



TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

MEASURING PROGRAMME IMPACT



**LEARNING
BRIEF**

MAY 2025

Framing Our Shared Challenge

As a collective of partners committed to the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, we are at the forefront of tackling South Africa's foundational learning crisis. We see the potential of the TaRL methodology every day: the potential to not just help learners close the foundational learning skills, but to restore their self-belief, reignite their curiosity, and open the door to enhanced learning in the mainstream curriculum. Yet, as we work to scale our impact, we face a critical and growing challenge: proving, with concrete evidence, that this model is effective.

This very theme represents a fundamental challenge that the TaRL Community of Practice (CoP) partners recognise as essential to their success.

During our third CoP, a conversation led by **Joanna Reynolds from Axiom Education** brought this critical issue into sharp focus - the complex task of measuring programme impact in ways that are both meaningful and sustainable.

As partners understand that wrestling with the central question of how to demonstrate TaRL's value within real-world complexities isn't just an academic exercise — it's pivotal to making a convincing case for TaRL's integration into broader pedagogy.

We recognise that without resolving this measurement challenge and developing compelling evidence of impact, our efforts to win over the education department and secure institutional support will remain an uphill battle. This issue demands their most rigorous thinking and collaborative problem-solving.



Core Challenge

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) tools are primarily used to assess the impact of TaRL. While these assessments are useful for quick, low-cost evaluations, more can be done to demonstrate overall programme impact to external stakeholders. More rigorous tools like the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) are widely recognised for reporting impact but are often too time-consuming and resource-intensive for regular use in the TaRL context. This highlights the need for a blended assessment strategy that balances practicality with credibility.

In the words of Joanna Reynolds: “We have to have an argument as to why it is us, our actions [TaRL], that are making the learning outcomes improve.”

This sentiment resonated, as it speaks to our shared desire to build a credible evidence base for the TaRL model in South Africa.

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—Joanna Reynolds

TaRL Learner Journey Example: Asanda, a Grade 4 learner

Baseline Assessment: Asanda first joins the TaRL session, she is shy and visibly anxious during learning activities. The initial one-on-one assessment reveals that she is at the “Beginner” level; she cannot recognise most letters of the alphabet, despite being in the fourth grade. In her main class, she hardly participates.

The TaRL Intervention: Placed in a small “Beginner” group with peers at the same level, Asanda began engaging with foundational activities that are playful. The TaRL facilitator uses songs, letter-recognition games, and sound-based activities.

The “Aha!” Moment: After two weeks of consistent sessions, the facilitator observes Asanda’s breakthrough moment. While playing a simple word-building game with picture cards, she correctly blends the sounds to read the word “isicathulo” (shoe) for the first time.

The Transformation: Asanda begins participating eagerly and her confidence grows. Within a month, she would progress to the “Paragraph” level. Her subject teacher in the main class would later note a significant improvement in her overall class participation and willingness to try new tasks.

INSIGHT: A "MIXED-METHODS" APPROACH IS RECOMMENDED

While quantitative data shows us what progress is being made in TaRL program, it is the qualitative evidence that reveals the profound how and why behind the numbers. These stories provide rich, contextualised proof of learning and are essential for showing stakeholders the true value of teaching children at their level.

By focusing on the individual child's journey, we can illustrate the core principles of TaRL in action: building confidence, fostering joyful learning, and ensuring no child is left behind.

The consensus in the TaRL network is that quantitative data, while essential, only tells part of the story. To truly capture TaRL's impact, we must weave in a compelling narrative that combines the "what" (the numbers) with the "how" (the journey stories) and the "why" (the overall impact).

TARL IN THE CATCH-UP COALITION: BUILDING OUR COLLECTIVE ACTION AGENDA



In implementation, the goal is to **build shared evidence across the network** to creating a repository of successful TaRL implementations, case studies, and small-scale research from across our network to build a South Africa-specific evidence base.



Advocacy through data and storytelling: By combining our data and stories, we can more effectively engage with government and funders, demonstrating our collective impact and advocating for policies that support foundational learning.



Working together towards a "Good Fit" Assessment Toolkit: Working together to refine and share assessment tools that are practical for our context, including standardising the practice of assessing.

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The Power of Community and Practice

As we continue to grow this network, what lies ahead is the demanding yet transformative work of cultivating both an authentic community and rigorous practice. The community dimension requires us to move beyond sporadic interactions toward sustained connection — creating spaces where partners can engage more frequently, not just in formal gatherings but through **ongoing dialogue that builds trust and understanding**.

This means **developing robust support systems** where members can turn to one another during difficult implementation phases, share vulnerabilities around setbacks, and **collectively navigate the political and practical challenges** that inevitably arise in education reform work. Building genuine solidarity requires moving past surface-level networking toward deep professional relationships grounded in mutual accountability and shared purpose.

The practice dimension demands equally intensive commitment to continuous improvement and collective learning. This involves the meticulous work of documenting our daily TaRL implementation experiences - both successes and failures - and subjecting them to honest analysis. It means creating **systematic approaches to knowledge sharing** that go beyond anecdotal exchanges, developing frameworks for peer learning that can genuinely improve instructional practice across diverse contexts.

The **innovation imperative requires us to experiment boldly while learning rigorously**, pushing the boundaries of what TaRL can achieve while maintaining fidelity to its core principles. Together, these twin pillars of community and practice will determine whether this network becomes merely another professional association or a genuine force for educational transformation.

A heartfelt thank you to Joana Reynolds and her team at Axiom Education for leading this insightful Community of Practice.

CONTACT US



Address:

WE WORK
173 Oxford Road
Rosebank
Johannesburg

info@thelearningtrust.org

www.thelearningtrust.org



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