



The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange

POLICY AND PRACTICE INSIGHTS

PLAY-BASED LEARNING





A synthesis of research supported by GPE KIX and the LEGO Foundation offers practitioners and decision-makers insights for strengthening and scaling play-based early childhood education in low-resource settings.

Photo: GPE/ Chantal Rigaud

Play is every child's basic right, according to Article 31 of the 1989 [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Play-based learning (PBL) involves social interaction and is characterized as joyful, meaningful, actively engaging and iterative.¹ The approach is particularly developed for early childhood education (ECE), targeting children in the crucial development years up to the age of eight. According to [UNICEF](#), it can take place in many environments and may involve free play, where children choose their own play activities, or teacher-directed play. A lack of opportunities for play deprives children of experiences regarded as developmental.²

Besides making learning fun, PBL has several life-long benefits. It involves movement and enhances children's physical development and motor skills. It involves thinking and negotiation, which can stimulate intellectual and social development. Play helps children learn about their emotions and how to safely express them. These gains form the building blocks for success in school and life beyond, helping children become well-adjusted, healthy people.

Many countries have embraced play in their ECE policies and curriculum; however effective delivery of PBL remains a challenge, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Implementation is hindered by inadequate teacher training and resources, and parents' perceptions that play is a waste of time that could be better spent on reading, writing and arithmetic.

THE RESEARCH

From 2022 to 2024, five projects supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) and the LEGO Foundation studied play-based learning practices and innovations in a variety of formal and informal settings. These included home- and community-based care centres, pre-schools, kindergartens and lower primary level classes. PBL approaches involved creating a positive and inclusive learning environment for all children, integrating games, stories and songs in guided classroom learning activities, and encouraging child-directed free-play. Play-based approaches, whether in the classroom or outdoors, made use of local languages and materials to enhance comprehension and relevance. The interventions also engaged parents and communities to support PBL beyond formal settings.

¹ The LEGO Foundation (2019). Learning through play: A review of the evidence. [learningthroughplay_areview_summary.pdf](#)

² International Play Association (2014). Declaration on the importance of play. http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/IPA_Declaration-FINAL.pdf



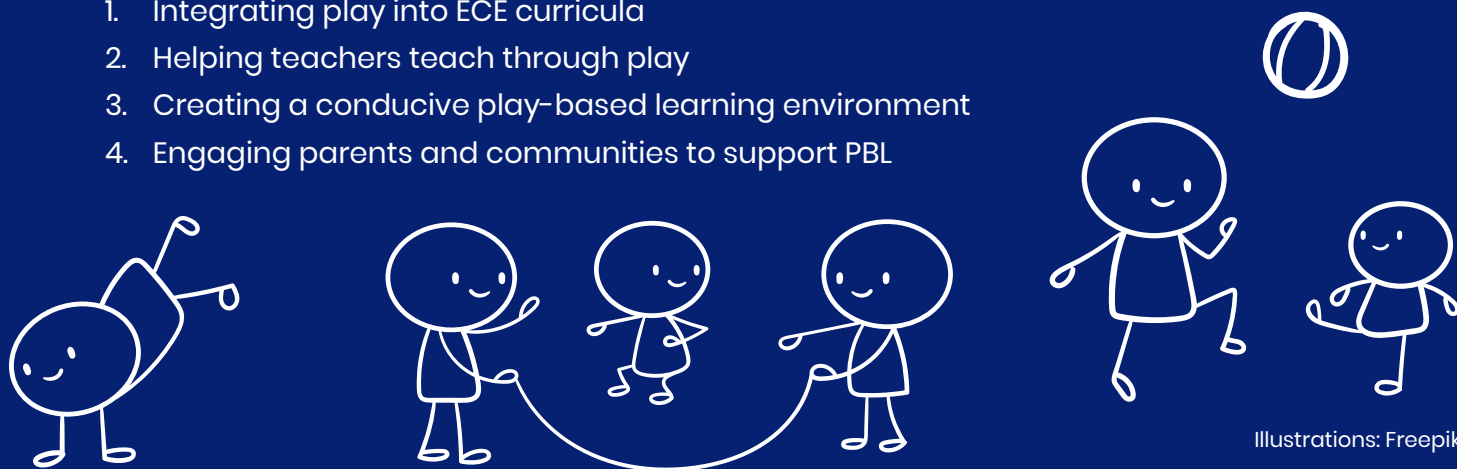
Photo: GPE/ Feruzi (Trans.Lieu)

THE FIVE PROJECTS WERE:

- **Inclusive Child-to-Child Learning Approach: Scaling Up Inclusive Play-Based Learning for Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary School** (Child-to-Child) in Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda
- **Promoting Positive Early Learning Outcomes Through Strengthened Capacity in Learning Through Play – Evidence from Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya** (Promoting Positive Early Learning)
- **Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation: Early Childhood Education Through Play for Scale in Mozambique and Rwanda** (GREAT-ECE)
- **Scaling the School Readiness Initiative – Strengthening School and Community Capacities for Adoption of Play-Based Learning in Uganda and Zambia** (SSRI)
- **Teacher Capacity Building for Play-Based Early Learning in Ghana and Sierra Leone** (Teacher Capacity for PBL)

This body of research generated lessons on context-based innovations to strengthen play-based approaches, and new evidence to inform policy and practice. The following measures emerged as key to effective implementation of PBL in early learning:

1. Integrating play into ECE curricula
2. Helping teachers teach through play
3. Creating a conducive play-based learning environment
4. Engaging parents and communities to support PBL



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1. INTEGRATING PLAY IN THE CURRICULUM

Based on their situation analyses of the countries in which they were implemented, a common thread across projects was the need to make PBL part of ECE curriculum. Through the research, PBL was mainstreamed either by revising existing ECE curricula to include play-based approaches, or by developing ECE curriculum where none existed. Collaboration with education stakeholders and providing quality guidance to teachers on implementation proved essential to successful integration of PBL across curriculum and policy frameworks.

In Nigeria, the Promoting Positive Early Learning project underscored the significance of stakeholder engagement, resulting in the adaptation of the child-centred and experiential Reggio Emilia curriculum to bolster its play-based component. Similarly, in The Gambia, collaborative stakeholder engagement led to the refinement and testing of an enhanced version of The Gambia's Open and Active Learning Spaces curriculum, complemented by supplementary resources such as teacher capacity-building manuals and parental-engagement guides. The new play-based curriculum was tested in selected ECE centres. Evidence from the project interventions in these three countries showed improved teacher competencies, enhanced use of PBL and a positive change in parents' perceptions of learning through play.

In Rwanda and Mozambique, GREAT-ECE adapted a gender-responsive PBL curriculum originally designed for primary levels to better suit pre-primary learners. The team collaborated through workshops with government stakeholders, teachers and ECE experts who reviewed the materials to align with national pre-primary standards. The resulting curriculum was contextualized for local use, such as by using local materials and languages, and supported by a revised manual and other teacher support materials, alongside training for targeted teachers.

In Zambia, drawing on findings from the SSRI project – which looked to scale a proven play-based approach to supporting school readiness among pre-primary children – the ECE curriculum embraced the concept of learning through play and now advocates for 60 percent play and 40 percent academic learning.

2. HELPING TEACHERS TEACH THROUGH PLAY

A lack of qualified teachers is a significant barrier to effective implementation of PBL. Given the limited number of ECE training institutions in low-income countries, GPE KIX projects focused on developing and testing flexible and innovative teacher-training strategies to promote PBL. Peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice were among those that proved effective in building teacher capacity and confidence in facilitating learning through play. In different contexts, projects worked with education stakeholders to address the lack of available teachers by building community capacity to support PBL, while in others, they worked to build the capacity of in-service teachers in a number of areas, including mastering content of PBL-enhanced curriculum, adopting play-based approaches to learning, using locally available resources for teaching and learning, engaging parents and addressing exclusions from learning based on gender and disability.

Even in contexts with limited resources for teacher training, research saw positive results from working with teachers to enhance play-based learning. In Ghana and Sierra Leone, the project Teacher Capacity for PBL studied the implementation of two training programs by Right to Play, in both rural and urban settings. With close mentorship and support, teachers showed continuous improvement in their ability to use PBL approaches. Sixty-seven percent of those who took part in continuous professional development programs rated their ability to focus on cognitive development and learning as very good, compared with 33 percent of those who did not. These gains from training have translated into positive outcomes for young learners, including increased participation, improved language skills, and enhanced cognitive, social and physical development.

To serve communities where formal preschools are either unavailable or ill-equipped, the Child-to-Child project adapted a model of learning that taps older children to facilitate school-readiness among younger children. It saw successful scaling and ownership of this innovative model in 32 preschools and community learning centres across eight districts in Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi. It trained teachers to train young facilitators to work with preschoolers – effectively extending access to early learning. Manuals and guides were developed to assist implementation. Child-to-Child reported more inclusive learning environments after training and sensitizing teachers and caregivers so they could better address stigma around disabilities.

In Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya, teacher training provided through Promoting Positive Early Learning was based on a proven capacity-building approach known as Tayari, which is cost-effective, scalable and amenable to incorporating play-based approaches. Pre- and post-training assessments conducted through the project saw gains in teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes from training in PBL pedagogy. These gains sparked interest from school managers in supporting further capacity-building initiatives for educators.

Beyond initial training and capacity strengthening, teachers need ongoing supervision, mentorship and coaching to practice and master their PBL skills. Monitoring and evaluating for continuous improvement is key. Projects used various strategies to support continuous professional development and mentorship, including the Training of Trainers' approach. GREAT-ECE used this approach to monitor classroom activities and identify areas where teachers still had skill gaps. They were then able to address these gaps through coaching and mentoring sessions. Every round of classroom observation demonstrated marked improvements in delivery of play-based learning by teachers in the study.

This continuous professional development also benefited from peer-to-peer learning sessions, communities of practice and the use of digital platforms to deliver capacity building. These provide a platform for teachers to exchange experiences among themselves. GREAT-ECE found peer-to-peer learning an effective avenue for capacity strengthening. During community-of-practice sessions, teachers shared their challenges, and these areas were addressed through refresher training and practice opportunities through simulated lessons. These sessions boosted teachers' confidence to facilitate learning through play.

To sustain PBL training for teachers, it is important to ensure that education training institutions include PBL in their curriculum. Recognizing this, projects worked closely with these institutions. For instance, the Promoting Positive Early Learning project shared its research evidence on PBL training with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, in order to strengthen the Institute's teacher capacity building programs. The Gambia Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education used the project's findings to review its curriculum and adopt an enhanced curriculum package that integrates PBL into teacher capacity building and parental engagement strategies.

In Zambia, SSRI worked with the Ministry of Education Curriculum Development Department to revise the ECE curriculum and include dedicated modules on PBL methodologies. These modules offer comprehensive guidance on incorporating play-based learning activities into various subjects and learning areas. Through this collaboration, competency-based continuous professional development sessions for both pre-service and in-service teachers, focusing exclusively on PBL, were effective in ensuring curriculum implementation.

3. CREATING A CONDUCTIVE AND INCLUSIVE PLAY-BASED ENVIRONMENT

Effective PBL requires a safe and stimulating space equipped with teaching and learning materials that spur children's imagination and develop their thinking and motor skills. These five projects used a contextualized approach to develop cost-effective teaching and learning resources by making creative use of what was locally available and culturally relevant. This included using outdoor spaces for play, creating toys from local materials, incorporating Indigenous games, songs and stories, and using local languages to ensure inclusion of children not yet familiar with the official language of instruction. This departure from Western models of play-based pedagogy ensures cultural relevance as well as access to resources. Working with what is readily available is essential in contexts where teachers don't have a large budget to procure books, toys and other materials to support play.

The Child-to-Child project developed play materials and created a repertoire of play approaches (called a playbank) that were shared with parents, community members and teachers. In Uganda, Indigenous games were used to implement the project, while in Ethiopia, they were used (in Amharic) to sustain ECE in communities. In Malawi, the Child-to-Child activity packs and guides were widely endorsed and accepted as national documents to support ECE curriculum implementation. In Nigeria, the Promoting Positive Learning project developed a digital repository and an activity bank on Indigenous play. This knowledge-sharing platform is used by pre-primary teachers to upload and share successful play resources and activities with other ECE teachers.

All GPE KIX projects encouraged the use of outdoor play spaces, local materials and languages, and activities such as singing, games and storytelling. Recognizing the importance of adult mediation in children's play, GREAT-ECE also sensitized parents on the need to use these approaches at home.

4. ENGAGING PARENTS AND MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT PBL

Play-based approaches can be implemented in different contexts, including at home and in the community. Outside formal settings, PBL can also be used by caregivers, parents and older siblings. The research suggests that raising parents' awareness about the importance of play and guiding them on effective strategies can empower them to facilitate children's learning through play. It can also be an avenue for addressing gender and social inequalities in education. Projects also found that active engagement of parents and communities could play an important role in sustaining early learning programs. They used a variety of means to involve parents and communities, including awareness campaigns, workshops and participation in research.

The Promoting Positive Early Learning project, for example, organized community dialogue and training meetings around the principle of Least Restrictive Environments, which aims to maximize the extent to which students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers by creating supportive learning environments that include disability-friendly facilities. In The Gambia, teacher capacity-building was combined with a parental-engagement strategy to support an enhanced version of the national curriculum, which provides for structured play in open and active learning spaces.

In some projects, the support of parents, communities and other key stakeholders proved instrumental in sustaining early learning innovations. With community support, the Child-to-Child project succeeded in establishing new early learning centres in rural communities that previously had none. It included income-generating livelihood activities that increased the involvement of male caregivers, brought parents together and generated income for the centres to ensure their sustainability.

The SSRI project confirmed that involving parents and creating conducive home environments were indispensable to school readiness and transitioning. It found that raising awareness about the importance of ECE and guiding parents on strategies for supporting their children's education could empower them. Schools and communities could, for example, collaborate to establish libraries and interactive learning spaces that offer parents resources and knowledge to support their children's education. SSRI implemented various strategies aimed at building support for ECE. In some communities, parents and community members played significant roles in supporting PBL by mobilizing local resources, such as building materials and equipment. In Uganda and Zambia, its community mobilization efforts led to infrastructure improvements in several childcare centres and the construction of outdoor play parks for home-learning centres.

In Ghana and Sierra Leone, the Teacher Capacity for PBL project tackled the gender-skewed participation of parents in meetings related to their children's education. Messaging during community sensitization meetings emphasized the need for men to participate more actively and encouraged parents to ensure that girls are supported in their education journey by reducing their household chores. It also underscored the need to ensure all schools had facilities for children with disabilities.

1 Integrate play-based approaches in early learning curricula.

Ministries of Education and other ECE providers should collaborate with teacher training institutions and other key education stakeholders in revising ECE curricula to integrate PBL. Collaboration is essential to ensuring these revisions respond to locally defined teaching and learning needs and constraints. Curricular support materials such as teacher's guides also need to be updated to integrate PBL approaches.

2 Strengthen teacher training in working with PBL.

Teacher training curricula for ECE need to be updated to include play-based approaches. New and in-service ECE teachers and facilitators need training on how to apply PBL, followed by opportunities for continuous professional development. These include ongoing monitoring, mentoring, coaching and peer learning on the use of play-based methodologies. Digital media and other distance education options can help in expanding access to training programs and professional development in rural and remote areas.

3 Develop locally appropriate resources to support PBL in centres, homes and communities.

Using locally available spaces, resources and local languages to develop and curate PBL teaching and learning materials – such as stories, games and songs – increases their cultural relevance and is cost-effective. Drawing on community spaces and resources, like outdoor areas, can expand opportunities for children to enjoy freedom of movement and learn through play.

4 Involve parents and communities.

Engaging parents and communities through awareness campaigns and training can empower them as active participants and supporters of play-based ECE. It provides an opportunity to extend early learning through alternative approaches such as play facilitated by parents or older siblings. Engagement campaigns can also be targeted to reduce gender bias and increase fathers' involvement in their children's education. Communities can play an important role in mobilizing resources to sustain PBL and maintain care centres and play structures.

The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) is a joint endeavour between GPE and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) that aims to ensure partner countries have and use the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the 21st century.

Five synthesis reports were commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence across research projects conducted between 2020 and 2024. Topics include: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion; teacher professional development; and out-of-school children and youth.