



TEEN READING PILOT SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT 2026





The 2026 Teen Reading Pilot Survey summarised in this report is part of the larger National Reading Barometer project, which describes household reading cultures and the broader reading ecosystem in South Africa. The project includes two components:

The National Reading Survey (NRS) is a nationally representative survey of South African households. It profiles reading practices, preferences, and contexts outside the schooling system and includes questions on reading with children, digital reading, library use, and language preferences. The 2023 NRS was designed to enable limited continuity with the 2006 and 2016 National Reading Survey run by the South African Book Development Council (SABDC).

The National Reading Barometer (NRB) is a compilation of secondary datasets, plus selected data points from the NRS, that collates and tracks changes in the overall health of the South African reading ecosystem. It was initiated in 2023.

The National Reading Survey and Barometer will be repeated in 2027 and 2030.

This report was published in September 2026 by the National Reading Barometer Steering Committee.

The pilot study was led by a consortium of Nal'ibali, Social Impact Insights Africa and Room to Read, with funding from the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) and the Zenex Foundation. The pilot research was conducted by Social Impact Insights Africa.



Published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license

Report written by Tara Polzer Ngwato
Social Impact Insights Africa

Citation: Polzer Ngwato, T. (2026) Teen Reading Pilot Survey Summary Report, National Reading Barometer Study, Nal'ibali

Design: Gaelen Pinnock
www.polygram.co.za

NRB PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The broader goals of the National Reading Barometer project are to:

Understand reading cultures:

describe the diverse reading practices of South Africans.

Understand reading motivation and attitudes:

understand why people do or don't read and how they feel about reading.

Understand access:

map access to reading materials, by type and language, and unpack barriers to access.

Understand the ecosystem:

map reading ability, policies, budgets and system capacities that enable or constrain the growth of reading.

Track change over time:

track changes since the 2023 National Reading Survey, when the Survey and Barometer are repeated in 2027 and 2030.

Inform research, policy and practice:

inform and inspire research on reading in South Africa, policy shifts that create a more enabling context for reading, and interventions to promote and strengthen reading.

TEEN SURVEY RATIONALE

Why is it important to understand how teens (10-17 years old) read outside of school?

Reading gives us power – to learn new things, tell our stories, and shape our futures. It helps build a stronger, more equal economy and a connected society. It improves educational outcomes, economic opportunities, critical thinking abilities, empathy, civic engagement and child-adult relationships.

The teen years mark a critical transition: children move from learning to read under adult guidance toward becoming self-motivated readers who take ownership of their own reading, and by extension, their own education. This shift in agency matters well beyond the classroom. It lays the groundwork for teens to take charge of their own learning, and eventually their own participation in the economy and in society.

To improve reading in South Africa, a whole-of-society approach is needed. Home literacy environments, libraries and community resources, social norms around reading, policies and budget allocations, publishing industry activities and accessible data all have an impact on reading. Supporting its growth starts with up-to-date information.

By conducting new research on how teens read and want to read, this pilot survey seeks to spark debate and enable collective decision-making around shared priorities and collaborative action.

2026 Teen Reading Pilot Survey

BACKGROUND

The South African National Reading Surveys (2006, 2016, 2023) have historically surveyed adults (aged 16 and above) about their own reading practices and their reading with young children. The 2023 survey also asked adults how much teens in their households read. In preparing for the 2027 survey, it became clear that we lacked sufficient understanding of what, how, where and with whom teens read and how they feel about reading. It was also clear that teens could not simply be surveyed the same way as adults. This motivated a pilot study to survey adolescents aged 10-17 about their reading practices, attitudes, and access to materials.

Understanding how South Africa's youth read has, until now, relied heavily on what adult teachers, caregivers, and survey respondents describe about the children in their care. Yet reading is a deeply personal practice, shaped by preferences, habits, and attitudes that are often invisible to observers.

Teens are the only reliable source of information on what they choose to read, why, and what stands in their way, insights that school performance data or adult proxy reports cannot supply. Asking adolescents directly also signals that their reading lives matter in their own right, not only as an outcome of early-grade instruction or a precursor to adult literacy. As the sector moves toward a nationally representative survey in 2027, testing whether adolescents can be reliably interviewed about their own reading is a necessary first step toward centering their voices in how South Africa understands teen reading.

The 2026 Teen Reading Pilot Survey asks what and how 10 to 17-year-olds read at home and in everyday life: their reading practices; their preferences around content, language and format; their attitudes toward reading; and their access to reading materials. It does not cover reading at school, and it does not measure reading ability, fluency, or comprehension. The pilot can tell us whether and how teens choose to read outside the classroom, but not how well they read, nor can it explain the well-documented "reading crisis" in school-based outcomes. Linking teens' reading at home to their reading performance at school is a question the pilot raises for the sector but cannot answer itself.

METHODOLOGY

The 2026 Teen Reading Pilot Survey combined qualitative and quantitative methods to adapt the questionnaire (question relevance and formulation) and test the survey methodology (reaching respondents, consent, and length).



The survey instrument was refined iteratively ahead of fieldwork. Insights from four focus groups and eight individual face-to-face interviews with adolescents were used to test and adapt the questions, alongside several rounds of consultation with the NRB Steering Committee to ensure the instrument met the sector's information needs.¹

The pilot sample was drawn from households that had participated in the 2023 National Reading Survey and had children in the target age range. These households were re-contacted, and caregivers were asked to consent to their teens being interviewed telephonically, as well as to being re-interviewed themselves. A quota was set for each single age year (10, 11, 12, and so on through to 17), resulting in 40% of the final sample being in primary school (grades 3-7) and 60% in high school (grades 8-12) spanning the Intermediate, Senior, and FET school phases. Age-year quotas were allocated proportionally to provincial populations, so that each province's share of the sample reflected its share of the national population.

Within these quotas, the sample reflects a broad spread of teen experiences by gender (57% female), population group (95% Black African), and settlement type (rural 42%, small town 8%, urban township 38%, urban suburban 12%). The intention was not to produce a sample that is statistically representative by population group or urbanity - that level of precision is reserved for the nationally representative 2027 survey - but to ensure the pilot's findings were not skewed toward any single group of teens.

WHAT CAN A PILOT STUDY CLAIM?

Findings describe patterns observed in a small, non-representative sample of 302 teens and 261 linked caregivers. They should be read as early signals worth exploring further — not as national statistics.

¹ The study received ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand (H22/11/63).

The 261 linked caregivers surveyed were mostly female (85%) and mostly mothers (58%) of the surveyed teens, with some aunts, siblings, grandparents and fathers.

Given the pilot's design and sample, its findings should be read as indicative trends rather than national estimates. The data can reliably describe broad patterns in teen home reading practices and attitudes, differences across primary and secondary school age groups, and the relationships between teens and caregivers and between teens and younger children around reading.

What it cannot do is support claims at a national level. Because the sample is not representative, exact percentages cannot be extrapolated to the country as a whole, and some sub-groups, such as non-readers and teens who are out of school, are too small in this sample to confidently analyse. The findings in this report are therefore presented as estimates rounded to the nearest 5% or described as proportions or relative sizes, rather than exact percentages. These limitations are inherent to a pilot that tests feasibility and surfaces early signals ahead of the nationally representative 2027 survey, which will confirm whether the trends observed here hold at scale.

KEY FINDINGS

HOW MUCH DO SOUTH AFRICAN TEENS READ?

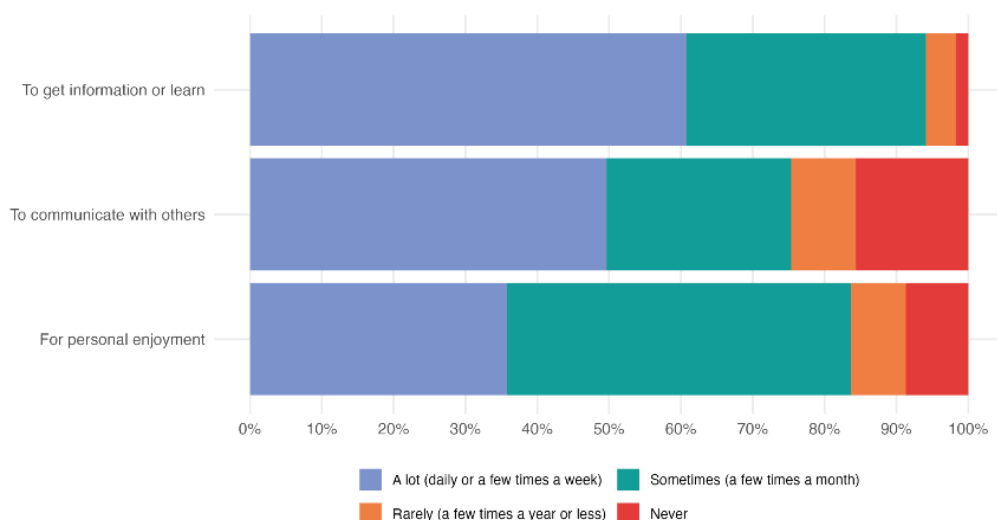
85% of teens read daily or weekly for enjoyment, and over a third frequently read long texts.



There is not one right or good way to read: people read for different reasons and in different ways. The National Reading Barometer project recognises that multiple reading cultures exist in our highly diverse and unequal context. Furthermore, reading is evolving, with digital and interactive reading and writing formats (messaging, social media) increasingly common.

To understand South Africa's diverse reading cultures, the survey asked about three distinct reasons people read: for enjoyment (entertainment or relaxation), for information (e.g. study, newspapers, self-improvement), and for communication (SMS/chat, social media, email). The teen survey also explored reading habits (how frequently you read) and reading depth (the length of texts).

Figure 1: Reading Frequency by Purpose (N=302)



The pilot survey shows that:

- Teens read most frequently to get information and learn: 60% do so daily/weekly and another third do so several times a month.
- Half of teens read (and write) to communicate with others daily/weekly, and another quarter do so several times a month.
- Over a third of teens read for enjoyment daily/weekly and another half do so several times a month, adding up to 85% who read for enjoyment at least once a month.

The length and complexity of texts are another important indicator of reading depth, since research has shown that reading short messages versus long texts, such as chapter books or long articles, has different effects on the brain. Over three-quarters of teens report reading long texts at least several times a month, with more than a third doing so daily or several times a week.

Both reading frequency and text length are gendered. Girls read more frequently in general, across all purposes (information, enjoyment and communication), and they read long texts more frequently.

Children read more often as they age. While there is a slight, steady increase in reading frequency for information and enjoyment as teens get older, there is a noticeable 25% jump in daily reading to communication between teens aged 12/13 and those aged 14/15. This may suggest that access to mobile phones increases around this age.

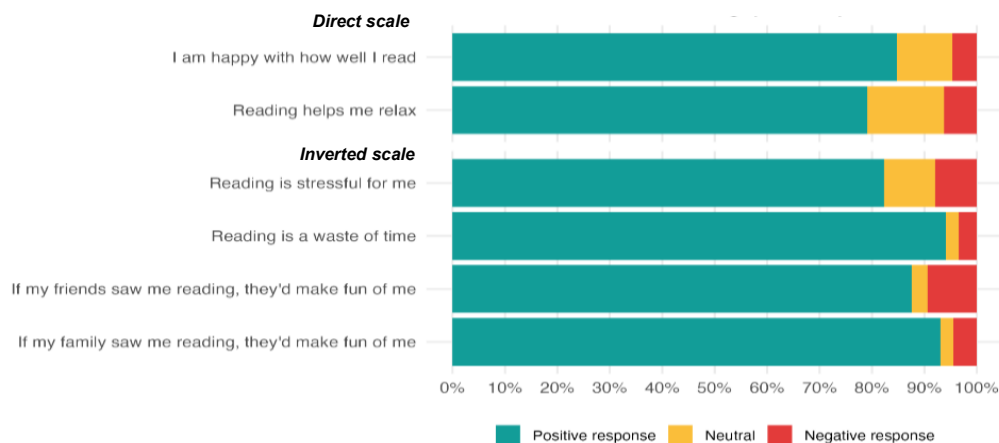
ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

Teen attitudes toward reading are very positive, and many identify themselves as regular or passionate readers.



A positive attitude toward reading is a necessary first step toward choosing to read independently outside the requirements of the formal education system. The pilot survey shows that on the whole, teens are positive about reading. More than 80% agree that reading helps them relax and disagree that reading is stressful or a waste of time. Similarly, reading is recognised as socially desirable: around 90% of teens do not believe that friends or family members would make fun of them if they saw them reading. Finally, teens have a sense of confidence in their reading abilities: 85% are happy with how well they read.

Figure 2: Statements about Reading



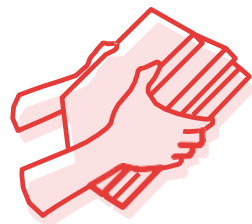
The 2023 National Reading Study found that reading identity², that is, whether someone considers themselves a reader, is an important predictor of how much and what they read. About a third of teens identified themselves as 'passionate readers', with another 15% identifying as 'regular readers'. Fewer than 5% overall identified as 'non-readers'. This is similar to the findings of the 2023 nationally representative study, in which just over 50% of 16- and 17-year-olds identified as passionate or regular readers.

Reading identity, as with reading frequency and depth, is gendered, with girls being more likely to identify as passionate or regular readers (c. 55%) than boys (c. 35%).

² The survey offered five options for reading identities: A non-reader (I don't read much and don't like reading); An aspiring reader (I don't read much but would like to read more); An occasional reader (sometimes I read and sometimes I don't); A regular reader (I read often for various reasons); A passionate reader (I love reading and it's an important part of my life)

ACCESS TO READING MATERIALS

75% of teens report that there are more than 5 books at home, and over a third have fiction books.



While the most common types of printed materials at home are school textbooks, followed by religious texts, more than half of teens report having 'books for young people to read for themselves' at home.

In print, teens most often read non-fiction books, followed by fiction and religious books. Online, they read social media posts most often, followed by religious and non-fiction texts. About 40% access free online books, one third use free online or mobile story sites, and around 40% listen to audiobooks or recorded stories.

About half of teens prefer paper formats over digital, with another quarter reading both print and digital equally. Digital reading is more popular among urban teens than rural teens. Given that rural teens have more limited internet access as 40% can only access the internet once a week or less, compared to 20% of urban teens.

SOURCES OF READING MATERIALS - SCHOOLS

Schools are the most important source of at-home reading materials for teens.



Having books at home is a well-established predictor of reading practice and ability. The teen survey pilot results confirm this by showing a positive interaction between the number of books in the home and how frequently teens report reading for enjoyment. Understanding how teens source reading materials to take home is therefore crucial for the literacy sector.

When asked about the sources of the books teens have at home, more than 80% of teens report currently getting books from school, which is also the most preferred source of free printed reading material to take home. In answer to the same questions, libraries are a current source of books for almost half of the surveyed teens, and almost 80% would prefer to get more free reading materials there. About a third of teens currently get reading materials from stationary shops or by borrowing from friends and family, with only a quarter buying from specialised bookshops. Preferred sources, apart from schools and libraries, are supermarkets and online.

Schools are not only sources of textbooks, but also a means of accessing books at

home 'for fun', i.e. not set texts or required reading. About 80% of teens report having some access to a school library or a book sharing system through teachers who lend books, bookshelves or boxes in classrooms. Forty per cent report using these opportunities to take home books for personal reading daily or weekly.

SOURCES OF READING MATERIALS - LIBRARIES

Schools are the most important source
of at-home reading materials for teens.



Just over half of teens reported having a community library in their neighbourhood, and just under half visited a library in the past year. This means that almost all teens with access to a library used it. This is very close to the proportion of 16 to 17-year-olds surveyed in the 2023 National Reading Study who visited a community library in the past year, and about double the average adult library visit rate. This points to teen library use being consistently higher than that of adults and that teens are an important independent user group for community libraries.

Just over a quarter of teens who use libraries do so weekly. The vast majority of teens use libraries for reading rather than for other activities, such as meeting friends and using the internet. The most common activity at the library is to sit and read books at 80% of library users, which is even more popular than doing homework or studying (75%). 60% of teen library users borrow books to take home and a quarter accompany younger children to the library and read with them there. When considering all teen respondents, not only current library users, we see that over 20% of teens regularly borrow books from community libraries, compared with only 8% of adults (2023 National Reading Survey).

Figure 3: What activities do you do at the community library? (N=113 past year library visitors)



Of teens who are not currently regular library users, 85% say they would use a library if there were one available nearby.

LANGUAGES

South African teens are multilingual readers. Teens want to read in African languages, but not enough appropriate texts are available.



This report uses “African languages” to refer to the nine national languages, excluding Afrikaans and English. As documented in the 2023 National Reading Survey, most African language speakers are multilingual readers who enjoy reading in both African languages and English. This also applies to teens. While around 80% currently read in English for both enjoyment and information, and around 20% already read in African languages, over half would prefer to read in African languages (along with English).

There is, therefore, a great unmet demand for reading materials in African languages that are appropriate for and interesting to teens. The pilot survey did not assess teens’ actual reading fluency in these languages, which has been one of the documented barriers to the uptake of African language materials in the past. Further engagement would be necessary to translate this general demand into actual resources.

There is already some access to African language materials, with 70% of teens who

speak Nguni languages or Sotho/Pedi languages reporting they have at least one book in their home language at home. This mirrors the findings of the 2023 National Reading Survey. African language books at home are often religious. Speakers of smaller language groups (Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Siswati, isiNdebele) have far less access to materials in their home languages.

In the world of digital communications, teens already communicate (read and write) regularly in both English and African languages. Reading and searching on the internet is still predominantly in English, suggesting that automated translation functions on the web are not regularly used.

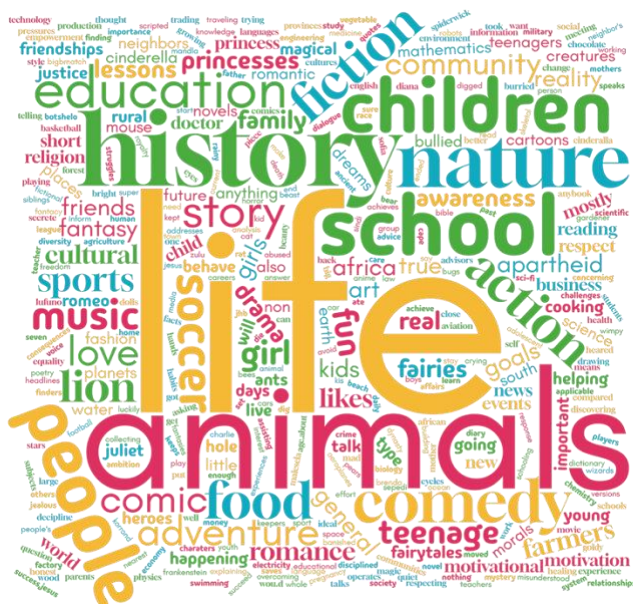
CONTENT AREAS

South African teens want to read content that links to their daily lives.



The pilot survey asked teens one open-ended question: if you could read any book you wanted, what would it be about? The most common responses related to content about 'real life' and the direct personal experiences and concerns of the readers.

This includes topics related to careers, such as 'careers in medicine', 'working with my hands', social issues, including 'stories about teen pregnancy' and direct, personally relatable experiences, with 'stories about rural girls', 'kids going to school', 'how to be disciplined when growing up', and 'overcoming life challenges.' As examples. Reading material on animals and nature, history, culture and heritage, as well as romance and fairy tales were also common themes. The size of the words in the word cloud above shows the frequency with which they were mentioned in the open survey responses.



While there were some gendered differences, with boys somewhat more interested in careers and girls more interested in nature and animals, the overall preference for non-fiction with direct relevance to self-improvement and local contexts was shared.

READING WITH CHILDREN

In addition to reading for themselves, teens read with younger children, making them an important stakeholder group for early learning.



Almost 50% of teens report reading with younger children in their households. This is a similar proportion to adults who read with the children they live with (52%, 2023 National Reading Survey). Teens also read with other children at school (30%), in the wider neighbourhood or family (20%) and in the library or at reading clubs (10%).³ Overall, over 60% of teens read with younger children in one context or another.

Fiction is by far the most commonly mentioned type of reading material teens read with younger children, including folk tales and traditional stories. Teens also often help younger children with homework, which entails reading school textbooks and readers with them. Furthermore, religious stories are common sources of reading material.

WHAT INFLUENCES TEEN READING

Predictors of teen reading include being read to as a young child, gender and having books at home. Caregiver reading identity and household income are not consistent influences.



When teens were asked who encouraged them to read, almost all mentioned family members, around 80% noted people at school, followed by people at their church/place of worship. Around half mentioned friends.

Analysing the teen and linked caregiver survey results together enabled regression analyses to identify which factors were significant predictors of teen reading practices. Frequent reading and reading with younger children are strongly predicted by whether the teen was themselves read to as a child. Almost 80% of the surveyed teens reported having been read to when they were small. Gender is another strong predictor, with girls being more likely to read than boys. Whether teens regularly read long texts is significantly linked to having more than 30 books in the home and being female.

Household income and caregiver reading identity (whether the caregiver described themselves as a regular/passionate reader or an aspiring or non-reader) were not

³ This was a multiple response question so answers add up to more than 100%.

predictors of teen reading. This is the case whether one is looking at teen reading frequency in general (across reading for enjoyment, information or communication), at reading frequently for enjoyment, whether teens read long texts, or whether teens ever read with younger children.

Finally, the only significant predictor of regular library use by teens is the presence of a community library nearby. Otherwise, library use is similarly prevalent across all other teen and household characteristics, such as gender, income level, primary or high school phase, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the teen reading pilot survey findings include:

- This pilot study successfully confirmed that teenagers can be surveyed telephonically about their personal reading. Methodologically, we can, and therefore must ask teens directly about their reading practices and preferences.
- Many teens already read for enjoyment, and almost all hold positive attitudes toward reading.
- While digital reading is happening, most teens still prefer print.
- Schools and libraries are crucial sources of reading material for reading enjoyment at home.
- Teens want to read in both English and their African home languages.
- Teens want to read books and stories that link directly to their daily lives and that help them navigate their current lives and possible futures.
- The key barrier to library use is simply that there is no library nearby.
- The most consistent predictors of teen reading are gender and the presence of books in the home. Caregiver practice (reading to young children) matters more than caregivers' own reading identity. Household income is not a barrier.

The pilot study's findings that South African teens read at home and value reading do not contradict other research showing that learners in school contexts struggle to read confidently, fluently, and for meaning. The purpose of the current study is not to assess technical reading skills or fluency, but rather to provide a broader context for discussions about teen reading that consider young people's own perceptions and choices. Teens clearly want to read. Gaps in technical reading skills in the school context are therefore not a matter of motivation or 'choice' but due to systemic factors to be addressed within the schooling system.

However, the teen reading pilot survey results confirm the importance of not limiting discussions of reading and literacy to the formal education system, but also considering young people's complete lives, at school and at home, in

libraries, communities and churches, as shaping their literacy opportunities and choices.

This implies a range of questions for organisations in the literacy sector:

- How do we get more books into homes?
- How do we use schools and libraries as intentional channels for getting books into homes and increasing the number of books that teens and households overall own?
- How do we support the continued and expanded availability of welcoming and well-stocked community libraries as crucial literacy spaces, especially for young people?
- How do we produce more reading materials for teens in African languages and with attractive content?
- How do we create and strengthen pathways between digital reading and reading in print, rather than seeing them as competing reading materials?
- How do we support boys' reading and how do we understand barriers to boys' reading, without assuming that boys should read in the same ways or volumes as girls?
- How do we engage with teens, as important actors in reading to and with younger children, to develop resources and programmes to encourage these crucial practices for early learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Reading Barometer project was led by the Nal'ibali Trust, in partnership with the National Library of South Africa (NLSA). The Teen Pilot Survey was funded by the NLSA and the Zenex Foundation. Social Impact Insights Africa implemented the survey and data analysis.

A steering committee shaped the project's direction and strategy and provided governance and oversight. Its members represented basic education, libraries, literacy non-profits, academia, philanthropy, publishing and community activism, and included: Bafana Mtini (Khutsong Literacy Club), Catherine Langsford (Zenex Foundation), Nadeema Musthan and Wade Harker (Room to Read), Dorothy Dyer (FunDza), Tara Polzer Ngwato (Social Impact Insights Africa), Janita Low (independent), Ongeziwe Nxowana (DGMT), Kulula Manona and Nompumelelo Mohohlwane (DBE), Nokuthula Musa and Marcus Maphile (NLSA), Lorato Trok and Gabrielle Kelly (Nal'ibali), Smangele Mathebula (SAIDE), Stanford Ndlovu (Masinyusanke Development Organisation), Elza-Lynne (Tape Aids for the Blind), and Takalani Muloiwa (Wits University).



www.readingbarometersa.org



info@readingbarometersa.org



[/BarometerSA](https://twitter.com/BarometerSA)



[/ReadingBarometerSA](https://www.facebook.com/ReadingBarometerSA)



[@readingbarometersa](https://www.instagram.com/readingbarometersa)



[@Readingbarometersa](https://www.youtube.com/Readingbarometersa)



[/national-reading-barometer-south-africa](https://www.linkedin.com/company/national-reading-barometer-south-africa)

FOR MORE
INFORMATION

Visit www.readingbarometersa.org



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



sport, arts & culture

Department:
Sport, Arts and Culture
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



NLSA

National Library of South Africa

an agency of the
Department of Sport, Arts and Culture



**SOCIAL
IMPACT
INSIGHTS
AFRICA**



ZENÉX
FOUNDATION
Leading | Connecting | Learning

