

# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Early Grade Reading Skills Benchmarks



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# OVERVIEW

## Benchmarking Early Grade Reading Skills

### Why

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- Roots of poor performance in grade 4
- Are language-specific benchmarks necessary?

### What

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- Methodological challenges
- Innovations

### How

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- Language specification
- Benchmarks



# BACKGROUND

## Measuring Reading Attainment in the Early Grades

### Action Plan to 2024: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030

- **Goal 1:** 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.
- **Goal 2:** Increase the number of learners in Grade 6 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and mathematics competencies for Grade 6.
- Innovation indicators: early grade reading is one of the three cross-cutting innovation indicator

### Medium Term Strategic Framework 2019–2024: Basic Education

- **Outcome 2:** 10-year-old learners enrolled in publicly funded schools read for meaning

### State of the Nation (SONA) commitments

- If we are to ensure that within the next decade, every 10-year-old will be able to read for meaning, we will need to mobilise the entire nation behind a massive reading campaign.



## Measuring Reading Attainment in the Early Grades

PIRLS International Benchmarks	Competency	Grade 4 (2021)
<b>Below Low Benchmark (&lt;400)</b>		<b>81%</b>
<b>Low Benchmark (400)</b>	Locate and retrieve information from different parts of the text.	<b>11%</b>
<b>Intermediate Benchmark (475)</b>	Make straightforward inferences from the text.	<b>2%</b>
<b>High Benchmark (550)</b>	Make inferences and interpretations with text-based support.	<b>1%</b>
SASE National Benchmarks	Competency	Grade 3 (2022)
<b>Band 4 Benchmark (Less than 355)</b>	No Description for Band 4	<b>12.4%</b>
<b>Band 5 Benchmark (355-404)</b>	Locate information that is prominent and explicitly stated within a few short sentences when there is limited, or no competing information.	<b>26,6%</b>
<b>Band 6 Benchmark (405-454)</b>	Band 5 Competencies and Locate information in short, simple texts	<b>24,2%</b>
<b>Band 7 Benchmark (455-504)</b>	Band 6 Competencies, Connect two, explicitly stated pieces of related information in short, simple texts and Make very simple inferences by recognising highly predictable ideas.	<b>17,4%</b>
<b>Band 8 Benchmark (505-554)</b>	Band 7 Competencies and Identify a range of familiar, distinctive text types, including identifying the purpose of sections of a text	<b>10,6%</b>
<b>Bands 9-12 Benchmark (Above 554)</b>	Band 8 Competencies, summarise, evaluate, extrapolate and other higher order skills in longer texts with increasing complexities	<b>8,7%</b>

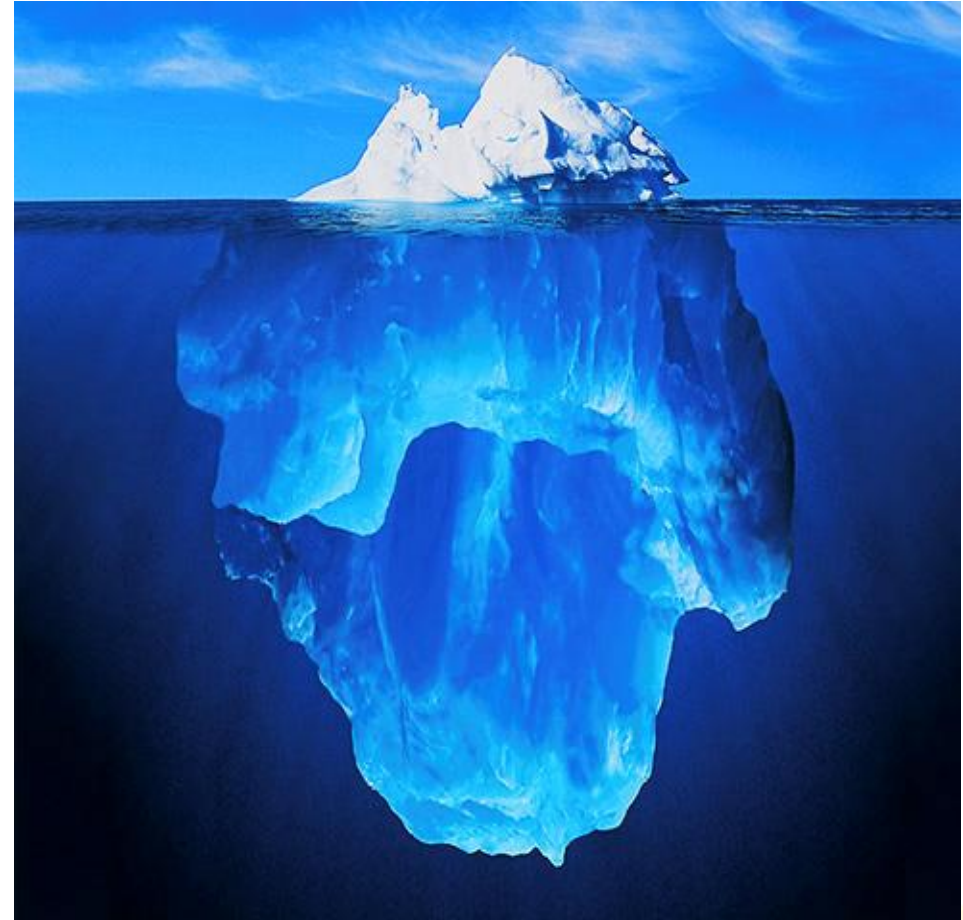
## BACKGROUND

# Measuring Reading Attainment in the Early Grades

International and regional assessments allow reflection and comparison to other education systems

Provide a dipstick on the goal of literacy – comprehension “iceberg”

BUT not clear what lies beneath – which parts of reading are not successful

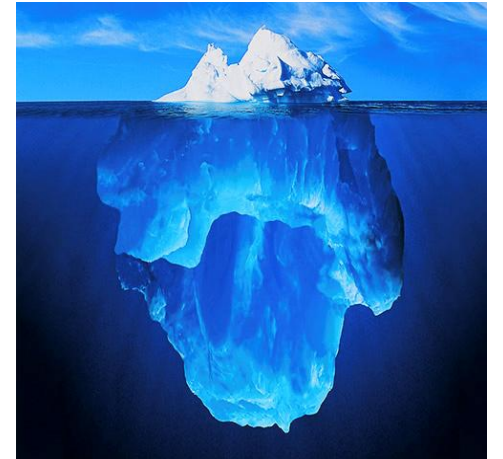
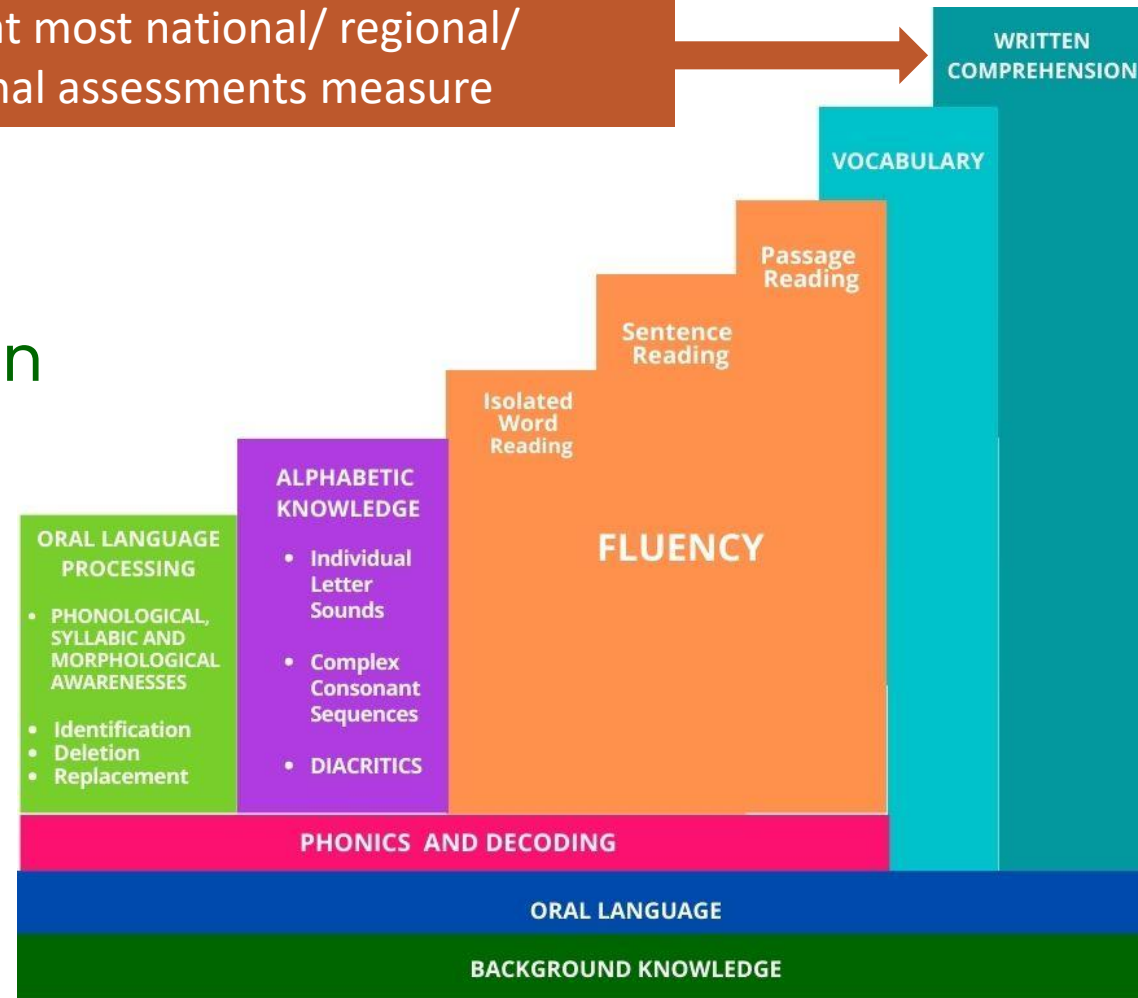


# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Measuring Reading Attainment in the Early Grades

This is what most national/ regional/  
international assessments measure

How can we measure  
better for early grades in  
South Africa ?





# FUNS OVERVIEW PURPOSE AND DEVELOPMENT

## Early Grade Reading Assessment Landscape

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"> <li>Measures the ultimate skill of comprehension</li> <li>Nationally representative</li> <li>Lang representative</li> <li>International</li> <li>Secure Assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only measures reading comprehension</li> <li>Floor effects – most children do not reach the lower threshold</li> <li>At the end of Grade 4 – late for Foundation Phase remediation</li> </ul>	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"> <li>Focuses on early skills</li> <li>Known by teachers and subject advisors</li> <li>Used for national reading monitoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use and purpose not fully aligned – classroom vs PED and national</li> <li>Not nationally comparable.</li> <li>Diagnostic teacher info – limited access and reliability Test not secure</li> <li>Not enough tests</li> </ul>	Grades 1-3	3 times a year 7				✓	Scores need updating  Termly progress needs interpretation  Overall scores need interpretation.
				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
South African Systemic Evaluations	Written comprehension at exit grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ National comparison</li> <li>○ Scaled with anchor items</li> <li>○ Scale linked to SDG &amp; CAPS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Only measures comprehension</li> </ul>	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"> <li>○ Ongoing assessment</li> <li>○ CAPS aligned</li> <li>○ Accessible to all teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Assumes teachers have remedial skills</li> </ul>	All grades	Each Topic/ Ongoing				✓	Teachers may understand
				11 Languages						
SEACMEQ: Southern & East African Consortium for Education Quality	Regional Literacy & Numeracy comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Regional comparison</li> <li>○ African curriculum alignment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Delay in analysis and reporting</li> <li>○ Only measures ultimate skill</li> <li>○ Intermediate phase focus – not Foundation Phase</li> </ul>	Grade 6	Every 7-8 years	✓	✓			Well understood at a policy level, regionally and internationally
				11 Languages						
ELNA: Early Learning National Assessment 11/11/2025	Measuring school readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pre-schooling measure</li> <li>○ Pre-literacy skills</li> <li>○ School readiness alignment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Only for reception years and not all Foundation Phase</li> </ul>	Grade R or start of Grade 1	3 years	8 ✓	✓	✓		To be confirmed
				11 Languages						
Thrive by Five	Measures cognitive dev for <u>4-5 year old</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pre-literacy skills</li> <li>○ Cognitive dev skills</li> <li>○ Pre-school focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Only for reception years and not all Foundation Phase</li> </ul>	Grades RR & R	3 years	✓	✓	✓		Easy dashboard, policy notes
				11 Languages						





# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## What lies below the tip of the iceberg?

- Growing number of studies revealed very weak foundations
- Children starting grade 1 with poor oral language skills

**Table 2** Oral language skills at the beginning of Grade 1

	Eastern Cape	Mpumalanga
Ability to identify initial sounds^ of words (phonemic awareness)		
... % of learners scoring zero (i.e. 0 of 3 items correct)	49%	68%
... Average percentage score (out of 3 items)	37%	18%
... % of learners answering all 3 oral items correctly	23%	7%
Listening comprehension*		
... % of learners scoring zero	12%	9%
... Average percentage score**	53%	55%
Observations (Grade 1 learners, Term 1)	590	3,327



# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Why do we need benchmarks for foundational skills?

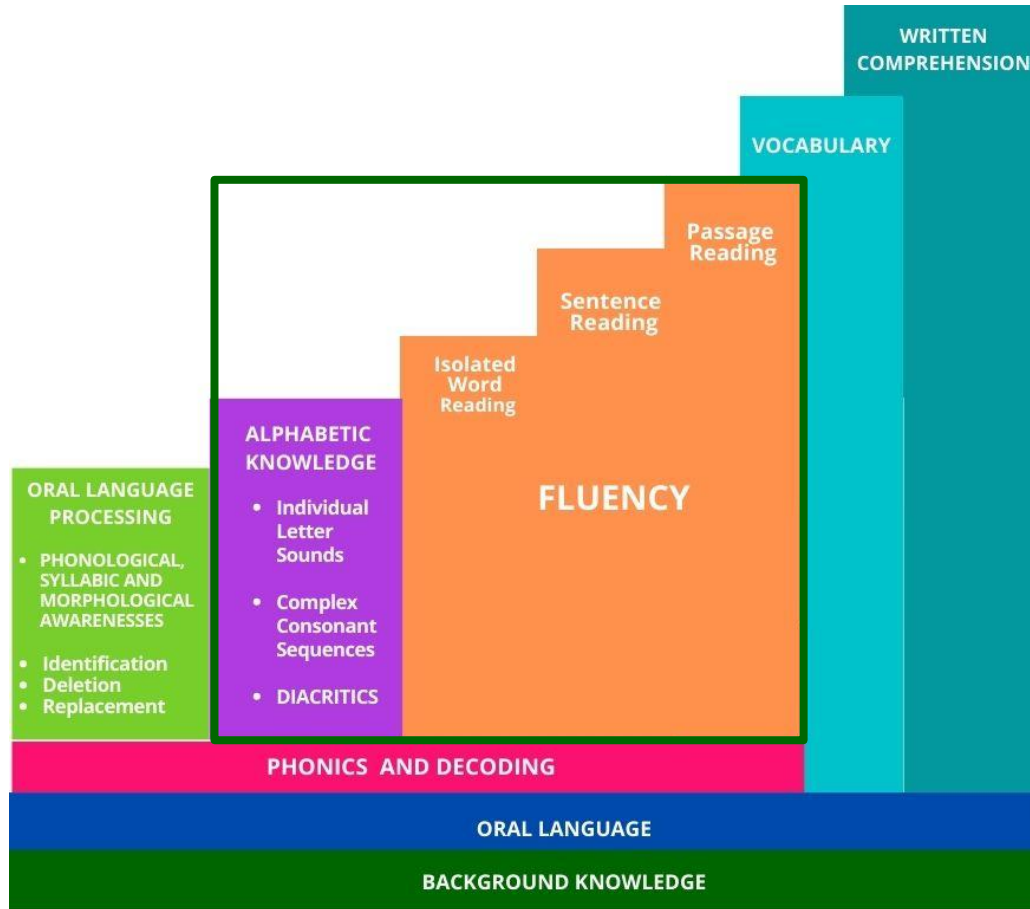
- Clarify key milestones in early reading development
- Enable early identification of children at risk
- Support timely and targeted remediation
- Guide differentiated instruction
- Monitor progress towards system goals



# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### Considerations for Precursor Skills to Benchmark



- Predicts/facilitates later written comprehension
- Explicitly taught and preferably attainable (constrained skill) in the Foundation Phase
- Metric that is readily understandable and useful for different users
- Appropriate across South African educational context (e.g. linguistic diversity and socio-economic landscape)

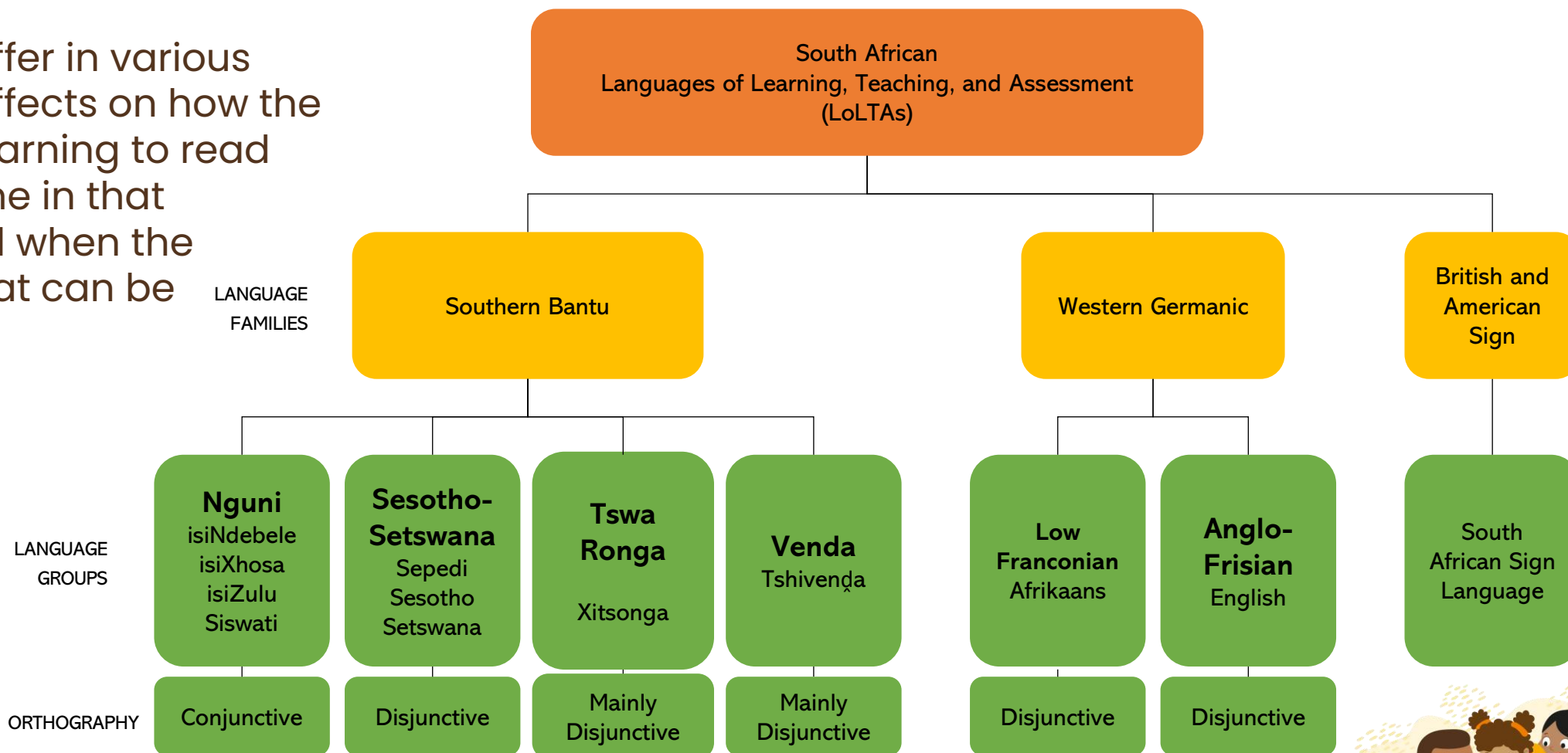


# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

Why do we need language specific benchmarks?

Languages differ in various ways which affects on how the teaching of learning to read should be done in that language and when the milestones that can be reached.



# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

Why do we need language specific benchmarks?

English	There was a stranger who was very hungry. He came to a village and asked for food. Nobody had any food.
isiZulu	Kunesihambi esasilambile kakhulu. Safika emizini omunye sacela ukudla. Abantu babengenakho ukudla.
Sepedi	Go be go na le mosepedi yo a bego a na le tlala. O fihlile motseng wo mongwe a kgopela dijo. Go be go se na yo a bego a na le dijo.

	Total words	Words per sentence	Letters per word	Total 1-2 letter words
English	21	7	3,8	4
isiZulu	11	3,7	7,7	0
Sepedi	33	11	2,9	23



## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### SETTING READING BENCHMARKS IN SOUTH AFRICA

October 2020



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### 3 Approaches:

#### Criteria Benchmarks

Define competency. Measure performance against a criterion e. g. from CAPS

#### Expert consultation

Based on curriculum, performance statements, experience, data

#### Data Driven

Based on the relationship between competency and reference criterion e. g., fluency with comprehension





## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### Our approach

- Grounded in theoretical understanding of reading development
- Avoid imposing assumptions speed-accuracy or fluency-comprehension relationships – use non-parametric techniques
- Examine full distribution to identifying **critical thresholds** in the accuracy-speed and fluency-comprehension relationships
- Align these critical thresholds to specific grades

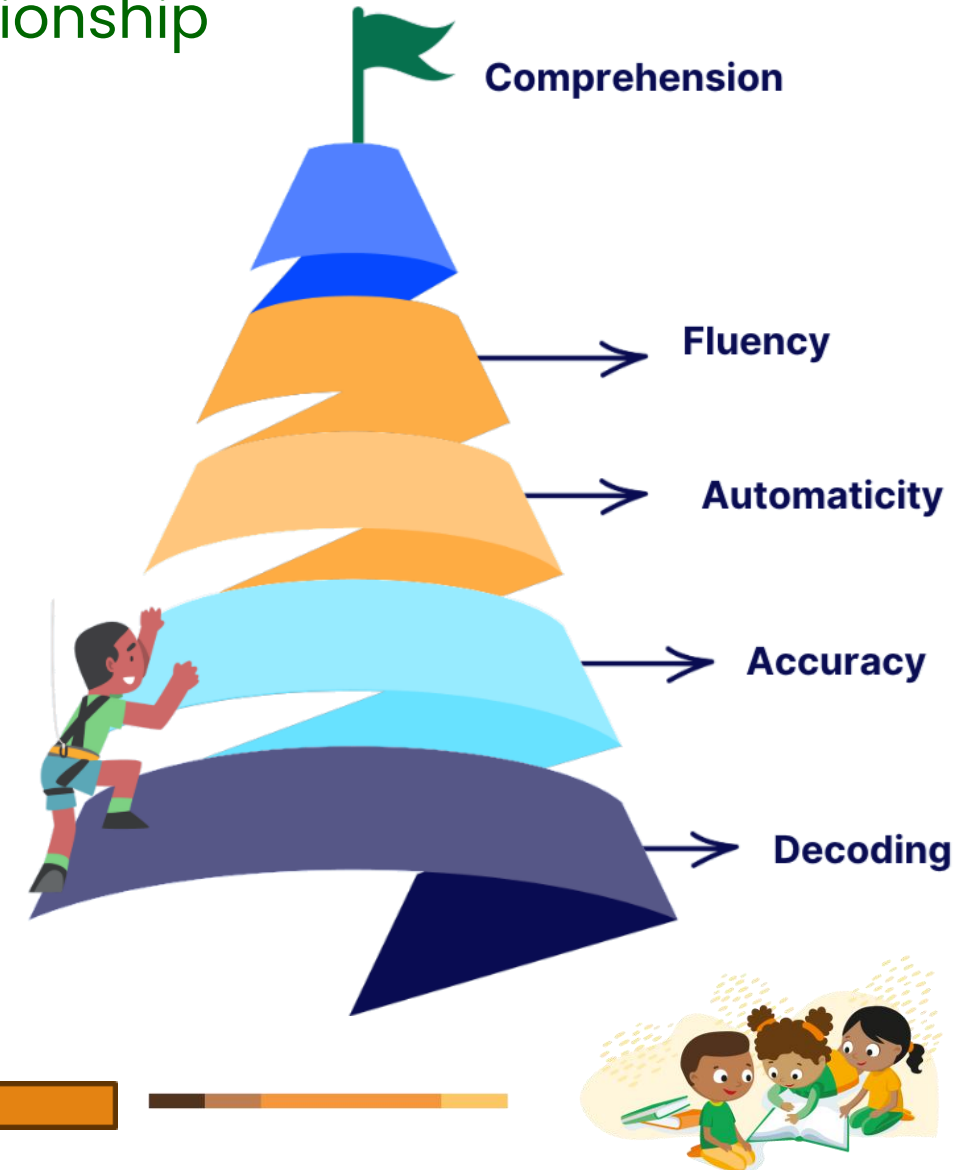


## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### Critical thresholds in fluency-comprehension relationship

Fluency is bridge between decoding and comprehension but likely non-linearities

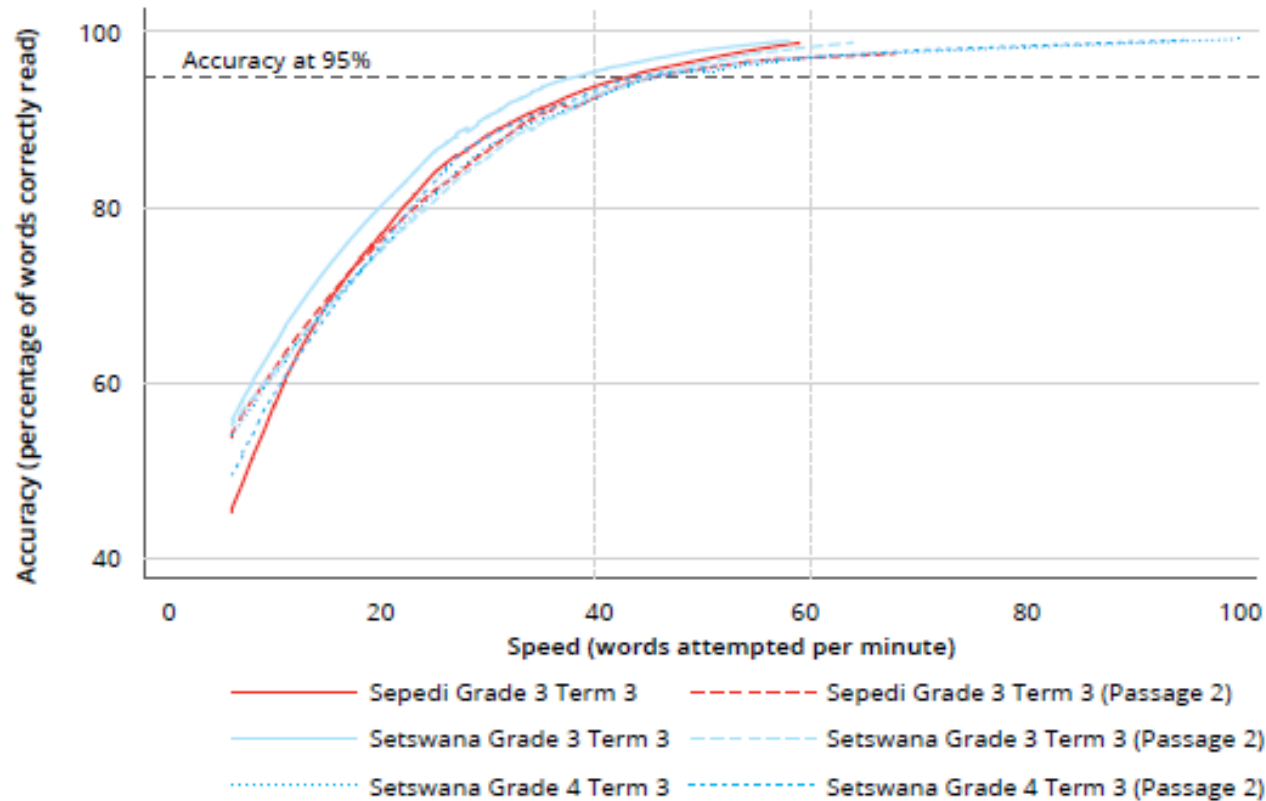
- Decoding threshold hypothesis (Wang et al. 2019) suggests that until fluency reaches a lower bound threshold, reading comprehension is unlikely to develop
- Possibly an upper threshold, beyond which there are no additional gains in comprehension for increased decoding skills -> beyond this fluency point, limited comprehension skills become the binding constraint



## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

Determine lower threshold

**Figure 4** Accuracy and speed in reading connected text: Sesotho-Setswana languages



### Examine accuracy-speed relationship

When children read at speeds below instructional level of accuracy, decoding is laboured hindering meaning-making from text

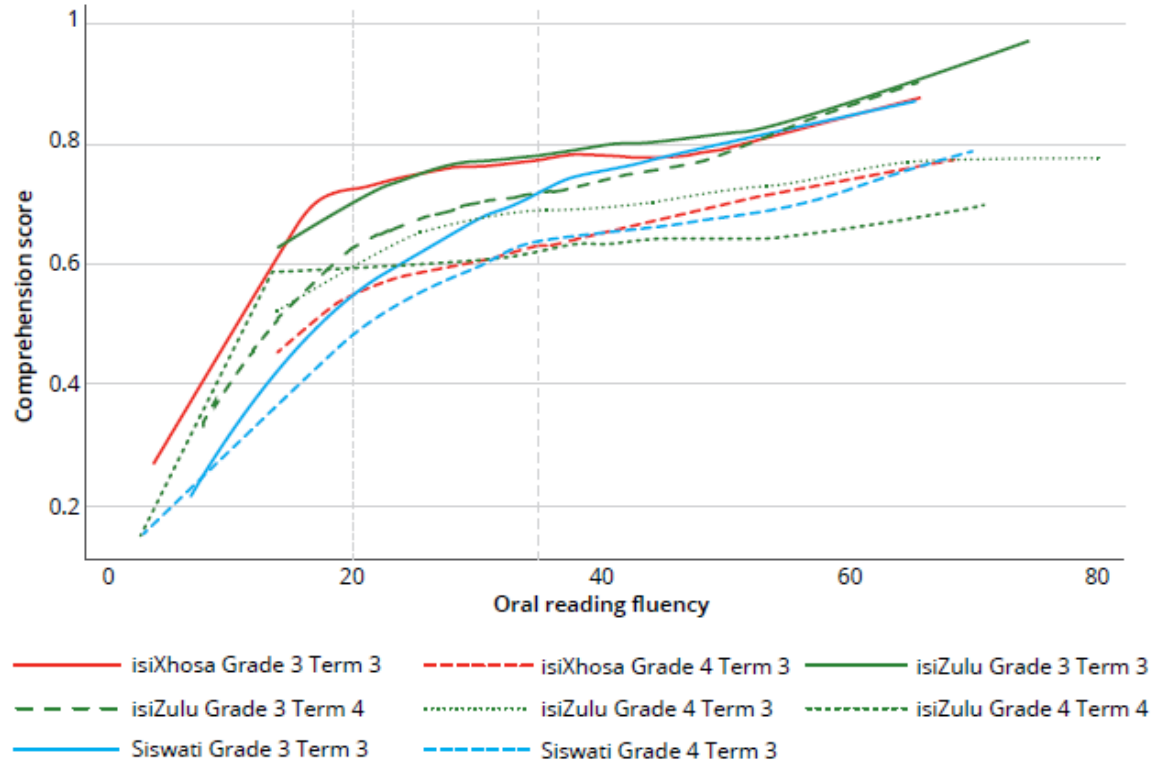
**Note** Number of words attempted trimmed to the range 6–100.



## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

Determine upper threshold

**Figure 5** The relationship between fluency and comprehension: Nguni languages



**Note** Grade 3 and 4 samples: restricted to learners attempting all questions.

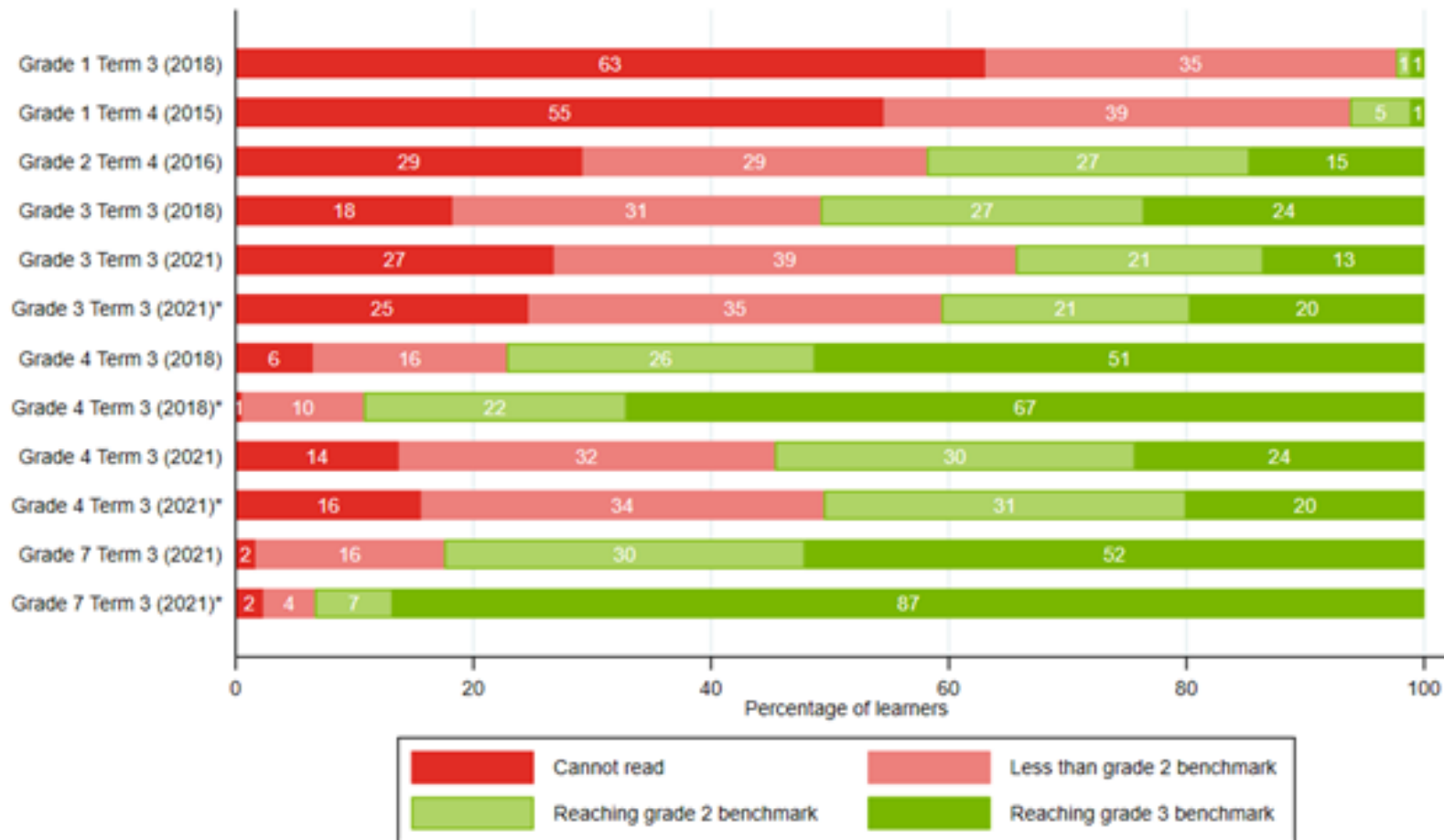
**Examine fluency-comprehension relationship**

Point of diminishing gains from increasing fluency – limited comprehension skills become the binding constraint



## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### Contextual alignment



### Balance of attainability with curriculum requirements

Determine whether the lower threshold is appropriate as the end of grade 2 benchmark

Determine whether the upper threshold is appropriate as the end of grade 3 threshold





# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Establishment of Early Grade Reading Benchmarks

### SETTING READING BENCHMARKS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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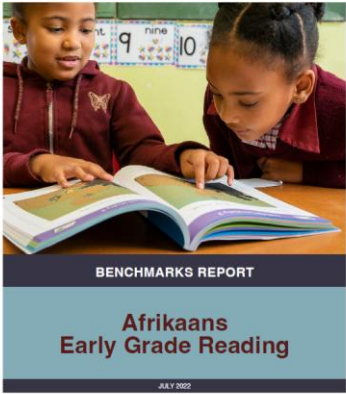
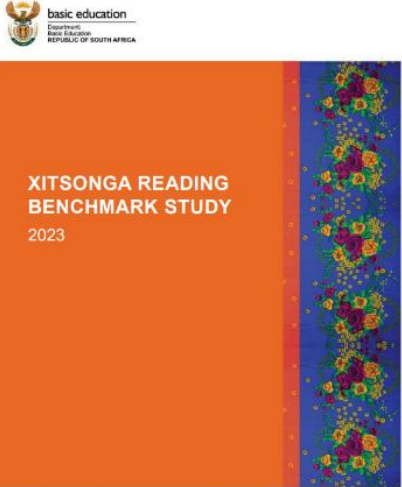
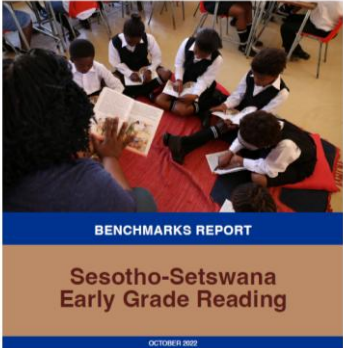


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**BENCHMARKING EARLY GRADE  
READING SKILLS IN SOUTH AFRICA:  
TECHNICAL REPORT  
TSHIVENḐA HOME LANGUAGE**

October 2023  
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**BENCHMARKING EARLY GRADE  
READING SKILLS IN SOUTH AFRICA:  
ENGLISH FIRST ADDITIONAL  
LANGUAGE**

Summary Report

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# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Early Grade Reading Benchmarks for South African LoLTAs

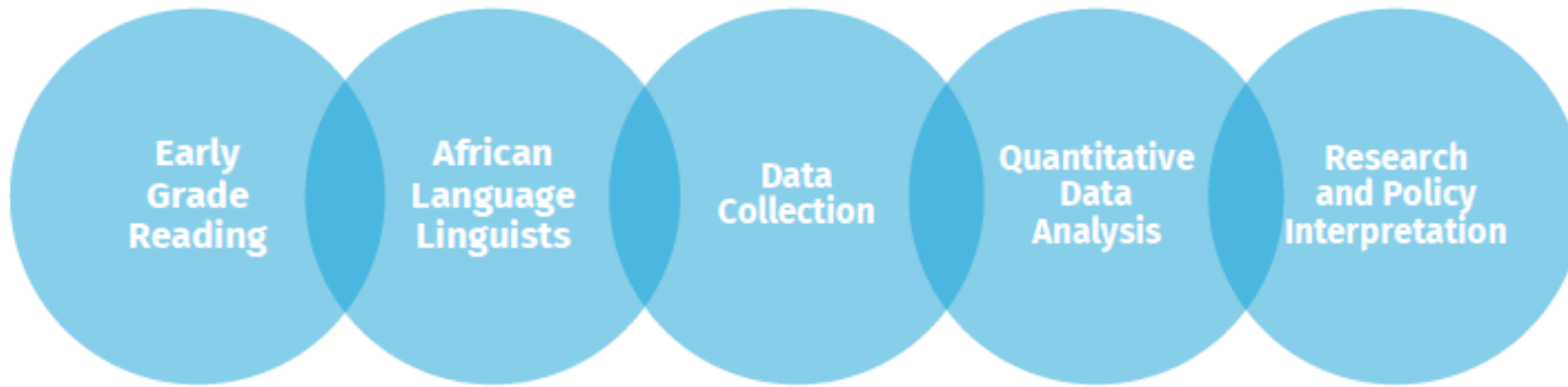
DBE Early Grade Reading Fluency Benchmarks			
Reading Fluency outcomes expected by the end of each grade's academic year			
Home Language	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
	Letter Sound Knowledge (LSK)	Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)	Oral Reading Fluency (ORF)
Afrikaans	40 CLSPM	45 CWPM	60 CWPM
English	40 CLSPM	50 CWPM	70 CWPM
Tshivenda	40 CLSPM	35 CWPM	55 CWPM
Xitsonga	40 CLSPM	35 CWPM	55 CWPM
IsiNdebele	40 CLSPM	20 CWPM	35 CWPM
IsiZulu	40 CLSPM	20 CWPM	35 CWPM
IsiXhosa	40 CLSPM	20 CWPM	35 CWPM
Siswati	40 CLSPM	20 CWPM	35 CWPM
Sepedi	40 CLSPM	40 CWPM	60 CWPM
Sesotho	40 CLSPM	40 CWPM	60 CWPM
Setswana	40 CLSPM	40 CWPM	60 CWPM
English (First Additional Language)	N/A	30 CWPM	50 CWPM

= New/Updated benchmarks



# LITERACY BENCHMARKS

## Range of skills – time and team implications





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**Dankie**  
**Enkosi**

**Ha khensa**  
**Re a leboga**

**Ro livhuha**  
**Siyabonga**

**Siyathokoza**  
**Thank you**



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