

Briefing Note

2030 Reading Panel

The Challenges and Opportunities in Foundation Phase Reading: Towards all grade 4 learners reading for meaning by 2030.

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The former Deputy President of South Africa Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka has convened the annual '2030 Reading Panel' to bring together respected South African leaders to ask: "What needs to change for us to ensure that all children learn to read by 2030?" The panel will meet annually until 2030.

The panel comprises the following members (listed alphabetically): Commissioner André Gaum, Bobby Godsell, Colin Coleman, Prof Jonathan Jansen, Noncedo Madubedube, Jay Naidoo, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, Prof Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Prof Sizwe Mabizela, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Hulisani Ravele, Prof Michael Sachs, Judy Sikuza, Elinor Sisulu, and Prof Catherine Snow. More information is available at readingpanel.co.za

This Briefing note was prepared by Sipumelele Lucwaba at the request of the Chair of the 2030 Reading Panel. The views and opinions expressed in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of individual Panel members or the sponsors of the Reading Panel. Recommended citation: Lucwaba. S. (2024) 2024 Briefing Note for the 2030 Reading Panel: The Challenges and Opportunities in Foundation Phase Reading - Towards all grade 4 learners reading for meaning by 2030. Johannesburg.

Executive Summary

The challenges of early grade reading in South Africa

81% of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language.

1

Insufficient BEd graduates trained in the Language of Learning and Teaching required.

2

As little as 2% of the content of FP BEd courses focus on teaching literacy.

3

At the current trajectory, it will take 80 years for all Grade 4 learners to learn to read for meaning.

4



Low reading levels defined by socioeconomic and language lines:

According to PIRLS 2021, 81% of South African grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, meaning they cannot “locate and retrieve explicitly stated information or make straightforward inferences about events and reasons for actions” (PIRLS, 2021). Two factors play a key role in these low reading levels. The first is language. The disparity in reading skills between learners learning to read in English and the lowest-performing African language (Sepedi in 2016 and Setswana in 2021) almost doubled between 2016 and 2021 (from 1,6 years to 2,8 years). The second factor relates to the socioeconomic status of schools. In 2016, a child in the poorest 70% of schools was five times less likely to be able to read; in 2021, this figure had doubled to 10 times less likely.



Roots of the reading crisis are in the early grades:

Local studies show that only 40% of learners know the letters of the alphabet by the end of Grade 1, and by the time the remaining 60% reach Grade 7, they are two to four years behind their peers (Wills, Ardington & Sebaeng, 2022).



Almost half of all government-employed teachers are aged 50 or older, so the country will soon face a wave of teacher retirements:

Approximately 46% of teachers are aged 50 or older and are expected to retire by 2030. The provinces that will be hit hardest by this wave of retiring teachers are Limpopo (58% of teachers), the Eastern Cape (51%) and Mpumalanga (50%) (Böhmer & Gustafsson, 2023). These numbers are even higher in primary schools, and to make matters worse, a large portion of these teachers fill senior positions such as head of departments (HODs) or school principals (Böhmer & Gustafsson, 2023). For example, in Limpopo, 63% of primary school teachers are expected to retire by 2030 and 81% of these teachers are senior teachers. To aggravate the situation even further, austerity measures are hampering the efficient replacement of retiring teachers, with provinces already exhibiting declining hiring rates. Between 2019 and 2021, for example, the number of HODs and deputy principals



declined by 2 071 and 763 respectively, indicating hiring freezes in senior management positions (Spaull & Ntaka, 2022). In addition, class sizes in the aforementioned provinces are also the largest compared to other provinces, with 35% of Grade 3 classes in Limpopo having more than 50 learners and 20% more than 60 (Wills, 2023).



Foundation Phase graduates insufficiently prepared to teach reading and maths

Aspiring teachers enrolling at universities enter with some of the lowest scores in language and math and go on to leave universities ill-prepared to teach both reading and maths, with low content, pedagogical and language skills. A 2018 study tested BEd students in their first and final years on items drawn from a primary school maths test (Grades 1 to 7). On average, students scored virtually the same in both years – 52% in their first year and 54% in their final year – indicating very little progression in mastering basic primary school maths over the four years (Bowie, Venkat & Askew, 2019). Insufficient time is spent in foundation phase BEd programmes developing content and pedagogical knowledge for both maths and literacy, even though these are the core learning areas for children in the foundation phase.



Learner progress is not measured effectively and evidence-based solutions are not scaled adequately:

Since the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) were jettisoned in 2014, South Africa has not had a universal, standardised assessment at the foundation phase level. The results of the National Systemic Assessment and the Early Learning National Assessments (ELNAs) implemented in 2021 and 2022 have yet to be released publicly and therefore cannot be used to plan and respond. Only the Western Cape measures learner reading abilities for all learners at a Grade 3 level annually. Additionally, Gauteng measures learner reading achievement at a Grade 3 level using a sample.

What can be done to improve reading outcomes?



A national budgeted long-term plan, supported by provincial implementation plans

Even though South African researchers have conducted rigorous research over the past decade on what improves reading outcomes, there is still no published and budgeted national reading plan that sufficiently considers these findings and begins to scale lessons learnt. Without a sustained and focused budgeted plan, where outcomes are measured promptly, we will continue to implement fragmented solutions that fail to address the urgency of the reading crisis. **Therefore, the most critical and actionable intervention is a long-term national budgeted plan, supported by provincial plans, aimed at improving reading.** Whilst there are a number of interrelated challenges in the system, we recommend that based on urgency, evidence and tools available for implementation, the plan(s) address (1) the minimum set of LTSM required in each foundation phase classroom, (2) plans to address teacher content and pedagogical knowledge and (3) assessing learner outcomes and measuring system progress.



The interventions that are most successful in improving reading outcomes all focus on quality learning materials and teacher training

South African interventions with the most significant impact on reading outcomes generally fall into one of three categories: (1) learning and teaching support material (LTSM), including workbooks and graded readers combined with aligned teacher guides and training on how to use these resources; (2) the effective use of unemployed youth as teaching assistants; and (3) teacher coaching. The first two – LTSM and TAs – are politically appealing and, given existing public youth employment programmes (e.g. the Social Employment Fund), financially plausible at scale. In terms of LTSM, the Rainbow Workbooks from the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which have been available since 2011, have made a significant impact on ensuring a minimum standard when it comes to the equitable provision of LTSM and, to some degree, teaching. However, a minimum set of materials (e.g. phonics friezes and graded readers) in addition to the Rainbow Workbooks is recommended to enable children to learn how to read. This minimum package is costed at R1 021 per classroom of 40 learners or R25 per learner, plus an annual top-up of R18 per learner to provide children with graded readers that they can take home. It's critical that all foundation phase classrooms are provided with a minimum package of learning materials, including lesson plans to support teachers in planning for and facilitating lessons effectively. The estimated cost of a quality TA programme with material but excluding TA stipends is R776 per learner.



The government should focus on scaling evidence-based programmes.

Encouragingly, four provinces are currently implementing province-wide, evidence-based responses to the reading crisis: Gauteng (Grade R literacy and maths programme), Western Cape (LTSM and teacher training for Grades 1 to 3), Eastern Cape (teacher training and anthologies for Grades 1 to 3), and the Northern Cape (teacher coaching and LTSM for Grades 1 to 3). All of these provinces are scaling their programmes via three different mechanisms: (1) reorganising the existing budget to identify savings (Eastern Cape); (2) establishing partnerships with private funders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Gauteng and the Northern Cape); and (3) requesting additional support on the submission of a detailed plan and budget from Treasury (Western Cape). Nevertheless, this progress is no substitute for sustained, focused and nationally driven reform.



Foundation phase BEd courses should have stricter admission requirements and a stronger focus on teaching reading.

The primary catalyst for improving reading outcomes is initial teacher education (ITE). Without a strong foundation, CPD (continuous professional development) training will become an endless and unaffordable task of reskilling teachers, instead of focusing on its main purpose: upskilling. A critical aspect of effective ITE will be ensuring university lecturers are equipped to teach the technical aspects of reading. Furthermore, universities should raise entry requirements for aspiring teachers to ensure that candidates meet certain language and subject-specific standards. Additionally, at least 25% of the BEd foundation phase curriculum should focus on teaching reading, combined with increased practical classroom experience and mentoring. For CPD programmes, minimum training requirements for both new and current foundation phase teachers, including rigorous training on teaching reading, must be considered.



Individual learner performance must be measured

For provincial education departments to effectively support schools and teachers and for national government to measure progress, plan and allocate resources efficiently, it is vital to measure individual learner performance and to monitor system progress. It is recommended that provinces or national government introduce an annual assessment that measures reading proficiency among all Grade 2 learners, with the instruments and analysis aligned with the existing DBE reading benchmarks. This could be further supported by a national sample-based assessment every three years (similar to the existing National Systemic Assessment) that includes both an oral reading fluency and a written component.



1. Teachers

Teachers are arguably the most crucial factor in improving reading outcomes in South Africa. By 2030, nearly 50% of government employed teachers are expected to retire, presenting a unique opportunity to develop a new cohort of purpose-fit educators. While both initial teacher education (ITE) and continuous professional development (CPD) are essential, ITE is most important. With four years to shape a captive audience (the average duration of a university-level teaching degree), ITE offers impactful and essential foundational training, which CPD cannot achieve. While CPD is vital for addressing skills gaps and ongoing development, over-reliance on CPD would result in a perpetual game of catch-up, which the education system cannot afford and that will not lead to the desired outcomes.

Constraints to training quality primary school teachers

- 1. The quality of students accepted into BEd programmes:** Prospective teachers accepted into BEd programmes exhibit poor language and maths skills. A 2019 report by the Centre for Educational Testing and Placement (CEPT) on 80 000 candidates that wrote the National Benchmark Test (NBT) academic literacy component found that 29% of aspirant teachers had only basic language skills (described as “serious learning challenges identified”) and 47% lower intermediate-level skills (CEPT, 2019). A report from the Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project (SIRP) recorded concerns from foundation phase BEd lecturers about students’ poorly developed language skills and their inability to read fluently in any language. Students with such low skill levels would experience challenges in grasping the academic content of a BEd programme and may take longer to complete the qualification or require additional study programmes. In other words, these students are unlikely to cope with mainstream university courses (CEPT, 2019).
- 2. The composition of the BEd curriculum:** Reading and maths are the core skills that foundation phase learners must develop. However, a review of BEd programmes at 16 universities revealed that only 2–10% of credits in primary school BEd programmes are currently allocated to the pedagogical components of teaching reading and literacy, and only between 5% and 17% of credits to teaching maths skills (Reed, 2020; Roberts & Maseko, 2022; Roberts & Moloi, 2022). University programmes have been found to be too theoretical, with insufficient time spent on developing deep subject and pedagogical content knowledge. In other words, students do not gain an understanding of how a child learns to read and are not equipped with the skills and technical knowledge of how to teach children to read.
- 3. Little progression in knowledge after years of study:** While this report focuses on reading, the core competencies required from foundation phase teachers also include maths. A 2018 study that tested a sample of 488 first-year and 282 final-year BEd students from three universities on items drawn from a primary school curriculum (grade 1-7), found that students have a poor understanding of primary school maths. Even more concerning was the fact that knowledge levels hardly improved by the time students had completed their four-year degree. The average score for first-year BEd students was 52% and, after four years of full-time study, the average score for final-year students on the same test was 54% (Bowie, Venkat & Askew, 2019).



Tests based on the school curriculum indicate that final-year BEd students are quite unprepared to teach mathematics in primary schools, revealing very significant shortcomings in initial teacher education (ITE) curricula. Continuous professional development (CPD), where it is well-designed and rigorously evaluated, has been shown to have small effects on both teacher knowledge and learner performance. However, unless ITE is reformed at the same time, CPD becomes a never-ending task of making marginal differences to the shortcomings of each successive cohort of qualified but incompetent teachers emerging from the universities.

- Taylor, 2021



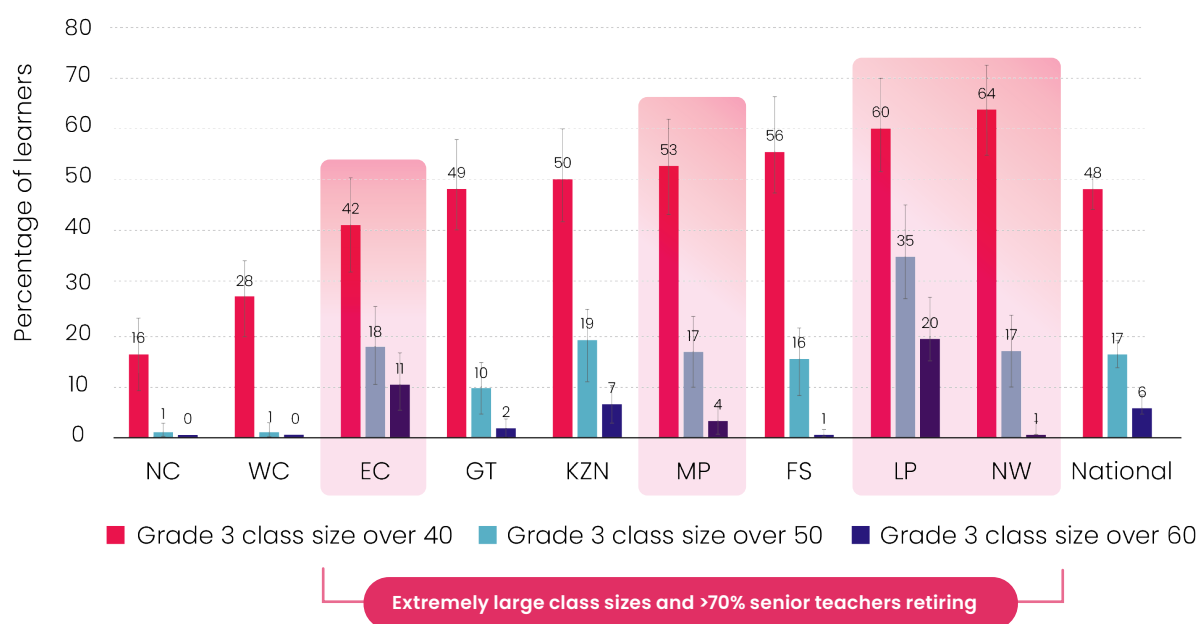
Promising ITE research and interventions

The Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project (SIRP) is an offshoot of the Primary Teacher Education Project (PrimTed) which seeks to enhance the teaching of reading and mathematics to prospective teachers in South African universities. The SIRP is based at the University of Johannesburg and aims to improve reading instruction in Sesotho and IsiZulu for BEd students and is currently being piloted across twelve universities that offer these languages in their BEd programmes.

The Advanced Certificate (AdvCert) in Foundation Phase Literacy Teaching, presented by Rhodes University, is a 120-credit course focused on teaching reading in the foundation phase. It is offered in isiXhosa, Sepedi and Afrikaans. The conclusion from an evaluation of the course in 2021 was as follows: "The evidence examined by the evaluation strongly suggests that the primary question facing AdvCert is not so much one of how to improve the programme, but what to do with it next ... [a] major new focus for the AdvCert should be to advocate for the inclusion of the curriculum, either as a whole or in parts, into BEd courses for primary school [foundation and intermediate phase] teachers." (Taylor, 2021)

4. Looming large-scale retirement of teachers: Almost 50% of teachers are expected to retire in the next six years. Limpopo will be the worst affected province (58% of teachers), followed by the Eastern Cape (51%) and Mpumalanga (50%) (Böhmer & Gustafsson, 2023). Teacher supply is however not necessarily the main problem that the education system faces. The key challenge is rather producing the right number of teachers for the right phase in the relevant language, combined with the provinces' ability to absorb and allocate these teachers effectively. In 2021, just 51% of teachers produced by universities were employed (Gustafsson, 2022). If not managed well, the looming retirements will further exacerbate the issue of extreme class sizes, since the provinces that face the most retirements also have the biggest classes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Provinces with the most learners in Grade 3 classes (2017/2018)



5. Insufficient number of BEd graduates in the required LOLT. New research indicates concerns in the number of African language LOLT foundation phase graduates, with some African languages producing as little as 20% of projected demand (Gustafsson, 2023). Again, this does not indicate an overall teacher supply problem, rather a need to ensure subject and language specific supply match demand.

Recommendations

Provinces

1. Allocate of sufficient teachers to the foundation phase and fill open posts.
2. Work closely with universities, especially those who teach the relevant languages, to manage demand and supply.
3. **Prioritise upskilling existing teachers below the age of 50 on teaching reading and providing the minimum LTSM.**
4. Provide all new teachers with access to dedicated support and accredited programmes that focus on teaching reading.



Universities

1. Introduce courses focused on addressing language backlogs and proficiency.
2. Increase the capacity of university staff to teach reading in African languages.
3. **Allocate at least 25%² of BEd curriculums to the teaching of reading and literacy. This should also be part of the minimum requirements for ongoing certification in the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) audit, which is currently underway.**
4. Strengthen the length and quality of the teacher practice components of the BEd.
5. Align public bursary programmes such as Funza Lushaka with university- and provincial-level requirement

2. The Minimum Package of Learning Materials

Currently, the only piece of LTSM guaranteed to be found in every foundation phase classroom is the Department of Basic Education (DBE) Rainbow Workbooks. However, the DBE's research, monitoring and evaluation unit recommends the following as the minimum package required for children in the foundation phase to learn how to read in their home language:

- Alphabet friezes
- Phonics friezes
- Flashcards
- Handwriting and vocabulary posters
- Anthologies of graded readers (a set of stories appropriate to the child's reading level)

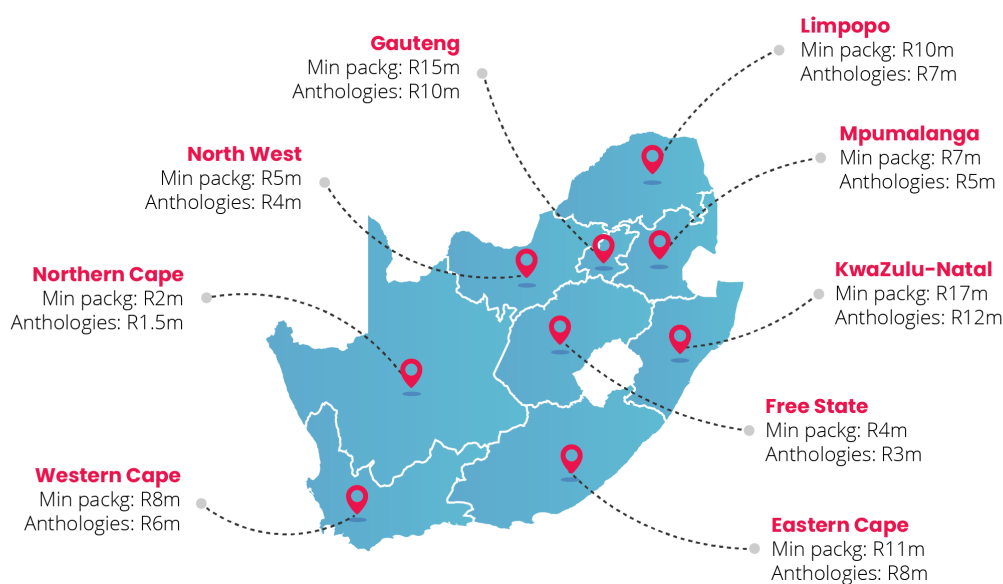
The DBE's estimate for providing this set of materials is R1 021 per classroom. Except for the anthologies of graded readers, these are classroom resources and therefore represent a once-off cost, with replenishments only required when necessary. Based on an average of 40 learners per class, Map 1 indicates the estimated cost of the minimum package and the annual anthology replenishment per province. It should be noted that some provinces may already be providing certain elements, which means they will only require an audit and top-up.



It would cost **R18 per learner** or **R720 per classroom** to **replenish anthologies annually**. A national roll-out would cost approximately **R55 million**

2 Together maths and literacy should be allocated 50% of Bed curriculums.

Map 1: Estimated costs of the minimum package of foundation phase learning materials per province



Source: Own Calculations based on figures provided by the Department of Basic Education

In addition, it's important to keep in mind that the minimum package represents what is required for learners to acquire the skill of reading. If learners are to excel and reach the advanced international reading benchmarks³ or progress to reading for enjoyment, supplementary reading materials will be required. The DBE estimates that a classroom library to support the habit of reading would cost R1 267 per classroom.

Two other essential materials are not included in the minimum package, possibly because they already exist in some form, namely learner workbooks and teacher guides or lesson plans. The impact of high-quality workbooks and aligned teacher guides is discussed in section 5. Additionally, there is a large body of research internationally, regionally and from the DBE (via the Early Grade Reading Study or EGRS) on the importance of structured pedagogy in supporting teaching practice and improving learning outcomes in a cost-effective manner. While a study of the impact of the DBE Rainbow Workbooks has not yet been conducted, these workbooks are regarded as one of the main drivers of improved learning outcomes (Gustafsson, 2019). Nevertheless, a review of the DBE workbooks can further improve the quality of the material and, as a result, learning outcomes. To support teachers in planning for lessons and mediating the curriculum to learners effectively, the development and supply of aligned lesson plans will be crucial.

Recommendations

1. Provide all classrooms with at least the minimum package of materials, including annual replenishments of anthologies, in addition to the DBE Rainbow Workbooks.
2. Review the DBE Rainbow Workbooks and develop aligned teacher guides.
3. Where funds are available, provide classroom libraries with additional reading material in each classroom to further advance reading skills.

3 "...Make inferences about complex information across different web pages and parts of text to recognise the relevant information in a list and use evidence in the text to support ideas ... Interpret and integrate multiple pieces of different information ... evaluate textual, visual, and interactive elements..." (PIRLS, 2021)

3. Assessment

The only assessment that provides a reliable, national picture of reading outcomes at a Grade 4 level is the Progress in International Assessment (PIRLS), in which South Africa has participated since 2006. While the insights from PIRLS are very helpful, it's a sample-based assessment that is only administered every five years. This means there are significant lags in understanding and responding to learner achievement levels, which undermines efforts to intervene before learners reach the end of the foundation phase. Additionally, PIRLS only measures comprehension, which is a challenge in the South African context, since the wheels come off quite early on. A recent study using longitudinal data from Nguni and Sesotho-Setswana language groups found that less than 50% of learners know all the letters of the alphabet by the end of Grade 1, and end up being two to four years behind their peers by the time they reach Grade 7 (Wills, Ardington & Sebaeng, 2022).

The last time South Africa participated in a universal assessment that measured the reading outcomes of foundation phase learners was in 2014, through the Annual National Assessments (ANAs). We have since made some strides with the implementation of the National Systemic Assessment and the Early Learning National Assessments (ELNAs). However, the results from these assessments have not been made publicly available, with some provinces reporting that they have not received any results since the inception of the assessments in 2021 and 2022⁴. The lack of data makes these tools essentially useless, as assessment can only be useful when it equips the system or teachers with the relevant knowledge to respond. Given this gap, two provinces are already implementing their own assessments. The Western Cape's systemic tests measure learner achievement in maths and reading in Grades 3, 6 and 9 annually. Gauteng conducts reading and maths assessments in Grades 3 every two to three years.



“The ideal national assessment system is diverse, comprising a combination of sample-based assessments (useful for system-level reporting and accountability pressure, with high stakes for policy-makers and low stakes for individual schools) and universal assessments (useful for school-level accountability pressure and communication and for mobilising improvement, with relatively high stakes for learners, school personnel, and parents).”

Van Der Berg & Nuga Deliwe, 2022

In the last three years, the DBE has developed early grade reading benchmarks for Grades 1 to 6. This will allow schools and provinces to measure early reading skills (phonemic awareness, fluency and comprehension) in primary schools, particularly in Grades 1 and 2. Although comprehension is the gold standard for reading, measuring it at a Grade 4 level is to an extent too late as it provides limited options for intervention and a poor indication of the specific skills that learners are struggling with. If learners are not assessed early enough in a standardised manner, it is difficult to know how and when to respond. Gathering insights from small-scale studies is not sufficient and looking at the PIRLS results every five years or at the matric results is way too late for successful intervention.

⁴ This data was recently made available for a DBE workshop in June 2024.

Recommendations

1. **Implement a national or provincial assessment annually of all Grade 2 learners, aligning the instruments and analysis with the existing DBE benchmarks. These assessments should culminate in reports and plans to respond at both a school and provincial level.**
2. Implement a sample-based assessment every three years – similar to the existing National Systemic Assessment – at a Grade 3 level that assesses Oral Reading Fluency and comprehension through a written component.
3. There is a large role for universities to play in the design of instruments, sampling and performing subsequent data analysis.

4. What Works to Improve Reading Outcomes and Estimated Costs

Over the past 15 years, three types of rigorously evaluated interventions have led to significant improvements in learner reading outcomes in South Africa: (1) learning and teaching support material (LTSM), including workbooks, graded readers and teacher guides; (2) the effective use of teaching assistants; and (3) teacher coaching. Below are a few examples of successful interventions in different provinces:

1. **Graded readers:** In 2019 and 2020, the Eastern Cape rolled out graded readers to all foundation phase learners in the province at a cost of R15 per learner. An evaluation found an improvement in reading outcomes of 20% of a schooling year (Ardington & Spaul, 2022).
2. **Quality workbooks and aligned teacher guides:** A study in Limpopo found that having quality workbooks and aligned teacher guides combined with quality teacher training improved learning outcomes by up to 60% of a schooling year (Ardington, 2024).
3. **Teacher coaching:** Two studies in the North West and the Eastern Cape showed that teacher coaching and LTSM improved learning outcomes by 40% of a schooling year. A similar programme rolled out across Gauteng between 2010 and 2014 (GPLMS) also had a positive impact on reading outcomes. (Cilliers et al., 2020; Ardington & Meiring, 2020).
4. **Teaching assistants (TAs):** Studies in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo have shown that carefully selected and trained TAs, with aligned LTSM provided at the learner and teacher level can ensure almost double the number of learners perform at grade 3 level versus their counterparts in control schools. Another study showed that TAs who are selected through public employment programmes and paid by government and who have minimal training, materials and support, have the potential to double the number of learners with sufficient reading abilities at their grade level (Ardington, 2024; Fleisch et al., 2024).

There is an urgent need for a budgeted national reading plan which considers large-scale implementation of some of these interventions which at a minimum addresses (1) the minimum set of LTSM required in each foundation phase classroom, (2) plans to address teacher content and pedagogical knowledge (including ITE) and (3) assessing learner outcomes and measuring system progress.



Three provinces are scaling a selection of interventions using three different mechanisms: (1) reorganising the existing provincial budget to identify savings (Eastern Cape); (2) partnering with private funders and non-governmental organisations (Gauteng and the Northern Cape); and (3) requesting additional support on the submission of a detailed plan from Treasury (Western Cape).

Table 1 summarises the evaluation results and costs of existing interventions, while Table 2 provides an overview of interventions currently being scaled.

Table 1: Evaluation results and approximate costs of early grade reading interventions

Intervention	Effect size ⁵	Tested at scale	Approx cost per learner p/a at scale ⁶	Source
Anthology of graded readers	20% of a schooling year	Yes, rolled out in the Eastern Cape in 2019, 2020 and 2024	R18	Ardington & Spaul, 2022
LTSM (workbooks and teacher guides)	68% of a schooling year 25% of Grade 3 learners at grade level versus 15% in control schools	Yes, currently in the Western Cape	R116-R342 ⁷	Ardington, 2024
Teacher coaching and LTSM (lessons plans + classroom resources)	40% of a schooling year 44% of Grade 2 learners at grade level versus 37% in control schools	Yes, currently in Northern Cape and previously in Gauteng	R530 ⁸	Cilliers et al., 2020; Ardington & Meiring, 2020
Teaching assistants and LTSM (workbooks and teacher guides)	115% of a schooling year 32% of Grade 3 learners at grade level versus 15% in control schools	No	R776	Ardington, 2024

⁵ With the exception of the anthology of graded readers, all effect sizes were measured through randomised control trials. The impact of the anthologies was assessed using a quasi-experimental evaluation.

⁶ For approximate costs of teacher coaching and a minimum set of materials see the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) costing tool, 2020. For costs of TAs, and, workbooks and teacher guides see Ardington (2024).

⁷ R116 is the cost excluding teacher training and R342 includes 8 training sessions per teacher over five years.

⁸ This cost is based on the DBE's EGRS costing tool using the average cost per learner for an external coaching model for all quintile 1-3 schools in all provinces. This includes the assumption that some teachers receive the base (training +LTSM) program and others the full coaching program.



Table 2: Interventions currently being scaled (by province)

	Eastern Cape (2024)	Gauteng (2022–2024)	Western Cape (2023–2025)	Northern Cape (2024)
Grades	1–3	R	1–3	1–3
Languages	isiXhosa, Sesotho and Afrikaans	All	isiXhosa and Afrikaans	Setswana, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, English first additional language (EFAL)
# Learners	485 000	130 000	236 681	32 317
# Teachers	3 825	4 500	6 094	894
# Schools	4 363	2 042	852	125
# Subject advisors	22	190	67	TBC
Provincial budget	R24 million	R21,36 million	R110,9 million	TBC
Donor budget	N/A	R85,44 million	N/A	R26 million
Cost per learner	R50	R822	R469	R805
Training provided	<p>Teachers and subject advisors: Two days of training on phonics and five days of training on teaching reading in African languages</p>	<p>Subject advisors: Five days of face-to-face block training and then one training day per term</p> <p>Foundation phase head of departments: Two-hour online information session once per term</p> <p>Grade R teachers: Monthly face-to-face training sessions (11 in total)</p>	<p>Subject advisors: Three days of face-to-face training and ongoing support</p> <p>Lead teachers: Quarterly face-to-face orientation</p> <p>Teachers: Face-to-face orientation day, three days of in-person training in April and online training every term</p>	<p>Teachers: Quarterly training focused on LTSM usage, routines and assessment and weekly/bi-weekly onsite coaching</p>
Resources	<p>1 x anthology of graded readers per learner</p> <p>1 x set of storybooks per classroom</p>	<p>Teachers: A concept guide, activity guides, workbooks, facilitators’ guides, slide presentation packs with videos, puppets, sequence cards, big books, game cards and maths kit</p>	<p>Teachers: Quarterly teacher guides, Grade 1 big books; eClassrooms via an interactive poster with additional resources</p> <p>Learners: Activity books (quarterly), anthology of graded readers for isiXhosa learners, decodable graded readers for learners whose home language is Afrikaans</p>	<p>Teachers: Termly scripted lesson plans and classroom resources, including big books, flashcards, anthologies and alphabet friezes</p>

Source: 2030 Reading Panel 2023 and 2024 Background reports

4 Case Study

What it takes to improve reading outcomes at scale: An example from Brazil

Sobral is a municipality in the state of Ceará in Brazil. In 2001, 40% of their grade 3s were unable to read a single word, less than 20 years later, over 80% of their grade 3s could read for meaning and they continue to maintain almost universal literacy rates. While Sobral is a small municipality of about 34 primary schools, their interventions were scaled to the state of Ceará, where there are 3 558 primary schools. Ceará has seen some of the largest increases in national education quality, with 10 of its municipalities ranked in the top 20 nationally and some scores higher than the average private school in São Paulo.

At South Africa's current rate of improvement, it will take the country more than 80 years to have all Grade 4 learners reading for meaning (Spaull, 2022). With Brazil having similar levels of extreme inequality and Ceará being one of the poorest states, this case study can be an important example for South Africa on how to accelerate the improvement of reading outcomes in adverse socio-economic conditions.

Key lessons for success



Strong political leadership, a focused plan and a dedicated budget are vital to large-scale change:

In Sobral, and eventually Ceará, reading became the key political priority during elections. However, the decisions on the specific reforms were not political. The leaders used the political platform to establish a clear goal of "all learners to be literate by Grade 2" and reorientated the system to focus on the mechanisms that could achieve this goal: structured pedagogy based on the effective use of student assessment, a focused curriculum, prepared and motivated teachers, and autonomous and accountable school management (Cruz & Loureiro, 2021).



There is no secret, really! It boils down to a strong focus on the basics, e.g., teaching children how to read by the right age, and making everyone and the system to coherently work towards that goal.

Ivo Gomes, Mayor of Sobral



Annual universal assessments are essential to timely intervention and fostering accountability in the system:

In Sobral, assessments are used to plan interventions, train teachers, support schools and monitor system progress. Table 3 provides an overview of the country's assessments of reading and maths skills from a national to a classroom level. At a national level, learners are tested every second year, at a provincial level they are tested annually, and at a municipal level, assessments are conducted twice a year. As Table 3 shows, the assessments vary in purpose and complexity. For example, at a municipal level, assessments act as a diagnostic tool and provide inputs on learner readiness. At a state level, the focus is on providing information on the overall progress of municipalities and guidance on budget allocations and which interventions to prioritise. The outcomes of these assessments are then

used to tailor support at a school and teacher level, including designing school-specific curricula supported by continuous teacher training. In considering appropriate assessments for South Africa, it may be more useful for provinces to understand annual learner-level results at a grade level (e.g. letter sounds and oral reading fluency) in order to identify priority schools or districts and to intervene. Nationally, insights into the performance of the system may be most useful. Such insights can be gathered using a sample-based assessment focused on comprehension conducted less frequently (e.g. every three years).



There is no substitute for the reskilling of teachers: Similar to South Africa, teachers in Sobral left university with a strong theoretical foundation for how to teach reading but very little practical and pedagogical knowledge. According to Sobral's mayor, the initial plan was to engage universities in rectifying this gap. However, when the recommended changes at universities did not materialise, Sobral created their own continuous training institutions for teachers. The instructors at these schools are all experienced teachers and the schools use results from standardised assessments to curate the curriculum each year (Cruz & Loureiro, 2021). All existing teachers were retrained over a year and their re-entry into the system was dependent on their performance. Teachers were required to teach during the day and attend school in the afternoons and evenings. The schools also paid particular attention to heads of departments (HODs) and pedagogical coordinators⁹. While creating new institutions for teacher training proved to be effective for Sobral, this option may be too expensive for South Africa and is a duplication of what initial teacher education (ITE) should achieve. Given the pivotal role that ITE plays in upskilling teachers, the lesson here is that serious attention must be paid to what structured collaboration between the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Higher Education & Training (DHET) must look like to produce effective teachers.



Learners need access to a minimum set of appropriate, quality learning materials and teachers must be trained on how to use these effectively: Sobral invested heavily in the development of new learning materials, following the decision that textbooks were inappropriate at the foundation phase. One of the reasons for this decision was that if learners were still struggling to read, the self-directed learning provided by a textbook was of little use. They therefore developed detailed literacy teaching material – which included structured lesson plans, books and a set of weekly and monthly learning goals – and provided teachers with eight hours of training per month. Classroom management was a central aspect of the teacher training as every minute in the classroom is important to student learning. To ensure optimal use of teaching time, emphasis was put on lesson plans, consistent feedback sessions between the municipality and pedagogical coordinators and between coordinators and teachers, and tailoring learning interventions to students' needs (Cruz & Loureiro, 2021).

⁹ Each school is allocated a pedagogical coordinator who supports teachers in how to ensure student learning takes place through activities such as monitoring lesson planning, observing classes, providing feedback, and creating strategies for students who fall behind.



Table 3: Learner assessments in Brazil, from classroom to national level

Assessment features	Classroom	Municipality	State	National
Purpose	Provide immediate feedback to inform classroom instruction	Provide diagnostic and summative information on the achievement of grade-level learning goals	Monitor quality in the state and set priorities for each municipality, including providing financial incentives to schools and municipalities and implementing remedial programmes at schools	Monitor quality at a national level and promote school accountability with respect to the common core learning standards
Frequency	Daily as part of the classroom practice	Twice per academic year	Once per academic year	Every second year
Learners tested	All students	All students from preschool to Grade 9	All students in Grades 2, 5, 9 and 12	All students in Grades 2, 5, 9 and 12
Format	Varies from observation and questioning to quizzes and group activities	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade
Subject areas covered	All subject areas	Literacy, language and maths	Literacy, language and maths	Literacy, language, maths, natural sciences and human sciences
Scoring	Informal and simple	Informal and simple for literacy and sophisticated statistical techniques for language and maths	Sophisticated statistical techniques to monitor learning over time	Sophisticated statistical techniques to monitor learning over time

Source: Luna-Bazaldua & Cruz, 2024.

6. Conclusion

Addressing the early grade reading crisis in South Africa will require a multifaceted approach that combines strong political leadership, rigorous assessment systems, effective teacher training, and the provision of quality learning materials. Evidence from successful interventions, both locally and internationally, underscores the importance of structured pedagogy, continuous professional development for teachers, and regular assessments to monitor and respond to learners' progress in particular.

Central to this effort is the critical role of universities in developing capable educators. With nearly 50% of current teachers expected to retire by 2030, there is a unique opportunity to cultivate a new cohort of purpose-fit educators. Universities must elevate their BEd programmes by dedicating at least 25% of the curriculum to teaching reading and literacy and including practical classroom experience. In addition, raising entry requirements and focusing on subject-specific standards will better prepare aspiring teachers for the demands of the classroom.

Several provinces – including the Western Cape, Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape – are making commendable strides in scaling cost-effective, evidence-based solutions. Their efforts illustrate the important leading role that provinces play in ensuring improved reading outcomes; the remaining provinces must follow suit. Nevertheless, to achieve sustainable and widespread improvement in reading outcomes, provincial-level efforts must be supported by a nationally driven reform agenda that prioritises reading proficiency at the foundation phase. Only through such a concerted and cohesive effort can South Africa hope to ensure that all learners acquire the critical skill of reading for meaning, thereby setting a solid foundation for their future academic success and lifelong learning.

7. Annexure 1: Contact details for interventions

Intervention	Contact	
Eastern Cape: Teacher training, anthologies and classroom readers	Chulekazi Bula Chief director: Curriculum, ECDOE chulekazi.bula@ecdoe.gov.za	https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/
Gauteng: Grade R Mathematics and Language Improvement Project	Phumelele Tloubatla Director: ECD, GP Phumelele.Tloubatla@gauteng.gov.za	https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/grade-r-maths-and-language-improvement-project
Northern Cape: Scale of the Early Grade Reading Study	Dr. Andile Dube Education specialist, UNICEF adube@unicef.org	https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/
Western Cape: Rollout of LTSM and teacher training	Almaret du Toit Chief Education Specialist Almaret.dutoit@westerncape.gov.za	https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/
Early Grade Reading Study	Dr. Stephen Taylor Director: Research, monitoring and evaluation, DBE taylor.s@dbe.gov.za	https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/EarlyGradeReadingStudy.aspx
Teaching assistants, teacher guides and workbooks	Phumelele Nhlapo CEO, Funda Wandé phumelele@fundawande.org	https://fundawande.org/news?i=4



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