

Yizani Sifunde

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4



YIZANI SIFUNDE LEARNING BRIEF SERIES

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

How a multi-pronged intervention strengthened teaching and learning in ECD centres



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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 fourth 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 changes the project made possible in early childhood development (ECD) centres, related to resources, practitioner attitudes and teaching practices, centre management, and overall ECD quality;
- how durable these shifts were; and
- how these shifts contributed to young children’s development.

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 the 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:

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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.

For context: profile of ECD centres and relevant elements of the intervention

The profile of participating ECD centres

While the Yizani Sifunde project was a multi-pronged intervention, the main node of intervention was the Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. To situate the intervention in context, it is helpful to understand the profile of the ECD centres that participated in the project.

In 2023, Yizani Sifunde was rolled out to 44 ECD centres in the regions of East London and Queenstown, of which:

- 41 (93%) claimed to be **registered** with either DSD or DBE (we didn't check their registration certificates to verify if they were up to date and unconditional).
- 18 (41%) had only **one single class** and 17 (39%) had two classes (a baby class and a class of older children). Only a small number of centres had 3 classes or more.
- 26 (59%) **charged less than R200 in monthly fees**. The rest charged between R200 and R399, except for two sites that charge more than R400 per month.

The median **number of children registered** at the ECDs was **31**. Fifteen ECDs had less than 20 children registered, and five had more than 50 children registered. There was often a large discrepancy between children registered and children attending.

Although we tried to prioritise centres where no other intervention was offered, about half of the centres turned out to be part of the SmartStart social franchise or supported by other programmes or non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The three layers of the Yizani Sifunde intervention in ECD centres

These ECDs were supported with the following “triple cocktail” of inputs:

- **Training:** Practitioners were trained in Wordworks’ “Little Stars” Pre-Grade R classroom programme by trainers from local NGOs ITEC and Khululeka. Practitioners attended six training workshops over a year, with cycles of learning, implementation and reflection; trainers also visited each ECD site at least once.
- **Resources:** Practitioners received the extensive set of Little Stars classroom resources, as well as Book Dash books and hanging libraries for their classrooms.
- **Support and modelling:** Young people known as “Story Sparkers” visited ECDs on a weekly basis to facilitate story sessions with children, model some activities and act as a support to practitioners, especially with specific activities such as organising parent workshops.

To document the transformation in the ECD centres, multiple tools and sources of evidence were used. Some were collected internally (by the project team), while others were collected and analysed by the independent evaluator, Social Impact Insights Africa (SIIA), either during their case studies of six ECD centres in August 2023 or during the baseline and endline fieldwork in February and October 2023.



Right: Children retelling a story using Little Stars sequence pictures.

Material outcomes of the project for ECD centres

Improved access to sufficient learning and teaching materials

As part of the external evaluation, SIIA surveyed practitioners at baseline and endline to establish their sentiment about the availability of learning materials.

As Diagrammes 1a and 1b show, even though most ECD centres had access to some storybooks and other resources at baseline, the quantity was rarely considered sufficient by practitioners. At endline, most resources were both accessible and more likely to be available in sufficient quantities.

DIAGRAMME 1A: Presence of learning materials at ECD centres, baseline vs. endline¹

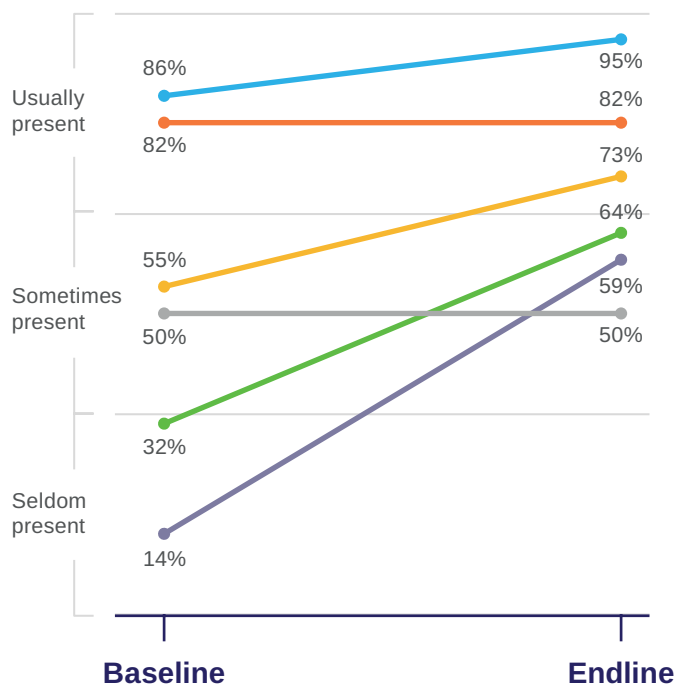
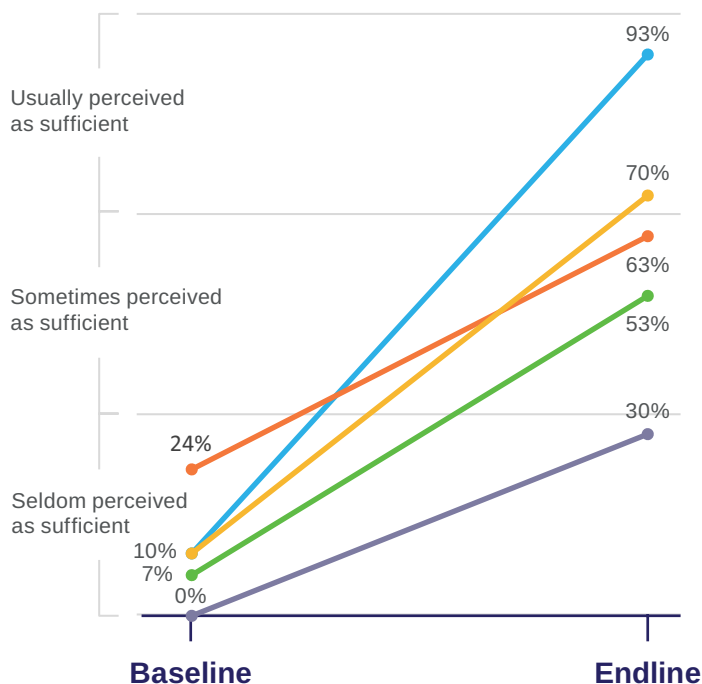


DIAGRAMME 1B: Quantity of learning materials at ECD centres: practitioners' sentiment, baseline vs. endline



- Storybooks
- Pencils, crayons, art materials
- Reading corner/ book area
- Teacher activity guides
- Puppets
- Clothes and props for the fantasy corner

SOURCE: adapted from Polzer Ngwato (2024), pp. 33-35

¹ Resources such as crayons and art materials, or clothes and props for the fantasy corner, were included in the survey questionnaire but were not provided by the project. Therefore it is not surprising that the responses show no increase in access to these resources.

The quality of book corners: findings from photographic evidence

An analysis of pre- and post-intervention photographic evidence collected internally by Story Sparkers helped create an understanding of the range of book corners before and after the project. For example, the pre- and post-pictures to the right and on the next page illustrate the transformation in one of the centres, in terms of children’s ability to see and handle books in their classroom.

At the beginning of the year (top picture), books were stored inside the tall metal cabinet, out of sight of children, reflecting the practitioners’ belief that books are precious objects that need to be protected from children’s hands. At year-end, books are present in large quantities and displayed at children’s height in the hanging library as well as on the corner table; children who want to engage in reading can pick a book and sit on one of the blue chairs, while colourful homemade posters celebrate the joy of reading.

Looking more broadly across our sample of participating ECDs, we found a range of scenarios both before and after the implementation of the project.

Through the project, ECDs received not only an abundance of Book Dash books and teaching resources, but also hanging libraries to help them organise the storage of the books. In training, they were encouraged to set up reading corners that would be accessible to children, and during site visits trainers gave guidance on how to improve the book corners.

This review of photographic evidence helped us become more aware and more intentional about the layers required when building up a classroom book corner, including visibility of books, accessibility, attractive display, and cosy/comfortable arrangement of the reading space.



Left: Book storage at Tiny Tots ECD in East London, before the start of the project (left) and after the project (below).



PRIOR TO THE START OF THE PROJECT:

- A number of ECDs had **no books at all**.
- Some had books that were **kept out of reach** of children (e.g. in cupboards or on high shelves).
- Some **stored their books informally** in crates or on tables (see pic. 1 below).
- The better-resourced centres had book corners, which were often **untidy and unattractive** (pic. 2).
- Only three of the 44 ECD centres had a reasonably well-designed book corner (pic. 3).



Pic. 1: Books kept in a crate on the floor at a Queenstown ECD.



Pic. 2: A well-stocked but rather unattractive bookshelf.



Pic. 3: One of the three well-designed book corners in pre-intervention ECD centres.

TOWARDS THE END OF THE PROJECT YEAR:

- **All ECDs had an abundance of books**, which were visible to the children.
- Some practitioners still kept their **books out of children's reach**, usually too high (pic. 4).
- Others kept the **books in reach but without an adjacent sitting space** where children could enjoy the books (pic. 5).
- Only a minority of better-resourced centres had been able to furnish their book corners in such a way that children could enjoy the space as **a safe, comfortable, attractive space** (pic. 6).



Pic. 4: An ECD centre where books are visible but too high for a child to take on their own.



Pic. 5: A library with abundant, well organised and accessible books, but without a cosy reading space.



Pic. 6: A book corner with comfortable soft furnishings and teddy bear for a safe and pleasant reading experience.

Practitioners' teaching practices, ECERS and LPQA Scores

Synthesis of internal data and external evaluation: impact on classroom practices

This section presents evidence about changes across the full cohort of ECD practitioners. A range of strategies were used to study the quality of teaching, and to explore whether classroom practices shifted as a result of the intervention. In addition to reports from trainer site visits, which we have not included here, useful data included:

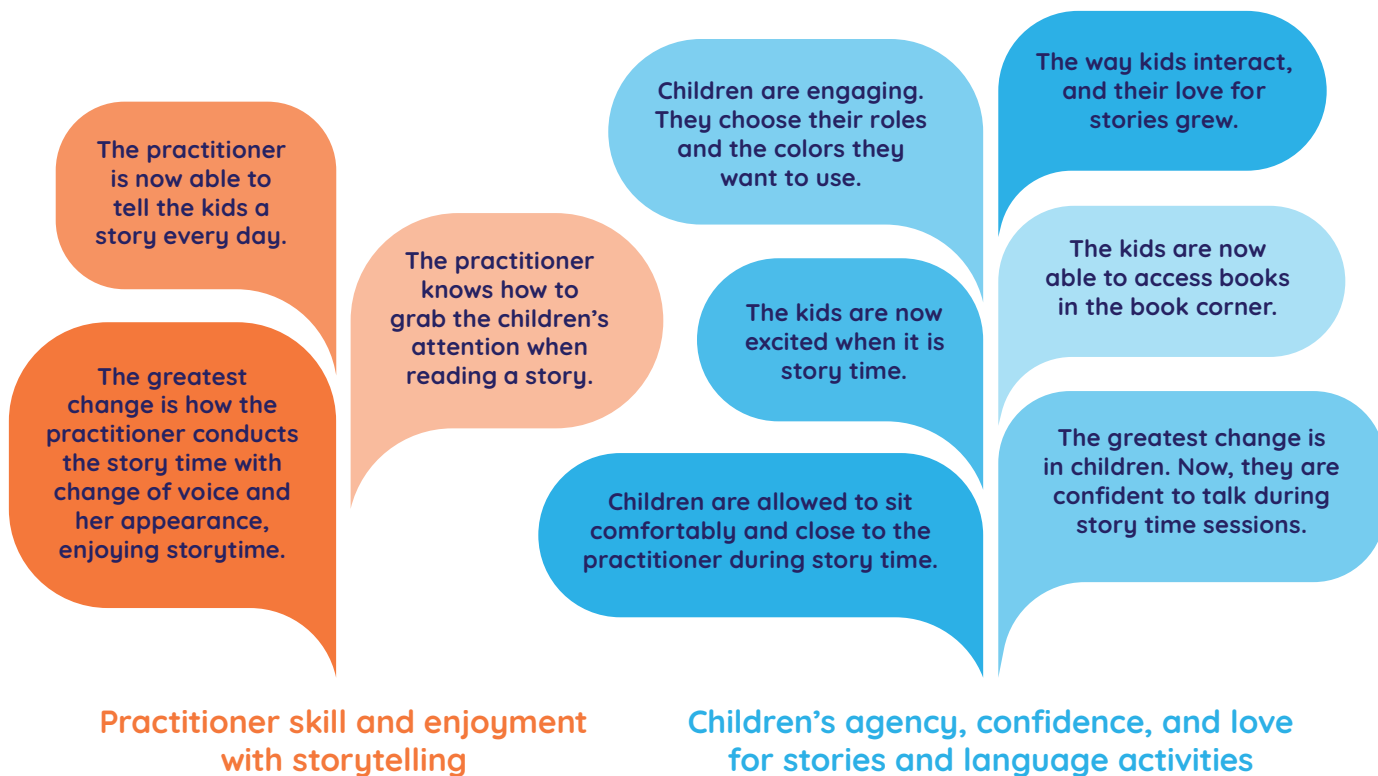
- a. Pre- and post-implementation observations and feedback by Story Sparkers
- b. SIIA's pre- and post-project practitioner survey at 22 ECD centres
- c. SIIA's observations of classroom practices in 6 case study centres, using the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales) tool, the LPQA (Learning Programme Quality Assessment) tool, and more general observations.

Combining these various data points helps to offset their limitations, since the subjectivity of the data collected through internal M&E and SIIA's survey [(a) and (b) above] is balanced out by the greater objectivity of the case study observations (c), while the former two sources help broaden the scope of what would otherwise be a very small sample. For this review, we present key themes and illustrate them with diagrammes derived from these three data sources.

KEY FINDINGS ARE:

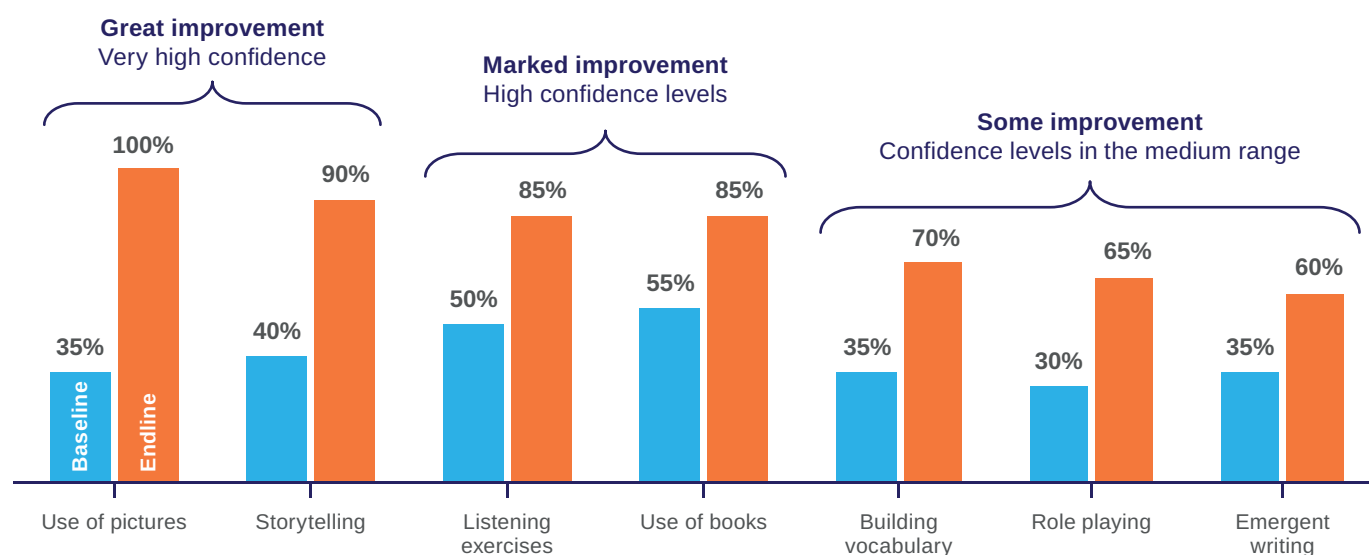
- **Practitioners feel far more confident with literacy activities** related to stories – both oral storytelling and sharing books. (See Diagrammes 2a, 2b and 2c). With other types of activities, practitioners' confidence has increased but remains in the medium range, except for listening activities, where practitioners reported high levels of confidence (2b).
- **Children are significantly more engaged and confident** (Diagramme 2a).
- **The area of emergent writing remains a weakness** and the activity where practitioners' confidence has progressed least (Diagrammes 2b, 2c). This is consistent with other research findings in a similar context.²
- **Children's independent use of book corners needs to be developed more.** This is in line with the need to deepen the work on the book corners (see above). The low variety of genres of books available in classrooms was also noted (Diagramme 2c).

DIAGRAMME 2A: Selected Story Sparker reflections about changes they noticed in ECD centres



SOURCE: Story Sparker classroom observations, October 2023

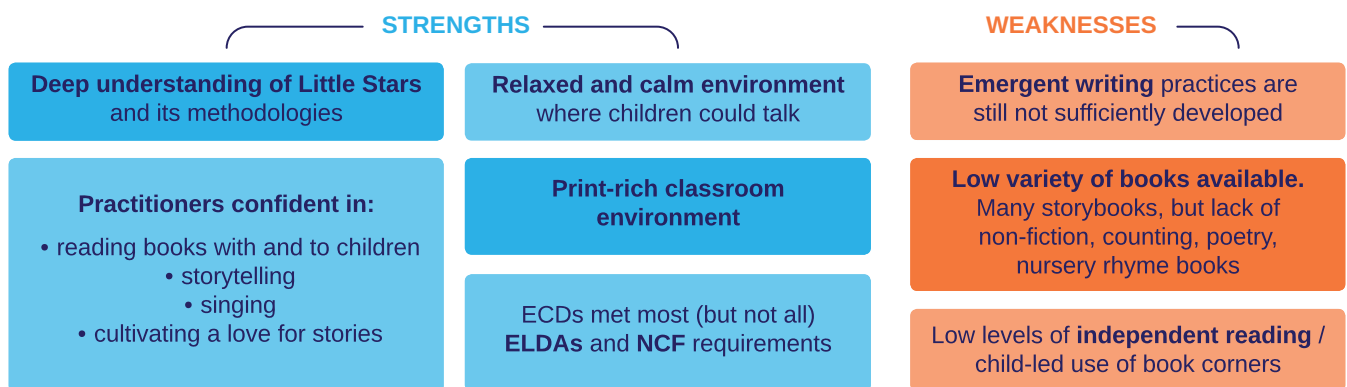
DIAGRAMME 2B: Practitioners' confidence³ with selected teaching practices, baseline vs. endline



SOURCE: adapted from Polzer Ngwato (2024), pp. 37-38

³ The confidence level is defined here as the percentage of practitioners who reported finding this practice 'very easy' or 'somewhat easy'.

DIAGRAMME 2C: External evaluators’ observations about classroom practices in case study ECD centres



SOURCE: adapted from Zhou and Shilakoe (2024), pp. 24-25

Case study observations: ECERS scores (external evaluation)

During case studies, evaluators used subscales of two Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-3 and ECERS-E) to guide their observations of teaching practices.

The ECERS rating scales were initially developed in the United States, with a curricular version (ECERS-E) expanded by a team in the UK. The scales provide specific indicators of quality. For each indicator, observers calculate a score on a seven-point scale: inadequate (1–2); minimal (3–4); good (5–6); or excellent (7).

Some indicators are easy to achieve, while others require more resources and a more skilled teacher, and are unlikely to score high in a low-resource environment. Previous studies have shown that in low- and middle-income (L&MI) countries, ECERS scores are usually concentrated in the lower half of the scale (1 to 3 or 4). This is partly because low-resourced ECDs usually lack access to the infrastructure and material required to achieve the higher range of scores.

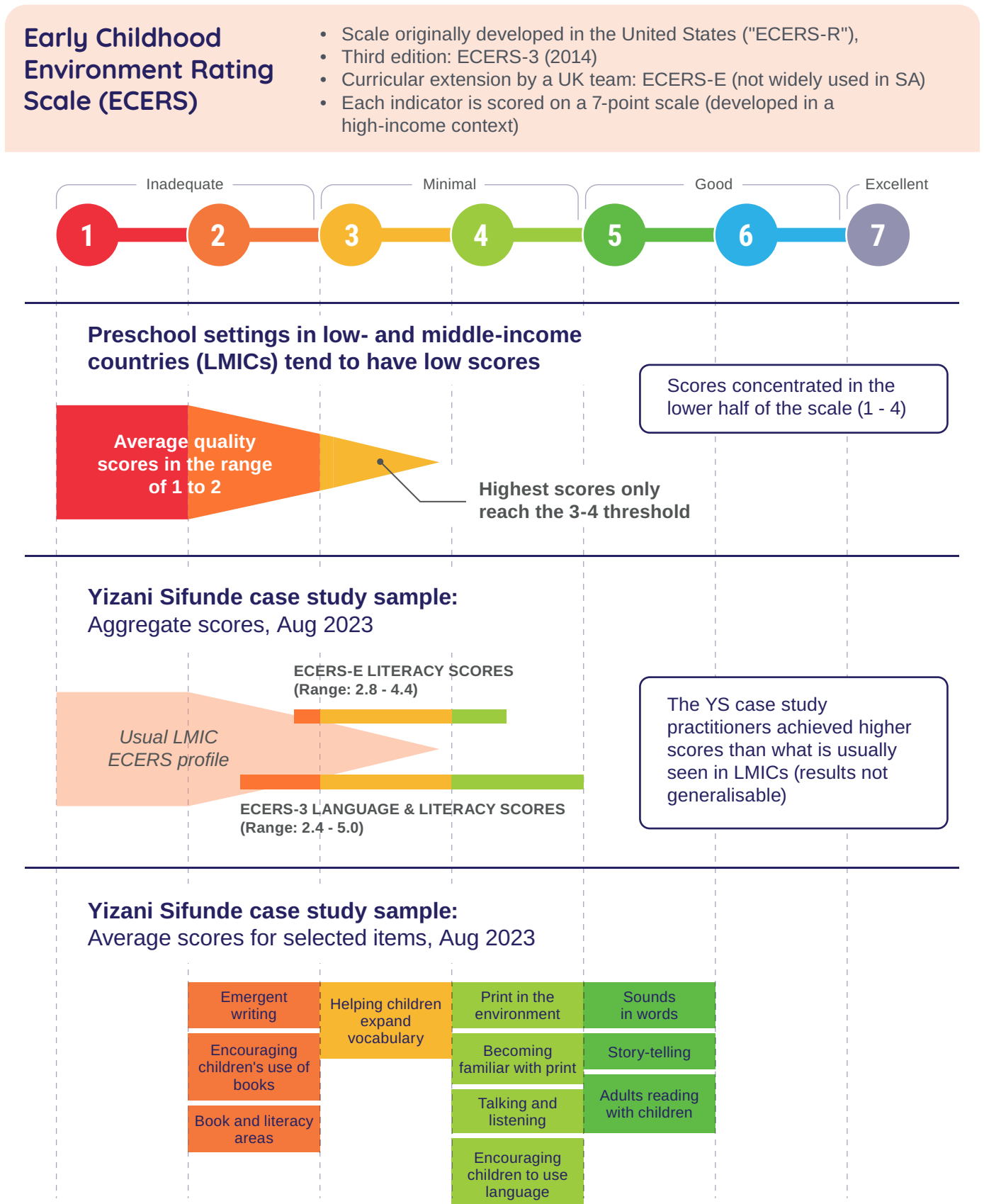
Despite this, the average scores for case study sites were 3.6 (ECERS-E: Literacy) and 3.5 (ECERS-3: Language & Literacy), higher than what is usually seen in L&MI countries. Diagramme 3 shows some variation between the scores achieved in the various items.

Although these results are not generalisable, as the case study sample was small and not statistically representative, they are consistent with previous research about the Little Stars programme.⁴ They can therefore be interpreted to indicate that practitioners on the Yizani Sifunde project achieved quality practices in most areas of the language and literacy domain that are higher than expected in low-resource contexts in South Africa.⁵

4 O’Carroll et al 2023.

5 The poor score achieved for the book and literacy areas item (see Diagramme 3) may seem surprising in light of the large number of books distributed to the centres. The weak scores recorded for this item were not for lack of books, but for a lack of diverse materials (there was an absence of informational/reference books, counting/ maths books and rhyme/poetry books), and for process issues (practitioners did not frequently encourage children to use books).

DIAGRAMME 3: ECERS scores at case study ECDs, vs. typical low- and middle-income country scores



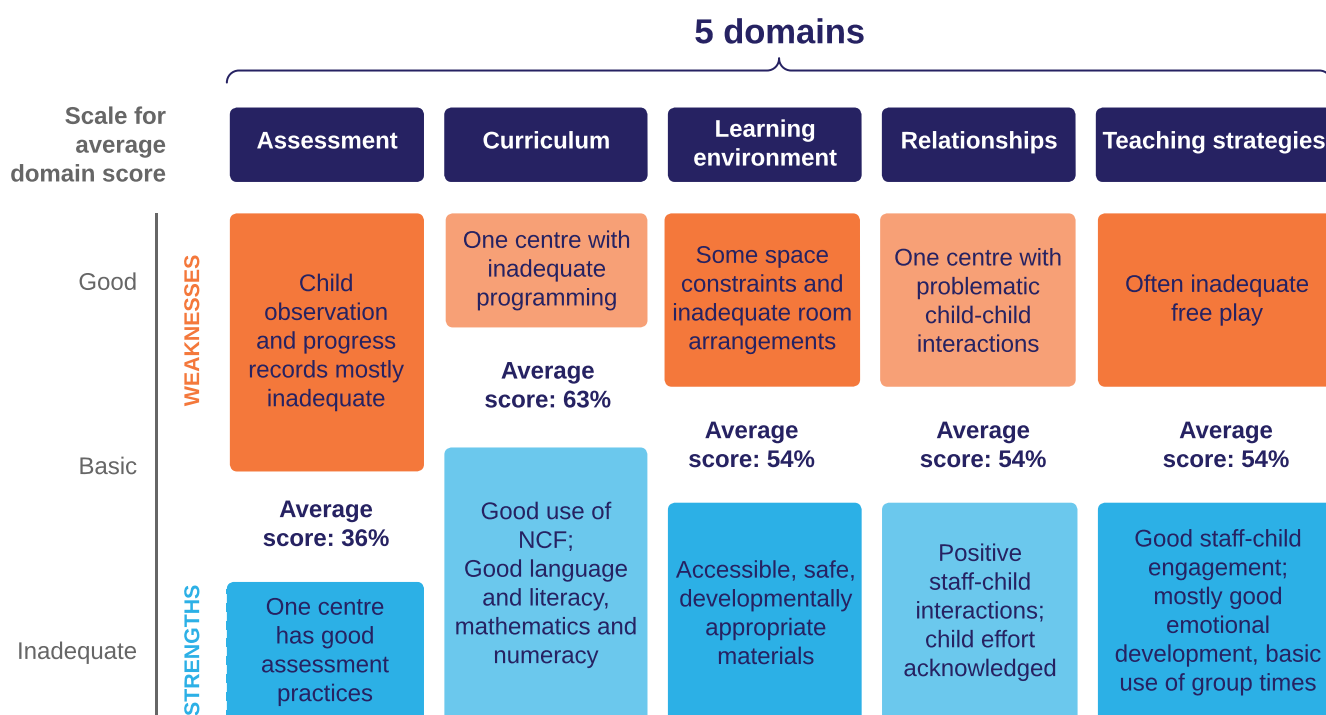
SOURCE: adapted from Zhou and Shilakoe (2024), pp. 27-30

Case study observations: Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA)

In addition to the ECERS, SIIA evaluators used a locally-developed tool, the Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA) from the ELOM suite, to look more broadly at the quality of the learning programme offered at the ECD centres.

Most LPQA scores at Yizani Sifunde ECDs were “basic”. The sample scored best in the curriculum subscale (63%), no doubt a consequence of the intervention. Other subscales were not impacted or less directly impacted by the project and therefore did not score as well. This is not surprising, given the very low-resourced context of the ECD centres. The lowest scores were in the assessment domain, as most ECDs do not have adequate child observation practices or progress records for the children.

DIAGRAMME 4: Strengths and weaknesses of case study ECDs on the LPQA scale



SOURCE: adapted from Zhou and Shilakoe (2024), pp. 37-42

One insight from this LPQA Assessment is that overall, the ECD centres selected for the evaluation’s case studies were average rather than excellent by South African standards – yet the Yizani Sifunde project was able to achieve considerable improvements in the children’s learning outcomes, as shown in Learning Brief 3.

Observations about caregiver engagement and the relationship between ECD centres and caregivers⁶

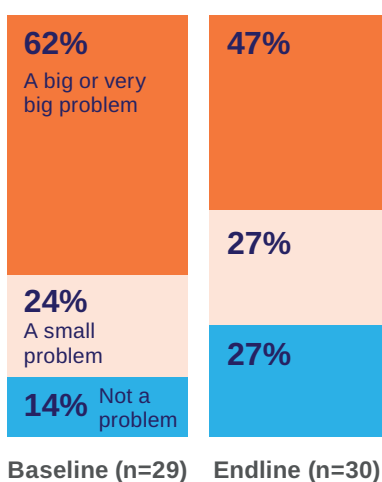
In addition to the observations in the ECD centres, SIIA also explored the ECD staff’s experience of parental engagement, which research has described as having an influence on the results of the ECD centre⁷.

Quantitative survey data collected by SIIA across a sample of 22 ECD centres helps us gauge the quality of caregiver engagement at the ECD centres. At baseline, as Diagramme 5a illustrates, the lack of caregiver engagement emerged as one of the greatest challenges in the experience of the practitioners. At endline, although the issue remained very prevalent for a large number of ECD centres, there was an increasing

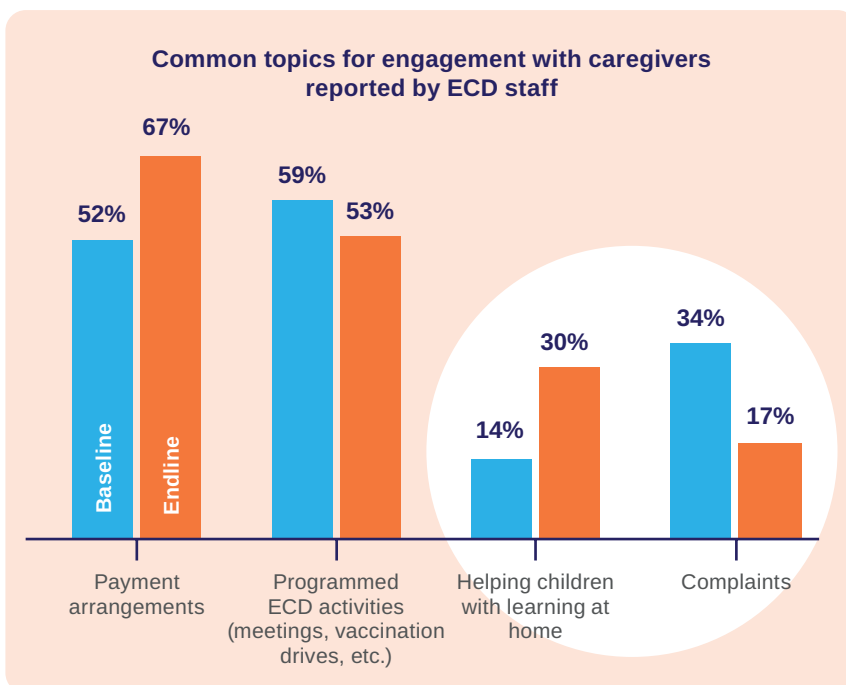
number of practitioners who indicated that it was no longer a problem, or only a small problem for them. Also, an analysis of the topics of engagements reveals that, although the main themes remain centred around payment arrangements and programmed ECD activities, there has been a marked increase in engagements around ways to help the child learn and a decrease in complaints (see Diagramme 5b).

DIAGRAMMES 5A AND 5B: Shifts in ECD practitioners’ experience of caregiver engagement

Is parental engagement in ECD and learner activities a problem for your ECD centre?



Common topics for engagement with caregivers reported by ECD staff



SOURCE: Adapted from Polzer Ngwato (2024), pp. 38-40

⁶ In this series of briefs, we refer to ‘caregivers’ as the adults caring for the child at home. They can be parents, grandparents, siblings, other family members or adults who are not part of the biological family. We refer to caregiver engagement in a broad sense to refer to all the practices by which caregivers play a role in children’s education, including interactions with the staff of the ECD centre and participation in the centre’s activities.

⁷ See for example Vale et al. 2023, p. 14.

Evidence on the durability of the shifts

The Yizani Sifunde project was implemented in different cohorts over one-year cycles. To help embed the classroom practices, training partners ITEC and Khululeka offered some refresher training sessions to practitioners in the year following their participation. No other support was provided in the post-exit year, barring occasional participation in ad hoc literacy events and possible support to reading clubs established in the communities.

In mid-2023, SIIA surveyed practitioners from the 2022 cohort to find out to what degree they had sustained the Little Stars practices they had been trained in. Of the 47 practitioners trained in 2022, 32 (68%) completed the survey.

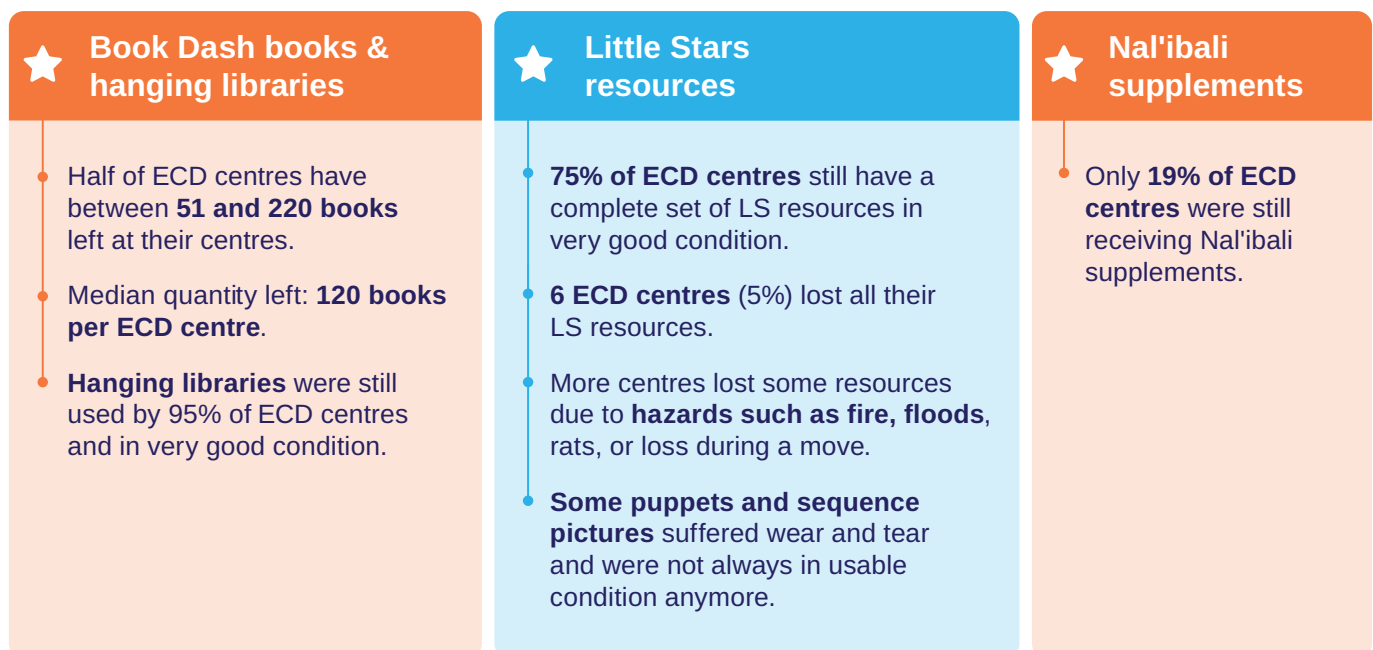
In addition, at the beginning of 2024 (Jan-March), the YS project team visited nearly all⁸ ECD centres from the past three cohorts to observe the classrooms; collect photographic evidence of the state of the resources; and engage with the ECD staff about the durability of the project's impact, challenges they may have experienced, or needs that they wanted to raise.

Durability of resources in the ECD centres

The external survey results and the internal team's visits converge to reveal that, post-project exit, most practitioners are still largely satisfied with the amount of project resources available to them. A year post-project, two-thirds to three-quarters of the 2022 practitioners said they still had enough of the Little Stars resources, and 50% had enough books in their classroom library. Less than 20% of practitioners complained of a serious shortage or not having the resources at all.

The internal monitoring data helped shed light on the cases where project resources were no longer available, which according to interviews were usually caused by hazards (e.g. fire or floods), a change in premises or the departure of a practitioner. Wear and tear of puppets and sequence pictures were also raised as a significant challenge.

DIAGRAMME 6: Resources left at ECD sites post-exit



SOURCE: Internal monitoring data: close-out visits to 113 ECD centres from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts

8 Of the 126 centres where the project was implemented between 2021 and 2023, one was not eligible because it withdrew early in the project; 10 were no longer operating in January 2024; and two could not be reached. A total of 113 centres were visited.



Left: a child selecting a book from a hanging library; **top right:** Little Stars puppets neatly stored; **bottom right:** Little Stars resources and Book Dash books on display. The pictures are from three different ECD centres from the 2022 cohort and were taken in January 2024.

Practitioner attrition

One concern that motivated this enquiry into sustainability was practitioner attrition. Considering the informal work practices and low remuneration in the sector, there is a risk that a sizable proportion of practitioners who received training will cease to be employed at the ECD centres in future years.

Our data revealed that:

- **Attrition was lower than expected.** On average, 6-8% of trained practitioners per year left their centres (not counting the centres that closed down).
- **In a few cases, practitioners took the Little Stars resources with them when leaving,** even though the MoU states that the resources should stay at the ECD centre. In other cases the principal was either unsure or the resources were incomplete, which may result from a low-quality handover.
- **In 85% of attrition cases, implementation of Little Stars stopped,** either because the practitioner was not replaced, or the replacement practitioner was not briefed about Little Stars.

Although the attrition is relatively contained, mop-up training for new practitioners (possibly online) and a small contingent of replacement resources for ECD centres who lose their materials could help sustain the impact in those ECDs.

Sustained classroom practices

Again, the independent evaluation and the internal monitoring data offer two different perspectives on durability of classroom practices.

The SIIA practitioner survey compared the 2023 practices with 2022 practices. Results indicate that the vast majority of respondents either sustained or increased their engagement with all types of Little Stars activities. Only three types of activities showed more than one person reporting a decline or discontinuation of the activity: listening exercises, role playing and emergent writing.

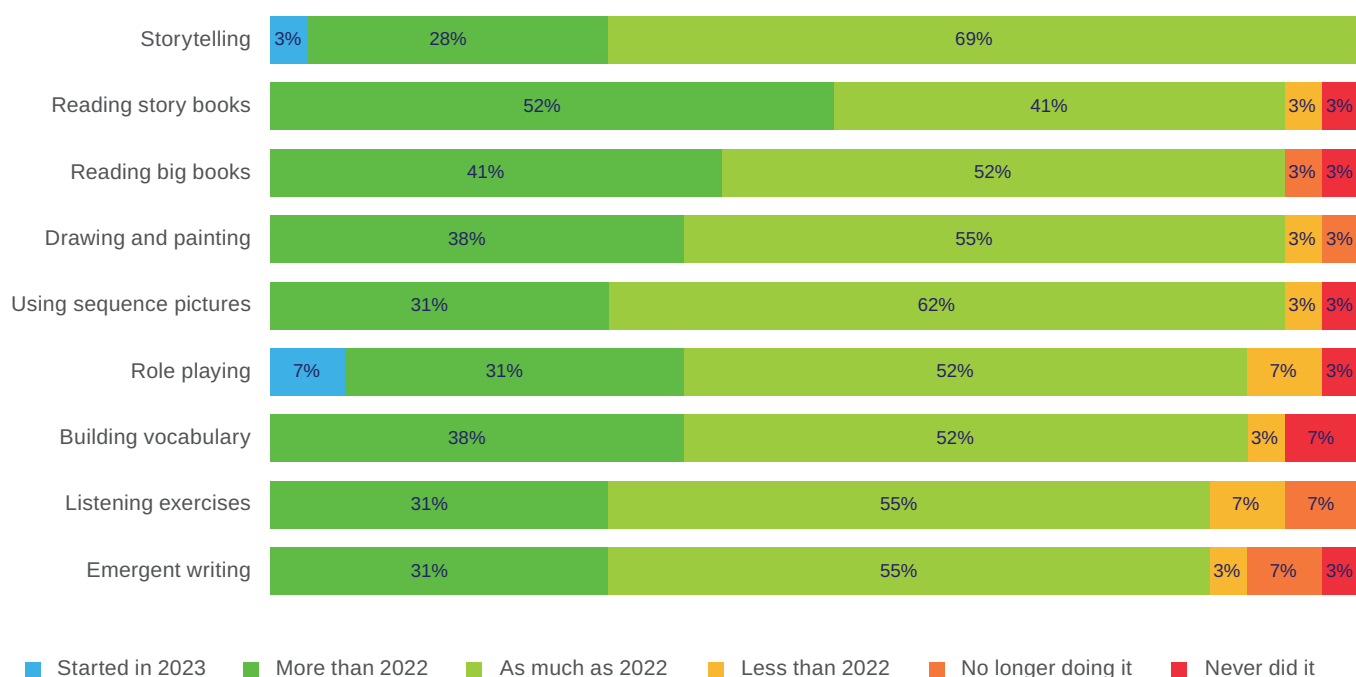
In contrast, the internal close-out survey asked about implementation with reference to the full curriculum of

Little Stars activities. Since three cohorts of ECD centres participated (practitioners trained in 2021, 2022 and 2023), comparing the responses helps to gauge the likely loss of practice over time, although the poorer project implementation during the the learning year⁹ (2021) blurs the picture.

Qualitative evidence and cross-referencing of other data points also helped identify some reasons for the incomplete implementation and sometimes decline of classroom practice over time.

The data shows that more than 75% of practitioners have continued with at least half of the activities in the year post-training, and there is good reason to hope that the 2022 cohort will sustain the practices to a higher level than the 2021 cohort did. Overall, this is a positive finding.

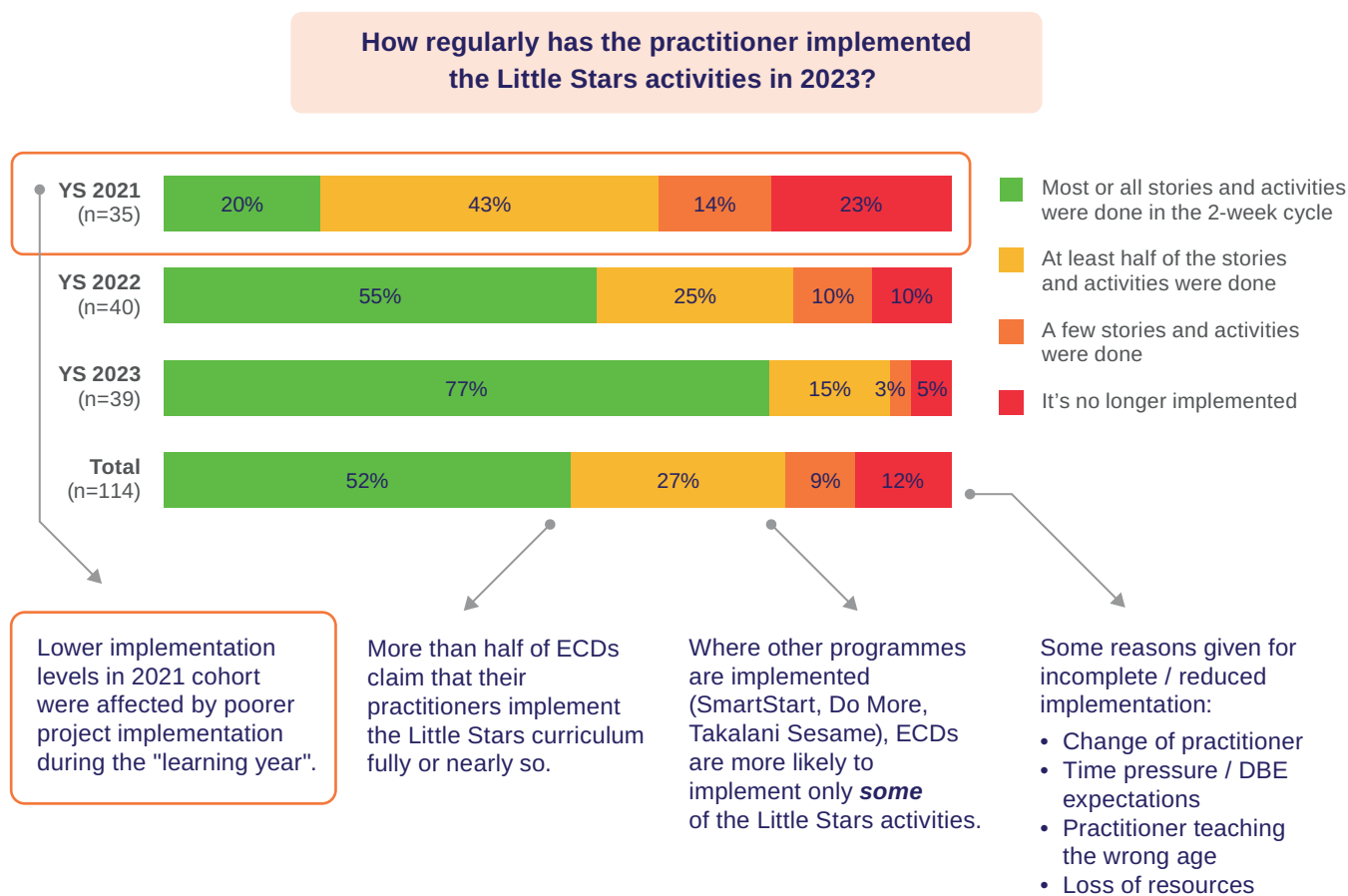
DIAGRAMME 7A: Practitioners’ self-reported engagement with activities in 2023, compared to 2022



SOURCE: Zhou & Shilakoe (2024), p. 54

⁹ The Yizani Sifunde project was first implemented in 2021. Due to delays in reopening of ECD centres after the Covid-related lockdown, and the challenges in setting up the complex intervention and internal processes, the 2021 roll-out started late and was suboptimal, with many lessons learnt for subsequent years.

DIAGRAMME 7B: Extent of sustained classroom practices, and reasons for incomplete engagement



SOURCE: Internal monitoring data: close-out visits to 113 ECD centres from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts

With hindsight: the project's greatest impact, in post-exit reflections

In exit interviews, ECD principals and practitioners answered an open-ended question about the greatest difference that Yizani Sifunde made to their centres. Qualitative analysis surfaced expected themes about practitioner's skills, especially around storytelling; children's love of stories; and children's progress in terms of language, literacy and school-readiness.

More surprisingly, especially given that the question was phrased to refer to the "impact for your ECD", a high number of respondents mentioned changes in practices at home as one of the greatest aspects of the impact. A smaller, but still sizable, number of respondents referred to an improved reputation for the ECD centre or improved relationships between the ECD centre and the caregivers as a result of the project. These themes are brought to life in the quotes in Diagramme 8.

That parental shifts should be such a front-of-mind thought for practitioners and principals in their post-project reflection is significant. Practitioners often experience caregiver engagement as a source of frustration, and evidence from the evaluation hinted at disappointing results for the parent component of the intervention. These responses with the benefit of hindsight suggest that shifts in homes may have been deeper than what practitioners perceived during the project's lifetime.

DIAGRAMME 8: Selected post-project reflections from ECD practitioners and principals about Yizani Sifunde’s impact



SOURCE: Internal monitoring data: close-out visits to 113 ECD centres from the 2021, 2022 and 2023 cohorts

Concluding thoughts

To sum up this review of available evidence, the various sources of data are mostly convergent and allow the following statements about the Yizani Sifunde project:

- Participating ECD centres have substantially increased their learning and teaching resources.
- Book corners are much better stocked; however, progress can still be made in terms of making these book corners more attractive and comfortable to allow for greater levels of independent use by children.
- Practitioners are feeling more confident in their teaching practices, and children are more engaged in class. Practitioners obtained scores on standardised rating scales which are uncommon in low-resource contexts in low- and middle-income countries.
- There is room for improvement in teaching emergent writing and promoting independent reading.
- Yizani Sifunde did not aim to improve all aspects of learning programme quality, but curriculum quality was strong using a standardised tool. The assessment component was weakest and will be considered for a future extension of the Little Stars programme.
- Parental engagement was one of the strongest challenges reported by ECD principals at baseline. Multiple sources of evidence indicate that Yizani Sifunde helped to address this challenge somewhat, although it remains a significant difficulty for many.
- In the majority of centres, the resources were maintained post project exit and the data is relatively positive about the sustainability of classroom practices.

Armed with the extensive data and learnings, the project team has identified possibilities to improve the project design and strengthen the sustainability component for future iterations of the project.



Left: Practitioner introducing children to print by reading a Little Stars Big Book.

ABBREVIATIONS

ECD	Early Childhood Development - by extension, an ECD Centre	LCT	Liberty Community Trust
ECERS-3	The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (3rd edition), see Harms et al. (2014)	LMIC	Low- and Middle-Income Countries
ECERS-E	Curricular extension to the ECERS scale, see Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2010)	LPQA	Learning Programme Quality Assessment
ELDAs	Early Learning and Development Areas	LS	Little Stars
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure	NCF	National Curriculum Framework
LB	Learning Brief	SIIA	Social Impact Insights Africa
		YS	Yizani Sifunde

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