

Exploring the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds

Implementing TIME at home: Insights from caregivers

This brief was written for Wordworks by Magali von Blottnitz, with input from colleagues. It can be referenced as follows: von Blottnitz, M. (2024). Exploring the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds, Brief 4, Wordworks: Cape Town.

This is the fourth in a series of learning briefs that explore the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds. This brief is based on interviews, home visits and observations made between February 2022 and August 2023 with participating families of children who were in Grade R in 2022 and in Grade 1 in 2023. It focuses on the home circumstances of families and their lived experiences while engaging with the TIME programme. A more detailed report on this topic is available on request.

This brief seeks to address the following questions:

- How does the diversity of families and homes challenge our mental representations of “family” and “home”?
- What does it take to embed the practice of TIME in the routine of the home?
- What can we learn from caregivers’ experiences with TIME at home, which could help improve the frequency and the quality of families’ engagement?

Methodology

The study was primarily qualitative with a small sample of study participants who were drawn from a variety of rural and urban settings, languages and household profiles. After starting with 36 families from 11 schools (2022), two schools withdrew and several children moved to other schools, leaving us with 27 families from 9 schools (2023). Data collection activities included:

- three rounds of caregiver interviews (March 2022, July to August 2022 and July to August 2023)
- two visits to the children’s homes (July to August 2022 and/or 2023)
- two sets of observations of TIME sessions done by the child with their caregiver (2022 and 2023).

Reaching caregivers in their private environment is often challenging. Through the fieldworkers’ perseverance, the response rates at interviews ranged from 81% to 97% and observations of TIME sessions were done for 65% (2023) to 72% of study participants.

Towards a richer understanding of “family” and “home”

What do families look like and who is available to do the TIME activities?

NPOs or individuals designing an intervention for “families” have a mental image of what a “family” looks like. There is wide acceptance that South African families, particularly in lower socio-economic categories, do not necessarily fit the “nuclear family” model. But is there a more fitting model, or do we perhaps need multiple models?

Our sample was not statistically representative; however, the exercise of trying to come up with a typology of households turned out to be complex, mainly due to the extreme diversity of configurations and the fluidity of situations in households, with new family members joining or leaving a household, babies being born and elders passing away. In our sample, the households ranged from 2 people (mother and single child) to 10 people (extended families) with between one and seven children per family.

Diagram 1: Profiles of the 36 families in the study sample (Source: Interview data, 2022 and 2023)

Profiles of 36 families in 2022 sample (in brackets, the 23 families reached in 2023)			
Nuclear families	13 (8)	Headed by both parents	
	5 (2)	Headed by mother only	
Intermediate categories	0 (1)	“Skip-generation household” (Grandparent headed, middle generation absent)	
	1 (4)	“Blurred-generation household” (Mother and daughter jointly raise younger siblings and daughter’s children)	
Extended families	12 (5)	Multi-generation families (with or without parent)	
	2 (2)	Other extended families (Mother with siblings and/or cousins)	
	2 (1)	Hybrid, compounded families (Nuclear family lives next to extended family in compound)	
Other	1 (0)	Foster family	

This leads to the following observations:

- **Nuclear families** involving both parents were the most frequent type, at approximately a third of the sample in both years. Including the mother-headed nuclear families, half of the sample were nuclear families – consistent with statistics for the Western Cape¹.
- **Multi-generational households** were the second most frequent. Often these households involved the child living with grandparent(s) and other relatives, mostly but not always with the mother. The drop between 2022 and 2023 mostly stems from families dropping out of the study or being unreachable in 2023.
- In 2023, the third-largest category is what we have labelled “**blurred-generation household**”. This is where there is a wide age gap between the study child and their oldest sister, who becomes a mother while still living with her siblings. The study child then grows up with nephews or nieces that are closer in age than their siblings, and the older sister may play a maternal role.

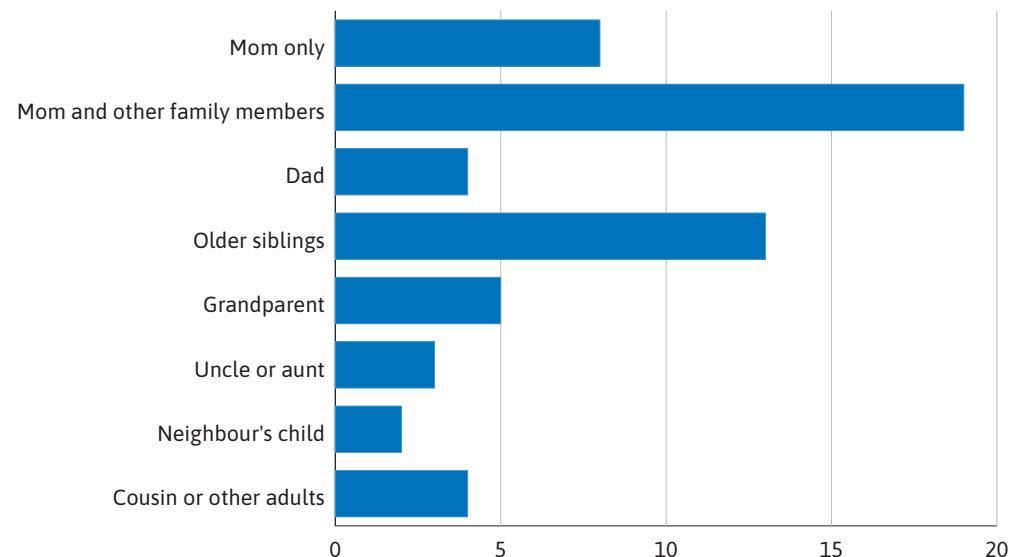


It is also important to note that these family profiles are often fluid. Among the 23 families that we were able to follow over a period of 18 months, eight caregivers (35%) reported a change in the people living in the household (mostly an aunt, uncle and/or cousin moving in) and two children (9%) moved to different family members altogether.

In terms of a home learning programme like TIME, acknowledging this diversity of family profiles implies embracing the variety of adults who can be involved with the child. As Diagram 2 shows, beyond the parents and occasionally the grandmother, many adults (older sister, aunt, mother's cousin, etc.) may play a role. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the level of commitment of other adults may fluctuate more over time than that of a parent; furthermore, the multiplicity of family members makes the teacher's mediating role very complicated.

Diagram 2: Which caregivers get involved with TIME

(Source: Mid-Grade R Caregiver Interviews, July to August 2022, N=31. Note: Many respondents named more than one person, hence the sum of bars exceeds the size of the sample.)



The material context of the home

The TIME activities are designed to be doable without requiring specific equipment. Nevertheless, a quiet space and some stationery are needed for many of the activities, and some games are best played in an outdoor space – which may be more or less accessible depending on the families' living conditions.

In our sample, of the 29 families for which data was available, we found that:

- 17 families (59%) lived in a free-standing house or a flat.
- 12 families (41%) lived in a shack, a single room, a backyard dwelling or other type of home.
- Children attending no-fee schools were more likely to live in spaces which the fieldworker assessed as crowded (25%) or tight (25%) than those attending low-fee schools (38% assessed as tight).
- Of the 21 families reached in 2023, most had access to a suitable outdoor space, to a quiet indoor space, as well as to the stationery required for the drawing or letter-tracing activities. A minority of 4 or 5 families (19–24%) expressed some challenges, mostly with the availability of a quiet space.

1 See Statistics SA, General Household Survey 2022, p. 5

Doing TIME in a very poor home: a story from the Winelands

Child G1 and mother



Child G1² lives with his parents and three siblings in a one-room shack in a rural area. When we met in 2022, the family had recently moved from the Eastern Cape and the parents were seasonal labourers on a grape farm. In the home, furniture was limited to little more than a bed; belongings were stored in bags; in the absence of chairs and a table, the family sat, ate and wrote on crates and buckets. The mother, however, was very organised and kept her children's school documents, including the TIME packs, under the mattress. Outside the grape season, the mother stayed at home and was

able to spend a lot of time with her children. Mother and son demonstrated a TIME activity to the fieldworkers.

When the fieldworkers returned in 2023, the mother had found a new job and had been able to gradually improve the comfort of her home. There is now a small plastic table and chairs for the two young children to sit and draw or do school work. The shack is now also equipped with cupboards, a TV, and various appliances including a kettle, stove and sewing machine.

There is no doubt that these pieces of furniture have contributed to improving the life of the family. However, the mother indicated that, given her working hours, she now struggles to find time to sit with her son and do TIME activities. She was also affected by the lack of a quiet space (as six people lived in the one-room shack), the absence of an outdoor space (there is no space in the yard and the road is not safe for them to play), as well as the lack of stationery. However, her son's learning mattered a lot to her and she did her best to support him, for example, by using recycled cardboard to make shapes and objects or decorating her shack's walls with TIME resources such as alphabet charts and poster stories.

Monolingual and bi- or multilingual homes

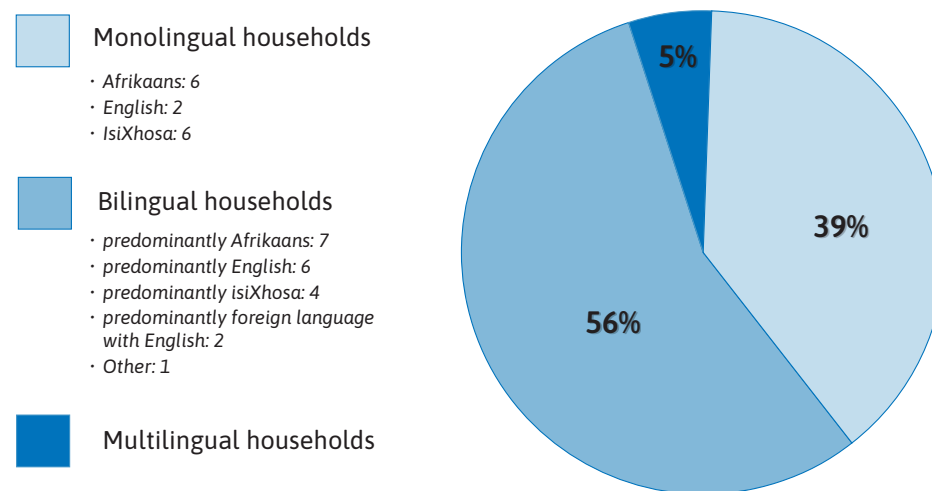
Education-related studies tend to have a negative bias towards bi- or multilingualism, viewing this as a deficiency rather than an asset.

After the 2021 study exposed the complexity of language patterns, we wanted to capture more nuanced data on the linguistic patterns of the home of our study children. The interview responses confirmed that some level of bilingualism is the norm in many families. Of the 36 families included in the initial sample, only 14 (39%) can be described as monolingual, the remainder having some degree of bi- or multilingualism. Two families (6%) had at least three different languages which they used at home. These families either included members who came from another part of the country, or the family was from a foreign country.

The language patterns of a child's home could also be fluid. A family in our sample was predominantly Afrikaans speaking at the onset of the study, but then they switched to using more English than Afrikaans after a cousin came to stay in their home for his matric year. We also had a study child who moved from his maternal grandmother's home to his paternal grandparents, effectively transitioning from a bilingual isiXhosa-Afrikaans home to a monolingual Afrikaans home.

Diagram 3: Language profiles of the families participating in the study

(Source: Caregiver interviews, March 2022)



² We have replaced all children's names with unique child identifiers; the letter represents the school.

When the mother struggles with the language: the story of a Somali family

Child F2 is one of three boys living with his Somali parents in a flat in the Northern suburbs of Cape Town. He attends an English-medium school. He has a stay-at-home mom. The main language spoken at home is Somali, and the mother's English is hesitant.

At the beginning of 2022, the Grade R teacher indicated that she barely had any contact with the boy's parents, perhaps due to the mother's lack of confidence in English. She was under the impression that the family did not use the TIME packs much, as the mother had not returned the file with the activities. Our visit to the family's home and observation of a TIME session made it clear that the child and his mother were very familiar users of the packs and engaged with the activities fairly confidently, although the mother's understanding of the instructions was sometimes affected by her limited mastery of English.

The mother confirmed that doing the activities together gave her son an opportunity to teach his mother some English words, which was boosting both his and her confidence. By the end of the Grade R year, apart from the spectacular improvements seen in the boy's language and literacy scores, the teacher also reported a radically different relationship with the mother. The mother was now more involved in the life of the school and even offered to help whenever the school needed volunteers to support certain initiatives.

Child F2, brother and mother



The caregivers' employment status and working hours

When setting up the sample for this study, the intention was to combine working caregivers and stay-at-home caregivers, in order to observe how a caregiver's working hours may affect the implementation of TIME in the home. However, due to the difficulty of scheduling interviews with caregivers who work full-time, it was not practically feasible to achieve the intended balance in the sample. The 2022 sample had:

- 15 caregivers (42%) who were not working and mostly at home.
- 14 caregivers (39%) whose working hours allowed them ample time at home.
- 3 caregivers (8%) working and spending most of the day outside of the home.
- The remaining 4 caregivers were either working night shifts, working from home or other.

Over time, the working patterns changed, with a number of unemployed caregivers finding employment. More subtle changes also took place, like caregivers taking up informal occupations (for example, a wife looking after her husband's business), changing working hours or finding a job closer to home. This provided valuable insights into the effect of employment conditions on TIME uptake, as it was apparent that, after a caregiver found a job outside of their neighbourhood, their quality of engagement dropped. Conversely, a caregiver who changed to a job closer to home was able to engage far more regularly with the programme.

Shifting responsibilities within the family in response to work: another Winelands story

Child C1 lives with his mother, baby sibling, aunt, uncle and grandfather in a spacious shack in a rural town. When we met early in 2022, none of the adults in the home was working. The mother was the boy's primary caregiver but, due to the new baby taking a lot of her time, her sister spent more time with her nephew, who was in Grade R.

Later in 2022, both the 63-year-old grandfather and the child's mother found employment in a nearby town. The child's aunt was the one still at home and looking after the children – she continued to engage him successfully with the TIME activities, sharing regular photos and video clips of her nephew's progress.

In 2023 the aunt also found employment. Her working hours prevented her from continuing to do the TIME activities with the boy.

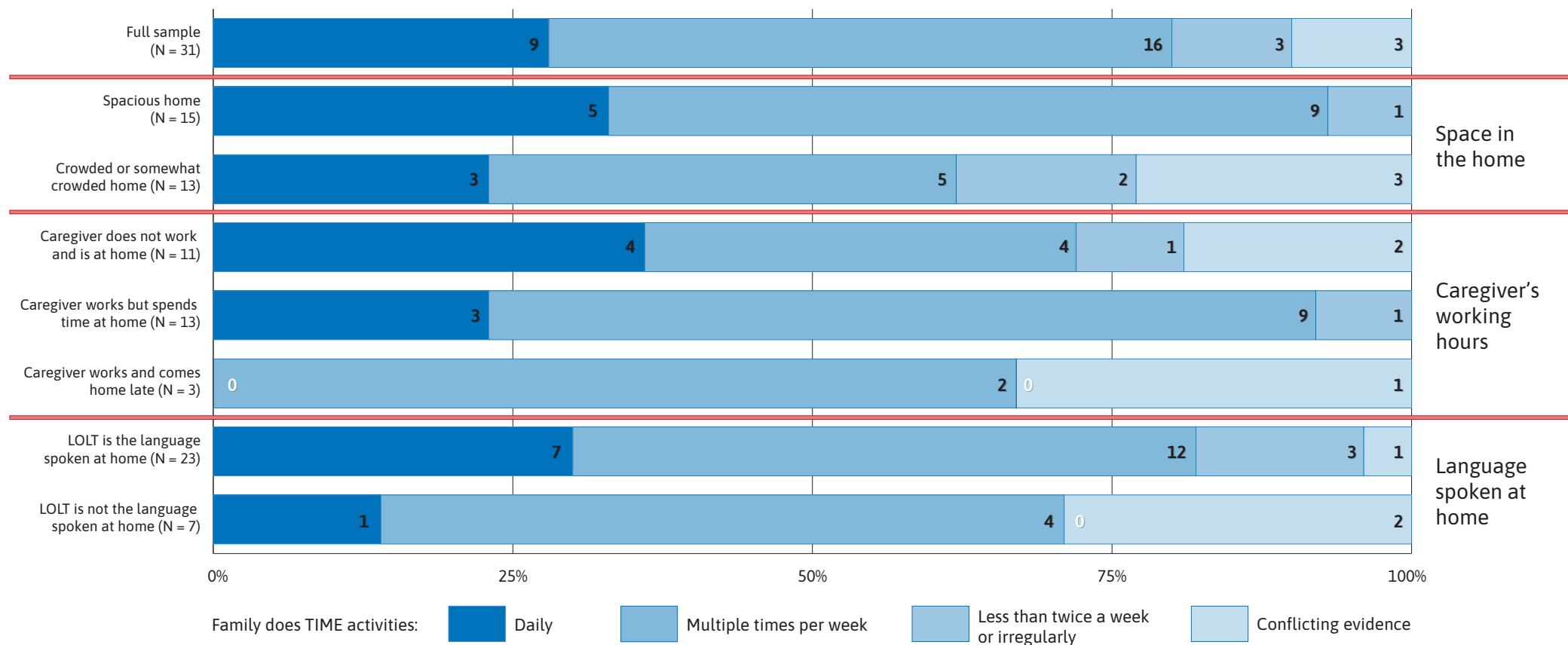
This example shows how the presence of one adult who is either not working, or has work that allows for sufficient free time, is important for families to maintain their engagement with TIME.

Child C1, mother, aunt and baby



While the study had a small, non-representative sample and was qualitative more than quantitative, a comparison of engagement frequency on the basis of several home circumstances supports the assumption that the uptake of TIME is related to spaciousness, caregivers' time at home and congruence of languages.

Diagram 4: Engagement with the programme, in relation to various home circumstances (Source: Caregiver interviews, July to August 2022. Note: The sample was too small to establish statistical significance.)



How well does TIME work in the home?

TIME activities are easy, but caregivers sometimes struggle to understand the instructions

By design, the TIME packs should stimulate the child's learning with a minimal need for outside guidance. This means that the activities should be easy enough while still including a degree of challenge, and that the instructions should be largely self-explanatory so that caregivers can understand how to implement the activities.

Interview data showed that:

- 24 of 31 caregivers (77%) interviewed in mid-2022 found the TIME activities "rather easy" or "just right" for their child. This suggests that they are pitched at the right level, giving the child a sense of mastery and encouraging practice.
- 8 of 30 caregivers (27%) found the instructions "sometimes confusing" and 11 (37%) found them "usually easy to understand". The likelihood of caregivers being confused was higher among families whose children were taught in isiXhosa (22%) and Afrikaans (38%) than English (12,5%).

- This difference may have to do with the presence of language variants in Afrikaans and isiXhosa (the type of Afrikaans or isiXhosa spoken at home may differ from the standardised language used in the packs), or with the fact that some children were schooled in a language other than their home language. It may also have to do with the caregiver's education levels and socio-economic variables, as the English-LoLT schools in our sample were fee-paying schools and more likely to attract families from slightly higher socio-economic categories.

The types of activities that caregivers found most challenging were:

- activities that require understanding and following rules (games)
- activities that require “making” (for example, caregivers are invited to cut and fold a die, or a little book)
- activities that involve writing/tracing
- activities that require concentrated listening (stories, look and listen).

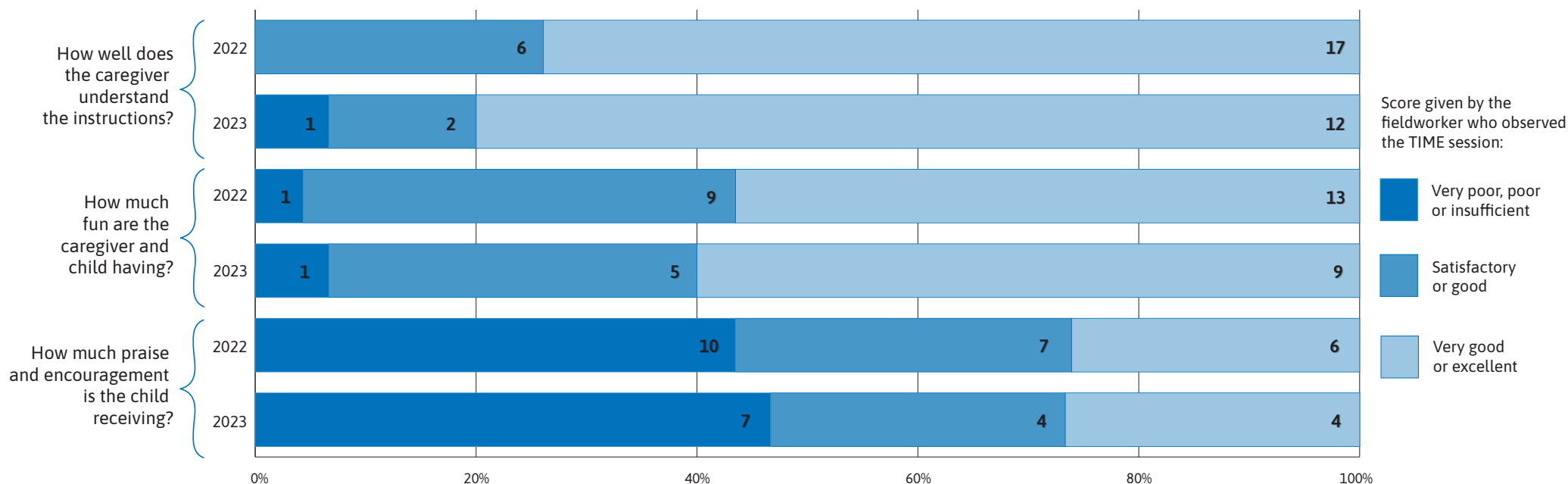
Fieldworkers observed that children mostly enjoy the activities, but caregivers don't give enough praise

When observing the caregivers and children in a session in 2022 and 2023, fieldworkers found that the caregivers' understanding of the instructions mostly ranged from satisfactory to excellent, and that a majority of them appeared to enjoy the session thoroughly, although some appeared very “serious” and concentrated. It is possible that the child and/or caregiver were more tense than usual because of the presence of an observer.

The area with the greatest room for improvement was in the use of praise and encouragement, which was often non-existent or very rare. Despite fieldworkers giving feedback to the caregivers after the first observation in Grade R, and reminding them accordingly before the second round of observations in Grade 1, it seems that there has not been much change between the two years in terms of the use of praise and encouragement.



Diagram 5: Some selected insights from the fieldworkers' observations of TIME sessions (Source: Fieldworkers' assessments of TIME sessions observed “live”, July to August 2022 and July to August 2023. Note: For these observations, caregivers chose which activity they would demonstrate. This may have influenced the scores in “understanding the instructions”.)



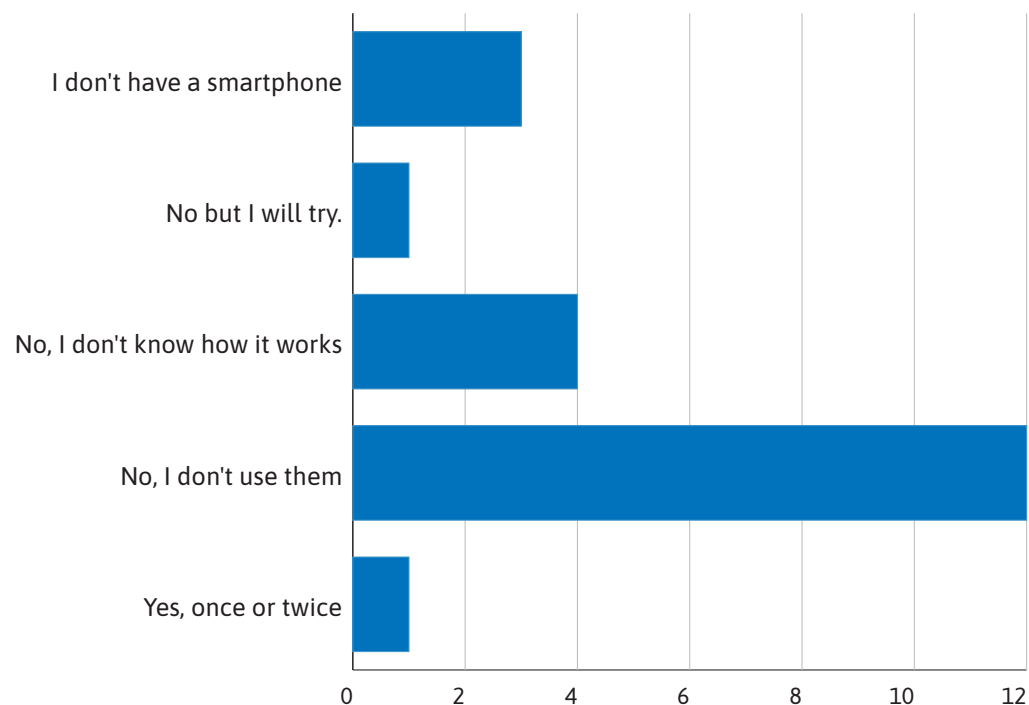
Caregivers hardly make use of the TIME multimedia messages

In order to help caregivers, particularly those who are less literate, to implement TIME activities at home, the Wordworks team had developed TIME multimedia messages, consisting of mostly audio resources and occasionally video clips. Examples of these resources include audio recordings of the week's story, or short clips giving the caregivers guidance about key principles to apply when working with their children. Messages were recorded in multiple languages, allowing caregivers to choose their preferred language.

Wordworks has experimented with various models to get these messages to caregivers – first by asking teachers to send a weekly link to their caregivers, then by printing QR codes directly on the paper packs to allow caregivers to retrieve messages at their own pace. Wordworks has also developed user-friendly technical guidance to help caregivers adopt the messaging app (2021) or scan QR codes (2022). During the 2022 interviews, fieldworkers also took time to demonstrate the QR code process to caregivers.

However, the data consistently shows that the caregivers who have a smartphone hardly make use of these messages. A few cited technological challenges, but most could not indicate a compelling reason other than forgetting or not feeling a need for this support.

Diagram 6: Caregivers' use of TIME messages in 2023 (Source: Caregiver interviews, July to August 2023)



This finding highlights a paradox of parent work, namely that the most involved caregivers feel comfortable enough in their role and do not feel a need for such guidance, however, if less confident caregivers are also less proactive, they are less likely to seek guidance although it could be especially valuable to them.

How committed are caregivers to the TIME activities?

Effective engagement patterns are difficult to ascertain

One of the greatest difficulties of home-learning interventions is that, since they happen in the privacy of the home, it is difficult to ascertain how good their uptake is. Statements by the caregivers are the main source of information, but are subjective with a risk of desirability bias. In the absence of independently verifiable documentation to test those assumptions³, the best available mitigation for the inherent bias of self-reporting was to corroborate the caregivers' statements, where possible, with two sources of data: assumptions from teachers, and the fieldworkers' observations about the caregiver's degree of comfort with the packs and activities.

An additional complication is that engagement patterns are neither constant across a population, nor static.

Based on the three sources of evidence described above (caregivers' self-reports, teachers' assumptions and fieldworkers' observations), we found that:

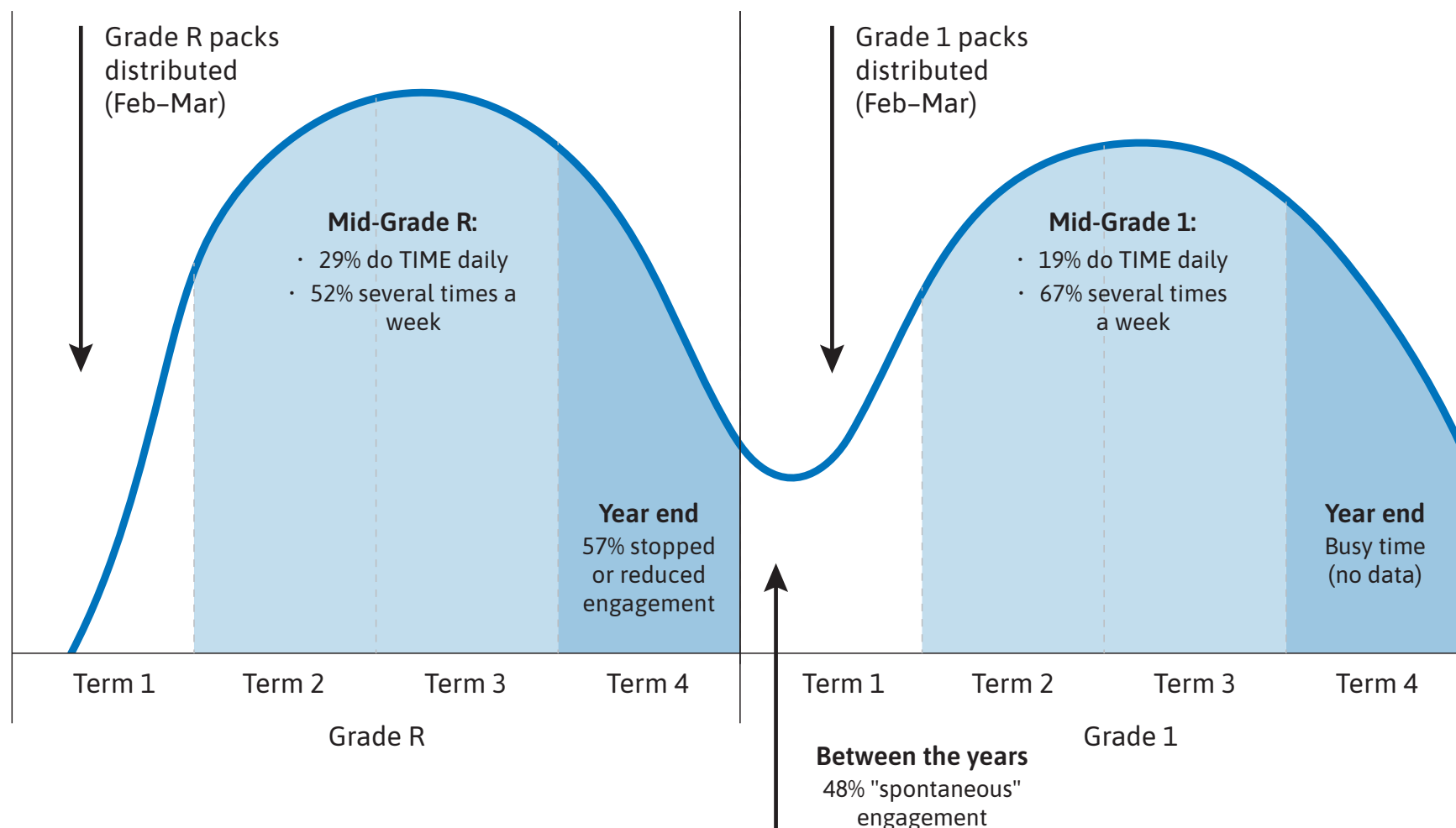
- Mid-Grade R is presumably the peak of engagement. By then, of the 31 caregivers interviewed, 9 (29%) stated that they were doing TIME daily and 16 (52%) stated that they were engaging a few times per week. The remainder were either irregular, or there were conflicting data points which could not be reconciled. A number of the caregivers engaging several times weekly were scheduling longer sessions to cover several activities per session.
- The engagement tends to decrease in the fourth term of the year, which is often a period of heightened pressure for teachers and caregivers alike. Of the 21 caregivers reached in 2023, 11 (52%) said that they had reduced their engagement with TIME during the last quarter of 2022, and 1 caregiver had stopped completely. This is far more than the 5 (24%) who said that they either maintained (4) or increased (1) their engagement.



³ Wordworks proposed an activity record sheet as a means to track engagement at home, yet in most cases it is not completed nor returned to the school.

- Since it takes a few months to manage orders, payments, printing and distribution, the Grade 1 packs are usually only available towards the middle of Term 1, causing a risk of disruptions to the routine between the two years. Of the 21 caregivers reached in 2023, 10 (48%) continued to engage spontaneously with Grade R activities until their Grade 1 packs arrived around March 2023, either regularly (7) or occasionally (3). The other 11 caregivers only returned to TIME activities once they received their new packs.
- The Grade R pattern repeats itself in Grade 1, albeit with a slightly lower engagement, for a combination of reasons such as competition of other programmes and homework, and loss of the “novelty” effect. By mid-Grade 1, of the 21 families reached, 4 (19%) were still doing TIME daily while 14 (67%) were doing it a few times a week.
- Since the regular touchpoints with the fieldworkers over the two years may have prompted and encouraged caregivers, it is likely that the engagement levels observed in the study sample are slightly higher than what would have happened without the study.

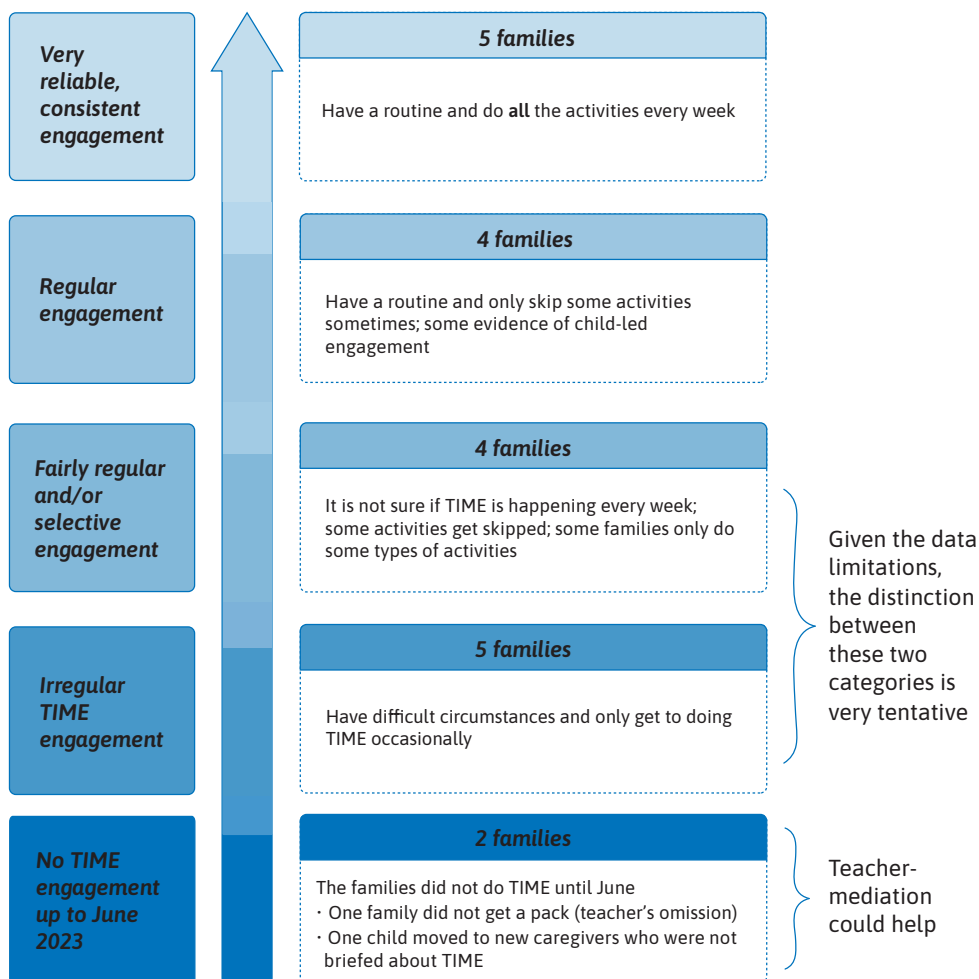
Diagram 8: Observed curve of family engagement with TIME among the study sample (Source: Caregiver interviews, triangulated with teacher interviews and fieldworkers' observations, 2022–2023. Note: Since the study was qualitative in nature with a small, non-representative sample, these quantitative data points are indicative only and cannot be generalised.)



Towards a nuanced typology of caregiver engagement

Looking at the variability across the sample, we used multiple data points to establish a typology of caregivers along a spectrum of engagement. While there is a continuum of degrees of engagement, we grouped our sample's caregivers into five types as shown in Diagram 9.

Diagram 9: The spectrum of engagement (Source: Analysis of multiple data points from caregiver statements and fieldworkers' observations, 2023)



Of the 6 caregivers who were not available for an interview, it is likely that many were in the lower end of the continuum.

At different ends of the engagement spectrum: A tale of two Cape Town boys

At the onset of the study, there were some similarities between the boys, both growing up as the only child in the home, although Child H3 has older siblings, who are now adults. Both families lived in backyard dwellings on property owned by relatives, in low-income neighbourhoods of Cape Town. Both moms were stay-at-home moms, and in both cases there was strong evidence of a warm and rich relationship between mother and child. Both boys started Grade R in 2022 at age 5, and both moms reported that their boys enjoy school.

There are, however, some important differences hinting at **more favourable circumstances for Child B3**.

His father is employed, the dwelling is well looked after, and the family is close-knit, with the paternal grandfather spending an hour with the boy every day. Before starting school, Child B3 attended crèche and has been exposed to a range of stories, conversations and stimulating activities. His mother describes him as “an emotional, sometimes stubborn child who is competitive and has a variety of interests”.

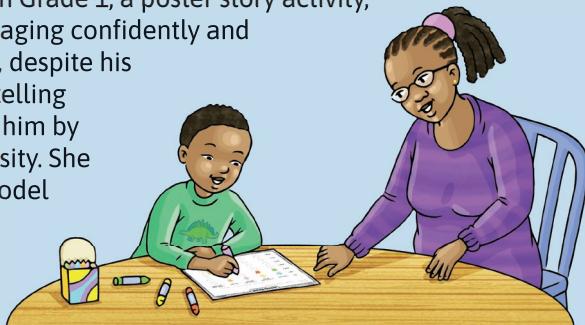


By contrast, Child H3's father has been unemployed since the COVID pandemic; his adult brother lives with a mental disability. The family's dwelling, which belonged to the mother's ailing aunt, is in dire need of repairs. When the aunt passed away during the course of the study, conflicts erupted around the family's right to stay in the dwelling. The boy did not attend crèche and his mother finds it difficult to have conversations with him, although she sometimes tells him religious stories. She described him as a “very active child who finds it hard to calm down”.

Over the course of the study, the differences between the two families manifested in their TIME uptake. In mid-Grade R, both parents indicated that they do the activities about 2–3 times per week, but Child B3's sessions lasted for about 1 hour, compared to 15 minutes for Child H3. The **mothers experienced those sessions differently**. Child B3's mother said, “We love it. It is our special time together.” In contrast, Child H3's mother commented, “When he is in the mood to work with me, we enjoy it. He is not always very keen.” She added that she sometimes found it difficult to read the weekly planner – whereas Child B3's mom found it “very well set out, easy to read and follow”.

In the course of Grade 1, the contrast between the two families' engagement with TIME became more pronounced.

By Term 3 of 2023, Child B3's family met all the criteria of a "reliable, consistent TIME engagement" – they had set a strict routine, spending between 15 and 30 minutes three times per week on the TIME activities. They never skipped any activity. The activity that mother and child demonstrated in Grade 1, a poster story activity, made it clear that they were both engaging confidently and creatively with the resources. The boy, despite his speech impediment, took the lead in telling the story and the mother encouraged him by expressing her interest, surprise, curiosity. She gently paraphrased his narrative to model correct sentence structures, and prompted him to go further by asking questions, before taking him into the mathematical part of the activity.



By contrast, Child H3's mother reported that her boy was usually not in the right mood or motivated for TIME, got bored easily, did not focus, and never reminded her about the activities. Another challenge was that the mother did not always understand what to do. As a result, they had an "irregular" TIME engagement, often skipping the looking and listening activities. When the fieldworker came to observe, they chose to demonstrate a game. Even with prior explanations from the fieldworker, it took time for the mother to understand how to play it, but with support, she was able to enjoy it.

Overall, there are a range of factors explaining the differences in the two families' experience with TIME – this includes the higher stresses (economical, relational, health- and housing-related) that Child H3's family was facing. It is also apparent that the combination of the child's personality (possible ADHD profile) with the mother's lack of confidence with reading and following instructions (possibly related to a low education level) made it very difficult for them to sustain the activities without hands-on support. Their ability to work out the game with support from the fieldworker suggests that a model involving home visitors may be more effective in helping this type of family to adopt and sustain a TIME routine.

Concluding reflections

The study has raised the following reflections that would be relevant to other organisations working with families or trying to effect shifts within the home context:

- The configuration and circumstances of families vary widely, both across a population at a point in time, and over time. When thinking about how a home programme will work in practice, it is helpful to test how adaptive a programme is to a variety of home contexts, but also, to the possibility that multiple adults engage with a child, multiple languages are spoken in the home, or to the possibility that changing work patterns will disrupt the routine. The TIME programme does try to adapt to these fluid environments, especially with the bilingual pages.
- Families with a conducive environment will easily "latch" on to a resource like TIME and implement the activities consistently. For families facing multiple barriers (which can be material, linguistic, health-related or psychosocial), more support may be required to help build the caregiver's confidence and sustain the motivation. Despite the simple language used in the packs, caregivers' understanding of instructions is not always guaranteed and it would appear that repeated in-person support might be more effective (albeit more costly and challenging) than multimedia messages.

The next brief will explore the role that schools/class teachers can play in mediating the TIME programme and encouraging parental uptake.

Acronyms

ADHD

Attention-deficit/
hyperactivity disorder

LoLT

Language of Learning
and Teaching

TIME

Together in my
Education

QR code

Quick response code: a bi-dimensional barcode that is used to provide easy access to online information through the digital camera on a smartphone