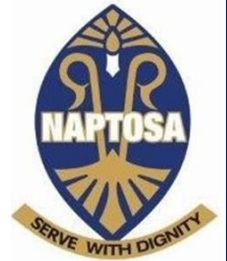


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Reading with Comprehension Crisis in South Africa – PIRLS Report

The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Report was released yesterday, 16 March 2023. The study assesses reading comprehension and monitors trends and indicators of growth in reading literacy at five-year intervals.

PIRLS 2021 is the first international large-scale assessment to report achievement trends after successfully collecting data during the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing 400 000 students in 57 countries. PIRLS achievement trends in fourth grade reading show a **high negative impact from the COVID-19 pandemic; home and school socioeconomic status** persist as strong indicators of achievement; most children attend schools with positive environments; and many learners and their parents only “somewhat” like reading. COVID-19 unexpectedly brought all the standard PIRLS plans and procedures to a halt in March 2020, and new strategies for data collection had to be devised. Only 43 countries managed to collect achievement data on schedule.

In the study, Africa is underrepresented, and South Africa is one of three countries to participate with countries using developed education systems from the global north (Europe, North America, Middle and Far East). In the Sub-Saharan region, South Africa is the only country participating.

A total of 12 426 Grade 4 learners in 321 schools, and 9 317 Grade 6 learners in 253 schools were assessed. The Grade 4 learners were representative of the 11 official languages and nine provinces, while Grade 6 was only representative of Afrikaans and English. South Africa’s Grade 4 and 6 participation rate was 97% and 98%, respectively (after replacements). It is important to note **that the study found that the lowest performing learners were found in Quintiles one to three schools.** These schools are **no-fee paying** schools and are often **under resourced** and dominated by **overcrowded classrooms.**

NAPTOSA is concerned that learners are adopting strategic learning approaches. This was evident based on the learner responses presented at the release of the results. This is a common practice when ‘teaching to the test’. Teachers are pushing content and aren’t really focused on ensuring that effective teaching is taking place in the classroom. The blame cannot however be placed solely on the teachers, since our curriculum has several skills, on paper, but is more focused on covering theory.

Whilst UNICEF warned that reading with understanding is a global phenomenon (<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-warns-shockingly-low-levels-learning-only-third-10-year-olds-globally>), this provides a cold comfort for South Africa. South African schools are plagued by:

- Overcrowding
- Underfunding – Leading to poor resourcing.
- Text Poverty – No graded readers
- Children are assessed more on reading aloud (barking at text) than comprehension of the text.
- Homes are text poor or have inappropriate texts.
- Parents do not reinforce reading.
- Books are not sent home for fear of loss or damage.
- Training at universities neglects the practical aspects of teaching prospective teachers the science of reading.

The Department of Basic Education needs to reassess the reading strategies; the absence of a country methodology; and the desperate need to train all in-service primary school teachers in reading science.

Mr BL Manuel

Executive Director