

Locating dyslexia in the South African schooling context

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Dyslexia is regarded an internal condition, which is neurobiological in origin and difficulties experienced persist despite effective classroom instruction. In South Africa the dyslexic learner's difficulties with reading accuracy and/or fluent word recognition, poor spelling and decoding are masked by the broader dysfunctional schooling system that renders most learners vulnerable.

As a country, South Africa has no locally

normed or criterion referenced tools for gauging reading achievement or identifying reading difficulties or dyslexia in any of the eleven official languages which includes English, Afrikaans and nine indigenous African languages. See Figure 1.

The South African educational system is a multilingual one. 75% of African children learn to read and write in an African home language in the first three years of schooling whilst at the same time, they learn English as a first additional language (FAL). Change to English as a medium of instruction occurs in Grade 4 (Spaull and Pretorius, 2019)



Source: Nompumelelo Mohohlwane (2019:138)

96.8% learners of school going age are reached through public schools and 3.2% learners reached through private/independent schools (Businessstech, 2019). Within state provisioning, there is inequity. Scholars identify "two public schooling systems: one that is functional, wealthy, and

able to educate students (about 25% of public schools); with the other being poor, dysfunctional, and unable to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills they should be acquiring in their schooling career (roughly 75% of public schools)." (Spaull 2014:2).

Public schools are graded by poverty levels from quintile one to five. Quintile one schools



are the poorest. Quintile one to three schools are fees exempted. Private or independent schools may charge a direct fee to the parent and some of these schools function without a cost to the state.

South Africa participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2016). This study assesses reading comprehension amongst Grade Four learners worldwide, every five years. Since 2006, South Africa participated, with reading assessed across all eleven official languages. In the PIRLS 2016, SA scored in the lowest band of 58 high and middle income countries (which includes countries like United States, Great Britain, Singapore, Kazakstan, Egypt and Morocco).

78% of South African Grade Four children are not able to reach the lowest benchmark for reading comprehension across all official languages, compared to 4% internationally. Further analysis based on PIRLS results (Spaull and Pretorius, 2019) shows:

- A child in the wealthiest 10% of schools in

South Africa are five times more likely to learn to read at a basic level by Grade Four than a child in the poorest 50% of schools.

- The average child in the poorest 75% of schools has a five times higher probability of not learning to read than of learning to read.
- More than 80% of learners whose language of learning (LoLT) is an African language could not reach the PIRLS low international benchmark compared to 56-57% for of learners whose language of learning and teaching (LOLT) is English or Afrikaans. The impact of the LOLT is regarded as secondary to the overall poor quality of teaching in these schools.

Research, largely conducted in the USA and UK, points us to what works in reading instruction for all learners and what is vital for the dyslexic learner. Key is teacher training to understand how reading develops, supporting children's phonological processing skills, teaching phonics systematically and explicitly, being

able to assess risk for reading difficulties and provide appropriate support. In an audit of the status of teaching reading in initial teacher education programmes in five universities across the country, Taylor (2014) found only about 6% of curriculum coverage was assigned to teaching trainee teachers how to teach reading.

Pretorius (2019 personal communication) aptly captures the status of initial teacher training in South Africa in respect of reading:

“Reading is taught somewhat erratically and unsystematically, and in some cases hardly at all. There also seems to be a serious lack of expertise with regard to reading, and a lack of awareness of evidence-based approaches to early reading instruction. In some universities, there is support for the whole language approach with little attention given to the development of basic decoding skills; in some universities, the teaching of reading in African languages is assumed to be similar to English so little attention is given to the similarities and differences between analytic and agglutinating differences and the possible implications for pedagogy.”

Pretorius advocates for an investment in training teachers to teach foundational reading skills briskly and effectively, while at the same time developing comprehension abilities and enjoyment of reading. Teaching phonics in African languages she regards is straightforward due to the regular syllabic nature of the languages, and transparent orthographies, which could yield results by the end of Grade One. “The teaching of basic decoding skills are also more immune to the effects of socioeconomic factors than more complex aspects such as language proficiency, vocabulary development and reading comprehension.” (Spaull & Pretorius 2019:162)

There are a number of initiatives, both from the National Department of Education and non-governmental agencies, trying to address our poor learner literacy levels through teacher training and learner support materials, as well as grade assessment tools and benchmarks in the African languages. A description of these is

beyond the scope of this article.

To date, there is no available research into the prevalence or indicators of dyslexia where English is the medium of instruction or in the African languages in South Africa. Bellavista S.H.A.R.E. with funding from the school and the Funda Wanda Project, undertook a small-scale qualitative study to develop an informal literacy survey in isiXhosa to identify risk for dyslexia (Clark, Naidoo & Lilenstein, to be published).

The concept of profiling for “risk of dyslexia” is important in South Africa, as legally only psychologists and medical practitioners can diagnose dyslexia. We were guided in this initiative by the British Dyslexia Association Definition (BDA), notably the difficulties associated with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills. In addition other indicators of naming speed, oral comprehension, discrepancies in achievement, and word fluency were included. Research indicates that expanding the definition of dyslexia to include a wider range of indicators improves the reliability of identifying risk/dyslexia (Wagner 2018).

The results showed that parents/primary caregivers use of indicators of risk were more aligned with those of the researchers than the teachers. Similarly, in the USA teachers' identification of reading impairments was poor, and worse for girls than boys (Wagner 2018:5). The implications are that teachers and support service staff (learning support educators, psychologists, speech and language therapists) should listen to and develop partnerships with parents/primary caregivers for those children whose reading difficulties are likely to be entrenched. The estimated, international prevalence of learners with severe dyslexia is estimated at 4%. These learners will require specialist support with strong parental involvement. Whereas, the estimated 10% or 15% of learners with dyslexia (own estimate based on figures in developed countries) are likely to be reached by teachers in mainstream schools. The best possible approach is to target teacher training to teach learning how to read effectively.

Bellavista S.H.A.R.E. has made a small inroad in addressing the needs of dyslexic learners where English is the medium of instruction, by upskilling practitioners with its continuing professional development course, accredited by the BDA.

We still have much to learn about how to design, pilot and norm informal surveys to assess for risk of dyslexia in all eleven South African official languages, and how to adapt specialist intervention programs to the changing needs of dyslexic learners, but a start has been made.

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