

# The Foundations of Educational Success are Built Before School

Evidence on why access to quality early learning matters



## OVERVIEW

### Executive summary

Young children in South Africa begin their schooling journey with very different levels of language, numeracy, cognitive, motor and social-emotional development<sup>1</sup>. These developmental differences are strongly associated with later reading and mathematics performance. Children are not merely scoring differently on a preschool assessment – they are entering different learning trajectories.

## This brief summarises key insights from two recent studies<sup>2,3</sup>, which show that:

01

Children who participate in good quality early learning programmes demonstrate **stronger developmental outcomes** than comparable children who do not participate.

02

**Developmental gains are larger** when children attend programmes that provide at least a basic standard of instructional quality.

03

**Larger developmental advantages** were observed among children who had participated in early learning programmes for longer periods.

04

Children's developmental skills before school entry are **strongly associated** with later reading and mathematics achievement.

## These findings point to four priorities for ongoing early learning reform



### Expand access to early learning

Increase participation among children who remain outside organised early learning opportunities, recognising that investment in early learning is an investment in children's later educational success.



### Support sustained participation

Encourage children to participate in quality early learning programmes for sufficient periods before school entry, as longer participation is associated with stronger developmental outcomes.



### Strengthen programme quality

Improve instructional quality so that participation in early learning programmes consistently translates into meaningful developmental gains for children.



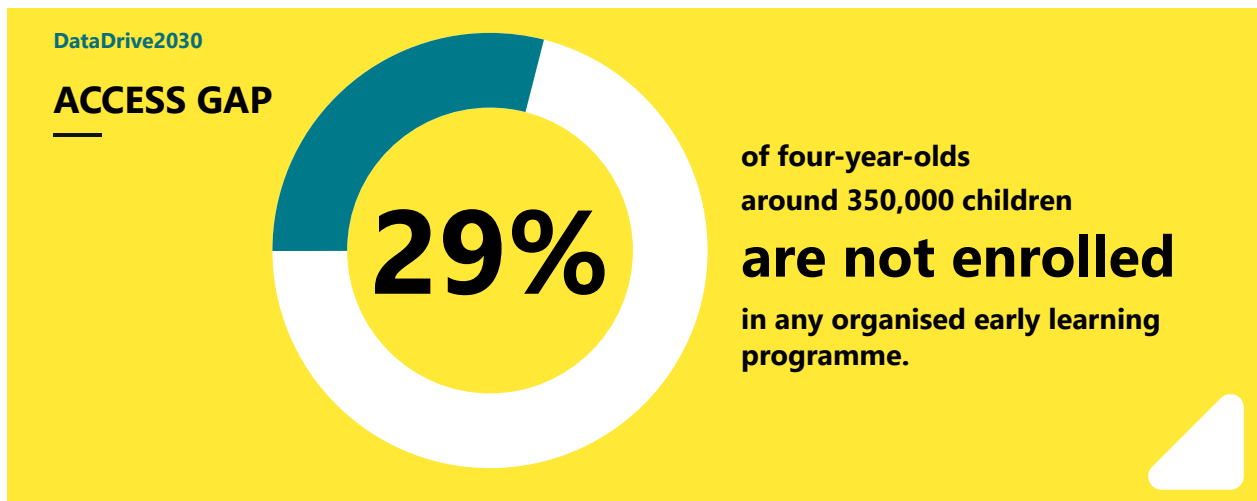
### Measure what matters

Routinely monitor both programme quality and child developmental outcomes to ensure that investments are improving children's development and strengthening their readiness for school.

The evidence reinforces the importance of **expanding access to good quality early learning opportunities**. **Strengthening children's developmental foundations** before school entry is an important strategy for improving later educational achievement.

## 01 / INTRODUCTION

# Too many children remain excluded



Source: Thrive by Five Index 2024: Summary: Key Findings for Children Not Enrolled in Early Learning Programmes.

South Africa has made significant progress in strengthening early childhood development (ECD), with growing political commitment, expanded investment, and a clear reform agenda focused on increasing access to early learning opportunities. As these reforms continue to scale, they have the potential to strengthen children's developmental foundations for learning and improve learning outcomes in the Foundation Phase.

However, approximately **29%** of four-year-olds – around **350,000 children** – are not enrolled in any organised early learning programme<sup>4</sup>.

In a context of competing public priorities and constrained fiscal resources, it has been challenging to build the case for the level of investment needed to achieve universal access. Two recent South African studies provide important new evidence to inform this debate and strengthen the case for investing in early learning at scale.

The first study examined differences in developmental outcomes between children who attended Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) and those who did not<sup>2</sup>. The second tracked children's progress from Grade R to Grade 2 to examine links between early development and subsequent learning outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

## Together, these studies begin to answer two important questions for policymakers:

- 1** Is participation in an early learning programme associated with stronger developmental outcomes at the point of entry into school, and under what conditions?
- 2** Are early developmental differences at school entry linked to later learning success in the foundation phase?

## 02 / MEASUREMENT NOTES

## How was child development assessed in these studies?

Both studies draw on standardised child outcome measurement tools designed to assess the foundational skills children need to succeed in school <sup>5,6</sup>.



### The Early Learning Outcomes Measure 4&5

ELOM 4&5 is a standardised direct child assessment used to measure the developmental outcomes of children aged 50–69 months before formal schooling. It assesses five domains of development: Gross Motor Development; Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration; Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics; Cognition and Executive Functioning; and Emergent Literacy and Language.



### The Early Learning Outcomes Measure Grade R

ELOM-R is a standardised assessment administered at the start of Grade 1 that measures the foundational language and mathematics competencies children bring into formal schooling. It provides insight into children's readiness to engage with the literacy and numeracy demands of the Foundation Phase.



### ELOM Social and Emotional Functioning (SEF) Scale

A teacher-rated measure completed alongside the ELOM 4&5 that assesses children's social and emotional functioning, including emotional regulation, cooperation, persistence and positive engagement with others.



### Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

EGRA is a standardised assessment used in the Foundation Phase to measure foundational reading skills, including letter knowledge, decoding, oral reading fluency and reading comprehension.



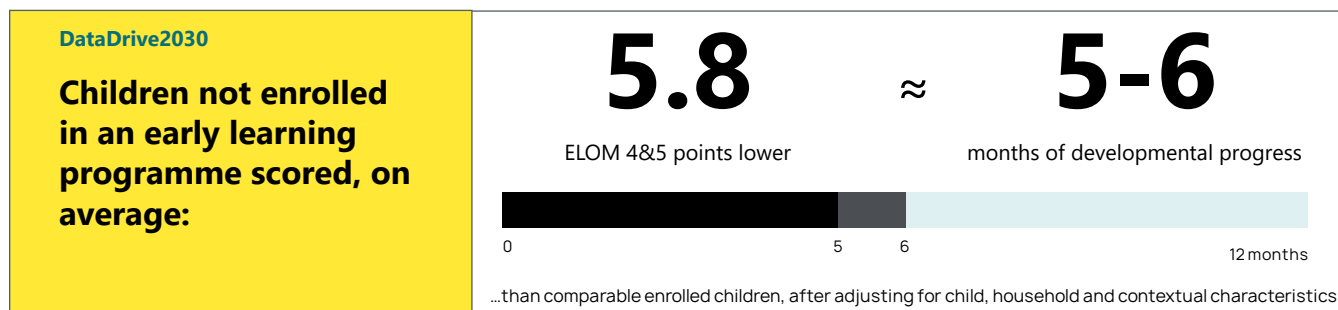
### Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA)

EGMA is a standardised assessment used in the Foundation Phase to measure foundational mathematics skills, including number knowledge, operations, measurement, geometry and problem-solving.

Together, these tools provide insight into key aspects of children's development at specific points in time.

## 03 / WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

### 3.1. Participation in an early learning programme is associated with stronger developmental outcomes at the point of entry into school



#### About the study

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024*<sup>1</sup> assessed over **5,000** four-year-old children enrolled in Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) across South Africa, providing the most comprehensive national picture yet of how young children are entering the schooling system. A sub-study, conducted alongside the main study, assessed children of the same age who were not enrolled in an ELP. These children were drawn from low-income communities in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The two datasets were then used to examine whether enrolment in an ELP is associated with stronger developmental outcomes. To ensure a fair comparison, the analysis matched enrolled and non-enrolled children with similar backgrounds and adjusted for differences in household, caregiver and contextual characteristics before comparing developmental outcomes.

#### What the findings show

Analysis of enrolment status and child outcomes found that children who were not participating in organised early learning opportunities performed less well on the ELOM 4&5 than comparable enrolled peers.

After adjusting for observable child, household and contextual characteristics, non-enrolled children scored on average **5.8 ELOM 4&5 total points lower** than comparable enrolled children – equivalent to approximately five to six months of developmental progress.

#### The largest differences were in three domains



**Emergent Literacy and Language**



**Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics**



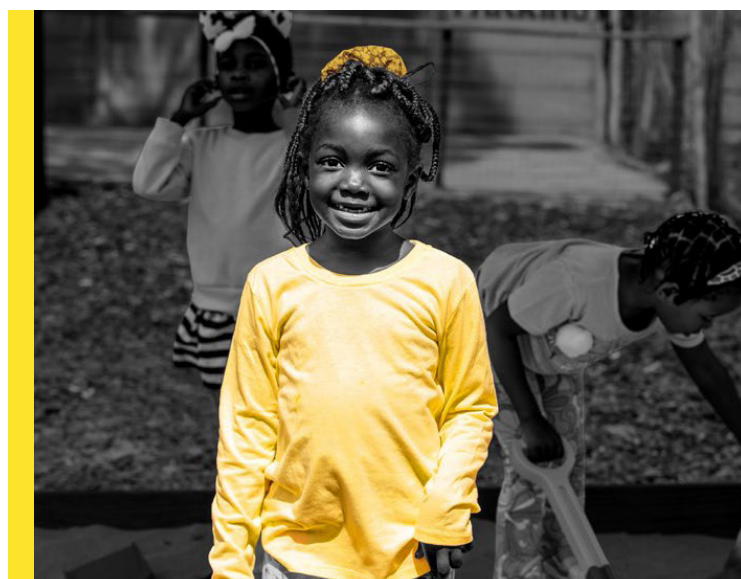
**Cognition and Executive Functioning**

These are precisely the skills that are crucial for later school success.

#### Why this matters

The developmental differences associated with participation in an early learning programme are important because they occur in areas that are closely linked to later educational achievement. This suggests that increasing participation in quality early learning opportunities could strengthen the foundations that support learning throughout the early years of schooling.

## 3.2. Developmental outcomes depend on programme quality and dosage



# 2+

### years of participation

The greatest developmental advantages were observed among children who had participated for two years or longer.

#### Programme quality matters

The sub-study mentioned above also found that the developmental benefits associated with participation depend on the quality of the programme<sup>2</sup>.

Children attending programmes with inadequate instructional quality showed little measurable developmental advantage over comparable non-enrolled children. In contrast, children attending programmes that met at least a basic standard of instructional quality demonstrated substantially stronger developmental outcomes.

Put simply, access without quality is unlikely to deliver the developmental gains policymakers are seeking.

#### Sustained participation matters

Dosage also matters. Larger developmental advantages were observed among children with more exposure to early learning programmes, with the greatest advantages observed among those who had participated for two years or longer.



**Access**



**Quality**



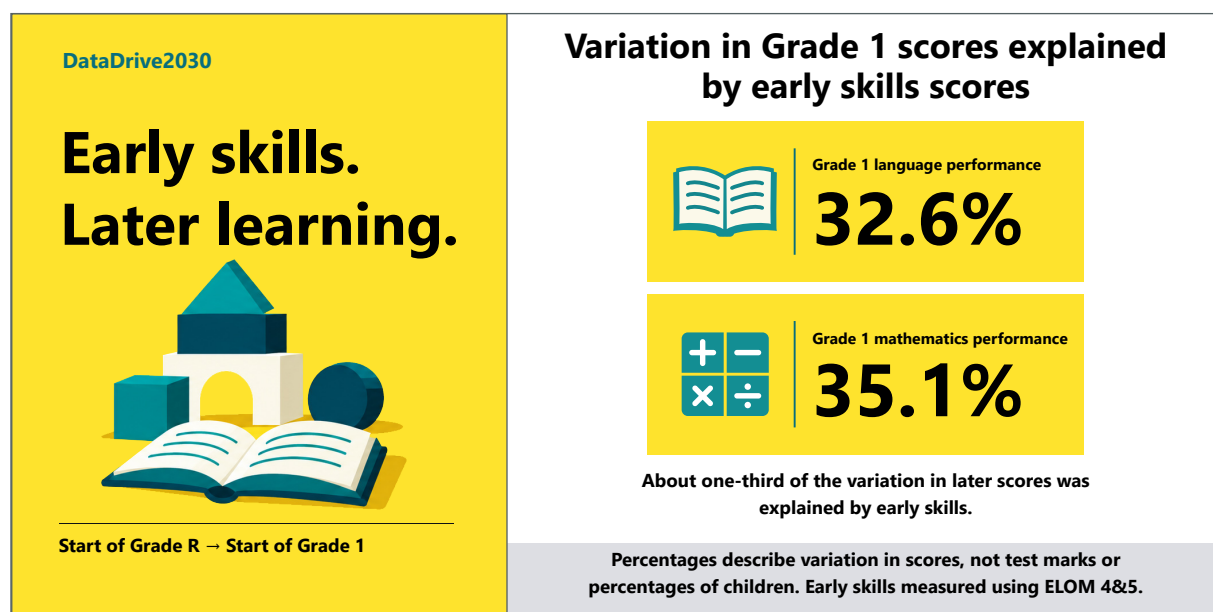
**Sustained  
participation**

#### Why this matters

Access alone is not sufficient. The evidence suggests that developmental benefits are most evident when children participate for at least two years in programmes that provide at least a basic standard of instructional quality.

Together, the evidence highlights the importance of pursuing access, quality and sustained participation as complementary policy priorities.

### 3.3. Early developmental differences at school entry are linked to later learning success in Foundation Phase



#### About the study

The Roots and Shoots study<sup>3</sup> followed a cohort of **378 children** from predominantly low-income households in the Western Cape from the start of Grade R to the end of Grade 2. Children were assessed at multiple points using nationally standardised South African assessment tools to measure their early development and later reading and mathematics achievement.

By tracking the same children over time, the study examined whether developmental competencies measured before and at the point of school entry were associated with later reading, language and mathematics performance<sup>3</sup>. This provides valuable insight into how children's early developmental foundations shape their subsequent learning trajectories.

#### What the findings show

ELOM 4&5 performance at the start of Grade R strongly predicted Grade 1 language and mathematics outcomes (measured using the ELOM-R), explaining **32.6%** of variation in language performance and **35.1%** of variation in mathematics performance.

ELOM-R performance at the start of Grade 1 then predicted Grade 2 reading and mathematics outcomes, demonstrating continuity between developmental competencies at school entry and later academic achievement.

The study also found that socioemotional functioning matters for learning. Children with stronger socioemotional functioning at school entry achieved higher overall ELOM 4&5 scores. Because socioemotional competencies help children engage in learning, regulate behaviour, build relationships and adapt to classroom environments, these findings suggest that children's preparedness for formal learning should not be understood solely in terms of early literacy and numeracy. Supporting children's social-emotional development is also an important part of building the developmental foundations that support later learning success.

## Why this matters

The developmental differences observed before children enter formal schooling are not simply short-term variations in assessment performance. They are associated with later reading, language and mathematics outcomes, suggesting that early developmental advantages and disadvantages can shape children's subsequent learning trajectories.

The findings also reinforce the importance of a holistic approach to children's development before school entry. Investments in early learning should support children's socioemotional development alongside cognitive, language and numeracy development, recognising that these capabilities work together to support later educational success.

## 04 / POLICY IMPLICATIONS

# The findings suggest four priorities for ongoing early learning reform.

### 1 INVEST IN UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EARLY LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION



- **A substantial number of children** remain outside organised early learning opportunities.
- **Expand access** to at least basic quality early learning programmes for children currently excluded from organised early learning opportunities, particularly in disadvantaged communities. Investment in early learning should be recognised as an investment in education itself, strengthening children's readiness for school and improving the impact and efficiency of later spending in the foundation phase and beyond.

### 2 IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMMES



- **Prioritise improvements** in instructional quality. The largest developmental gains were observed in programmes that met at least a basic threshold of instructional quality.
- **Efforts to broaden access** are therefore likely to have greater impact when accompanied by continued investment in teaching and learning quality.

### 3 SUPPORT SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION



- **Developmental gains were larger** among children who had participated in programmes for longer periods.
- **Policy efforts should therefore not only focus on access**, but also dosage: enabling children to access at least two years of early learning stimulation before formal schooling.

### 4 MEASURE WHAT MATTERS



- **Early learning systems** should routinely monitor child outcomes alongside programme quality to understand whether investments are improving children's development and where additional support is needed.

**If South Africa is serious about improving educational outcomes, the scale of our investment in early learning must be commensurate with the scale of the developmental gaps it seeks to address and the critical role these early years play in shaping later learning.**

## SOURCES

# References and evidence notes

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