



CASE STUDY

MICROCHANGE AT SCALE

**HOW SMALL DATA-DRIVEN SHIFTS
CAN TRANSFORM EARLY LEARNING
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, hundreds of thousands of children start school every year without the right learning foundations, especially children from low-income households. Urgent transformation is needed to close this gap and meet the National Development Plan's goal of universal access to high-quality early childhood education by 2030.

BIG CHANGE STARTS SMALL.

Local, data-driven improvements - when repeated and scaled - can transform early learning at a national level. [DataDrive2030](#) uses data to identify the microchanges needed to strengthen early learning programmes - helping practitioners, funders and policymakers make better, evidence-based decisions.

This publication explores:

1. How data helps inform microchange within early learning programmes.
2. Case studies featuring South African organisations successfully scaling positive change.
3. Key enablers and challenges to scaling microchange.



Note on sources: This publication draws on insights from ELOM assessments at participating early learning programmes and interviews with key spokespeople.



UNDERSTANDING THE EARLY LEARNING LANDSCAPE

THE EARLY LEARNING GAP

In South Africa, **less than half** of 4-year-olds attending early learning programmes (ELPs) are developmentally On Track. According to the inaugural [Thrive by Five Index 2021](#):

- Only 46% of children could complete the basic early learning tasks expected at their age.
- 26% were Falling Behind, and 28% were Falling Far Behind.

Furthermore, there was a strong correlation between poverty and poor learning outcomes.² At high-fee ELPs (charging fees of more than R1,751 per month), 8 out of 10 children were On Track for their age, compared to just 3 out of 10 children attending low-fee ELPs (charging less than R110 per month).

These disparities have lasting consequences - by the time children start school, many are already far behind, making it difficult to catch up.

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: THE ROLE OF DATA

You cannot improve what you do not measure. Without reliable data, early learning interventions risk being ineffective. This is where DataDrive2030 and the [Early Learning Outcomes Measurement \(ELOM\) tools](#) come in.

The ELOM suite of tools provides a standardised, locally validated framework for measuring children's development across key learning domains. Available in 11 official South African languages and designed for affordable use at scale, these tools help early learning practitioners, funders, and policymakers to:

- Identify strengths and gaps in ELPs.
- Test and refine interventions to improve effectiveness.

- Track progress over time to inform larger systemic change.

FROM MEASUREMENT TO IMPACT

Reliable data is only the starting point - **using data to drive change is what matters.** Beyond individual programmes, ELOM tools and digital systems provide NGOs, funders, researchers, and government with standardised data that enables data-informed decision-making at every level:

- **Micro level:** Enables organisations supporting ELPs to make evidence-based improvements in their programmes (the focus of this paper).
- **Meso level:** Supports research and evaluation across programmes, identifying proven interventions to scale for broader impact.
- **Macro level:** Tracks progress towards national and global development goals and informs policy.

DataDrive2030's end-to-end data value chain - from assessment to action - translates data insights into programme improvements.

The following case studies explore microchange at scale - how small data-driven shifts can improve the quality of programming and transform early learning in South Africa.

**You cannot
improve what you
do not measure.**



BULUNGULA INCUBATOR: USING DATA AS A CATALYST FOR RURAL TRANSFORMATION

CAN DATA HELP DRIVE CHANGE AT SCALE IN RURAL AREAS?

The Xhora Mouth Administrative Area on South Africa's Wild Coast is a remote and under-resourced region where, 20 years ago, there were no early learning centres or high schools, few functioning primary schools and high levels of adult illiteracy.

Today, the landscape has changed. There are five thriving early childhood development (ECD) centres, four primary schools and an independent high school - the top-performing school in the region for three consecutive years, with a 100% Matric pass rate.

This transformation has been driven by community-led innovation, data-informed decision-making and the work of the Bulungula Incubator (BI), a local NGO established in 2007.

This case study explores how BI uses ELOM data, its in-house data management system, and practitioner-led Communities of Practice (CoPs) to improve early learning outcomes at their centres and beyond.

A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO CHANGE

BI follows a structured four-step approach to improving early learning:

1) DATA MANAGEMENT

A custom-built, person-centred data management system is at the heart of BI's early learning approach. Designed to operate in rural settings with limited connectivity, the system allows offline data capture, synchronising automatically once network access is restored, tracking each child from birth in real-time.

At the ECD centres, daily attendance is recorded, curriculum adherence is monitored, and essential health indicators - such as immunisation, vitamin A supplementation and deworming - are tracked. The system flags when targets are not met.

These data insights enhance project management, enabling BI to assess impact, identify gaps, and redirect resources where they can have the greatest effect. For more in-depth information, visit the [BI Data Management System](#).

2) MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

To complement its internal data system, BI uses two ELOM tools (alongside the [Grow ECD app](#)):

- [ELOM 4&5 Years Assessment](#): Assesses 4- and 5-year-old children across five key early learning domains: Gross Motor Development (GMD), Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (FMC-VMI), Cognition and Executive Functioning (CEF), Emergent Literacy and Language (ELL), and Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (ENM).
- [ELOM Social-Emotional Functioning Rating Scale](#): Evaluates emotional readiness for school, relationships with peers and adults, and levels of independence.

The ELOM reports identify learning gaps, provide actionable recommendations and benchmark BI's results against provincial and national data. They are integrated into BI's data system to refine and improve programme delivery.

The ELOM reports are invaluable, showing what we're doing well, where we need to improve, and providing helpful suggestions. ”

- LINDIWE TUKANE, HEAD OF ECD - BI.



3) ENGAGING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

BI actively shares data findings with teachers, parents and funders to foster collaboration and shared learning.

"The ELOM results varied among our five ECD centres - we asked teachers why they thought this was the case. They readily share ideas and collectively contribute to improving outcomes."

- Lindiwe Tukane, Head of ECD - BI.

4) IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

Based on ELOM data and stakeholder feedback, BI makes targeted programme adjustments. These have included:

- **Teacher development:** Focused workshops to strengthen fine motor skills and visual-motor integration. Weekly teacher meetings and a WhatsApp group to exchange ideas, best practices and encouragement.
- **Parent engagement:** Sharing practical, home-based learning activities, e.g., sorting samp and beans to help children develop fine motor coordination skills.

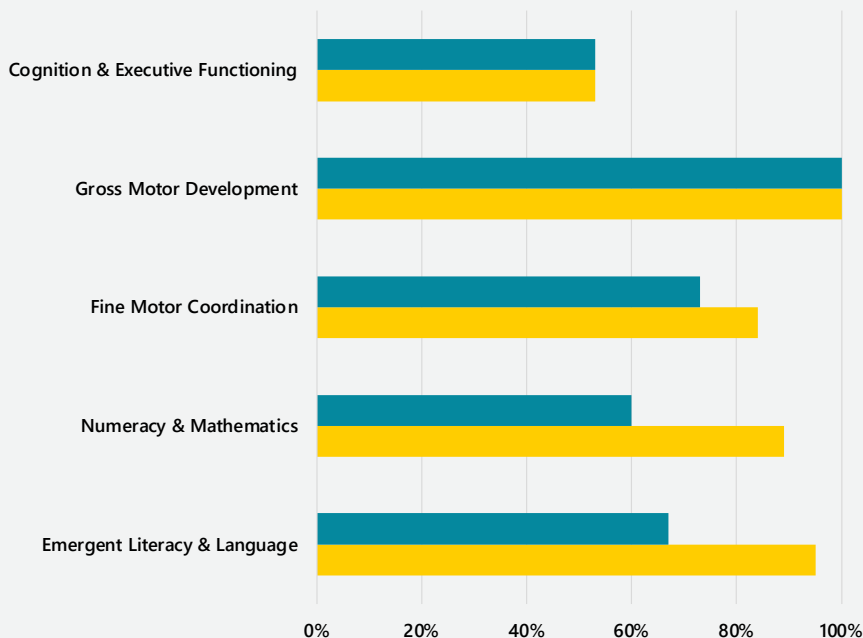
- **Nutrition support:** Recognising the link between stunting and learning outcomes, BI introduced a feeding programme providing over 50,000 meals yearly for children aged 3 to 6.
- **Health screenings:** BI's network of community health workers screens young children at home and annually at the ECD centres.
- **Curriculum tracking:** A digital ECD data management system tracks daily lessons to ensure consistency at every centre.

ELOM assessments from 2023 to 2024 confirmed the positive impact of BI's programme adaptations on child outcomes, demonstrating the effectiveness of data-informed **microchanges**.

The percentage of children On Track for Emergent Literacy and Language rose from 67% to 95%, while those On Track for Numeracy increased from 60% to 89%. Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration also improved notably, rising from 73% to 84%. Gross Motor Development remained consistently high at 100%, while Cognition and Executive Functioning held steady at 53%, highlighting an ongoing area for support.

BULUNGULA INCUBATOR ELOM RESULTS: 2023 VS. 2024

- 2023
- 2024



SCALING MICROCHANGE THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

With encouragement and support from the Kamvalethu Foundation (who fund several ECD programmes in the area), BI has established two Communities of Practice (CoPs):

1. **Bulungula Incubator CoP:** Reaching 180 children across BI's 5 ECD centres.
2. **Wild Coast ECD CoP:** A growing network of 20+ ECD centres, launched in 2024.

"Our intention is to be a catalyst for change across South Africa. By sharing knowledge, we help others design sustainable solutions for rural ECD." - Réjane Woodroffe, Co-Founder & Director - BI.

Despite the challenges of connecting in such a remote area, these practitioner-led groups have been transformational. ECD practitioners are able to draw on ELOM data and data-informed practices to share insights, refine techniques, and support one another.

"At first, some teachers were sceptical because they came from different backgrounds. But we found common ground - no matter the pedagogy, we all want to improve." - Lindiwe Tukane, Head of ECD - BI.

THE WILD COAST ECD COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID

Here's feedback from four of the early learning practitioners who attended the first Wild Coast ECD CoP meeting in June 2024:

"For every problem or challenge presented, there was a skilled or experienced person who could address and provide solutions for it. We learned so much." - Fundiswa, Ikhaya Labantwana

"It took me back to what I was taught in training when I started this ECD journey." - Nomaphuzi, Ngoko

"I learned so much that I can now teach my learners." - Nosandise, Ncinci Ones Montessori.

"One of the learning highlights was the importance of ensuring that our learners' ages are considered when giving them puzzles to do." - Luyolokazi, Ncinci Ones Montessori

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS: USING DATA TO BUILD COMMUNITY BUY-IN

Many parents and caregivers in rural areas have never experienced ECD and may need support in understanding its importance in preparing children for school and future success.

BI has used its data management system and ELOM data to demonstrate how early learning positively impacts school readiness.

KEY INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

- **End-of-year celebrations:** Parents see tangible progress in their children's learning through activities, performances and classroom displays.
- **Simplified data summaries:** Reports help parents understand how ECD builds cognitive and social skills.
- **Interactive parent sessions:** Hands-on workshops show how early learning connects to later school performance.

"In rural areas, most parents have never attended an ECD programme, so they don't realise how critical it is for their child's future. Having accessible data is helping shift perceptions - slowly but steadily." - Réjane Woodroffe, Co-Founder & Director - BI.

As a result of these activities, more parents are actively involved in their children's learning, and practitioners report higher motivation levels. This community-driven shift is helping to embed a culture of valuing early education.

SUSTAINING IMPACT

BI continues to refine its data-driven microchange model, demonstrating how small, measurable shifts can drive greater change in early learning, even in severely under-resourced areas.

To learn more about BI's approach, visit their [website](#) and explore their practical [ECD Programme Toolkit](#).



LULAMAPHIKO: SCALING DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHTS THROUGH FEEDBACK LOOPS

Lulamaphiko is a non-profit organisation working to improve the lives of young children in rural KwaZulu-Natal, where 81% of children under 6-years-old live in poverty,³ and according to the Thrive by Five Index 2021,¹ only 31% of children enrolled in ELPs are developmentally On Track.

In uPhongolo, Zululand District, where Lulamaphiko operates, 42% of the population receives no monthly income, only 4% earn more than R9,000 monthly, and malnutrition is widespread.⁴

Since 2021, Lulamaphiko has partnered with the Do More Foundation (DMF) to implement the DMF's Everyone Gets to Play model, providing a basket of services aligned to government ECD policy. Their interventions support:

- 115 ECD centres
- 265 principals and practitioners
- 5,626 children, with 1,701 receiving nutritional support

In 2023, Lulamaphiko conducted an ELOM 4&5 Years Assessment to gauge children's developmental status and identify improvement areas.

This case study explores how feedback loops amplified impact within ELPs and across the broader ECD Forum in Lulamaphiko's network.

A DATA SNAPSHOT TO ASSESS DEVELOPMENT

DMF encouraged Lulamaphiko to use ELOM tools, which they had used to assess another programme in Nkomazi, Mpumalanga.

"ELOM is increasingly seen as the gold standard when assessing young children - ethical, locally relevant, and reliable. We hoped to identify gaps or areas of concern to help inform DMF's future interventions and resourcing." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

Lulamaphiko assessed 31 children from 8 rural ECD centres using:

- ELOM 4&5 Years Assessment
- ELOM Social-Emotional Functioning Rating Scale
- Height-for-age (HfA), to compare with the World Health Organization's growth standards, to assess growth status

The assessments provided a holistic snapshot of children's development, learning progress and nutrition levels.

TURNING DATA INTO ACTION

The data revealed several areas needing improvement. Lulamaphiko's Emergent Literacy and Language results were particularly affirming, with children scoring above the Thrive by Five Index 2021¹ national and provincial averages: 61% were found to be On Track for ELL versus a national average of 55%.

"The results reflected our investments in book-sharing and emergent literacy workshops with parents and practitioners over the past three years, as well as the distribution of thousands of isiZulu Book Dash books." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

The Gross Motor Development results showed that 68% of children were On Track, above Thrive by Five Index 2021¹ provincial and national averages. Height-for-age measurements were encouraging, with 100% of children within the normal range.

The data raised some areas that need attention, particularly in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, Cognition and Executive Functioning, and Social-Emotional Functioning, where many children were Falling Behind or Falling Far Behind.



"Even though this wasn't a comparative study with a baseline and endline, it provided practical and actionable insights. We could immediately see where gaps were and how to improve learning across all domains." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

DATA-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS

The findings provided actionable insights, allowing Lulamaphiko to co-design targeted interventions with practitioners.

Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics:

- Selecting Book Dash books that incorporate numeracy concepts.
- Training practitioners to embed counting and maths into storytelling.
- Hosting parent workshops on numeracy games and play.

"We distribute thousands of books to ECD centres annually. Last year, we selected titles incorporating counting and maths concepts to support early numeracy." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration:

Practitioners received additional training on fine motor development, focusing on cutting, pasting, and pencil grip.

SCALING CHANGE THROUGH UPHONGOLO ECD FORUM

Lulamaphiko did not stop at improving practice at the ECD centres it supports. Recognising the broader relevance of their findings, they used the uPhongolo ECD Forum to scale insights across 75 ECD centres.

"We shared how well their literacy efforts worked and the excellent gross motor results. At the same time, we openly discussed red flags, showing that falling behind is common. We focused on what we can do to address areas of concern." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko

Findings were shared at three regional ECD Forum meetings to extend learning beyond the initial study. ELOM assessor, Pumla Mkhiva, led the discussions, reinforcing the credibility and relevance of the results. She facilitated peer

discussions on solving problems, areas requiring support, emerging trends and intervention ideas. Unlike a formal CoP, the ECD Forum acted as a scalable learning hub, making data insights accessible, actionable and relevant across a wider network.

"When one ELP struggles with something, others likely do too. By sharing our data, we shifted from isolated problem-solving to collective action." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

LESSONS LEARNED

Lulamaphiko's experience highlights the power of feedback loops in quickly driving measurable improvements at both ELP and forum levels. Some of the most valuable lessons were:

- Credible, accessible data fosters collective problem-solving.
- Engaging the ELPs involved in the study and the ECD Forum amplifies impact beyond the initial assessment.
- Engaging trusted facilitators strengthens credibility.
- Actionable insights can lead to immediate improvements.

"The ELOM reports 'sharpen the pencil,' helping us confidently assess what's working and where to invest resources." - Lynn Stefano, Executive Director - Lulamaphiko.

SUSTAINING IMPACT: WHAT NEXT?

Lulamaphiko is integrating the ELOM insights into some of their other programmes, including their Funda Engadini (Learning in the Garden) programme, which is planning a pre- and post-ELOM assessment.

To learn more about Lulamaphiko's work, visit their [website](#).

**Lulamaphiko
did not stop at
improving practice
at the ECD centres
it supports.**



MICROCHANGE IN ACTION: DRIVING IMPACT THROUGH DATA

Bulungula Incubator and Lulamaphiko demonstrate how small, data-driven shifts can have ripple effects through CoPs and ECD Forums.

Across South Africa, many NGOs are using ELOM data to refine interventions at the programme level and to make targeted, high-impact adjustments that directly improve learning outcomes for the young children in their care.

Below are additional examples from **True North**, **Knysna Education Trust (Blocks4Growth)** and **Singakwenza Early Childhood Education** - three innovative organisations that have used data insights to fine-tune their interventions, strengthen teaching practices and enhance child development outcomes.



Image credit: True North

TRUE NORTH CREATING A COLLABORATIVE SPACE FOR PLAY

 **Location:** Vrygrond, Cape Town

DATA INSIGHTS

ELOM assessments in 2021 and 2023 revealed a concerning trend in Gross Motor Development at True North-supported ECD centres. The percentage of children Falling Far Behind increased from 16% in 2021 to 28% in 2023, despite a slight improvement in the rate of children On Track overall.

DATA-INFORMED ACTIONS


With minimal open space available at ECD centres in Vrygrond, True North collaborated with the

local ECD Forum and the City of Cape Town to create shared community play parks. These parks allow local preschools to schedule slots for structured physical activities, allowing children to develop critical gross motor skills in a safe and stimulating outdoor environment.

REFLECTIONS

In areas where ELPs face physical constraints, safe community play parks provide children with much-needed space to run, climb, balance and play, essential for improving Gross Motor Development.

"The average ECD property in Vrygrond is just 180 square metres. There isn't space for active play." - Leigh Morrison, Director - True North.

 **Website:** www.true-north.co.za





KNYSNA EDUCATION TRUST (BLOCKS4GROWTH)

STRENGTHENING TEACHER AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT FOR BETTER LEARNING OUTCOMES

 **Location:** Garden Route, Western Cape

DATA INSIGHTS

Knysna Education Trust (KET) uses the Blocks4Growth programme to provide therapeutic support to children at risk of developmental delays. In 2022, the ELOM 4&5 Years Targeting Tool identified 316 children with gross motor, fine motor, numeracy and literacy challenges.

At year-end, KET reassesses progress using the ELOM 4&5 Years Assessment Tool and Social-Emotional Functioning Rating Scale. The 2022 data showed that only half of the children had measurably improved, lower than they had expected.

DATA-INFORMED ACTIONS

In response, Blocks4Growth introduced targeted teacher workshops and redesigned its parent observation model. Instead of passive observation, parents were encouraged to engage in activities with their children. The approach focused on building teacher capacity while strengthening parental buy-in to create a ripple effect at home.

"The initial ELOM results didn't support our assumption that we were as effective in achieving our outcomes as much as we thought. We had to sit down, discuss, and see what we could do differently. ELOM showed us, objectively, the weaknesses of our programme. And that we need to do more with teachers and parents." - Bernike Maarsingh, Blocks4Growth Programme Manager - KET.

REFLECTIONS

The ELOM tools are invaluable in helping identify children most at risk, pinpoint focus areas, track progress and demonstrate impact to funders.

"The detailed ELOM feedback, especially on domain scores, helps us make focused, informed decisions across the board - for teachers, parents, and programme design." - Bernike Maarsingh, Blocks4Growth Programme Manager - KET.

 **Website:** www.knysnaedutrust.co.za


**The ELOM tools are
invaluable in helping
identify children
most at risk.**





Image credit: Singakwenza

SINGAKWENZA EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ENHANCING FINE MOTOR AND VISUAL MOTOR SKILLS ON A SHOESTRING

 **Location:** Hilton, KwaZulu-Natal, and Johannesburg, Gauteng

DATA INSIGHTS

Singakwenza trains and mentors early learning practitioners and caregivers to deliver a structured learning programme and create and use educational toys made from recycled materials. Their 2022 ELOM 4&5 Years Assessment revealed unexpected Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration weaknesses. Although they knew their play-based approach to fine motor development was strong, the data pointed to visual motor gaps that needed intervention.

DATA-INFORMED ACTIONS

Singakwenza piloted new visual motor-focused activities at two crèches over five months, using handmade resources crafted from recycled materials. A follow-up mini occupational therapy assessment showed promising improvements,

prompting Singakwenza to include dedicated visual motor activities in their weekly lesson plans across all crèches starting in 2024.

REFLECTIONS

The impact was transformative. The 2024 baseline revealed that 53% of children were Falling Far Behind in Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration skills. By the end of the pilot, this number dropped to 10%, and 71% of children were now On Track.

"We used the ELOM data to implement changes to better meet the children's needs. It's been incredibly rewarding." - Jayde Rocher, Occupational Therapist - Singakwenza.

 **Website:** www.singakwenza.co.za

The impact was transformative.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

We have seen how small, data-informed adjustments can improve early learning outcomes at a programme level and beyond. But isolated success is not enough.

Achieving quality early learning opportunities for all children by 2030 requires deliberate action to create and replicate conditions where effective practices take root and spread.

The case studies have highlighted the factors that enable microchange to scale, as well as the barriers that impede progress. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can create an environment where every young child in South Africa has access to learning opportunities that set them up for success.

1 RELIABLE, STANDARDISED DATA: A FOUNDATION FOR INFORMED DECISIONS

Before 2016, South Africa lacked reliable, standardised tools to assess preschool child development at scale. The launch of the ELOM tools filled this gap, providing funders, policymakers, and practitioners with nationally benchmarked data for the first time. It laid the foundation for the Thrive by Five Index 2021, South Africa's first-ever national survey of preschool children's development.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Access in rural areas:** Limited infrastructure can make data collection difficult. Bulungula Incubator overcame this challenge by gathering children from multiple centres to meet ELOM's sample size requirements.
- **Absenteeism:** Seasonal factors, migration patterns and other disruptions can affect assessment participation. Strategic scheduling and adaptive sampling approaches help mitigate these challenges.

- **Sustained use of data:** Beyond one-off assessments, ongoing data use requires consistent investment in data literacy and technical support.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Locally relevant, reliable tools:** The ELOM suite of tools is culturally appropriate and provides a nationally validated framework for measuring child development, comparing results across contexts, and guiding targeted improvements.
- **Digital automation:** Technology reduces the burden on users by streamlining data collection, analysis and reporting.
- **Accredited data workforce:** A trained and accredited workforce ensures assessments are conducted reliably and at scale.
- **Accessible reporting:** Clear, actionable reports empower stakeholders to interpret and apply findings at every level.

"ELOM provides us with an accurate snapshot of how children are developing. Without it, we'd be making decisions in the dark." - Jenni-Kate Warwick, Kamvalethu Foundation.

"ELOM is increasingly seen as the South African gold standard for assessing young children's development. Respected ECD specialists have developed tools relevant to our local context." - Lynn Stefano, Lulamaphiko.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

2 DATA USE: TURNING INSIGHTS INTO ACTION

ELOM reports are designed to translate data into action, making insights accessible and useful to practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Data literacy gaps:** Practitioners and programme leaders may struggle to interpret data, limiting its impact. Capacity-building efforts, including hands-on training and peer learning sessions, are crucial for building confidence and competence.
- **Delayed feedback:** When feedback loops are slow or absent, opportunities for timely course correction are lost. Creating a structured system for delivering actionable insights can resolve this issue.
- **Fragmented data systems:** Inconsistent or incompatible data platforms prevent stakeholders from seeing the full picture. Prioritising interoperable systems allows for more efficient data management and collaborative analysis.

"You don't need to be an M&E specialist to use the ELOM data. The reports are clear and the insights are practical. ELOM gives us reliable, locally relevant data that helps us see where children are, compare across different contexts and identify where support is needed most." - Lynn Stefano, Lulamaphiko.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Clear and actionable reporting:** ELOM reports present data in a clear and easy-to-understand format.
- **Capacity-building:** Data literacy initiatives equip stakeholders with the skills and confidence to interpret and apply data effectively.
- **Technology and interoperability:** Integrated data systems support seamless data sharing and analysis across organisations, reducing duplication and enhancing collaboration.
- **Timely feedback loops:** Rapidly sharing data insights helps refine interventions quickly. Establishing regular check-ins and feedback mechanisms helps sustain momentum and track progress over time.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

3 EMPOWERED PRACTITIONERS: THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE CHANGE

Early learning practitioners are at the heart of programme quality. To scale microchange, practitioners must actively participate.

Practitioners become powerful agents of change when equipped with reliable data, supported in professional development, and engaged in collaborative networks.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Fear of data use:** Concerns about data being used for performance evaluation can lead to hesitation in participating in assessments. Lulamaphiko addressed this by highlighting that the data would be anonymised and aggregated for system-wide insights rather than individual assessments.
- **Isolation:** Practitioners in smaller or rural ECD centres may lack regular peer support. ECD Forums and CoP models create opportunities for collective problem-solving and mutual support.

"We had to allay natural concerns about being assessed. We explained that it's not about individual children - it's a random sample. The goal is strengthening the whole system." - Lynn Stefano, Lulamaphiko.

"We have two small schools and can't justify the salary for an education manager, which makes it difficult to turn reports into action. Sharing that responsibility amongst peers is hugely valuable." - Catherine Young, Jabulani Rural Health Foundation (Wild Coast CoP Member)

"The CoPs have been hugely energising. We all need motivation in our work, especially when you're working in isolation." - Lindiwe Tukane, Head of ECD, Bulungula Incubator.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Initiatives like the Wild Coast CoP allow practitioners to co-create solutions rather than passively receive training. By sharing experiences and insights, they can identify effective strategies and support one another.
- **Cross-learning opportunities:** ECD practitioners often come from diverse pedagogical backgrounds, including CAPS, Montessori and play-based approaches. Aligning efforts around shared developmental goals rather than enforcing a single methodology encourages collaboration and strengthens foundational learning across models.
- **Safe spaces for growth:** Establishing a culture of shared learning, rather than punitive evaluation, helps reduce fear and resistance. When practitioners see data as a tool for improvement rather than judgment, they are more likely to engage fully.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

4 THE POWER OF CONNECTIONS: DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH COLLABORATION

Networks, collaboration and partnerships are essential for scaling microchange. By connecting practitioners, organisations, funders, and government stakeholders, they can pool resources, share knowledge, and collectively solve challenges. These connections accelerate progress, particularly in South Africa's early learning sector, where many programmes face geographic isolation and resource constraints.

We have seen how CoPs and ECD Forums are powerful platforms that foster collaborative learning. They provide practitioners with opportunities to exchange ideas, troubleshoot challenges and learn from one another's experiences. Instead of receiving top-down directives, practitioners actively contribute to the change process.

Cross-sector partnerships further amplify impact. From NGOs and government to funders and local businesses, partnerships enable more comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Programmes like True North's collaboration with the City of Cape Town to build shared play parks demonstrate how partnerships can address gaps in resources and infrastructure.

However, creating and sustaining these connections requires intentional effort - ELPs risk being left behind without accessible networks or inclusive partnerships.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Geographic isolation:** Adapting meeting schedules, such as the quarterly Wild Coast CoP sessions, reduces travel burdens for rural practitioners. Digital tools such as WhatsApp groups and virtual check-ins sustain engagement between sessions.

- **Inclusive participation:** Expanding the role of NGOs, CoPs and ECD Forums to connect informal and unregistered ELPs ensures broader access to resources and support.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Peer-led collaboration:** Networks prioritising practitioner voices foster meaningful exchange and actionable problem-solving. In the Wild Coast CoP, teachers lead discussions and share solutions, building collective expertise.
- **Cross-sector partnerships:** Effective collaboration requires aligned goals and shared responsibility. True North's partnership with the City of Cape Town ensured the development of play parks that address gaps in Gross Motor Development.
- **Knowledge sharing:** Open data sharing and collaborative analysis allow partners to track progress, refine strategies and scale what works.

At our first Wild Coast CoP meeting, some teachers travelled for five hours to attend. We had to rethink how we structure sessions to make them more accessible." - Lindiwe Tukane, Bulungula Incubator.

"By sharing knowledge, we support other organisations, funders and government in designing solutions for vibrant, sustainable rural communities." - Réjane Woodroffe, Bulungula Incubator.

"We were incredibly impressed by what Bulungula Incubator was achieving. It made sense to create a space where others could learn from their success." - Jenni-Kate Warwick, Kamvalethu Foundation.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

5 FUNDING: INVESTING IN SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Scaling change requires long-term investment. While initial assessments provide valuable insights, sustained funding is essential to implement data-informed improvements and continue to monitor progress.

Funders like the Kamvalethu Foundation and the Do More Foundation (DMF) have demonstrated how ongoing support enables organisations to refine their practices, build capacity and expand their impact.

However, many ELPs rely on short-term project funding, often covering assessments but leaving little room for follow-up interventions. Funders also play a vital role in fostering collaboration. Connecting organisations, practitioners and policymakers can accelerate the sharing of best practices and support the scaling of successful models. The Wild Coast CoP, for instance, was established with the support of the Kamvalethu Foundation to foster collaborative learning among ECD practitioners in the region.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Lack of data integration:** Measurement and data use are often underfunded or treated as optional. Embedding data collection, analysis, and application into programme budgets ensures that progress is consistently tracked and acted upon.
- **Exclusion of informal ELPs:** 69% of ELPs operate outside formal NGO networks, often lacking access to funding and support. Co-funding models and cross-sector partnerships can ensure that unregistered and informal ELPs are not left behind.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Sustained investment models:** Moving beyond short-term, project-based funding to longer-term commitments ensures that organisations can implement, monitor and refine interventions effectively.
- **Supporting the full data value chain:** Funders should invest in assessments and implementation of data-driven solutions.
- **Facilitating collaboration:** Funders can amplify impact and enable collective problem-solving by bringing together partners across sectors.
- **Low-cost, scalable solutions:** Many microchanges, such as practitioner training or programme adjustments, are affordable and easily replicable. Funders can prioritise these interventions to drive systemic change.

"Funders have a responsibility to promote the sharing of best practices. It's not just about financial support; it's about working together to improve education for all the children in these communities. What works in one place can work elsewhere." - Jenni-Kate Warwick, Kamvalethu Foundation.

"Sustaining meaningful change requires long-term investment, not just one-off funding cycles." - Jenni-Kate Warwick, Kamvalethu Foundation.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

6 COMMUNITY BUY-IN: STRENGTHENING EARLY LEARNING THROUGH PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Learning does not only happen in ELPs. Parents, caregivers, and communities play a vital role in supporting the development of young children. When families are actively engaged, early learning outcomes improve and programmes become more sustainable.

Data can be a powerful tool in shifting perceptions about the value of ECD. By sharing accessible insights and celebrating progress, organisations can move ECD from being viewed as mere childcare to being recognised as a key driver of child development and future success.

The Bulungula Incubator has demonstrated how transparent data-sharing and inclusive community events can increase parental buy-in. Through end-of-year celebrations and simplified data reports, parents see tangible evidence of their children's learning progress, encouraging ongoing involvement.

"Communication campaigns, easy-to-understand data results, events and gatherings make ECD more attractive. The local culture around ECD is slowly but steadily changing." - Réjane Woodroffe, Bulungula Incubator.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Data as a conversation starter:** Clear, easy-to-understand data helps parents and community members see the impact of ECD. Visual reports and storytelling make insights accessible.
- **Celebrating progress:** Events like end-of-year celebrations allow parents to witness their children's development firsthand, reinforcing the value of early learning.
- **Community engagement:** Regular communication campaigns and local gatherings build trust and enthusiasm around ECD programmes.



CREATING CONDITIONS TO SUPPORT CHANGE AT SCALE

7 SUPPORTIVE POLICIES: EMBEDDING MICROCHANGE FOR LASTING IMPACT

Effective interventions must be embedded into policies at all levels - from local programme guidelines to provincial and national ECD strategies for sustained impact. While individual organisations can drive change in the short term, lasting progress requires systemic support.

Data-driven decision-making should be at the core of policy frameworks. By integrating reliable data into planning, budgeting and monitoring, government and other stakeholders can ensure that effective practices are sustained and scaled.

Simplifying regulatory and funding frameworks is also helpful. Impact is amplified when ELPs can easily access support, implement evidence-based solutions and track progress.

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES:

- **Fragmented impact:** Without policy integration, microchange initiatives risk remaining isolated. Successful interventions should be scaled through formal adoption within government frameworks.
- **Lack of data use:** Policymakers may hesitate to rely on data without confidence in its accuracy or relevance. Strengthening data literacy and creating accessible reports can address this.
- **Regulatory barriers:** Complex or inconsistent regulations can limit ELPs' access to funding or implementation of evidence-based changes. Simplified, supportive policies can remove these obstacles.

WHAT WORKS:

- **Embedding data into policy:** Integrating successful microchange interventions into local, provincial and national strategies ensures they are sustained beyond individual programmes.
- **Strengthening advocacy:** Consistent advocacy helps policymakers understand the value of data-driven decision-making and encourages adoption of proven practices.
- **Aligning with government priorities:** Collaborating with government departments to align interventions with existing goals increases the likelihood of policy integration.
- **Building data capacity:** Providing decision-makers with the tools and training to interpret and apply ECD data ensures that insights inform policy and resource allocation.

"Scaling microchange isn't just about testing interventions - it's about embedding what works into the system, so it's not dependent on individual organisations." - Sonja Giese, DataDrive2030.





KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Data-driven microchange works:** Small, incremental shifts can improve outcomes when ELPs use reliable data to refine their interventions.
- **Timely feedback accelerates change:** Rapid sharing of accessible, usable data empowers ELPs to make immediate adjustments. Structured peer-learning platforms (e.g., CoPs and ECD Forums) support collaborative problem-solving and continuous improvement.
- **Sustainable funding is essential:** Short-term project funding limits longer-term investment. For microchange to deliver lasting impact, funders must invest across the full data value chain - from measurement to decision-making and implementation.



CLOSING REMARKS

Stakeholders across the ECD ecosystem - practitioners, funders, NGOs, and policymakers - are encouraged to embed data-informed decision-making in everyday practice, prioritise ongoing data collection and analysis, and collaborate intentionally to scale impact.

"We need to start early and create safe, loving, and responsive environments where young children can thrive. ELOM gives us reliable, locally relevant data to see where children are, compare across contexts, and identify where support is needed most." - Lynn Stefano, Lulamaphiko.

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