



Practice Guide



Adapting Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) for rural South African schools

Impact at Scale Labs: Foundational Literacy & Numeracy

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Through the Impact at Scale Labs - Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), Global Schools Forum supports seven grantee organisations across India and Sub-Saharan Africa for testing, iterating, and generating evidence towards scaling their FLN programmes in low-middle income contexts. Read more about the Labs, our grantees and their innovations [here](#)



Overview

This Practice Brief is co-developed by Axiom Education and Global Schools Forum, as part of the Impact at Scale Labs for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy.

The practices, insights and recommendations shared here are grounded in the implementation realities and reflect the lived experiences of organisations working to improve foundational learning outcomes.

These approaches were designed and delivered in specific contexts. Applying them elsewhere will mean adapting to different programme, systemic and delivery realities. We share them as a guiding point for that adaptation. We encourage you to explore these practices and consider how they might inform your own work.

Let's continue the conversation:

If you are exploring how to adapt any of these practices, whether within your organisation, your fund or a wider education system, we would love to learn more about your programmes, the challenges you are navigating and the opportunities for impact you see ahead.

To discuss adaptation or implementation, or to connect directly with the organisations that implemented and refined these practices, please reach out to

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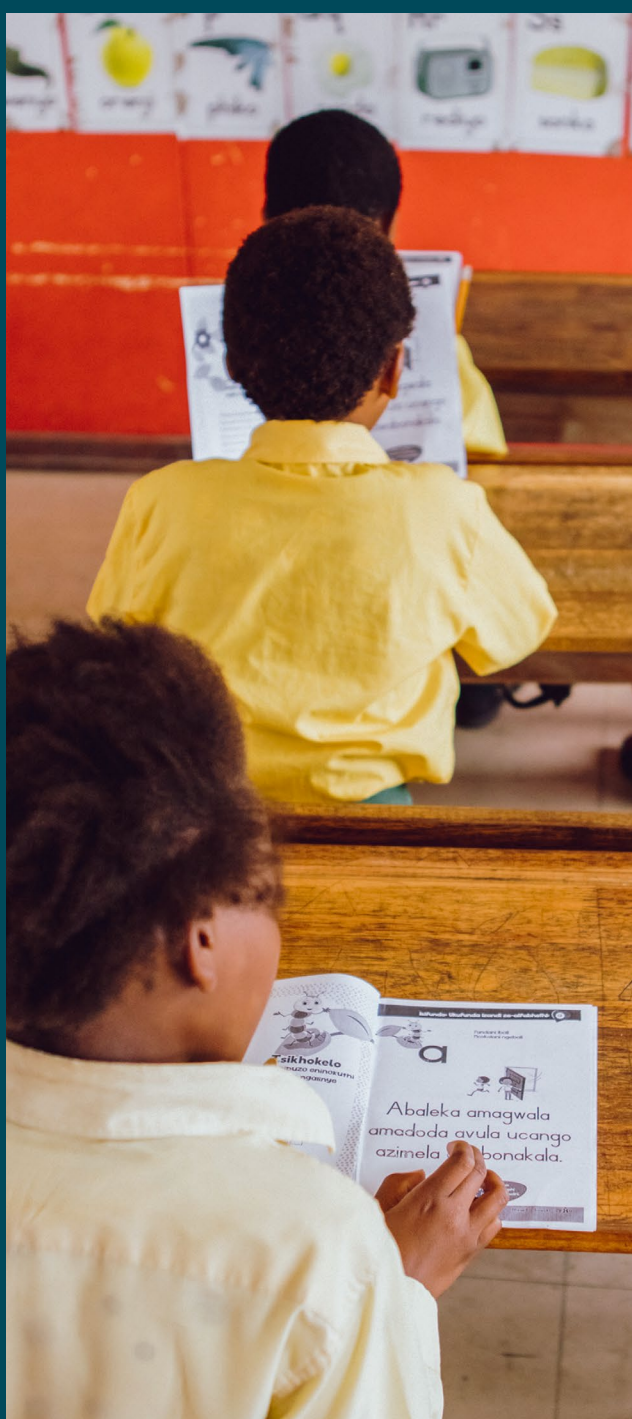
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Introduction



South Africa continues to face a deep and persistent literacy crisis. The Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) found that only around 30% of Grade 3 students read at the expected level in their home language. By Grade 4, fewer than half have reached the Grade 3 home-language benchmark. These findings reinforce what was already highlighted by the 2021 PIRLS study that four in five Grade 4 students are unable to read for meaning in their home language. Many children therefore move through school without the foundational reading skills they need to access the wider curriculum.

The consequences extend well beyond schooling. With three in five young people unemployed nationally and as high as 80% in many rural communities like much of the Eastern Cape Province - low literacy and limited employment opportunities together place a ceiling on future prospects. In rural communities particularly, these interconnected challenges leave many young people without viable pathways to further education, employment, or economic mobility. As both PIRLS and SACMEQ show, language and socio-economic background remain strong determinants of learning: children in wealthier, urban schools are roughly twice as likely to read fluently as their peers in rural, no-fee schools. Closing this gap is one of the country's most urgent priorities, and it depends on stronger collaboration between government and non-state organisations.

About the programme

Programme Duration

Running since 2015 (structured TaRL from 2019)

Implemented by

Axium Education

Goal

To improve foundational literacy and numeracy in rural schools

Reach



2

Districts within
the Eastern
Cape



50

Schools



5600

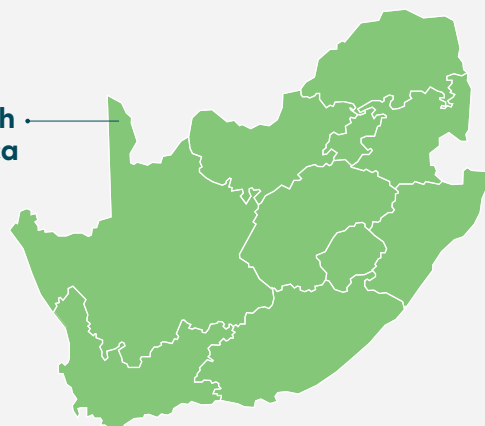
Students
reached



150

Teachers
supported

South
Africa



In this context, Axium Education works in the deep rural communities of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Its Nobalisa programme is staffed and led by rural youth and focuses on the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills (FLN) among children in their own communities. Through a contextualised Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, the programme provides targeted support for mother-tongue literacy development for students in Grade R – 3 during the school day. While the TaRL approach is globally recognized and supported by strong evidence base, Axium further adapted the model to the realities of the rural context, depending on the local languages, curricula, classrooms, delivery capacity and resource constraints.

About the Practice Guide

Axium has spent a decade adapting a well-researched, internationally credentialed intervention to be cost-effective and impactful in a remote, multilingual, under-resourced context, taking into account the distinctive structures of isiXhosa languages and the practicalities of rural communities. Like any intervention, TaRL has required careful contextualisation and ongoing iteration to become useful to teachers and schools.

Through this practice guide, Axium - as critical enthusiasts of TaRL - shares their journey with fellow practitioners looking to implement TaRL in new contexts. The guide further delves into several key considerations on adapting TaRL for rural South African classrooms, offers learning from implementation experiences and suggests “thinking points” so that fellow practitioners and policymakers can reason through them for their own settings.

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Context and Challenge



Since 2009, Axiom has been based in villages in the OR Tambo Inland and Amathole East Education Districts of the Eastern Cape - among the poorest in South Africa. The schools experience many of the challenges typical of deep-rural settings such as multigrade and overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated infrastructure and long commutes for teachers and students alike. The programme runs in about 50 schools within 100km of Axiom's head office in Zithulele Village.

Axiom's early work with high-school maths and science students revealed the deep backlogs in language and numeracy that many rural students carry with them throughout their schooling and prompted the launch of a foundational literacy programme, Nobalisa¹, in 2015.

Since its inception, the programme has been grounded in a conviction that

young people from rural communities can be a powerful asset to children's learning.

¹ "Nobalisa" means "Community Storyteller" in isiXhosa, reflecting the programme's roots in storytelling and reading for enjoyment.

What started as an ad-hoc way to provide extra hands in the classroom evolved into a more structured TaRL programme in 2019, as the need grew to equip those “extra hands” to deliver high-quality lessons.

The core challenge for Axiom is the same one teachers and governments across sub-Saharan Africa are wrestling with: where children enter school with learning deficits, and by Grade 3 the vast majority are well behind curriculum expectations. This also plays out in later years through children’s disconnection from learning, school dropout and eventual unemployment. Finding a way to bridge the gap between this rural reality and the demands of the national curriculum in a way that integrates within government systems and can feasibly scale remains at the core of the Nobalisa Programme.



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Theoretical grounding



The TaRL approach has been widely used in low-income and rural school communities globally. Since 2001, various implementation models of TaRL have been developed and evaluated by Pratham and J-PAL, with at least 6 randomized control trials

Endorsed by the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP) as a “great buy”,

TaRL now reaches ~4 million learners in countries across Africa.

A recent meta-analysis of the evidence for TaRL by Ardington, Menendez and Thunde² sounds a cautionary note. They suggest claims of a strong evidence base for TaRL need to be stress-tested against context and the complexities and limitations they highlight resonate closely with Axiom’s implementation experience.

² Ardington C, Menendez A, Thunde J, 2026 The Limits of a “Great Buy”: What Rigorous Evidence Reveals about Teaching at the Right Level. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WkhHx6Z4QDk5q1uJqCJc8-zUpqYBwODn/view>

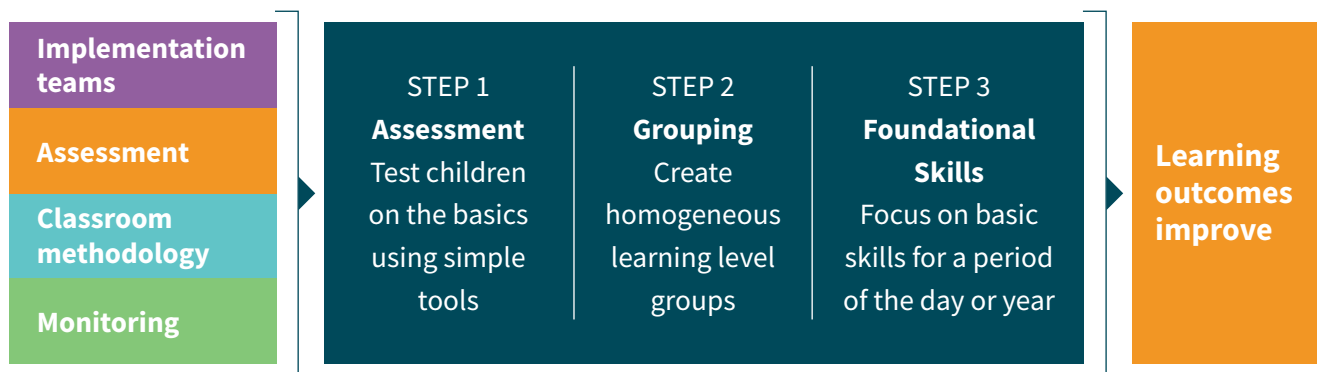
A recent working paper from the What Works Hub for Global Education³ identifies five core components of TaRL classroom practice. These are:

- Focus on a streamlined set of foundational skills
- Regular assessment to identify current learning levels
- Aligning instruction to current learning levels
- Interactive instructional techniques
- Localised, low-cost, well-aligned range of instructional materials

Typically, TaRL is run as a literacy and numeracy remediation programme in Grades 4-6. This approach⁴ allows facilitators to provide individual attention to learners and to focus on what learners need to know in order to progress to the next level.

TaRL support pieces

In a TaRL classroom



Children are reassessed and moved through the levels as they progress.

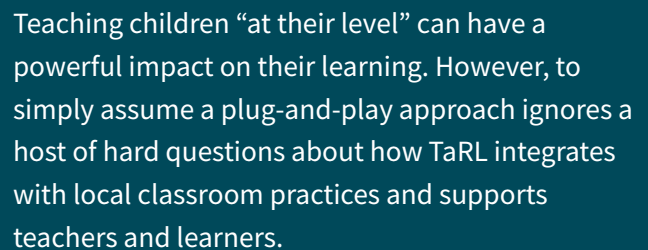
Image sources from JPAL-TaRL website

This is in stark contrast to most South African classrooms, where teachers must cover the content-heavy Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and often rush to finish it. This leaves little room for the individual support struggling learners need. Unaddressed gaps compound into the well-documented cumulative backlogs that make a TaRL-style programme so attractive.

³ Kaffenberger, M., Angrist, N., Hwa, YY., Kayton, H.L., Jukes, M. & Stern, J. 2026. Core components of teaching at the right level: Unpacking the black box of proven programmes into a set of 'core components' by systematically combining multiple sources of rigorous evidence with implementer insights. What Works Hub for Global Education Core Components Synthesis. 2026/001. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-WhatWorksHubforGlobalEducation-WP_2026/001

⁴ TARK approach: <https://teachingattherightlevel.org/the-tarl-approach/>

Approach to Adaptation



For each decision point, the key considerations are outlined, alongside lessons emerging from Axiom's implementation experience

and reflections that may inform adaptation efforts in other settings.

How Axiom's adaptation differs from "standard" TaRL?

Design decision	Typical TaRL implementation	Axiom's Nobalisa adaptation
Grade & duration	Catch-up in Grades 4–6; short bursts (e.g. 15-day camps)	Early grades (R–3), integrated into the school day, over a four-year journey
Language	Paced on English (Western Germanic)	Mother-tongue isiXhosa first; for an agglutinative language with a transparent orthography
Materials	Low-cost teaching-learning materials, training resources	Low-cost print/laminate plus materials, supplementing government resources
Staffing	Teachers, volunteers or NGO staff	Local rural youth employed through Public Employment; trained and coached by Axiom; living within walking distance of schools
System relationship	Often runs parallel to the system	Embedded in the CAPS Group Guided Reading period during the school day; active district & provincial relationships
Assessment	ASER-style oral assessment	ASER for formative use; EGRA validation for measuring impact over time

Decision 1 Which grades to implement, when and for how long?

Most TaRL programmes are catch-up interventions in middle grades (typically Gr 4–6) and run as short-term interventions (e.g. holiday camps). Given that in rural South African contexts, children arrive at school with pre-existing learning deficits and by Grade 3 most are well below grade level reading benchmarks, Axiom opted instead for **early grades implementation** (Gr R–3). Axiom also chose to develop an **integrated, ongoing programme** rather than a once-off catch-up programme. The rationale is that the structural aspects of rural classrooms (large or multigrade classes, constrained teacher supply, variable attendance) are unlikely to change soon, so an embedded programme that addresses under-resourcing is the best long-term bet.

However, this meant that Axiom teaches reading at the same time as school teachers are also teaching reading, rather than as a separate programme after the fact.

Three design factors were required to compensate for this:

- Adjust the traditional TaRL structure to **operate within a single grade at a time**, within the school timetable, rather than as a whole-school or after-school intervention.
- Lengthen the **period of intervention** to be a four-year journey with each child, rather than 15 days. This is because early language development in mother-tongue should not be rushed, and even learning letters should be paired with the systematic development of the oral and cognitive language skills that go with the ability to decode.
- Align and benchmark the TaRL intervention against **national curricular standards**, wherever possible. Certainly, if a child in Grade 3 has not achieved automaticity on letter recognition, then their lessons will not be aligned to the Grade 3 curriculum sequencing. However, for children who are on track, or nearly on track, their sequencing should follow the national curriculum to at least some extent.

Thinking points:

How will your TaRL programme integrate with and differentiate itself from existing literacy curricula?
When and where will you find the time within the school academic calendar?



Decision 2 Which language to teach in first and what does that change?

The standard TaRL pacing is built on the acquisition of Western Germanic languages (English). In line with the literacy research, Axiom works first in children's **mother-tongue, isiXhosa** - a Southern Nguni language that is agglutinative (words are built by stringing units of meaning together) and phonologically transparent and relies heavily on morphemes for meaning development. This has driven many design adaptations over the years:

- At the Beginner and Letter levels, phonics instruction still takes centre stage, but it must be paired with an emphasis on **prosodic and oral language development**. In agglutinative languages with transparent orthography, decoding is much easier and **meaning-making** at the morpheme level is of greater importance.
- At higher levels, the challenge is providing access to a variety of **high-quality texts** originally written in and for isiXhosa, which enable deeper meaning-making in oral and written language. Translated texts can only take children so far, as they lack the idiomatic and culturally situated language development that enables children to become thinkers in their mother-tongue. This is a broader issue of 'language nutrition' and the intellectualisation of African languages. This is where Axiom programmes mediate children's access to text.

Thinking points:

Which language is your priority? If not English, what resources exist to enable deep language contextualisation - beyond simply translation?

Decision 3 What mix of government, supplementary, no/low-cost materials to use?

While human resources are usually the biggest cost factor in any TaRL programme, materials and physical resource costs also become a significant factor at scale. Governments typically have limited budgets for Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM), so anything supplementary to state-provided materials requires careful thought.

South Africa's history of apartheid and Bantu Education is well documented. In this system, black African children were systematically provided with fewer resources and resources of a lower standard. Against this backdrop, there are understandable ideological barriers to programmes using "no-cost resources" such as sticks and stones, as in the original TaRL.

Axiom's implementation experience suggests:

- **Low-cost resourcing** (print/laminate) earns far greater buy-in from schools, caregivers and communities.
- Alongside **integration with government-provided LTSM** enables system's acceptance and coherence.

Thinking points:

Children’s dignity and equality are fiercely guarded, and this is a social issue to navigate with care. While designing for scale, how will you balance no-cost, low-cost and government-provided resources to be acceptable, affordable and of “good enough” quality?

Decision 4 **How will the programme be staffed? How will training and support work?**

TaRL programmes in different contexts have been run by teachers, NGO staff, volunteers and community members. Research suggests NGO-led programmes achieve higher results, but whether these are able to scale remains an open question⁵. Teachers are the obvious choice since they are already there, but asking more of an overstretched teaching force is unlikely to work.

Axium’s contextual rootedness therefore offered a prudent solution. Rural communities hold an **abundance of young talent**, though often without formal qualifications, still have a lot to offer children. Working with community youth brings its own considerations:

- With little more than a Grade 12 qualification, the onus is on Axium to provide the **training and coaching** that the youth need to deliver a high-quality TaRL programme.
- **To keep transport costs down**, staff must stay within walking distance to the schools where they work. This makes a decentralised training and support model both essential and complex. Many schools are remote and hard to reach, moreover vehicle maintenance is a major cost and public transport, where it exists, is prohibitively expensive relative to salaries.
- Decentralised recruitment comes with **child protection risks**. In addition to police and background checks, Axium draws on traditional and local leadership structures to confirm that the staff employed are in good standing in the community, since many local issues are never formally reported.
- Large numbers of young people based at schools make **adequate supervision essential** for child protection, teacher development and programme quality. This management layer is Axium’s biggest cost driver. While this cost can be reduced by co-locating leaders with schools, the right ratio of schools to leaders is still being worked out.

Thinking points:

What talent already exists in the communities you serve? What training, supervision and child-protection structures would let you draw on it safely, affordably and at quality, and who carries the cost of that supervision layer?

⁵ Ardington et. al 2026

Decision 5 What is the relationship with government systems and curricula?

With the possible exception of countries afflicted by war or humanitarian disasters, TaRL programmes operate within national education policies, systems and curricula. Implementers must decide how deeply to integrate and how much control to cede, so that the programme remains distinctive and disruptive enough without building a parallel system.

Axium continues to navigate this across three dimensions:

- TaRL is focused and limited by design which raises the question of how it aligns with broader, more ambitious government national curricula. In the **Nobalisa programme, TaRL is delivered during the school day through the Group Guided Reading (GGR) period** mandated under CAPS. Axium supports teachers to make this instructional time more effective by providing additional resources and structured approaches to GGR. While this helps integrate the programme within existing school schedules, it does not fully resolve the challenge of curriculum alignment, as learners may still engage in activities that are not strictly aligned to grade-level curriculum expectations but are necessary to build foundational reading skills.
- As schools are required to operate within government policy frameworks, **building trust and securing school participation** depends on strong, sustained relationships with district and provincial authorities. These relationships often involve negotiation and trade-offs, as Axium reconciles government priorities with its commitments to donors and the communities it serves.
- In a geographical context where teachers usually commute from towns an hour or more away and weather conditions or protests frequently disrupt road access, having staff within walking distance helps keep learning going. Axium teams are often called upon to continue with their lessons even when a teacher or teachers are absent. The **dependability of local youth** is another huge advantage of community staffing. However, this does rely upon warm and trusting relationships between our teams and the schools at a local level.

Thinking points:

How will your programme be distinctive enough to have an impact, yet integrated sufficiently with government that it stands a chance of widespread adoption? How will it complement rather than compete with national curricula?

Decision 6 How will it hold for scale?

NGO-led programmes or pilots can provide proof-of-concept, but that is not the same as proof-at-scale. Implementation research⁶ shows that few effective small-scale pilots manage to scale successfully because complexities multiply with geography, politics and logistics. Many things that work in a few schools, or even 50 schools, begin to unravel when geographic, systemic or practical complexities become magnified at scale. Two aspects of Axiom's experience with scale illustrate this point:

- **Skills development training and lesson plans at scale:** As Axiom has grown to cover larger scale over the last five years, it has had to cope with the challenges of training and supporting a larger cohort of facilitators (many on nine-month youth internship programmes), leaving less time to train them than needed. As a result, the teaching plans have been steadily simplified to reduce the skills burden, without over-simplifying the complexities of language development.
- **Impact monitoring at scale:** Impact monitoring from afar, especially when a small MEL team cannot reach all schools given connectivity issues, has required adaptations and simplifications of what to measure and how to measure it. However, maintaining the ability to assess learning impact fairly accurately means that simple adoption of the highly cost effective and simple TaRL assessment strategies would not suffice. TaRL / ASER assessments are excellent formative tools but, despite validation work against EGRA, are not designed at measuring educational impact over time. In addition, operating at a relatively small scale (~7 000 learners) it is difficult and/or expensive to make claims of statistical significance - such as through an RCT. This is a challenge that most small- to medium-sized education NGOs face, and certainly for governments considering assessment at the scale of a district or a province, the cost of measurement remains a serious factor.

Thinking points:

How will you know that something that works with a few schools, will work with many? This is where having a clear understanding of your theory of change and the core programme levers that drive it, along with their associated costs, is critical. Do those levers scale? Are the costs optimized to scale?

Decision 7 How will the programme be sustained?

South Africa has public employment schemes like the Social Employment Fund, National Youth Service or the Basic Education Employment Initiative. Axiom has worked with four different employment schemes over the years, seeing huge potential both for the young people employed and for the impact on literacy. Yet these schemes are currently unfocused, unstructured, unsupported and unpredictable and as such the country is missing out on a major opportunity.

⁶ <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/it-possible-improve-learning-scale-reflections-process-identifying-large-scale-successful>

Thinking points:

South Africa's employment schemes may be unique in the African context but the underlying questions remain: how will your programme be sustainably staffed? How will that staff be trained and supported? And how will risks of child protection be managed appropriately?



05

Impact and Results so far



This section sets out the evidence behind Axiom's belief that rural young people, trained in a methodology like

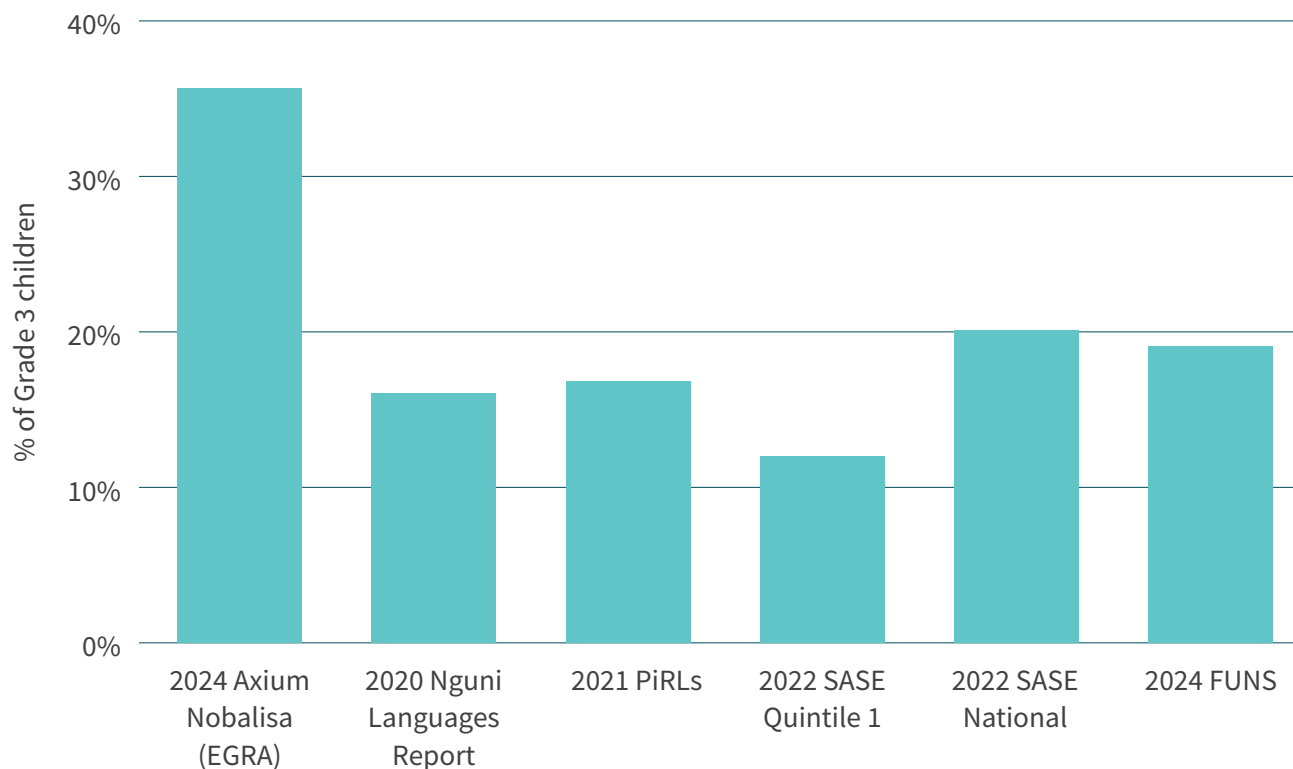
TaRL and deployed in rural classrooms, can have a powerful impact on learning and also signals where the evidence is still developing.

Learning outcomes

In Figure 1, below, Grade 3 children who have been in the programme for three or more years read for meaning at approximately twice the rate of their peers across various recent benchmarking studies.

Figure 1: The Percentage of Grade 3 children meeting reading benchmarks

Three years with Nobalisa vs Comparative reading benchmarks⁷



Figures 2 and 3 are drawn from the Pilot Study⁸ Axiom conducted in 2025, in partnership with an external researcher. The green line represents a group of 13 control schools, the blue line a group of 17 intervention schools, and the orange line the appropriate reading benchmark for the grade. Where the intervention (blue) line lies above the control (green) line, it suggests the intervention has had an impact on learning. A clear, positive difference is seen between control and intervention schools on Letter Sounds across all three grades. The difference is less clear for Passage Reading, which is in line with the findings of the recent meta-analysis of TaRL, referenced earlier. We have plans to address this weakness, which we outline under Key Learnings in the next section.

⁷ It is difficult to equate outcomes measures for different assessments, but the chart draws from the following:
 Ardington, C. et al. (2020) Summary Report: Benchmarking early grade reading skills in Nguni languages. Stellenbosch: ReSEP, Stellenbosch University. Cape Town: SALDRU, University of Cape Town. Chicago: NORC at the University of Chicago. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
 Department of Basic Education. (2023). PIRLS 2021: South African Main Report. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
 Department of Basic Education. (2024). South African Systemic Evaluation 2022 Volume 1 Technical Report. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/0429e7_72811a97a11b4b9fb004e0e12dbf1a2f.pdf
 Department of Basic Education. (2025). Funda Uphumelele National Survey: Summary Report. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria [note: assessment conducted at beginning of the year]

⁸ Publication forthcoming.

Figure 2: 2025 Pilot Study - Letter Sounds

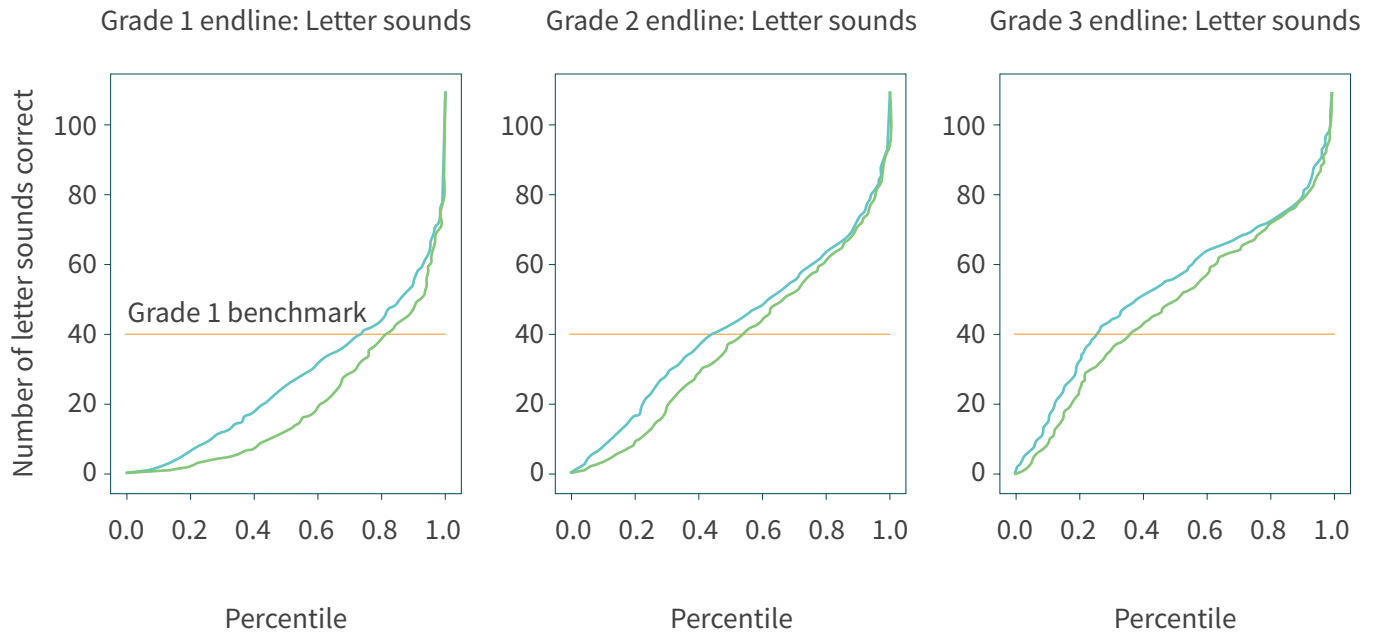
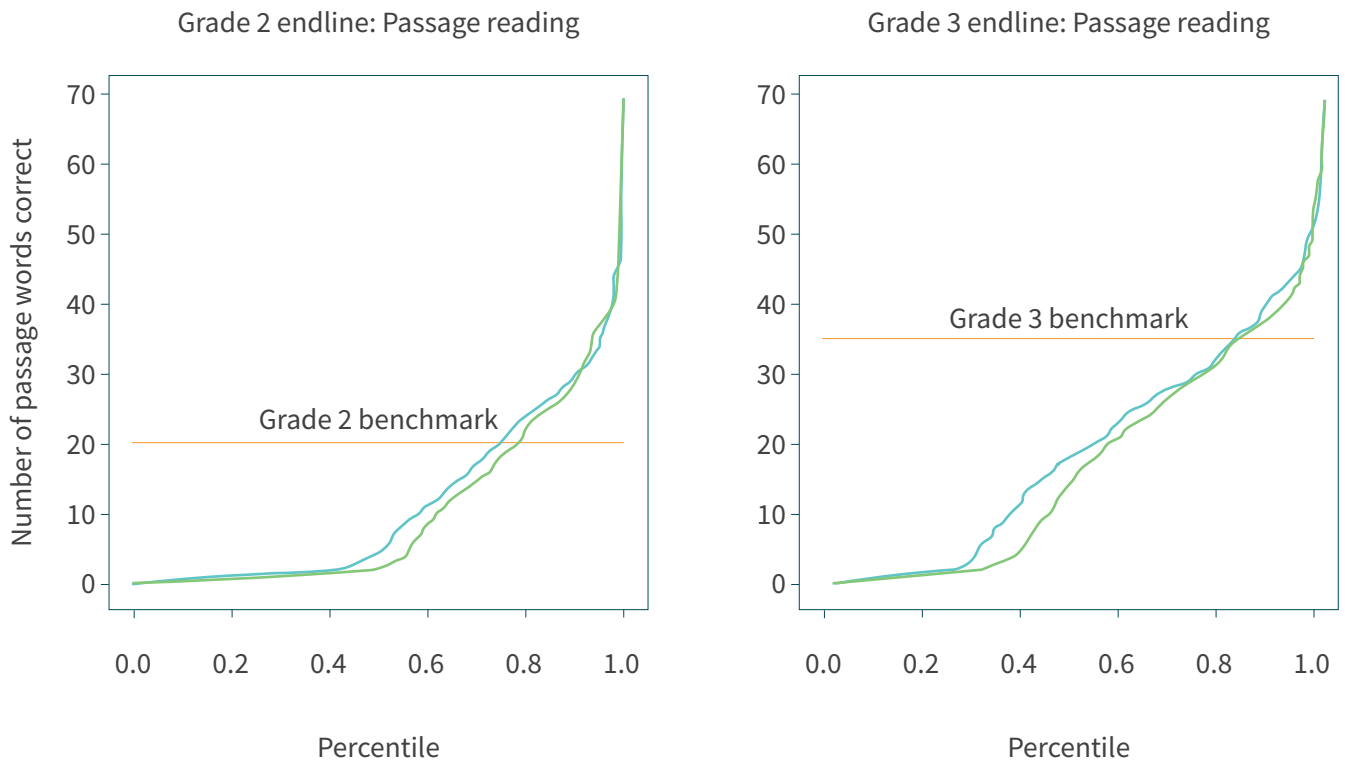


Figure 3: 2025 Pilot Study - Passage Reading

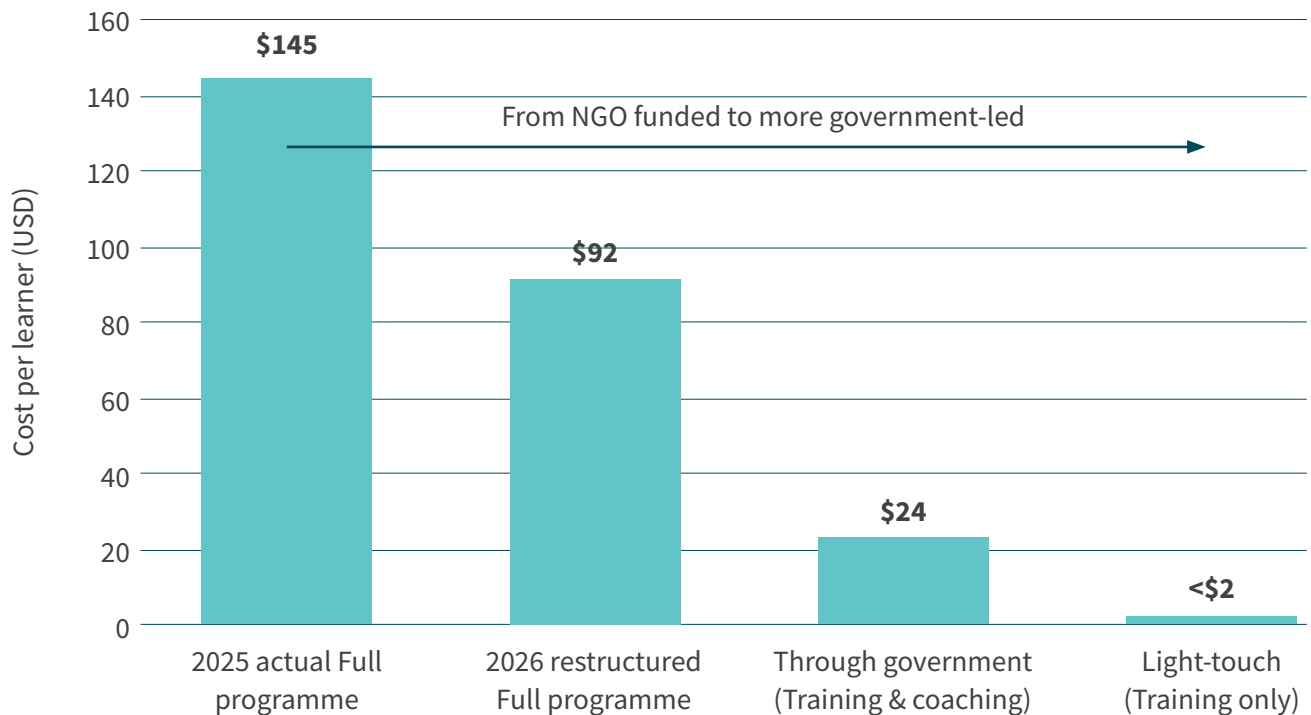


Cost Implications

The other dimension of impact is cost. A 2025 analysis of Axiom's key cost-drivers with the GSF- Impact at Scale Labs team helped restructure the support model and clarify cost per learner (CPL) at scale.

The pattern below shows comparison of 2025 actual programme costs, with 2026 projected costs after restructuring. The different scenarios below envision costs if government held full responsibility for programme management - as is the case with Education Assistants - and Axiom/NGOs were only responsible for technical training and/or coaching.

Analyses of Cost per learner (CPL) across scenarios



What does this imply for government as payer and doer?

Scenario	What shifts to government
2025 actual -full programme	Nothing yet; Axiom delivers and funds the full programme
2026 restructured - full programme	A leaner support model; Axiom still delivers, at lower cost
Full programme through government (training & coaching)	Government manages programme delivery (as with Education Assistants); Axiom provides technical training and coaching
Light-touch through government (training only)	Government delivers and manages; Axiom provides training only

Beyond learning: the “double impact” on rural youth

Given the scope of this practice guide, the evidence case here centres on FLN gains, but the impact of a programme like the Notalisa reaches well beyond learning outcomes to the communities, schools and the young people themselves. Of Axiom’s initial cohort of Social Employment Fund staff, 70% of the young people went on to further education, employment or training, after leaving. These “youth pipeline” successes have been replicated in more systematic ways at Axiom’s partner Year Beyond.

Nolutsha Parafini, one of the first Notalisa facilitators and now a leader on the programme, captures this “double impact” well:



I started as a facilitator in 2016, and today I’m a cluster leader supporting 15 facilitators and 230 children. When we started, many learners struggled to read. Now, thanks to consistent work, they are making real progress and even look forward to every session. Seeing this growth first-hand makes my role so fulfilling” -Nolutsha Parafini, one of the first Notalisa facilitators, now a cluster leader

The impact is also felt by parents, caregivers and communities.



I have a grandchild, who is now in Grade 4 and what I have noticed is that her reading skills have improved, she is reading fluently, even when they play after school you would hear them singing, playing all the games that they were taught by Nobalisa”

-Community Member and grandparent



[I am] excited about this programme that it has reached my community as it is characterized by high illiteracy. So touched about the humility, the patience of Nobalisa when teaching learners. My prayer is that it can reach all the schools under my community. ” -Chairperson of a participating School’s Governing Body

At the beginning, often teachers are the most skeptical of the concept of young people supporting learning in the classroom. Once they experience the programme in action, and see its impact on children, they become advocates.

A Department Head at one of the schools has become one of these champions:



Since the start of the programme, I have noticed a great improvement in my class: learners are able to speak independently, and I’ve noticed that there is a classroom discipline.

06

Key Learnings and Recommendations



This guide highlights a set of considerations that practitioners and policymakers should engage critically before wholesale adoption of TaRL. When to implement and for how long? Which language? How will it be staffed and resourced? How will it integrate with government systems and curricula? And perhaps most importantly, how will it scale and sustain?

None of these have easy answers, but navigating through these is a critical part of what gives implementation a chance of success.

Axium plans to do this by activating the role of the teacher as the highest-skilled “facilitator” in the room,

while at the same time updating its curriculum in a way that will allow these skills to develop from earlier on.

As “critical enthusiasts” of TaRL, Axium surfaces contextual nuances in both design and delivery, in a way that enables such interventions a good chance of having impact as well as a strong belief that what they do can make a difference!

Points to consider for Practitioners attempting similar programmes

01 Be clear on why a particular intervention is being adopted or adapted

Even interventions with a strong evidence base and proven track record cannot be implemented without multiple adaptations for context. Understanding the levers of change that make an intervention successful and the contextual differences that form part of their reality are central. For most small- to medium-sized NGOs, adopting and adapting approaches that have been tested elsewhere is often more feasible than designing and rigorously validating entirely new models, given the significant costs associated with evaluations.

02 Know which components will drive results

It is critical to identify the core components, without which the intervention is no longer itself and must be protected. While adaptation is necessary, organisations must guard against excessive drift that weakens the mechanisms that made the approach effective in the first place.

03 Make space for deliberate shifts in the model as scale evolves

As programmes expand, the intervention design often needs to further evolve, mainly to simplify, streamline and reduce cost drivers. Organisations must test assumptions and early-stage success factors to determine whether they remain relevant, effective and affordable at scale.

04 Navigate trade-offs with practical feasibility

Scaling within real-world system constraints requires NGOs to compromise at times on things they value (such as staff development or resource quality or coaching intensity) in order to meet operational requirements. These are important trade-offs that must be informed by evidence (both monitoring and evaluation data) and negotiated transparently with both internal teams and with the system stakeholders.



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