

## Building Teachers' Capacity to Enhance Play-Based Learning: A Critical Investigation At Initial Teacher Training And Early Childhood Centres In Ghana 2023



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## **Introduction**

Early childhood education is the most crucial period in the educational system of every country. Just as seedlings are constantly paid special attention to grow beautifully, so are children given appropriate and adequate support to grow academically, socially, and morally. Different teaching methods are employed to facilitate effective learning experiences for young learners. One prominent teaching method is play-based learning, which centres on the principle that children learn best through play. Advocates of the methodology emphasize that amongst the numerous reasons for implementing play-based learning, it promotes hands-on, experiential activities that stimulate critical thinking, problem-solving, and social interaction among learners. By integrating play into educational settings, children are provided with opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and the development of essential skills. Despite the acceptance of play-based learning by policymakers which is evident in the standard-based kindergarten curriculum and the various advantages of the methodology, its full uptake in early childhood classrooms in Ghana still needs to be worked on. Mostly, limited awareness, understanding, and training of the pedagogical benefits of play-based learning among some educators and members of school authorities, the inadequacy of resources, and other infrastructure hinder the widespread implementation of play-based learning. These challenges underscore the importance of research and initiatives aimed at upscaling and promoting the integration of play-based pedagogy in early childhood education.

To gain insights into the phenomenon, a Global Partnership for Education and Innovation Exchange (GPE/KIX) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC) supported research project was conducted in the Northern and Eastern Regions of Ghana by Associates for Change, a research and consulting firm which specialize in social policy analysis and international development and collaborates with a variety of African and Asian clients on education, poverty reduction, public reforms, and gender issues. The specific research questions were:

1. How is the new early learning curriculum with play-based approaches integrated into the pre-service and in-service teacher training programs?
2. How is the educational system adapting to the changes in the new early learning curriculum?
3. What innovations in play-based learning exist to support teacher capacity to implement play-based learning and what added value are these making (e.g., volunteer teacher models and right to play models)?
4. How are education innovators in the early learning space influencing early childhood education quality and uptake in Ghana and Sierra Leone?
5. Can there be more cost-effective approaches to scaling up early learning activities through volunteer teacher programs?
6. What is the value addition of play-based learning methods compared to schools that do not implement these, particularly concerning early-grade reading outcomes?

## **Methodology**

The study utilized a qualitative research approach to investigate the interrelationships between pre-service teacher training and teacher uptake at different levels of education. This is following interventions carried out by Right to Play and Sabre Education, on pre-service and in-service training of early childhood educators on play-based methods. The study specifically compared urban, peri-urban, rural, and extremely deprived districts. These districts were further categorized into two groups: intervention districts, where schools received support

from education innovators, and non-intervention districts, where schools did not receive any support. In each of the regions, 4 districts were selected comprising 2 intervention districts and 2 non-intervention districts. In the Northern Region, Tolon and Kumbungu Districts were selected as intervention districts while Yendi and Mion were the non-intervention districts. In the Eastern Region, Akuapem South and New Juaben Districts were the selected intervention districts and Suhum and Yilo Krobo were selected as nonintervention districts.

The target population consisted of three levels of investigation in the Eastern and Northern regions of Ghana. They were the College of education, early childhood education schools, and district education directorates. The sample size was determined using a purposive sampling technique, and a total of 64 schools were selected for the study across the intervention and nonintervention districts in Eastern and Northern regions. At the college of education level, the study focused on two Colleges of Education from each of the regions that have experienced interventions from the two partnering education innovators of the study; Sabre Education (in the Eastern region) and Right to Play (in the Northern region).

### Research Instruments

The study used a range of data collection tools, including a semi-structured interview guide, focus group discussion guide, lesson observation guide, and school-based checklist. Data collection tools were designed to collect data on a range of topics, including teacher training, teaching and learning resources (TLRs), gender and social inclusion, and child development outcomes. The data collection procedures involved key informant interviews with significant stakeholders, focus group discussions with student teachers and observations of classroom/lecture hall activities. The data collection procedures were designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem and to triangulate data from multiple sources.



Source: Field observation

## Key Findings of the Study

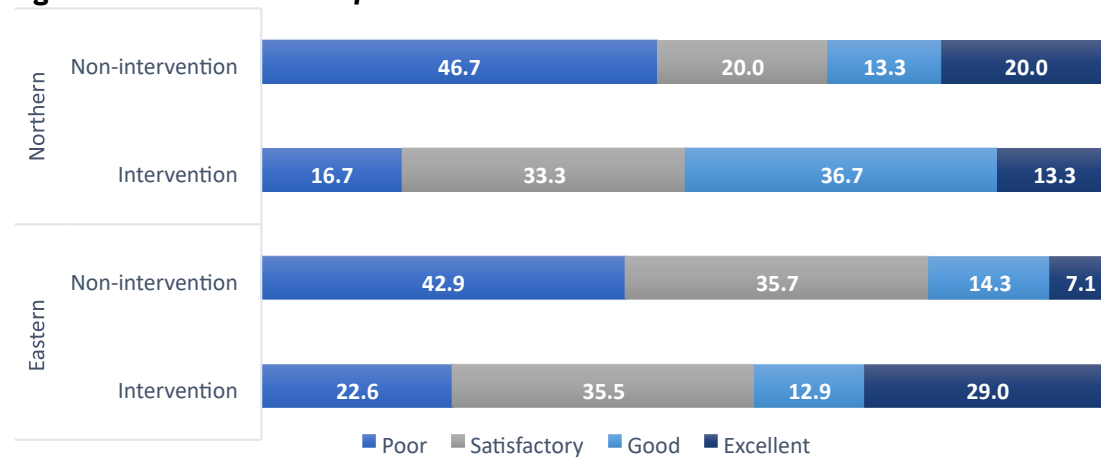
### A. Perceptions, and attitudes concerning Play Based Learning

The **first research question** focused on the interweaving of child-directed play and learning, guided play and learning, and adult-led learning. Findings highlighted the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the sampled participants about play-based learning and playbased pedagogies. It also focused on the support received and offered in the implementation of play-based learning. At the college of education level, the study revealed a positive understanding and perception of play-based learning among the study's participants (vice principals, tutors, and student teachers). They recognized its effectiveness in promoting engagement, aligning

with children's developmental needs, and fostering independent learning. However, the study highlighted the need for comprehensive training programs to equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge for successful implementation. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of appropriately placing trained early childhood teachers to maximize their impact. Regarding the training of student teachers, the study identified a favorable outlook among vice principals and tutors. However, inconsistencies were observed in the extent to which student teachers received mentorship in play-based instruction. This underscores the necessity for more comprehensive and consistent training across teacher education programs.

Similarly, it was identified that among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in early childhood education in Ghana, there was appreciable knowledge and understanding of playbased learning and play-based pedagogies. Though participants have knowledge of the methodology, the study also found that there is a need for more support and training for teachers to effectively integrate play-based pedagogies into their teaching practices. The availability and quality of teaching and learning resources (TLRs) were found to be major factors that influence the integration of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education in Ghana.

**Figure 1: Teachers Use of TLMs**



The study found that there is a need for stronger partnerships between schools and the community to promote the use of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education. This finding affirms studies that highlight the significance of community partnerships in overcoming barriers to play-based pedagogies. Brown and Davis (2019) discovered that schools that collaborated with community organizations were able to access additional resources, such as playground equipment or funding for play-based programs<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Jones and Reynolds (2016) emphasized the role of community involvement in supporting play-based pedagogies thus enhancing learners' creativity and problem-solving skills.<sup>2</sup> The report notes that the support received by teachers varied across the selected regions, with some teachers receiving more support than others.

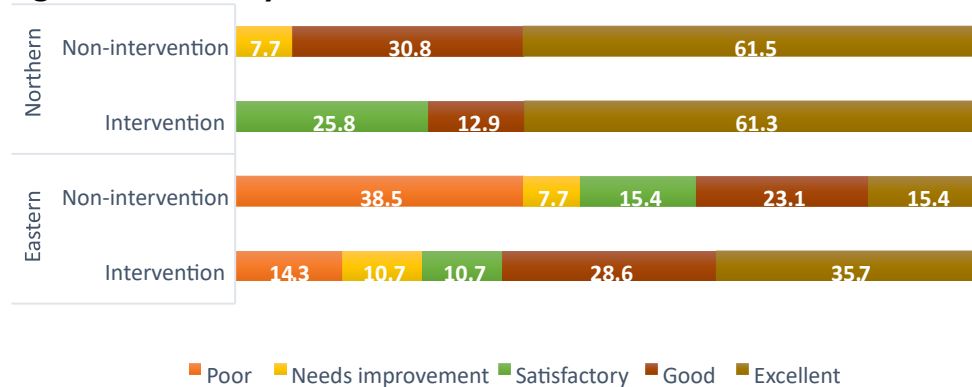
<sup>1</sup> Brown, E., & Davis, C. (2019). Building community partnerships to support play-based pedagogies in early childhood education. *Early Years*, 39(2), 188-204

<sup>2</sup> Jones, A., & Reynolds, D. (2016). Community involvement and play-based pedagogies in early childhood education. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186(10), 1642-1657.

## B. Adaptation Of Play-Based Approaches

Concerning the **second research question**, the study explored the adaptation of playbased approaches into the pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. The study established that the methodology of the Bachelor of Education curriculum encompasses various approaches, including e-learning, play-based learning, student-centeredness, inclusion, differentiation, and discovery-based learning. These methodologies aim to create an engaging and effective learning environment that prepares student teachers to become skilled educators capable of meeting the needs of diverse learners.

**Figure 2: Sensitivity to diverse learner needs**



However, several limiting factors hinder the adaptation to the curriculum. These include adjusting to new assessment techniques, inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials, insufficient curriculum training, and a disruptive tracking system. These factors pose difficulties for both students and teachers and compromise the successful implementation of the curriculum. Addressing these limitations requires concerted efforts. Recommendations include improving school infrastructure and providing teaching and learning resources, particularly for practical activities and play-based pedagogies. In-service training programs should be implemented to enhance the knowledge and skills of both student teachers and tutors. Regular reviews of the curriculum are necessary to ensure its relevance and alignment with contemporary teaching practices.

## C. Value Addition of Interventions

It was established under the **third and fourth research questions** that at the college of education level, existing education innovators, such as Sabre, Right to Play, T-TEL, and others, have made significant contributions to early learning at the college level. These innovators have provided professional development for tutors and supplied teaching and learning materials, positively impacting the quality of education and instructional practices. To sustain and scale up these interventions, collaboration with the Ghana Education Service (GES) and other government institutions is crucial. Additionally, involving private school teachers and promoting resourcefulness and creativity in teaching practices can contribute to long-term sustainability. Despite the successes achieved, challenges to the sustainability of these innovations exist. Time constraints, logistical issues, and training effectiveness are among the concerns raised. Planning training sessions during suitable breaks, providing comprehensive manuals, addressing network issues, and offering technical assistance can help overcome these challenges and ensure the continued success of the interventions. Furthermore, at the school level, in addition to Sabre Education and Right to Play, the report identifies several other

education innovators that are working to support play-based learning in early childhood education in the Eastern and Northern regions of Ghana. These include Learning, T-tel, NALAP, E-learning, Translation to English (T2E), and Lively Minds. These innovators value child-centered and play-based learning approaches and work to provide training and resources to teachers to support their implementation. These organizations provide a range of services and resources to support play-based learning, including teacher training, curriculum development, and the provision of teaching and learning materials. The study found that education innovators have had a positive impact on early childhood education in Ghana, particularly in supporting the implementation of playbased learning approaches. The innovators' programs have led to changes in teacher attitudes and practices, as well as improvements in children's learning outcomes. They have also influenced policy and practice in early childhood education in Ghana.

**Table I: Summary of the impact of NGO programme on child development**

| Indicator   | Schools in intervention districts  | Schools in non-intervention districts  |
|---|--|--|
| Familiarity with a broad range of songs/ rhymes/ poems          | <p>Learners are introduced to traditional and modern/new songs/rhymes and poems.</p> <p>Most of the songs/poems/rhymes they sang and recited are not known in a typical Ghanaian KG setting (eg; <i>puff out the candles on the pink cake ppp... ppp, puff out the candles on the pink cake; air air I can't see you, air air I can't touch you, air air I can't see you, but you're blowing everywhere; ants ants, on my arms, ants ants on my arms, ants ants on my arms are causing me alarm</i>) They also demonstrated actions with the songs</p> | <p>It was found that children here were more familiar with the traditional songs and rhymes that have been used in early grade (e.g.: <i>my head, my shoulders, my knees, my toes; this is the way I brush my teeth among others; twinkle twinkle little stars</i>)</p> <p>Teachers were not trained in any new content increasing their scope of songs and games)</p> |
|   | <p>In some instances, children were asked to volunteer to be part of this activity, learners were confident enough to volunteer without knowing</p>  | <p>Children in non-intervention schools were often timid and afraid to respond to questions/answers and perform other activities (songs, dance, and</p>  |
| Contributes to the improvement of confidence levels of children | <p>what the task was.</p> <p>When asking questions to the children the children were able to easily answer and eager to respond (<i>what you enjoy about the lessons, what play activities do you know with actions—they were asked to demonstrate</i>).</p> <p>It was observed that learners in the intervention district were confident when answering questions and performing tasks/ guided play.</p>  | <p>poems/rhymes.</p> <p>Researchers would have to spend a lot of time building rapport before children could participate in the discussion, questions, and activities</p>  |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Differences in command of the play activity and language competency | <i>Learners had a higher degree of mastery over the activities they engaged in and children knew/ remembered all the lyrics to songs/rhymes/and poems they were exposed to.</i>                                 | <i>Most learners did not know the lyrics and words to the songs and rhymes they sang and recited. They usually just hummed to the lyrics but could not sing the song fully. Interviewers usually spent time teaching such children the right words to songs and poems</i> |
| Differences in Language usage/competency                            | <i>Though it is advised that the language of instruction at the early grade level should be local language, children had a strong command of both locals and were using English throughout the interaction.</i> | <i>Most learners were very comfortable with their local language and did not switch to English unless they were singing a song or reciting a rhyme/poem that is in English.</i>   |

**Source: From various field instruments**

#### **D. Cost Effectiveness of PBL Interventions**

The **research question five** which sought to identify cost-effective approaches to scaling up early learning activities revealed that all the stakeholders interviewed in intervention schools praised the education innovators for emphasizing the co-production of teaching and learning resources in schools by teachers and learners. This has helped to reduce the cost of play-based learning by providing low-cost teaching and learning resources (TLRs) that are locally available and can be produced by teachers and learners. The cost of teacher training has been reduced by providing training that is locally available and can be delivered by local trainers. The cost-effective approaches used by education innovators have helped to increase access to play-based learning and early childhood education in Ghana. This has led to the improvement of the quality of play-based learning and early childhood education by building teacher capacity and providing teaching and learning resources (TLRs). There is also an increase in the sustainability of play-based learning and early childhood education by reducing the cost of teacher training and providing locally available teaching and learning resources (TLRs).

#### **E. Effectiveness And Challenges OF PBL**

Moreover, **the sixth research question** presents results on the effectiveness and challenges of play-based learning and the way forward. It is deduced that the positive impacts of play-based learning at the early childhood education level cannot be overemphasized. The interviews and focus group discussions with the study's participants corroborated with the assertions of existing literature on the effectiveness of play on the child's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language development. A study by White and Smith (2020) found that play-based interactions, such as engaging in imaginative play or engaging in conversations

during play, support language development.<sup>3</sup> Findings from our study also identified that when play is used as an instructional tool, early graders are given the opportunity to explore, be confident, innovative, independent in certain activities and become creative. This finding is in line with exiting research by Johnson and Jones (2018) which emphasized the importance of play in fostering social skills and interactions. This study found that play provides opportunities for children to practice cooperation, negotiation, and empathy.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this methodology is met with factors that limit the uptake and effective implementation of play-based learning. These factors include insufficient teaching and learning resources, inadequate professional early childhood teachers, lack of interest in early childhood education and play-based learning and inadequate training on play-based pedagogies. Limited funding, lack of motivation, and inadequate logistics are some of the challenges that hinder the ability of district officials to perform their supervisory roles, which could lead to challenges to the sustainability of interventions. To address the challenges to play-based learning, education innovators have used a range of strategies, including building teacher capacity, providing teaching and learning resources (TLRs), and engaging parents and the community.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the findings of this study contribute valuable insights into the integration of play-based learning in Ghana's early childhood education. The implications highlight the importance of training and supporting educators, enhancing the utilization of play-based pedagogies, and addressing challenges in curriculum adaptation. By addressing these factors, colleges of education and early childhood schools can create a conducive learning environment that prepares student teachers to become competent and innovative educators, benefiting the educational experiences of children in Ghana. The study's recommendations emphasize the need for comprehensive training programs, the provision of adequate resources and support, and successful sustainability and scalability of impacts made by education innovators. The training curriculum for colleges of education already integrates play-based pedagogies that are considered satisfactory. However, the implementation of these pedagogies is impeded by the scarcity of suitable teaching and learning materials dedicated to facilitating play-based learning experiences. Additionally, the lack of proper training for teachers in utilizing play-based approaches further hinders successful implementation in practice. By implementing these recommendations, the ECE space in Ghana can create a robust educational system that prepares skilled educators capable of meeting the diverse needs of learners. The improvements in infrastructure, training, and curriculum will contribute to more effective teaching practices, enhanced student engagement, and improved learning outcomes. The collaborations between education innovators, government institutions, and colleges of education will foster a supportive environment for knowledge sharing, resource utilization, and ongoing professional development.

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<sup>3</sup> White, S., & Smith, J. (2020). Play and language development in early childhood. *Early Education and Development*, 31(4), 567-584.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, L., & Jones, K. (2018). Play and social development in early childhood. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46(3), 289-305.