



# Learning through Play Methodology for Competency-based Curriculum Implementation

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In partnership with



The LEGO Foundation

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2023–2024 school year, PlayMatters delivered a core package of support to early pre- and primary schools located in refugee camps and host communities in Kigoma region with a goal of integrating Learning through Play (LtP) as a pedagogical approach aligned with the Competency Based Curriculum. Implementation research was conducted in six Congolese primary schools in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, and we found the following baseline–endline changes:

- Head Teachers improved support for teachers
- Teachers' occupational well-being significantly improved
- Teacher classroom management practices significantly improved
- The intervention was implemented with high levels of quality and fidelity

These findings, which represent changes over the course of one school year, provide strong evidence that PlayMatters' theory of change has worked as expected and is an implementation modality for the Competency Based Curriculum. Based on these findings, LtP has the potential to improve the quality of teaching and learning in low-resource contexts beyond refugee settings.

## BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology in Tanzania recently revised the basic education curriculum to prioritize a competency-based approach, highlighting the role of active, student-centered teaching methodologies in primary education.<sup>1</sup> This revised curriculum prioritizes such methodologies as critical for developing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (skills including creativity and critical thinking, amongst others) for Tanzanian children. Similarly, the pre-primary curriculum and syllabus prioritizes the use of play-based approaches that places the child at the center of the teaching and learning process.<sup>2</sup>

PlayMatters is a teacher professional development intervention focused on supporting pre-primary and primary teachers to use LtP, an active teaching and learning methodology, to deliver curricular content in refugee camps and host communities in Kigoma, Tanzania. PlayMatters defined LtP as an active teaching and learning method with three key components: (i) the teacher facilitates playful learning experiences connected to a learning objective; (ii) learners have opportunities to interact with materials and/or others; and (iii) the teacher creates a safe and inclusive learning environment. The intervention includes six components at the school-level: teacher training, training for school leaders to deliver teacher continuous professional development (TCPD), school management training, community engagement, provision of teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and safe school infrastructure. PlayMatters collaborated with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, the Tanzania Institute of Education, the Agency for the Development of Educational Management, the President's Office – Regional

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2022). Curriculum for Primary Education Standard I–VI. Tanzania Institute of Education. Dar es Salaam.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2023). Curriculum And Syllabus For Pre-Primary Education. Tanzania Institute of Education. Dar es Salaam.

Administration and Local Government, and national teacher training colleges to develop and implement training content and approaches aligned with the Competency Based Curriculum. PlayMatters ultimately aims to improve holistic learning and well-being for children.

Through a collaboration between a researcher from the University of Dodoma and the International Rescue Committee, an implementation research study was conducted in PlayMatters schools during the September 2023 – June 2024 school year in the Nyarugusu Refugee Camp. The study examines the validity of PlayMatters' theory of change as well as the quality and fidelity of implementation. This brief summarizes findings from the following research question (a sub-set of the broader study research questions): *"What changes are observed in teachers' continuous professional development, instructional practices, motivation, and well-being?"*

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a sequential mixed-methods approach from a sample of 6 Congolese refugee primary schools.

**Table 1: Quantitative Sample Table**

Participant	Baseline (Pre-Training)	Post-Training	Endline
Teacher Survey	129	-	129
Classroom Observation	-	46	46

Quantitative data were collected by trained enumerators as summarized in Table 1 and as follows:

- **Teacher Survey (Baseline & Endline):** Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale, Scale on Perceptions of LtP, ASSETS (Well-being Assessment of Skills and Supports that Enable Teachers to Succeed), Teacher Sources of Stress, and Teacher Access to TCPD
- **Classroom Observation (Post-Training & Endline):** Teacher Classroom Observation (Time on task, Materials available and used, Quality of learning environment, Teacher instructional practices, Classroom management practices, Student engagement)

For the qualitative data, face-to-face training observations, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted according to Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Qualitative Sample Table**

Participant	Post-Training	Endline
Education Coordinators (FGD)	5	5
Head Teachers (KII)	-	7
Teachers (FGD)	32	58
Children (FGD)	-	144

# FINDINGS

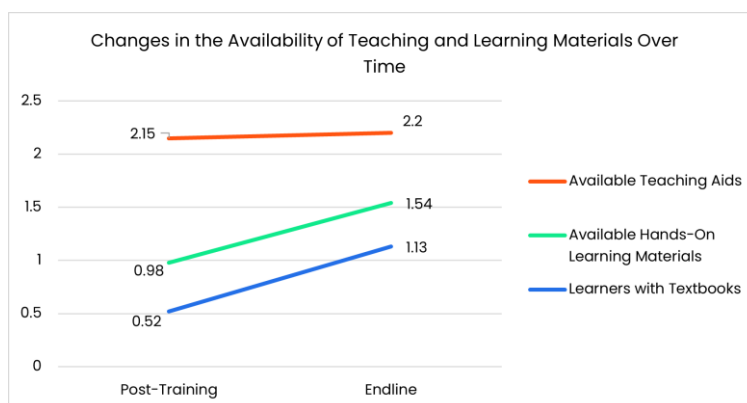
## Teachers Reported Significant Increases in Professional Development Opportunities Relevant to Their Work

Teachers at endline reported statistically significantly better TCPD opportunities than at baseline. This includes approaches such as teacher learning circles (TLCs), face-to-face in-service training, and coaching and mentoring. A majority of teachers described increased professional development opportunities, confirming reported surveys: *“We teachers helped each other on areas we identified to be problematic or difficult. We have been asked to be open to mentors so they can help in addressing the difficult to improve instruction”* (FGD, Teacher School 3). Additionally, Head Teachers described increased capacity to provide school-based TCPD: *“participation in the PlayMatters project enabled us to develop capacity to assure teaching done by classroom teachers. We have been oriented to assure teaching by conducting classroom observation to learn the extent to which subject teachers integrated LtP and use of manipulatives to promote learning, and the extent all students are involved in the learning activities”* (KII, HT School 3). Ensuring comprehensive TCPD opportunities for teachers through various modalities is critical for the uptake of LtP methods.

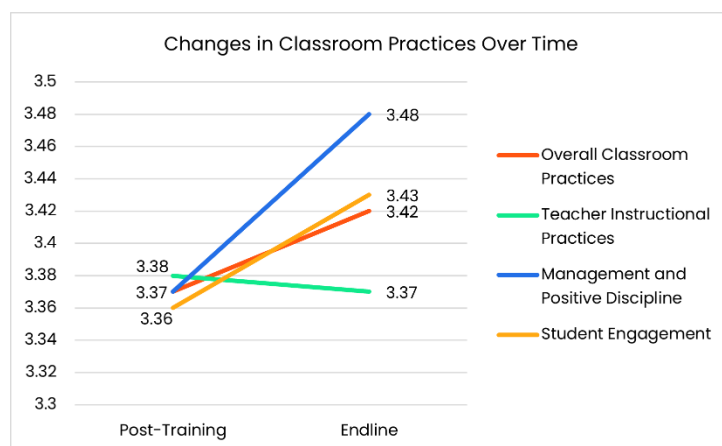
## Physical Learning Environments Improved

PlayMatters conducted light school rehabilitation and provision of TLMs. Positive but statistically insignificant changes were observed in classroom infrastructure such as the cleanliness of the classroom and seating arrangements. Minimal effects were detected primarily due to the minor scope and budget allocated to rehabilitation efforts. However, statistically significant increases in the availability of hands-on learning materials and textbooks were observed over time with moderate effect sizes, indicating more opportunities for students to engage with TLMs.

Teachers also described increased use of TLMs in their lessons: *“LtP makes students become engaged in learning all the time, they interact with each other, with the teacher and the learning materials. Therefore, all the time they are active. This was contrary to the traditional methods we used before the introduction of LtP by the PlayMatters project.”* (FGD, Teacher School 2). Ensuring teachers have, can create, and are able to use TLMs in safe learning environments are core components to LtP classroom implementation.



## Teachers Improved Their Classroom Management and Student Engagement Practices



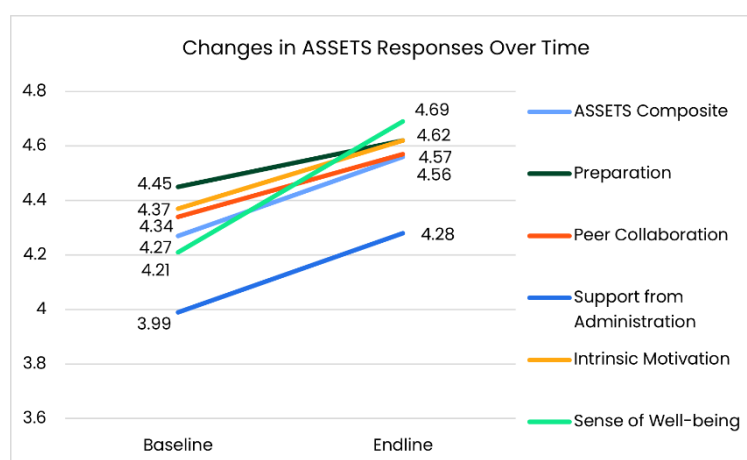
From post-training to endline, teachers displayed significantly better classroom and positive discipline practices. In addition, we observed positive improvements in teachers' student engagement scores, though not statistically significant. We also observed slight decreases in teachers' instructional practices, which were also not significant. One explanation for this phenomenon is that the sample size was too small to detect statistical significance in these

domains. Additionally, rather than a pure baseline, the first classroom observation was conducted one-month post-training, indicating that teachers may have improved their practices immediately following the training (at which point they were first observed) and the decline represents teachers reverting to their prior practices throughout the academic year. It is plausible that these scores are still an improvement from teachers' baseline skills prior to participating in any PlayMatters activities.

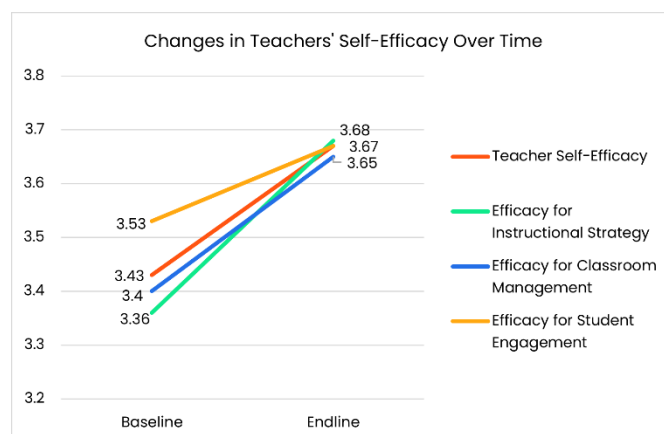
Qualitatively, respondents described positive learning environments. One Head Teacher reported: *"I lead the school, student and teacher, by creating a positive classroom teaching environment"* (KII, HT School 3). Similarly, a camp education administrator described the inclusivity of LtP: *"I ensure that the education provided involves all, so all children have the opportunity to receive education, regardless of their intellectual, gender, or physical differences"* (KII, Education Coordinator). Despite the lack of quantitative data, teachers repeatedly described an increased uptake of LtP in their teaching practice through planning and executing actively engaging lessons, signaling promise of LtP implementation as a core teaching methodology.

## Teachers Reported Improved Occupational Well-being

Teachers at endline reported significantly better skills and supports to succeed related to teacher well-being than at baseline. This suggests the PlayMatters Core Package influenced positive improvements in teachers' well-being across all sub-domains, despite the complex challenges refugee teachers face in Tanzania. The largest effect size observed was in the sub-domain of sense of well-being. When teachers are well, they are able to teach well, and can better engage in the teaching and learning process.



In addition to improvements in teachers' well-being, teachers reported that self-efficacy significantly improved from baseline to endline. This suggests the PlayMatters Core Package provided teachers with the confidence and belief that they were able to effectively implement practices related to instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement.



## Children Appreciated LtP in Their Classes

Children positively described engaging in LtP in their classrooms. Most children reported that LtP-integrated lessons ensure engagement in the learning process, bring joy, and facilitate easier understanding of curricular content: *"The teacher who uses games helps me understand, but the one who doesn't use play, I don't understand."* (FGD, Child School 4). Additionally, children described the benefits of group work, particularly the opportunity to develop friendship, inclusivity, and cooperation while also ensuring peer learning for content acquisition: *"We explain to the one who doesn't understand, we don't exclude them, we ensure that everyone understands."* (FGD, Child School 4). Overall, children also described the benefits to LtP, including numeracy and literacy development, indicating the value of LtP for supporting foundational learning skills.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Utilize the existing TIE Learning Management System (LMS) to develop an e-course to sustain and refresh teachers' skills on LtP, and scale good practice across other schools. Promote the use of LtP modules uploaded in the TIE LMS to support teachers through existing TCPD structures in schools throughout the country to integrate LtP into their teaching and learning practices.
2. Integrate LtP into pre-service teacher training, building on the knowledge, skills, and practices by utilizing approved LtP content and materials in the TIE LMS with support from PlayMatters-trained Master Trainers from TIE, Teacher Training Colleges, and School Quality Assurers involved in the PlayMatters project.
3. Provide ongoing support to TCPD and teachers at the district and regional levels to monitor, evaluate, and advise teachers' continued implementation of LtP practices in classrooms.

## CONCLUSIONS

These findings indicate positive improvements across all of PlayMatters' key outcome areas, including improved teacher professional development opportunities, classroom management



practices, teacher well-being, and teacher self-efficacy. This demonstrates that the promise of LTP integrated into the Tanzania education system to strengthen education services for all Tanzanian children.



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