



Summary note on “COVID-19 disruptions and education in South Africa: Two years of evidence”

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7th February 2023

1. About this note

Although school attendance and economic activity has returned to a more usual state of functioning after the removal of COVID-19 related lockdown restrictions, pandemic disruptions to schooling are far from over. In this note for the Reading Panel 2023, we summarise the main findings from a report titled “COVID-19 disruptions and education in South Africa: Two years of evidence”. The report reviews what we know about learning losses and other schooling impacts in South Africa after two pandemic years (2020 and 2021). We highlight specifically pandemic-related impacts on South African learner’s literacy levels.

2. Main findings

2.1. There have been extensive learning losses in the General Education and Training (GET) Phase.

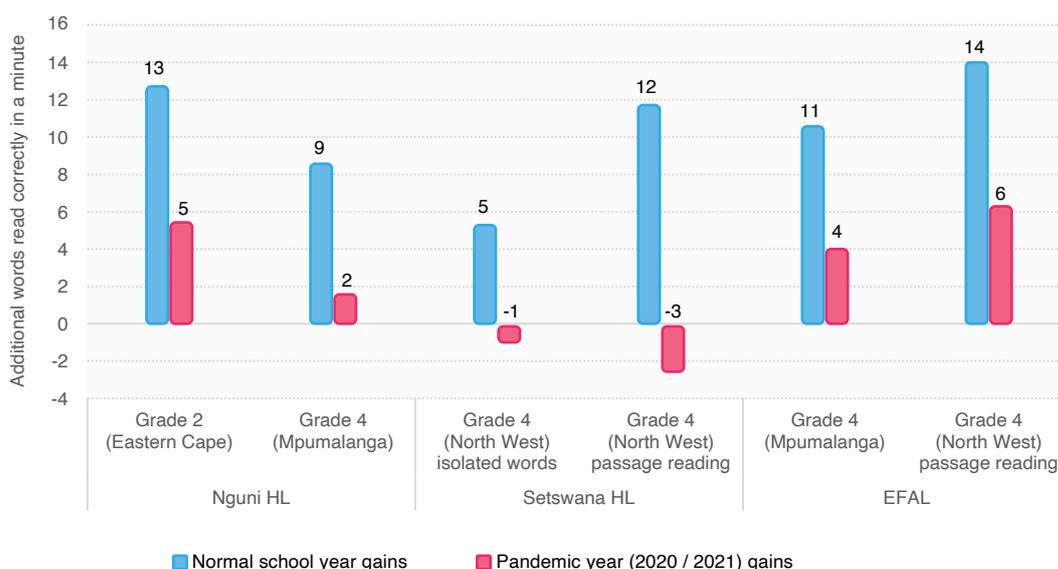
The Western Cape Systemic Tests are written in Grades 3, 6, and 9 in language and mathematics at year end. Conservatively, compared to cohorts assessed in 2019, Grade 3, 6 and 9 cohorts assessed in 2021 were 40-70% of a school year behind in language and much more behind, 95-106% of a school year, in mathematics (Van der Berg et al. 2022). Expressed in standard deviations, learning losses in South Africa have been larger than average learning losses reported in an international review of COVID-19 impacts (Patrinos et al., 2022), although losses in LMICs are underrepresented in that review.

2.2. Average learner performance declines in a pandemic context appear to be larger in primary grades (Grade 3 or 6 compared to Grade 9) and larger in mathematics than language as revealed in the Western Cape Systemic Tests (Van der Berg et al., 2022). However, language losses in earlier grades are likely underestimated where lower-order reading and language skills are not tested in those written assessments. Despite the inclusion of multiple-choice questions in the Grade 3 literacy Western Cape Systemic Test, making it possible to get some questions correct through random guessing, there were significant floor effects on the test in 2019 and even more so in 2021. Therefore, pandemic impacts on lower-order reading skills (such as oral reading fluency or alphabetic knowledge) are not being effectively captured in the tests.

2.3. The widening of already high levels of learning inequality across wealthier and poorer parts of the system from the Western Cape Systemic Tests is observed in both language and mathematics, especially at the Grade 3 level.

2.4. Losses in early grade reading skills over two pandemic years, between 46% and 118% of a year of learning in no-fee school samples, has exacerbated an existing early grade reading crisis. In 2020 among a learner sample in Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga no-fee schools, a 57–81% reduction in reading development in Nguni Home Languages and a 62% reduction in reading development in English First Additional language (EFAL) was observed compared to a normal Grade 2 or 4 year (Ardington et al. 2021). By the third term of 2021, Grade 4 learners in a North West no-fee school sample had lost 46–118% of a normal year of learning in foundational reading skills. Figure 1 illustrates these losses showing learners’ average development in oral reading fluency or word reading during a normal school year and then during pandemic years. After two pandemic years, Grade 4 learners in term 3 of 2021 were reading about the same number (or even fewer) words in a minute than Grade 3 learners in the same schools in term 3 of 2019. Not shown in the figure is the substantial decline in basic alphabetic knowledge. Pre-pandemic, Grade 2s in the Eastern Cape sample would usually sound an additional 23 letters correctly over a year. In 2020, alphabetic knowledge development during Grade 2 declined to just 7 additional letters. Pandemic-related deterioration in early grade reading is of significant consequence for children’s development (Wills et al., 2022) and attaining a national goal that children read for meaning by age 10.

Figure 1: Reading development over a year. Normal school year vs. COVID-19 pandemic years. Evidence from no-fee samples.



Notes: Grade 2 (Eastern Cape) & Grade 4 (Mpumalanga) estimates from Ardington, Wills & Kotze (2021) using Funda Wande, EGRS II and SPS data. Estimates for North West are from own calculations using Grade 3 and 4 EGRS I (2018) and RSP (2021) data, updating estimates in Kotze et al. (2022). Estimates from school fixed effects and/or difference-in-difference regression. HL = Home Language, EFAL = English First Additional Language.

2.5. Expect declines in South Africa’s PIRLS 2021 results in lieu of pandemic impacts on early grade reading and language. Applying a 0.27 standard deviation learning loss in Grade 6 Language in the Western Cape Systemic Tests to the national 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) result implies that the 80% that could not read for meaning in the 2016 PIRLS would ‘rise to an astonishing 88%’ (Van der Berg et al., 2022, p45). Expected declines should be viewed against the fact that PIRLS may underestimate losses in lower-order reading skills not assessed in this written reading comprehension test.

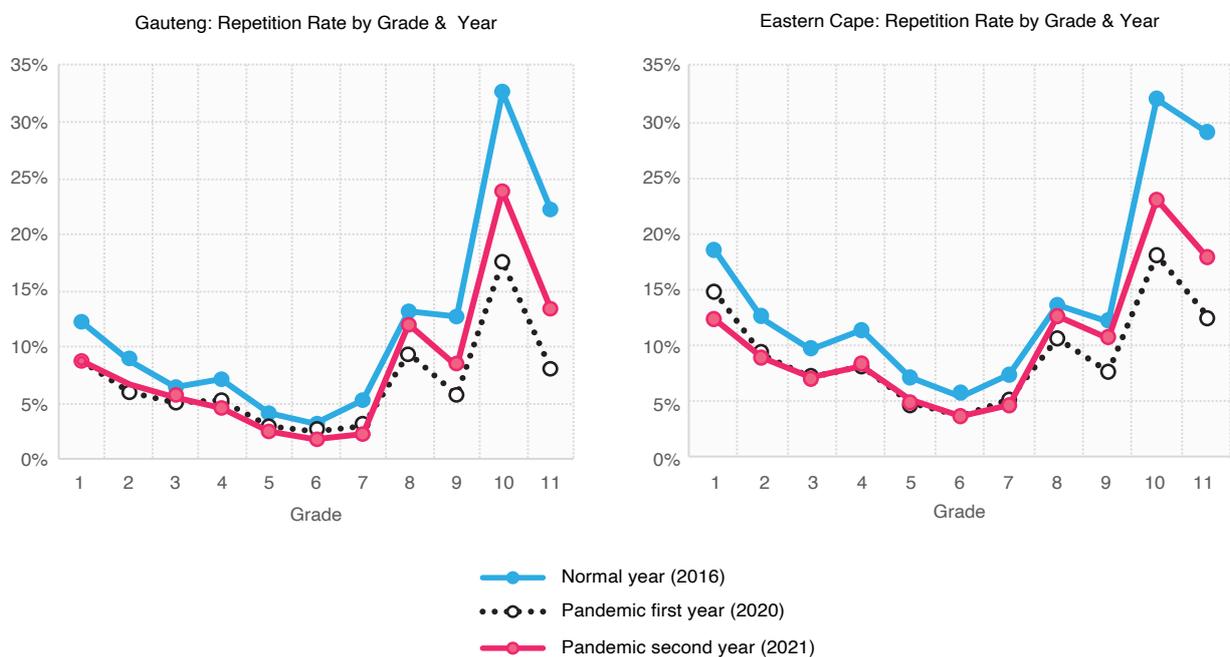
2.6. Learning losses are likely attributed to lost contact teaching time, with evidence of less work done in 2020 and 2021. Nationally across all learners, 54% of contact time was lost in 2020 due to

changes to the school calendar (DBE, 2022a, p5). In the second half of 2021, 22% of contact time in Grade 3 was lost due to rotations and regular absenteeism (Gustafsson, 2022b). In the Western Cape, an average of 155 school days, or 39% of contact time, was lost across 2020 and 2021 (Van der Berg et al., 2022). Year-on-year comparisons (2021 vs. 2018) of work done in Grade 3 Home Language and English First Additional Language in Department of Basic Education workbooks in a North West sample, show significant reductions in exercises completed, writing of full sentences and paragraphs in 2021.

2.7. A major pandemic trend is the large and sustained reductions in repetition rates at all grade levels in 2020 and 2021, but particularly in Grade 10 and 11 (see Figure 2). For instance, in 2016 almost a third of Grade 10s in the Eastern Cape (EC) and Gauteng (GP) were not progressed to Grade 11. Grade 10 repetition rates declined to 18% (EC) and 17% (GP) in 2020 and stabilised slightly to 23% (EC) and 24% (GP) in 2021. More lenient progression occurred as final year marks were based less on examinations and more on higher contributions of more lenient School-Based Assessments (SBAs) (Hoadley, 2020). Gustafsson (2022a, p1) also finds that nationally the Grade 11 to 12 promotion rate rose “from 67% in 2019 (for Grade 11 learners moving to Grade 12 in 2020) to 79% in 2020 (Grade 11 learners moving to Grade 12 in 2021)”.

2.8. Repetition rates in 2020 and 2021 also declined in primary grades, including in Grade 1. Historically high repetition rates in Grade 1 declined to pre-pandemic Grade 2 repetition levels by the end of 2021, evidenced in two provinces (the Eastern Cape and Gauteng). This will have implications for the acquisition of foundational reading and numeracy skills taught in Grade 1 if pre-pandemic patterns of ‘holding back’ children in Grade 1 were related to school readiness.

Figure 2: Reduction in repetition rates (i.e., not being progressed) during the pandemic. Gauteng and the Eastern Cape province.



Source: Data Driven Districts. Calculation by Van Wyk & Van der Berg (2022) using a balanced school sample in each province. Calculations using data for up to 1.5 million Grade 1–12 learners in each province. Repetition rates in each year identify the percentage of enrolled learners who were not progressed to a higher grade the following year.

2.9. Contrary to expectations, overall dropping out in South Africa declined during the pandemic, especially at the secondary level. There have also been large commensurate increases in total school enrolment. Between 2018 and 2021 total school enrolment rose by half a million, mainly due to *reduced* dropout (DBE, 2022a, p2). Accounting for population increases, in all provinces enrolment between 2020 and 2021 increased among learners aged 15 and older (DBE, 2022b). Of

the roughly 1 million learners that enter Grade 1, those leaving before Grade 12 declined from around 460 000 before the pandemic to perhaps as low as 200 000 in 2021 (DBE, 2022a, p2). This is in significant contrast to initial fears of dramatic pandemic-related increases in learners leaving school before Grade 12 (Shepherd & Mohohlwane 2021, 2022). Where dropout did occur between 2020 and 2021, it was in the initial school grades. About 2.3% fewer children than expected (roughly 27 000) had not enrolled as first-time learners in 2021, while up to 19 000 learners at the compulsory school-going age dropped out. General enrolment and dropout trends in 2020 administrative data are supported by patterns in survey data (Statistics South Africa 2022, p8).

2.10. As an unexpected outcome, “the pandemic may have pushed the system onto a new level at which far more youths obtain the NSC [National Senior Certificate] for many years into the future” (DBE, 2022a, p4). Many more will qualify for entry into tertiary studies. Related to pre-pandemic rises in secondary enrolment, altered assessment practices in 2020 and large increases in promotion rates at the end of Grade 11 in 2020, there was an unprecedented number of candidates (704 000) in 2021 writing the NSC and achieving a Bachelors-level pass (a 38% increase on 2019). Despite many more candidates, the NSC results did not reflect any notable negative COVID-19 impacts. This should not constitute evidence that there have been no learning losses in the system, especially where Grade 12s lost far fewer school days than other grades. The NSC as a certification system, is not designed to measure the overall quality of the education system.

3. Moving forward

Except for the Western Cape, South Africa has yet to demonstrate a cohesive and robust action plan to remediate losses. In the General Education and Training Phase, more time needs to be allocated to language and mathematics, in turn requiring freeing-up time from non-core subjects (Van der Berg et al. 2022). Educator Assistants, made possible through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, could be better used for recovery support and helping individual learners catch up content in core subjects. To identify learning gaps, diagnostic assessments of learners’ knowledge will also be required. One-on-one assessments in large class settings could be supported by Educator Assistants with appropriate training. In India, volunteers working in after-school catch-up programmes significantly helped to mitigate learning losses (Singh et al. 2022).

In-person remediation is unequivocally the preferred approach to addressing learning losses. Not only is remote instruction found to be less effective in remediating learning gaps (Muñoz-Najar et al. 2021), few South African learners were reached through remote learning. In 2020, nationally just 11% of South African youth aged 5–24 attending an educational institution had engaged in remote learning. Access to remote learning opportunities was also highly unequal (Statistics South Africa, 2022, p12). Nevertheless, in the event of a future lockdown, relatively high smartphone proliferation among youth (Statistics South Africa, 2022, p17) suggests phone-based or SMS learning opportunities could be better leveraged.

In conclusion, twin pandemic shocks of learning losses and enrolment increases have occurred in a context where education budgets are being squeezed. Enrolment increases in higher grades need to be addressed through realigning progression rules to effective assessment practices. Furthermore, budget cuts should not preclude prioritising remediating losses, a task that requires much more than adjusting Annual Teaching Plans. The long-term human development losses for South Africa of doing nothing to remediate losses will be more severe than the short-to-medium term costs of effective intervention.

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Acknowledgements: Research for the Covid-Generation project was made possible by financial support from Allan and Gill Gray Philanthropies. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies.