



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



INNOVATION EDGE



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Introduction

There are 1.3 million children in South Africa aged 4-5 years. Approximately 72% ($\pm 930,000$) attend some kind of Early Learning Programme (ELP).

The Thrive by Five Index 2021 is the first (baseline) in a series of surveys that will monitor trends over time in the proportion of 4-5 year old children attending ELPs who are On Track for their age in key areas of development. This is the largest survey of preschool child outcomes ever undertaken in South Africa.

The Index was initiated by First National Bank and Innovation Edge, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), and supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and ECD Measure.

The Index provides population-level data on how well preschool children are doing in three key developmental domains: Early Learning, Physical Growth and Social-Emotional Functioning. These measures were selected because a child's performance in these domains at the point of entry into school is predictive of performance in the Foundation Phase of schooling, and beyond.

Data collection

Data for the Index was collected between September and November 2021 and included 5,139 children aged 50 to 59 months (48% boys and 52% girls) drawn from 1,247 Early Learning Programmes across the country.

Data on Early Learning was collected using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM 4&5), a locally developed and standardised instrument that is aligned with the South African Early Learning Curriculum. Each child was assessed in their home language, by a trained and accredited ELOM assessor. Data was collected on five important learning domains: (i) Gross

Motor Development, (ii) Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, (iii) Early Numeracy and Mathematics, (iv) Early Literacy and Language, and (v) Cognition and Executive Functioning.

For Physical Growth, the Index looks at one key measure - the child's height for age. This is important because it tells us whether the child is at risk of stunting. Growth stunting is usually associated with chronic malnutrition and is known to compromise neurological and cognitive development with significant loss of an individual's potential.

Social Relations with Peers and Adults and Emotional Readiness for School were assessed using the ELOM Social-Emotional rating scales, completed by the child's teacher.

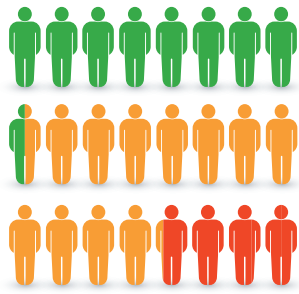
The Index sample is nationally representative of children enrolled in ELPs, and data may be disaggregated to show the performance of children in different provinces, different household income groups (using school quintiles as a proxy for income) and for boys and girls.

This document summarises key national findings for each of the three important domains assessed. It also includes one combined Composite Indicator on the proportion of children who are thriving i.e. children who are on track for both physical and cognitive development by age 4-5 years.

Key Findings (national)

1. Only 35% of children enrolled in ELPs in South Africa thrive by five

Half of all 4-5 year olds attending ELPs face barriers to thriving. These children will start school struggling, either because of physical stunting or because they lack the basic learning foundations. Of great concern is the fact that a further 16% of children will start Grade R at a *significant* disadvantage. These children are both physically stunted and *Falling Behind* in their cognitive development. For these children, considerable efforts will need to be made to support them as they transition into school.



35%

Thrive by Five

These children are On Track in both growth and early learning

49%

Face Barriers to Thriving

These children are On Track for only one of either growth or early learning and are deemed to be at risk

16%

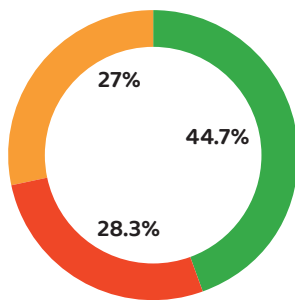
Face Significant Barriers to Thriving

These children are Not On Track for both growth and early learning domains and are deemed to be at high risk

2. Less than half of children attending ELPs are On Track for early learning

Less than half of children enrolled in ELPs in South Africa are able to do the learning tasks expected of children their

age. A staggering 28% of children are *Falling Far Behind* the expected standard. This means that more than one in four children starting Grade R will need intensive educational intervention in order to be able to cope in the Foundation Phase of school.



44.7%

On Track for early learning

These children meet the learning standard and are able to do the tasks expected of children their age

27%

Falling behind in early learning

These children are Falling Behind the standard and will need support in order to catch up with other children of their age

28.3%

Falling Far Behind in early learning

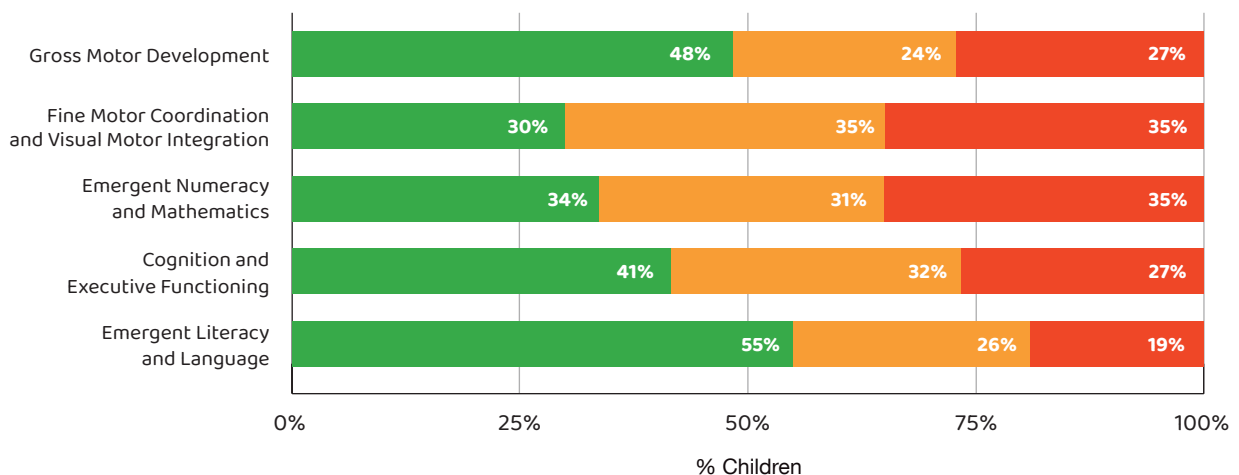
These children are Falling Far Behind the standard, need intensive intervention and are at risk of not catching up with their peers.

3. Poor performance in key learning domains is cause for concern

The figure below shows the percentage of children *On Track*, *Falling Behind* and *Falling Far Behind* for each of the five learning domains that were assessed. For all domains, except Gross Motor Development, boys performed on average worse than girls.

Very poor performance in three domains, particularly amongst the poorest children, is of great concern given how important these skills are for later school achievement.

- *Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (FMC-VM)* are skills that are really important to have when learning to read and write - Only 3 out of 10 children overall are *On Track* in this area of development. For the poorest children, the situation is even worse, and boys especially performed very poorly in this domain.
- *Early Numeracy and Mathematics skills* are strongly predictive of later school success - Only 3 out of 10 children overall can do the basic numeracy tasks expected of a child their age.
- *Cognitive and Executive Functioning (CEF)* are the skills that a child needs to pay attention, plan, think creatively, problem solve, and use self-control. Only 4 out of 10 children are *On Track* in this important area of development.



4. One in four children attending ELPs show signs of long-term malnutrition

One in four children attending ELPs are stunted, with 5.3% of children severely stunted. Rates of stunting in the Index were highest amongst the poorest children. Stunting is a (largely preventable) condition that arises from chronic malnutrition in pregnancy and the early years of life and impairs the physical and brain development of young children.

The Index found that children who were stunted performed worse on the early learning assessments than their non-stunted counterparts. They start out with lower scores at age 50 months, and these differences persist as children get older. The negative impact of stunting on the human capital of the country cannot be over-emphasised.

5. Social-Emotional functioning has a large effect on learning outcomes

The Index assessed children's levels of age-appropriate independence, social relations with peers and adults, and emotional readiness for school. For social relations with peers and adults, 27.5% of children who were assessed did not meet the standard. This number increases to 33.4% when it comes to emotional readiness for school. For both measures, boys were less likely to meet the standard than girls.

Children with better social and emotional functioning tend to transition more successfully into the school environment, and these skills influence the child's ability to play and work with their peers in a group setting, to ask for information or help from a teacher, to complete tasks independently, and to handle change. This was evidenced in the Index, where children who met the standard for social-emotional functioning performed better in terms of learning outcomes overall.

6. Children in poorer households have a far greater chance of falling behind

The Index found that a child's chances of starting school *On Track* is profoundly influenced by the income level of the household they are born into. Young children from more affluent backgrounds are starting school with a distinct advantage over their poorer peers. This advantage will increase as they get older because children who start school already falling behind, are likely to fall further and further behind over time.

The combination of risk factors faced by many young children

in South Africa has serious implications for their health and development. By way of example, by the age of 4 years, a child in the lowest income group who is severely stunted is developmentally roughly *one whole year* behind a child of normal growth in the wealthiest income group, when it comes to early learning.

7. Considerable variation in performance within income groups highlights potential

The Index clearly illustrates how socio-economic status impacts child outcomes. However, data collected for the Thrive by Five Index also highlight considerable variation in performance between individuals *within the same income group*. In other words, poor outcomes for poor children are by no means inevitable. There are many poor children who have significantly better outcomes than their peers, despite their disadvantaged circumstances. By investigating variation in performance *within* income groups, we can gain insights into the kinds of interventions needed to close the gap *between* groups, and to shift the performance bell-curve overall.

Conclusion

For most poor children in South Africa, the experiences that they currently have in their first five years of life place them at a significant disadvantage at the point of entry into school, with long term implications for their education, employment and income prospects. Urgent action is needed to eliminate the significant barriers to thriving that South Africa's children face in their earliest years.

More detailed information on the Index methodology and findings is available in the accompanying Thrive by Five Report and Technical documents on the Thrive by Five website: www.thrivebyfive.co.za. The website also contains action briefs which provide practical guidance on steps to be taken by various stakeholders to address the challenges identified through the Index.

Ultimately, we must hold ourselves and each other accountable for closing the opportunity gap between young children in the richest and poorest households, and for increasing the proportion of all young children in South Africa who *Thrive by Five*.

By repeating the Index data collection exercise every three years, we will be able to track whether our collective efforts are paying off.