ELOM in Practice: Reflections on Doing Large-Scale Evaluations

SmartStart and ELOM

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CHILD THE POWER TO SUCCEED.

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SmartStart is a South African network of partners and practitioners working collaboratively to provide quality early learning opportunities to children in every type of community.

We seek to harness the power and potential of affordable home and community-based early learning programmes, which can reach more children, more quickly.

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The SmartStart model

SmartStart is pioneering a new way to make sure children in every type of community in South Africa have access to quality early learning

WE PROVIDE A SINGLE NATIONAL DELIVERY PLATFORM

A national network of **13 NGOs** and four branches who...

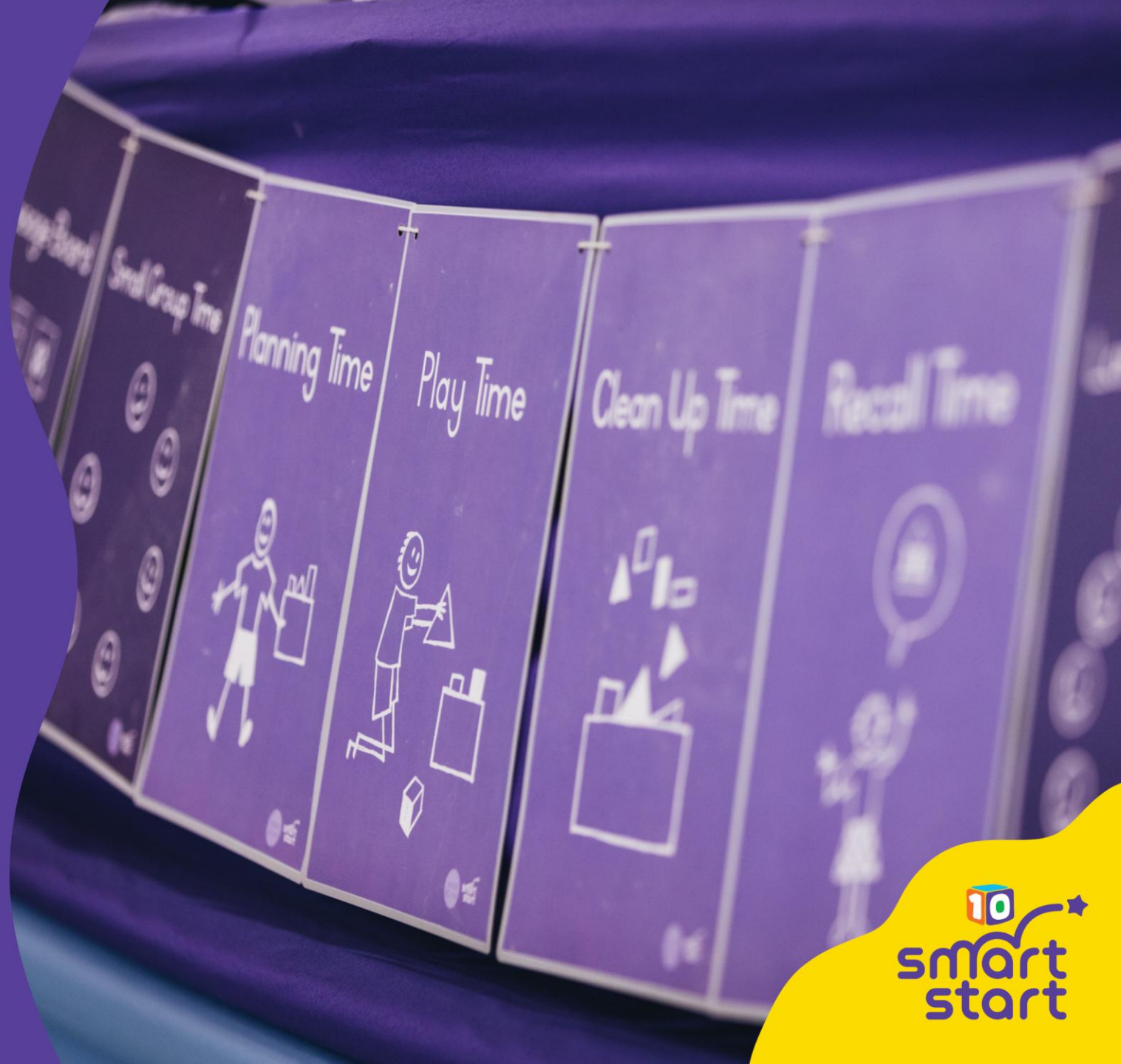license and support over **14 000 early learning practitioners** to run micro social enterprises which...

provide quality early learning to **160,000 3-5 year-old children** in home and community settings

OUR QUESTION…

Does SmartStart work at scale?

The answer to this question could have significant implications for how we think about the best solutions for **closing the early learning access gap,** including re-framing **theories of quality in early learning.**

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Why a full evaluation?

★ We were interested in the extent to which a home and community-based programme (SmartStart) could shift outcomes for children, and whether some of the key contributors to these changes could be identified.

★ This would help to answer the question, "Does SmartStart work at scale?

★ The answer to this question has implications for how we think about the most affordable and immediate ways to close the early learning gap.

★ Children's access to the right development and learning opportunities before they start school has the potential to transform outcomes across the course of their lives.

However, over one million new places in ELPs will be needed in South Africa to achieve universal access for 3-5 year-olds.

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Which tool, where and when

- **ELOM** (Early Learning Outcomes Measure) – 4-5 years domain,
- And **caregiver interview** (using the home learning environment questionnaire)
- And **practitioner interview** (to gather insights into the SmartStarters' qualification levels, the physical setting, teacher-child ratios, group sizes, availability of learning materials, considerations for health and nutrition

Where it happened: Across 325 SmartStart ELPs in 6 provinces
Representing all types of communities (urban, rural, informal)

Who took part: 551 children aged 50–69 months (approx. 4–6 years old)

When: 2023 evaluation (8-month period) Children were assessed at the start and again 8 months later. We then measured the difference in their "progress" at the beginning and compared it with the end results.

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THE DESIGN

✓ **Independent team**: Led by researchers including Prof. Sarah Chapman (UCT)

✓ **Representative sample**: Included a **wide range of ELPs**, not just the best-performing ones

✓ **Before-and-after design**: Tracked real change over time. **Baseline** was conducted at the start of the programme in March 2023, while **endline** was in November 2023 – 8 months later. We then measured the difference in their "progress" at the beginning and compared it with the end results

✓ **Compared to national benchmark**: Results were stronger than the **Thrive by Five Index**

✓ **Controlled for other factors**: Age, resources, location, and practitioner qualifications

This gives us confidence that the results are real, meaningful, and relevant for national decision-making.

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An Overview of the evaluation

★ A sample of 404 ELPs was drawn from a comprehensive pool of 8,993 SmartStart franchisees. However, due to various factors such as children dropping out and inactive ELPs at endline, a total sample of 325 ELPs and 551 children was used for analysis.

★ Two children aged between 50 and 61 months were randomly selected at baseline from each of the 404 franchisees, amounting to 808 children.

★ Randomly selected children represented a balanced gender distribution (one boy, one girl).

★ ELPs' sample was a representation of Quintile 1 to 5, with over 75% representing Q1 and Q2.

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ELOM enables you to see whether children in your programme are developmentally on track for their age, and how this changes over time.

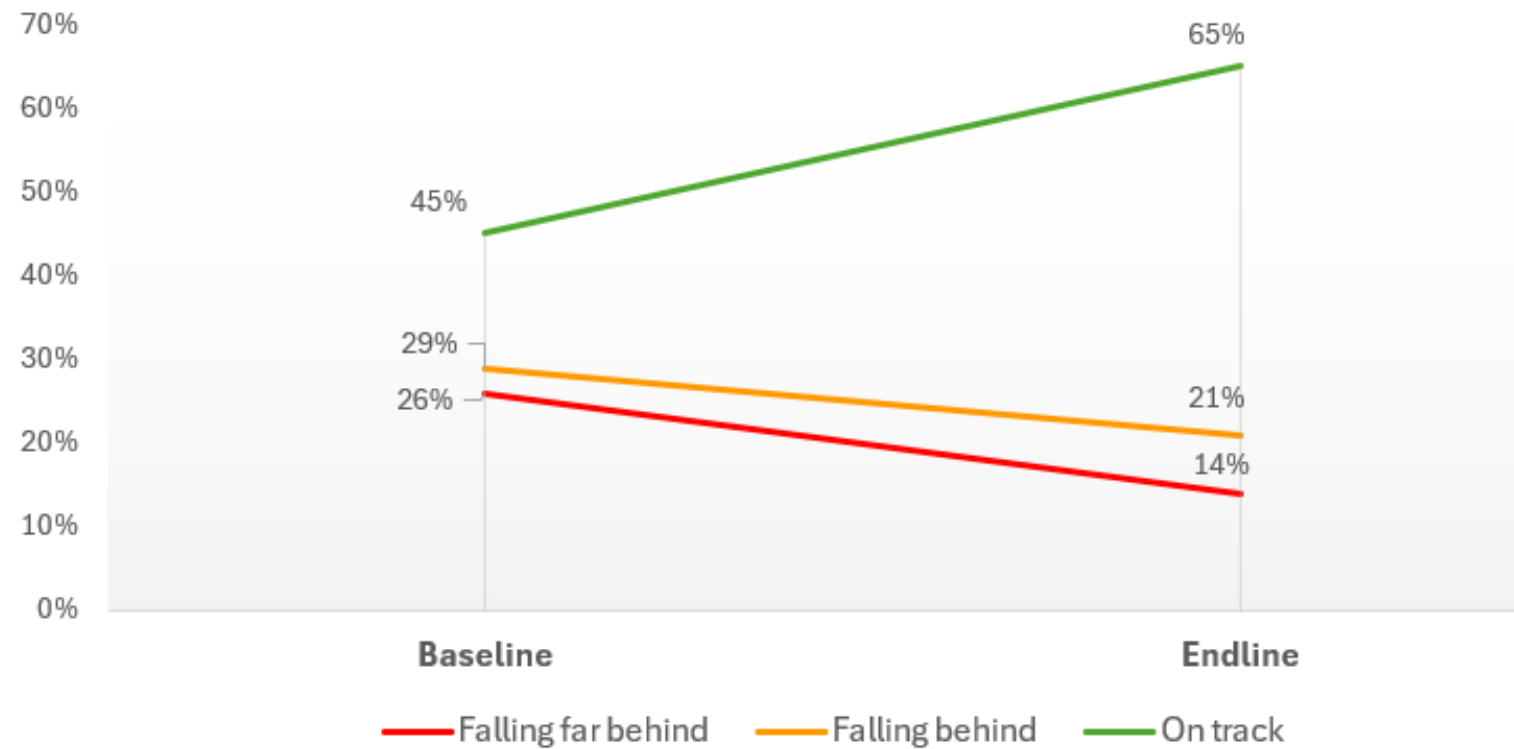A DECADE OF GIVING EVERY CHILD THE POWER TO SUCCEED.

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KEY FINDING:

Found SmartStart children scored higher than Thrive by Five average.

No effect size measured in this study — later analysis is addressing this gap.

ELOM Total Score: Proportion of children by performance band at baseline and endline

Baseline — Endline
- Falling far behind: 26% → 14%
- Falling behind: 29% → 21%
- On track: 45% → 65%

Legend: Falling far behind | Falling behind | On track

What ELOM can't tell you

It's a snapshot, not a full story

ELOM measures child outcomes, not why or how those outcomes occurred.

Without rich implementation or process data, it's hard to connect results to specific practices or contextual factors.

It's not a stand-alone quality tool

A child's ELOM score doesn't automatically mean a programme is "good" or "bad."

It is impacted by many external influences — home environment, attendance, nutrition

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What we learnt about large scale evaluation

⭐ Control for various factors: Important to ensure your study is built to control for various factors so you know that you are probably checking the programme effect

⭐ Data access: Consent forms must allow data sharing for later analysis — we couldn't re-analyse data later because data sat with a firm that closed.

⭐ Design for future use: Decide early if this is a one-off evaluation or part of a learning system – and therefore what information you need to collect eg are you interested in field officer visits, so you can track how more or less assisted?

⭐ Granularity matters: "On track/not on track" hides important variation — breaking into sub-bands was more informative.

⭐ Share learnings internally to enable programme reflections and learnings

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IF YOU ARE THINKING OF USING ELOM FOR LARGE SCALE EVALUATION.....

⭐ Think ahead about consent, access, and re-analysis.

⭐ Make fieldwork documentation watertight.

⭐ Invest in the data partnership, not just the data product.

⭐ Design your evaluation with tomorrow's questions in mind.

The one graph we wish we'd had – show the breakdown of on-track bands and what it revealed.

What I'd tell my past self – **Don't underestimate the fine print in your consent form.**

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THANK YOU

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