



**Funda Wande**  
Reading for Meaning

## EVIDENCE BRIEF:

# Baseline insights on early grade literacy and numeracy in Limpopo

*Authored by the Funda Wande Research Team - November 2025*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing synthesises the baseline findings from a longitudinal study initiated in April 2024 by Funda Wande across 30 schools in Limpopo. The evidence reveals systemic and profound challenges in foundational literacy and numeracy among Grade R and Grade 1 learners. Key findings indicate that the vast majority of Grade R learners cannot identify letter sounds or read a single word, and comprehension is nearly non-existent. Similarly, numeracy skills are critically underdeveloped, with over 90% of learners unable to perform Level 2 subtraction and lacking core conceptual understanding. The study also highlights significant equity concerns, including a high prevalence of over-aged learners linked to poverty and school readiness issues. The implications are clear: a strategic shift is required, prioritising school readiness in Grade R, embedding explicit comprehension instruction from the first year of school, strengthening foundational numeracy concepts, and implementing equity-responsive interventions. The baseline data presents a stark picture but also provides a clear, evidence-based roadmap for systemic change, aiming to ensure children in Limpopo can read with meaning and compute with confidence by age 10.

## 1. STUDY OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

In April 2024, Funda Wande launched a longitudinal study to generate independent evidence on the state of early grade literacy and numeracy in Limpopo. The baseline assessment, conducted in 30 schools, provides localised insights into the realities faced by learners, teachers, and schools, moving beyond national-level reporting.

### Methodological Approach

The study's design incorporates rigorous assessment and analysis to ensure the validity of its findings.

- **Cohort:** The research tracked learners in Grade R and Grade 1.
- **Assessment Tools:** Three primary instruments were used to measure learner performance:
  - **EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment):** Measures foundational literacy skills.
  - **EGMA (Early Grade Mathematics Assessment):** Measures foundational numeracy skills.
  - **MARKO-D (Sepedi):** Assesses conceptual mathematical understanding.
- **Data Analysis:** The fieldwork was supported by rigorous training and quality assurance. Data was analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential techniques, including Rasch modelling, to validate the functioning of the assessment tests.





## 2. CORE FINDINGS: SYSTEMIC LEARNING GAPS

The 2024 baseline findings confirm significant challenges in both reading and mathematics, with learners progressing through the early grades without mastering essential foundational skills.

### 2.1 Literacy Deficiencies

Performance in early grade literacy is alarmingly low, indicating that the building blocks for reading are not being established.

- **Letter Sound Recognition:** Most Grade R learners were unable to identify any letter sounds within a one-minute timeframe.
- **Word Reading:** The ability to decode words is exceptionally weak. 86% of Grade R learners could not read a single word per minute. Grade 1 learners demonstrated only modest gains from this low base.
- **Reading Comprehension:** The study found that comprehension is “nearly absent.” This indicates a critical disconnect where decoding, even when it occurs, does not translate into meaning-making for the learner.

### 2.2 Numeracy Deficiencies

Gaps in numeracy are equally severe, with foundational concepts and operations proving to be major stumbling blocks.

- **Number Recognition:** Performance was weak among Grade R learners and only marginally stronger in Grade 1.
- **Higher-Order Operations:** A significant majority of learners (over 90%) struggled with Level 2 subtraction, signalling a deep-seated difficulty with more complex operations.
- **Conceptual Understanding:** Conceptual mathematics including part-whole reasoning and ordinality is underdeveloped. This fundamental weakness limits learners' ability to progress to more advanced problem-solving.



## 2.3 Equity Dimensions

The study highlights critical equity issues that intersect with learning outcomes.

- **Over-Aged Learners:** The presence of a “significant share of over-aged learners” points to broader systemic challenges related to school readiness and poverty.
- **Gender Performance:** A slight variance was observed in literacy, where girls marginally outperformed boys in early reading. However, in numeracy, both genders demonstrated “equally low outcomes.”

# 3. IMPLICATIONS & STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The baseline evidence pointed to a clear set of priorities for policy and practice to address the identified learning crisis. The core issue is not simply curriculum pacing but a deeper problem of readiness, instruction, and equity.

Domain	Key Implication	Recommended Action
<b>School Readiness</b>	The foundation for learning must be established before formal schooling begins.	Strengthening oral language, phonological awareness, and number sense in Grade R is a non-negotiable priority.
<b>Literacy Instruction</b>	Decoding skills are not automatically translating into comprehension.	Explicit comprehension instruction must be embedded into the curriculum from the first year of formal schooling.
<b>Numeracy Instruction</b>	Abstract operations cannot be mastered without a firm grasp of foundational concepts.	Teachers require practical tools and training to effectively teach counting, ordinality, and part-whole relationships.
<b>Equity</b>	Standardised approaches will fail learners with specific disadvantages.	Tailored interventions must be developed for over aged and struggling learners, with targeted support directed at disadvantaged schools.

The Limpopo baseline study painted a “stark but clear picture” of the educational landscape in the early grades. Learners are entering and advancing through the foundational phase of their education without acquiring the fundamental literacy and numeracy skills essential for long-term academic and life success.

Funda Wandé can position itself as a catalyst for systemic change. The goal is to transform these outcomes, ensuring that by the age of 10, all children in Limpopo are equipped to read with meaning and compute with confidence.

