In Brief

The third ELOM in Practice Webinar -

Embedding ELOM Data into Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

The third "ELOM in Practice" webinar hosted by DataDrive2030 - Embedding ELOM data into MEL - was held on 18 June 2025. The webinar series aims to provide a forum for ELOM users to learn from each other's experiences and share their findings. This webinar focused on the experiences of two South African early childhood development (ECD) organisations, LETCEE and GROW ECD, who shared their experiences in integrating the ELOM 4&5 tool into their monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes. What follows is a summary of the main themes and key takeaways from the presentations and discussions.

Speakers

LETCEE is an ECD NPO based in KwaZulu-Natal focusing on ECD, with integrated programmes targeting early learning, health, and nutrition, including practitioner training, centre and non-centre based programming, food gardens and toy libraries. Kitso Maragelo is the Director of Integrated ECD projects, and has been with LETCEE for 12 years. Her biggest goal is to see every child reached through quality ECD services.

GROW ECD is a non-profit early learning enterprise that empowers ECD centre owners in underserved areas of South Africa to deliver quality early learning. It provides ECD centres with the digital tools, training, resources, and financing required to improve child outcomes and make ECD centres more sustainable.
Zani Lamb joined the Taking Care of Business Group, including Grow ECD, in 2023 as the MEL Lead. She brings nearly 20 years of experience in monitoring and evaluation. Zani envisions sustainable, high-quality ECD centres across South Africa that are safe, joyful spaces where every child builds skills for future success.

Main themes and insights

1. Refining a strategic rationale for integrating the ELOM 4&5 into MEL:

Both GROW ECD and LETCEE strategically adopted the ELOM 4&5 assessment tool to enhance their understanding of child development and programme effectiveness. For GROW ECD, the goal was to strengthen their impact measurement framework. Zani Lamb, the organisation's MEL lead, explained their aim was to "*start building longitudinal data*" to better understand their programme effect and different dynamics within program implementation. Zani presented GROW ECD's Theory of Change, explaining that the ELOM 4&5 assessment tool was chosen to measure one of the programme's key long-term outcomes: whether children attending GROW-supported centres are Grade R ready. The ELOM 4&5 assessment tool was chosen as the "*premier tool*" to measure child outcomes due to its statistical validation and standardisation, and national comparability.

Similarly, LETCEE used the ELOM 4&5 in a study to track school readiness for their 4 and 5-year-old children transitioning to Grade R. As explained by Kitso Maragelo, LETCEE's director of integrated ECD projects, a significant motivation for LETCEE was addressing a gap in their MEL system: their previous reliance on practitioner self-assessments, which have a "*potential for bias*". The team needed an external, objective measure to track child outcomes to compare against their internal assessments. Kitso highlighted that using the ELOM 4&5 tool helped to provide evidence-based data to track impact and readiness, align programme activities, identify trends and patterns, strengthen accountability, and identify areas within their programmes for improvement.

2. Facing challenges and refining approaches

Both organisations encountered challenges in integrating the ELOM 4&5 assessment tool, particularly in terms of identifying the best fit-for-purpose. GROW ECD initially tried to include the tool within the first 24 months of their programme's impact period as a monitoring tool. However, Zani described how this did not work out as planned as the tool was "*not designed to be a monitoring tool*" for frequent or regular data collection periods, nor was it easily usable or cost-effective for their team at regular intervals at the centre level. A significant logistical hurdle was that "*most centres do not have 15 or more learners that are four to five years of age, which meant we couldn't assess at centre level*".

In light of monitoring challenges, GROW ECD had to rethink their approach. They decided to use the tool further up in their Theory of Change timeline "*at what we call our long long-term outcomes level*". Here, it serves as a "*validation to ensure another form of quality control...what our data says here is corroborated externally*".

As with LETCEE, who included the ELOM 4&5 as a way to validate teacher self-assessments, GROW ECD uses the tool as an external validation and quality control to corroborate findings from their internal learner assessment tools. Their intention is to use it a maximum of every three years, embedding it within external evaluations to control costs and ensure that necessary data is collected proactively. This approach allows for familiarisation with the tool, builds longitudinal data, and ensures that evaluation findings are not "*coming in from the cold to the teams*".

LETCEE faced challenges related to sample size, characteristics, and time, noting issues like a gender imbalance (more boys than girls) that made sampling difficult. Resource limitation was another challenge, as they used internal assessors, which raised concerns about "*potential bias*" similar to their practitioner self-assessments. Time constraints were also an issue, as they had to "*rush everything*" due to difficult travel to remote areas and bad weather, despite a relatively small sample size. On the enabler side, Kitso highlighted the importance of early preparation.

3. Identifying key insights and making adjustments

The ELOM studies provided critical insights that led to programmatic adjustments and a deeper understanding of child development. LETCEE's dipstick study revealed that while children performed well across most domains, there was a noticeable area of concern in Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration. This prompted the team to "*go back and look at striking a balance across all the domains*" and to track child performance more regularly. The study also helped the team realise the importance of child individualisation, recognising that "*each and every child is very unique, learns at their own pace and has different needs*". This led to setting clear developmental goals and designing tailored activities for areas where children were not performing.

For GROW ECD, Zani shared an important insight to come out of their ELOM study in response to a poorly performing domain: the team realised that they "*actually need to tighten our learner assessment in that particular domain*" rather than just changing the programme offering. This demonstrates how ELOM data can be used to understand and refine measurement and learning practices, not just programmatic practices.

4. Enhancing communication

Communicating the ELOM 4&5 findings to various stakeholders, particularly parents, required careful consideration among both organisations. GROW ECD communicates findings from their internal learner assessment tools to parents, as these tools monitor each child. The overall findings from the ELOM 4&5 assessment are communicated to centre owners.

LETCEE addresses the challenge of complex measurement terminology by integrating it into their caregiver programme. Kitso explained, "*we actually empower them [parents] to understand the*

importance of ECD and what are the different developmental domains that kids actually have to thrive". This preparation ensures parents have "*a better understanding of what we're speaking about*" when ELOM 4&5 results are presented to them.

Both organisations found that first familiarising their teams with the ELOM 4&5 tool leads to a "*much more constructive and immediately programmatically focused discussion*" when study findings are shared.

5. Operational lessons and future considerations

Both speakers offered valuable operational lessons for future ELOM studies. LETCEE plans to make two significant changes: using "*external assessors to eliminate or decrease bias*" and allocating "*more time in terms of doing the study and not doing it in a rush*". The team is also interested in using the ELOM-R assessment tools to track children's progress beyond their programme.

GROW ECD's key advice, based on their own learning, is to "*strongly recommend not doing what we did in kind of making a lot of assumptions about what the tool can and can't do*". Zani urged organisations to "*find the context where it can work for you and the best tool for that purpose*".

GROW ECD also explored other ELOM tools, including the Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA) and the child Social Emotional Rating Scale. Zani explained that the LPQA was not a good fit for GROW ECD's needs, but that it is a "*very good tool*" for organisations with fewer MEL resources. The Social Emotional Rating Scale offered "*really great insights*" and is being considered for more regular inclusion due to its importance for child outcomes. Zani strongly encouraged future ELOM users to consult with the DataDrive2030 team as "*many organisations have gone before us and the DataDrive team knows those lessons that the organisations have learned, and are very open to discussing what can and can't be done*".

Recommendations for integrating ELOM data into MEL:

- **Clarify your purpose upfront**. Take time to fully understand the tools' purposes, capabilities and limitations before implementation. Ensure fit and alignment between key learning questions or needs and the data that the tools can offer. Don't assume the tool is suitable for regular monitoring. Decide whether you need it for one-off evaluation, validation of internal tools, longitudinal tracking, or all three.
- **Align tool use with your Theory of Change.** Position the ELOM tool/s where it best fits in your results chain or programme pathways – whether for early or formative programme monitoring, midpoint review, or long-term outcome assessment.

- **Consider sample requirements.** Understand the sample size thresholds needed for centre-level or aggregate analysis, and plan use of the tool/s accordingly. For example, consider using the LPQA to understand centre-level performance if there are fewer than 20 children at a centre aged 4–5 years.
- **Pair ELOM tools with others.** Combine tools with internal assessments or observational tools to triangulate and validate findings, and to provide actionable insight at both the child and centre level.
- **Embed ELOM studies into evaluation cycles to control cost**. Planning ahead allows you to collect data strategically and combine ELOM data collection with other evaluative fieldwork.
- **Invest in team and parent capacity-building.** Ensure internal staff, parents and partners understand the purpose, process, and value of the ELOM tools to create shared ownership, understanding and improve uptake of findings.
- **Be open to refining your measurement approach.** Use ELOM results not just to adjust programmes or curricula, but also to improve internal measurement tools and systems.
- **Anticipate fieldwork challenges.** Allocate adequate time for planning, allow for travel and weather-related delays, and consider external assessors to reduce potential bias.
- **Engage with DataDrive2030 early.** Consult with the team to learn from others' experiences and to design an ELOM study that is both feasible and meaningful in your context.

Conclusion

The experiences of GROW ECD and LETCEE demonstrate that integrating ELOM tools into MEL systems is not a one-size-fits-all process, but rather a strategic exercise in alignment, adaptation, and learning. Both organisations showed how careful reflection on purpose, timing, and context is essential to ensuring that ELOM data generates meaningful insights rather than burdensome reporting.

By repositioning the ELOM 4&5 tool to serve as a validation mechanism or outcome measure, rather than a routine monitoring tool, they were able to enhance programme credibility, refine internal systems, and spark more focused, programmatically relevant conversations within their teams. Importantly, their stories underscore the value of investing in team and parent capacity-building, communicating findings thoughtfully, and engaging with the wider ELOM community to avoid reinventing the wheel.

As more organisations begin to use ELOM data to inform decision-making, the lessons shared here serve as a helpful roadmap for designing MEL systems that are not only technically sound, but practically feasible and deeply embedded in day-to-day learning.