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## POLICY BRIEF: IDRC-KIX

### Playful Pathways: Advancing Early Childhood Education in Ghana through Play-Based Learning

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Play-based learning (PBL) or learning while playing is valued as the key way children learn. PBL's success, however, hinges on the availability of adequate school resources and highly qualified staff to promote a positive effect on educational outcomes and how students are shaped in the right way. Leveraging existing studies on the subject, researchers in Ghana surveyed 593 schools and 1156 teachers, measuring them against effective teacher capacity-building methods for play-based learning around the globe that can be replicated in the country of study. Overall, the findings show positive indicators in teacher capacity, infrastructure, and teaching practices. However, there are still challenges with learning materials, classroom infrastructure, and inclusive environment, among others. This policy brief discusses what is working well and not, and makes recommendations to contribute to the scientific debate on the merits of PBL and why it is imperative to build the capacity of Early Childhood Education (ECE) practitioners.

#### KEY FINDINGS



80% of respondents identified the unavailability of play materials as a major hurdle for play-based learning.



6 out of 10 teachers find classroom infrastructure unsuitable for creating a playful and effective play-based learning environment.



Large class sizes (above 40 pupils) persist, and there's a lack of support staff, despite policy recommendations.



Inclusive play-based learning faces challenges, especially for children with special needs. Another constraint to inclusion is linguistic diversity and the lack of teachers and teaching materials that address adequately this diversity in language.



Unhelpful beliefs and a 50% divide among teachers on the coexistence of play and learning hinder the coexistence of play and learning in some communities

## BACKGROUND

Play is integral to the holistic development of children, impacting the emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of growth. Globally, nations recognize its significance and incorporate play-based learning in educational policies emphasizing its role in transitioning from kindergarten to primary school. In developing countries like Ghana, where significant rural communities and limited education infrastructure and opportunities exist, a strong foundation in early education is key to preventing the need for remedial interventions and promoting future academic success.

The study offers a comprehensive view of the challenges in preschool teacher education in Ghana, highlighting the disconnect between theory and practice. It underscores the importance of bridging this gap as a key approach to fostering a child-centered environment. Also, it looks at the state of school infrastructure and classroom resources for play-based learning, teacher characteristics and their participation in play-based learning, as well as teaching beliefs, attitudes, and practices of play-based pedagogy. It illustrates how building teachers' capacity, alongside policy support, can enhance classroom quality and teacher well-being, ultimately leading to positive PBL outcomes for children's readiness for primary school.

## THE RESEARCH

The study employs a causal analysis to explain that there is a positive relationship between specific interventions -- notably teacher capacity building together with policy support-- and desirable PBL outcomes, and teachers' professional well-being. It compares groups of intervention and non-intervention schools, assessing them against a range of variables related to the implementation of play-based learning in early childhood education. These include measures such as school characteristics (e.g. type, level, and location, state of infrastructure), classroom resources for early childhood education, teaching capacity (i.e. quality of teachers in a school), and teacher characteristics (i.e. age, gender, subject specialization, marital status, highest educational qualification, and teaching

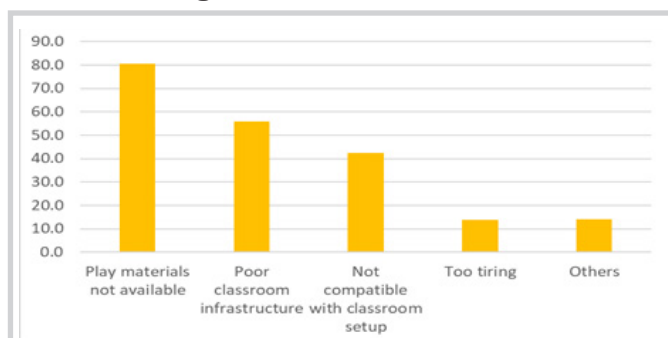
experience). Others are teaching beliefs, attitudes, and practices of PBL pedagogy and teachers' participation in play-based Learning professional development training.

## FINDINGS

The evidence indicates overall positive outcomes, with intervention schools outperforming non-interventions in various areas, including infrastructure and teaching capacity. The intervention schools demonstrate better classroom resources, seating arrangements, and access to utilities. However, common challenges persist across both groups, notably the widespread unavailability of play materials (identified by 80% of respondents) and inadequate classroom infrastructure. Other challenges flagged by respondents are the unsuitability of classroom infrastructure (6 out of 10 teachers) and incompatibility of classroom setup (4 out of 10 respondents), as shown in Figure 0.1 below.

The challenges at the micro-level include inadequacy of suitable play-based learning (PBL) infrastructure, particularly small classroom spaces and large class sizes, exceeding the recommended pupil-to-teacher ratio. The shortage of teachers, notably support staff, poses a significant hurdle, with best practices suggesting a need for two educators per class. Respondents also expressed difficulties in implementing play-based learning in inclusive classrooms, particularly for children with special needs. Furthermore, linguistic diversity adds complexity, as local languages lack adequate teaching materials and instructors. Lastly, weak community and parental support and negative religious beliefs present additional obstacles to the effective implementation of play-based learning in schools.

**Fig 0.1: Micro-level challenges impeding play-based learning in the classroom**



At the macro level, challenges in play-based learning are broadly categorized into infrastructural, financial, technical, and policy aspects. Infrastructural challenges encompass various elements like classroom resources, playing grounds, furniture, and buildings. Technical challenges involve both technological and human capacity, including pedagogical expertise and teacher training. Policy-related challenges pertain to curriculum design, expected outcomes, and assessment approaches. A comparison between intervention and non-intervention schools reveals that a higher percentage of teachers from non-intervention schools identify infrastructure as a major impediment, along with financial constraints. This suggests that intervention schools, having received support, face fewer infrastructural issues. However, the overall lack of government-initiated infrastructure programs for early childhood education remains a concern, with reliance on individual, religious, non-governmental organizations, and community support, as there is no identified government program for early childhood education infrastructure despite more than two decades of mainstreaming it into the formal education structure.

### Continuous Professional Development in Ghana's Education System: Insights into play-based learning training and teacher capacity

Teachers are expected to engage in Continuous

Professional Development (CPD) to enhance their content and pedagogical knowledge, maintaining and upgrading skills throughout their careers. In Ghana, CPD involves both supply-driven programs provided by government sources and demand-driven programs offered by certified service providers. Play-based learning, crucial for early childhood education, faces challenges due to the slow implementation of recommended pedagogies. The study reveals that 68.7% of teachers participated in play-based pedagogy training in the last three years, with 76% in the intervention group and 61.7% in the non-intervention group. Teachers attended an average of 3 training sessions in the intervention group and 2 in the non-intervention group. Training nature included a standard base curriculum (65% intervention, 49% non-intervention) and ECE-related topics (69% intervention, 56% non-intervention). While 30% of the intervention group attended Ghana Education (GES)/Ministry of Education (MoE) training, 44% of the non-intervention group did so. Teachers generally paid out-of-pocket for their training (91%). Continuous Professional Development is seen as important for teacher development, covering various areas like child development, health, safety, literacy, and inclusive practices. Teachers' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses, professional allowance, and feedback from appraisers were generally positive, emphasizing the significance of CPD in teachers' development.



Photo: Freepik

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research underscores the positive impact of interventions in schools, particularly in areas of infrastructure and teaching capacity. While there are notable improvements in classroom resources and utilities, challenges persist across both intervention and non-intervention groups, emphasizing the need for targeted solutions. The micro-level recommendations prioritize local adaptation of play materials, comprehensive teacher training, and investments in age-appropriate classroom infrastructure. Classroom dynamics can be enhanced through advocacy for reduced class sizes, support staff employment, and targeted infrastructure investments. Strategies for inclusive education and addressing special needs children, along with overcoming language barriers, are crucial for fostering inclusivity. To address community challenges, implementing sensitization programs aligning play-based learning with cultural norms and beliefs is essential. Macro-level reforms involving policy adjustments and bottom-up approaches, increased financial support, and sustainable

infrastructure planning are recommended for comprehensive improvements.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is crucial for effective teaching practices, and recommendations include increased government support for CPD programs to enhance the quality of early childhood education.

These findings offer actionable insights for stakeholders in early education, facilitating the effective implementation of play-based learning for positive educational outcomes.

## FURTHER READING

Blanden, J., Del Bono, E., Hansen, K. et al. Quantity and quality of childcare and children's educational outcomes. *J Popul Econ* 35, 785–828 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-021-00835-4>

National Teaching Council (NTC) (2020). A Framework for Professional Development of Teachers -Guidelines for Point Based- System (INSET and Portfolio). Ministry of Education, Accra – Ghana



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The images in this policy brief showcase several schools in Ghana's Eastern Region, all of which were included in the study. Photographed by Nana Amma Asante-Poku.

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