TaRL Instructors

Who are TaRL instructors and how are they equipped to effectively implement TaRL?

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Instructors assess children and use engaging TaRL activities to teach children according to their learning level and help them master foundational skills. TaRL instructors have come from a wide variety of backgrounds. TaRL programmes led by NGO staff, volunteers, paid tutors, and government teachers have led to marked improvements in children's mastery of foundational reading and mathematics skills (Banerjee et al. 2007; Banerjee et al. 2010; Duflo 2017; Banerjee et al. 2016).

Evidence and experience have revealed several key factors to consider which vary depending on who the instructor is.

Volunteers, tutors, and NGO staff

TaRL programmes led by volunteers, NGO staff and paid tutors have consistently led to gains in learning outcomes (Banerjee et al. 2007; Banerjee et al. 2010; Innovations for Poverty Action 2018; Banerjee et al. 2016). It is important to consider the following challenges and trade-offs when working with volunteers or paid tutors:

a. Take-Up
Many evaluations of tutor or volunteer-led delivery models require TaRL classes to take place outside of the school day (Banerjee et al. 2010; Banerjee et al. 2016). However, these can be harder for children to attend. A randomised evaluation of an after-school reading camp programme in India led by volunteers found that only 8% of children attended the camps (Banerjee et al. 2010, 19). In contrast, a TaRL programme led by Pratham staff and supported by community volunteers in a similar context in India avoided low student attendance and reached all children by holding classes during the school day. Pratham provided short bursts of instruction during the school day for 40 full days in 20- or 10-day instalments with supplementary support in summer camps (Banerjee et al. 2016, 18, 22).[1]

b. Recruitment and retention
When hiring instructors outside of the government education system, implementers should consider how to recruit, retain, and manage these teams well. In an evaluation of the Balsakhi TaRL model, researchers found high turnover among volunteers, which resulted in the continual recruitment and training of replacement volunteers[2] (Banerjee et al. 2007, 1240). Thus, dealing with issues related to instructor retention is important when TaRL instructors are not embedded into government systems. Implementers should also consider how to incentivise instructors to attend trainings and stay motivated throughout the program. For example, many programmes have paid volunteers or tutors a small stipend for implementing TaRL (Banerjee et al. 2007; 1263).

d. Dedicated time

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[1] The problem of take-up is not unique to volunteer- or tutor-led models. A summer camp programme led by government teachers in Bihar, India, found that only 23% of children in the targeted grades attended (Banerjee et al. 2016). In general, programmes which take place outside of the school day tend to reach a smaller percentage of children than in-school programmes.

[2] Despite high volunteer turnover, the Balsakhi programme improved learning outcomes (Banerjee et al. 2007).

Volunteers and tutors who support teachers to conduct TaRL may be absorbed into general school or class roles if they support teachers during the school day. A dedicated time either during or outside of the school day could help prevent this. When a TaRL programme implemented in Uttarakhand, India, provided training, materials, and volunteer support to teachers during the school day, volunteers tended to take on some of the teachers' regular responsibilities, acting as assistants, instead of implementing TaRL methods (Banerjee et al. 2016, 26). On the other hand, an intervention in Bihar provided training, material, and volunteer support, but volunteers conducted TaRL classes in Bihar did improve learning outcomes, [3] (Banerjee et al. 2016, 21).

Government teachers

Teacher-led TaRL models have the potential to reach large numbers of children by leveraging existing government systems and can be more sustainable than models relying on external resources. However, because teachers may default to teaching the regular curriculum, teacher-led models must have strong mentoring and monitoring systems and a dedicated time for TaRL instruction to be effective.

Evidence from randomised evaluations and Pratham experience show that government teachers can effectively deliver TaRL methodology when the following conditions are in place:

a. Dedicated time
Models which allocated a dedicated time for TaRL activities successfully improved learning. In Haryana, the government required schools to add an additional hour to the school day which was used for TaRL classes. In contrast, TaRL models implemented during the school day without a dedicated time for TaRL instruction have failed to improve learning outcomes. For example, interventions providing materials only, or a combination of teacher training, materials and volunteers did not improve learning outcomes in Bihar and Uttarakhand (Banerjee et al. 2016).

b. Strong mentoring and monitoring systems
The body of rigorous evidence of teacher-led TaRL models suggests that strong mentoring and monitoring systems are an important aspect of helping teachers implement TaRL effectively. In Ghana, the Teacher Community Assistant Initiative (TCAI), which trained teachers to use adaptive learning methodology, found teachers often did not comply with the new methodology. The model as implemented contained very little mentoring or monitoring structure during implementation, improving these two aspects might increase implementation fidelity and therefore student outcomes (Duflo 2017). Similarly, when teachers were provided with TaRL materials only, or a combination of training and materials in India, without additional mentoring and monitoring support, they failed to consistently implement TaRL (Banerjee et al. 2016).

c. Grouping across grades
Teachers implementing TaRL in Haryana grouped children across grades to focus on foundational skills. This grouping, in addition to a strong support system, allowed teachers to focus on level-appropriate activities during TaRL time and implement the approach consistently and effectively (Banerjee et al. 2016).

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[3] This intervention resulted in a 0.13 standard deviation increase in language and a 0.11 standard deviation increase in mathematics (Banerjee et al. 2016, 21).

Equipping instructors to effectively implement TaRL

Instructors attend a short initial (usually five-day) training to learn about the TaRL approach. Through ongoing mentorship, instructors continue to learn about the TaRL approach and perfect the method while practicing in the classroom.

Key principles for supporting TaRL instructors

TaRL instructor training aims to empower instructors by equipping them with the skills to effectively implement the TaRL approach. Years of experience and rigorous evaluations in India, Ghana, and Zambia have revealed a few key lessons for training and supporting a variety of different instructors to implement the approach.

a. Short initial trainings that model TaRL teaching can be sufficient for instructor training when coupled with other support

Short initial trainings lasting four days to two weeks are sufficient to provide teachers with the necessary skills to implement TaRL. Trainings introduce instructors to the following concepts: how to maximize children's learning, the benefits of TaRL classroom methodologies, and effective techniques to assess student learning. The content of these sessions varies across contexts. Trainers model TaRL teaching techniques for future instructors by using interactive, engaging, and participatory approaches which are common in TaRL classrooms.

b. Respectful communication and open discussion are essential for effective training

TaRL trainers often begin training sessions by asking instructors to share the challenges they are facing in the classroom. This discussion allows trainers to create a link between classroom challenges and TaRL as a possible solution. Throughout the training, trainers respond to participants' concerns with respect, understanding, and patience, and encourage instructors to actively engage with the content. The mutual respect and understanding that results from open communication throughout the training deepens the instructors' grasp of and belief in the TaRL approach.

c. Ongoing support for instructors is necessary for effective implementation of TaRL

Support for TaRL instructors should not end with the initial training. Ongoing mentorship through regular feedback and on-site training allows instructors to perfect the TaRL methodology in the classroom. This strong support system helps instructors build trust in the methodology as they test it out in the classroom. Regular feedback and on-site training from mentors help teachers to master the TaRL approach in the field. In some cases, mentors visit classrooms once a month to offer support. Evidence from randomised evaluations shows that government teachers, in particular, benefit from consistent support that encourages them to continue to use the TaRL methodology within the school system (Banerjee et al. 2016). Ongoing mentoring helps instructors keep the overall learning goals in sight, clarify misunderstandings, and maintain their capacity to implement key activities and classroom practices.

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