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# Reading cultures – Towards a clearer, more inclusive description

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**Background:** This article describes how the National Reading Barometer project has redefined the concept of 'reading culture' in South Africa.

**Objectives:** As expressed in the 2023 National Reading Survey ($N = 4250$) and the 2023 National Reading Barometer, a clearer description of reading cultures was developed to describe both individual reading practices (measured through the survey) and the national reading ecosystem (measured through the barometer).

**Method:** We describe the survey and statistical tools developed to measure the new concept of reading cultures. This includes a survey questionnaire that introduced novel questions alongside established indicators. Reading is defined and measured through six distinct dimensions: reading purpose, habits, volume, depth, motivation, and identity. The expanded understanding of reading purpose includes reading for information, communication, and enjoyment. At an ecosystem level, the National Reading Barometer was applied to visualise data from the National Reading Survey and secondary data on reading ability, access to reading material, and enabling environmental indicators to provide a baseline for high-level longitudinal trends in the national reading environment.

**Results:** The National Reading Barometer and National Reading Survey assisted to redefine the debate on reading cultures by providing evidence-based descriptions of varied reading cultures and situating these within the reading ecosystem.

**Conclusion:** We conclude by proposing how this revised concept of reading cultures and the new tools for measuring impact may open research and policy advocacy opportunities in the literacy sector.

**Contribution:** This article contributes a pluralistic, Afrocentric, and modernised understanding of reading cultures.

**Keywords:** literacy; national reading barometer; national reading survey; reading cultures; South Africa.

'Reading culture' is a term used by popular media, the government, and researchers, and it is frequently used in South Africa and internationally. Reading culture is often linked to academic achievement but is unclearly defined, making it difficult to monitor the impact of interventions seeking to strengthen reading cultures. Its frequent use has led to the misconception that we all have the same shared understanding, while simultaneously obfuscating the meaning of the term. Individual reading practices are more diverse than traditional book-based reading. There are with multiple reading cultures, each with motivations for reading, interaction with written texts, and opportunities to deepen reading practice.

This article describes how the National Reading Barometer project has redefined the concept of 'reading cultures' in the South African context, using a pluralistic, Afrocentric and data-driven perspective to recognise diverse and overlapping reading cultures; to value, describe, and measure adult reading in order to inform policy and practice; and to explore the connections between adult reading and childhood literacy. It also captures how the digital communications revolution expresses itself in reading trends.

After presenting the genesis and objectives of the project, we discuss the current use of the term 'reading culture' in South Africa. and the reasoning behind the new perspective that recognises diverse and overlapping reading cultures. We then describe the survey and statistical tools developed to measure the more inclusive understanding of reading cultures. This includes a survey questionnaire that introduced novel questions, alongside established indicators; the development

of evaluative indices for six identified dimensions of the various reading cultures; and the development of 'reading personas' drawn from the data. Finally, we show how these findings are integrated into a broader National Reading Barometer that draws on primary and secondary data to evaluate the overall health of the reading ecosystem.

## Redefining reading cultures

In early 2022, a diverse group of stakeholders in the South African literacy sector formed the National Reading Barometer steering committee. The steering committee held four 2-day workshops between June 2022 and January 2023 and included people who represented the government, libraries, research, literacy funders, non-profit literacy organisations (NPOs), publishers, community activists, and teachers. The committee aimed to design and implement a National Reading Survey of adults aged 16 and over, which would contribute, along with other sector data, towards building a National Reading Barometer to measure changes in the literacy ecosystem over time. We intended to provide accurate feedback to policymakers and practitioners within the literacy and reading ecosystem, strengthening an enabling reading environment in the country.

As a steering committee, we were aware of the conventional understanding of reading culture as meaning access to books (mainly fiction), talking about books, modelling reading books, and reading for enjoyment. For example, Evans, Kelley, Sikora and Treiman (2010) use the term 'scholarly culture' to describe homes with books where adult role models demonstrate the value of written text and engage with children regularly around books. Popular media and politicians also link reading culture to academic achievement. For example, Prof. Michael Le Cordeur, in his 2021 International Literacy Day speech, lamented 'the absence of a reading culture in our schools' (Le Cordeur 2021:28).

Ferreira, J. (2017) refers to the National Reading Survey 2016, after which a plethora of media followed, making claims about South Africa's reading culture, e.g., 'No reading culture'. Poor outcomes on international assessments (including Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [PIRLS]), survey findings, and the concept of 'no reading culture' were linked together and became part of our national literacy rhetoric. While our steering committee recognised and shared the concern about low childhood literacy outcomes, we were perturbed that the assumed link to a wider national 'reading culture' was unclearly defined and not empirically supported. This meant that policies and interventions to support a national reading culture were not evidence-based and could not be monitored for impact – either on national 'reading culture' (however defined), or on childhood literacy outcomes.

Biesman-Simons (2021:2) asserts that in South Africa there is 'no shared, clear definition of what constitutes a culture of reading'. She mapped the use of the phrase 'culture of reading' by government officials in South Africa over 20 years and noted that statements from key government officials have repeatedly called on South Africans to build, promote or embrace a 'culture of reading', usually in response to poor results in literacy assessments and at the launches of campaigns or strategies seeking to address these. She argued that the term has not only lacked clear meaning but has been used as a rhetorical tool to obscure insufficient or uncoordinated government action and explain the failure of mainly book-based reading initiatives. These statements are sometimes paired with statistics from the previous National Reading Survey, conducted by the South African Book Development Council (SABDC) in 2016, which found that South Africa was a nation of 'very light' readers, where only one-quarter of adults read any books, and just 14% of South Africans were 'committed printed book readers'. Sixty-five per cent of homes had no books (excluding religious texts), and agreement with positive statements about reading was low (SABDC 2016).

The committee, therefore, resolved to develop a clearer definition of reading culture that values, describes, and measures adult reading practices in their own right. Biesman-Simons (2021) found that the most common elements in the usage of the phrase 'reading culture' were adults modelling reading to children, access to reading materials, and reading for pleasure. While the committee agreed that these elements may be present in some reading cultures, the description is not sufficient to cover all reading practices. The committee understood reading culture to be an intersection between reading identity, motivation, purposes, and practices that exist within cultural and community contexts. Defining what operationalises the development of reading cultures allows an explicit theory of change to inform policy and practice regarding what qualifies (or constrains) reading culture.

Whilst reading culture includes the conventional book-based reading for enjoyment definition, we consider it evident that reading in the 21st century is much more diverse in function and form than reading a novel in print. Gee (2003:28) wrote that we never read or write 'in general'; instead, we always read or write something in a particular way. Bua-Lit (2022), a South African collective of language and literacy researchers, activists, educators, and teacher educators wrote about literacy as a complex social practice that varies from context to context. Depending on the nature and goal of the literacy engagement, both print-based skills and practices will vary. They note that children come into school with emerging reading literacies, and we fail them when we ignore their ways of knowing to preference our own definitions and understanding of what reading is (often literacy researchers are Anglophone, urban, mainstream educated, professionally trained adults, etcetera). The same applies to teenage and adult readers. Conventional definitions of reading materials ignore the multilingual nature of southern Africa; the digital communications revolution which has made communication through text messaging almost ubiquitous, especially among young people; how daily practices like study, work/income

generation and religion are linked with texts and reading materials and purposes; and how meaning is embedded in culture and context.

As a steering committee, we expanded our definition of reading materials beyond the printed book to the online book and other digital content, beyond fiction to information, and beyond reading for enjoyment to wider reasons for reading and exchanging texts. This particularly included returning to the original reason for reading and writing – communication. When we began to understand reading materials and purpose in this more pluralistic manner, it became evident that South Africa has multiple overlapping reading cultures, each with its own motivations for reading, interactions with written texts, and opportunities to deepen the reading practice.

We theorise that reading cultures comprise an aggregate of individual reading practices but go beyond this to include systemic factors that enable, or constrain, different groups to read differently. The project's Theory of Change shows the virtuous cycle created when reading cultures are strengthened by improving reading ability, access to material and motivation (cf. Figure 1). Regarding adult reading, the main levers for strengthening national reading cultures are improving access to appropriate and desirable material and building motivation through social pressure that highlights the benefits and popularity of reading. Flourishing reading cultures create a demand for more relevant and accessible reading material and a more enabling reading environment.

# Developing the questionnaire

Our understanding of reading cultures (rather than the singular culture) shaped the questions we asked in the survey, inviting a broad and inclusive understanding of 'who is a reader'. Demographic questions covered the usual indicators, as well as whether the person lives with children and the preferred languages when speaking and reading. Access questions covered discussion about where reading materials come from, book ownership (e-books and print), library access and use, school supply of books, languages of reading material accessed, and barriers to reading material access. Questions on motivation covered respondents' identification as a reader, and the degree to which they agree or disagree with value statements about reading, including statements about reading with children, reading confidence, barriers, and the perceived popularity of reading.

The concept of plural reading cultures significantly changed the types of questions we asked about reading behaviours and practices. We expanded the definition of reading purpose to include reading for communication alongside the more readily accepted reading for enjoyment (for entertainment or relaxation) and reading for information. To include all reading dimensions, we asked about short text (SMS, WhatsApp, and other social media); short articles (a few paragraphs, like a short newspaper article, a Bible passage, or a long email); medium text (an online or print news article,

blog, information websites or printed manuals) and long text (print or e-book of any genre). We also asked about reading frequency (how often someone reads) to identify habitual reading by oneself and with children, as well as reading volume (the hours per week someone spends reading). Significantly, we included religious reading, which was excluded by the previous National Reading Survey (2016). Early analysis shows that it is one of the most common genres of text South Africans habitually engage with. This illustrates how framing questions in a survey can invite or exclude membership regarding reading identity.

Fereirra (2017) indicated that where possible, questions were based on previous surveys, including the NRS 2016 the PIRLS (Howie et al. 2017), the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS 2002–2009), the South African General Household Survey (GHS 2020), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2018). Some of our areas of inquiry were novel, including religious reading and reading for communication, already described. Digital reading trends were a key focus, described in detail below. New questions were included on social perceptions of reading and self-identity as a reader. The questions on reading with children were expanded to reading with older children and adults' perceptions of older children's independent reading. A sub-group of steering committee members with research expertise developed these new questions, which were tested and refined using a small pilot study.

The SABDC commissioned the last NRS 2016 with the goal of growing the book industry in South Africa. The main research questions were mostly about reading printed books, with some discussion of e-book use. The revisioning of the National Reading Survey, carried out by our committee, led to the incorporation of multiple reading cultures and a deliberate attempt to celebrate the diversity of reading practices rather than polarise people as either readers or non-readers. However, there was also a desire for continuity between previous National Reading Surveys (prior to NRS 2016) and the new iteration. For this reason, some questions were replicated.

We maintained the questions that elicited people's preferred language of reading and the actual languages accessed, but allowed respondents to indicate multiple preferred languages (rather than just one). Building language diversity in published literature recognises and honours language as primarily connected to cultural identity. We maintained and developed questions about reading with children, noting the role families and communities play in supporting reading development (Hoyne & Egan 2019; Yazji 2014). We replicated the questions about library access and activities, recognising that libraries serve a critical function in providing no-cost access to online and print reading material.

There was one substantially new section in the survey: the inclusion of digital reading trends. Our reference group – 170 people from the public who were invited to comment on the purpose and content of the survey – pointedly raised the
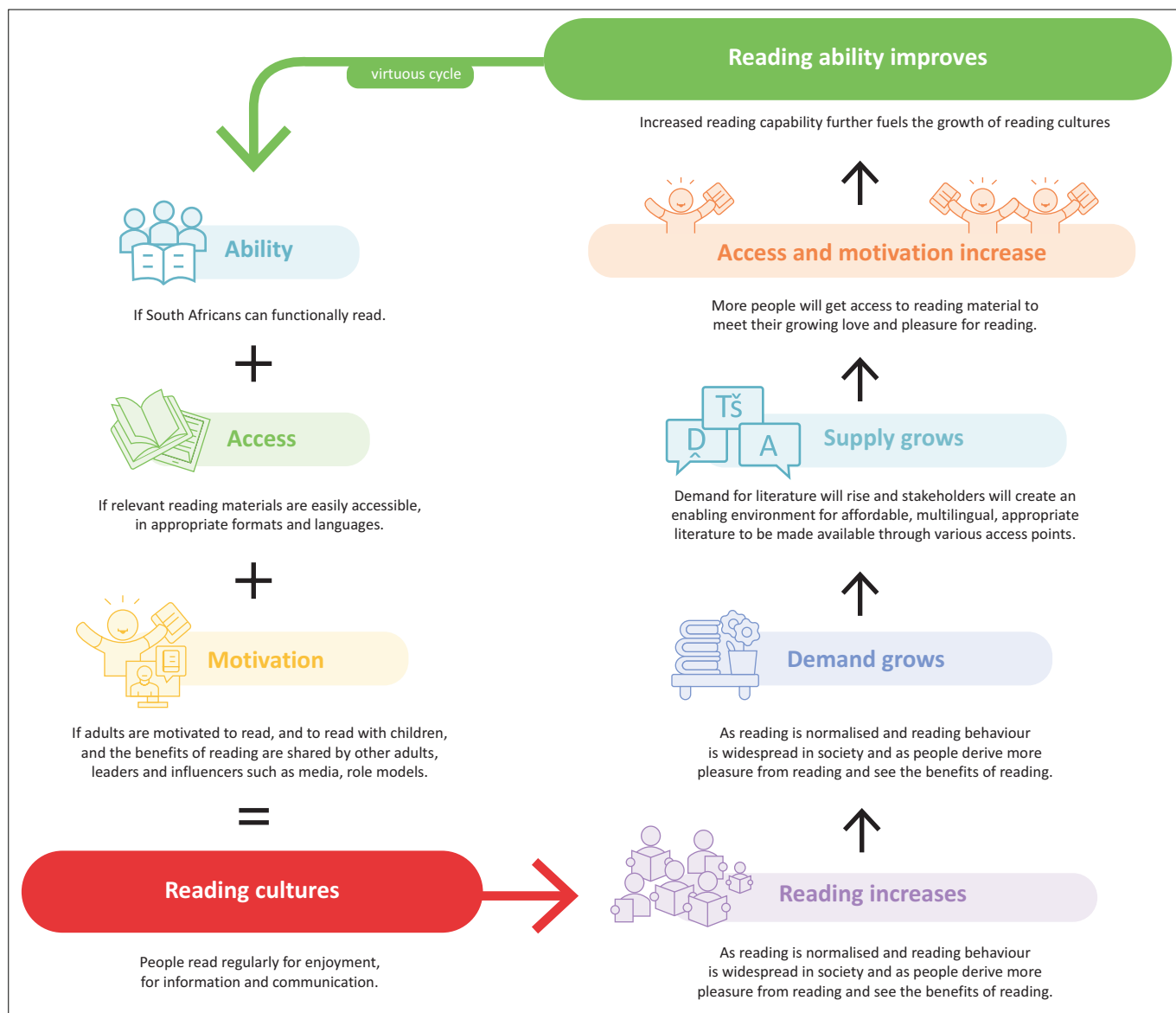
**FIGURE 1:** Theorising reading culture – Theory of change.

question of whether mobile phones are increasing access to reading materials or preventing people (especially young people) from engaging with reading material. While the survey and resulting barometer did not directly answer this question, we intentionally asked questions that would provide a broad understanding of the reading behaviour of people who read in various combinations of print and digital material and who use mobile phones and other digital devices for some, or all, of their reading activities. The survey asked these questions about adults' reading practices and the reading practices of their teenage children.

## Evaluating reading practices to define 'what is hot'

While the survey sought to learn inclusively about different reading cultures, the committee was also aware of the need to define an ideal each reading culture is moving towards. In constructing the 'reader personas', or 'profiles', we defined six distinct dimensions of reading culture and constructed

indices out of several survey questions to measure each dimension. In the indexing process, we recognised all reading practices, qualities and materials but gave some practices, qualities, and materials more weight than others:

- *Reading practices: purpose* – reading for enjoyment is valued over reading for information and reading to communicate.
- *Reading practices: habits* – habitual reading (daily or several times a week) is valued over less frequent reading.
- *Reading practices: volume* – this index combines the total time spent per week across all dimensions of reading.
- *Reading practices: depth* – reading long text is valued over medium and short text.
- *Reading motivation and identity* – the index combines questions about the value of reading, being motivated to read and self-identification as a reader.
- *Reading material: access* – the index combines the number, types, and diversity of reading materials (print and digital), access to the internet and library

use. The presence of printed reading materials in the home, especially books, was valued above other material types.

Our decision to value certain reading practices, qualities and materials over others is derived from the literature about how different forms of reading impact the brain and the different roles people bring to the action of reading. We used text length as a proxy for reading depth. Wolff's (2018) arguments influenced us in how digital reading and new formats affect the development of 'deep reading skills' – 'slower' cognitive processes like critical thinking, personal reflection, imagination, and empathy – in the brains of both adults and children. We also recognised the multiple roles readers bring to text, as outlined by Freebody and Luke (1990) – code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst – and the fact that these are engaged and activated in diverse ways and to different degrees through different practices of reading.

Internet surfing often involves skim reading which does not engage our brains in complex ways (Wolf, Barzillai & Dunne 2009). When we take the time to read deeply, we link the current text and other texts to our own experiences. We examine the truth and make value judgements, integrating everything into a critical analysis. We can enter the theory of mind and the feelings of another person, and this ability to take on another perspective may enable us to read in a quite different way than simply reading to absorb information (Wolff 2018).

Our definition of reading purpose included reading for information and communication, but we rated reading for enjoyment above other kinds of reading. When we read fictional text, the social and emotional areas of our brains become engaged; we extend ourselves into the perspectives of others and imagine new realities. We solve problems with the characters and, in so doing, begin to apply the same new thinking to our own lives (Aram, Dietcher & Shosham 2017; Snyman 2016). People who read for enjoyment report higher satisfaction with life, better connection to others, lower anxiety and depression, and deeper relaxation (Longden et al. 2015). Reading enjoyable texts is rewarding and helps build daily reading habits. Snyman (2016) followed a community reading club, in Limpopo province in South Africa, of women who started as irregular readers with low reading confidence. Over time, the women improved their reading, and their desire for engaging texts grew. They started to see their community and personal problems reflected in the books they read and found solutions therein. Members improved their employment status, started reading clubs for adults and children, and improved their educational levels and self-confidence.

We examined the question of reading frequency and valued habitual reading over occasional reading. A gap exists between intentions and actions (Wendel 2020). Good intentions and a sincere desire to change behaviour are not enough; these need to be followed through by applying specific strategies that will lead to a change in outcomes (Dweck 2013). Wendel (2020) wrote that a habit is developed when we act without considering it first. Ideally, if reading is as good for us as the literature indicates, we should encourage people to do it daily without needing to be reminded, prompted or persuaded.

For our motivational index, we grouped questions about the value of reading, being motivated to read and to read to children; and self-identifying as a reader. We highly rated identification as a reader and belief in the value of reading. Oyserman's (2015) model of Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) explained that identity is a necessary precursor to behaviour change. While we acknowledge that there is often a belief–action gap (Grandin, Boon-Falleur & Chevallier 2022), and that other conditions are necessary for actions to take place, we still maintain that identification as a reader indicates an essential relevant precursor to trying out the behaviours of reading. The survey results show that even though the self-identification variable is not perfectly correlated with reading practices (i.e. some people who spend many hours reading, do not self-identify as readers), in regression analysis self-identification was one of the strongest predictors of important reading practices, such as whether someone ever reads, frequently reads with children, borrows books from libraries, or reads long texts.

Finally, we valued having books above other reading materials in the home. Children who own even one book experience substantial benefits to reading ability, enjoyment, habit, and confidence (Clark & Teravien 2017; Manu et al. 2019). Children who grow up in homes with many books achieve the equivalent of three more years of schooling than children from bookless homes, independently of their parents' occupation, education, and class (Evans et al. 2010). The correlation between book reading and ownership is predictably strong, at 0.64 (Farkas & Hibel 2008). While our study diversified its coverage of types of reading material beyond books, the 2023 National Reading Survey results showed that owning a book has a positive benefit in identifying oneself as a reader and reading behaviour, such as the probability of reading long texts.

Our survey covered many other areas that contribute to reader profiles but do not have any value judgement attached to them. These include reading motivation: reading material type (print or online), languages read in, reading material balance (communication, information, and enjoyment), Internet use, reading time, and reading barriers.

## Applying the indices: Identifying reader personas

Behavioural change theories, such as that espoused by Oyserman (2015), showed us that people need to first identify as a reader before they start to take actions to engage with reading. They may engage as readers currently, or in a future

preferred self-concept. Identification includes saying, 'I am a reader', and adopting attitudes towards reading that are congruent with this identification. Inclusive definitions of reading enable more people to identify as belonging to the 'reader' category. Statistical clustering analysis enabled us to create distinct groups, defined mainly by their reading identification and behaviours. A crucial finding of the National Reading Survey is that reading cultures are generally not determined by gender, population group or income level. People from across South Africa's diverse (and unequal) society are present in each of the 'reading cultures' that were identified.

For each 'reading culture', the project developed a 'reader persona', with a name, a graphic and a short description of their 'reading journey'. These personas can be used to inform policy and practice by government and civil society literacy organisations, since each has different existing reading practices and, therefore, different reading needs and motivations. For example, people who rarely read to get necessary information will require different forms of engagement than those who already read for multiple hours daily, albeit mostly short digital content. In addition to informing decision-making at an institutional level within the government and civil society literacy sectors, the personas also enable a shift in the public debate about reading and individual decision-making about their own reading practices. They move the debate from a deficit narrative to an appreciative narrative, from 'I am not a real reader, so why bother?' to 'I am already reading some things and will try reading something more'. The personas challenge assumptions about who reads, to what degree and why, by revealing the demographic diversity within each persona and the diverse reading attitudes and behaviours within demographic groups.

Most studies of childhood reading ability and literacy practices position the child's development and academic learning context primarily and then may also consider the role that parents and caregivers play through providing books in the home and modelling reading practices at home. The National Reading Survey approaches how adult reading practices relate to children's reading practices from the opposite direction, starting with a representative sample of adults. Centring adult reading practices, and asking whether those same adults read with children in their households, leads to new statistical insights into the relationship between the two.

## Taking the framework forward

The National Reading Survey provides reliable information about reading access, behaviours and motivation for South Africans at the individual and, to some extent, household level. This current piece of research, however, goes beyond the individual and household levels to the systemic level. The National Reading Barometer is designed to be a new tool that allows the overall health of the national reading ecosystem to be visualised.

Reading choices may seem very personal and individualised, but they are supported by an entire ecosystem that may enable (or discourage) individual and family choices around reading. This includes social values and norms (whether reading is considered a 'normal' or 'aspirational' activity, whether it is something everyone can do or something associated with some groups more than others, etc.); accessibility and affordability of reading materials (in print and digital); how institutions that teach and champion reading (e.g. schools, libraries, literacy organisations, writers and literary organisations and publishers) are structured, resourced and linked to broader society; and whether there is an enabling government policy framework for all of the above.

To map this ecosystem, the project incorporates other evidence alongside the National Reading Survey results to build a National Reading Barometer. In addition to the findings of the survey on adult motivation and practice, the barometer compiles existing secondary data on reading ability, access to reading materials, and enabling environmental indicators.

To map reading ability (including early language and literacy ability), we draw on the 'Thrive by Five Index' (Giese et al. 2022), PIRLS (Howie et al. 2017), and official government education data collated by the World Bank (2023). To complement our survey data about access to reading materials, the barometer incorporates information on community and school libraries, publishing, free material, and digital access. To map the degree to which the broader ecosystem enables or constrains reading, we draw on national and provincial government budgets for literacy materials and programmes, the total value of the Cognitive Strategy Instruction (CSI) spending on literacy interventions, various policies that could enhance an enabling reading environment, and the teacher supply chain. Motivation and reading practice indicators are drawn from the National Reading Survey, and each data point is classified as representing either an enabling, emergent or constraint status. These assessments are then summarised across the four dimensions of the barometer (Reading ability, Reading materials access, Enabling environment and Motivation and/or Practice) and for the reading ecosystem as a whole to provide an overall picture of where the system is stronger and where it is weaker.

Understanding the national reading ecosystem as an interrelated set of dynamics across different institutions is important to enable collective action towards a shared set of goals. By establishing a shared picture of the country's current condition and trajectory in terms of reading, and showing which aspects of the current system are stronger and weaker, the barometer enables a conversation across sectors, generates a shared sense of urgency and galvanises collective action. Since the National Reading Barometer and the National Reading Survey will be repeated every 4 years (or more frequently, funding permitting), it can be used to measure the impact of large-scale interventions and policy changes over time.

The National Reading Barometer and National Reading Survey redefine the South African debate on reading cultures. This enables better decision-making that considers all the enabling and constraining factors in the literacy environment. Better decision-making can be achieved by being more open-minded about what constitutes 'reading', analysing the connection between adult and child, and understanding how the reading ecosystem operates and impacts on individual reading practices.

# Acknowledgements

## Disclaimer

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