

## **Literacy: an elusive goal?**

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There is general agreement that there is a crisis in school education in South Africa, particularly in the schools that serve the poor and from whom our university, UWC, attracts many of its students. This crisis is characterised in particular by very poor literacy and numeracy levels amongst school children. It is also characterised by a third of young people between the ages of 18 and 22, about 2.8 million young persons, being 'idle' – they are not in schools, nor in FET colleges or universities or in employment.

Literacy levels in South Africa currently pose one of the most severe challenges to the state. The rapid increases in skills levels in all sectors that are needed to drive and sustain economic growth are premised on sound educational foundations and this foundation is not possible without literacy - echoed in President Zuma's 2010 State of the Nation address. Yet, the most recent of several international comparisons over the last ten years, the PIRLS 2007 study, found that 80% of South Africa's Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners have not even attained the most basic reading level, the 'low' benchmark, as against only 6% internationally who did not reach this level (Howie et al. 2007).

Similarly the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQII) evaluation for Grade 6 between 2000 and 2003 found that the competence level of Grade 6 learners in South Africa stood at Level 3 (Basic Reading) (Moloi & Strauss, 2005:67). Essentially then, on average, South African learners are reading three grades below international reading benchmarks.

Against this backdrop, this paper outlines some of the challenges faced by young learners in learning to read and poses some ways in which to address this crisis.