



Research on Socio-Economic Policy

Department of Economics, University of Stellenbosch

# Learning to read and reading to learn<sup>1</sup>

Nic Spaull<sup>2</sup>

## RESEP Policy Brief

APRIL  
2016

**Policy Goal: All children must learn to read fluently and with comprehension by the end of Grade 3.**

### 1. The importance of reading

Reading for meaning and pleasure is arguably the most important skill children learn in primary school. Since almost all future learning will depend on this fundamental understanding of the relation between print and spoken language, it is unsurprising that literacy, built upon a firm foundation of basic reading, is used as one of the primary measures of school efficacy.

This is why in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) children are 'learning to read' but from Grade 4 onwards they are meant to be 'reading to learn', that is, using the skill of reading to acquire new information. However, if children cannot 'read for meaning' they cannot access the curriculum and they fall further and further behind even as they move into higher grades. Unfortunately, most children in South Africa do not learn to read for meaning by the end of Grade 3 and remain perpetually behind.

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief is based on research conducted within the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD)

<sup>2</sup> ReSEP (Research on Socio-Economic Policy), Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University

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## 2. Can children read for meaning in African languages in South Africa?

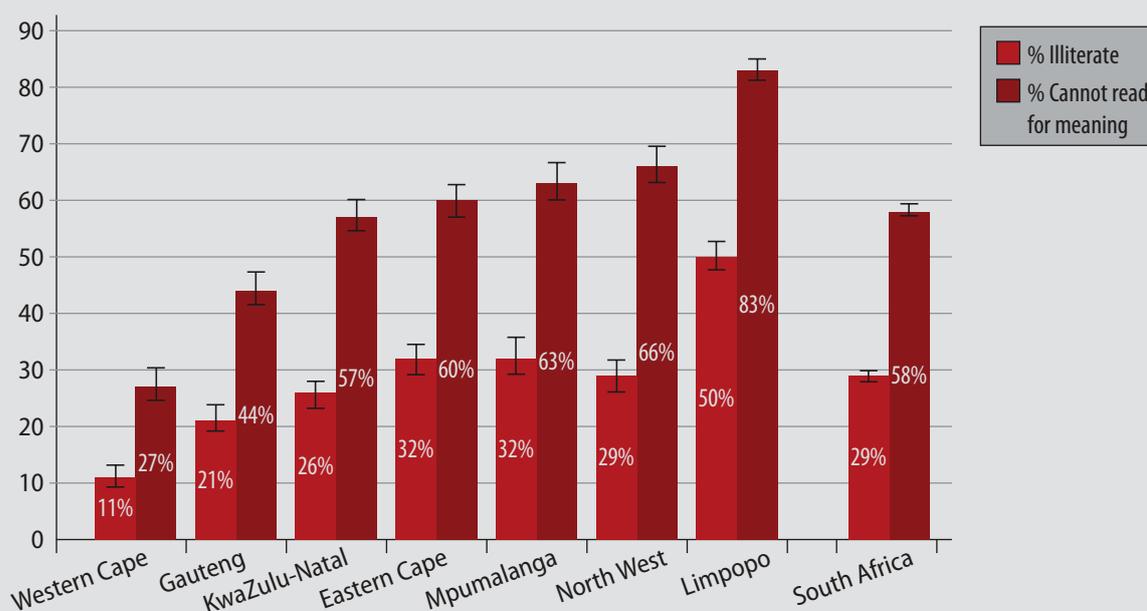
One of the main features of the South African education system is that the majority of children will do most of their schooling in English, which is a second (or third) language for most of them. Typically children learn in an African language in Grades 1 to 3 then switch to English from Grade 4 onwards. The 2013 ANAs (Annual National Assessments) show that approximately 70% of all learners in Grades 1 to 3 were learning in an African language. But in Grade 4, 90% were learning in English, showing the huge switch between Grades 3 and 4.

The logic behind this approach is that children find it easier to become literate in a second-language if they are first literate in their home language. Unfortunately in South African classrooms most children do not learn to read for meaning in an African language (or any language) by the end of Grade 3. Thus they are switching into a second language when they have not in fact become literate in a first language.

The prePIRLS assessment of 2011 deliberately aimed to assess reading literacy in whatever language the school used in Grades 1 to 3 (and thus whatever language the learner should be most literate in).<sup>3</sup> They tested 15,744 Grade 4 learners in a nationally representative sample of 341 primary schools. The tests were administered in all 11 languages. Unfortunately, as Figure 1 shows, 58% of the Grade 4 sample could not read for meaning (i.e. the intermediate benchmark) and 29% were completely illiterate (i.e. could not reach the lowest benchmark). These results are largely driven by extremely weak reading outcomes in the African languages. Unsurprisingly, these proportions differ dramatically by province. In the Western Cape only 11% of learners were illiterate and 27% could not read for meaning. In Limpopo 50% were illiterate and 83% could not read for meaning at the end of Grade 4.

**FIGURE 1: Proportion of Grade 4 students who are illiterate and proportion who cannot read for meaning (in Language of Learning and Teaching, Grades 1 to 3)**

Notes: Using prePIRLS 2011, 'illiterate' = cannot reach low benchmark; 'cannot read for meaning' = cannot reach intermediate benchmark. PrePIRLS was not stratified by province and therefore the Free State and the Northern Cape were excluded since they had fewer than 1000 learners.



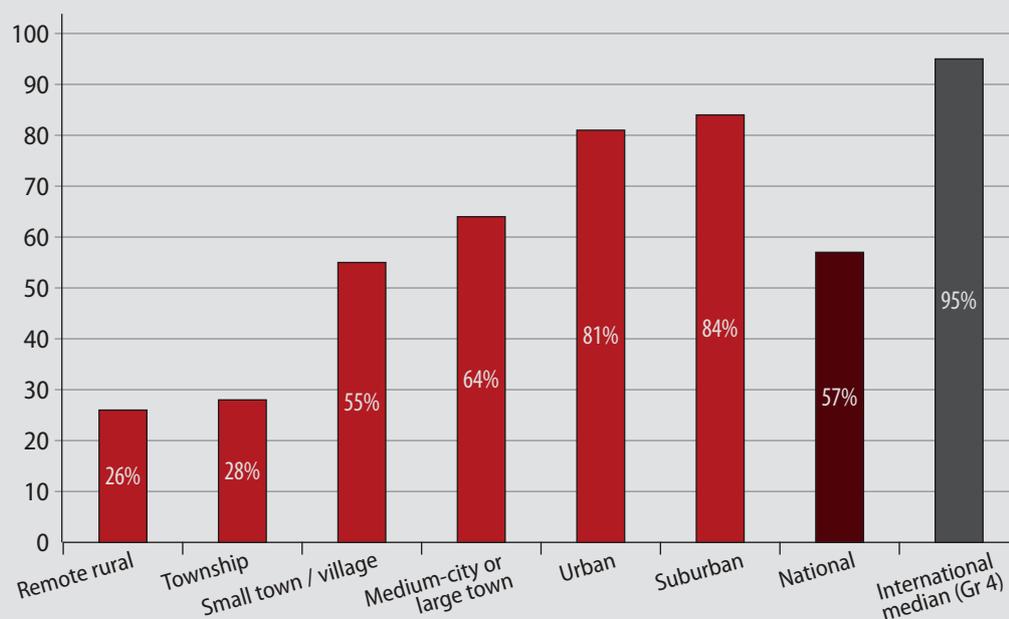
<sup>3</sup> The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international comparative study of young children's reading literacy. The prePIRLS test is considerably easier than the PIRLS test, with roughly 400 words per text rather than the PIRLS 800 words per text.

### 3. Do children in English and Afrikaans schools acquire basic reading skills?

PIRLS 2011 tested a sample of 3515 Grade 5 learners from 92 schools where the language of learning and teaching (across all grades) was English or Afrikaans (typically these are better-than-average schools). This test was set at an international Grade 4 level. Nationally, only 57% of the 3515 Grade 5 learners had acquired basic reading skills, compared to 95% of Grade 4 learners internationally. If we look at the Grade 5 learners in urban or suburban schools in South Africa, we find that about 81–84% have acquired basic reading skills. However, the percentages are much lower among learners in remote rural areas (26%) and townships (28%). A better approach is to focus on those learners who have learned to read for meaning (reaching the intermediate international benchmark). The international median at this level was 80% of Grade 4 learners; in South Africa only 34% of Grade 5 learners at English and Afrikaans schools could read for meaning.

**FIGURE 2: Proportion of Grade 5 students in English and Afrikaans schools acquiring basic reading skills by school location**

Note: Proportion reaching low international benchmark in PIRLS 2011. South Africa tested 3515 Grade 5 students in 92 schools where English or Afrikaans was Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT).



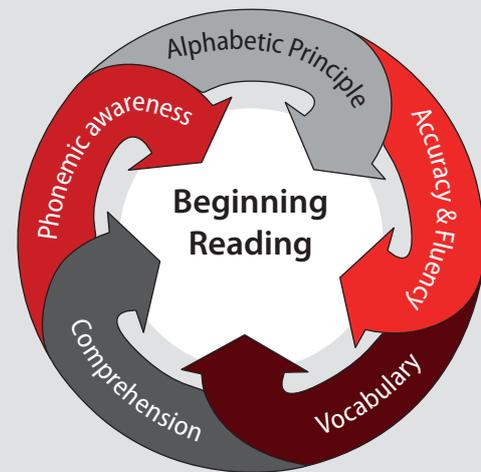
### 4. Reading aloud in English: New research in South Africa<sup>4</sup>

The ability to read aloud with speed, accuracy and expression – what is called ‘oral reading fluency’ – is one of the building blocks of early reading instruction. Indeed, the National Reading Panel (2000) of the US identified fluency as one of the ‘Big Five’ components of reading accomplishment, shown in Figure 3.

<sup>4</sup> The section draws on the following journal article: Draper, K & Spaull, N. 2015. ‘Examining oral reading fluency among Grade 5 rural English second Language (ESL) learners in South Africa: An Analysis of NEEDU 2013’, *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5, 2, 2015

- **Phonemic awareness:** *Being able to hear, identify and manipulate individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words and understand that spoken words and syllables are made up of speech sounds.*
- **Alphabetic principle:** *Understanding that words are made up of letters that represent segments of speech; understanding the systematic relationships between letters and phonemes (sounds).*
- **Vocabulary:** *Word knowledge, word instruction and word learning strategies and usage.*
- **Comprehension:** *Being able to construct meaning from written text.*
- **Fluency:** *Being able to read connected text quickly, accurately and with meaningful expression (prosody).*

**FIGURE 3: Factors influencing early reading acquisition**



## 5. Can rural Grade 5 children in South Africa read aloud in English?

As part of our project we analysed a new data set on oral reading fluency collected by the National Education and Evaluation Development Unit (NEEDU) in 2013. This survey tested 4697 Grade 5 learners from 214 schools across rural areas in South Africa. A sub-sample of 1772 of these learners was selected for an Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) test. The results showed that only 6% of the sample achieved comprehension scores above 60% and that 41% of the sample were non-readers (illiterate) since they were reading so slowly that they could not understand what they were reading. Sadly, 11% of the sample could not read a single English word from the passage.

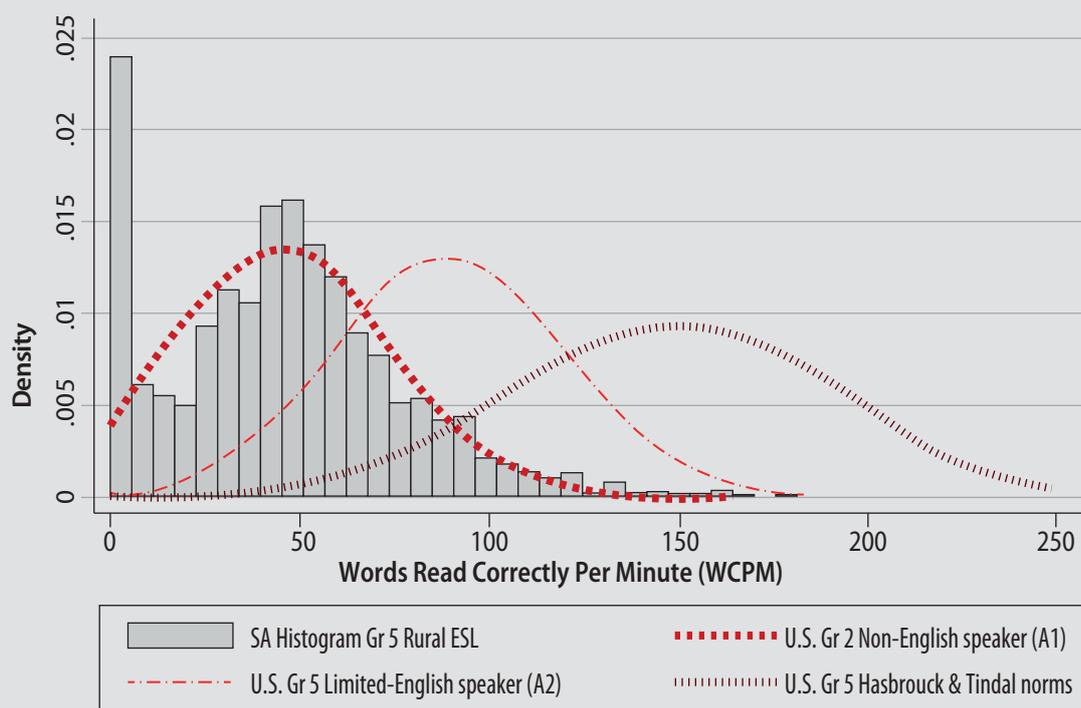
In an attempt to set oral reading fluency norms for English for South Africa (measured in words read correctly per minute – WCPM) we compared second language learners in South Africa with various types of second language learners in Florida (US), where there already exist norms for second-language learners due to the high number of Spanish learners in this state.

We found that South African Grade 5 second language learners from rural areas in South Africa had essentially the same distribution as Grade 1 second language learners in Florida, or Grade 2 second language remedial learners who had been removed from normal classes because they ‘cannot communicate meaning orally in English and demonstrate very little understanding in English’.

Figure 4 shows this comparison. The South African Grade 5 distribution is shown as grey bars. The Florida Grade 2 remedial second-language distribution is shown on the far left as a blue dotted curve. A tentative benchmark of where South African Grade 5 second-language learners should be is shown in the middle as a blue dotted and dashed curve. The American Grade 5 learners (all languages) are shown as a red curve.

It is worth reiterating that at the Grade 5 level in South Africa the entire curriculum is being taught in English for 90% of the learner population. If these learners cannot read for meaning in English then they cannot engage with the curriculum and are ‘silently excluded’.

**FIGURE 4:** Distribution of oral reading fluency scores (WCPM) for rural South African English Second Language (ESL) learners compared with Broward County ESL learners (Florida, US) (Broward County, 2012)



Five main policy recommendations emerge from this research:

1. **Emphasise reading as a unifying goal for early primary schooling.** The single most important goal for the first half of primary school should be the solid acquisition of reading skills. In this regard there should be a prioritised national goal: "Every child must learn to read in their mother tongue fluently and with comprehension by the end of Grade 3. They must also be able to read First-Additional-Language texts in English or Afrikaans with fluency and comprehension." This goal is easily communicated to and understood by parents, teachers and principals and is relatively easy to measure and monitor. The benefit of having a single unifying goal to focus attention, energy and resources should not be underestimated.
2. **Teach primary school teachers how to teach reading in African languages and in English.** That these teachers do not know how to do this is evidenced by the cripplingly low oral reading fluency scores in Grade 5. These learners cannot engage with the curriculum (which is now in English in Grade 5) and hence fall further and further behind as the reading material and cognitive demands become more and more complex. There is a clear need to convene a group of literacy experts to develop a course to teach Foundation Phase teachers how to teach reading. As part of our research we have created an 'extended abstract' indicating what the contents of such a course would need to be. This course should be piloted and evaluated and if it is of sufficient quality should become compulsory for all Foundation Phase teachers in schools where more than 50% of learners do not learn to read fluently in the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) by the end of Grade 3.
3. **Develop evidence-based interventions and evaluations and provide sustained support.** Much of the policy energy that has been expended in the last 10 years has been sporadic and haphazard. Successful programmes (such as the Systematic Method for Reading Success) are not pursued, while new initiatives are funded (but not evaluated) without a clear understanding of how they improve on or learn from previous initiatives. Any new national literacy drive needs to be piloted, independently evaluated and only taken to scale if and when it is proven to be effective. This should be seen as a medium-to-long term rather than short-term goal.

4. **Declare early literacy research (particularly in African languages) a National Research Foundation (NRF) Research Priority Area.** Given the magnitude of the reading crisis and the lack of research on African languages at South African universities (particularly on early literacy in African languages), the NRF should declare this a national priority. It should dedicate the necessary resources to those researchers and departments who have the skills and expertise to investigate how children learn to read in African languages and which interventions are the most promising.
5. **Establish oral reading fluency norms for South Africa's African languages.** Although there are already oral reading fluency norms for the English language, there are none for the African languages. It is also not possible to translate English norms into African language norms since the language structure (morphology) is different, with English being an analytic language and African languages being agglutinating languages. Without these norms it is not possible to reliably measure and benchmark children's oral reading fluency in African languages.

Acknowledging the magnitude of the reading crisis in South Africa is only the first step towards remedying it. Thereafter we will need sustained research and evidence-based interventions focusing on the Foundation Phase and teacher development. Only then can we expect to see all children acquiring the core reading skills at the appropriate age, irrespective of their linguistic or socio-economic background.