Policy Brief

Learning gaps by socio-economic status and gender in South Africa

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Policy Brief

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Inequalities in learning outcomes in South Africa remain a pressing challenge, deeply rooted in broader socio-economic disparities, historical injustices, and systemic inefficiencies. Despite significant investments in education and pro-poor policies by the state, students from wealthier households consistently outperform their peers from poorer communities. Another stark difference has emerged by gender, with girls outperforming boys in almost all areas. The COVID-19 pandemic, apart from the sizable learning losses, has also widened existing inequalities for affected learners.

Understanding and addressing these inequalities is essential to achieving a more equitable society and providing all South African learners with the best opportunity to succeed.

This note focuses on the primary school sector, outlining existing disparities by socio-economic status (SES) and gender. It presents key trends and provides insights into what is driving the divergences.

1. What gaps do we see in learning outcomes in South Africa?

Socio-economic status

By the end of the Foundation Phase (in Grade 3 or 4), stark differences in literacy and numeracy outcomes between children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more affluent communities are already evident. These have been measured in various ways, including school Quintile[1], language, province, race, urban or rural location, and fee status,[2] [3] all reflecting the country's deep income and wealth inequalities.

Literacy and numeracy gaps are stark: 20-25% of children from wealthier, increasingly multi-racial and urban middle-class families perform much better than the 75-80% from poorer, mostly rural African households. This divide has led to the system being called a "dual" system,

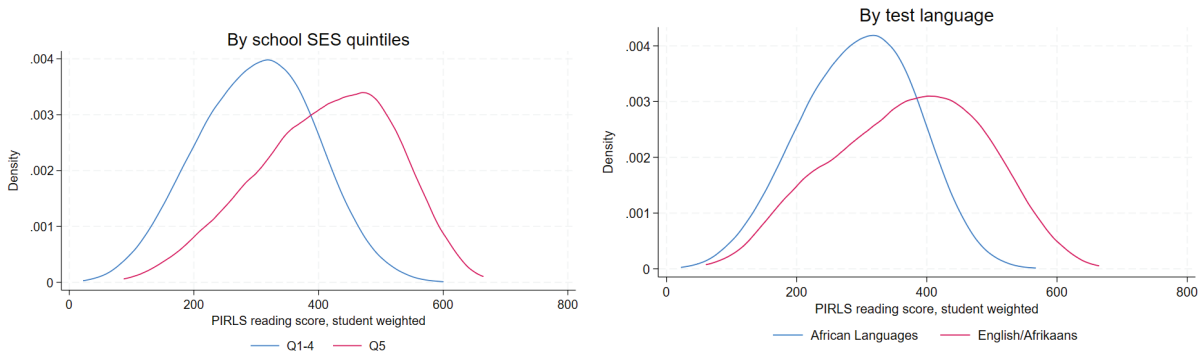
[1] Quintiles are an official classification in South Africa that determines the funding that schools receive. Quintile 1 are the poorest, generally rural schools, whilst Quintile 5 schools are the wealthiest. Quintile 1-3 schools are not allowed to charge fees and receive the most funding per student. In the initial classification, each Quintile contained about 20% of schools, however, the split has become skewed, with Quintile 1-3 schools making up more than 60%, as schools have argued to be reclassified to receive higher levels of financial support.

[2] Spaull, N. (2019). Equity: A Price Too High to Pay? In N. Spaull & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities*. Springer.

[3] Howie, S., Combrinck, C., Roux, K., Tshele, M., Mokoena, G., & Palane, N. M. (2017). Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2016: South African Children's Reading Literacy Achievement (PIRLS Literacy 2016). Centre for Evaluation and Assessment.

with vastly different outcomes.[4] A recent example of this dual system is evident in the 2016 PIRLS results, shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of Grade 4 mean reading achievement in PIRLS 2016 by school SES quintile and language of the test

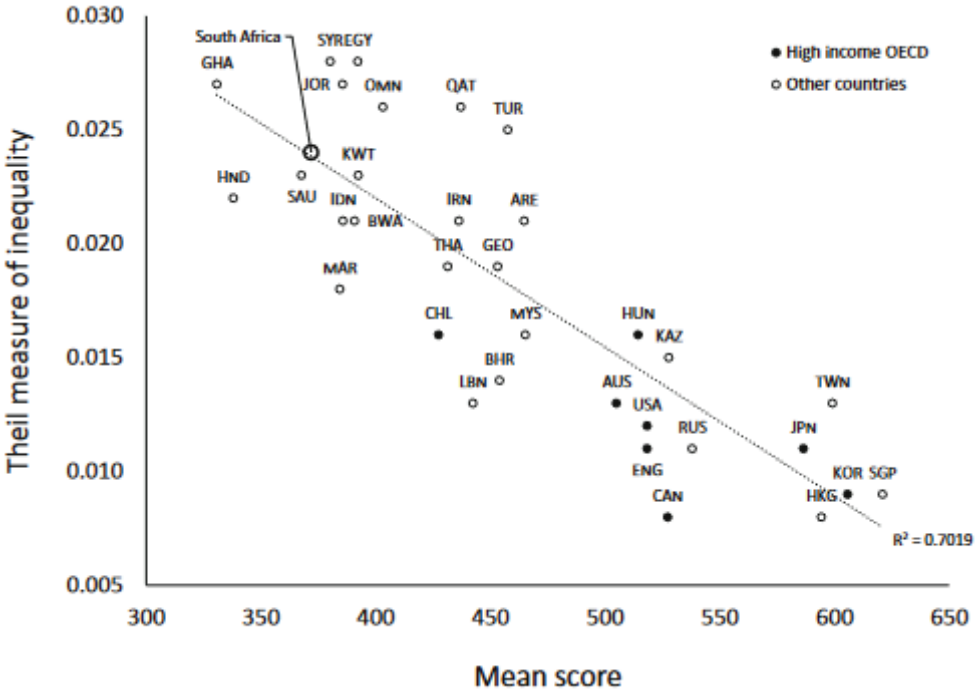


Source: Own calculation using PIRLS 2016 data

These performance gaps by SES are high, but given the overall levels of performance, they are not necessarily unexpected. Countries with lower levels of learning outcomes also tend to have higher levels of inequality in learning outcomes, as shown in Figure 2.

[4] Spaull, N. (2013). Poverty & privilege: Primary school inequality in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *33*(5), 436–447. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.09.009

Figure 2: TIMSS 2011 and 2015 Grade 8 Mathematics means and inequality in achievement



Source: Fig. 2.6 in Van der Berg, S., & Gustafsson, M. (2019). Educational Outcomes in Post-apartheid South Africa: Signs of Progress Despite Great Inequality. In N. Spaull & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities. Springer.
Notes: Calculations from the TIMSS microdata obtainable at https://timssandpirls.bc.edu to obtain country-level means and inequality measures, each student's mean across the five plausible values was used. For the four countries appearing in the 2011 data and not in the 2015 data, the 2011 data were used: Ghana (GHA), Syria (SYR), Indonesia (IDN), and Honduras (HND). For all other countries, just 2015 data were used.

Encouragingly, before COVID-19, there was some evidence that these gaps by SES were slowly declining[5] as the average level of learning increased.[6] However, for learners who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, much of this progress was lost. Although the impact on students who began school after the pandemic is still uncertain, early evidence[7] suggests some return to learning outcomes that are closer to pre-pandemic levels.[8]

[5] For example, the ratio of the 90th percentile to the 10th percentile decreased from 4.21 for Gr 4 PIRLS reading achievement in 2006 to 2.50 in 2016, and the intraclass correlation (an indicator of between-school inequality) decreased from 0.49 to 0.33 for PIRLS from 2011 to 2016.
[6] Gustafsson, M., & Taylor, S. (2022). *What lies behind South Africa's improvements in PIRLS? An Oaxaca-Blinder analysis of the 2011 and 2016 data* (Working Paper WP02/2022).
[7] In 2021 for the Grade 2's participating in EGRP I, 15% met or exceeded the home language benchmark (40 correct words per minute on an oral reading fluency task) and 59% could not read a single word, whilst at endline, in 2023, there was an overall improvement in Grade 2 home language reading, with 35% of learners achieving the word reading fluency benchmark and only 32% unable to read a single word.
[8] Zhou, T., Shilakoe, L., Ngwato, T. P., Ting, L., & Prew, M. (2024). *Early Grade Reading Programme I Evaluation Findings: Summary Report* [Summary Report]. Department of Basic Education.

Gender: the pro-girl gap

In high-income countries, girls generally achieve more years of education[9] [10] and have higher rates of tertiary completion.[11] In South Africa, too, boys are at greater risk of dropping out or repeating a grade.[12] Cumulatively, this has resulted in 15% more girls completing secondary school than boys and 66% more completing an undergraduate degree.[13]

In primary school in high- and upper-middle-income countries, there are also gender differences in performance by subject. Girls generally tend to outperform boys in Language and Reading, and boys generally do better than girls in Mathematics and Science (see Figure 3, with a similar pattern evident in the PISA results[14]). In low- and middle-income countries, the picture is more mixed: in some countries, boys still outperform girls.[15]

South Africa is an exception within PIRLS and TIMMS as girls outperform boys in both Grade 4 Literacy and Grade 5 Numeracy. This is particularly stark for Mathematics. Across all countries that participated in Grade 4 TIMMS 2023, there was only a single country in which there was a significant pro-girl gap for Mathematics: South Africa. Although SEAQMEC IV results suggest that such pro-girl gaps in Mathematics may not be unique in Africa. Botswana, Mauritius and Seychelles also had significant pro-girl gaps.[16]

This has changed over time in South Africa. This gender gap in Mathematics has switched from a pro-boy gap in the 1990s to a significant and increasing pro-girl gap, which is especially prominent in the lower grades. The pro-girl gap in literacy also appears to be increasing.[17]

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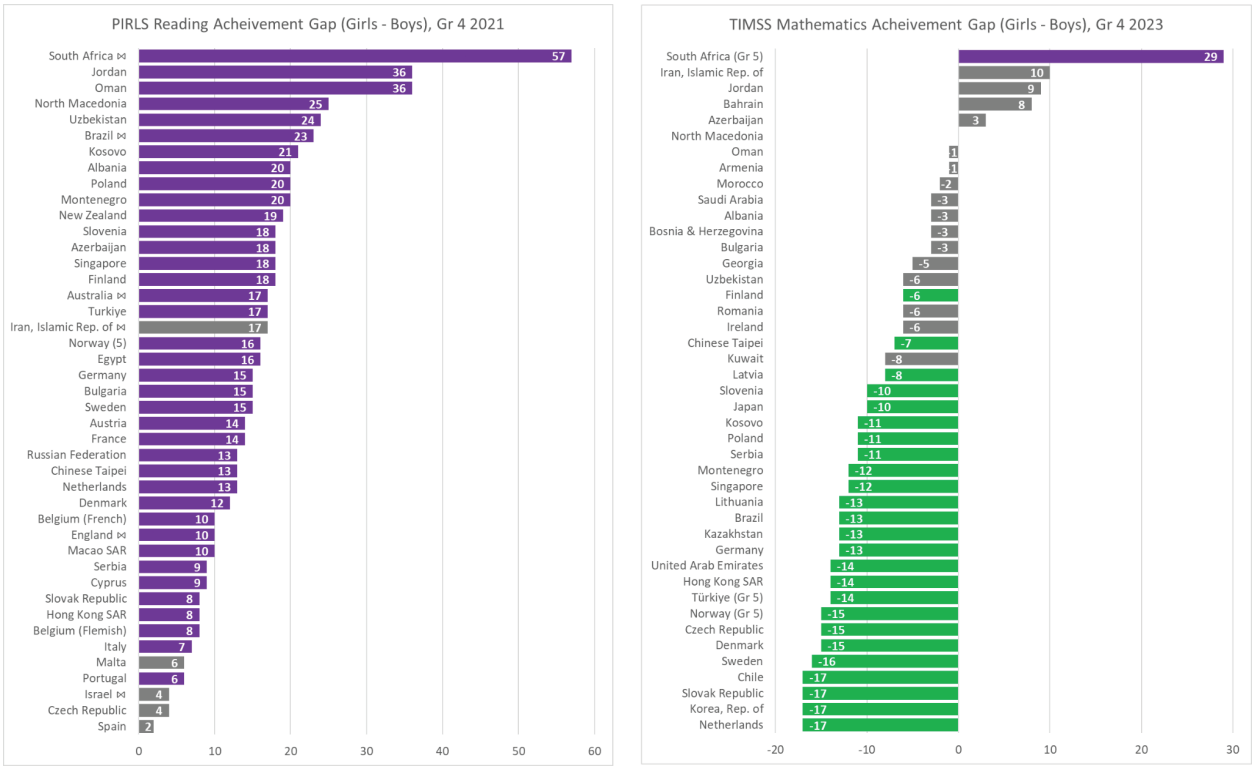
[9] https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-sch-life?gender=gender-gap
[10] Van Hek, M., Kraaykamp, G., & Wolbers, M. H. J. (2016). Comparing the gender gap in educational attainment: The impact of emancipatory contexts in 33 cohorts across 33 countries. Educational Research and Evaluation, 22(5–6), 260–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2016.1256222
[11] https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-ter-cmpl-zs?gender=gender-gap
[12] Department of Basic Education. (2023). *Grade promotion, repetition and dropping out 2018 to 2021* (Data Report). Department of Basic Education. Pretoria.
[13] Van Broekhuizen, H., & Spaull, N. (2017). *The 'Martha Effect': The compounding female advantage in South African higher education* (Working Paper WP14/2017; Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers). University of Stellenbosch.
[14] World Bank. (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
[15] Awich, M. (2021). *SACMEQ IV International Report: A study of the conditions of schooling and the quality of education*. Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.
[16] Awich, M. (2021). *SACMEQ IV International Report: A study of the conditions of schooling and the quality of education*. Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.
[17] Spaull, N., & Makaluza, N. (2019). Girls Do Better: The pro-female gender gap in learning outcomes in South Africa 1995–2018. *Agenda*, *33*(4), 11–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2019.1672568

Figure 3: Showing the Grade 4 pro-girl gap by country for PIRLS Reading and TIMSS Mathematics achievement across countries in 2021 & 2023.



Source: PIRLS 2021 International Reading Achievement and TIMMS 2023 International Mathematics Achievement. Purple bars indicate a significant pro-girl gap, and green bars indicate significant pro-boy gaps.

2. When do these gaps appear?

School readiness

These gaps are apparent even among children under the age of 5. Before learning begins, adequate nutrition is critical. In South Africa, boys have higher rates of stunting[18] than girls (33.2% v. 24.7%),[19] a widespread finding in Sub-Saharan Africa.[20]

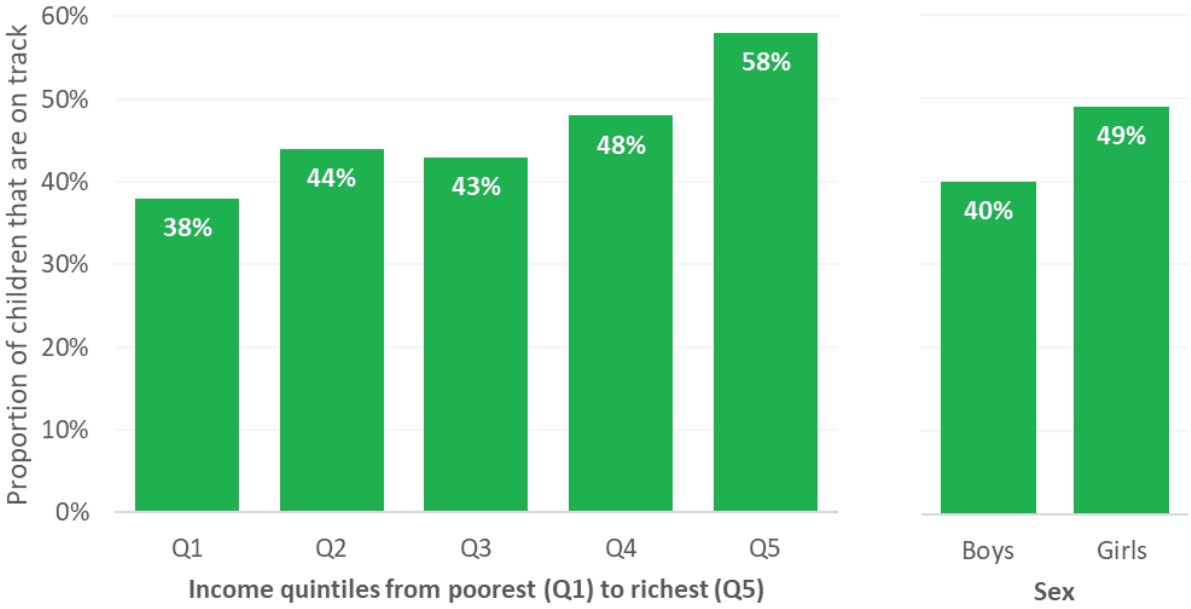
[18] Stunting here refers to all stunting (HAZ < -2). The gender difference is also significant for moderate stunting (HAZ <- 2 but HAZ > -3). No statistically significant difference is found by gender among severely stunted (HAZ <-3) children.

[19] Simelane, T., Mutanga, S. S., Hongoro, C., Parker, W., Mjimba, V., Zuma, K., Kajombo, R., Ngidi, M., Masamha, B., Mokhele, T., Managa, R., Ngungu, M., Sinyolo, S., Tshililo, F., Ubisi, N., Skhosana, F., Ndinda, C., Sithole, M., Muthige, M., … Marinda, E. (2023). National Food and Nutrition Security Survey [National Survey Report]. HSRC.

[20] Wamani, H., Åstrøm, A. N., Peterson, S., Tumwine, J. K., & Tylleskär, T. (2007). Boys are more stunted than girls in Sub-Saharan Africa: A meta-analysis of 16 demographic and health surveys. *BMC Pediatrics*, *7*(1), 17.

Internationally, differences in cognitive skill by SES are evident even at 3 years of age and grow over time.[21] The ThriveBy5 study tested children aged 4[22] who were attending early learning centres across South Africa. Before children enter Grade R,[23] inequalities in school readiness were already apparent, as can be seen in Figure 4. Specifically along two key variables: SES and gender.

Figure 4: Percentage of children on track by Income Quintile and Sex



Source: Thrive by Five Index Report (2022), taken from Figure 3 and Figure 5

Children in wealthier areas (close to Quintile 5 and 4 schools) were less likely to be falling behind and much more likely to be on track than 4-year-olds in poorer areas (see Figure 4). But, even in the highest income Quintile, more than 40% of children are not on track to start school; a staggering number, given their relative advantage. Gaps between boys and girls are also already apparent at this age, with only 40% of boys on track to start Grade 1, against 49% of girls. Boys are also more likely to be far behind, at 31% compared to 26% of girls.[24]

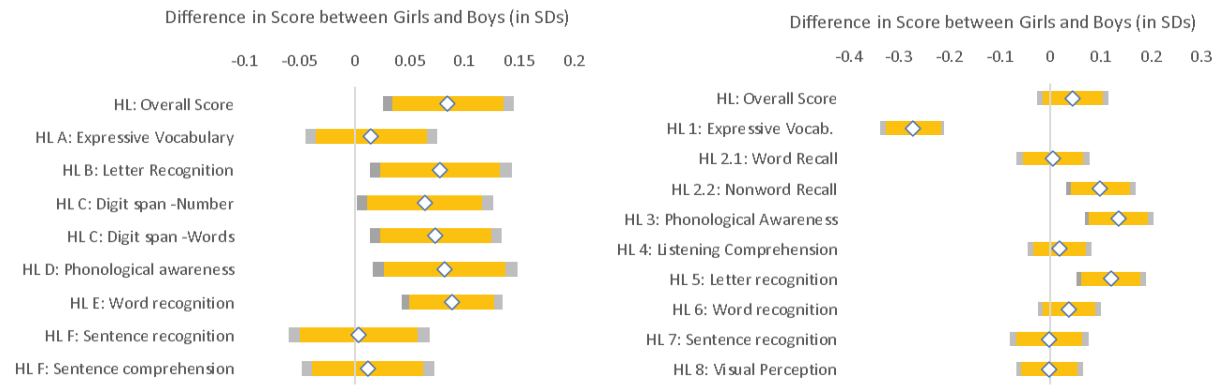
Grade 1

This data shows that the gaps in learning outcomes are influenced by home and social factors before school. At the start of school, in Grade 1, these gaps are already evident on some

[21] World Bank. (2018). *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank. p. 79.
[22] They assessed children aged between 50-59 months
[23] Grade R in South Africa stands for "Reception Year", which is the year before Grade 1 in the country's education system.
[24] Giese, S., Dawes, A., Tredoux, C., Mattes, F., Bridgman, G., Van der Berg, S., Schenk, J., & Kotze, J. (2022). Thrive by Five Index Report. Innovation Edge. https://thrivebyfive.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Thrive-by-Five-Index-report-Revised-August-2022-FINAL.pdf

literacy and cognitive measures, as seen in the Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS) research programmes.[25] There was only a single measure in the EGRS II baseline, where boys greatly outperformed the girls—vocabulary knowledge of animal names.

Figure 5: Difference in scores by item and gender at baseline for EGRS I and EGRS II



Source: Own calculations using the anonymised EGRS I Wave 1-5 and EGRS II Wave 1-4 datasets (available on DataFirst). Standard errors, clustered by school.

Additionally, Roots and Shoots, a much smaller longitudinal study, found that for learners in the Western Cape at the beginning of Grade 1, girls outperformed boys in both the Literacy and Numeracy components, however, the differences were not significant.[26]

By the end of Grade 1, children in Quintile 1-3 schools are more likely to repeat the grade than children in Quintile 5 schools, although this is partly driven by the age of Grade 1 entry, with children often starting when they are 6 months older at wealthier schools. Differences in outcomes by gender are sizable and significant, with boys about twice as likely to repeat Grade 1 as girls.[27]

Over the course of the foundation phase, boys start out behind the girls and fall further behind over time.[28]

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[25] The Early Grade Reading Studies are a research initiative led by South Africa's Department of Basic Education to improve early literacy in schools.They were designed and run by the Research, Coordination and Monitoring and Evaluations Directorate.
[26] Hofmeyr, H., & Ardington, C. (2023). *Roots and Shoots: Wave 2 Report*. https://www.rootsandshootsstudy.com/outputs
[27] Van der Berg, S., van Wyk, C., & Gustafsson, M. (2024). What SA-SAMS and LURITS data tells us about education. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP). Stellenbosch.
[28] Clayton, R. (2024). *Linguistic interdependence? Foundation Phase mastery in home language as a predictor of grade 4 repetition and EFAL marks* (Working Paper 02/25). Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP).

3. Where do these gaps come from?

Learning outcomes differ as a result of both contextual factors as well as innate or genetic variation. Inequality in learning outcomes by SES[29] can be largely explained by known contextual factors, including differences in nutrition; access to physical and human resources at home and at school; the quality of instruction and teacher content knowledge; environments that are conducive to learning, for example are safe with limited uncertainty; and fewer institutional hurdles, such as language policy or an ambitious curriculum.[30] These differences are therefore somewhat understood.

We have a less complete understanding of the underlying factors and mechanisms driving gender-based differences in learning outcomes. General patterns by subject across countries suggest that biological factors may contribute to these differences, however, this fails to explain the significant variation across countries and over time, suggesting that contexts, culture and expectations also play a role. Research also points to factors such as greater enjoyment and confidence in reading for girls, as well as generally higher levels of social and emotional readiness for school at the school entry age.[31]

However, once these gaps have been established, such gaps in foundational learning can contribute to weaker learning outcomes in later grades.[32] [33]

4. How did COVID-19 affect learning inequalities?

COVID-19 had a major impact on learning around the world, as school closures and disruptions reduced the time in class. Many children were affected by pandemic-related health and financial challenges at home. It is estimated that internationally, children in 2021 and 2022 were about half-a-year of learning behind the cohort from 2019 (Patrinos et al, 2021).

In South Africa, where school closures and disruptions lasted throughout 2020 and 2021, about a year of instructional time was lost, although schools that were able to meet the distancing

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[29] Some of the socioeconomic explanatory factors in the home include: In the home: income and wealth inequality, differences in parental education, employment, knowledge and networks, food security and access to healthcare and sanitation. And at school: despite pro-poor resourcing, the resources available to children at Q 1-3 (and sometimes Q4) schools remain fewer in terns of infrastructure, LTMS, digital connectivity and devices, similarly, instructional approaches and instructional quality also differe starkly.
[30] Spaull, N., & Jansen, J. D. (Eds.). (2019). *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality : a study of the present situation and future possibilities* (Vol. 10). Springer.
[31] Hofmeyr, H. (2022). Why do girls do better? Unpacking South Africa's gender gap in PIRLS and TIMSS. International Journal of Educational Development, 94, 102648. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2022.102648
[32] Cunha, F., Heckman, J. J., Lochner, L., & Masterov, D. V. (2006). Chapter 12 Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation. In E. Hanushek & F. Welch (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 697–812). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0692(06)01012-9
[33] Spaull, N., & Kotze, J. (2015). Starting behind and staying behind in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *41*, 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.01.002

requirements (generally wealthier or smaller schools) were able to return to full-time teaching sooner.[34]

Findings across studies suggest that about 50%-100% of a year of learning was lost, with higher losses in Mathematics than for language and literacy.[35] [36] [37] [38] Critically, learning inequalities increased across all dimensions. Inequality increased across different socio-economic groups, with the poorest schools and learners particularly affected. Additionally, both inequality *between* schools as well as the inequality in outcomes *within* schools increased. Whilst the gender gap grew overall under COVID-19, the increase was only significant at the 10% level. However, this hides a widened gap between boys and girls in the poorest 80% of schools.[39]

5. How can these gaps be reduced?

Decades of work by the government, NGOs, and the private sector have helped identify what improves learning outcomes in South Africa. We have proven programmes with strong evidence that can be scaled to begin the process of instructional improvement.[40] Further research can then be used to enhance these programmes and help to identify effective intervention measures.

Socio-economic status

Gaps in child outcomes by SES emerge long before children enter school. Ensuring that children receive adequate nutrition and have access to healthcare and sanitation is a critical first step.[41] In addition, school readiness can be strengthened through the provision of high-quality early childhood care and stimulation through parent programmes and early learning

[34] Shepherd, D., & Mohohlwane, N. (2022). A generational catastrophe: COVID-19 and children's access to education and food in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, *39*(5), 762–780. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2021.2017855
[35] Ardington, C., Wills, G., & Kotze, J. (2021). COVID-19 learning losses: Early grade reading in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *86*, 102480. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102480
[36] Van der Berg, S., Hoadley, U., Galant, J., van Wyk, C., & Böhmer, B. (2022). *Learning Losses From COVID-19 in the Western Cape: Evidence From Systemic Tests*. RESEP. https://www.ssrn.com/abstract=4212977
[37] Wills, G., & Van der Berg, S. (2024). COVID-19 disruptions and education in South Africa: Two years of evidence. *Development Southern Africa*, *41*(2), 446–465. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2024.2311711
[38] van der Berg, S., & Böhmer, B. (2025). South Africa: COVID-19 Learning Losses and Attempts at Recovery in a Poorly Performing and Unequal Education System. In N. Crato & H. A. Patrinos (Eds.), *Improving National Education Systems After COVID-19: Moving Forward After PIRLS 2021 and PISA 2022* (pp. 153–169). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69284-0_11
[39] Böhmer, B., & Wills, G. (2023). COVID-19 and inequality in reading outcomes in South Africa: PIRLS 2016 and 2021 (COVID Generation) [Working Paper]. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP).
[40] Taylor, S. (2019). How Can Learning Inequalities be Reduced? Lessons Learnt from Experimental Research in South Africa. In N. Spaull & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities* (Vol. 10). Springer.
[41] UNICEF. (2021). South Africa Consolidated Emergency Report 2021. UNICEF South Africa.

programmes. This is particularly important for underserved communities and for boys, to ensure that all children receive the foundational support they need to succeed in school. However, there is a capacity gap among parents and early childhood practitioners, which would need to be addressed to effectively implement such early learning programmes, otherwise, such an expansion risks further exacerbating the gap.[42]

Some of the learning gaps linked to SES at schools have declined over time, likely due to general system improvements, increased access and large-scale national programmes such as curriculum reform, the School Nutrition Programme, and the introduction of the Rainbow Workbooks.[43] Continued improvements and efficient provisioning by both Provincial and National Departments of Education will be essential to further reducing inequalities in learning and improving learning outcomes.

However, this is likely to be a gradual process and one that has a limit. Since learning takes place in the classroom, sustained progress will eventually require changes to instructional practices and investment in teacher capacity.

Poorer or lower-performing schools, in Quintiles 1-4, should be a focus for instructional change interventions to address some of the socio-economic differences. Based on what has been tested, interventions in both literacy and numeracy in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3), delivered in home language, are needed to strengthen both resourcing and the quality of instruction.

Two main types of programmes that target instruction have been extensively tested, internationally and in South Africa: structured learning programmes and targeted instruction[44] interventions.

- **Structured learning programmes**—which offer daily scripted lesson plans, learning and teaching support materials (LTSM), teacher training, and teacher support through coaching or teaching assistants—have a long history in South Africa. For these programmes to be effective, the lesson plans, materials, training, and support must be well-designed and tightly integrated, with each component reinforcing the others to function as a coordinated whole. A sizable body of evidence shows that such programmes have been successful across multiple provinces, at different times, in various languages, and under different implementing partners.

[42] Research on Socio-Economic Policy. (2014). The Impact of the Introduction of Grade R on Learning Outcomes. Department of Basic Education. Pretoria.
[43] Van der Berg, S., & Gustafsson, M. (2019). Educational Outcomes in Post-apartheid South Africa: Signs of Progress Despite Great Inequality. In N. Spaull & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities*. Springer.
[44] Angrist, N., Aurino, E., Patrinos, H. A., Psacharopoulos, G., Vegas, E., Nordjo, R., & Wong, B. (2023). Improving Learning in Low- and Lower-Middle-Income Countries. Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis, 14(S1), 55–80. https://doi.org/10.1017/bca.2023.26

Some of the largest[45] programmes that used this approach as a core strategy include the EGRS series[46], Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS), the Funda Wande programme, and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP)[47].

Adopting a structured learning intervention remains the most promising approach to improve learning outcomes and strengthen teacher capacity in poorer schools in South Africa. Targeted, practical professional development and in-classroom support to teachers can help to reduce the learning gap along socio-economic lines.

- **Targeted instruction**: There is evidence from international evaluations that suggests that streaming or tracking learners by class can improve learning outcomes under certain circumstances, provided that it is paired with differentiated, targeted instruction.[48]

  Activities that use elements of targeted instruction can be incorporated into classroom teaching. For example, the EGRS structured learning programme includes ***group guided reading*** as a form of targeted instruction. In this activity, children are grouped by ability and given readers that match their reading level. However, teachers found this activity difficult to implement, especially managing the classroom and keeping the rest of the class meaningfully engaged while working with small groups.[49] And, when used mechanically—for example, by dividing learners into smaller groups, but using texts that don't match their reading level—the activity was less enjoyable and likely less effective.[50] In practice, it is also often difficult for teachers to differentiate within the confines of the curriculum.

  Teaching at the Right Level (TARL) is a widely used methodology that utilises targeted instruction and incorporates multiple other elements. This approach, which started in India, has generally been used for learner support and remedial programmes in literacy and numeracy. Learners are grouped by their learning level rather than their age or grade, using a simple test.[51] Instruction is then tailored to the group's current learning level. The TARL approach is flexible and uses engaging child-centred methods designed to build confidence and participation. The programme has been successfully

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[45] Whilst the programmes listed are the ones which had the largest reach it is not a reflection of impact or efficacy. Partially, because not all of the programmes were formally evaluated.
[46]The EGRS series consists of 5 studies: EGRS I, EGRS II, RSP, EGRP I and EGRP II.
[47] Although, the PSRIP focussed on English as a First Additional Language not home language.
[48] Duflo, E., Dupas, P., & Kremer, M. (2011). Peer Effects, Teacher Incentives, and the Impact of Tracking: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Kenya. *The American Economic Review*, *101*(5), 1739–1774. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.101.5.1739
[49] Social Surveys Africa. (2021). Early Grade Reading Program Evaluation: Case Study Report 2021.p.44.
[50] Botha, D., & Schollar, E. (2018). *The Second Early Grade Reading Study: Case Studies in EGRS II Schools 2018*. Wits Health Consortium.
[51] The ASER test was developed by the Pratham organisation in India to collect information on an annual basis on children's ability to read simple text and do basic arithmetic. This was reported in their Annual Status of Education Report (ASER).

implemented both inside and outside of schools in India[52], and is being adopted in Africa, notably in Zambia[53], Botswana[54], Nigeria[55] and Côte d'Ivoire.[56] [57] Testing such a programme could be considered as a future step in South Africa.

However, while such interventions are necessary and do contribute to narrowing the learning gap, their impact is often modest relative to the size of the gap itself. This suggests that these interventions should be seen as a starting point in a longer-term, systematic effort to reduce educational inequality.[58]

Gender: Pro-girl gap

Given our still limited understanding of why this gap is so large in South Africa, some of what needs to be done is to understand some of the underlying factors—institutional, social and cultural—contributing to the pro-girl disparity.[59] It is also worth noting that despite much higher rates and levels of women's education, men are still favoured in the labour market with lower rates of unemployment,[60] more stable employment and higher average pay.[61] However, lower levels of education among men, particularly in a context of very high unemployment, such as in South Africa, can lead to negative societal outcomes in the longer run.

With the current knowledge, the best approach to this is likely to be similar to the strategy above: focus on improving the general quality of instruction and classroom management. Designing an intervention focusing on boys only, is undesirable because of the many barriers women still face, as well as it being more complex and therefore more expensive.

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[52] Banerjee, A., Banerji, R., Berry, J., Duflo, E., Kannan, H., Mukherji, S., Shotland, M., & Walton, M. (2016). *Mainstreaming an Effective Intervention: Evidence from Randomized Evaluations of "Teaching at the Right Level" in India* (Working Paper w22746; NBER Working Paper Series). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w22746

[53] Lipovsek, V., Poswell, L., Morrell, A., Pershad, D., Vromant, N., & Grindle, A. (2023). Chapter 2: Reflections on systems practice: implementing teaching at the right level in Zambia.

[54] Youth Impact. (nd). *Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)*. Youth Impact. https://www.youth-impact.org/tarl

[55] Shandilya, A., & Nkwane, T. M. (2025, April 30). Designing for Responsiveness: What We Learned from Piloting Targeted Instruction Tools in Nigeria and Botswana. *Youth Impact*.

[56] Ayiera, A. (2024, September 4). *Annual Strategic Review in Côte d'Ivoire Reinforces Government's Commitment to Nationwide TaRL Scale-up*. https://teachingattherightlevel.org

[57] A series of Randomised Control Trials are currently underway in a number of countries in Africa to evaluate the impacts at scale.

[58] Taylor, S. (2019). How Can Learning Inequalities be Reduced? Lessons Learnt from Experimental Research in South Africa. In N. Spaull & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities* (Vol. 10). Springer.

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Home language-based structured learning programmes have generally not shown significantly different effects for girls and boys.[62] Nonetheless, implementing interventions that provide strong literacy instruction and promote classroom engagement, as well as routine and structure in the foundation phase, will help ensure that boys are not left as far behind as a result of learning outcomes improving overall.

Conclusion

Despite progress, South Africa continues to face stark inequalities in educational outcomes. Starting in the Foundation Phase, South Africa should continue to improve learning outcomes across the system by implementing proven programmes, with a strong focus on supporting the poorest 70% of schools to help close persistent socio-economic gaps.

While some of these same interventions may also help reduce the rate at which boys fall behind, the gender gap in education is only partially understood, although increasingly recognised as a pressing concern. As such, it will be important to monitor and report on gender trends and build a deeper understanding before introducing gender-specific interventions, especially given the continued disadvantages women face in other areas, including the labour market.

[62] Stern, J., Jukes, M., Roper, M., Taimo, L., Bisgard, J., & Williams, B. (n.d.). Year 7 Report: Sustainability Impact Evaluation of The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS I) in South Africa (The First Early Grade Reading Study). United States Government Agency for International Development.

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