widespread belief that earlier intervention is essential for improving later reading outcomes. As the 2030 reading goal draws closer, Grade R is increasingly positioned as a central lever through which progress toward universal foundational literacy can be achieved.

At the same time, the move to compulsory Grade R raises important questions about what can realistically be expected from this additional year of schooling, particularly in a highly unequal education system. While access to Grade R is expanding, far less attention has been given to how differences in children's developmental starting points and school contexts shape what Grade R can and cannot deliver. Understanding these dynamics is critical if Grade R is to contribute meaningfully to the 2030 reading goal, rather than simply extending existing patterns of inequality earlier into the schooling cycle.

This advisory note draws on longitudinal data to examine socio-economic differences in developmental outcomes at the start of Grade R and one year later. Rather than asking whether Grade R "works" in a general sense, the analysis focuses on how patterns of measured progress differ across school contexts, and what this implies for the role Grade R can play within a broader strategy to improve early reading outcomes. In doing so, the note aims to inform ongoing policy discussions by clarifying both the potential and the limitations of Grade R in the current reform moment.

2. Study design and data

This note draws on longitudinal data from the Roots & Shoots study, which follows a sample of learners in the Western Cape from the start of Grade R into the early primary grades.[1] The analysis focuses on the 440 learners who had complete data at both the start of Grade R (Wave 1) and one year later, at the start of Grade 1 (Wave 2).[2] Learners' developmental outcomes were measured using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM), a widely used, standardised tool designed to assess school readiness across key developmental domains. ELOM 4&5, designed for children aged 4 to 5 years, was used in Wave 1, and ELOM-R (version 1), designed for children aged 6 to 7 years, was used in Wave 2. The sample includes learners from 75 schools across different socio-economic contexts, categorised here using school fee status (no-fee, low-fee, and mid-fee) as a proxy for socio-economic conditions.[3] Following the same learners over time allows us to examine changes in performance during the Grade R year and how these changes vary across school contexts.

1 The results presented in this note were first published in the ***Roots and Shoots Wave 2 Report*** (Hofmeyr & Ardington, 2023). More information about the study can be found at https://www.rootsandshootsstudy.com/.

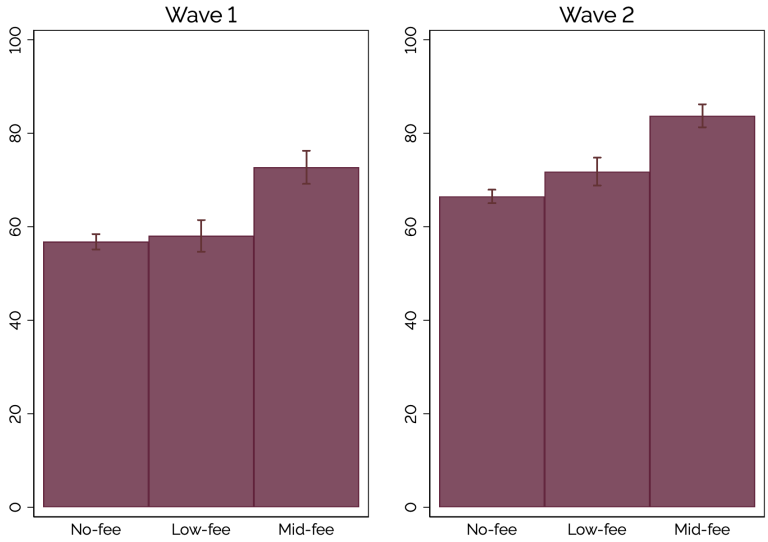
2 30 of the 440 learners (6.8%) had repeated Grade R and were therefore still in Grade R for the second wave of assessment.

3 No-fee schools do not charge school fees. Low-fee schools charge up to R3,000 per annum, and mid-fee schools charge fees more than R3,000 per annum. School fees were used to proxy for socio-economic conditions instead of the usual quintile designations since there were some Quintile 1-3 schools that charged fees and many Quintile 5 schools that did not charge fees (see Hofmeyr, Ardington & Spaull, 2022), suggesting fee status is a more up-to-date measure of these schools' socio-economic conditions than their quintile designation.

3. Developmental outcomes and inequality during Grade R

Figure 1 highlights substantial socio-economic inequalities in developmental outcomes that are already evident at the start of Grade R (Wave 1). Learners attending mid-fee schools enter Grade R with markedly higher average ELOM 4&5 scores than those in low-fee and no-fee schools. One year later, at the start of Grade 1 (Wave 2), the ranking by school fee category is unchanged. Because developmental outcomes at the two time points are measured using different instruments, changes in scores cannot be interpreted as precise measures of learning during the Grade R year. Instead, the figure shows that socio-economic disparities in developmental outcomes present at school entry persist over time, with no evidence of convergence across school contexts.

Figure 1: Mean developmental scores at school entry (Wave 1) and one year later (Wave 2), by school fee group



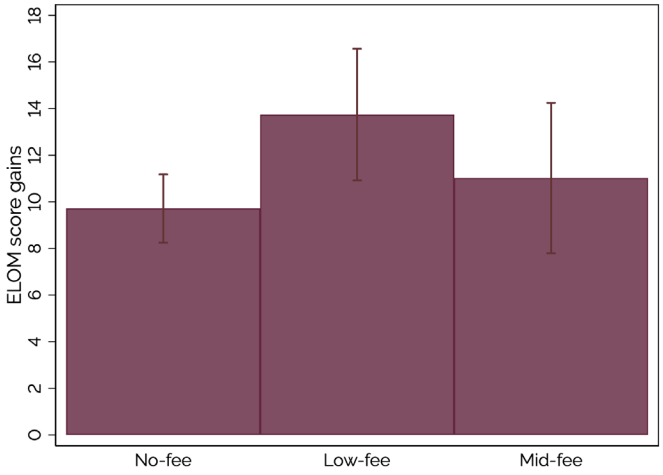
Notes: Observations: 327 no-fee, 64 low-fee and 49 mid-fee learners. Bars show learners' mean ELOM 4&5 (Wave 1) and ELOM-R (Wave 2) scores by school fee group at the start of Grade R (Wave 1) and one year later (Wave 2). Percentage-correct scores were calculated for each ELOM-R subscale and combined using equal weights to generate overall Literacy and Mathematics scores. The total ELOM-R score plotted represents the average across the ELOM-R Literacy and Mathematics scores. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. No-fee schools do not charge school fees, low-fee schools charge up to R3,000 per annum and mid-fee schools charge more than R3,000 per annum.

4. Were there socio-economic differences in measured gains during Grade R?

Figure 2 compares differences between learners' developmental scores at the start of Grade R (Wave 1) and one year later (Wave 2) across school fee groups. Throughout this section, these differences are referred to as "gains" for simplicity.[4] While the average gains shown in Figure 2 suggests that learners in no-fee, low-fee and mid-fee schools made similar progress during Grade R, this comparison is potentially misleading. Learners in no-fee and low-fee schools typically enter Grade R with substantially lower developmental scores (shown in Figure 1), and gains measured in absolute terms tend to be larger when starting from a lower base. As a result, similar average gains across school types do not imply that learners are learning equally effectively across different schooling contexts.

4 Because changes between ELOM 4&5 and ELOM-R scores cannot be interpreted as precise measures of learning, the analysis does not focus on the magnitude of gains in absolute terms. Instead, it examines whether the pattern of gains differs systematically across socio-economic school contexts.

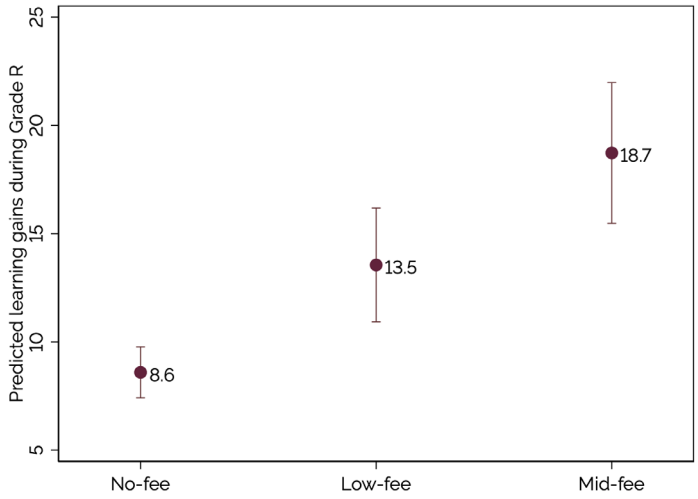
Figure 2: Measured gains by school fee group



Notes: Observations: 327 no-fee, 64 low-fee and 49 mid-fee learners. Bars show gains in learners' mean ELOM 4&5 (Wave 1) and ELOM-R (Wave 2) scores by school fee group between the start of Grade R (Wave 1) and one year later (Wave 2). Percentage-correct scores were calculated for each ELOM-R subscale and combined using equal weights to generate overall ELOM-R Literacy and Mathematics scores. The total ELOM-R score was calculated as the average across the ELOM-R Literacy and Mathematics scores. Gains were calculated by computing the difference between the total ELOM-R score (out of 100) and the total ELOM 4&5 score (out of 100). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. No-fee schools do not charge school fees, low-fee schools charge up to R3,000 per annum and mid-fee schools charge more than R3,000 per annum.

To account for these differences in starting points, Figure 3 compares learning gains for learners who enter Grade R at the same level of development. It shows predicted learning gains by school fee group after adjusting for learners' Wave 1 scores and other characteristics,[5] allowing for a like-for-like comparison across schools. The figure shows a clear socio-economic gradient to the learning gains made during Grade R, with learners in no-fee schools gaining an estimated 8.6 points, those in low-fee schools gaining 13.5 points, and those in mid-fee schools gaining 18.7 points.[6]

Figure 3: Predicted learning gains during Grade R, by school fee group



Notes: The figure shows predicted learning gains between the start of Grade R (Wave 1) and the start of Grade 1 (Wave 2) for learners attending no-fee, low-fee, and mid-fee schools. Predictions are based on regression models that control for learners' developmental scores at school entry, learner age, gender, and home language, and are evaluated holding covariates at their sample means. Points indicate predicted gains in ELOM score points. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

5 Other factors controlled for are learners' age, gender and home language.

6 Estimates for learners in low-fee and mid-fee schools are less precise due to smaller sample sizes, and we therefore cannot rule out that their gains are of similar magnitude. Learners in no-fee schools, however, experienced statistically significantly lower gains than those in the other two groups.

5. What this evidence tells us about the role of Grade R

The evidence presented in this note highlights that substantial socio-economic inequalities in children's developmental outcomes are already present at the start of Grade R. Learners from poorer school contexts enter Grade R with markedly lower levels of school readiness than their peers in more advantaged schools, and these differences remain visible one year later. This suggests that the origins of inequality in learning lie well before children enter the formal schooling system.

These findings point to the importance of intervening earlier than Grade R if the aim is to reduce developmental gaps. Much of the international evidence cited in support of early childhood investment (including influential work by Heckman and others) relates to high-quality early childhood interventions targeting children in the first five years of life, a period of rapid cognitive and socio-emotional development. A school-based Grade R year, delivered at ages five to six, is therefore not directly comparable to the early childhood programmes on which much of this evidence is based.Treating Grade R as a proxy for early childhood development risks overstating what can realistically be achieved at this stage.

At the same time, the evidence in this note cautions against the view that expanding access alone will be sufficient to improve outcomes. Once differences in children's developmental starting points are taken into account, learners in better-resourced school environments made larger gains during Grade R than those in poorer schools. This indicates that participation in Grade R does not guarantee similar learning progress across socio-economic settings.

These patterns suggest that Grade R is shaped by the same institutional and resource constraints that characterise the rest of the schooling system. Where school quality is weak, an additional year of schooling is unlikely to produce substantially different results. This aligns with the argument advanced by Akkari (2022), who cautions against extending the existing system downward without first addressing its underlying capacity and quality constraints. In such contexts, expansion risks reproducing inequalities earlier rather than eliminating them.

Taken together, the evidence points to two important considerations. First, if reducing inequality in learning is the objective, interventions must begin earlier than Grade R, consistent with the broader early childhood development literature. Second, whether interventions occur before or within the schooling system, their effectiveness will depend critically on quality. Earlier access, in the absence of improvements in how learning environments function, is unlikely to deliver the developmental gains often associated with early childhood investment.

6. Implications for the 2030 reading goal

As the implementation of compulsory Grade R begins in 2026, this evidence highlights both the promise and the limits of what this reform can achieve. The findings show that large socio-economic inequalities in developmental outcomes are already present at the start of Grade R and persist into Grade 1, and that patterns of measured progress during the Grade R year differ systematically across school contexts. These results suggest that while Grade R is an important component of South Africa's early learning architecture, it cannot on its own offset inequalities that emerge earlier in childhood or compensate for weaknesses in school quality. If the expansion of Grade R is to contribute meaningfully to the 2030 reading goal, it will need to be embedded within a broader strategy that prioritises earlier intervention and sustained improvements in the quality of learning environments throughout the foundation phase, particularly in poorer schools. Without this, there is a risk that compulsory Grade R will extend existing inequalities earlier into the schooling system, rather than serving as the equalising foundation it is often assumed to be.

7. References

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