



## Our dream team

Cotlands



Dr Monica Stach

Innocent Nkata

Nozizwe Dladla-Qwabe

Mari Payne

Daisy Kekana

Thabo Shange

Mealang van Heerden

Fathima Rawat





**Dr Monica Stach**  
CEO - Cotlands

Monica Stach holds a doctorate from the University of Pretoria. Her thesis explored the role of toy libraries in providing play-based early learning opportunities for young children. She leads a team of dedicated and passionate early childhood experts, who conceptualised Cotlands play based e-learning course, toy library and early learning playgroup models and training courses. Her passion is creating play based early learning opportunities for young children and promoting toy libraries. She has extensive experience as a presenter at both local and international conferences. She is the chairperson of the National Early Childhood development alliance (NECDA), and on the global stage holds the position of Chairperson for the International Toy Library Association. She is constantly innovating and tinkering the toy library model, collecting and using a variety of play activities, and passionately works towards creating a toy librarian qualification in South Africa. In addition, her firm belief that young children learn best through play makes her an advocate that promotes children's right to play, as well as a researcher eagerly trying to understand and find ways to improve how adults and children interact in a playful situation. Her favourite pastime is playing alongside her grandchildren, ensuring that every play opportunity is lot of fun and sprinkled with learning



**Innocent Nkata**  
Managing Director

Innocent Nkata is a social change leader with a passion for changing children's lives and moving Africa forward. He is currently the Managing Director of Sesame Workshop South Africa, the non-profit organization behind *Takalani Sesame*, the ground breaking South African children's program that has reached millions of children with high quality, engaging educational content for nearly 20 years. Broadcasting on South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), *Takalani* addresses diverse early childhood development needs from literacy, numeracy, and life skills to instilling a greater sense of self and nurturing children's readiness for lifelong learning. Innocent is currently leading *Takalani* through an exciting phase to deepen its impact and expand reach. Over the past 24 years, Innocent has served African communities with various reputable NGOs at local, national, regional and global levels, holding senior leadership roles at Health Systems Trust, ActionAid, Soul City, Oxfam, CAFOD and PLAN International; as well as serving on the UN Democracy Fund's Advisory Board.

Away from work, Innocent is a writer with a lifelong passion for storytelling, using creative writing to translate complex social and political issues into entertaining stories. He holds a Bachelor of Social Work degree, an MSc in Development Management and an MPhil in Human Rights.



**Nozizwe Dladla-Qwabe**  
COO

Nozizwe Dladla-Qwabe Cotlands Chief Operations Officer, holds a Master's degree in Social Sciences. Nozizwe worked for South African Medical Research council on HIV prevention clinical trials for 15 years before joining Cotlands. She leads a team that works to achieve excellence. Her dedication is in implementing good-quality toy libraries and early learning playgroups. Having completed her Advanced Certificate in Monitoring and Evaluation, one can see her true passion around impact and accurate assessment in Cotlands programmes. Her experience over the for the past 16 years in ECD has proven invaluable to the Cotlands team.



**Mari Payne**  
Director Education and  
Outreach

Mari Payne is the Director Education and Outreach at Sesame Workshop International, South Africa. Her previous work experience includes working for Save the Children South Africa as a Senior Education Project Manager as well as UNICEF South Africa Country Office as an ECD Consultant. She has over 15 years' experience working in child rights, child law, early childhood development and basic education. She holds a B.Ed (Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase) degree and a Hons B.Ed (with specialization in Early Childhood Development) from the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her research interests are in early childhood development and the importance/impact of play based learning. She was part of the research team to Map the gaps between Expert, Stakeholder and Public understanding of Early Childhood Development in South Africa with the FrameWorks Institute in Washington, DC. She served on UNICEF's internal working group for early childhood development and co-authored several publications on early childhood development, the importance of play based learning for young children and the impact it has on brain development. She is involved in supporting young children through play in her free time and she is an avid supporter of the right to play.



**Daisy Kekana**  
ECD Project Manager

Daisy Kekana Cotlands ECD Project Manager is passionate about developing and empowering communities to take care of their children. She has been working with children for the past 10 years and was granted an opportunity to join the Cotlands team in 2015 as an ECD Project Manager for Gauteng DSD funded projects. She is responsible for capacity building, mentoring, monitoring and evaluation of non-profit organisations in Gauteng and Mpumalanga to implement Cotlands playgroup and toy library programmes, as well as the parenting programme nationally and has worked on multiple projects. She holds a diploma in early childhood development, project management, Operations management and She is currently on her final year studying Bachelor degree in Community Development. Her life is motivated by the impact she makes in children's lives and her adorable son.



**Thabo Shange**  
Program Coordinator

Thabo Shange is a skilled program coordinator with years of experience in community engagement projects involving educational interventions aimed at young children. Over the past 8 years, he has occupied a number of roles where he was responsible for, among other things, several projects working towards creating access to early learning opportunities for young children through Playgroups and Toy Library Programmes, capacity building and mentoring of other partner organisations. In addition, Thabo has extensive experience working with government and non-government stakeholders at national, provincial, district and community levels. He holds a National Diploma in Marketing Management and is currently studying towards a BA in Human and Social Studies.



**Mealang Van Heerden**  
Instructional Engineer

Mealang van Heerden has been part of the Cotlands team since 1997, Mealang has more than 10 years' preschool classroom experience and this is where her desire to see children thrive encouraged her to mentor other practitioners. Mealang portfolio grew to include managing the operations and staff training of the Cotlands preschools.

In 2012 Mealang was appointed as Programme Development Manager. She was responsible for the co-ordination of all Cotlands early learning play groups and capacitating the Health care workers to implement the educational programme. As part of the programme development team, Mealang developed the 2 – 5 years and Grade R curriculum for the P.L.A.Y SA project (playful learning around you) an innovative online training that (is implemented by the Department of Basic Education in partnership with UNICEF, the Lego Foundation and Cotlands. Mealang also consulted with Takalani to develop material for their play everyday workshops. Currently Mealang is responsible for developing online accredited training (Early Childhood development practitioner) with a view to make formal training more accessible to ECD practitioners, Mealang enjoys advocating for play as a right and believes it is the most effective way to see children develop to their potential.



**Fatima Rawat**  
Manager Research and  
Outreach

Fathima Rawat is an Early Childhood Development Specialist with over 10 years of experience in the NGO and Public Sector. She has a proven track record of success, working with multiple stakeholders (local govt, NGOs, academia, and communities) and performing in challenging diverse environments. Fathima has led multi-disciplinary teams on large-scale ECD projects in vulnerable contexts across the Western Cape.

Fathima has been instrumental in developing holistic ECD interventions aimed at achieving universal access to ECD in informal and vulnerable communities using a population-level approach. Her work has been about addressing the social and infrastructural barriers in creating safe spaces for children to learn, play, and reach their potential in their natural environments.

She has done extensive research and developed ECD knowledge products including play-based ECD outreach models, family-centered intervention models, parent empowerment support programmes, and community interventions. She has managed, mentored, and trained a large cohort of community workers in ECD program implementation. Fathima holds a Master's in the field of Early Childhood Intervention from the University of Pretoria. She is currently the Manager Research and Outreach at Sesame Workshop South Africa.