

**Yizani Sifunde**

This project has been made possible through the **Liberty Community Trust**



How to Close the ECD Gap: Process Lessons from a multi- partner approach

Yizani Sifunde Programme Evaluation Case Studies Endline Report

May 2024

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Acknowledgements

This report was written by Tendayi Zhou and Lebogang Shilakoe, with inputs from Tara Polzer Ngwato of Social Impact Insights Africa. Shelley O’Carroll provided invaluable support in contextualising the results.

On the Yizani Sifunde team, we thank Nande Mkosi, Caroll Warmberg and Rene Botha from ITEC and Mxolisi Soji, Christine Harzenberg and Mary Venter from Khululeka for their assistance with arrangements during fieldwork.

The Yizani Sifunde consortium member evaluation steering committee gave excellent support and inputs throughout the process: Dorette Louw and Julia Norrish of Book Dash; Gabrielle Kelly and Mpho Ramasodi of Nal’ibali; Mammuso Makhanya and Asanda Mpahla of Wordworks. We thank Rodney Msomi as Yizani Sifunde Project Coordinator and most especially thank Magali von Blottnitz and Katherine de Wet of Wordworks for leading the evaluation design and engagement, providing excellent leadership on the internal Yizani Sifunde M&E processes and monitoring data collection and analysis, and generally being a guiding light throughout the evaluation process. And last but not least, we thank Liberty Community Trust, represented by Nomaxabiso Matjila, for making the Yizani Sifunde project and this evaluation possible.

Suggested reference for this report:

Zhou, T. & Shilakoe, L. (2024). How to Close the ECD Gap: Process lessons from a multi-partner approach. Yizani Sifunde Programme Evaluation Case Study Report. Social Impact Insights Africa & Liberty Community Trust, Johannesburg.

Acronyms

ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
FLN	Foundational Literacy and Numeracy
LTSM	Learning & Teaching Support Materials
YS	Yizani Sifunde

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Acronyms.....	1
Table of Contents	2
Executive summary.....	3
Introduction and background	3
Description of the Intervention	3
Evaluation questions, methods and data collection	4
Case Study Findings	5
Overarching findings.....	5
Classroom practices	6
ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment	8
Conclusions.....	9
Recommendations	10
1 Introduction and background.....	13
1.1 What has worked to improve early child learning outcomes - a review of the literature.....	13
1.1.1 Structural quality variables.....	14
1.1.2 Process quality variables	16
1.2 Overview of the Yizani Sifunde Project	18
1.2.1 Theory of Change	19
1.2.2 Description of the intervention and its partners.....	19
2 Case Study Methods	20
2.1 Rationale for the use of Case Study Methods.....	20
2.2 Sampling	21
2.3 Instrument design and data collection	21
3 Overall findings	23
3.1 Sample coverage	23
3.2 Differences and similarities across the ECD centres	23
3.3 The length and breadth of classroom practice and practitioner knowledge	26
3.4 Programme quality assessment outcomes	36
3.5 Parent/caregiver early literacy and language practices.	43
3.6 Reading Clubs	45
3.7 Integration of Little Stars with other programs	46
3.8 Yizani Sifunde Project Management	47
3.8.1 Partnership arrangements	48
3.8.2 Monitoring Systems and Project Data	49
3.9 The role of Story Sparkers.....	50
4 Sustainability findings	51
5 Conclusion	57
6 Recommendations.....	58
7 References	60

Executive summary

Introduction and background

This report presents the findings of a case study that was conducted from August to September 2023 on six Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDs) in the Yizani Sifunde project. The project was started in 2020 in rural and peri-urban Eastern Cape, but implementation commenced in 2021, a year designated as a learning phase. During this period, the emphasis was on refining the quality of delivery and enhancing the monitoring and planning aspects. This strategic approach acknowledges the complexity of the project, involving various partners. In late 2022, The Liberty Community Trust appointed Social Impact Insights Africa (SII Africa) to conduct an evaluation of the project.

The Yizani Sifunde Literacy Project is an initiative supported by Liberty Community Trust and executed by a consortium comprising Book Dash, Na'ibali, and Wordworks, together with their Eastern Cape partners Khululeka and ITEC. The project was started in 2020, but the first year of implementation was 2021. The project seeks to enhance reading and literacy among young isiXhosa-speaking children in rural and peri-urban areas of the Eastern Cape. It targets children in the ECDs along with their educators, parents and communities to shift the early language and literacy skills and reading habits of young children and communities.

The project targets 40 to 50 ECDs annually. The programme seeks to achieve this shift through a combination of strategies and interventions, by (i) providing significant access to high-quality African storybooks in isiXhosa, (ii) delivering a resourced-based language and early literacy teacher training programme for teachers of 4-5-year-olds in participating ECD (Early Childhood Development) centres; (iii) supporting ECD practitioners through young community base people called Story Sparkers, who visit weekly and run story time sessions (iv) awareness-raising and training workshops for parents/caregivers and community volunteers and, (v) Promotion of reading and storytelling through reading clubs and community activations.

These actions are premised on the evidence of studies and interventions that have proved the efficacy of these methods in shifting language development and literacy practices in different but similar vulnerable communities to the one the Yizani Sifunde Project targets.

Description of the Intervention

The intervention is implemented through its three partner organisations, and its implementing partners on the ground, each shouldering specific project responsibilities aligned with the project's Theory of Change. These organisations also undertake project administration responsibilities crucial for sustaining the project and ensuring the fulfilment of its obligations.

Wordworks trains the programme's two NGO implementing partners (ITEC in East London and Khululeka in Queenstown) to train ECD practitioners in the Little Stars early literacy programme. The Little Stars early literacy programme is then delivered in ECDs by ECD practitioners in 2-week cycles to enrich children on these ECDs. Practitioners are trained after every six weeks. Wordworks and the two NGO implementing partners support ECD practitioners through remote support via WhatsApp throughout the year and at least one site visit per year to observe and strengthen the implementation and application of the Little Stars structured learning programme in the classroom.

Nal'ibali recruits and trains Story Sparkers assigned to work in ECDs in the programme to run a storytime session with the children in the ECD once a week. They use Nal'ibali reading and storytelling techniques to cultivate interest in reading and make it an enjoyable experience for children. The Story Sparkers, who are supervised by Literacy Mentors, also run Nal'ibali reading clubs and train community members to start their own. They also initiate various community reading activities over school holidays.

Book Dash prints diverse titles, mostly in isiXhosa, and distributes them to ECDs and the children in the programme through both the project's implementing partners and Story Sparkers. A child will potentially receive and own up to 50 books over the course of one year of being in the programme. This is aimed at resourcing and supporting early childhood home-based literacy practices. Such practices are also taught by ECD practitioners in parent workshops to parents and caregivers of children in ECDs. To further encourage family literacy practises, each parent attending a parent workshop at the ECD (where the benefits of reading with young children are explained and good reading practices are modelled) can receive five additional books to encourage family literacy practices.

Evaluation questions, methods and data collection

The evaluation uses mixed methodologies, including learner assessments at baseline and at the endline, case studies and surveys. This report mainly relied on the case study approach to establish if the Yizani Sifunde intervention is delivering its intermediate outcomes. These are related to whether practitioners, reading club leaders and Story Sparkers are incorporating language and literacy-enhancing practices within their classrooms and reading clubs. It also seeks to understand if parents and caregivers implement supportive language and early literacy practices in home environments. Similarly, the case studies seek to understand if there have been notable enhancements in the relationships between ECDs and parents/caregivers. The case study also sought to establish which contextual factors play a role in influencing the capacity of ECDs and practitioners, parents or caregivers, and reading clubs to adopt the literacy-enhancing practices advocated by the project.

The evaluation team, in consultation with the Yizani Sifunde team, purposively selected ECD sites and reading clubs where stronger programme uptake was observed and implementation had been relatively smooth. The rationale is rooted in the understanding that numerous examples exist of what does not work within the system. By focusing on successful instances, the goal is to extract valuable insights into the factors and conditions that contribute to favourable outcomes.

Data was collected between August and September 2023 by two field researchers—one proficient in isiXhosa and the other possessing a working knowledge of the language. Both were trained alongside two other researchers in the application of standardised observation tools, namely the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-3 and ECER-E)¹ and the ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment (LPQA). They also administered context tools designed by the evaluation team with inputs from an early learning education expert. The case study spoke to teachers, parents/caregivers, programme implementers, and other programme agents to gather insights on evaluation questions.

Case Study Findings

The findings are presented thematically, namely general overall, overarching findings, Classroom Practice as per ECERS and ELOM LPQA findings, and project administration findings. While all these are interconnected, they provide a different perspective.

Overarching findings

1. In general, all practitioners were observed to be warm, confident, engaging, and considerate of children's feelings.
2. Story Sparkers were found to be mature, enthusiastic and well-trained individuals who used a variety of methods and tools to generate learner engagement and interest in reading books and stories. This likely contributed to the project's aim of making children's experiences of reading and storytelling a positive and nurturing activity.
3. Teaching was generally learner-centred, and practitioners could explain to the evaluation team why they were using the different methodologies they were trained in. This was generally reflected in classroom practice, with the majority of practitioners successfully implementing key practices that support early language and literacy development.
4. Across all the ECDs, the classrooms were generally print-rich and inviting, except for one ECD with severe resource constraints.
5. The quality of teaching and learning was visibly much better in the public school compared to the private small ECDs. This was likely supported by the presence of a well-established and better-resourced school, with both qualified teaching staff and effective school management. This school, however, has Grade R classes with mixed ages ranging from 4 - 6, with only those who reach the required age proceeding to Grade 1.
6. Practitioners were confident in storytelling, singing & and cultivating the love for stories in children by showing interest and excitement, drawing them in with animation, participation, questions, and actions. However, none were observed using puppets or props in the process. This could have been influenced by the day of the week the fieldwork was conducted.

¹ The evaluation team selected one of the six subscales of the ECERS-3 (Language and Literacy), and one of the four subscales of the ECERS-E (Literacy)

7. The practitioner and SS were confident in reading books to children/with children during story time - they were engaging, animated and drew learners in to participate but they did not use other pops such as puppets and dolls.
8. Teaching activities focusing on counting and early maths were weak at most of the ECDs except for the public school.
9. As expected, parental/caregiver engagement and parent workshops pose a general challenge with subdued attendance, though the public school and some ECDs in the sample report successful engagement and implementation of parental workshops. Similar pockets of success are noted from monitoring data across the other ECDs in the programme. ECD-based parental workshops should, however, be viewed through a developmental lens that acknowledges the inherent challenges that require a paradigm shift from both parents/caregivers and practitioners on how they see their roles. The evaluation thus primarily centred on understanding how successful implementation was achieved in selected sites, rather than emphasising on the extent to which these practices were universally adopted across the sample.
10. Though not part of the evaluation terms of reference, the evaluation team found the Monitoring and Evaluation system for the Yizani Sifunde project robust, encompassing a structured framework for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, offering in-depth insights into various aspects of the project.
11. Community reading clubs did not receive a strong uptake due to mainly a lack of committed community volunteers.
12. Self-reported feedback from the cohort of 2022 practitioners, suggest that they sustained most of the practices they carried out in their classrooms by 2022, with storytelling being the most practised classroom activity. Reading of story books gained the most practice post project support, with 52% (n=29) of practitioners revealing they practised it more in 2023 than they did in 2022.

Classroom practices

1. **In the assessment of classroom observation using the ECERS-E and ECERS-3 early childhood environmental rating scales, practitioners in the case study outperformed what is typically expected based on scores from similar contexts.**

Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-3 and ECERS-E), practitioners performed better than what is expected of scores from countries in similar contexts. Across seven practitioners, the mean score based on the ECERS-E Literacy Subscale was 3.6 out of 7. The overall mean score on the ECERS-3 Language and Literacy Subscale was 3.5.

These results are encouraging because based on the study of the review of scores in LMIC countries, the observation was that LMICS typically score low aggregate scores, with average quality scores falling within the "inadequate" range (scores of 1 or 2). The highest scores observed usually only reach the threshold for being considered "acceptable" (scores of 3 or 4).

The results were strong across all seven practitioners with only one falling below a score of 3. This contrasts with similar studies in South Africa, where a higher percentage of practitioners obtained mean scores in the ‘inadequate’ range (1 to 2)².

2. Practitioners recorded strong scores in specific items in the ECERS sub-scales

Practitioners recorded overall mean scores of 5 out of 7 for “sounds in words”, and “adults reading with children” items. They scored a mean score of 4 for the “staff use of books with children” item. These are strong results, given the expected scores for Lower Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) and previous studies. Other well-performing areas where practitioners achieved a mean score of 4 include: “facilitating the use of print in the environment”, “encouraging children to use language”, “talking and listening” and “helping children expand their vocabulary”. The ECERS rating scales only focus on storybook reading and do not include any items related to oral storytelling. As the Little Stars programme focuses on storytelling, we adapted the story reading item and gave practitioners credit if they told a story rather than reading one. It was encouraging that practitioners obtained a mean score of 5 out of 7 on this item.

3. Practitioners were rated lower on emergent writing and mark making, with a mean score of 2

The poor findings in this item are related to indicators that are process-related where the majority of practitioners were not observed facilitating emergent writing activities. This finding is consistent with findings from other studies. The limited emergent writing in most classrooms does not seem to stem from the lack of knowledge as they demonstrated in interviews a deep understanding of the Little Stars programme and its core methodologies, including emergent writing, and why it was important. The lack of practice could be due to the inability to mediate the emergent writing process for children in purposeful ways. It is also possible that other structural issues observed in some classes, such as space, and lack of resources such as pencils and crayons, may have contributed to poor results.

4. Practitioners scored poorly at encouraging children’s use of books and book and literacy areas.

Though most ECDs received programme books, this did not seem to lead to children showing interest in using books independently. Not a single child chose to use the book corner during free play in all the 7 classrooms observed except on two occasions where children were encouraged by a practitioner to consider the book corner. There were accessible books to children in all 7 classrooms. Programme monitoring data indicate a slightly better scenario, with slightly over 50% of practitioners reporting children independently using book corners.

The low scores on the use of book areas are not a reflection of a lack of books but may rather reflect the fact that the use of the book area is not included as an activity in the daily

² In a study (n=240) with results that were generalisable to the Western Cape (Biersterker et al, 2016) 32% of practitioners achieved a mean score of 1-2. In another smaller study (n=195) with the majority of sampled classes in poor communities, 48% of the practitioners had mean scores in the 1-2 range (Van Staden, 2016). Both of these studies used the ECERS-R Language Reasoning subscale which is comparable to the subscales employed in this evaluation.

programme or that practitioners do not do enough to mediate the use of the book area, model the use of books or show an interest in children's independent reading.

The low scores on the use of book items are also due to the limited variety of books, primarily fiction and story books, with a notable absence of informational/reference, counting/maths, or poetry/nursery rhyme books. Although books were accessible, not all practitioners received credit for indicators related to the book area being comfortable (e.g. rug and cushions or comfortable seating).

ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment

1. All 7 classes in this Yizani Sifunde sample scored moderately on almost all subscales, and their total scores indicate they need some form of assistance to improve their quality.

Most of the ECDs learning programs had an overall score of below 60%³ on the LPQA Total Score with the least performing ECD achieving 32%. The overall average score for the sample was 52%. The ELOM LPQA subscales include: The Learning Environment: Learning materials and classroom set-up (5 items); Assessment of Learning and Teaching: Session planning and progress monitoring (2 items); Relationships and Interactions: Practitioner interactions with children, child interactions, and discipline (4 items); Curriculum: Curriculum content, alignment with the National Curriculum Framework Early Learning and Development Areas and activity plans (5 items) and, Teaching Strategies: Teaching techniques and actions (5 items).

2. The assessment for the curriculum was the best-performing domain, with a mean score of 62,9%

The score, among other variables, likely reflects the benefit of structured learning programs in the case study sample. SLPs (Structured Learning Programs) differentiate themselves by not relying on incidental learning. Instead, they emphasise clear learning goals and they systematically approach curriculum elements to build and scaffold skills. They are also designed to meet the Early Learning Development Areas (ELDAS) and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)

3. The Assessment for Teaching and Learning sub-scale was the worst-performing domain achieving a mean score of 35,7%

Despite the awareness among practitioners and principals about the necessity to collect and track learner performance data, this was not observed as a regular practice. This suggests that planning and support may not be grounded in systematic observations by practitioners, who acknowledged relying on mostly undocumented informal ad hoc assessments/observations. The execution of these items within this subscale was more successful in the public school, most likely because there are assessment tools and guidelines specifically designed for Grade R, coupled with the presence of a supportive school management team. Notably, the National Curriculum Framework lacks

³ The total score per ECD is obtained by adding up all the scores from the 5 ELOM LPQA sub-scales. The scores are presented as a percentage of maximum total score of 44.

comprehensive guidelines for assessing and monitoring learner performance in pre-Grade R classes. Most ECDs in the sample are informal social enterprises and will likely struggle with adopting and setting up systems such as those for assessing learners.

Conclusions

With the Department of Basic Education under pressure to improve the quality of ECD provision and growing awareness of the fact that we must invest earlier to address the literacy crisis in South Africa, this Case Study report is a valuable contribution to the sector.

In selecting a case study approach, depth of coverage is always prioritised over breadth. However, the learning and insights that emerged from the approach validate this decision. These insights are a critical check on whether the project is grounded and responsive to contextual realities, and ensure that adjustments to the design can be made as this important work is replicated.

The report shows, without doubt, the value of donors investing in carefully designed monitoring, evaluation and learning processes. The case study monographs combined with standardised observation tools and questionnaires provide valuable learning for the sector and investors about evaluation designs and methods. By balancing an external 'outsider' view on a project with detailed programme monitoring data provided by implementing partners, the report has the integrity and rigour that is needed to both guide further enhancements to the project and drive further investment in the sector.

Through the case study monographs, the report provides a rich and nuanced description of the realities of ECD Centres and practitioners serving under-resourced rural and peri-urban communities in South Africa. Further insights are provided through quantitative data collected using standardised tools. The report captures a multi-layered and complex collaborative project and includes a deep dive into the contributions of different project partners and role-players, while also looking at cross-cutting themes and lessons learnt through this unique partnership model.

The report looks constructively at key areas of the project where reach was not achieved as anticipated (for example, community reading clubs) or where behaviour change was not evident (for example, the extent to which children demonstrated independent reading). Contextual factors that affected the take-up of certain elements are carefully explored and recommendations are made for aspects of programme design that could be further strengthened. All stakeholders can draw important lessons for the replication and scaling of this important work going forward.

The report provides evidence that resource-based practitioner training delivered by local NGO partners, supported through community-based young people, and combined with the provision of high-quality books in the language of the community, has great potential to strengthen curriculum delivery and quality early language and literacy teaching and learning in under-resourced ECD classrooms. The report also documents and explores the potential for including parents and caregivers as key role players in supporting early learning. It highlights the value of practitioners engaging parents and caregivers while acknowledging practical constraints and the challenge of changing parents' perceptions about their role in their children's learning. The case studies bring to the fore the potential value of young community members ('Story Sparkers') playing a supporting role as practitioners reach out to parents. This demonstrates the value of the partnership model,

where one aspect of the project serves to amplify and strengthen another aspect. It also encourages an openness to possibilities that might not have been explored in the original model.

In response to the literacy crisis in South Africa, there has not been enough recognition of the important contribution that early childhood practitioners, parents and community members can make. This project and the careful documentation and analysis of the project outcomes show what can be achieved by investing in the adults who support children in this critical phase of their development. The report provides key lessons on aspects of implementation and evaluation that are critical for deepening our understanding of 'what works' and 'why', and for maximising returns on investment in early learning.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Review the exploratory ECD-based parental workshops model to learn from cases of successful implementation for further design improvements. This review may be in the form of reflection workshops within the Wordworks team and project partners. Aspects to consider include:

- a) Exploring approaches to use actively involved parents as catalysts to stimulate interest among less-engaged caregivers/parents.
- b) Reviewing the format and length of parent programmes as well as identifying and addressing potential barriers to attendance
- c) Identifying ways of supporting and motivating practitioners to invest in parental/caregiver engagement work, including shifting their perception on this.

Strengthening this project arm will deepen the impact value chain as the home environment is a critical pillar for entrenching early language and literacy practices.

Recommendation 2

Review the recruitment and engagement strategy of community reading club leaders. This should include a review of the Yizani Sifunde organisational arrangements for the formation, support, and sustainability of community reading clubs.

Recommendation 3

Develop Little Stars training modules for practitioners to strengthen the following:

- Writing children's words and encouraging and mediating children's emergent writing.
- Creating an inviting and comfortable space for children to read books independently, ensuring there are times in the daily programme when children engage in independent reading, and that ECD centres develop a class culture of reading for enjoyment.
- Observing and recording child progress using existing templates and tools provided by the Department of Basic Education or from other sources. Integrating the different programs implemented in their ECDs to maximise children's early language and literacy outcomes and build practitioner confidence.

Recommendation 4

Work with ECD NGO partners and ECD Forums to explore the feasibility of establishing or strengthening communities of practice for programme practitioners. Communities of practice have been proven to work to improve teacher practice and provide opportunities for them to share ideas on methodologies they find difficult.

Recommendation 5

Consider engaging partners and donors to support ECD's soft furnishings, such as tables, chairs, and reading mats. These would make reading corners an attractive and comfortable space for children. It would also provide options for overcrowded classes with limited learning areas to set up outdoor spaces. Collaborating with programs offering these services is recommended to achieve economies of scale and safeguard alignment with programme intent.

Recommendation 6

The existence of multiple ECD programs by different organisations in the same schools and communities underscores the importance of thought leadership and collaborative engagement among stakeholders. We recommend fostering this collaboration to deliver increased social returns in vulnerable communities and greater value for funders. Building on the funder's demonstrated capacity in this project, we recommend that the Liberty Community Trust facilitate this engagement with involved players to maximise the positive impact on early childhood development.

How to Close the ECD Gap: Process Lessons from a multi-partner approach

Yizani Sifunde Programme Evaluation
Case Studies Endline Report

1 Introduction and background

The significance of early childhood literacy cannot be emphasised enough. It plays a central role in developing a child's brain, language and vocabulary skills, and reading, writing, and social-emotional development. Numerous studies consistently highlight that high-quality early childhood programs can have enduring effects, contributing to lifelong benefits in these areas. Exposing children to enriching language and literacy experiences during their early years can pave the way toward academic and socio-emotional development. This early foundation correlates with heightened academic achievements, improved health outcomes, and, ultimately, reduced societal costs in the long run (Jenkins & Duncan, 2017; Harvard University, 2016)

Many children in Lower Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) are not guaranteed access to quality early childhood classrooms, depriving them of this essential aspect of their developmental journey. The majority come from communities and education systems that often struggle to afford this crucial component, making interventions that can strengthen these children's early childhood education experiences necessary.

1.1 What has worked to improve early child learning outcomes - a review of the literature

There is established literature from high-income countries (HICs) and LMICs that provides knowledge of what has improved classroom quality, one of the pillars for improving learner early childhood literacy outcomes. From the outset, it is important to note that the quality of the early childhood classroom learning environment is commonly conceptualised in two broad categories: structural quality variables and process quality variables.

Structural quality, on the one hand, relates to the physical setting and organisational components. Its key variables include physical settings (the classroom's physical environment, including factors such as space, lighting, and safety measures), teacher qualifications, group size and ratios, and the availability and appropriateness of educational resources and materials. Process quality variables, on the other hand, focus on the dynamic and interactive aspects of the learning environment. It includes the quality of classroom interactions between teachers and children and among the children themselves; the teaching methods, strategies, and approaches educators employ; and the extent to which the educational programme aligns with a defined curriculum and educational goals (Biersteker et al., 2016).

Structural variables often influence process quality and may be necessary but insufficient to support process quality. For example, a structured curriculum and appropriate stories or books may facilitate the type of questions and conversations that are characteristic of high-quality interaction. However, teachers may have access to such a curriculum and materials but still not use them in ways that facilitate interaction.

1.1.1 Structural quality variables

Teacher qualification and training

Although teacher qualification is an important variable of structural quality, various studies, including a recent one from South Africa, show that it does not predict classroom and academic outcomes for children (Dawes et al., 2019). Nonetheless, recent data has shown a correlation between teachers' level of education and some ECER-R scores. This suggests that post-secondary education for teachers working with younger children remains important (Manning et al., 2017). Other studies highlighted the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) and in-service training for teachers, noting their positive impact on improving the quality of classroom processes (Early et al., 2007). Teacher qualifications are thus necessary but insufficient to achieve desired learner outcomes independently.

Important aspects to include in effective CPD, in both HICs and low-resource contexts, include mentoring and supervision, a focus on practice linked to knowledge, reflection on peer learning, training on interaction skills, and motivational management and leadership (DFID, 2017).

Class sizes and ratios

While evidence on the impact of class sizes is mixed, some studies reveal an intriguing dynamic where classes exceeding recommended group sizes demonstrate positive outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 1999; Tobin, 2005). However, this observation is nuanced by findings from a multi-county study indicating no significant association between ratios and language outcomes (Montie et al., 2006). In instances where positive outcomes were observed in larger groups, the correlation was often linked to enhanced process quality, particularly for infants (Huntsman, 2008). In some contexts, bigger classes may reflect more established ECD centres, with smaller classes more indicative of informal centres. The enhancement of process quality is anticipated in larger classes due to increased opportunities for child-to-child interactions. However, such scenarios are also likely to decrease the quality of teacher-to-child interactions.

Learning materials

Numerous studies have affirmed the connection between learning outcomes and the availability of learning materials (Montie et al., 2006; Aboud, 2006; Trawick-Smith et al., 2015). Learning materials are instrumental in shaping child learning outcomes by promoting engagement, supporting skill development, facilitating concept understanding, encouraging exploration, promoting language development, catering to diverse learning styles, building independence, and print-rich environments, contributing to creating a positive learning environment. Children raised in literacy-rich environments, including homes with at least 25 books and parents actively engaging them with written material, attain an educational advantage of two years compared to those lacking books at home (Evans et al., 2010). This element is important for any literacy intervention in resource-constrained communities where the ability to afford such resources is beyond their reach.

ECD management and staff conditions

There is widespread recognition that schools led by effective and inclusive leadership tend to function more efficiently, have higher classroom quality, and often provide supportive conditions of service that elevate teacher morale and cultivate a positive school culture. These schools have also recorded positive child outcomes (Biersteker et al., 2016). Importantly, interventions are more likely to succeed when implemented in schools with a basic level of functionality (Jet Education Services, 2010). However, it is acknowledged that in many impoverished contexts, these conditions are often lacking, and interventions must strategically position their work to enhance the likelihood of sustainably adopting their initiatives.

For instance, in South Africa, an impact study found that although modest Grade R gains persisted into primary school, lower quintile schools (located in the poorest areas) generally did not experience a significant effect on test performance, except in cases where schools were situated in regions with a well-functioning education system (van der Berg, 2013).

Age-appropriate curriculum and structured curriculum

Interesting findings reveal that a curriculum that specifically targets certain skills, such as literacy and mathematics, tends to be more effective than programs following a whole child curriculum that addresses these skills incidentally (Phillips et al., 2017). This implies that ECDs with well-defined and structured learning programs incorporating clear learning goals are more successful in promoting school readiness for the children they serve. To be effective, however, research shows that these focused learning programs should enable cumulative and sequenced learning that aligns with each child's developmental stage (Harvard University, 2016).

Studies on the appropriate length of exposure to ECD services for children show that they need about 15 hours of weekly activities to yield significant results for 4-5-year-olds. However, a study in the United States found this not to be consistent.

Research on the appropriate duration of exposure to ECD services shows that children need approximately 15 hours of weekly activities to yield significant results, especially for 4-5-year-olds (Loeb et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2004). However, it is important to note that findings may vary, as large outcome studies in the United States did not consistently support this notion (Xue et al., 2016). Generally, two years of attendance as opposed to one has been correlated with improved school readiness, especially for children from poor communities (Wechsler et al., 2016)

Structured learning programs also aid teachers in constructing a language rooted in practice, providing a framework for communication and dialogue. In areas with lower skill levels, like in South Africa, these programs lay the groundwork for a community of practice and serve as focal points for ongoing improvement.

1.1.2 Process quality variables

The variables discussed thus far all pertain to evidence regarding what is effective concerning structural quality variables. We now shift focus to process quality variables and what we learn from the literature. Research indicates that process quality variables, compared to structural variables, have a greater influence on child development (Sabol et al., 2013; Rao et al., 2014). The interactions between teachers and children contribute to developing a child's communication skills, cognitive abilities, and capacity to manage emotions and relationships. Moreover, these interactions instil the skills and confidence necessary for them to be effective learners (Torii et al., n.d).

Sensitive, individualised teacher/child interactions

Teachers who cultivate warm, supportive, and encouraging relationships with learners facilitate the development of social and emotional skills essential for a successful school transition. Hamre & Pianta (2005) found that learners with teachers who offered strong instructional and emotional support had higher achievements and better learner-teacher relationships than those who did not. Another study that examined the relationship between children's preschool social and emotional development and their academic success in primary school also revealed that social and emotional development showed significant predictive value for the first three years of primary school outcomes (Shala, 2013).

Inclusive practices that emphasise cultural and language sensitivity.

An inclusive curriculum promotes inclusion in early childhood educational settings by building a sense of belonging among children. This involves recognising and valuing their abilities, identities, languages, and worldviews within the early childhood environment. Such recognition creates a sense of belonging that, in turn, positively impacts learning and development outcomes for children. It ensures that the learning experiences are relevant and meaningful (Ministry of Education, 2017; Chan, 2019).

Research conducted in Kenya, Zanzibar, and Tanzania compared children exposed to a culturally responsive curriculum with those who were not. The findings indicated that cultural responsiveness significantly predicted cognitive achievement, particularly among those who experienced a culturally responsive curriculum. There were even greater improvements observed in verbal, non-verbal, and numeric cognitive school readiness in the group exposed to such a curriculum (Malmberg, 2011)

Balancing child-initiated play and teacher-initiated play

In a longitudinal cross-country study that sought to understand the connection between process and structural characteristics of the environments attended by children at the age of 4 and their cognitive and language performance at age 7, found that child-initiated activities and small group activities were aligned with developmentally appropriate practices, encouraging active learning. The study, however, also found that children's cognitive performance improved when they spent less time in whole group activities, while their access to various equipment and materials increased. This does not diminish the value of whole-group play but rather contributes to the understanding that

individual and peer activities, as well as adult-led group, small, and whole-group activities, are developmentally appropriate (Monte et al, 2006; Phillips et al, 2017; Jenkins & Duncan, 2017)

Integration of different types of play within learning programs

Studies consistently show that children who have abundant opportunities to engage in child-directed activities, such as free play with their peers, tend to demonstrate higher levels of self-control. The ability to independently choose activities, explore, and interact with others in unstructured settings positively influences the development of self-regulation skills in children (Barker et.al, 2014). However, when learning specific academic content, such as what a particular shape is, studies indicate that children benefit more from adult-facilitated play than free play with cut-out shapes or direct instruction from practitioners (Fisher et al., 2013). Inclusion of the different types of play is thus developmentally supportive, with free play scaffolded by adult structured activities where the teacher designs and sets rules with a particular learning objective (Jensen et al., 2019; Zosh et al., 2018; Pyle & Daniels, 2017)

This highlights the importance for practitioners and learning programs to inspire and create space for diverse playful activities, adapting their role to match children's evolving challenges. They scout for opportunities to integrate learning goals within play without disrupting the immersive experience. Despite its importance, many adults struggle with this balance, often uncertain about their role in supporting children's learning outcomes in playful settings (Jensen et al., 2019).

Learning from interventions with parenting components

Parenting programs were found to be more effective when they went beyond just giving them information and knowledge, targeting a change in parental attitudes, skills, and aspirations. Including an active, skills-based component and allowing parents to practise their newly acquired skills, reinforces this effectiveness. Particularly for improving language and cognition, such programs usually involve activities with the child, training for the parent, and joint activities involving both. Metadata from a rigorous review by DFID revealed that interventions involving both parent and child tended to have larger effects compared to parent-only programs, especially those focused on providing information (Rao, 2014; Grantham-McGrego, 2020)

The preceding discussion provides important insights into the necessary building blocks for an intervention aimed at enhancing early childhood experiences, contributing to learning outcomes, and preparing children for school. A key lever is classroom quality at both structural and process levels. Teacher training, along with the provision of teaching and learning support materials (LTSMs) and other resources, are pivotal components at the structural level. However, teacher training alone is insufficient; it must be complemented by in-service training, mentorship, and specific training focused on nurturing interaction skills to unlock the value of process quality, which holds greater influence in shifting outcomes. Parental involvement is important, but it should extend beyond mere information sharing to active engagement in activities and exercises to empower them and have the agency ask for better service from ECDs. These important findings must be contextualised to LMIC countries that often face constraints to meet some of these.

The Yizani Sifunde intervention integrates, in some form, most of the components and levers mentioned in the literature, albeit adapted to mirror resource-constrained settings found in the areas where it was implemented. The case study thus qualitatively examines how these components and levers worked in these contexts and explores what factors promoted or hindered their adoption, function, and effect.

The case study thus offers a unique opportunity to add to the local body of evidence on how a comprehensive ECD value chain solution in resource-constrained environments works and what prospects it produces for learners and other stakeholders.

1.2 Overview of the Yizani Sifunde Project

The Yizani Sifunde Literacy Project is an initiative supported by Liberty Community Trust and executed by a consortium comprising Book Dash, Na'ibali, and Wordworks, together with their Eastern Cape partners Khululeka and ITEC. The project was started in 2021, but the first year of implementation was 2021. The project seeks to enhance reading and literacy among young isiXhosa-speaking children in rural and peri-urban areas of the Eastern Cape. It targets children in the ECDs along with their educators, parents and communities to shift the literacy skills and reading habits of young children and communities.

The project design is intricate, featuring multiple layers with the overarching goal of strengthening early language and literacy skills and building reading habits among the targeted young children in the communities. This transformation is pursued through a combination of strategies and interventions, including:

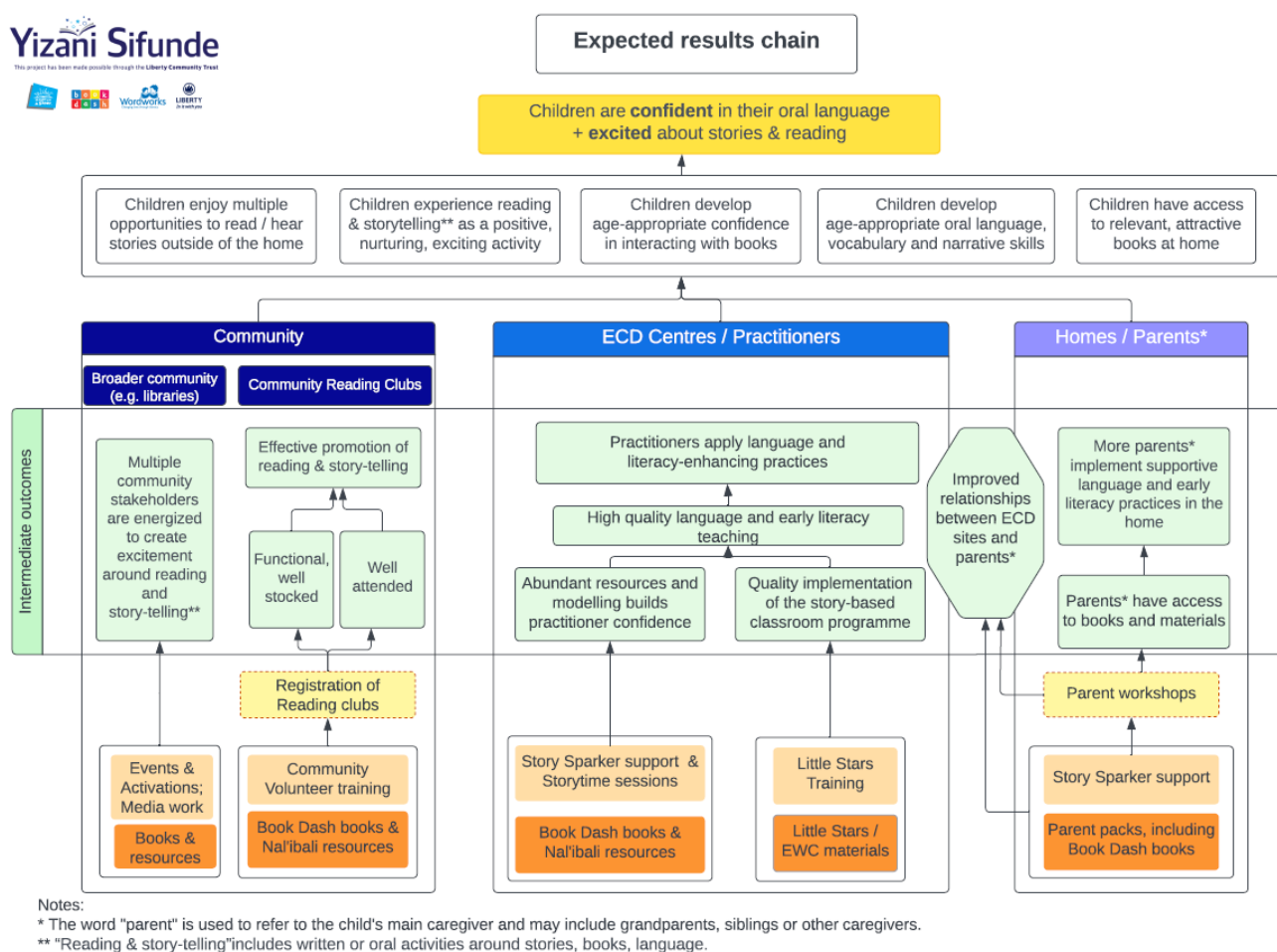
- Providing abundant access to high-quality African storybooks in isiXhosa
- A resourced-based language and early literacy teacher training programme for teachers of 4-5-year-olds in participating ECD (Early Childhood Development) centres
- Supporting ECD practitioners through young community base people called Story Sparkers, who visit weekly and run story time sessions
- Awareness-raising and training workshops for parents/caregivers and community volunteers
- Promotion of reading and storytelling through reading clubs and community activations.

The project targets 40 to 50 Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDs) annually. Starting in 2020, the initial two years were designated as a learning phase. During this period, the emphasis was on refining the quality of delivery and enhancing the monitoring and planning aspects. This strategic approach acknowledges the complexity of the project, involving various partners.

1.2.1 Theory of Change

The Yizani Sifunde Theory of Change is grounded in the elements explored in the literature review. It comprises ECD-based support, support to parents and community elements. Each of these is delivered by different partners, as articulated below.

Figure 1: Yizani Sifunde Theory of Change



1.2.2 Description of the intervention and its partners

Wordworks trains the programme's two NGO implementing partners (ITEC in East London and Khululeka in Queenstown) to train ECD practitioners in the Little Stars early literacy programme. The Little Stars early literacy programme is then delivered in ECDs by ECD practitioners in 6-week cycles to enrich children on these ECDs. The two NGO implementing partners support ECD practitioners through remote support throughout the year as well as at least one site visit per year, to observe and strengthen the implementation and application of the Little Stars structured learning programme in the classroom.

Nal'ibali recruits and trains Story Sparkers assigned to work in ECDs in the programme to run a Storytime with the children in the ECD once a week. They use Nal'ibali reading and storytelling techniques to cultivate interest in reading and make it an enjoyable experience for children. The Story Sparkers, supervised by Literacy Mentors, also run Nal'ibali reading clubs and train community members to start their own. They also initiate various community reading activities over school holidays.

Book Dash prints diverse titles, mostly in isiXhosa, and distributes them to ECDs and the children in the programme through both the project's implementing partners and Story Sparkers. A child will potentially own and take up to 50 books over the course of one year of being in the programme. This is aimed at resourcing and supporting early childhood home-based literacy practices. Such practices are also taught by ECD practitioners in parent workshops to parents and caregivers of children in ECDs. To further encourage family literacy practises, each parent attending a parent workshop at the ECD (where the benefits of reading with young children are explained and good reading practices are modelled) can receive five additional books to encourage family literacy practices.

2 Case Study Methods

2.1 Rationale for the use of Case Study Methods

The Yizani Sifunde programme evaluation employs a mixed-method approach, with the case study serving as a crucial component. In addition to the case study, other elements include quantitative baseline and endline assessments, where learners were evaluated using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) tools before the intervention and at the programme's conclusion. The methodology also integrates monitoring data collected by the Yizani Sifunde implementation teams to establish implementation fidelity. This data is independently triangulated through case studies, observations, and interviews conducted with a sample of principals, practitioners, and other programme agents.

The rationale for employing case studies lies in its organic and in-depth approach to research, utilising "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1975) that are essential for comprehending the context and circumstances in which the intervention was implemented. Case studies provide a nuanced understanding of how the intervention generated outcomes or, conversely, failed to produce the desired results. This qualitative method allows for a rich exploration of the intricate factors and connections at play within the specific context of the intervention, offering insights that may not be captured by more quantitative approaches alone. A more detailed justification of the rationale is in Annexure 2.

In line with any educational intervention of this nature, it is important to understand the key factors that may have played a role in the successful adoption, or lack thereof, of the innovation, in this case, both at ECD level and among ECD practitioners and intervention agents. While post-intervention quantitative data will show which ECDs reported improved learner performance, this

data will offer only limited insights into the reasons behind specific outcomes. Case studies thus provide a nuanced contextual understanding of the factors that potentially contributed to the observed learner outcomes. In addition, these studies identify ECDs, practitioners and other intervention agents that adopted the innovation. They delve into the associated conditions and mechanisms that led to this adoption, providing insights into how these factors may have influenced the observed results.

For this intervention, the case study specifically aimed to establish if the Yizani Sifunde intervention is delivering on its intermediate outcomes, namely:

- Are practitioners, Story Sparkers, and reading club leaders actively incorporating language and literacy-enhancing practices within their classrooms and reading clubs?
- Are parents and caregivers implementing supportive language and early literacy practices in their home environments?
- Have there been notable enhancements in the relationships between Early Childhood Developments (ECDs) and parents or caregivers?
- How effective are community reading clubs in promoting reading and storytelling within their respective communities?
- The case study also sought to establish which contextual factors influence the capacity of ECDs and practitioners, parents or caregivers, and reading clubs to adopt the literacy-enhancing practices advocated by the project. In addition, it explored whether the programme practices were visible in ECDs, practitioners, and reading clubs post-implementation.

2.2 Sampling

Six case study schools were purposively selected from the pool of twenty-two ECD centres that were sampled for the baseline and endline learner assessment. The sampling criteria were designed to achieve the maximum possible diversity in terms of size, socio-economic conditions, urbanity/rurality and location. Most importantly, the evaluation team selected the ECD sites and reading clubs where the Yizani Sifunde programme methodologies were successfully adopted. This was done through consulting implementing partners and the Yizani Sifunde team to identify sites where they observed a stronger programme uptake. The rationale is rooted in the understanding that numerous examples exist of what does not work within the system. By focusing on successful instances, the goal is to extract valuable insights into the factors and conditions that contribute to favourable outcomes.

2.3 Instrument design and data collection

The evaluation team used standardised data collection tools to conduct classroom observations and other ECD practices. These were mainly the ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment tool (ELOM LPQA), the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3), and its curricular subscales extension (ECERS-E). The ECERS tools were developed in the global north, where conditions differ from those of lower middle-income (LMIC) countries like South Africa.

For other context factors, the evaluation team adapted or designed what they have used in other studies, including drawing from other evaluations whilst aligning them with the programme Theory of Change, evaluation framework, and other project key elements. Care was also taken to align some of the tools with some of the programme monitoring tools to strengthen triangulation. All the tools were reviewed and shared with the Yizani Sifunde team for input and contextualisation. Below are all the tools that were used to gather data in the case study. All the tools are attached in Annexure 3.

Table 1: Data collection tools

ECD Based Tools	Reading Club Tools
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ECD Lesson observations: ECERS, ECERS- 3, ELOM LPQ 2. Practitioner interview Tool 3. ECD Centre Manager Tool 4. Story Sparker Interview 5. Parent/Caregiver Focused Group Discussion Tool 6. Parent workshop observation tool 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading Club observation tool 2. Reading Club Leader Interview tool

The evaluation team underwent a two-day training session led by an accredited trainer for the ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment (LPQA) tool and Dr Shelley O’Carroll for the ECERS tools. This training was complemented by a practical observation session at two ECD sites in Gauteng, where the tools were used simultaneously, followed by a debriefing and reflection exercise.

Data was collected in August 2023 by two field researchers, one proficient in isiXhosa, and the other possessing a working understanding of the language.

3 Overall findings

3.1 Sample coverage

	Queenstown		East London		Total	% achieved
	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual		
ECD Based Activities	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual	Total	% achieved
ECDs Visited	3	3	3	3	6	100%
Classroom observation	3	3	3	3	6	100%
Storytime observations	3	3	3	3	6	100%
ECD practitioner interview	3	3	3	3	6	100%
Story Sparker Interview	3	3	3	3	6	100%
ECD Principal Interview	3	2	3	3	5	100%
Community-based activities	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual		
Reading club observations	3	2	3	3	6	83%
Reading Club leader Interviews	3	2	3	3	6	83%
Parent/Caregiver FDG	2	0	2	1	1	25%
Parent telephonic interview	10	6	6	2	8	50%
2022 sustainability questionnaire	11	17	11	15	32	145%
Implementation team interviews	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual		
Interviews with partner organisations and funders	8				8	100%

Table 2: Case study data collection coverage

3.2 Differences and similarities across the ECD centres

The six case study ECDs are located within poor communities in East London and Queenstown, with the average fees charged by ECDs not exceeding R200 per month, with Queenstown fees on the lower end with fees as low as R30 per month except for the public school in East London. Baseline

monitoring data indicates that 91.7% (n =121) of caregivers and parents receive child grants. The five peri-urban ECDs and the semi-rural one on the outskirts of Queenstown operate in challenging socio-economic conditions. Principals and teachers consistently reported prevalent social issues in communities, including crime, alcohol and drug abuse, among others. Housing in these communities is a mix of informal and brick structures, while roads leading to the ECDs vary, with those in informal settlements mostly untarred. The locations are broadly comparable across the ECDs in the case study.

Enrolment in the ECDs varies, with Queenstown having more children per class than those in East London, leading to overcrowding due to their basic structures. An exception is a public school in East London, which has the highest number and three pre-grade R classes. All schools have mixed ages (three to six years). The public school follows a strict enrolment policy that prevents it from taking children below four years. It keeps them in the Garde R class until they are at the right age to proceed to Grade1. The public school was included in the sample to gain insights into their ECD practices and management.

While one school in the case study sample specifically caters to children with diagnosed learning disabilities, other ECD principals admitted to the possibility of undiagnosed cases in their centres, citing the difficulties of supporting children with suspected learning challenges, as they lack a formal diagnosis. They also stressed the challenges in raising such matters with parents/caregivers, as resistance to acknowledging potential issues is common. However, one principal successfully engaged parents/caregivers leading to a referral, and two learners from her class are now receiving professional attention at a public hospital, and the ECD also receives help in supporting these learners.

In general, all practitioners were observed to be warm, confident, engaging, and considerate of children's feelings. Teaching was also generally learner-centred, and practitioners could explain to the evaluation team why they were using the different methodologies that they were trained in. There was, however, no observation of the use of puppets and role-playing across all the six ECDs though the data collection spanned across two weeks. Emergent writing was also not observed except for the public school and one ECD centre. The most common activity was storytelling, and most practitioners reported being most confident in delivering it.

Across all the ECDs, the classrooms were generally print-rich and inviting, except for one ECD with severe resource constraints. A few cases of resource limitations were observed, though they were widespread. In one ECD, for example, children took turns using paintbrushes and paint during art time, often being rushed through by the practitioner so that other tables could get their turn. A more positive observation was that all classrooms featured Yizani Sifunde books displayed on shelves, along with props, puppets, and Nal'ibali hanging libraries. Despite space challenges, most classrooms organised different learning areas, despite a shortage of variety per play area. Some resourceful ECDs improvised, using readily available resources from the community, resulting in a wide array of play items, promoting free and immediate access for learners without waiting for turns.

Parental engagement poses a general challenge across most ECDs, with the public school in the sample reporting comparatively better engagement. Teachers and principals attribute the socio-economic context of these communities as a major impediment to parental involvement as they do not often prioritise any school engagement. Some Story Sparkers and programme implementers highlighted that an expectation for parents to be involved in these communities seems like a new thing for them, and it would take a while before they shift their perspective of what ECDs and schools are and what their role as parents/caregivers is. Practitioners and Story Sparkers generally found organising parent workshops a difficult task, citing non-responsiveness as a main demotivator. This highlights the need to address barriers to parental engagement and develop strategies that better resonate with the community to encourage sustained participation.

Several differences exist between the public schools and smaller private ECDs, primarily operated as social enterprises. The public school is well-resourced, with government-paid teachers, larger well-maintained brick classrooms, and a strong school management team, ensuring the delivery of high-quality ECD services. The Grade R classes receive a ring-fenced grant of R18 000 annually for books and other needs.

In contrast, smaller private ECDs face resource limitations and possess weaker ECD administration systems and, where present, weaker adherence to them. This is expected as some operate informally, lacking key operational requirements of the Department of Basic Education (DBE), such as record keeping, especially on continuous assessments and recording learners' progress. This was by far the most poorly performing aspect. In the sample of centres, only the public school kept such learner progress records. Most of the ECDs only kept enrolment forms with basic learner details.

The quality of teaching and learning was also visibly much better in the public school compared to the private small ECDs. While it's difficult to say what factors drove this, the management team at the school played a significant role in creating a culture of learning, innovation and openness. The school also has a strong management team structure, with a dedicated Deputy Principal responsible for the ECD. She was also involved and engaged, insisting on record keeping and team planning whilst giving support and professional freedom at the same time. The ECD also had several programmes that were targeted at specific components.

The public school had a strong maths component that targeted specific elements in the curriculum. It excelled across all the "maths in daily events" items in the ECERS-3 (this item is from the Learning Activities Subscale).

Learning programs were varied, with most of the Queenstown hub being exposed to both Yizani Sifunde and SmartStart. A key factor raised by teachers was that this was beneficial, but the programs were sometimes similar, and they needed help to sequence or integrate them meaningfully.

3.3 The length and breadth of classroom practice and practitioner knowledge

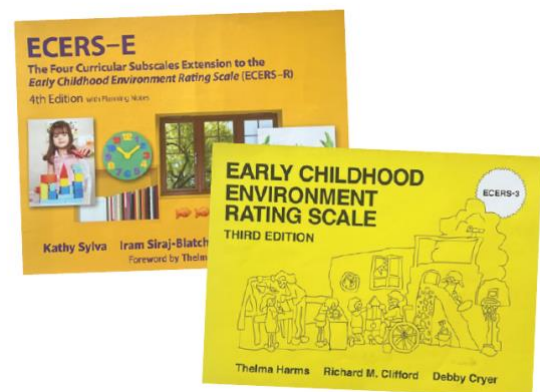
Classroom practices and teacher knowledge were assessed through various tools, including the ECERS-E Literacy subscale, ECERS-3 Language and Literacy Subscale, and ELOM Learning Program Quality Assessment. Two field researchers conducted data collection spending a day at each ECD site to observe and administer the assessment tools.

After each day, the researchers gathered to discuss and compare their observations, moderate their scores, and document the results. For the ECERS subscales data, which was initially scored with comments on physical copies during the day, the information was transferred and captured in an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis and documentation. This process ensured a systematic and organised approach to recording the assessment outcomes. ELOM LPQA scores were recorded using a dedicated tool on tablets throughout the day and were later verified during the collaborative construction and moderation meeting. All these scores, along with observations and detailed descriptions of the day's events, were documented collectively in monographs per ECD site.

Contextualisation of ECERS Literacy Scores

ECERS-3: Language and Literacy (LL) subscale

- Helping children expand vocabulary (oral vocabulary)
- Encouraging children to use language
- Staff use of books with children
- Encouraging children's use of books (independent reading of accessible books in a comfortable space)
- Becoming familiar with print (existence of environmental print and to what extent teachers use print to bring the purpose of print to children)



ECERS-E - Literacy subscale

- Print in the environment
- Book and literacy areas
- Adult reading with the children
- Sounds in words (focuses on rhymes, syllables and initial sounds and words)
- Emergent writing/mark-making (relates to what extent there are opportunities for children to do emergent writing or observe their teacher writing their words and to what extent they are encouraged to use writing for a purpose and engage with writing in a meaningful context like in their play)
- Talking and listening

Making sense of the scores

The ECERS-3 is an extension of the original scale developed in the United States, encompassing a wide range of items and indicators related to quality. Our specific interest lies in the language and literacy subscale among the six available subscales. The precursor to the ECERS 3, the ECERS-R, has been used in LMIC, including South Africa.

A UK team further expanded its use by incorporating it into classroom observations and creating an extension called the ECERS Extension, which is a curriculum focusing on Literacy, Maths, Science, and Diversity. For our evaluation, we focused on the Literacy subscale. While there were some overlaps with the ECERS 3, there were differences in emphasis, and certain items were not present in the ECERS-3, specifically sounds in words and emergent writing. It is worth noting that the ECERS-E has not been widely used in South Africa, except in the British Academy Study, which was conducted in South Africa in 2022⁴.

Each of these has a number of indicators the evaluation team would score against as they observe. The scoring scales are as per below, where all items are scored on a seven-point scale.

- inadequate (1–2)
- minimal (3–4)
- good (5–6)
- excellent (7)

Critique of the tools

There are legitimate critiques of the tools that are developed in the HICs when they are applied to LMICs.

Resource focused: One of the key ones is that some indicators are linked to resources whilst some are process focused. For example, if an observer looks at the book corner, they have to count a certain number of books but also the number of different books of a different kind e.g. fiction books, non-fiction books and other books. These are all resource-dependent, and a practitioner will get credit depending on whether they have met that criterion. Process factors look at the interaction between the practitioner and the children, the type of questions the practitioner asks, the opportunity for children to engage, and how the practitioner encourages children to talk. These can be scored without one having resources. The challenge is stop rules where if you do not meet the criteria for one item, which might be resource-dependent, you do not get credit for later items which might be more processed ones.

Solution - Our solution was to look at the scores as they are still valid on a broader understanding of quality, but we also looked at all the indicators beyond where the stop rule applies. So we looked beyond what would be allowed regarding the stop rules.

⁴ The report is still awaiting publication; however, a [learning brief](#) related to the content has already been released.

Storytelling: The observation tools were developed in high-resource contexts with access to resources and books in the classrooms; the items and indicators only focus on storybook reading and adults reading with children. There is no reference to oral storytelling, which is important in our context, which is story focused.

Solution: We thus developed extra items with the same wording and indicators and replaced, for example, where it says “adults read to children” with “adults tell stories to children”

Definitions of quality: What counts as quality is different in different contexts. In some cultures and contexts, child-led play-based learning is seen as high quality, whereas in other contexts, children are expected to follow the teacher's lead. So there might be different dynamics of quality which are specific to local contexts.

Solution: There is a tendency for low variability and low scores in low resource contexts, a finding from other LMICs. So in interpreting the scores and how the teachers have done, we should look at comparability to other contexts with similar constraints rather than compare to studies where conditions and contexts for learning are vastly different. Based on the study of the review of scores in LMIC countries, the observation was that LMICS typically score low aggregate scores, with average quality scores falling within the "inadequate" range (scores of 1 or 2). The highest scores observed usually only reach the threshold for being considered "acceptable" (scores of 3 or 4).

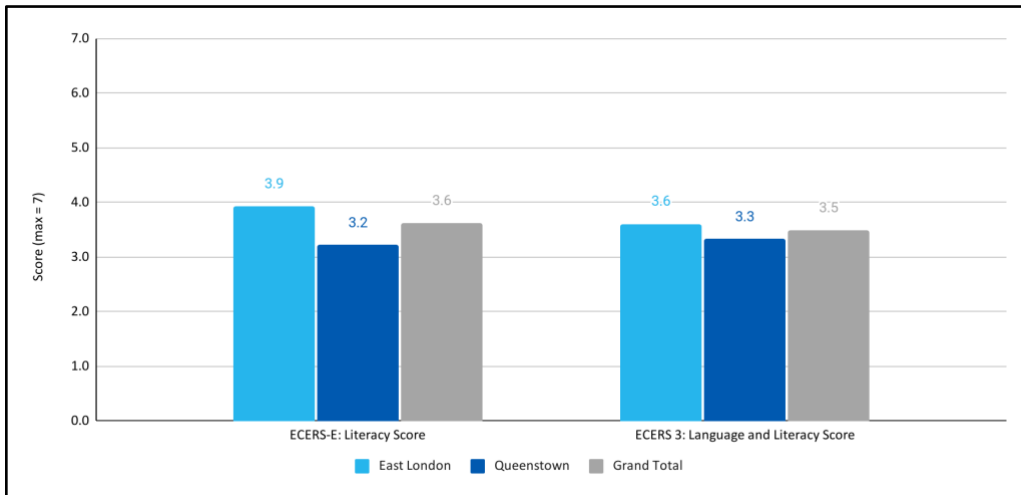
ECERS Aggregate scoring data

In the case study, the ECERS scores for the seven practitioners in the six ECD centres yielded an average mean score within the 3 to 4 range as per the figure below. While there was a considerable variation within this range, the results, when considered in the context of the LMIC average mean scores, are encouraging. Only one practitioner had a mean score below 3, specifically at 2.4, with the rest ranging from 3 to 5. This contrasts with similar studies in South Africa, where a higher percentage of practitioners scored in the inadequate range of 1 to 2 mean scores.

For instance, in a study (n=240) with results generalisable to the Western Cape (Biersterker et al., 2016), 32% of practitioners achieved a mean score of 1-2. In another smaller study (n=195) with the majority of classes sampled in poor communities, 48% of the practitioners had mean scores in the 1-2 range (Van Staden, 2016). Both of these studies used the ECERS-R Language Reasoning subscale, which is comparable to the subscales employed in this case study.

The variation between Queenstown and East London is influenced by the two practitioners in a public school setting who excelled across most of the indicators, which significantly magnifies the impact on a small sample. It does not reflect the general differences in quality between the two locations. Their school has a more established administration and well-resourced classroom settings. Removing these two practitioners results in similar scores between the two locations

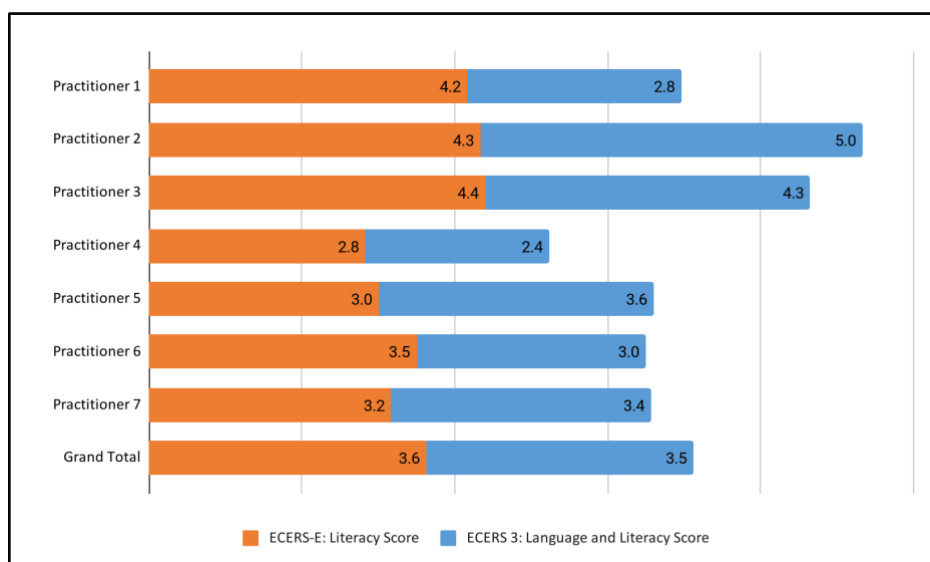
Figure 2: Overall ECERS-E and ECERS -3 scores



Classroom practices per practitioner

The graphic below shows the scores per practitioner. Whilst there is some variability, Practitioners 2 and 3, are from public schools in East London. This again shows encouraging results in the context of other comparable studies, with most case study practitioners achieving scores of between 3 and 4 for both subscales. The case study practitioners achieved similar results or better in some cases when compared to the British Academy study carried out in locations in Khayelitsha, Paarl, and Wellington, though the British Academy study took place in slightly higher SES contexts save for the Khayelitsha sample which was of a similar SES to this study. The control group in this study had an ECERS-E mean score of 2,97 whilst the intervention group mean was 3.22, for ECERS-3, the control group mean was 2.90, and the intervention group achieved 3.22. Caution is required when comparing these studies due to different sampling approaches.

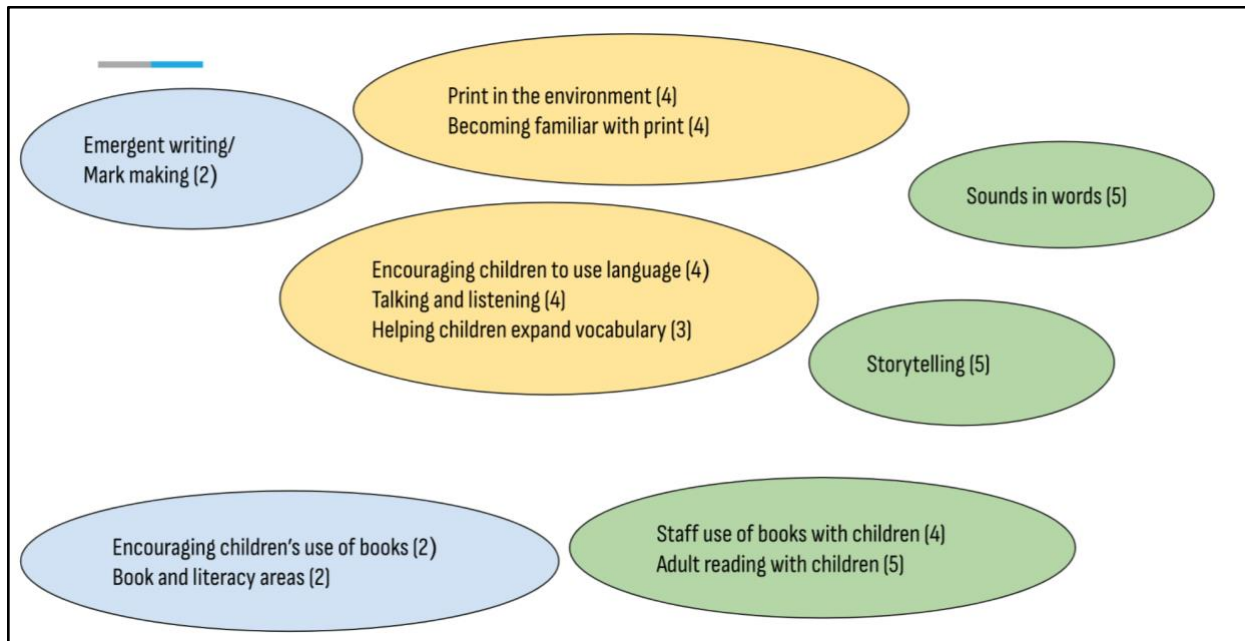
Figure 3: ECERS-3 and ECERS-E scores per practitioner



ECERS-E and ECERS-3 Item analysis

The graphic below provides the items underlying average scores of ECERS-E and ECERS-3 to unmask some items that practitioners did well on or need to improve on. The green items indicate aspects where practitioners generally excelled, while the yellow signifies areas where their performance fell within to slightly above the acceptable range for LMIC contexts. The blue highlights areas where practitioners did not perform as strongly and need improvement. These scores range from a scale of 1 to 7.

Figure 4: ECERS-3 and ECERS-E Item Analysis Results



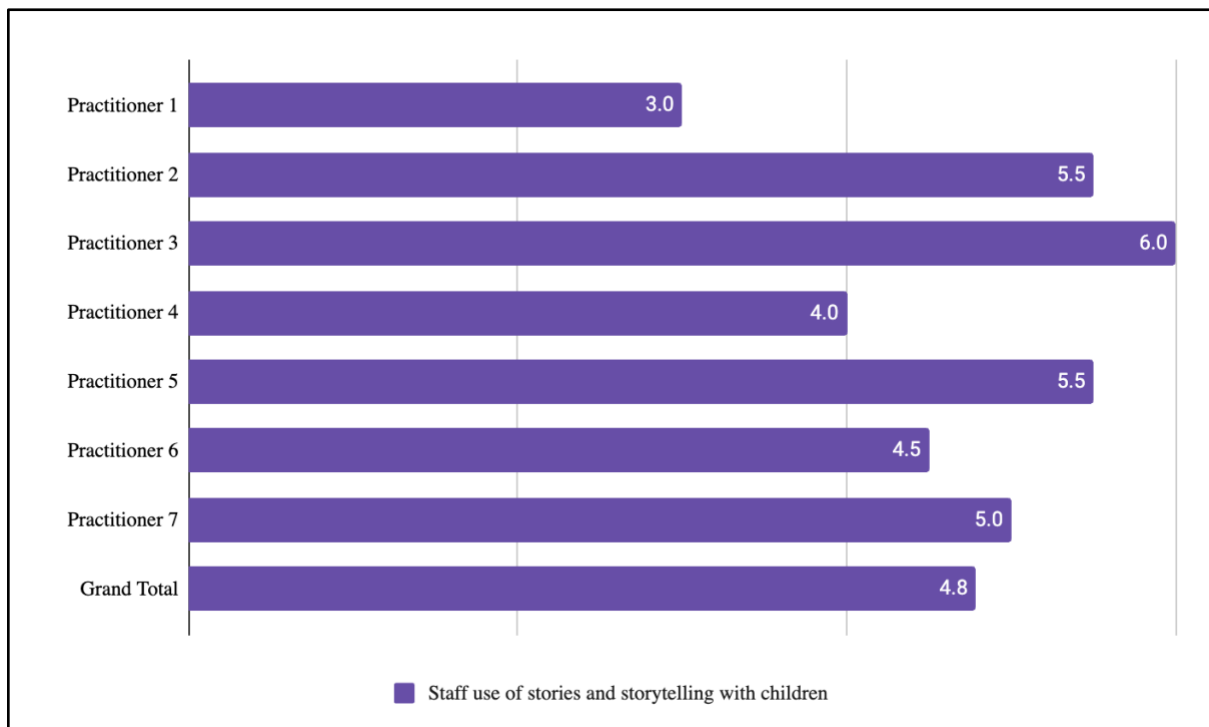
Storytelling

The evaluation team introduced the storytelling item to address the absence of an oral storytelling subscale in the ECERS. The team adapted the sub-scale from the ECERS-3 story reading scores and then calculated the average across these items. The results were solid, with mostly scores over 4, save for one practitioner whose storytelling delivery was somewhat weaker and did not accommodate two children who needed additional support. These scores were mostly drawn from a mix of practitioner-led storytelling sessions and Story Sparker story time sessions. A review of the daily programme and confirmations from practitioners and principles indicate that storytelling is a daily activity across all seven ECDs. In all classes, children were drawn in to take an active role during storytelling times, and the story was usually discussed afterwards.

All seven classes used appropriate support materials, such as pictures, in their delivery. However, none of them incorporated puppets or other props, even though they were available, and opportunities to use them existed. Classroom observation monitoring data collected in October 2023 by Story Sparkers, however, shows that 35% (n=31) of practitioners used puppets in their classrooms, suggesting that it is a practice that is used in some classrooms.

Furthermore, only three classes encouraged children to contemplate "what if" questions or connect the story's content to other experiences. There was just one practitioner who engaged in one-on-one storytelling with some children, albeit in a smaller class.

Figure 5: Staff use of stories and storytelling with children



Sound in words

Practitioners excelled in this aspect, with six classes incorporating isiXhosa and, in some instances, English rhymes into songs, particularly during the morning ring. The classroom atmosphere was consistently filled with excitement as practitioners actively encouraged children to sing and participate in the rhymes, with attention paid to syllables in words through clapping, stomping, and jumping, amongst other physical emphasis actions. In one class, a practitioner and Story Sparker used a phone connected to a speaker where children sang along to a common English rhyme emphasising specific words. There were no occasions observed where rhymes were spoken and not sung. A growth area for the practitioners is linking sounds to letters, as this was observed in only two classes.

Staff use of books

This was mainly delivered by Story Sparkers, with three cases of practitioners reading to children, where the Story Sparker practice had been observed in a reading club context they were facilitating. A review of the ECD daily programme and interviews with literacy mentors, practitioners and Story Sparkers, including feedback from monitoring data, shows that reading to children and using books is a daily activity across all the ECDs. Book time was always met with enthusiasm and excitement by learners. SS and practitioners showed much interest and enjoyment in the use of books. They created an atmosphere that cultivated an interest in reading books for children by making story time

something to look forward to through song and dance. Handing over books to learners for them to take them home made the whole experience even more exciting for children.

All the ECDs had appropriate books, though most were fiction and story books. Nal'ibali supplements, where they were used, provided some factual and informational content sources. There were, however, only two practitioners who used books that were appropriate to the classroom theme for the day, with the rest mostly falling off the theme of the day.

Adults reading with children

Practitioners performed similarly to the item on staff use of books, performing well across five out of eight of the indicators in it. Children were observed being actively engaged with the stories, and in some classes, they even narrated the story after it was read. These stories might have been introduced to the children earlier, explaining their familiarity. Similar to the item on adults telling stories to children, there were only two practitioners that encouraged children to think about “what if” questions or link the content to other experiences, missing an opportunity to extend children’s thinking. There were also only three practitioners and Story Sparkers who had discussions about print and letters as well as content as they read to children. However, it is important to note that this indicator was a higher-order one on this item, implying that it is not unexpected for practitioners to miss the mark. This is also not emphasised in the Little Stars programme.

Despite the availability of support materials for independent engagement, there was no evidence of children doing so autonomously across all observed ECDs. There was a notable observation in one ECD where the practitioner and Story Sparker distributed books intended for handout after story time to learners just before starting the reading session. Learners paged through the content alongside the teacher, who read and pointed them to images in her book and asked them to check in theirs. Surprisingly, this approach effectively maintained learner engagement without causing distractions, contrary to common expectations. If well executed, this approach bodes well for children’s book orientation skills.

Books and Literacy Area & encouraging children’s use of books

The great effort the programme put in to distribute in excess of 78,000⁵ books in 2023 was evident in every classroom observed in terms of bookshelves that were stocked with programme books and Nal'ibali hanging libraries. In most instances, programme books were the only ones present, suggesting that ECDs had no other source of books, a reality that most practitioners and ECD managers confirmed. However, though 38,880 Nal'ibali reading supplements were distributed, only one class had them easily accessible, though practitioners confirmed receiving them. The use of Nal'ibali supplements was observed in just one reading club, where the leader, also a practitioner, created small books from the supplements and had practitioners use them for their reading club sessions.

In all but one ECD, books were easily accessible for learners to read when they wanted to read. All classrooms also had attractive displays of books. Though no room was set aside for books because of

⁵ 2023 Program Monitoring Data

the socio-economic and infrastructure limitations of these ECDs, the books were arranged into a separate learning area within a large multi-purpose classroom.

The weak scores recorded for this item were not for lack of availability of books but for both diversity of materials and practitioner process issues:

(i) The book area has a limited variety of books, primarily fiction and story books, with a notable absence of informational/reference, counting/math, or rhyme/poetry books. Despite the presence of mats in some classes, the evaluation team did not perceive the book areas as particularly comfortable spaces. Program monitoring data collected by the Yizani Sifunde teams reveal that reading mats are available in 63% (n=43) of the classrooms they observed. A larger proportion of practitioners rated reading corners to be comfortable places, but programme teams acknowledged that this does not always translate into independent use by children. A reality observed by the evaluation team.

(ii) the evaluation team did not observe any of the children using the book area independently during free play or any other time of the day. Program monitoring data, however, shows that a slightly higher proportion of practitioners favourably rate the independent use of books by children.

(iii) Only two practitioners were observed encouraging children to use books or direct them to the reading area. In one observed case, a practitioner-led activity resulted in children picking books, while in another, still led by the teacher, children picked books to read to the whole class.

A review of monitoring data collected during classroom observations by Stories Sparkers in October 2023, however, shows an encouraging trend, with 88% (n = 41) of the ECDs they visited recording sightings of spontaneous independent reading. The data, however, still shows one or two children, in some cases more than five doing this in the visited ECDs, with Queenstown reporting lower observations.

The performance on this item serves as a litmus test linked to a core programme outcome:

"Children develop age-appropriate confidence in interaction with books".

The following reflection questions on encouraging children's spontaneous engagement with books should be considered.

(i) Are book areas modelled/hyped enough by practitioners to children in order to gather interest or present them as areas they can opt for in free play or any other time?

(ii) Are books considered items to be preserved and avoided for casual use/access by children?

(iii) What could make the book areas an inviting and enjoyable place for children?

(iv) Is there an allocation of time in the daily programme for children to access books independently in small groups?

Emergent writing and mark-making

Despite resource constraints in some ECDs, almost all but one had some materials, although insufficient, where children could access paper or writing materials, as confirmed by practitioners. Due to infrastructure limitations in these environments, most classes did not have dedicated writing corners. However, practitioners were credited for using the multipurpose learner tables, which are also used for writing and mark-making.

The weak results in this item are associated with process-related indicators. For instance, only two practitioners were observed writing what children said (others did not), overlooking an opportunity to connect text and writing with purpose and meaning. Additionally, there were only two classes where adults drew children's attention to the purpose of writing, such as addressing an envelope, creating a shopping list, or writing a story. Furthermore, the emergent writing of learners was displayed in only three classes. These findings are, however, consistent with The British Academy Study and other studies for pre-grade R and Grade R classrooms.

The lack of practice of this item by practitioners does not seem to stem from the lack of knowledge as they demonstrated in interviews a deep understanding of the Little Stars programme and its core methodologies, including emergent writing, and why it was important. The lack of practice could be due to the inability to mediate the emergent writing process for children in purposeful ways. The practitioners acknowledged that facilitating emergent writing was not one of their strong areas. They often find it challenging to implement, leading them to allow children to scribble without connecting it to a specific purpose.

Print in the Environment & Becoming Familiar with Print

Practitioners were credited for most of the structural or resource-linked indicators in these two items but were found wanting in some process-related indicators. All seven classrooms had labelled pictures that were visible to children. Other pictures were labelled with words so that children understand the meanings that go with what they are viewing. Most classes (five) had printed names of children in their cubby holes to encourage children to recognise printed words related to items of their interest. Generally, most classes were print-rich except for one with severe resourcing constraints. Reports from SS's indicate this as one of the most improved aspects between baseline and endline across the ECDs supported by the programme.

Some of the process-related indicators practitioners were credited for were observed in five out of the seven classes. This was evident in practitioners pointing out and reading print to children, particularly during the morning ring. Another instance was when practitioners encourage children to recognise printed words in their environment by showing how or why they used them. In one class, a practitioner was observed asking a learner to identify a play area by what was written on the label above it and then moving on to the next.

Only two practitioners were observed transcribing what children said, and in some instances, they even encouraged the child to write something. This was observed in two classrooms in the public school during maths time. Similarly, these practitioners were observed pointing out letters and words as they read print, even making the sounds of the letters or words. In both cases, children

were actively engaged and participated fully. At the school, one of the practitioners read the isiXhosa alphabet together with learners, pointing at letters and pronouncing their sounds together. This interactive session also included examples of isiXhosa words that would use those letters.

Encouraging children to use language, talking and listening, and helping children expand vocabulary

Practitioners recorded encouraging results with an average score of 4 for all three items with little variability and individual scores above 3, except for one practitioner who scored 2 in helping children expand vocabulary. Most practitioners observed frequently used names of people, things, and actions in routines and play to expand children's vocabulary. However, only three practitioners further explained unfamiliar words in a discernible way for children. Two practitioners could skilfully introduce new themes to provide a wide range of new words. There was generally little use of opportunities in the classroom materials and displays of other concrete experiences to introduce words. This was observed in three classes with one teacher from the public school using the Six Bricks Maths lesson to introduce words "above", "below", and "under" using bricks on children's tables.

All observed classrooms were learner-centred, with practitioners and Story Sparkers creating an environment and opportunity for children to engage in conversations with the teacher and among themselves. In all classes, there was space for children to ask questions, and in most instances, children were encouraged to provide answers with more than one word. However, practitioners did not create enough opportunities for one-to-one conversations, with only three observed engaging in such interactions. It is worth noting that four practitioners were consistently seen asking questions that extended children's language skills.

Maths in daily events

This was an extra item selected from the Learning Activities Subscale of the ECERS-3. Practitioners generally received low scores in this item, with an average score of 2, except for the two public school practitioners, who each achieved the maximum score. Their scores elevated the overall sample average to 4. Most practitioners were observed incorporating maths words or counting during routines. However, only in four classes were teachers observed using maths in non-math areas. The practitioners in the public school were, however, seen assigning complex maths-related tasks to their learners, who made commendable attempts to execute them, in most cases observed successfully. In contrast, private ECDs appeared to teach maths incidentally rather than having a dedicated and targeted programme. The public school seamlessly integrated the Six Bricks Methodology into daily activities as part of their maths teaching approach.

3.4 Programme quality assessment outcomes

The programme quality assessment was done using the ELOM LPQA as a measure of programme quality - aligned with the South African curriculum framework. It focuses on the provision and implementation of the learning programme activities.

Making sense of the scores

The scores of observations are done on a three-point scale ranging from inadequate, basic and good across five areas or sub-scales.

- The Learning Environment: Learning materials and classroom set-up (5 items)
- Assessment of Learning and Teaching: Session planning and progress monitoring (2 items).
- Relationships and Interactions: Practitioner interactions with children, child interactions, and discipline (4 items).
- Curriculum: Curriculum content, alignment with the National Curriculum Framework Early Learning and Development Areas and activity plans (5 items).
- Teaching Strategies: Teaching techniques and actions (5 items).

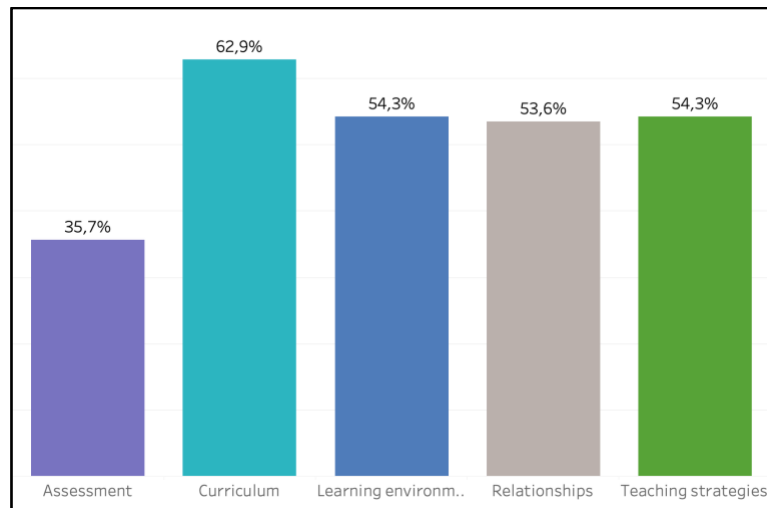
A supplementary, independent component evaluates materials and exercises related to gross motor development. The score from this item is not included in the subscales above.

Overall programme quality⁶

The assessment of overall programme quality is encouraging but indicates room for improvement in the case study sample. The graphic below shows that ECDs-excelled in the curriculum sub-scale, with the highest percentage score. These scores likely reflect the strong performance of the two classes in the public school, which had a strong curriculum delivered by experienced practitioners. The fact that only one ECD was considered inadequate may reflect the efforts that ITEC and Khululeka have put in to support the centres in achieving a curriculum that caters to most of the NCFs and ELDA. Without assigning causality, introducing a structured learning programme could have contributed to overall programme quality, especially for ECDs that did not have one. The nature of these targeted programs likely makes them more effective as they aim to teach skills directly instead of incidentally (Phillips et al., 2017).

⁶ The absence of comparable data poses a methodological challenge in evaluating learning programme quality based on this measure. However, when specific items of the subscale are considered, it becomes possible to draw connections to other measures.

Figure 6: ELOM Learning Program Quality overall results



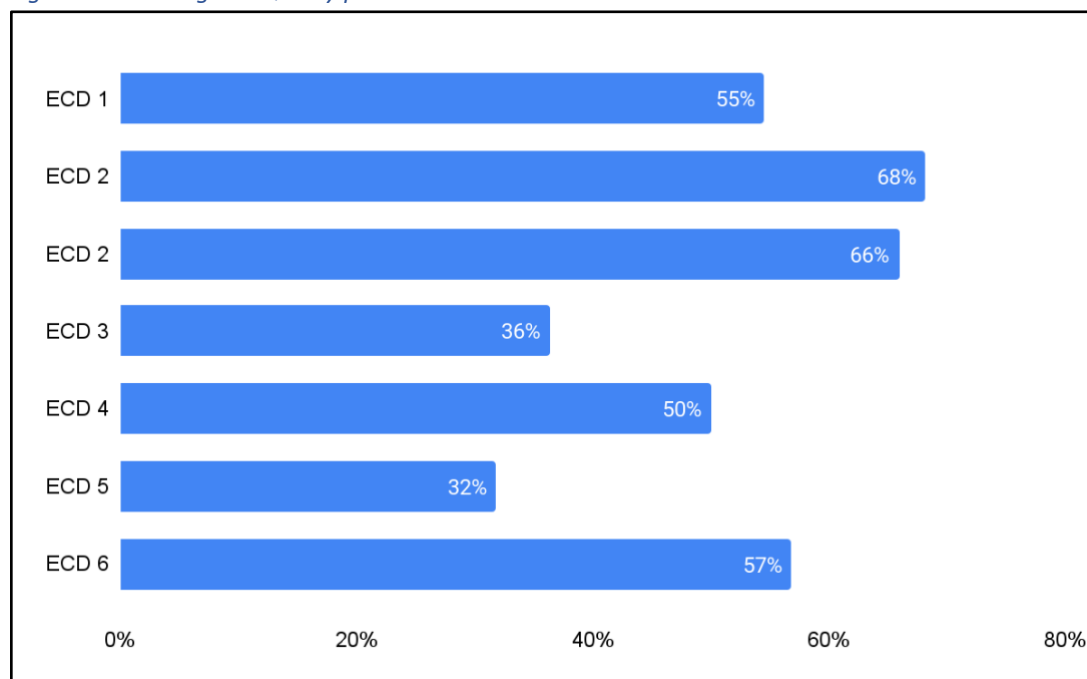
The typical informal structure of private ECD centres makes them susceptible to the prevalence of weaker systems, tools, and practices. This deficiency is evident, especially in the assessment item, which received the lowest score. The remaining results highlight similar, though different, observations based on ECERS subscales.

The overall quality of the early learning programme per ECD

Overall score for the ECD is derived by summing up all the individual subscale scores. The graphic below represents these scores as percentages, with the total score being out of a maximum of 44. According to the Early Learning Outcome Measure (ELOM), the fact that most ECD centre programs scored below 60%, suggesting that they require assistance to enhance their overall quality.

The graphic below indicates that the ECD represented by Practitioner 6 requires the most attention. This assessment aligns with observations from both ECERS-E and ECERS-3, where the ECD centre was flagged for resource constraints, which subsequently affected overall programme quality. The centre also faced concerns related to overcrowding and had the least print-rich walls. Similarly, the programs for the two practitioners in the public school were observed to have met most of the ECERS items. They are also ranked the highest in the ELOM LPQA.

Figure 7: ECD Program Quality per ECD



LPQA sub-scale ratings per ECD.

This section delves into the various subscales in detail. The results should be reviewed together with the [ELOM LPQA](#) tool in Annexure 2, which provides detailed scale descriptions.

a) Learning environment

Most ECD programs meet the basic requirements for quality but need follow-up support in the form of resources to strengthen the availability of tools that facilitate learning. The learning environment sub-items represent structural issues that could be solved by increasing access and availability of learning materials in the ECD.

Table 3: Learning environment sub-scale ratings per ECD

Learning Environment	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Room Arrangement	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Inadequate	Basic
Indoor Materials	Basic	Basic	Good	Basic	Basic	Inadequate	Basic
Developmentally appropriate materials	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Accessible, safe materials	Good	Good	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Good
Open-ended materials	Basic	Basic	Good	Basic	Basic	Inadequate	Basic

Over half of the ECDs received a rating of “good” for ensuring that all materials were arranged in a way that allowed easy access for children. The other ECDs received a basic rating primarily because they tended to place learning materials on higher shelves, possibly due to space constraints, rendering them less accessible to the children.

ECD programs were credited a basic rating for Room Arrangement if they had three distinct learning areas and a rating of “good” if they had four. ECDs with more than one of the same learning areas, such as two construction areas, were only credited once for it. Limitations on space could have contributed to most ECD programs achieving a basic rating. Opportunities to improve include using areas outside the classes to set up other staff-supervised learning areas. This was observed in some ECDs, and they were credited for it. Other items within this sub-scale pertain to the availability of a sufficient variety of developmentally appropriate materials that are open-ended and easily accessible to children. For example, for open-ended materials (such as wooden blocks, sand etc), a basic rating was credited to most of the ECDs because they had only one example of open-ended materials in two learning areas, whilst a rating of good was given if there were at least two examples of open-ended material in three learning areas. Open-ended materials play an important role in encouraging creativity and problem-solving skills in children.

Opportunities for improvement in this subscale are readily accessible, such as incorporating locally available materials from children's homes and the environment. However, some improvements may require financial resources to enrich materials in each learning area. Assisting practitioners with guidance on suitable room arrangements and identifying materials appropriate for various ages and disabilities has the potential to enhance this subscale.

b) Child assessment

This emerged as one of the areas with significant gaps in practice and tools, as per the table below. Despite the awareness among practitioners and principals about the necessity to collect and track learner performance data, there were no assessment records available. This suggests that planning and support needs might not be informed by systematic observations by practitioners. Practitioners mostly mentioned that they observed and assessed learners informally. The execution of these items within this subscale was more successful in the public school, possibly due to the availability of assessment tools and guidelines for Grade R and the existence of a strong and supportive school management team. The Eastern Cape DoE does not provide clear guidelines for assessing and tracking learner performance for pre-Grade R classes, and these are also not fully specified in the National Curriculum Framework. Most ECDs in the sample are informal social enterprises and will likely struggle with adopting and setting up systems such as one for assessing learners, especially if the tools are not readily available.

Table 4: Assessment for learning and teaching sub-scale ratings per ECD

Assessment for learning and teaching	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Child observation	Inadequate	Good	Good	Inadequate	Basic	Inadequate	Inadequate
Progress records	Inadequate	Good	Good	Inadequate	Basic	Inadequate	Inadequate

Teachers with large classes acknowledged feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of observing learners, especially when lacking the necessary tools. In contrast, teachers in public schools, despite having large classes, mentioned that they observed prepared activities in groups, attributing their ability to do so to the tools provided and planning support from the administration.

Enhancing this aspect would require providing practitioners and ECDs with assessment and tracking tools, along with training on how to effectively use them.

c) Relationships and interactions

This was fairly achieved and reflects the observations from the ECERS subscales. Interesting observations related to how teachers, and Story Sparkers, acknowledged and recognised children throughout the observation. This created a warm and welcoming learning environment that created room for engagement and free interaction between learners and teachers. Just like the ECERS observation, this confirms the learner-centredness of most of the classrooms.

Table 5: Relationships and interactions sub-scale ratings per ECD

Learning Environment	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Child-to-child interactions	Basic	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Inadequate	Good
Staff-child interactions	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Good	Good
Child efforts acknowledged	Basic	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Positive discipline	Basic	Basic	N/A	N/A	Basic	Basic	Basic

Practitioners were credited with a basic rating because they sometimes created a friendly atmosphere that allowed for warm child to child and staff to child interactions including not using discipline methods that are harsh. Practitioners who received a "good" rating exceeded expectations by consistently engaging in positive interactions, displaying sensitivity to non-verbal cues, regularly using encouragement to acknowledge individual children's ideas, and facilitating activities that encouraged collaborative work while supporting them to resolve conflicts independently.

d) Curriculum

The majority of the ECDs fulfilled certain but not all aspects of early learning developmental areas, resulting in them receiving partial credit and maintaining a basic rating. The basic score likely reflects the benefit of structured learning programs in the case study sample. SLPs (Structured Learning Programs) differentiate themselves by not relying on incidental learning. Instead, they emphasise clarity in learning goals and systematically approach curriculum elements to build and scaffold skills. This approach is evident not only in the Yizani Sifunde programme but also in other programs implemented in the same schools, including Six Bricks, Smart Start, and others. Maths programs were, however, found wanting for most of the ECDs.

Table 6: Curriculum sub-scale ratings per ECD

Curriculum	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Use of NCF	Good	Good	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Programme Planning	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Daily schedule/ programming	Basic	Good	Good	Basic	Good	Inadequate	Good
Language & Literacy	Basic	Basic	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Numeracy and Mathematics	Basic	Good	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic

The majority of ECDs conducted daily story time, engaged in reading with children, and had practitioner-child conversations. However, these activities only earned them a basic rating for this item. To achieve a rating of good, practitioners were expected to go beyond the mentioned activities to include recording children's sayings or labelling drawings, and displaying children's emergent writing on the walls, amongst others.

To their credit, some practitioners involved children in in-class discussions and participation, including recalling parts of a story. However, they fell short in facilitating children to answer questions in an extended way.

e) Teaching strategies

Some of these results reflect findings from some ECERS subscale items that emphasise process aspects of teaching.

Table 7: Teaching strategies sub-scale ratings per ECD

Teaching strategies	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Free play	Good	Inadequate	Basic	Inadequate	Basic	Inadequate	Good
Staff-child engagement	Good	Good	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Group times	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Questions to extend learning	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic	Basic
Emotional development	Good	Good	Basic	Inadequate	Basic	Basic	Good

The predominance of basic scores suggests that there is some adherence to the expected practices within the various teaching strategies employed by practitioners. Group times sometimes allowed for children to participate but it was not throughout group time sessions for the practitioner to be credited with a “good” rating. There was also limited use of open-ended questions to extend children’s thinking during these times. A basic rating was credited for two instances where this was observed, implying that increasing the use of open-ended questions to encourage children to reflect on actions and ideas would strengthen this item. Reflections from practitioner interviews show that most of them understand the importance of reflection and open-ended questions as an important aspect of their teaching repertoires, and they know how to carry it out, signalling that it’s a practice that has taken root.

f) Gross Motors materials and activities

The poor assessment in this subscale reflects the shortage of resources to erect outdoor gross motor large equipment and other toys that facilitate the development of gross motor skills. The evaluation team however, observed that some of the equipment, such as tyres, can be locally sourced if practitioners made an effort to do so.

Table 8: Gross motor materials subscale ratings per ECD

Gross motor materials	ECD1	ECD2	ECD2	ECD3	ECD4	ECD5	ECD6
Gross motor materials	Inadequate	Inadequate	Inadequate	Good	Basic	Inadequate	Inadequate

3.5 Parent/caregiver early literacy and language practices.

To fully understand the reflections in this section, it is important to ground the parent workshops in the context of how they were integrated into the project. In various South African contexts, the common assumption is that children's education primarily occurs at school or at their ECD Centre. Therefore, one of the goals of parental workshops is to change this perception and alter parents' understanding of their role. Likewise, educators and ECD practitioners were prone to assume that parents lack interest in supporting learning at home, when in fact, many parents would actively participate if provided guidance on how to support their children. Focused group discussions and telephonic interviews with parents and caregivers in this case study revealed that parents not only lacked understanding but were keen to be involved if they knew how.

It is noteworthy that when Wordworks developed the parenting intervention at the ECD level, the focus was on a home-visiting delivery model or on home visitors conducting group workshops for parents whose children are not enrolled in a centre-based programme. While Wordworks had a framework for teachers to lead parent workshops at a school level, there were realistic concerns about whether ECD practitioners could take on this task. They faced various constraints, including low pay, extended working hours, absence of supportive management structures, and logistical challenges related to venue arrangements. Despite these constraints, ECD practitioners are motivated by a parent component, and the ECD based workshop model originated from practitioners' requests, arising from their own training experiences and the belief that parents could benefit from the insights gained.

The reflections on ECD based parental workshops from this section should thus be viewed as developmental, aiming to gather insights for supporting future improvements and exploring the underlying driving forces. Despite initial scepticism from donors and others in the sector about practitioners leading workshops, the evolution of this model is a commendable achievement that has provided opportunities for exploring various themes arising out of sites where they were implemented successfully.

Though parents and caregivers were difficult to reach, the reflections captured here form a sample of only 11 parents/caregivers in both Queenstown and East London. The interviews revealed the following insights.

Children are shifting literacy dynamics at home.

Anecdotal evidence from parents revealed that the shared storybooks children brought home captivated their children's interest considerably. In fact, some parents or caregivers even mentioned

that their children were enthusiastically pressuring them to read the books together, indicating a strong eagerness for shared reading experiences within the family.

Parents and caregivers mentioned that they are eager not to dampen the interest of children and are now making adjustments to their schedules. This change in schedule reflects a hopeful start to commitment on the part of parents to actively engage in their children's learning and build a positive reading environment at home.

The proactive role of Story Sparkers and practitioners, consistently inquiring about whether children have experienced reading each day, has contributed significantly to shaping the expectations of these children. Those who have not had the opportunity to be read to are now expressing a heightened interest, placing additional expectations on their parents/caregivers to engage in reading activities. This deliberate interaction has not only cultivated a sense of anticipation and eagerness for reading among the children but has also inadvertently created positive pressure on parents/caregivers to fulfil this newfound expectation. As a result, there is a noticeable dynamic where children actively seek out reading experiences, thereby building a collaborative and enriched learning environment within the home.

Shifting literacy attitudes at home is a process that requires a long-term view.

Parents/caregivers expressed surprise and admiration on seeing their children's ability to understand and narrate stories based on illustrations and recollection of the stories they were read at school. Their surprise perhaps reflects the fact that many parents may not have grown up with books in their homes, and therefore associate the use of books with children of school-going age. The depth of the children's cognitive and linguistic development remains something that parents/caregivers need exposure to in their homes for them to appreciate its value. This observation is a testament to the effectiveness of the storytelling methods employed, highlighting the power of visual literacy and the children's innate storytelling abilities.

This positive feedback, albeit from a limited number of parents, suggests the necessity for programmatic initiatives to disseminate their experiences to encourage interest and involvement among other parents. However, recognising that this change might require time, adopting a more practical and long-term programmatic approach would be advisable.

Parents/caregivers are candid about their limitations.

Parents and caregivers acknowledged their inconsistency in reading to their children, a sentiment echoed by practitioners and Story Sparkers. They highlighted that the feelings of sadness when they do not read to their children at home sometimes bring guilt as they have many things to do. While guilt may not be the intended response sought through the process, it does, however, indicate that involved parents become increasingly conscious of their role in supporting their children's language and literacy development. This awareness aligns with recognising other responsibilities they hold and highlights a growing understanding among parents/caregivers of the central role they play in their children's literacy development.

Non-responsive parents/caregivers require a broader strategy for engagement

Despite the encouraging reflections from responsive parents, parental/caregiver engagement continues to be challenging resulting in low attendance at most of the workshops for the six case study ECDs. Notably, most of those parents who are generally engaged actively participate in these workshops. This finding is unsurprising, given that motivated parents would take advantage of these opportunities when they arise. A strategy to leverage actively involved parents as catalysts to stimulate interest among less-engaged caregivers/parents should be sought.

This disparity in engagement highlights the challenges in reaching and involving a broader spectrum of parents and caregivers, indicating a need for targeted strategies to enhance overall parental participation and involvement in educational initiatives.

Predominant obstacles parents pointed out for their limited participation in workshops were their involvement in other competing responsibilities, lack of transport and the need for refreshments at workshops, especially for older caregivers who are on medication. Some of these could be easily resolved by increasing budgets. However, reflections from Story Sparkers and practitioners were particularly insightful, emphasising that certain caregivers/parents perceived the workshops as intimidating because of the length and that they risked embarrassment as some of them also struggled with their academic work and reading. Additional insights and reflections from project implementers suggest that some parents might be reluctant to attend sessions if they have not paid tuition.

These few examples highlight the complex nature of parental engagement in these communities. The difficulty in reaching parents and caregivers was also experienced by Story Sparkers and practitioners who faced challenges in effectively engaging parents for parent workshops. There were, however, cases where the work of both Story Sparkers and practitioners collaborated well to host successful workshops despite these challenges. Interviews with practitioners highlighted the need for a shift in practitioner perceptions when approaching parental engagement.

3.6 Reading Clubs

The evaluation team visited community-led and Story Sparker-led reading clubs. Additionally, the team facilitated focused group discussions with parents and caregivers of children who attend the Reading Clubs (RCs). This comprehensive approach allowed the team to gain insights from club organisers and the families involved, providing a well-rounded understanding of the dynamics and impact of the reading clubs within the literacy ecosystem. The following insights emerged.

Reading Clubs are a fun and safe place to be

Reading Clubs (RCs) proved to be a fun, enriching space for children. In these clubs, children engaged in various enjoyable activities, including singing, drawing, writing, creating art, dancing, and, notably, reading and writing. The link between reading and writing is a strong lever for other future literacy

skills of these children. This was possible because most children were familiar with writing and could mostly read independently.

The interactive and creative environment was observed to cultivate a love for literacy, and children were not only entertained but also took books home, extending the impact of the club activities beyond the immediate session. This holistic approach to learning within RCs contributed to a positive and enjoyable educational experience for the participating children. Parents/Caregivers indicated that as long as the facilitator is known and trusted, they would support reading clubs, providing a safe but beneficial environment for their children to spend time.

Reading Club Leaders Preparation,

The evaluation team observed that RC leaders were enthusiastic, making the experience enjoyable for the children. These leaders demonstrated a high level of preparation, contributing to the clubs' success. Their enthusiasm and preparedness played a crucial role in creating a positive and engaging environment for the children, contributing to the overall effectiveness of the RCs as spaces for joyful learning and literacy enrichment.

Recruitment and selection of reading club leaders

Community reading clubs struggled to take off even until well into the year. One of the reasons is that even though Nal'ibali has experience in forming and sustaining reading clubs, it was not easily implementable in the Yizani Sifunde project context. Interviews with RC leaders and programme teams point to the fact that establishing and running an ECD-based reading club run by a practitioner was more manageable compared to setting up and sustaining a community-based reading club run by a volunteer.

This observation suggests that there may be inherent challenges or complexities associated with organising reading clubs at the community level. One of the key ones is that recruiting and engaging community volunteers who are not remunerated is difficult unless they have an innate love for the work. Reading clubs sometimes do not have established and trusted venues unless they use a school facility and a trusted RC leader. Further exploring these differences could provide valuable insights into effective strategies for establishing and maintaining reading clubs in various contexts.

3.7 Integration of Little Stars with other programs

Significant implementation of other programs was observed in the same ECDs where Yizani Sifunde was being implemented. In fact, all the ECDs within the sample for the Queenstown hub were formally registered as SmartStart centres, whilst the East London hub had 25%. While this could introduce elements of contamination that complicate attempts at causal attribution, it should be viewed positively as it enriches the overall early learning experiences of children. Rather than isolating project effects, the approach shifts towards acknowledging the contribution and integration of various initiatives for improved learner outcomes. This recognition of a holistic learning

environment emphasises the collaborative impact of multiple interventions in enhancing the overall educational experience for young learners.

With that in mind, what remains is that the integration should be done in a way that releases value in the classroom. Indications from practitioner interviews and classroom observations suggest that the Yizani Sifunde experience has been variable. This variability appears to hinge on factors such as the active involvement and support of the practitioners, their curiosity and interest in the programme, and additional support from mentors or peers. The evaluation team observed a case where the integration was handled well, but this was in a public school with experienced practitioners and a supportive and knowledgeable management team. The integration details are in Annexure 1 in ECD 1, where the Yizani Sifunde Little Stars Program was integrated with the Six Bricks, Maths Up, Takalani Sesame and Think Equal. The practitioner reflected in interviews:

"I began the story of Koketso last week, and this marks the second week of running it, so today I'll continue with it. I've used them together with the Think Equal programme, which is also story-based. Since we're working on subtraction, Six Bricks uses concrete blocks for this purpose.

I conducted these activities in the morning. However, in the afternoon, I used to use the Yizani Sifunde story cycle to reinforce the same concept through storytelling further since the story of Koketso is about lost chickens. The good thing about Yizani Sifunde is that it brings in a strong language and literacy component to the day, which I often integrate with my theme and my teaching plan. So, on a daily basis, I integrate the Yizani Sifunde programme into the ECDOE programme which the daily programme has set aside for story time".(Practitioner A, School 2, August 2023)

Other practitioners in other ECDs related that they use Yizani Sifunde with Smart Start. However, they adopt a strategic approach by spacing the literacy components of each programme, avoiding consecutive implementation to prevent overwhelming children. Some practitioners expressed the need for support, indicating a lack of clarity on the best way to integrate the various programs.

The coexistence of multiple interventions in ECD is a call for intervention coordination and support to ECD centres and ECD centre managers.

3.8 Yizani Sifunde Project Management

This section highlights learning about how the project was managed. Though this is not part of this evaluation's scope, it provided the evaluation team with an opportunity to document key learnings that can be shared with the community of organisations implementing education programs. This section does not replace the fidelity of implementation findings. These findings will be presented in a distinct endline report that will extensively use monitoring data and will encompass both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the evaluation methodology.

3.8.1 Partnership arrangements

As explained in earlier sections of this evaluation report, the project is executed through a consortium of organisations, including Book Dash, Nal’ibali, and Wordworks, in collaboration with their implementation partners, Khululeka and ITEC. This arrangement was initiated at the funder's request, Liberty Community Trust, which brought these organisations together due to their complementary expertise.

It is important to note that the multi-dimensional nature of the project - including materials production & distribution, practitioner training and on-site support in centres - required multiple organisations to work together, as very few organisations have all of the required capacities in-house. Combining methodologies therefore requires collaborating institutions. Effective collaboration, however, is not easy. It is rarely understood as a distinct ‘workstream’, with its own dedicated activities, personnel requirements, skills and resourcing. Often collaboration processes are either ignored (taken for granted) or retrospectively paid attention to when there are crises or conflicts. One of the valuable lessons from the Yizani Sifunde project is how to ‘do collaboration’ proactively, with intentionality and care.

The education sector has not traditionally embraced regular multi-agency collaboration, leading to fragmentation and unnecessary duplication of resources and efforts. The hesitancy towards collaboration is understandable given the complex nature of partnerships, encompassing challenges like perceived competition for limited funding and resources, divergent goals, power imbalances, communication barriers, disparities in organisational cultures and systems, accountability issues, trust deficits, and changes in leadership or personnel. The Yizani Sifunde project was not immune to some of these challenges but found a way to deal with most of them. The insights presented in this section are derived from the project partners, including the funder, and also encompass reflections from the evaluation team.

Noteworthy insights about partnerships and collaborations for other education projects include

a) *Formalisation of partner responsibilities*

From the beginning, the consortium defined formalised project administration duties alongside their distinct programmatic roles. Wordworks took on the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) responsibilities, whereas Book Dash assumed administration and secretariat duties, including communication with the funder and reporting. Nal’ibali led in managing human resources, encompassing recruitment and on-the-ground team training, as well as overseeing media and communications.

b) *Significant investments in collaborative meetings and updates*

The team planned for and held regular monthly meetings, which included all project partners and their teams, including the funder. These comprehensive meetings facilitated a deeper understanding among the partners of the full spectrum of project work and the intersections between partners’ respective responsibilities, contributing to developing a

project culture and a working model witnessed by the evaluation team. The meetings were also a structure that ensured accountability, fostered shared values, and found solutions. Despite having planned for such collaboration time, reflections from partners were that the required time investment to make the partnership successful was underestimated. If all the meeting times were costed for in the original proposal, the collaborative partnership would have become prohibitively expensive. Since the meetings are necessary for navigating the challenges of a complex partnership, this poses the question of whether participants in partnerships are willing to take on 'unfunded mandates'. In the case of Yizani Sifunde, all partners were able to dedicate the time and resources to the collaboration meetings.

c) *Alignment of goals and systems*

Though the partners came from different organisations, they had worked with each other bilaterally and in various personal combinations and shared a strong focus on education programs. This background likely contributed to a solid foundation for their engagement. It is likely that the time invested in the partnership contributed to strengthening the alignment of goals. The partners in the consortium, however, pointed out the challenges faced in aligning the systems of various organisations. These challenges contributed to some delays in achieving deliverables, such as the establishment of reading clubs.

One of the most important systems that was aligned across all partners was the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) system, as discussed in the next section. This was a particularly important example of effective collaboration and the implementation of this alignment and the ongoing monitoring and data sharing processes also contributed to a continuous deepening of the collaborative relationship.

3.8.2 Monitoring Systems and Project Data

Although the evaluation team was not tasked with evaluating the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) system, the interactions with both the MERL team and the system itself prompted the evaluation team to document the experience for further learning.

This is particularly noteworthy in a sector where educational implementing partners have historically lacked robust MERL systems. The Yizani Sifunde project designed and implemented a comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) system, establishing a strong foundation for understanding project-level details.

The evaluation team found the system robust, encompassing a structured framework for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data, offering in-depth insights into various aspects of the project. This system has all the key components that make it work, including periodic surveys, human capacity, an evaluative culture, M&E partnerships, a regularly updated database, routine monitoring and, most importantly, uses the information to improve results (Gorgens & Kusek, 2010). Of note is a strong evaluative culture that the Yizani Sifunde team cultivated across all the partners and role players in the project.

During the collaborative effort between the evaluation team and the Yizani Sifunde team to develop the project's monitoring framework⁷, the required indicators (both at output and outcome levels) had already been in the Yizani Sifunde team's monitoring system, occasionally requiring only minor adjustments. These indicators, backed with data sources, provide a solid basis for establishing fidelity and triangulating results with other arms of the evaluation to establish a more balanced understanding of results.

Noteworthy insights for other education projects emerging from this project concerning MERL systems include:

a) *Embedding M&E into project planning and execution*

MERL was a key component of the project planning phase, and it was embedded as part of the execution of the project across its different components.

b) *Human capacity for M&E systems*

A capable team was assigned to handle the MERL function, with clearly defined responsibilities. As the project progressed the scope of the MERL team's responsibilities grew resulting in an increased budget allocation to them for 2022 and 2023. This mirrors the project's established partnership arrangements, which were formalised and recognised as contractually binding.

c) *Evaluative thinking & culture*

A culture of evaluative thinking and learning was instilled among all key project contributors, including implementing partners ITEC and Khululeka and Story Sparkers, amongst other stakeholders. The interactions of the evaluation team with these stakeholders reflected this culture. The evaluation team found no attempts to conceal non-functional aspects, to the contrary these were voluntarily disclosed, as they were seen as a valuable contribution to the broader learning process to enhance the project.

d) *Use of Monitoring Data*

Regularly, monitoring data is utilised for reflection, learning, accountability, and improving implementation. Several reports are generated from this data for both internal and external purposes. In our view, this approach solidified the significance of being data-driven and enhanced evaluative thinking, in addition to contributing towards project improvement.

3.9 The role of Story Sparkers

Story Sparkers were found to be mature, enthusiastic and well-trained individuals who used a variety of methods and tools to generate learner engagement and interest. Observations of parent workshops, story time sessions, reading club sessions, and follow-up interviews with them unveiled not only their passion for their work but also their high competence in it across the board, hinting at the effectiveness of their recruitment and training. They generated excitement and fun while

⁷ [Yizani Sifunde Evaluation Framework](#)

reading stories and books to children, greatly contributing to the project's aim of making children's experiences of reading and storytelling a positive, nurturing activity.

Reflections from practitioners were positive regarding relationships with them and their children, describing them as cordial, supportive and, most importantly, loved by children. On numerous occasions during observations, the evaluation team noted them as an additional resource in the classroom, enhancing the overall classroom environment and sometimes acting as a tool for differentiated support.

Practically all practitioners appreciated the valuable insights they gained about reading to children from Story Sparkers, suggesting that their skills were being passed through practice. Observations of practitioners reading stories to children aligned with this assertion.

In the only parent workshop, the evaluation team observed, a Story Sparker was instrumental in creating hands-on learning experiences for parents through song, dance, and games and thoughtfully integrating these elements into the workshop content. Her collaboration with the practitioner was seamless and respectful. The immense value of these workshops was echoed by the parents who attended them, citing how they found the content helpful and how they now understood why children would be excited about books. More detailed reflections on the parent workshop are in Annexure 6.

In a few instances reported by teachers Story Sparker played a significant role in organising and holding parent workshops. While acknowledging the challenges of engaging parents, some practitioners emphasised that it would have been even more challenging without the involvement of Story Sparkers.

A key insight derived from this feedback is that Story Sparkers are strategically placed to play an integrating role across the home environment, ECD centres, and the community through their role in visiting homes collecting data, supporting in organising and conducting parent workshops, and establishing reading clubs.

4 Sustainability findings

The sustainability methodology aimed to assess the degree to which practises from the programme were sustained by project beneficiaries one year after receiving support. A limitation of the methodology is that the sample is self-selected, and data collected was self-reported. The findings presented in this section are drawn from a group of practitioners who received support from the programme in 2022. These respondents participated in refresher training sessions facilitated by implementing partners, Khululeka and ITEC in Queenstown and East London in August 2023 where they self-complemented the tool. A total of 32 practitioners completed the survey (17 in Queenstown and 15 in East London).

a) 2022 cohort sample characteristics

This self-selected sample includes practitioners who are currently teaching ECD classes. The majority of participants teach pre-grade R classes, with the next highest number teaching mixed groups. All respondents in this sample were female. The following figures provide a breakdown of the respondents' characteristics.

Figure 8: Current role in ECD (n=32)

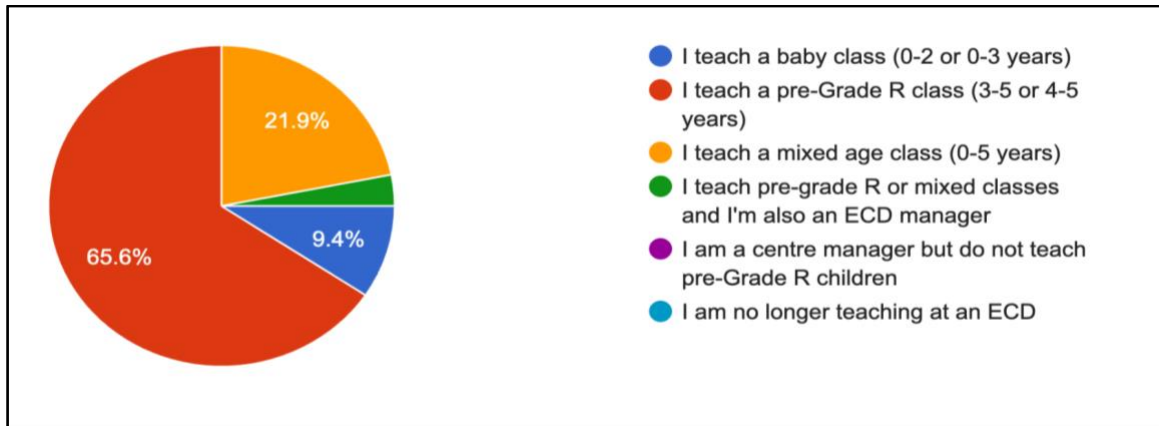


Figure 9: Highest qualification (n=32)

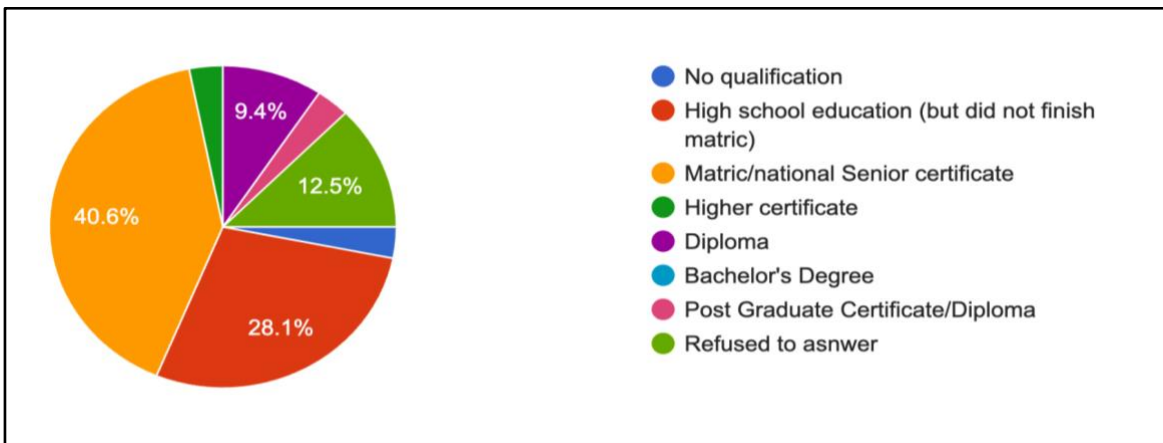
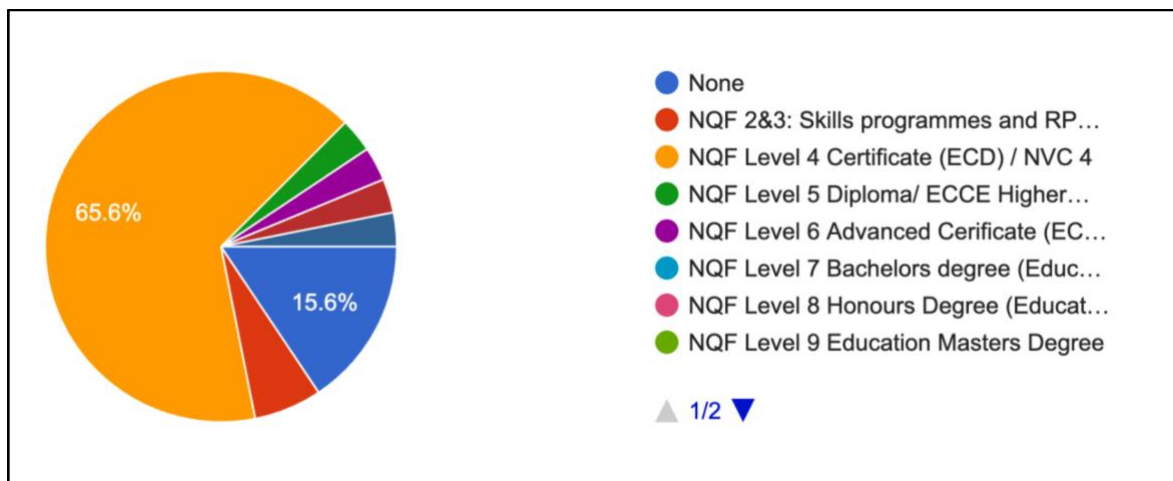


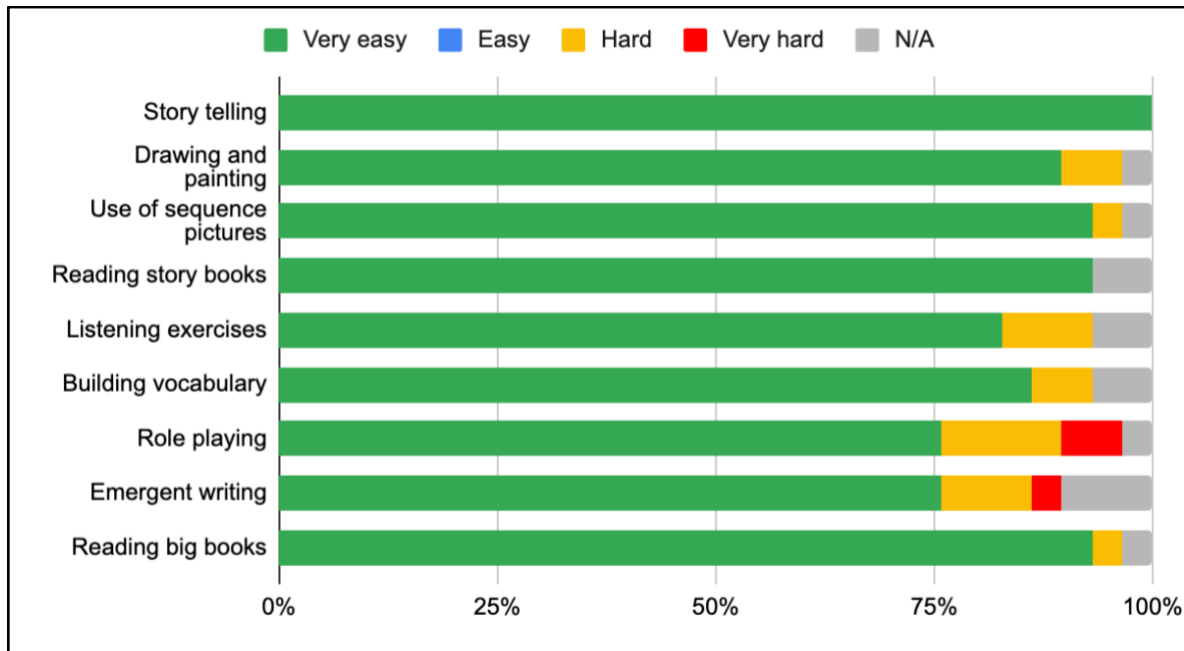
Figure 10: ECD Specific training/qualification (n=32)



b) Sustainability of classroom practices

Most participants noted that the Little Stars programme activities and practices were generally straightforward and easy to handle in their classrooms, though a smaller proportion (10%, n=32) held the same view regarding emergent writing and role-playing (Fig. 10). Only one practitioner mentioned that she found the methodologies challenging, an interesting distinction to observations from the 2023 cohort of beneficiaries. Without making direct comparisons, reflections from the 2023 cohort of practitioners flagged emergent writing as challenging.

Figure 10: Ease of conducting classroom practices (n=29)



The majority of practitioners report that they did not stop any of the classroom practices they did in 2022 with the most sustained activity being storytelling, recording 79% of practitioners maintaining the same level of practice as during the year of support (Fig. 11). This finding is not unexpected, given that a majority of practitioners found it easy, and additionally, storytelling is often used in conjunction with other approaches such as vocabulary building, role-playing, and the use of puppets. Classroom observation monitoring data collected in November 2022⁸ shows that not only was storytelling observed the most, it was also delivered confidently.

Reading storybooks had the highest increase in practice, with 52% of practitioners reporting they engaged in it more in 2023 than they did in 2022, a positive outcome that suggests the sustainability of this practice. The sustainability of this practice is nevertheless at risk when the supply of books and other reading materials is not readily available.

Encouraging results were also noted for emergent writing, with 34% (n=29) expressing the continuation of practice at 2022 levels, and 41% (n=29) reporting an increase in its practice in 2023. Monitoring data from classroom observations conducted in November 2022 shows that 44% (n=29) of practitioners facilitated classrooms where "drawing and mark making" was observed, in addition

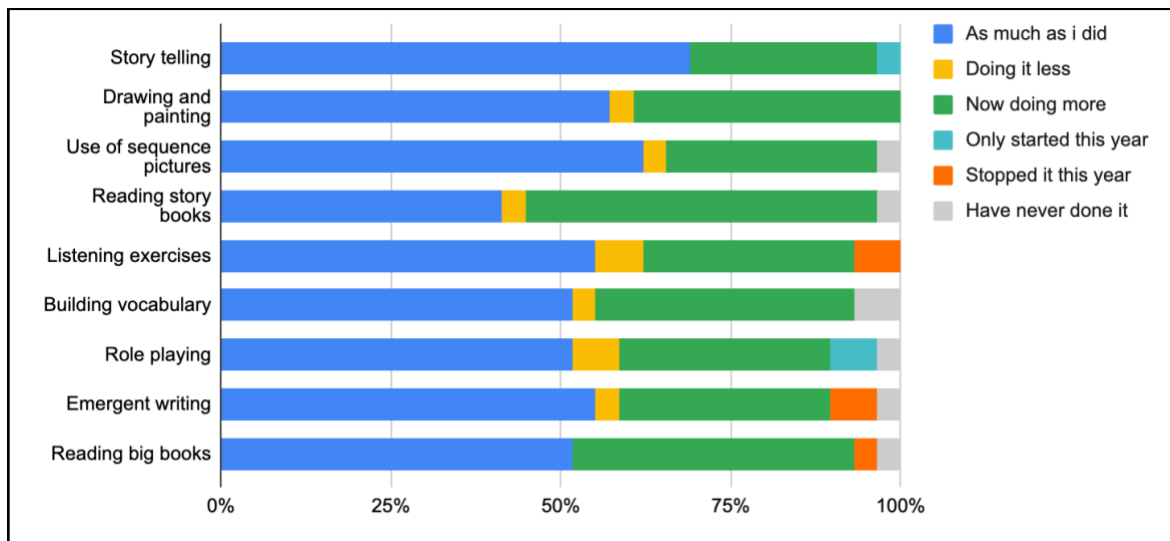
⁸ While the 2023 sustainability sample was in the same cohort with November 2022 observations, the two were neither matched nor correlated. Caution should thus be exercised when drawing comparisons.

to 65% (n=29) for "pretend reading and writing" suggesting that it was a fairly established practice in their classrooms at the time.

These observations could have been influenced by various factors, making it challenging to draw clear conclusions about their impact on the sustainability of practices reported by some of the practitioners in the 2023 sustainability survey. The trends are nevertheless very positive, with Figure 11 showing that most practices have been sustained or increased in the year beyond training.

To what extent do you still do activities you did in 2022 in your classroom (n = 29).

Figure 11: Activities practitioners still do post-project support (n=29)



Viewed in the context of challenges associated with parental engagement in general, practitioner feedback on parent workshops is relatively encouraging, albeit from a small sample, as nine practitioners (31%, n=29) reported conducting parental workshops in their ECDs (Fig. 12), with seven of them holding two workshops in the year, as opposed to the standard six sessions part of the 2022 cohort conducted in the previous year⁹. Also noteworthy is that 48% of practitioners reported improved parental engagement in 2023 compared to 2022.

While the other nine practitioners in the sample expressed their intention to conduct workshops before the year-end, the likelihood of this occurring is doubtful, given the limited time that was available before the end of the year. The sustainability of conducting six sessions is brought into focus, underscoring the need to reconfigure the number of sessions for the parent workshop.

⁹ Monitoring data from a sample of 14 ECDs shows that they successfully conducted 6 workshops in the year.

Figure 12: Parent workshop conducted post-project support (n=29)

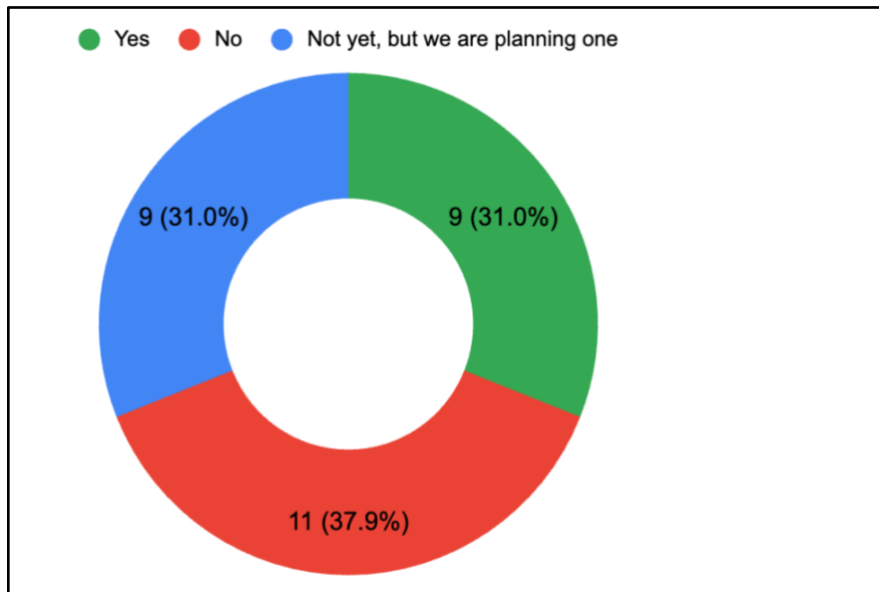


Figure 13: Number of parent workshops conducted post project support (n=9)

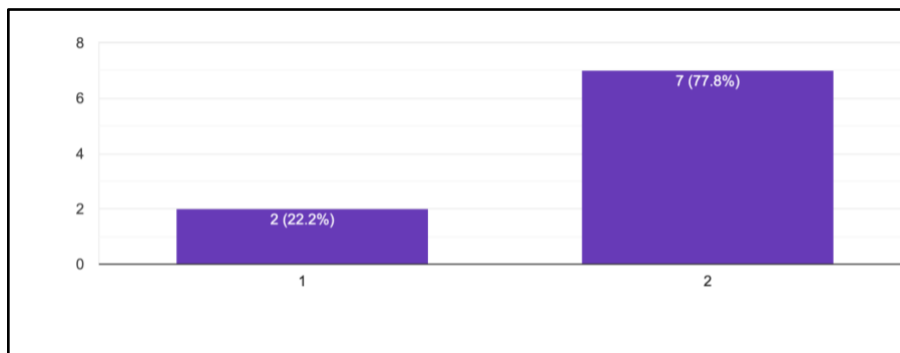
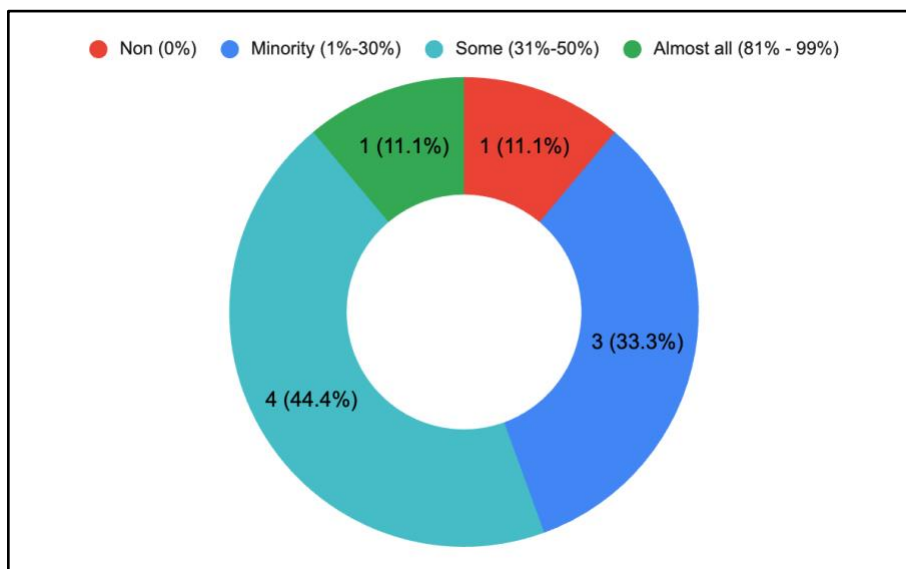
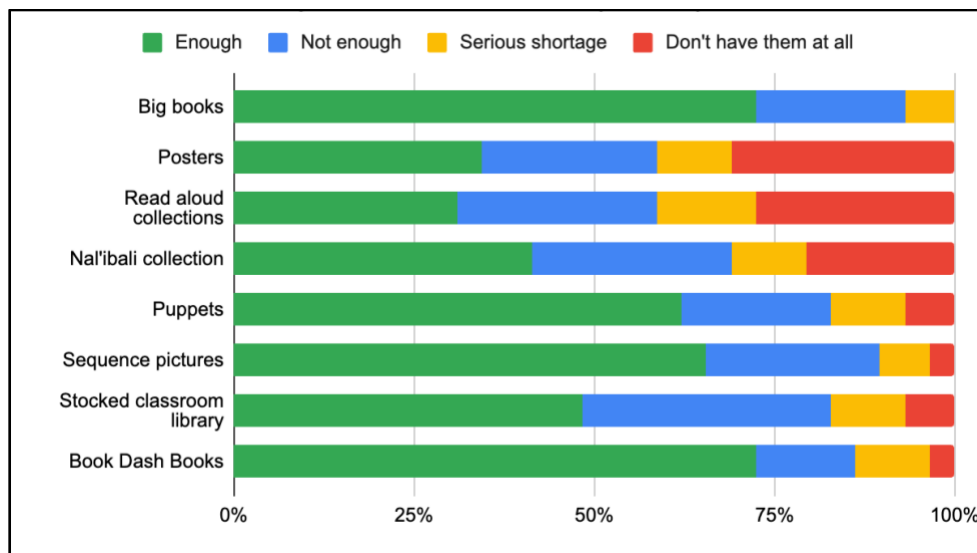


Figure 14: Attendance of parent workshops conducted post-project support (n=9)



The Yizani Sifunde project contributed a substantial number of books that were distributed in classrooms, learners, and homes in 2022. An attrition in the availability of these books is expected to occur over time. Books sent home are likely prone to more attrition, while those in the classroom may have better longevity as they are likely to be used under supervision. Mixed results in the availability of books emerged, with a higher proportion of teachers reporting relatively sufficient availability of Big books, Book Dash books, sequence pictures and puppets whereas other resources like posters, classroom library stock and Nal'ibali collections experience varying degrees of shortage, but these could have not been distributed in ECDs a matter of routine. A deficiency in the stock of classroom libraries may result in a limited variety for children to choose from, potentially having a detrimental effect on the interest and use of book corners

Figure 15: Sufficiency of books and material post-project support (n=9)



5 Conclusion

With the Department of Basic Education under pressure to improve the quality of ECD provision and growing awareness of the fact that we must invest earlier to address the literacy crisis in South Africa, this Case Study report is a valuable contribution to the sector.

In selecting a case study approach, depth of coverage is always prioritised over breadth. However, the learning and insights that emerged from the approach validate this decision. These insights are a critical check on whether the project is grounded and responsive to contextual realities and ensure that adjustments to the design can be made as this important work is replicated.

The report shows, without doubt, the value of donors investing in carefully designed monitoring, evaluation and learning processes. The case study monographs combined with standardised observation tools and questionnaires provide valuable learning for the sector and investors about evaluation designs and methods. By balancing an external 'outsider' view on a project with detailed programme monitoring data provided by implementing partners, the report has the integrity and rigour that is needed to both guide further enhancements to the project and drive further investment in the sector.

Through the case study monographs, the report provides a rich and nuanced description of the realities of ECD Centres and practitioners serving under-resourced rural and peri-urban communities in South Africa. Further insights are provided through quantitative data collected using standardised tools. The report captures a multi-layered and complex collaborative project, and includes a deep dive into the contributions of different project partners and role-players, while also looking at cross-cutting themes and lessons learnt through this unique partnership model.

The report looks constructively at key areas of the project where reach was not achieved as anticipated (for example, community reading clubs) or where behaviour change was not evident (for example, the extent to which children demonstrated independent reading). Contextual factors that affected the take-up of certain elements are carefully explored and recommendations are made for aspects of programme design that could be further strengthened. All stakeholders can draw important lessons for the replication and scaling of this important work going forward.

The report provides evidence that resource-based practitioner training delivered by local NGO partners, supported through community-based young people, and combined with the provision of high quality books in the language of the community, has great potential to strengthen curriculum delivery and quality early language and literacy teaching and learning in under-resourced ECD classrooms. The report also documents and explores the potential for including parents and caregivers as key role players in supporting early learning. It highlights the value of practitioners engaging parents and caregivers while acknowledging practical constraints and the challenge of changing parents' perceptions about their role in their children's learning. The case studies bring to the fore the potential value of young community members ('Story Sparkers') playing a supporting role as practitioners reach out to parents. This demonstrates the value of the partnership model, where one aspect of the project serves to amplify and strengthen another aspect. It also encourages an openness to possibilities that might not have been explored in the original model.

In response to the literacy crisis in South Africa, there has not been enough recognition of the important contribution that early childhood practitioners, parents and community members can make. This project and the careful documentation and analysis of the project outcomes show what can be achieved by investing in the adults who support children in this critical phase of their development. The report provides key lessons on aspects of implementation and evaluation that are critical for deepening our understanding of 'what works' and 'why', and for maximising returns on investment in early learning.

6 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Review the exploratory ECD-based parental workshops model to learn from cases of successful implementation for further design improvements. This review may be in the form of reflection workshops within the Wordworks team and project partners. Aspects to consider include:

- d) Exploring approaches to use actively involved parents as catalysts to stimulate interest among less-engaged caregivers/parents.
- e) Reviewing the format and length of parent programmes as well as identifying and addressing potential barriers to attendance
- f) Identifying ways of supporting and motivating practitioners to invest in parental/caregiver engagement work, including shifting their perception on this.

Strengthening this project arm will deepen the impact value chain as the home environment is a critical pillar for entrenching early language and literacy practices.

Recommendation 2

Review the recruitment and engagement strategy of community reading club leaders. This should include a review of the Yizani Sifunde organisational arrangements on the formation, support and sustainability of community reading clubs.

Recommendation 3

Develop Little Stars training modules for practitioners to strengthen the following:

- Writing children's words and encouraging and mediating children's emergent writing.
- Creating an inviting and comfortable space for children to read books independently, ensuring there are times in the daily programme when children engage in independent reading, and that ECD centres develop a class culture of reading for enjoyment.
- Observing and recording child progress using existing templates and tools provided by the Department of Basic Education or from other sources. Integrating the different programs implemented in their ECDs to maximise children's early language and literacy outcomes and build practitioner confidence.

Recommendation 4

Work with ECD NGO partners and ECD Forums to explore the feasibility of establishing or strengthening communities of practice for programme practitioners. Communities of practice have been proven to work to improve teacher practice and provide opportunities for them to share ideas on methodologies they find difficult.

Recommendation 5

Consider engaging partners and donors to support ECD's soft furnishings and gross motor equipment. This is especially important for ECDs that were overcrowded and lacked sufficient learning areas, preventing the possibility of setting up outdoor spaces. Collaborating with programs offering these services is recommended to achieve economies of scale and safeguard alignment with programme intent.

Recommendation 6

The existence of multiple ECD programs by different organisations in the same schools and communities underscores the importance of thought leadership and collaborative engagement among stakeholders. We recommend fostering this collaboration to deliver increased social returns in vulnerable communities and greater value for funders. Building on the demonstrated capacity of the funder in this project, we recommend the Liberty Community Trust to facilitate this engagement with involved players to maximise the positive impact on early childhood development.

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