

# Designing Foundational Learning Programmes

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GSF Practice Brief #1



Photo courtesy: United World Schools

# Developing affordable, scalable, impactful and inclusive programmes

**Given the limited resources available across many low-income countries, how can educators develop affordable, scalable, impactful and inclusive foundational learning programmes that ensure all children achieve foundational skills?\***

For children to thrive in school and achieve the educational outcomes they need to realise their potential, it is essential, as the RISE Programme **has demonstrated**, to prioritise the **conceptual and procedural mastery of the foundational skills** that will be the gateway to all other learning. With as many as **80 percent of children** in low-income countries unable to read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school, there is an urgent imperative to improve the delivery of foundational learning programmes.

At **Global Schools Forum** (GSF), our network of 66 organisations (who run or support 30,000 schools across 51 low-and-mid-income countries) recognises the significance of foundational learning.

These organisations have navigated the challenges of operating in low-resource settings to identify practices that deliver high learning outcomes for learners. We have compiled some of these practices in this brief to share with the broader education community. We recognise that schools and organisations running foundational learning programmes in a different setting may need to adjust these practices to suit the needs of their context and learners. These learnings emerged from a **GSF Community of Practice on Foundational Learning** – and includes contributions from Justice Rising (Democratic Republic of Congo), Rising Academy Network (Liberia, Ghana, Sierra Leone), Gyan Shala (India), Impact Network (Zambia), The Citizens Foundation (Pakistan), Peepul (India), United World Schools (Cambodia, Madagascar, Myanmar, Nepal), and Kizazi (Asia and Africa).

*\*Foundational skills refers to basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills, that are the building blocks for a life of learning, [World Bank Blog, 2021](#)*

## 5 key approaches towards improving learners' foundational skills



**Create learner-centred reading materials** that are context-relevant, aligned to reading levels, and leverage mother tongue knowledge to support learning



**Develop holistic assessments** aligned to goals and curriculum that assess students' life skills and academic outcomes, and inform teaching practices systematically



**Use structured teacher guides to support educators**, including content, lesson plans and assessments that are easy to decode and use by new and seasoned teachers



**Invest in ongoing professional development on foundational learning**, making training resources for teachers need-based, easy to access and available on-demand



**Ensure foundational learning programmes are inclusive and equitable** to make space for all children

## 1

## Create learner-centred reading materials

There is a lack of learner-centred early-age reading materials in languages other than English. While material development is time-consuming and expensive, **the availability of quality, age-appropriate reading materials is a significant predictor of strong early literacy.**

- **Build a bank of high-quality resources** with teachers, school leaders and other team members who have the skills to create reading materials in the language of instruction or the learner's mother-tongue. In Zambia, during school closures due to COVID-19, **Impact Network leveraged teachers' time to write and illustrate context-specific materials in the local language - Cinyanja**, now used across their **eSchool 360 programme**. **This report** by The Citizens Foundation explains the role of mother-tongue based instruction and ways to operationalise it.
- **Customise open-source fiction content for your learners by adapting names, places, food, animals, objects to make the content more relevant.** **Rising Academies' open-source radio lesson scripts include fiction and nonfiction texts** to support listening and reading comprehension. These scripts are available in an editable format and can be customised for your schools.
- **Supplement materials developed by the state or private children's story publishers with need-based content created internally.** **Gyan Shala** carefully selects picture stories published by National and Children Book Trusts in India for early grades, supplements them with reading-level appropriate text, and integrates them into the curriculum and daily lessons. A strong alignment between subject exposition, storytelling, reading material and worksheets during the lessons supports learners' holistic language development central to Gyan Shala's programme design.

## 2

## Develop holistic assessments aligned to goals, to enhance learner experience

Assessments can be an excellent tool for identifying learner needs, both academic and socio-emotional, and to analyse how the two affect each other. It also helps make ongoing assessments a positive learning experience for children.

- **Pick assessments that speak to your ambitions and customise them for your learning targets.** **Rising Academies adapted the ASER literacy assessment** to align directly with the phonics progression included in their FasterReading programme. United World Schools (UWS) collaborated with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to adapt Early Grade Reading/Maths Assessments (EGRA/EGMA) to ensure cultural appropriateness of the content. These assessments are similar across countries where UWS operates, allowing data analysis across regions while keeping the training central.
- **Re-invent assessments to adapt to remote and virtual schooling.** Peepul follows a structured teaching cycle in a virtual set-up with three proven steps that lead to mastery: 1) Teach 2) Assess 3) Review or Re-teach. If 50 percent or more of the class scores below an expected level, the content is taught again, using a different approach. Additionally, one-on-one reading assessments are conducted online twice a year using a tool loosely based on EGRA. Tools like Google Forms, gamified individualised assessments like Word Wall, and group tasks using Breakout Rooms make assessments exciting for ongoing evaluation.
- **Use assessments to check for life skills that impact the ability to learn.** Kizazi works with partner organisations to develop trauma-informed pedagogy that builds a bridge between academic learning and students' well-being. Kizazi and its partners adapt tools like those developed by **Dream a Dream**, which helps assess the impact of childhood adversity on learning capacity.

## 3

## Invest in ongoing professional development on foundational learning

A significant challenge in low-resourced contexts is teachers' capacity to create and deliver foundational learning lessons. Teachers often require extensive and ongoing professional development to adopt innovative pedagogical methods and deepen knowledge of the foundational subject matter.

- **Map teacher competencies and develop need-based training sessions.** At Justice Rising, teacher training design begins with an audit of existing teacher knowledge, beliefs and practices and then targeting elements that will yield the most impact. Based on the science of habit formation, this means making pragmatic, uncomfortable decisions on what to change and what to leave unchanged. Practice-based teacher training, inspired by [Doug Lemov's Teach Like A Champion](#) approach, means teachers adopt new practices in an environment of mutual constructive support.
- **Make teacher professional development continuous, available to teachers on-demand and simple to access.** Innovative methods like [Rising Academies' teacher professional development audio guides](#) have transformed how teachers perceive and access training, by making it continuous and readily available for use. According to their [RCT study](#), teachers with access to audio lessons on foundational literacy delivered through interactive voice responses, improved their subject knowledge. [Peepul created bite-sized digital learning resources](#) on topics such as behaviour management during online lessons, disseminated using WhatsApp to support teachers during the pandemic. In virtual [Professional Learning Circles](#), teachers practice these newly acquired skills with each other.
- **Provide training in subject matter as well as pedagogy.** Use teacher training for coaching teachers on foundational literacy content like sounds, decoding, and reading comprehension skills. [The Citizen Foundation's Nardban is an innovative programme](#) comprising two unique features: Teacher Competency Tests (TCTs) and an E-Learning platform. TCTs are yearly subject matter assessments that all TCF teachers take to help them identify areas of improvement. The e-learning platform includes Facebook groups where teachers engage with posts shared periodically by the TCF training team. TCF complements these Facebook group interactions by providing teachers offline access to a set of curated E-learning videos linked to learning objectives from the curriculum. Results from the TCTs are used to identify content areas where teachers need support, embedded in subsequent trainings, and shared with teachers (in the form of a scorecard) and with school leaders to inform them of year-on-year trends in TCT scores across different subjects for their schools.
- **Support teachers to address the impact of trauma.** Growing up in poverty exposes children to greater levels of stress. Training teachers to create an environment that addresses the impact of adversity on the developing brain is critical to learning. Kizazi works with its partners to introduce teachers to [key SEL concepts](#) that they can integrate into their own lives, gradually embedding them into their teaching. These practices (some examples [here](#) and [here](#)) improve learners' ability to manage stress and increase attention, memory, and learning.

**Training teachers to create an environment that addresses the impact of adversity on the developing brain is critical to learning**

## 4

## Use structured teacher guides to support teaching practices

Carefully designed Teacher Guides can be a gamechanger in scaling an approach or specific teaching practices across a network. Teachers can use the guides to implement a targeted programme while building their knowledge and capacity in subject matter, pedagogy, assessments and other areas.

- Use the teacher guides to build expertise in the subject matter and align it to your curriculum.** Provide an explicit description of the topic, choice of associated activities, and complimentary “good to have” knowledge on the theme. Organise topics in a carefully sequenced manner that aligns with curriculum objectives in a way that allows teachers to ‘see’ how the lesson objectives are extracted from the curriculum, which gradually builds their capacity in writing independent plans and resources. [The Teaching and Learning Material Development by Science of Teaching](#) describes how to align teacher guides to your curriculum and needs.
- Create evidence-backed and uncomplicated formats for lesson plans, then use these consistently across all guides.** This repetition allows teachers to familiarise themselves with the structure, even when the content differs, ensuring all lessons are delivered systematically as the programme scales. Rising Academies’ FasterReading programme is carefully structured to introduce and review content through an engaging set of repeatable activities. [Gyan Shala’s teachers’ guides](#) comprise daily lesson plans with an optimum combination of storytelling, subject teaching, daily worksheets and group activities - [this guided pedagogy](#) allows teachers to focus on learners' needs. [Justice Rising’s Chalkboard guides](#) empower teachers to present powerful stimuli on the board using a familiar "I do, We do, You do" model.
- Use Teacher Guides to support teachers in assessing mastery of taught objectives.** [The Citizens Foundation \(TCF\)](#) provides scripted lesson plans in their teacher guides that are [labelled clearly for the teacher to understand the objective of each step of the lesson](#), and [what unique skill that step aims to develop](#). This understanding helps teachers assess whether students were able to effectively engage as desired, or if any gaps in their learning remain. Teachers can then reflect on their performance after each lesson by identifying successes and areas of improvement and formulating a plan for improving on those areas, with support from school leaders.



## 5

## Ensure foundational learning programmes are inclusive and equitable

With education inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19, foundational learning programmes must consider issues of equity and inclusion. The [2020 Global Education Monitoring Report on Inclusion](#) details research, educational trends and promising practices to support practitioners seeking to advance inclusive education.

- Create a shared definition and commitment to inclusive education and get buy-in from all stakeholders, including children.** In 2020, United World Schools (UWS) undertook a series of consultations with staff across the organisation to create a shared definition of inclusive education, and produce an [Inclusive Policy](#) that outlines their commitment to education for all. This policy is adapted into a School Level Policy (1-page policy with attached training) designed for teachers who work in remote communities and into [child-friendly posters](#) to share the key messages with children. [Peepul has also developed an effective and replicable road map for inclusion](#) in low resourced environments to support and establish inclusion as per the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 in state-run schools in India.
- Integrate inclusive principles in your foundational learning programmes, among other areas.** UWS is currently working to ensure that inclusive education is embedded in their work. Their [Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy](#) is updated to ensure risk factors associated with vulnerable children (such as children with disabilities) are identified and considered within programmes. Additionally, their Training Programme includes consideration of the needs of all children. See [UWS' Vision of Quality, Inclusive Education](#).

This Practice Brief was compiled by Global Schools Forum's Divya Behl in collaboration with



Gyan Shala



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## About Global Schools Forum

**Global Schools Forum (GSF) is a catalytic community working to improve education outcomes at scale.**

We do this by supporting social enterprises in education through:

- Curated learning and networking opportunities
- Funding and coaching to scale innovations in partnership with government
- Generating evidence
- Strategic policy engagement

**Our network is currently 66 members strong**, each working in partnership with communities and governments in 51 countries. Our secretariat – spread across 4 continents – has expertise in school leadership, education innovation, and education financing. Our vision is that all children in low and middle-income countries have equitable and safe access to quality education so they can realise their potential.

### Our Supporters



### Questions?

If you have questions about this briefing, please write to [info@globalschoolsforum.org](mailto:info@globalschoolsforum.org).

