



POLICY BRIEF

THE POWER OF PLAY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AT SCHOOLS: INSIGHTS FROM FIELD RESEARCH

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BACKGROUND

Children Believe works with and through local partners in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nicaragua, and Paraguay to serve children, women, and other vulnerable groups. Our programs and policy work focuses on breaking systemic barriers that rob boys and girls of their choices and access to an inclusive, quality education. We have brought together diverse people and partnerships, driven by a common belief that education is the most powerful resource for children to live and dream fearlessly, exercise agency and change their world.

Challenges to Early Childhood Education

This policy brief focuses on case studies from Ethiopia and Ghana. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous country, with over 123 million people (UN Population Division, 2023). Though almost half of the population (48.6 percent) are children under the age of 15, and nearly 15 percent are under the age of 5 (UN Population Division, 2023), more than 55 percent of preschool children in Ethiopia do not have access to an Early Childhood Education (ECE) program. In addition, 41.3 percent of preschool children are categorized as severely malnourished according to the Global Hidden Hunger Index (2023).

Ghana has a population of 33.5 million people with children under the age of 5 accounting for 13 percent of the total. 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.

Solutions through Early Childhood Education Centres & Learning Through Play

To address the child education issues in both countries, Children Believe has constructed, rehabilitated or equipped 356 centres over the past five years. We have also implemented the Learning Through Play (LTP) approach 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 according to LTP programmatic calendars. LTP Calendars are pictorial guides that show the stages of child development with descriptions of simple play activities to help parents and educators understand age-appropriate care and to help them support young children effectively. LTP has also equipped parent group leaders, health promoters, educators, and social workers with play facilitation techniques to support parents/caregivers in their early child development (ECD) practices.

VISION:

We dream of a world where every child has a voice and the ability to achieve their full potential.

MISSION:

Children Believe creates a future of hope for children, families, and communities by helping them develop the skills and resources to overcome poverty and injustice. For 60 years, we have followed the example of Christ serving the poor regardless of their faith, cultural, and ethnic background.

This policy brief summarizes key findings and recommendations from the study of the power of play in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in school settings. It highlights the key messages from empirical evidence and case studies of sixteen early childhood education centers and pre-schools in Ethiopia and Ghana. The policy brief also outlines policy considerations and recommendations to promote effective, culturally sensitive and socially inclusive play and early childhood education, care and development practices.

Key Findings

- In Ethiopia, the provision of formal early childhood development and education, which was once predominantly supported by non-government actors primarily in urban areas has undergone transformation where the Government and its partners have developed a national policy and investment plan to expand the services in both urban and rural areas. The national efforts to expand play and access to preschool education by introducing 0-classes for 5- and 6-year-olds have significantly increased school enrollments for both boys and girls. Pre-primary enrollment in Ethiopia rose from 4.2 percent in 2012 to 45.4 percent in 2018/19 (ESAA, 2018/19). The enrollment rate further increased to 48.6 percent for females and 51.4 percent for males in the 2022/23 academic year (ESAA, 2022/23).
- However, the study revealed that while there has been substantial investment in building infrastructure, there has been less emphasis on improving the skills of teachers and caretakers and the overall quality of education. This highlights the need for greater investment in non-infrastructure aspects of early childhood education (ECE). On the other hand, positive results have been recorded in communities or regions where there has been strong collaboration between the government, non-governmental organizations, and international development partners including Children Believe, with investments made in both soft skills and infrastructure. Strengthening these multi-stakeholder partnerships will help expand and scale up access to play and early childhood programs, especially in remote and fragile communities.
- Ghana is recognized as a leading country 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 with Early Childhood Education (ECD) forums created among Children Believe partners, like-minded organizations, and governments, particularly in the Northern region of Ghana.
- It was reported that seven in every ten children 36-59 months attend early childhood education programs. Nearly seven out of every ten children - age 3-4 years attend early childhood education and they are developmentally on track in literacy-numeracy, physical, social-emotional, and learning domains. However, early childhood education is found lowest in the Northern Region, where Children Believe operates (UNICEF, 2018; UNESCO, 2023).
- 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. It is important to promote and integrate ‘indigenous’ play-based education to diversify the types of play and games in school settings and contribute to the holistic development of children.



Students in a Children Believe supported ECCD center in Ethiopia.

Photo by Brett Tarver

Policy Considerations and Recommendations

To advance the state of culturally sensitive, socially inclusive and academically effective play and ECE, the following policy considerations and actions are recommended.

1. 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 are not in favor of free play on the ground that learning shall 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.

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.

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. Establish minimum standards for the training of parents and other caregivers, and promote their participation and sense of ownership in early childhood education programs

Various capacity-support trainings 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.

5. Contextualize play and address toxic stress among children

Toxic stress such as class crowdedness, violent discipline, sexual violence, spousal violence, internal displacement, and conflict, undermines the benefits of play of play and negatively impacts children's learning. It is crucial to recognize and address these stressors while creating warm, affectionate environments to nurture 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.

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.

7. Optimize the application of play and its equalizing power to foster social inclusion

The study highlighted the importance of play in fostering meaningful engagement, creating mutual cultural knowledge exchange and promoting learning in ECE settings. It emphasized the significance of creating inclusive environments where children from diverse backgrounds can interact equally, promoting values like equality, equity, non-discrimination, appreciation of diversity, social participation, and togetherness. *It is important to equip teachers and caregivers to develop empathy and cultural sensitivity skills to work with children, particularly those from socially marginalized backgrounds.* When promoting play, it is imperative to reassess teachers’ and caregivers’ attitudes and train them to fully embrace diversity, multi-culturalism, and social inclusion.

8. Enhance multi-sectoral coordination and synergy of programs among diverse stakeholders

Multi-sectoral coordination is an important policy development and implementation mechanism in promoting play in early childhood, care, and development. The promotion of play must be integrated with diverse stakeholders and key technical departments such as health, nutrition, child protection, and gender equality.

9. Strengthen the collection, availability, and accessibility of data on children’s socio-emotional development and wellbeing

Most of the 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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This Policy Brief is based on the Education Upfront Research Initiative on the Power of Play and Early Childhood Care Development. The full report can be found at childrenbelieve.ca.

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It is important to promote and integrate ‘indigenous’ play-based education to diversify the types of play and games.

Photo by Brett Tarver



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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