



# Learning losses due to the COVID- pandemic

– Janeli Kotze, Gabrielle Wills, Cally Ardington, Stephen Taylor, Nompumelelo Mohohlwane and Carol-Nuga Deliwe

**What are we doing right as a country:** Over the past ten years, South Africa has experienced a renewed momentum regarding the importance of reading outcomes in improving the overall educational outcomes of children, and subsequently their later life outcomes. This increased focus has been accompanied by a significant increase in the prevalence of quantitative studies evaluating new and innovative interventions that will lead to improved reading outcomes. Similarly, the recent undertaking of the development of reading benchmarks in the African Languages is adding to our understanding of learning trajectories in reading outcomes and the expectations we should have of children in different grades. An unforeseen benefit of the plethora of data emanating from these research studies on reading outcomes has been the opportunity it created for the measurement of the impact of the COVID pandemic on learning losses.

**Impact of the COVID pandemic on reading outcomes:** The graphs below use the data from the various reading assessments that were conducted in the North West province to determine the learning losses that were experienced in early grade reading over 2020 and 2021. The data from the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) and the subsequent Reading Support Programme that was continued in the schools that participated in the EGRS. In 2018, a group of 2,063 Grade 3 learners and a group of 3,178 Grade 4 learners were assessed in their Setswana Home Language (HL) reading outcomes. In 2021, the DBE again assessed a group of 3,239 Grade 3 and 3,367 Grade 4 learners in the same schools using very similar reading assessments. Given that the same Home Language word reading task and oral reading fluency (ORF) passage was used across the years, it is possible to compare the reading performance of the Grade 4 learners who were affected by the pandemic (Grade 4 in 2021) with the reading performance of the Grade 3 and Grade 4 learners before the pandemic (2018). It further also allows us to calculate both how far learners have fallen behind, as well as how much learning was lost in 2020 and 2021.

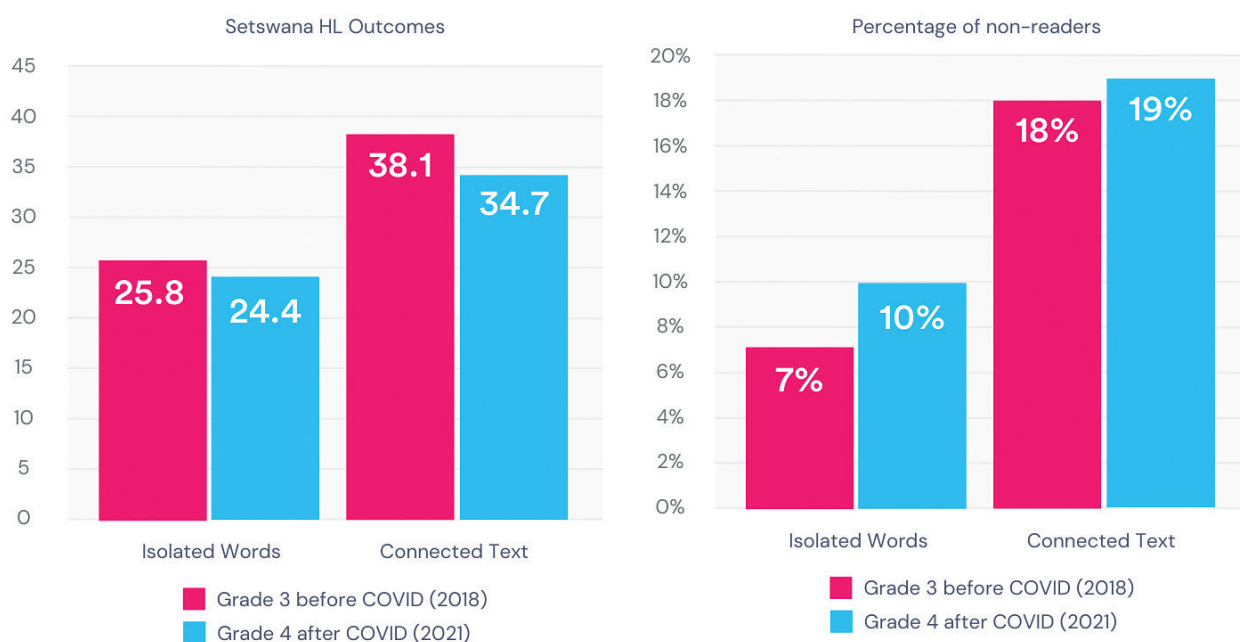
(Figure 1) below compares the reading outcomes of the Grade 3 learners pre-COVID (in 2018) with the Grade 4 learners who were affected by the COVID-pandemic. It shows that the Grade 4 learners in 2021 read, on average, 1.4 words less in a minute than the Grade 3 learners who were in the same schools in 2018. In the oral reading fluency task the Grade 4 learners read, on average, 3.4 words less in a minute than the Grade 3 learners. This signifies that the lost schooling during 2020 and 2021 has resulted in more than a year's worth of lost learning.<sup>38</sup>

(Figure 2) further shows that the percentage of non-readers, or learners who could not read a single word correctly, are higher among the Grade 4 learners in 2021 than what it was with the Grade 3 learners in 2018. Again, it is important to note that this is among learners in the same schools, and we have no reason to believe (other than the pandemic) that the Grade 4 learners in 2021 would be inherently weaker than the Grade 3 learners in 2018. In 2021, 10% of the Grade 4 learners could not read a single word correctly in the HL word reading task (where the first six words did not include more than three letters), compared to 7% of Grade 3 learners in 2018.

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<sup>38</sup> When considering Home Language word reading it is 127% of a year of learning lost, and for Home Language oral reading fluency it is 131% of a year of learning lost.

**Figure 1a & 1b: Comparing the reading outcomes of the pre-COVID Grade 3 learners with the post-COVID Grade 4 learners**



**How to respond to learning losses:** Early on in the pandemic, we quickly realized that the loss of schooling will inevitably lead to the loss of learning (Gustafsson & Nuga-Deliwe, 2020). What we did not predict is the extended duration of the loss of teaching time not only in 2020, but throughout 2021 as well. During the third term of 2021, we saw that more than half of schools were still implementing rotational timetables to comply with social-distancing regulations. The analysis presented here clearly demonstrates the terrible extent of learning losses that have been incurred. Although similar data does not exist for other subjects and grades, there is no reason to expect learning losses to be limited to reading in the early grades. In fact, some might argue that losses in mathematics could be larger and more enduring given the way new topics build upon previous concepts.

The Department of Basic Education initially revised the Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) to guide teachers on covering the curriculum despite the significant loss in teaching time. However, the revised ATPs do not guide teachers on how to remediate the lost learning that has been experienced over the past two years. This, however, seems to be a global problem, with many countries not having clear answers on how to remediate the shocks in learning outcomes brought about by the pandemic.

South Africa has by no doubt experienced a major setback in reaching the goal of all children reading for meaning by age 10 by 2030, and at this point, there is no clear understanding of what interventions work in catching up the learning lost. Three areas that now require urgent attention include:

1. Developing and implementing a scalable programme that can support teachers in remediating the significant learning losses;
2. Structured pedagogy has shown very promising results in improving learning outcomes before the pandemic, and we need to better understand how learning plans need to be adapted to take into account the performance levels of learners currently, but also the increased variance of learner proficiency within one classroom; and
3. Develop strategies to help teachers teach in classrooms with learners who differ vastly in their performance levels and are far behind curriculum expectations.