

Advancing Competency-Based Curriculum through Learning through Play: Policy Lessons from Research in Tanzania

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INTRODUCTION

Active and student-centered learning has been included in Tanzania's education curriculum particularly for pre-primary and primary education.¹ More specifically, the pre-primary curriculum emphasizes the use of play as the best method of teaching and learning.² Like other countries in the region, the recent shift from content to a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2022 highlighted the importance of teachers and their continuous professional development to utilize learning through play (LtP) as a pedagogical approach for ensuring the holistic development of children to develop 21st Century Skills like creativity and collaboration, amongst others. The Education Sector Development Plan 2025/26 - 2029/30 further emphasizes the importance of improving teacher training programs to the revised education policy for a qualified teacher workforce that can deliver the CBC.³

To understand the state of LtP integration in pre-primary and primary schools, PlayMatters collaborated with a team of researchers from the University of Dar es Salaam College of Education (DUCE) to conduct a formative study answering the question: "What are existing perspectives, practices, barriers, and enablers for

¹ Vavrus, F. (2009). The cultural politics of constructivist pedagogies: Teacher education reform in the United Republic of Tanzania. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29(3), 303-311.

² Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2016).

³ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2025). Education Sector Development Plan 2025/26 - 2029/30. United Republic of Tanzania.

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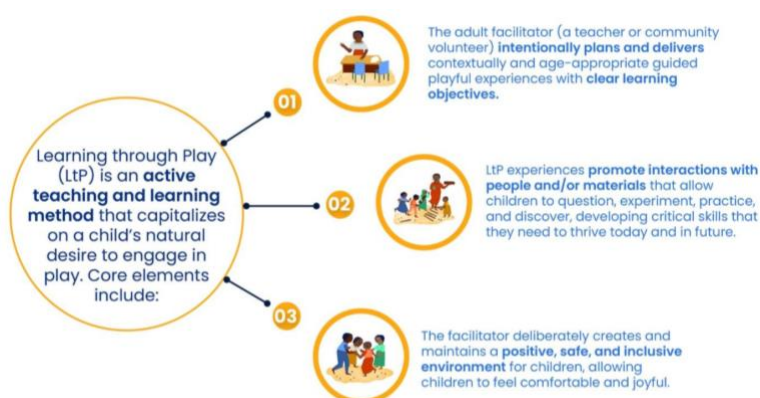
LtP in refugee and host country context pre-primary and primary schools?”. A positive deviance approach⁴ was used to select four ‘bright spot’ case study schools in Dar es Salaam, Dodoma, Mara, and Morogoro. In each case study school, rapid ethnographic methods were used to elicit participants’ reflections coupled with researchers’ observations to triangulate findings.

From these findings, PlayMatters developed a Core Package to be delivered over one academic year to support the integration of LtP into schools. PlayMatters is an education intervention (2020 – 2026) implemented by the International Rescue Committee and Plan International in partnership with the LEGO Foundation to strengthen education systems to integrate LtP into pre-primary and primary education.

FINDINGS

Multiple Perspectives of Play Requires a Clear Definition of LtP

The study revealed that teachers, parents, and children each held diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings of LtP. While most educators associated play with free time or extracurricular activities, children viewed it as a joyful, social, and meaningful experience that should be integrated into learning. Parents, on the other hand, often saw play as a distraction from academic success, expressing concerns about its educational value. For example, some teachers described LtP narrowly, equating it with sports or recess, while others emphasized games or storytelling as tools to reinforce literacy and numeracy. Children consistently articulated that play helped them understand lessons better, collaborate with peers, and feel excited about school. Parents, although supportive of joyful learning, often prioritized discipline and exam success, leading to skepticism about playful pedagogy. Some teachers, however, saw value in play as a teaching methodology, as stated by one teacher, *“Play facilitates the process of teaching. Teaching becomes easier when I use play. Personally, I don’t struggle a lot to teach children when I have my playful activities well arranged from the start.”*



Given these varying perspectives, PlayMatters synthesized global evidence with findings from this study to define LtP as an active teaching and learning method. This definition helped reframe LtP not as a separate or optional activity, but as a core teaching method aligned with the CBC. It also served as a foundation for discussions on how LtP could be integrated into classroom practice, supported by teacher training, and valued by the community.

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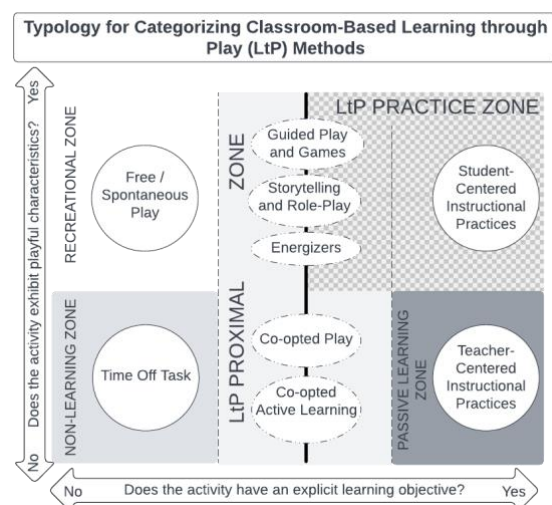
PlayMatters developed a typology to map classroom practices across spectrums and zones contextualized to East Africa from classroom observations.⁵ This typology builds on extant literature of play as a spectrum and active learning literature to identify practices and zones for classroom-based LtP. These zones are not fixed and practices can shift across zones depending on the presence of playful characteristics and explicit

⁴ 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.

⁵ Asfaw, A., Diazgranados, S., Akullu Ezati, B., Kwok, J., Raphael, C., Smiley, A., & Ssenkusu, P. (2025). Understanding perspectives and practices of “Learning Through Play” in East African refugee and host country schools. *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, (10): 14–41.

learning objectives. Notably, supporting teachers to make shifts in their practice towards the LtP Practice Zone is critical.

In the LtP Practice Zone, characterized by student-centered, active, playful instruction, teachers used creative and participatory methods such as songs, storytelling, drawing, roleplay, and manipulatives to engage children. These approaches were often improvised using locally available materials—such as bottle caps, mud, and fabric scraps—to create learning tools that support literacy and numeracy. Some teachers integrated play into formal lesson planning, with topics like “Dancing with Numbers” reflecting deliberate pedagogical alignment. Children were observed actively participating, especially during role play, which enhanced their communication and social skills. Group work and differentiated instruction were also evident in stronger classrooms, showing how LtP supports inclusion and learner-centered practices even in resource-limited settings.



In the LtP Proximal Zone, characterized by attempts at student-centered instructional practices but lacking either explicit learning objectives or playful characteristics, we observed some teachers use songs and games as energizers and ‘brain breaks’ rather than connected to the curricular content. In the Passive Learning Zone, in which teachers deliver primarily lecture-based and choral response lessons, we observed some whole-class call and response.

Multiple Perspectives of Play Requires a Clear Definition of LtP

Despite promising practices, LtP faces significant challenges. Overcrowded classrooms and limited space made it difficult to manage playful activities, while tight timetables left little room for games or creative engagement. Some teachers and parents held misconceptions that play is inappropriate during class time, believing it detracts from “serious learning.” Moreover, many teachers lacked training in how to implement or assess learning through play. Without adequate support or confidence, some teachers avoided LtP altogether. Even when professional development was available, it was often theoretical, lacking practical demonstrations or follow-up.

Several enabling factors contributed to effective LtP adoption. Supportive school leadership played a vital role—head teachers who encouraged innovation and allocated time for sharing games helped create a culture where LtP could thrive. Peer learning through TCPD clusters allowed teachers to observe, adapt, and adopt new methods from one another. Community involvement also proved instrumental. Parents donated reusable materials, and their positive feedback reinforced the value of playful learning. Exposure to mentorship and demonstration classrooms helped hesitant teachers gain confidence. In schools with strong collaboration, LtP was more systematically planned and sustained, showing that a collective and supported approach enhances implementation.

IN PRACTICE: SUPPORTING TEACHERS TO ENTER THE LTP PRACTICE ZONE

PlayMatters conducted a mixed-methods study to assess its implementation in six primary schools serving Congolese refugees in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp in the Kigoma region. This study found that a whole-

school approach, comprehensive TCPD through a combination of face-to-face training, peer learning, mentorship, light school rehabilitation, and teaching and learning materials provision supported teachers' uptake of LtP. Teachers significantly improved in positive classroom management strategies, reported significant increases in their self-efficacy by 0.24 percentage points and their occupational well-being by 0.29 percentage points. Teachers also reported significant decreases in stress related to insufficient recognition for good teaching, lack of time to spend with learners, and learners' impolite behavior. These findings suggest that LtP and comprehensive TCPD have the potential to not only improve teachers' classroom practices but also improve teachers' well-being, two critical factors in the successful implementation of the CBC.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

01

Adopt a national strategy across agencies (MoEST, TIE, ADEM, and PO-RALG) to institutionalize LtP as a core pedagogy aligned with CBC goals, supported by clear policy directives, comprehensive support to teachers, and implementation funding.

02

Streamline LtP into all TCPD opportunities, including via the TIE LMS and through school-based TCPD, as essential for helping teachers move into the LtP Practice Zone. Utilise evidence-based practices to design responsive TCPD models, ensuring they are practice-based, peer-led, and context-specific.

03

Establish a community of learning between schools to highlight positive LtP practices through LtP Champions and trained education officials. Teacher Resource Centers can serve as hubs for knowledge exchange and shared learning.

04

Recognize and praise good LtP practices being implemented by teachers. Embed structured LtP typologies and curriculum-linked play examples into teacher training, textbooks, and classroom guides to shift practice from unstructured to purposeful, learning-focused play.

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LtP has the potential to improve the quality of education delivery in Tanzania and strengthen the implementation of the CBC. Building on the positive practices of TCPD for LtP through the PlayMatters project, there is significant opportunity to improve the holistic learning and well-being of children nationwide.

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