



THE
**LEARNING
TRUST**
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL
**ADAPTING TO LOCAL
CONTEXTS AND FOSTERING
COLLABORATION**



August 2025



Framing Our Shared Challenge

South Africa's foundational learning crisis remains urgent. The Thrive by Five Index (2024), published by the Department of Basic Education and coordinated by DataDrive2030, assesses the outcomes of Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) by measuring the percentage of 4- and 5-year-old children who are "on track" for learning as they enter Grade R and Grade 1.

The Index revealed that **only 42%** of children entering Grade R and 1 are "**on track**" in early learning, confirming a growing concern captured by the **Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2021)** on the number of Grade 4 learners that cannot read for meaning. These are not separate crises—they are cumulative gaps that compound over time.

For many learners, the abrupt switch from their home language to English as the Language of Learning and Teaching and Assessing (LoLTA) in Grade 4 creates a profound disruption at a critical stage of development.

Addressing this language barrier is therefore central to solving the foundational learning crisis and ensuring genuine educational equality—a goal the **Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE)** policy is designed to achieve.

Through implementation of **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)** in South Africa, we are learning that for this approach to be effective, it must respond to this reality by adapting to local contexts and fostering collaboration across stakeholders.



As noted by implementing partners in our Community of Practice (CoP), **"Adaptation is not just about language; it is about resonance,** making TaRL feel natural and meaningful to learners in their context. Without this contextual responsiveness, even proven strategies, risk being undermined by systemic challenges."



- How do we make TaRL work in various contexts?
- How do we adapt it to fit South Africa's complex linguistic, socio-economic, and political realities?
- And how do we move from isolated pilot projects to systemic integration that reaches every child who needs it?

While the TaRL approach offers a powerful strategy for addressing foundational learning gaps, its effectiveness within the South African education system relies on a deep understanding of the local context and the establishment of robust collaborative processes.

This learning brief captures insights from our recent CoP, partner conversations and observations from the sector. It shares the practical challenges faced, innovative solutions identified, and crucial adaptations made to the TaRL framework.

Furthermore, the brief highlights a critical priority identified by the community **to build a stronger and more collaborative evidence base**. It explores proposed strategies for demonstrating impact, addressing the local nuances that must be considered and outlines a shared vision for future coordination to strengthen the case for TaRL in South Africa, especially to government and funding partners.

The South African Education Environment: Considerations for TaRL Implementation

Significant deficits exist in foundational literacy and numeracy in South Africa, especially as learners advance past the early years of schooling.



Understanding "On Track" Metrics

The Thrive By Five Index uses a holistic assessment tool measuring children across multiple developmental domains including **early literacy, early numeracy, self-regulation, and social-emotional development**. Children are categorised as:

42%

"On track": Meeting age-appropriate developmental milestones

30%

"Falling behind": Showing some delays requiring additional support

28%

"Falling far behind": Demonstrating significant developmental gaps



These early gaps accumulate as children progress through the system.

It is important to see this as not two separate problems. The Grade 4 learners who show up behind on the PIRLS assessment are the very same children who were "not on track" at age five.

As research demonstrates, children moving through a system that should be strengthening their capabilities are instead falling further behind, a compounding crisis that demands urgent intervention.



Contributing Factors to the Learning Crisis

Several systemic factors contribute to this foundational learning crisis:

- **Socio-economic Variability:** Significant disparities exist in school and family resources, home learning environments, and support systems across geographic areas. Children from under-resourced communities often lack access to quality early learning materials, adequate nutrition, and stimulating home environments that support cognitive development.
- **Teacher Training and Support:** Differences in teacher preparation, instructional techniques, subject knowledge, and access to professional development, especially regarding remedial or differentiated instruction, create implementation barriers. Many teachers lack specific training in foundational literacy and numeracy pedagogy.
- **Curriculum Demands:** The curriculum is frequently viewed as dense and overloaded, leading teachers to prioritize coverage over mastery of foundational skills, particularly in higher grades. This “rush through the curriculum” approach leaves struggling learners further behind.
- **Language Transition in Grade 4:** Grade 4 involves a significant shift in the medium of instruction from home languages to English for most African language-speaking learners. This abrupt transition increases cognitive and linguistic demands, particularly on learners who have not yet mastered fundamental skills in their home language.

While TaRL is an evidence-based approach that seeks to address these issues by teaching according to learners’ actual learning levels, observations from CoP partners implementing TaRL in South Africa indicate that successful implementation requires careful adaptation to specific contexts and sustained collaboration among stakeholders.

Contextual Understanding and Collaborative Efforts

The recent CoP assembled stakeholders from organisations currently implementing TaRL, as well as strategic implementing partners and funders with deep insights into the broader education sector. These conversations surfaced critical implementation realities.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN TARL IMPLEMENTATION INCLUDE:

SCHOOL RESISTANCE:

Some schools and educators express concerns about adopting TaRL due to potential disruptions to existing practices and uncertainty regarding programme benefits. Principals worry about fitting TaRL into already-packed timetables.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT:

Obtaining parental support is challenging but recognised as essential for learner engagement and reinforcement at home. Many parents lack confidence in supporting their children's learning, particularly when they themselves have limited formal education.

ADAPTATION TO LOCAL CONTEXTS:

Tailoring the methodology to accommodate linguistic and cultural differences is complex but necessary. Direct translation of materials often fails to capture cultural nuances and context-specific examples that make learning meaningful.

GOVERNMENT AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS:

Establishing partnerships and securing official endorsement at multiple governmental levels is essential for broader adoption and sustainability.

Solutions emerging through implementation



COLLABORATION AND FLEXIBILITY:

The [Accelerated Learning Project](#) has demonstrated that adapting the methodology collaboratively to fit specific contexts supports successful implementation. Content has been expanded to offer mother-tongue instruction in isiZulu (for KwaZulu-Natal), Setswana (Free State), and Afrikaans, in addition to English.

Critically, TaRL educational resources were adapted for these languages, not merely translated.

This distinction is crucial: **adaptation involves making content culturally appropriate and linguistically natural by considering local idioms, cultural references, and communication styles, rather than simply converting words.** Meanwhile, numeracy activities were integrated into the curriculum to address existing educational gaps.

LEVERAGING PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES:

Programmes such as the **Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI)**, which forms part of the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) aimed at tackling unemployment, poverty and inequality, can be leveraged to expand impact in schools.

BEEI deploys Education Assistants (EAs) into schools to support teaching and learning.

An example of this is **Masinyusane**, through their intervention, **Zazi iZandi (ZiZ)** targeting Grade R and 1, has successfully integrated TaRL principles of teaching at the right level to close foundational literacy gaps, specifically focusing on phonics and word sounds. The deployment of EAs through BEEI can provide practical staffing solutions to address implementation capacity gaps for interventions such as TaRL.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOPS:

The Accelerated Learning Project has pioneered structured parental engagement workshops that inform and equip parents, significantly improving participation and learning outcomes.

These workshops help parents understand how to support home language literacy development and reduce feelings of disempowerment around their children's education. Parents in rural and semi-urban areas have shared that these interventions help them feel more confident in supporting their children's learning journey.

EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY:

Funding organisations like Maitri Trust and Zenex Foundation have demonstrated how rigorous data collection and research can substantiate TaRL's impact and support policy integration efforts. Their work has contributed to building a compelling evidence base for TaRL adoption within government frameworks.

Continued Evidence Building: The Compass Guiding Our Journey

Our commitment to TaRL is rooted in evidence, but the evolving landscape of South African education requires us to continuously refine our approach to implementation and to be adaptive. We must deepen our understanding, especially as learners progress into the intermediate phase (Grades 4-6), where learning gaps can become even more entrenched.

Consider this scenario: A learner has developed solid foundational literacy in their mother tongue during the Foundation Phase. Research consistently demonstrates that a strong home language foundation facilitates easier transition to additional languages. However, when this same learner encounters complex English texts in Grade 4, the challenge becomes: How can TaRL best support this critical transition while leveraging the sound foundation of mother tongue-based bilingual education? The Learning from Familiar to Formal (L2F2) approach, central to TaRL, becomes vital. The MTBBE ascribes percentage-based dosages now to English introduction which gradually increases from grade 4 upwards, e.g. 80/20 mother-tongue to English in grade 4, 70/30 in grade 5 etc. It will be interesting how TaRL will adapt to this in its model.

Similarly, in mathematics, TaRL's alignment with the **Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract (CPA)** approach which involves moving learners from hands-on exploration with physical manipulatives, to visual representations, and finally to symbolic understanding; needs rigorous investigation across different grades and contexts.

Furthermore, we are seeing TaRL take various forms across the implementation landscape:

- Intensive, short-burst programmes (e.g., 30-day camps)
- Extended engagements (e.g., 120 hours over the implementation cycle)
- Innovative hybrid models incorporating digital platforms like Mindspark within organisations like Edulution's implementation

The Case for Collaborative Research

A truly powerful next step would be to collectively work towards a **Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT)**. A collective undertaking where we rigorously compare these different TaRL models, their durations, frequencies, and integrations across diverse settings. This would be us gleaning invaluable insights to optimise our strategies, ensuring we deploy the most effective TaRL approach for every child, every context, and every learning gap.



This research must also provide nuanced contextual insights considering the unique linguistic and socio-economic realities at national, provincial, municipal, and district levels. It must examine questions of scale and scalability, particularly within an education policy environment characterised by shifting priorities, evolving mandates, and changing political landscapes. As we navigate the complexities of Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) policy implementation, understanding which TaRL models work best in which contexts becomes crucial.

Role of strategic partners in Transformation

In this urgent mission to close learning gaps, funding and public organisations are much more than financial supporters; they are strategic collaborators whose vision and commitment can fuel innovation and secure sustainability.

LONG-TERM, FLEXIBLE FUNDING:

Providing support that transcends typical short-term project cycles, allowing for adaptive learning, iteration, and sustained engagement with government systems.

INVESTING IN RESEARCH:

Championing strategic risk-taking by investing in crucial research such as the collaborative RCTs proposed above, exploring new TaRL modalities, and supporting the adaptation of L2F2 and CPA approaches for the intermediate phase.

CONVENING POWER:

Bringing together diverse stakeholders, harmonising efforts across implementing partners, and amplifying the unified message that investing in foundational learning through TaRL is an investment in South Africa's future.

SUPPORTING SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING:

Funding capacity-building initiatives that strengthen government systems to adopt and scale TaRL principles, rather than creating parallel systems.

The [FLOAT Partnership](#) stands as a powerful example, demonstrating how pooled funding and a shared strategic vision among multiple funders can foster systemic impact. By coordinating investments and aligning around common goals, funders can achieve far greater collective impact than through isolated interventions.

Toward Systemic Educational Improvement

Addressing foundational learning gaps in South Africa remains a substantial challenge requiring sustained, coordinated effort. The integration of TaRL principles with emerging policies like Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) and proven pedagogical approaches like the Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract (CPA) method represents a promising pathway toward systemic change.

Collaborative platforms like the After School Catch-up Coalition and our TaRL Community of Practice are demonstrating that effective implementation depends on three critical factors:

1. Contextual adaptation that makes interventions relevant and resonant
2. Stakeholder collaboration that aligns efforts and builds collective capacity
3. Ongoing review of practices and outcomes to enable continuous improvement

As we work to ensure that learners in Grades 4-6 acquire necessary foundational skills, we must also build the evidence base that will guide future decisions.

Continued attention to these factors, combined with strategic research investment, can facilitate meaningful progress toward ensuring every South African child develops the foundational literacy and numeracy skills needed for lifelong learning and opportunity.

The next learning brief in this series will outline a collaborative research agenda designed to explore questions on the TaRL Curriculum development and design in the South African context and the trade-offs that implementing partners often have to decide against.

Acknowledgments

The journey of TaRL implementation in South Africa is one of shared knowledge and collective wisdom. We extend our deepest gratitude to all Community of Practice partners who contributed their insights, experiences, and commitment to this work.

Special thanks to the Accelerated Learning Project team whose voices in recent CoP convening catalysed vital discussions on contextualising implementation and the transformative power of genuine localisation and collaboration. By emphasising the art of partnering well, they shared not just results but a philosophy that strengthens our entire network.

Together, we are creating a clearer roadmap for making TaRL resonate in every school and community, driving toward tangible and lasting impact for South Africa's children.

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