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Exploring the implementation of the TIME home-learning programme and learning trajectories of 5-7 year olds

*How did TIME influence the children's learning trajectories?
A review and discussion of qualitative and quantitative evidence*



This brief was written for Wordworks by Magali von Blottnitz, with input from colleagues. It can be referenced as follows: von Blottnitz, M. (2025). Exploring the implementation of the TIME home-learning programme and learning trajectories of 5-7 year olds, Brief 7, Wordworks: Cape Town.

This is the seventh and final in a series of learning briefs that explore the implementation of the [TIME home-learning programme](#)¹ and the learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds. After an [introductory brief \(LB1\)](#) and two briefs reviewing the context in which the TIME programme was offered through schools ([LB2](#) and [LB3](#)), [LB4](#) discussed how caregivers' circumstances resulted in different degrees of TIME uptake in the homes. LB5 and 6 looked at the methods and results of child assessments and the children's learning trajectories. By weaving together these themes, this brief explores connections between the quality of implementation

of TIME in the homes, the participating children's personal development and their learning trajectories. A more detailed, technical report is available on request from Wordworks.

This brief seeks to address the following questions:

- What did caregivers and teachers observe about the effect of TIME on children?
- Can individual children's stories help to understand the mechanisms through which TIME impacts their academic achievement?
- Is TIME effective to support learners in vulnerable situations or does it mostly boost the learning of children who are already well supported at home and tend to be better off?
- Is there evidence across the sample to suggest that better uptake of TIME is linked to greater learning gains?

¹ TIME (Together in My Education) is a homelearning programme for Grade R and Grade 1 learners and their families, with Home Language activities developed by Wordworks and Maths activities by RED INK.

Caregivers' and teachers' feedback on the effect of TIME

The TIME longitudinal study involved multiple touchpoints with caregivers (interviews, home visits, observation of TIME sessions) and with Grade R and Grade 1 teachers (interviews, focus group discussions, written questionnaires).

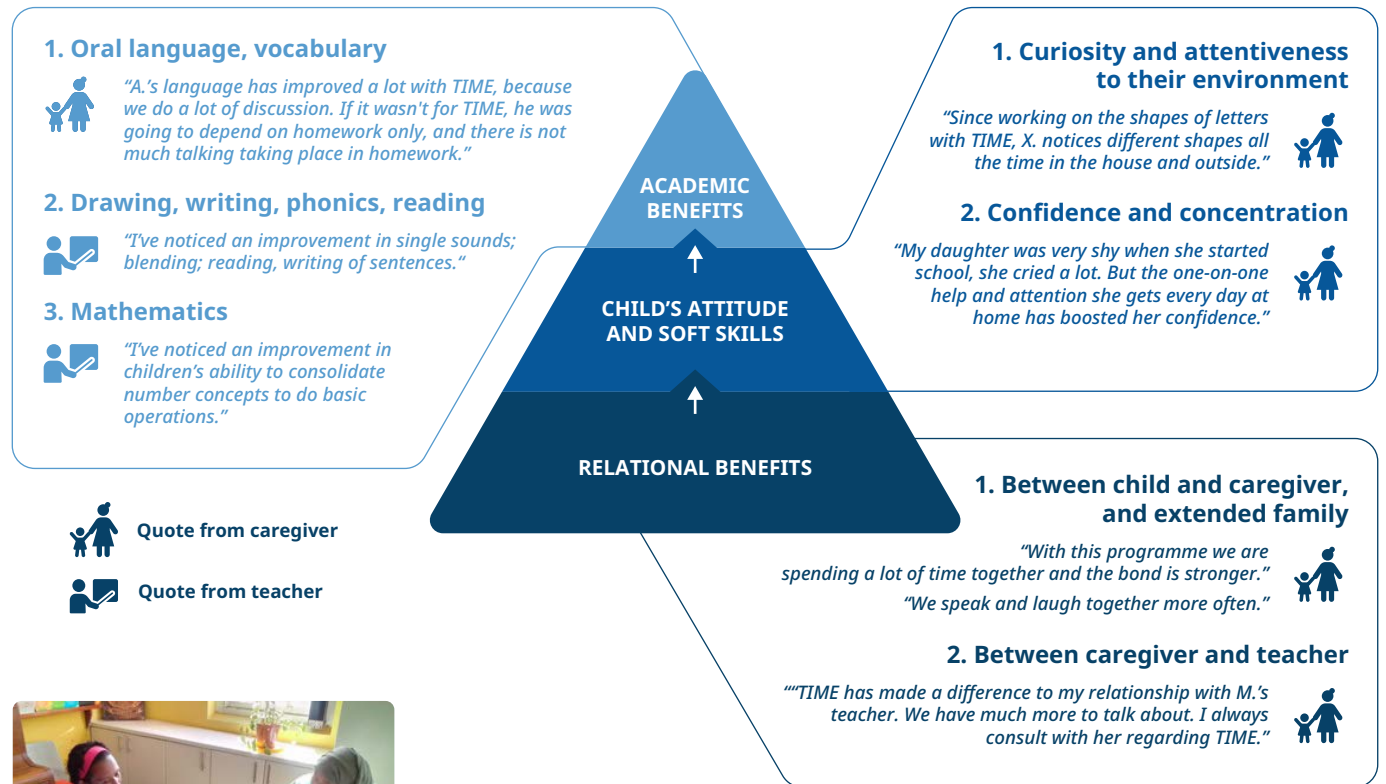
Caregivers and teachers commented on a wide range of benefits that they have observed, which fall into three categories: the strengthening of relationships, the children's holistic growth, and their academic learning. Figure 1 represents the three categories and provides selected quotes from caregivers and teachers for each of the most salient benefits.

The feedback provided by caregivers and teachers has highlighted a broad range of benefits of doing TIME and it is easy to imagine the interconnections between the three categories. In an ideal world, as children are carried by a stronger, safe and cohesive net of relationships, their confidence and willingness to take risks grows and activities which were previously daunting become enjoyable. This is often what it takes for children to try out, learn and acquire new skills.

As caregivers witness the child's learning process and see what they find easy and what they struggle with, they start feeling more competent in their interactions with the teachers; seeing that the teachers believe and trust in them to play a role also contributes to further growing their parental confidence. As the learning process extends beyond the confines of the classroom, and caregivers offer particular attention and encouragement to their child and keep them practising the very tasks that challenge them, children's academic learning gets boosted.

Next, we turn to individual stories to see how these dynamics have played out in three children.

Figure 1 - The main benefits of doing TIME, as mentioned by caregivers and teachers



Top: An interview of a parent.

Bottom: A focus group discussion with Grade R and Grade 1 teachers, March 2023.



CASE STUDY 1

Amir, a Somali child and “literacy shooting star”

In order to shed light on how the TIME programme has played out in participating families and in the children’s learning curves, we are zooming in on three individual children, selected to represent different trajectories. (See the background report for more details on the methodology and selection of case studies). All names in the case studies have been modified.

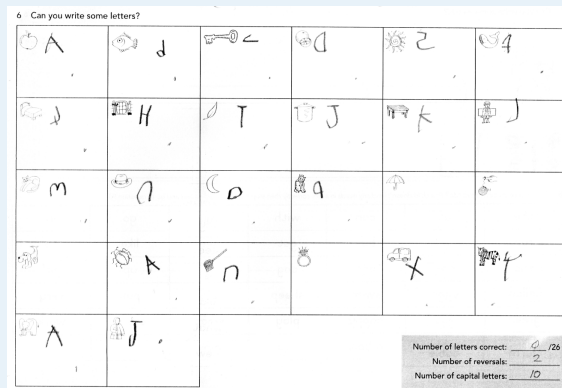
Amir, aged 6 in 2022, hails from Somalia and lives with his parents, his brother aged 5, and his baby sister in a two-bedroom flat. He attends a low-fee school in the Metro North district. When the study started, Amir’s stay-at-home mother did not speak English confidently and the teacher assumed that Amir may not be well supported at home. However, the family was language-rich, with conversations and a lot of reading and storytelling taking place (in their home language, Somali). The first interview also revealed that the parents had high expectations for their children.

The Grade R teacher described Amir as “a disruptive child who could not sit still”. Indeed, in the first round of assessments we did, Amir appeared as a lively child with a short attention span.

His WELA² assessment revealed a moderate ability to understand and some delay in the acquisition of the literacy concepts. He was unable to identify any of the beginning sounds of the words proposed and had a very limited knowledge of letters. His WELA composite score was one of the lowest of the sample and, against the WELA Composite benchmark, he was classified as “at risk”.

In mathematics, his MELA³ mid-Grade R assessment was less alarming, and his composite score was in the 3rd tier of the sample (below the median). He scored well in tasks pertaining to counting or adding and subtracting, as well as patterns. However, it seemed that the tasks involving some written code (number symbols) or some specific vocabulary (like shapes and positions) posed him great difficulty.

Figure 2 – Amir’s letter-sound knowledge and strip-sorting attempt at quasi-baseline (July 2022)



Left: Amir’s letters at the July 2022 assessment. He got the letter “n” (for net) and “q” (for queen) right and wrote “A” and “J” as capital letters. The letter “s” was reversed.

Bottom: Amir showing how he tried to sort strips from shortest to longest.



² WELA = Wordworks Early Literacy Assessment – please refer to Learning Brief 5 for a description of the assessment.

³ MELA = Mathematics Early Learning Assessment, as developed by RED INK. MELA focuses only on Grade R minimum requirements as per the CAPS Grade R Mathematics Subject. – please refer to Learning Brief 5 for further details.

AMIR'S MOTHER DID TIME REGULARLY WITH HER BOYS AND PRAISED THEM ABUNDANTLY

Although the teacher was initially assuming otherwise, Amir's mother has been doing TIME regularly, at least two-three times per week, since the beginning of Grade R. She turned it into a family activity, involving Amir's younger brother, who was also eager to participate. She spent on average 40 min to 1 hour on a TIME session, which is longer than recommended for this age. She justified this length with the challenge of children taking turns, and the need to give Amir breaks in between. She sustained this regular engagement with TIME throughout the Grade 1 year, despite more challenging circumstances with her husband being away in Somalia for some time.

In 2022, she sometimes struggled to understand the instructions, but she grew over that challenge and by 2023, she no longer had any challenges with TIME. This familiarity of mother and child with the TIME packs and the activities was apparent when the fieldworker observed the boys and their mother for the first time doing a TIME activity in July 2022. A year later, after watching Amir and his mother demonstrate the alphabet game, the field worker gave Amir's mom a score of 7/7 for her confidence and understanding of the instructions, as well as for praise and encouragement to her child, something that most caregivers were struggling with. Such positive feedback throughout the activities is known to help motivate children to persist with the activities even when they have difficulty.

Figure 3 – A TIME session with Amir, his brother and mother (2022)



Above: Going through the questions of the picture story, July 2022.

TRANSFORMATION IN AMIR AND HIS MOTHER: THE TEACHERS' OBSERVATIONS

The study surfaced big shifts in the quality of the relationship between Amir's mother and his teachers. The Grade R teacher reported that, after being initially concerned about the mother's ability to support, she saw Amir's mother becoming more confident in English and more present at the school, which she attributes to their engagement with TIME. In 2023, the Grade 1 teacher repeatedly praised the mother for her effort to engage with the school, and to support her child at home.

Similarly, teachers observed changes in Amir's behaviour in class: as he settled and learned to communicate better, his concentration and confidence improved. This also translated into major shifts in his learning. The Grade R teacher commented that "there was an all-round improvement with him", and specifically his vocabulary. Towards the end of 2023, meanwhile, the Grade 1 teacher described him as an average child in mathematics but one of the stronger learners in English, which contrasts starkly with the results of the Grade R assessments.

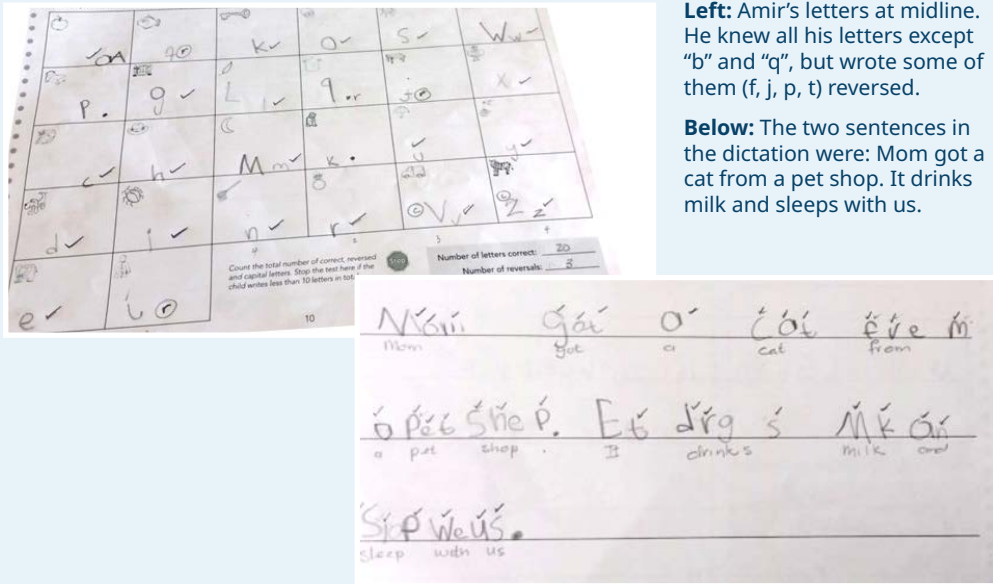
MIDLINE AND ENDLINE ACHIEVEMENT

The MELA assessment in Term 1 of 2023 confirmed some progress with mathematics. Despite some persisting difficulties, he was now comfortable with word problems and had a good understanding of positions and shapes. Overall, in mathematics he progressed at the same pace as the rest of the sample and therefore remained in the third tier.

On the other hand, his literacy achievement improved spectacularly by midline. In 8 months, apart from considerably improving his letter knowledge, he went from scoring 0 for phonological awareness to 100% in initial sounds and 88% in the more difficult blending task. Armed with these strong foundations, he could grow his reading of high frequency words and his ability to write not only words, but also simple sentences. This earned Amir one of the sample's best WELA composite scores, after being among the weakest 9 months earlier. From being classified "at risk", he was now achieving "above expectations".

At the WELA endline in November 2023, Amir kept his position among the top five in the sample and his literacy development remained "above expectations". Not only was he now able to read all 40 sight words proposed, but he also wrote, in neat handwriting, a story that made sense, was fairly detailed and well organised, with common words correctly spelt, despite some weaknesses in the language structure.

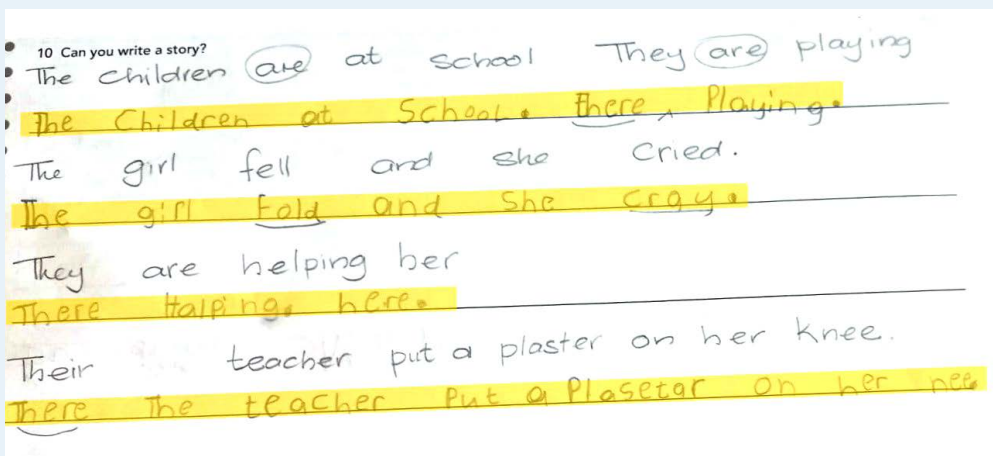
Figure 4 – Amir’s letter knowledge and sentence-writing tasks in March 2023 (midline)



Left: Amir’s letters at midline. He knew all his letters except “b” and “q”, but wrote some of them (f, j, p, t) reversed.

Below: The two sentences in the dictation were: Mom got a cat from a pet shop. It drinks milk and sleeps with us.

Figure 5 – Amir’s story in the endline assessment



Above: Amir’s writing is highlighted in yellow – above is the fieldworker’s transcription of what he was trying to write).

IN CONCLUSION

Amir’s story shows what is possible when the TIME resources land on fertile ground, with a mother who has both the time and the determination to support her child.

At the start of Grade R, Amir was struggling at school with his poor understanding of English. Given the parents’ high expectations for their son and the mother’s commitment to supporting him, he may have gradually caught up with his peers, even without TIME. However, the engagement with TIME helped Amir’s mother to build her own confidence levels with English and interact more with the teachers. As she became more aware of Amir’s challenges, especially with writing, she used the regular TIME activities as a non-threatening opportunity to practise this skill; her abundant praise and encouragement helped him persevere and overcome his difficulties. This strong value of TIME for families who speak a different language at home has been amply commented on by teachers.

Thus, the targeting of activities and the consistent practice of an unfamiliar language in a safe environment are some elements of TIME that accelerated Amir’s transition from a child with poor understanding and behavioural issues to one of the strongest English learners in Grade 1, performing above the expectations for his age.



CASE STUDY 2

Lucinda, a shy, but well-supported girl

Lucinda lives with her grandparents, her mother Jessica, her aunt and her cousin in a small town of the Cape Winelands. Lucinda and her cousin both started Grade R together in 2022 at the age of 5, in a no-fee school in town, while Lucinda's mother and her aunt work during the day. They live in a freestanding house and speak Afrikaans, which is the dominant language in their small town.



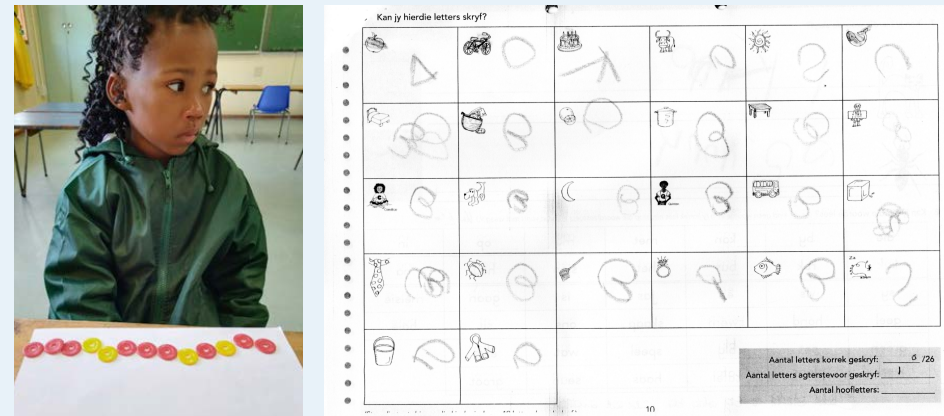
Lucinda (left) at her home, with her mother Jessica (front), grandmother, aunt and cousin, and two Wordworks field workers at the back.

Lucinda is a shy girl and is very attached to her mother. Her Grade R teacher describes her as an emotional but strong-willed child, who sometimes “arrives at school crying and then everyone has to leave her alone”, but on other days “forces other children to do things her way”. She is growing up in a language-rich family, with library books being read regularly, and grandfather telling stories. No wonder, then, that Lucinda started Grade R with well-developed speech. However, the teacher observed that Lucinda had challenges with learning some of the concepts of school, especially in mathematics (counting, patterns) and regarding phonological awareness.

Lucinda's emotional nature was confirmed during baseline assessments, with her crying and refusing to continue the assessment until a new assessor took her through the remaining tasks – resulting in poor scores.

In mathematics, she was among the weakest 25% of the sample, struggling with tasks that most other children found easy, such as recognising number symbols, adding and subtracting with counters, or creating her own pattern. Her mid-Grade R literacy assessment was more in line with the rest of the sample, with poor letter knowledge but a decent ability to identify beginning sounds (6/10).

Figure 6 – Lucinda's mid-Grade R assessment, August 2022: creating a pattern (left) and letter knowledge (right)



Above: At quasi-baseline, Lucinda was unable to create her own pattern. Most of her letters were indistinct scribbles.

LUCINDA'S MOTHER, DOING TIME AT HOME AS MUCH AS HER PROFESSIONAL SITUATION ALLOWED

During the two years of the study, Jessica's professional situation changed multiple times, from working full time including weekends, to being unemployed, then working two jobs, until in 2023 she finally landed a permanent job with more conventional working hours. These fluctuations have, at times, influenced her ability to engage with TIME activities, but generally she has committed to doing them at least two- to three times per week, mostly for about 15 minutes. Lucinda's cousin Candice was also involved.

In 2023, when Jessica had a more stable professional situation, she did TIME every day for a duration of 15 to 30 minutes each time. With this daily routine, they never skipped any type of activity. She felt that having regular working hours helped her to set up a routine at home and do the activities at a specific time of the day. Lucinda was always eager to spend that quality time with her mother.

When field workers visited in August 2022, they could verify that both girls and the mom had a lot of fun in the process, and that they did not experience any difficulty with the activities. Jessica was very comfortable, interacting lovingly with the two girls and inviting them to share their observations while asking prompting questions and praising them abundantly.

Figure 7 – TIME in action, 2022-2023



Left: Lucinda (in the middle), with her cousin Candice (left) and mother Jessica (right), engaging in a poster story activity, August 2022. (screenshot from a video clip)

Right: Lucinda in Grade 1, engaging with the poster story.

MIDLINE AND ENDBLINE ASSESSMENTS

Lucinda's teacher believes that TIME has had a great impact on Lucinda's concentration, confidence, language, counting, and more specifically on her writing. Jessica claims that Lucinda was usually disinclined to write, but overcame this reluctance through using the TIME materials: she now enjoys it and looks forward to that type of activity. "Her writing skills have improved a lot. Speaking skills and math skills also. Her confidence has improved the most."

The midline assessments confirmed the steep progress achieved by Lucinda.

Her MELA composite score increased by 10 marks, although it remained below the median: she now scored full marks for adding and subtracting and scored 67% in the word problems and sharing and grouping tasks.

Her composite WELA score stood markedly above the On Track benchmark and above the median: her letters were neater, and she could spell the word "kat" and the first letter of "spinnepkop". Her low confidence may have prevented her from transcribing the other sounds of the word, or from venturing to recognise high frequency words.

Figure 8 – Lucinda's letter knowledge and word writing at the midline assessment (March 2023)

Antwoordblaaie

6 Kan jy hierdie letters skryf?

g	v	k	z	Son	v
p	i	o	p	t	A
s	o	M	s	b	y
e	o	t	r	v	
ee	t				

Tel die totale getal korrekte letters, ongekeerde letters en hoofletters. Stop die toets hier as die kind altesaam minder as 10 letters korrek skryf.

Aantal letters korrek geskryf: 15
Aantal letters agterstevoer geskryf: 2
Aantal hoofletters: 0

10

8 Kan jy hierdie woorde skryf?

Puntetelling: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4

k a t ✓

s ✓

Puntetelling: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4

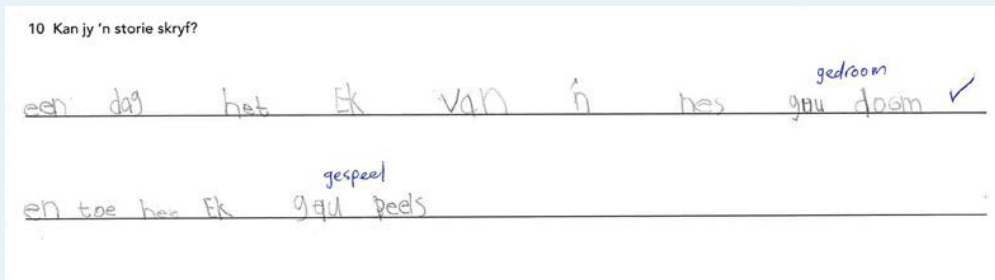
Totaal: 4 / 7

11

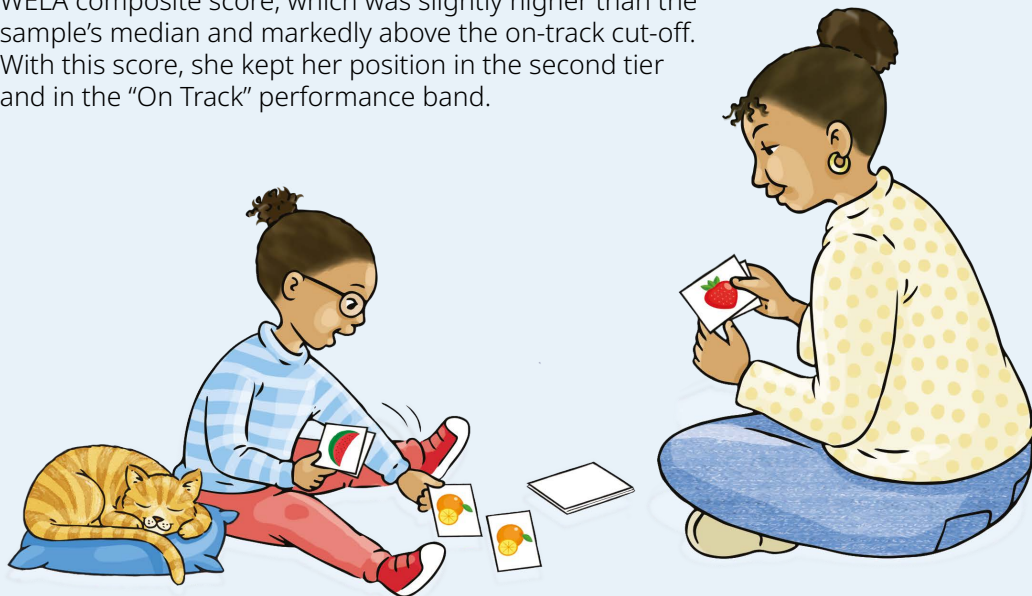
By the time of the endline assessment in November 2023, Lucinda had made tremendous progress with her sight words and could read correctly 35 of the 40 words - a score that not many children in the sample achieved.

Unfortunately, due to an error of the assessor at endline, Lucinda's writing could not be assessed following the normal scoring guidelines. It is apparent, though, that she was able to write simple words and sentences but was less confident with consonant blends (she wrote "sookl" for "skool", "peels" for "speel" and "doom" for "droom").

Figure 9 - Sample of Lucinda's writing at endline (due to receiving incorrect instructions, her story does not resemble others)



Based on these observations, we extrapolated a proxy score that would be comparable to that of her peers, and compiled a WELA composite score, which was slightly higher than the sample's median and markedly above the on-track cut-off. With this score, she kept her position in the second tier and in the "On Track" performance band.



IN CONCLUSION

Although Lucinda's progress has been less spectacular than Amir's, hers is another example of how beneficial the TIME programme can be when the main caregiver is available and committed to doing the activities regularly with her child, giving her individual attention and encouragement. Although by the end of Grade 1, Lucinda's mathematics were still not fully on track, she had become very confident especially in her reading.

It is possible that the emotional barrier experienced by Lucinda acted in a similar way as Amir's language barrier. The daily opportunity to practise her writing, counting and reading in a playful manner in the comfort of her home, helped her to grow the confidence that she was lacking. Lucinda's teachers confirmed the role that TIME and the mother's support have played in Lucinda's growth.



CASE STUDY 3

Adrian, a boy with irregular TIME uptake

When the study started in 2022, Adrian was 5 years old and lived in a shack with his 3-month-old brother, his mother Andiswa, his aunt Buhle, his uncle and his grandfather, who was the only adult working. He attended an isiXhosa school in a town in the Cape Winelands, a predominantly Afrikaans region. IsiXhosa was the grandfather's mother tongue, but Andiswa and her siblings, having grown up in Johannesburg, spoke mainly isiZulu at home and found isiXhosa a bit difficult. In addition, Andiswa encouraged her son to watch English TV.

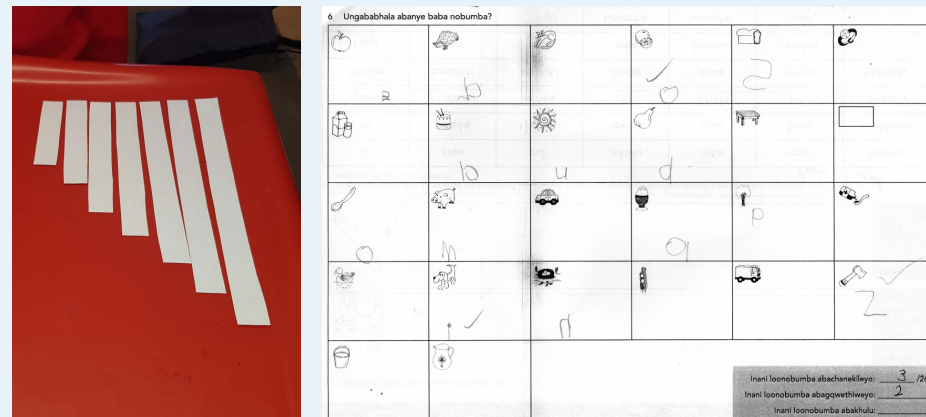
There was no strong evidence of conversations taking place with the child at home, nor are any stories told or children's books read. Andiswa indicated that her son did not take her seriously and had a better relationship with his aunt Buhle. The Grade R teacher experienced Adrian as a friendly child with poor concentration levels, who often did not follow instructions. She worried that he may have been badly affected by his parents' separation.



Above: Mother Andiswa (left) with her baby, Adrian, and Aunt Buhle (right)

The mid-Grade R MELA and WELA assessments confirmed that Adrian had some learning gaps, although nothing alarming. In mathematics, he was strong in non-numerical tasks and in solving word problems. Unfortunately, he skipped numbers while counting and couldn't solve adding or subtracting tasks using pictures – possibly a consequence of his low concentration levels. Adrian was one of few children who were able to sort strips correctly at baseline. The literacy assessment revealed that Adrian could write his name (with a few added letters) and understand most of a short story. His letter knowledge was developing, but he could not yet identify any focus sounds. His letter-sound knowledge was average for his age, with 6 letters being either correct or reversed/rotated⁴.

Figure 10 – Adrian's strip-sorting and letter-sound knowledge at quasi-baseline (August 2022)



Overall, his MELA and WELA composite scores were both close to the sample's 1st (lowest) quartile. Against the WELA benchmarks, he fell into the "at risk" category.

⁴ In the first row, he correctly wrote the o for "i-orenji" and wrote a reversed "s" for "isonka". In the third row, he might have written a rotated "p" for "ipere". In the fourth row, he has the correct "i" for "inja", "z" for "izembe" and a reversed "n" for "inesi".

ENGAGEMENT WITH TIME: GOOD IN 2022, POOR IN 2023

In the course of 2022, Andiswa found a job in a nearby town, 40km away from home. The long commuting times deprived her of family time, but Buhle was at home and could engage with TIME activities with Adrian on a regular basis. It was apparent in the interview that Buhle knew the materials very well, and she shared regular video clips of the activities which she was facilitating for Adrian. They enjoyed the programme, particularly the visual activities, like the poster story or activities with picture cards, which, Buhle realised, matched Adrian's learning style. On the other hand, they found the read aloud story difficult, because of Adrian's low attention span and perhaps Buhle's occasional challenges with isiXhosa. However, Buhle found the English translation helpful. What she enjoyed most, was that TIME helped her to see Adrian's progress, especially with counting or drawing.

Figure 11 – TIME in action: Adrian doing TIME activities in 2022



Abobe: Adrian counting items on a TIME poster (Sept. 2022) and playing a TIME hopscotch game (Nov. 2022).

In 2023, Buhle herself took up a job, which made it difficult for Adrian's family to sustain the engagement with TIME, as she had long working hours in the evenings. In addition, Adrian's mother moved out of the house, possibly to reduce commuting times. According to the Grade 1 teacher, this situation has reached the point where Adrian's attendance at school has become a concern, and the homework is often not done.

IMPROVEMENT BY MIDLINE, SOMEWHAT DISAPPOINTING ENDLINE RESULTS

According to the Grade R teacher, Adrian's regular engagement with TIME made a huge difference in his performance in class in 2022. Indeed, the midline assessments (early in Grade 1) revealed some genuine progress. In mathematics, he scored full marks in almost all tasks, with the exception of the oral counting beyond 10 and the task about position words – it is possible that Adrian's multilingual context delayed his acquisition of these skills. His MELA composite score was exactly the median of the sample.

The literacy assessment also revealed stronger foundations, especially his phonological awareness. His letter knowledge also improved. However, it was apparent that Adrian still lacked confidence; he did not feel able to read sight words or to write words, beyond writing "k", the focus sound for "ikati". Overall, his WELA Composite score at midline was just under the median and just above the On-Track cut-off.

Figure 12 - Adrian's letter knowledge and word writing at midline, March 2023.

maphepha eempendulo

6 Ungababala abanye baba nobumba?

Aa ✓	Kk ✓	Oo ✓	Ss ✓
Ll ✓	Pp ✓		
Mm ✓	Qq ✓	Uu ✓	
Dd ✓	Ii ✓	Rr ✓	Zz ✓

Bala inani elipheleleyo loonobumba abachanekeleyo, abagqwethakeleyo nokonobumba ababhalu use abangqamame uwayayo xa uthewana abhala onobumba abangaphantsi kwesuthi.

Inani loonobumba abachanekeleyo: 9
Inani loonobumba abagqwethakeleyo: 10
Inani loonobumba ababhalu: 2/14

8 Ungakwazi ukubhala amanye ala magama?

Between midline and endline, Adrian continued to progress, albeit at a slower pace than for the rest of the sample. His blending skills improved, and he was getting closer to knowing all his letters, but his reading score was low at only 6/40.

His writing improved over the midline, and he could write simple sentences but struggled to write digraphs or consonant blends (like “th” or “kw”). His story-writing task, although difficult to read, reveals the ability to transcribe coherent thoughts to paper. Considering that, 8 months earlier, he could not write the word “ikati”, this is a considerable improvement and testimony to his solid foundations and his growth in confidence.

Figure 13 - Adrian’s dictation⁵ at endline, November 2023.

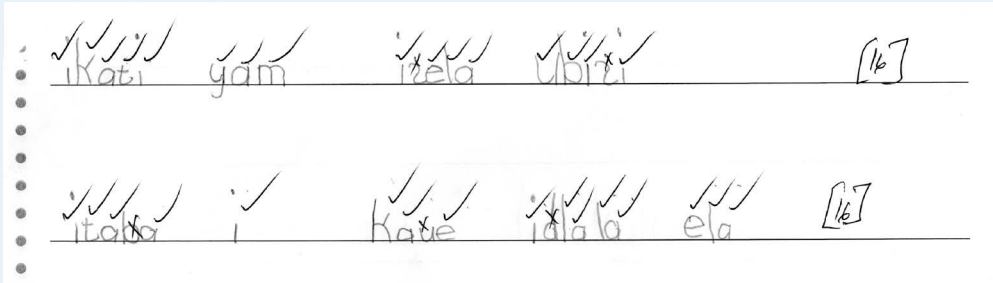
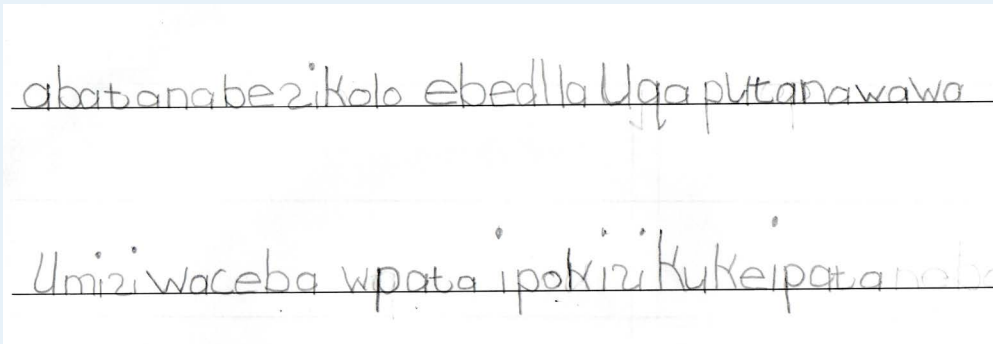


Figure 14 - Adrian’s story writing (bottom) at endline⁶, November 2023.



Despite improved writing, Adrian’s composite WELA score was markedly under the On Track cut-off. Thus Adrian regressed to the “Still developing” performance band, and close to the sample’s 1st quartile.

⁵ The dictation involved the following sentences: “ikati yam isela ubisi. Ithanda inyama kwaye ihlala elangeni” (My cat drinks milk. It likes meat and sits in the sun.)

⁶ Tentative transcription: Abantwana besikolo bebedlala ugqaphu, umntwana wawa. UMisi wafika waphatha ibhokisi kuke iiplasta. (School children were playing with a skipping rope, a child fell. The Teacher arrived and touched/carried a box [with] plasters.)

IN CONCLUSION

Adrian’s story illustrates the value of TIME packs in homes where caregivers are young and eager to learn about parenting, especially in contexts with limited access to stories or books at home. There is strong evidence that the programme helped Andiswa and Buhle to provide richer inputs into Adrian’s education; it seems they also helped Adrian acquire strong foundations.

However, his story is also a reminder that young children learn best in the sustained presence of a caring adult. When family circumstances change and caregivers become less available, whether practically or emotionally, the TIME programme can’t make miracles. Sadly, in vulnerable communities, it can happen that children pay the cost of their caregivers’ access to employment.

Considering his multilingual upbringing and his concentration and confidence issues, Adrian’s loss of support at home inevitably affected his pace of learning; if anything, his ability to still make solid progress in those circumstances is testament to the strong foundations that he built in Grade R, which TIME contributed to. Hopefully the steady support of his teachers will help him to keep up with the demands of his schooling.



Wrapping up the three case studies

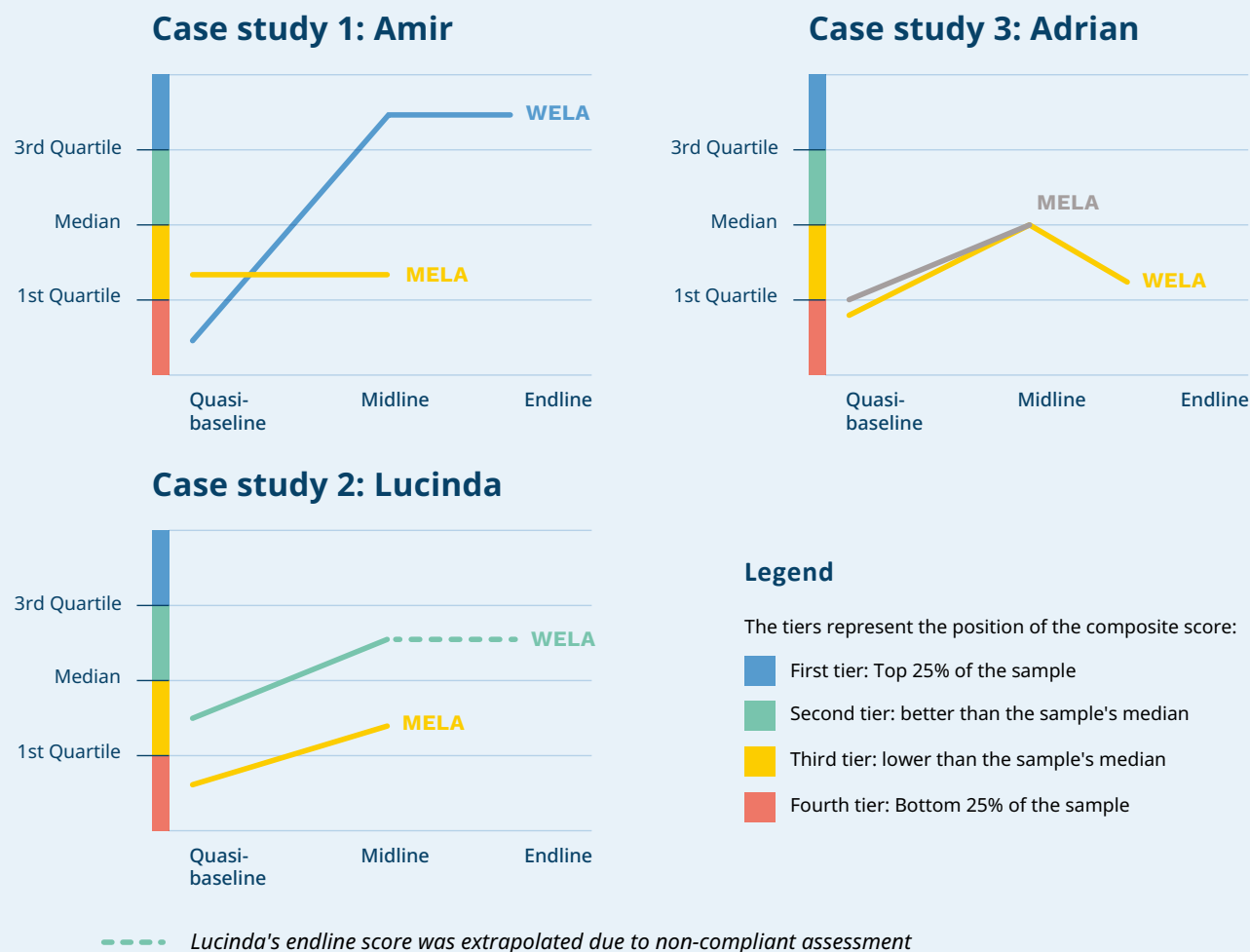
All three case studies are reminders that children often experience some invisible barriers to their learning, whether it is a language barrier (Amir and to some extent Adrian), an emotional barrier (Lucinda), or possible attention deficits (Adrian), which make them vulnerable at the start of Grade R. Fortunately for the three case study children, their caregivers were able to use the TIME materials to give their children one-on-one attention, which boosted the children's learning trajectories. The three stories confirm the interplay between relational benefits, shifts in child's attitude and academic progress, as surfaced in the first section. Sadly, in Adrian's case, this caregiver support was lost in 2023 and his learning slowed down somewhat.

To summarise the WELA and MELA scores of the children in an easy to visualise way, despite the different scales of the two assessment tools, we have plotted children's scores against the rest of the sample. Based on this approach, Figure 15 summarises overall trajectory of the three case study children.

The graph shows that all three children started in the lower half of the sample and had a pace of growth between baseline and midline which was above average (except for Amir's mathematics). Considering that the sample overall has had a strong upward trajectory, the flattening of Amir's and Lucinda's WELA curves between midline and endline indicates that the children maintained a solid growth.

The next section attempts to go beyond the individual stories to explore whether the extent of TIME uptake has an influence on the children's learning curves.

Figure 15 – Amir's, Lucinda's and Adrian's WELA and MELA scores plotted against the rest of the sample⁷



⁷ A flat or downward curve does not mean that the child is stagnating / regressing, but rather, that the child is improving at the same pace as, or more slowly than, the other children. Overall, as LB6 shows, the sample has improved faster than the WELA benchmarks.

An exploration of the possible link between the degree of TIME uptake and WELA/MELA trajectories

This section tries to move beyond self-reported qualitative evidence and individual stories to interrogate whether a minimum level of TIME uptake is required to see an impact on the children's learning trajectories.

- At the low end of the spectrum, is a minimum level of engagement required for any benefits to be felt?
- At the high end of the engagement spectrum, how do we know that TIME makes a difference? In other words, would well-supported children have achieved the same results without TIME?

We tried to explore these two questions through a qualitative and a quantitative review.

DEGREE OF TIME UPTAKE

[Learning Brief 4](#) has defined a spectrum of the families' profiles with regard to their engagement with TIME. Five levels of engagement were carefully established through the review of six dimensions based on triangulation of a range of data sources, from caregiver interviews with multiple probing questions to teacher interviews and TIME session observations.

Table 1 below summarizes the five levels of families' engagement with TIME and how we classified the 21 families for which sufficient data was available.

Table 1 - The five levels of family engagement with TIME

		NUMBER OF FAMILIES	
		Grade R	Grade 1
Type 1	No TIME engagement		1
Type 2	Irregular TIME engagement	4	7
Type 3	Moderate TIME engagement	7	5
Type 4	Regular TIME engagement	7	4
Type 5	Dedicated TIME engagement	3	4
Total		21	21

Please refer to the background report for the definition of each level and corresponding methodology.



QUALITATIVE REVIEW

We explored caregivers' feedback on the impact of TIME for their children through the prism of the families' engagement profile. This exercise revealed that:

- Caregivers report some positive impact across the spectrum of programme uptake – at the bottom end of the spectrum, the impact may be limited to creating opportunities and excitement.
- The most engaged parents felt that TIME made their engagement with their child more beneficial. For example, a mother shared that TIME encouraged her to use a greater variety of vocabulary and to focus on specific areas which her son needed to practise.

Figure 16 to the right provides some insights based on selected quotes from across the engagement spectrum.

QUANTITATIVE EXPLORATION

By design, due to a small, non-representative sample and the absence of a control group, the study could not provide statistically valid conclusions on the impact of TIME on children's learning. However, we wanted to subject the quantitative data to an exploratory exercise to establish whether the data is compatible with the hypothesis that greater engagement with TIME results in greater academic progress.

Summary of approach⁸

Since all participating children were exposed to TIME to some degree, we chose to focus on two groups at either end of the spectrum: seven families with irregular TIME engagement, and seven families with either regular or very consistent TIME engagement.

⁸ The detailed methodology is described in the background report, which also discusses several caveats of the approach.

Figure 16 – Observed benefits depending on the family's engagement profile



Next, we reviewed the children’s WELA composite scores across the three assessments in relation to WELA benchmarks. (MELA scores were excluded, mostly due to the absence of endline data and the high ceiling effect at midline). We classified the children according to their performance bands and then compared the band they found themselves in at baseline, with their band at endline, to establish if they had moved up, down or stayed in the same band. Since children performing “above expectations” could not move up to a higher band, and none of them had moved down, we kept them separate as a group for whom real growth could not be captured by the model.

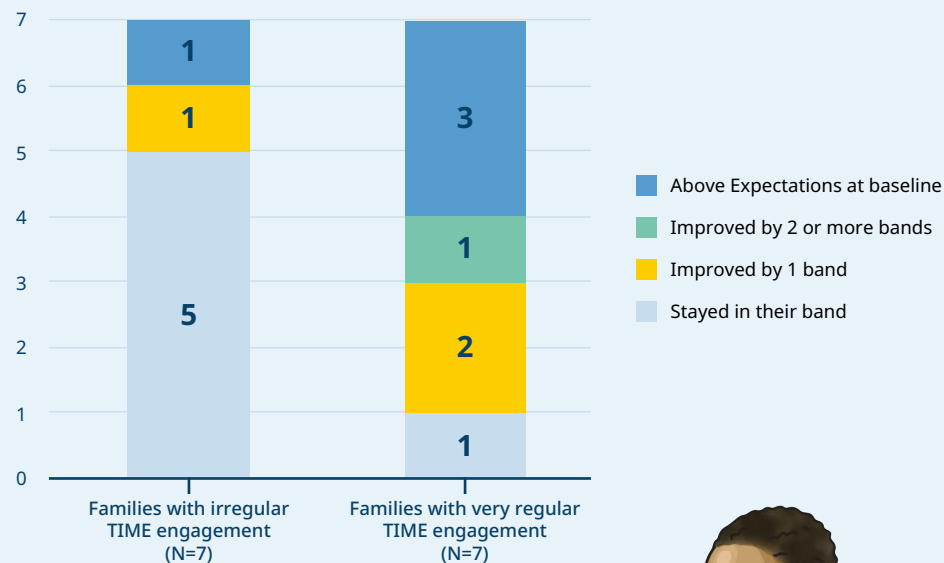
Exploratory findings

Figure 17 shows how those two groups of seven children have evolved between (quasi-)baseline and endline. Importantly, at quasi-baseline, the two groups are not comparable, with a higher likelihood of being on track in the high-uptake group than in the irregular uptake group⁹. This may reflect the general effect of parenting style on the child’s development, different socio-economic conditions, and even the possible early impact of TIME in the first half of the Grade R year.

Setting aside the children performing “above expectations”, a greater proportion of children doing TIME regularly move up to higher performance bands (3 out of 4), than among children with irregular TIME engagement (1 out of 6).

A possible interpretation of this result is that, although TIME brings some benefits even with a low level of engagement, its effectiveness in terms of boosting learners’ academic achievement is more strongly felt in families where engagement with TIME is regular.

Figure 17 – WELA gains of sampled children depending on their TIME uptake in Grade R and Grade 1



⁹ See the Background report for more details about the trajectories of these two groups of children across the performance bands.

Concluding reflections on the impact of parental programmes like TIME

In 2025, as we conclude this study on TIME, Wordworks is at a crossroads about how to position this resource and the programme, having experienced a drop in dedicated funding and in direct demand from schools.

THE STUDY FINDINGS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF TIME ARE POSITIVE

Even if the study was not designed to provide watertight quantitative proof of the impact of TIME on the children's academic achievement, both caregivers and teachers have observed a range of changes in the children, which they attribute to the TIME programme. The chain of impact that emerges involves the strengthening of relationships around the children, which unlocks their personal attitude and soft skills, enabling academic progress. This chain of impact was confirmed by case studies, with the caregivers' individual attention helping children to overcome the invisible barriers that might otherwise have hindered their progress.

The latest case study has also revealed how, in vulnerable households where the caregiver's availability may fluctuate, this may limit TIME's effectiveness – but strong foundations established in Grade R can help a child keep a positive learning curve even when circumstances are less favourable.

The full series of TIME Learning Briefs and other Wordworks publications are available online under: www.wordworks.org.za/insights

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TIME DEPENDS ON THE FAMILY'S PROFILE AND CAPACITY

Exploratory evidence shows that engagement with TIME activities can be beneficial at any point of the uptake spectrum – but the programme's effect on child academic achievement appears to be stronger amongst families with a more consistent pattern of engagement.

Considering the generally low levels of parental engagement in South Africa, this is an important insight. Admittedly, it would be unrealistic to expect that TIME could resolve the challenge of the most vulnerable families, where adults struggle to cope with an overwhelming burden of care. Nor is TIME sufficient to support children with sizeable learning disabilities. But that doesn't mean that the effectiveness of the TIME resource is limited to providing an extra boost to the children who are already thriving in conducive family conditions.

The greatest value of TIME is probably found in the sizeable number of children in the middle space, those growing in families on the edge of risk of possibility, facing obstacles (for example related to home language, small learning backlogs, emotional immaturity) that are real but not insurmountable. When those families' caregivers are encouraged to implement TIME activities at home, this can truly shift the children's trajectories.

LESSONS APPLICABLE TO OTHER PARENTAL PROGRAMMES

Beyond the TIME programme itself, these results should encourage governments and funders to maintain a steady investment in high-quality parent programmes, as these have the potential to raise the effectiveness of in-class interventions and fast-track the children's progress. The findings also call on NPOs and implementers on the ground to keep looking for creative solutions to support those children whose caregivers are unavailable.

Lastly, the study reminds us that parental programmes need to be embedded in the educational ecosystem. Parental confidence and contribution needs to be viewed not only as something that can be grown at the individual level but mostly, as something that forms part of the collective narrative. When the school system gives caregivers the message that it trusts and believes in the role that they can play, the individual shifts will be more sustainable.

