

# Learning to read is a journey: A study identifies where South African kids go off track

June 7 2023, by Gabrielle Wills and Cally Ardington

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Any parent who has watched a child learning to read knows that it is a journey. Various skills and processes must come together and build

"brick by brick" before a child can read a text and answer questions about it.

A child needs at least two kinds of skills before they can comprehend what they're reading. These are oral language skills (listening, speaking and knowing how spoken words sound) and decoding skills (knowledge of letter-sound relationships to turn a written word into a spoken word).

When decoding is a slow, labored process this places [demands](#) on cognitive processes like working memory. By increasing speed and accuracy in reading, cognitive resources are freed and the child can begin to comprehend what they are reading.

Reading fluency and expanding vocabulary act as the bridge from decoding to comprehension. Weaknesses in any of these [building blocks](#) will limit a child's ability to read for meaning.

There has been a great deal of concern in South Africa about how the country's grade 4 pupils fared in the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): [81% did not](#) reach the study's [low international benchmark](#). This suggests they cannot read for meaning. The country placed last out of 57 participating countries.

The study's findings are a global wake-up call to the [effects of pandemic disruptions](#) on children's reading comprehension. In South Africa they are also a transparent metric of the education system's overall performance. The study is conducted every five years and previous results have been useful for [identifying learning improvements](#).

But PIRLS cannot detect where children are falling behind in their reading. It only assesses written comprehension, which is the final stage in a reading journey. Without knowing which building blocks are not being properly established along the way, the government cannot know

where to intervene so that children do not fall further behind.

In a [recent study](#), we've shed light on where the reading wheels fall off. We found that far too many children were entering school with weak oral language skills and were acquiring alphabetic knowledge and fluency far too slowly. This limited their reading comprehension and academic progress through school.

Based on our findings, we advocate strongly for systematic phonics instruction in early grades and a national remediation program to address reading gaps in later primary school years.

## **Key findings**

For the study, we compiled reading assessments for over 40,000 South African learners from six studies conducted between 2015 and 2021. While these data are not nationally representative, they are drawn from over 1,000 no-fee-charging schools across six of the country's nine provinces. They tell us about reading outcomes in typical South African classrooms. In almost all these schools, children are instructed in their home language from grade 1 to grade 3 before a switch to English instruction happens in grade 4.

Children are struggling to master the most basic reading skills in their home language in the foundation phase (grades 1-3). By the end of grade 1, children should know all their letters, and be able to read words and short sentences. Pre-COVID, only 39%-48% of grade 1s assessed in these samples could recognize and sound out at least 26 letters at the end of the year.

More than 55% of these grade 1s could not read a single word correctly from a grade-level text by the end of the school year. This [worsened](#) during the pandemic. Across two samples assessed at the end of grade 1

in 2021, the majority (62% in one study and 78% in the other) could not read one word correctly from a passage of text.

With serious backlogs in basic decoding skills, large percentages of children do not reach minimum grade 3 African language fluency benchmarks. These benchmarks signal a minimum reading speed and accuracy level that must be reached before children can start making sense of what they are reading.

Pre-COVID, just 11%-48% of samples tested at the end of grade 3 (or start of grade 4) were meeting minimum fluency benchmarks in the [Nguni](#) or [Sesotho-Setswana](#) language groups. By grade 6, large percentages (35%-46%) of study samples still did not reach the minimum fluency levels set for grade 3.

## **Reading success happens from the starting block**

There are some positive findings.

We found strong evidence that reading success is possible when learners master the basics of reading in the first year or two of school. Learners who knew all their letters at the end of grade 1 were on track with their reading by the time they reached grade 4. Learners with very limited letter-sound knowledge at the end of grade 1 were three years behind, only reaching grade 4 reading fluency levels in grade 7.

Learners who met minimum [fluency benchmarks](#) in their home languages by the end of grade 3 or 4 were in a much better position to comprehend what they were reading by the end of primary school than their peers who did not meet these benchmarks.

## **Addressing the gaps**

Reading comprehension is one of the skills that South Africa needs most. It will be in short supply until basic reading skills are taught correctly.

Beyond grade 3, the teaching of basic reading skills in the home language is not included in the school curriculum. Children with weak foundational reading skills by the end of grade 3 will struggle to catch up.

What should be done about this? As the adage goes, "prevention is better than cure". We need to understand what prevents basic reading skills from being acquired in grade 1 and 2 classrooms. A systemic program to improve what teachers are taught at university is needed. In classrooms, diagnostic assessment of early grade reading skills can also help to detect where [children](#) are falling behind.

Remediation programs could also help bridge some gaps in later grades. Additional time and support is especially needed to recover lost ground for cohorts that missed out on foundational grade 1-3 teaching time during the pandemic.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Learning to read is a journey: A study identifies where South African kids go off track (2023, June 7) retrieved 22 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-journey-south-african-kids-track.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.