

PlayMatters

Technical Insights

Learning through
Play in Practice

www.playmatters.org

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Five technical insights from six years of implementation

In East Africa and beyond, education systems are increasingly recognizing that improving children's learning requires more than expanding access to school. It requires improving the quality of teaching and learning. Yet many teachers, particularly in crisis-affected settings, continue to rely on traditional teacher-centered approaches that limit learner participation and engagement.

In contexts characterized by large class sizes, limited teaching and learning materials, and inadequate school infrastructure, particularly in refugee settings, there is a growing need for teaching approaches that actively engage children and support both their learning and wellbeing.

Over the past five years, the PlayMatters project has worked alongside Ministries of Education, teachers, schools and communities in refugee and host community settings in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania to strengthen children's learning and wellbeing through "Learning through Play" as a teaching method. Reaching nearly one million children and generating a robust body of implementation and research evidence, the program has contributed important lessons on what Learning through Play is, what effective classroom practice looks like, how teachers can be supported to adopt it, the difference it can make for children's learning and development, and how it can be sustained and scaled within education systems.

Grounded in evidence, this paper synthesizes five key technical insights emerging from the program to inform governments, teachers, educators, implementing agencies and education practitioners seeking to strengthen teaching and learning through evidence-informed Learning through Play approaches.



Insight 1: Defining learning through play for PlayMatters

One of the earliest lessons from PlayMatters was that “Learning through Play” was understood in different ways. A Behavioral Mapping activity led by its consortium partner, the Behavioral Insights Team examined the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that influenced how teachers, parents, communities and other education system actors understood Learning through Play.

In the three project countries, teachers, education officials and communities commonly associated play with recreation, leisure or activities that take place outside formal learning. In many cases, play was viewed as a reward after learning had taken place, a distraction from academic work, or an activity suited only for younger children. While many educators recognized that play was important for children's development, its role as an intentional teaching and learning approach was not well understood.

Following this, the PlayMatters research team carried out a formative research study examining existing best practices in East African classrooms with a focus on active, child-centered learning. This led to the development of an LtP typology and a spectrum of LtP practices that reinforced the need for a clear, shared and evidence-informed definition that could guide teacher professional development, program implementation and systems integration across countries.

Based on these insights, PlayMatters defines Learning through play as:

An active teaching and learning method in which children learn through guided, hands-on, meaningful, play-based interactions in safe and inclusive environments.

Rather than viewing play as separate from learning, this definition positions play as a vehicle for achieving meaningful learning outcomes. It emphasizes that Learning through Play is an intentional pedagogical approach in which teachers actively design and facilitate engaging learning experiences linked to clear learning objectives. The definition is built around three defining characteristics:

1. Intentional planning around learning

Learning through Play begins with purposeful planning. Teachers intentionally design age-appropriate learning experiences with clear curriculum objectives, ensuring that play supports and, not replaces learning.

2. Active engagement with people and materials

Children learn by exploring, questioning, collaborating, experimenting and interacting with people, ideas and materials. Learning is active, participatory and learner-centered.

3. Safe, inclusive and joyful learning environments

Children learn best when they feel physically and emotionally safe. Learning through Play promotes positive relationships, learner participation and inclusive classroom environments where every child can actively engage and succeed.

Together, these three characteristics provide a practical framework for understanding what quality Learning through Play looks like in education contexts.

From definition to implementation

Defining Learning through Play was only the first step.

Building on the findings from the Behavioral Mapping process, PlayMatters worked closely with Ministries of Education, teacher training institutions and other education system actors across Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania to translate the definition into practical guidance for teachers and education practitioners.

This collaborative content development process informed the design of the PlayMatters Core Concepts Framework and the PlayMatters Core Package which includes teacher training packages, facilitator guides, teacher resource books, classroom support materials, school leadership training materials, school community engagement guides, and minimum quality standards for classrooms, among others as contained in the PlayMatters [Learning through Play Library](#).

Through iterative engagement with curriculum experts, ministry officials, teacher educators and consortium partners, the program ensured that Learning through Play was aligned with national education priorities while remaining grounded in evidence and classroom practice.

By developing a shared language and practical tools for implementation, PlayMatters helped move Learning through Play beyond a broad concept to a clearly defined, evidence-informed teaching approach that could be consistently understood, taught and applied across diverse education contexts.



Technical Insight 2: What does a Learning through Play teacher look like?

While defining Learning through Play established a common understanding of the approach, another important question emerged:

What does effective Learning through Play actually look like in practice?

To answer this, PlayMatters conducted a formative research study to identify teachers who were consistently demonstrating high-quality Learning through Play despite working in similar contexts and facing many of the same challenges as their peers. Rather than focusing on barriers, the study examined what successful teachers were doing differently and the classroom practices that contributed to effective Learning through Play.

The study found that effective Learning through Play is shaped less by individual activities and more by intentional teacher practice. Teachers who consistently created high-quality Learning through Play experiences shared several common characteristics.

Effective Learning through Play teachers:

-  Actively engage learners throughout lessons in classrooms that were sometimes noisy and messy, but also full of activity
-  Facilitated active learning rather than simply delivering information to learners;
-  Used open-ended questioning and connected topics to children's lived experiences to stimulate thinking and discussion;
-  Encourage collaboration and peer learning during class;
-  Found creative ways to adapt teaching to learners' needs and abilities, even in overcrowded classrooms;
-  Created safe, inclusive and joyful learning environments where every child felt safe and could actively participate in the learning process.

The study produced a typology of LtP practice demonstrating that teachers can gradually strengthen their practice over time, moving from passive learning to the LtP proximal zone, to the LtP practice zone. This progression informed coaching techniques for teachers. It supported teachers in moving towards improved practice and celebrating incremental improvements in classroom practice. Through coaching, mentoring and continuous professional development, teachers are supported to progressively strengthen the behaviors and competencies associated with high quality Learning through Play.



Technical Insight 3: Supporting Teachers to adopt Learning through Play using a whole-school approach

One of the key lessons from PlayMatters is that teacher training alone is not enough to transform classroom practice. While foundational training equips teachers with knowledge and skills, sustained improvements in Learning through Play require continuous support within the broader school and education system.

Drawing on implementation research and program learning, PlayMatters found that teachers were most successful in adopting and sustaining Learning through Play when they were supported through a whole-school approach. This approach recognizes that improving classroom practice requires coordinated support at multiple levels, including teachers, school leaders, communities and education systems.



At the centre of this approach is Teacher Continuous Professional Development. Rather than relying on one-off workshops, PlayMatters combined initial teacher training with ongoing coaching, mentoring, supportive supervision, peer learning and classroom observation as well as communities of practice. PlayMatters also utilized multimedia, using Learning through Play Instructional videos to help teachers reinforce teaching practice. These continuous opportunities for reflection and feedback enabled teachers to gradually build confidence, refine their practice and integrate Learning through Play into their everyday teaching.

The program also recognized the important role of school leadership. Head teachers and school leaders were supported to create enabling school environments that encouraged teacher collaboration, continuous improvement and the use of Learning through Play. Beyond the school, parents, caregivers and communities were engaged to reinforce children's learning and strengthen local ownership of the approach.

These complementary interventions constitute a culture of LtP within a school and ultimately formed the PlayMatters Core Package, which combines teacher professional development, school leadership, teaching and learning materials, enabling learning environments and community engagement into a coherent implementation model. Rather than introducing isolated activities, the Core Package creates the conditions that enable Learning through Play to become embedded within everyday classroom practice and education systems.



Technical Insights 4: Learning through Play improves learning, wellbeing and teaching Quality

As PlayMatters expanded across Uganda and Ethiopia, an important question emerged: Does Learning through Play improve teaching practices and holistic learning outcomes for children?

To answer this, **PlayMatters carried out two Randomized Controlled Trials** in Ethiopia and Uganda to evaluate the program's impact. Together, these studies provide one of the strongest bodies of evidence on Learning through Play in humanitarian and development contexts.

The findings demonstrate that Learning through Play is an effective and evidence-informed pedagogy that strengthens children's holistic learning while improving classroom practice.

Importantly, the evidence also showed that these improvements can be achieved through a cost-effective model.

In Ethiopia, PlayMatters demonstrated measurable improvements in:

- Children's learning outcomes, including literacy and numeracy.
- Children's social-emotional learning, creativity, and psychosocial wellbeing, helping learners build the skills needed to thrive both in and beyond the classroom.
- Teacher practices, including more active, inclusive and learner-centered teaching.
- Teacher wellbeing and confidence, contributing to more positive classroom environments and stronger learner engagement.

Compared to similar education interventions implemented in crisis-affected settings, PlayMatters achieved substantially greater improvements in social-emotional learning and numeracy, while delivering comparable literacy gains at approximately 1/6 of the average cost per child.



Technical Insights 5: Even in crisis contexts, Learning through Play can be integrated into education systems for long term scale and sustainability



PlayMatters commissioned multiple research studies to examine key questions around scale and sustainability, which laid the foundation for some of the project's most important learnings.

Because the project operates within the humanitarian-development nexus, it is critical not to operate as a traditional humanitarian actor, but instead to partner with education system actors, building capacity and co-ownership while also providing some level of direct services as required by the humanitarian context.

Balancing longer-term, system-level objectives and immediate foundational educational and non-educational needs builds coherence in the system that leads to long-term change, even when this appears difficult.

Additionally, when it comes to scale, building relationships with system actors such as the Ministry of Education and national teacher training colleges requires significant collaboration and coordination. It also requires developing of handover plans at an early stage of the project, and evidence of impact.

Thanks to the LEGO Foundation's long-term investment and flexible model of support, PlayMatters was able to set the groundwork for long-term scale in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania with six and a half years of sustained programming.



Evidence snapshot

PlayMatters at a Glance (January 2020-March 2026)	
Children reached	984,108
Schools reached	934
Greater impact on children's social-emotional learning	2×
Greater impact on numeracy	1.5×
Cost compared with similar education interventions	~1/6

Compared with similar education interventions in conflict-affected settings, PlayMatters achieved two times the impact on children's social-emotional learning and 1.5x the impact on numeracy, at approximately one-sixth of the average cost.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The PlayMatters evidence demonstrates that Learning through Play is not simply an engaging classroom strategy. It is an effective and scalable approach for improving education quality in both humanitarian and development contexts.

At a time when humanitarian education consistently receives about 4% in global funding, these findings provide compelling evidence that investing in teacher professional development and Learning through Play can generate meaningful improvements in children's learning and wellbeing while delivering strong value for money.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Learning through Play is an evidence-informed, effective and cost-effective approach that improves children's learning, wellbeing and teacher practice, making it a strong investment for education systems seeking to improve quality at scale.



Implications

The PlayMatters experience demonstrates that successfully implementing Learning through Play requires more than introducing new classroom activities. It requires a shared understanding of Learning through Play, and sustained investment in teacher professional development and systems that enable teachers to continuously strengthen their practice. The following technical lessons may help inform governments, implementing agencies, teacher educators and development partners seeking to integrate Learning through Play within education programs and systems.

1. Establish a shared understanding of Learning through Play

A clear and evidence-informed definition provides teachers, teacher educators and education systems with a common language for implementation. Shared understanding is the foundation for consistent teacher training, curriculum integration and classroom practice.



2. Focus on strengthening teacher practice

Learning through Play is not defined by individual activities or games, but by how teachers facilitate learning. Professional development should prioritize building teachers' pedagogical knowledge, facilitation skills and confidence to create active, meaningful and inclusive learning experiences.

3. Invest in continuous teacher professional development

Sustained improvements in classroom practice require more than one-off workshops. Ongoing coaching, mentoring, supportive supervision and peer learning enable teachers to continuously reflect on and strengthen their practice over time.

4. Adopt a whole-school approach

Teachers are more likely to sustain Learning through Play when they are supported by school leaders, quality teaching and learning materials, safe and inclusive learning environments, and engaged parents and communities. Strengthening these complementary components creates the conditions for lasting change.

5. Scale through education systems

Long-term impact depends on embedding Learning through Play within national teacher professional development systems, curriculum implementation, policy and government-led education reform. Working in partnership with Ministries of Education and other system actors is essential for sustainable scale.

Looking ahead

The PlayMatters experience demonstrates that Learning through Play is a practical and evidence-informed approach to improving teaching quality and, children's learning and wellbeing, that can be embedded within existing education systems and curriculum.

As governments and partners continue to address learning challenges in both humanitarian and development contexts, these lessons provide a foundation for scaling Learning through Play in ways that are sustainable, locally owned and grounded in evidence.

As PlayMatters enters phase 2 for the next four years from July 2026, these lessons will continue to inform efforts to scale and institutionalize Learning through Play. Building on the success of the initial phase, the next phase of the project is expanding to South Sudan while deepening systems integration and scaling Learning through Play in Uganda and Ethiopia. Together, these efforts will enable Learning through Play to reach more teachers, classrooms and children in the region.



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