

Perspectives and Practices of Learning through Play

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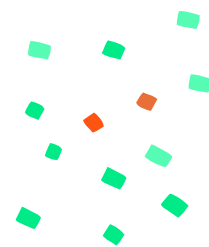
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In partnership with



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Active learning and play-based approaches to learning have been recommended as the best approach for lower primary schools in Uganda.¹ Both early childhood care and education (ECCE) and primary curricula and teacher training policies stipulate the use of play-based, child-centered, and active learning approaches.² In teacher training institutions, teachers are trained to use play-based approaches for child-centered and participatory learning.³ Due to strong policy support, there is a growing opportunity to transition from teacher-centered approaches to more student-centered practices, as efforts continue to address existing structural and capacity challenges.⁴

To understand LtP integration in ECCE and primary schools in refugee-hosting districts, PlayMatters and researchers from Makerere University conducted a formative study to answer the question: *“What are existing perspectives, practices, barriers, and enablers for LtP in refugee and host country context pre-primary and primary schools?”*. Using a positive deviance approach,⁵ four ‘bright spot’ case study schools were selected in Adjumani and Yumbe districts. In each case study school, rapid ethnographic and visual-stimulation methods were used to prompt participants’ reflections triangulated with researchers’ observations.

These findings led to the development of the PlayMatters Core Package, a comprehensive intervention delivered through a whole-school approach over one academic year to support the integration of LtP into schools. PlayMatters is an education intervention (2020 – 2025) implemented by the International Rescue Committee, Plan International, and War Child Alliance in partnership with the LEGO Foundation to strengthen education systems to integrate LtP into ECCE and primary education.

FINDINGS

Multiple Perspectives of Play Requires a Clear Definition of LtP

Participants often associated play with recreation, physical activity, and fun. Children most frequently described playful experiences through games like football and skipping rope, but rarely in connection to learning objectives and curriculum delivery. Parents also described play as unserious and separate from learning processes, particularly for children in primary school. One primary parent explained: *“I have known that it is good for a child to play depending on the*

¹ Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda. (2016). *The National Primary School Curriculum for Uganda Primary 1*. Kampala, NCDC.

² Ministry of Education and Sports, Uganda. (2012). *The Learning Framework for 3–6 Years Old*. Kampala, NCDC.; Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda. (2020). *National Child Policy*. Kampala.

³ Ssentanda, M. E., & Andema, S. (2019). Reclaiming the space for storytelling in Ugandan primary schools. *Per Linguam: a Journal of Language Learning* = *Per Linguam: Tydskrif vir Taalaanleer*, 35(3), 74–91.

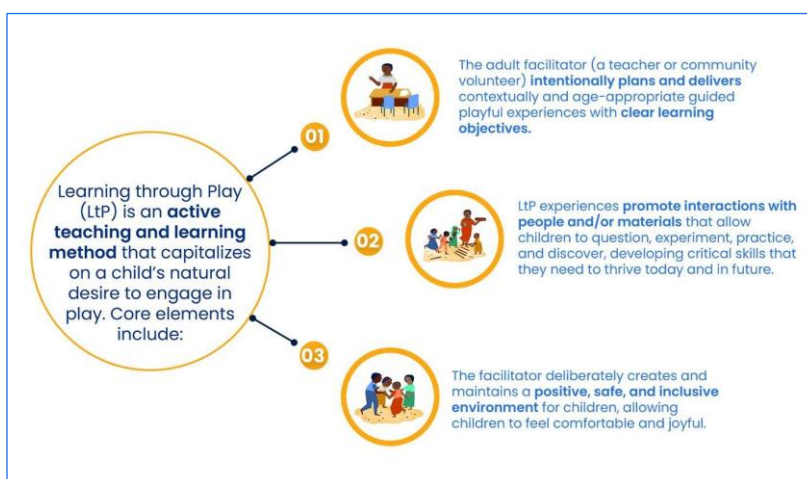
⁴ Altinyelken, H. K. (2010). Pedagogical renewal in sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Uganda. *Comparative Education*, 46(2), 151–171.

⁵ Positive Deviance is an assets-based approach to social science research by identifying existing solutions from communities through the assertion that some actors are exhibiting positive and desired behaviors and characteristics amidst challenging circumstances.

lesson. If it is mathematics, maybe that does not require the child to play.” Some educators described LTP primarily as energizers and warm-ups rather than as a mode of content delivery while few understood LTP as a pedagogical approach that could be embedded in their teaching practice. For example, one ECCE teacher shared: “In that process children are learning. It looks like a kind of play but it is a way of learning.” Drawing on Zosh et al.’s (2018)⁶ conceptualization of play as a spectrum, few participants across all stakeholder groups perceived LTP as playful instruction while most understood play as free play.



Education stakeholders, however, recognized the value of play – mainly playful instruction – for children’s holistic skills development and well-being, (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative skills). While free play, games, and guided play are important for children’s holistic development, PlayMatters sought to define LTP within the area of playful instruction. Thus, PlayMatters defined LTP as an active teaching and learning method, building on existing evidence synthesized with the findings from this study.



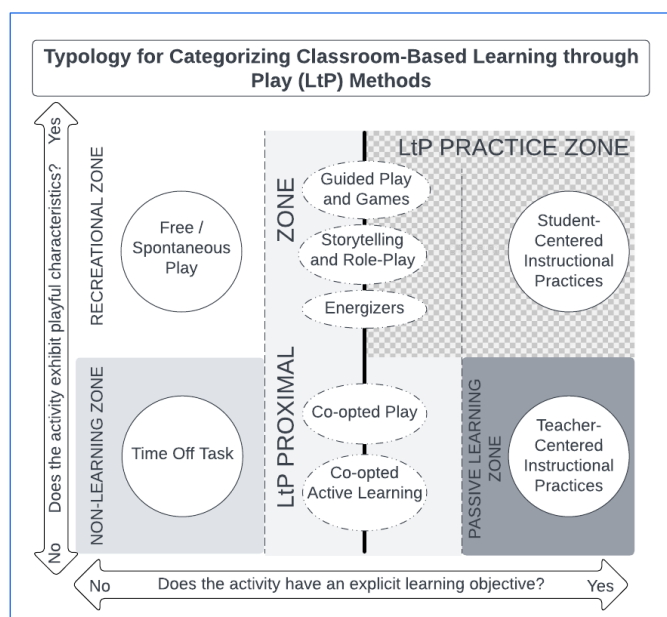
LTP Classroom Practices Vary in Application and Quality

Through classroom observations, LTP practices across the spectrum of play were observed. Thematic analysis of these practices led to the development of a typology of LTP practices contextualized to East Africa by synthesizing findings from Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda and extant evidence to identify spectrums and zones contextualized. These zones are reflective of Zosh et al.’s (2018) spectrum of play and PlayMatters’ LTP definition. Activities are fluid and shift between zones depending on teachers’ capacity to integrate playful characteristics and an explicit learning objective. Additionally, teachers should be praised and supported to move into

⁶ Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2018). Accessing the inaccessible: Redefining play as a spectrum. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 1124.

the LtP Practice Zone by selecting the appropriate teaching methods from their pedagogical toolbox for achieving their instructional goals. This typology can be applied as a tool in various contexts to ensure a consistent understanding of LtP practices by diverse stakeholders.

In the LTP Practice Zone, which is characterized by student-centered, active, playful instruction, we observed a variety of activities. Teachers effectively employed active learning methods like pair-work and group-work. They also utilized the school environment and spaces beyond the classroom. For example, by taking children outside to look at different types of soil for a lesson on soil erosion or by going to the water taps when discussing personal hygiene. In addition to the environment, the use of physical bodies and other teaching and learning materials were used to make practical connections to lessons. In Learning Area Three: Health Habits, for example, one



In the LtP Proximal Zone, characterized by attempts at student-centered instructional practices but lacking either explicit learning objectives or playful characteristics, we observed standing up and sitting down or songs and chants to re-engage distracted pupils. While this is not LtP as we have defined it, these may be valuable classroom management techniques, especially if the connection to a learning objective is strengthened. We also observed teachers using bottle caps to demonstrate a math problem in front of the classroom, without giving children the opportunity to use the bottle caps to do their own numeracy problems. This is a positive step towards LtP but missing the opportunity for the children themselves to have a hands-on learning experience. Finally, we often saw teachers seating children in small groups around tables, but continuing to teach through whole-class didactic methods. This is a positive step towards LtP but the teacher does not fully capitalize on the seating arrangement to meaningfully engage the children in group work.

In the Passive Learning Zone teachers deliver primarily lecture-based and choral response lessons. In some cases, teacher-centered methods may be important for delivering critical curriculum content, such as key definitions, but in a classroom promoting LtP, it should not be the predominant mode of instruction. Examples observed included lecture, pupils copying notes from the blackboard, whole class call and response, and pupils repeating the teacher.

Systems Can Support or Challenge the Integration of LtP in Schools

Teachers' creativity, motivation, and capacity was a critical component of LtP implementation in case study schools. Teachers generally held positive views of LtP as a teaching method and its perceived benefits, motivating them to implement LtP, as described by one primary teacher: "as a teacher first of all using this play as a method of learning makes me to be innovative...Secondly, it reduces my level of talking so, I talk less, give simple instructions, demonstrate and allow the pupils to participate." Teachers built on this creativity to develop teaching and learning materials out of locally-available materials like manila folders, Rwenzori Mineral water bottles, and banana fibres to use in their lessons, though this requires time and effort. Fostering teachers' creativity and capacity to implement LtP is critical for the successful integration of LtP in schools.

Despite teachers' interests and beliefs in LtP, structural barriers limited their ability to fully integrate LtP into their teaching practice. Large and overcrowded classes limited movements, stretched resources, and placed additional pressure on teachers to manage the volume of children in a class. While some teachers implemented strategies to manage such classes, teachers reported concerns over their successful management of their lessons. Additionally, examination-oriented perspectives persist from parents and children themselves, placing pressure on teachers to feel like they must deliver lessons using traditional rote methods to pass Primary Leaving Examinations. While LtP is a valuable method for curriculum delivery, acquisition, and retention, there may still be some systemic barriers, such as the focus on examinations, as well as perceptions that play is not appropriate for a classroom, that increases resistance towards 'play' and its role in teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Validate and disseminate National LtP Guidelines that describes learning through play along a spectrum, including situating playful instruction as a modality of delivering curriculum in student-centered and actively engaging ways.

02

Provide guidance and support on the delivery of continuous professional development on LtP at College and Cluster Coordination levels to support pre-service and in-service teacher training.

03

Support the creation and functionality of school-based teacher continuous professional development committees to support teachers' uptake of LtP.

04

Engage and mobilize stakeholders across the school community (including pupils, educators, parents, and community members) to understand and value LtP in classroom activities across the education ladder.

CONCLUSION

LtP is a promising pedagogical approach to improve the quality of education in Uganda. Adopting the definition of LtP as playful instruction and an active teaching and learning method across education actors can ensure coherent and collaborative approaches toward supporting playful instruction in classrooms. Finally, supporting teachers to strategically plan and implement LtP in their classrooms via continuous professional development is an important step towards bringing LtP to more classrooms and pupils in Uganda.



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