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Improving early grade reading for multilingual learners in English-medium classrooms: Evidence from the QondaRead programme in under-resourced schools in Makhanda, Eastern Cape

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Background: South Africa's early grade reading challenges are well documented and deeply systemic. Despite curriculum expectations that learners read with understanding by Grade 3, most, particularly in no-fee schools, fall short of this benchmark. The challenge is particularly acute for multilingual learners who speak an African language at home but attend English-medium schools.

Objectives: Although policy supports mother tongue instruction to Grade 3, many learners enter straight-for-English classrooms with limited language support. Addressing this intersection of language, literacy, and inequality requires scalable, curriculum-aligned solutions. This study evaluates QondaRead, a low-cost, classroom-embedded literacy intervention piloted in four under-resourced English-medium schools in the Eastern Cape.

Method: The programme integrates explicit phonics instruction, scaffolded fluency practice, and graded reader use into daily teaching. A mixed-method, pre–post design was employed with over 700 Grades 1–3 learners, complemented by teacher focus groups. Learner progress was assessed using standardised letter–sound fluency (LSF) and oral reading fluency (ORF) tools.

Results: Learners made statistically significant and educationally meaningful gains. Grade 1 LSF and Grade 2–3 ORF improved substantially, with effect sizes from moderate to large (Cohen's $d = 0.7–1.9$). The weakest readers showed the largest relative gains. Teachers reported improved classroom structure, learner engagement, and confidence in structured routines.

Conclusion: Low-cost, classroom-embedded interventions such as QondaRead can improve foundational reading outcomes in multilingual, English-medium classrooms. The findings suggest that structured decoding and fluency instruction can be effectively integrated into daily classroom practice in under-resourced school contexts.

Contribution: This study contributes empirical evidence on the implementation and scalability of structured literacy interventions in multilingual South African classrooms and highlights the potential of embedded teacher-supported models to strengthen early grade reading outcomes.

Keywords: early grade reading; oral reading fluency; multilingual learners; phonics instruction; literacy intervention; English-medium classrooms; under-resourced schools.

Introduction

In South Africa, a significant proportion of children complete Grade 3 without mastering the ability to read for meaning in the language of instruction. This persistent literacy gap is particularly acute in under-resourced schools, where learners often face compounded difficulties related to language, poverty, and classroom support (Funda Uphumele Consortium 2025). Addressing foundational literacy in these contexts requires interventions that are both pedagogically effective and feasible within the constraints of the public education system. The ability to read for meaning is foundational to academic progress and life opportunity (Duke & Cartwright 2021; Joshi 2019; National Reading Panel 2000; Pikulski & Chard 2005). Yet in South Africa, the majority of children are not acquiring this essential skill. According to the Funda Uphumele Consortium (2025) throughout, only 18% of Grade 1 learners met the benchmark for decoding (40 correct letter sounds per minute), and just 19% of Grade 3 learners met the oral reading fluency (ORF) threshold of 50 words correct per minute (WCPM) required for basic comprehension. This gap is most acute in no-fee public schools, where learners, particularly those whose home language differs from the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), are structurally disadvantaged (Long & Bowles 2024;

Mohohlwane, Taylor & Cilliers 2024; Pretorius & Spaull 2016; Republic of South Africa [RSA] 1997). In this complex landscape, GADRA Education, a community-engaged non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Makhanda, partnered with local schools to develop and pilot QondaRead, a targeted, scalable literacy intervention. QondaRead is designed for resource-strained, English-medium classrooms where learners speak isiXhosa or Afrikaans in their homes. Rather than substituting the national curriculum, QondaRead aims to enhance its implementation by embedding foundational literacy strategies within everyday instruction. Its theoretical grounding draws on the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Gough & Tunmer 1986) and more recent componential models of reading development (Duke & Cartwright 2021), which identify decoding, fluency, and comprehension as mutually reinforcing components of literacy acquisition. By examining literacy gains alongside teacher perspectives and implementation costs, this study contributes to the growing body of research on scalable early grade reading interventions in multilingual, under-resourced education systems. This article presents data from the first full-scale evaluation of QondaRead, a classroom-embedded literacy intervention implemented in four no-fee, English-medium primary schools. The study investigates whether a low-cost, classroom-based programme can improve foundational reading outcomes for multilingual learners. Specifically, the research addresses three sub-questions:

- To what extent does QondaRead accelerate literacy gains in early grade learners?
- How effectively does the programme support isiXhosa- and Afrikaans-speaking learners taught in English?
- Can QondaRead serve as a scalable model for broader system-wide adoption in under-resourced contexts?

In addressing these questions, the study contributes to South African literacy research by presenting cost-per-learner data, rarely reported in similar interventions, and by highlighting the impact of classroom-embedded pedagogy in multilingual, low-resource settings. Grade 3 is used as a key reference point in this study because national policy expectations (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS], [SA DBE, 2020]) require learners to read fluently and with comprehension by the end of this year of schooling. This juncture also coincides with the transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn', marking a critical threshold in academic development. The article opens with a review of relevant literature on early literacy interventions and the South African policy context. This is followed by an outline of the research design, methodology, and analytical framework. In the next section, findings from both quantitative assessments and qualitative teacher focus groups are presented. The final sections discuss implications, limitations, and opportunities for policy and practice.

Literature review

This literature review examines research related to early grade reading development in multilingual contexts where English serves as the LoLT, particularly within under-resourced school environments. The review further considers evidence on effective reading instruction and situates the QondaRead programme within this broader body of research.

The early literacy crisis and multilingual learners

Improving early grade reading outcomes in multilingual, English-medium classrooms is an urgent challenge facing South African education. While the national curriculum mandates that learners read with fluency and comprehension by the end of Grade 3, data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and local benchmarking studies show that the majority, particularly those in multilingual, under-resourced schools, do not meet this standard. The challenges are especially acute for learners whose home language differs from the language of instruction, yet enter 'straight-for-English' classrooms with minimal linguistic support. This literature review explores the nature of this challenge, the instructional components most strongly linked to literacy development, and the potential of classroom-based interventions such as QondaRead to offer scalable, cost-effective solutions. Despite wide consensus that early reading ability is pivotal to future educational success, South Africa's national data reveal a bleak reality. According to PIRLS 2021, only 19% of Grade 4 learners can read for meaning, the lowest performance among participating countries (Roux, Van Staden & Tshele 2023). More recent national data reinforce this picture: the Funda Uphumele Consortium (2025) found that only 18% of Grade 1 learners met the benchmark for letter–sound decoding, and just 19% of Grade 3 learners reached the ORF threshold required for basic comprehension. The consequences are far-reaching: learners who do not master reading in the early grades remain perpetually behind, with academic disadvantage compounding each year of schooling (Khosa 2022). Fluency, the ability to read accurately, smoothly, and with appropriate expression at a pace that enables understanding, is a critical bridge between decoding and comprehension. Once decoding is automated, working memory is freed for making sense of the text. As Pretorius and Spaull (2016) argue, fluency and comprehension must be regarded not merely as pedagogical goals, but as social imperatives in a deeply unequal society. Evidence suggests that learners who have not reached expected levels of fluency in the early years are unlikely to improve without intervention or remediation (Bigozzi et al. 2017; Friedman & Kern 2009; Lonigan & Anthony 2000; Pretorius et al. 2016). In the South African context, the national CAPS makes clear that 'by the end of Grade 3, readers are expected to read accurately on their own, at a steady rate, with comprehension and with enjoyment' (Pretorius, Mohohlwane & Spaull 2020:2). Yet, despite empirical evidence that more than 80% of learners entering Grade 4 have not reached this curriculum goal, from Grade 4 onwards, the curriculum provides no explicit teaching of how to read. These challenges are particularly acute in under-resourced schools. In South Africa, 72% of learners attend no-fee Quintile 1–3 public schools (White & Van Dyk 2019). In such contexts, the national curriculum's

assumption that all learners will be reading fluently on entering Grade 4 remains aspirational at best (Long & Bowles 2024; Pretorius & Spaull 2016).

Multilingual learners in English-medium classrooms

Language adds a layer of complexity. The *South African Language in Education Policy* affirms learners' right to receive instruction in the language most commonly spoken in their homes, during the Foundation Phase (Grade R – Grade 3) of schooling (RSA 1997) although policy mandates a transition to English or Afrikaans as the LoLT from Grade 4 onward. The scale of this challenge is stark; about 7% of South African learners speak English at home yet 23% of Grade 1 learners enter the system in straight-to-English settings (Sibanda & Tshehla 2025; South Africa, Department of Basic Education [SA DBE] 2018). For those learning in an indigenous home language, the three years of basic English taught as a First Additional Language, typically 1–3 h per week, provides inadequate preparation for the transition to English as the new LoLT by Grade 4 (Sibanda & Tshehla 2025). From a cognitive perspective, acquiring early literacy in a second language places significant demands on working memory and processing efficiency. They must simultaneously learn to decode (break down) unfamiliar phoneme-grapheme relationships (the connection between written letters or letter combinations and the sounds they represent) and acquire academic vocabulary in a language they do not speak at home (Cummins 2000). This disconnect is rarely addressed in curriculum pacing, leaving multilingual learners behind from the outset.

Effective components of reading instruction

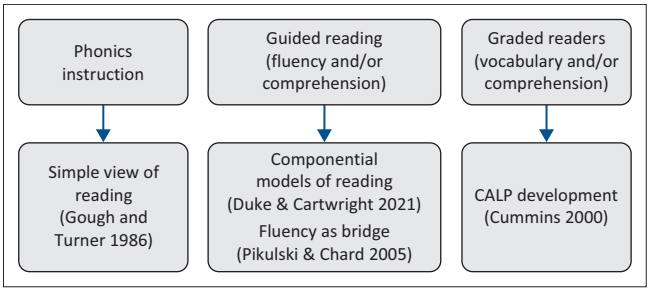
Fluency development plays a pivotal role in bridging decoding and comprehension. The SVR (Gough & Tunmer 1986) and componential models (Duke & Cartwright 2021) highlight the need to integrate phonics, oral fluency, and vocabulary in a coherent instructional sequence. Multilingual learners benefit most when these components are explicitly scaffolded and reinforced through repeated reading, guided practice, and contextualised texts (Cummins 2000; Pikulski & Chard 2005). Without fluency, learners lack the automaticity needed for comprehension, further entrenching literacy gaps.

Evidence-based reading instruction for early grade literacy

Effective reading development depends on integrating decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction (Pretorius & Spaull 2016). Of these, fluency has emerged, from extensive research, as a key predictor of later reading comprehension (Pikulski & Chard 2005). Without fluency, learners cannot allocate cognitive resources to make meaning from text. As Pikulski and Chard (2005) note, fluency development enables readers to allocate attention to meaning rather than decoding, acting as a bridge between phonics and comprehension. The SVR (Gough & Tunmer 1986) and updated componential models (Duke & Cartwright 2021) identify fluency as a bridge between phonics and understanding. The SVR posits that reading comprehension arises from the interaction between two core processes: decoding and language comprehension. While influential, the SVR has been critiqued for underemphasising the sociocultural and cognitive challenges of multilingual contexts, particularly for learners acquiring literacy in a non-home language (Snow & Matthews 2016). For isiXhosa-speaking learners, for example, decoding in English requires not only grapheme–phoneme knowledge but also cross-linguistic transfer (using knowledge from the home language to support learning in a second language) and syntactic reorientation (adjusting to differences in word order and sentence structure between languages). This highlights the tension between models privileging decoding and those, such as Cummins's Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) framework ([1979] 2008), which foreground the layered progression from surface-level communicative fluency (BICS) to the deeper CALP required for comprehension. In practice, decoding-heavy approaches can accelerate word recognition and fluency yet risk neglecting the broader linguistic and academic language demands that ultimately enable comprehension. QondaRead responds to this by prioritising explicit instruction in phonics and daily fluency practice while also situating these within structured opportunities for vocabulary growth and meaning making, aiming to strengthen both dimensions of the reading equation. In addition, QondaRead aligns with updated componential models of reading (Duke & Cartwright 2021), which identify fluency as a critical bridge between decoding and comprehension. Fluent readers are able to read with automaticity, inflection, and accuracy, allowing cognitive resources to shift from word recognition to meaning making (Pikulski & Chard 2005). This is particularly vital for learners acquiring literacy in a second language, where decoding is complicated by unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical foundations of QondaRead components.

Teacher practice and pedagogical adaptation

Research underscores the critical role of teacher practice in shaping learner outcomes, particularly in early grade literacy. Structured pedagogy interventions such as Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) and Funda Wande have



Note: Please see the full reference list of Long, K.A., 2026, 'Improving early grade reading for multilingual learners in English-medium classrooms: Evidence from the QondaRead programme in under-resourced schools in Makhanda, Eastern Cape', *Reading & Writing* 17(1), a616. https://doi.org/10.4102/rw.v17i1.616

CALP, cognitive academic language proficiency.

FIGURE 1: Theoretical foundations of QondaRead components.

demonstrated that when teachers are equipped with accessible materials and practical routines, reading outcomes improve significantly (Hoadley & Boyd 2022). However, such interventions often require extensive coaching or external support, limiting scalability in under-resourced contexts. QondaRead was designed for full delivery by existing classroom teachers, requiring no withdrawal from the curriculum or additional time beyond the literacy block. Focus group feedback suggests that teachers valued the predictability and structure provided by daily phonics and guided reading routines, and many reported growing confidence in implementing evidence-based strategies. This reinforces the importance of instructional models that build teacher ownership and are feasible within everyday classroom constraints.

Evidence from literacy interventions

A growing body of research supports the claim that carefully structured interventions can deliver meaningful literacy gains in under-resourced settings. In a study by Long and Bowles (2024), learners at a no-fee Quintile 3 school in Makhanda participating in the Whistle Stop School pull-out intervention programme consistently outperformed both provincial and national benchmarks on measures of ORF and comprehension. Fluency is most often assessed using ORF measures. Learners read a given text for 1 min and the number of WCPM is recorded as their ORF score. These offer valuable diagnostic insights into learner progress particularly when measured against national benchmarks (Funda Uphumele Consortium 2025; Khulisa Management Services & SA DBE 2022). Internationally, similar results have been reported in small-group, phonics-based interventions (Elston, Tiba & Condy 2022), with guided and repeated reading shown to be effective across multilingual contexts (Hudson, Mercer & Lane 2000). Comparable multilingual interventions in other low-resource contexts provide useful points of reference. In Kenya, the Primary Math and Reading initiative demonstrated that daily, structured instruction in phonics and fluency across Kiswahili and English substantially improved learners' decoding and ORF, with evidence of cross-linguistic transfer (Piper et al. 2018). Further research in Kenya underscores the mediating role of text reading fluency between decoding and comprehension, reinforcing its importance as a developmental bridge (Wawire, Liang & Piper 2023). In India, the Facilitating Reading Acquisition in Multilingual Environments (FRAME-India) study and the MultiLiLa project similarly showed that multilingual scaffolding and biliteracy approaches can accelerate foundational literacy when phonics and fluency practice are integrated into regular instruction (Hickey, Lewis & Baker 2020; Nag, Vaidya & Chiat 2014). More recently, classroom phonics programmes supported by digital tools, such as GraphoLearn Rime, have been found to enhance English literacy outcomes for children in low-resource Indian schools (Mishra, Dash & Singh 2024). Together, these findings suggest that QondaRead's focus on systematic phonics and fluency instruction aligns with a broader evidence base demonstrating the effectiveness of such approaches in multilingual, resource-constrained settings.

Addressing the research gap on multilingual learners in straight-to-English, under-resourced schools

While a growing literature documents early-grade reading interventions where the local African language is the LoLT, far fewer South African studies are designed for learners who speak an African language at home but are taught in English. Recent large-scale 'structured pedagogy' programmes are typically implemented by classroom teachers using lesson plans, readers and coaching (e.g. EGRS, Funda Wande). Against this backdrop, QondaRead is distinctive in targeting straight-to-English settings with a focus on English language fluency, embedding repeated-reading routines within everyday classroom practice, implemented by school personnel and infrastructure, supporting scalability (Hoadley & Boyd 2022; Mohohlwane et al. 2024). Through its use of classroom-embedded instruction, localised materials, and benchmark-aligned assessments, QondaRead represents an attempt to design a contextually responsive and relatively low-cost approach to supporting early literacy. This study contributes to the literature by reporting findings from the programme's first full-scale implementation, using a mixed-methods design to generate evidence that may inform future efforts aimed at strengthening literacy provision in under-resourced contexts.

Implementing QondaRead in multilingual, English-medium classrooms

QondaRead is a classroom-embedded foundational literacy intervention designed to support learners in acquiring decoding, fluency and comprehension skills in English. It has three core components. Each component of QondaRead is deliberately designed to reflect established theories of reading development. The phonics strand supports decoding and letter-sound correspondence (Gough & Tunmer 1986), the guided reading strand builds fluency through scaffolded, repeated practice (Kuhn & Stahl 2003), and the phonics and graded readers expand vocabulary and comprehension, supporting the development of CALP (Cummins 2000). Rather than treating these components as isolated skills, QondaRead integrates them into a coherent instructional sequence:

- Phonics model: Explicit instruction in grapheme–phoneme correspondence, aligned with the sequence used in the Whistle Stop School.
- Graded readers: Access to levelled contextually relevant texts, to promote decoding, vocabulary growth, and fluency.
- Guided reading: Structured small-group reading led by the teacher using carefully sequenced materials and focused decoding tasks.

Teachers received initial training and practical classroom resources, and all learners were independently assessed three times in the year providing baseline, formative and

summative data. The intervention was designed to complement, not replace, the existing CAPS curriculum and required no additional instructional time beyond the allocated literacy block.

Programme costs

Including detailed costing data supports the central premise of this study, that structured, high-impact literacy interventions can be designed to operate at low cost within the constraints of public school systems. Very few literacy interventions in South Africa publicly report disaggregated per-learner costing, making QondaRead's transparency an important contribution for policymakers and implementers seeking scalable models. The cost of materials per teacher varied by grade band. For Grade R and Grade 1, the package included a full set of graded readers with supporting materials, a complete single-sound phonics programme, and a data projector to enable delivery of lessons as designed. The total cost per teacher in 2024 was R30 000. These resources are expected to last for a minimum of five years. With an average class size of 35 learners, this translates to a cost per learner of approximately R172 (175 learners over five years). For Grade 2 and Grade 3, the per-teacher cost was lower, at R22 000, as it was limited to a set of graded readers per class. Using the same assumptions regarding longevity and class size, this equates to a cost per learner of approximately R126. These figures offer a transparent and replicable estimate of the per-learner cost of the QondaRead intervention, excluding training and personnel costs. Detailed financial reporting by other literacy interventions in South Africa remains limited; cost-effectiveness comparisons are often based solely on learning outcomes, such as effect sizes reported in randomised evaluations. For example, the Funda Wande programme has published strong learner gains but has not released publicly disaggregated per-learner cost data. In this context, QondaRead's costing approach contributes rare and valuable insight into the real-world affordability of literacy interventions, which may serve as a useful benchmark for future programme comparisons.

Research methods and design

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre–post mixed-method design in which purposively selected schools participating in the QondaRead programme were assessed using quantitative literacy measures (LSF and ORF) alongside qualitative teacher focus group data to examine both learner outcomes and instructional implementation.

Research design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, pre–post, mixed-method design to evaluate the impact of the QondaRead programme on early literacy development in multilingual under-resourced settings. Quantitative data were collected to measure changes in foundational reading skills over the course of a school year, while qualitative insights were gathered to explore teacher experiences, implementation fidelity, and contextual factors influencing programme delivery.

Although no control group was used, historical data from one school enabled a limited comparison with pre-intervention cohorts. This design allows for robust interpretation of change over time but limits causal inference, a recognised limitation of quasi-experimental studies.

Context and setting

The evaluation was conducted in four resource-constrained, English LoLT primary schools in Makhanda, a small city in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. These schools serve predominantly isiXhosa-speaking learners and are situated in historically disadvantaged communities characterised by poverty, under-resourcing, and low academic performance. GADRA Education, a long-standing educational non-governmental organisation in Makhanda, led the intervention in collaboration with school staff and local funders. This city has a unique educational ecology characterised by strong cross-sector partnerships, data-informed interventions, and an explicit commitment to improving public education outcomes (Long & Bowles 2024; Msomi 2024; Ntlabezo & Westaway 2024).

Participants

The sample included 712 learners across Grades 1–3 from four primary schools implementing the QondaRead programme. Schools were selected through purposive sampling based on their participation in the QondaRead intervention and their classification as under-resourced schools where English serves as the LoLT.

All learners in these grades at the four participating schools were included in both the intervention and the pre–post assessment cycles. Specifically:

- 278 Grade 1 learners.
- 263 Grade 2 learners.
- 171 Grade 3 learners.

Approximately 60 learners were excluded from the final analysis because of absenteeism at either the baseline or endline testing. For the qualitative component, 12 Foundation Phase teachers (three per school) participated in focus group discussions. Teachers were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in implementing QondaRead across the three grade levels. All participants provided informed consent.

Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data collection

Two reading assessments were used to measure literacy outcomes. Letter–sound fluency was administered for Grade 1 learners, in which learners were asked to pronounce as many letter–sound combinations as possible within 60 s. Oral reading fluency was administered for Grade 2 and Grade 3, in which learners read a grade-level English passage aloud for 1 min, and WCPM scores were recorded. Both tools were adapted from established South African

studies (e.g. Pretorius & Spaull 2016) and benchmarked against SA DBE norms and PIRLS thresholds. Trained assessors administered the assessments one-on-one during Term 1 (baseline) and Term 4 (endline). To ensure data quality, assessors receive standardised training, scoring protocol were applied consistently across schools and, a subsample of assessments was double-scored to verify scoring reliability.

Quantitative analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to report mean scores and standard deviations. Paired-sample *t*-tests assessed statistically significant changes in LSF and ORF scores between baseline and summative assessments. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) were calculated to quantify the magnitude of gains. These analytic approaches were selected to directly address the core research question: whether QondaRead can improve early-grade reading outcomes in multilingual, English-medium classrooms. The analysis also examined whether the weakest learners made proportionally larger gains, reflecting the programme's equity focus.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

To complement the quantitative finding, qualitative data were collected through teacher focus group discussions conducted at the end of the school year. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Topics included perceived learner progress, changes in instructional practice, feasibility of the programme, and suggestions for adaptation. Transcripts were coded thematically using a deductive framework aligned with the research questions. Key themes included learner engagement, routine integration, professional confidence, and peer support. Additionally, classroom observations were conducted during Term 2 and Term 3 to monitor implementation fidelity. While the observations were not formally analysed as qualitative data, they informed contextual understanding and triangulated teacher self-reports.

Data quality assurance

To ensure data quality, assessors received standardised training, scoring protocols were used consistently across schools, and a subsample of assessments was double-scored to verify reliability. Focus group data were anonymised, and transcripts reviewed by two coders to ensure consistency.

Ethical considerations

This study used secondary data obtained from GADRA Education with the necessary permissions. The study was conducted in accordance with GADRA's internal data governance and ethical protocols, rather than through a separate university ethics review. It did not undergo a separate university Institutional Review Board (IRB) review because it was an internal, commissioned study by GADRA Education. Under applicable guidelines, it did not qualify as human subjects research requiring IRB oversight, as it used fully anonymised, retrospective data with no new participant interaction. No new informed consent was sought from the original participants, as the study relied on existing data that were fully anonymised and involved no direct contact or intervention, thereby meeting the usual criteria for a consent waiver (i.e., minimal risk and impracticability of re-consent).

All records were fully stripped of direct and indirect identifiers by the data provider prior to researcher access, ensuring that no student, teacher, or school could be identified in the analysis. Data use was strictly in accordance with GADRA Education's data governance policies, and the dataset was handled on secure, access-controlled systems in line with standard data protection practices. No new data collection or participant contact occurred, so the study imposed no burden and raised no concerns about coercion or power dynamics. We recognise that students are a vulnerable population, but in this secondary analysis, their welfare was safeguarded by ensuring complete anonymity and requiring no active involvement on their part.

Results

This section presents a benchmark-based analysis of learner outcomes in 2024, contextualised within national and regional performance data. The analysis draws on key literacy assessments used across Grades 1, 2 and 3 to evaluate learner progress in the QondaRead intervention.

These findings directly respond to the article's central research question: Can a low-cost, classroom-embedded literacy intervention improve foundational reading outcomes for multilingual learners in English-medium, under-resourced South African schools? Learner gains are presented by grade and compared against SA DBE benchmarks and national performance trends. The aim is to assess whether QondaRead measurably advanced foundational literacy in these challenging school contexts.

Benchmarks and national performance

The SA DBE and the 2025 Funda Uphumele Consortium define minimum reading benchmarks for learners acquiring English as an additional language:

- Grade 1 (LSF): 40 correct letter sounds per minute.
- Grade 2 (ORF): 30 WCPM.
- Grade 3 (ORF): 50 WCPM – considered the threshold for reading comprehension.

National performance remains low, with the 2025 survey reporting:

- Only 18% of Grade 1 learners nationally reaching 40+ LSF.
- Only 26% of Grade 2 learners reaching 30+ WCPM.
- Only 19% of Grade 3 learners reaching 50+ WCPM (Funda Uphumele Consortium 2025).

These statistics underscore the scale of South Africa's literacy crisis and provide a basis for evaluating QondaRead's relative impact.

QondaRead performance

Statistical analyses were conducted to determine the effectiveness of QondaRead using:

- Paired *t*-tests to assess statistically significant gains.
- Cohen's *d*[1] to measure the magnitude of gains.

Each analytic component directly supports the study's primary aim, to evaluate whether QondaRead improves foundational reading in multilingual, English-medium, low-resource classrooms.

Grade 1: Letter–sound fluency analysis: This section examines learner performance in LSF from January 2024 to November 2024 across the four participating QondaRead schools. Table 1 presents descriptive and inferential statistics on Grade 1 learners' gains in LSF across the four QondaRead schools, based on assessments conducted in January and November 2024.

As shown in Table 1, QondaRead Grade 1 learners outperformed the national average, with 31.8% reaching 40+ LSF compared to just 18% nationally (Funda Uphumele Consortium 2025). All schools showed substantial average LSF gains ranging from +20.9 to +31.7 correct letter sounds per minute:

- School 2 showed the highest mean gain (+31.75), nearly reaching the benchmark of 40 LSF.
- School 1 and School 3 also made significant progress, ending with averages around 33.6 and 32.2.
- School 4, while improving, remained furthest from the benchmark (25.5).

All gains were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), with effect sizes ranging from moderate to large (Cohen's $d = 0.7–1.6$).

These improvements suggest that learners moved from near non-reader status to basic decoding competence over the intervention period.

Table 2 presents performance breakdown for all 283 Grade 1 learners across the four categories for January and November 2024, with counts and percentages.

In January 2024, the LSF results revealed a concerning baseline, with over half of learners (51.94%) unable to identify even a single letter sound, and 91.52% scoring below 20, highlighting widespread initial difficulty across all schools. The average LSF scores ranged from just 4.50 to 7.80 and, notably, no learners achieved a score of 40 or higher. By November 2024, however, the data showed significant improvement. The proportion of learners scoring zero dropped dramatically to just 1.77%, and mean scores increased substantially to between 28.50 and 35.00. Additionally, there was a marked shift in performance categories: 36.75% of learners scored between 20 and 39, and 29.33% scored 40 or above, categories that were virtually unpopulated at the start of the year. Nonetheless, 32.16% of learners still scored below 20, indicating that while most learners made strong gains, a notable minority continued to struggle. Overall, the proportion of learners below 20 decreased from 91.52% to just 33.93%, reflecting large average gains (23.50–29.00) and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*: 1.42–1.53). Some schools, such as School 1 (Q3) (35.00) and School 2 (Q3) (33.50), came close to reaching the national benchmark of 40 LSF, underscoring the magnitude of progress while also highlighting areas for continued support.

Historical comparison with pre-intervention cohort: While these results indicate substantial growth in LSF during 2024, it is important to interpret them within a broader context. Baseline scores for Grade 1 learners in January are typically very low in under-resourced schools, and large year-on-year gains may partly reflect the steep initial learning curve rather than exceptional programme impact. Without comparison to external benchmarks or historical performance, there is a risk of overstating progress. To address this, we compared the November 2024 outcomes for School D with the same school's November 2017 results, collected prior to the introduction of QondaRead in any grade. This provides a more meaningful gauge of how current Grade 1 learners are performing relative to a pre-intervention cohort at the same point in the school year. To contextualise the 2024 Grade 1 results, performance was compared with an equivalent cohort from the same school (School D) in November 2017, prior to the introduction of QondaRead in any grade. In 2017, learners averaged 18.22 correct letter names per minute (SD = 16.59,

1.In line with Cohen's widely accepted benchmarks, effect sizes of 0.2 are considered small, 0.5 moderate and 0.8 or higher large (Cohen 1988). A low *p*-value (typically < 0.05) indicates that the likelihood of the observed gains occurring due to random chance is extremely low.

TABLE 2: Grade 1 performance breakdown.

Category	January 2024		November 2024	
	n	%	*n*	%
Unable to identify (LSF = 0)	147	51.94	5	1.77
Fewer than 20 (0 < LSF < 20)	112	39.58	91	32.16
20–39 (20 ≤ LSF ≤ 39)	24	8.48	104	36.75
40+ (LSF ≥ 40)	0	0.00	83	29.33
Total	**283**	**100.00**	**283**	**100.00**

LSF, letter–sound fluency.

TABLE 1: Grade 1 progress in letter–sound fluency.

School	Learners (*n*)	Mean January LSF	Mean November LSF	Mean gain	SD November	*t*-statistic	*p**	Cohen's *d* (Effect size)	Interpretation
School 1 (Q3)	37	7.75	33.40	25.65	18.63	-8.82	1.59e–10	1.45	Large
School 2 (Q3)	91	4.59	36.34	31.75	19.00	-7.00	4.42e–10	0.73	Moderate
School 3 (Q4)	72	6.34	32.44	26.10	17.28	-15.73	1.62e–24	1.88	Large
School 4 (Q3)	83	4.75	25.66	20.91	16.50	-12.03	1.55e–19	1.34	Large
Total	283	5.49	31.83	26.34	17.77	-	-	-	-

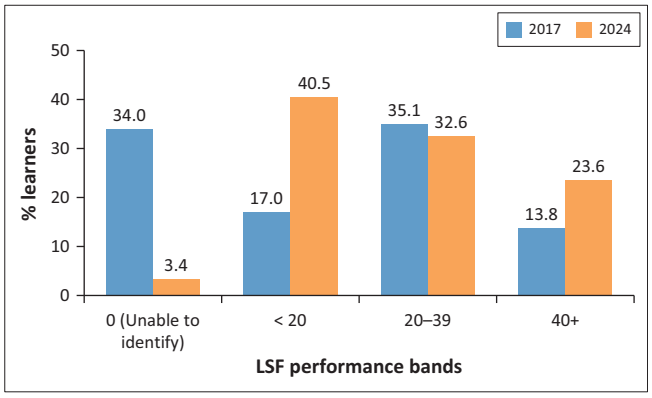
SD, standard deviation; LSF, letter–sound fluency.

*, Common to statistical reporting, values such as 1.59e–10 are scientific notation for expressing very small numbers (e.g., 1.59e−10 is 0.000000000159).

n = 93), whereas in 2024 the mean was 25.49 (SD = 17.29, n = 89), a statistically significant increase of 7.28 points (t(175) = 2.90, p = 0.0043). Although both cohorts remained below the SA DBE benchmark of 40 LSF for end of Grade 1, the 2024 learners performed around 40% higher on average than the 2017 group. In 2017, 34% of learners could not identify a single letter sound compared to only 3% in 2024. The proportion achieving the benchmark of 40+ LSF rose from 13.8% to 23.6%. These shifts suggest a marked reduction in complete non-readers and an expansion of the high-performing group. Figure 2 illustrates these shifts highlighting the sharp decline in non-readers and the corresponding increase in learners meeting or exceeding the SA DBE benchmark between 2017 and 2024.

This historical comparison strengthens the interpretation of 2024 Grade 1 outcomes by showing that gains are not solely the result of maturation within the school year but also reflect improvement relative to past performance at the same point in the year.

Grade 2: Oral reading fluency analysis: To further examine the research question, the Grade 2 results evaluate whether QondaRead improved ORF, a critical bridge between decoding and comprehension for learners acquiring English as a second or additional language. The key issue addressed here is whether the intervention can build fluency among learners who, without additional support, typically fall well below national thresholds by this grade. Demonstrable gains in this area would suggest that QondaRead strengthens both foundational reading processes and learner trajectories. Table 3 summarises Grade 2 learner performance.



LSF, letter–sound fluency.

FIGURE 2: School D Grade 1 performance band comparison (November 2017 vs. November 2024).

All schools demonstrated substantial increases in average ORF scores. School 1 showed the highest average ORF by November (40.3 WCPM), exceeding the SA DBE benchmark of 30 WPM for Grade 2. School 4 learners also showed notable progress (mean gain of 29.9 WCPM), despite starting from a very low base. School 2 and School 3 began with low January scores (3–11 WCPM), but both improved significantly, though School 2 (19.5 WCPM) remains below the national benchmark. All participating schools demonstrated statistically significant and educationally meaningful improvements in ORF. These results provide strong statistical evidence that QondaRead had a meaningful and measurable impact on Grade 2 learners' reading fluency across all sites. The probability of these results occurring as a result of random variation is effectively zero, reinforcing the conclusion that the intervention had a consistent and real impact across diverse school contexts.

Grade 3: Oral reading fluency analysis: At the Grade 3 level, the research question is tested by examining whether learners were able to reach or exceed the 50 WCPM benchmark associated with reading for meaning. This is a pivotal point in literacy development, where learners transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. Improvements in ORF at this stage would signal not just decoding improvement, but readiness for comprehension, a key marker of foundational reading success. As such, Grade 3 performance is critical in assessing whether QondaRead can drive meaningful improvements in multilingual English-medium classrooms. Grade 3 outcomes are detailed in Table 4.

Oral reading fluency gains were achieved at all three participating schools. Particularly notable is the strength of evidence at School 1, where the t-statistic reflects a very pronounced shift in reading fluency over the course of the year. These findings support the programme's effectiveness as learners transition into more advanced reading stages.

TABLE 3: Grade 2 performance breakdown.

School	Learners (n)	Mean January ORF	Mean November ORF	Mean gain	t-statistic	p	Cohen's d (Effect Size)	Interpretation
School 1 (Q3)	41	12.93	40.32	27.39	-7.54	3.3e–09	1.18	Large
School 2 (Q3)	87	3.05	19.47	16.43	-8.41	7.8e–13	0.90	Moderate
School 3 (Q4)	53	11.49	33.47	21.98	-7.45	9.5e–10	1.02	Large
School 4 (Q3)	82	3.34	33.21	29.87	-8.86	1.5e–13	0.98	Large

ORF, oral reading fluency.

TABLE 4: Grade 3 performance breakdown.

School	Learners (n)	Mean January ORF	Mean November ORF	Mean gain	t-statistic	p	Cohen's d (Effect size)	Interpretation
School 1 (Q3)	36	45.97	68.19	22.22	-11.11	5.05e–13	1.85	Large
School 2 (Q3)	68	28.31	44.12	15.81	-8.38	4.93e–12	1.02	Large
School 3 (Q4)	67	39.87	51.03	11.16	-5.38	1.07e–06	0.66	Moderate

ORF, oral reading fluency.

Comparative performance and national context

Compared to PIRLS 2021 estimates and SA DBE norms, QondaRead learners performed notably better than national averages for under-resourced schools. For instance, in Grade 3, 41% of QondaRead learners reached 40+ WCPM, exceeding national estimates which place the proportion closer to 20% in similarly resourced schools (Roux et al. 2023). These gains were achieved with limited additional resources and no withdrawal from class, highlighting the value of classroom-embedded interventions.

Qualitative insights from teachers

Teachers consistently reported positive learner engagement, improved decoding confidence, and noticeable changes in reading stamina and enthusiasm. Focus group analysis yielded three dominant themes:

Ownership and confidence:

> 'My learners are no longer scared to try reading, even those who couldn't identify sounds at the start are now reading whole sentences.' (Grade 1 teacher, School 1, focus group participant)

Improved routine and structure:

> 'The phonics sequence gave my day structure; it was easy to follow and link with what I was already teaching.' (Grade 2 teacher, School 1, focus group participant)

Scalability and peer support:

> 'At first, I was overwhelmed but having others doing the same thing helped. We learned from each other.' (Grade 3 teacher, School 4, focus group participant)

Teachers also highlighted the utility of the graded readers and the benefit of weekly literacy mentor visits, suggesting that ongoing support and community of practice were key enablers of successful implementation.

Taken together, the results indicate measurable gains in early literacy skills following the implementation of QondaRead. The discussion that follows considers these findings in relation to the study's research questions, including their implications for multilingual learners and the feasibility of implementing structured literacy interventions in under-resourced school contexts.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation and outcomes of the QondaRead programme in multilingual, under-resourced English-medium classrooms. The findings contribute to addressing the study's three research questions. Firstly, the results demonstrate measurable improvements in foundational literacy skills, as reflected in gains in LSF in Grade 1 and ORF in Grade 2 and Grade 3. Secondly, the findings provide insight into how structured literacy instruction can support reading development among multilingual learners transitioning to English as the LoLT. Finally, the study offers preliminary evidence regarding the feasibility and scalability of the intervention, drawing on programme implementation data, cost considerations, and teacher feedback regarding classroom practice. The findings of this study provide compelling evidence in response to the central research question: Can a low-cost, classroom-embedded literacy intervention improve foundational reading outcomes for multilingual learners in English-medium, under-resourced South African schools? Across Grades 1–3, learners demonstrated substantial, statistically significant gains in foundational skills such as LSF and ORF. These results suggest that embedded, structured literacy support can be a powerful lever for improving reading outcomes in multilingual, under-resourced contexts.

Interpreting the gains

Analysis of performance across the four participating schools revealed consistent gains. While learners with stronger baseline skills made the most progress in absolute terms, relative gains were largest among learners who started with the weakest reading fluency, indicating that QondaRead may help narrow early literacy gaps rather than widen them. For example, one teacher noted:

> 'My learners could barely read any letters at the start. Now most of them can read simple words and even full sentences.' (Grade 1 teacher, School 1, focus group participant)

This shift corresponds with a rise in the proportion of learners achieving 40+ LSF from 0% to 29%, as shown in Figure 2. Similarly, a Grade 2 teacher's comment that 'learners became more confident reading aloud' aligns with the Grade 2 average ORF increase to over 35 WCPM, well above the national average of 25 WCPM. The large effect sizes observed across all grade levels (Cohen's $d > 1.0$) indicate that the improvements in reading fluency were not only statistically significant but also educationally substantial. In schools where learners began close to fluency, the programme accelerated their progress to well beyond national expectations. In lower-performing contexts, learners made measurable, statistically significant improvements that moved them closer to reading proficiency. These gains represent a critical step toward ensuring that learners transition successfully from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. The historical comparison with School D's 2017 Grade 1 cohort provides further insight into the nature of these gains. The November 2024 cohort achieved a mean LSF score approximately 40% higher than the 2017 cohort at the same point in the year, with a significantly smaller proportion of complete non-readers and a larger share meeting the SA DBE benchmark. This pattern suggests that QondaRead's implementation in earlier grades may have contributed to stronger school-entry skills, underscoring the potential for cumulative, cross-cohort effects in literacy interventions. In Grade 2 and Grade 3, learners approached or exceeded SA DBE fluency benchmarks. The effect sizes observed in this study far exceed what would typically be expected from normal maturation or classroom exposure alone. National studies, for example, show that Grade 1 learners usually make only modest literacy gains during the year (Khosa

2022; Taylor et al. 2019; Western Cape Education Department 2006). The much larger gains reported here, therefore, provide strong evidence of the intervention's practical significance for improving foundational literacy. These outcomes offer a direct response to our core research question. They show that when appropriately designed and integrated into daily teaching routines, low-cost interventions like QondaRead can produce literacy gains that exceed those expected from typical classroom exposure alone, even for learners who do not speak the LoLT at home. The accelerated gains observed suggest that with appropriate classroom-based support, learners can make rapid literacy progress, even in highly constrained learning environments where they are not learning to read in the language of their homes.

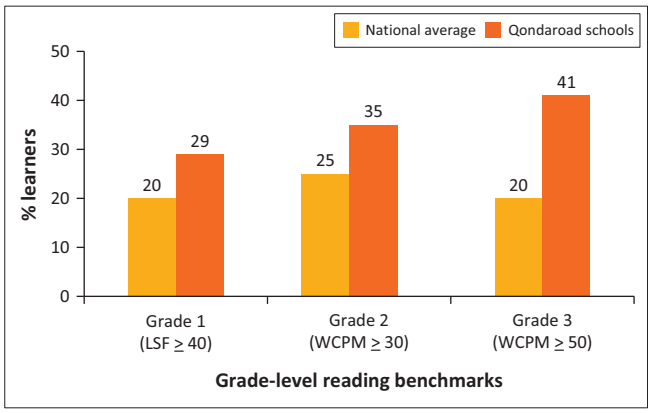
QondaRead vs national trends

In a national context where early reading stagnation persists, the Funda Uphumele Consortium (2025) reports that only 18% of Grade 1 learners meet the decoding benchmark, and just 19% of Grade 3 learners achieve the comprehension threshold of 50 WCPM. Against this backdrop, QondaRead schools demonstrate substantial divergence from this pattern, represented in Figure 3.

As shown in Figure 3, QondaRead learners in Grades 1–3 exceeded national averages by 15–20 WCPM on average, with 29% of Grade 1 learners reaching the LSF benchmark, and 41% of Grade 3 learners surpassing the 50 WCPM comprehension threshold, more than double the national average.

Reinforcing the role of classroom-embedded interventions

Unlike many externally delivered or small-group pull-out programmes, QondaRead was designed to be implemented within the existing classroom routine, requiring no changes to the school timetable or additional teaching staff and no extra administrative burden for teachers. This is particularly critical in low-resource settings, where scalability often fails as a result of dependence on external personnel or infrastructure. The programme's success reinforces the growing evidence that literacy interventions embedded in daily instruction, when supported by structured materials, can be both effective and sustainable (Duke & Cartwright 2021; Pretorius & Spaull 2016). The simplicity and accessibility of the phonics and guided reading model used in QondaRead make it an attractive option for broader replication.



LSF, letter–sound fluency; WCPM, words correct per minute.

FIGURE 3: Comparative performance: QondaRead versus national benchmarks.

Inclusive and equitable literacy gains

One of the most encouraging findings was that learners with the weakest baseline performance demonstrated the greatest relative improvement. This suggests that QondaRead may help narrow early literacy gaps rather than exacerbate them, an important consideration for equity in education. These outcomes speak directly to the aims of fostering inclusive, high-quality literacy learning in diverse and dynamic contexts. By meeting learners where they are, linguistically, cognitively, and socially, QondaRead helped to surface and strengthen their latent literacy potential.

Teacher ownership and professional growth

Qualitative data underscored the value of teacher ownership and professional learning in successful implementation. Teachers described the programme as manageable, meaningful, and aligned with their instructional goals. They valued the structure and consistency it brought to their teaching practice, as well as the collaborative learning enabled by school-wide implementation. 'We had a clear plan every day. That made the biggest difference', noted a Grade 1 teacher, referring to the guided structure.

This supports the broader literature on responsive pedagogy and funds of knowledge, suggesting that effective literacy instruction is not simply about materials, but about enabling teachers to draw on their own professional knowledge and that of their learners to make meaningful instructional choices (Elston et al. 2022; Moll et al. 1992).

Limitations and areas for further research

While the study provides robust early evidence of impact, several limitations must be acknowledged.

Without a counterfactual, it is difficult to definitively attribute improvements to the intervention alone. Although historical comparisons (e.g., School D's 2017 cohort) provide some context, these are not equivalent to a causal research design. Future evaluations could benefit from incorporating quasi-experimental methods, such as a matched comparison group drawn from similar under-resourced schools not implementing QondaRead. Additionally, a difference-in-difference (DiD) analysis, comparing literacy gains over time between treatment and non-treatment schools, could offer stronger causal inference while remaining feasible in real-world school settings. These approaches would allow researchers to isolate the impact of QondaRead more robustly while respecting the ethical and logistical constraints of educational fieldwork.

The study was confined to a single city with strong NGO–school partnerships, which may not generalise to other provinces.

Sustainability and long-term outcomes remain unknown. Although short-term fluency gains were substantial, follow-up studies are needed to examine whether these gains translate into later reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and academic achievement in Grade 4 and beyond.

While national benchmark comparisons offer insight, differences in school context, assessment administration, and sample composition should be noted when interpreting divergences.

Future evaluations should explore whether short-term fluency gains hold over time and whether early literacy growth leads to sustained improvements in reading comprehension and academic success. Such studies should consider longitudinal tracking, randomised control designs, and implementation studies across varied provinces to assess adaptability and scalability at a systemic level.

Implications for policy and practice

The results of this study hold important implications for both policy and practice. First, they highlight the feasibility of low-cost, high-impact interventions that work within existing systems and timetables. Second, they call for investment in teacher-led models of literacy development that embed structured fluency and phonics instruction without displacing broader comprehension goals. Finally, they reinforce the urgent need for early and sustained intervention in under-resourced schools, particularly before the Grade 4 transition to English as the LoLT. These findings also offer clear policy signals. Structured decoding and fluency instruction should be mandated and resourced from Grade 1 in all English-LoLT, under-resourced schools, especially in multilingual contexts. Classroom-embedded delivery must be prioritised over externally driven, high-cost interventions, to ensure sustainability. National funding frameworks should incorporate per-learner costing standards, to enhance transparency and planning. Critically, language transition policies must be aligned with long-term fluency support to avoid exacerbating early learning inequalities. If scaled with fidelity, QondaRead-style programmes could help shift South Africa's literacy trajectory, without overburdening teachers or education budgets.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer whether a scalable, low-cost, classroom-based intervention could meaningfully improve early reading outcomes in South Africa's multilingual, under-resourced English-medium schools. The findings presented here offer a strong affirmative, across all grades: learners at all participating schools made statistically significant and educationally meaningful gains in LSF and ORF. These results offer a compelling counter-narrative to dominant accounts of stagnation and decline in South African literacy achievement. Importantly, the gains observed were not limited to already proficient learners. Those with the weakest baseline performance improved most in relative terms, suggesting that targeted, classroom-based interventions like QondaRead may serve as effective tools for closing the early literacy gap. By situating the intervention within the day-to-day routines of teachers and learners, rather than as an add-on or externally managed programme, QondaRead offers a scalable model that foregrounds inclusivity, equity, and sustainability. The implications are clear: if children in under-resourced settings are supported with appropriate instructional strategies, and if teachers are empowered through accessible materials and ongoing mentorship, literacy outcomes can be transformed at scale. This aligns with the broader goals of the Special Issue to advance inclusive early literacy learning and responsive pedagogies in dynamic, diverse contexts. In closing, QondaRead stands as a promising contribution to the growing body of evidence that foundational literacy need not be a luxury afforded only to the privileged. These findings affirm that the answer to our central research question is yes. These findings demonstrate that structured, classroom-embedded literacy interventions can meaningfully improve early reading outcomes, even in multilingual, under-resourced school contexts.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Kelly A. Long: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The learner assessment data underlying this study cannot be made publicly available due to ethical restrictions related to research with minors. Aggregated or anonymised data may be made available from the author, Kelly A. Long, upon reasonable request and with appropriate institutional approvals.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or

position of any affiliated agency of the author. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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