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Formative Study of Learning Through Play (LtP) in Nursery Schools in Adjumani and Yumbe Districts (Uganda)
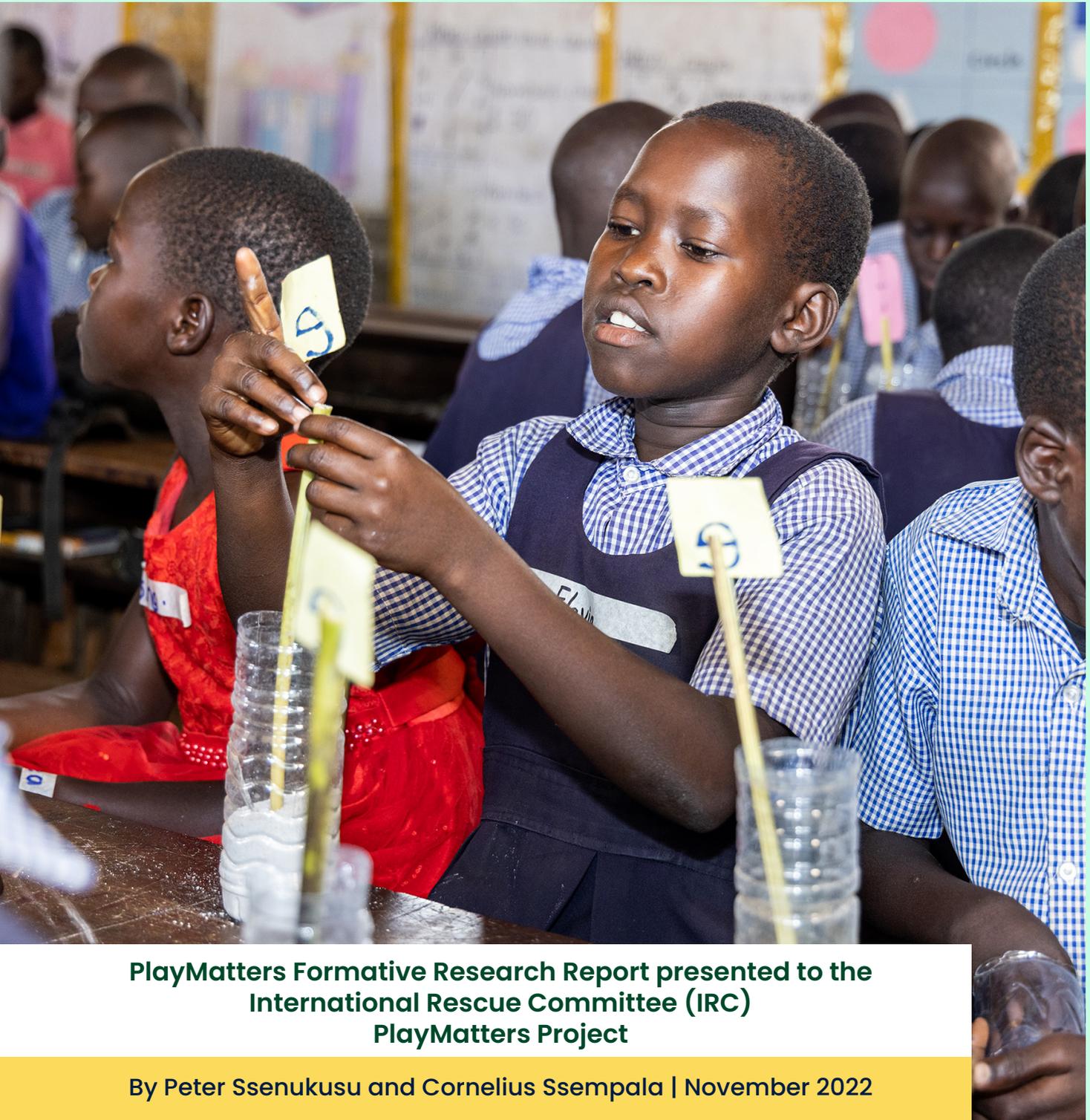
PlayMatters Formative Research Report presented to the International Rescue Committee (IRC) PlayMatters Project

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Executive Summary

This study used an ethnographic case study approach with ECD centres in Uganda using a positive deviance framework to establish,

1. The meaning and significance of Learning through Play (LtP).
2. Examples of LtP.
3. Barriers and opportunities for LtP to flourish.

The study was conducted in 2 selected ECD centres in Adjumani and Yumbe districts in West Nile province, Northern Uganda with 2 head teachers, 9 teachers, 20 students, and 17 parents.

In summary, the investigation disclosed the following:

1. Children perceived play as linked to their own wellbeing through physical exercise, pleasure and enjoyment as well as building self-confidence, self-motivation (active engagement), empathy, communication and friendship (building and maintaining social relations). Gender dichotomies are largely minimized at school.

2. Play was understood as an activity that could happen inside the classroom during lessons, but was most present outside class, during free play. However, LtP has been appreciated in terms of songs, rhymes, drawing, painting, recitation, demonstrations, music, dance and drama, reciting riddles, story-telling, imitation of animal sounds and movements as well as role playing. During free play (and at home) there is a tendency to segregate between types of games and duration for (or not for) girls and boys.

3. Some teachers and parents did not see play and learning as intertwined, but others did, suggesting that efforts should be put on continuous teacher professional development programs so that pre-primary teachers urgently receive training on LtP so as to measure up to new curricular and pedagogical demands in Uganda's ECCE Policy Document (2018). Parental engagement needs more emphasis, going beyond paying school fees and provision of scholastic materials.

4. Poor quality of infrastructure and limited availability of play materials since school proprietors lack adequate finances to put up the requisite structures and play areas to comfortably allow for 'free play' (which teachers acknowledged as authentic play) is a recurring concern.

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Section 1: Study Background

Introduction

Learning through Play and the Body

Learning through Play (LtP) is often misleadingly linked to emotional and bodily sense only, rather than the cognitive. There is the tendency to view play as lacking in seriousness and intellectual rigour. Whereas, a key characteristic of LtP is that it supports not only physical, social and emotional, but also cognitive development. LtP thus blurs traditional boundaries (dualisms) between the mental and bodily senses (Barsalou, 1999, 2008; Diskara & Post, 2015; Foucault, 1976; Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2019; Macedonia, 2019:5).

According to Alibali & Nathan (2012), **"We explain math basic operations (addition, subtraction, division and multiplication) to children by putting real world things together, taking them apart from each other, cutting them and so on. All these we so by means of our body".**

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Learning through Play: Pleasure, Meaning, Social Interaction and Active Engagement

According to developmental psychologists like Piaget and Vygotsky, children learn better by interaction, or better through play. Play is the means by which we integrate (through trial and error and taking risks) new information into our already existing mental schemas. This integration occurs when we are actively involved in our own learning. We construct our own knowledge schemas or structures (ways of perceiving, understanding and thinking about the world) through investigating, creating, discovering and interacting with the surrounding environment.

Further interactions with the natural and social environments, mental schemas progressively acquire higher, critical, problem-solving and abstract thinking skills. Vygotsky (1967, 62) was probably the first modern-day theorist to fully consider the meaning and value of play in children's lives, and to recognise how the learning of cultural beliefs and practices is possible only through socially mediated environments, and a 'more knowledgeable other'. Children actively construct *skills* and *knowledge* as well as *attitudes* during playful interactions, without just passively mirroring (or representing) the world around them (see Freire, 1970: 10). As active constructors of own meanings, they need accompaniment to handle more challenging tasks (Vygotsky, 1978; Weisberg, et al., 2013).

Active engagement has both psychological and social implications. Various scholars echo Professor Peter Gray's complaint that:

> **Children spend so much time in school, so much time on homework after school, so much time in adult-directed activities which are not fully play — play is activity that children develop themselves — that children take control of themselves and the children learn to be independent and solve their own problems. … As we deprive children more and more free play, we get more anxious, more depressed or less resilient children. (Gray, P., 2020, see also Trawick Swith, T.: 2014; Miller, E., & Almon, J.: 2009; Nicolopoulou; 2010; Pyle & Danniels 2016).**

Thus, LtP should involve children's initiative, decision-making and self-choice.

Other debates revolve around the challenges faced by teachers as they choose between teaching academic content through direct instruction or allowing children time to engage in child-led play (Chien et al., 2010; Pyle & Danniels, 2016). The polarities (either play or learning) are prevalent, but can however be very misleading. While children need to be trusted to be capable of taking on an active role and ownership in their learning experiences, nevertheless teachers are still needed to enable the learning of new concepts within a motivating and engaging, relaxed, fun-filled learning environment. Teachers (instead of *ascribed* roles) play the role of commentators, co-players, questioners, or demonstrators of new ways to interact with the materials available (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013).

Contextual Background

Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Uganda

In this section, we employ the terms 'nursery school', ECD centres, and pre-primary schools interchangeably to refer to the kind of education that happens before primary schooling. According to Ejuu (2012), nursery education and ECD in Uganda was brought by the British colonialists in the 1930s in order to prepare children for formal education. Nursery schools were private and established exclusively for private communities, for example, European and Indian children. Curriculum and pedagogies within these schools were foreign, with very little reference to the Ugandan situation. Later when indigenous Ugandans got interested in nursery schooling, they established their own schools to cater for local children in urban centres. Infant level teachers originally meant to teach in lower primary schools were trained and recruited to teach in nursery schools.

From 1972 to 1986, there were no major developments in the pre-school education domain because of civil wars. Direct government control of nursery education only started in 1993 when the government enacted

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a statute which conferred upon the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) the mandate for developing curriculum and supporting materials for all levels, including pre-school (Ejuu, 2012). After the 1980s wars, the 1990s saw a rise in advocacy for pre-primary education and increase in nursery schools in urban areas of Uganda. However, policy development on curricula and pedagogies remained minimal and was a reserve of NCDC. According to the Education Act 13 of 2008, "Pre-primary education is to be run by private agencies or persons to provide education to children aged from two years to five years and the financing of that type of education shall be the responsibility of parents and guardians" (p. 15). In 2012, NCDC produced a comprehensive curriculum in its Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development (3-6 years of age). According to Nyombi Tembo, this was "a major breakthrough for Early Childhood Development (ECD)" (MoES: 2012). In this framework, LtP has been sufficiently appreciated as a pedagogy that cuts across various subjects. LtP underwrites an entire gamut of participatory and practical hands-on activities, such as modelling, music, dance and dramatization of situations, holding hands, recitations of rhymes and poems, drawing and modelling, painting, demonstrations, reciting riddles and poems, listening to and telling stories, sharing with others, imitation of animal sounds and movements as well as role playing (pp. 12ff). Later, in 2018, government policy clearly dictated that "the main method of teaching in pre-primary institution is through Montessori play and that the curriculum of teachers training colleges is oriented to achieve this" (Nakabugo et al., 2019: p.6).

Currently, in Uganda, MOES does not provide any financial support to pre-primary schools. Rather, as Nakabugo et al. (2019) observe, government maintains oversight for:

> (a) Provision and distribution of policy guidelines for the establishment and management of pre-primary institutions. (b). Production and development of appropriate national curriculum and textbook in Ugandan languages. (c). Approval of relevant supplementary reading materials and teachers/instructions' manual. (d). Provision and approval of appropriate certification of work done and training received.

Challenges Faced by Uganda's Pre-primary Education

Major challenges relate to lack of teachers' guides (compelling them to adopt primary textbooks), lack of infrastructure (especially in rural areas), and lack of qualified pre-school teachers. In its problem statement, The Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Document (2018) also cites the following challenges:

> (a) Limited access to ECCE services; (b) Ineffective regulation of ECCE delivery; (c) Limited awareness of the importance of ECCE; (d) Inconsistent levels of family and community engagement; (e) Uncoordinated efforts in ECCE delivery; (f) High poverty levels; (g) High cost of ECCE services; and (h) Limited access to quality ECCE data (ECCE Policy, 2018: No.7).

Operational Objectives and Implementation Guidelines of ECCE Policy (2018)

The operational objectives of pre-primary education as stated in the ECCE Policy, 2018 include academic and psycho-social elements: inculcating a spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature and environment, art, music and playing with toys, etc.; developing a sense of cooperation and team spirit, and promotion of good health habits. ((Nakabugo et al. 2019, p.4).

The following implementation guidelines were agreed upon:

> (a). To establish pre-primary sections in existing public schools and encourage both community and private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education. (b). To make provision in teacher childhood education programmes for specialization in early childhood pre-primary education. (c). To ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. (d). To ensure that the main method of teaching at this level shall be through play and that the curriculum of teacher education is oriented to achieve this, regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education. (Nakabugo et al. 2019)

These guidelines are coherent with the LtP ideals as will be further explored in section 3 on findings following an overview of the study methodology.

Section 2: Methodology

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Research Design

This study used ethnographic methods to answer the research questions, drawing on the "Positive Deviance" framework for sampling and analysing. Positive Deviance (PD)

> **Refers to a behavioural and social change approach which is premised on the observation that in any context, certain individuals confronting similar challenges, constraints, and resource deprivations to their peers, will nonetheless employ uncommon but successful behaviours or strategies which enable them to find better solutions. Through the study of these individuals– subjects referred to as "positive deviants** (Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010).

The PD approach suggests that innovative solutions to such challenges may be identified and refined from their outlying behaviour.

Population and Sample

The study population is comprised of educators, school leaders, parents and pupils in ECD centres in Yumbe and Adjumani districts. The two districts were selected because they host refugees but also because they are contexts where PlayMatters is operating. These areas have a lower socioeconomic status and schools are underfunded or under resourced. From each district, with the help of the District Inspector of Schools, two ECD centres were selected. Selection was based on:

- Implementation of LtP approaches regularly.
- Sustained implementation of LtP approaches for over 5 years.
- Having a developed a vision that includes references to LtP (or similar practices).
- Adoption of inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.
- Focusing on the development of holistic learning outcomes, including social emotional skills and creativity.
- Provision of education to refugee children and/or host community members.

From each school, one school leader, 4 educators and 10 children and parents participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the educators; with the help of the school leaders who identified teachers who were using LtP. Thereafter, the educators helped to select the children. The parents of the selected children were then enrolled in the study.

Table 1 summarizes the numbers of participants.

Table 1: Summary of sample size and methods of data collections

District	Name of School	Participants	Method
Yumbe	ECE A	School Leader (1) Educators (4)	Interviews
		Children (10) Parents (7)	FGD
Adjumani	ECE B	School Leader (1) Educators (5)	Interviews
		Children (10) Parents (10)	FGD

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Access to Participants

In order to access the respondents, we first met with the school leaders. School leaders then helped to identify the educators. The educators identified the children who took messages to their parents inviting them to a meeting. Key informants were informed about the study, and consented to participate and Parents assented to their children's participation in the study.

Methods of Data Collection

In-depth interviews with a total of 9 educators and 2 school leaders were conducted. Specifically, educators who were using LtP were interviewed. We observed these educators deliver lessons in the classroom as well as times of free play to gain insights into the types of play inside and outside the classroom. Lastly, focused group discussions with parents and children were carried out. A photo of children engaging in a fun activity was shown during teachers' interviews, parents' FGDs, and children's FGDs, thus stimulating a reflective discussion or conversation about LtP.

Data Management

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011) emphasize the value of effectively organizing data in research. Consequently, the audio and written transcripts from interviews, FGDs and observation notes were saved into different storage devices. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. The audio, video and written transcripts and notes will be destroyed 5 years after the study as recommended by Uganda National Council of Science and Technology guidelines.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed following one case at a time (case schools). This enabled a deep understanding of each case at a time, as a complex social entity located in its own socio-historical situation. Data analysis started with transcription. The transcribed data was then coded into Dedoose. Analysis was thematic to produce themes aligned to the study objectives. Thereafter, a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006), where the findings across the two cases were discussed in relation to existing research in the field, eliciting broader insights into the understandings, use, and barriers of LtP in the two ECD centres.

Validity and Reliability

Qualitative trustworthiness and credibility was established through triangulation using multiple methods (observation, FGD, in-depth interviews), which corroborated findings across the cases. Secondly, daily peer debriefing provided an external check of the research process. Finally, in the presentation, rich and thick descriptions are employed to permit readers to make decisions regarding trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was first sought from Makerere University Social Science Ethics Committee (MakSS) before proceeding with the study. The IRC's Institutional Review Board also provided ethical approval for this study at a regional level (Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda) under IRB Protocol EDU 1.00.021. Voluntary participation and informed consent were established through explaining the study to each participant who then signed a consent form, and in the case of parents who signed assent forms. The consent and assent forms guaranteed confidentiality of participant identities and, pseudonyms were used as a measure in this regard. We also observed COVID-19 standard operating procedures including wearing of masks, sanitization, and social distancing during physical research interactions. The next section is a presentation of the study findings.

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Section 3: Findings of the Study

This section comprises findings from two case study schools, ECE A and ECE B. When taking the Case Study approach, we will attribute quotations to no specific school as no major differences existed between the selected schools. The section provides insights into the participants' understanding of Learning through Play (LtP), examples of LtP as well as opportunities and barriers to the implementation of LtP in these schools.

Children playing rope skipping game during an organised Play Session, Palabek Refugee Settlement, Uganda, October, 2021

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Understanding of Play and LtP

We present understanding of play and LtP first from children, then parents, head teachers and lastly teachers. We also provide insights into how LtP is used in and out of the classroom settings, the importance of LtP and the disaggregation of gender and play.

Children's Understanding of Play and LtP

Play is understood by children as any physical (embodied) activity that leads to enjoyment and happiness, active engagement, social interaction, and is meaningful or purposeful (good) in itself. Play is about doing something that a child enjoys since it is actively and engaging, relaxing. For example, some children explained:

One child perceived play in terms of physical exercise, furthering conceptions of play as embodiment: **"Play is exercising while running".**

Play is also understood in terms of relating with some play materials, "We feel happy when playing with balls, tyres and skipping ropes". Another child stated: **"Play is about using skipping ropes, toy cars and aeroplanes and old tyres."**

Play is perceived as socially interactive. Furthermore, play was perceived as a positive activity that contributes to a peaceful environment. One child said, "I am enjoying play because I am not fighting". Another one also commented, "When we are playing at home, we cannot fight with our friends – we just concentrate on play and playing with others". Play was also understood as a tool for creating more friendship amongst the classmates and beyond as indicated in the children's responses:

> **"I feel good when I am playing'.**
> **'I enjoy it [old tyre] when rolling it".**
> **"I feel okay".**
> **"We feel happy when we are playing".**

The majority of the children (14 out of 20) were satisfied with the time allocated for play such as at break time and in the classroom, while the other group felt that the time was not sufficient. However, all the children were aware that some games including football, netball and rolling tyres were not allowed in the classroom **"because I can cause injury"** and that **"the classroom space is not enough".** Children not playing were on the other hand perceived as not interested in playing, as one child commented: **"She is not able to skip the rope because she is not interested".** A potential explanation is that the types of play available at that time did not suit their preferences or moods.

In addition, more than half of the children (12 out of 20) perceived play as not (academic) learning. For example, one child noted **"When children are playing, they are not learning".** "They are not learning, they are playing!" However, another presented a contrasting view, **"They are learning as they play, and some are learning to make exercises".**

The children's responses showed a divergent perception of play and LtP. Generally, they perceive play as a physical and social activity that builds cohesion. To some play is a learning act while to others it is merely play. Perceptions of the relation between learning and play diverge, rather than converge.

> **"Play helps us to know the names of our classmates because they call us by name as we play".**
> **"We share some play materials with our friends'. 'We play with our friends, even those from other classes".**
> **"We also play with the teachers".**

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Parents Understanding Play and LtP

Parents perceived play as a practical activity that is joyful and interesting, participatory and engaging (personal, non-mechanical). Play was also perceived as a set of physical activities that boosts bodily health:

Some parents understood play as connected to learning, as one parent commented:

"So learning is not only in the class rooms, learning can take place anywhere, so as they [children] are there, they learn certain things like (even) listening to the way the person is talking, they learn the skills of speaking, they learn how to control themselves when they are in public and so on."

The majority of the parents (16 out of 17) perceived play as part and parcel of learning and described the act of play as developing, refreshing and re-energising (bodily), motivating and/or engaging (psychologically), educating and enabling the young to relate (socially). Play was also described as an outward sign that children are in good health (are not sick). As a parent explained:

"They are learning skills. The way how to jump over the ropes. Since some children are better than others, it is a learning experience. Some children are learning from the best doers. The children are learning socialisation skills. The ways of staying together because while playing one needs to create friendship."

However, some (3 out of 17) parents looked at play as not connected to learning in any way, as one commented: **"Playing is destructive – once children concentrate on play they cannot learn"!!**

Play was also perceived as a powerful tool for relaxing and developing the children's brain as well as socializing them in the life of the school. **"When children are playing, they feel nice and free and can forget about some of the things that were disappointing them before."** Another parent remarked',

" "Play can strengthen my muscles. I feel very active when I participate in play".

Another one noted: **"Play is a part of exercise that relieves you from stress, gives energy to your body and relieves you from any pain".**

Still another parent observed, **"I want to involve myself in play to make myself strong and avoid some diseases since I am old and play can help me become strong. When I was young, I used to play a lot".**

Several parents further observed that play can significantly interest the children's attention to the extent that they may not easily feel hungry. Play engages children such that they don't easily get bored and according to some teachers they don't feel hungry. **"They are feeling free and cannot feel hungry. They feel good when they are playing".** Play was also seen as helping children to overcome barriers to effective bonding. Another parent stated, "The children are learning socialisation skills. The ways of staying together because while playing one needs to create friendship and overcome fear" Another parent noted, **"They are not wasting time, when they are playing, they are learning to be leaders and to be friends. Those children who are shy also learn to speak."**

The above section shows that parents perceive play as a way of constructing a state of wellbeing. They value practical activities that are personally engaging and socially interactive (friendly), while at the same time promoting bodily and cognitive development.
A minority had their reservation about LtP, suspecting that play and learning cannot go together.

" In the process of playing, the children's brain develops and some of them forget about their mothers because during the morning time when they are being brought to school, they tend to cry but playtime can make them forget about their parents.

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Head Teachers' Understanding of Play and LtP

Similar to the parents' perceptions, the school heads understood play as free activity, free choice that involves learning and discovering a lot of new things, thus contributing significantly to teaching and children's understanding. One head teacher observed,

> **"Children of 3-6 years understand better if you introduce a lesson with play. Introducing a lesson with a play activity like singing and dancing before actual teaching helps children understand properly and prepares their minds. LtP helps them to grow better" (SLK111).**

LtP was highlighted as vital for children's overall development by both head teachers. As Head teacher SLKII1 observed, **"The children's brains develop through play much faster as compared to some form of learning that does not involve play"**. It was further noted that play can create more learning possibilities,

> **Sometimes here we take them outside and ask them to propose activities they want to engage in such as football and skipping ropes and we start from what they have suggested and then introduce ours for class It helps them develop the habit of associating with one another and also sharing. You find when they are playing a game like football and the balls are limited, they keep sharing (SLK111).**

Play was also viewed as critical in enhancing the readiness to learn,

> **They also learn how to speak well. Some children normally keep quiet like those in Baby class (2-4 years). Normally some are staying alone at home and don't have friends to play with but here at school, they learn to talk after participating in play activities. (SLK111).**

Both school heads perceived LtP as supportive to children's growth and understanding, socialization with classmates and improving their communication skills.

Teachers' Understanding of Play and LtP

The teachers generally understood play in terms of games such as football, rope skipping, sliding, counting games, ball games and any other social, physical and mental activities that make children active and bring about amusement and fun. 'Play is using manual and physical materials that are interesting' (MKIII). **"Play can make you feel free, even when you are thinking of other things - it also keeps you busy as you are enjoying the activity"** (FKIII). The teachers further noted that play time enables children to share with their friends in addition to socializing with their teachers and any other adults.

They understood play as handy in the mastery of new concepts as one teacher observed: **"When children are playing and you bring the materials and tell them to sort the numbers, they will immediately do it"** (MKIII).

It was further noted that playfulness has the potential to make learning more accessible:

> **When we teach them without demonstrating any activity, children cannot understand. But when you show them an action in a playful way they may think you are just playing, but you find eventually that they have understood, they get the concepts very fast through play (MAKIII).**

Another teacher gave the following explanation about the significance of Learning through Play:

> **When [I] am teaching about aeroplanes I want children to understand the concept even when it is not physically visible. In such a case, I can make a model which looks like a real aeroplane so that I can demonstrate to them. And later on when they interact with the real object they can recall the class discussion and realise that it was the same thing that teacher was talking about (FKIII).**

In the same line, another teacher noted that,

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> **❝** When you don't play and don't involve children in play activities you find that kids will be sleeping, feel dizzy, some will not participate because they may get the concepts very slowly. But in group activities they can get involved. Play makes children to become active and participate actively in learning (FKIII).

Another teacher explained, **"If you are teaching about pots, you just need to introduce a song related to the picture. They will get interested about what you are teaching"** (MKIII). All the teachers agreed about the usefulness of play in enhancing behavioural change as well as the mastery and retention of concepts. For example, this was pointed out by (FKII1), **"If you use play the kids will not forget, if they reach home they can continue to do the same that they were doing (at school)"**. **"In that process children are learning. It looks like a kind of play but it is a way of learning"** (TKII1).

Teachers also understood play as very essential in motivating learners to enjoy learning as one teacher observed:

> **❝** When some children are not feeling happy because of some reasons such as hunger, and you start making jokes or playing with them, they become happy and learn. Children who are tired and want to cry also become active and learn when play is introduced in class (MAKIII).

Across different participant groups, there are convergences and divergences relating to beliefs of Learning through Play as integrated with the cognitive, on the one hand, and the social and emotional, on the other. Children generally did not see play as related to the cognitive whereas adults could see how an embodied perspective including sociological-cultural and psychological-personal interests rendered play to be supportive of cognitive learning processes. In fact, teachers (especially recently trained), appreciated a hybridisation of learning and play. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the development of key policy statements on LtP in the Ministry of Education and Sports (2012) *Learning Framework* for ECD (3-6 years of Age) and the Ugandan 2018 *ECCE Policy document* is very recent.

Gender and Play

The children indicated that they always played together without any distinction between boys and girls. However, all 12 girls indicated that they preferred skipping much more compared to the boys who preferred tyre rolling and playing on the swings.

The parents similarly acknowledged that schools taught both boys and girls together without any separation; **"In the classroom, children are taught together and there is no segregation. It is the same thing when they go to play".** However, the parents further indicated that boys and girls have their preferences: **"Boys normally like football while girls like skipping ropes... but they [girls] can also play football."**

The parents indicated that the situation for boys and girls was different at home due to several reasons: **"The boys can take long but girls take a short time because they get tired easily";** Secondly, **"Girls have many household chores such as washing utensils, washing dishes and fetching water while boys only fetch water and food and therefore have more time to play".** All the parents agreed about limiting play time for girls, **"When they are encouraged to play, they will concentrate on play and leave other activities and learning".** This suggests existence of culturally-based mind-sets or attitudes that take for granted (or rarely question) inequalities of opportunity/access to free play at home.

The head teachers emphasized the benefits of letting boys and girls play together. One of them remarked thus: **"When boys and girls play together, they learn from one another and also share with one another. Combining them brings love, sharing and helping one another. But when they are separated, it creates a gap"** (SLKI).

However, from our observation it was noted that the preferences by boys and girls towards the available

play activities were often gender skewed. While the boys generally preferred football, tyre rolling and sliding on the swings, the majority of the girls were for rope skipping and hand ball. These observations are consistent with the play preferences expressed by both children and parents

The teachers were aware of the parents' tendency to fix the girls' and boys' play activities as explained by one of the teachers: **"While schools try to create equal opportunity for all children, the girls' time for play is limited as they are expected to do home chores such as washing dishes, fetching water, cooking and washing clothes. Boys tends to do less work"** (MAKII1). This teacher further highlighted the need to talk to parents about the advantages of boys and girls playing together such as unity, sharing, language development and self-expression.

Educators' Perception of the Importance of Play and LtP

The benefits reported apply to the children's and the teachers' wellbeing. While the children's benefits from LtP are in line with cognitive, social and emotional growth, the teachers' gains are in terms of easing work-related stress, enabling the sharing of skills between teachers and learners as well as amongst teachers.

LtP and Children's Wellbeing

Wellbeing here is employed as a broad definition encompassing an overall feeling of happiness, enthusiasm, and satisfaction (Aristotle-eudaimonia)—including feeling secure, safe, enjoying bodily and psychological health, enjoying a sense of belonging and being accepted or loved in the group, and team spirit. The teachers viewed LtP as essential in enhancing the children's wellbeing as one of them stated; **"You see kids who do not play are always lazy and cannot participate in class, they are always idle. But these kids who are participating are very active and when you bring them out to play, they are playful and interested in that play".** (FAKIII)

One of the head teachers also noted that when children are playing, relaxed and excited, teachers can easily emphasize on the learning of some important values that can make them responsible citizens.

Head teacher CKIII indicated how LtP is helpful in the cognitive, social and emotional growth of the children:

> **When children are busy playing and participating in class, you see it on their faces that they are happy and enjoying what they are doing. -Play also opens their brains. -They also learn how to manage anger. For example, when materials like balls and ropes are few and children have to share them, some can cry when they have not yet accessed but we encourage them to share. (Head Teacher CKIII)**

Benefits of LtP and Teacher's Welfare

The teachers indicated that LtP is beneficial in easing work-related stress, building team work and aiding them to learn new knowledge and skills which can increase their occupational self-efficacy. As one teacher explained, **"Ltp makes me too interested in teaching. A lesson involving play cannot be compared to one in which the learners are not even responding to you. Such lessons make me to lose interest in teaching".** Similarly, another teachers pointed out, **"I feel better and proud. For example, if you sing a song and the kids dance you feel happy and proud".** (FKIII)

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Another teacher showed how LtP is incredibly connected to their wellbeing:

> As a teacher I can benefit from participatory methods. For example, in instances when children have started crying, and I introduce play, they stop and I become secure and teach well. When children are not happy and crying, I can't impart my knowledge. I also become happy, active, get knowledge from the children in form of new stories and songs during play time. (FAKIII)

Another teacher shared about how LtP can enhance their skills: **"And it also makes me to get skills from the learners. I may not know some forms of play or songs – but the learners can teach me."** MAKIII

LtP was thus underlined as helpful approach in improving the teachers' and learners' relationship as well as creating teamwork. LtP creates teamwork between the teachers and the learners. The bi-directional relationship in interactions between teacher and learners in building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships can positively influence wellbeing. **"When I bring them out for outdoor and we are doing modelling, we put our hands together- we work with the children. What I might not know, I learn from them and what they don't know they learn from me."** (FAKIII) Above all, one teacher showed that LtP helped to bring the teaching staff closer.

Peer support can positively influence teacher wellbeing (Goleman Daniel, 2008). **"When we are working together we share new knowledge, skills, experience, creativity and care from other teachers. It also cements our relationship and creates friendship and communication skills".** (FAKIII)

LtP in the Case Study Schools

LtP in the case study schools was organized around the five Learning Areas stipulated in the *"Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development".* They include Learning Area 1: Social Development; Learning Area 2: Language Development; Learning Area 3: Health Habits; Learning Area 4: Numbers; and Learning Area 5: Reading and Writing. LtP was observed and reported to be integrated into all the Learning Areas with songs, rhymes, drawing, painting, recitation, demonstrations, music, dance and drama, reciting riddles, story-telling, imitation of animal sounds and movements as well as role playing. Following the *Learning Framework for Early Childhood Development* document guidelines; children **"need to observe the environment around them, manipulate and experiment with objects in the environment",** the classroom and outdoor activities in the study schools were often integrated. This was also confirmed by one teacher, **"Children cannot sit in one place for long. We always try to change their activities every after 30 minutes in order to maintain their attention."**

The first part of this section focuses on LtP in the classroom setting while the second part looks at LtP and outdoor activities. What the findings indicate is that Ltp is a complex and broad concept covering activities and practices inside the classroom and outside the classroom, and in addition, both teacher guided and non-teacher guided activities. Various nuances of LtP appear within different contexts and even within different learning areas.

LtP in the Classroom

In the classroom setting, all the teachers (09) used LtP in the form of rhymes, songs and poems to introduce a lesson but also in the middle or towards the end. For example, one teacher explained, **"I use play when I am introducing lessons. I sing for them and then, they dance. I also recite rhymes and poems".** Another teacher gave a similar comment, **"For about five minutes, I play with them and then begin teaching. This is the introduction. I also apply LtP when I am teaching"** (AGKII2).

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Learning Area One: Social Development

LtP gave room to the teachers to begin their lessons in various ways: **"Every time I enter class, the first thing I do is start with a song, a rhyme or riddle. Even though I am writing the work on the blackboard, I keep singing to make the children attentive."** (MAKII2)

This was also confirmed by one of the investigators and has this to say:

> **The class was highly participatory and engaging. The class which started at 8:00 am was conducted by two teachers. The teachers introduced the class with a song. Children looked happy while singing and were all motivated.**

In another lesson of Social Development one teacher said: "Children learn to socialise…. in case of disagreements (fighting and crying), however, they learn to resolve these and move on. Through stories and role plays, they learn empathy and how to comfort one another, and even how to forgive one another and move on" (FAKII2).

A teacher said:

> **Emotionally, LtP helps them learn to forgive one another… Helps them to have acceptable behaviors… "Even like we have learning Area 1 that is where it talks about God's creation, then we can make them to learn through play. You first show them the pictures of God's creation and then you sing" (CK112).**

Data from investigators confirmed the cultivation of compassion and empathy through play especially outside the classroom when accidents happened, children would emotionally support each other and then resume play. The teachers were observed to make Positive affirmations such as "good children". The children on their part would return the compliment with "good teacher" and looked very happy and motivated. There was no sign of anxiety among children. Both boys and girls mixed while playing. It is evident that LtP does not only provide for intellectual and bodily but also emotional maturity (care and compassion).

Learning Area Two: Language Development

The teachers indicated how LtP facilitated the learners in grasping the required language skills. "When they were instructed to stand up they also stood up and when I told them to clap hands they were able to clap their hands when I asked them to read for me the sounds of animals they were ready and able to give the uses of animals to people"(FAKII2). This was also confirmed by the investigators' observations.

Such approaches allowed the children to recite and model more easily:

> **"They were learning the sounds of animals and sound of letters. Yaa children learn how to recite sounds of animals it easy for them to read the words, to spell the words and will be able to write their own words" (MK112). Integration was perceived to be more possible: "By singing songs which are fitting the content of what you are teaching, reciting the rhymes of related sounds" (CKII2).**

Investigators' observation revealed that children found the mimicking of animals interesting and exciting rendering learning to be enjoyable. In addition, most of the songs and stories included common things and words in children's environment. Where it necessitated using local language for children to understand the games, the teachers applied it. Children demonstrated memory of the games and songs that teachers used. Children learnt common words represented by drawings. Generally, the teachers used drawings to help children understand the work.

Learning Area Three: Health Habits

A teacher said:

> **"When am teaching learning Area Three, I take the children outside the classroom and teach them how to sweep, pick up the garbage and dump it correctly. And when am teaching them about hygiene, I take them out to the latrine and teach them through play". (MAKII2)**

> **"When you are teaching fruits … you must make sure that you have one or two types of fruits …you have to bring real objects so that the learners can understand". (SLKK2)**

> **"I start with a song, brush, brush brush your teeth. And when am teaching body parts I sing a song related to body parts. I bring two or three children in front of the class and sing a song related to body parts. "Hello little children show me your head, stomach, etc… and they reply this is my head, stomach etc." (MAKII2)**

All participant observation reports confirmed the singing of such bodily hygiene songs especially during the morning circle. There was the checking of cleanness including teeth, nails, underwear and

hair. Those who needed cleaning were helped by their teachers. The teachers were observed to foster habits that favour a clean environment, as one investigator notes:

> **I also observed a good culture of washing hands. There is a constant supply of water for children to wash their hands when they are going to have break tea and after break tea. All children line up to wash their hands. There is a teacher who monitors to make sure that all wash hands while another one is stationed at the washing centre to help all wash hands.**

Learning Area Four: Numbers

One investigator observed a Mathematics lesson which began by some challenge on the board about addition of objects. These objects were presented in an artistic form. Later on different learners were called out to try the addition. Those with challenges were encouraged until they found the correct answer and then rewarded by the whole class. It was a less complex way of teaching numbers.

We also observed that 95 per cent of lessons in Numbers were widely well integrated with LtP. For example, a rhyme about number counting can be used at the beginning to enable the learners to recite numbers in a playful way. This was helpful not only in concept building but also in the retention of the learnt knowledge and skills as one teacher further explained: **"So that they [learners] cannot even forget the lesson even when they get back home, the child can even start singing that same song which they have been singing in class to the parent."** (AFKII2)

Another teacher said:

> **If the content requires these children to count you bring in activity which includes counting. For example when it is about counting I tell them to clap 5 times. ...If am teaching shapes I will bring models which are made out of mud and tell the child it's a circle. When you go for content it will be easy for them to understand... when they are jumping they sometime will keep on counting, now they develop their counting skills. They also develop their muscles. (FKII2)**

The teachers demonstrated how LtP can be used to enhance the learning of mathematical concepts. "I **use empty bottles and make children to fill the bottles with water. This helps them to learn the concepts of volume as the water level continues to increase until the bottle gets full."** (AKII2) There was another teacher who used one example to describe how she uses LtP: **"For example, today I was teaching about finding**

the odd man out. I used demonstration. Here, I brought materials like two balls and a cup and instructed the children to pick the odd man out."** (MKII2)

The following is the experience of an investigator of a Mathematics class conducted mainly in English and some local language:

> **The class was highly participatory and learning was mainly through play. The teachers sang a song of numbers while showing sticks to the children. All children were encouraged to participate as individuals, in small groups and as a whole class. Both boys and girls were invited to write the numbers on the blackboard. Though some of the invited children were struggling to write the numbers, the teachers left the children to keep trying. All the children including those who couldn't do the work were encouraged and appreciated by clapping and dancing for them.**

The investigator further observed the use of improvised local materials as learning and teaching aids:

> **In this lesson, teachers used sticks to teach children numbers. There are also other local materials pinned on the walls. For example, sacks with work written on, improvised hard paper, abacus and cups made out of clay among others.**

Despite the challenges of finding learning materials, reports from all investigators confirmed the teachers' willingness to integrate LtP in the teaching of Numbers. Teachers appreciated that children learn better in artistic and embodied ways. All teachers talked about creativity and the MoES curriculum was very supportive.

Learning Area Five: Literacy, Reading and Writing

LtP was described as helpful to the learners in identifying the different colours: **"When I am teaching sorting objects, I use objects with different colours (yellow, green, red) and tell them to sort according to colours and then later ask them to identify the different colours".** (FKII2).

LtP pedagogies are increasingly found to be effective in enhancing learners' interest, engagement and motivation, key elements for effective cognitive learning.

An investigator reports the following about a Literacy lesson:
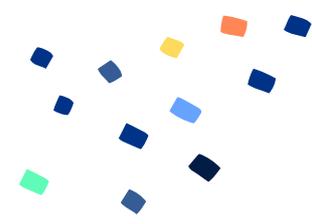
> ❝ I observed a teacher distributing books to learners and selecting some to learners to come up front to repetitively read out or pronounce the words. The whole group would repeat the word and corrections were done by the teacher. The lesson was integrated with songs and bodily movements.

All reports from investigators revealed that matching words to pictures was commonly used in Literacy lessons. Letters of the alphabet were sung and matched to real objects. However some objects seemed not to be in learners' experiences e.g. apple, zebra, queen and xylophone. Generally, there was lack of innovation and creativity in this learning area.

LtP Outside the Classroom

Similar to the parents' perceptions, the school heads understood play as free activity, free choice that involves learning and discovering a lot of new things, thus contributing significantly to teaching and children's understanding. One head teacher observed,

The Morning Circle

We observed that the Morning Circle is the first event of the learner's school day in the case schools and is conducted between 7.30 and 8.00 am. This lesson contained aspects from all the five learning areas (1 to 5). For example, Teacher MAKII2 explained how health habits are emphasized,

> ❝ At the morning circle, we teach them how to brush their teeth how to cut their finger nails. When they are coming [to] school they have to bathe, comb their hair, and to be smart every day. We check whether they have put on their pants or not, we especially advise boys who do not usually put on pants. This lesson about health habits that is done in a play manner instead of telling the learners, they can sing a song while they mimic a person that is brushing. The game helps them learn the skills.

Picture 2:
Children attending Morning Circle

Head teacher SKII2 further emphasized the broad scope of the morning circle:

> ❝ "In the morning circle they learn a lot including health-promoting habits, language and mathematical concepts, prayers, National Anthem, school motto. They have to know all these areas and you do that in form of play and singing of songs".

Teacher-Guided Play

The teachers explained that these outdoor activities were always designed to emphasize some of the concepts already introduced in classroom: **"If you bring them outside for outdoor activities the activity should be related to what you have introduced in class."** (FKII2).

When asked how she engages children in play outside the classroom, FAKII2 explained, **"When I am teaching Learning Area Two (Social Development), I take them out and teach them how to sweep, pick garbage and dump it. Also, when I am teaching them about latrines. I take them out and teach them through play"**. She also added that **"All our lessons include play. Children cannot learn without play. Even when we are teaching Religious Education, we include play, songs, stories etc".**

Picture 3:
A Game of Counting Sticks

Observations reveal that most of these outdoor engagements involved mathematics, passing on while counting sticks, counting steps, skipping rope while counting. The rest of them were oriented towards social skills and competences, for example, running relay. Teachers felt that they needed to be around as the children played and could therefore could not be fully trusted to take on full ownership in their learning experiences. However, teachers were 100% positive about their role in creating a motivating and engaging, relaxed, fun-filled learning environment.

Free Play

Our observation was that 'free play' happened before end of school around midday. Some teachers saw it as time for relaxation, however, others saw elements of learning through play. One teacher claimed that LtP can facilitate learning both in the classroom and during free time because it engages the whole person (mind, feelings and body).

It can be used to improve ECD especially because it develops cognitive dimension—mental ability to reason, ask questions and solve problems. During play the learner is kicking the ball, calculating the right speed, or impact, and dodging and passing the ball correctly to another colleague, and through team work, he or she is making sure obstacles to scoring a goal are overcome so that the team wins. When issues arise, they are solved as team. At the same time, one is having fun and people are laughing and enjoying (FAKII2).

Picture 4:
Free activity

Teachers were observed to keep watching at a distance, allowing the activities to be self-chosen, self-managed and intervening only in extreme cases of accidents and misunderstandings.

Factors that Facilitate or Inhibit the Engagement of Children, Educators, School Leaders and Parents in LtP at School

This section provides insights into factors that facilitated or inhibited LtP in the two study ECD centres of Adjumani and Yumbe. We begin by presenting the factors that facilitate, then those that inhibit.

Factors that Facilitate Engagement
Support of LtP by the Head Teachers

Head teachers were highlighted as strong pillars in the success of LtP in the case schools. Their support to LtP revolved around the inclusion of LtP on the timetable, provision of learning materials, provision of specialized care for the learners with special needs, lobbying organization for help and resolving conflicts among teaching staff. There were still other obligations that included linking up with different organizations that provided play materials and teacher professional development workshops and talking to the parents and community about the school requirements. Other obligations included budgeting and funding play-related activities and integration of LtP in the school programs.

> **"One of the support is the time given to the children to play that is indicated on the timetable; she has given us time for children to play."** (MAKII3)

> **"If we don't have some of the play materials, she can go out and buy them. Sometimes she even writes letters to some other organizations to support the school."** (AGKII3)

> **"The head teacher provides us with teaching materials like chalk and she also convenes meetings every month so that we can make some accountability for the classwork."** (FAKII3)

> **"And when teachers are having some conflict they also come to the office of the head teacher and they solve these issues. These are the things the head teacher is doing for us."** (FAKII3)

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> **"Sometimes she also goes and sits in the class and monitor what we are teaching and advise us on how to integrate LtP. She guides us on how to handle learners with special needs." (MAKII3)**

The teachers' views strongly indicate that the head teachers in the two study schools supported LtP activities. The headteachers too acknowledged this, but also (to an extent) the more engaged parents.

On their part, all the teachers were in support of giving the same play opportunity to the boys and girls to play, **"All {boys and girls} have the same experience because they have the same skills in their respective play and games." (MAKIII)**

The Support of LtP by Parents

LtP in the case study schools was made possible by the financial and emotional support of the parents. While the some of the parents had meagre incomes, they still willingly enrolled the children in schools and attended the meetings whenever summoned.

As one teacher noted: **"The parents are supportive. It is a community school and has kept strong because of parents though they don't have enough resources like income to pay in one instalment, they still provide for their children." (FKIII3)**

Parents were acknowledged for supporting LtP activities. **"Parents encourage us to teach using play because they know children can only study well through play. Even some parents have testified that their children force them to bring them here because of play materials in this school."** (SLKII3)

Another form of parents' support was exhibited in their attendance to school events, **"Parents like it and some of them even encourage us to go ahead with our work. This is shown by their full attendance whenever they are invited to come for a meeting here at school." (FKII3)**

A school leader confirmed the above claims by indicating that **"Parents are together with us. In case of anything we call them. They come and we sit with them to handle the school issues and find solutions."** (CKII3)

The teachers further explained how parents facilitated LtP by working together with the teachers to make toys, balls and skipping ropes: **"When these playing materials are not enough, we also call them and we work on them together."** (FAKII3)
T
he teachers' responses indicated two categories of parents in relation to facilitating LtP. There are some parents who pay school fees on time, bring some materials like brooms, pencils, rubbers, and crayons and drop the children to school in time. However,

others are not supportive because they don't have money for supporting these activities. The participation of parents in making play materials out of local materials is a major supportive factor for LtP because it is sustainable.

Also notable is the view that parents, unlike teachers and headteachers who got some training by NGOs, generally lack awareness of the importance of LtP.

NGO Support to LtP

There were mainly two NGOs (Right to Play and UNICEF) that supported LtP activities in the two districts of Adjumani and Yumbe. In collaboration with the district education office activities were organized to create awareness about play, give out play materials and train teachers and other school stakeholders, as several teachers commented:

"The NGOs supported our ECD [centre] by talking to the different management committee members that lead the school. Right to Play sometimes invites these committees to come and attend the meeting with them and say other things about play." (AGKII3)

There is a visible difference between teachers that have had some training from those that have not:

> **We have been trained from Yumbe by Right to Play. Some of these trainings go on for one or two full weeks. That is why if you go to the other schools that have had no trainings, you cannot get such methods of playing. Our approach is very different from theirs. (FAKII3)**

Still another teacher explained how UNICEF and Right to Play trained them: "UNICEF took us to Lodonga Institute in Yumbe. They trained us for 6months then after that, Right to Play also came in".(K113)

Two other teachers testified to the work of the two organisations in the following way:

> **"In 2019 we did a workshop with the Right to Play. I also had training in a college called Lodonga in Yumbe district. We were trained about how to teach, handle learners, play and the importance of play to the learners." (K113)**

> **In 2020, Right to Play trained us. It was practical and we were taught how to play with the children. They combined us with many teachers from other schools and we used to learn from each other. The training ranged from 2 to 5 days. The training was about how to include play in the classroom. (FAKIII3)**

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Although the school leaders and their teachers applauded Right to Play and UNICEF for training them regarding how to implement LtP, there were still many gaps. Several teachers (7 out of 9) indicated that they required more training in order to manage LtP activities: They saw the need to get new skills and knowledge that would help them promote LtP more effectively. **"I would like to attend so that I come back and help these children and promote LtP."** (FLKII3) **"I need to go for further studies to improve my standard of teaching. I need more knowledge on how to handle the children and how to introduce a lesson using play."** (AGKII3)

It is note worth that NGO involvement in CPD such as workshops in rural areas has provided solutions to challenges faced by teachers as they choose between teaching academic content through direct instruction or allowing children time to engage in child-led play. Training has enabled them to appreciate the fact LtP is indeed a preferable pedagogical mode, and that teacher's identity need not be rigidly ascribed (as in the old inflexible, visible socialisation).

NGO involvement is a good enough starting point for Uganda's National Teacher Policy (2019) guidelines which emphasise lifelong learning, for all teachers at all levels, through CPDs within teacher learning communities.

Availability of Local Materials

The availability of local materials from which to make pots, skipping roles, dolls and balls coupled with the willingness of the teachers to make play materials supported LtP activities in the study schools. Some teachers further described how they made reading books using Manila papers and superglue with their learners. The teachers further explained,

> **Most of the local materials are supplied by teachers. For example, tyres, we go to our friends who are mechanics and request them to give us tyres that are no longer useful to them. Children also bring materials like clay and banana fibres for making skipping ropes and balls. (MAKII3)**

Another teacher further emphasized,

> **As teachers, we also help. For example, in modelling cups, plates, tables, jugs and others. We also bring other materials depending on the subject of the day. If I am to teach about fruits, I bring apples, watermelon, jackfruits and oranges to show children real fruits and how they look alike. (AGKII3)**

The teachers retaliated the need to be creative in order to enhance LtP activities rather than having the attitude of buying every learning material. However, some further noted that making local play materials is time consuming especially when one is making balls and clay works. It was also noted that the local materials were often hard to get and could hinder the timely preparation of lessons: **"We lack materials like fibres. We have to move far to get materials and transporting them is a problem."** (FLK113)

Perceived Benefits of LtP

The responses of the teachers and head teachers from the case schools pointed out that the perceived benefits of LtP was one of the major factors that popularized it.

One of the head teachers SL3 summarized the benefits as follows:

> **Children who are dull and lazy can also participate in the activities that involve LtP. They become active. Learning through play enables children to remember things easily. It also makes children creative in doing things like modelling with clay. During play, children socialize with each other and create friendships. LtP makes children creative and attentive to what you are teaching. In terms of creativity, like if you are demonstrating how to match objects and you bring the real objects such as cups and draw for them, children will know them very well. (CKII3)**

Other benefits of LtP that were given by the teachers include: Keeping the learners' minds fresh, increasing learners' motivation to school related activities, strengthening their muscles, cognitive development, increasing learners' attendance and retention and improving their participation in class.

Factors that Inhibit the Engagement of Children, Educators, School Leaders and Parents in LtP at School

Several factors highlighted by the teachers and school leaders as hindering the integration of LtP in the case study schools. These factors include budget constraints, inadequate learning materials and large classes.

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Budget Constraints

School leaders can strategically support LtP by procuring necessary materials only if there are sufficient funds. For example, it is a big huddle to meet the all the essential requirements of an ECD centre as one head teacher remarked: **"The parents are paying only forty thousand a term to cater for everything including feeding, paying the teachers and other requirements. So, it is very hard to budget for play materials at the sometime paying the teachers and maintain the sanitation."** (SLK3) It was generally observed that the parents did not have enough funds to adequately support the school activities.

The budget constraints equally affected the provision of play materials as one teacher explained: **"We don't have enough play materials. What we have can't serve all the learners. Like the skipping ropes are only three."** (FAKI3) Another teacher added: **"We also want to be provided with more play materials so that our children stop fighting over the few available materials"**. The teachers' effort to participate in the making of play materials had some limitations: 'We sometimes make play materials but they don't last long enough. And even getting the local materials like fibres in this town area is also difficult'.

The teachers also commented about the late payments and poor meals as a significant hindrance to LtP. **"When we are not paid in time, we lose interest. We also don't have a good diet at school and sometimes the food is not enough."** (MAKI3). Lack of finances negatively affects teacher wellbeing and motivation.

Other inhibitors to LtP that were highlighted included poor classroom ventilation, lack of teachers' guides and bookshelves, inadequate furniture, teachers' guides. Without an enabling environment with sufficient learning materials, LtP will always seem like an abstraction.

Large Classes

An enabling environment includes sufficient classroom space to accommodate learners with an appropriate teacher-learner ratio (Cussum & Gul,2017). Large classes are another challenge inhibiting effective LtP. This space limitation hinders teachers from setting the learning environment in accordance to the age, size and needs of the learners as one of the teacher explained:

> **The classroom is not enough for us. The children are many. We are supposed to handle 35 children per class but, the number is more than 35. In baby class, we are almost having 120 children. The children need to be divided so that teaching goes on smoothly. As teachers, it is hard to manage and monitor those children who play as we teach. (FLKII3)**

A school leader further observed:

> **I am using the smallest room as the office then the remaining three rooms are for classes - that is the other big challenge we are having. The moment you step in baby class you can really see, the rooms are not really enough for the learners. (SLK3)**

*Picture 5:
A Congested Classroom*

The space limitation equally affected the outdoor LtP activities such as football, jumping, skipping, tyres and rolling tyres as one teacher elaborated:

> **Our section has over 300 learners while the primary has 800 plus. So the compound we have is not enough for children to play because they need to play freely without over controlling them because that is what play means. And as a teacher you are supposed to stand or sit and observe and get control; don't play this, don't play with that. It is even harder when some teachers are not all on duty or are not all at school it is hard to manage. (FAKI3)**

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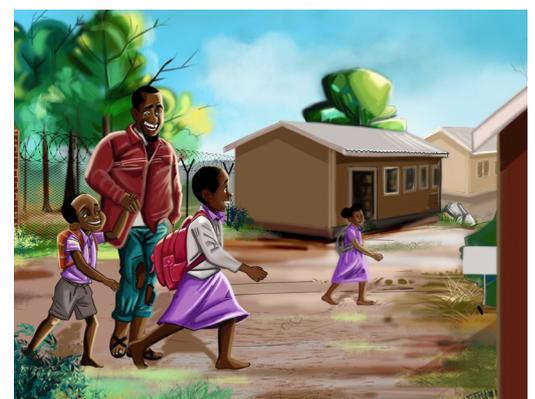
Conclusion and Way Forward

As data from children, parents, head teachers and teachers suggest, play is experienced as a joyful, stress free, positive mood or feeling. All saw play as a good measure of good health of a child. All appreciated LtP as personally engaging (promoting internal motivation or drive), and as making teaching and learning processes more effective.

However, the meaning and significance of LtP has become more critical than ever before in the sense that the learner (even at the pre-primary level) may no longer be seen as a passive mass public, 'stupid and naïve', but that on the contrary, he/she actively and creatively make use of what the school system provides to construct his/her own identity. Moreover, as socially interactive, LtP is appreciated for promoting empathetic, communicative and caring team-workers. Gender dichotomies are largely minimized during play at school.

Stakeholders, especially teachers, recognise how the benefits of LtP range from the physical (bodily wellbeing), to memory (maximisation of attention span, focus, flow), cultural-sociological (learning to get along with peers), imagination (cultivating creativity), personal-psychological (skills of improving emotional health), and academic (intellectual, cognitive) skills. Teachers indeed pointed out how LtP is foundational for later learning. They thus concurred, not only with numerous scholars on LtP, but also with Uganda's ECCE Policy Document (2018).

Play was largely understood as an activity inside, but mostly outside class. However, findings showed that teachers saw LtP as breaking with the old routine-like, strictly rule-bound, impersonal and mechanical modes of teaching and learning. So, LtP has been sufficiently appreciated in terms of practical hands-on activities, songs, rhymes, drawing, painting, recitation, demonstrations, music, dance and drama, reciting riddles, story-telling, imitation of animal sounds and movements as well as role playing. During free play (and at home) there is a tendency to segregate between types of games and duration for (or not for) girls/boys.

Stakeholders, headteachers and teachers and especially parents (who would simply pay school fees) are supportive of LtP in terms of availing locally-made play materials, however, their efforts are limited by lack of financial and material resources. This is compounded by large numbers of learners crammed into small classes and compounds. Poor quality of infrastructure and limited play materials, since school proprietors lack adequate finances to put up the requisite structures and play areas to comfortably allow for 'free play' (which teachers acknowledged as authentic play) is a recurring concern.

There is an urgent need for CPD for pre-primary teachers. Pre-primary education in Uganda, having been neglected (by government) for too long, has neither attracted many professionals nor made the few available affordable to be hired by economically struggling schools. Moreover, those who are in-service at the moment urgently need training for LtP so as to measure up to new curricular and pedagogical demands in Uganda's ECCE Policy Document (2018).

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Recommendations

•   Policy makers should pass policies that favour play as a fundamental aspect of early education to ensure quality implementation of the ECCE Policy Document 2018.

•   Community leaders should work closely with all school stakeholders to address issues of Gender inequality in favour of increased quality ECD for girls.

•   Policy makers should consider introduction of LtP training at the level of stakeholders, including parents.

•   Policy makers should consider introduction of LtP training at the level of Initial Teacher Training, starting with retooling teacher-trainers.

•   Development partners should consider supporting the implementation of LtP through CPDs, teacher training instituions, TETD and NCD.

•   Sensitization workshops and seminars should be regularly held to enhance the local Communities' appreciation of LtP as a norm for ECD pedagogies everywhere, including homesteads.

• Donor communities should work hand in glove with government to upscale quality of learning environments for ECD.

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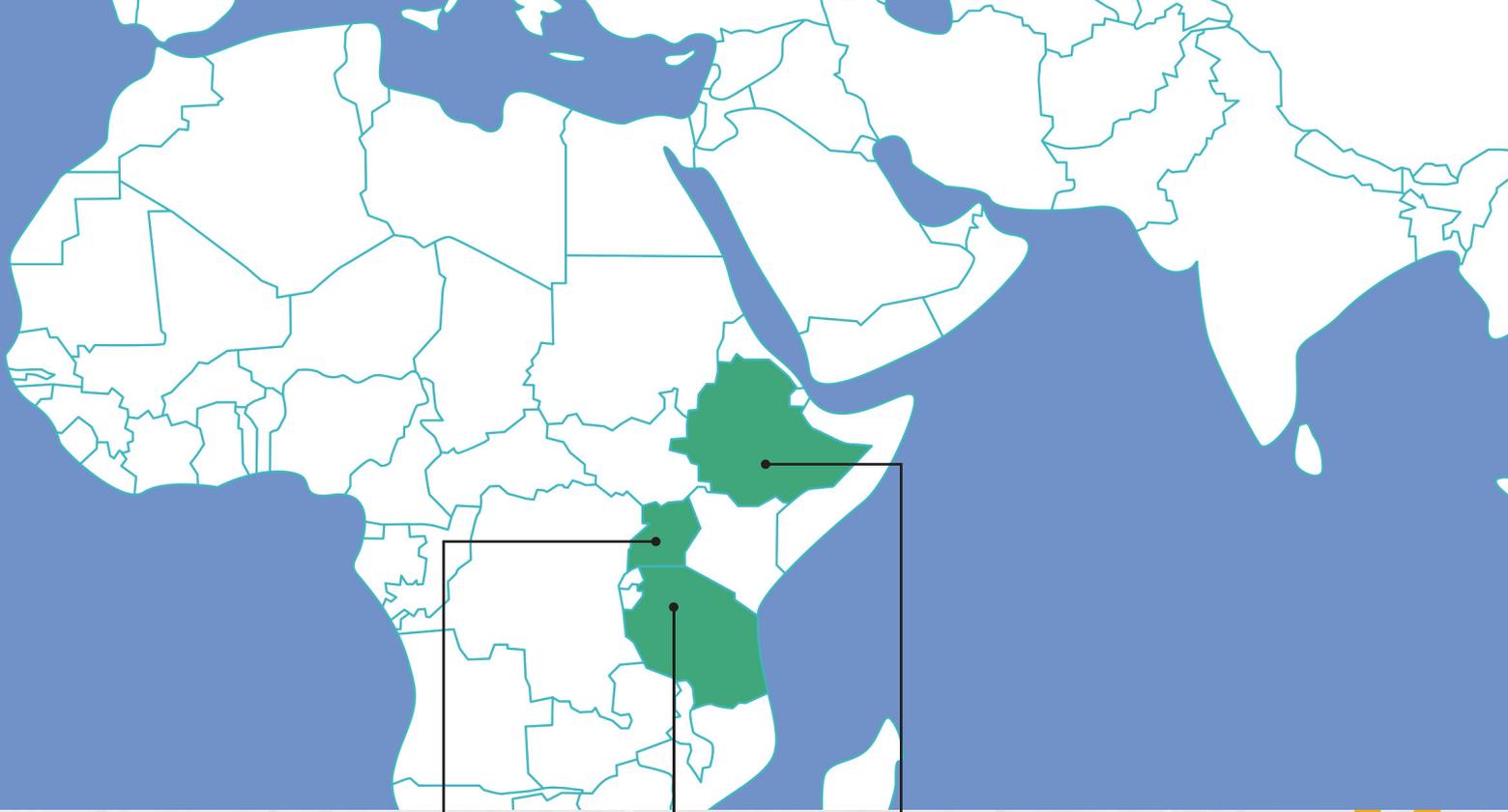
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