

Yizani Sifunde

This project has been made possible through the Liberty Community Trust

LEARNING
BRIEF

2



YIZANI SIFUNDE LEARNING BRIEF SERIES

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

Lessons from a successful multi-NGO collaboration



LIBERTY
Standard Bank Group




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 second 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 focuses on:

- the experience of the collaboration; and
- the factors and practices that made it successful.

This Learning Brief was written for the Yizani Sifunde project by Dr Magali von Blottnitz, with input from other project partners. It can be cited as follows:

von Blottnitz, M. (2024). Exploring the impact of a collaborative, multi-pronged early literacy intervention on 4- and 5-year olds, Brief 2, Yizani Sifunde: Cape Town.



The Yizani Sifunde project partners gratefully acknowledge the **Liberty Community Trust**, without whose impetus, funding and constant support this collaborative project and the associated research would not have been possible.

A collaboration owned and designed by the project partners

Although the South African non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector plays a considerable role in supporting early childhood development, it is highly fragmented: the lack of coordination between various interventions limits their effectiveness.¹ Over the last decade, this has led to increased interest in NGO collaborations as a vehicle for collective resolution of the country's complex societal challenges.²

However, the lived experience of multi-NGO projects is not always as positive as it looks on paper. Therefore, Yizani Sifunde – a complex collaboration that successfully and significantly improved learning outcomes for children – offers an interesting case study to reflect on how to design and implement collaborative projects.

The funder's role in Yizani Sifunde's inception

As indicated in Learning Brief 1, the impetus for the Yizani Sifunde project came from the Liberty Community Trust (LCT). It was motivated by the Trust's focus on improving learning outcomes for young people in South Africa by investing in education initiatives that enable sustainable economic inclusion. After a landscape review by Trialogue, Book Dash, Nal'ibali and Wordworks were independently invited to apply for funding from LCT under one of the trust's pillars, Foundation Phase Literacy.

LCT management recognised the three NGOs' solid track record and the complementarity of their offerings in the early learning ecosystem. They felt that leveraging each organisation's expertise to benefit the other two could result in an impact greater than the sum of the parts, and a better chance to "shift the needle". The LCT Board challenged the three organisations to form a consortium, and integrate their offerings into a comprehensive response to the early literacy crisis in the Eastern Cape.

Importantly, rather than coordinating the inputs of the three organisations at funder level, or contracting a managing agency to do so, **LCT left it to the three NGOs to set up their consortium and design a joint proposal.** This gave the NGOs an opportunity to take responsibility for the success of the collaboration, and to adjust the collaboration framework on an ongoing basis as required by the lived experience.

Clearly defined roles and collaboration modalities

Book Dash, Nal'ibali and Wordworks had worked together before, although not on projects of this magnitude. Their leaders and senior managers had a high-level understanding of each other's work, and there was already a positive working relationship between the three organisations.

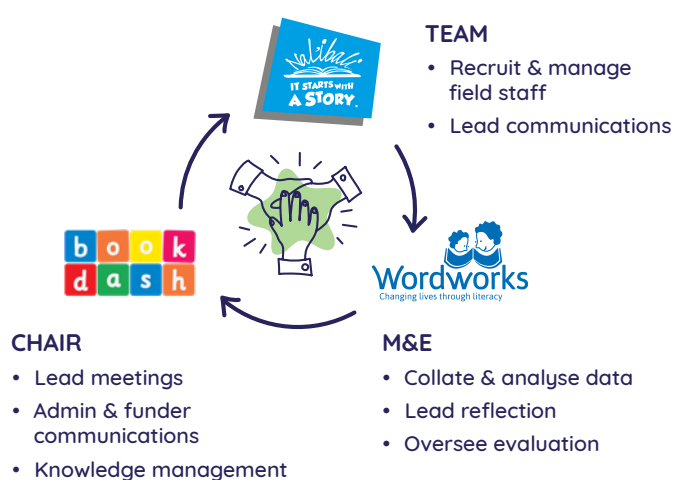
Building on these existing relationships, the partners produced a joint concept note (mid-2019), followed by a full joint proposal to LCT a week later.

When the joint proposal was approved, the partners and LCT entered into a project agreement (April 2020).

While the partners could have relied on pre-existing relationships, good faith and trust to govern their working relationships, they wanted to ensure that the collaboration was **codified and future-proofed.** Then, if the team members, organisational contexts or external context changed, or if unforeseen challenges (like the Covid-19 pandemic) arose, there would be a clear, impartial blueprint to follow. With pro bono legal support, the partners put a substantial amount of work into discussing additional collaboration modalities, imagining steps required under various scenarios, and documenting them in an internal Memorandum of Understanding, signed in June 2020.

One key success factor was a very intentional definition of each partner's role. In addition to being responsible for specific deliverables, each partner had clearly defined "collaboration roles", as shown below.

DIAGRAMME 1: Collaboration roles



1 See e.g. Volmink and Van der Elst 2019, King et al. 2024

2 See e.g. Nkonyeni 2020, Whittaker et al. 2021

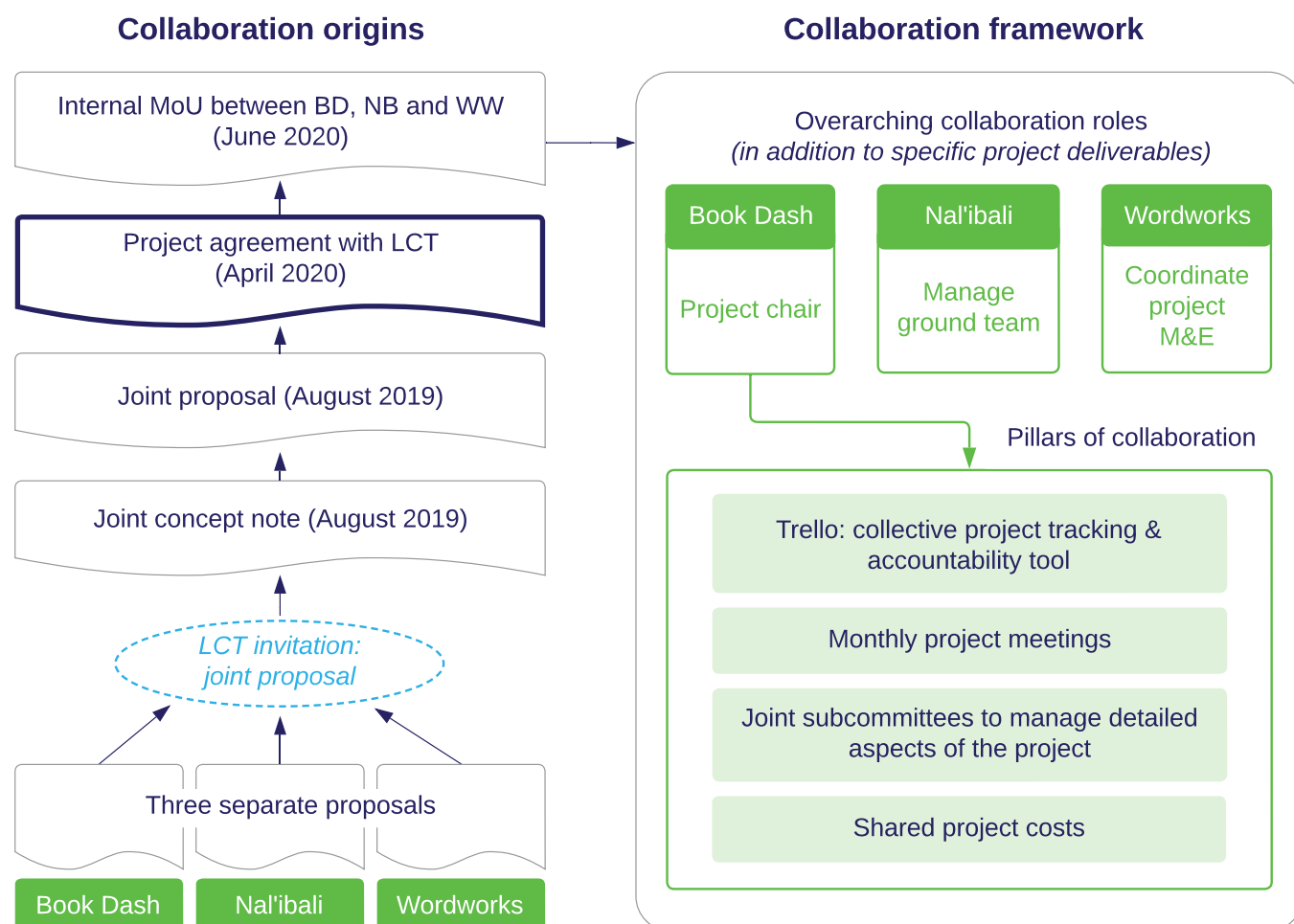
This division of project responsibilities was sustained throughout. It provided clarity and ensured all parties’ consistent commitment to the overall project.

In addition, the NGOs agreed on specific ways of working together, which were recorded either in the internal MoU or in early project minutes:

- **Trello** was adopted as a collective project tracking and accountability tool.
- Partners agreed to **monthly project meetings**, which included representatives from LCT.
- **Sub-committees** were set up to manage various aspects of the project, such as training, communications and marketing, and M&E.
- Importantly, the project budget included a pocket of funding for **shared project costs**, separate from each organisation’s budget. As Project Chair, Book Dash was responsible for disbursing these funds, subject to all partners’ approval, and maintaining records accordingly. This enabled partners to cover ad hoc consortium-related expenses without negotiating about which partner’s budget would need to cover the costs .

This initial architecture of the collaboration is represented in Diagramme 2.

DIAGRAMME 2: Initial architecture of the Yizani Sifunde collaboration



Sustaining the collaboration with a learning mindset

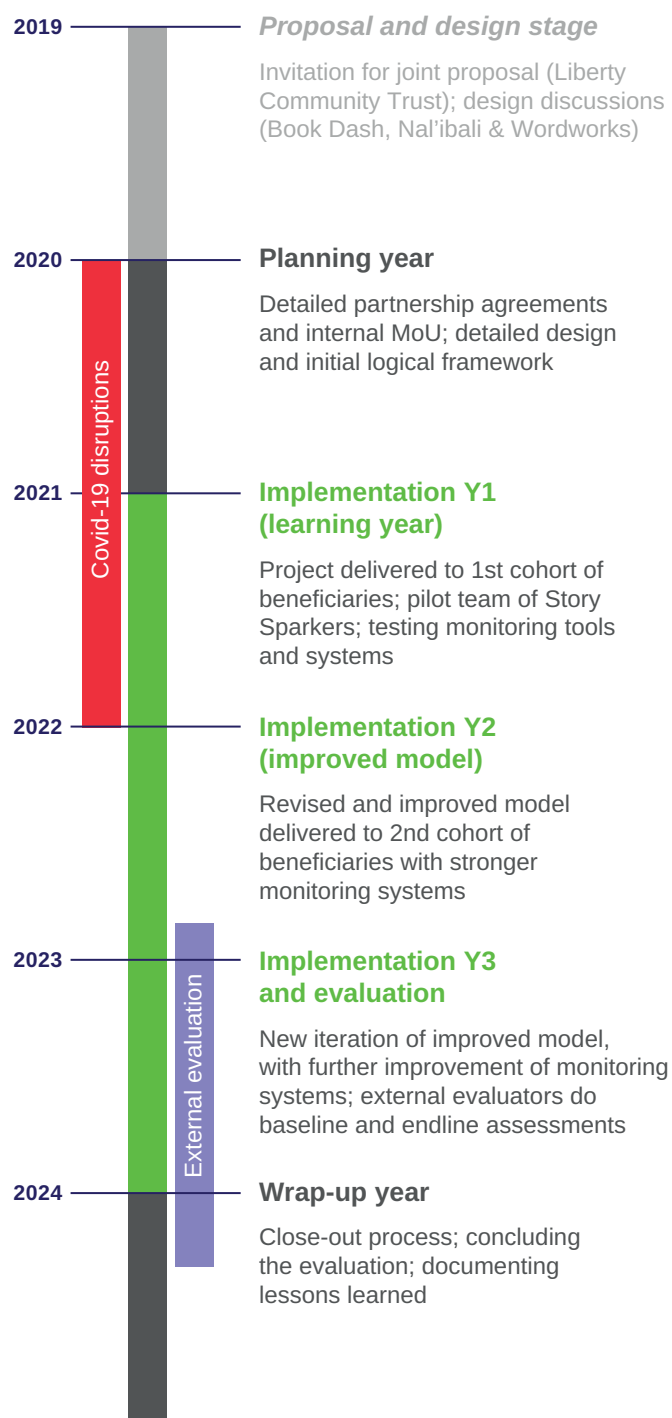
As explained above, in the early months, the partners invested considerable time and effort in setting up an intentional collaboration with a robust structure. The fact that this structure was owned by the partners made it easier for all to commit. Inevitably, when implementation began, unforeseen complications surfaced, especially given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It became clear that keeping the collaboration effective over five years would require sustained commitment to learning and reflection.

Covid-19 disruptions and adjustments to the timeline

The initial plan and contract with LCT was to deliver a three-year project. However, as the Covid pandemic persisted, and its devastating effects on the ECD sector became more apparent, it was clear that implementation could not start before 2021 – and even then, it would be disrupted, with low enrolment reducing its intended reach and impact.

With LCT, the partners redefined the project timelines, extending it to five years rather than the initial three. The project budget remained the same, but was spread over a longer period of time to allow two full years of implementation after the initial “learning year” in 2021

DIAGRAMME 3: Yizani Sifunde
Project timeframe, 2019-2024



Keeping the Cape Town ‘architects’ and the Eastern Cape ‘builders’ aligned

Until early 2021, project design and planning had been held by the consortium management team, which was based in Cape Town. In 2021, implementation started, led by a team based in the Eastern Cape. This team was made up of:

- **Training partners:** ITEC (East London) and Khululeka (Queenstown) recruited ECD centres and delivered ECD practitioner training. Although ITEC and Khululeka had some pre-existing working relationships with project partners, they had not been privy to design conversations.
- **Field team:** The project coordinator, Literacy Mentors and Story Sparkers were recruited to implement activities on the ground.

While the architects had to hold their plans loosely enough to allow adaptation for on-the-ground realities, it was important to ensure that the Eastern Cape teams stayed aligned with the project vision and logic. **Regular project meetings**, including all partners in subcommittees, and **clear communication and reflection** were critical to keep this dynamic in balance throughout the project. Practically, project monitoring also helped bridge the gap between theory and practice.

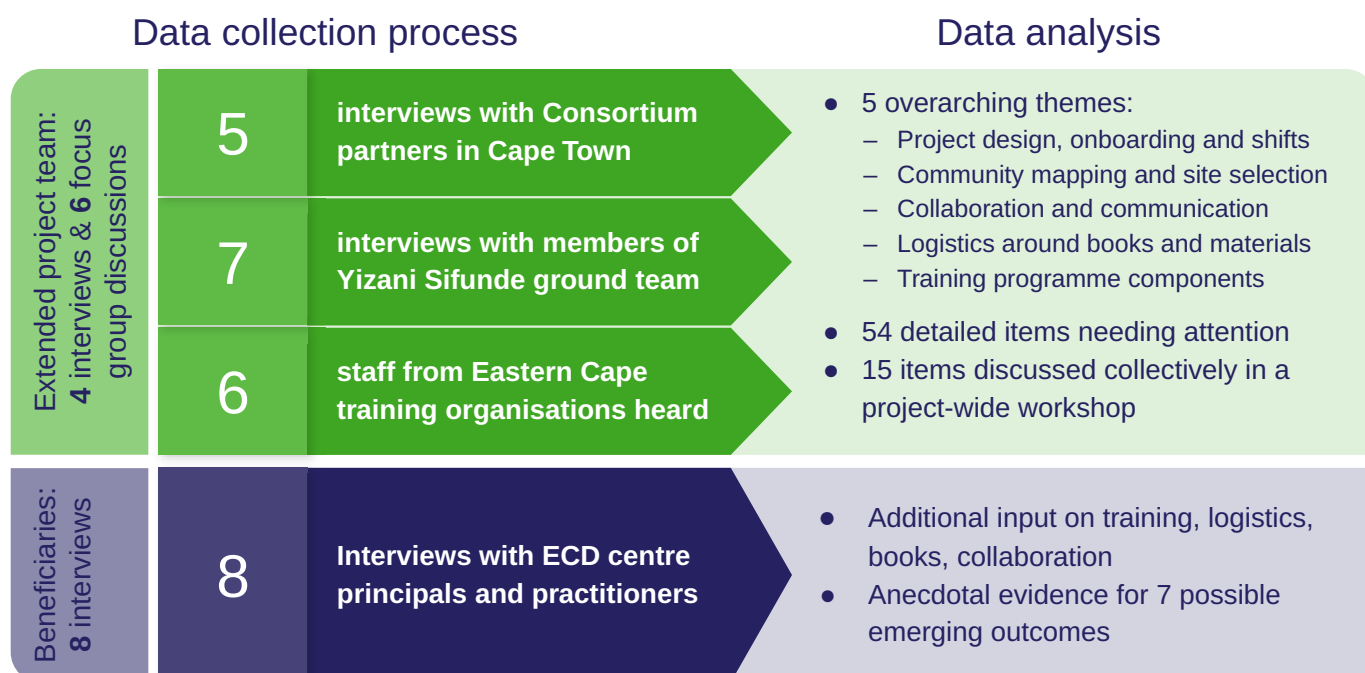
The joint reflection exercise at the end of the “learning year”

In 2020, the year set aside for planning and preparation, the partners undertook some remote work, such as extending the collaboration to Wordworks’ Eastern Cape training partners (ITEC and Khululeka) and agreeing on a logical framework for the project.

Once the project coordinator was appointed in early 2021, it became apparent that extensive local planning and preparation was still required: the project had to identify sites, appoint the rest of the field team and finalise logistical arrangements, while strengthening nascent communication channels. Ultimately, implementation only started around mid-year. The compound delays led to pressure to meet targets, a far-from-ideal scenario. The project partners agreed with LCT to label 2021 a “learning year”, and to draw lessons from this first iteration to ensure smoother delivery in years 2 and 3.

The partners invested in a comprehensive reflection process in September 2021 to explore issues that emerged in this “learning year”. The project Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team led the process, which included one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions with internal team members, local training partners ITEC and Khululeka, and a small sample of beneficiaries. This exercise is summarised in the diagramme below.

DIAGRAMME 4: “Learning year” collaboration monitoring and reflection process



This rigorous, in-depth exercise helped surface challenges which would have otherwise remained unnoticed and unaddressed. It also laid the foundation for a project review workshop where partners unpacked some of the most complex challenges and took decisions on remedial action. Table 1 gives three examples, and illustrates how the reflection exercise helped resolve them.

Building on these improvements, implementation in 2022 was considerably better than in 2021. Roles were clearer, communication was more effective, time-consuming processes were initiated well in advance and carefully managed, and monitoring systems were more reliable.

TABLE 1: Examples of collaboration challenges resolved via the 2021 review

THEME	CHALLENGES OBSERVED	REMEDIAL ACTION
Integration of Eastern Cape training partners	<p>Training partners ITEC and Khululeka were ‘subcontracted’ by Wordworks to train ECD practitioners. However, in 2021 they had not been briefed on the full scope of the project. This resulted in confusion about e.g. the role of Story Sparkers.</p> <p>Project timeline shifts also made it difficult to manage trainer calendars.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more comprehensive project background to ITEC and Khululeka. • Include ITEC and Khululeka in monthly project meetings. • Strengthen relationships between trainers and project field team. • Improve consultation on timeframes.
Role of Story Sparkers, especially in ECD centres	<p>In Nal’ibali’s organisational model, Story Sparkers visited schools or ECD centres to establish reading clubs and run reading campaigns.</p> <p>In Yizani Sifunde, this created confusion: Story Sparkers’ work was not fully aligned with the “Little Stars” training that ECD practitioners were receiving. Story Sparkers’ relationship to ECD practitioners also needed clarity: some ECD practitioners used their visits to take breaks. This raised concerns about the legacy of the Story Sparkers’ contribution in ECD centres, beyond the end of their contracts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include Story Sparkers in Little Stars training so they understood the approach. • Adapt the Story Sparker training curriculum to make it Yizani-Sifunde specific. • Clarify that Story Sparkers should play a supporting role to ECD practitioners, and model reading activities while practitioners were present. • Clarify expectations and be more attentive to the quality of relationships between Story Sparkers and practitioners.
Materials distribution logistics	<p>Although logistics were well thought through, practical challenges surfaced, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unanticipated workload caused by unpacking and re-packaging books; • Variability between ECD centres in the pace and method of giving books to families; • Challenges tracking book distribution to homes; • Excess books, due to overestimation of enrolled children in 2021. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up a ‘distribution subcommittee’ to manage challenges as they arise. • Waves of successive Improvements in the book tracking mechanisms. • Keep excess books from 2021 for distribution in 2022.

Reflection as a ‘glue’ through waves of team renewals

Pre-existing relationships and high levels of interpersonal trust contributed to the quality of the joint design in 2019-2020. However, over the five-year project, Wordworks and Nal’ibali experienced **staff turnover**: management team members who had initiated the project left or changed roles, and key M&E team members also left. The initial project coordinator also resigned in 2023 for another opportunity. Fortunately, Book Dash, which acted as the project chair, was not affected by turnover, which aided continuity.

In this context, onboarding new team members and maintaining effective working relationships was critical. In this regard, the project partners’ strong commitment to learning, and the data gathered and distilled by the Monitoring and Evaluation team, helped sustain a **reflective culture throughout the project’s lifetime**. This was further enhanced in 2023 by the scrutiny of a team of external evaluators.

As the quality of data collected grew stronger in 2022 and 2023, the M&E subcommittee was able to convene and facilitate multiple reflection sessions to unpack and discuss project data, feedback from beneficiaries and other observations.

Below: Children from a participating ECD centre in Burgersdorp, paging through their new Book Dash books.



Concluding thoughts: relevance for the sector and for funders

The Yizani Sifunde project offers valuable insights for NGOs interested in setting up collaborative projects or improving the quality of existing collaborations. It can also inform funders that are keen to play a catalytic role in nudging NGOs to overcome their fragmentation and combine their expertise.

Some of these insights are summarised below:

- Pre-existing **relationships** are important factors that pave the way for collaboration. Therefore, initiatives to foster relationship-building between NGOs should be supported.
- **Funders** can play a catalytic role at the proposal stage by encouraging NGOs to submit joint proposals (and giving realistic timeframes for collaborative planning). They should do this where they are serious about investing: designing a joint project is complex and time-consuming and NGOs are unlikely to invest in this exercise without some assurance that it will be funded.
- An important success factor for the Yizani Sifunde project was that **the collaboration was owned** by the partners, rather than imposed and managed by the funder. The participating NGOs all had a vested interest not only in their own deliverables, but in the success of the whole, and were able to agree on and adapt the collaboration mechanisms that would work for them.

- An explicit and deliberate **collaboration framework** set out in a Memorandum of Understanding was helpful: it clearly defined roles, enshrined regular project meetings and established a system to manage shared project costs.
- Ample **planning time** and a **learning year** to test, reflect and adjust, contributed to the project's success. If funders want NGOs to step into innovative collaborations that stretch them beyond their usual modus operandi, they need to understand that many detailed considerations only crystallise once on-the-ground implementation starts. NGOs need funded time to experiment, identify and resolve issues before a collaboration prototype can be refined.
- While time-consuming, the **thorough project review** at the end of year 1 was invaluable: it surfaced niggling issues, solidified trust between the parties, and ultimately led to much greater impact for ECD practitioners, caregivers and children in Years 2 and 3.
- Mechanisms for onboarding new team members and regular reflection helped bridge periods of staff transitions and sustain a learning approach throughout the five-year project.

REFERENCES

King, M. et al. (2024). [The Bridge Story: Learning through Communities of Practice, 2009-2023](#). BRIDGE: Johannesburg.

Nkonyeni, N. (2020). [NGOs Today: competing for resources, power and agency](#). UCT Graduate School of Business: Cape Town.

Volmink, J. & Van der Elst, L. (2019). [The evolving role of 21st century education NGOs in South Africa: Challenges and opportunities](#). National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE): Johannesburg.

Whittaker, R., Rajab, R. and Keevy, J. (2021). [Deep collaboration for deep change: rethinking collaboration in South Africa during and after the COVID-19 pandemic](#). NASCEE and IPASA Discussion Paper: Johannesburg.



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



Yizani Sifunde

This project has been made possible through the Liberty Community Trust

