The Centrality of the Working Class in the Struggle for Socialism

Some not-so-random facts about South Africa:

- **According to Stats SA, South Africa's unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2023 was recorded at 32.9 percent—among the highest in the world. Up from the high twenties, the rate has been in the thirties since 2020, and means that some 8 million job seekers are chronically unable to find work—with all that that entails for living standards and quality of life for so many South Africans.**

- **In 2017, The South African formal business sector generated R690 billion in profits. While many small businesses have been knocked out by load shedding and other disasters, Corporate South Africa appears to be more than coping.**

- **With effect from March 2023, the minimum wage in SA was raised to R25.42 per hour (just over R4 000 in a 160-hour working month). What impact is this expected to have on living standards for the poor? What impact has past adjustments meant for the living standards of the poor?**

- **Mining company Sibanye-Stillwater is ranked 16th largest company in South Africa. This year it paid its CEO, Neal Froneman, a modest R190 million—modest when compared to what they paid him last year: a "jaw-dropping" (to use News24's term) R300 million. This is the power of capital in SA today. Justifying this obscene level of remuneration, the company's head of investor relations and corporate affairs, James Wellsted, remarked that "it was imperative to acknowledge that remuneration in the mining industry needed to be competitive on a global scale to attract and retain skills." (News24, 26 May 26 2023)**

In an article on IOL's website by Xolile Mtembu in October 2022, she observed that, with a Gini index of 63.0% South Africa topped the world's list of countries with the highest wealth inequality.

In South Africa, 10 percent of the population own more than 80 percent of the wealth (Al Jazeera, March 2022).

Capitalism has been cruel to the world's masses, and particularly so in the case of South Africa. Life for the vast majority of the country's citizenry is one of slum-dwelling, squatter camps (or, to use the euphemism, "informal settlements"), exposure to crime, poor health, poor education and poor-to-non-existent service delivery.

There are those who would blame the poor for their own misery. "There are too many people in the world" we are told. Yet, in a 2020 Bloomberg article Adam Majendie tells us that "without clearing any new farmland, we could feed two Earths' worth of people."

In a June 2021 article News24 claims that South Africa lost R1.5 trillion through corruption in just the years between 2014 and 2019 (That is, R1 500 000 000 000 in five years (!)).

Not without good reason, there are many who would directly blame the ANC government for the country's innumerable woes. The ruling party's record over the last almost-thirty years in power is atrocious, and worsening. One reads with disbelief that "Taxpayers paid R93m to upgrade ministers' kitchens, install gener-

Inside this issue:

ators and kill cockroaches." (article by Michael Sachs in City Press, 21 May). And, as is well-known, cabinet ministers are spared the inconvenience of load shedding at their residences "because they have to be available 24 hours." They're not even trying to hide their shameful ethics any more. The fat cats thumb their noses at us, as they get fatter and fatter.

Is the answer to vote the ANC out of power in 2024? Will a new administration change what is largely a structurally deformed polity? Or will it simply be a case of new snouts at the feeding trough?

Our country's future was arrested in 1994. That was when we ushered in the tried-and-tested formula used so successfully by the western imperialists to grant paper independence while securing ongoing economic domination. It was also when we wiped the slate clean for all the quislings and sell-outs who, during the apartheid era, worked the machinery of their own (and our) oppression.

The upcoming elections are fail-proof—guaranteed to ensure the victory of class forces inimical to working class interests. These elections must be boycotted. Even if by some miracle, bourgeois elections in this country should result in a victory for a working class party committed to the socialist transformation of society, there would be little prospect of enduring change, unless, as Vivek Chibber so forcefully states:

> A party in power, or in the legislature, can only ne-gotiate effectively for working people if there is an organized movement behind it . . . So having a par-ty can never be a substitute for building an orga-nized and militant working-class movement. Its po-litical power in fact depends on having this move-ment behind it.
>
> (Vivek Chibber. Confronting Capitalism: How the World Works and How to Change It (Kindle Loca-tions 950-951). Verso.)

One has to view the state of the organised working class movement with pessimism, particularly if Cosatu is taken as the standard. It must be remembered that Cosatu is (and always has been) part of the ruling alliance. And the less said about the other party to the alliance, the better.

However, there continues to be an underlying militancy within working class society as a whole, which often ex-presses itself in contradictory ways. The potential for pro-gressive organising exists, and this is the cardinal chal-lenge which faces the Left right now.

American activist Nancy Fraser has produced a powerful conceptual framework for struggle. In her book, "Cannibal Capitalism" she asserts that capitalism involves both exploitation and expropriation — that workers are exploited in the workplace and that whole national communities are expropriated via imperialism. In addition, she identifies a

range of "non-economic" sites of anti-capitalist struggle, including race and feminism. Her conclusion includes the position often repeated by another American (Adolph Reed) that all forms of working class struggle must be anti-capitalist, otherwise it's nothing other than "left-wing neoliberalism."

What these ideas stress is the need to broaden the anti-capitalist struggle to include all forms of working class struggle – at the level of the workplace, in our communities, and across cultural lines. Importantly, there is the imperialist dimension that gets foregrounded as well — a dimension that many would argue lies at the very root of our oppression as a country in the Global South.

In closing this short piece, Chibber is again worth referencing. He makes the point that "the socialist move-ment [has] to rise above its "economic-corporate" political identity and seek to represent all subordinate groups. The socialist Left has understood that workers are not the only group that is oppressed."

> ". . . an appropriately organized working class, with real power, and with the ability to significantly disrupt the flow of profits, changes the power balance in society more profoundly than any other social group. No other group offers the combination of being in the numerical majority, having an interest in progressive change, and also having the capacity to bring it about. (Ibid, Kindle Locations 1266—1269)

In the Preamble to the Unity Movement's Ten Point Programme, the following are among the immediate aims listed:

- To subordinate the state and the economy to the leadership of the working class, so that the scandalous social deficits existing in our society, which are actively promoted by the policies of the current ruling class, might be rapidly eliminated.
- To strive to eliminate poverty in all its manifestations i.e. material, cultural, intellectual and social.
- To end foreign domination - political and economic - and to wage a relentless battle against all local agents who serve the cause of foreign domination and exploitation.
- To strenuously oppose all Washington Consensus pre-scriptions, in terms of which our economy is subject to structural adjustment programmes, privatization, deregulation and other forms of subjugation to imperialist interests.
- To forge alliances with like-minded movements both in South Africa and abroad in order to accelerate the aims of the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle.

The immediate task facing the Left is clear: to build the uni-ty of all sections of the oppressed masses in the anti-capitalist struggle.

AUTOMATION AND THE THREAT OF JOB LOSS

ChatGPT is an emerging technology which has taken the world by storm.

> **It has produced poetry, Shakespeare-like prose, software code and medical prescriptions. Teachers and educators have expressed alarm over the use of ChatGPT by students to complete assignments. News articles have excitedly announced that it has passed law, medical and MBA exams... Abstracts written by ChatGPT for medical research journals have fooled scientists into believing humans wrote them. Tons of articles have appeared announcing the impending demise of a whole range of professionals, from journalists, writers, and content creators to lawyers, teachers, software programmers and doctors. Companies such as Google and Baidu have felt threatened by ChatGPT and rushed to announce their own AI-powered chatbots. (Bappa Sinha, February 2023).**

What is a "chatbot?" It is a software application that aims to mimic human conversation through text or voice interactions, typically online. (The "bot" in Chatbot stands for "robot.")

In November 2022, the artificial intelligence (AI) research laboratory OpenAI launched a free prototype of ChatGPT, and within four months more than 100 million users across a wide range of disciplines have been experimenting with the preview version of ChatGPT. (Kevin Reed, March 2023)

ChatGPT represents a significant step forward in AI technology. Experts in the field believe it to be a "tipping point" – that it has "crossed a threshold" and that it is "startlingly" superior to previous versions. (Reed, ibid)

Understandably, there is "fear and trepidation" in the ranks of white collar workers, who expect not only whole job categories to be eliminated, but even whole sectors, even while the technology is still in its infancy. Ahmed Bouzid (April 2023) thinks that "AI is not going to confine itself to swallowing only [ordinary white collar jobs]. It will also make short-shrift of those who have so far been enjoying cushy, elite jobs: the consultants and the researchers and the professors and the "experts.""

While personal computers in the 1980s had a positive impact on productivity, the adaptive and learning features of artificial intelligence tools like GPTs mean productivity will rise exponentially over a much shorter period of time.

> For example, today, ChatGPT is a powerful tool for software developers. Using its natural language processing capability, it can model what a developer is trying to accomplish and provide corresponding code snippets. It can also automate repetitive and time consuming tasks without mistakes and inconsistencies typical of direct human coding input.

> ChatGPT can quickly and accurately simplify complex computer code and provide comments and documentation that are often more accurate and informative than anything a developer can write. (Reed, ibid)

Seen within the context of capitalist development over the centuries, AI in general and ChatGPT in particular could be regarded as "just the latest" in the long, ongoing line of innovations designed to continue profit maximisation. As is well-known, it has always been the case that automation and other technologies are readily adopted by capitalists if they prove to be a more profitable option than human labour. Capitalism is not about people, it's about profits.

While labour-saving technology has undoubtedly contributed to job-losses, it has also had other negative effects for work and workers - principally, deskilling of jobs, and re-casting job roles. In regard to the latter, an example might illustrate the phenomenon:

> The current AI revolution doesn't come from better designed algorithms, but from an enormous growth of data over the last decade that is used to train neural networks. Though ChatGPT was trained on mostly free and even pirated data, other AI companies may need to hire workers to generate data in the future. Additionally, embedded into the training process are "ghost workers" who perform menial tasks like classifying images for pennies per task. Workers in Kenya scrubbed ChatGPT of offensive content for less than $2/hr. Data is the raw material for AI, and AI-related ghost work will only grow as AI consumes ever-larger datasets and a stagnant economy forces workers into gigs. (Tony Gong, May 2023)

This is shown more graphically by Phil Jones (2021):

> This is the hidden abode of automation: a globally dispersed complex of refugees, slum dwellers and casualties of occupations, com-

pelled through immiseration, or else law, to power the machine learning of companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon. Take autonomous vehicles, a growing industry for many of the biggest platforms, estimated to be worth $54 billion in 2019 and well over $550 billion by 2026. So much of the labour that companies like Tesla require centres around the need for clean, annotated data to help its driverless vehicles navigate traffic. Images taken from on-board cameras contain large amounts of raw visual data, which, to become useful, must first be categorised and labelled. The labelled data then shows the car how to differentiate the urban environment and recognise everything from pedestrians and animals to road signs, traffic lights and other vehicles. Data training rarely takes place in-house. Instead, companies like Tesla outsource the work to the Global South. In 2018, more than 75 percent of this data was labelled by Venezuelans facing the most desperate circumstances. (Phil Jones. Work Without the Worker: Labour in the Age of Platform Capitalism (Kindle Locations 203-207). Verso.)

A growing trend in recent decades has been the emergence of the so-called "gig economy," where the labour market is characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs. "Gig workers gain flexibility and independence but little or no job security. Many employers save money by avoiding paying benefits such as health coverage and paid vacation time. Others pay for some benefits to gig workers but outsource the benefits programs and other management tasks to external agencies." (Investopedia, October 2022)

This has inevitably had the effect of undermining workers' ability to organise and collectivise, as workers in the tech-driven industries are structurally separated from one another. Moreover, the relatively lower skills-levels of jobs in the sector, plus the availability of a huge reserve army of labour, blunts workers' militancy, especially their recourse to strike action. Furthermore, as we have seen, mega firms like Amazon.com have been active in union-bashing and –busting, and in persecuting staff members in the forefront of organising workers at shop-floor level. Mass strikes of the kind we saw recently by Uber drivers are still possible, but infinitely more difficult to organise.

Does this mean that labour-related issues and disputes should be politicised? Should workers in affected industries and professions demand greater legislative protection? How do they do that (or, for that matter, take any kind of collective action) within the constraints of the gig-economy?

Relying on government support in a neoliberal order is more-often-than-not an exercise in self-delusion. Governments are openly concerned to promote the interests of Big Capital at any cost, and as we are seeing in South Africa, far more concerned about plundering the state than fostering the interests of the citizenry.

A point worth noting about the AI industry is that large industry leaders such as Facebook, Microsoft, Google, Apple and Amazon have seen its potential as a mechanism to drive profitability for themselves, and have begun to develop their own capacity to compete on this front. An illustrative example: In 2018, Microsoft acquired the largest open-source development platform, GitHub, for $7.5 billion.

> In 2019 . . . Microsoft poured $1 billion into the non-profit OpenAI. Since then, it has gained exclusive licence to some of the company's innovations, including the frontier deep learning AI model 'GPT-3'. At the time of writing, the firm is expected to put an additional $10 billion into the further development of the AI chatbot ChatGPT. (Cecilia Rikap, NLR, Jan/Feb 2023).

To end off with, we quote a thought-provoking insight by left-wing sociologist, Aaron Benanav, who contests the notion that automation is the main cause of the jobs bloodbath of recent times:

> We live in an era of dizzying technological change, with smartphones, self-driving cars and automated stock-trading desks apparently set to transform life across the globe. What will human beings do in an automated future? Will we be able to adapt our social and political institutions to realize the dream of human freedom presaged by a new age of machines? Or will it turn into a nightmare of mass joblessness? . . . I argue that a real trend unfolding across the world is a chronic under-demand for labour. However, the explanation the automation theorists offer - runaway technological change destroying jobs - is false. The real cause of the persistently low demand for labour is the progressive slowdown of economic growth since the 1970s, as industrial overcapacity spread around the world, and no alternative growth engine materialized. .As economic growth decelerates, job creation slows, and it is this, not technology-induced job destruction, which is depressing the global demand for labour. (adapted from Benanav's article, "Automation and the Future of Work," 2019).

THE ABANDONMENT OF OUR CHILDREN

Education is the systematic instruction to develop human potential, gain knowledge, and experience, develop the intellect, critical abilities, and values of social justice, human rights, social and environmental needs. It teaches skills and self-discipline to become agents of social change and useful productive citizens in society. It builds global humanity across national borders with no racial, class prejudice or xenophobia.

The educational system is often subverted to support the governing ruling class elite, their dominant neo-liberal ideology, their social racial or class structure and values.

The recently released Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results of the Grade 4s in South Africa was embarrassingly appalling, yet predictable. Out of 57 countries, worldwide SA came absolutely last. Education standards in SA have been on a slippery slope for many decades and this should come as no surprise to many educators. The recently released results of the Pirls survey are no different to that of 2017 when SA also came last out of 50 countries. It appears that no fundamental change has been effected to improve education since the release of the 2017 Pirls report.
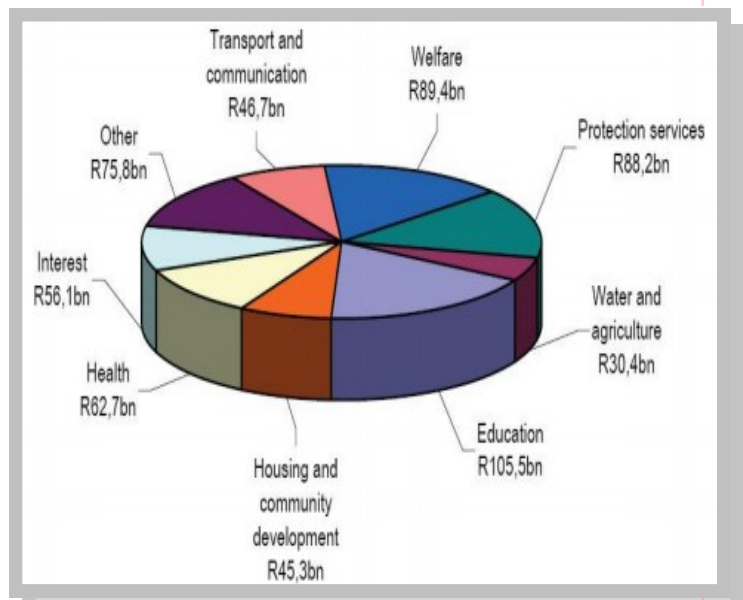
Most of the countries participating are high- or middle-income countries. The average figure for international reading achievement is 500 with the best country, Singapore scoring the highest with a total of 587 points, Brazil scored 429 and Egypt a credible 378 with SA coming in last with 288. Not only did we underperform, but our score dropped from 320 (The least in the results of 2017) to an ignominious 288 in 2023.

One of the main findings is that 81% of Gr. 4s cannot read for meaning. This is not only tragic but a national crisis. What is going to happen to our children? What life awaits them?

The announcement of the Pirls results paints a gloomy picture of the quality of education in our country despite the hullaballoo made annually over the matriculation results. Further, this is against the background of spending 18.42% of GDP, the largest amount on education.

As usual, government officials denied that a crisis existed. None of what Motshekga said in parliament addresses the fundamental question of accountability in the schools where reading and numeracy are concerned. Who holds departmental officials accountable for lack of progress in the schools, or for that matter, the

Education gets the biggest slice of the cake

principals or the teachers?

In the schools of the poor, where it is assumed, that SA's challenges are concentrated, the question of ratio of learner/teacher is not addressed. Principals or the teachers.
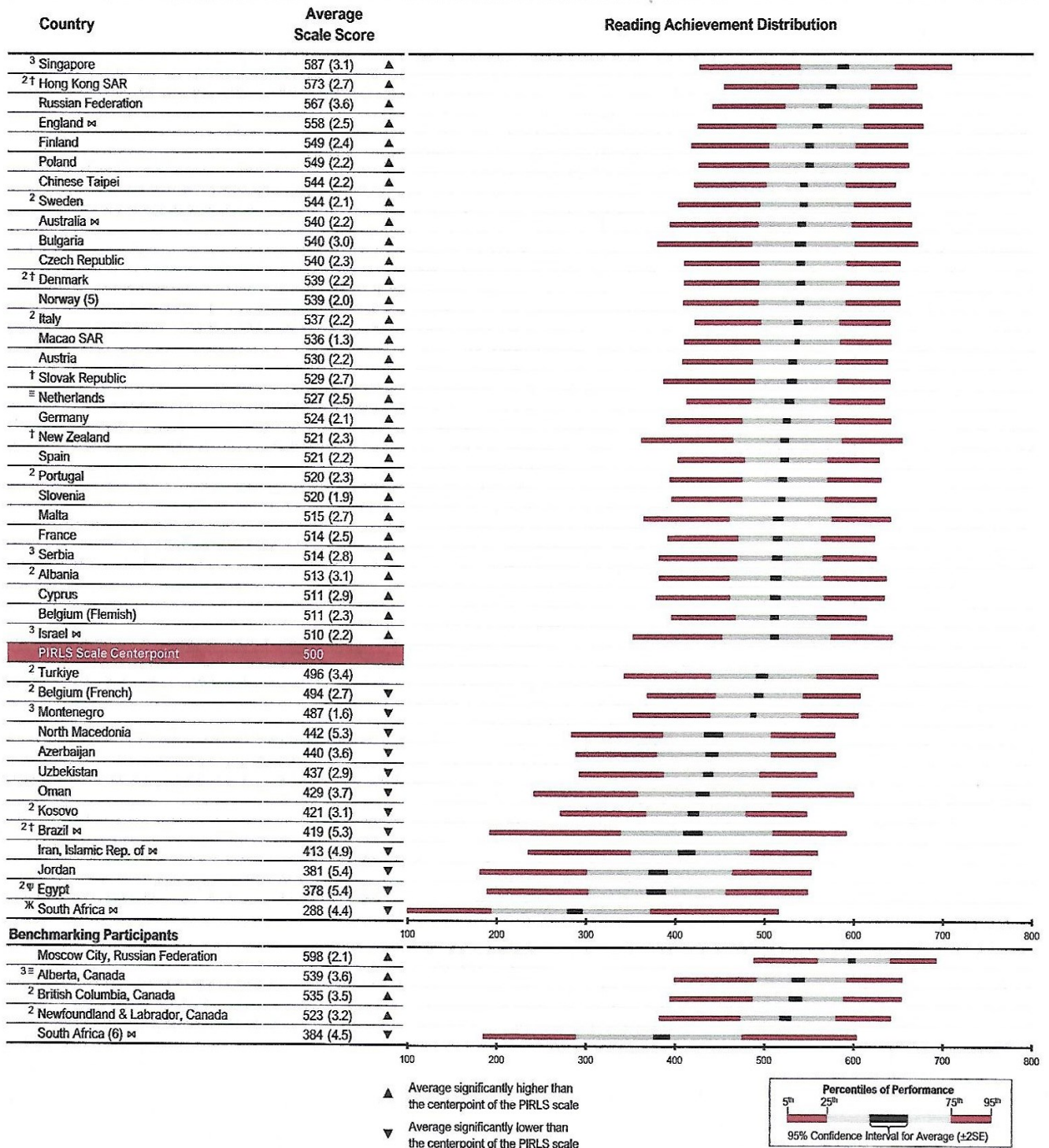
It is significant that of the countries assessed, SA has the highest learner/teacher ratio.

The report also revealed the following statistics: Less than half the learners who took the tests in English and Afrikaans could read, while more

Exhibit 1.1: Average Reading Achievement and Scale Score Distributions

Assessed Fourth Grade Students at the End of the School Year

Grade 4 — IEA PIRLS 2021

⋈ Assessed one year later than originally scheduled

Country	Average Scale Score		Reading Achievement Distribution
[3] Singapore	587 (3.1)	▲	
[2†] Hong Kong SAR	573 (2.7)	▲	
Russian Federation	567 (3.6)	▲	
England ⋈	558 (2.5)	▲	
Finland	549 (2.4)	▲	
Poland	549 (2.2)	▲	
Chinese Taipei	544 (2.2)	▲	
[2] Sweden	544 (2.1)	▲	
Australia ⋈	540 (2.2)	▲	
Bulgaria	540 (3.0)	▲	
Czech Republic	540 (2.3)	▲	
[2†] Denmark	539 (2.2)	▲	
Norway (5)	539 (2.0)	▲	
[2] Italy	537 (2.2)	▲	
Macao SAR	536 (1.3)	▲	
Austria	530 (2.2)	▲	
[†] Slovak Republic	529 (2.7)	▲	
[≡] Netherlands	527 (2.5)	▲	
Germany	524 (2.1)	▲	
[†] New Zealand	521 (2.3)	▲	
Spain	521 (2.2)	▲	
[2] Portugal	520 (2.3)	▲	
Slovenia	520 (1.9)	▲	
Malta	515 (2.7)	▲	
France	514 (2.5)	▲	
[3] Serbia	514 (2.8)	▲	
[2] Albania	513 (3.1)	▲	
Cyprus	511 (2.9)	▲	
Belgium (Flemish)	511 (2.3)	▲	
[3] Israel ⋈	510 (2.2)	▲	
PIRLS Scale Centerpoint	**500**		
[2] Türkiye	496 (3.4)		
[2] Belgium (French)	494 (2.7)	▼	
[3] Montenegro	487 (1.6)	▼	
North Macedonia	442 (5.3)	▼	
Azerbaijan	440 (3.6)	▼	
Uzbekistan	437 (2.9)	▼	
Oman	429 (3.7)	▼	
[2] Kosovo	421 (3.1)	▼	
[2†] Brazil ⋈	419 (5.3)	▼	
Iran, Islamic Rep. of ⋈	413 (4.9)	▼	
Jordan	381 (5.4)	▼	
[2Ψ] Egypt	378 (5.4)	▼	
[Ж] South Africa ⋈	288 (4.4)	▼	

Benchmarking Participants

Country	Average Scale Score		Reading Achievement Distribution
Moscow City, Russian Federation	598 (2.1)	▲	
[3≡] Alberta, Canada	539 (3.6)	▲	
[2] British Columbia, Canada	535 (3.5)	▲	
[2] Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada	523 (3.2)	▲	
South Africa (6) ⋈	384 (4.5)	▼	

▲ Average significantly higher than the centerpoint of the PIRLS scale

▼ Average significantly lower than the centerpoint of the PIRLS scale

Percentiles of Performance: 5th 25th 75th 95th — 95% Confidence Interval for Average (±2SE)

The PIRLS achievement scale was established in 2001 based on the combined achievement distribution of all countries that participated in PIRLS 2001. To provide a point of reference for country comparisons, the scale centerpoint of 500 was located at the mean of the combined achievement distribution. The units of the scale were chosen so that 100 scale score points corresponded to the standard deviation of the distribution.

( ) Standard errors appear in parentheses. Because of rounding some results may appear inconsistent.

See Appendix A.2 for population coverage notes 1, 2, and 3. See Appendix A.5 for sampling guidelines and sampling participation notes †, ‡, and ≡.

Ψ Reservations about reliability because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 15% but does not exceed 25%.

Ж Reservations about reliability because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 25%.

Issues identified in Albania's data quality led to reduced comparability and framework coverage.

South Africa continued investigating its PIRLS 2021 results at the time of publication and will deal with the findings through its national report.

TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center
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than 80% of those in the other official languages cannot read at all. A further damning statistic is that the provinces with the highest level of poverty, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo also had the highest percentage of learners that could not read.

It is also significant that *reading with meaning* in the *no-fee schools* (Quintile 1, 2 & 3) is worse off than in schools in Quintile 4 & 5 (Former Model C and Private - Curro Schools).

Most schools in Quintile 1—3 have non-existent to poor access to quality educational resources that stimulate the minds of the learners. Libraries are often non-existent, and where there are class libraries (in the Foundation Phase) they are mostly stocked with books that do not interest the learners. Teachers have inappropriate teaching skills and thus lack confidence in their ability as they lack content knowledge of the subjects. The lack of active on-going teacher development programmes by the education department adds to the crisis

The University of Cape Town's Children's institute from 2020 indicated that four million children have stunted growth because of malnutrition and 10 million go hungry every day. An estimated 27% of SA's children under the age of five are stunted which results from pro-longed under-nutrition, that affects their physical and brain development. Researchers have found that 47% of households ran out of money to buy food in May and June in 2022. The National Schools Nutrition Programme is fraught with problems. Recently non-delivery of food to schools in KZN and the Eastern Cape has again highlighted these problems.

How are our children expected to learn if they are undernourished?

The Funda Wande Report of the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that there are many challenges outside of the classroom that hinders a learners ability to be engaged and fulfilled in their learning, these factors include, socio-economic, home languages and motor skills.

That means that inequality in society plays an integral part in the underdevelopment of the learning of children.

Do poverty and unemployment affect education?

Of course, how are learners able to study living with violence and degradation in the shanty-towns that dot the SA landscape, without piped water in their homes, electricity, well-ventilated rooms and healthy food?

Many schools in the townships have dilapidated infrastructures, no laboratories, no libraries, no halls or recreational facilities. None of the schools in the areas of the advantaged minority has produced this appalling level of illiteracy. Whilst the education department is not directly responsible for the *for-profit* (e.g. Curro Schools) schools, they have overall oversight of education in the country. The schools of the rich are the best-equipped schools with modern technology, the best teaching resources and above all small classes. Needless to say, this situation obtains in former Model C schools as well. These schools whether wittingly or not, encourage values of superiority, condescending class structures and even racism.

The majority of the poor suffer under a destructive social system of inferior, class discriminatory public education. Children are housed in over-crowded classrooms, as inadequate staff provision at most schools is the norm. At your former Model C schools, SGBs can afford to hire additional teachers (before they become permanent) to augment the staff complement, making for a more manageable pupil-teacher ratio.

Our education system is part of a dehumanising

system of exploitation and oppression that condemns millions of people in society to suffering, poverty, joblessness and inequality. This situation can only be changed when we eliminate the profit-driven system in which the rich become richer and the poor are condemned to a life of degradation and misery. The education system can only show the desired improvement when the human needs of all citizens are taken into account. This can only happen when control of the economy based on equity and justice, is vested in the public, the affected workers and communities.

Schools for the rich - former Model C School

Children learning under a tree with dilapidated prefabricated buildings in the background