



**CASE STUDY**

# MESO-LEVEL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

HOW PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS CAN  
DRIVE STRATEGIC CHANGE IN THE EARLY  
CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM

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# INTRODUCTION

South Africa's early learning landscape is marked by persistent inequalities and developmental challenges, with a substantial proportion of children failing to meet age-appropriate milestones before they enter formal schooling. The [Thrive by Five Index](https://thrivebyfive.co.za/data/) (2021), the largest nationally representative survey of preschool child outcomes to date, provides a critical baseline for monitoring these challenges. The 2021 Index revealed that only 46% of 4-year-old children attending early learning programmes (ELPs) across South Africa are developmentally on track, while a third (28%) are falling far behind what is expected of their age, requiring significant intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, disparities in early learning outcomes have been identified according to socio-economic status.<sup>2</sup> Using monthly fees charged by ELPs as a proxy for income-level, we see a stark difference in child outcomes between South Africa's poorest and most wealthy areas; 83% of children in the highest-income ELPs are developmentally on track, compared to only 34% of children in the lowest-income ELPs.<sup>2</sup> These gaps in early development have long-term implications, as children who start school behind are likely to struggle with academic progression, limiting their future opportunities.

## EARLY LEARNING MEASUREMENT

To bridge this socioeconomic divide, non-profit organisations (NPOs) in South Africa's early learning sector have long supported low-income and community-based ELPs with offerings such as infrastructure, learning materials, practitioner training, and curriculum development and support. A 2023 survey<sup>3</sup> identified 139 NPOs providing training and resourcing to ELPs around the country. Collectively, these organisations report training and supporting an estimated 34,449 centre-based ELPs and playgroups nationwide.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these organisations deliver non-accredited training<sup>4</sup> programmes, with a strong focus on practitioner development using structured curricula. However, their sustainability remains dependent on diverse donor funding streams, with most NPOs relying on support from six to ten different funders.

**Funders in South Africa's early learning sector commonly report shaping their funding strategies around three key objectives<sup>5</sup>:**

- Increased reach of early learning services
- Measurable improvement in the quality of early learning services
- Measurable improvement in child outcomes

To ensure accountability in achieving these objectives, many funders require NPOs to use standardised measurement instruments, such as the [Early Learning Outcomes Measure \(ELOM\) tools](#)<sup>6</sup> to assess young children's learning outcomes, early learning programme quality, and early learning in the home (read a summary of each tool in [this infographic](#)). The ELOM suite of tools has been used by many NPOs working around the country to meet both summative and formative purposes. Summatively, NPOs have embedded the ELOM tools in large-scale programme evaluations to measure and report on the impact of their programmes. For example, tools such as the ELOM 4&5 measure 4- and 5-year-old children's early learning outcomes which help NPOs determine the extent to which their programmes are supporting early learning development. Formatively, this data is fed back into programme design and management to improve the implementation quality of programmes, and better support programme outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup><https://thrivebyfive.co.za/data/>

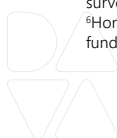
<sup>2</sup>Henry, J. & Giese, S. (2023). Reviewing the Socio-Economic Gradient in Learning Outcomes for Children who Participated in the Thrive by Five Index. DataDrive2030. <https://datadrive2030.co.za/resources/child-learning-outcomes-by-elp-fee-levels/>

<sup>3</sup>Horler, J., Biersteker, L. & Berry, L. (2023). Survey of resource and training organisations supporting early learning programmes in South Africa. NECDA and Umncedi. <https://www.ecdalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Resource-and-Training-Organisations-Skills-Survey-2023-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Programmes that have not been accredited by the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA)

<sup>5</sup>Horler, J. (2021). Early Learning SA Funder Survey Report. IPASA, Innovation Edge, Tutuwa Community Foundation. <https://ipa-sa.org.za/download/early-learning-sa-funder-survey-report-december-2021/>

<sup>6</sup>Horler, J. & Biersteker, L. (2022). ECD Funding Landscape: Survey IPASA and Tutuwa Community Foundation. <https://ipa-sa.org.za/about/funder-support-initiatives/education-funder-support-initiatives/ipasa-eed-funding-landscape-survey-october-2022/>



## DATADRIVE2030

Established in 2022, [DataDrive2030](#) plays a central role in supporting NPOs, researchers, evaluators, and policymakers to collect, analyse, and use ELOM data effectively. With a data architecture specifically designed for the ELOM suite of tools, DataDrive2030 implements a data value chain that supports stakeholders, such as NPOs, researchers, evaluators, and governments, to collect high-quality data on key aspects of early learning, enabling data-driven decision-making.

DataDrive2030 operates within three levels of South Africa's early learning ecosystem:

1. **Macro-level monitoring** – ELOM tools are applied in population-level surveys to track and report progress toward local and global development goals, providing data for large-scale policy and planning efforts.
2. **Meso-level research and evaluation** – ELOM tools are used to assess the effectiveness of different interventions, supporting evidence-based decision-making and resource allocation in the ECD sector (the focus of this report).

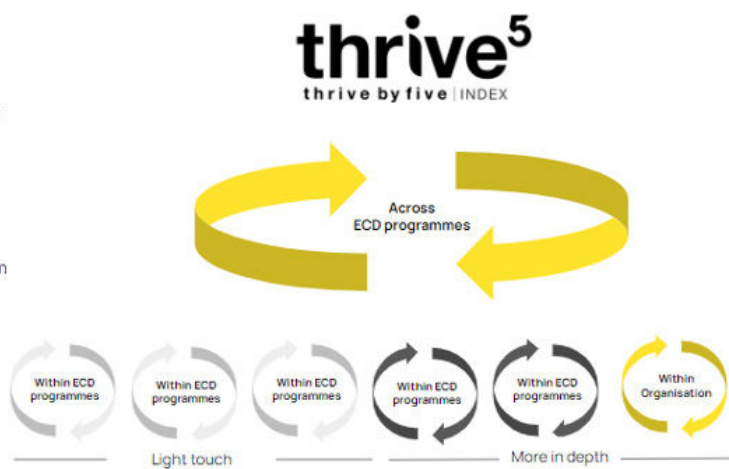
**Microchange at scale** – ELOM tools help identify strengths and gaps in early learning programmes, guiding data-driven improvements in daily practices. These small, targeted adjustments—or “microchanges”—can contribute to meaningful systemic impact when replicated and scaled. Read more about this [here](#).

## Our tools are used at 3 levels within the ECD Ecosystem

**Macro perspectives**  
Our tools are used in population-level surveys to monitor and report progress towards the attainment of local and global development goals

**Meso level research**  
Our tools are used to research the relative effectiveness of interventions, to enable broader data driven decision-making and inform resource allocation

**We prioritise**  
**Micro change at scale**  
Our tools are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of ECD programmes, to enable data informed enhancements in everyday practices



We also play a broader ecosystem role by leveraging data for impact through key strategic partnerships with government, funders and local and global networks



## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report focuses on the meso-level perspective, examining how ELOM-integrated evaluations have been used summatively and formatively to assess programme effectiveness, inform strategic decision-making, and improve early learning provision.

To explore the role of ELOM tools as a driver of meso-level change, this report seeks to answer the following questions:

*How have ELOM-integrated programme evaluations strategically contributed to South Africa's early learning ecosystem?*

*What enablers and barriers are associated with ELOM tools as a driver of meso-level change?*

To answer these questions, we examined four case studies in which ELOM tools were used to evaluate programme effectiveness, enhance learning, and support advocacy efforts: SmartStart, Wordworks Little Stars, Yizani Sifunde, and the Anglo American South Africa Education Programme. Through these cases, this report explores how ELOM data has been leveraged to demonstrate impact, refine implementation strategies, and contribute to sector-wide conversations on early learning. It also identifies key barriers and enablers that shape how ELOM findings are used, offering key lessons for DataDrive2030.

	SmartStart	Wordworks Little Stars	Yizani Sifunde	Anglo American South Africa Education Programme
Number of interviewees	1	1	3	3



## CASE 1:

# SMARTSTART EVALUATION

SmartStart is a social franchise organisation that supports the activation and ongoing supervision of community-based early learning programmes. Early learning practitioners (SmartStarters) are trained and licensed to run home- and community-based early learning programmes. SmartStarters are supported by regional SmartStart branches and partners, or franchisors. A key question driving SmartStart's interest in conducting large-scale evaluations of its programme has been: *Can a national early learning delivery platform shift developmental outcomes for young children at scale?* This question led to two major child outcome evaluations: the first in 2018 and the second in 2023.

## USE OF THE ELOM TOOLS IN SMARTSTART EVALUATIONS

The 2018 evaluation was a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test study that tracked 199 children attending 69 SmartStarter ELPs. The evaluation aimed to measure the extent to which participation in SmartStart improved children's developmental outcomes, measured using the ELOM 4&5. The results showed significant improvements, with the proportion of children in the sample On Track for ELOM 4&5 total score increasing from 32% at baseline to 62% at endline.

The 2023 evaluation scaled up the 2018 evaluation, including 551 children from 325 ELPs. The study sought to understand whether SmartStart could maintain its impact as it scaled and what mechanisms were associated with ELOM 4&5 gains. The evaluation found that children attending SmartStarters' ELPs continued to show developmental gains, with a 20 percentage point increase in those On Track in ELOM total. Notably, the greatest gains were seen in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, and Emergent Literacy and Language.

## STRATEGIC USE OF ELOM FINDINGS

The primary goal of both evaluations was to make the case for a systems-level

intervention that could bridge South Africa's early education access and quality gap. The evaluations served as a strategic advocacy tool to demonstrate that community- and home-based early learning programmes, which are held in a supporting ecosystem, can be an effective, scalable solution to improving early learning outcomes. Moreover, the 2023 evaluation further reinforced this argument by demonstrating that even as SmartStart scaled, its impact on child outcomes remained significant. This is particularly meaningful in the global early learning sector, where scalability often leads to diluted impact.

Findings from both evaluations are being widely used in policy and funding advocacy by SmartStart. SmartStart has leveraged the data in presentations to government stakeholders, global funders, and policy think tanks, arguing that high-cost or infrastructure-dependent early learning models are not the only way to improve early learning. Instead, training and supporting women in informal settings can yield meaningful improvements in child outcomes.

**SmartStart is a social franchise organisation that supports the activation and ongoing supervision of community-based early learning programmes.**



## CASE 2:

# WORDWORKS LITTLE STARS EVALUATION

The Wordworks Little Stars programme is a story-based teacher training initiative aimed at enhancing early language and literacy for children aged 4- and 5-years-old in under-resourced early learning settings. Developed with a strong emphasis on contextually relevant, play-based learning, the programme provides teachers with structured training, daily activities, teaching resources, and ongoing support to improve language-rich interactions in the classroom.

The decision to evaluate Little Stars was driven by a strategic interest in building an evidence base for early language interventions. Wordworks partnered with UK researchers and South African academic institutions<sup>7</sup> to conduct an evaluation of the programme's impact on teacher practices and child learning outcomes. The evaluation sought to answer both practical and strategic questions: *Does the programme improve quality of teaching? Does the programme improve children's language and literacy skills? What factors influence its success? How can findings inform programme scaling and broader ECD policy?*

The evaluation included 56 teachers and 246 children from ECD centres in low-income areas within Paarl, Wellington, and Khayelitsha, with teachers recruited through local ECD forums and NGOs including Inceba Trust, Sikhula Sonke, and Ikamva Labantu. Teachers were randomly assigned to either an intervention or control group.

### USE OF ELOM IN THE LITTLE STARS EVALUATION

The ELOM 4&5 was introduced into the evaluation as a standardised tool to measure children's early learning progress. This was the first time Wordworks used an ELOM tool, and its inclusion was partly exploratory - to assess how well the ELOM 4&5 could complement other literacy-specific measures used in the study.

The evaluation took place over an eight-month period, tracking children's progress before and after exposure to the Little Stars programme. The ELOM 4&5 was used alongside other literacy and language assessments, such as vocabulary, print awareness and narrative skill tests, to provide a holistic picture of children's development. Findings showed that in classrooms where teachers implemented the Little Stars programme effectively, children made greater gains on ELOM 4&5 total score, cognition and executive functioning and literacy-related skills directly targeted in the intervention, compared to classrooms where the programme was not implemented or not implemented as intended. These results reinforced the programme's effectiveness in supporting early literacy development in diverse linguistic and socio-economic contexts.

### STRATEGIC USE OF ELOM FINDINGS

The findings from the ELOM assessments were used in multiple ways, reflecting both internal learning within Wordworks and external advocacy for investment in early literacy interventions. Internally, results were fed back into strengthening the programme's implementation - trainers used insights from the data to strengthen certain aspects of teacher training and support.

Externally, the evaluation provided credible, data-driven evidence that Wordworks could use in funding proposals, policy discussions, and broader sectoral engagement. Findings were shared with NPO partners, government stakeholders, and international research networks, contributing to ongoing conversations about the role of structured teacher training in improving early learning. The research was disseminated through learning briefs, conference presentations, and open-access repositories, and will be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

<sup>7</sup>Stellenbosch University, University of Sussex, and Lancaster University (and funded by The British Academy).



## CASE 3:

# YIZANI SIFUNDE EVALUATION

The Yizani Sifunde Literacy Programme is a multi-partner early literacy intervention aimed at improving the language and literacy skills of isiXhosa-speaking children in rural and peri-urban areas of the Eastern Cape. It was implemented through a collaborative effort between [Book Dash](#), [Nal'ibali](#), and [Wordworks](#), with on-the-ground support from Khululeka and the Institute of Training and Education for Capacity-building. The programme's core components included book distribution, practitioner training, classroom support, and parent engagement, all designed to create a literacy-rich environment for young children.

The evaluation of Yizani Sifunde was initiated in 2022 by the Liberty Community Trust, which funded the intervention. The evaluation was conducted by Social Impact Insights Africa. The aim was to assess the programme's impact on early literacy outcomes, classroom practices, and caregiver engagement. While partners valued the opportunity to build a strong local evidence base, the decision to commission the evaluation was also influenced by funder expectations - specifically, the requirement for child-level impact data to demonstrate programme effectiveness. The overarching question in this vein was: *To what extent do the learners attending Yizani Sifunde ECD centres in 2023 display improved learning outcomes?*

## USE OF ELOM IN THE YIZANI SIFUNDE EVALUATION

ELOM tools played a central role in the evaluation, serving as the primary tools for assessing child outcomes among 99 children using a pre-post design. The study used the ELOM 4&5 (excluding the Gross Motor domain), [ELOM Social-Emotional Functioning Rating scale](#), two items from the [ELOM-R Language \(V1\)](#) tool. In addition, the [ELOM Home Learning Environment tool](#) was used in an internal study which was made available to the independent evaluators.

Findings from the ELOM 4&5 assessments demonstrated significant improvements in children's learning outcomes. The proportion of children On Track in the Emergent Literacy

and Language domain increased from 29% at baseline to 57% at endline, nearly doubling, with similarly substantial gains seen in Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, as well as Cognition and Executive Functioning. A spillover effect was observed, with notable results in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics despite the programme's primary focus on literacy. The evaluation also examined shifts in the home learning environment, revealing that children with more books at home consistently scored higher on ELOM 4&5 assessments. Despite ongoing challenges with parental participation in workshops, the evaluation confirmed that increasing book ownership and structured reading support at home played a significant role in improving early learning outcomes.

## STRATEGIC USE OF ELOM FINDINGS

The multi-partner nature of Yizani Sifunde meant that different organisations used the ELOM findings in different ways.

- Book Dash leveraged the results to strengthen its advocacy for book ownership in early learning, commissioning an infographic that highlights the link between book access and developmental gains.
- Nal'ibali used the evaluation as a learning experience, adapting its measurement approach to include the numeracy component of the ELOM 4&5 in future projects looking at child outcomes, based on the unexpected ELOM findings.
- Wordworks integrated the insights into its teacher training programmes, reinforcing the importance of structured classroom literacy practices, and placing more emphasis on the setup and use of reading corners.

Beyond internal learning, the evaluation served as an advocacy tool. Findings were shared with policymakers, funders, and sectoral stakeholders to demonstrate the effectiveness of multi-pronged and collaborative early literacy interventions. The data provided a compelling case for scaling the model beyond the Eastern Cape, with discussions underway on how to replicate the approach in other provinces.



## CASE 4:

# ANGLO AMERICAN SOUTH AFRICA EDUCATION PROGRAMME EVALUATION

In 2018, Anglo American partnered with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to launch the Anglo American South Africa (AASA) Education programme aimed at improving child outcomes across 100 early learning sites and 100 primary and secondary schools located near its mining operations in South Africa. The initiative formed part of Anglo American's Sustainability Strategy, which seeks to create thriving communities in its operational areas, with education as a central pillar. The early learning component set an ambitious target: 90% of learners aged 5 years meeting the minimum requirements for school readiness. This goal was to be achieved through practitioner training and improved curriculum implementation.

The early learning component of the programme was implemented by [The Unlimited Child](#), with [JET Education Services \(JET\)](#) providing project oversight and evaluation management. JET led the project's design and coordination, ensuring alignment between programme activities and intended child outcomes. They also managed the evaluation process, overseeing data collection and analysis in collaboration with an external evaluator, Benita Williams Evaluation (BWE). The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of the intervention in improving school readiness, while also providing formative insights into practitioner development and curriculum implementation. While Anglo American required impact data for accountability reporting, both The Unlimited Child and JET used the findings for continuous quality improvement and curriculum refinement.

## USE OF ELOM IN THE AASA EDUCATION PROGRAMME EVALUATION

The ELOM 4&5 was chosen as the primary child assessment tool due to its standardisation, validated psychometric properties, availability in multiple languages, and norm group comparisons.

The evaluation followed a three-wave assessment approach—baseline, midline, and endline—over two years. The baseline assessment identified developmental gaps and informed early intervention strategies, while the endline measured programme impact for accountability and reporting purposes. The results demonstrated substantial improvements

in children's developmental outcomes. Overall, the percentage of children On Track on ELOM 4&5 total increased from 35% at baseline to 64% at endline.

Analyses by JET disaggregated the ELOM 4&5 data by Anglo American business unit/geography, revealing variations in child outcomes across different areas and identifying targeted support strategies for improvement. For example, in one area, pre-post analyses showed no observable change in Cognition and Executive Functioning results, attributed to the absence of structured learning programmes in the sampled ELPs at baseline. This highlighted the need for substantial capacity building by The Unlimited Child in structured lesson planning and play-based learning. In another area, children's Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration performance improved by 38%, while their Gross Motor Development performance declined. Supplementary observational data suggested that many teachers were not implementing outdoor play activities, possibly in an effort to enhance children's fine motor skills through structured indoor activities.

## STRATEGIC USE OF EVALUATION FINDINGS

### The ELOM findings were used in multiple ways:

- JET and The Unlimited Child used the baseline results formatively to train The Unlimited Child coaches, refining their support to practitioners in areas of structured lesson planning, resource utilisation and play-based learning and teaching.
- The Unlimited Child incorporated the findings into ongoing practitioner mentoring and coaching, ensuring that curriculum implementation better aligned with children's developmental needs.
- Anglo American used the results primarily for impact reporting, leveraging ELOM as a credible tool to demonstrate return on investment to funders and stakeholders.

Despite these strategic uses, there was limited dissemination beyond Anglo American, as the evaluation was considered a contractual deliverable rather than a public-facing research output.



# SYNTHESIS OF LEARNINGS: THE ROLE OF ELOM TOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S ECD RESEARCH ECOSYSTEM

The ELOM suite of tools has emerged as a powerful mechanism for measuring child development at scale in South Africa, assisting organisations working in early learning to reliably measure the developmental outcomes of their programmes.

Across the four case studies described – SmartStart, Wordworks Little Stars, Yizani Sifunde, and the AASA Education programme – ELOM tools were used to assess programme effectiveness, guide improvements, and support funding and advocacy efforts. The tool's standardisation, psychometric validity, reference groups, and comparative datasets have enabled a data-driven approach to early learning interventions, offering organisations and policymakers concrete evidence of what works and where gaps remain. However, the case studies also reveal structural and practical challenges that influence how ELOM data is interpreted, used, and disseminated within the sector. In the sections that follow, we synthesise key insights that emerged across the case study interviews.

## ELOM AS AN ENABLER OF CHANGE IN THE EARLY LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

### 1. ESTABLISHING PROGRAMME EFFECTIVENESS

One of the most significant contributions of the ELOM suite of tools has been its ability to establish credible evidence of programme effectiveness, indicating whether interventions should be replicated or scaled. In a sector where early learning interventions vary in approach and quality, the tools allow organisations to compare their results to empirically-set standards as well as national comparative datasets, offering an objective measure of progress. This has strengthened the position of early learning organisations seeking to scale their interventions, secure funding, and advocate for policy support. The use of comparative data – particularly through reference points such as the Thrive by Five Index – has further reinforced both the legitimacy of the tools and the contextualisation of programme findings, helping to support action through data.

*“The ELOM is useful because it does provide some sort of a sense of a benchmark or a comparison base. Without that, we measure, but we can't value.”* - Benita Williams (Benita Williams Evaluation)

*“ELOM, of course, gave us a very solid grounding in terms of the fact that what we were doing was actually right. It was working. And so why not duplicate?”* - Roseisha Ishwardutt (The Unlimited Child)

### 2. FORMATIVE IMPROVEMENT

Beyond outcome measurement, ELOM tools have also played a critical role in programme learning and adaptation. When used formatively, assessment results provide actionable insights that allow programme teams to refine their curricula and teaching approaches, strengthen practitioner coaching models, and identify areas where children need additional support.

This capacity for real-time learning enhances programme quality, ensuring that early learning strategies remain responsive to developmental gaps rather than simply meeting evaluation requirements. A particularly powerful approach is to engage practitioners in sense-making processes to unpack the ELOM results from a contextual, on-the-ground perspective.

*“The baseline findings gave us lovely nuggets of insight into parts of our programme design that we might want to adapt or test different approaches.”* - Rebecca Hickman (SmartStart)

*“We've almost defined an agenda because of some of the gaps we've seen around school readiness outcomes.”* - Roseisha Ishwardutt (The Unlimited Child)

*“There were definitely feedback loops back into the programme and training team which happened during the study, as well as post, as we looked through the data and gave feedback...It certainly strengthened aspects of the programme”* -Shelley O'Carroll (Wordworks)



### 3. OUTCOME MONITORING

The case study interviews also suggested that the ELOM tools appear to have influenced the way early learning stakeholders engage with data. The tools have contributed to a broader shift from measuring outputs (such as child enrolment numbers or teacher training workshops) to focusing on child-level outcomes. This appears to be a function of funder requirements for outcome measurement, as well as the legitimacy and buy-in fostered by the Thrive by Five Index.

*“I think the donor landscape is shifting, and funders are becoming more strategic in how they allocate funding. They want to see system-wide change, and having a recognised, standardised tool like ELOM helps us make a strong case for that.” - Rebecca Hickman (SmartStart)*

This has encouraged organisations to embed assessment into their monitoring and evaluation processes, making developmental tracking an important part of programme management as opposed to a retrospective reporting requirement. As a result, the sector is increasingly recognising data as a strategic asset, not just for reporting and funding but for shaping interventions that directly enhance children’s learning experiences.

*“ELOM has given us a structured way to quantify the changes we see in children, beyond just reporting on how many were reached.” - Rachel Neville (JET)*

*“You need the right data for the right advocacy.” - Shelley O’Carroll (Wordworks)*

#### BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE USE OF ELOM

Despite its strengths, several challenges affect how the ELOM tools are used and whether ELOM findings lead to meaningful change.

### 1. PERCEIVED HIGH COST

A key barrier is the cost and logistical burden of large-scale assessments using ELOM tools. Conducting evaluations using the ELOM 4&5, particularly when requiring a baseline and endline, were reported to be expensive, requiring significant investments in fieldwork. For some, this poses a trade-off between investing in rigorous representative child samples and directing resources toward programme implementation. The financial strain is compounded by the fact that funders often expect repeated evaluations for each new project cycle, even when existing evidence may already support an intervention’s effectiveness.

### 2. UNSUPERVISED ENUMERATORS

The quality of data collection is another critical factor affecting the reliability of ELOM data. The tools depend on trained and accredited assessors to ensure consistency and accuracy, yet fieldwork constraints, such as assessors working alone or without adequate supervision, can introduce errors that compromise the quality of data. This raises concerns about how data quality is maintained at scale, particularly when evaluations are conducted across multiple sites with varying levels of oversight.

### 3. INCONSISTENT APPROACHES TO ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Another challenge is data analysis and resultant interpretation among different stakeholders. Interviews indicated that there are sometimes differences in approaches to ELOM data analysis, leading to variable conclusions. For example, combining different sample subgroups, incorporating contextual and qualitative data, or using different comparative datasets can lead to different interpretations of ELOM results.

Relatedly, while the Thrive by Five Index data provides important contextual information, this dataset can be misappropriately used in reporting. Multiple interviewees made reference to the usefulness of Thrive by Five Index data for comparisons, however, some incorrectly referred to this data as “provincial standards”, indicating that the Thrive by Five Index results may be seen as an aspirational benchmark or norm, rather than a comparative dataset for descriptive purposes.

While ELOM 4&5 results are used widely in evaluations to understand the contribution of a given programme to children’s outcomes, child attendance data is rarely collected or included in analyses. This makes it difficult to draw strong conclusions about the effect of a programme on a child’s learning.

*“Without attendance data, you’re assessing kids at baseline and endline, but you actually don’t know whether those kids were actually at the programme.” - Benita Williams (Benita Williams Evaluation)*

This inconsistency in analysis and interpretation can complicate how findings are used for decision-making, particularly when different stakeholders have competing priorities or expectations for the data.



#### 4. LACK OF FUNDING FOR DISSEMINATION

While organisations invest significant time and resources into conducting evaluations, findings often remain underutilised beyond internal stakeholders or funders, limiting their broader influence on policy and practice. Several interviewees described a lack of attention and funding paid to disseminating evaluation results within the sector.

Many organisations operate under tight project budgets that prioritise data collection and analysis without a budgetary allocation for communication and knowledge-sharing activities. Some project funding includes learning and dissemination activities, sometimes facilitated by consultants, but this is relatively uncommon. As such, without a structured mandate to share findings, evaluation reports often become contractual deliverables rather than public-facing knowledge products that feed evidence into the sector.

***“We need to build [dissemination] into project funding and deliverables otherwise it never gets prioritised.”*** - Rachelle Neville (JET)

Furthermore, there is a lack of sector-wide platforms for sharing evaluation results and discussing lessons learned. While individual NPOs engage in internal data use, opportunities for cross-sector engagement remain limited. Several interviewees expressed an interest in sharing the results of their evaluations and learning about others', but were unsure of a structured and appropriate space in which to do so. Several interviewees recommended that DataDrive2030 hosts learning events for the sector to share their results and experiences.

***“I think there isn't currently enough space for smaller, kind of more informal reflections and a more open-ended space where people can discuss use of the ELOM findings”*** - Magali von Blottnitz (Wordworks)

***“[An event] just provides a platform for people to come together that are all using the same assessment and say, ‘Okay, this is what we found, and this is what we experienced’. And I think, if it's confined to, like the ELOM tools or the DataDrive tools, it will attract people that are using those tools that want to understand from one another as well, and that are not having these conversations.”***  
- Rachelle Neville (JET)

#### 5. FUNDER REQUIREMENTS

Finally, the ELOM tools have been adopted by many funders working in the ECD sector to measure the social outcomes of their investments in programmes

that support early learning. While this has driven uptake of the tools, the funder-driven nature of evaluations can be problematic in some cases. Some have warned that there is the risk of punitive action when results do not meet funder expectations. While the measurement of child outcomes is important for accountability, there is a concern that some funders' expectations may not align with the resource-poor context in which these outcomes develop. As such, one interviewee pointed out how vulnerable smaller organisations working in rural or very low-income contexts are to misinterpretations or oversimplifications of their data. When stripped of the context, poorly communicated results can potentially damage an organisation's credibility and funding prospects.

***“I look at the vulnerability of so many ECD NGOs and I think there's a real special responsibility for us not to look for oversimplified headlines or in particular comparators.”*** - Rebecca Hickman (SmartStart)

Some consultants build sense-making into the evaluation process, ensuring that stakeholders have the opportunity to correctly understand the data and provide important context for interpreting the results. However, this can be a resource-heavy exercise and thus requires funder support. Secondly, funder requirements were noted by some interviewees to create redundancy in data collection and evaluations, where organisations conduct multiple ELOM assessments across different funding streams, for the same intervention, because each funder requires its own evaluation.

***“I find that there is like an over resource allocation to doing ELOM assessments across different donors, whereas you just need to do it once. You know, if you're doing multiple funded projects in a year with the same standardised intervention, you just need to do ELOM once, and you don't have to do it five times across five communities in the same context for five different funders.”*** - Roseisha Ishwardutt (The Unlimited Child)

Similarly, some questioned why the same types of interventions were being evaluated for effectiveness by multiple implementing organisations. Once an intervention has been measured and deemed effective, particularly at scale, there were suggestions made that it should not need repeated measurement unless it is adapted to different contexts.

***“I think until there is just a fundamental shift in how donors understand programme design and quality then we are going to keep rehashing the same evaluations.”*** - Rebecca Hickman (SmartStart)



# LESSONS FOR DATADRIVE2030

The use of the ELOM suite of tools across multiple large-scale evaluations has provided valuable insights into how early learning outcomes can be measured and used to establish evidence for what works and to guide programmatic decision-making. However, it has also highlighted challenges that should be considered to ensure that ELOM findings are used effectively to drive sector-wide learning, programme improvement, and advocacy efforts.

## 1. ELOM TOOLS ARE MOST VALUABLE WHEN USED BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTING

While the ELOM tools are widely recognised as credible, standardised tools for demonstrating programme effectiveness and are widely supported by ECD funders, their greatest potential for impact lies in formative use. Programmes that engaged with ELOM data beyond simply proving impact, by using evaluation findings to refine implementation, inform coaching models, or strengthen practitioner training, actively leveraged data to support organisational learning and enhance programme quality. DataDrive2030 should continue to promote integrated approaches to formative evaluations using ELOM tools, ensuring that the tools are embedded into ongoing monitoring and programme refinement rather than being treated as a once-off reporting requirement.

## 2. DISSEMINATION MUST BE A FUNDED AND STRUCTURED ACTIVITY

One of the most significant challenges identified was the lack of structured dissemination and knowledge-sharing platforms for ELOM findings. Many evaluations remain internal deliverables for funders or organisations, limiting their potential impact on sector-wide learning. Without explicit funding and planning for dissemination activities, such as creating and writing briefs or presenting the findings at sectoral events, others are unable to learn from evaluations. This can create redundancy in the sector, as resources and time are invested in repeating the same kinds of evaluations, or experiencing the same challenges with evaluation planning or fieldwork. To address this barrier, DataDrive2030 will be

facilitating Community of Practice events with sectoral partners who have used the ELOM tools, or plan to use them, to create a collective space for sharing study findings as well as teams' experiences with using the tools. Additionally, the following may further support dissemination:

- A centralised and up-to-date repository, hosted by DataDrive2030, where organisations can voluntarily share non-sensitive evaluation insights and briefs.
- Guidance from DataDrive2030 on effective knowledge translation, helping organisations advocate for additional funding for data dissemination, as well as frame and communicate findings for different audiences.

## 3. STRONGER GUIDANCE IS NEEDED FOR DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

Variability in how different evaluators approach ELOM data analysis, and understand ELOM-related datasets such as the Thrive by Five Index, was highlighted in the interviews. To further support effective knowledge translation that is grounded in consistent interpretation of the ELOM tools, the following knowledge products should be considered:

- Published guidelines for ELOM data analysis, particularly for large-scale or public-facing evaluations.
- How-to guides on understanding ELOM benchmarks versus comparative datasets.
- An evaluator/researcher Community of Practice where evaluators can share and align on methodologies to enhance sector-wide consistency.



#### 4. FUNDERS NEED TO ALIGN ON THEIR APPROACH TO ELOM EVALUATIONS

The funder-driven nature of ELOM assessments provides exciting opportunities but also poses several risks, particularly where funders may not consider the contextual constraints of ELPs in resource-poor environments. A punitive stance on ELOM evaluations may foster biased ELOM fieldwork if organisations conduct their assessments internally, and discourage organisations from using ELOM data formatively for programme improvement. It is therefore important that DataDrive2030 supports funders to take a nuanced and contextual approach to using evaluations in outcomes-based reporting, ensuring that organisations are supported to focus on quality enhancements.

Secondly, funders often require multiple ELOM assessments across different projects, requiring organisations to conduct several separate assessments, and to repeat measures annually even once programme effectiveness has been established. In its engagement with funders, DataDrive2030 can thus encourage funders to streamline child outcome evaluations more efficiently to reduce the fieldwork and financial burden on organisations, as well as encourage the use of other forms of process quality measures.

#### 5. DATA QUALITY IS ESSENTIAL, AND FIELDWORK STANDARDS MUST BE REINFORCED

The reliability of ELOM data is only as strong as the quality of fieldwork and assessor conduct. Several interviewees highlighted concerns about assessors working alone. While accredited ELOM assessors undergo intensive training, and DataDrive2030 monitors data quality with rigorous checks, challenges in supervision and field conditions can lead to inconsistencies or inaccuracies in data collection.

Where possible, DataDrive2030 could facilitate collaborative data collection among ELOM tool users, allowing organisations to pool their fieldwork and group assessors for supervision.

#### 6. INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR COSTING ELOM STUDIES ARE NEEDED

While DataDrive2030 has successfully reduced the costs and time associated with digital data collection, cleaning, analysis, and reporting through investment in automation, fieldwork costs—including assessor wages, transport, and per diems—remain a significant barrier, particularly for smaller, less-resourced organisations. To enhance accessibility and sustainability, DataDrive2030 could explore funding opportunities linked to job creation and workforce development for ELOM assessors.

Securing support from job creation funding streams could provide assessors with more stable income, reducing dropout and turnover while enabling continued professional development. Strengthening this workforce would not only improve data quality but also contribute to the broader goal of building capacity within the early learning sector.





## CONCLUSION

The case studies presented in this report illustrate how the ELOM suite of tools contributes a data-driven lens to South Africa's early learning landscape. By providing a standardised, psychometrically validated framework for assessing child learning outcomes, the tools have enabled early learning organisations to generate credible evidence of programme effectiveness, refine their implementation strategies, and strengthen advocacy efforts. The use of ELOM data has shifted sectoral focus beyond outputs and reach to measurable child-level outcomes, supporting more strategic decision-making by funders, practitioners, and policymakers.

However, while the ELOM tools offer significant value in both summative and formative evaluation, several barriers remain. Assessment costs, inconsistent approaches to data interpretation, assessor supervision, limited dissemination of findings, and challenges in aligning funder expectations with programme realities all affect how ELOM findings are used and leveraged for sector-wide learning.

Looking ahead, the integration of ELOM tools into programme monitoring and evaluation must go beyond accountability reporting to actively inform learning and enhanced practice. DataDrive2030's commitment to scaling services to reduce cost, fostering a community of practice, strengthening data use guidance, working with funders, and supporting fieldwork quality will be crucial in ensuring that ELOM findings continue to drive meaningful improvements in early learning. By leveraging these insights, DataDrive2030 can help strengthen data-informed decision-making in the early learning sector, contributing to efforts to improve equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities for all children.