



INSTITUTE OF STATISTICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH (ISSER)

College of Humanities, University of Ghana

No. 03

MARCH,

Advancing play-based learning through improved continuous professional development

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.

KEY FINDINGS



Participation in PBL Training: The majority of teachers (68.7%) had engaged in PBL training within the past three years. Intervention schools exhibited higher participation rates (76.7%) compared to non-intervention schools (61.7%). Additionally, teachers in intervention schools attended a higher number of training sessions.



Sources of Training: While innovators like Right to Play and Sabre Education played significant roles, a notable portion of teachers also received training from government agencies, peer learning groups and other education partners. This indicates the availability of diverse professional development avenues following the liberalisation of the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) landscape by the National Teaching Council (NTC).



Cost of Training: Teachers predominantly bore the costs of training themselves, with intervention schoolteachers bearing as high as 91% of CPD cost, underscoring the financial burden on educators seeking professional development opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is vital in shaping the quality of childhood education, deeply influencing the effectiveness of teachers in nurturing comprehensive development through play-based learning approaches. Yet, despite an increasingly significant proportion of teachers who have tertiary education as their highest qualification, specialization in ECE is quite low. The study revealed that only 16 percent and 12 percent of teachers in the intervention and non-intervention group respectively have specialization in ECE. In contrast, 59 percent of teachers in the intervention group have a specialization in General Education; this percentage is slightly higher at 63 percent in the non-intervention group. This suggests limited academic grounding in ECE approaches for teachers who find themselves operating in the field.

Moreover, there is a general absence of a robust knowledge base about how to prepare preschool teachers (Okai & Amoah, 2016), according to some experts, leading to conflict between the learning philosophies taught in the classroom and what they encounter in their practice or on the field (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2017). Perhaps not only pre-service teachers but also in-service teachers grapple with the gap between theory and practice. Bridging this gap is vital to improving preschool teacher education and preparedness to handle PBL (Nijhawan, 2017). This is critical because it translates into providing quality education for children.

Considering the above-mentioned challenges of disparities in teacher qualifications and specialization, investing in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is imperative. CPD activities aim to enhance both teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills, offering avenues for ongoing growth and improvement (NTC, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this brief is based on quantitative data gathered from 1,156 teachers working in 593 public schools located in Ghana's Eastern and Northern regions and qualitative data from 48 school heads, 24 teachers, 8 district directors

of education, 8 early childhood education district coordinators, 4 district program coordinators/facilitators. These schools were divided into two groups: intervention and non-intervention, based on their participation in Play-Based Learning (PBL) training provided by educational innovators, Right to Play and Sabre Education. Data was collected through surveys, supplemented by qualitative research methods, to gain insights into teachers' experiences and perspectives.

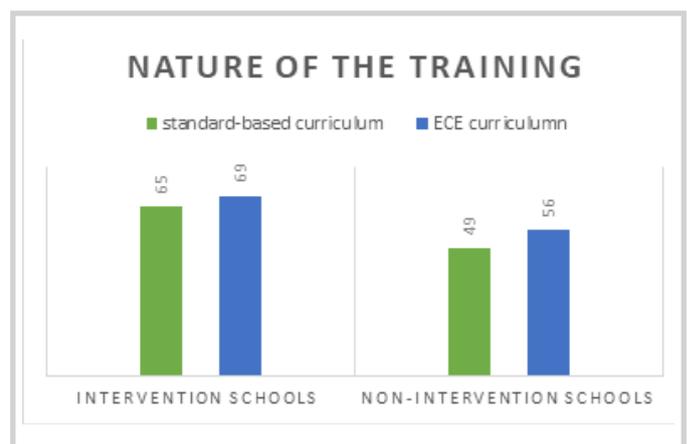
FINDINGS

Majority of teachers participated in PBL pedagogy training in the last 3 years

The findings reveal that 68.7 percent of the sampled teachers participated in a play-based pedagogy training program within the last 3 years. Relatively more intervention school teachers (76%) underwent such training, compared to non-intervention group (61.7%), indicating potential alternative sources for non-intervention group training.

On average, teachers in the intervention group attended three play-based training sessions, while those in the non-intervention group attended two. The nature of the training also varied, with a higher percentage of intervention group teachers (65%) receiving standard-based curriculum training and 69 percent receiving early childhood education (ECE)-related training, compared to 49 percent and 56 percent, respectively, in the non-intervention group. These findings suggest that teachers may have received additional standard-based curriculum training from GES/NaCCA alongside the innovator-provided training.

Figure 1: Nature of PBL Training



Gender and Inclusion a beneficial training component

Teachers in intervention schools found their PBL training particularly valuable as it incorporated a component on Gender and Inclusion (GESI) issues. This GESI training focused on promoting sensitivity to gender and learners with special needs in teaching methods. Specifically, it addressed strategies for ensuring equal participation from both boys and girls while catering to their distinct learning styles. The training contributed to addressing long-standing gender prejudices, as evidenced by teachers' reduced use of discriminatory practices.

“Previously we may have had tasks that we would reserve for boys and those for girls. Perhaps you want someone to carry the chair and you call a male learner. But now the boys can be at the kitchen learning center cooking while the girls are the construction learning center. We now take into consideration their interest regardless of our traditional gender roles and this is a great change to our existing pedagogy,” (Key informant interview (KII) with teacher).

Multiple organizations offering CPD training

After the liberalization of the CPD landscape by the NTC, various organizations now offer TCPD trainings. These include the Ghana Education Service (GES)/Ministry of Education (MoE) and education partners, including international organizations like UNICEF, USAID, World Vision, Plan Ghana, Sabre Education, and Right to Play (RTP). Table 1 shows (in percentages) the number of training sessions offered by the various organizations.

Table 1: Organisations that provided training

	Intervention %	Non-intervention %	P-value
GES/MoE	30	44.48	0.001
Education partners	11.11	15.58	0.026
Sabre Education	30.93	0.65	0.001
RTP	24.44	17.86	0.006
Others	9.81	17.7	0.002

Playing a crucial role in teachers' professional development were the frequently held Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which provided a platform for both receiving CPD trainings and exploring play-based pedagogy. Occurring weekly throughout the

year, these PLCs facilitated learning about new approaches in play-based learning and fostered discussions around challenges faced in implementing them.

“We hold PLC meetings and organize workshops where we go through some of the methods in teaching the children and play based activities that will help the children learn.” (KII with a district ECE Coordinator)

A look at CPD payment modalities

The services of Certified Service Providers (CSP) are not free; teachers pay for these services directly. In the intervention group, teachers predominantly paid out-of-pocket for their trainings, with 91 percent covering costs directly. This could be due to the fact that the training allowance is now added to their salary. However, it's worth mentioning that the amount of money allocated for training is not adequate, and teachers often have to top it up with their own funds. Only 9 percent used their CPD allowance, which is provided to support their professional development. This allowance, at rates of GH¢1200 and Gh¢800 per annum for professional and non-professional teachers respectively, is intended to assist teachers in accessing professional enhancement programs. These findings underscore the financial burden on educators seeking professional development opportunities.

Assessing impact of training on play-based learning

In terms of the impact of training on play-based learning (PBL), findings indicate that teachers from the intervention group and females report a higher ability to deliver PBL. Regarding the learning gained from CPD programs, the majority, particularly from the intervention group, rated their ability to focus on these aspects highly. For instance, 66.7% of intervention group teachers rate their ability to focus on child brain development and learning as very good, compared to 33.3% from the non-intervention group (table 2). Gender differences in ratings are also evident, with female teachers generally rating their knowledge and ability higher than male teachers across various aspects of play-based learning.

Table 2: Teachers who have good knowledge of the following pedagogical skills

Pedagogical skill for Play-based learning	Intervention	Non-intervention	P value
Child's brain development and how children learn	66.67	33.33	0.004
How to create an emotionally friendly environment to support children's learning	54.39	45.61	0.408
How to implement strategies to manage children's behaviour	59.72	40.28	0.03
Your skills and ability to deliver the child-centered approach to teaching and learning	61.2	38.8	0.01
How to develop Teaching, and Learning Materials (TLMs) and resources	57.53	42.47	0.062

Difficulties in implementing knowledge obtained from CPD trainings

A critical issue emerged when teachers acknowledged receiving training, yet the absence of essential teaching and learning materials (TLMs) posed a significant obstacle in translating that knowledge into practical classroom applications. This resource scarcity impeded the effective implementation of the newly acquired skills and strategies.

“We received training on differentiated learning, which emphasized learning-based and play-based activities for teaching English and Mathematics. However, the materials necessary for implementing this approach have not been provided since the training, making it impossible to put into practice.”
(Upper East, Teacher)

This suggests that fostering teacher willingness to learn is only part of the equation. Equipping teachers with necessary resources is equally crucial. Additionally, investigating the potential for developing teacher skills and motivation in creating their own TLMs could be a valuable step in bridging the gap between training and practice.

Challenges to Teachers' CPD Participation

Despite the importance of CPD, various factors hinder teachers' participation. Maternity leave, cost, illness, lack of interest, and unawareness of CPD opportunities are among the barriers cited. Notably, a higher percentage of non-intervention group teachers express unfamiliarity with CPD compared to the intervention group. Additionally, the fact the teachers are simply unavailable to participate in training sessions also affects CPD attendance

rates. A slightly higher percentage of non-intervention group (8%) teachers reported unavailability compared to the intervention group (6%).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers' capacity building for play-based learning is fundamental for the effective implementation of play-based pedagogy in line with the early childhood development policy of Ghana. This policy brief provides evidence of the level of existing capacity for play-based learning through analyzing the proportion of teachers who have undergone training in play-based pedagogy, the nature of the training, the training providers and the cost of the training. Additionally, challenges to teachers' participation in CPD for PBL are also highlighted.

Based on the findings, the following key policy recommendations to support the development of teachers CPD training in PBL are outlined for consideration primarily by the government (Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service), as well as education partners.

- Develop incentives to motivate teachers to engage in CPD and reward those who make efforts to participate.
- Engage with teachers to discuss and devise additional strategies to alleviate the financial burden associated with CPD.
- Explore public-private partnership to expand CPD training in play-based learning. For example, Education innovators such as RTP and Sabre Education could be supported to scale up their CPD activities nationwide to address existing gaps in CPD

in non-intervention schools.

- Provide teachers with necessary resources to facilitate the application of acquired CPD training knowledge into PBL practical classroom activities. The capacity to fully implement knowledge obtained from CPD trainings is itself an important motivator for teachers' continued participation in CPD initiatives.

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Source: Freepik

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Acknowledgment:

This Policy Brief emanates from the KIX-IDRC project "Teacher capacity for play-based early learning in Ghana and Sierra Leone" with Prof. Peter Quartey as Principal Investigator (P.I) and Dr Leslie Casely-Hayford as Co-P.I. The project team also included Dr. Clement Adamba, Prof. Cynthia Akwei, Dr. Nana Amma Asante-Poku, Vicentia Quartey Rukayatu Adam and Joana Guo.

Published by:

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