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BRIEF

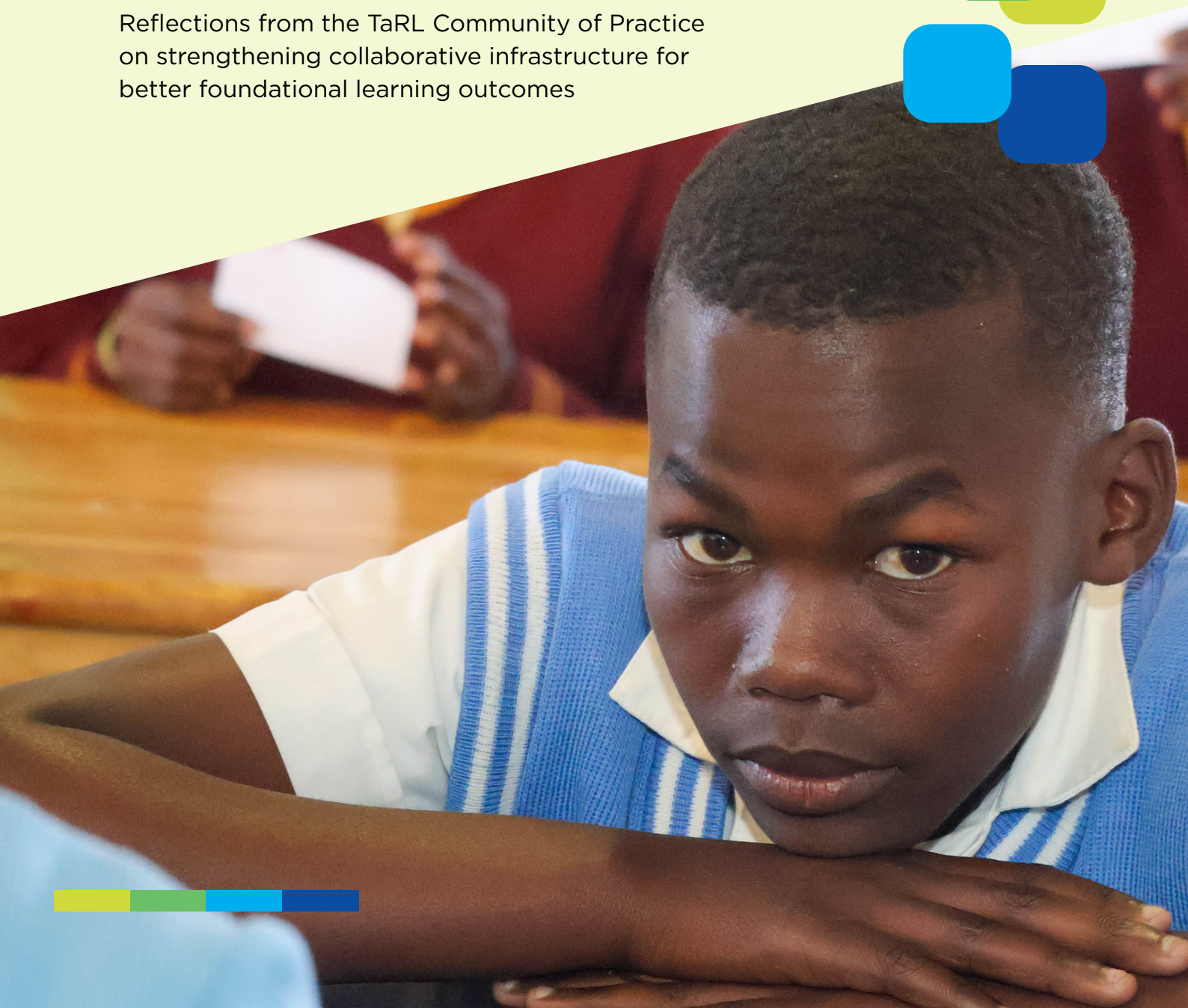
Issue No 5. 2026

BEYOND IMPLEMENTATION:

Coordinating TaRL South Africa for Systems Change

Teaching at The Right Level

Reflections from the TaRL Community of Practice
on strengthening collaborative infrastructure for
better foundational learning outcomes



Introduction

South Africa's foundational learning challenge remains urgent. While there is broad agreement on the need to prioritise strengthening literacy and numeracy in the early grades, the sector is increasingly asking a deeper question: both what works, as well as how effective approaches can be implemented, adapted and sustained across diverse contexts.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) offers one promising response. By assessing learners according to their current level of understanding, rather than their age or grade, and providing targeted instruction in response, learning gains are possible. Across South Africa, implementing organisations have adapted the approach to different provincial contexts, school environments and learner needs, building a growing body of local implementation knowledge.

As implementation expands, it is becoming clear that programme quality alone is not enough. Success increasingly depends on the ecosystem surrounding these programmes: strong partnerships, responsive policy environments, meaningful collaboration, continuous learning and the ability to generate and share implementation evidence. The first year of the TaRL Community of Practice (CoP), convened by The Learning Trust, has reflected this shift. Earlier conversations explored impact measurement, contextualisation, programme design and our response to the growing priority on bi/multilingual- based education. Together, these discussions show a community moving beyond improving individual programmes towards strengthening the conditions that enable those programmes to flourish.

How do we strengthen the ecosystem that allows Teaching at the Right Level to flourish in South Africa?



Velle TaRL facilitators at a training delivered by Partner, Youth Impact.

The Next Phase of TaRL is Collaborative Infrastructure

The TaRL COP's reflections points to a significant shift in how TaRL is evolving in South Africa. For much of the past year, the focus has been on strengthening implementation: adapting assessment tools, refining programme design, supporting facilitators and responding to diverse classroom realities. Increasingly, however, the challenge is not only how individual organisations improve their own implementation, but how the ecosystem strengthens implementation collectively.

This marks an important stage in the maturation of both the Community of Practice and the wider TaRL ecosystem. Communities of Practice often begin as spaces for connection and exchange. As trust develops, knowledge sharing becomes knowledge creation, individual reflection becomes collective inquiry, and the central question shifts from “What are we doing?” to “What are we learning together?”



Building the Infrastructure for Collective Learning

As a collective, a strong desire for future engagements that move beyond presentations and updates towards practical problem-solving, honest reflection and peer learning is emerging. Collectively, these priorities point to the need for stronger mechanisms that enable organisations to learn from one another between meetings, across provinces and throughout different stages of implementation.

These mechanisms include national coordination that strengthens relationships while respecting contextual diversity; implementation clinics where partners can diagnose challenges together; collective evidence generation that values implementation learning alongside learner outcomes; peer observation and exchange; and collective advocacy that communicates the value of TaRL through a coherent voice

Together, these priorities describe the architecture of a mature learning ecosystem. Every organisation contributes new evidence, every adaptation generates insight, and every partnership reveals both opportunities and challenges. When these experiences are shared openly, they become collective assets rather than isolated organisational knowledge. In this way, the Community of Practice becomes an integral part of the implementation infrastructure for TaRL in South Africa.

Comment



"There's no one-size-fits-all approach... we have plenty of teachers in South Africa already dealing with lots of languages and children from different contexts, using different strategies, different classroom formations. So what are they doing, and what are we learning from that?"

— Marcienne Koenig, Youth Impact

INSIGHT 1:

PUBLIC SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS ARE A RELATIONSHIP JOURNEY

Relationships provide the conditions under which an ecosystem can flourish. Perhaps no relationships are more important than those between implementing organisations and the government. We are also reflecting on how we can identify opportunities and develop sustainable approaches for working with the Department of Basic Education at all levels. Although contexts differ, one lesson is clear: successful government engagement is rarely built through presentations, proposals or MOUs alone. It is built through sustained relationships, developed through consistency, reliability, and demonstrating value and impact over time.

As these relationships mature, teachers become more willing to engage, district officials become stronger champions, and school leaders develop greater confidence in the interventions. This challenges a narrow view of scaling as simply reaching more schools, districts or learners. The experiences shared within the CoP suggest that scaling begins long before implementation expands. It begins when relationships deepen.



Velle TaRL facilitator, Duncan Kokopane, explaining one of the activities

INSIGHT 2:

COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY REQUIRES A SHARED LANGUAGE

As the Community of Practice grows, so is the diversity of organisations contributing to it. Partners operate across different provinces, use different implementation models and respond to different educational realities.

This diversity is a strength because TaRL is not a rigid programme; its power lies in remaining faithful to core principles while adapting thoughtfully to local contexts. However, diversity also creates a challenge:

how can the ecosystem communicate a coherent message about TaRL while continuing to honour contextual adaptation?

It is noted that organisations often describe TaRL differently, emphasising learner assessment, pedagogy, foundational learning, multilingual education or systems strengthening depending on their experience and context. The need is not for standardisation, but for a shared narrative. Successful ecosystems require both diversity and coherence: diversity enables organisations to innovate, while coherence helps others understand that innovation.

Collective advocacy is strengthened not by speaking with one identical voice, but by speaking from a shared set of principles. The Community of Practice next advocacy challenge is therefore to strengthen the visibility and credibility of the ecosystem itself, while allowing different organisations to recognise their work within a common story.



Learners from Modimokwane Primary school, enjoying a TaRL whole class activity before splitting into their level groups

INSIGHT 3:

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS ARE TOO BIG FOR ANY ONE ORGANISATION

One of the indicators of a maturing Community of Practice is the quality of the questions it chooses to pursue. Early-stage CoPs often focus on exchanging experiences; more mature communities begin identifying the questions that no single organisation can answer on its own. Over the past year, multilingual based education has emerged as one of those questions. Across South Africa, language remains one of the most significant influences on how children experience learning. Growing national attention to Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education has created renewed opportunities to rethink the relationship between language and foundational learning.

No single organisation can generate complete answers to these questions. The value of the Community of Practice lies in its ability to bring together multiple implementation experiences, examine patterns across contexts and build knowledge collectively. The Community is not seeking one multilingual model. It is seeking a deeper understanding of multilingual implementation. By connecting research, implementation and practitioner reflection, the Community creates a bridge between policy aspirations and classroom realities. As national conversations around Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education continue to evolve, this bridge becomes increasingly valuable.

INSIGHT 4:

SCALING TARL WILL REQUIRE BOTH EVIDENCE AND COLLECTIVE COURAGE

Over the past year, organisations have strengthened implementation, refined methodologies and built a growing evidence base on how TaRL can support foundational learning in South African classrooms. These gains show that meaningful improvement is possible and raise a new question:

What happens when a Community of Practice generates enough knowledge to influence the wider system?



Learners engaged in a TaRL group activity conducted by Velle team

Educational systems rarely change because one organisation produces strong evidence or one programme shows positive results. Systems change when evidence is interpreted collectively, translated into action and embedded in relationships built on trust, ownership and shared purpose.

This reflects a broader evolution in the role of evidence. Outcome data shows whether improvement occurred, while implementation learning explains how it happened. It captures adaptations, decisions made under uncertainty and lessons from partnership, experimentation and refinement. In this way, implementation experience becomes evidence. By connecting organisations across provinces and contexts, the Community turns isolated experiences into shared patterns, tested assumptions, local innovations and collective memory.

The Questions That Define the Next Chapter

As we continue to think about the future of TaRL in South Africa, several questions keep surfacing repeatedly. These questions do not seek immediate answers; rather, they point towards the next frontier of collective inquiry.

They include how TaRL can complement the CAPS curriculum while remaining faithful to its own principles; what forms of evidence are most useful for strengthening policy dialogue and government decision-making; how implementation learning can be translated into practical guidance for teachers, schools and districts; and how organisations can avoid creating parallel systems while responding meaningfully to persistent learning gaps.

Throughout the discussions, another idea quietly emerged. Although partners speak frequently about evidence, partnerships and implementation, many of the reflections point towards something less tangible: the willingness to continue learning, adapt, question familiar assumptions and acknowledge challenges before celebrating success.



These qualities are rarely described in programme reports, yet they may be among the most important characteristics of innovation. They require collective courage: the courage to experiment before certainty exists, to share implementation challenges openly, to treat adaptation as a hallmark of responsive practice and to place learning ahead of organisational recognition.

In doing so, the strengthening of the COP not just as a group of organisations, but a professional community in which learning is valued, is key. Evidence gives the Communities confidence to move forward. Collective courage gives permission to keep learning.

Emerging Directions for the Community of Practice

Every Community of Practice reaches a point when reflection must become action. This Learning Brief suggests that the TaRL Community of Practice is nearing that moment. The priorities emerging from this year's conversations are offered not as prescriptions, but as a shared direction for where collective effort can have the greatest impact.

The Community should continue building a shared national narrative for TaRL's contribution to foundational learning while honouring contextual diversity. It should expand implementation clinics, strengthen collective evidence generation, keep multilingual implementation as a strategic learning priority, and create more opportunities for peer learning across provinces and contexts. These priorities cannot be achieved by any one organisation alone. They depend on collaboration, trust and a shared commitment to something larger than individual programmes.



Velle TaRL facilitators engaged in a team-building activity

Final Reflection

When this Community of Practice first came together, its purpose was to create a space where organisations implementing TaRL could learn from one another. This collaborative has become more than a forum for exchange; it has become a space where collective intelligence is formed, tested and translated into stronger practice.

This evolution matters because South Africa's foundational learning challenge cannot be addressed through isolated excellence. It demands approaches that work in classrooms, evidence that is trusted by practitioners and policymakers, partnerships that are strong enough to carry learning across institutional boundaries, and leadership that values collaboration over competition.

The Learning Trust convenes this Community with a simple conviction: **the future of TaRL in South Africa will not be shaped by one organisation alone.** It will be shaped by an ecosystem that is willing to learn together, make sense of evidence together and act with greater coherence in pursuit of foundational learning.



Tebogo Loate, Velle CEO visited Matimalenyora Primary School for a meeting with school leadership, TaRL mentors, the coordinator and facilitators



Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere appreciation to every member of the Teaching at the Right Level Community of Practice, including implementing partners, strategic partners, researchers, government colleagues, facilitators and technical advisors.

We thank you for the generosity with which you have shared your experiences, challenged assumptions and contributed your learning throughout the past year. This Learning Brief reflects your willingness to engage openly with both opportunities and challenges.

As we look towards the next chapter of the Community of Practice, we remain committed to creating spaces where practitioners, researchers, policymakers and partners can continue learning together in pursuit of one shared goal: ensuring that every child can develop the foundational skills they need to thrive.

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