

# Yizani Sifunde

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LEARNING  
BRIEF

# 3



## YIZANI SIFUNDE LEARNING BRIEF SERIES

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

# An effective approach to closing the early literacy gap



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## 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 third 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 summarises the quantitative evidence on how the Yizani Sifunde project effectively closed gaps in early learning, with a focus on early language and literacy.

This Learning Brief was written for the Yizani Sifunde project by Dr Magali von Blottnitz, with input from other project partners. It draws extensively on an external evaluation conducted by Social Impact Insights Africa. Liberty Community Trust holds the intellectual property rights to the evaluation results and gave permission for them to be shared subject to specific acknowledgements. The brief can be cited as follows:

*von Blottnitz, M. (2024). Exploring the impact of a collaborative, multi-pronged ECD literacy intervention on 4- and 5-year olds, Brief 3, Yizani Sifunde: Cape Town. Based on an external evaluation by Social Impact Insights Africa and funded by the Liberty Community Trust.*



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.

# South Africa’s literacy and early learning gaps

The Yizani Sifunde project kicked off at a time when new evidence about South Africa’s literacy and early learning gaps was emerging. In addition to the widely-publicised PIRLS<sup>1</sup> studies, which drew attention to South Africa’s alarming literacy levels, the inaugural Thrive By Five 2021 study used the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) to document the state of early learning in South Africa.

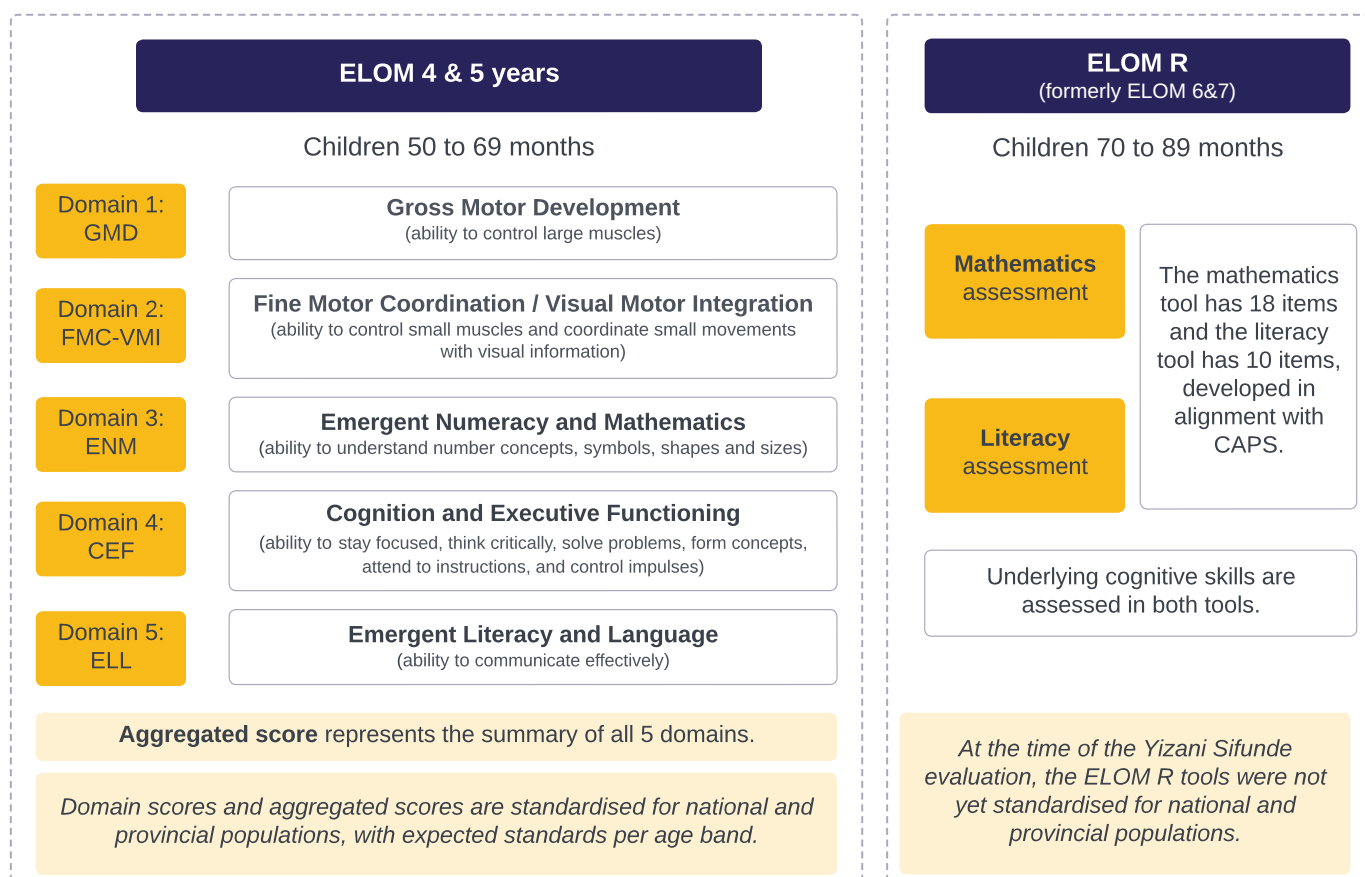
## What is the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM)?

The ELOM is the first validated South African instrument for measuring early learning programme performance against age-appropriate development standards. It consists of two aged-normed assessment tools, which are managed by DataDrive2030, as represented in Diagramme 1.

Importantly, ELOM 4&5 scores can be compared against provincial and national benchmarks and categorised within one of three performance bands:

- **On track:** for children achieving the expected standard for their age;
- **Falling behind:** for children who do not achieve the standard; or
- **Falling far behind:** for children in need of significant assistance to reach the standard.

DIAGRAMME 1: The Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM): overview of the ELOM 4&5 and ELOM R<sup>2</sup>



1 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

2 Extensive documentation on the design and interpretation of the ELOM tools can be found at <https://datadrive2030.co.za>.

## What do we know about early learning gaps in South Africa?

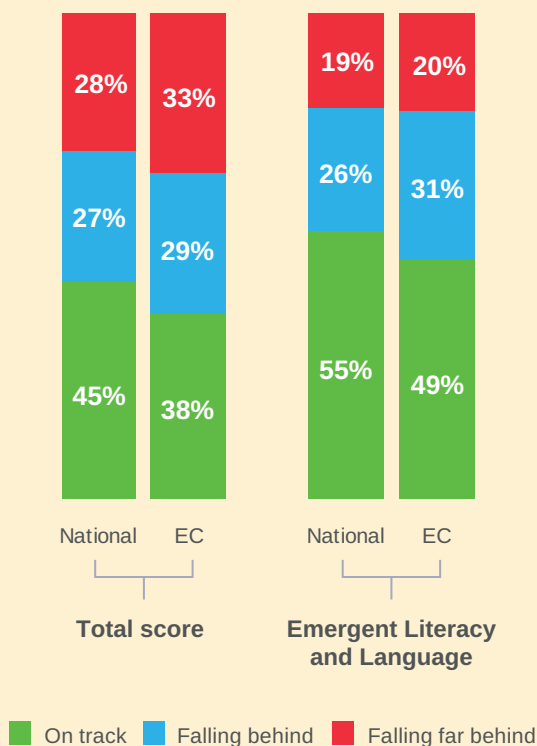
Using ELOM assessments, the Thrive by Five 2021 report revealed that:

- 55% of children attending an early learning programme (ELP) experienced developmental delays.
- The proportion of children falling behind was higher in more rural provinces and lower socio-economic categories.
- Although it was beyond the scope of the Thrive by Five study, we know that children who are not exposed to an ELP (usually the poorest children) are even more likely to have developmental delays.

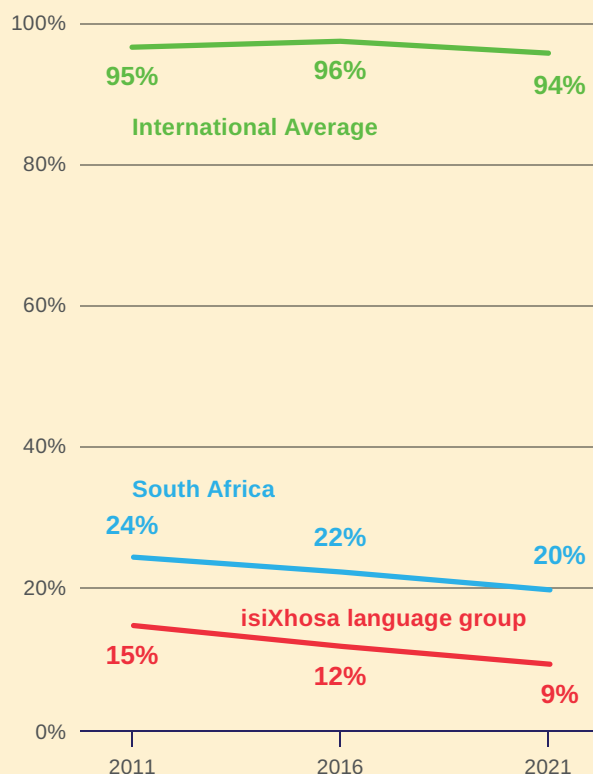
The graphs below summarise two critical indicators of early learning and literacy gaps in the Eastern Cape: the percentage of children who are falling behind at ages 4 and 5, and who are unable to reach a low reading benchmark at age 10. For each data source, we have selected the level of disaggregation closest to the subpopulation served by the Yizani Sifunde project: low-income, isiXhosa-speaking children from rural and peri-urban Eastern Cape communities.

The evidence is clear: the majority of children in South Africa are not learning to read, and this is not just a failure of the formal school system. With more than half of our children already “falling behind” at the start of their school journey, the roots of the literacy crisis are in the early years.

**CHART 1A:** Proportion of 4- and 5-year-old children on track: total ELOM score and language and literacy domain (national and Eastern Cape)



**CHART 1B:** Proportion of Grade 4 children reaching the lowest PIRLS international benchmark (global, national and isiXhosa-speaking)



SOURCE: compiled from the Thrive By Five 2021 Index report and the PIRLS reports 2011-2021<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Thrive by Five report is listed in the bibliography as Giese et al. 2022. The PIRLS reports are listed as Howie et al. 2012, Howie et al. 2017 and Department of Basic Education 2023.

# The Yizani Sifunde external evaluation

## Background

The implementation of the Yizani Sifunde early literacy project started in 2021 in various communities around East London and Queenstown (see Learning Brief 1). Ahead of the third and last year of implementation, the funder, Liberty Community Trust (LCT), appointed Social Impact Insights Africa (SIIA) to run an independent evaluation of the project.

The quantitative component of the evaluation focused on:

- 1. Child outcomes:** the extent to which learners in the intervention demonstrated improved language and literacy skills.
- 2. Intermediate outcomes:** the extent to which the intervention led to changes within ECD centres and families that could explain the child outcomes.
- 3. Mediating factors:** what factors contributed to, mediated, and moderated child language outcomes.

A qualitative component examined implementation fidelity, impact pathways and sustainability of the practices.

**Below:** Drawing and letter tracing activity at Makukhanye Day Care Centre, Berlin



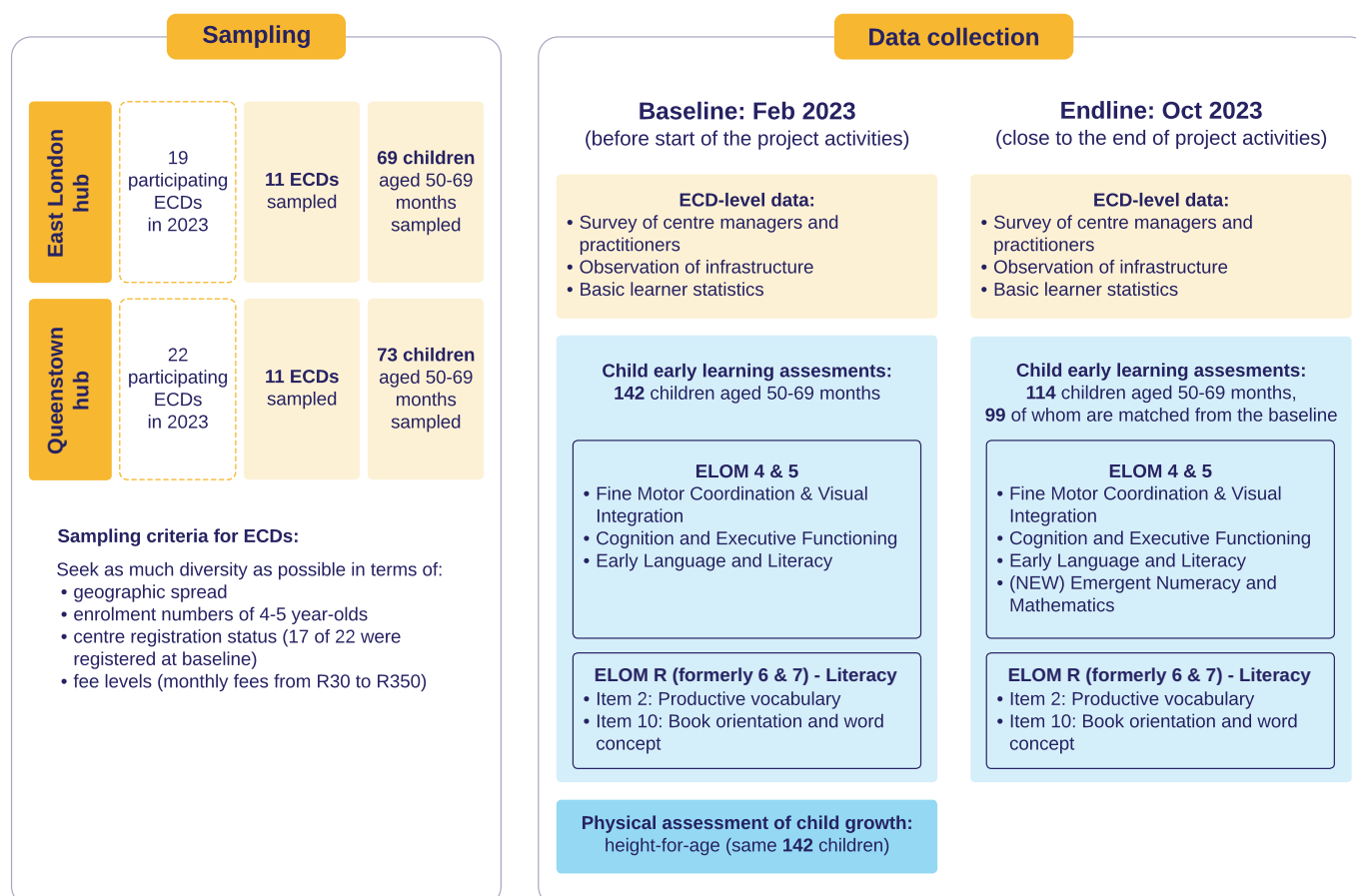
## Methodology

From the 41 ECD centres included in the 2023 cohort, the evaluation selected a sample of 22 ECDs (11 in the East London hub and 11 in the Queenstown hub). Evaluators conducted two rounds of targeted data collection: one in February before the start of training (baseline), and another in October (endline). The data collection included ELOM assessments of a sample of children from both hubs, as shown in Diagramme 2.

The child assessments included:

- **Three domains of the ELOM 4&5 assessment**, at baseline and endline: Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (FMC&VMI), Cognition and Executive Functioning (CEF), and Emergent Literacy and Language (ELL). These were the three domains which we most expected to be impacted by the intervention.
- A fourth domain, **Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (ENM)**, was added at endline, after other studies revealed that similar interventions had resulted in learning gains in this domain.
- **Supplementary vocabulary and book orientation tests** were added to provide richer and more nuanced language and literacy scores. For convenience, these test items were drawn from the ELOM R (previously referred to as ELOM 6&7), even though the children were still between the ages of 4 and 5. The psychometrics (statistical analyses required to generate reliable, fair and valid standard scores, norms and standards) for the ELOM R were not yet complete at the time of reporting. Once they are published, the YS children’s performance against these benchmarks will be explored.
- An assessment of the **children’s height-for-age** at baseline. Since the incidence of stunting in the final (matched) sample was minimal, this is not reported further in this brief.

DIAGRAMME 2: Sampling and data collection methodology for quantitative external evaluation



## ELOM 4&5: comparison of baseline vs. endline scores

The chart below represents the distribution of the sampled (matched) children across the three performance bands at baseline (middle bar) and endline (right bar), compared to the Thrive By Five Eastern Cape group which acts as a comparison group. It is important to note that the comparison group is not statistically equivalent to the Yizani Sifunde (YS) sample: it includes a wider range of socio-economic and geographic settings, and the assessment timeframes are different.

In the three ELOM domains that were assessed at both intervals, findings were that:

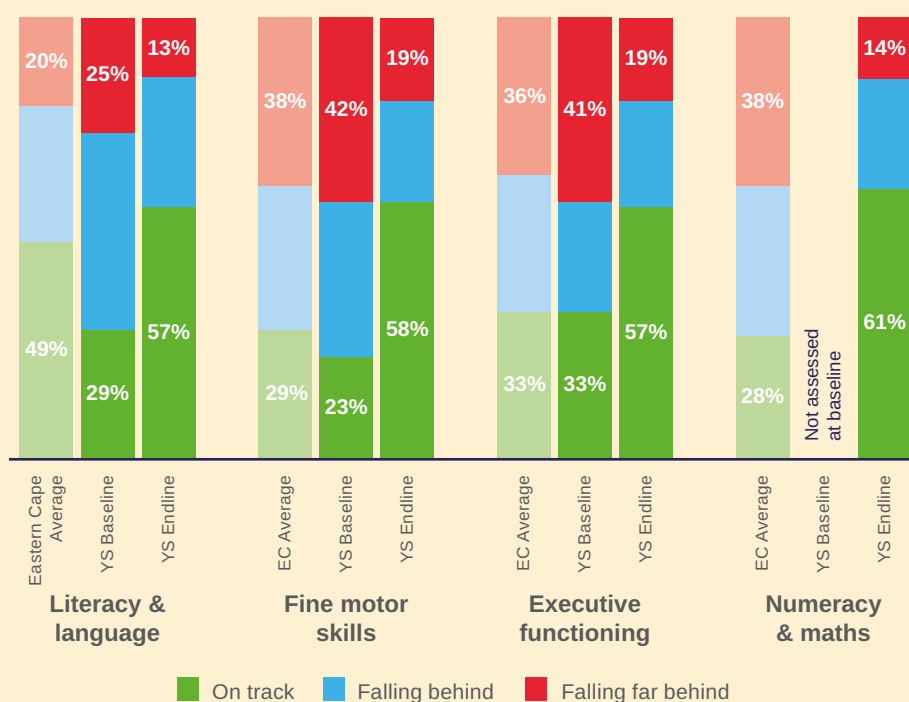
- **At baseline, the sampled children performed similarly to the comparison group**, except for emergent language and literacy, where the YS children performed markedly worse than the comparison group.
- In the eight months between baseline and endline, in all three domains, the distribution of children between the three performance bands shifted dramatically. The proportion of **children ‘on track’ roughly doubled** (increasing by 73% to 152% depending on the domain), while the proportion of **children falling far behind was roughly halved** (it decreased by 48% to 55%).

- The **children with the lowest baseline scores improved most**. Approximately a third of the learners who were “falling far behind” at baseline had progressed enough to reach the “on track” benchmark at endline.

Although no baseline is available in the Early Numeracy and Mathematics (ENM) domain, there is no reason to believe that the children in the sample would have scored very differently from the Thrive by Five Eastern Cape (EC) standard. At endline, the distribution of numeracy scores across the performance bands was even more favourable than in the other three domains, with 61% on track, compared to 28% on track in the Thrive by Five EC standard. This suggests that Yizani Sifunde has a holistic impact on children’s learning, even in areas that were not targeted by the project. This finding is consistent with other studies on the impact of the Little Stars programme .<sup>4</sup>

**Yizani Sifunde has had a holistic impact on children’s learning, even in areas that were not targeted by the project.**

**CHART 2: ELOM 4&5 performance at baseline and endline, and vs. provincial averages**



## ELOM 4&5: maturation effect vs. programme effect

Some improvement in ELOM scores between baseline and endline was expected, as children naturally mature and gain skills over an 8-month period.

Based on statistical analysis across very large datasets, DataDrive2030 has derived a formula for the “maturation effect”: the gains we expect to see from children who are not exposed to an intervention. Any learning gains beyond this maturation effect are therefore regarded as the “programme effect”, which is the closest estimation we have of the plausible effect of the Yizani Sifunde intervention.<sup>5</sup>

In Chart 3, the vertical bars represent YS children’s average learning gains between baseline and endline, for the full matched sample (blue bars) and for children “most at risk”, i.e. who were “falling far behind” at baseline (green bars).<sup>6</sup>

As the chart shows, over the **8 months** of exposure to the Yizani Sifunde project, children gained between **3.8 and 6 months of additional learning**, on average – and the most vulnerable learners gained as much as a year of additional learning.

The fact that the children who were weakest at baseline improved the most is worth highlighting. It confirms that Yizani Sifunde has the power to address structural inequalities by enabling the lowest-achieving children to improve and catch up with mid- and high-achieving children.

This quantitative analysis has been corroborated by ample qualitative evidence from practitioners who were trained in 2021 or 2022. Many reported that they were contacted in subsequent years by teachers at the primary schools their ECDs feed into, who were surprised by the unusual skill level of the children coming from Yizani Sifunde ECDs. These statements, some of which are quoted below, could not be verified independently.

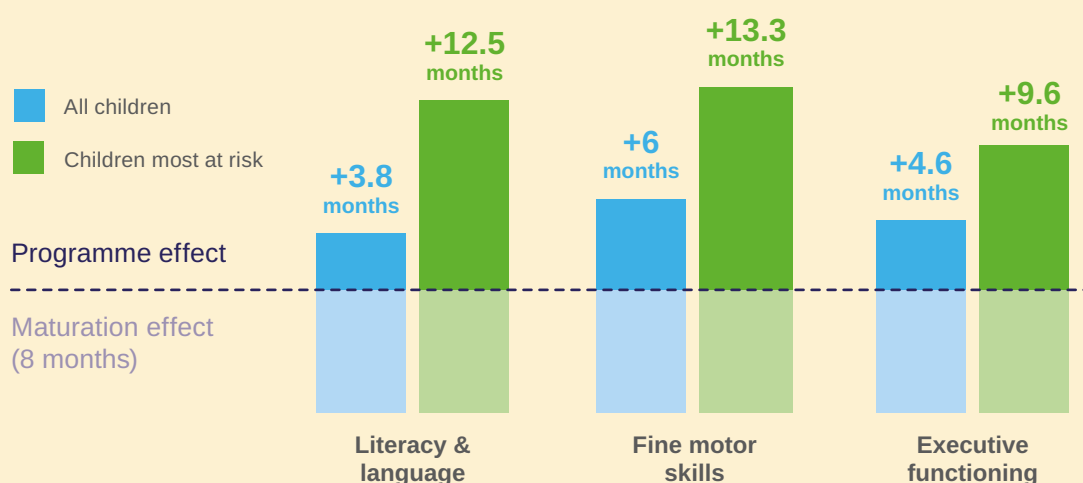
*“We have also received feedback from primary school teachers that children from ECD centres are very smart now”.*

– QUEENSTOWN HUB PRACTITIONER, TRAINED IN 2022

*“I was once called by primary school teachers and they asked me what we were using to teach the children, because the ones who were coming from my ECD centre were able to read the words from the get-go.”*

– EAST LONDON HUB PRACTITIONER, TRAINED IN 2021

CHART 3: Average ELOM 4&5 “programme effect” in months, above expected “maturation effect”



<sup>5</sup> Importantly, only a comparison with a randomly selected control group would have allowed us to make robust claims about causality. It is possible that other factors (e.g. the input of other NGOs that were also operating in some of the ECDs) have also contributed to the additional learning gains.

<sup>6</sup> The findings for the children who were falling far behind at baseline are less reliable due to the smaller sample size.



## Moderators, contributing factors and mediators

The evaluation used various analyses to identify which factors had a significant effect on child literacy and language outcomes. The main findings are summarised in Diagramme 3.

**DIAGRAMME 3:** Presence or absence of correlation between child outcomes and contextual factors/project inputs/intermediate outcomes

### Contextual and 'within-child' factors (moderators)

#### Have no significant effect on child outcomes

Presence of other interventions

In ECDs where other programmes were also implemented, such as SmartStart, there was no reduced efficacy of Yizani Sifunde.

Child-practitioner ratio

Child outcomes were not significantly different in contexts with high or low child-practitioner ratios. Yizani Sifunde was effective even in very large classrooms.

Child attendance

ECD attendance of the poorest children in rural settings was affected by numerous factors. Yizani Sifunde had an impact even on children who did not attend regularly.

Child sex

There were no significant differences between boys' and girls' achievement at endline. This is worth noting considering the large South African gender gaps, especially with regard to literacy.

#### Appear to have a significant effect on child outcomes

Deep rurality

Children in the Queenstown hub achieved lower scores than in the East London hub, even after correcting for other factors. This suggests a probable disadvantage for deeply rural locations.

Some factors like household income could not be tested separately for lack of data.

### Project inputs (contributors)

#### Effect on child outcomes could be quantified and is significant

Number of books received

All children assessed received some books to own, some more than others. The number of books received was an important predictor of early learning achievement across several domains (aggregate, CEF, ENM).

#### Individual effect on child outcomes could not be tested with statistical methods

Quality of practitioner teaching practices

*Out of scope*  
A detailed quantitative assessment of all practitioners' teaching practices was beyond the evaluation's scope.

In-person support by Story Sparkers

*Lack of data variability*  
Nearly all ECDs received the same level of support by Story Sparkers.

Participation in caregiver workshops

*Technical data challenge*  
The children assessed could not be matched to the names of caregivers who attended workshops.

Although the individual inputs could not be tested statistically, there is no doubt that the combination of these inputs has been deeply impactful for the children's learning.

### Mediator: a strong predictor of ELOM scores, influenced by the intervention

Child's task orientation (ability to concentrate on a task)

Task orientation was the most significant variable explaining the aggregate ELOM achievement, and a significant predictor of the CEF and ELL domain scores. It was strongly influenced by the intervention.

In terms of context, the evaluation team found that **results were not influenced by contextual or ‘within-child’ factors** such as child sex. Children’s learning gains remained consistent regardless of the child’s attendance at the ECD, as well as conditions at the ECD (child-practitioner ratio and presence of other interventions). The only exception was the region: children in the Queenstown hub achieved lower scores, which suggests a possible “deep rurality” disadvantage. There was no significant difference between boys’ and girls’ achievement at endline.

In terms of project inputs, the only type of input that could be tested for separately was the **number of books distributed to children to own**. This input had a very significant effect on the children’s ELOM achievement. This confirms the value of the approach chosen in Yizani Sifunde’s theory of change, which gives a central place to the child’s ownership of books. Other project inputs could not be tested statistically, but qualitative evidence attests to their impactfulness (see Learning Brief 4).

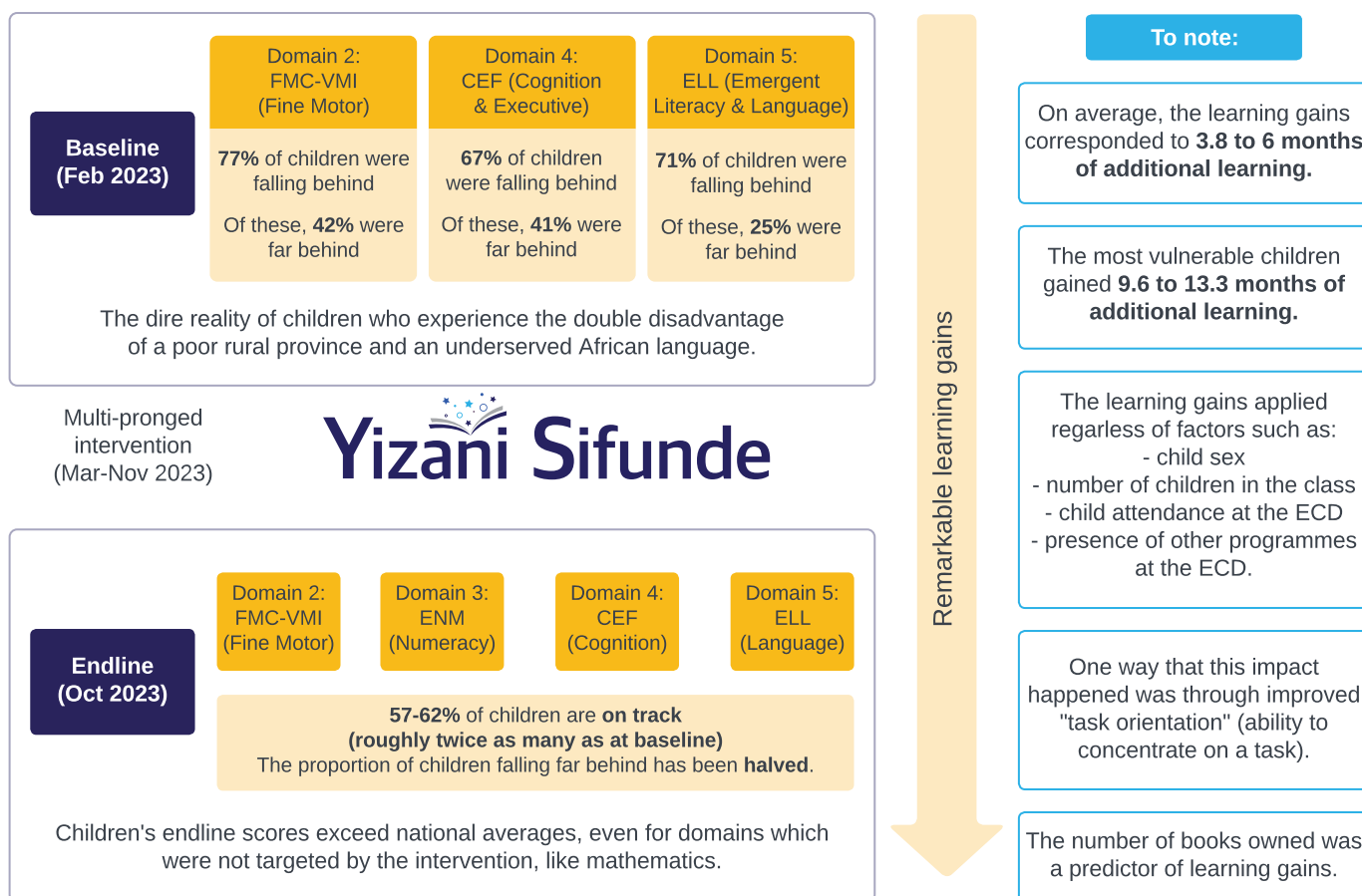
Lastly, the evaluators found that **task orientation**, defined as the ability to persist with attention to accomplish a given task, improved greatly as a result of the project and was a strong predictor of higher ELOM scores.

## Summary of evaluation findings

Diagramme 4 summarises the quantitative evaluation results related to child outcomes. The improvement in children’s ELOM achievement, across all domains assessed, has been remarkable. More specifically, the children who were under-achieving (“falling far behind”) at baseline had the largest learning gains, corresponding to 9.6 to 13.3 months of additional learning, a very significant amount for children who are only 4 and 5 years old.

**Yizani Sifunde children outperformed both provincial and national averages in almost all domains, despite no significant changes in their contextual realities.**

DIAGRAMME 4: How Yizani Sifunde closed the learning gaps: summary of evaluation findings



## Limitations

The main limitations of the evaluation are related to the small sample size and the absence of a control group, which limit the statistical results' conclusiveness, especially when breaking down the sample into subgroups (for example, when studying the children who were falling far behind at baseline).

Another limitation is related to the presence of other NGOs and programmes supporting a substantial number of the ECD centres that participated in the project, the most frequent being SmartStart. The evaluation tested the interaction between Yizani Sifunde and other interventions, but it remains difficult to attribute the learning gains to the intervention alone without a control group. It is likely that a combination of existing programme support with the added value of the YS project led to the gains in child outcomes.

Additionally, some factors and project inputs could not be quantified or did not have sufficient variability to be included in the multivariate analysis.

A further limitation of this quantitative analysis is that it does not, in itself, provide sufficient insights to explain the causal relationships between the variables. Learning Briefs 4 and 5, which lean more heavily on qualitative analysis, help to provide this missing perspective (see References section).

## Concluding thoughts and recommendations

In conclusion, as the ECD sector is structurally weakened by multiple contextual factors after the Covid-19 pandemic, the current generation of young South African children – especially those who speak African languages and live in rural provinces – are still far from reaching the developmental milestones that will give them fair chances of a successful school career. There is a dire need for interventions that will move the needle and help children, especially the most vulnerable ones, reach age-appropriate developmental milestones.

Yizani Sifunde is one such intervention. Within eight months, this multi-pronged approach at age 4-5 doubled the proportion of children who were 'on-track' with their developmental milestones (from 25-30% to 55-60%). Further, a third of the most at-risk children reached the 'on-track' benchmark.

Based on these evaluation findings, policymakers, funders and NGOs in the ECD ecosystem are encouraged to contemplate similar multi-pronged models that integrate distribution of storybooks for children to own, an intervention and resources to strengthen the quality of classroom teaching, and mediation by trained youth.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CAPS</b>	<a href="#">Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements</a> , the official South African curriculum	<b>ENM</b>	Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics
<b>CEF</b>	Cognition and Executive Functioning	<b>FMC-VMI</b>	Fine Motor Coordination - Visual Motor Integration
<b>EC</b>	Eastern Cape	<b>GMD</b>	Gross Motor Development
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development - by extension, an ECD centre	<b>LB</b>	Learning Brief
<b>ELL</b>	Emergent Literacy and Language	<b>LCT</b>	Liberty Community Trust
<b>ELOM</b>	Early Learning Outcomes Measure	<b>PIRLS</b>	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
<b>ELP</b>	Early Learning Programme	<b>SIIA</b>	Social Impact Insights Africa

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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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