



Measuring what Matters

– *Servaas van der Berg* (Resep, Stellenbosch University)

What are we doing right?

Participation in international assessments in the past two decades has made South Africans more aware of the weak state of the education system and the low quality of education in most schools. Regular information on educational performance from participating in PIRLS (on reading and literacy in Grade 4), SACMEQ (reading and mathematics in Grade 6) and TIMSS (Mathematics and Science performance in both Grade 5 and Grade 9) has also allowed us to measure progress, albeit from a low base.

Policy stability in education for a number of years, in particular with regard to the CAPS curriculum framework, may have contributed to gradual educational improvement.

Prioritisation of reading: President Ramaphosa's SONA speech in 2019 elevated reading for meaning by age 10 to the level of a foundational goal. This raised the salience of reading as an indicator of progress and the foundation phase's importance within schools.

What are we doing wrong as a country?

Unlike many of its neighbours, South Africa has no common (systemic) assessment in primary school. Countries in the region have admittedly been reducing the stakes of what used to be Primary School Leaving Examinations. But because these were historically so important, much attention is still paid by parents and communities to how individuals schools perform in such tests, even if they no longer determine secondary schools access. South Africa has no such common system-wide assessments; the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) in 2014 were the last attempt at introducing such measures. The lack of common assessments means that parents, teachers and indeed learners themselves get no consistent feedback on learner performance relative to their peers. For the many learners performing at low levels, school-based assessments are in any event all high stake, as they determine progression to the next grade. Due to repetition at earlier grades, more than half of Grade 10 learners are over-aged and one in five at least three years over-aged.

The inconsistency in school-based assessments means that parents and children receive noisy signals about learner performance, which provides little usable information, but also that criteria for advancing to the next grade vary greatly among schools and grades.

Currently we have no systematic measurement of how many children can read in individual primary schools: Despite the ostensible importance of the goal that children should be able to read for meaning by age 10, as spelt out by President Ramaphosa, there has been no attempt by the education authorities, national or provincial, to follow this up with systematic measurement of how many children and in what provinces, education districts, quintiles and schools can read for meaning. Such measurement is needed both to understand the extent of the problem and to provide benchmarks for systematically measuring improvement.

There has been no encouragement of a reading culture. In the 2013 SACMEQ test, nearly 80% of grade 6 learners were in households containing fewer than 20 books; only one in eight were in households with more than 40 books. Furthermore, many of the books would not be appropriate for children, most would not be available in their home language, and in most households, there is little example of reading as a regular activity.

What needs to change to reach the goal of all children reading for meaning by age 10 by 2030?

Newly proposed sample-based national assessments will not function as an accountability tool:

The DBE is currently instituting a new sample-based national assessment to replace the Annual National Assessments in Grades 3, 6 and 9. This will provide a regularly updated picture of progress with reading at a systemic level, and a large sample size will also allow progress to be measured at provincial level. Though useful for policy makers at system level, this will not provide information at the level of the school and classroom as the ANAs did. It will thus not function as an accountability tool.

The need for common assessments per grade. Common assessments within groups of schools have become more common in recent years, with marking within schools by the teachers themselves. This is to be encouraged, but still does not provide enough systematic and consistent information for learners and parents. Introducing a single national assessment of home language (and in higher grades also first additional language) for each grade in one term, to replace the internal assessment for that term, could still serve as an important feedback mechanism on reading comprehension (even if marked by teachers themselves, leading perhaps to greater variation in marking than is optimal). Schools should then provide a report card to parents, containing their child's performance in this assessment, as well as the performance of the class, school, district and quintile. Such a national assessment would also make teachers more aware of the standard expected of them; some analysts believe that the Annual National Assessments may have contributed to such greater awareness among teachers and of how to assess. Moreover, for learners this assessment would not be high stakes, though it may strengthen accountability.

Emphasising reading fluency as a necessary (and easily measurable) component of reading: Now that there is broad consensus on the importance of learning to read, this should be measured throughout the system. One way of doing so is to emphasise reading fluency:

- **Reading competitions:** Hold reading fluency competitions and provide awards for good reading performance within the school for each grade. (Awards by gender could also be considered.)
- **Principals and SMTs:** Require principals or another member of the senior management team to regularly test reading fluency of a random selection of five learners per class in grades 1 to 4, and to give monthly feedback to teachers and to the SMT. This would give content to the instructional leadership role of principals.
- **Subject advisers:** Require subject advisors or other district officials that visit schools on each occasion to test the reading fluency of a random selection of learners from a random selection of Foundation Phase classes. They must report back on this to the district.
- **Increasing access to print material:** To support early reading acquisition, children must have access to reading material. Small print runs and other factors lead to high prices and limited availability of books in African languages. Government could intervene in two ways:
 - ◇ **Provide subsidies** to authors and publishers of reading material for young children in African languages.
 - ◇ **Allocate more funds**, through the conditional grants to provinces, to the acquisition of books in African languages for young children. The brief province-wide roll-out of the isiXhosa Anthologies of Graded Readers in Grades 1–3 in the Eastern Cape in 2019/20 showed that this is possible and at very low cost (~R15/anthology).