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Teacher beliefs, attitudes and practices in play-based teaching and learning in Ghana

KEY FINDINGS



Teachers generally have positive beliefs towards play-based learning pedagogy although there is no consensus among teachers on the co-existence of play and learning.



The majority of the teachers have a positive attitude towards play-based learning approaches.

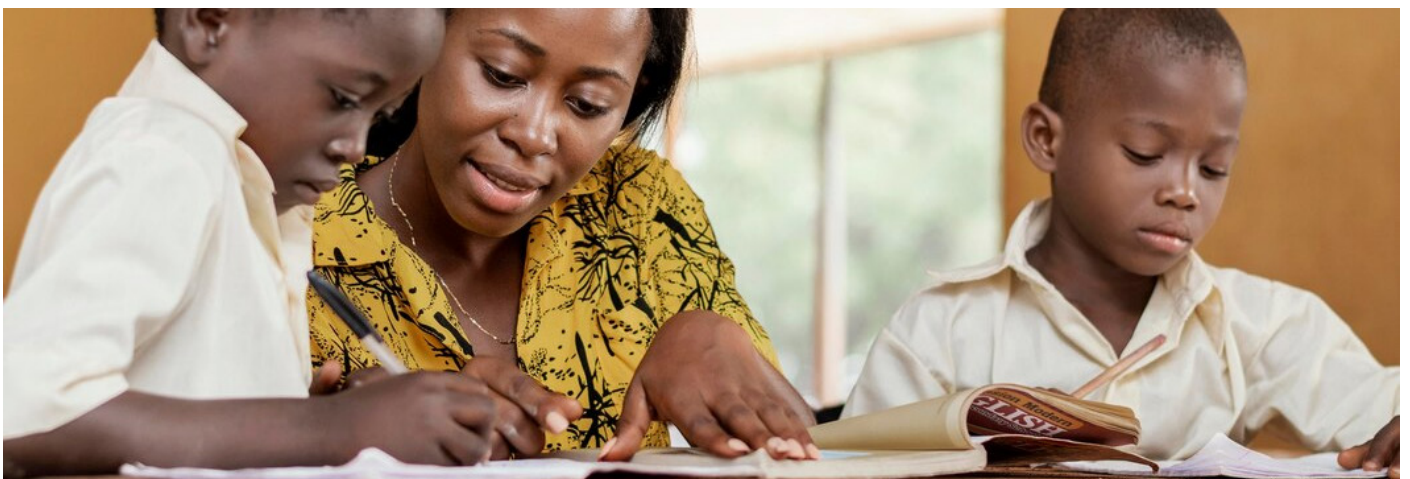


Overall, teachers take appropriate action for play-based learning across intervention and non-intervention schools.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The importance of play in early childhood education (ECE) cannot be overstated. It serves as a vital component in children's development, influencing emotional, intellectual, and social growth. Recognizing this, various initiatives worldwide have emphasized play-based learning (PBL) as a cornerstone of educational practices; however, the effective implementation of play-based pedagogies relies heavily on teachers' capacity and training. Hence the need for research to unearth evidence on teachers' capacity for play-based learning to inform public policy in ECE.

A sequential mixed-methods methodology was employed which involved a qualitative study followed by a quantitative study to investigate teacher capacity building for play-based early learning.



METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on findings from an exploratory sequential study carried out from 2022 to 2023. It commenced with a qualitative study followed by a quantitative survey. The qualitative study sample covered a total of 48 headteachers, 94 early grade teachers across selected public schools, 16 FGDs with parents, 32 district education officials, 4 Principals, 8 tutors and 8 FGD interactions with trainee teachers within selected colleges of education across the Eastern and Northern regions of Ghana. The quantitative survey involved 1,156 teachers working in 593 public schools in Ghana's Eastern and Northern regions. The schools were divided into two groups: Intervention schools where teachers receive training from two education innovators, Sabre Education and Right to Play (RTP) and non-interventions schools where instructors receive no training from the two education innovators.

1. Definition of PBL

Teachers across both the southern and northern zones demonstrated a good understanding of the meaning of play-based learning with a few indicating some pedagogies used in the approach and its utility. A recurrent definition of play-based learning by the teachers both at the kindergarten and lower primary levels was, "learners learning through play". Even those responses from teachers who claimed to have had very little knowledge on PBL showed that they had general ideas about the pedagogy. The most probable explanation for this outcome is the presence of many other innovators such as USAID, Jolly Phonics, Opportunity Education, T2E amongst others, offering training on play-based pedagogy to teachers in both the intervention and non-intervention districts of the two (2) study regions.

2. Common teaching beliefs

Teachers' individual beliefs, skills, knowledge, attributes, mediate what is in a policy and what gets enacted in classrooms (Priestley, 2011). Teachers generally have positive beliefs towards play-based learning. An overwhelming majority of the participants expressed positive views about the utility of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education with the responses ranging from improvements in fluency skills, cognitive, social and physical development of the learner as well as increased learner participation in lessons,

increased experiential learning and unearthing of hidden abilities and talents in the learner. However, about 50 percent of them do not appreciate the co-existence of play and learning (work) or, better still, learning through play (Table 1). This reflects the lack of convergence between the policy environment and the communities of implementation, but also, the lack of a clear consensus about the intended outcomes of early childhood education.

Table 1: Teachers agreed to the following belief statements about teaching

Teaching beliefs	Intervention	Non-intervention
Children learn best when they are able to find the solutions to the problem, they are confronted with through play	98.89	98.86
An effective teacher must always be ready to exhibit the right way to solve a problem	98.72	99.03
I feel that I am making a significant educational difference in the lives of my students through play	97.78	98.74
I usually know the kind of play my students need and want to engage in	88.74	93.02
All in all, I am satisfied with my job as an ECE teacher	88.52	90.10
My role as a teacher is to facilitate students' own inquiry	87.96	91.72
It is better when the teacher – not the student – decides what activities are to be done	74.44	76.14
A quiet classroom is generally needed for effective learning	68.33	74.19
Thinking and reasoning processes are more important than specific curriculum content such as play	51.67	55.52

3. Teachers' attitude towards play-based learning

Teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning and how to engage pupils during play hours was examined using a 10-item module. More than 70 percent of teachers from both intervention and non-interventions schools either agreed or strongly agreed to each of the 10 items, demonstrating that the majority of the teachers have a positive attitude towards play-based learning approaches. Particularly, nearly all teachers; intervention (98.5%) and non-intervention (99.2%), affirmed that they "integrate games and songs in classroom learning activities" This suggests that all teachers integrate play-based learning activities, one way or the other, in their teaching activities.

Table 2: Teachers who agree to the following statements of attitude about teaching

Attitudes towards teaching and about play-based learning	Intervention	Non-intervention
I integrate games and songs in the classroom learning activities	98.52	99.19
As a teacher, I plan all lessons to strengthen the learning experience of my students	98.52	98.7
I interact with learners during play to enhance safe play	98.33	98.21
Learners' participation in play is assessed through observations to determine learning outcomes	96.67	97.56
Teachers should put a variety of interesting activities out during free choice time and then let children make their own activity choices	96.48	95.94
Teachers should encourage children to pick up their toys (with adult help) during clean-up time	87.96	89.45
When a child takes a toy from another child, teachers should observe and see what happens.	82.59	80.68
When many children in the class lose interest during story time, teachers should stop and go on to something else	79.26	73.54
During group time, teachers should encourage children to sit and listen most of the time	77.22	81.82
I allow all learners to play with toys of their choice despite their gender	77.04	79.71

Teachers' enthusiasm for PBL was tempered by practical concerns: managing the additional time investment, potential fatigue, lack of trained support staff (teaching and learning resources, TLRs), limited resources and infrastructure, and feeling inadequately equipped with implementation knowledge.

"I spend more time marshaling the grown-up students to help me develop simple TLRs. Sometimes, I use the entire week to prepare different kinds of TLRs and have less energy to teach them. If the school had enough TLRs, I would not have been wasting time to do these things" (KG2 Teacher, Eastern region).

"Sure, there are challenges based on the environment we find ourselves in. The environment is not strategized for PBL teaching and learning, because we don't have most of the teaching and learning materials" (Headteacher, Northern region).

4. Teacher Instructional Practices

Appropriate actions of teachers in the play-based learning classroom

The quality of implementation of play-based learning pedagogies in the classroom is determined by the routine practices and actions of teachers that support the children's learning sessions. There are 10 actions identified as appropriate as shown in table 3. Except for two items that received approval from less than 80 percent of the teachers (from both intervention and non-intervention schools), the rest of the items received approval from more than 90 percent of the teachers. This essentially means that the teachers strongly relate with all the items and therefore take the appropriate actions for play-based learning in the classroom.

Instructional practices are also correlated with classroom management so we may want to explain some of the actions in the table above with information on how teachers are able to manage the classroom. A clear distinction emerged in play-based pedagogy use across early childhood centers. Teachers in intervention districts embraced a wider range, including Jolly Phonics for pronunciation and word blending in English, Know-Want-To-Know-Learn (KWL) for comprehension in various subjects, and local games for experiential learning in science. Their counterparts in non-intervention districts primarily relied on traditional methods like rhymes and role-playing.

Table 2: Teachers who agree to the following statements of attitude about teaching

Appropriate actions of teachers in PBL	Intervention	Non-Intervention
I talk with children in order to enhance their play	97.78	97.08
I help children remember to clean up as they finish activities	97.78	97.08
I show children the appropriate way to use play materials	96.67	96.43
I make suggestions for how to use material	95.93	95.13
I help children use play materials	95.74	96.43
When I describe what children are doing, I give extra information	95.56	93.99
I help children find activities to play with	95.19	97.08
I get involved in children's dramatic play	94.63	93.99
I get down on the floor and play with children	78.15	86.36
When children talk to me, I restate their comments	67.04	80.68

This diversity highlights the potential of play-based pedagogies to enhance learning across various subjects and domains. The study found these diverse approaches were used in transmitting specific skills across used in various subjects like addition/subtraction in Numeracy, pronunciation/word blending in English, cultural enhancing historical understanding in Our World Our People and enhancing experiential learning in Science.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has provided evidence on teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices towards play-based learning in Ghana based on an exploratory sequential mixed methods study. Even though the evidence shows that the vast majority of teachers in both intervention and non-intervention schools have positive beliefs, attitudes and practices towards play-based learning, the differing beliefs and practices albeit of the minority of teachers and their practical concerns ought to be addressed seriously. The government/the ministry of education needs to invest heavily in training personnel both at the pre-service and in-service levels to help address the knowledge gaps and change beliefs and attitudes towards play-based learning. School authorities also need to forge partnerships with their communities and education partners to address the infrastructure challenges and the limited TLRs in schools for

better PBL results. Overall, the role of teachers in facilitating play-based learning should be given the needed attention by all stakeholders to ensure effective PBL implementation.

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