

Emergent Language and Literacy

Why is the Emergent Literacy and Language domain important to measure in young children?

The Emergent Literacy and Language domain provides a snapshot of young children's developing expressive language skills, vocabulary, understanding of language, and their awareness of sounds in words. These skills begin developing from the earliest days of a child's life and are all critically important foundations for both reading and writing, and have a strong influence on whether children will learn to read and write with ease or difficulty.

At the earliest stages of learning to write, fine motor coordination and visual motor integration are also key to progress. Young children who are able to hold a pencil, to copy simple shapes, and represent their ideas through drawing will move more easily into writing letters and experimenting with writing words.

Research has shown that children who have poorly developed language and early literacy skills when they begin school are more likely to struggle to learn to read and write. Language and literacy are gateways to learning across all subjects, to completing school and making a positive contribution to society. Language is also a fundamental part of social interaction and strong relationships, and therefore of socio-emotional wellbeing.

How are children in SA doing?

The Thrive by Five Index 2021 found that only 44.7% of children who attend early learning programmes are achieving

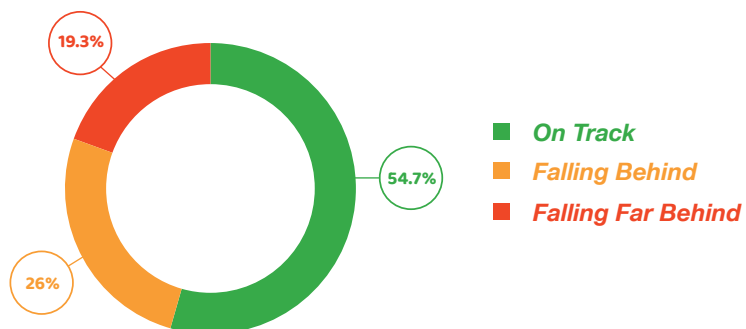
the standard for early learning (are *On Track*), with 27% *Falling Behind* and 28.3% *Falling Far Behind*.

As would be expected, there were significant differences on scores across school quintiles, with lower proportions of poor children being *On Track*. In Quintile 1 (poorest children), 51.4% of children are *On Track* in the Emergent Literacy and Language domain, with 27% of children *Falling Behind* and 21.7% *Falling Far Behind*. When we consider Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, only 25.4% of children in Quintile 1 are *On Track*, with 33.3% of children *Falling Behind*, and 41.3% *Falling Far Behind*. Those children who do not attend early learning programmes are even more at risk, as they are less likely to have had experiences that support their early development.

Children who are not *On Track* are likely to struggle to speak in full sentences or give a logical account of events with the correct language usage. They may have difficulty naming common objects, understanding stories told to them, and recognising initial sounds in words. They are not yet able to use the small muscles in their hands competently, and may have difficulty drawing basic shapes or a picture of themselves.

If more than half of the children in Quintile 1 are not *On Track* when they enter school, teachers will struggle to meet their learning needs and help them catch up, while being under pressure to move ahead with the demands of the curriculum in Grade R and One. To further compound their difficulties, these children will enter the most poorly resourced schools in our country. The result is that children who begin school *Falling Behind*, fall further and further behind.

Literacy and Language: % Children *On Track*, *Falling Behind* and *Falling Far Behind*



What are the implications of these findings?

The Index points to the roots of our literacy crisis in South Africa. By not providing young children with quality early learning experiences that ensure they are *On Track* when they begin school, we continue to set both our children and our teachers up for failure. It comes as no surprise that the majority of our children are still not able to read for meaning after three years at school.

Those children who benefit from learning opportunities between birth and five years and are *On Track* will continue to pull ahead, while those already *Falling Behind* will face significant barriers to learning from the start of their school journey. The education that these children receive is costly and inefficient, with high levels of grade repetition, school failure and drop out. The achievement gap becomes entrenched from the earliest years, extending the intergenerational cycle of lost opportunity and wasted potential.

What actions can we take?

Learning is cumulative and early skills provide the building blocks for the acquisition of new skills. The Thrive by Five Index 2021 points to an urgent and immediate need to improve the quality of young children's early learning experiences.

1. Government spending on early education is not increasing despite all the evidence that investment in these early years is critical for shifting educational outcomes.
Priority Action: Increase government spending on creating quality early learning opportunities for all young children. This means expanding access to centre and non-centre based learning programmes, while focusing on quality of teaching and learning.

2. Early years teachers are often underqualified, under-resourced and initial teacher training does not include a focus on language and early literacy.

Priority Action: Review qualification frameworks and increase opportunities for in-service training for preschool teachers. Training must include high-quality resources in all languages and should focus on providing practical strategies for supporting language and literacy development in ways that are appropriate for young children (playing, talking, doing, imitating, exploring, singing, telling stories and reading).

3. Children learn best in their mother tongue and books in African languages are not easily available or affordable.

Priority Action: Invest in writing, publishing and distribution of cost effective, high quality books for young children in all South African languages.

4. There are very few opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn how best to support their children's learning at home.

Priority Action: Targeted workshops and awareness-raising campaigns should be used to help parents understand and value their role, as well as equip them practically with the information, skills and confidence to support their children's language and early literacy development.

5. There is limited research on early language and literacy development in South Africa, and insufficient investment in the work of NGOs who deliver language and literacy programmes at a local level.

Priority Action: Invest in and support the work of NGOs to strengthen early language and literacy development. Gather evidence about the effectiveness of existing programmes, materials and training courses, with a specific focus on language and early literacy.

Author bio:

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