

The LEGO Foundation

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Learning through play

Strengthening learning through play in early childhood education programmes



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UNICEF, 2018

1. Introduction

The importance of early learning is entrenched in the second target of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to ensure that, by 2030, “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. Pre-primary education is now considered an essential tool for achieving Universal Primary Education and the SDGs. Ensuring access to quality pre-primary education is a key strategy for improving learning and education outcomes as well as the efficiency of education systems.¹

The global momentum to expand and integrate early education services into education systems has great potential. But it also carries risks, if programming is not appropriate to meet children’s learning needs and interests. It can be tempting to extend primary education ideas and methods of teaching and learning down into the pre-primary level.

One of the great challenges in education planning, therefore, is to incorporate pre-primary education into the formal education sector while retaining the distinctive elements of quality programming for young children.² A key element to consider is ‘learning through play’, or ‘playful learning’, which is central to quality early childhood pedagogy and education.³

This brief will help pre-primary stakeholders advocate for making play-based or playful learning a central aspect of expanding and strengthening the pre-primary sub-sector. Grounded in a systems perspective, the brief offers background knowledge and examples of strategies that could be adapted to multiple contexts. The goal is to share practical ideas on how to embed play and child-centred pedagogy in pre-primary education expansion efforts to ensure the quality and appropriateness of these programmes.

In this brief

The brief describes the nature of pre-primary services within the broader concept of early learning. We then share definitions of what is meant by play in early childhood, followed by key points of why learning through play builds lifelong learners and supports children’s overall development. We then note the obstacles that pre-primary advocates may face when making a case for play-based methods, and we propose a systems perspective in advocating for child-centred pedagogy and playful programmes. Noting the unique context of every country, the suggested strategies in this brief provide initial ideas that could be adapted to local contexts.



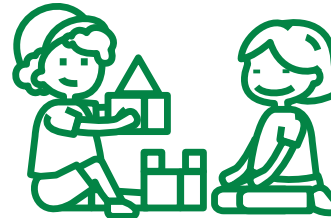
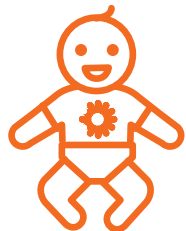
2. Play: An essential strategy for learning



The early years matter

Scientific research over the past 30 years has taught us that the most important period of human development is from birth to eight years old.⁴ During these years, the development of cognitive skills, emotional well-being, social competence and sound physical and mental health builds a strong foundation for success well into the adult years. Although learning takes place throughout life, in

early childhood, learning is taking place at a speed that will never be equalled.⁵ The preschool (or pre-primary) education years fall in the middle of the early childhood period and lay the groundwork for success in school and beyond.⁶ Although this brief is focused on the pre-primary years, we note that learning through play is relevant throughout the whole early childhood period and beyond.



Conception to age 2 or the first 1000 days

With adequate stimulation, a child's brain forms neural connections at a pace of at least 1,000 per second. However, recent indications are that the speed could be up to 1 million per second. These connections are triggered by rich, loving and protected environments, in the context of responsive and playful caregiving that foster bonding and secure attachment, contributing to positive socioemotional development.

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3 to 5 years

Often referred to as the "preschool period". Children's language, social-emotional and cognitive skills are rapidly expanding. During this period, the stimulation and learning that come from play, reading, singing and interacting with peers and caring adults at home and in quality early education settings are essential. Play in the preschool years enables children to explore and make sense of the world around them, as well as to use and develop their imagination and creativity.

6 to 8 years

Often considered the early grades of primary school. Play-based learning continues to be critical, yet it is often neglected in favour of academic-focused education approaches. Yet, in this period, active, play-based learning approaches can transform the educational experiences of children in the early primary grades and strengthen learning motivation and outcomes.

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How does this brief define pre-primary education?

Pre-primary education is focused on support for learning available to children in formal or organized settings and programs. It typically covers children three years of age until the start of primary education. Under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 0 Programme categorization, pre-primary education programmes typically focus on interactions with peers and trained educators and the development of logical and reasoning skills, as well as introducing early literacy and mathematical concepts and other school readiness skills. The landscape of pre-primary education provision is complex, with great variety of programs and providers. Age of entry to pre-primary programmes and how long such programmes last differ from country to country.

Play, and why it is important for learning and development in the early years

Educators are re-thinking how to teach young children to tap their enormous learning potential. **Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills.** For this reason, play opportunities and environments that promote play, exploration and hands-on learning are at the core of effective pre-primary programmes. The next section of this brief explains what is meant by play and play-based learning and gives examples of the many ways in which children learn through play.

Play takes many forms

Everyone knows 'play' when they see it – on streets, in villages, on playgrounds, in classrooms. People from every culture, economic background and community engage in play from their earliest years. Yet play can be hard to define. Researchers and theorists, however, agree on the key characteristics of playful experiences, as seen in the figure on this page.⁷ An important aspect of play is children's agency and control over the experience. Agency refers to children's initiative, decision-making and self-choice in play.⁸

Ultimately, play should involve some degree of agency, enabling children to take on an active role and ownership in their experiences, as well as recognizing and trusting children to be capable, autonomous, and agents of their own playful learning journeys.

Play is meaningful

Children play to make sense of the world around them, and to find meaning in an experience by connecting it to something already known. Through play, children express and expand their understanding of their experiences.

Play is joyful

Look at children – or adults – playing, often smiling and laughing. Of course, play may have its frustrations and challenges (Who gets the first turn? Why can't I make this block building stay up?), but the overall feeling is one of enjoyment, motivation, thrill and pleasure.

Play is actively engaging

Watch children playing, and you will usually see that they become deeply involved, often combining physical, mental and verbal engagement.

Play is iterative

Play and learning are not static. Children play to practice skills, try out possibilities, revise hypotheses and discover new challenges, leading to deeper learning.

Play is socially interactive

Play allows children to communicate ideas, to understand others through social interaction, paving the way to build deeper understanding and more powerful relationships.





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Learning through play: More examples

Children at play learn how to:

–**Make a plan and follow through** [*“I want to draw my family. Who will I put in my picture?”*]

–**Learn from trial and error, using imagination and problem-solving skills** [*“My tall tower fell down! Maybe my friend can help build it up again.”*]

–**Apply concepts of quantity, science and movement to real life** [*“I like these big seeds. How many will I need to cover this part of my picture?”*]

–**Reason in a logical, analytical manner by acting on objects** [*“There are still some pieces missing in this puzzle. Which ones might fit?”*]

–**Communicate with classmates and negotiate differences in points of view** [*“I want to be the mother. Could you be the baby? Or maybe the grandmother?”*]

–**Derive satisfaction from their own accomplishments** [*“We did it together!”*]

–**Develop creativity and explore aesthetics and artistry** [*“I wonder what will happen if I mix these colours together?”*]

Children learn critical skills and develop as they play

When children choose to play, they are not thinking “Now I am going to learn something from this activity.” Yet their play creates powerful learning opportunities across all areas of development. Development and learning are complex and holistic, and yet skills across all developmental domains can be encouraged through play, including motor, cognitive and social and emotional skills. Indeed, in playful experiences, children tap a breadth of skills at any one time. Often this occurs during ‘corner play’ or ‘centre time’ in the context of early learning or pre-primary programs. Corner play, when well planned, promotes child development and learning competencies more effectively than any other pre-primary activity. By choosing to play with the things they like to do, children actually develop skills in all areas of development: intellectual, social, emotional and physical.⁹

For example, while children are playing, they can try out new social skills (e.g., sharing toys, agreeing on how to work together with materials), and they often take on some challenging cognitive tasks (such as figuring out how to make a building with smaller blocks when the larger ones are not available). Children are ‘hands-on’ learners. They acquire knowledge through playful interaction with objects and people.¹⁰ They need a lot of practice with solid objects to understand abstract concepts. For example, by playing with geometric blocks they understand the concept that two squares can form a rectangle and two triangles can form a square. From dancing a pattern such as step forward, step back twirl, clap and repeat, they begin to understand the features of patterns that are the foundation for mathematics. Pretend or ‘symbolic’ play (such as playing house or market) is especially beneficial: in such play, children express their ideas, thoughts and feelings, learn how to control their emotions, interact with others, resolve conflicts and gain a sense of competence.¹¹

Play sets the foundation for the development of critical social and emotional knowledge and skills. Through play, children learn to forge connections with others, and to share, negotiate and resolve conflicts, as well as learn self-advocacy skills. Play also teaches children leadership as well as group skills. Furthermore, play is a natural tool that children can use to build their resilience and coping skills, as they learn to navigate relationships and deal with social challenges as well as conquer their fears, for example through re-enacting fantasy heroes.¹²

More generally, play satisfies a basic human need to express imagination, curiosity and creativity, which are key resources in a knowledge-driven world. They help us to cope, to find pleasure, and to use our imaginative and innovative powers. Indeed, the critical skills that children acquire through play in the preschool years form part of the fundamental building blocks of future complex “21st-century skills”.



Play is an essential strategy for learning and teaching

Learning through play in organized pre-primary setting

In organized pre-primary settings, play experiences are enhanced when children are provided with ample time and space to engage freely with the pre-primary setting/environment. Play can occur in many forms: play with objects; imaginary play; play with peers and adults; solitary play; cooperative play; associative play; physical play. Play is considered children's "work" and is the vehicle through which children acquire knowledge and skills, allowing children to engage independently and with others. The role of teachers and other adults in the room/environment is to enable and scaffold playful experiences and learning – this requires thoughtful planning (for example, setting out materials to pique children's curiosity) and spontaneous interactions building on natural curiosities and ideas (for example, following the children's lead in pretend play). Providing children with active and playful hands-on experiences help foster and enrich learning.



Learning through play at home and in the community

While this brief focuses on the systems approach to integrate play in all aspects of pre-primary programs and to ensure developmentally appropriate practice, we must not forget that young children do not only learn in formal or organized settings. The home environment and the community are where young children spend the larger, if not the largest, part of their early lives, interacting with parents, siblings, extended family members, and neighbours. These interactions and relationships have a significant influence over how children understand and experience the world around them. Indeed, home environments and the community provide excellent opportunities to promote learning through play from the early years through pre-primary and primary years. Primary caregivers, as children's "first teachers," are the biggest supporters of children's learning, and therefore have an important role in creating the space for learning through play. It is therefore essential to support caregivers and empower them to take an active role in shaping children's learning and development, as well as to facilitate playful learning for their children at home and in the community in day-to-day experiences.



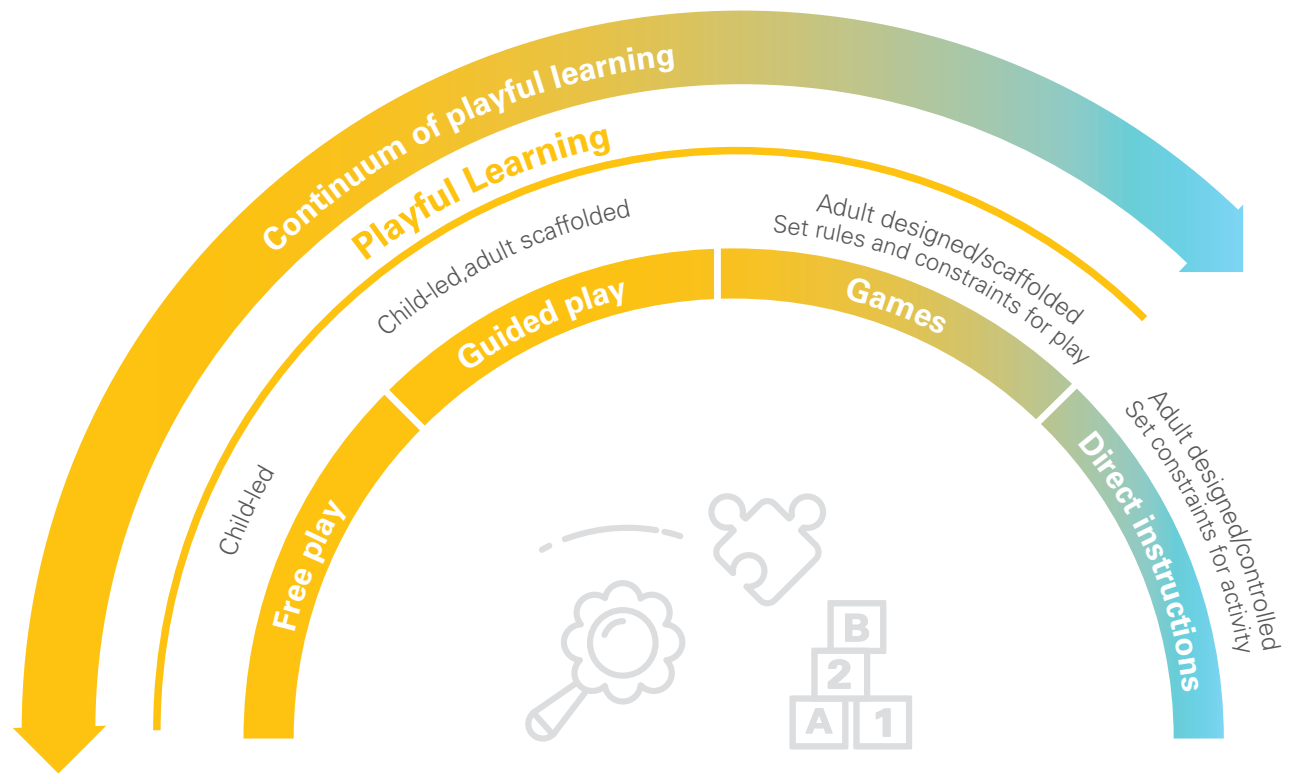
Learning through play in the early grades of primary school

Learning through play is not only for pre-schoolers. In the primary grades, play opportunities enhance children's mastery of academic concepts and build motivation to learn. In fact, two of the most important things that play can develop are interest and motivation. Encouraging these in the early grades brings children on board in contributing to their own learning. For example, playing board games can strengthen math concepts while building social competence. Book clubs, dramatizing stories, and other reading games, make it much more likely for struggling readers to move ahead and not give up. Exploration of a wide variety of printed materials and writing tools at a 'writing corner' can engage reluctant writers and help children learn from one another. Further, play fosters creativity and imagination, critical components in enabling us to cope, to find pleasure, and to innovate. Play and opportunities to engage actively in learning strengthens student's creative powers. Letting primary grade students engage actively with materials, issues, topics, opens up the space for inquiry and problem solving¹³.



A central tenet of learning through play is bringing together the different spheres of children’s life – home, school and community and wider world, such that there is continuity and connectivity of learning over time and across different situations.¹⁴ The adults in these spheres have a critical role in facilitating this continuity and connectivity of learning, by recognizing, initiating, guiding and scaffolding playful experiences, in support of children’s agency. The continuum of playful learning¹⁵ in Figure 1 shows the different levels of child-adult involvement in playful experiences – at one end, free play gives children the freedom to play, explore and discover; this progresses towards more guided or structured play with adult participation. Across this continuum, it is important to ensure that adults are equipped with the necessary and appropriate skills to support learning through play¹⁶ – even in cases of free play, as adults need to recognize the benefits of free play, and foster it by providing the time and environment.

Figure 1. Continuum of Playful Learning



Source: Adapted from Zosh, Jennifer N., et al. Learning through play: a review of the evidence. LEGO Foundation, 2017.



3. A systems approach to making play a core aspect of early childhood education programmes



Obstacles to integrating play into pre-primary systems

Why is learning through play not deeply integrated in many countries' pre-primary programmes?

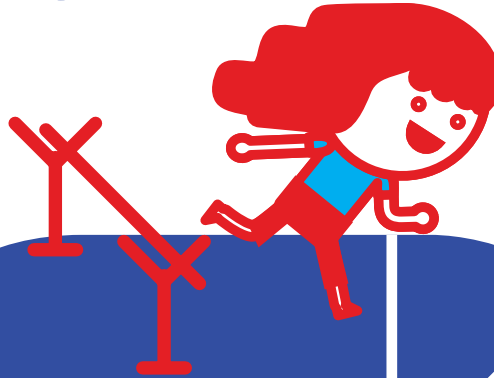
Various factors contribute to this:

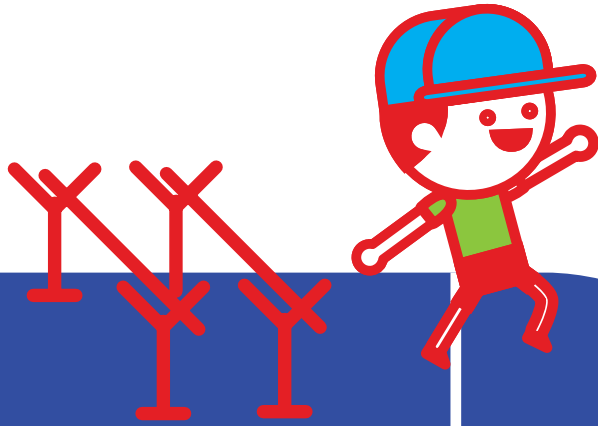
Lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts.

Rote memorization and recall of information remain the norm in many settings. Education officials and staff, as well as administrators and principals, may not realize the critical role of play in building young children's understanding of mathematical, scientific and literacy concepts.

Parental or caregiver misconceptions about play.

Many people, if asked, express the belief that play is frivolous and that play opportunities take time away from 'true learning'. These misconceptions are caused by a lack of understanding of the benefits of play in children's education, with the result that families might not demand play opportunities in pre-primary education settings.





Curriculum and early learning standards that do not address play.

Many countries have curricular standards yet they seldom include play-based learning activities and teaching methods. For example, a review of Early Learning and Development Standards of 37 countries conducted by UNICEF revealed that only in one third of the standards, the concept of playful learning was well integrated.¹⁷ Furthermore, 'play competencies' are unlikely to be part of stated desired outcomes for children's development.¹⁸

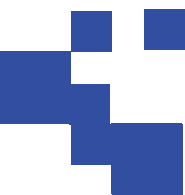
Lack of teacher professional development that focuses on learning through play.

Many teachers are not adequately prepared to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. They may think of 'learning materials' only as workbooks or charts on the wall, rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning. Even if teachers see the need for such hands-on materials, there are often inadequate resources, and no training to help teachers find or create play materials with low cost-locally available materials. Many teachers have not seen learning through play in practice and as a result lack confidence in implementing in their classrooms.



Large class sizes that limit children's freedom to play.

Finally, additional challenges exist when classes are too large. When more than 30 children are in a relatively small space, it is challenging to give children active experiences with materials or even have enough materials for all children. Large classes also make it difficult for teachers to support children's play through personal conversations and thought-provoking questions.





Removing obstacles and moving forward

Because the pre-primary sub-sector is so complex, a coordinated systems approach is helpful to remove obstacles and integrate play consistently into programmes.

Simply tackling one challenge at a time will not work. For example, if a country develops teacher workshops on the value of play but has no guidance or curriculum expectations for play's place in pre-primary programmes, teachers are unlikely to implement what they learned in workshops. Similarly, if there is no effort to help families understand how their children can learn by playing and to support them in promoting play experiences at home, then the families might press for rote learning, workbook pages and tests of abstract knowledge.

To strengthen and systematize efforts and initiatives in the area of pre-primary education, UNICEF developed a conceptual framework that emphasizes the complex nature of the sub-sector and outlines key **enabling factors** in the policy environment as well as five **action areas** that contribute to an effective pre-primary sub-sector.¹⁹ Figure 2 presents a visual summary of the framework and also highlights the **guiding principles** of equity, efficiency, responsiveness as well as the importance of coordination across national, subnational and local levels of the sub-sector.

In the following section, we look at how each aspect of the pre-primary system can foster play-based learning. For each area, background and rationale are provided, along with examples of strategies that promote play-based learning. These examples are intended to encourage reflection and should be adapted to meet countries' needs.

Can a focus on playful learning be integrated in the enabling environment?

'Enabling environment' refers to the broad set of interrelated national political, social and financial conditions that can either promote or hinder the successful functioning of the pre-primary sub-sector. A supportive enabling environment is conducive to recognizing the importance of learning through play, and it can further strengthen this emphasis by fostering coordination with other sectors such as health, nutrition and social protection, which together can create a unified voice for play in children's lives. The four elements of the enabling environment, and how they can foster play-based learning, are:

Policies and legislation

Policies specific to the pre-primary sub-sector are important because they can clearly affirm children's right to play and can state that play-based learning is a distinctive and essential feature of effective early learning. Policies and directives can reflect a child-centred approach to learning and teaching; such policies create an expectation that playful learning will be taken seriously and implemented across levels of the sub-sector.

Public Demand

Support for pre-primary services among parents and caregivers is key and it should be informed by strong awareness of what quality means in pre-primary education. Awareness-raising should focus on young children's unique learning needs, e.g., the need to make meaning through playful investigations supported by knowledgeable teachers. A key aspect of fostering public support and demand for learning through play is to ensure that parents recognize their role in providing meaningful play experiences in the home environment, and to empower them to do so. Garnering public support and demand for learning through play will enhance the pre-primary system's commitment to and recognition of the benefits of play.



Figure 2. Pre-Primary Sub-Sector Conceptual Framework

Ministerial leadership

High-level leadership that is convinced or aware of the value of child-centered and playful approaches for teaching and learning can give visibility to these issues and put pressure on all parts of the sub-sector to integrate meaningfully in their strategies and implementation plans. Ministerial leadership can facilitate coordination of this philosophy across sub-sectors as well, promoting continuity between pre-primary and primary education. Additionally, relevant child development expertise across key arms of the lead ministry and other institutions can validate the importance of play in making pre-primary learning effective.

Financing

Both public and private investments in the pre-primary sub-sector should take into account essential financing for appropriate learning materials, equipment and professional supports that make a strong emphasis on play possible. In the context of limited financing, where quality elements are often neglected, public funding estimates for pre-primary education should be based on achieving quality pedagogical goals. Service expansion targets should be reasonable, balancing access with achieving minimum quality.

How can playful learning be integrated into the five Action Areas of the pre-primary sub-sector?

Each Action Area provides an opportunity to strengthen the use of play as a core value of the sub-sector.



ACTION AREA 1

Planning for pre-primary service provision

Providing pre-primary services that are available and affordable to all families and their children requires careful planning that prioritizes equity and ensure that children, especially those who are most vulnerable, have equitable opportunities to learn through developmentally appropriate activities and materials.

Emphasizing learning through play as a pre-primary teaching methodology has implications for the sub-sector's financial, human and physical resources. Implementing a play-focused vision also requires regulations on class size that take this methodology into account.

Examples of strategies to ensure play is a part of planning

Consider existing governance structures and the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders to ensure that there is a shared vision around the value of play.

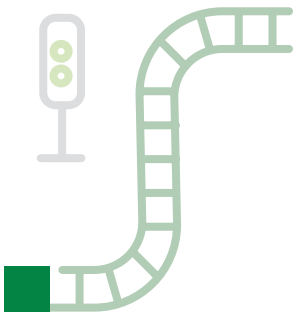
It is important to ensure that the value of play is recognized and acknowledged by stakeholders across all governance levels and ministerial branches. Pre-primary expansion planning, for example,

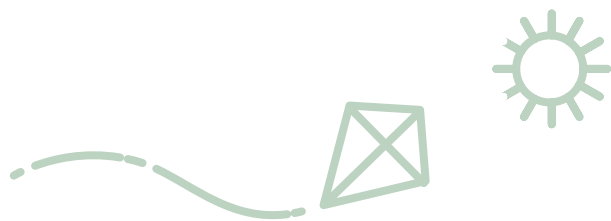
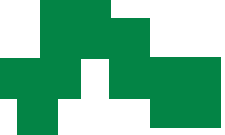
is often managed by planning officers in the ministry of education (or other relevant ministry) while teacher training and curriculum development is led by other branches in the ministry. Sharing a common vision for the pre-primary sub-sector which includes learning through play enhances coordination and planning across relevant ministry branches to support its implementation.

When planning for expansion, consider human resources needed to implement quality play-based programmes.

It is important to consider national, sub-national and local needs for all personnel required for the delivery of quality play-based programmes (e.g., sub-national and local officials, teachers, specialists, supervisors, principals, technical experts, quality assurance inspectors, building engineers, etc.). This involves planning for appropriate class sizes and teacher-child ratios. Requirements for class sizes and teacher-child ratios should be based on the number of children a teacher can effectively support using active, play-based learning methods. A recommended class size is no more than 25 children with one teacher and one assistant.

However, the reality is that many current programmes do not meet these recommendations. This makes it very difficult for teachers to implement methodologies (e.g., language-rich conversations, indoor corner play, etc.) that promote child development. Possible solutions include dividing children into two groups (of 25-30 children each) that rotate from outdoor to indoor activities under the supervision of a teacher and community teacher assistant. This arrangement enables 25 children to have access to corner play materials, and small group sizes for circle time, while 25 others enjoy outdoor play and a small group activity such as story time with the community teacher assistant.





When planning for expansion, consider physical resources and materials needed to implement quality play-based programmes.

Planning for physical spaces and equipment should follow child-centred principles. Guidelines on room construction should reflect the need for large spaces to support movement and interactions of young children. Thematic or free play corners/centres should be available, as well as ample outdoor space to promote outdoor learning activities.

An important policy-level planning activity is to ensure sufficient resource allocations for play-based pedagogy.

Sometimes policymakers interpret ‘learning through play’ to mean that children do not need any materials (e.g., textbooks) and conclude that money can be saved this way. Advocacy can clarify that while many play activities are ‘free’ – and many learning materials can be produced from local materials – a substantial inventory of equipment and materials is required to support holistic learning and development.

Financing play

Financing for appropriate learning materials, equipment and professional supports that promote play does not need to be costly but does need to promote relevance and diversity in scope. For example, nationally relevant, low cost materials can be explored as governments develop pre-primary learning resource packages for each classroom. For example, in Senegal, UNICEF supported the development of a local preschool classroom kit of play and learning resources (modelled after the ECD kit for emergencies settings) ensuring the use of local toys, games and other resources that promote play.



A
B
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ACTION AREA 2

Curriculum development and implementation

Learning through play with stimulating materials is an essential feature of pre-primary curricula, although specifics will differ across contexts and cultures.

Curricula and pedagogy must respond to varying cultural contexts. However, a key principle across all settings is that curricula should be **developmentally appropriate**. An effective curriculum is well suited to the ages and the developmental, individual and cultural characteristics of children. For pre-primary children, a curriculum that emphasizes exploration and intentional teaching of key content through stimulating interactions and active, playful learning experiences is likely to promote progress across all areas of development and learning.

Examples of strategies to promote play in curriculum development and implementation

Ensure that play and/or active, child-centred learning and teaching are a core value of national and local curricula.

Some written curricula describe outcomes and child competencies but do not specify the methods or pedagogies that should be used to achieve them. For example, a national curriculum may state that a literacy goal for pre-primary children is knowing the alphabet, or that a math goal is knowing the names of geometric shapes. These goals may be valuable and appropriate if the primary approach is learning through play; if the method is rote teaching (simply reciting letters or naming shapes from flash cards), however, children will learn less effectively and their engagement in learning is likely to be undermined.

Provide clear, user-friendly curriculum implementation guides for teachers and managers.

To implement learning through play, service providers and teachers require user-friendly curriculum guides that describe what to do and why. They also need training to use these materials. Implementation guides should be supplemented with such resources as simple,





Developmentally appropriate practice and playful learning

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)²⁰ is an approach to teaching young children that is grounded in research on how young children develop and learn. The four key dimensions of DAP are:

Individual appropriateness: Children's varied personalities, learning styles and family backgrounds influence how they experience learning. Children also grow at different rates, and some children have learning difficulties or talents that shape their progress. That is why group teaching is minimized in DAP. Direct observation of children helps teachers build on children's individual interests and abilities to help them develop.

Age appropriateness: Evidence of what is typical at each age and stage of development helps determine which experiences best promote holistic learning. Play-based activities must be right for a child's individual development yet challenging enough to promote progress and interest.

Cultural appropriateness: Cultural context and priorities also account for differences in child development and learning priorities. Getting to know children's families and learning about the values and expectations that shape their lives helps teachers provide meaningful, relevant and respectful learning experiences for each child and family. It creates a foundation for parent-teacher partnerships.

Meaningfulness to the child: In early childhood, children learn best through play-based, hands-on experiences. They make sense of ideas from real-life experience (versus 'telling') and are motivated to learn when something is interesting and exciting.²¹ Children appear to gain lasting academic and social benefits when they spend part of each day planning and directing their own learning through play, rather than receiving impersonal, direct instruction focused specifically on academics, which may discourage individual initiative. Self-directed play with interesting materials and peers in the presence of caring teachers appears to foster confidence, independence and concentration skills.

day-to-day implementation guides; training on the curriculum and teaching materials; and ongoing on-site supervision and support. When curriculum training is combined with implementation guides and resources, teachers gain the capacity to implement a balance of teacher-guided and free-play learning activities.

Ensure an adequate supply of indoor and outdoor games, toys, manipulatives and other learning materials that support implementation of a play-based curriculum.

Pre-primary programmes cannot implement a play-based curriculum without equipment and materials to support implementation. As noted in Action Area 1, effective planning covers all resources required to ensure adequate materials, and yet when it comes to implementation and ensuring these resources make it to classrooms, more bottlenecks emerge. Like the curriculum, the materials and equipment should be culturally appropriate and adaptable for use by children with and without disabilities. Outdoor equipment that supports learning through play is also important and can take many forms.

Ensure that early learning and development standards, where they exist, incorporate play features.

Early learning and development standards (ELDS) are a set of statements that reflect expectations for the learning and development of young children, from birth to 8 years of age, across several domains of development. Experience to date of countries who have developed and/or implemented ELDS suggests that ELDS present an effective entry point for embedding the value of play and child-centred learning into curriculum practice. Many countries have used the ELDS to review or develop curriculum and in some countries (e.g., South Africa), ELDS drove the first nationally applicable curriculum to be used across the variety of early childhood education and development provision. It is therefore opportune to leverage the ELDS, where relevant, to inform the curriculum.

Ensure that pre-primary curriculum includes strategies for families to reinforce activities, skills and competences at home.

Primary caregivers are children's "first teachers," and therefore have a critical role in supporting learning at home, as well as ensuring continuity and connectivity of learning (as mentioned earlier), and it is therefore opportune to leverage this resource. Pre-primary curriculum can therefore include strategies to involve families to support learning, such as: take home activities that parents can reinforce; school meetings and conferences that focus on building caregivers' capacity to support playful learning at home; ideas for



games that can be replicated in the home, etc.

ACTION AREA 3

Pre-primary teachers and other personnel

Facilitating meaningful playful experiences and learning opportunities to promote holistic development and school readiness is among the most important competencies for pre-primary personnel.

Teachers and early childhood educators are at the heart of delivering quality pre-primary services. Teachers need to understand the importance of play and child-centred pedagogy in early learning, and be equipped with the necessary skills and dispositions to put into action play-based learning. Other education personnel – education inspectors, training providers, specialized staff, and directors and principals – must also be sensitized to and embrace learning through play as an effective tool for supporting learning and child development.

Examples of strategies to promote play through teacher development

Seek ways to bring more adults into children's learning experiences to support children's learning.

It can be difficult for one teacher to implement play-based pre-primary education. A second person in the room/setting, whether a parent or another type of community teacher assistant, can make a great



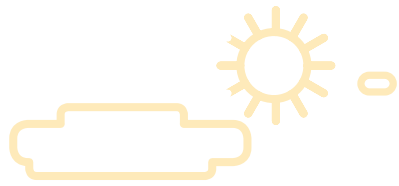
difference for the teacher and the children. Assistants can work as volunteers or for a modest honorarium. Having two adults in the room/setting means that there is more support available to children to experience free play or to engage in learning. It also means that children – including children with disabilities – will experience more personal relationships that will deepen their play experiences and enhance their learning. Using volunteers or paid assistants effectively, however, requires orientation and supervision.

Emphasize the distinctive work of supporting child-centred pre-primary settings when selecting teachers for those settings, and when setting goals for their professional development.

Teacher selection criteria (and goals for professional development) for a play-based pre-primary education environment should not be identical to selection criteria for primary-grade teachers. Emphasis should be on the attitudes and skills that enable learning and development to flourish. Examples of these attitudes and skills include physical energy and curiosity; willingness to try new practices and willingness to let children shape some of their own learning; creative skills; and willingness to spend time preparing materials and playful activities. These attributes are also important when selecting and mentoring teachers in the early primary grades.

Integrate learning through play and its benefits in pre-service programmes for pre-primary teachers.

Pre-service education institutions need to develop specialized programmes for pre-primary education that highlight play-based learning and related teaching methodologies. In Zambia, the



Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework for Colleges of Education specifically highlights that the focus of nursery centres for 3 and 4-year-olds is to promote social interaction of young children of different social backgrounds through play, and that the teaching and learning of 5 and 6-year-olds is largely informal through guided and unguided play.²¹ Programmes often combine primary and pre-primary teacher education; they often emphasize only formal classroom teaching of academic skills. Advocacy is needed to develop courses and modules that show future teachers the benefits of play and developmentally appropriate methods and materials to use in their rooms/settings. Training and re-training college and university instructors is also important, so that they have the capacity to support play-focused teacher education.

High-quality pre-service education includes practical components, in which future teachers may observe playful pre-primary practices and try out those practices during internships or other supervised hands-on opportunities. When such models are not available, videos and other online resources may be useful.

Tips for programmes

Making the most of community assistant teachers

In addition to supporting children's play, community assistant teachers have other advantages for a pre-primary programme. Outreach to vulnerable communities and language minorities and changing parent beliefs about how children learn are more easily promoted when a community insider is working in the pre-primary setting. One source of such assistants is adolescents, who can be energetic volunteers in playing alongside young children.



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Innovative approaches to training educators on the value of play

In March 2017, South Africa's Council for Education Ministers (CEM) launched an innovative free on-line in-service training programme for early childhood educators, entitled "Powerful Learning Around You" (P.L.A.Y.), and accredited with the South African Council of Educators (SACE). The P.L.A.Y. initiative is a partnership between the Department of Basic Education, the LEGO Foundation and Cotlands. As a complement to existing and formal teacher training, P.L.A.Y. aims to reach pre-primary professionals to strengthen their knowledge and skills to effectively implement play-based learning, based on the country's National Curriculum Framework and National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, which highlights play as quintessential ingredient of early childhood education. This training programme is a creative example of how play can be integrated into the sub-sector, fulfilling the goal of reaching, equipping and inspiring practitioners to adopt learning through play, while achieving the vision of strengthening the inclusion and utilization of play as a powerful tool and method of early learning and development.



Tips for programmes

Simple training activities to help teachers implement corner play

Education officials can lead by example when their curriculum plans include resource allocations for workshops that train teachers to implement corner play and produce and use play materials.

Teachers can be trained to implement corner play by playing with typical materials found in each corner and then reflecting on the competencies children acquire from exploring the material independently or with a friend.

It is also helpful to give teachers the time to make one or two games or materials for each corner during a training workshop. This helps them get a good start on setting up corners in their classroom and increases their interest in doing so.

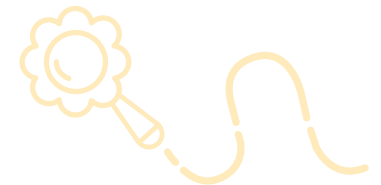
Workshops can also help teachers establish rules for orderly corner play and care of materials (e.g., hanging string necklaces for children to wear corresponding to the number of children allowed in the corner). Teachers can also learn to help children when they wish to change corners: children need to follow rules such as tidying up the area and telling the teacher what they plan to do next.

Ensure ongoing training/professional development opportunities for teachers to build practical skills on active teaching and learning and play-based methodologies.

Ongoing professional development and user-friendly teaching guides are necessary for strengthening teachers' ability to implement play-based methodologies. Teachers can also learn from their own and others' practices. For example, monthly meetings can bring teachers together to share reflections, brainstorm ideas for learning toys and trouble-shoot classroom management problems with other pre-primary teachers. In remote areas, social media such as WhatsApp can provide other venues for sharing. Pre-primary teachers can become a bottom-up force for change when given opportunities to lead these ongoing professional development meetings.

Provide practical resources to support teachers' and administrators/principals' understanding of the value of play.

Many pre-primary teachers/educators, as well as administrators and principals, believe that children learn from the teacher through direct instruction, and that play opportunities are a reward for completion of 'work'. Teachers may also fear loss of control. Teachers need training and setting-based mentoring to help change their beliefs about how young children learn. Efforts to present the science behind development and learning in a digestible manner to educators can pay off by helping teachers internalize the information they are trained on. Instead of telling early childhood educators, administrators and principals, that play is important, what helps is helping them understanding why it is important. Resources such as a simple daily schedule that builds in time for play, a good set of toys, games, and other hands-on learning materials can help teachers begin to manage a play-based learning environment. When they see the results in children's engagement and enhanced learning, their beliefs, too, will change.







ACTION AREA 4

Families and communities

Collaboration with families and communities in the context of pre-primary programs is key. When families are active partners in children's learning and development, a shared vision for the role of play in pre-primary programs can emerge.

Primary caregivers are their children's first teachers. They should be an integral part of pre-primary programmes because they can contribute and also learn and apply key strategies at home – it is therefore important to support families in becoming equipped and confident to implement play-based learning at home. There are many ways parents can stimulate child development through their nurturing care, conversation and storytelling, and by teaching life skills and providing time and materials for enriched play (e.g., pretending to 'cook' rice in a pot). Primary caregivers (and other community members) can also contribute to the curriculum at their children's pre-primary centre. The traditional stories, crafts, games and oral histories they share constitute hands-on learning experiences and ensure that the pre-primary setting/ environment is culturally grounded.

Families who understand how much their children are learning through play – at home and in the pre-primary programme – become community advocates. Their outreach to reluctant families may be the most powerful means to ensure that vulnerable children participate in pre-primary education programmes. Change is often thought about in a top-down way: what government sectors or organizations can do for people. However, people at the grassroots can reshape institutions by promoting playful learning. The role of families and communities in supporting learning through play also extends to the primary years to ensure continuity and connectivity of learning across the ages.



Examples of strategies to promote play in engaging with families and communities

Strengthen families' understanding of the value of play, in pre-primary settings and at home.

Families may not understand how much children learn from everyday activities; including conversation and play. They may have little appreciation for play-based instruction and prefer what is familiar from their own learning experiences – blackboard recitation and copying. One way to help families see the value of play-based learning is to use simple means to help them understand how children learn. For example, families can be shown photos of children building with blocks accompanied by statements of specific math standards. Teachers can also hold discussion groups with families to demonstrate how children learn through play. This can help families see the value of play as a learning tool. Sessions might include: how children learn through play; providing time, materials and a safe place to play; how to promote math and literacy through everyday conversation and play-based activities; and keeping children safe at play. Families can also use everyday activities and routines at home, such as preparing food, washing clothes and going to the market, as learning opportunities.

Engage families and community members in supporting a play-based approach to learning.

When families and communities feel valued and included as partners, they are more open to play-based learning. Inviting families and community members into the pre-primary setting to interact with the children and to experience first-hand the process of learning through play is a powerful eye-opener to the benefits of play. Seeing active learning in action can help convince families that playful experiences can build critical skills in ways that didactic methods and rote learning cannot. Families and communities can also be encouraged to contribute to the curriculum, focusing on play activities. Families and communities can also participate by contributing resources and materials to facilitate play experiences (for example, a community sports center can offer its space for children to explore physical play; families can provide cultural artefacts; etc.). Tapping into these partnerships helps maximize the mobilization of support and resources across the systems and levels of the sub-sector.

Protect children's ability to play safely by involving the community.

Communities constitute children's immediate connection with the real world. Communities provide additional resources, referrals and expanded services that can extend and enhance learning through play, so it is important to identify and integrate community resources (e.g., community centres, libraries, museums and playgrounds) to strengthen play-based programmes.



Image by Hippocampus Learning Centres

Tips for programmes

Engaging families and communities in the pre-primary setting

Many programmes have a monthly event at which family members or community experts are invited to the pre-primary setting to share something they know about, or to lead an activity with the children (for example, making play materials, read-aloud with re-enactment, etc.). In a play-based programme, these sessions can be opportunities to teach children traditional games, songs, stories, dances or crafts that they can then explore later during corner time (in pretend play, for example) or on the playground and at home. This promotes hands-on learning for children and it quickly becomes very popular with the families and communities. Another strategy is working with the community to create a school-community annual event such as a storytelling fair or toy-making competition. These events bring attention to what children can learn through playful activities.



ACTION AREA 5

Monitoring, regulation and quality assurance of pre-primary services

Play should be a central element of defining pre-primary quality. Monitoring and quality assurance are central to ensuring continuous improvement and identifying areas where additional supports and resources may be needed.

Quality assurance assesses the extent to which standards, desired practices and programme implementation are happening as intended. The goal of monitoring and quality assurance systems is to lead to improvements to services and ultimately policies. Because play-based learning is an essential component of quality pre-primary programmes, it is important to include play-related components as part of monitoring tools and quality standards. Even if 'play' is mentioned in a pre-primary vision statement or curriculum, if it is not clearly present in standards for implementation, then its impact is lost.

Examples of strategies to promote play in quality assurance and monitoring

Ensure that quality standards for pre-primary education include process-level indicators that capture features of learning through play.

Data collection in a pre-primary system needs to go beyond basic indicators on access and inputs to include indicators related to quality and, specifically, the type of learning and teaching happening in the pre-primary setting/environment,

including play (e.g., indicators on children's engagement in free play and on positive teacher-child interactions that encourage active learning). Monitoring tools should note whether there are toys and other equipment and materials for play, and whether the daily schedule has blocks of time for corner/centre play. In monitoring classroom/physical environment quality, in addition to inspections, it is also possible for pre-primary teachers and programmes to self-assess with simple instruments, recording their own perceptions of strengths and areas for improvement.

Create a shared vision and ownership of quality standards across pre-primary service providers.

Having quality standards that incorporate key features of active and child-centred teaching and learning is a critical foundation of quality pre-primary programmes. However, the mere existence of such standards does not necessarily entail compliance or use. Service providers, including private providers, need to feel ownership of standards. Various quality assurance and regulatory mechanisms (such as accreditation, licensing, etc.) can help foster this shared vision and commitment to key aspects of quality in pre-primary programmes.

When monitoring children's outcomes, broaden the scope of competencies and skills that are assessed.

Often, monitoring of child outcomes, where relevant, focuses exclusively on tests to identify whether pre-primary children have specific knowledge of isolated math and literacy facts. These kinds of assessments do not identify the broader range of school readiness skills that include social, emotional and life skills, nor do they cover approaches to learning, curiosity, team work, and other skills, even though these may be better predictors of long-term success than isolated academic knowledge. It is important to support teachers in understanding the value of formative assessment and using observational methods that capture children's learning through play and interactions with others. Formative assessment methods provide more and better information about a child's development and learning support needs than test results.

Play across the humanitarian-development continuum

While this brief focuses on building pre-primary systems that value play and that can implement robust quality programs, it is important to highlight that these same systems should be prepared to extend services to children in situations of emergencies and disasters. Young children are prone to experiencing “toxic stress” in humanitarian crises (including human-made and natural disasters and public health emergencies), a condition caused by extreme, prolonged adversity in the absence of a supportive network of adults and positive stimulation. As such, humanitarian response must support their psychological, emotional and cognitive health and development and protect their future potential. Children affected by crises more than ever need a safe place to play and learn. Opportunities to play in an emergency context not only keeps children safe, but also provides comfort to children and helps them return to the routine and normalcy of being a child.

While regular pre-primary services may be put on hold during a humanitarian response, there are alternative ways to ensure children have access to safe learning spaces and play materials/activities. Children’s learning

environments can be enriched with locally-produced toys and materials that are informed by their communities’ traditional learning and play context. When these are not available, the Early Childhood Development Kit (ECD Kit), developed by UNICEF, can be introduced as a substitute to school, learning spaces and teachers/facilitators to help children develop skills and competencies for thinking, speaking, feeling and interacting with others for children ages 0-8. To the extent possible, the ECD kit should be complemented by locally-made materials. The ECD kit has the aim to strengthen the response for young children caught in conflict or emergencies by complementing basic services (such as health and nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, protection and education). Some key ECD Kit items include: puzzles and games; board books; puppets; art supplies; etc. The use of the ECD Kit is one example of an attempt to ensure that opportunities for play are available for children caught up in emergencies; but more concerted efforts are needed to match play-readiness of children, local caregivers’ awareness of the importance of play, and teachers’ ability to manage child-friendly classrooms with large numbers of resource-deprived children – with developmentally appropriate props and learning tools.



4. Conclusion

This brief should serve as a starting point for reflection and advocacy work that puts child-centred pedagogy at the centre of pre-primary systems. Policies, pre-primary implementation plans, teacher training plans, resource allocations and quality assurance strategies should reflect the growing evidence that active, play-based early learning environments provide the most developmentally appropriate critical foundation for success in school and beyond.

In addition, the role of families must be recognized by the system, and they should be supported and empowered to actively participate in shaping children's learning and development through play – establishing partnerships with families to ensure continuity and connectivity of learning across the spheres of children's life (home, school, community) is thus critical. This Advocacy Brief therefore proposes several key recommendations:



Ensure that the value of play for children's development and learning is widely understood and enacted in pre-primary sub-sector plans and policies and reflected in resource allocations.



Ministries of Education should have clear standards and statements that preserve the unique play-focused, developmentally appropriate approach that is essential to quality services.



Ensure that pre-primary curriculum is developmentally appropriate and anchored in child-centred learning and experiences.



Cultivate and strengthen the demand and support (from families, communities, etc.) for play-based learning.



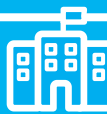
Create partnerships with families and communities to create continuity in the experiences of children in pre-primary and home settings and to tap into family and community resources, including locally available materials and the time of caregivers.



Use quality professional development initiatives to provide teachers and other personnel, including administrators and principals, with knowledge and skills that build capacity to implement playful learning across settings and for all children.



Ensure that teachers have access to implementation guides, equipment, and other hands-on resources and materials that are essential for young children's learning and explorations.



Use collaborative approaches, including collaborative professional development, to extend play-based learning into the early primary grades and beyond, using these methods to foster engagement and build academic competence.



Create a shared vision around quality standards that focus on and capture learning through play.



Broaden the scope of competencies and skills that are assessed to capture those that are developed through learning through play.



Resources on play and early learning

Explore the following resources (click links for full information) to access research on the benefits of play for children's learning.

[Chopsticks and counting chips: Do play and foundational skills need to compete for the teacher's attention in an early childhood classroom? Spotlight on Young Children and Play](#), Bodrova, E. and Leong, D., 2004.

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