

SmartStart Child Outcomes Evaluation 2023

It is well established that children's access to the right development and learning opportunities before they start school, has the potential to transform outcomes across the life course. In this context, SmartStart was set up in 2015, to achieve population-level change in access to quality early learning in South Africa. From the outset, SmartStart sought to build a delivery system that could achieve scale by, first, harnessing the potential of affordable home and community-based early learning programmes (ELPs) in order to reach children in low-income communities; and, second, by working with and through a national network of implementing partners.

After a period of rapid expansion, a central question has been whether SmartStart can maintain the programme quality at scale that will continue to shift outcomes for young children, and, if so, what are the mechanisms by which impact is being achieved.

To answer this question, a team of external researchers conducted an outcomes evaluation. The findings relating to child outcomes are set out in Briefing 1. This briefing describes the findings relating to associations between SmartStart's programme quality assurance (PQA) tool and child outcomes, as well as between components of SmartStart's platform design and child outcomes.

Much of what we know about drivers of programme quality is derived from research in the global north. This means it was conducted in contexts with potentially critical differences, and among children with vastly different backgrounds and early years contexts. With about two-thirds of South Africa's children living in extremely poor homes, it is plausible that different mechanisms will move the dial for these children.

Study design

The researchers used the *Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM)*, to track the progress of a representative sample of 551 children in 325 SmartStart early learning programmes (ELPs) over an eight-month period. Practitioners were interviewed to derive insight into systemic quality factors, and a home learning environment questionnaire was administered to parents and caregivers.

Key findings

- ★ The frequency and quality of Coach visits were associated with measurable effects on both PQA scores and ELOM gains.
- ★ A number of components of the SmartStart programme's design and practice, as measured by the 34 individual PQA items, were significantly associated with ELOM gains. These included faithful implementation of the ten activities in the SmartStart Routine (daily programme).
- ★ Club meetings were highly rated by practitioners but did not show a strong correlation with ELOM gains specifically.

How is SmartStart shifting child outcomes?

The answer to this question has implications for how interventions can be designed to tackle **the structural excluders in early learning**, and for re-framing **theories of quality in ELPs**, both in South Africa and globally.

What is SmartStart's Programme Quality Assurance (PQA) tool?

SmartStart's PQA's design draws on other assessment tools, and reflects studies on the mediators and moderators of child outcomes in ELPs.

The instrument includes 34 separate indicators which are grouped into six domains. Each item has three narrative scores, which correlate to a numerical score of 0, 1 or 2.

The six domains are:

1. A stimulating and adequately resourced learning environment
2. Using the SmartStart Routine
3. A stable and nurturing environment
4. Positive and plentiful adult-child interactions
5. Opportunities for open-ended play, supported by adults
6. Interactive storytelling

The PQA tool also incorporates a check to ensure that the physical space provides a safe and healthy environment for children. This is called a 'SmartSpace Certificate'.

As such, the PQA encompasses both *process* factors, such as interactions, nurture and play and learning activities, and *structural* factors such as space, adult-child ratio and health and safety.

According to the summed item scores, an ELP is categorised as 'Green', 'Orange' and 'Red' – where 'Green' indicates that it meets the expected quality standard.

The PQA tool is administered at different points in an ELP's life-cycle, and different versions of the tool are used for each.

Background

SmartStart's value chain and platform architecture incorporate various components designed to support quality implementation at each level of the network. Coaches, Clubs and the Programme Quality Assurance (PQA) tool are three of these mechanisms.

Implementing partners and branches employ Coaches, who are allocated a group of ELPs to support and oversee on a regular basis. Coaches receive training in SmartStart's programme methodology and the ingredients of quality more broadly, and must achieve accreditation as a coach. They are also trained to administer SmartStart's PQA tool.

The PQA tool was designed as a formative assessment tool. This means its purpose is to check that known components of quality are in place, to incentivise good practice, and to identify areas for targeted support and capacity-building.

Coaches provide support to Clubs, which are local communities of practice where practitioners meet regularly to exchange ideas and offer personal and professional support. Clubs have a key role to play in sharing good practice, but they are primarily focused on building a sense of collective endeavour, peer support, and recognising effort and progress.

Scope and methodology

This part of the study considered whether SmartStart's PQA tool, including individual items, was associated with higher ELOM scores. It also investigated the extent to which different aspects of SmartStart's support systems were potentially linked to PQA scores and child outcomes.

To explore both questions, the researchers used multivariate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis, which enabled them to control for a range of ELP-level and child-level variables.

Descriptive statistics

Programme Quality Assurance visits

The majority (77%) of ELPs had 'Green' PQA status, with 10% classified as 'Orange' and 3% as 'Red'. The remainder (10%) were unclassified. In terms of domain scores, Overall, the average scores of items within each domain were high, with many items having an average score close to 2 (maximum score).

SmartStart Coaches

In terms of Coach visits, 86% of practitioners found them to be valuable, rating them as useful (20%), very useful (28%), or extremely useful (38%). Almost 80% of practitioners reported receiving constructive feedback by the Coach after a visit. Frequency of Coach visits varied, with an average of 4.92 visits per year. The majority of ELPs were visited once or twice a year (29%), followed by 3-4 times per year (23%) and 5-6 times per year (16%).

In addition, in terms of ongoing communications, 86% of the practitioners were in contact with their Coach through WhatsApp, 78% through phone calls, 26% through meetings and only 11% used SMS. Email or written communication was used by less than 10% of practitioners.

SmartStart Clubs

93% of practitioners confirmed their participation in a Club, and of these a substantial 95% attended Club meetings. 91% of Club members expressed the value of club participation as either useful (25%), very useful (33%), or extremely useful (33%).

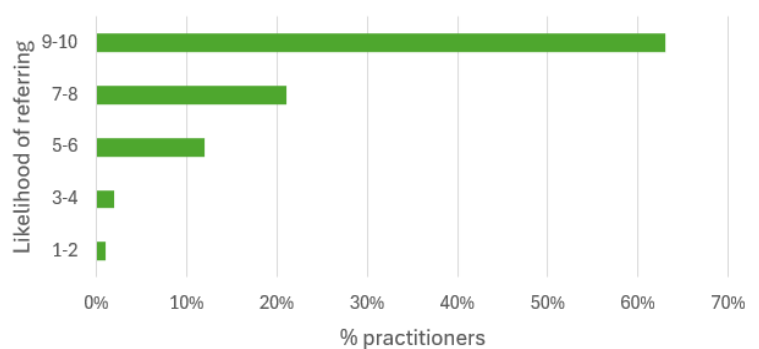
Business skills training

SmartStart offers a comprehensive two-day business skills workshop, with attendance strongly encouraged. 69% of practitioners reported participating in the workshop. The feedback on the training was overwhelmingly positive, with nearly unanimous supportive ratings, and only 4% of attendees finding the training to be not at all useful or just slightly useful.

Practitioner satisfaction

Practitioners were asked to assess their likelihood of recommending SmartStart to another ELP. The findings, shown in Figure 1, indicate strong support for SmartStart, with only 15% providing a likelihood rating of less than 7.

Figure 1: Likelihood (out of 10) of referring another ELP to SmartStart



Findings

PQA scores and ELOM gains

The total PQA score for an ELP, as well as the Green/Orange/Red categories and the sub-domain totals, did not show a significant association with gains in ELOM scores. This is similar to other studies which have found that direct correlations between quality assurance tools which are designed to monitor good practice and target support, and actual child outcomes, are rare.

A more detailed analysis was undertaken to gain insights into the relationship between individual PQA items and ELOM gains. This analysis revealed that after controlling for child-level and ELP-level variables, there is a notable likelihood of increased ELOM gains in ELPs that adopt specific practices. In particular, the practices associated with significant gains in ELOM Total score were:

- During the session, 8 or more of the 10 activities in the SmartStart Routine were observed
- There was enough time set aside for children to recall and reflect on their activities
- Adults allowed children to play and learn at a level and pace which was appropriate to them

The first finding is particularly noteworthy as children at ELPs that consistently engaged in at least 8 of the 10 activities in the daily programme, had an average gain of 4.57 more points on the ELOM compared to children in ELPs who delivered fewer than 8 of these activities, suggesting a substantial positive impact of faithful implementation of the SmartStart Routine. Other PQA items were associated with gains in specific ELOM sub-domains. These are examined further in Briefing 3.

Coach visits and ELOM gains

The analysis indicated a significant association between the frequency of coach visits in the prior year and the PQA scores of ELPs. ELPs receiving 0-1 visits had PQA scores 4.48 points lower than those with two visits per year. There was also a significant association between the frequency of

Coach visits and ELOM gains. However, this association was only significant when comparing ELPs receiving 0-1 visits annually to those receiving 11-24 visits, with children attending the ELPs in the latter group achieving an average of 6.14 additional ELOM points.

Quality of Coach visits was as important as frequency. Satisfaction among practitioners regarding the effectiveness of coaching visits was significantly associated with improvements in ELOM scores. ELPs where coaching visits were perceived as "not at all useful" saw an average increase of 8.37 ELOM points, while those rating visits as "extremely useful" saw an increase of 12.45 points. Analysis identified two attributes significantly associated with positive usefulness ratings: providing practical ideas for creating stimulating environments and assisting in child assessments and planning.

These findings suggest that Coach visits need to be both regular and good quality if they are to have a measurable effect on programme quality and ELOM gains.

Club meetings and ELOM gains

Club meetings were highly rated by practitioners with a small minority of just 8% rating them as only slightly useful or not at all useful. There was no discernible relationship between club participation and improvements in ELOM scores or PQA scores. These findings were not unexpected given that the primary focus of Clubs is mutual support and recognition, towards improving retention.

Discussion and conclusion

Briefing 1 described the main finding of this study, namely, that an early learning delivery platform focused on home and community-based settings in low-income communities, can shift outcomes for children as it goes to scale. A further area of inquiry was the mechanisms of change. While the evaluation did not look at all the dimensions of the SmartStart architecture that could bear on quality and child outcomes, it did consider programme design/practices (via PQA scores) and the role of Coaches and Clubs.

The detailed findings on the PQA are considered further in Briefing 3. However, the finding that some individual PQA items are strongly associated with ELOM gains, provides direction for strengthening both PQA design and practitioner training. Of particular significance is the discovery of a strong positive association between consistent implementation of the SmartStart Routine and higher ELOM Total scores. This shows that even in low-resource home and community-based settings, basically trained paraprofessionals can move the dial for young children when using a carefully designed daily programme.

The frequency and quality of Coach visits were also significantly associated with both ELOM gains and PQA scores. This has implications for key platform design components, including Coach-ELP ratio and enhanced training for Coaches on the types of support likely to be most impactful.

The study's findings foreground the central role of both fidelity to an evidence-based daily programme and regular, quality Coach visits, in building quality early learning opportunities across contexts. The findings have implications for conceptions of quality in early learning provisioning in under-resourced communities, insofar as they indicate expensive facilities and resources are less important than *what* a programme provides and *how* this is supported. This in turn encourages policy and intervention designs to think more innovatively about the potential contribution of paraprofessionals, the role of micro-credentialling, and the core components of a supporting ecosystem.

Re-framing quality

This evaluation shows that ELPs run in low-resource settings, can have a significant impact on child outcomes, if the ELP has certain opportunities and practices in place and is held in a supportive structure.