

BENCHMARKING FOR PRECURSOR SKILLS IN READING: SDG 4.1.1A SOUTH AFRICA CASE STUDY

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1. Background¹

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is actively working to enhance the reporting on indicator SDG 4.1.1a, which measures the percentage of children achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by grades 2 or 3. Currently, the number of countries reporting on this indicator remains substantially lower compared to those reporting on primary school enrolment. For example, only 37 countries report on learning outcomes at the grades 2 or 3 level, whereas 203 countries report primary school enrolment. This slow increase in reporting is concerning, as it would take many years to reach comparable levels of enrolment reporting.

In 2024, UIS established a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) to explore precursor skills for reading comprehension and to develop appropriate benchmarks using advanced statistical techniques. Additionally, UIS commissioned case studies to examine how countries have independently established their own benchmarks, supplementing the insights drawn from centralized databases.

South Africa has been identified as one possible case to map alternative approaches to measure reading. This would serve as an example of an effort to measure precursor skills and serve as an option as UIS advises the relevant countries. This document is the preliminary report for this case, providing some initial analysis and progress on the case activities.

2. Benchmark Development in South Africa

South Africa has utilized the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) to monitor reading comprehension levels among Grade 4 learners. While significant improvements were observed between the 2006 and 2016 cycles, with the percentage of learners reaching the lowest reading comprehension benchmark rising from 7% to 22%, performance remains suboptimal. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with the percentage declining to 19% in 2021. PIRLS results indicate that these challenges stem from setbacks in early literacy development, particularly during the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3), where many learners struggle with foundational skills critical for reading comprehension. During the pandemic, children in the Foundation Phase spent the most time out of school.

In 2022 South Africa reintroduced national assessments replacing the Annual National Assessments (ANA). The latter was an assessment programme which was intended to signal achievement levels of learners in grades 1 to 6 and 9 between 2011 and 2015 in all public

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schools. After a ten-year absence of an equivalent assessment system for the primary years, the new model of Systemic Evaluation assesses the performance of the education system in performing in Grades 3, 6 and 9 against identified targets set out in the *Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF)* and the *National Development Plan (NDP)* for Mathematics and Languages. While this is a significant national effort, assessing over 12000 learners, the assessments are similar to PIRLS in that the language skills component is assessed through written comprehension.

In addition to PIRLS and the national Systemic Evaluation assessments, the country makes use of several other assessments. However, none of these focus on the early grade precursor reading skills at a national level. Table 1 below is a summary of the different assessments South Africa undertakes and their purposes. The table was prepared to advocate for the need for a national survey to track the system's progress attaining in the precursor skills of reading in the early grades expressed in the locally developed reading benchmarks. The recently approved inaugural *Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) 2025* is set to provide the baseline national, provincial, and linguistic statistics of learners' performance against the reading benchmarks that measure skills that precede written comprehension skills in grades 1-4.

Table 1: Assessment summary and purpose

Literacy Assessment	Purpose	Strengths	Limitations	Grade & Language	Intervals by years	Comparability over time	Nationally Representative	Provincially representative	Classroom use	Ease of communicating the results
PIRLS: Progress in Reading Literacy Study	Written reading comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures the ultimate skill of comprehension Nationally representative Lang representative International Secure Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only measures reading comprehension Floor effects – most children do not reach the lower threshold At the end of Grade 4 – late for Foundation Phase remediation 	Grade 4	Every 5 years	✓	✓			Point scale is difficult to communicate
				11 Languages						
EGRA: Early Grade Reading Assessment	Diagnostic test on early skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focuses on early skills Known by teachers and subject advisors Used for national reading monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use and purpose not fully aligned – classroom vs PED and national Not nationally comparable. Diagnostic teacher info – limited access and reliability Test not secure Not enough tests 	Grades 1-3	3 times a year				✓	Scores need updating Termly progress needs interpretation Overall scores need interpretation.
				11 Languages						
South African Systemic Evaluations	Written comprehension at exit grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National comparison Scaled with anchor items Scale linked to SDG & CAPS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only measures comprehension 	Grades 3, 6 and 9	Every 3 years	✓	✓	✓		Point scale with proficiency levels
				11 Languages						
Assessment for Learning	Formative feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing assessment CAPS aligned Accessible to all teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumes teachers have remedial skills 	All grades	Each Topic/ Ongoing				✓	Teachers may understand
				11 Languages						

Literacy Assessment	Purpose	Strengths	Limitations	Grade & Language	Intervals by years	Comparability over time	Nationally Representative	Provincially representative	Classroom use	Ease of communicating the results
SEACMEQ: Southern & East African Consortium for Education Quality	Regional Literacy & Numeracy comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional comparison African curriculum alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delay in analysis and reporting Only measures ultimate skill Intermediate phase focus – not Foundation Phase 	Grade 6 11 Languages	Every 7-8 years	✓	✓			Well understood at a policy level, regionally and internationally
ELNA: Early Learning National Assessment	Measuring school readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-schooling measure Pre-literacy skills School readiness alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only for reception years and not all Foundation Phase 	Grade R or start of Grade 1 11 Languages	3 years	✓	✓	✓		To be confirmed
Thrive by Five	Measures cognitive dev for 4-5 year old	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-literacy skills Cognitive dev skills Pre-school focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only for reception years and not all Foundation Phase 	Grades RR & R 11 Languages	3 years	✓	✓	✓		Easy dashboard, policy notes
FUNS: Funda Uphumelele National Survey	10-year-old reading & earlier or later attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparison to new African reading benchmarks by skill and grade Nationally representative Provincial representative Language representative CAPS alignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited to selected oral skills Assumes teachers have medial response 	Grades 1-4 11 Languages & EFAL	3 years (new)	✓	✓	✓		Percentage reaching benchmarks by skill, grade and lang

Source: Department of Basic Education, Funda Uphumelele National Survey Concept note 2024

2.1 A focus on Foundational Literacy

The inability to read proficiently in the first three grades has serious long-term implications in education and learning. In South Africa in particular, Grade 4 marks a language and content transition. In content teaching transitions from learning to read, to reading to learn other subjects, including mathematics amongst other content subjects. In addition, most learners transition from learning in their Home Language to learning in English. It follows that learners who do not master this transition are at increased risk of academic failure and school dropout. Addressing these early literacy deficiencies is essential to ensure learners can read fluently and comprehend texts.

To address this gap, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), in collaboration with academics, practitioners, funders, and international specialists, has developed early-grade reading fluency benchmarks. These benchmarks aim to raise awareness of the essential milestones that learners must reach in the Foundation Phase. Tracking these benchmarks helps to identify literacy gaps early, preventing them from affecting later academic performance. Given South Africa's linguistic diversity, the benchmarks address the 11 official spoken languages.

The benchmarks established by the DBE are expressed as the minimum number of words read correctly per minute (CWPM) in a grade appropriate passage or word list for grades 1-3. Additionally, Grade 1 has the benchmark for the number of letters correctly sounded out per minute. The benchmarks were set with the correlation to comprehension attainment factored in. They are therefore the minimum thresholds learners need to reach in grades 1, 2 and 3 to be on track to read with adequate comprehension by the age of ten. Data from EGRA-type assessments were used for this analysis.

These benchmarks serve multiple purposes at the national, provincial, school, and classroom levels, facilitating improved monitoring and intervention strategies. The table below summarises the different uses.

Table 2: Usage of African Language Reading Benchmarks

NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL ADMINISTRATION	SCHOOL	CLASSROOM
Establishes definition of reading proficiency	Standards and targets that school leaders can aim towards	Standard against which to measure learner skills
Clearly communicates standards and targets	Standardises assessment practices across and within schools	Identify early on learners at risk of not being able to read
Monitor progress	Identify the extent of remedial support required	Adapt instructional focus to meet learners' needs

Source: Department of Basic Education, Benchmark design report 2020

The benchmarking design work started in 2019 with the first set of benchmarks finalised in 2020. To date, early-grade reading benchmarks for the Nguni language group (isiZulu, isiNdebele, Siswati and isiXhosa); the Sesotho-Setswana language group (Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho); Afrikaans, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda. All of these were developed at the Home Language level with the only English as the outstanding language. Plans to establish the English Home Language benchmarks are underway for finalization in 2025. However, English benchmarks were developed at the First Additional Language level as the only language at the additional language level. The table below provides a summary of the benchmarks.

Table 3: A summary of the Reading Benchmarks

	By the end of grade 1, all learners should be able to sound	By the end of grade 2, all learners should be able to read at least	By the end of grade 3, all learners should be able to read at least	By the end of grade 4, all learners should be able to read at least	By the end of grade 6, all learners should be able to read at least
Nguni Home Language group (Siswati, isiZulu, isiXhosa)	40 clspm (letters)	20 cwpm (words in a passage)	35 cwpm (words in a passage)		
Sesotho-Setswana Home Language group	40 clspm (letters)	40 cwpm (words in a passage)	60 wpm (words in a passage)		
English First Additional Language	N/A	30 cwpm (words in a passage)	50 cwpm (words in a passage)	70 cwpm (words in a passage)	90 cwpm (words in a passage)
Afrikaans Home Language	40 clspm (letters)	50 cwpm (words in a passage)	80 cwpm (words in a passage)		
Xitsonga Home Language	40 clspm (letters)	30 cwpm (words in a passage)	40 cwpm (words in a passage)	50 cwpm (words in a passage)	85 cwpm (words in a passage)
Tshivenda Home Language	40 clspm (letters)	35 cwpm (words in a passage)	55 cwpm (words in a passage)		90 cwpm (words in a passage)

Source: Department of Basic Education, Summary of benchmarks, 202

3. Key Stakeholder Interviews

For the compilation of this report, a range of stakeholders who were involved in various ways in the conceptualization, development, and usage of the benchmarks were interviewed to give their reflections of the benchmarking process.

This section covers the thematic analysis of their responses. This draft report contains the preliminary aspect with themes and illustrative discussions has been completed for three of the twelve interviewees from different organisations:

- **ST:** a DBE official from the Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation (RCME) directorate. He was one of the principal researchers in the conceptualisation and development of the South African early grade reading benchmarks.
- **FA:** a representative from a local education foundation and grant-maker that has seeks to support programmes that seek to improve South Africa's language and mathematics education. The foundation supported the benchmarks through funding and through provision of materials used for instrument development.
- **CM:** a lecturer in Language in Education and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) at a local university. She was contracted to be the language specialist in the development, piloting, and training for data collection aspects for the benchmarking of one the languages.

These are categorised under the following areas:

1. Background for Benchmarking Precursor Skills in South Africa
2. Decision Making for the South African Context
3. Expert and Participant Selection
4. Description of the Benchmarking Method
5. Results, Use, Lessons, and Gaps

4.1 Background for Benchmarking Precursor Skills in South Africa

Theme 1: Importance of benchmarks for literacy strategies

Without measuring reading fluency, measuring reading becomes intangible and less understood in the educational sector, which could hinder advocacy for early literacy skills. A lack of significant influence of benchmarks in the literacy strategy may limit its effectiveness in measuring literacy outcomes. The literacy strategy may not adequately consider the measurement of impact, potentially leading to a lack of effective evaluation of literacy outcomes. Currently the Monitoring and Evaluation approach for the literacy strategy may not adequately measure the impact of the literacy strategy on reading outcomes, focusing instead on outputs and expenditures.

4.2 Decision Making for the South African Context

Theme 1: Funding

When preparing the proposal to the grand-maker's board for funding the development of the benchmarks, it was anticipated that the board would appraise the benchmarks as falling under Research and Development and not an intervention; which they typically fund. Knowing this, **FA** had a strategic approach to the board. First, she wrote a concept note without asking for funds. Following the buy-in from her organisation's board, she then developed a proposal a funded proposal with input from the RCME directorate This was substantiated by convincing the board by mapping the work done by the directorate on the Early Grade Reading Studies series that the organisation had previously funded, and its interlinkage to the benchmarks. They then developed a narrative to convince the board. In addition, the existing partnerships on the benchmarks that RCME had with the known researchers, other Education NPOs, and other donors reduced risk for the organisation so that they were comfortable to contribute financially.

Developing the benchmarks for the different languages in phases meant that there were a different cohort of donors and contributors for each iteration. While there was real burden of altering strategies that fit the different organisations to secure their partnership, the pay off was that goal of having benchmarks that were adopted by the whole sector because of the widespread involvement. That is, there would be a reduced chance of replication of this process.

4.3 Expert and Participant Selection

Theme 1: Diversity and equity

The interviewee **FA** expressed that the principles of equity, redress, building the capacity of (especially for black South Africans) are important to her organisation. It is important to use different people in work for productivity and the diversity of views and approaches. Her belief is that diversity should be meaningful and not for the sake of compliance. The challenge she expressed though was that, because of lack of exposure and capacity, and the same people keep being utilised especially in research and evaluation, so there is work still needing to be done in the sector to attain diversification without compromising the quality of work

Theme 2: Linguist and Language Specialist Role

When reflecting on her role as a Linguist and Language Specialist for the development of the benchmarks, **CM** expressed how the process was pivotal in giving her the practical understanding to the theoretical knowledge of early literacy acquisition she already had. This

included gaining experience in the use of tools such as the Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRAs) for assessing early grade reading.

In her time as the linguist for the project, Dr Makgabo said in addition to the skills she already possessed- knowledge of the language, the context of Initial Teacher Education, she would have been better equipped had she had the quantitative data analysis/interpretation skills to further understand the meaning of the data that was used to refine the instruments in the piloting stage. Her research expertise lies more in qualitative data. Additionally, she believes she would have benefited from observing the data collection for more than one day after training as they would have given better understanding the around the dynamics in schools and improving the instruments.

Theme 3: Development of Instruments

Dr Makgabo highlighted the scarcity of EGRA type tools that have been developed in African languages that are also culturally responsive. She wondered how many texts in African languages have English as their point of departure, noting how cultural nuances can be lost in translation, which complicates the understanding of the content. Citing the 2021 PIRLS passage, she mentioned how even she herself as a Sepedi language expert didn't know the word for 'octopus' until then. This cultural deafness in versioning means a lot especially in texts where the purpose is to assess reading proficiency and not broaden a learners' understanding/vocabulary.

She found the bank of oral reading fluency texts that were provided for further development in the Sepedi benchmarking project to be sufficiently culturally reflective. However, the need for more instruments/texts developed specifically for and in African languages is still needed. Dr Makgabo continued to express her concern about the limited data available for these languages. She emphasized that having more data could have significantly aided the development and evaluation process.

4.4 Description of the Benchmarking Method

Theme 1: International and local expressions

Challenges in standardizing assessments across countries were acknowledged, alongside the importance of focusing on learning outcomes rather than strict comparisons. It was also mentioned that there is a significant gap in the existing literacy assessments in South Africa, as current methods do not adequately measure foundational skills or comprehension levels, which could lead to ineffective evaluations of student literacy. The annual national assessments conducted from 2011 to 2014 in grades one through six and grade nine primarily utilized conventional written tests, which may not accurately reflect students' literacy skills. There is a concern that while the national assessment may highlight the importance of reading

benchmarks, it could also lead to an overemphasis on metrics at the expense of understanding the broader context of children's learning. There is a risk of conducting the assessment poorly, which could lead to criticism and undermine the benchmarks' credibility.

4.5 Results, Use, Lessons and Gaps

Theme 1: Uses of benchmarks

Dr Makgabo and her team at the University of Pretoria conducted a survey of other teacher training institutions to see how they teach pre-service teachers reading pedagogy for African languages. Their findings were that the same assumption that in-service teachers ascribe to their learners is the same assumption that the different universities ascribe to their student, that is, being a language teacher, it is taken for granted that you know how to teach early reading skills. Of the institutions surveyed, there was none that had a teacher reading programme for African languages to train pre-service teachers in. As a result from these findings, the university has reached out to the NGO Room to Read to help develop teacher training reading programmes for Sepedi, Setswana, IsiNdebele, and IsiZulu.

Within the DBE there is a plan to include benchmarks in the strengthening of the curriculum and to potentially integrate them into future strategies, indicating a move towards a more cohesive educational framework. It was agreed that the incorporation of benchmarks into the latest LTSM catalogue is a positive development, indicating a shift towards recognizing the importance of measurement in literacy strategies. The discussion highlighted the importance of reaching certain levels of reading in the home language during grades one, two, and three, which is crucial for later educational outcomes. The discussion raises the issue of how to compare different languages and scripts in educational benchmarks, emphasizing the need for innovative thinking in standardization efforts. The interview highlighted the incorporation of a new methodological approach from South Africa into their design component, indicating a shift in how benchmarks may be established moving forward.

Theme 2: Further Opportunity for the Extended Use of Benchmarks

Dr Makgabo suggested that to extend the use of benchmarks to initial teacher education, a module be developed for reading pedagogy courses where assessment and remediation of reading in African languages is addressed. This module should include components for their micro-teaching. This will ensure that in addition to in-service teachers, being capacitated, the novice teachers are also getting the same orientation to the benchmarks and their use for improving reading.

Theme 3: Key success factors

The necessity of government involvement in the benchmarking process was highlighted to ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Participants agreed on the need for benchmarks to be integrated into educational materials and teacher training programs, with a focus on long-term planning for implementation. The speakers noted that benchmarks must be developed in collaboration with the government to avoid issues of recognition and implementation, indicating a strategic approach to policy influence. The speakers expressed concern that benchmarks created without government involvement would not be effective and could lead to wasted resources. They highlighted the importance of government ownership for the success of such initiatives. They noted that benchmarks must be developed in collaboration with the government to avoid issues of recognition and implementation, indicating a strategic approach to policy influence.

Theme 4: Gaps and areas of improvement

There is a need for longer-term planning and mapping to determine how and where the benchmarks will be integrated into various programs. The discussion acknowledged the need for clear communication about the benchmarks and their integration timelines into ITE and other programs.

Theme 5: International considerations

In considering the replicability of the process undertaken by South Africa, **ST** notes that any given country has its own context and the development of the educational assessment model like the South African benchmarks was achieved because of its existing opportunities and limitations. A critical catalyst for South Africa's benchmarking process was its failure to reach the PIRLS benchmarks that are of written comprehension, establishing benchmarks for precursor skills, like fluency, that would be applicable for all languages taught in the country would be most useful. Developing benchmarks for this skill for a country that is already exceeding the written comprehension benchmarks or setting fluency benchmarks for linguistic contexts where fluency even difficult to measure because of the orthography, may be imprudent. So, while the establishment of comparable benchmarks is important, the focus should be on communicating the significance of learning outcomes rather than on strict comparisons between countries. Similarly, international donors should be mindful of the context they are partnering with and be open to being flexible on the types of evaluation tools and measures they use especially when working in different country contexts- even when they are neighbouring countries.