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Advisory Note



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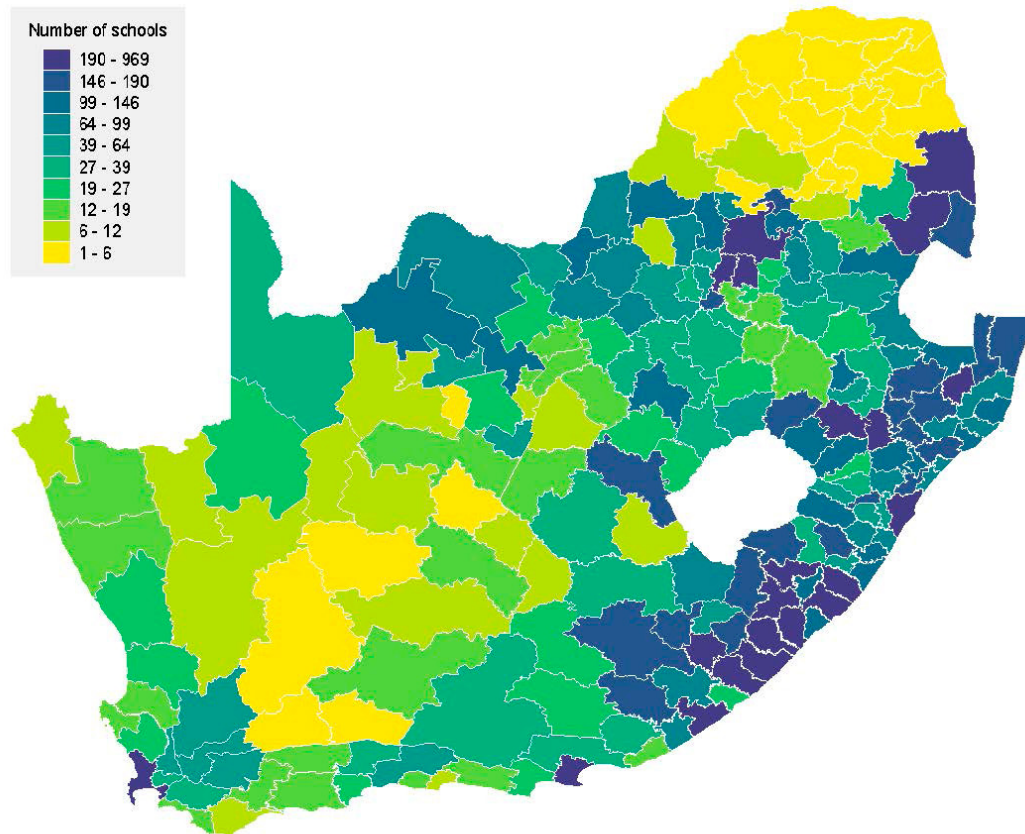
Harnessing community resources to enhance learning: Funda Wandu Teaching Assistants

1. Background

Two of the most pressing challenges facing South Africa are a remarkably high rate of youth unemployment and a learning crisis deeply rooted in early education. Arguably, these issues exert the most substantial influence on the country's future growth and well-being. The lack of opportunities for South African youth is epitomized by the sheer numbers "Not in Employment, Education, or Training" (NEET). More than one-third of individuals aged 15 to 24 and over half of those aged 25 to 35 are fall into this NEET classification (Khuluvhe and Ganyaupfu 2023). These youth are predominantly situated in disadvantaged areas, particularly rural communities, where employment opportunities are scarce and geographical distance poses a substantial hurdle to labour market inclusion. These same communities contain some of the most disadvantaged and underperforming schools.

The Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) was launched in October 2020 as part of South Africa's Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, in response to the devastating economic impacts of Covid. Within the PES, the Department of Basic Education and the Presidency introduced the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI)-Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) which has since placed nearly 850 000 youth at schools as either education assistants or general assistants (Department of Basic Education 2022). The BEEI stands out as an exceptionally scalable youth employment programme due to its capacity for broad implementation and its geographically equitable reach, encompassing the most underserved communities (see Figure 1). Considering South Africa's multiple challenges, it is essential to explore whether such initiatives have the potential to concurrently have a meaningful impact on early learning outcomes. These are the very questions that the Funda Wandu Teacher Assistant intervention and accompanying evaluation set out to answer.

Figure 1. Number of BEEI schools per local municipality in 2023



Source: Department of Basic Education, 2023. PYEI-BEEI participating schools.

2. Funda Wande Teacher Assistants Intervention and Evaluation

Funda Wande is a not-for-profit organization that aims to ensure that all learners in South Africa can read for meaning and calculate with confidence, in their home language by the age of 10. They have developed a comprehensive set of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) in African languages which form the basis for a programme designed to improve the content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers, and in turn improve early literacy and numeracy outcomes. In partnership with the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Western Cape Departments of Education, Funda Wande is delivering a series of interventions around the LTSM with different modalities of support.

In Limpopo, Funda Wande developed a Teacher Assistant (TA) programme with the aim of developing a model to effectively select, train and support unemployed youth from the community to assist teachers within a structured programme. Each teacher was assigned a TA for the full school year. The key pillars of the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant programme are summarised in Figure 2 (see Makaluza and Mpeti 2022 for a detailed description of the programme).

Figure 2. Pillars of the Funda Wandé Teacher Assistant Programme

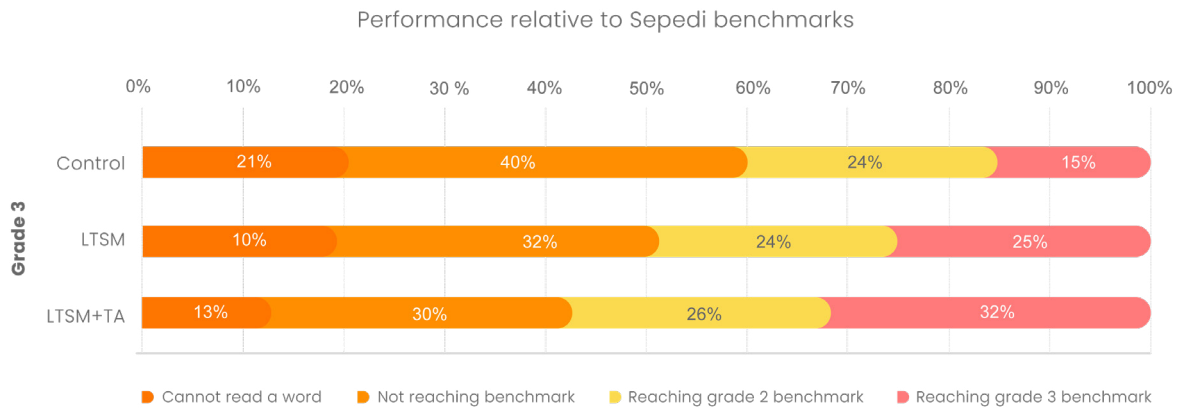
Rigorous recruitment and selection of youth	Teacher assistants were recruited through a rigorous selection process managed by Funda Wandé. More than 1200 applicants took an online competency assessment of which 256 were invited to an in-person day long selection bootcamp. From this process, 145 teacher assistants were hired .
High-quality learner and teacher materials in classrooms	The materials comprise (1) activity workbooks for each learner, (2) teacher guides aligned to the learner workbooks that explain to the teacher what they need to teach and how and (3) classroom materials including readers, posters and phonics flashcards . All three components are strongly aligned so that teachers can seamlessly move between the different materials.
Continuous support on how to fulfil their duties	Teacher assistants are periodically visited by a mentor during classes and have mentor group sessions with other teacher assistants to ensure that the program is being implemented effectively. The mentors each have between 21 to 26 teacher assistants that they support and visit schools at least once a month.
Comprehensive training that is aligned to the materials	Initial onboarding and then two days on literacy at the beginning of each term /in the school holiday. Teacher assistants are trained by the mentors.

The Funda Wandé intervention in Limpopo is accompanied by an independent evaluation employing a randomized control trial across 120 schools. Schools were randomized into three groups – control, Funda Wandé LTSM and teacher training (LTSM), and LTSM plus Funda Wandé Teacher Assistants (LTSM+TA). The intervention began in 2021 with a cohort of grade 1 learners and was expanded each year to fully cover the Foundation Phase by 2023. The evaluation has followed this cohort conducting Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRAs) in term 3 of each year. The most recent round of assessments provides us with estimates of programme impacts near the end of grade 3.

Similar to findings from the second year of the programme (Ardington 2023), learners in schools with Funda Wandé Teacher Assistants outperform their peers in control schools across the range of assessed tasks from foundational skills such as letter-sound knowledge to oral reading fluency and comprehension. Overall learners in schools with Funda Wandé Teacher Assistants are around half a standard deviation ahead of learners in control school¹. The gap between learners in schools with the Funda Wandé materials only is smaller but still highly significant at around a quarter of a standard deviation. That these effects are educationally meaningful is clearly apparent when we measure performance relative to the Sepedi grade-specific reading benchmarks (Figure 3) (Ardington et al. 2022). By term 3, the percentage of learners reaching the grade 3 benchmark in schools with a Funda Wandé Teacher Assistant is just over double that in control schools (32% versus 15%). Gaps between Funda Wandé and control learners are apparent across the distribution of learner performance. At the lower end of the distribution, 61% of learners in control schools are yet to reach the grade 2 benchmark in comparison with only 43% of learners in schools with a Funda Wandé Teacher Assistant.

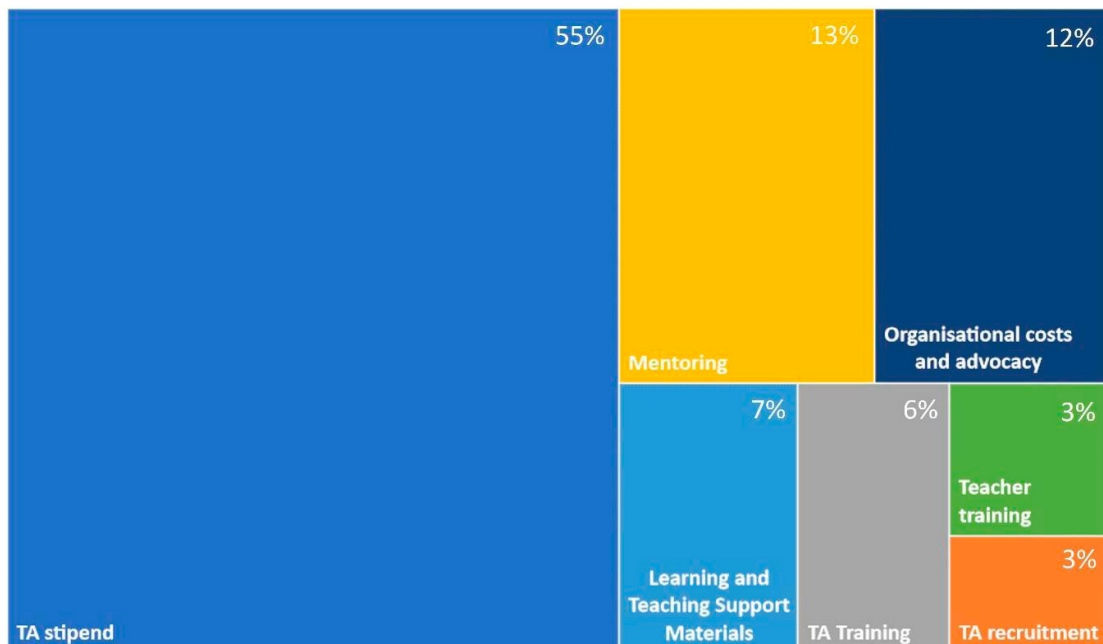
¹ These results are likely an under-estimate of the true impact over the three years as 25% of Funda Wandé schools did not receive the intervention in 2023 due to budget constraints but are still included in the evaluation.

Figure 3. Impact of Funda Wande Teacher Assistants – performance relative to Sepedi benchmarks



The total cost per learner per year for the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant intervention is around R2,571, which is clearly unaffordable if considered solely as an education intervention. Figure 4 presents the cost components of the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant programme². Over two-thirds of the total cost of the programme are the Teacher Assistant stipend, set at the minimum wage, and mentoring costs which include mentor salaries and transport costs for school visits. In terms of financing the intervention, Funda Wande leveraged funds outside of education in the form of two youth employment programmes, the Youth Employment Service (YES) and the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI³). Together these covered around 81% of the budget, leaving a cost of R484 per learner to be funded from education sources. The effect size of 0.5 standard deviations corresponds to 1.25 years of education in business-as-usual school in South Africa and 0.65 Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS⁴). In terms of cost-effectiveness, the intervention delivers the equivalent of 2.44 years of high quality education per \$100 which compares reasonably with other education interventions in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICS⁵).

Figure 4. Cost components of Funda Wande Teacher Assistant Programme



² We have excluded the costs of the mathematics specific LTSM and training.

³ The ETI reduces the cost of hiring young people to employers through a cost-sharing mechanism with government, leaving the wage of the employee unaffected.

⁴ Angrist et al. (2020) set a high-quality learning rate of 0.8 standard deviations per year. Their learning adjustment estimates place the South African rate at 0.4 standard deviations per year.

⁵ At full cost, the programme delivers 0.46 LAYS per \$100 which places it around the median cost-effectiveness of programmes considered by Angrist et al. (2020) that had a statistically significant impact

3. From proof of concept to scale

The BEEI has established both the organizational and political feasibility of a teacher assistant programme at scale, and that the schools most in need can be reached by such programmes. The Funda Wande evaluation shows that placing community youth in classrooms can be highly effective in improving foundational literacy outcomes when rigorous recruitment and selection is in place, high-quality learner and teacher materials are available in classrooms, comprehensive training is provided, and continuous support is offered. Compared to other education interventions, the programme is reasonably cost-effective if it can be integrated into a youth employment programme. However, transitioning from a proof of concept to scale requires careful consideration of costs and the organizational feasibility of each component of the programme at scale.

A key concern with scaling up is the ability to continue to selectively recruit youth. The very high youth unemployment rate, together with the large number of applicants for the BEEI positions suggest that this should not be a major constraint to scale. In the round of recruitment for school assistants for 2023, over 1,5 million young people applied for the 255,000 BEEI posts. Operationally, the competency assessments for first round screening were administered online, making them affordable and scalable.

An essential pillar of the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant intervention is the integration into a structured pedagogy programme with high quality learning and teaching support materials. Just over half (55%) of the R484 per learner cost is for LTSM and teacher training. Funda Wande's experience with a provincial roll out across all Afrikaans and isiXhosa schools in the Western Cape, demonstrates that LTSM costs can be reduced by 40% at scale. There are also a range of open-source materials in African languages that are readily available for mass print and distribution such as the Funda Wande materials and the Vula-Bula series anthologies.

The second largest cost driver of the Funda Wande Teacher Assistant programme was the ongoing mentorship of the Teacher Assistants. Funda Wande employed highly skilled mentors resulting in substantial salary costs. While it is impossible to separate out the impact of these mentors from other components of the programme, the Teacher Assistants performed beyond expectations and next iterations of the programme would look towards a model of using previous TAs as mentors, substantially reducing costs.

Undoubtedly, the biggest challenge to scale is training of the teacher assistants. Funda Wande views in-person training, which is focused on content and is based on practice and modelling essential to programme success. The training needs to be led by skilled trainers and aligned to the materials in order to equip the often inexperienced youth on what to do in the classroom to meaningfully impact learning.

4. Conclusion

The Funda Wande Teacher Assistant program demonstrates the potential of placing community youth in classrooms to enhance foundational literacy outcomes. While the program is reasonably cost-effective, scaling requires addressing logistical, cost, and quality considerations. Leveraging funds from youth employment programs offers a promising avenue to scale, potentially impacting education outcomes at a broader district or provincial level.

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