

Learning through Play in an Accelerated Education Program – Learning Brief

February 2025

Background

A combination of COVID-19 and civil conflict led to years of interrupted education delivery in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. To mitigate the negative effects of 3 years of school closures, the Regional Education Bureau instituted an Accelerated Education Program (AEP) in the region. Globally, there is little evidence on the role of Learning through Play (LtP) as a teaching method in AEPs. This study seeks to explore an AEP-focused adaptation of PlayMatters' (PM) teacher training approach to gain insight into the role and potential use of LtP as a teaching method in an AEP in Ethiopia.

PlayMatters Program

PM is an education initiative (2020 - 2026) that supports existing education systems to integrate LtP in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda. The PM Core Package of activities includes teacher training, school leadership training, school-based continuous professional development, community engagement, teaching and learning material (TLM) distribution, and light school rehabilitation. In the context of Tigray, this Core Package was adapted to respond to the specific needs of teachers and students in Tigray, which was in an immediate conflict recovery phase when the intervention began in May 2023.

PM utilized existing Educational Needs Assessment data and conducted a participatory diagnostic assessment to understand the challenges facing teachers and students given the compounding post-conflict and AEP context, and created a bespoke 3-day teacher training. It focused on teacher and student well-being, LtP core concepts, and LtP-informed assessment practices. The materials were developed to accompany a 2-day government training orienting teachers to the AEP model. In the middle of the academic year, a broader 3-day training on LtP practices and strategies was conducted to strengthen teachers' pedagogical knowledge based on the PM Core Package refresher training. The adapted Core Package also included distribution of supplementary TLMs and school rehabilitation, seeking to meet the prevailing needs of the post-conflict context.

In partnership with



The LEGO Foundation

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Morning Session	Welcome, Opening and Climate Setting	Introduction to Learning through Play	Accelerated Education Challenges and Mitigating Strategies - Part 1
Mid-morning Session	Teacher Well-Being	Interactions with TLMs, Peers, and the Teacher	Accelerated Education Challenges and Mitigating Strategies - Part 2
Afternoon Session	Student Well-Being	Introduction to Six Bricks	Deep Dive on the Importance of Lesson Planning and Learner Assessment

In addition to seven early childhood development centers in Shire, PM supported three primary schools in the Sheraro woreda of Tigray. All three schools were located in the relatively urban center of town and served both IDPs and returnees. The three schools varied on a spectrum of continued effects from the conflict:

- School 1 remained an IDP compound, resulting in school activities relocating to an unfinished building on the district education office compound. This building is multiple stories tall, is not a proper school compound, does not have classroom blocks, and has few walls.
- School 2 remained as half an educational facility and half as an IDP camp, with some classes being taught in makeshift structures to accommodate IDPs in part of the compound. It's important to note that these temporary structures were frequently damaged by exposure to weather and required repair multiple times throughout the academic year to remain functional.
- School 3 no longer hosted IDPs and was operating at a relatively functional level.

Methodology

This mixed-methods study answers the following learning questions:

1. What adaptations to PlayMatters are needed to be successful in an AEP?
2. What does LtP look like in an AEP?
3. What additional supports are needed for LtP in a conflict-affected context in an AEP?
4. What are the effects of LtP on teachers' well-being in an AEP?

Measures

1. **Teacher Survey** - Survey including demographic data and the Well-being Assessment of Skills and Supports that Enable Teachers to Succeed (Well-being ASSETS)¹ focused on a)

¹ ASSETS generally showed good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha >0.70 on the composite score and all sub-domains except for Intrinsic Motivation

Peer collaboration; b) Teacher Preparation; c) Intrinsic Motivation; d) Support from Administration; e) Teacher-Pupil Relationship; and f) Sense of Well-being

2. **Teacher Classroom Observation (TCO)** - 22 items to assess the quality of classroom instructional practices using a four-point Likert type scale via direct observation focused on a) Classroom environment; b) Teacher instructional practices; c) Classroom management and positive discipline; and d) Student engagement²
3. **Training Pre-/Post-Test** - Test administered before and after the training to measure knowledge gained through the face-to-face training and a 4-point Likert-style self-report on confidence to apply LtP strategies
4. **Key Informant Interviews** - Qualitative semi-structured interview protocols tailored to Head Teachers and teachers
5. **Focus Group Discussion** - Qualitative semi-structured discussion protocol with education system actors

Procedures

Quantitative data was collected through routine project monitoring. This included a quantitative survey administered at baseline (November 2023) prior to intervention and at endline (June 2024) at the end of the academic year. It also included classroom observations administered one month after face-to-face training (December 2023), two months after training (February 2024), and at the end of the academic year (June 2024).

Qualitative data was collected from local education system actors in a focus group discussion (FGD) after the second classroom observation time point in February 2024. This FGD was facilitated by PM staff and conducted in Tigrinya with detailed notes taken. Head Teacher and teacher qualitative data was collected via Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in June 2024 in English with PM staff translation. Detailed notes were taken in lieu of a recording and transcription process. These data were collected by an American PM staff member and may have led to positivity bias or translation bias.

Sample

This study used a purposive sampling technique for selecting three primary schools participating in the PM program in the Sheraro Woreda in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia. From these schools, 32 teachers were randomly selected for quantitative data collection as depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Quantitative Sample

School	Participants		
	Male	Female	TOTAL
School 1	6	5	11
School 2	9	3	12
School 3	4	5	9
TOTAL	19	13	32

² TCO showed strong signs of reliability with a Cronbach's alpha >0.70 on the composite score and all sub-domains



Of these 32 teachers, a sub-set of 13 teachers and all Head Teachers (HTs) also participated in qualitative data collection. Additionally, relevant education system actors were selected based on their roles as co-implementers of the PM program for qualitative data collection.

Table 2: Qualitative Sample

School	Head Teachers			Teachers			TOTAL
	Male	Female	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL	
School 1	1	0	1	2	3	5	6
School 2	1	0	1	4	1	5	6
School 3	1	0	1	1	2	3	4
TOTAL	3	0	3	7	6	13	16

Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted using Stata 18.0. Qualitative analysis was conducted using thematic coding. Data were triangulated to develop the key learnings. Participants are identified as "HT#" for HTs or "T#" for teachers to maintain confidentiality.

Key Learnings

The findings of this study are organized into five key learnings:

1. LtP was considered relevant and was appreciated by AEP teachers
2. Teachers improved their application of inclusive LtP classroom practices
3. PlayMatters has the potential to support the holistic wellbeing of conflict-affected teachers
4. LtP has the potential to supports the holistic learning and well-being of conflict-affected children
5. Structural barriers limited LtP implementation

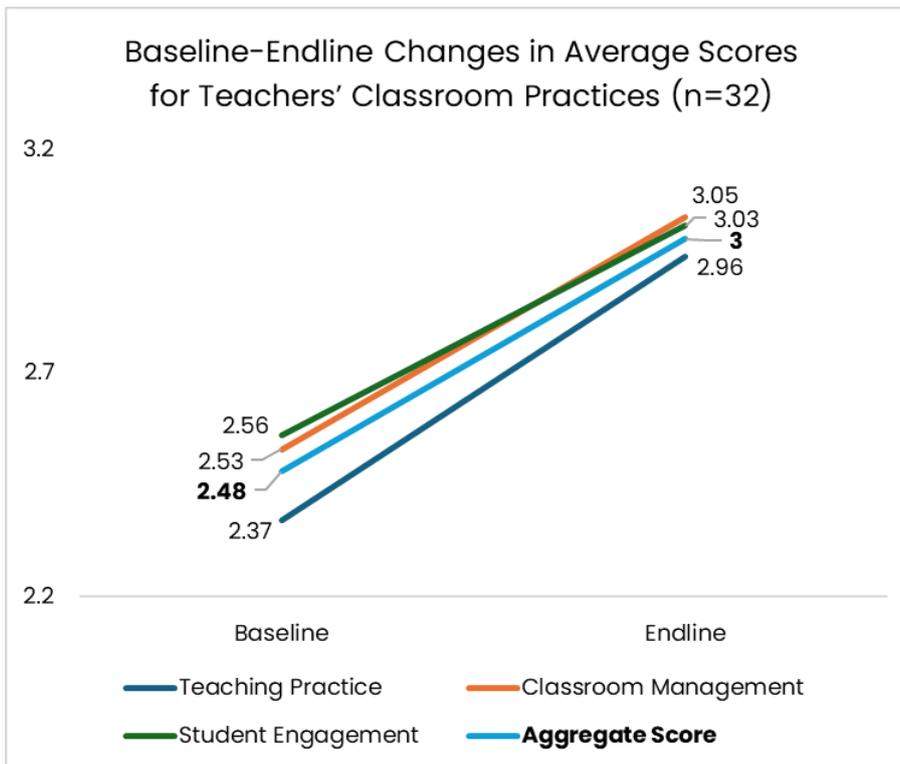
Key Learning 1: LtP was considered relevant and was appreciated by AEP teachers

Overall, participants viewed LtP as highly effective in an AEP environment. Educators described LtP as "supportive," "easy to apply," and "useful." Some noted that "LtP strategies increased interest in learning" among both students and teachers.

Many participants highlighted the practical nature of the training. For instance, T1 emphasized that the "current situation with students demands practical, rather than theoretical, learning, which is most effective for engaging them actively in the teaching and learning process" given that schools were closed for approximately three academic years. Additionally, T10 observed that students are now "more interested in their education" since LtP was introduced. LtP also helped contextualize curricular content by incorporating cultural games, making learning more relevant and engaging. The pre-/post-test results from the face-to-face 3-day training also indicate a statistically significant ($p < .001$) increase in participants' knowledge of LtP following the training from an average score of 66.80% at Pre-Test to an average score at 73.54% at Post-Test. Overall, educators reported feeling better equipped to teach their students, as the training provided them with practical strategies to improve student engagement and learning outcomes.

Participants also acknowledged that their participation in school-based Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities, primarily teacher learning circles and supportive supervision visits, helped increase their implementation of LtP. For example, one teacher shared that CPD activities allowed them to voice the negative side of their classroom practice and what needs to be improved. CPD also facilitated the sharing of ideas, collaborative efforts, and opportunities to debrief on student behaviors, further enriching their approach to LtP.

Key Learning 2: Teachers improved their application of inclusive LtP classroom practices



Teachers improved in their teaching practice over the academic year measured by the TCO. A composite score of the sub-domains of teaching practice, classroom management, and student engagement shows a statistically significant increase in teachers' implementation of LtP in the classroom, with the average score rising from 2.48 to 3.00, with a p-value of less than .001.

In interviews, participants reported positive outcomes from the implementation of LtP. T1 shared LtP assisted in an increase of participation and retention by utilizing practices like role play and question and answer. Other teachers discussed the use of Six Bricks, songs, and other activities in their lessons to engage students. Participants mentioned LtP's positive impact on student behavior. One teacher recalled that before the training, teachers did not know how to integrate supportive practices into daily activities. Another participant gave an example of a student who had been ejected out of the classroom for misbehavior. The teacher altered their tactics from retributive punishment to align with LtP's positive behavior management practices and took the student out for tea to understand the student and discuss the bad behavior. In this situation, the participant reported the student's behavior changed for the better (T2).

While some participants highlighted the difficulty of delivering the AEP, most maintained that LtP can be implemented in an AEP and make positive changes in student learning. T2 reported that "LtP in AEP is a student-centered approach so it supports me to deliver quality education," in contrast to the traditional lecture-based technique. HT1 expressed gratitude for the training, stating that it has equipped teachers on "how to teach, how to improve teaching, and how to support children dealing with trauma" (HT1). However, a few teachers attested to the difficulty in

implementing LtP in an AEP. One HT shared “it’s difficult to conduct the LtP in the current status because the condensed curriculum has many lessons to cover in a short period of time” (HT2).

The vast majority of system actors attested to LtP being implemented by teachers in the AEP. System actors particularly noted teachers’ creativity to utilize locally-available TLMs in their lessons despite a lack of many scholastic materials as a result of the conflict. Additionally, they note new sensitivities on the part of teachers to be aware of and responsive to student’s unique needs: “Teachers may encounter traumatized children in the classroom. Therefore, the training assists teachers in identifying and addressing the needs of these students, thus aiding implementation.”

The majority of teachers requested additional LtP training, particularly covering how to better implement LtP, use and store TLMs effectively, support students with special needs. They also requested access recordings of training materials for continued development.

Key Learning 3: PlayMatters has the potential to support the holistic wellbeing of conflict-affected teachers

The third major finding was PM has the potential to support teachers’ wellbeing. As T10 aptly stated, ‘if we fail on teachers’ well-being, we fail on the implementation of LtP.’ Overall, the quantitative data indicates that there were no significant changes in teachers’ occupational wellbeing from baseline to endline as shown in Table 2 below. This could be explained by persistent challenges in a post-conflict recovery context (e.g., schools hosting IDPs, insufficient classrooms and infrastructure, lack of scholastic materials) and the fact that PM is not a MHPSS intervention.

Table 3: Baseline-Endline Changes in Teachers’ Occupational Wellbeing (n=32)

Item	Means scores (95% CI)			
	Baseline	Endline	Difference	P-value
Overall (all items)	3.989 (3.804 - 4.174)	3.915 (3.837 - 3.993)	-.073 (-.112 - .259)	0.427

However, in the interviews, participants reported an increase in self-efficacy, which positively impacted both their quality of life and teaching. Data suggests that job satisfaction and life satisfaction are interconnected, with improvements in one area influencing the other. Several educators highlighted reduced stress in their classrooms since implementing LtP, citing support from PM as instrumental in managing their stress. For instance, T1 contrasted their experience with other schools, where classrooms are overcrowded and resources are limited. With PM, their workload and stress have been reduced, enabling them to deliver ‘quality education.’ Similarly, T2 noted that they are now more sociable with their students and said, “I deliver education through practical activities to create personal satisfaction.” Yet another participant reflected that before PM, this educator rejected that AEP could provide quality education, but after LtP training, found it “more comfortable to teach my students” and felt overall better in their teaching journey (T8). Likewise, many participants equated their increased wellbeing to the LtP training equipping them to be better educators which in turn gave them the confidence and competency to do their jobs.

Similarly, a head of school stated that the change brought about by the LtP training was how teachers show greater empathy toward their students and stronger teacher-pupil relationships. They explained that before the training, teachers would often resort to corporal punishment for any

infractions. However, after the LtP training, teachers have become more aware that students may be dealing with trauma or other factors beyond their control (HT1).

However, several teachers shared that they are currently or previously experienced trauma because of the conflict. A teacher shared their experience of being 'very traumatized' by the ongoing conflict, especially since a loved one is part of the army. Through the LtP training, they came to understand that their role in addressing the conflict is by teaching the students who are the nation's current and future citizens. This teacher believes it is their mandate to provide quality education to these students. Additionally, they are committed to helping others understand the experience. This persistent trauma and personal connection to the conflict reveals the complexity of improving teachers' wellbeing in a crisis-affected context.

One HT also cautioned that PM's intervention provided only temporary relief for teachers. They explained, "There's a lot of documentation expected from teachers, and it can be tedious. Teachers suggest that training alone isn't enough; more frequent training sessions could help refresh and motivate them amidst routine school tasks" (HT2). Participants also pointed out that their physical needs impacted their well-being. For example, T10 shared that they have not been paid by the government for 17 months, which has lowered their morale. Furthermore, educators have been affected by ongoing conflict, with T10 reporting incidents of theft, kidnapping, and rape.

Key Learning 4: LtP has the potential to supports the holistic learning and well-being of conflict-affected children

Similar to the improvements in staff wellbeing, LtP has the potential to support student wellbeing, both psychologically and academically. Teachers reported increased student wellbeing, as indicated by higher participation rates and a decrease in classroom disruptions (T3). They described students expressing disappointment when LtP activities were absent, actively requesting them. Since the implementation of LtP, students have been described as 'happy' (T2), 'singing' (T7), and 'enjoying' class activities (T7). One participant observed a positive shift, noting that students are now 'motivated to seek advice and build strong relationships with teachers' (T8).

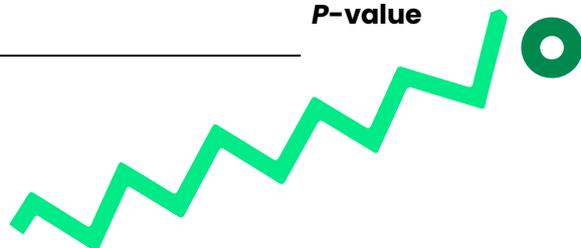
In addition to psychological benefits, educators have also observed academic improvements. After integrating LtP, more students actively engaged in lessons and demonstrated higher reading levels (T10). However, one participant highlighted the challenges students face outside the classroom, noting that some students struggle with basic needs, such as having to beg for food, cope with ongoing violence in their communities (T12), or have lost parents during the conflict (T13).

Key Learning 5: Structural barriers limited LtP implementation

Despite these promising findings, teachers and system actors explained the complex situation in the Tigray region, highlighting the challenges they face. Although PM has provided materials for some schools, some participants noted that their school remains in a dilapidated state. There was a statistically significant improvement in observable environmental factors, such as the presence of four walls, seating, space, and adequate lighting from baseline to endline as depicted in Table 3 below, with 0 being not present and 1 being present.

Table 4: Baseline-Endline Changes in Environmental Scan (n=32)

Item	Means scores (95% CI)	P-value
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	Baseline	Endline	Difference	
Overall (all items)	.219 (.128 - .309)	.700 (.593 - .806)	.481 (.616 - .347)	0.000

One participant described the AEP as different from schools without PM's intervention. While other schools are crowded and more run-down, PM schools, according to Participant 1 (T1), had "enough classrooms and chairs and seating arrangements." However, one HT mentioned that teachers' ability to implement LtP was hindered by the condition of their classrooms, especially during the rainy season, which affected the classroom structure (HT2). System actors also identified gaps in infrastructure, primarily related to classroom security, classroom space/size, and the availability of TLMs to adequately deliver LtP.

Additionally, when comparing the environmental scan scores and the composite classroom observation scores of the three schools, data shows that School 1 performed statistically significantly worse compared to the other two schools. A possible explanation for this discrepancy is that this school is occupied by internally displaced persons. A teacher from this school provided an example of the safety hazards caused by structural deficiencies, explaining that students have fallen from a two-story building because there are inadequate barriers or walls. They also noted that there are no medical services available to assist when a student falls. Additionally, this school lacks basic facilities, such as running water and clean toilets, creating significant hygiene risks to the already safety risks. Many of the educators from this school indicated that additional support is needed in terms of infrastructure and supplies to strengthen implementation of LtP.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Teachers can successfully integrate LtP within the context of an AEP, with PM's adapted core package being both relevant and well-received by teachers. Findings highlight several positive outcomes, including an increase in positive classroom practices and perceived improvements in teacher and student wellbeing. However, structural barriers limit LtP implementation and teachers highlighted their need for better infrastructure, training, materials, and interventions to support their own well-being.

Based on the findings of this study, the following actions are recommended for LtP in the AEP context:

1. Ensure that schools have proper infrastructure that meets standardized requirements, such as four walls, to ensure schools meet basic safety and health standards for the well-being of both children and staff. Ensure teachers have access to TLMs to support LtP practices, particularly in conflict-affected areas where resources are scarce.
2. Strengthen professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders, particularly at the school-level through peer learning initiatives, to support ongoing implementation of LtP, including a focus on the creation and use of TLMs and supporting children with disabilities and students with diverse needs.
3. Prioritize teacher well-being by incorporating care practices into pedagogical training such as: staff debriefing sessions, fair and regular compensation, regular check-ins with supervisors, and engaging warm-up activities before meetings.

4. Strengthen psychosocial support for students by equipping teachers and local actors with increased awareness and resources to support those exposed to trauma.
5. When possible, implementing alongside government actors and conducting systems strengthening activities can facilitate a smooth transition to government for continued support.

To learn more about PlayMatters, go to www.playmatters.org or contact Anne Smiley, Deputy Project Director, Research & Technical, at Anne.Smiley@rescue.org

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