

Catching Up:

Lessons in Implementing
Accelerated Learning
Programmes in
South African Schools

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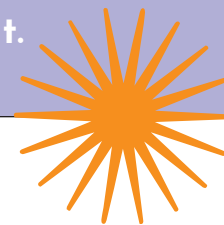
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Accelerated
Learning
Project





In South Africa, eight out of every 10 Grade 4 learners in South Africa do not meet the low international benchmark for reading set by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which serves as an indicator of learners' ability to make sense of texts. The ability to recognise words and make sense of them is essential for reading and overall learning. Without these core literacy skills, learners can struggle to keep up with the school curriculum, leading to frustration and disengagement. Over time, this disengagement contributes to a much larger issue - the risk of dropping out.



This learning brief is an overview of the Accelerated Learning Project's five-year journey of development, which included various phases of implementation and iteration. By continuously refining mentorship and evaluation processes, this project aims to empower learners and support community-based organisations to deliver high-quality educational outcomes.

Dropout is a pervasive problem in South Africa, where learners who fall behind in early grades often struggle to catch up. This is why the Accelerated Learning Project began as a pivotal part of the Zero Dropout Campaign, funded by DGMT. The Accelerated Learning Project has developed an after-school programme that employs the internationally recognised Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, focusing on meeting each child's unique learning needs rather than on their age or grade. The aim is to keep learners engaged in their education, ultimately reducing the risk of dropout.

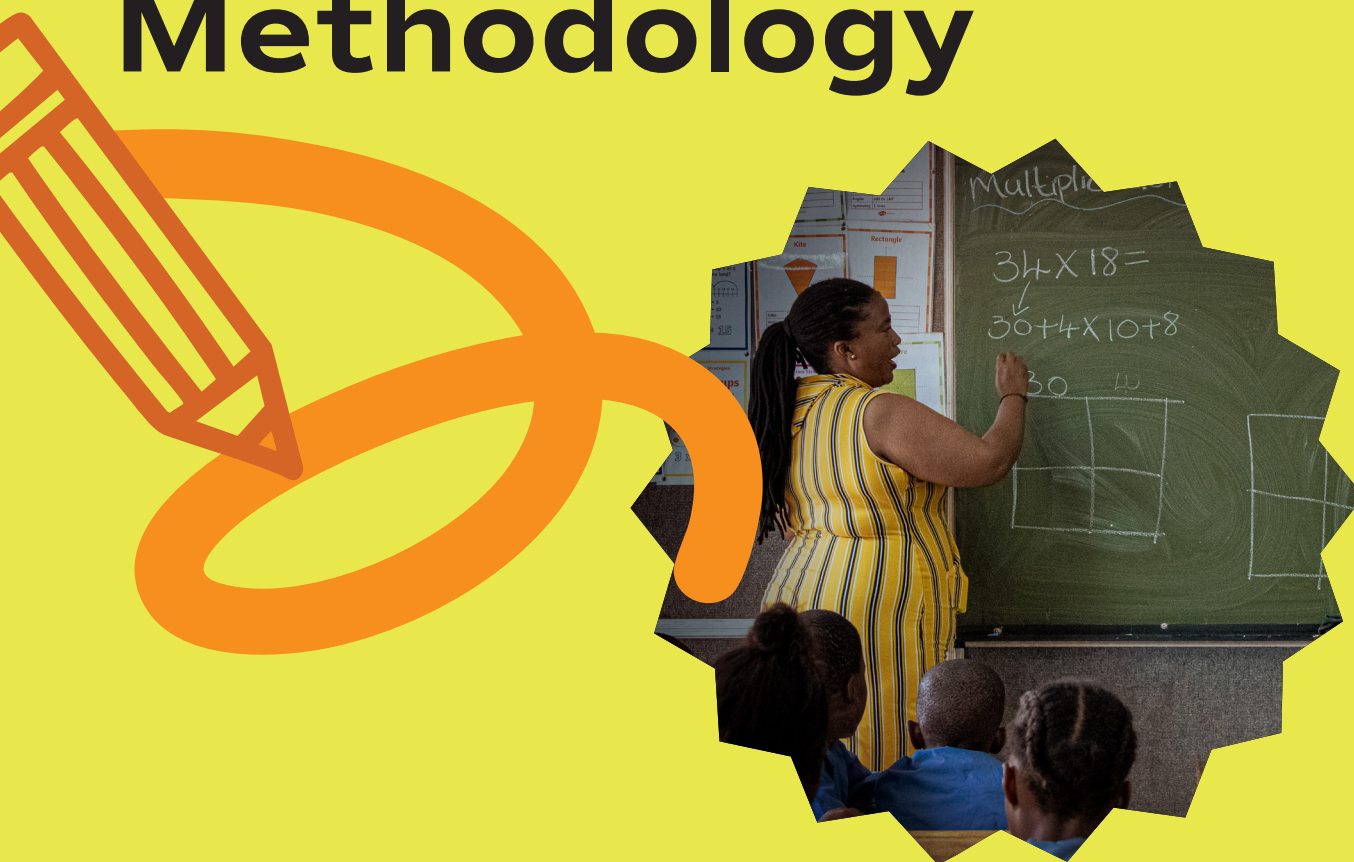
The project has evolved through various phases since its inception in 2019. Initially focused on English literacy and working with community-based organisations in just two provinces, the programme faced challenges that required adaptations in mentorship, training and implementation strategies. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic further shifted the focus to online platforms, highlighting the need for robust digital infrastructure. More recently, the project has expanded to include multilingual resources and numeracy components, integrating technological solutions for improved monitoring and evaluation.

Eight things to know about the Accelerated Learning Project before we get started:



- 1** The Accelerated Learning Project, now operating as an independent initiative, **originally began as a pivotal component of the Zero Dropout Campaign**. Both are funded by DGMT.
- 2** The project began in 2019 as a single programme focused on foundational literacy, known as "Reading for Meaning", but it has since **expanded its offering** to cover gaps in foundational numeracy, too.
- 3** The Accelerated Learning Project is not intended to cover the full school curriculum but **focuses on foundational skills in literacy and numeracy** that are required for learners to reach the appropriate grade level.
- 4** It uses the TaRL methodology, which allows for contextually appropriate responses that **align with children's needs and their level of cognitive maturity**. The best-known example of this is the Indian education NGO Pratham's TaRL, the principles of which inform the Accelerated Learning Project's approach.
- 5** Other teaching methodologies beyond TaRL are also under consideration, with a view to **incorporating them into a robust accelerated learning approach** for South African children.
- 6** The Accelerated Learning Project is implemented by community-based organisations in schools. These organisations **play a critical role in adapting, delivering, and sustaining** the intervention at a grassroots level, with support and training provided by the Accelerated Learning Project team.
- 7** Facilitators drawn from communities are **trained to run assessments and deliver effective maths and literacy sessions** for selected learners from grades 4, 5 and 6.
- 8** Mentors are young people with a formal post-matric education, **responsible for supporting, monitoring and evaluating** the performance of facilitators in schools. They also run regular training sessions with facilitators and ensure quality implementation.

The Teaching at the Right Level Methodology



The methodology at the heart of the Accelerated Learning Project is a learner-centred, activity-based approach that promotes peer learning. TaRL groups students according to their current learning abilities, rather than their age or grade, enabling targeted instruction to meet their specific needs. TaRL may be adopted at a whole-school level, or as an additional programme in the form of after-school, pull-out or holiday programmes.

Using TaRL, the Accelerated Learning Project has broadened its scope to include literacy and numeracy through its “Reading For Meaning” and “Maths Matters” offerings. This transition has not only broadened the scope of the intervention but also

deepened its collaboration with Teaching at the Right Level Africa (TaRL Africa) and the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Together, these partnerships have been instrumental in adapting the TaRL methodology to suit the South African educational context, ensuring it responds to the unique challenges faced by learners in the country.

Addressing both literacy and numeracy is crucial for academic achievement, as foundational maths skills are just as important as reading skills in shaping a learner's ability to solve problems and think critically. Numeracy helps foster logical reasoning and decision-making, which are vital not only for success in mathematics but also for broader academia and life.

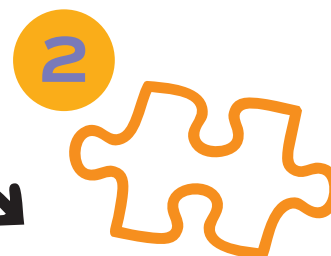
How TaRL works

TaRL works across four domains, with success achieved through the combined efforts of implementing partners, facilitators, schools and parents:



DOMAIN ONE: Assessment, data recording and grouping

An assessment is carried out to evaluate children's learning levels, focusing on basic literacy and numeracy skills. The results are then systematically recorded, enabling educators to track progress. Learners are grouped based on their assessed learning levels, allowing facilitators to provide targeted instruction tailored to each group's needs.



DOMAIN TWO: Activities and teaching learning materials

Once learners are grouped, facilitators engage them in level-appropriate activities that focus on developing specific skills, using hands-on and participatory methods to keep learners engaged. This phase is key to making learning interactive and meaningful, helping students to practice reading, writing and problem-solving at their level of understanding.



DOMAIN THREE: Lesson procedure and classroom management

Facilitators follow a structured lesson plan with clear objectives. To manage the classroom's diverse learning levels, they implement group-based strategies, keeping different groups engaged in tasks suited to their abilities.



DOMAIN FOUR: Monitoring and evaluation

Facilitators continuously monitor learners' progress through observation and periodic assessment, tracking their advancement across levels. Regular evaluation helps assess the effectiveness of teaching methods, activities and materials, allowing facilitators to adjust instruction and re-group learners as needed to ensure ongoing progress for all.

The five-year evolution of the Accelerated Learning Project

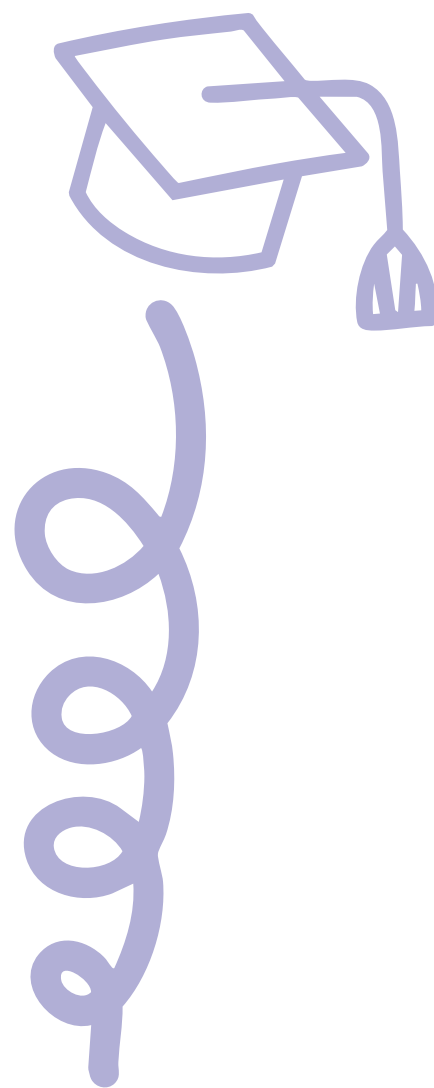
The Accelerated Learning Project is implemented in schools through NGOs and community-based organisations, with relevant training and resources provided by the project team.

The project team creates the learning and training resources, quality assurance frameworks, and monitoring and evaluation material, and drives the overall strategy.

The role of a community-based organisation is critical to adapting, delivering and sustaining the intervention at a grassroots level.

When the project began, implementing partners were funded by grants to carry out programmes in different schools, but this operating model was later discontinued in favour of a more sustainable approach. The project currently has a presence in three provinces, namely KwaZulu-Natal, the Northern Cape and the Free State, and operates in 22 schools.

Over the course of five years, the project underwent different phases of refinement, growth and adaptation, eventually addressing both literacy and numeracy skills. Each period contributed to refining the project's offerings, expanding its reach and improving its impact through key learnings and adaptations.



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2019

SCHOOLS: 14
LEARNERS: 212
FOCUS: Initial phase.
TRAINING: Facilitator training.

KEY ACTIVITIES: Focused on English literacy; involved community-based organisations in KwaZulu-Natal and East London.

CHALLENGES: Ensuring quality and scale across diverse contexts.

LESSONS: Importance of tailoring mentorship and facilitator training.

2020

SCHOOLS: 17
LEARNERS: 105
FOCUS: Covid-19 response and online transition.
TRAINING: Facilitator and mentor training.

KEY ACTIVITIES: Transitioned to online platforms due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and introduced digital tools for facilitators.

CHALLENGES: Accessibility issues and financial constraints on community-based organisations.

LESSONS: Digital infrastructure and engagement in virtual settings are critical.

2021

SCHOOLS: 9
LEARNERS: 410
FOCUS: Curriculum expansion.
TRAINING: Facilitator and mentor training.

KEY ACTIVITIES: Introduced mother-tongue languages (isiZulu, Setswana, Afrikaans) and integrated numeracy.

CHALLENGES: Report verification and financial transparency issues.

LESSONS: Benefits of mother-tongue instruction in improving literacy outcomes.

2022

SCHOOLS: 3
LEARNERS: 55
FOCUS: Multilingual and numeracy integration.
TRAINING: Facilitator and mentor training.

KEY ACTIVITIES: Expanded sessions to include 60 maths and 60 literacy lessons in isiZulu.

CHALLENGES: Inconsistent implementation across organisations.

LESSONS: Comprehensive multilingual and numeracy training is essential.

2023-2024

SCHOOLS: 12
LEARNERS: 1200
FOCUS: Strengthening partnerships and quality assurance.
TRAINING: Facilitator and mentor training.

KEY ACTIVITIES: Strengthened partnerships with TaRL Africa and DBE; developed Quality Assurance Framework.

CHALLENGES: Real-time adjustments needed during implementation as each province had unique challenges.

LESSONS: The importance of localised community interventions for sustainability.

Establishing a foundation in literacy

The "Reading for Meaning" programme began in 2019 with a focus on English Literacy, using a curriculum that was developed by Pam Hicks in collaboration with DGMT, members of the Zero Dropout Campaign and literacy advisors and experts in Cape Town. The goal was to establish a scalable franchise model by partnering with community-based organisations (implementing partners). This model provided training and resources to implementing partners, ensuring consistent quality and adherence to the curriculum while allowing autonomy in delivery.

The 'Train-the-Trainer' model was used for training facilitators to run literacy sessions and mentors to oversee the facilitators. The sessions were conducted in partnership with local Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, integrating Early Childhood Development (ECD) studies.

The following challenges were encountered during this phase:

- There was a lack of practice sessions for facilitators. TaRL Africa requires all new implementers to do at least 10 practice sessions for each subject area;
- Non-native English-speaking facilitators struggled as there was a language barrier; and
- There were challenges in ensuring quality control across diverse community-based organisations.

From this, it was learnt that it was important to tailor the mentorship and facilitator training. Regular check-ins and quality assurance were also needed.



KEY LEARNING

Organisations need multiple sources of funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of the model. The project team realised that because they were handing out grants to small organisations, their funding was also used to manage these organisations' operations instead of the accelerated learning work that they were allocated for.

The pandemic period

As a result of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and strict lockdown measures that resulted in prolonged school closures, there was a transition to online training and implementation of the programme on digital platforms such as Zoom. The project's website was also revamped to include a login for training resources. This shift aimed to continue support for facilitators and learners despite physical distancing measures. During this period, facilitators were expected to host digital sessions with learners – at least 10 per facilitator – using mobile phones.

This meant that only learners who were able to access an adult caregiver's mobile phone benefitted. Learners who stayed engaged made good progress and said they enjoyed their lessons. Caregivers appreciated the support their children received, especially the opportunity to engage with stories and learn new vocabulary.

However, the transition highlighted several challenges, including issues around accessibility and how to maintain engagement in a virtual environment.

Some groups only completed the initial assessments before learners disengaged. This may have been due to a range of factors, such as a lack of interest or understanding, lost phones, or parents being unavailable during session times because of work commitments.



KEY LEARNING

Robust digital infrastructure and tools are crucial for maintaining engagement in a virtual setting, and alternative strategies must be developed to retain facilitators and learners.

Post-pandemic period

1

Expanding the curriculum and addressing language needs

In this period, the curriculum was expanded to include mother-tongue instruction in isiZulu, Setswana and Afrikaans alongside English. The resources were adapted into these languages and not translated. Adaptation, rather than mere translation, is about making the content more natural and appropriate for the culture and language. Instead of just converting words, adaptation considers local idioms, cultural references, and style. Numeracy activities were also integrated to address educational gaps.

Grants were stopped and the focus shifted to partnerships with organisations that had secured their own funding. Mentor training was enhanced to improve quality support and coaching.

The challenges that were faced during this phase:

- Report verification and accuracy issues. Since results were recorded manually, there were challenges in ensuring that the information was correct and reliable.
- Inconsistent implementation: It was hard to ensure that the programme was conducted the same way across different organisations, especially since each had its own structure and way of working.

2

Adjustments to improve implementation

The Accelerated Learning Project has made several adjustments to strengthen and scale its implementation based on learnings from the previous phases, including the development of an Operational Manual for implementing partners, which included a detailed Quality Assurance Framework to ensure programme fidelity.

2.1 Partnerships

Along the way, the project team has also worked on strengthening partnerships with TaRL Africa and specific provincial education departments, as well as establishing networks with community trusts.

2.2 Capacity

Capacity and resources have been devoted to expanding multilingual language resources to include Afrikaans, Setswana and isiZulu. The implementation of technological solutions for better monitoring and evaluation is also underway. The project now uses the Teampact app to collect data that is synced into Salesforce for improved tracking and visualisation.



KEY LEARNING

Mother-tongue instruction significantly improves literacy outcomes, but standardising the curriculum across multiple languages remains a challenge. Comprehensive training models need to cover both multilingual and numeracy components.



2.3 Implementation and engagement

While originally an after-school initiative, some regions have shifted to in-school project delivery due to safety and transportation challenges. Additionally, the project is training teachers in schools where facilitators are already working, equipping them with TaRL principles and activities to incorporate into their own classrooms. This dual approach helps strengthen the integration into daily teaching practices, promoting long-term sustainability.

In addition, the project team is collaborating with caregivers to address challenges such as poor attendance and lack of buy-in from schools or learners. These parental engagements have been valuable, as parents in rural or semi-urban areas have shared that they feel less disempowered in their children's education. Many expressed that they had struggled to understand the homework their children were given yet were expected to help them with it. Through engagement workshops, the project team has been able to create a deeper connection with caregivers, offering guidance and support to help them feel more confident in their role. These interactions are vital, as they strengthen the link between home and school, ensuring that learners receive the encouragement and assistance they need both inside and outside the classroom.

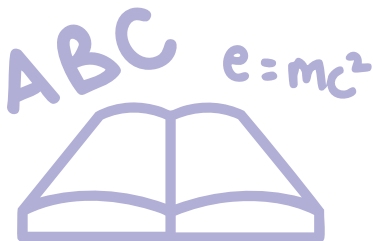


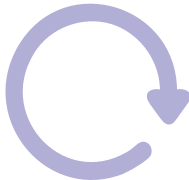
3 Ensuring quality at a local level

A Quality Assurance Framework was developed to ensure the effective implementation of TaRL programmes through community-based organisations that employ youth or childcare workers. By leveraging the strengths of localised community interventions, we can improve the quality of education provided to underserved communities, leading to improved educational outcomes and empowering the next generation.



Tools for quality assurance:

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Standardised assessment tools 	TaRL facilitators assess each child using a one-on-one oral assessment to determine their highest learning level. This interaction helps instructors connect with the child's learning needs. The assessment should be conducted in a comfortable setting, avoiding terms like "test" or "assessment" to reduce anxiety. Implementing partners should use standardised assessment tools aligned with the TaRL methodology to measure literacy and numeracy levels. Standardised tools assess foundational reading skills (letter recognition, word recognition and comprehension) and mathematics skills (number recognition and basic operations).
Training modules 	Training modules are developed for mentors and facilitators to ensure they understand the TaRL methodology, classroom management, and strategies to shift learning outcomes. Context-specific mother-tongue workbooks and resources covering numeracy and literacy interventions have been created. Parental and teacher engagement modules are also being developed for integration into training.
Monitoring and evaluation 	The project team uses an offline data collection app called Teampact that integrates with Salesforce (the team's central database) in real-time. The app tracks intervention progress, verifies attendance, and serves as a repository for observation tools, quality assurance forms and surveys. If digital tools fail, paper tracking tools can be used, but data must be captured digitally later.

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
Quality control guidelines 	Clear guidelines and criteria must be established for quality assurance, including classroom observations, assessment reviews and feedback mechanisms.
Feedback mechanisms 	Feedback loops should be implemented for continuous improvement. This can be done through site visit debriefings or monthly communities of practice. Feedback should be gathered from youth facilitators, mentors, teachers, and community members to inform programme adjustments.
Community engagement tools 	Tools should be developed to engage the community in the educational process, ensuring transparency and building trust. Examples include parental WhatsApp groups, pre- and post-parental training assessments, and phone calls.
Programme evaluation tools 	Tools should be used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of TaRL interventions. These may include pre- and post-intervention assessments, qualitative assessments and longitudinal studies.

4

Focusing on localised implementation

Localised interventions are not just a means of delivering the TaRL methodology; they are integral to its success. By capitalising on the deep knowledge, trust and cultural alignment inherent in these organisations, the team hopes to improve the quality and sustainability of educational interventions. This approach is not only about teaching children to read and write, but also about empowering communities to take charge of their educational destiny and, in turn, their future prosperity.

● Cultural relevance and sensitivity

Community-based organisations understand the intricacies of the people they serve, including cultural norms, traditions and languages. This deep cultural awareness is critical in adapting the TaRL methodology to make it not only relevant but also sensitive to the unique needs and preferences of communities. This cultural resonance facilitates the active participation of children and their families in the programme, as they feel a sense of ownership of and identity with the intervention.

● Trust and familiarity

The presence of community-based organisations, staffed by youth or childcare workers, engenders trust. Parents and guardians are more likely to entrust their children to individuals they know and who understand their specific challenges and aspirations. This trust is an essential part of a successful educational initiative. It encourages families to send their children to these programmes and actively engage in their educational journey.

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● Tailored approaches

Community-based organisations can adapt the TaRL methodology to address the specific educational needs and contextual challenges of their community. They can incorporate elements that are particularly relevant to the local environment, making the interventions more effective and relatable. This adaptability is a strength that centralised, top-down programmes often lack.

● Sustainability

Community-based organisations are committed to the long-term development of their communities. By empowering these organisations and youth facilitators within the community, TaRL interventions are more likely to have a lasting impact. Local leadership ensures that the programme continues to evolve, even after external support diminishes. This creates a sustainable approach to education that benefits generations to come.

● Continuous feedback and adaptation

One of the critical advantages of collaborating with community-based organisations is the real-time feedback mechanism that can be established. Local organisations are better positioned to gather feedback from the community, parents, youth facilitators and childcare workers. This feedback allows for quick adaptations and continuous improvement of interventions. By listening to the voices of those directly involved, the programme can make necessary adjustments promptly, ensuring its ongoing effectiveness.

● Community engagement

Community-based organisations can organise community meetings, involve parents and caregivers in their children's education, and create a sense of shared responsibility for educational outcomes. This community involvement not only enhances the quality of implementation but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability for the programme's success.

What's next?

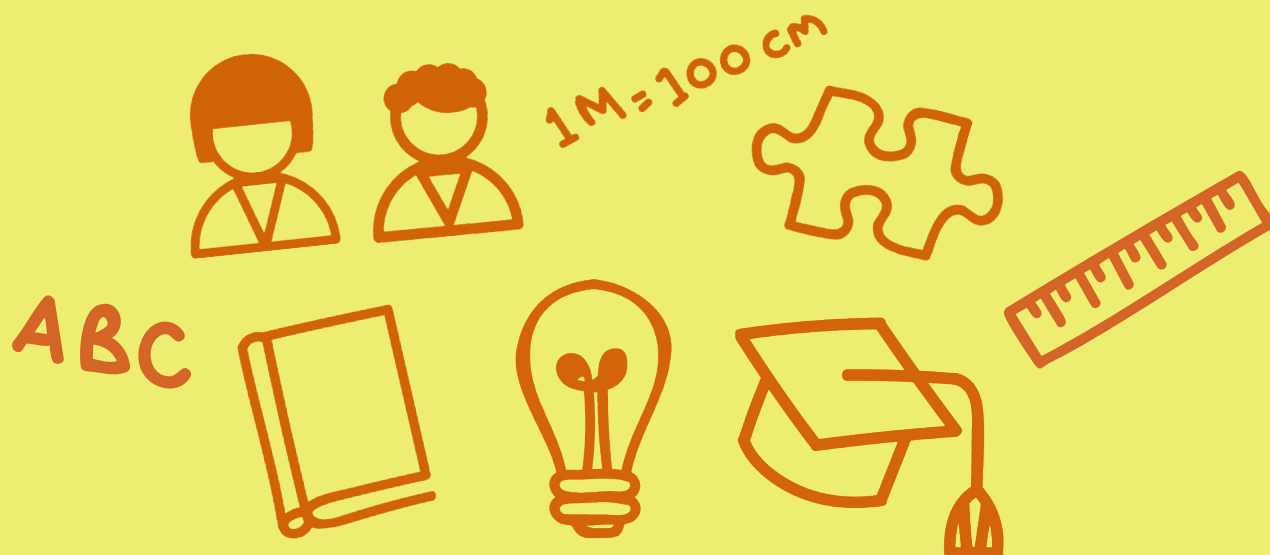
Older learners, who are often trapped in cycles of grade repetition, face significant barriers to academic success. Without the necessary reading and numeracy skills, they find it difficult to keep pace with their peers, making them even more vulnerable to dropping out. For these learners, the challenge is not only to acquire foundational literacy but also to catch up on the basic numeracy skills they missed in earlier grades.

While the "Reading for Meaning" and "Maths Matters" offerings have made significant strides in improving foundational skills for learners, there remains a critical need for targeted interventions for older learners. These learners require tailored support to master the skills they missed in earlier grades. The needs of older learners, particularly those in grades 4 to 7, are unique in comparison to younger learners, as they are not new to schooling. They have likely been exposed to foundational literacy skills in their classrooms, and many have developed the ability to speak and listen in the language of instruction.

However, despite their exposure, many of these learners struggle with reading fluency and comprehension (the ability to read a text and make meaning from it).

According to research, learners in this age group often face what is referred to as a "reading gap". They may have the basic ability to decode words and understand spoken language, but they require a more focused and targeted approach to develop their reading and writing skills fully, particularly when it comes to comprehension.

These learners do not need to start from scratch; instead, they need additional time and instructional strategies that are tailored to their specific gaps in literacy. Approaches such as TaRL, which emphasise targeted learning and individualised support, have proven to be effective in helping older learners catch up. Research supports the idea that with the right interventions, these learners can improve their reading comprehension and writing skills, allowing them to engage more meaningfully with texts and succeed in their educational journey. By focusing on both fluency and meaning-making, we can help these learners bridge the gap between basic literacy and full comprehension, enabling them to fully participate in the learning process and keep up with their peers. Without such interventions, they risk being left behind, perpetuating cycles of underachievement and ultimately increasing the likelihood of dropping out.





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