

Learning through Play in Emergency Response Promising Practices and Policy Implications



This brief summarizes the findings from the full report of the same title.

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Implemented in Partnership with



The LEGO Foundation



Background

Armed conflict in northern Ethiopia and other regions that proliferated in 2020 impacted millions of people, including children. In the Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Tigray regions, 2.7 million children have had their physical, psychosocial, and educational well-being affected by schools that were destroyed or used as shelters for the internally displaced.² Additionally, most teachers were displaced from their permanent residences due to the conflict, and many had to restart their lives from nothing.

To minimize the conflict's impact on children's educational and life outcomes, the LEGO Foundation granted PlayMatters the flexibility to reallocate \$15M from the larger PlayMatters grant to design and implement a 1-year multi-sectoral Education in Emergencies (EiE) intervention providing an integrated and holistic response to ensure that crisis-affected children have their basic health, safety, and educational needs met in crisis-affected locations. The ERM (Sept. 2022–Sept. 2023) was implemented by the IRC, Plan International, and 10 other implementing partners (IPs) in 201 integrated pre- and primary schools, reaching 177,409 children. The ERM included an educational quality component, training teachers on Learning through Play (LtP) methods using modified PlayMatters training materials.

PlayMatters defines LtP as an active teaching and learning method in which children learn through guided, hands-on, meaningful, play-based interactions in safe and inclusive environments. To respond to the context in Ethiopia's ERM regions, PlayMatters adapted existing PlayMatters Ethiopia's LtP teacher training content to integrate conflict-sensitive approaches, EiE (Education in Emergencies) principles, and contextual relevance. Core components of the ERM's LtP intervention included face-to-face training delivered by trainers of teachers (which included a focus on psychosocial well-being and using and creating locally-available materials), provision of teaching and learning materials, provision of recreational play materials, provision of a contextualized PlayMatters@Home packet to be used as a reference point of LtP activities, and some parental training and awareness creation sessions

As the first intervention that integrates LtP methods into emergency response, this research aimed to assess the relevance of LtP methods in emergency contexts and to identify promising classroom practices of LtP.

² International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2022, April). DTM Ethiopia — national displacement report II (December 2021 — February 2022). IOM, Ethiopia.

Research Questions & Procedure

The present study investigates promising practices of LtP methodologies in such emergency contexts. It also seeks to fill evidence gaps by addressing the research question *“What are promising practices of Learning through Play (LtP) participatory teaching methods in crisis-affected settings in Ethiopia?”*.

Data were collected in May 2023, approximately 3 months after LtP training, in conjunction with routine monitoring and support visits conducted by PlayMatters staff. At each site, we spent 2 days collecting data from 6–8

participant teachers, reaching a total of 37 teachers. With each teacher, we observed a full lesson utilizing a semi-structured classroom observation tool followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview reflecting on their LtP practices.

A key limitation of this study is that it was an internal study conducted by PlayMatters staff, which may have created positivity bias. However, the researchers emphasized the voluntary and explorative nature of the study to all participants.

Findings

Key Finding 1:
Most teachers tried to integrate some aspects of LtP into the lesson plans and lesson delivery.

Integrating LtP into the lesson plan and the execution of the lesson plan are critical to the quality implementation of LtP. The findings show that most teachers tried to integrate some aspects of LtP into their lesson plans but there are remaining gaps in teachers’ ability or motivation to fully integrate quality LtP activities into lesson plans.

Out of the 37 teachers, 17 integrated LtP well, 17 somewhat integrated LtP, and

only 3 did not integrate LtP into their lesson plans.

However, we observed some gaps in that the LtP activities integrated into lesson plans do not fully account for differentiated instruction to include all learners for deeper learning. This may be due to large class sizes and teachers being unable to assess the levels of all students.



All subjects are suitable for the LtP methodology, but there are some topics or content that are a bit challenging to teach through play. However, it doesn’t mean they are impossible to teach. We need to put in extra effort.

Teacher B5,
Ethiopia



Key Finding 2:
Almost every classroom demonstrated the characteristics of a positive and safe learning environment.

A key element of LtP and its implementation is the physical and psychosocial environment of the classroom. A core characteristic of LtP and EiE general principles is a positive and safe learning environment as reflected in the LtP practices included in the content. Observations concluded that a positive and safe learning environment was identified in almost every classroom.

Some of the criteria include:

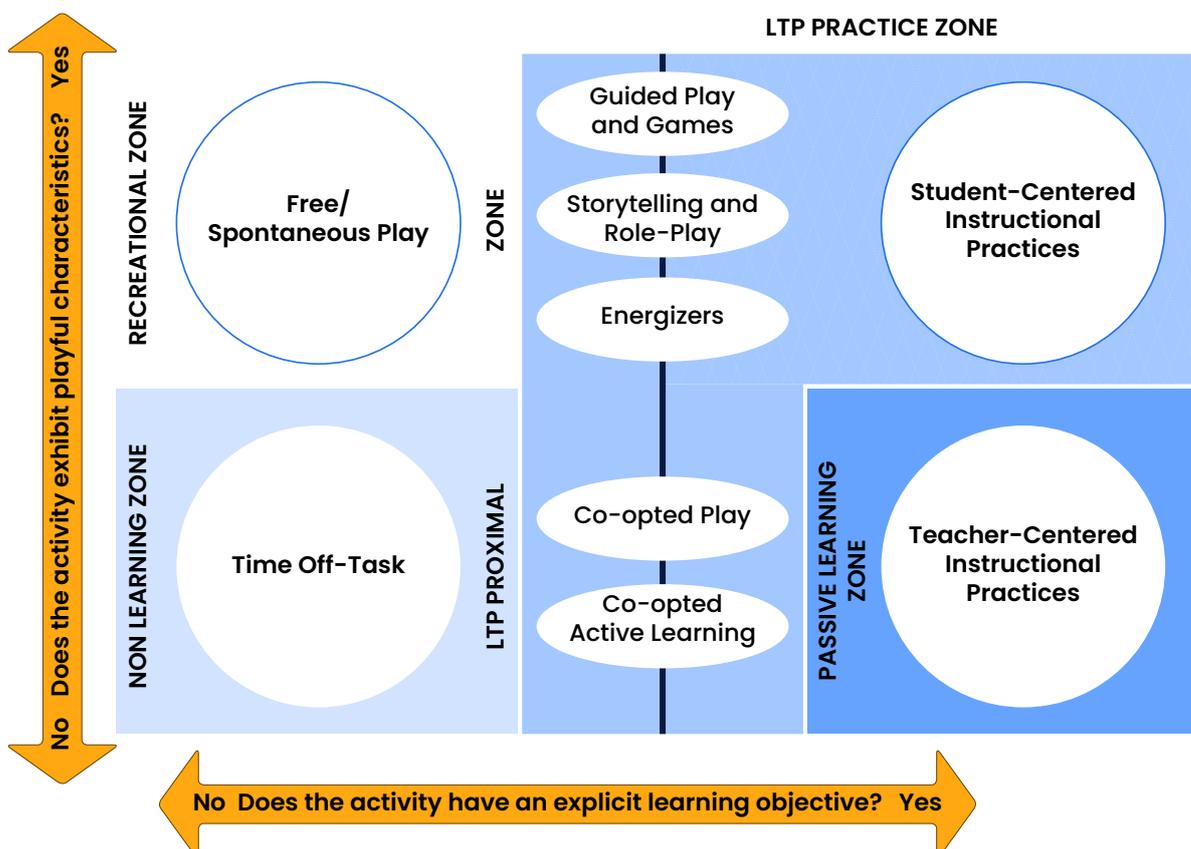
- Rapport and engagement between teacher and students.
- Inclusion and/or attempts at engagement of all children, with particular recognition of girls' participation.
- General attentiveness and engagement of students in lesson activities.
- Child-friendliness and age-appropriateness of classroom furniture and aesthetic of the classroom.

Key Finding 3:
Many teachers implemented LtP activities in their classrooms.

The observations focused on three different LtP Zones in classrooms (see figure below created from PlayMatters formative research). The LtP Practice Zone describes the active utilization of playful activities connected to the learning material.

The LtP Proximal Zone means activities that show promise of LtP yet lack a key component (either an explicit learning objective or exhibition of playful characteristics). The Passive Learning Zone where teachers employed teacher-centered instructional methods, primarily through rote lecture.

Typology for Categorizing Classroom-Based Learning through Play (LtP) Methods



LtP Practice Zone

Student - Centered Instructional Practice	Poster of body for hygiene lessons, replicated structure for a cultural heritage lesson, stones or dried fruit seeds for counters in a mathematics lesson. Pair work/Group work.
Energizers & Songs	Introduction to the lesson, also to reinforce topics during the lesson or reiterate the main concepts at the end of the lesson.
Storytelling and Role-Play	Integrate lesson objectives like ethics, conflict-resolution, mathematics, and science into existing cultural stories or newly-created stories.
Guided Play & Games	Used as content delivery or as an assessment strategy like using local games for reinforcing counting and simple calculations.

LtP Proximal Zone

Guided Play & Games	Counting coins to discuss Ethiopian currency in mathematics lesson, and winner was who had collected the largest amount. Connection between game and lesson objective unclear.
Energizers & Songs	Songs used as an introduction warm-up for children to focus in class but lacked deep connection to lesson objective.
Co-opted Play &	Use of visual aids that were not relevant to the lesson objective or did not have enough materials for all learners to meaningfully engage.
Co-opted Active Learning	Few students participating in LtP activity at the small space in the front of the class but unable to have all learners participate due to overcrowded classes.

Key Finding 4: LtP supports with student engagement, student-teacher interaction, improved attendance, and learning.

Overall, there was a shift in perceptions and practices of LtP methods. Teachers reported that their lesson planning skills have improved as they incorporated LtP methodologies and well as valued a new teaching method. However, it should be noted that some teachers viewed LtP as a complementary approach to teaching and learning to be balanced alongside traditional, rote methods.

There were four other main benefits of LtP identified by participants.

Firstly, teachers described the increased student engagement in LtP classroom activities.

Secondly, teachers described positive teacher-student interactions and relationships in the classroom.

Thirdly, teachers reported that LtP increased the joy, relaxation, and stress relief for both students and teachers.

Fourthly, some teachers also reported reduced dropout and absenteeism from school.



Key Finding 5:
Teachers faced structural barriers to implement LtP despite multi-sectoral foundational support.

Barriers for implementation still exist, mainly structural barriers. With continued instability, internal movement, and service delivery in ERM schools, enrollment has increased in schools, placing additional strains on the existing infrastructure and class allocations.

Therefore, the types of LtP activities implemented were reduced and limited as well as limiting the amount of material available for children. Other existing barriers include parental and community perceptions of LtP, reiterating the fact that simple parental training and awareness creation sessions

may not be sufficient to fully address long-standing parental perceptions of the purpose of play and schooling. Another barrier mediating effectiveness was the necessity for additional teacher training to ensure sustainability and deeper integration of LtP methods.

Further, in conflict-affected contexts, holistic EiE responses are needed to support quality education delivery. Multi-sectoral approaches that support children's physical development (Health and Nutrition, WASH, and Child Protection) and psychosocial development and well-being (through mainstreaming gender, inclusion, and psychosocial support) are critical to supporting LtP and quality education delivery).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, following actions are recommended to ensure the continuity and prosperity of LtP practices.

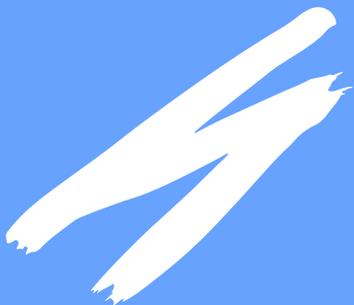
- 1.** Framing LtP as a core component of education quality in EiE response within project design, strategy, and quality standard documents can strengthen learning and well-being in emergency contexts.
- 2.** Where possible, LtP should be integrated into teacher training and development programs in EiE response, in connection with long-term strategic planning to transition into mainstream education systems.
- 3.** Always aim to allocate sufficient resources to minimize structural barriers to LtP implementation in emergency settings, while maintaining a strong focus on teacher continuous professional development for classroom-based LtP practice. Create and uphold standards for basic support to ensure that schools are safe and inclusive.
- 4.** Conduct further research on the longitudinal impacts of LtP on children's development and life outcomes in order to build a stronger evidence base and standardize measurement of the benefits of LtP methods.





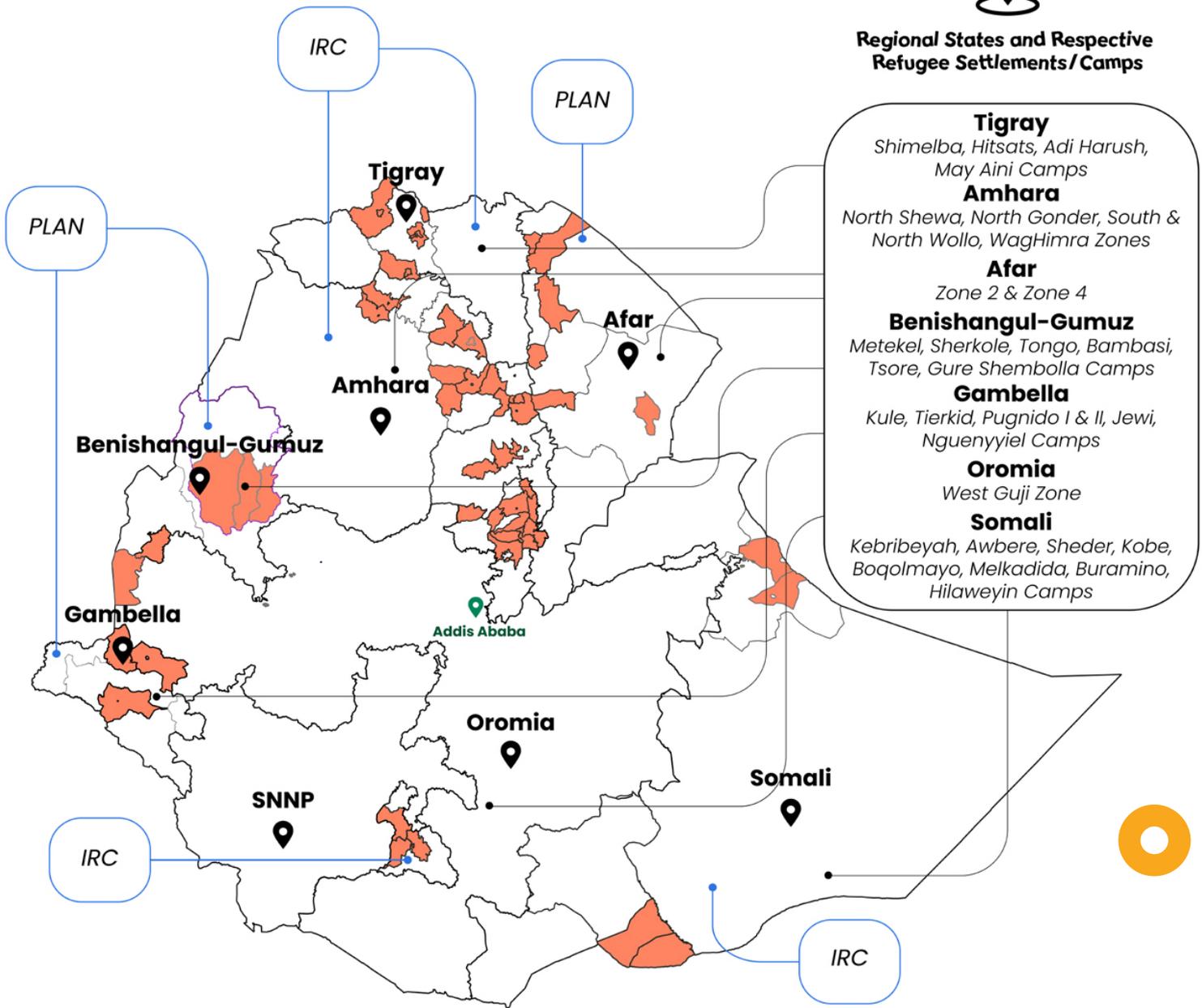
Zenebech Yesuf, a Grade II teacher interacts with learners during a mathematics lesson.

Derk Weyra Primary School,
PlayMatters ERM, Dessie, Kombolcha,
Ethiopia





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