

The 2022 School Monitoring Survey

Reading Corners in Foundation Phase classrooms

1. Introduction

The School Monitoring Survey collected information on various types of Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) in schools, including the presence and use of reading corners in Grade 3 classrooms.

Developing key numeracy and literacy skills, especially in reading was one of the six priorities identified by the Council of Education Ministers for the administration period of 2019-2024. Likewise, Goal number 1 of the Basic Education sector's Action Plan for 2019-2024 is to "increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3".

The School Monitoring Survey is used to monitor progress towards the achievement of some of the goals and indicators that are documented in the Action Plan. In the 2022 edition of the School Monitoring Survey Grade 3 teachers interviewed were asked to respond to several questions regarding issues around experiences and views regarding home language reading at their schools. The questions that teachers were asked covered:

- Availability of daily lesson plans, a classroom library/reading corner in their classroom.
- The number of books in classroom library/reading corners.
- Tools teachers use to assess learners' reading ability, and the reading programmes teachers participate in. (Department of Basic Education, 2019).

Policy Context

The **National Guidelines for School Libraries**, drafted in 2012, define classroom libraries—sometimes referred to as "reading corners"—as compact collections of theme-related resources, primarily books, housed in a box or reading bag. These resources are typically arranged on a reading mat, shelf, or cupboard. Some cupboards may even have wheels, making them portable units that can display books and information resources at a level suitable for the learners in that class, supporting both recreational reading and curriculum requirements (Department of Basic Education, 2012).

Given the reading challenges prevalent in South Africa, particularly in classrooms, reading corners are a valuable tool for encouraging learners to read at their own pace, for pleasure, or during designated quiet reading periods. Establishing these reading spaces is crucial for nurturing a reading culture in students. Over time, such practices could help address the broader reading challenges faced in the South African context. The **Reading Barometer**, published in 2023, emphasizes that "Access to reading materials is closely tied to a country's ability to enable or constrain a reading ecosystem" (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse, & Huston, 2023, p. 54).

A reading corner, also known as a classroom library, is defined as a reading mat, shelf, or a box/bag containing age-appropriate and theme-related resources that align with the learners' level and the curriculum. Ideally, it should be situated where students can easily access materials during lessons or upon completing tasks. To make full use of these corners, it is recommended that teachers receive training in managing these resources, promoting reading, and utilizing the reading corner to foster information literacy skills. The minimum recommended number of books for a reading corner is 40. The core purpose is to provide learners with opportunities to engage independently with a variety of books (Department of Basic Education, 2019).

One major advantage of classroom libraries is that they allow learners to borrow books and take them home, which is especially beneficial for students in no-fee schools who may have little to no access to reading materials at home (Sebaeng, 2019). Schools can source books for reading corners from various entities such as the Department of Basic Education (DBE), provincial Departments of Education, local school districts, NGOs, or through book donations from parents, businesses, and community members during book drives.

Classroom libraries offer students access to a broader range of reading materials beyond what is covered in the standard curriculum, including exposure to different genres. They also provide opportunities for on-site reading support, which is often limited. However, a key limitation, depending on the school's resources, is that reading corners might lack diversity in terms of genres and themes.

The **National Guidelines for School Library and Information Services** outline several models for establishing school libraries and information services. One notable project, the **Classroom Library Project (CLP)**, implemented in 98 schools in the North West province, identified four essential conditions for the effective use of classroom libraries or reading corners:

1. **Reading in a familiar language:** Learners should read in the language they are most comfortable with, which is often their Home Language (HL) or the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT).
2. **Learner autonomy:** Students should have the freedom to choose books that capture their interest. Encouraging self-selection increases engagement and motivation.
3. **Reading at an appropriate level:** Teachers should guide students in selecting books suitable for their reading levels. Establishing a system that helps learners identify texts that match their skills is critical.
4. **Regular reading:** Students in Grades 2 and 3 are encouraged to read at least one new book per week, promoting continuous engagement with texts.

Implementing these conditions can significantly enhance the functionality and impact of reading corners in South African schools, contributing to the development of a strong reading culture among learners.

Key findings from the SMS on reading corners.

The school monitoring survey found that an estimated 71% of grade 3 teachers in South Africa have access to reading corners in their classrooms. The Western Cape reported the highest percentage (95%) whilst schools in the Eastern Cape (49%) and KwaZulu-Natal (64%) had the lowest prevalence of reading corners in South Africa.

Figure 1: Percentages of Grade 3 teachers with a classroom library or a reading corner in their classroom by province, in 2022

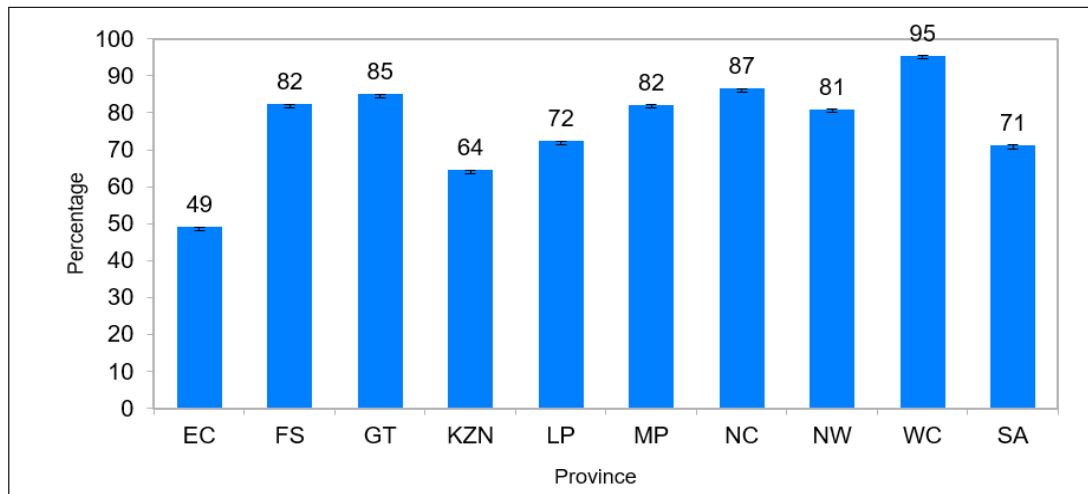
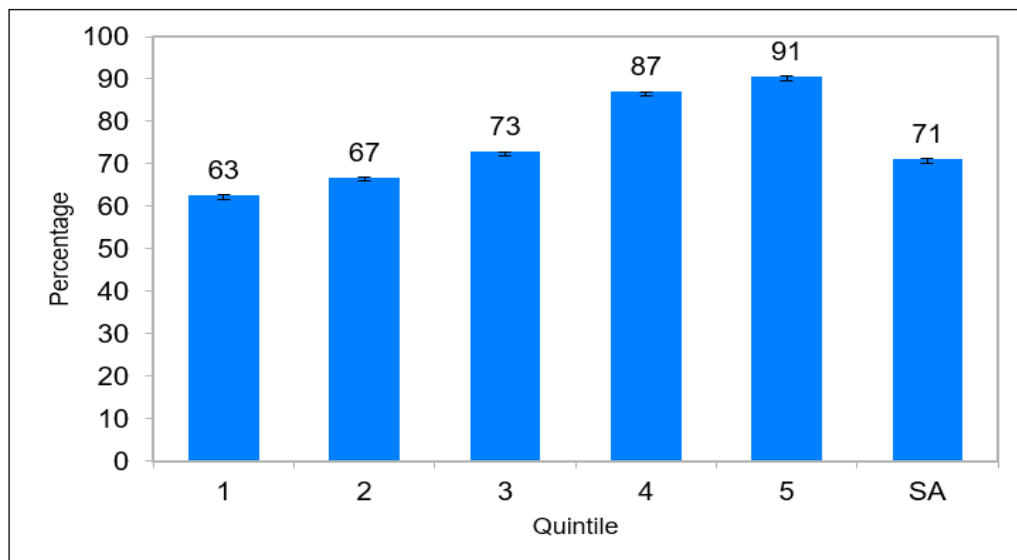


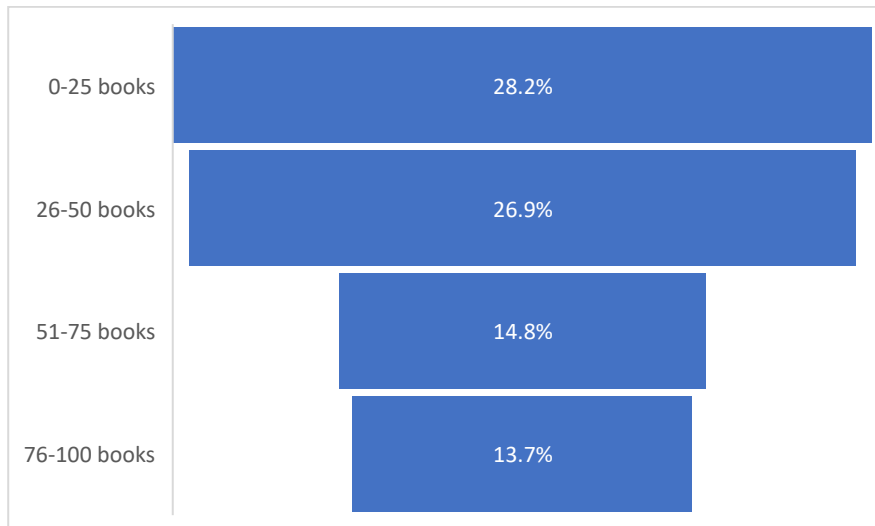
Figure 2: Percentages of grade 3 teachers with a classroom library or a reading corner in their classroom by quintile and in the entire country in 2022



Amongst those teachers with reading corners, 28% of Grade 3 teachers stated that they had access to 0-25 books in their reading corners and 27% stated that had access to 26-50 books. 45% of teachers had access to 51 or more books in their reading corners. Grade 3 teachers in Gauteng had the largest number of books in their reading corners, followed by the Western Cape and the North West province. KwaZulu-Natal had the least number of books. When we analyse the graphs above it

becomes evident that quintile 1-3 schools (which are also known as non-fee-paying schools) are under-resourced when it comes to their reading corners. Whilst quintile 4-5 schools have access to an array of reading books. These low numbers of access to books are concerning since the library guidelines outlines that a minimum of 40 books is required to start a reading corner. The low numbers of books in many reading corners is perhaps the greatest barrier to their potential impact on reading outcomes.

Figure 3: Number of books that teachers in grade three classrooms have access to in South Africa.



The quantitative element of the report revealed that almost one-third of classrooms that were monitored in the SMS lacked a reading corner. Many of the teachers who did not have reading corners cited “a lack of classroom space” as a key factor that led them to not having reading corners in their classrooms.

Findings in the SMS report also documented that some teachers revealed that “learners go to the reading corner to select books to read and then they go back to their desks to read them.” This might not be the ideal practice when it comes to reading corners. However, it maintains the main purpose of the reading corner which is encouraging learners to interact with books independently.

Furthermore, when teachers were asked to list the different types of material or books that teachers and learners have at their disposal in their reading corners teachers mentioned: graded language books, storybooks, photocopies, charts and magazines as some of the reading material that was available in their reading corners.

Initiatives or organizations that donate material for reading corners.

Based on the research conducted through the Classroom Library Project, a set of estimated costs was developed, which could inform planning and budgeting at national, provincial or school level. This is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Estimated costs of a Classroom Library Box or Reading Corner

| Item | Quantity | Unit Price | Total Price |
|---|----------|------------|-------------|
| Books (set of 40) | 1 | R807.20 | R 807.20 |
| Box Base and Lid | 1 | R 44.92 | R 44.92 |
| Tabs (set of 40) | 1 | R 60.85 | R 60.85 |
| A1 Book Cover poster | 2 | R 45.16 | R 90.32 |
| A1 Book Management Charts | 1 | R 45.16 | R 45.16 |
| Stickers (green/pink/blue/black) | 4 | R 17.20 | R 68.80 |
| Five Finger Rule | 1 | R 3.50 | R 3.50 |
| Reading Cards | 40 | R 1.85 | R 74.00 |
| A5 Plastic Sleeves | 40 | R 1.50 | R 60.00 |
| Parent Letters | 40 | R 0.31 | R 12.40 |
| Estimated cost per Classroom Library set for class of 40 learners | | | 1,267.15 |

Teachers, principals, deputy principals and Departmental Heads (DHs) could reach out to various organizations who have been involved in book donations for reading corners:

- The learn project
- Biblionef SA
- Centre for the book
- Rotatory
- The Bookery
- READ Educational Trust

Recommendations

South Africa's academic calendar consists of four terms, and it is crucial that learners have access to a diverse range of books from various genres throughout the year to foster a love for reading. To maintain engagement, teachers should refresh the selection in their reading corners at the beginning or end of each term. This regular updating helps prevent students from losing interest in the available materials.

Raising awareness among educators about the importance of creating dynamic and well-utilized reading spaces is essential. According to the library guidelines, a minimum of 40 books is recommended to establish a reading corner. However, recent statistics indicate that less than 30% of South African schools meet this minimum requirement. Consequently, there is a strong need to expand not only the number of books but also the variety of genres available in reading corners.

Greater investment from the government, communities, NGOs, and local businesses is needed to support schools in building a broader selection of reading materials. In addition, a portion of the provincial departments of education's Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) budget should be specifically allocated to supplying books for reading corners, particularly in no-fee schools, which should be prioritized in these efforts.

The **Reading Barometer** pointed to the importance of ensuring that all classrooms, especially in the Foundation Phase, have reading corners or classroom libraries. One key recommendation is to promote the flow of books from schools into learners' homes. This strategy emphasizes the value of integrating reading corners into classroom practice and encouraging learners to choose books to read independently. Even if the reading corner is not physically large enough for students to sit and read, teachers can still encourage learners to take books to their desks to read. While not ideal, the main goal is to promote the habit of reading and interaction with books, regardless of where it takes place in the classroom.

The **Classroom Library Project (CLP)**, conducted in no-fee schools, provided Grade 1 teachers with access to 100 books and Grades 2 and 3 teachers with 200 books each, far exceeding the recommended minimum of 40. However, the project found that many teachers were hesitant to let young learners take books home for practice, which pointed to a lack of trust rather than an issue of resource availability (Sebaeng, 2019).

To address this challenge, two key recommendations can be made:

1. **Teach Book Care Practices:** Teachers should prioritize teaching students how to handle and care for books properly. Establishing these habits is crucial for maintaining the longevity of resources and building trust in learners' ability to borrow and return books responsibly.
2. **Implement a Practical Loaning System:** Teachers can establish a simple, practical system to track book loans, such as a check-out system using cards or similar tools, similar to those used in the CLP. This structured approach could help create a sense of accountability and responsibility, fostering a trusting environment where students feel encouraged to borrow and read books at home.

By implementing these strategies, teachers can strengthen the culture of reading in their classrooms, ultimately supporting the development of a robust reading ecosystem in schools across the country.