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**About this paper****Appears in:**ICERI2022 Proceedings  
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International Conference of  
Education, Research and  
Innovation**Dates:** 7-9 November, 2022**Location:** Seville, Spain**Citation download:**([BibTeX](#)) ([ris](#)) ([plaintext](#))**Other publications by the  
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## ASSESSMENT OF SKILLS TO FACILITATE THE LEARNING OF READING AND WRITING: A STUDY IN THE 1ST YEAR OF SCHOOLING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This paper presents the results of a quantitative study based on the assessment of competencies to facilitate the learning of reading and writing at the beginning of the 1st year of schooling. This study is part of the "Promoting Reading and Writing" project, which has been underway since 2018 in 11 school clusters of the Intermunicipal Community of Terras de Trás-os-Montes - Portugal. This project's main goals are to conduct screenings in the first four years of schooling to detect risks in the learning of reading and writing skills of the children involved, at an early stage of the school year and to train the respective teachers in the teaching of reading and writing to improve their classroom practices, in order to contribute to the success of all their students in these skills. In the screening carried out in the school year 2020/2021 (in the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic and after months of distance learning), 544 students from the eleven school clusters involved participated.

The data collection tool used for this screening was the Know, Act and Change (Conhecer, Atuar e Mudar (CAM)) tests - Version 3 (2020) which, for the 1st year of schooling:

- assesses knowledge of letters,
- identification of the final syllable,
- cultural knowledge of the printed word,
- identification of the initial phoneme and, consequently,
- provides information on phonological awareness (identification of the final syllable plus identification of the initial phoneme).

After the analysis of results, using descriptive statistics, it was possible to verify (based on data presented throughout the text) that regarding letter knowledge, most students were at the highest level of performance, and the data collected is in line with others that the team collected in previous years. As regards the identification of the final syllable, the results are not as good as in the previous item, with almost 40% (39.34%) of the scores obtained being in the two lowest levels ("very fragile" and "fragile. Regarding cultural knowledge of the printed word, 91.91% have no relevant difficulties in this competence, as they get between 7 and 12 answers right (12 being the maximum result). With regard to the identification of the initial phoneme, where more than half (51.47%) of the scores were placed in the two lowest levels, and phonological awareness, where 41% of the scores were placed in the same two levels, the greatest weakness in the area of these competences is evident. These results highlight that, on the one hand, no negative effect is visible from the changes forcibly introduced because of the Covid-19 Pandemic about letter knowledge and cultural knowledge of print. On the other hand, there is an added need for great attention and

particular and intentional action in the development of phonological competence, remembering that this development is crucial for learning to read and write. The reflection and training with the teachers involved also included sessions whose objective was to work with different digital technologies (namely Storyjumper and vizia.com), from which they could develop reading and writing activities that promoted learning, in person or remotely. We would highlight yet the importance of professionals keeping a close eye on those students who are not in the majority group and who present a risk in one or more of the skills assessed. It is mainly to these students that our work with these teachers was directed.

**keywords: reading, writing, phonological competence, risk.**