



Early Grade Reading

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A. Introduction

The challenges South Africa faces with early grade reading are reflected in the 2016 PIRLS³⁶ study which found that 78% of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning. The findings of the PIRLS report are well-known in the education sector. In the interest of building further evidence in this regard, the NECT undertook two evaluations of the state of reading in schools, linked to the PSRIP programme (see Table 3 below), and two rapid surveys towards the end of 2021 to establish the extent to which this challenge could have been exacerbated by the limited schooling that followed the COVID-19 pandemic. The two surveys involved samples of 100 and 114 schools randomly sampled from across the country. Table 1 presents the findings.

Table 1: NECT Evaluation Findings

PROJECT	KEY FINDINGS
RAPID SURVEY 1 (Aug 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 42% of Grade 3 teachers experienced challenges in delivering the recovery curriculum• 53% of teachers completed the Terms 1 and 2 recovery ATPs
RAPID SURVEY 2 (Nov 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 65% of schools were on a traditional timetable• 30% of schools on rotation (of some form)• 74% of schools wished to return to traditional timetabling 2022• 68% of respondents acknowledged learning losses• Estimated 30% – 38% of work completed in Maths (overall for Grades 3 & 6)• Estimated 29% of work completed in EFAL (overall for Grades 3 & 6)

The surveys concluded that schools need more focused support for curriculum recovery and that the NECT has a strategic role to play in this regard.

B. National Reading Coalition (NRC)

In 2019, the NECT launched the National Reading Coalition (NRC) to network efforts aimed at addressing the numerous connected blockages to reading improvement. Interventions are clustered around six value chain areas: continuing professional teacher development, access to reading resources, community support, initial teacher education, policy, and research, monitoring and evaluation. These value chain areas promote and support the system to implement the DBE's National Reading Plan to achieve the

36 Howie, S.J., Combrinck, C., Roux, K., Tshela, M., Mokoena, G.M., & McLeod Palane, N. (2016). PIRLS Literacy 2016: South African Highlights Report. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria.

national target and outcomes, through multi-year initiatives.

The NECT has spearheaded the implementation of several early grade reading interventions.

2.1. Continuing Professional Teacher Development

- a. The Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) seeks to improve the teaching of reading in primary schools through capacitating subject advisors, enhancing teachers' pedagogical practices in the teaching of reading, and monitoring the gains made. It involves the development and provision of structured learning programmes (SLPs), the training of subject advisors as master trainers, and twice-yearly teacher training. The PSRIP's change theory is that reading improves across the primary school through enhanced the capabilities of subject advisors and teachers in teaching reading and through the provision of resources. PRSIP EFAL reach is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) EFAL

PROJECT	FP & IP EFAL	SCHOOLS	9 318 (4 198 FP and 5 120 IP) Approximately 50% of all primary schools
YEARS	2018 to 2021	TEACHERS	23 790 FP and 13 277 IP
PROVINCE(S)	GP, MP, FS, WC, NC, WC, LP, EC and MP	LANGUAGE(S)	ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE
PARTNERS	DBE and ETDP-SETA	GRADES	1 – 6
SUBJECT ADVISORS	562 (341 FP and 221 IP)		

Due to 2019 PSRIP successes (see Table 3 below), the Head of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) adopted the programme as the national sector approach to the teaching of reading.

Table 3: NECT Evaluation Findings

EVALUATION	KEY FINDINGS			
PSRIP (2019) Learner Baseline – 15 215 learners in 412 schools	<p>General findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24% increase in subject advisors' and 16% increase in teachers' understanding of the reading policies and methodologies needed to successfully teach reading • 21% increase in reading comprehension scores for Grades 2 and 3 over 8 months <p>Learners were tested on letter sound recognition, word recognition, oral reading of a text and reading comprehension to ascertain their grade-appropriate oral reading skills. The following results were found:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade 3 learners read 43.8 correct words per minute • Grade 4 learners read 48.3 correct words per minute 			
PSRIP (2020) Exploratory Study – 2 976 learners in 124 schools	Grades	Baseline (2019)	Study (2020)	Difference
	3	43.8	40.6	-3.2
	4	48.3	44.6	-3.7

Working initially in EFAL from 2018, the PSRIP has recently included a Foundation Phase home language pilot in its design. The PSRIP HL follows the same approach and structure as the PSRIP EFAL described above. The reach of the PSRIP HL pilot is detailed in *Table 4*.

Table 4: Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) HL

PROJECT	Foundation Phase HL	SCHOOLS	102
YEARS	2021	TEACHERS	1008
PROVINCE(S)	NC, MP, FS, GP, LP, EC, NW, KZN	LANGUAGE(S)	Afrikaans, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Siswati, IsiNdebele, Xitsonga, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and Tshivenda
PARTNERS	DBE	GRADES	1 – 3
SUBJECT ADVISORS	40		

The PSRIP HL has the potential of reaching all primary schools (approximately 20 000) and approximately 200 000 language teachers and their learners.

- b. The purpose of the Comprehension Across the Curriculum (CATC) was to upskill teachers to better teach reading comprehension skills across the curriculum. It was conceived of to form part of the teacher support programme during the COVID-19 period. The CATC’s change theory is that teachers who are exposed to well-researched critical thinking processes and reading comprehension strategies would acquire critical and creative thinking around the COVID-19 challenges, and ultimately improve critical thinking and reading comprehension in schools. The reach of the CATC is detailed in Table 5.

Table 5: Comprehension Across the Curriculum (CATC)

FOCUS	All subjects	TEACHERS	10,1000
YEARS	2020 to 2021	LANGUAGE(S)	English
PROVINCE(S)	GP, MP, FS, WC, NC, WC, LP, EC, MP	GRADES	1 – 12
PARTNERS	DBE and ETDP-SETA		

- c. The purpose of the Comprehension Across the Curriculum (CATC) was to upskill teachers to better teach reading comprehension skills across the curriculum. It was conceived of to form part of the teacher support programme during the COVID-19 period. The CATC’s change theory is that teachers who are exposed to well-researched critical thinking processes and reading comprehension strategies would acquire critical and creative thinking around the COVID-19 challenges, and ultimately improve critical thinking and reading comprehension in schools. The reach of the CATC is detailed in *Table 5*.

Table 6: Competency Based Learning Programme (CLP)

PROJECT	SLP with literacy education and competency -development	SCHOOLS	11
YEARS	2 years (2020 and 2021)	TEACHERS	41
PROVINCE(S)	Gauteng and Limpopo	LANGUAGE(S)	English, Sepedi and Setswana
PARTNERS	University of Johannesburg, Centre for Curriculum Redesign (CCR) and Class Act Educational Services	GRADES	Grade 1
SUBJECT ADVISORS	2		

The PSRIP HL has the potential of reaching all primary schools (approximately 20 000) and approximately 200 000 language teachers and their learners.

Initial evaluation results indicated that, as in all projects, COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges CLP teachers faced in 2021. It was demonstrated that while teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge in relation to literacy improved, they required more time to grasp an understanding of the competencies.

B2. Access to Reading Resources

The NRC implemented several initiatives aimed at providing schools and communities with reading resources. For example, collection boxes were placed at shopping malls, provincial offices, universities and churches in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West and Eastern Cape. This resulted in 32,000 books being collected and distributed to 24 NRC circuits. Room to Read donated 20 000 primary school English books to schools in Limpopo. 21 Foundation Phase storybooks were written by 10 NECT District Change Agents in 2021. These books were originally written in Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, IsiXhosa and Sepedi. They were versioned into additional languages resulting in a total of 168 Foundation Phase stories developed and distributed to schools in the NRC circuits. The storybooks are currently being compressed into WhatsApp format so they can be more easily shared with parents, teachers, principals and circuit managers across the country. The provision of readers is one of the most difficult elements to implement. It is a costly exercise more so given the number of learners involved. Compressed reading materials presented via electronic platforms present some potential.

The DBE, EU, UNICEF and NECT are working in partnership in the Reals-SA Project to address the negative impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education in South Africa. With relevance to early grade reading, the project’s change theory is that providing reading resources to schools, involving parents in at home reading and broadcasting reading programmes on community radio increases South African children’s interest in reading and leads to improved reading outcomes. The Reals-SA project targets include 650 quintile 1 to 3 primary schools, 290 000 learners, 66 000 parents and 4 600 teachers in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. Reals-SA will also provide 230 000 story books to the schools.

B3. Community Support

Central to the community work of the NRC is collaboration with reading stakeholder partners. This collaborative strategy was given effect through supporting the DBE with Phase 1 (2020/2021) and Phase 2 (2021/2022) of the reading champions programme which aims to support reading promotion and youth empowerment. The NECT works with provinces and literacy partners² to source, train, deploy and support 50 000 youth to primary schools across the country to support reading. The objectives of the programme are to instill a love of reading across the nation, pursue reading outcomes disrupted by COVID-19 that have resulted in the need for recovery, and to provide support to teachers who are overwhelmed with catch-up and learner welfare.

In addition, the President's initiative to get South Africans in the spirit of reading gathered momentum in 2021 through the establishment of the monthly Virtual Reading Club (VRC). Participation was encouraged across individuals from all walks of life and across all ages to attend the club's meetings which will continue throughout 2022. Also, in 2021 the NECT updated and circulated curriculum trackers to account for the DBE's revised ATPs and the learning losses experienced due to COVID-19. The teacher trackers are envisaged to reach all teachers in schools. In 2022 household versions of the trackers will be developed to involve parents more in their children's schooling through at home learning.

B4. Initial Teacher Education

In partnership with DHET, the DBE has begun the process of supporting the Centres for African Language Teaching (CALTs) in previously marginalised languages. With a focus on Tshivenda, the NECT plans to establish a strategic monitoring and evaluation partnership with the University of Venda to document gains and lessons learnt during the early implementation stage.

B5. Policy

Professor Leketi Makalela is a professor of language and literacy education and the founding Director of the Hub for Multilingual Education and Literacies at the University of the Witwatersrand. He has developed a language brief for the NECT and DBE detailing how national policy supports the teaching of reading in schools as well as instances where misinterpretation leads to confusion at school and classroom levels. Professor Makalela also provides technical support in the development of a Language in Education Policy Unit at the DBE. This unit, funded by the Old Mutual Foundation and supported by the NECT, will ensure that each school adopts a language policy that operates within the prescripts of the Constitution, legislation and policy frameworks that promote multilingualism. The aim of the unit is to ensure that African Languages are developed to the level of usage as languages of learning and teaching beyond Grade 3.

B6. Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

NECT has conducted a series of evaluations and organised quality assurance activities to contribute to evidence regarding the improvement of reading. The findings relevant to early grade reading largely point to several process, systems, teacher-skills and behaviours, and resourcing requirements needed to improve reading.

37 Funda Wande (EC), READ Education Trust (FS), Nal'ibali (GP), The LEARN Project (KZN), Room to Read (LP), Pen Reach (MP), A Better Africa Foundation (NC and WC) and Activate Leadership (NW)