



NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



SERVING EDUCATION SINCE 1904

Visit our website: www.naptosa.org.za

NNF 52 of 2020 28 October 2020

NEW EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THAT READING FOR MEANING IS IMPROVING

In recent years, there has been uncertainty around whether the learning outcomes of South Africa's schools are improving from their historically low levels.

There are three international testing programmes that South Africa can draw from to gauge performance trends, namely: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), focusing on Grade 9; Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ), focusing on Grade 6; and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), focusing on Grade 4.

In 2012, the TIMSS results pointed to substantial improvements in lower secondary mathematics and science since 2002. A few years later, SEACMEQ revealed improvements in the upper primary level in these subjects. Then in 2017 results from PIRLS indicated that reading in lower primary had remained static between 2011 and 2016.

Because the PIRLS results were inconsistent with those of the other two testing programmes, Professor Martin Gustafsson was requested by South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2019 to examine the raw data from the literacy study to verify the reported no-change trend.

The review of the PIRLS raw data found that there had been flaws in the analysis of the data and that in fact, the progress in reading in lower primary for South Africa had been substantial, from around 32% correct to 42% correct. As a result of the review, all references to the no-change finding for South Africa were removed from the international report.

It is important to note, however, that even after these improved results, South Africa still underperforms relative to most other middle-income countries. What is encouraging though is that there is a move in the right direction.

The correction of the PIRLS results has important implications for South Africa. It removes the uncertainty created by the 2017 report in that all three international programmes now point in the same direction, which is upward. This affirms that our teachers are making an impact in teaching and learning.

According to Professor Gustafsson the improvement can *inter alia* be attributed to access of young people to resources which facilitate learning (electricity at home and public libraries), greater access to textbooks and curriculum reforms.

NAPTOSA welcomes the revised PIRLS findings for South Africa and believes that for further improvement to be assured the DBE needs to look closely at the curriculum for content and assessment overload that are hindrances to teaching and learning.

Noting that research indicates that effective teaching of reading in the early grades is a prerequisite for virtually everything else in education, NAPTOSA reaffirms its support for the Presidential call to improve foundational skills of numeracy and literacy, especially reading as underpinned by a “Reading Revolution”.

BASIL MANUEL

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Information sourced from the ***A revised PIRLS 2011 to 2016 trend for South Africa and the importance of analysing the underlying microdata*** by Prof Martin Gustafsson.