



Collectively moving towards the same goal

– Nangamso Mtsatse (*Funde Wandé*)

When I think about South Africa’s early grade reading outcomes, the first thing that comes to mind is a quote by Steve Bantu Biko: “A community is easily divided when their perceptions of the same thing are different”. I accepted the invitation to be part of the National Reading Panel to help avoid exactly this. I believe this initiative has significant potential to align people from different walks of life and experiences to unpack the problem together, recommend sustainable solutions and monitor progress towards achieving the country’s 2030 goal, as laid out by President Ramaphosa in the 2019 SONA address. The fact that, after 28 years of democracy, South Africa is still undergoing a literacy crisis is no longer a point of debate. This is a crisis that needs to be dealt with immediate effect, as literacy rates have tangible repercussions for societal issues such as poverty, crime and unemployment. Bold government policies are required to ensure that we are not still here in 50 or even 100 years, as current projections indicate. That said, not all has been dark in the education system. It is essential for society and the sector to acknowledge the progress made over the last two decades, such as achieving access to free primary education and a centralised curriculum.

The advisory note to the 2030 National Reading Panel reflects the reading outcomes of the last two decades. These views are based on professional judgment and involvement in medium- to large-scale interventions implemented by Funda Wandé and partners.

What are we doing right as a country?

- 1. All children in SA have access to primary education:** The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 states compulsory school attendance for learners up to grade 9. Learners from the poorest communities can access free education in quintile 1 – 3 schools and be given basic school stationery such as exercise books, pencils etc.
- 2. The National School Nutrition Programme:** During the 2019 – 2020 period, 9 275 481 learners received two meals a day. This accounts for 79% of learners in no-fee paying primary and secondary schools. The programme is the foundation to social assistance and poverty mitigation that contributes to a meaningful school experience.
- 3. Reading for Meaning declared an apex priority:** In the SONA 2019 address, the President declared improving literacy and numeracy outcomes as a top priority for the Basic Education department. In the Basic Education Lekgotla in 2020, President Ramaphosa also said, “Reading is not a portion of education...it is education!” Improving reading outcomes has been set as a sector goal in the 2018–2021 Annual Performance Plans.
- 4. Involvement in large-scale international studies:** South Africa participates in international literacy assessments such as PIRLS and SACMEQ. Our participation ensures we measure our curriculum output at global standards and allows the sector to measure learner progress over time. The results are made available to the public and are widely discussed. Analysis of the PIRLS results shows that

South Africa made substantial progress in reading achievement between 2011 and 2016 (Gustafsson 2020).

5. **South African large-scale studies:** There has been an increase in medium and large-scale studies that have provided evidence-based research in understanding how learners learn to read for meaning and the types of sustainable interventions that have potential to be taken up by the government, such as the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), Gauteng Primary Languages and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) and the Funda Wande programmes in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Limpopo.
6. **National Reading Framework for the Teaching of Reading in African Languages in the Foundation Phase:** The curriculum has been revised to best suit African languages' scope and sequencing, context, and linguistic structure.
7. **DBE Workbooks:** Every learner in a public school receives two colour printed exercise workbooks for each learning subject every year.
8. **Presidential Youth Employment initiative (PYEI):** The deployment of unemployed youth as education assistants and reading champions to assist teachers in improving learning outcomes.
9. **PrimTED (support by DHET):** The development of knowledge and practice standards for teaching reading in the Foundation Phase (FP) and Intermediate Phase (IP). DHET has set up Centres for African Language Teaching (CALTs) at UJ, UWC, Sol Plaatje University and NWU. The CALT at UJ has been actively developing a set of teaching resources in isiZulu and Sesotho. The CALTs have bursaries for students to register for postgraduate degrees.
10. **Development of National Reading Benchmarks:** The development of reading norms and benchmarks in Nguni languages, with further language groups currently under development. If implemented, teachers will track reading progress and remediate as per curriculum requirements.

What are we doing wrong as a country?

1. **Learner repetition:** Although all children have access to schooling, many repeat grades and drop out – their inability to read plays a large part in this.
2. **Grade R and ECD as a wasted opportunity:** Research shows that Grade R is currently a wasted year for children in non-fee-paying schools, due to low quality, which widens the gap between learners in fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools (Van der Berg et al. 2014). This is a wasted opportunity for laying the foundations for literacy. Grade R teachers get paid far less than other FP teachers and do not have the same status as teachers in other grades.
3. **Teacher Content Knowledge:** In general, Foundation Phase Teachers (including Grade R teachers) have very little conceptual knowledge of how children learn to read. This creates a barrier against making sound judgments about pedagogy. Many teachers do not use research-based methods for teaching and assessing reading; we don't have sufficient research on the best practices for teaching decoding in African languages.
4. **Systematic assessment:** We do not monitor progress throughout the learners' schooling career. Assessments are only done in grade 12, the school-leaving grade. Only the Western Cape province administers systematic assessments to all children in grades 3, 6 and 9.
5. **Rotational Timetable:** Schools continue to implement rotational timetabling, resulting in severe learning losses (Ardington, 2021 and Sheperd & Mohohlwane, 2021).
6. **Building expertise and leadership in the early literacy field:** As a country, we are not building expertise and leadership in the early literacy field.
7. **Lack of accountability in the education system:** Districts, schools, principals and teachers are not held accountable for learner performance.

What needs to change if we are to reach the goal of all children reading for meaning by age ten by 2030?

- 1. Anthologies of graded readers:** Access to an anthology of graded readers in the Foundation Phase has positive effects on reading performance in the Eastern Cape (Ardington & Spaull. Forthcoming). With the immediate introduction of anthologies for the FP across all provinces, the cost would be approximately ±R7.50 per anthology.
- 2. The dual crisis – using unemployed youth to improve learning outcomes:** Permanent employment of Reading Champions and Education Assistants in quintile 1 – 3 schools.
- 3. Large classroom sizes:** Decrease class sizes! Approximately 57% of grades 3 and 6 schools have more than 40 learners per class (School Monitoring Survey, 2017). The policy states that the class size should be 35 learners. Research shows that large class sizes is a binding constraint to effective teaching and learning (Van der Berg et al., 2016; Hoadley, 2018; Taylor, 2017).
- 4. Budget and expenditure:** Decreasing the actual per-learner education expenditure won't improve primary schools' learning outcomes. Fiscally prioritise primary schools; only 31% of the DBE budget gets allocated to primary schools (grades R – 7).
- 5. Accountability:** Incorporate the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) with learner performance.
- 6. In-service teacher training:** Rhodes University, in collaboration with Funda Wandé, have designed an accredited course in early literacy teaching: the Advanced Certificate in Foundation Phase Literacy Teaching. The course has been rolled out to subject advisors, HODs and teachers in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Western Cape. Ideally, at least all subject advisors should take the course. The course has been said to be the gold standard by PrimTED, CHE and DHET, and recommendations suggest the course should be adopted widely. The Harvard Graduate School of Education reviewed the course, and the resulting report stated that *“Designing a robust and well-conceived course to support professional learning on the part of foundation phase teachers is the first aspect of a successful learning tool. Having the foundation phase teachers use the course to change their instructional practice is the important second aspect of this endeavour”*.
- 7. Prioritisation of the Core Curriculum:** CAPS curriculum needs to prioritise fundamental skills required to learn how to read.