PATHWAYS TO LEARNING:

Understanding how Funda Wande Teacher Assistants contribute to Improved Learner Outcomes

May 2024

Funda Wande
Reading for Meaning

SOCIAL IMPACT INSIGHTS AFRICA

CONTENTS

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ACRONYMS

BEEI	Basic Education Employment Initiative
CA	Coaching Assistant
DH	Department Head
DP	Deputy Principal
EA	Education Assistant
EC	Eastern Cape Province
EFAL	English as First Additional Language
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLN	Foundational Literacy & Numeracy
FW	Funda Wande
GSA	General School Assistant
HL	Home Language
LP	Limpopo Province
LTSM	Learning & Teaching Support Materials
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Initiative
SALDRU	Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit
SMT	School Management Team
TA	Teacher Assistant
TG	Teacher Guide

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of an independent study of the roles played by Teacher Assistants (TAs) in the 2023 implementation of Funda Wande (FW) foundational literacy and numeracy programmes in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces of South Africa. The qualitative study conducted by Social Impact Insights Africa builds on and augments a quantitative impact evaluation conducted by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town, which suggests that TAs significantly improve learner outcomes, beyond the effects achieved by the provision of Funda Wande's base intervention of structured learning plans, materials and teacher training. This qualitative study intends to understand the mechanisms and pathways through which TAs impact learning outcomes, directly through interactions with learners or indirectly via interactions with teachers and the wider school environment.

This study comes at a time when policy debates are taking place concerning the possible long-term continuation of government's integration of young 'paraprofessionals' such as Education Assistants or Teacher Assistants into the public education system at scale and in the long term. This provides an immediate opportunity, and indeed an immediate need, for an evidence-based discussion on which design parameters can be put in place at scale for education paraprofessionals to have the maximum impact on learners' foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Learnings from non-governmental organisation (NGO) interventions like Funda Wande's, which test specific approaches to Education/Teacher Assistants, can directly apply to a broader national debate.

The methodology employed in this study included in-depth case studies of twelve schools in two provinces (Eastern Cape and Limpopo) conducted in October 2023. The case study methodology included structured classroom observation, interviews with TAs, teachers, Department Heads (DHs) and school managers and a brief exercise with learners. Interviews with teachers and school managers conducted after the programme's implementation phase (February 2024) offer important insights into sustainability. Interviews with TAs in February/March 2024 explored the impacts on the young people after leaving the programme.

The current study augments the quantitative findings that Funda Wande TAs have a measurable impact on learner outcomes by documenting a high level of acceptance and appreciation within the schooling system for the roles Funda Wande TAs play. Direct participants within the programme, including TAs and teachers (who participated by receiving training in the Funda Wande structured learning programme and by partnering with TAs in their classrooms), consistently rated the intervention very highly. Therefore, Funda Wande's approach to placing and managing young paraprofessionals in schools seems highly effective from impact, system integration, operational fidelity and quality perspectives.

This efficacy suggests a programme design worth documenting and learning from for the broader ongoing policy discussion about paraprofessionals in education, especially their roles in improving foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes in foundation phase classrooms.

The current study shows that if a paraprofessional intervention is structured according to the design parameters of the Funda Wande approach, the following TA impact pathways apply:

1. increased use of differentiated teaching and individualised attention in multi-ability classrooms,
2. the effective application of a structured learning programme with specific literacy and numeracy strategies (e.g. group guided reading for literacy, use of manipulatives for maths, etc.),
3. increasing individualised learner feedback and motivation,
4. freeing teacher time for instruction by taking on non-instructional classroom management activities,
5. enabling continuity of learning when teachers are absent from the classroom,
6. identifying and supporting learners with psychosocial challenges,
7. enabling teachers to engage in ongoing 'peer learning' by discussing learner needs, teaching strategies and the application of structured learning materials with the paraprofessionals (who themselves receive ongoing training and coaching/mentoring support), and
8. enabling Department Heads to have the time to coach teachers.

Key design elements in the Funda Wande TA programme design enable these impact pathways to be effective. We therefore recommend that these elements be considered as part of future interventions with young paraprofessionals in schools. We recognise that interventions at scale may require adjustments to the ratio of paraprofessionals per classroom or the depth of training and mentorship provided, as these are costly elements in a large-scale and long-term programme. Still, the broad elements listed below should be considered minimum characteristics of an effective intervention:

1. **Time Period:** contract TAs for at least an entire school year and ideally two years in the same school. This allows TAs and teachers to develop a consistent and substantive division of labour and enables school managers to plan their teaching resources effectively.
2. **Local recruitment**: place paraprofessionals in schools near where they live, where possible, to maximise home language alignment with learners and enable them to play linking roles between the learners, school, home environments and the wider community.
3. **Contracting on clearly defined roles**: have a structured contract between paraprofessionals, schools and a supporting agency (such as Funda Wande) that sets out specific tasks for TAs and ensures clarity on shared expectations.
4. **Structured learning programme:** combine the paraprofessional intervention with a structured learning programme (lesson plans and LTSM) in which the teachers and TAs are both trained.
5. **Training and ongoing support:** combine an initial training period (a week) with regular top-up training (termly) and ongoing mentorship support. In the Funda Wande design, each mentor supported 18-33 paraprofessionals.
6. **Focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in home languages:** dedicate paraprofessional training, grade allocation and task definition primarily to foundational literacy and numeracy (not higher grades, and not predominantly non-pedagogic roles and functions) and ensure materials and training are aligned with the home language of learners.
7. **Make motivation and psychosocial support roles explicit:** include motivational teaching methods, positive classroom discipline, and an understanding of psychosocial issues as explicit elements of paraprofessional training, teaching materials and job descriptions.

We conclude that, in achieving the goal of improved foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes for foundation phase learners, the well-established effects of the 'triple cocktail' (Fleisch 2022) of structured teaching materials, teacher training and teacher coaching are effectively augmented by paraprofessionals, resulting in a highly effective 'quadruple cocktail'. Further quantitative research is needed to establish the size of the added paraprofessional effect and how different operational designs (such as teacher/paraprofessional ratios) affect learner outcomes.

The Funda Wande TA programme effectively trained and employed young people for the programme period and also motivated participating young people to gain further qualifications and remain active in the field of education, specifically in early-grade teaching. It may, therefore, have a longer-term impact on the systemic challenge of foundation phase teacher supply (Bohmer & Gustavson 2023), especially if linkages to foundation phase initial teacher education are built into the programme design.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well established that the literacy and numeracy levels of South African learners are concerning (Spaull 2013). Not only do large proportions of South African learners score well below international benchmarks (Nyamunda 2021; Govender & Hugo 2020), but these learners also do not have the basic skills to engage successfully with the South African curriculum as they progress to higher grades. Backlogs in early grades compound in the higher grades, deepening inequalities in educational achievement and later economic and social opportunity. The urgency of addressing foundational literacy and numeracy skills early and at scale is recognised as a whole-of-society imperative, galvanising coalitions across government, civil society and the private sector.

Designs for educational interventions to bolster foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills in the public sector foundation phase have been studied extensively internationally and in South Africa. The South African debate has mostly revolved around the efficacy of the 'triple cocktail' of structured learning materials (lesson plans with appropriate learning & teaching support materials (LTSM)), teacher training and teacher coaching (Fleisch 2022). A relatively recent addition to the debate is the added efficacy of young 'paraprofessionals' in schools and classrooms. These are called Education Assistants or Teacher Assistants in the South African context. They are considered 'paraprofessionals' because they do not have full formal qualifications as education professionals (teachers) but can be trained to do some of the less technical tasks that teachers do.

The logic is similar to paraprofessionals active in medical, legal, social work, and other fields. While the parameters for paralegal skills and roles, for example, are relatively well established, the debate on para-teachers is in its infancy. Many different models are being experimented with and remain largely uncoordinated. One of the most extensive South African experiments was the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) as part of the Covid-19-period Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), which placed 850 000 young men and women in +/- 23 000 public schools as Education Assistants (EAs) and General School Assistants (GSAs) since October 2020. The first phase of the BEEI was limited to five months (1 December 2020 to 30 April 2021), and various iterations have continued since then, with even larger numbers of young people placed in schools. The impact of the BEEI on learner outcomes has not been independently evaluated, although the programme's value in addressing youth employment is evident.

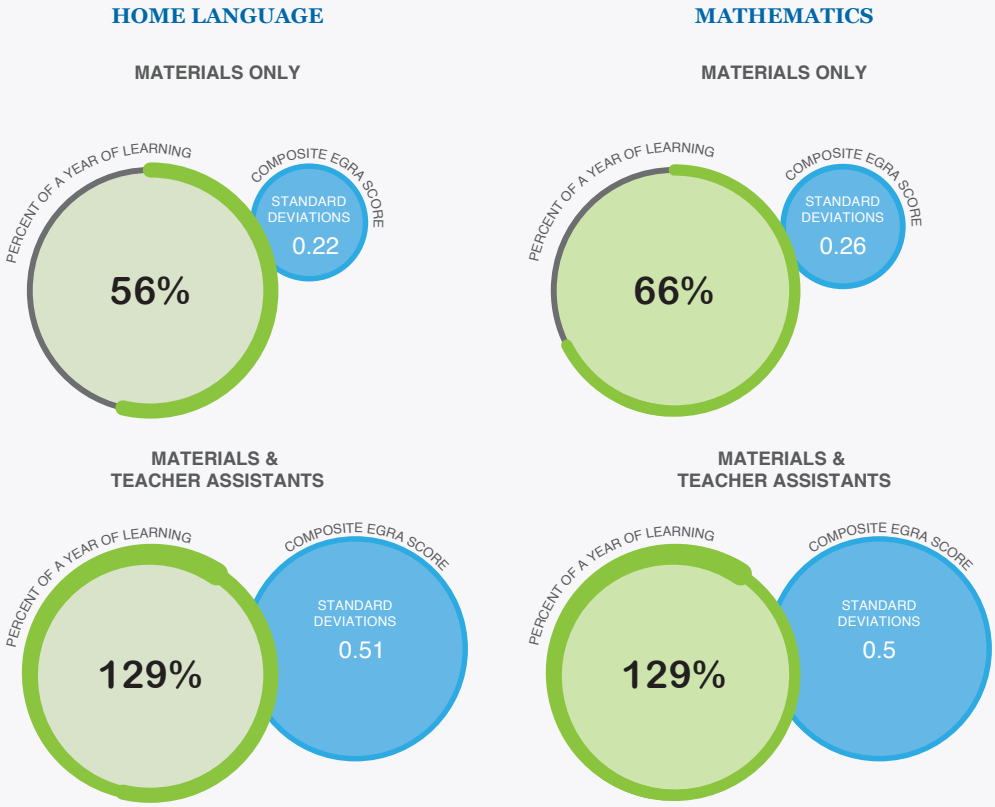
Policy debates are taking place in early 2024 concerning the government programme's longer-term continuation, which means an opportunity to integrate young paraprofessionals such as Teacher Assistants or Education Assistants into the public education system at scale and in the long term. This provides an immediate opportunity, and indeed an immediate need, for an evidence-based discussion on which design parameters can be put in place at scale for education paraprofessionals to have the maximum impact on learners' foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Learnings from NGO interventions like Funda Wande's, which test specific approaches to Education/Teacher Assistants, can be directly applied to a larger national debate.

Funda Wande (FW), a not-for-profit organisation that equips teachers to teach reading-for-meaning and calculating-with-confidence in Grades R-3, has long been at the forefront of interventions to improve FLN in South Africa. Building on Funda Wande's long-standing work in materials development and teacher training, it has since 2020 added training and support for classroom-based Teacher Assistants (TAs) into its FLN programme design.

This report presents the findings of an independent qualitative study of Funda Wande's Teacher Assistants programme as implemented in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape provinces in 2023. This qualitative study, conducted by Social Impact Insights Africa, builds on and augments a quantitative impact evaluation of Funda Wande's Limpopo intervention conducted by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at the University of Cape Town since 2021. The midline report of this quantitative evaluation, published in 2023, suggests that TAs significantly improve learner outcomes, beyond the effects achieved by providing structured learning plans, materials and teacher training.

As reported in the midline report, "The provision of Funda Wande selected, trained and supported Teacher Assistants to classrooms over six school terms has proved highly effective in improving foundational reading and mathematics skills. By the third term of grade 2, learners in classrooms with Funda Wande Teacher Assistants significantly outperformed their peers in comparable control schools by 0.5 standard deviations in both literacy and numeracy. These gains are substantial, translating to around 1.25 years of learning in 'business as usual' environments." (Ardington 2023: 3)

Figure 1 Funda Wande Limpopo Intervention Evaluation Midline results comparing learning outcomes with and without Teacher Assistants (Ardington 2023: 3)



The endline results of the same evaluation in Limpopo showed that learners in schools that combined LTSM with TAs consistently outperformed not only the control schools but also the schools with only the LTMS intervention. In both Grades 2 and 3, the LTSM+TA learners achieved on average 1 to 1.4 years of additional schooling compared to a 'business as usual' South African school and 3 to 7 months of additional learning compared to the LTSM-only schools (Ardington 2024).

Table 1: Funda Wande Limpopo Intervention Evaluation Endline results comparing learning outcomes with and without Teacher Assistants (Ardington 2024: 10)

			Average treatment effect (standard deviations)		Year of schooling in South Africa `business as usual' school	Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS)
Grade 2	LTSM	EGMA	0.273***	(0.0908)	0.7	0.3
		EGRA	0.189*	(0.0969)	0.5	0.2
	LTSM + TA	EGMA	0.559***	(0.0966)	1.4	0.7
		EGRA	0.399***	(0.0923)	1.0	0.5
Grade 3	LTSM	EGMA	0.166*	(0.0865)	0.4	0.2
		EGRA	0.266***	(0.0838)	0.7	0.3
	LTSM + TA	EGMA	0.400***	(0.0925)	1.1	0.6
		EGRA	0.458***	(0.0859)	1.0	0.5

The current qualitative study aims to explain the reasons for the positive impact measured in the quantitative evaluation. It explores how TAs impact learner outcomes, including direct pathways (interactions with learners) and indirect pathways (interactions with teachers and the wider schooling environment). The study also examines programme sustainability and broader implications for integrating TAs into public sector educational support initiatives.

Subsequent sections of this report explore the context within which the TA intervention was implemented, the design features of the TA intervention that enabled impact within the classroom, and the roles and activities of TAs within the schools and what this suggests about impact pathways. The report also discusses the challenges faced in Funda Wande programme implementation, provides insights into the sustainability of programme effects at schools after the end of the TA presence at schools, and discusses the effects of programme participation on TAs after they leave the programme.

In conclusion, we consider which aspects of the Funda Wande TA programme offer lessons for other education stakeholders, including government, to increase the impact of existing and future Teacher/Education Assistant interventions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to answer the following questions:

- Through which mechanisms do TAs impact learner literacy and mathematics outcomes, including direct and indirect pathways?
- What value-add do TAs bring to teachers?
- What are the effects of programme participation on TAs, including the trajectories they take after the completion of the programme?
- Do any aspects of the TA intervention have sustainable effects on schools, even when TAs are no longer present?

The two-person research team conducted in-depth case studies in 12 schools: six in the Eastern Cape (EC) and six in Limpopo (LP) in October 2023. At this point, most of the TAs had been contracted to the schools for between one and two-and-a-half years, with all contracts ending in November and early December 2023. The schools were chosen to represent a spread of institutional contexts and TA skills, based on ratings of intervention fidelity provided by Funda Wande's TA mentors. This included highly functional schools and schools with lower management functionality, and TAs with high, average and poor performance (according to their mentors). The intention was to explore variations in how the TAs operated, depending on their own drive and the contexts in which they worked.

During the day-long case study visits to each school, structured classroom observations were carried out during mathematics and home language (HL) Grade R-3 classes to understand how TAs engaged with teachers, with learners, as well as with Bala Wande (numeracy) and Funda Wande (literacy) materials. During the classroom observations, researchers conducted an activity with the learners to understand their relationships with the TAs. Classroom observations were conducted in eleven of the twelve case study schools (six in the Eastern Cape and five in Limpopo), since all Foundation Phase teachers were attending a Department of Basic Education (DBE) workshop on the day of the visit to one of the Limpopo Schools and no Foundation Phase lessons took place on that day.

In addition to the classroom observations, interviews were conducted with TAs in the selected schools. They were requested to bring learner workbooks (LWs) - one HL and one maths - to show the type of feedback they provide to learners. Moreover, the school's Foundation Phase (FP) Department Heads (DHs), and school Principals/ Deputy Principals were interviewed. Finally, the researchers conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with all Foundation Phase teachers in the schools who were willing to participate, including those whose classrooms had been observed.

In addition, TAs from all the Eastern Cape Funda Wande schools were engaged at their 'graduation' celebrations in Gqeberha, Makhanda and East London in the Eastern Cape in November 2023. TAs from all the Funda Wande schools in Limpopo were engaged through virtual focus groups using Mentimeter in the same month. In March 2024, the TAs from both provinces were also engaged using WhatsApp interviews to assess their trajectories after leaving the programme.

Furthermore, phone call interviews were conducted with seven case study school managers in January and February 2024 about post-intervention sustainability in the schools. The study sample is provided in the tables below.

Table 2: Case Study Sample

	Schools	TAs	DHs	Teacher FGDs	Principals/ DPs	Learner activity	Learner Workbooks	Classroom Observations
LP	6	17	6	5	6	6 classes	68	9
EC	6	20	5	6	6	6 classes	80	10
Total	**12**	**35**	**11**	**11**	**12**	**12 classes**	**148**	**19**

Table 3: Sustainability Interviews Sample

	TA Graduations / Mentimeter engagements	Whatsapp interview Participants	School manager Interviews
LP	2 (Mentimeter)	51	3
EC	3 (Graduations)	32	4
Total	**3**	**83**	**7**

3. CASE STUDY SCHOOL CONTEXTS

The twelve schools chosen for the case studies provide insights into the diverse contexts shaping education in their communities. Located in areas across the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces in South Africa, these schools face challenges stemming from socioeconomic conditions prevalent in their surroundings. High levels of unemployment, poverty, and alcoholism characterise many of these communities, impacting the students' home environments and overall well-being. Additionally, issues such as parental absence, parents' lack of engagement with school communications and inadequate supervision at home contribute to the difficulties faced by educators. However, school principals explain that despite these difficulties, these schools, especially those in Limpopo, maintain strong connections with their communities, facilitating effective communication and collaboration. Community engagement is also evident in both provinces through various initiatives, such as WhatsApp groups for communication and participation in school activities. Moreover, in two Eastern Cape schools, communal gardens support children's nutritional needs.

The case study schools were representative of the schools in which Funda Wande was active, and indeed of the majority of public schools in the country, in that there were extensive internal school challenges, including overcrowded classrooms affecting the establishment of reading corners and classroom libraries, infrastructural deficiencies such as lack of school fencing, and resource limitations like outdated furniture and insufficient stationery. Figure 2 shows a picture of all the stationery in a Grade R class in Limpopo.

Figure 2: Stationery in Grade R classroom

Despite being generally under-resourced, all twelve case study schools had some home language and mathematics resources in the observed classrooms. These efforts can be attributed to Funda Wande's provision of age-appropriate materials and its teacher and TA training programmes, which equip teachers and TAs with skills to create their own resources. Figure 3 shows handmade materials created by a Grade 3 TA and a teacher in an Eastern Cape school based on Funda Wande's training.

Figure 3: Grade 3 material that was created based on Funda Wande training

4. THE FUNDA WANDE TEACHER ASSISTANT PROGRAMME

In Limpopo, half of the intervention schools (40 schools) were allocated one TA per Foundation Phase teacher in 2021. The other half only received Funda Wande materials and teacher training but no TAs. In the TA 'arm' of the intervention, the 1 TA to 1 teacher ratio remained in place throughout the intervention from 2021 to 2023. In some schools, TAs remained with the same teachers for two years; in other schools, they changed teachers after a year.

In 2022, Funda Wande assigned one TA per Foundation Phase teacher in the participating Eastern Cape schools. TAs remained with the same teachers for the full year. In 2023, TAs in the Eastern Cape schools were reduced to one or two TAs per grade. They rotated through the classes within the grade every week, meaning a TA supported one class for a week before moving to a different class the following week.

Funda Wande provided TAs with one week of initial training and four additional days of follow-up training per term thereafter. TAs also received ongoing support, including periodic visits from Funda Wande mentors, coaches and coach assistants (CAs) during classes and group sessions with other Teacher Assistants to ensure effective programme implementation. Mentors and coach assistants, each responsible for supporting 18 to 33 TAs, were expected to visit each school with Teacher Assistants at least once a month. TAs received a monthly stipend of R4407, funded by the government through the Youth Employment Service (YES) fund. At the end of 2023, the Funda Wande TA programme ended in both provinces. For a detailed description of the TA programme, see Makaluza & Mpeta 2022 and Ardington & Henry 2021.

5. ENABLING PROGRAMME ELEMENTS

The impact potential of TAs in the Funda Wande programme was enabled by the following programme design elements:

- how TAs were recruited and trained
- how TAs received ongoing mentorship
- that TAs, teachers and school managers shared an understanding of the overall Funda Wande programme and their respective roles within it

5.1. TA RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The recruitment and training process for TAs across schools in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape followed a similar pattern. Funda Wande's rigorous selection procedure included maths and home language competency assessments. TAs received one week of initial training, focusing on administrative tasks, handling LTSM, identifying and supporting struggling learners, and conducting remedial exercises with small groups of students. Subsequently, they received four days of training each quarter (continuous professional development), typically scheduled during school holidays. These sessions included practical training on working with teachers, teaching numeracy and literacy using Funda Wande materials, utilising teacher guides (TGs), preparing learner-centred lessons, identifying and assisting struggling learners, and employing teaching methods suitable for learners with diverse abilities. This training also included guidance on creating learning support resources and classroom management (managing learners' behaviour). Feedback from TAs indicated that they found these training sessions beneficial, equipping them with the necessary skills to support learners in maths and home language. TAs also completed a literacy course offered by Reading Academy after being hired by Funda Wande, further enhancing their skills and knowledge in supporting learners during reading activities.

Even though TAs suggested additional training on learner discipline and specific teaching areas such as measurements and multiplication, they were satisfied with the training because "everything was covered." The follow-up sessions provided opportunities for TAs to share ideas and strategies for overcoming challenges encountered when supporting learners in their schools. TAs highlighted that Funda Wande set clear expectations during the training. Despite varying backgrounds, including limited prior education sector experience, TAs found the training invaluable in equipping them to plan lessons, teach, and support learners confidently. TAs also appreciated the specialised training components, such as composing songs and rhymes or creating resources, noting their practical relevance. Observations of TA-led lessons by the research team demonstrated the practical application of training content. School principals and teachers emphasised the effectiveness of training by comparing TAs to government-supported Education Assistants (through the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative - Basic

Education Employment Initiative, PYEI-BEEI) who were not trained but placed in schools to conduct learning activities and provide administrative support in the general school environment. An Eastern Cape school Principal argued,

> *"Funda Wande TAs are trained and understand the routine. We were just given EAs. They were only trained as reading champions just before they left."*

Overall, the training provided by Funda Wande was deemed effective by both TAs and school staff, with the majority of TAs rating it 10 out of 10 for its effectiveness. Several school managers interviewed for this study in both the Eastern Cape and Limpopo commented that Funda Wande TAs were equally or better qualified than newly graduated teachers in teaching learners early literacy and numeracy, specifically because "the TAs have better practical teaching strategies while the newly qualified teachers possess theoretical knowledge but less practical application."

Box 1: Conclusions on TA Training

Effective training is a prerequisite for Teacher Assistants to have a positive impact on learner literacy and numeracy outcomes. The Funda Wande training has the following characteristics that made it effective:

1. Focuses on **practical pedagogies** for teaching literacy and numeracy skills.
2. Prepares TAs to provide **differentiated support** to struggling learners through learner assessments and adapted pedagogies, explicitly defining TA roles in addressing the challenge of FLN backlogs.
3. Includes elements of **classroom management** (TA roles in managing learners and supporting teachers).
4. Is linked to a **structured learning programme** with LTSM and Teacher Guides that clearly outline daily FLN activities for TAs.
5. Uses the same structured learning programme and materials in which teachers have also been trained, providing a **shared TA-teacher repertoire** in the classroom.
6. Combines an **initial training** period with **continuous professional development** (termly refresher training) that also enables peer learning.

5.2. TA SUPPORT AND MENTORSHIP

In addition to the regular training sessions attended by TAs, Funda Wande implemented a robust support and mentorship system. The support model differed slightly in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, with Limpopo having one layer of coaches (called mentors) and the Eastern Cape having two (coaches and coaching assistants). TAs in Limpopo explained that mentors made weekly visits to the schools to support teachers and TAs. In the Eastern Cape, coach assistants (CAs) provided TAs with weekly support and coaches visited schools once or twice a fortnight. In both provinces, the activities of the support system were the same: TAs noted that during school visits, mentors, coaches and CAs observed lessons, delivered materials, assisted with classroom duties, and offered feedback to both teachers and TAs. They also modelled how to assist struggling learners and provided resources to enhance the effectiveness of TA duties. A TA noted,

> *"The support is effective because if we don't understand some topics or materials are not enough, we can communicate this to the mentor. They visit us every two weeks, check our work, give us feedback and suggestions. I can always call her if I'm struggling with anything; for example, if I'm struggling with creating a tune for the songs that they gave us."*

According to TAs, this mentorship also assists them in understanding how to engage with the workplace environment, keep to the Funda Wande and school codes of conduct, and improve their support strategies towards learners and teachers. Feedback from TAs regarding the support received indicates a high level of effectiveness, with many TAs rating their mentors, coaches and coach assistants between 8 and 10 out of 10 for their guidance and helpfulness. The TAs also reported strong relationships with their mentors, coaches and coach assistants. While some TAs had mild complaints about the coaches' punctuality, overall, they saw them as motivational and supportive figures. Furthermore, TAs reported that they benefited from continuous peer support and guidance through platforms such as TA WhatsApp groups, where they exchanged ideas and recommendations for improving their work.

It is important to note that TAs received support not only from Funda Wande mentors and each other but also from teachers, the Foundation Phase Department Heads and school Principals. For example, TAs noted that they learned about punctuality and professionalism from Department Heads, which TAs acknowledge and incorporate into their work ethic. According to TAs, this support was pivotal in guiding them to implement support strategies effectively and conduct themselves appropriately in the workplace. Additionally, the DH's role extends to monitoring the implementation of the Funda Wande programme and providing support to teachers and TAs when necessary. Having been trained by Funda Wande, the DHs reported feeling well-equipped to align the school's Funda Wande plan with their own, ensuring cohesion and effectiveness in programme execution. This multifaceted support system, comprising Funda Wande, the DH, and teachers, was instrumental in ensuring that TAs are empowered, comprehend the objectives of the Funda Wande programme, and successfully support children.

This study did not observe any significant differences in efficacy between the support models implemented in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. In both provinces, the support processes were consistently applied and highly effective, according to both TAs and school-based interview respondents.

Box 2: Conclusions on Continuous Mentorship and Support

The combination of ongoing mentorship and collaborative support from Funda Wande, teachers, Department Heads and school Principals was instrumental in empowering TAs to carry out their duties effectively and contribute to the improvement of learners' literacy and numeracy skills. The coaching and mentorship had the following characteristics:

1. **external** coaching and mentoring was explicitly **linked with internal** school-based mentoring through training teachers and Department Heads in how to support TAs. There was therefore no competition or confusion between inputs received from external and internal mentors.
2. **peer** support (through Whatsapp groups) was integrated into the support system, creating informal Peer Learning Communities.
3. external coaches and mentors were successful in building relationships of trust with the young TAs by not only focusing on technical skills but on **skills for managing the workplace** and working relationships in general.

5.3. CLEAR TA ROLE DEFINITION AND CONTRACTING

When visiting the case study schools, it was clear that all stakeholders, including TAs, teachers and school managers, had a shared understanding of the role of Funda Wande and the TA intervention in supporting learner development in maths and home language. This level of consensus on the function and roles of TAs stands in contrast to the lack of clarity school managers described concerning the roles of government-supported Education Assistants. In their case, it was largely left up to schools to define what they wanted the EAs to do.

Coupled with insufficient EA training in literacy and numeracy pedagogies, this meant that many EAs ended up doing menial jobs such as cleaning rather than engaging directly with learners.

In contrast, all research participants across the twelve case schools, except one school Principal in a Limpopo school, demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the Funda Wande programme and its objectives. They emphasised the programme's overarching goal of improving children's reading comprehension and numeracy proficiency. They consistently repeated Funda Wande's overarching goal statement: to "get learners to be confident in mathematics and read with understanding by 2030." Moreover, TAs highlighted Funda Wande's aim to make learning enjoyable while providing learning resources and better teaching strategies through mentors and coaches. They also recognised the programme's introduction as a response to the learning gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study argues that because school staff understood the rationale behind integrating TAs into the Funda Wande programme, they could support these TAs in their roles. When discussing the role of TAs within the Funda Wande programme, there was consensus among participants who perceived them as essential in providing additional support to teachers, thereby reducing teacher workloads and allowing them more time to attend to individual learners, especially in classrooms with large numbers of students. School Principals, DHs and teachers perceived TAs as integral in providing individualised support to learners, particularly those struggling to keep up with the curriculum. Moreover, all school staff that were interviewed saw TAs as essential in reinforcing learning objectives, revising content and facilitating various activities such as mental mathematics, reading comprehension, and utilising Funda Wande resources effectively. The picture below shows an Eastern Cape TA revising maths content with learners before the lesson of the day was introduced.

Figure 4: TA revising the previous day's work with learners

The TAs themselves articulated their role as supporting both learners and teachers in various capacities, including classroom management. They also underscored their function in bridging learning gaps by providing remedial support for struggling students. Overall, the study participants' clear comprehension of the Funda Wande programme and the role of TAs within it underscores the effectiveness of the programme's implementation. Their understanding allows them to confidently execute their duties, ultimately contributing to the programme's objective of enhancing learner outcomes.

In the case of the Funda Wande TAs, the teachers and TAs pointed out that the clarity of role definition was facilitated by a combination of clear communication and stakeholder engagement by Funda Wande provincial staff and by a written contract between TAs, schools and Funda Wande that set out specific tasks for TAs and included exclusions of what they were not allowed to do (such as school cleaning duties).

School managers indicated that they willingly accepted TAs playing clearly defined roles and responsibilities in classrooms because TAs were committed to a school for at least a full school year in the Eastern Cape, and for at least two full years in Limpopo. This allowed for their full integration into the school's resource planning and division of labour, rather than being seen as a temporary addition.

Box 3: Conclusions on TA Role Definition and Contracting

Clarity and consistency of TA role expectations increase the efficacy of TAs in impacting learner outcomes. The contacting of Funda Wande TAs had the following characteristics:

1. TAs were introduced to schools with clearly defined roles and a formal contract.
2. Funda Wande engaged with school leaders and teachers about the aims of the overall learning programme and the roles of TAs within the larger programme so that all stakeholders were fully informed and had shared expectations.
3. TAs were contracted for at least a full school year, enabling schools to include them in their staffing and resource planning.

6. PATHWAYS THROUGH WHICH TAs IMPACT ON LEARNER OUTCOMES

This study identified a range of pathways through which TAs impact learning outcomes. These include direct pathways where TAs interact directly with learners and indirect pathways where TAs interact with teachers and the wider school environment, creating a better learning environment for learners.

6.1. DIRECT IMPACT: TA SUPPORT TO LEARNERS

Teacher Assistants were observed to support learners in various activities across all case study schools. Their interactions with learners encompass a range of responsibilities to create an engaging and conducive learning environment. We categorise these activities into the following:

1. **Differentiated Teaching:** the intended design of the Funda Wande TA programme was for TAs to be a supplementary resource for the teacher to enable more differentiated teaching. Differentiated teaching requires a cycle of a) continuous assessment of individual learner backlogs, b) providing individualised and small group attention for the reinforcement of concepts at different levels of skill, c) giving learners individualised feedback and d) monitoring/supervising the rest of the class while individual teaching takes place. In most observed classrooms, TAs played a supplementary teaching role. In some cases, TAs were observed to play more extensive instructional roles, such as introducing new concepts and teaching the full class.
2. **Motivation:** TAs were observed to be instrumental in encouraging learners to attend school and pay attention in class by infusing the learning process with elements of fun, including songs, rhymes, and physical exercises, to enhance their overall learning experience.
3. **Psycho-social support:** being young people from the same communities as the learners, TAs were observed and reported to have built trusting relationships with learners, enabling TAs to identify learners needing psychosocial support.

Across these activities, TAs' ability to provide **individualised support** sets them apart from teachers, allowing them to address each learner's specific needs. By creating a supportive atmosphere and addressing academic and emotional needs, TAs contribute to the holistic development of learners and improve learner outcomes in mathematics and home language.

6.1.1. DIFFERENTIATED TEACHING

Enabling more differentiated teaching and learning sits at the core of Funda Wande's TA intervention design. This addresses several well-known **problem statements** in under-resourced public schools:

1. Class sizes are large, mitigating against individualised learner attention and individualised feedback on learner skill gaps and progress.
2. Many learners have backlogs in foundational literacy and numeracy skills, even in the early grades, resulting in de facto 'multi-grade classes' because of the wide spectrum of learner skill levels. This creates the need for differentiated instruction that covers different content or covers the same content in different ways or at different speeds for different groups of learners in the class.
3. The curriculum is full and rapidly paced and there is systemic pressure for teachers to cover all topics in a standard teaching plan rather than adjust their timing and content coverage to the abilities of their learners.
4. In some cases, Foundation Phase teachers have limited practical skills in teaching foundational literacy and numeracy skills, especially in home languages.
5. Teacher absenteeism, for personal reasons but also to attend teacher training and mandated meetings, impacts the amount of instructional time learners are exposed to and introduces discontinuity of learning.

In this study, we conclude that the Funda Wande TA intervention addresses these problem statements in the following ways:

1. TAs decrease the 'teacher' to learner ratio by adding a second teaching resource, thereby enabling more individualised attention for learners.
2. TAs provide extra teaching time for differentiated content coverage and are specifically trained to assess learners, place them into groups with different skill levels, and reinforce the coverage of basic literacy and numeracy skills for these different skill levels.
3. TAs are less tied to the imperatives of curriculum coverage than full teachers. They can therefore provide parallel instruction for some learners while the teacher covers the curriculum for those learners with the requisite skills to keep up.
4. TAs are specifically trained to support the teaching of foundational literacy and numeracy skills in home languages using practical exercises, supportive LTSM and manipulatives provided as part of the structured learning programme. While teachers are also trained to use the same LTSM and manipulatives, TAs have an intensive initial training period and longer termly top-up training (TAs receive a full week of training while teachers only get trained for a day or two), meaning their practical skills may be fresher than those of teachers.
5. When teachers are absent, TAs are supposed to monitor learners or do revision activities rather than teach new content. In practice, TA training and Funda Wande's structured learning materials enable TAs to substitute for absent teachers, reducing lost teaching time and ensuring greater continuity of learning.

During all observed maths and home language lessons, TAs were seen to be fulfilling the expectations of the Funda Wande design described above, including assessing learners and providing differentiated individual and small group support to learners with different skill levels. These processes were enabled by using the literacy and numeracy teaching activities as per the Teacher Guide and LTSM provided by Funda Wande.

6.1.1.1. ASSESSING, GROUPING AND SUPPORTING LEARNERS

The TAs in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape reported administering baseline assessments such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to gauge reading abilities and group learners accordingly for targeted support. TAs were also observed to track each learner's progress in informal ways. For example, when asked why she held a book during a maths lesson, a TA in Limpopo clarified:

> *"I have a book that I use to identify and track improvements. If I say they should count from 1-10 and the learner can only count up to 7, I note it down so that I know how to assist them. I also know their abilities and where they lack."*

The TAs in both provinces indicated that after tracking the learners' performance and progress, they group learners based on their abilities and facilitate learning sessions tailored to individual needs. One TA explained,

> *"During group guided reading, learners are grouped according to their levels. If they are in a lower performing group, they will want to leave that group, so they will work hard."*

TAs mentioned that after grouping the learners, they monitor reading fluency, comprehension, and phonics awareness through activities like reciting letter sounds and reading aloud. The researchers also observed that through group guided reading (GGR), TAs observe individual learners' reading comprehension and provide targeted interventions using Funda Wande-provided resources like flashcards and storybooks so that children can improve. They use the "reading ladder" as a monitoring tool. The ladder has categories from Blue Birds (underperforming learners) to Reading Stars (well-performing learners). Those who improve their reading skills move up the 'ladder' until they become Reading Stars. TAs described how this promotion pleases the learners (see below for a discussion of motivation strategies), and they continue working hard to stay at the top of 'the ladder.' The Funda Wande workbooks also include weekly assessments which test learners on the concepts taught each week.

In all case study schools across both provinces, TAs were observed walking around the classroom during in-class activities conducted by the teacher, offering assistance to individuals and groups of struggling learners during concept development and individual activities, including conducting remedial exercises tailored to their needs. For example, TAs were observed offering manipulatives such as counters to learners who struggled with subtraction and addition activities. They also emphasised what the teachers taught by reexplaining concepts to learners during lessons. The TAs also reported in interviews that they use lower-grade materials with the children where necessary so that they understand the basics of reading.

Teachers in the Eastern Cape schools noted the importance of TAs providing individualised attention to learners that they themselves cannot offer:

> *"Some learners did not want to open their mouths but because TAs sit next to them during GGR, they learn one word at a time. The TAs are very patient; as a teacher, I cannot wait for them to open their mouths because I don't have time so it is going to be a problem when these TAs leave."*

> *"It's going to be a nightmare when they leave. When you are teaching, there are learners who pretend to be writing when they are not. TAs can easily spot them and assist."*

Even though this was not observed in any of the visited schools (since the case study visits took place only in the mornings), TAs and teachers mentioned that TAs also provide after-school remediation support, including one-on-one and small group support. TAs claimed that in some cases, they assigned struggling learners specific homework from the Funda Wande workbooks to reinforce learning and maintain momentum outside of school hours, ensuring continuity in literacy and numeracy skills development. The teachers they worked with confirmed this.

Two teachers in the Eastern Cape elaborated,

> *"They give individual attention to learners in reading and writing. Because when you teach the whole class, not all the learners will understand, so TAs go an extra mile to help those learners understand."*

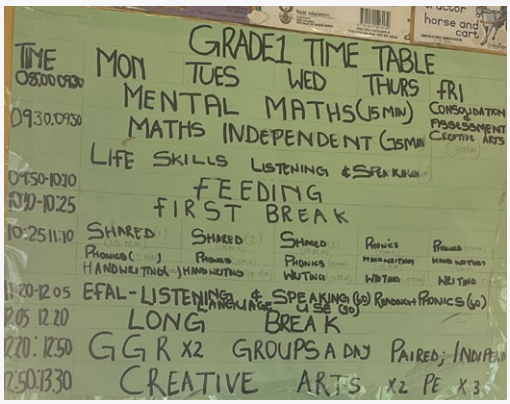
> *"FP children go home at 1PM and the TAs stay with struggling learners for [another] 30 mins or an hour."*

During interviews with researchers, most TAs also reported supporting well-performing learners, even though they mostly assisted struggling learners. They noted that for well-performing learners, they offer additional challenges to enhance their skills, such as providing complex tasks and higher-grade reading materials.

6.1.1.2. APPLYING SPECIFIC FLN TEACHING STRATEGIES

Across all the case study schools whose lessons were observed, TAs employed specific strategies to support learners in mathematics and home language lessons. The strategies utilised by TAs are embedded in the Funda Wande Teacher Guides and reinforced during the regular TA training sessions. As shown in Figure 5, these strategies have been incorporated into daily timetables in many of the classrooms supported by the TAs.

Figure 5: A class timetable incorporating Funda Wande activities



In **mathematics**, the TAs were observed using the following strategies or the strategies were described by either TAs or teachers:

1. Across all the case study schools whose lessons were observed, TAs were seen following the Funda Wande Teacher Guides by initiating mental maths sessions to make learning enjoyable and interactive before teachers introduced new concepts from the curriculum.
2. During all the observed maths lessons, TAs played maths games with learners to reinforce concepts.
3. TAs were consistently observed using manipulatives provided as part of the Funda Wande LTSM, such as dice, counters, base-ten blocks, number cards, sticks, clocks and hourglasses to facilitate activities such as addition and subtraction, or materials such as measuring tape and 3D shapes to reinforce concepts like measurements and shapes. A Principal at a school in Limpopo highlighted the benefits of utilising such manipulatives in teaching and the valuable support TAs provide in using them to enhance mathematics instruction.
4. All TAs who were interviewed in the twelve case study schools mentioned that they employed practical examples to teach concepts. For example, they used "sweets to illustrate division by demonstrating sharing equally among learners."

A TA in Limpopo emphasised this by explaining:

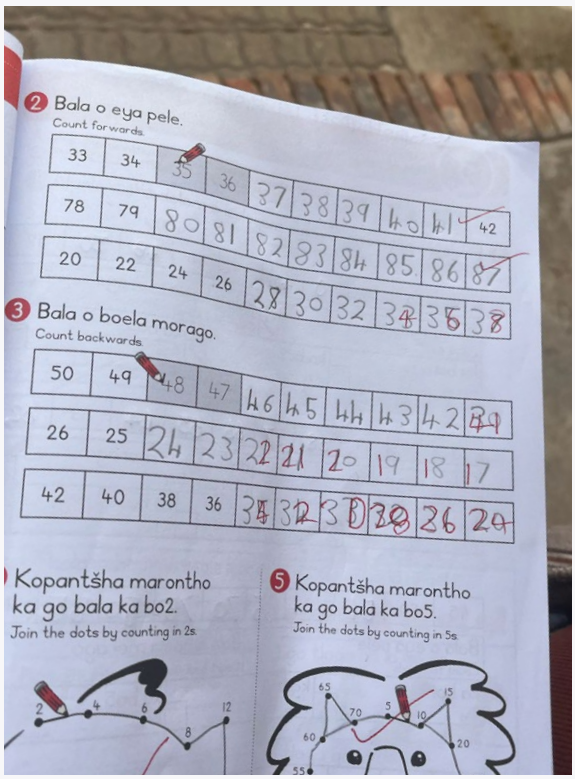
> *"To teach measurements, addition and subtraction, I make them count their footsteps, use fingers, sticks, dots and symbols. When teaching height, I use simple terms such as short, tall or average. When teaching numbers to Grade R learners, I 'write' them in the air and ask learners to do the same."*

In **home language literacy**, TAs were also observed implementing diverse strategies to improve reading proficiency. During reading instruction, TAs focused on phonics-based teaching methods. They assisted learners in identifying letters, pronouncing words, and building vocabulary using flashcards, word cards and letter sounds. TAs applied strategies such as paired reading, shared reading, story predictions, and visualising to create a learning environment that fosters engagement and comprehension among learners. TAs also mentioned that they utilised resources like Funda Wande big books to conduct picture walks to maintain focus during lessons and employed reading games to make learning enjoyable, again as per the Teacher Guides.

6.1.1.3. GIVING LEARNERS FEEDBACK

In large classrooms, with 40-75 learners and one teacher, learners often lack individualised attention and feedback. By essentially halving the teacher-learner ratio in the classroom, one important impact mechanism through which TAs influence learning outcomes seems to be increasing the levels of individualised feedback that learners receive. Researchers observed TAs providing mathematics and home language feedback to learners in various ways. While TAs do not typically write comments in Funda Wande learner workbooks because of Funda Wande's instructions that they should not do so, they utilise strategies such as ticking correct answers and correcting incorrect ones during or after marking. TAs clarified that they refrain from marking incorrect answers as wrong directly, opting instead to correct them or guide learners through the process of redoing their work to prevent discouragement and promote improvement. An example of the feedback provided to learners by TAs is shown in the picture below.

Figure 6: Feedback provided by a TA in a Bala Wande learner workbook



Verbal feedback and encouragement such as "well done" and "you are very smart" are provided to the learners to reinforce positive efforts and boost learners' morale (see the discussion below on motivation). The researchers observed this during all home language and mathematics lessons. A few TAs also reported that when there is limited time for verbal feedback, they assign individualised homework to allow learners to improve their work independently. Researchers noted that some TAs write comments in DBE workbooks, especially to encourage well-performing learners to maintain their efforts. However, the focus remains on providing constructive verbal feedback to all learners. TAs emphasised the importance of their feedback in motivating learners to work harder and strive for improvement. Other observed methods of reinforcement

involved putting stickers in books or on learners' foreheads and awarding stars to well-performing learners. TAs posited that this was done to recognise and incentivise hard work, foster a desire to excel, and move up from low to high-performing groups. The personalised feedback provided to learners not only guides learners in understanding their mistakes but also fosters a supportive learning environment where achievements are celebrated and improvements are encouraged. Through these feedback mechanisms, TAs play a vital role in instilling confidence in learners' abilities and empowering them to enhance their skills and performance in mathematics and HL.

6.1.1.4. TAs' ROLE IN INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY

When Funda Wande Teacher Assistants were brought into schools, they were tasked with supporting teachers during concept development, with instructions not to deliver new lessons or introduce unfamiliar topics to learners. TA job descriptions include not being left alone with learners for more than 15 minutes. Despite these guidelines, in four case study schools TAs were observed leading lessons and introducing new topics to students while teachers were absent or busy with administrative tasks. In five other schools, TAs mentioned in interviews that they have found themselves standing in for absent teachers, teaching entire lessons across various subjects, including home language, mathematics, English, and Life Skills. In a few cases, teachers agreed to let TAs deliver lessons because it allowed them to fulfil the teaching hours requirements of the Foundation Phase teaching qualifications TAs were studying for.

School managers and teachers reported that some TAs were left in charge of classrooms for extended periods due to shortages of teachers or teachers being on extended leave. A TA in Limpopo explained:

> *"I helped with maths last year because the teacher was on maternity leave. I have also helped with teaching home language because the teacher was on sick leave for three months."*

According to a school Principal in the Eastern Cape:

> *"There is a shortage of Foundation Phase teachers in the school so learners will suffer because we have many learners and a shortage of teachers. The TAs were helping with that so they must come back. We need them."*

Finally, in a few case study schools, school managers reported instances where the presence of TAs enabled ineffective teachers to be absent from the classroom more often, leaving the TAs in charge. One TA indicated,

> *"I cannot say I create time for her [the teacher] to teach because I do all the teaching; she is almost never around. I am supposed to support but I teach from scratch…She will find a way to leave the classroom and come back later. Even when she is at school, she won't be present in class. When she is in class, she just sits."*

While the design of the TA programme did not foresee TAs playing an independent role in instructional delivery, the structured teaching programme enabled TAs to follow existing lesson plans and introduce new material aligned with the curriculum even when teachers were absent. Furthermore, teachers, DHs and school managers in both provinces reported that TAs provided equally good or better lessons than some absent teachers, with overall positive effects for learners. Crying hysterically in an interview, a Deputy Principal in Limpopo argued,

"If the TAs leave, we will be going back to square zero because most of them work harder and teach better than teachers. You would think they are the ones that were trained as teachers. Even when the teacher is absent, business goes on."

Where TAs stood in for absent teachers, school managers believed that the TAs played a vital role in maintaining continuity of learning and ensuring that students received the necessary support. School managers argued that TAs' willingness to adapt and assume teaching responsibilities reflected their commitment to student welfare and educational outcomes, albeit within the constraints of their designated support roles.

In schools where TAs played a greater instructional role, this shift in responsibilities was not without its challenges: in a Limpopo school, TAs said that it strained the collaborative relationship between TAs and teachers, leading to feelings of frustration and isolation among TAs who desired more collaboration and guidance from teachers. TAs and school managers in these schools were especially concerned about sustainability and how schools would cope after the end of the TAs' contracts.

Box 4: Conclusions on Differentiated Teaching

This qualitative study confirms that the presence of Funda Wande TAs in the classroom logically leads to improved learner outcomes in home language literacy and numeracy because TAs directly increase instructional delivery of literacy and numeracy skills (both increased time on task and increased learner engagement with specific pedagogies), as structured by the Funda Wande materials. They do so in ways that supplement teachers by increasing differentiated instruction. In some cases, they enable continuity of learning when teachers are absent.

The Funda Wande TA programme has the following characteristics that enable effective differentiated teaching by TAs:

1. The TA programme is linked to a **structured learning programme** with LTSM and Teacher Guides that clearly outline daily FLN activities for TAs.
2. TA training and structured activities include explicit forms of **learner assessment** which allow for grouping by skill and regular **monitoring** of changes in learner skill levels.
3. Practical teaching **strategies** with the accompanying **materials** and **manipulatives** are provided as part of the structured learning programme and are adapted to different learner skill levels, and both TAs and teachers are repeatedly trained in the use of these strategies, leading to their effective and consistent use in classrooms.

The parameters of TA contracts specify their supplementary and supportive role in relation to teachers. However, in cases where teachers are either absent (short-term like on training days or longer term on extended leave or due to unfilled posts) or unwilling to teach, the TA training and supportive learning programme and materials enable TAs to take on significant levels of teaching responsibility, thereby providing learners with **continuity of learning**.

6.1.2. MOTIVATION STRATEGIES

Another pathway through which TAs impact learner outcomes is to serve as catalysts for learner engagement and motivation within the classroom environment. According to the TAs, the Funda Wande training and materials include a range of strategies to foster participation and boost learners' morale. These strategies are available to both teachers and TAs, given that both were trained to use the Funda Wande materials, but TAs seemed more comfortable using them and were observed to take on the 'motivation' role more often than teachers in the classroom environment.

Motivational approaches observed during the case study classroom observations addressed both struggling learners and those performing well. The following motivational strategies were observed:

1. Acknowledging and celebrating academic achievements, such as putting stickers on learners' foreheads and offering enthusiastic applause for exemplary performance. This simple yet effective gesture was observed to resonate with learners, as evidenced by their eagerness to proudly display stickers even beyond the classroom setting. TAs extended praise through verbal affirmations such as "great work," particularly when learners successfully tackled challenging tasks, further reinforcing a positive learning atmosphere. They also offered recognition for academic achievements through gestures like high fives, clapping, and verbal affirmations such as "you are clever," bolstering students' confidence and morale.
2. By incorporating weekly rituals like selecting "Reading Stars," TAs spotlighted exemplary readers, encouraging emulation among peers and instilling a sense of pride in achieving academic goals.
3. Affirming struggling learners' potential by encouraging them to emulate successful peers and saying, "You can also do it like the ones who are doing well". Despite policy limitations, some TAs even provided additional incentives like sweets and fruits (funded from their own resources) to motivate learners further.
4. The creation of engaging songs or chants, such as a memorable tune addressing absenteeism, which, according to teachers, significantly reduced non-attendance rates when sung to students.
5. Engaging learners during lessons by incorporating interactive elements such as games, stories and songs, particularly in mathematics sessions. TAs used fun activities in the Bala Wande and Funda Wande structured teaching materials. They also invented their own motivational activities, as they were encouraged to do in their training. TAs actively participated in the motivational classroom activities, demonstrating their commitment to engagement by joining in singing and jumping exercises to maintain student interest. By infusing fun and excitement into the learning process, TAs created a vibrant and enjoyable learning environment where learners felt comfortable and motivated to participate.
6. TAs provided opportunities for learners to do creative activities in which some learners who struggled with academic activities could excel. They fostered a sense of achievement and pride by showcasing the creative work in class.

TAs tailored their motivational strategies to cater to the diverse needs of learners, recognising and rewarding both high-performing and struggling students. For instance, by grouping children according to their reading and math abilities, they not only enabled differentiated content coverage but also fostered a sense of achievement in comparison to a relevant peer group. TAs were also observed to implement a system of group promotion based on individual progress, inspiring learners to commit to their peers and strive for advancement and improvement.

Generally, the classroom observation found that TAs fostered a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere where learners were encouraged to make mistakes as part of the learning process, promoting a growth mindset and resilience. They also dedicated extra time to explaining tasks thoroughly to underperforming students, emphasising comprehension over rote copying and displaying patience in guiding students through challenging concepts.

A wide range of motivational strategies was observed across all case study schools, with no significant differences across provinces or types of school environments. This suggests that these strategies are part of the Funda Wande TA training repertoire and that TAs consistently apply them.

From an intervention design perspective, the importance of learner motivation is well established, yet many FLN teacher training initiatives focus on imparting technical pedagogical skills to teachers, with a less explicit focus on whether and how teachers generate a motivating learning environment. Where engaging, participative teaching methods are espoused as part of structured learning programme materials, the challenge remains of one teacher being able to

apply these methods in a differentiated way to different skill levels in the class.

TAs enable a division of labour within the classroom, where the teacher's mandated focus on curriculum coverage can be augmented by a TAs greater focus on motivation and individualised attention. Given that the current study did not include pre-intervention classroom observation, we cannot comment on the extent of change in the classroom learning environment. However, both TAs and teachers reported that learners were much more engaged and motivated, especially in maths lessons, since the arrival of TAs. It is unclear whether the TAs introduced motivation strategies to the classroom while the teacher behaviour remained the same, or whether teachers also adjusted their own motivational approaches based on the Funda Wande training and the behaviour modelled by the TAs. This is likely to depend on each teacher and classroom.

Further research would be fruitful on simple motivational strategies' relative contribution to learner outcomes. This would inform the extent to which TA training and standard 'routines' should include an explicit motivational function. It would also be important to understand further the relationship between how TAs model motivational feedback to learners and how this affects teacher approaches to motivating learners.

Box 5: Conclusions on Motivating Roles

TAs play a crucial role in nurturing a positive and motivating learning environment, where learners are empowered to actively engage in their educational activities and strive to do better. TAs were observed to inspire confidence, foster enthusiasm for learning, and thereby pave the way for academic success among learners. To enable such a motivating environment, the Funda Wande TA programme had the following characteristics:

1. Since TAs are young and come from similar backgrounds as learners, they act as direct role models, able to motivate learners to imagine success even though their home and community backgrounds seem 'hopeless.'
2. The FW learning programme's emphasis on imparting literacy and maths concepts through engaging activities means that increasing learner motivation is incorporated into the core pedagogical conceptualisation of the intervention.
3. TAs are encouraged, through training and mentorship support, to provide learners with positive and motivating feedback. Building this into the training programme means it is standardised and is not dependent on individual TA personalities and attitudes.

6.1.3. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TA AND LEARNERS

It is well-documented that challenging home and community environments adversely impact the learning outcomes of individual learners as well as the ability of teachers to teach effectively (Khan, Begum and Imad, 2019). Zheng (2021) argues that nurturing learners' emotional well-being is crucial for improving learner outcomes. Even though TAs were neither trained nor expected to perform this role, one pathway through which TAs support learning outcomes is by forming trusting relationships with learners and identifying learners in need of psychosocial support. Across the twelve case study schools, teachers, school managers and the TAs themselves emphasised that TAs play a pivotal role in fostering strong connections with learners, characterised by patience, understanding, and genuine care. This is also facilitated by TAs being closer in age to learners and coming from the same communities and cultural/socio-economic backgrounds. One TA explained,

"I do not shout at the children because I know that they are abused at home; some come to school with blue eyes and others with dirty uniforms because the parents are never at home."

Consequently, TAs better understand learners' circumstances, allowing them to offer tailored support and intervention. Teachers and TAs across all schools noted that this connection is fostered by the TAs' approachable demeanour, attentive engagement and friendly communication style, which stands in contrast to the fear often associated with traditional teacher-student interactions. During one lesson, the researcher observed that, unlike the teacher who threatened to hit the learners every few minutes, the TA was patient with the learners. TAs often assume roles akin to older siblings, role models, peers or parental figures, earning endearing titles like "tshomi" (friend) or "mama" (mum) from learners, leading to a sense of comfort and trust within the classroom environment.

TAs' relationships with learners positively impact classroom dynamics and engagement. According to teachers, learners demonstrate a willingness to seek help from TAs in both mathematics and home language activities, often preferring their guidance over that of teachers. The researchers also observed that during lessons, most learners preferred asking the TAs for assistance whenever they needed clarification on concepts. Based on observations, this preference can be attributed to TAs' approachability and support, which alleviate fears of judgment, reprimand or punishment.

As expressed by a learner, DH, teacher and TA, respectively:

> *"Ndiyamthanda kuba akandibethi okanye andingxolise njengoMiss. Undicacisela izinto ngokuphindaphindiweyo. [I love her because she does not hit or shout at me like the teacher does. She explains things to me over and over again] " (Learner)*

> *"Learners who struggle to read are scared to read in the presence of teachers but when the TAs ask them to read, they do so because they are not scared of them." (DH)*

> *"Learners like them better than us. When they arrive at school, learners run to them and hug them. Learners will lose something when they leave. They can tell when a learner is not feeling well by just looking at them. They know more about them than they know themselves. Now they feel comfortable with her and also learners can talk to the TA more than me when a parent died." (Teacher)*

> *"They're [very] comfortable. They are more able to communicate with me than their teacher because I'm soft so they tell me their problems about having absent fathers and they are free to ask me anything when they do not understand the concept. We have a very good relationship because I am friendly and professional, not strict. Sometimes it can be distracting because the kids see you as your friends, but it helps to get them to improve. By being friendly and making everything they teach fun like playing games with them, they become free to do things with you." (TA)*

Consequently, learners were observed to be more receptive to instruction and to actively participate in learning activities, motivated by the encouragement and understanding provided by TAs. Through this, TAs create an environment where learners feel valued and supported. This sentiment is echoed by learners who express admiration for TAs' patience and willingness to explain concepts repeatedly, demonstrating a commitment to their improvement in maths and home language. Moreover, during classroom observations, researchers asked the learners to draw or write their favourite and least favourite "thing" about the TAs. All learners wrote that they loved the TAs because they were loving, patient and caring; some Grade R learners drew hearts while others drew flowers to express their love for the TAs.

Based on observations and interviews with the TAs and teachers, it is clear that TAs' relationships with learners extend beyond the classroom, serving as a source of inspiration, emotional support and companionship. The TAs modelled good behaviour so that learners could follow in their footsteps. For example, one TA noted that learners often came to her and told her they wanted to be like her when they 'grow up.' As a response, she always encouraged them to refrain from misbehaving even outside the school environment so they could be like her one day. The researcher observed this when some learners came to the TA to say goodbye before they went home after school. The TA held all their faces and said, "Bye, be a good boy." The learners responded by assuring they would be 'good boys' and do their homework. Teachers mentioned that TAs give the learners "hope and motivation for a better future" because the township seemed "hopeless." By encouraging good behaviour, TAs ensured that learners took their school work seriously. An Eastern Cape teacher elaborated,

"Learners saw themselves becoming something because they saw someone from the community becoming something."

Teachers and TAs argued that the closeness highlighted above facilitated open communication, enabling learners to confide in TAs about personal challenges and experiences. These TAs leveraged their rapport with learners to identify and address psychosocial issues affecting them or to alert teachers when intervention was required. One TA said that she was emotional and worried that the programme had ended because she was "mentally attached to the children and knew how to handle their difficulties."

While TAs reported feeling well-supported by Funda Wande in their academic and motivation roles, they noted the need for better training and support, debriefing and counselling for dealing with learners' psychosocial challenges. They felt overwhelmed by the multifaceted demands of their role, often likening themselves to social workers due to the extent of support required beyond academic instruction. One TA said, "we become social workers when we are not."

Box 6: Conclusions on Psycho-social Support Roles

TAs create a safe space where learners feel empowered to seek assistance and express themselves freely. The bonds formed between TAs and learners are instrumental in cultivating a conducive learning environment characterised by trust, empathy, and mutual respect. In many public schools, this is a significant change from a conventional teacher-learner relationship characterised by strict hierarchy and fear. To enable such a shift in environment, the Funda Wande TA programme had the following characteristics:

1. TAs are young and recruited from the communities around the schools where they are placed, enabling TAs to understand learners' home environments.
2. TAs are encouraged, through training and mentorship support, to build relationships with learners, and the FW learning programme's emphasis on fun learning approaches and individualised attention reinforces such relationships.
3. TAs receive some training in classroom management and positive discipline and some background in psycho-social support provision, but this could be strengthened in future training and coaching programmes.

6.2. INDIRECT IMPACT: TA SUPPORT TO TEACHERS

In addition to their direct interactions with learners, Funda Wande TAs were also found to impact on learner outcomes via the support they provide to teachers. We observed two main forms of support to teachers:

1. **freeing teacher time:** by doing administrative and classroom management tasks, TAs enabled teachers to spend more time on content instruction.
2. **'peer' learning:** although TAs have less formal training than teachers, they received significant training in the use of Funda Wande's practical instructional strategies and LTSMs, enabling a professional exchange of teaching strategies.

6.2.1. FREEING TEACHER TIME

TAs were observed to take on non-academic activities such as the morning routine (roll call, checking the weather, and preparing and serving instant porridge), handing out books and materials, re-arranging the classroom for group work, and maintaining discipline, all of which would otherwise use up teaching time. For example, researchers observed that during lessons, the TAs walked around to ensure that learners paid attention when the teacher was teaching. They also observed that the TAs reprimanded learners who misbehaved during the lesson. TAs explained that this was important so that teachers could focus on teaching. One of them posited:

> *"I create time for teachers to teach because when a teacher is doing an activity on the board, I monitor learners so that she does not spend time asking them to pay attention while she teaches. If the teacher was alone, she would not be able to teach and deal with disruptive learners."*

A TA in the Eastern Cape also noted that her presence in the classroom had given the teacher "flexibility" and time "to implement other tasks that she would usually leave out because of lack of time." Further, a different TA added that while the teacher was setting exams, the TA monitored the learners. With the support of TAs, teachers could dedicate more time to individual learners, ensuring a deeper understanding of concepts and improved learning outcomes.

6.2.2. PEER LEARNING

In most case study schools, except in one Limpopo school where a TA complained about the lack of support from a teacher, TAs were observed to have formed close relationships with teachers. According to TAs, this closeness enabled open communication and facilitated the exchange of ideas, with TAs feeling comfortable making suggestions on teaching strategies, which teachers said were valuable and implemented. These relationships were characterised by mutual respect and shared goals and they often extend beyond the classroom, with some teachers viewing TAs as akin to family members or close friends. For instance, one teacher described their TA as "my daughter," while another highlighted their friendship outside of school due to their similar ages.

In classroom settings, TAs assisted teachers in various tasks, taking instructions professionally while also offering valuable insights based on their experiences. This coordination was evident during classroom observations, where TAs and teachers worked together to manage different learner groups and tasks efficiently. Such collaboration enhances teaching effectiveness and fosters a supportive environment for learners. TAs and teachers also posited that through regular discussions and strategising sessions with teachers, TAs identified areas of improvement and developed targeted interventions to support underperforming learners. The partnership also fostered a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching practices.

Funda Wande TAs actively contributed to the enhancement of teaching and learning practices. In the mornings, researchers observed that TAs took charge of preparing classrooms for lessons, ensuring that teaching aids were readily available and relevant materials were displayed. Furthermore, TAs explained that they contributed to creating print-rich classrooms and organised learning spaces. They also highlighted that they contributed significantly to academic administrative tasks such as lesson planning and capturing marks. Even though TAs were not observed planning for lessons and capturing marks, the teachers confirmed that these duties formed a huge part of TAs' roles. TAs in all the case study schools were specifically observed preparing teaching aids and other materials for lessons, marking learner workbooks, and distributing LTSM. These activities saved teachers' time and acted as 'peer learning' interactions between the TA and the teacher. Figure 7 shows a theme table created by a TA to prepare learners for the themed weekly lessons. This proactive approach sets the stage for effective learning environments, allowing teachers to focus on instructional delivery.

Figure 7: Theme table created by a TA

The TAs also helped older teachers with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related tasks such as typing, printing and making copies. A Principal noted,

> *"They help in terms of typing, printing, and just technology in general. You might undermine it, thinking it's a small thing, but that is a very big thing, especially for the older teachers who are technologically otherwise."*

This helps free up time for these teachers to focus on teaching and assessing learners instead of trying to adjust to technology. When the study team called the schools after the TA contracts ended, a Foundation Phase Department Head at a Limpopo Province school noted that the oldest Foundation Phase teacher was no longer coping with teaching because there was no one to help her with ICT administrative tasks. She spent a considerable amount of time typing learner activities. The DH elaborated that TAs could handle such tasks faster than teachers, thus saving a lot of time and enabling teachers to spend more time teaching and covering the curriculum.

6.2.3. TA SUPPORT TO DEPARTMENT HEADS

Department Heads and school managers noted that Teacher Assistants play multifaceted roles in supporting them. In all the case study schools, DHs and TAs acknowledged the TAs' role in aiding DHs with administrative tasks and teaching responsibilities. This alleviated the DH workload and allowed them to focus on mentoring and teaching. For example, at one Eastern Cape school, a Principal noted that TAs actively aided the DH by overseeing classes when the DH was supporting teachers, attending crucial meetings or any other activities. The absence of TAs means DHs must manage learners and high workloads alone. For example, when the researcher called a DH in Eastern Cape after the end of the Funda Wande programme to find out how the school was managing without the TAs, the DH stepped out of the classroom for the interview. However, she had to go back at least every 3 minutes to discipline learners because no one was monitoring them and they were making a lot of noise, disrupting the school. Consequently, the interview had to be cut short.

School managers and Department Heads also reported that TAs took over teaching the DH's classes when the DH was observing other teachers, ensuring that learning activities continued smoothly in their absence. A DH in Eastern Cape explained,

> *"I have lots of work [for TAs to do for me] because we plan together, they prepare teaching aids and keep them safe and monitor which ones are missing. If I have to do class visits to observe teachers, they help me to prepare early and remind me to do the stuff that needs to be done to prepare for the visit. They also take over the class when I am not there." (DH)*

Similarly, a DH in Limpopo acknowledged the important role played by TAs, describing them as "very handy people" who contributed significantly to the school's functioning and success.

6.2.4. TA SUPPORT TO THE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM

School principals and deputy principals also described Teacher Assistants as invaluable assets to school management teams (SMTs), extending their support beyond classroom responsibilities to contribute to various activities around the school. The researchers observed that the TAs helped organise children and maintain order during assembly periods. In addition, school managers noted that they were involved in extracurricular activities such as reading competitions, excursions and sports events, as noted by the Deputy Principal and DH at one Eastern Cape school. For example, one Eastern Cape TA said "I am a sports person, I gym with soccer players and I am also a judge during modelling shows." The Principal at this TA's school confirmed this by highlighting that the TA was involved in all school activities and processes.

Moreover, across most schools in the two provinces, TAs engaged extensively with Principals and Deputy Principals. They supported the schools' administrative functions by assisting Principals who were not tech-savvy with ICT tasks such as typing, printing, and communication, as highlighted by the Deputy Principal at one school. In one Eastern Cape school, managers reported that TAs also participated in curriculum discussions and IsiXhosa teaching strategy meetings, ensuring their involvement in constantly finding ways to improve coverage of the home language curriculum.

6.2.5. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND LINKS TO THE COMMUNITY

Funda Wande Teacher Assistants were observed to foster connections between the school and the broader community. They help staff gain insights into learners' family backgrounds and facilitate parental involvement in students' education. Despite rarely being directly involved in formal parent meetings, the TAs in both the Eastern Cape and Limpopo explained that they facilitated communication between the schools and the communities they come from. For example, they invited parents to meetings and encouraged them to be involved in their children's academic development. A teacher also added that TAs improve parental involvement,

> *"If we have a troublesome learner, the TA provides the family background of the learner and I send her to try to convince the parent to help the child to cooperate."*

Parental involvement is linked with children's positive academic performance (Topor, Keane, Shelton and Calkins, 2010); thus, TAs' engagements with parents may contribute to yielding positive learning outcomes for the children they support.

6.3. CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF FUNDA WANDE MATERIALS AND TAs IN ENHANCING LEARNING

The Limpopo and Eastern Cape schools where TAs were based are characterised by a shortage of learning resources. The provision of Funda Wande materials was therefore appreciated by participating schools. These materials include Teacher Guides, teaching aids (such as maths manipulatives), reading anthologies, big books and videos. All the teachers in the observed case study classes said that they had integrated these resources into daily teaching practices, utilising Funda Wande Teacher Guides for lesson planning and incorporating Funda Wande workbooks into daily lessons. They reported finding the resources to be aligned with Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) and DBE priorities.

Despite initial concerns about increased workload, teachers and Principals across the case study schools confirmed that Funda Wande materials complemented DBE resources, finding them instrumental in reinforcing DBE concepts and facilitating a smoother teaching process. As a result, in all but one of the schools visited, Funda Wande materials were observed to be the main resources used for teaching and learning. The teachers and TAs also indicated that the Funda Wande resources provide better clarity and ease of implementation in lesson planning and delivery compared to DBE materials, which were perceived as complex and repetitive by both the TAs and educators interviewed by the research team. Researchers observed that when DBE materials were used alongside Funda Wande resources, TAs ensured seamless integration, leveraging Funda Wande guides to navigate through DBE content effectively. This strategic integration of Funda Wande and DBE materials ensured that learners received lessons that addressed curriculum objectives while fostering engagement and comprehension.

It is also worth noting that some schools, especially in the Eastern Cape, did not use DBE materials at all. For example, a school Principal said, "The school only uses Funda Wande material and not the DBE books." The quotes below reflect why TAs and teachers preferred Funda Wande materials to DBE resources.

> *"Funda Wande is CAPS aligned and it is easy to catch up when you are behind with Funda Wande work because the lesson plans are helpful." (Teacher)*

"Funda Wande materials are integrated with those of DBE, especially the Xhosa and Life Skills. We usually do not have enough time for Life Skills. Mathematics is integrated with language. Funda Wande also makes reference to DBE workbook, even the classwork. It is CAPS aligned." (Teacher)

"We don't even use the DBE books anymore, it's a bonus that we even have Life Skills embedded in IsiXhosa. DBE might be a bit complicated for children so if a learner starts with Funda Wande then goes to DBE, only then will they be able to do it." (TA)

"The learners also take the IsiXhosa book- the Funda Wande Vula Bula home because it teaches the children to read. They start with very small words then big ones as the child progresses; this makes learning easier for children." (DH)

In Limpopo Province, some schools received the Funda Wande materials and teacher training without being supported by Teacher Assistants as a means of testing the relative impacts of the materials on their own and the combination of materials and TAs. As noted in the introduction, the quantitative evaluation found that the presence of TAs greatly increased the impact of the teaching materials on learner outcomes (Ardington 2023, Ardington 2024). The current qualitative study did not visit any of the schools that received materials only, but as discussed above, we confirm that the combination of TAs with structured learning materials is highly effective, suggesting that TAs contribute to more effective use of the materials in the classroom than if the same materials are used only by the teacher. This may be because TAs benefitted from more intense Funda Wande training than teachers, which equipped them with the skills to navigate DBE materials effectively and supplement them with Funda Wande resources as needed. In cases where there were insufficient Funda Wande materials for large classes, researchers noted that TAs were very resourceful because Funda Wande had trained them to create their own materials, such as word cards. A TA indicated, "The most helpful thing about the training was learning how to create material if we do not have it."

Where there were occasional discrepancies between Funda Wande and DBE sequences, TAs and teachers reported that they could creatively adapt to these challenges as needed and maintained fidelity to Funda Wande guidelines in their teaching practices. Overall, the consistent use of Funda Wande materials by TAs reflects their value in enhancing learning experiences by providing practical resources aligned with DBE standards and responsive to Foundation Phase learners' needs in achieving the goal of calculating with confidence and reading with understanding by the age of 10.

7. OVERALL PROGRAMME EFFECTS

7.1. ON LEARNERS

Across all twelve case study schools, the Funda Wande programme and the TAs were recognised by school managers as vital resources for improving student engagement and learner outcomes in maths and home language. For example, two school Principals explained the overall impact by indicating:

> *"The programme is working. When I was teaching, there were learners I wrote off but with the TA, they improved. These children struggled but the TAs' step-by-step support moved them from the bottom to the top."*

> *"The [Funda Wande] programme is good with and without TAs even though TAs make it better. There is improvement in both reading and maths. The programme started in 2017 or 2018 without TAs and the children who were a part of it are now in Grade 5 and they can read fluently and are good at maths. The transition to the intermediate phase was good."*

The responses above suggest that, in the opinions of school leaders, while the provision of materials and teacher training alone made significant contributions to learners' overall performance, the TA aspect made the Funda Wande programme more effective. The section below describes how TA, teacher and school manager respondents described the impact of the TAs' support in Home Language, mathematics and beyond the classroom.

7.1.1. HOME LANGUAGE

Teachers, school managers and DHs credited TAs' presence in classrooms and their teaching strategies, ranging from one-on-one attention to engaging teaching methods, with enhancing learners' vocabulary, confidence and proficiency in reading, writing and other literacy-related activities. According to a TA in Eastern Cape, Grade 2 learners demonstrated confidence in retelling stories, a testament to their improved literacy abilities facilitated by the Funda Wande programme. TAs pointed out that many learners who previously struggled could now read and write independently. They also noted improved reading fluency, comprehension and a love for reading. Teachers attributed these improvements to TAs supporting learners in grasping fundamental reading concepts and literacy skills. Further, TAs noted enhancement in learners' writing skills. They explained that this resulted from them providing individualised assistance in lower grades to address specific needs, such as writing between the lines. A teacher in Limpopo and a TA in Eastern Cape also explained,

"Learners that were struggling have improved. Reading fluency has improved and the kids read with understanding. Some learners were stuttering, some had no confidence, and now they even entered reading competitions. One learner won a circuit reading competition. In term one, I struggled with those who were not confident but now they are very confident; some children will come and ask if they can read to the class for the day." (Teacher)

"You have to be patient and teach them how to hold the pen and write between the lines." (TA)

7.1.2. MATHEMATICS

TAs indicated that learners' confidence during mental maths had improved. A TA explained that during maths games, "you can see that a child who was quiet participated more in class." According to teachers, TAs' remedial classes and individualised support have contributed to reducing the number of underperforming learners in mathematics.[1] All teachers in both provinces reported that learners demonstrated increased confidence and participation in calculating activities, with some school managers highlighting that the learners even excelled in inter-school competitions due to their enhanced maths skills.

7.1.3. OTHER EFFECTS

During the learner activity administered by researchers, learners reported that their maths marks had improved because the TAs were patient in helping them understand difficult concepts. The learners also highlighted that in addition to their improved performances in maths and HL, the TAs' support also helped them to speak and write better English. Teachers explained that TAs who struggled with HL were tasked to help children with English (as a First Additional Language) instead. Even though this was an unintended consequence of the programme, it is an important milestone for the learners and their overall academic performance.

Beyond academic achievements, behavioural improvements were observed by teachers, TAs and school managers, with learners exhibiting greater confidence, reasoning, discipline and engagement in learning activities. TAs' patience and support fostered a nurturing environment where learners felt encouraged to explore and excel academically. TAs described that they made the children repeat affirmations such as "I am confident, I am beautiful, I am strong, I am smart." Through such activities, shy learners also felt encouraged to freely share and participate in engagements, contributing to their overall academic and social development. Lastly, TAs were pivotal in instilling a love for learning among Foundation Phase learners. School managers and teachers indicated that learner absenteeism decreased significantly because TAs monitor learners' attendance and follow up with parents when they notice repeated absences from school.

Overall, research participants including teachers and principals, acknowledged the notable improvements in learners' performance, attributing higher pass rates and enhanced skills in both maths and home language directly to the assistance provided by TAs.

7.2. ON TEACHERS

The Funda Wande TA programme has significantly contributed to a positive atmosphere in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo schools by enhancing the capabilities and enthusiasm of teachers. According to an Eastern Cape school Principal, "teachers were growing from the Funda Wande

1 This study was not able to verify this by analysing trends in learner's marks. However, the results of the quantitative evaluation study seem to verify this assertion.

programme because they also learnt from TAs" and their confidence in teaching improved. The Principal provided an example of a Foundation Phase teacher who was helped by a TA to gain confidence in teaching writing. He said,

> *"One teacher changed from teaching Grade 1 to Grade 4 because she was not comfortable with FP. A Funda Wande TA asked to help that teacher, only to find out that they were not confident in teaching the basics of writing so they helped with that."*

The programme and its TAs revitalised teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, leading to more dynamic classrooms and better learning outcomes. A Limpopo school Principal noted,

> *"Teachers were not active but after TAs came, they became livelier. Learners can now read and write. They have made a difference from Gr R to 3. They made what was dead come alive again, and teachers and learners are now more active. The teachers jump with kids."*

As reported by all interviewed teachers and some principals, the collaborative efforts between teachers and TAs resulted in increased curriculum coverage and quality instruction. This is likely to benefit learners' academic growth and overall development. The teachers and school principals who were interviewed argued that teachers, often burdened with high work volumes, found relief in TA support and user-friendly Funda Wande resources, which enabled them to navigate the curriculum more effectively. They added that classroom management also became more effective, with TAs assisting in organising learners and activities, reducing teacher stress.

TAs' collaboration with teachers also led to the sharing of effective teaching strategies, resulting in more engaging and creative approaches to instruction. During case study interviews, teachers reported feeling more confident and supported in their teaching roles, leading to a more positive learning environment for learners. Overall, the TA programme has had a transformative impact on schools, fostering a culture of learning and growth among learners and educators. One Eastern Cape educator emotionally expressed her gratitude for the Funda Wande programme and TA support by arguing:

> *"Andizange ndiyibone iprogramme engakhathaleli kuphela abafundi kodwa nootitshala. Sibulela kakhulu kuba naxa sifuna iresources bayazizisa. Ii-TAs nazo zizinikele. Andinamagama. [I have never seen a programme that cares about not only learners but teachers too. We are very grateful because even when we want resources, they bring them. The TAs are also committed. I am short of words.]"*

A Deputy Principal in a Limpopo school also shared the same sentiments that Funda Wande applied a holistic approach to learning; she said,

> *"Re hotšwe kudu ke Funda Wande. Ga e sa le ke eba morutiši, ga se nke ka bona selo se se swanago le Funda Wande. [We have benefited a lot from Funda Wande. Since I became a teacher, I have never seen anything like Funda Wande.] They give us resources, TAs that are full-time, workbooks, bilingual teaching aids, mentors. They even review their materials termly, and consider our suggestions while doing so."*

7.3. ON THE SCHOOL

The impact of TAs extended beyond the direct improvement of individual learner outcomes to encompass creating a positive learning environment within the school. When case study data was collected, principals and teachers across various schools expressed concern about the consequences of discontinuing the TA programme. One Limpopo Principal highlighted the role of TAs in fostering a positive learning climate and expressed worry about an increase in learner injuries (due to lack of supervision) and a decline in academic performance if the programme were to end.

When follow-up interviews were conducted after the TA programme ended, school principals and teachers confirmed that the end of the TA programme has had significant impacts on the schools, particularly concerning the safety and supervision of learners. With no TAs present, learners are left vulnerable during teacher absences for workshops and meetings. This has resulted in injuries, especially in Limpopo classrooms which have very large numbers of learners. Moreover, the absence of TAs has led to disruptions in attendance, since learners sometimes stay home when their teachers are absent or away for DBE workshops. The Department of Basic Education has not provided Education Assistants to schools, exacerbating the struggle to manage the school environment and classroom workload.

During case study visits, school managers expressed concerns regarding heightened teacher absenteeism due to their increased workload in the absence of TAs. In response to these concerns, school management, including Departmental Heads, advocated for the retention of TAs until the end of the 2023 academic year to mitigate potential disruptions and sustain the progress achieved rather than terminating their contracts before the year-end exams in late November/ early December 2023. School principals expressed disappointment at the potential loss of valuable staff members (TAs) and emphasised the need for continued support for both learners and teachers.

7.4. ON TEACHER ASSISTANTS

The Funda Wande TA programme not only improved learners' educational outcomes but also profoundly impacted the TAs involved. The programme played a transformative role in the lives of the TAs involved. From shaping career aspirations to fostering personal growth, the programme has empowered TAs to make meaningful contributions to children's education while gaining valuable skills and experiences and improving their livelihoods.

7.4.1. WORK EXPERIENCE

The Funda Wande TAs recognised the broader societal implications of the Funda Wande programme, including its role in addressing unemployment by providing opportunities for young individuals to explore the field of education. They have gained invaluable work experience through their involvement in the programme. They reported gaining experience in working with children, becoming more patient, developing a deeper understanding of early childhood education, and gaining practical skills and insights into the teaching profession. Some TAs noted that they had enrolled in formal teaching courses when they were interviewed in February 2024, a few months after completing the Funda Wande programme. They attributed this to Funda Wande and saw the TA job as an opportunity to gain hands-on experience as a stepping stone to their teaching careers. When TAs were interviewed after their contracts ended, ten indicated they had secured jobs as teachers, part-time Teacher Assistants and administrative assistants at the DBE. Another TA explained that she was still working with children in an NGO. They all attributed their choices to continue working with children to the experience they had gained through the Funda Wande TA programme.

7.4.2. CAREER TRAJECTORIES

The Funda Wande programme has shaped TA career aspirations and ignited a passion for teaching. When the TAs were first interviewed during the case study data collection period in October 2023, many of them indicated that they had aspirations, funding permitting, to train as teachers to formalise their roles in education. The Funda Wande intervention currently does not include an integrated tie-in with teacher training funding but would benefit from such in future iterations. When the TAs were interviewed after their contracts had ended, their responses echoed the same sentiments about staying in the childhood development and teaching spaces. Most TAs said that even though they are not working, they were studying towards a teaching qualification or planning to enrol in one. Three TAs mentioned:

> *"Funda Wande had a big positive influence because I started my Bachelor of Education in 2023 after 8 months of being employed by Funda Wande, so I told myself that I want to do teaching because I love the job and I see that I am good at it."*

> *"I have applied for a foundation phase teaching qualification at UNISA."*

> *"I am not yet working but the programme influenced me to choose to study teaching. I developed a love for children. I have registered with the Department of Education to upgrade my Grade 12 marks so that I can register to study B Ed in the foundation phase."*

These responses illustrate how Funda Wande influenced the TAs' decisions to pursue a Bachelor of Education (B Ed) degree and to choose teaching as a career path. These examples show how Funda Wande not only provided time-bound employment but also served as a catalyst for personal and professional growth, guiding TAs towards fulfilling careers in education.

The TAs who had dropped out of their qualifications because they were unsure about their passions re-registered because Funda Wande confirmed their love for working with children. During a case study interview, a TA in Limpopo elaborated,

> *"I realised that I actually enjoy working with learners. I had dropped out of B Ed because I had lost my passion for teaching. So, Funda Wande brought back my passion for teaching. My passion for education has been revived and most things I can do, I do not have to ask the teacher. I have re-registered for 3rd year."*

Some TAs with qualifications in other fields explained that they also wanted to switch to teaching careers. A TA who was a third-year Communication Science student at UNISA indicated that he had "fallen in love with children" and said, "I have found my calling." He planned to study towards an education qualification. A second TA also said, "I don't see myself going back to HR." Lastly, another TA added,

> *"Yes indeed, well I have an honours degree in Bachelor of Laws. However, being a Teacher Assistant for Funda Wande made me fall in love with teaching. I enjoyed each and every moment assisting the learners with their studies. I noticed that I am no longer interested in Law; I want to pursue lento yam yofundisa (my passion for teaching)."*

In addition, other TAs who were already qualified teachers wanted to specialise in the Foundation Phase. For example, a Limpopo TA indicated,

"I am thinking of doing a qualification in the Foundation Phase because I loved it more than what I studied for: Intermediate phase."

TAs who did not intend to become teachers explained that Funda Wande influenced them to stay in the early childhood development space and contribute to it. For example, during sustainability interviews in 2024, one TA noted that she was still working with children in a different NGO. Another one explained that working for Funda Wande had educated her and influenced her to find solutions for children with special needs. They said,

"It helped me learn that learners don't learn the same as some have special needs and that each learner should be taught to read and write. This has made me want to write a book about special children who are in schools in order to educate both parents, learners, and teachers about their needs and finding ways to make schools cater to them."

"Because of Funda Wande, I fell in love with the childhood space. I work for a NGO that is similar to Funda Wande but it focuses on children's health and HIV."

7.4.3. FINANCIAL BENEFITS

The Funda Wande programme brought financial stability to the lives of TAs because the income was a lifeline for many of them. TAs explained that while their salaries may not always cover all their needs, through the monthly stipend provided by Funda Wande they were able to afford basic necessities, provide for their families and even invest in personal development, such as pursuing higher education or acquiring essential skills like obtaining a driver's license. With smiles on their faces, two TAs said,

"Even though the money is not enough to cover everything, I can afford the basics. I am able to pay for my school fees. I am able to take care of myself and help people at home."

"At home, I am the only one with an income. I had an 18-year-old brother last year so I managed to do a ceremony for him. My child has everything."

However, with the end of their contracts, many TAs expressed their financial struggles. They mentioned being the primary breadwinners at home. The loss of employment has left them without a steady income, resulting in significant financial strain and inability to afford basic necessities. The difficulty in finding alternative employment in their communities exacerbates the situation, leaving them feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their future. Unemployment and financial stress have taken a toll on their mental well-being, plunging them into feelings of anxiety, stress, despair, and depression.

7.4.4. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Funda Wande programme has instilled valuable qualities in the TAs, such as patience, confidence, responsibility, and problem-solving skills. TAs remarked on how their interactions with students have taught them to be more patient and understanding in their professional and personal roles. For example, the role improved their parenting skills, as they learned effective communication and interaction techniques that benefit their relationships with their

own children. They also noted that the job had improved their self-esteem and public speaking skills and helped them develop communication skills, particularly in resolving conflicts and addressing challenges within the school environment. Two TAs described,

"I understand my 2-year-old better now and I understand young children. I have realised that they listen if you talk to them properly."

"When I started working there, I saw my potential to be able to deal with young people and solve conflicts with colleagues. I am patient and I did not know that I had some skills."

In these responses, the TAs reflect on how Funda Wande influenced their decision to pursue teaching as a career. They attribute their choice to realising their potential and discovering previously unrecognised skills while working with Funda Wande. This example highlights how Funda Wande served as a platform for self-discovery and skill development, ultimately shaping the TA's career aspirations. By recognising their ability to work effectively with young people and discovering their patience and teaching skills, Funda Wande played a pivotal role in guiding the TA towards a career in education.

Despite the positive impacts of being employed by Funda Wande, some TAs acknowledged their challenges, such as feeling overwhelmed by children's psychosocial issues and struggling to balance their TA responsibilities with other commitments such as their 'side hustles'. When the contracts ended, the absence of the structured routine provided by the Funda Wande job also had emotional consequences on the TAs and left a void in their daily life, contributing to a sense of aimlessness and emptiness. Despite these hardships, they recognise the importance of resilience and perseverance that they were taught by Funda Wande. Some also shared that even though unemployment was a challenge, they had coping mechanisms imparted to them by Funda Wande. This assertion mirrors the research team's observation during TA 'graduation' ceremonies. During these ceremonies, TAs were encouraged to engage in activities such as volunteering and to pursue further education after their contracts had ended. TAs acknowledged that the Funda Wande programme prepared them for the "end of the contracts and the outside world."

8. CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING FUNDA WANDE ACTIVITIES

implementing the Funda Wande programme with TAs experienced challenges in some schools. A high level of teacher absenteeism was the most significant implementation challenge for the Funda Wande TA intervention identified by the study. Teacher absenteeism meant that TAs had to manage classrooms alone and deliver lessons even though they were not trained to do so. Another common difficulty faced by TAs was instilling discipline in learners. TAs faced dilemmas in disciplining students without resorting to corporal punishment, highlighting the need for alternative strategies and support mechanisms, as some students exhibit disruptive behaviour and resistance to instruction, affecting the overall classroom environment and the delivery of Funda Wande activities. Despite efforts to engage them, some learners refused to participate or follow instructions, making it challenging for TAs to maintain order in the classroom. Difficulties in coordinating with uncooperative parents also complicated disciplinary measures because "some parents do not want their children to be reprimanded."

Another significant challenge noted by Funda Wande TAs is the overwhelming task of assisting many learners with diverse needs and abilities. TAs struggled to address the needs of learners with learning disabilities or behavioural issues, as they lacked the necessary training to handle such situations effectively. With only one TA per grade in many cases in Eastern Cape, TAs struggled to provide individualised support to each student, especially when dealing with issues such as concentration difficulties or learning disabilities. A TA elaborated,

> *"I struggle when I have to group the children according to their abilities because now I have a child who needs a psychologist. I have tried everything to help them and have asked for advice during training. I feel that the child needs a special school because they cannot even identify simple things in a picture."*

TAs also reported encountering logistical challenges in managing resources and facilitating activities within the classroom. For instance, TAs often found it difficult to control the use of Funda Wande resources, such as counters, as some learners misused them or become distracted during lessons. A TA laughed and said, "they make guns, cars and houses using counters."

The TAs also noted the limited availability of Funda Wande workbooks during training sessions as a challenge for TAs in adequately preparing for the term ahead. Another issue that TAs reported grappling with is the use of unfamiliar isiXhosa and Sepedi terms in Funda Wande materials, possibly due to regional variations in dialect. In large classrooms such as those in Limpopo, researchers noted that there were resource constraints, hindering the availability

of materials like puzzles and play dough for Grade R learners. In some schools, especially in Limpopo, teachers and TAs argued that the absence of libraries and reading corners due to space constraints complicated Sepedi instruction.

TAs also highlighted that time constraints, particularly in some Limpopo schools, resulted in clashes between DBE and Funda Wande activities, leading to Funda Wande tasks being assigned as homework, affecting content coverage. A TA said,

> *"The Funda Wande and DBE activities are clashing because the DBE has a lot of work and the teacher has to submit activities to the DH so sometimes she has to do DBE activities the whole day so we cannot implement any Funda Wande activities. During the training we were told to give each other a chance but sometimes she cannot give us a chance. The mentor said that she will speak to her but I do not think that there is a solution because we just do not have enough time to cover the Funda Wande activities. The DBE checks whether the teacher has reached the target for activities and this puts Funda Wande at a disadvantage. If we are not able to do any activity in class we give them as homework and then we just do the next activity in class so this is one way of catching up on the Funda Wande activities."*

Funda Wande TAs expressed frustration regarding assigning Funda Wande activities as homework because of a lack of parental support, which further complicates TAs' efforts to help learners succeed. In light of the challenges mentioned in this section, TAs have recommended the inclusion of counselling services to help address the emotional needs of both learners and TAs.

9. PROGRAMME SUSTAINABILITY

Not all education interventions are designed to impart an effect on a system and then end while leaving the effect behind. Some, such as continuous professional development or materials provision, require ongoing investment and presence. Teacher Assistant programmes are similar in that most of their effect depends on the TA's presence in the classroom. We do not, therefore, expect many of the positive effects for schools, teachers or learners to continue beyond the TA's presence. Indeed, there was some indication that when schools and teachers adapt to the presence of TAs, it has a negative impact when that form of support is withdrawn again, to the detriment of learners. On the other hand, there was some evidence of lasting positive effects.

The following information on sustainability is based on comments by school managers, teachers and TAs during the case study period in October 2023, in expectation of the end of the intervention in November/December 2023, as well as interviews conducted with the same school managers, teachers and TAs in February 2024, following the end of TA contracts.

During case study data collection, school managers and teachers were concerned that learners' performance would drop when TA contracts ended. For example, a school Principal in the Eastern Cape emotionally said,

"We are worried that [TAs] will not be coming back because we were already seeing progress with some learners."

When the TAs, teachers, DHs and school managers were contacted after the Funda Wande programme ended in their schools, they noted that the absence of TAs had left a void in the classroom dynamic, causing confusion among learners who had grown accustomed to their presence. The absence of TAs disrupted the established support structure within the classroom, particularly impacting children who relied on remedial assistance and individual attention provided by the TAs. TAs, DHs and principals were worried that teachers would struggle to cope without TA support, grappling with increased workloads, and struggling to manage tasks efficiently.

For example, one TA stated,

"I'm feeling very sorry for struggling learners because we were there to make sure that every learner is attended individually and in groups."

Even though all TAs were generally worried that schools, teachers and learners are not coping without them, a few argued that the Funda Wande programme implementation would continue because "the teachers could still make good use of the 'good old' Funda Wande resources."

This was confirmed by DHs and school managers in the case study schools, who in February 2024 expressed their intent to continue utilising Funda Wande materials independently, highlighting their perceived value and usefulness. They indicated that they would make copies of the Teacher Guides so that teachers could use them for lesson planning. However, they believed the programme would have a lower impact without the TAs. Teachers in Limpopo also explained that even though the schools had continued using Funda Wande materials, the teachers had not adjusted to working without TAs and so they are "not coping." Not having TAs to monitor learners when the teacher is teaching is "slowing down the teaching pace". Teachers also expressed worries because the "straightforward and less complicated" resources such as Learning Activity Books (LABs) that were provided by Funda Wande every year were instrumental in facilitating teaching and learning, and their absence after the discontinuation of the programme could hinder the smooth operation of classroom activities. In some schools, discontinuing the TA programme has impacted the utilisation of those Funda Wande materials that remain in schools. One TA said that when she visited the school where she used to work, she realised that teachers no longer used Funda Wande materials due to overwhelming workloads.

Despite the end of their contracts, several TAs expressed a desire to continue supporting education in some capacity. They discussed volunteering in the community, staying in touch with the schools where they used to work, and seeking opportunities to make a difference in education. One TA said "I am still talking to both the teachers I worked with in the two schools I worked in since 2022." A Department Head in Limpopo Province noted that after TA contracts expired, some TAs continued supporting the schools with Funda Wande activities as usual. In 2023, during case study interviews, some schools in the Eastern Cape expressed that they intended to keep the TAs and pay them from the schools' budgets after the end of the Funda Wande contracts. Some teachers in the same province also said they would keep the TAs and pay them from their pockets. This was mirrored by TA interviews when two Eastern Cape-based TAs confirmed that they were still working in the schools and continuing with the same activities they supported teachers with while working for Funda Wande. It was impossible to confirm with all schools that had stated the intent to continue employing TAs if this happened in early 2024.

10. CONCLUSIONS

There was consensus across all case study school managers and teachers that the presence of TAs in classrooms has significantly improved learner outcomes in maths and home language. This reinforces the findings of the quantitative impact evaluation of the Funda Wande programme in Limpopo Province (Ardington 2024).

The current qualitative research confirms not only that Funda Wande TAs have a measurable impact on learner outcomes, but that there is a high level of acceptance and appreciation within the schooling system for the roles Funda Wande TAs play. Direct participants within the programme, including TAs and teachers (who participated by receiving training in the Funda Wande structured learning programme and by partnering with TAs in their classrooms), consistently rated the intervention very highly. Therefore, from the perspectives of impact, system integration, operational fidelity and quality, Funda Wande's approach to placing and managing young paraprofessionals in schools seems to be highly effective.

This efficacy suggests a programme design worth documenting and learning from for the wider ongoing policy discussion about paraprofessionals in education, especially the roles they can play in improving foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes in foundation phase classrooms.

The current study shows that if a paraprofessional intervention is structured according to the design parameters of the Funda Wande approach, the following TA impact pathways apply:

1. increased use of differentiated teaching and individualised attention in multi-ability classrooms,
2. the effective application of a structured learning programme with specific literacy and numeracy strategies (e.g. group guided reading for literacy, use of manipulatives for maths),
3. increasing individualised learner feedback and motivation,
4. freeing teacher time for instruction by taking on non-instructional classroom management activities,
5. enabling continuity of learning when teachers are absent from the classroom,
6. identifying and supporting learners with psychosocial challenges,
7. enabling teachers to engage in ongoing 'peer learning' by discussing learner needs, teaching strategies and the application of structured learning materials with the paraprofessionals (who themselves receive ongoing training and coaching/mentoring support), and
8. enabling Department Heads to have the time to coach teachers.

The key design elements that enable these impact pathways to be effective are described below under Recommendations.

We conclude that, in achieving the goal of improved foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes for foundation phase learners, the well-established effects of the 'triple cocktail' (Fleisch 2022) of structured teaching materials, teacher training and teacher coaching is augmented by paraprofessionals, resulting in a highly effective 'quadruple cocktail'. Further quantitative research is needed to establish the size of the added paraprofessional effect and how different operational designs (such as teacher/paraprofessional ratios) affect learner outcomes.

Furthermore, the Funda Wande TA programme was not only effective in training and employing young people for the programme period, it also motivated participating young people to gain further qualifications and remain active in the field of education, specifically in early grade teaching. It may therefore have a longer term impact on the systemic challenge of foundation phase teacher supply.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the insights about impact pathways for Teacher Assistants generated by this study, we recommend that the following design elements be part of future interventions with young paraprofessionals in schools. We recognise that interventions at scale may require adjustments to the ratio of paraprofessionals per classroom or the depth of training and mentorship provided, as these are costly elements in a large-scale and long-term programme, but the broad elements listed below should be considered minimum characteristics of an effective intervention:

1. **Time Period:** contract TAs for at least a full school year and ideally for two years in the same school. This allows TAs and teachers to develop a consistent and substantive division of labour and enables school managers to plan their teaching resources effectively.
2. **Local recruitment:** place paraprofessionals in schools near where they live, where possible, to maximise home language alignment with learners and enable them to play linking roles between the learners, school, home environments and the wider community.
3. **Contracting on clearly defined roles:** have a structured contract between paraprofessionals, schools and a supporting agency (such as Funda Wande) that sets out specific tasks for TAs and ensures clarity on shared expectations.
4. **Structured learning programme:** combine the paraprofessional intervention with a structured learning programme (lesson plans and LTSM) in which the teachers and TAs are both trained.
5. **Training and ongoing support:** combine a significant initial training period (at least a week) with regular top-up training (termly) and ongoing mentorship support. In the Funda Wande design, each mentor supported 18-33 paraprofessionals.
6. **Focus on FLN in home language:** dedicate paraprofessional training, grade allocation and task definition primarily to foundational literacy and numeracy (not higher grades, and not predominantly non-pedagogic roles and functions) and ensure materials and training are aligned with the home language of learners.
7. **Make motivation and psychosocial support roles explicit:** include motivational teaching methods, positive classroom discipline, and an understanding of psychosocial issues as explicit elements of paraprofessional training, teaching materials and job descriptions.
8. **Teacher-Paraprofessional Ratio:** an ideal ratio is one paraprofessional per foundation phase teacher, but it is recognised that this may not be financially feasible at scale (see below).

To apply the lessons from the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant programme in other contexts and at larger scale will require further research and implementation experimentation on the following elements:

1. **Teacher-Paraprofessional Ratios below 1:1** such as one paraprofessional per grade and the effect this has on the valuable impact pathway of attention to individual learners.
2. **Mentor-Paraprofessional Ratios** and the efficacy of coaching assistants (cascade coaching and mentorship models) in providing ongoing support to paraprofessionals.
3. **Linkages with different structured learning programmes** given that various approaches to lesson plans and teaching materials exist across the South African public and NGO-supported education system.

4. **Linkages between paraprofessional placements and transitions into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) (such as B Ed qualifications) and practical experience/internships during ITE.** The current Funda Wande programme does not explicitly link Teacher Assistants with opportunities for further study but other programmes may wish to explore building such connections into their design.

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