Yizani Sifunde

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

YIZANI SIFUNDE LEARNING BRIEF SERIES

Exploring the impact of a collaborative, multi-pronged early literacy intervention on 4- and 5-year-olds

The design of a multi-pronged intervention for early literacy

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IT STARTS WITH A STORY.

book dash

Wordworks
Changing lives through literacy

WHAT IS YIZANI SIFUNDE?

Yizani Sifunde (isiXhosa for "come, let's read") aimed to boost early literacy outcomes at under-resourced early childhood development (ECD) centres in the Eastern Cape. It was implemented in three one-year cycles between 2021 and 2023.

The project was initiated and funded by the Liberty Community Trust, and jointly designed and delivered by three literacy nonprofits: Book Dash, Nal'ibali and Wordworks. Local Eastern Cape partners ITEC and Khululeka supported implementation.

This is the first in a series of learning briefs that explore the design, implementation and impact of Yizani Sifunde, a collaborative multi-pronged intervention designed to boost early literacy outcomes in 4- and 5-year-olds.

This brief describes:

- how the intervention was designed;
- how close monitoring of implementation enabled improvements to the design over time.

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A triple cocktail for Early Childhood Development

In 2018, Brahm Fleisch published a book titled *The Education Triple Cocktail*. Coined in reference to the multi-drug antiretroviral therapy that helped curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the phrase "Education Triple Cocktail" refers to a **combination of three types of inputs** to improve foundation phase literacy skills:

⭐ **structured lesson plans,**

⭐ **high quality learner materials,** and

⭐ **instructional coaching.**[1]

As a result of extensive research on the effectiveness of this combination, including through the Early Grade Reading Studies (EGRS), the 'Education Triple Cocktail' has become a widely-known concept in South African policies for primary school education.

Yizani Sifunde offered an opportunity to test the effectiveness of a similar combination of inputs for the ECD sector. The project aimed to improve early literacy outcomes by infusing underserved communities with a 'triple cocktail' of aligned and complementary interventions.

The project design rests on the alignment and complementarity of three main types of inputs:

- **Training** of ECD practitioners on **high-quality, structured lesson plans** for language and literacy, following Wordworks' "Little Stars" programme;

- Provision of abundant, engaging **storybooks** from Book Dash for children to own, as well as other **quality resources** for the classroom, the home, and beyond; and

- Regular **support** and encouragement by Nal'ibali Story Sparkers through site visits, modelling activities and practical involvement in ad hoc projects.

Beyond the inputs, there are other similarities between Yizani Sifunde and the Triple Cocktail, including:

- the importance of partnerships and collaboration to deliver these inputs;

- the central role of empirical evidence and robust data analysis in ascertaining the effectiveness of the intervention; and

- the acknowledgement of challenges in rolling out this intervention in under-resourced contexts, and the need for solutions.[2]
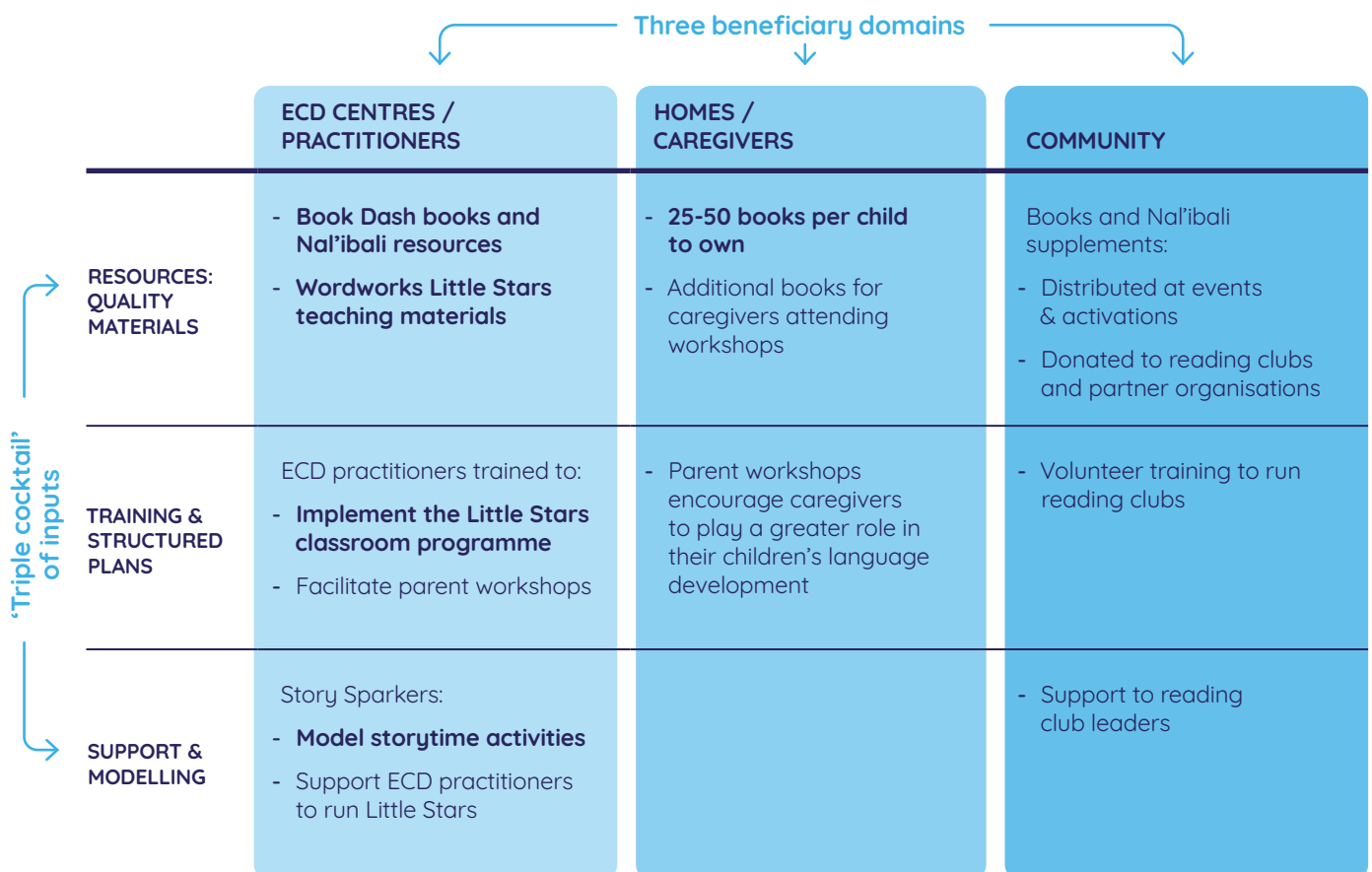
1   Fleisch 2018, pages 91-96
2   Fleisch 2018, page 2

An ecosystem-wide approach

Unlike the traditional triple cocktail defined by Fleisch, which has a narrow focus on the classroom, Yizani Sifunde recognises that parents and community play an important role in supporting preschool children's development, especially children whose attendance at informal ECD centres may be irregular. The project therefore targets a range of players who are part of children's learning journey, who can be grouped into three categories: ECD staff, parents and caregivers, and the broader community.

The project design therefore is multi-pronged both with regard to its inputs and its targeted groups; the intricate design and the various layers of the Early Childhood ecosystem reached are illustrated in the diagramme below. Core inputs in bold contributed strongly to project impact. Other inputs helped extend reach and support impact.

DIAGRAMME 1: Yizani Sifunde: three types of inputs for three groups of beneficiaries.

Three beneficiary domains

| 'Triple cocktail' of inputs		ECD CENTRES / PRACTITIONERS	HOMES / CAREGIVERS	COMMUNITY
	RESOURCES: QUALITY MATERIALS	- **Book Dash books and Nal'ibali resources** - **Wordworks Little Stars teaching materials**	- **25-50 books per child to own** - Additional books for caregivers attending workshops	Books and Nal'ibali supplements: - Distributed at events & activations - Donated to reading clubs and partner organisations
	TRAINING & STRUCTURED PLANS	ECD practitioners trained to: - **Implement the Little Stars classroom programme** - Facilitate parent workshops	- Parent workshops encourage caregivers to play a greater role in their children's language development	- Volunteer training to run reading clubs
	SUPPORT & MODELLING	Story Sparkers: - **Model storytime activities** - Support ECD practitioners to run Little Stars		- Support to reading club leaders

A design that evolved over time

The initial proposal to Liberty (2019)

The impetus for the creation of Yizani Sifunde came in 2019 from the Liberty Community Trust (LCT). LCT approached three leading non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the area of early literacy – Book Dash, Nal'ibali and Wordworks – and challenged them to design a comprehensive response to the early literacy crisis in the Eastern Cape.

From LCT's initial invitation, the three NGOs sought ways to combine their strengths and areas of expertise, and recognised the need to bring on board local NGO partners ITEC (East London) and Khululeka (Queenstown). This gave birth to Yizani Sifunde, a collaborative value chain intervention, which was funded for five years by the Liberty Community Trust.

As Diagramme 2 shows, the initial project design was structured as a "triple cocktail" approach, with each partner contributing the elements where they had expertise.

DIAGRAMME 2: Yizani Sifunde initial project design, as per proposal to Liberty (2019)
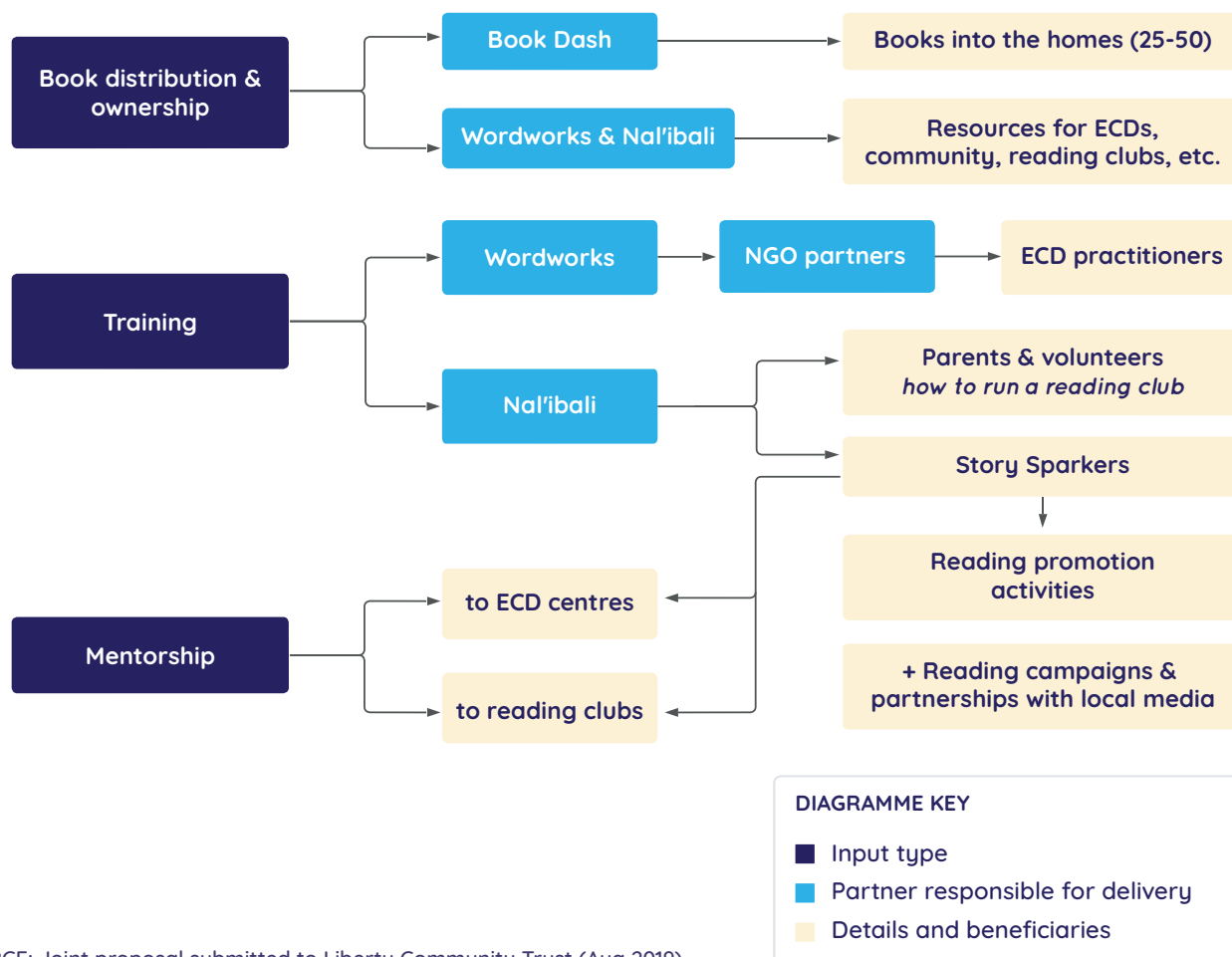
SOURCE: Joint proposal submitted to Liberty Community Trust (Aug 2019)

Trial, error and reflection: how the design was tweaked during and after the learning year

The Liberty Community Trust funding was approved in 2019 to launch the project in 2020. However, prolonged ECD closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that on-the-ground implementation could only begin in 2021 – and that first year was still very disrupted, with Covid-related school closures and low enrolment. The partners were fortunate that Liberty bought into their vision of 2021 as a learning year in which the model could be put to the test and refined through observation and reflection.

As the comparison between Diagrammes 2 and 3 (on page 7) illustrates, the real-life experience of Yizani Sifunde provided an opportunity to refine and layer some of the model elements. Apart from the richer conceptualisation of the project inputs (navy blocks in the diagramme), some of the meaningful decisions taken in the course of the learning year were:

• To encourage ECD practitioners to provide Wordworks' "Every Word Counts" **parent workshops**, to motivate and support caregivers to stimulate informal learning at home;

• To use school holidays to extend the reach of the project through **activations in clinics** and similar public spaces.

At the end of 2021, an ambitious **collective reflection exercise** resulted in further tweaks. The main overarching shift was the decision to redefine the role of 'Story Sparkers', young people from the community employed by the project. Story Sparkers became the local face of the project.

In addition to fulfilling the role as defined by Nal'ibali (facilitating storytime sessions at ECD centres, supporting reading clubs, and arranging events and community activations), Yizani Sifunde **Story Sparkers took on new tasks**, including:

• overseeing book and resource distribution, and capturing distribution data;

• attending training alongside practitioners and supporting them on the ground, particularly in offering parent workshops.

This meant that all three NGOs had to co-design and co-deliver their training.

The project team also decided that:

• Trainers from ITEC and Khululeka would visit ECD centres to observe the classroom programme in action;

• Some books would be specifically earmarked for the ECD classrooms, to ensure practitioners' needs were met and help them feel comfortable with the idea of sending large quantities of books into homes.

Left: Story Sparker Siphesihle Lishwa leads a storytime session at Makukhanye Day Care Centre in Berlin. **Below:** Story Sparker Olwetu Gxumisa introduces a singing and dancing activity at Uyehova Unathi Day Care Centre in Scenery Park, East London.

DIAGRAMME 3: Design tweaks that emerged during and after the learning year (2021)
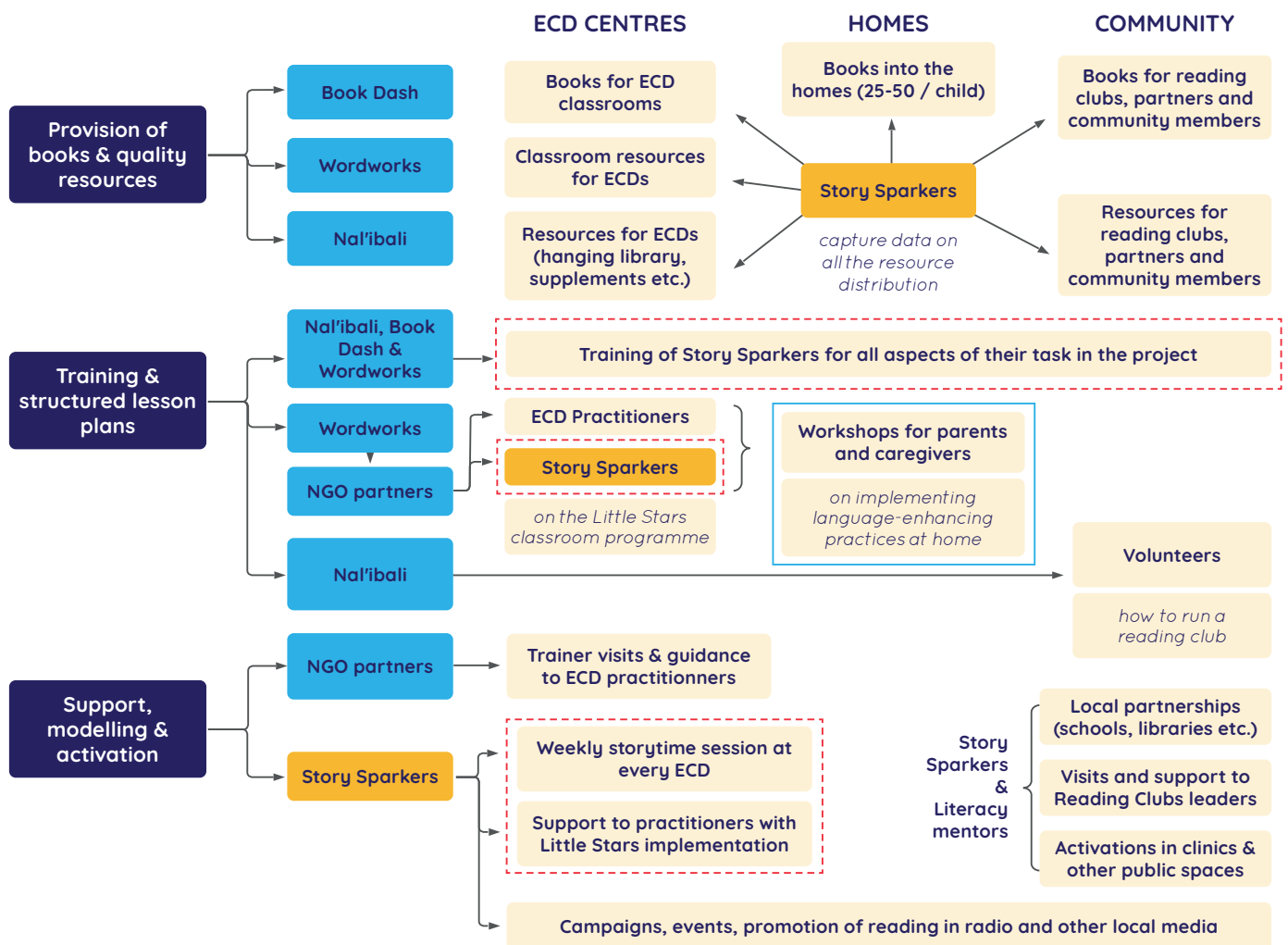
| ECD CENTRES | HOMES | COMMUNITY |

Provision of books & quality resources
- Book Dash
- Wordworks
- Nal'ibali

Books for ECD classrooms

Classroom resources for ECDs

Resources for ECDs (hanging library, supplements etc.)

Books into the homes (25-50 / child)

Story Sparkers

capture data on all the resource distribution

Books for reading clubs, partners and community members

Resources for reading clubs, partners and community members

Training & structured lesson plans
- Nal'ibali, Book Dash & Wordworks
- Wordworks
- NGO partners
- Nal'ibali

Training of Story Sparkers for all aspects of their task in the project

ECD Practitioners

Story Sparkers

on the Little Stars classroom programme

Workshops for parents and caregivers

on implementing language-enhancing practices at home

Volunteers

how to run a reading club

Support, modelling & activation
- NGO partners
- **Story Sparkers**

Trainer visits & guidance to ECD practitionners

Weekly storytime session at every ECD

Support to practitioners with Little Stars implementation

Campaigns, events, promotion of reading in radio and other local media

Story Sparkers & Literacy mentors

Local partnerships (schools, libraries etc.)

Visits and support to Reading Clubs leaders

Activations in clinics & other public spaces

DIAGRAMME KEY

- **[yellow]** Story Sparkers, whose role proved to be central to nearly all project deliverables
- **[blue]** Activity added / tweaked as opportunities were seized, in the course of 2021
- **[red dashed]** Tweak that resulted from a reflection session at the end of the "learning year" 2021

Empirical evidence as a cornerstone of the project

In light of the complex and innovative nature of the model, the partners made a strong commitment to gather comprehensive empirical evidence on the project. They agreed with Liberty that this endeavour would be twofold:

- **Internally**, ambitious project monitoring systems were put in place to track the various layers of implementation across the three years of delivery (2021-2023);

- **Externally**, a project evaluation was commissioned, which included child assessments to provide rigorous feedback on the effectiveness of the project in improving early literacy outcomes.

Through these two avenues, a considerable body of data was collected which informs the Learning Briefs in this series:

- **Learning Brief 2** takes a look at the ways in which Yizani Sifunde is a successful example of a multi-NGO collaboration. It lists some factors and practices that contributed to the success of the collaboration.

- **Learning Brief 3** unpacks the project's child-level outcomes and shows how, within eight months, the project doubled the proportion of children who were "on track" with their developmental milestones. It also shows the benefits for children who were falling far behind.

- **Learning Brief 4** sheds more light on the shifts at ECD centres that supported children's learning gains, and to what degree they were sustained.

- **Learning Brief 5** looks at the project's impact beyond the classroom, in homes and communities, including an analysis of comprehensive datasets on children's home learning environments.

REFERENCES

Fleisch, B. (2018). The education triple cocktail: system-wide instructional reform in South Africa. UCT Press: Cape Town.

The evaluation reports, a summary infographic and the full Learning Brief series can be accessed in this folder or by scanning the QR code.

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