MAY 2024

Education Upfront

THE POWER OF PLAY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AT SCHOOLS:

INSIGHTS FROM FIELD RESEARCH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was made possible by the steadfast efforts and commitment of a multi-country team of Children Believe staff and external research consultants. We would like to recognize the contributions of the following:

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Cover photo: Happy children on a swing in a Children Believe supported school in Ghana. Photo: Brett Tarver

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND TERMS

CPDO	Child Development Project Officer
ECCE	Early childhood care and education
GER	Gross enrollment rate
GES	General Education Services (Ghana)
GOI	Government of India
LMICs	Low- and middle-income countries
LTP/LTP+	Learning through Play/Learning through Play Plus
NCF	National Curriculum Framework (2022)
NCF-FS	National Curricular Framework for the Foundational Stage
PTR	Pupil-to-Teacher Ratio
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TLMs	Teaching and learning materials

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to introduce the **Education Up Front (EUF)** publication series of Children Believe. The series focuses on policy-oriented and empirical research and analysis to enhance the understanding of the multidimensional aspects of education and to provide insights that shape education programs and policies at national, regional, and international levels.

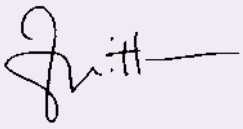
The 2024 edition of the series focuses on cross-comparative research on play and early childhood education in schools which is grounded in our durable programming support for play and early childhood education across the six countries where we operate. It explores the complexity of play meanings and contributes to the ongoing inquiry of play in cultivating wonder.

Children Believe is keen to demonstrate how play is incorporated and shown in early childhood or pre-primary classrooms in targeted communities, given the renaissance in play research and the sustainable development goal target (SDG 4.2) for early childhood education. Play is universal in every context, including refugee camps, rural or urban areas, and high or low socio-economic status communities. While play has the potential to facilitate learning, identity building, social interaction, democratic participation, and human capital development, we recognize that many challenges inhibit the power of both structured and unstructured play. How schools learn and incorporate play depends on education policies, teachers' education, curricular frameworks, resourcing and, ultimately the creativity of policymakers, administrators, educators, and parents.

We hope that the first edition of the EUF series, "Insights from Field Research on Power of Play and Early Childhood Education at Schools", contributes to our ongoing strategic engagement in education and deepens our understanding of educational programs and practice, and supports global policy dialogue by bringing diverse perspectives from a range of countries and regions.

We specifically look forward to implementing key policy and practice-focused recommendations drawn from the study to advance effective play-based learning. This, *among other things,* includes:

- Adopting a balanced approach to promote play activities, ranging from unstructured to structured play, for holistic learning.
- Incorporating indigenous and cultural knowledge into curricula to foster cultural diversity, equity, and mutual respect in early childhood education.
- Encouraging fathers' and boys' involvement along with mothers and daughters in play-based learning to address gender stereotypes in early childcare roles and enrich children's social and emotional experiences.
- Coordinating with stakeholders across multiple sectors including health, nutrition, child protection, gender equality and social protection to nurture play in early childhood, care, and development.



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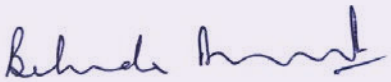

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Inspired by the power of play in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), Children Believe has implemented the Learning-through-Play-Approach to promote early childhood programs across our six countries of operation: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua and Paraguay. Over the past five years, we have worked with 27 local implementing partners and key government technical departments, including education, health, social and gender affairs departments.

We have successfully renovated, equipped, or constructed over 360 ECCD centers and as a result increased access to quality early childhood care development opportunities for over 48,000 children, including over 24,400 girls.

This publication focuses on the case studies and analysis of play and early childhood education programs in pre-school settings in Ethiopia and Ghana. It aims to generate evidence to improve the effectiveness of early childhood education policies and programming, thereby contributing to the frontiers of knowledge and dialogue on play-based early childhood education.

The study employed semi-structured and one-on-one interviews with 32 education workers (16 home room teachers and 16 school leaders/principals); focus group discussions in the selected schools with over 160 parents; and classroom observations of up to 120 minutes. The study also benefited from a review of secondary data sources including annual reports, evaluation documents, previous academic research and feasibility studies.

The case study in Ethiopia revealed that the national efforts to expand access to preschool education by introducing O-classes for 5- and 6-year-olds significantly increased enrollment levels of both boys and girls. However, investments in building infrastructures overshadowed the focus on building the capacities of teachers, and caretakers and improving the quality of education, indicating a need for more investment in non-infrastructural aspects of early childhood education. On the other hand, successful outcomes were registered in communities or regions where strong collaborations for investment in both soft skills and infrastructural development were maintained among government, non-governmental organizations, and other international development partners. Strengthening these multi-stakeholder partnerships will help increase the reach and scale up play-based and early childhood programs to remote and fragile communities.

The study identified Ghana as one of the leading countries in the world to launch its "Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development", a comprehensive strategy designed to foster the overall development of children.

Successful collaborative initiatives to promote play were carried out and early childhood education forums were created among Children Believe partners, like-minded organizations, and governments, particularly in the Northern region of Ghana. Despite the strong belief in the benefits of play and play-based learning, there is a need to improve facilities and the quality of preschool teachers in public and government-owned early childhood preschools to enhance play in these settings. The study further highlighted the importance of promoting and integrating 'indigenous' play-based education to diversify the types of plays and games in school settings and contribute to the holistic development of children.

To promote greater effectiveness, sustain, and scale up play and early childhood education, care, and development; the study provided the following recommendations:

- **Support a Balanced Approach to Play-Based Learning:** The case study revealed that there are a considerable number of

parents and educators who still perceive play mostly as a leisure activity. Hence, they do not favour free play on the grounds that learning should be more formal and it has to be guided by more defined teachers' instructions and guidelines. To change this perception, it is advisable to adopt a framework that views play-based learning as a balanced spectrum that ranges from unstructured play to inquiry-based exploration, collaborative play, playful learning, and structured games.

- **Promote Integrated curricula:** The study showed that play and play curricula were more appreciated and implemented in the education sector often independently or with limited collaboration with other caregiving services such as health, nutrition, and social protection sectors. It is important to promote curricula that reinforce the interconnection of caregiving and play by strengthening child development programs and policies that encourage caregivers to engage with their children in playful exchanges from the early stages.

- **Inclusion of Indigenous and cultural knowledge:** Currently, play centers are mainly focused on preparing children for primary school. This approach limits the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems into play-based curricular frameworks and teaching practices in preprimary classrooms. Therefore, it is essential to deepen the inclusion of Indigenous and cultural knowledge in early childhood curriculum development through the promotion of Indigenous knowledge systems in the design, delivery, and evaluation of curriculum frameworks, teacher professional development programs (both pre-and in-service), parental education programs, and production of culturally responsive teaching and learning materials.

Play builds a child's confidence.
Photo: Brett Tarver

- **Establish minimum standards for training:** The various capacity-support trainings which were extended to parents have been highly valuable in helping parents become familiar with ECD curricula, improve their pedagogical skills for play-based learning, and actively collaborate with school communities. To better systematize and harmonize the various capacity support initiatives, it is advisable to train parents and other caregivers with established ECD minimum standards to promote participation and ownership of ECCD Programs across multiple care services.

- **Contextualize play and address toxic stress:** Toxic stress such as class crowdedness, violent discipline, sexual violence, spousal violence, internal displacement, and conflict, were found to have drawbacks on promoting play and attaining positive outcomes on children's learning. It is crucial to recognize and address these stressors while creating warm, affectionate environments to nurture children's learning and development.

- **Strengthen fathers, men's, and boys' engagement:** Childcare which often perceived as women's role has shown incremental change so that more fathers have taken shared responsibilities concerning child care and development responsibilities in the studied areas. Hence, greater male participation in all ECCE and development programs is required for holistic learning.

- **Enhance multi-sectoral coordination:** The adoption of multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms in both countries created the necessary enabling environment to promote play in early childhood, care, and development and facilitate synergy of programs among diverse stakeholders. This multi-sectorial coordination, however, needs to be strengthened through cross-country knowledge exchange platforms, and coordination of policy dialogue national/ regional forums

- **Strengthen the Collection, Availability, and Accessibility of Data on Children's Socioemotional Development and Well-being:** The study highlighted that both countries are still challenged by the lack of comprehensive national statistical data on determinants of play and children's care, and development. This emphasizes the need to improve the collection, availability, and accessibility of data on children's socioemotional development and well-being. This can include data on attributes like attachment formation, responsive caregiving interactions, maternal well-being, postpartum depression, and the utilization of life course developmental health curves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children and an educator learning through singing in an ECD center in Ethiopia. Photo: Brett Tarver

1.1 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Children Believe recognizes the importance of investing in early childhood development and its positive impact on protecting and fulfilling the survival, growth, and developmental rights of all children especially in fragile and humanitarian settings. These investments have lasting impacts and significant social benefits for children as they grow into adolescence and adulthood, even for future generations. Many studies including the World Bank (2023), reveal that every USD$1 spent on early childhood development interventions can yield a return investment as high as USD$13. Overall, initiatives that advocate for early childhood development are crucial for fostering prosperous, healthy, equitable, tolerant, multicultural, sustainable, and democratic societies (Mustard, 2006).

Children Believe's focus on supporting play and early childhood care and development (ECCD) is crucial considering the state of children in the countries where we operate, including Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua, and Paraguay. In these countries, over four in ten children under five lack the benefits of nurturing care they need in their early years, which puts them at a higher risk of facing learning difficulties in school as they grow older. This, in turn, can lead to lower future earnings and could negatively impact the well-being and prosperity of their families and societies.

The design of Children Believe's ECCD program is aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on Education (SDG 4.2), Health (SDG 3.1), Nutrition (SDG 2.2), Child Protection (SDG 16.2, 16.9, SDG 5.3) and Gender Equality (SDG 5.1). The ECCD interventions promote a holistic child development approach which focuses on

interconnected components. This includes the integration of play in early childhood education (ECE), the promotion of maternal and child health and nutrition, the prevention of violence against children and women, and gender transformative actions.

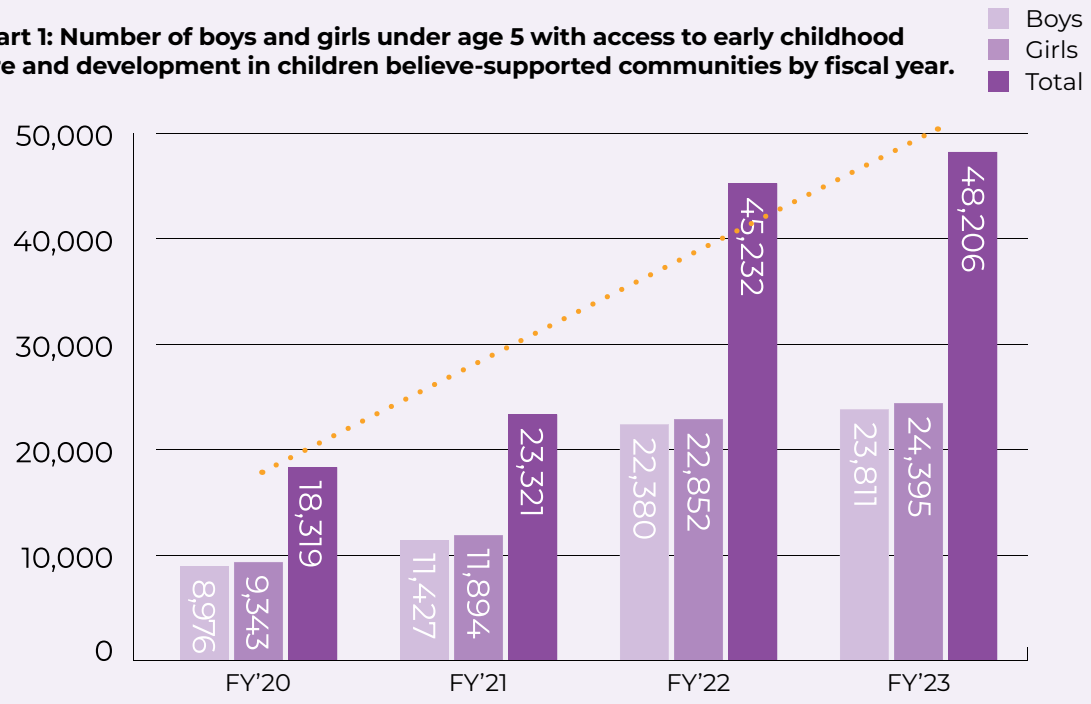
Over the past five years, Children Believe developed excellence and championed its best practices in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) by implementing age-appropriate learning approaches including Learning Through Play (LTP). Its center of excellence initiatives employed the Learning Through Play (LTP) approach, which was developed by the Hinks-Dellcrest Centre (now the Gary Hurvitz Centre for Community Mental Health of Sick Kids Hospital, Toronto, Canada) and the City of Toronto Public Health Department. The LTP approach promotes early childhood development by enhancing the knowledge and skills of parents and caregivers through early mental stimulation and psychosocial support using LTP calendars. LTP Calendars are pictorial guides that show the stages of child development with descriptions of simple play activities to help educators and parents understand age-appropriate care and to help them support young children effectively.

It also equipped parent group leaders, health promoters, educators, and social workers with play facilitation techniques to support parents or caregivers in their early child development practices. Its resources have been translated into 36 languages and the program has been implemented in 25 countries.

LTP provides tools and training for educators, parents and other caregivers. Evaluation reports of Children Believe (2018, 2023a, 2023b) revealed that the ECCD programs implemented across Children Believe country programs were low-cost, sustainable, multicultural, and applicable both in rural and urban settings regardless of literacy or language skills.

The Children Believe 2023 annual report (see Chart 1), highlights how Children Believe has provided play and early childhood development opportunities for 48,206 children (including 24,395 girls) by collaborating with 27 local partners and government education departments and renovated, equipped, or constructed 356 ECCD centers across its six countries of operation. The number of children impacted by its support increased 2.6-fold from FY20 to FY23, demonstrating a continued commitment to providing ECCD support.

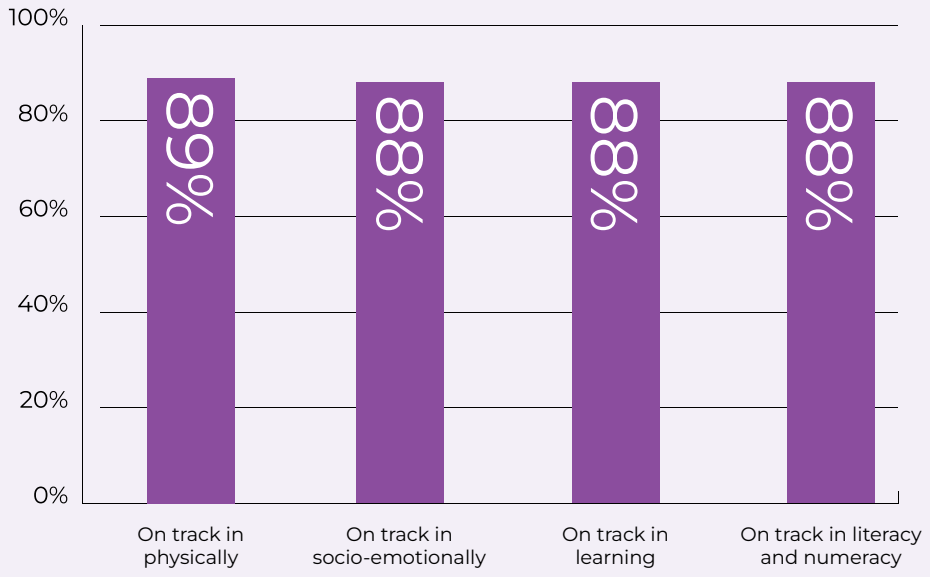
Chart 1: Number of boys and girls under age 5 with access to early childhood care and development in children believe-supported communities by fiscal year.



The quality of play and early education provided by the ECCD centers in communities served by Children Believe is reflected in the positive outcomes experienced by children who attended. Over the past four years, early childhood educators and other stakeholders across its operational areas have collaborated to support community–based systems that prioritize children's well-being. This is achieved by integrating health care, early care and education, and family support into a holistic approach to child development.

Chart 2 shows these positive outcomes. Approximately 89 percent of the children enrolled in ECCD centers showed appropriate progress in their physical development, while 88 percent demonstrated positive socio-emotional development and proficiency in literacy and numeracy skills.

Chart 2: Development performance of children under age 5 who attended early childhood care and development centres supported by children believe — FY23



Source: Children Believe — Global Annual Data Report, FY'23

Children Believe's end-of-term review (2023) further revealed that children who participated in the LTP program successfully improved their social interaction, emotional well-being and learning ability. In addition, the various positive parenting practices that embraced the LTP approach increased fathers' participation in caring and nurturing their children as evidenced in the final evaluation of the Saving Brains Project in Ethiopia (2018). This has helped to break wrong perceptions and harmful traditional beliefs, particularly in countries like Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana and Nicaragua, where male involvement in early childcare is discouraged.

Children Believe also established strong collaborations with government departments including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, and Universities across the countries where it operates. For example, in Ethiopia and Ghana, Children Believe played active roles in the development of national policies and guidelines for play and ECE, enabling her interventions to be more sustainable and better aligned with the national ECCD Policy and Public Health National Plan.

It also contributed to scaling up best practices and lessons learned at grassroots levels at regional and national levels.

As a child-oriented and education-focused organization Children Believe promotes play and early childhood care and development programs as one of its strategic priorities across the six countries where it operates. ECCD programs are more impactful when integrated with and supported by investment in other programs, like maternal and child health and nutrition and community-based child protection programs. The positive lessons learned from targeted communities were replicated or scaled up by maintaining partnerships with relevant government departments in these countries, specifically with the Ministries of Education, Health, Social, and Gender Affairs. Building on these successes, Children Believe has a new strategy to double reach and expand the influence of early childhood care and development programs in the future. The findings from this study will be used to enhance the quality and effectiveness of future programs and to strengthen collaborations with other stakeholders in the field of play and ECE.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.2.1 OVERALL OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of the study is to contribute to the frontier of knowledge and promote dialogue on play and ECE policy and practices.

1.2.2 SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Share empirical evidence on play and ECE from two low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) Ethiopia and Ghana.
- Provide insights into the meanings and applications of play and recommend ways to close policy and practice gaps in early childhood care and development.

To address these objectives, the study employed the following interrelated research questions.

- What are the national contexts in relation to play, ECE, care and development?
- What are the dominant meanings of play and what are the attitudes, and practices among educators, caregivers, and parents at selected schools/sites?
- What enabling and constraining factors influence these understandings and the integration of play in pedagogical practice?
- What are the implications of the current empirical findings for future policy, practice, and research?

1.3 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section explores the main theoretical perspectives on play, its conceptual foundations, and its diverse forms in early childhood care and development. In recent years, play has received increased attention from many disciplines including education, psychology, neuroscience, health sciences, economics, anthropology, and game studies. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, play can blur boundaries between concepts like human-non-human, play-work, nature-nurture, virtual-real world, and childhood-adulthood. Researchers have studied play in mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and invertebrate species to suggest its evolutionary and developmental benefits (Burghardt and Palagi, 2023). In humans, play is universal across countries, but its expression varies based on historical, political, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors that shape its meaning. These factors can influence how play is structured both inside and outside the classroom in ways that may be gendered, classed, racialized, and otherwise exclusionary.

Various research studies highlight the diverse benefits of play for child development. Play enhances brain structure and function, supporting executive function (Yogman, Garner & Hutchinson, 2018), language, cognitive abilities (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004), physical, social, and emotional well-being (Ginsburg, 2007). Additionally, play is associated with increased creativity (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012; Bitew & Sewagegn,

2023) and protects against toxic stress while promoting secure, stable, and nurturing relationships with caregivers, essential for children's flourishing development (Bornstein & Putnick, 2012; Yogman, Garner & Hutchinson, 2018). Through play, children explore their environment, acquire new skills, and learn collaboration, sharing, negotiation, conflict resolution, and self-advocacy. Play provides a platform for children to refine their decision-making abilities and explore their interests (Ginsburg, 2007).

In addition to promoting child development, play also functions as a powerful tool for cultivating meaningful interactions, mutual cultural understanding, and learning within ECE settings, which fosters social inclusion (Kangas, Lastikka, & Arvola, 2023). Playgrounds become environments where children engage on equal footing, irrespective of their backgrounds, nurturing values such as equality, equity, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity, social involvement, and camaraderie (Kangas, Lastikka, & Arvola, 2023).

Play manifests in diverse forms, each offering unique opportunities for different learning outcomes. For example, infants acquire language sounds through playful babbling, toddlers explore cause-and-effect relationships, and three-year-olds engage in dramatic play to understand social dynamics such as leadership and timidity among peers (Elkind, 2016).

Play is also recognized as enjoyable, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive (The LEGO Foundation, 2018). Neuroscientific research shows that while brain development occurs throughout life, there is a surge in neural connections during critical periods, especially from birth to age five. This makes early experiences crucial for developing brain areas associated with cognition, emotional, and behavioural regulation, language use, executive functions, memory, and pleasure (Mustard, 2006). Additionally, environmental stressors such as trauma, financial instability, and food insecurity can adversely impact synaptic growth and brain architecture and function (Fox, Levitt, & Nelson, 2010; Shonkoff, 2012).

Rapid changes in the human cortex and brain make young children receptive to early experiences, especially those linked to responsive caregiving interactions.

Interactions like touching, smiling, talking, singing lullabies, and playing with infants facilitate the formation of neural connections that enhance brain development and have lasting impacts.

When a mother and a baby share affectionate moments such as eye contact, positive affection, and communication, their heart rhythms and brain patterns synchronize, creating bio-behavioural synchrony, which offers a new perspective on attachment (Feldman, 2014; Ashad & Feldman, 2020).

The UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), are global household surveys designed to gather crucial data on health, education, protection, and various factors affecting child development, and maternal and child well-being. Data from UNICEF MICS 3 (2005-2007) in 28 middle- and low-income countries revealed significant deficiencies in home environment conditions for families with children under 5 years old. This includes limited access to formal and informal learning resources and low levels of engagement from caregivers. Research conducted in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has further suggested that parenting programs are successful in enhancing parental understanding of child development (Aboud, 2007), improving mother-child interactions, increasing maternal sensitivity towards their children, encouraging more stimulation through play activities and materials provided by parents, and alleviating depressive symptoms in mothers (Jeong, Pitchik, & Fink, 2021).

Recognizing the crucial role of early responsive caregiving in child development, health specialists advocate for enhanced maternal and child health services, school feeding programs,

and parental responsiveness workshops. The Nurturing Care Framework integrates health, nutrition, education, child protection, and social protection, addressing issues like intergenerational poverty and poor parenting practices, as highlighted in The Lancet (Britto et al., 2016; McGregor, 2017). Promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, and the World Bank Group (2018), this holistic approach aims to design scalable 'smart and "sustainable" programs that target multiple risk factors and are implemented at appropriate developmental stages.

Two key elements of the Nurturing Care Framework; Responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities, are closely connected to play. Caregivers have the most impactful tools for engaging with babies and toddlers through play: their eyes, voice, touch, time, and love (Daly, 2015). This interaction can begin prenatally, taking advantage of the advanced development of the sensory system before birth (Nagy, Thompson, Mayor & Doughty, 2021), and continues into infancy with simple social game routines.

An essential aspect of attachment is the role of responsive care and play as protective factors against toxic stress (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, et al., 2018; Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, & Bhutta, 2020). Strong caregiver-child bonds offer a secure foundation, promoting resilience and emotional regulation and play serves as a beneficial avenue for stress relief and emotional expression, aiding in brain development and coping skills. Furthermore, the involvement of both fathers and mothers in play and caregiving interactions offers similar and unique benefits to the child (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014). Father-child engagement directly and indirectly influences various aspects of child development, including language skills, self-regulation, cognition (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LaMonda, 2007), and social-emotional skills (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004, Millei, 2006; Campbell-Barr & Nygard, 2014).

A grandmother playing with her grandchild in Ghana. Photo: Children Believe

Although play is widely acknowledged as beneficial to children's learning (EYS IV, 2020), ongoing discussions persist regarding its definition and elements.

For some, play entails unstructured play experiences without an educator's intervention, where adult involvement is perceived as undermining children's independence in play. Conversely, others view play as an opportunity for caregivers and educators to steer and mould children toward educational goals

(EYS IV, 2020). The study sought to investigate the viewpoints of caregivers and educators regarding this conceptual dichotomy, which can influence caregiver-child interactions and teaching pedagogies in classrooms.

Play must also be discussed from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge. Historically, studies on Indigenous knowledge were often influenced by colonial and dominant knowledge systems (Dei, 2011, p. 24). How play is embodied reflects

the historical, social, political, and economic structures within societies. For example, communal relations are more prevalent in African societies, whereas individualism is more common in Western states (Nxumalo and Mncube, 2019; Pence and Nsamenang, 2008). The aim of prioritizing Indigenous knowledge systems and other ways of learning (Santos, 2014; Connell, 2007) is neither to erase nor marginalize Western education discourses and practices which would be highly impracticable and undesirable. Rather, the aim is to challenge universal constructs of childhood by pluralizing meanings of play with place-based approaches (Escobar, 2018)

Research from this cultural perspective shows Indigenous games, proverbs, songs, and riddles that support socialization processes including relations with peers, siblings, adults, elders, and forms of spirituality, in ways that reflect cultural knowledge and prepare children to assume future roles in adulthood (Mtonga, 2012; Awopegba et al. 2013; Jirata, 2012). It is important to raise awareness in educators, and caregivers of their implicit and explicit biases regarding Western knowledge and forms of play, and integrate Indigenous play pedagogies in curriculum frameworks, training manuals, and other teaching and learning materials (TLMs). Mulualem, Tamiru, and Kelkay (2022)

Children and parents dancing in the community. Photo: Children Believe Ghana

examine the pedagogical practices of Ethiopian Orthodox Church traditional schools that teach poetry (Qene). They argue that, contrary to generalizations about traditional education systems, these schools use student-centred approaches that include scaffolding, critical inquiry, self-directed learning, and reflective practices, alongside memorization and rote learning. The study highlights the value of cultural norms and practices such as social responsibility, care for others, obedience, and diligence. By recognizing these values, they counter deficit-based perspectives that focus on what is lacking in communities rather than what is present (Oppong, 2020; Serpell, 2011). This approach requires understanding play as a set of relational practices that reflect children's interactions with siblings, caregivers, extended family, elders, communities, and nature, rather than viewing it solely as rational or functional.

This review affirms that early childhood education (ECE) is an important area, where the concept of play is influenced by various fields such as neuroscience, developmental psychology, health and nutrition, education, education economics, philosophy, and cultural/de-colonial studies. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have brought more attention and commitment to the role of play and ECE, evidenced in global policy frameworks like the Education for All agenda and the Millennium Development Goals. The systematic collection of cross-national statistical and evaluation data has been implemented since the inclusion of ECE in the SDGs, including SDG 4.2, which mandates that states ensure access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education by 2030 2030 "so that they are ready for primary education'. The case studies in the empirical chapters have incorporated these theoretical perspectives and provided a comprehensive analysis of play and ECE.

1.4 DATA COLLECTION METHODS, APPROACHES, AND ANALYSIS

The study employed a qualitative, comparative case approach, involving 16 pre-primary/primary schools randomly selected from implementing partners in four out of the six Children Believe implementation countries. Data collection took place from February to August 2023, based on the school calendar, and comprised of four main sources:

i) National ECE policies and strategy documents published in the past ten years to contextualize findings from other sources;

ii) Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with education workers including a total of 16 home room teachers who manage classrooms and 16 school leaders/ principals;

iii) Focus group discussions in the selected schools involving over 160 parents, and

iv) Classroom observations of up to 120 minutes.

The different datasets enabled the triangulation of findings by cross-referencing teachers' and school principals' responses with corresponding classroom observation results, and by comparing findings from parents and caregivers. The selected pre-primary/primary schools were located in low-income rural areas, small towns, or marginalized communities.

Only educators with a minimum of two years of teaching experience in the preschool classroom were eligible for selection in the study. New teachers were excluded because they face various challenges unique to their early stage of teaching. Where possible, efforts were made to select educators of varying age groups and gender.

Interviews were conducted in local languages, recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and translated into English (except in the case of Ghana where the transcripts were originally in English). The data was coded based on emerging themes and analyzed by research teams. In some cases, when country-specific codes were identified, new nodes were added to the initial coding structure based on the findings.

The qualitative analysis was complemented with quantitative data on early human development and associated risk factors. Country-specific statistics from Ethiopia and

Ghana were integrated into individual life course developmental health curves, spanning from prenatal to adult life. These curves included key indicators of child development like low birth weight, child malnutrition, school readiness levels, primary school academic achievement, and school dropout rates. Additionally, the curves incorporated both protective and risk factors, such as anemia among women of reproductive age, preschool attendance, physical abuse, early marriage, violence against women, parental engagement in early stimulation activities, and the number of internally displaced people as a proxy to toxic stress and other determinants of health (this last indicator is only presented for Ghana and Ethiopia). **The adopted life-course approach is valuable for comprehending development as a trajectory influenced by factors such as toxic stress, malnutrition, and the quality of cognitive and social stimuli.** Research indicates that many adult diseases have their roots in epigenetic factors stemming from early-life malnutrition (Berretta, Guida, Forni, & Provenzi, 2021) and toxic stress (Shonkoff, 2012).

These curves aim to demonstrate the interconnectedness of physical and mental health, learning, and behaviour, to identify early experiences that can affect later development, and to support the design of public policies. The figures are based on a model developed by Tinajero (2020) and serve the additional purpose of identifying unmeasured indicators and protective/risk factors that may not be addressed by the country's social policies.

1.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study conformed to ethical standards involving human subjects. The research team obtained the consent of educational authorities before proceeding. Informed consent and permission were received from all participants including consent to record, transcribe, and anonymize the source of the data with exceptions.

All participants were given sufficient time and opportunity to ask questions and decide if they wanted to take part in the study. They also had the freedom to withdraw from the process at any time without a reason and without facing any consequences.

Participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential and that all data would be made anonymous to reduce any potential risks. It's worth mentioning that no participant chose to withdraw during the study.

1.6 LIMITATIONS

This study had some limitations. The study did not address the play needs of certain groups, such as children with severe or multiple disabilities, who are often enrolled in special education institutions where available. A more detailed assessment that includes special schools and children with special needs, is needed in the future. Additionally, the study focused on the interviews and class observations in school settings and hence the participation of parents and adults was limited to sharing their perspectives on their collaborations with schools. This differs from observing a child play at home, where interactions are often with close family members rather than teachers or caregivers. An attempt was made to address this gap by analyzing previous evaluations conducted using an assessment of play specifically focusing on a home setting.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report consists of four chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of Children Believe's play and ECE programming. It also presents a review of the literature and the methodological approach used in the study. Chapters two and three analyze and present the case studies from Ethiopia and Ghana respectively. The fourth chapter covers the conclusions and recommendations of the study, presenting its implications for policy and for play-based learning and ECE.

2. ETHIOPIA CASE STUDY

A toddler learning through play with her family in Ethiopia. Photo: Children Believe

2.1 OVERVIEW

Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa with a population of over 123 million people (UN Population Division, 2023), is a culturally rich and diverse country. It has ranked 11th out of 179 countries for its risks of fragility context in 2023. Nearly half of the population (48.6 percent) are children under the age of 15 years, of which nearly 15 percent are under the age of 5 years (UN Population Division, 2023). The country has been affected by consecutive years of drought, prolonged ethnic tensions, armed conflicts, displacement, long-term economic underdevelopment, and political marginalization. In 2023, close to 24 million people became dependent on humanitarian aid, nearly three-quarters of whom were women and children. Over 4.5 million people were internally displaced largely due to ethnically targeted attacks and dispossession of properties. War in Northern Ethiopia (Afar, Amhara, and Tigray) has reportedly claimed the lives of over 600,000 people, damaged about 85 percent of the health and education facilities and pushed over 2.5 million children out of schools (UNOCHA, 2023).

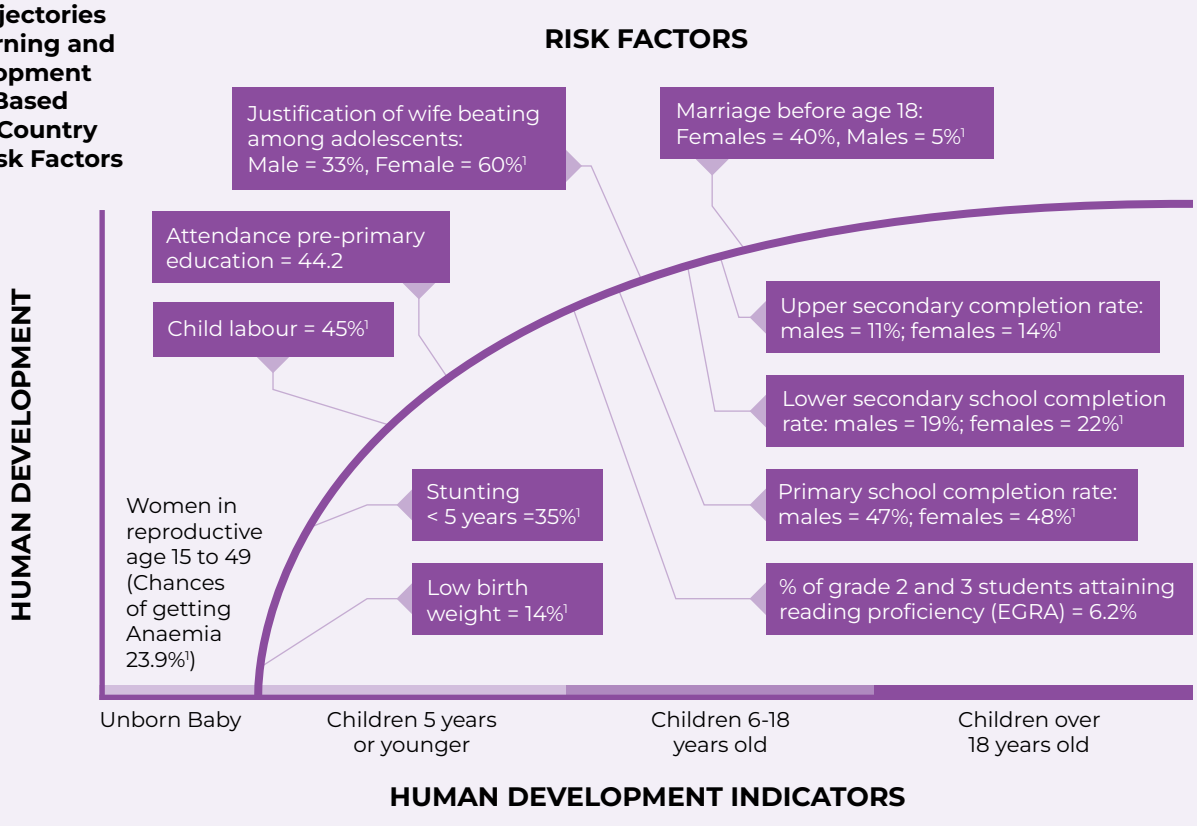
More than 55 percent of preschool children in Ethiopia do not have access to an ECE program, and 41.3 percent of preschool children fall in the severe category under the Global Hidden Hunger Index (2023).

Existing early learning centers are environmentally compromised, outdated, and without basic amenities. Children Believe has operated in Ethiopia since 1987 and works in partnership with six local NGO partners in Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, and Southern Regions.

2.2 TRAJECTORIES IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT: MACRO ANALYSIS

The trajectory of human development in Ethiopia (see Figure 1) indicates a "poor developmental health start" marked by high rates of anemia in women of reproductive age (23.9 percent), low birth weight (14percent), and delayed growth in children under five years (35percent). These early developmental challenges can lead to long-term biological burdens and adverse impacts on health, learning, and behaviour throughout the lifespan of individuals. Additionally, areas of concern include the low levels of reading proficiency among second and third-grade students (6.2 percent), and poor completion rates in primary (48 percent) and upper-secondary schools (13 percent). Various risk factors, such as early female marriage (40 percent), justification of wife-beating (female=60 percent), child labour (45 percent), and human displacement, contribute to these developmental challenges. Notably, physical violence and human displacement have been linked to the occurrence of toxic stress which can harm human development (Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, & Bhutta, 2020).

Figure 1: Trajectories in Early Learning and Child Development in Ethiopia Based on Existing Country Data and Risk Factors



References: [1]UNICEF (2023a), [2]USAID Ethiopia (2019), [3]WHO Data (n/y), 4UNICEF (2019), 5UNHCR (2024). Figure 1 is based on a methodology developed by Tinajero (2020).

Approximately 3.5 million internally displaced people and 1 million refugees and asylum seekers in 2024[5]

Healthy life expectancy = 59.9 years (global = 63.7)

The macro-analysis illustrated in Figure 1, implies that the Ethiopian Government shall continue supporting its existing multi-sectoral policies, including those related to play. This is because play serves as a protective factor and plays a crucial role in keeping children engaged in school learning due to its enjoyable nature. Additionally, it acts as a buffer against toxic stress, promotes healthy child development, and contributes to the establishment of a strong parent-child attachment. (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, et al., 2018; Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, & Bhutta, 2020 and Ginsburg, 2007).

Conversely, Figure 1 does not reveal indicators related to early learning, child-rearing practices, and play. Since Ethiopia did not participate in MICS 6, crucial indicators regarding early parent-child interactions and play are missing. Therefore, the country should consider the importance of collecting this developmental health data.

2.3 PLAY IN NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Ethiopian government introduced publicly funded pre-primary education (O-class) for children six years of age in 2010 and expanded access to children 4 and 5 years. Besides O-class, the government also supports child-to-child (CtC) learning programs or "Accelerated School Readiness Program". As a result, enrollment in pre-primary education increased from 5 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in 2020 (Kim et al., 2022). While the government contributed to expanded access to pre-primary education, gross-net enrollment gaps indicate issues of right-age enrollment, retention, progression and, more broadly, education quality, and social disparities.

It is encouraging to note that the expanded enrollment levels reflect the government's view that education is a critical driver for the country's growth and transformation (Ministry of Education, 2018, pp. 3-4). Its *Education Development Roadmap for 2018-2030* highlights the role of education in the development of holistic citizens, who are confident, competent, critical thinkers guided by ethical and moral values that support peace, unity, and diversity, as well as global market growth (p. 93).

The *Education Sector Development Programme VI 2020/21 – 2024/25* (ESDP VI), commits the government to expanding quality, equity, and internal efficiency (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2022/23). Component 1 of this program states, "Every child aged 5 to 6 has access to free, safe, quality and developmentally appropriate pre-primary education to be ready for primary education" (p.84). The goal is to raise the pre-primary Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) for children 5 and 6 years to 74.1 percent by 2025 from 41.8 percent in 2019 (p. 84). ESDP VI aims to address in-school factors by strengthening inclusive pre-primary teacher training programs in relevant mother tongues, with a focus on holistic child development, remedial teaching, and continuous assessment (p.84). It also addresses out-of-school factors through campaigns to inform parents, the creation of community-based parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs), school feeding programs, and financial incentives for vulnerable children (EDSP VI, p. 85).

EDSP VI does not explicitly endorse play or play-based learning in pre-primary education but the current *National Early Childhood Development and Education Policy Framework* (2023) endorses a play-focused approach for children 4-6 years of age.

The Ministry of Education prefaces the document by stating its commitment to holistic child development represents an "investment in the young, the human capital for sustainable development of the future" (2023, p. ii). The Ministry of Health, similarly, shares the commitment to holistic child development cautioning that,

> "Malnutrition, toxic stress, lack of nurturing care and brain stimulation during the early years impair brain development and thus children's potential to learn. This precludes children from reaching their full potential and becoming productive adults." (2023, p. iii).

The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs also acknowledges the positive impacts that education has on human capital development and the disruption of cycles of intergenerational poverty; adding to the importance of improving child-rearing practices, community engagement, and child protection systems (2023, p. iv). Moreover, the Framework identifies holistic education with the integration of Indigenous knowledge in basic education for children 4 to 6 years, but only designates the Ministry of Culture and Sport to identify and promote Indigenous parenting/child-rearing techniques through the ECDE program (p. 16) (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2022/23).

While the Framework identifies "play-centred services" as one of the eight guiding principles for the policy and emphasizes a "play-focused" approach for pre-primary education (ages 4 to 6) (pp. 5 & 7), it does not unpack what these mean in practice. Instead, the Framework states, "Through pre-primary education, children will be nurtured physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, ethically, and culturally so that they are ready for primary education and lifelong learning" (p.7). It outlines implementation modalities that include: institutionalizing a free and compulsory three-year pre-primary education program with a separate budget; awareness-raising activities on birth registration, skills training for parents and caregivers, expanding access; supporting teacher training institutes to deliver in-service teacher professional development programs; training teachers on identifying children with special needs and using alternative formats (sign language, braille, touch tiles etc); establishing systems for measuring the performance of pre-primary schools; developing and distributing teaching and learning materials and teaching children in their mother-tongue language (p. 8) (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2022/23).

The ECE system prioritizes biomedical and human capital perspectives, emphasizing the importance of ensuring access, quality, and efficiency in pre-primary education to facilitate economic growth by equipping children with the necessary skills to excel in primary school and beyond.

Recognizing cultural and ethical perspectives, the Framework acknowledges the importance of social cohesion in settings of conflict and climate-induced human displacement. However, it has not extended moral/civic education to pre-primary education. Such education promotes "national unity in diversity" for children in Grades 1-6, and civic education for Grades 7-10 to "live in harmony and work for the unity of the country through an appreciation of diversity, inter-culturalism, and inclusion (Federal Ministry of Education, Ethiopia, 2021, p. 29). The early years can support a culture of peace particularly given the socio-economic inequalities, regional armed conflict, and climate variability including drought and flooding that have contributed to the rise in number of over 5.5 million internally displaced people (IOM 2022) and 823,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2022).

2.4 PLAY IN PRACTICE: KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

2.4.1 CURRICULUM, INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS, AND IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

Studies exploring the Ethiopian "O" class curriculum revealed that: 1) the curriculum exhibits minimal differences from primary grades regarding content allocation, teaching methodology, assessment methods, and the learning environment (Dakamo Tomora, 2022; Addisu & Wudu, 2019); 2) there is limited emphasis on child play and creative activities, and assessments include portfolios, practical activities, as well as traditional tests and questions (Dakamo Tomora, 2022); and 3) the primary teaching method identified is question and answer, followed by explanation (Addisu & Wudu, 2019). Another investigation on the pedagogical implementation of the curriculum identifies a deficiency in current pedagogical practices, particularly in fostering communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. The studies suggest that facilitators of ECE should introduce systematic scaffolding for playful learning to enhance instructional quality and improve teachers' skills (Geletu, 2023).

These findings highlight the need to review

policies and criteria for early childhood care and education programs. This reassessment is vital to guarantee that these policies align with the age, culture, and other social characteristics of children. Moreover, the proposed revisions should prioritize training for ECE and the integration of the "O" class curriculum's learning content through a pedagogy based on songs, art, practical activities, storytelling, and play (Dakamo Tomora, 2022). Additionally, the creation of technology-supported learning and reading corners is advised (Ministry of Education, Ethiopia, 2018).

Ethiopia has implemented several initiatives centred around play. The first initiative stems from ESD VI, mandating health providers to offer counselling services to parents and caregivers, guiding them on play, communication, and strategies to enhance their child's development. This service targets the age group from pre-birth to 3+ years (Ministry of Health, Ethiopia, 2023). The second initiative is the Luminos Second Chance program, which aims to reintegrate out-of-school children into the educational system. This program takes a comprehensive approach, involving various stakeholders in the education ecosystem. Its success is evident in helping over 100,000 children access quality learning opportunities through accelerated learning, with a focus on play-based pedagogy. The program includes community mobilization through parental engagement groups and capacity building for partner government schools, aiming to overcome systemic barriers to education (Wang, 2018). Lastly, the third initiative is PlayMatters, which addresses the needs of young children, especially those affected by displacement and crises. PlayMatters utilizes LTP as its active teaching and learning method, where children engage in guided, hands-on, meaningful, play-based interactions in safe and inclusive environments. Its goal is to encourage children to interact with people and/or learning materials to question, experiment, practice, and discover. The PlayMatters Emergency Response Mechanism (PM ERM) is a response to the conflict in northern regions of Ethiopia, providing services to 201 integrated pre-primary and primary schools and 177,405 children (Plan International & The Lego Foundation, 2023).

However, an examination of Play in Practice in Ethiopia needs to be conducted in the context of the Education Sector Development Programme VI 2020/21 – 2024/25. The Ministry of Health undertook a situational assessment in 2019 to investigate the extent to which nurturing care interventions are being implemented in the health sector as part of Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, Child, Adolescent Health, and Nutrition programs. According to the assessment's findings, among the five nurturing care components, good health, adequate nutrition, and safety have been implemented to varying degrees by the health sector through its programs; however, interventions to ensure responsive caregiving, opportunity for early learning, and stimulation were revealed to be critical components of the nurturing care framework components with no or limited degree of implementation in the health sector. These interventions include: 1) monitoring child developmental milestones (children under 5 years of age); 2) counselling the caregivers on responsive care and opportunity for early learning and stimulation; and 3) establishing play sessions at health facilities (Ministry of Health, Ethiopia, 2023).

On the other hand, conflicts and displacement in Ethiopia were identified as the driving force for elevating toxic stress levels in children due to abrupt and intense exposure to trauma, such as violence and forced displacement (Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, & Bhutta, 2020). Toxic stress, stemming from prolonged activation of the stress response, may manifest during sensitive periods of development, leading to possible epigenetic changes and subsequent health and neurodevelopmental implications (Ataullahjan, Samara, Betancourt, & Bhutta, 2020). Buffering toxic stress among displaced and refugee children in Ethiopia is, therefore, crucial for the overall play, well-being, and development of affected children.

2.4.2 MEANINGS OF PLAY: REFLECTIONS FROM BOTTOM UP

Educators and caregivers held diverse views on play. The available research literature in Ethiopia

regarding the beliefs of parents and teachers on play is limited. Common perspectives highlight a preference for academic activities over play within organized preschool programs and parental approaches (Tigistu, 2013; Adams, 2016). For instance, in a study featuring kindergarten school children in Wolaita Zone, it was established that teachers' pedagogical knowledge, parental play beliefs, and the incorporation of play as a teaching technique significantly and positively predicted children's early literacy and numeracy skills (Zekarias & Zhao, 2023). Similarly, an investigation in the Tigray region revealed low levels of parental engagement in playful activities and home learning, coupled with a lack of awareness regarding age-appropriate stories, songs, and games for young children (Dighe & Seiden, 2020). Lastly, a study conducted in Addis Ababa identified that parents, while acknowledging the potential benefits of play in child development, prioritize academic activities for their children while also endorsing participation in arts and crafts (Metaferia, Futo & Takacs, 2021).

In our study, most educators expressed that children engage in play naturally and they viewed play as a stage of development. For example, a teacher noted, **"Children understand things and they explain what they have understood through play; play is children's language to communicate with others" (Tr4).**

Other pre-school teachers stated,

> "When children, who have never met before, meet for the first time in a play situation, they easily communicate with each other and share play materials, because play is their language and their means of communication" (Tr7).

"At an early age, the number one thing that children need is play; children want to play both at school and home...." (Tr3).

Focus group discussion (FDG) participants also generally associated play with pleasure.

> "When children play their mind becomes free. Children also become happy when they play. Instead of controlling and punishing children, they can easily understand what you tell them if you tell them through play....." (FGD1).

"Play is any activity that gives happiness to children," "Because play entertains children, you can use it to teach them something" (FGD4).

The study found that playing is instrumental for teaching and learning. Educators associate play with pleasure and use it to make learning more interesting

"Play is an activity that entertains and relaxes children's minds; children become very happy when they play" (Tr8).

"Play is something teachers use to make children happy during a teaching-learning process" (Tr2)."

"Play is an activity that motivates children to learn. When you teach without play children will not listen to you and will not follow your instruction' (Tr2).

> "Play is a form of enjoyment and playing itself can be a form of learning. We have realized that teaching children through play is an effective method to teach preschool children. Compared to other teaching approaches, play is the most effective way to impart knowledge to children at this age. Play promotes children to keep their minds flexible, which allows them to process and record information more effectively" (FGD teachers 1).

In addition to being enjoyable, participants linked play with positive developmental outcomes. They noted that play enhances children's communication and social skills, as well as providing other developmental benefits such as supporting physical and cognitive growth. Play also impacts emotional development by fostering confidence. The linkage between play, pleasure, and developmental outcomes was

associated with a favourable perspective of play pedagogy depending on the child's age.

> **"Some children struggle to make friends and interact with other children. But, when they play in groups, they learn how to communicate and interact with other children and adults and through this process, their social skills become improved which in turn improves their confidence". (Tr-6)**

> "Children's physical development improves through play. When children play games that involve physical activities like running and jumping, they mature physically. When they manipulate small play objects their fine motor development also improves" (Tr4).

> "I believe that children should not be prohibited from playing. Children should play because this is their age for playing. If children don't want to do schoolwork, they don't do it effectively even if we force them to do it. Therefore, we should not restrict them from playing which is something they like the most; play is what they have" (FGD4).

In general, our study found that most school administrators, educators, teachers, and caregivers held positive attitudes toward play. They also understood and implemented play in their pre-schools as an entertainment and participatory tool for promoting teaching and learning.

2.4.3 TYPES OF PLAY IN ACTION: INSIGHTS FROM CLASSROOM ASSESSMENTS

The study observed the different types of play implemented and practiced in selected classrooms. Play is an enabling tool for learning, but not all types of play are equally valued by educators.

There's a strong preference for guided play in the classroom.

Interview data and classroom observations established that play activities often come before formal instruction and are curated by teachers to align with learning objectives. Some teachers used songs, riddles, and games before a lesson with themes tied to learning objectives.

> **"Play activities that are planned and supervised by teachers, in my opinion, are the most important because they provide children with educational opportunities. Informal play doesn't provide opportunities for real learning. ... "The informal running is not purposeful play. I'm talking about the structured play activities that educate children" (Teacher One GK).**

Children Believe's CEO Fred Witteveen at a Children Believe supported ECCD center in Ethiopia. Photo: Brett Tarver

"If you give them time for simple play or if you make the children simply play, it will have no significant benefit for them. Simple play cannot be learning" (School Principal Two).

"Children are not generally interested in classroom learning, but if they play well before any classroom instruction, their attention to the lesson improves' (Tr-6).

Educators classified play into two: educational play used to teach academic subjects with teaching aids; and free play for entertaining children. Free play is mainly found outdoors involving activities like rope jumping, running, hide and seek, football, and local games. However, play on outdoor equipment, such as slides, see-saws, swings, and merry-go-rounds was limited due to equipment shortage and, where such equipment was available, it was often damaged or broken. Due to the shortage of play equipment children wait their turns and have only a few minutes each to play on the equipment.

"We have an Afaan Oromo alphabet made of wood, so we simply spill them on the floor and ask the children to identify each alphabet. We let them jump while carrying the alphabet and instruct them to identify it by calling out the letters' names. In addition, we teach alphabets through songs, which is a significant form of play-based pedagogy" (Teacher Two GA).

"In outdoor play, children are allowed to play their activities and games. But, in the classroom, we select the types of play and play materials and guide its implementation because we have to make sure that the play is related to the lesson at hand" (Tr7).

"Outside the classroom, children engage in their preferred play activity in their preferred play area; it is free play time, and the role of teachers is to supervise children and protect them from any harm" (Tr2).

"They [children] return to the classroom to resume their education after playing outside of the class. The children return to play after finishing their class tasks."

The study observed through interviews and class observational that singing is commonly used by teachers for play-based activities. These are categorized into three types.

a. The first song group teaches morals and good behaviour and includes themes around love, respect, and conviviality with lyrics. However, teachers were not observed to intentionally link the morals represented by the lyrics to children's real-life situations, for example, by asking open-ended questions related to the song's meanings or reflecting on how they interpreted the songs based on their experiences.

"We use songs in the classroom to teach different lessons and to entertain children" (Tr5)

b. The second group comprises songs that convey specific domains of knowledge such as numbers and counting, letters, colours, animal behaviours, and caring for nature. A typical song in this category, for example, includes teaching the Amharic alphabet and numbers linking Amharic letters and numbers with various shapes.

c. The third group conveys basic life skills such as washing hands, with lyrics such as "I keep my hygiene every day."

In addition to singing, pretend play was also utilized in both the classroom and the schoolyard, where children role-play being mothers or fathers in daily routines such as cooking, cleaning, caring for young children, shopping, and caring for animals. In the classroom, for example, when learning about animals and their behaviours, teachers may instruct children to act like different animals.

"They pretend to act like the hyena. In the classroom we write the names of different animals on a piece of paper and children take one piece of paper and act like the

animal written on that paper; children like such types of pretend play" (Tr1).

The most frequently observed form of play in the classroom was pretend play. Other play-based learnings used for teaching numeracy and literacy skills include the use of stones, bottle tops, and paper or wooden letters to aid counting.

Both teacher-guided and free play are implemented in the school settings; although the free-play is often practiced outside the classrooms or as extracurricular school activities.

2.4.4 ENABLING FACTORS FOR PROMOTION OF PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Participants identified three main enabling factors for play-based learning:

- Support systems,
- Pre-school curriculum, and
- A favourable attitude of teachers towards the use of play.

Support systems include the presence of a teaching assistant and a supportive school leader.

> "Because my assistant and I are supporting each other, we can manage children and implement play-based learning in the classroom". (Tr1) "The principal also supports us to implement play-based teaching and she has a good attitude about play and play-based learning".

> **"The principal does everything for us and supports us in every way possible, including looking for play and learning resources, books, and other administrative issues. Even if what we ask her is beyond her capacity, she always communicates with the school's administration and tries to bring what we require" (SL2).**

Conversely, some teachers reported that,

> **"Preschools receive little attention from school principals… they are concerned with elementary schools even while the preschool program is dealing with complicated problems that require immediate attention."** This may be due to a misunderstanding of the relevance of preschool education…. "They [primary school principals] believe that children should learn three subjects each day without considering class size, the various age groups in the same classroom, and the lack of teaching tools. Furthermore, they frequently complain to us that they [the children] spend a lot of time outside the classroom, which they think is pointless." (T1T2 Geda Melba).

The preschool curriculum and teacher guidebooks encourage teachers to use play-based pedagogy. These guides include playing, singing, and riddling as the primary pedagogical technique for preschool education. Teachers are required to use play-based learning, and their instructional plans, classroom practices, and reports are assessed against the criteria of including play-based learning.

The pre-school curriculum includes play and play-based pedagogy – it is about play-based learning, and it instructs teachers to teach through play and songs.

> "Every teacher is required to use play because children learn best through play-based pedagogy" (ANDOT-2).".

> "The curriculum [states that] children should learn through play rather than becoming bored with school learning….It states that children should not sit on chairs, but rather on the carpet, to teach children via play.

School administrators acknowledged that favourable attitudes toward play-based learning as an enabling factor. When interviewed they expressed the views that teachers are aware of and have good attitudes toward play-based learning and the benefits of using play to teach young children

> "I can say that all teachers have a good attitude and awareness about child play and

play-based learning" (ATP-1).

"They (teachers) know about play-based pedagogy; they understand the importance of play in children's learning. Based on this understanding the teachers implement play-based pedagogy in their classrooms" (DK2D-2).

In sum, the presence of agile and supportive teams, the creation of a preschool curriculum, and engaging school leadership were highlighted as positive enablers to actively implement play-based learning in schools.

2.4.5 HINDERING FACTORS FOR THE PROMOTION OF PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Educators outlined constraining factors for play-based learning such as inadequate in-service training, lack of teaching and learning materials, time and space limitations, and unsupportive parental attitudes.

2.4.5.1 LIMITED CAPACITY SUPPORT TO TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The majority of educators indicated that they received some form of training and in-service teacher professional development on play-based learning. However, these capacity-building programs were mainly delivered by non-governmental organizations including Children Believe and the training varied in quality and duration. Though in some cases the training was beneficial, some were inadequate to inform classroom practice. For example, one teacher recalled,

"The training did not assist us to truly grasp how the contents were to be performed in our classroom because the training lasted only one or two days" (Teacher One GA).

According to the focus group discussions for teachers, they believed that they didn't have enough training to properly support children with disabilities, except those with less severe disabilities that can be managed with relative ease. They lacked specialized professionals to help support these children.

2.4.5.2 SCARCITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS AND LIMITED PHYSICAL SPACES

The lack of teaching and learning materials presents a barrier to play-based learning. Teachers and school administrators claimed that the biggest challenge to effectively implementing play-based learning is the shortage of resources and teaching aids to support teaching.

"There are limited resources. For example, we lack building blocks, we don't have enough scissors, and we don't have enough puzzles. If we have enough resources, we will be successful in using play-based learning because we have the motivation and interest to teach using play" (ANDOT-3).

"We have no appropriate teaching aids such as balls, dolls, chalkboards, alphabet and number teaching aids that children require to learn and for entertainment" (SP2).

"We don't have adequate play spaces and play materials to properly implement play-based learning as provided in the curriculum" … "We have large class sizes inadequate to effectively promote play-based pedagogy practice. Except for children with less severe disabilities that could be accommodated with relative ease through building ramps; we lack classes equipped for children with special needs" (DK1D-4).

2.4.5.3 PARENTAL PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PLAY

Poor parental view on play-based learning was another challenge identified by educators in the study. Educators indicated that parents' unfavourable attitude toward play is deeply rooted in their belief that learning does not occur through play and without direct classroom instruction, and playing is a waste of time.

"Parents do not have a positive attitude towards children's play at school." (Teacher ANDOT- 1)

"Parents complain about children's play time in the preschool. They think that children

spend the entire day playing" (Principal DK2D-2) ,

"Parents want their children to learn numeracy and literacy in the classroom and they don't think that play contributes to children's learning." (Principal ANDD-3)

Data from the FGDs with parents also revealed the reservations of some parents toward play. They stated that children ought to give more attention to their schoolwork and play during only their free time, not while they ought to be studying.

"Because education determines children's future success, it should get more attention than playing which is a mere waste of time for happiness." (Parent ATPt-1).

"I prefer my children to spend more time doing schoolwork and supporting me with with helping their younger siblings than playing outdoors."

Play is an important tool for building interactions and social skills in children. Photo: Children Believe.

This view is different from the reports of the parents which suggested extensive awareness creation and collaboration with pre-schools through the establishment of early childhood care and education (ECCE) centers by NGOs, including Children Believe and its partners. For instance, the evaluation of the Saving Brains Project of Children Believe (2018) indicated that there was improved parental knowledge and practice on child development through the promotion of the LTP approach. 51.8 percent and 99.4 percent of parents answered correctly the LTP questions on parental knowledge assessment in the control and intervention groups, respectively, showing a significant difference in the knowledge of parents on antenatal care, delivery, and postnatal care between the control and intervention groups.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Inadequate teachers' in-service training, limited teaching and learning materials, limited physical spaces, and unsupportive parental attitudes were identified barriers to effectively promoting play in schools.

2.5.1 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The government's efforts to expand access to preschool education with the introduction of O-classes for 5- and 6-year-olds since 2010 have increased enrollment levels of boys and girls. However, the rapid enrollment growth has outpaced the development of infrastructure and the recruitment of teachers, resulting in large class sizes of children aged 4 to 6 years. The focus on building infrastructure has meant that capacity building for in-service teachers has fallen largely to NGOs. This has led to fragmented provision, limited quality assurance, and disparities in access to and quality of professional development opportunities for early childhood education (ECE) educators. These limitations hinder the potential for expanding play-based teacher professional development and reinforce traditional teaching methods.

The findings suggest that educators perceive play as a developmentally appropriate practice that contributes to a child's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. It is present in the classroom and schoolyard, mainly as guided and free play, respectively. Because play is associated with pleasure and happiness, teachers use guided play to create a permissive environment for learning

and preparing children to read, write, and count etc. The majority of parent participants minimized or rejected the intrinsic value of play as learning while acknowledging the pleasure and happiness of playful moments. Rather, they mobilized play to learn academic skills. As a result, play-based learning in the classroom is largely guided by teachers and is coupled with instructional activity using "chalk and talk" or other teacher-directed instructional forms and positioned before academic lessons or to focus children's attention. From this perspective, play is perceived as instrumental for learning or what Nilsson, Ferholt and Lecusay (2018) called "play-for-learning".

Children Believe CEO, Fred Witteveen, singing with children in an ECCD center in Ethiopia. Photo: Brett Tarver

The findings also revealed a prevailing parental inclination to prioritize traditional academic subjects over the educational benefits of play in their children's development. This parental perspective poses a significant challenge, as educators and school leaders observe a lack of positive attitudes of parents toward children's play at school.

This research confirms earlier studies indicating factors affecting educational quality like overcrowded classrooms, availability and quality in-service and pre-service teacher professional development, supportive administration, resourcing teaching and learning materials, and parental attitudes (for a list of factors, see Diale and Sewagegn, 2021). In other words, teachers' capacity to implement play pedagogy is enabled by a support system that may include the availability of teaching assistants and TLMs and a permissive environment (school yard, play equipment, class size) for play.

These findings suggest a process of "schoolification" of ECE (Rentzou & Ekine, 2017), coinciding with increased emphasis on academic skills, driven by parents and teachers who draw comparisons with private preschools emphasizing academic proficiency and English-language instruction. This emphasis may lead to less attention to play-based activities and, conversely, more time dedicated to teacher-directed instructional practices such as writing drills.

There are several reasons why teachers often rely on songs, local games, and riddles as dominant forms of play for several reasons. First, these activities require minimal resources. Secondly, they can be intergenerational and evolve over time to resonate with both children and adults. Thirdly, traditional education systems, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church schools, include both spoken word (scriptures and poetry) and musical traditions rooted in religious and spiritual culture. Fourth, riddles are significant in African languages, expressing creativity through local metaphors, although they are less common in English-language societies.

These points highlight the importance of Ethiopian knowledge in shaping play. Western models of play, like circle time and play centers/corners, might not be the most suitable given the resource levels and social structures in Ethiopia.

The research suggests that play pedagogies can incorporate Indigenous knowledge, such as songs, riddles, and local games, to support moral education, foundational learning, and nature-based education, thereby aiding in building the identity of children.

2.5.2 LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

2.5.2.1 STRENGTHENING PARENTAL CARE BELIEFS AND PRACTICE

It is important to recognize and endorse the intrinsic connection between parent-child play and responsive caregiving interactions. Play, as a foundation for responsive engagements, enables parents to tune into their child's cues, emotions, and needs. Therefore, to transform play into a protective factor, it must be embraced as a parental practice from the early stages of a child's life. The Nurturing Care Framework adopts this early intervention approach.

The information obtained through interviews and focus groups suggests a parental inclination to prioritize traditional academic subjects over the educational benefits of play. According to some teachers, "this negative parental attitude towards play is rooted in the belief that learning primarily occurs through direct classroom instruction, with playing being seen as a waste of time."

Changing these kinds of beliefs is a challenging task which requires a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach that acknowledges and respects local values The LTP program implemented by Children Believe is an exemplary initiative that facilitates this transformation. In LTP sessions, parents engage in hands-on experiences and discussions to reflect on their new knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to play. This approach helps parents gradually shift their perspectives, allowing them to see the

intrinsic value and benefits of play while aligning with their cultural beliefs (Tinajero, 2016).

2.5.2.2 ENHANCING MULTI-SECTORIAL COORDINATION AND PROMOTING SYNERGIC APPROACHES IN ECD

The 'traditional' approach in the health and education sectors is to work in silos and function independently. This separation poses a challenge to the effective implementation of holistic ECD policies like ESDP VI. Both health and education sectors play a crucial role in shaping children's developmental trajectories in physical and mental health, learning, and behaviour. Medical professionals can broaden their traditional roles by guiding parents on play and responsive caregiving interactions. Likewise, educators possess the ability to establish playful, warm, and affectionate school environments, creating spaces free of toxic stress for children.

> There is a need for effective collaboration of both health and education teams to deliver services related to early stimulation, responsive caregiving interactions, and child development monitoring.

2.5.2.3 PREVENTION AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN FROM TOXIC STRESS

Toxic stress affects children's learning and is considered a major social determinant of health. Nevertheless, this indicator remains largely unmeasured by social policies, with no data collected on it by WHO or UNICEF (Tinajero, 2021). The concern regarding toxic stress in Ethiopia is substantiated by the statistics presented in Figure 1 e.g. violent discipline, the high number of displaced children, possible academic pressure in school, and the issue of overcrowded classrooms.

Identifying and addressing sources of stress is imperative for creating an environment that supports the comprehensive development and overall health of young children. One step to tackle this issue is to be mindful of children's stress levels and the various stressors. Teachers, family doctors, and professionals working with displaced children should be aware of the negative effects of toxic stress. In this context, play should be designed and implemented to provide the opportunity to build safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer and act as a protective shield against toxic stress (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, & et. al., 2018).

2.5.2.4 PROMOTING HARMONIZED VIEWS AND HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO PLAY

The continuum of parental and teachers' perspectives on children's play spans a spectrum. At one end, some acknowledge the significance of play on child development. On the opposite end, some consider play as a natural activity for children, primarily for amusement. In the middle are perspectives held by parents who recognize the distinct benefits of play but give priority to academic activities for their children (Metaferia, Futo, & Takacs, 2021).

The insights gathered from interviews and focus groups indicate a divergence in perspectives between parents and teachers regarding the nature of play. Parents see play as a recreational activity, focusing on its fun and leisure aspects. On the other hand, teachers consider play as a crucial part of children's learning. This difference emphasizes the need to align parental and educational perspectives to ensure a unified and integrated approach to ECE and care.

Training, group discussions, and practical, play-based programs can all help to foster more comprehensive perspectives on play for parents and teachers. The LTP program offers opportunities for parents and teachers to engage in, reflect on, and learn about children's play.

3. GHANA CASE STUDY

Children Believe's Regional Director for West Africa engaged in play with a student in Ghana. Photo: Brett Tarver

3.1 OVERVIEW

Ghana has a population of 33.5 million people, and is comparatively a more stable country in West Africa ranking 107th out of 179 countries in the world in the Fragile States Index (2023). The country has taken major strides towards building a more democratic multi-party system, with a strong judiciary and freedom of the press. 13 percent of the total population are children under the age of 5. Approximately 28 percent of children under 18 years are involved in child labour, with about 21 percent working in hazardous conditions (UNICEF, 2023). Also, 33 percent of young women do not have a school education and 28 percent of young men are either unskilled or unemployed. This was deeply intertwined with poverty, lack of access to quality education, inadequate social protection, gender inequality, and limited child protection systems (UNICEF, 2023b). The unprecedented economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic made the country vulnerable to high inflation, increased external financing and growing debt burdens. Children Believe has been operational in Ghana since 1996 and its child-centred, family-focused integrated community development programs largely cover the Northern, North East, and Savannah regions.

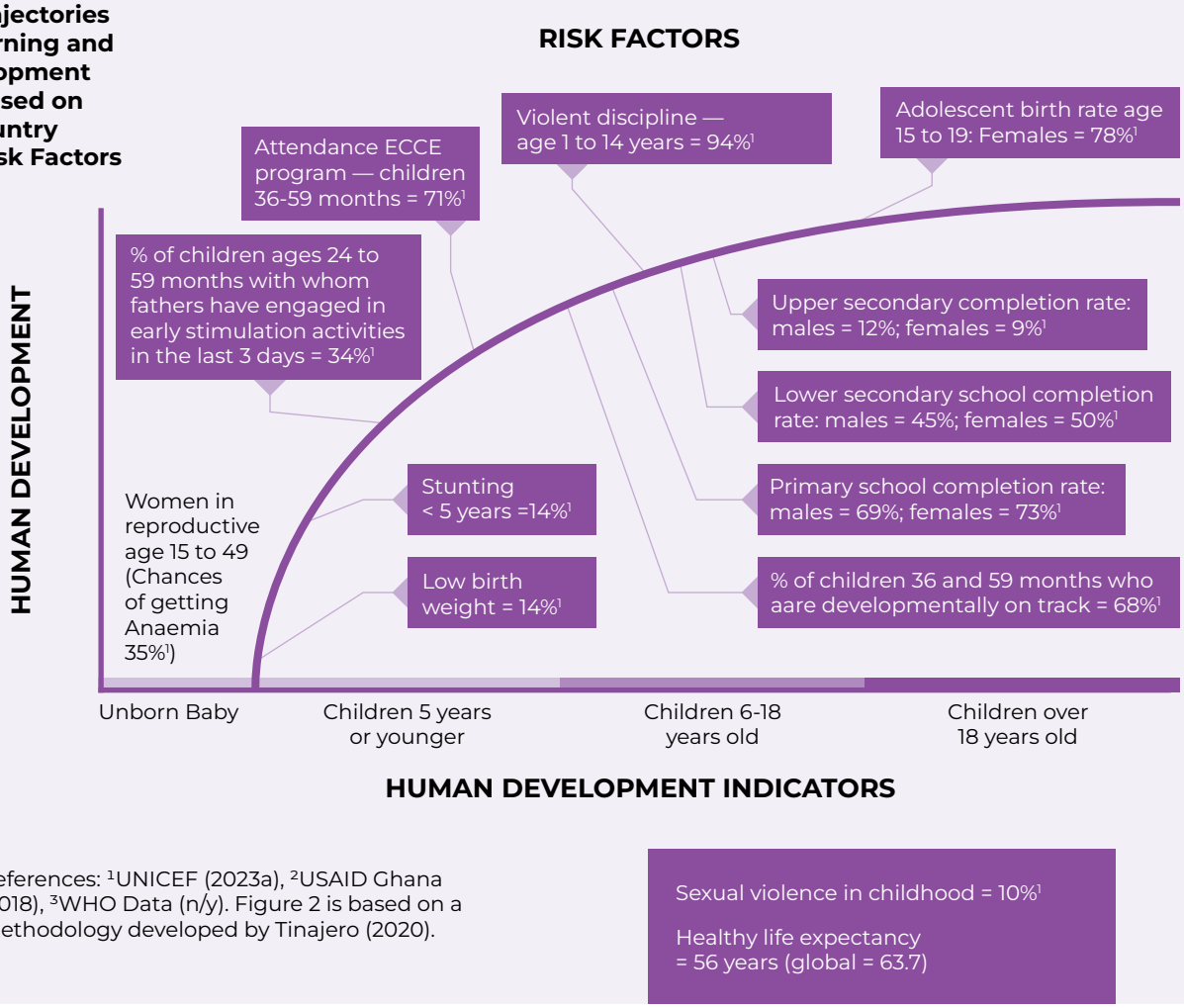
3.2 TRAJECTORIES IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT: MACRO ANALYSIS

As depicted in Figure 2, the trajectory of early learning and child development in Ghana generally indicates a poor developmental start, marked by high rates of anemia in women of reproductive age (35 percent), low birth weight (14 percent), and delayed growth in children under five years (14 percent). Additionally, areas

of concern include low reading proficiency among students by the end of P2 (73 percent are unable to read a single word in the Ghanaian language), as well as poor completion rates of primary (71 percent) and upper secondary school (11 percent). Various risk factors, such as sexual violence in childhood (10 percent), corporal punishment (94 percent), female adolescent (aged 15-19 years) birth rates (78 percent), and low parental engagement in early stimulation activities (34percent), contribute to these developmental challenges.

References: [1]UNICEF (2023a), [2]USAID Ghana (2018), [3]WHO Data (n/y). Figure 2 is based on a methodology developed by Tinajero (2020).

Figure 2: Trajectories in Early Learning and Child Development in Ghana Based on Existing Country Data and Risk Factors



References: [1]UNICEF (2023a), [2]USAID Ghana (2018), [3]WHO Data (n/y). Figure 2 is based on a methodology developed by Tinajero (2020).

Education is a lifelong learning trajectory that starts in early childhood and spans an individual's entire life. Among a range of factors, the trajectory of formal education in Ghana is impacted by malnutrition, low engagement of fathers in early stimulation activities, poor early childhood education infrastructure, low levels of school readiness at the beginning of schooling, a notable dropout rate in primary and secondary education, and a high prevalence of adolescent births, (UNICEF, 2023a).

To effectively address developmental health needs and associated risk factors depicted in Figure 2, it is crucial for the Ghanaian government to continue to implement its existing multi-sectoral efforts, including the Nurturing Care Framework and the Early Childhood Education Policy. Children's play can serve as a crucial tool for integrating health and education efforts and policies across multiple sectors.

Play in National Policy Framework

In 2007, the Ghanaian government integrated two years of kindergarten education for children aged 4 and 5 with the Free and Compulsory Basic Education (FCUBE) system through legislative reforms in the Education Act (Government of Ghana, 2008). As a result, the gross enrollment ratio for pre-primary education increased from 59.9 percent in 2000 to 116.1 percent in 2020, with slightly higher rates for girls (UIS UNESCO, 2023). This ratio is more than four times the average for GER for Sub-Saharan Africa, estimated at 28 percent, making it the second highest in the region after Liberia. International Aid to ECE) has also increased significantly, rising from 0.3 percent of total official development assistance for education in 2010 to over 10 percent in 2021.

> This commitment to strengthening ECE is further demonstrated by the Ministry of Education's call to allocate 15 percent of the total education budget to pre-primary education (2021 Early Childhood Education Policy, Ministry of Education, Republic of Ghana, 2019).

While these developments are encouraging and suggest increased awareness of the importance of ECE among both governmental bodies and the public, girls' enrolment rate (GER) exceeding 100 percent indicates right age-appropriate enrollment remains an issue. Moreover, statistics indicate regional disparities due to unequal access to educational services, particularly for remote and rural residents.

Since urban communities have greater access to schools, qualified teachers, media, and technologies, perceptions of childhood may differ from their rural counterparts, which maintain stronger ties to traditional values and practices. In rural and remote areas where employment opportunities are typically scarcer, and among urban families experiencing poverty, children sometimes engage in agricultural work, small-scale mining, street hawking, and other forms of labour to support their families or themselves. These diverging contexts suggest multiple conceptions of childhood rather than a single, universalized ideal (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016). However, attachment to traditional social norms that regulate adult-child relationships and inform parenting practices is seen even among children from comparatively wealthy families whose childhoods more closely align with global ideals.

In 2018, Ghana became one of the top countries in the world to launch its "Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development". This Framework is a comprehensive strategy designed to foster the overall development of children. It presents insights into the process of early childhood development and offers strategies for enhancement through policies and interventions. It emphasizes the importance of enhancing developmental health during the earliest years, from pregnancy to age 3. The Framework identifies key threats to early childhood development and highlights the protective role of nurturing care in mitigating adverse effects, and fostering development across physical, emotional, social, and cognitive domains. Additionally, the framework outlines what caregivers need to provide nurturing care for young children (Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection, Republic of Ghana, 2018). This policy framework is significant as it mandates the inclusion of play and caring as essential components of early child development.

The 2021 Early Childhood Education Policy acknowledges the early years as a critical period for the development of the brain's "fundamental organization and functional capabilities" (p. 1). It goes on to state that "KG offers children a lead in their primary schooling and positively influences later performance at school" (p.1). The policy supports children's holistic development, which includes the socio-emotional, cognitive, language, and physical developments required to improve school readiness (p. 6). The six action areas highlighted are curriculum development, implementation, and review process, creating culturally relevant materials, making materials available in formats for special education needs

children, and ensuring the adoption of play-based pedagogies (p.13). Other important dimensions include infrastructure building to meet pupil-teacher rate (PTR targets of 1:35), improving the capacity of teachers with in-service and pre-service training and certification, expanding inclusive education, quality assurance systems, including standardized assessment measures, and at-home support for families. The latter includes scaling the Lively Minds methodology to actively engage families in the early years of children's education.

> Lively Minds provides knowledge, skills, and training for mothers and volunteers on play-based pedagogies using local materials in rural areas to support the development of children 3 to 5 years (Ministry of Education, Government of Ghana, 2021, p.16).

3.3 PLAY IN PRACTICE: KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

3.3.1 CURRICULUM, INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS, AND IMPLEMENTATION PRACTICES

The Kindergarten Curriculum adopts a play-centered approach to offer positive learning experiences to young learners. Emphasizing creative learning and teaching methods, the curriculum aims to prepare students for formal education by utilizing play-based learning techniques. It focuses on experiential teaching and learning, integrating play methods, inquiry, and discovery and promotes participatory and child-centred activities in the classroom, fostering reflection, collaboration, and interaction among learners with both their peers and adults (Ministry of Education, Republic of Ghana, 2019).

Challenges of the Kindergarten Curriculum include a discrepancy between parental expectations for children's learning and the incorporation of play-based pedagogy within the curriculum (Government of Ghana, 2021). Another challenge is the limited experience and training of kindergarten teachers in play-based pedagogy (Government of Ghana, 2021). These educators often prioritize academic subjects such as Literacy/Numeracy and Environmental Studies, overlooking aspects such as Physical Development and Psychosocial Skills (Sofo, Asola, & Ocansey, 2019). Additionally, these teachers tend to utilize compulsive, direct, and unfriendly teacher-centered pedagogic strategies (Kekesi, Donkor, Kormla, Winton, & Torkonyo Moses, 2019). A significant gap in play-learning beliefs exists between highly educated teachers and their less educated counterparts, which is also observed among parents. (Avornyo & Baker, 2021). Furthermore, teachers with Early Childhood certifications hold a stronger belief in the significance of play compared to those with a general basic education certification (Sofo, Thompson, Ray, & Dako, 2018).

3.3.2 MEANINGS OF PLAY: REFLECTIONS FROM BOTTOM UP

While there is limited research literature on the play beliefs among parents and teachers in Ghana, the available studies consistently identify a gap between parental expectations of children's learning and the play-based approach incorporated into the curriculum (Government of Ghana, 2021). Kindergarten teachers generally hold favourable views of play as an effective teaching method, that maintains children's interest in lessons and provides a break from traditional learning (Avornyo & Baker, 2021; Kekesi, Donkor, Kormla, Winton, & Torkonyo, 2019; Sofo, Thompson, Ray, & Dako, 2018). Conversely, parents are skeptical about the educational value of play, often regarding it as a break or reward rather than a learning activity, leading to a perception of play and learning as mutually exclusive (Avornyo & Baker, 2022).

There are differences among teachers and school leaders in their perception of play. Some teachers perceive play activities as instrumental in bringing children's "minds back to the classroom" and in "handling the children" (Tr1). Others understand play as a child learning "to make sense of the world around them" (Tr5).

The nuanced differences reflect the presumed

Children at play in an ECCD centre in Ghana. Photo: Children Believe

relationship between play and learning, which can be located along a continuum based on interview findings. At one extreme is the view that learning is most effective when play is guided by the teacher. For example, school leaders reported that

> "When you put play together with learning... the outcome is going to be positive for the child as well as the teacher because the child will feel free to participate in whatever is happening in the classroom" (Hr3).

> "We add play into our teaching and learning because play is important and should be guided to achieve aims and objectives" (Hr 1).

From this perspective, play is seen as additive, and teacher-guided play enables children to interact with their social, physical, and natural world and generate better learning outcomes.

The different perspectives on play: one endorsing teacher-guided play, while the other supporting free and voluntary play show that the meaning of play can vary. It also demonstrates the different ways people think about the relationship between play and learning. On one hand, play is seen as a tool for learning, while on the other hand, it is valued for its ability to provide intangible benefits and help with understanding, rather than just achieving specific learning goals.

It's important to note that these perspectives are not necessarily in conflict, but are rather two different aspects of the same idea.

There was broad consensus among participants that play "motivates" children.

> "Play is a key to children's learning; it is a foundation that prepares children's minds to learn. Since children like playing, when

the teacher starts teaching with play and later brings in the main lesson, they are happy to learn it and it makes them understand better" (Tr3).

"Play in the preschool classroom is a term that we use to motivate children to learn through games which improve their social, emotional and physical health, socialization and communication skills, motor development (and cognitive thinking and memory" (Hr 4, Tr5, Tr8, Hr6, Hr5, Hr7).

Few educators expressed the view that play contributes to creativity and freedom. Caregivers, like educators, had diverse viewpoints on the advantages of play. Some caregivers acknowledged its instrumental value, stating, "Play helps in developing the brain and abilities of a child", it helps "refresh the brain" and "open the minds of children" (FGD6), and "widen the brain's capacity" (FGD8). It always makes them healthy and active. This is because play usually is used "as a tool by teachers to draw the attention of children whenever the children are bored during class hours" (FGD 5). Another focus group discussant summed their thoughts, "Play is part of the learning process" (FGD3).

On the flip side, but without challenging the pleasure inherent in play, some parents view play-based learning as detrimental to children's educational outcomes. According to a teacher, "When they [parents] come to the school and realize that their children are outside playing they feel they are not doing anything" (Tr5). A caregiver key informant asserted that play and learning are incompatible, despite acknowledging that LTP "works." They claimed, "Using play to teach and learn in school is not good. My reason is that [children] come to learn. And learning and playing cannot be mixed...."

Another caregiver from the same community believes that playing with children erodes respect for parental authority. "If you are playing with the children, they will not respect you" (FGD4).

A few caregivers mentioned that "Sometimes too much play is not good for the child. Overplaying will affect the child's performance in school. So, children's play should be moderated" (FGD 2). These responses signal that positions vary, and meanings of play must align with cultural values, including obedience and respect for authority or else play might be seen as corruptive.

For the majority of caregivers, play also has instrumental value in motivating children and reducing school absenteeism (FGD2, FGD4, FGD6). For example, a focus group discussant said, "It is good that the teachers are playing with the children. When that happens, you see that the child will always want to come to school. It is not good that all the time it is just teaching. It would get to a time when the child may not even want to come to school ..." (FGD4). By the same logic, play motivates children when they are tired or their interest is flagging (FGD2) and mimics play in adults: "Even when we adults gather to build our local houses, we normally sing and play to keep us motivated and throw away laziness. The same way it happens to children whenever they are learning..." Play also helps adults identify children's talents, capabilities, and signals potential futures (FGD5, FGD6). Conversely, it helps foretell children's weaknesses (FGD8).

A few caregivers talked about the value of play. Focus group participant parents underlined, "Play is something that always brings about togetherness among children and others" (FGD6). Also recognizing the bond that comes with play, one parent said, "When we are at home, we sometimes play with the children just to bring them closer to [us]" (FGD3). This closeness derived from play means that if something is bothering them, they will not be afraid to approach me and tell me (FGD7).

Caregivers also viewed play as a way to introduce children to societal norms and practices, preparing them to take on normative roles in adulthood. A focus group discussant mentioned that by pretending to cook and sell products in a market children mimic adult behaviour and learn "to speak, relate to different people, and

become familiar with currency" (FGD6). When children are playing with tins and trying to cook, it teaches cooking" (FGD 7).

> "When children return from school, they put stones together as if they were cooking and fetching water with small bottles, and place cans on the stones. If they get flour, they would pretend to prepare TZ *[tuo zaafi]* a soft and sticky food made from maize or sorghum prepared daily in Ghana".

The significance of local stories in play was also emphasized as a method of conveying moral lessons, such as the story of the fowl and hen warning children against laziness (FGD6), or narratives that disapprove of gossiping (FGD6).

Meanings of play among educators and caregivers evolve with training, dialogue, and experience. According to a key informant teacher,

> "In the past, I thought play was different from learning. Once, play meant doing what you wanted and having nothing to do with learning. But today, I understand while you play you learn something from it. So, play becomes part of learning, or play is even learning because it helps the child to learn."

They go on to say, "For instance, children gather under the tree to play using sand cooking saying [I] am the mother. The child is learning how to cook, and how to become a role model like the mother" (Tr7).

Another teacher suggests that parents can be persuaded to think differently about play. In the past, "anytime they [parents] come and see you introduce a play they think that you the teacher you are not serious …but now that we are engaging the parents and regularly talking to them … they put greater value on play" (Tr1).

In summary, play is recognized by both caregivers and teachers as a crucial aspect of childhood, providing children with essential opportunities for learning, development, and socialization. While educators emphasize the role of play in engaging children and enhancing their cognitive and emotional growth, caregivers appreciate its value in teaching children adult behaviours and societal norms. Despite differing views on the extent of teacher involvement in play, a shared understanding exists around the importance of play in preparing children for their futures and strengthening community ties.

3.3.3 TYPES OF PLAY IN ACTION: INSIGHTS FROM CLASSROOM ASSESSMENTS

Despite the perceived benefits of play and play-based learning articulated by educators, it was observed that the varieties of play in the classroom were limited. Singing was commonly mentioned. Consistent with the view of play as a motivational tool, a teacher reported, "We start with our lesson. We have to sing a song. I just want to motivate them, that's why I start with a song" (Tr4). Songs are also used when teaching the names of animals (Tr3), and movements like "*ayaayaa sinkenke* w" [Tr5]. In this activity, children hold each other's hands, sing, and move, usually involving the entire class (Tr3). Aside singing and dancing, educators used blocks to teach numeracy skills. One teacher reported that building blocks help children develop gross and fine motor skills (Tr7). While there were some musical instruments available in the visited schools, teachers did not explicitly mention their use.

Studies indicate that traditional Ghanaian storytelling has the potential to enhance comprehensive cognitive and social development in young learners (Agbenyega, Tamakloe & Klibthong, 2017). Utilizing local Ghanaian stories, such as the *Ananse* stories, proves effective in teaching academic concepts to children, given their capacity to facilitate discussions between teachers and learners (Dzamesi & van Heerden, 2020). This aligns with other research findings that indicate Indigenous play-based pedagogy not only facilitates academic conceptual development but also contributes to the holistic development

of children (Dzamesi & van Heerden, 2020).

Many of the outdoor play activities involved games with rules as summarized in Appendix 1. Gender differences in play outside the classroom were reported by most teachers, school leaders, and caregivers. Boys typically engage in football and wrestling, and girls play "*Ampe*" (Tr3). *Ampe* is a common game in Ghana that involves children jumping and clapping while coordinating their legs, promoting physical fitness and alertness. In general, most play involves games with rules – structured play.

3.3.4 ENABLING FACTORS FOR PROMOTION OF PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Enabling factors for promoting play among educators include formal and non-formal training, mutual support programs, and supportive administrations. With a few exceptions, all the teachers indicated that they did not participate in pre-service training focused on play-based learning during their certificate or degree program. However, educators were introduced to play through other teacher education courses and workshops (Tr7).

Educators also highlighted the value of in-service professional development and peer-to-peer learning (Tr7). "Previously, we were made to understand by our parents that children who play will always grow to become bad people, and some parents used to even beat children who were seen playing. But today, I know that play is a key to children's learning. We need to be practicing it in our schools because it helps children to learn" (Tr7).

Similarly, a school leader reported, "Previously, I thought play was just to allow children to be. But now, I understand that play can be used for teaching and learning" (Hr5).

Another school leader indicated, "My understanding of playing was just telling them to go out for a break and play. I did not know you can let children play in the classroom and learn something out of it" (Hr8).

Children at play at an ECD centre in Ghana. Photo: Children Believe

The majority of educators acknowledged that the standard-based curriculum supports play-based learning. During interviews, school leaders emphasized that the curriculum in use is the approved curriculum and recommended the incorporation of circle time, starters (introduction of lessons through play-based activities) and learning centers.

However, not all educators were familiar with the curricular framework. Focus group participant parents reported "We used to stop the children from playing. But after we had attended the workshop things changed. We are now giving them the freedom to play. Sometimes we will sit by them and give them directions while they are playing, and this creates an intimacy between parents and the children." (FGD3).

This comparison between "then" and "now" was echoed by a different caregiver: "After the training, the way I now relate with my children has improved (FGD7). Even parental workshops where play was tangential were instructive". Another focus group participant parent recalled a workshop that focused on good nutrition, health, and hygiene and encouraged caregivers to "allow children to play" (FGD3). Another parent mentioned adopting parenting techniques modelled by their elders, reflecting intergenerational learning.

This caregiver shared, "When I was young, my parents used storytelling to educate me. So, I am also using stories to educate my children... I have chosen to raise my children the same way I was raised because I grew up well, and I want the same for my children."

The study found that in Northern Ghana, NGOs were the primary source for in-service teacher professional development, alongside UNICEF and the Red Cross. These NGOs included international and local organizations such as Children Believe and its local partners AG-CARE and PARDA, Lively Minds, and Right To Play, all in collaboration with Ghana's Education Services (GES). The quality, content, and duration of training opportunities varied. While some training sessions were completed within a few hours, others lasted up to one week (Tr 6). Participants identified topics covered; using TLMs (including creating play centers) and LTP was mentioned frequently, but other topics included child development, differentiated learning, storytelling, and inclusion of children with disabilities. They also suggested the need for more frequent training, including refresher courses on play-based learning (Hr2, Hr3, Hr4, Hr7) and opportunities for professional learning communities and mentorship (Hr1, Hr6, Hr1).

3.3.5 HINDERING FACTORS FOR THE PROMOTION OF PLAY IN SCHOOLS

Educators identified multiple factors that constrain the integration of play in their teaching activities. One of the most mentioned challenges is the unavailability of Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs). A teacher (Tr7) said, "We have been struggling to use the curriculum. The curriculum outlines how we can introduce play in our teaching and learning, but we lack the necessary materials" (Tr7). Focus group participants rated the shortage of teaching resources as the second greatest challenge aside from teacher training, "If you have the skills and the understanding of what you want to do and you don't have the resources to use and implement that, then you cannot do what you want to do" (FGHr1).

Another school leader said, "We do not have the materials that we need to teach some of the play...," elaborating those materials play an important role in children's practical learning, noting that children need materials to manipulate to gain sensory experiences (Hr5).

Specific materials lacking include building blocks, which help children's reasoning and motor skills (Tr2), charts and shapes (Tr3), flashcards (Tr4, Tr8), and outdoor play materials like see-saws, and footballs (Tr4, Tr7) (Tr7). One teacher lamented, "The only resources we have are alphabet cards, some puzzles" before elaborating a list that comprised "puzzles, skipping ropes, number cards, word cards, charts..." (Tr8).

Similarly, teachers mentioned that furniture

and play equipment were either inadequate or poorly maintained. Overcrowded classrooms mean that classroom furniture is insufficient, with three or four children sharing one dual desk in some instances. The crafting of early years' classroom furniture must be designed to promote group work such as hexagonal-shaped tables that seat up to six children (Tr3).

Outdoor play equipment like swings, slides, and see-saws were observed to be available, but limited in type and often damaged and unusable due to unrepair and lack of maintenance. According to a key informant teacher, "We see it spoiling before we maintain them" (Tr2). While funding for annual maintenance is available for each school term, disbursement is often delayed by as much as a year, preventing proper maintenance, which would prolong the lifespan of the equipment.

Adequate space was another constraint to play activities, particularly for classes with 60 or 70 children. This limited space restricts the movement of students, who are often seated in rows facing a blackboard or directly on the ground. A school leader highlighted that overcrowding hinders play opportunities, noting that a classroom designed for 35 children but accommodating up to 70 children leaves no room for play-related activities (Hr4). Crowded preschool classrooms can also impose significant stress on young children due to increased noise levels and chaotic environments.

Another constraining factor was the lack of sufficient in-service training about the pedagogy of play and its applications. Workshops are organized by the Ghana Education Service and NGOs but they are infrequent and do not fully address the training needs of the teachers, schools' administrators and other education workers.

Parental objections and expectations regarding homework and exercises were also a concern. However, educators did not view this as a limiting factor. They saw it as an issue that could be addressed through relationship-building and education.

Play allows children express their creativity. Photo: Children Believe

3.4 CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

3.4.1 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings suggest that play is seen as instrumental and additive rather than intrinsic to learning. Most in-class activities involve guided/structured play or direct instruction. Similarly, most parents perceived schooling as a means for children to gain the requisite skills necessary for securing jobs and earnings and fulfilling their obligations as they enter adulthood.

Societal norms and perceptions of child-adult interactions and intergenerational relations influenced caregiving and educational practices.

> Adults expect children to comply with their instructions, while parents feel responsible for providing a nurturing environment for their dependent children. In return, they expect that when the children grow up, they will care for their infirm or aging parents and respect and obey their elders.

This form of reciprocity involves an obligatory exchange and is a central feature of caregiver-child relations and the intergenerational contract, with each party incurring obligations at different times in the life course.

Teacher and parent training programs helped shift attitudes and knowledge of caregiving interactions and play by conveying brain research findings and emphasizing play's instrumental value in reading and writing skills building and transmitting content knowledge.

The findings indicate a disconnection between teaching practices of Ghanaian and African concepts of communal identity and personhood, typically conveyed through storytelling, proverbs, music, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Therefore, play-based learning must be rooted in place and community, and "quality" teacher professional development must be relevant without causing any harm. We suggest that, by intentionally integrating Ghanaian and African games, music, myths, fables, oral histories, music, spirituality, and other cultural expressions into play-based learning, children can learn academic skills and discover their personhood.

The effective implementation and advancement of play-based teaching methods are influenced by limitations in space, materials, and human resources. This highlights the need for increased and improved investment and resource allocation to improve physical infrastructure, enhance the skills of teachers and education workers, and expand the availability and accessibility of play materials.

3.4.2 LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

3.4.2.1 BUILDING A MULTI-SECTORAL APPROACH TO SUPPORT PARENT-CHILD PLAY AND RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING INTERACTIONS

A multi-sectoral approach to enhancing parent-child play and responsive caregiving interactions is crucial to promoting holistic child development and fostering strong parent-child relationships. This approach recognizes the intrinsic connection between play and caregiving, highlighting how play serves as a foundation for responsive engagements between parents and children. By engaging in play parents are better equipped to tune into their child's cues, emotions, and needs, thereby strengthening the parent-child bond and promoting healthy development.

3.4.2.2 PROMOTING FATHERS' ENGAGEMENT

Father-child play uniquely contributes to child development, differing from mother-child interactions. Father-child engagements support multiple aspects of child development like language, cognitive, and self-regulation skills. Currently, the levels of father involvement in caregiving and play needs significant improvement to foster child development.

3.4.2.3 ENHANCING COORDINATION BETWEEN NGOS, DONORS, AND HOST GOVERNMENT

Enhancing coordination between NGOs, donors, and the host government in Ghana

is essential to support play-based learning in preschools. Joint provisional/regional and national forums on early childhood care and development need to be further strengthened to increase the physical, financial, human, and institutional capacities of ECE departments. This collaborative effort should further involve cross-country knowledge exchange, mobilization, learning, synthesis, and partnership with the Knowledge Exchange Initiative Africa 19 hub and national education stakeholders. This collaborative hub facilitates exchange among 19 African nations, aiming to enhance their respective national education systems.

Children playing on a swing with Children Believe Ambassador Natalie Preddie. Photo : Brett Tarver

4. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Children Believe's Regional Director for West Africa engaged in play with a student in Ghana. Photo : Children Believe

In the preceding chapters, we explored the implementation of play and Early Childhood Education (ECE) development programs through the case studies conducted in Ethiopia and Ghana. Data for these case studies were gathered using Focus Group Discussions (FDGs), key informant interviews (KII), in-depth interviews, and classroom observations. This was further enriched by reviewing secondary literature and developing life course developmental health curves for each country.

The case studies showcased the diverse modalities and backgrounds through which play was implemented. The findings highlighted that play significantly enhanced children's engagement, inclusion, and holistic skill development during their preschool years and beyond. Successful play-based early childhood care and development programs were evident in communities where strong institutional collaborations existed among like-minded organizations, policymakers, researchers, and educators.

Based on the findings, the following conclusions and recommendations are provided to further advance culturally sensitive, socially inclusive, and academically effective early childhood education in the future.

4.1 SUPPORT A BALANCED APPROACH TO PLAY-BASED LEARNING

The case studies revealed that there are a considerable number of parents and educators

who still perceive play mostly as a leisure activity. Hence, they are not in favour of free play on the ground that learning should be more formal and it has to be guided by more defined teachers' instructions and guidelines. Free play and play-based learning must not be seen as opposites. A learning framework that views play-based learning as a spectrum, that ranges from unstructured play to inquiry-based exploration, collaborative play, playful learning, and structured games should be adopted.

It is vital to embrace a balanced approach to play-based learning, which requires continuous professional development for educators and caregivers; ongoing review and assessment of curriculum and; importantly, a shift in the conceptualization of play-based learning within educational and social policies.

Furthermore, adequate spaces and resources within early education programs are essential to support diverse forms of play. Without this, discrepancies in perspectives between teachers and caregivers may prompt tensions in curriculum development and implementation.

4.2 PROMOTE CURRICULA THAT REINFORCE THE INTERCONNECTION OF CAREGIVING AND PLAY

The study indicated that play was more appreciated and institutionally located in the education sector in isolation or loose collaboration with other caregiving services rendered through health, nutrition and other social protection sectors. Efforts should be focused on strengthening the link between responsive caregiving interactions and play in curriculum development and implementation. Practical play-based workshops and continuous capacity-building programs should target not only teachers and caregivers but also mothers, fathers, expectant parents, and families with newborns and young children.

4.3 DEEPEN THE INCLUSION OF INDIGENOUS AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Currently, play centers are mainly focused on preparing children for primary school. This approach limits the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems into play-based curricular frameworks and teaching practices in preprimary classrooms.

Incorporating indigenous and cultural knowledge into curriculum development is essential for fostering cultural diversity, equity, and mutual respect in education.

This holistic approach requires intentionally promoting Indigenous knowledge systems in the design, delivery, and evaluation of curricula, teacher professional development programs (both pre-service and in-service), parental education programs, and the creation of culturally responsive teaching and learning materials.

4.4 ESTABLISH MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR THE TRAINING OF PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS, AND PROMOTE THEIR PARTICIPATION AND SENSE OF OWNERSHIP IN ECCD PROGRAMS

The various capacity-support trainings which were extended to parents have been highly valuable in helping parents become familiar with ECD curricula, improve their pedagogical skills for play-based learning, and actively collaborate with school communities. It is important to ensure that ECD teachers and educators have safe environments to engage with children through play. This requires standardizing and providing necessary teaching and learning materials, outdoor play spaces, and maintaining appropriate teacher-child ratios.

4.5 CONTEXTUALIZE PLAY AND ADDRESS TOXIC STRESS AMONG CHILDREN

The experiences of Children Believe and the case-study analysis confirmed the power of play and its added value in protective impacts against toxic stress such as class crowdedness, violent discipline, sexual violence, spousal violence, internal displacement, and conflict that affect children's learning. Additionally, scaling up services may expose some children to learning demands beyond their current readiness levels, potentially causing frustration and hindering their educational progress. Recognizing and addressing such stressors while nurturing warm, affectionate environments is crucial to promoting children's learning and development.

> Reducing toxic stress should be a key consideration in designing and implementing play-based early childhood education and development programs.

This is especially important in highly fragile contexts, where displaced/refugee children concurrently need warm and playful environments that promote healthy development and well-being.

4.6 STRENGTHEN FATHERS, MEN'S, AND BOYS' ENGAGEMENT

There is an incremental change in the perception of child care and development roles among parents, caregivers and teachers in the studied areas. Positive trends toward achieving more male participation in LTP programs in targeted communities were observed. The involvement of grandparents and fathers is important to foster intergenerational bonding and enrich the child's social and emotional experiences. This needs to be further strengthened at a greater scale across all the ECE and development programs and during parental training and capacity support efforts.

4.7 ENHANCE MULTI-SECTORAL COORDINATION AND SYNERGY OF PROGRAMS AMONG DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

The study revealed the importance of multi-sectoral coordination in early childhood, care, and development. This has been exemplified by the passing of policies and adoption of the "Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development". The integration of play in ECE was found strong in districts or regions where multi-sectoral coordination was created with a diverse array of stakeholders and key technical departments such as health, nutrition, child protection, and gender equality. This has helped to create and nurture holistic early childhood, care, and development services. The collaborative efforts could be further enhanced through the gathering of MICS, strengthening of cross-country knowledge exchange platforms, and coordination of policy dialogue national/regional forums.

4.8 STRENGTHEN THE COLLECTION, AVAILABILITY, AND ACCESSIBILITY OF DATA ON CHILDREN'S SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING

Both countries in this study were challenged by the lack of comprehensive national statistical data, which includes indicators of human development, social determinants of health, and service provision and monitoring. Special attention should be given to increasing capacities to collect data related to children's socioemotional development and well-being, such as attachment formation, responsive caregiving interactions, maternal well-being, and postpartum depression. More collaborative efforts are needed to strengthen the capacity for gathering national Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data and to enhance cross-country knowledge exchange platforms.

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Children Believe

Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in — and be heard. For 60+ years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education — inside and outside of classrooms — is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

Children Believe is a member of ChildFund Alliance, a global network of 12 child-focused development organizations working to create opportunities for children and youth, their families and communities.

ChildFund helps nearly 23 million children and their families in more than 70 countries overcome poverty and underlying conditions that prevent children from achieving their full potential. We work to end violence against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children and youth to create lasting change and elevate their voices in decisions that affect their lives.

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