



**Funda Wande**  
Reading for Meaning

## EVIDENCE BRIEF:

Cross-cutting lessons

across interventions:

Foundational education

reform brief

*Authored by the Funda Wande Research Team - November 2025*



This cross-cutting brief synthesises the findings and policy imperatives from four recent reports focusing on educational interventions in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Limpopo, highlighting shared challenges in implementation, teacher capacity, and the attainment of substantive learning outcomes.

## **Translating compliance into substantive fidelity and understanding**

Across disparate interventions, a recurring theme is the difficulty of translating surface level compliance (process adherence) into deep pedagogical or conceptual change (substance and quality).

### **• Instructional Fidelity**

The Behavioural Science for Pedagogical Change (BSPC) midline evaluation demonstrated that while behavioural science principles were successful in getting teachers to use the Funda Wande Teacher Guide (TG) consistently as a dominant instructional resource, the quality of implementation remained low. Behavioural teachers implemented, on average, only 23% of intended lesson steps and their components, despite covering more than half the steps. This limited coverage highlights a need to shift focus from TG presence to substantive implementation.

### **• Learning Outcomes**

This challenge mirrors the findings in Limpopo, where learners showed significant improvement in basic, routine skills like letter-sound recognition and simple counting, but failed to transition to higher-order skills. For instance, decoding improved, but reading comprehension remained limited/nearly absent. The progress achieved was primarily mechanical, not conceptual.

### **• Professional Development Consistency**

In the Hub & Spoke PLC Model, engagement was uneven. Lead teachers varied significantly in sessions delivered, and teacher attendance fluctuated considerably, suggesting challenges in mobilising consistent, quality professional development.



## Focusing on higher order foundational skills

The analysis consistently confirms that foundational learning gaps are defined not merely by a lack of basic skills, but by critical deficits in understanding the inability to apply skills in meaningful ways.

- **Literacy**

The evidence points to a critical “comprehension deficit” where decoding skills are not translating into meaning-making. Policy must reorient Grade 1 instruction around comprehension and meaning making from day one, rather than focusing narrowly on rote decoding and counting. Training and accountability mechanisms must prioritise activities that require higher cognitive demands, such as long-form productive writing, comprehension, and fluency practice.

- **Numeracy**

Similarly, progress on routine counting has not addressed the “conceptual math bottleneck”. Learners struggle with foundational concepts like part-whole reasoning and ordinality, preventing them from moving beyond memorisation to genuine problem-solving.

The aim across the three provinces is to build an education system ensuring every child can read and write with meaning and compute with confidence by age 10.

## Ensuring systemic and high-quality teacher support

**Sustained PD and collaboration:** The province of Limpopo must invest in sustained, practical professional development and collaborative platforms (like PLCs), focusing explicitly on instructional techniques for teaching reading comprehension and conceptual mathematics. Teachers require practical tools and training to effectively teach counting, ordinality, and part-whole relationships.

**Refining Coaching and Support:** Coaching must be refined to move beyond encouraging surface-level adherence to focusing on the quality and completion of lesson components. Specific support is required for complex, time-intensive routines like Group Guided Reading (GGR), including strict adherence to allocated time (e.g., 35 minutes for GGR, which was significantly under-allocated in observed lessons) and managing Independent Work.

**Incentives and Mitigation:** While incentives matter, they must be supported by mitigation strategies. The PLC model utilises an honorarium (R500 per session) to motivate Lead Teachers. Risks like lead teacher burnout and single-teacher dependency are addressed through continued use of scheduled check-ins, and training deputy or co-lead teachers.





## Addressing Equity and Readiness

The baseline evidence from Limpopo established profound learning gaps, confirming that learners are often entering Grade 1 unprepared for the formal curriculum.

- Mandating a rigorous focus on oral language, phonological awareness, and number sense in Grade R is considered a non-negotiable prerequisite to reduce costly downstream remediation.
- Systemic fragility means that under-resourced and rural contexts often lag. The system is actively failing its most vulnerable learners, evidenced by the significant presence and continued underperformance of over-aged learners.
- A one-size-fits-all approach widens equity gaps. Policy must direct dedicated funding toward equity-responsive strategies, including tailored interventions for over-aged and struggling learners and targeted support for disadvantaged school.

The evidence across the Western Cape Hub & Spoke Model, the Limpopo foundational learning reports, and the Behavioural Science for Pedagogical Change (BSPC) midline evaluation demonstrates that interventions are showing promise as a vehicle for structured pedagogy reinforcement, but variation across hubs remains significant. The core challenge is the transition from surface-level adherence to substantive implementation, which directly impacts learner outcomes.

Targeted approaches such as the behavioural science principles used in the BSPC intervention were successful in getting teachers to consistently use materials like the Funda Wande Teacher Guide (TG) as a dominant instructional resource, they were not sufficient to ensure the full and consistent implementation of the guide's complex instructional content. The data confirms a low overall fidelity, with behavioural teachers implementing, on average, only 23% of intended lesson steps and their components. This requires a policy pivot to shift focus from TG presence to substantive implementation, refining coaching to move beyond surface-level adherence to focus on the quality and completion of lesson components.



The failure to achieve substantive fidelity contributes directly to the persistent learning deficits in Limpopo, where learners improve on routine skills (decoding, simple counting) but fail to make the critical transition to higher-order skills. Gains remain limited in reading comprehension, and fundamental concepts like part-whole reasoning and ordinality in mathematics remain underdeveloped. The system must be reformed to reorient Grade 1 instruction around comprehension and conceptual fluency from day one, rather than focusing narrowly on rote decoding and counting.

Sustaining and scaling impact requires embedding intervention strategies into the educational ecosystem. Incentives matter, as demonstrated by the use of an honorarium (R500 per session) to motivate Lead Teachers in the PLC model, but so does system alignment and buy in to ensure that there is consistent attendance. Operational risks, such as the potential for lead teacher burnout, must be addressed through strategies like continued training deputy teachers.

Key focus must be placed on embedding PLC routines into the fabric of district practice and SMT and linking PLC participation to tangible improvements in classroom instruction. This systemic effort must be coupled with dedicated funding toward equity-responsive interventions for at-risk learners. The goal remains clear and unwavering; to build an education system that ensures every child in the province can read & write for meaning and compute with confidence by age of 10.

