In Brief

The fifth ELOM-in-Practice Webinar -
Large-Scale Evaluations Using ELOM Tools

The Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) 4&5 is a powerful tool for measuring developmental gains in children, but its true value emerges when combined with contextual data and thoughtful study design. Large-scale evaluations require careful planning, robust methodology, and realistic expectations about what the ELOM measure can, and cannot, reveal about programme effectiveness.

Here are the key takeaways regarding large-scale ELOM evaluations, drawn from the experiences of SmartStart and The Unlimited Child.

Speakers

Justine Jowell – Lead: Programme Design and Development, SmartStart

SmartStart is a national delivery platform working with 13 NGO partners to support over 14,000 licensed early learning practitioners serving 160,000+ children in home and community-based settings across South Africa.

Roseisha Ishwardutt – Chief Operating Officer, The Unlimited Child

The Unlimited Child trains and coaches child minders to become ECD practitioners, transforming spaces into learning-through-play environments. They operate across 7,000 ECD centres in five countries, reaching 14,000+ practitioners and cumulatively serving 2.5 million children annually.

Main themes and insights

1. What the ELOM 4&5 Tells Us (and What it Doesn't)

The ELOM 4&5 provides clear, measurable evidence of developmental progress, but it's not a standalone quality assessment tool.

What the ELOM 4&5 does tell us

- Measurable Developmental Gains: The ELOM 4&5 demonstrates clear, quantifiable improvements in child development over time. SmartStart saw children On Track increase from 45% at baseline to 65% at endline over an 8-month programme period.
- National Comparisons: Results can be compared against national data through the Thrive by Five Index, providing context for programme performance.
- Domain-Specific Insights: Breaking down results by developmental domain reveals specific strengths and areas requiring attention, enabling targeted interventions.
- Equity Impact: ELOM data can show which socioeconomic groups benefit most. SmartStart found their greatest impact was among children in the lowest quintile, confirming their programme effectively reaches those most in need.

What the ELOM 4&5 does not tell us

- WHY children achieve specific scores
- The quality of the learning environment
- Nuances of practitioner behaviour and teaching practices
- Richness of classroom interactions and relationships
- Contextual factors affecting performance (caregiver involvement, health, migration, poverty levels)
- Child attendance at early learning programmes
- The fidelity with which the programme was implemented (e.g., how closely practitioners were supervised or mentored to deliver as required).

Critical Insight: ELOM 4&5 results require interpretation alongside programme implementation data. Without contextual information, such as coaching frequency, socioeconomic indicators, health data, and programme fidelity measures, it is difficult to understand what is driving child outcomes or to make informed programme adjustments.

2. Study Design and Methodological Considerations

Successful large-scale evaluations require careful planning and specific methodological approaches.

Sample Size and Attrition Management
- Oversample at Baseline: SmartStart started with more sites than needed to account for natural attrition (practitioners leaving, children moving, sites closing). This is essential in pre-post designs.
- Representative Sampling: Include diverse contexts (urban, rural, informal settlements) and programme quality levels (not just high-performing sites) to ensure findings are generalisable.

Data Collection Beyond the ELOM 4&5
- Caregiver Interviews: Gather information on the home learning environment of children, resources, and socioeconomic context.
- Practitioner Interviews: Collect data on qualifications, teaching practices, daily routines, group sizes, coaching frequency, and resource availability.
- Implementation Data: Track programme dosage, coaching visits, training participation, and fidelity to programme model.

Controlling for Confounding Factors
- Statistical analysis must control for age, socioeconomic status, location, practitioner qualifications, and other variables that could influence outcomes.
- This requires partnering with qualified evaluation experts and analysts who can design the study properly and conduct appropriate statistical analyses.

Timing Considerations
- Programme Exposure Period: SmartStart had approximately 8 months between baseline and endline, accounting for time needed to recruit children, settle them into the programme, and complete assessments before the December break.
- Evaluation Frequency: Both organisations recommend comprehensive pre-post evaluations every 3 years rather than annually, with smaller "dipstick" assessments in between if programme adjustments are being tested.

3. Critical Success Factors Driving Child Outcomes

When implementation data is properly collected and analysed alongside ELOM 4&5 outcomes data, specific drivers of developmental gains emerge.

Practitioner Practices Matter More Than Qualifications

- Neither organisation found strong correlation between formal qualifications and better outcomes.
- What matters is what practitioners actually do daily:
  - Consistent use of daily routines
  - Facilitating play and learning at appropriate developmental levels
  - Intentional language-building with children
  - Involving children in decision-making and conflict resolution
  - Acknowledging and encouraging children's efforts

Coaching is Critical

- Regular, frequent coaching significantly impacts outcomes more than one-off workshops.
- Practical, experiential coaching (demonstration, modelling in the real classroom context) is more effective than theoretical training alone. The Unlimited Child adjusts coaching frequency based on centre performance, with lower-performing centres receiving more intensive support.

Consistency Over Time

- Achieving strong results once is easier than sustaining them year after year at scale.
- Consistency requires disciplined systems: standardised resources, reliable coaching dosage, fidelity checks, peer-learning structures, and digital monitoring.

4. Using ELOM Data to Drive Programme Improvement

Both organisations demonstrated how they've translated their evaluation findings into concrete programme changes.

Data-Driven Adaptations

- The Unlimited Child found literacy scores plateauing in some cohorts. In response, they shifted training focus toward dialogic interaction and deepening vocabulary to ensure continued growth.
- SmartStart identified specific teaching practices linked to better outcomes and revised their coaching model to emphasise these practices through modelling and practical feedback.

Feedback Loops to Practitioners

- ELOM 4&5 insights inform continuous professional development (CPD) modules, training content, and coaching strategies. Both organisations emphasised that practitioners need ongoing support to translate theoretical knowledge into daily practice.
- Results are communicated to practitioners in supportive, constructive ways, not as punitive feedback - helping them understand where to focus their efforts

5. Consent, Data Access and Legal Considerations

Best Practice Recommendations:
- Consent forms must include provisions for future reanalysis by the commissioning organisation, not just the immediate evaluation partner.
- Ensure legal agreements allow long-term data access and use and plan for data to serve ongoing learning systems, not just one-off evaluations.

These details may seem minor but have massive consequences for the utility of expensive data collection efforts.

Critical Insight: SmartStart discovered that their consent forms allowed data sharing with their external evaluation partner but did not permit the organisation itself to access raw data for future re-analysis after that company closed.

6. Managing Donor Expectations

Many organisations often experience the challenge of donor expectations of annual ELOM 4&5 evaluations for every project, which can be unnecessary and resource-intensive.

Recommended Approach
- Educate donors that once a robust evaluation demonstrates a model works, the question shifts from "does it work?" to "are we maintaining fidelity and improving over time?"
- One robust pre-post study at scale can serve as evidence for several years, provided programme fidelity is maintained.
- Cost management: Balance evaluation rigour with resource constraints. Large-scale evaluations are extremely expensive.
- Between major evaluations: Use smaller "dipstick" and pre-post assessments when testing programme adjustments, but interpret them cautiously, especially in challenging contexts (high poverty, health issues, migration).

7. Workforce Development and Staff Turnover

Staff turnover amongst practitioners is high in the ECD sector, creating challenges for maintaining consistency in programme quality and evaluation samples.

Strategies for Maintaining Consistency

- Standardised training pathways and licensing systems (SmartStart licenses all practitioners using a quality assurance tool)
- Structured mentoring and coaching that can onboard new practitioners efficiently
- Peer-learning structures that embed pedagogical culture within centres, so new practitioners enter environments with established routines and expectations
- Regular re-licensing and support rather than relying on one-off training events
- Evaluation Impact: When a practitioner leaves mid-study, that site effectively drops from the evaluation sample, contributing to attrition between baseline and endline.

Learn more: To learn more about SmartStart and TUC, and other organisations who have used the ELOM tools in programme evaluations, please read **this case study.**